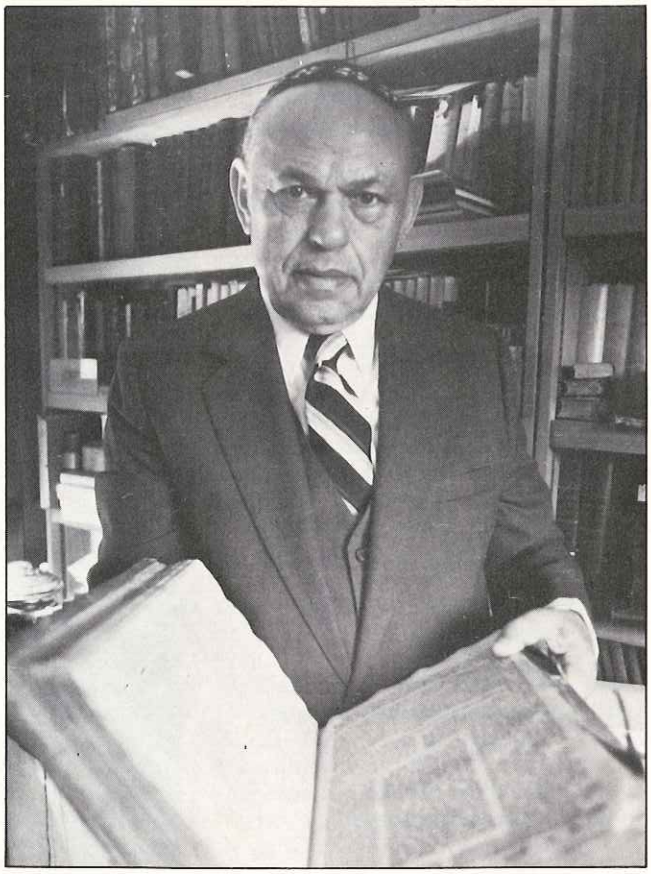


Across the broad expanse of his lifetime, people have been his purpose.

Rabbi, Teach Us!

by SSgt. Craig Pugh
photos by Mickey Sanborn, AAVS

They trudged in long, thin columns alongside the roads in Germany, those walking dead, those broomstick people. Bellies swollen from hunger, they clasped each other with bony fingers of support. Together they shuffled and stumbled along toward a future that was at this turn in their lives as terrifying, no doubt, as the past they had just left behind.

It was 1945 and the walking damned had but one goal—to put as much time and distance as possible between themselves and Hitler's death camps.

They had survived the Holocaust.

Rabbi Herbert S. Eskin, then a U.S. Army chaplain assigned to the 100th Infantry Division that was slashing through Germany, remembers the Holocaust survivors as if they were today filling the streets outside his home in a Detroit suburb. They are still that close to his heart. The memory of those gaunt shadows is branded on his heart and soul forever.

The searing didn't stop there. It burned deeply into the very fabric of his life. The sights and sounds of suffering at its wretched worst did not, however, make him bitter for revenge. Instead, his life has been lived as a monument to love—both for his God and for humankind.

The road to peace he chose to follow has taken him many miles in many directions, serving as he did for more than 30 years as a circuit rider of sorts visiting military installations in Michigan.

Included among them were Selfridge, Wurtsmith,

and Kincheloe Air Force bases. At each location he conducted services and tended to the religious—and as often the very human—needs of Jews.

All the while, of course, he was a full-time rabbi at his own synagogue in Detroit. And since 1946 he's always been an auxiliary, on-call chaplain for at least one VA hospital in the state.

His reasons for all of this are deceptively simple. There is in him a love for people, but it runs far deeper than that. He also loves America. And the two loves are indistinguishable.

"We take so much from others and from life itself," he explained. "I believe you do the right thing by giving it back—by sharing your life with others. That's been my motto: Give of yourself. This is what I've tried to do. And when you serve people, you also serve America, because what is America if not its people? So in my own way I do what I can."

And he did and is doing just that—what he can. His life has been a revelation packed hard all around with the giving of himself.

For the Holocaust survivors he established a sanctuary, a house of refuge in Stuttgart. For many it was a place of hope, their only resort.

Now 70 years old and "retired," Rabbi Eskin can today talk about the Stuttgart days as if they were a chapter in his life. So consuming was his compassion for others that he went on to do so much more.

"Herb's indefatigable," said Chaplain Ronald Phelps, chief of chaplain services at the Allen Park Veterans Administration Medical Center where Eskin has worked part-time for twenty years. "I first met him in 1965 when I was the chaplain at a school for retarded children.

"I'd been unsuccessful in finding someone from the Jewish community to spend time with the Jewish children there. I mentioned that to Herb and he volunteered on the spot. As I later found out, that's characteristic of him.

"In the eighteen years I've known him, I've grown to realize he serves God in the classical image; that is, you best serve the Almighty by serving His people. Herb serves the Almighty's people."

Service. That's the one word above all that describes Eskin's life. He has been three times the department chaplain of the Michigan Jewish War Veterans; three times department chaplain of the American Legion, Michigan branch; and in 1950 was elected the first Jewish national chaplain of the U.S. Veterans of Foreign Wars. A retired Army Reserve lieutenant colonel, he has a law degree and speaks five languages.

He has met presidents, Supreme Court justices, and testified before the U.S. Congress on behalf of veterans. He has been quoted in NEWSWEEK magazine and was a charter member of the Michigan branch of the NAACP—in 1954! In short, he's manned the front lines of life itself. That's typical of this Russian-born former infantry chaplain who earned the Bronze Star in World War II. He has always been where the action is when it comes to living, and the friendships he's formed along the way are his true treasures.

To meet him is an experience not soon forgotten. He is a bear of a man. While neither too tall nor too wide, there is a solidness in his build that smacks of strength. His head rests on a thick stump, a wrestler's neck, and he prides himself on having been an athlete in his youth.

Naturally, he has a preacher's voice—he was an active rabbi for 40 years—and uses it well: whispering sometimes, nearly shouting at others, speeding up the words, and then slowing them down for emphasis. His dark brown eyes are warm and liquid. Noticeably kind toward others, he is the consummate gentleman. He's the epitome of the grandfather who easily draws children to his knee.

He regularly plays 18 holes of golf, and wouldn't think of using a cart. After all, a soldier walks. "I'm an ex-GI," he said, "an infantryman. You don't have to handle me with silk gloves."

And therein lies the contrast. Eskin is leather and lace; stern when he has to be, but gentle by preference.

As soldierlike as he was when he served his country in uniform, he never forgot that his first service was to God. He always served the principles of righteousness as he saw them. He believed in humankind, even in the German people, some of whom were slaughtering Jews.

Such was the case one day in 1945 when the 100th Infantry Division was marching into yet another German town that had fallen. He saw an elderly couple by the road, and pulled his jeep over to talk. He asked in German, did they know of any Jews nearby?

"The wife started to cry," Eskin related. "She took me by the sleeve and implored me to come to her house. Her husband, a Lutheran minister, went to the attic and brought out a young couple: two Jews, skinny as rails. The minister and his wife had saved them from the camps by hiding them for six years. Immediately the couple talked to me in Yiddish, telling me that this man was their God: He had saved their lives."

Eskin returned to the town a few weeks after the war was over. He found the German couple in tears. "Please help us," they implored. "Our daughter is in an American prison camp because she has been a Hitler Youth member."

Her parents had kept the two Jews in hiding a secret from her. They couldn't risk her finding out and perhaps turning them in to the authorities.

Rabbi Eskin talked to the U.S. Army major in charge at the prison. He told him what the girl's parents had done. "They saved two lives," he said. "Give one back—give me their daughter. She was too young to know what she did. Show these people our good faith; I'll take the blame if you get in trouble."

The warden released her. At home, her father told her what the rabbi had done. She was confused be-

cause she'd been taught that Jews belonged in the camps. Why, then, would this Jew unlock her prison door?

"Let this be a lesson throughout your life," Eskin later admonished the girl. "Your parents could've been shot for what they did, but they risked their lives to save two others.

"Taking someone's life is easy when you have a rifle and all the power," he said, "but to save a life shows you are a human being instead of an animal. Live as a human. Follow your parents' example."

Once she realized how wrong she had been and the hurt she had caused her parents, the girl wanted to commit suicide. But Eskin later received a letter from her parents relating that she was contemplating going to Israel and working on a kibbutz as compensation for her wrongdoing. "How do you like that!" Eskin exclaimed, reveling in the conversion he'd played a part in—the birth of a new understanding.

Always a student of life's lessons, he measures his growth as a person by such meaningful encounters. As one who looks, and finds, Eskin has found himself enmeshed in many such touching encounters. One of the most poignant was in battle.

Carl DeHartung was a young 100th Infantry Division trooper who visited the chaplains' offices when the division was in stateside training. "And he always had a friendly word for me," the rabbi remembered.

Committed to battle in the invasion of southern France, the division saw action immediately as did other units of the Seventh Army. The infantrymen advanced hundreds of miles in the first few weeks, taking thousands of prisoners as they fought their way into Germany. But enemy resistance stiffened at the Neckar River, where crossing attempts were repulsed four times, each with tremendous casualties.

Chaplain (then-Capt.) Eskin was at his familiar post—the first aid stations, little more than tents with tops flapping in the brisk March wind. "And there was young Carl," the rabbi said, "with a bullet in his chest; a handsome lad about twenty years of age—blond hair, blue eyes—a farmboy from Iowa. I was shocked to see him lying there."

Eskin went to his side, and there was a flicker of recognition in Carl's eyes. "Chaplain, say a prayer with me," the lad whispered. "I took off my helmet and knelt in the mud beside his cot," Eskin said, "reciting the Twenty-Third Psalm. As I finished I felt his hand tighten on mine. I looked at him, and Carl DeHartung was no longer among the living."

The rabbi's voice broke and tears streamed from his eyes. "Excuse me," he said, "It still hurts after all these years. What a wonderful lad."

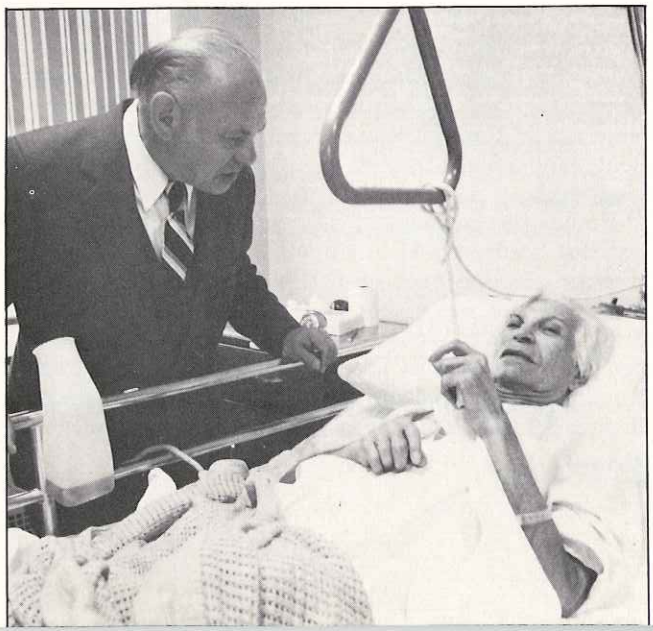
So touched was Eskin by the experience that he later wrote a sermon concerning DeHartung's death for his weekly Jewish service. He called it, "What It Means To Be An American." The sermon was later sent with routine monthly reports through division channels.

Later, Eskin was surprised to read that a nationally known editor of a religious magazine, Dr. Daniel A. Poling, had somehow gotten the sermon and then printed it in his syndicated newspaper column. More important to Eskin was the fact Dr. Poling could fully appreciate the sermon. The editor was the father of a young minister whose death had become part of American war history.

The clergyman was one of four chaplains aboard the U.S. Army transport ship, the *Dorchester*, torpedoed en route to England. While the ship was sinking in the Atlantic, a rabbi, a priest, and two Protestant clergymen—one of them Dr. Poling's son—gave their life jackets to frantic crewmen who had none. The four chaplains, though, linked arms in prayer and were last seen slipping into the icy depths.

Dr. Poling wrote to Eskin about the DeHartung sermon, and a correspondence was begun. The letters are some of his greatest joys, his most cherished mementos.

It's characteristic of him to savor relationships, because people interest him. But he's also infinitely curious about all life around him. The rabbi is never too busy to stop and study something as simple as redbirds flying amongst the trees as he walks to his daily morning prayer service at the neighborhood synagogue.



In the war years, life had not allowed such pleasures. Life then was a roaring current of destruction, catching up all people and things in its turbulence. Through France and Germany Eskin marched with the men, and he was always waiting for them whenever they came off the battle lines for rest.

"They had been so close to death on the front lines that most of them wanted a religious service immediately, right there in the field," Eskin said. "If they were Jewish boys, I'd do the service. For the boys of other faiths, I'd arrange for their chaplains to come in. This is what combat chaplains did during the war."

Along the way, in every bombed-out town the troops marched through, Eskin couldn't help but notice: Not a Jew was to be seen. "We knew their fate would be bad," Eskin said, "but we had no idea six million would be killed."

By war's end, the 100th had taken Stuttgart and was garrisoned there. Eskin knew Jews were being released from prison camps and would need help. The legions of survivors clogging the roads confirmed as much.

He found a three-story warehouse and an apartment building that had belonged to three Jewish brothers who'd perished in the concentration camps. With division volunteers, the rabbi began cleaning and building walls. Soon there would be a sick ward and kitchen facilities. Word spread quickly, and survivors began pouring in. "They were so sick it's still hard to picture," Eskin said sadly. "It would break your heart to see human beings in such condition."

From their ranks he found accountants, administrative clerks, doctors—people who'd had normal lives and occupations before the Holocaust—and organized a minicity within a city.

Eskin fashioned a synagogue in the building and held Jewish services, the first in Stuttgart in 10 years. All aspects of the project grew and gained momentum, fueled by the gratitude of the survivors who so much appreciated the Americans' kindness.

Chaplain Eskin was seemingly everywhere at once, appealing for help. He solicited money and GIs emptied their pockets. Buses were chartered to go out and pick up Jews from the highways. They could hardly believe anyone would do such things for them. "The goal was to provide food and lodging for these people—stabilize them until they could make it on their own," the rabbi said.

Medics brought penicillin; nurses and doctors came at night to care for the survivors; potatoes and other foodstuffs from mess halls ended up in the warehouse's kitchen; and dentists drilled into the wee hours of the morning. Slowly but surely, the "dead" returned to life.

Along with the inevitable stories of tragedy, there were happy stories, too—great human dramas unfolding among the people in the house in Stuttgart.

Rabbi Eskin likes to talk about a survivor named Goldberg, heartbroken over the loss of his wife. Rumor had it that she was on a boat packed with Jews that was intentionally sunk by the Germans. Goldberg felt his life was nothing without her, and everyone knew his sorrow. One evening a linguist in the "receiving" department of the home told Eskin he'd interviewed a woman named Goldberg who came from the same village as Mr. Goldberg. Could she be his wife?

Eskin brought the woman upstairs and, in the hallway outside Goldberg's door, said to her, "Please don't get your hopes up," preparing her for the worst. "So many have been lost." But when Mr. Goldberg opened his door, there was no doubt. A cry of joy sprang from his lips, "and they embraced for over an hour," Eskin said. "I stood with the other volunteers and cried from happiness."

Today the Goldbergs own a furniture store in South America and have stayed in touch with Rabbi Eskin.

The 100th Division was deactivated in the fall of 1945 and the rabbi returned home. He later learned that the survivors who remained in the Stuttgart warehouse renamed it "Eskin House." It remained open, a center of Jewish activities in Germany and a living monument to the rabbi who cared, until the early 1950s.

Eskin was only 35 when he returned to Detroit, and there was much to do. He happily re-immersed him-

LEFT TO RIGHT: Rabbi Herb Eskin chats with Chaplain Ron Phelps at the Veterans Administration hospital in Southfield, Mich. Later, he visits VA patient Sidney Bluemberg. At home, the rabbi who served northern tier Air Force bases for years reads while Mrs. Eskin enjoys needlework.

self in the business of being a rabbi, but his bond to the service was still strong. He joined the Army Reserve as a major and worked with hospital groups until his retirement almost three decades later.

Also, in 1946, he began what would turn into 35 years of driving each month to military installations in Michigan, always volunteering, always ready to help. A letter from the national Jewish agency that indorses rabbis serving in the armed forces is typical of letters he received from agencies seeking his help:

"Dear Chaplain Eskin," it reads. "Considering the job you have been doing for the men at Selfridge AFB, the 28th AAA Group, the U.S. Naval Air Station, the U.S. Public Health Service Hospital, the Dearborn Veterans Administration Hospital, and Wurtsmith AFB, we would very much appreciate you extending your favors in another direction. . . ."

Of course he could and would. Whether or not he volunteered for some of the loose odds-and-ends jobs or whether they somehow gravitated mystically toward him is irrelevant. Fact is, he was always ready to help. "Time and money are nothing," the rabbi said. "Service is everything." And he means it. He estimates he put 400,000 miles on his personal cars over the years he traveled the Michigan roads.

"The Selfridge Air Force Base commander used to call me during the winter," he said, "telling me not to risk coming—the roads were too bad. I would tell him, 'Don't cancel the services; I'll be there.' And I was." Sometimes road conditions were so poor he could drive only 20 mph, but Eskin would not be deterred, not from that or the thousand-mile round trip drive to Kincheloe AFB every month! To him, it was a duty, a necessity.

That "I'll be there" attitude has carried him down many a road, and if true wealth is represented by honors and awards from peers, then Rabbi Eskin is a wealthy man indeed. To wit:

"Dear Rabbi Eskin," the director of rehabilitation services for the VFW wrote in the 1950s. "I have been a member of the VFW since 1919 and I believe I have personally known every chaplain general since that time. I am sincere when I tell you that I believe you did more good during your term of office than any national chaplain the organization has ever had. The boys of all faiths recognize in you a man of God who was a sincere friend of the veteran."

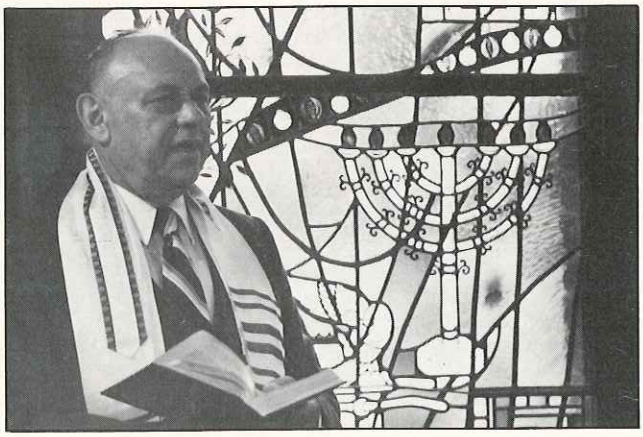
He's remained a sincere friend to GIs. Although 70 years old—or young, in his case—he still makes the 400-mile round-trip drive to Wurtsmith AFB every month, dismissing it with a simple, "they need me."

"I love the service because it is so democratic," the rabbi likes to say. "In the service, people make rank because they earn it, not because they're a Protestant or Catholic. Favoritism is minimal; promotion is on merit. That's how it should be.

"To anyone separating from the service, I say carry that feeling of unity wherever you go. This is what America is all about, a land of opportunity, a land that safeguards not only its own shores but those of every freedom-loving country in the world. We are not selfish. Americans are a people who can live together in spite of their differences, because we know our differences make us strong. Sure we have rough spots, but thank God they're so few."

Of all things, the mention of his beloved 100th Infantry Division still stirs him to animated conversation. "I get a Christmas card every year from the division chaplain, Father Charlie Mulumphy," he said. "Can you imagine? After thirty-seven years. We are still like brothers."

And the observer is left with but one question: Is it any wonder?



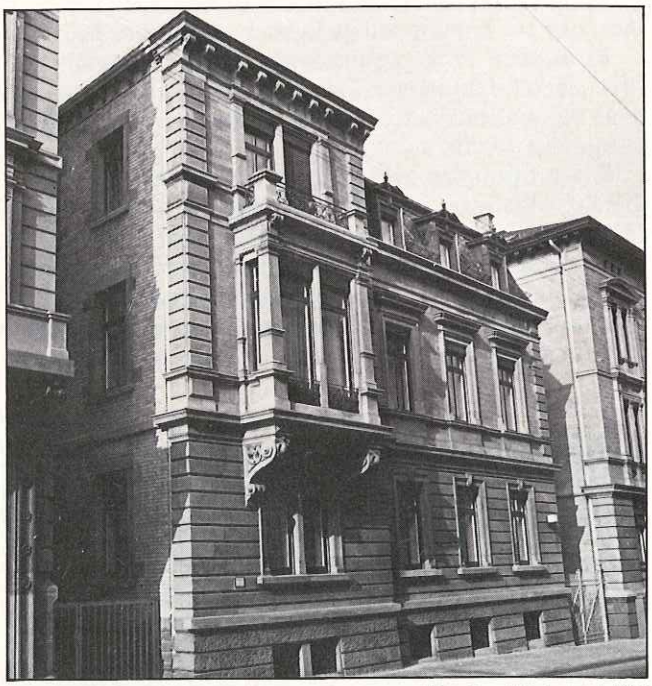


photo by MSgt. Donald Sutherland, AAVS

ABOVE: "Eskin House" in Stuttgart, which served survivors of the Holocaust from June 1945 until it closed in the '50s. LEFT: Rabbi Eskin conducts a reading during morning services at the Jewish chapel in the VA hospital.