

Iron Cross

Heinz Schwarz

Until Hitler's rise to power, Heinz Schwarz enjoyed a relatively normal German childhood. His parents, Elizabeth and Walter, owned a clothing store that served Jews and non-Jews alike. Walter was a proud veteran; he had served in the German Army in World War I and was awarded an Iron Cross medal for bravery in combat. The Schwarz family was Jewish, but just like so many others, also identified as full members of German society.

Heinz was only six years old in 1933 when Adolph Hitler became the German Chancellor. Germany underwent drastic changes over the next several years thanks to the new leadership: Dachau concentration camp was established, thousands of "un-German" books were publicly burned, and new laws excluded Jews from civil service positions and mandated the forced sterilization of the disabled. The Schwarz family was not unaffected. In the summer of 1938, Walter was forced by the local mayor to "give up" his business. That same year, the Schwarz family was issued identification documents, each stamped with a large glaring "J" to easily identify them as Jewish. The following spring, the last trace of normalcy disappeared from Heinz's life when he was forced to leave his German school.



Like many Jewish veterans, Walter Schwarz believed that his service to the fatherland in World War I would save his family from Nazi persecution. He saw his Iron Cross medal as a guarantee of his family's safety, protection, and loyalty. The tradition of the Iron Cross began with the Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm III in 1813, during the Napoleonic Wars. Walter's cross, embellished with Wilhelm's initials and the year Iron Crosses were created, symbolized the medal's history. As the Schwarz family cherished their protective medallion, however, a new generation of the Iron Cross was being forged, each carved with a sinister swastika—these newer medals were awarded to those recognized for their service in the German armed forces between 1939 and 1945. Now even Walter's military honor was insufficient to shield the Schwarz family from persecution.

In the face of increasing danger, the Schwarzes chose to abandon their home for a place across the world: Shanghai, China. Thousands of European Jews had sought refuge in Shanghai since the early 1930s, since the city's divided governance by Western powers meant entry was possible without a visa. Heinz turned twelve during the two month journey by ship to his radically different new home. While in Shanghai, Jewish refugees found themselves relying on charity and living in cramped conditions. Despite such hardships, the Schwarzes valued their freedom as members of Shanghai's growing Jewish community. Heinz celebrated his Bar Mitzvah, attended school, and joined the Boy Scouts. He learned Chinese, Russian, and English, and later studied accounting at the Gregg School of Business.

In 1948, the family was financially and legally able to leave Shanghai. They arrived in San Francisco but subsequently moved to Seattle, and became naturalized U.S. citizens and registered to vote. Walter only lived for five more years before his death in 1953. Heinz Schwarz passed away in 2010 and donated his father's Iron Cross, along with other family artifacts of significance, to the Holocaust Center.