

Holocaust survivor recounts incredible life since escaping Nazi Germany

By Caroline Enos | Staff Writer

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Holocaust survivor Werner Salinger fled Nazi Germany with his parents when he was just 6 years old, though not before witnessing the horrible night of Kristallnacht.

He remembers looking out of his family's second-floor home

in Berlin on the morning of Nov. 9, 1938, to find a sea of glass from broken store windows scattered across his street.

That day and the next, Nazis ransacked Jewish businesses and homes and rounded up more than 30,000 Jews to send to concentration camps, the first major act of doing so.

“My most vivid memory really is of the smoke, the very dark, acrid smoke that came from the burning synagogue just a block away,” Salinger said. “That’s stayed with me really all of my life.”

He would go on to escape the Holocaust, spend time with Albert Einstein and marry the daughter of a Nazi soldier — all memories he shared during a Zoom presentation hosted by the Beverly-based Lappin Foundation Thursday night to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, observed annually on Jan. 27.

The day's observance becomes more important as the number of survivors dwindles, Lappin Foundation Executive Director Debbie Coltin said.

“Here we stand with them at the threshold of time when the responsibility to bear witness to the Holocaust is passed from them to us,” she said.

Salinger, now 91, was born in Berlin in 1932 and had a “very normal childhood” until the Nuremberg Laws were passed by the Nazis in 1935.

The antisemitic laws declared that no Jew, regardless if they were practicing the religion or not, could be considered a true German citizen: A law that later included Black, Romani and Sinti people.

Salinger's mother, a dentist, and his father, a lawyer, could no longer treat or take on non-Jewish clients. He himself had to move from an integrated-kindergarten to a Jewish kindergarten with two of his best friends, both of whom would later perish in the Holocaust.

It wasn't until witnessing Kristallnacht that Salinger's parents decided to flee their home.

“As far as I know, in almost all the families that were able to leave, first of all, you had to have the money to leave,” he said. “My parents were both professional people and I guess had the money.”

They secured some of the few visas available to German Jews due to American immigration quotas, and an affidavit from movie mogul Carl Laemmle to sponsor them thanks to a connection through an aunt.

Laemmle, a German Jewish immigrant himself, produced the 1930 film and Academy Award best picture winner, “All Quiet on the Western Front,” co-founded Universal Studios and rescued hundreds of Jews from the Holocaust.

“Absent that (affidavit), I probably would have gone up in smoke like the other 6 million,” Salinger said.

After a short stint in London, his family arrived in the United States on Feb. 12, 1939.

Life wasn't necessarily easy for the family once they were out of danger from the Nazis. Starting school without knowing an ounce of English petrified Salinger, and while trying to set up another dentistry business in 1940, his mother died of tuberculosis.

Salinger went on to live with other refugee children at the home of relatives in Princeton, New Jersey, just down the street from Albert Einstein's house.

Einstein's caretaker was an old friend of Salinger's grandmother, who'd also managed to escape the Holocaust. Salinger remembered going with his grandmother to visit the house.

"If Albert Einstein was there — and he was a man who loved children — and I was just a kid, he would take me by the hand and we'd walk through his beautiful garden," Salinger said. "He'd take me back to his study, take the violin off the wall and played for me more than once."

Salinger eventually moved to Baltimore with his father and new step-mother, whose parents had survived both Dachau and Theresienstadt.

He returned to Germany for the first time in December 1951 as a U.S. Air Force intelligence officer. It was during his three years in the service there that he met his wife Martha, a German daughter of a Nazi soldier.

He was hesitant to tell her that he was Jewish, but it didn't matter to her or her family in the end, Salinger said. Her father had been drafted into the German army and served in German-occupied France and on the Russian front, where he was injured and sent back home.

"He was a liberal German," Salinger said. "I loved him and he loved me."

It was difficult for his step-mother, a highly devout Jew, to initially accept the marriage. But she eventually came around, and the couple would go on to have four children, six grandchildren and five great-grandchildren.

Today, he lives in Wayland, having previously called Phoenix home for decades. He continues to speak to classrooms about his life and the Holocaust.

“The message to kids when I talk to schools is to be upstanders. Don’t be bystanders,” Salinger said. “Bystanders allow these kinds of dreadful things to happen that must never happen again.

“Of course, all over the world, they do happen,” he said. “Genocides take place in other countries ... But the goal is never again.”

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Photo caption: Holocaust survivor Werner Salinger fled Nazi Germany with his parents when he was just 6 years old, though not before witnessing the horrible night of Kristallnacht. He spoke about his experiences before and after the Holocaust during a Zoom presentation by the Lappin Foundation Thursday night to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day.