

NEW JERSEY ROCKLAND

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Surviving ‘Monuments Man’ to speak in Teaneck, Paramus

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Harry Ettlinger, right, and another MFAA member discover a Rembrandt hidden in a salt mine in 1945.

Harry Ettlinger of Rockaway has nothing negative to say about the movie “The Monuments Men.” In fact, he said, it is both “educational and recreational.”

Still, he pointed out, “Hollywood made it.” So it’s not surprising that the film doesn’t show what the former soldier, a real-life member of the Monuments, Fine Arts, and Archives section of the Allied Armies — the MFAA — really did during his 15 months with the group.

The MFAA, established by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1943, worked to retrieve and return priceless works of art looted or displaced from private and public collections in Nazi-occupied countries.



Harry Ettlinger

Mr. Ettlinger escaped from Germany with his family in September 1938 and “was the last bar-mitzvah boy in Karlsruhe, before the synagogue was burned down.” The family settled in Newark. He was drafted into the U.S. army in 1944. He was trained as an infantryman, and before he volunteered to work with the MFAA, he had little knowledge of fine arts.

“My grandfather on my mother’s side was a collector of prints,” he said, and his grandfather had thousands of ex libris book plates from the inside covers of books. Some were signed by the artists.

“During my time as a soldier in Germany, I was able to retrieve his collection,” Mr. Ettlinger continued. The prints now hang on his wall. Although he helped retrieve the stained glass windows from the Strasbourg Cathedral, as well as a Rembrandt self-portrait, he calls recovering his grandfather’s prints one of his proudest moments.

Mr. Ettlinger said his work with the MFAA was not dangerous — “Nobody was shooting at me. It was peace time.” Nevertheless, he had some close calls.

Assigned to retrieve art belonging to French institutions from two salt caves in Germany — “I was a 19-year-old Jewish kid bossing a number of German miners around” — he ordered the workers to break down the door to a previously unknown chamber.

“The door to it was locked. I ordered them to break it down. Inside the chamber, there were tables holding huge jars filled with a clear liquid with yellow bubbles. It was nitroglycerine. They didn’t know about it. Nobody knew. I told the mine manager. He removed it, took it outside, and exploded it.”

Had it not been discovered, he said, sooner or later the mine would have exploded.

Because Mr. Ettlinger could both speak and read German, he was pulled out of the Battle of the Bulge (in which three of his buddies were killed and five wounded) to work as an interpreter. He expected to be assigned to the Nuremberg court proceedings. But when he heard that the MFAA could use someone, “I went there the next day and volunteered.” The group’s leader was James Rorimer, later a director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (played in the movie by Matt Damon).

As a member of the team, Mr. Ettlinger — who believes he may be the only remaining member of the group — helped discover a hideout at the Neuschwanstein Castle near Munich, where the Nazis had kept some of the Rothschild family’s art treasures, and the salt mine in Heilbronn, from which he helped recover the Strasbourg windows and the Rembrandt.

“Old mines are clean places,” he said. “The chambers were 60 feet wide, 40 feet high, and a mile long.” President (then General) Eisenhower wanted to bomb these facilities, he said, because he had received information that they were to be converted into underground factories. Indeed, Mr. Ettlinger pointed out, the last battle in Europe was fought in Heilbronn.

The Nazis “were going to use Hungarian Jewish slave laborers to make jet engines for the German air force,” he said. Had they been able to accomplish that, “the German air force would have been able to shoot down our planes and extend the war by two years.”

Noting that it is important to save art because “it provides a culture in which we feel comfortable in our surroundings,” Mr. Ettlinger described Adolf Hitler as a “frustrated artist” and pointed out that Hitler and Hermann Goering stole art for their own collections.

“Hitler was going to turn the city of his birth in Austria into the art capital of the world,” he said. “He did not have the ability to be creative.”

One of the ironies of Mr. Ettlinger’s work was that he saved some pieces that originally had been displayed in an art museum three blocks away from where he was born. But in those days, he said, “I was not able to see it.”

He said he was also instrumental in retrieving the 73 stained glass windows from the cathedral in Strasbourg, “a city about 40 miles south of where I was brought up. My family had a store there in the late 1800s.” Strasbourg, he explained, “lies in a province that is sometimes German, sometimes French. I was very familiar with it.”

After the return of the windows, “there was a big celebration. It was one of the first works of art returned to another country. They had big shots there.” But he — a mere buck private — was “not invited to share the festivities,” he recalled with a smile.

Mr. Ettlinger said his life continued to be exciting after he returned home.

“Soldiers in the U.S. armed forces were given benefits,” he said, referring to the G.I. Bill, which provided veterans with money for education, among other things. “One of the benefits I got was tuition for an engineering college, \$125 per semester.” Using the money to study at the Newark College of Engineering (now the New Jersey Institute of Technology), he studied together with others in similar circumstances.

“My classmates were not high school students,” he said. “We were all in our early 20s. It was a totally different atmosphere.” He graduated from the school in June 1950 with a BA in mechanical engineering. Later, he earned a masters degree in the same subject from Brooklyn Polytechnic, now a part of NYU, and later he was awarded two honorary doctor’s degrees.

He put that education to good use. “I’ve had quite a number of jobs,” he said. “The last one was to provide the U.S. Navy with a missile guidance system for a nuclear deterrent.” He worked “with a very sharp group of men, who saw to it that we had a missile system that could deter a war.”

Still, he laughed, this was before the invention of lasers. The missiles he worked on could travel 600 miles, “and we prided ourselves on the fact that if we shot a missile from Boston to RFK Stadium in Washington, we would be able to hit the infield. Now they’re able to pinpoint the target within a few inches.”

Mr. Ettlinger, married for 54 years to the late Mimi Goldman, has two sons, a daughter, and four grandchildren. He passes down a proud legacy.

“The Monuments Men were involved not in stealing art but in returning it to their rightful owners,” he said. “We cannot live in a society without a peaceful culture that respects other peaceful cultures.

“What we had done was something that every American should be proud of. Instead of taking things, we gave them back.” He was awarded the Congressional Gold Medal in June 2014.

According to Ann Levenstein, co-president of the Bergen County Section of NCJW, the NCJW meeting at which Mr. Ettlinger will speak will include a commemoration of Holocaust Remembrance Day.

“Remembering the six million Jews who were murdered in the Holocaust becomes more important than ever as fewer and fewer survivors remain to give their first-hand accounts,” she said.

Information

Who: Harry Ettlinger

What and When: Will speak at a meeting of the National Council of Jewish Women on Tuesday, April 21, at 12:30 p.m.

Where: At Temple Emeth, 1666 Windsor Road, Teaneck

More

information: www.ncjwbcs.org

And What and When: Will speak at a breakfast meeting of the JCC of Paramus’s men’s club on Sunday, May 17, at 9:15 a.m.

Where: E. 304 Midland Avenue, Paramus

More information: (201) 262-7691 or jccparamus.org