

# **Ernest W. Michel (1923-2016), Holocaust Survivor, Reporter, Teacher & Builder**

*John Q. Barrett\**

Copyright © 2016 by John Q. Barrett.  
All rights reserved.

Of the hundreds of press corps reporters who covered the Nuremberg trial of the principal Nazi war criminals seventy years ago, only one, I believe, had been tattooed by the Nazis.

Ernst Wolfgang Michel, then only twenty-two years old, was an Auschwitz survivor. On his arrival in that Nazi death camp in 1943, a guard had tattooed a number on Michel's left forearm.

Three horrifying and miraculous years later, Michel covered the Nuremberg trial as a reporter for the Allied occupation-approved German news agency. At his insistence, each story he wrote bore this byline: "By Ernst Michel, DANA Staff Correspondent (Formerly prisoner No. 104995 at Auschwitz concentration camp)."

\* \* \*

Ernst Michel was a German and Jew.

Born in Mannheim in 1923, he lived a happy, comfortable life there until Hitler came to power in 1933. Michel's father's business soon was taken from him—"Aryanized"—for a token payment. In 1937, Ernst, then in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, and all Jewish children were barred from public school by government edict. That ended his schooling. He went to work in nearby Bruchsal, as an apprentice in a cardboard factory.

On the night of November 9, 1938 (*Kristallnacht*), Ernst Michel, age fifteen, awakened to see the Bruchsal synagogue, torched by Nazi brownshirts, in flames. Gestapo agents arrested his employer, a Jew, and

---

\* Professor of Law, St. John's University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York ([www.roberthjackson.org](http://www.roberthjackson.org)). I emailed an earlier version of this essay to The Jackson List on May 14, 2016.

For an archive of selected Jackson List posts, many of which include document images, visit <http://thejacksonlist.com>. This essay is posted there as a PDF file with "live" hyperlinks.

To subscribe to The Jackson List, which does not display recipient identities or distribute their email addresses, send "subscribe" to [barrettj@stjohns.edu](mailto:barrettj@stjohns.edu).

seized his factory. Returning to Mannheim, he found its synagogue destroyed, Nazis swarming the streets, his family's apartment destroyed, his mother beaten, his father arrested...

In March 1939, Michel's parents managed to send his younger sister to France. She later was sheltered in Switzerland and then made it to Palestine—she lived.

In September 1939, the Gestapo arrested Ernst Michel. He never saw his parents again. He learned later that the Nazis deported them in spring 1940 to a concentration camp in southern France. In August 1942, they were transported in cattle cars to Nazi-occupied Poland. They were murdered on their arrivals at Auschwitz.

Between 1939 and 1945, Ernst Michel survived in Nazi forced labor and concentration camps, including near Berlin, Paderborn, Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, Buchenwald and Berga. Some particulars:

- In February 1943, Michel and hundreds of other prisoners were shipped by rail, in cattle cars, to Auschwitz-Birkenau.
- On arrival, a Nazi officer asked Michel his age (which he inflated from nineteen to twenty). The Nazi pointed Michel into a line to the right. Trucks then took him and others to squalid barracks and forced labor. He soon understood that prisoners who had been sorted to the left went directly to the gas chambers.
- Michel was one of the slave laborers who worked to build the Buna synthetic rubber factory at Auschwitz-Monowitz.
- In winter cold, with minimal food and beaten severely, he approached death.
- In desperation, he went to a camp infirmary. He got some treatment and volunteered to fill out (false) cause-of-death records that the Nazis insistently kept. Because Michel improbably had some calligraphy skills, he was useful in that task and thus was spared harsher forms of labor.

- During the next two years, Michel worked as an Auschwitz infirmary orderly. He survived typhus and other disease. He witnessed gruesome “experiments” that Dr. Josef Mengele and others performed on prisoners. Michel carried thousands of bodies to storage, and to trucks which moved them to crematoria.
- On January 18, 1945, as Soviet troops approached, Michel left Auschwitz after 674 days. The Nazis marched him and thousands west, to Buchenwald.

In April 1945, as Allied forces closed in on the Third Reich, Ernst Michel and two friends, again on a forced march, escaped into the woods. After more than five and one-half years as a Nazi prisoner, he was free.

Soon the Nazis surrendered and Michel was a displaced person. He was restored to some health, mentored, and given the chance to become a journalist.

In late 1945 and into spring 1946, Ernst Michel was in Nuremberg, covering the trial. He watched the U.S. chief prosecutor, Justice Robert H. Jackson, in action. Michel met the Soviet chief prosecutor, General Roman Rudenko. Indeed, Rudenko, learning that Michel had observed Dr. Mengele’s atrocities in Auschwitz, contemplated calling Michel as a trial witness but then explained, apologetically, that he could not—with only one exception, it was Soviet policy to call no trial witness who was a German, regardless of the person’s religion.

\* \* \*

“Ernie” Michel, as he became to all who knew him, went on to live a long, energetic, constructive and generous “second life,” including:

- During 1945 and 1946, Michel worked in Allied-occupied Germany with the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (the JDC, or “the Joint”) to assist displaced persons (“DPs”). Through Joint leaders, Michel learned of its broader history and work, and of the United Jewish Appeal (the UJA, which would become his career), and of a special quota for DPs to emigrate to the U.S.

- In June 1946, Michel was among the first Jewish DPs to sail for the U.S. He reached New York, then Chicago, and then (of all places) Port Huron, Michigan, where he got a newspaper job and began to give speeches about his experiences in Germany and during the war.
- The UJA national office, raising funds for Jewish refugees and to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine, soon recruited Michel to speak at appeal events around the country.
- In 1948, Michel went to work for UJA in California. He traveled throughout the west, speaking and fundraising. (He also married and became, in time, a father of three children.)
- In 1955, he visited Israel for the first time—and, for the first time since she had been smuggled out of Mannheim in 1939, he saw his sister, a fellow survivor and by then an Israeli, a kibbutz and a mother.
- In 1958, he moved to New York, joining UJA's national staff.
- In 1960, Michel was part of a small group that met in Washington, in the White House oval office, with President Eisenhower—once the supreme Allied commander who had liberated Europe and, Michel felt, himself. This was the first time that Holocaust survivors were received at the White House.
- In 1962, Michel returned to UJA work on the West Coast.
- In 1967, he left UJA, working for the next three years in Paris and throughout Europe on behalf of the Joint.
- Beginning in 1970, Michel returned to UJA for the rest of his career. He was chief executive of New York UJA, and then in the leadership of the merged UJA-Federation of New York. He was a tireless fundraiser for Jews and for Israel, working with government leaders and private individuals.

- In 1981, he was instrumental in organizing the World Gathering of Holocaust Survivors, which brought 6,000 people and many of their descendants together in Jerusalem.
- In 1983, forty years after his first arrival in Auschwitz, Michel led a UJA mission to that place (and then to Israel).
- In 1988, he led UJA-Federation's trip to West Germany to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. On that occasion, this delegation met in a private setting in Bonn with Richard von Weizsäcker, president of the Federal Republic of Germany (and son of a Nazi criminal who had been convicted at Nuremberg). Michel spoke of his German life and wartime suffering. Von Weizsäcker listened carefully and then (as Michel later wrote about it) "spoke of his own feelings as a German, about the Nazi period and the fact that Germany would for all time, carry the stigma of those years. [He r]ecogniz[ed] the suffering of the Jewish people at the hands of the Germans, the injustice and persecution, [and] assured [the] group that there would be no forgetting."



\* \* \*

And a small, personal note: On May 5, 2016, in Poland, I was one of thousands who participated in the March of the Living from Auschwitz (Auschwitz I, the original camp) to Birkenau (Auschwitz II), where trains had delivered Ernst Michel and hundreds of thousands of other prisoners who then were sorted for immediate extermination or sent toward grim, overcrowded, filthy barracks for abuse, slave labor and for most, after not very long, death by starvation, work, disease, torture, hanging, shooting or gas.

In those sites of unimaginable horror, I thought of all victims and very specifically of Ernie Michel, the survivor whom I was lucky to have as a teacher and friend.

I knew then that Ernie, back in New York, was in failing health but at peace, no longer remembering the horrors of war and the suffering he had experienced and seen. He died two days later.

Ernie Michel's life, and what he did with all of it, was and is a great, lucky, stirring, inspiring victory.

\* \* \*

Some links—

- Ernest W. Michel's 1993 autobiography is **PROMISES TO KEEP: ONE MAN'S JOURNEY AGAINST INCREDIBLE ODDS!** [Click here](#) — this is a book to get, to read, and to keep.
- video of a 2002 interview, in which Ernest Michel described some of his experiences in Auschwitz, his April 1945 escape from Nazi custody during a death march, and as a reporter at the Nuremberg trial – [click here](#);
- an Ernest Michel essay, on meeting Hermann Goering at Nuremberg in 1946, excerpted from a speech that Michel gave in Berlin on November 21, 2005 – [click here](#);
- video of a 2007 Ernest Michel oral history – [click here](#);

---

*ERNEST W. MICHEL (1923-2016)*

---

- a 2010 *New York Times* profile of Ernest Michel – [click here](#);
- video of Michael Stoler’s 2011 “BuildingNY” interview with Ernest Michel – [click here](#);
- a May 2016 Jewish Telegraph Agency obituary – [click here](#); and
- a *New York Times* obituary – [click here](#).