

Sharing Love and Ending Hate

Holocaust Survivor, Walter Kase Shares His Inspirational Story with Katy Students to Help Change Lives

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Select Photography by Suzi Issa



THE HOLOCAUST

The Holocaust was the systematic, state-organized persecution and murder of nearly 6 million Jews by Nazi Germany and its collaborators. Two-thirds of Europe's Jews and one-third of the world's Jewish population were slaughtered in the Holocaust. More than half of the dead came from Poland, where the Nazi annihilation effort was 90 percent successful. The Holocaust hit Jewish children especially hard. While the Nazis were in power, from 1933 to 1945, they murdered up to 1.5 million children, the overwhelming majority of them Jewish. Of the European Jewish children alive in 1939, only 11 percent survived.

The Nazis held that Germans were racially superior, and that every threat to their racial "purity" must be wiped out. Nazi Germany's anti-Semitic and genocidal policies made Jews the primary victims. But more than 200,000 Roma and Sinti (Gypsies) and about 250,000 mentally or physically disabled Germans and others were also destroyed between 1939 and 1945.

Millions of other defenseless people were persecuted and murdered by the Nazis for racial, ethnic, nationalist, and other reasons. More than 3 million Soviet prisoners of war were killed. Tens of thousands of Slavs marked for slave labor lost their lives. Homosexuals and others whom the Nazis called "antisocials" were harassed and murdered. Thousands of political and religious dissidents — Communists, socialists, trade unionists, Jehovah's Witnesses — were oppressed and put to death as well.

Nazism scorned democracy's ideals and values by denying human rights and committing ruthless aggression. Unfortunately, its legacy includes various neo-Nazi groups whose racist propaganda and anti-Semitism preach hatred and incite violence. By no means are those groups confined to Germany. They can be found in the United States as well. They are ignored at humanity's peril.

Do not forget me. Do not forget my story. At the age of 81, this is a reasonable concern for Walter Kase, who is still robust after all he has seen and been through. Born in 1929, Kase survived the Holocaust and now shares his story with the community in the hopes of promoting love and ending hate. Kase focuses on reaching out to children, giving more than 50 speeches every year in schools and colleges throughout Texas. "I just tell my story," he says. "Children's minds are still open; you can make an impression." In Katy, the impact of his message can readily be seen among students, and Cinco Ranch High School, Taylor High School, and Beck Junior High regularly welcome Kase into their halls every year.

Telling His Story for a Better Tomorrow

When students enter an assembly where Kase is speaking, one can hear a pin drop. This silent walk of dignity honors the congenial speaker, who always begins his presentations this way: "God decides who we are – what nationality, what race, what religion – and to hate someone for any of these reasons is prejudice."

Kase strives to relate the dehumanization process of his early years, sharing with students about the confiscation of his family home and business, how Jews were ordered to wear yellow armbands and move to ghettos, the liquidation of those ghettos by sending people to work camps, and the mounting death at every turn. "I was a little boy when the war started, too young to know that being Jewish was a crime punishable by death in a gas chamber," says Kase. "My sister was shot in front of my eyes. She was 8 years old."

Though this tragic and horrific time seems unimaginable to today's teens, it is recent history - as fresh and raw as the tears that roll down Kase's cheeks, matched by his listeners. As a young man, Kase was stripped naked and made to stand on a selection field where officers decided who lived and died. Kase's father placed him on a brick to look taller, and another time, changed his son's birth date to save him from the machine gun. "Who could imagine a civilized country like Germany could do these things?" says Kase. "I feel compelled to tell the story or history will repeat itself."

Connecting with Katy Kids

As a member of the Anti-Defamation League and board of directors of the Holocaust Museum Houston, Kase receives regular requests to share his inspiring story. And in return, people send letters. Over the years, tens of thousands of notes, photos, and treasured scrapbooks

have come his way. "They call me the life-changer," says Kase, whose tone is always warm with affection. "Kids connect to me. I talk about their problems – bullying, hate – and they send me very private letters. I tell them not to take things for granted, to be appreciative for what they have, and most importantly, to embrace their parents and say, 'I love you,' because that time could be their last." Kase's own mother was ripped away from him before he could say goodbye in the chaos of unloading the trains at Auschwitz, the first of five camps he endured.

Remembering Liberation Day

On May 5, 1944, hope finally began to shine through when an officer in Kase's camp announced that Germany was losing the war and the prisoners would soon be liberated. Guards climbed from their towers, dropped their weapons and ran into the forest. "An hour later, those who could walk – not many – broke through the wire fence to a nearby warehouse," Kase says. What he saw was beyond comprehension. "Every day, hundreds died of malnutrition, and here was food that could have saved their lives." Kase still chokes up remembering the moment and the absurdity of it.

That day, he poured a bucket of marmalade into his mouth and carried bread, cheese, and meat back to his skeleton father. Then, he followed his father's advice. "He had a sense of survival about him and told us to carry him to the nearest highway to attract soldiers," says Kase. An hour later, the rumbling of an army procession met them, the lead tank draped in an American flag. "I walked out on the road with my arms outstretched," he recounts. "A young soldier - 18 at most - said, 'Oh my God, how could one human being do this to another human being?'" That is always the question when it comes to hate.

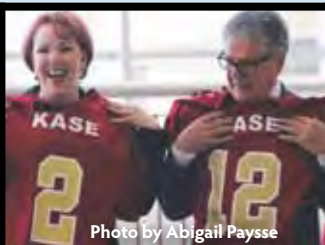


Photo by Abigail Paysse



Photo by Ashley Payne



Kase tours the halls of Holocaust Museum Houston, where he is a member of the board of directors

An ambulance rushed Kase and his father to a hospital. "I walked in there at 15 years old weighing 65 pounds and walked out a 120-pound human being," says Kase. Unfortunately, his father died one month after liberation, and suddenly Kase faced life without family, friends, or any skills.

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Looking to the Future, While Never Forgetting the Past

The U.S. Children's Center stepped in to offer immigration to America for some under 18. Of the 32,000 children who registered, Kase was one of 400 they accepted. When the interviewer asked Kase what he wanted to do, he said, "I want to get an education, to use my mind. I'll make my way."

Kase earned a business degree, built a successful import business, and is happily married to his wife, Chris with a blended family of four children. Still, Kase fears mankind too often acts with hate towards one another, so he will continue to tell his story. He shares, "My hope is that young people will change that." **KM**

GAIL G. COLLINS is penning a novel set during World War II and treasured her time with Walter Kase.



Kase treasures the only photo he has of his mother

A Son Honors His Father

An excerpt from Kenny Kase's poem to his father, Walter Kase

I'm especially proud of the speeches you make
to influence young minds, to prevent more mistakes,
to bring to reality the best that you can
the atrocities that man commits against man.

Robbed of your family, your freedom, your youth
while the world refused to see the truth.
Your story has impacted all you have met -
through you, 6 million say,
"Never forget."

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