

A True Story
By Judith Buber Agassi

After more than 49 years I met the "Jewish-looking American soldier" my mother, Margarete Buber-Neumann, had met in Boizenburg, Mecklenburg, in the beginning of May 1945, 11-12 days after she had in the last days of the War walked out of the infamous women's concentration camp Ravensbrück after five years of imprisonment there.

This American soldier played an important role in her life and in that of her daughters. Yet my mother never learned his identity, and my sister and I did so only rather accidentally 49 years after the event.

This man is Chicago industrialist Manfred Steinfeld, a generous patron of Jewish Studies and of the commemoration of the Holocaust.

My mother has described several incidents concerning American soldiers in the last two chapters of her famous first book "Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler" (1948) (in English "Under Two Dictators" 1949).

Two important incidents concerned the then 21-year-old US officer, who had in 1938 as a 14-year-old Jewish boy succeeded to leave Nazi-Germany to join an aunt in Chicago. His mother and sister stayed behind and perished in the camps in the last months of the war.

When my mother's book was published by Dodd Mead in the US in 1950, Manfred Steinfeld, again in uniform, had picked it up accidentally at a railway station and while reading, discovered that its author was that camp survivor, a half-starved, sick, 43 year old woman, who had appealed for his help 5 years earlier in Boizenburg. He told me that he later had tried several times to contact her, but without success.

In the last chapters of her first book my mother describes her tortuous journey on foot and bicycle through

bombed-out, defeated and occupied Nazi-Germany from Ravensbrück in Mecklenburg, north of Berlin, to the village of Thierstein in Bavaria near the Czech border. The Red Army was advancing rapidly, the Western Allies who had already crossed the Elbe, were ordered to retreat behind the river.

My mother's desperate aim was not to fall into the hands of the Soviets who had arrested her in 1938 while she was a political refugee from Nazi-Germany in Moscow, had sent her to the huge Gulag-Camp Karaganda in Central Asia, and two years of slave-labor later, had -- as a part of the Stalin-Hitler Pact -- delivered her and hundreds of other German and Austrian anti-Nazi political refugees into the clutches of the Gestapo, who then had imprisoned her in Ravensbrück until the end of the War.

She had not seen her daughters for 10 years, but knew that we were in Jerusalem with our paternal grandparents. We did not know at all where she was, not even whether she was alive or dead.

My mother tells that while still in Mecklenburg she had approached "a Jewish looking American soldier" with the request to send a message to her daughters in Jerusalem to let them know that she had survived, and that later she realized that this soldier had indeed done so. At this time Germans had no chance to send mail abroad. When some time later she had succeeded to cross the Elbe, and had reached the city of Hannover, she put the same request at the International Red Cross office there, but was rejected outright.

Recently Manfred Steinfeld told me, that as an American soldier he could correspond with his younger brother, whom their widowed mother in 1938 had succeeded to send to a religious Kibbutz in Palestine. In his next letter Manfred indeed asked his brother to write to Jerusalem, and it was this younger brother Naftali Steinfeld who sent the postcard

from which my sister Barbara and I received the message of our mother's survival. We of course did not yet know then where we could contact her, nor did we know who had sent the postcard.

We never learned that, tragically, only a few months later this young brother was killed, when British soldiers surrounded the Kibbutz whose members had helped illegal Jewish immigrants ashore, and shot eight of them.

Only in 1994 did I quite accidentally learn the identity of the "Jewish looking American soldier". When Prof. Gilya Gerda Schmidt who teaches Judaic Studies at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, met me in Israel, she mentioned that the chair of Judaic Studies there had been funded by Mr. Manfred Steinfeld, who also was a patron of the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C.; talking about Mr. Steinfeld whom she admired, she mentioned that he once had told her a story about Margarete Buber-Neumann whom he had met as a soldier in Germany in the spring of 1945.

When Gilya Gerda Schmidt told me this story, she did not yet know that this was my mother. From her I received the name of Mr. Steinfeld's firm in Chicago, and when coming to the States at the end of August 1994, got his business phone number from information and his secretary there immediately made the connection. We talked on the phone and in September, when Mr. Steinfeld came for a day to Toronto, my husband and I met with him and a Toronto associate, had a meal and talked for hours.

Only then did I learn about the other role that the "Jewish looking American soldier" who had conveyed the message to us, had played in my mother's life. From my mother's book and from her stories I knew that while in Boizenburg she had fallen seriously ill, and had to rest before being able to move on. One day while walking in the streets of the small

town, she recognized Ramdor, the most notorious SS and Gestapo camp guard of Ravensbrück, followed him and in desperation approached an American officer demanding that he arrest him. He did so. This officer was Manfred Steinfeld. He interrogated Ramdor and made him admit his identity. My mother was called to testify; as Ramdor claimed not to have belonged neither to the Gestapo nor even to the SS, her testimony that she had seen him in SS uniform, was crucial; she reported all those incidents of atrocities he had committed against women prisoners and that she had witnessed. Men who had been prisoners in the men's camp and who had helped catching him, added their testimonies. It was in the course of these events that my mother asked the young American officer to convey her message to Jerusalem. Ramdor was later sentenced to death by a British court.

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