

## **RG-50.493.0060**

### **Summary**

Sasha Emmanuel Erlik, an only child, was born on August 24, 1925 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. His family was affluent; his father worked in the movie business and his mother was an upscale dress designer. He had a happy life until he was six or seven when his mother got ill and was sent to Switzerland to recuperate. When she returned several months later his father had a girlfriend, who he later married, and his parents divorced. Erlik attended school in Prague until he was twelve and then went to high school in Carlsbad in the Sudetenland and lived with a German family where he improved his German. But when the Germans occupied the Sudetenland in 1938 he went to live with his grandparents in a small town (Tarfur?). He went back to school there until 1940, even though by then the Germans had occupied all of Czechoslovakia. In 1940 he and his grandparents had to move to another town and work. By then they were forced to wear a Yellow Star on their outer garments. His father was able to get papers for himself, his wife, Erlik and his mother. His father and wife left for France (and in 1942 to the U.S.), but his mother refused to leave her business. By then Erlik was living with his mother in Prague. He did not experience antisemitism from the Czechs.

In the spring 1941 he and his mother and grandparents were sent to Theresienstadt (Terezin). In Theresienstadt, a former military barracks, men and women were housed separately, so he and his mother were separated. His mother, grandparents, great grandmother, and his mother's sister and two children were all there. Only Erlik, his grandparents, and one cousin were to survive the war. Jewish leaders organized the ghetto under Nazi supervision. Erlik was fortunate in that he was transferred from working in a tomato field to sorting the belongings of the prisoners given up when they arrived. Thus he was able to take food and other necessities and give them to his relatives. Later, he was transferred to the kitchen where he was in an even better position to eat better and to help his relatives. This good fortune was to end for him in late 1943 or early 1944 when he was sent to Auschwitz and separated from his mother.

He stayed in Auschwitz for only a few weeks, but it was enough for him to witness the gas chambers, the crematoria, senseless killings, and prisoner killed trying to escape. (Two of his uncles were able to escape and survived with the help of a German priest.) Erlik was then sent to a work camp in northern Germany. There he at first worked digging trenches outside a factory that turned coal into gas. While digging he was almost electrocuted by a wire whose insulation had come away. He was saved by an SS officer who pulled the wire off from another section with insulation. He thought that he would be killed, because he was now paralyzed. But again he was lucky, because he was sent to the "sick room" where a German prisoner massaged his legs day and night until he could walk. By then the Russians were bombing and drawing near. So the Germans evacuated the camp and led the remaining Jews, about 300 or so, on a long death march. To Erlik this was the worst part of the war for him, but he was among only thirty plus prisoners who survived when the Germans peeled away one morning.

He and the others were taken to Theresienstadt. By then he was very sick and emaciated. His grandparent were still there (his mother had been shipped to Bergen Belsen) and cared for him. But when one of his uncles came to visit he took him to a hospital in Prague where he stayed almost a year. In 1946 he was able to go to the United States where his father lived. He eventually was able to marry (1950) to another prisoner from Theresienstadt and open a

fashion factory. At first he found it difficult to adjust to the pace in the U.S. but he soon adjusted. Living in Orange County in California he experienced antisemitism from a small American Nazi Party group. However, he found that people in general in the U.S. treated others as individuals. Erlik saw himself first as a person and only secondarily as a Jew.