

Four Miracles That Saved My Life

by Leon Horowitz, 397-F

Do you believe in miracles? I do. I guess it depends on how you define a miracle. My definition is the occurrence of an incident over which you have no control that has a very beneficial and unexpected outcome. You may define a miracle differently, but this works for me.

Miracle #1

It was a very cold, bright moonlit night when I emerged from the potato cellar and found myself staring down the barrel of a German burp gun. My headquarters squad had taken refuge in the potato cellar of a farmhouse in Rimling, Alsace, as the Germans, on the third day of their attack in last gasp Operation *NORDWIND*, overran the town with the aid of Panzer tanks and SS infantry. As we emerged from the potato cellar after being threatened with grenades the SS Oberlieutenant bragged, "We will push you back into the English Channel." My eyes were on his trigger finger and I said my last prayers, expecting the worst. When I emerged from the cellar I had my hands up, the Germans knocked off my helmet (to them it was a sign of defiance) and I said, "Nicht Shiessen" (don't shoot) as I had heard many captured Germans say. As I waited for the death rattle of the burp gun the GI behind me came out with his hands up and shouted, "Nicht Scheissen" (don't shit). The Germans broke out laughing and slapping their knees and repeating "nicht scheissen, nicht scheissen." That broke the tension of the moment, the burp gun was silent and my life was saved.

Miracle #2

Much publicity has been given to the use of human shields in the Gulf War and the bombing campaign in Serbia but it's really nothing new. It has been done in all wars. Immediately after the capture I was placed on top of a Tiger tank along with our lieutenant, Leo Rabinowitz, affectionately known as "Rabbi." The town had not been entirely taken by the Germans and there was still some fighting to do. As the tank advanced we came under heavy small arms fire but neither Rabinowitz nor I were hit. When the town was secured we were taken off the tank and put on a truck to the rear with many German wounded and dead.

Miracle #3

After interrogation all captives were marched to a train station and loaded on a boxcar. All the boxcar stories you have heard about are true. There were so many of us crowded in we couldn't lie down. There were no toilets or any water. Wounded and dead were crammed in together. The train stopped in Frankfurt and the rail yard sustained an Allied bombing. The boxcar next to mine was hit and most were killed including Lt. Leo Rabinowitz.

Miracle #4

After four days we got to Bad Orb, Germany, a spa village in the Black Mountains. We had wooden barracks, wooden bunks, German dog tags and one rough blanket. Heat was from one potbellied wood-burning stove. There were enough body lice so that everyone had his share. After a few days the Germans ordered the Jews among the American POWs to fall out separately the next morning at body count. We were segregated in a separate barracks in a separate barbed wire compound. The "Yuden Barrake"—a ghetto within a prison camp. The rations were so meager that I lost weight rapidly. In February the Germans said that a work detail, "Arbeits Konmando," was to be shipped out and everyone in the Yuden Barrake was to go. When that time came I was left behind because I was unconscious on the floor with pneumonia. Instead I was dragged to the Krankenhaus (sick house) where captured medics cared for me as best they could without medication. When I recovered after going through the crisis of pneumonia, they showed me the coffin that had been made with my name on it. A majority of those shipped out died of sickness or starvation or were shot while trying to escape. Call it "Fate." Call it "Coincidence." Call it whatever you like; I call it the "Four Miracles That Saved My Life."

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