

KAREL LANGER

Karel Langer survived several concentration camps

“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.”

Karel Langer was born in 1929, in Uhersky Brod, a small rural town in Czechoslovakia. He enjoyed playing in the family’s lumberyard and going hunting with his older brother Pavel and his father.

Evicted from their home in March 1939 when the Germans invaded, the family was moved into the Jewish section of the town, living there with curfews and many restrictions. In January 1943 they were all assembled at the local high school and sent by train to Theresienstadt, the Nazis’ “model” concentration camp where Karel was separated from his parents.

In December 1943 the family was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau and housed in the so-called Familienlager (family camp). Located very close to the gas chambers and crematoria, the stench of burning bodies surrounded them. They lived from day to day, not knowing what fate awaited them.

In 1944 the entire family was sent to work camps in Germany. Karel, with his father and brother, went to Blechhammer where he witnessed the execution by hanging of eight innocent prisoners. His mother went to Hamburg as a part of a work brigade cleaning the streets after the Allied air attacks.

In January 1945 a Russian offensive came within a few miles of Blechhammer. The Germans evacuated the camp and forced the inmates on a two-week death march during which Karel’s father died. The survivors arrived in Gross-Rosen and were sent on to Buchenwald by cattle car. Karel was placed in the camp hospital with frozen feet which he had developed when his shoes fell off on the march through the snow.

In April 1945 the camp was liberated by the American Army. The Langers were repatriated to Czechoslovakia, and eventually found their way back home. Karel, his mother and brother were three of only about twenty out of a pre-war population of approximately 900 Jews who had survived.

After the war, Karel went first to England to school and then in 1949 to Israel to join his mother and brother. He moved to Canada and in 1961 to San Francisco where he married and started a retail furniture company called The Chair Store.