

Survivor recalls death camp liberation

By Rachel Young
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Flipping through a photo album, Armin Kornfeld recalled the worst chapter of his life.

Now a successful Canadian businessman and the owner of the Liberty Inn, in DuPont, the album was a reminder of a time when Kornfeld had nothing, at all, and the U.S. Army saved him from certain death.

He pointed to a photo of an elaborate building made of stone and wood.

"This is Mauthausen, at the entrance. This is where the horses were kept. They were kept nicer than us," he said.

Kornfeld's story begins Dec. 10, 1926, in Satoraljaujhely, Hungary. He was born the last of eight children, to a devoutly Jewish family.

Kornfeld recalled being taunted and beaten at school for his faith. But the worst came when the German army occupied the city in March 1944. The arrival of the German army signified the end of his life as he knew it.

As the spring progressed, life for the Jewish community became increasingly difficult. Jews were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothing and subjected to a curfew.

In mid-April, about 15,000 Jews were removed to a tiny ghetto, in the poorest part of town, Kornfeld recalled. Before leaving the family farm, Kornfeld buried the family jewelry in the barn.

"I had, somehow, a feeling that we won't be back and I didn't want them to have it," Kornfeld said.

In the ghetto, living conditions were appalling.

"My family was put in with four other families in two rooms," Kornfeld said. "There was no hygienic situation — it was hell, no food, no nothing."

A month later, Kornfeld and 3,500 others were stuffed into cattle cars at the train station. The cars were packed with about 90 people each and pulled into huge hangars where steam blasted into the cars to purify them. With no windows and only a one-inch gap around the doors, the heat was too much for some. Several died in the night. The bodies were removed prior to the train's departure.

The train stopped in Kosice, where SS officers took over command. Two days into the journey, the train arrived at its destination: Birkenau-Auschwitz.

"Auschwitz was the most notorious camp. Everybody was going through there who arrived," he said. "From there, you were distributed, if you were young and able to work. If you weren't, then you didn't go farther."

The SS waited outside of the boxcar with dogs and rifles, shouting at the passengers to "get on."

The prisoners were brought before the infamous Dr. Josef Mengele to be given their fate.

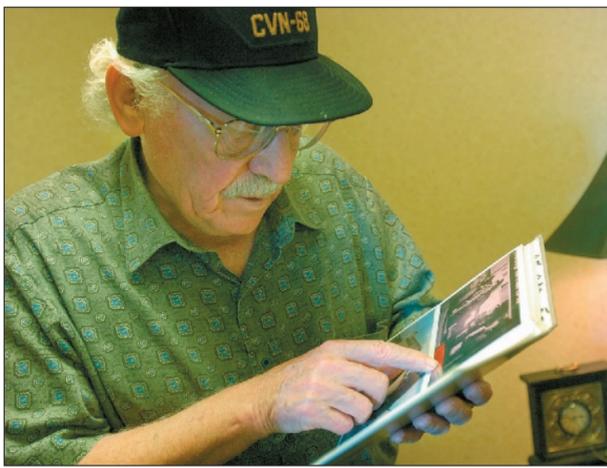
"He was God — he decided who shall live and who shall die," Kornfeld said. He had been advised to tell Mengele that he was an 18-year-old farmer, which he did. He was sent to the right, his parents to



Cpl. Donald R. Ormitz

Liberated prisoners in the Mauthausen concentration camp near Linz, Austria, give rousing welcome to Cavalrymen of the 11th Armored Division. The banner across the wall was made by Spanish Loyalist prisoners.

Armin Chaim Kornfeld, owner of the Liberty Inn, points out a photograph of American Soldiers who liberated the Mauthausen concentration camp.



Jason Kaye

the left. He never saw them again.

Kornfeld endured humiliations and horrors at Birkenau before being sent to Mauthausen a few days later.

"Their purpose was to dehumanize you as much as possible — and they succeeded," he said. The prisoners were left outside naked for hours in the cold and made to sleep in wooden bunks with no mattresses. Kornfeld recalled being so thirsty he laid on the ground and lapped water out of a puddle, like a dog.

After a week of this treatment, he was loaded onto a train and shipped to Mauthausen. Mauthausen was built on a beautiful hill outside of Linz, Austria, Kornfeld said.

Kornfeld's introduction to the camp was just a taste of the humiliation to come. Upon arrival, barbers shaved a strip down the middle of each prisoner's head.

"Nobody could walk out the gate unless he took his hat off," he recalled.

The exposed strip of scalp made it obvious to the guards who could leave and who could not.

The prisoners then took a shower and received a number.

"My number is 67,655," he said. "They said I haven't got a name anymore. That's what you are: 67,655."

He was sent from Mauthausen to Gusen I, one of the many sub-camps, where he toiled in a rock quarry. The prisoners were required to carry massive rocks on their shoulders up 186 stairs to be used as paving stones for Gusen II, a new camp the prisoners were forced to build.

"I became a permanent resident of Gusen II from June 6, 1944, until the end of April 1945, where I experienced the most terrible time of my life, witnessing severe beatings and executions for trifling things, the most cruel behavior by one human being to another," he said.

At Gusen II, Kornfeld worked underground, building tunnels into the mountain where the Germans built the fuselage of Messerschmitt 109 airplanes. He worked 12-hour days with little to no food and deplorable living conditions. Lice and dysentery rampaged the prisoners.

Kornfeld ate coal he found on the ground to keep from getting dysentery.

"I was caught once. (The SS Officer) saw me and he took his rifle and

busted my head," Kornfeld said, pointing to a pink scar on his scalp.

He suffered from scurvy and an abscess on his left ankle, making it nearly impossible for him to walk.

"I couldn't go to work," he said. "Once you couldn't go to work, there was a danger that you would never make it further."

Incident after incident assured him that his days were numbered. His inability to walk was surely his death warrant.

Little did he know, however, that the American Army was just days away.

On May 5, 1945, the 41st Cavalry Recon Squadron Mechanized, 11th Armored Division, 3rd U.S. Army arrived at the gates of Mauthausen.

After the liberation, Kornfeld returned to his hometown and collected the buried jewelry. After studying, traveling and working, Kornfeld settled in Canada and became a lawyer, but he never forgot his debt of gratitude to the United States.

"If the American Army was two weeks later, I would not be sitting here," he said.

Every year, Kornfeld tells his story to grade schoolers, encouraging them to remember his story. And every morning he wakes up and thanks God for another day.

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