

Sons and Soldiers: The Untold Story of the Jews Who Escaped the Nazis and Returned with the US Army to Fight Hitler

Bruce Henderson (Harper Collins, 2017), 423 pp., notes, *dramatis personae*, appendix, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by David A. Foy

Of the millions of American men who fought in Germany during World War II to defeat Hitler's Festung Europa, only a minority were of Jewish extraction, and only a miniscule number of those were of German birth. Bruce Henderson's latest book, *Sons and Soldiers*, focuses on this sometimes overlooked minority, who came to the United States in the 1930s to escape Nazism and preserve their family names. Despite their limited numbers, they would make a disproportional contribution to the US war effort in general—and the intelligence war in particular.

In mid-1942, early in the US involvement in World War II, the US Army began to recruit and train these select individuals by means of an eight-week-long training session at a newly-constructed, \$5 million hush-hush facility in rural Maryland known as Ft. Ritchie. Here these ethnic German Jews (who spoke German and often other European languages, as well) were trained as translators or interrogators. Experts in the fine art of eliciting critical intelligence information from their captured former countrymen, they were then assigned to frontline Army units in Europe. In return for their service, the recruits—known ever since as the Ritchie Boys—were frequently promoted rapidly and placed on the fast-track for US citizenship. The fact that these men had been recruited into military intelligence was a closely guarded secret for many years—as was the training they experienced at Ft. Ritchie, where in the early days the locals besieged authorities with panicked phone calls about men in German uniforms and vehicles spotted in the area.

The first few chapters of *Sons and Soldiers* focus on the family life and coming of age of approximately a half-dozen of the Ritchie Boys who, by various means, were spirited out of Nazi Germany before they could be consigned to internment or concentration camps and purposely forgotten or eliminated. The key to fleeing the Third Reich proved to be the correct combination of timing, refugee quotas, daring and determination, and, often, Jewish refugee organizations that helped the Ritchie Boys find relatives in the United States who

could sponsor their young charges. The “luck and pluck” demonstrated by these young boys and men and their families, together with their determination to survive the horrors of Nazi Germany, would serve them well during their military training and their wartime service. Some of their stories are highlighted in the book, including those of Martin Selling, who survived Dachau to become a Ritchie Boy; Werner Angress, whose ticket out of Nazi Germany proved to be his answering an Army newspaper ad seeking foreign-language capable soldiers to apply to the Military Intelligence (MI) Training Center (no one referred to it openly as Ft. Ritchie at the time) as translators; and Victor Brombert, whose French-language capabilities led to his being promoted to master sergeant at the tender age of 19, after only five months in the Army. Though the Ritchie Boys were constrained by strict orders not to divulge their MI assignment, that restriction was made up for, at least in part, by the operational independence they enjoyed as members of an elite club. A letter from Gen. Dwight Eisenhower, which instructed military commanders to fully cooperate with the Ritchie Boys in the pursuit of their critical duties, attests to their privileged status.

Although the stand-up of the Ritchie Boys occurred early in the war, the identification, recruitment, and extensive training required took time. Thus, it was not until the D-Day assault and the campaigns that followed that the interrogators and translators were able to demonstrate their considerable value. Farmed out to different units in combat, the Ritchie Boys focused on satisfying the largely tactical, short-term information needs of those units in contact with the enemy by immediately interrogating newly-captured German soldiers who were dealing with the shock of surrender, or those who had been in the MP-guarded POW cages for only a brief time. Thus, some Ritchie Boys found themselves attached to the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions, and others to various armored and infantry divisions—including the ill-fated 106th Infantry Division that would bear the brunt of the German surprise offensive during the Battle of the Bulge.

All statements of fact, opinion, or analysis expressed in this article are those of the author. Nothing in the article should be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations.

As the author points out repeatedly with specific examples, the Ritchie Boys were able to elicit critical tactical information from German POWs that contributed to US battlefield victories and resulted in the saving of US lives. For example, 82nd Airborne Division member Werner Angress persuaded a POW to provide a map of a recently planted German minefield, an intelligence coup the veracity of which was proven by Angress's ensuring that the POW first went through the minefield. Another Ritchie Boy, Martin Selling, enlisted the help of a captured German medic to sketch a map of German positions that was then provided to the US regimental commander, who used the information to decimate the medic's former unit; for that critical piece of intelligence, the commander nominated Selling for a commission. Still another Ritchie Boy, Stephan Lewy, elicited from a surrendered German general officer tactical information that was used to destroy the infantry division he had commanded.

The Ritchie Boys continued their contributions to the war effort not only in the breakout following the Normandy invasion but also in the hard fighting in Holland and in the Hürtgen Forest. In Holland, Manny Steinfeld was part of a three-man order-of-battle team with the mission of providing intelligence support for the entire 82nd Airborne Division. During the Germans' December 1944 Battle of the Bulge offensive in the Hürtgen Forest, 28th Infantry Division assignee Victor Brombert argued that US assessments of the low morale and determination of the German Army were grossly underestimated: the 30,000 casualties the US Army suffered as a result of its encounter with the 25 German infantry and armored divisions (comprising 500,000 troops and equipped with 600 tanks) served as tragic confirmation of his assessment.

As US forces swept into Germany, most of the Ritchie Boys remained with their assigned units, operations discussed in a chapter Henderson appropriately titles, "Return to Deutschland." As the German defeat became more imminent, some of the Ritchie Boys found themselves focusing on strategic-level intelligence collection—for example, Guy Stern was among 24 German-speaking interrogators assigned to the US First Army, a force of 300,000 men. As Stern moved among the internees in the POW cage, guarded by 500 MPs, he queried them about the German railroad system and German use of chemical warfare, among other topics. When faced with Nazi fanatics or those who were simply uncooperative, Stern adopted the persona of brutal Russian interrogator "Com-

missar Krukov," to whom Stern threatened to turn over tight-lipped German captives. The threat of handing them over to the hated and dreaded Russians prompted most POWs to answer Stern's questions fully and accurately.

While the interrogators and translators were trained and ready to deal with their captive former countrymen, they were not prepared for what they found in the concentration and extermination camps in Germany. Ritchie Boy Capt. Herbert Gottschalk was the first of the interrogators to encounter the horrors of Buchenwald, which the nearby US 6th Armored Division did not even realize was there until a group of German captives was attacked and beaten by men in striped clothing—Jewish and other inmates from the camp. A colleague of Gottschalk arrived the next day, and Guy Stern three days later. When the men began interrogating former camp guards, officials, and nearby townspeople, they were stunned to hear repeated claims of ignorance and failure to take responsibility for what had occurred close to them over the preceding months and years. When they were not dealing with the mentally and psychologically taxing extermination camps, some of the Ritchie Boys were enlisted to help in other ways—Manny Steinfeld, for example, translated the one-paragraph surrender document into German when the 21st Army capitulated to Maj. Gen. James Gavin, commander of the 82nd Airborne Division.

Only in the last month or so of the European War did the Ritchie Boys gradually learn the fate of two of their own. On 7 April 1945, German captain Curt Bruns was tried for the deaths of Ritchie Boys Kurt R. Jacobs and Murray Zappler, who had been separated after their capture on 16 December 1944 and questioned by Bruns. When Bruns learned that Jacobs and Zappler were German Jews and had, earlier that same day, interrogated German troops in German, he announced to his men, "Juden haben kein Recht, in Deutschland zu legen." (the Jews have no right to live in Germany) (280) He then conferred with one of his NCOs, who gathered other German soldiers who—despite Jacobs's plea that he and Zappler be treated according to the Geneva Conventions, as they had treated the Germans they'd interrogated earlier that day—marched the two captives into a field and executed them with a volley of rifle fire. Bruns was found guilty and himself executed by firing squad on 14 June 1945, in the same uniform he had worn the day Jacobs and Zappler were killed—all the time protesting his innocence.

In the immediate postwar period, the Ritchie Boys remained with their assigned units but still found useful work—Stephan Lewy, for example, volunteered to round up Nazi Party members in Aschaffenberg. Although the work soon became impracticable and the program was ended in 1948, it afforded Lewy and his fellow interrogators and translators the opportunity to witness and intervene in the inevitable “street meets” between SS/Gestapo members and their victims. On one occasion, Lewy and a fellow GI were walking down the street when a woman ran up to them, screaming, “Verhafte Ihn! Verhafte diesen Mann!” (Arrest that man!) (356). Military policemen did so, only to later discover their captive was a sadistic physician who had worked at one of the extermination camps. The other activity of some of the Ritchie Boys during this interregnum between war and peace was trying to find family members and learn their fates. Although some found surviving relatives, others learned of their deaths from abuse, disease, or gassing.

Henderson deserves much credit for researching and writing another little-known but significant account of World War II, which makes an interesting if heart-rending read. He is the author of more than 20 non-fiction books on a wide range of topics, including naval adventures and history, serial killers, North Pole expeditions, and Vietnam and World War II-era POWs. His writing is polished and engaging, and the depth of his research into archival sources in particular is an indication of his great curiosity and desire to tell a largely unknown and compelling story. Bonuses of *Sons and Soldiers* are the profusion of black-and-white photographs, especially from the US Army Signal Corps, which help readers better know the Ritchie Boys, and the particularly-welcome *Dramatis Personae* section at the back, where we learn what happened to

them after the war. Several received doctoral degrees and spent decades in college teaching, another became a CPA, and yet another a multi-millionaire businessman. Equally appreciated is the appendix which lists all 1,985 of the German-born US soldiers who attended the eight-week military intelligence training course at Ft. Ritchie between 1942 and 1945. Buried within the book is also the contemporary message that it is important to develop rapport with POWs, and the corollary that, in the experiences of the Ritchie Boys, violent interrogation accomplishes little.

Criticisms of *Sons and Soldiers* are few—readers looking for the contribution of the interrogators and translators to the war effort will have to be patient, as the author discusses several chapters of family history before getting to Ft. Ritchie and then fighting through Europe with them. In the more minor category, Henderson gives conflicting dates for the execution of Curt Bruns (14 June 1945 in the text on page 352; 6 June 1945 in the caption describing the stark photo of Bruns’s being tied to the stake for his execution on page 353), and the book’s subtitle, while accurate, is excessive. Readers with a passing knowledge of World War II will also realize that the figure “250,000 British and Canadian bombers” (368) involved in attacking Hildesheim, Germany, on 22 March 1945 is likely a typo, off by a factor of 1,000 (the British Empire produced only 33,000 bombers during the entire war, and other accounts refer to 250 or 280 bombers in that raid).

Readers awaiting a new, significant, and compelling read from the never-exhausted well of World War II subjects will find *Sons and Soldiers* enjoyable and satisfying, one which ably addresses yet another aspect of the confrontation between the Jewish experience and the conflagration of World War II.



