

■ 'I AM 18, HEALTHY AND CAN WORK,' 15-YEAR-OLD BEN TOLD MENGELE

Faith lost as brother and sister torn away

HOLocaust survivor BEN LESSER, 86, chronicles his amazing story in the book, *Living A Life That Matters: From Nazi Nightmare to American Dream* (Abbott Press). Ben, who was given the number 1212 by the Nazis, and sister Lola were the only two of his family of seven to survive Auschwitz-Birkenau and Dachau concentration camps. Six years ago, Ben founded the Zachor Foundation with the goal to reach more than six million individuals who want their voices to be heard and to stop intolerance. He also founded I Shout Out, for people to act, speak out against intolerance, injustice, racism and bullying. In this edited extract from *Living A Life That Matters*, Ben describes his encounter with Josef Mengele on his arrival at Auschwitz

WE were ordered to leave our belongings on the train. Gasping for fresh air, holding on to our loved ones, we all tried to squeeze through the doors.

As we tumbled down, we were "greeted" by shrieking, gun-waving Nazis and their vicious barking dogs. We were also greeted by other prisoners who were forced to pick through our bundles.

They were looking for the valuables we had been told to bring. Whatever they found that was of value — clothing, shoes, eyeglasses, jewellery, pots and pans, canned food — would be taken to giant warehouses.

These prisoners also became our interpreters. Just in case someone didn't get the message or just didn't get it fast enough, they told us in many different languages what the Germans were yelling.

Instead of giving us orders, the Nazis clubbed us viciously while screaming at us to move fast.

"Raus! Schnell, Schnell! (Get out! Fast! Fast!)"

Women and children were roughly directed to the right, and men to the left. One minute I was holding on tightly to my little brother and to my sister Goldie. And then suddenly — the next minute — they were gone. We were just torn apart. Never to see each other again.

I am still filled with sadness and guilt when I think about not being able to protect Goldie and Tuli. It was at that moment that I lost my faith. How could a God let this happen to us?

My Uncle Hershel, Cousin Isaac and I were then lined up with the other male prisoners. As we looked around, we were shocked by what we saw.

This camp, which by then we had discovered was named Birkenau, was a strange, completely alien world. Almost like science fiction.

And as we stood quietly lined up in the eerie darkness, we were almost overcome by an indescribably sickening stench. We saw four huge chimneys with flames rising above them. Constantly erupting from these chimneys, as if from belching volcanoes, were dense clouds of ashes. Like a snow storm, these ashes rained down on us, completely covering the ground with a strange white dust.

Whenever we moved, we left ghostly footprints in this dust. We couldn't have known that we were walking on the dust of our loved ones. Since there was no way we could have guessed the



IN HAPPIER TIMES: Ben's family at the wedding of sister Lola and Mechel Lieber in Niepolomice, Poland, in 1941. Ben is on the front row, third left

truth, most people believed that the flaming chimneys were part of smelting factories, where we probably would soon be working.

So we stood quietly in our ghostly line, calmly waiting to be directed to our new "home".

Once again, officials decided who would go to the left and who would go to the right. We had no idea what this meant.

Always alert and observant, however, I noticed that at the head of the line stood a man, who looked like a medical doctor, wearing a bright white lab-coat and spotless white gloves. We wondered if we would be receiving medical attention.

He just stood there, expressionless, motioning with his

Birkenau was a strange alien world

index finger for people to go to the left or to the right. Occasionally he would ask someone a question.

As I came closer I could hear him ask various men whether they could run five kilometres or whether they rather go by truck. When he asked this of a seemingly young, healthy man, the frightened guy looked almost relieved and told him he was having trouble with his knees.

The "doctor" quickly pointed to the right. The poor soul didn't realise that this meant certain death.

At that point, I didn't know it either, but I figured that since we were in a labour camp, they would have no use for people who couldn't do the work.

Of course, I didn't dream that instead of making us free, the "work" we would be assigned, was designed to kill us. As we got closer to the head of the line, I began to realise that it was important to be directed to the left.

Maybe on some unconscious level, I had an idea that this monstrous doctor was asking certain questions in order to separate the weak from the strong people.

I told my uncle, "Whatever he asks you, be sure to take the hard part; say yes, you can run if he asks you that".

At that time, I was just 15½-years-old and not very tall. I wasn't quite a man, and it had been a long time since I'd been a child.

I had always been very observant, however, and knew from what I saw going on around me, that my survival depended upon my being useful to the Nazis. And strong men would be much more useful than boys.

So, when it was my turn, I stretched myself out as tall as I could, and saluted the man in the white lab coat before he even asked me a question.

And in the deepest voice I could manage, I said, "Achtzen jahr alt, gezunt, und arbeits-fahig (I am 18-years-old, I am healthy, and I can work)".

Then he asked if I could run 5km and I quickly said, "Jawohl!" So he sent me to the left.

My uncle and my cousin, both gave the correct answer, and followed me in the same direction. Later on, I found out that this "doctor," was Dr Mengele, the "Angel of Death," who was notorious for conducting horrific medical experiments, particularly on twins.

With a slight motion of that pristine, white-gloved index finger, he decided who would live and who would die. Of course, we had no idea then what lay ahead for us. We couldn't have known. No one could have imagined. And still today, some people don't believe.

In fact, we couldn't have been more stunned if we'd been transported to another planet. No one had any idea what this Hell on earth was all about.

After a while, the Nazis marched us into a huge one-story cinder-block building and then into a very large room, the

size of a high-school gym.

They told everyone to get undressed, and leave all our belongings right there — our clothes, and, of course, our shoes, and then get in the line leading to "barbers".

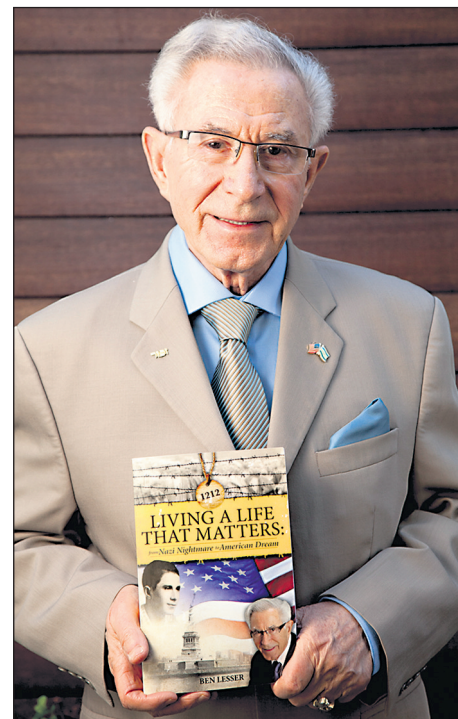
Well, I got undressed, and left what little I still owned on the floor. Everything, that is, except my beautiful black shoes with the diamonds in the heels.

Trying to look inconspicuous, I walked right up to those barbers, and found out that this would be no ordinary haircut. Apparently they were trying to rid us of the lice that carried the deadly typhus fever, so they cut the hair from all over our heads and then our entire bodies. Everywhere.

I don't know what was more terrifying, the degrading clippers or the chance that my shoes would be discovered. By some miracle, however, nothing was said to me about the shoes.

So I followed the others into the showers — still with my shoes on!

■ zachorfoundation.org and <http://tinyurl.com/m8q4mr9>



CHRONICLE: Ben Lesser with his book

If you don't, who will?



A gift in your Will can create a great deal and save you money on tax.

To find out more about leaving a gift in your Will:

- visit www.jewishlegacy.org.uk, or
- telephone 0203 375 6248, or
- email info@jewishlegacygiving.org.uk, or
- visit a solicitor and add your favourite charity to your Will today.

Jewish Legacy
If YOU don't, who will?

Reg Charity 1144193

Jewish Legacy is working with over 50 Jewish charities to raise awareness of the importance of leaving a legacy to a Jewish charity. Without your help, the future of some of our favourite causes will be a very uncertain one.