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FEATURED

Holocaust remembrance: Daughter discovers father's role during the Dachau liberation in hidden letter

Krista S. Kano Apr 12, 2018



Carla Newberry, left, of Solon and her sister Gail Silver of Cincinnati reminisce about their father, Dr. Alan Silver, a Jewish American soldier in World War II who was at the liberation of Dachau concentration camp.

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In the early 1960s, Alan and Rhoda Silver left their preteen daughter Carla alone in their University Heights home. Like many young girls, Carla was curious, feisty and somewhat rebellious, and with her parents away, she wanted to explore the forbidden crawl space above her little sister's closet.

Climbing a ladder, Carla slid a ceiling panel aside and pulled herself up into a cubby hole. Unable to stand up straight, she sat on a wood panel and found a box of her father's World War II memorabilia.

She read countless letters from the European and Pacific theaters, but more than 50 years later, Carla Newberry, now 68, sitting in her Solon home next to her sister Gail Silver, only remembers the details of one.

Starting with “Dear People,” as her father often addressed his parents, Dr. Silver described his experiences as a Jewish American soldier at the liberation of Dachau, a concentration camp near Munich, Germany, written days after he spent 24 hours in the camp that imprisoned an estimated 188,000 people between 1933 and 1945.

“I couldn’t believe what I was reading,” Mrs. Newberry said, remembering her father and his experiences in anticipation of Yom Hashoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, which is today (Thursday). “It kind of knocked me over that something like that could have happened and that my little daddy was in the middle of it. Dachau was the last one I read. That one stopped me cold.”

After reading the letter half a dozen times, young Carla carefully replaced the letter, climbed down the ladder and didn’t speak of it again for more than three decades.

Ich bin a Yid

Growing up during the Great Depression, Alan Silver was bullied by his classmates for being the only Jewish student at his school in the Hough neighborhood of Cleveland, but he found that the abuse stopped when he started a dance band and his classmates wanted him to play at their parties. He played his \$35 silver-plated saxophone professionally in Cleveland bars and burlesque clubs, but with World War II looming, he knew it would only be a matter of time before he was drafted.

He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1943 at the age of 18 with the hopes of joining the Camp Perry Dance Band, but instead was assigned to the 86th Infantry Division.

In 1945, Dr. Silver’s unit landed in La Havre France as the Battle of the Bulge came to a close, and fought their way to Germany.

“When we got to Munich, there was a horrific odor,” Dr. Silver, a podiatrist, told Ms. Silver in video interviews prior to his 2015 death at the age of 89. “It’s impossible to explain, but the smell was just awful. I didn’t know why and nobody told us.”

In the distance, Dr. Silver saw pieces of clothing hanging off of chain link fences, but upon approach, he realized that those pieces of clothing were in fact the emaciated prisoners of Dachau.

“There was a man hanging onto the fence. I tapped him on the shoulder and he turned around. I think he thought I was going to kill him” Dr. Silver recalled. “He spun around and looked at me and I could see fear in his eyes. I said to him ‘Ich bin a Yid,’ which means ‘I’m a Jew.’

“He looked at me, and put his hands on my shoulder and started to sob. There were no tears. He was so dehydrated. There was nothing there to give him tears.”

A commanding officer told Dr. Silver to go back to where the furnaces were and at that point, he identified the permeating odor.

“It was the smell of burning corpses,” he said. “The fires in the furnaces were still going. There were bodies scattered on the grounds of the camp.

“I can still smell that camp.”

Not long after leaving Dachau, Dr. Silver wrote the letter that would be found by Mrs. Newberry more than 15 years later, but with the exception of that letter, Dr. Silver rarely spoke of his experiences even with other soldiers.

“Most of us didn’t want to relive the experience, so we didn’t discuss it in detail. One time, me or one of the others broke down because we talked about the babies we had seen thrown in the ovens,” he said.

Of all the carnage of war he had seen – the Battle of the Bulge, a friend blowing up right next to him – Dachau was the experience that crept into Dr. Silver’s nightmares for more than 60 years. In interviews, he told Ms. Silver that the smell seeped into his nightmares, and that he once had a nightmare so vivid that he woke up choking his wife, thinking he was in the war. If it weren’t for her screams and sharp nails, he said, he could have killed her.

Discussing Dachau

Throughout Ms. Silver and Mrs. Newberry's adolescence, they rarely heard their father speak of the war, explaining that he felt ashamed for having been a part of it. He didn't join any veterans organizations and didn't keep in touch with his army friends.

But when his grandchildren, Mrs. Newberry's children, were in elementary school, they asked to interview him for school papers, and the doting grandfather agreed.

"That's when the doors opened," Mrs. Newberry said.

In 1996, Dr. Silver told his 12-year-old granddaughter Jamie about how the bundles of black and white rags were people, how after liberation the survivors were sent to Displaced Persons camps and how, most disturbing to him, the people of Munich whom he could talk to denied the camp existed.

Finally, with Dr. Silver's Dachau experiences in the open, Mrs. Newberry admitted that she had read the Dachau letter.

"I said to him, 'This is what I remember. This is how you described an interaction with a survivor.' I said all those things I had read, and he said, 'Yeah. Yeah. That's right,'" Mrs. Newberry recalled. Still he would not discuss Dachau in detail.

Even in 2008, when Dr. Silver agreed to be interviewed by Ms. Silver, he spoke of Dachau only in general terms – in a 13-page transcript Dachau is mentioned once in a brief exchange. Ms. Silver was 56 at the time, and it was the most she had ever heard her father speak of the camp.

"I didn't engage him because I knew he didn't want to talk about it," she said. "It wasn't until he started talking with Stanley that he made a conscious decision that it was the right thing to do to start talking about."

Tikkun olam (repairing the world)

Dr. Silver met Stanley Bernath after moving to Menorah Park in Beachwood in 2012. Mr. Bernath, a Holocaust survivor who has spent the last 40 years educating students about the inhumanities of the concentration camps, was a volunteer at the retirement home.

After Dr. Silver was living there for about a year, the head nurse approached Mr. Bernath and told him she had someone for him to meet.

“She takes me over to a room, and she said, ‘I want you to meet Alan Silver.’ He was a liberator of Dachau concentration camp. I am a survivor. It was unbelievable,” Mr. Bernath, 96, told Chagrin Falls eighth-graders in February. “He hugged me, crying. For 68 years, he never talked about it. He couldn’t. What he found there when he arrived in Dachau, he couldn’t talk about it.”

After many conversations, Mr. Bernath convinced Dr. Silver to join him at Beachwood High School to share their World War II experiences with 250 students.

In a 2014 interview, Dr. Silver explained, “(Mr. Bernath) said it would be good for me to talk from the standpoint of the prisoner and of the liberator. He said ‘You know, if we do nothing else, we’ll alert the younger generations that things like this can happen. That kind of got me, and I said, ‘Well if that’s the case, I’ll try it.’”

For that first event, Mrs. Newberry and her mother Rhoda sat in the front row, and watched as Dr. Silver in a power wheelchair, shook and cried as he spoke about his experiences publicly for the first time.

“You could hear a pin drop, and I felt better about it than I had before. I thought I was doing some good. I thought that these kids had to know that there were monsters in this world that they have to be weary of,” Dr. Silver said.

Dr. Silver continued to travel with Mr. Bernath telling his story for about a year before he lost his voice. For over 60 years, he had nightmares. After meeting Mr. Bernath and sharing his story, the nightmares finally stopped. Dr. Silver was at peace.

Lasting legacy

Three years after Dr. Silver’s death, Mr. Bernath still mentions him at every presentation he gives. Mrs. Newberry speaks about him as a docent at Congregation Shaarey Tikvah’s Face-to-Face program that allows students to meet with Holocaust survivors at the Beachwood temple.

“He didn’t want to be forgotten,” Mrs. Newberry said. “He wanted his message to go on and to have meant something in the world.”

Sitting in Mrs. Newberry's home, it's clear that Dr. Silver has not been forgotten. There are countless albums filled with photographs of Dr. Silver in his uniform and newspaper clippings that mention him. The American flag presented at Dr. Silver's funeral sits atop the living room curio cabinet. Elementary school papers written by her children who interviewed their grandfather are safely preserved in memorial boxes in each of their childhood bedrooms.

Ms. Silver treasures her own memorabilia – photo albums, a picture that Dr. Silver sent to his wife, who died the same year as her husband that reads “For my darling” and hours of interview footage the daughter continues to edit.

“He says at the end of the video that it's the responsibility of all humans to make the world better than what they found. Despite what he went through, he became such a great man and accomplished so much. He was so filled with love, so I took away hope that even when humans go through horrific things, they can still prevail above,” Ms. Silver said.

In all of their records, there is one piece that is missing – the Dachau letter. It was lost in one of their moves.

“I hope that someday those letters surface,” Ms. Silver said. “Maybe when we're long gone. Who knows, maybe someone has them or someone will find them. That's another way Daddy's memory will carry forward.”

Krista Kano

Krista Kano joined the Times in 2015, and has reported on the Republican National Convention, statewide issues, marijuana, the Geauga Park District and Bentleyville. The award-winning reporter is a graduate of Boston University