

Helen and Pearl Herskovic

Helen and Pearl Herskovic were the youngest of eight children of Isaac Herskovic and Chaya Schwartz Herskovic. They were born on January 18, 1921 in Chynadiyovo (Cinadovo), in the Carpathian region of Czechoslovakia, where their father was a well-respected tailor.



In March 1944, Germany seized control of the area and soon deported all the Jews to Auschwitz. As they left the cattle car, Helen and Pearl heard the guards call for twins, and since they looked so much alike, they knew they could not escape the guards' notice. So they stepped forward, hoping they would be OK as long as they stayed together.

At Auschwitz, SS officers assigned Helen and Pearl the unimaginable task of neatening piles of bodies and disinfecting the warehouse floor where they lay. For twelve days they silently worked, wondering whether their family members were among the bodies, until Josef Mengele summoned them for his experiments.

He took their medical histories and measured them meticulously. “Even our hair was counted,” Helen commented in a Daily Beast interview in 2009. “The eyelashes. He was measuring Pearl; then he came to me, and vice versa. Everything was written down.” Mengele left the injections to his nurses. The sisters didn’t know what the needles contained, but they remembered nurses drawing blood often.

On their 24th birthday—January 18th, 1945—Helen and Pearl were among 56,000 prisoners forced on a death march from Auschwitz, as Nazis evacuated the camp in an attempt to remove evidence of their crimes from advancing Soviet troops. Helen was very ill and did not think she could walk. But Pearl reminded her of words Helen herself had spoken: “If you survive, you’ll tell the world what happened to us.” And Pearl added, “And you cannot die. Because if you die, I’ll die.”

Three months later, they were finally liberated by an American battalion in Austria.

*Four Herskovic sisters: (l. to r.)
Emilia, Helen, Pearl, Miriam. 1923
(courtesy of the USHMM)*



Pearl and Helen with their brother, Arno, a soldier in the Czech army. 1945 (courtesy of the USHMM)

Helen met Herman Rappaport at a synagogue in Zatec, Czechoslovakia, on Yom Kippur in 1945. They married in August of 1947, but shortly thereafter, Helen received her visa to the United States and had to leave without him. Herman then escaped to Palestine and lived there for four years as he waited for his own visa to the United States. Helen and Herman reunited in Gary, Indiana, in 1952. Pearl and her husband settled in the Chicago area, as well.

Helen was married to Herman (also a Holocaust survivor) for 55 years. They had two daughters and four grandchildren. Helen never turned down an opportunity to speak about her experiences, whether it be to a group at a synagogue or children in a Catholic high school. She especially loved her trips to the CANDLES Holocaust museum. After her beloved Pearl passed away she was very proud to become an official member of

the speaker's bureau at the Illinois Holocaust Museum in Skokie, where she continued to share their story with so many.

Pearl died in 2010 at age 89; Helen died in 2013 at age 92.

Helen's tattoo number is 5080.

Pearl's is 5079.

A loving note from Eva Kor:

Dear Friends,

I met Helen Rappaport and Pearl Pufeles in about the spring of 1985. From the beginning they were sweet, caring, and supportive, even if they did not agree with some of my ideas. They would bring me homemade cookies to sweeten my life—and they did. Helen always wanted me to visit Chicago and stay with her, so my friend Mary and I did.

Both Helen and Pearl were never angry or bitter. I miss their friendship and caring, and I know that they are smiling down on us and our work.

*Eva Kor, Founding Director,
A-7063*

