

## A conversation with ... Ela Stein Weissberger

### Children's opera 'Brundibar' helped her, others endure concentration camp

By Janelle Gelfand  
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Ela Stein Weissberger was 11 years old when she arrived at Terezin in February 1942, with her mother, sister and grandmother. Greeting their arrival at the Nazi controlled camp in Czechoslovakia were several young men, hanging dead in the square.

"I remember they took us out and said, this will happen to you if you try to escape," recalls Mrs. Weissberger, 70, in a grandmotherly voice. "We thought that ghetto means that we would only be concentrated there. We didn't know about death camps."

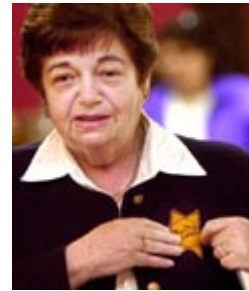
Like the children's opera *Brundibar*, in which she sang the role of the Cat for all 55 performances at the World War II concentration camp, her story has a "happy" ending. She survived.

"We were originally 15,000 children, and only 100 survived," she says from her home in Tappan, N.Y. "It is by a miracle that I can talk about it. I was saved. I think I speak in the voices of those that couldn't make it. All that is left behind a whole generation of children are a couple of poems and pictures."

Terezin (Teresienstadt in German), 60 miles from Prague, was a transit point for Czech Jews to the Nazi death camps. Of 141,000 people who lived there over four years, more than 33,000 died there; another 87,000 were transported to death camps.

The opera, first staged in a Jewish orphanage in Prague in 1942, is a charming folk tale with delightful music, intended for a cast of children. It tells the story of two children singing to raise money to buy milk for their sick mother. An evil organ grinder (Brundibar), throws them out of the town square. A sparrow, a cat (Mrs. Weissberger's role), a dog and a chorus of children come to their aid, helping them sing over the organ grinder and collect enough money to help their mother. The opera concludes with a victory song.

Many of Prague's elite Jewish artists were sent to Terezin, including the composer Hans Krasa (who was killed at Auschwitz in 1944). Ela and the other children, who were housed together in a barrack, were allowed to draw, sing and write poetry. Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, an artist, gave them art lessons. Helga Kinsky, a music teacher, found an old harmonium, and played operas such as Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*.



Ela Stein Weissberger with the cloth badge worn by Jews in Nazi Germany.



Mrs. Weissberger joins the cast of *Brundibar*.

When the music to *Brundibar* was smuggled into the camp, the teachers asked to perform it with the children. It became extremely popular, and tickets were prized, Mrs. Weissberger recalls.

For the children, who were hungry, ragged and had seen parents and loved ones carted off to death camps, the opera took their minds off daily horrors.

“When we sang, we forgot where we were. We forgot hunger, we forgot all the troubles that we had to go through,” Mrs. Weissberger says. “When we sang *Brundibar*, we didn't have to wear the Jewish star on our clothing.”

The Nazis did not know that the Victory Song at the opera's end had a double meaning.

“In our eyes, *Brundibar* was Hitler. ... We wanted a victory over a terrible man,” she says.

The Nazis used *Brundibar* for propaganda purposes. Mrs. Weissberger was in the cast that performed for an International Red Cross delegation in 1944, and she appears in the Nazi propaganda film: *The Fuhrer Gives the Jews a City*.

“They moved us from the barrack to a regular theater, and they ordered Krasa to write an overture. The Germans said, what opera doesn't have an overture?” Mrs. Weissberger says.

“I remember it well because we were so scared of the Nazis. They were standing in the gallery of the theater,” she says, naming Adolf Eichmann, mastermind of the Holocaust that killed 6 million Jews, Henrik Himmler, and the commander of Terezin. “There is one part in *Brundibar*, the lullaby, that is very close to our hearts. When we started to sing the lullaby, they sat down and took off their hats.”

After that performance, she says, most of the children were sent to the gas chambers.

When Ela was 8 years old, her family fled their home in the Sudetenland, on the Czech-German border, for Prague. Her father had had a thriving porcelain business; her mother's family were wealthy owners of a glass factory. They lost everything in 1938. Her father was arrested by the Gestapo and they never saw him again.

They were sent to Terezin in one of the first transports. In an eerie similarity to the story made famous in *Schindler's List*, a German farmer saved the lives of Ela, her mother and her older sister. Her mother and sister worked in his agriculture fields.

“He went to the commander of the camp and said, look if you don't want to lose the crop in the fields, you have to keep my group together,” Mrs. Weissberger says. His workers were spared going to the gas chambers. Her mother was allowed to scavenge for anything edible that was left behind in the fields, thus augmenting their meager diet.

Of the 64 members of her family, four survived the war.

Today she speaks often to children, not so much about the terror, but about the little things to appreciate, such as having a pet and going to school.

“*Brundibar* meant, for many, many people, a lot,” she says. “What I’m asking is, please remember those that couldn’t make it, because they are in my heart until I die.”

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