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Hitler's worst nightmare: After escaping, German Jew went back to battle Nazis

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By Kevin Deutsch

On a crisp autumn day in 1935, Werner Oppenheimer, 13, walked into his school in Germany and noticed a new sign above the entrance. He gasped as he read it, because it meant the old way of life — the Germany his family had fought for and loved — was gone.

Adolph Hitler Realgymnasium, the sign read in bold, German lettering. Inside the school, changes were more extreme. Teachers now made students, even Jewish ones, sing Nazi songs with lyrics like “When Jewish blood spurts off the knife, things will be twice as good.”

The songs, the anti-Jewish laws, the vicious Nazi rhetoric; all of it made Werner sick. Even now, while recounting his childhood from the comfort of his Riverdale apartment, Mr. Oppenheimer’s voice trembles with anger.

“Everything changed, the old Germany was gone,” said Mr. Oppenheimer, 87. “I had to help fight them.”

After escaping to America with his family shortly before the war, Mr. Oppenheimer didn’t just fight the Nazis. He made history.

The young soldier was among a group of 10,000 troops who came to be known as the Ritchie Boys. Largely Jewish, German and new to America, the group returned to Europe in U.S. Army uniforms to wage psychological warfare against the Nazis.

Mr. Oppenheimer shared his World War II story in advance of Veteran’s Day — a time when the ex-soldier is reminded of the sacrifices made by local Jewish vets who took on Hitler’s regime.

Trained at Camp Ritchie, in Maryland, Sergeant Oppenheimer and his fellow soldiers were chosen for their intelligence, background and mastery of German language and culture.

Grueling coursework taught them the minutest details of the German military, from uniform insignias and medals to the weapons and vehicles used by each unit.

“I knew the German army better than the Germans did,” Mr. Oppenheimer said, and in 1943, he shipped off to Europe and put his training to use.

Trailing Gen. George Patton’s armored troops, Mr. Oppenheimer, then in his early 20s, worked with a team of five men — four of them Jewish — to interrogate soldiers captured at the front.

The Ritchie Boys gathered reams of important intelligence during World War II, using psychology to manipulate prisoners and earn their trust.

“By knowing what you were talking about to a prisoner, it gave him more confidence and made him more willing to trust you,” said Mr. Oppenheimer, who conducted hundreds of interrogations and still has notebooks packed with information on German troop movements and unit breakdowns.



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“The idea was to never be above him or below him, but rather on the same plane. You had to understand his mentality.”

Moving from house to house every few weeks as the front shifted, Mr. Oppenheimer and his team were motivated only partially by revenge.

“We were angry at what they were doing to Jews, at what we’d seen, but we also just wanted to win the war,” he said, adding that his own relatives had gone to war for the German army before the Nazis came to power.

The Ritchie Boys’ tactics were creative: before interviewing a German general, they attached a general’s star to the collar of an interrogator’s uniform, knowing the enemy soldier would only respect someone equal to his rank.

Their methods were also a far cry from the water-boarding, stress positions, forced nudity and other tactics used by American troops after Sept. 11, Mr. Oppenheimer said.

“We were strictly forbidden to do anything like that, and we were more successful because of it,” he said. “I don’t understand why they do these things. They make you enemies right away.”

Sometimes, the intelligence they gathered went to waste. Mr. Oppenheimer said his team learned of a major upcoming German offensive, which would lead to the Battle of the Bulge, but their superiors ignored the warning.

“They said ‘who are these refugee boys? What the hell do they know?’” recalled Mr. Oppenheimer. “We were laughed at and chewed out and told this was nonsense.

“By ignoring this information, we lost some approximately 20,000 men.”

Mr. Oppenheimer’s most disturbing memory, though, came a few months later, in 1945 when he arrived at the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp.

Dead bodies were piled high all around. Emaciated ex-prisoners called out to Mr. Oppenheimer, who had loaded up a truck of the tastiest food he could find, intending to hand it out.

“Please give me something to eat,” the starving men and women pleaded, but Mr. Oppenheimer’s own soldiers wouldn’t allow it

“They said the food was too rich for their failing bodies, and that if they ate it, they’d be dead in two days,” Mr. Oppenheimer recalled. “They had to feed them a little at a time, because they weren’t used to normal food.

“It was a horrible situation.”

After the Allied victory, Mr. Oppenheimer encountered former Nazi supporters who disavowed their party connections, claiming they had been against Hitler all along.

“They turned like the wind, every one of them,” Mr. Oppenheimer said. “I didn’t talk a word to them. It goes against my grain.”

With the fighting over and Nazi war criminals desperate to escape capture, Mr. Oppenheimer’s unit turned their attention to tracking down members of the German Schutzstaffel — or SS — who were responsible for many of the war’s most heinous crimes.

He recalled one member who, during an interrogation, claimed the telltale SS insignia tattooed near his armpit was actually a “bee sting.”

“So many of them got away. It’s awful,” Mr. Oppenheimer said.

But there was joy, too. Mr. Oppenheimer and his soldier friends celebrated the war’s end by playing music together in a quartet. A talented musician whose training was stunted by the Nazi’s rise to power, Mr. Oppenheimer rediscovered his passion for violin and piano — which he pursues today as promoter for the Four Seasons Symphony Orchestra.

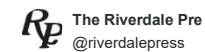
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When Loeser’s Kosher Deli opened in 1960, John F. Kennedy was on the verge of being elected the 35th President of the United States. “The Flintstones” premiered on television, and the first troops were sent to Vietnam.


“We had a wonderful time,” he said. “There were no more enemies, just music.”


Soon, he was sent back to New York with a commendation for aiding in the “apprehension of many war criminals and wanted war personalities.”

He built a life in Manhattan and later Riverdale, going into the jewelry, metal and machinery businesses. His memories of the war faded, replaced by new memories of time spent with his wife, Margaret, who died earlier this year, and their children and grandkids.


Today, when the gray-haired former soldier sees old pictures of himself — looking handsome and proud in his Army uniform — he smiles at his bittersweet luck.

“I’ve been through a lot in my life,” he said. “But I didn’t suffer.”

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