

## Erna Neuberger-Kolb: Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Oederan and Bergen-Belsen

*by Herbert Kolb*



**Erna Neuberger-Kolb, born July 31, 1923 in Nuremberg, died March / April 1945 in Bergen-Belsen**

(photo: private)

In the following text Herbert Kolb, Erna Neuberger-Kolb's brother, compiled all the information he collected over the time about the group of young women to which his pregnant sister belonged when they were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz in October 1944. In the closing chapter he describes his tour from Nuremberg to Bergen-Belsen in search of Erna after being himself liberated from Theresienstadt concentration camp in May 1945.

We would like to thank the author and Mrs. Arlene Beckman for making available this story at our website.

## **Introduction**

On April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1945 a group of young women arrived in Theresienstadt. They came from Oederan, after being shipped for 8 days, without food, in open railway box cars. They arrived in Litomerice (Leitmeritz), and from there they had to walk to Theresienstadt. These women were from the transport Et of October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1944 from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz. This was the same transport Erna was on, but Erna was not with them now. I recognized some of these girls and asked them where they had been and whether my sister was with them. They knew her very well, as they were together with her until March 1945. I was told that the one who knew her best was Margot Unger. I soon found Margot. Margot's number was 59429. She was deported together with her older sister Ruth, number 59430 and younger sister Charlotte, number 59428. Margot told me the following story:

## **Margot Unger's Report about Auschwitz and Oederan**

The very crowded train arrived in Auschwitz and afterwards everybody was chased out of the wagons by the SS guards with their dogs. They were screaming and hitting the people aimlessly with whips. There was panic. The people were terror stricken, many of them crying with fear. The guards made them line up and they were separated into different groups. 51 men and about 200 young women were picked out of the 1715 new arrivals, the rest of the people were gassed to death immediately. For many hours the girls were standing on roll call, constantly being tortured by the SS guards. Finally they were marched off. Once more they were selected. They had to undress, put their clothes in bundles and throw them away. This was the end of October. They were completely naked, led like cattle in front of a SS officer, probably that hangman, Mengele. There again they were selected. After that they got clothing thrown to them, without any consideration of size. Then their hair was shaven off. This group was never tattooed with numbers. For three days it went on with constant tortures and more selections, but never anything to eat. Some of the earlier arrivals in their barrack explained to them that the smoke they could see, was coming from the crematorium. It was their parents and children being burned.

On the third day they were marched to the train again and loaded into cattle cars. Even though they just came from the west, on October 27<sup>th</sup> they were transported westward again, to Oederan, a small town in Saxony, near Chemnitz. On October 30<sup>th</sup>, 1944 they arrived there. Oederan was a part of the Concentration Camp system of Flossenbürg. After they were unloaded they were marched to a factory building close by. Already 300 women were there, most of

them from Poland and Hungary. The factory previously had produced threads under the name of Erwin Kabis, but was confiscated in autumn 1944 by the *Agricola G.m.b.H. Werk K*, a part of the *Deutsche Kühl-und-Kraftmaschinen G.m.b.H.* This was mentioned for the first time in a report from September 12<sup>th</sup>, 1944. The machines were torn out of the building and it was changed for war production.

The women were directed to the back building, which used to be the dye-works. It had three story bunk beds like in Theresienstadt. Between Erna's and Margot Unger's bed was just a little space were one just could squeeze through. As they were that close to each other the two of them became good friends. Margot told her that she and her sisters were born in Chemnitz, which was less than 10 miles east of Oederan. Erna was telling Margot about her husband and about the child she was expecting. At their arrival in Oederan each one got three hot potatoes and 17 deka (170 grams) of bread.

The women were assigned to different jobs. Margot and her older sister Ruth worked in the group called the *Außenkommando* (outdoor work force). They had to mix cement by hand and load up lorries. They were also digging trenches for installing water pipes and building and converting factory buildings.

Her younger sister Charlotte worked in the night shift in the ammunition factory. There the women had to insert the projectiles into the cartridges for 2 cm anti-aircraft shells. This factory, which was across the railroad, used to be a weaving factory. While the women in the factory had to work in three eight hour shifts, the ones who did outdoor work had to work for twelve hours.

Margot did not remember if Erna was working either in the ammunition factory or in the sewing and weaving factory. The women in the *Außenkommando* had a typical concentration camp uniform with a white cross painted on their back; the one working in the factory had just their little flimsy summer dresses. The outside workers were doing heavy construction work. The clothes of all the women were completely inadequate, as in winter the ground was snow covered most of the time. The ones working outdoors were freezing bitterly, as they had no socks, no underwear and only wooden shoes. Even during the cold winter, the barracks were not heated. At night, after a 12 hour workday, Margot and Erna met in their bunks. The 12 hours probably included the roll call three times every day, which might have taken hours. These roll calls were like in any camp, whether it rained or snowed or if bitter cold. The food was also completely insufficient. Every day they got just a thin soup and one slice of bread. Coffee was just a watered down black brew, no coffee at all.

In Oederan at least the barracks and the beds were clean. These were not what one understands as beds, but just rough wooden constructions on which some bags filled with a little bit of excelsior were placed. Even the treatment was in most cases bearable. There were 30 guard women for the 300 Jewish women. Just one of their SS *Aufseherinnen* (guard women), Winninger, sometimes to show her Germanic training in inhumanity became the personification of a wild beast. She tried not to be outdone in intolerance by the perverse male counterparts. Friedrich Schiller, the German poet, describes this kind of German women very fittingly, in his poem of *Das Lied der Glocke* (the song of the bell) with these words: "... *da werden Weiber zu Hyänen und treiben mit Entsetzen Scherz ...*" (... there women are just like hyenas and atrocities are for them just jokes ...)

For the smallest kind of infringement of the rules, Winninger shaved off the eyebrows of the prisoner. This beast of a German woman wanted to show her sister, *Oberaufseherin* (head SS guard) Wolkenrath-Mühland, that she is just as tough with her charges as is demanded by the rules of the supermen. Again, at other times, she could almost be humane. For instance she permitted Erna just to do the cleaning of the barrack, and not to have to go to the factory any more, when her pregnancy could not be hidden any longer. At that time three of the women were in their ninth month.

### **What I Learned from Documents about Erna's Final Days in Bergen-Belsen**

The Red Army kept on advancing from the east. Erna's number was 59339 and the two other pregnant women, Charlotte Swenkowa (the Germans listed her as Schwenk) from Prague, was number 59405 and Trude Freund, was number 59218 from Czechoslovakia. I had gotten the name of Olga Sinerova, a nurse from Rimavska Sobota in Slovakia, but this seemed to be wrong. These three pregnant women were told to be ready to be shipped somewhere else, as they could not be kept any longer in Oederan. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the three were taken to a train and shipped to Bergen-Belsen. Three women SS guards went along. The three women were not unhappy about the transfer as they believed they would be sent to a hospital and would be able to bear their babies in real beds with white sheets. A list of the Red Cross from the International Tracing Service in Bad Arolsen states that 3 women came to Bergen-Belsen on March 19, 1945. I believe the date is wrong.

None of them had ever heard anything about Bergen-Belsen. Their bread and butter (probably margarine) were taken from them on arrival there. On that day there were 44,649 prisoners in Bergen-Belsen. 698 had died, and 1982 new prisoners arrived.

Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British Army on April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1945. In the month of March 1945, 18,168 inmates had died, included were 3980 women in the so called *Frauenlager* (women camp). Erna had died sometime between March 13<sup>th</sup> and April 15<sup>th</sup>, and I believe it was rather in April than in March. At the time of the liberation 25,000 women, 18,000 of them Jewish, were still alive. Of these, 17,000 survived. The total of liberated prisoners in both camps on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1945 was 61,810 of which 825 died on that same day.

### **Grete Salus' Book**

Grete Salus, number 59392, another one of the survivors of the camp in Oederan, who also was transported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz at the same time, wrote a book: "*Niemand, nichts - ein Jude*" (nobody, nothing - a Jew) "Theresienstadt, Auschwitz, Oederan." She writes:

(...) the train ride in the closely crammed cattle cars took 32 hours, one afternoon, one night and a full day. Besides the people in the wagons, there were all the suitcases and backpacks and only one pail of water and another that served as a toilet. Not everybody had room to sit down on the floor. People managed to look through cracks in the door and saw they were being shipped easterly. After they noticed Breslau and Gleiwitz in Silesia, they figured that they were taken to Birkenau They had heard of Birkenau in Theresienstadt and believed that it was another camp like Theresienstadt. Nobody knew that Birkenau was Auschwitz. At that time nobody knew anything about Auschwitz.

The train arrived around 10:00 p.m. and just like Margot said, they were chased out of the cars by screaming SS-men: "Leave all the packages and leave the sick people and get out fast, fast, fast!" Men and women were separated. Each line had to pass in front of a SS-officer, the infamous Dr. Mengele who was directing with a flip of his hands to the right or to the left. Nobody knew at that time that this meant either to life or to death by gassing.

(...)

The much smaller group was the selected women on the left side, who were marched off, flanked by German order police men. On both sides of the road were barbed wire and behind they saw barracks, lots and lots of barracks. The guards told them to stay in the middle of the road, as the wires on both sides were electrified. After about half an hour of silently, stumbling through the night suddenly one of the officers screamed "Halt!" They were standing in front of a large stone building. The door was opened and they were ordered in. Shocked they realized that there were a lot of SS-men and men and women in striped cloths were in the front room where they were pushed in now.

Someone screamed: "Take off your clothes! Fast, fast, everything off, only keep your shoes in your hand!" They were horrified, in front of all these men they should undress? The people in striped clothes just tore off the clothes of anybody who hesitated. Grete could not find her shoes any more.

In front of all these SS-hangmen they had to stand up straight: a line of nude women being looked over, by these murderers from head to toe like cattle at a market. They had to go slowly by in front of them and a doctor picked out some of the women, who were too thin or if he found something else wrong with them and made them stand on a side.

They were still nude when they were ordered into the next room. On the floor were mountains of hair. They had to sit on stools and somebody cut off all their hair with a machine. The girls and women did not recognize each other anymore and had to ask: "Who are you?"

In the next room were basins with some kind of a liquid with which their skin on the shaved parts of their body was dipped. This gave them burning marks which stayed with them for a long time. SS-men and -women were constantly coming and going through these rooms. Suddenly a big scream! One of the striped girls was hit in the face by one of the female *Kapos* (overseers picked from the inmates by the SS), with a German SS-woman standing next to her with a whip. The reason, some of the women were not shaved close enough. They now were shaved over once more.

They had to pass a couple of tables where their rings and earrings were taken from them. In case these did not get off easy they were filed off. The next place was the shower. Somebody said something about gas, but these women had not heard of gas yet. Still nude and wet they had to go in the next room. The doors were standing open, it was quite cold and there were a lot of Germans coming and going like in the lobby of a large hotel. Freezing, the nude women were huddling together. In the middle of that room stood one of those guard-women distributing clothes; wooden shoes, socks and scarves. For a long time they had to stand in line until their turn came. They got a fantastic collection of rags of summer dresses. Nobody got a matching pair of socks. Some were white some red, some only got one sock. Grete was one of them.

Men in striped uniforms told them that they now have to wait until morning. When somebody asked what would happen to them, the men just shrugged their shoulders: "Nobody here knows what happens!" These men were assorting the clothes which the women had brought. Once in a while one of these men came by with some of the clothing and one or the other women rushed them and tore pieces out of their hands. Grete was lucky and captured a stocking. She now had at least one sock and one stocking.

The next morning standing in rows of eight, was the first time they saw the camp. As far as the eye could see, nothing but barracks, barbed wire, and towers with machinegun emplacements. They were marched off, guarded again by men of the military order police. The wooden shoes got stuck in the mud and some of the girls fell back to dig them out again. As the guards noticed that the women could not make headway, he permitted them to lock arms. This way it went a little better.

They now came to a cement barrack and were counted. Once, twice, twenty times. From front to back and from back to front. A woman in the striped clothes came out and now one by one they had to enter the barrack. There were three-tier stalls, like rabbit stalls, on both sides of the room.

Part of one side of that room had to be emptied for the newcomers. The former occupants, who did not move fast enough, were driven out by the *Kapo* women with beatings. The new prisoners had to conquer for themselves some room and finally exhausted, could at least sit down.

Suddenly, the older inhabitants ran to the door. Lunch! The newcomers jumped out of the beds too and ran to the door. But there was no food for them.

Roll call! Everybody stormed out of the barrack. Lined up in rows of six they were standing there. Four hours, six hours, even longer than that, until finally the German guard-woman came. If the number was right they could go back to the barrack, if not they would have to stand there for a couple more hours. Finally after they were back in the room they were permitted to go to the latrine. Before then it was forbidden. They were told it is *Blocksperr*e (curfew). The only place to relieve themselves was a pale standing outside. The one who used it when it got full had to empty it by just pouring it over outside.

The next morning at 4:00 a.m. Roll call! After that everybody got hot coffee. It was really no coffee at all. They drank a little, but mostly they used it for warming their cold hands. The rest they used to wash their hands a little.

Again roll call. This time the newcomers got bread and margarine too. Everybody was ordered back to the barrack besides the newcomers. The 214 women had to stay. The *Blockälteste* (chief overseer of the block) counted them: "You will be going on transport today!" She said. They were happy not to have to go back to that horrible place, even though they had no idea what the unknown was to bring them.

They marched off. Even with the wooden shoes it went better now, the women were getting used to them. It was quite a walk, but they finally came to a gate. There was a guardhouse. The woman-guard, who brought them there, whistled and a woman sentry came out: "I can't

process the prisoners anymore”, she said. Back to the barrack again. Their beds were already occupied again and it took a while until they got them back. Their blankets too were gone, but the *Kapo* women replaced them.

The next morning after roll call a clerk came, wrote up names and told them they probably would go on a transport today. She mentioned not to give ages older than 32 years and not younger than 17.

Suddenly somebody called out:

“Watch out German control!” That moment they already came in:

“Attention, attention, Theresienstadter, take off your clothes, take off everything!” With that they were chased out of their beds, counted and again they had to stand in line all nude. With the arms up high the women had to march by in front of Dr. Mengele. The ones he accepted as usable labor slaves got a smack on their back as a sign of approval. 14 were not accepted to come with us. They were already one step closer to death.

One of the Czech girls, Milena Lengsfeldova was born November 3, 1927, she was not quite 17 yet. She quickly gave herself another birthday. She said, February 3, 1925. There were two more girls who either were just 17, or they also gave a different date, Inge Goldschmidt from Germany gave her birthday as June 13, 1927, and Judith Lahovics, another Czech girl gave it as July 7, 1927.

200 women selected for a labor camp. This time they were let through by the sentry at the guardhouse at the gate. It was very stormy and the women shivered in their flimsy clothes. Again they had to go to a shower. It was a different one where they were lead to, much more primitive and very dirty. In the hall they had to undress and all their clothes were taken from them. Only the socks they were permitted to keep. For two hours they had to stand and wait, all nude. They were so cold that they were shaking all over. When they got into the shower one of them was saying: “Let’s hope they don’t put the cold water on now!” Even in the shower it was very drafty as all the windows were broken. One of the SS-bitches was walking around cracking her whip. Hot water spilled over their numb, cold bodies.

Steaming and wet they had to line up next to the open windows to receive their new clothes. Some of the women who asked for different shoes, as the one they got did not fit, were beaten up. They even got coats this time, but no scarves for their bald heads. For six hours they had to stand outside while it was raining and snowing. Unbelievably, nobody got as much as a cold. While standing there, they tore out the linings of their coats and covered their heads with them. This was October 27, 1944.



After many hours which seemed an eternity, the women were told to climb into the waiting, open cattle cars. They got bread, salami and margarine before boarding the train. SS-order police was guarding them, who told them that their destination was Oederan in Saxony. The train went through Dresden again, almost exactly a repetition of the trip a couple of days before, only in the opposite direction. The ride took even longer this time. Totally exhausted they arrived in Oederan, which was administratively belonging to the concentration camp Flossenbürg. From there they got their numbers. This was October 30, 1944.

The first three weeks the women did not have to work at all, which at least helped them to recover from the mental and physical fatigue of the last days. Later on the women were recruited into different work groups.

In each layer of the three story beds slept two women. Quite often there were so called bed controls, where a lot of valued objects like knives, scissors, combs and mirrors were taken away.

During the later months there was not much work anymore, but the women had to act like they were very busy. Chicanery increased as the news from the front worsened daily. Hunger became also more and more, as in the last three months there were no more potatoes and the women only got a thin watery soup with turnips and a small piece of bread which got smaller and smaller every day.

Grete writes:

A very sad chapter was our three pregnant women. One of them was very young. (This was Erna, who was only 21 years old. H.K.) She was about in her ninth month in February and one could not keep it a secret any longer. Her condition as well as that of the two others, was very pronounced, one could not make up less months in their pregnancy any more. These women were suffering enormously from hunger and worries about themselves and their unborn children and the rest of us worried with them. The worries were well founded, as one day the command came to them: "Be ready for departure!"

Our comrades were sent with three women guards to Bergen-Belsen. One of the women survived, the others died as well as all the babies who were born there.

### **Recollections from Oederan: Horst Schröder and Edeltraut Petrat**

Grete Salus writes about some of the German workers who helped the prisoners by giving them some food. They had to be very careful not to be seen by other German co-workers, who might denounce them. One of the women she mentioned especially was Else Schröder from Oederan. Her son Horst Schröder remembered:

“I was 10 years (old) in 1944 and lived with my mother and sister, but no father. My mother worked as a cleaning woman in the weaving mill of Salzmänn in Oederan. As her wages were very low, we had to live very modestly. Sometimes my mother talked about a Grete, but she impressed on us children, never to talk to anybody about this. During the war I often went to the farmer Haubold Klotz in Oederan to tend his cows. Because of my work I got extra food from him, which we badly needed. When I came home in the evening and brought a couple of slices of farmers bread with me, my mother said, that the next day she could take a little more bread along to work. She gave that to the Jewish prisoners.

Sometimes I picked my mother up from the factory and walked home together with her. At one time she showed me a hiding place on the fence of the factory where she leaves food for the prisoners. At that time she also mentioned, that it would be less conspicuous if children would play in the meadow nearby. Once in a while I hid something there where my mother told me to.”

Another woman, a young girl, Edeltraut Petrat, remembered that in the years 1944/45 she worked in the kitchen of the Salzmänn company in Oederan and therefore did have contact with the prisoners: “The women in the kitchen always cooked a little more than necessary and therefore could give the surplus to the prisoners. As I was the youngest and a small, delicate little girl, I always had to do that secretly. In my opinion, this was discovered and denounced by a woman whose husband was the factory’s foreman. As all the women prisoners’ hair was shaven, they were amazed by my lush red-brown hair and loved to stroke over it with their hands.

### **The Evacuation of Oederan**

On Friday, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1945, Grete writes:

The women officially heard that probably in the night they will be evacuated. All night long they were listening to heavy artillery being driven through the village. Their nerves were on the breaking point. Is it possible that they would be liberated soon? But nothing happened that night and the next morning, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 1945, they were marched to the factories as usual, even though there was almost nothing to do. Most of the German workers did not show up any more.

Great excitement reigned in the camp because at 3:00 p.m. we had to fall in for departure. The order said:

“Prisoners and all the overseer personnel fall in for evacuation before the enemy!” Destination unknown. At about 8:00 a.m. we could already hear the rumbling of guns and our hearts beat faster in the hope that it would now come to an end after all.

When we fell in at 3:00 p.m., the windows were rattling and the ground shook beneath our feet. Hand in hand with my friend equipped with a bucket stuffed full with my belongings, we, 500 women stood in the yard of the camp, to bend once more under the cruel yoke. And this in the face of the advancing Allies, whose guns we could hear and who could not hear our prayers. Under an escort of armed Reserves and Hitler Youth, we left, wrapped in our blankets. We walked to the station and were loaded into open coal cars!

We did not get any food or water and in our famished state, fell into semi-consciousness. Nobody knew where they were heading, until somebody heard the SS-women screaming from wagon to wagon: ”Mauthausen!”

As the train came to the railroad station in Aussig they saw German refugees, sitting on packages and bundles and looking perplexed. This stop was probably not planned and therefore they drove them as soon as possible to a siding away from the station. The engine left and the cattle cars were standing there for the next two days. Then there was an air-raid. The planes flew very low over them, but they were concentrating on other targets. Very clearly they could hear the planes strafing some objects.

Margot remembers, one of the female SS-guards told the prisoners to wave their striped uniform with a white cross painted on their back, so that the planes would not bomb and strafe them.

The whole trip was like that. Constantly the engines left and they were marooned on different places. Near Leitmeritz they were standing for another three days. A very heavy armed SS-train joined the prisoners’ coal cars. For days their train was driving around in circles between Aussig and Leitmeritz and back again to Leitmeritz. The women still did not get any food and in their weakness they fell into a half sleep.

Somebody heard they were being shipped to Dachau and then again to Flossenbürg. Towards the end they heard about Theresienstadt. Again they drove towards Leitmeritz and the women were hoping for Theresienstadt. But then they heard they would bring them to the *Kleine Festung* (small fortress, part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century fortification in which the concentration camp was located).

For half a day the train was standing near Theresienstadt but the commandant of Theresienstadt did not let them enter and after that the train went to Prague. The new destination they

heard, was the Pankratz jail there. Then the train came north again and was standing for a while again near Leitmeritz. The SS-train was still with them.

Finally that train with the Nazi soldiers left. It started to rain very heavily. At least the weather was good for the last eight days, while they were driven around without ever getting any food. Finally in Leitmeritz the women were told to get out of the train. They walked or better dragged themselves through the town and trudged along towards Theresienstadt. This was Saturday, April 21<sup>st</sup>, 1945. The women from Oederan were the second transport of former inmates of Theresienstadt who arrived back there. On Friday, April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1945 the first transport arrived with only a couple of women who used to be in Theresienstadt before being shipped off.

### **Hanna Fiala's (Malka) Testimony**

Hanna Fiala, number 59207, another survivor from Oederan says, that she does not remember anything from the transport from Auschwitz to Oederan. It seems she was still in shock. This she remembers:

Of the 1800 people who were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz only 200 women survived there. The rest of the people were killed on the night of their arrival. Many of these surviving women lost in that night their husbands, their younger children and their parents. After some time we were told that they will transport us to Germany to work. In our thin summer dresses, which they gave us, nothing underneath, no socks, only a short jacket and with a shaved head, we stood again for roll call. It rained, mixed with snow, it was very cold. We were not permitted to move and had to wait for who would bring us to the train. This way we stood all day, but the train did not come. At that time came the frightening thought, that this might have been another German deceitful play, and we would end up in the gas chambers, which were very close by. At the end it seems the train came anyway. After all this we were stunned by fear, sorrow, hunger and the cold.

My memory only came back, when I jumped off the cattle car on the railroad station in Oederan. It was a nice autumn day. All around me I saw miserable creatures with the shaven heads. I was thinking, who were these poor girls in these torn dresses? Only then did I realize that I too looked as inhuman as they.

They brought us into the factory, where they gave us soup. After that they took us upstairs. There were three-tire beds, in each one a large paper bag filled with straw and a thin blanket. The rooms were warm, as large pipes went through this room to bring steam to the factory. (It

seems that these pipes were maybe only in one room, as nobody I spoke to remembers them. H.K.)

The beginning in Oederan was not bad. Our *Oberaufseherin* (head prison guard) had not arrived, We also did not work yet, as the machines were not operative. The first guard woman became the head mistress. I believe her name was Gerda and she was from around that area. She was a rough, but not a bad woman. All I remember is that she had four or five children, each one from another man she was engaged to. Generally she left us alone, and we could recover a little bit from the ordeal in Auschwitz. At the time when I had to be her cleaning woman, she even got some books for me. As paradoxical as it sounds, we tried not to lose all our culture. The French prisoners of war sometimes smuggled some books to us.

Hanna said that they always tried to keep it a secret that pregnant women were between them. After seeing a picture of Erna, she remembered her. They were looking after their pregnant comrades, and tried to ease their lot as much as possible. As prisoners were working in the kitchen, the girls there usually managed to give them a little more of the small amount of food each one of them had. Hanna said, that through their sleeping quarters ran large pipes with hot water. Because of that they could wash with warm water, wash their clothes and could dry them by hanging them over the pipes. She says, nobody was beaten in Oederan. There was only one *Oberscharführer* (sergeant), the rest of the guards were women. She only remembers the names of a few of the *Aufseherinnen* (guard women). One of them was Lind. Everything changed to the worse when the head prison guard woman and her friend Sonja Schienabeck from Munich came. Both of them were fanatic Nazis. Sonja was a tall slender blond woman, always very elegant. She told our girls, that she was from a poor family from Munich, and a Jewish doctor helped them a lot. The Jewish girls trusted her because of that, and told her a lot of things which were happening in camp. She told everything to her best friend the *Oberaufseherin* (head women guard) Winninger. Whenever there was an air raid Sonja took her white fur coat along. I believe she was a prostitute.

Winninger was the head guard for only a short time. Then came Wolkenrath-Mühland, also a mean Nazi woman. Not only did she reign over us, but even the rest of the guard women did not have it easy with her.

There was one of the women guards I remember favorably. Her name was Mariechen. Her father was a foreman in the factory and he too helped the girls. Mariechen was small and thin and had her hair brushed smooth back. She was inconspicuous. At that time, around Christmas, I was the cleaning woman for the guards. As I came into Mariechen's room on Christmas morning to clean, she closed the door behind me. On the table was a plate with different

delicacies. I was told to sit down and eat everything unhurried. It was not the food that was touching. Between the baked morsels was a little card with a quotation from the bible. I do not exactly remember the wording, but something like: "Don't despair, it will change to the better one day!" This little scrap of paper gave me the confidence, that even between the guards were such who knew, that we ragamuffin, inhuman looking characters were normal human beings.

At one time, one of the guard-woman did not let me into her room. After a while, when she did not clean her room herself any more, she ordered me in again with a lot of special instructions. Somebody had given her a little radio and she was afraid I could damage it. She was one of the not bad ones, and she left the radio playing that I could enjoy it while I washed her floor. But under no circumstances should I touch the radio or even come close to the table. She left the room, I heard Händel's Largo and I started to cry. I could not stop crying any more. This was the first time, I realized suddenly what they have done to us. This simple peasant girl was convinced that we were a primitive human species.

When they were transported from Oederan, the Nazis first wanted to transport the women to Dachau, but the allied planes were bombarding the rail lines constantly, so that the train was stopped all the time. In the end we had to march to Theresienstadt.

### **The Statements of Mina Chern and Jean Diamond**

On February 9, 1970 a lady who seems to have been in Oederan was interviewed at the German General Consulate in New York. Her name was Mina Chern, formerly Czarnoczapka. I believe she was from Poland and she said she came to Oederan before the women from transport Et from Theresienstadt. She probably had lots of it forgotten and made some of her story up, as some of her statements were obviously wrong. She was in Oederan with her sister Regina Diamant who lived in Toronto, who might be the Rosa Diamant whose maiden name was Lefkowitz and was interviewed on February 20, 1970.

Mina said she worked in the ammunition factory on a machine drilling holes into bullets, the same as Rosa said. Mina said: "I have trained a young girl, 18 years old on my machine. She was from Czechoslovakia. She was married and pregnant. She was not in my room. I knew her very well, but I can't remember her name. She was sent away with another woman who was also pregnant. In Theresienstadt a young man ask me about her. That was her husband."

I am sure some other statements she made were wrong; therefore I am not sure if the girl she trained was my sister. But as I asked a lot of these girls about my sister, it might have been me who spoke to her.

Jean Diamond, formerly Rega-Rifka Diamant, who was interviewed on the 12<sup>th</sup> of December 1969 might be the same person as Rosa and Regina Diamond. She also spoke about a girl who was pregnant and shipped away.

### **My Search for Erna**

All the survivors I as well as and Julius Ceslanski brought back from Theresienstadt to Nuremberg on July 1, 1945, would be sent the next day, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, by trucks to the Protestant vacation home in Rummelsberg near Feucht until the house in Wielandstraße would be fixed up and furnished. They would be lodged and fed there. I did not go with the rest of the people. I first was trying to find my sister.

On July 3<sup>rd</sup>, I found out Bergen-Belsen was in the British Zone near Hanover. That meant I had to go into another occupation zone. I went to Miss Nixon from the American Red Cross and told her I was going to Bergen-Belsen looking for my sister. As I intended to go by bicycle I asked her if she could get me a pass. Travel between the different zones was at that time almost impossible or at least very difficult. She immediately wrote following letter for me:

4. July 1945

*Military Government*  
*F 1 B 3*  
*Nuremberg*

To Whom it May Concern:

The bearer, Herbert Kolb, has been released recently from the concentration camp, Theresienstadt, and is seeking his sister, Erna Neuberger, who is in another concentration camp.

Any assistance you can give him in reaching her and helping her to return to Nuremberg will be greatly appreciated.

Helen B. Nixon

American Red Cross

As soon as I came back to Schnieglinger Straße, I tried to get ready for the trip. I packed only the absolute necessities, a couple of sandwiches, and tied this on the back of my bicycle. A short time later, probably the following day, I left on the bicycle to the railroad station in Fürth. The one in Nuremberg was completely destroyed, but Fürth's was still functioning, Fürth was much closer from Schniegling. I found out some trains were already running, but not by schedule.

Shortly after I arrived, around 7:00 a.m., there really came a train going towards Frankfurt. It was just a freight train and the people were now traveling like they shipped the Jews. Some of them were sitting on open coal wagons and from the coal dust they were completely black. I managed to get my bicycle and myself into one of the wagons. It took forever and only by the next morning the train arrived in Frankfurt. I was lucky and found another train that went as far north as Gießen. That was the end of another railroad possibility. I went to the American military headquarters there, to find out if they could help me with transportation to go farther north. It was now mid morning.

Showing the commander of the base the letter from Ms. Nixon, I asked him if he can help me with transportation to go north. The officer did not know of any American trucks going north, but he wrote me another note on a piece of tissue paper as follows:

M.P.(Military Police) Get this man a ride to Hanover - Route 3. He is OK and has his papers. If you can't get him a ride all the way, get him started out of town.

Geo. E. Smith

T. R. P.

I started on my bicycle. I managed yet to get a small tube of rubber cement from one of the soldiers in the compound, as I was afraid to travel on these unrepaired roads, which were torn up by tanks. If I should get a flat without the possibility of repairing the tube, it could be disastrous. Nowhere could one buy any of these items. The weather was good and the roads were generally quite empty. Pedaling north for a couple of hours I saw two American soldiers resting next to their truck. I went to them and showed them my papers, the one I got from the Red Cross in Nuremberg and the one from the commander in Gießen. The soldiers agreed to take me along. They tied my bicycle on the hood and I jumped on the back of the truck. I got a ride to somewhere south of Kassel.

I found the railroad station which I heard was still operational and found out that a train was soon leaving going north. This was just perfect. I pushed my bicycle through the main hall towards the platform. Coincidentally I met Manfred Heizer in the station, one of the fellows who were together with me in Wulkow and Regen. We did not have much time to talk, as I did not want to miss the train. But as all these trains had no schedule it took hours until it left. I believe it did not cost anything and I could not find out how far it would go. But this did not matter as long as it went north.



My bicycle was on the train, and at last the train started. Each wagon was packed to capacity. It moved very slowly, I could have traveled faster on my bike, but I was happy at least not to have to pedal. Nobody knew why, but after quite some time it had not gone more than 10 km and the train stopped. Everybody had to get off. The retreating German army had blown up the bridge over the Werra or Weser River near Münden. One after the other had to cross on a pontoon bridge to the north side of the river. There was another train standing and now it too waited until everybody had come across. Again it took hours. All were hoping it would get us now a little further. Finally it got in motion and went as far as the rails were usable. This trip was just another 17 or 18 kilometers. If I would have pedaled I would have been there hours before.

Now there was nothing but pedaling a couple of hours more, as long as it was day light I didn't have a light on the bike either. Just after dark I found a Red Cross home for returning refugees. The place was completely empty; I was the only guest for the night there. The Brazilian Red Cross nurses did everything to make me comfortable. It is possible that they made me something to eat.

I left fairly early in the morning, I was anxious to get to Bergen-Belsen and find Erna. Around noon I arrived in Alfeld. Right on the main road was an inn. I stopped, sat outside at a table, had a glass of beer and ate my butter sandwiches which Ella Baruch had packed for me. Suddenly right across the street I saw a man who looked familiar. But this would be almost impossible that in two days I should now find another familiar face. But it was no mirage. That man, I am not sure if his name was Fritz Heidt, was with us in Wulkow. We talked for a little while; I told him I am going to Bergen-Belsen to find my sister. If on my return trip I come again through Alfeld, he invited me to sleep in his house. I told him I might then be with my sister and a baby. He gave me his address and told me that he was married to a non-Jewish wife; therefore they still had their house.

I did not trust him in Wulkow and thought he was a stool pigeon for Rafaelsohn, a SS informant among the inmates. I also remembered, while in Wulkow he always acted as if he was hard of hearing and only now did I find out that he just faked. He was kind of a weird character. I had never anything to do with him and stayed away from him. I still believe he was a collaborator and maybe just faked the hard of hearing to spy on us.

While we were talking a car, a station wagon stopped and a couple of people who were sitting in the back with the back flap open almost fell out. They were almost asphyxiated from the exhaust fumes.

After bicycling a couple of hours I saw a truck which was stopped on the road, with German civilians sitting on top. It was just starting again when I asked somebody on the back whether I could hold on and let the truck pull me up the hill ahead. One of the passengers had a piece of rope and tied it to the back board of the truck. Now I could save my legs a little and let them pull me for a couple of kilometers. The truck did not move very fast, but it was much easier than pedaling. But when he was going downhill I had to let go as he now went quite fast and I was scared if he suddenly stops I would drive into it. Down again I had no trouble catching it again.

I don't remember where, but eventually I arrived on the British-American demarcation line. I had no problem crossing the line, as the papers did the job. The British soldier checking me happened to be Jewish. I gave him the name of Justin Neuberger, my brother-in-law's brother. I may not have known that he changed his name to Jack Newton, but I did know he was in the British army. Also I gave him the name of my friend Werner Kraemer who came to England with the children's transport. I did not know he changed his name to Warren. His parents, who also were survivors from Theresienstadt, asked me to try to find out about him, as they did not have an address. The soldier promised to inquire at the chief rabbi's office about it.

Traveling now through the British zone I pedaled through Hildesheim and finally towards evening arrived in Hanover. I did not have a map but was under the impression that Bergen-Belsen was just north of the city. In town I found out that the camp was not that close, but north of Celle. I had to ride on. I was getting more and more anxious and did not want to spend another night somewhere else but figured I could still make it and maybe I would even find Erna yet that night.

I rode on and on, not realizing, that it was another 40 kilometers just to Celle. Here I heard it was still further north. Now It was night, pitch dark and I did not have a light, but I did not give up, I knew I was not that tired, I could make it. My eyes got used to the darkness, I rode on.

From Celle going north the road went slightly uphill and it got harder and harder, but now I did not even have another choice, as there were no towns or villages on the road any more. There were no houses on either side of the road, nothing besides some trees. Luckily there was absolutely no traffic. It was another thirty or forty kilometers until I got to the camp. At least another 2 hours of pedaling.

Coming closer to Bergen-Belsen all I saw was barbed wire on the left of the road, but no barracks or houses. This went on for miles. It was already very late at night and everything looked completely deserted. There was a sign a little farther. It said, that the inmates of that

concentration camp were all moved to the former SS hospital next door, just on the northern end of the camp. Now this could not be too far any more. I pedaled on.

The guard at the door let me in after I showed him my papers. Somebody was still in the office and I was given a place to sleep that night. I told them that I was looking for my sister, but was told that at that time of the night I could not find her any more, as the office with index cards was closed.

The next morning, as soon as the office opened, I went back and asked for my sister. Obviously nobody knew her and I was told to look through the index files of the survivors of the camp.

First I looked for Neuberger, but there was nobody with that name. Then I searched for Kolb, also nothing. Maybe it is spelled wrong I looked for Neuburger and anything what could have been misspelled. But I did not find anything. I had a list of names along of some people from Nuremberg and Fürth who had asked me to find out about their relatives. There was Rosi Seeligmann nee Goldmann, who was deported to Theresienstadt with us. Paul, her husband, had survived and came back to Fürth after he was shipped with one of the train transports to Theresienstadt. Nobody with that name either. Betty Ceslanski, the wife of Julius. Also nothing, Lilly Baruch, born August 29.1900. Nothing.

I now tried to find anybody who might have come from Nuremberg and might have known Erna and these other women. This was much more complicated, as now I had to go through all the cards from A to Z. This took hours. finally I found one familiar name, Trude Guenther. She certainly would know Erna. I wrote down the room number where she would be. But I kept on looking for more, if I could not meet her; after all, there were thousands of people in that building. I looked through more and more files and finally found three more listed from Nuremberg: Karoline, Peter and Samuel Stern. I did not know who these people were, but I wanted to look for them anyway. All three lived in one room; I figured that might be a family. I wrote down the room number. There were no others from Nuremberg in that big file. I knew Trude quite well and thought if anybody would have known Erna it would be her first of all. Trude as well as Erna used to be very active in the Jewish sport club and knew each other very well. I first went to look for her.

A little while later I came to the room and Trude was there. She recognized me and I also could pick her out from the other girls in the room. She told me she was for a while very sick even after the liberation and had no idea that Erna was in Bergen-Belsen too. Besides, she was still not well and had troubles remembering anything. I believe she told me she had encephalitis and for a while she remembered absolutely nothing. She could not help.

I tried my luck now with the Sterns. Mrs. Karoline Stern knew my father very well, but also did not know anything about Erna. She was the wife of Arthur Stern, the instructor in the workshop in the school in Kanalstraße, whom I knew very well. Peter and Samuel were their two boys, 9 and 6 years old. Mrs. Stern who said, I should call her Lina, told me if I have no place to stay, I could sleep in her room. At this point I was not too interested of finding a place to stay; I wanted to find Erna and was sure I could stay with her.

I had photographs along from Erna, when she was about 18 years old and was sure she did not change too much. She would be almost 22 years now. From room to room I went now. Most women in Bergen-Belsen at that time had very little hair, as the Nazis usually shaved them. The picture of Erna was with hair and I kept on covering her hair with my hand to make it more how she would look now. I kept going. In every room where I went I asked every woman if they remember somebody like that who possibly had a baby in March or April. I did not have to ask the men, as they were in a separate camp. Everyone just shook her head. Nobody had seen her. This was very discouraging and went on all day. As not everybody was in their room, I went back to some of them.

I came to a room, and again showed the picture. Nobody remembered her. All just shook their heads. I was just going to leave when a small red haired woman, Rosa Albert, asked to see the picture once more. I went back to her. She said, "I think I remember her." I said my sister must have come to Bergen-Belsen together with two other women, sometime in February. All of them were pregnant and expecting to have given birth shortly after their arrival.

"Yes", said the lady, "I remember now, your sister was pretty young?"

"Yes", said I, "she was not even twenty-two yet, do you know where she is now?"

"I do", said the lady, "but I feel awful to be the one to tell you."

I thought lightning had struck me: "Please, tell me anything you know!"

"Your sister came here, like you said, to camp III, with two other women, both of them were Czechs. These women already left to go home after we were liberated. All three women had babies and of one of them I believe the baby died, of the other one, if I remember right, the baby lived. I don't remember which one it was. Your sister slept in the top bunk. She gave birth to a baby boy and had a pretty easy time. During the night she got very high fever. All of us were sick and we had nothing to help her, besides we were starving, we did not get any food for days, even weeks. We did not get bread since the beginning of March. In the night between 11:00 and 12:00 o'clock she developed high fever and fell out of the bunk in the third tier, she was unconscious. She never regained consciousness and must have died immediately!"

"What about the baby?" I asked.

The baby, a boy, died about a day and a half after birth, nobody could feed him. So many thousands of people died around that time, that one did not remember more details!"

(More than 50 years later I found out that besides Erna, one of the other women, Trude Freund, also gave birth and she as well as her baby had died. Charlotte Swenkova, the third woman, survived, but her baby also had died. H.K.)

I thanked the lady and left. I was stunned. This was such a blow. I did not expect this. After all, just in May I spoke to the girls who were together with Erna and they told me not to worry, she was well when she left them and they were sure she would be all right. I could not cry, I could not speak. I walked around aimlessly, what should I do now? My mission was over. Should I ride back to Nuremberg at once? How can I face my parents? Who can give a message like that to his parents?

Erna, who had gotten married, so young, she was just nineteen, to save Julius from deportation. She, as well as Julius figured that the war would be over before the Germans could deport them. Everybody believed in a miracle. That was an over-optimistic miscalculation. Miracles did not happen anymore. Erna loved Julius and he loved her, but in normal times she would have waited at least until she was twenty-one to get married.

When she got pregnant, both, Erna and Julius, did not even consider an abortion. The Nazis had ruled in Theresienstadt, any pregnancy had to be reported and by decree, aborted. Julius was looking forward for this baby so much. What about Julius, is he still alive? In his last note to Erna, the one he managed somehow to get out of the train, he wrote about it. This note was probably responsible for her death now. One can't blame him about it, it was just their unshaken optimism that Germany would be beaten by the time the baby would be born. Nobody believed that it would take so long. Also nobody believed that the Germans could be as barbaric as they proved they were.

She sacrificed her young life for her husband and for this unborn child. I even tortured myself, thinking, that maybe I was responsible for her death. After all, it was me who built this little room out of a three story bed up in the attic of the children's house. They would not have been able to live together otherwise. I was so very sure, I would find my sister, and my mother even had to warn me not to take her home on my bicycle with a newborn baby. It would be dangerous for a woman who just gave birth. It even would be impossible to take a newborn baby on such a trip.

I went back to Lina Stern. Lina was a mature woman. Maybe she had an answer. I needed somebody to talk too. Lina tried to comfort me. She said not to leave right away:

"It really is no hurry to tell that to your parents. Stay here a couple of days, until at least you get somehow over it. There is absolutely nothing you can do about it to soften the blow. In a couple of days you may see things a little clearer. Look, I also lost my husband; one has to get on living. Do as I tell you, wait a couple of days!"

I listened and stayed for a few days. Lina asked me what I think; should she too finally return to Nuremberg? I told her that the *Schwesternheim* (former Jewish nurses home in Nuremberg) was going to be furnished for people who return and as long as nobody can emigrate yet, it might be the best way. She told me that she can't come as long as there is no transportation, no trains running, etc. Maybe it would be possible that she and her children would be picked up. She also did not know the situation in the country.

I believe I stayed a week, I was afraid of just thinking of going to my parents with such a message. Finally I had to go. I started out one morning in the middle of July. Every moment on that trip I was trying to formulate, how I would bring the news to my parents. I could not think clearly. Every kilometer was a torture. It scared me just to think about the meeting with my parents. I was sure, as soon as I enter the room, they would ask for her. How could I soften that blow?

I left and again it took me three days to reach Nuremberg. That same night I arrived at the Baruchs. Hearing about my trip and Erna, the Baruchs too became very upset; they were very close friends of Erna and Julius. Still to come was the worst part of my life.

The next day, probably Sunday, July 22, 1945, I rode to Rummelsberg. It happened just the way I knew it would happen. As soon as I was entering the room, my parents asked about Erna and the whole drama had to be disclosed. My mother as well as my father had lost siblings in the First World War, who died for the German Empire, now had their child murdered by their countrymen. If they had ever any patriotic feelings for their monstrous homeland, it sure was gone now and only hate was left for their fellow citizen. They too knew that there was no way they could live in that country with these people who had killed their daughter.

I intended to drive back the same night, as I did not have a room or bed in Rummelsberg, but I had very severe rheumatic pain in my knees and hips, so that I almost could not walk anymore. I decided to stay overnight, sleeping on the floor and probably stayed until Monday or Tuesday.

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