

USC Shoah Foundation

The Institute for Visual History and Education

Marta Wise

Marta Wise says it was nothing but “pure, unadulterated luck” that allowed her to survive the Holocaust.

Born in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, on Oct. 8, 1934, Marta lived happily with her brother, four sisters and parents, who owned textile mills and shops and maintained a very religious household. Once Germans occupied their country, however, Marta’s father sent each of the children out of Czechoslovakia with false papers; a German woman named Mrs. Tafon passed Marta off as her daughter and took her to a distant cousin of Marta’s in Hungary, where Marta lived for two years.

In 1944, Germany invaded Hungary and conditions became just as dangerous as in Czechoslovakia. Marta’s father quickly sent Mrs. Tafon to take Marta to Budapest to begin the journey back to Czechoslovakia. In Budapest, Marta’s aunt gave her an agonizing choice: sail with a group of children to Palestine or return home to her parents. Marta, still only nine years old, chose home. The boat to Palestine sank, killing every child on board.

After a harrowing two-day trek through wheat fields over the border, Marta joined her younger sister Eva in Czechoslovakia for two months pretending to be Catholic. The sisters were arrested on Marta’s 10th birthday, interrogated and beaten for a week but they refused to admit they were Jewish. Eventually, the family’s former nanny was questioned and she immediately betrayed them. Marta and Eva were sent to the Séréd transit camp and from there to Auschwitz.

During the selection upon their arrival in Auschwitz, Eva was sent to the right and Marta to the left, which meant her immediate death in the gas chambers. But at that moment, Soviet planes flew overhead and the two lines were pushed back together in the subsequent confusion. Marta was saved, and the two were sent to the “family camp” section of Auschwitz. There, Dr. Josef Mengele gave them mysterious injections (Marta has never known what they were for) and they spent their days trying simply to survive.

In January 1945, the approaching Soviet Army triggered the Germans to send the majority of camp inmates on what would be death marches to lands that were still under German control, but Eva and Marta stayed behind, and the Red Army liberated them on January 27, 1945. After a few months of recuperation, they hitchhiked their way back to the old family home in Bratislava, where they were reunited with their parents and all their siblings except their little sister Judith, who they found out had died in Auschwitz. But not long after, their older brother Kurti drowned, and the family left Czechoslovakia for Australia in 1948.

Marta finished school, studied physiotherapy and in 1967 married Englishman Harold Wise. In 1998, they moved to Israel. They have three daughters, Judy, Michelle and Miriam, and 14 grandchildren.