

MY TWO LIVES

By Lotte Weiss, *Community Stories Collection, Sydney Jewish Museum*, Sydney, 2003, 152pp. Foreword by Neville Wran, AC, QC.

Until the age of eighteen in 1942, Lotte Frankl was a member of a loving family of eight, two parents and six children, four girls and two boys. They lived in Bratislava, Slovakia, then in the Czechoslovak Republic. The father was a small-time accountant who managed to keep his job even in the Depression of the 1930s, and the lives of the family were hardworking, modest, traditionally Orthodox, and happy.

In late March 1942 all this ended. The three older Frankl girls were in the group of Jewish girls from Slovakia, aged 18 to 25, selected to build the death camp of Birkenau or Auschwitz II, six kilometres from Auschwitz I. They endured what became the usual arrival procedure of being totally shaved in all body parts, losing all belongings including clothes, being tattooed with a number, endless roll-calls outdoors in freezing weather, hunger and exhaustion.

They were put to work building roads in sub-human conditions and lived through the first gassings which took place in Birkenau. The three sisters drew some comfort from being together. Lotte caught meningitis, but managed to survive against the odds, but her sisters both became ill with typhus in September 1942 and were gassed. Lotte wanted to die too, but her former *kapo*, a non-Jew, got her a job in the area where prisoners' clothes were sorted, nicknamed 'Canada', because it seemed like being in a land of plenty. Despite continuing hardship, she was chosen for indoor office work in January 1943 in the German Mineral and Stone Works, one of the industrial concerns, which used camp slave labour, and this gave her the possibility of surviving. After stays in other minor camps, she ended the war in Theresienstadt and later found that she was the only survivor of her nuclear family of eight. Thus ended her "first life".

Freedom in Prague started her "second life", and she was helped by non-Jewish friends of her late parents when she returned to Bratislava. Throughout her book Lotte Weiss gives credit to various non-Jews, fellow-prisoners in Auschwitz, who helped her to survive. She kept in touch with some of them until they died. Her surviving uncle and aunt did not believe her story of how the rest of her family perished in Auschwitz, and this created a gap in their relationship. "We almost felt we had to apologise for surviving! Some deep feeling of disbelief was mixed with shock at having been spared. It

was a complex mix of emotions and for years and years many of us could not speak about these feelings or fears." (p72)

Slowly she regained her faith in God, and in Bratislava met the four young men including Alfred Wetzler and Walter Rosenberg, later named Rudolf Vrba, who became famous for escaping from Auschwitz in April 1944 to warn the world. This was the first eye-witness report about Auschwitz and Birkenau, which was couriered to many Allied government representatives and to the Vatican, but nothing was done to stop the deportations or the gassings.

Eventually Lotte married Alfred Weiss, a widower with family connections, who had also survived Auschwitz. When she had previously met by chance a pre-war boy-friend who had wanted to marry her, but who had no concentration camp experience, she felt that this meant they would not have enough in common.

Her husband's brother Leo, who had survived with him, also married in Bratislava. The two families emigrated to Wellington, New Zealand, where each had children and settled down. After the death of her husband, Lotte followed her two sons to Sydney where they had preceded her and gradually became settled in Australia, although it took time. Lotte's nephew is Peter Wise, chairman of the Jewish Communal Appeal, and with most of her surviving family in Sydney, happiness and contentment have come to Lotte Weiss.

Her style is simple but very readable and, despite the horrible events through which she lived, mostly cheerful. Lotte's positive personality has always helped her to make the best of any situation. If you can only bear to read one book on surviving Auschwitz, this should be the one. It costs \$25 and is available from the Sydney Jewish Museum.

Sophie Caplan

THE DUNERA BOYS

By Robyn O'Sullivan, Rigby Heinemann, Port Melbourne, 2003

This slim volume is part of an educational series of publications for schoolchildren called 'Our Voices'. It was published as a collaborative project with the National Museum of Australia and won an award for Excellence in Educational Publishing in 2003. Its aim is to highlight part of Australia's multicultural history and emphasise the contributions to Australia made by those 'Dunera Boys' who chose to remain in Australia.