

Lucyina and Irka Cuker

Lea Berkman (born Lucyina Cuker) and her twin sister Irka were born on September 1, 1923 in Radom, Poland, where their father, Shmuel, owned a shoe store. The twins also had a younger brother, Tuvia, born in 1927. The family was very Zionist and religiously observant. Their grandfather was a *shochet* (a ritual slaughterer). Lea and Irka attended a private Jewish school as well as a general Polish high school.



Frieda Cuker, mother of Lea and Irka (courtesy of USHMM)

After the start of World War II, the family was forced into the smaller Radom ghetto, where the girls were assigned the job of sewing clothes for the German army. In August 1942 the family was deported from the ghetto. Shmuel and Frieda (the twins' mother) were sent to Treblinka death camp, where they perished. Tuvia was sent to a labor camp and then to Gross Rosen. The twins were first sent to a labor camp in Blizyn, Poland, and then to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

When they arrived in Auschwitz in June 1944, the block leader noticed they were twins and had them join a group of twins from Hungary who were to be used for Josef Mengele's medical experiments. Though the sisters were 21 years old, they appeared much younger and therefore were not subjected to any gynecological tests. However, they were taken for various blood tests.

During the evacuation of Auschwitz on January 18, 1945, Lea and Irka were first sent on a death march. They later were placed on trucks and taken to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in Germany, and then to an airplane factory in Neustadt-Glewe (a subcamp of Ravensbrück). Since they were twins, they were assigned special work, guarding their block, collecting human refuse, and collecting bodies of those who had perished overnight.

American and French troops liberated Lea and Irka in May 1945. After the war, Lea and Irka went to Lodz, Poland, where they successfully reunited with two cousins. (adapted from an account by the USHMM)