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Holocaust Survivor Tells His Story

By Henry M. Holden

Eighty-three-year-old Peter Engler, was the guest speaker at the Mt. Freedom Jewish

Center's annual Randolph Interfaith Holocaust Memorial on June 6.

Engler grew up in Shanghai, China, a city

he described as "pleasure-mad, corrupt, squalid, decadent rapacious, licentious, strife-ridden, and depraved." And that was a good place to be in 1939, because he had just left Nazi Germany as Hitler began ramping up the extermination of all Jews in Europe.

Engler of Berkeley Heights was born in 1934, in Berlin, Germany. His father was a chemist and his mother was a milliner. According to Engler, in the early years of the Nazis, his father, an Austrian citizen, felt relatively protected from losing his job. That was until Hitler marched into Austria, and then things became ugly.

"My father had a degree in chemistry and worked in a sugar factory in Berlin," said Engler. "He soon lost his job and started a small ice cream store."

But everything changed on Oct. 9/10, 1938, a night that would go down in history as Kristallnacht, commonly known as the night of the broken glass. The name comes from the shards of broken glass that littered the streets after a coordinated anti-Jewish demonstration in Berlin by paramilitary forces and German civilians. The windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings, and syn-

agogues were smashed and looted. The number of dead when deaths from post-arrest maltreatment and suicides was in the hundreds.

Engler's father knew at once that he did not have the protected status he thought he had. They had to get out of Germany as soon as possible. So, they went into hiding on a farm that belonged to a non-Jewish friend of theirs.

"Since Hitler had taken our passports we couldn't travel out of Germany," said Engler. "My mother went to a travel agent that didn't require a passport, and somehow was able to buy tickets to Shanghai."

"My father urged the rest of the family in Austria to leave with him, but they all felt they had a protected status." None of Engler's family survived.

"At the time, Shanghai was separately administered from the rest of China, and was essentially an open port, run by the French, British, Americans and the Japanese, so no one really had any control, and consequently it attracted all sorts of riff raff, refugees and criminals," said Engler. "It was the city where greed drove the forces, and calamity was at the door." The journey took about eight days.

"When we arrived in

Shanghai, we were greeted on the docks by Chinese Coolies who took everybody's luggage to what was called a refugee center where we were placed in a large Jewish community. There were a lot of European women in Shanghai and my mother found employment as a milliner, again. My father found work in the dental community making gold teeth, which at the time was a symbol of wealth among the Japanese and Chinese."

Engler went to a British school, and in his own words, "became a colonial brat," with a full-time nanny and a private rickshaw for school transportation.

All of that changed when the Japanese occupied the city.

"They moved between 18,000 and 20,000 Jews and other Europeans to a ghetto approximately one-square mile in size that already held 100,000 Chinese," said Engler. Barbed wire and guard towers did not surround the ghetto. "The borders were strictly defined by street names. With special permission, one could leave the ghetto as my mother did often because of her clients."

"By July 1945, the Americans were bombing parts of the city where the Japanese had a military



presence. On July 17, an American bomber accidentally dropped a load of bombs on the ghetto. Forty-three Europeans and hundreds of Chinese were killed.

"On August 6, we heard that the United States had dropped an atomic bomb. The Japanese had left the city and we were free," said Engler. "It was a day I could not describe even if I had three hours."

The American bombers soon began dropping thousands of cases of C-rations. "We thought we had gone to heaven, but our joy was short-lived," said Engler. "On the horizon, we saw bombers coming toward us at a very low altitude. There was a gas trailing each airplane. We thought we were about to be gassed, but it turned out to be bombers spraying DDT to delouse all of us."

By 1949, after spending

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Holocaust Survivor...

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10 years in Shanghai, Engler spent a year in Israel and another year in Italy and Austria before settling down with his parents in Montreal, Canada, in 1951.

He earned a master's in electrical engineering from Cornell University in 1961, followed by a doctorate in Biophysical Sciences in 1974.

In 1999, he was one of

the charter members of the Biomedical Engineering Department at the New Jersey Institute of Technology from which he retired as Tenured Associate Professor Emeritus in 2002.