

Pathway to Freedom

May 5th, 1945

Mauthausen Camp, Austria

Exhausted, Nathan stared down at the cold stone path that he was supposed to walk down to collect rocks from a quarry.

"Zurück an die Arbeit!" spat a German guard as he swung his club at Nathan.

It connected with his head and made a sickening thud. Nathan let out a helpless gasp and stumbled down the path. He soon reached the "Stairs of Death," as the other prisoners called them. Here, prisoners were to carry slabs of granite – often weighing up to 100 pounds – up 186 steps to the quarry at the top. Sometimes those at the top collapsed from exhaustion and fell onto others, making people topple like human dominos. Nathan trudged up the steps and realized something strange when he reached the top: all of the SS guards and Kapos who usually monitored the prisoners were nowhere to be seen. He turned around and noticed that even the man that had hit him was missing. Suddenly full of energy, Nathan climbed up on top of a truck so that he could peer over the wall and see what was going on. In the distance he could see a line of advancing vehicles that appeared to be armored cars. As they got closer, he spotted that they had a white star on the front of them. The Americans had come to free Mauthausen!

A parade of American soldiers marched into the camp and were met by an overjoyed crowd of Jews, which included Nathan. He joined in with others in pulling down the hated Nazi eagle from the cave entrance and celebrating. But the best part of all was that the Americans brought food to distribute to everybody. Food had been extremely low in the past year and numerous people had starved to death. The American soldiers provided them with plain loaves of bread, but it was a feast compared to what the Germans provided them with. They stuffed themselves as fast as they could, as they feared that it could be suddenly taken away from them once again. As soon as he had eaten his fill, Nathan decided to turn himself in for a much needed rest. *Tomorrow, I'll set out to find my family and put this rotten war behind me.* As he fell asleep, Nathan began to dream of when he was first separated from his family.

He was standing in the center of an overcrowded railway station with his mother, father, and two brothers, waiting for a German officer to split them up onto different trains. An officer finally walked over to them and inspected Nathan.

"How old are you?" he asked Nathan in a cold voice.

"Sixteen," Nathan calmly responded, trying to act brave.

Nathan was actually only fourteen years old, but he appeared to be older because he was taller than most kids his age. He thought that it was his job to be the bravest because he was the oldest child.

"Hmm," the officer pondered. "Go there." He pointed towards a train labeled Mauthausen.

Nathan simply nodded his head. He turned and hugged his mother, and then his father. He opened his mouth to say something, but before he could speak to them or his brothers, the German yanked his arm.

"Now," he said through gritted teeth and pulled Nathan away through the crowd while holding a hand over his mouth.

Nathan was shoved onto a train car and instantly surrounded by the faces of strangers. He looked around desperately for somebody that he knew – maybe a neighbor or family friend from his hometown – but he saw no familiar faces. He gazed through the wide window on the side of the car in search of his family, but he couldn't locate them. As more and more people boarded, the car became hot and stuffy and Nathan felt like he was going to pass out. From the looks of the people around him, he wasn't the only one. Well, this is it. No turning back now. No hope now. With glazed eyes, he stared out the window just as the train started to move. Nathan caught a glimpse of his mother and immediately started banging on the window. She didn't notice him since she was far away, but Nathan wouldn't stop slamming his fist against the window pane, willing her to look over at him. The train sped away from the train station, and a tear rolled down Nathan's face.

Nathan jolted awake, sweaty and overheated. It had been two years since that day he was separated from his family, yet he still played the moment when he saw his mother from the train over and over again in his head. He couldn't handle the thought of his family possibly being dead, but he couldn't rid himself of the feeling. Nathan stood up and walked outside of the room where he had slept. It was morning and the sun was just rising above the tree line in the distance, glowing a soft yellow and pink. He stood admiring the beauty for a few minutes and then walked down the path he had walked the previous day before the Americans arrived. It brought back bad memories of when the Germans pushed them beyond the physical limit to complete laborious tasks. Eventually Nathan reached the front gate and gazed beyond the entrance. *Freedom.*

The American soldiers guided Nathan and the others onto a train that transported them to a camp where they could look for their families. The word "camp" made him cautious, but he continued anyway. When he stepped off the train, he was engulfed in a crowd of thousands of other Jews looking for their families as well. Nathan gradually made his way up to the center of the camp where there was a huge list of everybody that was at the camp. He looked desperately for somebody with the last name of Alterman, but he had no success. His family was not here.

Maybe they went back home. Yes, that's probably where they are now. Another person he met at the camp was kind enough to lend him a bicycle and Nathan rode it to his hometown. It was just a few miles ride, but it was difficult because he had been so weak in the past few months and he had to stop four times to regain his strength. At last he could see the town in the distance. Just before he entered the town, a man ran in front of him and yelled for Nathan to stop.

"What's the problem?" Nathan asked, slightly annoyed.

"Are you Jewish?" the man said.

"Yes . . . Why?"

"You can't go in there. There are people that are killing any Jews that enter the town. The war may be over, but many people still hate you."

Nathan was taken aback by this. When the war ended he had assumed that all discrimination would end too, once and for all. Then again, there was always discrimination against Jews before the rise of the Nazis, so it seemed hopeless.

"Oh, ok." Nathan's voice sounded shaky. "Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome. Now leave before they see you."

Nathan simply nodded, turned his bike around, and pedaled back towards the camp. *If they're not there, where on Earth could they be?* He reached the camp just as the late afternoon sun began touching the horizon and ate his first full dinner in a long time. *I can't give up. I won't give up my search.* Nathan went into another building and laid down on a cot for a well-deserved rest.

He woke up at dawn the next morning with renewed energy and confidence. As soon as he stood up from his bed, he walked outside and strode assuredly toward a soldier in uniform. The trooper looked tough on the outside, but Nathan could recognize kind eyes behind his exterior.

"Can I help you?" he asked Nathan.

"Yes. I am searching for my family and I don't know where they are right now."

The soldier thought about this for a moment. "Well, we're going to liberate another camp 9 miles from here, so I can make arrangements for you to come along. Maybe your family will be there."

"Thank you so much!"

"We leave in 10 minutes," the soldier said, smiling. "Also, it should be OK for you to come in the camp with us when we arrive. We are told that all of the Germans left it."

Nathan walked back to his room to check if he had anything he needed to take with him, but he had no possessions at all. He sat down on his cot and thought about the possibility of finally finding his family. He could feel it in his heart that they were alive. After about ten minutes, Nathan walked outside and strolled up to the soldier, who directed him into a truck. In the relative darkness, he could see that he was surrounded by other soldiers in combat armor and with guns.

After a boring trip for Nathan, they arrived at the camp in what seemed like an hour. The soldiers filed out, followed by Nathan. As he watched, they charged into the camp and secured it. There were no Germans. All of the people in the camp were so famished and unhealthy that they could barely display their gratefulness. Nathan ran into the camp and searched through the crowd that had gathered. Nobody. He saw nobody that he knew. Nathan fell onto his knees, put his head on the ground, and started sobbing. *My family must be gone forever.* As he was doing this, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned his head and saw the weathered face of a woman, whose eyes he recognized.

It was his mother.

Sources

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