

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

By Bill Hull, Haskell Senior Living Solutions

Tell Your Story!

It was originally known as The Train of Death. But the journey that started on that train over 65 years ago will culminate in a joyous celebration this August at Arbor Ridge Senior Living Community in Rhinebeck.

Bruria Falik was a 12-year old girl when she found herself huddled with 2,500 others on a train, stopped in a glorious, flower-speckled meadow on a sunny day in early May, 1945. Little did she realize that her life had been bartered away, amidst the deception, greed and desperation of the final pangs of the “War To End All Wars” in Europe. The 2,500 Jews, including over 500 children, once promised to be bound for Switzerland and freedom, were instead headed to almost certain extermination at Auschwitz as Hitler and his Nazis accelerated their horror. In an instant the Train of Death became a Train of Life as over the ridge came four United States soldiers, part of a tank battalion who had been alerted about a train being guarded by German forces. They liberated the train, causing the Nazis to flee. Young Bruria was astonished as the soldiers brought food. She had never before seen food in a tin can! One of the four was a First Lieutenant named Frank Towers.

Liberator and liberated will meet for the first time since that amazing encounter so long ago. Mr. Towers, now age 93, was invited last winter to come up from Florida this August to tell his story at Arbor Ridge. Since this story was first made public, there has been a successful effort to locate over 150 of the survivors. Most who are still alive, like Bruria, were children at the time; and many of them are scattered across America, Europe, and Israel. Remarkably, and unbeknown to me when we planned this event, Mrs. Falik has been a resident for many years right here in Woodstock. Gordon McAleer, Executive Director at Arbor Ridge said, “Every year at Arbor Ridge we offer a life-long learning program throughout the summer for our residents and the community of Rhinebeck. When I heard Mr. Towers’ story, I was happy that he was willing to travel up here from Florida. Little did anyone know at that time that one of the actual survivors he rescued is one of our outstanding neighbors!”

This will be a special celebration for Arbor Ridge as we witness the reunion of these two for the first time after so many years, and have the honor to hear the stories. For Bruria, it means even more. “With this event,” she says, “you have completed the circle of my life.”

In my twenty-plus years of working with seniors I have been ever amazed at how often they tend to downplay the importance of telling their own stories. O sure, once in a while you find a senior who talks almost constantly about their memories of the “good old days”. But often I have discovered there is a reticence to pass along the wisdom, humor, drama, and lessons from the past that they have gleaned from living through remarkable times.

Not long ago I was talking with a friend who related to me what she learned about her father’s bravery and hardship during World War II. He was in the Navy and his ship has been torpedoed and sunk by a German sub. He witnessed the loss of many fellow crewmen in the shark-infested waters of the Pacific as they bobbed for hours waiting to be rescued. Very few came back from that episode alive. For my friend it was a shocking revelation. She had never heard this story. He had never talked about it. It was told to her by a family friend at her father’s funeral.

Perhaps you are one of these folks who says, I have no dramatic rescue story in my past; no heroism; no medals; no banners; no brass bands. Can I urge you to dig a little harder into the soil of your memories and realize that every life has a story worth telling and retelling. Fred Allen once said that “*A human being is nothing but a story with a skin around it.*”. There are events and choices; failures, successes, encounters, and *history*, however “small” in the overall

HELPFUL HINTS FOR SENIORS

By Bill Hull, Haskell Senior Living Solutions

global march of Mankind that have altered the universe of your life and loved-ones forever. I can remember when I was living in New Orleans, a decade before Hurricane Katrina, and I would listen to the stories of all the ripples of change that were caused by Hurricane Camille (1968). Just that one domino started the chain of a million dominos across the Gulf South for a generation. Each one of those stories is important and enduring. There are no generic human beings.

The theologian Harvey Cox agrees that "*All human beings have an innate need to hear and tell stories and to have a story to live by.* We all know people who have can tell an inspiring and dramatic story. Compared to them, you think there is nothing too great about your story. Perhaps you believe everyone who would care has already heard the tale. But I'm sure you are wrong. I have no doubt there are folks around who will hang on every word to hear some things you may have forgotten long ago. We need to keep the stories alive across the generations. Pass along what you know about your heritage and the life of yesteryear that you witnessed for yourself. Do this before the mists of change sweep it all away. And know that it will make a difference. In the words of Betty Reese: "If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito."