

I Am American by Laurie Silver

My father told me stories and I came to know that I am American.

A teenager during the Great Depression, my father hauled trees and built roads in the wilds of Massachusetts as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps. He sent most of his earnings home to the crowded tenement neighborhood on the east side of Worcester, Massachusetts where he had left behind four brothers, one sister and his immigrant parents.

Later my father joined the United States Army and enrolled in Officer Training School. My father admired the orderliness of the military, but disliked guns and warfare. Indeed, as the Class Orator of his high school graduation class in 1934, he had titled his speech "'War is Hell'".

When the United States entered World War II, my father shipped overseas to command a battalion that would move through northern Africa, Italy, France and Germany. The American military, in World War II, segregated its troops by race. The Army had assigned my father, a Jewish American Army officer, to lead a battalion of African American Army soldiers who composed a non-combat supply battalion, to my father's good fortune.

During the early 1950's, my father, married and a civilian, traveled the United States selling vending machines. Arriving in a town in Ohio, my father commented to his wife who was travelling with him that a soldier named Eichelberger in his wartime battalion had come from that town. As they walked close to the railroad station, my father noticed a group of men working on the tracks in the distance. My father halted and called out, "Eichelberger... Ike... Is that you, Ike?" A man looked up, stared for a few moments, smiled, and began rapidly striding toward them, "Captain Silver, is that you?"

In late 1971, in the noisy lead-up to the '72 Presidential election, the first one in which I could vote, my father was the campaign manager for a declared candidate for President. The candidate, a man whose name would remain unknown to most citizens of the United States, campaigned on a platform that referenced acts of corruption involving then President Richard M. Nixon, acts that my father described to me, in enumerated detail, at the kitchen table.

After a childhood of listening to my father's stories, in 1972 I went to college to study narratives in other voices.

My father shared with me the denouement to his experience as election campaign manager. While my father was sitting in the front seat of a large American automobile that the candidate was starting to move down his driveway, Federal agents from the Internal Revenue Service appeared at the driveway's exit. The agents charged the candidate with nonpayment of Federal income taxes and with assaulting those agents by rolling his car toward them. That chapter ended with the candidate fleeing to Canada.

Thank you, Dad, for narrating events from your grand American life, which, now, belong to my story.