

Collecting the Stories of Survivors and Liberators



Iowa Jewish Historical Society

One way to honor cultural traditions and to capture important stories for future generations is to collect oral histories from members of your community. Even before the [Iowa Jewish Historical Society](#) (IJHS) was formed, the Jewish community in Iowa made special efforts to document its history and its connections to state, national and international events. From 1969 to 2006, volunteers interviewed community and business leaders as well as prominent members of Iowa's Jewish community, amassing a collection of audio and videotaped Jewish oral histories.

The Iowa Jewish Historical Society's [oral history collection](#) today includes more than 400 recordings on a broad range of topics that honor and celebrate Iowa's Jewish history and culture. Hundreds are now digitized and accessible through the IJHS museum. You can view oral history collection listings on the IJHS website and also contact the museum to arrange to listen to individual tapes. This document features two Jewish individuals with connections to Iowa that shared their stories of survival, service and liberation.

Disclaimer: Due to the subject matter being discussed in these interviews, the audio and video recordings may be too graphic for younger audiences. But these descriptions need to be preserved for the public to never forget the atrocities committed during the Holocaust.

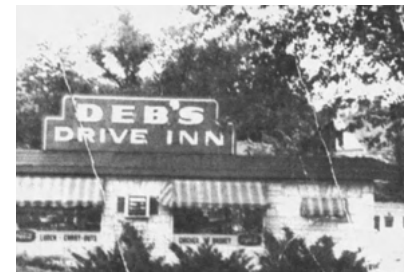
The Story of Manuel "Manny" Soodhalter



Manuel "Manny" Soodhalter was born in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1916, and raised in the city's Jewish community. He graduated from Des Moines High School and attended the University of Iowa and St. Ambrose University. Prior to the start of World War II, he enlisted a private. He was then promoted to chief warrant officer and then to captain.

Soodhalter was directly involved in making the Omaha Beach model that was used at General Dwight D. Eisenhower's command center during the war. He also participated in D-Day, and on June 6, 1944, he landed on Normandy Beach. He spent 11 months with the 116th Combat Team, 29th Division. Soodhalter also was present at the Buchenwald concentration camp on the day it was liberated.

- Listen to a [10-minute audio recording](#) of Manny Soodhalter as he recalls his work in preparation for D-Day, including helping to make an Omaha Beach model.
- Listen to a [23-minute presentation](#) featuring Manny Soodhalter from an "Iowa Liberators Witness the Holocaust" virtual program. In it, Soodhalter speaks about his experience leading up to and on D-Day and what he witnessed at the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in Weimar, Germany.



Soodhalter's business was a favorite eatery in the Quad Cities.

He married Esther Finkel on July 22, 1945, in Fairfield, Iowa, prior to his honorable discharge in December of that year. After the war ended, Soodhalter went on to own and operate a popular Quad Cities diner, Deb's Drive In, from 1955 to 1982. He died at the age of 92 in 2008.

[Listen to more stories](#) from veterans and survivors that were featured in an Iowa Jewish Historical Society's "Iowa Liberators Witness the Holocaust" program. To hear all of Soodhalter's oral history recordings about his military history and life, contact the Iowa Jewish Historical Society at (515) 987-0899 ext. 216.

Veteran takes museum behind the scenes of D-Day

Bettendorf man brings program to the Putnam

By Mary Louise Speer
QUAD-CITY TIMES

The dangers of fighting in D-Day when Allied troops began driving the Germans out of France are well documented. What is not so well known, according to Manny Soodhalter, a World War II veteran and Bettendorf resident, are the undercurrents that infiltrated the planning maneuvers and proved to have been an obstacle as the underwater mines guarding Omaha Beach.

The Putnam Museum held a special Planning D-Day: Behind the Scenes program Sunday afternoon, featuring Soodhalter, the oldest ranking Fifth Corp engineer.

In 1944, Soodhalter, then a chief warrant officer from Davenport, was part of a select force of the BIGOTter intelligence officers from the Fifth Corps who helped plan the invasion of Normandy.

Even his high security ranking did not give him access to the plans being made at the top by the generals. His commander, General Leonard Gerow, was in charge of the First and 29th Divisions of Fifth Corps.

"They all disagreed with my general. If he had listened to Gerow, it would have saved a lot of lives," Soodhalter said. "We wanted to use our troops and our armor a different way."

He cites evidence to prove his point from "Omaha Beach: A Flawed Victory," written by Adrian Lewis. The general was part of a planning team of generals that included Gen. Omar Bradley and George Patton who effectively quelled Gerow's input. The Fifth was responsible for planning the invasion.

"Gerow's position in the invasion was reduced. ... Bradley was confident that he knew D-DAY

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John Schultz/QUAD-CITY TIMES

Manny Soodhalter, the oldest ranking Fifth Corp. engineer, talks about the preparation and execution of the invasion of Normandy during his talk Sunday at the Putnam Museum.

The Quad City Times (Davenport, IA), May 26, 2003, p. A3

The Story of Celina Karp Biniaz

Nearly 77 years ago, an emaciated 13-year-old girl, imprisoned in the Auschwitz concentration camp, somehow convinced Dr. Josef Mengele, the “Angel of Death,” to let her live.



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After nearly five years in a ghetto and forced-labor camps, Celina Karp and her mother Phyllis were transported to Auschwitz prior to being sent to work in a new munitions factory in Brünnlitz, Czechoslovakia. They were two of approximately 1,100 Jewish prisoners on Oskar Schindler’s list of workers needed to staff the factory. At Auschwitz, the women on Schindler’s list were first taken to the showers where they were relieved that water — not gas — came out of the shower heads.

It took Oskar Schindler several weeks to get the Germans to release the women into his custody and move them to his Brünnlitz factory, where they stayed until they were liberated in May 1945.

Two years later, Celina and her parents immigrated to Des Moines, Iowa, and built a new life in their new country. In 2015, Celina returned to Auschwitz on the 70th anniversary of its liberation and suddenly became that 13-year-old girl again.

In 2017 and 2019, the Iowa Jewish Historical Society presented a series of programs featuring Celina Karp Biniaz, who by that point was one of the last living survivors from Schindler’s list — and the only one who graduated from North High School and Grinnell College in Iowa.

During her visits, Celina shared her personal story, which included nearly five years in the Krakow ghetto and the Plaszow labor camp, the transfer to Auschwitz and her terrifying encounter with Dr. Josef Mengele before she, her mother and the other women on Schindler’s list were transported to Czechoslovakia and reunited with her father at Schindler’s factory.

Celina also recounts her family’s immigration to Iowa and life in the United States. When she spoke at Tifereth Israel Synagogue in 2019, it was especially fitting as this was the synagogue that her parents, Phyllis and Irvan Karp, attended during the 50 years they lived in Des Moines.



Celina Karp Biniaz posing with the Schindler cup, which was made in his enamelware company and used by the Karp family when they were imprisoned at Schindler’s factory in Brünnlitz, Czechoslovakia.

- [Listen to Celina](#) tell the story of that 13-year-old girl’s experiences at Auschwitz through a series of poems she composed after her return from that trip to Auschwitz in 2015.

[Watch more recorded presentations](#) from the 2017 and 2019 events featuring Celina Karp Biniaz that were hosted by the Iowa Jewish Historical Society. You can also listen to an [oral history interview](#) with Celina’s mother, Phyllis Karp.



Celina Karp Biniaz speaking with an audience member after her event in the Melva and Martin Bucksbaum Auditorium at The Caspe Terrace in Waukee, Iowa, on September 12, 2017.