

Lessons Learned from the Holocaust

Although I am a senior citizen, relatively informed about the Holocaust, this year I learned the incredible value of simple acts of kindness.

My father, Israel Friedman, was a sergeant with the 120th Evacuation Unit during WWII. This Unit's principal mission was to provide medical services to wounded soldiers during their evacuation from the battlefield. However, in April 1945, the 120th found itself to be the first medical personnel to enter the Buchenwald Concentration Camp just before Germany's surrender. After leaving Buchenwald, on the road to the small town of Cham, the 120th came across a group of Survivors who had been marched from Buchenwald before being abandoned by the retreating Germans. Among those Survivors was a young man Bendet (Ben) Fainer. Ben was 14 years old and had spent the last 6 years of his young life in various Concentration Camps surviving as a slave laborer.

My father met this traumatized youngster and struck up a conversation with him in Yiddish, a second language to both of them. According to Ben's book about his experiences, "60 Years of Silence" over several days they talked frequently with my Dad apparently even raising the possibility that Ben could immigrate to America as his adopted son. Ultimately, Ben left to try and find his family members none of whom, other than his father, survived. And, of course, the 120th Evac Unit, as a mobile medical unit, also moved on.

To my Dad, his lasting memory of this experience was the inadequacy of their training to meet this medical catastrophe and the paucity of the tools to help these starving and dying survivors. His lasting belief was that they may have done more harm than good. But, to Ben, those conversations made a lasting impression and a life-long desire to reconnect with Israel Friedman, the man who filled a desperate need. Sixty-five years later he says in his book, "I've recently been trying very hard to track down Israel's family. I'd love to learn more about him and tell his family members about all he did for me. I'd love to talk with his children, to introduce myself as the adopted brother they almost had".

In his life Ben never succeeded in that desire. But he did come to America, had a successful professional and family life, and ultimately dedicated himself to educating others about the Holocaust. But, while Ben was unsuccessful in reconnecting his children somehow, miraculously, tracked me down after my

journey from Brooklyn, to California, and to my retired life now living near Olympia, Washington.

The lesson I've learned, is how the simplest of gestures, finding a way to share conversation with a traumatized youngster, can have an lifelong impact that now spans generations through both party's children. For me, it is an enormous gift giving me new insights into my father's generous soul and helping explain his lifetime's service to children in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant community.

In gratitude,

Richard Friedman