**HOW UNCLE HERMAN ALMOST PREVENTED WW II**

Born in 1938, I grew up as a young child hearing a lot about the War. My father hated Hitler and disparaged him almost daily, it seemed. I was taught that Hitler was a perfidious and evil person. My mother also was worried about the War, as two of her younger brothers were soldiers, one in the Philippines and one in the States. I seemed to gain the impression as a child that he War was somehow, in some convoluted way, my mother’s fault. She seemed to feel guilty that the War was so full of killing and destruction. I had little understanding then of what the war was all about, but it was clearly a worrisome and very bad thing to get my parents so upset. I remember V-day—I must have been seven, as my mother had my younger sister Mary Margaret and me sitting out on the porch drawing pictures and coloring them in celebration. I recall feeling greatly relieved.

When I became a teenager, about 16, I gained some insight into my mother’s odd attitude toward the War. Mother told us the story about her oldest brother, Herman, who joined the Army and, after training in Mississippi, was sent to Germany. It was the middle of October, 1918, when Uncle Herman was summoned to a hospital at Pasewalk in the Prussian maritime province of Pomerania. Several Germans had been captured and brought to the hospital suffering from gas-blindness. The Germans were to be treated by a team of five skilled American medical doctors. My uncle Herman, who had one year of medical school in Indianapolis, was assigned to the team of doctors as an aide or medic, really a nurse. It took some time to treat the Germans, as most of them were seriously afflicted with gas-blindness. One of the first patients to begin recovering was a young colonel by the name of Adolf, and my uncle found him to be an interesting and articulate fellow, though he spoke almost no English.

What no one knew, not the Germans, not the medical doctors, not the other medic, and not the security guards, was the fact that Uncle Herman was fluent in German. Yet he spoke no word of German and nonchalantly moved among the Germans giving no inkling that he understood their every word. Uncle Herman soon learned the Germans were planning to kill all the medical doctors as soon as they had all sufficiently recovered from the gas-blindness. But at first it was not clear when, or how they were planning to implement these mass murders.

A few days before Christmas in 1918, the colonel, who was the apparent leader among the recovering German prisoners, put out the word that they would strike the next morning at 6:00 and that Adolf had somehow smuggled a pistol into the hospital. He had kept it hidden in his knapsack, which the slack security guards had neglected to search.

As soon as Uncle Herman heard the location of the pistol, he walked insouciantly into the Germans’ storage area and offered Adolf a cigarette and a book of intentionally wet matches. As Adolf was endeavoring to light the cigarette, Uncle Herman suddenly grabbed the knapsack and reached inside. An instantaneous struggle ensued, but Uncle Herman got the gun, which turned out to be loaded. Adolf began backing away, and then abruptly charged my uncle, who, shaking with fright, fired the pistol. The bullet flew just three inches above the colonel’s head, the shot mobilizing the two security guards who quickly brought the tense confrontations under their command.

Uncle Herman was hailed as a hero and was given full credit for squelching the murderous scheme. He was a WW I hero,

Only later would Uncle Herman learn that Adolf was in fact Adolf Hitler. “Had my hand only been steadier,” Uncle Herman would repeatedly lament, especially later in life, as he constantly relived his nightmare. “I could and should have prevented WWII,” he would say. The whole family on my mother’s side felt guilty, but seldom wanted to talk about a history that never happened. So during Christmas of 1918, Uncle Herman was a local hero in a hospital in Pasewalk in WW I, but he lived the rest of his life knowing that if his shot had been three inches lower he could have been a greater, though unsung (because who would have known) hero by preventing WW II. I write this during the Christmas holidays in the year 2000, 82 years after WW II could have been avoided, and 55 years after WW II ended.

Merry Christmas.