Legacy of Freedom

An alumnus' mission to preserve the experiences of veterans of World War II shines a spotlight on heroism that saved generations. His work and their courage changed hundreds of lives around the world.

By Kris Dreessen

Her first memories are snapshots — flashes in black and white. She is about 1 year old. She is watching people run. There is a big boom. Her mother is screaming as a soldier bursts in.

In the next, she and her mother are on a train. When it finally stops, her mother carries her into a cold, cold shower. Afterward, her mother lays her on the floor. Then, her mother is gone.

Over the years Lily Cohen has pieced together as much as she could after her father was shot and she and her mother were sent to the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in northwestern Germany. She knows her name; she knows she was born in Warsaw.

She knows that when her mother died, women in the camp she did not know cared for her. At age 4 or 5 she remembers being sent on another train in the final days of the war.

The Germans abandoned the train near Magdeburg; it's believed they planned to blow it up if the Americans or Russians approached. Lily hid under the cars from the shots and planes buzzing overhead.

She saw the Germans run away, so when the Americans came in tanks and Jeeps, she knew they must be good.

Even though they were about to fight a major battle with the enemy, the 30th Infantry Division of the U.S. 9th Army stopped to rescue Cohen and the other prisoners. They had farmers harvest through the night to bring the prisoners food and the soldiers moved them to shelter and services. It would be the last time Lily was alone.
Above, Hudson Falls students like Melanie McDonald, left, and Melissa McDonald, call teacher Matthew Rozell '83/MS '88 a hero in his own right for his achievements in preserving the history of World War II veterans. His Living History Project has gained international attention and has changed generations of lives.

At left, survivors run toward the U.S. soldiers who rescued them from the Germans in 1945. The servicemen took the photos at the time of liberation. They are grateful to have met some of the survivors, thanks to Matthew Rozell '83/MS '88.
A woman and her son asked Cohen to take their hands and come with them. She went with them to the town of Hilbersleben, where the family gave her something called sheets, and she bathed in warm water for the first time.

It is then that Cohen began to remember her life in color.

... The 743rd Tank Battalion and 30th Infantry Division liberated Cohen and other surviving passengers on that train on April 13, 1945.

Sixty-five years later, survivors have reunited with the men who saved their lives, thanks to a teacher’s history project.

Matthew Rozell ’83/MS ’88 created the World War II Living History Project to preserve the oral history of veterans’ experiences.

He and his history students at Hudson Falls High School have interviewed more than 150 veterans in their upstate New York area and are sharing the stories, photographs and videos online.

Launched quietly in the early 1990s as a way to connect the teens to history in a more personal way, the Living History Project has changed hundreds of lives of veterans, students and generations of families. Rozell has organized two reunions between veterans and the survivors of the Magdeburg train, allowing thousands of students to be part of history.

In so doing, Rozell and his students have made history, garnering international media attention for their efforts and tearful gratitude from survivors like Cohen, from Israel, who have made the journey across the world to say thank you.

... Rozell had no idea the Living History Project would have worldwide impact when he started it nearly two decades ago. His quest was to document as many accounts of veterans as possible.

Of the 17 million young men who served in the U.S. military during World War II, fewer than 2 million are alive today. According to the National World War II Museum, they are dying at a rate of 900 a day.

“It’s a race against time,” says Rozell.

One of the first veterans Rozell interviewed on videotape is Hudson Falls resident Carol “Red” Walsh, a retired New York State Supreme Court justice, who was a commander in the 743rd Tank Battalion. Just 24 at the time, he was one of the first soldiers to come upon Cohen’s train. He saw the Germans run. He had no idea at first that the boxcars were jammed with people, or where they came from. It was not until 60 years later — because of Rozell’s project — that Walsh knew fate helped him rescue prisoners, who, in another hour, would have been dead.

Like many veterans, Walsh doesn’t feel he did anything courageous or even noteworthy. In fact, he nearly didn’t mention the Magdeburg train incident during the interview with Rozell, until his daughter encouraged him to do so.

Luckily, he did.

“I thought, ‘By God, I didn’t do anything in particular,’” remembers Walsh. “It wasn’t anything heroic. It was part of every day for me at the time.”

Rozell posted Walsh’s story on his website in 2001 with testimony and photos taken of the liberation by Walsh’s friend Sgt. George C. Gross.

There it sat, seemingly unnoticed. Four years later, Rozell received an e-mail. It was from a grandmother in Australia. She found his site — and photos. After she screamed from emotion and burst into tears, she wrote Rozell and sparked what has become a legacy.

“I was giving a test, when I read her message,” remembers Rozell. “I put my head in my hands and cried a little.”

Since then, 160 survivors of the train have come forward or have been found,
many by survivors searching for their past or through the Bergen-Belsen Memorial.

"I get so many calls," says Rozell, "the district put a direct line to my classroom."

In 2007, Rozell organized his first reunion of a handful of survivors of the train and Walsh at Hudson Falls High School. It drew the attention of national news agencies, television and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, which chose him as one of just 14 teacher fellows for 2008-2009. As a fellow, Rozell received training and resource support for individual projects, and now serves as a resource for other teachers.

“We look for teachers who have demonstrated leadership ability to inspire their students to take what they learn outside of the classroom,” says Peter Fredlake, director of the museum’s National Outreach for Teacher Initiatives. “Matt’s project was pretty phenomenal.”

Rozell organized a second, three-day reunion in September 2009 for the 30th Division liberators and train survivors. Seven liberators and nine survivors—who grew up to become authors, educators, doctors and grandparents—came from as far as Canada, England and Israel.

“I was awed, because never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would ever meet anyone who was on the train … How could I ever get to know them or see them again?” says Walsh. “It was never anything I ever thought could occur. It really is tremendous because we all have such affinity for each other. And of course it all came about because of Rozell.”

Walsh still doesn’t feel worthy of the immense gratitude survivors have shown; his greatest reward is to see the doctors and authors and public speakers they have become. He keeps in close touch with a few of the survivors.

The museum produced a short feature film about the reunion that is prominently displayed on its website (see box). In a story by ABC News Anchor Diane Sawyer, Rozell, the students, survivors and soldiers were all named “Persons of the Week” in September 2009.

Rozell also has earned state and national teaching honors. Last spring, he was the only teacher invited to an official ceremony in the U.S. Capitol Rotunda to pay tribute to World War II liberators in the national Days of Remembrance.

If it weren’t for Professor Mahood …

Always a history buff, Matthew Rozell '83/MS '88 graduated with a bachelor’s degree but was unsure about a teaching career.

“When I went into the education master’s program, that was a whole other world with some really important people who recognized my potential when maybe I didn’t have much confidence,” says Rozell. “Now, I think that was incredible preparation for life.”

Rozell, a history and archaeology teacher at Hudson Falls (N.Y.) High School for 22 years, is the creator of the World War II Living History Project and was named the 2010 Organization of American Historians’ Tachau Teacher of the Year.

Thirty years after his Geneseo graduation, Rozell reconnected with Distinguished Service Professor of Education Wayne Mahood to say thank you for inspiring his choice of a career, and inspiring how he teaches. Mahood is a SUNY distinguished service professor emeritus of education.

“I’m not sure that he realized what he did for me,” says Rozell. “He pushed people to think about what they were doing. A lot of the things he did have resonated with me throughout my career … If it hadn’t been for him and a few conversations I had with him, I’m not sure I’d be doing what I am doing.”

Walsh believes Rozell’s project will go down in history itself, as a great work in the remembrance of World War II.

“I don’t think anyone has done anything greater or better or more organized or more informative than what Matt Rozell has done,” says Walsh. “He preserved that moment for all of history and posterity.”

Cohen was not aware of the organized reunions. She was frying schnitzel last March in her Tel Aviv home when the phone rang, forever changing her life. It was a woman named Varda from Canada, whose father was 14 when he was liberated from the train in Magdeburg. Varda was in contact with Rozell and the 30th Division, and tracked down 70 or so survivors, including Cohen.

“She found me. So here I am in the kitchen and she’s telling me this …,” says Cohen. “I had no idea this existed. I was completely shocked.”

Cohen—who has called Rozell’s project holy work—knew she must meet the man who made it all happen.

Cohen flew from the Middle East last June to meet Rozell just weeks after that first phone call. She thanked him over dinner and met students on an end-of-year cruise. Sitting in her hotel room, she teared up thinking about what the Living History Project means to her and so many others.

“I think that if a person has so much compassion in him to understand people and to create something wonderful out of this—you don’t meet people like this every day,” says Cohen. “What Matt does really touches the hearts of people and that is something to be cherished.”

Cohen herself only recently began talking about her experiences, when her granddaughters asked about their family tree. Now she speaks freely about her life after Hilerseleben, when she was taken to a kibbutz, a community settlement in Israel. She grew up with a family there. She married and had children. She realized her dream of being a stage dancer and taught choreography in England. She even became close with Bronka, who cared for her at Bergen-Belsen and searched for her after the war.

Despite her rescue from the train that allowed her to live, Cohen says she has always felt uprooted.

“You are floating all the time. You don’t have parents. You don’t have anyone who has known your parents,” says Cohen. “It’s a void.”

Over the years survivors have found out information about their own families from each other. Cohen did, too. On her visit to America, Cohen was able to find her birth date. She also has been writing other survivors, plus Frank Towers, a first lieutenant with the 30th division who led the freed prisoners to town.

Upon her return to Israel she wrote Rozell: “Maybe it is a family after all.”
Just like Walsh, former Army field medic John Carney doesn’t consider himself a hero for his service in World War II. He was just doing a job.

An 18-year-old newlywed, Carney got a crash course in dentistry and field first aid before being shipped off to the South Pacific. He was shot in the leg on his first day and received a Purple Heart. He rejoined his squad because he didn’t want to let them down.

Carney can still feel the earth against his hands and the smell of spent shells that pressed against his lungs as he crawled between mortar rounds to reach a wounded soldier after battle. They were trapped in a valley following a fire fight, surrounded by Japanese. They had to wait until night to rescue the wounded soldier; every few seconds, the sky lit up with shells.

As Rozell has found with many of the Living History Project participants, Carney and many veterans rarely spoke about their experiences in World War II. He opened up to Hudson Falls 2010 graduate Melanie McDonald for the project.

“People get a different perspective on the war, and different views,” says Carney. “People get a different interpretation than Hollywood gives on wars.”

Over the years, Rozell has seen students and vets bond during interviews.

“In many cases, they develop a relationship that continues after my class,” he says. “Both generations come to appreciate the other more. It’s a bridge.”

Each walks away with a different perspective of the other generation, and some important life lessons.

“It’s life-altering,” says Melissa McDonald, Melanie’s sister. “You are a part of history as well. Because we’ve heard these stories, it’s our job to make sure it won’t happen again.”

The sisters say the reunions and the interviews changed their lives, too. As several students have, they each chose Mr. Rozell as their hero in the yearbook.

“He’s made his dreams come true. He’s made them a reality,” says Melanie McDonald. “I want to do that in my life. He showed me that anything is possible. You just need to put your heart into it.”

Another student, Morency Madison, had no idea how much a single teacher could change her life.

“He puts history right in front of your eyes,” she wrote in a tribute. “Never could I have gotten the experience of meeting such inspiring people who learned love after the ultimate form of prejudice was thrust upon them. A message of acceptance not only reached the little town of Hudson Falls, but the entire world.”

For his part, Rozell is uncomfortable with praise for what he’s done. Compared to the veterans and survivors, he believes he’s done little. He is a facilitator, on a mission, proud that he and his students have been able to recognize sacrifices made during World War II, and share the veterans’ impact.

“It’s taken on a life of its own … There’s no explanation for it but it’s happening for a reason,” says Rozell of the train incident. “This is a pin prick of World War II. One, however, that is responsible for how many lives now, and for generations afterward.

“There are so many lessons here — lessons of self-sacrifice and duty. This war brought out the worst in people and it brought out the best of people,” says Rozell. “When you look at this mini snapshot of time, you see it all. In the end, good triumphs over evil. For my money, all of the World War II veterans not directly associated with those fateful days in April 1945 when the train was liberated were liberators, too. They are all liberators.”

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Geneseo honors World War II veterans

Thank you to all of our courageous alumni who served our country. Here are the veterans who responded to our request for information and who we know served.

- Joseph Anzalone 48, 1943-1946, U.S. Army Transportation Corps
- Fred A. Barraco 52, 1944-1946, U.S. Navy
- Charles Battaglia 49, 1944-1946, 114th Battalion, Navy Seabees
- Richard Batzing 52, 1946-1948, U.S. Army
- Blaise P. Buffamante 49, 1944-1946, U.S. Naval Reserve
- Arthur Carbonaro 52, 1942-1946, U.S. Coast Guard
- Thomas Conners 51, 1945-1946, U.S. Army, intelligence and reconnaissance
- H. Hunter Fraser 50, 1943-1946, U.S. Army Air Force
- Robert D. Hall 50, 1942-1945, Gen. Patton’s Third Army
- Ralph Harris 47, 1943-1946, U.S. Army 78th Infantry Division
- Donald Lee 49, 1942-1946, 13th Army Air Force in the Pacific
- Robert T. McDonald 50, 1943-1946, 14th Army Air Corps Flying Tigers
- William McDonald 43, U.S. Army Air Corps, killed in action in Austria, 1945
- Donald Carew Mills 50/MS 59, 1944-1946, U.S. Army
- Harrison M. Phillips 42, 1942-1946, U.S. Army Infantry 1st Division; U.S. Army Intelligence career officer, 22 years
- John Roach 52, 1942-1946, U.S. Marine
- John “Jack” Samter 49/MS 58, 1943-1947, U.S. Navy, aviation midshipman
- Ralph Wermuth 52, 1946-1948, U.S. Army Air Force
- Robert Yull 49, 1943-1946, U.S. Navy Seabee