

This is All I Remember

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David Fränkel

Translated from the Hungarian by Donka F. Farkas



David (Dodo) Fränkel

There are many stories about the camps, but David's account (we called him Dodo) is unique because there's no trace of self-pity or overt display of emotion.

Ligeti György

(Hungarian composer whose father was in the camp together with David Fränkel)

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FOREWORD

On several occasions in the past, it occurred to me that I ought to write about the months I spent in German concentration camps. Most recently, I considered this in 1985, when Micu Klein, a fellow inmate from Buchenwald, insistently asked me to do so. I haven't done it till now for two reasons. Most importantly, because I knew that in Romania such writings served only too well Ceaușescu's nationalist policies, aimed at instigating hatred of Hungarians. "Jews from Romania were not sent to camps because such acts do not agree with the humanism typical of Romanians. The Hungarians, by contrast, were driven to deporting the Jews by their inherent aggressiveness and inveterate xenophobia." These were the twin claims the Ceaușescu regime was trying to substantiate in Romania by maintaining total silence about the massacres perpetrated by the Romanian army in 1941 (before the Nazis' decision to exterminate the Jews!) while at the same time happily publishing every detail of the deportation of the Jews from Hungary, and especially from Northern Transylvania, a region that was taken from Romania and given to Hungary in 1941 as part of the Second Vienna Agreement. The victims of the 1941 massacres numbered several hundred thousand Jews from Bessarabia, Bucovina, Dorohoi, etc.

An equally important reason for not writing was that I felt I didn't have much to say. I went through life without paying much attention; I have always been interested in the future, not in the present. This is why it is difficult for me to write about the past. Moreover, in the camp, I deliberately tried "not to be there", not to let events get close to me, because I felt that this attitude helped survival. I've heard many people say that their life is a real novel, if only they would write it down! I have never felt this way and I have always known that I have no literary talent whatsoever.

Despite all this, I am trying to write now first of all because my daughter, Donka, mentioned that she feels I told her little about my camp experience. I think she is wrong: over the years I have told her all. But perhaps she is right in that this 'all' is not much. I will nevertheless write it down now because perhaps it will mean much to my grandson, Benny, one day.

And finally, I am writing because I think that the survivors' authentic, sincere, and unexaggerated testimony is needed.

1943-1944: THE LAST YEAR OF FREEDOM

It is a complete mystery to me why I didn't read newspapers or listened to radio news until after 1945. Before that my knowledge of world events was indirect and full of gaps. In 1943 my father would listen to the BBC all day long and, half asleep, he would mutter the news ahead of the announcer, news he must have already heard that day who knows how many times.¹ But he was not a talkative man. I hardly remember any information coming from him.

My behavior is all the more surprising since I was never 'apolitical'. I had always been interested in the question of the elimination of social misery and of ethnic and racial discrimination. I still remember how deeply touched I was by Georg Fink's book, *I am Hungry* and by all the poverty that I saw daily around me. I even dealt with these issues, but only in theory. I believed that socialism would bring about the disappearance of all that is inhuman. I became, in 1936, at age 14, an active member of the Habonim, a Zionist organization, because I agreed with the ideology of its leader, Borochoy. According to Borochoy, Diaspora Jews could not participate in bringing about the socialist revolution in their respective countries, and therefore they had to create a socialist state in Palestine. Later, like so many other young people, I read little of what Marx wrote but argued all the more about his teachings. My conversations with my friend, Pityu Roth, for instance, were endless. I remember long discussions about where the capitalists' profits will go and about what people will do, under communism, with their overabundance of free time.

I kept up my daily visits to Pityu even when, in 1944, Jew-beatings became common in the streets of our town, Kolozsvár. Once I was attacked by several men. I started running, with the little band of ruffians at my heels. A man with earlocks, dressed in a black kaftan, thought I was chasing *him*. He took off too, and disappeared behind a door. I managed to reach home and lock the gate behind me. The attackers didn't give up and tried to knock the gate down but, luckily, without success. Mother was away, visiting some neighbors and when she came home she said, all aghast: "A Jewish boy was beaten up on our own street!" "Do you know who he was?" I asked.

¹ The names of David's parents are Herman Fränkel and Gizella Fränkel, née Weisz.

"No. Who?" "Me", I said. "But don't worry, they didn't manage to lay their hands on me."

I wasn't willing to give up my conversations with Pityu even after this incident, although my way went past the brothels of Forduló street, and the habitués of those establishments were not particularly trust-inspiring. I had a plan. If they try to catch me I will use foul language, a characteristically non-Jewish reaction. And I had the satisfaction of experiencing how good my idea was. One evening, on my way home from Pityu's, five thugs came out of the pub on the corner of Forduló street as I was going by. I hear one of them say: "There goes a Jew!" "Your grandmother's a Jew!" I retorted, casually. "Hm. If he mentions my grandmother, he isn't a Jew after all" said the guy, and the throbbing of my frightened heart was somewhat eased by my psychological success. With feigned composure I continued on my way but I soon heard another voice: "Perhaps he is a Jew too! Hey, you, stop!" "The devil will stop, not me! I'm going here, to the brothel. You can come look at me there, if you want", I said. I thought this will convince them for good since, obviously, a circumcised Jew wouldn't behave this way. But no, the thugs kept after me. I went in through the first door. They followed me. We were crowding a small courtyard enclosed by an iron fence and lit by a bare bulb. They turned my not exactly Aryan profile towards the light and I expected them to squelch me through the fence. But no, I was wrong this time. "Pardon us, brother", they said and tried to kiss me on the cheeks. But that, I could not tolerate.

This story reminds me of another occasion when my appearance was deemed non-Jewish. In the autumn of 1943 I traveled to Budapest from Kolozsvár. (Until the German occupation of Hungary, in 1944, Jews could travel freely there. In Romania on the other hand, already by 1941, Esther, my future wife, needed a special permit to travel from her hometown, Torda, to Temesvár, the town where she had to take her high school equivalency exams. In 1941 Jews in Romania were not permitted to attend regular high school and had to take such exams.) A young theatre student and I were standing on the corridor, in the train, engaged in trying to win a pretty girl by taking turns at reciting poetry. I was up to the task because I had passed my baccalaureate a year before and I knew about 150 poems by heart. After a while, the girl must have had enough, because she left us. My young rival whispered to me: "Did you notice how obvious it is, in this girl's case, that she is Jewish?" To which I replied, also in a whisper: "Why, in my case it isn't?" The guy was terribly embarrassed. He hemmed and hawed and excused himself, saying he didn't mean it as an insult. I assured him that if he insulted anybody, it could only have been himself. He retreated into his compartment, put on white gloves, and made the rest of the journey in silence, sitting upright next to his elegant mother.

I was going then to Budapest to take the entrance examinations at the rabbinical seminary and I was doing that because seminary students were exempt from forced labor. I had graduated from high school in 1942 and, as a 21 year old, I was supposed to go to forced labor. (In March of 1939 a law was passed in Hungary according to which untrustworthy elements of society – by which they meant primarily, the Jews – were conscripted for forced labor instead of regular military service.) My older brother, Joki [Jehoshua], had been a 'musz' for a year already and it was only with great effort that my family succeeded in exempting him, for reasons of health, in the fall of 1943.² In fact, Mother had tried to exempt me from the service on the basis of a medical certificate too. We had turned for advice to a local cardiologist, renowned for his good will. The advice he gave was that right before the medical exam I was to do a hundred knee bends and that I should tell the doctor in great detail about the grave pleuresy which had indeed kept me bed-ridden for a whole year at 16. And I did indeed get an excellent sounding diagnosis: pericardeal adhesion and miodegeneration of the chord, in compensated state. But it did me no good whatever: when called up, I was found fit for service, which is why I turned to the rabbinical seminary. Incidentally, the diagnosis almost did me in later. After I had passed my entrance examination to the rabbinical seminary in Budapest, Mother came to visit me once. I lived on Salétrom Street, on the fourth floor. I always ran up the stairs and, of course, I got out of breath. Mother became alarmed of my breathlessness. She took me to the private office of the head physician of the Jewish Hospital. She mentioned to him my earlier diagnosis, oblivious to the circumstances under which it had been established. The head physician, a pompous ass, examined me and, pretending not to have heard the diagnosis Mother had mentioned, self-importantly declared: "Hm. We are dealing here with a pericardeal adhesion – he stressed the 'dh' – "but, luckily, the miodegeneration of the chord is compensated. Immediate hospitalization and surgery are necessary. The heart has to be separated from the pleura, to which it is now stuck." I tried to explain later to Mother that we were swindling ourselves but she insisted I had to be examined in the hospital. I soon found myself in a ten-bed ward. The head physician, who obviously thought he had stumbled on an interesting case, ordered a lot of EKGs made: under stress and without, lying on the right side and on the left, etc. The EKGs were all lined up on my night table when, during the morning rounds, the head physician, full of himself, started explaining to his army of followers, what they were to see on the various sheets, which he had not yet seen himself. He then spread them out and, to his shock, it became apparent to all present that none of his predictions was even vaguely validated. After a moment of silence he spoke: "I still think that immediate surgery

² 'Musz' is an abbreviation of *munkaszolgálatos* 'person in forced labor service'.

is necessary." For my part, I concluded that immediate discreet departure was necessary.

The idea of the rabbinical seminary was given us by our neighbor, Uci (Tibor) Neuman. He was already in his second year at the seminary and claimed to have excellent connections which would assure acceptance even in the absence of any knowledge. Besides, he said, in my two years at the Jewish High School I must have learned some Hebrew and must have gotten some knowledge of the Bible. I could brush up on all of this during the two weeks I had till the exam. My parents were enthusiastic about this idea. For my part, I was very reluctant. On the one hand, I wanted to share the fate of the Jewish youths and go to the forced labor camps. I also disliked anything that was in the least bit connected to religion. Despite my parents' piety, atheism was my oldest and my deepest conviction. But on the other hand, I wanted to become a doctor and a stay in Budapest would perhaps allow the possibility of unofficially auditing certain courses at the Medical School.³ I couldn't resist this temptation. Mother and I traveled to Nagybánya and drove in a horse carriage to the mansion of general Revicky, who gave me a deferment. I started studying for the entrance exam with my classmate, Zoltán Lustig, an excellent, intelligent and pleasant young man, whose dream was to become an engineer. The date of the entrance exam was postponed several times so the initial two weeks of preparation became six months. Now I am very sorry that I had so little interest in and so much antipathy for my studies at the time. I did acquire some factual knowledge (I knew Moses' five books so well, for instance, that I could tell where certain unusual phrases occurred), but I remained essentially unacquainted with the spirit and the content of the Bible. The study of the original text would have meant so much more than the reading of the Hungarian translation with which I occasionally spend a few hours nowadays. As to the Talmud, I managed to get through only a small part of the Beca treatise. I committed the unforgivable mistake of always looking for nonsense and contradictions in it, and didn't even try to approach it from a cultural-historical perspective. I had some 'success' with this attitude, though, because some of the questions I asked from my tutors happen to appear in the famous Talmud commentators as well, such as Rashi or Rambam. One after the other, two of the tutors my parents had engaged felt unqualified to continue instructing me. The rumor spread that young Fränkel was a Talmud *chacham* (a Talmud scholar) and chief Rabbi Glasner perhaps mentioned this to my father, who might have nourished the secret hope that, eventually, I will go on to become a Rabbi after all. In the end I was the loser because, although I managed to pass the entrance exam to the seminary on the strength of my knowledge rather than that of Uci Neuman's connections, I hardly remember anything from the Talmud today.

³ Jews in Hungary were barred from attending most institutions of higher learning at the time.

After I was admitted to the seminary I did indeed try to audit courses that would be useful to a medical career. Most of all I would have liked to attend dissection classes. The professor, a profoundly democratic man and a practicing Catholic, surreptitiously gave twenty Jewish youths permission to participate in his classes. But now the quota was full. I had the crazy idea of looking this professor up as a member of the rabbinical seminary, and ask for special status, in the interest of the intertwining of religion and science. It was typical of me that I did look him up, and it was typical of him that he agreed to see me. After patiently hearing me out though, he turned me down. So I audited courses in histology (I went to labs too but all I remember from that experience is that I was bored to death), chemistry, biology, physics, and mathematics.

I also went to see the famous actor Oscar Ascher. I wanted to learn from him how to recite poetry. (In the Jewish High School back in Kolozsvár I had been considered one of the best at reciting poetry.) Oscar Ascher asked me to recite a few poems for him, 'but, for God's sake, don't choose 'The Insane' ', he said. I recited a poem by Attila József. "You know", Ascher said, "when they want to find out if there is somewhere underground water for a well, they make a trial dig. But one can find out whether there is indeed enough water there only after one properly digs up the area. Look, your trial dig was successful. I accept you as a pupil. But you should know that the road ahead is long and hard. What you are doing now is a strictly personal matter. You have no speech technique whatever. Put your hand on my head. Do you feel my skull resonating when I speak? Now put your hand on your own head and speak. You don't feel anything, do you? Oh well, but all this can be learned." I would have gladly studied with him but my stay in Budapest was cut short. In all it was hardly longer than three months altogether. My parents could not afford the expenses any longer. Father had stopped working for quite a while by then. His textile store was being managed by an Aryan strawman but that business must have brought us very little. I remember that after the Vienna Agreement, when Kolozsvár was given to Hungary, Mother flew to Bucharest and brought back some puplin that was ours. (The flight itself was considered a great act of courage in those turbulent times.) As far as I can tell, that was all we had. According to what I remember, in 1944, after my return from Budapest, my family lived on what I earned giving private lessons in Kolozsvár. In those times a large number of Jewish pupils studied privately and took equivalency exams at the Jewish High School. I was particularly well suited as a tutor because I was very good in all subjects – Hungarian, Latin, Hebrew, physics, mathematics – and so I could teach everything myself. It seems to me that I had a large number of private lessons but thinking back on it now it seems unlikely that my earnings alone could have covered the needs of a family of five.

Suddenly, this quiet though far from carefree life started to unravel at unbelievable speed. On March 15th, 1944, the German troops occupy Hungary. After four weeks, from April 5th, we have to wear the yellow star. After six more weeks, we are thrown into the ghetto designated for us in the Irisztelep brick factory, and after ten more days we are crowded into cattle cars, and, on May 27th, 1944, we find ourselves in Auschwitz.