

Leo Camnitzer (1886-1977) was born in Suchau, West Prussia, one of eight siblings three of whom died in service to their country in World War I, where he was also a proud combat veteran, the son of Jacob and Bertha Camnitzer who were horse traders and inn keepers. Leo was apprenticed for three years in the textile industry and, while on leave from his military service, married Henni Blumberg (1892-1972) with whom he had a daughter Ursula (1916-2013) and son Peter (1924-1987).

This family lived happily in their spacious apartment where they owned the top two floors of the now-defunct house on the Neue Kantstrasse 21 while Leo pursued his career as owner of the textile firm Camnitzer & Co.



Ursula had married Martin Blumenthal (1909-1974) in 1934 and moved with him to Mexico, returning briefly in 1935 to give birth to her son Hans Joachim Blumenthal (later John J. Buckel). Life was pleasant in this lovely home by the Lietzensee where young Hans lived with his grandparents, oblivious to the events evolving around him until upset, fear and turmoil were about to unfold in the Camnitzer household with the advent of Kristallnacht. On November 10, 1938 Leo was one of 5000 Berliners sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp from which he was released that December with the proviso that he would leave Germany by March, 1939. In the interim the firm of Camnitzer & Co, was "Aryanized" and Leo was ousted without compensation. In the meantime, Ursula had divorced Martin and returned from Mexico in 1937 only to be summoned to Gestapo Headquarters and informed that, failure to leave Germany within five days would result in incarceration; additionally, her son was to be left behind. A generous bribe extended her departure by two weeks allowing time for a tourist visa to Belgium to be arranged. Hans remained with his grandparents.

In 1938 Ursula married Alexander Buckel (1897-1958) in Belgium and arranged to have her son Hans literally "smuggled" out of Germany in February 1939 to join them. On April 1st 1939 Leo and Henni Camnitzer , along with their son Peter, also departed their homeland crossing the Eiffel mountains into Belgium on foot since visas were no longer available.

The now-reunited family's temporary respite in Belgium ended on the morning of May 10, 1940 with the invasion of Belgium. A paranoid Belgian government promptly arrested all "enemy nationals", including Leo Camnitzer and Alexander Buckel and shipped them off to a series of camps. These two escaped after some months of incarceration, most others were not so fortunate.

With the men gone and terrified of what might occur under German occupation, the women took Peter and Hans to join thousands of others in an endless trail of refugees headed toward the coast in the hope of finding passage to England. The rapid German advance and the events at Dunkirk foiled that plan and the family was now trapped in France for several weeks, undergoing hunger and privation until the Belgian Red Cross sent busses to evacuate the women and children. Peter, now 16, didn't qualify for transport and remained behind, eventually joining the French Resistance until the end of the war.

With the men having rejoined the family in Antwerp a reasonable sense of normality returned until 1942 when the roundup of Jews began in Antwerp, forcing a move to Brussels where the roundups also began shortly thereafter. Since fleeing was not possible, hiding remained the only option. The family adults obtained refuge in an attic where they remained cloistered until the liberation of Brussels in September 1945. Hans was hidden in Flanders by a series of incredibly brave families who "adopted" him with a fake identity, at grave risk to their own families, despite betrayals by collaborators on two occasions resulting in searches that fortunately failed to find him.

In 1947 Ursula and Alexander Buckel , along with Hans (now John Buckel), emigrated to the USA and established a new life. Leo and Henni Camnitzer joined them there in 1950. Peter remained in Belgium where he married and raised two sons.

Through the intrepid efforts of Gunter Demnig, and all the kind people who coordinated and arranged the placement of Stolpersteine, the family's names are now preserved as a reminder of "what was".

These were the fortunate members of the Camnitzer family. Less fortunate were Leo Camnitzer's mother Bertha, who at the age of 86 perished in Theresienstadt along with her son in law. Leo's sister was murdered in Auschwitz, as was one brother with his family. These were all memorialized with their own Stolpersteine.

Text John J. Buckel