



Brian Stieglitz/Herald Life

**BERNARD RADER**, left, was joined by his wife, June, at a recent talk — one of many he gives to keep the stories of WWII veterans alive.

# Jewish POW encourages vets to keep stories alive

## Bernard Rader inspires conversation at library presentation

By **BRIAN STIEGLITZ**

Philip Zysberg, of Wantagh, was born in Poland in 1935. Two years later, his father noticed that for the Jewish people, “things were not good.” His voice rose from the audience during a presentation by WWII veteran, Freeporter Bernard Rader. Zysberg spoke with a heavy accent and a crack in his voice, eyes glossy with the promise of tears.

“We went to Britain and they wouldn’t let us in,” he said. “We went to the United States —” he choked the tears back and paused for a moment. “They wouldn’t let us in.”

Rader and his wife, June, have made appearances at libraries and schools for the past 10 years to share his experience as a prisoner of war. His presentations, as was the case in Merrick last month, transform rooms into a safe space in which people such as Zysberg can confide in one another and share their stories from past wars.

Rader began his presentation with a letter he wrote to his family when he was held at a hospital on Ile de Groix, an island off the coast of France. “It’s hard to write because I hate to remember,” he read. “But I know you wanted to know just what happened.”

Rader, 20 at the time, was a rifleman for the 94th Infantry Division’s Company K. After the D-Day invasion, they were sent

to the front lines in Brittany. His team was outnumbered 12 to one against the German Army that, after four hours of fighting, threw out concussion mortar shells. When he was blasted by raining shrapnel, Rader had no choice but to lie still. He did not want the German soldiers to see the “H” for Hebrew inscribed on his dog tags, so he buried them.

Despite his condition, Rader survived the ambush. He was captured by the German Army and, along with the 50 soldiers who survived that battle, became a prisoner of war. They were taken to Il de Groix, with the injured held at a hospital on the island. According to June, Rader’s wife, the soldiers were not mistreated or abused, but they were starving. For breakfast, they had a slice of bread with some lard. “For lunch, a slice of bread with some lard,” she said. “And for dinner, watery soup with nothing in it.” While he was a prisoner, Rader made a list of 145 things that he wished he could eat. The last was sauerkraut juice.

While Rader was a prisoner, he made sure to keep his Jewish identity hidden. Somebody gave him a calendar with a picture of Jesus on it, which he kept over his bed.

On Il de Groix, the men were only allowed to walk in public to a well for water. They moved single-file with a German soldier at the front and back of the

line. If they turned a corner and the Germans couldn’t see, the people of the island sometimes gave them an apple or turnip. One of the men smuggled a letter seeking the help of the American Red Cross to a local woman. He had no idea if it would be received, but weeks later the soldiers were sent supplies by Red Cross Field Director Andrew Hodges. This was the same man who would save Rader’s life.

Hodges crossed through the American and German bases to transfer the supplies. Exuding charisma, according to Rader, he managed to negotiate the largest prisoner exchange in WWII history, and secured the release of every prisoner on Il de Groix.

Rader was recognized by the French government and was inducted into the French Legion of Honor by former President Nicolas Sarkozy. This decoration of gratitude has been bestowed on several Americans such as Rader, who risked their life in either World War. Years later, Rader spoke with his fellow soldiers and they created an honorable plaque for the people of Il de Groix. Rader met Hodges, the man who secured his release, in 2001 at a screening for a documentary about the exchange called, “For One English Officer.”

Rader recently celebrated his 93rd birthday in Freeport, where he lives with June. He is part of the American Legion,

Jewish War Veterans and Disabled American Veterans. When he finished speaking he asked the veterans in the crowd to raise their hands and shout out the wars in which they fought.

“My husband is a veteran,” Brenda Zysberg said. “But he won’t raise his hand.”

Brenda Zysberg said it was because he never fought, but the crowd erupted into a flurry of voices encouraging him to be proud he served. Zysberg interrupted with his story.

“This country is a great country,” he said. “But sometimes they just don’t make sense.” As an example of this, he referred to the country’s refusal to accept him and many other Jewish people before World War II. After getting turned away from the United States, Zysberg and his father went to Cuba. They stayed there for 11 years and were finally granted entry to America under the Polish immigration quota system. In 1949, when he was 17, Zysberg made the decision to fight for his new country and enlisted in the army.

Rader said that, out of the 140,000 POWs in WWII, there are about 4,000 alive now. A man in the audience pointed out that the number of veterans, in general, is dwindling because the Army is a smaller outfit. Rader said that’s why he decided to give his presentation. He wanted to keep the story alive.