

The Limits of Starvation – Personal Experience*

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In December 1942 I escaped from the Lwów ghetto in Poland. Armed with forged documents on an assumed name, Józef Balicki, I reached Warsaw, where I tried to pass as a Polish Christian. I was 13 years old. From the start my situation became complicated, and during the first 4 months in Warsaw I hid in seventeen different places.

In May 1943 I was lucky to find a Polish family that took me into hiding with three other Jews: my uncle Gabriel, and another couple, a man and woman. The Bajer family kept us in hiding and fed us, for payment. For a year and a half, until the autumn of 1944, we did not leave their home even once [1,2].

At the end of July 1944 the Bajers went for a 2 day holiday in the country and they left us food, just enough for 2 days. The next day, 1 August, was the start of the Warsaw Uprising. For the sake of clarity I must point out that this was not the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that took place in April 1943, but the Polish national uprising of *Armia Krajowa* that started on 1 August 1944 and lasted until early October – 63 days. Because of the uprising, the Bajers did not return.

We were in the apartment alone, with no contact outside and without information about what was happening around us. We never met our neighbors, they did not know about us, and there was no supply of food – any food.

There were explosions and constant shooting outside; our building was hit several times and sustained considerable damage, but it did not collapse. We were on the second floor of a three-story building, but we were not afraid of bombs. On the contrary, fighting in the streets gave us hope of liberation. But we were hungry. There was nothing to eat. The food left to us was supposed to suffice for 2 days; it lasted for 4, but there was no other source of food. In the kitchen we found some potatoes and a little flour, but after a few days there was nothing left. Additional search disclosed a small paper bag containing dried peas and we made soup from the entire contents. It was meant to last for several days. Unfortunately, in Poland at that time there were no refrigerators and the summer of 1944 was exceptionally hot. The soup quickly spoiled and after 2 days was already malodorous. Despite the bad smell we ate it and paid for it dearly with severe bloody diarrhea and abdominal pain. The next day there was such an unbearable stench in the apartment

that we had to throw out the rest of the soup. But the damage to our bowels was already done and the diarrhea persisted. We all were very ill and felt extreme weakness. Then came another surprise. It had to do with the Bajer's little girl, Hania, 5 years old. She was extremely thin, almost transparent, and without any appetite. When given a slice of bread with whatever spread, she never finished it. Mrs. Bajer was a deeply religious woman who could not throw bread away, even the remnants that Hania did not finish. "Bread is the gift of God and must not be thrown out" she would say. So she put the remnants of Hania's sandwiches into paper bags, and stored them in some corner. In our constant search for food, we found many of those remnants. They were covered with a thick layer of dust and mold that were impossible to separate, so we ate it all to the last crumb.

At this stage we were unable to talk or to think about anything but food. Our brains became blocked to any other topic. We were approaching the end of September, two months of near total starvation. I recalled an earlier time of war, June 1941, when the Germans were bombing Lwów and we were sitting in the shelter. It was impossible to cook meals. At that time, 1941, we were eating sandwiches with dry salami. Now, as I was lying in bed, I started sucking the corner of my bed sheet, imagining that I was eating that wonderful salami. I would gladly have paid with years of my life for just one slice. But my dream could not provide the much-needed calories.

The physical weakness was extreme. Rising from bed became nearly impossible. The last thing that could be swallowed was a few pills of artificial sweetener (saccharine), some vinegar and tap water. We did not know whether the water was suitable for drinking, but we drank it anyway. We mixed the vinegar with water and dissolved the pills of sweetener, making a kind of "lemonade" without any nutritional value; each one of us received a small bottle, about 100 ml – "The last supper." To raise that small bottle to my mouth took great effort; I had to use both hands.

At this stage we already knew that we were dying from starvation, and an idea sprang up: why not just leave the apartment and disclose ourselves to the neighbors as Jews? We discussed what could happen if we did that. Perhaps the Poles would feed us, rather than give us away to the Germans. And if they do kill us, so what? We were dying anyway, so why prolong the agony?

In a formal vote, all members of the "parliament," including the youngest, myself, not yet 15, voted for disclosure. The decision was taken. Tosia, the woman who was with us, volunteered

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to go to the neighbors and tell them that there were four Jews hiding in the building who were dying from starvation. There was no elevator and she had to walk down three flights of stairs to the basement. She was ill; she had a heart disease. She died from her heart disease shortly after the war ended, still in the 1940s. But on that day, 30 September she, the strongest of us all, walked down three flights to the basement and back, three flights up. She returned, accompanied by three men – a kind of local emergency authority. They were deeply shocked to see us, four skeletons covered by skin, in dirty clothes, our hair uncut. My weight at the time was 28 kg (64 lbs); I was 15 years old. The members of the committee were compassionate and generous and explained to us that we had nothing to worry about: we were not under German rule, but in independent Poland: the Uprising had not yet collapsed. Then they left. After a few

minutes one of them came back, with some flour, some sugar, and one potato, a small one, for all four of us. He told us that as from that moment we would partake of the food distribution, as miserable as it was: everybody in Warsaw was hungry. From the flour Tosia made some kind of pita, and the small potato was sliced into eight slices – two for each of us. We boiled it in water, since there was no oil or fat of any kind. This was the most delectable potato I ever ate in my life, before or after.

Armia Krajowa, the Polish underground, surrendered on 2 October. One of the conditions of surrender was that the entire population of Warsaw would be evacuated. This was in preparation for the total systematic destruction of the city. Evacuation of the population started on the same day, October 2. Our section was evacuated on October 4 [Figure 1] and marched to the Pruszków transfer camp, where a selection was conducted: those able to work would be sent to Germany to work in military industry or agriculture. Children, the elderly and the sick would be sent to refugee camps in western Poland. The point of transfer from *Armia Krajowa* back to the Nazis was marked by two flags: the Polish and the Nazi-German. Every person received from the Red Cross one whole loaf of bread, and in addition every child received a 300 ml can of high fat concentrated milk.

I knew that after prolonged fasting it is dangerous to eat a large amount of food and it should not be eaten at one sitting. I wanted to try just a little bit of bread and milk. But the hunger was overwhelming. Once I tasted it, I could not restrain myself and within minutes I had consumed it all. I paid for it dearly with a most severe, incessant bloody diarrhea.

At the selection in the Pruszków camp I was classified as unable to work and they sent me with other sick people to the refugee camp in Częstochowa. We were pushed into the cattle cars of a very slow train. There were no seats. Everybody in the group was either sick or elderly, but we all stood. There was not even a possibility of sitting on the floor because there was sim-



Figure 1. People on the march to the Pruszków selection camp. The boy in shorts is the author of this article. Photograph taken by the International Red Cross.

ply no room. The distance from Pruszków to Częstochowa is only 260 km (160 miles), but the train was very slow. When the train left it was still daylight; by the time we reached Częstochowa it was already the next day.

My diarrhea was a mixture of blood and mucus; it was incessant and very severe. There was no toilet and no pail or bucket of any kind on the train; all excretions went into my pants. The skin burned, irritated by feces, and all that, while standing and exhausted. When we reached Częstochowa I felt half-dead. They then took us from the train to the refugee camp in open trucks. Before we reached the camp, the trucks stopped at a city hospital and some people helped me and a few others to get off the truck and into the hospital.

A clean bath in the hospital. (At the Bajer home in Warsaw there was no bath and no shower. We washed ourselves at the sink in the kitchen. And before that, in the ghetto, it was the same. I had not had a bath or shower for years.) A bed with clean sheets. Three proper meals a day. And not less important: the smiling and polite doctors and nurses.

I told them that I had become separated from my parents during the uprising. They did not know that my parents were murdered much earlier because they were Jews. For them I was a lost Polish child – one of their own.

1989. I am already a veteran Israeli, a physician – graduate of the Hebrew University-Hadassah Medical School, and a surgeon, chief of the Department of Surgery in a government hospital. Poland is organizing an international convention of surgeons and I have decided to go.

I arrived in Warsaw in August 1989, exactly 45 years after the uprising. It was evening. The next morning I made my way to that house, the one in which I had hid for a year and a half, and in which I nearly died. I went up to the second floor and knocked on the door.

The Bajers had not been alive for many years, but the woman who lived in that apartment let me in, listened to my story, and allowed me to look around as much as I wanted. Before I left, she suggested that I go see Dr. Mroczek; "He still lives here on the first floor" she said. I told her that I had never met him since I had lived there illegally. But she insisted that Dr. Mroczek must remember the family that gave us shelter and that I should go and talk to him.

I went one floor down. On the door there was a name plate: Dr. Mroczek – Oto-Laryngologist. I knocked and a young woman opened the door. I introduced myself and she led me to her grandfather. An old man was resting on a bed. Later I found out that he was 87 years old. We started to talk. I told him about our difficulties during the uprising, he told me about his, and while we were talking it occurred to me that I had seen him before. He did not seem a complete stranger. There was something singular in his voice and eyes, something intriguing and persistent, until it suddenly dawned on me that he was the man who had given us that small potato – the best potato of my life. Indeed, it was him, the head of the house committee during the uprising, and he had been in charge of food distribution. That very same evening I visited his son, who gave me his father's photograph and some more information: After the war Dr. Mroczek became the founder of pediatric laryngology in Poland, and a professor at the medical school in Warsaw. He died a short time after I visited him. I couldn't help thinking that he had waited, to give me one last opportunity to come and see him before his death. For this I am very grateful. His son, Dr. Janusz Mroczek, is a physician, a surgeon, chief of surgery in one of the hospitals in Warsaw, and 10 years my junior. When I was 14, he was 4 years old. For a year

and a half we lived in the same apartment house, just one floor apart, but we never met and never knew of the other's existence.

As a result of prolonged starvation I have severe osteoporosis, and during the years I sustained some rather unusual fractures, such as fracture of the femoral neck at age 27 when I was an intern at Hadassah, or, a few years ago a rib fracture without any trauma. I just coughed and felt pain in the chest, and a rib was broken. There were, of course, some other periods of starvation during the war that also contributed to it.

What are the limits of starvation? How much longer could we have lived, had we not received the help from Dr. Mroczek and his committee? What are the limits of human suffering? How much can one suffer and still remain humane?

I experienced many difficult and painful events in my life, but the episode described here was undoubtedly the worst. Its recollection is still very painful, not only for me but for my family as well. But the very fact that we did survive signifies our victory over the Nazis.

References

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When women love us, they forgive us everything, even our crimes; when they do not love us, they give us credit for nothing, not even our virtues

Honore de Balzac (1799-1850), French novelist

Capsule

Management of IL-2 expression by helper T (TH) cells

The cytokine interleukin-2 (IL-2) is both produced by and exerts strong effects on T cells. Despite its fundamental importance for T cell development and immune regulation, IL-2 is only fleetingly expressed, consistent with a need to keep the potent effects of this growth factor under tight control. Villarino et al. investigated the management of IL-2 expression by helper T (TH) cells and found that several feedback mechanisms exist to ensure the brevity of its expression. Selection cytokines – including some that use receptors bearing the common chain – exhibited the ability to suppress IL-2 expression. Most potent among these was IL-2 itself, and it was at its best in combination with one

or more of the other cytokines. Negative feedback was also mediated by the intracellular STAT family of transcription factors, which assist with the differentiation of TH1 and TH2 cells. These *in vitro* observations were supported by *in vivo* experiments, in which treatment of mice with recombinant IL-2 measurably reduced the levels of IL-2 produced after immunization. It will be of interest to investigate whether these pathways cooperate in distinct ways to control early T cell immunity, regulatory T cells, and the formation of T cell memory.

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