

FREDDIE KNOLLER



My book, *Desperate Journey*, which was written with the help of my friend John Landaw, tells the story of a young, naive boy, just 17 years old, forced to leave the strict parental home. There I was, like a bird leaving the nest for the first time, wanting to taste all the things, which a boy, in normal circumstances, would not have been allowed to experience. My attitude of hope and optimism helped me to overcome fear and perils and was one of the reasons why I am still alive today.

My father was an accountant and quite strict. My mother loved life; she was very easygoing, always happy and very musical. She made sure that her three sons received musical tuition. My oldest brother Otto played the piano, Eric learned to play the violin, so naturally I had to learn the cello at the age of six. By the time I was ten, we performed on the stage and at various charity functions.

From early childhood, my family and I were subjected to anti-Semitism. I was set upon ever so often by Christian children on my way to school. After the Anschluss (annexation of Austria) these attacks became even more virulent. On the night of 9 November 1938, when the Nazis burnt down all the synagogues, my parents insisted that we, the children, should emigrate. I was the first one to leave, going illegally to Belgium. Eric was next and left for Florida, USA, having been supplied with an affidavit by a friend of the family. Otto was the last to leave our parents; he went illegally to Holland and from there to England. My parents did not want to leave, saying that they were too old for anything to happen to them. Father was 56 and mother 53.

When the Germans invaded Belgium in 1940, everyone fled to France. After spending time in the unoccupied zone of Vichy, I moved to Paris where the Gestapo eventually arrested me. At the beginning of October 1943 I was taken to the railway station where people were squeezed into cattle wagons. There was not enough room for everyone to sit on the floor. The youngsters made room for the old people, women, babies and infirm. In the wagon there was one bucket with drinking water and one empty sanitary bucket. We travelled for three days and three nights to our destination. I will never forget the stench, the arguments, the screaming of the babies and the moans of those who were dying. I was squeezed against a middle-aged Frenchman called Robert, a

gentle person who looked very much like my father. We became good friends. He told me that he was a doctor and I did not realize then that it is because of him that I am alive today. When we arrived we saw a sign "Osviecim" (Auschwitz) on the railway platform. We guessed that we were somewhere in Poland. The SS selected the younger people who were to walk to the camp, but trucks took the older men and women with their children away to be murdered in the gas chambers.

On 18 January 1945, as the Russians approached Auschwitz, the whole camp was evacuated. We were lined up in rows of five and were told that we would have to walk, and that anybody trying to escape would be shot. We went westward, walking in our wooden shoes on icy, snow-covered roads. We were still in our striped, thin clothes. Many collapsed and were immediately shot on the spot. We had to take the corpses and throw them into the ditch next to the road. The SS surrounded each of our columns and were ready with their guns. After walking for the whole day and night, we reached a brick factory where we were allowed to rest and sleep under cover. Only half of us were still alive. One in our group, a French political prisoner, did not wake up. He was dead, frozen stiff. Finally, we were taken to a railway station and squeezed into an open cattle wagon, standing room only. We travelled through Austria and Germany, seven days and seven nights, until we reached our destination, Dora-Nordhausen camp, the place where the V1 and V2 rockets were manufactured. As the American troops were nearing our region, we were evacuated to Bergen-Belsen. There was no more food available. The German SS disappeared, and Croatian and Hungarian SS units guarded us. We dug into the ground to find some edible roots. Many collapsed from hunger and dysentery and died.

On 15 April 1945, British troops entered Bergen-Belsen. We were given hot milk with rice, which we devoured like wild animals. Many inmates died, having stuffed themselves with food, which their stomachs could not digest. Liberation was two days before my twenty-fourth birthday. I was later re-united with my brothers. Both my parents perished.



Freddie Knoller in 1945

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'..AND THE BUSH BURNED WITH FIRE,
BUT WAS NOT CONSUMED'
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FREDDIE KNOLLER'S STORY

