

MEMOIRS

Max Rothschild

Dedicated to my grandchildren

*Kenneth, Kelley, Roxanne, Michael, Colette, Eric,
Samantha, and Roman*

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The Army Years

In Sept. 1941 I was inducted into the U.S. army in Milwaukee. However, anyone without American citizenship who came from Germany, Italy or Japan was classified as an enemy alien. It was for this reason that I was kept in an army stockade for a few days until my citizenship status was cleared for service. Next I was sent to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, where we were dispersed to different training camps in the 48 states. I requested to go to California and headed west by train to Camp Roberts (halfway between San Francisco and Los Angeles in the San Bernardino mountains). I received basic training there in the infantry. On occasion we were allowed to go to Copperas Cove for a break. It was a small, honky-tonk sort of town. The local barber charged 35 cents for a haircut and another 25 cents for a hot bath. Not much else to do. The training was harsh, in a dusty and hot climate. My pay as a private was \$21 a month, \$6.60 went for life insurance and then some more went for laundry service.

On my first overnight pass I hitchhiked into Los Angeles. It was not easy to catch a ride, because it was still peacetime and men in uniform were not that highly regarded. I

went to Pershing Square in L.A. where the USO had set up a big tent serving refreshments. Volunteers helped to make our visit as pleasant as possible. Early that evening I went to a dance sponsored by a ladies' organization. About an hour into the dance an announcement came over the loudspeakers saying that Pearl Harbor in Hawaii had been attacked by the Japanese. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attack_on_Pearl_Harbor All military personnel were to report back to their stations at once. The dance ended and I immediately went into the street to try to hitch a ride back to Camp Roberts. An elderly couple waited at the curb to take anyone back to their post. They were very kind and drove me all the way back to camp. We were now at war and people's attitude towards men in uniform had suddenly changed from indifference to wholehearted support.

In camp security had been raised to maximum alert and a total blackout took effect immediately. It was so dark that I could hardly find my way back to the barracks. Basic training stopped for me after only two and a half months. A troop train took me to Fort Lewis, Washington, a short distance from Tacoma. The sight of the Rocky Mountains was a breathtaking experience I will never forget.

I was assigned to a Reconnaissance Unit of the 41st Infantry Division at Fort Lewis, Washington. <http://home.st.net.au/~dunn/usarmy/41stdiv.htm> This was a National Guard outfit where almost everybody knew each other from their home towns. From the time I joined the service all my letters back to my family in Germany had been sent out through my friends' addresses in Wausau, Wisconsin. I did this to protect my parents, not knowing what the Nazis might do to them because of my being an enemy soldier. Looking back, it might have eased their pain had they known the truth.

We were to be sent to the Pacific and had been trained for jungle warfare. However, before being sent off I was called to the Division Office and ordered to surrender my rifle. I would not be allowed to go on with my division because I was not

an American citizen, and instead I was sent to an enemy-alien stockade set up for German, Italian and Japanese men. There I found a couple of other members of the Hyman family, because Mr. Hyman had been instrumental in helping several other young men escape from Germany. One guy I met there was from Hanover, Germany, and lived with his parents in Chicago. He became my friend for life. His name is Harold Weinberg, and he later helped introduce me to your mother. After the war Harold had heard of a young Jewish woman who was trying to contact her family, trapped in Poland. At that time the only mail allowed into Europe was via the U.S. Army, and since he knew that we were in similar circumstances, Harold put Ann in contact with me. The rest, as they say, is history. Tragically, we found out later that Ann's family had perished in the camps.

After a short while Harold and I were cleared by the army for active service. We both were assigned to the Reconnaissance Company of a newly formed battalion, the 899th Tank Destroyer Battalion.

http://www.tankdestroyersociety.com/899th_reconnaissance_company.htm (*Note: This website has Max's name listed as a member of the 899th Reconnaissance Company. Music plays on the site*) The 899th Battalion was to be my home until the end of the war.

http://www.tankdestroyersociety.com/history_of_the_899th_tank_battal.htm [*This website details the accomplishments of the 899th Battalion and cites their outstanding performance and heroism in the line of duty-music plays on the site*]

We trained with scant equipment left over from World War I. A light machine gun on bicycle wheels and broomsticks for rifles stood in for real equipment. But this was to change soon. The country's war production went into high gear and soon performed miracles. In four or five months the 899th was almost combat ready, except for more training in desert-like terrain. And this was to be done in Texas. We were sent

to Fort Hood, near Waco, for the training which put us one step closer to actual combat. We lived in tents on cots enclosed with mosquito nets. Black widow spiders and scorpions, rattle snakes and armadillos were our companions.

Toward the end of 1942 the battalion was moved to Fort Dix, New Jersey, closer to the port of embarkation in New York. Judging by the type of training we received it was obvious that we were to be sent to the deserts of North Africa. The next step for us was gangplank training. A plank was placed over a ditch that led into the first sergeant's tent. This was to simulate the boarding of the troop transport. The sergeant called out your last name and you answered with your first name, then proceeded into the tent and went back out. We had a guy in our group by the name of Cosimo Pusateri. When his name was called he froze and did not utter a word. He just stood there as white as a sheet. They took him away and that was the last I saw of him.

Every day brought me one step close to making my wish come true to find my parents alive. This helped me to bear all the hardships along the way. To see the end of Nazism was no longer a dream. It would be possible, but many more sacrifices had to be made. Two days before embarkation I was told that I had to stay behind because I was not a citizen yet. Lieutenant Colonel Maxwell Tincher was our battalion commander. I asked if he could intervene on my behalf. He did, and I was summoned to the adjutant general's office in Fort Dix where I was the only one in the company to be sworn in as an American citizen. He simply asked me if I was ready to die for America. And I was. It was the proudest moment of my life.

The actual boarding of the transport went smoothly. I found myself way down in the ship's hold where I spent the next two or three weeks. We were part of a huge armada that stretched far beyond the horizon with us in the center, while destroyers on the exterior guarded us from enemy submarines. Schools of dolphins dove playfully in

and out of the water alongside us. Our destination was finally announced after several days out at sea, but it was really not hard to guess. We took a southeasterly course to Africa and the temperature grew steadily warmer. All our training pointed to desert warfare. It came as no surprise when the ship's commander announced that we were headed for Casablanca, Morocco.

We were given printed instructions on what to expect in North Africa. Most importantly, it explained the culture of the native Arab population and the way their Islamic religion was strictly observed, especially during the festival of Ramadan which was soon to be celebrated. We were told that people feasted during the night and fasted during the day, and were warned to keep our distance because they might be edgy during this period.

At last we sighted land in the far-off distance. Casablanca's white houses gleamed under the deep blue sky. We landed and bivouacked to the coast near a light tower, within walking distance of the town. It would take another two weeks or so for our tank destroyers and other equipment to follow in another convoy. In the meantime we had to settle down in our pitched tents. All our belongings were damp from the voyage. We laid them out in the sun to dry. Everything we had was white: underwear, towels, mattress covers, long johns and sweatshirts. We were supposed to stuff them with straw and sleep on them. But there was no straw anywhere in sight.

It did not take the natives very long to spot these treasures. Soon they would come to our camp to inquire if any of these things were for sale. The long johns and mattress covers, along with cartons of cigarettes, were most attractive to them. Soon a market price of \$20 for each item was established. To the Arabs our long johns must have looked quite elegant, because we saw them promenade in them on the street. Business was booming but we had no replacements, so we closed up shop.

Discipline was quite lax. Normally we had close-order drills or cleanup details when there was nothing else to do, but not in this camp. One morning when everybody was loafing around a high-ranking general walked into our camp and not one soldier jumped to his feet and saluted. It turned out to be General George S. Patton.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Patton As you can imagine, he was a stickler for discipline. His visit caused an uproar. Full field inspection was called and we had to lay out all our supplies in front of our tents. But there was not one mattress cover or pair of long johns to be seen. From that moment on we had to wear woolen uniforms with their ties closed at all times, even under combat conditions.

They needed us badly in Tunisia. Field Marshall Erwin Rommel http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erwin_Rommel and the German Panzer units threatened to break through our lines at the Kasserine Pass.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Kasserine_Pass. The front was 1,500 miles away and we were to be sent there immediately. We went over the snow covered Atlas Mountains driving day and night, just making short stops to have a bite and to stretch our legs. Believe me, sitting in an open two and a half ton truck on wooden benches was not the most comfortable way to travel 1,500 miles. Our first engagement with the Afrika Korps was at El Guettar and Gafsa. The battle finally turned our way. We took many German and Italian prisoners. British Field Marshal Montgomery

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/field_marshall_bernard_montgomer.htm went on to take Tunis, but we turned around and went back to Algeria for rest and relaxation at a small fishing village named Benisaf, right on the Mediterranean. We lived on the beach and enjoyed the lazy life.

Soon it was time to move on. This time we were to go to Italy on an American navy ship, a day before Thanksgiving. It was paradise for us. We could take hot sweet

water showers and relax on clean bunks. Thanksgiving dinner was served cafeteria style on shiny stainless steel trays. I went through the line twice and just collapsed on my bed and could not move for hours. We landed in Naples, but they no longer needed us for combat action. We were then taken to a British barracks outside Oran, where we boarded an ancient Polish freighter sailing under the British flag, the Kosziusko. I remember that name well because the conditions were very bad. We slept on hammocks, if you could get on them. Buckets were hung at the end of long wooden benches to wash our mess gear and then for use in mopping the floor. As long as I was in the army I never had to go hungry, even if it was only C-rations and dry biscuits, but here we were actually starving. One day I counted twelve beans and one small canned hot dog for lunch. It got so bad that one night we broke into the food stores. I got away with two raw potatoes. We protested to our colonel and the food improved somewhat. Luckily this trip did not last very long.

After going through the Straits of Gibraltar we sailed along the coast of Portugal, Spain and France and finally docked in Southampton, England. We headed straight for a camp located near Salisbury. We lived in corrugated tin huts (Nisson huts) and used coal pot-belly stoves. It was winter in England, wet and chilly, only days before Christmas. I was given a furlough and took off to visit my good friends in Balmedie, Scotland. Only four years before I had left Scotland as a homeless refugee and now I had come back as an American citizen in an army uniform. The Lumsdens were still there at the cottage, except for their two sons in the army. Ma Lumsden treated me like royalty. She would not let me get up in the morning unless I had breakfast in bed first. Much to my regret the visit ended only too soon. I loved those people. How could I ever forget their trust in me? Before I left for America in 1939 I did not have a penny to my name. They knew it and without being asked they gave me \$60, never asking if or when I would pay it back.

Training for the invasion now went into high gear. All our vehicles had to be waterproofed so that they could be driven ashore through water. It was very time-consuming work. We tested every vehicle in a nearby river, and there was not a single water leak. My company was sent to Wales for anti-aircraft gunnery training. Riding back through the Welsh mountains on curving roads in darkness with the headlights off, our driver missed a curve. We rolled down a deep ravine. Sitting upright on a hard bench I remember the crunching sound of gravel while we turned over and over. I came to sitting upright with no one else beside me except a man lying on the floor of the truck. All the others lay scattered on the ground. Some were dead. I had just minor scratches. Only two of us were able to go for help. We climbed up a steep incline to reach the road, but not a soul was around. We walked to a nearby farmhouse and called police. My lucky star was still shining for me that night.

Not far from my base in England was an airfield used for fighters. I would lie in the grass and watch them take off toward the French coast. Time was drawing closer for the moment the entire free world had been waiting for: The invasion of the continent.

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery came to review the American troops. I can still see him as he walked by looking at us. We expected to leave for France at any moment. There was tremendous tension in the air. Finally the long awaited moment arrived. It was after midnight on June 6th, 1944. The skies were covered with clouds, but moonlight came through in spots. I heard a deep rumbling sound coming closer and closer to where I stood. Hundreds of Allied bombers flew above in the dark night skies headed for France. Some had troop-carrying gliders in tow. The invasion had begun. This was the moment I had been waiting for.

How life had changed. Just five years before I had gone to Balmedie to be a teacher for the Graham children. I thought back with deep gratitude to all those good

souls who had helped me along the way. I had become an American citizen, and a soldier at that. What had become of my parents? This thought never left my mind. I was hoping against hope that they survived. I had to find out. I wanted to be there for them if they should have survived. I wanted revenge for what might have happened to them.

General Eisenhower announced to the world that night over the radio that the invasion of France had begun.

http://www.valourandhorror.com/DB/BACK/Eisenhower_dir.php I listened and soon after went to sleep, released of my nervous uncertainty. Early the next morning our entire battalion headed for the staging area in Southampton, which was securely enclosed behind high barbed wire fences. The gates closed behind us. Days before we had replaced all our tank insignia with code numbers. The only thing we were allowed to keep on us were our identification tags (dog tags). All other personal items were placed in individual bags and left behind. In small groups we went into tents for our final briefings. An officer displayed a large-scale map of our landing sector. It showed ditches, trees and farmhouses near the landing site of St. Mere-Eglise. The 82nd Airborne had cleared the town the night before. Our intelligence detailed ditches, houses, even trees and we were told what enemy elements waited for us. That map helped us to avoid surprises, even providing the identity of enemy units that were there.

We boarded a ferry to take us across the English Channel. I was very anxious, which I suppose was a natural reaction. Only six short years before this moment I had been degraded and persecuted. Fear of death is natural but when I saw the beach in the distance something stirred in me. No more running, no more hiding.

Someone gave me a can of soup with a heating element attached to the bottom of it. It fascinated me and distracted me from my nerves. We sat in silence. An assault craft pulled alongside us and we descended down rope ladders. Soon we approached the

beach in choppy waters. There was an eerie calm all around us. Far off in the distance we heard the rumble of gunfire, but none landed on the beach near us. The landing plank was lowered, a sailor checked the water depth and told us to wade ashore. It was more like swimming ashore. My buddy, Schultz, a farmer from Minnesota, went in ahead of me. I could just see his helmet bobbing in the water, because he was only a little over five feet tall. I lifted him up until we reached firm ground.

<http://www.taphilo.com/history/wwii/D-Day-Invasion.shtml>

St. Maire Eglise was straight ahead of us. The 82nd Airborne Division had landed there the night before. There was much confusion on the beach because most of the outfits did not land as a unit. I fell in with a long line of guys, most of whom I did not know. Little by little we grouped the boys from the 899th together and reached our command post. Along the way I saw dead paratroopers still in their chutes dangling from the trees. It upset me. The Germans had planted pointy wooden poles in open fields where our gliders might land. We took a quick break and I ate a can of C-rations as I sat next to a dead German soldier. This had no effect on my appetite.

We advanced slowly from hedgerow to hedgerow.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Normandy On June 11th at St. Jean de Daye the SS Panzer Division Lehr had staged a heavy counter attack. They were elite SS Panzer units, but they could not penetrate our lines and we slowly made our way toward the Carentan Peninsula and to Cherbourg. At one point we came to an open wooded area near a small village and rested. I spotted two Frenchmen with FFI armbands, which meant that they belonged to the underground. They waved their arms excitedly and approached. My company commander knew that I spoke French and asked me to talk to them and find out what was happening. I made a big mistake by introducing myself as Sgt Rothschild. Before I knew it they were hugging and kissing me, crying that I had

returned. (The Rothschilds are a very famous French family.) I was embarrassed because after a while my buddies started to whistle. Once the Frenchmen had calmed down a bit I was told that there were Germans hiding behind a farmhouse and they wanted us to take them out.

Only air power could stop the Germans from driving us into the sea at that time. I happened to meet Ernie Pyle, a well-known field reporter for the Stars and Stripes newspaper, in Cherbourg and gave him a ride back to Carentan. I later heard that he was killed in the Pacific theater. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ernie_Pyle

Next came St. Lo, a vital crossroad which was heavily defended by the Germans. To take it without strong air cover would have inflicted very heavy casualties. From where I stood I could see the town in the valley below. We stopped our advance and watched an armada of American bombers soften up the resistance for us. The ground was shaking. The German survivors came crawling out with their hands up and bleeding from their mouths and ears.

With that obstacle overcome we broke out into the open without much opposition. We moved southeast toward Paris, but bypassed it to the south, leaving the glory of entering it to the French Resistance. The French lined the roads in their Sunday best to greet us. You can't imagine how we were received- with flowers, loaves of crusty bread, bottles of wine and best of all, kisses from the girls. I was smothered with kisses. But we did not have time for celebration. There was still lots of work ahead of us. In the first village we went through in Germany there was not a sign of a living soul. But I spotted someone peeking timidly out of a cellar door. This gave me satisfaction, because six years before I remembered the signs everywhere saying "Jews and dogs not allowed" and now I was returning with the conquering Allied forces.

The Germans had been dropping paratroopers in American uniforms behind our lines. They spoke fluent English. One night when I drove back to my position in the woods an American patrol challenged me to identify myself. I wasn't sure if I would pass with my German accent. It got a little hairy. "Who are the Brooklyn bums?" one of them asked me. "The Dodgers," I answered and luckily they let me pass.

We advanced relentlessly until we reached Eupen-Malmedy at the German border, where we stopped and took up positions in the Hurtgen Forest. It was now the beginning of December 1944. We had gotten plenty of snow and it was very cold. My company commander gave me a pass to visit friends in my beloved Luxembourg. I had a jeep and took three buddies with me. We went through Bastogne <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bastogne> which was held by the 82nd Airborne Division. You can well imagine the bittersweet reunion I had with my sister's friends. It was a wonderful but also a sad visit, because so many I had known were gone.

Time came only too soon for us to return to our positions in the woods and once again we passed through Bastogne. Only days later the Nazis started a powerful offensive there. We did not know their objective at that point. Later I learned that it was the start of the German drive to turn us back. We were in danger of being overrun because we had no air cover. Our air force could not penetrate the cloud-covered skies to give the air support our ground forces desperately needed. It must have been around December 16th when the skies finally opened up and the sun came out. The air force went to work and gave the Germans hell. Now we were able to penetrate the Siegfried Line (a heavily fortified line along the western front) and then they could not stop us from penetrating deeper and deeper into Germany.

The road toward the heart of Germany finally opened up for us and soon we reached the Rhine River. We stopped at the Remagen Bridge long enough to allow our

infantry to clear the bridge for our vehicles to advance.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bridge_at_Remagen We were still under scattered artillery fire, but not heavy enough to slow us down. From there it was on to Kassel, Nordhausen, and the Hartz Mountains. We formed a task force as we sped through the Hartz Mountain consisting of a Piper Cub plane, a platoon of infantry and some armored reconnaissance vehicles. It was a very effective way to clear out pockets of resistance.

I was there when they opened up the gates to the Nordhausen death camp. It was a shocking and unspeakable experience that I cannot describe. At that moment I could only imagine what had happened to my parents. How I wished they could know that I was still alive and that I would avenge them.

Off and on I worked with the Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) to interrogate captured Nazis. A freed Russian slave laborer came over one time to lead me to the apartment of one of the commandants of a weapons factory. I broke into his apartment and found him in bed with a woman. I spotted a trap door in the middle of the floor and found two suitcases filled with all kinds of German salamis. I gave them to the first Russian civilian who passed by. I called a CIC agent to assist me in interrogating that SOB. We took him to an empty house and worked him over. There were times when we had to revive him with cold water. When we thought we had about all the info from him that we needed I took him to a prison camp and made sure the CIC boys knew what I had brought them.

On the way to a village we encountered some small arms fire that came from the woods along the road. That had to stop. I ordered the German civilians to assemble in the village square with their sons. Some were in Hitler Youth uniforms. They could not have been much over 12-15, some even younger. I ordered them to say goodbye to their parents and put them into one of our trucks. I had to teach them that they were playing a

deadly game. I took them to a collection point of dead soldiers. They had to see for themselves what they were doing. Then I took them back to their village. I would like to think that this experience had some impact on them. The sniping stopped and we had no more problems with them.

Our advance continued toward the Elbe River and we linked up with Russians, but we were not allowed to visit their camp. With the fighting winding down, my battalion went back to Bavaria and took up position along the Autobahn not far from Dachau near Munich. The war in Europe was finally over on May 10, 1945.

My commander allowed me to drive to Stuttgart. I was afraid of what I might find there. With the help of the police I began my search. My parents' house still stood. Through former neighbors I learned that two of my father's sisters had survived because they were married to Christians and they had been hidden, but there was no trace of my parents. No one could tell me of their fate. Overwhelmed with emotion I stopped and returned to camp. A few days later I summoned enough courage to return to Stuttgart. I went to see my aunts. It was an emotional reunion, but my worst fears had come true. My parents did not survive.

The search was now ended. Aunt Hannah had kept my father's walking cane and his billfold for me. Nothing was left from my mother. I only had the letters and postcards that they had written to me from the time I left in 1938. I kept them to this day, but did not ever read them again. It was heartbreaking, because all my efforts to save them had been in vain.

The time had come for us to go back to America. I was one of the first to return according to the army point system based on length of service, mainly overseas and in combat campaigns and decorations. I had won the Purple Heart after receiving a shrapnel wound and losing part of my hearing. I was taken on a freight train past the town of my

birth to Munich, and from there to Antwerp on a Liberty ship bound for Boston. The Red Cross and volunteers from the USO gave us a warm welcome, but I felt lost and alone.

I floated aimlessly until I found the one who would be my companion for life—your grandmother, Ann. We both had suffered the loss of our families in the Holocaust and found each other by circumstances fit to be an exciting story in itself. I found in Ann the anchor and unswerving support I needed so badly. I love her and always will.

In 1973 I returned to Stuttgart with Ann and my daughters Suzan and Ona, and then again in 1993 with Ann. Our hotel was around the corner from the synagogue where my family used to belong. It had been completely rebuilt on the same spot where it had been leveled to the ground during Kristallnacht. The Jewish community of Stuttgart now consisted mainly of immigrants from Eastern Europe; not a single one of my generation was left. Only then did I learn the ultimate fate of my parents. They had been taken to a concentration camp near Riga called Theresienstadt, where they perished in 1941. In the center of Stuttgart was a memorial to the Jewish residents who had been rounded up on December 21, 1941 and deported to Theresienstadt. My parents' names were on the memorial. It was the final and undeniable proof of their fate. It haunts me to this day.