

Name: **Eric Wellisch**

Birthdate: August 12, 1920

Birthplace: Wiesenfeld No, Austria

Parents: Hugo and Irene Kohn Wellisch

Siblings: Trudy Wellisch (Schonberger)

Children: Two

Eric's family had lived in lower Austria for countless generations. Most of his extended family and Jewish community lived in the neighboring town of St. Poelter. Eric's family, however, lived in a small farming village. They were the only Jewish family in town. Relationships with the non-Jewish neighbors tended to be quite friendly. So friendly that with Kristallnacht came on November 11, 1938 the sheriff appeared at the door of Eric's home and, almost with an apology, said that he had to take Eric and his father Hugo to the jail to be locked up- he released them several days later. It was from that point on that Eric planned to leave for America.

Eric was allowed to graduate from gymnasium, but not allowed to receive his earned honor at the head of the class nor give he valedictory speech. First, he moved to Vienna while he waited for his cousin, Dr. Lefkovitz, in America to complete the sponsorship papers. While there, he participated in a Zionist Youth organization and often attended Betar evening meetings in his uniform. One night, Nazis were patrolling for Jews to force them to sweep the streets. One of them shined a flashlight his way on seeing the uniform mistook it for a Hitler Youth. They said "Heil Hitler" and Eric returned with "Hiel Hitler!". They passed him by.

Once safely in the United States, Eric began to worry about his family who were waiting anxiously to join him in America. With a great deal of chutzpa (nerve), Eric wrote directly to President Roosevelt and asked him to help him bring his parents to safety. He received a reply from Steven Early, the President's Press Secretary. Within a few months his parents and sister were in America.

Eric signed on as an American soldier in 1943 and was assigned to the 44th Combat Engineering Battalion. He participated at the tail end of many of the greatest campaigns of the war as the allied troops swept across Europe constructing temporary pontoon bridges to replace those that had been destroyed.. He landed on the beaches of Normandy and swung west to Brest, France, traveling in a four-man reconnaissance jeep across Germany to the border of the Czech Republic.

As part of Patton's army, they were pushing fast to beat the Russians at capturing as much territory as possible before Stalin's army got there first. They passed by a small German village where one of the villagers told Eric that he had been hiding a Jewish couple and he took him to them. When Eric walked in the woman said, with resignation, thinking Eric was a German soldier, "You finally found us." In the confusion she did not understand that he had not come to

take her to the death camps but rather to freedom. To convince her that he meant her no harm, he began to recite the Shma-the Jewish prayer- "Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One." It was then she realized she been rescued.

The same cousin, Dr. Lefkowitz, who signed his affidavit to come to the United States had also signed up as an army doctor. Eric knew where he was and found him at a site in Germany. Having access to intelligence reports, he warned his uncle that the Germans were expected to swing his way in two weeks. Two weeks to the day the Battle of the Bulge began. It was an army hospital and Dr. Leifkowitz was operating- on a German soldier. He told all the staff to leave when the capture seemed imminent. When the Nazi soldiers found him in the operating room, they told him to finish up and then leave and he did.

Part of the push to beat Stalin's army took them past the entrance to Buchenwald death camp. Eric and his follow soldiers stopped for a half-hour and saw first hand the horrors about which they had only heard. Eric still recalls the piles of bodies and they smell of death on that day in May, 1945.

Eric lost many family members in the Shoah; others survived. His cousin Erna spent the war at Theresienstadt, missing several transports to the eastern death camps. On her return, she gave Eric several pieces of the "Jewish money" that had been distributed at the camp. Before the Final Solution, part of the plan was to ghettoize Jews into areas where they would be separated from the general population-complete with its own economic system. After the first implementation of the Final Solution, Theresienstadt became a facade to show the Nazis "humane" treatment of Jews to the world through the Red Cross and other international organizations. While at the camp, Erna married Alexander Bernat who had been a roofer by profession. Following the war they returned to Vienna. The Austrian government was not obligated to hire him as a reparation for the war. He made a good living re-roofing all the government buildings. When Eric returned to the United States, he entered Columbia and Purdue Universities and received his doctorate in 1951. He came to Asheville in 1964 where he worked at Olin and Ecusta in Brevard. Now retired, Eric speaks to area school students on his experience as a youth when he was of a similar age.