

A MEMORY OF WAR, A PRAYER FOR PEACE

Mindful of his place in a dwindling population, World War II veteran **MILT FELDMAN** felt compelled to put his experience in writing. Seventy-five years after the conflict's end, the story of a Jewish-American soldier who survived both the Battle of the Bulge and a Nazi prison camp is a poignant reflection of a generation's sacrifice.

BY RYAN JONES '95 COM



IT WAS WHILE LIVING IN A NORTHERN CALIFORNIA RETIREMENT

community that **Milt Feldman '47 Lib** first started telling his story in a community newsletter and interviews with the local paper. The more he shared it, says his stepson, Seth Bauer, “the more he felt it was something he wanted to put down in detail.” That’s when Feldman and Bauer, a longtime magazine editor, started talking about writing a book.

The result, *Captured, Frozen, Starved, and Lucky: How One Jewish American GI Survived a Nazi Stalag*, was published in 2018. Culled from Feldman’s own writing and months of interviews with Bauer, the book tells the story of Feldman’s life, from growing up the son of immigrants in New York City through his time at Penn State—a stint interrupted, as it was for so many of that

generation, by the Second World War. “He’s a good storyteller,” says Bauer, “so I really tried to keep it in his voice.”

As evidenced in the excerpts on these pages, Feldman’s voice comes through with poignant clarity, not only in the details of his experience as a soldier and captive in the war’s final months, but in his perspective on the conflict’s awful impact. When I spoke to Feldman by phone in January, he was still ebullient about having committed his words to paper. “I always had the story in my mind that I wanted to tell my children and grandchildren, and suddenly they have this whole book to read,” he says. “It’s very exciting for me.”

Milt Feldman died on March 2, two months shy of his 96th birthday. Bauer says his stepfather was sharp and engaged until his final days, appreciative of the life he’d lived, and motivated by how few of his generation were still alive to tell their stories—by a sense of responsibility to share what he’d endured, and what he had learned.

I’m a veteran of World War II, a Jewish American soldier who was captured during the Battle of the Bulge and held in a Nazi prison camp. Not far away, the members of my family who had not immigrated to the U.S.—aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents—had been brought to other camps for slavery and slaughter.

My war was in many ways entirely common. Nearly all capable men of my generation served in the military. Millions were killed or maimed; those of us who were not were just lucky. We all were exposed to the horror of mass warfare and its impact not only on the soldiers on both sides but on families, on societies, on the cities and towns and farms that people had carefully constructed over centuries. On the ways we treat other human beings.

As a result, I am very anti-war. I thought the saying that war is hell was obvious, but apparently it’s not, because wars still happen. In war, everyone loses.

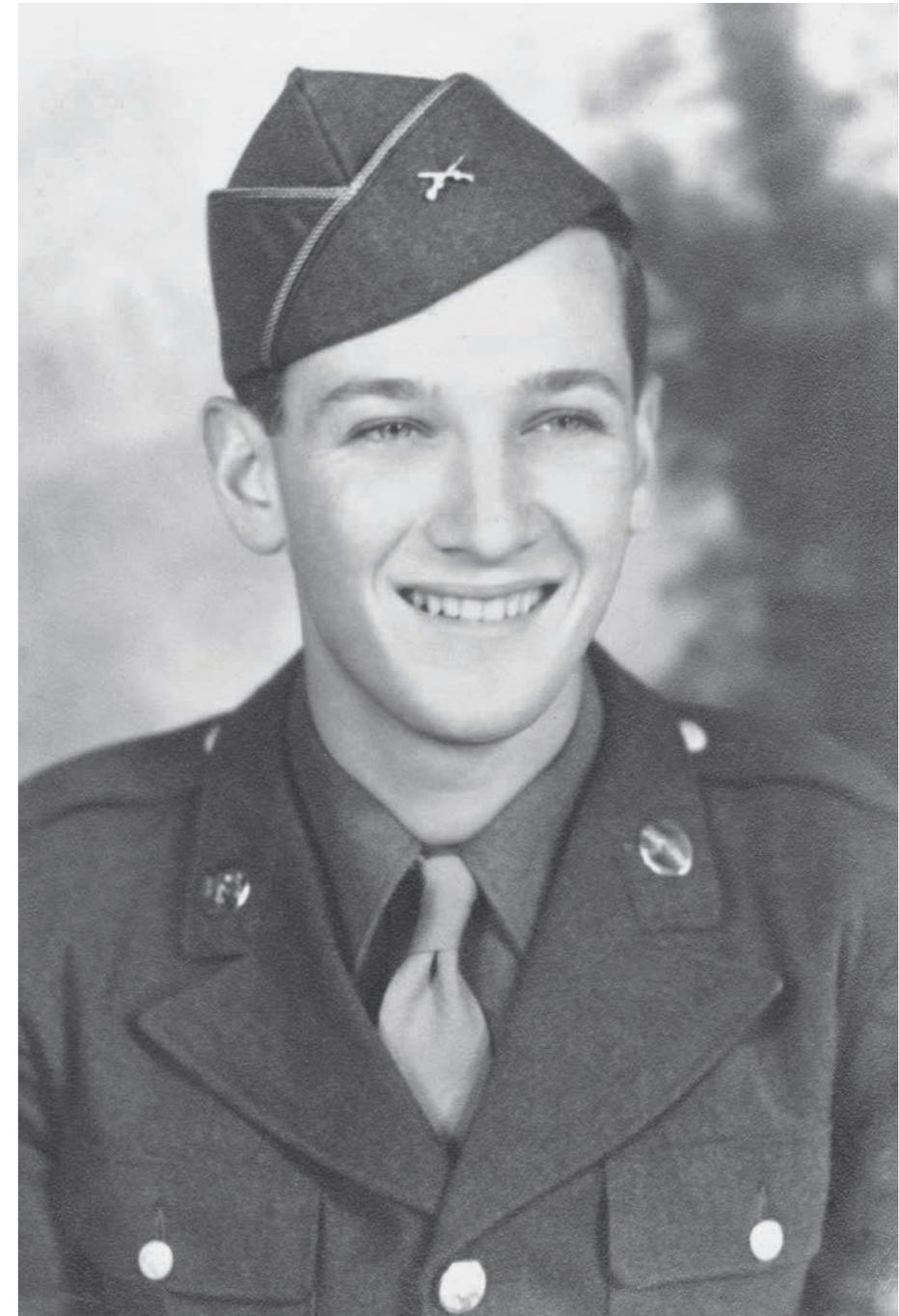
As time passes, it becomes harder for people to grasp what World War II was like on a global scale, with tens or hundreds of millions involved in the conflict. At the same time, if people don’t hear individual stories like mine, they might never imagine what it’s like to have one shriveled apple and the small act of kindness it represented offer a brief glimmer of hope for survival and recovery at a moment of utter despair. Or think about being 19 years old, having surrendered your weapon and your dignity to the Germans, and under pressure to declare your religion in a Nazi prison camp.

Recently, I celebrated the birth of my great-grandson. He will be too young to hear my story directly from me. I hope this book opens his—and all readers’—eyes to both the misery of war and the humanity of shared experience.

Feldman’s parents had come to the United States as children in the years before World War I, part of a massive migration of Eastern European Jews in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His mother was from Ukraine, while his father came from a territory disputed by Poland and Russia, which he left in part to avoid serving in the Russian army. Feldman writes that his father arrived in the U.S. around 1914, “just in time to serve in the U.S. Army in World War I.”

His parents married and settled in Queens, where his father bought a store with rooms in the back where the family lived. Theirs is a typical tale of hardworking immigrants who “ran the store without any help ... trading shifts, they kept it open 18 hours a day.” Born in 1924, Milt grew up in the city and graduated from high school in 1942; from there, he headed off to college amid the hills and farmland of central Pennsylvania.

I had just turned 18. I knew that I would end up serving in the armed forces, but they were still offering student deferments, so I



entered Penn State right away. A month later, a recruiting officer came to campus and said that if we signed up for the Enlisted Reserve Corps, we'd be able to finish our educations "if possible." I wanted to stay in school as long as I could, so I volunteered for the Army, but I didn't leave school and enlist as many others did.

Though I was only there for two semesters, I guess I worked pretty quickly, at least on one front. I had joined a Jewish fraternity, and one weekend we arranged to attend a semi-formal dance. I was paired with Shirley Levine '45, '47 MA Lib. I couldn't believe my good fortune. You would have to be pretty lucky to find a perfect match that way—and we were. Shirley and I started seeing each other regularly, and soon I gave her my fraternity pin, which was a prelude to becoming engaged. We were 18 years old.

Of course, it wasn't possible to finish my education. The military needed everyone they could get. Just six months later, at the end of the fall semester of 1942, they called up the reserves, and I was in the Army.

Feldman went first to Camp Upton on Long Island for induction, then on to Fort McClellan in Alabama for infantry training in the grueling Southern heat of July and August, 1943. ("I went in weighing about 165 pounds," Feldman writes. "I think when I was finished I was about 135.") Then came selection for the Army Specialized Training Program, for which he spent two semesters at Alabama Polytechnic Institute (now Auburn University), studying to be an army engineer; another exam to see if he qualified for training to be a doctor was one of the first times Feldman says he experienced anti-Semitism in the military: He writes that most Jewish soldiers who scored well on the exam weren't selected for the program.

Eventually, Feldman was sent on to Indianapolis and assigned to the 106th Division, where he ended up a radio operator. In the summer of 1944, he and thousands of other American soldiers boarded the *Queen Elizabeth* in New York harbor, arriving in Scotland in late September; after a few weeks in England, he crossed the Channel and landed in France. There, Feldman learned he was no longer a radio man—he'd been reassigned to a heavy weapons platoon. From

France it was on to Belgium. Autumn turned to winter. Milt Feldman was about to join the war.

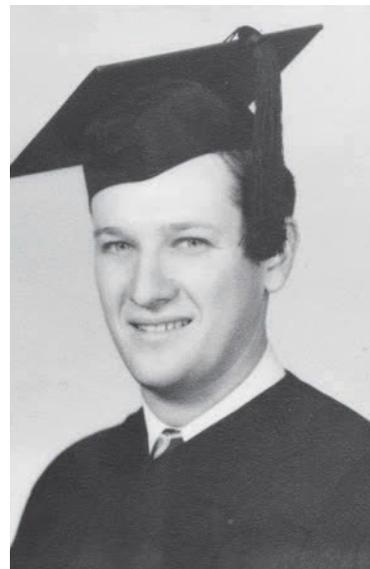
Early December, 1944. It was so extremely cold. My group got lucky. We were assigned a pillbox, a concrete bunker along the Siegfried Line, just across the German border. The Germans had built these fortifications, but they'd been captured by our troops in the fall. There were about 20 men assigned to the pillbox. Inside it was nice and warm. Oh, my god. We thought we'd hit the jackpot.

We took turns on guard duty. It meant being out of the pillbox at night for two hours, and then you'd be off for four. In the middle of the night, you would hear all sorts of sounds and you'd swear you saw all sorts of movement. Maybe it was just the cold, we thought, or Belgian locals or our own troops. But it wasn't. We heard the Germans preparing to attack.



LOOKING BACK

Like so many of his generation, Feldman saw his education interrupted by World War II, surviving to return to campus after the war's end. Of living long enough to write about his experience 75 years later, he said, "You know you've been lucky."



The massive German counterattack that became known as the Battle of the Bulge began on Dec. 16, 1944. Feldman's company, fearing it might be surrounded, decided to retreat. He was part of an anti-tank gun crew that was tasked with bringing up the rear of the convoy and, if necessary, holding off the chasing Germans. Feldman remembers the team setting up its 57mm gun near a wrecked armored vehicle: "All of a sudden there were flashes all around us like enormous fireflies. The night was pitch-black. We realized it had been hit with a phosphorous shell. The smoke was gone, but the phosphorous was still glowing. It was like a nightmare."

On the move for more than 48 hours with no food, cold and exhausted, Feldman and three other soldiers were eventually separated from the rest of the convoy. "I think we were a sergeant, a PFC, and two privates," he writes. "I never learned the names of the other guys." Knowing there were large numbers of German troops nearby, they decided their only hope was to dump their weapons and surrender. Before long, they were spotted. "Somebody yelled 'halt,'" Feldman writes. "There were four German soldiers. Two of them must have been 15 years old, two of them must have been 60. They had rifles. We had a white flag."

They formed us up and we started marching deeper into Germany with hundreds of other American POWs. We were a sorry mess. We had not eaten in days. We were dirty, hungry, miserable and cold.

Mostly we were on country roads. At times, we could look down on a town below us, snow-covered, with a church steeple in the middle, as yet untouched by battle. It looked like a Christmas card.

As we passed one farmhouse, an elderly woman had a basket of apples which she was handing out to the POWs. I got a small one, mostly dried out, but it tasted better than any steak I've ever eaten.

It took two weeks to reach the Nazi prison camp. At first, they marched; along the way, he remembers looking skyward to see a flight of German Me 262s, the first jet airplanes used in warfare, and the launch of a V-2 rocket. Eventually, they reached a railroad, where they were crammed into box-cars. Only later would Feldman appreciate the awful symmetry with the journey taken by victims of the Holocaust. "They put probably 120 Jews in a boxcar. They treated us a little better: In my car, there were about 80 of us. They closed us in the train car and locked it. We still hadn't eaten, and there was no food. We had no water. There were no toilets."

The nightmare of the train ride, of men with frozen feet and dysentery crammed together in a locked car, ended when Allied planes attacked the train, unaware of its occupants. With the train disabled, they marched again, and the men

got their first food in nearly 10 days: a tablespoon each of molasses. Eventually they were crammed into trucks that took them to their destination: a Nazi prison camp known as Stalag IV-B. They arrived on New Year's Eve, the last day of 1944.

We arrived at about midnight and lined up in front of a barracks. It was snowing and again very cold.

When my turn came to enter the building, I saw there were six desks; at each desk was an officer in a British uniform. At this point we had been starved, dehydrated, suffered dysentery. I had no expectation of decent treatment. Whether it was from delirium or fear or reasonable suspicion, I was not persuaded by these officers' uniforms or perfect English. I was sure they were Germans.

I could hear the questions being asked of the men in front of me:

- Name
- Rank
- Serial Number
- What was your outfit?
- Where were you captured?
- Where are you from?
- Parents' names?
- Religion?

When my turn came, I answered the first three questions, then kept answering "Sorry, sir. Sorry, sir," as we had been trained. My questioner then stopped and said, in his British accent, "How long has it been since you've eaten, soldier?" This question I answered. "Two weeks, sir."

"Soldier, I will ask these questions one more time. If you don't answer, you won't eat for another month!"

I answered. When it came to religion, lying seemed to be the safe thing to do. But I didn't care. I was young, angry, and by any measure stupid. I answered, "Jewish."

I fully expected to be pulled out of the line by my German interrogator, but I wasn't. I was led out with others and assigned to a barracks. The next morning, we were lined up and counted. The officer in charge barked out a number of orders in English:

- "All medical personnel take one step forward."
- "All cooks and bakers take two steps forward."
- "All Jews take three steps forward."

We knew the Nazis enslaved and murdered Jews, though we did not then know the extent of the slaughter at the death camps. Along with a number of other Jewish GIs, I stepped forward anyway. We were not rounded up. Some prisoners who had not stepped forward were picked out for work details. The rest of us were dismissed.

Had I been in another prison camp, that moment might have turned out differently: A contingent of Jewish-American GIs and other "troublemakers" were sent from Stalag IX-B to the Berga slave camp, part of the Buchenwald complex. Some were worked to

death. More died on a forced march as Allied troops approached.

Over time, I learned why Jewish soldiers were not abused. By this point in the war, the Germans had minimized the number of German guards at POW camps to send more soldiers into battle. Most of the guards were from countries Germany had annexed. Allied officers, mostly British, were in charge of a lot of the internal workings at the camp. They did their best to protect Jewish soldiers. My interrogator had in fact been British. My defiant pronouncement about my religion probably helped save my life. The Germans themselves did not want Jewish prisoners on work details outside the camp, where we would meet German civilians. They did not want civilians to know that there were brave, strong American Jews, willing to fight. It belied their propaganda.

Over the coming weeks, Feldman would get used to the routines, deprivations, and small joys of life in a POW camp. The food was enough to keep the men alive—"maybe 800 calories on a good day," he writes—though not enough to keep them healthy. He spent nearly a month in the camp infirmary fighting off pneumonia, a stint that meant more food and a heated barracks. In late March, he and a dozen or so other Jewish soldiers got together in another barracks for a secret celebration marking the first day of Passover.

Nearly a month later, liberation arrived on a pale steed.

"On April 23," Feldman writes, "a Russian officer rode into camp—I'm not exaggerating—on a white horse. He came into the camp and said, 'You're free. You can leave.' Not in English, in Russian. Somebody understood.

"Here we were, free."

Eventually, Milt Feldman made it back home. Released by the Army in October 1945, he returned to classes at Penn State the following February. After all he'd been through, he found the idyllic, quiet life back on campus to be "funny ... but wonderful." He and Shirley, now married, chaperoned dances at his old fraternity. "I had five semesters to finish. Shirley got a master's in sociology. We got our degrees at the same time and started our life together."

When you're 94, healthy, possessing all your faculties, and able to write the story of your life in a war that took place 75 years ago, you know you've been lucky. As our generation dwindles, interest in World War II veterans has been rekindled, and I'm asked about it, thanked, celebrated and congratulated at every turn. I never thought I was a hero, and do not think so now. But to many, even survival is a form of heroism. So is living to 94.

Shirley died in 2006, and I thought my life would be half empty from then on. But a couple of years later, I got lucky again. I met Renee Bauer, and we've had the kind of late life together that everyone dreams of. Every day, we laugh and sing and tell stories. She



SHARED SACRIFICE

Feldman, seen visiting the national World War II Memorial, was adamant that his story spoke for those who could no longer tell their own. "I never thought I was a hero. I know that I was lucky in ways large and small."

has encouraged me to tell this one as often and in as many forums as I can.

But every day we also read the papers and watch the news. We see a tug of war: On one side, American citizens who, astonishingly, seem bent on pulling us toward becoming the kind of brutalist, prejudiced society we went to war against in 1941; and on the other side, caring, optimistic (often young) Americans who want to end the stereotypes and propaganda and belligerence on which wars depend.

The America I love is one where immigrants like my parents can make a life they could not have hoped for in their native country. It's a country built on laws and morality, where we recognize right and wrong, that ends don't always justify means.

In addition to helping Feldman write his life story, Bauer encouraged his stepfather to cooperate with documentary filmmaker Eduardo Montes-Bradley on a project called *A Soldier's Dream*; the film, which largely parallels the story told in Feldman's book, is available for free on Vimeo. Like Bauer, Montes-Bradley was struck by Feldman's spirit, and by his unromantic view of the conflict he survived.

"I think he was a pacifist in the old Eastern European Jewish tradition. They've seen a lot, and they had seen a lot before World War II," Montes-Bradley says. "I have interviewed many older Jewish men; their eyes get misty when they talk about peace, and the horrors of war.

"Milt," he says, "was the last pacifist I knew." ♥