

How German-born 'Ritchie Boys' helped America defeat Hitler

By [Nick Poppy](#)

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Three of the "Ritchie Boys" who, as German-born Jews, defected to America and helped fight the Nazis

Courtesy of Harper Collins

The slight American soldier sat down across from the tough old Nazi sergeant. The German wasn't talking. Only name, rank and serial number. The American had an idea.

"How is it," he asked the German, "that a tough old soldier like you was captured by inexperienced Americans like me?"

The Nazi unleashed a stream of invective. The American asked him questions, and got answers.

Finally, the German stopped.

“Of course, I know you can’t read a US military map,” said the American, producing a tactical diagram of nearby German positions. “Of course I can!” roared the Nazi, and proceeded to show the American everything he wanted to know about the German regiment.

The American was a trained interrogator, part of military intelligence. His name was Werner Angress, and he had been born Jewish, in Germany. How he and other German-born Jews came to serve as American soldiers may be the last great unknown tale of World War II.

In the 1930s, as Germany grew increasingly hostile to Jews, many Jewish families tried to leave the Nazi state. And many of their efforts were stymied — by lack of money, by vindictive German authorities and by the nearly closed borders of countries like the United States. Often, a Jewish family could afford to send only one of its children — usually the oldest male — at a time.

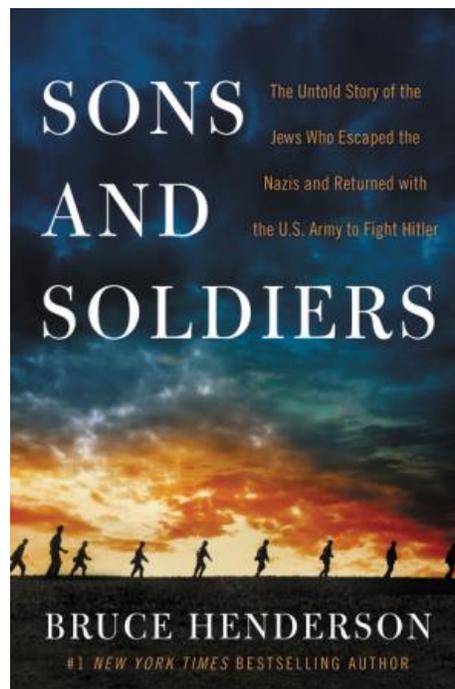
Those Jewish children, mostly teens, settled as best they could in America, cut off from their families and what was once their home. When the United States entered the war against Germany, many of these German-born Jews jumped at the chance to help their new country — and to help their families still in Europe.

Some of these enlisted German-born Jews were selected for special training, an Army program whose secrecy rivaled that of the Manhattan Project. The military intelligence program operated out of Camp Ritchie, in western Maryland, and trained soldiers to become military interrogators.

Should the interrogators fall into German hands, the Nazis would spare no cruelty for German-born Jews now fighting for the US. Knowing this, many of the Ritchie Boys changed their names to sound less Jewish.

Nearly 2,000 German-born Jews were trained at Camp Ritchie to interrogate captured German soldiers. Because they grew up with the language and the culture of the enemy, the group was uniquely suited to plumb the minds of their Nazi captives. After completing the eight-week training course at Camp Ritchie, these Ritchie Boys were formed into Interrogation of Prisoner of War (IPW) teams. They would face the very men who persecuted them and their families.

The harrowing adventures of the Ritchie Boys are told in Bruce Henderson's new history, "[Sons and Soldiers: The Untold Story of the Jews Who Escaped the Nazis and Returned with the US Army to Fight Hitler](#)" (William Morrow).



In researching the book and speaking to surviving Ritchie Boys, Henderson tells *The Post*, “I was in awe that these guys would go back . . . I was amazed at the humble courage that they showed, time and again.”

No small amount of courage was needed for their work. Typically, small IPW teams were attached to forward units of American forces, to have access to fresh information from newly captured German soldiers. Recently captured soldiers, disoriented, scared and hungry, were more likely to talk.

The Ritchie Boys knew what they were doing. Interrogations were in every sense a mind game, and at Camp Ritchie, the young soldiers were taught how to best their interrogatees without using force. There were four basic interrogation techniques: “superior knowledge,” “form of bribery,” “find common interests” and “use of fear.”

The interrogator would first overwhelm the prisoner with their vast, detailed knowledge of the German military. This would often get a new prisoner talking, since the interrogator seemed to know everything already. (As part of their training, Ritchie Boys exhaustively studied the ins and outs of the enemy forces. They had to commit much of it to memory.)

The bribery tactic would have the interrogator consume a coveted item — usually chocolate or cigarettes — in front of the prisoner, and share only in exchange for information. In finding common interests, the interrogator would chat amiably with the prisoner, developing a rapport, and thus lower their guard.

And lastly, fear. Sometimes it was enough to put a .45 on the table, conspicuously; other times, more creative methods were used. One IPW duo invented a fake Soviet official named Commissar Krukov (one of them dressed up in a borrowed Soviet uniform) who threatened to send uncooperative prisoners to Siberia. The German POWs seemed to fear that more than anything.

The interrogators were instructed never to torture, or even touch, their prisoners. Doing so would violate the Geneva Convention on Warfare, which they tried their best to observe. It made tactical sense: Intelligence gathered

under physical duress is typically bad intelligence. But the Ritchie Boys followed a moral code as well. Henderson says the Ritchie Boys' principle was, "If we did something like that, that would make us as bad as them. And we weren't those guys. We were Americans. We were not going to do that."

Still, Henderson was astounded by their self-control, marveling, "My God, did they have the motivation to treat these German prisoners badly."

The front line was, of course, a perilous place for anyone. But for the Ritchie Boys, there was an extra danger: Should the interrogators fall into German hands, the Nazis would spare no cruelty for German-born Jews now fighting for the US. Knowing this, many of the Ritchie Boys changed their names to sound less Jewish, and gave themselves "American" back stories they would tell in the event of capture. They would claim to be Protestants, right down to putting "P" on their dog tags, as opposed to "H" for Hebrew. If captured by the Nazis, the telltale "H" would be a death sentence.

Henderson tells of Kurt Jacobs and Murray Zappler, two Ritchie Boys from the 106th Infantry Division who were captured by German forces in December 1944. One of their former German POWs, newly liberated, identified Jacobs and Zappler as "Jews from Berlin" to a German battalion commander. That commander, a Nazi among Nazis, declared, "The Jews have no right to live in Germany." Then he sent the two men to a nearby field, where they were cut down by a firing squad.



The Nazi commander who ordered Kurt Jacobs and Murray Zappler to be killed, as he is taken to be executed himself

U.S. Army Signal Corps

After the German surrender in the spring of 1945, IPW teams stayed on in Europe. They translated for occupation authorities, and they interrogated war criminals. Most heartbreakingly, they helped liberate the concentration camps the Nazis had built to exterminate their people. Most of those who had left family behind before the war would never see their loved ones again.

At this point in history, what might be most remarkable about the Ritchie Boys is how little-known they are. Henderson thinks there are a number of reasons why their stories haven't received the attention they should.

"First of all, they were military intelligence," he says. "They couldn't even reveal to their families that they were working for military intelligence, or what their job was. Secondly, when they graduated, they were put into very small

teams that were then attached to larger units, and so they didn't serve with a lot of other guys like themselves . . . so they were kind of isolated."

And that isolation continued after the war, because these German-born Jewish soldiers "were quite different from the guys after the war who joined veterans associations and had reunions." The Ritchie Boys, Henderson observes, "still had German accents. They weren't the type to go around and join those groups and have reunions and share stories."

But their contribution to victory is undeniable. One Army study estimated that almost 60 percent of the intelligence collected in Europe came from interrogations conducted by Ritchie Boys.

As one Ritchie Boy, Gunther Stern, said, "We were fighting an American war, and we were also fighting an intensely personal war. We were in it with every fiber of our being. We worked harder than anyone could have driven us. We were crusaders. This was our war."