

A Jewish American Soldier in World War II

FOREWARD

I always wanted to write about my father, the Jewish American Corporal who was stationed in the European theater during World War II. Though his story is only one of thousands that remain untold, there are significant coincidences threaded into this narrative that take one by surprise.

Even as a child, I knew Dad was a very special person. Few of my friends had father who was as patient with them as Dad was with me and my brother. While he always seemed to have plenty of time to devote to his family as well as his work as a director of a nursing home in Manhattan, Dad spent countless hours serving the community, assuming responsibility for dozens of functions and endeavors.

I suppose that's why I wasn't really surprised to learn that his unselfish nature took him on an unusual journey during the war...

Chapter 1

Me.

The story begins.

September, 1994. The bar mitzvah was over. Kenny did us proud. He chanted his torah and haftorah reading beautifully. Delivered his speech without a hitch. We sang. We danced. We ate. And ate some more. We bid all our guests a very fond farewell, packed up all the presents and drove home.

I knew my parents would be returning to their sunny retreat in Florida tomorrow, but before they left, I was determined to get them to record the stories I'd heard about Dad's experiences in World War II. I'd heard snippets of these stories for the last several years but never got the full lowdown. So the next morning, after all the excitement of the bar mitzvah had somewhat dissipated, I sat down in the den and pulled out my trusty tape recorder and nagged mom and dad to talk.

“OK,” I said. “Exactly how and when did you meet Rabbi Reiner’s cousins during the war? And what’s the story behind the picture of the seder with 2000 soldiers and WACs? Who is Charlotte Weber? What happened in Liege?”

Dad smiled and started talking. “Wait a minute!” I interrupted. “Let me get the tape going. Testing. Testing 1, 2,3.” I rewound.” Testing. Testing 1,2,3.” The recorder echoed.

OK. So...what happened?

Chapter 2

Dad

Meeting the Englanders

I was quaking in my boots. Easy enough for my buddies to tell me to trek through the small town of Godine to find the Jewish family that had been in hiding throughout the war. Even though this part of Belgium was supposedly liberated, there was still plenty of sniper fire in the most unexpected places. And I was scared spitless.

But they were egging me on. Greenberg and Berkowitz and all the other guys in my battalion wouldn’t let up. They were told by the soldiers who were there before we arrived that there was a Jewish family that had been hiding in an attic during the war and needed help. And, since they knew I was the only guy in the company who spoke Yiddish and at least tried to stay observant, they elected me to go. After all, I was the unofficial Jewish chaplain to my fellow Jewish soldiers.

So I strapped my carbine on my shoulder, worked up my courage and ventured out to the address the guys gave me. Every so often, I heard sniper fire. Every minute I asked myself how on earth did I get myself into this situation. But I soldiered on to the address my comrades provided. Finally, I found the house. Alone in the dark, afraid, with no clue who would answer, I knocked on the door. No answer. So I knocked again. No answer. I’d come this far, too far to give up so easily. So I knocked one more time. Finally, a tremulous voice in French...“Who is it?” I don’t know who was more frightened. The woman in the other side of the door or me. And what should I answer? Who was on the other side of the door? Taking the bull by the horns, I announced in my very best Yiddish “Ich bin a Yiddishe zelner” I’m an American Jewish soldier, and I’m here to help.

Slowly the door opened and a young woman, probably in her early thirties, appeared, though she was barely visible in the dark, unlit hallway. I repeated my introduction while she shone her flashlight in my face. Satisfied that I was indeed an American soldier, she

led me upstairs to an attic apartment where I found another woman about the same age, an older man with a trimmed goatee and two children, a boy about 11 or 12 and a little girl about 6 years old. We started talking.

Anna, the woman who escorted me upstairs, introduced her father-in-law sister-in-law and the two children, Henry and Charlotte. I can't recall the other first names but the family name was Englander. They told me that their husbands had travelled to England before the war reached Liege, intending to send for their families as soon as they could. Before they could travel to London, Liege was captured by the Germans and the two women with their children and father-in-law were trapped in Belgium. Fortunately, a gentile friend hid them in the attic during the Nazi occupation and helped them survive the war.

I must have stayed in that little attic room for about an hour. Before I left, I promised to try to find their family in America and help them in any way I could.

When I rejoined my battalion, I told the guys what had happened. They were as happy as I was that I had found this family alive and in reasonably good health. Now what? What should I do?

First things first. Anna told me that they had family in New York who were in the diamond business. Was there any way to find them?

I wrote to your mother. At that time she was my fiancée. Since mom's family, the Kirschenbaums, lived in Williamsburg, I was hoping she could track down the Englanders for me. I had no idea how she would accomplish this, but I knew my Betty was resourceful and would think of something. Sure enough, she did.

Chapter 3

Mom

Finding their relatives

First thing I did when I got your father's letter was speak to a friend of mine whose father worked in the diamond district. I was hoping they could post a notice asking anyone who knew an Englander to call me. Days went by. No response. They turned into weeks with not a single call. Finally, I knew I'd have to try something more proactive. I got a Manhattan phone book and looked up the name Englander. There were several listed. So I started making calls. The first few yielded no results. But eventually I reached an Englander who had relatives in Belgium. I explained that my fiancé, Sidney

Feinberg, is a soldier stationed in Liege who is trying to help in any way possible and eventually get the family reunited. As a fiancé, I was entitled to send packages for very little money. The American Englanders were thrilled to be able to help their Belgian cousins. They put together packages of food, clothing and a host of other necessities that I then mailed to Sid for eventual delivery to Anna and her family.

Chapter 4

Dad

Who are the Englanders?

I delivered all those packages to Anna and her family as soon as they arrived. And I kept acting as a go between until I was eventually shipped out of Belgium.

At one point, on a Monday or Tuesday, I managed to get a can of special rations...kosher meat that was packaged in a can. I ran to the Englanders to deliver this treasure. That Friday night, I made my way back to the attic apartment. Sure enough, though the family hadn't tasted meat in two years, they had saved the can for the Sabbath meal. That's the kind of people they were. Amazing.

I never found out exactly how the husbands were able to send for their wives and children and their father, but they all made it to London after the war.

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Fast-forward about 40 years. Mom and I planned a trip to Europe. We were going to travel with several friends, including Rabbi and Mrs. Eli Schwartz. Knowing that one of our stops was in England, I wanted to get in touch with the Englanders and find out how they fared after the war.

Mom and I looked for the Englander family in New York. Once again, the trusty old Manhattan White Pages provided the information we needed. I called several Englanders until I found the family we were looking for. They told me Charlotte, that little 6-year-old girl had married. Her name was now Charlotte Weber, and she lived with her family in London. Perfect.

I dialed the phone number. A woman answered. So I asked her, "Does the name Sid Feinberg ring a bell?"

"Sid Feinberg?!" She exclaimed. "Of course I remember Sid Feinberg."

In the background I heard her husband ask, "Who the hell is Sid Feinberg?"

To that 6-year-old child, apparently I seemed like a hero out of a book. An American Jewish soldier who came again and again with packages – food, clothing...items Charlotte had never seen during the war. How could she ever forget.

“Well,” I said. “My wife and I will be in London in a few weeks, and I’m hoping to see you and your family while we’re there.”

“Of course,” answered Charlotte. “How about Rubin’s for dinner? It’s a great kosher restaurant in the Golden Green section of London. They have incredible deli sandwiches piled high with corned beef, tongue or pastrami. With a side of a knish or potato salad and coleslaw, it’s a feast.”

It sounded good to us, so we settled on a date and time to meet and eagerly anticipated getting together with them on the London leg of our trip.

On the appointed date, Mom and I, along with Rabbi Schwartz, arrived at Rubin’s anxiously waiting for Charlotte and her husband, Yaakov, to arrive. Finally, the Webers appeared, introduced themselves, and we all sat down to a scrumptious meal punctuated by nostalgia and poignant reminiscences.

At some point, Yaakov turned to Rabbi Schwartz and started playing Jewish geography. “So,” said Yaakov, we have a cousin who’s a Rabbi in New York. Maybe you know him?”

How many thousands of Rabbis are in the New York Metropolitan area? The likelihood of a connection seemed remote.

“His name is Rabbi Jacob Reiner,” continued Yaakov. Rabbi Schwartz had never heard of him, but you know your mother is a maven in Jewish geography. She overheard the question and perked up. “Rabbi Reiner,” she exclaimed. “The Rabbi of Congregation Ohab Zedek in Belle Harbor? That’s my daughter’s Rabbi!”

Chapter 5

Me

Small, small world

Sure enough, the family my father met during World War II was indeed related to my own Rabbi. Charlotte was his cousin. Years later, I met Charlotte and her husband when they visited Belle Harbor to see the Rabbi and his wife. Small, small world.

And it gets even smaller.

My parents passed away in 2011 and 2012, just four months apart. My in-laws spent winters in an apartment in Miami Beach that we purchased in 1988. After my father-in-law passed away and my mother-in-law stopped going south for the winter, my husband, Allen and I spent a week or so now and then in that apartment.

There we met and befriended a wonderful family, Shaul and Rachel Ringler and their daughter Rebecca. Shaul is an airplane pilot who flew the US Air route to Israel. They lived in our building and always invited us for a Sabbath meal whenever we came to Miami Beach. So we spent many delightful Friday nights with them.

One Friday night, Allen told the Ringlers about his family's experiences during the war... which is a book in itself. Once his narrative ended, I transitioned into Dad's story. When I mentioned the name Charlotte Weber, Shaul perked up.

"Charlotte Weber? From England?" He asked.

Rachel chided him. "You think you know everyone. We don't know any Webers."

But Shaul knew better... "Years ago, when I flew into England, I got to know a guy named David Weber. He invited me to his home where I met his parents, Charlotte and Yanik Weber."

And that's how I found out that Shaul knew the very same family my father helped during World War II seventy years ago.

Chapter 6

Dad

The seder in Liege

It must have been sometime in March 1945. By that time many cities in Belgium, including Liege, were liberated by the Allied forces, but there was still fighting taking place just across the border in Germany. With Passover about a month away, the US Army decided they were going to collect all the Jewish servicemen and women in the area, conduct a seder in Liege, and "stick it" to the Germans. Two challenges. Where to hold the seder? And who's going to conduct it?

After scouting the city, the planners found a roller skating rink that would be big enough to accommodate about 2000 troops. But the proprietor didn't want to lease it to the US Army. No problem. They simply requisitioned the space. Who's going to argue with the US Army in 1945?

Problem number one was solved. Now they just have to find someone to run the seder. After some investigation, they found this Rabbi in Liege who had been conducting services every Sabbath in a small synagogue that was still standing in the city. But the Rabbi only spoke French and Yiddish and the troops only understood English. What to do?

"Ah," said the Rabbi, whose name is Rabbi Lepkifker. "There are two Jewish soldiers who make their way to our synagogue Friday night whenever they can. They understand Yiddish and can translate my service in English for the troops."

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Me

At this point Dad backtracked a little. He told me how he met Rabbi Lepkifker. He was told that there were services in a synagogue in Liege that met every Sabbath. Once Liege was no longer under enemy fire, Dad got permission to leave his unit on Friday night in order to attend. The first Friday night he managed to find this synagogue and actually pray with a minyan (a quorum of at least 10 men) in Liege was very moving.

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Dad

Sabbath at the Rabbi's table

But then the most incredible thing happened. The Rabbi invited me to his home to join him for Sabbath dinner. You can imagine how I felt when I walked into that little apartment and saw the candles burning and the table set for the Sabbath. Of course, they had very little food, so I thanked them profusely, but declined to partake in the meal. Just breathing in that atmosphere was more than enough for me.

Anyway, when I got back to my unit and told my buddies about it, they decided to come on Friday night too. Though they couldn't understand a word the Rabbi and his family said, in Yiddish or in French, there was such camaraderie and laughter, it really didn't matter.

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Anyway, back to the seder... So Rabbi Lepkifker told the organizers of this event about me and another fellow, Irving Kleinman, who also attended services whenever he could.

And that's how we got drafted into translating the Rabbi's words at a seder that was attended by 2000 soldiers and WACs.

Me

A picture is worth a thousand words

There's a picture of the seder among my father's army photos. I often looked at it and wondered where it was taken and what it was all about. You can see a host of army officers and other dignitaries at the head table, the smiling faces of the GIs and WACs seated at dozens of tables graced with boxes of matzoh and Manishevitz wine. Dad said the food wasn't kosher, but the army tried their best to make the seder as authentic as they could. And there, at the front of the crowd is Dad, a tall, skinny soldier translating the Rabbi's words to the receptive audience of Jews of every persuasion, Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, as well as unaffiliated, all serving in the US Army in their battle against the Germans in World War II.

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But this story doesn't end in 1945. Fast-forward to that same trip to Europe in 1991. Dad wanted to show Mom where he was in Belgium, so they planned to stop off in Liege. Mom and Dad spent the Sabbath before the trip at my home in Belle Harbor, NY. After services, my friend, Susan, started talking to Mom. She found out they were going to Liege and insisted they send regards to her friend's parents who still lived there. After Sabbath, Susan called and gave Mom the phone number.

Chapter 7

Mom

The Rabbi, his wife and the photograph

When we got to Liege, I called the number Susan gave me. A woman got on the phone and I sent Susan's regards. So the woman asked me what we were doing in Liege. I explained that my husband was a soldier during World War II stationed here in Liege, and he wanted to show me the city.

"You know, my husband was the Rabbi in Liege right after it was liberated," said the woman. After some back and forth, I realized that this Rabbi was the very same Rabbi who presided over the seder some 50 years before.

Now your father got interested. Unfortunately, Rabbi Lepkifker had suffered a stroke and was unable to communicate easily. Certainly not on the phone. But Dad wanted to meet him again and try to reconnect. Mrs. Lepkifker invited us to their home. They reminisced

about the war and talked about their experiences after liberation. Eventually, Mrs. Lepkifker asked Dad if he'd like to see the synagogue he prayed in during the war.

"I'd love to see it. Of course everything looks so different. When I was here, so many buildings were rubble. There's no way I could find it on my own."

"I'll be happy to take you there. Just let me call the President of the synagogue, so I can get the key."

So Mom and Dad were led to the synagogue by Rabbi and Mrs. Lepkifker and the President of the shul.

"Would you like to see our museum?" asked the President.

"I'd love to see it."

They climbed up the steps to a little museum in a synagogue in Liege, and there, behind the glass, was the same picture of the seder the Rabbi conducted in 1945. And there on the dais, you can see my father, a skinny Jewish American soldier translating the seder for 2000 soldiers and WACs so many years ago.

Epilogue

By the time I turned off the tape recorder, I had a clearer understanding of Dad's wartime experiences. I am so grateful that I have the recording. I transferred it to a CD and sent it to my children and my brother. Listening to my parents' voices brings back so many good memories, and enabled me to write this piece.

Today is the anniversary of my mother's passing. It seems appropriate to revisit this short story of my parents' reminiscences. I hope they are both smiling.

See pics below.

1. Dad's in the middle in the back.
2. Dad's left of Rabbi (who is in the white hat)
3. Soldiers and WACs at Seder



