

Olga and Vera Grossman

Olga and Vera Grossman were fraternal twins born in 1938 in Czechoslovakia. Their father was a wealthy landowner who could afford to lavish his family with everything they needed.



(courtesy of the BBC)

When the German troops invaded Czechoslovakia, the Grossman's lifestyle came to an end. Even though they were well-to-do and had government connections, the family was forced to go into hiding. At first they lived with a Christian family that was bribed to take them in. Vera remembers having to keep quiet during the day so as not to endanger the families. When it became too risky to stay, the Grossmans left their hiding place and kept a low profile, foraging for food at night.

Sometimes their only meal was a few raw potatoes.

After three years of avoiding detection, the Nazis found the Grossmans and sent them to a series of concentration camps, ending at Auschwitz in April 1944.

Six years old at the time, Vera remembers standing on the ramp at Birkenau where people were selected for immediate death and herded to the gas chambers.

"Suddenly we didn't see our father anymore," she said. "It was very quick." Her mother, Shari, who with her daughters understood German because of a German governess, told Mengele that she had twins. Mengele was interested in the different features of the twins and their mother.

Vera has horrendous memories of being locked in a small cage with Olga for days.

Mengele came daily to inject them with a substance that made them violently ill. Vera remembers a collection of hundreds of human eyes pinned to the wall. "It was like a collection of butterflies," she said. She remembers bloody bodies in the snow, children killed in her barracks at night, and looking over her shoulder to see the Nazis shooting at women being sent on a death march.

Vera says her hatred of Mengele and his need of her for his experiments were the only things that kept her alive during her two years at Auschwitz "I had my own private war with Mengele," she said.

"I fought him by being unruly. He would say do one thing, and I would do another. He threw me across the room once, but I didn't cry. I just looked at him with hatred, and he had to look down. Then he looked at me and said, 'We will see who will be the lucky one from all of this,' and I said, 'Yes, Dr. Mengele, we shall see.'"

After the war, Shari learned that no one in her family survived. She and her daughters could not return to their estate, because the people who moved into it threatened to kill them. So Shari and another camp survivor rented two small rooms, and they earned money by fattening geese and reselling them for a profit. Shari worried that if something happened to her, the twins would have no one to care for them.

One day in 1947, a rabbi from England named Dr. Shlomo Schoenfeld visited the twins' home. Dr. Schoenfeld had founded Jewish high schools in England and was traveling around Eastern Europe, locating Jewish child survivors to take to a better life in England. Dr. Schoenfeld convinced Shari that the girls were not safe in Czechoslovakia. So they joined many other children on a Kindertransport bound for a new life in Britain. They were initially taken to a convalescent home in an old castle near Dublin, Ireland. They were well fed and cared for, and they felt happy there.

In the meantime, Shari married a survivor from Auschwitz, and they left Eastern Europe for a new life in Israel. They had four children, and the husband started a new business.

When Vera and Olga gained sufficient strength, they moved from Ireland to the home of a rabbi and his family in London. The twins attended one of Dr. Schoenfeld's high schools, Avigdor High School. They loved the school, but their home life was not happy. They missed their mother and found it difficult to communicate with her, because as the girls' English skills became more proficient, their ability to use their native Czech became more challenging. The girls lived apart from Shari for six years.

Olga began to suffer from panic attacks and black-outs in class. She looked pale and timid.

One day, the girls received word that Shari was very sick and wanted them to travel to Israel to be with her. Vera and Olga were so excited—they envisioned returning to a home filled with love and care. When they arrived in Israel, however, they were shocked to find that their stepfather's business had collapsed, and there was little food for the children. Vera and Olga had to abandon their schooling and find odd jobs. They gave every penny they earned to their mother. They were only fifteen years old.

Olga's health continued to deteriorate. At Yom Kippur services she passed out at the synagogue. A soldier named Rafael came to her aid, and Olga saw him as her guardian angel. They fell in love, and soon after Olga turned 18, they married. Olga and Rafael raised two children, and after many years, she overcame her illnesses and found the strength to share her story with others.

Vera found her husband in Israel as well—she met Shmuel through a matchmaker. She and Shmuel also raised two children. In 1985 Vera was one of about 30 survivors to participate in a mock trial on Mengele's war crimes that was organized by CANDLES. Since that time, she has traveled across Europe and Israel telling her story so that future generations will not forget the horrors of the Holocaust.

(portions adapted from *Children of the Flame* by Lagnado and Dekel)