

image 38

When the pole cracked to a v-shape, all the boards would have shifted too. I can hardly imagine an air-tight situation at that point.

Also, the opening must have been near the end, and that's how the millstone was able to slide off it toward the center, but that would have been a stronger part of the pole. Indeed, had the millstone then slid to the center, it would have likely caved-in the dugout.

Kostman begged for one of us to take his place while he attempted to open the entrance. It was dark, and we were full of fear and exhaustion. Kostman, being so tall, could not find a right position for pushing. We felt close to fainting.... Finally, with super-human effort, he managed to slightly lift the heavy object blocking the entry hole, and it shifted a little towards the crook of the bent ceiling. A stream of fresh air quickly revived us all. We got out.
We didn't try to figure out at the moment

image 39

Right. Bojarski, who has probably never killed a person in his life, is so sure this will work, that in the space of this 5 minute incident, he went back to his house and got undressed. It reminds me of episodes of Batman when I was a kid, or James Bond movies where the villain is completely taken aback when his deathtrap didn't work. Except this is supposed to be real life.

what it was all about. Kostman went to inform Bojarski of the accident, for it still hadn't occurred to us that he actually tried to bury us alive, and that only the broken pole and gravity made possible the shifting of the heavy millstone, saving us from death. Now he returned saying that Bojarski was getting dressed and related that when he saw him he clasped his head and screamed, "How did you get out?" and stared at him as though seeing a ghost.

Bojarski was an interesting character. It wasn't until some years later, when I was more mature and had time to reflect on all these happenings, that I tried to understand him. I am convinced that he gave us shelter with the intention of saving our lives. The fact is that for five months he carried out this difficult task. It is possible that, with his family living under the threat of death, he had gradually become used to this spectre. Then, somehow or other, came the breaking point. Perhaps the temptation of getting the rest of our little hoard of money and jewelry, together with the fear of being discovered by

image 40

the Nazis, the constant Sword of Damocles hanging over his head, had suddenly broken his spirit and had propelled him toward murder. And so, from a man of good-will he became a criminal.

At the time, however, we had no time for deep psychological analyses.

Bojarski came. We watched his huge figure advance towards us in the murky night.

"Well, boys," he said, "you'll have to return to the old hole. We'll think of something else later."

image 41

5. THE END IS NEAR

That, and the fact that four and a half by 3 by 3 feet, isn't big enough for 3 people to live and stretch out to sleep. But they still stayed, even though they were at a farm on the edge of the woods that contained partisans fighting the Nazis.

Not until we got settled in our old place under the table did we begin to have serious suspicions; for it was strange that, fearing an inspection, he had not made a hiding-place in the fields, far from the farm, but, on the contrary, had put us into that hole behind the barn, which could be more easily discovered than his shelter, our original one. And yet, when you drown, you grasp at straws.

We tried to reject these thoughts, tried to argue that it was merely an accident. After all, had he not kept us safe for several months?

Thus we reasoned in our small prison.

Five-and-a-half months had passed since that winter day when we first knocked on Bojarski's door, and now came the fatal day: April 23, 1944.

image 42

We had hunger pangs; another day without food. I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking of freshly baked bread. I could almost smell it. It was late. Kostman and Wajcen slept in one corner of the hide-away, a space of about one yard, while I was at the other end, near the entrance. I felt cold and so I got between them the way we used to do during the cold winter months.

However, Kostman said he didn't want to feel crowded, got up and took my place by the entrance. We were lying quietly, resigned, dreaming, when we heard faint footsteps about the barn. We thought we recognized Bojarski's tread. Perhaps he was not as mean as we thought; perhaps he was bringing us food. We heard him stop before the board barring the entrance.

Suddenly Kostman stretched out on his belly and edged through the opening in the straw to the board. We heard the catch open and the board move: a moment of silence,

image 43

then the flash and crack of a shot. I heard Kostman wriggling and screaming, "God-damn...." The rest became a gurgle and then a mutter.

The board was hurled back and now we heard only Kostman's hoarse gaspings of death. Wajcen and I were sitting against the wall. Kostman, in his final convulsion, threw himself about, spraying us with his blood. After a moment of shock and confusion, we realized that he was dead and it was our turn. Still, we felt it was a nightmare, a kind of dream — but Kostman's body was only too real.

The few moments of quiet seemed to last hours. We reasoned that, perhaps, whoever did the shooting didn't know there were three of us, and so he wouldn't come back; but no, we again heard steps and voices.

To reach us, one had to crawl flat on the stomach; perhaps that seemed to them too dangerous. We heard straw, which covered the shelter, being pushed away. We knew it was our last moments. Cramped, without arms, we felt like rats in a trap.

Except the straw is in the inside of the barn, and the entrance, which just got hurled back, is on the outside of the barn.

Blatt has forgot how he described the shelter in the beginning of the story. The shelter is a long table inside the barn in a corner, covered with hay. They sit underneath the table. There is a removable board outside the barn which is the entrance.

Blatt now has them removing the hay outside the barn.

image 44

The straw kept being removed. Wajcen crawled to the other corner, where he burrowed into some thick straw. I followed him. We waited.

"They aren't here," said a voice close by. A thick layer of straw covering me was now removed.

"I got him!" shouted a young fellow. His flashlight shone in my eyes; his pistol covered my head. I begged him not to shoot, to spare my life. He looked straight into my eyes. I saw his face and the muzzle of his old rusty gun.

"Where is the first one?" he asked.

"He is dead."

"And where is the second?"

"Next to me."

I heard the report and felt the sharp, burning bite of the bullet under my jaw. My ears rang. Instinctively, fully conscious, I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and slid down. Seconds went by. I felt no pain. I realized that I was thinking. I wasn't sure if I was alive or if this was life after death. Once,

Throughout the story, he seems oblivious to how dishonorable he makes himself look. Such as here giving away his friend.

image 45

in early childhood, my uncle told me a strange tale.

For three days after death you can hear and feel, and your hair and nails grow, but you cannot respond in action. Perhaps this was what was happening to me? I tried to open one eye. In the dim light I saw the man who had shot me. He was talking in a low voice with someone. Now I knew I was alive. At the same time I wondered, should I ask him to shoot me again? If he left me, I would only die later with suffering. If not, he would bury me alive. But I let it ride. I thought of Wajcen, deeply buried in the straw behind me. I felt a noose around my feet. They pulled me out of the hole; evidently I was in the way of their reaching Wajcen.

I was put down in the mud. The night was cold. I was barechested and it was raining. I opened my eyes and watched the dark silhouettes of the men in front of our hole. My thoughts raced. Should I try to escape? I sat up in the mud. I heard steps and laid down again.

This whole thing would have happened inside the barn where the straw covered the table. But he's describing it as outside where he gets rained on. He's likely forgot the layout he described in the beginning of the story.

image 46

A man approached, stopped, and said, "Might be better to give him another bullet."

I froze, recognizing Bojarski's voice. I tried to look as stiff and dead as possible. Only I couldn't overcome the trembling. However, in the dark it probably was not noticeable. The other man bent over me and put his hand over my mouth. All this time my eyes

(continued on next page)

image 47

Tears

(continued from previous page)

were slightly open; I had seen the shadow of the hand coming down and held my breath. At the instant when I thought my lungs would burst, he removed his palm. He then touched my hands in the dark, looking for rings, and said to Bojarski, "Let's not waste a bullet; he is already stiff."

The moment he went away, the trembling I had been controlling now overcame me and literally shook me.

I wasn't thinking of running away now. There were too many people moving about the yard. Among them I recognized the silhouetted form of Bojarski's plump wife. Then I heard a scream from Wajcen — "Don't shoot!" he cried, "Don't shoot! I want to live!"

A hackneyed line used often in movies, which Blatt uses to make his story work.

Next