

Name: Walter Ziffer
Born: March 5, 1927
Birthplace: Cieszyn, Silesia, Poland
Parents: Leo and Anny Borger Ziffer
Siblings: Edith
Children: Six
Grandchildren: Twelve

Walter grew up the son of an attorney in a "not very religious" German speaking, Jewish family. One of Walter's earliest memories of anti-Semitism involves walking with a group of elementary school friends, one of whom was an Orthodox Jew. Several non-Jewish children passed by and began to throw stones at them. As Walter describes it, the so-called "town idiot" came by in a cart, picked up the young Orthodox boy and rescued him.

In 1938, Hitler took over the Sudetenland of Czechoslovakia, and the Pole's took over Ziffer's part of Czechoslovakia, Czech Silesia. When Walter's father was no longer permitted to practice law, it seemed that life could hardly be worse. Then came Sept. 1, 1939 when WWII broke out. On that day Walter recalls watching from the first floor of their home as the German soldiers marched through the town streets. And then the Gestapo appropriated the first floor of the Ziffer's home as their headquarters. After two weeks, the family was evicted and forced to leave behind all of their silver, rugs, furniture, etc.

First, they moved in with an uncle, followed by a series of four or five evictions, until they ended up with only a small suitcase of belongings. Lastly, in 1941, the family and all other Jews were forced into a ghetto which in this case was a huge farm with various out-buildings, one of which - a dance hall - was divided into compartments. Deportations were a constant threat. All Jews were required to wear a Star of David displayed on the front and back of their clothing. For a time, his mother was still allowed to shop outside of the ghetto.

Hoping to delay their deportation, Leo Ziffer found employment for his children (and others) working for the war effort. Each day, Walter (13) and Edith took an hour long train ride to a nut and bolt factory. While in the ghetto, Walter met a young girl named Lydia who also worked with him in the factory and they became close friends. Later, Lydia's parents decided that they would try to flee to Russia. Two weeks later, Walter learned that Lydia's family had all been shot east of Cieszyn.

Walter was 14 years old in June 1941 when he learned that he was to be deported the following day. As he was leaving, Walter remembers his mother crying out to him, "Valti!" And then an SS guard hit her over the head with a whip. Before being deported, everyone was ordered to turn over all their valuables to the SS guards. Some were selected for a personal search and taken into a barrack. Walter heard screaming and saw people being kicked out bleeding. He decided to drop his watch - which he had not turned over - onto the ground, and then buried it with his foot. Along with other boys of whom he knew fifteen, Walter was ordered onto a train and taken to the first of seven concentration camps. Only Walter and a fellow deportee, Peter Berger, survived the war. (Peter eventually moved to a kibbutz in Israel).

Walter's life over the next four years was one of unspeakable horror. Nazi regulation allowed fourteen ounces of bread per day, but "one was more likely to receive nine or ten ounces." Walter said that the starvation caused "numbness so that you couldn't really feel the insults, indignities and beatings." The

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last year was particularly bad and Walter said that he was a "Mussulman." This was a word that derived from the Armenian War beginning in 1915, that identified someone as "skin and bones."

All of the slave labor camps were usually assisting the war effort in some way. At the first camp, Walter worked on building an autobahn (highway) which included work in a sand quarry filling train wagons with sand. In another camp (Graeditz), he unloaded all day long one - hundred - pound sacks of cement. At another camp he loaded and unloaded bombs. His last job, at Gross Rosen, was drilling holes in bedrock in subzero weather. Sometimes he and other prisoners had to stand for 12-13 hours working while being hit and whipped. Another torturous labor was burying murdered Jews in a mass grave in the woods. Walter said that at this point in the war, ordinary Germans were employed as guards who taunted and beat Jews while watching them work.

The beginning of Walter's greatest deterioration was at the last camp of Gross Rosen. In the winter of 1944-1945, the prisoners were marched to work through the city of Waldenburg. One day, someone threw a package to the prisoners. Walter caught a piece of bread with margarine and then he heard shots. Not until later that night did he realize that his foot had been shot. Days later (Walter is not exactly sure when) he went to the camp "hospital" where Dutch Jewish doctors hid him under the bed in order to treat his foot for a longer period.

On May 8, 1945 all of the prisoners were lined up in the usual "Appell". Walter saw the commander leave, throw down his keys and walk out of the camp. They noticed there were no guards in the watchtowers. They stayed in line for another to 30 - 40 minutes. Suddenly, a Soviet tank arrived and leveled one side of the triple - fencing around the camp. The prisoner next to Walter nudged him, and said "I think it's over." Walter was 18 years old and weighed 87 pounds.

Walter and his fellow prisoner immediately went to the neighboring town of Waldenburg looking for food. That was all he could think of - food. He never thought of revenge- just food! (His sisters and parents later reported feeling the same way). The two of them found a truck full of military rations: cans of pork with white pork grease, and sugar. They began to eat and passed out.

The next thing they knew was that he was between white sheets, but figured that he was "not in heaven since there were no angels." A woman living in an apartment house above the stationed truck had watched the two prisoners and had seen that they had passed out. She and a neighbor dragged them up to her apartment. Later, Walter found clothing in an abandoned house and then returned to Gross Rosen. As Walter says now, "What do people do after a slavery experience?"

Several days later, women came into the camp and from them Walter learned that his mother and sister were alive and in a nearby camp. He went back into Waldenburg and told a German to get off his bicycle and then Walter biked to the camp where his mother and sister were. They "were out organizing food" when Walter arrived. Once they were reunited, the three of them went back to Cesky-Tesin, Czechoslovakia and found their father and husband, Leo, at the home of a former family cook.

The family stayed together in Cesky-Tesin until February 1947. At that point, because of the impending threat of a communist take-over of the country Walter went to an orphanage in Champigny, France that was being run by an international

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Jewish organization, the OSE, Oeuvre de Securite aux Enfants. The OSE was founded in Russia in 1912 but transferred its headquarters in 1933 to France. In Champigny, Ziffer studied auto-mechanics. In December 1948, he finally acquired an American student visa and went to Nashville, Tennessee where his maternal uncle Bruno Borger, a chemical engineer, lived. He studied mechanical drafting at the Hume-Fogg Technical and Vocational High School. While enrolled at this school, Walter received a notice from the US Government that he must return to Czechoslovakia.

Visas fell into "preference" and "non-preference" categories and since Walter's happened to be in the non-preference category, his student visa had expired. Walter's uncle was acquainted with Mr. Mortimer May who knew the Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver. Kefauver wrote and carried through a US Senate bill which gave Walter permanent residency in the USA. Soon after this Bill #2810 was passed, Walter graduated from Hume-Fogg.

After earning an engineering degree and working six years for General Motors, he then returned to school, earning three additional degrees, including the Ph.D. and became a professor of theology in the USA and in France. He continues to teach at area colleges and in Elderhostels throughout the country. He and his wife Gail Rosenthal live in Weaverville and between them have six children and twelve grandchildren.