

Jacob Feingold and his twin sister Reizel

The twins were born on November 3, 1927 in Berlin, Germany. They were two of five children born to Binyamin and Hannah Feingold. Binyamin was a businessman who owned grocery stores and fresh fish markets. Hannah was a deeply caring mother who worked hard to raise her children. Before Kristallnacht (November 9-10, 1938), life was good: they went to the cinema, hiked with friends, traveled on vacations, and visited relatives. Jacob held a job sweeping his father's grocery stores.



The Feingolds lived in the back of their store. On the morning of Kristallnacht, Jacob's teacher instructed her students to return home, even though school had only been in session for one hour. She urged them to walk with a classmate, and not to be out by themselves. Jacob witnessed townspeople plundering stores in his neighborhood, smashing windows. They damaged the Feingold's grocery stores as well, stole food, and strewed groceries all over the street. That evening, the Feingolds had to hide in their cellar because the authorities were looking for Binyamin.

Two days after Kristallnacht, Hannah realized it was not safe for her family to remain in Berlin. She made arrangements with her brother in Holland to send her five children there to live with him. After their grandfather blessed them, Hannah took them to the railway station and put them on the train. A gentile woman was there and made sure the train waited in the station so that all the children could board.

The journey was long. The train stopped at the border between Germany and Holland, and a guard wearing a yellow uniform gruffly asked the children their ages and religion. A second guard, this one wearing a black uniform, entered the car and asked the same questions, but in a much gentler tone. The train resumed its course, but at some point the Dutch police decided to split up the children and place them in separate homes. Jacob and his brother went to live with a Jewish family for a couple days; the sisters were taken in by another family. The children visited each other during the day in a nearby park. Next, they were placed in a children's home in Amsterdam for Jewish refugees, where they remained for a couple months.

During that time, the Feingold children had no idea whether their parents were still alive. Their aunt and uncle were able to visit occasionally, but they had received no word from Binyamin or Hannah, either. One day, Hannah appeared in Amsterdam. She had smuggled herself out of Germany and made it to the Netherlands. She informed the children that their father had been taken to a labor camp.

In 1940 the entire Feingold family was reunited in Westerbork transit camp, where they would live for four years. Jacob recalled both good times and bad at Westerbork. At first, life seemed very nice. The family lived in a brick-and-wood barrack, and they had their own rooms. The camp had a dining hall where families ate together and a school for the children. Jacob celebrated his Bar Mitzvah there, inviting friends to the dining hall for the ceremony. He even received gifts: Hebrew books and some games.

However, in 1942 life changed at Westerbork. Dutch Jews came and left in trainloads. Prisoners were told they were going to a labor camp. Horse stalls were built on the outskirts of the camp, and more families had to squeeze into fewer rooms. The Germans built new railroad tracks. The food was not as tasty or as plentiful as before. By 1943 food was very scarce; Jacob remembered eating a lot of cabbage.

In 1944, Jacob and his family were transported to Theresienstadt ghetto/camp in Czechoslovakia and lived in the armory. Theresienstadt had special currency used as payment for work. One day, Jacob had to spray-paint the armory, and he purchased food with the money he earned. During that time, Jacob became sick with water in his lungs, and a couple months later (May 1944), when guards rounded up all the large families to deport to Auschwitz, Jacob had the option to stay at Theresienstadt. But he chose to leave with his family. The prisoners were loaded into cattle cars and endured a two-day journey to Auschwitz. The Feingold family knew what their fate would be.

When the trains pulled to a stop at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the families were sent to B Camp. Jacob remembered about four weeks passing before he and Reizel were tattooed with the numbers A-2042 and A-4891. Dr. Josef Mengele called for twins, promising them better treatment, so Jacob and Reizel stepped forward. Guards took the two of them to a special room, where they were ordered to undress for an examination. Doctors asked many questions. Jacob and Reizel continued to see their family occasionally since they all still lived at B Camp.

Then the Nazis decided to liquidate this camp. All the prisoners who were in good health were taken to a labor camp, while women, children, and sick people were left behind. Binyamin, who suffered from kidney problems, was not selected for labor. Jacob worked in the private kitchen for the SS guards because he spoke German. He also polished guards' boots. Jacob and his younger brother would arrange to meet at the back of the kitchen to smuggle out potatoes for his parents. Binyamin sometimes came to the kitchen to peel potatoes. One day he asked for food, and Jacob fed him bread. The SS caught Binyamin with the bread and took him away. That was the last time Jacob saw his father.

The next day, Mengele ordered twins to be taken to the F Camp for study. Guards ordered the Jewish orchestra musicians to play loudly in order to deafen the twins' cries as they were separated from their families. Reizel was taken to the twins barracks for girls/women.

As a twin, Jacob was permitted to wear regular clothes, with a hole cut in the back of his shirt and a striped patch sewn in. He secretly carried his Bar Mitzvah siddur (prayer book) in his coat pocket and some money his mother had sewn into the lining. During the day, the twins were taken from Birkenau to Auschwitz., never knowing their fate from one day to the next. Jacob never learned the type of experiments the doctors conducted on him. He only remembered Mengele from the B Camp. Other doctors injected Jacob once or twice a week and took a lot of blood. They also took extensive measurements.

One evening, an SS officer who did not like Mengele arrived at the twins' camp to make a selection. Jacob pinched his cheeks to add color and to look as healthy as he could, but the officer sent him to the "bad side." The Kapos spoke German to the officer and made him change his mind (because Jacob had done work for the Kapos). Somehow Mengele was notified; he pulled into the camp in a Jeep and chastised the officer, saying, "What are you doing to my children?"

When the guards ordered the prisoners on a death march in mid-January 1945, Jacob was too ill to leave. He was one of several hundred who stayed behind. The next morning, the camp was quiet, empty – there were no guards to be seen. The remaining prisoners searched for food and clothing; the Soviet POWs seemed particularly interested in finding ammunition. Nazi soldiers not too far from Auschwitz heard some shooting in the camp and returned to find the source. The POWs confessed to firing shots in the air. The Nazis led them to a pit behind the barracks, shot them, and left.

Jacob recalled a Polish farmer telling prisoners that the Soviet army was approaching. That night, snow fell heavily, and the next morning the Soviet army arrived camouflaged in white. At the sight of the troops, the prisoners knew they were safe. The prisoners formed groups to leave Auschwitz to travel toward Krakow either on foot or by Soviet army trucks. Jacob had to be carried; he could no longer walk. From Krakow Jacob found transportation to Budapest, Hungary, and eventually to Romania. However, Reizel was not with him.

Initially Jacob stayed in a British DP camp, Trofaiach, in Austria. From there he disguised himself as a girl and fled to the American zone in Salzburg, Austria. After a couple months, he was reassigned to Foehrenwald, one of the largest Jewish DP centers in the American zone of Germany. He spent two months recuperating at a sanatorium. Foehrenwald had a rich educational and cultural life, and Jacob was happy to attend a yeshiva and experience life on a kibbutz.

While in Foehrenwald, a man mentioned that he had met a girl who resembled Jacob. It was Reizel! He received a letter from her from Czechoslovakia, and she traveled to Germany to reunite with him. Another sister was liberated from Bergen-Belsen and taken to a sanatorium in Switzerland. She sent a letter to Jacob, as well, but she was too far away to travel to meet him.

An uncle who lived in New Jersey sent papers for Jacob and Reizel to obtain visas. This uncle had arranged affidavits earlier in the war, but the Feingold family was too large to obtain visas at that time. In September 1947, Jacob and Reizel boarded the army boat Ernie Pyle bound for the United States. Their uncle brought them to his home in Teaneck, where they lived for a year. Jacob corresponded with his sister in Switzerland and learned that other family members were planning to emigrate from Belgium to America. Jacob decided to move in with an aunt and uncle who lived on 189th Street in Washington Heights (Manhattan), because they led a more religious life.

Reizel married. Jacob married Helga Deutch (who escaped to the U.S. in 1938) in 1952. They settled in the Bronx for 18 years and built an upholstery business. They had two children.

Jacob believed strongly that prayers helped the prisoners survive. Jacob encouraged people to keep their faith, to keep on going.

(adapted from USC Shoah Fdn testimony; photo courtesy of the USC Shoah Fdn)