

More than 4 Questions with Warren Heilbronner

Interviewers: Josh Herz and Margie Searl, via Zoom, February 17, 2022

Warren was a toddler living with his older brother and parents in Stuttgart when the Nazis took power in 1933. His father, who was a textile engineer working in the family business, sought a sponsor for their immigration to the U.S. in 1936. Stuttgart was not as strongly Nazi as some other towns and antisemitism had briefly subsided during the 1936 summer Olympics in Berlin, but his attorney told his father he should try and get out now. He signed up but didn't get his "number" allowing him a place in line for a visa until 2 years later. A retired uncle in Memphis became their sponsor but the affidavit required by the U.S. guaranteeing support hadn't arrived by the Kristallnacht pogrom in November of 1938. During Kristallnacht his father hid at his in-law's home (his father-in-law had already been arrested and so it seemed potentially safer) while Warren and his brother watched through the second floor railing while the Gestapo came to their house. Their father was safe for the night and wasn't immediately found, but when he went to the factory where he worked the next day he was arrested and sent to Dachau.

The very next day the affidavit finally arrived at the post office but since it was addressed to Warren's father his mother was not allowed to pick it up. After attempting to do so in vain for several days she telegraphed an urgent request to please resend it addressed to her, and in time she was able to successfully receive it which led to his father's release from Dachau. In January 1939 they went fearfully to the consulate, knowing that his uncle had died 2 weeks before, but nobody else knew that yet and so the visa came through. Still, the German authorities wouldn't let them out without a 10 thousand Mark payment, but as a Jew his bank account was frozen. He had a life insurance policy which he was able to cash out and they were allowed to leave. First to Lausanne where there was an aunt who had stored some jewelry which they could sell, then Paris, then Rotterdam, arriving in the U.S in March of 1939. April, May, and June were spent in NYC to finish school. In September they went to Perry, where Warren's father's second cousin in Rochester, Ruth Wolf, had arranged for him to meet the Feinbloom brothers, who steered him to the Perry Knitting Company.

Perry was a small factory town with a large Polish population and in September 1939 as the Nazis rolled across Poland, the Heilbronners from Germany were not particularly welcome. There were few who appreciated any difference between Germans and German Jews, and they were regarded with suspicion: their mail was opened by the post office, their shortwave was disabled, and townspeople made especially sure their home was completely dark during air raids. Meanwhile Warren had learned English as a first grader in NYC and gradually adapted to Perry. After graduating from Cornell and Columbia Law School and a stint with the Army Reserve, he moved to Rochester for his first job as a lawyer.

He was familiar with TBK from his childhood. Cousin Ruth Wolf was the wife of the previously deceased TBK Rabbi Horace Wolf, and they had attended high holiday services at TBK while living in Perry. He started out by playing bridge with Lou Perlman, who suggested he usher. Eventually that led to being the head usher and then the TBK Men's Club. The Men's Club was a large and active group at the time, and had retreats at Seneca Lake which the rabbis would lead. At around this same time he met Joyce. Her family was strictly Orthodox, had belonged to Beth Joseph Center on St. Paul St., but fortunately she was flexible enough to begin attending TBK with Warren!

In 1968 he became president of the Men's Club. At the time, the Civic Club downtown was, with the aid of Rabbi Bernstein, hosting the Israeli ambassador at a luncheon at TBK. Warren was asked to pick him

up and later drop him off at the airport and so had the opportunity to tour around a bit and spend some time alone with Yitzhak Rabin.

Warren's early experience with antisemitism has had an effect on many of his activities since. He became TBK president in 1978 and he's been attending meetings ex-officio ever since. He's been a regular attendee at the RAC (Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism) biennial *Consultation on Conscience* meetings and has served informally as a liaison between the RAC and TBK. He continued to be active with the URJ Commission on Social Action until just several years ago. Because his family had to come here illegally after their sponsor had died, he has felt a special connection to immigration issues.

Warren has long been involved with TEMPRO (TEMple PROject), the temporary housing program for the homeless which was begun by Rabbi Bronstein and TBK members in 1969. He has served as president of the ARC of Monroe and continues to help oversee the NYSARC trusts, which help those with disabilities protect their benefit eligibility. He served on the URJ board and also serves on the Amicus Committee, which decides whether to sign on to friend-of-the-court briefs in judicial cases which the URJ feels are important, often for social justice initiatives or separation of church and state. As the number of Holocaust survivors decrease, he continues to help educate by publicly speaking about his family's experience in schools, colleges and adult programs, and its relevance in today's world.