

Walter Sommers, born in Frankfurt am Main, died at the age of 101 in Terre Haute, Indiana – an obituary

"I have a question..."

At some point, every conversation and every exchange by letter or e-mail came to this point: "I have a question!" Walter Sommers was full of curiosity, with which he sought to understand political and historical events of the past and present. In particular, he followed the events in Europe and Germany with keen interest.

In 1939 he had to leave Germany together with his parents and his younger sister. At the end of his life, Terre Haute in Indiana was his new home.

Walter Sommer was a true Frankfurt boy. Born in Frankfurt in 1920, he experienced a happy childhood there. He vividly remembered regular trips to the Taunus. That's why his son Ron, who was invited by his father's birthplace in 2012, was urged to take hiking boots with him in order to be able to walk in the footsteps of the family in the Taunus. A year later, Walter's daughter Nancy followed. She took part in the laying of Stumbling Stones for Walter's uncle Ernst and for his cousin Margot.



In the highest tones, Walter Sommers repeatedly praised the



Musterschule, the school, which he attended until 1936. He was able to benefit from the good education at this school in the USA, even during his time in the military. He commissioned his mother to send him his Trigonometrie book from his school days in Frankfurt to his place of work in the Pacific. On the occasion of the award of the American military order "The Honorable Order of Saint Barbara" last year, Walter Sommers emphasized the quality of his

school education at the Musterschule: "I want you to know, it was a trigonometry book from Germany that helped win the war. It was a lot better than the Army trigonometry book." The fact that he had to leave the Musterschule in 1936 was a great shock for him. He visited the Philanthropin, the Jewish school, for a year. Finally, he began an apprenticeship in Hamburg, because a university education was no longer conceivable at that time.

With shining eyes, Walter told of the business of his father, the Wittwe Hassan chain. Julius Sommer had built up the delicatessen chain together with his brother-in-law Alfred Mayer. Walter Sommer fondly remembered how he and his father visited the almost 40 branches in and around Frankfurt. Wittwe Hassan sold coffee, cocoa, chocolate, wine and other delicatessen products. There was a roastery in the company headquarters in Hanauer Landstraße. The whole house was filled with the scent of coffee, Walter enthused.

The boycott in 1933 had little effect on the business at first, but the pressure to give up the company grew more and more. In 1937, the two entrepreneurs decided to sell the company. However, conditions imposed by the Nazi authorities prevented the sale of the entire chain of stores, which is why the two partners had to conduct difficult negotiations with different business partners and could only sell the company piece by piece.



During the November pogrom of 1938, there were still two branches. They were completely devastated during the riots. Alfred Mayer had already emigrated to Holland in 1937. There he was able to survive hidden with his family. Julius Sommer was arrested on 10 November 1938 and deported to Buchenwald. He came back as a broken man. Walter described seeing his father in this state as his saddest experience in Frankfurt. "He could never understand that such a thing would happen in the Germany he knew."

After the release of Julius Sommer, the family feverishly prepared for emigration. In February 1939, the family was able to flee to the USA. But the beginning was difficult. The former entrepreneur did not succeed in regaining a foothold. For the younger ones, like his son Walter, it was easier. He served as a soldier in the American Army in the Pacific from 1942-1945 and became an American citizen in 1943.

In 1948, Walter Sommers married Louise Levite, a native of Straubing. Through an uncle of his wife, he moved to Terre Haute, Indiana in the same year. There he worked for 40 years at Meis, first as a buyer, later as vice president of the Meis department stores.

When he reached retirement age in 1988, Walter Sommers increased his diverse volunteer work, for example in hospitals, as president of the B'nai B'rith, for the Lighthouse Mission or the Jewish War Veterans.



In 1992, Walter Sommers visited his native city at the invitation of the city of Frankfurt. There he had the opportunity to talk about his life story and his family in his former school, an important experience for him. He, who had turned his back on Germany disappointed for decades, felt a connection to his former homeland again.

Since this time, he was involved in the Candles Holocaust Museum in Terre Haute, which was set up by Eva Kor. There he regularly spoke as a contemporary witness about his experiences in Germany. Communicating the history of the Jews in Germany and in Europe had become his life's work. In 2016, he was awarded the Federal Cross of Merit for his commitment, an honor that initially irritated him, but then filled him with pride.

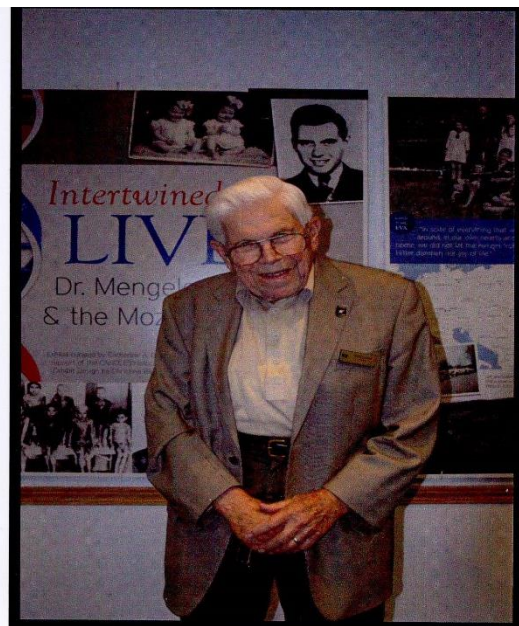
Last year, author Rick Kelsheimer paid tribute to the former

Frankfurter with the book "A Reluctant Heroe – The Walter Sommers Story".

For Walter it was important to be in contact with his birthplace and with Germany again. Since visits to the U.S. were not possible during the pandemic, we were at least able to stay connected through online meetings. The planned big party on the occasion of his 100th birthday also had to take place digitally. Walter was very happy about the congratulations of the Musterschule, which sent him a cinematic birthday greeting.

On February 18, 2022, Walter Sommers' heart stopped beating. His life exemplifies what it meant to be discriminated against and persecuted, to have to leave one's homeland and everything that was built up there. On the one hand, it shows how difficult the new beginning was, but also impressively the strength that the emigrants have developed in shaping their new lives. It is admirable how Walter engaged not only within the family, but also in his environment, in order to contribute to a better world through his own experiences.

The Candles Holocaust Museum paid tribute to Walter Sommers in a memorial service on 12 March 2022. We will miss his voice, but his commitment, curiosity and affection can serve as a model for our own actions.



Walter Sommers

CANDLES Holocaust Museum Docent on Fridays at 1 p.m.

Walter was born in Germany in 1920. He and his family witnessed the wave of attacks on Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues known as Kristallnacht. They escaped Nazi Germany for the U.S. where Walter joined the Army and fought in WWII.