

The chain of goodness

How a Tenafly dentist advocated for a WWII hero and a Jerusalem clinic

BY NATE BLOOM | June 29, 2017, 11:57 am |

Just before Memorial Day, I wrote a “Noshes” column item about Capt. Ben Salomon, a Jewish dentist who was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in 2002 for his heroism in World War II.

I noted that in November 2016, the American Friends of Dental Volunteers of Israel presented a special lecture honoring Salomon. The AVI, as the organization is known, is the sister organization of Dental Volunteers for Israel (DVI). Founded by the late Trudi Birger, DVI runs a free clinic for children in Israel.

My column item prompted Dr. Scott Dubowsky of Tenafly, a longtime Jewish Standard subscriber, to email the Standard. He thanked me for the item and told me he is a dentist and the president of AVI. We exchanged further letters and I came to realize that several personal stories, including Dr. Dubowsky’s, intertwined in what I came to think of as a remarkable chain of goodness.

Dr. Salomon, an only child, was born in 1914 and raised in Milwaukee. In 1937, he graduated from the University of Southern California’s dental school. In 1940, he was drafted into the peacetime army. An official Army article says about his first year:

“After basic training Ben joined the 102d Infantry Regiment and quickly proved to be a natural soldier and leader. He won awards as an expert rifle and pistol marksman, and his commanding officer stated that he was ‘the best all-around soldier’ in the regiment. Within a year he had risen to the rank of sergeant and was in charge of a machine-gun section.”

In 1942, with America at war, the Army realized it needed more dentists, so Salomon was transferred to the Dental Corps. In July 1944, he went ashore on the island of Saipan, where a fierce battle raged. He quickly volunteered to replace his battalion’s wounded surgeon.

The final push to defeat the Japanese began on July 4. On July 5, Capt. Salomon set up an aid station 50 feet from the front line. The next day, the Japanese, who were running out of ammunition, were ordered to wage a suicide attack against the Americans.

Capt. Salomon defended the aid station's patients. Inside the aid station tent, he killed several enemy soldiers in hand-to-hand combat. When he went outside, he saw that the enemy's numbers were overwhelming, and he ordered the healthy men to evacuate the wounded while he stayed behind and provided cover.

When his body was discovered a few days later, it was clear his machine-gun fire had killed 98 enemy soldiers. Salomon's body had 24 wounds on it.

Trudi Birger (née Simon) was born in 1924 in Frankfort, Germany. Her family was prosperous and Orthodox. She had one older brother. In 1934, a year after the Nazi takeover, the family moved to Trudi's parents' birthplace: Memel, Lithuania, a city that had been German before World War I. The Simons were living in Kovno (now Kaunas), Lithuania's capital, when the Germans invaded in June 1941. Many Kovno Jews soon were killed on the streets. Those who survived, including the Simon family, were forced into the Kovno ghetto by August 1941.

In March 1944, the Nazis swept the ghetto and rounded up the children they planned to kill immediately. Trudi's father tried to hide some children. He and the children were discovered and murdered. Shortly thereafter, the ghetto was emptied. But Trudi and her mother survived. They were sent to a labor camp where, through a series of miracles, they were able to hang on to life, although barely. Her brother was sent to different camp, and he, too, survived.

The heroes who got a hero his medal

The official Army article on Dr. Salomon devotes several thousand words to the long, difficult process that finally ended with Ben Salomon getting his Medal of Honor in 2002.

Here's a short summary: the story begins with Capt. Edmund G. Love, the historian for Salomon's division, and never would have ended happily without him. Love was among the first on the scene of Salomon's heroism. He carefully documented what he saw, and that, along with the witness statements he gathered, allowed him to recommend Salomon for the Medal of Honor.

A major general turned down the recommendation on the grounds that the Geneva Convention did not allow a medical officer to take arms against the enemy.

In 1946, Love wrote a magazine article that mentioned Salomon. Salomon's father heard the article discussed on the radio. He wrote the Pentagon. The Secretary of War asked Love to visit Salomon's father in Los Angeles and also to re-submit the recommendation for the Medal of Honor.

Capt. Love was the first person to tell Ben's father how his son had died. Until then, all his father had been told was by telegram — and all it said was that his son had died.

It took until 1951 before Capt. Love could submit a new recommendation. The original recommendation papers had been lost and several witnesses had died or couldn't be found again. Love's new recommendation was rejected when the Army ruled that the statute of limitations had run out for submitting papers for World War II awards.

In 1969, Dr. John Ingle, the dean of the USC School of Dentistry, who learned from his friend, Ben's father, about Ben's heroics, took over the fight. Again, it took a long time to put together more paperwork. Again, Capt. Love submitted an extensive account of the events on Saipan. However, in 1972, the Department of Defense refused to act on the Secretary of the Army's recommendation that Salomon be awarded the Medal of Honor. This despite the fact that the statute-of-limitations bar had been eliminated by subsequent legislation and that legal counsel had confirmed that under the Geneva Convention a medical officer can take up arms in self-defense or to defend the wounded and sick.

In the mid-1990s, Col. John E. King, who had been working on something else, came across Salomon's story. At the same time, a USC dental school grad, Dr. Robert West, became interested in Salomon's story. (In the mid-1960s, a major clinic at the school was named after Capt. Salomon.) King and West joined forces and Dr. West put together the paperwork for the medal. This time the cause had a great ally: Maj. Gen. Patrick D. Sculley, the deputy surgeon general, and head of the Dental Corps. Sculley made sure that everything stayed on track as each approval in the long chain of command was secured.

Finally, on May 1, 2002, President George W. Bush presented Salomon's medal to Dr. West, who represented USC's dental school. Ben's parents were long dead, and he had no close relative to accept the medal on his behalf.

Trudi Birger and her clinic

Trudi Simon and her mother lived in a displaced persons camp in Germany until Trudi discovered that her brother was alive and living in Frankfort, and they joined him there. In Frankfort, she met and eventually married Zev Birger (1927-2011), a strong Zionist who struggled to maintain Hebrew culture in the Kovno ghetto. After the ghetto was emptied, Birger

was sent to a labor camp and then to Dachau. He was liberated by American troops, and became a translator for them, and they urged him to immigrate to America.

But Zev wanted to build a Jewish state. After much thought, Trudi and her mother made the difficult decision to not go to America, as Trudi's brother and his wife had done. Instead, they would go with Zev to Eretz Israel. Trudi and Zev were married in 1946, and in November 1947 they made aliyah. After serving in the army in the War of Independence, Zev went into government service, rising to be a deputy minister overseeing various economic matters in 1967. After retiring in 1977, he and Trudi went to Paris, where he headed up the local office of ICM, a worldwide arts management company.

Trudi became a microbiologist in Israel. Her thoughts frequently turned to helping others and easing their suffering. She long had been aware that poor children in Israel had a pressing need for dental services. The government does pay for a sort-of HMO to treat children under 13, but the co-pay, while small, often is too much for a poor family with many children. (Many ultra-Orthodox and Palestinian families tend to have large families.)

When she lived in Paris, she determined to set up a free clinic in Jerusalem, staffed by volunteer dentists. Israeli dentists usually spend a month in the army each year, so asking them to volunteer in their off-time is difficult. She decided that foreign volunteer dentists might be the solution to that problem. She recruited six volunteer dentists from France, set up a nonprofit company in Israel, and got an Israeli shipping line to bring in tons of equipment donated by a French company.

In 1980, what is now called the DVI Trudi Birger Clinic opened in Jerusalem. Thousands of children have been treated there in the last 37 years. The clinic treats all children, regardless of ethnicity or religion. It emphasizes bringing oral hygiene education to the the entire family, so that problems are stopped before they start or get much worse. About half the volunteers are from America; the others are from around the world. (The international nature of the clinic's volunteers is reflected in the fact that the DVI website is in 14 languages.)

It is the largest free dental clinic in Israel, and recently it began providing free dentures to Holocaust survivors and the elderly.

After Trudi Birger died in 2002, age 75, the clinic was named after her.

Enter Dr. Dubowsky

Dr. Scott Dubowsky, 67, is the linchpin that ties all these stories together. He's a second-generation dentist with a practice in Bayonne and the proud father of three "really cool" sons:

Eric, 41, is a former rock band musician who is now a mixer, songwriter, and producer, and he won a Grammy for mixing the best dance music album (Flume). Jonathan, 39, has his own band (Jonny Lives) and once played with his band on the old Conan O'Brien Show. He now is working with people at NYU on IT projects that deal with sustainability and the environment. Adam, 33, is a comic wit who has sold one animated project to Fox animation — he's the creator and producer — and he has five funny videos on the popular "Funny or Die" site.

On September 11, 2001, Dr. Dubowsky saw the North Tower of the World Trade Center collapse from Bayonne, where he works. Later, he heard that some of the bodies might be transferred to a morgue in Bayonne. Having some experience in identifying bodies through teeth and dental records, he called someone he knew in the New York medical examiner's office and asked if the office needed help. He was told that yes, they did, but at the New York morgue. Could he volunteer there?

From then until end of May 2002, Dr. Dubowsky worked, without pay, examining the dental remains and records of 9/11 victims. During that time, he maintained his own practice. At first, he worked from eight to 16 hours a week on 9/11 victims, although later he slowed down a little bit.

Dr. Dubowsky had met Trudi Birgir before 9/11, and he knew about DVI. But it took some time, he said, to recover from 9/11, and he had three relatively young sons to look after. But by 2007, his sons were grown. Dr. Dubowsky wanted to do something else "outside himself" — as he had in the aftermath of 9/11. He chose to volunteer at DVI.

Volunteer dentists do pay for their own transportation, but they are provided a free if spare apartment in a nice area of Jerusalem, he said. They typically spend a week at the clinic, working Sundays through Thursdays.

During his stays in Israel, Dr. Dubowsky has visited the Holocaust shrine Yad Vashem several times. When I said I wasn't sure if I could stand to go a second time, he said, "When I go to Yad Vashem, it's not so much to remember the victims of the Holocaust, it's to make sure that I don't forget."

During a return visit to Yad Vashem in 2009 with a group of other DVI dentists, Dr. Dubowsky came across an exhibit he had not seen before, about someone he'd never heard of. "While touring the exhibits, I came to an exhibit which was dedicated to American Jews who had been awarded the Medal of Honor," he said. "I read all of the material diligently, but when I came to the last awardee — Capt. Salomon — I was totally blown away. As an American, a Jew, and the son of an American Jewish dentist who had served in the Pacific theater in World War II, I just stood there and the tears flowed down my cheeks."

In November 2016, Dr. Dubowsky helped to arrange a benefit for AVI at New York University that featured three speakers who told Dr. Salomon's story. The speakers include Dr. Dubowsky and another Medal of Honor winner, Jack Jacobs, who also is Jewish. The main speaker was retired Maj. Gen. Patrick Sculley. He's the mensch who finally pushed Ben Salomon's Medal of Honor over the finish line.

Dr. Dubowsky tells me that this year, Ben Salomon's yarhzeit falls on July 10, and because Dr. Salomon has no family alive, he will light a candle for Dr. Salomon. Perhaps you will too. If you do, as you do, think of all the menschen named in this article.

One final note: Dr. Sadowsky tells me that the funds available to DVI were diminished a great deal by the Madoff scandal. So think about joining this chain of goodness and donating to AVI or DVI. All funds go to support the clinic's work.