
A Father's Story

Rolf Levy und Christina Ceballos-Levy

Rolf Levy, geboren 1930 in Schmieheim, wanderte mit den Eltern 1938 nach Südamerika aus. Gemeinsam mit der Schwiegertochter Christina Ceballos-Levy schrieb er für die „Ortenau“ seine Erinnerungen nieder an die Kindheit in Schmieheim, an die Übergriffe der Nazis, an die Auswanderung und die Überfahrt nach Kolumbien, an die schweren Anfänge und schließlich die Gründung einer Bäckerei. Heute lebt Rolf Levy mit Frau und Kindern in Miami.

All across the world, in all walks of life, families everywhere look forward to Summer vacations as a way to spend meaningful time together. When my own children were young, I made it a point every year to take them to someplace exciting and new-Florida and New York in the United States, Switzerland and Italy in Europe, Ecuador and various Colombian cities in South America. I always hoped that, as adults, they would look fondly upon the memories they had of their vacation days with their father and one day do the same with their own children.

In July of 2003, my children, who are now adults and starting families of their own, put an exciting twist on the idea of a family vacation. My sons surprised my wife, Nohra, and me with the gift of a trip to Germany, which I had not visited in thirty years. The best part of this gift was that three of my sons, Guillermo, Rodolfo, and Oscar, would be joining us. My sons, who were born and raised in Colombia, South America, told me that they wanted to know the place where their father had grown up. Many times I had tried to tell them about my life in Schmieheim as a boy, but my memories of those days were scant. I could tell them that Schmieheim was a small town in Germany's Black Forrest and, like most German towns, it had a Schloss in the town center surrounded by family homes. I could relay only vague memories of my grandparents, the excitement of getting dressed for celebrations in the town, and the sweetness of my mother's rhubarb tarts. I remembered leaving Germany suddenly with my parents and two younger brothers and boarding a steamship that eventually landed in Colombia. Other than those memories, I could not fill in any of the gaps for them. Our family vacation of 2003 was just the catalyst my memory needed to enable me to tell my children the story of their father's childhood.

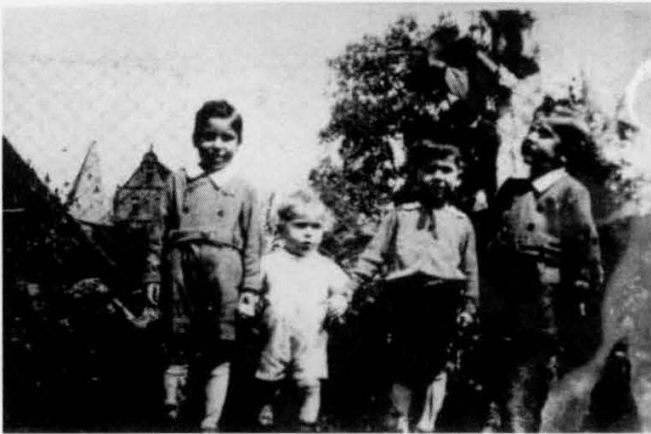
This was actually my second visit to Schmieheim since I left it as a small boy in 1938. My first return took place in 1973, when my parents, my brother Lothar, and our wives took my father back to the Black Forrest



*Rolf, Helmuth, and Manfred Levy
in front of grandfather's fence in
Schmieheim*

to reunite with his friends and celebrate his sixty-sixth birthday. Our first stop on that trip was Frankfurt, where my father attended a reunion with some German friends. From there, we traveled to Schmieheim. This was a trip that proved to be very emotional for my parents, particularly my father. Although my father must have been flooded with the memories of the life we left behind in Schmieheim, he kept most of these to himself. As a result, I could not tell my own children much about that trip, other than the fact that my father had been reunited with some old friends, and the inhabitants of my family's former home had taken us for a tour of our old house in Schmieheim. Unfortunately, this trip may have proven to be too much for my father, for he died upon twenty days of our return to Colombia. The doctors said that he died of complications from a heart condition and diabetes, but we all suspected that he may have been overcome with emotion. Thirty years later, I found myself in the same place my father had been in the Summer of 1973. I was returning to Schmieheim with my sons and their wives to show them a part of their history.

On the day we arrived at Schmieheim, we were all full of anticipation and questions. Did the town still exist? Would I remember how to find my old house? Would anyone in the town remember my parents or me? Would this trip help me tell satisfy my sons' curiosity?



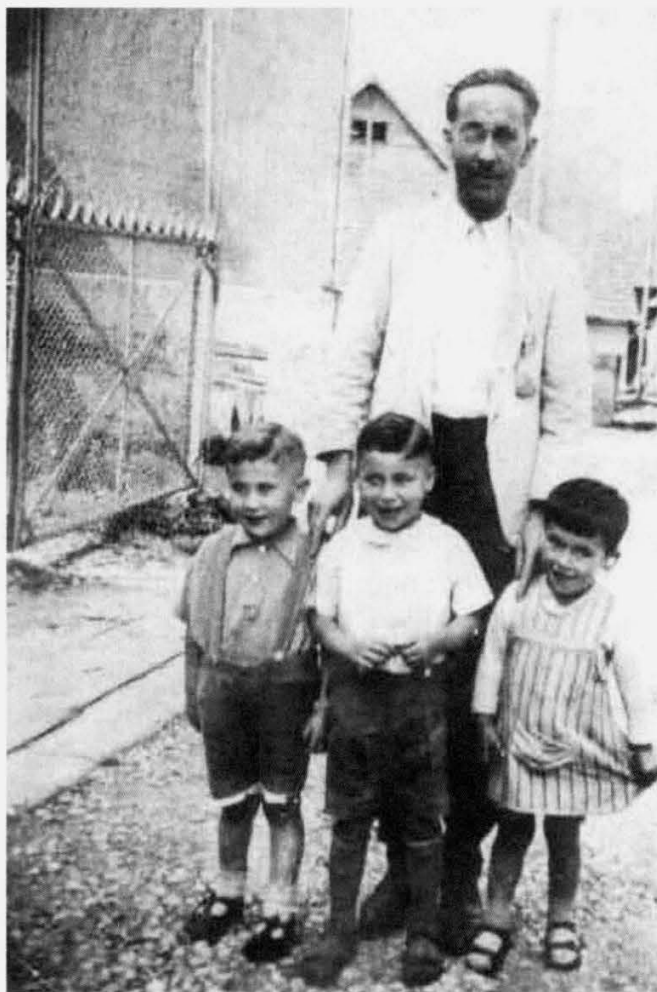
*Rolf, Lothar, Manfred,
and Helmuth Levy, Schmieheim
Schloss in background*

The drive through the winding roads of the Black Forrest began to answer all of these questions for me. The dark, dense foliage of the forrest's trees brought back the earliest memory I have of my hometown – the Summer of 1935, right before my fifth birthday. One of my favorite activities at the time was walking through the Black Forrest with my grandfather and chasing colorful butterflies. I could almost see the other boys from the town running after the butterflies, and my grandfather carrying me on his shoulders. I was born with a congenital heart condition, so I would tire easily when I was walking through those paths. In fact, I could not run and play like the other young children, and my parents were always extra careful to guard me from any injuries. My grandfather always accompanied me on these walks and would lovingly lift me up when he saw I needed a little help.

The memory of my grandfather triggered other memories of my family in Schmieheim. As we drove into the town, I remembered the Schloss I used to play by as a small boy. During the winter months, I would sled down the hills of the town Schloss with other boys. I could almost hear my mother scolding me as she did on the day I fell off the sled and hurt my nose. When I returned home that morning, and my mother saw my bloody nose, she prohibited me from sledding anymore that year. I spent the rest of that winter looking out at the other boys playing in the snow from our living room window. I was determined to find my house so that I could show my sons that window.

The only indication I had for the location of my family's house was that it was a short distance from the Schloss. Driving through Schmieheim, and with my sons's assistance, I was able to find it. It was the house I grew up in, together with my parents, my maternal grandparents, and my brothers, Lothar and Helmuth. It still looked identical to the way my family left it in 1938.

As we disembarked the car to get a closer look at the house, the memories came flooding back to me. By the front door of the house was the



Rolf, center, with grandfather

same light switch my father used to turn on at night. Across the street was the same warehouse where my family stored household and business supplies. Next to the house was the building that housed my grandfather's fencemaking business. Most prominent of all, however, was the attic window that housed the small space where my father hid from the Gestapo when they came to search the house in 1937.

My family was one of several Jewish families in Schmieheim. My mother's family, the Hofmanns, had been living intermittently in the town since the Sixteenth Century. This was a fact we learned during our visit to Schmieheim, when a town resident helped us trace our family tree in the town's records. My father, who was born in Frankfurt, moved to Schmieheim in 1933. At the time he arrived at Schmieheim, he already was married to my mother and was the father of two sons – myself and my brother, Helmuth. Eventually, my third brother, Lothar, was born in Schmieheim.

I still cannot recall much about Jewish life in Schmieheim, other than the festivities of the high holidays. On those occasions, relatives would come from other towns in Germany. My mother would take out her best



Rolf Levy with sons, Rodolfo, Oscar, and Guillermo Levy, in front of the former home of Rolf's parents in Schmieheim, June 2003

china, and all of the Jewish residents of the town would dress in their formal evening wear to attend services at the synagogue and share the evening meals.

As I remember, my father was well-liked by all of the residents in Schmieheim. Nevertheless, they did not help my father when the Gestapo came to look for my father at our home. When I was a small boy, there were at least two occasions when my father hid himself in our attic. Another time, he hid amongst the dark foliage of the Black Forest. On yet another occasion my mother asked a family friend to help hide my father. I do not remember the details of this event because I was a small boy, but I do remember going to visit my father in a nearby town, perhaps Lahr or Kippenheim. My mother towed me along in a small seat attached to her bicycle until we reached the town where my father was being kept under protected police custody. He spent approximately one week under protection, until the crisis temporarily subsided.

As I look back at these events, I realize that there came a time when my father no longer had to hide from these Gestapo raids because the residents of Schmieheim had come to think of him as a local hero. Shortly after the incidents described above, it could have been weeks or months later, there was a day on which torrential rains fell upon Schmieheim. Water raced



Verner Bloom (Schmieheim resident), Nohra, Rolf, Guillermo, and Oscar Levy, in front of the former home of Rolf's parents in Schmieheim, June 2003

down from the forest, gushed into the streets with great force, and rose several feet into a neighbor's house. The owner of the house, who was a non-Jew, was trapped in it, along with her young children and their family dog. She yelled for help, and my father was the only one who responded. Despite the strong current, my father jumped into the water and navigated his way to the house. He rescued the owner of the home, her children, and even the family dog. After my father's rescue of our neighbor and her family, our other neighbors began to protect him against the Nazi party raids.

I do not have any other memories of my life in Germany from this moment until the last day I lived in Schmieheim, which was in August of 1938. My parents did not tell me what was happening that day, but I knew that something very sad was about to take place. My parents and grandparents were crying unconsolably, as they were saying good-bye to each other. I now know it was because they suspected they never would see each other again.

In August of 1938, I was seven years old, Helmuth was six, and Lothar was three. My parents took the three of us from Schmieheim and boarded a train headed out of a nearby city to Le Havre, France. On August 25, 1938,

we embarked upon a steamship called "Cuba", which was docked at Le Havre. During World War I, this ship served as a military transport vessel. On this day, it was transporting Jewish emigrants to South America. It was not until a few years ago that I became aware that the – then President of Colombia, Eduardo Santos, had granted permission to a limited number of Jewish families to enter Colombia. When I was older, I learned that, shortly before our departure from Schmieheim, my parents had traveled to the Colombian consulate in Frankfurt, Germany, to obtain the entry permits for Colombia. I am not certain why my parents chose Colombia, but I believe that other South American countries, such as Argentina, had reached their quota for Jewish immigrants.

Our trip aboard the steamship lasted for more than three weeks. It always amazes me that there are only two things I can remember about my family's voyage to Colombia. The first is that, despite my fragile heart condition, I was one of few people aboard the steamship that did not become seasick during the trip. I befriended a young Polish, Jewish boy, who also was named Rolf. We seemed to be the only two people who were unaffected by the seasickness-epidemic, and we had the run of the boat to ourselves for the entire three weeks. My other memory is of our first stop, which took place in the Canary Islands. Several gypsies boarded the ship there. When these new passengers boarded, the crew placed all of their luggage on one side of the ship. Until these passengers disembarked some days later, the ship seemed to be traveling tilted to one side. I was afraid that we were going to capsize, but the ship returned to its normal state once these passengers disembarked with their luggage.

In September of 1938, my family and I arrived at Puerto Colombia in the northern coast of the country. All I remember about my arrival to Puerto Colombia is that we had to disembark the ship and walk along a seemingly endless and narrow pier to get to land. Having never learned how to swim, I clutched my mother's hand tightly, afraid that I would fall in the water and drown.

My family and I stayed in Puerto Colombia only one or two nights, and then we traveled to a larger city, Barranquilla, Colombia, where we stayed for one week. In retrospect, I do not know how my parents were able to communicate or find their way around the port cities of Puerto Colombia and Barranquilla. At the time, foreigners, particularly non-Spanish speakers, would seldom visit Colombia, much less the port towns where we had arrived. Needless to say, German Jews were a rarity throughout the country. The one preparation I now can remember my mother having made for our trip was the purchase of a Spanish-German dictionary in Germany. The "dictionary" was actually a large box that stored a collection of smaller volumes, one for each letter of the alphabet. For weeks before our departure from Schmieheim, my mother would teach my brothers and me words

from this enormous collection. I now realize that she was preparing us for our journey and our new home. At the time, I believed this to be a new family activity for the evening hours.

The little Spanish my mother learned from this dictionary was enough to enable my parents to purchase airplane tickets for our family's flight from Barranquilla, Colombia, to Cali, Colombia, where we lived for a few more months and where I eventually would return as an adult to raise my own family. The only thing I can remember of my family's voyage to Cali was that our flight, which had no more than ten passengers, made a stop in the city of Medellin. The passengers were asked to disembark the plane, but my brother, Helmuth, would not wake up. We yelled his name and tried to shake him from his slumber, but nothing we did could wake him up. My mother let him sleep aboard the plane and went to get him one and one-half hours later, when we were ready to board the plane that was headed to Cali.

After several hours, our flight landed in Cali, the city where we spent our first months as Jewish immigrants. My parents immediately enrolled me in the Jorge Isaacs Hebrew Academy. Although Cali was a relatively small city, there were some Jewish families living there, so a Hebrew school was in existence when we arrived. The Jorge Isaacs Hebrew Academy, which still exists today, was located on the top of a hill. Because of my heart condition, it was very difficult for me to walk to school in the mornings, and I was always short of breath by the time I arrived to the school.

My parents could not find work in Cali, so, after a few months, we moved to Palmira, a smaller city near Cali. Unlike Cali, which had a Jewish population large enough to support a Hebrew Academy, there were very few Jewish families in Palmira. As a result, my formal Hebrew education ended when I was seven years old. In Palmira, my father met another German Jewish immigrant who had started a bakery. He hired my parents to sell and deliver bread aboard bicycles they would ride around the town. Over time, my parents became known for their hard work and good business ethic and gained their own clients.

When my father arrived at Palmira, he was an agriculturer by trade and had hoped to establish an agricultural business. For nearly one year, he saved the money he earned working for the baker and attempted to invest it in land for farming. To my parents' dismay, the Jewish immigrant to which my father had entrusted the money for the land purchase ran off with my father's money, and we never saw him again.

My family suffered a second blow while living in Palmira. Prior to leaving Germany, my parents had arranged to ship our family's belongings to Buenaventura, Colombia. After several months, my parents received a telegram informing them that their belongings had arrived. When my parents arrived at Buenaventura, they learned that everything was gone. No-

body had told them when they shipped their belongings from Germany that Buenaventura's warehouses were uncovered and easy prey to thieves and rain. My parents' furniture, clothes, china, and books were all gone. Whatever was not stolen by thieves was destroyed by the elements.

My father was disappointed and frustrated, but he knew he had to establish his own business in order to make a good life for his family in Colombia. After having spent one year in Palmira learning the bakery trade, my parents moved to Ibagu e, a small Colombian city in the foothills of the Andes Mountains to start their own bakery. Ibagu e was not the ideal town to start a business because it had very few inhabitants at the time, but my health prevented us from moving to Bogota, the country's capital and my parents' preferred city of relocation. At an altitude of 2600 meters above sea-level, my doctors feared that Bogota's altitude would have an adverse affect on my heart condition.

Soon after arriving at Ibagu e, my parents started their own bakery. They ran this business with the knowledge they had acquired in Palmira and from books on bread and dessert baking they were able to find. This line of work was very hard for all of us. My parents' working days would begin before 5:00 a.m. and end at 10:00 p.m. In the end, however, it paid off, as my parents were able to provide a comfortable livelihood for themselves and their children. Indeed, "El Centro Social" (The Social Center), the bakery they founded, is still in existence today in Ibagu e, where it is run successfully by my brother, Helmuth.

Little by little, we began adjusting to our new lives in Ibagu e. In 1941, my "Colombian" brother, Enrique, was born. The birth of a Colombian son to my parents proved to be quite symbolic, for each year that passed integrated us more and more into our adopted society. The persecutions we experienced in Germany at the hands of the Nazi party were a thing of the past, but our Colombian integration also signaled a disintegration of many of our Jewish traditions. There were no other Jewish families in Ibagu e, no synagogue, and no Hebrew academy. In fact, my brothers and I were forced to attend classes on Catholic catechism in our schools in Ibagu e. At first, my parents attempted to persuade the principals to exempt us from these classes, but my parents eventually relented. Over time, we no longer celebrated the high holidays. My parents also ceased teaching us Hebrew and most Jewish traditions. At home, however, we continued to speak German for many more years. When I had children of my own, I continued this one small tie to my native country by educating them in a German school in Colombia, where they were taught in both the Spanish and German languages.

My family led a very isolated life in Ibagu e, not only because we were the only German or Jewish family in the city, but also because, in the 1940s, Colombia and its small towns were relatively cut off from the out-

side world. Once a week my parents would receive a newspaper in the German language called "Aufbau". It was our principal source of information from the world outside of Colombia. Once we were able to gain a better command of Spanish, we began reading a Colombian daily newspaper, "El Tiempo" (The Time). The only friends I remember my parents having in those early years were the Bloch family, who traveled with us aboard the same steamship from Germany to Barranquilla, Colombia. The Blochs stayed in Barranquilla and made their lives there, but my mother occasionally would write to the matron of the family, Meta Bloch, until one day we never heard from them again.

After World War II, we eventually began to hear news of my relatives' fates. In November of 1938, my maternal grandfather, Leopold Hofmann, was transported to the concentration camp at Dachau along with other Schmieheim residents. In June of 1939, he returned to Schmieheim, but he died shortly after from injuries inflicted at the camp. My maternal grandmother, Adelheid Hofmann, emigrated to the United States in 1948, and she lived with my uncle, Heinrich Hofmann, until her death. Due to economic conditions, my mother was unable to reunite with her mother. As a result, she never saw her parents again.

Our family vacation of the Summer of 2003 helped me fill in all of these details for my sons. What did not come to me in the form of memories is the product of an extensive investigation my children and I have undertaken since our return from Germany. It is with great pride that I can now tell my sons where their father is from and the struggles their grandparents faced to ensure our survival. My story is not remarkable for that of a Holocaust survivor, but it is part of our family's story. Now that I can tell it, I can only hope that my sons remember it and one day take their own children to Schmieheim to tell them a little bit about their past.