

John Steiner

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born in Prague on August 3, 1925, and went to school there until I was expelled in 1940 because of my "racial" background. I attended a Jewish electro-technical school, and became an apprentice in this field. My parents came from upper middle-class backgrounds. My mother was university educated and specialized in English Literature. Among other things, she translated *Gone with the Wind* into German. My father completed an equivalent of an MBA and was employed by the leading private bank in Prague.

Our entire family actively resisted the Nazis and my mother was interrogated by the Gestapo-ironically in the beautiful bank building my father had worked in and which served as Prague Gestapo headquarters. My father was sent to Theresienstadt in September 1941; I was sent there in August 1942, in retaliation for the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich that May. Boxcars were ready for our transport from the camp to an unknown destination. Most of us could no longer walk so they ordered us to crawl. The sick and crippled were thrown in. Most were crushed or suffered an agonizingly slow death by suffocation. Our fateful journey on this horror train had begun.

In November of that year my mother "joined" us, and so our family was "reunited". From Theresienstadt, I was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This was in the autumn of 1943, and my parents "followed" me there some time later. My mother was gassed in 1944; my father and I were sent to the slave labor camp Blechhammer.

My father was liberated in February 1945, but in January I had been sent on a death march to Reichenbach, which was also a slave labor camp. From there I and several hundred other prisoners were shipped to Dachau in open cattle wagons. Only a few of us were still alive after that. I became the spokesman for a small group of dying survivors and addressed the SS Captain. I told him that he should either shoot or help us. He decided on the latter and ordered special rations for us for about two weeks.

We were liberated on April 19, 1945. Because of severe frostbite, the amputation of the toes on my right foot, and the lack of adequate treatment, I was near death. I recovered, returned to Prague and found my father.

I rescued Germans, who were not Nazis, from mistreatment and on occasion saved their lives when I worked for the city government in Prague. Subsequently I worked for the United Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, caught up with my education, and started my medical studies.

I was active in working against the Communist regime and had to leave Czechoslovakia. I went to Australia and then the United States. I completed my MA in Sociology and German Literature at the University of Missouri. I became a lecturer in the Department of Speech at the University

of California, Berkeley and continued to work on my doctorate. In 1961 I worked for the United States Air Force and left for Europe, where I conducted research on the SS, taught at the University of Freiburg, and completed my doctoral work.

I am the founder and director of the Sonoma State University Holocaust Studies Center and a professor of sociology. I received two Fulbright Fellowships, and have published articles and books including *Power Politics and Social Change in National Socialist Germany*, which I authored, and *Survivors, Victims and Perpetrators*, which I co-authored. I write, broadcast, and interview former SS personnel. As far as I know, I am the only survivor who has gone back to former perpetrators and entered into a dialogue with them resulting in major research on that subject.

I am divorced and have a son who was born in 1979.