My Lucky Streak

I was 20 years old when I was drafted to the Hungarian Army Infantry. After three months of training, the Allies of Germany implemented anti-Jewish laws and immediately forced us to exchange our civilian clothing for fatigues and leave our homes. The Nazis had arrived in Hungary. We were given a wide yellow band that marked me as part of a civilian work force apart from arm-bearing German allies. Yet we participated in strict military conditioning alongside the soldiers and learned to build bunkers, dig anti-tank ditches, and hide *ekrazit,* sticks of dynamite. My friends and I were treated like allies at first, but the trials ahead of us took many of our lives.

We said goodbye to Koszeg, a Hungarian city ten miles from the German border, and all two-hundred and fifty of us were loaded onto cattle cars headed to the violence of the Russian war front. Armed officers guarded us as we huddled for warmth during the thirty-six hour train ride. Packed without room to sit, we stood the entire time with no food and no idea of what experiences awaited us. When we arrived, we were forced to run through several feet of freezing snow to pack it down for the soldiers behind us on the way to camp. We examined the empty stables in which we had to sleep. Only straw was strewn across the cold wooden floor as bedding. And that night, we had no choice but to hold each other for warmth to pass the time without freezing .

The harsh conditions began to take their toll on us. We subsisted off of daily rations of food, but the cold was unbearable. We would dig anti-tank ditches n?\_arly eight feet deep everyday, and we had to keep on our boots at all hours to avoid frostbite . My feet were quickly covered in pus and blood. It seemed like it was always snowing and the temperature often dropped to the extremes around -40 degrees celsius. Spit and urine would freeze through the frigid air. We could only wash up with melted ice. The armed sargeant would take pleasure in lining us up for beatings during and after our endless hours of digging through the snow. I once fell to his knees and begged for mercy. He let me pass and beat the next man in line enough for the two of us. The promise and illusion of safety was lost-- my friends and I were no longer treated as allies. We still lived according to a soldier mentality, yet we were treated as slaves.

It was hard to keep hope alive once the reality of suffering sunk in our hearts. Within three days of our arrival, my friend Kalai Otto didn't leave the stable and report to work. Weary and exhausted after digging, we returned to the stables that night to rest. Kalai hung lifelessly above the straws that made up his home. His new reality had stripped him of his spirit and identity as an artist, a man who played the accordion beautifully. He couldn't bear the uncertainty and suffering of his circumstance any longer. We stood in shock and silence that night in the stable . I couldn't give up. I had to survive. No matter what.

After months of suffering, sixteen of us decided we had to escape to avoid certain death. As we lined up for our nightly rations of beans and potatoes, we fled into the dark towards the Slovakian border in search of safety and rescue. We split up in groups of two and took different routes to avoid military personnel along our journey . Those unlucky enough to meet personnel or get caught crossing bridges were almost certain to meet an untimely and quick execution.

I left with my best friend, Tibor Rainer. Surrounded by the high mountains in the area, we hiked through snowy passes in search of the border. I knew some lucky force

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# had kept us alive along our journey. At one point, we had to cross a clearing in the mountains where we would be in the plain sight of soldiers surveying the front. The deep roar of a fighter jet sounded above us and bullets began whistling through the air and exploding in the snow around us. We sprinted for our lives towards cover and somehow managed to escape death. The plane never returned.

Within two days, we had reached the border at night but our only route to safety was a bridge that crossed a dark, flowing river. We knew the bridge was guarded by an armed soldier, but Tibor and I had to try our luck. We had no choice. Towards the end, we froze at the sound of a loud shout, *"Ha/t i "* A guard was pointing a sub-machine gun directly at us. Yet he was holding a girl with his other hand who was dressed in her nightly wear. He demanded answers in German: "Who are you? Why are you hear?" My drive for survival took over and I found courage. I swallowed tightly and lied in German as best as I could, "We are Hungarian Laborers headed to sleep for the night." He paused and stared for the longest moment of my life. He nodded and let us pass without asking for our identification or papers. We left as quickly as we could in silence. If he would have asked for any proof, Tibor and I would have been shot on sight immediately. Perhaps it was his desire for the girl that saved us. Perhaps it was my near-Aryan looks. We once again found luck and survived.

But after days of hiking we still struggled to stay healthy. My hunger pains drove me to desperation. We broke into a house because we knew all the men would be at war . The woman in the home gasped and screamed in fear, but we spoke deliberately , "We want nothing but food." She gave Tibor and I coats to wear along with packaged bacon and old bread. We left and later found shelter again with a Slovakian farmer , his wife, and three kids who lived in a humble shack heated by a clay oven. All we did was offer to work, and in exchange he took care of our needs. But we were careful to maintain our anonymity at all costs. Eight germans arrived at the farm and took shelter with Tibor and I in the stables where we slept. My rough proficiency in German and Tibor's silence kept us alive as we slept alongside them. We had to leave. It was only a matter of time before our cover was blown and our lives were lost.

Luckily, the farmer had told us at that time that the Underground Partisan's Resistance were winning against the Germans and stationed at a camp hidden in the forest nearby. We quickly left to find them in hopes of joining the safety of the Resistance. We found them and subsisted for the last remaining months of our journey . Tibor and I still struggled to survive , but we had hope in numbers as we worked alongside the Resistance.

Four months later, we left with hungry soldiers to steal a sheep from a nearby village. Once again, we were desperate. We ran as fast as we could, sheep over shoulder, towards the forest, but realized the woman shouting at us wasn't shouting for us to return the sheep. She yelled, "Don't hide! The Russians are here! The Germans are dead!" I knew she spoke the truth when we returned to the village . As I walked around, I saw a Russian \_soldier dragging a dead Nazi towards his grave. The makeshift cement bunkers that the German's had built were littered with the bodies of their own. It was a terrible, yet comforting sight. Tibor and I were on our road home!

We celebrated that night and I finally knew we had reached permanent safety and comfort. A soldier placed a bright-red bowl of *borsc* alongside some bread at my table. After my first taste, the delicious, rich soup coated my stomach. I had not truly

eaten in over a year. My head grew heavy and I immediately fainted at the table from the sudden rush of comfort and nourishment. I fell into a deep feeling of wholeness for the first time since I had left my home. Luck had overwhelmed my life and kept me alive in the face of hatred and death. Not all of my close friends were as lucky. I later found out from a pair of friends that they were the only other ones to make it. The twelve others had likely died at the hands of the Germans or in the solitude of the forest.

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