

■ PREWAR NAZI GERMANY ■

WALTER ESCAPES AT AGE 12

Born in 1927 in Germany, Walter Falk and his widowed mother lived in the city of Karlsruhe, which had a strong Jewish community. By the time Walter entered public school, Hitler had taken power and the Nazis were instituting their harsh anti-Jewish policies. After the Nazi-ordered mob violence of Kristallnacht in 1938, Walter escaped to England through the Kindertransport program.

I went to public school like everyone else in Karlsruhe. I was not permitted to say “Heil Hitler” or wear a uniform. This set me apart from the rest of my classmates. I had to attend school parades and listen to propaganda speeches. The attitude towards Jews became worse as time went on. The other students were told not to socialize with Jews. The teachers were not supposed to speak to Jewish parents. In 1937, the Jewish children were separated from other German children, and we were placed into a school for handicapped children, with the Jewish kids on one side of the building and the handicapped children on the other side.

On the night of November 9-10, 1938, the Nazis unleashed the violence of Kristallnacht, the “Night of Broken Glass.” They destroyed 257 synagogues, desecrated Jewish cemeteries, shattered the windows and looted over 7,000 Jewish businesses, and beat up countless Jews on the streets. About 100 Jews were killed and up to 30,000 Jewish men were arrested.

My mother and I lived in an apartment and we didn’t know what was going on. The first thing I noticed as I went to school that morning was that the Jewish shoe store downstairs had all its windows smashed. The glass and shoes were all over the street. I went off to school, and the first thing we were told in school was that the teacher would be late because the synagogue was burning and that the teacher, a religious man, had gone over to the synagogue to save the Torah,* which he did. He brought it out of the burning synagogue, I was told, and then came over to school. Then some plainclothesmen, I guess they were from the Gestapo, came and took the teacher and the headmaster away, and I went home.

Getting home, I found my mother in tears because two men had been up to our apartment and searched it. They had torn the curtains and a few pictures off the wall. I suppose they were looking for valuables. They were looking to see if there



* The Torah is the sacred scripture of Judaism, known to non-Jews as the first five books of the Old Testament (traditionally ascribed to Moses).

was a safe behind the picture. My mother was very upset. She said, "Let's go to Grandma's," and that's what we did. We went to the railroad station and took the train. My Grandma lived about an hour and a half away in Gondelsheim, a small village. Everything was in order there. There was a Nazi in full uniform standing in front of Grandma's house; he happened to be the next-door neighbor. This man put on his Nazi uniform and stood in front of the house so that no one would do anything to Grandma. He looked out for us. So he was a good Nazi, if there is such a thing.

Walter's mother searched for ways to get Walter out of Germany. Through a friend she learned of the Kindertransport program, through which 10,000 children, mostly Jewish, were allowed to emigrate out of Nazi-occupied territory to England. When Walter left in 1939, he hoped he would see his mother again.

After I left Germany, my mother moved in with her mother in the village of Gondelsheim. On October 22, 1940, all the Jews in this part of Germany, which was the province called Baden, were deported to Vichy, France. They were not told where they were going. They were given 15 minutes—at most, two hours—to get a suitcase packed, and they were allowed to take, I think, 50 kilos [about 100 pounds]—or whatever they could carry. There were little children and there were very old people. There were sick people. There were no exceptions made. They were put into cattle cars and sent off. My mother and grandmother were sent to the Gurs internment camp in unoccupied France.

In 1942, my mother was sent to Auschwitz. [He reads from a list of Nazi deportations.] It says here, "Nelly Falk shipped on Convoy #33, September 16, 1942." The Germans were very good at keeping records, and they listed exactly the train she was on. She was identified by her birthdate. There was only one Nelly Falk listed who was born on July 1, 1899. So there is no question about this.

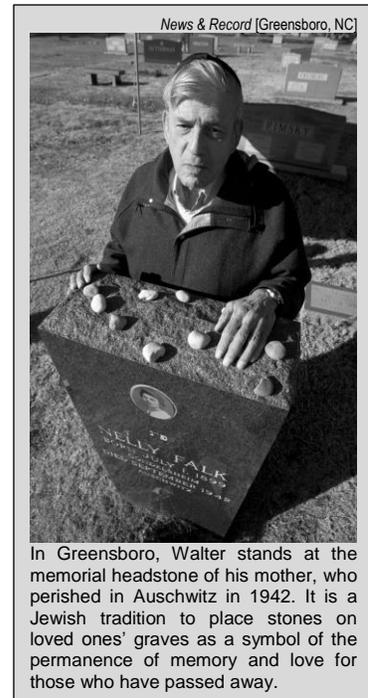
It's just recently that I could talk about it [1980s]. I would never have talked about the Holocaust during the 1940s and 1950s and maybe into the '60s. I wouldn't talk about it. It was too fresh. But now it needs to be told. Because there are people who say it never happened, and there are also people today, if you listen to them carefully, who are trying to justify what happened. I didn't go through what other people with numbers on their arms went through. I'm the luckiest fellow in the world. It could have me down there, too. No, I am very lucky.

Walter came to the U.S. in 1944 to live with an aunt in New York, where he finished high school. He was drafted into the army during the Korean War (1950-1953), serving in Iceland. When he returned he married his wife Ginger, who had left Germany with her family before the war. He began a long career in sales with the Lion Ribbon Co. In 1960 Walter and Ginger moved to Greensboro, NC, when Walter assumed the sales region of North Carolina and Virginia. They have no children.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- "Pebbles from a 'Kindertransport,'" *News & Record* [Greensboro, NC], December 6, 2006
www.greensboro.com/news/columnists/pebbles-from-a-kindertransport/article_50918661-8fa5-5c72-ba17-261ea7f461dd.html

Selection from Cecile Holmes White, *Witnesses to the Horror: North Carolinians Remember the Holocaust*, published in cooperation with the N.C. Council on the Holocaust, 1987, archive.org/details/witnessestohorro00whit. Reproduced by permission of the author.



In Greensboro, Walter stands at the memorial headstone of his mother, who perished in Auschwitz in 1942. It is a Jewish tradition to place stones on loved ones' graves as a symbol of the permanence of memory and love for those who have passed away.