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Obituary: Major General William P. Levine

A Highland Park resident, Levine served in the U.S. military and was one of the officers to help liberate the concentration camp Dachau during World War II. He died on March 29, at age 97.



Jacob Nelson, Patch Staff

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The information and eulogy below come from Jonathan Plotkin.

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Major General William P. Levine passed away on Friday, March 29, 2013 at the age of 97.

Loving husband of Rhoda Kreiter Levine and the late Leah Goldberg Levine. Devoted son of the late Sadie and Joseph Levine, eldest brother of Robert and the late Clarence and Orrin Levine. Extraordinary father of John (Merril Prager), Maxine (John Souza), Susan Kreiter Margolis (Dr. Fred Margolis), Shelley Kreiter-Solow (Sheldon Solow), Robin Kreiter Plotkin (Jonathan Plotkin). Adoring grandfather of David and Adam Margolis, Alison and David Solow, Noah, Oliver, Alexander and Pearl Plotkin.

Born July 1, 1915 in Duluth Minnesota and graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1937. Served in Europe as an officer in the 34 AAA Group during World War II. Following the war, William served for 30 years in the Army Reserve achieving rank of Major General. Awarded the Legion of Merit and Distinguished Service Medal. In civilian life, William was President of Lakeside Plastics Sales Company.

In lieu of flowers, please make donations to a meaningful charity of your choice.

Eulogy, by Jonathan Plotkin

I have been thinking hard over the past few days how does one possibly take the measure of a man like William Levine. Father, husband, son, brother, uncle, mentor, soldier, patriot and devoted friend to so many. His complexity and multifaceted interests and experiences are almost without measure.

Consider for a moment 1915 the year he was born. Woodrow Wilson was only half way through his first term as President. Trans-continental telephone service would be established for the first time that year with Alexander Graham Bell himself making the first call between New York and San Francisco. Babe Ruth would hit his first home run in May. The cornerstone of the Lincoln Memorial would be laid in Washington DC just 50 years after that great Presidents untimely death while far out at sea the Lusitanian would be sunk by a German U-Boat propelling the United States into the First World War which was already at that time raging over most of Europe and the Mid-east. In 1915 France and England were busy at work seizing control of the Mid East by creating zones of influences

that established the borders of Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq...the very nations, 97 years later that are imploding in civil war.

It is not inconceivable that William as a baby might have been held in the arms of a person who may herself been held as a child by an adult born before our nations very birth. Such is the short arch of history and William's place in it. Our William came on the scene into the arms of a loving immigrant family that saw opportunities for those who worked hard to achieve their goals at the crucible of our nations history. William learned his lessons well.

I only knew William for the last third, or approximately 33 years of his long and productive life however I honestly don't know anyone else who had a such a profound influence over my own personal destiny other then my own parents.

For those of you have heard this story before forgive me. In the summer of 1980 fresh out of graduate school I caught a ride from Massachusetts with my brother Danny who was returning to school in Wisconsin. My intentions were to be dropped off south of Chicago as he turned his car north and to hitch-hike from there to San Francisco, a trip that I had made on a number of occasions. This time I had enough money to hitch one way and fly back...a rare treat. Approximately 10 miles from my drop off point at what I now know to be I-80 and I-90/94 I pulled Danny's car that I was driving off the highway into a roadside oasis. The weather was nasty...hot and humid with the air smelling like sulfur from the south shore blast furnaces.

Feeling a bit overwhelmed by the moment I elected to take a chance and call Rhoda Kreiter in Highland Park who had reminded me recently that her door was always open for a meal if I was ever in the area. Here was my chance to get off the highway to eat, shower and replenish myself before the long push west by myself. I located a pay phone and called Rhoda in Highland Park.

A man answered who identified himself as William Levine...a man I had never met or spoken to who had apparently three weeks earlier married Rhoda on my birthday no less. Rhoda was not home and wouldn't be for a while. After a series of rather awkward exchanges I made up my mind to make my dash for the west coast that afternoon and skip Highland Park.

William wouldn't even consider the idea.

"I've heard of you and the rest of the Plotkin family...it would be nice for you to stop by" he said. " Get dropped off at Skokie and Dundee on the North Side and I will pick you up". I protested making up lame excuses along the way. William dug his feet in...his voice transforming from mild amusement to well....an actual order:

"Get dropped off at Skokie and Dundee and I will pick you up...**DO YOU UNDERSTAND?**"

I did, and I did.

That evening at dinner Robin, my first friend and companion from an earlier time as little kids in the neighborhood joined us for dinner. Before the night was over Robin (who will confirm all of this) decided we were going to get married however she had the presence of mind of waiting to tell me until after I finished my journey. I had no idea as to what was in store for me. The next morning William arranged a ride for me south to the I-80 and Harlem interchange in Tinley Park and three days later I arrived tired and dirty in San Francisco. The following weekend...back in Boston, Robin showed up at my door like the beautiful angel that she is. After a year of long distance telephone exchanges and expensive travel between Boston and Chicago I proposed and my life became enriched beyond measure...with a loving wife and four children who are here today and a large family of Kreiter's and Levine's to keep me occupied for the next 30+ years.....and all because of William ordering me that fateful afternoon to change my plans and stop by for dinner.

It is nearly impossible to describe the odd couple of friends that William and I became over the intervening decades. A General and a free spirited ex hippy would not necessarily have gotten along however William by this time had mellowed and I had seen enough of the world where my politics would be challenged, especially after traveling through various eastern bloc countries. All of a sudden America was looking a lot better to this self professed radical.

William and I rarely discussed politics, we both agreed that politics was a spectators sport that neither of us could abide by. We both loved history and the interactions between the sublime and the great events of the day...all of which in one form or another were

expressions of the self interests of people acted out on vast stages. Biography's were a favored form of history for both of us.

I am not ashamed to say I was in awe of William's military background, especially his service during the Second World War. While my brothers and I were "playing army" in the fields and ravines around our house William had actually been in the thick of it...from D-day to the surrender of Germany. Every year around June 6th I would entice William with a bottle of wine and a lunch where I would squeeze information out of him regarding his experiences. I was most interested in what a happy go lucky guy from Duluth made of the events surrounding him during those difficult years when life changed so drastically for his family, friends and the nation. When I asked him what first went through his mind upon opening his eyes the first morning in France when he woke up his eyes lit up and he said "I can remember the feeling like it was yesterday" I was convinced he was going to tell me some great truth about fighting and dieing, of great armies and sweeping plans to free an enslaved people. Instead he said "what came to my mind that first morning was that I had to pee like a racehorse!" (his words). Apparently the day earlier he was a little busy and simply forgot to stop long enough to relieve himself.

Most of you know Williams experiences toward the end of the war as he and his fellow troops entered Germany. As a liberator of Dachau he saw first hand the evil perpetrated on an innocent population without restraint. The death and suffering was almost overwhelming. Even so William managed to conduct himself with dignity and honor, while allowing for that home grown Minnesota optimism to shelter him from the abject brutality all around him. However it wouldn't be until years later that William could speak about these experiences.

Forty years later, at a ceremony at Yad Veshim in Jerusalem in memory of the Warsaw uprising where William was asked to represent Allied Forces he encountered a man in the audience, a father and a grandfather by the name of Maurice Pirot, a Belgium Jew, now a Israeli citizen who came down from the seats and embraced William as his savior...the soldier who carried him in his arms to safety in Dachau that first day of liberation. Pirot was now able to thank William for saving his life even though I suppose William in his modesty would have rejected this as simply his responsibility to help along with the many others who needed to be cared for at that time.

In a world of CNN sound bites and artificial hero's of the day it is becoming more and more infrequent to find a person like William who represents the best in all of us...a person who reminds you that there is yet hope for our species. While not perfect William epitomized the very ideals that formed our nation, that personal sacrifices are essential despite easier roads many of us would have elected to take. Williams abiding faith and unyielding thirst for knowledge and doing it right the first time set him above and apart from most. It is a blessing that Rhoda and William found each other...two strong willed hearts of gold.

Like Maurice Pirot William carried me to safety and nurtured our growing family unconditionally. Our collective lives are richer beyond measure as a result of William's influence. He will be missed and adored for all eternity.

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