

Ivor Perl BEM



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Ivor was just 12 years old when he was taken to Auschwitz. He survived with the help of his older brother, but the rest of his family were murdered in the Holocaust.



'Out of my family, nine children and my mother and father, only me and my brother Alec survived. He saved me from the jaws of death.'

Ivor Perl was born Yitzchak Perlmutter on 4 February 1932, in a Hungarian town called Mako. He grew up in an Orthodox Jewish family with eight siblings – four brothers and four sisters. Antisemitism was rife across Hungary, and Mako was no different. On the streets, Ivor had stones thrown at him, abuse shouted at him and his hat knocked off his head. He remembers: 'having rocks thrown at us was quite normal, as was being called 'dirty Jew''.

Despite this, for most of World War Two, Ivor and his family were relatively safe from the reach of the Nazis. Hungary was allied to Germany, but at first the country did not bow to Nazi pressure and take part in the systematic murder of Jews which was taking place across Europe. However, in March 1944, Nazi occupation began in Hungary. The fascist Arrow Cross Party gained power and levels of antisemitism increased. New legislation meant contact between Jews and non-Jews was banned and Jews were forced to wear a yellow star. Ivor remembers having to put boards in front of their windows to prevent them from being smashed.

Initially, Jews were forced into ghettos – small and overcrowded areas with appalling living conditions. Ivor and his family moved in with an aunt, who already lived in the area which was made into a ghetto. His father was taken away for forced labour along with his eldest brother, who Ivor would never see again. The family was soon deported to a bigger ghetto for two days, where they were told they would be sent east on a transport to work on farms. Ivor, who was 12, was forced onto a train with his family. After days of suffering in the cramped and dirty train carriage with people dying around them, they arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

'When we arrived in Auschwitz all we could see from the cracks in the cattle truck were some Polish Jews in striped uniforms. And they kept on shouting in Yiddish: 'The children must say they are at least 16 years old.'

As they were forced off the train, people were divided into two lines. Ivor wanted to join the line that his mother, sisters and younger brothers were told to stand in, but his mother stopped him - a decision that saved his life. Upon reaching the front of the line, his fate rested in the white-gloved hands of the infamous Dr Josef Mengele, a member of the SS, who demanded to know his age. Remembering what the prisoners had told him, 12-year-old Ivor lied and Mengele's finger pointed him away from the gas chambers. Ivor recalls 'I said, 'I want to come with you Mummy'. She said 'No, go and stand there with your brother'. It's the last time I saw them.'

Ivor was put into a barrack in Auschwitz I, which served as a holding camp for prisoners awaiting orders to begin forced labour. He was given a number – 112021, which he says he will never forget. However, it was not tattooed on his arm as it was for most prisoners, as they had run out of ink. For the time he was at the camp, his days consisted of wandering around between roll calls and queuing for meagre meals.

At one point, Ivor ended up hiding in the children's barrack after an air raid siren sounded. His brother Alec found him and forced Ivor to leave the barrack and come with him. Ivor resisted at first because he was afraid of being caught, but eventually gave in and went with his brother. He remembers: 'He said, 'Come on Ivor, you've got to come out from there.' The following morning we woke up, and the whole children's block was empty. All of the children were taken to the gas chamber.'

In January 1945, with the Russian army descending upon Auschwitz from the east, the Nazis aimed to evacuate the camps and head west before their arrival, destroying evidence of the systematic murder which had taken place. Ivor and Alec were sent by train to the Allach concentration camp in Germany. The conditions in this smaller camp were terrible; Ivor remembers wheelbarrows everywhere to carry around the dead and dying. 13 year old Ivor was forced to do exhausting work, digging underground bases for military equipment using only the most rudimentary tools.

Typhus was rife due to the appalling conditions, and Ivor soon ended up in the hospital block with the disease. He remembers the doctors visiting twice a day to check if they were strong enough to work. There was no medical treatment at all. Before long, the doctor on hand would condemn those too ill to death. Alec knew this and managed to help him escape, so he could recover away from the other prisoners.

After a few months at Allach, the Nazis moved the prisoners on again, marching them for seven days to Dachau in the spring of 1945. The camp was so overcrowded that they were ordered to be taken to the Tyrol-Mountains to be killed, but their General refused; he knew that the Allies were approaching and was afraid of the consequences of carrying out the order. With lots of prisoners held in an open field, many managed to escape, including Ivor and Alec. After a few days hiding in the forest, the American army liberated the camp.

After liberation, the brothers stayed in a displaced persons' camp, attempting to find out what had happened to their family. Months later, they were told by the Red Cross that neither their parents nor any of their siblings had survived. In November 1945 Ivor and Alec managed to get on a transport to England, where they finally settled in London. When he was 18, Ivor met his future wife Rhoda and they married in 1953. Together they have four children. Today Ivor dedicates his time to sharing his story. He says: 'All I can do is talk about my experiences and to tell whoever wants to listen what happened. Even if there's only one person who has heard either me or somebody else's story, it makes a difference.'

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