

## Harry Schlesinger and his twin sister, Sitonia Gluck

The twins were born on March 9, 1929 in Munkacs, Czechoslovakia, in the Carpathian Mountains. Harry recalls that about half of the population of Munkacs was Jewish, and most of the stores on the main street were owned by Jews. Harry and Sitonia's father, Bentzion, had a jewelry store on that street which their mother, Fany, also helped run. The successful business afforded the Schlesingers a very comfortable lifestyle. Their house had beautiful gardens behind it, and the family loved to skate and play ball together. The Schlesingers were very religious. The twins went to Hebrew kindergarten and elementary school, and Harry went on to Hebrew gymnasium. Harry remembers abiding by kosher rules and going to the *shul* that was located on the same street as his house.



*The extended Schlesinger family at the wedding of Fany and Bentzion. Year unknown (courtesy of the USC Shoah Fdn)*

When the Hungarians occupied Munkacs, antisemitism became more apparent. Hungarian officials enacted laws that allowed only certain schools to enroll Jews. Later, Jews could not own stores, and thus had no income. The government sent Jewish men to forced labor in Russia to help the Hungarian army clean mines. At first Bentzion did not have to go; however, in 1941 the rules changed, and the twins' father was sent away, leaving Fany to tend to the jewelry store and the family on her own.

The Schlesingers owned a radio and kept track of events taking place in Europe via the BBC. The family was technically only allowed to listen to one radio station from Budapest; however, a mechanic showed Bentzion how to find other stations. Unfortunately, the family did not know about the concentration camps.

After German forces occupied Hungary on March 19, 1944, they began to transport Jews to concentration camps. Harry recalls this process being very well organized. To help with the organization, the Germans created a *Judenrat* (a council of Jewish elders responsible for the organization of the ghettos), who Harry believes was told secretly that the Jews would be sent to the camps. Harry believes that the members of the *Judenrat* were not permitted to tell anyone; if they kept the secret, their families would be sent to Budapest and spared from the camps.



*Fany, Harry (Hermann), Bentzion, Sitonia. 1934 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Fdn)*

During the evacuation of the Jews, the Germans created ghettos, which decreased in size as time went on. When the ghetto in which the Schlesingers lived became smaller, the family moved to his maternal grandfather's giant mansion. Harry recalls the house being filled with people. His grandfather set aside the laundry room for them so they would not have to share a room with other families. There were no opportunities to cook, so the family had to survive on dry food for a week or two.

Early one morning around 4:00, they were awoken by gendarmes with rifles, yelling "OUT!!" and beating people on their heads. Harry remembers them thrashing open his family's sack that contained their clothes and food. The Jews were chased to a local brickyard, which was located near a train station. Harry remembers the sound of children screaming and sight of blood everywhere from all the beatings. It happened so quickly that no one had time to think.

The tents in the brickyard were built so low to the ground that everyone had to crawl through them. Even worse, all the males' beards were cut off, and the family members did not recognize each other. Harry remembers their ration being an occasional piece of bread. One day the Hungarians in charge of the brickyard cooked a bathtub full of soup. The Jews lined up to finally eat and to feed their children. However, when it came time to serve the soup, the guard in charge beat the first man in line because he had dirt on the bottom of his bowl. Everyone else left the line because they feared for their lives. The guard then announced that no one was apparently hungry, so he dumped the bathtub of soup onto the ground.

The Jews in the brickyard became more and more confused as they received letters supposedly written by Jews in Hungary who said they were working at a labor camp. They described how the children and elderly did not have to work and insisted they were doing fine. This ruse lulled many of the ghetto prisoners into believing that their lives were not in danger.

One day, all the Jews in the brickyard were loaded onto trains and traveled two to three days without food or water. When they arrived on the selection platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Josef Mengele

yelled “Twins!” in German and Hungarian. Harry and Sitonia ran forward. The twins from the transport were hauled away in a closed van; girls taken to one camp, boys to another.

Harry remembers the men’s twin camp “hospital” being used for a variety of horrific experiments, some of them on twins. The “doctors” amputated limbs and removed eyes—they treated the prisoners as less than animals.

The Roma were the first victims of the experiments. At first, they were kept together as families and treated fairly well. The children had toys to play with, and families could eat meals together in a canteen. Harry started a business of trading toys to the Roma for food. He was able to do this because only a barbed-wire fence separated the boys’ camp from the Roma camp. However, one night, seemingly without warning, the Nazis liquidated the Roma camp, sending all the prisoners to the gas chambers.

Harry became an office messenger for a Dr. Epstein, a prisoner-doctor from Czechoslovakia who assisted Mengele with “research” on a disease that was killing Roma prisoners. Harry’s job was to run messages and to keep the office clean, and he had lots of free time to send food to Sitonia, help other prisoners, and establish his own business. This job also provided him his own room in a barrack with the Jewish doctors. Here Harry was able to cook food for himself, and he always had plenty to eat. He would often help the young twins by sharing food with them. He would ask them to dance for a piece of food to entertain the young twins and keep their spirits up. In Auschwitz, no one spent time thinking. Everyone focused on survival, on how to obtain a piece of bread.

Dr. Havash and Dr. Peter, from Harry’s hometown, worked as *Sonderkommandos* (Jewish prisoners who were forced, on threat of their own deaths, to aid with the disposal of gas chamber victims) at night. However, during the day they cut grass, and Harry had opportunities to talk with them to find out what was going on. He wondered, “How could Jewish doctors do such work, even if they recognized their family members?”

Harry remembers Mengele as a good-looking German officer. His official office was at the gypsy camp, where he had a young Belgian Jewish woman as his secretary. To see Mengele, a prisoner was required to have an appointment. When the prisoner arrived for an appointment, he or she had to take a shower in the gypsy camp before seeing Dr. Mengele. He would take many measurements and ask many questions about family history in his evaluation. Dr. Mengele kept excellent documentation and records. Harry spent many hours with Mengele, every second week. Sometimes Mengele would give the twins macaroni in their soup or better bread, to confuse them into thinking that he was their father, that he cared for the children. Harry did not buy into the act because he learned Mengele’s true intent from the doctors he lived with.

Harry had a better life than most of the twins, but he was still a twin in Auschwitz. The doctors often took blood from him. Because he lived with the other doctors in his barrack, he was able to hear about other experiments being performed on twins.

Harry had contact with Sitonia throughout their time at Auschwitz. Sometimes only a barbed wire separated them. One time, Harry remembers helping to push a wagon that was heading to the women’s camp. He also visited the hospital when Sitonia was sick to bring her medicine, vitamins, and clothing. When the Russians were approaching, word got out that prisoners should try to leave

the camp in order to avoid being killed. Sitonia was not able to leave because she was still too sick. But Harry decided to leave.

To prepare to leave Birkenau, Harry found warm clothes, a coat, and shoes that were too big for him. He began walking. After about two days, the prisoners were loaded into open trains that took them to Mauthausen concentration camp. Harry remembers Mauthausen being situated on a big hill with hundreds of steps. Half the people on the journey died from cold weather and a lack of food. When the prisoners arrived at around 11:00 one night, they were taken to hot showers and then forced to stand naked in the snow for a selection. Any person who was unable to work had a black X put on them and was electrocuted.

Prisoners who survived the selection were taken to a big barrack and made to lie down side by side. Blankets were put on top of everyone, and then a guard walked on top of them, breaking their noses and bruising them. Prisoners dared not say anything. The next day, the prisoners ate soup and went through lice control.

Harry knew he could not stay at this place. So when a transport to Melk came, he took it. Later that evening, Harry arrived at a big camp. He was told he was going to have to walk five kilometers each way to go to his job. Harry knew he could not walk that far, so he sneaked in with a group of children to peel potatoes for the SS. This was a good job. When he finished for the day, Harry could return to the barrack which was not far from the kitchen.

One day, Harry met the boyfriend of his family's maid in Munkacs. His name was Moishe. Harry arranged to steal potatoes from the kitchen and give them to Moishe for him to cook in hot water. Harry would then use the hot water to soak his damaged feet. This ultimately saved his feet and his life. Harry stayed at Melk between one and a half and two months before he was forced to walk back to Mauthausen.

From there he walked to Gunskirchen, which was a concentration camp in Austria. On May 5, 1945, a Jeep arrived carrying a white flag and four U.S. soldiers, who announced the prisoners were free. Unfortunately, the soldiers gave the prisoners a lot of food to eat, thinking it would ease their hunger. Instead it made many of them very ill. The soldiers took the prisoners to the hospital, where many of them died.

After liberation, Harry eventually returned to Munkacs to be with his parents and sister. In 1949, Harry emigrated to Haifa, where he stayed until 1955. Harry tried but could not make a living there, so he left for America. But he says his heart will always be in Israel. Harry married his wife in 1963, and they raised two sons.