

Zvi and Magda Spiegel



Zvi Spiegel, in the 1960s (courtesy of Yad Vashem)

Zvi and Magda Spiegel were born on January 5, 1915 in Budapest, Hungary. When they were young, their family moved to Munkacs, a Czechoslovakian town known for its flourishing Jewish community.

At age 29, Zvi and Magda were among the oldest of the twins deported to Auschwitz. Magda was married and had a seven-year-old son. When their family arrived on the selection platform, Magda, her son, and mother were ordered to the left—to the gas chambers. In the meantime, Dr. Josef Mengele had learned that Zvi was a twin, and so he hurried to pluck Magda from the line leading to death.

When Mengele learned that Zvi had been an officer in the Czech military, he appointed the prisoner “Zvilingefater,” “twins’ father,” placing Zvi in charge of about 80 boy twins. Mengele warned Zvi that if anything were to go wrong, he would be killed on the spot. Regardless, Zvi risked his life many times to save other prisoners.

According to Zvi’s testimony, when a pair of twins arrived in the barracks, they were told to complete a detailed questionnaire from the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. Zvi helped the boys fill in the paperwork, especially the young ones who could not yet read or write. Next, Zvi took the twins to Mengele’s office, where the doctor would ask additional questions. Since most of the twins spoke only Hungarian and Mengele spoke only German, Zvi served as translator.

One day, as György and István Kun (the Kun brothers’ story is found in our archived stories of the Mengele twins) were filling out their forms, Zvi noticed their birthdays were not the same—they were not twins. Zvi knew that if Mengele learned of this, the boys would be sent to the gas chambers immediately. So Zvi decided to risk his own life and log false birthdays onto the form, in order to “make” them twins.

Zvi also used his position to protect the young twins. One afternoon, a new Nazi doctor named Thilo came to the boys’ barracks and selected all the twins for the gas chambers. The doctor then ordered the barracks be sealed, so no one could leave. Somehow Zvi broke out of the barracks and ran to the guards’ station, where he

demanded to talk to Mengele. Zvi informed him of Thilo's order to kill all the twin boys. Mengele became very upset and immediately went to reverse the order.

Zvi became a father figure to dozens of twins, mostly aged between nine and 15. He watched and guarded them, trying to keep the children together and out of harm's way. He taught them math, history, and geography—whatever he could remember from his school days. He comforted them when they cried for their parents, and he gave them hope that they would escape unharmed.

With the liberation of Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, Zvi's dedication to the twins did not wane. Even though he had the opportunity to run away with another adult prisoner, he felt obligated to see the twins safely home. So on January 28, he led 36 children on the journey back to Hungary. This was no easy feat in the chaos of the war's aftermath, and travelling on foot, by truck and by train for six weeks, all but one made it home safely. The twins' route home covered thousands of miles across Poland and traversing Slovakia, Hungary, Carpatho-Ruthenia and Romania.

Zvi met his wife seven months after liberation, and they were married on January 27, 1946. Although they began a comfortable life, neither felt they could establish roots in Eastern Europe. So they emigrated to Palestine, where Zvi quickly found an accounting job at a large firm. He became very successful and tried to forget about the Holocaust, reminding himself of how lucky he was. He and his wife had two children, and occasionally his other children—the twins—would phone or write letters. On those occasions, Zvi would become the “Zvilingefater” once more, listening to them with a sympathetic ear and offering kindness and support.

Magda and her husband, Nahman, reunited after the war. He had spent the years in labor camps throughout Russia. They moved to Palestine and eventually started a family, raising two children. But Magda always bore the guilt of leaving her son to die in the gas chambers.

Zvi died at the age of 78 in 1993. He first told his story in a Life Magazine article in the 1980s and was reunited with some of the “Spiegel boys,” by then men in their 50s.
(from *Children of the Flames* by Lagnado and Dekel and the Royal Holloway Holocaust Research Centre)