

The Centre for Holocaust Education and Scholarship
Teachers' Workshop
Identity Charts
"John Freund"

***Spring's End* by John Freund 2014: Naomi Azrieli Publisher is a book of the memories of John Freund who survived the Holocaust and later came to Canada. His book is the source for this paper. The following information was compiled by Sharon Rosenberg.**



John Freund was born in 1930 into an educated, close and loving family. The Freund family had lived in a prosperous town of 50,000 located in southern Czechoslovakia for generations. The Jewish community numbered 1138. John comes from a long line of judges, lawyers, teachers, and businessmen. His father was a pediatrician. His mother was well educated and passed on her love of music and literature to her sons. The extended family consisted of musicians, scientists, publishers, senior civil servants and bankers. The family identified strongly as Czech. It was recommended that John's paternal grandfather convert as Jews were only accepted if baptized and stopped being Jews. His grandfather refused and in fact, ensured that John and his older brother received a Jewish religious education.

Before the war, John's memories are of the joys of childhood: swimming, ping-pong, piano lessons, skating, school. Summers were enjoyed in the country. The family lived in a large apartment near the town centre, had a maid and a car.

John was 9 years old when Germany occupied Czechoslovakia in 1938-1939. "With the entrance of the devil" life changed dramatically for the Jews. Notices stating 'Jews Not Permitted' appeared in parks, public facilities, restaurants, cinemas and schools. To talk to a Jew was now a crime. At great risk, John's old Grade 3 teacher crossed a street to shake John's hand and said "Be Brave" before rushing away.

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Attempting to maintain normalcy, the Jewish community set up schools in private homes. Youth groups and activities were organized for the children. Special relationships developed among the young Jews who were now shunned and vilified by the non-Jewish community. New strength was found to help each other through these sudden, hard times.

John's father was forced to give away his car and close his medical practice. The maid had to leave. The family lived off savings. Eventually, the family was forced to relinquish 2 rooms of their 4 room apartment to an insurance office.

The beautiful synagogue built in the 1800s was blown up by the Nazis so the Rabbi held services in a warehouse. Jews began taking more interest in religion. Friday night services were now very popular among both children and adults.

In April, 1942 the entire Jewish community, including John, his parents and older brother were transported to the Theresienstadt Ghetto. The ghetto was overcrowded. The inhabitants were malnourished and disease ridden. To bolster the Nazis' lie to the outside world that Jews were being well treated, Theresienstadt Jews stood apart from other camps and ghettos. Cultural activities were allowed. John wrote poems for a weekly newsmagazine, attended lectures, put on plays. With the help of his Rabbi, he had his Bar Mitzvah in the ghetto.

John was 13 in December, 1943 when the Freund family was transported by cattle car to Auschwitz Concentration Camp. They did not know where they were going. There were no windows and just barely enough room to sit or lie down. They were given some old blankets and food for 1 day. The journey took 2 days. The Theresienstadt Jews who arrived in Auschwitz were not subjected to the usual and immediate selection procedure: who would live (the able-bodied, capable of work) and who would die (the infirm, the old, mothers and their very young children). The Theresienstadt Jews remained together in an area known as the Czech Family Camp. Conditions there were somewhat better to continue the fiction that all was well and there was no mass murder of Jews. The Czech prisoners were made to write postcards of their fine resettlement in the east.

In July, 1944 John's brother who was weak with typhus and his father were selected with others to work in a slave labour camp. Both were shot on the forced march along the way. John's mother was gassed along with 3,000 other women and children. Just before the Red Army arrived in January, 1945, the Nazis evacuated the camp. John survived a selection process and was forced on a death march heading west. John walked from January until April when he was liberated by the Americans.

After liberation John returned to his home town hoping to find his parents and brother. He found an uncle and was taken in. John and his uncle met with the principal to register John in school. They were stunned when the principal refused on the basis that the law forbidding

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Jews in school was still in force. From 1945 to 1948, John lived with an aunt in Prague where he was able to attend school. He was 15 and felt great pressure to catch up on his education. He found his studies very difficult but persevered and ultimately succeeded.

Due to the political instability and Stalin's aspirations in the country John wanted to leave. John's "lucky break" came with the assistance of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Canadian Jewish Congress. In March, 1948 John left Prague with 30 other Jewish orphans to make a new life in Canada. The only thing he knew about Canada was that it was in North America.

After a 16 hour train ride, John arrived at a harbour in northern Germany. It was a rough trip across the choppy North Sea to England. Next he boarded a train to London. While out sightseeing with a few other orphans, a man recognized the group as Jewish refugees and brought them all home to his family for dinner. John maintained his contact with the Goldenfeld family throughout the years. After 2 days in London John was on a train to Southampton and then on a ship for a 5 day crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. Once in Halifax, John boarded a train that stopped in Montreal and finally, Toronto. On the train a man recognized the group as Jewish refugees and gave each child \$2.00 so they wouldn't be penniless on arrival at their destinations.

In Toronto, John was initially housed at the temporary housing centre. Learning English and establishing a career became John's priorities. John mastered English and then undertook training as a chartered accountant. John married a Jewish Czech girl. She had immigrated to Canada along with her parents before the war. John and his wife have 3 children and 10 grandchildren. John retired in 1989 after 40 years working as a chartered accountant.