

Eugen Wellisch

Photographed with his wife Edith

Wartime Experience: Camp Survivor

I was born on October 1, 1924 in Budapest, Hungary. I am the oldest of four boys born to Nandor and Julianna Wellisch. My youngest brother, Rezso died of illness at the age of 18 months. My next-to-youngest brother, Miklos was killed by the Nazis when he was 17 years old and was caught in a roundup of civilians. My younger brother, Andras lives in San Francisco, and visits me regularly.

Since I was a Hungarian citizen, most of my family and I were able to avoid transports to concentration or labor camps until late in the war. My father spent over two years in a labor camp in Russia. I was sent to a coal mining labor camp in the northern part of Hungary, near the Czechoslovakian border. I was taken from my home in the city in the summer of 1944, with only the clothes on my back. The labor camp was in the mountains, and as autumn, then winter would approach, I knew I couldn't survive the harsh conditions with the inadequate clothes and shoes I wore.

Another camp inmate and I planned an escape. We inmates were allowed to shower one day a week and were marched in groups by armed guards up a small hill to the building housing the showers. On one such day my cohort and I decided we would try our escape later that day. In anticipation of such a bold act, my stomach was upset, and I had to run ahead to use the toilet in the shower building. The guards escorting my group didn't stop me, and they continued at a slower pace up the hill. Once the group arrived, the building manager turned them away because there was no hot water available for the showers. The guards forgot about me, so I hid in the building until nightfall and escaped under cover of darkness to the nearest train station.

The mine in which I worked as a forced laborer employed Hungarian Gentile citizens who commuted to the mountain mines by train every week. When, by good fortune, I found the station in the dark mountain night I recognized one of the miners waiting for his train to go home. I caught the miner's attention and took the chance of asking him for help. I had no money and had to trust the miner to not only buy me a ticket, but not to turn me over to the Nazis either. The miner was a righteous man to take such a risk and buy me a ticket. If the miner had been caught, he could have suffered the same fate as me.

My good fortune continued, as I was asked only for my ticket on the train, and not for any identification papers. I arrived at my mother's Budapest doorstep on my 20th birthday, October 1, 1944. When my mother answered the door, she said she knew I'd be coming because she had my favorite meal prepared.

I survived the remainder of the war in Budapest by getting new identification papers almost daily and avoiding citizen roundups. My family avoided being moved to the city's ghetto, and

from there being transported for immediate extermination to Auschwitz, by hiding in abandoned and bombed-out city buildings.

I left Hungary in 1945 and have never been back. I became a professional soccer player after the war, and first played for Hakoah in Vienna, Austria. I met my wife, Edith in the hospital in Bratislava, Czechoslovakia where she was working as a surgical nurse. I was taken there after an opposing soccer player deliberately kicked me in the shin, breaking my leg. I married Edith in Italy, where I was playing, and our first daughter was born there. I then played in France, and went on to play in Belgium, where my son was born. We moved to the United States with our two young children in 1954, settled in the Cicero neighborhood of Chicago, then moved to San Francisco in 1956, where our last two daughters were born.

In San Francisco, I first found work as a landscaper, but then I got a job as a waiter at the Fairmont Hotel. Henri and Werner Lewin were two of my bosses at the Fairmont, and when they went to work at the Hilton Hotel, they offered me a job there as a Banquet Captain. I worked at the Hilton for 27 years until I retired at the end of 1991.