A synopsis from the book “Lost and Found”
(A memoir by Karl Knebl), (All family member names omitted)
(1938 through 1956)

The true story I am about to share with you is the story of only one family that endured hardships and was nearly wiped out; one family among millions of others. It will show how prejudice and animosity between people of different nationalities can create suffering for millions of people. Consider the holocaust during WW II. In more than seventy years since the end of the Second World War, we humans have sadly not learned from the past; ethnic and religious persecution and genocide still exist in many parts of the world today. With God’s help and people’s further education and enlightenment, events like I have witnessed will hopefully not be repeated in the future.

Because I have very few memories of my family, most of the information about my family is from information I learned from my American uncle, after I was located in an institution for orphans and war displaced children in Slovenia.

I was born late in the 1930s in Serbia; in former Yugoslavia. My father was born in Austria/Hungary and was of German ancestry, as was my grandfather and several generations before him. Austria/Hungary broke up after the First World War in 1918 and part of it became Yugoslavia. My mother was born in Romania. My siblings at that time were two sisters, also born in Serbia. I was the oldest child.

The ethnic Germans and Serbs coexisted peacefully until Germany invaded Yugoslavia in April 1941. Soon the hatred for anybody of German ancestry escalated all over Serbia and they were persecuted by their Serbian neighbors.

After my youngest sister was born (1941), my parents decided that in order to escape persecution in Serbia, they would flee with the family to Germany. With an infant and a 2 year old and me, probably 3 or 4 years old (I don’t know which month we fled), they joined the exodus of refugees. We traveled through Serbia, Hungary, Austria and possibly Czechoslovakia to the north German town of Lebenstedt. I have sketchy memories of hordes of people traveling across open fields avoiding settlements, in ragged clothing, carrying bundles made from bed sheets full of personal belongings; after leaving their houses, family members, friends and everything else behind. We traveled by foot, horse drawn wagons and at times in cattle cars. We slept along railroad tracks, waiting for passing freight trains to hop on, when they slowed down. Because we were (ethnic) Germans, we avoided settlements for fear of more persecutions. Looking at a map of Europe, I calculated the distance we traveled was about 670 miles as the crow flies (like Denver, CO to Dallas, TX). Of course, trips are never in a straight line, so it was a much longer distance. I recall two stays for a few days in what were probably camps for displaced persons (DP camps). When I see today families with children fleeing the fighting in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Afghanistan my memory takes me back to my early childhood, for I was like one of these children.
While we lived in Lebenstedt, my parents had another child; my brother was born in 1943. To this day I have no memories of having any siblings, but thanks to information given me by my American uncle a decade later, I learned that at one time I had two sisters and one brother.

In late 1944 my father was conscripted into the military service for the German army. During the war I remember crouching in basement air raid shelters, while American and British bombs were falling all around us; plaster dust was falling from the ceiling as the buildings shook; people were huddled together in fear crying and praying. Between the air raids, I played with other children among the rubbles of burned out and destroyed buildings; and outside of the town we explored destroyed tanks, military trucks and derailed trains. As a young child I had no comprehension of what the people all over the world were going through.

One image I can still recall is my mother reading a letter with a wide black border along all the edges, and crying a lot. That must have been a letter from the German army or war ministry informing her that my father had died at age 34 in a battle with the Soviet Russian Red Army in Poland. It was sometime between February and April 1945 (German Red Cross investigation and conclusion); and the war ended in May. He died in the waning days of WW II. My mother was now a widow, 25 years old, with four children, aged 1, 3, and 5 and at age 7, I was the oldest.

After my father died, my mother set out with us children on a return trip to Yugoslavia, to live with her blood relatives, who were Romanian. Since the hatred for Germans was still strong all over Europe, she decided to use her maiden, Romanian name, instead of the obviously German sounding family name. We again became refugees (the second time); joining the tide of others traveling by foot and in canvas covered trucks, on back roads, across fields and “hitched” rides in cattle cars. As before, we were not alone, there were huge crowds going in the same direction. We again covered the distance equal between Dallas, TX and Denver, CO.

According to the American uncle, nearing our destination, a Serbian woman recognized my mother and informed the Serbian Partisans that my mother was married to a German man (my father). That is how we came to be placed into a Serbian concentration camp called Bački Jarak, also known as “Jarak” (pronounced Yarak), run by Tito’s communist Partisans. It was probably in summer or autumn of 1945 and the War was already over.

The conditions at the camp were horrible. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire fences and controlled or run by armed Partisans in guard towers. We lived in one of many wooden barracks, slept on rough bare wooden floors covered with straw; some lucky people had a sheet or blanket on top of the straw. There were many families in each barrack which was just one large room, with no privacy. In winter, the wind would blow snow between the vertical wooden planks that made up the buildings inside and outside walls.

A typical meal was a little soup in a tin plate and a slice of bread or corn muffin. There was never enough to eat; each night we went to sleep hungry. The Partisans ate more palatable food. In the camp was a large pit in the ground. That was the spot where the kitchen scraps were thrown by the cooks who prepared the food for us detainees (prisoners) and the guards. Every day for
hours, we children sifted through the scraps, looking for potato peelings, egg shells that may still have some yolk or egg whites clinging to them, onion skins and pieces of bread or anything we could bring to the barrack where our mothers could heat it in water outside the barracks and make “soup”. For toilet facilities we used a few wooden outhouses with no paper; located in a wooded area away from the barracks. Some elderly and sick people could not get up to use the facilities, and you can imagine the stench and unsanitary conditions in the barracks. There was neither bathing nor showering. At night search lights illuminated the entire camp.

Bački Jarak was a known as a “hunger camp” for women and children and old men unfit for hard labor. There were poor sanitary conditions and people were “allowed” to die of natural causes like starvation and untreated diseases like typhus, tuberculosis (TB), malaria and other causes. It was not unusual to see a corpse lying about. I vaguely remember reading long ago that they were collected by men with a wooden wagon and dumped into a mass grave. Not surprising, since there were no Christian burials. Over 6,500 people died in the camp and the Bački Jarak village, per internet accounts from other survivors. Some living people were not much more than walking skin and bones. Lice infestations, mice and rats were everywhere. For most people a daily ritual was checking each other for head lice. A major concern was rat bites to children while they were sleeping.

One morning I tried to wake up my mother who was lying next to me on the straw covered floor. I shook her but she would not wake up. I tried again with the same result. Soon some people from the barrack gathered around us. I saw two men come into the room carrying a large burlap sack; it was a body bag. They put my mother into the sack and carried her out of the barrack. That was the last time I saw my mother. When she died she was 26 years and 2 months old; she died in early March 1946 and the camp was closed in mid-April. After my mother was carried out of the barrack, the other inmates around us silently dispersed and went back to their parts of the room. Their feelings for compassion and consoling others were probably numbed or desensitized, because of the daily deaths around them. They were probably wondering who will be next. No one offered any comforting or consoling words to me or my oldest sister who died about 20 days later at age 6.

In the same concentration camp my youngest sister (age 4) and brother (age 2) also died. According to camp records from the Yugoslavian Red Cross, they died before my mother did (the oldest sister’s name does not appear on the camp’s Death List and her fate was unknown until about May 2016). My mother probably witnessed the deaths of her two youngest children. No eight year old child should witness the death of his mother, as I did, and possibly all his siblings. In less than 3 months I lost the rest of my family. Thankfully I do not remember that. They died of exhaustion and starvation (Serbian web site information). (I have no memory of my siblings being with me on our journeys or in the camp; I also do not recall my father on our flight from Yugoslavia to Germany, only vaguely my mother). (Per my American uncle, my paternal grandparents were separated and died of starvation in two different concentration camps in 1945). (More concentration camps in Serbia for ethnic Germans were Gakovo, Filipova and others).
I don’t know how much I weighted when I came out of the camp, but 10 years later (1956), after receiving nourishing meals in Slovenia and Germany, the weight and height on my passport for immigration to USA (at age 18) was 127 lbs. and my height was 6 ft. I think I was skinny!

More than 70 years ago the concentration camp Bački Jarak was closed (April 1946) and I had just turned 8 years old. Some surviving children were transported to a catholic convent in Slovenia, far away from Serbia. There we were deloused by the nuns and our heads were shaved. We were given showers and fresh clothes. For a few nights we slept on soft beds covered with a white sheet and a down filled comforter. From the open, white lace curtained windows, a soft breeze was blowing into the room; and birds were probably singing outside. What a contrast from our previous residence!

From the convent I was sent to live in seven communist state run orphanages or institutions and attended Slovenian schools for eight years. Again I had to learn a new language, Slovenian. I probably spoke Serbian before escaping to Germany at age 3 or 4, and possibly learned German while living there for about 3 years during the War. In the Slovenian institutions were many children who were either orphans or had been displaced or separated by the War from their families. We developed friendships that were later abruptly broken when our friends moved out, to be reunited with their parents or other relatives; or we were transferred to other locations. We made new friends with the same results. Consequently some of us learned to avoid building close friendships. I wished and cried many times, hoping that there would be someone looking also for my family and me. Aside from occasional bullying and ridiculing because I didn’t know my age and place of birth as a teenager, my stay in these orphanages and institutions was good.

One night, while living in a small, 15th century castle/manor (built in 1428) that was destroyed and rebuilt many times during previous wars; but was transformed into an institution for children that were separated during the WW II, I awoke from a deep sleep and on the dark ceiling above me I saw my mother’s smiling face looking at me through a haze for about 5 or 6 seconds. No word was spoken but I had a sense that she was saying that everything will be all right. Slowly my mother’s face faded into the fog. Was that a reassurance from heaven? I like to think so.

I grew up in a different culture where religion was shunned, but tolerated. Religious people were usually the older generation who attended churches before Yugoslavia became a communist country. I questioned if there was a God; and if so, why did He allow mine and other orphans’ innocent families to be victims of the War. We were not alone, the entire world suffered. For a very long time I felt guilty for being the lone survivor from my family. But unbeknown to me, God had other plans. By His grace I survived, while my entire family perished at a very young age. And ever since, I questioned why. God does indeed work in mysterious ways.

While living in a Slovenian institution in late 1953, I received a letter from the Red Cross in Munich, Germany, informing me that a man in America (the American uncle) was searching for his brother’s family and my last name was spelled similarly to the way he spelled his. The Red Cross asked that I send them any information I knew about my family. At age 15 my last name was misspelled, I didn’t know where or when I was born and I did not know if I had any brothers
or sisters. I think that I knew my father’s and mother’s first names. I sent this little information to the Red Cross; they compared it with the information from the American man and concluded that I was one of the people the man was searching for. They put me in touch with my father’s brother who lived in Philadelphia, Pa. He sent me pictures of his family and my family. On the back of a black and white photo of a tall man with a brimmed hat and a woman with a head scarf, he wrote in German [Das “sind deine Eltern” (These “are your parents”). The two people looked familiar to me (in 8 years, I am ashamed to say, the faces of my parents had started to fade from my memory). Prior to this I had no pictures of anybody. He also wrote about my parents and surprised me with information that I had two sisters and a brother; and provided information about places and dates of all our births and the correct spelling of my last name. I am forever grateful to him for his efforts to locate his missing brother and his family. Another uncle in New Jersey sponsored my immigration to USA in 1956; he even had a job waiting for me. I was extremely happy to be finally reunited (after about 15 years), with my aunts and uncles at age 18, (who last saw me as a 3 or 4 year old child in Serbia) and meet my many new American cousins for the first time. I had to adjust to life in a family environment, as opposed in structured institutions.

But before coming to America, I and about 23 other young boys (no girls), going to different countries in Europe, USA and Canada were detained in a dormitory in Ingolstadt, Germany, because our immigration documents to our destination countries somehow were “lost” and we had to stay in Germany (17 months) until new papers were created. We were put into a special total immersion class to learn a new language (German). Eventually I got a part time job in a bakery delivering baked goods on a bicycle with a basket in front, to small local stores.

My story as a two time refugee, concentration camp survivor, orphan and being literally lost for 8 years is similar to other peoples’ stories in Europe and other parts of the world; that have lived through and survived the Second World War. There are probably hundreds of thousands of such stories; each unique in its own way. Many are much more tragic, especially when we consider what happened to the Jewish people and eastern European gypsies; where entire families were wiped from the face of the earth.

Perhaps God still has a plan for me, work yet to be done. He does indeed work in mysterious ways. I am deeply grateful to Him for reuniting me with my relatives. He blessed me with a loving wife, and a new family consisting of three great sons and seven wonderful grandchildren. Reflecting back to the vision of my mother in that dark bedroom so long ago, everything has turned out all right. Someone has been looking over me all these years.

**Epilogue:** In 1989 I visited Slovenia with my wife to attend a 35th year class reunion of the 8th grade. Later, armed with the address of my infancy, we traveled to my birth city in Serbia and tried unsuccessfully to locate the street and building in which I lived the first few years of my life. Later we tried unsuccessfully to locate the house in the village where my family lived for generations. My plans also included visiting the site of the former concentration camp in Bački Jarak. After asking direction from an elderly postal worker on a bicycle delivering mail and later from another person along the way, to be certain that we were going to the right location, I arrived
at a weed and grass covered field at the edge of a housing development. Many sad memories flashed through my mind, for I was looking at the location where my family had died! I considered it a cemetery; a sacred ground.

While conversing with a man and his wife in Serbian, who lived across the street in the development, I learned that the man also lost family members in the same camp. He also said that the barbed wire fences were removed only a few years before (many decades after the camp was closed). When I inquired where the people who died in the camp are buried, hoping to see my mother’s and siblings’ names on a cross or grave stone, he shrugged his shoulders and answered in Serbian “Ko zna!?“(“Who knows!?“). According to him, after the War, the town’s population wished to erect a monument in memory to the people who perished there, but the communist authorities would not allow it. They did not want it generally known that Yugoslavia also had concentration camps for the “undesirable” ethnic population, during the Second World War. They would rather, for the rest of the world to believe that only Germany had concentration camps for ethnic cleansing.

[Das] “sind deine Eltern”
([These] “are your parents”) 1937?)

My family in Lebenstedt, Germany (1944).
L to R: Mother (24) holding my brother (3 months) and father (34) Bottom: Sisters (age 4 and 2) and me (6).
Except for me, 2 years later they were all dead.

(The above is a condensation of my book “Lost and Found”; omitting identity theft sensitive personal information like family members’ first names and places and dates of births). (20180308)