

I HAD TO REST

There were times when I was momentarily on the verge of insanity having lost the will to live as exhaustion, hopelessness and despair put me in a state of stupor and indifference. One day while digging in one of the endless anti-tank trenches, I simply decided to just sit down and rest, out of the blue, in total denial of possible consequences. At that moment I just did not care. As totally predictable, a Nazi guard came running, foaming at the mouth with curses and baton swinging. "Why did you stop digging?" he roared. I awakened from my dazed state and realized I was on the precipice of my grave. I quickly conjured a response cowering, "Sir, a stone got into my shoe. I needed to sit down and get it out so I can work faster." The guard seemed to swallow this explanation and ordered me to proceed post-haste and continue working, as he turned and walked away. I am sure my reputation as a productive worker was an influence. Again, my Bubbe's spirit did not rest, even if I had gone nuts momentarily.

Another foolish incident occurred in Gross-Masselwitz around 1943. We were working on building railroad tracks. It was intensely arduous and years of these hardships wore on my hopelessness, more than ever. I was weary and depressed and began thinking of suicide. I temporarily abandoned my determination to survive and rob my enemy of victory over me. My thoughts spun on various quick and painless ways I might accomplish this. I settled on running between rail cars that passed occasionally very close to each other on adjacent tracks such that they would instantly crush me. At the last minute, I lost my nerve for that action but another crazy notion popped into my mind inexplicably in a moment of irrationality.

I don't know until this day what put this kooky thought into my head. With one foot stretched way out in front of me, I swung my pick with all my might directly onto the top of it, in the middle just above the toes. The sharp point of the pick spike went completely through my foot, emerging from the sole into the dirt below. In agony and delirium I was carried away. At such occasions, this would have rendered me useless to the taskmasters who would likely have dispatched me with a bullet. Probably because I was so liked as a worker, they took me to an infirmary where an inmate Jewish doctor attended to me. He told me that by luck the pick had completely missed any bones and only damaged flesh. It was a hard way to get the unexpected rest I had yearned for, but indeed the taskmasters tolerated the six weeks that I was allowed for my recovery. I guess they thought me valuable and worth the wait. I still carry its scar till this day. Naturally, gratitude to my Bubbe filled my being. Maybe getting me some much needed rest time is what she planned all along, steering me to the otherwise stupid and self-destructive prank I pulled with the pick. Perhaps she had planned this as a means of giving me a break, even if paid for with the pain of a severe injury.