

Gary Bason

**A Recount of My Experiences of nearly Six Years
in German Concentration Camps**

Norbert Wollheim Memorial

J.W. Goethe-Universität / Fritz Bauer Institut

Frankfurt am Main, 2009

I was born on May 2nd 1924 in Berlin, Germany, as Gerhard Basowitz. I was the oldest of three children. I lived with my parents, Samuel Basowitz and Chana Basowitz, née Rubin, in Berlin. My Father owned several stores in Berlin, where he dealt in import of provisions from Denmark and the Netherlands as well as Poland. My father was a Polish citizen. He was born in Galicia, which belonged to Austria. After World War I it became Poland.

Mid October 1938 he was arrested with thousands of other Polish Jews as undesirables and deported to Poland, where on or about May 1940 he was executed in his hometown of Rudnck, Poland, by SS Special Units (*SS-Sonderkommandos*).

Under European law, even though I was born in Germany I automatically assumed the citizenship of my father. I had never been to Poland and was too young to have a passport, but the Germans considered me to be Polish. World War II started on September 1, 1939, when Germany invaded Poland.

On September 13, 1939, Erev Rosh-Hashanah, I was arrested at 5 a.m. at our home by the local police as a 15 1/2 year old teenage Jew. My mother Chana Basowitz, my younger sister Paula, and my brother Norbert were permitted to stay in our apartment until March 1942, when they also were arrested and deported to Auschwitz directly into the gas chamber. Through the auspices of the Red Cross in 2008, I received a copy of the Gestapo records confirming their destiny.

The police interned me at a previously Jewish owned department store near my home, which was converted into a center for the Hitler Youth. There were numerous of my school mates as well as acquaintances of my parents, all being classified as undesirable Polish Jews. The following day we were transported to the infamous Sachsenhausen concentration camp, about 25 miles east of Berlin.

At the time of my arrest I was a healthy youth, active in sports that were still permitted for Jews by the regime. I had the usual childhood diseases like measles, chickenpox etc.

In Sachsenhausen we were assigned to barracks 37, 38, and 39. There were about 600 of us interned on September 14, 1939. We immediately were put to work under SS supervision, transporting sand and stones from one pile to

another about 200 yards away at double speed. There were severe beatings, if someone was unable to keep up the pace. We were given a striped grey uniform with a matching cap. This was going on from early morning till late in the afternoon. We had to stand in formation before and after work for head count, during which the SS noncoms with riding whips inspected the columns and singled out individuals by the shape of their figure, their face, their posture, and started torturing them with beating and kicking. There is one extremely sad incident I witnessed and years later in 1968 I was summoned to a war criminal trial in Cologne, Germany, as a witness.

My mother kept a kosher home and purchased chicken from an orthodox butcher, heavy set with a long beard, and about in his sixties. During the evening head count he was selected by the superior SS officer against whom I testified at the trial in Germany. The former butcher was still obese. He was given severe beatings by several of the SS. He was placed under a cold shower, there was no hot water, and the kicking and beating continued. Due to severe pain inflicted he yelled out "Shmah Yisroel;" that the SS officers interpreted as he called them "Schwarzes Schwein," Black Swine. They kept beating and kicking him in front of us, standing in formation, until his death. They asked us whether anyone would like the same.

After the evening head counts we normally received a watery bowl of unrecognizable soup and a small piece of dark bread, which had to last until the next evening.

There was a number of German nationals, inmates in Sachsenhausen, former judges, politicians, socialists, anti-Hitler etc., which constituted a so called underground; the rest of the German inmates were criminals released from prisons and made Kapos or supervisors, if they worked for the SS regime.

In our group, we had about 14 to 16 youths less than 18 years of age. This never before happened in the history of the camp. The underground had people in important places in the camp and they were able to place several of us away from the brutal chicanery of carrying sand. They placed us into the machine or woodworking shop. I was assigned to the machine shop. This was a life saver. I knew nothing about this kind of work, but I learned fast and was helped by some

of the mechanics working there. Fortunately for me, this lasted for about ten months. To this day I cannot understand how a human, being reduced to skin and bones from malnutrition, had the strength to carry a heavy load under duress.

The camp was very active having a full production factory producing yellow bricks from clay, which was brought in by lorries from a clay pit about 14 miles from the main camp. Naturally, prisoners were transported to the pit to excavate the clay and fill the lorries. They had a narrow-gauge railroad running between the camp and the work place. There also was a diesel steam shovel, which had to be mechanically kept in good working order. I was assigned from the machine shop to the pit. This work detail consisted of about 40 inmates, some Germans, Jews, and others. The work load was extremely heavy. To excavate the clay, prisoners had to dig sometimes in knee deep water to load the lorries. There were several portable pumps to extract the standing water. The maintenance of the steam shovel and the pumps was my job, preferable to digging for clay in the mud holes. There was a small machine shop hut set up for the repairs. I mostly worked there.

The detail was guarded by SS guards around the periphery of the clay pit. The guards were given like a three day pass, if they caught an escapee.

The clay pit had civilian employees and SS noncoms as supervisors. If one was addressed by a German, you had to stay at attention and remove your cap. Should you lose your cap that was equal to a death warrant. The clay pit was surrounded by barbed wire, with the guards on the inside. Their favored sport to get a pass was to call an inmate, who was new to the detail, to remove his cap. The guards asked to see his cap. They took the cap and threw it behind them. Should one return to the camp without a cap, he was subject to severe punishment for losing government property. Unfortunately some lost their life by being shot, because they did not want to go on living.

One day, two of the German inmates managed to escape in broad daylight. They may have had outside help. That became the start of an unbelievable episode of my life. They returned us to the main camp immediately. If there was an escape, the entire camp had to remain at assembly until the escapees were captured.

The main gate of the camp was a massive structure with facilities for the SS commander and his cohorts. As punishment for the escape, all inmates of the clay pit detail had to remain at the main gate at a knee bend position without any relief, being kicked and beaten to confess that we assisted in the escape. Finally after approximately 24 hours they forced us to get up and marched us to a special solitary compound. We were placed in small cells, no facilities, nor windows.

After countless hours they removed me to a treatment room, where they tied my arms behind my back and made me stand on a stool. Then they placed my arms on a hook on the wall and kicked the stool away from underneath me. The pain was so intensive that I fainted and had no idea, how long I was hanging. They finally released me back to the barracks, because the two escapees were caught. For weeks after, I could barely move my arms and had to ask for help to get dressed. The following day we were back at the clay pit.

On October 28, 1942, all Jewish inmates at Sachsenhausen were evacuated by cattle car to the KZ Auschwitz, to make the heartland "*judenfrei*" (free of Jews). Of the original count of about 1,700 men there, only close to 850 men had remained. The rest perished due to starvation, sickness and suicides. We were given a small portion of bread which had to last for the duration of travel. The freight cars had one barrel of drinking water and one barrel for human waste. The trip, which normally would have taken about 6 to 8 hours, lasted for about 8 days because of frequent stops for the troop trains going to the eastern front. Fortunately, the weather in late October was on the cool side. The stench from the urine and human waste was unbearable. On several of the stops the guards opened the sliding doors of the freight cars and some men were ordered to dump the barrel with the waste into a nearby field.

Upon arrival to Auschwitz we were screened and assigned to work details. We did not have to go through the usual gas chamber selection, because we were old-timers scheduled for work. The number 69895 was tattooed on my left forearm in one inch high numerals to be branded for life, by some merciless Poles, who hated us as much as the Germans.

About ten miles from the main camp, I.G. Farben, the German chemical giant, was building a factory to produce synthetic rubber, called "Buna," for tires for their armed forces. Most of our transport, with exception of only five of us, was loaded on trucks destined for the Buna factory.

How they picked five of us, we never knew. One was a prominent Physician from Czechoslovakia, one a former editor of a Jewish paper in Berlin, one the owner of a building material store, and two minors including myself. We were detailed to a satellite camp, Budy, a horse farm for SS officers, also about 12 miles from the main camp. They loaded us on a truck with 2 guards and send us off.

It was late night as we arrived. The camp had stables and a few barracks inside barbed wire, and barracks outside for the SS. The 40 or so inmates were all privileged Poles, Jew-haters. They were allowed to receive packages from their families, which they used to bribe the SS noncoms to receive favorable positions at work. There were no Jews.

Each camp, big and small, had a cadre like a mayor of a city and his cohorts. In Budy the staff was a group of German criminals transferred from prisons, given privileges to be masters of life and death over the inmates.

We were lucky, they all came from Sachsenhausen. The big cheese Kapo greeted us: you're my kind of people, because we came from the same place and spoke German. Our first work assignment was to lay concrete floors in the horse stables, to mix by hand and pour the stuff with the proper pitch for the water to run off. We had no idea how to proceed except the heavy mixing by hand. Fortunately, one of us had some experience. We laid wooden beams to level the floors and finished. This lasted for about two months.

Then came the beginning of an extra strenuous part of my incarceration. Aside from the lack of nourishment, we were forced to perform heavy slave labor. We had to retrieve and cultivate swamps for agriculture. Because of insufficient clothing and shoes, our bodies and feet were constantly wet. This took a heavy toll on my health.

In 1943, the Germans took a heavy beating in Stalingrad. They did not have enough trains to supply their army with ammunition and reserves, but they found trains for the infamous Eichmann, to transport Jews from the tip of

Greece, Saloniki, to Auschwitz. Some of these were sent to our camp. Several of them were carriers of malaria.

I contracted malaria or a form of swamp fever. A visit to the infirmary which existed meant certain death. This was a trip of no return. A wonderful comrade, Dr. Walter Loebner, a well known physician, formerly of Carlsbad, Czechoslovakia, had been detailed to the SS infirmary as a doctor. At the risk of his own life he saved mine. The guards had no doctor only a medic, and Dr. Loebner stole and supplied me with Quinine tablets and injections, thereby saving my life.

The Germans are notoriously known for their penchant of book keeping. At the end of 1943, I was singled out to return to the main camp. They found a record that in Sachsenhausen I was detailed to work at the machine shop.

The German giant arms manufacturer Krupp was building a factory in Auschwitz to produce detonators for artillery shells. They started collecting inmates with some experience to finish the plant by setting up the incoming machinery and generally finish the interior, which was about 80% completed.

I was delivered to Auschwitz and assigned to a building. Auschwitz was build for the Polish cavalry before the war. The Germans found a ready-made KZ (*Konzentrationslager*, concentration camp). I have never seen a gas chamber, nor the crematorium, but I knew they existed. The stench of burning flesh lingered in the air day and night. At times, one could see flames shooting up in another part of the camp, where the crematorium was located.

The solid buildings were filled to capacity inside with wooden structures and straw mats as bunks, two or three inmates per bunk. The building manager was a comrade of mine from Sachsenhausen, who lost several fingers in the woodworking shop the same time I worked in the machine shop. Some of my former comrades were assigned as firemen to the fire brigade. That was a sweetheart job.

I came back to Auschwitz as a newcomer even after being an inmate for nearly four years. I got a fairly decent bunk only with one person to share. There were two large circular cold water basins. Cleanliness was utmost important. Nearly all had lice from the bunks. People were getting heavy underarm boils. The camp had a large infirmary staffed by SS doctors and some Jewish assistants. They

performed horrible experiments on inmates. They selected twins, healthy young men mostly. Once about each month they held an open inspection by SS doctors. The ones too skinny, weak or unable to work were guided to the side, never to be seen again. Any kind of illness reported to the infirmary was an automatic death warrant.

My building had a pair of twins from Lodz, Poland, in their early twenties, who spend about six or more months at the infirmary complex and then were returned to our block. Everyone knew they were castrated, but nobody mentioned it, they were too ashamed to ever talk about it.

I was assigned to my work detail for Krupp. There were numerous work details departing daily from my block. Some worked in the fields or in construction, or in maintenance of the 20 or so buildings, as roof repairs and painting.

There was a special isolated commando called "Canada" assigned to collect valuables from arriving transports. They also handled bodies to and from the crematorium. They were not in our buildings but in the same camp, given preferred treatment and food.

Their lifespan was by hearsay about six to eight months, and then they also ended in the gas chamber. They were replaced by newcomers. The Germans did not like to have witnesses of their atrocities.

Somehow there was a vivid black market only for the Kapos or overseers. A number of assignments had contact with civilians, Poles, also some Germans. From "Canada" some inmates stole gold or diamonds, which the Kapos traded with the civilians. The exchange involved bottles of Polish vodka for jewelry. It was a deadly game, being caught meant a death warrant, but people risked all. The vodka was diluted and further traded in camp for provisions like bread or salami. None of my acquaintances were involved, only the building supervisors and Kapos, Polish and also some Jews.

After a short period I made some friends. The inmates, mostly Jewish came from all over Europe; I came from Germany, others from Poland, Hungary, France, and Belgium. One had to have friends. There were gangs like in prisons that

stole the meager provision we received, or started physically menacing someone they did not like.

Each morning we marched in formation under guard for about 4 miles. While passing through the gate with the iron words "*Arbeit macht frei*" (work makes you free), an orchestra of about 30 Jewish musicians was playing classical music. Same thing upon our return from work in the evening

The periphery of the camp was a double set of electrified barbed wire. As we marched in formation to the factory, we passed the barbed wire and often saw bodies electrocuted. People tired of living, who could not take the hardship anymore.

When I came to Krupp, the factory was staffed with a fairly large number of German civilian supervisors, all Krupp employees. They had maybe thirty or more different sections, each with Germans and SS noncoms. The factory had been active for two years before my arrival. There were heavy power presses stamping out the shells for the artillery detonators they intended to produce. I am happy to state: they never accomplished that. Some sections were reserved for several hundred women prisoners. They had been transferred from Birkenau to a satellite camp nearby for this purpose. Their function under supervision was to assemble small electric parts for the detonators. No great knowhow, blue wire to blue and yellow to yellow.

At the plant there was little physical abuse by the SS, because the inmates were needed for the work, only chicanery at the march to and from the factory.

I was very lucky by being given a choice by the Kapo of my detail, of either working on the lathe in the machine shop, or of handling the gauges, which were used in the production of the various stages of the detonator. This inspection was a very responsible assignment. Most gauges were meant for non technical personnel, like go or no-go.

The German civilian foreman, the head of the department I reported to, was a mining engineer, who had lived for over thirty years in Mexico. He was deported when the States entered the war and returned to his home town near Krupp headquarters. We did not have a love affair, but he was half way decent by

comparison. To offset this stroke of luck, we had the worst of all bully SS noncoms assigned to our group.

As part of my assignment I had daily to check the various gauges at the women's section. After several months on the job, they brought a new set of women inmates to the factory. By coincident, one of the new girls recognized me, because she was a close friend of my sister, same age. She told me that my family was deported just before her in March of 1942.

To add to the bad news, the SS noncom saw me talking to the girl and ordered me to his office. After a severe beating he wanted to know whether I knew that talking to females was forbidden.

He reported me to the camp commandant. The following morning, I had to report to the gruesome isolation department for punishment. Inside were the commandant and three SS doctors. There was an executioner, a heavysset guy about three hundred pound, Hungarian Jew. I recognized his accent, while he was talking German. He read my infraction and the punishment of twenty-five whiplashes on my behind.

They strapped me to a wooden structure after I removed my pants. I had to count to twenty-five. Should I lose count, he'll start all over. I don't know how I survived, because the pain was unbearable.

I do not know how many lashes I received, there were others in line to follow my punishment. After it was over, one of the SS doctors examined my behind and had me make about ten or more knee bends to restore my blood circulation. I had to pull my pants back up and was ordered to immediately report back to the factory with an SS guard. I remember to this day that I was unable to sit down for weeks.

Time went by, each day the same, hoping to survive. Late into 1944, there were rumors circulating, that various inmates picked up, that the Russians were coming.

Planes often circling overhead, but we had no idea of which origin. We heard the rumbling in the distance of heavy artillery. In December 1944, we felt a lot of anxiety by the civilians and also by SS noncoms. We were ordered to start disassembling some of the machinery and crating it. During the first two weeks of January 1945, inmate groups were assembled for transport out of Auschwitz.

My friend from Sachsenhausen, a Polish boy, who worked as a fireman, said to me: "The Russians are at the gate, why don't you hide with me and await their entrance."

I gave it a lot of thought, but decided not to gamble with my life. Capture by the SS guards meant immediate execution. I still was detailed to disassemble some of the machinery until the last minute.

On January 18, 1945, with the Red Army approaching, we left Auschwitz as about the last group consisting of several hundred inmates, on a forced march at the height of a bitter cold winter. Due to the heavy snow and ice in the middle of a severe winter.

It lasted for approximately six weeks. We wore very poor clothing for the cold and received some provisions. Our footwear consisted of confiscated upper Red Army boots taken from prisoners, nailed to wooden clogs. Very hard to walk in, but some isolation to the icy and snowy road we were forced to take.

The route took us by foot through lower Poland, Germany, and Czechoslovakia, to Bratislava, where they finally loaded us into open freight cars destined for Mauthausen, near Linz in Austria.

Nearly two thirds of all inmates did not survive the inhumane conditions of the march because of sickness, starvation, and brutality by the SS guards, many of them Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Croats under German command. All SS noncoms and officers were German. Many prisoners were openly executed on the road by the guards, because they were too weak to keep up and fell behind.

In February 1945, we finally reached Mauthausen, where I was given the inmate number 117540.

I was detailed to a satellite camp, Gusen, about 20 miles from the main camp. We were forced to build by hand tunnels into the Austrian Alps, which were intended to permit German aircraft manufacturer Messerschmitt to escape Allied bombings. The German specialists were blasting the tunnels with dynamite and inmates had to remove the chunks of rocks by lorries. The labor was physically very strenuous, especially because of the poor conditions of our bodies. We received better rations, obviously from the surplus of the military, with a piece of white bread and some soup, to keep us capable to work.

Finally on May 2nd, 1945, my birthday, we were liberated by American troops. As we awoke in the early morning, the main gate was open, no guards in sight and the camp was surrounded by American tanks.

One of my old friends from Auschwitz was a British citizen, a diamond dealer who lived in and was deported from Belgium to the concentration camp. He was able to contact the commanding American officer, identified himself as a British subject, and requested to be repatriated.

The U.S. Air Force was flying large bombers with supplies into Linz and returning to Paris with released prisoners of war, mostly British and French, not KZ inmates.

Our friend was lucky enough to get himself and four of us two days later with the help of the US Army Colonel on a departing flight. As luck would have it, there was a severe thunderstorm over Paris and the plane was diverged to Lille, in northern France.

I was completely undernourished down to 40 Kilos (about 85 lb.) and was placed by the authorities into a Catholic field hospital. The doctors and nuns were all French.

I had some knowledge of French from school and was able to communicate. They were very kind and kept me for about six weeks to recuperate.

Many of the returnees suffered from dysentery and various other diseases, after finally getting some decent food, which did not agree with their run down system.

After the hospital stay I went to Brussels with some friends, fellow inmates from Belgium.

In Brussels, the Belgian government and some Jewish Aid organizations placed me into a special home, with medical supervision. The home was a villa formerly belonging to deported and perished Jews, and administrated by the Jewish Aid organization.

I stayed there for about 18 months and received some accelerated schooling, since my education, as of the others there likewise, was interrupted at an early age.

Some very generous Jewish diamond dealers, who escaped the war in Switzerland, somehow were able to place several of us into sort of an apprenticeship to learn diamond cutting. In Belgium this was unheard of because of the very strong trade union. The trade was kept in the family from father to son, but obviously the dealers' money opened several doors to place us.

My late father had two sisters in the States since the turn of the century. I never knew them, only by occasional hearsay. One passed away many years ago and the other one was married, with a family. My uncle by marriage was orthodox and read the Yiddish paper each morning.

I believe *The Forward* (*Forverts*) published daily a list of survivors compiled by the UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration). They found my name and contacted me through the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society). On December 2nd, 1947, I finally arrived in the USA.

This document is only a short synopsis of my experience of nearly six years in German concentration camps. There are not sufficient pages to fully recount the misery and suffering I went through during the period of my incarceration. My story has been fully recorded for the Steven Spielberg Shoah Foundation as well as for the Fortunoff Foundation at the Yale University Library of Holocaust studies, and the Library of Congress.

Thanks to God and some unselfish volunteers and doctors, I am here today and able to tell my story for future generations, to come as a living testimony.

March 12, 2009