

A SURVIVOR'S DIARY – “THE BOY WHO FOLLOWED HIS FATHER INTO AUSCHWITZ” BY JEREMY DRONFIELD

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Abstract: This article aims at drawing the attention of the readers to the danger of nationalism and populism and their devastating consequences in a hesitating world which seems to have forgotten the greatest tragedy of humanity: the Holocaust. Dronfield's book is not just a memoir; it is a serious historical document based on minute research, the main source of which is Gustav Kleinmann's diary which he miraculously managed to hide all through his dismal journey into the darkness of Nazi concentration camps. At the same time this book is a warning for all of us not to make the same mistakes.

Keywords: concentration camp, Auschwitz, diary, atrocity, mass killings

On 27th January 2020, seventy-five years since the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, more than two hundred survivors gathered at the former extermination camp, and numerous wreaths were laid at the Death Wall. Nobody really knows how many people were killed in this Nazi hell, but it is estimated that around 1.1 million children, women and men, mostly Jews, were shot, gassed, tortured to death or starved in Auschwitz-Birkenau. This year again survivors shared haunting stories of death and endurance, and warned that the harrowing crimes are in danger of being forgotten. Benjamin Lesser, a ninety-two year old former prisoner stated: “I have returned so that I don't forget any of the details of what happened to me, so I can keep the memories alive, and stop the world from acquiring amnesia.” (The Guardian, January 27, 2020) We have the duty to remember the mayhem and what led to it.

On 1st September, 1939 Nazi Germany invaded Poland thus marking the beginning of WWII. On the eve of the German occupation 3.3 million Jews were living in Poland. By the end of the war, approximately 380 thousand Polish Jews remained alive, according to Israel's official memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, Yad Vashem. Some of the most horrifying Nazi crimes happened on Polish soil, where Jewish people died in ghettos and the six death camps operated by German SS units including Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau. Whereas almost all Jews who entered Belzec, Treblinka, Chelmno or Sobobor died, the name Auschwitz became a metonymy for the entire Holocaust. Fact is that when Auschwitz-Birkenau became one of the main Nazi death factories, the vast majority of Jews had already been slaughtered in the Eastern regions of Poland. In order to put into practice Hitler's horrendous fantasy of a planet without Jews, the Nazis developed three lethal techniques. They started by shooting the prisoners on the brink of mass graves; later on the inmates were killed by asphyxiation first with carbon monoxide in so-called gas vans, and then with Zyklon B (crystalline hydrogen cyanide), which caused the deaths of around one million Jews. Between the fall of 1941 and the fall of 1944 the Germans transported in death trains millions of prisoners to killing centers in occupied Poland. The Final Solution, the ultimate monstrous killing technique, consisted of gassing, shooting, random acts of terror, disease, starvation and was meant to be the last act of what the Fuhrer called the ecological cleansing of his empire.

Even though Nazis imposed death penalty on all those who helped Jews in any way, there were thousands of Poles, and not only, who risked their lives to protect or hide them during the Holocaust. Around 7000 people are recognized by Yad Vashem as the 'Righteous Among the Nations' for having supported Jews during the war. In his book "Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning", Timothy Snyder compares the fate of Victor Klemperer, Anne Frank and Emanuel Ringelbaum, three very famous chroniclers of those years. Thus Klemperer, a German scholar of Jewish extraction, author of a brilliant analysis of the language of the Third Reich, was married to a non-Jew, survived and left behind a valuable linguistic work. Anne Frank and her family were deported to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen where she died. A teenage German Jew, who was hiding in Holland with her family, she is the author of a heart wrenching diary, which became the best read text about the Holocaust. In his turn, Ringelbaum is the author of a priceless archive, a unique collection of documents about Jewish life in Poland and the Holocaust. He was captured and saved several times by Polish Jews and non-Jews, and ultimately shot together with those who had helped him. Klemperer, Frank and Ringelbaum are only three of the numerous witnesses of the horrendous crimes committed by Nazi Germany. They left behind priceless confessions and precious documents

Among the testimonies of death camp survivors Jeremy Dronfield's novel "The Boy Who Followed His Father into Auschwitz" stands apart. Dronfield, former archeologist, historian and biographer, relies on a lot of research and interviews about the horrific experience of the Holocaust, but also on Gustav Kleinmann's sparse diary kept and concealed during his camp years – thus risking execution- and Fritz Kleinmann's heart-breaking memoir, "The Dog Will Not Die", the German title being even more suggestive "Der Hund will nicht krepieren", issued in 1995. Apart from being a comprehensive document about one of humanity's most horrendous errors, which had appalling consequences, Dronfield's book is unique in that it follows a father and a son's six year unimaginable journey through Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Monowitz, Mauthausen, and Belsen-Bergen. In addition, this tear-jerking story of tremendous suffering and resilience is primarily based on Gustav's diary. In the nightmarish environment of the concentration camps this notebook survived by sheer miracle and constitutes the starting point for Dronfield's research and historical document.

The book starts shortly before the German *Anschluss* of Austria and the infamous *Kristallnacht*, on 9th November, 1938, when "Jews were beaten and murdered out of hand if they got in the way." (Dronfield 2019, 26) In Vienna too, where the Kleinmann family, Gustav, his wife Tini, and their four children, Edith, Fritz, Herta and Kurt were struggling to survive in a now very hostile and dangerous environment, Jews were living on a razor edge. Foreign newspapers disappeared, everyone was to wear a Swastika badge, the Heil Hitler salute became mandatory, books were burned, the Israelische Kulturgemeinde was taken over by the SS, Jewish property worth two and a quarter billion Reichsmarks was seized: "The world left Austria to the dogs" (Dronfield 2019, 17)

Gustav had a small upholstery business, which had enabled him to feed his family. Fritz was preparing to follow in his father's steps, while Edith was learning millinery and wished to become a hat designer. The peace and calm of all Jewish families were irretrievably broken on the night of November 9, and for a long time afterwards. Chaos ensued, Jewish homes and businesses were robbed, their belongings were smashed and destroyed, synagogues were pillaged and set on fire, Jews were fiercely beaten and arrested, even killed. Hell had suddenly settled in Vienna. The playwright Karl Zuckmayer wrote: "The netherworld had opened its portals and spewed out its basest, most horrid, and filthiest spirits ...What was being unleashed here was the revolt of envy; malevolence; bitterness; blind, vicious vengefulness." (Dronfield 2019, 15) But the worst was to come.

Gustav and Fritz, his eldest son, were the first of the family to take the Blood Road to Buchenwald, on 2nd October, 1939. The date would mark the beginning of their frightful journey into the darkest of nights. Buchenwald meant very hard work in a quarry, punishment, torture and death for a lot of Jews, Roma, Poles, Catholic and Lutheran priests, homosexuals, and political prisoners. Their daily ordeal was to feed a stone crusher in an infernal contest, always won by the machine. "Rattling, clattering, the crusher went back to work, consuming the rocks fed into its insatiable gullet by the laboring prisoners..." (Dronfield 2019, 72) Many of the prisoners collapsed with fatigue and malnutrition and were shot then and there. Backbreaking Sisyphean work in quarries, meager food rations, poor sanitation, bone-chilling cold, lack of warm clothes and shoes, daily beatings and injuries, torture, and senseless killings made life unbearable. Despite life-threatening danger, Gustav had managed to smuggle his diary into the camp, and his first entries show a father determined to survive and save his son: "I have seen how prisoners get beaten by the SS, so I look out for my boy. It's done by eye contact; I understand the situation and I know how to conduct myself. Fritzl gets it too." (Dronfield 2019, 51) Later on Gustav fell ill with dysentery and Fritz got severely beaten; nonetheless, Gustav did not lose heart: "I work to forget where I find myself," (Dronfield 2019, 61) he wrote in his diary. Life was more and more insufferable at Buchenwald. Prisoners were beaten to death, shot or hung from Goethe's Oak. This venerated tree had been a landmark in Goethe's walks from Weimar up to Ettersberg. The SS had preserved it, built the camp around it, and sarcastically used it for hanging prisoners who did not work hard enough. "Every day another death. One cannot believe what a man can endure," (Dronfield 2019, 68) was the next short journal entry. Overwhelmed by the cruelty of the kapos and the extremely hard work Gustav composed on the back pages of his notebook the 'Quarry Kaleidoscope': "Click, clack, hammer blow,/ Click, clack, day of woe./ Slave souls, wretched bones,/ At the double, break the stones..." (Dronfield 2009, 69) As time passed by, survival became more and more difficult for Gustav and his son.

As Buchenwald expanded very fast and new barracks for prisoners were needed, Fritz was apprenticed to Robert Siewert, the kapo of Construction Detachment I. Although a supervisor, Siewert had a kind heart. Moreover, he was mainly concerned about the young prisoners' fates. In his autobiographical book "Doch der Hund will nicht krepieren" Fritz Kleinmann recalls that, despite his appearance, Siewert was merciful and talked to the inmates like a father. Very soon, under Siewert's guidance and protection, Fritz became a skilled mason and builder, and was able to share his additional food rations with his father.

For a few months in the beginning of 1941 Gustav did not write anything in the notebook hidden under the mattress of his bunk. "Again there is unrest in the camp," (Dronfield 2019, 117) was the first entry after a long period of silence. It spoke of a budding spirit of revolt caused by the murdering of around four hundred Dutch Jews and that of Phillip Hamber, a former Viennese movie producer, by drowning in a trench full of mud and rainwater under the eyes of his brother, Eduard. Eduard Hamber was beaten and tortured to death for having complained about Phillip's inhumane treatment and death. When Gustav took out his diary from the hiding place he wrote that Phillip Hamber had been "drowned like a cat." (Dronfield 2019, 119)

During the summer of 1941 the Nazis started implementing the T4 program, which involved specialized asylum facilities equipped with gas chambers, mobile gas vans by means of which those deemed by the regime weak sick or unable to work were collected and never seen again. They called them 'mercy deaths'. Gustav commented in his notebook: "I smell rat;" his only solace and support was his son: "The boy is my greatest joy. We strengthen each other. We are one, inseparable." (Dronfield 2019, 123)

Hard times became harder in the spring of 1942. The heads of the SS had agreed upon the Final Solution. Many of Gustav's friends had been taken away as 'invalids' the previous year, and disappeared. The feeling was one of fright and horror, and Gustav confessed in his journal: "Everyone thinks, *tomorrow morning it will be my turn. Daily, hourly, death is before our eyes.*" (Dronfield 2019, 134) The Jewish population drastically dwindled as a consequence of a transformed concentration camp system. Euthanasia of invalids, starvation, abuse and murder were intensified in order to bring about a 'Jew-free Reich'. For Gustav and Fritz the worst was to come.

In October 1942, after three years, two weeks and one day in Buchenwald Gustav Kleinmann's name was on the list of prisoners who were going to be transferred to Auschwitz. The list was a long one and comprised almost all Jews still alive in Buchenwald. Fritz and a few other skilled construction workers, however, were not among the roll, as they were needed at the building of a German ammunition factory. The thought of abandoning his father tormented Fritz, and although Siewert's advice, "If you want to go on living, you have to forget your father" (Dronfield 2019, 160) was a wise, reasonable one, he could not imagine his life without his father. He made the crucial decision to join the transferees, to 'Follow His Father into Auschwitz', in spite of the certitude that they were heading to their extermination. Once again the four hundred and five Jews took the Blood Road and travelled for the second time for two endless days and nights, in cattle wagons, in indescribable conditions. Gustav had miraculously concealed the battered diary under his clothes, thus clinging to the harsh reality of their lives: "Everyone is saying it is the journey to death, but Fritzl and I do not let our heads hang down. I tell myself that a man can only die once," (Dronfield 2019, 164) are the only sentences he wrote during the frightful journey into Auschwitz. Soon enough Gustav and his mates, who had become the numbers on their tattooed forearms, would find out about the experimental killing facilities of Block 11, or the 'Death Block', and the 'Black Wall' against which tens of thousands of prisoners had been shot: "Many scary things here. It takes good nerves to withstand it." (Dronfield 2019, 182) One of these was the selection of prisoners at the end of which more than six hundred people from Buchenwald, Dachau, Natzweiler, Mathausen, Flossenburg, Sachsenhausen, and Ravensbruck were exterminated. The prisoners were ordered to strip naked in order to be evaluated as fit or unfit for hard work. Fritz and Gustav escaped the death sentence that time again, but: "We knew now that we were doomed to death," (Gartner and Kleinmann 2012, 90). It was not immediate death, they had still to endure living hell. The remaining around eight hundred slaves were marched to the neighboring village of Monowitz to dig roads and build the barracks of the sub-camp Monowitz. The workers who got sick or were exhausted were sent to Birkenau and gassed. Once again surviving was impossible unless you were a skilled worker or relied on companionship and good luck. Many prisoners fell into deep depression and moved around like ghosts, their hearts dead. In camp slang these lost souls were called 'Muselmanner', the German word for Muslims. Muselmanner were bound to break down and were avoided by the other inmates. Still, Gustav did not lose hope and wrote in his notebook: "Every day the departures. Sometimes it is heartbreaking, but I tell myself, *Keep your head high; the day will come when you are free. You have good friends by your side. So don't worry – there are bound to be setbacks.*" (Dronfield 2019, 192) And a major setback was still to come in the summer of 1943.

Fritz had joined the resistance which was burgeoning inside the camp, but was denounced and brought in front of the Gestapo chief. As he did not give away any names, he was savagely tortured. With the help and support of his friends and a stroke of luck Fritz was literally brought back to the pitiful life of the Monowitz sub-camp. Gustav wrote: "And so the

year of 1943 goes by.” (Dronfield 2019, 226) For Gustav and Fritz it was the fourth winter of life in death.

Between May and July 1944, one hundred and forty-seven trains arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Because of the huge number of prisoners, mainly Hungarians, additional gas chambers were put back into use and worked round the clock. Many of the men and women who had survived the selection were sent to Monowitz. This is what Gustav wrote: “Many of them no longer have parents, because the parents are left behind in Birkenau. Such a sad chapter.” (Dronfield 2019, 248) Many of the newcomers already had the symptoms of the ‘Muselmanner’.

While the Germans were being pushed out of the conquered territories, the level of atrocity rose significantly. More and more Jews became the victims of the Final Solution strategy. Horrifying stories about killings in Birkenau were spread among the Monowitz prisoners: “The stench of the burning corpses reaches as far as the town.....and all this in the twentieth century,” (Dronfield 2019, 251) was what Gustav scribbled in his journal. Any defection or suspicion of collaboration with the resistance was punished by hanging in front of thousands of awe-struck inmates. In spite of the horror and fright inflicted upon the prisoners, Gustav did not give up hope: “I keep thinking that our stay here will soon come to an end.” (Dronfield 2019, 264)

On 19th January, 1945, as the Red Army was closing in, all thirty five thousand reasonably able men and women from the Monowitz sub-camps were marched under immediate threat of being beaten, trampled over or shot towards the town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz). This journey proved to be infinitely worse than the Blood Road to Buchenwald all those years ago. Again they were crowded into open-top wagons, normally used for carrying coal, heading towards Mauthausen. After several excruciating days and nights they crossed the Austrian border and Gustav convinced his son to escape and leave him behind. It is unbelievable that Gustav still had his notebook: “The Lord protect my boy. I cannot go, I am too weak. He wasn’t shot at. I hope my boy will win through and find shelter with our dear ones.” (Dronfield 2019, 285) For Gustav the Death March had not come to an end. After having reached Mauthausen the train slowly moved back to the German border because the camp was full to bursting. The journey proved to be worse than anything Gustav had seen so far: “Starved and murdered, some frozen to death, and the whole thing not to be described,” (Dronfield 2019, 285) he still found the strength to write. After spending two days in Mittelbau-Dora, Gustav was assigned to the neighboring Ellrich concentration camp, where life conditions were worse than in any other camp. The death toll was of sixty to seventy deaths daily. The prisoners were doing inhuman slave labor digging the tunnels where lethal weapons were manufactured. Gustav was weaker and more desperate every day, but still did not give up hope: “I have made a pact with myself that I will survive to the end...and every day I say a prayer to myself: *Gustl, do not despair. Grit your teeth – the SS murderers must not beat you,*” (Dronfield 2019, 302) he still clung to his journal. The infernal odyssey was not over though. In April 1945, a week before the US 104th Infantry Division arrived at Ellrich, the still living skeletal slaves were transferred to the North of Germany, to Belsen-Bergen camp. The dozen or so sick prisoners had been shot by the SS.

Belsen-Bergen was one of the last concentration camps on German soil. Over sixty thousand souls were struggling to survive among piles of unburied corpses. In Himmler’s sick mind they would serve as hostages or even as a proof of mercy towards the imprisoned Jews; he thus hoped to win the favor of the Allies. Finally, just as Gustav’s resilience started to waver, on the 14th April the first British tanks could be seen in the distance. Once inside the camp Captain Derrick Sington was appalled by the sight of the walking skeletons “in their terrible motley, who had once been Polish officers, land-workers in the Ukraine, Budapest

doctors, and students in France...” (Dronfield 2019, 314) He confessed that he had to fight back his tears. Such was the dimension of the calamity that it took two whole weeks to bury the corpses in deep pits, mass graves. For Gustav Kleinmann true liberation and the journey home lasted until September 1945. Almost six years had passed since Gustav had written the first entry in his little green notebook, which had accompanied him all through the journey into darkness: “Arrived in Buchenwald on the 2nd October 1939 after a two-day train journey...” When liberated Gustav wrote: “At last one is a free man, and can do as one pleases. Only one thing nags at me, and that is the uncertainty about my family at home.” (Dronfield 2019, 323) He was to find out soon that Fritz had been caught after he had jumped from the Death Train, and imprisoned in Mauthausen, one of the worst concentration camps where the death rate had reached three thousand inmates a day, for three months. He very rapidly lost strength and hope, and almost turned into a ‘Muselmann’. When the Americans arrived at Mauthausen, Fritz was a bag of bones wrapped in skin, his body full of sores and bruises: “I was utterly demolished there.” (Gartner and Kleinmann 2012, 82) Nevertheless, miraculously, Fritz Kleinmann arrived at the Westbahnhof, Vienna on the 28th May 1945, after five years, seven months, 28 days since the departure to Buchenwald. Later on Fritz found out that out of 1,035 Jews who had been on that transport only twenty-six survived.

Gustav’s wife, Tini and the youngest daughter, Herta had been deported in the East and shot. Edith, their elder daughter had succeeded in fleeing to London as early as 1939. She had married there and afterwards immigrated with her family to America. The youngest son had been entrusted to an American family and became an American citizen. For Gustav and Fritz life after the Nazi Hell meant incessantly living with horrifying memories and incurable trauma.

Gustav Kleinmann died on May 1st 1976, a day before his eighty-fifth birthday.

Fritz Kleinmann had serious health problems caused by the beatings and tortures, even suffered from partial paralysis, but he lived a long life. He died on January 20th 2009, at the age of eighty-five. It may not be a mere coincidence that father and son died at the same age.

To conclude, Dronfield’s “The Boy Who Followed His Father into Auschwitz” reads as a captivating, heartrending novel but is indubitably a precious historical document, the result of a minute scientific research, based on individual memoirs, interviews with survivors, and a huge amount of scientific data about the Holocaust. From among all these materials Gustav Kleinmann’s little green notebook is perhaps the most reliable source of information. Although extremely terse, the diary traces back the frightful odyssey of father and son, their journey to hell and back, highlighting crucial moments of crises. It often supported Gustav during the darkest moments, when everything seemed to be lost.

In 2020, seventy-five years after the liberation of those who survived the Holocaust after the Final Solution we have the duty to remind humanity of the Nazi atrocities which killed millions of innocent people in concentration camps. In January 2020 more than two hundred survivors came together at Auschwitz-Birkenau. We don’t know how many will be present next year at the 76th commemoration of those who lost their lives for no guilt at all.

Significantly, references about the resurgence of anti-Semitism have been made. A report from

Tel Aviv Kantor Center reveals a high level of major violent incidents across the world, especially in Europe and the United States, in 2018 and 2019. It seems that history has a lethal tendency of repeating itself. It all starts with hateful words which soon turn into hateful laws that allow legal hateful acts.

In the center of Vienna, hidden in the sidewalks there are commemorative plaques bearing the names of deported Jews, the date of their deportation, and the name of the concentration camp where they died. They are a constant reminder of the past and of our duty

to be watchful: “The Holocaust is not only history, it is also a warning.”(my translation) (Snyder 2018, 13) It is of utmost importance to teach generations living now and those to come not to be indifferent to human suffering anywhere and anytime. Otherwise it will suddenly be too late.

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