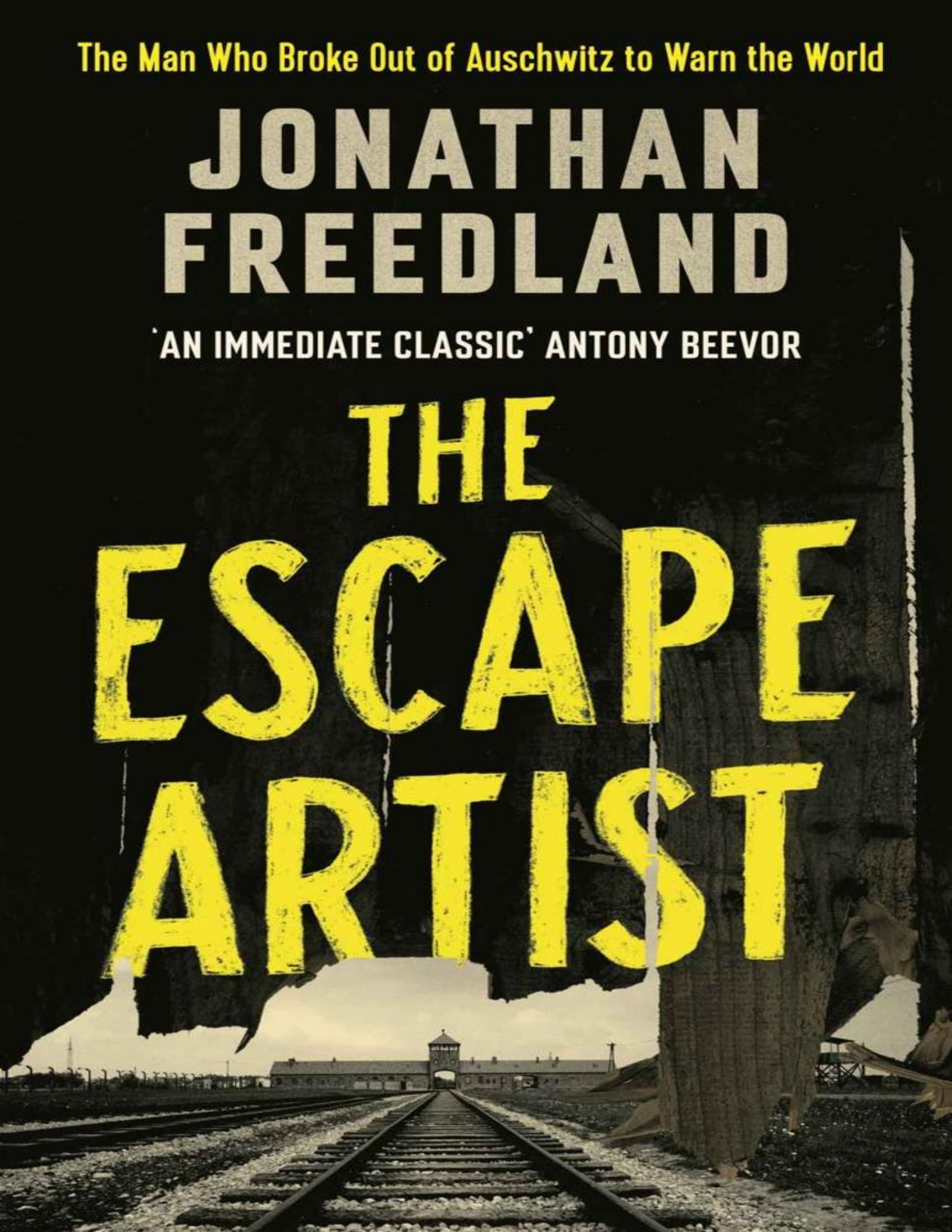
The Man Who Broke Out of Auschwitz to Warn the World

JONATHAN FREEDLAND

'AN IMMEDIATE CLASSIC' ANTONY BEEVOR

THE ESCAPE ARTIST



About the Author

Jonathan Freedland is a *Guardian* columnist and former foreign correspondent. He is the presenter of BBC Radio 4's contemporary history series, *The Long View* , and a past winner of an Orwell Prize for journalism. He is the author of eleven books, including the award-winning *Bring Home the Revolution* . He has written nine thrillers, mostly as Sam Bourne, including *The Righteous Men* which was a *Sunday Times* number one bestseller.

Also by Jonathan Freedland

NON-FICTION

Bring Home the Revolution

Jacob's Gift

FICTION (AS SAM BOURNE)

The Righteous Men

The Last Testament

The Final Reckoning

The Chosen One

Pantheon

To Kill the President

To Kill the Truth

To Kill a Man

FICTION (AS JONATHAN FREEDLAND)

The Third Woman

THE ESCAPE ARTIST

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Map of Auschwitz I and labels on map of Auschwitz II adapted from maps by Nikola Zimring, Rudolf Vrba Archives, LLC 2018, used with permission.

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For my father, Michael Freedland, 1934–2018
His memory is a blessing.

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Author's Note

WHEN I WAS nineteen years old, I went to the Curzon cinema in Mayfair in London to see the nine-hour epic documentary *Shoah* . It was not a normal movie-going experience. Partly it was the length of the film; partly it was the audience. In the room were survivors of the Holocaust. My friend made the mistake of bringing popcorn, but he did not get very far with it. He had barely begun chomping when a woman from a nearby row leaned over and slapped him, hard, on the thigh. In an accent thick with the sound and memories of pre-war Europe, she said: 'Have you no respect?'

The film left a deep mark, but one of the interviewees stayed with me more than any other. His name was Rudolf Vrba. In the film, he is shown testifying to the greatest horrors in human history, horrors he had witnessed first hand, horrors he had survived. Very briefly he mentions something extraordinary, a fact which made him all but unique among Holocaust survivors. Aged nineteen, no older than I was as I watched the film, he had escaped from Auschwitz.

I never forgot his name or his face, even though, over the decades, I would be struck how few others had ever heard of him. And then, some thirty years after that night in the cinema in 1986, I found myself returning to Rudolf Vrba. We were living in the age of post-truth and fake news, when the truth itself was under assault – and I thought once more of the man who had been ready to risk everything so that the world might know of a terrible truth hidden under a mountain of lies.

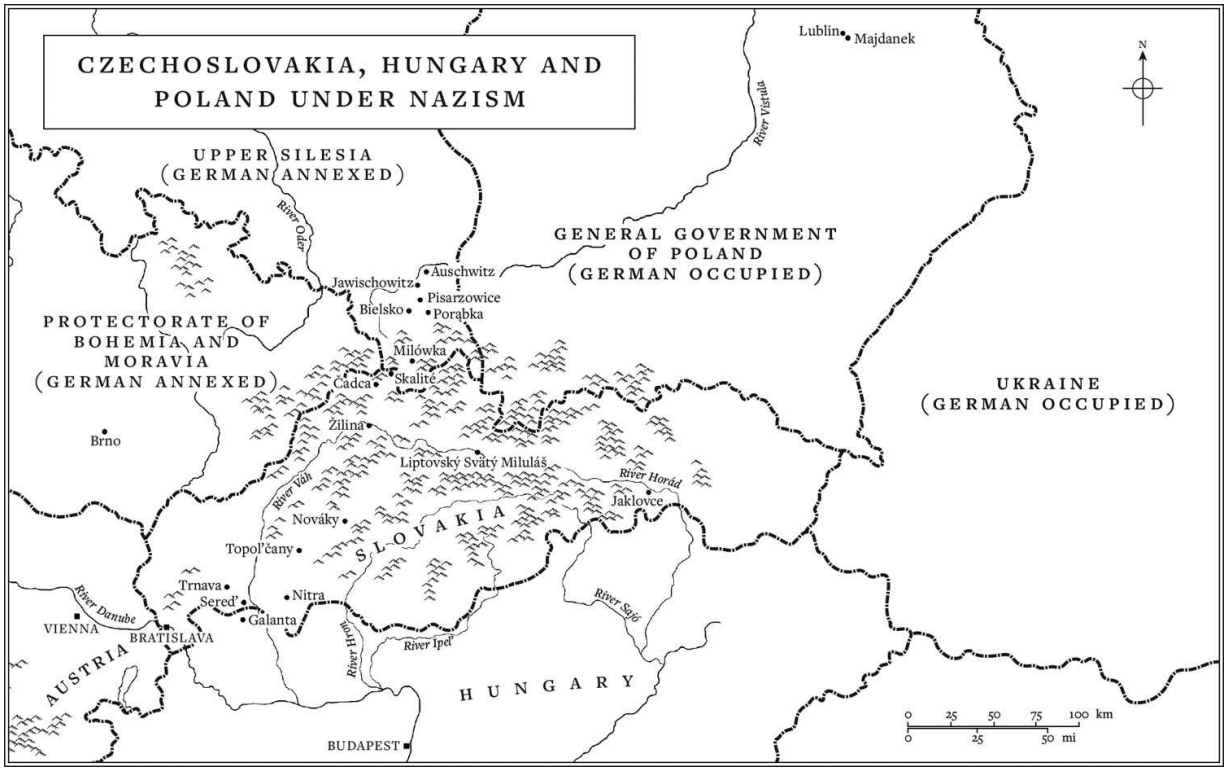
I began to look into the life of Rudolf Vrba, finding the handful of people still alive who had known him or worked with him or loved him. It turned out that his teenage sweetheart and first wife, Gerta, was living alone, aged ninety-three, in Muswell Hill in north London. Over half a dozen summer afternoons in the plague year of 2020, she and I sat in her garden and talked of a young man, then called Walter Rosenberg, and the world they had both known. She handed me a red suitcase packed with Rudi's letters, some

telling of almost unbearable personal pain. A matter of days after our last conversation, once Gerta had told me the story in full, I got a phone call from her family, letting me know that she had passed away.

Rudi's second wife and widow, Robin, was in New York. She and I talked for hour after hour too, as she filled in the story of the man Rudolf Vrba became, the memories he had entrusted to her, the love they had shared. What soon became clear as I listened, and as I immersed myself in the official documents, testimonies, memoirs, letters, contemporary reports and historical accounts on which this book is based, was that this was more than the true story of an unprecedented escape. It was also the story of how history can change a life, even down the generations; how the difference between truth and lies can be the difference between life and death; and how people can refuse to believe in the possibility of their own imminent destruction, even, perhaps especially, when that destruction is certain. Those notions were stark and vivid in the Europe of the 1940s. But they seemed to have a new, fearful resonance in our own time.

I also came to realise that this is a story of how human beings can be pushed to the outer limits, and yet still somehow endure; how those who have witnessed so much death can nevertheless retain their capacity, their lust, for life; and how the actions of one individual, even a teenage boy, can bend the arc of history, if not towards justice then towards something like hope.

I left the cinema that night convinced that the name of Rudolf Vrba deserved to stand alongside Anne Frank, Oskar Schindler and Primo Levi, in the first rank of stories that define the Shoah. That day may never come. But maybe, through this book, Rudolf Vrba might perform one last act of escape: perhaps he might escape our forgetfulness, and be remembered.


CZECHOSLOVAKIA, HUNGARY AND POLAND UNDER NAZISM
UPPER SILESIA (GERMAN ANNEXED)
PROTECTORATE OF BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA (GERMAN ANNEXED)
GENERAL GOVERNMENT OF POLAND (GERMAN OCCUPIED)
UKRAINE (GERMAN OCCUPIED)
SLOVAKIA
HUNGARY
AUSTRIA
River Oder
River Vistula
River Váh
River Horád
River Hron
River Ipel'
River Sajó
River Danube
Lublin
Majdanek
Jawischowitz
Auschwitz
Pisarzowice
Bielsko
Porąbka
Milówka
Čadca
Skalité
Žilina
Brno
Liptovský Svätý Miluláš
Jaklovce
Nováky
Topoľčany
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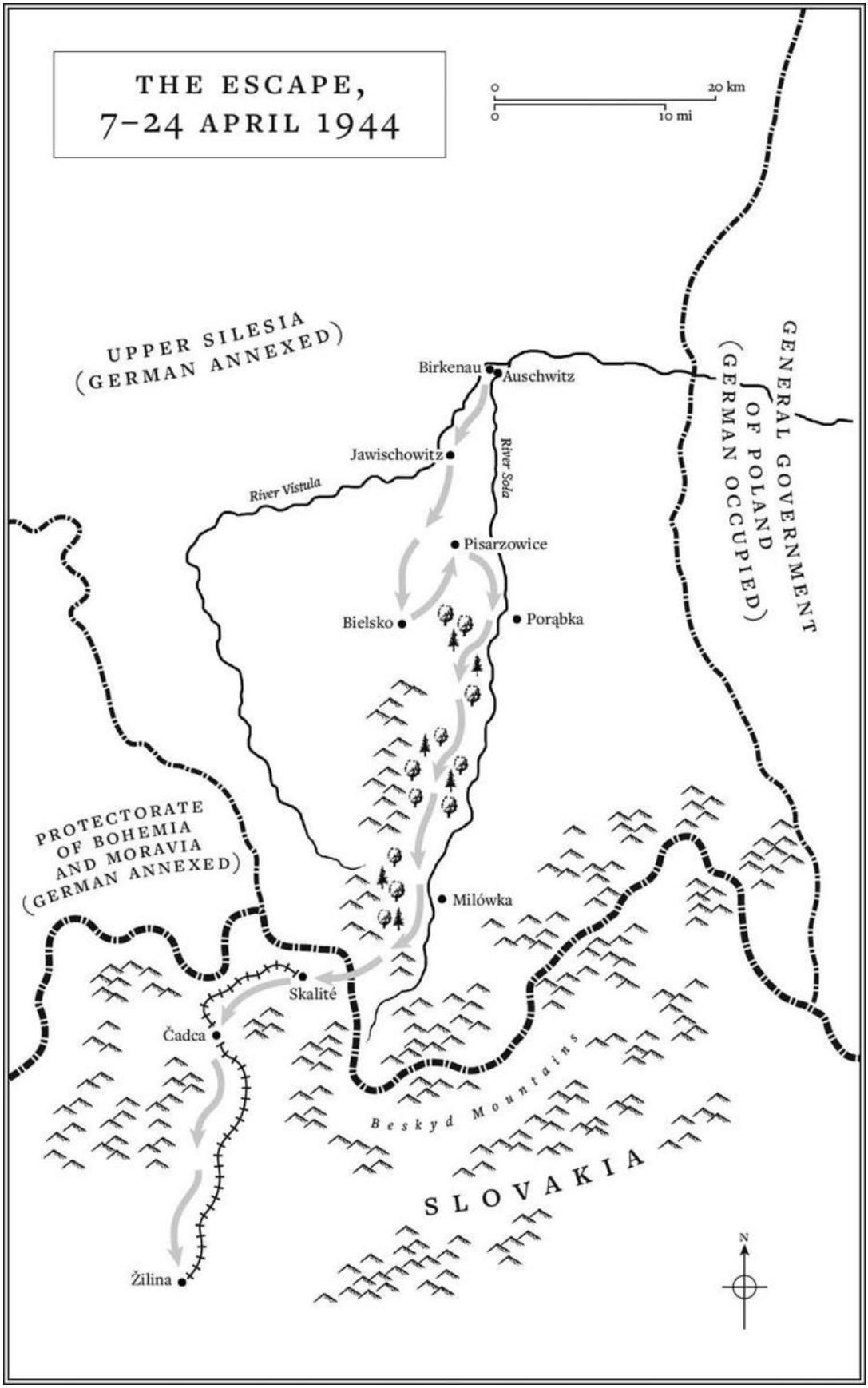
THE ESCAPE,
7–24 APRIL 1944
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UPPER SILESIA
(GERMAN ANNEXED)
GENERAL GOVERNMENT
OF POLAND
(GERMAN OCCUPIED)
Birkenau
Auschwitz
Jawischowitz
River Soła
River Vistula
Pisarzowice
Bielsko
Porąbka
PROTECTORATE
OF BOHEMIA
AND MORAVIA
(GERMAN ANNEXED)
Milówka
Skalité
Čadca
Beskyd Mountains
SLOVAKIA
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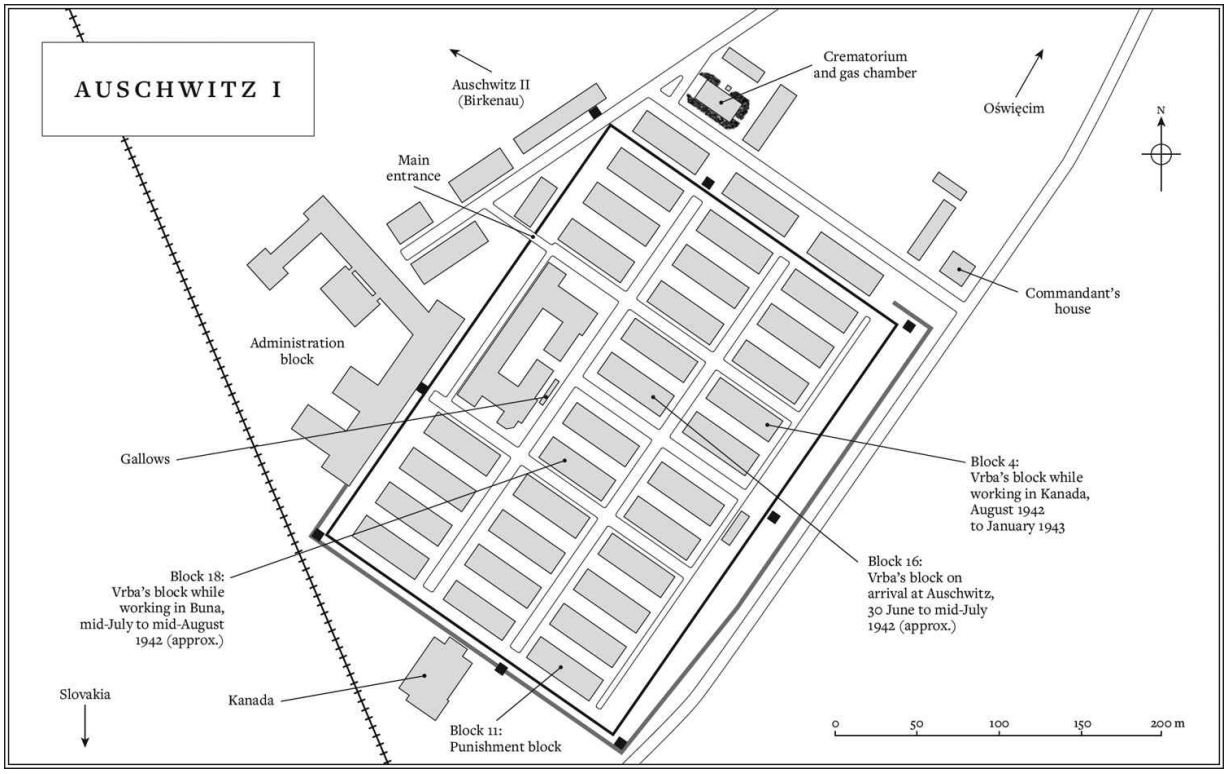
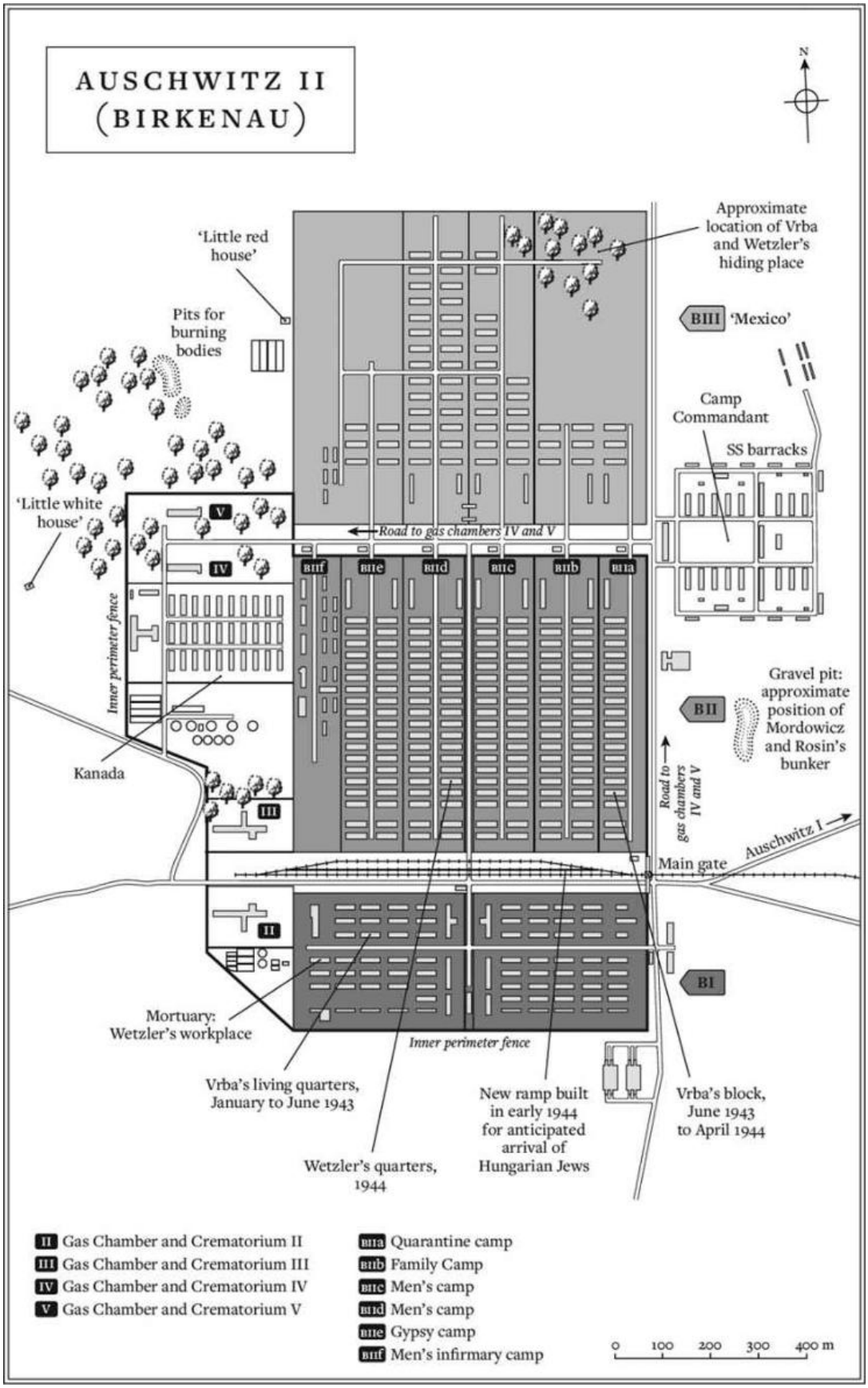

AUSCHWITZ I
Auschwitz II
(Birkenau)
Crematorium
and gas chamber
Oświęcim
N
Main
entrance
Commandant's
house
Administration
block
Gallows
Block 4:
Vrba's block while
working in Kanada,
August 1942
to January 1943
Block 16:
Vrba's block on
arrival at Auschwitz,
30 June to mid-July
1942 (approx.)
Block 18:
Vrba's block while
working in Buna,
mid-July to mid-August
1942 (approx.)
Slovakia
Kanada
Block 11:
Punishment block
0
50
100
150
200 m


AUSCHWITZ II
(BIRKENAU)
N
'Little red house'
Pits for burning bodies
Approximate location of Vrba and Wetzler's hiding place
BIII 'Mexico'
Camp Commandant
SS barracks
'Little white house'
V
IV
Road to gas chambers IV and V
BIIf
BIIe
BIId
BIIc
BIIb
BIIa
Inner perimeter fence
Gravel pit: approximate position of Mordowicz and Rosin's bunker
BII
Kanada
III
Road to gas chambers IV and V
Auschwitz I
Main gate
II
BI
Mortuary: Wetzler's workplace
Inner perimeter fence
Vrba's living quarters, January to June 1943
Wetzler's quarters, 1944
New ramp built in early 1944 for anticipated arrival of Hungarian Jews
Vrba's block, June 1943 to April 1944
II Gas Chamber and Crematorium II
III Gas Chamber and Crematorium III
IV Gas Chamber and Crematorium IV
V Gas Chamber and Crematorium V
BIIa Quarantine camp
BIIb Family Camp
BIIc Men's camp
BIId Men's camp
BIIe Gypsy camp
BIIf Men's infirmary camp
0 100 200 300 400 m

Prologue

7 April 1944

AFTER DAYS OF delay, weeks of obsessive preparation, months of watching the failed attempts of others and two years of seeing the depths to which human beings could sink, the moment had finally come. It was time to escape.

The two other prisoners were already there, at the designated spot. Wordlessly, they gave the nod: *do it now* . Walter and Fred did not hesitate. They climbed on top of the timbers, found the opening and, one after the other, they dropped inside. A second later, their comrades moved the planks into place above their heads. One of them whispered, ‘Bon voyage .’ And then all was dark and silent.

Without delay, Walter set to work. He pulled out the *machorka* , the cheap, Soviet tobacco he had been told about, a batch that had been prepared as instructed: soaked in petrol and dried. Slowly, he began to wedge it into the cracks between the wooden boards, sometimes blowing on it gently, puffing it into place, hoping against hope that the Soviet prisoner of war who had taught him the trick was right, that the scent would be repellent to dogs. Not that they were relying solely on Walter’s handiwork. They had already made sure that the ground around the hideout was liberally sprinkled with the treated tobacco, so that the canine SS would not even draw near. If the Red Army man’s confidence was well-founded, Walter and Fred should be able to crouch in this hole beneath the woodpile, silent and undisturbed, for exactly as long as they needed: three days and three nights.

Walter stared at the phosphorescent hands of his watch. Time was crawling. He wanted to stand up, to stretch, but he could do no such thing. His arms and legs were cramping up, but he knew he would have to endure that and endure it in silence. It was too risky to talk. At one point, Walter felt Fred, who was six years older than him, take his hand and squeeze it . Walter was nineteen years old.

What was that? The sound of footsteps – and they were getting closer. Was this the end for Walter and Fred, so soon after they had begun? Reflexively, each man reached for his razor blade. They were clear on this point: they might be caught, but they would not let themselves be interrogated . They would end it in this hole in the ground; they would turn this hideout into a burial pit.

Not that the SS would leave them here. They would drag their dead bodies back to the camp. They would prop them up on spades or hang them from the gallows, a sign of warning placed around their necks, the same performance that followed every other failed escape. They would make trophies of their corpses.

Walter's nerves seemed to be tightening with each passing second. This pit they were in was so small. But then the footsteps, if that was what they were, faded away.

At 6 p.m. that Friday night it came, the shriek of the siren. It was a howl to make the air vibrate and the blood freeze in your veins, a thousand wolf packs baying in unison. The pair had heard it enough times, a sound so piercing even the SS men would put their fingers in their ears. The noise was appalling, but every inmate welcomed it: it meant that at least one of their number had been found missing from the evening roll call – and that, perhaps, a prisoner had escaped Auschwitz.

That was their cue. Fred and Walter moved out of the main space, which had been built to hold four, and wriggled into the side branch, a kind of passageway, that could accommodate only two. It was intended to be an extra layer of protection: a hiding place within the hiding place. The pair squeezed in and lay dead still, side by side . For Walter, it was almost a relief. Now at last the waiting was over ; battle was joined. Each man had tied a strip of flannel across his mouth, so that he would not betray himself – and the other – with a cough. The only movement came from the luminous hands of the watch.

They would not see it, but they knew what the siren would bring. And soon enough they could hear it: the manhunt under way. The pounding of close on 2,000 pairs of jackboots, tramping across the ground, the senior men alternately swearing and barking orders – *screaming* them, because, given what had happened a couple of days earlier, another escape was a humiliation – the dogs slavering as they rooted out any sign of frail, quivering human life, 200 of them , trained and primed for this very

purpose. The SS would search every ridge and every hollow; they would comb every bush, examine every ditch and shine a light into every trench of the sprawling metropolis of death that was Auschwitz. The search had begun and it would not let up for three days.

Fred and Walter could be precise about that because the Nazis had a security protocol from which they never deviated. This outer part of the camp, where prisoners laboured as slaves, was guarded only during the daylight hours when the inmates were working. No need to watch over it at night, when every last prisoner was herded back inside the inner camp, with its double lines of electrified wire fences. There was only one exception to that rule. If an inmate was missing, presumed to have attempted an escape, the SS kept up the outer ring of armed sentry posts, every watchtower occupied by a man with a machine gun.

It would stay like that for seventy-two hours, while the SS searched. After that, they would conclude that the escapee, or escapees, had got away: from then on, it would be the responsibility of the Gestapo to scour the wider region and find them. Those guarding the outer cordon would be ordered to withdraw, leaving it unmanned. Which meant there was a gap in the Nazi defences. Not a literal gap, but a loophole. If a prisoner could somehow hide in the outer area during those three days and nights after the alarm had been sounded, even as the SS and their dogs strove to sniff them out, then he would emerge on the fourth night into an outer camp that was unguarded. He could escape.

Walter heard a familiar voice. That murderous drunk, Unterscharführer Buntrock, was close by, giving orders to some luckless underlings. ‘Look behind those planks,’ he was saying. ‘Use your heads!’

Fred and Walter braced themselves. The SS men got nearer. Now they could hear boots climbing on to the boards overhead, sending a fine sprinkling of dirt down into the cavity beneath. The pursuers were so close, Walter could hear the heaviness of their breath.

Next came the dogs, scratching at the wood, snuffling and sniffing, shifting from plank to plank, their panting audible through the timber walls and ceiling. Had the Soviet prisoner been wrong about his special brew of tobacco? Or had Walter misunderstood his instructions? Why had these animals not been driven away by the smell?

This time Walter reached for his knife rather than his razor; he wanted a weapon to use against others rather than himself. He felt the throb of his

heart.

But, miraculously, the moment passed. The SS men and their dogs grew more distant. Inside their tiny double coffin of a hiding place, Fred and Walter allowed themselves the comfort of a smile.

The relief never lasted long. All through the evening and into that first night, the sounds of footsteps and barking dogs would come nearer, then grow distant; rising and falling, louder then softer, then louder again, as the searchers kept returning to this same corner of the camp. Walter liked to think he could sense frustration in the voices of the SS men as they probed the same ground, again and again. He would hear them cursing as they gave a second and then a third poke to a pile of timbers or roof tiles, sweeping an area they had already swept twice before.

Both of them were desperate to flex or stretch, but hardly dared. Walter longed to warm his ice-cold hands and feet, but even the slightest movement saw his whole body gripped with searing cramp. If one of them dozed, the other would remain taut with tension, listening for any hint of movement nearby. Even sleep brought no rest, just nightmares of an endless present, stuck in this subterranean box: hellish below ground, worse still above.

They heard the morning shift begin, the familiar sounds of forced labour. This area was a construction site, and it soon echoed to the banging of timber, the clanking of metal, the barking of dogs and the shouting of the SS and their henchmen . Fred and Walter reckoned that the risk that their woodpile would be disturbed by slave workers was minimal – these planks were not earmarked for use any time soon – but they could hardly relax. Perhaps ten hours passed before the noise quieted and the *Kommando* marched back to barracks.

Throughout, the two men kept still, knowing that back in the inner camp the SS would be searching every hut, store, washroom, latrine and shed, turning every barrack building upside down. Naturally there was a system: the method was to search in a series of ever decreasing circles, with the sniffer dogs in the middle of the pack, closing in on their prey. And once they got to the centre of the smallest circle, they would start all over again.

The Nazis came so close, so often, Walter considered it a wonder he and Fred had not been discovered hours ago. Fred saw it differently. ‘Stupid bastards !’ he said when it was safe to break the silence. Perhaps it was bravado. Twenty-four hours in, Fred was no more able to eat or drink than

Walter. They had stashed some provisions in this narrow passage: several pounds of bread , carefully rationed into chunks, as well as some margarine and a bottle filled with cold coffee . But, such were their nerves, neither had the stomach to touch a thing.

Somehow the hours dragged their way through Saturday to reach Sunday. Now the pair decided to take a chance. For the first time since the sirens sounded, they emerged from the side cavity into the relative expanse of the bunker itself. Even though Walter had tried to fill the gaps in the wall and the ceiling with the treated tobacco, he had not plugged them all: some of the frosty morning mist seeped through.

They were so stiff from lying still. Fred could not move his right arm and he had lost all feeling in his fingers . Walter massaged his companion's shoulder to get the blood circulating. They did not linger in the larger space for long.

The SS kept up the search. Fred and Walter froze as they heard two men, Germans, a matter of yards away. It was in the early afternoon, and they could pick up every word.

'They can't have got away ,' said one. 'They must be still in the camp.'

The Germans began speculating about Fred and Walter's likely hiding places. One was clearly pointing to something. 'How about that pile of wood?'

Walter and Fred did not move.

'Do you think they might be hiding under there?' the second voice said. 'Maybe they built themselves a little alcove.'

The first one thought it unlikely. After all, he mused out loud, and not inaccurately: 'The dogs have been over it a dozen times.' Unless, that is, the missing Jews had found some ingenious way to put the dogs off the scent.

Then some words of resolve, a declaration that it was 'worth trying' and the sound of two men scrambling to get nearer.

Once more, Walter grabbed his knife. Fred did the same.

The two Germans climbed on top of the woodpile, which they proceeded to dismantle, board by board. They took off the first layer, then the second, then, with some effort, the third and fourth.

If it had come ten seconds later, it would have been too late. Not for the first time, indeed this may have been the eighth or ninth time, Walter's life

was saved by a random moment of good luck, in this case one that could not have been more perfectly timed.

Far off there was a sudden commotion, the voices distant but excited. Fred and Walter could hear the men just above them pause, their ears seemingly cocked to pick up what was happening. A second passed. Then another. Finally, one of the pair said, 'They've got them! C'mon … Hurry .' And, down below, Fred and Walter heard their would-be discoverers scramble away.

Sunday night passed into Monday morning. Now it was a countdown, Walter staring at the hands of his watch, knowing that if they could hold out just a little longer …

The morning shift returned, bringing with it the same din, the same barking, both human and animal, for another ten hours, each minute passing at the same agonising pace.

Eventually the *Kommando* returned to barracks. The three days were nearly up.

At 6.30 p.m., Walter and Fred finally heard the sound they had longed for. Announced loudly, it rang out: *Postenkette abziehen! Postenkette abziehen!* It was the order to take down the *grosse Postenkette* , the outer chain of sentry posts, shouted from one watchtower to the next and then the next, circling the entire perimeter, becoming louder when it got nearer, fading as it shifted further away, before it finally completed a full circuit. To Fred and Walter, those words, bellowed out by the men who had enslaved them and murdered hundreds of thousands of their people, sounded like the sweetest music. It was an admission of defeat by the SS, recognition that they had failed to recapture the two prisoners they had lost.

As SS protocol demanded, the outer ring of watchtowers was vacated, the cordon shrunk to lock in only the inner camp. Walter could hear the SS guards returning to the smaller loop of sentry towers. This was the great flaw in the Auschwitz system, the gap through which he and Fred had long planned to make their escape.

They were sorely tempted to rush, but they restrained themselves. First they had to emerge from the side cavity. For Walter, even inching forward sent a sharp pain shooting through his arms, legs, trunk and neck. His muscles were stiff and cold, his first movements jerky and uncertain, as if his body needed to relearn basic motor function. It took time for both of

them, but finally they were in the main pit. They squatted and stretched, rotating their wrists and feet; they hugged each other in the darkness.

Now they took a deep breath and pressed their palms against the roof, trying to give the bottom board a push. But it would not move. They tried another spot on the ceiling. Still it would not budge. Was this to be the fatal flaw in their plan? Had they accidentally sealed themselves into their own tomb? It was the one thing they had not practised or even thought about. They had assumed that, if you could pile a plank on, you could take it off. But lifting boards is easy from above, when you can remove one at a time. Not so from below, when the weight of the entire stack is pressing down.

Shoving in tandem, grunting with pain, they managed to lift one of the bottom planks no more than an inch. But it was enough to give them purchase. Now they could get hold of it, just enough to shove it sideways. Fred turned to Walter with a smile. Thank God for those Germans who nearly found us, he whispered. 'If they hadn't moved those planks, we'd have been trapped .'

It had taken longer than either man had imagined, but finally there was an opening in what had been the roof of their home since Friday. There was a glimpse of the moonlit sky.

They summoned their strength again, shifting and shoving the boards until they could, with excruciating effort, haul themselves up and out. At last, they had done it. They were out of that hole in the ground.

But they were not yet out of the camp. There was still so much ground to cover if they were to become the first Jews to break out of Auschwitz. Even so, for the teenage Walter Rosenberg, it was an exhilarating feeling – but not a wholly new one. Because this was not his first escape. And it would not be his last.