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Heinz joins the Ritchie Boys during World War II

Kay Past

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Heinz and Carolyn Bondy in Bethesda, Md. with their dog family. (Contributed photos)

When “60 Minutes” ran a story on the Ritchie Boys last May, daughter Mariana was visiting us. “Eric’s father Heinz was a Ritchie Boy,” she exclaimed. However, Eric (Mariana’s husband) did not know about that part of his dad’s World War II service until a couple of years before Heinz died in 2014.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Eric and his brother Peter asked.

“You didn’t ask,” Heinz replied. After being sworn to secrecy about his assignment during the war, he never talked about it afterwards.

Heinz Eric Bondy was born in 1924 in Bad Gandersheim, Germany, where his parents ran a boarding school. Although they came from a Jewish family, the Bondys were not religious. In 1936, after Hitler took power, the government began appointing Nazi teachers to their school, then confiscated it. The Bondys decided to escape to Switzerland, where they started another school, primarily for Jewish refugees from Germany, some of whom had been students at their previous institution.

However, when Switzerland began sending Germans back to Germany, the Bondys decided to go to the U.S. in 1938. Since their friend in the German embassy had made sure their passports did not have the “J” in the numbers which indicated “Jew,” they were admitted, through Ellis Island. At that time, the U.S. was not accepting Jewish immigrants.

The Bondys settled in Vermont, where they started the Windsor Mountain School, which they eventually moved to Lenox, Massachusetts. Heinz graduated from the family school and attended college for a year before joining the army at age 18. He volunteered for the mountain troops because he had heard they did lots of skiing and spent eight months training in Colorado, where he became a U.S. citizen. Rather than skiing, they did lots of hiking, he remembered.

Heinz spoke English fluently by then, but when someone learned he also spoke German and French (which he had learned in Switzerland), he was sent to Camp Ritchie (near Baltimore). There he was trained to interrogate people, with emphasis on using psychology and never touching the prisoner. His name was revised to “Eric H.,” so that it would appear less German.

One of the youngest recruits at the camp, Heinz was assigned to the 79th Division, which landed at Normandy on D-Day in 1944. Heinz was in the group that landed just after the invasion, and he saw many dead American soldiers on the beach. He was horrified, having never seen anything like that.

He and his fellow Ritchie boys were always assigned close to the combat zone, so they could interrogate prisoners as soon as they were captured. He was wounded in action in Normandy, being hit in the foot when he didn't get in a foxhole soon enough. He was bandaged and returned to duty. Later he participated in the Battle of the Bulge.

“I interrogated some 2,000-3,000 people over the next year and a half,” Heinz remembered. “We asked what division they were from, what their orders were and other military intelligence questions.” By then the Germans were drafting boys from 15 to 17 years of age, so Heinz was older than some of those he questioned. He got to wear several army buttons to suggest more rank, which impressed German officers and also gave him access to the officers' mess hall.

Heinz was with the soldiers who liberated the Dachau concentration camp, where he interrogated 20-30 guards and talked to some of the survivors, who were nearly starved at the end of the war. They were able to point out the particularly cruel guards.

When Paris was liberated, Heinz was in the first procession of Americans and French to enter the city in jeeps, driving down the Champs-Élysées. The team of Ritchie Boys he was assigned to spent a year interrogating officers, many much older than Heinz, about their war crimes. He then wrote up the interviews for his commanding officers.

Heinz was glad to get out of the army and return home, where he earned his bachelor's degree from Swarthmore College, then a master's in history from Bryn Mawr, a women's college that admitted men for graduate study.

For 25 years, Heinz served as headmaster for his parents' Windsor Mountain School, where he championed racial integration and helped provide scholarships for talented, disadvantaged students. After Windsor Mountain closed in the mid-1970s, Heinz held administrative posts at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and helped found Elkins Mountain Schools in West Virginia.

After moving to the Washington, D.C. area in 1989, Heinz served as headmaster of Canterbury School in Accokeek, then directed a Montessori school in Prince George's County, Maryland, until he retired in 1998.

The first Heinz' family knew of his Ritchie Boys service was when he received an invitation to the group's reunion in Washington, D.C. in 2012. Eric encouraged his dad to attend, and he and then 8-year-old grandson Ray accompanied him to the event, which Ray thoroughly enjoyed. Heinz also enjoyed it, although, since he at age 88 was one of the youngest members of the group, many of the Ritchie Boys had already died.

Eric then insisted that Heinz agree to an interview after the reunion. His hour-long account of his experiences as a Ritchie Boy is on file at the Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Heinz' grandson Ray now has a very special interest in his grandfather's special service in Germany during and after World War II.

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Un poco de todo

