

## Karel Langer

### Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born on September 6, 1929 in Uhersky Brod, Czechoslovakia to Arnost and Irena Langer. I had a brother Pavel, who was six years older than myself. My paternal grandparents were Moric and Marie Langer; my maternal grandparents were Eduard and Ida Winter.

I spent ten happy years of childhood in the small rural town in Moravia playing in my father's lumberyard and going hunting with him and our wonderful hunting dogs, whose breed and names I maintain to this day.

On March 15, 1939 the Germans marched in to occupy what was left of Czechoslovakia. Within a short time we were evicted from our home, and a German family moved in. We, along with hundreds of other Jews from the surrounding area, had to move into the Jewish section of town. We lived there with curfews and restrictions until January 27, 1943 when we were all assembled at the local high school and sent by train to Terezin. Terezin was a military garrison from the time of Marie Teresa that had been converted by the Germans into a ghetto. I lived separately from my family in a room of thirty boys. Fourteen of those boys survived the war, and this year eight of us met in Prague for a reunion. In December of 1943, my family was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. We were kept together in what was called the "familien lager". The camp was very close to the gas chambers and crematoria and the stench of burning bodies surrounded us. We barely lived from day to day; not knowing what fate awaited us.

In the summer of 1944 my entire family was sent on to work camps in Germany. My father, brother and I went to Blechhammer; my mother went to Hamburg as a part of a work brigade cleaning the streets after the Allied air attacks. In Blechhammer I witnessed eight executions by hanging of innocent prisoners. Despite the personal danger, I remember being very happy when the Allies bombed the factory where we were working. To us this meant we were getting closer to the end of the war and closer to freedom.

In January 1945 the Russians launched an offensive and came within a few miles of our camp. The Germans evacuated the camp and we spent two weeks on a "death march" to Gross Rosen. My father perished on that march. We were sent from Gross Rosen to Buchenwald by cattle car. From the time I arrived in Buchenwald, I was in the camp hospital with frozen feet, which I developed when my shoes fell off on the long march through the snow. On April 11, 1945 the camp was liberated by the American Army. After one month, we were repatriated back to Czechoslovakia. My mother and brother managed to survive and we eventually found our way back to our home. Out of a population of approximately 900 Jews. Only twenty or so survived.

In 1947 I went to England to school. Due to the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, my mother urged me to stay in England. In 1949 my mother and brother immigrated to Israel, and I joined them soon after. I spent four years in Israel, two of them in the Army. In 1953 I moved to

Canada where I lived until 1961. During that time my brother died as a pilot in the Israeli air force while on a mission.

In 1961 I moved to San Francisco where I found employment in the furniture industry. In 1972, I started a retail furniture company called The Chair Store. I retired in 1988 but have become active again in the import business.

I have been married for the past twenty-two years; my wife's name is Marilyn. We have three daughters: Maya, Petra, and Pavla.