

# *Boris Kacel*

*From the book "From Hell to Redemption: A Memoir of the Holocaust"  
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## *My fight for Survival in Vaivare<sup>1</sup>*

The odyssey to the new labor camp had finally ended, and I stood among the other inmates at the Appelplatz, awaiting the familiar head count. I surveyed my new surroundings. This was an isolated, tundra-filled region in the northernmost part of Estonia, and no civilization was in light. It seemed a barren land, with low-lying shrubs all around, and I questioned how useful or significant this labor camp could be in such a wasteland. When I began to work I learned the answer: A few miles from our campsite was a strategically important railway junction with maintenance facilities for the steam-driven locomotives that were still in use.

After a quick head count we were led to the barracks. At the entrance each inmate received a piece of bread, some margarine, and a bowl of hot, watery soup. We walked into a long, dimly lit barracks, about one hundred and fifty feet long and fifty feet wide, part of which was already occupied. On both sides were continuous rows of two-story bunks with individual straw sacks packed tightly next to each other; the arrangement resembled two long shelves. The only way to reach one's sleeping space was to crawl in from the front. The barracks had two small cast-iron, coal-burning stoves with chimneys through the roof, but they were a poor source of heat for such a large space. In the middle of the building were a few long tables and benches where the inmates had their meals or could spend social time together. The only natural light came from two small windows at each end of the room. There was never enough light, so the electric lights were on at all times.

The few inmates who already resided in our barracks tried to be friendly and make us comfortable. They were eager to find out where we

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<sup>1</sup> Vaivara in Estonian [M.R.]

came from. The city of Riga was familiar to them, since most of them were from Poland. They had been forcibly rounded up in the Vilna Ghetto and transported to Vaivare; some had even participated in building the camp. They informed us that this barracks had been fully occupied until a few days ago, when the former occupants had been sent to a newly erected camp, Nerete<sup>2</sup>, about twelve miles away. The inmates wanted to keep up the conversation, but none of our men felt able to continue. We were all glad our transport ordeal had ended and that we were finally in a warm place. Most of our hungry men were busy enjoying their hot soup and the soft, edible bread, but some were so weak they barely ate the meager rations. We congregated around the stoves to warm our cold bodies and then chose our bunks. Our trio managed to stay together again; Father and I picked a lower bunk for easier accessibility, and Boris took the one above us. There were no partitions between the straw sacks; each of us lay right next to the other. Every morning we would wrap our straw sack with our blanket to mark our sleeping area.

I slept between Father and a middle-aged man who was so weak he could barely crawl into his bunk. His tired, worn-out face and skinny body looked familiar, but I could not recall where I had seen him. I felt very sorry for him, and I knew he was too exhausted to attend to himself, since he still had his rationed bread. He desperately needed help, so I went to get him some water. When I returned I asked him, "How do you feel? Why don't you eat your bread? I have some water for you." In a low, stuttering voice he replied, "I don't feel like eating; I am too exhausted. I just need to rest." I tried to feed him his bread, as I knew that if he did not finish it somebody would take it from him while he was asleep. With many kind words I convinced him to eat his bread with a cup of water. It felt good to help a fellow Jew in dire need. I covered myself with the thin, gray blanket and fell into a deep sleep in no time.

When the sun was barely up I heard loud voices shouting, "Everybody up, up, up; everybody up from your nares." *Nares*, I found out, was the camp slang for bunks. The voices were those of the barracks' Jewish elders and their helpers. They were in charge of waking us and keeping the barracks in

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<sup>2</sup> Probably Ereda [M.R.]

order. I was barely able to get up. My father, as always, was ahead of everyone, up and on guard for the next move. He called, "Bora, get up; it is time to get up. My cousin Boris was also slow to get out of bed, so Father climbed to the top bunk and told him to do so right away. Father was ready to start his first day in this new labor camp. He started to give out his first orders of the day: "Boris, Bora, lets go wash up; let's go get our coffee while it is still available; we have to hurry to be ready for the morning roll call." Boris and I had barely finished in the adjoining washroom when Father was ready to guide us to the hot, black coffee one of the orderlies poured into our metal cups. Our trio sat at one of the tables nearest the hot stove. The piece of bread from our previous night's ration and the hot coffee constituted our first meal of the day.

The barracks became very crowded, since all of the inmates had left their bunks at around the same time. The men tried to speak as little as possible, but it was still fairly noisy. We tried to clean our muddy clothes from yesterday's relentless march. Everybody was in a rush to finish the coffee, which, for some, was the only hot meal they would receive until their daily ration in the evening. I noticed that we were like most of the inmates in saving a small piece of bread for breakfast.

The most difficult part of getting ready in the morning was getting dressed and putting on shoes, because the barracks were very crowded and much shoving and pushing took place. I was accustomed to such a situation, thanks to my experience in Kaiserwald, and had become a graduate student in the school of concentration camp life. The older inmates acted as though they were the superiors in the barracks and were, therefore, able to overpower the newcomers, so we had to let them have their way.

When I left my bunk that first morning, the man next to me was still asleep. I had pushed him to wake him up and then left the bunk to follow Father and Boris. As we were about to leave the barracks, I noticed that he was still lying in his nare. I pushed him again, but he did not respond, so I pulled down the blanket that was over his head. His body was motionless, his eyes were closed, and his face had no expression. My body shook as I realized I had slept next to a dead man. He had died in his sleep, and I never knew. Everybody was ready to leave the barracks for the morning roll, so I quickly

notified one of the orderlies that there was a man dead in his bunk. Unconcerned, the orderly replied, "I will take care of the body after everybody leaves for work." My emotional voice did not bother this seasoned inmate; he was accustomed to seeing and taking care of the dead.

I left the comparatively warm barracks for the subzero temperatures outdoors. A light snow covered the frozen ground on which we were lined up for the morning roll. I noticed that in addition to the men, a large contingent of women was in the camp; they had been brought forcibly from the Vilna Ghetto. Most of them worked indoors, taking care of the German living quarters or working in the camp kitchen or in warehouses. A quick head count was taken by the German SS *lagerführer* and the Jewish camp elder, and the several hundred camp inmates were dismissed. The old inmates left for work in organized groups headed by a foreman, and the newly arrived prisoners were left standing around in clusters, waiting to be assigned to a work group. I could not avoid seeing the bonfire that served as a makeshift crematorium. The previous night the fire had been glowing and shooting flames high into the sky, but by this morning the odor of burned flesh had diminished. A few Jewish inmates were ready to clean out the old ashes and prepare a pile of wood for the next bonfire. The fire burned full blast every day, and this day was no exception. Several corpses were already visible on the pile of wood that would be lit with gasoline.

The entire camp consisted of two rows of several barracks each that were used for prisoners' living quarters, a kitchen, a small infirmary, and an administrative office. The space between the two rows of barracks served as both the camp's main thoroughfare and its *Appelplatz*. In the center of the area stood a hand-operated well, which was one of the main sources of water for the camp. The grounds were surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence with a wide gate guarded by Estonian soldiers. The camp administrators were German SS officers, so the guards had little authority over the camp population. They oversaw the security of the camp and the region around it, but the main force in Vaivare was the *Todt*; its members were found in every work group as foremen and project engineers.

The *Todt* was a paramilitary organization—an arm of the Nazi Party—whose name came from Dr. Fritz *Todt*, an outstanding organizer and

engineer who died in a plane crash in 1942. He was the builder of Germany's military defensive West Wall, known to most people as the Siegfried Line, which stood on the opposite side of France's well-known fortification the Maginot Line. Todt was in charge of Germany's construction industry and was a devout Nazi Party member. His "Todt Organization" was responsible for building roads and other facilities in Nazi-occupied countries—the original German forced labor program. Todt members wore green military uniforms with their own insignia but did not carry weapons. I could not determine whether these men had volunteered or had been drafted to help Nazi Germany in the war effort; most were far above the mandatory draft age.

Our transport of five hundred men was divided into several work groups. My father, Boris, and I stood together and became part of a fifty-man kolonne. Under the guidance of a few Todt men, our group left the camp. It was hard for me to walk, since I still had mud stuck to my shoes. I wore my grandfather's boots, which felt good when I had to walk on flat, frozen ground. Less than a mile from the camp gate, we stopped at a railroad track. In the distance I could see a tall building with a water tower next to it; this was the maintenance plant, where all passing steam locomotives stopped for refills of water for their engines. On the tracks stood several flat railcars loaded with large pieces of steel beams brought from the Soviet Union as the Germans dismantled and stripped the Soviet manufacturing plants. We were divided into groups of ten men to a car. Each piece of steel was ten to twenty feet long and weighed several tons. The heavy cargo had to be unloaded and dropped into the open field. One man could not undertake this task alone; since no tools were available, everything had to be done manually. This difficult job called for a coordinated effort among all ten men. The Todt man in charge left the job site without telling us how to unload the beams.

After waiting to no avail for the supervisor to return, Father decided to take over and to figure out how to accomplish the job. He wanted to be on good terms with his new German master, if it was possible for a Jew to be on good terms with a Nazi. He directed the men to various positions along the heavy steel beam; when everyone had taken his place, Father called out when to pick up, when to stop, and when to move. All movements had to be

perfectly synchronized, and each man used his full strength to complete the task successfully. When the heavy object had been lifted off the railcar, additional instructions were given as to when to drop it to the ground. Any slip by even one man could mean disaster or serious injury to some workers, which, in turn, would mean certain death for the men in our labor camp. To avoid such a situation, as we held the heavy piece of steel everyone called out all of the instructions which enabled each man to understand what he had to do and encouraged the men to be alert and act responsibly. The calls sounded something like this: "Pick up the front; hold the side; pick up the rear; do not let it down; hold it; lets move it; the rear is letting down; pick it up slowly, right side; let it go down; slowly, slowly.'

Some men had difficulty adjusting to the physical work, and they often had to be reprimanded for not cooperating responsibly with their fellow workers during the strenuous lifting. For many, the freezing weather and the heavy weight of the steel were too much to handle. The gruesome train ride from Riga to Vaivare had left their undernourished bodies in an unstable condition. I sometimes thought these fine men would probably not survive the rough climate or the harsh camp life. It was sad to accept that those in our troika were among the few healthy men in the group.

Our supervisor, the Todt man, showed up frequently to check our progress. Once in a while he would yell at us when we were too slow in unloading the steel cargo. Although it was freezing outdoors, we perspired from the work. All of the men wanted to be at their best on the first day. At noontime a truck arrived with a large container of watery potato soup. It was little nourishment for hungry men, but it warmed our bodies, and the extended rest period helped us. I felt somewhat stronger after I had eaten my small piece of leftover bread with the hot soup.

That first day I could not absorb or analyze my living and working conditions; I was walking and working in a haze. It felt as if a strange, invisible power had taken over me and was guiding my movements. Before the day was over, my body felt numb. I would have given anything for a warm, peaceful rest. I pushed myself the last few hours of the day so as not to disappoint my father or other co-workers. When the day was over, the rest of the men in our group could not have gone on much longer. At four

o'clock we were told to stop working and to congregate in one meeting place. We were glad the day had ended without any injuries to our ambitious, hard-working men.

Under the watchful eyes of the Todt men, the kolonne was guided back to the labor camp, and we were in front of our barracks in less than half an hour. Everyone was ready to warm up around the stove all or being in freezing temperatures and handling cold steel all day, but our wishes were denied, and we were forced to stay outdoors for the evening roll call. Only when the SS lagerführer had finished were we permitted to enter the living quarters. Inside, everybody received his daily bread ration with margarine, and hot coffee was available. Now came the hardest part of the day. I was very hungry and ready to eat all of the bread, some of which was meant for the following day, but I knew I must save some. I exercised incredible restraint and divided the bread into three pieces: one to be consumed immediately, one for the next morning, and the third for the next afternoon on the job. Under the supervision of our own elder, my father, we slowly cut up each piece of bread. The pieces not meant for the evening meal were wrapped in a cloth. The cutting and wrapping of the bread had to be done very carefully to avoid making any crumbs.

After we had our evening meal, the men could devote some time to personal hygiene. I tried to keep my grandfather's shoes clean to prolong their life, for I knew I had an obligation to preserve the gold coins and my mother's picture. I kept myself as clean as possible, and every evening I washed my face, hands, and, at times, chest. During the free evening hours, most of the men relaxed on their bunks or went to sleep early; nobody was in the mood to socialize. I felt a certain compassion for my sleeping neighbor who had passed away. I later realized he had looked familiar to me because he was a very well-dressed gentleman I had often admired on my way to high school, although I never spoke to him. I admired his custom-made suits, the variety of beautiful ties, and the colorful cufflinks that adorned his sleeves. He must have been an attorney, since he always carried a briefcase and was on his way to the central part of Riga. It was sad that such a capable person was unable to withstand the harsh living conditions under the Nazi yoke.

That same evening, before my tired body rested, I exchanged a few words with my new bunk neighbor. He felt more comfortable than he had the previous night, when he had not had his own straw sack. There was a shortage of sleeping spaces in our barracks, but in no time all of the men were in a deep sleep, and another day was behind us.

I found out that this camp had a special work crew to take care of the many corpses. Every night, several people expired in their sleep. I developed a daily habit of checking the upper and lower bunks to see how many inmates had not uncovered themselves, and there were some every morning. I became frightened; I was aware that the Nazis were dissecting my young life, but I knew I must sustain the courage and strength to fight this evil. I became a victim of the fanaticism that had gripped the German people. I also knew I had been brought here not for the sake of my free labor, as they claimed, but for my elimination. Our compulsory labor was a false front—in reality, it was part of Hitler's plan to exterminate European Jewry. I had to learn how to survive in the brutal world that surrounded me at Vaivare and slowly learned to deal with my personal trauma.

The days and weeks passed with great difficulty for all of the men. Our numbers were dwindling with every passing day. Our relationship with the old inmates from Poland became strained; those transported from Riga were labeled unwanted guests. Most of the Riga and German Jews were mild-mannered, soft-spoken men with limited ability to perform the work required in this labor camp. The inmates who had come before us from the Vilna Ghetto were more seasoned and suited to the work, so they found it much easier to adapt to the harsh life. A majority of them had rough manner and talked tough, and they derided us as a "fine and gentle class of Jews," unsuited for the labor camp. They might have been right about us, except for the fact that we performed work unsuited to any human being. The work had to be done without heavy building equipment or tools, but despite the hardships we managed to fulfill our obligations. In conversation, the old inmates expressed a profound concern and sympathy for those from Kaiserwald, but some of the inmates in leadership positions did not practice what they preached when it came to assigning the less strenuous jobs. None of our men was ever assigned to indoor or camp work. In the end it would

not matter, since we all had to face the same daily problem—the fight for our survival.

On one of our days off, a surprising thing happened: I met an old friend from Riga named Wulja. For many days we had been so absorbed with our own problems that we had not noticed the people around us. I was not aware that he had come to Vaivare with the same Kaiserwald transport as I. Happily, we embraced each other and had enough time to exchange a few words. We agreed that we would try to visit each other in our respective barracks and reminisce about our lives in Riga. Thus the day began on a happy note, and I hoped it would end the same way. An even bigger surprise followed when it was announced that all occupants of our barracks would be transported to a bathhouse. Trackloads of men were sent several miles away to a building that housed a large room with many shower heads, a dressing room, and a waiting room. As we entered, we surrounded our underwear for entlausung and, after we had enjoyed hot showers, we went to the dressing room to receive those unwashed but deloused garments. The rest of our clothes were sprayed with an odorless disinfecting powder. It felt good to be clean again, so it was a very pleasant day.

The following day we resumed routine of the working day. Another heavy load of steel was unloaded and piled on the frozen ground; at four o'clock the exhausted, hungry men were again on the way back to the barracks. We passed through the open gate under the watchful eyes of our Todt men and the two Estonian SS guards. I was bothered most by the never-ending pit of fire with the high flame. I visualized the smoke and the bright red flame reaching to the blue sky, asking the heavens for acceptance. In reality, the hot, smoky flame routinely dissipated in the clear, unpolluted air, with nobody paying any attention to its source. I thought, I am one of the very few who knows the flame has engulfed many innocent, decent human beings; if only the charred corpses could cry out and say to the heavens, "Almighty God, why did You let us suffer so much? Now take us in Your arms and spare the lives of the oppressed people below." I could not escape the thought that someday my naked body might simmer in that towering flame, but I had to overcome such emotional thoughts if I wanted to survive. I had to restrain the fight between mind and body; my life was too precious.

This inner struggle was difficult for me. I became moody and depressed; at times, I was ready to give my life up, since I did not see the purpose of continuing. It took me a while, but I finally realized that I had to distance myself from the gruesome vision of flames. With the help of my father and Boris, I was able to pull myself together and bring my mind back to reality.

As time passed, a new phenomenon swept the camp. As a result of malnutrition, the lack of sanitation, and poor hygiene among the inmates, the lice infestation reached such proportions that we had to clean ourselves each night before we could get to sleep. We thus had something new to occupy our time – entlausung. We would try to find all the lice in our clothing and kill them one at a time. They multiplied so quickly that we could never get rid of them all. In the evenings, everybody sat on his bunk, looking for and killing his lice. My father found an easier, more effective way of getting rid of these tiny creatures. We would go to the well in the middle of the campsite, undress halfway, and rub our underwear against the ice that was encrusted on the well; we also washed our chests and backs with the cold well water. All of this had to be done very quickly, as the outdoor temperature was often below zero. This method was cold and unpleasant, but it was also very effective.

Because of the freezing temperatures, at times I did not feel like leaving the warm barracks and was ready to skip my daily rendezvous with the lice. Father went after me faithfully, and his persuasive words always made me agree to go with him. When we returned to our quarters, I was always glad I had listened to Father. We were the only ones who used this effective method. The lice multiplied so quickly that only icing them daily could keep them under control. The insects could eat us alive, and it took me a while to realize that they were as deadly an enemy as the Nazis. I was sorry that a few of my fellow inmates fell victim to these parasites that lived on human blood. Some days they multiplied so rapidly that we could not see an individual louse but saw only large gray spots made up of several thousand lice. Only scraping them against the ice on the well could dislodge them from our underwear. Although this method was harshly cold, it not only temporarily relieved us from the lice bites but also strengthened our bodies' resistance to the harsh winter climate.

One morning before our kolonne went to work, a few of us were taken from the lineup and sent to another work unit that consisted of about a hundred men and needed additional people. The man in charge of this group was an elderly Todt with a back that was severely curved; he had to use a cane when he walked. This supervisor, whose name we never learned, barely spoke to his men, and the few words he did speak were uttered in a strong, nasty voice. He wore a stern, unpleasant expression that seemed to convey that he wanted no one near him. My impression of this man was verified when I went to work for him.

This work kolonne existed for some time, building roads in the middle of the wasteland. The men in our unit had to level off the ground that would serve as the new road foundation. When we reached our work site, we received shovels with long handles. The supervisor ordered several inmates, including me, to take up digging positions across the full width of the projected road. I worked very slowly, since I lacked the proper knowledge of how to dig frozen ground.

The man with the cane constantly surveyed us and checked our progress. If he thought we were working too slowly, he would tell us to shovel faster. I wondered, What is the hurry—where will this road lead to, anyway? This tundra like region is not populated—who will be using this road?

The elderly German let every worker know he could be physically violent. Despite his disability he was on the go all day, checking every group. If he did not feel his harsh words were speeding things up, he would use his cane without hesitation. The unscrupulous man would hit the workers on their heads, backs, and feet. His severe beatings were not limited to one person but would include all of the men in that persons group. At times, he reversed his cane and hit the men with the curved end. Those beatings were painful but did not fully penetrate the heavy, padded winter clothes the inmates wore. Still, some of the men were bruised to such an extent that they were unable to work the next day. The supervisor was so eager to advance his road project that he was willing to shout at and beat his workers. His Nazi beliefs were so strong that he had developed the mentality of a slave owner. I constantly heard his loud voice saying, "Hurry up, hurry up, dig faster; fill

your shovels; move your shovels faster!" At times I thought a man his age must have his own family, with children and perhaps grandchildren. How could he gently caress his innocent children's faces with the same hand that had hurt a helpless man? This man was filled with vicious hatred of the Jews and seemed devoid of the natural instinct to be considerate of other human beings. He was a cruel man and very well suited for the Third Reich.

One day, the supervisor was standing on high ground watching his men dig up the ground. He did not seem to like what he saw, as he lost his temper and started to move furiously toward my group. With the help of his cane, his walking speed increased, and he came straight at me. I was very scared and did not know what to do or to whom I could turn for help. I sent a prayer to heaven: "O Lord, hear my prayer; do not ignore my plea; have pity on me; do not let him hurt me." Before I could utter the last words, he was behind me and began to beat me mercilessly. I received multiple blows on my head and back, and he then turned to the others with his cane raised. While hitting us he shouted, "You dirty bastards—you were moving empty shovels. You tried to fool me. Fill your shovels to the top; keep on digging; faster, faster." I summoned all of my strength and dug as fast as I could. I filled the shovel to capacity with dirt. He watched us for a while and then left to check on the other groups. That was a frightful moment for me. The Todt man had swung his cane with full force but had not hurt me much, since my heavy winter outerwear protected me. I wondered whether somebody in heaven had heard my prayer.

I concluded that I would not last long if I did not learn an easier way to dig. The best teachers were the more seasoned members of the kolonne, so when the supervisor was not around I watched their technique. I noticed that they did not pick up the shovel; instead, they glided it along the sandy ground. A slight turn of the shovel and the dirt slid off to the side of the road. I liked their method, which had two advantages: It required less strength, since the heavy shovel did not have to be picked up, and the shovel was in movement all the time, which pleased the supervisor. After some practice I mastered this new digging process. I was glad when, after several days, I was released from this kolonne and escaped from the ruthless Todt supervisor. I went back to my old job working with the steel beams and was

reunited with the rest of my troika. My job transfer occurred because a few men had been hurt by falling beams; this was unfortunate for them but was a big improvement for me.

The Todt supervisors on this job were more tolerant and understanding of human needs than my previous supervisor had been. These men may have hated Jews much less than that particularly nasty overseer; whatever the reason, they did not beat us. The only threat made to this group was verbal, which hurt no one. The only injury we could incur would be a result of the negligence of our own men. As long as everyone kept working within his capacities, no problems were foreseen. Within a few days of my return, though, Father was severely injured when some men lost their grip on a steel beam and it landed on his foot. For several days he was in pain and could barely move, although he continued to go to work and did his best to help the others. Eventually, he recuperated, but he lost one of his toenails.

A few months had passed since my arrival in Vaivare. The cold fall weather had changed to the most severe winter of the decade. That winter of 1944, with subzero temperatures during the day, turned out to be the determining factor in the outcome of the fighting on the eastern front. The city of Leningrad, located sixty-two miles from Vaivare, was under a siege that lasted nine hundred days. Little did I know that as I was fighting for my survival in German bondage, Father's entire family was fighting off famine and cold in Leningrad. During the war my relatives had moved from their native town of Ostrow to Leningrad to seek shelter. The family consisted of my grandparents, Rachael and Kusiell, two uncles, Monja and Mischa, and my Aunt Rebecca. I knew little about them; I remembered only that Father had sent food packages to Ostrow in the early 1930s. Sadly, my grand-parents succumbed to the famine that persisted in Leningrad during the German siege and to their exposure to extremely cold weather.

The terrible winter also left its mark on the men in our labor camp. Every morning before I got up, I noticed motionless bodies still covered; men had died during the night from hunger and the freezing temperatures. So many good people were gone who could have served our human race well. The more able-bodied men moved slowly on their job sites, their worn, swollen faces showing weariness. Our work group grew from ten to twenty

just to accomplish the same job. My growling stomach, freezing limbs, and parched lips caused me to become progressively weaker. There was no way to obtain additional food, and I thought we had finally reached the stage of becoming objects for destruction. I lived from day to day; each day I drew on my inner strength to enable me to continue my work. I soon became a victim of failing health; I developed a small pimple on the back of my neck that soon became a large, infected boil. It grew to such an extent that it affected my entire neck and head. I sought help at the camp's inefficient infirmary, but the treatment was ineffective, so I decided to treat the boil myself. In the open field I found a white rag that I washed several times at the well. When it had dried I wrapped my neck with it. Every night I washed the cloth and dried it on the stove in the barracks, which gave me a warm, clean bandage in the morning. I soon felt an improvement in my neck, and I eventually managed to heal my own boil. From then on I always wore the ragged piece of cloth around my neck; it was pleasant to at least have a warm scarf in the morning.

The most severe winter of the decade left its mark on the German soldiers in the Leningrad region. Train after train filled with wounded and sick men of all ranks stopped a few hundred feet from our campsite for refueling and maintenance. The soldiers were engaged in the severe fighting on the northernmost front; they were the ones who kept up the long siege of the city of Leningrad. Most had not been injured by bullets but had suffered frostbite. The intense cold created the greatest number of casualties in the German Army; in fact, it was one of the main factors in the downfall of the superb Third Reich Army on many fronts in the Soviet Union. Through the fogged-up windows I could see the bedridden soldiers. Some could move around, but others lay flat on their backs in narrow bunks. Nurses were seen inside and outside the train. The wounded soldiers often sang patriotic military songs in a spirit of victory. Many looked bewildered when they noticed our inmates around the train. I am sure they were wondering who we were and what we were doing in this isolated part of the country. We were happy to see that these evacuated soldiers were wounded and sick, for we viewed their unfortunate destiny as revenge for our sufferings.

These hospital trains had their own kitchens, and when the trains pulled out we often found food on the tracks. I once had a serious argument with my father when one train had left after a lengthy stopover. Our kolonne was on its way to work, and we had to cross several tracks to get to our train. Father picked up a handful of crumbs of bread and other food from the ground; he was very hungry and was ready to eat them. I grabbed his hand and told him he should throw the crumbs back on the ground; I tried to explain that the food could be contaminated with germs from the sick soldiers and that he could get sick if he ate it. Finally, I raised my voice and said, "I always listen to your advice. This time you must listen to mine. Please drop the pieces of food. It is better to be hungry than sick." He did not reply, but he took my advice; he slowly let the crumbs drop to the ground. Apologetically, he said, I was very hungry—that is why I was keeping them. I still do not think I would get sick from a handful of leftover food." With this, our short misunderstanding ended, and no hard feelings lingered between us. I congratulated myself on having withstood my father's strong will; until now, I had merely lived in his shadow. My decision to challenge and convince Father proved I had matured to adulthood faster than I had thought. I was now seen as a mature son who could make important decisions on his own and whose opinions should be considered.

Our trio's health slowly deteriorated. The subzero temperatures, insufficient food, and ever-increasing lice were fearful concerns. I thought, I am on a hopeless road to destruction; only a miracle from God could save me. Even the gold coins I kept in my grandfathers boots could not help us. We found ourselves in a completely barren land, with no other humans in sight. At our present job site we had no access to anyone who would accept our gold coins in exchange for a piece of bread or a few raw potatoes. Vaivare was a place for abandoned people like us, but, most of all, it was a place of death. Every day I quietly prayed for a miracle. Every passing day was precious to me and my two loved ones.

One day I heard an announcement that the Todt organization was seeking a few qualified electricians, so I decided to apply for the job. When I arrived to register, a large group of men had already gathered in front of the Todt barracks. The supervisors were surprised to see so many electricians

applying for work. Only a few of the men assembled were actually electricians, however; the rest were simply desperate to try a lighter, more pleasant job in an effort to survive. Since the Todts were very suspicious, they decided to screen the applicants by examining each one separately. I was sure I would not pass the exams and that my application for the job would be denied. Among the applicants, I met my good friend Wulja. I knew he had attended the Jewish Trade School in Riga, where students took general education courses and learned electrical and mechanical trades as well. He had knowledge of wiring and electronics, so I asked him whether he would help me if necessary. He agreed to do so but told me he did not know what he could do.

As each inmate was called into the office for the exam, Wulja and I decided to be among the last ones questioned. When the first applicants came out of the barracks, we learned that each had been given the same problem: how to install wiring for one light controlled from two places. Wulja knew the process, and with a stick he drew a diagram on the frozen ground. He explained the drawing to me, and I tried to memorize it. Eventually, I was called into the examining room, and a miracle from heaven occurred. When I was asked to draw the wiring diagram, I did it as well as an experienced electrician, just as Wulja had shown me. They liked my drawing and my explanation in perfect German. Most of the inmates from Poland did not speak German but conversed with the Germans in Yiddish, which was close enough for everyone to understand.

The Todt management needed only two electricians, and an inmate from Vilna and I were accepted on the crew. My co-worker was an electrician who had been working in his trade at home, so he was very well qualified for the new job. This young man had been one of the first to arrive at the camp from the Vilna Ghetto and was in good physical condition, considering the terrible living conditions; he must have worked indoors on a less strenuous job assignment than mine. I met him after we had completed our exam; he seemed to be a very pleasant person. I was sorry to hear that Wulja, who was a master electrician, had not been accepted to work in his trade. I thanked him for his much-needed help and expressed my sorrow that we would not be working together. I promised that I would somehow try to compensate

him for his devotion to me, but a few days later he was transferred with other inmates to Nerete, and a long friendship ended abruptly. I will never forget Wulja's unselfish help, which gave me one more tool for survival.

The following day, we two Jewish electricians were assigned to a group of three gentiles. John was from Poland, Tony from Holland, and the third man, whose name I have forgotten, from Luxembourg. A Todt man was in charge, but the three gentile electricians were sympathetic to our situation and were helpful to us. They had been recruited in their native lands and worked for a German company called Licht und Kraft (Light and Power). They had been sent here under duress to install power lines and wiring for the German SS and Todt men's living quarters, which consisted of numerous barracks. We all worked under the supervision of the Todt organization. From the outset, I had to be cautious not to reveal my limited knowledge of electrical work. I watched the professionals perform their tasks. I had to pretend that the work they were doing was familiar to me; in reality, it was not too complicated for me to comprehend, and I was soon ready to work with my co-workers. In the beginning I helped them, but they later allowed me to work on my own.

John was a rough-spoken individual who was in his late twenties. He was always conscientious about his work and tried to accomplish as much as he could to please his German superiors. Tony and the electrician from Luxembourg were easygoing men in their early thirties. They never argued about their assigned work but did not go to far to try to please the Germans.

I most frequently worked with Tony, and we got along very well. We conversed in German, which brought us closer together. He spoke a great deal about how much he missed his family in Holland and showed me pictures of his wife and two small daughters. He wanted to know about my life in Riga and the destiny of my family. His hatred of the Germans was so great that it often slowed my work on our assigned project, for Tony saw me as his confidant and shared his inner thoughts with me. He revealed that when his vacation came, he planned to go home and not return; instead, he wanted to join the underground resistance in Holland. Our co-worker from Luxembourg expressed similar intentions. John spoke very poor German and

felt more comfortable with the other Jewish electrician, who came from Vilna and with whom he could converse in their native Polish.

My new job required a great deal of walking, which I did not mind. I was happy to be able to move about and not be stuck in one place. I felt like a free bird who could fly around the open wasteland to look for nourishing crumbs. In the morning, I had to walk a mile or so to a barracks, where the electricians met with their Todt supervisors. After we had received our assignments, we dispersed—individually, in pairs, or all in one group, depending upon the urgency and size of the job. We worked in the various living quarters and warehouses of the German SS Einsatzkommandos and Todt organization, which were several miles from each other. The German living quarters consisted of barracks, which were very well kept by female Jewish inmates from our labor camp. These women had a fairly comfortable life; they worked indoors, were cleaner and more neatly dressed than other inmates, and received enough food to prevent hunger. They also had the opportunity to listen secretly to the radio and inform other inmates about the situation on the front, which boosted everyone's morale and encouraged us to survive. The news spread quickly until it reached everyone in the camp.

We had to travel on foot to our various job assignments. There were no roads, so we followed man-made tracks through the empty, snow-covered fields. At times, the tracks were obscured by snow, and we had to find our way out through the bushes in the open wasteland. It took me a while to become familiar with the different locations and to know how to find them without getting lost. When I had mastered the complicated orientation, one problem remained: my footwear. My boots had fallen apart as a result of the constant moisture and had been replaced with a pair of wooden Dutch shoes called *klumpes*. I had to master walking in these shoes, and I learned that wooden shoes were very different from leather ones. To wear the klumpes properly, I was not supposed to bend my legs or my toes but, rather, to make slow, sliding movements. My feet had to be wrapped with rags to prevent blisters caused by the harsh wood finish on the inside of the shoes.

The shoes kept my feet warm and dry but prevented me from moving quickly. A solution came about when I was assigned to install porcelain insulators on utility posts for high-tension wires. To reach the top, special

climbing hooks were fitted to our shoes, but for me to use them I needed a pair of regular work shoes. Since mine were wooden, I would have been unable to join my co-workers on these assignments, so my supervisor often loaned me a pair of boots for the job. After a while, as a reward for my good work, I was allowed to keep the boots, which made me very happy. The blisters I had suffered from the klumpes healed quickly, but the scars remain to this day. Still, from then on I could walk painlessly and comfortably. My new shoes became the next hiding place for my gold coins and the small picture of my mother.

One day while I was working in a supply warehouse for the SS and Todt, I noticed fluffy bath towels on the shelves. Thinking of my father and Boris, I took two towels from the shelf and wrapped them around my chest. When I returned to the barracks, I gave the towels to Father; he was delighted to have them. The following morning, before he left the barracks, he wrapped the towels around his body to protect it from the freezing weather. The next day, I stole two more towels; I gave these to my cousin Boris. He, too, wrapped the towels around his body and was more comfortable working outdoors. I tried to steal two more towels for myself, but someone was always present when I walked into the warehouse. Eventually, however, I succeeded in getting towels for myself I knew that if I were caught stealing German property, my life would be in serious jeopardy. To the Germans, the towels meant comfort in their daily lives; to us, they were a necessity for daily survival. They not only kept us warm but served as a shield from the lice that fed on our blood. From then on, the entlausung at the frozen well was changed for the better. Instead of taking off our undershirts, we simply unwrapped the towels from our bodies and shook them against the ice.

I became very well acquainted with my Jewish co-worker. We were two of the most fortunate inmates in our camp, as we were free to explore our surroundings. At times we would leave our work sites and visit the isolated farms nearby. One of us was always on the lookout for anyone suspicious in the area. The farmers we were able to reach were friendly and willing to help. They knew who we were, so no explanation was needed for our presence on their farms. Some gave us bread, others gave us potatoes; everything was

appreciated, and we always thanked them for their generosity. The food we obtained was divided in half, and I shared mine with Boris and my father when I returned to the barracks. At times Tony and the Luxembourg electrician brought me some leftover food they did not care to eat. Both would say apologetically, "We would like to help you more, but we do not get much food either." I tried to explain that I understood their dilemma and was very grateful for everything they did. They always expected less work from me; both of them would say, "Just relax, take it easy; do not exhaust yourself"

I was eager to work in the German living quarters, where I found a window to the outside world. The Jewish women there gave me the latest political and fighting news, which they learned from listening to the radio or overhearing private conversations among the German SS or Todt men. This information gave me the motivation and strength to continue fighting for my survival and eventual freedom. The women told me that despite the unfavourable news from the front, the Germans were still acting like fanatical dreamers—like conquerors of Europe. Their forces were retreating from all fronts, yet they could not see that they would never obtain the lands they desired.

In time, I became the morale booster for the men in our barracks. Many inmates would wait for me to return from work to find out whether I had any new and encouraging information. The report from the front in the winter of 1943 gave us the boost we needed to deal with the difficulties of camp life. After more than two years of successive military victories, the German blitzkrieg efforts had come to a halt. The Soviet forces had begun a massive attack across the eastern front. These attacks soon became so damaging to the Nazis that, reluctantly, Hitler's armies were forced to retreat. General Paulus and his army surrendered, and the Soviets retook Stalingrad. In 1943, Soviet forces advanced rapidly on all fronts. One of the fiercest battles took place around the city of Kursk. Leningrad was still under siege, and the German forces endured heavy casualties there. At the same time, the Allied forces were preparing for the Normandy invasion.

Several railroad tracks around our campsite experienced very heavy traffic. Hospital trains constantly made stopovers for maintenance on their way back to Germany with wounded men. When the trains left, our men

found potatoes, carrots, and other vegetables on the side of the tracks. The food was safer now because these soldiers were not sick but injured. The freezing temperatures did not let up, and it was very hard for Father and Boris to work outdoors all day. I tried to provide them with additional clothing, but it did not help. The cold killed more inmates than the shortage of food. The mortality rate in the labor camp rose considerably, and our bunks had many empty spaces. When our Riga transport had arrived, there had been too few sleeping places for us all. Now, a few months later, the bunks were becoming emptier by the day.

At this point my behavior sank to its lowest level. I lost all sense of decency and, with a few others, participated in gambling on human lives. We would bet on which men would die during the forthcoming night. The tragic individuals were judged by their poor physical condition and unstable mental behavior. I became accustomed to dead bodies, as I saw them on the bunks nearly every morning. Unfortunately, the first to expire were the German Jews from the Riga Ghetto, who could not adapt to the new, difficult surroundings of Vaivare. By this time my heart had become so hardened that the corpses around me did not bring me down. Paradoxically, they had the opposite effect, increasing my determination to outlive other inmates and overcome the hardships in the labor camp. I looked forward to our day of liberation.

One morning my father and Boris were slow to get up. I paid little attention, since I, like everyone else in the barracks, was in a hurry to get dressed, have some coffee and a piece of bread, and be ready for the morning roll. When we were in line on the Appelplatz, I noticed that Father and Boris's faces were puffed up and bluish in color. I knew these were the first symptoms of deterioration as a result of exposure to cold and of a decline in the body's resistance because of malnutrition. These signs could mean, as we said in the camp, "the beginning of the end" of a person's life. I was very disturbed, for I could not imagine the moment when Father's name appeared on the betting table. It was unthinkable that I would bet on my own father's life for the sake of recreation. I asked him how he felt and whether he noticed any swelling in his face. He acknowledged that he felt swelling there, as well as in his feet. He never complained about himself, and I did not

expect him to say anything unpleasant. He always justified his condition by saying it could always be worse.

After roll we went our separate ways, as always. I was bothered all day by Fathers and Boris's appearances. I decided that I had to find a way to get some nourishment for them, even if it meant jeopardizing my own life; I was determined to save their lives. My goal was to locate a farmer with whom I could trade my gold coins or some clothing in exchange for food I could steal from the Germans. I was familiar with the landscape in this part of the country: I knew every tundra bush, footprint, and sled track. Fortunately, the German SS and the Todt knew me as the electrical maintenance man who walked freely from one location to another, so it would not be suspicious if I were found walking in some remote place. I began to look for new sled tracks that might lead me to a farmer who had never met me. Near the end of the day, I found fresh tracks that led to a forest in the distance. I followed them, feeling they would eventually lead me to a farmers house. Soon, I reached the forest and was surrounded by a variety of trees.

Finally, I reached the edge of the forest, but the tracks continued. It was a daring undertaking to walk across an open field, but I had no choice. In the forest I had been camouflaged by bushes and the high trees, but my movement here was completely exposed; I was noticeable from miles away. From a distance I might have looked like a dark speck gliding along the clean, glittering snow. My parents' faces were constantly on my mind: Mother, as my savior in heaven, and Father, for whom I had to be a savior.

At last, in the distance I noticed a farmhouse. As I approached the house, I looked for a watchdog in the snow-covered yard but did not see one. I knocked at the door, and the farmer opened it immediately; he had seen me coming through the open field for some time. He greeted me warmly and let me into his house. He noticed my frozen face and shivering body and allowed me to warm myself at the wood-burning stove. He offered me hot coffee and food; I ate delicious homemade black bread with an assortment of cheeses and sausages. I was a novelty to this Estonian farmer, since none of the inmates would have dared to journey here. He spoke in broken German, but we understood each other very well. He knew I was Jewish and that we

were being mistreated, and I told him I was working for the Germans as an electrician.

I was ready to offer him my gold coins, but before I could speak he called me to the window. He wanted to show me his backyard and the fence that led from the house to the barn. Then he said, "I would like to have electricity in my barn. You see the porcelain insulators on the fence? I installed them but could not finish the job because I lacked wires. Can you provide me with the necessary wires in exchange for produce?" I liked his proposition and thought to myself, If I can strike a deal using wires, I will be able to keep the coins for a future hardship. My reply was to the point: "Can you give me butter, bacon, bread, and other produce in exchange for the wires?" He agreed, and the deal was made. I told him I would be back with the wires within a week. The friendly farmer had known the purpose of my visit from the outset. Without my asking for anything, he filled my pockets with potatoes and pieces of bread. I left the house and made my way back to the camp, happy that my first undertaking with a wealthy farmer was such a success. My promise to deliver wires to him had been made without thought of the consequences that could follow—I had, in fact, put my life on the line.

I walked as fast as I could through the open field and was relieved when I reached the forest. The walk back was much easier, since I knew my destination and the familiar road ahead. I had only one problem: I did not know what time it was. The sun was setting fast, and I had to arrive at camp in time for the nightly roll call. Where the snow was not deep I tried to run, but it soon became very difficult to move at all. In addition to my body weight, I was carrying the additional load of the potatoes and bread. My legs became progressively weaker, I was perspiring from exhaustion, and my breath was condensing to icicles on the scarf that covered my mouth. Finally, I made it out of the forest and found myself surrounded by the familiar low bushes of the tundra. My fear diminished somewhat, but I was still running late. My body was soaking wet, but I kept on until I reached the camp gate.

When I arrived, the inmates were already on the Appelplatz; I could see Father and Boris in the distance waving at me, indicating my place in the lineup. I rushed toward them, knowing I was very late. My Father asked me

where I had been, but I just smiled and winked at him. He quickly got the message that I had lots of surprises for our evening meal.

We stood at attention for the roll call and then returned to the barracks, where our troika enjoyed the treats I had obtained from my new acquaintance. We had enough supplementary food to last us several days.

A week passed, and the materials I had promised the Estonian farmer were on my mind. When the opportunity came, I stole two boxes of wires from my work site. I had to get rid of them before someone noticed they were missing, so I made my way to the farmhouse the next day with both boxes under my arms. I knew my way down the long road, but I needed good luck so no one would see me in the open spaces. I walked as fast as I could. My eyes were focused forward, and my mind was ahead of my body. I did not stop until I reached the forest, where I allowed myself to rest for a few minutes and made sure nobody was following me. My arms were somewhat numb from carrying the wires, but I did not care how I felt as long as I did not meet with foul play at the hands of the farmer or the Germans. When I finally reached the open field, I stopped again to inhale more of the pure air before I thoroughly surveyed the surrounding area. Nothing was moving, and no sounds were audible; in that part of the country, everything is dormant during the winter months.

I crossed the snow-covered field with renewed vigor and determination. The farmer had seen me coming from a distance and was waiting at the door; he seemed very happy to see both me and the wires. A large bag of produce had already been prepared for me. I was told this was the first installment and that I should come back the following week, when there would be another. I took my payment and thanked him for his generosity. I left the farmer's house holding the bag close to my body, as though it were my most treasured possession. I took a break under a pine tree in the forest and slowly opened the bag: There was butter, sausages, cheese, bread, and potatoes. To my amazement, I also found a pint of homemade whiskey; the only thing missing was the bacon I had requested. I was happy with what I had received as my first payment, but I was faced with the dilemma of how and where to distribute it. Slowly, I filled my pockets and other garments,

making sure the bulging areas protruded as little as possible. When this delicate work was finished, I continued the walk back to my quarters.

I was beyond the forest and crossed the tundra as fast as I could. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel every beat through my heavily padded clothes. I knew that if I were caught with this illegal food, my existence would be made miserable in a cruel way. I was disturbed but continued down the unmarked road that led to the camp. My passing through the heavy snow became more difficult with every step. To amuse myself, I began to talk to the bushes: "You bush, you are too tall; you are too bushy, too fat for this place; you have too many branches; you bush, with very few branches, you are worn out and will not survive this winter; ah, you are the best-looking one of all I have seen." This one-sided conversation with the bushes helped me to continue on and to keep my mind focused.

I felt much better when I got closer to the camp and could see the high, red flames from the bonfire. I thanked the invisible force that had protected me and given me the strength to reach home on time. At the gate, the Estonian guard was standing in a wooden booth, protected from the wind; I passed him with a smile and a wave, acknowledging his presence. He smiled back, and I was relieved to have passed through the camp gate. It was after sunset, and the inmates were preparing to line up for the evening roll. Boris winked and Father smiled at me as they noticed my enlarged chest and hips and my protruding pockets. After roll, we entered our barracks excitedly, and every man received his daily ration and hot coffee. Then the three of us crowded on the top bunk Boris occupied and had our meal—the feast of the year. I showed them everything I had obtained; we carefully cut each food item into smaller pieces for convenience and concealed them by carrying them on us at all times. We had not seen such a variety of food in years. As we enjoyed our meal, I told them about my experience and the friendly Estonian farmer. One at a time, we took a sip of the homemade whiskey with a bite of a sausage sandwich. This was a truly memorable evening, different from all other nights; we went to sleep with bellies filled with food. It was also very special for me, knowing I was able to help Father and Boris in their struggle to survive.

The following day life returned to normal. My fears had passed, and I could watch the fruits of my daring mission help my dear ones. The food I brought home lasted quite a while. Father and Boris had a sip of whiskey daily to keep their bodies warm during the unending freezing weather; within a few days, their facial swelling had been reduced and their normal coloring reappeared, which made me very happy. After several days I visited the friendly farmer once again. Just as before, he was extremely generous; another bag of various smoked meats, butter, and bread had been prepared for me. This time, though, he had also included a large piece of bacon. His valuable food prolonged our lives and helped to strengthen us for future challenges. I bow my head in great gratitude to a friend, a nameless rural farmer in Estonia, for his high sense of values and his desire to help another human being in need.

When spring of 1944 was upon us, the melting snow prevented me from going long distances. Although I had an open invitation to visit the farmer, I could not get to him. The open fields were flooded, and the muddy country roads were impassable by foot. Father and Boris still could not leave their workplace, so I became the sole provider of additional food for our trio. We were in good physical shape now, thanks to the help we had received. I was cautious about my unlimited free movement in the countryside, for I did not want to jeopardize the good relationships I had with my Todt superiors and my gentile co-workers. At times I did visit other farmers on the way to or from work. They were accustomed to being visited by hungry inmates of the camp; therefore, their generosity was limited, and they would sometimes give me nothing. At other times I succeeded in begging a few potatoes or a small piece of stale bread the farmer did not want. Even this was enough to partially satisfy our hunger; every little piece of food was a great help. Anything I brought into the camp had to be concealed from the other inmates, so I had to be careful not to arouse the suspicion of anyone in our barracks. As hard as it was, I succeeded in keeping the food a secret. It was hard to see my friends go hungry, which made me much more aware of how fortunate I was.

My spring dreams came true. The sun tenderly began to warm our worn, skinny bodies, and I looked forward to the day when we could shed

some of our shabby winter clothes. The rail traffic became heavy; the German hospital trains, filled with sick and wounded soldiers, passed the camp one after another. The soldiers occasionally sang the famous German national anthem, "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles [Germany, Germany over all]." We also heard the moans of those who were bedridden. The men who were mobile stared at us through the windows as though we were wild animals. The increase in rail traffic gave us incentive to continue fighting for our survival. The Soviet military advancement on the front could be felt at Vaivare, as the heavy fighting neared an end in our favor. Despite all of the German casualties on the front, the dismantling of Soviet industrial complexes was proceeding at full speed. Open railcars loaded with steel beams and girders arrived uninterruptedly for Father and the rest of the men to unload. I was dreaming that a glorious end to my tragic story would arrive by summer. The morale in the camp was high, but, unfortunately, lingering hunger diminished hopes.

With the warmer weather, my working conditions changed somewhat as well. Tony was about to leave for a vacation in his native Holland, and the electrician from Luxembourg was also returning home. Both were very happy to be leaving Estonia, and neither had any intention of returning, I was now working only with John and the other Jewish electrician. We were very busy and had to work hard to fill the outstanding work orders with fewer workers. John, the only remaining foreman, became very demanding and followed us to every job site, which prevented my co-worker and me from calling on farmers for food. When John was under the influence of alcohol, he became very violent. He wanted to go back to Poland but was not permitted to do so. His vacation was scheduled for when Tony came back, but I knew that day would never come and that John was here to stay. The Todt organization had drafted an extensive development plan for the region, and several barracks had already been erected and needed to have electrical wiring installed. John was unhappy about these additional assignments and occasionally took his frustration out on me. I tried my best to please him, assuring him that all of the work would be finished to the satisfaction of our superiors. He was very moody and unhappy in Estonia and was jealous of his friends who had left

for their homes. My Jewish co-worker knew how to handle him, though, and he always managed to reconcile differences pleasantly.

One day I received a work order to repair defective light fixtures in the living quarters of several high-ranking SS officers. It was one of my most memorable days, which began on a positive note but ended with a very sad occurrence. The SS officers' living quarters were several miles apart, and I could move from one to the other without John following me. I easily completed all of the repair work before the day was over. I also managed to stop at a farmhouse, where I was given a few potatoes. At the end of the day, I strolled through the open fields, whistling a tune. I had a habit of doing this whenever I was pleased with the day's events. I returned to the camp, thinking that our trio would not be hungry that night; after a long time with no extra food, we would enjoy baking the potatoes on the stove in the barracks. When I entered my quarters, however, I faced the most serious dilemma of my life.

Father was waiting to tell me he and Boris had been selected to be transferred to another labor camp a few hundred miles away. I was stunned by such unexpected news. Within minutes, I had to decide whether I should join them or remain in Vaivare and continue to enjoy my good job and livable food supply. I knew I must not be parted from my father, no matter what might happen to me. He was delighted when I told him, "I am going with you and will not leave you alone." The new camp was located in a small town called Sonda, where we would work in a sawmill. The work unit of two hundred men was already organized and ready for transport the next day. With great effort, I managed to be included in this group. The fact that I was an electrician made it difficult for my transfer to be approved, but luck was with me again. I was glad our troika had survived this treacherous camp and would stay together, for better or worse.

## *Sonda, My Next Home*

My last day in the labor camp at Vaivare began like any other, with a wake-up call before sunrise, early morning cleanup, the meal of black coffee with leftover bread, and the morning roll call by our lagerführer and his Jewish subordinate. After roll, the two hundred men selected to move on were congregated, and my era in Vaivare neared its end. Army trucks with armed Estonian SS soldiers arrived in the yard to transport us to our new labor camp in Sonda. We boarded the trucks and were on our way. My love for life had paid off; my will to survive was stimulated in Vaivare through inhuman suffering and had developed into an increased capability to fend off hunger and physical abuse. I did not regret my choice to leave the camp, since I felt strongly that each day presented another opportunity for self-preservation and that in the end my freedom would be achieved.

After a few hours' ride along a country road, we arrived at our new campsite, which consisted of only one barrack with a spacious Appelplatz in front. The entire area was surrounded by a high, barbed-wire fence. The barrack was newly erected and included the necessary facilities; everything inside was new and clean. As in Vaivare, our beds consisted of individual two-story bunks with straw bags. The camp lagerführer was a young, noncommissioned SS officer from the Einsatzkommando unit. The camp elder and his assistant were young men from Vilna whom I had never met. By profession, the elder was a butcher, and his assistant was a barber; both were rough, shrewd individuals. Of all of the inmates, only our troika and a young man named Henry were from Riga; the rest were from Poland. It is significant that a majority of the men were butchers from Vilna; this was a select group of able-bodied men in good health. A boy of bar mitzvah age, accompanied by his father and uncle, were the second troika in our midst. This trio, like ours, stayed close together and shared their meager food.

After a days rest, we were ready to go to work. I requested an assignment as an electrician in the sawmill but was denied, since the mill employed its own electricians. We soon discovered that our men would not work at the

sawmill, as we had been told, but in the forest to provide the mill with necessary timber. Only local Estonians worked inside the mill; we had been deceived by the SS in Vaivare so they would not have problems getting the strong, healthy workers they needed. We were sent to the forest in small groups, each of which had a function to perform: we had become lumberjacks. We cut down trees and loaded the logs onto trucks to be transported to the mill. I worked with my father and Boris, trimming the downed trees by cutting off branches with a handsaw or an axe. All chopping and cutting were done manually, which required a fair amount of strength.

The routine in our new camp was the same as it had been in Vaivare, but the living conditions were much better. The barrack was clean and less crowded, with good facilities for washing. The problem with lice was considerably diminished, and we no longer needed to undergo the daily entlausung. Once a week we were sent to the public bath in town. Everyone was very concerned about keeping the barrack clean and sanitary, as well as about taking care of individual hygiene.

Sonda was located in the heart of the Estonian timberland, which was an ideal location. In addition to the sawmill, the town had a slaughterhouse that secretly provided leftover meat to the camp, thanks to the good relationship between the lagerführer and the Jewish elder. We were excited to frequently find small pieces of meat in our soup, but the Jewish camp elder and his assistant benefited most. I was told they ate steaks and other delicately prepared foods in the company of the lagerführer.

The young SS kommandant had his own quarters in the barrack and felt comfortable enough to mingle among the inmates. I considered him a hunk with a six-foot-tall human body and very little brain tissue—a "cheesehead," as we inmates often called him. This noncommissioned officer probably realized he could have been sent to the front and become another German casualty in the war; instead, he belonged to the elite SS Einsatzkommando unit and was fortunate to be out of the fighting zone. He was "somebody" among the weak and helpless incarcerated Jews. In Sonda he could enjoy the fresh, clean country air and exercise his unlimited power over the camp inmates. He often drove to town to satisfy his sexual urges

with local Estonian frauleins, to whom he falsely depicted himself as a brave German soldier.

The living conditions in our camp were dependent upon the elder and his assistant, who knew how to handle the young, inexperienced lagerführer. The inmates generally benefited from the good relationship between the elder and the lagerführer but still suffered from hunger. We received insufficient nourishment for the hard work we were forced to perform. Our troika had an additional problem in this small, confining camp: We found ourselves among a close-knit group of Vilna men. At times it was difficult to live with our fellow inmates, as we were looked down upon because of our Yiddish dialect, the way we performed our work, or other habits they did not like. These men did not hesitate to make fun of us, and their domination and intolerance of the few Riga inmates became unbearable. They stuck together and expressed bias toward us, not realizing we all faced the same destiny. Their harsh life in the Vilna Ghetto and the labor camps had caused their attitude toward other inmates to toughen in an attempt at their own self-preservation. They judged people not by their mental abilities but by their physical strength.

To overcome our mutual misunderstanding, Father tried to speak to the Vilna men in a friendly and reasonable way, but his well-meaning attempts failed. We thought their unwarranted hatred of us might dissipate over time. I recalled how, as a small boy in Riga, I had often overheard the words *Vilner kacovim* [Vilna butchers], which were used to identify a person who was exceptionally rude or who used abusive and obscene words in daily conversation. I never understood the full meaning of these words until I had to live and work closely with men they described.

Eventually, two factors changed the conduct of the Vilna butchers, as we called them. First, they realized that our troika was as able as the rest of the men in handling the work in the forest. In fact, our accomplishments generally garnered us considerable respect from our co-workers. The second happening was the development of a friendship between my father and the assistant elder. They were both interested in politics, and on their days off they would debate world affairs, as well as the eventual outcome of the war. This relationship caught the attention of the Vilna inmates and led to a

friendlier alliance between our factions. We were no longer considered outsiders by the men in our labor camp.

Unfortunately, Henry, the fourth Riga man, faced a different fate. He was a lonely, strong-minded young man, with a history of negative experiences with co-workers in previous camps. Henry was severely undernourished and could not accomplish as much work as the rest of the men in the forest. He sometimes left the work site to look for farmhouses in the area at which he could obtain extra food, so his fellow workers soon labeled him unruly and lazy. One day he left his job to call on a farmer and was given several raw potatoes. When his group returned from work, he was searched by the gate guard, who found the food in his pockets. He was detained and then brought out to stand in front of the men during evening roll call. Our lagerführer accused him of leaving the job site unlawfully and canvassing for food. Henry tried to defend himself, explaining why he was forced to beg, but the SS man was not in the mood to listen and began to beat him with a leather jockeys whip. It was horrible to see his bleeding face.

After a lengthy whipping, Henry was dragged to a bunker that had been built as a lockup facility for prisoners who were being punished. It was like an oversized doghouse covered with earth, and only a hinged door was visible; from the outside it looked like a bomb shelter. Henry was put inside, and the wooden door was locked behind him. He was fully dressed and had a blanket but received no water, food, or additional bedding for two days. When the guards finally opened the door to feed him, Henry lay dead on the sandy ground. This young, mild-mannered man, who had fled from Nazi Germany to Riga with his parents in the late 1930s and then lost them in one of the concentration camps, had met his own gruesome death in the wasteland of Estonia. I asked myself angrily, Did one of the Vilna Jews report him to the authorities, thus indirectly taking his life, solely because he was a German Jew from Riga? Such inhuman treatment was difficult to tolerate; Boris and my father were also very disturbed by this tragic death of a fine young man. We never attempted to discuss the matter with the Vilna inmates, since we feared for our own safety; instead, we closed our minds and shut our mouths. For a few days the incident shook up some of the more socially conscious inmates, and the mood in the barrack became noticeably

tense, but this attitude slowly dissipated as if nothing had happened. Our lives returned to a daily routine, but the memory of the young Jew named Henry lingered in my mind.

Our tiring work in the forest continued with little change. Although spring of 1944 was already upon us, it was barely noticeable in the deep wooded areas. The tall pine trees obstructed the warm rays of the sun, which could not reach the frozen, snow-covered ground. I still wore my shabby, worn-out clothes, which gave me little protection from the chilly air. During working hours we made a bonfire and at times moved near it to warm our cold hands and feet; at mealtime all of the men gathered around the fire. A truck would deliver a tall canister of soup, our only warm meal of the day. The soup was watery, but one could find some slivers of meat and crushed potatoes. Thanks to the donations of meat from the local slaughterhouse, this meal was considerably more nourishing than those we had received in Vaivare. Nonetheless, soup and a piece of bread did not fully satisfy our ever-lingering hunger, although deaths from hunger or cold did not occur in this labor camp; I was grateful not to see a large bonfire of inmates' corpses. I had no way to obtain additional food from outside sources; after witnessing Henry's fate, I did not dare to knock at the door of a local farmhouse.

With the passage of time, our hunger became severe. One day my father came to me with a solution to our problem. "I think I can trust the barber" he said, meaning the assistant elder of our camp. "He seems to be the right man with whom I should do business." "What do you mean, Father?" I asked. He replied, "Over the past few weeks I have had several conversations with him, and he told me about his secret dealings with the slaughterhouse in town to improve the food distribution here." After a pause he continued, "Do you think we should give him one of our gold coins in exchange for some leftover meat or bread?" "That is a very good idea. The only thing I fear is that he might double-cross us," I said, thinking again of Henry. After mulling it over, I agreed with Father that we could take a chance with one of the five gold coins I carried in my boots. I thought that if any problems arose, Father could say he had found the coin in Vaivare.

During the next conversation with the barber, my father suggested that he could obtain an old Russian ten-ruble gold coin in exchange for some

meat. The barber accepted Father's offer without hesitation, and it was agreed that he would provide several pieces of edible meat in exchange for the coin. Our troika feared the possible outcome of this deal, but we soon began to receive small, concealed packages containing baked meat that could be readily consumed. Much of it was not meat but, rather, pieces of cow organs: liver, lungs, kidneys, and stomach. We did not mind, as long as the food was edible and satisfied our hunger. Father was glad his undertaking with the head of our labor camp had been successful and that our worries had been unjustified. Every few days the barber secretly gave Father the promised packages. Our fight for survival was again strong.

After a few weeks the assistant elder told my father, "This will be the last package you receive from me. The slaughterhouse people will not give me any more for your coin." Father said nothing and took his words in good faith, although we had received fewer than the agreed-upon number of packages. The actual cost of these organs was a small fraction of the value of the Russian czar's ruble, but to us oppressed and hungry men, gold had no value since it was inedible. Until now, we had not been able to use the valuable coins to improve our desperate health condition. Father, Boris, and I could have died of hunger while the valuable coins lay untouched in my boots, so we were happy to still our hunger pangs with the ready-cooked meat—be it lung, kidney, or a piece of stomach. After a long time, Father traded another gold coin; again, we received baked bits and pieces of organs the slaughterhouse would normally have put in the garbage. That "garbage" gave me and my loved ones a new lease on life, improving our mental and physical strength and giving us hope.

Eventually, the sun's rays penetrated the thick branches of the pine trees, and we could finally take off our old, worn-out winter clothing. The snow melted and the grass appeared, with wildflowers in the open expanse of the forest. As nature became rejuvenated by the warmth of the sun, so did our men. They enjoyed the sparkling rays of sun and the fresh aroma of pine; with the change in the weather, a considerable change occurred in our co-workers' attitude toward our troika. All harassment ended, and we helped each other like a close-knit family. We had been so estranged only a few months but we were now bonded in friendship.

Father made more deals with the assistant elder, and I soon had only one gold coin left. Father received the small packages of meat at different times and places so as not to arouse the suspicions of the other inmates. Eventually, the assistant apparently formed the sudden, unfounded notion that my father had stocked away a fortune in gold rubles. We assumed he had decided to find them without harming us, for we often found our bunks ransacked when we returned from work. Only then did we realize that somebody was after our supposed fortune, thinking it was tucked away in our straw bedding. It was not enough that we had given the valuable coins away for much less food than they were worth, but somebody had now become greedy and wanted to obtain them for nothing. We had no proof of who had done the ransacking, but nobody except the barber could have been responsible, since it was done while the other men were at work. It would have been impossible to have searched anybody's bed without the knowledge of the camp elder or his assistant. At any rate, whoever had looked for our coins was probably disappointed.

The seeker of our fortune was so desperate that he searched our clothing in the bathhouse. One Friday when we returned from the shower room, we found our pants and jacket pockets turned inside out and our socks removed from our boots. Our last gold coin had not been found, for I had wrapped it in a piece of cloth and pushed it into the pointed toe of my boots. If the interloper had shaken my boots, it might have fallen out. We had to find a way to outsmart our foe so we would not lose that coin; following this incident, whenever we went to the bathhouse we never all went into the shower room together. Our nest egg was watched at all times by one of us, and our clothing and boots were never again touched. Father continued his friendly discussions with the camp's assistant elder but stopped the food dealings with him, since he feared harm might come to us. He made it clear to the barber that no more gold coins were available.

Our camp elder and his assistant, who worked as a team, were widely admired by the inmates in our labor camp for providing better food and a calmer atmosphere in the camp and at our workplaces than we had experienced in previous labor camps. After Henry's tragic death, no more casualties occurred as a result of "natural causes", meaning deaths caused by

hunger and mistreatment. The inmates were peaceful and, for the first time in a long time, were thinking of a better future. I had a vision of becoming a free man again, but our wishful dreams were soon cut short.

At the end of August 1944, rumors spread through the camp that the rapid advancement of the Soviet Army on the front could mean our labor camp would be evacuated. Within days the persistent rumors had become a reality. Early one morning we were ordered to pack our few belongings and leave them on the bunks. After neatly making our beds, we left the barracks for morning roll call. I noticed that our guards around the fence had been joined by several Estonian soldiers. Our lagerführer and the Jewish administrators became nervous and engaged in short conversations among themselves. Finally, the lagerführer announced that he expected the arrival of higher SS officers, who would inspect us.

Soon a private military car and a canvas-covered truck entered the camp, and several high-ranking officers from the Einsatzkommando stepped out. The rear gate of the truck opened, and several German SS soldiers, armed with machine guns, jumped off. We realized that something terrible was going to happen to us, and the memory of the massacre of the Jewish ghetto police in Riga sprang to mind. We were ordered to stand at attention while we were examined. This meant we could not move or converse, so I looked at my father and he looked at me. I exchanged glances with Boris; at times, our gazes crossed, as though we were signaling a last farewell. With the nervousness of our lagerführer, the presence of the newly arrived SS officers, and the heavily armed SS soldiers in the background, I found myself in a very hostile environment. Finally, the highest-ranking officer, accompanied by our lagerführer, began to walk between the rows of inmates, thoroughly and systematically checking each one's appearance. He picked his victims with a raised arm and a pointed finger, saying, "You, out; go to the truck." Both men walked slowly and carefully, selecting their men. I looked straight ahead and could only hear from a distance, "You out, you out; go to the truck."

The loud, deadly words of the SS officer quickly grew near. My body froze, and my heart felt as if it were beating a thousand times a minute. I occupied my mind with one concern: the fate of my father. I thought, What shall I do if Father is called out? Shall I go with him, as I did before, or shall

I let him go alone to face certain death? What shall I do? I hoped it would not come to that. At this crucial moment of my life, only my father was on my mind; I could not think about myself, for I was in a complete state of shock. The officer was slowly moving from my right, intently observing every inmate. The dismissals were repeated several times, and the officers growling words sank so deep in my mind that I thought I would go insane, idly standing, glued to my spot. The selected inmates left the lineup and walked slowly toward the truck. I wanted to pray to God for our safety, but my experience had shown me that the God of any religion had abandoned me and my people. Some gods seemingly supported or sympathized with the Nazis. To pray for my salvation, I could only rely on my immortal mother in heaven; she was the only goddess upon whom I could call to rescue me at this decisive moment.

Before I could utter a prayer, I heard the SS mans distinctive voice say, "You; go to the truck." He was pointing to the boy from the other troika, who did not move. The officer said, "Come on, come on," but before he could finish the words "go to the truck" the boy's father interrupted the determined officer and said, "He is my son—please leave him here with me." The SS man paid no attention and called on the boy again. "Faster, faster; go to the truck". Suddenly, the loud, crying voice of a child sounded throughout the Appelplatz: "Papa, Papa, Papa!" "I want to go with my son," said the father nobly. "You can go with him," replied the officer, and the pair left our lineup and vanished under the canopy of the military truck, the father holding his sons hand. This loss saddened me greatly. I had often wondered how the boy had been able to survive the severe camp life in Vaivare; he and his father and uncle had arrived there long before our transport from Riga.

The selection continued. The officer passed the boys uncle and stopped in front of my father. I noticed that Father had puffed his cheeks out to alleviate their sunken appearance and had straightened his posture as much as he could. He was trying to look his best, and his desire to live could be seen on his strained face. Slowly, the SS man moved away from him without lifting his arm. I felt relief. O God, Father is safe, I thought. Then the German officer neared me, and I, too, puffed out my cheeks. I feared him greatly, for he could end my life by pointing his finger. He looked at

me for a split second and then passed, continuing toward Boris. I stayed at attention, then I noticed that he had passed my cousin and was slowly moving farther and farther away. My only concern was that Boris and Father were safe.

Down the line, I could hear the SS officers words again: "You, go to the truck." When he and the lagerführer had reached the other end of the line, twenty men had been confined in the truck. Without delay, both men joined the other officers, and after a short conversation, they departed, giving a brisk "Heil Hitler" salute. The soldiers who stood at the rear of the truck closed its gate. I could see the dust the truck raised as it hurried away; in a few minutes it had completely vanished from sight. The twenty innocent men, who represented 10 percent of our camp's population, were on their way to be massacred. Their mute, mass grave somewhere in the forest of Sonda will never bear a marking or a trace of the people who committed the gruesome crime. This genocide of innocent men was known in Yiddish as the "Zen Percent Akciye," or the "Ten Percent Solution "

Our lagerführer returned and dismissed us, but none of us moved. We stood like wooden soldiers, glued to the ground. The camp elder looked around and then began to shout "Why are you all standing? Move, move; go to the barracks." With expressions of outrage and sorrow, the inmates slowly began to disperse. Everyone was tense and lost in thoughts of what had just happened; it was an unexpected experience that none of us would ever forget. Later, at another evacuation camp, I met inmates from other labor camps who informed me that gestapo headquarters in Berlin had ordered every evacuated Jewish labor camp to reduce its population by 10 percent before transporting everyone to Germany. There were hundreds of Jewish victims before the urgent German retreat from the Baltic countries ended.

Our men left the lineup as though they were leaving the funeral of a devoted friend. I held the boy s grieving uncle without saying a word, for the poor man had just lost his brother and a bar mitzvah—age nephew. I walked into the barrack, where a dead stillness hung in every corner. None of us could yet comprehend what had occurred on the Appelplatz. Everyone was mourning for the unfortunate men whose lives had been snatched away with the point of a finger. We all felt as though we had returned from

heaven and been granted new lives. Father sat on his bunk and wiped the cold sweat that appeared on his forehead. "Ohhh, was *that* a roll call. I will never forget this one," he whispered to me. Boris removed his jacket, and his entire body was soaking wet from this tragic experience. With the passing hours our pain slowly subsided, and the men began to converse in whispers, as though we were confined to an area in which our regular voices were not permitted. Our troika was happy to be alive to face the uncertain future together.

My last day in Sonda was far from over. Late in the afternoon, our evacuation began. Each inmate received coffee and a somewhat larger than usual ration of bread. After the meal we were ordered to our second lineup of the day on the Appelplatz. A large corps of heavily armed Estonian SS soldiers appeared and surrounded the camp, I supposed to ensure that nobody escaped. Another roll call took place as the men stood five in a row, ready to leave the camp. The soldiers surrounded us; under the leadership of the lagerführer, we marched through the camp gate and walked toward the small Sonda railroad station. When we arrived, I noticed the familiar boxcars on the tracks, ready for our evacuation. The men were evenly divided among the cars, and our troika wound up in a group of inmates with whom we had worked in the forest. We knew each other well and felt like one large family; I was glad to be with friends. We were ordered to board the boxcars; after everyone had found a place, the Estonian guards put in our toilet bucket and shut the heavy sliding doors, and we were on our way to Germany. The guards accompanied us in their comfortable, private railcar.

I left the God-forsaken country of Estonia without having observed nature in full bloom or hearing a birdsong. I had walked through miles of open prairies and deep forest but had never seen a print of any wild animal. I left behind my perished countrymen in unmarked graves and departed from this land, in which I had encountered the crudest days of my life. Plagued by cold, illness, and unending hunger, this place brought to life the darkest pages in the history of mankind. It was the setting for a frightful experience that will stay with me to the end of my days.