



# Curtis George Ward

September 13, 1917 - May 23, 2022

## Curtis George Ward

Curtis George Ward died on May 23, 2022, at the age of 104. Curt, born Kurt Georg Wertheim, lived a most wonderful and interesting life, that unspooled like a cross between a History Channel documentary and Forrest Gump. "The essence of my life," Curt said, "is that I was blessed with good fortune." He indeed had good fortune, but he made much of his own good luck, through hard work, his engaging personality, and the ability to make friends wherever he went. An eternal optimist, Curt Ward was a walking advertisement for a positive attitude leading to longevity.

Born on September 13, 1917, to Hermann and Hertha Wertheim in Frankfurt, Germany, Curt was the youngest of three children, including brother Ernest and sister Kaethe. After an idyllic childhood, 1933 was a watershed year for 16-year-old Curt. Hitler came to power in Germany, his father died, he graduated from the prestigious "gymnasium" high school, and was apprenticed to L.S. Mayer, a company which exported German products. He moved to Berlin for work, while his siblings and mother were planning a move to Belgium, which was thought to be a safer place than Germany for a Jewish family. Because it was becoming increasingly dangerous to be a young Jewish man in Germany, the family put all its efforts into securing passage to America for Curt, which had been a long-held dream of his. ("I got a Sears & Roebuck catalogue, and I was captivated," he remembered. "Also, I had heard about drugstores with soda fountains, and I wanted to see them.")

Happily, Curt was lucky to get a visa, because the quota for Jews to immigrate to the U.S. was so low. This was made possible through a strong affidavit of support from his cousin Erich Fromm, the famous German social psychologist, philosopher, and author of *Escape from Freedom* and *The Art of Loving*, who already had immigrated to America and was living in New York. "I was so lucky," Curt remembered. "I was one of the few who were allowed to come." He arrived in New York on November 11, 1937, with all of his worldly possessions in one suitcase.

After working in New York for two years, an acquaintance put him in touch with some influential Memphians, who encouraged him to relocate to the Bluff City, which he did in 1939. After a couple of jobs with local paper companies, he landed with Edgar Haas, Sr., at Slumber Products mattress manufacturing company. He stayed with Slumber and the Haas family for the rest of his professional life, retiring as director of operations at age 70.

In 1941, Curt took leave from Slumber to enlist in the army, ahead of the Pearl Harbor attack, which turned his short-term commitment into one for the duration of the war. While Curt was in the army, he was naturalized as an American citizen, and was plucked from the ranks to go to Camp Ritchie in Maryland, becoming one of the now-famous "Ritchie Boys," a group of Jewish-German immigrants who were trained in military intelligence and became integral in the U.S. success in acquiring information from captured German prisoners of war. Recent books, movies, and television programs have focused on these heretofore little-known heroes of WWII.

The rest of Curt's family found refuge in Belgium during the war years. Curt's mother and brother were safe; tragically, his sister and her husband and daughter were deported shortly before the liberation and perished at Auschwitz. Curt said: "For a long time, I didn't talk about the Holocaust, but now I want to talk about it, because that generation is dying out, and people need to remember." Indeed, Curt's own escape from Germany in 1937 is now remembered in Berlin with a Stolpersteine, a commemorative brass plaque embedded in the pavement in front of the last voluntary address of victims of the Holocaust, including people like Curt who managed to escape.

After the War, Curt came back to Memphis, and saved enough money to bring his mother to New York to be with her sister; because of her German expatriate connections there, another Curt Ward Coincidence was born. Through those family connections, Curt made contact with Hedi Schulenklöpper, who was born only a few doors down from Curt in Frankfurt (albeit 13 years later than he). Her family had also escaped to the U.S., settling in New York. Curt and Hedi began a long-distance relationship, marrying in 1957. Hedi and Curt had a happy, 50-year marriage, completing their family with their son Jeffrey Bernard Ward. After his retirement, and until Hedi's death in 2007, Curt and Hedi were avid travelers, visiting sites all around the world, but especially loving their "special place" of Carmel, California.

A man of deep faith, Curt treasured his affiliation with Temple Israel, and was a dedicated member of the Temple Israel Brotherhood, serving on its board. Some of his volunteer work included delivering MIFA Meals on Wheels, donating and delivering blood to

hospitals for Lifeblood, and working for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, the Jewish Community Center, the Sam Schloss B'nai B'rith Lodge, and the Jewish War Veterans of the USA (America's oldest military service organization, established in the Civil War).

Curt was well-loved by many friends, 25 of whom traveled from all over the world to celebrate his 100th birthday with him in 2017. After the party, he sent handwritten thank-you notes, along with this message: "I've had happy times throughout my life—I never had a bad day. I was blessed with a happy childhood. I was blessed to be able to come to the U.S. I was blessed with so many happy coincidences. I was blessed to have a very happy marriage with Hedi, and to have a fine son in Jeffrey."

Curt is survived by his son Jeffrey, a niece, Susie Osnoss (Ken), a nephew David Poll (Becky), and many grand-nieces and grand-nephews. Burial will be Wednesday, May 25th, at 1:30 at Temple Israel Cemetery, with a celebration of Curt's life to be held at a later date. The family suggests memorials be directed to Temple Israel or the Jewish Foundation of Memphis. Or perhaps, we should just pay heed to Curt's advice: "Get a good education, work hard, enjoy life, and be good to each other."

Z"L: Zikhrono Librakha: May his memory be a blessing.

A"H: Alav Hashalom: Peace be upon him.

# Cemetery Details

## Temple Israel Cemetery

1708 Hernando Road  
Memphis, TN 38106

# Previous Events

## Funeral Service

MAY **25**. 1:30 PM (CT)

Levy-Cooper Chapel @ Temple Israel Cemetery  
1708 Hernando Rd.  
Memphis, TN 38106  
<http://www.timemphis.org>

# Tribute Wall



“ *Peaceful White Lilies Basket was purchased for the family of Curtis George Ward.*



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May 25 at 03:48 AM