

WALTER BEER
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Walter was born in 1922 in a small town in Czechoslovakia. He came from a large, well-to-do family; his father was a merchant and he had two older siblings. He reminisced about a pleasant life which changed after the occupation. Non-Jews stopped communicating with the Jewish population, Walter had to leave school and his father lost his job, although he did have a small pension. His older brother left for England and his mother's brother went to the United States.

Prior to moving to the ghetto in 1939, Walter worked in a forced labor group. 300 Jews from his town were sent to Poland near Niskov to build barracks, but the work was difficult as the area was all sand. Walter tried to escape to Russia but he was caught and sent back. After six months he was sent back to his home until 1941 when all the Jews in his town were sent to Theresienstadt. His mother had previously died.

Walter describes life in Theresienstadt where he stayed with his father until 1944. The camp was self-governed between the Austrian, German and Czech Jews. He describes much fighting between the groups. They made German uniforms, worked at farming and mined mica. Walter was by this time an electrician and worked as such. He said Rabbi Leo Beck was very influential in the ghetto. He had communication with some people in Auschwitz and so knew about the mass killings and gas chambers. Walter said there was a lot of sickness and death, but the young and healthy like him survived.

In the Fall of 1944 Walter's father was being sent to Auschwitz so Walter elected to go with him. He describes the ordeal of the cattle cars and then the shaving, stripping and delousing. He recounts the selection and telling his father to look strong so he wouldn't be sent to the side going to the gas chambers. After a few days, when Walter was made to carry the dead bodies to a site in wagons, he was sent to a smaller camp, Taucha, near Leipzig and his father was sent to Bergen-Belsen. In Taucha, Walter worked in a munitions factory. They got only soup and bread to eat, but they lived in hope. He said there was a lot of sharing between the prisoners but also a lot of collaboration. He tells of one German Jew so despised by the group that he was pushed into the electrical fence and then killed by hand. He remembers the Germans telling them with glee that FDR had died.

In mid-April the prisoners were sent on a march which had no particular destination. About 350-400 people were ordered to march; by liberation there were about 70 left. On May 4, they woke up and found the Germans were gone and the Russians had come. He and his friend Arthur Goldstein walked away from the group that was staying in a soccer field; after a few days they went back to the soccer field to find that the Germans had killed all the Jews.

Walter and Arthur took bikes and rode them until they got to a railroad and went by train to Prague. They were given food and shelter by the Jewish Center, but many of the things were stolen by the Russians. Walter got typhoid and spent 4 weeks in a makeshift hospital. He found out his father had died in Bergen-Belsen but his brother was alive in England. He came back and joined the Czech air force. Eventually their uncle in America was able to bring them to the US in 1946. He remains very close to his brother.

Walter states that his 2 daughters are very interested in his and his wife's stories. He now lives in Atlanta and feels that his experience strengthened his Judaism. He feels that a

holocaust could happen again because of the economic jealousy towards Jews in US and Europe. The state of Israel is very important as a safe haven.