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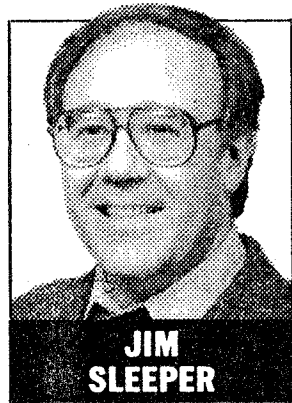
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**JIM  
SLEEPER**

## Birth of a generation - and a new era

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My father doesn't remember where he was on D-Day, except that, as a corporal in the Army's 277th Combat Engineers, he wasn't on the beaches

of Normandy. Combat engineers seldom saw combat; they saw the corpses and hapless German prisoners the infantry had left behind. The engineers' job was to build pontoon bridges across rivers already well-enough secured to be unlikely to fall back into enemy hands. The front line was always a few miles to the east.

My father didn't even build the bridges. He ferried the brass back and forth in a motor launch while others were building them, or he took a jeep 20 miles west to pick up the mail. That suited him, and he has never been ashamed to say that he wasn't much of a soldier. As a Jew moving across Germany in American uniform in 1945, he felt mostly grief and revulsion. A child of poor Lithuanian Jews who spoke Yiddish, a mix of German and Hebrew, he was sometimes assigned to order German prisoners around. "Nicht Nazi, nicht Nazi," everyone would say," he recalls with disgust. "Suddenly, there wasn't a Nazi in all of Germany."

One day, the 277th commandeered the estate of a baron named Von Bulow in the town of Hohne. In a little cottage in the

woods behind the mansion, my father and others in his unit found a family led by a silver-maned, well-spoken man whom they suspected was Von Bulow himself. As they escorted him down the hill, some of the soldiers began prodding him roughly with their bayonets.

"Cut it out," my father said.

"Why? You should enjoy this, Sleeper. You're a Jew!"

"Cut it out," he repeated. He had no stomach for Germany on any terms, even a conqueror's.

Back in the States, he took out a G.I. loan to buy a truck and a load of Army surplus first-aid kits and, later, toothpaste and shampoo, and he and my mother rode around selling the stuff to small stores. A child of the De-

pression, he'd made it through college with a degree in Romance languages, but, like so many of his generation, went into business to provide for his family. We still have the dog-eared ledger that records his taking off the day I was born, June 6, 1947, the third anniversary of D-Day.

Working 16 hours a day out of the basement of our little house in Springfield, Mass., my father built a wholesale health and beauty aids business. Into it he poured all the rage and grim intensity he'd withheld from war.

He made sure I learned to work that way, too, even after he'd moved the company to a warehouse across town. Many of my Saturdays and vacation days were spent opening big cardboard boxes of toothpaste with ra-

them as we prepared orders for the stores.

As we bounced along in the van delivering the orders, my father would sing opera and "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean" over the noise of the engine. In supermarket aisles he taught me how to wield a feather duster on old bottles of Prell shampoo and Noxzema skin cream, my face turning hot with shame whenever one shattered on the linoleum floor and I had to go out back for sawdust to sop up the goo.

**B**UT EVEN AS he insisted that I learn physical labor and "the value of a dollar," my father dreamed of my becoming a professor, lawyer or writer. "James, never go into business," he would admonish me, his mock formality only underlining his utter seriousness. In the 1960s, I and many of my peers took such advice so seriously, indeed, that we assailed all business, but especially health and beauty aids and "plastics," as symptomatic of everything wrong with the American dream. I still loathe those newspaper features that celebrate men's changing styles in order to sell us the false liberation of more cosmetics.

But I've long stopped feeling that way about my father's seemingly endless years of hard work amid dank basements, rattling vans and supermarket Muzak. Although he never built any bridges for the Army, he and his two brothers made themselves into the bridges across which I and my sister and cousins walked from the shadows of our ancestors' European hell into the American sunlight. Since D-Day is my birthday, it reminds me of those bridges and of the strange, tormented, awesome sacrifices of the generation that built them.

Thanks, Dad. And thanks to you all.