

# TOM LEWINSOHN



Tom Lewinsohn's father was a physician, his mother a licensed cosmetologist before the war. Their 14-room Berlin apartment included Hugo Lewinsohn's clinic, with living quarters in the back. Tom's grandparents owned a department store that spanned a city block in Plauen, a three-hour train ride from Berlin.

When Tom wasn't playing soccer, he liked riding in the car with his dad on house calls. Afterward, they would stop at the bakery for hot rolls and sausage. The Lewinsohns went to the opera and to concerts. They attended a Reform synagogue and did not keep kosher.

Not understanding what was happening in his country, Tom watched Nazi parades and wished he too could show pride in his "German-ness" by wearing the *lederhosen*.

Many of his father's friends – other physicians and lawyers – were not Jewish. When they came to play cards with his father, Tom could hear them say: "This Hitler thing will pass. After all, Hugo, you are a World War I veteran. You got the Iron Cross, so nobody is going to touch you."

Then came November 9, 1938 – *Kristallnacht*.

"My dad shut off all the lights and told us to lie on the floor and not move," Tom recalls. "There was noise all around and you could see flames." After *Kristallnacht*, Tom no longer could attend public school and had to wear the Star of David.

Mathilde Lewinsohn wanted to send Tom and his brother, Peter, to England on a *Kindertransport*. Hugo Lewinsohn resisted until January 1941. A police official who was a former patient tipped him off that the family would be deported within days.

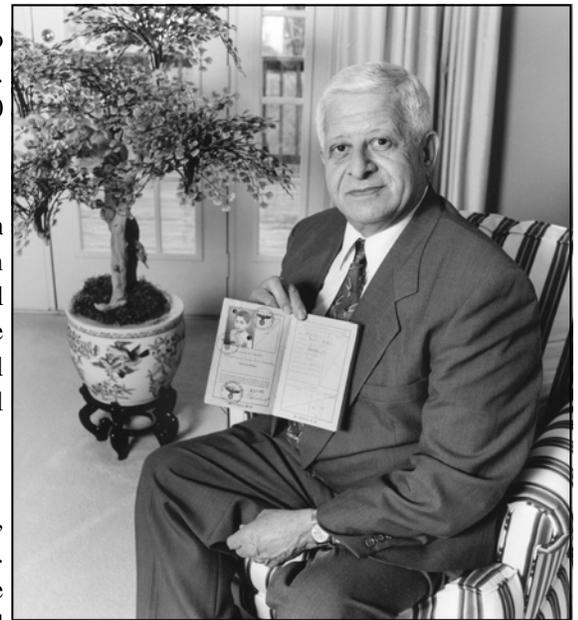
In the middle of the night, the Lewinsohns boarded a train and traveled for two weeks from Berlin to Warsaw to Moscow to Manchuria and finally to China. In Shanghai, a place open to Jews, the Lewinsohns lived in a ghetto with 17,000 refugees.

After the war, Tom worked as an apprentice electrician to pay his way to San Francisco in 1948. When his \$80 ran out in San Francisco, he called a friend in Erie, Pennsylvania, who sent him a train ticket. Tom graduated from high school in Erie, joined the Air Force and served in Korea. After his discharge from the service, he enrolled at the University of Kansas, where he studied personnel administration and earned a master's degree in public administration and political science.

In 1964 he became director of personnel for the City of Kansas City, Missouri overseeing more than 4,000 city employees. He retired in 1993. Today, he teaches at Baker University and is a part-time personnel director for the City of Prairie Village. He met his wife, Alice, from Kansas City, on a blind date. They married at Temple B'nai Jehudah in 1957 and have two children, Debbie and Bob.

In his work, Tom Lewinsohn has made a special effort to fight bigotry and hatred. Sadly, he believes the world still has a long way to go.

When Tom and Alice visited the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in 1999, he left feeling both guilty and fortunate: "To have this kind of success, to have good friends when, you know, I could have been ash."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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