Joseph Van Mackelenbergh & The Rescue Story of George Levy



The following is the testimony of George Levy as relayed to his friend, Rachael Katz Wachstein.

The Rescue Story of George Levy

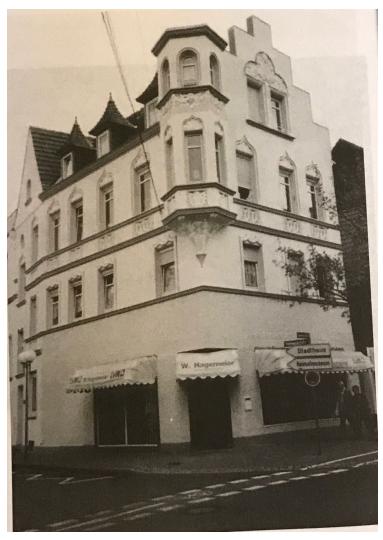


Levy Family, 1937

The Levy Family Before the War

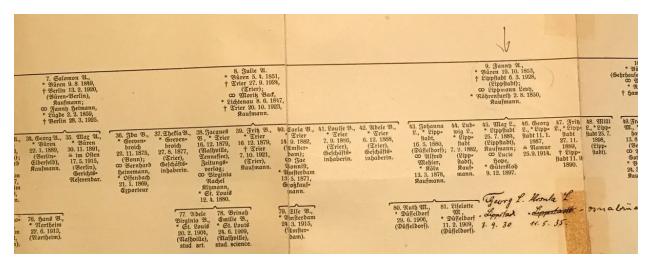
Max Levy and Lucia Hope Levy lived an upper class lifestyle in Lippstadt, Germany, where they owned a dry goods store that occupied the lower level of a grand house. George was born on September 3, 1930 and daughter Ursula followed five years later.

George has very fond memories of his childhood growing up in Lippstadt. The Levy house was full of love, family and friends. George enjoyed riding his bicycle and playing outside with his buddies. The kids attended the local primary school where they studied, played and made good friends with Jewish and non-Jewish children.



Levy Family Home, 19 Karl Zatler Str. Lippstadt, Germany

The Levys were Jewish but not particularly religious. They went to synagogue on the High Holidays and the children attended Hebrew school. Aside from not eating pork or attending church, they were indistinguishable from their Christian neighbors and felt completely assimilated into German life. George's father, uncles and grandfather fought in the German army during World War I. Max Levy had been awarded a medal in honor of his service. The Levy family had deep roots in the area, having lived in Germany for hundreds of years.



George Levy's Family Tree, Germany, 1700's

The earliest known case in Prussia of Jews being granted citizenship occurred in Lippstadt in 1779. Lippstadt's Jews were primarily independent business owners and a number of them had even served as town councilors. Still, throughout the history of Jews in Westphalia, violence and anti-Semitic incidents were ever present. In 1935, as Jews were banned from entering local restaurants, Lucie and Max Levy felt that this too shall pass. They could not have imagined what the future held for the Jews of Europe including their beloved children.

George's gentile uncle, Dr. Joseph Mueller, the husband of Lucie's sister Irmgard was alarmed. Dr. Mueller returned from a medical conference in a panic because his fellow doctors reportedly called for "the streets to run with Jewish blood." Joseph took the threats seriously and decided to leave Germany for the U.S. with his Jewish wife. He pleaded with Max to do the same. It may have been the Levy family's long history in Germany or the fact that Jews had survived anti-Semitic outrages in the past, but the Levys decided to stick it out. George was 8 years old.

Kristallnacht: The Beginning of the End

Everything changed in November of 1938 when *Kristallnacht* revealed the true intentions of the Nazis. As synagogues burned across the country, Jewish men were hauled out of their homes and put into camps. Max and his brother Ludwig were sent to Sachsenhausen where they were treated brutally for six weeks before being released. This was no joyous homecoming. They brought back stories of torture and despair. Meanwhile, Lucie, George and Ursula moved into an apartment with other Jewish families after a Nazi took over their home. It was now obvious that the Nazi situation was not going to blow over.

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Max and Ludwig Levy's Release Papers from Sachsenhausen

The Jews of Germany were in real trouble and it was too late to escape. George's father was delivered home from the camp on a stretcher. His legs were frozen, his body and soul broken. George remembered his father crying. It may have been because of his injuries or possibly because he realized the gravity of the situation. Max went into the hospital and was dead by January 1939.

The Van Mackelenbergh Connection



Joseph Van Mackelenbergh (second from left) and the *Huisvestigingscomité* sometime in the 1920s

Before leaving for the States, Dr. Joseph Mueller called on Jos Van Mackelenbergh, a Dutch hardware shop owner. The men met when Mueller fled Germany for Holland earlier in the year and worked as a doctor at a hospital in Van Mackelenbergh's home town of s'Hertogenbosch. Van Mackelenbergh was a member of the *Huisvestigingscomité*, a Catholic committee dedicated to the care of foreign refugee children. Dr. Mueller asked Van Mackelenbergh to look after George and Ursula Levy once their mother got them out of Germany and the destructive path of Nazi persecution.

Holland



George and Ursula Levy, Early 1940's

Lucie made arrangements to send George and Ursula to Holland. In March 1939, George, 10, and Ursula, 5, were put on a train to a quarantine center in Rotterdam. Lucie instructed George to look after his sister. She promised to follow as soon as she had the opportunity to flee. To this day, George is haunted by the vision of his mother as their train pulled away from the station.



Letter to George and Ursula from Lucie Levy

In May, the kids were sent to live at Sint Jacobus Gesticht, a convent in the city of Eersel. It was here that George and Ursula first met Mr. Van Mackelenbergh. He introduced himself to George and Ursula as their guardian. Over the next two years, he proved to be far more than a guardian. Van Mackelenbergh was a deeply religious man who believed it was his obligation to do good in the world especially for those in need. Without parents, in a strange country on the verge of war, the Levy children were certainly in need.



Van Mackelenbergh Family Photo Circa 1954, Taken by George on a Visit.

George and Ursula lived at Sint Jacobus with other Jewish and half Jewish kids when George wasn't on break from the Ruwenberg Kost boarding school a short distance from the Van Mackelenberg home. George spent occasional Sunday afternoons with the Van Mackelenberghs. Their son Emmanuel was George's age and made for a good playmate.

Occupation

In May of 1940, the Germans invaded Holland and within days the entire country had fallen. The Nazis immediately began to isolate the Jews through restrictive laws. It was at this time that the nuns of Sint Jacobus sewed a yellow Jewish star on the outer clothing of George, Ursula and the other Jewish children. George greatly resented having to wear the star.

As the Nazis set up their occupation machine, the noose tightened around the necks of Holland's Jews. There were plenty of Nazi sympathizers amongst the Dutch including Eersel's

mayor and police chief. In addition to limited hiding places, a country-wide shortage of food and supplies and a terrain that made escape near impossible, Jos Van Mackelenbergh and his Catholic committee struggled to keep the children out of harm's way.



Dining Hall, Children's Home at Sint Jacobus, Eersel, NL

Source:

http://www.zustersvanliefde.nl/nieuws/2/geschiedenis/20/archief/334/de-nood-van-de-een-is-de-opdracht-voor-de-ander:-jacobusklo oster-in-eersel.html

For the next two years, George and Ursula were kept safe within the walls of Sint Jacobus. With the help of the nuns and Mr. Van Mackelenbergh, the Levy children avoided arrest and deportation to the death camps. This was possible in large part because Jos understood that he needed to develop relationships with the German occupiers and their Dutch accomplices in order to protect his vulnerable charges. For this reason, when the new Commandant of the Vught Concentration Camp, Karl Chmielewski, stopped by his hardware store, Van Mackelenbergh gifted him with a pair of roller skates. Chmielewski appreciated the gesture and developed a fondness for the shopkeep.

In addition to acting as guardian for numerous Jewish children, Van Mackelenbergh helped hide members of the Dutch underground and facilitated communications between allied prisoners of war and their families. His activities were not without risk for himself and his family. Anyone caught helping Jews or other enemies of the Nazis could be sent to the labor or death camps. Jos was arrested and spent a brief time in a Nazi prison for passing letters between prisoners of war and their families.

The situation for George and Ursula became extremely dangerous after September 1942, when special Jew hunting units were formed, comprised of Dutch collaborators. By 1943, most of Holland's Jews had already been deported to death camps. It is estimated that 25,000 Jews went into hiding in the Netherlands. At this time, Jos Van Mackelenbergh made the decision to separate George and Ursula and hide them in different locations in rural Holland

Hiding

George was placed with a group of workers near the Maas river. Although the workers were kind to him, the loneliness and being apart from his sister whom he had promised to look after weighed heavily on his heart. He begged to return to the convent. Mr. Van Mackelenbergh brought the kids back to Sint Jacobus. There is no one living to explain why this decision was made. George believes that it is because he expressed his deep discontent with the situation, but it is unlikely that a child's wishes would dictate such a major decision.

Arrest & Interment



NSB Mayor of Eersel, NL, Fontein Strootman

Source: http://www.hskdeachtzaligheden.nl/tng/showmedia.php?mediaID=235&albumlinkID=158&tngpage=4

In April 1943, the Eersel police chief, Mr. Klaasen, was ordered by the pro-Nazi mayor Fontein Strootman to arrest the remaining Jews including the children at Sint Jacobus. Two policemen came to the convent and picked up George and Ursula. George remembers the policemen apologizing to the children as they were being transported.

George begged to see Mr. Van Mackelenbergh hoping that his guardian could once again protect them. The police drove to Van Mackelenbergh's office. George was hysterical and crying, remembering what had happened to his father years before when he had been interned at a camp for six weeks following Krystalnacht. Jos did his best to comfort the children. He looked George in the eyes and promised to get them out.

The kids arrived at Kamp Vught and immediately faced their worst fears. Within the first minutes inside the camp, they witnessed the merciless beating death of a fellow prisoner.



Front Gate at Kamp Vught

Source: http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/vught.html

Karl Chmielewski, the camp commander, transferred to Vught after having served as an SS-captain at the Mauthausen, Gusen and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. Chmielewski was a sadist and had developed a reputation for extreme cruelty. He is known as the inventor of the "death baths," having killed 300 prisoners at Mauthausen by stripping them naked in the winter and hosing them with icy water until they collapsed and died.



Kamp Vught Commandant Karl Chmielewski
Source: http://www.holocaustresearchproject.org/othercamps/vught.html

A Righteous Act

In May 1943, Jos Van Mackelenbergh along with his teenaged daughter, Trees, walked into commandant Karl Chmielewski's office at Vught and changed the fate of George and Ursula Levy. On pain of death for himself and his daughter, Van Mackelenbergh lied to Chmielewski about the origins of the Levy children claiming that they were in fact half Jews with a Catholic-German father, Dr. Joseph Mueller, who had immigrated to the United States before the war.

Knowing full well that Chmielewski was capable of anything, Van Mackelenbergh argued that the kids should be released or at least given preferential treatment.

Karl Chmielewski summoned the children to his office. After looking them over thoroughly, he declared that it must be true as they hardly looked Jewish with their blue eyes. He even sat little Ursula on his lap.

Had Commandant Chmielewski not believed Van Mackelenbergh's story he and his family would have been thrown into the camp. This was a man with a long history of extreme brutality. He enjoyed torturing and killing people in horrific ways during his time at the Gusen and Mauthausen concentration camps.

Jos Van Mackelenbergh's actions up until the meeting at Vught were honorable. He actively endeavored to provide shelter to Jewish refugee children when most of the rest of the world turned away. When the Nazis occupied Holland, Van Mackelenbergh was neither a bystander nor a collaborator like so many of his fellow Dutchmen. His faith motivated him to shelter the persecuted and care for the vulnerable. The event at Vught, however, elevated Jos Van Mackelenbergh from a good man to a righteous man as he risked his life to save the lives of George and Ursula Levy.

Jos and Trees left the camp and the Levy kids, hopeful that their ruse would work. Trees recalls her father saying that he was certain George and Ursula would survive. Although George and

Ursula were not released from Vught, Van Mackelenbergh's brave lie about a non-Jewish father in America loosened the grip of death. The kids were given better accommodations than the rest of the population at Vught. They were no longer just two undesirable Jewish children in the Nazi extermination machine but instead potentially valuable hostages to exchange for German prisoners of war held by the allies.

Saved from Sobibor



Deportation of children and parents from Kamp Vught to Westerbork and on to Sobibor, 1943

In the summer of 1943, sickness spread through camp Vught. The Nazis believed that the large number of families with children contributed to the outbreak. In June, an order was given to clear the children from the camp. Two groups were to be sent to a "special children's camp."

All children up to age 16 were transported in dirty freight cars to the Westerbork transit camp. A day later, they boarded freight cars for the "special children's camp" which turned out to be the Sobibor death camp in Poland. All 3,050 Jewish children and parents from Vught were gassed on arrival. There were only five kids left at Vught including George and Ursula Levy.

There is significant circumstantial evidence to prove that the kids were saved because of Van Mackelenbergh's intervention. Jeroen van den Eijnde, Directeur of the Nationaal Monument Kamp Vught received information from the Dutch National War Archives (NIOD) that George and Urslua's inmate registration cards are marked "exempt", a designation that has not been seen before on inmate registration cards from Vught.

"Van broer en zus Levy hebben we een kampkaart! Beiden zijn statenloos en op 10 april 1943 geregistreerd. Als godsdienst staat 'katholisch' vermeld, en dat ze zijn 'vrijgesteld door de kampcommandant'. Zo'n opmerking heb ik nog niet eerder gezien, ik neem aan dat ze vrijgesteld waren van...tsja, van appèl of arbeid. Niet van transport want op 20 november 1943 gingen ze naar Westerbork. Ze zijn vrijwillig binnengekomen vanuit het Jacobusgesticht in Eersel. George is blijkens de kampkaart op 3 september 1930 geboren in Lippstadt, Ursula op 11 mei 1936 in Osnabrück."

Translation: "We have camp registration cards from the Levy Siblings! Both are registered on April 10, 1943 as stateless. It mentions their religion as "katholisch" and that they are exempted by the camp commander. I have never seen this remark before. I assume that they were exempt from appeal or labor but not transport because they went to Westerbork on November 20, 1943. They voluntarily entered from Jacobusgesticht in Eersel. According to the camp registration card, George was born on September 3, 1930 in Lippstadt, Ursula in Osnabrück on May 11 1936. "

The above information was provided to Jeroen van den Eijnde, Directeur of the Nationaal Monument Kamp Vught by the National War Archives (NIOD). Contact Jeroen van den Eijnde to confirm that the NIOD found that the registration cards for George and Ursula Levy had a designation of "exempt" that has not been seen on other inmate registration cards.

Contact for Jeroen van den Eijnde: 073 658 70 61 jeroen.vandeneijnde@nmkampvught.nl

The experience of the Levy siblings throughout their internment at Vught, Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen together show a pattern of the Levys being spared the fate suffered by a majority of Holland's Jews. George feels that Mr. Van Mackelenbergh may have been able to get them out of Vught through Karl Chmielewski, but the Commandant was removed from the camp after being accused by the Nazis of grand theft in October 1943.

Exchange Jews



"Star Camp" (Sternlager), Bergen-Belsen

George and Ursula were transferred to Westerbork in September of 1943 before being sent to their final destination, Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen was divided into distinct sections. The Levy kids were interned in the Sternlager. According to the United States Holocaust Museum, "In September 1943 the SS established the "Star Camp" (*Sternlager*). This camp housed about 4,000 Jewish prisoners. Most of them came from the Netherlands via the Westerbork transit camp. The German intent with respect to these prisoners was to exchange them for German nationals interned by the Allies."

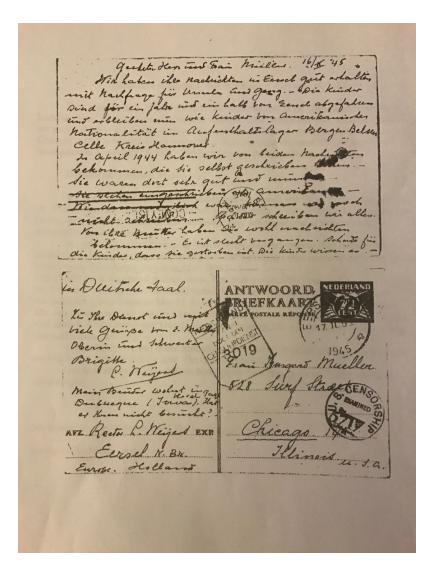
To Whom It May Concern

Herewith I confirm that George Mueller (formerly Georg Levy), born September 3rd 1930 in Lippstadt (Germany) and his sister Ursula, born May 5th 1935 also in Lippstadt, have been inmates in the so called "Star Camp" within the concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. They were deported from Camp Westerbork (Netherlands) to Bergen-Belsen. They were liberated in Troebitz (Germany) on April 23rd 1945.

Dr.Thomas Rahe Bergen-Belsen Memorial Deputy Head of Memorial

> Letter Confirming George Levy Mueller was Interned in the Star Camp from Dr. Thomas Rahe, Deputy Head of Memorial, Bergen-Belsen Memorial (Original letter attached)

Jews with proven links to enemy states, otherwise known as Jews of merit, Jews who had offered up large properties as well as diamond workers and dealers made up the Sternlager's population of 3700 "exchange Jews." The Levy children would not have fit any of these categories had Mr. Van Mackelenbergh not convinced the Commandant at Vught that their real father was a Catholic doctor living in the United States. A letter written by Rector Leo Weyers in 1944 to the children's uncle Dr. Joseph Mueller, explains that the kids are interned at Bergen-Belsen and that they are listed as American citizens.



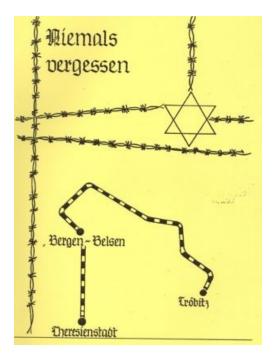
Letter from Rector Leo Weyers of Eersel to George and Ursula Levy's uncle Dr. Joseph Mueller in the United States stating that the kids are interned in Bergen-Belsen and are listed as American citizens. The rector comments that he does not understand how or why the children are listed as Americans. (Translation attached)



"Star Camp" (Sternlager), Bergen-Belsen

Dr. Joseph Melkman, a fellow prisoner at Bergen-Belsen who looked out for George and Ursula, described the fate of Dutch Jewish orphans in the camp during his testimony at the trial of Adolf Eichmann. Melkman describes how he and his wife would care for the orphans throughout their brief time at Bergen-Belsen before being sent east to the death camps. George and Ursula Levy were the exception.

The Lost Transport



Map of the Lost Transport

When the war was not looking good for the Germans, they attempted to cover up their campaign of genocide by destroying records, murdering the remaining concentration camp prisoners or transferring them elsewhere before the arrival of the allied forces. On April 9, 1945, George and Ursula were put on a transport train with 2,500 other prisoners to Theresienstadt.

Allied bombing prevented the train from reaching its destination. Instead, the train aimlessly wandered through Eastern Germany. Six hundred of the passengers died along the way from disease and malnutrition. On April 23rd, the train stopped in the German town of Troebitz where it was liberated by the Russians. The Russians themselves had little food so the survivors of the transport were largely left to fend for themselves.

George and Ursula took over an abandoned house. They scavenged for food and water. Both kids contracted typhus and continued their struggle to survive for the next three months. Eventually they were taken to the American military base in Leipzig before being sent to an army hospital in the South of Holland. They received medical treatment, food and much needed rest. When the Americans felt the kids were strong enough, they gave them some money and told them that they were free to go.

The War is Over

Orphans with no known surviving relatives in Europe, George and Ursula went to the only place they could think to go, Mr. Van Mackelenbergh's in s'Hertogenbosch. The Van Mackelenbergh family was very happy to see the kids. They burned the lice egg filled clothes the kids had worn in the camp in their garden before taking them to a nearby hospital. After a few weeks of treatment, Mr. Van Mackelenbergh took them back to their home away from home, Sint Jacobus in Eersel. Meanwhile he coordinated their immigration to the U.S. where Dr. Mueller and their Aunt Irmgard were waiting.

It took over a year to get the necessary permissions and paperwork to legally immigrate to the U.S. Van Mackelenbergh continued to look out for the children, providing for all of their needs until they left for Chicago, Illinois, in 1947.



Trees and Husband Visit George and Katie Mueller Circa 1990

George and Ursula have maintained a lifelong friendship with the Van Mackelenbergh family. They have visited each other numerous times on both sides of the Atlantic. George and his wife, Katie, hosted Van Mackelenbergh's granddaughter at their home for a number of months. Trees, now over the age of 90, speaks with George regularly from her home in Holland.

Conclusion

Children such as George and Ursula were particularly vulnerable during the Holocaust. Over a million Jewish children perished in the ghettos and death camps. Even children who had parents and family members with them could not escape the murderous Nazi regime. George and Ursula Levy managed to survive the Holocaust as young children without their parents or other family members. There is nothing particularly exceptional about George and Ursula Levy that would explain why they survived when so many others just like them did not.

The only logical explanation for avoiding extermination at Sobibor and receiving the special designation of "exchange Jews" at Bergen-Belsen is that Joseph Van Mackelenbergh, at great risk to himself and family, convinced a sadistic concentration camp commandant to classify the children as half Jews with connections to an enemy state, making them potentially valuable hostages. *Please refer to the information provided by the Dutch National War Archives to Jeroen van den Eijnde, director of the Kamp Vught Memorial and the letter from Rector Leo Weyers to Dr. Joseph Mueller as evidence of the life saving actions taken by Joseph Van Mackelenbergh on behalf of George and Ursula Levy.

Statement of George Levy Mueller

I survived Vught, Westerbork and Bergen-Belsen because of the actions of Joseph Van Mackelenbergh. Faith was his motivation, and he never asked for or received any form of compensation for helping us. Without Van Mackelenbergh's intervention on our behalf in the Commandant of Vught's office, my sister and I would not have had protected status as "exchange Jews."

It is my sincere hope that you find that Joseph Van Mackelenbergh meets the criteria for recognition as Righteous Among the Nations.

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| George Levy Mueller | | |
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