

USC Shoah Foundation

The Institute for Visual History and Education

Shmuel Schelach (Robert Schlesinger)

Shmuel Schelach (born Robert Schlesinger) was one of the very few who managed to survive the Holocaust with his immediate family intact, though when this photograph was taken he had just endured three months in Auschwitz alone with his little brother.

Born Jan. 19, 1934 in Mytna Nova Ves, Czechoslovakia, Shmuel lived with his mother, father – who managed agricultural farms – and brother Palo, who was four years younger. During the first wave of transports of Czech Jews to concentration camps in 1942, Shmuel's family tried to cross the border into Hungary, but did not succeed. Since they could not go back home, they rented an apartment in Nitra, Czechoslovakia, and Shmuel's father began working in a brick factory. The manager of the factory was not a Jew, but he offered to hide the family in the factory in exchange for money.

On September 5, 1944, the family received orders to report to Gestapo headquarters. Early that morning, Shmuel's mother dressed Shmuel and Palo in warm clothes and instructed them to go ahead to the factory alone – the parents would follow later so as not to arouse suspicion. Shmuel and Palo passed all the German checkpoints and arrived at the factory, but when their parents never arrived the boys knew they must have been caught. After a few days of hiding, the factory manager realized that he was not going to be paid and conditions were getting dangerous so he ordered the children to leave.

Without any idea where else to go, Shmuel and Palo began following the railroad tracks to their grandparents' house 30 kilometers away. When they arrived, the house was empty. They found shelter with a neighbor for one night and then went to their aunt's house in another village, where they stayed alone for several weeks. In October, they were caught along with three other Jews in the village by the Slovak militia and sent to the Sereď concentration camp, and from there to Auschwitz-Birkenau by cattle car.

Unlike the last transport to arrive at the camp, which had been sent immediately to the gas chamber, Shmuel and the others on the train were allowed inside Birkenau with their belongings. In Birkenau, Shmuel worked with other children collecting garbage. A German guard took a liking to Palo and would bring the boys extra food from time to time and even a warm coat for Palo. Unbeknownst to them, their mother was working in the kitchen at the women's camp in Auschwitz and another prisoner told her that she saw Shmuel and Palo in the men's camp. On Christmas Eve, she got some sugar cubes from the kitchen and met the boys at a fence. She threw the sugar cubes over to them, but they fell into the deep snow and the boys couldn't find them.

On January 18, 1945, the approaching Red Army triggered the Germans to begin sending the majority of the camp to go on death marches to lands that were still under German control. Shmuel, because he looked strong enough, was selected to join the march, but he immediately asked to stay with Palo since he knew they had to stay together. On Jan. 27, the Soviet Army arrived and liberated Auschwitz.

Miraculously, all four members of the Schlesinger family were sent to Auschwitz and all survived. After liberation the family immigrated to Israel in 1949, where Shmuel married his wife Eva Mayer (today Chava Schelach) and had two daughters, Tali and Limor. He was optimistic person, never vindictive and always willing to share his stories for the rest of his life, Limor says. He passed away on August 29, 2006, from heart disease probably caused by complications from severe arthritis he developed in Auschwitz.