

RETURN TO LEIPZIG

AFTER ESCAPING NAZI GERMANY AS A YOUNG BOY, a longtime SU faculty member revisits his childhood and appears in a television show about his family

BY H. RICHARD LEVY

At age 9, H. Richard Levy departed the train station in Leipzig, Germany, for an uncertain future. He returned to the station in 2009 (above) to meet a relative and participate in a German television show that brought him face to face with his past.



LAST OCTOBER, I returned to my hometown, Leipzig, Germany, for the first time in more than 70 years. The journey came about because of the efforts of Marianne Wintgen, a distant relative from Berlin who had been trying to locate me for years. Her inquiry to a Leipzig web site caught the attention of the staff of *Die Spuhr der Ahnen* ("Traces of Ancestors"), a German reality television series featuring stories about family ancestry. Before sharing the story of my return, I need to tell you about events surrounding my departure.

THE DEPARTURE

I WAS BORN IN 1929, FOUR YEARS BEFORE Hitler came to power. During my childhood, German Jews suffered increasing oppression, culminating with *Kristallnacht* ("the night of broken glass"), November 9, 1938, when Jewish-owned shops and synagogues all over Germany were destroyed and thousands of Jewish men were arrested. Early the next morning, men pounded on our apartment door, shouting vile epithets about Jews. They told us to assemble immediately at a nearby location. At the last minute, my mother decided not to take my little sister, then only 10 months old, but left her with our trusted maid. It was a raw day. I walked between my



The Levy family (above) included H. Richard, his sister, Elisabeth, and their parents, Berthold and Charlotte. The family was separated in 1939, and the Nazis seized the family's factory in Leipzig. Levy visited the factory (above center) during filming of the television show.

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parents, holding their hands. I was 9—and very frightened. As we got closer to our destination, I heard loud banging and thought, “They are killing Jews in there.” It turned out to be a shoe factory. The whole thing was a hoax to torment Jews.

As we walked home, we met a lady who was very agitated and crying—it was the first time I saw an adult cry. The wife of a department store owner, she told us the store windows were smashed, the store had been looted, and the synagogue was set on fire. We met another acquaintance who said he was going to board a train and travel back and forth between Leipzig and Berlin until this blew over. My father said he would do the same, but only after checking on my grandfather and our family's knitted goods factory, and call from there. The call never came. When we returned to our apartment, our nameplate was gone, a preface to our subsequent eviction. For more than a week, my mother tried frantically to locate my father. She eventually learned he had been viciously beaten and imprisoned, and was to be sent to Buchenwald, a concentration camp she had not heard of until then. I cried every day he was away and asked my mother how God could let this happen. My father was released 10 days after his arrest. Two things kept him from being shipped to Buchenwald: The Nazis needed him to sign documents

so they could take over the factory; and his raw scar from cancer surgery led them to believe he might not survive the journey. Later on, no one had such scruples.

My parents already had plans to emigrate, but after *Kristallnacht* they realized the Nazi noose was tightening rapidly and my escape became their first priority. At the time, the British government agreed to grant refuge to a limited number of children under age 17. (A similar plan died in committee in the U.S. Congress.) The British *Kindertransports*, as they were called, were permitted by the Nazis on the condition that each child was allowed only one suitcase, no toys. During an eight-month period, some 10,000 children reached England from Germany and Nazi-occupied territories, escaping almost certain extermination. Why I was fortunate enough to be included, I do not know. Any parent can imagine the agonizing decision my parents made to send me, alone, 9 years old, not knowing if they would ever see me again. When I said good-bye to my father that morning, my mother knew I would never see him again as he was already mortally ill. He died six weeks later.

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Levy meets his relative, Marianne Wintgen, at the Leipzig train station. During filming (above right), they review documents.

were billeted out to British families who had volunteered to take them. I went to the home of Bernard Schlesinger, a London pediatrician, and his wife, Win, the daughter of my grandfather’s cousin. They took me into their home to live with them and their five children, ranging in age from 6 to 13. The oldest, John, would later become a famous film director, known for such pictures as *Midnight Cowboy* and *Marathon Man*. The Schlesingers rescued 12 more Jewish children, placing them in a hostel they established in London and hiring a staff that looked after all the children’s financial, educational, social, and religious needs. We all owe our lives to this remarkable family.

After my father died, my mother tried desperately to escape with my sister, but the police had seized her passport and refused to return it. A former employee at our factory agreed to try to retrieve it, for a fee. But by that time, all Jews’ money had been confiscated; they merely received weekly subsistence allowances. Then, in an extraordinary twist of fate, my mother discovered some money that my father had left in his wallet after his final business trip. She used it to pay the man who succeeded in getting her passport back to her. My mother and sister fled to Holland, and then, on August 27, 1939, to England, boarding the last KLM plane before the outbreak of war. I was one of the very fortunate



few to be reunited with at least one parent.

In my new circumstances, I did everything possible to forget Germany and to become English. It was a matter of survival in my boarding school because we were at war with Germany, and my classmates did not understand the difference between a German Jew and a German. I did not want to speak German, and so I forgot my native language almost entirely until I was about 13, when I relearned it, writing and speaking to my mother.

THE RETURN

THE PRODUCERS OF THE TELEVISION SHOW CONTACTED me in Syracuse, offering to pay for me to come to Leipzig to appear in an episode about my family. My wife, Betty, was unable to come, but our daughter Karen wanted very much to come along, and the television network, *Mitteldeutscher Rundfunk* (MDR), offered to pay her way. I was to meet Marianne, and we would go to various sites that had played significant roles in my childhood. I would be interviewed at these places about my memories of personal and historical events.

Karen and I flew to Germany and were accommodated at a fine hotel in Leipzig. We filmed for two days. The first scene was my meeting with Marianne, who had come there from her home in Berlin. She had only been told the previous day that I was alive and in Leipzig. The location was the main railway station—the last place I had seen before leaving. After 70 years, I still remembered it. I walked down the platform as though I had just arrived on a train, while Marianne searched for me. She recognized me from my resemblance to my grandfather, whose pictures she had seen. We embraced warmly and began a non-stop conversation, speaking in German, as she does not know English. We went to lunch with Anett Friedrich, the director of the television program. In one of the many moving moments of the trip, Anett gave me copies of several documents she had recovered: my father’s death certificate; a page from the Leipzig police blotter on November 10, 1938, showing my father’s arrest; a document confirming the Nazi take-over of my family’s factory (ending

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with the salutation “Heil Hitler!”); and a notice from the Gestapo authorizing the auction of my mother’s books.

We went to the apartment house where my family had lived. Our former apartment is currently a center for abused and disturbed children, but the television crew had received permission to film there. I still remembered some details of the apartment, and Anett’s questions reawakened more memories. We had been evicted after *Kristallnacht*, but my mother had somehow managed to find us a small apartment, despite a Nazi ban against renting to Jews. We did some filming there as well and then drove to the factory, which had been established by my family in 1865. It is now partly in ruins. In the afternoon, we went to the Old Jewish Cemetery, where my father is buried. Marianne and I were given a map of the cemetery, and we were filmed as we located our family plot. Seeing my father’s grave was a very emotional experience for Karen and me; I spent several minutes communing with him. The plot right next to ours had been desecrated with the words *Juden Schweine* (“Jew pigs”). In a filmed interview at the cemetery, I told Anett it had taken me a long time to be able to talk to Germans without thinking about whether they or their relatives were Nazis who had murdered members of my family or other Jews, but I had shed that feeling with time. She said she is still tormented by questions of whether members of her family were involved in Nazi atrocities.

At the Jewish Cultural Center, Marianne spotted some photos of my grandfather in an exhibition. He became president of the Leipzig Jewish Community after the war, when only 16 Jews remained of the 16,000 who had lived there before the Nazis came to power. Remarkably, he had survived with his second wife, who was not Jewish, under harrowing conditions. Then came one of the most moving events of the trip. Two teenage boys, Julius and Paul, interviewed me. They asked excellent questions. Their teacher had done



research on me and my family to help them prepare, and after the interview the boys presented me with a beautifully illustrated book containing the results of their teacher’s research. They also gave me a framed receipt from my family’s factory, dated December 9, 1902, featuring the original company logo. This was an extraordinary event, inspiring hope in me for German youth.

Before leaving Germany, Karen and I spent a day in Berlin, which neither of us had ever visited. We went to the Jewish Museum, designed by the Polish-born American architect Daniel Libeskind. Although we only saw part of it, we were most impressed. The tilting floors and the skewed angles at which the walls meet deliberately convey an appropriately disturbing sense of disorientation. We were deeply moved by the numerous displays about the fate of Jewish individuals and families, enabling the viewer to relate personally to these events. We also visited the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, consisting of some 2,700 concrete slabs. It was jarring to be brought back so vividly to the Nazi horrors after the more healing time in Leipzig, but certainly a worthwhile experience.

Before returning to Syracuse, I spent two days in England. I shared memories with two old Leipzig friends who live in London, and enjoyed a memorable evening reconnecting with Hilary, the sole survivor of the Schlesinger family. On the return flight to Washington I sat next to a man who told me his maternal grandparents were German Jews who had emigrated at the same time as I did. His paternal grandparents were German Catholics, and he feels sure this family included Nazis. He has a master’s degree in international law from Harvard, and volunteers to help individuals and institutions gain restitution for war-related crimes. His interest in this arose after he served in the U.S. Army in Bosnia and saw the horrors there. This seemed like a fitting conclusion to my journey.

H. Richard Levy (facing page) spends a quiet moment at his father's grave. The grave (right) is in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Leipzig. The German film crew (below left) gave him and Marianne Wintgen (below right) a map of the cemetery to locate the family's plot.



THE STORY ON TV

THE TELEVISION PROGRAM, TITLED "THE LITTLE BOY and the Nazis," was shown as an episode of *Die Spuhr der Ahnen* on the MDR network last November 25. I was provided a web site link to view it before it aired. It was a skillful mix of several elements: Marianne's search for me; our visits to various locations in Leipzig, which served as backdrops to the interviews with me; scenes from my childhood recreated by actors depicting my parents and me; family photographs; and historical footage of *Kristallnacht*, the *Kindertransport*, and Leipzig in the 1930s, including the anti-Semitic signs on display around the city. I participated in a chat room with viewers after the film. I had never been in a chat room before, let alone one conducted in German and on such an emotional subject. I was astonished. Dozens of viewers participated, and many of them were deeply moved. They wanted to know how I felt about returning to Germany, and many expressed their admiration for my doing so. The father of the child actor who played me as a boy wrote that this was a great honor for him. Obviously, my experiences were trivial compared to those of the countless children who suffered so greatly. My story had a happy outcome, and this may have made it easier for people to relate to. Marianne thought the program made a statement against prejudice of all kinds. If so, I am most gratified.

Several factors stand out in making the trip a positive personal experience for me. Karen's presence meant a great deal. She was supportive and helpful, taking care of practical

details and keeping me emotionally grounded. We shared a unique father-daughter experience. Then there was the interaction with the German television crew. Every one of them was kind and thoughtful, sensitive to the tenor of the whole event and respectful of my feelings. They treated us in a loving way. We bonded during the interviews, some of which evoked deep emotions in me. They were drawn into my story, and Anett, the director, cried on several occasions. I was struck by how many reminders of Germany's role in the Holocaust we saw. The book the schoolboys gave me contains a whole section devoted to events in Leipzig commemorating *Kristallnacht*. We saw a constant stream of schoolchildren entering the Jewish Museum and the Memorial to the Murdered Jews. In former East Germany, all schoolchildren were required to visit a concentration camp. This made me think that we, in the United States, have nothing comparable to deal with the horrors of slavery and the century of legalized segregation that followed. I believe memorial places might help us deal with our continuing racial problems. This journey, which I never thought of making until I was invited to do so, was an extraordinary event in my life. Although I have spoken about these events before, my personal connections to them lay dormant inside me. I never relived this part of my life until I returned to the place where it happened. Some painful memories were revived, but some healing took place—healing I didn't know I needed.

H. Richard Levy is a professor emeritus of biology who retired in 2000 after 37 years at SU. A similar account of Professor Levy's return to Leipzig will appear in the Fall 2010 issue of BIO@SU, the biology department newsletter.

For more on "The Little Boy and the Nazis," go to Google Translate and enter <http://www.mdr.de/ahnen/6809307.html>.