

The Man Who Broke Out of Auschwitz to Warn the World

JONATHAN FREEDLAND

'AN IMMEDIATE CLASSIC' ANTONY BEEVOR

THE ESCAPE ARTIST



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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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Jonathan Freedland

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Map of Auschwitz I and labels on map of Auschwitz II adapted from maps
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For my father, Michael Freedland, 1934–2018
His memory is a blessing.

Contents

About the Author

Also by Jonathan Freedland

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

How to use this eBook

Author's Note

Maps

Prologue

PART I: The Preparations

1. Star
2. Five Hundred Reichsmarks
3. Deported
4. Majdanek

PART II: The Camp

5. We Were Slaves
6. Kanada
7. The Final Solution
8. Big Business
9. The Ramp
10. The Memory Man
11. Birkenau
12. 'It Has Been Wonderful'

PART III: The Escape

13. Escape Was Lunacy
14. Russian Lessons
15. The Hideout
16. Let My People Go
17. Underground
18. On the Run
19. Crossing the Border

PART IV: The Report

20. In Black and White

21. Men of God
22. What Can I Do?
23. London Has Been Informed
24. Hungarian Salami

PART V: The Shadow

25. A Wedding with Guns
26. A New Nation, a New England
27. Canada
28. I Know a Way Out
29. Flowers of Emptiness
30. Too Many to Count

Acknowledgements

Picture Credits

Notes

Bibliography

Picture Section

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Look out for linked text (which is in blue) throughout the ebook that you can select to help you navigate between notes and main text.

You can double tap images to increase their size. To return to the original view, just tap the cross in the top left-hand corner of the screen

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.

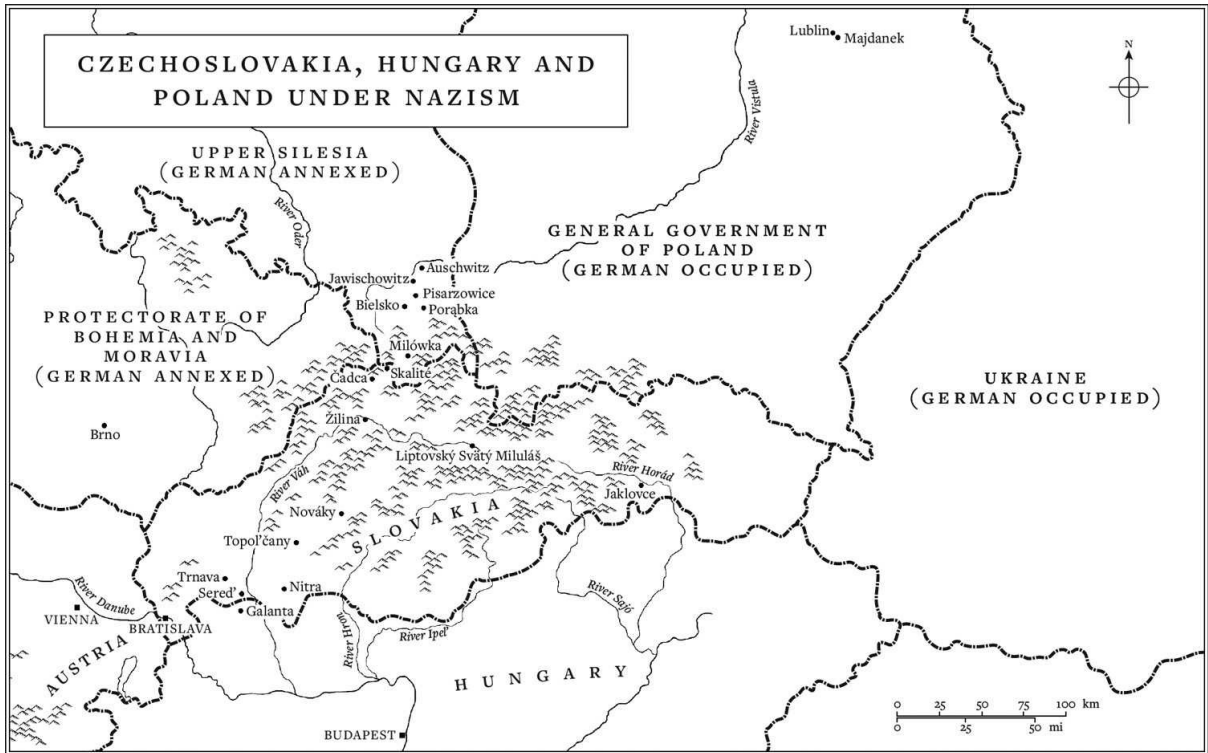
I began to look into the life of Rudolf Vrba, finding the handful of people still alive who had known him or worked with him or loved him. It turned out that his teenage sweetheart and first wife, Gerta, was living alone, aged ninety-three, in Muswell Hill in north London. Over half a dozen summer afternoons 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.

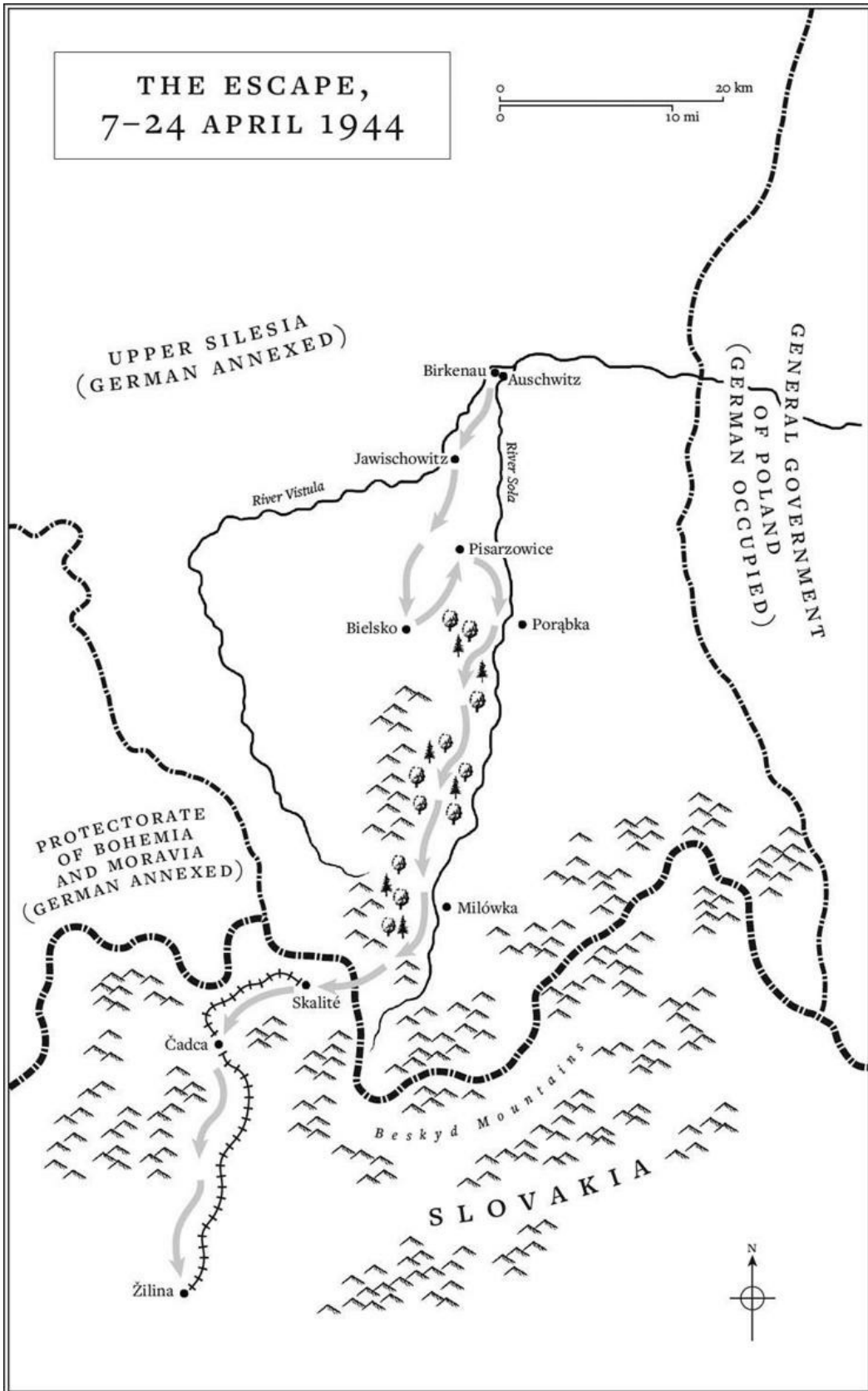
Rudi's second wife and widow, Robin, was in New York. She and I talked for hour after hour too, as she filled in the story of the man Rudolf Vrba became, the memories he had entrusted to her, the love they had shared. What soon became clear as I listened, and as I immersed myself in the official documents, 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.

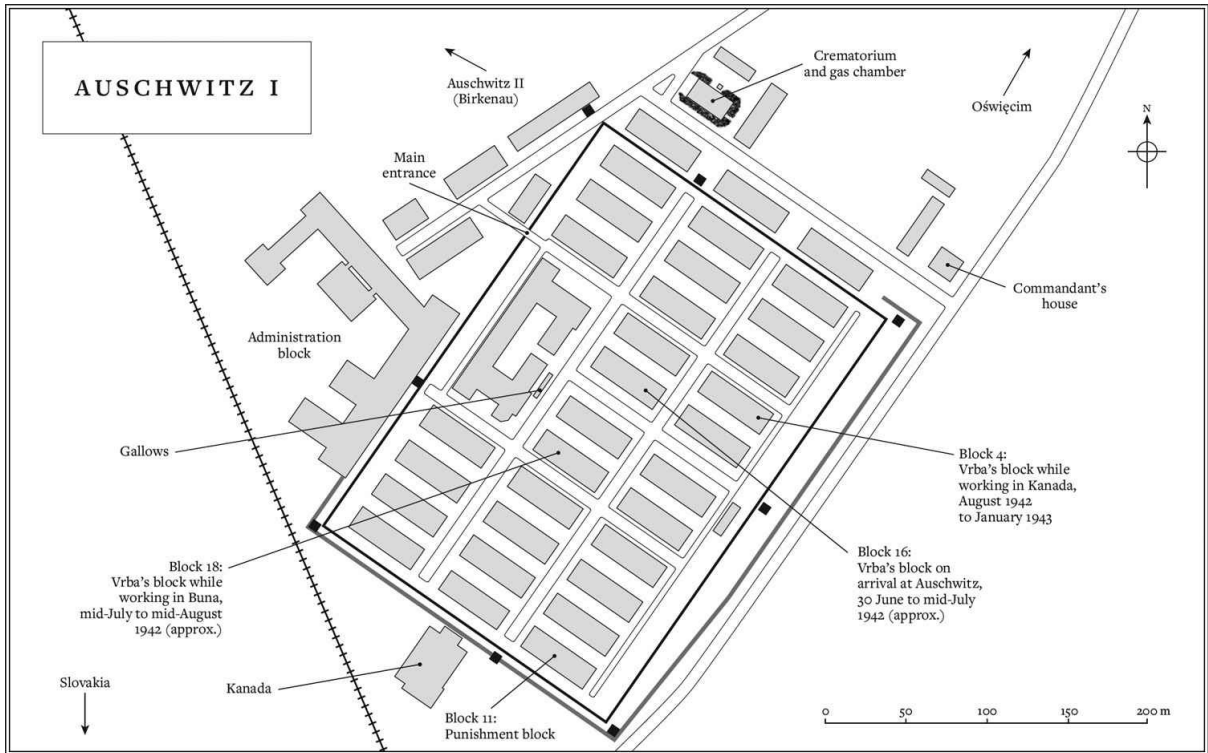
I also came to realise that this is a story of how human beings can be pushed to the outer limits, and yet still somehow endure; how those who have witnessed so much death can nevertheless retain their capacity, their lust, for life; and how the actions of one individual, even a teenage boy, can bend 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.

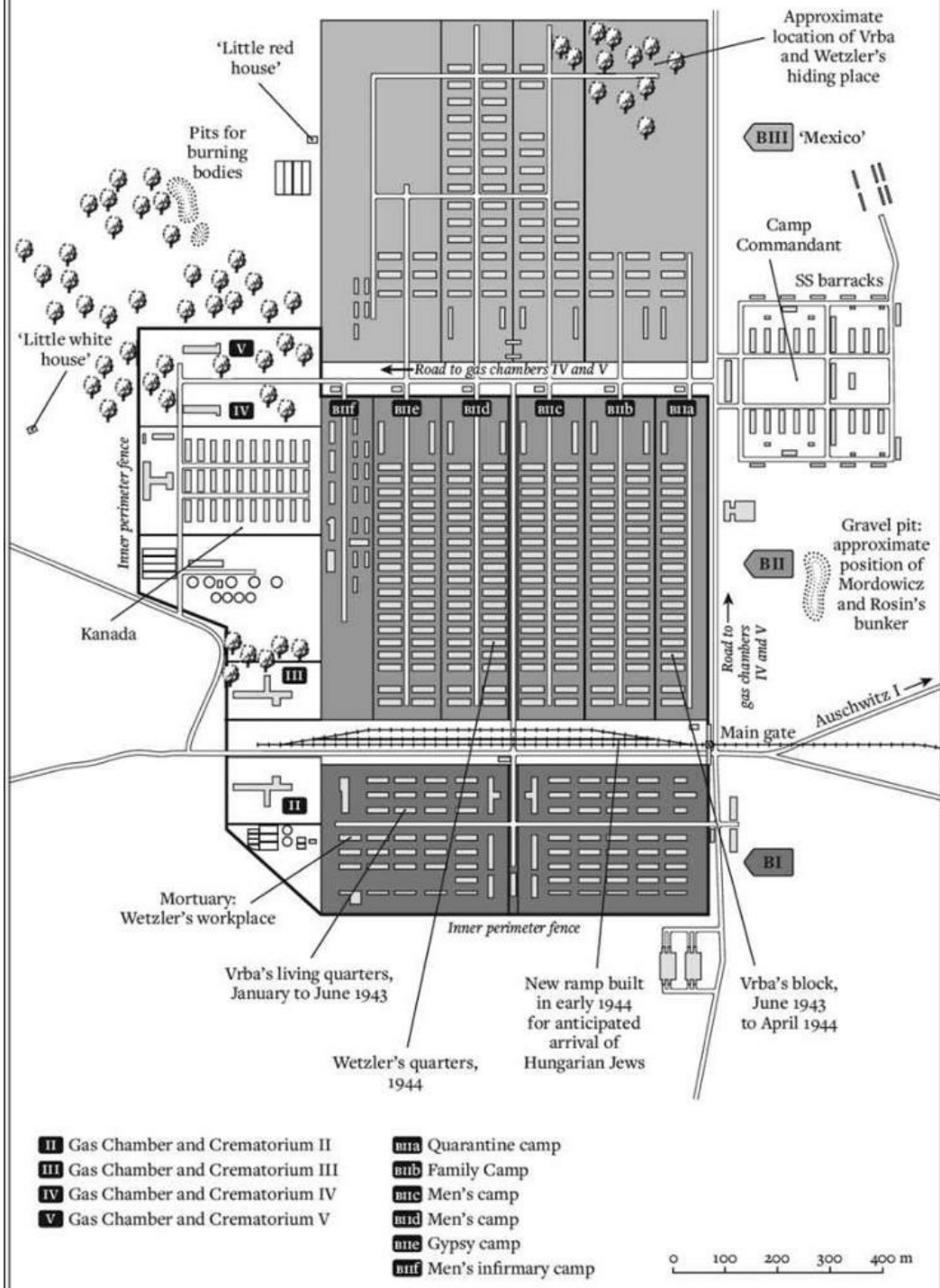


THE ESCAPE,
7-24 APRIL 1944





AUSCHWITZ II (BIRKENAU)



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