



*AFTER THOSE
FIFTY YEARS*

***Memoirs of the
Birkenau Boys***

Edited by John Freund



DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the memory of the more than forty-five boys of the July 6th, 1944 group who did not survive.

JIRI DIAMANT

Housle

*Ztrnul jsem jakoby uštknut zmijí,
nestačím vnímat ty tóny melodií.
Cítím, jak otvírá se mého srdce brána,
utváří se pak hluboká rána
a do té rány se mi lije
ta krásná houslí melodie.*

*Housle, toť nástroj umění,
jež starosti lidí v radost mění
a v chudákovi, který v nouzi
chuť k životu probouzí.
Nástroj ten, jež plný lásky
otvírá srdce junáka a krásky.*

*Zazní-li z těch houslí krásných
směsice akordů jasných,
neb' žalostná a smutná hudba,
tu cítím, že v žilách krev mi ztuhla.
Ach, kdyby mi tak bylo v sutbě,
oddávat se této hudbě!*

*Housle krásné zvuky hrají,
na žalost zapomínají.
Pohánějí tok pokroku,
ba dopřávají i otroku
by poslouchal ty zvuky lahody —
housle, to je nástroj svobody!*

Jiří Diamant — 1943 v Terezíně.

Naděje

*V nitru mém plamínek vzplál
a teplo jeho se ve mně rozhostilo,
jakoby zvadlý květ pookřál
a nové štěstí jej porosilo.*

*Krvavá brázda v nitru mém táhne se
a nenávisť v ní leží stále,
však jakýs' zárodek zde líhne se
a směřuje navenek dále.*

*To je plamínek, jež ve mně vzplál,
do nového žití vrátit mě spěje,
do nového světa, jít dál a dál
v mou vlast mě navrátit — to je naděje!*

Jiří Diamant — 1944 v Osvětimi.

*K 1. listopadu 1945
(K 43. narozeninám maminky)*

*Již dávno tomu, co naposled mi zněl
Tvůj překrásný maminko hlas;
pln lásky, který jen blaho lidem chtěl,
však nad Tebou zavřel své perutě Čas.*

*A přece je mi, jako kdyby včera,
jak kdybych před chvílkou Tě ještě zřel —
vidím Tě, jako bys nade mnou bděla —
vidím Tě! Kéž bych Tě políbit směl!*

*Je tomu rok, co naposled Tvé krásné oči
se starostlivě na mě dívaly.
Tys' věděla, že Němec po nás skočí
a odvede nás kamsi do dále.*

*Tys' věděla, že nelze Tobě žíti,
z úst Tvých nevydral se ani jeden sten,
láska velela Ti s mladším bratrem býti,
Ty zaplatila jsi to životem.*

*Vzpomínám na poslední chvíli,
kdy radilas' mi, jak životem jíti,
jak žít, bych k dalekému došel cíli,
však nebylo mi s Tebou dále žíti.*

*Již dávno tomu, co naposled mi zněla
ta překrásná Tvá mámo slova;
a já věřím, věřím, že jsi nezemřela —
ve mně budeš matko žíti znova!*

Jiří Diamant — 30. 10. 1945 v Uherském Brodě.

K 27. prosinci 1945
(Otcí)

*Je tomu již více než rok, co mě dělí
od té chvíle, co spolu jsme seděli
na tvrdém kavalci, v místnosti plné špíny —
My představovali si ten svět zcela jiný,*

*my neviděli všude otroky a pány,
my neviděli pouze koncentráků plány —
my svobodně, jak druzí chtěli žít!
A pro ten ideál Tys' musel odejít!*

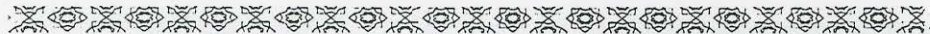
*Poctivě a čestně životem jsi šel
a jenom dřinu na tom světě's měl,
však překonával všechny jsi překážky —
Svět Tvůj jiný byl — byl plný lásky,*

*kterou měl jsi ke každému člověku —
a já teď místo Tebe sklízím plno vděku —
a všude lidí potkávám, vždy na Tebe jen chválu
slyším — proč zanechals' mne v žalu*

*a pro Tebe zde pouze lkáti?
Já však slibuji Ti, že dále cestou Tvou chci se bráti —
vždy za čest a svobodu se bítí,
a tím památku Tvou uctítí!*

Tvůj vděčný syn.

Jiří Diamant — v Bratislavě.



JIRI J. DIAMANT

I WAS BORN IN BRNO, Czechoslovakia on May 4th 1930. My father was a well-situated businessman in textiles. He came from a family of a teacher of the Jewish religion, who had eleven children. After my the untimely death of my father's father, my grandmother brought up her ten children; one boy had died. She owned a village inn, and the eldest daughters had to help with the work.

My father was the second oldest son. His older brother was socially less capable; therefore my father had to take over the father's role while he was still young. He tried to help all his brothers and sisters and did not get married until after his youngest sister. In a sense he sacrificed his career for the family and thus could not afford to study, even though he would have liked to. My mother was seven years younger than my father.

She came from an orthodox Jewish family at Uhersky Brod, Moravia, and had three brothers. Her father died in 1935; her mother died in Terezin. My parents married in 1929 and moved to Brno, where my father got a job. My younger brother, Thomas was born in 1934.

I still remember the Nazi occupation on March 15, 1939. I still see before me the plane with a swastika on it as it appeared before the window of our flat in the morning. I remember the row of German tanks in the street close to the place where we lived.

In 1940 my father lost his job and had to work as a manual labourer building a railway station. We had to move to a cheaper flat. In 1941 we had to share a flat



Diamant, 1991



Jiri in 1946

with two other Jewish families. One family had two daughters and I remember how romantic it was to live so close to them. The second family had one son my age.

On March 23, 1942 we had to leave for Terezin. On that tragic day I remember my father saying to our neighbours that we would return within three months.

My number in Terezin was AD 555. I often speculated about the deeper meaning of this queer configuration of numbers; maybe it helped me to survive. In Terezin, my father worked as "Krankenträger" in Vrchlabi barracks. We stayed first with our mother in Hamburg barracks. Later on I moved to L417, "Heim" – home – for boys. I started there in group seven and later went to group nine. I was a kind of "in-between," and this phenomenon reappeared in my life many times.

In L417 I illegally attended three classes of secondary school that were given in the attic. On December 17, 1943 we left for Birkenau as a punishment for my mother's activities. The Nazis had discovered that she had been involved in "organizing" food from the kitchen to feed babies (Säuglingsküche).

We came to the family camp of Jews from Terezin, BIIB in Birkenau. My number there was 169049, again a magic one (4x4, 3x3, 0x0, 2x2, 3x3). We were witnesses there to the extermination of the September 1943 transport on March 7, 1944. In June it was our turn. My mother decided to stay with my younger brother. I had convinced my father to try to leave the camp. Unfortunately, he did not succeed. He was sent back by Buntrock, the Lagerführer. I decided to leave my family and not go to the gas chambers. At first my parents did not agree with me; however, during our last talk my mother said: "You must go, I believe you will survive." My father told me to go to his sister in Uhersky Brod after the end of the war.

So I left my family on July 6th, 1944 and was transferred to Männerlager BIId, several hundred meters away. There I stayed with the Birkenau boys next to the barrack of the Sonderkommando, people who had to work in the crematoria.

In our barrack, Bednarek was the Kapo and we lived with people who had been punished for many reasons. We saw many cruel things. Secretly we visited the members of the Sonderkommando in the evenings. There I found a Polish Jew named Diamant who was happy to find someone with the same name. He gave me food and told me about his tragic life.

I left BIId on December 12, 1944 and went to Auschwitz, where I worked in the Tierpflege Landwirtschaft – animal and land care. We left the camp very early in the morning and returned towards evening. I hardly ever saw the camp. On January 21,

1945 we left the camp together with the horses and never returned again. In Leslau, the Nazis put us in open wagons and brought us to Buchenwald. Since I had to sleep two nights in snow, my feet froze and I was not able to walk from the sauna in Buchenwald.

They took me to the hospital, where I stayed till April. On April 10th I went on the second march of the dead; nobody knew where we were supposed to go. The Nazis put us on a train. Fortunately, American planes destroyed the engine near Jena, and this saved us. We were liberated by the American army April 14, 1945. My parents and brother Thomas died in the gas chambers on July 11, 1944.

I went to Prague on May 15, 1945 and on June 4 went to my aunt and uncle in Uhersky Brod. I attended the secondary school there from 1945 to 1949. From 1949 to 1953, I studied psychology and philosophy at the Masaryk University in Brno. In 1953 I went to Praha, where I worked as a clinical psychologist at the Psychiatric Clinic of Charles University. In 1956, after two years of military service, I was married to Jaroslava, born Cernohorská. She came from Cerveny Kostelec in North East Bohemia. She is a teacher of the Czech language and music education.

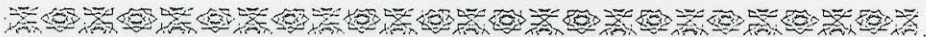
I studied medicine at the Charles University from 1959 to 1965. I spent the year 1966/67 studying and working in the U.S.A. In 1967 I was nominated chief of the Department for Medical and Clinical Psychology at the Institute for Post-Gradual Education of Physicians and Pharmacists in Prague.

After the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, I left Czechoslovakia with my wife and two daughters. My first job abroad was chief scientific co-worker at the Department for Clinical Psychology. Later I became a part-time lecturer, and in 1970 I became the Chief of the Department of Psychology at a Psychiatric Center.

My wife and I have two daughters – Zuzana, 36 years old, married, a physician and scientific worker and Michaela, 35 years old, an internist and researcher, as of 1997.

Next to my work, and especially neuropsychology, I enjoy travelling, music, philosophy and politics. I hope I shall get the opportunity to write in the future.

Editor's note: Jiri retired in 1990 and is now a visiting lecturer. He has published more than eight articles, among them "Notes about the Psychology of Life in Terezin" (1995) and "The World after the Holocaust" (1996), in the *Terezin Journal* and "Witnesses of a Miracle" (see page 273).



WITNESSES OF A MIRACLE

by Jiri Diamant

This address, entitled, "Meeting after Half a Century," was delivered by Dr. Jiri Diamant in Prague on June 17, 1994 at the reunion of the Birkenau Boys.

I. Introduction

If someone would have told me, on July 9th 1944, when I left, along with you, the Family Camp of Czech Jews BIIb in Birkenau, that I would be alive in 1994 and would be able to meet you today here in Prague, I would have looked at him with mistrust and would not have believed him. It was quite difficult to believe in miracles in the shadow of the crematoria in Birkenau, with their high flashing flames.

The belief in miracles has remained for centuries one of the characteristics of the Jewish people, that gave the world not only Einstein, but also Freud and Bergson.

I realize that we, the Birkenau Boys, form a quite exceptional group that has gone through a unique experience at a sensitive young age, half a century ago. Today, at the beginning of the last phase of our lives, we try to evaluate its influences on our fate as the very last witnesses of a unique human tragedy.

Our lives have been amputated in a sense: we were pulled out of our environment, and soon we lost the closest members of our families. Our further lives have become concrete examples of how each of us has coped with this psychosurgical intervention in our lives.

We have to realize at this place today, that we have become the subjects of political and ideological controversy in recent years. Still more efforts have appeared in different countries to deny the existence of concentration camps, of gas chambers and of the extermination of more than six million Jews during World War II.

We meet here in a period when manifestations of antisemitism become still more frequent, even in countries where no more Jews exist.

At this very solemn moment, we want remember all those of our group who did not survive, as well as those who died after their liberation and those who were not able to attend our meeting today.

2. What have we in common?

Most of us were born into the Czech environment, in a culturally and historically important country that has given to mankind many personalities who have deeply influenced its cultural and political history.

What we had in common was our Jewish origin, although many of us were not aware of it before, until others reminded us of its existence.

Our parents and relatives were already confronted with growing racism and antisemitism, in the thirties. They had to decide to voluntarily submit, or to escape to a foreign country. In most cases they did not dare to make the important decision, and stayed in their native country. The persecution gradually intensified; and, in the forties it culminated in the deportation of Czech Jews to the ghetto Theresienstadt (Terezin), and from there, to different concentration camps in Poland or in the former Soviet Union.

Most of us have spent some time in Terezin, mostly in the home L 417. Unfortunately, we did not belong to those who would continue to survive in this oasis of relative security.

Nevertheless, we were lucky in our disaster: we came to an experimental family camp of Czech Jews, called B II b in Birkenau, part of the infamous concentration camp Auschwitz in Poland. We got the opportunity to live during the six months' quarantine period, with the expectation of the "final solution." Life gives hope, and that was true in our case. We remember that, even under these inhuman conditions, we had the chance to experience some relatively pleasant moments in a special barrack, under the leadership and protection of the legendary Fredy Hirsch. At that time we were at the beginning of our puberty: dreaming, sensitive, starting to be interested in girls, adventure and romance.

Under tragic conditions, we were prematurely confronted with the basic problems of life and death. Our childhood was shortened; we had to become adults sooner than others. In our dreams and daydreaming we could be free; we meditated about the deeper

sense of our life; we turned to God and sought from Him the answers to our pressing problems of justice, security, certainty and protection. Finally, we fled into ourselves, and looked for certainty in our souls. We came closer to each other in order to be able to resist the dangers and surprises that appeared quite frequently. Around us, violence and death raged; and all of this became engraved into our sensitive minds and stayed there forever. We lived in the present; the recent past was an open wound; and the future was covered by the mists of uncertainty.

3. The influence of our common trauma

The period spent in Birkenau has left permanent traces in our lives. It influenced our future development as individuals, as well as the whole course of our future lives.

We lost our parents and siblings at the age when we needed them most. We had to take all responsibility for our future at a very young age. Premature maturation may have some negative influence on emotional maturity, psychosexual development, and on social behavior. In the literature, the concepts of concentration camp syndrome and post traumatic stress syndrome are often discussed. Some of the concentration camp survivors have needed long term psychotherapeutic help by specialists; and the physical health of some of us has been permanently damaged. Nevertheless, all of us had great support from the group cohesion that was created between the members of the group because of the permanent threat and stress around us.

In recent literature, the problems of close relatives of former concentration camp prisoners, as well as of the second and third generations, are still frequently described. In some countries special institutes have been built to help former KZ prisoners cope with their problems and symptoms.

It is important to use introspection of one's own experience, as well as observation of the behaviour of others and facts gained by interviews, to be able to describe specific features that might be typical for most members of our group.

I fully realize that my description is not liable to broader generalization. Nevertheless, I am convinced it is worthwhile to think about the specific psychological traits that might be relevant to most of us.

In many members of our group, the changes in behaviour as a consequence of our long stay in concentration camps have not been so intensive as to reach the limit of psychopathological symptoms that would lower the quality of our life for a long time. We have to state, however, that in our group there were several cases of suicide,

anxiety-depressive neuroses, endogenous depression and other psychological disturbances.

I believe that in most members of our group there persists an elevated level of anxiety, that most of us are liable to fear and phobias, that there is a tendency towards depressive moods. Most of us are often afraid and worried. In some members of our group there are periods of hyperactivity or hypomania. In most of us there is lowered self-esteem and insufficient basic trust. Many of us do not have enough confidence in other people: they mistrust them; sometimes they are even suspicious or paranoid. We often try to overcompensate these feelings by means of an exaggerated need for security and certainty, especially in terms of social and economic safety. We often have a symbiotic relationship with our spouses and children; many of us have extremely high aspirations as far as work achievement and property are concerned. Moral and social norms are quite often very strongly accentuated.

Many of us have a very serious attitude towards life, and thus become slaves of strong feelings of responsibility and obligation towards our families and society. Quite often we do not love ourselves enough. We have high aspirations and expect the same from others. Some of us have problems with choices and decisions; they are afraid of taking risks and responsibilities in their work and family lives. Our view of life is often sceptical, ironic or sarcastic, or even pessimistic. Many of us cannot react adequately to aggression; they cannot get angry in situations, when others do, and are not able to defend themselves or to attack others. Many of us are often sub-assertive, and try to overcompensate this by hyper-assertiveness. We often get stuck in a sort of pubertal competitiveness. Some of us have difficulties in adapting to new life situations; they manifest a tendency towards rigidity and lack of flexibility. In many respects we are hypersensitive, and try to hide this behind a facade of emotional hardness.

Our stay in concentration camps also had positive consequences, in my opinion: we have learned to experience the depths of life and to differentiate between what is important in life and what is irrelevant. We have learned to seek security, first of all, in ourselves; we have discovered the relative value of many things in life, and we have tried to preserve our moral values and principles under all circumstances. In this sense, we can allege that our concentration camp experience was the best school of life, maybe even a compensation for psychoanalysis.

After our liberation we started to work, to study and to catch up with the life we had missed during the years of our captivity. We have tried, not only to catch up with

others, but even to get ahead of them. We got married, and our children were born. In our families we tried to find love and the security we needed so badly. We can state today that most of us have succeeded in achieving our aims in life after our liberation.

4. What are the differences between us?

The liberation from Nazi oppression has been for us a physical, mental and social rebirth. It has enabled us to continue our former development, although with an intermission of several years.

Most of us first returned to the places we had been deported from. Our return to our liberated homeland showed, however, that "one does not enter the same river twice." Our homes were inhabited by unknown people; some of us saw only the ruins of the houses in which they lived with their parents and siblings before deportation. We had the feelings of people who returned after long exile to Mycenae or to Pompeii. It took us some time before we completely woke up to our new life conditions, and before we could find our former connections with our former lives. We have followed different educational paths, entered different jobs, and started different interpersonal relationships. Some of us have left our home countries and found a new home in other countries in Europe, Israel or across the oceans.

After several years of common traumatic experiences during World War II, our lives have become quite different, and each of us has tried hard to make the best of it. Each of us has been influenced by his new environment, i.e., by the national norms and traditions we have been living with during the last decades. The consequences of this may be found in our different mentalities, attitudes, opinions and habits. Each of us has changed in a radical way, so that today we are meeting here as representatives of different countries, nations and lifestyles. We must not forget that there are also great differences in economical levels and advantage between us. All these factors have contributed to the formation of our different characters and personalities in the decades that followed our liberation. Despite all of these differences and half a century that we have not been together, we are meeting here today as old friends who have a lot to share.

5. After fifty years

Currently we are in our sixties. We have arrived at a life-phase when people retire, and the next life-period starts. Some of us do not want, or are unable to take, leave from their work, jobs and positions, as they are afraid that, with the growing quantity of

leisure, there will be more time for recurring memories of the traumatic experiences in the concentration camps. They are also afraid that the sorrow, anxiety and anger that have been successfully suppressed until now, will reappear.

The problem is to find a new equilibrium and a new satisfactory sense of life, which until now most of us have associated with busy occupations. This is not easy with our past, when the existential emptiness and existential frustration described by Victor Frankl often appeared in our minds. It is necessary for each of us to stop and take the time to think about ourselves, and to try to reconstruct ourselves. It is not easy at our age. However, it is necessary, to prevent continuous feelings of dissatisfaction and depression. What we also need is to reevaluate the meaning of our common stay in Birkenau and to reintegrate it into the beginning of a new phase of our lives. In this connection, we cannot avoid the philosophical and religious problems that most of us have neglected until now. It is necessary for us to create a synthesis of our life-experience that has ripened over many years, and to hand it on to future generations. It is also important to redefine our relationship with God, Judaism and with the Jewish nation in Israel and in the diaspora.

It is my opinion that we have met here, in democratic Praha, for this reason. It is no pure coincidence that we are meeting here today, at the roots of our existence. We came here to be together, to remember our past, and to think about what our common tragic experience could mean for us today and in the future. I am convinced that many of us have done so repeatedly. I am afraid that none of us has found the definitive solution. The most important fact today is that we still exist, and that we have the need to share our memories, thoughts and feelings. We have the feeling of satisfaction and gratitude that we have been elected to survive one of the greatest tragedies in the history of mankind, for half a century at least. We are the last few witnesses to a unique catastrophe in human history. Our enemies would like to erase it from human annals and memories. We who are present here have learned by our own experience what makes man a human being, and what can make beasts of them. We have found a way to overcome the blows of fate, and how to continue our lives and make the best of them. We have found the meaning of our lives in ourselves, in our families and in our work. Thus, we have given a good example to others. Let us wish that they can follow it without suffering what we had to go through.