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Eating Semmi: What Sprouts from Emptiness

PART I

You saunter around your split-level home on Windsor Drive in Cinnaminson, New Jersey. Your suspenders are neatly aligned, light dancing off of the mirror of your black shoes, your face smooth as worn sandpaper, your mouth closed as you chew the very last bite.

“Dad, Dad, what are you eating?” Martin, the youngest, long and thin, inquires. A smile dances on your lips. “Semmi,” you whisper back playfully.

“Can I have some? Please!”

“Do you even know what semmi is?”

One hungry-eyed head vigorously shakes back and forth, anxiously awaiting his treat.

“It’s Hungarian for nothing....”

This is my family’s, and perhaps the world’s, conversation with my grandfather. He told his story at my kitchen table for the first time in 1996 to his three children and his wife, when he was 68 years old and beginning to forget due to Alzheimer’s. This memoir is written in the style in which he spoke, with much of the text transcribed directly from his powerful words. The italicized portions are our words, sometimes words spoken directly to him on this occasion by one of his children or his wife; sometimes they are my thoughts or stories my father and aunt and uncle have told me. By this time in his life, he has already begun to forget a bit. Some things are disjointed, and I purposely kept the tense shifts within the text because I believe he is at times reliving the past. He was always proper and gentlemanly, crisply dressed, and ate like a true mensch. Some of these stories are on subjects about which he had never before spoken.

The poems inserted throughout the piece are all my original compositions. They were sometimes written with inspiration from the very subject about which my grandfather had just spoken, sometimes written through a cloud of questions and emotions ignited by the confusion and frustration of his suffering during the Holocaust and later struggles with Alzheimer's. And sometimes they are simply his words, rewritten in verses, more simple and haunting than anyone could imagine.

I viewed the conversation detailing this story on a DVD my father burned for me. It was composed of 14 clips, each approximately 12 to 15 minutes long. They were split into two digital folders, and at the beginning of the second folder there are two completely unrelated clips, taken on my dad's video camera directly before the conversation. They are of my younger brother, Noah, age 2, my older brother, Daniel, age 7, and me, age 5, accompanied by my aunt. I am wearing a leotard and pink ballet tights, and everyone else is wearing exercise clothes. We are dancing and doing "exercises" led by my aunt, all excited and smiling and carefree. These are the clips in the middle of a story of the greatest atrocity ever to befall my family. These are the clips depicting the future generations, carrying the hope that came out of my grandfather's suffering, the joy that can blossom from the past, from the story of survival. Why are those clips there, in the wrong chronological order? They are to tell us something. The clips are a strange coincidence, perhaps a sign, of how my grandfather nurtured life out of "semmi." That out of anything, happiness, laughter, joy, life can be born. That out of Hitler's plan of destruction and devastation, triumph and determination, love and laughter can be the most powerful proof of his failure.

If someone was looking for a thread with which to tie my grandfather's story together, a theme that weaves itself throughout everything he experienced, that theme would be food. Human beings' relationship with food began at a time when food was scarce, and humans developed genetic adaptations to seek out the most calorie-dense foods and to use up as few calories as possible through day-to-day activities in order to store energy for later. These genetic adaptations were beneficial at a time when food access was inconsistent, when food consisted solely of what could be found in nature, when people expelled physical energy in order to access food.

*However, today there is an excess of inexpensive and easily accessible food for most people. Energy does not need to be used in order to get it, and food has been processed so that just the aspects that are pleasing to the taste buds are present. The excess of highly processed and fast food, the evolution of the global food system, has taken place much more quickly than human genetics have had the chance to adapt. The food that tastes good is the food with high fat, high sugar, high variety characteristics. Coupled with a sedentary lifestyle and a food surplus, this has contributed to a global obesity epidemic. In earlier times, the seeking of a variety of foods implied finding foods with a variety of necessary nutrients, as each food growing naturally in the environment contained different nutrients. However, presently many foods contain virtually no essential nutrients.*¹

*Obesity is currently the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States. Sugar can be addictive, and people adapt what they eat based on the relative cost of products. Processed, nutritionally-lacking foods are often the cheapest and simplest to consume. Modern humans view food as a commodity rather than a necessary element of survival.*² *With this idea of food as a commodity, food waste has become rampant. A full 25% of the water that humans use produces food that no one consumes. One third of all fresh fruit and vegetables is wasted before consumers have access to them, and 40% of the world's landfill content is food waste.*³

Pop Pop, my grandfather, had a close relationship with food — he appreciated its scarcity and its ability to sustain during his childhood and the Holocaust, and it became a representation of community and of humanity. Food represented his ability to overcome what he feared most—starvation. The most profound destructive and debilitating element used against him by the

¹ Brownell, Kelly D. Class Lecture. The Biology, Psychology and Politics of Food. Open Yale Courses. Lecture 2—Introduction: What We Eat, Why We Eat, and the Key Role of Food in Modern Life. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <http://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-123/lecture-2>.

² Brownell, Kelly D. and Gearhardt, Ashley. Class Lecture. The Biology, Psychology and Politics of Food. Open Yale Courses. Lecture 6—Culture and the Remarkable Plasticity of Eating. Web. 14 Dec. 2012. <http://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-123/lecture-6>.

³ Macguire, Eoghan, and Ines Torre. "Food Waste: From Farm to Fork and Landfill." CNN. Cable News Network, 21 Dec. 2012. Web. 22 Dec. 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/12/21/world/food-waste-infographic/index.html>.

Nazis was not a gun, nor was it a gas chamber, nor was it a club or a fist. It was an absence rather than a presence. An absence of access to common decencies, most notably, food. That is why I call starvation a weapon. Like a weapon in the common understanding of the term, it is used against victims, has the ability to torture, to kill, to weaken.

Starvation in daily life, during peacetime, is a hindrance to human development and survival. However, the world's population has found a way to overcome starvation throughout much of the world, through agriculture, trade, and the development of our modern food system. Humans have done so in a way that has allowed another threat, obesity and all of the medical issues that come with it, to endanger their health. Many communities have become disconnected from the sources of their food, have lost an appreciation for its purpose and its value, and have allowed it to evolve from being the most essential element of survival to a leading cause of death.

“We don’t trust food. Instead of trusting it we fear it and instead of valuing it we throw it away. We don’t smell food. Instead of smelling food we just read the label on the back of the package. We don’t cook food; we just add water.”⁴

“You’re beautiful” he told me
 Stroking my face with the back of his hand and smiling
 Just after I leaned my face close and touched my lips to his cheek
 I smiled. Embarrassed but obliged.

He sat in a soft brown chair tugging at his shoe
 Jamming a pen into the polished black leather
 Muttering to himself and pinching his eyebrows
 His suspenders parallel and hair parted down the side

He wouldn’t get in the car.
 Flailing out to strike his son as he tried to help
 “I don’t know who you are or what you’re doing to me”

And before, when he remembered, he told his story
 Of men with pistols that spit bullets or sometimes made you want them to spit one at you
 How funny, he didn’t know who they were or what they were going to do to him

⁴ *How Food Shapes Our Cities*. Perf. Carolyn Steel. *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*. N.p., Oct. 2009. Web. 27 Nov. 2012. http://www.ted.com/talks/carolyn_steel_how_food_shapes_our_cities.html.

Everyone I talk to says to tell my story into a microphone, to put it on tape. I say, I don't have the energy...now that you made this opportunity I don't want to deny it because really and truly it will be best if people know. It's not good to forget it so that it cannot happen again.

You--Andy, Andrew, Pop Pop, Dad--were born on February 25, 1928 in Budapest, Hungary. You were lucky because you had all of your family nearby. You played soccer, took the trolley car to a hill at the edge of town to go skiing, and loved radio ever since you got a Crystal radio as a present when you were seven. You were lucky because you were happy, because you had just enough but not too much.

I lived in fourth floor apartment in Budapest, Hungary. There was a grocery on the first floor. My mother was a seamstress, and my father drove taxis. As Jews we were simply second class citizens before Hungary was overwhelmed. The persecution got worse and worse, and by the time I was 16 we had no freedom to go out. There were only certain times we could do our shopping--after 12 or one when the stores were empty. We were taken away to work, but we always came back. That was not the terrible thing. My father was drafted into a special Jewish unit of the army, but he was not there to fight because Jews weren't trusted with guns. He did come back. It was the Hungarian Nazi sympathizers who treated us poorly, who enforced these rules. They wore an emblem displaying a cross with four arrows. My father and I were taken away to a local area to do manual labor for no pay. But we always came back.

We rarely had any food. We would buy a loaf of bread, put it out in the sun to dry, put it in a paper bag and store it for later, and this was a life saver.

You valued food, the scarcity of it, the power it held in it to help you survive, above all else.

Then they came to take out everyone between the ages of six and 60. My sister was barely six. We left her in the care of a friend and neighbor. We were marched to Budapest, to the big factories, in a horrible environment, and kept there for a couple of days. I don't know what was the objective; we never knew what was going on or why anything was happening. We once or twice went back to the apartment; we were given a paper saying we were in the protection of the Swedish government. Then we had to move to Budapest. The brutality was not done by the Germans. They weren't visible. My sister was under the protection of this lady, and we didn't know how long it would last...nothing really happened, there was just no food. When we

marched back to Budapest we could see blood on the sidewalk and the curb and newspapers thrown on there.

One evening, I saw a man walking. It was around 12 or 1 when Jews were allowed to go out. This happened all over Budapest; it was a big city with close to a million Jewish people. One of these jerks [Hungarian Nazi sympathizers] goes over there and starts hitting him. 'Get out of here Jew, get back!' 'I'm just going to get something to eat...'. I don't know what happened, we kept marching. But this was all over...newspapers covered dead people. They were shot.

Then something happened that is still one of my biggest self-tortures. We were at the central rail station. It was dark. I heard that a number of people went into the synagogue in the area. I kept saying, "let's go in there because maybe this is a shelter for us," and my father had the tremendous decision to make, and he decided to bring us inside. It ended up being another trap. From there we were taken to the Judenhause--the Jewish house. There was almost no space. We were three families in a two bedroom apartment. There was a stove and some place to lie down. Some shelter.

Then my father found out they were accepting some workers in the hospital. I had no clue what to do, where to go, what was a good decision, so I went to the hospital because it was safer since they used young kids to do work. I took the linen to the laundry, and there was food so I ate. I wanted to take some home for my parents. I took off my yellow arm band and packed up food, went to the house and gave my family the food. They worried about me, but nothing happened. I returned to work at the hospital and again collected food to bring back to my family. When I went to the house again, I was grabbed right away by a German soldier, and we were all marched to a railroad station. I didn't know what it was; it was just another place. We were not needed in the hospital, I guess.

We were marched overnight one or two nights without food to cattle cars where we were put 75 people to a car, loaded in, with nowhere to go to the bathroom. I had a backpack with a little bit of tomato paste in it....

Were you worried about dying?

No. Basically I was in good shape. I was hungry but I didn't think of dying...that was not on my menu. The only thing that worried me is what I saw on the city streets, the brutality and death, and that didn't happen to me. I don't know why it happened ...I wasn't smart enough to figure out just what is happening...perhaps if I had foresight....

And he wandered the camp
 Eyes sallow, then flashing with hunger then hatred...then hope
 Bony fingers colored with dirt
 Clutching a filthy folded piece of parchment
 Százéves Étterem⁵ printed in bold letters across the front
 The sweat and dirt-smeared center fold
 Reading "DEATH" in font so large it spanned the pages
 The word, the sentence that would forever mark the menus of others
 If they had only known, they had the means to change it
 But they had long ago reconciled themselves to their fate lying in the hands of others
 He was among the few to see that he too had something with which to mark the page
 The deep, charcoal "X" blocking out the only word that made sense to most
 He had replaced the printed word with "Andrew"
 Scribbled small and sure and sloppy
 In his own hand

We had occasional stops. It was a big relief to be able to let our water out outside...a place not to do it on others. While in the car we had to step on other people's faces to get to the crack in the wall, a place where you could poke out and not do it on others. There was an elderly man who couldn't see in the dark...every once in a while you'd get some on your face.

On one of those stops, looking out of the car I saw my father...his clothes and his walk.... I was worried I would lose him. I told one of the guards I saw my father. I asked to get in with him, and the soldiers were kind enough to let me.

I ended up in Buchenwald, where they stripped your clothes off and pulled out the teeth of people with fillings or anything like that. They pulled at our hair, searching for lice; we were all naked and ice cold. It was December of '44, and we were dumped into some kind of black chemical or whatever it was to disinfect you...at the time I didn't have any lice...and they threw some rags at you. That was your clothing.

Buchenwald camp was not an extermination camp, but tens of thousands of prisoners died from starvation, disease, overwork (if you didn't work you were executed), senseless shootings or hangings, human experimentation, and the testing of vaccines on prisoners. Think

⁵ The name of the oldest inn in Budapest, Hungary

of animal testing, looking for products that say, "this product was not tested on animals"...what about "this product was not tested on Jews"?

We went to this quarantine...this big barrack. A lot of people were pushed in, and there were racks where you could lie down on ripped pieces of rags. I think I was able to find a shoe...made out of wood with rag on top. My father told me to be careful. People don't have anything; they will take whatever they can. If you want to survive then keep the clothes, keep the shoes with you.

I came up with some disease and was put into another barrack--Kronkenhouse--I was separated from my father. I couldn't get out, I was sick. I was full of blotches...there was no food...I don't know if they gave us anything. A piece of bread maybe...I don't remember if I ate in that place...I must have...I had to or else I would have died...they had to have given us something.

There was an older man who organized people to do the best they could in the environment. Everyone got something out of the loaf of bread that came. We were given a dish for eating soup and a spoon--that was all. You got your bread; you ate your bread. Then they took you out in groups to do labor. We went to a mountain where we were trying to dig a hole in the granite to build a shelter for the SS. Some of the women who lived with the SS were more humane--occasionally, not often, they brought us a little bit of soup.

When we were given food, it was almost exclusively a little bit of this soup-like thing made out of a big yellow root.

We would sit at a table with 10 people on each side. There wasn't enough room; we all had one shoulder off and kept bothering each other. We learned to sit with one foot on the other side. We didn't know what was in the soup. The second or third night now, I wasn't weakened yet, I still had some fat on my body. There was a guy sitting next to me who stirs my soup, not his, and he says, you're so lucky. You have a piece of potato or something. And his eyes water, and I needed the potato like he did, but my heart broke for the man. Here's this new guy who comes in and he's lucky enough to get a potato. It sort of made it real as to what the hell place I am in. I was an optimist up to that point...we'll be free. And I was stupid.

I found out that they took my father away and many other people to build high wires in the middle of the winter. People said they would die from not enough food...I said no.

I was hungry; I was getting skinnier...but we had a little bit of food and I thought that was enough. I don't know what's gonna happen, but hopefully we'll survive. There's a little bit of food and everybody gets skinny...those other guys I was with, I couldn't stand them. They were all negative.

It was your attitude that probably kept you going.

It was nothing I could fight with. I didn't see any brutality there, except perhaps on the parade place. There were head counts every once in a while and the entire population of every one of these barracks would have to go out in the middle of the night. The SS were out there, and they were shouting and illuminating the group with their flashlights. They kept counting for hours, and some people in the group couldn't stand there anymore. They had to release their water and solids. Oh my God what is this? Why couldn't they just know who wasn't there? This brutality was another side of a terrible place. I still didn't lose my hope that we would get through.

Were there bathrooms?

There were. Not bathrooms...that's another story. When we went to the concentration camp there was a big hole, a big, big hole. And all around that hole there is a rail. And I guess the way you were supposed to free yourself on this thing is to sit on the edge and let it fall.

What about cleaning yourself? Was there any way for you to do that?

There was a place with shower heads and you could wash your hands. You could do something--wash your face.

And water...there had to have been water.

There might have been water; I don't remember that detail. We had something to drink...maybe it was the morning coffee...I didn't take notes. I didn't have a pencil.

The story about the toilet...It's a pretty dirty story, but it's something I lived through...the fact that I did what I did probably saved my life in one way. We spent a long time on the train with very, very little or no food. We came to the camp and got tidbits or pieces of bread when we were quarantined.

I had a chisel and a spoon - that was my treasure. That was what I lived from. So we did get something in there. But for a long time you don't go to the bathroom it isn't going to come out. And I had begun to feel this pressure, and I couldn't do it. So what you do...dirty thing but

it's human...you take the back end of the spoon, you try to polish it down against a stone or something and you try to get it in your rear end to force something out.

And I think one evening, it was pitch dark, I was sitting there and I was doing this for hours and I did release some of this block, and I remember I only had to do it once. After that there wasn't enough food. It's not a fun thing to do.

Walking out to the daily work there was a lunch break...I don't know what it was, a half hour or ten minutes; I had no idea. There was time. There was some little grass, one looked like onion, and I pulled it out and it smelled like onion and it was good, something to eat. So I collected them, and when we marched back I was rich...I had something I could trade for something. Not thinking about anybody else, just myself.

I was in the camp from late December, near Christmas of 1944, to April 1945.

Wow, that was a long time.

That was a very short time. People were in concentration camps for years...that's why I survived. I was overweight, and overweight is probably what saved me.

The Nazis did not occupy Hungary until 1944. This was much later than other places. That's why you think you were lucky in a way. Lucky, huh.

And he had it "good"
 Scraping a spoon along a rock to make it smooth
 Picking out his hardened waste
 Hours and hours and minutes and seconds
 Cramped and dark and ashamed
 But...life
 After that there was no food to scrape out

And he had it "good"
 He once found a piece of potato in his soup
 That made a man's eyes water
 the soup dribbling from his sockets
 the moment a skinny teenage prisoner realized
 it was stupid to hope

I don't think there were crematoriums in the camp. I didn't see smoke anywhere. There may have been, but I didn't know about it...and no one said in the camp that there was...*no one in the camp said anything. When did anyone ever have any idea what was going on? Never.*

My father was on the other side of the quarantine. I didn't see him. I saw these people that looked like zombies.... I could recognize the faces of some of them from the cattle car my father was in...but I was glad to see them. This man I saw on the other side of the fence confirmed my father—Micsa--was there and he was working. It was bad. Those people were working really but looked like ghosts. It was at the limit of this man's ability to even think or talk, but he was kind enough to say, "yes, your father is there".

I never did find out where my mother went. I went back to Hungary in 1946 looking for surviving relatives...to the best of my knowledge she was in Bergen Belsen, a women's camp...maybe it was another. I don't remember.

And then there was the death march.

As the American troops advanced, and it became clear that Hitler would be defeated, the Nazis were given orders to evacuate the camps and take the Jewish prisoners on marches that would kill them and delay defeat for as long as possible. These death marches were a very efficient and inexpensive execution strategy. People were starving and worn thin. Their spirits were often weak, and they didn't have any reason to have hope. Marching them for weeks, barely allowing them to rest and not giving them food was a surefire method for committing a genocide.

Did they just tell you one day, "okay everyone, we're going to a death march?"

No. There is no information at all. We have no idea what's going on. They just simply emptied the barracks and moved us over to another next to the factory. We were there for a couple of days and don't know why. The idea of these concentration camps was to get free labor--that was one of them. Besides that, extinguish the people they don't want. They took the bodies to make soap. That's what I heard afterwards. They didn't waste anything.

After this factory we were marched for months. At the start of this march, although most of us were skeletons...I was not yet a complete skeleton. I became a skeleton after that 45-day death march...I don't know where the numbers I give come from. They just flash in my mind. They might not be right.

Many were taken in railroad cars, those who could not walk.

It seemed like months this march...I remember having 36 hours of walking, no stopping, and people dying. There was no official distribution of anything.

Somebody was killed along the way...many were killed. There was this cart which one person pushed and the rest pulled...when somebody was killed they picked up the body and kept going...when there were some trees, they took the body out and threw it in the trees and kept going....

There are dead dogs, dead horses, dead anything next to the road. People from our ranks, probably smart, not like me where I wouldn't eat any of that, they went with the knife or whatever they had. The back of the spoon used to be polished from the stones...*the spoon that was your most prized possession, the spoon that you and others used to pick clogged excrement from your bodies to survive*...that was your knife. The SS would laugh. These people took a little bloody meat and got back in line.

I saw an animal bleeding on the side of the road
 So I took my spoon
 Which I had polished into a knife
 To slice off a hairy sliver of the horse's belly
 Somehow knowing it would make me sick didn't stop me
 Somehow knowing I would be beaten and kicked didn't either
 And somehow it wasn't satisfying. But that didn't stop me from dreaming of more every minute
 Or from digging my arms into stinking, rotten, bug-ridden compost (references next paragraph, consider placing poem after next paragraph)
 And eating what I would have cringed to think of feeding to my dog
 Somehow there was an intense desire to live
 Even though my family was dead
 Even though curling up on the ground
 And sleeping forever
 Seemed enticingly sweeter
 It was as if this was the most important game in the world
 Where all I wanted was to eat and to sleep
 But those were just the temptations
 And the only real goal
 The only way to defeat the boss at the end of the level
 The boss taunting me, shooting my friends and wearing a uniform
 Was to survive

I think there was actually food given to those people who were up front. I guess they must have been pushing the carts. Plus the group that was picking the dead men up and throwing them in the carts. They got potatoes. Raw potatoes--good stuff now.

You say this with a hint of excitement in your voice, like potatoes are a prize.

All I know is that when we walked on the road there were potato peels. Now they ate raw potatoes. I ate the shells or whatever. As you go by large compost piles the others eat it and you think I'm gonna eat it too. You put your arms in up almost to the shoulder and you find something solid and you pull it out. Food. And I didn't get killed. Not everyone got killed. Many times they would beat them to death.

And he had it "good"
He didn't see any brutality
Except bodies on the sidewalk, heads covered with newspaper
Except a man beat over the head for drinking out of a muddy puddle
Except people collecting bodies in a wheelbarrow in exchange for raw potatoes

But he could eat potato skins off the dirt
And he could dig his hand elbow deep into a compost pile
And pull out something solid
Like grabbing a stuffed animal in a claw arcade game
He wasn't in a death camp.

Did people see you when you were walking? Did you walk through towns?

When we went to a town I couldn't believe it. We had never before gone into towns. We went to a town where there were trolley cars. I had no idea where I was. There were people...and we just marched through. I don't know what they thought of us. I don't know if they were impressed or not impressed.

Why would they be impressed? How, if they were humans, could they be impressed?

They probably thought we were criminals. Nobody complained....

There were 1500 people on the march...it looked like 1500. I found other Hungarians. The young man, Yanchi, who became my dear friend, I'm not sure who saw who first but we were talking and we knew we were going someplace but we didn't know where....

Could be to death, to heaven, to hell, to the tops of the trees. Or it could be to life...real life.

Everybody said yeah, we'll stick together. I didn't have this daily contact with them, but they were close by in the area, not talking to each other just knowing who's who.

No longer every man for himself. Finally a sense of community, of familiarity, of family in some form.

We stopped sometimes--not often--sometimes in a barn but usually just on the ground. *It must have been freezing.* It was...it was raining so it was not ice yet...I just wanted to survive. I would help people who fell back...sometimes people would fall back. I saw one of my father's acquaintances run out, there was water at the edge of the road and he went over there and put his hand in there and took a drink...and I saw an SS officer go over to him and hit him and he fell down and I saw from the side and I knew this person and he was helpless and he couldn't get up...and they hit him on the head or whatever and he said nothing and he didn't do anything and a couple of other prisoners went over and shot him...

Do you mean officers? Why would prisoners shoot him? How would prisoners have guns? You are unclear about this and simply move on.

I saw this man die essentially with no fight. A group of us was trying to keep him walking--he couldn't--he was at his end and the SS was behind us and they start to hit him and I didn't want to die and same with Yanchi. And I could no longer support the guy, cause the next was your head...a rifle is a pretty heavy thing. We sort of forced ourselves back into the ranks I think; I don't have a microscopic analysis of it...and I didn't look back. And it was a traumatic experience but I figure I'm not going to go before I want to, and I didn't want to....

We found him sprawled in the street
 His body a six foot pole
 Perfectly perpendicular
 As if he had been made to fit that path
 Or the path had been made to fit him
 A rag clinging to his crotch
 Another draped over his eyes
 I couldn't get myself to lift it to see
 Instead I knelt in the dirt beside his body
 And wrapped my fingers around his clenched fist
 My head dropping to the hollow
 Half moon concave below his protruding ribs
 Jan dropped to his knees
 took my hand to press into his matted beard
 And placed his face on my cheek
 Smearing our tears together with our faces and empty hands
 We lay there until we could taste the dirt
 That puffed up from the ground as distant boots marched
 But before we had to run into the shadows
 Something made me pry open the man's fingers
 The creases caked with dirt and a flattened cockroach
 His last chance at life.

I said to Yanchi that day, or the next day, I don't know. I couldn't breathe. That's a normal part of a human life, you breathe. You don't know you're breathing; you're just breathing. And this day...I needed to think and make an effort to do it. "Breathe! Breathe!" *You motion with your fist up and down, "In! Out!"*

The power of the mind to choose your physical state. Jewish prisoners all eventually came to that state. They were weak enough that they could decide to curl up in a ball, and they would die. Or they could keep on fighting, but most of the time deciding to keep on fighting wasn't enough to stay alive...some aspects of physical strength were crucial...and you were almost at the point where your body could no longer handle it.

Besides moving along the road, I now had to make sure I was getting oxygen or whatever it was. I didn't know the details. So I felt this is it. If I don't go away, hide somewhere, this is going to be the end of my life. I told Yanchi that we were not going to survive another day, and he agreed. We were herded into this big barn where there was a tremendous amount of hay, and we could actually lie down and sleep so we lay down next to each other.

Now there were 250 I think. Not 1,500 but 250. A lot of them were dead-- *almost 85%...*--there was no official counting on the march. In the middle of the night, I was totally unaware what happened. There were apparently guns going off indicating that the American group was coming. There was fighting. I don't know if the SS had a role, they were just doing the torture.

Yanchi woke up, and I don't know why he woke up...there's apparently some chaos. They're getting everyone out because of the Americans, so let's hide now. That's where he saved my life. I probably would have been eaten by the dogs. Yanchi saw people coming down from the ladders in the hayloft, which was very high, three or four stories up, and Yanchi says, "let's go up there. This is the chance. Maybe they'll go without us."

Yanchi had just gotten to the hay, and I was just about to step up and a light shines on me...the light of the SS. I thought--just get across. You may be dead, but try it anyway. So I got across. The guy probably wasn't even looking at me.

With constant fear, how can you know?

It was probably only a fraction of a second, but to me it was like the end of life.

We got into the top of the hay and stayed quiet, hoping the dogs didn't find us. Down below there was so much turmoil. There was shouting and dogs barking and people getting ready to march. There was not much air, but there was enough. *The most basic needs of survival. Just*

like the scarcity of food. Not much but enough. Most people in the US no longer have an understanding of this--excess and too much are all that are known and expected.

Our group left to continue the march, and we slept through the night in that barn...then in the morning, we hear some noise on the lower level—some farm laborers apparently already found some people who hid in that hay.

So Yanchi whispers to me, wondering if I was around. Some jerk hears and says, “up there” so Yanchi shuts up. I was just hoping nobody will find us. We had wishful thinking.... Some guy came up and I was burrowing further and further...hoping I can hide...but I couldn’t.

Was there terror in you?

I mean, what can I do? I tried to survive. I didn’t know what was outside, what it was.

The guy comes out and apparently sees the hole where I furrowed...and he says something...not in a language I would understand. So he took the pitchfork with spines about a foot and a half long, you know, into the hay, so I kept on going down. He was smart--he reversed the pitchfork and took the stick. I was moving to the side. I had a rag cap, so when I moved down, that got stuck further up, and he found it and knew I was there. I couldn’t do anything, I came up.

The workers who found us were two Russian refugees...these type of workers had a little red patch with either an “R” or a “P” telling whether they were Polish or Russian, and these mean each had “R’s.” I guess they were some kind of forced laborers. They got Yanchi. They got several of us out of there--seven of us eventually. There may have been more...some may have escaped some other place.... They could have been strong enough and fast enough to get out.

These people didn’t know what to do with us. They didn’t want to just kill us...they weren’t authorized to do that. But they called the police. They were standing around with pitchforks, and the police came. I didn’t know what they were going to do, but they came with guns. They were to take us to the police headquarters several towns away. It was a long distance, and we probably could not make it, but we started on that march.

There were no SS, just local policemen. Just policemen whose job was to do what they were told. And no one was telling them anything about us, just that their duty was to take us to the headquarters. The prisoners were here; they have to take care of the prisoners and not let them get away...who knows, maybe these prisoners are killers.

To have that degree of contortion and deception, that complete reversal of understanding...murderers. Emaciated, sallow, tortured murderers. The ones being murdered en masse are thought to be murderers.

We were just marched. And we were weak. They were not cruel. If you dragged or fell you got up, and nobody hit you on the head. It was 1,000 times better. They were not inhuman.

That's the time that I came to that little town that I will never forget. People keep coming out of the door. There were like four homes. So this kid comes out, looks at us from there, I could see him. And he goes back in the house and brings out two or three people and they look at us and then these people go back into the building and bring out a loaf of bread and a knife. Another brings out his canister of milk...it has a big lid and it's metal and it's a shining metal thing. So we approach this place. They are running out and they are offering bread. They had some cups and they put some milk in it, or coffee, I don't know.

And they offered it to these skeletons that walked by...this is humanity.

I couldn't eat. I was too sick; I couldn't digest food. I was saving everything, and I had this raggedy jacket and I was saving everything for a day when I can eat. And they gave me, I think, something to drink and I did. A little bit of milk. That must have saved my life perhaps because I was so rickety.

Apparently the policemen had further orders of what to do with us. The plan was now for us to be moved to the railroad station which was two towns away so that we could be sent to meet up with the SS and continue our march.

At one of those towns, this policeman somehow got an ox cart and we didn't have to walk. Finally, near the evening time it stopped, and they put us into a little jail, really a house made out of bricks.

It's crazy that this structure can be labeled "jail" and the concentration camps be labeled "camp." The connotation of each word is so far from what it represents to you.

The policeman, who I later found out was Mr. Maurer, comes in and says, "the doors are not closed; you can leave. I think you'd be better off if you stayed. I'm going to bring you back some food and some water and tomorrow we'll go in the ox cart and go to the next town and my friend, a farmer, will give you more food." All of this is said in German, and Yanchi, who spoke German, translated for us.

It sounded just too good...not too good, good. I believed that this policeman wasn't going to send us to meet up with our old march so I said to Yanchi, "we have no other option...if we go out we have no food, no strength, no nothing. This looks like an opportunity." And we decided we were not leaving.

How did, how do you have any trust in anyone left? Nothing was ever told to you; you were lied to and mistreated. What made you think this would be different?

I later found out, from his daughter, Martha, that when he came home that evening he sat in a chair and sobbed. It upset her terribly because when he saw us, the head of the police in the town...everybody knows him...is in tears. He couldn't stop. He said he saw such horrible things. The local German policemen were not the SS, didn't know the extent of the treatment of the Jews.

Sure enough, the next morning he packs us up and tells us, "Don't try to run away because probably someone is going to hurt you."

And the man in all his actions certainly proves what kind of person he was. He was always gentle and kind...and when I needed some help later on, when I was building up my minimal way of making a living, fixing radios or building things...he was always of help.

Anyway, we went to this barracks, to this barn, and there was a nice long table and they sat us down and gave us a favorite of mine...soup. My mother used to make it. I ate the egg...I was very sick. But they fed us; they treated us very kindly. We stayed that day, and then they packed us up and we were put on this other cart and Mr. Maurer talks to us again and explains...he knew the Americans were very close. It's a matter of one or two days. He told us he was going to take us over to a friend's farm. These are all friendly people taking care of the land. He had already discussed the matter with his friend. He told us, "you will be put up; you will have food, a place to rest. And maybe the Americans will be there soon..." So that's what happened. We got in a cart; we were taken over.

We went in, and we slept and the barn offered food. I don't know how we ate...I don't remember that detail, but they gave us again something to eat and to lie down...and low and behold the next morning somebody went out and saw that the American tanks are coming. Somebody is shouting "comrade" and "comrade", whatever that means. Here come the Americans.

All of us heard this; we were rolling down the hay. I almost broke my neck. *Imagine if that was the moment at which you died....* And I look and, sure enough, there are tanks slowly moving towards us.

Everything seems to be April...April may have been the end of the world.

April 11, 1945 was the official date of the Buchenwald liberation by allied forces. So April was the end of a world, or maybe just the end of a bitter nightmare. But then again, for many it was a beginning too....

This whole group comes to a stop. And they see these seven scoundrels in rags.

Yes, you are a scoundrel. You ran away from a death march; you fought to survive. You refused to let the Nazis beat you, and you trusted some lowly German policeman.

The lid of the first tank opens and the officer looks up and asks a question. Yanchi answers. He speaks every language, you know. [Laughing] I wasn't jealous. I was so proud--my friend can speak every language. He's the one guy with brains and education. *Education, maybe, but the one guy with brains? You went on to put yourself through school and become an electrical engineer.*

Yanchi had another skill I could never do...while he's on the railroad he's beating out a tone with his two feet...at one time you had to do two things...I kept watching. I could never do that with my feet. I was trying real hard...and he was...I mean, I love that guy...everything I wanted to learn from him.

He's answering in English this guy and he tells him about the SS. The soldier tells us don't go away, stay here. He says, "by later on this day I will be notifying the medics that they will be picking you up here, set up a place to take care of you. Don't go away; stay here." And then he hands out a big, big box...full of all of their rations or maybe the care packages or what they had. And he says, "here, take this...take it to the farm and eat." Then he goes back into his tank, and the second tank stops, the lid opens, another box comes out and this is repeated ten times, and we were running in and out with this stuff...and we have too much. Nobody will be able to eat all that. So we say no more, we have lots of food and thank you.

Pop Pop on Friendship:

Michael, Susan, Martin, I want you to understand something.

Friendship teaches you about life, compassion, love, purpose

But there are many levels of friendship.

Not all friends are equal in dearness and importance to you.

You simply must understand the places different friends hold

And the levels of sacrifice connected to these friendships.

It can all be understood in cookies.

A six cookie friend. If you had six cookies you would give him one.

And a true best friend?

A three cookie friend. If you had three cookies you would give him one.

“I get it! And a two cookie friend would be to that friend you have once in a lifetime”

Hush children. There is no such thing as a two cookie friend.

Then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, this other type of soldiers appeared. They were prisoners actually, of war. But not under the tremendous pressure of concentration camps. They were posted at these farms as laborers. One of them speaks Hungarian so I say, “Who are you?”

We said we have to stay here...the medics will be back. The Hungarian prisoner of war says that we can come with them if we want so we won't have to wait to be cared for.... He was very kind. And obviously they were friends, not enemies. And he says, “you don't have to walk,” and he took this cart...we weren't in very good shape...and they took us over to the German hospital, the local hospital in Eirgelsbach. And there's a whole gang of them and they bang on the door. Nobody wants to come out, and they keep shouting. They threatened the people inside to let us in...they screamed and they threatened them I guess.... “We want to get these people cleaned up” and eventually, with some fear, these nuns opened the door and we went in. They and these soldiers made sure we were bathed and cleaned—we were ridded of the lice and whatever--and we were spick and span. I haven't seen water on my body in a couple of months or something like that...so we came out clean and not naked. They threw away our “clothes” and they gave us their spare clothes. We all got dressed in these uniforms...not fancy but clothes! Actual clothes! Now I don't know the details, but it was fit for a human being.

Then we got on a cart, you know, they did not want to take one ounce of our energy away. And then they bring us over to their little place where they live, and they sat in their beds

and played banjo and had tea. All of their packages they had from home they opened up. We had tons of food from before, but they gave us something of their own. They sang. Such humanity, it made you feel like...there's life.

So that time comes, and they take us back to the place where the American soldiers said they would return; they did not forget. I probably would have forgotten.

You keep emphasizing the good of others over yourself.

Sure enough the medics come, and they are looking for us. They pack us away and take us into a house they had arranged that day to empty it to be able to put us inside. They took us up, and they gave us sugar...*Glycerol or glucose*. Yeah, so it gave us like a boost.

Food, it was food.

Which the body could digest, because I couldn't eat normal food...my stomach couldn't get the nutrients it needed. It had been so long since I had eaten anything substantial. Still for days after that I couldn't eat at all.

They, again, were typical of American troops. They loved the eggs, and they made them, more than anybody could eat. We did not speak the same language but "Eat something" was understood. They're trying to feed you to make you feel better.

Food is the universal language, the universal way of taking care of others, of sharing, of warmth, of displaying humanity.

They also arranged to have a temporary hospital for us. It was in a school house. Everything was accommodated...they had beds; they had everything you could imagine in there. I don't know where they got it from, but it was all taken care of.

There was a cook. There was a German doctor who was ordered to take care of us, and he gave orders to the cook--what can be cooked, what can be given these guys.

After many, many weeks or maybe months the doctor came to the cook to speak of my situation. He said, "give him whatever he wants; he's not gonna make it." I was, I guess, one of the worst ones...and Yanchi in the meantime was so bad that they picked him up and took him into the American medical unit.

The danger doesn't start or end with violence or hatred or even starving you. It shoots its roots into you and clings to you after all of that is over. With the disease that lingers, and the memories that won't ever be crushed.

I missed him terribly, but he did come back from there later...and by then he was in better condition.

After coming out of the hospital, after proving ourselves against all odds and guesses, in my mind there are a number of places that I lived at...first at the home of a poor lady who lived in a small home in Ergolsbach. That was when Yanchi became the businessman...he went to the American post and said he wanted to get a job. He started the idea that he can clean up their clothes or fix their shoes or whatever they want.

The policeman that had saved my life, Max Maurer, moved his daughter out of her room and gave the room to myself and Yanchi to live in for a few months as we recovered.

In the video of your return to Germany to honor Max Maurer, surrounded by your savior's children and family, you and Yanchi describe your experience living in the Maurer home as one of the most important healing experiences. You said that Max had a heart twice the size of anybody else's, that he had a feeling for people; he just understood them. After moving in with them you felt like you were in heaven. At the point when you were at the very bottom, Max helped not just to save your life, but to introduce you to humanity as it is, powerful enough to cement into your mind "that people are kind on the whole." Yanchi spoke of a cut that heals over quickly but then two days later starts to get pussy and infected because it never got the chance to bleed out. He said that most Holocaust survivors never bled out; they had to get on with their lives. But in the Maurer household, it was different; the poison was allowed to slowly leave your bodies.

But Yanchi also spoke of being forever damaged, scarred, from his experience. He loved little dogs but couldn't look at a Doberman because those were the dogs the SS used. Seeing them brought him right back to the death marches. He couldn't walk by a pool because the scent of chlorine brought him right back to Buchenwald where they would scrub the floor with bleach. He said, "these are not nightmares. These are daymares."

We were treated decently in that town. I don't know if it was because of Mr. Maurer or not, but we got a card that certified that we were previous concentration camp prisoners...freed and living in Ergolsbach...and we were registered as a part of that community. And we were entitled to get rations. And I want to get a motorcycle because I had a buddy who had a motorcycle and I thought, gee that's very nice. So I was able, I had enough to buy a used

motorcycle from another farm...and I had to have a license so I had to go to town hall to get a license. By then I spoke a few words of German, and for the test you had to know the language. So the questions came up and I think I answered most of them right. Then they had a question of who has the right of way at an intersection if they both come in at the same time...I forget. I didn't know what to do. So he's like sitting there and he's trying to tell me. I was dumb enough that I took quite a while to see that he was showing me his right hand to help me cheat and pass the test, but I eventually noticed. I passed the thing. Not quite kosher....

So that was the good life. And really everything I have seen in that town...it was friendliness...that was exactly what I needed right then...it was humanity. I was having a wonderful time there. The American soldiers were nice. Later, things changed, but the Americans that first came there were marvelous people.

One day the Americans left. And at night I went walking with a girl, and these gangsters would try to kill us and so that was recorded in my mind, but it didn't happen much.

One incident I remember, and we sort of ran away.

Who were these people?

Americans. But that was not the first group. After the liberators left, a second group of American soldiers was stationed in town, and that second group was not the caliber of the liberators.

That was a surprise. I never expected American soldiers to commit these acts of violence towards us, but that's life, you know. This is really not much to do with the Holocaust, but that's just a side issue.

Is it, though? Why do you accept these acts of violence as part of life? Because they are nothing when compared with what you went through and witnessed before?

The important thing was my whole attitude towards it after surviving...you know, this was the good part. And there was the bad part, thinking about my parents and my insistence, back near the beginning, to go back to the synagogue to seek protection.

You had no idea what would have happened if you had gone anywhere else....

My father first didn't want to do it, to go into the synagogue. I think he only brought us in because I thought it was a good idea...maybe things would have been different. People survived without any of this torture. Most of them died, but there were some, and God knows, maybe they forgot to get the people out of the house...maybe if we were there instead of the synagogue, they

might have lived through...I don't know, maybe my sister could have been taken back. Those things bother you for a long time, but they went away....

I used to have dreams. I was in a concentration camp. I had this hunger and this desire to eat something sweet.

And later on it was satisfying this hunger that made you sick. It was this hunger that was never satisfied that made you eat so many sweet and fattening things, that led to your high blood pressure and cholesterol, your need to take countless pills to adjust for what your diet had done, your triple bypass surgery later on....

Eventually, I was working for an electrician. And we were going to various places to fix the electricity. You would go to a bakery and fix their wires and they said, "Have some loaves. Take whatever you want." I was at the pastry shop one day, and they were having problems with their electricity...and we worked hard, did a good job, and we stayed late. It was a lot of work, and I was only an apprentice. This head guy, white hat on his head, says, "What would you want to take home?" And it was this marvelous place...and there were all cakes, all kinds of chocolate...there were nuts...anything, a box this big, one foot by one foot in dimension, and he says, "What do you want?" A box full of cakes...I brought back something my friends didn't have...I was very proud...boy, did I feel good.

I didn't have that in the concentration camp...no sweets; I couldn't go out in the streets.

In the town, sometimes I'd have a few cents and I saw something that's half a loaf of bread with a sardine or something pickled or some little cheese...and you get this in the mouth...it's delicious...all the flavor and all the good stuff. I was crazy about it. Every time I had ten cents I would try to go to one of these places.

When I was in the concentration camp, all the time I had these dreams I was in the pastry shop. I was having one of this, one of that, and I said wow and I began to put it in my mouth and then I wake up.... That happened so many times.

After I was out of the concentration camp and in America I had these dreams, but some worse ones. The absence of food was a terrible thing. It's not as important as saving the life, but it just stays with you...crazy.

And I fast for Yom Kippur. I say I am "starving." I say I can't think or concentrate, I'm in a bad mood and I have an excuse because I haven't eaten in a day. I haven't eaten in one day.

You were 75 pounds, a body racked with dysentery. You couldn't eat when you tried. You thought weeds were a treasure of food.

That must have been why, when you took your family to Hungary you made them stop in every pastry shop, get something everywhere you went. Eat and eat and eat and eat and never once feel hungry, feeling terribly sick from eating too much.

I'm starving.
But are you hungry?

How can I
On Yom Kippur
Think about my stomach
But how can I stand to think
When my stomach is so
"empty"

What is empty?
125 pounds. Five foot 2.

What is empty?
75 pounds. Five foot 6.

I am hungry.
But are you starving?

I want to eat.
But when can you?

Many many good things happened to me after that, but I had the burden of trying to explain why God has punished me...I was a very religious kid. My father took me to Hebrew school when I was four or five years old...and I learned how to read Hebrew fluently. My father sometimes walks up to his friend on the street and talks about me; he can read anything...I'll show you...he was so proud of me that I could do this. But I haven't done it since because I had a change of my faith.

It must have all started when telling your family to go into the synagogue ended up being a trap, when your comfort in your faith led you to make a decision that haunted you for decades...even though you could never have known, even though they probably would have gotten you all anyway.

Really I abandoned the thought of God--not directly--I could never completely give it up...I had these discussions with God...why? When my parents and I follow every rule? My father read Torah; I was Bar Mitzvah'd...we were always kosher...on Passover we were only on the other set of dishes, cleaned the house of every particle. Everything was done right...and I went to the synagogue...on the days where you sit in there 8 hours, 10 hours, all day...I kept the fast; I went out a little bit to walk in the garden instead of sitting and dovening all day...being I guess six or seven years old I was given this break.

So I could not understand...I never ate marvelous rolls with ham...it smelled so good and my buddies and my friends did.... On Passover they had one of those marvelous Hungarian rolls with ham and ate it. I said, Oh my God, this is committing terrible sins." And I was this good guy.

I come back in 1946 and I meet the family of one of those friends. I say, "How are you?" Everything is fine. The parents were there. His family was all alive, as far as I know.... It was different for me...my parents, my sister, my cousins, you name it. Almost all of my family was gone. I was the dovening one. I was crying on the bed in the concentration camp about my father, my mother, I don't know where they are. Are they living? I don't know if I'll see them. And now I know they're not around, and God punished me when I didn't do anything wrong...and I didn't understand it...and I still don't.

Are moral and ritual mitzvot, good deeds, the same thing? Were you a better person for doing those things? Was God meant to choose you to save because you followed the ritual guidelines of the Torah?

I have a different outlook now.... Well, somebody said to me; it became my basic, underlying reason, "I don't know whether there is a God or there is not. And if there is, I don't want to be on the wrong side, so I won't do anything that I think he would not want me to do." And that is very much what I am doing because that seemed to fit. I don't know if there is a God. I don't know if he is protecting us or not, but if there is, I do not want to insult him, I don't want to act with such things that are not appropriate for a Jewish person...very simple things. Not much. Be reasonable...that's about all that I think my God would want me to do. I am not a leader. I am not somebody that's going to revolutionize the world, but I want to have something that I don't feel guilty about...this gives me comfort. That's enough. I do not care if I go to the synagogue, doven or not doven. My dovening is thoughts; that's sufficient. I am not influenced

by any kind of force that says, “You have to do this or that...don’t turn a light on or you must have a hat when you go and pray.”

There are certain things...I don’t know if I should burden you with it, probably not, but in my thoughts, when I do my walks, when I do things when I’m alone, I think about my ancestors...my parents, my sister...who are, in my estimation, if there really is a heaven, then they’re certainly there, and I want to make sure that if I talk to God, which is whatever small essence of God may be in me--that’s the one I talk to, I wish for that certain environment that I think is kind and friendly, where people are not trying to get each other but be kind and helpful and, God knows, enjoy, if there’s any opportunity. The existence, if there is such, of the knowledge that I have a wonderful family, healthy and they’re all growing up and they are decent people--they don’t hurt anybody. I’m happy for them, and I want my parents to know that, my sister, how much I missed them.

I have these things...I think about it, I don’t know if it makes any difference or not; it makes me feel better...religion, I have long lost the very formal part of it. I don’t think it’s going to help anybody by practicing traditional things such as beating my chest and praying....

I want you to know that I am not without thought about what I went through.... It’s almost daily, and there are many people on heaven and earth that I would really like to be in contact with...and wish them something that I wish for myself.

We kind of have similar religious beliefs to you...religion is not necessarily the same thing as being spiritual.

I am not spiritual.

I think you are more spiritual than you are religious.

Is that what I am? Okay.

Spirituality is you having your own beliefs, not necessarily what any one religion teaches you...it’s what you develop on your own. Religion is a practice, a way of talking to God.

Spirituality is talking to God.

How can I avoid it? There is something very selfish about this that I recognize, but I need it, and I do it.

You have had so much stolen from you, physically and emotionally and in terms of your own measure of self worth. How can searching for a way to come to terms with that be selfish?

There's always a time when you feel very alone, nobody to tell it to, nobody to ask. God is pretty convenient. It's there.

In Ergolsbach there was a tiny little Jewish community...a little inn owned by Mr. Raucher...who happens to be a fellow refugee's wife's father. Especially when Yanchi was no longer there, this fellow refugee was my friend...he was number one...he was Polish, but he spoke good German, and by that time I spoke enough German...it was important to me. There was this German professor who I employed for my education...in my empire. I wanted to learn English. I arrived in the US and they said, "What is your name?" But I hadn't learned that word. I learned half a dozen words...really not worth it.

I haven't heard from the people who owned the tavern in a long time.... I would very much like to look them up. Yanchi has forbidden me to tell anybody anything until this thing [the induction of Max Maurer into "The Righteous Among The Nations"] is over. He wants this very much to be an emotional surprise for Martha [Max's daughter]...many people care for her. But when I go back I will write him a letter, and if he is there, I'm just going to drop in.

This tavern is still there. You visited in 1996, and your sons have each been back since then. The family still owns it, and the old man who has, each time you visited, played the accordion for everyone to dance is in his nineties and still playing....

In the Jewish community we'd have little parties or something like that. In Ergolsbach I really became a part of the population. I had no hope to go home for a few years so I was just going to do the best I can. There was a little band, and regular holidays were big events, very special. There was music and people would dance.... I was there too, but I never danced. And the wife of the musician was a kind lady and took me and taught me essentially a few steps, and then I liked to do it.

At these little parties there was cake--cake, real cake. I got cake and I was very happy. And there was music and dancing...once I got drunk and ended up under the table...that was the only one time, I didn't want to do that again.... I don't know how I got under the table...[laughter]

So how'd you gather the wherewithal to go back to Hungary?

I first have to tell you, I was the king of the whole celebration. They have a queen and a king, and the queen was this musician's wife and she picked me as the king...I danced well...by

that time she had trained me. They played, and I danced. I was very proud, you know. I didn't show it, but inside....

I was of course troubled all the time, trying to find out what happened to my family.... I had a rich family...a lot of people. It was announced that there was some transportation back to Hungary.

I was an established businessman in Ergolsbach. I was fixing radios...lampshades before radios. Yanchi and I went to Hungary together; when I came back to Germany he did not. I did not see him, as far as I know, ever since then. That's why I said 51 years.

This is the year you were contacted by Yanchi, who has been living in Australia, because he wants to induct Max Maurer, the policeman who saved your life, into "The Righteous Among The Nations"⁶, for bringing the group of you to the barn and caring for you when he was supposed to have turned you over to the SS.

All those years before I was trying to go back to Hungary, not to live there, but to find out, there was no mail, no mail at all. I wanted to find out what happened to my parents, what happened to my sister, what happened to my cousins, uncles, aunts.... I had a big family. I had no idea if anyone was alive or not. I knew what happened to me...and there was no place I could ask. I don't think Yanchi and I discussed this...we just tried to make a living together.

I was living at the time at the house of the Hoffmeisters; it was a general store where we lived. These people were very kind to me too...they were like parents almost. They were so fine. If I needed something they could find it in one of their stores at a discount price. We were eating their food, any holiday she invited us to be there...it was a good place.

When we finally found out we could go back, I left my business in the hands of my apprentice. For my business, Americans came to me from Munich to fix their car radios.... I knew how it worked. I don't know how, but I understood it. And I was a genius, I was famous, people came from Munich to come to my store. I was very happy. And they would give me cigarettes, and I would hide it in the chimney because that was the black market...but that was how I lived. There was no money; it was all exchanges. Sometimes they would give me something to eat.

⁶ This award is "The Righteous Among The Nations" granted to non-Jews for risking their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust by Yad Vashem, the "world center for documentation, research, education and commemoration of the Holocaust." *FAQs*. Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. <http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/faq.asp>.

We spoke to Mr. Hoffmeister.... He had a little car, and we were packed in. He took us all the way to the railway.... It was the first time in my life I read in the car. I didn't puke. Definitely I had to stop reading after a while [laughter].

We got back to Hungary, and I went around and looked up my family. My father's nephew survived--his wife and two kids. I came in, and he said you must stay with us; don't go away. But I couldn't; I was looking for my parents. So I kept searching. But I couldn't find any sign of life...my sister was gone, my parents gone, and I really have no reason to stay.

I went to every stop where the taxis line up. I figure if my father is here, the taxi drivers will know.... I went to every one of them...many knew him, but they hadn't seen him since before we were taken away.

As for my sister, I went to the lady who kept her. She said she was sorry, but at the time they had no food so she took my sister to the Red Cross. I went to the Red Cross and asked them. Yes, she was here and she died on a certain day.... They wouldn't tell me anything more. Later I found out there's a disease that happens when there's no food, no water, or contamination, and that's what killed her....

Later I got information that my sister had left the Red Cross home and went back to our home and was trying to stay in the room that was rented out to a shoemaker and his wife...asking these people to take her and keep her until her parents came back. She was ten years younger than I was. I was 16; she was six. She was alone and lost. I loved that baby; I took her everywhere I could. Like Daniel [my grandson] perhaps, he learned the same thing...that he loves his kid brother and sister.

She asked to stay with the shoemaker and his wife?

And they couldn't do it. So she had no choice but to go back to the Red Cross home. And one explanation given to me was when she found out nobody could take care of her she died of a broken heart. Nonsense...I guess they wanted a more glorious story...I don't know if it was a lack of food.... I'm sure it was a disease.

I wouldn't doubt that emotional disease, emotional upset, can trigger that...

But there's a lot of dysentery and things like that...when you have that illness it can deplete you.

I know, but my point is that I don't think it's one or the other.... I could imagine that the emotional stress of all that could have a very serious effect on someone.

I am sure. Look, if I knew anything...she was not there. And I remember I would take her with the little carriage, and I used to play soccer or whatever and took her with me ...and now she was dead.

She was dead. That's all you could know, that's all that you can know, that's all that mattered, that's all that matters.

You are my baby
I take you everywhere with me
I wish I could have taken you with me then
But not to the camp
Not to the place where my rags were stuffed with uprooted grass
Or my mouth was filled with potato skins picked out of the dirt
Or my fat was shivered away with dirty soup and a hard floor

You are my baby
Why couldn't she keep you?
The woman says there was no food
Then where did her rounded belly and pink cheeks come from?
Why couldn't she keep you?
My father and my mother are gone
But maybe you wouldn't have to be
If she had taken care of another life
And held it like her own

Maybe then you would be with me now
In Hungary
Learning how to dance and maybe laugh again
And I would give you every morsel of cake my hands could touch
While I smoke a cigarette and smile

But then again maybe you would all be here
Father, mother, sister, son
If I hadn't said, "go in the synagogue"
Why did I say that?
Why did they listen to me?
It was a trap.

She was my baby
I took her everywhere I could
She was lost
I loved that baby
I loved you.

I looked everybody up I could. One relative could no longer talk. She had lost her gorgeous, youngest son...he was like a movie actor, you know. He was my age...same age. But he was gorgeous.

I found one of my aunts in the street...on one of the benches sitting there. I saw her and I was glad to see her. She was alone...she gave me one piece of advice.... She says, "Marry rich." I couldn't help her...

I met up with Peter.... How I found him I didn't know because I didn't know the uncle's name...but I found him. He was a lovely little boy. Big glasses, you know. And he would hug me and he was so happy to see me....

Peter is your first cousin, but he has become like a brother to you, an uncle to your children, a great uncle to your grandchildren. He is dear to all of us.

I didn't want to stay anymore. I went around and tried to figure out how to get out of Hungary and back to Germany legally. I picked up the address of my aunt and uncle in New York, the number of my cousin in Israel.

I also went to the group under which I was being educated as an apprentice before the war, and I said I would like to get my journeyman papers.... It was one of the first jobs I had. Could I now get a job in radio? And I did get a job. I was repairing something. I didn't stay very long.

There was no way of going anywhere to the east, for me to get back to Germany. No official way...there was no way the orphan's agency could help me. My father...I knew he wasn't there...I had this girlfriend Haidi in Germany; she was a very nice young lady. I asked her after I left Germany if she would do me a favor, and she investigated if there was any record of my father in Dachau, or in the hospital in Dachau. And she did that, and she sent me that information. He was buried in the local cemetery; he died on the day of liberation in Dachau.

That was at the time when many of the Jews tried to help Jewish people out into Israel to protect Israel.... There was a lot of need I guess. But apparently many people were escaping Israel because they didn't want to get killed. I wrote to my cousin there, and he says "don't come here. I'm leaving...."

I wrote to my aunt in America. She says, "come...this is a gold and honey land." They did everything they could to help grant me passage, and I was able to register....They had to

certify they had so much money. They had a whole \$1,000 left, and they paid for my passage. If I didn't have that aunt I would not have been able to come to the United States.

There was essentially an underground railroad to get people to Israel, but they didn't say you couldn't go anyplace else...with a Russian set of guys who will take you across. They weren't guiding the place; they simply got you across.

I had picked up some odds and ends from our home, including my mother's engagement ring.... I took it, and I offered that. They took it.

The Russian men put us in a flat truck with a gate all around the truck bed and tarps over the top and told us, about half a dozen people, to keep under the tarps. They were Russian, so I don't know how we understood them. I don't know where we are; I can't see anything. It's dark. It's night, and I'm underneath this tarp. I hear all this shouting.... I think what happened is there was a bottle and a guy was drinking...water probably, and they were shouting and shooting their guns in the air....

Then I was aware that we had come to the border...and I think the Russians were threatening to shoot the men controlling the border because then the Hungarians moved back.... After a while we were in a small town. And I think the people we met were people from the Jewish group who were relocated here. Then a big truck came in the morning, and that was our bus to move on. There was a tarp on top in case of rain, and as we moved through other borders I was standing up at the edge of the bed, and the rain comes, and I was holding the tarp up to protect myself from the rain, but the water comes down the sides and I am soaking wet. Then we came to Vienna, and the people looked at this thing and how soaking wet we were, and they said to go on. They were supposed to check our passports or something, but they just let us go on.

Then we got to a hospital in Vienna, and people come out and got rid of our clothes and sterilized you again and gave you new clothes...and they checked us for lice. Then they told us that there is food. It was like a luxury transit; I didn't know what happened.

There I ran into a girl who was my classmate in elementary school who was one of the workers helping to get people where they wanted to go. From there I was able to get into Germany. That was sheer luck. I was in the right place at the right time and scared as hell like I was going to be arrested or something...but I got home.

It's funny that you think of Germany as home now. Germany is where the humanity exists, the laughter, where you don't have to constantly be reminded of your life before, of what

you lost. Where you have a new life that's full enough to move your feet forward and tilt the corners of your mouth up. But Germany is also the place where all of this terror started....

I started to write and send the letters to my aunt, uncle and cousin in the United States. I went back to my store. *Your partner was still there?* Yeah, he took care of everything. He was not my partner; he was my employee. *That funny little proud smile.* I had been in Hungary probably about six weeks. I didn't have any problems while I was there, but I was just getting handouts. It wasn't my radio store; it wasn't the same.

There was no education for a while...that was skipped both in the concentration camp and the first few years after it. I learned what I could by doing things.

I wrote to my aunt in the United States and worked on getting my papers in order so we could prove that I wouldn't be a burden to the country. Then I came to New York City--without my aunt there they would never have let me in. Jewish Family Services sent me to Philadelphia to live with a Jewish widow. It was hard to find work. I first worked painting chemicals onto animal hides until I got a job as a radio repairman with Emerson Radio.

I was then drafted into the army.

As an immigrant you could refuse the draft, but you would risk deportation.

I was kept as a radar instructor in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey instead of being sent to Korea since I had experience as a radio repairman.

I attended LaSalle College through the financing of the GI bill.

Being part of the army in the Korean War turned out to be some form of a blessing in disguise because you got to go to college. How ironic, one war rips out everything you'd ever known or loved, and another gives you a future.

While at school I was an RCA technician doing the job of an engineer. I was then hired by Burrows Corp. as an engineer then went back to RCA, which paid for me to go to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania.

In the meantime, soon after traveling to Hungary with you in 1946, Yanchi became known as Joseph Weiner and moved to Australia. You had not spoken to him for 50 years when you were contacted as the only other person who could be found to stand witness to honor Max Maurer with "The Righteous Among The Nations" Award. The German industrialist Oskar Schindler, who became famous for saving the lives of his Jewish workers during the war, was the first to receive this award. When Yanchi argued for Maurer to receive this award, he was told,

“but it was only for one day.” Yanchi slammed his fist on the table and replied, “One day?! Do you know what one hour was, what one minute was, how many times you could die in one minute?”

This was why, in 1997, you, your wife, my grandmother, your children Martin, Susan, and Michael [my father] along with Martin’s wife, my Aunt Robin, embarked on a trip back to Germany, to bear witness to the places you had been, to meet the people you had known, and to honor the man who saved your life.

And then he puts a plate the size of a garbage can lid
 On the table in front of me
 Grinning and saying “enjoy your meal”
 As his brown eye disappears behind a lid for a moment
 Winking
 And I stare down
 Praying that feeling full will be enough to stop me
 But I can already feel my survival instincts kicking in
 Scratch that—they would be survival instincts
 If I was a hunter gatherer hiking all day
 Unsure where my next meal would come from
 Or a starving young man in a camp, on a march
 Not knowing when his next meal would be
 But I didn’t need those
 Eating as much as I could wouldn’t help me survive
 And conserving as much as I could wouldn’t help me survive later
 And refusing part of the food in the first place
 Wouldn’t help someone else survive
 I furiously gulp my water to curb my appetite
 But, I can’t waste...
 Isn’t that worse?
 Think of the starving children in Africa
 Eat your entire 3,000 calorie dinner
 I think there was a connection lost somewhere in there
 A twisted reason for us to sweat, waddle, pant.

Basically I was in good shape
 I was hungry
 But I didn't think of dying
 That was not on my menu

Sitting at a table
 10 people at each side
 Not enough room
 One shoulder off
 Learned to sit with one foot on the other side
 Don't know what's in the soup
 My second or third night
 Not weakened yet
 I still had some fat on my body
 This guy sitting next to me
 Stirs my soup, not his
 And he says
 You're so lucky
 You have a piece of potato
 Or something
 And his eyes water
 And I needed the potato like he did
 But my heart broke for the man
 Here's this new guy who comes in
 And he's lucky enough to get a potato
 It sort of made me realize
 As to what the hell place I am in
 I was an optimist up to that point...
 We'll be free
 And I was stupid

One looked like onion
 I pulled it out
 And it smelled like onion
 And it was good
 Something to eat
 So I collected them
 And when we marched back
 I was rich
 I had something I could trade for something
 Not thinking about anybody else
 Just thinking about myself

It has a big lid and it's metal
 It's a shining metal thing
 Where they collect the milk
 They are running and they are offering us bread
 They had some cups
 And they put some milk in it

Or coffee
 I don't know
 And they offered it to these skeletons that walked by
 This is humanity
 I couldn't eat
 I was saving everything
 I had this raggedy jacket
 And I was saving everything
 For a day when I can eat
 And they gave me I think something to drink
 And I did
 A little bit of milk
 That must have saved my life
 Perhaps
 Because I was so rickety

Don't go away, stay here
 And then he hands out a big big box
 Full of all of the rations
 Or maybe the care packages
 Or what they had
 And he says here take this
 Take it in the farm and eat
 Then he goes back
 Nobody on foot
 All in tanks, endless line
 Second tank stops
 Lid opens
 Another box comes out
 And this is repeated ten times
 And we were running in and out with this stuff
 And we have too many.
 Nobody will be able to eat that.
 So we say no more
 We have lots of food
 And thank you
 Or whatever.

We walked through bones
 Scraps of meat gripping the marrow
 Stinking flesh weaving bloody patterns on bleached ossein⁷

I kept my eyes forward
 Gazing at a tree with tiny pink buds
 Then, as we passed, peering at tiny bird, wings dancing

But you kept your eyes on the ground
 Because they weren't just bones to you
 You had something to search for
 You had everything to search for
 But all you found were pieces of what used to be yours

But then, across the field of bones
 They came running
 She grabbed your hand and pulled you dancing
 We lifted your eyes
 You lifted your eyes
 And saw the tree, the bird and a sky

The bones may always poke holes in your shoes
 The smell might still spin in your nostrils
 But each of your hands holds another
 And on your tongue is a sweetness
 Chocolate, almonds, ice cream
 And it all came from semmi

PART II

Pop Pop's experiences, his evolution, very much embody the symbolism demonstrated in the "semmi" experience he shared with his youngest son, my Uncle Martin. He took nothing, actually less than nothing—he was starving, poverty-stricken, alone, sick and uneducated--and he transformed that "semmi" into a comfortable life for himself and his family, into a future for his grandchildren. But more importantly he turned "semmi" into something delicious. It is not about what we are given, but our ability to find value, find richness in whatever it is that we have or do not have.

⁷ Bone collagen

From the time before his family experienced the worst of the effects of the Holocaust, when he describes drying out a loaf of bread and saving it to be his family's "life saver," to the time he was living in a Buchenwald when he scavenged wild onions and hid them in his rags as he was out working, to the time when he had a family of his own and insisted that he and his family get pastries at every shop they saw--just because he could afford it, even though none of them were hungry--food or the lack of it was his source of pain, of comfort, of intrigue, of happiness.

For my family, as for many families, food is a symbol of love, of generosity, of community. The principal way Pop Pop knew to take care of his family was to share food with them. It was how the American liberation soldiers had demonstrated their empathy towards him and the other prisoners. Being able to eat food represented Pop Pop's resilience, his spit in the face of the Nazis who had almost won. Every time he ate was proof that the doctor had almost been right; he had almost died.

Evolution molded humans into creatures that sought what would give them a competitive edge over everyone else, what would ensure their survival. This meant anything that would give them energy at the present time, energy for the future. Those who were most efficient were those who could conserve as much energy as possible, whose bodies could find ways to move as little as possible so as not to waste food energy, and they were the ones to survive, the ones who, according to the old food system, were genetically superior.

These traits were ideal for hunter gatherers, but they were also ideal for Holocaust victims. Those like my grandfather, who most successfully persevered through food scarcity, were those with stored body fat to live off of, those who could seek out calories in any way they

could. These traits, traits that were essential to human survival millions of years ago, were also essential to survival during the Holocaust.

However, that is clearly not how things work today. Today there is an obesity epidemic in the United States, in many countries in Europe, and surprisingly, in many nations in the developing world. Obesity is in fact a more widespread issue within developing nations than is starvation. Diabetes is projected to increase in all nations in the next 25 years, in developing nations at a rate of 124%.⁸

Pop Pop's three favorite foods were nuts, chocolate and ice cream. Once he became an engineer and never had to worry again about having enough food, when he could afford to buy more food than anyone could ever need, he held onto these consumptive tendencies. He ended up suffering from health issues and needed triple bypass surgery when he was in his early sixties.

One such interesting example of the different facets of the modern food culture, including its dangerous potential that comes hand in hand with overcoming starvation, is the place where I spent nine weeks of the summer of 2012. Its unique geographic, social, political and economic features blend together to lead to the highest obesity rate in the world if it were a country⁹.

American Samoa is an unincorporated, unorganized United States territory halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand. It is the most majestic, awe-inspiring place I have ever been, with the coastal scenery, mountain ranges and climate of paradise. Tourism does not play much of a role on the island, which makes the snorkeling, hiking, and volcanic rock tidal pools,

⁸ Brownell, Kelly D. Class Lecture. The Biology, Psychology and Politics of Food. Open Yale Courses. Lecture 1—Introduction: What We Eat, Why We Eat, and the Key Role of Food in Modern Life. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <http://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-123/lecture-1>.

⁹ "Australia-Oceania::American Samoa." *The World Factbook*. CIA, n.d. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aq.html>.

unmarked by gaudy signs and paved walkways, feel like treasures belonging only to the observer and the earth.

Its location would be considered by most Americans to be “the middle of nowhere.” The only industry on the cluster of five islands and two atolls is a tuna cannery on the main island of Tutuila, the island on which 95% of the population resides. Unemployment is about 30 percent, and average annual income is \$8,000 a year.¹⁰

However, there is virtually no homelessness, and certainly no hunger. That is not only due to the money the US government pours into the territory without collecting taxes in return, as some might argue. It is also because of the communal values of the society, because of the village system. Everyone within a village takes care of one another, shares with one another, and no one goes hungry. So, do they get this food from their gardens? Is it bought locally? Sometimes it comes from small local farms or gardens, usually owned by immigrants from the Philippines. However, most of it is fast food: McDonalds, KFC, Pizza Hut. And every store in between displays a sign boasting “Fast Food.”

Many people think that people eating too much junk food is a personal health issue. The responsibility is placed on the shoulders of consumers. However, the fast food industry and general food system make junk food available and appealing in the territory, as it does in many other regions. It has become convenient, long-lasting, affordable, and it is heavily advertised. A sufficient nutrition education curriculum is not in place to guide healthy eating habits, and there are addictive characteristics of fast food. Psychological as well as physical distances now separate people from food. People do not appreciate their food as much because it is everywhere, all the time, and fast food companies have trained people to eat outside of their normal meal

¹⁰ "Australia-Oceania::American Samoa." *The World Factbook*. CIA, n.d. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/aq.html>.

times. Commercials condone and normalize large portion sizes, a lack of control over diet, and binge eating.¹¹

A McDonald's commercial I found on "YouTube" for American Samoa uses the slogan "it's who we are" to advertise McDonald's to Samoans. Fast food has become a part of the culture: hamburgers, french fries, spam sushi, donuts, chicken flavored crunchy corn snacks, and deep fried anything. Genetic susceptibility plays a role, but it is not the reason for the obesity epidemic.

This is clear from the example of the Pima Native Americans. The Arizona community of the Pima Indians suffers from the highest obesity rate in the world within a cultural group. This population has a 90% obesity rate and a 60% diabetic rate. However, obesity and diabetes are virtually unknown within the Pima population of 700 people residing in Sierra, Mexico, and practicing their traditional lifestyle, including consuming their traditional diet. The genetic make up of these two populations is the same; the only difference between them is lifestyle. Rather than the fast food the Arizona population consumes and the average of two hours per week of physical activity that this population gets, the Mexican Pima people consume corn tortillas, fruits and vegetables and get on average 22 hours a week of physical activity.¹²

This data suggests that this ethnic group has a genetic susceptibility to weight gain when living a lifestyle characterized by highly processed, calorie-dense foods but that genetic composition is not the only characteristic that determines the population members' physical

¹¹ Brownell, Kelly D. Class Lecture. The Biology, Psychology and Politics of Food. Open Yale Courses. Lecture 1—Introduction: What We Eat, Why We Eat, and the Key Role of Food in Modern Life. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <http://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-123/lecture-1>.

¹² Brownell, Kelly D. Class Lecture. The Biology, Psychology and Politics of Food. Open Yale Courses. Lecture 2—Food Food Then, Food Now: Modern Food Conditions and Their Mismatch With Evolution. Web. 10 Dec. 2012. <http://oyc.yale.edu/psychology/psyc-123/lecture-2>.

states. This same genetic composition allows individuals to maintain a healthy weight and resilience when living an active lifestyle and consuming mostly whole, plant-based foods.

American lifestyle influence, low income levels, limited areas of flat land to grow crops, a sedentary lifestyle brought on to a great extent by automobiles and lack of job opportunities, as well as the success of American advertising have wedded themselves in the perfect combination to support processed food consumption in American Samoa.

American Samoa's location 5,000 miles from the west coast of the United States would logically lead to the assumption that produce from the United States would not be ideal and that perhaps importing these items from New Zealand or another nearby country would be a better option. However, since it is a US territory, all produce comes from the United States mainland, principally California, and most stores stock other food items from the US as well. The more durable produce is brought in by ship and isn't unreasonable in price, but one can imagine the physical state of these items after spending weeks in transit. The more perishable items must be sent by air, and this inflates the prices to an extreme degree. One such example is tomatoes, which are not often locally grown and are therefore imported. They are imported by air and are extremely expensive. The poor quality of tomatoes is known throughout the island, and residents often cringe at the mention of them.

This importation process may not seem atypical, as items often come from thousands of miles away to our refrigerators in the United States. However, the situation is different in American Samoa. Principally, produce imported to American Samoa often must travel farther than items coming into or traveling throughout the mainland United States. We must also consider some demographic characteristics. The population of American Samoa is about 60,000 people in total, without a lot of disposable income for expensive produce. People are accustomed

to eating mostly fast food, so the demand does not support the importation of high quality, fresh food. The importation system is not at maximum efficiency to ensure the produce is shipped to arrive in peak condition. Additionally, once the shipments come in and are distributed to the stores, it often takes days for food to reach the shelves.

So, most people do not buy much produce. Instead, they buy the fast food or go to Asian restaurants. Due to the proximity of Asia and the Asian ownership of many supermarkets, a large quantity of dry goods is imported mainly from China. Chinese restaurants are cheap and popular, and some local vegetables are used, but the two main ingredients are grease and MSG. I ate at a Chinese restaurant only once while there. There was a pool of grease in the bottom of my bowl of white rice, and the eggplant in brown sauce dish, although delicious, made me light-headed and lethargic for the rest of the evening.

Traditional culture also plays an important role when it comes to food consumption. The traditional oven is known as an “umu.” Rocks are heated up over a fire, and the hot rocks are moved to a separate area. Layers of animal meat (principally chicken and fish) are placed on top, with a layer of banana leaves covering them; then layers of vegetables are laid out: taro, green bananas, breadfruit, squash and palusami (coconut milk and taro leaves filling a banana leaf or a squash, sometimes mixed with fish). The entire oven is covered with banana leaves, and the food cooks for several hours. Almost always the pig is cooked separately. Families usually buy the pig live from a local piggery and kill it and cook it themselves, whole, over a separate umu oven or a fire.

Families usually begin preparing the umu early in the morning on Sundays and then, after church, there is a feast. A popular mindset is to eat until you cannot move, then to sleep it off. This food is all extremely rich--principally composed of simple carbohydrates and a great deal of

saturated fat. But the problem is also the quantities of food served. Samoans are beautiful people, and naturally very strong. However, like the Pima people, they also have the propensity to easily gain weight, especially when a sedentary lifestyle and an exorbitant surplus of food are present.

At an umu feast I attended, we were told that a large bag of frozen chicken was appropriate to bring as a gift. The head of the household told us that he had diabetes, but it did not matter because he was happy. He said the three most important things in life were to eat, sleep and be happy. We saw him eat two brimming plates of food, have two helpings of dessert and eat another full plate of the main course afterwards. But he was a family man, and he was happy. It is unfair for an American, coming from a population with its own obesity problem and a country where it can be argued that the unhealthy lifestyle originated, to believe she has any right to criticize this man and this culture. Especially when she comes from a place with consistently low happiness ratings and a virtually nonexistent level of social capital, and American Samoans have a beautiful sense of community and of the importance of slowing down and enjoying and appreciating life. They are generous and take care of one another, while Americans are often motivated by individualism and competition.

It is also understood that Samoans are more tolerant of obesity than are Americans. Although obesity is widespread within the United States, it is not considered an appealing or desirable human characteristic. Contrarily, in American Samoa, people are often looked down upon if they are slim; being slim is equated with being diseased or stressed. Meaning is attached to food in Samoan culture, where it is used as a medium of exchange and a gesture of love and respect. It is a principal focus of social interaction, and it is considered appropriate for high status individuals to remain sedentary.¹³ At big events, a huge platter of food is given to each person

¹³ Yamada, Seiji, MD. "Obesity in Samoans: A Practice-based Naturalistic Inquiry." *Pacific Health Dialog* 6.1 (2011): 65-70. *Pacific Health Dialog* Vol. 6. 13 Jan. 2011. Web. 12 Dec. 2012.

because it is expected that each individual will take the extra food home to share with his or her family. Serving small portions would be considered offensive.

A sedentary lifestyle characterizes much of the population, which is a significant contributor to the obesity epidemic. For an island that is a mere twelve miles long, one would think walking and biking would be the principal forms of transportation. However, nearly everyone drives, and the remaining people take the bus and taxis. These are habits despite many factors that should have limited automobile use. Firstly, gas costs a dollar more per gallon than the national average in the United States. The main road is extremely windy and often rough, so the maximum speed limit anywhere is 25 miles per hour. As the main road is in almost all places the only road, the traffic during rush hour is horrendous. The roads, humidity, and intense rainfall drastically shorten the lifespan of the cars, which are already expensive because they have to be shipped to the island.

Biking might sound like an appealing alternative, especially since driving is so costly and may not be a quicker means of transportation. However, there are thousands of feral dogs living on Tutuila that “protect” different villages and wander the streets. They are known to attack passersby on foot or bicycle. Several fellow residents had incidents being attacked by dogs while walking near their homes or biking in the area, and people needed stitches to address these wounds. Due to the threat of dogs, I could not run throughout most of the island. There were only certain places where I felt comfortable running, and even then my heart would nearly stop if I saw a dog or heard a bark.

“Development” influenced by the United States brought in cars and fast food and television. Manual labor is not necessary for virtually any aspect of life, and few job

opportunities are present, so physical activity is not an integral part of life. People do enjoy playing volleyball, and there are high school football, rugby, and wrestling athletes who train in hopes of attaining college scholarships. However, exercising is not an expected or consistent part of many residents' lifestyles. There are efforts to change this, such as the Toa Lei Tai Ocean Lifeguard program, which teaches young people how to swim and trains lifeguards. Another example is American Samoa Olympic Day. This event hosts a 10 kilometer running race along the ocean road, and a series of activities and competitions at Utulei beach. There is a giant zumba class, a beach volleyball competition, weight lifting, wrestling, and sprinting. The main sponsor of the event is McDonalds. For placing second in the race (behind a French woman whose husband worked as an engineer on the island) and winning my age group, I won a \$5 gift card to McDonald's.

Some consequences of all of these elements are an obesity rate of nearly 80% and a diabetic rate of around 40%. People may be happy and have communal values, but they are very sick. Over the summer a hyperbaric chamber, which has one use as a treatment for the effects of diabetes, was installed in the local hospital, the Lyndon B. Johnson Tropical Medical Center. This chamber had to be created in a special size in order to accommodate American Samoan residents; it has the capacity to hold a person who weighs 700 pounds.

So what is the trajectory when it comes to development and food consumption? American Samoa has developed in all of the ways that have been detrimental to the United States. Development has translated to a greater reliance on technology and less practical awareness of consequences. The majority of the population cannot swim, even though the territory is composed solely of small islands. People drive everywhere, eat fast food, and watch television, among other things. And physical labor, while necessary in traditional societies, has

virtually disappeared. Communal values have stood strong, although competition among the villages is often fierce. But social capital proves to be useless when addressing the obesity epidemic if culturally oriented education on the issue does not exist, if people do not know or care about the sources of their food, and if the fast food marketing efforts do not diminish.

The high unemployment rate, when accompanied by US funding, encourages the maintenance of a sedentary lifestyle. One would think that the high unemployment and low per capita income would encourage subsistence farming or a search for short-term manual labor opportunities, activities usually adopted by Western Samoan or Asian immigrants, but this is often not the case for American Samoan community members. Enough funding is pumped in by the US government and often shared within families and villages to allow people to own houses and consume fast food. Although most people cannot afford to leave the island, ROTC, athletic, diversity or academic scholarships sometimes give children the opportunity to attend universities in the United States.

There are a few important things to note about American Samoa's relationship with the United States. The most widely noted impacts the population has on the United States are through supplying football players to college teams and the NFL and beefing up the army with many ROTC students who cannot afford to go to college otherwise.

What I learned from my grandfather's experience and through my brief residence in American Samoa is strongly focused through the lens of food consumption as a result of my own personal experience with and relationship to food. These experiences mold my passion about the subject.

My family has been obsessed with food for as long as I can remember. Both of my parents were overweight growing up and began exercising and eating right together, before having children, attaining healthy weights and lifestyles while in their twenties. My father's mother (Pop Pop's wife) was a wonderful cook and a baker and my mother's mother was also a talented cook. They had little nutrition education and did not involve themselves in many sports or physical activities.

Since my parents had seen the wonders that eating well and exercising often had done for them, they wanted to make sure their children understood these things while growing up. As kids, both of my brothers and I were involved in sports to keep us active. At home we consumed only unprocessed, whole foods, principally fruits and vegetables. Our diet was low in fat and contained no added sugars. For us, a trip to a fast food restaurant was as rare as winning the lottery.

I got hooked on gymnastics at a young age and by the time I was ten or eleven I was in the gym nine hours per week. I never had a weight problem, and since I was getting so much exercise, my mom let me eat snacks sometimes, hiding them in her closet for me so my brothers couldn't see. By that time both my brothers were having issues with their weight. Although they principally ate healthy food and participated halfheartedly in sports leagues, it seemed that a genetic susceptibility to weight gain made a significant impact.

I soon transitioned into an intensive gymnastics program because my dream was to be a college gymnast. Gymnastics was how I had always defined myself, and I began spending 21 hours every week working out in a gym. The first hour of every practice was spent doing strength conditioning followed by three or four hours of gymnastics training. Most of the girls had to keep daily food logs, and no junk food was allowed in our vicinity. I still ate what I

wanted and as much as I wanted, which was actually four full meals per day. My menstrual period stopped for the full nine months I was on this program due to my extremely low body fat percentage. I was 5'2" and weighed about 110 pounds and was actually considered to be one of the thicker girls there, without a full set of clearly defined abdominal muscles visible through my leotard and especially since I had developed breasts, which my coach considered to be a measure of extra fat on the body.

I remember one time going through a stressful and upsetting experience which made me lose my appetite for a day and coming into the gym and my coach telling me "good job Autumn, you're losing weight. You look great; keep it up." I was older than the other girls I worked out with, and I knew I had less potential, so that acknowledgement was a significant amount of attention to be getting from my coach.

A girl a few years older than me was basically made of muscle; she was tall and strong. Our coach told her she had to lose 20 pounds or she was off the team, no matter how talented a gymnast she was. So the girl was put on a cleansing diet of nothing but apples and celery for two days while spending her normal time in the gym, and she ended up in the hospital with pneumonia.

My parents gave my brothers a bit of a hard time about being overweight, so each of them began doing cardiovascular workouts every other day. They each went from being overweight to attaining normal weights, but they never lost that body insecurity. They had years of being made fun of in school, of having my parents worry over them, of seeing me eat whatever I wanted and not gain an ounce, and they got thinner but didn't end up with the abdominal muscles possessed by every athlete and even by many of their friends who never exercised.

At the end of my freshman year of high school I decided to take a break from gymnastics. I returned a month later involved much less intensely, focusing on being a leader on the high school team and taking a step back. However, I soon suffered a back injury that forced me to end my gymnastics career permanently. I participated in the high school swim team for a season, then ended up spending the rest of my high school athletic career as a track sprinter and hurdler. By the end of high school, I had started to gain a little bit of weight—I had thighs, and love handles, and cellulite! I was still 5'2" but now weighed about 125 pounds, again, mostly muscle.

Then I went away to college, where having an all-you-can-eat dining hall was a real struggle. I gained over ten pounds my freshman year because I was eating whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted to eat it, and the quantity of junk food at my fingertips was difficult to resist. I was staying up late, snacking at all hours, and working out like a maniac, but eating quickly and excessively, often when I wasn't even hungry.

I became a vegetarian a few months into my freshman year, mostly for ethical and environmental reasons, but being a vegetarian does not necessarily have any influence on weight and healthfulness. I developed a physical insecurity from my weight gain and my clothes fitting more tightly, but it didn't stop me from binge eating, especially late at night. I had never needed to worry about what I put into my mouth because I was always pure muscle, strong and active, and once it became important for me, I found it nearly impossible to modify my relationship with food and my eating habits. I knew what was healthy to consume and was sure to eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, whole grains and variety, but in addition to that I snacked on cookies and ice cream and "good fats" and other things in excess that were only healthy in small quantities.

In the fall of my sophomore year I decided to adapt a vegan lifestyle. I was once again passionate about the ethical and environmental implications, but this time a principal guiding

factor was my health. I thought that if I cut out cheese and eggs and most desserts then I would inevitably lose weight and go back to what I looked like in high school. And I did lose some weight. But I didn't go back to the point I was at years ago because all I was thinking about was what but not how much I was putting into my body. Going to an extreme and cutting myself off from more and more types of foods did nothing to help me establish a healthier relationship with food. I could still gorge myself on bread and Cliff bars and peanut butter, and I could complain all I wanted to the genetics gods for making me gain weight, but it wasn't going to do me any good.

I was never actually at an unhealthy weight, was never even "chubby", and I never suffered from a true eating disorder, but deep down I knew I wasn't doing all I could to be healthy and confident. I often ate to the point at which I felt sick. I often went on eating sprees where I would be a bit hungry, then eat something and just want to keep eating. I would eat each item quickly so that I could go onto the next item. I would be eating something and perpetually be thinking about the next thing I would get to eat; I ate so fast that I wouldn't let myself feel full until I was way too full and had eaten half a day's worth of calories. As many people surrounded by cheap surpluses of food are, I was a binge eater.

The semester I spent studying abroad in Costa Rica was life changing for many reasons, one of which was my relation to food. I fell in love with the dozens of new fruits and vegetables and traditional dishes, many of which were vegan by nature (as they are in many cultures since meat used to be a luxury and a rarity). Interestingly, the two key elements to bringing my host family and my biological family together when my parents and brothers came to visit me were food and music. My host brother was a chef, my host mom and sister pastry chefs and my host father a true foodie.

My host family prepared food for everyone as a way to express their generosity, their affection and their passion. Food truly did become the universal language among us, especially since my dad had brought an ice cream maker as a gift and we all prepared ice cream together. I had told my host mother that my mom ate home-popped popcorn every night before going to sleep, so Gera took out her old popcorn popper and made my mom a bowl “para ayudarla a dormir...”¹⁴. Exchanging food united my two families, forging a permanent bond between them characterized by amor y cariño.¹⁵

The true turning point when it came to my relationship with food happened during my study abroad experience. Although my host family loved food just as much as my biological family did, they ate slowly, served smaller portion sizes, and didn’t deprive themselves of unhealthy foods.

One day, a few months into my program, I was struck with an epiphany that I was in complete control of how much I ate and that was the only way I was ever going to be satisfied with my body. I started serving myself smaller portions, eating slower, savoring each thing I ate, waiting long enough between meals to allow myself to feel truly hungry, and drinking plenty of water, especially before eating, to feel full more quickly. I didn’t eat anything in the hours between dinner and bed time, but I didn’t deprive myself from eating snacks or desserts in small quantities. It became all about portion size and self-control. I began to feel leaner, more confident, and in control and maintained this lifestyle for the remaining month of my program.

It has been over a year since then, and I have tried to maintain that lifestyle and mindset. However, at times I have definitely regressed into old habits, especially while at home. My family eats healthy food, but we eat quickly, with huge portion sizes and a love for using

¹⁴ “to help her sleep” in Spanish

¹⁵ love and fondness

leftovers up and not letting anything go to waste. For us, food is our principal means of expressing love, of taking care of one another, of sharing with other people. It holds a beautiful propensity for bringing people together, for sparking conversation, for bridging gaps.

I love cooking for other people, cooking with other people, and showing generosity and affection through food. However, I acknowledge the hypocrisy in this when I believe that a key solution to the world's food problems lies not only in eliminating food waste but in limiting quantities consumed.

Every member of my family believes strongly in healthy and ethical consumption-- my brothers and I are vegan, and my parents are vegetarian. I appreciate the value of these lifestyles for their moral implications as well as for their health benefits and strongly believe that vegan food can be delicious, simple and satisfying. It was certainly a challenge to maintain this diet while in American Samoa, but being vegan kept me eating right in the face of a lot of temptation. I had to cook almost all of my own meals and explain to chefs at restaurants what being vegan meant and suggest how they could perhaps prepare something I could eat.

However, solely adapting a plant-based and active lifestyle is not the key to health or satisfaction. There is more to it. My experiences have made me food-obsessed, a food lover, and a person who understands the amazing power of food as well as its great destructive capacity. I have come to understand that eating healthfully, reasonably and consciously have the propensity to act in conjunction as the most influential form of preventive medicine. However, I do not believe that it is ever impossible to overcome any obstacle while striving for a healthy lifestyle. Constantly exercising and eating all-natural, plant based foods as my family does is not the sole answer, blaming genetics is not an excuse, and simply giving in to the accepted processed food culture is inexcusable.

People have imperfect relationships with food on many levels, often to a moderate extent which do not result in morbid consequences. However, the extremes of starvation and obesity are painful reminders of the harm that can be done through the imposition of an unbalanced physical and emotional relationship with food.

The Nazis successfully used food, or the lack thereof, as a weapon, a means to murder, to break spirits and resolve and to torture a group of people. Generosity with food also gave my grandfather his first glimpses of humanity in years. In American Samoa, food is an integral part of a culture that has great communal values, is a means of expressing affection, love and happiness. But it has also created widespread clinical issues and physical obstacles for the population. Food is one of the most essential elements of life, and we are not going back to a hunter/gatherer society. We will not lose our obsession with food, and it is unclear if our genetically based instincts will steer us towards healthier lifestyles in the near future. The path towards establishing a comprehensively positive relationship with food is filled with obstacles (quite a few cheeseburgers and even some jars of all natural peanut butter to name a few), but it is there.

We are never full, never satisfied, and completely disconnected from what the idea of hunger really is, from what having enough food to survive really means. It seems to be that there is either starvation or surplus and overconsumption. Most of us forget to savor and appreciate; we forget why it is we are eating in the first place. It seems that nourishment and health are often forgotten when we think about the purpose of food, and we put things into our mouths that, instead of helping us survive, destroy our bodies little by little.

We must not strive for the “perfect” physical ideals that stand before us, unachievable and ultimately disappointing. We must set our own goals, within our own selves, not for physical

results, although those will come in time, but for a confidence in our lifestyles. Obviously education is a principal key and so is a reconnection with the sources of food, but there is something else that we all must keep in mind, something profound that my grandfather and uncle stumbled upon one day forty years ago.

It is semmi. It is about realizing that food does not need to be a part of every element of life for that element to be enjoyable. It is about savoring whatever it is that you have in the moment that you have it and transforming it into something grand. Perhaps most importantly it is about appreciating the concept of scarcity over excess and using a bit of imagination. Food can be a source of comfort, a symbol of generosity and community, and a gesture of love. Despite what the modern food culture has turned food into, what advertising has made us believe, what our bodies crave, how food has been used against us, we as consumers are ultimately the ones in control.