HELMUT ISENBERG EXTENDED BIOGRAPHY

Helmut Isenberg was born on June 15, 1919 in Saarbrücken, Germany, the middle of three sons. His father was a banker. Helmut was active in Boy Scouting, achieving the Eagle Scout rank. This appears to have gotten him an invite to travel with Prince Emanuel of Liechtenstein, who had just been named the Chief Scout of the Princely Liechtenstein Scout Corps. In a 1943 interview, Helmut recollected: "We saw most of Europe, stayed at many of the Prince's castles (he has 21 of them) and met many notables, men like Schussnig and Otto Von Hapsburg." (This likely refers to Kurt von Schuschnigg, who was Chancellor of Austria at the time, and Otto von Habsburg, former Crown Prince of Austria and later one of the leaders of the Austrian resistance.)

In 1935, Helmut's father took the family on "vacation" to Switzerland to escape Nazi Germany. Through the intervention of Prince Emanuel, they were admitted to residency in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. (Their home in Saarbrücken was taken over as an SS headquarters. After the war, when Saarland became a French protectorate, the French installed their Sureté in the Isenbergs' former home until the territory was returned to Germany in 1957.)

Meanwhile, Helmut found work as a photographer for several Paris newspapers, and met many more political figures there. The family spent three years in Liechtenstein, but Helmut's father Sally (Salomon) was subject to increasing anti-Semitism in the press. Helmut's older brother, Artur, had been admitted to Harvard, and the two brothers sailed to the US on the Ile de France in September 1938. Family lore says that Artur's classmate John F. Kennedy (they were both 1940 graduates) helped the rest of the family gain admission to the US.

The family was living in Queens in the 1940 census, where Salomon was working as an antique dealer, and Helmut as a photographer. Around this time, he met Ellen Martha Pollack Kaufman who had also emigrated from Germany in 1938. She was working as a sculptor, designing heads, busts, and hands for department store display windows. Ellen got a divorce from her husband, and the two married sometime in the early 1940s.

Helmut registered for the draft on October 16, 1940, and enlisted in the US Army on February 1, 1943. His two brothers also were involved in the war effort--Norbert enlisted in the Army and was stationed in the Philippines, and Artur (armed with a cum laude degree in psychology from Harvard and fluency in a number of languages) went to work for the Office of War Information.

Helmut was assigned to the Headquarters and Service Company of the 603rd Engineer Camouflage Battalion, and stationed at Fort Meade in Maryland. It was from there that he applied for US citizenship on June 28, 1943; SGT Myron Teaney of the 603rd was a witness to his petition. In a 1943 interview, he stated that "my chief concern in life is getting my citizenship papers."

Helmut went to Europe with the Ghost Army in July, 1944. Sometime after his arrival there, his wife Ellen sculpted a plaster "pinup" figurine of herself and sent it to him. Helmut's battalion mates were enchanted with the doll, and they all wanted one. "They'll pay whatever it costs." He encouraged her to start a business making the dolls and it wasn't long before she had 20 full-time workers in a walk-up factory on Sixth Avenue. A 1945 Collier's Magazine article reported that she had produced more than 150,000 dolls.

Several years after his discharge from the Army, Helmut found work as a salesman for Paper Mate Pens, a company founded in 1949 with global aspirations. Helmut set out to sell the pens all over the world. Ship and airline records from the early 1950s show him traveling to London, Paris, Zurich, Frankfurt, Rio de Janeiro, Maracaibo, Panama, Bogota, and Havana, sometimes staying for weeks or months at a time.

Helmut and Ellen divorced in Reno in November 1950. That same month his first child, Helmut George Isenberg, was born. The child's mother was Irene Grosse, a 17-year-old German beauty queen. (She eventually married and emigrated to Brazil, where Helmut George Isenberg became George Spreen.)

Helmut's second wife was German-born Josephine Johanna Woelfl. They married around 1953, and their son Robert was born in New York in 1954. In 1956/57 Helmut left Paper Mate and moved to Paris, and young Robert went to live with his grandmother in Munich.

Even prior to moving to Europe, Helmut had become active in the American Legion in Paris. By 1954, he was Vice Commander and PR chairman, and in that capacity delivered a Paper Mate pen to Prime Minister Winston Churchill that October as an early 80th birthday present. Churchill wrote him a prompt thank you note: "It is with pleasure that I received the ball-bearing pen which you brought to London for my birthday."

During the 1960s, Helmut served several times as Vice-Commander and Commander of the American Legion Department of France (which includes most of Europe). As the designated representative of the organization he presented the Legion's Gold Peace Medal to German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Belgian Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak in 1963, and to German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard in 1965. He was also photographed with Richard Nixon in Paris in 1970. For a young man who had reveled in meeting political leaders in the 1930s, these must have been significant experiences.

After he left Paper Mate, Helmut owned a variety of businesses. In the 1960s he sold gourmet products (caviar, pâté, etc.) to Lufthansa for their first-class passengers. He owned a Baden-Baden art gallery, Merkur, during the 1970s. While he lived in Germany, he also became the father of a daughter, Eva. In addition, he obtained several patents during those years, including a 1968 patent for an artificial sweetener and a 1982 patent for a stereoscopic television.

He moved to Wiesbaden, Germany around 1990, and died there on May 17, 1992. He is buried at the Jewish Cemetery at the Nordfriedhof in Wiesbaden. In 2021, the American Legion Department of France Commander laid a wreath on the former Commander's grave.