Survivor

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The truck was dark green, highlighted with the yellow specks and black stripes typical of camouflage military gear. A handful of others were waiting in the truck when Boin boarded.

The truck slowly made its way through Berlin, stopping at one home, then another and another. At every stop, the guards checked another name off their list as each terrified prisoner came aboard. Within an hour, the truck was crowded with about 50 prisoners.

Two guards rode in the front of the truck; two watched the back. The prisoners were packed in an area seven feet wide and about 12 feet long.

The ride to the camp lasted 1 1/2 hours. The prisoners were silent, fearing the guards would hit them with their rifles if they spoke. But a million questions raced through their minds.

"It took us off guard," says Boin. His hair is now gray. He wears gold-rimmed glasses, and liver spots dot his face. Tiny, red veins show through on his nose, but his mustache is still there.

"We never expected it," says the old man.

Not even when he was thrown out of high school in 1938 because he was Jewish.

Not even when he was banned from using public transportation.

Not even when he was forced to wear a yellow star on his sleeve.

In 1936, Boin's uncle warned his father that something terrible was about to happen.

"Arthur, now is the time to get out of here," his uncle had said.

"What do you want," Boin's father replied. "I was in World War I. I have a legitimate business. I pay my taxes. What can they do to me?"

As the truck carried Boin to the camp, he tried to comfort himself with his father's words.

"My father always said, 'Don't worry about a thing. There's no reason to be afraid.'

"But then you start thinking, 'What's going to happen? How am I going to get out of here?'"

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The frightened prisoners watched the gates at Sachsenhausen close behind them. Two fences topped with barbed wire surrounded the camp. One fence, Boin learned later, was electric.

The truck stopped, and the prisoners filed out. Soldiers began calling off names.

The list included Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, political enemies of the state and priests.

They took turns emptying whatever possessions they had in their pockets onto a table. Then, after stripping them of their possessions, the Nazis stripped them of their identities.

3709. The number, tattooed on Boin's left forearm, would become a symbol of those nightmare years. Later, he had his doctor remove the four black numbers, leaving only an inch-long, white scar as a reminder of his past. He had it removed, he says, because he was tired of being pitied when someone spotted the tattoo.

After giving him his number, the soldiers shaved Boin's head and sprayed his naked body with DDT. He was given new clothes to wear — a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of pants that looked like gray-and-white striped pajamas, only they were thicker and itchier.

Then the soldiers took Boin to the barracks, a large, wooden building that housed about 95 prisoners. Inside were rows of bunk beds stacked three high. Boin shared a bed with six or seven other prisoners, though only three could fit comfortably.

"Most of the time when you woke up in the morning, the guy on the right or the guy on the left was dead," he says.

* * *

Boin learned the silent rules of the camp quickly.

The morning after he arrived, Boin stood next to an old man who was visibly undernourished. The man fell to the ground, and Boin instinctively bent down to help him up.

Whoomph. A blow to Boin's neck knocked him to the ground.

"If you want to live, don't look, don't listen, don't hear and don't see," fellow prisoners told him later. "Because if you do, you're going to be in big trouble."

The soldiers never let the prisoners forget who was in control.

One cold night, for example, Boin got permission to leave the barracks to go to the bathroom. A guard accompanied him to the outhouse. Boin had wrapped a rag around his body for warmth, covering the yellow star on his sleeve. Outraged, the guard took him to the camp's commandant.

"All I did was try to keep warm to go to the bathroom," Boin said defensively.

The commandant smiled.

"Oh," he said. Then he turned and struck Boin several times.

"Okay, the next time you know," the commandant said. "I don't want to see this happen again because I can do something more to you than this."

Like the silent rules, Boin quickly learned the camp's routine. The days ran into each other.

At 5 a.m. the soldiers woke up the prisoners for roll call by blowing a trumpet or ringing a bell. Boin usually awoke on his own. A different soldier called the roll each day. Sometimes the prisoners stood in the cold for an hour while the roll was called.

Breakfast, if there was time for it, consisted of tasteless coffee and a slice of bread. The prisoners each received one loaf of bread a week, and they learned to ration each slice.

At 7 a.m., the soldiers would choose about 14 of the strongest prisoners, Boin included, to work on the roads outside the camp. They would walk a few miles to the work site. Two soldiers walked in front of the prisoners, who were lined up in rows of two and three. Two more guards followed behind and another two kept watch from the sides.

The guards in back would hit the prisoners with instruments that resembled police sticks if they didn't walk fast enough.

By 8 or 8:30 in the morning, Boin and the other prisoners would arrive at the work site. Often, their task was to surface a new road. All day, they would break up the old concrete, shovel it out and load it onto little carts. When the carts were full, the prisoners pushed them onto the side of the road or onto trucks.

"You dirty Jew," the soldiers would yell. "You never worked a day in your life. It's about time you are taught to do some honest work."

At noon, Boin and the other prisoners took a 20-minute break to eat bread and water for lunch. Boin often used the time left after he was done eating to take a short nap.

At 6 p.m., the road-workers would return to camp.

Dinner was served in a kitchen house, where large serving tables were set up. Gray kettles filled with potato-peel soup sat on the tables. Sometimes a black kettle filled with fried potato peels cut into small pieces sat among the gray kettles. Boin looked forward to seeing the black kettle, where a small piece of meat might be found among the potatoes.

"I don't know what kind of meat, but I didn't care," Boin says.

It took about 20 minutes to reach the front of the line, where a soldier filled one compartment of an army tray with soup.

"Hurry up, there are other people waiting after you," the guards would order.

Some prisoners hurried so much they spilled their soup. They couldn't go back for more.

"If you tried to do that," Boin says, "you would be taken out and put in a place separate from everyone else or they'd beat you half to death."

The prisoners returned to the barracks to eat.

"The soup tasted terrible, but you ate it anyway," Boin says. "It kept us warm a little bit."

Keeping warm was a constant battle. Some of the prisoners sewed scraps of material together to use as blankets. They scavengered the scraps from the sewing room where the commandant's clothes were made.

One prisoner wrapped old newspapers around his worn-out shoes to keep his feet warm.

The prisoners who had enough strength talked in the barracks . . . always about the same thing.

What were they going to do? How could they get out of here? What was going to happen to them? What happened to their families? How could they get in contact with them?

There were never any answers.

"We were hoping that finally England and France and all the countries would come and bomb these places and put us out of our misery, but it never happened. It never happened," Boin says.

Once at Sachsenhausen, Boin expressed his hatred for the Nazis.

"If God gives me the strength and I stay alive," he told fellow prisoners, "I will kill every German I can find when I come out."

A Catholic priest, alarmed by Boin's statement, reprimanded him.

"Listen, if you do what you said you're going to do, you put yourself in the same category as the Nazis."

"So I started thinking, 'My gosh, this guy is right,'" Boin recalls.

Most of the time, the prisoners were silent in the barracks. Many were too tired to talk, but they also knew they must watch what was said because the guards often tried to find out what was going on inside the barracks.

Sometimes bribes were offered in return for information.

"Listen," a guard would say, "I will give you a piece of chocolate if you tell me what is happening in the barracks."

And despite of everything, some of the prisoners remained optimistic.

"Maybe they're not as bad as we think they are," they would say. "Maybe we can talk to them. Maybe we can discuss things with them."

"We hoped," Boin says. "Inside you have all this hope."

But some would give up.

"I don't want to live anymore because I just don't have the strength," some would say.

Others simply ran into the electric fence.

"I was sometimes considering it's better to be dead than alive," Boin says, "But somehow, some way, I always came out of it."

Boin usually went to bed at 8 or 9 p.m. But sometimes sleep eluded him.

"So many things go through your mind. If you start thinking about it you almost go crazy trying to figure out why you're there and then what will happen to you."

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When the soldiers at Sachsenhausen announced one spring morning that the camp at Buchenwald needed airplane mechanics, Boin stepped forward.

"If I had a chance to get out of there, I might have a better chance to live," Boin says. "Not knowing, of course, whatever comes might be worse than I had."

He pauses for moment.

"But that's really why I stayed alive, I think."

But it's still a mystery to Boin how he survived the brutal train ride to Buchenwald.

About 1,000 prisoners were crammed onto the train, packed like sardines in a tin container. The train was so full there was no room to sit, no room to fall down, no room to move.

"You couldn't move to blow your nose," Boin says. "You had to hold your hands above your head all the time unless they were down and you didn't have any way to get them up."

The train smelled of urine and feces.

"People are people," Boin says. "If they have to go, they have to go. But there's no way to go. You have to do it in your pants."

Prisoners fainted from the smell and the heat. Others died, but there was no room for them to fall. For two days and two nights, the prisoners had no food or water. Boin slept standing up.

"You just close your eyes and whatever happens happens," he says.

The trained stopped three hours short of Buchenwald just before noon on the third day of the trip. The prisoners would be transferred by truck from there to Buchenwald.

"What a feeling when they opened the door and we could get out," Boin says.

Prisoners poured out of the train. Nazi soldiers waited outside the doors. As Boin exited, he saw thousands of other prisoners spilling out of other trains, screaming for relief.

When Boin finally arrived at Buchenwald, he went to the bathroom, took off his clothes and underwear and washed them. When he was done, he put the wet clothes back on and let them dry on his skin.

"I've heard people say, 'If you really wanted to get out, you could.' That's baloney. There was no way, no way that you could escape."

After Boin had washed, the guards ordered him and some of the other prisoners to move a huge pile of stones to another location about a mile away.

As the last stone was stacked, the guards gave a new order.

"Okay, now you put them back in the place where you got them," the guards said.

* * *

Six months passed.

Then in the fall of 1941, Boin was transferred by freight train to Auschwitz.

The scene at the Auschwitz depot horrified Boin. Hundreds of Jewish prisoners poured out of the trains, screaming. Many of them were beaten by guards for no reason. Husbands were separated from their wives. Mothers were separated from their children.

"Women came with little babies in their arms, 4 or 5 months old, and they took them away and threw them in a pile where they were used as target practice," Boin says.

During the 1 1/2 years he spent at Auschwitz, Boin worked in the coal mines. It was hard, back-breaking work. But Boin faced a more difficult job outside the coal mines.

For two weeks, he pushed wheelbarrows full of dead bodies to the ovens, where the bodies were destroyed.

"The smell from the dead bodies you could smell for miles," he says. "I will never in my life forget the burning flesh."

* * *

A guard at Auschwitz had arranged Boin's move to Hindenburg, Silesia.

"If you are able to work hard again, not in the coal mines, but in the stone quarries, I might be able to get you out of here," the guard had told Boin.

"Do it," Boin said. "Just get me out of here. I can't stand it anymore."

Soon after that conversation, Boin found himself on a passenger train with about 60 other prisoners.

At Hindenburg, prisoners who couldn't work faced certain death.

Boin watched as soldiers led about 80 men, woman and children five miles into a field. The guards forced them to dig a large hole and undress. Then, the soldiers shot them as they stood at the hole's edge. Their bodies fell into the hole. A bulldozer covered the hole with dirt.

Speaking in German, Mrs. Boin adds to her husband's story.

"Yes, some people were buried alive. That's true," Boin says softly.

* * *

Boin's freedom came as unexpectedly as his imprisonment. On April 22, 1945, Russia bombarded the camp at Hindenburg. Boin and 10 other prisoners escaped into the forest.

The frightened fugitives ate rats and anything else they could find to survive. But it was more than they got in the concentration camps. By this time, Boin weighed only 72 pounds.

As he thumbs through a history book about the Holocaust, he stops on one page and points to man so thin his ribs bulged from his chest.

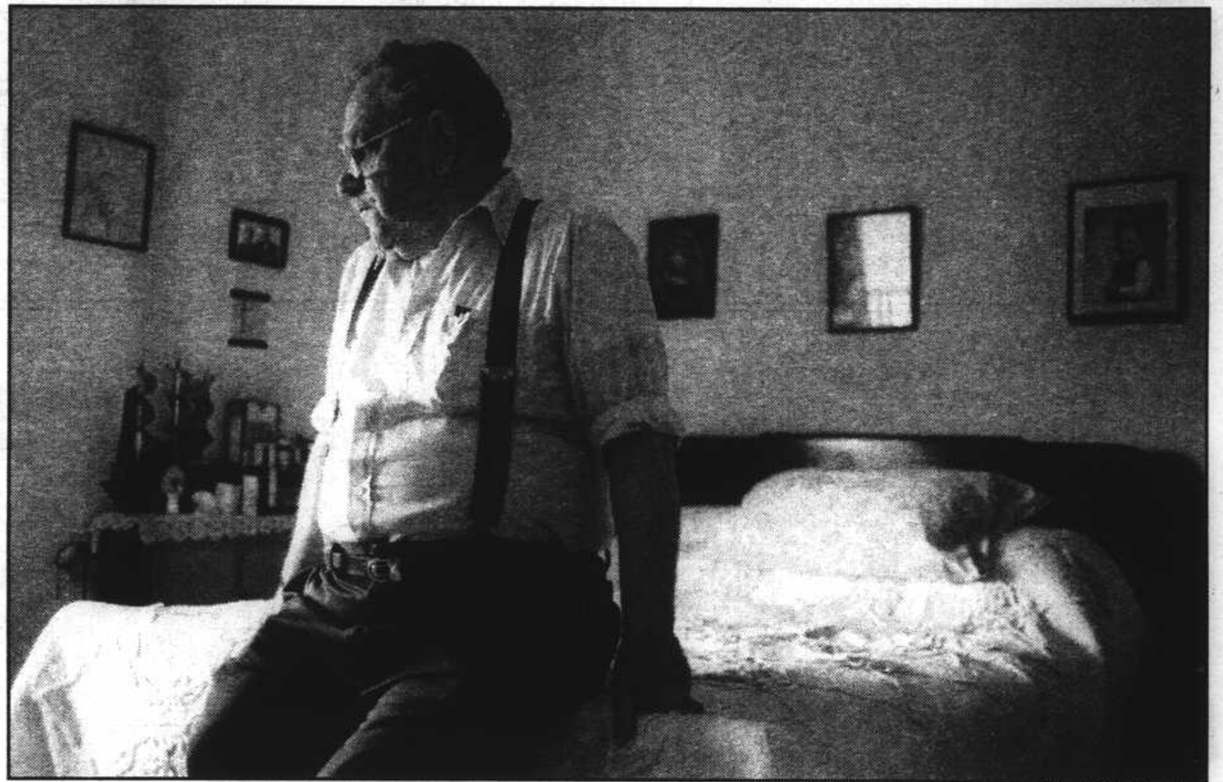
"That's about how I looked when I got out," he says.

Russia finally liberated the other Hindenburg prisoners in early May 1945. By that time, Boin had made his way to Holland, where his family had promised to meet after the war. Fortunately, his mother, father and sisters survived. Boin's aunts, uncles and cousins all perished.

For Boin, the questions remain.

Why? Why did he survive? Why did his family survive and six million others die?

He doesn't have an answer. Not then. Not now.



Travis Heying/DN

Joe Boin, 72, is president of the Society of Survivors of the Holocaust in Omaha. Fifty years ago, he escaped from a concentration camp at Hindenburg when the Russians bombarded it.