



'Gated Grief' book launch

■ **When:** 7-9 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 20

■ **Where:** Congregation Beth Israel

■ **Details:** Brief talk with slide show, reading, Q&A and book signing

■ **Books for sale:** Available for purchase at event for \$24.95. Levinson will donate 20 percent of profits from books sold that evening to Jewish War Veterans and Under the Hood, a resource center for Fort Hood community.

■ **Publication date:** Official publication date is Monday, Jan. 31, and locally copies will be found at Book People. Also available at most major online booksellers, such as Amazon, Borders and Barnes & Noble.

■ **Information on author's research:** www.veteranschildren.com



Austin's Leila Levinson, author of 'Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma'

Author to launch book inspired by finding Holocaust, war photos

By ANDREA ABEL

SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

Austin author Leila Levinson will launch the publication of her historical memoir, "Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma" (Cable Publishing, 2011) this month.

The event, scheduled at 7-9 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 20, Congregation Beth Israel, will include a talk by Levinson on the book's multigenerational perspective on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), how unhealed trauma reverberates through a family, and how facing trauma enables enormous healing. Levinson also will read selected passages from the memoir, lead a question-and-answer session, and be available to sign copies of her book.

For Levinson, the moving journey began more than two decades ago. In 1989, after the sudden death of her father, Dr. Reuben Levinson, she found his Army trunk from World War II in the basement of his medical office. Inside was a box of photographs he took from the moment he crossed the English Channel heading to Utah Beach for the D-Day invasion all through the war in Europe.

At the bottom of the box she saw awful images: endless skeletal bodies filling a huge courtyard. Her father's handwriting on the back said, "Nordhausen Concentration Camp, April 11, 1945."

The photographs of Nordhausen shocked Levinson, who had no idea that her father witnessed a concentration camp. He hardly spoke of the Holocaust at all as she was growing up except to say, "Don't think it can't happen here." But as marriage and children filled the years after her father's death, Levinson had little time to think about the photographs' significance.

Her life was scarred further by the sudden, mysterious disappearance of her mentally ill mother. Levinson was 5 years old the last time she saw her mother. Police separated them after a shopping trip where Levinson's mother was arrested for shoplifting. For the rest of his life, Levinson's father refused to explain the disappearance, leaving her to piece it together.

It wasn't until 15 years after finding the photos that a question from a student in her Holocaust literature class at St. Edward's University, where Levinson was an instructor, sparked a quest to delve deeper. One day in class, the student asked, "Can veterans' war trauma be passed onto their families?"

That question would inspire five years of extensive research at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and Holocaust



REUBEN LEVINSON COLLECTION
After her father's death in 1989, author Leila Levinson found his Army trunk from World War II. Inside was a box of photographs Reuben Levinson took starting with the crossing of the English Channel heading to Utah Beach for the D-Day invasion and continuing all through the war in Europe. The photo at right was taken while crossing the English Channel. Above is the clearing station at Utah Beach, during the June 1945 invasion.

muse-ums around the world, interviews with more than 70 veterans who liberated concentration camps, and their families — and eventually Levinson's current book.

Levinson received grant funding for her research, which included an emotionally charged visit to Germany, where she walked the same ground as her father at Nordhausen Concentration Camp. In 2006, the Writers League of Texas named her manuscript, which later became the book "Gated Grief," "Best Narrative Nonfiction Manuscript."

The finished book weaves together the voices of eight liberators, as well as her memories of trauma, to create a portrait of how her father's unhealed trauma shaped her own childhood. It also contains more than 100 photographs.

"It was my interviews with other WWII vets that helped me to understand and put into context my own life," Levinson shared.

"I want people to see my work as having multiple layers of importance," she said. "As well as finally recognizing the trauma of the liberators, 'Gated Grief' shows how when a veteran's invisible wounds go unhealed, those wounds become infectious within the veteran's family. Trauma erases



Veterans on liberation

"The shock was complete and total, especially when we walked into the crematorium."

— George Kaiser, liberator of Dachau

"And then, the leaves turned gray. Gray? I wiped them, and ash came off in my hands. Then we walked through the gates and ... and ..."

— Nat Futterman, liberator of Buchenwald

"Did I ever, did I ever change back?"

— Al Hirsch, liberator of Ohrdruf

"There were no words that could convey ..."

— Dr. George Tievsky, who treated survivors of Dachau

At the bottom of her father's Army trunk, the author found awful images showing skeletal bodies filling a courtyard. In his handwriting on the back was written, 'Nordhausen Concentration Camp, April 11, 1945.' Levinson was shocked, not having known that her father had witnessed a concentration camp. When she was growing up, she recalled, the most he said of the Holocaust was, 'Don't think it can't happen here.'



a veteran's ability to take in important information and to take action. The numbing of emotion necessary to function leads to a banning of all emotion for everyone in the veteran's family."

Levinson pointed out the possible extent of PTSD among WWII concentration camp liberators.

"We think of the biggest camps like Buchenwald and Dachau," she said. "But Buchenwald had 180 subcamps. Some subcamps even had subcamps. All told, there was an estimated 20,000 camps. Researchers have estimated that at least 350,000 American GIs witnessed the camps."

Beyond the publication of "Gated Grief," Levinson's extensive research led her to recognize the shared trauma among all war veterans and their families, not just those involved in WWII. She founded the online community Veterans' Children (www.veteranschildren.com) to "create a bridge of stories between veterans and their children" and as a resource. The website includes video recordings of WWII veterans recounting their memories of liberating concentration camps, as well as video of Levinson explaining some of her book's themes of Jewish GI concentration camp liberators, the trauma suffered by liberators, and the impact of WWII trauma on the next generation.

"'Gated Grief' not only helps us to understand how the Holocaust reverberated through American society in a deep way," Levinson said, "but (also) how any war — how our wars today in Iraq and Afghanistan — come home with the soldiers."

■ *Andrea Abel is a regular contributor to The Jewish Outlook. Contact her at andreaabel@sbcglobal.net.*

Praise for 'Gated Grief'

"After her father died, Leila Levinson discovered his haunting photos of the German concentration camp where Captain Reuben Levinson had encountered hell. To understand the toll of bearing witness to war's horror, Leila sought out other veterans who had also witnessed the unimaginable and who were then imprisoned by their own nightmares. 'Gated Grief' is a must read for those who wish to understand the spiritual wounds of war."

— James Bradley,
author, "Flags of Our Fathers Flyboys"

"Leila Levinson's 'Gated Grief,' rooted in her own experience as the daughter of a World War II veteran, speaks to a more universal experience — the trauma of war as it wrecks its hidden havoc generations. It is a touching story of search, revelation and recovery."

— Robert H. Abzug,
author, "Inside the Vicious Heart"

"My father had shared with me over the years and I had asked him what he did in the war. He told me about fighting at the Battle of the Bulge, but he never mentioned that he had entered Buchenwald, and how could I have thought to ask him that question? 'Gated Grief' has allowed me the ability to understand my father better than I ever have. For this you have my gratitude."

— Fred Futterman,
son of a GI liberator

"On rare occasions, a book comes along that refuses to allow the Holocaust to become a compilation of mind-numbing statistics and brings it back to the human level. 'Gated Grief' is just such a book."

— Flint Whitlock,
author, "The Beasts of Buchenwald"

The grief behind the silence

By ESTHER MIZRACHI MORITZ
SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH OUTLOOK

As U.S. troops have returned home from Iraq and Afghanistan, there has been much media coverage about the devastating effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on GIs and their loved ones. Yet, many GIs are silent about their symptoms because they fear that seeking treatment would lead to stigma and job-loss. Proposals to remedy this with new legislation and better education about mental illness could lead to healing for these men and women.

But what of the troops who returned from World War II at a time when nobody talked about the trauma of war? How has this silence affected the WWII veterans who have been living with PTSD for more than 65 years? Leila Levinson of Austin explores this question in her new book, "Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma."

It was after her father's death that Levinson discovered the horrifying photographs he took during WWII. To Levinson's shock, the photographs showed rows and rows of emaciated dead and dying concentration camp victims. Everything in her screamed that it couldn't be — how could her father have taken these photographs? If he had witnessed a concentration camp, surely he would have told her about it.

Levinson soon realized that her father, Dr. Reuben Levinson, and his unit had been liberators of Nordhausen, a Nazi slave labor camp. As a medical doctor, her father had the hopeless task of treating the emaciated concentration camp victims pictured in the photos in an attempt to bring them back to life. Surely this had been a devastating, life-changing experience, and yet Dr. Levinson had never breathed a word about it to his children.

Nine years ago, when I first met Levinson as a colleague in a writing group, she was working on a memoir and struggling to understand many aspects of her childhood, among them her father's lack of emotional support and presence, his insistence on stoicism in the face of personal tragedy, his melancholy demeanor, and his refusal to discuss what had become of Levinson's mother, who disappeared when Levinson was 5 years old. Levinson wondered whether her father's emotional stoicism could be traced back to his WWII experiences — and why he had never spoken about those experiences.

As Levinson delved deeper into her

family's history she became curious about other WWII liberators. Had they, too, remained silent about their experiences? If so, why? And what effect had the silence had on them and their families? Moreover, would they break their silence now and talk to her?

These and other questions led Levinson on a fascinating journey around the United States to converse with WWII liberators and then, finally, to Nordhausen, Germany, the original site of her father's photographs.

"Gated Grief," is the artful result of Levinson's internal and external search for answers. In it she compassionately records the difficult stories of the WWII veterans, conveying the pain and grief that they have carried with them for a lifetime. Levinson weaves these stories into her own history and the result is an important, informative book that illuminates the intergenerational effects of trauma and grief on the human soul.

Without exception, the GIs had trouble sharing the horrors that they experienced and, as Levinson observes, each of them remains terrified after all these years. As a result of the trauma they experienced, each of the veterans had disassociated themselves from their memories and had lived in melancholy silence in an attempt to protect themselves and their loved ones from their grief.

When one of the veterans describes his memories as "laminated," Levinson observes:

"We laminate photographs and documents to preserve them, making them unalterable. ... The lamination of traumatic memories encases them, seals them away, taking away all emotion but melancholy. ... The veterans could not see that the sadness seeped through the plastic coating of silence ... that sadness without story brings unpredictable consequences."

In "Gated Grief," Levinson reveals the story behind the sadness of the more than 300,000 GIs who liberated concentration camps and, in doing so, removes the plastic coating to allow healing to begin.

I have had the good fortune of being a stowaway on Levinson's journey and have witnessed the evolution of her book from personal memoir to historically significant work of nonfiction. "Gated Grief" is the stunning result of Levinson's passion and devotion. She has gifted us with a book of far-reaching implications for everyone — those who go to war and those who remain at home to welcome them back.

■ *Esther Mizrahi Moritz is an Austin writer.*

REVIEW