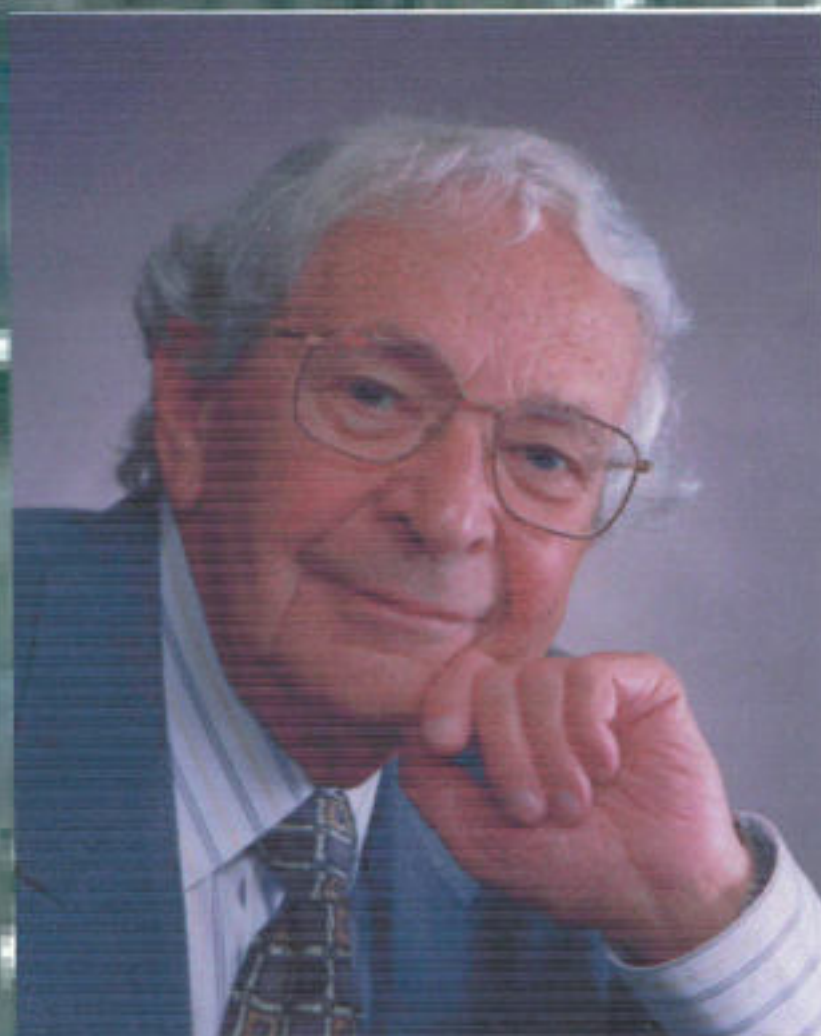


# Rabbi Erwin Schild

## „The Very Narrow Bridge“



**The information of the „Gedächtnisblatt“ is based on the correspondence with Rabbi Erwin Schild, his autobiography and the file of the Public Record Office Würzburg, Gestapostelle Würzburg 12315.**

### Childhood in Cologne

Erwin Schild was born on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1920 in Köln-Mülheim, a suburb of Cologne, as the son of Hermann Schild and Hetti Neugarten. For his parents his birth was a symbol of happiness after the end of World War I. Erwin had a very good relationship with them and called them the "most marvellous parents". He also had a brother and a sister. His brother Kurt was born in 1912 and was very talented in music. His sister Margot was two years younger. Erwin developed a close relationship to her because the age-difference was not too big.

His parents had a shoe store in which they were both equal business partners. In Mülheim he lived in Wallstraße 43 in a quite luxurious house where his mother organised the household.



Erwin and his mother Hetti



Erwin, Margot, Kurt



Picture postcard: Erwin's family Home & store in the city of Mülheim



Second-grade class in elementary school in Mülheim 1927



The synagogue in Köln-Mülheim Before its destruction

### Education and School

Erwin never went to a kindergarten, but had a "Kindermädchen" – a governess, Anna Winterschladen. She was very young when she came into their household. She was extremely conservative and encouraged the Schild children to read and write. Erwin possessed these abilities long before he entered the *Evangelische Volksschule*, the Protestant Elementary School, which was a Christian school. He went there because there was no Jewish elementary school in Mülheim. Erwin was a very good student and read a lot in his free time. In second grade he started his Jewish education at the synagogue.

At age 10 he entered the "Gymnasium" – high school. Despite preferring the humanistic *Gymnasium*, his parents chose to send him to a *Realgymnasium*, where the curriculum concentrated on modern languages. He later would see that his parents had been right, and he profited from their decision. In the *Gymnasium* he was the *Primus* – head of his class. His first three years there were full of happiness and joy.

### 1933: Hitler Wins – the Trouble for Jews Starts

When Hitler took over power in 1933, the school system was changed. It became based on racial theories and national socialist ideology. The exclusion of Jews began and they were treated as the lowest part of society.

His family would not emigrate when it still was possible. They didn't take Hitler seriously and they thought that he wouldn't be able to keep his threats. Like many other people, they believed that the time of the national socialist government would soon be over.

When he celebrated his *bar mitzvah* (a ceremony and celebration for a Jewish boy, who has reached the age of 13 at which he accepts the responsibilities of an adult) in March 1933, he developed into a grown man in Jewish obligations. The political situation was not a suitable environment for a celebration, but yet they had a party.

In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws were passed and the situation of the Schild family started to worsen. Despite the Nuremberg Laws, most teachers and students, even those who had turned into Nazis, were still fair to Erwin. So he didn't have big problems and remained the best student in his class. Nevertheless, he could not fit in the Nazi school system; besides it got more and more difficult for a Jewish student to go to a normal *Gymnasium*, and so decided to leave the *Realgymnasium*. He entered a Jewish *Gymnasium*, the *Jawneh*, where he stayed from 1935-36. Since Jewish teachers were no longer allowed to work in general schools, the director could hire the best Jewish teachers. There the curriculum didn't admit any Hitler-education and the school-level was very high. The transfer was challenging but it was a place where he could share the Jewish fortune with other colleagues and it was something like a "refuge". He had a very fulfilled life and since Cologne was not known for violent anti-Semitism he was able to grow spiritually. However, when the director of the *Jawneh* high school wanted to prepare the students for emigration to Great Britain, and therefore change the curriculum for the German *Abitur* to the British matriculation, he feared that he could not finish his *Abitur*. So he applied to change to a normal *Gymnasium* and was accepted. In 1937, when Hitler had so much power, this seemed a miracle. So Erwin went to a *Gymnasium* for one year until 1938 and finished his *Abitur*! After that he was frightened by the sudden void that appeared. For him there was no future but fear, because he didn't know what would happen under the Hitler regime.



The class where Erwin could finish his „Abitur“

### Würzburg and Reichspogromnacht

Since Jews were not allowed to enter universities and he didn't have a chance to leave Germany, he didn't know what to do at first. However, he was interested in Jewish learning and had the choice between two institutions. He was accepted at the Jewish Teacher's Seminary in Würzburg. So it was the first time in April 1938 that he left his parents. He had to realize that in Würzburg the Nazis were far more violent than those in Cologne. He lived in a dormitory which wasn't as comfortable as the one at home. He didn't have problems adjusting to his colleagues and so he found very good friends there. Nevertheless he worked hard and studied as much of the Torah as possible.

After holidays he returned to Würzburg, and then the "crushing of a whole world" happened – the *Reichspogromnacht*, November 9, 1938. He didn't flee to Cologne because he thought passivity and obedience would be the best. But the next night a group broke the gate to the dormitory and destroyed all the furnishing, however without violating the students. The next day he had to see that the seminary was also burning, the library with all the Torah scrolls. On the same day a group of Nazis ordered them to jail. There was only fear for him and behind the bars they were praying. Erwin's memories are mixed up from that part of his life. They didn't get any news from their families, but after a few days the students were brought to a hall. There every prisoner was interviewed and after a few days in jail, all prisoners over 18 were taken to the Dachau Concentration Camp.



**Rhine steamboat excursion,  
Kurt, Erwin, Hetti, Hermann**

### Dachau Concentration Camp

The transportation to Dachau took many hours. They were collected in buses. Erwin only knew that Dachau was synonymous with terror. He still didn't know anything about his parents and he wouldn't get any information from the Nazis. When he arrived on November 12, 1938 (the archives of the "Gedenkstätte Dachau" states that he was brought to the concentration camp on November 16, 1938), his belongings were taken away, his hair shaved off and they all had to take a cold shower. After that he got a camp uniform that wasn't warm enough for that season of the year. He could manage somehow to keep a sleeveless sweater that his mother had crocheted for him. After that they were taken to the block. He was assigned to a group and had to sleep on wooden platforms with a thin layer of straw. He hardly had any space because there were too many people. They scarcely got food – and if, only some bread or watery soup – so he was always hungry. Erwin had to get up very early for the general roll call, the part he feared most of the day. There, he had to stand attention for many hours and people were tortured by physical exercises. He wasn't allowed to speak a word or help people who had broken down. So they had to lay there until they could get up by themselves, and if one could not do so, they laid there until the end of the roll call. Since the prisoners did not have gloves, his fingers were quickly frostbitten. The rest of the day they marched up and down under the supervision of the Capos, around the barracks or along the borders where the electric fence was and the machine guns could be seen very well.

One day, he met "Uncle" Juppemann, a friend from Mülheim, his home town. He told him that his father was also in Dachau. Erwin went to him and saw his father who had just been beaten. Even so his father was lucky and soon released.

Erwin did not know if he ever would be free again or if he had to die there.

One night he had a fever dream, but nevertheless he went to the roll call. And there – like a miracle – his name was read out for release! But before you could get out of the concentration camp you had to have a medical inspection. Erwin was scared that they would not let him out with his fever and his frostbitten fingers, but they decided that he looked good. And so he was released under the condition to leave Germany as soon as possible on December 13, 1938.

He went to Würzburg, but he doesn't remember how, because this period for him is mainly blacked out. In Würzburg he called home from a friend's phone and then went to Cologne.

There he got to know that his mother had obtained an affidavit for refugee and the consul for the Dominican Republic had issued it for five *Reichsmark*. Erwin's mother then had sent the forged affidavit to the Gestapo Würzburg and they had accepted it.

However, emigration was difficult. Only Kurt had prospects for a visa to the USA. Many countries had closed their doors because there were too many emigrants.

Erwin feared that he would have to go back to Dachau, so he wrote many letters and applied to various rescue agencies abroad.

Then he got some hopeful news. A student visa for Great Britain would be issued for him and also from Holland he had received assurances that he would be allowed to cross the border. The document for Holland came first. Since he didn't want to stay in Germany any longer, he decided not to wait for the visa for Great Britain, and so he went to Holland.



**The last family picture before  
he went to Holland**

### Holland

Erwin crossed the border and finally felt free. He can't remember this passage very well because for him these goings-ons were "overpowering". In Enschede he had to go to an agricultural training school which had the intention of training them that the Jews would be able to settle in Palestine. But the real intention of this school was to save the Jews from the Nazis.

Erwin needed time to calm down again. Enschede was not the right place for him, especially because it was too close to Germany. In the end he only stayed five weeks in Holland, and since he got his British student visa, he left Holland and took a train to England.

### London

When he arrived in London his cousin Arthur Kracko was waiting for him at the station. He arrived in the spring of 1939 and went to the yeshiva of Rabbi Schneider to study the Torah. The students there had to live in an austere house and had a simple existence. They had to observe strict rules, and Erwin worked hard. But nevertheless, he found time for his friends outside. His stay at the yeshiva stretched from March 1939 to May 1940. Then he was taken into custody arrest. Great Britain was preparing for war and so they suspected people with a German passport of being a spy or having sympathy for Germany. There were soon 30 000 Jews in arrest but they all were promised that they would be released soon, which was not true. The organisation of the camp was bad. Jews who only wanted to eat kosher food had problems to get any food. Erwin stayed at the race track for a few weeks. Then he was brought to an army camp where the conditions were a little better. In June 1940 the prisoners were shipped to the Isle of Man where they could stay in hotels which were empty due to the war.

One day the commanding officer told the internees that they would be sent overseas. That was a pleasure for Erwin because that would mean that the Nazis were further away from him.

So he was shipped to Canada and landed in Quebec City on July 15, 1940.

### Internment Camps

But the Canadian guards who expected their ship were not expecting Jewish refugees but Nazi soldiers and German civilians – enemies. The guards brought them to the Camp T. German prisoners of war who had already been there started to sing war songs. Erwin feared to be a fellow camp inmate. But the authorities realized the problem and separated the Jews from the military prisoners. The camp was not too bad, but they had no hope of being released, even though the Jewish community there had become aware of the Jews in the camp. On August 12, 1940 the group was transferred to a camp B in New Brunswick, where Erwin stayed nearly one year. Erwin did not suffer physically; however, he suffered psychologically because he did not know how it would go on. The inmates developed cultural and educational programs so that they had their own yeshiva study program and also were able to be a real community. It was a mix of Jews that was very interesting.

On June 20, 1941 he had to move out because the camp was believed to be too luxurious for non-military interned refugees, and so he was transferred on June 6, 1941 to camp I, that was on an island – on Richelieu River. This camp turned out to be very beautiful, though less comfortable than the others. On July 1, 1941 they were no longer treated as "enemy aliens" but as "interned refugees", so they were allowed to leave the camp unsupervised for a walk.

Rabbi Abraham A. Price, from Toronto, visited the yeshiva students of London. He wanted them to be released to bring them to his own yeshiva. So in February 1942 he was at last free!

### Yeshiva

To be free was an exciting situation for him. But nevertheless he was not as free as normal immigrants because he only had a temporary admission. However in this time he did not feel as happy as he actually should have. He missed his family and the carefree past in Cologne. It turned out to be better when the long winter was over and summer came. In Toronto Erwin first stayed with a host family, and then he lived in a dormitory. His roommate was Albert Schild, whom he already knew from Würzburg, Dachau and the internment camp.

Erwin was once a little depressed, and he walked to the Kelman family, who were friends of him, and played the piano. One of the Kelman daughter's friends came into the room and listened to him. Her name was Laura Saxe.

### Laura

Erwin met Laura again when she was on her way home from school. Since Erwin liked her he timed it to go outside when Laura was walking home from school so they met more often and finally they had a date. More dates followed and they fell in love.

### University of Toronto

In summer 1943 Erwin applied for admission to the University of Toronto and since he had a copy of his German *Abitur* he was accepted. He participated in the four-year honours course in oriental languages that led to a Bachelor of Arts degree. Though he had a lot of activities in this time and studied hard, he calls his years at the university the "best years of [his] life". He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1947 but then wanted to do a two-year graduate program that would lead to the Master's degree in Semitics.

### Wedding

Laura and Erwin decided to get married. The date would be December 31, 1944 in the Kiever Shule, which was an old synagogue. They didn't want to wait until the end of the war because it was not certain that it would be over soon. The preparations were not easy to make because they both were very busy. But finally they both got their marriage licence and they had a nice celebration. Being married was an exciting new experience, despite his work at the university, his teaching at the yeshiva, the part time job in journalism and his private lessons.



**Wedding of Erwin Schild & Laura**

### "The Lights Go On Again"

In May 1945 the German army surrendered. Erwin felt an "electric charge" when the news reached him. For a certain time he felt confused and he realized that his fears were worse than the reality; but Kurt, who lived in the USA, together with Erwin got the pleasant message that Margot, their sister, was alive. She had been taken to a refugee camp in Sweden. The worst message was that their father had died on December 21, 1943 and that the fate of their mother was unknown. Kurt organized an immigration visa for Margot and on December 19, 1945, the three siblings were together in America.

### The Following Years

The time that followed was very exciting for Erwin. His wife Laura was pregnant and that brought new responsibilities. Laura gave birth to their first boy, Herman Daniel, on October 18, 1945. Two years later Laura gave birth on October 8, and the baby was called Judith. On May 15, 1952, Naomi was born into their family. In spring 1947 Erwin became Rabbi in the first Rumanian Hebrew Congregation Adath Israel. In June 1947 Erwin received a Bachelor of Arts degree. In 1989 he retired from work, but he continues to study in his synagogue every day. He now has the time to travel, to write, to study and to lecture. Rabbi Erwin Schild now visits Germany almost every year and makes lecture tours in Germany.

### The Author:

My name is Steffi Falk. I am 19 years old, and I come from Passau (Bavaria). Since I had heard of the project "Gedächtnisbuch" for the Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site (Germany), and I am interested in the period of World War II, I chose to do the curriculum vitae of Rabbi Erwin Schild for my final assignment in school. To work through his life was very interesting for me, because now not only do I know some facts about this time, but I can also connect these with the destiny of a person, which brings this time to life for me.



**Internment Camp T**

*Stefanie Falk*  
Stefanie Falk

*Erwin Schild*  
Rabbi Erwin Schild

KZ Gedenkstätte  
Dachau

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