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GEORGE KATZMAN: LIONIZING A LIBERATOR

Professor George Katzman passed away last week, just a few hours before *Yom HaShoah* - Holocaust Memorial Day. His death also came two weeks after Florida Governor Rick Scott came to the David Posnack Jewish Community Center in Davie to ceremoniously sign legislation creating a Holocaust Memorial on the



State Capital Grounds Complex in Tallahassee. Regrettably, George couldn't be present at this historic event; by then, he was in the throes of his final decline. Nonetheless, Professor Katzman lived to be 96; up until a few weeks before his passing, he was still a student in my "All Politics All the Time" class at Florida International University, the place where he taught international relations for more than 30 years. (About seven years ago, I

was honored to take over his *Great Decisions* course, at which the professor became a student.) Though wheelchair bound and needing oxygen, his zest for life and learning continued to shine up until his last breath. Pretty remarkable for a man who, in his own words, ". . . almost died five times on a single day in 1944."

To blithely say "Well, 96 is a long, long life," I respond with two thoughts: First, that few people have any idea precisely how long 96 years really are; George

Katzman's life spanned 40% of the life of the United States. To get the merest glimmer of how long George's life was, consider that when he was born in New York to immigrant parents:

- ▣ There were still Civil War Veterans living in his parents' apartment building.
- ▣ The only "Roosevelt" anyone had ever heard of was Teddy; by the end of the year his distant cousin Franklin would run a losing race for Vice President.
- ▣ The most popular movie stars were Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks, Lilian Gish and Wallace Reid.
- ▣ The year George was born, F. Scott Fitzgerald published *This Side of Paradise* and Edith Wharton scored big with *The Age of Innocence*.
- ▣ A decent annual income was about \$850.00, and a brand new Model T cost \$295.00.
- ▣ A prefabricated 7-room home could be purchased through the Sears catalogue for \$1,250.00
- ▣ Babe Ruth had yet to play his first game as a member of the New York Yankees.

Indeed, it was a long, long time ago. George was a child of the "Roaring Twenties," came of age during the Great Depression, went off to war before his 20th birthday, survived, got married to Ellen, the love of his life for nearly 65 years (they met on a ship heading for France where both were going to study at The Sorbonne), raised their two children, Richard and Susan during the Ozzie and Harriet/Leave it to Beaver years, and begin a new life in South Florida more than 60 years ago. In his forties, George became a *bar mitzvah*; in his fifties he earned a B.A. and M.A. in international relations and then went on to teach for years and years. George and Ellen loved traveling the world (but please, never as part of a tour group), playing bridge, becoming immersed in his *shul*, Beth Torah, and enjoying life. But something was gnawing at George for years; his experience as a liberator.

As a young man, PFC Katzman was a member of Gen. Patton's Third Army, where he served as a rifleman, German/Yiddish translator and occasional photographer. On April 29, 1945, PFC Katzman, then aged 25 years, 2 months, 3 weeks and 5 days, was one of the soldiers responsible for shooting the lock off the gate at the Dachau Concentration Camp. As one of the few soldiers capable of speaking Yiddish, he became the one liberator that the cadaverous survivors could talk to. Imagine what it must have felt like - to be freed by the Allies, only to discover that the first soldier who spoke to them was a Jew - a Yiddish-speaking American Jew! It must have seemed as if the Messiah have come to save them. For George Katzman, what he saw and experienced had more than a profound effect on the rest of his life: "It also made me far more of a Jew than I had ever been before going off to war," he said on many occasions.

While liberating Dachau and Langwasser Lager, PFC Katzman took disturbing black-and-white photos of the stacked piles of half-naked bodies and the unwashed, shrunken survivors his battalion found. Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower had encouraged photographs and first-hand reports so no one could later deny what the soldiers had seen. After filing his photos with the Army, Katzman put his own copies in a box that he buried in his closet. He didn't take it out until years later, when he read that a university professor was denying the Holocaust had taken place. From that point on, Professor Katzman became a tireless witness, speaking of his experiences - of what was etched in his mind and troubling his sleep. "I had to speak out," George told a reporter for the *Miami Herald*. "There are too many deniers out there. I was one of thousands who saw what happened. But now there are few of us, and that bothers me." His experiences were, needless to say, both terrifying and transformative. He bore witness to the single-greatest act of mass murder ever perpetrated on this planet

George continued wearing his army dog tags until the last day of his life. He could still fit into - and would wear - the "Eisenhower Jacket" that he had worn 70 years ago. He devoted himself to telling several generations of young people precisely what happened; all with the hope that in his own small way, he could help stave off a recurrence of international madness.



There were 16,112,566 members of the American military in World War II. As of last month, the Department of Veterans' Affairs reports that 697,806 are still alive, and passing away at a rate of about 490 a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. This means that within five years, there won't be a single World War II veteran alive; no one left to bear witness to what "The Greatest Generation" was able to accomplish.

From time to time, people would call George Katzman a hero. He would always respond: "I was no hero; I just had a job to do . . . hopefully without getting myself killed in the process." To my way of thinking, it is no coincidence that his passing occurred just hours before Holocaust Memorial Day; in Yiddish, we would call it באַשערט (*b'shayrt*) - "fated" or "predestined." To my way of thinking, by permitting him to shuffle off this mortal coil on the precise day he did, G-d was placing an enormous exclamation point on the good professor's long, and immensely productive life.

And by the way, the second response to the statement "96 is certainly a long long life, I say this: for a man like George Katzman, 96 years wasn't nearly enough.

In the Biblical book of 1st Samuel (20:18) King Saul's son, Jonathan speaks to his best friend, the young David, who is about to flee in fear for his life. Jonathan says:

וַיֹּאמֶר-לוֹ יְהוֹנָתָן מָחָר הַדֵּשׁ וְנִפְקְדָהּ כִּי יִפָּקֵד מוֹשְׁבָהּ

Namely: "*And Jonathan said, tomorrow is the New Moon; you shall be missed for your seat will be empty.*" Indeed, *today* is the New Moon, and in class tomorrow, Professor Katzman shall be missed, for like David, *his* seat shall be empty . . .

Go in peace.

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