

Field of Ashes

My Grandfather's Survival Tale

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*Adam looked like
a ghost and, in
many ways, had
become one.*

At dawn on Adam Dojs' second day in *Strafkompanie* (SK), he was sent with 20 other prisoners to shovel cartloads of ashes onto nearby fields. The guards told the inmates they were shoveling fertilizer.

It was the end of June, 1944, and SK was a prison inside a vast concentration camp: Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Soon the sun beat down on the inmates who were coated in gray ash that got under their eyelids, inside their ears and noses, and they kept spitting out bits of ash that infiltrated their mouths. They coughed and kept coughing.

Every time Adam shoveled, it seemed that the ash did not want to stay on the ground; it clung to his hands and caked the blue-and-white striped uniform he had been wearing for the last six months.

Adam looked like a ghost and, in many ways, had become one. The ashes were not fertilizer, and Adam, only 18 years old, was no longer young.

Adam Dojs was my grandfather.

Nazi Invasion & Railway Station

Almost four years earlier, on September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west and started World War II. On September 17, the Soviet Union invaded from the east, as part of a pact the two totalitarian nations had signed in August. The Polish Army lacked the capacity to hold off one of these larger forces, let alone both. In October, the Nazis took full control of the western half of the country, and the Soviets occupied the eastern half.

Adam was nearly 14 years old and had just started attending a boarding school in Poznań in western Poland when the invasions began. Poznań was in the German-occupied territories, but Adam was too young to be conscripted into the German Army. Instead, he was sent back to his family in Kłomnice, a village located 125 miles southwest of Warsaw, the capital of Poland. Adam was the second youngest child with four older brothers and a younger sister.



Adam Dojs's identity card, issued six months after the end of WWII by the Polish Political Ex-Prisoners Association. Adam is dressed in his prison camp uniform.

Adam's father, Leon Dojs, had fought for Germany in WWI and was considered loyal enough to take charge of the railway station in Kłomnice during the Nazi occupation. After WWI, Leon had moved his family from station to station, as he worked up the ranks of the Polish State Railways.

Officially, all schools in Poland were closed, but this didn't stop Adam from joining an underground school. After daily studies, he helped his father at the station. Over the next few years, his responsibilities increased at the same time as he built positive relationships with the Railway Protection Police, who were mostly *Volksdeutsche*, meaning ethnic Germans who lived in Poland.

Polish Resistance

By April 1943, Adam was given permission to work as an understudy to engine drivers and firemen on numerous trains that passed through the region, sometimes taking him as far as Warsaw. The railway police knew him as the son of the stationmaster, so he could travel without suspicion. This drew the attention of the Polish resistance movement. Adam was secretly approached by a captain of the local branch of the AK, the *Armia Krajowa* (Home Army). Adam was asked to pass messages between underground units during his travels and he agreed to help.

During the next six weeks, Adam proved himself as a trusted courier. In May, Adam took the AK's official oath:

Before God Almighty and Mary the Blessed Virgin, Queen of the Polish Crown, I pledge allegiance to my Homeland, the Republic of Poland. I pledge to steadfastly guard Her honor, and to fight for Her liberation with all my strength, even to the extent of sacrificing my own life. I pledge unconditional obedience to the President of Poland, the Commander-in-Chief of the Republic of Poland, and the Home Army Commander whom he appointed. I pledge to resolutely keep secret whatever may happen to me. So help me God!

Throughout the summer of 1943, Adam secretly received military training with other AK recruits in nearby forests. The training focused on guerrilla warfare tactics, which included firearms, explosives and, most importantly, how to be inconspicuous. The new resistance fighters were trained by the famed *Cichociemni* (the Silent Unseen), who were Polish special-operations paratroopers in exile in Scotland. In total, 316 *Cichociemni* were secretly parachuted into occupied Poland, beginning in February 1941.

Adam's role as courier was crucial to communications and to coordinating operations. The Gestapo was constantly trying to infiltrate the AK to break up the growing resistance in Poland. By this time, the AK was "the largest resistance organization in Europe," as chronicled by historian Gregor Dallas in *1945: The War that Never Ended*, with 400,000 members.

After a Gestapo raid on a secret AK supply run, AK's leaders concluded that people working on the railways were informing the Nazis. Adam soon discovered the identity of the traitors and several days later, with his AK captain's permission, led an attack on the collaborators, who were thrown from the train as it passed over a high bridge.

Afterwards, Adam's involvement in the AK progressed from courier to participating in blowing up train lines, transporting supplies to German units on the Russian front, and carrying out assassinations on Nazis and collaborators, who had received the death penalty from AK's underground courts.

Sometimes Adam made life-and-death decisions in the moment. For example, he identified a railway policeman whom he believed was informing on the identities of several AK members. Adam followed the officer as he walked home and, at an isolated spot, shot and killed him. Perhaps he got the wrong man or perhaps there was more than one informer. Two weeks later, the Gestapo staged a series of raids and captured several AK members, who were his friends.

Fearing arrest, Adam fled to Radomsko, a town in central Poland that the Germans nicknamed *Banditenstadt*, the city of bandits, where he hid for a month.

Operation Heads

In 1942, the AK initiated a series of assassinations of Nazi leaders under the code name “Operation Heads”—which referred to the skull-and-bones, or death’s head, symbol worn on *Schutzstaffel* (SS) and other Nazi uniforms.

By June 1943, the AK had successfully carried out more than 500 attacks. Then came an opportunity to execute the prime target, Hans Frank, who had served as Hitler’s personal lawyer and was the Governor General of the regions of Poland not directly incorporated into Germany after the invasion. Under Frank’s direction, large numbers of Polish Jews were segregated into ghettos and sent to the death camps. In his diary in December 1941, Frank wrote, “We must annihilate the Jews wherever we find them and whenever it is possible.” Also, non-Jewish Polish civilians were conscripted into forced labor, and many died as a result.

When Adam learned about the assassination plan in November 1943, he came out of hiding to participate. AK intelligence agents learned of a trip that Frank was scheduled to take by rail from Kraków to Warsaw. Adam, along with his AK unit, set explosives on the track. However, Frank had unexpectedly gotten off the train in Częstochowa, just south of the attack location.

Several days later, on November 20, the Gestapo picked up Adam for questioning. He never found out whether this was related to the failed assassination attempt, but he was soon sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most infamous Nazi extermination camp, located in southwest Poland.

Auschwitz-Birkenau

For 1.1 million men, women and children, Auschwitz was the end of the story. For Adam, it was the beginning of an improbable survival tale. When trains arrived at the infamous entrance to the death camp, prisoners were immediately sorted: men from women, young from old, healthy from sick.

As a young healthy male, Adam was selected for work instead of immediate liquidation. While being processed, he was asked his occupation and replied, “locksmith,” hoping he would be given the tools he needed to escape. Seeing

“Whoever went through [the gates of Auschwitz] convinced themselves that the camp was only a vestibule to hell. Hell itself was the Strafkompagnie,” Josef Kret, survivor, quoted in Punishments and Torture by Irena Strzelecka.

how massive Auschwitz was, Adam knew he would need help. But who could he trust? He remembered his AK training about secrecy and decided to remain quiet and wait for the appropriate time to act.

Adam's head was shaved, and he received the striped pajama-like uniform with a red inverted triangle and a large black "P" sown on top, identifying him as a Polish political prisoner. By that evening, he was assigned a prisoner block where he struggled to find a place to lie down among the emaciated prisoners. He tried to sleep, but the pain of the tattoo of his prison number (169531) on his left arm kept him awake. When he awoke the next morning, it was December 20, 1943: Adam's 18th birthday.

He was put to work in a forced-labor group on building projects, moving supplies or whatever he was ordered to do. Adam learned quickly that the

biggest danger in the camps wasn't the guards. In fact, he rarely encountered German soldiers. Rather, the most brutal incidents he witnessed were initiated by fellow prisoners who had been placed in authority roles, the Kapos. He saw Jews killing Jews, Poles killing Poles. The Kapos were essentially criminals and murderers who reigned terror over their incarcerated countrymen.

Remaining quiet was not enough to avoid their wrath, but having a good relationship with a Kapo could earn extra food, a new pair of shoes or a delicacy such as a piece of chocolate.

2358	97284	Baranowski	Karl	1.3.19	b.a.w.
2359	101977	Frey	Hans	14.2.15	3 Monate
		26. Juni 1944			
2360	169560	Sypula	Marian	8.9.11	b.a.w.
		28. Juni 1944			
2361	81880	Winter	Jankiel	25.5.18	b.a.w.
2362	169531	Dojs	Adam	20.12.25	b.a.w.
		29. Juni 1944			
2363	15594	Schegietz	Frauz	31.3.99	b.a.w.
		30. Juni 1944			
2364	99288	Frydberg	Abraam	4.2.24	b.a.w.
2365	150488	Poluch	Nicolas	1.1.10	b.a.w.

This page in the SK Book (*Strafkompanie's* penal colony records) chronicled Adam Dojs's incarceration on June 28, 1944, as the 2,362nd prisoner. The third column recorded his prisoner number, and his date of birth was entered in the last column shown on the right.

Courtesy of the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum.

For the first six weeks, Adam did his best to remain quiet and unnoticed, but he caught the attention of an SS lieutenant who singled him out for special work, which included cleaning his boots and running errands. He received extra food for his efforts, but he also had to suffer several severe beatings when the lieutenant was drunk.

In June, Adam was locked up in SK, the prison inside the prison camp for "prisoners who act against camp order and rigor," which included work evasion, stealing food, and helping in or attempting an escape. What Adam did to be sent there, he never revealed.

A handwritten entry for June 28, 1944, found in the SK Book, a surviving record from Auschwitz, shows that Adam was the 2,362th prisoner sent to the penal company. His sentence was listed as "b.a.w.," an abbreviation for *bis auk weiteres* (meaning, "until further notice").

He was placed on starvation rations and worked from dawn until after sunset. SK inmates were given the most undesirable jobs, including shaving the heads of incoming prisoners before they were sent directly to the gas chambers and shoveling human ash from the crematoriums onto the surrounding fields.

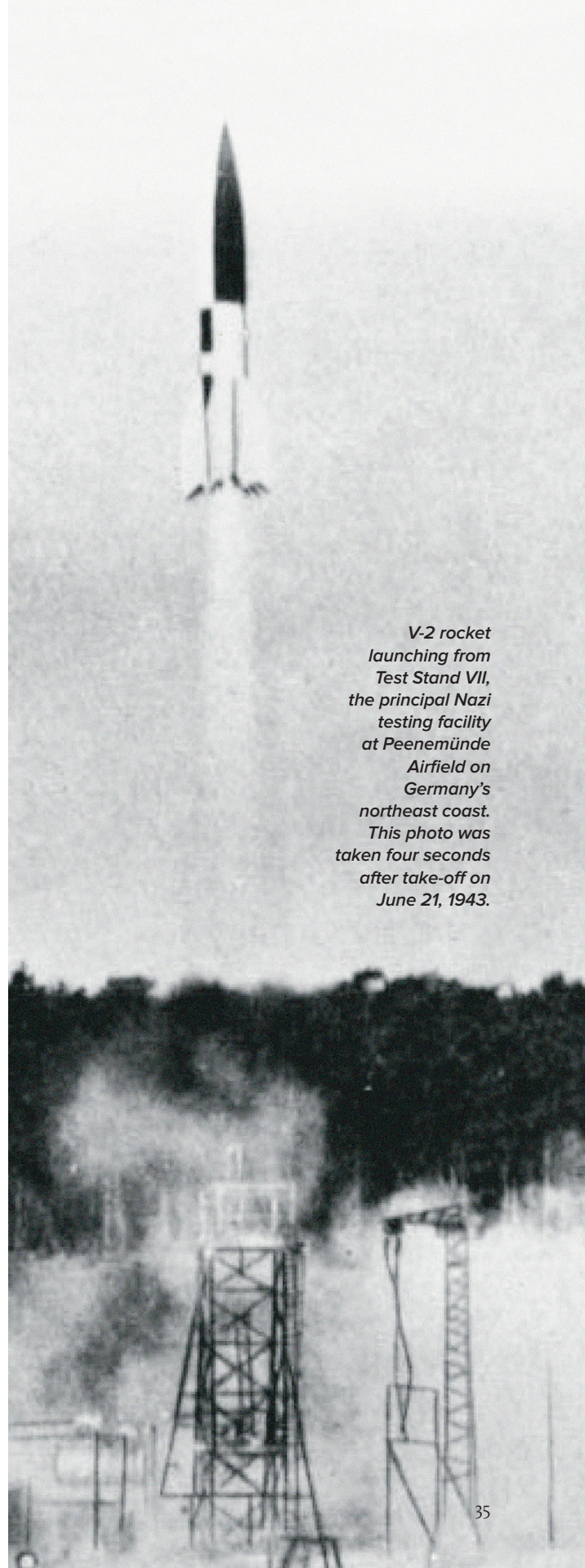
Adam was saved from a lengthy term in SK, which would likely have been a death sentence, by the advancing Soviet Army and his good health. On July 7, after just 10 days in SK, he was selected for transport to Buchenwald, a concentration camp in central Germany devoted to the war effort.

Buchenwald

On August 15, 1944, eight months after entering Auschwitz, Adam arrived at Buchenwald, which kept meticulous records. Much of this paperwork still survives and is conserved at the International Tracing Service (ITS) in Bad Arolsen, Germany. Initially established to help reconnect families who had been displaced during the war, the ITS now curates over 30 million documents compiled by the Nazis during the war.

Documents on file include Adam's personal effects card, listing that he had a cap, a shirt, a smock, two pullovers, trousers, underpants, and a pair of socks and shoes. His prisoner ID card listed his new number as 79769. Adam's height and weight were recorded as 5 foot 5 inches and 134 pounds. Regarding his occupation, since claiming to be a locksmith at Auschwitz never gained him access to the tools of the trade, he tried another approach. This time, he claimed to be a chauffeur, hoping to get behind the wheel of a car and escape. He was fluent in German and might have been able to disappear.

The prisoner population at Buchenwald was



*V-2 rocket
launching from
Test Stand VII,
the principal Nazi
testing facility
at Peenemünde
Airfield on
Germany's
northeast coast.
This photo was
taken four seconds
after take-off on
June 21, 1943.*

primarily used as a work force supporting the German military. There were former factory directors, company owners, and other professional and highly skilled workers selected from concentration camps. There were about 1,200 major camps and sub-camps in Germany and other Nazi-occupied countries, with as many as 715,000 prisoners at one time. A study by the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., published in 2013, revealed that there were about 42,400 camps in total—some disguised as “care” centers where forced abortions and infanticide took place—and ghettos that constituted a Nazi killing machine that murdered 15 to 20 million people.

The Germans called the V-rockets Wunderwaffen, meaning “super weapons.” They hoped to demoralize the civilian populations of their enemies.

On the day Adam was processed into Buchenwald, Wernher von Braun, an SS scientist who became known as the father of rocket technology (both in Germany and, after WWII, in the U.S.), visited the camp—as he wrote in a letter: “to find a few other suitable prisoners” to help build V-1 and V-2 rockets. In essence, these rockets were long-range artillery weapons with on-board gyroscopes as guidance systems. Their accuracy was limited to large targets, mostly cities, and they functioned less as strategic weapons than as instruments of civilian terror.

The Germans called the V-rockets *Wunderwaffen*, meaning “super weapons.” They hoped to demoralize the civilian populations of their enemies. Deployment began in October 1943 and, in total, 9,251 V-1s targeted England, mostly London, which was hit 2,515 times, resulting in 6,184 civilian deaths. The more expensive V-2 was developed as a supersonic ballistic weapon, which Allied fighters couldn’t shoot down. Again, most of the 1,115 V-2s fired at England landed in London, killing 2,754 people.

Soon after the V-rockets were deployed, Allied air raids started targeting construction facilities. In response, the Nazis built a new factory inside bomb-proof tunnels in the southern Harz mountains near Nordhausen, about 47 miles from Buchenwald. This facility manufactured both V-1 and V-2 missiles. The factory, which was part of the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp (known as Dora), went into production in the summer of 1943.

Because of Adam’s technical skills—both real and those he claimed to have—he was assigned to work at the Dora factory on August 17, 1944.

Dora

There were two main groups of workers at Dora: laborers in transport columns and specialists. The laborers moved weapon parts from work hall to work hall as the specialists finished manufacturing them. No skills were needed for laborers but physical strength. These workers were highly expendable and died at higher rates than slaves at other concentration camps, due to the extreme exertion involved in heavy lifting and brutal treatment by guards.

Adam, fortunately, was assigned to a specialist group working on making V-2 parts, as in the photograph on page 38. Camp records show that he was listed as an *autoschlosser*, a metal worker. Working on the assembly line involved skills Adam lacked, but his time as an understudy on the railroad made him an observant, fast learner. To survive, he had to master spot welding, which was not a mistake-free process. Guards beat his hands for making errors, which made operating tools more difficult, but he persevered. Failure meant joining the ranks of the transport column laborers, who were constantly being replenished usually by Soviet POWs, whom the guards took great pleasure in abusing.

He soon established himself as a spot welder assembling the V-2's outer shells. Adam's last hope of escaping captivity vanished since the area of the factory he worked in was nearly half a mile underground.

Many of the other specialists were political prisoners from across Europe, including Norway, Belgium and France. There were many intellectuals and artists, with sharp minds and deft fingers. Most of these prisoners had been arrested for resistance activity and brought their resistance skills to Dora.

POWs passed on news that the German-occupied territories were shrinking rapidly. This gave the prisoners hope that resistance efforts would have a direct impact on the war. Many specialists focused on delaying production and sabotaging the rockets. Sometimes this meant simply urinating on electric circuitry and in fuel lines. Other times, they did sloppy work, albeit hidden within precise workmanship.

Sabotage was extremely dangerous since guards and factory inspectors were constantly looking for damaged rocket parts. Worse, trusting fellow prisoners was perilous since guards provided incentives to informers, such as extra food or a visit to the camp brothel.

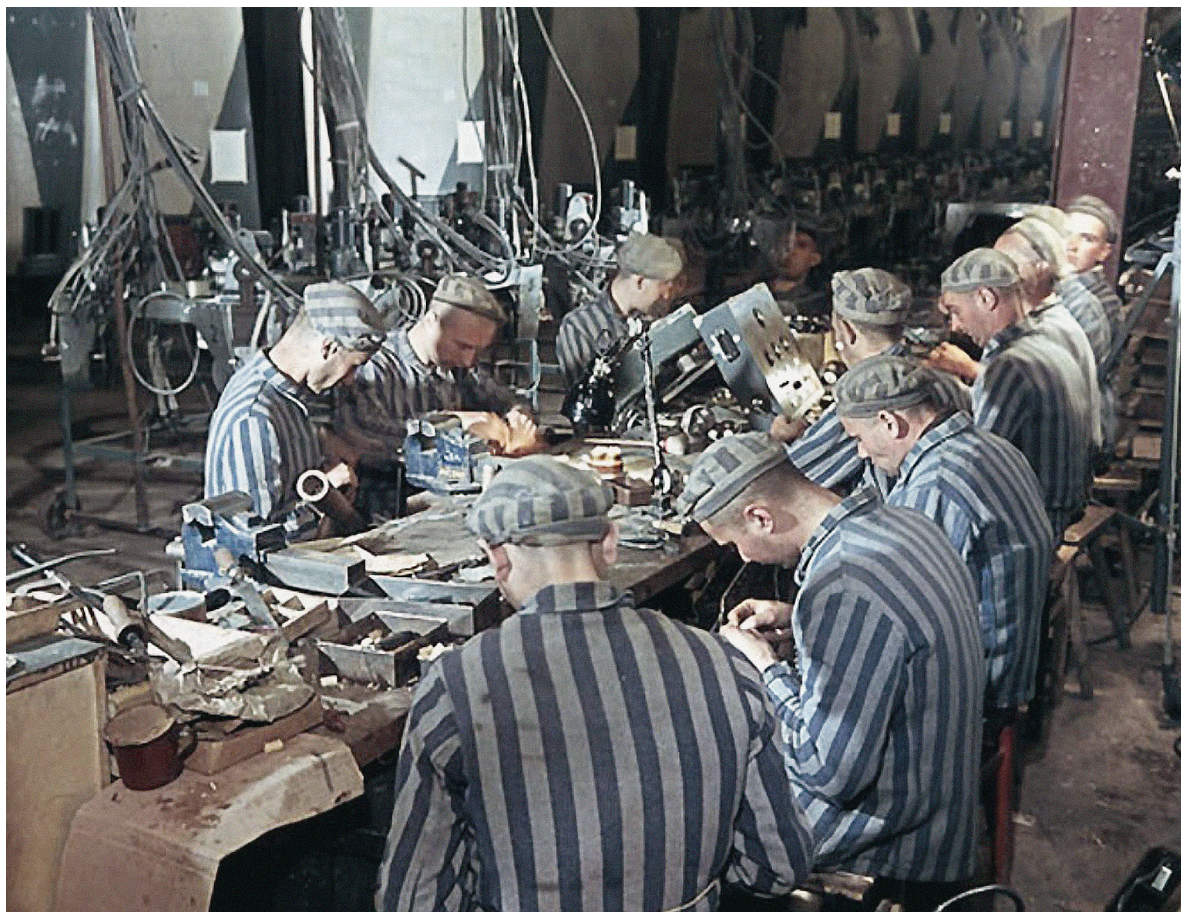
If caught, saboteurs were hanged to death at the entrance to factory tunnels, so workers had to walk underneath and see the results of resistance.

By January 1945, it was obvious that Nazi Germany was losing the war. The Soviet Army marched into Warsaw on January 17, and the last major German offensive, the Battle of the Bulge, failed eight days later. Auschwitz was liberated on January 27.

Manufacturing V-2 rockets at Dora became desperately important for the Nazis. Many guards evacuated from Auschwitz were reassigned to Dora in order to speed up production. Although allied fighters had an 80-percent intercept rate with V-1s, there was no way to shoot down V-2s since they traveled at three times the speed of sound.

However, the V-2 had technical issues: exploding at launch, overshooting targets or crashing short. Sabotage, the Nazis reasonably assumed, was responsible for some of these failures.

"They hanged them in pairs, the two. And everybody working in that factory had to go into the tunnel, line up, and walk through underneath the gallows," Alan Zimm, Jewish survivor of Dora.



A work group deep in the tunnels at Dora manufactures and assembles parts for V2 rockets. This photo was taken in the summer of 1944 by Walter Frentz, known as "Hitler's photographer." It remained undeveloped until Frentz's son discovered the film in the attic in 1998.

In March, the wreckage of a V-2, which crashed in Norway, was recovered and examined to determine the source of the malfunction. The rocket had been sabotaged. Soon the production group responsible for the tampered part was identified. The Nazis decided to execute the entire work group, which included Adam, to make an unforgettable example for other groups.

On March 10, Adam stood in line with the condemned members of his group. Several guards stood with guns ready, as pairs of workers were hanged overhead in the tunnels. Adam was near the end of the line with a Norwegian, a Belgian, two Frenchmen and another Pole—six specialists in total. When it was their turn to be hanged, the guards stopped and said there was no time to train other prisoners to replace them. They were returned to their work table.

Retelling this story years later, Adam was certain that 127 fellow workers were executed that day, but official records (as on page 40) chronicle only 93 prisoner names. In total, more than 200 workers, who were suspected of sabotage, were hanged publicly during the two years the Dora factory was in operation.



VIEW OF BODIES LINED UP AT REAR OF NAZI MURDER FACTORY
20 APRIL 1945. GARDELEGEN, GERMANY

14.

Ravensbrück

All work in the Dora factory ceased on April 1, 1945. Allied forces were closing in, so the camp was evacuated. Most prisoners were sent to northern concentration camps, such as Bergen-Belsen and Ravensbrück. On April 6, Adam was on one of the last trains leaving Dora towards Bergen-Belsen. The train was forced to stop before reaching its destination, as Allied bombers targeted railway trains and tracks to disrupt German supply lines and hinder troop movements. The SS guards ordered the prisoners off Adam's train and started marching them to Ravensbrück instead, which was about 230 miles northwest of Dora.

Since there were almost 4,000 prisoners, the guards recruited locals to help control them. On April 13, near the small town of Gardelegen, 115 miles from Ravensbrück, the prisoners were separated into smaller groups. One group with 1,016 prisoners was forced into a large barn nearby. The guards

Photo and inscription by Sgt. Herman Hoffman, a Jewish-American G.I. He arrived at Gardelegen four days after the massacre with the 113th Evac Hospital unit. The barn and bodies of the Dora inmates were still smoldering. "Darling, I'm sorry if I made you feel bad, but I just had to tell someone," he wrote to his wife in Cleveland. "I cannot believe that such a thing is possible ... among civilized people."

Image courtesy of the Permanent Collection of the Holocaust Museum Houston.

Lfd Nr	▽	Nr	Name		*	†	Abtr	Bkg
4413	Russl	7082	Galkin	Nikolai	10.3.45	10.3.45	12.3.45	Exekution
4	"	7821	Schirokij	Ilya	---.23	"	"	"
5	"	9486	Chochlow	Iwan	6.1.21	"	"	"
6	"	12592	Kabanow	Konstantin	27.8.14	"	"	"
7	Pole	13396	Stytschuk	Michail	26.2.19	"	"	"
8	Russl	26646	Jasanolow	Wasilij	13.3.19	"	"	"
9	"	32294	Delikow	Nikolaj	1.1.24	"	"	"
4420	"	34082	Petrenko	"	12.8.20	"	"	"
1	"	112	Mkolow	"	25.8.26	"	"	"
2	"	1859	Dimidow	Georgij	23.4.14	"	"	"
3	"	2885	Wasiljuk	Iwan	4.1.25	"	"	"
4	"	3190	Lajzew	Wasilij	27.5.02	"	"	"
5	Lit.	4142	Bozan	Piotr	24.12.25	"	"	"
6	Russl	4797	Koptschijenko	Nikolaj	3.12.23	"	"	"
7	"	4963	Minajew	Mladimir	26.4.13	"	"	"
8	"	5658	Kietjakow	Anatolij	11.2.20	"	"	"
9	"	6240	Schorodunow	Alaj	31.1.22	"	"	"
4430	Pole	6240	Dubinski	Zdarski	16.4.22	"	"	"
1	Russl	6422	Indenker	Iwan	10.2.18	"	"	"
2	"	7012	Tschirjew	Michail	17.9.24	"	"	"
3	"	7256	Dolger	Jefim	20.1.15	"	"	"
4	"	7276	Dilka	Fedor	30.7.24	"	"	"
5	"	8565	Kalitzjki	Iwan	9.10.23	"	"	"
6	"	10399	Murawow	Orlando	14.9.20	"	"	"
7	Pole	10628	Gajewski	Mladimir	29.6.24	"	"	"
8	Russl	11747	Gusich	Nikolaj	24.12.13	"	"	"
9	"	12297	Kamola	Nikolaj	6.12.25	"	"	"
4440	"	12645	Schewtschenko	Nikolaj	17.10.25	"	"	"
1	"	12786	Zubow	Petr	16.11.26	"	"	"
2	"	13954	Sikaglo	Alexander	22.7.25	"	"	"
3	"	15614	Palkowski	Niktor	10.2.24	"	"	"
4	Pole	15817	Mistal	Stefan	16.5.26	"	"	"
5	Russl	15912	Semerak	Anton	18.1.24	"	"	"
6	"	16460	Dostaj	Lubomir	7.12.14	"	"	"

locked the barn and set it on fire. What became known as the Gardelegen massacre was discovered the next day by American troops.

Once again, death passed within a whisper of Adam. He had been assigned to another group that arrived in Ravensbrück in late April. The notoriously meticulous Nazi record-keeping was abandoned as the war ended. Only one document survives that chronicled Adam as prisoner number 440 among transfers to Ravensbrück, and his occupation was listed as electrician.

The evacuation of Ravensbrück was soon ordered. The Nazis wanted to ensure that no eyewitnesses of their atrocities were left behind. As Allied forces advanced simultaneously on German positions from the east and west, evacuations turned more frequently into mass executions, as at Gardelegen.

Fortunately, the presence of the Swedish Red Cross at Ravensbrück made killings more difficult to arrange. To create a positive image of himself at the end of the war, Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS and the chief architect of the Holocaust, allowed members of the Swedish Red Cross to assist with the evacuation of women prisoners from Ravensbrück.

News reached the camp that the Soviet Army had completely surrounded Berlin, only 56 miles south of Ravensbrück. There was no time to evacuate the male prisoners. To avoid surveillance by the Red Cross, the guards took these prisoners to the camp's railway station at the end of April. In order to draw less attention, the guards started hanging rather than shooting prisoners.

Adam's group was next to be strung up when a Red Cross train pulled into the station. One of the prisoners was still hanging and alive when Red Cross officials stepped off the train. As they argued with the guards, Adam caught sight of an Allied bomber. Moments later, a blockbuster bomb, one of the largest Allied bombs used during the war, exploded nearby and chaos erupted.

Adam and the prisoner next to him escaped. They ran as fast as they could, making sure to avoid roads as they moved west toward advancing Allied troops. After several days on the run, Adam's companion said he did not have the strength to continue. Adam left him in a small barn where they hid the night before. Hoping to find a British or American unit, Adam continued walking through farm fields at night and hiding during the day.

On May 2, a firefight broke out close to where Adam had taken shelter. He tried to run away but soon came face to face with a German soldier who raised his gun. Adam heard the sound of an explosion and then blackness. An Allied artillery shell had landed between them, killing the soldier and throwing Adam back. This was his last brush with wartime death. When he regained consciousness, Adam was helped up by an American soldier most likely from the 8th Infantry Division.

After 529 days as a prisoner, Adam was liberated.

*Once again death
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Opposite: Page 219 of the Dora Death Book (Register of Deaths in the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp). The first column indicates the total number dead. The second column shows nationality and the third column lists prisoner numbers. The column with the asterisk records birth date, and the next column to the right, headed with a cross, chronicles the date of death. The next column shows the date the prisoner's name was removed from the rolls. The final column records the manner of death. All of these prisoners were executed at Dora on March 10, 1945, as punishment for sabotaging V-2 rockets. Adam Dojs was one of only six out of 133 inmates in his work detail who were spared.

Courtesy of the Mittelbau-Dora Concentration Camp Memorial.

But Never Free

I wish this story had a happy ending, but Adam lived the rest of his life with a tremendous amount of post-traumatic stress due to his experiences in the concentration camps. He was relocated to England where he met and married my grandmother. She was also a Polish refugee, who had been taken as a child with her family by the Soviets to the Siberian gulags. My grandparents had two children, but the marriage failed because of their mutual traumas, and Adam left the family.

My father, as a young boy, has no memory of Adam. In the late 1980s, after he immigrated to the United States with my mother and me, he became curious about his father. With the help of the British Red Cross, father and son finally reconnected. My father was 40 years old. There was considerable tension due to Adam's absence, but they worked hard on their relationship.

Meeting Adam

Growing up in Houston, I was keenly aware there were few people named Dojs around me. Other than my parents, brother and sister, there was only an aunt with our family name. Naturally, I was curious about our family's story, but when I asked about my grandfather, my father said little. When I traveled to England to visit my grandmother, I would ask about my grandfather, but her responses made it clear that Adam was not a subject to discuss.

After my father reconnected with him, I became increasingly curious. Finally in 1998, at 22 years of age, I flew to England and met my grandfather for the first time. Over the next 15 years, I made five return visits, sometimes with my wife and children.

Adam lived in a small studio flat in Dartmouth in southwest England. He never remarried nor had other children. He lived alone, surrounded by the plants he loved to grow. On my first trip, I found the absence of photographs to be interesting, since my father had sent him family photos. Perhaps he felt he didn't deserve to have grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

Adam was an interesting character, definitely not the grandfatherly type. His manner was gruff, but I had both the interest and patience to listen to his stories and sort them out. He would become animated and talk in the voices of characters, even speaking in German at times.

During a visit in 2009, I suggested spending a week with him to record his stories for a film project, since I am a documentary filmmaker. Several months later, I returned and after days of listening to stories I'd heard before, he told me a new one, which had haunted him since he was 18 years old.

He recounted being sent to the SK prison inside Auschwitz and what

he was forced to do there: The days shaving prisoners heading to the gas chambers, and the days he was sent to shovel their ashes. “I must have shoveled the ashes of hundreds, maybe thousands, of people into those fields,” Adam began quietly. It was getting late and the room was darkening, but I dared not turn on a light. He spoke slowly, with long pauses between sentences, reliving what he had tried to forget for 67 years. At the end of his narrative, he said, “When I die, I want my ashes scattered there.”

It was as if I wasn't in the room anymore. In that moment, I understood that after all the terrifying things Adam had lived through and somehow survived, he believed he never should have left that field of ashes. In some ways, he never did. Adam left the incinerated remains of his soul among those ashes at 18 years of age.

Ashes to Ashes to Ashes

The next morning, I promised my grandfather that I would take his ashes to Auschwitz after he passed. He thanked me.

On November 20, 2012, the 69th anniversary of Adam's arrest by the Gestapo and my 37th birthday, he died. I flew to England to help my father prepare for the funeral. Photographs of Adam's grandchildren and great-grandchildren now adorned the shelves in his flat.

Before he passed, my grandfather started a campaign to honor the memory of the 127 prisoners who were hanged at Dora for sabotage on March 10, 1945. His wish was to have a small ceremony in a London park where a handful of dirt from Dora would be spread. Adam spoke with Dr. Sarah Wollaston, his local Member of Parliament, who made the arrangements.

Dr. Wollaston's office learned I was making a film about Adam and, soon after, I was invited to be my grandfather's representative and collect the dirt at Dora. My father and I traveled to Germany that summer. We walked through the ruins of the concentration camp grounds and visited the empty factory tunnels. I picked up a handful of dirt at the tunnel entrance and, a few days later, spread it at the Holocaust Memorial in London's Hyde Park.

What of my promise to take Adam's ashes to Auschwitz? For legal reasons, this has proven difficult, due to the transport of human remains across the Polish border. I am still working on fulfilling my promise and hope to soon return my grandfather's ashes to the field of ashes. ♦

*I must have shoveled the ashes
of hundreds, maybe thousands,
of people into those fields,”
Adam began quietly. ... At the
end of his narrative, he said,
“When I die, I want my ashes
scattered there.”*