

A Living Memorial in their own words

Family of Walter Lachman

I was 5 years old in 1933 when the Nazi Party came to power and Hitler was named Chancellor. Prior to that life was normal, practically good, as we lived a middle-class life style thanks to my father's wholesale kerchief and handkerchief business which he entered with my grandfather. My parents Max and Frieda Lachmann, grandparents, and great grandparents were all born in Germany, mostly in Berlin. My father, a university graduate and trained as an engineer, was "very German." For many years after the Nazis rose to power he would say "This government won't last" and "If we have to leave we'll leave on the last train."

I was an only child and we had a nice apartment not far from the business and also a small summer house in Neuenhagen near Berlin. In summer, we took vacations in Italy, Austria, or Switzerland. My father would travel with us and stay the first week, and then pick us up at the end of the summer.

I entered public school in 1934 and remember that before classes we assembled in the yard and sang the national anthem and also the Hymn of the Nazi-party. At first, I suffered discrimination at school, but around the dinner table there was constant talk about the Nazis and the increasing measures that were taken against Jews. First Jews could no longer be university lecturers, judges, government officials and members of the armed forces. Then my father's customers were intimidated not to trade with Jews. Then Jewish doctors could only treat Jewish patients and Jewish lawyers could only advise Jews. Then we had to turn in our radios and could not subscribe to newspapers. In 1936 the racial laws were passed.

Throughout all this time my father kept saying things would get better, so we stayed.

By 1937, it was illegal for Jewish children to attend public school so I started to go to the Jewish school near our synagogue. I had to walk or take the train to school and the gentile boys waited for us, and beat us, jeered at us and sometimes threw our books into the river Spree. Every morning I worried about the trip to school and woke up early thinking about the ordeal. Also about this time Jews could no longer own pets. We had a terrier and my father had to bring our dog to be put down.

In summer 1938, we went to one of the few places where Jews could still vacation. While there my mother became ill. It turned out that she had acute leukemia and died soon after. In November 1938, "Kristallnacht" took place. Many synagogues in Germany were set afire and the few Jewish businesses that remained were vandalized. Kristallnacht finished my father's business off.

My father had been coughing and smoking for years, and in December, 1940, soon after my mother died he came down with tuberculosis and died. I moved in with my maternal Grandmother who was in her early 60s and seemed very old to me. While I lived with her, I continued to navigate my way through the German bullies to the Jewish school, but I could not play out in the street and was very lonesome. As my bar mitzvah approached in 1941 there were no restaurants or facilities where a reception could be held. Nevertheless, I learned my torah portion and my grandma planned a small get-together for her friends in our apartment. We had no close family left in Berlin. My paternal grandparents had died, and my only aunt, Alice Gabali, had left for the US. My father's brother was in Palestine. On the morning of my bar mitzvah, I decided that I was mad at God and that I would not read my Torah Portion. My grandma and the rabbi tried to persuade me to do it, but I was adamant. As a side-note, if I am around in 2012, I will have a bar mitzvah together with Matthew, my older grandson.

About the middle of January 1942, we received a letter from the government ordering us to report for "resettlement" in the former synagogue, one of the few to survive Kristallnacht. On January 20, we were allowed to bring one suitcase which could not exceed certain dimensions and weight and also were advised to leave all other possessions in the apartment, lock the door behind us and bring the keys to the reporting point. Once we arrived at the reporting point our suitcases were searched and we had to turn over any cash we had brought with us. All the seats in the synagogue had been removed and we spent the night lying on the floor. That evening I watched the first person die; a man near us who

had a heart attack. In the morning we were brought by truck to a railroad siding near Berlin, and loaded on freight cars. There were about 50 people per car, so there was not room to lie, only to stand or sit. We were provided with a toilet bucket. The journey was long and the car was cold and got colder as the train slowly made the journey east. From time to time we were given bread and an opportunity to empty the bucket. On January 28, we arrived at another railroad siding covered with much snow and we were told that after the seven-day journey we were in Riga, Latvia. We were invited to place our suitcases on trucks, and that was the last we saw of them. We then marched for some time until we arrived at a part of the city that had been partitioned off with barbed wire, the ghetto in Riga. There were small dilapidated walk-up apartment houses with communal toilets. We settled down in the various rooms of each apartment, and grandmother and I landed in a kitchen along with two other people. There were clothes in the closets and some food in the kitchen and linens on the beds. We thought this



Walter Lachman in Berlin, circa 1933.

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Family of Walter Lachman continued

all very peculiar, but now we know that in November 1941 about 80,000 Latvian Jews who had been in the ghetto were rounded up and taken to Rumbuli Forest near Riga and shot.

I was only 14 and in a strange city and I did not want to listen to the “old” people moan groan, so when a loudspeaker truck asked for volunteers to sort clothing, I signed up. We sorted used clothes every day and at night I came home to the “kitchen” and Grandma for a meager meal. On February 5, 1942, I came home and grandma was not there. There was a rumor that some older people had been taken for light work to a fish cannery nearby and would probably be back soon. I kept sorting clothes and sometime in early February the truck that brought the clothes also had a soiled grey cloth coat with a Persian lamb collar that I recognized as grandma’s. I knew then that there was no cannery and that my grandma would not be back. We now know that a group of older people had been rounded up in the ghetto and had been shot at Rumbuli Forest.

I had always been a sheltered child without any street-smarts, and now I was all alone in the world. But I kept sorting the clothes, and must have been good at it because I was given work in a German army depot where we reconditioned and cleaned and repaired uniforms. We received some bread and artificial honey for lunch which made this a good job. The ghetto was liquidated some time in 1943, and we were placed in a concentration camp, but I continued to work at the army depot. The camp was called Kaiserwald. It was not an extermination camp but a work camp. Food, however, was very meager and we got weaker. Going to sickbay was not an option because people who went there were never seen again. There were occasional beatings and serious offenders (such as anyone stealing food from the SS kitchen) were hanged, but most of us persevered. We now also worked loading and unloading ships in Riga harbor, dangerous work because Russian bombers flew over the port frequently and dropped bombs. As the Russian Army came closer to Riga, we were transported, along with the army depot to Libau also in Latvia. The Russians continued their bombardments and a direct hit on our barrack killed about 30 of us.

Near the end of 1944, we were put on a ship and transported to Germany where the SS ordered us to stand on the deck of the ship in our striped prisoner uniforms, in the hopes that the ship, laden with plunder, would not be bombed. When we arrived in Hamburg we were not expected and nobody knew what to do with us. So for about a week they put us in the local jail. Then at the end of 45 days we were brought by police truck to Bergen-Belsen.

Bergen-Belsen was overcrowded. Disease was rampant, particularly typhus. There was almost no food or water. There were lice everywhere. The Germans knew they were on their last legs, and

*Walter Lachman in Springfield,
Massachusetts, 1947.*

they no longer cared about us. They only thought of saving themselves. They left us alone and did not hurt us, but also did not feed us. Within days I became sick and soon I was only able to drag myself out of the barracks in the morning to lie outside and then drag myself back inside at night. Once in a while we received some bread but we were so sick that it was hard to keep it down. On April 15, 1945, we were liberated by the British Army. It was hard to feel much joy, since we just did not know if we would make it. The British found 13,000 unburied dead at Bergen-Belsen and another approximately 30,000 died in the first four weeks after liberation.

After the liberation, my first priority was to get well. This took several weeks. I then worked as an interpreter for the British army. I miraculously remembered that my Aunt Alice and her husband Alfred Gabali were in Springfield, Mass., and a kindly sergeant helped me send her a letter.

Soon after I came to Springfield, I began looking for jobs, which was not easy as this was when the GIs all came home from the war. I looked at wholesale textile places such as Lynch and Katz, and Rubin Brothers with no luck. But while I applied at Rubin Brothers, Adolph Katten from Blake’s was there buying inventory for his store. A few days later, Arthur Levy, the bookkeeper at Rubin Brothers called me and suggested that I go to the “X” and apply at Blake’s. I went to work there the next day for \$22 a week. While I worked there I took correspondence courses to get a high-school equivalency certificate and later took evening courses at Northeastern University (Springfield) which was located in the old YMCA building on Chestnut Street.

In 1958, I married Jean Rohald from Chattanooga, Tennessee. We have two daughters, Deborah and Miriam. I continued to work at Blake’s and later bought it. We lived in Springfield until I retired in 1996 and moved to California.

