

# Jewish refugees who returned to Nazi Germany as U.S. soldiers during World War II are profiled in new book

'The Enemy I Knew' documents a largely untold story

By Ron Grossman, Chicago Tribune reporter, November 8, 2009

When Walter Reed speaks to schoolchildren on Veterans Day or in a Holocaust studies class, he leaves them with a moral of his life story.

"If a kid is being picked on, you need to step in," said Reed, a retired public-relations consultant from the North Shore. "Otherwise, there might be no one to speak up for you. And what happened to me might happen to you."

Reed was among a handful of Jewish children from Germany who found refuge in the U.S. during the Nazi era, only to return as GIs to fight in World War II. The others included Henry Kissinger, a future secretary of state, and Manfred Steinfeld, a Chicagoan who went back to Germany to ensure proper respect for the graves of Holocaust victims he had buried more than half a century earlier.

With their language skills, they provided critical military intelligence by interrogating German prisoners, yet theirs was a forgotten chapter of World War II history until recently documented in a book, "The Enemy I Knew."

For them, this week is freighted with emotion. Two days before Veterans Day on Wednesday is the anniversary of *Kristallnacht*, Nov. 9, 1938. A day of bloody violence against Jews by Nazi thugs, it impelled their families to get them out of Hitler's clutches -- with the aid of strangers who risked their lives helping the children escape.

Yet Reed long hid his part of the story from friends, business associates -- even from his future wife until the day he proposed.

"I said: 'Before you answer, I need to tell you something,' " Reed recalled. " 'I'm Jewish.' "

To others, he claimed to have been born in Brooklyn and to have lost his parents in an auto accident. In fact, they died in a Nazi extermination camp. When he went to Germany for business, people admired how well he spoke the language. He said he'd had a great teacher.

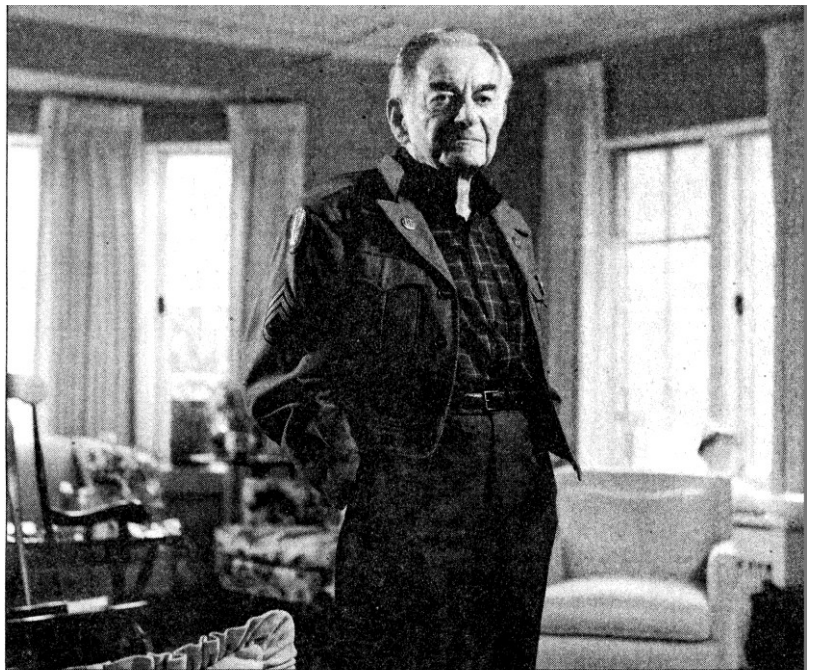
Half a dozen years ago, it was his turn to give an autobiographical talk at a Rotary Club. He felt he couldn't lie to fellow members. So he explained he was Werner Rindsberg, born in 1924 in a small town in Germany.

Repeating the narrative in his home last week, the words came tumbling out, as if propelled by the same force with which he'd long withheld them.

His was one of two dozen Jewish families, well integrated among the 900 inhabitants of his hometown. But that changed in the 1930s, when Hitler's ideas became part of the school curriculum.

"In biology class, we measured each other's skulls with a calipers," Reed said. "It was part of the Nazi theory of a 'master race.' "

Shortly after *Kristallnacht*, Reed's father was sent to Dachau concentration camp for six weeks, which convinced Reed's parents to get him out of the country, via a rescue effort set up by a group of wealthy Belgian women.



Having fled Nazi Germany as a child, Walter Reed of Wilmette until recent years kept details of his life secret -- including his heritage, his birthplace, his name. CHRIS WALKER/TRIBUNE PHOTO

There he lived with other young Jewish refugees in a group home. When the Nazis invaded Belgium in 1940, Reed's benefactors evacuated the children to southern France, where Swiss volunteers came to their aid. Reed was taken across the Pyrenees Mountains to Spain, then Portugal and put aboard a ship bound for New York.

He lived with relatives in Brooklyn until drafted during his senior year of high school. He served with the 95th Infantry Division.

It took the Army a while to recognize what a resource it had in Reed and others like him, noted Steven Karras, author of "The Enemy I Knew."

"They were aliens from a country we were at war with," Karras said. "But eventually the military realized that, as Jews, they and the Army had a common enemy, and could be trusted."

Manfred Steinfeld was born in a small German village. After the Nazis came to power, his widowed mother arranged for Steinfeld to go to Chicago in 1938 with the help of the Jewish Children's Bureau, a Chicago-based social-service agency.

"My mother put me on a train, saying I was to hold up a white handkerchief when I got off," said Steinfeld, recalling the first leg of his journey, when he was 14. "A woman [who was part of the rescue effort] would meet me, also holding up a white handkerchief."

After graduating Hyde Park High School, Steinfeld went into the Army, which trained him in prisoner interrogation. He volunteered for the 82nd Airborne Division and was aboard a glider that crashed during an attack in the Netherlands. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and, at war's end, his unit liberated Woebbelin, a Nazi labor camp.

"We buried the inmates' bodies in the town square," Steinfeld said. "We marked the graves with wooden crosses, painting a Jewish star on every fifth one."

More than five decades later, Steinfeld went back to find the improvised graveyard had become a playground. The crosses were gone. The mayor explained they'd been burned for firewood during a bitter postwar winter.

"I was flabbergasted, outraged," Steinfeld said. "Right there, I wrote a check for \$10,000 to put up proper memorial stones."

He could afford the gesture, having become a successful furniture manufacturer. He has chaired the Jewish Federation of Metropolitan Chicago, which funds charities including the one that helped him escape the Nazis.

Reed went in another direction. He explained how he found anti-Semitism in America, albeit a less viral variety than in Germany.

"In the 1940s, I couldn't have bought the house I live in," said Reed, recalling that many suburbs were off-limits to Jews. So he went into the Army under a changed name, and afterward kept his origins a secret -- until that Rotary luncheon.

Since then, he has become passionate about reconnecting with the other refugee children who were cared for by good Samaritans in Belgium and France. He's writing a book on the experience.

Fear that the Nazi-era tragedy will be forgotten inspired Steinfeld to have his military decorations duplicated for each of his 10 grandchildren. A couple of weeks ago, he got a phone call from one.

" 'Poppy,' our 8-year-old grandson said," Steinfeld recalled. " 'I took your medals to school, for show and tell.' "