

Discovering A History for Myself: My Grandfather's Wartime Writings

A transnational adoptee discovers her American grandfather's wartime writings, and gets more than a war story about a Jewish soldier fighting in Europe during World War II.

By: Lucia Zerner

I first met my grandfather about a year after I arrived in the U.S as a Chinese adoptee. I visited him with my parents once or twice a year. By then he was living in a retirement community and no longer hosting the passover seders that his other grandchildren and the rest of his family still recalled. My cousins were fully grown and starting families of their own.

My paternal grandparents died long before I was born; my maternal grandmother died when I was one year old. I enjoyed only scattered interactions with my one surviving grandparent. Sometimes we played ping-pong in silence until one of us missed and the ball fell to the floor. Once, I recall, we played chess. My grandfather beat me in less than five moves. I never asked him questions. Our relationship was simple. When I was twelve, he died at the age of ninety-five.

I didn't feel like part of my extended adoptive family. My parents each had their own family history, whereas mine was the story of my adoption. I knew nothing about my biological family except what I imagined. It was a mystery that I didn't have any means of exploring.

A few weeks ago, while cleaning out the basement, my parents unearthed a collection of black-and-white photographs of Jewish Holocaust victims and survivors taken between April 10 and May 6, 1945 by the 166th Signal Photographic Company. Among the images were photographs from Buchenwald, where my grandfather had served as an American Jewish soldier. He had witnessed firsthand the horrifying scenes captured in the photographs I held, nearly 75 years later, in my hand.

In one of the photographs, a group of men, young and old, lie in rows on the wooden shelves on which they slept. Many look directly at the camera. Their expressions seem stoic and pensive. One man rests his chin on his palm, his fingers curled, touching his cheek. Others rest their heads on the backs of their folded hands. Looking at this image, I couldn't help but wonder about my grandfather's encounters with Holocaust survivors. My mother suggested I read his unpublished writings. With his letters and journal entries in hand, I had the chance to deepen my relationship with my grandfather Jacob and uncover a story of the past.

A rabbi's grandson

Despite being an “anti-war person,” as he said in a 2002 interview with the Library of Congress, my grandfather Jacob Volkman felt differently about World War II: he believed this war was “necessary.” The army rejected him the first time he tried to enlist, but Jacob was later drafted and served in the U.S. Army Signal Corps as a radio operator in Europe. His writings from the war tell the story of an American Jewish soldier — a Jew as fighter and liberator, not as victim or survivor.

Jacob was born on December 25, 1911 in Jaslo, Poland. He came from a long line of rabbis including his well-known grandfather, known as Beresh Doktor. He was the youngest child of Sholom and Raisel. In 1915 Jacob and his family — except for his father and brother, Henry, who had left for the U.S in 1912 — fled the pogroms in his village for the comparative safety of Cologne, Germany. One year later, the family arrived at Ellis Island and Jacob was reunited with his father, Sholom, and brother, Henry. They all lived together in the Lower East Side, a place that Jacob described in his journal as “a world concentrated within an area of two square blocks that encompassed home, school, relatives, rabbis, and storekeepers.” Though he later moved to Brooklyn, he never left New York City until War World II.

The First World War sent Jacob to America, and the Second World War brought him back to Europe. Although he had never operated a radio, he was assigned the role of radio operator and was sent to Fort Jackson, South Carolina for training. There weren't a lot of Jews in his cohort, and he encountered anti-Semitism at all levels.

“We were regarded as sort of strange creatures from outer space and by most we were under suspicion and challenged from the time we entered until we left, until we were discharged,” he said in his interview with the Library of Congress. This attitude ran “from the top rank of the colonel to our buddies in the barracks.” As a trainee, Jacob was supposed to learn Morse code as well as how to operate, send, and receive messages. However, he was frequently pulled out of training and given tasks that had nothing to do with his responsibilities, like garbage detail, extra kitchen patrol, and double guard duty— a signal from the officers that Jewish soldiers should not be treated as equals.

In 1944 the 59 Signal Battalion set sail for England in a British ocean liner that had been converted to a crew ship. On June 8, two days after D-day, they landed in Normandy. From France, the unit moved into Belgium and fought in the Battle of the Bulge.

“A strange place ahead of us”

In early 1945, Jacob found himself in Germany as the war was ending and the Wehrmacht were retreating. “The sun was bright in the east, and the dawn's early bright colors were fading,” he

wrote in a journal entry. “When we stopped for a break, word began to circulate of a strange place ahead of us, the village of Ohrdruf, site of a small concentration camp.”

They soon arrived at this sub-camp of Buchenwald. “I could not take my eyes away from that scene on the ground. The faces were virtually bare skulls, and yet agony was written across them, and in the back of each head was a neat bullet hole,” he wrote. “Among these tortured and slaughtered Jews, there I could see myself, my father, or my brothers, guilty of the same crime as theirs, the crime of being Jewish.”



“Buchenwald, main entrance. Prisoners (former) wait around, anxious to serve as guides in various languages to soldier visitors” Source: Jacob Volkman archive

A young man named Pierre introduced himself to Jacob and Sam, the other Jewish soldier in the unit. He told them that he was a Jew from France who had arrived at the camp two weeks ago. Pierre showed them the barracks and the gallows. Then he took them to the “ice house”— an isolated building at the edge of the camp where bodies had been disposed of. Jacob and Sam took some photographs. Some GIs thought this was indecent. In response, Jacob told them, “These are

going to be handy five or ten years from now, when somebody says these things never happened, they were just war propaganda.”

At the end of his journal entry on Ohrdruf he described the torching of the camp. “I sat on the tailgate of my radio truck and started to write my thoughts as I watched the flames and the smoke,” he wrote. “What came out was verse. I have never really attempted verse before.” As I read his words, I imagined the scene so vividly: an American Jewish soldier sitting just a few hundred feet away from a site of death and anguish. A witness— safe, yet deeply moved by the tragedy he saw. And that American Jewish soldier was not just anyone; he was my grandfather.

Chance encounters

Later, in June, Jacob returned to Buchenwald with the intent of documenting the site through photographs. But instead, he found that the survivors wanted to talk. He put away his camera and listened. He met a husband and wife, who had been separated and had just reunited for the first time. “They had gone hunting for each other, quite aimlessly, since no system exists yet for tracing missing victims,” he wrote. “By chance they stumbled upon each other about two hours ago, in this very spot, as each was questioning everyone they met about the possible whereabouts of the other.” Now, standing in the crematorium looking at the ovens, the wife told her story while her husband silently nodded and Jacob listened. A question on many people’s minds, Jacob wrote, was “Where can we ever go? Where is there a home left for us?”



“Inside I met the couple posing on the left, just reunited after he had been four years in prison, she 18 months. The man with the cane was in the hospital the day of his liberation. Note the baggy German uniform the husband got to replace his striped prison clothes. Note also how the woman hides her left arm so that the branded numbers won’t show.” Source: Jacob Volkman archive

In early July 1945, Jacob again returned to Buchenwald, which now served as a facility for displaced persons. Once inside, Jacob asked a twelve-year-old boy, who acted as his guide, if anyone was from Jaslo or from Jacob’s father’s town, Nowy Sadz. The boy led him to two men, one from Gorlice and the other from Nowy Sadz. Drawing on his Galitzianer Yiddish, Jacob asked if they knew of a rabbi named Beresh, a well-known healer in the region. One of the men said, “We did have one famous rabbi. He was called Beresh Doktor. My father, may he rest in peace, used to tell me about him.”

“That was indeed my Grandfather! Beresh Doctor!” Jacob exclaimed. Upon hearing this, the man ran to gather a group of men and women. Jacob wrote, “They clustered around me, reaching out, eager to shake my hand or even touch the soldier whose ‘Zeide’ had been the legendary Beresh Doktor, and I too, not even struggling to hold back tears, rejoiced in the reflected glory of my ancestor.”



Source: Jacob Volkman archive

A Jew and an atheist

A month later, Jacob confided his emotions in a letter to his wife. “I often wonder why I want to go back to Feldafing, to see the suffering, to hear again and again the painful tales of prematurely aging people, young and old, to suffer with them to the limited extent that suffering is possible for someone who was so removed. Do I feel great guilt because I was safe? Do I experience a deep sense of identity with strange people whose heritage might have been my own had I not cut myself away from it long ago?” He continued, “I still find myself questioning again and again, whether I know who I really am, and whether I am the same person I thought I was before. How many times will I have to confront myself before I know? Or does one ever know?”

Although Jacob does not answer those questions himself, his eldest daughter Erika said her father identified more as a contrarian and a fighter for the underdog than as a religious person. “His Jewish identity was rather peculiar,” Erika told me. “I think he identified with the trauma of being Jewish but certainly not with the religion.” Jacob saw himself as a Jew and an atheist, a

duality shown in his parenting. While attending elementary school in a non-Jewish neighborhood, Erika told me, she and her sister were kept home for all Jewish holidays despite not celebrating any of them. When the sisters moved to a school in a Jewish neighborhood for high school they were sent to school on every Jewish holiday.

After the war, Jacob returned to New York City. Drawing on his experiences, he soon began writing a novel, which he never published, titled “The Liberated.” In the early 1950’s Jacob began a twenty-year career as a New York City public housing project manager. At the age of fifty he retired and pursued a PhD in Sociology at New York University, inspired by his lifelong interest in inequality, race and class. A decade later at the age of sixty, he got his first academic job teaching sociology at Southern Connecticut State University.

With his first wife he had two daughters. My mother, his youngest daughter, does not remember him talking very much about the war. For this story I turned to Erika, who had a closer relationship with her father. After his first marriage ended Jacob married Hilde, a German woman who had lost her entire family in the Holocaust. In his late eighties, living in a retirement community, he began to write again. He wrote short stories, essays, and reflections, including one about his visit to a Belgian family he had met during the war. At this time he was interviewed for the Veterans’ History Project at the Library of Congress.

Confronting myself: “Does one ever know?”

My own memories of Jacob begin with the last phase of his life. Though I knew he fought in World War II, my childhood self didn’t think to ask about it. I was content with the simple relationship we had. My family was my adoptive parents. I imagined my birth parents as good people who had no choice but to give me up. I was abandoned because of the one child policy in China, something beyond their control. My grandparents did not fit into this picture. I thought of Jacob more as my mother’s father than my own grandfather.

As a young adult my perspective on family has expanded beyond my biological and adoptive parents. I am no longer interested in fantasizing about my biological family and their history; I was not fulfilled by the stories I made up, which revealed more about my own hopes than my history. I have grown more interested in a family history where the individuals are real.

Jacob’s letters, journal entries, and photographs, invited me to join in my adoptive family’s history. While I will most likely never know my biological family’s history, I finally can connect with a wider narrative that is both historical and, at the same time, personal. Although I did not have a deep relationship with Jacob while he was alive, the stories he has shared posthumously

through his writings have welcomed me home a second time. A home where blood is not thicker than water and our stories tell histories not to be forgotten.