

The Human Experience

An Artist's Testimony

TIBOR SPITZ FOUND HEALING BY PAINTING HIS EXPERIENCES

High up in the mountains of northern Czechoslovakia, the six members of the Spitz family were being lined up to be executed by partisans. It was February 1945, and the Spitz family, having successfully evaded deportation to Auschwitz, now hiding in the forest for the previous five months, seemed to be at the end of their luck.

"I can sneak up behind him and split his head open with my hatchet," whispered 14-year-old Tibor to his mother from the corner of his mouth. "Then I'll take his gun and shoot the rest of them."

"Do you know how to shoot?" she whispered back.

"No," came young Tibor's reply, "but I'll figure it out."

Tibor (Simcha Bunim) Spitz and his family survived that day, and lived to see the Soviet Army liberate Czechoslovakia two months later. But Tibor's story does not end there. For the next 20 years Tibor labored as an engineer in oppressive communist Czechoslovakia before making a daring escape during an airplane refueling stop in Gander, Newfoundland in Canada. Today, almost 70 years after the Holocaust and 45 years after escaping the clutches of totalitarian rule, 84-year-old Tibor is an artist living in Kingston, New York who tells his story through his artwork and Holocaust presentations.

In truth, though, it's not just a story he tells. It is his testimony. And that testimony, in turn, is his way of coping with the memories.



A LITTLE TOWN CALLED DOLNY KUBIN

Tibor Spitz was born in 1929 in the quiet Czechoslovakian town of Dolny Kubin. Tibor's father, Reb Yosef Tzvi, was employed by the Jewish community as their *shochet* and *chazzan*, and his mother Raizel was a public school teacher.

"My parents were both from Trnava. They were among the first settlers of Bnei Brak, when it was still Palestine," explains Tibor. "They were married there in 1924, and their first child, Esther, passed away in Palestine. My father couldn't handle the climate and came down with malaria and other tropical diseases. Then he was shot by Arab snipers and the wound became infected. The doctors told him that if he

didn't go back to Europe he wouldn't live another two weeks."

The couple returned to Czechoslovakia in 1927 and Reb Yosef Tzvi accepted the position in Dolny Kubin. "It was a very small community, of only about 100 families, 93 of which were taken to Auschwitz."

In 1939 Slovakia became an independent fascist protectorate of Nazi Germany, with a Catholic priest named Jozef Tiso at its helm. Two years later it enacted the Jewish Codex, 270 laws denying Jews of their rights as citizens.

With the enactment of the Jewish Codex, Jewish businesses were seized. The country, however, was severely underdeveloped and uneducated, and the Slovaks

did not know how to run many of their newly-acquired, formerly Jewish businesses. This forced them to delay the deportation of Jews, who had owned these essential industries, so they could train their new managers.

“The Slovakian Jews were the first to be deported. Tiso paid 500 Deutschmarks to the German government for each one who was deported, on condition that they never return. The Nazis tested out and perfected the gas chambers on Slovakian Jewry. By the spring of 1942 they were almost all wiped out.

“A Catholic priest or Lutheran minister would never stoop to burying a Jew, so the government decided to temporarily halt the deportation of some Jewish clergy in charge of burials, and my father fell under this category. At the same time, the government didn’t want Jewish children running around, so my mother was saved because she was a teacher. That’s how we managed to survive 1942.”

DISCOVERING THE TRUTH

“When the first deportations began, people in our town started to get postcards from family members who had already left, saying how nice their accommodations were. These messages were written in Slovak. But on one postcard there was something that no one could decipher. They called my father over to look at it, and between the lines were the Hebrew words *‘lo tov*: ‘not good.’

“My grandfather lived in Trnava, and was out of town when the deportations started there. He came back to discover that seven of his children—my father was the eighth—had been sent away, ‘resettled’ as they called it, and his apartment had been sealed up, its contents to be auctioned off. He had nowhere to go so he came to us. He stayed with us for the duration of the war and survived, but when he found out what really happened to his children he lost his will to live. He passed away three months after the war ended.”

By 1942, with the Jewish community disbanded, Reb Yosef Tzvi no longer had any income. From that point on he and his children—Ernest, Tibor and the youngest, Eva—scrounged around, doing odd jobs in exchange for a little bit of butter or a few eggs. Going out at night to a creek fed by melting snow, Tibor would catch trout with his hands as they huddled between the rocks.

One night Tibor heard someone calling out in Polish and Yiddish from the town jail behind the creek. “I walked over and saw a man sticking his hand through the bars; he was holding a gold coin. He told me, ‘If you get us out of here, I’ll give you a fist full of them.’

“I ran home and told my parents what I had discovered. The Jewish owner of

German farmers.”

“Can you imagine what it was like for my parents? All of their siblings and families—gone. I remember my father, devastated; my mother, screaming. We children had to calm them down. My parents interrogated the men, asking again and again if they were exaggerating. But they weren’t.”

INTO THE MOUNTAINS

When the tide began to shift against Nazi Germany in 1943, the early enthusiasm of many Slovakian collaborators began to wane. It slowly dawned on them that Hitler’s victory was not as inevitable as they had once believed.

“The Slovaks started thinking that they might be the ones to go to the gallows, so the deportations halted. Then in

“These men were doctors who had worked on biological warfare for the Germans before managing to escape.”

the Slivovitz distillery had not yet been deported and he knew everyone in town; it was a country of alcoholics who would do anything for a bottle. He bribed the prison guards and we snuck these Jewish prisoners out and brought them to our house. Our neighbors had already been deported and their apartment sealed, so we hid them there for ten days until the guards stopped searching for them.

“These men were doctors who had worked on biological warfare for the Germans before managing to escape. They told us what was going on, how they were luring Jews into the gas chambers by making them think they were taking a shower. By then they were killing 2,000 Jews every two hours. Their bodies would then be thrown into the crematoria. Their ashes became fertilizer that was used by

1944 there was an uprising, and the Germans came in with heavy artillery to end it. Everyone, Jewish and non-Jewish, was running to the mountains, so we just took off our yellow stars and ran too.

“After the Nazis had crushed the rebellion they told everyone it was safe to return home. But we stayed in the forest. Whoever went back was deported.

“During the uprising, the old rabbi of Dolny Kubin was with us in the forest. We told him to stay with us, but he said he was too old and went back to town. He was deported to Sachsenhausen.”

In the forest, the Spitz family, including Tibor’s grandfather, lived in a tiny underground hideaway which had been brilliantly designed by Tibor’s older brother Ernest. “My brother was a genius. He had designed our hiding place before we left

town, and had figured it out exactly. It was built on a very steep incline near a stream, a place where horses wouldn't go. Still, there were foot patrols in the forest; we could have been discovered at any time."

BRUSH WITH DEATH

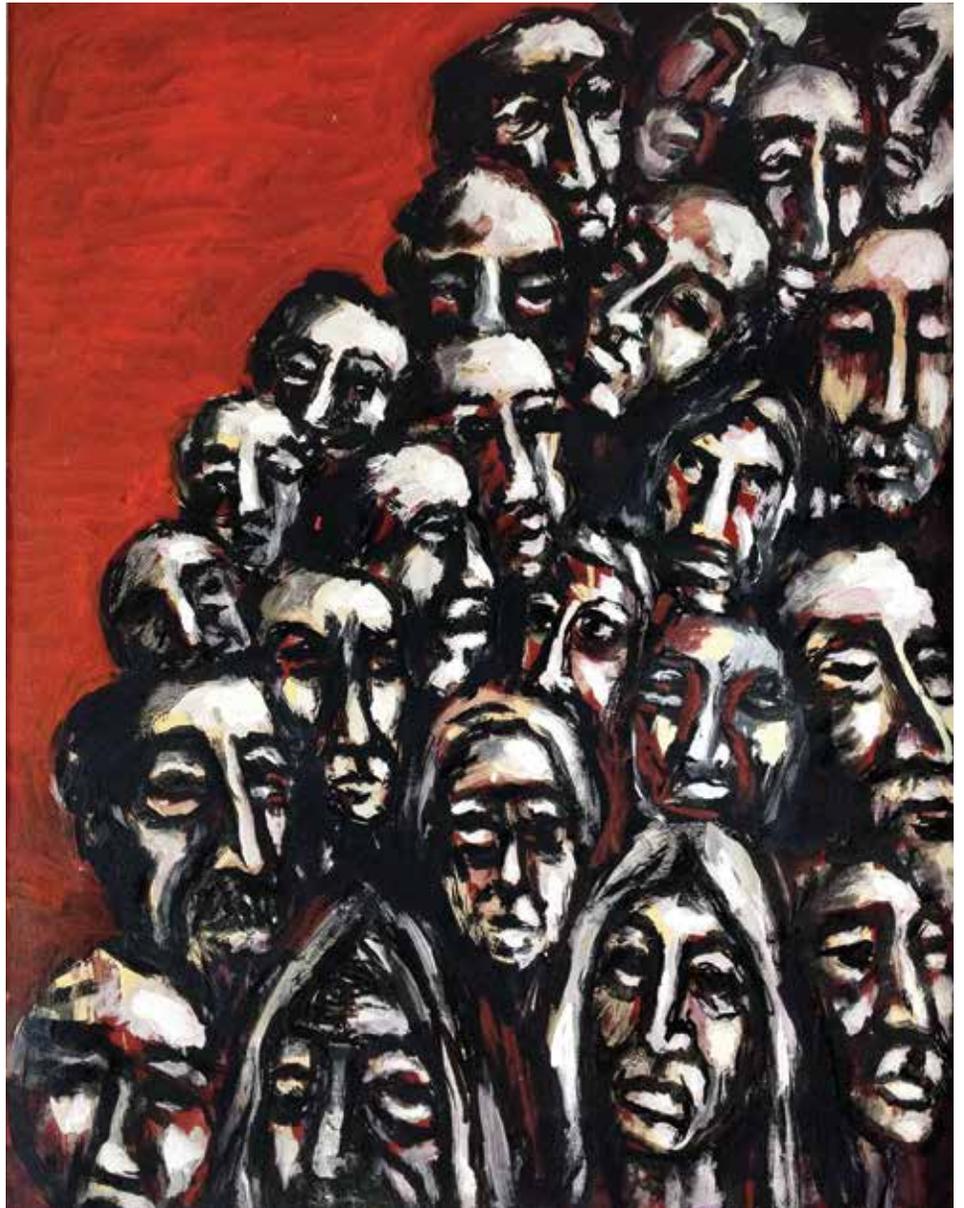
In February of 1945 the family was discovered by a group of partisans who identified themselves as followers of the Ukrainian Stepan Bandera, a group that had collaborated with the Nazis for much of the war. Seeing that they had stumbled upon easy prey, the partisans took their time before executing them, first ransacking their tiny underground hideaway.

"When I asked my mother if I should attack the guy with my hatchet she said no, because he might turn around and see me. A few minutes later the rest of them emerged and lined us up to be killed. They asked us if we had any last wishes, and my father and grandfather asked to put on *tefillin* and pray, and they allowed them to.

"When he finished my father said, 'We are ready. Shoot.' My mother started yelling, 'No, why would you kill us? What did we do to you? What have my children done to you?' And again my father said, 'Get it over with,' and my mother yelled, 'No!' This went back and forth."

Amidst the confusion Tibor took off, zigzagging down the mountain as bullets whizzed by him. Running to a nearby village, Tibor relayed what happened to his family to a Slovak partisan whom he knew. From the man's reaction he understood that the people who attacked his family were not Ukrainians but Red Army partisans, Soviet irregulars dropped behind enemy lines to sabotage the Nazis with whom the Slovak partisans were allied. Fearing that the Slovak would now kill him in order to shut him up, Tibor quietly made his way back to the mountain to bury his family.

"I discovered my family alive, but with no provisions. The partisans had taken my grandfather's, father's and brother's outer clothing and left them with nothing. They decided that we would all either freeze, starve or get caught by patrols anyway.



"That night a hot mineral spring opened up under our hideaway, and although it stank like rotten eggs, it warmed us up." By the time the Red Army arrived in April the Spitz family had been in hiding for seven months. Broken and sick—Tibor had tuberculosis—the family had to be convinced by locals that the war was actually over before they finally felt safe enough to leave their hiding place.

THE IRON CURTAIN DESCENDS

With the war finally over, Czechoslovakia found itself under the political sphere

of influence of its liberator, the Soviet Union. Despite joining three Zionist training camps and making plans to leave Europe once and for all, Tibor was held back by his father's health issues. When the Iron Curtain descended in 1948, it was too late to get out. Tibor Spitz and his family were once again trapped.

Despite having missed five years of schooling, Tibor graduated from high school with honors in 1949. Tibor's brother Ernest was an artist, and Tibor wanted to become a sculptor. Instead, the communist government compelled him

to become a chemical engineer, believing chemistry would be the tool to win the war against capitalism and the West.

“As a young researcher, the factory once presented me with a task. The Soviets needed a very large piece of a glass, about one-inch thick, that was optically perfect and wouldn’t turn brown if you put it in a radioactive field. Usually, glass that is exposed to radioactivity will turn as brown as a piece of wood.

Staying in the factory for weeks on end, where he was given an unlimited budget Tibor finally came up with a solution. “I was given a few projects like that every year—for 20 years! It took physical and mental strength and a lot of chutzpah. But I made it.”

THE GREAT ESCAPE

Ernest Spitz went on to become a celebrated artist who fought for freedom of artistic expression. Because of this he was a target of the Czechoslovakian secret police, who finally killed him in 1960 by exposing him to a fatal dose of radiation. Tibor’s grieving father, who had continued to serve the Jewish community after the war, died two years later.

The late 1960s saw the arrival of the liberal Dubcek period, and with it, a political thaw. In 1967 Tibor married Noemi Eichler, a Holocaust survivor 14 years his junior. Due to Czechoslovakia’s more relaxed atmosphere, Tibor and Noemi had a public *chuppah*, something that hadn’t been tolerated in the country for decades.

Shortly afterward, the couple was sent to Cuba, where Tibor would be responsible for overhauling three glass factories.

Dubcek’s liberalization proved too much for the Soviets, and in August 1968 Russian tanks rolled into Czechoslovakia to force them to adopt a harder line. “They called Dubcek’s era ‘Communism with a human face.’ But the Russians didn’t like it, and put the beast’s face back on.”

After nine months in Cuba the Spitzes returned to Czechoslovakia for a short visit. On their way back to Fidel Castro’s paradise, the ancient Cuban airplane stopped to refuel in Shannon, Ireland and then a second time in Gander, Newfound-

land, where it needed another four hours of repairs.

“I already had a plan in my head. I was 37 but my wife was only 24, and I was worried that she was so honest she would reveal it on her face, so I didn’t tell her.

“We were sitting in the visa-free zone in Gander, a big waiting room.

“In the corner I spotted a Canadian immigration officer in a tiny cubicle sitting at a typewriter. When the Cubans started boarding I didn’t even put on my jacket. I didn’t want them to become suspicious so I kept my passport in my pocket. As we walked toward the gate I kept telling Noemi to slow down. When we were the

“I had a stressful life as an engineer and never had time to recover after the war. I had nightmares. Painting was a way of getting rid of those memories. When I paint, I am liberated of them.

“In 1985 I took a huge piece of paper and on the left-hand side painted a frustrated face in acrylics; on the right-hand side I wrote with a marker an account of the last 45 years of my life, sort of like an autobiography. I wrote that a lot of people had asked me to forgive and forget.

“When I do these paintings—standing in line to be shot or sitting in a hole in the forest—I try to express the uncertainty we felt. Hearing someone else’s story can be

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last ones left I told her to follow me, and we ran into that room and handed the man our passports. He looked up at us and said ‘What took you so long?’

Tibor and his wife spent three months in Halifax, first in detention and then learning English and French while the Canadians ascertained whether or not they were spies, before settling in Montreal. Meanwhile, the Spitzes were tried in absentia in Czechoslovakia and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

RELIVING MEMORIES

In Canada, Tibor continued working as a glass engineer.

In the mid-1980s, while living in Philadelphia, Tibor rekindled his childhood love (and aptitude) for sculpting and painting. When he eventually retired at the age of 68 in Kingston, New York he became a full-time artist. To date, his art has been bought by many collectors, displayed in prestigious galleries around the world and been reproduced in numerous books.

scary, but it’s not *your* story; you can still feel the chair you’re sitting on and can return to your surroundings. The feeling of being a few seconds from death is a very unique feeling, and cannot be reproduced easily. We were in that hole for seven months, when at any moment someone could have stuck his gun inside and that would be the end. Whenever we heard branches falling or a deer walking outside, for us it was someone with a gun.”

But for Tibor, his art is not only a way to heal from painful memories but to focus on the Jewish future. He is an active member of the Chabad House in Kingston, and shares his message to the world through presentations there and elsewhere.

“Bearing witness involves more than being passive. We can never forget our past, and must always be prepared for the future.” ●

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