



## Biography of Werner Coppel

Werner Coppel was born in Moers, Germany on February 22, 1925, to a middle-class, German-Jewish family. At the age of 15, Werner became highly involved in a Zionist youth group called Hachshara, one of many such groups that were established throughout Europe. While Werner was with Hachshara, he received a message that his mother, father, and little brother were being deported. He returned home and asked for permission to be deported with his family. When his request was denied, he returned to his Hachshara group. He never saw his family again.

The Gestapo arrested Werner and the rest of his Hachshara group in 1943, deporting them to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Upon their arrival, Werner was selected for factory work in Auschwitz III-Monowitz (Buna). Werner and his Hachshara friends stuck together, offering support and encouragement to one another. While in Auschwitz, a rabbi told Werner about many religious objects that he had buried in a cemetery in Berlin to keep them safe from the Nazi's destruction. Werner would never forget this story. In January 1945, Werner was forced on a death march, but managed to escape, hiding in an underground animal shelter until freed by the advancing Russian soldiers. Upon Werner's liberation, he and a few other survivors traveled to Weissensee Cemetery to dig up the artifacts the rabbi had told them about. They would later use the prayer shawls and prayer books at the first public Jewish worship service in post-war Berlin. Among these objects was a Haggadah (a religious book used during Passover Seders. Passover is the Jewish holiday which celebrates the Jews' freedom from slavery in Egypt) and tallit (prayer shawl) that Werner kept with him.

Very ill and weighing 90 pounds, Werner met a young nurse, Trudy. Nursing him back to health, Trudy and Werner would eventually marry in 1946, holding the distinction of having the first Jewish wedding in Berlin after the war. The couple had their first son, Ron, and decided to immigrate to the United States in 1948. They had another son, Steven, in America.

Years after the Holocaust, Werner learned the fate of his family: his father, Karl, was killed in Riga, Latvia, and his mother, Gudula, was deported from Riga to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was murdered. The fate of Werner's brother, Gunther, remains unknown, but it is assumed he was murdered with his mother at Auschwitz.

In 1975, Werner's life would change after the *Cincinnati Enquirer* printed a Letter to the Editor claiming that the *Diary of Anne Frank* was a hoax and the Holocaust never happened. In reaction to the letter, Werner spoke out, becoming the first local survivor to share his experiences during the Holocaust. From that point until he passed away in February 2016, Werner spoke to hundreds of thousands of students, educators, and community members about his experiences during the Holocaust. In 2014, Werner and fellow Auschwitz survivor, Bella Ouziel, were featured in an exhibit curated by The Holocaust & Humanity Center, *Unlocking the Gates of Auschwitz 70 Years Later*.