

Isaak and Tzvi Klein



Isaak Klein, 2013

Isaak and Tzvi Klein were the eldest of eight children born to Simon and Pepi Klein in Somator, Czechoslovakia, in 1931. Isaak recalls a happy life with his family in Somator, although he also remembers his father being ridiculed by non-Jewish neighbors who disliked Jews living in their city. When Czechoslovakia was forced to cede southern Slovakia to Hungary in 1938, the Kleins were stripped of their farmland and citizenship by the occupying Hungarian military government. Soon afterward, Isaak and his family were deported to Poland.

In 1944 the Kleins and other Jews of the region were loaded onto cattle cars and shipped to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Isaak and Tzvi were only thirteen years old. After being forced onto the cattle trains, the twins never saw their parents again.

By the time the train arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, only fifty percent of the passengers were still alive, as they had traveled for nearly two weeks without any food and water. The Nazis unloaded the surviving Jews from the train and split them into groups: one comprised of women, children, and the unhealthy; the other of men healthy enough to work. Among the Nazis present was the infamous Nazi doctor Josef Mengele, also known as the “Angel of Death.” Taking particular interest in Isaak and his brother because they were twins, Dr. Mengele selected them to stay in the camp, instead of sending them to the gas chambers. Isaak and Tzvi stayed in the D-Lager (D-Camp) with other sets of twins.

Isaak and Tzvi were subjects in Dr. Mengele’s medical experiments. Every day, for two or three hours, the Nazi doctors checked them and conducted experiments, which included skin grafts and injections, many of which were done under anesthesia. One time, Isaak remembers waking up with stitches on the back of his head; today a permanent scar remains, reminding him of the torture he went through at the camp.

The twin’s daily routine began at about 5:00 a.m. with a head count, which could last as long as four hours. Afterward, they worked to transport materials throughout the camp and clear the dead bodies. Their daily food ration included two slices of almost always moldy bread and a thin, watery soup that may or may not have had vegetables in it, such as turnips or beets. If prisoners did not follow orders, they were lashed with a whip, usually ten or more times. The prisoners were forced to count the lashings aloud to the flogger, and if they failed to do so, the lashings would start over again from zero.

By the end of 1944, the Russian army began advancing into German-occupied territory. Fearing that the Russians were coming too close to Auschwitz, the Nazi officials forced the prisoners on a two-week-long death march south to a camp in Melk, Austria. On the death march, the prisoners received no food, water, or shelter, and they barely had enough clothes on their backs to survive. Hundreds died from starvation, freezing temperatures, and beatings they received from the guards. On one stop in German farmland, the prisoners noticed a farm, where a dead horse was lying outside. Isaak quickly entered the farmhouse and ate out of a pig trough, a meal he considered the best he had had since being in the concentration camp. When he returned outside, Isaak saw that his fellow prisoners had picked the horse carcass clean of anything edible.

The twins remained at Melk for only one month. Next they were forced to move to Mauthausen, where they stayed for another month. Finally, the prisoners were sent to a camp called Gunskirchen, located deep in the Austrian forest, the nearest civilization being almost twenty-one kilometers away. The conditions in this camp were far worse than any Isaak and Tzvi had yet experienced. The barracks had no roof, and many of the prisoners drowned in stretches of mud that were two to three feet deep. One night the mud was so dangerous that Isaak laid five bodies down next to one another and placed a blanket over the top of them. He went to sleep on top of the pile of bodies to ensure that he did not drown in the mud while sleeping.

At last, hope arrived one night when the twins noticed explosions in the distance; they knew the Allied forces were drawing nearer. Soon the Nazi soldiers fled from Gunskirchen, leaving the prisoners on their own. Isaak and Tsvi fled the camp with a large group of inmates the next morning, fearing night travel. On the road, they met up with American troops, who gave them food such as cakes, chocolate, and other candy. Unfortunately Isaak and many of the others fell ill from food poisoning, because their bodies were not accustomed to the food. The following day, Isaak was hospitalized in Linz, Austria, along with forty other prisoners. Of those forty, only five, including Isaak, survived.

After his stay in the hospital, Isaak and Tzvi set out for their hometown in Czechoslovakia to find friends or relatives who also might have survived the Holocaust. But they found no one. In 1946 Isaak and Tzvi went on a six-month trip through Europe, passing through Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Austria, France, and finally to Belgium. After arriving in Boneffe, Belgium, they made the journey to Palestine by boat. There, Jewish organizations tried to smuggle them into the country, but British officers would not grant them entry. Running out of food and water aboard the ship, the ship's inhabitants surrendered to British officers, who afterward shipped the detainees to a prison in the gulf of Haifa. Isaak and the others were detained for ten months and then released to the Jewish population in Palestine.

Isaak attended an agricultural school near the city of Tel Aviv for a year. Soon afterward, the struggle to make Palestine independent began. Isaak remembers being arrested by British officers nearly a dozen times for participating in the events that led up to Israel's independence in 1948. After Israel declared independence, Isaak joined the army and served for four years. In 1962, as his financial situation dwindled and as conflict erupted across Israel, Isaak decided to move with his new wife (whom he married in 1955) to the United States. They settled in Brooklyn, New York, and started a family. Eight years later, Isaak moved to Miami, Florida, where he eventually retired in 1996. Nowadays Isaak shares his story each week with students at a local Holocaust Center in the Miami-Dade area. His message to the world is "never again." He hopes that by passing his story on to others, people will learn to understand one another and live in harmony.

(This is adapted from the 2008 testimony given to Rabbi C. Rosenzweig for the Holocaust Memorial Center/Zekelman Family Campus)