

THE CAMPS ■ JULIUS SURVIVES CLOSE CALLS

Julius Blum was born in 1925 in Munkacs, Czechoslovakia, a mountain town with a strong Jewish community. In 1938 the area was annexed by Hungary as part of the Munich agreement that gave most of Czechoslovakia to Hitler. The Jews of Hungary were relatively safe until Nazi Germany invaded the country in March 1944. By late May, all the Jews of Munkacs had been sent to Auschwitz to be killed.

In March 1944 the German army occupied Hungary. Shortly afterwards, laws were put in place requiring Jews to wear yellow stars and observe a curfew after sunset. All other rights Jews had previously had as citizens—owning their own businesses, attending universities, practicing a profession, and even owning a radio, the only source of news that they had—were taken away from them.

I was 19 years old. I lived with my family in a small town about 100 miles south of the Polish border. A small group of young friends and I, 20 of us total, decided never to wear a yellow star. Using false papers identifying us as non-Jews, we at first avoided capture. At night we secretly listened to the BBC [radio] broadcasts from London. We never learned about what was happening to Jews in other parts of Europe. Had we known it, we would have organized and fought behind the lines, gladly giving our lives or perhaps helping to end the war sooner.

Not long after the Germans ordered Jews to wear the yellow star, we were forced to leave our homes and move into the ghetto. My grandmother, grandfather, aunt, her husband, their two children, and his parents, and my uncle and his family all shared two small rooms. Instead of moving into the ghetto, we 20 fellows decided to go into the woods where we hoped to survive until the war was over. We pretended to be migrant workers accepting odd jobs from the farmers. We worked on one farm taking care of pigs and carting wheat to the flour mill. Close to the end of April, the farmer we worked for informed on us to the Germans. We were captured by German soldiers and taken to the brick factory, which was the transport area for Jews being deported to Auschwitz. At the brick factory, we were severely beaten and then interrogated to find out if we knew anyone else hiding in the woods. Unfortunately, I had a note written in Hebrew in my pocket which a German officer found. Thinking it was a secret code, he took me to the group leader. I was questioned and beaten until I passed out. Luckily, I was taken to a first-aid station and the doctor looking after me happened to be a close family friend. He made sure I was put in a cattle car with the rest of my friends.

No one in the train knew where we were heading. A day later the train stopped. The Germans opened the cattle car doors and allowed Hungarian Jews from the nearby labor camp to bring water into our car. The big bucket that served as a bathroom for the whole train car was emptied. Immediately they locked the doors again and the train headed east.



USHMM/Yad Vashem



Selection on arrival at Auschwitz, spring 1944

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Selection for slave labor at Auschwitz, spring 1944

About three or four days later, the train stopped, and the doors opened to a bedlam of noise. Voices in German, Yiddish, French, and Polish shouted for us to get out of the car, leave everything behind. Men and women were told to line up separately. Immediately they marched us forward and we passed the first selection in front of [Dr. Josef] Mengele. I shall never forget Mengele. He was dressed immaculately from his uniform to his very highly polished boots. I could see my reflection in them. He looked at me. I was still showing bruises on my face, and despite the fact that I was young and otherwise in excellent condition, he wasn't sure if I should go right or left. Finally he asked me, "Can you run?" I loudly answered "Yes." Then he pointed to his left and I started running. This was the difference between life and death.

We were taken to an empty barrack where we sat wondering where we were and what was going to happen to us. Late that evening a fellow in a prison uni-

form came to our barrack, hoping to find somebody he knew. He had heard that a transport from Hungary had arrived. He told us that we were in a camp called Birkenau, an adjoining camp to Auschwitz, and that we had been selected to work, but he doubted that many of us would survive the harsh conditions and the lack of food. We asked him about the others who were directed to Mengele's right, mostly the elderly, frail, or women with children. He told us we would never see them again. He pointed to the chimneys spewing smoke and sparks, letting us know that was where they were. We realized the odor we were smelling was burning flesh. The rest of the night not one of us slept a wink. We just stood by the windows and looked at the chimneys.

Early in the morning several prisoners took us to the showers, ordering us to strip naked and leave everything behind except for our shoes. First the barber shaved our bodies. After the shower, we were disinfected and given a towel, a piece of soap, and a bowl with a rusty spoon. They also gave us a uniform of lightweight striped fabric and marched us to Auschwitz, about a mile and a half away. There we were assigned to a place in a barrack and a number was tattooed on our left arm. Then the guards asked everybody about their profession. Other prisoners had advised me to claim a profession; I told them I was a plumber.

One day they came and called out certain numbers. The men with these numbers were assigned to be taken to a labor camp. I was one of the 200 men taken in a transport to a new camp built to

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house workers for a nearby factory. I was assigned to a drill machine used in producing cannons for the German army. We worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day on the day shift, and another group worked 12 hours on the night shift. We were considered luckier than most other people who worked outdoors and in the mines which was much more difficult.

Our life followed a certain routine. We got up at six o'clock in the morning and lined up for appel, which was the roll call or counting. We got a dark hot liquid that they called coffee and marched to work.

Seven o'clock at night the night shift arrived, and the day shift marched back to camp. We were given a soup which sometimes contained one or two pieces of potatoes or turnips. It was a daily struggle figuring out where to stand in line to reach the kettle just before it was empty. People at that point in the line were the lucky ones. They were in the right place to receive the piece of potato and turnip in the bottom of the soup kettle. We were also given a slice of bread, one sixth of a loaf.

Little communication took place among prisoners. We were not allowed to talk while working or marching, or during roll call. The only time we talked to each other was during mealtime when the subject was invariably food—what our mothers used to cook and our favorite dishes, and what we were going to do when we were liberated. I was going to spend all my money eating in a pastry shop until I was sick to my stomach. My dream was to have enough bread to satisfy my hunger along with one slice of bread for tomorrow.

Luckily, for me, the patient underneath had died during the night and the doctor, risking his life, changed the tag from my bed to the dead man's bed, and I survived a close call.

after I developed a high fever. My fever started just as the inspector from Auschwitz came to take away the dead and half-dead. At night he passed through the hospital and if he saw somebody too weak to return to work, he tagged the bed, assigning the person to be taken back to Auschwitz. In the morning I woke up and saw the tag on my bed. My fever had broken and I felt much better. I asked the doctor to help me since I felt good enough to go back to work. Luckily for me, the patient underneath had died during the night and the doctor, risking his life, changed the tag from my bed to the dead man's bed, and I survived a close call. Two days later I was back at work.

In December [1945], just before Christmas, we heard heavy machine gun fire and knew Russian soldiers were coming closer. The Nazis gathered us together, gave each of us half a loaf of bread, and marched us to the railway station. The factory where we worked produced one gun a day, the



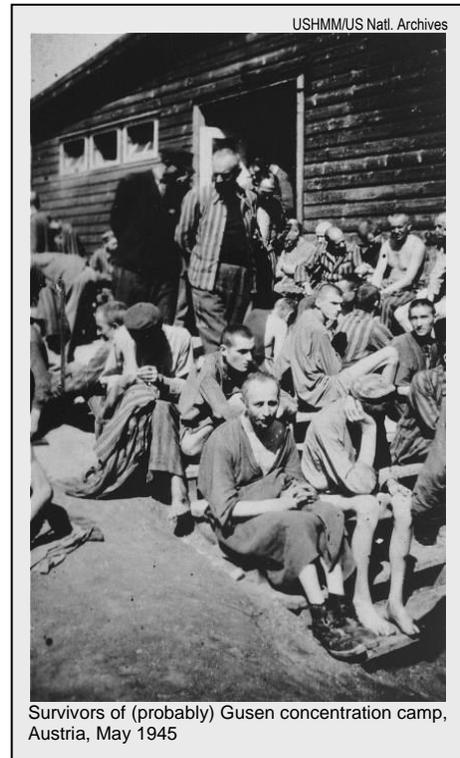
best gun of World War II, but for the previous few weeks not a single gun was taken to the battlefield because the Germans lacked the fuel or trains to carry them. Yet they had no problem getting a train to take us to Austria. We ate the bread on the first day of the trip. For the rest of the trip, we had no bread or water. We picked up some snow from the top of the car through a small window. In Munich, Germany, the train was taken away from us and we waited for a day outdoors for another. We were gathered in a corner in the railroad station, watching the people walking by with Christmas packages. We stood there starved and looking miserable, but not one person out of the hundreds passing by took notice of us or gave us so much as a morsel of bread. A day later we arrived at Mauthausen, a concentration camp in Austria. We had to get off the train and walk about a mile to the station in knee-deep snow. Weakened by starvation and brutal treatment, many could not make it. Those who fell in the snow were killed. At least one third of the group died.

Mauthausen was at the foot of the Alps mountains. It was mid-January and extremely cold. We kept ourselves from freezing by huddling together to get the warmth of our body temperatures. After three weeks, we were taken to Gusen, a labor camp working for the military. I was assigned to assemble machine guns. The camp was in a valley, and the factory was on top of a hill. From the camp to the factory we had to climb 21 rough uneven steps, and these steps became the test to determine if we were still fit to work. If anyone fell while walking those steps, his number was reported and the next day he was told to stay in his barracks. Staying in the barracks usually meant you would be taken to the crematorium to die.

Again I was in luck. My barrack was the very last one on the road before the cart headed for the crematorium. . . . The cart came, but it was so overloaded with corpses that the fellows pulling the cart said to me, "We will come for you tomorrow." The next day . . . the same thing happened again. The cart was too full.

afternoon, the cart came, but it was so overloaded with corpses that the fellows pulling the cart said to me, "We will come for you tomorrow." The next day, two of us sat on the steps, waiting for the cart. Our minds were so numb that it really didn't matter that this would be our last day on earth. The same thing happened again. The cart was too full. Again they told us that they would be back for us tomorrow. I didn't know whether I was happy or sad to be given another day to live.

That afternoon, at five o'clock, we again lined up for an appel [roll call]. Always exactly at five o'clock the gates opened and the German soldiers appeared. But on this day it was five minutes after five and the gates were closed. Suddenly I saw two soldiers in green uniforms peeking through the gates. Then the gates opened and suddenly some prisoners shouted, "We are free."



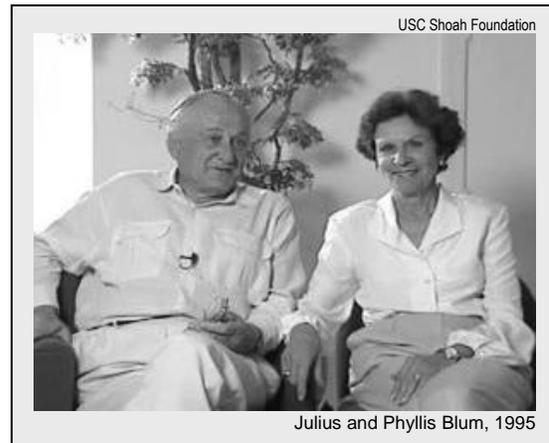
On the second day of May, as I was going to work, I fell on the steps. My number was recorded and I was told not to go to work. After everyone left for work, I sat on the steps waiting for the cart to come for me to take me to the crematorium. Again I was in luck. My barrack was the very last one on the road before the cart headed for the crematorium. In mid-

Everyone ran towards the gates to surround the [American] soldiers. They looked at us as if we were creatures from outer space, while we looked at them as if they were angels from heaven.

We stared at each other without saying a word. Then I remembered my English lesson from school and I shouted "God Save the King." A soldier looked at me and said, "We are Americans, not British." The silence was broken and we started communicating. Thus my captivity ended and my second life began.

Julius was reunited with his mother and father in the United States. His brother and the rest of his family died in the Holocaust. Julius came to the United States in 1947 on a scholarship to study in Georgia; he earned his degree in textile engineering from the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. After working in textile mills in South Carolina, he opened his own textile plant, Blue Jay Knitting, in 1966 in Asheville, North Carolina. Julius retired in 1988 after establishing several other textile plants in the region. He and his wife Phyllis have three sons and five grandchildren.

The German soldiers had fled as American GIs approached the camp. We started singing our national anthems. Every European country was represented. Then everyone ran towards the gates to surround the soldiers. They looked at us as if we were creatures from outer space, while we looked at them as if they were angels from heaven.



ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Julius Blum, video, 1 hr. 50 min., no date: first seconds of video, likely including the interview date, omitted (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum)
collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn520398
- Julius Blum, profile in *Choosing to Remember: From the Shoah to the Mountains*, 2000, p. 15 (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/choosing%20to%20remember%20small.pdf
 - ◆ Study Guide for *Choosing to Remember*
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/Choosing_Student_Guide.pdf.pdf
- Julius Blum, profile in *Coming to the Mountains: Immigration and Western North Carolina*, p. 9 (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/ComingtotheMoutnains.pdf [sic]
 - ◆ Study Guide for *Coming to the Mountains*
diversityed.unca.edu/sites/default/files/ComingtoMountains_Studyguide.pdf
- Julius Blum, brief biography in research for the project SHOAH: Survivors and Witnesses in Western North Carolina (Center for Diversity Education, UNC-Asheville)
toto.lib.unca.edu/findingaids/oralhistory/SOAH/blum_julius.pdf

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