

Eddie Hellmuth Willner

Holocaust Survivor, Army Officer, 20-Year Census Employee

The U.S. Census Bureau has a proud history of employing a diverse workforce. Additionally, starting with veterans of the Civil War, the Census Bureau has maintained a strong record of veteran employment. Eddie Hellmuth Willner, a Jewish immigrant from Germany, who also served 20 years in the U.S. Army, encompassed the qualities of diversity and service that are valued at the Census Bureau. In addition to the difficulties many immigrants experience in a new country along with the challenges of a military career, Eddie also faced the horrors of surviving the Holocaust in Germany during World War II.



Eddie at work at the Census Bureau.
Census Bulletin, March 1977

Eddie was born on August 15, 1926, in Mönchengladbach, Germany. Eddie's father had served in the German Army with distinction for 4 years during World War I, for which he earned an Iron Cross. However, as the situation for Jewish people in Germany deteriorated with the rise of the Nazis, Eddie's parents sent him to relative safety in Belgium, while they fled to France.



Eddie showing the tattoo he received at Auschwitz to a *Washington Post* reporter in 2002.

The Washington Post, September 16, 2002

The French arrested Eddie's father for being German, and when Eddie visited him in the prison camp, they also detained the youth. Eddie and his father escaped from the French camps and reunited with the rest of the family. A Catholic priest secured false papers and hid the family in an empty church in France. In 1942, the Nazis discovered the Willner family and transported them to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland, where Eddie's mother was immediately sent to the gas chambers. As healthy men, Eddie

and his father served as slave labor in extremely dangerous jobs, including in the construction of tunnels for V-2 rockets. On his 50th birthday, the Nazis deemed Eddie's father too old to be of any more use, and he was also murdered in the gas chambers. In all, Eddie would lose 27 family members in the Nazi camps.

In 1944, the SS (i.e., the Schutzstaffel or "Protection Squadron") forced Eddie and approximately 4,000 other prisoners on a death march to Gross-Rosen concentration camp in Germany. Eddie was one of only 26 who survived. In April 1945, as the Allies closed in, Eddie's camp had orders to be marched to Buchenwald where they knew that the SS would murder them due to their participation in the top secret V-2 program. Eddie, along with five other men, made their escape attempt on this march, however only Eddie and his friend Mauritz "Mike" Schwaab survived.



Eddie as a Lieutenant in the Army.

Wikipedia (accessed April 1, 2018)



CELEBRATE SPANISH-STYLE—The Census Bureau Spanish Club, and other interested SESAITes, are invited to a gala Latin American Dance on April 21. The gettogether, \$4 per person, is sponsored by one of the major Spanish clubs of the greater Washington area. If you'd like to go, please contact Richard Washington (FTD), ext. 35150, before April 15. Photo above shows the Census Spanish Club at a recent luncheon meeting in the FOB 3 cafeteria.

From l.: Ernesto Monti (ISPC), Carmina Young (ISPC), Ellie Boyer (BUS), Lupe Saldana (PERS), Ellen Jamison (ISPC), Bill O'Leary (ISPC), Bill Duncan (ISPC), Richard Washington, Instructor (FTD), Laura Hernandez (POP), Jeanne Griffith (ISPC), Eddie Willner (ISPC), Isa Saez (POP), Emma Moreno (DIRS), Angel Landron (DCS), Hector Villa (AGR), Jesse Rodriguez (NOAA).

Eddie and fellow Census Bureau employees.

The SESA Inquirer, March 30, 1973

and the Americans easily took their next objective. For 6 months, Company D kept watch over the boys, until Eddie could contact a cousin in Connecticut, who then sponsored him into the United States. Eddie would not see any of his comrades from Company D until a reunion in 2002.

Desiring to show his gratitude for his new country, and in appreciation of the comradeship he shared with the members of Company D, Eddie enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1948. Eddie completed Officer Candidate School and served most of his career as an intelligence officer. He served in Korea, Germany, and Japan, and in 1951, became a naturalized U.S. citizen. In 1968, Eddie retired with the rank of Major.

Not through with service to his adopted country, Eddie then joined the Census Bureau, where he would work for 20 years. He served in several divisions, including Population and Governments, but spent most of his career in the International Statistics Program Center (ISPC), where he worked as a Social Science Analyst. Eddie also participated in the Census Bureau's extracurricular activities, such as the Spanish Club, and international outreach activities like the Overseas Technical Assistance Club. Eddie's extensive overseas experience and linguistic expertise helped the Census Bureau with many of the outreach programs conducted in coordination with other countries. These programs provided assistance with methodology, techniques, and training to foreign countries, while also hosting a healthy exchange program which allowed many foreign statisticians and survey takers in the United States to observe the functions of the Census Bureau.

For 8 nights, Mike and Eddie slowly made their way towards the sound of American artillery. On April 12, 1945, they came across an American tank column— Company D, 32nd Regiment, 3rd Armored Spearhead Division. The American soldiers pulled the starving boys up onto the tanks—at that point Eddie only weighed 75 pounds—and fed them and provided them with spare uniforms. Eddie and Mike helped point out German positions they had avoided during their escape,



Eddie Willner (ISPC) opened 177th meeting of OTAC.

The SESA Inquirer, February 1975

Despite his early hardships, Eddie always kept a positive outlook. In an interview with the *Census Bulletin*, Eddie said, "I've never allowed the darkness of the past to invade my soul. I don't hate the Germans and feel that I can have a better life by choosing the best of both my German and Jewish cultural heritage. People of all races and countries, including Germans, died in concentration camps." In 1959, Eddie married a German woman, Johanna, who herself had fled the Soviet occupation of Germany. In addition to the decades of service to his country, both in the Army and the Census Bureau, Eddie also served for 20 years in the Public Safety Commission of his new hometown of Falls Church, Virginia. Eddie passed away in Falls Church on March 30, 2008, survived by his wife of 49 years, their 6 children, and 14 grandchildren. He is interred at Arlington National Cemetery. We are thankful for Eddie's courage and his service to our country and the U.S. Census Bureau.



Eddie's headstone at Arlington National Cemetery.