

# Hedvah and Leah Stern

**Hedvah and Leah Stern** were 13-and-a-half years old when they and their family were sent to Auschwitz from their small town in Hungary. Their mother was a widow; their father had died when they were only six years old. Their mother was a seamstress and worked very hard to provide the twins with whatever they wanted. And they adored her and couldn't wait for the day they would be old enough to work and help her. Hedvah and Leah dreamed of owning their own seamstress shop someday. They planned to call it "The Stern Sisters."



When the guards opened the cattle car doors, their mother was very frightened and refused to let go of her daughters' hands. Other prisoners told her in Yiddish that Dr. Mengele was saving twins, and at the last minute she told the girls, "Go to Dr. Mengele. He is asking for twins. Go and we will meet again at the gate."

For days Hedvah and Leah searched for their mother among the other women. They looked for the striking black dress with pink strawberries printed on it. Finally the head of the barracks pointed to the crematorium and told the twins that their mother and the rest of their family went to the gas chambers.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hedvah and Leah were frightened of Mengele's experiments. The doctors drew a lot of blood, causing them to faint several times. They were forced to stand naked while the doctors took pictures of them and the Nazi guards jeered. Mengele tried to change the color of Hedvah's and Leah's eyes. One time, the girls were given eye drops that left them unable to see for several days. They thought the Nazis had made them blind.

\*\*\*\*\*

The girls were forced on a death march from Auschwitz to a small town in Germany called Pritzberg. When they heard the war was over, at first they didn't believe it. But when they realized the news was true, they had no idea what to do or where to go, so they wandered the streets of Pritzberg, crying, in their ragged, dirty dresses.

Some French soldiers in town recognized the girls as war orphans and brought them to their headquarters. There, they were fed their first real meal since before the war. Although it was difficult to communicate with the soldiers, Hedvah and Leah were able to make them understand that they wanted to return home to Hungary. So the soldiers gave them two suitcases and some cans of sardines, and they put the twins on a train bound for Hungary. When they arrived at their hometown, two widowed uncles—the only members of their

family to survive—met them and took them to their old house. Everything had been removed from it—nothing belonging to the twins’ family remained.

Hedvah and Leah realized there was no future for them in Hungary; there was no Jewish community, no young people left in their town. They dreamed of moving to Palestine, but their uncles forbade them from joining the local Zionist movement, the B’nai Akivah. The uncles didn’t want their nieces to join a coeducational group. So the twins found another Zionist group that admitted only girls, and the uncles relented and let them join.

Hedvah and Leah sailed to Haifa from Marseilles in 1948, but because of war, they could not land and instead sailed to Alexandria and Cairo. When they finally landed in Haifa, they had hoped to find the “land of milk and Honey,” but instead found more war. The twins were placed in an orphanage in Tel Aviv and began work in a factory. The fighting made them nervous, and although they were happy to be in Palestine, they felt deep sadness for their family who would never be with them. They felt very alone in the strange country.

\*\*\*\*\*

The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann was devastating to the Stern twins. Throughout the trial, horrible memories of dead bodies piled up in front of their barracks came flooding back.

Up to that time, the Stern twins had never spoken publicly about their experiences during the war. They would share their stories with friends, but they felt nobody believed them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Their new lives really began when they built their communal settlement, Moshav. Together with a group of young people, Hedvah and Leah decided they needed a place to call home. There were twenty boys and girls in the settlement, all survivors from Europe, many from Auschwitz.

The group chose a site in Ashdod, near the Mediterranean Sea. They called their commune “Nir Galim,” which meant “the air and the waves,” and they focused on agriculture and fishing. At first they lived in tents, and then built huts. It was very hard work. They tilled the soil, cooked meals in the kitchen, and washed pots and pans. When they found a piece of wood, they were overjoyed because they could use it to build a table. Nothing was wasted.

Yet Auschwitz remained with Hedvah and Leah—everything around them reminded them of the horror. From their Moshav they could see factory chimneys in downtown Ashdod, which reminded them of the chimneys of Auschwitz, especially at night, when flames poured from the stacks.

As they built their new lives, they felt like actresses, hiding their true feelings. On the outside, they laughed and smiled, but inside, everything felt rotten and dark. They knew it would remain this way until the end of their lives.

(adapted from *Children of the Flames* by Lucette Matalon Lagnado and Shiela Cohn Denkel.)

*Hedvah Stern's tattoo number is A-8273,  
Leah's number is A-8272.*