



## David Kaye

### Some of these experiences may cause distress.

In September 1939, the German Army occupied Lodz (Poland). My family and myself had to wear the Star of David. We were short of food. In 1940 we were all placed in the Lodz Ghetto. We had only one room between the whole family, there were five of us. I was put to work in a factory producing nails for the shoes of the German Army. I worked long hours, sometimes all through the night, and there was very little food. A lot of people became ill and died from malnutrition. A lot of diseases prevailed, especially dysentery, which left us all weak. I felt weak all the time from lack of food. This way of life went on 'til 8 August 1944 when my parents, my two sisters and myself were put on a cattle train with lots of other people. Destination, it later transpired, was Auschwitz. It was a terrible journey. We were all packed in, like sardines. The smell of human excrement - unbearable.



David Kaye in 1950, aged 22.

On arrival at Auschwitz, I was separated from my mother and sisters. My youngest sister was screaming wildly from fear, and her screams will live with me for the rest of my life. This is the last time I ever saw my mother and younger sister. I don't, even to this day, know how they died and when. My older sister survived both Auschwitz and Belsen concentration camps, but died at the age of 41 in New York.

My father was with me for a while in Birkenau (an offshoot of Auschwitz). I was separated from him around the middle to end of August 1944 when a tattooed number was put on the inside of my left arm and, along with other boys of my age, we were sent to the main camp of Auschwitz and from there I was sent to work to Hof Birkenau, where I was put to work in the horses stables.

The daily routine was as follows: I was woken up at 3:30 am when I had to stand, together with my other inmates in one spot for about half an hour (Appel) to be counted, no matter what the weather, until the SS were satisfied that the number of inmates were present and correct. Then from 4:00 am to 7:00 am I had to clean the horses in the stable using a special brush, and to prove the job was done correctly I had to knock out so many strokes of white dust from the horses onto the stable floor. On one occasion the SS man was not satisfied with my work so he punched me hard in the stomach, which has damaged my bowel.

At 7:00 am we at last got some food, which consisted of a stale piece of dry bread and black coffee. After that I was put to work in the fields, doing all kinds of jobs, even ploughing, a job which was most unsuitable for a boy of my age. At 12:00 midday, we



stopped for so-called lunch which was a bowl of soup fit for pigs, and at this point I would like to state that this was the last meal we had until the next day at 7:00 am when we got the dry bread and coffee.

After the midday break, I worked right through the day until it got dark when I returned to work with the horse inside the stables. (Feeding the horse, cleaning etc.) This work went on until 11:00 pm when we all fell, exhausted, into the bunk, to again be woken up the next day at 3:30 to follow the same routine, day after day.

Needless to say, there were many dead each day. If you became ill, then you were as good as dead. Things got really bad when the winter of 1944 - 45 came as we had no proper clothing to combat the weather. All through the winter weather, my hands were exposed to the severe frost as I had no gloves and as a result both my hands were severely frostbitten. To this day my hands are still affected. On one occasion, an SS man made me stand on one spot during a very cold day, 25° below zero, for six hours.

On 18 January 1945, as the Russian Army was approaching from the East, we were all rounded up and surrounded by SS guards and started walking due west, a walk which lasted non-stop for two days. Anyone who dropped out was immediately shot by the guard. Unfortunately, many prisoners who through lack of food were so weak collapsed from exhaustion and were therefore shot. On one occasion, during that walk, it was night-time, a Russian woman prisoner (we were a mass transport of mixed nationalities, both men and women), collapsed and as I was passing her, the guard aimed the rifle towards her half dead body and fired two shots at her. As it was dark I could see the fire coming out of the rifle barrel and go into the woman's body. This vivid picture has been haunting me to this day and I always wondered whether the woman felt the bullets hitting into her flesh. This sight made me gain strength as I knew if I gave up, I would be shot.

After walking for approximately 75 miles, we were put into open wagons at a railway station which took us to Weimar and then another 10 miles walk to Buchenwald concentration camp. In Buchenwald we did not work, it was just as well as every one of us was extremely weak from lack of food and this was now almost six years of war, suffering and hunger. A piece of dry bread was regarded as a luxury, and so were potato peelings, let alone potatoes. Life in Buchenwald was similar to that in Auschwitz except we did not work. We had to get up very early in the morning to attend the Appel, we had to stand in the freezing cold to be counted, again we got a piece of dry bread around 7:00 am and a bowl of soup at midday and after that nothing at all until the next morning.

The barracks were full of prisoners and we were all huddled together on bunk beds. The smell was unbearable. A lot of us were sick and sometimes we found ourselves waking up to dead bodies around us. It was all taken for granted and the most important thing was that everyone thought of their own survival and how to achieve it.



I was in Buchenwald until 8 April 1945. On that day we could hear the guns of the approaching of the Allied Armies from the West. The SS in the camp started to retreat, but instead of leaving us prisoners to be liberated from this hell, they rounded up around 5,000 of us, including myself, and made us retreat with them. Firstly, we walked for ten miles to Weimar rail station, and the same principal applied, namely anyone who dropped out with exhaustion was shot dead and naturally this happened to many in the transport. We did not know that the next four weeks would turn out to be the worst time of our six years of suffering with the chances of dying had increased tremendously.



Prisoners in open wagons, 1945.

We were put onto a train of cattle wagons which were completely open with approximately 150 people to a wagon and started proceeding in a south-easterly direction towards the Czech border. The wagon I was in consisted mostly of boys my age (16 - 17 years old), and there were so many of us we were almost lying one on top of another. We did not mind that as it was very cold, and we sort of huddled together to try and keep warm. On every wagon there sat on top an SS guard, and one wagon held a contingent of SS Guards.

It was cold and dark, snow was covering us, and this was especially bad for those who were lying on top of the other boys. Most of us were groaning and crying, as we were all lying on top of each other in a very uncomfortable and awkward position. One incident I clearly remember nearly cost me my life. I was apparently squashing one of the boys and he was shouting so much for me to get off, but I could not move anywhere. Suddenly I felt this tremendous pain in my behind, he had apparently stuck a needle into me and I felt blood on my hands and passed out. This episode did not help me much, the combination of the cold, the blood and the pain made me feel very ill. Since we had left Buchenwald and this was some thirty hours later, we had been given neither food nor water and as a result there were already many dead. After travelling all night, the train stopped in the middle of nowhere and thankfully we were all ordered out of the wagon. The Germans surrounded the whole train, and us, and we were allowed to get water from a stream, light fires and cook grass and any other vegetation we could find. This barely kept us alive and the grass tasted awful. Nevertheless we ate some in order to survive. We also ate baked wood to contain the hunger. We stopped in this place for around seven days, and naturally the death toll was beginning to mount.

Every evening we were ordered back to the wagon and at daylight we were ordered out again. Every morning the dead were gathered into empty wagons. I can't begin to describe the state of these bodies, it was an awful sight and I don't think I could be strong enough now to take in such a sight.



One evening after we were ordered back into the wagons, the train commenced to roll and we travelled all night. When we stopped the next morning we were surprised to find we had stopped at exactly the same spot we had started from. It then became obvious to us that the Germans did not know where they were going. Once again we looked for bits of anything we could either eat or chew. We stayed there for another two weeks and each day there were more dead bodies. We had no way of sheltering from the rain and snow, except to crawl under the wagon, which a few of us did, but there was not enough room to accommodate each one of us. At times like these our main wish was to have a roof over our heads, and enough dry bread to eat.

By late April 1945 the number of prisoners was beginning to dwindle. We were getting weaker and weaker and were wondering if we should ever survive this hell. I was so weak I could hardly sniff up. Even the SS guards were beginning to look tired and fed up.

In the first week in May, the train crossed the Czech border, still heading south-east. On 8 May we came to a stop into a siding we were there for a few hours and all of a sudden we realised that all the German guards had disappeared. By this time I realised that my life, what was left in me, was ebbing away. I was delirious and very feverish. I could vaguely remember being in some kind of makeshift hospital where I was thoroughly bathed (my body had not been washed for months), and put into a bed. I passed out and when I came to I was told that I am lucky to be alive as I survived a high temperature which is peculiar to typhus. I gradually learned that the train had ended up at Terezin, near Prague. The town had been liberated by the Russian Army and that is why we could no longer see the German guards. I was very, very weak and although I was given food, none of us could keep it down. Our stomachs had shrunk through lack of food for six years, and especially for the last four weeks. I weighed in at five and a half stone and I was seventeen years old.



Wagon containing the boys aged 15 - 17 who survived and came to England. David Kaye is among these boys.



April 1945, convoy of wagons with prisoners.



April 1945. Russian prisoners on liberation.



The Czech Partisan who took some of these photographs.

We were told to go easy on the food and it was a question of discipline (not) consuming the foods available. As a result, it was very distressing to see many of my friends die from simply eating, having survived the terrible experiences in the concentration camps etc.

My colleagues and myself were looked after from May to August 1945 until we gradually gained weight and our general health improved. On 15 August 1945, a whole transport of about 300 were flown to England to a new life.