

Menashe and Leah Lorenzi

were born in the city of Cluj, Romania on May 20, 1934. The twins were vacationing with their grandparents in Transylvania when German troops arrived in 1944. The grandparents tried to send the children back to their mother, Bella, in Cluj, but they were not permitted to travel.



The Lorenzi family, 1937 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation)



Menashe and Leah, 1938 (courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation)

The police rounded up the Jews and took them to the Cehei ghetto, a former brickyard, where Eva Mozes Kor and her family were also deported. Menashe and Leah spent their tenth birthday in the ghetto, their grandmother giving them each a slice of bread as their gift.

On the selection platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the grandmother heard the guards shrieking, "Twins! Twins!" and naively thought that Bella was there and had instructed the guards to search for her children. For that reason the grandmother pushed Menashe and Leah out of the line leading to the gas chamber and said, "You are going to your mother."

During his imprisonment, Menashe recalled watching war planes fly over Auschwitz, and he prayed they would drop bombs on the camp—even if it meant killing him in the process. But the planes never dropped a single bomb. He also remembered seeing the trains arrive each day, unloading thousands of Hungarian Jews that were herded to the gas chambers. Although he was just a child, he understood the gravity of his circumstance.

Menashe served as a messenger for Dr. Josef Mengele and was one of the few prisoners allowed to wander freely around the camp. After Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz in January 1945, Menashe volunteered to be the tour guide for the many journalists who arrived at the camp. Menashe led reporters and Soviet soldiers through the labyrinth of barracks and buildings that comprised Birkenau. He became the first child survivor to be interviewed for newspaper stories circulated around the world.

After speaking with the journalists, Menashe fell ill. For months he remained at an infirmary set up by the Soviets at the camp, battling one illness after another. He developed a lung infection, tuberculosis; his teeth even fell out. Leah stayed at his side throughout his ordeal.

Finally Menashe recovered, and he and his sister set out for Cluj to try to learn the fate of their parents. It took several months to reach home, because many of the river bridge crossings had been heavily bombed, and trains could not cross. They returned to discover that only one uncle had survived.

Unbeknownst to the twins, their father, Avraham, had spent the war in a Soviet labor camp. He read about the twins' survival in a newspaper article that had quoted Menashe at the time of liberation. Determined to locate his children, Avraham convinced the camp authorities to release him. He was placed on a transport with sick people and began the long journey back to Cluj.

Avraham's reunion with his children was heartbreaking. As Menashe described it, "I will never forget that day as long as I live. We were laughing and crying at the same time. Father took my sister and me in his arms. Then he sat down. He put me on one knee and Leah on the other. He couldn't stop kissing us. And we couldn't stop crying."

The twins were happy to be with their father but devastated that their mother was not with them to rebuild their lives. Over the course of the year, as more refugees returned to Cluj, the Lorenzis sought information on Bella. They were eventually able to piece together what happened to her. Bella had been in a group of workers sent to several labor camps around Poland. She ended up in Riga, Latvia, where she was killed.

Leah found it difficult to accept the loss of her mother and chose to devote her life to the Communist movement as a way to forget her sorrow. However, the Lorenzis found life difficult under the Communists. The family was very religious, but the Communists did not support religion. Menashe and Leah attended a Jewish school, just as they had before the war, but the

Communist government in Romania closed it down and forced them to attend classes on the Sabbath. The family realized they should emigrate to Palestine, but the Communist government would not allow them to leave Romania.



Leah and Menashe in Israel, 1950s (courtesy of the USC Shoah Foundation)

At last, in 1948 they arrived in Israel. Leah decided to study to become a nurse, because a nurse had saved her life at Auschwitz. She worked very hard and learned Hebrew from listening to her patients. Leah married a Hasidic Jew and led a very religious life. They emigrated to the United States—to Brooklyn—where Leah worked in a sweater factory to help make ends meet. She eventually became a businesswoman and ran two successful ladies garment stores on the lower East Side of Manhattan. Even in America, she would search for her mother as she walked down the sidewalks, always hoping that somehow she survived.

Menashe settled in Israel and married. In 1985, he and other Mengele twins journeyed to Auschwitz with CANDLES to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of the camp and to help the world know the suffering they had endured during Mengele's inhumane experiments. He and his wife raised three children and enjoyed the company of many grandchildren.

Menashe's tattoo number is A-12090;
Leah's number is A-7059.

(adapted from *Children of the Flame*, by Lagnado and Dekel)