

## Biographic Profile of Peter Feigl

Peter Feigl, the only child of Ernst and Agnes (Bornstein) Feigl, was born on March 1, 1929, in Berlin, Germany. Thoroughly integrated into mainstream German society as non-practicing Jews, the family lived comfortably due to Ernst's position as a mechanical engineer in a company with offices in several European cities. This position took the Feigl family first to Prague and then to Vienna. Shortly after moving to Austria, Peter's parents had him baptized as a Catholic in the hopes of protecting him from worsening antisemitism.



Peter, Ratier-Figeac Co., France, June 2022

Within days of the *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria) on March 12-13, 1938, the family fled to Belgium, leaving most of their belongings. Once settled they felt secure until Hitler's invasion of France and the Low Countries beginning May 10, 1940.

On that day, as the German Army entered Belgium, Ernst Feigl was arrested by Belgian authorities as an enemy alien and potential spy due to his German identification papers. Peter, with his mother and grandmother, fled west and south to France, eventually reaching Oloron-Sainte-Marie, where they were detained as enemy aliens by French authorities along with thousands of other immigrants at Gurs, an internment camp.

In Summer 1940 Agnes bluffed authorities into freeing her, Peter, and his grandmother. They fled north and were first sheltered in a Catholic convent in Auch, France, until Agnes secured employment in Auch at a food distribution center (canteen) sponsored by the Swiss Red Cross and American Quakers.

In October 1941 Peter's grandmother joined Peter's aunt and uncle immigrating to the U.S. via Spain and Portugal. Peter's father, released from incarceration on "convalescence leave" in March 1941, reunited with his family in Auch, living at 60 *Rue de Metz*. That summer Peter participated in a Quaker-operated summer camp near the Swiss border. He enjoyed a similar arrangement in the summer of 1942 at a children's colony, *Château de Montéléone*, in nearby Condom, France. Throughout this period, the Feigl family was unsuccessful in securing American visas.

While at the children's camp in mid-August 1942, Peter's father, though ill, rode his bicycle to visit, leaving thirteen-year-old Peter with a small bag containing "family treasures." On August 27 after learning of his parents' arrest by French police, Peter started a diary he hoped to one day share with them. Soon after, Peter discovered he too was to be arrested. The camp director, Mrs. Cavailhon, a devout Catholic, ensured that each of the three times French police arrived, Peter was "too ill to be transported." Simultaneously she worked to have Peter sent from Marseilles to the United States via the Quakers, but that transport was canceled after German forces occupied the southern part of France in response to the November 1942 Allied invasion of North Africa. Instead he was temporarily placed in a nearby Quaker's children's colony at Les Caillols in Marseilles.

Peter traveled by train in January 1943 to St. Agrève and then together with Daniel Trocmè, cousin of Pastor André Trocmè, walked for miles in snowy darkness to *Les Grillons*, a children's home Daniel directed in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a predominately Protestant village which was later named Righteous among the Nations for sheltering thousands during the war. While there, Peter's diary disappeared, presumably confiscated to safeguard

identities, and he was also given a false French identity card with the name Pierre Fesson. Months after Pierre's arrival, Daniel was arrested and deported to Majdanek during a German raid. A few months later Pierre was sent to Figeac to board at the *Collège Champollion* high school where he started a second diary. During his stay, Pierre, fluent in German, helped French Jewish "Scouts" in their resistance efforts against German forces, including the sabotage of important machines at the Ratier factory which produced propellers for Germany. After evading a German SS raid in Figeac in May 1944, Pierre was helped to and across the border into Switzerland.

After interrogation by Swiss police for illegally entering the country, Pierre was admitted as a refugee and allowed to stay with the family of a professional associate of his father's in Bern where he went to school for one year. He then attended other schools and had a variety of living arrangements until, with the help of the International Red Cross, Pierre became Peter again, immigrating to New York City in July 1946 to live with his grandmother. Although Peter was aware that his parents had been transported in 1942, first to the transit camps of Le Vernet then Drancy, knowledge of their subsequent deportation to and murder in Auschwitz-Birkenau eluded him until after the war.

Upon his arrival in the United States, Peter embarked upon what he described as a "long career of job hopping." He worked various jobs and shortly after his eighteenth birthday, he joined the U. S. Air Force in hopes of becoming a pilot. Due to his extensive language fluency, he was assigned to T-2 intelligence. The technical knowledge he gained there by analyzing and translating captured German aeronautical documents during his three-year enlistment would be key to his future success. In the decades following his Air Force service, Peter moved through careers in several parts of the U.S., including a highly successful position in military equipment sales for the U.S. Department of Defense.

At the time of Peter's interview with the USC Shoah Foundation in 1997, he and his now deceased wife Leonie, also a Holocaust survivor whose family arrived in America the day after *Kristallnacht*, had two daughters, Joyce and Michele, and two grandsons. Retiring with Leonie in Palm City, Florida, Peter dedicated much of his time sharing with area youths and teachers his experiences during the Holocaust, and, as fate would have it, he was reunited with his first diary. They moved to Maryland in 2016, where Peter continued to share his wartime experiences as a survivor volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and at educational venues in the United States and abroad. Both diaries are now part of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's collection.

Although Peter has returned to locations where he was hidden over the years, in the summer of 2022, Peter, his significant other Jackie Stover, and American teachers Lisa Bauman and Sheila Hansen met in France to embark on a 10-day trip to retrace and film Peter at authentic sites mentioned in his diary, including as shown in the photo, the Ratier-Figeac plant in Figeac, which he helped to sabotage in 1944! Across France, Peter served as our gracious and tireless guide, interpreter, and interviewee, providing testimony about his experiences some eighty years prior.

**Source:** Much of this biographical content was taken from Peter Feigl's 1997 USC Shoah Foundation Institute testimony. Please see some selected trip photos and video clips at <https://annotatehistory.com/journeymap/> which is a work in progress!