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My Father and the Nature Friends of America

The Nature Friends of America membership pin in the attached photograph belonged to my father, Erich M. Gross. I believe some of my family's history is necessary to understand how this little pin came to my possession, and the significance of it.



My father was born Erich Max Levi in Angenrod, Germany on February 25, 1924. He lived on a farm owned by his parents with his sister, Sylvia. His father's name was Max Levi and his mother's first name was Martha. The only information I have concerning the family's residence in Angenrod is from my father, who stated the family had lived in the town for some "300 years." With the changes taking place due to the rise of Adolf Hitler the family decided to leave Germany in 1936. They came to New York City under the sponsorship of persons already in New York, as this was required to gain



entrance to the United States at that time. The immigration paperwork shows Max to be a meat cutter and butcher. They settled in the Fort Washington area of New York City near the George Washington Bridge. The family would remain at that location through the death of Max in 1945 and Martha, his wife, who died there in the mid-1980s.

The reason for the family's name changes from Levi to Gross is an interesting story in itself. Clearly there was no way for Max and the entire family to hide the fact they were German. They came to the country not speaking any English. However, with the name of Levi it was clear that more likely than not they were Jews. Max took a job in the meat cutting and butcher industry in New York City. This trade was dominated by German Americans. At the time he earned approximately \$18.00 a week. The decision was made to obtain a name for the family that did not indicate the family could be Jews. So, the name Grose was decided upon. However due to

typographical errors with the immigration and naturalization authorities the paperwork came out Gross. After the name change, he found a job that paid \$28.00 a week.

My father's name change from Erich Max Levi to Erich Max Gross, was granted through a decree of the court on the 25th day of April 1944. He was age 20 at the time and had enlisted in the United States Army at the age of 19. While normally a person could not gain United States Citizenship until the age of 21, if one enlisted in the United States Army they could become a citizen immediately. This is the route my father took. He served in the Army to near the end of the war, was injured and honorably discharged.

He desperately wanted to go back to Germany and fight. However, in the wisdom of the United States Army he was sent to the South Pacific.

Erich was politically active from a young age in New York City. He was proudly arrested at 16 years old by the New York City Police Department for being part of a group of people protesting against Franco in front of the Spanish Embassy.

Even with my father serving in the United States Army, the family was officially on the Enemy Alien list of the United States government. My father told of officials coming to their apartment in New York and demanding they hand over any radio that could receive short wave broadcasts. Most radios did have that capability at the time, having both the AM band and the short-wave band. They were given receipt for the radio and told at end of the war they could get it back. Of course, that was not true. Additionally, living so close to the Hudson River near the George Washington Bridge, enemy aliens were not allowed to possess flashlights. The idea was they could use the flashlights to signal to German submarines off the coast, providing them with some kind of information. I still have numerous letters written between my father and his father while my father served in the South Pacific. Each letter has been opened and a paper seal was placed along the top stating in bold black print Opened by Censor. And so it was as German Jewish immigrants they were welcome, but not too welcome.

Prior to the war my father took an interest in photography. I have numerous photographs that he took of demonstrations for various social causes as well as numerous photographs of Paul Robeson, the singer. The latter were taken after the war. At some point my father adopted what could be called socialist leanings and after the war for the most part was called communist.

As best that I know his involvement with the Nature Friends of America in the Catskill Mountains of New York began in the early 1950s. In fact, he met the girl there who would become my mother. Her name was Ruth Heilborn and became Ruth Gross. My mother died 3 years ago at age 98.

As the 1950s progressed and McCarthyism became an illness in America, my father made a decision to step away from any organizations or groups that could be considered communist or communist sympathizers or un-

American groups in some fashion. Bitterness came between friends and family during the McCarthy era. In my own family its effect in part were, when my mother announced to her family her intention to be married to my father in 1953, my mother's brother, who worked for the Central Intelligence Agency, told her she could not marry Erich! The reason being Erich was known to be associated with "subversive groups" and that it could damage his career by association. The disagreement that followed resulted in my mother and her brother not talking to each other for over 20 years. They finally reconciled after the temperature in the country went down concerning McCarthyism.

The membership pin came into my possession in May 1981. This is when my father passed away and I found it among his belongings. I had seen it in years prior and asked him about it. He didn't say much about the pin, in fact he didn't discuss it at all. It was only from information gained from talking to my mother, I understood the significance of the pin and how my mother and father met at a "camp" in the Catskills.

I must believe there are few of these pins from that time period in existence.

So this is the somewhat long story about a very small pin.

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