BIG IMPACT: MSU’s Ken Waltzer shaped students, academia and Holocaust scholarship for 43 years.

By Don Cohen, Contributing Writer
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As last year ended, Ken Waltzer completed 43 years of teaching, scholarship and service as professor of history at Michigan State University’s James Madison College. He helped save the college and worked to build MSU a solid Jewish Studies program, while teaching thousands of students and reaching many more through curriculum development.

To honor his work and accomplishments, MSU is throwing him a Big Bash Retirement Celebration March 27-28 at its Kellogg Center in East Lansing. Although this signals official retirement, Waltzer is not done yet.

Groundbreaking research he conducted in 2008 as a member of a team of scholars sent by the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum to open and apprise the Red Cross International Tracing Service Archives in Germany, is still keeping him busy.

His findings of an organized network that rescued young boys at Buchenwald, including Israel’s future Chief Rabbi Meir Israel Lau and Holocaust scholar Elie Wiesel, has spawned numerous articles, a film and will be the topic of two books he is working on. And he vows to stay politically active on Jewish and Israel issues.

Waltzer, 72, grew up in what he terms “Jewish New York,” having been born in Brooklyn and growing up in the Bronx and on Long Island.

“I was acutely conscious as a kid of the ethnic or ethno-religious divides,” Waltzer says. “I had several encounters with anti-Semitism as a boy and had to fight my way through them.”

The root of his Jewish identity, politics and love of education and jazz music was family life.

“My parents weren’t Reds but were progressives, and they were active in civil rights,” he explains. “My father and all my uncles were jazz musicians, six total, and that had an effect by itself. We interacted in an integrated milieu. My heroes growing up were [jazz pianist] Oscar Peterson and [baseball great] Willie Mays.”

Waltzer was active in the New Left and the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) during the 1960s and early ’70s. At the same time, he was grounded in his Jewish identity.
“I was not alienated from my own background. I am, and have always been a self-identified Jew, secular rather than religious, interested in the history of the Jewish people in the modern era,” he says. “I consider myself a grandchild of the East European Jewish migration. Growing up, I was close with my grandfather, Morris Waltzer, the patriarch of the large family, and I think that’s the source of my interest in immigration and urban history.”

And that family life, helped form his. “I married a beautiful Jewish girl from the Bronx whose parents were garment workers,” he says of his wife, Sandy, with whom he has two sons. “All fits together.”

Waltzer studied American history at SUNY’s Harpur College in Binghamton before heading to Harvard University in 1964 to study urban history and immigration with Professor Oscar Handlin, one of the most prolific and influential American historians of the 20th century. Waltzer was a Harvard Prize Fellow, and busy with activism and teaching as well his degree. He went to work at MSU in 1971 and completed his Ph.D. in 1977.

“During the Vietnam War, I was an activist so it took a while to finish,” Waltzer says. After the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, he considered working in the labor movement but was drawn to MSU’s James Madison College and the residential college movement.

**James Madison College**

California and Michigan were leaders in the movement, which Waltzer says was geared toward establishing “a small college in the midst of a large university” that would “highlight excellent teaching, community spirit and experiment with curriculum.” James Madison College was four years old in 1971 when Waltzer arrived on a one-year contract.

“We had probably the best students at Michigan State; it was a great place to be,” Waltzer recalls, still excited about the idea and reality of the residential college. “We teach that the present comes from the past. Unless you understand the past, you won’t know how to make choices you face today.”

Waltzer is proud to have taught courses in immigrant and minority history and in urban history, and to have developed a multidisciplinary course dealing with Jews, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. It traced Jewish life in Europe, the history of anti-Semitism and the rise of Nazism, the Nazi policy path to genocide, European Jewish reactions in ghettos and camps, and the U.S. response to the Holocaust. It touched on several areas so students could get credit in every field in James Madison College.

“Ken’s course on the Holocaust had a real impact on me and my fellow students,” said Avi Davidoff, an international relations major at James Madison and now Michigan director for AIPAC and on the board of the Jewish studies program.

“I grew up with Jewish life all around me, but the Holocaust was Ken’s area,” Davidoff says. “The class had very interesting conversations about different perspectives on the Holocaust, and he helped me realize that I was the one who has to tell the story. I would give him a good amount of credit for my passion to work in the Jewish world and to protect Israel.”
In the early-1980s, Michigan’s poor economy put James Madison College on the endangered list, and it was slated to be closed.

“It was an important moment, whose outcome was whether I would spend the rest of my life in Michigan,” Waltzer says. Putting his already well-worn organizing skills together with others, it was a struggle, but the college stayed open.

“We survived and thrived,” he says.

By the end of the decade, MSU referred to the college as the “jewel in the crown.” Waltzer would serve seven years in its leadership, including as acting dean.

“I was always oriented toward curriculum work,” he says. His work on integrating study-abroad programs into the college led to his becoming the director of Integrative Studies in the Arts and Humanities in the College of Arts and Letters, where he worked on making general education interdisciplinary and globally aware.

A recipient of several MSU teaching awards, Waltzer wants the same for the college, so he and his wife have established the Ken and Sandy Waltzer Teaching Excellence Endowment for James Madison College to support annual teaching excellence awards. Building its endowment is just one of the projects that promises to keep him busy in retirement.

**Jewish Studies**

In 1994, Waltzer began working with Steve Weiland to develop a Jewish Studies program at MSU. Weiland would become program director in 1995, with Waltzer taking the reins in 2004. Yael Aronoff, the Michael and Elaine Serling and Friends Chair in Israel Studies, became the director in August 2014.
“There was no program, not enough faculty,” Waltzer says of what passed for Jewish Studies before. “It’s probably the proudest thing that we were creating something important and leaving something of value for MSU.”

Building Jewish Studies meant developing its purpose and program, garnering support on campus and raising money. Weiland gives serious credit to Waltzer for helping make it happen.

“One of the great things about Ken is that he is always ready to respond to opportunities,” Weiland says, recalling an example from the late 1990s when they were looking for donors. “A promising candidate told us to ‘think big.’ We went down the elevator and out to my car — and then stood there for an hour while Ken sketched what would be the conceptual foundation for the Jewish Studies program to this day. We still kid about our ‘parking lot’ program.”

Moving beyond European Jewish history, the MSU program would focus on the United States and Israel as the two centers of modern Jewish history. This meant having four pillars: American Jewish history, Israel studies, Judaism and Jewish thought, and Hebrew. An annual Israel Film Series and a study-abroad component soon followed.

Weiland credits Waltzer for the Israel studies component of the program, which began in 1998.

Following a presentation at Hebrew University in Jerusalem on a trip to develop an innovative Study in Israel Program tailored to MSU, Weiland says, “We walked out into the hall and Ken said let’s stay right here for a while. And he came up with the rationale and structure for what we began the following year and maintain to this day as our ‘hallway’ program.”

Both the personal and professional connections with Israel are relatively new for Waltzer, who traveled to Israel for the first time in 1995.

“Initially, I read modern Jewish history in a unilinear way, Europe to America and trained as an immigration historian,” he says. “Today, I read it in a more complex multi-centered way, with North America and Israel the two centers of post-Holocaust modern Jewish history.”

He’s now been to Israel eight times, three times to teach and others to research, lecture and negotiate MSU’s Israel program.

These days it’s not uncommon to see a Facebook post or share from Waltzer challenging, exposing and deconstructing the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and others that target or threaten Israel’s existence, or expressing empathy for both Jews and Arabs caught up in the violence.

“I’m working with good people on the left against the anti-Zionist left,” he says of his activism in academic circles and with the new movement, The Third Narrative. “I’m working against BDS full-time, full-stop, with everything that I have. We’re anti-BDS, anti-occupation and for active, aggressive promotion of a two-state solution.”
Holocaust Research

At the Red Cross archives in Germany, Waltzer researched the Buchenwald Boys, 904 survivors, most adolescents, but many age 12 and younger. Here he looks at a prisoner registration card.

In the 1980s, Waltzer grew dissatisfied with how Holocaust scholars wrote that America and American Jews did little to nothing to help European Jewry.

He found that the left, and the heavily Jewish labor movement and Social Democrats, were very active during the war pushing for American diplomatic action to save Jews. When that wasn’t enough, they went underground to send money and other assistance to Europe through the Polish government in exile.

He was able to track down some of the couriers and documented that hundreds of thousands of dollars were transferred to those in hiding.

“It was a mistaken approach to focus on good people and good communities doing selfless things,” Waltzer says. “It was the resisters that turned into rescuers. Rescue was a collective activity, clandestinely done along networks.”

Waltzer’s research focuses on Buchenwald, a concentration camp where American liberators had found 21,000 surviving prisoners, among them 904 boys, most adolescents, but many age 12 and younger.
Among the boys were Elie Wiesel, then 16, and Meir Israel Lau, 8, who would become Israel’s Chief Ashkenazi rabbi.

“How were they able to make it through?” Waltzer asked at the time. He found they were rescued inside the camps. The Communist-led underground protected all the boys.

“The goal was to stay in the camp and not go outside where the work was brutal. In Kinderblock 66, they kept them inside the barracks,” Waltzer explains. “They created a school, led songs and had performances. They had to convince the kids they would make it to the end.”

Waltzer served as historical consultant for a 2012 documentary, *Kinderblock 66: Return to Buchenwald*, that told the story. While the film was being screened at the Jerusalem Film Festival, it was announced that Antonin Kalina, a leader in the camp underground, would be posthumously granted Righteous Among the Nations status by Yad Vashem for his role in saving the boys. This year, the film was shown at the United Nations and UN-sites worldwide on International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Jan. 27.

Previously, Waltzer’s research as one of 15 scholars from North America, Europe and Israel who traveled to Bad Arolsen, Germany, in 2008 to examine the newly opened Red Cross International Tracing Service Archives, led to Yad Vashem recognizing another righteous man.

Waltzer tracked down Rabbi Lau’s rescuer, whom Lau had sought for decades without success. Lau only knew the older boy’s first name, Fyodor, so Waltzer searched the Red Cross archives and found only one person with the same name interned with Lau.

Lau invited Waltzer to the ceremony at Yad Vashem in 2009, but he was unable to attend so MSU produced a short video for the occasion.
Waltzer has now gathered information on more than 200 of the 904 boys rescued from Buchenwald. He is currently completing a book, *The Rescue of Children and Youths at Buchenwald*, and another collection of essays, tentatively titled *Children’s Stories: Children and Youths in the Nazi Camps*.

He has lectured internationally on his recent work, including in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Israel and the United States.

His knowledge of Buchenwald also received wide attention when he challenged the publication of a Holocaust memoir considered slated for the best-seller list and movie screens. Waltzer assembled a team to investigate his suspicions of fraud, and the book, *Angel at the Fence*, was withdrawn.

It’s clear that Waltzer’s activist days continue, with new things to teach, know and build in order to better society, Israel and the Jewish world.

**Retirement Bash:** Professor Ken Waltzer’s Big Bash Retirement Celebration will be held at the MSU Kellogg Center in East Lansing on March 27-28. He is being honored for his role in building James Madison College. There will be a Friday night dinner and events all day Saturday. For information and tickets, contact Kim Allan at (517) 353-3381 or email allank@msu.edu.

**Video Links**

**MSU Video:** Ken Waltzer for former Israeli Chief Rabbi Meir Lau

**Kenneth Waltzer, Opening the Red Cross International Tracing Service Archive (2008)**

**Ken’s Blog**

**Ken’s blog at the Times of Israel**