

ILLUSTRATED FAMILY EDITION

Pavol Bučan

A Prisoner's Memoir

Sachsenhausen and Lichtenrade

January - July 1945



The complete memoir • translated from the edited Slovak

September 2026

Cover: AI illustration

About this edition

This is a complete translation of the edited Slovak edition. The Slovak was prepared by six AI editorial agents, cross-checked against the photographs, and harmonised in a final review. Its editing addresses spelling, punctuation, grammar and awkward phrasing while retaining every event, detail, viewpoint, date and expression of uncertainty or hearsay. The translation follows that text without adding scenes or turning reported information into established fact.

Replacement photographs of source pages 6, 14 and 17 recover the previously hidden words and distinguish cancelled typing. The reading text has no illegibility placeholders. Securely restored letters are integrated into the words, and editorial explanations appear in the closing notes. Markers ¹ and ² refer to the incomplete sentence on source page 5 and the original prisoner-count wording on page 17. The first note also preserves and translates the unfinished clause that cannot be integrated into a fluent sentence without supplying an unstated claim.

Period terminology and judgements belong to the narrator's testimony. Retaining them does not imply endorsement. This is a personal historical source, not an independently verified historical or medical record.

The closing attribution dates the original account to Banská Bystrica, 20 September 1946. It names Ivan Bučan as the author's son who transcribed and edited it; that later work is undated.

About the photographs and illustrations

This edition brings the complete memoir together with family photographs, documentary photographs of places, and illustrations created with AI. The family photographs preserve the supplied originals; Martin Peniak identified the people shown. Documentary captions give the location, date and source, making each photograph's period clear. Illustrations inspired by the account are labelled individually. They offer an artistic interpretation of the situations described; their figures and individual details are interpretive. No portrait of Pavol Bučan was supplied for this edition.

Images accompany the narrative between complete paragraphs. The memoir's text, sequence of events and closing notes are preserved.

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Memoirs of a Prisoner of the Sachsenhausen and Lichtenrade Concentration Camps.

Source page 1

On 14 January 1945, a long train with barred windows stopped at an unfamiliar station. The German military guards opened the carriage doors and roared: “Los, los!” We tried to get out as quickly as possible so that the guards would not vent their hatred on any of us. A large sign on the station building announced that we were in Oranienburg.

The man beside me in the carriage wanted to leave his good winter boots and suitcase there, but the guards shouted that we were to take everything and would be allowed to keep it. It was there at the station that I first saw concentration camp prisoners unloading various things from the carriages under guard. They were shouting something in German, but I could not understand them. They wore striped clothing and had large numbers with a red triangle on their chests.

I had no time to think about it, because they were forming us into rows, counting us and ordering us to move off. The biting cold that greeted us made these first unhappy moments in a foreign land still harder. Surrounded by guards, we marched away to the incessant roar of “Los, los!”

I walked deep in thought, wondering what fate had in store for us. Then a heavy blow struck my face and a German guard roared something at me that I did not understand. The man beside me explained that I should take my hands out of my pockets, because it could end in something worse than a single slap.

Beside me walked our singer Jenko Harach, who sang even where others wept and who had suffered with me in the prisons of Prievidza, Nitra and Sered'. Slovak miners from Handlová had also arrived with me. Among them was my friend, old Schmidt, who had worked in the Handlová mines for 30 years and was now walking here with me towards an unknown fate. All of us sad, hungry and frozen through, our heads hanging, laden with all sorts of boxes, we march towards the concentration camp.

A large sign on the gate told us where we were: Sachsenhausen. There I saw for the first time the great wall surrounding the entire camp, with watchtowers from

which gun barrels protruded. At the large gate came the order to halt, and the German SS men silently inspected us and took us over from the men who had guarded us until then, German home guards.

They led us on across a broad open space containing a football pitch surrounded by identical wooden barracks.



Modern photograph

Sachsenhausen: entrance Tower A seen from the roll-call area, 28 August 2007. A modern photograph of a place described in the memoir.

Cabologist / Wikimedia Commons, public domain

Source page 2

We stopped beside one barrack and were made to face it. Suddenly, as if on command, about ten older prisoners rushed out of the barrack and took everything we had with us: parcels, warm shoes and various other things.

One by one they shoved us into the barrack, where we were registered in one room: names, date of birth, nationality and place of residence. From there we went into another room, where we were ordered to take everything off. They pulled the rings off our fingers and the gold crowns off our teeth. Then they pushed us as we were into another room, which looked like a bathhouse. About

eight prisoners sat along the walls; they shaved us and shoved us under the showers. We then had to run into further rooms, where heaps of rags had already been prepared: torn underwear and striped outer clothing, and, for our feet, footcloths stitched together and wooden clogs. Dressed in these rags, we were driven out in front of the barrack where we were to live. They left us standing for 6 hours in a frost of about 20 degrees below zero. That evening they finally let us into the barrack.

The next day older prisoners visited us and said that we had been very lucky, because when they had arrived as newcomers, at least 50 of them had been beaten with clubs and three of them had literally been drowned in soup. Perhaps, maybe, the reason they treated us more leniently was that the Soviet troops were slowly but surely approaching Berlin.

In the days that followed, various German guards drilled us on the football pitch, and kicks and slaps were part of the exercises. At about 11 o'clock they brought cauldrons of so-called soup, “zuppen”. Each of us received a little piece of white cloth on which he had to draw his assigned number with an ink pencil. I was given the number 123357. Above, behind the number, we drew one red triangle, and below it the letters SL. These stood for “Slovak political offender”. The hardest thing was having to learn our prison numbers by heart and report them in German.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-78612-0008
Foto: v. Ang. | 1936/1944 ca.

Documentary photograph

Prisoners at a roll call in Sachsenhausen, approximately 1936–1944. A historical camp photograph; the people shown are not identified as Pavol or the companions named in his account.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-78612-0008 / CC-BY-SA 3.0

About a week later we were ordered to take everything we had and move off. Where to, we did not know. Under a stronger guard, we were taken to the railway station. Most of us who had recently arrived at the camp met again in the carriages. From the train we saw the terrible ruins of Berlin, through which we passed slowly. We got out at a small station and waited to see what would happen next, surrounded by older German home guards. A tram took us to the edge of Berlin, where there was a small concentration camp, Lichtenrade, and again a long, high wall, barbed wire and a gate with SS men standing at it. The camp had been built for 280 prisoners.

Source page 2, 3

The next day we travelled by tram for almost 2 hours through the ruins of houses. We got off in a small square, were given pickaxes and shovels, and had to clear away the rubble of buildings. I look nearby and see the street name Wilhelmstraße. It is a very long street, with most of the surrounding houses in ruins from the bombing. As far as my eyes could see, there was nothing but the rubble of houses, with only chimneys still standing here and there. In these sad surroundings we worked hungry until evening, every day. I shall never forget Lichtenrade in Berlin. From morning until evening, a beating for every little thing, and hard toil all day on a little unappetising food. As the bitter cold continued, I worked quite hard to keep warm. My fellow prisoners kept telling me that if I wanted to stay alive, I should expend only as many calories at work as I took in through food.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-P0627-501
Foto: Cürlis, Peter | 1946 Frühling

Documentary photograph

Berlin, the ruins of Wilhelmstraße, spring 1946. A later documentary view of a street named in the memoir.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-P0627-501 / Cürlis, Peter / CC-BY-SA 3.0

Source page 3

There were prisoners of other nationalities in this small concentration camp, not only Slovaks but also Norwegians, Poles, Russians, Frenchmen and Belgians. They told us that we had been lucky to be sent here and that it was, after all, safer here than in the large concentration camp, where prisoners were poisoned with gas and burned every day.

Daily hunger tormented us all more than anything else. It was no use picking out everything edible from among the rubble as we worked. We looked enviously at the plump Norwegians, who received food parcels every two weeks and slept in fur sleeping bags. The Norwegian Red Cross looked after them. The SS men in this camp were cruel and bloodthirsty, as in every larger camp. Their commandant, a drug addict and an alcoholic, excelled above all in cruelty. The Läger-erste and the barrack commandants were mostly Germans; later, a few Poles were appointed as barrack commandants. A German with social convictions, a decent man, was assigned to our barrack, No. 8. Later they put a Pole there, a former cobbler whom they called Ivan. He was a very cruel and wicked man, always carrying a rubber tube and taking pleasure in beating the prisoners.

We Slovaks were asked to come forward if we knew German, to serve as work supervisors, vorarbeiters. This meant that we would not have to work but would only drive the others to work and receive a double portion of soup. I wondered how many would volunteer, since many knew German well, but I was relieved to learn that only two out of 280 prisoners had come forward.

While working among the ruins, I often wondered what the future would hold for this beautiful, devastated city. Some fellow prisoners said that the SS planned to order all Slavs who had committed some offence against them to come here and, after a victorious war, build Berlin anew, even more beautiful than before. Well, we had something to look forward to.

Source page 3, 4

By clearing away the rubble we were opening the city to traffic again. A fellow prisoner who was a builder said that if they wanted to build a new Berlin, they would have to cart away all sorts of unwanted material that could not be reused and make a heap as large as Pánsky Diel near Banská Bystrica. One day after a heavy bombing raid, about 200 of us prisoners were assigned to a large crossroads to clear rubble from the houses so that traffic could move again, as it had been diverted onto a side road. Wherever prisoners marked with various numbers and triangles were working, civilians were forbidden to have contact with them, on pain of being sent to a concentration camp themselves. Sometimes a civilian would perhaps stray by mistake into the place where we were working, but the SS men would shout loudly and send him back. I was working right at the edge of that crossroads, with civilians passing nearby. I was bent over picking up bricks when a parcel suddenly landed at my feet. I quickly picked it up and hid it under my shirt. I opened it with one hand and could smell salami, cigarettes and chocolate. Then I realised that not every German was a fascist. I looked at the guards to see whether they had noticed anything, but I see that something is stirring among them. One guard came over to me, wrote down my number, shouted something at me and took the parcel away. Then I realised what awaited me: hanging, being tied up and suspended, or a terrible beating. My friend the builder, who knew German well, was working nearby. I turned to him and asked whether he would try to persuade the guard not to report it. He agreed and spoke to the SS man. Then he came and told me it was settled: the guard had been persuaded and would not report it. He only sent word that next time I would get away with it and would be properly punished for the offence.

A parcel among the rubble



AI illustration based on the memoir.

While Pavol was clearing rubble in Berlin, a parcel of food landed at his feet. A guard later took it away.

Source page 4

When American aircraft were approaching on a bombing raid, a “for-alarm” was sounded first. We then had to get dressed within 5 minutes and run out to the shelter. In the shelter doorway stood the so-called commandants, prisoners who held a post. They had rubber hoses in their hands and used them to beat the latecomers indiscriminately. By the time the siren sounded the “alarm”, everyone had to be inside the shelter. This happened 3–4 times a night. Many times we saw German soldiers firing at American aircraft with anti-aircraft guns. Sometimes an aircraft would be hit and catch fire, and little white clouds would separate from it. These were the parachutes of airmen who had been forced to jump.

We went on working, hungry and frozen through, and grew terribly thin; yet some prisoners would still sing in the evening.

Easter was slowly approaching. We heard that we would not work for 2 days over the holiday and would receive more food. In fact, we had one day off and were given one more slice of salami than usual.

After the holiday, a fellow countryman from Mikuláš came to me and said that while we were still here in the concentration camp, Soviet troops had already liberated Banská Bystrica. We did not know what would happen to us. Perhaps they would kill us all. Later I learned how he knew, since prisoners were not allowed to listen to any radio. In barrack I lived the *lágér-erte*, the highest-ranking prisoner official. He was always dressed in clean prison clothes and had a purple triangle beside his number, which meant “religious fanatic”. The Germans had imprisoned an entire sect in the concentration camp, and he was one of its members.¹ He listened to the radio and would let something slip from time to time.

On our way to work we passed a half-demolished house on which someone had written “Hitler ist kaput” in white paint. It gave us strength, and we hoped that perhaps we would live to see liberation.

The unpleasant cold still continued. One day at work I felt a sharp stabbing pain beneath my left shoulder blade, and swelling began to form around my eyes. That evening, after the orders had been given, I went to the infirmary to be examined. They told me that I had become badly chilled and that this, together with the lack of food, was causing my problems. An orderly, a Belgian priest, massaged my back that evening. As the pain grew worse each day, the doctor ordered me to lie down. The next day I did not go to work and reported to the barrack commandant. He was a German with a social conscience. First he gave me quite a long talk. He told me to work slowly, that I would sweep the paths, and not to think about home. He arranged for me to receive more food so that I could recover. Otherwise, he said, I would go “in komín” (“up the chimney”), by which he meant the crematorium chimney at Sachsenhausen. When the pain had still not stopped a week later and I began to swell up, the doctor told me to stay in bed. One room had been set aside for cases like mine. Every day after work had been assigned, an SS man, the deputy commandant, came to inspect me.

I shall never forget the complete silence that fell after the prisoners had left for work. It was broken by the steady tread of military footsteps. The door opened and the all-powerful SS man came in. With his stick he lifted the blanket on my bed, checked whether I was still alive, and left.

Source page 5, 6

As my illness was not improving, I was assigned to a transport to the large camp at Sachsenhausen. In the morning I got dressed, and after the others had been sent to work, six of us remained standing there, assigned to the return transport to Sachsenhausen. With me was a Pole wasted to the bone, declared incurably ill and destined for the gas chamber and crematorium. Before we dispersed, we were ordered to report in front of the office at exactly nine o'clock. I gathered up the few rags I had and arrived in front of the office at half past eight. One of my fellow prisoners arrived a little later, when the SS commandant was already there. He flew into a rage and beat him terribly, until he lost consciousness.

Source page 6

And so I found myself once more in dreaded Sachsenhausen, that terrible camp where a human life means nothing. For a long time I drifted from one barrack to another. I looked with fear at the gas chamber and the crematorium, whose great chimney constantly belched acrid smoke. At last I was assigned to the prisoners' hospital, which they called the "revír", where I could at least lie down and have my temperature checked. The sick men lying there said, with fear in their eyes, that an SS doctor came to examine them and was constantly giving experimental inoculations, producing various sera with which German soldiers were then treated. I too received many injections and had blood taken several times, but nothing helped me.

In the distance we could hear artillery fire like thunder, drawing ever closer. Some of the sick men lying there said that Soviet troops were already in eastern Berlin. These events kept us alive, but we expected the worst to come at the very end. Among the sick there was talk that perhaps they would shoot us all or poison us with gas, while some had heard that we would be allowed to go home. A change could also be seen in the behaviour of the SS men and the prisoner leaders: they no longer killed over every little thing, they let some things pass; in a word, they had become a little softer.

At the beginning of April 1945, on a sunny day, the siren sounded the “for-alarm” and then immediately the alarm. We in the infirmary, the so-called revír, remained lying in our beds. There was a great roar of aircraft, and two bombs fell within the camp as well. One landed on the barracks used as storehouses. Our civilian clothes were also kept there, and everything burned to the ground. The second bomb fell right beside the wall surrounding Sachsenhausen. American airmen were bombing a grenade factory in Oranienburg, and two large bombs had fallen on the camp only by chance. Many prisoners were killed and wounded, especially those working in the grenade factory. Our infirmary filled completely with very seriously wounded prisoners, who were lying even in the corridors. For this reason, those of us who were not so seriously ill were sent to block No. 37, called the schonungs barak, which was used for convalescence. A room commandant led us across the roll-call square. A hanged man hung from a football goal, his face already completely blackened. A board attached to his chest bore the words: “This is what happens to anyone who steals during a bombing raid.” I knew him by sight. He was a Slovak partisan from Horehronie. His offence was that, when the bombing began, he had taken a piece of bread from a shelf reserved for the barrack commandant. The commandant saw him, seized him and took him to the political department for the SS men, and on their orders he was publicly hanged from the football goal. He wept and pleaded in vain; he was shown no mercy. I felt terribly sorry that this young Slovak would never again see his loved ones and his native region, beautiful Horehronie, or his mother, whom he called for in the last moments of his life.

As we passed the barracks, I noticed familiar faces from Lichtenrade. They were all there: Harach, Schmidt and all the others. Later, when I visited them, I learned that they had been forced to fortify Berlin, repair bridges and dig trenches. Then the entire Lichtenrade camp had been quickly emptied and they had returned to the large camp at Sachsenhausen.

On 9 April 1945, to our great surprise, we were all allowed to move freely around the camp. Everything was in great disorder, and all sorts of papers were being burned. During the night the kapos and commandants were released and dressed in SS uniforms. They also distributed among the other prisoners large quantities of tobacco that they had kept hidden in the barracks, and so I too received 2 packets.

New heavy-calibre machine guns were placed on the watchtowers above the wall surrounding the entire camp. They were no longer pointed out of the camp but, on the contrary, inwards. I was still in Block No. 37, where the infirmary for sick prisoners was. The barrack commander was a German, an elderly man, a former sea captain who was said to have killed many sailors and had therefore been imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen concentration camp. He was a terrible man; he beat prisoners over every little thing. One of his favourite pastimes was to have a group of prisoners sprayed with cold water in the bitterest weather. He always had young boys around him to wait on him. It was said of him that he was a sadist and a homosexual. One morning I rolled a thick cigarette from the tobacco—the makhorka I had been given—and smoked in the yard outside the barrack like the chimney above the crematorium. I did not notice our barrack commander creeping up on me; I only felt a hard slap, followed by more blows and kicks. He took away my carved cigarette holder bearing the inscription Sachsenhausen. An acquaintance with whom I had shared a room for a time had carved this holder and given it to me. My roommates told me that I should not have smoked during working hours, even though we, being ill, did not work. The next day, as ordered, I went to wash in the barrack with those terrible showers, where one never knew what would come out: water or poison gas. I did not get my prison clothes back; instead, they gave me civilian clothes that had belonged to dead prisoners. Once I was dressed, I looked like a circus clown. The trousers were made of good cloth, black with stripes, but four rectangles had been cut out of them, and each had been patched with a different garish material. The coat was a shortish winter coat with a large patch of red cloth on the back. The hat was light-coloured, with a large red cross painted on top in oil paint.

Transports of prisoners began arriving at Sachsenhausen from other camps already occupied by Soviet troops. Many prisoners also came from Auschwitz. They were in the worst physical condition and died one after another. A German Gypsy was assigned to take the corpses to the crematorium. He carried them on a two-wheeled cart covered with a black lid. He had so much work that another prisoner was assigned to help him. The large Sachsenhausen camp could hold as many as 100,000 prisoners, but because new prisoners arrived every day from various camps the Nazis had been forced to abandon, we assumed that there were at least 200,000 prisoners here. And so, in those days, the chimney above the crematorium smoked day and night.

On 10 April 1945 we were ordered to report to the roll-call square to be assigned work. We were told to dig trenches near the camp. The weather was beginning to turn springlike, and little green blades of grass were starting to grow around the camp, which many of us grazed on ravenously. I wondered whether I might escape, but I could see that it was still impossible, because we were still guarded very strictly, with trained dogs as well. We no longer slept one to a bed; now as many as three of us were squeezed into a single bed.

The guns thundered ever more loudly from the east. Those of us who belonged to Block No. 37 (Schonugs-barak) were made to stand in a long line, and we waited in fear for what would happen next. Two camp doctors sat in one place, and each of us went before them. They wrote down our number, our age and the illness we were suffering from. This was a board that determined which of us was capable of making a long journey and which had to remain in the camp because of illness.

11 April 1945—since we were getting no food, terrible hunger took hold in the camp. Prisoners picked potato and beet peelings out of a large heap beside the garden. I too gathered a cupful and went to wash them. I looked around the camp, and I see that the gas chamber and the crematorium have disappeared in a single night. I went to pick up my cup, and I see that while I was looking around, another prisoner has stolen the cup and everything in it.

Source page 8, 9

On 12 April 1945 they drove all of us out of the barracks onto the large roll-call square, where a long line of prisoners was already standing, and I saw that those at the front were receiving bread and tins of food. We were ordered to join the line. I stood there in the long line, looking around to see whether I could spot any of my acquaintances. But they were nowhere to be seen. I heard someone shouting: "Slovaks, over here!" So I went over to where most of the Slovaks were, and then I ran to the barracks where I had seen the men I knew from Lichtenrade. They were in that barrack, sitting on the beds, and told me that they were not going anywhere and wanted to wait here for the Soviet army. I went back, and later I heard that they had been driven out of the barrack and had had to leave with an unknown transport. I stood in the long line again, and when my turn came, I received only half a ration of bread and one tin of food.

The Soviet troops were drawing inexorably closer, which was why the preparations to leave the camp were so hurried. I immediately ate the bread and the tin of food we had been given, all of it, and for the first time I felt that I had eaten my fill. While we were still at the gate on our way out, a German detachment of SS men with a commander surrounded us, and we were off. They drove us northwest, towards Neuruppin. We marched all day. During this march, the effects of prolonged starvation and hard labour began to show. One prisoner after another fell behind and developed dysentery, so the guards drove them after the column with sticks. In the evening we reached a village whose name I did not remember. There they herded us into a large barn full of straw. They drove all of us into that barn, so that when we slept we were almost lying on top of one another. That evening I had to relieve myself under guard, and when I returned there was no room at all for me to lie down. So I stood there until, after a long while, someone moved and a little space to lie down opened up. As I struggled to lower myself into it, weary and broken, I lay on my neighbour's leg, and he began to beat and kick me with all his strength. The other prisoners had to pull us apart. This unpleasant incident was the result of enormous physical and mental strain. In the night I woke up feeling terribly cold, felt around me and realised that I was partly lying on someone. I shook off my drowsiness and realised that I was lying on a dead fellow prisoner. That evening I had seen a former Roman Catholic parish priest lie down not far from me, so I woke him and told him what had happened. Then together we carried the dead man out into the yard, where we buried him. Early the next morning they drove us on without food. At the front, about 8 prisoners pulled a cart loaded with raw potatoes and the guards' belongings, and we marched behind them six abreast. By chance I found myself in a row where we were all Slovaks, former workers in the Slovak forests.

I do not want to die yet



AI illustration based on the memoir.

Even during the march, he noticed the plants beside the road. Nature sustained him, and he longed to return home.

Various shrubs and little plants were already growing beside the roads along which we marched. I did not know some of them, so I asked my neighbour whether he knew them. He looked at me in astonishment and said he was surprised that, in such a state, I was still interested in nature. I told him that I did not want to die yet, that I wanted to return home and felt supported by nature in this wretched state. In the evening we again reached a small village, and there too they herded us into a large barn, but there was more room than the previous night—we could at least lie down comfortably. We pulled up the flooring and picked out the grains that had fallen underneath, which we ate. Each of us carried a large bag that had been sewn back in Sachsenhausen and looked like the kind of bag beggars used to carry. In that bag we kept a cup, into which we put everything we found that could somehow be eaten. In the barn where we slept, I gathered plenty of oats and slowly nibbled at them. In the morning they lined us up in front of the barn, and a prisoner appointed to the task reported the number present to the SS commander—two were missing. The commander, an SS man, and another guard went to search the barn. They raked through the straw and prodded it to see whether the men were hiding there. Not even 10 minutes had passed when a terrible wailing came from inside and the prisoners were discovered somewhere under the straw. The commander took the bayonet from the guard's rifle and stabbed both of them to death there. He ordered two pits to be dug, and we buried the poor men in them and went on.

They drove us through Neuruppin and ever farther west. At one place we stood for a long time. The SS men consulted some civilians, and about an hour later we moved on, but no longer in the direction we had been going: now we were heading east. We heard that the Americans were already very close. We went around Wittstock, and they drove us towards the town of Neustrelitz.

And again we slept in various barns and huts. Behind us, marking the route of our march, we left all those who could go no farther and died of hunger and exhaustion. Now and then they gave us 3–4 raw potatoes, which we ate half-raw by a small fire, surrounded by guards. Fortunately, young nettles were already growing, and we picked and ate them. In one small village we stood for a long time, hungry and exhausted. The guards had found an abandoned horse with a broken leg there. They killed and skinned it, and the SS commander generously ordered the horsemeat to be shared among the prisoners. When the meat was handed out, I received an unusually large portion, which I put into my beggar's

bag. Along the way I cut a piece from it and ate it raw. This happened many more times on the rest of the journey: I ate raw horsemeat, with oats to go with it. My neighbour, a partisan from Margecany, asked me to give him a piece, because he had nothing left. I cut him a good-sized piece, and he ate his fill.

Source page 10, 11

In the next village we again stood for a long time. The SS men and the guards held a conference, and once more we went in the opposite direction, because Soviet troops were approaching along our route. Now we were heading towards Wittstock and Pritzwalk. Since we have been wandering back and forth every day for over a week, without rest and almost without food, we are exhausted almost to death. My friends, with whom I have endured that dreadful abuse and torment from the beginning, are slowly disappearing and dying. Their graves are mostly just the ditches beside the roads we have already travelled. Behind our column, in which about 280 prisoners marched, two SS men walked some 50 to 80 metres back. They had red crosses sewn onto their sleeves. When a prisoner could no longer march with the others and his friends could no longer carry him, they left him beside the road. Those two finished him off with several shots to the back of the head and then kicked his dead body off the road. And, of course, we went on as if nothing had happened.

Source page 11

We walked on, stumbling, and from exhaustion and hunger we could no longer even see. We came to a crossroads where some unfamiliar vehicles were standing. Some prisoners were unloading parcels from the vehicles, which the SS men then handed out to the prisoners. Each prisoner received half a parcel; the SS men received a whole one. They were Swiss Red Cross vehicles. We sat down beside the road, opened the parcels and ate almost everything in them. They contained food unheard of by our standards: coffee, tea, sugar, chocolate and jam. It helped us, at least for a while; after such a long time, I felt I had eaten my fill.

This journey of suffering along the road from the concentration camp, from which we were fleeing ahead of the Allied armies, was called the road of death. We were approaching Parchim. Parchim is a town beside the road leading to Hamburg. On the roads we encountered great numbers of refugees, soldiers and civilians with packs, who had fled their homes in fear of the Soviet troops. Amid this rabble we were forcibly driven west, where they expected the Americans to be more merciful towards them. Between Pritzwalk and Parchim, a great many empty boxes bearing the Red Cross emblem had been left in a wood. Apparently, a column like

ours had stopped there and received parcels. A little farther on, four charred corpses lay around the remains of a fire, and farther still, beside a stream, lay a prisoner who had been shot, as though he were drinking water. He had been shot in the back of the head. We only learned what had happened there later, after liberation. A large column of prisoners—about 1,000 of them—had rested at that spot, and during the night drunken SS men had shot dead whomever they pleased.

Slowly we were reaching the larger town of Parchim. Parchim is a memorable place for me, not only because I was there three times, but above all because the Soviet army liberated me near Parchim. At the edge of the town the guards stopped us, and we returned to the nearest wood. We lit fires and somehow managed to sleep until morning. In the morning we went through Parchim and heard that the Germans had capitulated and peace had been declared. One guard, an SS man, a Hungarian, told me that we should escape because they had been ordered to shoot us.

Source page 12

From that moment I kept thinking that I had to escape. Under no circumstances did I want, at the end of all that evil, simply to let myself be shot without doing something to prevent it.

I approached the group of Slovaks near me and suggested that we try to escape, but not one of them wanted to. One said that an SS man had told him they were to take all of us to the Americans. Only my nearest neighbour, a former partisan, young Jožko Kovalčík, told me that he would try to escape with me. We agreed that I would pretend to be very ill and weak, that he would accompany me and that we would gradually fall behind the main group. We wanted to get between the main group and those two cutthroats who finished off the weak and those lying on the ground. When we get between the two little woods visible ahead of us, we will run off to the right. We reckoned that the SS men would fire at us with their automatic weapons. Everything happened as we had agreed, and beside that wood, at the signal, we leapt away and ran into the trees as fast as we could. The guards opened fire on us, the bullets rattled against the trees all around us, and we ran on with the last of our strength. We went on into a second wood, where we found an abandoned shelter. We made a little roof of branches over it and, exhausted almost to death, slept for the first time as free citizens, at liberty.

The first night of freedom



AI illustration based on the memoir.

After escaping with Jožko Kovalčík, they found an abandoned shelter. They covered it with branches and fell asleep exhausted.

In the morning we searched the wood for something to eat, but found nothing except young nettles, which we seasoned with red salt and ate. We survived here like this for 3 days. On the third day we could bear it no longer and set out to explore another wood as well. After walking for some time, we came upon an old farmstead. We crawled towards it. We heard no dog barking, and in the yard there was a heap of beets prepared for the livestock. Carefully we took some and crawled back into the wood. We ate some of the beets we had taken, covered ourselves with pine branches in a hollow and slept. During the night we were woken by a great rumbling and shouting. We realised that soldiers had entered the wood in six lorries. The next day we crawled close enough to see the lorries. But everything was completely quiet; we thought the soldiers were asleep inside them. Since, after more waiting, nothing moved in or around the lorries, we wanted to find out whether anyone was there. Jožko picked up a stone and threw it towards the lorries. It landed with a loud crash on the mudguard of one of them. Again there was silence and nothing moved. So we threw stones several more times, and when there was no sound, we went to look directly inside the lorries. They were mostly empty, apart from one, which we climbed onto and found full of filled sacks. I untied one, and soya beans began to pour out of it; in the second I found almonds. Jožko and I ate almonds and soya beans until we had had enough. In another lorry we found clean underwear and clothing. So we took off our ragged, filthy clothes and changed. We also found civilian trousers and heavy boots, as well as various other useful things such as rucksacks and razors, which we took too. We packed soya beans and almonds into two rucksacks as well and set off towards the town of Parchim.

We reached a large farmstead that we had already marched past once. I went into a large barn with straw in it and called out to ask whether anyone was there.

A large Black man slowly emerged from beneath the straw, and we made ourselves understood in prison slang. He said he was a French prisoner of war. We asked him whether he had seen any Slovaks there. He said he could not tell, but a larger group of former prisoners was hiding at the back of the barn. So I went to the place he had pointed out and called loudly that, if there were any Slovaks there, they should come out of the straw. At my call, several Slovaks, former prisoners, came out. They told me that if I was thirsty, there was good water flowing in the garden, and gave me a piece of raw pork.

I went into the empty rooms of the farmstead. There I found a civilian coat, which I put on, and a hat, which I placed on my head. I took various cooking utensils from the kitchen. We built a fire in the yard, and over it I fried pork in a pan and boiled potatoes in a pot; I had found the potatoes there too.

It was evening, the meat was nearly cooked, and its aroma spread throughout the farmyard.

On the road beside the farmstead there was a constant movement of all kinds of vehicles, all heading west. German soldiers came up to us on motorcycles, dismounted and shouted at us to put out the fires at once, saying that enemy airmen might see them and then bomb us. They asked who we were, so we told them where we had come from. They bellowed at us that we were nothing but communist swine and that we ought simply to be shot. Another German soldier came off the road towards us on a motorcycle. They talked among themselves about something for quite a while, then quickly mounted their motorcycles and disappeared.

Darkness was slowly falling. The meat in the roasting pan was almost ready and the potatoes were cooked when a loud rumbling came from the road, by which we knew that tanks were approaching. Three tanks stopped in front of the farmstead, soldiers jumped out of them, and a few came over to us. One of them looked at us for a long time without speaking. Then I noticed that he was not a German soldier, but a Soviet soldier—an officer, a tank man.

Source page 13, 14

I was very weak from illness and hunger, but in my great joy I embraced and kissed that tank man. We told him that we were Slovaks and had been in a concentration camp. Then the other tank men came over to us too, and we embraced every one of them as well. They asked us whether we had seen any “Fritzes”. We said that they had been there a short time before and pointed out the direction in which they had gone. We offered them the roast pork with potatoes, but they refused. They could probably see how terribly emaciated and wretched we all were. A little later they all left.

I took a milk container from the farmstead, and together we caught a black German cow that was grazing freely on the grass there. From this we concluded that, when the owners of the farmstead fled before the approaching Soviet troops, they had turned the cows and horses they could no longer take with them loose in the fields. I tried to milk the cow. Milking her was hard work—she was quite difficult to milk—but her milk was excellent. It was the first milk I had drunk since the end of the Slovak National Uprising.

After breakfast we slowly set off along the road towards the town of Parchim.

The Soviet army was already there, so we reported to headquarters, where they told us it would be best to find some sort of cart and make our way to one of the assembly camps.

We learned that the transport of prisoners from Sachsenhausen from which we had escaped had remained somewhere near Pritzwalk. We very much wanted to know how they were, for all our closest friends were there. Together with Kovalčík, we boarded a Soviet truck travelling in that direction. After a long ride we got off in a village near Pritzwalk, and in the village we met the miners from Handlová whom we knew. I asked them where Harach and Schmidt were. They told me that Schmidt had died during the onward journey and that Harach was in a barn on the edge of the village. I ran to the barn, and there on the straw lay Harach, my comrade in arms from Svätý Kríž and my fellow sufferer in the prisons of Prievidza, Nitra and Sereď, as well as in Sachsenhausen. He no longer recognised me, for he was very ill and had a high fever; they said he had contracted typhus. The next day he died beside me in that barn, where we also buried him. He remained far from home and his loved ones in a small German village.

They took us to Parchim in trucks, and there we slept in a town school.

I was the first to fall ill. I developed very severe dysentery together with a high fever, and then Jožko Kovalčík came down with the same illness. With great difficulty we cooked some soup, which we ate slowly.

There was no question of even considering setting out for home on a bicycle or a motorcycle, because we had continual fevers and had grown weaker still. But we could not bear simply lying in an abandoned house, and so we slowly set off on foot towards home.

I felt very ill, still had a fever and bled during bowel movements. That was why we walked very slowly. Jožko, who was younger and had more strength, kept to my pace at first, but then he could bear it no longer and told me that he was going on faster and that I should walk on my own. He left me to my own fate, ill and very weak in a foreign land. And I, alone, slowly dragged myself towards my unknown fate. On one stretch of the long, straight road, an old-fashioned carriage drawn by a single little horse caught up with me. It was decorated with a Czechoslovak flag, and six people were sitting in it. They stopped when I called out and asked who I was and where I had come from. When I told them that I was a Slovak and very ill, they made room for me in the carriage and I climbed in. They were Slovak Jews, and one of them took out a bottle of strong spirits, handed it to me and told me to have a little drink. Afterwards I felt a little better.

They drove me to a large village where a small hospital had been set up, left me there and went away. I lay there for three days. There were no medicines, but they gave me a special diet of potatoes and milk. I recovered a little, and on the third day I went on. While I was lying down and keeping to the diet, I felt fairly well, but as soon as I began walking, the fever and diarrhoea returned. The rucksack I kept with me all the time felt as if it weighed a hundred kilograms. It contained only the things I needed every day. Beside the road along which I was struggling, I found an abandoned handcart. I took it, loaded my rucksack onto it and slowly pulled it behind me. Near a building I found some small rounds of German cheese lying discarded. I took two of them and loaded them onto the cart. My fever rose so high that I could no longer even see what was around me. After a long, painful journey I reached the town of Bützow. A hospital had been set up there under the supervision of the Swiss Red Cross. I lay there for a week, and when I began to feel a little better, I dressed, put my rucksack on my back and continued eastwards on foot. Towards evening, when I was already very tired, I noticed a piece of stiff paper nailed to a telephone pole. On it was written: "Czechoslovaks, report to the assembly camp in Prenzlau." It was the first greeting from my homeland, and I was very glad. I reached the town of Teterow. There was a strong garrison of Soviet soldiers there, so I reported to headquarters and also received a parcel of food for the journey ahead. A Soviet truck driver was being sent to Neubrandenburg, so I asked him to take me along.

I got off in Neubrandenburg and continued on foot through the town. On the way I met a fellow countryman of Czech nationality, who told me there was a smaller assembly camp for Czechoslovaks on the edge of town and advised me to report there. I went straight there in the direction he had shown me, and after a while I reached the camp. Many Czechoslovaks had already gathered there. A camp commander had already been appointed, and he had his own clerk. I reported to them, they assigned me quarters and told me to wait until Soviet vehicles arrived to take us to the large assembly camp in Prenzlau. Here, for the first time on that terrible journey, I was able to bathe in warm water and was given clean underwear. We ate together and received quite decent food. I went for walks and began to feel much better. A week later three Soviet trucks arrived, we climbed aboard them and set off for Prenzlau.

The weather was kind to us throughout the journey; after all, June was already half over. They took us to the town of Prenzlau, to the assembly camp for Czechoslovaks. And I had to go to hospital again. It was a Belgian hospital, and there were also Belgian prisoners of war there who had pleasant little rooms and good care. The doctors at the hospital were Belgian, and there were a great many people there. They did little to help me, so I reported to the Soviet infirmary. A woman doctor examined me, gave me 20 medicinal powders and instructed me to take one every two hours.

In the large assembly camp at Prenzlau there were thousands of former concentration camp prisoners of various nationalities from all over northern Germany. Separate houses were assigned to each nationality. As I learned, it had been a German military camp.

On the second day of my stay, fine large buses came for the French, who made up almost a majority there. Every Frenchman received a new civilian suit, underwear and a small suitcase. They stowed their suitcases above the seats and left. We Czechoslovaks moved into their places and were quite comfortable there. We cooked in the little kitchens that the French had left behind, together with the kitchen utensils.

There I met several acquaintances, particularly Kovalčík, who had left me ill on the road and gone off in an unknown vehicle. I would never have done that to a friend. Many of our people had carts and horses and went into the surrounding area, to empty houses and farmsteads, to “requisition” or procure pigs, hens,

hares and the like. We slept on straw mattresses and covered ourselves with thin blankets. There was plenty of food and tobacco.

Our greatest worry was how we would get home. Our leaders did not know what to do, because no trains were running anywhere in Germany and telephone and telegraph connections had been completely cut off. They did not know how to let Czechoslovakia know that we were here in Prenzlau, far from home, and that we needed to be taken home as soon as possible. Those who could play a musical instrument obtained one, and together with our Gypsies they formed quite a good band. Dances were also held, because there were plenty of women from all over our republic. The neighbouring camp was occupied by Yugoslavs, who also had a band and lived there cheerfully and in fairly good order. Since the weather was beautiful, we went for walks in the surrounding countryside. A fairly large river flowed near Prenzlau, and there was a large lake where we went boating and some of us also swam.

Source page 16, 17

I had almost completely recovered. The powders I was taking helped me greatly. The swelling went down, and the dysentery soon disappeared as well. I continued recovering from the other illnesses at home for a long time; only nervous weakness remained as a reminder.

Source page 17

At the beginning of July 1945, our camp leaders reached an agreement with the local Soviet military command. As a result, one of the prisoners' representatives and a Soviet commander flew to Prague. They reported that a thousand concentration camp prisoners were waiting in Prenzlau to be transported back to their homeland, and asked them to send at least some trucks.²

On 6 July 1945, the first vehicles from Czechoslovakia arrived to collect us. They had been sent from Prague. The women and some of the seriously ill left with the first transport.

When the vehicles were due to come for the second transport, we were told to prepare a large heap of wooden blocks, because the trucks would run on wood gas. But where were we to find so much wood, when there was no forest in the area and only a few twisted pine trees grew nearby? Not far from our camp stood a large building that was locked, but some of our people got inside and found that it was full of skis. Perhaps the Germans had been preparing to fight even through

the following winter. We carried the skis out of that storehouse, cut them into small blocks and piled them up ready.

When the vehicles came for the second transport, there was still no place for me. So I was assigned to the third transport, on an old truck powered by wood gas.

Wood for the journey home



AI illustration based on the memoir.

Before the second transport, skis from a store were cut into fuel for wood-gas lorries. Pavol left with the third transport.

On the night before our departure for home, I could not get to sleep at all. I was overcome with great joy that I would see my family and my homeland, Czechoslovakia, again. All the events and all the people I had been with during my imprisonment in the concentration camp, as well as on that terrible road of death, passed through my mind once more. I asked myself silently why people are so wicked and cruel to one another, when we live on this earth for such a short time. But I could find no answer.

Towards dawn I went outside the quarters, and the first light of morning began to illuminate all that countryside where I had been forced to live for over a month. Slowly the whole flat landscape emerged from the mist, with hills outlined only in the far distance. The plain was crossed by long roads lined with trees. Between the roads lay great stretches of fields and lakes. What a beautiful region, and one

can hardly believe that only a short time ago a cruel war raged here and thousands of people died in the concentration camps every day. I was very glad to be leaving this region for ever.

I did not feel well, but I hoped that after reaching home I would recover completely. In the morning we cooked breakfast for the last time and climbed into the vehicles.

Source page 18

We travelled towards Berlin in the vehicles along one of those beautiful roads bordered by avenues of trees. We rode during the day; in the evening we cooked and ate, and at night we slept in the nearest barn or in an abandoned house. Slowly we reached the outskirts of Berlin. Hundreds of small makeshift dwellings had been built there from all sorts of materials. They housed residents of central Berlin who had survived the bombings but had nowhere to live.

The officer leading our transport invited me to sit beside him at the front of the vehicle, wanting to show me shattered Berlin. Once again I saw the long Berliner Straße, along which we had walked to work as prisoners for two months, and once again I caught sight of the white inscription I had passed every day: "Hitler ist kaput".

We drove back and forth through the great expanse of rubble that was called Berlin. I moved back among my companions on the truck bed, and we travelled along a broad road towards Dresden.

From a distance we could see the ruins of Dresden, once such a beautiful city. Then our vehicle made an unscheduled stop, and after inspecting the engine the driver said that it had developed a fault that could not be repaired without spare parts. We pushed the vehicle to the side of the road, and the drivers of the other vehicles called out that we should walk on slowly and that they would send vehicles from Teplice-Šanov to collect us.



Quelle: Deutsche Fotothek

Documentary photograph

Dresden, the ruined Frauenkirche, after 17 September 1945. A period view of the devastated city, photographed after Pavol had returned home.

Deutsche Fotothek / Richard Peter sen., df_ps_0000384 / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE

We slowly drew closer to our border and spent the night in a small village. It was our last night's lodging on German soil. The following day we slowly set off again, and in the distance we saw a fine large bus coming towards us. It was a bus from the spa of Teplice Šanov, and it had been sent for us. With great joy we climbed aboard and settled comfortably into its seats.

A few hours later the commander of the transport announced with great joy that we would soon be at the border of the Czechoslovak Republic. We were all excited and waited joyfully. On a nearby hill a barrier stretched across the road, and border posts stood there. The bus stopped before the barrier, we got out and crossed onto the soil of our homeland. On our side a ceremonial arch had been erected and festively decorated, bearing a large inscription: "Welcome".

Along the left side of the road, a great stream of people laden with all kinds of belongings was making its way towards Germany. As we learned, they were Sudeten Germans who had to go to Germany under various agreements.

Source page 18, 19

We were approaching that ceremonial arch when the border guards' band began to play our anthems, Kde domov můj and Nad Tatrou sa blýska. We stood as if frozen to the spot, tears fell from my eyes, and I threw myself to the ground with the cry: "My dear homeland, dear Czechoslovakia!" I saw that all around me everyone was embracing and kissing and weeping.

On home soil



AI illustration based on the memoir.

The anthems sounded as they crossed back into Czechoslovakia. Pavol fell to the ground; around him people wept and embraced.

Source page 19

When we got up, with tears in our eyes, we promised one another that we would work so that there would never be war again.

Then they took us to the town of Teplice Šanov, where we changed to another bus that carried us to our capital, Prague.

Since no trains were running yet, we travelled by various means of transport and finally reached home on 22 July 1945.

I was very glad that we had all lived to see the end of the war in good health, and ahead of us lies a life of peace and tranquillity.

Completed in Banská Bystrica on 20 September 1946

Pavol Bučan

born 4 January 1896

Transcribed and edited from the original by his son Ivan Bučan,

born 10 March 1929

End of the memoir

Family photographs

Pavol Bučan is the author of the memoir. Its closing attribution names his son Ivan Bučan as the person who transcribed and edited it. These family photographs show Ivan with his daughter Odetta Peniaková and with his wife Odetta Bučanová, née Zigová. The captions distinguish the two Odettas.

The dates and locations of these family photographs are unknown.



Family photograph

Ivan Bučan and his daughter Odetta Peniaková.

Family archive; photographs and identifications supplied by Martin Peniak. Photographer unspecified.

Ivan Bučan • Odetta Peniaková

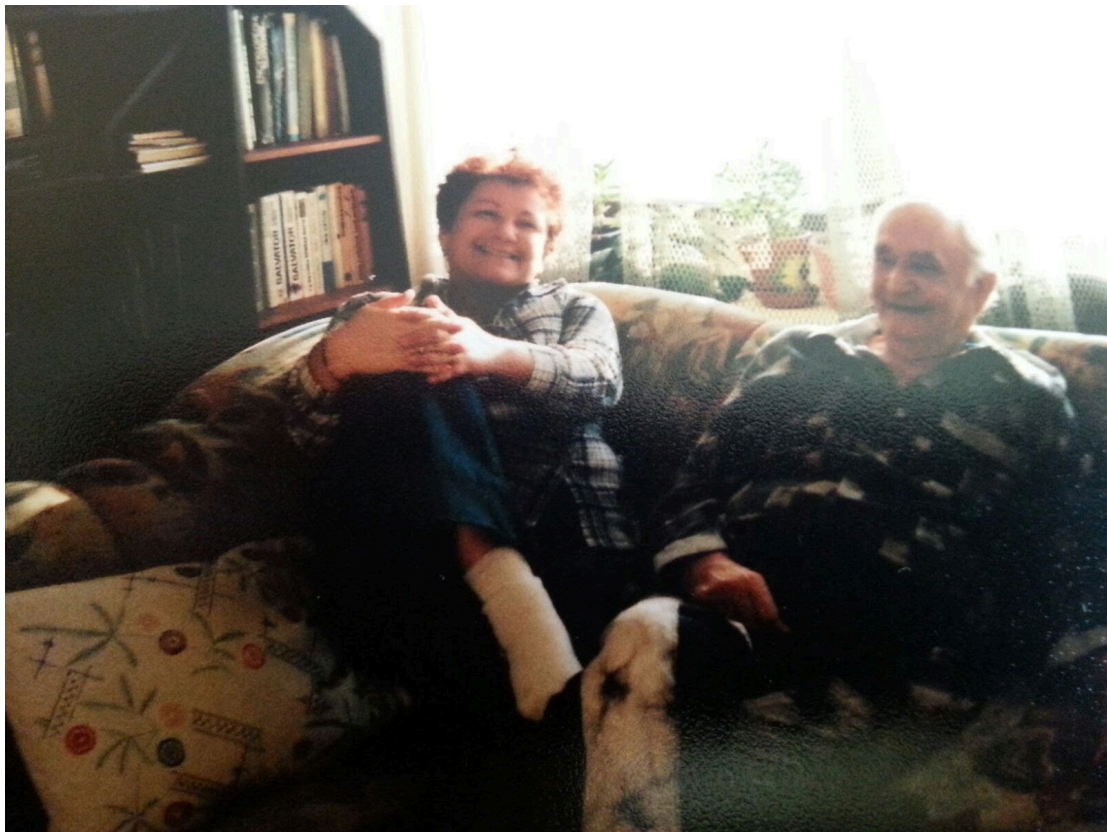


Family photograph

Odetta Peniaková with her father Ivan Bučan.

Family archive; photographs and identifications supplied by Martin Peniak. Photographer unspecified.

Ivan Bučan • Odetta Peniaková



Family photograph

Ivan Bučan and his daughter Odetta Peniaková.

Family archive; photographs and identifications supplied by Martin Peniak. Photographer unspecified.

Ivan Bučan • Odetta Bučanová



Family photograph

Odetta Bučanová, née Žigová, and Ivan Bučan.

Family archive; photographs and identifications supplied by Martin Peniak. Photographer unspecified.

Places in the memoir

These modern photographs introduce places named in the memoir. Each caption states when the photograph was taken. The account does not identify the village near Pritzwalk where Harach died or the precise bus-transfer point in Teplice.

Lichtenrade



Modern photograph

Memorial to victims of the Sachsenhausen subcamp in Berlin-Lichtenrade, Bornhagenweg 55, 15 November 2024. It commemorates the camp in which Pavol was imprisoned.

OTFW, Berlin / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0

Pritzwalk



Modern photograph

Pritzwalk town hall, 24 June 2008. A modern view locating the town. The nearby village where Harach died remains unnamed in the memoir.

Doris Antony, Berlin / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0

Teplice



Modern photograph

Teplice, Náměstí Svobody and the town hall, 29 May 2014. A modern view of the town where Pavol records changing to a bus for Prague. The transfer point is unspecified.

ŠJů, Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 4.0

Notes on the text

The departure date (source page 8)

The memoir dates departure preparations to 12 April 1945. The Sachsenhausen Memorial dates the main evacuation to 20-21 April. This discrepancy is acknowledged; the date in the personal account is retained.

The prisoner estimate (source page 8)

The figure of at least 200,000 prisoners is explicitly presented as the prisoners' assumption. The Memorial's figure of over 200,000 covers the whole period 1936-1945; it does not confirm a simultaneous population at evacuation.

Medical procedures and reported information (source pages 5-6)

The narrator attributes the claim about experimental sera to fellow patients. That attribution is retained. His account of pain, treatment and illness does not by itself independently establish the procedure or a diagnosis.

¹ An incomplete sentence (source page 5)

The original Slovak transcription retains the unfinished clause “ktorej členovia do ruky vziať zbraň”: literally, “whose members ... take a weapon into their hands”. The typescript lacks the verb expressing the members' attitude. The edited text and translations keep the complete assertion about the sect's imprisonment in the narrative and preserve the incomplete clause here. Neither refusal nor prohibition is supplied as verified wording by the author.

Replacement photographs and recovered words (pages 6, 14 and 17)

New photographs supplied on 5 September 2026 replace those three pages in the photographic edition. Page 14 now reveals the words for towards, during, more, told me, his own fate and slowly dragged himself. The opening words hodne, choroby and ostali on page 17 are also fully visible. On page 6, a cancelled, overtyped false start precedes the clear word apríla; the readable transcription is “At the beginning of April 1945”. No numerical day has been supplied. Minor letter restorations elsewhere remain marked in the original Slovak transcription and are integrated into the edited text and translations.

Names, places and narrative voice

The diplomatic Slovak retains period spellings and apparent errors in names and places. The edited edition normalises only unambiguous spelling variants; it does not invent personal identifications or events. Meaningful repetitions, shifts into the present tense and the narrator's judgements are retained.

A contradictory sentence (source page 4)

The guard's warning combines getting away with it again with the threat of proper punishment. A potentially missing negative has not been supplied. The source contradiction is retained in the narrative and explained here.

Place spellings in the edited edition

Lichtenraden is standardised as Lichtenrade; Parchým/Parchym as Parchim, Neu-Ruppin as Neuruppin, Wittstok as Wittstock, Neusterlits as Neustrelitz and Pricwalk/Fritzwalk as Pritzwalk. Variant spellings of the collection camp towards the end are contextually standardised as Prenzlau. These are editorial identifications of spelling variants, not a new reconstruction of the exact route.

² Cancelled typing and the prisoner count (source page 17)

The replacement photograph shows a short cancelled typing fragment before tisíc, rather than a hidden numeral. The surviving Slovak reads “ako tisíc väzňov”. The cancelled characters are omitted; both Slovak editions retain ako. Its unusual grammatical relation is not silently resolved as about or more than. For readability, the translation says “a thousand” with this note recording the original qualification and uncertainty. This is not independent confirmation of an exact count, and no multiplier is supplied.

Historical context and sources

Sachsenhausen Memorial: 1936-1945

<https://www.sachsenhausen-sbg.de/en/history/1936-1945-sachsenhausen-concentration-camp/>

Death March Memorial in Below: April 1945

<https://www.below-sbg.de/en/history/april-1945-death-march-and-forest-camp/>

Berlin: Lichtenrade memorial plaque

<https://www.berlin.de/ba-tempelhof-schoeneberg/ueber-den-bezirk/gedenken/gedenktafeln/artikel.1426554.php>

Image sources and credits

Documentary photographs retain their complete framing and original colour or monochrome appearance. Each has its own photographer or archive attribution and image licence.

Sachsenhausen: Tower A

Sachsenhausen: entrance Tower A seen from the roll-call area, 28 August 2007. A modern photograph of a place described in the memoir.

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Source record • Licence

Lichtenrade: memorial

Memorial to victims of the Sachsenhausen subcamp in Berlin-Lichtenrade, Bornhagenweg 55, 15 November 2024. It commemorates the camp in which Pavol was imprisoned.

OTFW, Berlin / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0
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Source record • Licence

Sachsenhausen: roll call

Prisoners at a roll call in Sachsenhausen, approximately 1936–1944. A historical camp photograph; the people shown are not identified as Pavol or the companions named in his account.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-78612-0008 / CC-BY-SA 3.0
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Berlin: Wilhelmstraße

Berlin, the ruins of Wilhelmstraße, spring 1946. A later documentary view of a street named in the memoir.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-P0627-501 / Cürlis, Peter / CC-BY-SA 3.0
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Dresden: Frauenkirche

Dresden, the ruined Frauenkirche, after 17 September 1945. A period view of the devastated city, photographed after Pavol had returned home.

Deutsche Fotothek / Richard Peter sen., df_ps_0000384 / CC BY-SA 3.0 DE
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Source record • Licence

Pritzwalk: town hall

Pritzwalk town hall, 24 June 2008. A modern view locating the town. The nearby village where Harach died remains unnamed in the memoir.

Doris Antony, Berlin / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 3.0

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Source record • Licence

Teplice: Náměstí Svobody

Teplice, Náměstí Svobody and the town hall, 29 May 2014. A modern view of the town where Pavol records changing to a bus for Prague. The transfer point is unspecified.

ŠJů, Wikimedia Commons / CC BY 4.0

CC BY 4.0

Source record • Licence

Family archive

Family archive; photographs and identifications supplied by Martin Peniak. Photographer unspecified.

The dates and locations of these family photographs are unknown.

Illustrations created with AI

Digital illustrations created with the image-generation tool in Codex, based on Pavol Bučan's memoir. The prompts and image selections are recorded in the edition's production documentation.

A parcel among the rubble - While Pavol was clearing rubble in Berlin, a parcel of food landed at his feet. A guard later took it away.

I do not want to die yet - Even during the march, he noticed the plants beside the road. Nature sustained him, and he longed to return home.

The first night of freedom - After escaping with Jožko Kovalčík, they found an abandoned shelter. They covered it with branches and fell asleep exhausted.

Wood for the journey home - Before the second transport, skis from a store were cut into fuel for wood-gas lorries. Pavol left with the third transport.

On home soil - The anthems sounded as they crossed back into Czechoslovakia. Pavol fell to the ground; around him people wept and embraced.

The cover uses I do not want to die yet. All five illustrations were generated in September 2026.