

WHERE WERE YOU WHEN IT HAPPENED?

By Baruch Cohon

My father came home on that winter Sunday with a very long face. He hung up his coat and turned to me. He said just two words: "It's war." The date was December 7.

In 1941 there was no TV for home use. We had a radio but generally didn't turn it on until evening, for Lowell Thomas' newscast, or *Amos 'n' Andy*, or *The Goldbergs* on weekdays, and on Sundays rarely at all. The morning paper came out before the big news happened that day. So it remained for my father to bring home the word of the attack on Pearl Harbor. The next day Roosevelt went to Congress, made his "day that will live in infamy" speech, and got a declaration of war.

I was in high school. That Monday morning I remember another boy and myself writing "Lick Japan" on the homeroom blackboard, as if it was a football game. Our teacher erased it. At that time we didn't know why.

Two years later I was on my way overseas in the Navy.

Every year on December 7th those scenes come back. Other dates bring other scenes to mind, as they do for all of us. Here are some of mine:

May 8th 1945 was VE day. I was on a minesweeper in the Aleutian Islands, one of just 30 enlisted men in the crew. Expecting the war in Europe to end soon, we had a pool: each man put in a dollar and picked a date. I happened to pick number 8. So for the first and only time in my life I made money gambling – I won 30 bucks when Germany surrendered.

One reason VE day was important to us was that the next step was the planned invasion of Japan. Minesweepers generally went in first to clear the way for the landing craft. So we were ordered back to Dutch Harbor, Alaska, to get outfitted for the invasion of Paramashiru, the northernmost Japanese island. On the way we stopped at Amchitka, one of the Aleutian chain, to draw "small-stores." I was standing in line outside a Quonset hut, waiting to draw shoes, when suddenly every foghorn, bell, whistle and klaxon on every ship in the harbor sounded off at once. Nobody had to tell us why. We grabbed each other and jumped for joy – the war was over! It was August 14th 1945. For us the timing was perfect. Statistically, a small minesweeper like ours was good for 80 mines, more or less, before it hit one. With a direct hit, the ship exploded and sank, and maybe the guy on the flying bridge survived. By that August, our ship had cut 78 mines. So thank you, Harry Truman! You dropped the Bomb and saved my life, and a few million other lives too.

Where were you on November 22nd 1963? I was in Hollywood supervising an editing job on a TV film when I heard of Kennedy's assassination. One of the editors guessed that the killer was a right-winger who would "rather see the world on fire than see the world change." He was probably disappointed when the killer turned out to be a Communist. I left that editing room early to pick up my little daughters from school, trying to plan what to tell them.

Where were you when Princess Diana was killed? I was in Dallas at a family wedding. For that young couple, their anniversary will always bear a grim overtone.

On Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in 1973 I was conducting High Holiday services at Temple Emanuel with Rabbi Meyer Heller when we got a report that there was a bomb in our building. We evacuated. A thousand people stood on the sidewalk till the bomb squad searched the temple. Finally they cleared us to go back in and we resumed the prayers. Then we got a second bomb-scare message. Rabbi Heller, also a WWII veteran, got up and deliberately walked to the pulpit. "We just got another report of a possible bomb," he told the congregation. "I plan to stay. Anyone who feels they must leave is certainly excused. All who are willing to stay with me, we will continue our service." And 99% of that congregation stayed.

PS: no bomb. Not in Beverly Hills. But Arab armies were attacking Israel that day, and Jewish soldiers were called out of synagogues to join their units and drive the invaders out. The enemy calculated the attack to take advantage of the Hebrew calendar, but they underestimated Israeli courage. And whoever was trying to alarm my congregation with a false scare underestimated Mike Heller's courage.

Speaking of cataclysmic events, where were you on 9/11? Or on Thanksgiving 2008 during the Mumbai massacre? And what makes those events different from Yom Kippur 1973, or Pearl Harbor Day 1941?

I see a huge difference. As those of us who experienced the 40's remember, we had four words that helped us win World War II. Two of those words were "total war." Everyone was involved, whether in the armed forces, in a war plant, as an air raid warden, selling war bonds or knitting Bundles for Britain – it was your war. The other two words were "unconditional surrender." When an SS squad burned a Russian village, or a kamikaze sank an American ship, Roosevelt and Stalin did not invite Hitler or Tojo to a peace conference. We cannot afford to treat Al Qaeda or Iran any differently.

Israel's defenders in 1973 knew those words – or their Hebrew equivalents. They, and we, need to relearn them now.

More important, we need to teach them to our media mavens and our Hollywood leftists. To quote Daniel Pipes, the men who attacked Mumbai are not "gunmen" or "militants" as some newspapers described them in politically correct neutral terms – they are murderers. They are part of a lunatic fringe of jihadists who somehow took over leadership of the Muslim world and threaten the lives and safety of non-Muslims everywhere. Why do they hate us? Why do they want to kill us? Are they distorting a good religion to condone mass murder? Never mind. They are dangerous enemies and must be defeated.

First win the war. Then make peace.

And then maybe you and I – or maybe our children or grandchildren – will have another Victory Day to celebrate, another date to remember where we were when Bin Laden or Ahmedinejad surrendered. May it be soon.