



A Lucky Child

Thomas Buergenthal

About the book

A Lucky Child is the memoir of Thomas Buergenthal, a survivor of Kielce ghetto and both Auschwitz and Sachsenhausen Concentration Camps. The story tells of a happy childhood and the vibrant parents who had to flee their peaceful life in Lubochna, Czechoslovakia. The memoir was published in 2007, and Buergenthal ponders at the beginning of the book that it may have been a very different memoir had he written it in the aftermath of the Holocaust. However, the story he tells is thoughtful, understated and very powerful. His amazing strength at the age of 10 when he was finally separated from both of his parents in Auschwitz resonates throughout the book. When, in 1945 he escapes from the deserted Sachsenhausen, the account takes an unexpected turn as we learn how he spent time in the company of the Polish army. He later became a minor celebrity whilst in an orphanage, as it was so unusual for a child to have survived Auschwitz. In these early post-war days, he desperately tries to ignore the likelihood that his mother and father are dead. However, he is reunited with his mother in 1946, and we learn her story too.

About the author

Thomas Buergenthal emigrated to the United States in 1951, and studied law at undergraduate level, before completing a masters' and doctorate in International Law at Harvard Law School. In 2000 he began serving as a judge at the International Court of Justice in The Hague, from which he retired in September 2010. Buergenthal writes in his foreword to the book:

It might seem obvious that my past would draw me to human rights and to international law, whether or not I knew it at the time. In any event, it equipped me to be a better human rights lawyer, if only because I understood, not only intellectually but also emotionally, what it is like to be a victim of human rights violations. I could after all, feel it in my bones.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

1. Thomas gives a very full picture of his parents and family life early on in the book. How do you feel about their forced eviction from the hotel and him having to leave his little red car behind?
2. Thomas' mother visits a fortune teller in Katowice who tells her he is a 'lucky child'. Discuss the various pieces of luck Thomas had which may have kept him alive.
3. both Thomas' mother and father seem very brave during their time on the run and in the ghetto. Does it seem that they were extraordinary people, or just doing what they needed to survive?
4. during the liquidation of Kielce his father saves a number of his factory workers, but the family is unable to save Ucek and Zarenka, the orphaned children they are looking after. How do you think this made the Buergenthals feel?
5. when the family arrives in Auschwitz, Thomas witnesses the killing of a man he knew from Kielce by *Kapos* who were also in Kielce. The moment appears to have had a real impact on Thomas' view of people. Discuss his reflection that without the horrific situation they found themselves in they might have remained decent people.
6. in the chapter 'a new beginning', Thomas says that he found out he and his father were in Sachsenhausen at the same time. How difficult must it be to have found out this information, years later?
7. in the epilogue Thomas discusses how he was able to write the book relatively freely; yet his mother could not write more than a few pages of her own story. Do you think that this is because Thomas was a child at the time?
8. throughout the book, Thomas has interspersed his story with memories or anecdotes from his later life and life with his family. A number of these are about friends whom he thought he had lost – is this something we can relate to as a human experience or is it unique to the post-war situation?

You can use HMDT resources to find out more about life in the camps

<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/life-in-the-camps>

Simon's testimony <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/films/untold-stories-simon-winston>. Simon, like Thomas, spent a long time fleeing Nazi Persecution

The liberation of Sachsenhausen <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/dates-to-remember/liberation-of-sachsenhausen-concentration-camp> which Thomas couldn't believe had really happened