

# Thomas and Peter Somogyi



Thomas and Peter, March 1945, a few days after they returned to Pecs from Auschwitz. The bags were made by the twins to carry bread or other food during their travels back to Hungary.

**Thomas (Somogyi) Simon and Peter Somogyi** were born on April 14, 1933, in the university town of Pecs, Hungary. Their father, Josef, owned a prosperous automotive parts industry and was the first in the town to sell cars – he was a Ford representative. Their mother, Erzsebet, kept a strictly Kosher household at home, but when he went to other towns, they were not very strict. A German nanny took care of the twins and their older sister, Alice. She taught them German and they became quite fluent. When the twins turned five, they began piano lessons at home. The next year they joined a boy scout troop.

The first day of elementary school for the Somogyi children was also was the first day of World War II (Sept. 1, 1939). Later, they attended a private high school run by a cistercian order of priests. It was considered the best high school of Pecs.

Even though antisemitic laws were enacted in Hungary as early as 1933, Josef felt they were better off than the Jews in Poland or the Baltics. After all, Josef had been an officer in the Austro-Hungarian army, so he felt protected from the rising sentiments against Jews. The Somogyi family had long been assimilated into the Hungarian culture and community. Josef had many Christian customers. Thomas and Peter don't recall experiencing overt antisemitism until after the German invasion.

On March 19, 1944, German troops invaded Hungary and life changed rapidly. Within weeks, Jews had to wear the yellow star. At the end of the first term in high school, Thomas and Peter had to take their exams with the Jewish star on their Hungarian national uniform. The priests were embarrassed about this; some of them were sympathetic and kind. However, the students harassed them and picked fights. The Somogyi children were considered "external" students because they were Jewish. Some of the other "external" students (Protestants) were treated as badly as the Somogyi children.

By May the Jewish families were herded into a ghetto formed in a working-class neighborhood of Pecs. The residents of that neighborhood vacated and moved into the Jewish families' flats. The Somogyis were assigned only one room. Josef had already been sent to a "labor brigade" to assist the Hungarian army in the war effort, thus eliminating any possibility of resistance in the ghetto. The ghetto was policed by the regular Hungarian police, who were much more humane than the gendarmerie. Families were still able to use money to buy food and other necessities, so they had enough food to eat. Children no longer went to school, but families organized activities like private tutoring.

The Somogyis remained in the ghetto for about six weeks, at which time all residents were taken away to a gendarmerie camp—formerly horse stables—in Pecs. Conditions there were more severe. People slept in stalls and had only latrines available to them. Families stayed there for a week before deportation.

On July 6, 1944, the families were forced to walk from the camp to the train station, where they were loaded into cattle cars; they had no idea where the transports were taking them. For three days they traveled without food or water. The trains arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 9th.

Thomas and Peter remember lining up on the platform at Birkenau and seeing prisoners in striped uniforms, but they didn't understand where they were or what was happening. A guard called out "twins" in German, and Erzsebet raised her hand in response, thinking she was helping her sons. A German officer who turned out to be Josef Mengele told the boys to step out of line. On the train, Erzsebet had told her sons that if they were ever separated and anyone asked, they should say they were nine years old, rather than eleven. So throughout their imprisonment at Auschwitz, Thomas and Peter posed as nine-year-olds.

On the selection platform, the twins were separated from their family, and they never saw their mother and sister again. Thomas and Peter were driven by ambulance to a barracks for twin boys, where they were tattooed and met the other twins. Although Thomas was only eleven years old, he knew the separation from his family was permanent.

Thomas recalls about 50 pairs of boy twins living in his barrack, most of them from Hungary. Dwarfs lived there, as well. There were only a few adults. The twin girls were in another area. Thomas and Peter were among the last to arrive at the barracks; Thomas recalls only one other set arriving after him: Karoly and Robert Brichta, from the suburbs of Budapest. The twin barracks contained three levels of wooden bunks and was very crowded. They did not receive sufficient food, nor in the winter, sufficient heat. Children under the age of 10 received a little milk every night.

The Somogyi twins felt fortunate because they did not endure as many experiments as others, perhaps because they arrived so late at Auschwitz. Most of the time, the doctors took blood from the boys; they were not injected with any substances. Beyond that, they were measured. One of the most unpleasant things Thomas recalls is having impressions made of his teeth, because his mouth was filled with gypsum or a similar substance. It wasn't until the Somogyi brothers had a meeting in Jerusalem with other Mengele twins (1985) that Thomas learned of the experiments performed on other twins.

One night, “Dr. Tilo,” who was a rival of Mengele, arrived at the twins’ barrack and selected Thomas and Peter for extermination, because they were too young to work. Mengele didn’t know about it. When Mengele was notified, he nullified the extermination request.

Thomas remembers prisoners getting caught in the electric fence and burning to death. He remembers prisoners’ beatings and punishments. The Roma “Gypsy” camp was located next to the twins’ barracks; Thomas remembers the screaming as they were rounded up one night and sent to the gas chambers.

As the Soviet troops approached Auschwitz, the Nazi officers panicked and set the “Kanada” warehouse on fire to destroy the evidence inside. Thomas and Peter had to push cartloads of possessions that the Nazis had taken from the prisoners to add to the fire.

As the Soviet troops approached, the Nazis forced the prisoners on a death march toward Germany. Thomas and Peter were too weak to join them. When the Soviet army arrived at Auschwitz, they did not expect to find such death and starvation.



Peter, Josef, and Thomas, 1947 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Fdn)

There were many young twins remaining at the camp, as well as the boys’ leader, Zvi Spiegel. Zvi took responsibility for the boys and did as much as he could to protect them. After liberation, when the twins decided they wanted to return home, Zvi helped them. They set off on foot to Krakow, occasionally getting lifts from Soviet soldiers in trucks. They stayed in Krakow for a few weeks and went door to door begging for food.

Thomas and Peter arrived in Pecs on March 1, 1945; they were the first deportees to return to Pecs and the only children to survive. Some months later, their father returned—he had been imprisoned in Dachau. They eventually got their house returned to them. Of the 4,500 Jews in Pecs, only several hundred survived.

Thomas was quite sick after liberation, with scarlet fever and pleurosy. He and Peter eventually returned to school. They were the first in Pecs to have a bar mitzvah after the war. Josef rebuilt his business, and in 1947 he married. This was first time Thomas realized that his mother was never coming back.

In April 1949, Josef decided he wanted to leave Hungary and move to Israel. He sent Peter and Thomas first. The twins escaped Hungary (because there was no legal way to exit Hungary) with the help of a Zionist organization and traveled through Czechoslovakia, Austria, and Italy before arriving in Israel. The boys settled in a Youth Aliyah program in western Galilee, where they stayed for two years. By then, his father and new mother obtained exit visas, and they all settled in Jerusalem. Peter was called to the army; Thomas stayed behind (he served later). Thomas then served in the ministry of education. In 1956 the family moved to England for a couple years and then onto Canada in 1958. It was Josef's wish to end up in Canada or Australia.

Thomas married in 1960 and has three children. Peter lives in the United States; he has two children and four grandchildren.



Thomas Simon, 1995 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Fdn)

Thomas urges young people to try to judge each individual on his or her own merits, and not to generalize. Even in the worst situation, at Auschwitz, there were some perpetrators who showed acts of kindness. He remembers toward the end, in an instance of humanity, some SS officers passed sugar cubes to the twin boys when other officers were not looking. In each group, there are decent people and wicked people. You cannot group them all together. Try to be as understanding as you can.



Peter Somogyi, 2015

Peter wants to tell the next generations that the Holocaust really happened—he was an eyewitness—it was not just a story.

Thomas Simon's tattoo number: A 17455

Peter Somogyi's tattoo number: A17454.