



What would a WWII vet think today?

Reflections on my dad's 100th birthday

2022-05-10

Dad would have turned 100 today. I've missed him terribly these last 14 years, but I'm glad he was spared the wrenching disruptions we've all been living through in the US during that time.

Dad was the son of Jewish immigrants who fled the pogroms in Eastern Europe. My grandfather came from a small town near Kiev, and my grandmother from Vilnius. They came here penniless and alone at 16 and 9, respectively, and made their way as immigrants do.

There was so much scarcity and adversity in my family's path. Hot nights in cramped tenements. Moving all the time to avoid paying rent. Tough jobs and long hours. Little time to learn English. The Depression. But they got by somehow.

Then came World War II. Dad served under Patton in Europe. He was wounded twice, went AWOL once, and didn't return to the US until '45. What he saw in war few should have to see. GIs like him who liberated Nazi concentration camps were witnesses to unspeakable horror, and will

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always carry that with them. The camps are the ultimate expression of what happens when you dehumanize your fellow man, when you view them as evil and expendable, when you link your identity to their extinction.

I grew up with a box of pictures Dad took when he liberated Mauthausen. Those images of emaciated bodies and instruments of torture and death are seared in my mind. He later donated them to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Dad kept his purple heart in a drawer with his socks and a German bayonet in the coat closet. But he was always tight-lipped about the war. When I was away at college, Dad threw them all out, without a word. Despite so much prodding over the years, he never divulged much about what he experienced during those awful and consequential years. That says it all.

But he lived his life having internalized all he saw. He never forgot how low people can go and how important it was to go high.

That's why he would be so devastated by the tattered state of American democracy today. The resurgence of hate in all its forms, including antisemitism, the radicalization of our politics, the rise of authoritarians, and the normalization of violence would bring back horrible memories.

If he were still alive today, we'd be sharing our sadness, revulsion and anger at today's backsliding and revisionism, at rampant distortions and propaganda.

While I don't use guns and haven't enlisted, I will continue his fight for a better tomorrow. I owe Dad that, and then some, and I owe it to my children and future generations.

We mustn't forget that it's in our power to shape our future. It was then, it is now and it will always be. But we have to believe we have that power,

envision a better future, and then do the work to build it. That's what good ancestors do.

More from Suzette Brooks Masters

I think about how to strengthen our pluralistic democracy, make it truly inclusive, and ensure that it leaves nobody behind.

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