

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DAVID R. KATZ
IN MEMORY OF MY BELOVED PARENTS
AUSCHWITZ 1942

My mother and I were being held in a farm compound surrounded by a tall stone wall topped with embedded broken glass shards. Our sleeping facilities consisted of a bale of hay in the horse stables, and many a night I awoke screaming with huge rats climbing all over my body. My mother by that time was quite ill, mostly from fear of what the future held for us. Also, we had no idea as to the whereabouts of my father, who was put in a labor camp somewhere in France. We later found out that he was in Gurs, a terrible camp in the Pyrenees, in southern France. About two weeks after our arrest, we were taken by train to the city of Mende, to be delivered to the concentration camp Rieucros. Our first sight of the camp was most traumatic. Row upon row of wooden barracks surrounded by barbed wire fences, with armed guards patrolling the perimeter. Rieucros was a camp for women and children. Inside the barracks were rows of wooden bunks, two high, and we slept packed like sardines, with only a straw mattress and a rough horse blanket for bedding. Those same wooden bunks are where we spent most of the daytime also, since there was no other place to sit. The sanitary facilities were located in a wooden barrack in the center of the camp, and consisted of the latrine, with trenches along one wall, over which were some long wooden planks with a round hole about every two feet or so, with a small partition between them. Along the other wall were about two dozen showerheads, but only cold water. With several thousand people in the camp, the lines of people waiting to use these facilities were very long at times. When going to the showers, my mother would blindfold me so as not to embarrass the women using the facilities. Breakfast consisted of a piece of dark, hard bread and some coffee made from several types of roasted roots. For lunch and dinner, we were given a bowl of soup, which was nothing more than some hot water with some cabbage leaves and pieces of rutabaga floating in it. With that kind of food on a daily basis, dysentery ran rampant throughout the camp, and about the only medication available to us were some huge carbon pills. Due to the unsanitary conditions in the camp, my mother and I were constantly sick. Rainy weather created a particularly difficult situation in the camp. Since there were no paved roads all areas became fields of mud, and very often the mud would be so thick, that when walking, we would discover that our wooden shoes remained stuck in the muck. In spite of all the hardships we had to endure, our spirits were kept high by the continuous rumors being spread throughout the camp that peace was imminent, and that we were soon to be released. How wrong those rumors proved to be. While we were incarcerated in Rieucros, the children old enough to attend school, were allowed to do so in the city of Mende. About once a week, my mother would give me a few franks so that I could bring back a loaf of bread, which I would hide under my coat to bring it into the camp. This same tactic was also used by some of the other children, until the guards at the gate discovered our ruse. After that, we were no longer allowed out of the camp to attend school.

Although living conditions in the camp were miserable at best, the women in the camp did their utmost to provide for the children, and to assuage their fears. Among the internees were

musicians and writers, and as a means of preventing boredom, my mother wrote the music for a parody of camp life. The performance made a big hit, and brought some laughter into our morose life. The text was in German, and to this day I still remember one of the songs. The children were also encouraged to provide some entertainment. One particular event still comes to mind. In the section of bunks right next to the one my mother and I occupied, there was a girl about my age, with her mother and her aunt. Her mother was a very nice and easy-going person. Her aunt however, was a mean spirited woman who did nothing but scold that little girl for the slightest infraction. That girl however was forever singing some tunes, and she had a nice voice. Anyway, our mothers decided that some of the children in our barrack should put on a musical performance. We both learned our songs, and the day of the performance finally arrived. I don't remember if the play was based on "Snow White" or "Cinderella", but she was the beautiful young girl, and I was to be the handsome prince who would sweep her off her feet. While she was singing her song, "Un jour mon prince viendra" (One day my prince will come), she got so nervous that she wet herself, and went in tears into her mother's arms. As for me, I was extremely shy at that age, and I remained standing in "the wings" (behind a row of bunks) without ever uttering a word or singing a single note. I guess that musical fiasco was the demise of any ambition for the musical theater I might have harbored at the time.

By that time, my uncle and aunt and their children were settled in Buffalo, and with the help of some friends and relatives who were American citizens, they sent us the affidavits necessary for us to immigrate to the United States. Once again it seemed as though all hope was not lost.

http://www.holocaust-trc.org/dkatz_autobio.htm

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