

# Czechoslovakia

## Three Czech Jews recall their internment in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Czechoslovakia was one of several states created after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the wake of the First World War. It consisted of three regions: the former crown lands of Bohemia and Moravia made up the Czech lands; most of Slovakia had been northern Hungary for nearly a thousand years; Subcarpathian Ruthenia was its easternmost province. During its brief twenty-year life span, it proved to be the only stable democracy in the region. Around 356,000 Jews lived in interwar Czechoslovakia, of whom 117,000 lived in Bohemia and Moravia, or Czechia as it is now called.

When Nazi Germany began dismembering the country in October 1938, then occupying Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939, thousands of Jews fled the country. Most of those who remained were first deported to the Terezin (or Theresienstadt in German) Ghetto, around sixty kilometers north of Prague) and, from there, tens of thousands were sent on to death camps in German-occupied Poland.

Only around 14,000 Jews returned alive, and many of those left the country with the coming of Communism in 1948 and after the Soviet invasion of 1968. A small Jewish community still exists in Prague today with some Jewish activity in smaller towns.

Between 2001 and 2006, with a team headed by historian Martin Korcok, and with invaluable support from Pavla Neuner, Centropa interviewed forty-six Jews still living in Czechia. We digitized nearly a thousand of their family pictures. We digitized nearly a thousand of their family pictures, which you can find—along with their remarkable life stories—[here](#).

Nearly all of our Czech interviewees were deported to Terezin; most of them were later deported “to the East,” which is how they referred to the death camps.

Three Czech Jews—Ludmila Rutarova, Jiri Franek, and Ruth Goetzova—were born into secular families. The Germans sent them to Terezin, and then to Auschwitz. These excerpts were taken from their interviews conducted by Dagmar Greslova and Pavla Neuner.

*Special thanks to Tamar Aizenberg for editing these stories, as well as Lauren Granite.*



## Ludmila Rutarova

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

Date of interview: February 2007

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*Ludmila Rutarova was born in 1920 to a secular Jewish family in Prague. She had a brother, Josef (nicknamed Pepik), who was two years younger. Her parents, Alfred Weiner and Helena Weinerova, owned a general stor and Ludmila spent much of her time living with her non-Jewish aunt in Nadejkov, where she received a Catholic upbringing.*

[CLICK HERE to see Ludmila Rutarova's family photos](#)

*Once the Germans invaded her country, Ludmila and her boyfriend tried to escape to Canada, which is why she had herself secretly baptized in 1939. Their plan failed. Her brother was put on a transport to Terezin [German: Theresienstadt] in November 1941; Ludmila and her parents were sent in April 1942.*

*From Terezin, Ludmila was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Hamburg, and Bergen-Belsen, where she was liberated. In July 1945, Ludmila returned to Prague with her mother and were reunited with Josef. Her father was murdered in Auschwitz. Soon after, Ludmila married Karel Rutar, though she soon became a widow and raised their two children alone. She also worked as a bookkeeper for many years*

I was in Terezin from April 1942 until May 1944, when I was deported with my brother to Auschwitz. My mother and father had already left on the first May transport for the so-called Auschwitz family camp, and my brother and I left on the third one in May 1944. When my brother and I were boarding the train, Haindl came walking along. When he saw Pepik and me, he was surprised that we were leaving, and asked why we hadn't come to tell him we'd been included in a transport because he could have gotten us off it. Pepik told him that our parents were already in Auschwitz and that we had to join them.

It was already dark when the train stopped in Auschwitz, and we could hear them bellowing "Raus, raus" [German for "Out, out"]. We got out and were ordered to leave all our bags there; they told us that we'd get them later. Of course, we never saw our bags again. The only thing we were left with was what we were wearing and what was in our hands. I had some sardines, a flashlight, and about a hundred marks on me.

The Polish guards were very cruel and beat us with sticks. We lined up five in a row, walked along, and saw the sign "Arbeit macht frei" [German for "work shall set you free"] above our heads. Some Polish guard walked along with us and told us that if any of us knew how to write well we'd have it good in Auschwitz. Several girls worked as so-called *Schreiberinnen*, as office assistants, and each block had one *Schreiber*.

In Auschwitz, they tattooed us, and I got No. A 4603. I'd actually counted the line as it moved in front of me and positioned myself so that the sum of my number was 13. I'm superstitious, and I said to myself that if the sum of my number's digits would be unlucky 13, I'd survive the war.

Then they assigned us to blocks. Soon after, the block leader yelled at us that we were all to go outside and leave everything inside. I'd noticed that the block leader had been talking to a friend of mine with whom I'd worked in the *Landwirtschaft* [German for agriculture] in Terezin, Dina Gottliebova, who'd arrived on the first September transport. I had absolutely no idea of Dina's status in the camp. I went over to Dina and told her that the block leader had ordered us to leave all our things inside and Dina told me to go back and take everything with me. The block leader noticed it but didn't object because she knew that Dina had privileged status.

Dina was the lover of the *Lagerältester* [camp elder] Willy, thanks to which she saved herself and her mother from the gas. Dina was a swell girl; before the war she'd attended art school in Brno and could draw beautifully. Dina drew for the children in the children's block. It was from Dina that I found out that the Nazis were murdering people in gas chambers in Auschwitz. She told me that she was sure of it because

she'd gotten to see the gas chambers, which she'd also drawn. When I found out about the gas, I cried for three days. I saw huge flames flaring, two meters high.

I lived in a different block than my mother, as she'd already been in Auschwitz for some time. But we were able to see each other, as well as my brother, father, Auntie Zofie, and cousin Inka. I tried to visit Auntie Zofie in particular, because she was over sixty years old and lived in a bunk that she had a hard time getting to. I tried to bring her some food.

I worked in a block with the smallest children, about three or four years old. I played with them, told them poems, and sang with them. When the weather was nice, I'd also go play with them outside in front of the block. Across from us were wire fences, the inner ones not electrified and the outer ones electrified. I gave the children lunch and, in the evening, I'd bring them rations to their block, where they were living with their mothers. Children got somewhat better food than the others, somewhat thicker milky soup and milk.

None of these small children survived. Only several older ones survived, boys of about fifteen who walked around Auschwitz during the day and called out various pieces of information—for example, they called out "bread" or "soup" when food was being distributed. These boys passed the selection prior to the destruction of the family camp and were transported from Auschwitz to other concentration camps, thanks to which they lived to see freedom.

Packages would arrive in Auschwitz for prisoners, many of whom were already dead when the packages arrived. We were given what remained of the packages and picked out things for the children—for example, remnants of cookies that had broken along the way.

Pepik worked in the *Rollwagenkommando*. For this work, men were harnessed instead of animals and dragged heavy loads behind themselves. They had a wagon on which they transported corpses out of the camp and would bring bread or other things back on the wagon. In the *Rollwagenkommando*, Pepik also went to the ramp where the trains arrived. Occasionally, there were things lying on the ramp left by people arriving in Auschwitz, so from time to time Pepik managed to pick something up. Once he found a small canister filled with warm goose fat and he poured a bit into each of our cups.

One day, there was a selection. The barracks had so-called chimneys in the middle, along which we had to walk, and Mengele would be sitting there, and pointing, left, right. Mengele needed to pick out a thousand women. Older women and mothers with children remained in the camp, and he picked the younger ones. He'd picked

out some women, but he was still missing a certain number of the thousand. My mother wasn't in the selection because she was already 48 and seemed to be too old for them. However, when they still didn't have the required number of women, they ordered all women up to age 48 to present themselves. Finally, Mengele also picked my mother for work.

We had to undergo a gynecological examination. I was so skinny that there was no way anyone could have thought I was pregnant, so I avoided the exam. They then sent us to go bathe. We were, of course, afraid that gas would come out of the showers instead of water, but in the end it really was water. When we went to bathe, I was wearing a wristwatch and thought it would be a shame to damage it, so I said to myself that I'd hide it somewhere. A pile of coal caught my eye, so I hid it in there, intending to retrieve it after washing. But then we all exited out the other side, so I never saw the watch again.

Since we exited from a different side, instead of getting our things back, we were given horrible rags and high-heeled shoes! So, I left to work in Hamburg in high-heeled shoes! We also got a piece of bread and a piece of salami so that we'd have something for the trip. I ate my ration right away and my mother saved hers for me, in case I got hungry.

My brother left Auschwitz to go work in Schwarzheide [near Brandenburg, Germany]. We ran to watch him leave on the train. Because my dad was already 65, they didn't take him for work in Schwarzheide. When my mom and I left for Hamburg in July 1944, my dad stayed in Auschwitz. Saying goodbye to Dad and Auntie Zofie was awful because I already suspected how it would end. Dad calmed me down, and said, "I've got my life behind me; you've got yours ahead of you. I'm glad that you're going with Mom." My father didn't survive. He was sent to the gas in that same year, 1944.



## Jiri Franek

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Dagmar Greslova

Date of interview: February 2005

[CLICK HERE to read Jiri Franek's Centropa interview](#)

[CLICK HERE to see Jiri Franek's family photos](#)

Jiri Franek was born in 1922 to non-religious but politically aware parents who strongly identified as Czech. His father, Alfred Frischman, died prematurely at age 31 of appendicitis, so Jiri was raised primarily by his mother, Hana Pfeiferova, who ran a hand embroidery shop. Jiri recalls few instances of antisemitism before the German annexation of the Czech border areas. However, once anti-Jewish laws were instituted, he began to experience significant changes, such as having to move from Vysoke Myto to Brno to finish his education at a Jewish high school. In 1942, Jiri was deported to Terezin [German: Theresienstadt] along with his mother and brother, neither of whom survived the war.

From Terezin, Jiri was deported to Auschwitz, a factory in Schwarzhilde, a city between Dresden and Berlin, and then to Sachsenhausen [a concentration camp in eastern Germany near Oranienburg]. After liberation, Jiri moved to Prague, where he studied at university, became a professor, married, and had children.

I was deported on the transport from Terezin on December 15, 1943, arriving in Auschwitz on December 17. As soon as we got off, they confiscated our luggage; there was noise, beatings, basically everything so that we would realize that Terezin was ideal in comparison. The first few days there were quite the adventure. I am sometimes amazed at my courage then and the things that I did.

On the way to Auschwitz I met Ari, the son of Jakob Edelstein, the so-called *Lagerältester* [camp elder] in Terezin. He was the Jewish mayor of Terezin, who of course had minimal powers. But despite that, he managed to accomplish some good things. Ari took a liking to me, so he went to see Fredy Hirsch in Auschwitz [a Czech Jew responsible for creating the so-called "family camp" in Auschwitz] and told him that he wanted me to be his teacher again.

When we arrived in Auschwitz, they bathed us, shaved us bald, tattooed us, and then we went to the sauna where they disinfected us. We stood there naked and then the *Kleidungskapo* [something like a clothing warden] threw us whatever clothing he had on hand. Luckily, I got these black pants made from decent material, a shirt, and a brown light jacket. It wasn't very warm clothing, but since I worked inside it didn't matter so much. But during roll calls I froze.

We all arrived with decent shoes, which was very important. I had these beautiful high lace-up army boots. Even before we went through all of the insane entrance procedures, this boy came into our quarantine area, gave me the once-over, including my boots, and said, "Give me those boots and I'll give you something decent, otherwise you'll be in wooden shoes. You won't get socks. I'll give you socks and some decent shoes." And I believed him. I don't know if it was intuition or that I had already managed to have a look around and knew that it was true. So, we agreed on how we'd find each other later. I gave him those army boots, which he proudly wore and I would look at them with envy, and he gave me socks and shoes. Normal shoes, but decent ones, which was a big deal there, because they stayed on your feet. In the freezing cold, normal shoes were still better than the wooden shoes that everyone froze in.

When I saw Fredy, he said to me, "I've already heard of you, come over!" I think that one thing that also helped me was that I was "well dressed." That was very important because he saw that immediately upon arrival, I was already capable of scavenging for some decent clothing and shoes, which was no mean feat. It showed that I was probably a capable person.

Fredy said to me, "Come back tomorrow, and we'll see." I went to work for only about one day and that was murderous work, almost impossible to live through without a large dose of luck. So, the next day I, of course, immediately ran over to Fredy

and he said, "Okay, you can start." The children's block had some chairs and that was about all. Later, they even painted it, but we weren't allowed to have any teaching aids. That is, we were allowed to teach, but there wasn't anything to teach from. They already knew that those children were going to die, so they let us teach.

We sat with the children around us. We had no paper, no pencils, and everything depended on how well a person was able to tell stories. I think that I showed that I had a broad knowledge of literature, that I could recite the history of Czech literature from memory—at that time they were interested in Czech literature, not German or Hebrew—and that I could talk about geography. I had the atlas memorized, so I could, for example, talk about how one would get to Palestine. I was able to enthrall those children for the whole half day. I had a decent knowledge of history and also something of philosophy, which was of interest to those fifteen-year-old boys.

I didn't know how to sing, which was a problem. But I did manage this one small miracle: I put together a collection of Czech poetry. That meant that first I had to find some paper. We were allowed to receive packages, so I had to cut the [wrapping] paper to size. In Birkenau, scissors were a rarity. Cutting up and ironing out the pieces was also a major problem. I cut the cardboard [from packages, which were later allowed to be sent] covers, in the middle of the front cover I glued a white paper square [about 7x7 cm] and I recall that to this day. I can't draw at all, but I did manage to draw on it some picture of a landscape with a building, probably a school. The next problem was ink. I tried to make some myself—someone told me that it could be made out of ashes—but that didn't work for me. Finally, by some miracle I managed to get a pen and some ink, and so I began to write.

We read those poems and strangely enough the boys were interested in it. Maybe because they saw how it came about. I don't know if children are really that interested in literature, but when I was presenting Czech poetry to them, they really did pay attention and asked questions. I knew a lot of war poetry, and that particularly interested the children. They could understand it; after all, they had personal experiences with war. To this day I'm proud of that work and the fact that I managed to put together material for that collection of poetry in such difficult conditions.

We also organized a rebellion in Auschwitz. It also had various ups and downs, though, with the eventual realization that a rebellion would be hopeless. I was a member of the resistance in Auschwitz. In fact, even before I entered the concentration camp I was surrounded by some Communists, then in the concentration camp I became a member of a Communist group.

In Auschwitz, my party chief came to me and told me the gas chambers were waiting for us. Not only were the Communists organized, but also the Zionists, and other

Czech Jews had agreed to organize an uprising. So, these 'troikas' [groups of three] arose. One was a Zionist, one a Czech, and one was something else. I was in a 'troika' with this one guy who was already at that time a Zionist. You see, people changed a lot because they had the impression that their particular faith had let them down, so Zionists became Communists, Communists became Czech Jews, Czech Jews became Zionists, and so on. Avi Fischer, who was in my 'troika,' was a Czech Jew and later left for Palestine, but he was a swell guy. On the other side, I had Kurt Sonnenberg, who was a German Jew, but otherwise German to the core. But I think that he was honest. Because he was a *Vorarbeiter*—a work group leader—so, after the war, they put him on trial. I had to take his side, if only because we were in that 'troika' and he also prepared for the uprising.

Our work for the rebellion was minimal. We had to obtain matches, but you can't very well imagine what it meant to try to find matches in Auschwitz. Besides that, we had to find blankets and containers for water. Our plan was the following: when the time comes for us to go to the gas chambers, we'll set our straw mattresses on fire to create confusion. We'll throw wet rags—that's why we needed the water—on the electric fence to short it out. And then we'll run toward the partisans. We even had a map.

In any case, when the transport that had arrived before us went to the gas chambers, our 'troika' became very active and we had the feeling that it was time for action. But we couldn't do anything more than keep collecting rags, matches, and water, in case the time for the uprising came. As a result, we didn't accomplish much. The question is whether we should have rebelled.

We knew that those the Germans told they were going to work were all actually murdered. One day we also found out that we were to go to work in Germany. When we were preparing the resistance, there was a motto: "One to two percent of prisoners can be saved." It's better to save two percent than for one hundred percent to go off like sheep into the gas chambers. In the resistance, everyone couldn't know about everyone else, so that in the case of interrogation everything wouldn't be found out. Therefore, I was only supposed to know about the two men in our 'troika'—Fischer and Sonnenberg. But I knew some others from the "Heim" ["Kinderheim," the children's home] and also a few from the Communist Party.

When they were dissolving our prison camp in Auschwitz, I had no choice but to go. We marched from the camp, ostensibly to go work in Germany. However, at first it looked like we were on our way to the gas chambers. I had a friend behind me, who I knew was also in the resistance. We weren't allowed to talk. There were SS with rifles everywhere, but a person learned to talk in Auschwitz without it being noticeable; I don't think I'd be able to do that now.

So, we said, "What's up? Are we going to the chambers? Are we still going to rebel? Or are we going to give up on this life?" And then we saw that we had begun to move and that we were going to the ramp from where the trains arrived and departed. So I finally got out of Auschwitz when Hitler found that he had too few workers, and that instead of killing people just for being Jews, it paid to work them to death—simply to let them work until they dropped, but at least on the way to death, they would be doing something useful.

From Auschwitz, we went to a gasoline refinery in Schwarzheide, where they made artificial gasoline from coal. Schwarzheide is between Dresden and Berlin. On June 1, 1944, I boarded the transport and was in Schwarzheide that same day or the next.



## Anna Hyndrakova

Prague, Czech Republic

Interviewer: Pavla Neuner

Date of interview: 2003

[CLICK HERE to read Anna Hyndrakova's Centropa interview](#)

[CLICK HERE to see Anna Hyndrakova's family photos](#)

*Anna Hyndrakova was born in Prague, Czech Republic in 1928 to Pavel Kovanic and Augusta Kovanicova. Pavel served in the Austro-Hungarian army during World War I and during Anna's childhood, he worked as a commercial traveler selling perfume. Augusta was a housewife and occasionally helped out her mother at her tailoring shop. Anna also had a sister, Gertruda, who was seven years her elder.*

*Growing up, Anna attended a Czech elementary school, where she was particularly focused on learning languages. She studied English in the hopes of emigrating at the start of the war, also that plan was never realized. She particularly enjoyed reading and writing assignments and hoped to become a writer.*

*In September 1941, Anna, like the other Czech Jews, had to wear a yellow star on her clothing. Around the same time, her father was no longer able to work as a commercial traveler and had to make a living painting lampshades. Over time, Anna, her family, and other Czech Jews experienced a range of additional restrictions, such as being forbidden from ice skating or owning pets.*

*In October 1942, Anna and her parents were deported to Terezin [German: Theresienstadt]. In the camp, Anna began working in a box-making workshop and was later transferred to working in a garden. In May 1944, Anna and her parents were deported to the family*

*camp at Auschwitz. Two months later, they were sent to Gross-Rosen concentration camp [today western Poland]. In February 1945, Anna attempted to escape the camp with a friend, but they were recaptured and taken to the labor camp Gorlitz [a part of Gross-Rosen]. A couple of months later, Anna was liberated.*

*After the war, Anna returned to Prague and studied graphic arts at a technical school and later attended university. Neither her parents nor her sister survived the war. In the beginning of 1949, she got married and had two children, Alena and Pavel. At the time of the interview, both Alena and Pavel were married and had children.*

In May 1944, my parents and I were assigned to be transported again. Along with fifty other people, we were put in one cattle-truck with two buckets of water and some bread. I don't remember how long the way to Auschwitz was.

In Auschwitz most of us didn't work because we were in the family camp. The toil began only in the other camps. We saw smoke from the crematorium and knew what it meant. Mum's hearing wasn't very good, which protected her quite a bit from the nerve-racking situations that the others went through. She didn't hear the screams and wails, the barking of dogs, the cries and groans of the people around us.

A selection was carried out in June 1944 and I was separated from my parents, who stayed behind. I was sent to the women's camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. They took us to the sauna. I had a picture of my mum, dad and sister on me. I cut out their heads with manicure scissors and wrapped them in cellophane and hid them under my hair-clip. We were searched to see if we were hiding anything. I kept shifting the photos. I had them in my mouth when I was examined by a Slovak woman, who said, "What's in your mouth, you goose?" "Photos," I replied. "Who of?" "Mum." "Go on then." So I smuggled them through. I was there for about two weeks and it was sheer hell. There were endless roll calls. For entire days we gazed across the ramp at our old family camp. One morning the camp was empty.

In July [1944] they sent us to Christianstadt [now Krzystkowice in western Poland, which was a part of to Gross-Rosen. There were several workplaces in Christianstadt and I was assigned to the forest commando. We went to a forest where we knocked down trees and pulled out the stumps. When we left it, there were roads there. They didn't have asphalt covering, but they were covered with gravel. After that, we worked in a munitions factory and in a sandpit, where we loaded sand onto trucks. That was terrible work.

In February 1945, our camp received transports from eastern areas that had been

liquidated. When I saw the state those girls were in, I persuaded a friend to run away with me. Another girl joined us, so we managed to escape from the death march on the third day of marching while we stopped on a road surrounded by woods. On the way we claimed to be from the Sudetenland and said that we were escaping from a Czech camp. But in three days a farmer informed us on and they came for us because I was having hallucinations, as I had a high fever, probably dysentery, and, in my delirium, I was speaking Czech. Well, in short, they caught us and took us to the Niesky camp, which was a camp for Aryan men only. We were there for about three days and were then taken to labor camp Gorlitz [part of Gross-Rosen]

The last day of the war we felt something in the air. The camp was in a big mess. Everything was over, but in fact wasn't because the fascists were still there. At a roll call we had there at the end of World War II, the *Lagerführer* [camp commander] offered to take us to the Americans. They wanted to go to the Americans themselves so they would get better treatment. He horrified us by telling us everything that the Russians would do to us. We were afraid to stay in the camp because it was said that the Germans would place mines in it and set it on fire, so we left with them. There were twelve of us, with horse and cart to carry their provisions, and we escaped with them. The cart was full of margarine, marmalade, and bread. We met the Red Army on our way to Prague.