

Barely escaped death

Otto Gunsberger, Hungarian Jew, was deported to Auschwitz in April 1944 together with his family. Eight months later he was brought to Buchenwald and in March 1945 to Bisingen. In his autobiography "Choice of Profession" he describes his memories of the concentration camp Bisingen.



Otto Gunsberger, 1998 in Bisingen

Sick and lacking any strength he arrived in the camp. When he had to get up to work in the oil shale-works the next morning it was impossible for him just to carry the lightest tool. He crawled on a hill and lied down underneath the sun. As he was a newcomer it took some time for his absence to be noticed. Yet finally he was discovered.

"Behind my back I heard a sound, as if someone was moving on top of the hill between the trees. I did not change my position, but just turned my head and saw a young, strong and well-built guard approaching out of the forest. He had a big German Sheppard dog with him. It only took him few seconds to find the shirking prisoner lying in the grass, burning in the sun. That is it. No way out. It would be a matter of minutes as to be killed. At best I could try to take influence on the method. His dog was trained to attack prisoners. If I got up and tried to walk away – I was not able to run – the dog would be left off the leash and would tear me up into pieces. (...) It would be less dirty if the guard took his whip off his belt and beat me up. With regards to my condition I would be unconscious after two or three strokes and could finish my life less painfully. I preferred this way of dying. So I did not move. From the corner of my eye I noticed the guard's perplexity. Usually the prisoner would try to run away and this trained killer would be happy watching the hunt and fight of a trained dog against a weak and sick human being. For a while he waited for me to start an escape but I was determined not to move at all. Still standing he let the dog off the leash. The dog encircled me trying to scare me. He was excited, trained to attack fleeing victims. My position was an unusual situation for him. I tried to calm him and talked to him gently, like 'good dog, quiet, sit' and so on. He opened his mouth, stuck out his tongue and – what miracle – instead of biting he started licking my face and lay beside me. Thereby encouraged I kept talking to him and started stroking his coat.

He was pleased and gently licked my hands. Meanwhile his master was watching the disarming of his wild companion. It took him several minutes to come down. He stood next to my head, bowed down and took the dog's collar. He pulled the dog aside and commanded me to get up. He took a long examining look at me and ordered my return. I turned and went back to the tool shed, my legs shaking. I did not dare looking back and just turned my head a little bit when I heard the dog howling desperately. The dog left to the mercy of his owner was being whipped relentlessly. It was disgusting and I kept walking until I could not hear the suffering dog anymore. Lucky I, this SS-man's priority was training dogs and not slaughtering human beings. To him it was more important to immediately correct a dog's bad character trait than to care about an unimportant Jew whose days were numbered anyway.

By Christine Glauninger – english translation Judith Rentschler, Bisingen - 2008