

THE LONG MARCH HOME

An American Soldier's Life as a Nazi Slave Laborer

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*An American Soldier's Life
as a Nazi Slave Laborer*

ROBERT R. MAX



DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF MY
WIFE AND PARTNER OF 67 YEARS,
SHIRLEY BILLER MAX.

THIS STORY WOULD NOT HAVE
COME TO LIFE WITHOUT HER LOVE,
GUIDANCE, AND INSPIRATION.

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"Bob Max's story, that of an American-Jewish soldier who was captured by the Germans and made to perform brutal forced labor, is a little known thread in the tapestry of the history of the Second World War. His escape, followed by a long recuperation from the consequences of his ordeal, are a testament to the human ability to endure horrors beyond our imagination and the resilience of the body and spirit. While recuperating from his ordeal Bob came to the decision that he should devote much of his time and energy to working for the good of the Jewish people. Now at age 94, he can look back proudly at his achievements in Jewish public life, in business, and family life; and at the age of 94, he can still do 25 push-ups a day. His memoir is remarkable and deserves to be read."

— Dr. Robert Rozett, Director of the Libraries, Yad Vashem

LOOKING BACK

I TRIED ON THE ARMY JACKET — the one I wore when I was discharged from the military in December 1945, the one bedecked with the battle ribbons and medals. It no longer fit. Sixty-nine years had gone by.

I thought of that day...

I stood there frozen—frozen by fear, frozen by the bitter, biting cold air. Shrapnel from exploding American or British artillery shells landed on the ground around me. I tried to squeeze into the German sergeant's bunker. "*Nein*," he grunted, his rifle pointing at my chest. I wanted to run, but the presence of guards and other German soldiers in adjoining bunkers made escape impossible.

"What are you going to do with me?"

In surprisingly good English, he replied with seeming indifference, "We have to kill you."



PREFACE

FOR 53 YEARS, I gave little thought to the possibility of writing about my experiences as an American soldier in World War II and the events that followed, but questions from my grandsons helped me to recognize that the story of my survival in combat was very different from anything I was aware of in print or film.

“Were you in the war, Poppy?” nine-year-old Emerson asked. “Where did you sleep? What did you eat?”

Xander followed with, “Did you have a gun? Did you ever shoot it? Did you ever kill anyone?”

I had spent the most brutal months of World War II as an unregistered slave laborer for the German Army, the very enemy I had enlisted to fight. Unlike other American prisoners of war, I had been a victim of Nazi atrocities. Although I was an American soldier, my war experience more closely mirrored those of Jewish concentration camp detainees who were sent on “death marches” towards the end of the war.

Had I been registered as a POW, I might have been afforded the protections granted under the Geneva Conventions, shelter, heat, food, and bed and bathroom facilities. These conditions were nothing elaborate, but would have been considerably better than exposure day and night to sub-zero temperatures, starvation, “sleeping” outside on the snow and ice-covered ground, beatings, and the threat

of being shot for failure to perform assigned work. The proposition was simple: You worked (repairing bombed railroads) or you died. And many did die.



Elie Wiesel (left) with Shirley and Robert Max in 1988.

Inspired by Elie Wiesel during a weekend in 1988 that my wife Shirley and I spent with this Nobel laureate, profound author, and chronicler of the Holocaust; and motivated by Xander and Emerson, I felt an increasing obligation to break my silence and add my name to the growing list of Holocaust survivors who were finally speaking out, many for the first time. The world must know and must remember that six million Jews were murdered by Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany. And so I started to tell my story. By coincidence, I learned about the Holocaust Council of Greater MetroWest NJ, a division of the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ. Council director Barbara Wind invited me to share my experiences with students in public and private schools and universities. These opportunities allowed me to reach a vital and sensitive audience as I

released my memories of the war and the Holocaust to generations well into the future, part of the mission to ensure that the world would “never forget.”

Now, years later, I have spoken to thousands of young people in public schools in New Jersey, where Holocaust education is mandated, and in other states as well. These students have become witnesses, carrying the messages of the outcomes of war, genocide, and survival to future generations. In the closing pages of this book, I include excerpts from some of these young people’s letters, in which they commit themselves to the mission—to remember and to speak to others years in the future so that there will always be voices carrying the memories; voices of reason that will stand as deterrence to any future atrocities.

My memoir reveals the life-and-death struggles encountered in battle, including my capture during the Battle of the Bulge; and the harsh physical treatment, starvation, and almost intolerable physical and emotional pain I experienced as a Nazi slave laborer. The story culminates in a desperate escape. I am one of the few American soldiers known to have successfully escaped their German captors and survived.

I also chronicle my recovery at military hospitals in Europe and America. It took me almost a full year to recover from the physical trauma of captivity. The healing of my psychological wounds would take much longer.

When the first World War II soldiers returned home, they were greeted as if they were celebrities. My own homecoming was no different, and I share my memories of a nation and its people as they reached out to their returning

soldiers with gratitude in response to our service during a most critical period in American history.

Wartime experiences generated a transformation in my character, and my future goals were largely reshaped during the sleepless hours of my hospitalization. I felt that life had become more precious. Survival stirred in me a compulsion to serve, to do things for others beyond my immediate sphere of influence and contact.

Years earlier, I had been inspired by Rudyard Kipling's poem "If," which includes the lines:

*If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

At 93 years of age, I am one of a dwindling number of surviving World War II veterans. Sharing my unique wartime experiences with a wider audience has become one of my personal goals and the inspiration for this book.

The events, conversations, and memories portrayed in The Long March Home are based on my recollections, many dating back 70 years and more. I've tried to present them with clarity, and through the best of my ability and memory, as they occurred.

CHAPTER 1:
A CALL
TO DUTY

Sign Up to Serve – We Were at War: Fort Dix, New Jersey

HOW CAN I describe the appeal of military life in 1943? Our country was in a war we hadn't started but couldn't avoid. While entering the fight was not attractive to all, it did hold a certain appeal for many of us. It was popular to be part of the war. Some were driven by patriotism, others by conscience.

For me, maybe it was a bit of both. I often read *The New York Times*, specifically searching for news reports of Adolf Hitler's war on the Jews. Such reports, though, seemed to be buried among the later pages of the *Times*, and that concerned me.

While I believed the Ochs-Sulzberger family, the owners and publishers of the newspaper, were Jews, I was to learn that some had converted to Episcopalianism. Why were these stories about the Jews as targets of the Nazis not front page news? Was there an anti-Semitic sentiment?

Reading the limited reports and the discovery of the merciless killings probably influenced my judgment in signing on to the war effort. When I enlisted, my hope was that I would wind up in the European Theater of Operations. Like many Jewish young men eager to serve, I wanted to confront the Nazis and help stop their war against the Jews.

In the predominantly Jewish fraternity house at Ohio University where I was living with 20 other students, we often had late-night bull sessions, with the conversation often turning to the war. With American news sources reporting daily on the campaign in Europe came additional stories of Jews being massacred by the Nazis. One by one, my friends and I seemed to be subliminally signaling to one another that our obligations lay outside the university's walls. It was a new sensation for me.

The bull sessions in my Phi Epsilon Phi fraternity house made their mark. As a group of young men at similar states in our lives, we were moved to sign up. We did what so many others did. At age 20, I left a comfortable campus life and enlisted. As it would turn out, Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC) at the university would give few clues to what military life was like.

Once the determination to sign up became real, we faced the reality that we might never again assemble as fraternity brothers—and that we had a good-sized bank account. With so many members now heading off to war, we knew we would have to close down the fraternity home for an extended period of time. With the future uncertain, it didn't make sense to leave a full bank account untouched during our absence, so we decided to spend it all.

During the closing months of the school year in the spring of 1943, Phi Epsilon Pi became the gourmet center of Athens, Ohio. New York's finest steaks and chops could hardly have been better. It became socially significant on campus to receive an invitation to dinner at Phi Ep.

(An interesting note: Those of us who returned after the war and attempted to restart the fraternity discovered that we had no treasury, no money. My fraternity brother Dave Friedman of Cleveland suggested that we incorporate and sell non-voting stock. Who bought the stock? Our parents. We were on our way. A year later, I was elected president of the Alpha Rho chapter of Phi Epsilon Pi fraternity as well as the president of my university's Hillel Foundation. These were my first steps on a path that would ultimately lead to many leadership roles in the Jewish community and beyond.)

You're In the Army Now

NEW JERSEY'S FORT DIX was one of many Army induction centers throughout the country. It was a staging area where we were to be conditioned to what was for most of us a very different lifestyle. We had to be weaned from civilian self-determination to a kind of regimentation that had to be shaped gradually.

First impressions sometimes last a lifetime. Sighting the barracks that would be my home for weeks or months ahead, I was struck by its stark appearance: a long grey building with three steps leading up to its entrance. The landscape was no better—building after building. They all looked alike. Thank goodness for the numbers posted outside each barracks.

Bedrooms and privacy gave way to cots and public latrines. Alarm clocks and late night radio news were replaced with shrill—and at times, piercing—sounds of reveille and taps. The “Bugle Call Rag” became just the bugle call.

Marching drills were the order of the day. Discipline was instilled in this early stage of a new Army career. And there were other duties: KP, or kitchen patrol, for example. If the Army lived on its stomach, it was surely the potato that was the core of its sustenance. KP duty called me for kitchen and dining room setup, cleanup, and of course, peeling potatoes; endlessly peeling potatoes.

Our barracks were our homes; policing them our duty. Order and cleanliness were a matter of policy. And so we were measured on the neatness of our footlockers and the tidiness of our beds and “living” areas. It all required work, and we were expected to perform diligently. We were also judged on the firmness of our bed sheets. Officers inspected the barracks and dropped coins on the sheets to see if the coins would bounce. I was diligent and produced tight bed sheets; coins bounced. Those whose sheets didn’t make the coins bounce received demerits. There were penalties for the demerits, which were posted outside each barracks.

Music and the Military: Another Way to Serve?

SEVERAL DAYS AFTER my arrival at Fort Dix, I was summoned to the company office. I was told I was being granted a weekend pass and that I was to return with my saxophone and clarinet. How did they know that I played? This was long before computers could reveal intimate details of our lives. Somehow, though, my pre-war experience with dance bands in New Jersey and Ohio had gotten into my records.

I remember that on my 10th birthday, I awoke to find a clarinet at the foot of my bed—an unexpected gift from my parents. I must have shown some early interest in music.

I took lessons, later adding alto saxophone, and was ready to pursue an experience with big bands in the 1930s. I not only played, but studied the popular big bands of that period and learned to recognize the members of those bands, the sidemen.

During my freshman year at New York University, I planned my classroom schedule to run from Monday through Thursday, leaving Friday free to spend the day at the Paramount and Adams theaters in Newark. Friday was special in my world—it was opening day at the theaters for some of the country's leading orchestras.

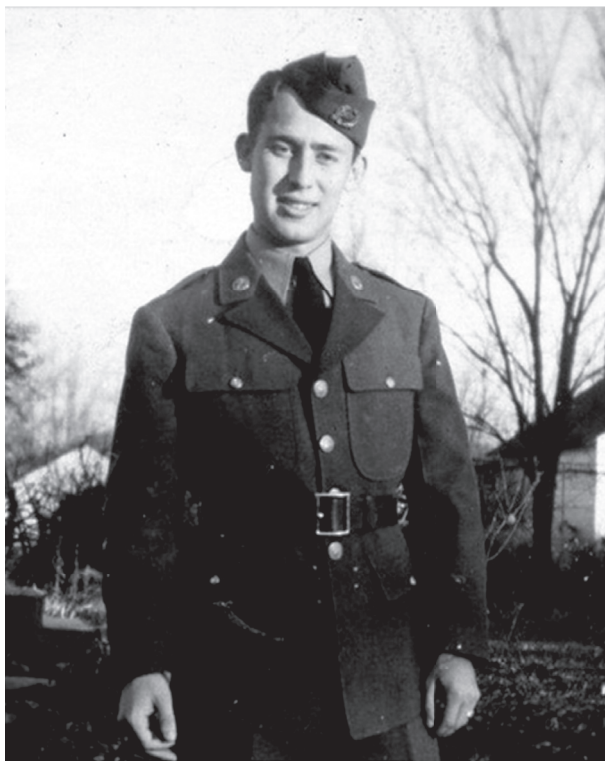
As a beginning young musician, I was entranced with the music of the big bands of that period. I remember one Friday when two of America's most popular bands came to the theater stages in the same week. They just happened to be led by the two greatest clarinet players at that time (if not ever), Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw. I was delirious with joy. I had been playing clarinet and alto saxophone with local bands for several years. Momma packed me a sandwich and soda and sent me off by bus to Newark for one of the most thrilling days of my life.

Playing music in an Army band was far from my pre-enlistment expectations. I was entering the military, prepared to (temporarily) give up everything to do what military people do: to prepare for combat and ultimately face an enemy—nothing heroic, simply an act of responsibility. That was what I told my parents, and while my mother was worried, my father supported my decision.

Fort Dix had assembled an outstanding group of musicians, sidemen who performed with the top big bands of Tommy Dorsey, Les Brown, Harry James, Benny Goodman, and others. Jack Leonard, a handsome, smooth-voiced singer who preceded Frank Sinatra as vocalist with the Tommy Dorsey orchestra, led the Fort Dix Swing Band. Jack wanted me to join the band, and evidently that was enough for the officers in charge to send me on my way to South Orange, New Jersey, to retrieve my sax and clarinet.

What a shock at my first rehearsal! I was intimidated—I was sitting next to the best musicians of the time. Most

could compose and orchestrate, and some had attended institutes like Juilliard in New York City. I wasn't in their class, but managed to survive. While scared, I was thrilled to play alongside professionals, America's best, and those I had hoped to emulate in my pre-war years.



Home on leave in South Orange, New Jersey, 1944.

With the band assignment, Army life could have been an excursion to easy living. Over the next month, my days were filled with more leisure than I had known in a long time. Morning schedules were of my own making for practice, and I enjoyed afternoon rehearsals and some evening radio broadcasts. No chores, no potato peeling. A wonderful way to wage war. Or was it?

One day, my name appeared on a list; I was to be shipped out for basic training, preparation for combat. At the request of Jack Leonard, the order was set aside; I was to remain with the band, and ironically, probably sit out a large part of the war. Whether it was the search for adventure, the desire to serve as others were doing, or a matter of conscience, I don't know, but I asked not to be excused from those shipping orders. "No, Jack," I said, with some reluctance, but knowing I would have experienced a feeling of guilt or abandonment if I hadn't. We were at war, and I just didn't feel comfortable watching some of my buddies shipping out. And what would I say years later when someone asked, "Were you in the war?"

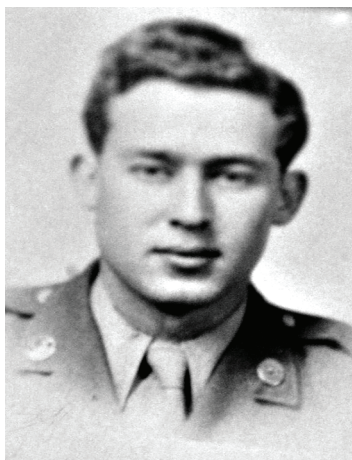
I told Jack I expected to be back with the band someday. "Kid," he said, "you leave now and you're not ever coming back." Prophetic. The decision made, destiny took hold. I was headed for basic training and real Army life.

Tough Training Makes Good Soldiers: Final Preparations

FOLLOWING A CIRCUITOUS train ride, I landed at Fort McClellan, Alabama. Some called it “the hell hole of the South.” As military camps go, it had all the facilities one might expect—barracks, mess hall, drill staging sites, field obstacle courses, and a marksmanship shooting range. What it also had was a cadre of hardened Army veterans, many of whom had served in combat units. They weren’t about to let a bunch of smart-aleck college kids escape the hardships they had endured in service.

Basic training was rigorous—deliberately stretched-out marching drills, obstacle courses, physical and mental torment. When one bivouac and forced march over challenging, mountainous Bain Gap wasn’t enough to break us, they tried another. They marched us, in full combat uniforms and burdened with backpacks and rifles, in temperatures hovering around 100 degrees. After one march under a blazing sun, they stood us in an open field. After some time, I became faint and wobbled, but refused to fall. I barely remember the march back to the barracks, but I sustained myself until I fell onto my bed, barely conscious. We survived—all but one of us, someone I had known as an English professor at Ohio University, where I had transferred from NYU before entering the service.

He was older than all of us, in his forties, and not in good physical condition. Unable to complete the exercises for the obstacle course, he ultimately received a medical discharge. I was sorry to see him go. For me, though, my mind and body were strengthened by the ordeal. It would later save my life.



Notice the pompadour. That's the way some of us wore our hair, even in the Army.

Unlike the rest of the week, Sundays were special—a reminder of sleeping late and asking Mom to rustle up some pancakes or eggs. At the mess hall, I ordered what I wanted, and the cook made it to my specifications. I followed a routine: two eggs up with whole wheat toast one week, pancakes with sausage the next. Breakfast was not only pleasant, but also a time to “schmooze,” share photos from home, and gossip about the cadre, our trainers. It made returning to drills on Monday more difficult, but it was well worth it. It was hard to believe that this was the Army, and we were preparing for war.

In contrast to this one pleasant memory of Fort McClellan, I also recall the frustration of seeing bronzed, shirtless German prisoners of war laughing, smoking, and enjoying the privileges of shopping at the Post Exchange while they ridiculed the forced, heat-exhausting marches we endured in heavy military clothes and equipment at blazing temperatures. Oh, how I wanted to break ranks, dash over, and bounce my rifle right off their skulls.

Now, years later, I'm reminded of the irony in all of this. I don't know what happened to all those German captives. But I do know that going through what they ridiculed—what seemed like abusive training at the time—probably helped save my life while I was in captivity and under the control of their comrades.

A New Wrinkle in Army Preparedness

GOING FROM FORT McCLELLAN to Auburn, Alabama, while no great distance, was a transformation in lifestyle. Alabama Polytechnic Institute, later known as Auburn University, was home to an Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). I was assigned as an engineering student to the unit based there.

The US Army needed engineers and language specialists, and reached into its ranks for trainees. Military vehicles had to be maintained, pontoon bridges built. Translators of foreign language documents and conversation were essential parts of military intelligence.

Typical of the US Army selections process, leadership often chose GIs with no civilian experience, so that they might be trained to function the Army way. I had no training or education in engineering; no collegiate math, science, or engineering. But an Army entrance test revealed that I had a reasonably high IQ, so I was qualified.

Dormitories replaced barracks and tents. While military discipline was enforced and marching and fitness drills were routine, study and exams became part of our lives. We spent long, grueling hours each week in actual classroom work plus preparation time each night and on weekends.

But dormitory life had its moments—events that gave us relief from the routines of military life. We let loose on Saturday nights, when two close friends from New York City and I planned and produced our own off-off-off Broadway shows. We posed as musical impresarios, calling ourselves MKM Productions (Herb Maneloveg, Charlie Kwartler, and Bob Max). We staged productions featuring the greatest music of our time (all recorded on commercial records we got from home) and attracted an overflow crowd of our student soldiers in my stuffed dormitory room. We listened, some sang, and we all enjoyed pretzels and soda (no beer allowed). The feature attraction on opening night was America's Greatest Black Musicians. The entertainment: the recorded music of Duke Ellington, Jimmy Lunceford, Earl "Fatha" Hines, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, and many others. The shows were big hits and provided a release from the stressful dual life of soldier and student.

With this kind of interlude at Auburn University, for these short periods, we were able to embrace the lives we left behind and nurture great memories and dreams of what life would again be like when war ended. For a short time, we were living in a dream world. How could we have known what lay ahead?

There's a War On

WHILE OUR ALLIED troops advanced aggressively across France, infantry casualties mounted, and combat-ready forces were needed overseas. ASTP became a casualty. The program had to be sacrificed to a greater need. Herb, Charlie, and I talked a lot about the impending change in our lives. Herb, philosophical, accepted fate; Charlie, ranting, was just plain not happy. I accepted the reality that there was a war on. Ground combat, we knew, was dangerous and dirty. Most of us wanted to avoid it.

When it became apparent that ASTP would be terminated, many of us at Auburn applied first to air cadet training in Montgomery, Alabama, and later to Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia. The exams we were required to take were reasonable, and I think we all did well on them—but perhaps not so much on the intimidating interview we had to go through.

At the Officer Candidate School, I remember being ushered into an austere darkened room. To my right at a long table was more “brass” than I had ever seen in one setting: Army officers, and not a welcoming look among them.

This was the interview that would help determine if I had the essential qualities for leadership. Intimidating? I was a “young” 21, not accustomed to being grilled, particularly by such an imposing group of questioners. The questions

were reasonable, as I recall, but I never did learn the results of the interview.

Our efforts at both the Air Cadet School and Army Officer Candidate School were thwarted by a more critical need. The Army simply had to reinforce the depleted ground troops in Western Europe.

I've often wondered if I would have made a good officer, one who could draw the respect and confidence of subordinates. Up to that point I had never held a leadership role. I had additional strikes against me: I was probably younger than any soldier I might have led, and I looked it. I was short: 5'4", well-built and athletic, but still short. The average male height at the time was about 5'8" or 5'9". I was certainly not an imposing figure.

Training for Combat: Top Priority

CAMP ATTERBURY in Indiana was my next stop. I would finally link up with a unit preparing for combat, the 106th Infantry Division. I had to learn to be a combat infantryman. But as I soon discovered, I had a dual role to play: one with a rifle, the other with a jeep.

Training took on a greater sense of urgency. Through lectures and manuals, we were introduced to simulated battle conditions, and came face to face with the consequences of war: soldiers killed one another, and the better prepared we were, the greater the chances of survival and ultimate victory. I learned early on that a rifle would become my best friend in combat and that caring for it might save my life. It was a US M-1 Garand .30 caliber rifle. I learned to take it apart and reassemble it in the dark, and I became comfortable with it on the firing range. Maintenance was important. But another kind of maintenance would soon occupy my time and training.

We were often assigned to roles in which we had no experience. I ended up in the motor pool in a combat training unit of the 106th Infantry Division, where I was expected to help maintain jeeps and trucks.

The only thing mechanical I knew was that the automobile engine had spark plugs and a carburetor. And the only

reason I knew that was because my father had inherited my grandfather's 1925 maroon Cadillac (built, incidentally, like a tank). Many Sundays, on a family outing, we would drive up South Orange Avenue in South Orange, New Jersey. It was hilly, and partway up, the engine would stall. Not to worry. My father grabbed a wrench, lifted the engine hood and tapped on the carburetor, then got into the car and drove off. Residue from the gasoline had clogged the carburetor. The spark plug, I discovered, created the spark to ignite the gasoline.

I observed the procedure, and there I was, an "expert" on the internal combustion engine. I knew little more than that, but with some training, it made me eligible to become a member of the motor pool, responsible for auto maintenance. I did my job the Army way, the way the Army preferred.

Responsibilities in the motor pool called for more than vehicle maintenance. I chauffeured officers to meetings and other assignments, and that turned out to be a relief from the drills required for combat readiness. I enjoyed driving and getting to know some of the officers, hearing stories about their families and their civilian lives. Discussion often turned to their kids, sports, vacations, and the hope for the war's end and their return to their families.

Training in preparation for ground combat included handling and firing automatic weapons in addition to the M-1 rifle. I earned a marksmanship medal. While I could handle the M-1 rifle well, I never felt comfortable with a machine gun or an automatic rifle.

We were well aware of our destiny. We were being trained to reinforce ground troops in the European theater and would ship out when ordered to do so. There were no surprises—trepidation among some of the troops, anticipation among others. But how do you develop a mindset for battle? I wasn't sure I was emotionally ready for the hazards of combat.



Driving a jeep at Camp Atterbury, Indiana, September 1944.

During breaks in training, we talked a lot and tried to anticipate what combat might be like. Some of the younger guys were charged with excitement and anticipation, harboring in their innocence visions of performing heroically against an enemy that had defeated most of Europe. I remember the comment of one of these gung-ho soldiers: "Gonna get those heinies." I liked his spirit and told him so.

Others were less comfortable with the realization that we were headed for danger. I knew my own life and the lives of others would be on the line. It was the unknown, and for some—particularly the older ones—the fear that they might not be coming back that held sway.