

## GIUSEPPE CONE

*Rhodes Island, Auschwitz - Birkenau, Rizertau Charlotte Gruppe.*

We were all very happy in Rhodes until the racial laws. The foreign Jews had to leave the island and many went to Turkey. One day in 1939, my brother and I went to the Mandraki, the harbour, to look for a boat so that we could escape to Turkey. But I just could not go through with it, I had a wife and three children as well as my own family.

When the Germans arrived, they went to the police and obtained the names of all the Jews on the island. These were all rounded up including my mother, my two brothers, my wife, my children and myself. I shaved my hair so the authorities would think that I was Turkish and as a result I was able to go in and out of the camp until three large freight ships arrived and we were all pushed inside amongst the cows and sheep to be taken to Athens where we remained for days waiting for the trains to take us to G-d knows where.

When the wagons finally arrived, we were loaded, about one hundred people per wagon. There were no toilet facilities, only a few buckets which were emptied at some of the stations where we stopped. How I remember the embarrassment and shame I felt for my own children who toppled into these buckets causing everyone to be covered in their excrements. The smell in those wagons was absolutely unbearable. They gave us only rancid bread and a few watermelons from time to time. The journey took about fourteen days.

When we finally arrived at Auschwitz, we still did not have any idea what was going to happen to us. We were ordered to leave the few possessions we had taken from Rhodes in the train. We thought that we would now be fed but instead the Germans began to shout to us to get off the train, fast! fast!

The men, the women, the aged, the children, the sick, the babies were lined up for selection. When it was my turn, I was asked how old I was. I said I was thirty five. I had to turn around for them to see from my buttocks if this was true and since these were still firm, I was told "*Arbeit!*", which meant work.

The old, the women and the children were all sent in the other direction to the gas chambers which were working day and night. A Salonikan Jewish prisoner confirmed that all those people were killed. Only about one hundred of us Rhodeslis escaped death, young men and single girls. Our heads were shaved and we were given black and white pyjamas and clogs, then sent to quarantine for forty days and forty nights. I remember Bochor Alhadeff, Leon Maio and Israel Levy had to stay behind in the infirmary.  
(Leon Maio was the brother of Violette Fintz.)

Our arms were tattooed. My number is B-7251. We were roll called by our number and I had to reply *swaing zipsin ain an jifizin*

We were then taken to another camp, Rizertau Charlotte Gruppe, a coal mine which apparently used to belong to a Jew. Many died there of hunger, cold and beatings. Here I

worked with civilian technicians. I was selected with other prisoners to place the mine explosives. For the explosions they needed big stones to use as supports to release the jacks which supported the walls and roofs of the gallery through which the coal trucks were wheeled. We dug the tunnels and removed the stones by hand.

I suffered a terrible injury while working in these coal- mines. From the strain of carrying these heavy rocks, I developed a huge bulge on the top of my leg. The pain was unbelievable but the hospital would only accept you if you had a fever. Eventually, I had a fever and could then be taken to a doctor, a strong Polish Jewish doctor prisoner who anaesthetized me with chloroform only, cut up the bulge and withdrew the infection with a long stick and gauze and as soon as I woke up, with the cut still bleeding and covered with toilet paper, I was sent back to work. Luckily, my body was still strong and I recovered.

We moved to another camp whose name I don't remember where we had to load the wagons with bricks to be used to build a new kitchen for the prisoners. Many more prisoners died there. I remember, one day, looking at my hands which were covered in blood from handling these bricks.

I spotted a barrack and decided to hide in it. One of the 55 officers saw me and chased after me. He chased me from room to room until we got to a room with no exit. He hit me on my head with his baton so powerfully that I collapsed. I never understood why he did not kill me. I was sent to the doctor who bandaged my head so that it looked as if I wore a turban. Of course, I was immediately sent back to work. The next day when I saw the 55 officer he asked me what had happened to me, as if he did not know; I knew I had to say,

"I don't know".

Another time Eli Hugnou wanted me to escape with him through the toilets. I could not go. He went alone and hid there. The Germans realised where he was hiding and set the whole toilet on fire and there he died.

As the Americans and Russians were approaching the area where we were, we were sent to Mauthausen, further south in Austria where my brother died. We were transported in open wagons with no food or drink, and were covered in snow, protected only by the flimsy layer of our pyjamas. The majority of the prisoners froze to death, only the very strong survived this journey. When we finally arrived, the camp was full so we had to spend the night sleeping outside, on the road in the cold, one next to the other. More died during the night.

The next morning, we were told that we were to go somewhere else. This time we went on foot, in the snow without boots. It was unbearably cold but we had to walk regardless. I remember walking with a few of my friends from Rhodes, Josepu Hasson, Ner Alhadeff and Joseph Menashe. All of a sudden Joseph started slowing down. Although a very brave man, he could no longer go on. We urged him not to give up and offered to carry him. The Germans saw that he was slowing down and took him to the side, shot him and

left him to die alone in the snow. We went on until we reached a camp in Ebenzen. The Germans treated us worse than slaves, worse than anything imaginable.

In that camp, I suffered a terrible attack of dysentery. One of my friends advised me to stop eating the little bread that they gave us. So I hid it under my mattress. When after a few days, I began to recover I realised that someone had stolen all my bread. How hungry I was!

Here again we worked in the mines. Once when we were outside near the wagons, supervised by the SS and their German shepherd, the dog was served a bowl of food with bones and meat and hearty soup. I could not control myself and as soon as the SS left I threw stones at the dog which ran away. I quickly grabbed his bowl and gobbled up its contents. I ate so fast that my stomach bulged out. [could not believe that all we would get would be a slice of bread for lunch and a bowl of soup for supper while this animal was so well fed.

There was another time when I was so hungry that while walking, I would pick up old dried animal bones and chew them with my teeth or even pick up asphalt from the road and chew on it like gum to keep going until the next "meal". The hunger was terrible.

One day, there were screams and shouts the Americans had finally arrived to liberate us. Many Germans managed to escape and others were made prisoners. I heard that there was a German officer who even tried to poison all the inmates when he heard that the Americans were coming.

It was horrible to see how many inmates died after liberation because when offered food (biscuits), they ate too much and their bodies, unaccustomed to food, could not cope. I also remember that a cousin of mine was given a thermometer by one of the Americans which he mistook for food and was so hungry that he ate it and died of mercury poisoning. What a pity after having survived all the atrocities.

We were sent to a Weimar hospital where we remained for about a month. My legs were terribly swollen and remained like that for a very long time. I remember how for many days, whenever I was given food, I would save it and hide it under the pillow or the mattress from fear that the next day we would face starvation again. This habit lasted for a long time.

Those few who did survive were generally young and fearless, 15 to 16 year olds like Jaquitou Hasson, Samikou Modiano, David and Joseph Castavel. I think I survived because I had been an athlete in Rhodes and had thus developed a strong body, but more important a strength of mind and willpower. I cycled, swam, did trapeze work, boxed, played football, walked, ran and I often had to push myself. Perhaps another explanation can be the fact that I gave a lot to charity in Rhodes even in the time when we had nothing. I remember that the poor would say "G-d will grant you a long life!", maybe ... Of course, luck was also very important, often more than physical or mental strength.

My brother only survived until Mauthausen, where he was taken ill and I never saw him again. My sister managed to escape to Palestine. My other brother had gone to the Congo in 1936.

The rest - all dead!

When I recovered we went to Rome where we were cared for by a group of women. The first night of Pesach, we were invited to the home of one of these women.

We would often go there to have things mended and to tell our stories. Later I married her

### **POSTSCRIPT BY MRS CONE**

In the beginning my husband had a lot of nightmares every night. The good thing was that the survivors would often get together and reminisce about their experiences and sometimes even laugh about them. A laughter of sadness! Sometimes he talks about things and I let him because I know that it is good for him to get it out. It is not that it is difficult for me, it is only that it is sad. The amazing thing about this man is that he is always optimistic about everything and does not worry or complain about silly things. Worse could happen! Worse had happened before. First the Holocaust, then some very difficult years in the Congo. Then we decided to come and live here and even then he would say that if things did not work out, we could still go to Italy or Israel. But things did work out and we have found happiness here.

*GIUSEPPE CONE was born in Rhodes Island in 1910. He was a gymnast. He survived slave labour in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Rizertau Charlotte Gruppe, Mauthausen, and Ebenzen and was liberated on 5.5.1945 when he went to Italy and Zaire arriving in South Africa in 1967. He is married to Miriam and has two daughters Rebecca and Sara, and a son Matteo.*

Source: "IN SACRED MEMORY" Recollections of the Holocaust by survivors living in Cape Town, edited by Gwyne Schrire.