

RETURNING HOME

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British
Troops Pass
Belgian
Refugees,
Image
Courtesy of
the Imperial
War
Museum



Nina Wolff Feld

“Please excuse my long silence, but I just got back 3 days ago from my little trip ... What struck me immediately was that nothing had apparently changed, except for the many uniforms on the street”

In December of 1945 my father, Walter Wolff, returned to 155 Rue de la Loi in Brussels, five and a half years after he and his family had escaped the city.

Born into a cultured German Jewish family in Koblenz, my father was sent to school in Switzerland after the Nuremberg Laws were put into effect. While he was in Switzerland, his family left Germany and moved to Belgium but their refuge in Belgium proved to be only temporary.

Four days before Hitler bombed Belgium in May of 1940, my

father, his parents, his sister, and an American friend were forced to flee the city. Heading out of Brussels, the family took the coastal road south across the border into Normandy. At times they hid under their car as battles erupted around them and, while having dinner in Dunkirk, they heard the thud of the first bombs as they dropped from Nazi aircraft.

In France, they lived openly at a chateau in Noyelles sur Mer alongside the Wehrmacht which had just made it their headquarters. During their six-week stay, my grandfather pretended to be the family chauffeur while my grandmother pretended to be shell shocked and mute. My father and his sister assumed the identities of American teenagers, with the American friend playing the role of their father.

At one point, one of the German officers, a former actor, guessed their identities. But on a sunny morning, when the Royal Air Force dropped bombs over the chateau, the officer was killed before he could expose their secret. My father, who was nearby at the time, was spared because he found himself in the crater of an unexploded bomb which had landed in the patch where he was picking strawberries.

Escape from Europe

Shortly after the bombing, my father's family decorated their car with a fake American flag, painted USA all over the car, and made their way to Moulin, crossing into unoccupied Vichy. From there, they fled to Lyon and onto Marseilles. They crossed the border into Spain, which was a “non-belligerent” nation, in August of 1941.



Refugees on the infamous *Navemar*, Public Domain

At the port of Cadiz, they bribed the captain of the now infamous SS *Navemar* to secure their passage. They were extremely fortunate and obtained one of the two cabins available aboard the banana freighter.

The ship's passengers included 1,200 desperate Jewish refugees from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. One of the last ships to leave Europe, the *Navemar* almost failed to leave port because there were too few typewriters to issue visas for the many Jewish refugees aboard. The passage of these refugees had been secured by The Joint (The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee). Along with the livestock that was their only source of protein on the voyage, many of the *Navemar* passengers survived the crossing, sleeping above and below deck in conditions so deplorable that *The New York Times* quoted passengers as saying: "...as freight we were treated satisfactorily, but just freight not passengers...we could only stand this trip because it meant our salvation."

Nine weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor, the *Navemar*, with my father's family on board, finally arrived in Brooklyn Harbor. From September 1941 until he left for the army on Memorial Day of 1943, my father was a typical immigrant. He finished high school in New York and even began to take night classes.

Refugees, even those who were not yet citizens, were eligible for the draft and in 1943, my father,

who was not yet a citizen, was drafted. He became a citizen on March 1, 1944 while in the army.

Becoming One of the Ritchie Boys

My father, along with other refugee soldiers, was sent to Camp Ritchie in Maryland to be trained as an intelligence officer. The Ritchie Boys, as they were known, spoke a variety of European languages and knew the routines and customs of their former countries better than anyone else. My father was a typical Ritchie Boy as he was fluent in German and French as well as conversant in Spanish and Italian. Recognizing the skills of these immigrants, the American Army trained these refugee soldiers in interrogation, psychological warfare, and intelligence tactics so that they could return to Europe and ferret out Nazi war criminals.

While in the army, my father sent frequent letters home, chronicling his new life as a soldier. His letters were written on every available scrap of paper he could find---from army dossier paper to the Nazi stationery he purloined upon his return to Europe in 1945. Over the course of three and a half years he wrote over 700 letters home, describing everything from his training to interrogations he conducted to help locate and identify Nazi war criminals.

Return to Europe

Belgian Jews Being Rounded Up, Public Domain

Two weeks after Roosevelt died and just weeks before the end of the war in 1945 my father was sent to Europe as an interrogator. When he arrived he came face to face with the horror he would have endured had he not escaped. Seeing Hitler's far reaching devastation, he wrote what he called "Gulliver's Travels In The Country of Diamonds." His account interspersed the mundane with the horror of the Holocaust.

He was determined to make his way home to see what was left of their old lives. When he returned to Brussels five and a half years after he and his family had left, he had grown from a gangly teenager into an American Intelligence officer with movie star good looks.

Incredibly, when he returned to Brussels that December, to yet another building that the Wehrmacht had requisitioned as their headquarters during the war, he recovered most of his family's belongings. When he arrived he learned that the building's concierge, a pharmacist, and an old family friend had gone to great lengths to protect and keep his family's things. They had even endured an interrogation at the hands of the Gestapo at their infamous headquarters on Avenue Louise.

Barely twenty-one, my father was one of very few Jewish refugees who managed to reclaim a portion

of their former lives and finances. This gave his family a rare opportunity to regain a sense of financial and emotional stability. My father was able to return not only to his aunt's home but also to the apartment building from which his family had fled in 1941. Their house in Landau had been expropriated by the Nazis while the apartment building had been requisitioned by the German army which had used it as their headquarters during the war.

Like a Jewish John Wayne, passing through Landau, he reclaimed his ancestral home from its "new owners" and gave it to the occupying French government for their use.

His memories never blurred or faded over time but like many refugees and Holocaust survivors, he kept silent about his experiences, believing that the next generation should grow up unencumbered by the losses he, his parents, and sister had endured.

Nina Wolff Feld has pieced together her father's journey from Europe to America using the letters her father wrote to his family while in the American Army. She is completing a book about her father's experiences during World War II. You can visit her project [here](#) or [here](#) to learn more about it.

**Camp Ritchie,
Maryland, Public
Domain**

