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Freedom

The shelling and fighting lasted about two more days. One morning when we got up it was very quiet. There were no German soldiers in sight, since they retreated. The order came from the Americans for every household to hang a white flag of surrender out of the window so that it could be seen from the street. If a white flag could not be seen the house would be levelled. These orders were carried out by the villagers.

It wasn't until the next day that the American tanks rolled in. What a joyous time that was. We, the prisoners of war, greeted them with open arms. Some of the American soldiers spoke Polish and we were so pleased that our liberators could speak our language. The Americans told us to stay in the same place until the war was over. It was either May 3rd or 4th when we got liberated. I do not remember the exact day. A few days later on May 7, 1945 the war with Germany and the Allied Forces was over. I was a free man.

The people I had worked for wondered if I would take revenge on them for the things they had done to me. We were encouraged by the Americans to get even with anyone who was mean to us. Instead of taking revenge though, I picked up the few belongings that I owned and said to them, "I am leaving, and don't worry, I am not going to be like you. Thank you for the good times I had which to me weren't many." (I was thinking about the time they were sick with the flu and I had access to all I could eat). I shook hands with them and they cried. I thought that maybe it was about time for them to cry.

The next day the boss lady's son, Walter, came back from the war. He felt bad that I had left his house and went to stay with some other people who welcomed me into their home for a few days until things got settled. This hurt them more than anything.

Now that the war was over and I had my freedom, I decided one day to go and see my brother who lived about 200 kilometers east from Tautenburg. I borrowed a bicycle from

some people, got up at 5 o'clock in the morning, took some lunch with me and headed out. When I got to the main highway there were many military vehicles heading in the same direction that I was going. I grabbed on to the side of a truck and that way I made good time getting there. I got to within a half a kilometer of the Russian zone to a place called Magdeburg and found out that my brother had gone back to Poland and home. My brother Aleksander was liberated by the Russians. I was so disappointed that I didn't get to see him and of course exhausted.

After eating my lunch I immediately began my journey back to Tautenburg. Every time I got a chance, I would grab hold of the side of a truck and that gave my legs a chance to rest from pedalling especially when the going was uphill. The trucks travelled up to 80 kilometers an hour. When I got back to the place where I stayed it was 10 p.m. and needless to say the bicycle was a total wreck. The tires were flat, the spokes were all loose and there wasn't much left of the bicycle, to put it mildly. The people couldn't believe that I had made it to Magdeburg and back all in one day. When they saw the bicycle; that is when they believed it! I had bicycled 400 kilometers in one day.

The American authorities encouraged the Polish people in the village to either go to the city of Jena (Yena) and register or to go back to our homes in Poland, which was now under Russian rule. We had a choice. My friend Stachu and I decided to go to Jena on foot which was about 15 kilometers away. We got there about 4 p.m. There were hundreds of Polish people there, mostly young men. We received identification cards and then were given supper. We were put into barracks which had beds with no mattresses only springs. Stachu wasn't too happy. I, on the other hand, thought this was just great, and just what I needed; a trampoline! I was jumping up and down on the springs and saying, "Isn't this beautiful" and almost hit my head on the ceiling saying with encouragement, "Maybe tomorrow we'll get the mattresses!"

The next day a convoy of army trucks came in and took us to a former concentration camp called Buchenwald. I later learned that this was the concentration camp that I was threatened

with many a time by the ladies and the Gestapo that came to beat me up. So I guess I finally made it!

The Americans converted the concentration camp into a displaced personnel camp. There were mostly Polish people there, literally thousands of us. We were placed in the former German guard's quarters which were quite nice. Stachu and I were assigned to one room with two single beds and this time the beds had mattresses much to our delight, and blankets too. It was nice and clean. Soup kitchens were set up to feed us and we were also given daily rations of bread and meat. We had all the food we could eat and I thought that was just beautiful.

Stachu was not happy and I could see that he had something on his mind. He talked about this German girl he had left behind in Tautenburg and I could see that he missed her very much. A few days passed. Then I woke up one morning and saw that Stachu wasn't in his bed. I went around the camp looking for him and asking people if they had seen him. No one seemed to know anything about him. I found out later that he went back to Tautenburg. So there I was, all alone again. He knew I would have talked him out of going back had he told me his plans. A new mate was soon assigned to my room.

There was nothing to do in the camp. We were waiting for news as to what the Americans were going to do with us. I went looking around the camp and saw first hand what a concentration camp looked like. It made me shiver at how horrifying it was.

The camp was enclosed with heavy barbed wire about three meters high and was electrified. Towers stood every hundred meters or so equipped with machine guns. The stench from burnt human flesh was still in the air. I saw the torture chambers filled with all kinds of different gadgets that were used to torture the people; hooks that were used to hang people by their chins; needles that were put behind finger nails; stretching gadgets that stretched the human body to its limits. These were some of them.

I saw ten cremation ovens. I was informed by some of the camp survivors that before the liberation the ovens were operating twenty-four

hours a day. Hundreds of people were cremated every day. Piles of ashes lay by the ovens waiting to be cleared away. There were hundreds of crockery pots with human ashes in them. This concentration camp had held many German people who had also opposed Hitler as well as many other nationalities.

The survivors told many hair raising stories about what went on in the camps. It would take volumes to tell of all the atrocities that happened there.

In one instance, I was told that they would take a victim and immerse him in ice cold water and leave him there to see how long he could survive in it. Many medical experiments took place here. I was told that Frau Brown, one of the camps commanders, had gloves made out of human skin for herself. The stories that were told were unbelievable but true; these would all come out in the war crime tribunals later on in Dachau and Nuremberg.

It was the middle of June, 1945 when we were given forms to fill out regarding whether we wanted to immigrate to a Western country or to go back to Poland. We had to decide this in a few days. The Americans were beginning to withdraw from this area and the Russians were to take over because the division of Germany had been decided in Yalta between Russia, America and England.

So I had to make a decision to go West or to stay and fall into Russian hands with the probability that they would let us go home to Poland. Many of the people formed groups and discussed amongst themselves what to do. Some said to go West, others said to go to Poland. I listened to all of this and was somewhat confused as to what I should do. I did not know if my mom, dad and sisters were even alive, as I hadn't heard from them for over two years.

So I sat down by the big gate which led to the concentration camp and said, "With God's help I am going to make my own decision and I will not be influenced by someone else as to what I should do." I sat there for a long time and searched my conscience as to what to do. I remembered how it was in Poland before I was taken away as forced labour, and I imagined what it must be like now after having been in the middle of the war zone for 5 years, and I

wondered what lay ahead of me.

I thought about the lady who prophesied about me in Poland when I was nine years old. She said that I would go into the world and would be rich. I thought to myself I already was "in the world" since I left home, but I never came to the part of "being rich". I had lived through three different fronts; 1939 - Poland and Germany; 1941 - Russia and Germany; 1945 - America and Germany. So I prayed, thanking God for saving me through this war. All of a sudden I got such a warm feeling and I felt so good I knew that God was with me and I decided to go West. I promised myself that I would never look back. My decision was made. It was June 21, 1945.

It seems to me that from that day on it was heaven on earth for me. The next day an order came from the American army that anyone who wanted to could join the army. The recruits would be all Polish personnel and officers. We would receive American army uniforms and would be under American supervision. After five years we would be able to become American citizens. I thought, "Wow, this is for me!" I was overjoyed.

On June 22, 1945 I joined the army. In the American zone 45,000 Polish recruits signed up to join the army. Three companies (called a battalion) were formed in the Buchenwald camp. I was in one of them.

We received our uniforms and a few days later we were loaded on trains headed for southwest Bavaria for training. We travelled for a few days. The railway system wasn't that good. It was very badly disrupted during the war by all the bombing.

One night we almost ended up behind the Russian zone. A Russian spy had rigged up the train order. Some of our men were familiar with that area, and knew we were going in the wrong direction. They told our officers that the train was heading toward the Russian zone. We were less than one kilometer from the Russian zone when we stopped the train. We would have ended up in Siberia. The cold war was already in progress and because we joined the Americans instead of going back home to Poland which was under Russian occupation, the Russians hated us. The American military police arrested the engineer and some other

people who were also involved in the betrayal.

The train was backed on to the right track and we finally came to our destination, a little town in southern Bavaria called Windsor. This was a former German army training camp. We spent the next five months in training. It was in this place that I almost died.

There were apple trees growing along the roadside. They looked so good. I went and picked some of the apples to eat. They were very green. I knew they weren't ripe for eating but I ate them anyway. I didn't think anything could hurt me. To top them off, I drank some beer. I got very sick and I couldn't eat anything for about two weeks. I wasn't getting any better and the doctor who came to the camp once a week kept saying to take some aspirin and assured me that I would be alright. But I wasn't alright. I was running a very high fever, so I decided to walk to the hospital on my own which was located about five kilometers from our camp. The doctors couldn't believe that anyone with such a high fever could be alive. I was admitted into the hospital and put into a ward with other patients who had no hope to live. The next day I was still alive much to their surprise. They took some tests and found out that I had a blockage in my intestines. I was



John (middle) and two American friends

given an enema and was kept in the hospital for about two weeks. I was very sick and weak and could not stand up on my legs. Slowly I recuperated and a few days later I was given my first meal of a baked potato and cheese. From then on I improved daily. I was visited by our officer from the training camp and many soldier friends. They were pleased with my recovery.

When I got back to the training camp I was still weak, but the food was good and everything was tasty. As a result I started to gain back the weight I had lost. In a few days I was back in training. It was an exciting time for me and it was exhilarating.

At times we were called unexpectedly at different hours of the night for competition training exercises. The trumpet would sound and we would scramble out of bed, dress in full uniform and gear, get lined up outside, have roll call and be ready to march. This exercise involved four different companies. The record set by the companies was three minutes. Our company won it once. This record was never broken.

Many times we marched up to twenty kilometers before we had a break and something to eat. Our gear included food rations, much of it being canned goods. When the commander gave the order for lunch break we would all scramble, eat hastily and be ready to march again at a moments notice. On marching back to the barracks we sometimes dragged our feet. So to remedy this, the commander would order us to sing marching songs. This we did. You can imagine a chorus of thrilling marching songs sung by a company of 250 young men, their strong voices resounding throughout the village as they marched through. The villagers would come out of their houses to watch us, and it was a thrill to hear us. It was also thrilling for us. We felt good about ourselves.

This was a big change for all of us. Just a few months earlier we were prisoners of war, beat up, abused, nothing to eat, little to wear and with no future in sight. Now here we were soldiers of freedom and highly respected by the German people. The tables had turned at last.

There was something to look forward to each day. Although our food rations were plentiful, they were mostly canned goods. To

put a little variety into our meals a bunch of us guys would go to a farmer in the village and buy a steer from him. This one day we bought a steer weighing approximately 200 kilos. The steer was butchered and cut up into small portions. We took the meat and brought it into the camp and sold it to the guys. There was no problem to sell it. Often in an hour's time it would all be sold. We did this many times. There was no profit in this. It was done so that we could have fresh meat in our diet. Each barrack had between ten and twelve young men in it. A coal and wood heater was in the middle of the room. Two or three of the guys would get together and buy some meat then cook it in a pot on the heater.

This one time we had a bottle of home-brew. We were celebrating and having a great time. I got some meat but there was no room on the heater to cook it. I couldn't wait, I was too hungry, so I decided to see what it would taste like raw. I salted and peppered it, sliced some onions on it, then I put it between two slices of bread and ate it with such relish that one of the guys decided he would like to try some too. He did and he liked it too. From that moment on we became very good friends. We were just like brothers, fully trusting one another. His name was Mirek Baranek.

By the end of summer I was in top shape.



John and Mirek Baranek

I was admired by many people about how good I looked. Of course I felt good too.

The war with Japan was still on and there was talk that we might be going to Japan to fight. I was looking forward to that. When the news came on the radio that the Americans had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, our hopes to go to Japan were over. The war with Japan was over. There was a big celebration, especially for the Americans.

By the end of November 1945 two of our companies were posted to Dachau to guard the German SS prisoners of war. Dachau was a former concentration camp that was converted to a prisoners of war camp.

It was situated about twenty kilometers north of the city of Munich, Bavaria. We were told that my company number 4020 would soon be posted for guard duty at Dachau. I was all excited and expectantly waited for the day.

On December 22, 1945 early in the morning, a convoy of American trucks arrived at our camp. In about one hour we were all loaded and heading for Dachau.

We arrived in Dachau that evening. We were assigned to nice quarters. There was a big dining room area and good food. I was just bursting with joy.

The next day they showed us around. There were 45,000 SS prisoners in this camp. Inside this camp there was a hospital for the prisoners. This hospital was like a camp within a camp. It was fenced right around with barbed wire and there were towers surrounding it manned with machine guns. The hospital was heavily guarded. Inside there was a special barrack which housed Nazi high ranking officers who were war criminals. One of Hitler's right hand men, Air Marshal Goering, was one of the prisoners. He was later transferred to Nuremberg for the criminal war tribunal. I guarded him. Frau Brown was also a prisoner here, she was known for the monstrosities she committed in many concentration camps.

We were assigned for duty which was to guard the prisoners. Our schedule was 8 hours of guard duty and 16 hours on alert. Then we had 48 hours off duty. We had a lot of free time for ourselves. Some of that time we spent in the pub located in the camp where we enjoyed free beer, coffee and donuts. Every once in a while

an American officer would come in to the pub bringing with him a few bottles of whiskey. We would line up and have a shot of whiskey to keep our morale up. My morale was at an all time high even without the whiskey.



Party Time: John at bottom

There were seven companies of Polish soldiers in this camp. Each company had 250 men. There were many Polish army veterans there who were taken prisoners of war as early as 1939. I ran into some of my old school buddies from my village in Poland. My cousin Chester Kiec was one of them.

One of the best times I had was when I came across my brother's friend Tadeus Kawka. He was the one who bullied me when I first started school. He threatened to castrate me with his dull jackknife. One time he was on guard duty when I was assigned to check the guards. I was a corporal then and he was a private. I had him outranked. I walked up to him, pulled out my jackknife and said, "I will castrate you." He didn't recognize me. The last time we saw each other was when I was just a kid. By this time I was much bigger and stronger than he. He couldn't believe it when I told him who I was. We had a good laugh over our past and present time. After this I saw him quite often. He couldn't keep up to me with my style of living though, especially the time when we took the train to Stuttgart to pick up some home-brew. We travelled all night on the train to get there. I knew some people there who had some home-brew for sale. We picked up two suitcases full of bottles of home-brew. We had to carry the suitcases, which were very heavy, five kilometers to the railway station. Tadeus

carried the smaller suitcase. He never stopped complaining from the time we left till the time we got back. He said the suitcase was too heavy and too much for him to carry. Meanwhile I had the large suitcase and was well ahead of him. I kept looking back to see if he was coming. He would yell, "Wait for me." So I would have to stop until he caught up to me. The roads were very slippery and icy as it was winter time. We finally made it to the railway station. At the station we got stopped by the military police. They suspected something, as it was unusual for soldiers to be carrying suitcases, especially that heavy. Also, there was a lot of smuggling of home-brew going on at that time which was illegal. They called us into the station and asked us what we had. Without hesitating I said, "Homemade wine." Homemade wine was legal. I opened the suitcases to show them what we had and offered them a sample. They didn't want any. "It's okay, I believe you," one of them said, and they let us go. So we got away easy! We travelled all night by train back to Dachau. We hadn't slept for two nights. We walked from the station to our barracks. The road was very slippery. We were so close to our barracks that I could "smell the bed", I was so tired. I had my suitcase on my shoulder, when I suddenly slipped and fell. About fourteen bottles of home-brew got broken and only one two litre metal container was saved. I felt disgusted to say the least. Anyway, I did sell the two litre container of home-brew and still made money. It was sold on the black market. That was my first taste of capitalism and free enterprise.

It was my personal challenge to buy whiskey for fifty cents a bottle and sell it for ten dollars. I always succeeded. When I look back on this it was actually a sad experience. There were times when an American soldier would knock on our door early in the morning wanting to know if I had any home-brew and holding ten dollars in his shaking hand because he was an alcoholic. In those days I didn't know too much about alcoholism. I couldn't imagine anyone wanting whiskey that badly. But they did. His face would light up when I said that I had it, because sometimes I didn't have any to sell. I thought I was doing a good deed when I had some to sell. Now I know different.



This cannon was fired every morning at 6am. Dachau, John (far right)



John and friend black marketeering



John on the Rhine river



Guard Duty Soldiers (John fourth from left)



Assembled to march to church service (first in line)



Dachau (John; middle)