Excerpt form:

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THE COLOURS OF WAR
Ten Uncertain Years, 1935-45

FRUITLESS SUMMER

At long last we reached out destination, a small camp surrounded by a high barbed-wire fence. It was in the middle of a forest but all the trees around the camp had been cut down, there was no grass, and depressing grey gravel covered the entire area. Inside the enclosure were six buildings: four large barracks, a combined administration block and kitchen near the entrance, and a small prefabricated hut about three metres square. The whole area was terribly dirty, full of all sorts of garbage which the men were ordered to clean out. Our predecessors had been Ukrainian prisoners of war, now dragged off somewhere else to make room for us.

Finally we could enter the barracks, each of which had a long table and, behind it, bunks covered with straw and some rough grey blankets that were neither woolen nor comfortable. There were no wardrobes and our meagre belongings were placed under the bunks or became our pillows once again. It was all exceedingly miserable, but anything stationary seemed preferable to our days and nights on a goods train never designed to carry human beings.

The first morning everything looked as grey, stark and unfriendly as the gravel-strewn courtyard where we assembled, but the sun shone. As usual we stood in rows and were introduced to our so-called Lagerfuhrer (the camp commandant). At a fairly long table sat a committee of German officials who told us we would have to work and all orders

had to be obeyed promptly, otherwise we would be punished most severely. Our supplies were to be brought in from the village of Viehofen and work would consist of drawing gravel from the nearby river, the Traisen, which was wide, shallow and fast flowing.

When we were told this there was a moment's silence, and then on the spur of the moment I stepped forward, holding Peter's hand, and said: 'I arrived here as a prisoner for some crime that I did not commit. It is obvious I am unable to work. I was never a burden to anybody in my life and I do not intend to become one now. Please let me go back and on my word of honour, I promise that after the confinement of my baby I will return.'

There was another silence. I could see by their faces that our guards were stunned. But nothing happened. Today, when I think back to that moment I realize how naive my request was and wonder that Peter and I were not sent to another concentration camp. Our camp was a working one, but not far distant were others earmarked for extermination. At any rate I was ignored, and suppose I can consider myself extremely lucky.

We returned to our barracks and further, more private, organization began. It turned out that we had two doctors with us. One was sent out to work at once and the other, Dr Balogh - a well-known surgeon from Subotica - was allowed to stay in the camp where he made himself important. He went out almost daily with a little handcart into the nearby village for our food. He was of service for those who became sick as he could go to the hospital for medicine. And with this wife and two daughters he occupied the little hut which was almost behind the administrative and kitchen barracks. His mother-in-law, a fine lady who became a good friend of mine, slept in one of the big barracks where forty people were housed.

A man named Pottesman was selected from our group to help with administrative work in the office, and a few older women were singled out for kitchen duties.

Pottesman was a fine, quiet, intelligent fellow though he suffered from a stomach ulcer. When the morning rush and

various chores were finished he came into our barrack and lay on his bed to rest. My bunk was about opposite his, and sometimes we had long talks about the whole crazy situation. He told me that often, in the quiet office hours when he was alone with the Lagerfuhrer, he gave him long lectures about the Jews and how and why everything had happened to us. Slowly the Lagerfuhrer began to think that this little crowd, a small fragment of Europe's persecuted Jews, was quite different from what he had been led to believe, and apparently he slowly started to wonder about Nazi propaganda.

Mrs Pottesman worked in the kitchen, spoke German very well, was a capable organizer, and became our chef. Kitchen duties were not easy. A few women were appointed kitchen aides and had to feed 140 people daily from meagre and poor-quality ingredients. Life began at five each morning except Sunday. By six o'clock, when work started, men and women labourers had to dress and stand in queues for a meagre, hasty breakfast consisting of black coffee and a piece of bread. After that they were marched off to the river where they spent a long day drawing gravel from the banks and towing it away in small handcarts.

Everyone except me was supplied with wooden shoes, like clogs, and early each morning their steps echoed like heavy thunder on the wooden boards. It was a grim sound to greet each day.

One woman, Anica, who had a strong personality and was extremely practical, had a boy of fifteen and a younger girl. With her excellent German, she became secretary to the Lagerfuhrer, a small, thin, uninteresting-looking man who was rather simple and either confused or bewildered by his 'high' responsibilities. In civil life he had been a butcher.

There were a few young men in our crowd, but most were elderly since the younger ones were invariably on forced labour and scattered across middle Europe. Almost the whole community consisted of incomplete families which had been torn apart. All came from different walks of life, different parts of Hungary. There were a few from Subotica, including the lawyer Dr Shaffer and his wife, though their son was

elsewhere on forced labour. Everyone had been taken from businesses, homes and members of their families. There were very few children.

In the barrack next to mine was a frail-looking middle-aged woman with six children, the youngest of whom was a little girl a bit younger than Peter. In the same barrack was a complete family — a very rare occurrence — still together because the man was a diabetic and as such exempt from forced labour. Their surname was Kraus and the father's Christian name was Imre, as was my husband's, a coincidence that later became significant. They had a six-year-old daughter.

The others, who came from all walks of life, became a conglomerate of desperation, humiliation and worry about their wives, husbands or close relatives. Because of their circumstances many were irritable, just as many were also sick, and all of us were perpetually hungry and fearful for the future. Fear and hunger are not good companions and became the cause of many distressing but perhaps inevitable disputes. It was mid-July, but unseasonably cold and miserable. Rain had fallen for weeks as if even the heavens added to my continuous, uncontrollable flow of tears. Simply, if anyone even talked to me I burst out crying.

My main worry was Peter. All this turmoil had had a terrible effect on him. He had spoken fluently when he was only sixteen months old but now he did not utter a word. He only sat quietly, sucking his thumb. He ate the meagre amount of poor food we were allowed and was as pale as he was quiet. I was terribly worried that he might become mentally affected because of all that we had gone through, but there was nothing that I could do except pray for him, talk to him and walk with him on the grey gravel. When we had a little lie-down I told him fairy tales and sang him songs which I remembered. That was all I could do, with all my heart and all my remaining strength and all the love I had for him. I had not been sent to work because of my condition, so at least I could give Peter all my time — the one thing we had in abundance — and this became a blessing for his sake.

All the weeks before, I had thought how much better it

would have been for Peter if I had not been pregnant, but I had been wrong. Had I not been preganant I would have been sent out to work and could not have saved my son. And, mercifully, my efforts to revive his spirits were not in vain because six weeks after our arrival, late one afternoon when we were playing outside and the clouds had at long last given way to the sun, Peter suddenly started to laugh. I thanked God with all my heart. My little son was back to normal again! We had hope! We would live on hope again!

Slowly the situation took some shape and we became a little community, even though a very strange one, huddled together in a relatively quiet spot in a torn, stormy, bewildered world. Despite the fact that our circumstances were so bad, and everybody's mind and heart so utterly sad, it became evident that human nature is one of the most flexible and adaptable things in life — a wonder of creation.

Each day became a routine exercise, though one which daily became more difficult as we were undernourished and at least scarcely any of us were either used to, or suited to, the heavy physical work imposed on us. Six days a week, and in all weather, almost everyone except me had to go to the Traisen, cross it by a narrow plank, collect gravel from its banks and haul it away. I never learnt the purpose — if any — of this work.

To add to the workers' problems they had a work manager — Kubicek — who was an extremely strict and rude taskmaster. He arrived at the barracks on horseback at six each morning, shouting more or less wildly according to his mood.

Everyone else's moods and spirits sank lower and lower as they went about their arduous and unexplained work. By the rest day, Sunday, everybody was exhausted but this was the only time anyone had to do washing and mending before, hopefully, resting.

Slowly we all found someone with whom to make friends. The few very old women stayed in to clean all the barracks and theirs was perhaps the most unpleasant task of all. There were two sisters, who in their spare time were much occupied with interpreting dreams. People became very superstitious

and eager to listen for some prophecy, longing for any comfort and hanging on to every thread of hope.

One frail old lady had a slightly-built daughter who was an excellent dressmaker and Anica made good use of her talent, giving her a bit of extra food for her services. On top of which, while the daughter was sewing she had time away from the dreaded heavy work for which she was not at all suited. Anica obtained a spare blanket and had a well-cut suit made. Naturally all this was hand-sewn as there was no such luxury as a sewing machine.

Then there was a dwarf, quite a fat little one, who was a bootmaker and was always kept busy. An ugly-looking, bad-tempered hunchback carried all the wood to the kitchen.

Altogether it was a miserable existence. Gloom hung over our little community. Laughter seemed to be banned by tacit agreement and everybody was overburdened with life from day to day. We worried about family members and dear ones who had been torn away from us. I yearned for someone upon whom I could rely, but there was nobody, no human being. The only being was God and I asked Him for phuysical and spiritual strength, because I needed these now more than ever before.

The nights became colder and colder as winter approached. And fear was in the air, not just over the prospect of winter but also because during the nights there were occasional visits from the SS. They always came around midnight.

As the time of my confinement came closer, the question of what would happen remained unanswered. Would I be allowed to go to hospital? As I could think more clearly now we were settled and Peter was more relaxed, worries about our future came back. What would happen if I did not survive? I was not worried for myself , or for my baby, but for Peter.

I asked Dr. Balogh about hospitalization. At first he said, 'Yes, you will be permitted to go to a hospital,' and I was enormously relieved. It was arranged that I should go with him to nearby Viehoffen and see the village doctor. I was glad to to out and left Peter in the care of an old lady who loved him, and who worked only light duties in the kitchen.

It was a beautiful sunny day and as we had to go through the forest, I enjoyed this small freedom. We walked very quickly, however — I don't know why — and I was quite breathless and unable to talk until we got to the doctor's waiting room which was full of people, none of whom gave up a seat for me. The tension in the room was almost tangible. I stood and leaned against the open doorway, looking out. In the far distance I saw a little church on the hillside. It was beautiful, shimmering in a golden haze of sunshine and of my tears. I stood like this for a while and then Dr. Balogh said we should go without seeing the local doctor. Why I had been taken there in the first place remains a puzzle.

Back in camp I asked again where he thought my confinement would be. 'Here,' my doctor said.

I was still in one of the large barracks with forty other people who argued and quarrelled quite a lot. This was almost tangible, depressingly so, but when Peter cried occasionally all forty turned against me. It was almost unbearable.

I kept asking where I would give birth to the baby and was told that when the time approached I would be quartered in a little prefabricated barrack, similar to Dr Balogh's, which our predecessors had used for the contagiously sick. I didn't care about the building's previous purpose but simply wanted to get away from the crowd, and to do so as quickly as possible. I even lied and said my baby was due in late September (rather than October) in the hope we would be moved to our hut all the sooner.

Eventually my hut was put together with big clamps and with a shutter on the outside. When it was assembled, two narrow wooden beds were built, in an L shape so we had more space. Under the small window was a small table but no chair, so we sat on the beds which were so rough that I continually had to pull splinters from Peter's little fingers. And yet, a palace could not have given us greater happiness than that little hut. All this for just the two of us! Home away from the crowd! I moved in and asked in the office for some newspaper to put on the shelf where I kept the handbag in

which I always stored half the bread from our rations. (It was bread in name only and was baked from all sorts of substitute ingredients including, I was told, ground up bark.)

We enjoyed our separation, but when night fell so too did my spirits. I had time and solitude enough for contemplation and all my worries came to life again. By day Peter absorbed so much of my time and attention, but at night I worried about my circumstances and about my family. What had become of Jim? Or of my friends, my parents and my brothers? Everyone amongst us had heard all sorts of terrible stories. Surely they could not all be true! To free my mind of worry as much as possible I fell back into that old and slightly evasive routine of saying over and over, 'Today I will not think of these things.' I could not afford any more stress. Everyday life was a big enough struggle.

When all the workers went out in the morning I went to the big washroom, fetched water, washed our clothes, bathed Peter and cleaned the room. I borrowed a broom from the old women who remained in the barracks.

Our doctor now went daily with Anica to Viehoffen to fetch our food. Once a week we had soup with some meat pieces in it, and once a week mince balls and potato dumplings. These were the nicest meals. Anica established herself well in the office, so much so that the Lagerfuhrer often stayed in overnight. Nobody said a word about this because she was very kind and helped anybody whenever she could. Meanwhile the office worker Pottesman continued to instruct the Largerfuhrer in Jewish history. The rest of the people remained a miserable, desperate crowd, men and women alike.

Other camps hidden nearby in the forest housed prisoners of war whose circumstances were slightly superior because they had better food and also received Red Cross parcels. Although we were not permitted to talk to any outsiders, hunger and hardship made everybody ingenious, and the camps did meet. Some young girls benefitted from these brief meetings and we were also able to get some news through the nearby prisoners, some of whom had made a radio receiver

which was as ingenious as it was illegal. The news was vague, however, and usually not very encouraging.

The men were all very sympathetic towards me and always asked when my baby was due and if I had any clothes or bottles. They were all sorry for me, which I didn't like, but nevertheless I appreciated their concern.

We had four guards who came in rotation for three-day periods, during which they were present day and night. One of them was a tall, sad-looking man of about sixty called Losleben. He used to talk to me and whenever I asked him 'What will happen to us in winter? It is very cold here and I have no warm clothes for me or for my child,' his sad eyes looked down and he quietly said, 'Yes, winter will be very bitter.'

It had been a fruitless, flowerless summer, without music or any type of comfort, but the prospect of winter wasn't simply bleak . . . . It was terrifying.

Sometimes I told Losleben how worried I was that my family did not know where Peter and I were and that I would like to let them know that we were alive. I told him how much I worried about my sick mother and that I was afraid that the great anxiety might kill her. And where were my husband and brothers? If only I could know about them. At least I now had an ear for my most private worries, though this was cold comfort at best.

I heard that trains were passing by filled with young men who had been taken for forced labour, and who were now heading towards the extermination camps. Again I fled to my nerve-saving philosophy: 'I will not think about this today, and I don't believe it in any case.' The strategy was not my own. I had adopted it and adapted it from *Gone with the Wind*, which I had read not long before the war.

I became very friendly with the sad old Losleben and he told me his story. He had recently lost his wife, one of his daughters had TB and his son was in the Army. I told him that the time was approaching for the birth of my second child and I hadn't so much as a nappy.

Our conversations were not cheerful. I never spoke to the other guards, but occasionally when they saw me or little

Peter outside our hut they came over and gave him a miserable little apple or, on one occasion, an unwrapped potato dumpling pulled from a pocket. Although it was a bit dirty, it was still a great gift for Peter's empty stomach and showed, too, that human feelings had not quite died.

Since I badly missed any sort of activity, I asked if I could help in the kitchen. My request was granted but the job — helping give out the food from the small window in the kitchen — did not last long. I liked it, I was quick and it was something to do, but some of the others said that I was in the way and they were afraid they might bump into me. So that activity ended.

One day I asked the Lagerfuhrer if he could bring me in some work, I didn't mind what it was. He turned up with some grey wool and said if I wished I could knit jumpers for his children — he had nine. I was very thankful because forced inactivity is one of the greatest punishments an active person can be forced to endure. There were no knitting books but one of the elderly ladies helped me when I needed advice and the little cardigans turned out beautifully. I even crocheted the buttons: the wool was dull grey but I managed to get a bit of coloured wool and embroidered an edelweiss on the top of each button. I hurried to finish them before my baby arrived, and the Lagerfuhrer took them home. They looked very pretty.

As my time and autumn came closer, I became more and more worried. One day I spoke again to the Lagerfuhrer, telling him as tactfully as I could that as he had nine children he must understand my situation. 'What will happen? I haven't got a rag to wrap the baby in and the nights are already freezing cold.'

He seemed to listen and one day a little stove arrived. I was overjoyed but my happiness was short-lived as it turned out the stove gave no warmth at all: it was a little 'deaf' was the explanation of the dear old man we used to call Uncle Vaczi. As he was over seventy and very, very thin, 'Uncle' stayed in the camp and did all sorts of duties in the kitchen. Occasionally when he was tired he came into my little hut, had a good chat, told me all the gossip and rested. Quite a few

of the others also got into the habit of coming to my hut. It acted in some small way as a refuge in the sad, unhappy and relentlessly grey world where the future was as bleak as the autumn sky or the winter to follow. It was here I heard with tremendous interest about the October revolution against Hitler, but it had failed.

Eventually the Lagerfuhrer gave me another stove which worked. In normal circumstances this might seem an insignificant matter, but when someone is a prisoner, with nothing at all, every little request looms large and my problems were particularly pressing.

My doctor came to visit me and have a little chat and said, 'If we are liberated by the time of your confinement, I will buy you the greatest bunch of flowers that is possible.' It gave me some hope and a reason to smile. With the tremendous burden of worry about what would happen when the really cold weather arrived — we could all freeze to death — and what would happen to Peter if I did not survive, there were not too many causes for smiles.

One day Losleben said to me: 'You have to promise that you will be absolutely quiet about the things that I am going to tell you. If you talk about them, then not only you and your child, but my whole family and I will die.'

I assured him of my silence and then he told me that his son was in transport and travelled almost weekly between Austria and Hungary. As he always stayed a couple of days in Budapest, and if I wrote a letter to my family he would give it to his son who would deliver it. I was so overwhelmed by this possibility that I could scarcely express my feelings, but at once I wrote a long letter.

For weeks I heard nothing and did not dare to ask. In any case our conversations were always very brief because gossip flourished in the community and I did not want to fuel it.

One day I was called to the office. It seemed that the Lagerfuhrer had made some application in Vienna where a Jewish welfare committee was still working, and they had sent me a parcel of very old babywear and some old nappies. They were rather like rags, but meant the world to me. One day another little parcel arrived with three baby bottles and a

few other things, sent by a kind woman in the village who had heard of my plight. Her name was Mrs Wagner and her parcel was a gift from heaven.

The time of my confinement approached. Sometimes I worried because the baby was so very still. What would happen if something was wrong with him? All I could do was pray.

And then one night Peter became ill. I did not know what the matter was but he had such a high temperature that he was delirious. I put cold compresses on him, and my cool hands on his forehead, knelt at his bed, and prayed and talked to him while he shouted about squirrels running around the wood. I had never known such fear and anxiety, but towards morning he became calm again and fell asleep. Slowly he recovered, but I will never forget that night.