



Survivors of Nazi concentration camps crowd around American officers on the estate of a former Nazi leader. The estate was commandeered by Army officer Sidney M. Cooley, who turned it into a colony for Jewish survivors of the death camps.



Concentration camp survivors gathered for a group photograph at the wedding ceremony of two survivors who met at the concentration camp. Sidney M. Cooley is second from the left in the second row. Below, a sign marked the Siegfried Line, a series of fortifications on Germany's western border that U.S. troops blasted through en route to the German heartland.



IF YOU GO

What: Hatikvah Holocaust Education Center
Where: 1160 Dickinson St., Springfield
Hours: Monday-Thursday, 9 a.m.-4 p.m.; Friday, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m.
Cost: \$4, adults; \$3, seniors; \$2, students
For info: Call (413) 734-7700; online at www.hatikvah-center.org



Retired Judge Sidney M. Cooley, 92, stands in his office at the Cooley Shrair Law offices, left. At right, Cooley as he appeared in 1945 after World War II ended and he was assigned to the military governor's office in a section of Germany under American control.



Left photo by MARK M. MURRAY

Photo exhibit tells story of Holocaust survivors

By STAN FREEMAN
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There is justice and then there is poetic justice. For retired Judge Sidney M. Cooley, no legal decision he has ever made packed more poetic justice than one he made as an Army officer in Germany in the days following World War II.

For scores of Jews who survived the horrors of Nazi concentration camps, his decision was their salvation.

Using personal photographs taken by Cooley, the story of those months in 1945 and 1946 is chronicled in a new free exhibit at Springfield's Hatikvah Holocaust Education Center.

Cooley, 92, of Longmeadow, graduated from Springfield's Central High School and served much of his career as a District Court judge in Hampden County, including having been the presiding justice of the Westfield District Court for many years. But in the spring of 1945, when Nazi Germany fell, he was an officer with the 63rd Infantry Division in Europe.

"When the four different occupying countries - Russia, France, England and America - set up independent zones, they suddenly decided they were going to look for certain specialties to run the zones. I had sufficient points to go home, but they apparently discovered I was an attorney. I had passed the bar a few months before going into the army, but had never had a client or been in court," Cooley said.

So he was assigned to the military governor's office in Bayreuth, a section of Germany known as a Nazi hotbed. "I was blessed by being put in a position of great authority. And this was just at the time in the war when they were freeing concentration camp inmates from all over."

The survivors would leave the camps emaciated, dressed in soiled camp uniforms, searching for a place to go. Cooley had the power to invite them to Bayreuth to live, and he did so. He also had the power to commandeer Nazi property, something the Nazis had done extensively prior to the war, taking the land

and belongings of Jews and others they deemed undesirable. Cooley now turned the tables.

"I was able to appropriate the estate of one of Hitler's top men, who had handled the propaganda. He was a violent anti-Semite, but his estate was magnificent. So we were able to establish a colony there" for camp survivors.

The estate belonged to Julius Streicher, Hitler's chief propagandist and publisher of various anti-Semitic books that fueled the hatred of Jews. Streicher was at that moment under arrest, and by the end of 1946 he would be executed after being found guilty of crimes against humanity during the Nuremberg war crimes trial.

"Many of the camp survivors didn't want to stay in Germany, though. They wanted to go to Israel," Cooley said. "But at that time, Israel was strictly an agrarian society and most of the people who came to Bayreuth knew nothing about living and working in an agrarian society. So we taught them farming and animal husbandry."

"There were maybe 100 to 200

people. When they first arrived, they were skin and bones. You can't imagine it. They were wearing their striped concentration camp uniforms," Cooley said. "One of the most touching things was when they held Passover. It's a tradition for the family to get together at a meal and recite the traditional story of the exodus from Egypt. And when they arrived from the concentration camps, it was decided to hold Passover and to recite the exodus. Just a few officers were there. It was the most touching and emotional thing I'd ever experienced in my life."

With the benefits of sleep, food and healthy outdoor work, most of the camp survivors returned to health in just months, Cooley said. "They were human beings again. We even had a marriage that took place among two of the concentration camp people who were living in the colony."

Cooley especially values the plaque those who lived on the estate gave him just before he left Germany in 1946. "They kind of looked at me as if I were a savior, but I was just doing my job."



As an Army officer attached to the military governor's office in occupied Germany, Sidney M. Cooley commandeered this former Nazi official's estate for use as a colony for Jewish survivors of Nazi concentration camps.



Beneath a banner reading "God bless America," concentration camp survivors mingle with American officers on the estate of a former Nazi official.