

War Era Story Project 2012

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Recollections of a World War II Childhood

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, which propelled the United States into World War II, occurred 67 days after my 10th birthday. The war was my constant companion for the next four years, until I was nearly 14 years of age. The War was at home, in the schools, in the movies, on the radio, in churches and temples, in the marketplace, in conversation and in dreams. It was inescapable and flavored everything, especially the attitudes of a child transitioning into teenage during those impressionable years.

Probably my earliest recollection relating to WW II (and one of the strangest) took place sometime in 1939 or 1940 – after Germany invaded Poland, but before Pearl Harbor. My family (consisting of my mother, father older brother and me) was vacationing in Miami Beach, Florida. My father had read in the newspaper that a German warship had put in at a seaport nearby (perhaps for supplies or emergency repairs-- certainly not for a port visit), and determined that he, my brother and I should drive over and look at it. Even at the age of eight, being Jewish, I knew about the hatred of the Nazis and I remember asking my father if the sailors would hurt us. He said they wouldn't, and so I went along.

I can clearly recall standing on the dock looking up at the huge, grey ship, immense swastika flag fluttering in the sea breeze, and two sailors in tropical white uniforms, leaning on the railing, staring back at us. I definitely perceived that this adventure was a risky undertaking, and was glad when we left, unmolested. In later years I would think back to this experience and wonder: how many American kids actually came face-to-face with The Enemy?

On the afternoon of Sunday, 7 December 1941, I was at our breakfast room table, doing my school homework (a spelling lesson). My brother was upstairs doing his homework and listening to the radio (they did that in those days, too), while my mother and father were reading in the library. Suddenly, my brother was leaning over the stair rail shouting that he had just heard on the radio that Japanese paratroopers were landing in California. He rushed to the landing with each news bulletin and it wasn't long before we understood that war had come to America.

I was very frightened and wanted to know how long it would take the Japanese to reach our house. My parents reassured me by telling me that we were separated from our enemies by two vast oceans, and that we would be safe. This was a comforting thought throughout the war. Strangely, I never bothered to wonder, "If we can get to them, why can't they get to us?"

Realizing that a national crisis was at hand, I asked my mother if I would have to go to school the next day, and was surprised to learn that war was not an excuse for absence.

I have memories of a considerable amount of travel during the war. Shortly after the war began, our family was in Washington, D. C. (probably to change trains). It was my first trip there, and my parents took me for a brief look at the exterior of the Capitol. It was night and the lights that had illuminated the dome in peacetime had been extinguished "for the duration." It was a disappointing sight, this dark building. There were soldiers armed with rifles with fixed bayonets guarding the sidewalks. I recall feeling that I didn't wish to hang around, lest I be mistaken for a spy.

Train travel during the war was a trial, for several reasons. Reserved space was very hard to get; reservations that you did get could be preempted at any time by someone with a travel priority. Trains were crowded to the walls with servicemen in transit, and schedules were constantly disrupted by freight and passenger trains having to be placed on sidings to wait for troop trains, which had absolute priority, to pass.

On one trip to Princeton to visit my brother, I believe, my mother and father and I had seats in a coach that was so crowded that people were sitting on their baggage in the aisle. At one point, we went together to the dining car for dinner. When we returned, some drunken sailors were sitting in our seats. My father politely informed them that we held tickets for those seats and had been sitting there earlier. One of the sailors became very abusive and said something about us being "dirty kikes." This was a very frightening experience. I could not understand why we should have to fear our own servicemen. Later in the evening, the sailor came over to apologize to my father and insisted on shaking his hand.

After my brother enlisted in the army, he was stationed at the University of Michigan for Japanese language training. My mother and father and I drove to Ann Arbor, Michigan to visit him, and we had rooms at what in peacetime had probably been a student union. Having some time to prowl around, I remember looking in on what must have been a rathskeller, now closed "for the duration." I noted that initials and graffiti had been carved into the oak tabletops in a happier time. I stood there a long while and imagined the singing, laughing crowds of students free of concerns of global conflict, wondering if this dark room would ever again be a place of celebration; it was an overwhelmingly sad sight.

It was decreed that all homeowners should prepare for firebomb air raids by clearing out combustible materials in attics and learning how to combat these weapons. Our suburb's fire department held a public educational session at the high school auditorium one evening, followed by a realistic demonstration outside, in front of the football bleacher seats. The type of ordnance in question was a cylinder not much larger than a milk bottle that was designed to penetrate a residential roof and ignite on the attic floor. They were constructed of magnesium, which was ignited by an explosive device triggered on contact with the roof. Magnesium burns furiously and when burning cannot be extinguished by normal means; water, for example, spreads the flame. The instructions were that every

household should have buckets of sand ready to dump on the bombs and a long-handled shovel with which to carry the device outside, Children were included in this training and were expected to perform these duties along with the adults.

My father, always a stickler for obedience to authority, bought all the necessary tools for air raid survival and stored them in a special locker in the basement. There were shovels, pry bars, saws, etc., with which we could presumably dig ourselves out from our ruined house. With the creation of the tool cache, our basement recreation room was designated our bomb shelter and blackout panels were fabricated and installed in the windows of the room.

My brother, still in high school at this point, wanted to give a party at our house and, since the recreation room would have been the logical focus of such an event anyhow, somehow the idea evolved that he should have a "blackout" party. This theme was carried out in considerable detail, including using only candles in hurricane lamps for illumination. I was enlisted to stand guard at the top of the basement stairs in my Cub Scout uniform, with a flashlight, telling party arrivals, "this way to the air raid shelter." I consented to this duty only after extracting a promise from my father that he would get me a steel helmet to wear. He did, in, fact, supply such an item, but it was a toy, and rather a disappointment. I did the duty, however, and the party was a great success.

Civilian Defense, as it was called then, was the agency that recruited people on the homefront for duties associated with air raid protection and attack aftermath management. Our next door neighbor was designated air raid warden for our street. My father volunteered to train as a firefighter. He attended once-a-week evening sessions at the fire station, and at some point actually rode to alarms, clinging to the rear of a fire truck. He would come home anxious to tell of responding to exciting alarms, such as one where refrigerant gas was leaking from a refrigerator (he got to wear a gas mask). I think he loved it. All during the war, his turnout coat and steel helmet hung prominently in our closet.

The prospect of an 11-year old boy being able to help the war effort was intoxicating. Civilian Defense had maintained that no one was too old or too young to be of value. And so, during an enlistment drive, I stood in line with people twice as tall, ready to help my country.

The interviewers were very respectful, telling me that I would be fine for messenger duty, and the necessary papers were executed. They would call me. I rushed home and looked up the symbol for Messenger in the CD handbook (each specialty had its logo). I could hardly wait until they issued me my armband with the lightning flashes on it, or whatever. After weeks of waiting, my father consented to have such an armband sewn up in his factory, which he did. It was not a satisfactory substitute for the real thing, however, and I kept hoping. The call never came.

The war was present during each school day. We had air raid drills in which we huddled close to interior hallway walls, and we had fire drills, where we evacuated the building. For our school assemblies, we learned to sing the marching songs of all the branches of the armed services, including the Merchant Marine. We had school scrap drives, which collected truly mountains of whatever material the drive

required. We collected metal, rubber and paper. For the rubber drive, my father contributed a bassinet with a large rubber bottom, which he wisely slit with a knife to prevent someone from taking it off the pile to use.

As the war progressed, brothers would send home military souvenirs, which were a great source of “show-and-tell” for the school kids. In one instance, a school library display case was devoted to captured Nazi items sent home by one fellow's brother. War souvenirs became a medium of exchange and there was much bargaining and trading. The girls were not involved in this cult, whatsoever

In the movies of the time, the German soldiers always roared into town on motorcycles. Having this image well fixed in my mind, it is no surprise that I became very frightened one night when I heard motorcycles in the street outside and wondered if our time was up. I knew that as Jews we would be the first to go. Sometimes, it was hard to judge just how safe we really were.

I can remember one Yom Kippur children's service in which all the lights were turned out, except for the Eternal Light. The rabbi explained that at many times and places in history Jews had to worship in secret, and that some were still doing so in darkened rooms like ours. Being Jewish certainly compounded whatever paranoia a child of the times could be expected to have.

Nothing about the war was particularly enjoyable, for me. I do recall, though, that it was a satisfying feeling seeing all the factories running at full tilt. Everyone who could work had a job. From that standpoint, these were exciting times. Factory parking lots were jammed full at all times. Every smokestack was belching smoke. Even my father's little buffing wheel shop was running three shifts. Autos with chrome bumpers were not being made during the war, so there was little need for buffing wheels, but my father had obtained war materiel contracts that utilized his machines. One of those contracts was for the manufacture of life raft sails, made from an oil-cloth type material, one side blue, the other yellow, with grommets at the corners.

I had just read in Popular Science magazine (the way boys of the time kept up with war technology) about these sails, and the variety of ways -they could be folded to signal aircraft. When I heard that my own father was making them, I knew I had to have one. At one point, production must have been falling behind, because my father asked me if I (probably about 11 years old) would come down to the plant on a Sunday and help him glue on reinforcing corner triangles on the sails. My pay was to be something like one cent per corner, or a sail, my choice.

I have a vivid memory of just the two of us (the plant was closed) gluing corners on the sails, my father with his ever-present long cigar looking out of proportion with his small, round face. We glued what seemed like mountains of sails, working all day. In the end, I opted for a sail of my own, which I practiced folding in the back yard, in case I ever needed to signal any aircraft. The sail remained a treasure for years.

I think that the lasting effect that growing up during World War II had on me is a feeling that I was cheated out of whatever security a peacetime childhood affords.