

JOSEPH BERGER

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.



Jan Karski was born Joseph Berger was born to Imre and Ana (Goldner) Berger on September 20, 1937, in Subotica, a small town on the Hungarian-

Yugoslav border but spent most of his early years in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, where his father was a physician, and his mother's family owned a large factory. Joseph and his sister, Myriam, were raised in an observant Jewish home.

Joseph's father joined the Yugoslav army as a physician, remaining at his post while his family fled back to Subotica in 1941 when the Axis invasion began. After the Yugoslav army surrendered, Joseph's father escaped and reunited with his family in Subotica.

Joseph recalls that in 1943 the Bergers saw many dramatic changes in their lives. First, a German soldier took up residence in their home, and later that year the Gestapo arrested Joseph's father although he was subsequently released. The family then moved to Budapest, Hungary, hoping that the larger city would provide them with anonymity.

In mid-1944, over 1,000 Hungarian Jews, including the Berger family, left Budapest aboard the Kasztner transport rescue mission. However, the transport was detained in Austria and the passengers deported to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany.

At Bergen-Belsen, the Berger family was housed in a hospital barracks where Joseph's father was the only physician. One of Joseph's memories of that time is when a Nazi guard gave Joseph's father an apple after recognizing him as the physician who had long ago saved his child's life.

At the end of 1944, the Berger family was among those transported from Bergen-Belsen to a series of refugee camps in Switzerland where Joseph's father continued to practice medicine. In 1946, Joseph's father was offered a job in a hospital complex in Territet, Switzerland, where Joseph, who was eight, attended school for the first time.

In 1947, despite strict immigration quotas, the Berger family managed to immigrate to New York City via Paris and London with the assistance of a family friend living in the United States.

In 1965, while visiting Israel with his mother, Joseph met his future wife, Ester Widrich, who had, along with her parents, also been in Bergen-Belsen. After they married in 1966, Joseph was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War; his wife, a veteran of the Israeli Air Force, enlisted and served in Vietnam as well. Afterwards, they first moved to Pennsylvania where Joseph studied medicine and then to New York City, where he completed his medical residency. Their daughter, Daniela, born in 1975, was a student at Ithaca College at the time of Joseph's interview in 1995.