# Eric Levi Returns to Boyhood Home and Saves Village

by Robert Tessmer, 397-I

There are many twists and turns of fate during wartime, but the story of Eric Levi deserves special recognition.

Eric's story starts in his hometown of Ellwangen, Germany, where he was born in 1920. He was enrolled in the prestigious Peutinger-*Gymnasium* (similar to our high schools) until the Nazis took power and forced the Jews out of school in 1935. He left Ellwangen to become an apprentice in a shoe factory.

His family was very fortunate to escape Germany, just prior to the *Kristallnacht* in November 1938 when Nazi Stormtroopers broke the windows of all Jewish property and terrorized them. They traveled to New York, settling on 145th Street. They had exchanged the Jagst River for the Hudson River.

Eric never completed his formal education as he went to work for an uncle to help support his family. In 1943 he entered the Army and ultimately became a Medic for Company D, 399th Infantry Regiment. Bob Fair says he was very highly regarded because of his medical knowledge, and because he spoke fluent German.

Bob relates an incident during combat when after taking the town of Oberhaslach, the platoon spent the night on the floor of the Town Hall. Bob had been relieved of guard duty at midnight and was just about to go to sleep when two German soldiers in full uniform and helmets entered the room. Bob grabbed his rifle and alerted the others, but before he could shoot, Eric Levi came into the room and announced he had captured them. Medics don't normally carry weapons, but Eric had made an exception. He was quite amused by the trick he had played on his platoon buddies.

Eric transferred out of the Company on March 7, 1945, and must have been assigned to another unit that advanced somewhat further into Germany as he showed up at the town of Ellwangen on April 23 as noted in the Division history. Ellwangen is about 60 kilometers east of Stuttgart. His unit had and bombed Crailsheim and was about to do the same to Ellwangen when Eric saw a German sheep herder, Herr Koenig, who he remembered. He was able to communicate in the Schwabisch dialect and asked Herr Koenig where the German positions were located. Koenig told him the *SS* troops and the *Volksturm* were entrenched one kilometer north of the town on a strategic location and that there were few, if any, troops in the town.

This information allowed the air force and artillery to concentrate on the entrenched German troops, sparing the town from damage. This story was provided by a current resident of the town, Georg Fuchs, whose father was present during the battle. Georg was instrumental in giving this information to Eric's son, Michael.

Eric married on his return from Germany in 1946 and had two children, a daughter, Barbara, and a son, Michael. Unfortunately, Eric died in an automobile accident in Caracas, Venezuela in 1966. Michael has been very interested in the story of his father and is the author of a presentation called "The Jew Who Saved Ellwangen." He and his family were present in Ellwangen at the recent commemoration of a plaque honoring "The Last Jewish Students at the *Gymnasium* and the *Realschule*—Eric, Erwin, and Max Levi."

April 2004 Association Newsletter

# Trips to My Father's Past in Ellwangen

by Michael H. Levi

*Michael Levi, son of Eric Levi, 399-D, and his family followed their ancestral roots back to Ellwangen, and in the process learned more about Eric's past.*

One of my last memories of my father, Eric Levi, was a bad argument we had about high school. It was 1966 and he wanted me to go to a private boarding school where, he was convinced, I would blossom as a student. I was an average American 14-year-old junior high school student and wanted to stay with my friends in my suburban public school. The issue died shortly thereafter, along with my 45-year-old father, after a freakish car crash in Caracas, Venezuela.

My father had been on one more business trip where selling himself appeared to be the key to contracts and success. Ironically, it is only in the last three years, since I have visited my father's hometown of Ellwangen, that I have come to understand the real meaning of that argument.

My connection with this picturesque German town began in the winter of 2001. I received an invitation from teachers at the Peutinger-*Gymnasium* in Ellwangen to attend the opening of their exhibit on the few Jewish families who had lived in this town until 1938, the year my father and his parents escaped Germany. (Max Levi, my father's younger brother, had already been sent to England on a *Kindertransport* by that time.)

The students and teachers from Ellwangen were motivated to begin this study when they learned from a local priest that, before Hitler, Jewish families had lived and thrived in their town. In fact, my grandfather and his brother had been very much a part of the town's life and economy. My grandfather was known for his skill as a *Viehhändler* (cattle trader) and for his honest business methods. His brother, Sigmund, was a member of the Ellwangen *Schützengilde* (gun club) and the plaque commemorating his wedding still hung in the club office when we visited in 2001.

In January of 2001, the exhibit organizers tracked down and telephoned my mother in New York. They learned of my father's death 35 years earlier and she suggested that they ask me to attend their exhibit, which was named after my father, "*Wer war Erich Levi?*"

I was intrigued. How, I wondered, could these strangers in Germany have known about the many times I fantasized visiting this town to learn about my father? And how did they know about the many times I had pored over my father's army memorabilia, wondering what it must have been like for him to return as an American soldier to his hometown–a town that had turned against him?

That phone call from Ellwangen came as quite a surprise within just a few days and my 14-year-old son Jacob and I flew to Germany to reconnect with this town. I now know that Ellwangen, previously known to me for its humiliation of a proud family, fell in 1933 into the darkness of Hitler. As we drove up to the Peutinger-*Gymnasium,* a bed-sheet-sized photo of my father hung above the entrance to the exhibit. It was like a dream to be so welcomed into the same town whose last statement to my family upon their exodus in 1938 was an article in the local paper, the "*Ipf-und Jagst-Zeitung,*" which describes the departure of Julius Levi thus, "*Auch Ellwangen wird so nach und nach Judenrein: der Jude Julius Levi wandert nun nach Amerika aus. Umso erstaun licher ist es, dass es im Jahre 1938 noch deutsche Volksgenossen und genossinnen gibt, die in rührender Weisse von einem Juden Abschied nehmen, wie dieser Tage beobachtet werden konnte.*" ("Little by little, Ellwangen is also becoming *Judenrein*. ["Jew pure"] The Jew, Julius Levi, just emigrated to America. It is therefore that much more astonishing that in the year 1938 there are still Aryan brothers and sisters who are filled with emotion when taking leave of Jews, such as we have observed in recent days.").

The article goes on to describe in derogatory terms how such "Jew-lovers" were "less valuable than the Jewish *Mischpoke*." (The Yiddish word *Mischpoche*, meaning family, has been absorbed into the German language, but is used as a pejorative term to mean unpleasant or unwanted company.)

The student's poster exhibit filled the school exhibition space and the opening ceremony was prideful and solemn. There were speeches by historians, teachers, the school director and me. I pondered what to say and found that the words that came easiest were those associated with life at home with my German-Jewish parents and grandparents. Ironically, it seemed that my memory of Spätzle, the Swabian noodle, provided a means for connecting with my audience. As I reminisced out loud about the Spätzle being formed in the pot of boiling water as the cook cut the sticky dough into little pieces using a funny little hand operated machine, I could feel the crowd and myself relaxing together.

The exhibit chronicled how the Jewish families practiced Judaism and built up their lives and families in Ellwangen. It also described the politics of Hitler and National Socialism. The students and I were driven to ask the same questions about how and why all this came to pass. (It was particularly interesting to observe a bond forming between the students at Peutinger-*Gymnasium* and my son.) The exhibit focused on my father because of his unique position as a U.S. Army soldier who returned to the town in 1945, when the U.S. troops secured the southern region of Germany.

Eric Levi had reason to be angry and vengeful toward the town of Ellwagen. Despite their good standing as neighbors and business people, however, soon after 1933, the humiliation began. Following Hitler's 1933 Law Against the Overcrowding of German Schools and Institutions of Higher Learning, which limited the number of Jewish students in German schools, my father was forced to leave the *Gymnasium* despite being a good student. In 1936, the anti-Semitic weekly newspaper from Stuttgart, *Flammenzeichen*, singled out Julius Levi, my grandfather, in an editorial titled, "*Jude Levi und seine Freunde*" ("The Jew Levi and His Friends"). In this article, the author asked why Levi was still working. It went on to taunt and name persons who still were friendly to him. The author wonders why these people did not understand what was happening in Germany and demands that the people he named be more attentive so they would know better than to associate with such a man.

Finally, around 1937, an event occurred, that must have signaled to the Levis that their life in Ellwangen was over. My grandfather's barn was surrounded by Nazis. His cattle were forced into the River Jagst and drowned. Then, in 1938, the penniless family, aided by Jewish agencies, escaped to New York City. The details of their departure and travel are still unknown to me, but one thing is clear: they were among the lucky ones.

[My father's wartime experience is related by Bob Tessmer in the accompanying article.]

Though my father had returned to his hometown, it must have been painfully obvious to him that it could no longer be his real home. His actions were not vengeful, but rather humane, even business-like: He helped round up the Nazi zealots, he tried to help those who he thought were brutalized by the war, and he made the *Bürgermeister* (mayor) find and repair the gravestones of the desecrated Jewish cemetery. On one occasion, my father arranged for the release of a man who had been arrested for violating curfew, because my father knew that this Ellwanger had not been a willing Nazi. The man's granddaughter remembered my father's generous deed and gave me regards from her grandfather when I was in Ellwangen in 2001.

In 1945, the town was physically intact, but the earth had been scorched with hatred. Ellwangen had been home to a slave-labor camp and an *SS*-fortress during the war years. Yet my father's parents were in New York City, his brother in Australia, and this was no longer the place my father seemed to enjoy as a young boy. Although he and my mother would return to Ellwangen in the 1950s, there was no discussion with us, their children, about this trip or pictures to document it.

The *Gymnasium* in Ellwangen seemed so central to my understanding of my father. What would a 15-year-old do after being forced out of school? My father had not failed his courses (in fact, he was a good student), but suddenly he was told that he was not German and that there was no longer a place for him in the school. This year, in 2004, I returned to Ellwangen and was eager to learn what my father's life was like during the difficult years of 1933 to 1938. Just this past Thanksgiving my mother arrived with a document that confirmed his apprenticeship in a shoe factory in Permisens, Germany. Today, I look at my children, now 13 and 16, and imagine what it would be like to tell them they had to leave home, live with a relative many hours away and become an apprentice in a factory. We all do what life demands, but sending one's children away is very hard to imagine.

Once Eric Levi arrived in New York at the age of 18, he had no school diploma, only a letter of reference from an uncle in Permisens where he had worked in his factory. For some unknown reason my father was not able to continue his education in New York and this became a source of shame for him. No matter how many doors were opened for him by good business acumen and financial success, he was filled with doubts and insecurity. Despite my father's fluency in four–perhaps even five–languages that was the key to his thriving import-export business, despite a loving family and many friends, my father often seemed angry, obsessed and insecure.

In a small effort to rectify what had been done, the Peutinger-*Gymnasium* and the town of Ellwangen in 2002 honored the last Jewish students with a dramatic plaque and sculpture. The plaque highlights that Eric, Max, and their cousin Erwin were the last Jewish students in this school, but were forced to leave by national socialism. Although this cannot fill the void that my father felt about his education, it is my hope that the plaque can open the eyes of future generations to the value of all lives passing through this school.

This winter my family returned to Ellwangen to celebrate the 2004 New Year. We arrived at the Ellwangen Bahnhof, where our friends immediately greeted us. We felt so welcome, warm and happy to have returned. There was none of the weird feelings that I had experienced on previous trips to Germany. The next day we celebrated my wife's birthday in a small restaurant in the nearby village of Rosenberg. The restaurant's owner recalled his father telling him of a certain American coming through with the U.S. Army at the end of the war. While the Americans blew up nearby roadblocks, this soldier helped preserve his father's old restaurant building.

That evening we ate like kings, drinking good champagne and toasting to these better days and the new bridges of friendship.

In the following days, I visited with four older residents of Ellwangen who still had memories of my family. As I sat in the home of a family that had been butchers in Ellwangen for generations, munching German pretzels, I was shown a picture of my father as a young boy. He stood among his friends with a snowball in his hand. Just as Proust evoked his own youth by tasting a Madeleine cake, I was transported to a moment during a stay at summer camp as a child when I

was walking on a dirt road with my father. In my memory, we were near the horse stables when he told me a most bizarre story. He recalled that when he was a boy he would make snowballs using horse droppings to form the center. It seemed so strange at the time, but now, knowing about the business of cattle trading that was central to this town, it made perfect sense to me. (Even today, in fact, the town sells a chocolate candy called the Ellwangen Rossapfel or “horse dropping.”)

I am linked to Ellwangen by memory and by a half-unconscious need to fulfill some of those unfulfilled needs of my father. Obviously, my father was psychologically damaged by what had occurred to him in this town. The processes of introspection and psychiatric self-analysis were not readily accessible to a person like my father. Unfortunately, his demeanor was too often that of an angry man; he drove too fast, smoked and drank too much. In the end, these probably led to the crash in Caracas.

As I sit in my office today, surrounded by my diplomas, settled in my own life, I find that during the last three years I have come to feel proud of a man I really did not know. When we fought about the private high school, I now realize his urge was to give me all that had been denied him. If I could relive that moment now, with all that I now understand, I still think that I would have fought to remain in my own school. But I would understand how his complex and frustrating past had given him an uncomfortable sense of pride and ambition.

April 2004 Association Newsletter