

Escaping Hell

taken off for the night, the country would be open for a free walk home. However, it was not that simple. The Germans were very thorough when counting prisoners; in all my five years in the concentration camp, I cannot recall a single miscount. Even if a prisoner did walk away unnoticed, the surrounding countryside was either deserted or had been resettled and occupied by the German army, the SS and civilians. Without knowing where to go, an escapee was bound to stumble across some German patrol or, simply exhausted, would die in the fields. If caught, he too was paraded in front of the prisoners, then publicly hanged. Nothing, however, could discourage men from attempting escape.

One of the most spectacular escapes occurred when an officer, acting as a courier for our organization, fled with three colleagues. Each had worked in the industrial park where they were able to steal machine guns and SS uniforms. In broad daylight, fully disguised and guarded by the SS, they drove down the main road and out of the camp in a convertible car belonging to the commandant of the industrial park.

Needless to say, the boldness of this escape left the Auschwitz authorities furious. Aumeier, the deputy commandant of the camp, warned that all escaping prisoners would sooner or later be tracked down by the Gestapo since the whole of Europe was under German control. Executions would be swift and families hanged. This proved to be no idle threat. One day we found bodies, supposedly of a family, swinging from the gallows in front of the camp kitchen.

The most desperate attempts were made by the Russians in Birkenau, who were treated even more cruelly than their counterparts. They did not trust our underground; after all, only a year before, Russia had sided with Germany in its war against Poland. In time, our organization made contact with representatives of the Russian prisoners. Nevertheless, they continued to act independently.

Preparations began for a mass escape. First, the Russians snatched the corpse of a prisoner who had died during working hours and hid it within the outer ring of sentries. At evening roll call the alarm was sounded and the SS men, kapos and blockelders went out for the search. The rest of the camp in Birkenau, closely guarded, remained standing at attention in the roll call square. The body had been hidden well; after several hours the kapos and SS

men came back empty-handed. Then, just loud enough for one of the kapos to hear, a Russian remarked: "If they let us look for him, we'll find him for sure! We know all the places where a prisoner might hide."

With nothing to lose, the SS men decided to let a group of Russians continue the search. Of course, they found the dead body and everybody was happy. They thus became the "experts" in finding escapees. They repeated this charade a couple of times over several weeks until the moment finally arrived for real action.

Once more the Russians hid a corpse, but when asked to search for the escapee, simply walked around aimlessly and made little attempt to locate the body. The Germans were furious. During the search, the whole camp of Birkenau had been standing at roll call for four hours while the sentries kept watch from the towers. In a last-ditch attempt to solve the problem, the commanding officer announced that all Russian prisoners would participate in the search. If unsuccessful, each one would be punished with 50 strokes to the bare buttocks. They went, but as they walked through the fields and between the buildings they collected stones, bricks and anything else which might serve as a weapon.

All at once the Russians attacked the guards and even succeeded in disarming one of the tower sentries. Then they ran towards the river where they believed freedom lay. The other towers opened fire and the alarm brought more reinforcements. SS men jumped into cars and drove to the other side of the river where frequent shots indicated they had found their targets. Most of the Russians were killed but several individuals escaped. The rest were brought back to the camp and hanged.

The building of new gas chambers at Auschwitz for the mass extermination of European Jews made it necessary to smuggle Jewish eye-witnesses out of the camp.* Late in 1943, two Slovenians named Wetzler and Rosenberg planned an escape. They decided to build an underground hideout in the industrial park and wait there for three days, until the posts were taken off the towers. When a prisoner went missing during working hours within the outer ring of sentries and no way was found by which he could have escaped, the guards remained at their posts for the next three days

* *Escapes from Auschwitz* (in Polish) by T. Sobarski (Warsaw: Polish Ministry of Defence, 1974).

Escaping Hell

and nights.

It took Wetzler and Rosenberg about two months to prepare; in a place where an old building had been demolished and where old lumber and broken boards were still lying around, they had dug a hole big enough in which to lie down. On the appointed day, their friends covered them with boards camouflaged with loose soil. They then sprinkled pepper generously around to prevent tracking dogs from sniffing them out.

When the evening roll call revealed two prisoners missing, the usual search was initiated. But the escapees were not found. Three days later, under the cover of night and when the posts were off the towers, Wetzler and Rosenberg walked away to freedom.

Through the intervention of the Polish and Slovenian undergrounds, they were eventually granted audience with the Vatican envoy to whom they made full eyewitness reports and asked for the intervention of the Pope on humanitarian grounds.

Though great danger was involved in escaping from Auschwitz, it was a way to fight back. Nonetheless, the great majority had no desire to escape, unwilling as they were to put themselves voluntarily in a position of immediate danger. The instinct for self-preservation told them to postpone action in favour of prolonging their lives at least a little. This may also explain why the Germans could lead thousands of people into the gas chambers, in most cases without any resistance.

In May 1942, the local Gestapo gave an order to shoot about 170 prisoners — officers or proven members of the Polish underground, some of whom had been in the camp for a year or more. All of them marched to their deaths singing the Polish national anthem, their only sign of defiance. At the time, we thought them very brave. In actual fact, they knew that if they tried to attack the SS guards, they would be shot on the spot. By marching and singing they postponed their deaths for perhaps an hour or two.

Shortly after this execution, 400 more Polish prisoners were summoned and transferred to the penal company in Birkenau. In addition to their red triangle, men in the penal company had to wear a black dot on their uniforms with a red circle just above it. This distinguished them from ordinary prisoners and signified that they were extremely dangerous.

A week after their transfer the first ten red circles were called up and shot. A week later another ten men were executed. When,

the week following, ten more red circles were shot, they began to suspect the reason for their transfer. They had been condemned to die, but the Germans, afraid of a rebellion, had decided to execute them in small groups.

This was confirmed by Thomas through his contacts, prisoners working in the Gestapo offices. He immediately gave thought as to how he might save his colleagues who were sentenced to death.

The red circles decided to make a break for freedom, en masse, while they worked on the construction of the Konigsgraben Canal near the River Vistula. In addition to the 370 red circles, the regular penal company prisoners were also prepared to flee. The methods used to effect escapes could seldom be repeated because the Germans were invariably alerted as to what suspicious signs to watch for. Thus, almost every escape from Auschwitz had to employ a different technique.

Their plan was to disarm the immediate guards, run in groups towards the river, swim across and scale the embankment. "Much would depend on individual courage, enterprise and luck. Naturally heavy losses were to be expected — perhaps over 200 prisoners would fall to bullets or be caught and murdered, perhaps more would die and only 50 be saved — but how much better that would be than to wait passively for certain death."*

In order that the mass slaughter which had happened to the Russians not be repeated, partisan units had damaged the bridge over the river and were waiting on the other side. Dispatched troops of SS men would have to take the long drive around, giving the prisoners more time to escape.

It was decided that the attempt to escape would take place on June 10th, when the whistle to cease work sounded. It was a beautiful, sunny day, with no suggestion of a change of weather. Suddenly, at about four o'clock, clouds appeared in the sky and rain began to fall; some minutes later this turned into a downpour. In the torrents of rain it was almost impossible to see. Those in the know were not upset by this as it could only facilitate their plans, for work would go on to the end of the day; it never stopped for bad

* The events are described by an eyewitness, Zenon Rozanski, in *Fighting Auschwitz* by Joseph Garlinski (London: Julian Friedmann Publishers Ltd., 1975), pp. 104-105.

Escaping Hell

weather. But this time they were mistaken. Unexpectedly, the SS sergeant came out of his hut, looked around and with one long, shrill whistle gave the signal to knock off work. It was only half-past four.

Complete confusion resulted. Prisoners ran wildly from all sides, some towards the embankment and some not at all. When the crisis was over only fifty prisoners with red circles had disarmed the nearest SS men and tried to get away. Thirteen fell to the hail of bullets, a number turned back and only nine reached the Vistula and freedom.

Despite the general order from Berlin, the camp authorities took bloody retaliation for the attempt at a mass escape. The following day, Aumeier arrived and demanded of the 320 prisoners that they bring forth the leaders of the revolt. They silently refused, and immediately the deputy commandant shot 17 men, leaving three for his colleague Hossler. The remaining column of prisoners was led to the bunkers and gassed. On July 8, two members of the penal company who had been recaptured after the escape were publicly hanged.

As the war progressed, conditions in the camp tended to be in inverse proportion to the successes of the German troops in Russia: the less successful the German campaign, the more cruelly prisoners were treated. Jewish families arrived at Auschwitz in larger and larger numbers and the gas chambers were now used to exterminate all Musselmenn, all hospital patients, Russians, Gypsies and Poles considered dangerous by the Gestapo. These extreme circumstances demanded that word be sent to the Warsaw headquarters. The bearer of the message had to be a long-time member of our organization, one who could persuade the Polish underground army that an uprising in Auschwitz was absolutely necessary.

I volunteered and my offer was accepted.

The SS kitchen where I was still serving very often worked overtime, after the outer ring was released from duty. Only one SS man guarded us in the kitchen and he could easily be distracted by good food. Before I could actually escape, however, there were several problems to be solved. I knew that if I escaped alone my colleagues would be held responsible and, as a reprisal, possibly hanged. I had to find out whether they were also willing to go. As it turned out, they had been talking about it for some time. When