

René and Renate Guttman

Twins René Slotkin and Irene Hizme were born René and Renate Guttman on December 21, 1937, in Teplice-Sanov, Czechoslovakia. Before the twins were born, their parents Herbert and Ita Guttman had fled Dresden, Germany, to escape the Nazi government's policies against Jews. Before leaving Germany to live in Czechoslovakia, Herbert worked in the import-export business, and Ita was an accountant.



Renate and René Guttman, 1940-41 (courtesy of USHMM)

Soon after the birth of the twins, the Guttman family moved to Prague, where they were living when the Germans occupied the area in 1939. Herbert was arrested and taken from his family. Ita and her children were sent to Theresienstadt concentration camp, 40 miles north of Prague. They never saw Herbert again. They later learned that he was killed in Auschwitz in December 1941.



Ita Guttman with her twins, in Theresienstadt concentration camp, 1942 (courtesy of USHMM)

In December 1943, Ita and the twins were deported from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz on a transport with 2,491 Czech Jews. They lived together in the Czech family camp in Birkenau for six months until Dr. Josef Mengele moved René and Renate to separate barracks that housed subjects of his gruesome genetic experiments. Ita was sent to the gas chambers. The twins at the time were only six years old.

Mengele experimented on Renate and kept René as the control. Renate remembered sitting naked in Mengele's office, with doctors measuring her and drawing blood from her neck. She received injections that made her very sick. One day, a nurse hid Renate under her long skirt to save her from being taken away and killed.

They lived separately in girls and boys barracks and hardly ever saw each other. Renate saw her brother once through a barbed-wire fence. She recalled, "It was just a look. We knew we belonged to each other, and this reaffirmed it — that we would be together again."

In January 1945, René survived a death march during which thousands of prisoners died of exposure and disease. René was eventually taken to an orphanage in Czechoslovakia, where he met an administrator named Dr. Kalina. Dr. Kalina and his wife had no children of their own and decided to bring René home to care for him. After Communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1947, Dr. Kalina and his wife were forced to flee, leaving René with Kalina's sister and her family in Kosice, near Prague. This family—the Mann family—later adopted him and cared for him for years.

In the meantime, after liberation, a Polish woman named Mrs. Mucha found Renate and took her to her house in Oswiecim (Auschwitz) to recover. Mrs. Mucha changed Renate's name to Irenka. Mrs. Mucha was very, very strict, and while she never demonstrated affection toward Renate, she did nurse her back to health. In 1946, a Jewish organization took Irenka from the home in Poland to a Jewish orphanage in France. The people running the orphanage changed Irenka's name to Irena.

In October 1947, a representative from an organization called Rescue Children chose Irene and a boy named Charles Karo to come to the United States to raise money for other Jewish orphans in Europe. Irene and Charles were taken on a ten-day tour; they were treated to stuffed animals and fancy clothes and featured in a Life Magazine spread. They even visited the White House. All the while they promised Irena that she would return to France.

However, after serving as model children for the Rescue Children effort, Irene and Charles were not taken back to France as promised. Rather, they were adopted by Jewish families in America. The Slotkin family from Long Island adopted Irene, and when they learned she had a twin, they hired a private investigator to look for René.

Dr. Kalina, who had emigrated to Israel, happened to see the Life Magazine article about Irene "Guttmann" and made the connection to the little boy he helped after liberation. Dr. Kalina contacted authorities in the U.S. and told them that René was living with this sister in Czechoslovakia. The Slotkins worked through much red tape to reunite René with his sister. On March 29, 1950, after more than six years apart, the twins were reunited.



René with escorts in Frankfurt, Germany, on his way to the U.S., 1950 (courtesy of USHMM)

In the decades since, Irene and René have been prominent speakers about their Holocaust experiences. They have recorded several testimonies with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and are the subjects of a documentary titled René and I.



René's tattoo number is 169061

Renate's number: 70917