

HELMUT WELLISCH



HELMUT WELLISCH

By Claudia Dobkin, Ph.D.

There is so much beauty to be found everywhere by those who seek it.

Elsie Wellisch

Para Eva, la mujer que me enseñó a vivir



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FOREWORD

Germany, 1931. The country was facing an economic and political abyss. The government was on the brink of bankruptcy and pursuing fierce austerity policies. Public employees were taking huge pay cuts and taxes were drastically increased. The economy was in a slump and unemployment rates were exploding. People were fighting each other on the street while banks collapsed and international capital was drawn out of the country. Two years later Hitler would be in power, eight years later the Second World War would begin.

In Munich, a newborn baby boy looked up from his crib to adoring parents who were looking at their firstborn with pride and joy. The boy decided to send up a steady spray, his first life-affirming act in a world soon to be shaped by adversity and immorality.

The story of Helmut Wellisch's life is representative of Jewish life in the 20th century. Where he came from and what forces molded him reflect the education and fulfillment of a pioneering man who largely invented the rules of life as he went. A central paradox of Helmut's life is that he is simultaneously the ultimate establishmentarian and an adventurous man. This self-taught entrepreneur ran his business with infinite attention to detail, a passion for perfection, and a ferocious drive to succeed. Yet this guardian of ethical standards for work and human relations has colored his life with a whimsical desire to explore the world, understand how things work, and share his enthusiasm and humor wherever he goes.

Helmut can explain why the Greater Blue Mountains in Australia are blue. He can tell you when a striptease show is art and when it is pornography. He can convince you without a shadow of a doubt that the best way to beat out competitors in any business is to know more about your product and more about your clients' needs than anyone else. And in a world where belief in God's presence and concern for humanity has been searingly tested, Helmut stands as a beacon of faith. There is no better example of his commitment to Judaism than the radical amazement with which he lives every moment of his life. As the great Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel once stated, "Wonder, rather than doubt is the root of all knowledge."

This book offers glimpses of life's adventure through the wondrous lens of Helmut Wellisch. In the course of many hours of conversation with me, Helmut shared his stories with verve, vivacity, and great precision. His tale is filled with lessons about character, leadership, values, and love of family. It is my hope that the readers of this book will also learn from Helmut how to live with spark and sparkle.

Claudia Dobkin, Ph.D.
Miami, 2013

MILESTONES

							November 9-10. Kristallnacht "Night of Broken Glass", a series of coordinated attacks against Jews throughout Germany. The attacks leave the streets covered with broken glass from the windows of Jewish-owned stores, buildings, synagogues including Helmut's school. December. Ernst Wellisch and Hugo Deller families leave Munich and wait in Paris for their visas to Uruguay. The visas do not come through, and after ten weeks, they finally obtain visas for Ecuador.			
1929	1931	1933	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	
Ernst and Elsie Wellisch marry in Fischach and move to Munich.	June 19. Helmut Wellisch is born in Munich and grows into a delightful child full of humor.				Ernst Wellisch and Hugo Deller go to Neuendorf, to attend agricultural school. With assistance from HICEM, a Jewish migration association, they plan to learn farming skills in order to escape Nazi Germany and move their families to a rural settlement in South America.				Ernst Wellisch and Hugo Deller part ways and Ernst sets up a small cheese farm. Helmut and Edith begin attending catholic school, the best school in the rural town where they lived.	
				Berlin Olympics. Hitler tries to showcase his country as a model of dynamism and progress. At the same time, he begins a systematic policy of discrimination and harassment of the German Jewish population and any other segment of society that does not fit in with the Aryan ideal.				Ernst Wellisch and Hugo Deller rent a small farm.		
			Hitler enacts the Nuremberg Laws stripping German Jews of their citizenship.					March 21. Wellisch and Deller families arrive in Salinas, Ecuador after three weeks of terrible conditions aboard the ship Orduña.		
		February 20. Edith Wellisch, a beautiful baby girl is born in Munich.								
		Ernst Wellisch is dismissed from Dresdner bank where he serves as general manager of the investment division for the bank's top clients.								

				Eva and Helmut meet in Quito and are engaged six months later.						
1942	1949-1952	1952-1962	1962	1965	1966	1967	1970	1998	2008	
			Helmut moves to Los Angeles, CA to attend Northridge University. He is forced to return to Ecuador after six weeks to be with his parents as his father has a massive heart attack. Helmut purchases 75% of his father's factory Cintas Textiles S.A. of which he already owned 25% and takes over management of the company so his father could retire.			July 2. Ricardo Wellisch is born.	February 20. David Wellisch is born. March 29. Death of Ernst Wellisch, in San Diego, CA.	July 6. Death of Elsie Wellisch, in San Diego, CA.	Helmut and Eva move to Miami, FL.	
		Helmut becomes a partner in the distribution business Representaciones Dr. Otto Seidlitz and opens the Guayaquil office. He serves as representative of some 150 foreign manufacturers of complex machinery and raw materials.								
	Helmut is hired as general manager of the store Salchichería Suiza. After one year, he resigns and is hired by a Jewish entrepreneur in the food business. Shortly thereafter, Helmut comes down with typhus and spends 8 weeks convalescing. He makes a full recovery and then studies window display, returning to Guayaquil to start his first company, Arte Decorativo.				January 9. Marriage of Eva and Helmut.					
	Helmut is sent to Quito to attend public school. He lives alone, renting a simple room from strangers and takes his meals in the home of his uncle Arthur Falk.									

THE EARLY YEARS

Leave your country, and your father's house,
and go to a country which I will show you.

Genesis 12:1

Do we define who we are, or does our culture or country define us? And when we are living in exile, do we lose, or do we instead reaffirm, our identity? Helmut's story begins with these questions as his family moves through different degrees of desperation on their way from Nazi Germany into the strange world of Latin America in the 1940s. And while the answers they found were very different from the ones we see in our time, these questions have remained fundamental to this day.

The Jews of Germany, most of whom until the 1930s, considered themselves an integral part of German life, found themselves in an existential and severe identity crisis under Nazi rule. They shared the culture, esthetics and joy of German culture; they in fact felt nothing in common with the poor Eastern European Jews. Munich Jews still had an acceptable life in snobbish society and still found places where their conversation was welcomed, where their Jewishness was either acceptable or overlooked. In time, however, whether rich or poor, assimilated or traditional, western or eastern in appearance and custom, all Jewish stereotypes fed the anti-Semitic imagination, and all Jews came to be seen as an alien presence on German soil. After World War II, German Jews became a community of refugees, survivors, and broken souls who had lost their family and sometimes even their faith.

Jewish mass immigration to Ecuador started in 1933 and by 1945, about 6,000 immigrants have arrived there. But statistics do not tell the story of immigration; people do. Assimilation is seldom smooth, and if you were a German intellectual entering rural Ecuador in 1939, it is pure adversity that revealed your character.

Helmut's parents made a wholehearted effort to pierce the chaos of the world and make a life worth living for their family. While they always appeared optimistic, it was no secret to their children that difficult choices and many sacrifices were made every single day. A major lesson in Helmut's story is that the identity of Jews cannot be formed on the basis of catastrophe and trauma, which ultimately turns every Jew into an eternal victim. Helmut's life-affirming journey helps us to see that while the Holocaust broke the spirit of the Jewish people, their spiritual vocation is renewal.



Helmut, 5 years old and Edith, 3 years old. Munich, 1936

Another Life and Time

My very first memory of Germany is of the first grade, when Dr. Berlinger forced me to use my right hand even though I was left-handed. This practice was very common at the time, and could be traumatic, but I was wired differently from other children and was not negatively affected by the incident. I always look for the upside of everything that life brings my way, and I never let anything stop me, not even the German way. Today, I write with my right hand, but I also play a mean game of tennis with my left.

By the time I was in first grade, it was 1937, and the situation in Germany was deteriorating rapidly. The tension at home was palpable. I say that now, but in those days, I only knew good times. Weekdays seemed normal to me, going to school, doing homework and playing with my friends – sometimes even finding something I was able to read in father's 5,000 book library, which seemed like a glowing tower of hidden treasures for a young child. Jewish holidays and vacations were especially wonderful as they were spent in Fischach, my mother's birthplace. The simple three-story house where various generations of Dellers had been raised was a magical oasis where I spent countless hours with my cousins Menni and Henry Stern, Alberto Deller, and Walter Falk, as well as my best friend Kurt Dorfzaun, creating marvelous memories that still put a smile on my face. Winters filled with wild sleigh rides in the snow, and summers with climbing the tallest trees I had ever seen until then. Even going to synagogue was a thrilling experience. We ran up and down dark stairwells making believe we were like Zorro, defending the people of the land against villains, while in the sanctuary, our fathers and grandfathers prayed for an end to the horrific situation that Jews were facing under Nazi rule.

A few years before, in 1933, a general boycott against German Jews had been declared, and the German SA, the original paramilitary wing of the Nazi party, stood outside Jewish-owned stores and businesses in order to prevent customers from entering. The word "Jude," German for "Jew," was often smeared on store windows, with a Star of David painted in yellow and black across the doors. Approximately one week later, Hitler enacted the first major law to curtail the rights of Jews so they could no longer serve as teachers, professors, judges, or in other government positions. Shortly afterward, a similar law was passed concerning lawyers, doctors, and tax consultants. That year, my father, the youngest but most senior investment advisor in Dresdner bank, was fired.

I was only two years old when Father lost his job, but I recall the drama of the moment as if it were happening to me this very day based on what Father had told me many years later of that day's events. Most Jews who considered themselves normal German citizens, especially those like Father who did not grow up as observant Jews, did not heed what was going on around them. Business was still good, so they ignored all the signs that pointed to the fact that life as they knew it would never be the same. Imagine that one morning you go to work as usual, and out of the blue, someone comes into your office and tells you that you are dismissed. That is exactly what happened to Father. With

tears of shame flowing down his face, the general manager of the bank handed Father a telegram signed by Hitler ordering the dismissal of Jewish employees. In the twenty minutes that Father had to clear his office, his lifelong dream and promise of a brilliant career in Germany's most prominent bank came to an end. He could not understand or contain the conflicting feelings he had toward his manager: compassion for the man who, like so many other Germans, was simply following orders and rage at his unconscionable cowardice.

Father returned home to face the harsh reality of having to care for a young wife, a two-year-old son, a two-month-old baby girl, and no savings. Somehow, he mustered the courage to set up his own office, and within a few hours, his largest clients at Dresdner had left the bank and placed their assets with him instead. Although Father was allowed to work until 1938, life in Germany became intolerable for Jews. In 1935, Hitler began instituting the Nuremberg Laws and Jews were stripped of their citizenship.

Kristallnacht

From the Nazi rise to power until 1938, Nazi policy sought to expel Jews from society and strip them of their rights and property while simultaneously engaging in campaigns of terror and violence. The goal was to make the Jews leave Germany. Those Jews who managed to leave turned out to be the lucky ones, and we were among them.

On November 9, 1938, everything changed. During the night "of broken glass", a night of rampant violence against Jews, the Nazis burned my school and our synagogue. From that night of madness until December 1938, when we finally left Munich, I recall the confusion I observed all around me. It was only much later, when I silently faced the fear of making a life for myself all alone in Ecuador that I came to recognize that sense of overwhelming helplessness I had felt that night in 1938.

Just a couple of hours before Kristallnacht, Father had been alerted by a Christian friend that the Nazis were coming, so he left Munich with uncle Hugo, my mother's brother. They hid for several days in the *Oktoberwiese*, where the remainders of the recently celebrated Oktoberfest were still standing. Later, they fled in the trunk of a car to Stuttgart. The two men hid at my aunt Herta's house in Stuttgart, where apparently the violence had not escalated as it had in Munich. The day they arrived in Stuttgart, the Nazis came to search my aunt's house. They broke everything in sight but did not find Father and Hugo who were hiding in the attic. Meanwhile, in Munich, my grandfather Max was taken from his home to Dachau. He was released with the help of a friend after four months, but by the time he returned to Munich, we had already left for Paris. A year later, my grandparents found their way to Paris, but shortly after, France fell to the Nazis, and my grandparents were taken to Auschwitz. We never saw them again.

Dresdner Bank
Filiale München.

Direktion.

Telegramm-Adresse:
„Dresbank“.

München, den 30. Juni 1933.

Herrn Dr. Ernst Wellisch

im Hause.

Auf Grund der Durchführungsbestimmungen des Gesetzes vom 7. April d.J. kündigen wir Ihnen vorsorglich Ihre Stellung bei uns zum 31. Juli 1933. Soweit Sie nach diesen Bestimmungen noch nach dem 31. Juli Ansprüche an uns haben werden wir auf ihre Regelung zurückkommen.

Hochachtungsvoll

DRESDNER BANK FILIALE MUENCHEN.

[Handwritten signature]

Dresdner Bank
Filiale München

Direktion

München, den 22. Juni 1933

Abschrift

Herrn Dr. Ernst Wellisch

im Hause

Infolge des Gesetzes zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentums vom 7.4.1933 müssen wir feststellen, welche Angehörigen unseres Instituts unter die Bestimmungen des Gesetzes fallen. Wir bitten Sie, uns demgemäß durch ☒ entsprechende Ausfüllung und Unterzeichnung der untenstehenden Erklärung zu bestätigen, ob Sie nichtarischer Abstammung sind oder nicht, bzw. ob die Ausnahmebestimmungen zutreffen.

Als nicht arisch gilt, wer von nicht arischen, insbesondere jüdischen Eltern oder Grosseltern abstammt. Es genügt, wenn ein Elternteil oder ein Grosselternteil nicht arisch ist. Dies ist insbesondere dann anzunehmen, wenn ein Elternteil oder ein Grosselternteil der jüdischen Religion angehört hat.

Entsprechend den gesetzlichen Vorschriften wird in bestimmten Fällen noch ein besonderer Fragebogen auszufüllen sein, den wir Ihnen gegebenenfalls noch zustellen werden.

Dresdner Bank Filiale München

gez. Fischer Raithel

Ich erkläre hiermit,
dass ich ~~arischer~~ Abstammung bin

dass ich nicht arischer Abstammung bin

dass ich Frontkämpfer bin *(Wohnhaft da bei Kriegsausbruch in France ab)*

dass mein Vater im Weltkrieg gefallen ist *Am 20. Aug. 1919 von der Luftschiffbau-AG*

dass mein Sohn im Weltkrieg gefallen ist *von der Luftschiffbau-AG*

(Unterschrift) *[Handwritten signature]* *(H. Fischer Raithel)*

Official dismissal letter from
Dresdner Bank terminating
Ernst Wellisch employment
effective July 31, 1933

Letter from Dresdner Bank to Ernst Wellisch containing Nazi decree that all employees must certify their Arian race origins and Ernst's hand-written response stating that he came to Germany following the German empire annexation of the Alsace-Lorraine territory

INSPIRATION AND FAITH

Today is the best day of my life,
and tomorrow will be even better

Dale Carnegie

To achieve great things in life, we need more than talent, hard work, and a relentless desire to succeed: we need inspiration and faith.

All of Helmut's role models were people of great personal integrity, starting with his parents and his uncle Hugo. When he was just a little boy, Helmut read the book *Men of Wealth*, the story of great fortunes made by the most notable men of wealth in history from Cornelius Vanderbilt, to J.P. Morgan and J.D. Rockefeller. But the story has a special twist since the author places special emphasis on the difference between market means and unjust means of acquiring wealth. Much like Ernst and Hugo, the honesty with which these magnates achieved their success inspired Helmut and formed the foundation of his work ethic and world view. Even humorous anecdotes collected over a lifetime of seeing the glass half full offer a big lesson in integrity. When all is said and done, for Helmut, every story of success, and failure, is also a story about the virtue of persistence despite obstacles.

Like virtually all Jews who emigrated to Latin America from Europe around World War II, Helmut grew up to become a staunch traditionalist in his Jewish observance, attending synagogue on a regular basis. In this respect, he resembles many of the Jewish men of his generation. The synagogue was the great unifying factor. There may be a range of observance, but as long as one goes to synagogue, he declared his religious and social place in the community. There is no doubt that Helmut identified deeply with this social tradition. He even rose to the presidency of the Jewish community in Guayaquil for seven years. Still, there was much more to Helmut's Jewishness than his communal identity. In 1958 he found himself in a hospital in Mergentheim convalescing along with many patients who were former SS and German military. Much to his surprise, Helmut discovers he is incapable of hating the Germans. In fact to this very day, he still travels with a German passport.

Helmut has unwavering faith in humanity, even after having seen the worst of it. This is a core Jewish value that helped to buffer the hard blows of anti-Semitism that he has encountered throughout his life. All of Helmut's values are Jewish values. Living a Jewish life, for Helmut, has meant acting ethically towards family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, and strangers. It has meant that the reputation of a fellow man is sacred, that honesty in all dealings must prevail, and living life affirmatively trumps regret and revenge.

And for a man whose search for scientific truths about Jewish history, and just about everything else in this world is never ending, he has given more than equal time to the mystery of creation and the creator. Knowledge is the building block of Judaism, or as Einstein once said, "You cannot be a man of science and not believe in God." Helmut is one such man.



Elsie Deller Wellisch, 1960 - 1990

Elsie

One of the best decisions of my life was to go to San Diego every year to spend uninterrupted quality time with Mother, or “Oma”, as the children called her, which means grandmother in German. We would go to Palm Desert to a restaurant she loved, and she would marvel at how wonderful it was to look at the menu without having to worry about prices after so many years of deprivation. I loved my mother deeply, and we were extremely close my entire life. We saw the world in the same way. Curiosity was just one of the elements of her personality that made her such a singular human being. I learned from her the importance of never deviating from my ethical standards. I also inherited my love of nature from her, and perhaps the greatest of all lessons, the ability to find beauty in life’s journey.

Mother was born in Fischach, Germany, the youngest of five children, and was raised in a family of Orthodox Jews. In spite of the restrictive roles assigned to women, she followed in her mother’s footsteps and became the intellectual of the family. In the early years of marriage, however, it was not her inquisitive mind and gregarious nature that served her best. Rather, it was her strength of character that helped her adjust to life in the tropics and raise a family as a new immigrant, while working long hours managing a small hotel on the beach, and never managing to make ends meet.

After a few years they managed to buy a small factory that manufactured elastics and shoe laces, and in 1966 that they moved to San Diego. Unfortunately, they only enjoyed four years of their retirement, then Father passed away.

After Father died and the difficult years were far behind, Mother embarked on a new life. At sixty-five, her zest for living was rekindled and finally blossomed. Mother always knew exactly what she wanted and always persevered until she achieved her objectives. Once for her birthday, I wanted to buy her flowers. Upon reflection, it occurred to me that cut flowers don’t last so I decided to give her a plant of African violets that were not yet in bloom. The following year when I returned, I was amazed at how beautiful they had blossomed. I knew that she loved plants and had a bit of a green thumb, but how she got the African Violets to bloom is a good example of Mother’s unconventional approach to things.

When Mother first got the plant, she tried everything she knew to make it bloom, she put fertilizer, water, sun, then she took away fertilizer, water, sunlight, tried one combination, then another, everything to no avail. Until one day, she zoomed in on the word “jealousy”. She bought an exact replica plant made of plastic and within one week, the real plant was in full bloom. Unbelievable but true, Mother was definitely an out-of-the-box thinker.

Mother set out to learn how to drive, to learn English, to play bridge, and to experiment with sculpture – all this, in addition to being active in several charitable organizations.

Her English turned out to be more of a personal amalgam of German and Spanglish, but she had no inhibitions and everyone she met was seduced by her spirit, even if they did not fully understand her language. With an uncommon passion for Judaism, it was Mother who instilled the religious framework in our home. She believed that everything in this world is God's creation and that we must therefore embrace the adventure.

Embracing the adventure of life every day as joyfully as Mother did is truly an art and surely her greatest legacy.

Ernst

Living in the narrows between utter brokenness and the unwillingness to give in to despair has always struck me as the quintessence of Father's life. A brilliant man who never boasted his intellectual prowess, he was a born fighter who never talked about the past. He was a man of few words but always the right ones. He was straight as an arrow in all his dealings which is perhaps the way that I resemble Father most.

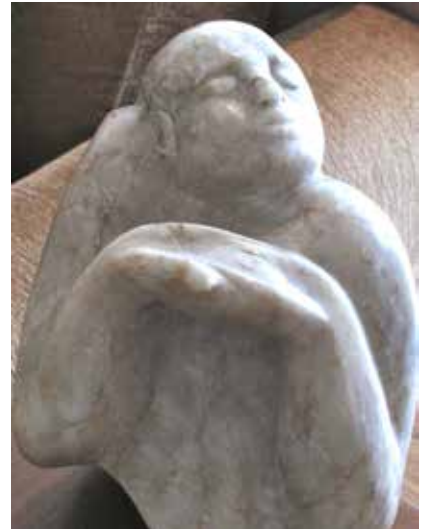
Father was born in 1904 in Pirmasens, Germany. His high school years were spent in Strasbourg, and he went on to university in Munich, graduating with a doctorate in macroeconomics. Father was raised in a very liberal Jewish home, and one of the reasons he was attracted to Mother was her faith, which he felt guaranteed modesty, tranquility and happiness. To demonstrate to Mother's parents that he was willing to enter their world of observance, he learned Hebrew to perfection. Not surprisingly, they accepted him with open arms.

Father became the youngest director of investments that Dresdner Bank ever had. While he would never have dreamed of working independently before, as only corporate life was acceptable for the educated class at that time, the day he was dismissed from the bank, Father was forced to set up his own practice in order to survive. His clientele included some of Munich's wealthiest elite, and most of them followed Father, continuing to seek his investment advice. The irony of history is that between 1933 and 1938, when Father worked as an independent investment advisor, he earned more money than he ever could have over the course of an entire career at Dresdner. Father was diligent about paying taxes when he left the bank, and this reported income served as the base for calculating the restitution payments made by the German government after the war. Father received the maximum amount given, but no amount of money could ever make up for the humiliation and the utter despair Father felt the morning he left Dresdner.

We just don't know what the future brings. What seemed like a catastrophe at that time, a young man with two small children left jobless, provided much financial



Elsie's sculptures, created between 1970 and 1998





Miami, 2013