

Flying Kuchar

In the concentration camp located at Mauthausen-Gusen in Germany, prisoner Kuchar dreamed of having wings to fly above the fence wires to escape from camp. In this dream his best friend in the camp, prisoner Grzesiuk, caught him some day. Kuchar he lay hidden under a pile of new coffins stored on the site, thus avoiding work, and put his head up and watched the birds.

“Someday, I would have wings, and I will fly from the camp to my home” Kuchar said to Grzesiuk. Another day, Kuchar and Grzesiuk worked as stone-cutters, breaking rocks with hammers. And the birds flew away on high, at the top.

“Look, the birds, I want to be a bird!” Kuchar said lifting his eyes to the sky and waving his hands.

“Do not talk nonsense. Do not wave your hands; because ‘kapo’ will see you and will beat you badly. Think of how to reduce the hard work and how to arrange for something to eat,” Grzesiuk said. After a while they did not work. They took empty wheelbarrows and walked around. Who was able to make out why they were walking with them, since the area was so huge, and around them worked several thousands of prisoners? With time, Grzesiuk stopped paying attention to the strange behavior of his friend.

“It is not harmful his dream. Maybe it is better that he has faith in his conversion to a bird; maybe it is better that he believes in flying? That

44
dream keeps him alive,” Grzesiuk decided to pay no more attention to Kuchar’s “bird disease”.

One day, Kuchar was missing, disappeared from the camp, he did escape! “He did escape? Son of the guns! Why he did not inform me about it?” Grzesiuk felt a grudge against Kuchar.

“In the camp, there are no friends; everyone thinks of himself!”

After two days, however, Kuchar was caught by guards and brought to the camp about dinner time. He was dirty, beaten, bloodied, and handcuffed. The guards took him to headquarters, where Commander Miller, accompanied by his retinue of officers ate lunch. Miller, short and thick, a fat beast, had just a very good dinner and was in a good humor. He drank French cognac which was a rarity even for a camp commander. Miller suddenly wished to talk with the fugitive.

“Tell me how you escaped and who helped in the escape?” Miller asked.

“No one helped me; I flew over the fence.”

“You flew out? Are you trying to make a fool of me?!” said Miller surprised and rising his eyebrows.

“I swear to God, it wasn’t my intention.”

“Why are you telling me such nonsense? I do not see any wings attached to your body!”

“It is not nonsense. I can demonstrate my flying to you, Commandant. The wings will show in time of detachment from the earth.”

“But, what will happen if you fail to take off and fly?” asked Miller ironically and winked at the surrounding officers. The officers nodded smiling; they also drank too much alcohol.

“In this case, I will allow you to shoot me personally. But if I fly, you will give me freedom.”

“Look, how he is gracious, he will allow me to shoot him!” laughed Miller, and the officers laughed too.

“But, I can kill you without your permission!”

“It is true, but there is a huge difference between killing with permission and killing without permission.”

“Do you think so?”

“It is according to the law; I studied it before the war.”

45

“Look at him, I thought that he studied aircraft construction since he found a way to fly!” and all officers were laughing again.

Miller’s eyes were full of tears from laughing so hard. He wiped them.

“I can take your bet, I do risk anything. Of course, I cannot give you freedom, but I can give you the job in a kitchen. You will be hungry no more, and you will live long.”

Then he turned to his officers.

“This prisoner is so funny. We Germans are the nation of culture, and we like humor. Am I right?”

The officers eagerly nodded.

“So can we give him a chance? Officers, what do you think?” Miller looked at the officers. Of course no one protested.

Miller did not wait for an answer; he gave the order to take Kuchar outside to the assembly square. Miller and the officers went outside too, with full glasses in their hands, laughing. Only Kuchar looked serious, walking with tense face. Miller gave the order to guards, “Do not shoot prisoner Kuchar!”

“And bring to the assembly square all the prisoners, right now!”

Miller shouted to the Chief of Security. His order was sent to all personnel in the camp.

“Which way do you want to fly? In the direction of your house in

Poland?” asked Miller and again broke into laughing.

“In this direction, in the direction of the gate, because the gate is a bit down; I will stay over there on the small hill, and I will accelerate down.

It will give me more speed and easier to raise,” said Kuchar gravely.

“Choose any direction to fly, but fly! If not, I will take off your skin!” roared Miller, and emptied his glass, which was immediately refilled by nearby officer.

In the meantime, the prisoners filled the assembly square and watched Kuchar with amazement.

“What is happening? What is going on?” they asked each other, but no one knew anything.

“Apparently, Kuchar wants to fly,” said somebody.

“What nonsense are you talking?!”

“If you do not believe it, you will see it for yourself.”

46

Thousands of prisoners gathered at the assembly square. Due to lack of space, some prisoners climbed on the roofs to get a better view. Amazingly, this time none of the guards tried to remove them. Kuchar stood on a knoll, did some sit-ups, and waved his hands. Miller was giggling and exchanging ironic remarks with his retinue. The prisoners were silent, they were completely surprised when suddenly Kuchar started walking, in the beginning slowly, then walking quickly and finally going into a run.

He ran slowly at first, then faster and faster, at the same time waving his hands and making a sound like a bird squeak. He was getting closer and closer to the gate. The spellbound prisoners watched him, and everyone, even the guards, wished to see him fly out of the camp. They forgot that a human is not a bird. The prisoners forgot about their misery, lost their pessimism, and common sense. Kuchar enchanted them, like a magician. Even always calm and sober Grzesiuk, for a moment, imagined Kuchar flying over the wires. Kuchar had almost approached the gate where the guard stared with open mouth, looking at the prisoner's oddness.

Kuchar was just a few meters from the gate and at that moment Grzesiuk knew that he could not manage to rise above the gate. The guard at the gate would normally open fire, but he got order not to shoot so he not shoots!

Everyone watched in suspense, wondering whether Kuchar would fly or not?

Even Miller was under the input of collective influence and stood frozen, with glass in his hand. Kuchar reached the gate, quickly climbed

up on it, and was on the other side and ran away, straight into the nearby forest. And this time, he was not waving his arms and not imitating bird call. With all of his power in his legs he headed for freedom in the forest. “Shoot,” Miller shouted, grabbing the pistol from the holster.

The guard woke up, took aim and pulled the trigger. But the shot was not heard; the lock was jammed! The chances of that happening probably one in a million!

The guard unsuccessfully fought fiercely with the lock. Drunken Miller and the other drunken officers opened fire, but they did not hit the target. They hit the guard, who finally fixed the lock and aimed his rifle at Kuchar. The guard fell down, either killed or wounded.

“Kuchar, run, run!” screamed the crowd of prisoners.

And Kuchar ran; soon he was at edge of the forest and disappeared in the woods. Miller and his officers immediately sobered up. Miller issued a loud order to chase Kuchar immediately using trained dogs.

“Kuchar has no chance to escape,” assessed the prisoners.

“If it was at night, maybe, but not in daylight.”

“He cannot run away from the dogs!”

But surprisingly, Kuchar was not caught that day or the next day or after a few days. It was obvious that the Germans had lost Kuchar forever.

Now the prisoners believed in the success of his escape. Thousands of prisoners enjoyed this success; euphoria reigned in the camp. The prisoners walked smiling, gathering in groups and talking, talking, talking about escape.

“But how is it possible, that he was not caught?” everybody was wondering.

“He flew, as he promised,” explained Grzesiuk.

“How he flew, since we saw that he ran on his feet?”

“He was not flying over the open land, because it would be easy to shoot him. But in the forest, he did fly from tree to tree. And it is the reason, why they could not catch him; there were no traces on earth, so dogs could not detect him, because simply there were not traces at all. Grzesiuk stubbornly repeated his version whole time of his stay in camp until the liberation in May 1945. And he repeated it, year after year, after liberation, at the annual meetings of the former prisoners from Mauthausen–Gusen in the Bristol Hotel in Warsaw.

“Well, Grzesiuk, maybe you are right; maybe it is true that Kuchar flew, but why is he not with us? Why did he not fly to Warsaw to enjoy our annual meetings?”

“Well, he flew the long distance to a warm country. He is not stupid to be frozen in cold Poland”. After this explanation everyone began

laughing.