How We Became an American Family

a memoir

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Life in America

By the age of eleven, I had lived through the upheaval of the Russian Revolution, the horrors of the pogroms, the devastating typhus epidemic, and my traumatic experience at Ellis Island. On June 10, 1922, my mother, my sister, Celia, and I finally arrived in America. I met our father, whom I never knew, for the first time.

From Ellis Island, Pop took us to the home of his cousin, Anna Mizen, in Philadelphia. Other relatives were there to greet us. We were the "greenhorns," creatures from another world.

That evening, he took us on bustling Seventh Street and bought us shiny shoes. The sight of so many pushcarts loaded with fruit and vegetables and the noise of the crowd was like the atmosphere of a carnival. I asked my father to buy a *covoon* (watermelon) that we enjoyed that evening. Truly, America was paradise.

That night, we bedded down on the floor of the Mizen home. I must have consumed too much watermelon, for, in my sleep, I wet my father from head to toe. It was a most unfortunate beginning for a loving relationship. It certainly "dampened" ours for a long time to come, almost until I reached manhood.

In a few days, we were off to our home in Allentown, Pennsylvania. My father was a junk dealer, an occupation that was shared by quite a few Jews in that town. He furnished our three-story house with junk

furniture. In reality, it was good, beautiful furniture. Today, they would be priceless antiques. It was the best home we ever lived in.

It didn't matter that we had to use an outhouse. It didn't matter that the only heat was from a pot-bellied stove in the dining room. The upper floors were supposedly heated by holes six inches in diameter in the ceiling above the stove. One can only imagine how little heat reached the second floor, and even less than nothing found its way to the third floor. Getting out of bed was a real torture that winter. Gas jets on the walls were our lighting fixtures. No one knows how many immigrants blew out the flame at bedtime and went to sleep forever.

We were the only "greenhorns" in Allentown at the time, and the good people of that town had their fun with us. They began to teach us American expressions, such as "good night," "goodbye," "good evening," and laughed when we said "goodeelning." The expression "get out of here" sounded to us like "gerroria." Oh, they laughed because they were so much smarter than we were. Of course, they introduced us to all of the choice four-letter words that delighted them to no end. The very first day, the boys took me outside and taught me the "manly art" of self-defense and blackened my eye. Everyone had a marvelous time, but us.

None of this was lost on my mother. She knew, deep in her dear heart, that the stigma would cling to us no matter how long we lived there. My sister Celia was now 15 years old and her opportunities for a good social life and marriage were a real concern to my mom. She began to urge my father to move to Philadelphia. There were more newcomers in the big city as well as a more favorable atmosphere there.

My dear father did listen to her. He loved and respected her and truly saw her wisdom. He agreed to move despite the fact that he had a good, ongoing business in Allentown. He had a horse and wagon and a large stable. He also had steady customers in outlying towns who saved their rags, paper, metals, and old furniture for him when he called on them once a month or so. In March of 1923, we moved.

Prior to our relocation to the big city, I was enrolled in the third grade in public school. I took very little part in class, except arithmetic. At Christmas time, I sang carols with the rest of the class. If anyone had

listened closely to the way I pronounced the words, they would have thrown me out of the window. I knew the Russian alphabet, but that created even greater confusion in my mind. However, a young mind is like a dry sponge. I quickly absorbed the speech and idioms of my schoolmates. By the time we arrived in Philadelphia in March, I spoke as good or bad as the other Jewish kids in Key School at 8th and Wolf Streets. They also said things like:

"Lesh out the fire."

"Varf the ball."

"Lak the ice cream corn."

"Don't shitte too much salt on your eggs."

"You wanna go to the moonpitcher?"

On moving day, Mom, Celia, and I rode to Philadelphia with the moving van. Poor Pop. He drove his horse, Gertie, and the wagon, all of the 60 miles on Route 309 and the whole length of Broad Street to South Philadelphia on this cold, blustery day in March. It took him most of the day and into the night. Our anxiety was unbearable. About 9:00 in the evening, he rode in. Relatives had to bodily lift him off the wagon. He was stiff from the cold and the ordeal.

Mom and Pop purchased a small house at 2441 S. Darien Street for $3,400. Although Mom would have liked a house on 8th Street, which was wider and had a porch front, it was out of their range. It was a $6,000 home.

I enrolled in the third grade again at Key School. Celia went in the 7th grade at Thomas Jr. High. She had some schooling in Russia before the revolution. I had practically none.

My dear father tried the junk business again, but big city conditions were entirely different. People threw their junk out on trash day. They had no barns in which to save it. Now, Pop had to root through trashcans for scrap. It was demeaning, very degrading, and quite impossible for him to continue. One day, at recess time, I saw him rummaging in trashcans in a nearby alley. My heart ached for him.

He soon realized that he could not make a living this way. He did have a horse and wagon and wasn't entirely helpless. He began to go to the wholesale fruit market at 3:00 in the morning and buy bananas. He

tried working close to home. The women in our neighborhood wanted to buy at cost or even less and still complained that his prices were too high. He went farther. He crossed Broad Street and did a lot better. Pop was wise enough to realize that good flavor will be remembered long after the price is forgotten. He would buy only the best. Jamaican bananas were short and fat and were the sweetest. Soon he became a legend. People waited for his call and became steady, satisfied customers. His regular appearance on the same streets on Monday, Tuesday, etc., began to take on the semblance of a route. His English was limited, but his honesty was beyond question. Pop began to make a nice living.

From Key School, I went to Thomas Jr. High. I made up a few grades by going to summer school and then went to Southern High. Naturally, my mother wanted me to become a doctor, so I took the academic course. Soon, however, I realized that there would be no money for college, so I changed to the worthless and uninteresting business course that would lead to nowhere.

At this point, I would like to tell you what a "lavish" bar-mitzvah I had. On a Thursday morning, my father and one of his friends came back from the fruit market, parked their horses and wagons loaded with fruit in front of our house. The three of us went to the synagogue around the corner at 8th and Porter Streets. I read the portion of the Torah for that day. We came home. Pop and his friend had a schnapps, and a piece of cake, got on their wagons, and went to work. I hurried off to school. I was only about fifteen minutes late. I whispered the reason to my teacher, Mr. Blitstein, and showed him the impression of the strap marks of the *tfillin* on my left arm. He understood. All was forgiven, and he went on with the class. As George Gobel would have said, "They don't hardly make them like that anymore."

Without question, I didn't have enough ambition to do it the hard way. Night school did not appeal to me. I dropped out of school in the 11th grade. I was a top student without ambition. My mother was heartbroken.

That summer, my brother-in-law, Joe Litvin, got me a job at First Brother's Pawn Shop. I was paid ten dollars a week, seven of which Mom saved for me, and three dollars was for carfare, lunch, movies, and

cigarettes. When the banks failed in 1929, I lost all of my savings — $300.

At any rate, I found the pawnbroker business most interesting. I thought that my bosses, Sam and Irving First, were the smartest men I ever knew. They were strict and demanding bosses, but good teachers. One week I worked four days, and the next week three days from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. They knew how to get every ounce of work out of me. For example, one morning, I got off the trolley at the same time they drove up in their big Buick, and they told me I was not particularly on time.

I was the boy with the broom, of course, and never knew why I swept up so many quarters. I religiously put them on the cash register. One night, while working with Sam, he asked me if I knew why I found so many quarters. They were testing my honesty. It seems that I passed the test.

It wasn't such a humdrum job. Every so often, there were incidents when the police had to be summoned because some thief would try to unload stolen goods. All items were checked against daily police records, and when stolen items popped up, my boss would casually call out a code word. That was my cue to leave quietly, run like hell to the police station at 12th and Pine Streets, and run back with three or four cops. This was a periodic occurrence. On one occasion, a young fellow was trying to pawn a stolen watch. One policeman was there. The thief said he was thirsty and asked for a glass of water. It seemed like a reasonable request. However, instead of drinking, he threw the water into the cop's face, ran out of the store, and made good his escape. We lost that one. Other times, when I arrived with the police, I'd see the thieves' complexions turn pale. On the way out, handcuffed, they promised to "get" me. Today, I'd worry a lot about such threats. In those days, I was young, and I'd just grin at them.

Working late one evening with Sam First, a big, burly man came in and wanted to see a heavy gold chain displayed in the window. He didn't look "kosher" to me. I held on tightly to one end of the chain and he to the other. Suddenly, he yanked it out of my hand and made

for the door. I reached for the pistol that always hung near the cash register. It was not there. Brave, little Sam First was standing with his back to the door. The gun was in his hand. The man turned white, and Meyer was off like an arrow to 12th and Pine. Luckily, our store was located at 12th and South Streets, just a block away.

On another occasion, I came very close to killing my boss, Sam. Almost all men in that neighborhood, even in those days, owned guns. They would pawn them on Monday and take them out on Friday and Saturday. When they brought them back again the next week, my job was to clean the bullets, wrap them in a newspaper, ticket them, and put them in a drawer. My carelessness was unforgivable. The result could have been tragic. I used to check the pistols by pulling the trigger six times. Sooner or later, it had to happen. There was a live round in one of them. There was an explosion! A bullet came within an inch of Sam's head and lodged in the wall. There was a great commotion, and I was sternly instructed to clean each weapon the correct way. As good as my bosses were as teachers, they were not so good after all. They should have known beforehand that I was doing something wrong.

This is a sad and ironic note. Sam First was shot and killed years later behind the counter of his own store in broad daylight.

The Great Depression hit us in 1929. All businesses had to cut expenses. I was expendable. The salesman who was getting $20 per week was to do my work also.

I was allowed to keep my last pay of $10. It was to be for carfare to look for a job, cigarettes, and all the rest. The ten dollars did last for ten weeks. If there was a job somewhere, I would get up and walk. I finally landed a job in the Center City area, on 10th and Filbert Streets. A small manufacturing firm of men's clothing needed a stock boy. When I arrived on the scene, there were at least a thousand men in the street. That was not unusual in those days. At eight o'clock, they opened the door. The huge crowd surged forward. The immense pressure from behind pushed five others and me right through the open door. The door was shut on the others. They took our names, and each of us was to come back at 15-minute intervals for an interview. I was to be the third man. I didn't wait the allotted time and came back first. They wanted to know,

"What the hell was the idea?" I told them the idea was I wanted the job. Evidently, this impressed them, and I was hired.

Little did they know that I would be the cause of them almost going bankrupt. I was trained to be a stock boy and was to learn to be a shipper. All went well for a while, until one morning, feeling good and talking too much, I got pretty careless. I packed an enormous order into a large crate and labeled it to its destination. The firm, out west, was clamoring for the merchandise. Their season was coming close to the end, and the shipment hadn't arrived. The company canceled the order. A trace was made. An atmosphere of gloom was everywhere. The crate finally came back. I labeled it to "Miss" instead of "Minn." The boss got me in a corner and would have gladly choked me. Instead, he said, "Get your ten dollars in the office and get to hell out of my sight!" I was out on the street again.

My brother-in-law, Joe Litvin, again found me a job. His friend, Eddie Tinkleman, was going into business on Sansom Street in an area known as "Jeweler's Row." He needed a young man to tend the store while he was on the outside selling watch materials. My job also meant cutting crystals to fit the bezels on watches. I learned to work the cutting wheel and fit crystals well, no matter how odd the shapes were. Also, I was to sell watch parts to the trade. I had three hundred dollars in the bank, and Eddie wanted me as a full partner. I refused. I had very little confidence in him. As usual, I was wrong. Eventually, Eddie bought out the stock of an old jeweler who was retiring. He bought it dirt cheap. The war made watch material from Switzerland almost unobtainable. Our Eddie Tinkleman almost "cornered the market" and became a wealthy man. Again, I let an opportunity slip through my fingers. At this writing, I have no regrets. Wealth is not always as wonderful as it seems.

Events have a way of determining one's destiny. My father was a fruit huckster. He stabled his horse and wagon at 4th and Shunk Streets. One morning, three armed hoodlums, faces covered with handkerchiefs, held him up. He paid his bills at the market on Monday mornings. The money was hidden in his socks. The thieves knew this and went right to it. They tied and gagged him and threw him into a pile of

manure. He heard one fellow say, "Don't hurt him." Pop recognized the voice of the son of his best friend. He managed to free himself and ran to the police station at 4th and Snyder Avenue. He was afraid to identify this character because he was a dangerous degenerate. As a matter of fact, the police did catch him in a hold-up of a subway station a few years later and killed him in a shoot-out.

Now there was another problem. Pop was too frightened to go to the stable at 4 a.m. I would get up at that hour and walk him there, wait until he harnessed up and walk back home. Then I would try to get some sleep before I had to get to work at Eddie's by 8 a.m.

After a few months of this torture, my father made me a proposition I couldn't refuse. Eddie paid me $10 a week. Pop offered me 20% of the gross profits. That would average out to about $20 a week. I really didn't have much choice. Getting up in the middle of the night was getting me down. The livelihood of the family was at stake. I now had two little American-born brothers: Philip (Favele) was about six, and Mark (Moishele) was four. The first week with Pop, I hit the jackpot. My share was over $20. It was so much money I didn't know what to do with it. I bought my mom a spring coat. The pay wasn't always that great a bonanza.

Pop and I continued working together. One day, he told me to open my mouth and holler, "Bananas, cheap bananas!" I did open my mouth, but no sound came out. I tried again, nothing. If there was a hole in the street, I think I would have jumped in and been glad to disappear. I was so ashamed. There must be a better way. I began to make a list of the house numbers of our customers. I did this street by street, day after day. It soon took on the shape of a route. Now it wasn't such a haphazard way of getting the customer's attention. I rang their doorbells and brought the fruit into their kitchens. My father never knew their names. He knew them as the "fat one," the "skinny one," the "redhead," the "widow," etc.

Eventually, I learned their names and compiled them into an account book. I extended credit until Saturday. We started to become progressive businessmen. But there was one more "fly in the ointment." Who the heck wanted to be seen huckstering with a horse and wagon?

What if, by some chance, my girlfriends would see me. I'd be mortified. I began to agitate for a truck. Then I'd be riding proud and in grand style. I must have been persuasive. Pop gave in. It was a shiny blue Dodge truck. Cost: $1000. We became the envy of all of the hucksters in the market. Our business increased 50%. But for poor Pop, it was a "come-down." I was the driver, and he sat in the back with the produce.

Next, we took on a full line of fruit and vegetables that we knew little about. We became the kings of the hucksters. It was 1932 and the height of the depression. We did very well, indeed.

Most people would gladly work for $25 per week, but we netted $100! We worked very hard in those days. We were up at 3 a.m. On Fridays and Saturdays, we didn't get home until 9 p.m. We, together with the fruit, froze in the winter. Our fingers were chapped to the bone. In the summer heat, we wilted like our vegetables. It didn't matter. People worked hard in those hard times and were glad for the opportunity.

I had a membership at the YMHA. I swam, boxed, wrestled, and played basketball. I only knew the "Y" for what the gym offered. One night, leaving the "Y" with my small bag that contained my gym clothes, I looked in at what seemed like a dance in the auditorium. I saw a few fellows from school who told me that there were weekly dances that I never paid attention to before. They took me in hand. Now I had to learn to dance. A whole new world opened up for me. In no time, I thought I was the John Travolta of that day. Ballroom dancing became an obsession. I didn't know that I had two left feet until I took Betty Gottlieb out on the floor. She is Joey Bishop's sister and was an excellent dancer. I saw that she couldn't follow me and I told her she was a terrible dancer. Sometime later, dancing in her living room, I said to her that her dancing had improved. She then told me a few things.

I had new friends now and began hanging out on their corner, 6th and Shunk Streets. I was a late starter when it came to the opposite sex. My eyes were open now. I noticed a very pretty girl passing by on the opposite side of the street now and then. She was my dream girl. I began to look forward to seeing her. She never looked our way. She ignored us. I would toss snowballs in front of her and in back of her. Nothing would make her notice me. I had no class. I was a corner bum.

One time, at a Saturday night dance, my heart skipped a few beats. There she was, dancing with my long-legged cousin, Tooney. He was three times clumsier than I. Very high-handedly, I took her away from him. She allowed me to take her home, and I knew I was in love. This wonderful girl was Sylvia, later to become my wife. It became a steady courtship. But now I had a problem. I had to get rid of her boyfriends, of whom there was a long list. Somehow, they were frightened away. It was some things I must have said to them. I just can't remember what.

Our dear mom died in 1935. She was only 49 when her heart gave up. My father was now a widower at 54. My little brothers, Phil and Mark, were ten and eight years old. Celia had her own family. I didn't realize how selfish my motive was. I asked Sylvia to marry me, and we would all live happily together. Sylvia was only 19 years old. At this tender age, she inherited a husband, a father-in-law who suffered from stomach ulcers, little Phil, who was a pest, and Mark, a sweet, loving child. It was so unfair. My sister Celia warned me that I was subjecting a young girl to an overwhelming responsibility. I'm quite certain that Sylvia's mother was none too happy about it either. But we were in love. We were married, with no frills, on October 27, 1935. Ten months later, we were very sure we must be on our own, much to the dismay of Pop. This created quite an upheaval for my father and the little guys. My sister and her good-hearted husband, Joe Litvin, took them all into their home.

We lived in miserable two-room apartments for the next three years, but for us, they were heavenly. When the baby was due, we lived only one block away from Mt. Sinai Hospital. In the middle of that eerie night, I was a mess. Whoever got a taxi to ride one block? We decided to walk. I remember how Sylvia walked too slowly for me, and I got to the hospital before her. Our son was born that morning, March 23, 1939. Little Arnold was here! That week of Sylvia's confinement, I didn't know what to do next. I ran around to everyone I knew with the good news. I had a son!

Meyer and Sylvia on their wedding day, October 27, 1935

At this point, Pop got over his grievance and showed his real love for Sylvia, Arnold, and me. He said we needed a home. We went out one day and walked up and down the streets of South Philadelphia. Sylvia was sure we had gone crazy. How could we possibly afford a house? But we came across a little porch home on the 2500 block of Beulah Street. It cost the "tremendous" amount of $1,650. Pop and Celia each gave me $500. We took out a $1,000 mortgage. With my own $300, we renovated the house and moved in. In those days, it was possible.

In a few years, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. We were at war! Many young, married men went into any kind of defense work, especially at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. I refused to do this. I preferred to wait for my draft number to be called. Young men were going off to war, and I was a young man, although I was 32. Meanwhile, I joined the Auxiliary Police and served as a sergeant. We went out in the middle of the night to the eerie sounds of the air-raid alarms, together with the air-raid wardens. We took our work very seriously. Small cans of sand were placed on all corners to fight fires in case the enemy firebombed us. How naïve we were! Later on, when I was fighting in Germany and saw the major cities in flames, I was amused about our dependence on small cans of sand back home.

One terrible day, Pop suffered a major coronary and died in my arms in just a few minutes. It wasn't too long before my induction papers arrived. I qualified for the Navy, Marines, or Army. I chose the Army. It allowed me two weeks to settle my affairs at home. The other services did not. Sylvia saw me off. I left her stunned on the railroad platform as we were marched away.

I received my basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. An aptitude test showed I was best suited for the signal corps; second best was mechanics. After seven weeks of infantry (basic) training, I was chosen to go to Armored School. I was rather pleased because I was dreadfully afraid that I would never remember the Morse code.

After graduating from school as a tank mechanic and being assured as a permanent cadre of the post, I decided to send for Sylvia and Arnold. In nearby Elizabethtown, we were lucky to find an attic apartment in a farmhouse. The town was overrun with soldiers, and, as is usually the case, the people were none too friendly toward us. The rent was too high, so we went to the bus station and found another couple who would share the attic with us. They had a little girl who made Arnold's life miserable. Nevertheless, we were very happy to be together for a few months. Then the bubble burst!

We were scheduled to go on maneuvers. All leaves were canceled. I had to steal out of the camp to tell Sylvia the bad news. She and Arnold had to go home. I had no money, and neither had she. All that night, we packed trunks. There were tears, and our hearts were heavy and sad. Sylvia had to wait until her mother forwarded her allotment check. I left her while it was still dark. I had a mile walk on a country road to the bus station. A pack of dogs followed me all the way, snarling and snapping at my boots. I didn't give them much thought. I had my own, bigger worries. What would happen to Sylvia and little Arnold? He was only four at the time. How would she manage with all of those boxes, a trunk, and our little boy? At this point, my patriotism suffered a low ebb.

Despite a directive that pre-Pearl Harbor fathers were not to go overseas, there I was, on the way. For the next three weeks, we were out on maneuvers. Every day there was a blizzard. Gunnery practice and tank fighting tactics were next to impossible. We were miserable and freezing and learned next to nothing. When we got back to Fort Knox, I had to make out a will. That saddened me even more. When I questioned my captain why, against the directives of pre-Pearl Harbor fathers, I was going overseas, he said my attitude was unpatriotic. Besides,

they needed tank mechanics very badly. Then I asked him if he was going with us. He said that his ears hurt him too much from all of the tank fire. He was some patriot! My ears hurt also, and I was nearly deaf, but that didn't count. I also noticed that I was being followed by the same soldier, no matter where I went. I finally led him to an alley and demanded to know what he was up to. He was frightened and told me that he was sent to spy on me, lest I try to go AWOL.

All the way across the Atlantic, we had destroyer escorts who made wide circles around us constantly. German submarines were close by in those troubled waters. Onboard, we were very crowded. We shared a compartment with medics who were going up and back with the wounded. The space was meant for fourteen people, and we were forty. During a storm, our duffel bags were tossed about from one end of the room to the other, and each time, there was confusion as to whose was whose. This annoyed the medics so much that they wished they would bring us back without arms and legs. Ironically, this period of time was known in the army as "buddy-buddy week."

We finally landed in Liverpool and took the train to Southampton, where we boarded an old tub for the Channel crossing to Le Havre. When we marched through the town, we noticed that the mothers grabbed their children indoors and shut their doors as if we were the enemy. We were later told that the British bombed Le Havre and told them that the Americans did it.

I wound up in the 14th Armored Division in Alsace. They had suffered heavy casualties during the Battle of the Bulge, and I was a replacement. They had more tank mechanics than they needed. I was to replace the cannoneer who was wounded. I was in the 25th Tank Battalion, Charlie Company, 2nd Platoon. Our unit consisted of Leonard Sheldon, the tank commander; Arthur P. Garrett, the best gunner in the company; Donald Busby, bow gunner; John V. Prince, our driver; and me, the cannoneer. My new comrades gave me about 15 minutes of instructions by flashlight during the night. The very next day, we were in a fierce battle with Nazi tanks. I loaded about 60 rounds of heavy shells in a few hours. I learned very quickly. Our excellent gunner, Arthur P. Garrett, destroyed seven enemy tanks that day. As cold as it was, when

it was over, I was so perspired that my clothing was as wet as if I was in a shower.

We came close to death quite a few times. Going through the Siegfried Line, where our engineers blasted a hole in the Dragon's Teeth (rows of concrete pillars that ran the boundary of Germany for miles and miles), a heavy German shell exploded in front of our tank. It flipped us over as if we were a toy tank. Immediately, there was chaos inside. Everything was topsy-turvy and completely dark. I saw legs exiting through a crescent of light, an escape hatch. I was on my back. Many shells had slipped out of their tubes and were on my chest. No matter how hard I pushed up on them, they slipped right back. I knew that 35 lbs. of pressure on the nose of one of these high-explosive shells would blow me to the next world. In desperation, I threw them every which way. I heard voices outside shouting, "Levin's in there! Get Levin out!" Hands reached for me. I was whisked out through a very narrow opening. The skin of my spine was ripped off. I was saved by my comrades. They stood by me, knowing that, with the gallons of gas pouring out and the engine still running, the tank could explode any second. This was real brotherhood. That was on March 23rd, Arnold's birthday.

A few weeks later, at a place we referred to as "88 Junction," a secluded German 88-mm anti-tank gun fired at our column of tanks. Their timing was off, and their fire came between our moving tanks until the one in front of ours stopped. Immediately we were hit, as well as the tank following us. It was on fire! Their ammo was exploding. The men inside made a vain attempt to escape and perished in that inferno. We saw everything and couldn't help them. Going back a few days later, we stopped to look inside the burned-out hulk. The metal was melted like butter. There was no trace of any remains of human beings, just ashes.

Our tank suffered a shot that sheared off our 75-mm gun and gun shield. The escape hatches were wedged. No one could get out. My hatch was OK. I climbed out and released their hatches. The German infantry was firing at us, but I wasn't hit. The continuing impact was like a giant sledgehammer hitting us. The rivets inside tore loose and zinged around like bullets. One hit Garrett's helmet, and he began to

shout that his head was blown off. SSG Sheldon, our tank commander, walloped him on the head with his hand mike and thereby reassured him that his head was still on. Johnny Prince, our driver, quickly ran off the road into an embankment, knocking down young trees as he went deeper into the forest. The enemy had, by this time, infiltrated the woods, and their bullets were pinging off of our tank. We laid down a steady line of fire from our machine gun in their direction. We fired so many belts of ammunition that there was no more bark on the trees, three feet off the ground. At the same time, they rained air bursts over us, and shrapnel hit our tank like hail. Suddenly, a dark storm came up, and visibility was so poor that we were able to get back on the road again and rejoined our company later that night, miles away.

One night of terror, bordering almost on the supernatural, I can't forget. We captured the town of Steinfeld by late afternoon. The Germans launched a counterattack almost immediately. We suffered an artillery barrage of such intensity that the mind and nerves could not long endure. They sent in wave after wave of rockets that we called "screaming meemies." In my mind, they took on the specter of wild, insane shrieking women flying toward us from the sky. It was terrifying. In addition, they pulverized the town with 88-mm gunfire. First, you would hear the scream of the shell that goes right through your brain. Then you could hear and feel the mighty crash that made the tank and the buildings tremble. This continued all through the night without a letup. Hell must be a picnic compared to this. Buildings were burning, and the walls collapsed. Tanks were milling around, trying to avoid these burning walls that were falling all around us. I looked out the prisms (small windows) of our tank and saw, by the flashes of exploding shells, our infantry trying to escape from these burning buildings, flying through the air and smashing into walls, each time a shell had burst in the street. We sat in our tank. Our hatches were locked tight. The German rapid machine-gun fire kept ripping off the side of our tank. We anticipated a German, with a hand grenade, on top of our tank looking for an opening. My mind and nerves gave up the struggle, and I sank into a stupor. I saw a beautiful vision, in color, above me, my beautiful mother and father looking down at me. They were smiling. I awoke

feeling so good and so very safe. I felt that they were protecting me. To this day, I can't figure out this apparition. It was so clear, so reassuring, and so beautiful. The mind is a mystery.

Hostilities ceased on May 2, 1945. We, the 14th Armored Division, now earned the name *The Liberators*. The 14th Division was the first to enter the Dachau concentration camp outside of Munich. Never are we to forget the condition of those unfortunate human beings. They gave me the impression that they were dead and had climbed out of their graves. They were walking skeletons in weird striped pajamas. They were without flesh. The skin on their bones was rotten with sores. They sat on the ground and wept. We gave them whatever rations, chocolate, cigarettes we had in our tanks. I remember a group who could still walk, smashing a window in a nearby building at the sight of food and clothing inside. They fell on the food. They attacked the clothing and began changing into trousers, coats, and shoes. I was right in the middle of this crowd. An American came in shouting that they must clear out. Looting was forbidden. I took up their cry of "*Raus*! *Raus*!" ("Out! Out!"), but in a low voice said, "*Langsam*! *Langsam*!" ("Take your time! Take your time!"). There was real satisfaction in disobeying that order.

The three brothers—Meyer, Philip, and Mark—after the war, 1946

With the end of the war, I was now part of the occupation force. I was sent to Berlin. The devastation was unbelievable. The city looked like a vast dump. I was put in charge of the Recreation Department for our soldiers. I met the Russians. They had taken the city, and the graves and memorials of their fallen comrades were there, in the streets, by the thousands. The goodwill and camaraderie that first prevailed were now changing to more and more hostile acts by them and us. Waiting for my turn to come home was becoming unendurable. I had a family to care for. Combat was easier to bear.

I came home on April 8, 1946. My son, Arnold, was now seven years old. He was waiting for me on our porch, waving a little American flag. I greeted my dear Sylvia like a bear and tore a very expensive blouse she had bought specially to greet me.

I didn't realize how disoriented I had become. I practically had to be housebroken again. I had an urge to go out to the yard to urinate. I stumped out cigarette butts on the kitchen floor. I was a mess. What must they have thought of me? For six weeks, I sat at home greeting other boys who also came home, swapping war stories, and drinking whiskey. I lost all sense of responsibility. Then, one fine day, Sylvia had just about enough of this. In no uncertain terms, she asked if I intended to sit there and do nothing the rest of my life. That did it. I knew that I was really home and had better get on the ball.

Arnold salutes his dad, c. 1945

I was invited to work at Joe and Celia's food market with the understanding of a partnership when I shaped up. I felt the work too confining. I had to be on the outside. I had to do things my own way. After six months, I decided to resume my fruit business. I said so-long to Joe and Celia and bought

Meyer's fruit truck

another truck. Sylvia had sold the one I left behind to pay off our $1,000 mortgage. I sent out a letter telling my old customers that I was coming back. I began to do well. Considering that the average wage at this time was about $40 per week, I averaged four times that. No wonder I continued this for fifteen years.

In 1947, Sylvia suffered a miscarriage. Once again, we raced to the hospital in my truck in the middle of the night. This time we had a sleepy boy with us.

A few years later, on March 12, 1949, our daughter, tiny Naomi, was born. She was exquisite from the start. Snow Crop, the frozen food company, held a national beauty contest. They wanted a sweetheart for their Snow Crop products. We entered her, and she became the "queen." She's been our sweetheart to this day.

Naomi, Meyer, Sylvia, and Arnold in front of their house in South Philadelphia, 1950