



A Jewish GI Returns Home to Nazi Germany

By Carla Curtis

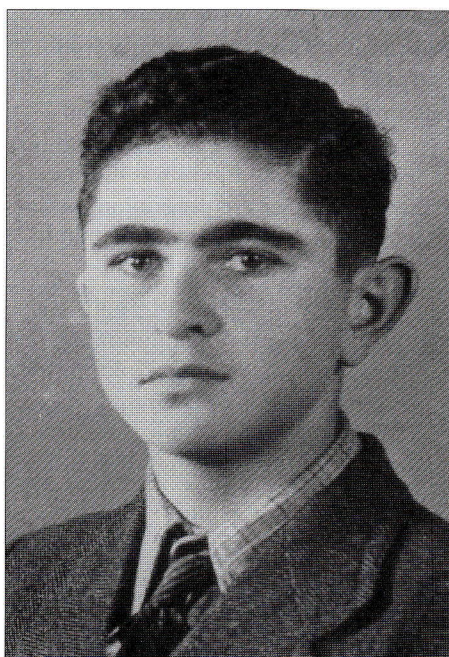
During an interview with Sandra Breisacher Lessig on November 10, 2004, she related the fascinating story of her father's escape from Germany. This was no ordinary story, but one with sadness, hope, and justice. This is a story about a man thwarting the Nazis and their anti-Semitism by escaping from Germany. He is, nevertheless, a survivor of the persecution doled out to so many under Hitler's regime. This man lost his childhood to tormentors and persecutors but returned as the victor.

Walter Breisacher, Sandra's father, was born on May 14, 1922, in Breisach, Germany. Breisach is a small town nestled along the Rhine River and situated on the edge of the Black Forest. A town where both Christians and Jews lived in harmony for centuries, Breisach's population was approximately 3,500 just prior to World War II and the beginning of the Nazi persecution.

The Breisacher family can trace ancestry in this town back to the 1600s. They were an old, well-known and respected family. Walter's father, Bertold, was a decorated World War I veteran. He fought bravely for the Kaiser and the fatherland. Bertold and Hedwig Breisacher were members of the Social Democrat Party under the Weimar Republic and they owned a lucrative wholesale textile business. Both Christians and Jews frequented their shop. The Breisachers were Germans, albeit, German Jews. They kept kosher and attended synagogue and, for all purposes, they were upstanding German citizens of Breisach, Germany. Anti-Semitism had not been a factor in their everyday lives. Walter had happy memories of his childhood in Breisach, Germany, but

the rise in anti-Semitism shattered his adolescent years.

In the early 1930s, the peace and harmony with which they lived began to disintegrate. Walter's friends began to abandon him. He was, after all, a Jew. At school he was harassed, tormented, and called vicious



A young Walter Breisacher (1922-2000).

Courtesy Breisacher Family

names. Nobody would sit with him. He repeatedly heard, "I can't sit by you. You are a Jew and Jews stink." They told him he would contaminate them, as he was a Jew. Walter was devastated. Just a year or so prior, these same people came to his bar mitzvah party and considered him a good friend. Walter soon became afraid to attend classes. The anti-Semitic hatred came gradually but the pain Walter felt was intense. His best friend, Paul Braun, would now have to sneak over in the middle of the night to see his friend Walter.

When all Walter's old classmates and friends joined the Hitler Youth, he became even more isolated. The persecution among his peers increased. He was consistently

called "dirty Jew boy." It was difficult to explain to a young boy why he was suddenly ostracized and not able to wear all these nice new uniforms, go off to camps, and sing and march in the streets. He was "different."

By 1933, Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany and anti-Semitism was rampant. Although the Nuremberg Laws had been enacted, many restrictions already applied to Jews. German citizens were discouraged from shopping at Jewish stores. Jews could no longer play in parks or eat in restaurants. Jews were unable to employ any female less than 35 years of age. The Breisachers' *Kindermädchen* (governess) had to leave because she was a gentile under 35 years old. Walter and his sister considered her part of their family. This was a great loss.

Schools had become more segregated. Those few Jews who still attempted an education were beaten, tormented, and harassed by classmates. *Der Stürmer* newspaper began to display caricatures of Jews. Captions under these horrid pictures labeled Jews as perverts, sexual deviants, and killers. These drawings scared Walter and his younger sister. For a young boy, it felt like his world was coming apart. How would he survive these horrors?

Walter's parents noticed the increase in anti-Semitic activities. Even though everyone kept saying "This will blow over. It has happened before. Be patient," Walter's mother, Hedwig, was not convinced. She was becoming very concerned with her children's torment, beatings, harassment, and fear. She insisted they leave Germany. Her husband, Bertold, was in his fifties and this would be a major change for him. He would have to sell his business, leave family and friends, travel to strange lands, and learn a new language. He, too, had his own fears. Nonetheless, Hedwig Breisacher was adamant about leaving Germany before the persecution and terror increased. They made plans to leave Germany and immi-

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grate to the United States.

Bertold, Hedwig, and their two children, Walter and Helga, left Germany in October 1938 with \$12 (U.S.) in their pockets. Walter was sixteen years old. They were unable to bring the grandparents. They were too old and would not pass the physicals required by the United States government. The Breisachers settled in Indianapolis, Indiana. Helga attended school while Walter obtained employment. Bertold did odd jobs while looking for full time employment and Hedwig took in boarders. Letters received from Germany made them realize how lucky they were to escape the wrath of the Nazis. Other family members were not so lucky. A young cousin with Down's Syndrome was euthanized. Many of Walter's aunts, uncles, and their families perished in the gas chambers.

When the United States became involved in World War II, Walter Breisacher, not yet a U.S. citizen, joined the Army. He was assigned to a tank division and sent to

Europe. Walter fought hard, saw many horrors, and slowly gained promotions. By the time they reached Germany, he was a sergeant. They fought through France and into Germany. Approximately three miles outside of Breisach, their intelligence informed them there were German soldiers holed up in Walter's hometown. Three days of artillery exchanges ensued, and finally they were cleared to go in. The tanks rolled into Breisach. Walter was finally "free!" He would never be tormented and persecuted again. Walter went into Breisach as the liberator, carrying a gun, and wearing a United States military uniform. No longer could he be considered a "dirty Jew boy." Now he was the hero. He was the liberator. As they rolled into the town, Walter saw his old friend, Peter Braun. Braun was walking down the road in a German military uniform. He had just returned from the East.

Walter's commanding officer asked him to interpret for him. As this was the town from which Walter fled persecution, he was given authority to make any request of the

Burgemeister (mayor). Walter asked for the cemetery to be repaired. He noticed that headstones had been broken and used as stepping-stones. Graves had been desecrated. This was Walter's heritage and its disarray disturbed him. The cemetery was repaired forthright and Walter could finally mourn the devastation caused by the Nazis. He and his family had lost everything. They had been persecuted, tormented, and lived horrors beyond belief. Now he was back. He was their liberator. He had beaten Hitler and the Nazis. Justice prevailed.

A few years later, Walter became a U.S. citizen. He lived a long, fruitful life and passed away in 2000 at the age of 78. Walter's eldest child, Sandra Breisacher Lessig, lives in Houston with her husband, Van, and their two children. They are very active in the community. Sandra works long hours for the Jewish Federation and Holocaust Museum Houston. The Lessig family firmly believes that we must never forget man's inhumanity to man and continue to strive for peace. ★



The Breisacher family decided to leave the home in Germany behind and flee to America. They were among the lucky ones. Six million other Jews, unable to escape the Nazi war machine, perished during the war.

Courtesy Breisacher Family