

## Chapter 10: Night of Fire at Berlin Railroad Station

I had not yet reached my fourteenth birthday. Another empty cattle train eased itself through the gates of Auschwitz to the very same landing spur where we had first arrived about a year before. The doors of the dirty, old cattle train slid open, as it had many times before. Each car was packed to capacity with prisoners. After the transport was completely loaded without incident, the doors slid shut, locked and sealed as if they were carrying precious cargo. These sealed doors would not be reopened under any circumstances until we arrived at our destination. We were already too weak, both mentally and physically, to care. We knew from experience that an existence worse than death was awaiting us for the next several days. We were to be without food, water, or sanitation facilities. Not one of us knew where we were going or why.

The train traveled very slowly for several hours as if the locomotive couldn't get up enough steam for the heavy load it was pulling. It might have even been going up a grade. We were gasping for air in the heated car and didn't care about our ultimate destination. We felt that this time none of us would be alive when the doors to our cars would finally slide open. The locomotive quit pulling and we felt the train slowing again. It came to a halt at a remote side track waiting for more important trains to pass, trains filled with wounded German soldiers returning from the Russian front and munitions trains heading north to resupply the German army.

It was late in the afternoon. The temperature in the locked cattle car was very high. The two small windows did not provide enough air for the occupants to breathe. We had been sitting there motionless for six hours. At least when we were in motion, the cooler air from outside would seep in through the cracks and we would get some relief. We felt that dying would be a blessing for us, ending our suffering. I felt that I was going to die soon anyway and postponing the inevitable would be much more painful in the long run.

Just as our death wish was about to come true, the train began moving again and the temperature began to fall. It was early evening. It was cooling off outside and cooler air entering through the crack was of great benefit. We traveled all through the night and a second day. On the third night, our train eased itself slowly into a very large railroad station. We heard many trains coming and going as our train proceeded to a side spur. I saw the platform and sign with the station name through the crack in the door. The lit sign read "**BERLIN.**" We all became very excited when we realized that we were inside Germany. The train came to a halt. Each one of us came up with his own version of why we were there. The train continued moving very slowly, switching tracks for almost half an hour until it finally came to a halt at the most remote track of the Berlin railroad station, where we would probably spend the night

for one reason or another. We felt a jerk as the locomotive disconnected and abandoned us on the side track.

It wasn't long after we stopped that we heard explosions in the night, and through the cracks in the door I saw many fires erupting all around the railroad station. German soldiers were running around in confusion and firemen attempted to put out the fires. Explosions erupted more frequently and many trains were on fire all around us. Through the cracks we saw wounded German soldiers, some of them on fire. Munitions trains were exploding all around us, adding to the chaos. The train next to us was on fire. We could feel the additional heat from the burning train next to us, through the walls of our box car. The German guards left the scene and abandoned us in the locked box cars. I knew that soon our train would be hit and would ignite like all the other trains around us. The bombs continued hitting their mark, causing one explosion right after another. Steel and wooden objects were flying through the air, igniting other trains, and puncturing cars as they landed. We didn't care so much about dying at the hands of the Allies, but we didn't want to die in the gas chamber. Within fifteen minutes, which seemed like an eternity, the bombing had stopped and everything around us was burning. Shells were still exploding from the burning munitions trains. The danger had not yet passed for us. We could still be hit by exploding shells or catch on fire from the burning train on the adjoining track. By some miracle, our train was spared from the bombs and did not ignite from the surrounding fires.

We realized that the railroad station was being bombed by the Allies. (We learned later that the British bombed by night while the Americans bombed by day.) At first we were frightened and aware that we were locked in a train which could ignite at any moment. This was not the way we would have chosen to die. I felt that since death was just around the corner, I would rather die by allied bombs than at the hands of the Germans.

The next morning, our locomotive was sent to remove some of the burned cars to clear the main track. It took two more days to repair the damaged tracks. Our black, smoke puffing locomotive returned to us at the end of the second day and hooked on to our train with a big jolt. We began moving again and a few hours later we arrived at a new railroad station. The sign said "**Oraninburg**."

It was raining as we unloaded the train. We had to march two miles to our new camp. We could barely walk. The short distance we had to walk seemed like an eternity. We collected raindrops in our folded hands for drinking and the wetness that covered our bodies was refreshing. Some of us who could no longer walk were left in the box cars and the rest of us proceeded to the main gates of the "Katzet Lager" (KZ).

As we passed through the main gates, we found ourselves inside a fenced camp with modern barracks, well-paved streets and sidewalks. It looked like a well-organized army base. There was a lot of activity on the streets. Army trucks rushed by us on the rain drenched street, spraying us as they drove by. We were led in a column down the main street. The weaker people fell behind and were disposed of later, just like the ones who couldn't leave the train station. The SS guards wore rain proof pants, ponchos, and boots and were in good physical condition. They looked superhuman to us. Maybe it was because we felt so weak and inferior at that time. We were all led into what looked like a large empty hangar with only straw on the floor. About two thousands of us were packed into this one large hangar which was to be our home.

Each prisoner selected a small spot on the thin straw to make his home. My father told me to stay where I was. He was going to gather some more straw for us to sleep on. A few minutes later I saw a Nazi guard kicking and beating someone on the ground about fifty or so feet from where I was sitting. I did not move from my designated space for fear that my dad might never find me. He had been gone a long time and I was beginning to worry that he might not return. A while later, Dad returned. I told him what I saw; he did not comment.

We were put to work almost immediately doing garbage detail and cleaning up the streets. Once a day we'd get our moldy bread rations and a bowl of thin, tasteless soup that looked more like dirty dish water than soup. This became our routine. A few days later, after work, as we were sitting on the straw in the hangar, my dad took off his shirt. I noticed black and blue marks all over his upper body. I asked him, "Where did you get the marks?" He told me that it was he who had been beaten up a few days before while looking for extra straw in the dim light of evening. A strange feeling came over me. I thought to myself, I saw my own dad being beaten and didn't even know it. I felt very bad and scared. My dad was my hero being beaten and not being able to defend himself was mentally destructive to what little hope and confidence was still left in my being.

Head count was at 5:00 a.m. every morning. We had less than six minutes to get dressed and out the door. We had to sleep with our clothes on because of the cold and also because it took too long to get dressed in the morning. Some of our work also consisted of digging ditches and carrying bricks or sacks of sand or cement on our backs. Every time the sirens sounded because of the Allies' air raids (twice a day), we'd be rushed to our hangar. After the all-clear siren was sounded, we'd go back to what we had been doing.

We heard many airplanes taking off and landing and I felt that we were near an air base. At night, in the hangar, during the air raids, I kept listening to the sound of the Allied bombers approaching. It was predictable. Almost every night, we heard sirens

and then the faint sounds of approaching aircraft. I was one of the first to hear the sound of the heavy, loaded bombers because I was the youngest and my ears were probably better than most. I wished that I could go outside and wave and shout, "drop your bombs here so we might have a chance to escape." But of course our doors were shut and locked for the night. As the airplane engines became faint in the distance, the all clear sirens sounded once more. We knew that the sirens would not remain silent for very long because Berlin was only about thirty miles away and we knew as well as the Germans that Berlin was the squadrons' destination, where the bombs were to be released. The Allied planes would return over our camp again on the way back to England, empty of bombs. The sound of the unloaded B17 bomber was different, of higher pitch. We could tell by the sound of the engines that the bomb load was dropped successfully. I don't recall any German fighters going up to challenge the Allied bombers, even though we were right on top of a Messerschmitt aircraft factory.

This became a daily routine. It got so that I could tell in an instant which direction the planes were headed by the sound of the engines. I often thought, what if the pilots couldn't drop all of their bombs on Berlin and decided to drop the remaining load on the hangars that were our home? It looked so much like an airplane hangar. We would be destroyed instantly.

I heard a few antiaircraft batteries open fire at the overhead Allied squadron and I don't recall them ever scoring a hit. After the daytime air raids when we were allowed outside and looked at the sky, I could see the black rings of smoke high in the sky created by the anti-aircraft shells exploding. This went on for three weeks. Every day the routine was the same. The bombers would come, drop the bombs over Berlin, and return empty to England.

One particular Sunday, things were different. Allied planes approached Oraninburg as usual, and as usual the sirens sounded and antiaircraft fire was sent up. The all clear siren sounded a few minutes later and we knew from past experience that within one hour the sirens would sound again as the empty planes returned on their way back to England after the bombing run on Berlin. This time when the empty planes approached overhead, the engines sounded different. The sound was low, as under a heavy load. Their engines had the characteristic of high rpm, laboring, hardworking, under a heavy load. I told my father that something was different this time. Suddenly, to our total surprise, the B-17s began dropping their bomb load at a corner of our camp to be more precise, on a young pine forest recently planted. Beneath the ground was a modern, well-camouflaged Messerschmitt plane factory. Bombs exploded nearby and there was total chaos among the Germans. The airplane factory was destroyed, including all the Messerschmitt planes below. The airfield was also destroyed in the same raid. Within minutes, there was total and complete destruction of the entire facility. We found pleasure in knowing that the Allies knew where the airplane factory

was located not at the obvious hangars where the prisoners slept, but beneath the ground under a pine forest. None of the hangar barracks was even slightly damaged; not a single prisoner was hurt. After that, there was no more reason for us to remain here, so we were shipped out on yet another train.