

Irene Fogel Weiss, born in 1930 in Czechoslovakia. She now lives in Virginia.



We lived in Bótrágy, a very small, mostly poor town in Czechoslovakia with a population of approximately 1,000 mainly farming families, including about 10 Jewish families. The town was a typical low-income community with a tailor, a shoemaker, a grocery store, where people struggled to get by, but where everyone knew each other and there was easy communication between the neighbors, though that didn't mean we were equal.

When I was eight years old Czechoslovakia broke apart and we became part of Hungary. That was when our problems started, because the Hungarians were allied with the Nazis. It was a difficult time for Jewish families, as suddenly the law no longer protected us and overnight we lost our civil rights. My father's lumber business was taken away and given to a non-Jew, and we received no compensation. Jewish children were thrown out of Hungarian schools, so right away we had no choice but to

concentrate on not to bring attention to ourselves. We couldn't ride the trains and we had to wear the yellow star. It was a free for all. With no law to protect us, it was common for Jews to get beaten up or thrown off the train.

It's an incredibly scary feeling when you're exposed to anyone's raw feelings and anger. These young Nazis roamed around and did tremendous damage to many individuals. But at least we were still in our community and were not evicted from our home, so that was some comfort.

In the spring of 1944 my family – my parents and their six children, the oldest of whom was 17 and I was 13 – found ourselves being taken on cattle carts to Auschwitz in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Imagine it like this: three generations of your family have lived in the same house in the same town. They've struggled to raise a family, put kids through school, to feed them all. You have your friends and family. All of a sudden you are told to leave it all and walk out with a single suitcase.

We had been absolutely unaware of such a place as Auschwitz. It was a stunning reversal of the life we had had up until then. And I cannot emphasize enough how utterly scary it is to be at the mercy of your fellow human beings. As a child I could not understand what we had done to deserve going there.

My father surveyed the scene from the train and could see prisoners, uniforms and barracks so we immediately thought it was a work camp, and that was reassuring – if we can work, it can't be such a dreadful place. We had heard about the stories in Poland of lots of mass shootings of Jews or people being taken into the forest and shot, so it was a relief to see out the window that there was actually a system. Even though we were victims of discrimination at that stage that's all it was, as we had no clue then that this was a very carefully orchestrated plan of genocide. We could not have imagined that they would kill little children, until we realized that killing children was their primary goal to prevent any new generations. Because desperate people will always look to find some sign of hope, we thought to ourselves even if we have to work, at least we'll see each other occasionally.

The German system was full of this sort of deception. Thinking we were going to a work camp. Thinking that you were going to take a shower when in fact you were going to the gas chambers – that was the ultimate deceit.

When we arrived it was, as I later found out, the usual story, though not to us at the time. Our family was torn apart on the platform on arriving. My sister, Serena, was chosen for slave labour. My mother and the younger children were sent off to one side and my father and 16-year-old brother to the other side. I held tightly on to the hand of my 12-year-old sister and for an instant I was mistaken for being older than I was, probably because I was wearing a headscarf that my mother had given me.

My sister was sent with my mother, while I went to the opposite side. That was the first chance I had to survive. The reality of where we were, struck home fairly quickly. I was stationed near crematorium number four, and we witnessed the columns of unsuspecting women and children entering the gate of the crematorium; they would have been dead within half an hour. When the Hungarian Jews arrived they had the gas chambers going day and night. How can you wrap your imagination round that? I still can't.

I was with my older sister Serena and we were sent to be forced laborers together in the Birkenau section of Auschwitz. Many times we were threatened with separation but somehow we managed to stay together. Later on, to our great relief we ran into my mother's two younger sisters, our aunts Rose and Piri, who were in their early 20s. It was like finding our parents. They were such a huge moral and emotional support for us. Later we were transported yet again, and my aunt Piri became ill and was killed.