

Helen Lewis



Helen aged six

From a middle-class Jewish family living in the Czech Sudetenland, Helen Lewis was brought up with a great love of music. At the age of six she went to her first dance class, where she made up her mind that she was going to become a dancer. After finishing school, Helen moved to Prague, where she studied dance and philosophy at the German University.

On completion of her studies Helen became part of a dance company and also taught pupils privately. In the spring of 1938 she married Paul Hermann. The Munich Agreement and the establishment of the 'Second Republic', a puppet régime for the German-Nazi administration under President Hácha, did not bode well for Czech Jews. Finally, in early 1939, it was announced that Czechoslovakia had become a protectorate of Nazi Germany. The German army moved in.

Unable to contemplate leaving their family, Helen and her husband Paul remained in Prague as life became more and more difficult for Jews. Soon, transports began to a garrison town north of Prague that had been evacuated – Theresienstadt, known in Czech as Terezín.

Helen and Paul received their summons in August 1942. They were allowed to bring 50 kilogrammes of luggage and spent the night at the local Trade Fair hall with hundreds of other families. They were marched to the railway station at three in the morning and herded onto cattle trucks. Upon arrival at Terezín, Helen was separated from her husband and taken to her new home – a bare-floored barrack room which already housed 30 women.

Helen began work in a children's home in Terezín, where she tried to provide some instruction for her charges. She was involved in the cultural life of the ghetto, which flourished despite Nazi attempts to suppress it. In conditions of poor hygiene and chronic undernourishment, she also managed to survive surgery for acute appendicitis.

After two years in the ghetto, Helen and Paul were included in one of the transports to the east. They arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. They both survived selection but Paul was sent on another transport to Germany. He died in Schwarzheide concentration camp in April 1945.

Helen was moved to Stutthof concentration camp and was put to back-breaking work in the snow. In January 1945 the camp was evacuated. The prisoners were force-marched on an endless road for two weeks until they reached an abandoned barn, where they stayed for three days before being marched on again.

Jumping into a ditch, Helen managed to escape the column of marching prisoners. She reached a nearby house and remained there until the Russian army liberated the village. She was eventually able to get to hospital, where she slowly recovered, and eventually returned home.

In 1947 Helen married a friend who had escaped to Northern Ireland before the war and moved with him to Belfast. They had two sons, Michael and Robin. Although no longer able to dance, Helen worked as a choreographer and dance teacher. She still lives in Belfast.

We were escorted by the fiercest and most dreaded SS guards, who shouted their 'Schneller, schneller!' as if they wanted to hear the sound of their own voices. The SS women and a few officers travelled ahead in a horse-drawn cart. At night we were herded into an abandoned church, where we slept on the stones. It was very cold and we were terribly tired.

After a few days of wandering on icy roads through hostile villages, we began to realise that we were, in fact, going nowhere; we just kept walking in ever-decreasing circles. If the guards had been rational human beings, they would have run away and saved themselves. But, instead, they stayed with us, faithfully obeying their orders to the last: to hate and torment us and in the end to kill us.



Helen Lewis in Belfast, 1994
©Pacemaker

From: *A Time to Speak*, Helen Lewis (Belfast, 1992)