



George Wozasek

June 27, 1925 - October 27, 2016

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Survivor, soldier, husband, father, grandfather, community leader, businessman ... and skier. George Wozasek died at his home in Linz, Austria on October 27, 2016. He was 91 years old.

George is survived by three children (and six grand-children): Gerald Wozasek of Vienna (and his children Philipp and Charlotte); Sylvie Wozasek of Vienna (and her children Daniel and Benjamin); and Heidi Gerger of Houston (and her husband David and their children Adam and Ria). George's wife Claire died in 1999 at M.D. Anderson, where she came for experimental cancer treatment. George is also survived by his partner after Claire died, Cristine Lang.

George was born in Austria in 1925, into a long line of industrialists (except for the stubborn relative who fancied music, Gustav Mahler). The other Mahlers had paper mills and were fully assimilated into secular society. But that world shattered when Hitler "invaded" Austria (to cheering crowds). After Kristallnacht, George begged his parents to leave. They sent him on a "kinder transport" to France meant to save the Jewish children of Austria. He ended up at a supposed "safe" school near Paris, but George wanted to go on to

America. And, at 14, he did, with the help of a family friend in Paris - on one of the last boats to leave France. George's letters home from France show the quick evolution of a young teenager: from "Don't let the Nazis get my stamp collection" to "Don't worry about me: I'm not spoiled anymore."

Incredibly, George found his parents in New York, who had "bribed" the SS with all their property to leave Austria. That "kindly" act (not shooting the parents in the back as they left), earned one German officer a reprieve at the Nuremberg war crime trials after the war, when he could document that he let the Wozaseks escape, even though he had sent others to Dachau.

In America, George became a U.S. citizen and enlisted in the U.S. Army at his first opportunity - specifically, the Tenth Mountain Division, because he grew up skiing and liked the mountains. For that, he got to sleep (not ski!) in the Italian Alps en route to defeating Germany. George later joked he was a bad soldier: in Italy, he got shot in an ambush, which sent him to sit out the war in the hospital. He was awarded a Purple Heart.

After the war, George attended Columbia University on the GI Bill and met his wife Claire. George loved the United States - it took him in and saved his life - and he remained a U.S. Citizen forever. But his parents urged him to return to Austria to see what was left, which he and Claire did in 1953. George meant to stay six months. Instead, he managed to reclaim the "Feurestein" mill (where he then worked for 20 years) and later became CEO of the Neusidler paper company. As a boss, George was demanding but compassionate: he never asked anyone to do anything he wouldn't do himself. Claire agreed to live in post-war Austria, but she insisted that each child be born in the United States, so she always flew to New York while pregnant to give birth.

George and Claire loved art, music, and theater, and intensely collected glass objects, from ancient to contemporary. Even more, they were avid tennis

players and skiers - and this became a requirement for their children as well. He supervised their tournaments and races and expected them to win. He was VP of the Upper Austrian Tennis Federation and "coach" of the women's team. With his children, he was generous ... but demanding. George and Claire disdained false praise (and gave none). They had high expectations and little regard for sentimentality. When asked by his biographer why he settled in Austria after the war, George reflected: "Good skiing." But there was more.

Linz, with 18,000 Jews before the war, now had fewer than 20 including the five Wozaseks. George and Claire researched and chronicled the fate of the Jews there. They restored the cemetery. They rebuilt the synagogue on the ruins of the original one burned in Kristallnacht. They helped organize tours of the nearby Mauthausen labor and death camp. They supported the preservation of Hartheim - the castle where the Nazis euthanized the mentally and physically disabled. In these efforts, they befriended and received the support of the Catholic Church, the Pope, and leading businesses and politicians of the region. George became a leader of Interfaith Dialogue.

George was quiet and diplomatic; Claire less so. George used reason and perseverance; Claire brought the flare (in a typical example, once "offering" to bring TV cameras if a large factory - owned by friends - refused to publicly commemorate their use of war-time slave labor with a prominent plaque). George and Claire approached this work as a matter-of-fact duty, like making one's bed in the morning. And in the end, they reestablished a Jewish presence in the state of Upper Austria. They even had a regular Sabbath service in the new synagogue ... at first just for themselves, but later the "congregation" grew to include two dozen "regulars," most of whom were not Jewish!

George's good works extended beyond Austria. A community center for Ethiopian immigrants in Arat, Israel bears his name. And he was especially proud of his work leading the Hayak Foundation, which supports a home in Israel for 140 children who were abused or neglected called Achuzat Sarah.

For all these efforts, George received some of Austria's highest honors -- which Claire thought was just a big fuss.

George never spoke of his past. He was serious and fiercely independent. Even though he skied and practiced his tennis serve well into his 80s, he skied and served alone ... yet he became a leader in every aspect of his life. It was not until historian Birgit Kirchmayr wrote his biography in 2012 that we learned the details of his youth. And knowing his past gives us a greater appreciation for his life. George was rigid in his standards and habits -- but he was able to adapt to life's unexpected turmoils and challenges.

In lieu of flowers, please donate to Holocaust Museum Houston (Capital Campaign), M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, or a charity of your choice.