

MY THREE WATCHES Si Frumkin

I got my first watch for my birthday, 8th or 9th. I am not sure which. I loved it. I think that it wasn't a very good one: it didn't keep very good time, I had to remember to wind it very carefully – “never force it,” my father said, “you will over wind it and the spring will break” – and I was told again and again to keep it away from water. But it was my watch, its numbers would shine greenish in the dark, and I felt, oh so grownup and more important than my friends who didn't have one.

The watch disappeared in the ghetto. It might have been taken away when the Jews had to turn in all their valuables, or maybe my parents sold it for food, or maybe I just lost it. I don't really remember except that I would remember it once in a while and wished I had it back. But there was much else that I missed – unimportant stuff when I think back, but I was just 10-years old when they put us behind barbed wire and so I didn't think much about the important and meaningful things that became important and meaningful when I got older. I missed silly things: ice cream and chewing gum and movies and listening to the radio and going for rides in my father's car or swimming in the river in summertime – like I said, silly things.

Then, the war was over, I was 14 and in a refugee camp in Italy. Once a month I would go to the UN office where they gave us our monthly allowance of 5000 lira – about \$10 – and I would spend some of it on the silly things I had missed for the past 4 years. I bought ice cream, went to the see movies that I didn't really understand (they were all dubbed in Italian which I didn't speak all that well) and sometimes I bought a comic book – I remember liking “Flash Gordon” a lot.

And then a strange thing happened. Mysteriously, wonderful watches appeared for sale in the refugee camp. They were beautiful. Waterproof, Swiss made, fluorescent numbers, large second hand and only 10,000 lira – same watch cost about 100,000 in a store. I still don't know where they came from – Mafia? Stolen goods? Contraband? Who cares! I had to have one.

I skimped and saved. I ran errands for the black marketers. I sold some of the goodies that charity organizations gave us. I wiped the windshields of American army jeeps and shamelessly asked, "GI Joe, tip boy, please?" – this was all the English I knew. I stopped buying ice cream, movie tickets and comic books. And, it took a while, but I got it. I got my watch.

I kept it a long time. It finally broke down more than 10 years later, in far away California.

And then, a few weeks ago, 60 years after Italy, I got a mysterious package in the mail. There was a small box in it and a letter from Carlsbad, a small charming town not far from San Diego. The name meant nothing to me. Here it is:

Dear Mr. Frumkin:

I was in the audience when you were at the opening of the library display of the concentration camp photos. After the talk I came up to speak to you. In our discussion I told you about being at the liberation of Dachau Concentration Camp. In that conversation I mentioned our unit's experience at several of the satellite camps prior to reaching Dachau.

A story which caught your attention was the one about our blowing the safe at one of the camps and finding it full of watches. Not knowing just what to do we gave the watches to the prisoners who were still in the camp. You then told me about not having a watch and wanting one so badly after you were free that you bought one as soon as you had enough money to afford it.

That has touched me so that I took one of the two watches I still have to a local jeweler and had him clean and repair it. The watch caught his attention and he told me that it was certainly a gem worth keeping. After he heard the story behind the watch he was astounded!

Please accept the watch on my behalf as a completion of the liberation of the camp.

Now, you have one of the watches.

Sincerely, Donald E. Jackson

The watchmaker is right. The watch is a gem. It's a pocket watch with a silvery metal back. The dial has "Swiss made", the make "Bentima" and, in

French, “Facon 8 jours” which means that it will run for 8 days after being wound. I don’t think that it is worth vey much in money. But to me – and to the wonderful Don Jackson, the watch is priceless.

It belonged, long ago, to someone who is long gone and who probably cherished it almost as much as I will.

It will remind me, again and again, of what should never be forgotten.