

From immigrant to entrepreneur

WALTER SOMMERS LIVES A LIFE EMBODYING AMERICAN IDEALS

Words *Kiel Majewski* Photo *Joe Garza*

Shards of broken glass. Store front windows smashed. Merchandise strewn about the street. The people of Hamburg, Germany, watched helplessly with tears in their eyes.

Seventeen year old Walter Sommer pedaled his bicycle home from the import/export office where he was an apprentice, surveying the damage and trying to comprehend what was happening.

A few blocks down the street, Sommer passed the reform synagogue where he attended services. It was engulfed in flames. Fire fighters stood by, only kicking into action to wet the roofs of the adjacent buildings so they wouldn't catch fire. Nazi stormtroopers supervised the firefighters to make sure they didn't attempt to quell the blaze.

Nov. 9, 1938. Kristallnacht. The Night of Broken Glass.

That night, some 1,000 synagogues were set ablaze across Germany in a wave of attacks that also destroyed countless Jewish businesses and homes. The mob violence was orchestrated by the Nazi party in what is widely recognized as the opening act of the Holocaust.

At midnight on Nov. 9, Sommer's father Julius was arrested in his hometown of Frankfurt. In a scene that reveals the complexity of the Holocaust, the policeman who showed up to arrest the elder Sommer was an acquaintance of the family.

"You'll have to come with me to the police department," the officer said politely. "You may be away from home for a few days. Pack your things and have something to eat." There, in the kitchen of their Frankfurt apartment, Julius Sommer, his wife, and the policeman shared an early breakfast at midnight.

From there, Julius Sommer was imprisoned in the Buchenwald concentration camp. After being treated very poorly, he was released 30 days later when the family's immigration papers for America came through. In January 1939, the Sommer family boarded a Dutch ship bound for America and an uncertain future.

It's a slow Friday at CANDLES Holocaust Museum. Walter Sommers is the docent on

duty, and he's anxious to educate some visitors, but so far we've had none. He bides his time in the library, reading "Who Financed Hitler?" through a magnifying glass. As the doorbell dings, Sommers quickly puts down the book, grabs his cane and makes his way down the hall.

False alarm. It's the FedEx courier making a delivery (which wouldn't necessarily stop Walter from striking up a conversation, but the courier is in a hurry).

Walter heads back down the hallway, skipping over the library to take a seat in the office I share with museum founder Eva Kor. Walter and I regularly converse on Fridays, often about a newspaper article on the Holocaust or museum business. Occasionally, Walter lowers his head, looks over the rim of his glasses and gives me a tidbit of advice on the operations of the museum.

This time, though, he casually mentions the time when he helped to desegregate downtown Terre Haute.

I quickly grab my voice recorder from my bag and ask Walter to tell me the story.

"Oh, I never told you that?" Walter says with a chuckle. He shifts in his seat and his eyes start to glow. He raises his voice as he begins to tell the story.

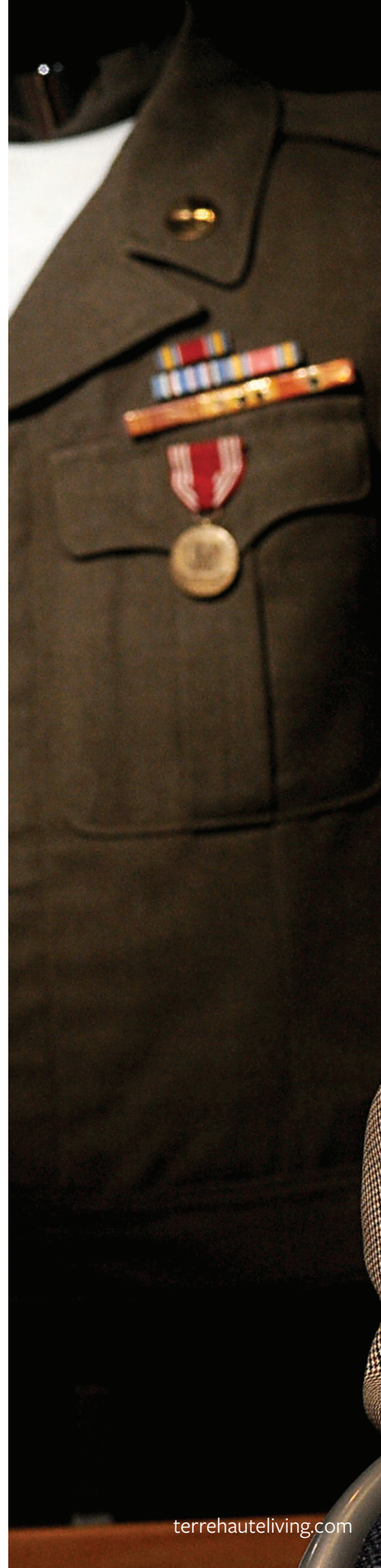
"It was in the middle or late 1960s," he tells me. "The Deming Hotel had a wonderful dining room. I went to lunch with two other managers from the Meis store, and we took with us a nice young man who was in the display department, and he happened to be African American." The way he phrases that last sentence catches my attention.

"And he said, 'They probably won't serve me.' We told him, 'If they won't serve you, then they won't serve us, and we'll never go back.'"

"So we walked into the Deming Hotel coffee shop and we sat down. The waitress who had always previously waited on us looked at us, gave us kind of a dirty look, and I said, 'What is your problem?' She said, 'The way you're seated, I cannot serve you.'"

"So of course we knew immediately what she meant, and we told her, 'Talk to your manager, and you will either serve all of us, or we will leave and never come back.' So a moment later she came back and said, 'Okay, it's all settled. You will be waited on.'"

"That was the moment of desegregating the Deming Hotel coffee shop. The Terre Haute House followed suit very soon after that. And



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from that moment on, African Americans could eat wherever they wanted to eat in downtown Terre Haute." Walter finishes like he started: with a chuckle, as if to say, "So that was that. No big deal."

I've known Walter for five years through our mutual association with CANDLES Holocaust Museum, and I've never heard him mention this story. I'm amazed as much by his rich life experience as his modesty. Here is a man who escaped Nazi Germany, arrived in New York City with exactly 25 cents to his name, eventually reached the rank of vice president of Meis department stores in Terre Haute, and apparently helped to integrate the downtown dining rooms of Terre Haute. Not that he thinks of any of that is a big deal.

I tell Walter I'd like to write a profile of him. He initially agrees and gives a good natured chuckle, but later he pulls me aside, looks over the rim of his glasses, and asks, "Don't you think you should write about Eva Kor first?"

Born in Frankfurt, Germany, on Dec. 29, 1920, Walter Sommers has eventually come to embody two hallmark American characteristics: entrepreneurialism and respect for the rights and freedoms of others.

He comes by the entrepreneurialism honestly. His father, Julius, after serving in the German army during World War I, purchased a small food store from a Turkish woman in 1918. He took on a business partner and the two men expanded the single store into a chain of fine foods stores. The chain survived Germany's post Treaty of Versailles economic hardships, when the German mark wasn't worth the paper on which it was printed. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Hitler instituted a series of reforms that helped the economy bounce back. By 1934, Sommer and his partner owned 38 stores in and around Frankfurt.

At that time, the intentions of the Nazis and their staying power were not as clear as they perhaps seem today.

"May 1, 1933," Walter began, telling a story to illustrate the point. "My father, who drove a 1932 Buick, was invited by his own employees, who had joined the Nazi party and were wearing storm trooper uniforms, to participate in the May Day parade. Our car was bedecked in black, white and red flags, and I was permitted to ride along. It made a tremendous impression on me."

When Walter became ill with typhus and fell behind in geometry, his math teacher personally visited the house wearing his swastika lapel pin to help him catch up.

But Hitler's economic leadership was a double edged sword. Ultimately, increased persecution of Jews in Germany severely hampered the Sommer family business. In 1936, the extended Sommer family held a meeting to decide whether to stay in Germany or attempt to emigrate. Like most German Jews, they considered themselves German first and Jewish second. Besides his father, two of Walter's uncles served in the German army during World War I. "We are staying here," the family decided.

By 1937, it became clear to Walter's parents that they had to leave. After a lengthy search,

they located a distant cousin in America who was willing to conditionally vouch for the family so long as they promised not to bother him for financial assistance upon their arrival in America.

"Without somebody vouching for you, that they would stand for your support, you could not be considered an immigrant to the United States," Walter reminded me. "You have to remember that in 1939, unemployment in the United States was in excess of 20 percent. These were tough days. But we were very grateful to him that he was willing to at least fill out the paper."

The decision to leave Germany was tough for the Sommer family. It was the only life they had known. They felt comfortable among their friends and neighbors.

"Our school did not permit the slightest degree of discrimination, right up to 1937," Walter said. In 1937, Walter opted to end his formal schooling after six years in order to take an apprenticeship in Hamburg. "When I left the school, I was the only Jewish student in the class. The principal had me up in his office, and he said, 'Why are you leaving?' And I told him, 'I'm leaving because I want to prepare myself for immigration since I cannot attend university in Germany. I do not see any kind of a future for myself in this country."

"He said, 'I understand and I wish you well.'"

At the Hamburg import/export office where he apprenticed, Walter was able to develop marketable skills while exercising his French, Spanish, English and German. Though he knew not where he would end up, Walter knew he had to leave Germany.

In preparation for immigration, his father and mother had to turn over all of their assets to the German government. They sold their home under duress, and the resulting income was also confiscated by the government.

By Nov. 9, 1938, only four of Julius Sommer's stores remained. That night, they were all destroyed in the Kristallnacht attacks.

The experience of the Sommer family reveals an amazing diversity of encounters with anti-Semitism among Germany's Jews. Whereas some Jews were quite plainly targeted by anti-Semitic violence and discrimination, Sommers remains adamant that he experienced none personally. And yet the entire course of his life was shaped by the systematic economic persecution suffered by Germany's Jews. The family's final experience in Germany again reveals the dissonance between everyday experiences of anti-Semitism (or lack thereof) and the systematic effects of it. The story also behooves us to look past a "good guy" versus "bad guy" dualism.

"You had to show your passport before you crossed the border, and you had to show other papers, proving you had liquidated your checking and savings accounts, and you had to have all the necessary papers," Walter said. "On the train out of Germany, an SS officer came into our compartment to check our papers. He

came in and sat down and said, 'It is very sad and too bad that nice people like you have to leave our country.' My father, who had just come out of a concentration camp, couldn't believe he was hearing right."

"My parents were actually in tears when they were leaving Germany because they were going into a totally unknown future," Walter said. Eleven other Sommers remained in Germany. All perished in the Holocaust.

Walter, his mother, his father and his younger sister Lore, arrived in New York harbor in January 1939, virtually penniless except for the bit of cash his parents were able to retain. Walter started out with 25 cents of his own.

"I'll give you a quarter if you know the capital of Wisconsin," said a shipmate who attended the University of Wisconsin.

"I believe that's Madison," replied Walter.

"By God, you know that?" said the non-founded student. Ever the entrepreneur, Walter pondered what he could buy with 25 cents. He recalled his options with ease.

"Twenty five cents in New York City would buy a big piece of apple pie with a tremendous scoop of vanilla ice cream," Walter said. "It would also buy five loaves of one day old bread

On their way to California in 1943, Walter Sommer and his fellow U.S. artillery men were crossing the country in Pullman railroad cars, when the engine broke down in a city called Terre Haute, Ind.

or five subway rides."

So the family arrived under intense pressure to establish themselves in New York City. Julius spoke only German and was unable to work upon arrival. How long did it take Walter to find a job?

"Forty eight hours," he says sharply, sitting up straighter in his chair as he tells the story.

"I got a reference to a fabric store at 411 5th Ave. It was a business run by three brothers, the Kates brothers. I told them I needed a job very badly. They told me business was very bad and they were not hiring.

"I told them, 'If you hire me, I will make all your piece goods look like they just came in, with new wrappers, because they look like they have been sitting here for a while gathering dust.' Also I told them that I found some remnants in the basement just thrown aside, and I might have a market for those remnants in Mexico. They looked at each other, and said, 'When will you start?' And I said, 'Right now.'"

Sommer started at 25 cents an hour, for about \$11 per week. Nearly two years later, he was earning \$15 per week. But like many Americans, his world changed dramatically on Dec. 7, 1941.

The morning after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Walter Sommer tried to volunteer for the U.S. Army but was met with derision at the

local recruiting office.

"Since I was not a citizen, and had only come to this country in January of 1939, they kind of laughed at me and told me I should go back to Germany, because they might need me," Walter said. But as America's war effort required more troops, Walter was eventually issued a draft number. By March 1942, the tone of the recruiters had changed.

"I went back to the same recruiting station, and I was told, 'Well, your draft number is not coming up for several months, and you cannot volunteer since you are not a citizen, but being that you're here, we're going to draft you right here and now.'"

On their way to California in 1943, Walter Sommer and his fellow U.S. artillery men were crossing the country in Pullman railroad cars, when the engine broke down in a city called Terre Haute, Ind.

"We were stuck between 7th and 9th streets for about three hours," he recalled. "The whole town came out to greet us with coffee and donuts. AT&T set up telephones so we could call home.

"I couldn't believe how nice the people were. It was a heartwarming experience which was burned into my memory."

Walter entered the 306th Field Artillery Battalion, 77th Infantry Division, which fought in three major engagements: Guam in the Marianas, Leyte and Cebu in the Philippines and Okinawa. The Kates brothers sent \$1 bills to support their former employee overseas, but

Sommer's entrepreneurialism again emerged.

"I wrote them, 'Stop sending money, I can't buy anything with that over here,'" Walter said. "So they started sending remnants of fabric." He traded the fabric to the locals in the Philippines for live chickens, which made him very popular among his battery mates.

Sommer eventually reached the rank of corporal. But it during his military service, he earned another important distinction: American citizen.

"In the spring of 1943, my platoon lieutenant and two buddies accompanied me to the courthouse in Los Angeles, and within a matter of minutes I became a U.S. citizen. But I had a name change. The judge felt the name 'Sommer' was too German sounding."

Thereby, Walter Sommer became Walter Sommers.

After the war, Sommers returned to New York and eventually started a company that produced synthetic leather. The business was profitable, but he found the New York life draining. Around the same time, he met the woman who would become his wife.

Louise Sommers' uncle, Salo Levite, was co owner of the Meis department store on Wabash Avenue in Terre Haute. At the same time Walter was looking to get out of New York, he was offered a job with Meis. Recalling his fond memory of Terre Haute, he sold Sommers Plastic Products (a thriving business today Google it) and accepted a position as buyer for

Meis. Walter and Louise purchased their first home at 905 Monterey Ave. in Terre Haute for \$11,000.

"My job was to start the ladies' sportswear department at the Meis store on Wabash Avenue. Mr. Levite thought that I was quite entrepreneurial and there was no reason in the world why I couldn't learn to do that," Walter said.


The stakes were high. At that time, before the Honey Creek Square shopping mall came into existence, downtown Terre Haute was a Mecca of retail for a large market area extending to St. Louis to the west, Chicago to the north, Indianapolis to the east and Evansville to the south.

"It was a very competitive place," Sommers recalled. "We were surrounded by two other family department stores and several chains." Besides Meis, downtown Terre Haute was also home to the Schultz, Smith, Wolf and Hertz (later Alden) department stores, as well as J.C. Penney, Roots (now Macy's) and Sears.

"In 1951 or '52, when the Terre Haute House still stood, on Saturdays you were barely able to walk on the sidewalks," Walter said as he described the downtown culture. "That's how busy the sidewalks were. For me to go to lunch, I had to go either by 11 o'clock or wait until 2 o'clock. Otherwise you couldn't find a table or chair. All the lunch places were busy. That was downtown Terre Haute."

Salo Levite's wife, Mary Levite, was the dress buyer for Meis.

"Mary Levite had the most phenomenal



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dress department in the Midwest," Sommers said. "She was the most outstanding dress buyer of her time."

Sommers himself was also a success. He became a buyer for the ladies suits, coats and furs department, and eventually became vice president. Sommers helped to grow the one Meis store into 10 stores by 1988 in Indiana, Illinois and Kentucky.

When Sears and J.C. Penney moved from Wabash Avenue to Honey Creek in the 1970s, traffic eventually diverted away from downtown, causing the collapse of specialty retail stores on Wabash Avenue. Eventually, Terre Haute's shopping center relocated to the nexus of I 70 and U.S. 41. While Lucien Meis of Terre Haute served as president of Meis department stores for several years, Meis headquarters also relocated to Honey Creek.

The Meis company was eventually sold to Elder Beerman. Mr. Levite passed away in the early 1990s, while Mary continues to live in Terre Haute and maintains a close relationship with Walter and Louise. She turns 96 this November.

Sommers retired in 1988, 40 years after he began with Meis.

Now, he is happy to see the revitalization of downtown Terre Haute.

"I'm very excited about the opening of the Children's Museum, the Hilton Garden Inn, the renovation of some of the business places and the monument of Max Ehrmann," he said. Sommers also cited the beautification of Seventh

Street and the improvements to the 13th Street corridor, Canal Street and the bicycle path on east Poplar Street as important projects.

"I think Terre Haute is beginning to look a lot better," he said. "It's becoming a more people friendly place."

In the 22 years since his retirement, Sommers has devoted himself to community service. He served as a volunteer and first aid instructor for the Red Cross, taught English as a Second Language through the Vigo County Public Library, was Chairman of the Jewish Welfare Fund, was past president of B'nai B'rith, is a member of the American Legion, and also volunteered for the Lighthouse Mission, the Jewish War Veterans, and Hospice of the Wabash Valley. Sommers became a Master Mason in 1965, and he is also a longtime member of the United Hebrew Congregation and current member of the Kiwanis.

Sommers also serves as a docent at CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center on Fridays from 1-4 p.m. Here his entrepreneurial spirit and respect for people of all backgrounds combine to make him a highly engaging docent with many important personal experiences to share. His further reflection on the desegregation of downtown Terre Haute reveals a perspective still very apropos for today's shrinking world, and one that simultaneously echoes the statements of civil rights leaders.

"When I came to Terre Haute in 1948, I

came from New York City," he said. "And in New York City, African Americans could eat wherever they wanted to eat. So I would say that was a very negative experience when I came to this part of the country. And I talked to several people about it, and they said, 'That's just the way it is, and I don't think we want to rock the boat.' That was the expression 'Don't rock the boat. It will play itself out eventually.' Well, we thought 'eventually' had lasted long enough. So the time had come to do something. It was a peaceful integration so to speak. The town was ready for it."

"We always felt that people should be treated decently and should be taken for who they are and not where they come from or what their racial background is. I was brought up to believe God created all people, and He made them in different colors and looks. And that's just the end of it."

Because of his outstanding service to the museum and his dedication to Holocaust education, CANDLES Holocaust Museum and Education Center is naming its library "The Walter and Louise Sommers Library."

And on Dec. 29, Walter will turn 90 years old.

"I'm amazed," he said on turning 90. "I never thought too much about it. It just sort of crept up on me. Every day is a special blessing." And those of us at CANDLES Holocaust Museum feel blessed to share some of those days with Walter.

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