

THE STORY OF DAVID:
A Century Of Life



INTRODUCTION

David Aaron Solomon is not the most likely candidate to have his life immortalized in print. He is not famous or infamous. He has not done any of the conventionally "great" things which those depicted in biographies and autobiographies have, like start wars, lead nations or build cities. Other than his extremely long life of 98 years, there doesn't seem to be much that would distinguish him from his peers. Like so many other men of his time, he learned a trade in Europe, then immigrated to this country to find greater opportunity and establish a family, on whom he bestowed the fruits of his improvement.

The very fact that this American success story is so common and such a pervasive feature of this country's ethnic heritage is exactly the reason why this man's life is so significant, and as worthy of being recounted as anyone's. David is one of the few survivors of the generation of immigrants who settled in this country and, through lineage, account for over forty percent of its present population. His longevity and his experiences' cannot help but symbolize the turmoil, hope and joy of that era and those people.

From the oppressions of life in Europe, mostly at the hands of his fanatical father, who was enmeshed in the rigidity of orthodox Judaism and wished the same for David, to the brutal horrors he witnessed while serving in World War One, David is truly a survivor. He is a survivor in the most exalted sense, because the years of pain, upheaval and hardship have not scarred or embittered him. He is able to honestly say that he is content with how his life turned out; he dwells on the happiness, not the pain.

Most of the days of David's life have been filled with work. Before he really knew what life was, while still a boy, he took the work ethic for his own and never stopped to question its validity. He was always sure of it. His long hours working as a tailor, first for others, then in his own business, did not represent the drudgery it does today for so many people who are dissatisfied with their jobs and the nine to five routine. David enjoyed his livelihood and knew the hard work would yield lasting benefits, for both him and his family. He certainly was right. His amazingly positive attitudes towards work and diligence are a lesson for everyone who has even an inkling of dissatisfaction with what

they do for a living.

The account of David's life that follows is sketchy on specific dates and details, but this is to be expected. A lot has happened to David in a lot of years. Many things are forgotten or just vaguely remembered. Also, one must realize that during the time period in which much of his life has taken place, the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, the communications revolution was nascent. Europe and the United States were just shedding the tradition of informal communication and documentation. Most people then, David included, viewed the events in their personal lives, as well as the world, in terms of their immediate significance. Unlike in our automated age of relentless documentation, preserving happenings and events for posterity was not nearly as important in David's time.

In keeping with the spirit of those times and David's disregard for structured documentation of names, dates and places, this biography will be somewhat of an informal history of the man's life: complete, but not scientifically precise. Ultimately though, nothing will be lost in using this informal means to tell David's story, because the very human and honest qualities of this man transcend any meticulous chronology of his life.

David is, as he says, "In the last stages." When he dies, though, he will be much more than a memory in his children's lives. They are imbued with his values. Most likely, their children will also retain some of these values. David's stability, benevolence and moderation, core values of the man, are like pieces of him that his two children, Herbert and Shirley will always carry with them and never relinquish. David prides himself on teaching, not forcing on them, what he always felt to be the best way to live. Thus the success story continues.

CHAPTER IV

By 1917, the war that was raging across Europe was three years old and showed no signs of letting up. The United States initially declared itself neutral, but a combination of factors made entry into the war inevitable. Wartime trade to both sides was far from equal, with the overwhelming amount going to Britain and her allies. Another factor which helped push the United States into the war was the threat of random German submarine attacks, one of which claimed the *Lusitania*. On top of all this, Britain was pouring a steady stream of anti-German propaganda into the United States.

Before 1917, the war in Europe was no more than a distant thundering to David and his friends. But as the pressure for the United States to go to war built up, David realized he might be called to fight. He did not want to go to war. He had no desire for glory or honor, but every day the paper carried ominous news and war seemed imminent for the United States.

In the spring of 1917, the United States declared war on the Central powers, Germany among them, and began sending troops to Europe in June. By fall of that year, David was still working, but most of his friends and acquaintances had either enlisted or been drafted. It was a lonely and difficult time for him. He spent many long and sleepless nights thinking about the war and whether he would be drafted.

On more than one occasion, war-ready acquaintances of David's kidded him about his civilian status and called him a slacker. As cruel as this seemed, David himself sometimes thought the same thing. Finally, with the pressures of seeing all his friends go to war and feeling left out, along with the looming, seemingly inevitable draft hanging over him, David enlisted. His patriotism was no small factor in his decision either. Since returning to the United States and subsequently becoming a citizen while still in New York, David felt a strong attachment to the United States. He considered himself an American. Still, David feared the unknown. The United States press censored the horrors of trench warfare and very few people in the States knew what was happening in the war. Along with his fear of the unknown, David had a general distaste for war in any form. "War

is no good anytime to anyone," he says.

Soon after enlisting, David went down south for basic training. Within the first two weeks of boot camp, his sergeant found out he was unfit for combat. This was revealed during a drill in which the sergeant gave David's regiment the order "about face," and David stood still. He could not hear the command! This was due to a hearing loss in his left ear, the result of a childhood operation in which a tumor was removed from behind the ear.

David was excused from combat, which was no small relief to him because he was scared of the firing line. He was especially glad he had avoided combat after he got to France and saw what the front was actually like.

After about three months of basic training, David was shipped to St. Luzerne, France, with a company of 5000 men, for non-combat duty. He remembers the weather as being constantly bleak and always raining. The ugly weather went hand-in-hand with David's ugly duties.

Private David Solomon was attached to the Quartermaster Corps, a mop up crew that traveled across France and scavenged the trenches after battles for reusable items of clothing. These salvaged war duds, after being shipped to a cleaning plant, repaired if necessary and dyed green to remove blood stains, were given to German prisoners of war. In some ways, David's job was worse than actual combat. Although far less dangerous and frightening, David probably saw more death than did most people in the war, or for that matter, than most people ever see in a whole lifetime.

To understand how grim and grisly David's job was, one has to know something about how World War One was fought, specifically the phenomenon of trench warfare.

World War One was the first fully mechanized war. The introduction of automatic weapons (previously used in the Spanish-American War, but not on a widespread level), aerial warfare, poisonous gas and fragmenting grenades created a quantity and quality of carnage previously inconceivable. Ten million people died in the "great war."

The most gruesome aspect of the war, which caused so much death, was trench warfare. This was how most of the battles were fought. In this absurd strategy, each side constructed long, fortified trenches opposite each other on a long battle field. At any

given time, one or both sides would launch a frontal assault on the enemy trench, in which a human wave would attempt to reach the other side and lob grenades in their trenches and draw them out for hand-to-hand combat. This tactic, which required thousands of men to be exposed in open ground to machine guns and grenades, led to enormous casualties. It was not uncommon for 100,000 men to die in a single battle.

To draw troops from their trenches, mustard gas was sometimes used. This was a powerful, acid-like chemical that seared flesh and damaged the nerve system and internal organs. One particularly horrid tactic used to attack trenches was to flood them. When this happened, many soldiers would drown, and sometimes rats would eat their flesh.

The sickening irony of trench warfare was that so little, in the way of territory or strategic advantage was ever gained. It was merely a bloody war of attrition.

David never saw the battles take place, he just witnessed their aftermath. Barely pausing to scratch their heads and wonder how God could have deserted the human race in such a monstrous way, he and his mates waded through the trenches, sometimes knee-deep in bodies, and unceremoniously tugged coats, shoes and other usable garments from corpses that were sometimes still warm.

David was a good soldier and took orders well. He did his job with no complaints or problems, as he had always done. But even he could never really get used to the amazing brutality which he encountered. It was just not something he could block out. At first he described it as "easy work" and said that it did not bother him--that he got used to it. But this just was not so. When pressed for details about his war experiences, he became visibly shaken and declined to speak further of the period. This 18 months in France, steeped in death, is a very bad memory for David; probably the worse experience of his life. "Even today I get bad dreams," he says. Of course, to deal with all the death for as long as he did, he had to become somewhat numb to what he saw, but only a robot or a subhuman could be completely unaffected by so much blood, bullet holes and rigid men piled grotesquely on top of one another.

Nothing can ever really prepare a man for something like the mass slaughter and all-encompassing confusion of World War

One. It destroyed not only bodies, but an entire social and political world order. The iconoclastic ideas of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche had hinted at the eruptions and fragmentation that were to define the twentieth century. World War One was the conflagration that vindicated many of their dark assessments of humanity and history.

The chaos and destruction of the war was reflected in the radically innovative art of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot. None of this mattered to David though when he was stepping over bodies with a pile of coats slung over his arm. He was one lone soldier in the midst of the most turmoil humanity had ever known and he just wanted to go home and blot the ugliness from his memory.

The war wasn't all scavenging and dead bodies for David. He and his friends often visited the towns near to where they were assigned. Although he did not engage in the whoring and drinking that his friends did, he enjoyed the respite from the battlefield and the chance to see another part of the world. Sometimes at night there were vaudeville shows, put on especially for the troops. This vaudeville among the ruins hardly changed the situation for David, but it did provide a brief escape and he appreciated that.

While in France, David wrote to his parents regularly. His letters, along with all outgoing mail, had to be censored. They did not relish the thought of their son as a soldier, but took it calmly and believed he would be alright. "It wasn't happy news for them," says David, "but they couldn't do anything about it. They never told me not to go."

At one point during his tour of duty, David was given a 10 day furlough and used the time to visit his family in London. Everyone was glad to see him and pumped him for stories about life as a soldier. This brief visit was the only time David would see his parents or his hometown ever again.

The war ended in late 1918 and David's company stayed in France for a while afterwards, finishing their grim tasks. The fear and tension was greatly lessened for David, because he knew he would soon be home where he could banish the horrors he had seen to the depths of his mind.

The first stop for David after France was New York where he and the others were greeted by a massive ticker tape parade. The glory and exultation of that spectacle was certainly pleasing to David, but it seemed hollow and unrealistic compared to what

he had just been through.

A few days after landing in New York, David went back to Pittsburgh. With an honorable discharge and a good conduct stripe, David the veteran was eager to embrace civilian life once again.

The transition from military to civilian life was easy for David. He moved back into his old apartment and got a new job in a very short time. But he was still nervous from the war. He found that little, insignificant things would rattle him. During his first month back, he woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat more than once. People asked him questions and prodded him for war stories, but he wanted only to leave the war behind.

"I was just glad to be left alone, and forget about the past," he says. "I didn't care for war stories. They just brought back bad memories...You came back alive that was enough."

Despite David's distaste for war memories, he joined the Organization of Jewish Soldiers, a religious and social club. He certainly did not want to be reminded of the trenches and the bodies, but he felt it was necessary to retain some kind of human tie with others who had seen what he had. Perhaps he needed to convince himself that all of it wasn't just a long nightmare, a lost weekend that lasted a year and a half.

