

Jiri and Zdenek Steiner

A great challenge we face in this type of project is verifying the information we find about the twins. This account that has been loosely translated from a German website about the Theresienstadt camp and ghetto. We ask you to bear in mind that this account has not been corroborated. If you have information about these twins or their family, we encourage you to contact us.

Jiri and Zdenek Steiner were born to Jana and Pavel Steiner on May 20, 1929 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Pavel ran a successful textile wholesale business that included German business partners. When the Germans marched into Prague on March 15, 1939, the approximately 31,000 Jews who lived in the city became subjected to harsh antisemitic measures. Pavel lost his textile business. The twins could no longer play in the city parks or attend school. In 1941 the Steiner family was evicted from their apartment.



Jiri and Zdenek, date unknown

Jiri and Zdenek were 13 years old when the family was deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp and ghetto in December 1942. Their mother was assigned to a separate barrack, and when Jiri became ill, the twins were separated from their father, as well, and sent to a children's barrack. While school was banned at the camp, the boys received instruction secretly in many school subjects. The twins quietly attended concerts and theater performances held in an attic somewhere on the camp grounds.

On September 5, 1943, the family was loaded into cattle cars to endure a three-day journey to Auschwitz. The twins remember the SS officers' brutality as they pulled prisoners from the train cars. On the first night at Birkenau they had to sleep on a wet concrete floor. The next morning they were suddenly wakened and sent to be registered and tattooed; their heads were shaved and they were given prisoner uniforms.

The Steiners were sent to a newly installed area for Theresienstadt families. Jiri reported that families had better food there and were not subjected to the harsh roll calls ("appels") that most other prisoners had to endure. Prisoners secretly conducted school lessons and rehearsed plays. It is reported that SS guards even attended some of the performances.

Despite the relatively humane treatment they received, the twins saw the smoke from the crematoria chimneys bellowing each day and the prisoners dying on the electric fence. In March 1944, rumors circulated of the impending liquidation of their camp, and one day the camp guard read a list of names. Jiri's and Zdenek's were among the approximately 70 names called. That night, all others at the Theresienstadt family camp were exterminated in the gas chambers.

Jiri and Zdenek were claimed by Josef Mengele and subjected to his experiments. They, along with other male twins and dwarfs, lived in the infirmary, and the twins were repeatedly weighed, measured, and tested.

When the SS guards forced the prisoners on a death march in January 1945, Jiri and Zdenek hid in the main camp (Auschwitz I). They were liberated by Soviet troops on January 27, 1945. The twins were 15 years old, but Jiri weighed only 62 pounds. After liberation, the twins were in the care of a Jewish family, perhaps somewhere in Slovakia. They also spent time in a military orphanage and briefly lived with an aunt who had survived the war. Jiri began training for a job in the chemical industry in Litvinov, Czechoslovakia, and Zdenek trained in a textile factory. In 1947 Zdenek was killed in a car accident.

Over the years, Jiri was married twice and had children and grandchildren. Beginning in 1970 he worked in the Czech insurance industry. Only once—in March 1966—did he return to Auschwitz. He wanted to reflect on the victims, especially all the members of his family who perished there.

Jiri Steiner's Tattoo number: 147743

Zdenek's number: 147742