

My War

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122,000 words

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Preface

When my father died at age 86, they said it was from “natural causes.” Technically, this meant they couldn’t find any specific organ—liver, heart, kidney, to pin his death on. My own opinion is that as time passed and his arthritis grew more severe, he got tired of spending life confined to a wheel chair or propped up in bed with his hands near useless.

Perhaps, too, he was tired of living alone. Not that he ever actually did, there were plenty of grandchildren by the time my mother died, and my sisters were constantly in and out of his house fixing things for him to eat. “Food he barely touched,” they confided.

I know he missed my mother, his life-long companion since the war. But she’d been dead for ten years by the time he died, her heart weakened like so many of the displaced by the constant stress during wartime. For she’d grown up in Germany, escaping just in time through France to the Channel Islands only to be trapped there forced into hiding during the German occupation. Surely if he were going to die of loneliness, he’d have passed away ten years earlier, shortly after she did.

“He wants to see you,” my sisters had told me repeatedly in the three months preceding his death, but I’d put him and them off for so many years, that I’d say, “Sure thing, this Sunday,” automatically and then forget about it when Sunday came.

“Never mind, he just wants to tell you his war stories.” My sister Ruby clearly had given up on me when she said this, but for once, my ears perked up. I’d always enjoyed my father’s war stories, tales of derring do he’d been telling me since I was five. He’d stopped though when I was in my teens. All right, he’d stopped when I stopped listening, when I wanted to do my own thing, with my friends, not his.

But now he lay in bed, fingers all knotted up with arthritis, as he dictated. “I want you to write down the story of my war, maybe publish it, you think.” He looked hopeful. “A tribute to your mother.”

I doubted the accuracy of this last, for I knew that for all the devotion he’d shown her, he’d a never-ending stream of other women he’d shown devotion to, at least on a temporary basis.

“So you’ll write it down,” he repeated eagerly, when he saw the thoughtful look on my face.

“Better than that,” I replied from my seat by his hospital bed and whipped out my brand new Dell with its brushed aluminum case that I occasionally polish unnecessarily with my sleeve, 520K RAM, and a 40 MB hard disk. ‘Course my ancient Quay 100, 64K RAM, no hard disk, just a 5 1/4” floppy, would have done every bit as well for word processing, but it wouldn’t have been as portable or as shiny.

And this is how this book came to be.

Book I. The Pilot

Chapter 1. My War

Now, I'm going to tell you about my war, my tiny part of World War II, right from the beginning. Sure, there is a much greater war to write about, with a far broader scope: World War II was fought on every continent but Antarctica. But I wasn't in the desert with Rommel and Montgomery, or on the Russian front when a million Russians died along with several hundred thousand Germans. And I wasn't in the Pacific fighting a constant rear guard action as the Brits fled Singapore, then Burma. Few Canadians were. My war was confined to England, France, Switzerland, and a tiny bit of Spanish airspace over the Pyrenees, and, oh yes, the airfields out at Châteauguay, Quebec and Camp Borden, Ontario where I did my basic. I'll tell you about them, too. And, I'll tell you about the Channel Islands where I met your mother. Claimed by France, these islands were claimed by England also, and, for a few brief unpleasant years, by Germany as well. I lived there twice: once, when I begat you while in a state of near amnesia, and once when I was in charge of the whole shebang.

Chapter 2. A Secular Jew in a Hostile Land

As a Jew growing up in Montreal, my principal memory is of how eager everyone was to remind me that I was a Jew. My uncles, my aunts, and, later, when we'd moved to a more accommodating neighborhood, my playmates. After my parents signed me up at the YM/YWHA (Young Man and Young Women's Hebrew Association), my father so I could learn to box, my mother so I could learn to dance, all my friends were Jewish. Soon, like them, I was an ardent Zionist.

But unlike many of them, I really wasn't much of a Jew, I mean from the religious point of view. My parents, like many of their generation, were secular Jews. That is, they were cultured—dabbled in the arts (abstract paintings on our walls), music (a piano in the living room, which my mother, who'd played for the silent movies, would play for us), literature (good books for them, and for me too, *Tom Sawyer* and *The Prince and the Pauper*), possessed a belief in the future of humanity (while keeping a wary eye on mankind's current behavior), and sprinkled their conversation with a few, a very few, Yiddish expressions.

Like all Jews, they had a near universal anti-Semitism to contend with. What they didn't have was religion.

I wasn't sent to Heder to learn Hebrew until I was 12 (and then only for a brief period as I prepared for my bar mitzvah), nor was I forced to listen to daily passages from the Torah. I had uncles who prayed three times a day, skullcaps on their heads, Tallits over their shoulders, Tefillins on their foreheads and wound round one arm, but my father and my mother, no.

At that time, Montreal had three school systems. These were religious rather than secular as in the States. Catholic schools for the French Canadians where instruction was in French, Catholic schools for the Irish (and a few other English-speaking nationalities), and Protestant schools for the English.

I went to the latter. We didn't have religious classes per se as the Catholic schools did, it was more a matter of atmosphere. I remember walking one morning into my first grade classroom, eager to learn—most first graders are—and being told in a chorus by my fellow students that I couldn't stay, I must go home. "It's a Jewish holiday," they cried. I shook my head, puzzled, what holiday was that? Why had I not been told about it? My classmates led me to the official school calendar, where one might see that two and sometimes three days in a row were marked with the letters j.h. In the current week, only one day, the present one was marked. "It's a Jewish holiday today, see."

I returned home, to my mother's surprise, and informed her that it was a Jewish holiday. "What holiday is it, mom?" She shook her head; she had no idea. "Something to do with the harvest, or maybe the planting, or maybe it has something to do with Torah."

Don't get me wrong; we did observe two of the major religious holidays, sort of—Yom Kippur and Passover—just none of the minor ones. On Yom Kippur both my parents would fast, and, when I was a small child, I would fast too, though it might be only till lunchtime. During Passover, I would play the part of the youngest and only child and be allowed to ask the four questions.

Just as the Jews were a minority within the Protestants, so the Protestants were a minority within the larger Catholic population of Montreal. The exception were certain "cities within the city," largely Protestant communities, where Jews were unwelcome,

Hampstead for one, Mount Royal, and Westmont. (The latter, distinctly upper-class, had just been penetrated by the Bronfman family, bootleggers in the 1920's, who owned Seagram.)

I don't recall being harassed by my classmates because of my religion, nor did I sense any hostility emanating from their parents when I went to play at my classmates' homes. But I knew anti-Semitism was present if only through remarks made by my mother and father.

My contacts with Catholics were oblique. They ran a store, or lived on my street, or, when I was older, they gave me a lift when I was hitchhiking.

Some Catholics were wary, looking for horns. Many a Catholic priest, particularly in rural Quebec, would devote a Sunday sermon to the iniquities of the Jews. Christ killers? It was the Romans for Christ's sake; have those priests no scholarship?

Of course, a Jesuit-educated Catholic would not have made this mistake, but they, too, thought there was something special about the Jew and would always be examining you for signs. Of what I was never sure, and only if they knew you were Jewish.

In my entire life, only one man ever identified me as a Jew and he was newly arrived from Xingjian, the Western-most province of China. He didn't look Chinese, more like a Turk, and explained that this was because he was descended from the raiders of Genghis Kahn as all the Turkamen peoples were. Having told me this, he announced without hesitation, "And you are a Russian Jew."

But as I say, he was the only one to identify me so, apart from my relatives who, of course, knew what I was.

My father had already Anglicized our name twice from its Hebrew origins to Friedgut and then to Freygood, which could have been anything. Norwegian perhaps, wasn't Frey one of their Gods?

I had brown eyes, long eyelashes (when young), and straight dark brown hair. I could have been Irish, or German, or (and this only if you were from Azerbaijan or Xingjian province) a Jew.

When it became evident to one and all that Canada would enter the War as a British ally, the latent French-Canadian anti-Semitism once again emerged.

The reasoning in this instance was rather tortuous. The French-Canadian's ties to Europe were with France. They still felt a strong hostility toward the English, though they'd been living side-by-side with English-speaking Canadians for 400 years. They wanted no part of an alliance with Britain and its Queen. So what if Germany persecuted Jews, the Jews were terrible people (present company excepted). As early as 1939, the government of Quebec informed the Canadian Prime Minister, McKenzie King, that they would resist any draft. And when, very late in the War, the draft was finally instituted, the Mayor of Montreal went to jail for his protests.

But long before this happened, back when war was still just a possibility, I'd already joined the air corps, eager to crush Hitler and, not incidentally, to learn to fly.

Chapter 3. Basic Training

In 1937, I was 17, four years older than the Royal Canadian Air Force. I was eager to join the latter, not because I was particularly interested in the military—there was no history of the military in my family, although the uniform was somewhat of an attraction—what would girls think of it?—but because I wanted to fly.

I'd dreamed of flying for years, beginning with those dreams that signal the onset of puberty. In my case, those dreams had become daytime fantasies, and scale models of airplanes, and all the books on flight I could lay my hands on. I could probably have named every major pilot of World War I on the German or British side.

I might well have signed up the instant my final exams were completed had not cooler heads prevailed. "Enlisted is not for you, you want to be an officer.", "A Jewish boy can be a doctor, a lawyer, or a shipping clerk; you wanna be a shipper?" advice that I ignored, and "A pilot has to be an officer," which caught my attention, instantly, though it proved not to be completely true.

"Two years of college, then you can join. That's what it takes." And two years of college was all it did take to be an officer in those days, so off I went to McGill, to take the courses all freshmen had to take, along with as much math and science as I could fit in my schedule.

Now, I'm sure what my uncles had in mind was that with two years of college, I'd want four, then I'd want to study medicine, and by that time I'd have forgotten all about my silly desire to join the military. But by 1939, Hitler had made his intentions clear, to all but Neville Chamberlain, and my uncles were as firm as I in their desire to see me serve my country as they had been that I become a doctor. "Peter will show that Hitler bastard."

With two years of college under my belt, I was having second thoughts—my uncles were right in thinking that the relative independence of a college education would have an appeal for me—but I knew I was a Jew whatever an orthodox rabbi might think of a boy who had barely made it through his bar mitzvah and was seldom to be seen in the synagogue. In fact, once I'd given the matter serious thought, I'd as much desire to shoot down that Hitler bastard as the most patriotic of my uncles.

The Air Force was glad to have me, though it turned out it was for all the wrong reasons. I didn't find this out though until after six weeks of useless drills, and sleeping in a barracks, and wearing ill-fitting uniforms.

Basic training in the Air Force is not much different from basic training in the Army. You even get to carry a pack, though there's not much you can put in it. Your head is shaved, you go to bed when told, you get up when told. You march endlessly. You are inspected. Bloody boring. When do we get to see an airplane?

Basic training was divided into four phases. First was introduction to the service. We filled out numerous forms, uniforms were issued, we received innumerable inoculations, were taught who and when to salute, (rule of thumb: If it moves, salute it; if it is still, white-wash it), and we began our physical training. Plus intensive instruction on how to wear, spit and polish uniform and boots, close order drill (marching at 140 paces per minute), more physical training, introduction to firearms and rank structure, more drill (marching at 160 paces per minute), more physical training.

Phase Two consisted of a classroom introduction to military law, organization and history of the service, military writing, and map reading, plus more drill, firearms, more

physical training, and aptitude tests. In the latter, I learned I had the aptitude, if not the willingness, to be a navigator. But more about this later.

As the weeks progressed, we took turns leading the marching drills and calling out the fitness exercises. That is to say, we were given leadership training. Whoopee.

We didn't go up in a plane, but we got to pack and unpack our parachutes. At last, a useful skill. And we practiced jumping off walls into sand, absorbing the shock with our knees.

Phase Three included radio use, aircraft recognition, more physical training (the tired serviceman is the reliable serviceman), parade drill (if it has gray hair, it's at least a squadron leader), and the theory of flight.

An unheralded part of our course required a kid who as an only child had always had his own room to adapt to sharing close quarters with a dozen other smelly males. (We weren't that smelly; a guy who didn't shower often enough got hosed down. A man who snored would be placed under his bunk; a man who wet his bed—it happened—would be ignored.)

My bunk mates consisted of a couple of fellows I'd seen if not known at McGill plus Norman Feldman who because of his name had sat next to me in my college classes and sat next to me in classes now, three Quebecois from the l'Université de Montréal, (thoroughly pissed off once they discovered all our classes were to be in English), a chap from Hull on the western edge of Quebec province, one from The University of Fredericton, one from Dalhousie, and one whose family lived in Montreal but had done his four years of college—yes, a college graduate—at Queens in Ontario. We bunked together, ate together, had classes together, by far too much togetherness. Like being in college (though the classes were more like high school) only you didn't get to go home at the end of the day.

A Phase Four existed too, a flight school located in Camp Borden Ontario, but only if one passed through the previous phases successfully.

All proceeded according to some intricate schedule. We weren't privy to the schedule, of course; this wasn't McGill where you knew that on Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 9:00 to 10:00 am you'd be in English Lit. One did what one was told. One anticipated that someday one would have subordinates who would do what one told them.

As always with the armed services, I did not get to be what I wanted to be. What I wanted to be was be a pilot. What they wanted me to be was a navigator.

Sit in a darkened compartment looking at instruments, playing with a slide rule, when I could be piloting the plane, one with the universe?

"We're desperate for you, people with a solid math background. What good's a bombing mission if we can't reach the target?"

They were impressed it seems by my math courses, math and physics, both. If I'd known in advance that they would be, I'd have studied English Literature. "You want to be a pilot? You'll do what you're bloody well told. Besides, you wear glasses."

"I don't really need them." To prove my point, I immediately removed my glasses and tucked them away in a shirt pocket.

"Thankfully, as a navigator, you're free to use them, bent over your charts and what not."

"I really thought . . ."

"Impressive your math skills. Ideal navigator."

And that as they say was that, at least for the duration of my basic training, much of which was done in the confines of an oversized windowless shell of a plane that never actually got off the ground.