

Jiri Fiser

Jiri Fiser usually does not like to think about his childhood in the concentration camps. However in 2004, Ludek Stipl, the director of the Foundation for Respect and Tolerance in Lostice, Czech Republic, asked Jiri to share his memories. Here is the text from the interview.



Jiri and Josef with their sister, Vera, 1938 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation).

But you were children. Did you have a place to play? Were you in any mood to play?

Children can play everywhere, and it is very good. In our spare time we modeled little plastic figures, cut out fairy tale heroes from book illustrations, and later we even created a small puppet theatre. We also participated in a real theatre at Theresienstadt, which was set up in a makeshift space in the attic above the barracks. I still remember the name of that play—it was Brundibar (“Bumblebee”). Such activities were extremely important and useful, because they helped us to get our thoughts away from the horrors which surrounded and threatened us.

How did you get from Theresienstadt to the Angel of Death?

Our stay in Theresienstadt was suddenly brought to the end on May 15, 1944, when we were sent by the transport DZ 410 -413 to the feared Auschwitz. Our journey lasted three days and two nights, but to us it seemed endless. We were crammed in cattle wagons without food and water. Many people died before we got to the final destination. The saddest moment of our trip came when the train went through our hometown of Ceska Trebova. We stepped on top of our baggage and peered through a small window at places we used to know. They were so close, but at the same time so far away for us. Immediately after our morning arrival to Birkenau, there was a selection, which was conducted by Joseph Mengele. My family and I were lucky, because we were placed in so-called Theresienstadt Family Camp B II b. We stayed there until the fateful night from June 11 to June 12, 1944, when the Family Camp was destroyed and all people not able to work and also mothers who did not want to separate from their children were murdered in the gas chambers. Our mother and our younger sister Vera fell into this category. My mother did not want to give up her daughter, so they had to both die. Vera was just ten years old at the time.

Why you were spared?

My brother Josef and I were saved because we are twin brothers. Together with many other twins from Italy, Hungary, Austria, and other states, we were placed into the special hospital section, which was frequently visited by Josef Mengele. This Nazi criminal, philosopher, physician, and anthropologist—called the Angel of Death—was conducting there his pseudo-scientific experiments. He regularly examined us, compared our measurements, weights, fingerprints, length of nails, and many other things. Each month he took samples of our blood for a laboratory analysis. Sometimes he injected solutions into our arms, which caused feverish diseases, and he monitored whether the reactions were the same in both twins. Mengele's experiments also surveyed the possibilities of improvements in amputations and blood transfusions for injured German soldiers. He also researched methods that would ensure the higher fertility of German women, to compensate for the decrease in racially pure men, who were killed in the war.

Were you afraid?

We were children, and at the beginning, we believed we are really sick and thought the doctor was trying to cure us. When a blood sample was taken from us, we received several sugar cubes and other treats. We survived the Holocaust because we were children, and we did not realize what was really happening. For that reason, we went through these events with more hope than adults. The feeling of terror came upon us later, after the war, when we learned what was happening in other sections (of the camp). Suddenly we realized how easily we could be transferred from groups where experiments were performed on living material to other sections, where the results of experiments were verified by an autopsy.

Were all medical experiments conducted by Doctor Mengele only?

He was not the only one there. He was accompanied by many German doctors, who were bad as well. They were competing with each other. There were also several doctor-prisoners. They tried to make our lives easier, in given circumstances. However, it is necessary to realize that any fault in their conduct could mean their execution. After the war, some of Mengele's colleagues were brought to justice and punished. Unfortunately Mengele escaped to South America, where he lived for a long time. I learned that some of his relatives supported him for decades after the war. It is hard for me to comprehend that.

What do you remember about the end of the war?

Auschwitz was liberated on January 27, 1945. In 1948 we wrote an article about our feelings of this beautiful moment. Let me quote from the original text, which was written three years after liberation. We were twelve years old.

"We will never forget January 27, 1945. One day we felt something extraordinary was happening outside. We heard guns and cannons and also stamping of German soldiers, who were running in the courtyard. The doctor did not show up. Aircrafts were flying above the camp, and cannon shots were getting closer. No one was allowed to go outside. We whispered, *Russians are coming*. Suddenly we heard yelling, crying, singing—everything mixed together. Prisoners were running from their sheds like a flood. It was a sure sign that Russians entered the camp. Russians were quite careful and tried to capture some Germans. Prisoners ignored the danger; they were crying and hugging and kissing soldiers."

Russian soldiers were exhausted. I think they were as hungry as we were at that time. Apparently they were advancing so fast to save us that their supply unit got lost somewhere. They were nice to us. Even though they faced death for many years during the war, horrors of Auschwitz moved them. Very soon they started to care about our food, clothing and health.

Russians filmed these events, and some shots were included in a documentary called *Leningrad and Auschwitz*. In one shot, people could see my brother and I walking in striped prison uniforms between barbed wire fences. We were eight years old.



Jiri pointing to himself in a still from the liberation video recorded by Soviet troops, January 1945 (courtesy of AHA online)

How did you get home?

Our journey back home was quite complicated. We were the only survivors from our family. Instead of names, we had just tattooed numbers. We had no parents and no home. We were sent to a sanatorium in Kosice, which had been set up to help people recover from the trauma they experienced during their imprisonment. In the meantime, our uncle Emil was searching for us. After four months he found us in Slovakia and brought us back to Nesovice. We lived with him, and later we moved to Lostice.

What is the conclusion?

I really wish that the horrors of Nazism and concentration camps will never be repeated. Therefore I beg you: *“Do not be silent, and right in the beginning uncover all signs of intolerance, antisemitism, racism and restriction of freedom—not only in our country but also around the world.”*

Jiri Fiser's tattoo number: A-8348

Josef's number: A-8347