

Document

De Profundis: Memoir of an Inmate at Mauthausen Concentration Camp, March-May 1945

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Born in Miskolc in northern Hungary to a well-to-do Jewish middle-class family in 1922, Andrew Romay received his baccalaureate degree with high honors from the Royal Catholic Gymnasium in his home town in 1940. Admitted to the University of Economics in Budapest, he was temporarily exempted from forced labor service, into which most Jews of his age group were drafted. But following the German occupation of Hungary in March 1944, such exemptions were invalidated, and Romay was sent to a labor camp run by the Hungarian army. After the most extreme wing of Hungarian Nazis seized power with German help in October 1944, Romay's unit was transferred to the Germans to build fortifications along the Austrian-Hungarian border against the advancing Soviet Army. Ultimately, the retreating Germans took Romay to Mauthausen in March 1945. It was from this most notorious of Austrian death camps that he was liberated by the U.S. Army on May 5, 1945.

After recovering for about a month in a U.S. Army hospital, Romay was put on a train to return to Budapest. He was able to locate his parents' home, but when his brother opened the door, he failed to recognize Romay in his striped prison pajamas. His mother, however, had no such problem. By the end of 1946, Romay earned his Ph.D. in economics at his old university. Yet he found it increasingly difficult to reconcile his liberal views with the basic tenets of the Communist system, which had consolidated itself in Hungary by 1948. His requests for an exit visa having been repeatedly denied by the authorities, Romay attempted to leave the country illegally in early 1949. Caught at the Austrian border near the place where he had once dug trenches in 1945, he was shipped to a camp of internment as an "enemy of the people" and held there for eight months without trial. Upon his release, he remained in Hungary for seven years until the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 enabled him and his fiancée to escape to Austria, whence they both emigrated to the United States under the President's Emergency Program for Hungarian Refugees. Arriving in the

United States penniless but profoundly grateful to the country that had set him free and was offering him a new home, Romay became an independent entrepreneur: with hard work and good luck he achieved unusual success in the world of finance. Now in semiretirement, he has responded to a historian friend's request on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of his liberation in Mauthausen by summarizing his reminiscences.

Mauthausen Concentration Camp

Mauthausen, one of the harshest of Nazi concentration camps, was located near the village of Mauthausen, some twelve miles east of Linz.¹ It was established in April 1938, shortly after Austria was annexed to Germany, as a satellite of Dachau, and it became an independent camp in the spring of 1939. In the ensuing years Mauthausen acquired thirty-three subcamps of its own located throughout Austria. The first inmates were criminal offenders, to whom were eventually added political prisoners from the German Reich, Spanish republicans caught in France after its defeat by Germany, anti-Nazis drawn from all over occupied Europe, prisoners of war (chiefly Soviet soldiers), and Jews. The captured Soviet soldiers were so brutally mistreated, even measured by the prevailing general harshness of the camp regimen, that of the first 5,000 who arrived in November 1941 only 80 were still alive in March 1942. Poles, including many Jews, constituted the largest national group at Mauthausen. The mortality rate in the camp was extremely high. The number of prisoners who passed through Mauthausen is estimated at 199,400. Of that number an estimated 119,000 died as a result of hard labor, beatings, privation, shooting, gassing, and phenol injections; 38,120 were Jews. Despite the high mortality rate, the killing of political prisoners and Jews, and the construction of a gas chamber and crematorium, Mauthausen was not an extermination camp on the order of Auschwitz. It was intended primarily as a center for economic exploitation. Inmates worked, under horrible conditions, in the granite quarry that was incorporated into the camp. Heinrich Himmler saw the high-quality granite of the Mauthausen quarry as a source of building material.

Until 1944, mainly Dutch and Czech Jews were sent to Mauthausen. In May and June of 1944, 6,000 Hungarian Jews selected for work at Auschwitz were brought to Mauthausen. They were followed by 4,600 Jews from Plaszów (near Kraków). These Jews were put to work digging tunnels for mu-

¹Information has been drawn from the following sources: *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust* (New York, 1990), 3:944-52; *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1972), 11:1136-38; Hans Maršalek, *Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslager Mauthausen. Dokumentation* (Vienna, 1980); Evelyn Le Chêne, *Mauthausen: The History of a Death Camp* (London, 1971); Raoul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews*, rev. and definitive ed., 3 vols. (New York, 1985); and Evan Bukey, *Hitler's Hometown: Linz, Austria, 1906-1945* (Bloomington, Ind., 1986).

nitions factories. All told, around 13,726 Jews (mostly males) entered Mauthausen in 1944; 3,437 Jews died that year. In January 1945, in the face of the Soviet advance, 9,000 Auschwitz evacuees, the majority of them Jews, arrived in Mauthausen, along with thousands of prisoners from other camps. Thousands of Hungarian Jews were taken to Mauthausen in March 1945. These Jews had been imprisoned in camps along the Austrian-Hungarian border,² where they had slaved at building a line of fortifications, the so-called Southeast Rampart. As the Soviet army drew near, the camps were evacuated and the prisoners sent on foot to Mauthausen. Many died during evacuation, and more died in the camp from starvation, disease due to unsanitary conditions, and brutal treatment. Mauthausen was liberated by U.S. Army troops on May 5, 1945.

De Profundis

The story that follows is now exactly fifty years old. It happened to me and lives indelibly in my memory. I was twenty-three years old at the time, so unless I tell it now, it may never be told. Everything in it is recorded faithfully.

On that gray, overcast fall day, I stood together with a large group of people in the Jewish cemetery in Budapest. I was only twenty-three, but the trip to the cemetery, and standing during the ceremony, exhausted me. This was the first time I had left my apartment since my return from Mauthausen, in June 1945. But I had to be there, since 279 of my friends and fellow inmates were laid to rest: almost everyone who had remained in Balf, that small village in western Hungary, when the rest of us were marched off into Germany.

The audience listened in deep silence to the speeches and the traditional prayer for the dead. Toward the end of the ceremony, a man approached me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Bandi, you don't recognize me, do you?" I studied his face, but to no avail. It was a pale, sensitive face with scars and deep holes all over. "I am Jozsef Fenyo. We were in the same shed in Balf."

"But of course," I muttered in great embarrassment, though instantly I remembered him. He was the third on the right. We slept in those sheds exposed to the icy wind sweeping down from the mountains for three brutal winter months. Seven days a week, from sunup to sundown, we dug trenches in the hard frozen ground, with sleep and dreams the only respite from the all-pervasive bleakness. I vegetated without any emotion, never laughing, never crying.

Except once. It was the second day of Christmas, at six o'clock in the

²At the time, of course, it was the German Reich-Hungarian border.

evening, when we were dragging ourselves back to our respective sheds. As we came closer, inching ahead through the silent, single-lane village, from the half-open window of a house covered with icicles, I suddenly heard piano music. Someone was playing a waltz. I was so deeply moved, the tears welled up in my eyes. The soft music reminded me of a world I had already buried, which nevertheless still existed somewhere.

Fenyo was considerably older than I was, around forty. There were two age groups in our shed, those around forty, the old ones, and the young ones, around twenty. When the milder weather arrived late in February, so, unavoidably, did the typhoid fever. People, especially the old ones, died by the hundreds, and were buried in unmarked, mass graves.

My childhood friend, George Bach, also developed the dreaded fever, and ended up in the shed for the sick, segregated from the rest of us. I would sneak over to see him after returning from the daily digging, and to talk him into eating some of his untouched food. One night, he was gone. He became one of the victims of the frequent "cleansing" operations. All the sick in the shed were thrown onto trucks and driven to a neighboring village, Hidegseg, where they were executed.

Thus arrived March 27, 1945, the first night of Passover. Rumor spread that the Russians were near. After work, we were told that we would move further on. We were to be ready to march within the hour. Undoubtedly, we were being taken to Germany. By then, both my feet were frostbitten, and in addition one of my ankles was deeply ulcerated and swollen to such an extent that even the wooden clogs we wore did not fit. By sheer accident, the day before, I got a *Krankenzettel*, which meant one day's rest in the shed. The German guard let it be known that from here on it would be forced march. "Nur wer laufen kann"—"Only those who can march briskly"—he declared emphatically. We all knew what happens to anyone falling behind in the march. I thought that my chances were even, whether or not I went, and decided to remain in the shed.

The ragged band of survivors lined up and I said good-bye to my closest friends. We were all convinced this was to be the last farewell for us all. Suddenly the whistle blew, and the group started up. I stepped out to return to the shed. A guard, however, noticed me, and ordered me back into the line. I tried to explain that I was sick, and I waved my sick-leave card. All in vain. He rudely shoved me into the marching line, aimed his gun at me, and said if I uttered another word he would shoot me in the head.

And so I started to march toward seemingly certain death, a clog on one foot, the other wrapped in filthy rags, without even my little bundle, which contained basics like a brush or a spoon. The guard, suspecting my attempt to flee, marched next to me for hours, way into Germany. There was no escape.

I hadn't seen Fenyo since Balf, and so I said, "I'm happy that you, too, survived. Now tell me, how did *you* get away?"

"I did not," he said, "I remained with the sick in the shed." He must have seen my astonishment, since the remains of our sick companions had been

buried just a few minutes before, in front of our very eyes. And then he told me his story.

"After you all left, there was quiet. The German troops retreated continuously through the village and on the evening of Good Friday the evacuation was nearing its end. We thought we had escaped. The following day, two German military guards came to the shed. They had been following the retreating troops and had learned there were Jews left in the village.

"Semiconscious from fever and terror, we were marched out to the very same trenches that we had dug all winter long, supposedly to hold back the Russians. The Germans didn't even attempt to use them for that purpose. SS soldiers were already standing at the top of the trenches, and a hail of bullets started immediately. I don't recall how long it took. All I knew was that I was hit several times and that was the end. Darkness surrounded me. But I was alive, and must have moved in the trench; an SS noticed it, and I heard him tell the other, 'Dieser letzte lebt noch,' or, 'This last one is still alive.' After a short pause, 'I've run out of bullets.' Then the other, 'Here, I still have some.' I heard the click of the gun, while it was loaded. The shot was fired, and afterward, complete silence."

Fenyo related all this in a colorless monotone, and then stopped. Recalling the incident obviously had exhausted him. I listened in bewilderment. All of a sudden I saw myself saying good-bye to the others, stepping out of the line, the appearance of the German forcing me to march on, despite my frantic pleading to let me stay.

"The last shot destroyed my face," Fenyo finished his story. "An hour and a half later, the first Russians arrived on horseback. I was lifted out from among the about three hundred dead and taken to the hospital in the neighboring town of Kapuvar."

We were slowly leaving the cemetery, overwhelmed and crushed. We both saw our last images of Balf: he, the executioners above the trenches; I, the guard who unwittingly saved my life.

We were already sitting in the tram during the hour-long trip to Budapest when Fenyo said, "Now it's your turn. What happened to you afterward?"

It was an effort for me to tell the story in a comprehensive way. The memories were like a nightmare, an infinite wasteland where life and death jell, and the victims belong to neither.

But Fenyo deserved to know what he missed, so I began my story.

"When the Germans said, 'Only those who can do forced march,' they weren't exaggerating. We were driven for twenty-four hours at a stretch, with occasional ten-minute breaks, and without any food. They were in a great hurry, since the Russians were approaching. My foot ached; I had very little strength left, so I dragged myself most often close to the end of the line. Thus I often heard the gunshots that marked the end of my weakest companions' miseries.

"Late the next evening we arrived in a village in Austria—which was Germany then—named Loretto. The village lads were waiting for us on the main street with huge wooden clubs, screaming and laughing, baiting us to

run. When the ragged, wavering shadows tried to escape, they beat us savagely from all sides. Those hit over the head fell and were finished. The rest of us jumped over the bodies, frantically trying to get away. Miraculously, I wasn't hit. Perhaps I moved more easily because I had nothing to carry. Under the circumstances, that may have been a lifesaver.

"The survivors were collected in the quarry at the far end of the village. After a short rest we were marched onto the highway again. A day later we were jammed into cattle cars near Vienna. I don't recall how many days we traveled. They let us out once or twice, and surrounded by the guards, we grazed on the pasture. We ate leafy plants and drank from the puddles. When some extra time was allowed, we immediately fell into deep, redeeming sleep.

"One night the train stopped, and we were all let out. We stood in the midst of blinding searchlights, a huge iron gate and low squat buildings in front of us. We arrived in Mauthausen, though we learned the name only later on.

"The camp SS took over, and we were led up a steep hill. Everything was surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers with guards, their machine guns at the ready. Spotlights spread daylight all over the camp. As we later learned, the camp was overloaded with prisoners brought here ahead of the advancing Russian troops. Large tents were pitched at the top of the hill, on the bare soil, with mud and huge puddles all over. Many were already lying there, their eyes expressionless from infinite exhaustion and resignation. Seeing the newcomers they didn't even budge.

"A *Kapo* appeared and announced we were staying there until further notice. The *Kapo* was a Polish-Jewish prisoner who for some reason had been promoted. His voice was raspy and harsh and threatened us with dire consequences for disobedience. The only permissible reason to step out of the tent was to use the latrine. He next informed us that we would be given a can of *Dörrgemüse*, or grass and leaves boiled in water, every other day, and one kilogram of bread per every eighteen men, 'achtzehn Mann [*sic*] ein Brot.'

"We sat down in the mud amongst the others. And now a new chapter of our fast degradation began. By the third day we all looked alike.

"One day, I found a crumbling book among the scattered rags, entitled *Anthology of European Poets*. It had probably been the source of intellectual relief for its dead owner. Now it was my turn. The book affected me as the piano music had on Christmas Eve. Trying to erase the all-pervasive horror from my consciousness, I grabbed the book and threw myself into its world of poetry and fantasy.

"I was lying in the mud, absorbed in European poetry, when a childhood friend and former classmate, George Lovinger, discovered me. He had arrived with the latest transport, and was in somewhat better shape than the rest of us. He had lost his father, whom I had known very well, on the way to Mauthausen, and had buried him with his own hands.

"It was a sad meeting, with hardly any doubt left that this would be the

last one. Wrong again. George was subsequently liberated in Günskirchen [a subcamp of Mauthausen]. And when he finally arrived back home, he avoided my father, who was desperately searching for me. After all, how could he tell him about our last encounter?

"The last transport out finally left, and I remained with the dead, and those wishing to be dead. Perhaps I could have dragged myself further, but it seemed so pointless. The days and the nights went by; there was less and less groaning. The end was certain; only its form was unknown.

"Next morning the SS arrived. They wore the Afrika Korps uniforms salvaged from Rommel's North African campaign. Amidst screaming and beatings, those who were able to stand were made to straggle along. I was among them. The rest were thrown onto trucks lined up behind. The guard opened the heavy iron gate and we started out on the road leading out of the camp.

"We couldn't have chosen a more picturesque route leading to death. Snow-covered peaks of the lower Alps formed a background to the curving trail leading down to the Danube. Spring flowerets and sun-soaked budding trees all heralded Nature's renewal. I absorbed the sight, bidding farewell without emotion.

"The German commands became louder and louder as we approached the river. Suddenly, I saw what was happening. A large, old barge was anchored near the shore. A wooden strip led onto the barge's holding area, with SS guards on both sides. Crossing the plank, we were all made to jump into the dark abyss.

"I don't know how deep I fell, but I landed on something soft. Under me were several layers of delirious, once-human beings, those brought here by trucks from the camp. They could hardly speak, but their panicky groaning filled the space.

"Air and some light reached us only through the jump-hole above. On unsteady legs, in the almost total darkness, I searched among my rags for last night's leftover bread crumbs. What a mistake! A shadow snapped at me and tore it out of my hands. Losing balance, I fell, and by the time I got up it was too late. The shadow disappeared into the dark.

"Night came slowly, with all its misery. There was hardly any air, even on top of the human heap, let alone at the bottom. I expected the barge to be sunk. For what other reason were we dragged here? Yet the night passed, and we were still afloat. The following morning, the barge was ordered to be vacated. A long ladder was pushed down into the hold of the barge, and the living formed a human chain, through it, up to the deck. The dead—most of the captives—were thrown into the river one by one. Finishing the task, we waited on shore for our fate to be decided.

"We were ordered to go back to the camp. Upon reaching it, by late evening, we were taken directly to the bathhouse, which was rumored to be usually a cover for the gas chambers. First we were stripped naked in a front hall, then shoved into the chamber itself. Our eyes were riveted onto the showerheads built into the ceiling. After a short while, water gushed forth.

"Naked as we were, we then marched down to the barracks at the bottom

of the hill. This was the so-called *Russenlager* or Russian camp, originally meant to hold Russian prisoners of war, but as the Germans ran out of Russians, the barracks were made into a *Krankenlager*, or camp for the sick. Prisoners no longer able to work were kept here. We looked around with apprehension. The triple-decker wooden bunks were all filled beyond capacity. Old, bristly faces with scared, apathetic eyes looked at us, just like long-trapped wild animals stare at their recently taken brethren.

"Everyone being naked, it was shocking to see these old faces on shrunken, childlike bodies. The barracks leader ordered us to crawl onto the bunks, four to a bunk, as he put it. So we squeezed ourselves onto the bunks holding fewer than four. As the bunks were made for only one, we could only sit with folded legs. Even so, each movement hurt the one sitting opposite, but that was unavoidable. His reaction greatly depended on his remaining strength. Most didn't kick back, just groaned faintly.

"There was filth all over, mostly human waste. Many saved energy by not using the latrine. Others simply could not move. And that all-pervasive, sickeningly sweet, penetrating stench, the smell of rotting and decay: its main source was the dead thrown into a heap at the back of the barracks. Each morning the bodies were pulled out from among the living and stacked up. The pile almost reached the top, and was not removed until the evening.

"After that, came the watery soup. Occasionally, when we got a piece of bread, it had to be eaten with a spoon. Mildew turned it into powder. Those who had given up didn't even queue up for their portion. Some of the prisoners suffered from a strange, constant shaking of the body, foreboding the end. The rest knew the symptoms very well. It resembled the Muslim prayer position. 'Du bist schon Musulman [*sic*],' 'You are already a Muslim,' the dying man was cruelly baited.

"The system which served this unrelenting destruction also produced bizarre incongruities. In a neighboring barracks, a small group of prisoners offered 'first aid'; naturally, there was little they could do. During the first few days, my ulcerated ankle was swathed in paper bandage. That was all they had.

"Although we couldn't tell one day from the next, I believe about three weeks went by. We were fewer and fewer. New supply of prisoners was ebbing. Most bunks held three, and sometimes only two. There was no human contact. We no longer cared about the others, not even about our own fate. I became lethargic, and stared heedlessly into space, just like the prisoners I saw upon arrival.

"It was early afternoon, and lying on the topmost bunk, I saw through a tiny window, on the top of the hill, grim buildings of the camp administration surrounding the *Appellplatz*, the square where prisoners were counted before going to work. For days now there was only deep silence there: no more labor troops. The *Appellplatz* seemed totally deserted.

"Suddenly, on the winding road a jeep appeared, followed by an armored car with a soldier at the machine gun mounted on it. They moved very, very slowly, cautiously uphill. The buildings on top were separated by a steel

barrier from the rest of the camp. Today it was not the usual SS guard; the soldiers wore a different uniform. The two strange-looking vehicles reached the barrier. They stopped, and for a while the two sides eyed each other. Then the German guard raised the barrier without any resistance. Just as slowly as they came, the vanguard moved forward and stopped again in the middle of the square. Two giant-looking American soldiers got out.

"A minute later, the eerie silence was shattered by an earthquakelike rumble. Humanlike shapes, clad in striped prison pajamas, crawled forth from nowhere, moving grotesquely, seemingly senseless, stumbling, falling, and getting up again, trying to approach the Americans. All the while, they were shouting and screaming inarticulately; the sounds emitted were hardly human. They threw themselves at the Americans, who stood there in shock and disbelief, taking in this apocalyptic scene. Tripping over each other, they kissed their hands, their feet, their uniforms, wherever they could touch them. Many crawled around the vehicles convulsively, in hysterics.

"If man ever cried out from the depths, here was the nadir. These were the victims of the great German empire. All the enslaved, humiliated, down-trodden people of Europe.

"This moment remains indelibly set in your memory. Very few lived through such a scene and survived to bear witness. This is an experience during which you know, right when it happens, that the rest of your life can produce nothing like it. And perhaps time ought to come to a stop here. For a brief moment it seemed that justice prevailed after all: the innocent is set free, and the evil is punished.

"Lying on the bunk, all that crossed my mind. But I didn't cry. I had run out of tears long ago."

We got off the tram, and said good-bye with a long handshake. Before parting, Fenyo remarked, "Bandi, I feel this was a little bit our funeral, as well."

Andrew Romain
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