

## Yizkor Remembrance

Pesach 2015

On June 6, 1944, my father Sgt. Steve Lowell, (z"l) was one of 157,000 men – 4,000 of them Jews – who stormed the beaches of Normandy on D-Day.

My father never spoke much at all about his war experiences, except to minimize them, laugh about how he was wounded at St. Lo; or to tell us how at the Battle of the Bulge, they all – especially the Jews – were scared deathless that they would be overrun. But that all came later, after D-Day.

It wasn't even until "Saving Private Ryan" came out that he talked much about his experiences at Omaha Beach, where he saw plenty of action; and he never – ever – told us the story I'm about to tell you.

Yizkor is an occasion for memory. It strikes me that we have our own memories of the people we've lost; but there are other memories that they have, equally part of who they were, but about which we know nothing. That's why this story which my sister and I found in the days after my father died – came to us, literally, as a gift – a memory of our father from beyond the grave.

We got it from this article we found among his belongings, which was published in the "Jewish Forward" in the year 2000. It was written by my father's army buddy, Bernie Bellush, who became a noted professor of history at the City College of New York.

It tells this story.

My father's unit landed on Omaha Beach in the middle of D-Day. As an ordnance unit, they were assigned to remain near the beach as a link in the chain funneling munitions to the troops breaking out south into France toward Paris. They were near Omaha on August 25, when Paris was liberated. It was only later that they moved up to the front. Rosh Hashanah that year was September 13th, just a couple of weeks after the liberation.

My father, Bernie and three other guys decided that they had to get to Paris for Rosh Hashanah. They approached their C.O., asking for leave to get to Paris for this purpose, where they wanted to go to the Rothschild Synagogue; the Grand Synagogue of Paris.

The CO told them they could not get leave, because Brigade HQ had specifically not permitted any leave for anyone.

However, he said, looking toward the ceiling – hypothetically, he did not see anything critical happening in the next few days. And if a small group were not to be there until four days later, he might not notice. However, if this hypothetical group were to get into trouble and get picked up by the MPs, they would be in trouble – there was nothing he could do to help them – they'd be AWOL.

Without hesitation, the guys grabbed up their belongings, and anything they thought they could use to bribe MPs who might stop them. They hiked to the

nearest main highway, where they hitched a ride with the Red Ball Express, which was the constant convoy of trucks all driven by African Americans in the Jim Crow army of the day, doing the dangerous 24/7 work of ferrying supplies and materiel to the troops in Paris and beyond.

On the outskirts of Paris, they had to walk and hitch some more. But when they got to the center of the city near the synagogue, they realized that they really were in trouble.

Why?

Because all the troops in Paris, including the MPs, had leapfrogged the troops on the beach – they hadn't landed on D-Day but later: and they were wearing neatly pressed trousers, smart short tunic jackets, and soft overseas caps. My father and his four buddies had on boots, baggy combat pants, canvas windbreakers, and big steel helmets with the unit insignia of combined operations: an eagle, an anchor and a rifle – painted in bright blue on the front. It was a dead giveaway.

They had to abandon their plan to get to the Rothschild Synagogue, which was surrounded by MPS. Instead, they found a hotel in a little neighborhood, washed up, and put on what they had that passed for civilian clothes. They asked the hotelier if there was a synagogue nearby and he said, yes, a fairly large one, but he did not know if there were services there: there hadn't been any for the past four years.

They turned the corner and sure enough, there was a synagogue; they pushed open the big wooden doors, and entered cautiously. This is what they found: (And now I will read directly from Bernie's article):

“To our delight, Rosh Hashanah services were being held, but very quietly.

“Where hundreds could have sat, only some 20 middle aged and elderly French Jews prayed. Later we would meet a handful of women seated upstairs.

Within moments of our entrance, all heads turned toward the rear, where we were standing. It soon became apparent to us that we were the first American GIs to enter this synagogue and to share its prayer services since the liberation of Paris only days before. Some men came back and gently took us to the *bima*, where they sat us down on either side of the ark. There we remained until services concluded, in positions of the greatest honor they could bestow upon us.

“Communicating with us in French, Yiddish and some halting English, they told heartrending stories of having hidden from the Nazi occupiers, coming out of their hiding places only days before. They thanked us profusely for their liberation by American GIs, bringing tears to our eyes. During the services, we had also given thanks for our own survival on D-Day and for being able to share Rosh Hashanah with our landsmen in this Paris synagogue.

“We refused invitations to share a meal in their homes because we knew they had very little food for themselves. We left the synagogue walking on air. During the rest of our brief stay, and the long ride back to Omaha Beach, we

knew we had had the experience of a lifetime. We had found a synagogue in Paris, away from the military police, at which we could share our tradition and memories with other Jews who had managed to escape Hitler's grasp."

You and I have it easier – we can find a minyan to remember; we don't have to hike and hitch to it. We can just come here to Temple Emunah, one of the four Conservative congregations in our area that has a twice daily minyan; and mourn our losses in a healthy community that sustains us.

At this Yizkor service, let us remember our own losses – of the memories of the people we knew – and the many memories that they had but we never knew. Let us also remember not only our own personal losses, but the devastating magnitude of our people's losses. And let us give thanks that we can remember them all together here today.