Alumni

Armistice and the Man

William D. Kauffman '38JRN, ninety-four, publishes a book about his life.

By
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Early in November we took the Long Island Rail Road out to Northport, New York, and then a taxi to Commack to have lunch with William D. Kaufman '38JRN. A small, welcoming man with a short, white beard, Kaufman first proposed taking us on a tour of the attractive and busy Gurwin Jewish Residences, where he's lived in a tidy two-room suite for seven years. When we reached the bingo room, Kaufman pointed out a card table he's commandeered - "This is my desk" - on which were framed photos of his parents, an Italian-English dictionary, some maps, a stack of magazines, several yellow legal pads, and a handwritten sign warning, DO NOT TOUCH. "This is where I wrote my book," he says.

The book, *The Day My Mother Changed Her Name and Other Stories*, was published this fall by Syracuse University Press. It is the first book by the 94-year-old author.

"I always felt that I could write, but I never really did," says Kaufman, who worked for 31 years as a fundraiser for the Jewish Theological Seminary. He began taking courses at SUNY Stonybrook after his wife, Zelda, died in 1982, and the classes got the ink flowing. "That's when I started writing seriously, and by seriously, I mean writing stories."

The 30 or so stories in his book are mostly about his childhood and teenage years in Scranton, Pennsylvania, the anthracite coal city where he was born in 1914. Wise rabbis, tyrannical schoolmarms, golden-hearted whores, immigrant neighbors, priests, playmates, and much of his immigrant family wander in and out of Kaufman's character sketches and vignettes. Some of the stories, seasoned with sugar and pepper, are so neatly tied up that we had to ask Kaufman where the tales

lie between memoir and fiction.

"Heavily, heavily memoir," he answers. "Most of my stories are true, or partially true, or somewhat true. I have very few fiction stories."

One of the true stories, "The Day the War Ended on Penn Avenue," draws on memories of a November afternoon 90 years ago. Kaufman, just shy of four, was playing in front of his house when the Polish, Ukranian, and Russian miners started returning home for the day from the surrounding pits, four or five miles away.

"They would finish work somewhere around 3:30 and come back by streetcar," says Kaufman. "Their faces were black with coal, and some of them were still wearing their caps with the burning lamps. There were kids among them - 11, 12 years old - called mule boys, because they took care of the animals used to haul the coal.

"Right below where we lived on Penn Avenue, which the miners called Jew Street, there was a saloon, and it was the first place that they would run into, especially on a Friday, which was payday. The men would go in the front door and the boys would go through the family entrance in the back. Usually they would stop and they'd tease us. They liked us: I was a cute little kid, my sister was a cute little girl, and they'd try to grab us and rub their black hands over our faces."

Kaufman first sensed that something was up this particular day when two things happened: the mule boys ignored him and his sister - and went into the saloon through the front door. Soon the church bells began to toll, says Kaufman, and the population massed in the street, much of it going to the rabbi's house to hear that the Great War really was over. The excitement lasted through the night. "The next day, November 12, 1918, the mule boys went to the saloon the usual way: through the back."

Kaufman graduated from Yeshiva College in 1936 and from the School of Journalism in 1938. He borrowed $100 from his father and bought a small money-losing newspaper in Pennsylvania, selling it shortly before he was drafted in 1941. He served as a chief warrant officer in North Africa and Europe. After the war, he worked briefly for the American Zionist Emergency Council as a publicity man.

"Almost everybody in Zionist history passed through our doors," he says, "and the experience was one of the highlights of my life. Of course I was the lowest man on

the totem pole. I really was. My biggest adventure was when I took Chaim Weizmann to the toilet. He wanted to know where the men's room was, so they pointed to me and said, 'Follow him.'"

The Day My Mother Changed Her Name and Other Stories is getting attention not only because of its charming author, but also because Kaufman tells his wise-guy stories skillfully, efficiently, and humorously. He brings us to a time when childhood was both tougher and more innocent.

"I wanted to give the book to our rabbi here," says Kaufman. "He's a wonderful man, something of a *talmud chacham*, and very orthodox. I was wary about how the hell he was going to take the whorehouse business that I described."

But even that chapter, about running errands for the ladies in Scranton's "second industry," had a kind of innocence about it, didn't it?

"It did," he agrees. "We weren't there as customers, we were there as delivery boys. And they were terrific tippers."

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