

KURT MESSERSCHMIDT

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



Kurt Messerschmidt was born on January 2, 1915, in Werneuchen, Germany, and was raised by his mother, Else. Kurt moved with his mother to Berlin in 1918, where Else was a seamstress and designer.

Kurt had a younger half-brother, Henry Oertelt.

In 1921, Kurt entered public school and also attended classes in Jewish education. Kurt excelled as a linguistics scholar, musician, and athlete. He represented his Gymnasium (European secondary school that prepares students for the university) in an annual gymnastics competition in Berlin in 1932. Referred to by friends and teachers as the “exceptional Jew,” Kurt witnessed the intensifying persecution of Jews after the Nazis came to power in 1933.

Although offered a scholarship through his Gymnasium, Kurt knew he was unlikely to be admitted to Berlin University because of the antisemitic laws, which also prohibited him from being a published author in Germany. With limited options, Kurt worked as an interpreter in the Far East for a year before returning to Berlin to teach and coach in a Jewish school. On the day following the Kristallnacht Pogrom in November 1938, Kurt remembered arriving at his vandalized school to comfort and protect his students from attacks by the Hitler Youth.

In 1942, after the dissolution of his school, Kurt worked for a German furniture-moving firm whose owner, Mr. Schäffler, employed former Jewish educators to help them avoid deportation. Kurt’s family remained in

Berlin until 1943, when they were deported, along with Kurt’s fiancée, Sonja to the Theresienstadt ghetto in Czechoslovakia. Within the ghetto, despite long days of forced labor, Kurt sought to be a source of comfort and leadership. Kurt and Sonja married in Theresienstadt but soon were separated when Kurt and his brother, Henry, were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and assigned to work detail at Golleschau. There, through his musical talents, Kurt continued to provide comfort to fellow inmates.

Kurt and Henry remained at Golleschau until January 1945 when the camp was evacuated due to the approach of the Soviet Army. After surviving a death march, the brothers arrived first to Sachsenhausen and shortly thereafter to Flossenbu rg, where they were separated when Kurt continued on to Ganacker. Despite worsening illness, Kurt managed to survive until he was liberated near Traunstein, Germany, on May 1, 1945.

In the early post-war days, Kurt worked as a teacher and translator in Germany while searching for news of his family. After Kurt’s reunion with Sonja, they lived in Munich where Kurt was a soloist in a radio choir broadcast across Europe. On July 3, 1950, they left Germany for Brooklyn, New York, and then settled in Portland, Maine, where Kurt continued his profession as teacher and musician. Kurt’s brother, Henry, arrived in America a few years later. Their mother, Else, was murdered at Auschwitz-Birkenau. At the time of Kurt’s interview in 1997, he and Sonja had two children, Eva and Michael, and two grandchildren, Sarah and David.



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