

Irena Kirkland
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Abstract

Irena Neumann Kirkland was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 22, 1925. Her father, Emil Neumann, was an engineer/architect; her mother died eight months after Irena and her twin sister, Alena, were born. Her father remarried. The family lived in a lovely, assimilated neighborhood and were not observant Jews. After Munich pact was signed, Jewish children could not go to school. Jews could not go to parks or movies, they had to wear yellow stars, and they had to give all jewelry to Germans. Transports started in 1941. In May 1943, Irena's family was sent to Theresienstadt, and in the fall of 1944, Irena and Alena were sent to Auschwitz, where they were shaved and transported to a slave labor camp. When liberated by the Russians, the sisters were reunited with parents at Theresienstadt. The family returned to Prague. Irena was active in the anti-Communist movement and briefly arrested. Family then went to Israel, and Irena ultimately immigrated to the United States, where in 1973 she married Lane Kirkland, president of the AFL-CIO

Irena Neumann Kirkland

Irena Neumann Kirkland was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, August 22, 1925.

:57

Her father, Emil Neumann, was born 40 miles out of Prague.

Her mother came from a wealthy family. Her grandfather was a landowner and a member of the Austrian Parliament.

She had a twin sister, Alena.

1:36

Irena's father was an engineer/architect. The family lived in Prague in a very lovely, assimilated neighborhood. There were no Jewish neighborhoods.

2:55

Mr. Neuman designed private houses and office buildings. He opened his own office two years before the war.

Parents were agnostic and did not observe any Jewish holidays.

5:03

Irena's mother died when she and her twin sister, Alena, were eight months old. Her father remarried, and Irena and Alena never knew that their mother was really their stepmother until they were being deported.

Extended family had many intermarriages.

7:12

"We knew we were Jewish but not observant. We celebrated Christmas and had a Christmas tree. Everything was marvelous. We did not think about being Jewish until March 15, 1939 when Hitler marched into Prague."

9:48

Irena and Alena went to the neighborhood public school through fifth grade and then went to a college preparatory high school.

Family spoke Czech at home.

13:25

Irena and Alena were always together. Although they fought a lot, they were like one person.

16:29

The family became aware of Hitler because refugees were coming out of Germany and Vienna.

"We were not frightened because we never thought that Czechoslovakia could be occupied. We had a good army and a wealthy country."

In 1939 all the children were evacuated from Prague. Men were being mobilized, including her father. Everyone was in a very “up mood.”

20:28

After Munich pact was signed, father tried to get family out, but it was impossible. Most of their extended family did not survive.

Daily routine continued, but soon laws were enacted prohibiting Jewish children from going to school. Jews also had to take other families in and give all jewelry to Germans. No pets were allowed.

Jews were not allowed to go to movies or to parks.

27:27

Irena remembers first transport in 1941. Everyone had to register and had to wear stars on their clothes. “It scared the hell out of you. One thing after another; what you could or could not do.”

29:30

Remembers one non-Jewish friend who dropped them, but all their other friends did not.

Tape 1

Side B

32:40

Transports started. One of her uncles was on one of the first transports that included lawyers like himself.

Irena had to work at a Jewish Community Center copy machine.

“These were not good times.”

In 1943, family notified by letter to report to a big fair ground.

About 5,000 people were packed in like sardines. People took warm clothes but really did not know what they would need.

Irena’s family went to Theresienstadt.

37:39

Irena describes Theresienstadt as an 18th century military fortress with old barracks. The family was still together. They met friends and relatives. Father was very composed. Food was served in a communal kitchen and was adequate but terrible.

41:20

A typical day for Irena was to work in the fields. Then she worked in a factory making beds from wood for the barracks.

42:46

In October 1943, a transport went to Auschwitz with 5,000 people, none of whom survived. Father somehow got papers that excluded them from the transport. Irena still has the paper.

Red Cross came to Theresienstadt, got intimidated, and did not make an investigation. Swedes came later, and they insisted on going into the camp, which greatly boosted prisoner morale.

45:46

Irene describes social and cultural life. Many musicians helped lift morale. Remembers Verdi's Requiem being played as transport was leaving.

There was some social life but not much privacy.

52:26

Danes and Dutch did not all go on transports.

54:44

Irena and Alena did go on transport to Auschwitz in the falloff 1944. Auschwitz was so terrible that she could not remember the "better" times in Theresienstadt.

She and sister became very friendly with Eva who was half Jewish, the same age, and much tougher.

It took a long time to get to Auschwitz. When they got there, it was dark, dogs were barking and biting, and smoke could be seen. A guard told them that that smoke is your people.

Barracks were terribly cold. They had to stand outside in ap. They had no documents and were put into prisoner uniforms.

Tape 2

Side A

:35

Kapos took information, and when one of them realized that Irena and Alena were twins suggested that they change dates of births so Mengele would not use them for experiments on identical twins.

2:09

Parents stayed in Theresienstadt. When Irena and Alena were transferred to Auschwitz, it was very difficult to say goodbye to their parents.

4:05

Sisters and friend stayed together in closed cattle car. Conditions were terrible: no food or water.

6:55

At Auschwitz, the girls were shaved completely and stripped of everything. The barracks were wooden, and there was mud everywhere.

Of the 250,000 prisoners, only 200 were not sent to ovens. "You could smell stench of smoke burning flesh. We were in absolute shock."

12:24

The three girls were sent to a small munitions factory in Sachsen Chemnitz, East Germany. They were very hungry. Had soup twice a day with a piece of potato at night. Irena remember that on their day off, the three girls stole a piece of bread and ate like ladies.

31:00

"Nobody talked much. "You worked 12 hours a day and went to sleep. You had to ask permission to go to toilet."

On April 20, 1945, Hitler's birthday, the Russians were coming into East Germany. Germans tried to get rid of prisoners. Americans did not strafe them.

Tape 2

Side B

When liberated by Russians, Irena, Alena, and friend went on transport to Theresienstadt where Irena and Alena were reunited with parents. Then family was given permission to go to Prague "We were walking on air."

They went back to their apartment where best friend of parents had been staying. Irena took a bath for first time in two years.

50:00

Family stayed until 1949. Learned who had not survived.

Sisters were allowed to go to school but had to take placement exams. They then went on to university where Irena studied literature.

57:52

When Communists came in, they threw Irena out of the university because she was a bourgeois. Then she was put in jail because she was secretary of the Social Democrat Student Association and had organized demonstrations against Communists. She was released when she refused to sign paper saying that she would be a spy.

Tape 3

Side A

:18

Irena was scared every time a car stopped. She could not re-enter university and worked as a secretary.

2:27

In 1949 the family went to Israel on a ship from France. They lived in a tent near Haifa. She and sister got jobs at an airport hotel. Irena was a bookkeeper.

9:23

Irena stayed in London for two years, then returned to Israel and got married in 1956.

11:06

Irena is very aware that she is Jewish. Israel had a positive influence on her. She does get some reparations for health. Her sister was a source of strength. Sister now lives in Switzerland.

“Your natural instinct is to survive.”