

### **NEVER FORGET TO PRAY . . .**

“Never forget to pray. Keep your faith, your courage, and never give up”

These words of advice from his mother helped keep Gunther Skaletz alive during years of danger, imprisonment and torture. In 1943, at the age of 16 he was rounded up by the Gestapo and taken to the dreaded Auschwitz prison camp. The sign at the entrance of this infamous death camp was diabolically deceptive. It read: “Arbeit macht frei” (work will make one free). In reality almost everyone died!

Segregated by age and gender Gunther was assigned to hard labor on a road gang. As death was all around him, Gunter thanked God for every sunrise as it meant that he had survived another night. After 6 months at Auschwitz a benevolent friend and mentor named Otto arranged for his release. Among other things involved in this transaction was the stipulation that Gunther join the Hitler Youth. He did, but on Nov. 22, 1943 while he was in Berlin allied bombers reduced it to rubble. He survived but recalled that the bombing was like “hell on earth”.

The Red Cross gave Gunther a train ticket to go home for Christmas, but it never happened. He waited for hours but the train never came. Again, his friend Otto came to his rescue and arranged for him to work in a hotel in Magdeburg. Not long after this Magdeburg was also bombed into oblivion. Again, Gunther survived. In the spring of 1944 he was drafted into the German army and four months later he was seriously injured but again survived but was taken prisoner by the Russians.

As he and other prisoners were being loaded on a train, Gunther overheard two Russian soldiers say that their destination was Siberia. They didn’t realize that he could understand Russian. Gunther realized that the destination of Siberia was a virtual death sentence. When an explosion stopped the train Gunter and another man leaped from the train and fled into the night. With bullets flying around them their escape was successful and they began the lonely trek across Poland. They eventually parted company believing that by themselves they would attract less attention. Gunther begged for food in the daytime and at night slept in foxholes and barns. Eventually, by the grace of God, he made it to Helmstedt, West Germany. There, British soldiers had mercy on him and helped him get a job washing dishes. Bereft of family, he never forgot the words of his mother. He continued to pray he kept both faith and courage, and never gave up.

Consequently, he worked hard, saved his money, and studied French. Then he enrolled in a culinary school in Switzerland. After five years he graduated with a Master’s Degree in culinary arts. With his newfound culinary skills he found work at hotels in Frankfurt, where he met and married his wife Elaine. They emigrated to America in the 1960s.

Again, by the grace of God, he found work in a posh New York city restaurant. The exclusivity of the restaurant is revealed by the fact that it was here he became friends with President Lyndon B. Johnson. After hearing his story the president made him promise to write a book about his life. As painful as it was to relive those nightmares, Gunter began the book in 2006. He finished it five years later. It is titled “*Life on Both Sides of the Wall*”. Signed copies of the book can be purchased for \$ 27. Write to Gunther at 340 Grandview Drive, Lake Ozark, Mo. 65049. Gunter retired in 1994. Sadly, his wife Elaine passed away, but he remains a sharp minded 90 year old man who is willing to share his story in schools, churches, and everywhere he has a chance. His library is filled with memorabilia from his amazing life as well as letters of appreciation from those who have read his book. His survival and success are a testimony to the influence of his mother. He still remembers to pray, to keep the faith, to remain courageous, and to never give up.

(Condensed from “The Will to Survive” by Heather Berry in the March 2018 Rural Missouri)