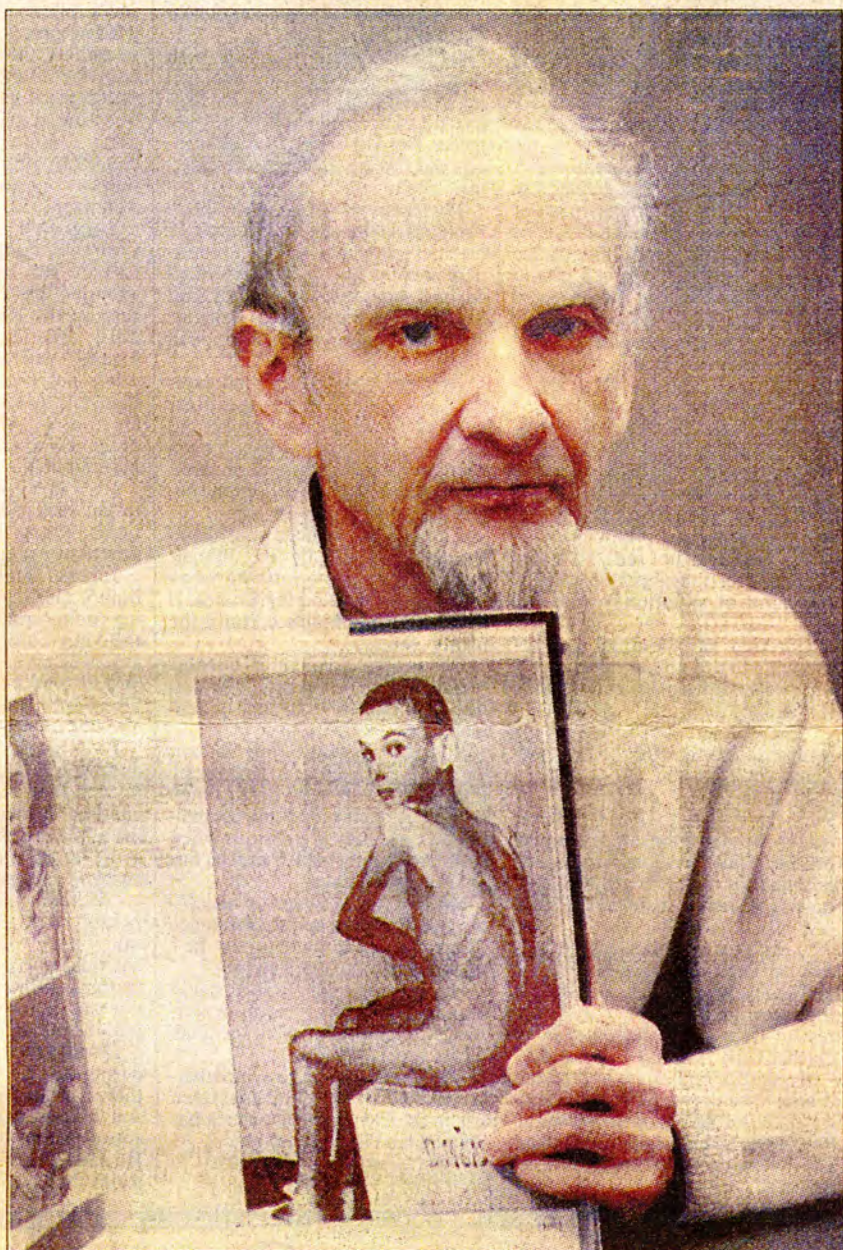


Lingering pain of Auschwitz



TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

Stephen Bleyer holds a copy of book on Auschwitz that shows what he looked like as a 14-year-old, when the death camp was liberated 50 years ago.

Death camp a synonym for evil 50 years after its liberation

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Today is the 50th anniversary of the liberation by Soviet troops of Auschwitz-Birkenau, a name synonymous with evil.

The largest and most destructive of the Nazi concentration camps was built in south-central Poland and expanded to carry out the Nazis' "final solution to the Jewish question." It was a killing machine for Poles, Gypsies and all others regarded as inferior, including Communists and Soviet prisoners.

In Poland, Israel and other countries, and in Montreal where several thousand World War II survivors live, memorial ceremonies are being held to commemorate the freeing of its few survivors.

Between 1.2 million and 1.5 million prisoners were killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau. They

were incinerated, starved, beaten, gassed, tortured — and nine out of 10 were Jews.

For Montreal architect Stephen Bleyer, 64, the horrors of Auschwitz can never be forgotten.

"We are survivors! We remember because we have no choice!" Bleyer wrote 10 years ago in reaction to the trial in Toronto of Holocaust-denier Ernst Zundel.

Bleyer, his brother, parents and two sets of grandparents were among more than 70 Jewish families from the town of Komadi in southern Hungary who were shipped in railway freight cars to Auschwitz in the summer of 1944.

With German troops retreating from the

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AUSCHWITZ *Dream of returning home was a recurring fantasy*

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western front. Adolf Eichmann, the man charged by Hitler with carrying out his final solution, moved to carry out one of the last chapters in the destruction of East European Jewry.

Of his immediate family, only Bleyer and his brother survived. Many cousins, aunts and uncles also perished.

Bleyer was among the 7,000 sick and dying prisoners left behind in Auschwitz-Birkenau when the Germans evacuated the camp, destroying the crematoria in an attempt to erase traces of the Kingdom of Death.

The Germans forced the 64,000 inmates who could walk on a death march to other places in Germany. "I had two feet that were frozen with open wounds. I wasn't in a position to walk and I was very weak," Bleyer recalled, the pain still vivid.

"A Russian officer walked into our barracks," Bleyer added in an interview this week at his de Maison-neuve Blvd. W. office.

"He was wearing a white cape (as camouflage in the snow) and told us in Russian that we were free."

The first days after liberation remain a blur. Bleyer does remember well the family life in his home town, where his father ran a general store near the main square.

In the camp, the dream of going back to that cocoon was a recurring, persistent fantasy.

"Sometimes my dreams of liberation included a return to the embrace of parents, grandparents, family and friends, who in fact had been swept away by this infernal conflagration," Bleyer said.

"Sometimes my dreams of liberation were more like nightmares of an anguished and tortured soul who was not prepared to face reality after an existence suspended between life and death."

As the war raged throughout Europe, life remained fairly comfortable in Hungary until March 1944. That was when German armies occupied Hungary and Eichmann was organizing the deportations of Hungarian Jews to the death camps.

With a touch of irony in his voice, Bleyer recalls that several SS officers

were billeted at his parents' home. "They were so polite, so disciplined" and could communicate easily with his German-speaking parents.

As in the rest of Europe, Jews in smaller centres were forced to relocate in larger towns for the final destination – the concentration camp.

They were transported by horse and cart and installed in the Jewish ghetto of Nagyvarad before being shipped to Auschwitz. Some welcomed the move since life under Hungarian fascist police was becoming increasingly difficult.

"We thought that maybe our lives would be a little bit easier because the civilized Germans are taking over and it cannot be as bad as the Hungarian Gendarmes," Bleyer said.

"We know a little more today than we knew then."

The Jews were packed into freight trains, as many as 100 in each railcar.

"I suppose you could be fairly comfortable if you were 20 and given something to sleep on. But we were not 20. We were not provided anything to sleep on. We had some water for drinking."

On arriving at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bleyer recalls seeing "people in striped prisoners' uniforms jumping around – if you didn't move fast you were hit on the head or shoulder. We were told to get off the train, leave everything behind, line up, men and women separately.

"The children could go with the men or the women.

"My mother decided at a certain point that I shouldn't be walking with her, that I should join the men. I went over to the men and stood in line and this is the last time I saw her.

"In fact, this was the last time I saw anyone in my family" – except for a brother, with whom he was reunited after the war.

Then the "selection" began, with the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele, the Angel of Death, who checked out every new arrival and decided who would live and who would die. He pointed people to the right or to the

left, the very young, the old and infirm being dispatched immediately to the four gas chambers and crematoria.

The rest were used as slave labor, some of them at the nearby I.G. Farben synthetic-rubber factory.

"I was tall, I looked strong. I was very unhappy because I thought it would be better to go with the older people than the young ones so I wouldn't have to work. Obviously we didn't know a lot of things in those days."

Bleyer, who was too young to have specialized skills, was used for menial jobs: he was part of the "potato commando," digging ditches to store the vegetable.

"There are many memorable events that are connected with this work," he said with some irony.

"We were guarded by SS men and women and guard dogs. I suppose they needed entertainment and very often they would send the dogs after you.

"You are a kid, 13, 14 or 15 years old, and there are these huge dogs coming after you and grabbing you by the ankle. Then you hear the laughter of the SS guards. These are the kind of things you remember.

"I remember watching an older man, at least in his 40s. He was on a potato commando and before going back to the camp, he refused to take off his hat. He was beaten to death by the SS, right before our eyes."

Twice Bleyer was selected for death.

"In one case some of us managed to break down the doors of the barracks where we were locked up. The following day we were to be transported by truck to the gas chambers.

"We were replaced by others because the numbers had to be right. The Germans did not accept any numbers that were not right. So they went out and selected 35 to replace us.

"The second time it was the last selection in Auschwitz. And just before we were taken away to the gas cham-

ber, an order came down to stop all gassings and destroy the crematoria.

"However the local commandant decided that he didn't have to accept this. They did a second selection among those designated and I was not selected at that point. A number of people were taken away as a last gesture, and they died."

Bleyer was picked up in the Polish city of Krakow by a special train sent from his home city in Hungary to gather up survivors and bring them home. He was then reunited with his brother Frank, now 71. After the Communists seized power, they escaped from Hungary and found their way here. Bleyer trained as an architect, married and has two children, who live in Ottawa and New York City.

Like many survivors, Bleyer is not really comfortable talking about his experiences. He speaks slowly and deliberately in resurrecting painful memories, the strained look on his face suggesting a lingering, psychological pain. In fact, it was only in response to Holocaust denial in the 1980s that Bleyer decided to become active in keeping the memory of Nazi atrocities alive.

Asked to reflect on the anniversary, Bleyer does not have harsh words for the perpetrators of the worst, systematic genocide of the 20th century.

Instead he urges Canadians to speak out and work to defeat today's atrocities, like "ethnic cleansing" in the former Yugoslavia.

"We have to translate all this into today's terms. We have to use it to learn from it and avoid making the same kind of horrible mistakes. We have to prevent it and if we cannot prevent it we have to act to stop it before it reawakens again."

■ *In tomorrow's Gazette: On the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz death camp by Soviet soldiers, Montrealers relive their experiences in Nazi death camps and labor camps during World War II and tell of their own liberation.*

STARTS TOMORROW
CLOSED