

## An act of faith—a key to survival



BY **Howard Margol**

World War II in Europe ended on May 8, 1945, and, for my twin brother, Hilbert, and me, our days of combat in France and Germany were over. On that date, we were together in the same unit of the 42nd Infantry "Rainbow" Division, south of Munich, Germany, near the Austrian border. We then went on occupation duty in Austria.

In June 1945, the division was ordered to transport several thousand Jews from a concentration camp to Bad Gastein and Bad Hofgastein, Austria. Before the war, they were at the heart of one of the finest resort areas in Europe. Underground deposits of hot mineral water were piped into the hotels for bathing purposes. The mineral water was alleged to cure various ailments, so that was one reason this resort area was very popular.

When our division chaplain, Rabbi Eli Bohnen, from Providence, Rhode Island, heard about the plan, he was against taking this group of Jews from a concentration camp and putting them in the fancy hotels with all of their posh surroundings. He was concerned that the sudden change from

years in a concentration camp would be too much for them to deal with. His pleas to General Mark Clark to change the orders were to no avail. General Clark said the orders came from Washington and would be carried out as planned.

I do not remember the exact location where our Army convoy of over 200 vehicles picked up the several thousand Jewish survivors. I do remember going through the remains of the city of Frankfurt. The entire city had been destroyed, except for two church spires that stood tall against the skyline, in stark contrast to the destruction around them. I was riding in one of the trucks as an armed guard for the driver.

We had been driving all day when, suddenly, yelling and screaming was heard throughout the entire convoy of Army vehicles. All of the drivers stopped so we could investigate the problem. All of the Jews got out of the trucks and sat down on the side of the road. They refused to ride any farther.

The leaders of the group of Jews explained that it was late Friday, the sun was almost down, and the Sabbath would start. They refused to ride on Shabbos. I, together with several other Jewish soldiers, explained that we were Jewish and fully understood about Shabbos. After what these Jews had been through in the concentration camps, they deserved to spend the night in fancy hotels, with hot food, hot baths, and clean clothing. In another 25 or 30 minutes

we would have them at the hotels.

They absolutely refused to get back in the trucks, and all of the Jews sat down on the side of the road. The Army set up field kitchens to prepare hot food and brought out blankets, and the Jews coped as best they could. All Friday night and all day Saturday, the Jews stayed on the side of the road. After the sun went down on Saturday, they returned to the trucks, and we brought them to the hotels.

It took them a day or two to get used to their new surroundings, but after that, things went well. They enjoyed the nice rooms, hot baths, good food, and the fact that they were waited on by Austrian civilians. Rabbi Bohnen established classes for those who wanted to learn English, made arrangements for some to go to Italy if they wanted to try and get to Palestine, and took care of other details.

For years, the Jews in that group of survivors were not allowed to practice their Judaism. However, regardless of their suffering and circumstances, they held on to their faith in their minds. That day, in Austria, was their first opportunity to practice their faith. That is why they refused to ride on Shabbos, and they spent the night on the side of the road instead of in comfortable hotel rooms. I have no doubt that holding on to their faith in their minds was a major reason for their survival. It gave them something to hold on to, to look forward to,



**Howard Margol at a captured German airbase in Furth, Germany**

and a way to survive against all odds.

I think it was also their way of showing that they won, and Hitler lost.

## School board member Julia Bernath is a leader in education



BY **Carolyn Gold**

*This article is part of an ongoing series on women who are community leaders.*

In view of the bad publicity some local school boards have received lately, it is a pleasure to recognize one member, a woman, who deserves applause. Julia Bernath has served on the Fulton County School Board since January 2000 and has received numerous honors for her service.

Julia is past president of her local board and of the Georgia School Board Association. She is vice chair of the Georgia Professional Standards Commission and serves on a number of statewide committees dealing with education.

Julia is a product of local schools, having grown up in Atlanta in what was her grandfather's house on Penn Avenue. She attended Spring Street Elementary School and Grady High School. At Grady, she met her future husband, Terry Bernath, when they were 8th-graders. He had gone to Morningside School. They were high

school sweethearts, as they started dating in their senior year.

Julia was president of both her junior and senior classes and went on to graduate magna cum laude in journalism at the University of Georgia. She and Terry married in 1975.

Julia says she learned in high school that "you have to have the courage to try to become involved." So after marrying and becoming a parent (she and Terry have three children) she started volunteering in her children's pre-school, elementary school, PTA, and on committees formed by the board of education for lay people.

As an involved parent, Julia was encouraged to run for a position on the board of education. In 1999, she was appointed to a position that would begin in January 2000. The then-president of the Fulton County School Board said to her, "Welcome to pleasure and pain."

Julia has now been elected and re-elected four times. She is in her 14th year on the board, which is composed of seven women. It has been an all-woman board now for eight years.

The Fulton County school system includes close to 100 schools with 92,000 students. Julia counted off the names of the 17 high schools, which are in four clusters: northeast, northwest, central, and south. The clusters are not contiguous; the district is bisected by the Atlanta Public Schools.

Fulton County was the first school system to be district certified by SACS. In those districts not certified, students are not eligible for Hope Scholarships. Julia says the Fulton County board's success is due to three reasons: they try "to not have disagreements in public;" "not to surprise each other," and "to support the will of the board."

The board's job is to select a superintendent, set the millage rate and approve the

budget, and develop and approve policy on which the schools operate. They do not hire anyone else and they can't fire teachers or coaches, no matter what angry parents may wish.

Julia and Terry live in Sandy Springs, and their three children graduated from Fulton County schools. They now have two grandchildren. Julia is working full time to help educate the children in her district.

These are the goals that she lists for the future for Fulton County schools:

- improve the graduation rate so that in 5 years, 90% of students will graduate on time;
- raise college readiness so that 85% of students are eligible for state colleges and universities;
- ensure career readiness so that 100% of students are work-ready certified.

Julia Bernath wants the community to know that "everyone benefits by having a quality public school. It takes community involvement. It takes volunteers, donations, and community support to keep quality schools."

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**Julia Bernath**