

HENRY OERTELT

Born Zvee ben Avraham Oertelt 1/31/21 in Berlin. Parents divorced early on. Mother Elsie Messerschmidt was a seamstress. Brother Kurt (now a cantor in Portland ME). Spoke German. Twice a week religious school til Bar Mitzvah. Aware of Nazis coming to power. Saw Brownshirts marching and singing songs about killing Jews with swords "dripping with blood." Knew Jews were beaten and businesses burned. Family too poor to escape Germany. Jews banned from public entertainment sites 1936, public transportation, except for work, 1938. Wore yellow Star with "Juden" on it. Had to be sewed on tight or be arrested by SS. 9/39 Jews removed from jobs and put on road work. All work done by hand, carts filled with dirt/stones pulled by hand. Many Jews "disappeared" over time. Groups of school children brought to jeer at Jews laboring. Did street work until 1941. Due to a shortage of skilled labor, he was put in a furniture workshop to make furniture for a high-ranking Nazi.

March, 1943 family taken by SS at 2AM to burned out synagogue and then to station for transport to Terezinstadt. Danish and Czech Jews in camp as well with ~100,000 inmates. Ten people in 12'x12' room. Food scarce. Future wife's mother and a great uncle, who owned Brunn Department Store in Berlin also there. Most guards were Czech and were "fairly mild." Dug ditches and stole tomatoes from nearby fields, ate some and smuggled others back to barracks. At some point family sent to Auschwitz/Birkenau. Mother, a diabetic, selected out early on along with children and other sick people and killed. Forced to witness killing of prisoners who had tried to escape. Later, at Flossenbergl in 3/45, he was ill with a growth under arm. Snuck out of barracks to sick line. Saw a Dr. Schmittz kicking and punching sick prisoners who cried or complained when boils lanced. He did not complain and Schmittz operated on him and sent him to the sick barracks. Schmittz later tried and sentenced to death. Put on a death march from Flossenbergl until liberated by 3rd Army 4/23/45. Sent to a farming village for care as he weighed 82 pounds. Other prisoners given food by soldiers which was too rich and they died as a result. Brother Kurt also at Flossenbergl and he was picked to build airfields with 1000 others. All slept outside in cold and wet and many died from exposure. More died on march as US Army approached. Kurt escaped while guards sleeping and hid in a farmhouse. Remaining 50 prisoners were machine gunned by SS leaving him the only survivor.

Oertelt later walked to West Berlin to old apartment in French Zone. Discovered brother survived and was in Munich serving as a cantor. Heard him on the radio. In 1949, he moved into the British Zone and later came to St. Paul, MN. Wife born 1925 and knew him back in prewar Berlin. He lectures at the university and at high schools about the Holocaust. Distrusts Germans and Czechs his age as he wonders if they killed Jews. More religious now. Feels he survived because he was small and poor and used to eating less.