

127. MEMORIES OF THE HOLOCAUST

(1938–1945)

The following selections are the recollections of three survivors of the Holocaust. Sam Bankhalter was born to a Jewish family in Lodz, Poland; Fred Baron to an Austrian Jewish family; and Reidar Dittmann was a Protestant Norwegian. Although from very different backgrounds and countries, they all had one thing in common: they were deemed enemies of the Nazi state. Burkhalter and Baron were Jews, and Dittmann was a political dissident. All three were very lucky in that unlike most of the others who fell into the hands of the S.S., they survived.

Baron and Burkhalter were deported to the infamous death camp at Auschwitz in occupied Poland, and Dittmann was held in the German camp at Buchenwald. They were rescued at the end of the war by Allied forces.

[Sam Bankhalter's father was a manufacturer of prefabricated wooden houses, a Hebrew scholar, and an ardent Zionist who helped young Poles who wanted to go to Palestine. Sam was running an errand for his father when the Nazis caught him and sent him to Auschwitz.]

There was always anti-Semitism in Poland. The slogan even before Hitler was "Jew, get out of here and go to Palestine." As Hitler came to power, there was not a day at school I was not spit on or beaten up.

I was at camp when the Germans invaded Poland. The camp directors told us to find our own way home. We walked many miles with airplanes over our heads, dead people on the streets. At home there were blackouts. I was just a kid, tickled to death when I was issued a flashlight and gas mask. The Polish army was equipped with buggies and horses, the Germans were all on trucks and tanks. The war was over in ten days.

THE GHETTO The German occupation was humiliation from day one. If Jewish people were wearing the beard and sidecurls, the Germans

were cutting the beard, cutting the sidecurls, laughing at you, beating you up a little bit. Then the Germans took part of Lodz and put on barbed wire, and all the Jews had to assemble in this ghetto area. You had to leave in five or ten minutes or half an hour, so you couldn't take much stuff with you.

The Jewish community chose my father to run the cemetery, to organize burials and clean up the streets, because dead people started smelling on the streets. They brought in frozen Jewish soldiers, hundreds and hundreds. I helped bury them.

AUSCHWITZ We were the first ones in Auschwitz. We built it. What you got for clothing was striped pants and the striped jacket, no underwear, no socks. In wintertime you put paper in your shoes, and we used to take empty cement sacks and put a string in the top, put two together, one in back and one in front, to keep warm.

If they told you to do something, you went to do it. There was no yes or no, no choices. I worked in the crematorium for about eleven months. I saw Dr. Mengele's experiments on



Jews rounded up in the Warsaw Ghetto, World War II.

children, I knew the kids that became vegetables. Later in Buchenwald I saw Ilse Koch with a hose and regulator, trying to get pressure to make a hole in a woman's stomach. I saw them cutting Greek people in pieces. I was in Flossenbug for two weeks, and they shot 25,000 Russian soldiers, and we put them down on wooden logs and burned them. Every day the killing, the hanging, the shooting, the crematorium smell, the ovens, and the smoke going out.

I knew everybody, knew every trick to survive. I was one of the youngest in Auschwitz, and I was like "adopted" by a lot of the older people, especially the fathers. Whole families came into Auschwitz together, and you got to

Dr. Mengele, who was saying "right, left, left, right," and you knew, right there, who is going to the gas chamber and who is not. Most of the men broke down when they knew their wives and their kids—three-, five-, nine-year-olds—went into the gas chambers. In fact, one of my brothers committed suicide in Auschwitz because he couldn't live with knowing his wife and children are dead.

I was able to see my family when they came into Auschwitz in 1944. I had a sister, she had a little boy a year old. Everybody that carried a child went automatically to the gas chamber, so my mother took the child. My sister survived, but she still suffers, feels she was a part of killing my mother.

I waved to my mother and I went over to my father and said, "Dad, where's God? They kill rabbis, priests, ministers, the more religious, the faster they go! What has happened?" His only answer to me was, "This is the way God wants it." This was the last time I spoke to my father. . . .

[Fred Baron was fifteen when the Germans marched into Vienna in 1938. His parents were well-to-do assimilated Jews; both died in the Holocaust.]

. . . In March 1938 the Germans marched into Austria. What had evolved in Germany over five years happened in Austria within a matter of weeks.

THE OCCUPATION One of my best friends became overnight an outspoken Austrian Nationalist and an anti-Semite. I was kicked out of high school. My father's store was closed down. Bank accounts were closed, people lost their jobs, Jews were not allowed to practice as professionals. We were penniless, forced to share our apartment with other Jews.

Jews could not go to any public building or any parks. We could not go to a library or movie. We were not allowed to ride on public transportation except under certain conditions, and then only on the rear platform. We could not go into a store, except one hour a day. Even if we had money we were not allowed to buy many things, including some foods, because they were just not sold to Jews. I went to a soup kitchen every day to bring home our only meal.

September 1, 1939, war broke out with Poland, and after a few weeks they took Jewish people on trains and dumped them in ghettos in Polish cities. Many of our friends were taken this way. My father saw his family, everything, going down the drain. He became very sick, and there was no medical treatment for Jews, so he didn't get any treatment and soon died.

My mother and I were hiding one night here and one night there, with non-Jewish

friends. Anybody hiding a Jew was subject to terrible penalties, so to ask even a close friend to hide you was not an easy thing to do. We also tried to hide in Jewish apartments where the people were already deported.

Then I found work at the railroad station and was given security for myself and my mother. I worked carrying pig-iron on my shoulders.

In fall of 1941 the German extermination policy really got running. Transports to the east were increasing, so my mother and I went over the border at night to Hungary.

In Hungary I was trying to get legal documentation so we could get food stamps. I traveled to a little town where somebody with connections was supposedly able to give us the necessary papers. But a crime was committed in the town, and as soon as they saw me, a stranger, they put me in jail. The judge said I was innocent but wanted to send me back to Austria! I tried to explain that being sent back there was like a death sentence, and finally the judge dismissed me because I had some papers from my father, who was a volunteer and an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army in the first World War. I was given papers that I was a legal resident of Hungary and could get food tickets.

Then the Hungarian authorities got hold of my mother and put her in jail in Budapest. Because we entered the country without papers, they told her they would deport her unless I would join her.

This was December 1941. We were sent to an internment camp in northeastern Hungary. There were separate buildings for men and women, but I saw my mother from time to time. Later all the male Jews were sent to a prison camp near the Slovakian border, and my mother was freed to live with relatives in Hungary. She sent me letters, a package containing some clothing, even a cake. Then the German S.S. completed the occupation of Hungary in the spring of 1944, my mother again was put into a camp, and that was the last I heard from her.

DEPORTATION I was marched with the local Jewish population—men, women, and children—eight or ten hours, to a small railroad station. Nobody told us where we were going. We were forced into railroad cars, 100 to 120 in one car, like sardines, without food, without water, without any sanitary facility. The cars were sealed and we stood there for maybe half a day before even moving. Finally, began the slow trip to nowhere.

There were children in our car, and old people. People got sick, died, and some went insane. It was an absolute, indescribable hell. I really don't know how many days and nights we were in that living hell on wheels.

When we finally stopped, they tore open the railroad cars and we were blinded by light, because our eyes were just not used to light any more. We saw funny-looking characters wearing striped pajama-like uniforms with matching caps, with great big sticks in their hands. They were screaming and yelling in all languages to jump out of the cars.

I didn't know where I was. All around us were barracks and barbed wire and machine gun towers, and in the distance I saw what looked like a huge factory with black smoke coming out of chimneys. I noticed a peculiar smell in the air and also a fine dust, subduing the light. The sunshine was not bright but there were birds singing. It was a beautiful day.

We were marched through a meadow filled with yellow flowers and one of the fellows next to me just turned and walked straight into the meadow. The guards cried out to him to stop, but he didn't hear or he didn't want to. He just kept slowly marching into the meadow, and then they opened up with machine guns and the man fell down dead. And that was my reception to Auschwitz.

AUSCHWITZ We were separated, men and women, and formed rows of fives. I found myself in front of a very elegantly dressed German officer. He was wearing boots and white gloves and he carried a riding whip, and with the whip he

was pointing left or right, left or right. Whichever direction he pointed, guards pushed the person in front of him either left or right. I was twenty-one years old and in pretty good shape, but older people were sent to the other side and marched away.

We had to undress and throw away all belongings except our shoes. We were chased through a cold shower, and we stood shivering in the night air until we were told to march to a barracks. We were handed prisoner uniforms—a jacket, pants, and a sort of beanie—and a metal dish. We didn't really know what happened yet. We were absolutely numb.

A non-Jewish kapo, an Austrian with a hard, weather-beaten face, told us, "You have arrived at hell on earth." He had been in prison since 1938, and he gave us basic concepts on how to stay alive.

"Don't trust anybody," he said, "don't trust your best friend. Look out for yourself. Be selfish to the point of obscenity. Try and stay alive from one minute to the other one. Don't let down for one second. Always try and find out where the nearest guards are and what they are doing. Don't volunteer for anything. And don't get sick, or you will be a goner in no time."

Auschwitz was gigantic—rows and rows of barracks as far as the eye could see, subdivided by double strings of electric barbed wire. There were Hungarians and Polish Jews and a great number of Greeks, many Dutch Jews, some French, Germans.

Food was our main interest in life. In the morning we received what they called coffee—black water. We worked until noon, then we got a bowl of soup. In the evening we received another bowl of either vegetable or soup, a little piece of bread, and sometimes a tiny little piece of margarine or sugar or some kind of sausage. And that was the food for the day.

Suicides happened all the time, usually by hanging, at night. One fellow threw himself in front of a truck. It just broke his arm, but the S.S. guards beat him to a pulp, and in the morning he was dead.

A tremendous number of transports were coming in. The gas chambers could not keep up, so they were burning people in huge pits. Some of the smaller children were thrown in alive. We could hear the screams day and night, but sometimes the human mind can take just so much and then it just closes up and refuses to accept what is happening just 100, 200 feet away. . . .

[Reidar Dittmann was a Lutheran. He was only eighteen, a music student studying choral conducting, when the Germans occupied his country in April 1940.]

I was the first political prisoner in the history of my home town, and my home town is 1,100 years old! In October of 1940 I demonstrated against the Germans by leading 4,000 young people singing anti-German songs, and I was arrested and given a six-week jail term. But my father came, and the judge let him take me home.

When the underground was organized that same fall, it became reasonable for the organizers to use someone who had already showed his loyalty. As a clerk in a shipyard building ships for the Germans, my task as a member of the resistance was to see to it that work would go very slowly. One day a major merchant vessel was being officially baptized by the admiral of the German fleet in Norway. His wife cracked the champagne bottle on the prow, the ship sailed down the bedding—and then it sank! We had removed the plates the night before. I was sentenced to life imprisonment for that and sent to build coastal fortifications.

Then the puppet premier of Norway, Vidkun Quisling, pardoned 1,000 political prisoners according to age, and since I was only nineteen, I was sent home. I immediately got back into the underground, and I was apprehended again. This time I was sent to Germany, to Buchenwald.

BUCHENWALD The first concentration camps in Germany were built to get members of the political opposition out of the way. The senior inmate in my barracks was a German Social Democrat, a member of the city council in Kassel. He was imprisoned on April 15, 1933, six weeks after the Nazi takeover! He was a professional survivor, number 431. I had number 32,232.

The corpse carriers were one of the more active working teams in Buchenwald. From 800 to 2,000 people died every day. We estimated that if you were Norwegian, Dutch, Danish, you might survive. If you were Belgian or French, your chances were slightly poorer. If you were Czechoslovakian or Hungarian, they were even poorer. As a Polish prisoner, you had a life expectancy of three weeks. The Jews, of course, were a totally separate category, brought into Buchenwald for the express purpose of being exterminated.

We wore our numbers in a triangle on our left breast pocket. A red triangle meant political prisoner, and we had *NO*, which meant *Norwegian*. Criminals were wearing green triangles. Jewish prisoners had a purple triangle. The tattooing of numbers was reserved for Jewish prisoners.

On my card was written "Germanic intellectual material." I was Lutheran, Protestant, I was a university student, I was "Germanic"—blue eyes, blond hair. I was like an S.S. recruitment poster! So in a sense, that card said I was destined to survive. . . .

Everything you did in camp, you did through responding to the public address system. One morning we were informed that roll call was delayed. We could hear the grinding of trucks, the mobile gas chambers that were waiting. And we knew that the night before some 10,000 Jews had arrived from Hungary.

We were hovering out in front of our barracks, and we heard this shuffling of wooden shoes against the gravel, from the lower part of

the camp. The sound came closer and closer, and in the grayness of this November morning we saw masses of people shuffling toward the roll-call area.

They were all males. There were some so old they couldn't walk by themselves but had to be supported by younger individuals. And there were some so young they hadn't yet learned to walk, and they were carried in the arms of their fathers, their uncles, their grandfathers. They were all walking toward annihilation.

And on this particular day, the smoke poured forth so voluminously from the crematory chimney that daylight didn't break through.

As the war approached its end in the spring of 1945, we hardly got any food at all. I was convinced I wouldn't survive, because we were all thinking, "The Germans are not going to let us get out and tell about it."

LIBERATION To be called to the gate meant to be exterminated. On March 18, 1945, the announcement came over the public address

system, "All Norwegians to the gate." We were 349 Norwegians. We shuffled up the walk to the roll-call area, and the commander-in-chief—he was hanged in Nuremberg—came in with two people in dusty uniforms. He was smiling. To see him frown was horrible. To see him smile was even worse.

One of the two young men in the dusty uniforms said to us in Swedish, "I have come to take you to neutral Sweden." We didn't believe it. We thought that this is a trick. And then he said, "Go back to your barracks and pick up your belongings."

If he had been part of the system, he would certainly have known that we had nothing but our striped suits, and a triangle with a number, and our wooden shoes! So we shuffled back to the barracks, and into the barracks, and out again, and back to the roll-call area. And there they were, the two in the dusty uniforms, and the commander was gone. And the same young man said, "All right, boys. Let's go. . . ."

I weighed ninety-two pounds.

QUESTIONS

1. Extermination became Nazi policy for the Jewish people in 1941. How did the regime deal with Jews before that date?
2. Some Jews survived the Holocaust by eluding capture. How did Fred Baron manage to escape captivity for so long?
3. What were conditions in the camps like? What could a prisoner do to survive?
4. Nazi racial policy dictated different treatment for different nationalities—how does this document illustrate this point?
5. Compare these accounts with the testimony of Adolf Eichmann, the man who organized the transport of Jews to the camps (pp. 279–281). How different are they?