



What perils were in store when a family was forced across the Dniester River?

BEN WALKER

Ben Walker (Walzer) was born to Sali and Aaron Walzer in Romania. He and his younger sister grew up in Nepolocauti, a small town near Czernowitz, Romania. His grandfather had a big farm in that village and his father owned a store nearby.

"Before the war began my family and I had a great life."

In their small town, the Walzer family did not experience the harsh antisemitism that faced Jews in the larger cities. Even before Romania officially allied with Nazi Germany, The Iron Guard, a fascist group in Romania, falsely accused Jews of spreading communism and supporting Hungary. They demanded that the Jews of Romania be thrown out of the government and professions and expelled from Romania.

A little more than a year after World War II began, on November 20, 1940, Romania formally joined Nazi Germany and the Axis alliance. Romania participated in the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941. Within days, Romanian authorities staged a pogrom against the Jewish population in the city of Iasi, the regional capital of Moldavia. Hundreds of Jews were shot by Romanian police and hundreds more were killed on the streets or in their homes. Over 4,000 Jews were murdered during the pogrom.



Following the invasion of the Soviet Union, Romania took back Bessarabia and northern Bukovina from the Soviet Union. That was the region in which the Walzer family lived and worked. Other military successes led to Romania being given the land between the Dniester and Bug Rivers. Romanian authorities ruled the area they now called "Transnistria."

The Romanian military and police massacred thousands of Jews in the area. In October, Jews remaining in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina were deported to ghettos and camps in Transnistria.

Deportation of Jews to Transnistria across the Dniester River, June 1942
Photo courtesy of Yad Vashem

Ben's family was among them. They were sent to a barn where the family had a few feet of straw and no food.

Ben recalled, "I still remember one day a soldier came and we begged him to give us more straw because the straw we had was infected by waste and lice." The soldier explained, "We didn't bring you here to live. We brought you here to die."



Photo courtesy of William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum

The little food the family received came from trading the family's few valuables. Once the valuables were gone, the family was destined to starve. Starvation, disease and privation claimed the lives of Ben's little sister, his father, grandparents and uncles.

When the Soviet Union defeated the Nazis in Stalingrad in 1943, Ben and his mother were the only survivors of their family. As conditions in Transnistria were still difficult, Sali Walzer made the difficult decision to send Ben to an orphanage for children who lost parents in the war. Ben was delighted to be able to sleep on a small cot with sheets, eat soup and sing.

When she was able, his mother returned to retrieve Ben from the orphanage. They returned to their family farm in 1944, but it had been converted to a collective farm under communism. It no longer belonged to the family.

Ben and his mother emigrated to Israel, where he served in the Israeli Defense Force. Their journey was not over, however. Ben's mother moved to Orlando, Florida, where they had relatives. In 1956, Ben joined her there.

Ben attended college in Florida, where he met his future wife, Ruth. After graduation, Ben and Ruth moved to Tampa, Florida for work, then to Syracuse, NY for graduate school. The Walker family moved to Atlanta in the late 1960s where he worked as an educator. Ben and Ruth raised two daughters. Ben devoted himself to telling his story after 9/11, when he realized his experiences contained an important message for his audiences.



Photo courtesy of William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum



Map courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum