



The Final Act of Wulkow

by Herbert Kolb (text & illustrations)

Introduction

After having been imprisoned for almost a year in the Ghetto Theresienstadt, on Friday, March 3, 1944, a ghetto policeman delivered to me at the cabinet makers' workshop the following:

"By official order you immediately have to report at the office for being registered."

This policeman had to bring me to the SS-headquarter, where a lot of other men were already present. After being mustered by the SS-commander we all were sent home and told to pack for being transported to a place called Zossen, to build barracks.

During the night came another order which read:

"The members of the barrack builder group were informed today at the office of SS-OSTF Bergel, that within the next couple of days (maybe already tomorrow) a special task force will be selected from them and dispatched.

The persons in question will be selected by the head officer of the SS tomorrow morning.

For this purpose and to receive your orders you are obliged to appear tomorrow, Saturday, March 10, 1944, punctually at 7 a.m. in the courtyard III of building Hauptstraße 2.

Upon receipt of this note you have to prepare your luggage anyway. The individuals selected for the transport will be provided with missing pieces of outfit, especially overalls, shoes, underwear, suitcases, rucksacks etc., immediately after their selection for the task force at the central storage for clothing and equipment, Hauptstr. 2, courtyard II, room 14.

It must be stressed that anyone who does not follow this order will face measures.

The obligation to prepare the luggage and to appear tomorrow at 7 a.m. is binding for anyone who receives this order even if he could not follow the call to the office on Friday evening for some reason.

The knowledge of this order has to be confirmed by signature."

March 4, 1944, I was ready to go. For some reason, I don't know why, I was not taken. The train left at 3 p.m. without me. The many manual laborers on this transport were told that they would only go for six weeks and their destination would be a place by the name of Zossen. As I found out much later, this was another one of the Germans' lies. The six weeks went by and no one came back. Even though nobody knew where Zossen was, people in Theresienstadt believed that was where they went, until the members of that task force came back in February 1945. Heinz Frankenstein and Walter Grunwald were part of the 200 men on the first transport.

On August 24, 1944, I received another subpoena:

“Central Labor Office, August 24, 1944

Detail for group of workers to build barracks outside the Ghetto.

You are ordered to be in the third courtyard of the building Hauptstraße 2, (B V) tomorrow, Friday, August 25, 1944, at 7:30 a.m., for the purpose of being shown to the SS-headquarter.

You have to be ready for departure on Friday at 12:30 p.m. with your luggage (rolled-up blanket, backpack or suitcase) in the Lange Straße 5 (C III, room no. 112) and stand in line. This notification has to be submitted.

For both dates punctuality is mandatory.”

This time I as well as 14 other men and 25 women were taken.

I will not go into the whole story of Wulkow, which was similar to any concentration camp, just a matter of constant torture. Obersturmführer (First Lieutenant in the SS) Stuschka, the camp commander, was handpicked by Adolf Eichmann. Stuschka was one of the perverse criminals whose transgression of all human decency was the bible of Nazi philosophy.

From Wulkow back to Theresienstadt

January 31, 1945. I was working all day long on putting new handles on all kind of tools at the construction site “Z”. In the evening our small group was being marched back to the camp. From a little knoll, just outside our camp enclosure, I happened to look back, down to the road from Bad Freienwalde via Frankfurt (Oder) and Cottbus to Dresden. One could just see the road from this one spot in the woods. Usually on that road there was not much traffic, and now with the winter snow, almost none. But this evening, when I just by chance looked in that direction, I noticed that the road was very congested with all kind of vehicles. I saw horse drawn carriages, cars, trucks and lots of people on foot with bicycles, with wheelbarrows and other vehicles. It was pretty far away and one could not make out who was in these vehicles in the dim light of late afternoon. I could not see if the people were soldiers or civilians. I made one of my comrades aware of it who was next to me . We both stopped a second and looked.

The fellow asked me: “What do you think that means?”

“I believe the Russians have broken through in Silesia and the people are fleeing!”

“Finally the shoe is on the other foot! What the Germans did to all the other countries at last they get a taste of it. Maybe it will be over soon!”

I was wrong, The Red Army of Marshal Zhukov was not in Silesia, but they were actually much closer to us. They were already on the eastern bank of the Oder river near Küstrin. The refugees were not coming from the south, but from the north. Küstrin was not even 18 miles from us.

Back in the camp we spoke to our comrades about our discovery. A couple of them also had seen the traffic jam. Now we had a very lively discussion. I thought that the refugees came from the south, heading north, while others thought that they were going south coming from the north. Some said, they heard artillery fire, and saw the sky red towards the northeast. Everybody had different ideas, all were very optimistic.

“What is going to happen to us?” somebody asked, but nobody really could answer. In the evening we got sweet barley with a little bit of meat and a small amount of sugar.

Erwin Pick was one of the carpenters. He was already 29 years old, a small fellow we called “Picheck”. He was one of my special friends. Sometimes in the evening he taught me a little Hebrew, as he thought that after the war we all would go to Palestine. I remember that on that night he was sitting up on his bed in the second tier. I was whispering to him:

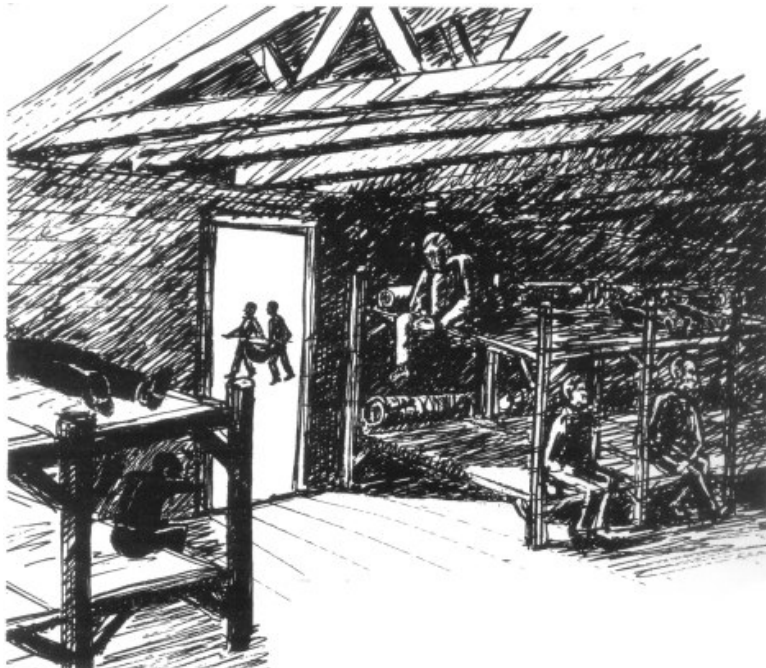
“One never knows what that perverse dog, Stuschka, has on his mind. I believe as we are actually the only ones who have at least something like a weapon, our axes, maybe we should try to hide them somewhere! I know, our tools had to be deposited every night in a special tool shed and one man was responsible for the tools. If the number of axes was not correct he had to report it. How can we get around that? Let’s just be sure that everyone takes his axe along every day whether he needs it on the job that day or not!”

I did not know that other groups had similar ideas. Walter Grunwald remembers that they too were thinking about arming themselves with makeshift weapons. Our electricians made truncheons for some of the men. A piece of ground cable was dipped into hot lead until it had a nice size glob on one end which formed a club. When they tried it out, they realized that it could sever a tree branch three inches thick with one hit. They carried the weapon inside their sleeves. In case we had to, we wanted to take as many of these hated Germans with us as we could.

Their group kept it a secret from the rest of us, the same way that we too did not spread the word beyond our carpenters. One had to be very careful so nothing would leak through to Raphaelsohn, or one of the other men one was not sure of.



The next morning, February 1, 1945, when we exited the barrack for roll call, we were chased back into the barracks by the SS-guards. Our conspiracy of the night before was already too late. Raphaelsohn came into the barrack and brought the orders of the Obersturmführer: “Nobody is allowed out of the barrack, anybody seen outside will be shot.” He now commanded two men to go to the kitchen and get the coffee. They came back with a big kettle. People asked them whether they saw anything, but they did not. At lunch the same thing. It seemed the cook was allowed to prepare food. Raphaelsohn came again. He was told that we will be shipped to another building site for a couple of days and afterwards come back here again. By now nobody believed him. He also said to take only the most necessary along, we would come back. As soon as he had left everybody started packing his meager belongings. Most of the people had just a backpack anyway.



I had made a little diary, and since I had learned bookbinding in Nuremberg, I made the cover out of two thin slices of locust wood. The design on the cover was a barrack behind barbed wire. This was now too dangerous to have on me. I tore the cover off and just saved the sheets. Actually, I did not even remember that I saved these sheets. Only many years later did I find them again.

We were debating about where they were going to send us. Nobody had any idea. If somebody had to go to the latrine he had to ask one of the guards who was standing outside for escort. Everything was very confusing.



All day long the same situation prevailed. We were just sitting on our bunks. Nobody was allowed outside. The food was brought in by two men who were assigned to bring it. Frequently we heard explosions but somehow it did not sound like artillery fire. Later on we found out that the Nazis were blowing up the bomb secure dugouts that our masons had been working on until yesterday. Some of them were not even finished yet. They were constructed for storing important files.

In the evening everybody got "Savarka" (a brand name of chicory). It tasted bitter and had a consistency like sawdust, but we liked it as it took away the feeling of hunger. When one

mixed it with a little bit of margarine and a little sugar it was not bad at all. Also sugar, yeast and margarine were distributed, and barley soup with bread.

February 2, 1945, no change; nobody was allowed out. We only got one meal on these days. Between 9:45 and 10:45 p.m. we got some meat with three potato dumplings, sugar, margarine, marmalade, "Einbrenn" (a thick paste of flour, a little oil and water, cooked together), three cans of liver pate, "Savarka" and bread cubes. We were sure something is going to happen, and instead of going to sleep everybody got dressed.

Suddenly at midnight the command: "Everybody out! Take what you want to take and get on the roll call place!" 198 men and 17 women were lining up. This time roll call did not take as long as usual. We marched off into the night at 12:45. There were a lot of SS-guards around.



For a long time we marched through woods. Nobody knew where we were heading for. Finally, still in complete darkness, we arrived at railroad tracks. It is possible that this was the same place, Trebnitz, where last August we left the train. It now was 2 a.m. A couple of cattle cars were standing there: "Everybody in!"

It was 2:15 a.m. In the cattle car with me were 74 people and our hand truck. There was not enough room for everybody to sit down. Two armed SS-guards were positioned at the open door. After a while the wagons were hooked up to a train and we moved.



Again everybody started speculating about where they were bringing us. It was pretty sure that the train was going very slowly westward. Usually the stations we passed were completely dark. Just for a second the lights were turned on, probably for the engineer to see. It was not only difficult to see anything at all through the one little window on top, but it was night and nobody recognized the stations. Slowly it was getting lighter and somehow we realized we were going towards Berlin.

The train was not going very fast to begin with, and then it stopped altogether somewhere out in the fields. It was 9 a.m. From a distance one heard air raid sirens wailing. One of the SS-soldiers came along the train, and said something to the two guards on our door. They jumped off and went into one of these ditches that were dug next to the tracks as an air raid shelter. They left the door standing open. A moment later, one already heard the first bombs falling in the distance.

This was February 3, 1945, and American planes were raiding the capital. The train was just somewhere pretty near, but still east of Berlin. Almost none of the fellows in the wagon had been in an air raid before, as most of them were from Czechoslovakia. They now enjoyed the show through the open door. Before the two SS-men jumped off they announced, anybody getting out of the train would be shot.

It was a little hazy, but one could see thin aluminum strips like Christmas tinsels flying all over the place. The planes had jettisoned them to confuse the German anti-aircraft batteries. The noise now came much closer. Through the open door I noticed one plane coming directly towards us, and bombs exploding in the field one after the other, closer and closer towards the train. After all a railroad was a prime target. I was quite convinced that the next bomb either would hit us or at least come very close. I was just waiting under extreme tension, as the plane flew over the train. When does the bomb hit? - That next bomb never came. We were safe.

At 11 a.m. the air raid was over and the SS-heroes came back into the wagon. A short while later the train started moving again. Slowly and with many stops we were going around the south side of Berlin. At 3 p.m. the train still was somewhere south of the German capital.

February 4, 1944. Between 9:15 and 11 a.m. the train had stopped at Großbeeren. By evening we passed Zossen. Finally we found out where the place was, which they told us we would be shipped to. Now the train kept going almost directly southward. I recognized the stations; it was the same route I always went to and from Berlin to Nuremberg. Like the night before the stations were lit up only for a very short time, but now anybody who was standing near that little window was telling me the stations: Luckenwalde, Jüterbog, Wittenberg, Bitterfeld. Every couple of minutes, all through the night, a lot of trains loaded with tanks, trucks and canons were passing us in the opposite direction.

February 5, 1945, at 6:30 a.m. the train stopped in Halle. More and more trains rolled north with equipment. "Probably against the Russians, maybe they are attacking Berlin now", somebody said. The train moved farther and farther south: Naumburg, Jena, Saalfeld, Kronach, Lichtenfels. No one in my wagon had any idea of the area we were traveling through. I told my friends that we are going south and it is possible they will bring us to Theresienstadt. We still were traveling exactly the stretch I knew. This is not the shortest way, but maybe the Russians are already in Silesia and therefore the train has to make a detour.

It was night again. Some of the men as well as the women always could sit down a little and sleep. There was not enough room for everyone to sit at one time. I was getting tired, standing at this little window-type opening. It was so high that I had to stand on my toes. I had a chance now that I could sit down a little and told one of the fellows to keep on watching when the light goes on, while passing one of the stations, and tell me the name of the town. I told him it should now be Bamberg. If not he should wake me right away.

Even in this crowded place, I fell asleep in a second. After all, this was the fourth night without sleep. After a short rest, only a little while later the fellow woke me and said: "Bamberg

never came, is it possible we did not reach it yet?"

"What was the last one you saw?" I asked.

"It was something like Steinbach and Zeil."

"I have no idea where that is", I said, "keep on watching and tell me as soon as you see another station." The next one was Augsburg, and then came Haßfurt.

"I don't understand it", I said, "as far as I know, Haßfurt is on the Main river, why are we going straight west now? Maybe there is another Haßfurt, let me know what the next one is called." Again there came a couple of small station I never heard of before. Somebody now came with the announcement: "We just passed a place called Schweinfurt." I got up and went to the window.

"If this was really Schweinfurt, they are bringing us west, maybe to the western front, to France to dig trenches." We did not know that by that time the Allied forces were already well on German soil. The train now went southward again.

At 7:30 a.m., on February 6, the train arrived on the railroad station in Würzburg.

"Everybody off the train!", the SS-men screamed. Everybody took his bag and jumped down from the wagon.

"Now line up!" We were standing on one of the platforms on the railroad station in Würzburg. For the first time now after about 82 hours we were allowed to urinate onto the rails. There was no food since we left Wulkow. The little we had saved from what was given to us in Wulkow was gone by now. Only if anybody had saved a crust of bread he had anything to eat. There was nothing to drink since we left the camp either.

From where we were standing one could see the upper part of the city and the low mountains of the Main valley and it looked like nothing was destroyed. The hills in the background had a slight dusting of snow. In general everything looked pretty peaceful. The whole city of Würzburg seemed like it never had been bombed until then.

After standing there for quite some time we heard a noise which gradually got louder and louder. A railroad engine was driving up and down the station just producing a lot of steam to cover the railroad station with a smoke-screen. The noise now reached a crescendo when about 50 American bombers flew quite low over the railroad station. That smoke-screen did not help, we saw them very clear. When I saw all those planes I said to the fellow next to me: "You better take your backpack off!" I believed in the next second or so, bombs would be raining down on us and we just have to throw ourselves somewhere for cover.

This very important railroad junction was not touched yet. I could not believe it, but absolutely nothing happened. A heavy anti-aircraft canon was mounted on a railroad flatcar just

about 100 feet from where we were standing. It was fully manned, but not one shot was fired. That was our luck, as it only would have drawn fire from the planes.

A couple of hours later, as we were still standing on the same place, again this roaring of engines was heard. I thought that the planes were returning, but another perhaps 200 bombers, heading to the same direction as the first ones, flew over us now. Again nothing happened. Everybody was wondering where these planes came from and where they were flying to.

In the evening a train with cattle cars pulled in. We were ordered to board them. It was now 8 p.m. There was not any more room than in the first one. It still was almost impossible to sleep for the couple of men who were selected to sit down for a short time. The train now went eastward. Are they bringing us back again? There was no water and no food. The good thing was that this was in mid-winter and therefore the wagons were not getting too hot with all these people in it. If someone had to go to the toilet, which did not happen too often when there is no food and therefore no bowel movement either, two men were holding him on his arms at the open door.

All through the night the train went very slow and very often not at all, just standing around for hours. At 8:30 a.m. on February 7, 1945, we arrived on the freight station in Nuremberg. I was looking out, but could not see any familiar sight, not even any bombed-out houses. For hours we were standing there and hoped that they would bring us to Theresienstadt.

During the night the train left again and arrived at 7 a.m. on February 8, 1945, in Furth im Wald. Ever that slowly the train went eastward. One of our Czech comrades looking out now saw Böhmisches Kubitzten written on one of the buildings. He knew that was Česka Kubic, the old Czechoslovakian border. First very low somebody started singing: "Kde domov můj!" (Where my homeland is), the old Czechoslovakian national anthem. The rest of our Czech friends joined in. It got louder and louder. Even we, the ones from Germany and Austria who did not know the words, hummed along. This was an uplifting experience for everybody. Suddenly we were not slaves anymore. This felt just like a revolution, everybody was caught up in it. The guards screamed: "Quiet, quiet!" But instead the song got louder and louder and in a crescendo we passed Domazlice, the first Czechoslovakian town. One of the fellows, a known pessimist, was saying: "What are you so happy about? The Nazis are just sending us to our death!" But he could not discourage this sudden enthusiasm. Even though we all were hungry, thirsty and tired, now there was no more stopping. The singing went on and on. They sang "Praha je krásná" and "Koline, Koline", and who knows how many other Czech songs. It was wonderful.

We arrived in Pilsen at 2 p.m., on February 9, 1945. The train was standing still again. At 7 p.m. each one got one slice of salami. Afterwards our thirst became even stronger. Berthold Hornung suddenly was doubled over in pain and moaning. This little piece of salami on an empty stomach was too much to digest for him. Everybody tried to help, but nobody had any water or anything else. Somebody thought that any item of food might help. But who still had food? We had been in the trains already for seven days. I had still a couple of cubes of sugar, my iron ration, that my mother gave me along and one or two bouillon cubes. Somebody probably had sent them in one of the small packages to my parents. I never used them. I always thought one day would come when I would need them more desperately.

I asked somebody who seemed to know, maybe he was a doctor, how about a sugar cube. "No", I was told, "no sugar. But let's try the soup cube." I opened my backpack and searched for it. After I found it, somebody broke it up, grinded it finely and gave it to Berthold without water. Nobody had ever heard of a soup cube as a medicine before, but it helped and his colic stopped.

February 9, 1945. At 9 a.m. the train arrived in Prague. It went around the city, from one railroad station to another. At 4 p.m. we were still around Prague. While the train was standing again for a while at one of the stations, we got 200 grams of salt meat and some "Einbrenn".

It became night again at a peripheral station of Prague. Someone asked the guards, or better made them understand, if they would get us some water. These men were humane enough to take a pail and left and came back a couple of minutes later with water. How could we distribute it equally?

It just happened, that I had a little one quarter liter aluminum cup, my only drinking vessel, which was marked at the one eighth level. With this cup, one of the SS-guards handed out 1/8 liter of water to each of the 75 men.



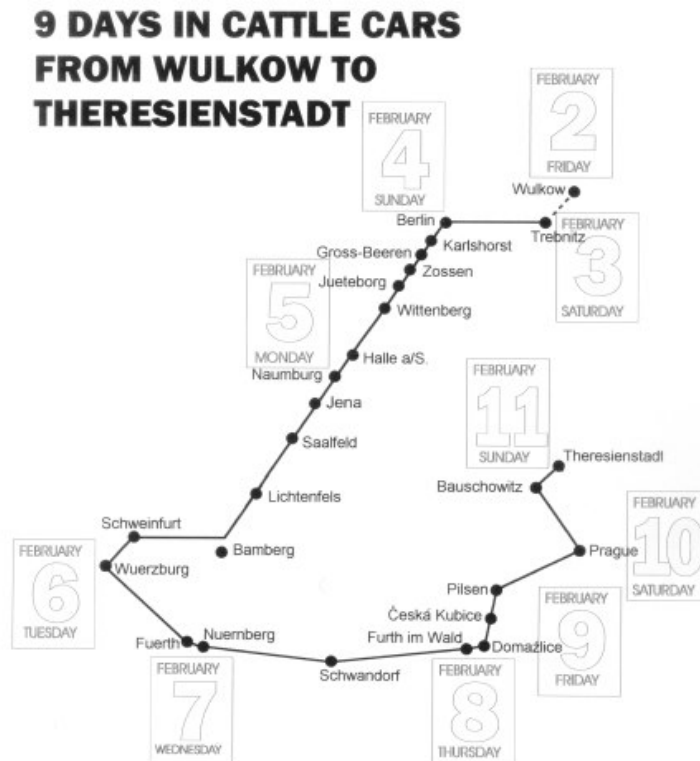
Probably the train did not leave before sometime during the night.

By now it was February 10, 1945. During the morning we came by a railroad station, where there must have been an air raid shortly before. I believe this was the station of Roudnice. One of the Czech fellows knew that the Germans had an underground gasoline storage facility there. The buildings were completely demolished and even some of the rails were standing vertically into the air. Only one track had been repaired and the train went over it very, very slowly. It still took until 3 p.m. to reach the railroad station of Bauschowitz.

Again waiting and waiting. We were standing there for hours. Our wagons were disconnected and just standing on a siding. So close, but still we had to wait.

8 p.m., we were hooked up to an engine and shuttled the two kilometers to Theresienstadt. This still was not the end of our long journey. Until midnight they kept us in the wagons.

While we were waiting something very amazing happened, one almost could call it a miracle. Many of us had a candle or just a stump of it. Somebody hung a little jar on a string from the ceiling and in there we put a lighted candle. We were for eight nights in these wagons, and as soon one candle had burned out, somebody else came up with another candle. Even that some of us had matches was very unusual. The candle did not give much light, but it was enough so one could see not to step on a comrade. As we were standing in Bauschowitz, the last little candle was placed into the jar and lighted. We knew that there was none left and after that we would be in the dark. The candle light died only as we stopped in Theresienstadt.



Finally we could get off, stiff, tired and hungry. Now we were marched under guards to the “Schleuse” (sluice) so that nobody could get away to his family. This was the “Jäger” barrack. Everything was frisked again. The Nazis were sure that after all the time in Wulkow we must have gotten a lot of valuables. I as well as lots of others had to take all our clothes off.

As one never was sure whether he would get back his backpack at the end of such a journey, people wore as much as possible. Since we left Wulkow I myself wore the following items: 2 t-shirts, 1 undershirt, 2 regular top shirts, 2 short underpants, 1 long underpants, 1 gymnastic shorts, 1 pajama, 1 pair of slacks, 2 work pants, 2 sweaters, 2 pairs of socks, 1 jacket, 1 work jacket, 1 wind jacket, 1 coat, 1 pair of puttees, 1 pair of gloves and 1 pair of shoes.

At 2 a.m., on February 11, 1945, we were marched over to the Hanover barracks, which was just one block from the “Jäger” barracks, where we were to be held under quarantine. Nobody was allowed in or out.

We were directed up to the third floor of the building. There was water and every one kept drinking again and again. Also there were beds in the rooms, two or three tiers high. Most of us just laid down any place we could find.

I too crawled in someplace. Nobody got undressed; we were much too tired to care. I said to one of my colleagues: “If there is some food, wake me.” I fell asleep at once.

After I woke up a couple of hours later, it was daylight already. I said to the same fellows: “I am really hungry, how comes they don’t bring us something?”

“What do you mean? There was some bread and jam a while ago, didn’t you get anything?”

“No, I just woke up!” The first food after nine days, and I had overslept.

Some of the fellows looked out of the window and kept on calling to people down on the street. They begged them to go to their relatives and tell them that the people from the “Barackenbau” group were back. News like that went like a grassfire through Theresienstadt. Relatives, friends and everybody who had next of kin in the group came. That means everyone who was still in Theresienstadt. After a short while my father came too. The ones on the outside were not permitted in, and we could not get out. Now everyone was at the windows and because all of us were shouting excitingly to each other, one could not understand anybody.

Shortly afterwards somebody in the street came with a long rope and after a couple of tries, someone in a window caught it. Now we were connected. Another one brought a little basket and we on top could now get some food from the people on the street. As nobody could understand a word, we wrote messages on little pieces of paper. On our improvised elevator the papers went up and down in the basket.



For the next three days they held us in quarantine. We got food, but we wanted to get out to our families. Besides being at the windows and getting news about what had happened in the meantime in Theresienstadt, I believe we did a lot of sleeping to make up for all the time in the train.

Herbert Kolb, November 2008

edited by Gerhard Jochem

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