

Albert and Fritz Nothmann

Albert and Fritz Nothmann were born on April 22, 1885.

By 1942, they had left their small hometown of Gross-Strehlitz, Germany, and moved to Berlin, where they lived secretly at several addresses using forged papers to escape detection.

As Albert described in his account, titled (translated) Notes by Albert Nothmann, formerly whole-sale merchant of Gross-Strehlitz, Upper Silesia, Germany, of his own and his twin brother, Fritz's experience under Hitler, December 1942-June 1945*, "On March 16 (1943) fate caught up with us. On a walk with my wife - we had just come from visiting our cousin Fritz Priester - we were seen by Ingenieur Branczyk from Gross-Strehlitz (the Nothmann twins' hometown) who recognized us and, unbeknownst to us, followed us to the boarding house. In the hall he stopped and confronted me, while my wife managed to escape. I struggled with him, but he was stronger than I. He took me by force to the nearest police station and insisted that I be arrested."

Thus began three months of detention for Albert and Fritz in a number of facilities. Their valuables—money, rings, fountain pens—were confiscated; they received very little food, and they had no idea what the next day would bring. Albert became seriously ill with pneumonia and was hospitalized for many weeks.

On June 16, 1943, he and Fritz were transported to Theresienstadt camp in Czechoslovakia. Albert's account describes the stark contrast of the camp: on the one hand, prisoners participated and had access to concerts, operettas, prayer halls, gardens, sports competitions, even a café. On the other hand, each day they fought to survive against hunger, imprisonment, severely overcrowded housing conditions, and death.

And beginning in April 1944, there were ominous rumors that a large deportation to the East was being planned for the near future.

On May 14, 1944, 7,500 prisoners from Theresienstadt were transported by cattle car to Auschwitz. They were divided into three groups of 2,500, each group in a freight train with 50 cars. Albert and Fritz left with the last train, in the second-to-last car. They had tried to pull strings through contacts in the ghetto administration in order to stay behind. Ironically, Albert believed that in the end, the deportation saved their lives.

Albert's account describes their harsh treatment on the selection platform at Birkenau "...by the most brutal, criminal Stormtroopers and men in prisoners uniforms who treated us in a most bestial manner. Our distorted faces must have reflected our fear and despair. Many were beaten without any provocation as they climbed from the train. All possessions we carried were snatched away by brute force."

On their second day at the camp, guards asked if there were any twins among the prisoners. At first, Albert and Fritz were unsure whether to step forward, but in the end they decided to volunteer. The next day, they were taken to a camp hospital where they met about 20 sets of

Czech twins. Because they were twins, they were declared “protected inmates,” and their lives were saved. Albert reported that every part of their bodies was scrutinized by doctor-specialists, and the findings entered on various reports. Countless blood samples were drawn every day, and they also received injections. During that time, Albert and Fritz were photographed naked and x-rayed. Impressions were made of their hands, feet, and other parts of their bodies. Dr. Mengele examined them frequently, and all the prisoner-physicians in the lab were under Mengele’s command.

“Although we were quite desperate we tried to encourage each other, and never lost the unbounded optimism which kept us from losing hope for survival and liberation despite the dark and seemingly inescapable future.”

On July 10, 1944, all twins and dwarves were ordered to appear for a roll call and for deportation to neighboring Camp F. This camp was exactly like Camp B, where Albert and Fritz had been imprisoned, except that all the barracks (former stables) were infirmaries of some sort. There were barracks for internal diseases, for surgery, infectious diseases, etc. The twins and dwarves were sent to the “Protective Camp,” together with approximately 80 pairs of Hungarian twins ranging in age from 4 to 60 years. The immediate supervisor (kapo) for the boys was a twin named Zvi Spiegel, whom Albert described as “very decent and pleasant and quite different from the rest of the generally brutal kapos.”

All able-bodied twins over the age of 16 were forced to build roads. Food remained scarce. Day by day they watched long trains arrive, carrying Jews primarily from Hungary, Romania, and Greece. Their valuables were heaped in huge piles on the platform directly in front of the Nothmann twins’ barracks, and it took days until trucks could carry it all to Kanada, a warehouse where victims’ belongings were sorted for shipment to Germany.

Behind Kanada and about 50 meters from Camp F stood the four crematoria and gas chambers. The sight of these forced Albert and Fritz “to face the certainty of the annihilation of our brothers and sisters of our faith.”

On January 18, 1945, guards gave the order for all prisoners who were able to walk 60 kilometers to begin a march to Germany. Albert and Fritz knew they were in no condition to make that journey, so they took the chance and stayed behind. Large numbers of Russian planes flew overhead, and bombs fell close by. By January 21, power was cut from the electric fences around the camp, and the water main burst. With no electricity, prisoners could now force open the gates and cut through the wire fences. Fleeing Stormtroopers set fire to many of the barracks near Kanada, destroying millions of dollars of looted property. The prisoners formed groups to monitor the fire, gather wood, and cook food that had been found in an abandoned SS kitchen. To Albert and Fritz, freedom seemed so near.

On January 25, three Stormtroopers returned to the camp and ordered all Jews who were able to walk to assemble on the main street. Approximately 400 men and 200 women appeared, standing in the snow. The guards ordered them to march, and Albert and Fritz felt certain they would be massacred at some point along the route. After about 45 minutes, the Stormtroopers ordered the prisoners to halt, and the Nazis sped away as artillery shells exploded around the prisoners. The group resumed their march until they arrived at Auschwitz I. Prisoners and doctors who were already at that camp took them into a cellar for shelter.

Early on January 27, the prisoners remained sheltered from the heavy artillery and machine-gun fire. Finally, the air grew quiet, and at 3:00 in the afternoon, the Russian troops liberated the camp. Albert recalls about 1,500 men and women prisoners greeting the soldiers by swinging their caps and embracing them.

With each day, the Russians improved the daily lives of the newly freed prisoners. Mobile kitchens were erected, and prisoners ate warm beans, rice, and peas. Soup with meat, sausages, and bread were added to their diet. Many people had trouble digesting the food and became sick, but Albert and Fritz were spared. The barracks were made more comfortable with blankets, and the Russians quickly restored electricity and repaired the water line at the camp. Mobile Russian cinemas played war films, and each day someone translated the latest news from the front.

Prisoners from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary walked or found transportation to Krakow, in the hope of finding a way home from there. Albert and Fritz had to be patient, since there was no transportation yet back to Germany.

On February 28, a huge funeral ceremony took place to bury the bodies of 200 men, women, and children found dead in the barracks. Former prisoners, as well as thousands of nearby residents, attended the ceremony. The Red Army led a solemn parade of 200 coffins from Birkenau to Auschwitz and buried them in a mass grave in front of the main gate. Religious leaders and former prisoners delivered speeches in almost every European language but German.

Finally on March 5, Albert, Fritz, and about 150 other people left Auschwitz to begin their journey home to Germany. They persevered through snowstorms, with little food or warm clothing. Albert and Fritz were fortunate to spend some time recuperating at the home of family friends named the Schlesingers. They were at long last able to take hot baths and sleep in beds with down quilts. The twins celebrated their 60th birthday with the Schlesingers, who presented them with suits to replace their prisoners' uniforms.

The first train back to their hometown of Gross-Strehlitz left in early June. They returned to find nearly the entire town burned to the ground. Fritz and Albert were greeted by old acquaintances and former business associates, and the generous food sped their recovery.

After three weeks, they boarded a train for Berlin, arriving on June 30, 1945.

The end of Albert's translated account states, "The family of Albert Nothmann was one of the very few of which every member survived. They all were reunited in the United States, where his oldest son, a physician, had been the first to arrive, and where some of them live today."

Albert's tattoo number: A-1719

Fritz's number: A-1720

* Notes by Albert Nothmann, formerly whole-sale merchant of Gross-Strehlitz, Upper Silesia, Germany, of his own and his twin brother, Fritz's experience under Hitler, December 1942-June 1945 is archived at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C.