

FROM VIENNA TO HOLLYWOOD

By Peter Lilienthal



Studio Head: Eric Pleskow

Academy Award winner Eric Pleskow will be interviewed by his daughter Michelle Abt, President of Selah (Fairfield County's Reconstructionist Congregation), as part of the Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County's December Featured Program. The interview will cover the story of his remarkable life – from a Jewish schoolboy living in Nazi occupied Austria, to his return to Europe as an American soldier, and his subsequent brilliant career as a Hollywood executive, during which time he won six Academy Awards for Best Picture. The program, which is free and open to the public will be held on Sunday, December 14, 2014 at the Bartlett Arboretum, 151 Brookdale Road, Stamford, CT 06903 starting at 1:30 PM with refreshments at 1:00 PM.

A long time resident of Weston,–Connecticut, Eric Pleskow, was born on April 24, 1924 in Vienna, Austria, the son of a Jewish Russian refugee father and a Jewish Hungarian mother. After the Anschluss (the annexation of Austria by Hitler's Germany) in March, 1938 and following Aryanization of their apartment, the

family emigrated to the United States in 1938, leaving Austria on the last train into France before war was declared the following day.

In 1943, he was drafted into the US Army as one of the “Ritchie Boys,”—a small contingent of Jewish Austrian and German immigrants who trained at Camp Ritchie, Maryland a US special military intelligence unit. They were able to exact a perfect revenge by returning to Europe as U.S. soldiers -- using their language and cultural knowledge to wage psychological warfare against the Nazis, interrogate prisoners of war, and help liberate Europe.

After the Second World War, Mr. Pleskow was stationed in Germany, where he guided POW interrogations during denazification and filmed trials and executions. Due to his short education in film editing, which he finished before joining the Army, he became film officer (US War Department) in 1945 and was assigned to rebuild the Bavaria Film Studios at the age of 21.

Continuing in the film industry after being discharged from the Army, he worked for United Artists, and was responsible for film distribution in South Africa and then Europe. He went on to become president of United Artists in 1973, and under his presidency, United Artists won the Academy Award (*Oscar*) for the best picture three years in a row (1975: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, 1976: *Rocky*, 1977: *Annie Hall*).

In 1978, Eric Pleskow left United Artists to found Orion Pictures, which he directed until 1992. Their greatest successes were *Amadeus*, *Dances with Wolves* and *The Silence of the Lambs*.

Since 1998, Pleskow has been president of the Film Festival Viennale in Vienna. In February 2007 he was awarded honorary citizenship of Vienna, following Billy Wilder and Teddy Kollek (2001).

Elissa Kaplan, Chair of the Oral History Committee of the Jewish Historical Society said, “We arranged to tape a Veteran’s history piece with Mr. Pleskow. When we heard his story, we were blown away! We wanted Eric Pleskow to share his story.

The Jewish Historical Society of Fairfield County is a beneficiary agency of the United Jewish Federation of Greater Stamford, New Canaan and Darien.

Questions about the program?

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