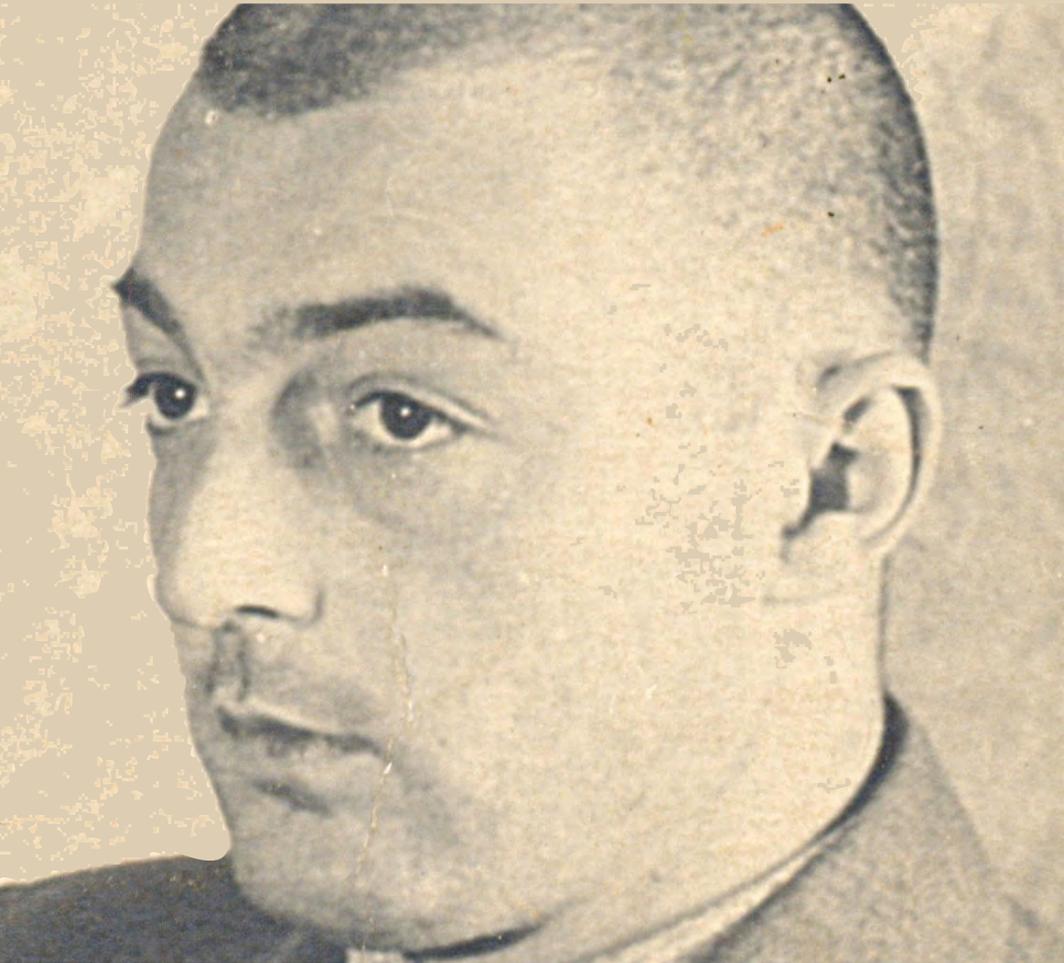


Kristallnacht to Dachau

Diary of Ernst Geiduschek

Translated by his daughter June



Stili Novi Publishing

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There is no present or future.
Only the past repeating itself over and over again.
~Eugene O'Neill

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Special thanks to Lucy of Lucy Krämer translations

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The moral right of Ernst Geiduschek to be identified
as the author has been asserted.

Actually experienced, recounted by

Gestapo prisoner "X"

In memory of the sacrifice of November 10th 1938

Preface

This memoir was originally written in German, in 1940. It was 136 closely typed full pages. The war was in its early stages, and the future was uncertain. The author was careful not to reveal his identity, and gave the wrong date of birth.

His name was Ernst Geiduschek, and he was born 6 December 1905 in Vienna. He came to England on a temporary visa in 1939, and was interned on the outbreak of war as an “enemy alien”. He was interned on the Isle of Man, and then sent to Canada. The internment camp in Canada was a pleasant place, but remote, and there was nothing to do. This is where he wrote his memoir, before returning to England in 1942 and settling there.

The document lay at the back of a wardrobe for many years. Ernst’s English was never good enough to translate it. Many horrendous stories became public following the war, so there seemed to be no interest in this tale of Dachau in 1938.

Eventually the memoir passed to me, and sat at the back of a filing cabinet for many years. It was understood to be about Dachau over a short period of time in 1938: this did not strike anyone as interesting enough to read. When I retired from work, I had the time to investigate. Purely out of curiosity, I started translating it. What was so much that could be said about so short a time? Very soon I was riveted by this tale of one man, and at the same time of many men.

The occasional comments in italics are my additions, to clarify or provide translations of words that have been left in the original German.

My thanks go to the librarian at the Wiener Library in London, for finding me a copy of a report, which corroborates this story. This was: Dachau - “fast eine Erholung” (Dachau - almost a rest cure) Yad Vashem Bericht 02/455

Special thanks go to my cousin Bobby Garson, Ernst’s nephew, for proofreading and suggesting some improvements.

I think Ernst at heart wanted others to read his memoir. So do I.

His daughter June Nathan Geiduschek

Foreword

I wrote down my recollection of the experiences as a Gestapo prisoner eighteen months later, when another grim fate crossed my path. With the help of some notes and by reliving the unforgettable experiences which are unequalled in their barbarousness I was able to write them down. Every single event really happened and was experienced by myself. The chronological order or dates may not always be accurate. This however by no means invalidates the veracity and truth of the events.

Around the world there are hundreds of thousands of refugees from Austria and Vienna and many will remember experiencing one or more of the same events themselves and can therefore vouch for the truthfulness of my account. Just the bare facts are presented without any exaggerations. I avoided dialogues, descriptions and thoughts as much as I could as the facts speak for themselves.

The chronic hunger, hardships and inhuman treatment of that time are etched on my mind. While reading one should bear in mind that incidents which I often recorded just once were repeated daily. I froze every day, until I became used to the cold. I starved every day, until I became used to being hungry. I was beaten, until I was used to being beaten.

In spite of everything I was lucky. I did not nearly suffer as much as many others. I had the good fortune to avoid anything worse. I did not have to work in a quarry, wasn't interrogated, didn't suffer the tree hanging punishment. I avoided the terrible 36-hour assembly, during which men fell like flies and died, because luckily I was released a few days earlier. Compared to other unfortunates prisoners I have not endured much. I was fortunate in my misfortune. Although I did not receive any bodily injury in circumstances where many died because they couldn't cope with the hardships I did however lose one thing: courage and confidence in life. I returned broken in spirit. I had lost confidence in life and believe I will never be able to reclaim it.

Gestapo prisoner "X"

Written in Canada, December 1940

All names have been changed, to protect those concerned

Part 1

Arrest - Vienna

not dare give him a “tip”. When I wanted to give him the note-covered coin, he pointed with his eyes to the opposite side of the platform, where an SS man had just appeared.

“Not now”, he whispered quietly, “you understand?” and blinked with his eyes. When the SS man turned his back to us by chance, the police inspector asked me for the note with an appropriate gesture. I passed it to him discreetly. After a few moments he called me, gave me the 10-pfennig back, and said that he could not accept money for a phone call from his home. He did it out of sympathy for us, and would not accept any money.

Months later, after my release, I found out that he had truly phoned my family and passed on my request for food. When he was asked who he was, he replied:

“Don’t ask so much, bring some food. I cannot say any more. Perhaps you can imagine who I am. I am always there.”..... and hung up.

I was not the only one to smuggle out requests for food. But nothing ever arrived for anyone. (A few succeeded in smuggling in some food by other means.)

“The Jews can starve” seemed to be the theme of those in charge.

Meanwhile a young man, with the help of the duty inspector of that moment, took the initiative and made a whip-round, for 500 bread rolls to be bought at a nearby baker. I only heard about this later. During the early part of the afternoon the 500 bread rolls were shared out between 2500 hungry people. In the scramble for bread, people tore at each other’s clothes. The few police were not in a position to organise a quiet and orderly distribution. There were fistfights over one bread roll. I stood back, even though I was hungry. I was unwilling to trade my coat for a bread roll.

The news percolated through, mainly coming from the police, that this was not the only place that people were being held. There were 10,000 people at North-West train station, which was not in use at that time, 25,000 were held in the Trost barracks, and others were held in other smaller locations. In total 50,000 Jews were arrested in Vienna alone. What was supposed to happen to 50,000 people? Surely we could not all be sent to Dachau or some other concentration camp? We thought that we would be released in the next few days, after the funeral of Baron von Rath.

Part 2

In Hell

“Kenyongasse”

The van set off. Where to? We assumed it was to a police interrogation, as we were going in the direction of Schottenring. As expected, we went through Porzellangasse. But hold on now. We were going across Schottenring to Schottenbastei. Were we going to the district court? No! The van drove on over Ring des 12 November. Now where were we going? Everyone became very anxious. The accompanying police officer, whom we repeatedly asked about our destination, just shrugged his shoulders. Then the vehicle turned into Burggasse. Were we going to the district court in Hermangasse? That ought not to be so bad a place.

“For God’s sake,” someone shouted, “we have already passed the district court, we are being taken to the Westbahnhof station, and then to a concentration camp.”

The horror of it made us all tremble with fear. I felt the blood drain from my face, my knees trembled, and with some others I uttered a cry of desperation. A few others calmed us down again. It could just as well be some barracks in the “outskirts of the city”. Meanwhile we turned a corner, away from the route to the Westbahnhof, went through a few side streets and then came to a sudden stop. Where were we? For the first few moments I had no idea. But soon I worked it out. We were at an empty convent school in Kenyongasse, where a new hell was about to start. We had hardly come to a stop when the devilry began.

The door was thrown open. Two SS men from the Dispositional Troops (which I only found out later) stood there with rifles, the butts lifted ready to strike, causing wild confusion situation. “Out”! And already the rifle butts were flying onto us. I received two or three blows before I was able to get through from the van to the crowded entrance to the building. From the van, into the building and lining the stairs, stood SS men. We had to “run the gauntlet”. They hit at us as we passed with their rifle butts, dog whips and iron rods.

“Move, move, move!” they shouted .

“Quick, quick, quick!” and whips and rifles whistled through the air.

I ran and ran, not knowing where I was going, or how or what. From every side blows rained down on us. At one point someone put out his leg out in front of me. I stepped back and, as often happens when dealing with fouls in football, kicked his leg hard in return.

Part 3

In the Concentration Camp

I had accidentally overlooked an old envelope in one of my pockets.

“Here, you son of a bitch,” he said with a slap in the face. His reaction to my mistake was more surprising than painful. My handkerchief and its contents were thrown into a box, which was standing there in readiness. My wallet and my documents went into a large envelope, which was then sealed, and I had to sign. I was allowed to keep my handkerchief and my purse with 12.63 Reichmarks in it. Through a door I came to a large room - a bathroom. Here we had to get fully undressed, in preparation for a hot shower bath. Oh, how refreshing! A bath, after seven such terrible and sleepless nights! I jumped up and down in the bath, to get the benefit of every drop of this refreshment. But after two minutes I had to get out again. In front of me stood someone with a fire hose. Just like everyone else, I was hosed with cold water. The water pressure was very strong and caused, I found out later, a slight reddening of my skin.

Next I was ordered to open my mouth. A jet of water gushed into it. The pressure pushed my head against the wall, and I gasped for air. And already it was the next person's turn. There was a pile of about twenty dirty, wet and used towels. I received one of them. I was horrified, as it had been used so many times before. I dried myself very briefly, and already someone was grabbing it out of my hand, and asking me to move on.

Then I came to a doctor, who looked at everyone very superficially.

“Healthy?” he asked.

“Yes”, answered everyone.

“Why are there bruise marks on your body?”

“Fell while running.”

“Off”

He asked me an additional question, “What is with your knees?”

I looked at them, and noticed that they were very swollen.

“They are swollen.”

“Off”, and he made a note in his card file.

I then received a new pair of socks and a pair of military shoes. I also received two white strips with my prisoner number printed on them in black. After that I went back to retrieve my clothes, which were somewhere on the floor.

to get dressed. But we had to hand over coats, gloves, scarves, hats, gloves, pullovers, if we had not lost them somewhere on the way, plus our own shoes and socks.

Then I was back in the open. I emerged from the warm room, freshly bathed, only to stand in line in the cold without a coat. I shivered. I stood my jacket collar up, stamped my feet on the ground, but still I was frozen. The brightly lit clock over the gated door said it was 1am. After another half an hour an Aryan prisoner came. He counted 52 of us, and led us down between the huts. At one of them he turned and led us in.

Here he gathered us around him and briefed us. Every order, either from the SS or from him, had to be obeyed immediately. Anyone who hesitated or countermanded an order would face severe consequences: he would not leave Dachau alive. (I had already established where we were from one of the prisoners during the admission process.) He warned that stepping onto the grass strip along the perimeter fence was forbidden. Anyone who stepped onto it would be shot without any forewarning.

“And obeying is the most important,” he ended his talk “otherwise you will learn about Dachau, especially what lies behind the kitchen. It is rare for anyone to return alive from there.”

He appointed a clerk and some others to carry food. Meanwhile I thought about his words. What did it mean about what lay behind the kitchen? No. I was not keen to know. I knew enough about the Nazis to know how they treated their adversaries.

I had a look around. When one came in there was a small ante-room, measuring about five metres by two and a half. Opposite the entrance door were two doors. One of them led to the toilets, which were quite open, without any walls between. The walls were painted white and the floor was covered with stone tiles. Everything was scrupulously clean and neat. Through the other door to the right of it was the washroom. The walls here were also painted white and the floor was the same as in the toilets. In the washroom there were some washbasins on the left, made from tiles, and in the centre of the washroom were two round pillars, around which were evenly spaced 10-12 outlet taps. Underneath the taps a large basin ran around, to catch the water. A box for towels stood by the door. This room too was spotlessly clean. The two rooms were also linked to each other by another door.

20 December

In spite of yesterday's treatment, my frozen hands had got worse. In the morning I heard that we had received herring grease for our shoes. I was shown where it was. It was in a five-kilogram container, a grey-green oily mass, which stank horribly of herring. Cautiously I took a small sample and tried it on my hands. I stank of herring the whole day, but my hands were covered with a layer of protective fat. From that day on, I smeared this remedy onto my hands three times a day. All my food tasted of herring. But it was worth it. Unlike the others, who did not follow my example, my hands did not get worse, and even got a little better. Who knows, how I got the idea?

A man who had been in my quarters together with his son, was released this morning: only the father, not the sixteen year old son. They both discussed it together very excitedly, and so were not on time for lining up. The father was supposed to line up at the end of the group, ready to be released, while his son remained in the middle to march in the usual way. They tried to work out how to line up so as to stay together for as long as possible. When August saw them still standing together talking, he came crashing down on them. He, kicked the father a number of times on the shin and shouted:

“You old donkey, can't you stand in line? I will trample on your bones.”

When it was explained to him what it was all about, he grinned mockingly over his whole face.

“Quite right, what happened to that idiot. He should keep to the rules and not chatter so much. At least I have now given him enough bruises for the doctor to send him back. This old chatterbox should stay here. I will crush his bones before he goes free.”

The two stood there white as a sheet. Then they lined up, the son in the middle and the father at the back. When the call came for those being released to step forward, the father limped forwards, took his son by both hands, and kissed him. They separated, both crying.

At midday the father returned. As August had prophesied, the doctor had sent him back because of his bruises.

had extended his stay in this nightmare unnecessarily. He was eventually released at the beginning of January.

The second man who had collapsed while hopping yesterday, spent the night in a feverish delirium. Nevertheless he was still required to go to assembly. He was taken there wrapped in a blanket. The blanket was brought back to the quarters after assembly, and the ill man had to join in the marching and all exercises in spite of his fever and fits of shivering. He was registered as being in need of a doctor. In the evening he went to the sickbay and was booked for the doctor the next morning.

In the evening I received a big and heart-warming surprise, as I received a payment order from home. This meant that at the next payment day I would again be able to buy something in the canteen, and eat as much as I wanted. In the last few days I had only been able to buy dry bread. As I only had just over one mark at my disposal, I had to keep that for extreme emergency. When my hunger became unbearable I would still be able to buy bread. It was the first time in my life where I could not even buy a piece of dry bread. That thought depressed me, all the more when I heard that the next payment date would only be in mid January.

21 December

A most disheartening rumour went around this morning. As we watched today's batch of inmates marching away to freedom, we were deeply distressed to think that this was the last release before Christmas. Rumour had it that no more people would be set free before 7 January. The rumour proved true.

In some blocks, quite a lot of people had been released, while in others it had gone more slowly. This meant that some quarters held about 150 people, while in others only 40-50 remained. Nevertheless the kitchen delivered the same amount of food to those quarters with about 40 people as it did to those quarters with about 150 people. As a result, in some quarters there was so much food that it had to be thrown away, while in others, including mine, the people were starving. When some clever inmates found this out, they hurried off to a hut that had an excess of food, as soon as they had eaten in their own quarters. On arrival they stood outside the door, and waited for food.

Part 4

Set Free

Two Aryan prisoners now gave instructions while the SS supervised. We had to undress completely, put our clothes on the floor and stand to attention naked. One of the two prisoner instructors then told us that we were to be examined by a doctor. We had to stand to attention in front of the doctor, and answer all questions loud and clear. The doctor would ask each of us the same question, namely our state of health and if we had contracted any illness in the concentration camp.

After that, the instructor read out a statement that we all had to sign. In this statement, we each confirmed by signing that we had been treated well, that no bodily harm had been inflicted and that we were in good health. Further, we declared with our signatures that we would make no claim whatsoever on the state, the Gestapo, the commandants, block leaders or guards for any financial or physical damage that may possibly have arisen during our imprisonment, either now or in the future. In addition, our signatures committed us to agree that we would not reveal anything about the conditions or the workings of the camp. The document ended with the following words:

“I pledge that neither in this or any other country will I take a hostile position against the current National Socialist regime, and will not oppose it through spoken or written word. I have read the above and noted it.”

When the instructor had finished reading out the statement, he asked: “Who thinks he can’t sign this statement?”

The instructors and the SS people looked around them. No one responded.

“Step forward and sign.”

The documents were already prepared with name and prisoner number, and lay in alphabetical order. Within fifteen minutes all 155 people had signed.

Then we returned to where our clothes lay on the floor, and stood to attention beside them. In contrast, the three SS men stood there in warmly lined winter coats. They became too warm as the bathhouse was centrally heated, so they ordered some windows to be opened. The cold winter air blew into the room, and 155 men had to stand there in our birthday suits. I suspected that this was the final period of discrimination we were to be given. Perhaps here too, the two hours of standing sowed the seeds of further suffering for a few of us.

At last after two hours the doctor finally arrived. By then we were thoroughly frozen. His examination took no time at all. Each person had to step forward, state his name, and stand to attention. The supervising prisoner, who had led proceedings up to this point, stood beside the doctor and asked the questions for him.

“Healthy?”

“Yes”

“Turn round”

The doctor briefly examined our naked bodies for welts, bruises or frostbite. “Away”, the supervising prisoner would say, and already it was the next person’s turn to be examined.

Occasionally he asked, “any kind of illness?” instead of “healthy?” If one had to reply “yes” to the usual question, one had to reply “no” to this question, to give the same meaning. Because the examination went at such speed, three people made a mistake and were immediately held back. A further four were also detained by the doctor, because of welts and frostbite on their bodies.

When it was my turn to come forward, I was really nervous. This was the last hurdle I had to overcome. Because of the application of herring fat, the frostbite on my hands was better, although some parts were still inflamed. I turned my hands so that the inflamed parts would not show. I answered the perfunctory questions. I was very relieved when I heard the key word of dismissal “away”.

I took my clothes and my few possessions, including the underpants that I had worn for nearly two months, under my arm, and marched forward out of another door. An SS man stood in a small room. He asked me to put the possessions that I wanted to take with me onto my handkerchief, and to put all the camp clothes in a corner of the room. I did as instructed and still totally naked moved on with my few possessions wrapped in the handkerchief (minus my underpants which I included with the camp clothes!). In a corridor stood another SS man, who inspected the contents of the handkerchief meticulously. I continued on down the corridor and came to an SS man who sat at a typewriter. Here I had to give my number, name and date of birth yet again, which the man recorded with the typewriter.

“Onwards” he ordered, and I continued on. When I reached the dressing room, I was given my bag of belongings, which had already been prepared.



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Kristallnacht to Dachau

Diary of Ernst Geiduschek
Translated by his daughter June

In memory of the sacrifice of November 10th 1938

During Kristallnacht on November 10th 1938 the Gestapo arrested, mistreated and transported Ernst Geiduschek together with 11,000 other Viennese Jews to Dachau concentration camp near Munich in Germany. His family managed to buy emigration papers for him to England while he struggled to survive the horrors of the camp.

This diary of Ernst Geiduschek covers the time from his first arrest to his liberation. It was written in December 1940 in Canada, where he was interned at the start of war.

He wrote: “Where is the golden Viennese heart?” I asked myself again and again. “Is this the city of song and gaiety?”

On April 29th 2015 it was 70 years ago that the prisoners at Dachau concentrationcamp were liberated.



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