
War Stories: For Lt. Withers, Act of Kindness Has Unexpected Sequel — U.S. Officer Broke the Rules To Let His Men Take In Young Dachau Survivor — A Son's Search for 'Peewee'

by Bryan Gruley | 25 November 2003 | *The Wall Street Journal*

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The two young men stood trembling before Army Lt. John Withers, dressed in the rags they'd worn at the recently liberated Dachau concentration camp. Sores pocked their bony arms and legs. Decades later, the lieutenant would remember how their sunken eyes sought mercy.

But in 1945, near the end of World War II, they posed a problem. Lt. Withers was a black leader in an all-black supply convoy. In violation of Army orders, his men were hiding the refugees. Lt. Withers planned to have the strangers removed—until he saw them.

They stayed with his unit for more than a year, two Jewish survivors of the Holocaust hiding among blacks from segregated America. The soldiers nicknamed them "Peewee" and "Salomon." They grew close to Lt. Withers. By the time he bid them farewell, they'd grown healthy again.

Mr. Withers never forgot them. Over the years, he told and retold their tale to his two sons. When one son set out to find them, he discovered that Salomon had died in 1993. But Peewee, he learned, was alive.

Unlike Mr. Withers, Peewee had buried his past. His children and grandchildren knew almost nothing about his time in Auschwitz, Buchenwald and Dachau. When his grandson asked about the number tattooed on his left forearm—A19104—all he could say was, "Bad people put that down."

He couldn't bring himself to talk about it.

Then John Withers reappeared—and changed Peewee's life yet again.

A BRIGHT MORNING SUN shone on the cobblestone square in Starachowice, Poland, as the Nazi soldiers separated the strong Jews from the weak. It was Oct. 27, 1942, a scene reported by historians and survivors. The healthy would go to work building bombs for the Germans. The rest would be piled on a train to the extermination camp at Treblinka.

Izaak Wajgenszperg gave his 14-year-old son a brick to stand on. He said it would make the boy look bigger, so the Nazis might not send him away. Mieczyslaw Wajgenszperg obeyed. Across the square, he recalled, his

mother and younger sister disappeared into the crowd. He would never see them again.

Mieczyslaw (MEE-shuh-slaw) had grown up in a red-brick house in Starachowice, an industrial town. His grandfather was a banker, and his father exported timber.

After the Nazis invaded in 1939, they moved Mieczyslaw's family and other Jews into an unwallled ghetto, where Jews were expected to step off the sidewalk when Germans passed. They lived there until that October morning when the Nazis tore Mieczyslaw's family in two and put him and his father to work in a munitions factory in Starachowice.

In July 1944, with the Russian army approaching, the Germans put the Jews on a southbound train. Mieczyslaw and his father were deposited at Auschwitz and given blue-and-gray-striped uniforms. From there, the Nazis sent the boy to another camp nearby. His father stayed behind, and Mieczyslaw said goodbye to him for the last time.

LATE THAT SEPTEMBER, Army Second Lt. John Withers, then 28, boarded a train bound for a boat that would take him to Europe. Black soldiers rode separately from whites. Stopped in New Orleans, Lt. Withers recalled seeing another train carrying German and Italian prisoners of war. Black porters were serving them.

He came from Greensboro, N.C., where segregation ruled, and blacks were expected to step aside when whites passed. Lt. Withers knew he was going to war for freedoms he didn't enjoy. Still, he recalled in an interview this year, "I thought I would be better off if the world subdued Hitler." He had his own dream: leave the South, become a professor and join the American middle class.

He grew up the precocious son of a janitor and a seamstress in a six-room house with three siblings, five cousins and a family friend. His mother bought the children dress shoes instead of work shoes because work shoes announced that you were poor, her son recalled. If neighbors had a Thanksgiving turkey, the Witherses told everyone they did, too, even if their holiday dinner was ham hocks and beans.

As a teenager, John developed a passion for opera, and carried in his pocket index cards he filled with poems, Gospel verse and snatches of literature. He earned a bachelor's degree in social sciences from North Carolina A&T, then a master's degree in economics from the University of Wisconsin in 1941. He hoped to seek a Ph.D., but funds were scant. And the Army called.

Three years later, he was helping to lead one of the quartermaster truck companies ferrying supplies to the front lines in Europe, military records show.

Lt. Withers stood apart from the other soldiers. He didn't smoke, drink or curse. He helped illiterate soldiers write home. He spent a leave in London at libraries and the theater.

He never experienced full-fledged combat. He fretted about returning to Greensboro, where he worried he'd have no job, no money to pursue a Ph.D., no way to escape the South. A glimmer of hope appeared: the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the GI Bill, which was designed to help veterans pay for college. As 1945 dawned, Lt. Withers was determined to take advantage of it. But he had to keep his record clean.

FROM HIS LABOR CAMP near Auschwitz, where he had been for six months, 16-year-old Mieczyslaw heard the Russian cannons. In late January of 1945, the Nazis marched him and thousands of others northwest. Mieczyslaw wrapped his shoes in paper bags so he wouldn't slip on the snow. Many who faltered were shot, he later recalled.

He wound up in the "Little Camp" at Buchenwald. In April, he was loaded onto a snow-filled train that zigzagged through Germany and Czechoslovakia for three weeks. He sat on a man who had frozen to death. When he arrived at Dachau, his ribs poked at his skin. He'd been there two days when U.S. troops liberated the camp on April 29, 1945.

U.S. soldiers moved Mieczyslaw and other inmates to an abandoned SS barracks near Munich, he recalled. One day Mieczyslaw discovered that a bag holding his only belongings—a few items of clothing—had been stolen. The theft so infuriated him that he left.

Dressed in his ragged prisoner's uniform, Mieczyslaw walked to another barracks where he'd noticed black U.S. soldiers. He had heard that American blacks were poor and, like him, had faced discrimination.

He found members of Quartermaster Truck Company 3512 washing dishes. Using hand gestures and some German, he made them understand he wanted a job.

The men let Mieczyslaw help. That first night he slept outside on a table, he later recalled. The next morning, the soldiers gave him a room with a bed, a bureau, a desk and a window that looked out on a forest. They fed him goulash and bread, and gave him a nickname, "Peewee," because his name was a mouthful and he was about 5 feet tall.

Then one morning, the soldiers told Mieczyslaw—now Peewee—that a lieutenant had learned of his presence, as well as that of another Dachau refugee, 20 years old, whom they'd dubbed "Salomon." John Withers, who'd recently been promoted to first lieutenant, wanted to see them.

Quartermaster units had orders to avoid contact with the Dachau prisoners, Lt. Withers later recalled. His superiors worried that supply convoys would pick up diseases and spread them to other Army units. Researchers at the National Archives couldn't locate specific records of such orders but said other records indicate that Army brass were acutely concerned about health risks posed by Dachau prisoners.

Lt. Withers had learned that it was especially important for blacks to follow orders in the segregated Army. He recalled worrying that sheltering

Dachau refugees might get him a dishonorable discharge—and then there would be no GI Bill for him.

He assumed the two refugees were war-toughened men who were exploiting his soldiers' sympathy. So he was unprepared when the soldiers brought Peewee and Salomon. The refugees seemed shrunken and frightened, really just boys, he recalled thinking.

Peewee would later recall that his knees felt weak as he waited for the lieutenant's verdict. He assumed that his immediate family was dead. He was 16. He had no home, no money and no clothing but what he wore. He wanted no more part of the Allies' displaced-persons camps. In the chaos following the war, he had no idea what to do next.

Lt. Withers assumed that Peewee and Salomon would be returned to Dachau, where thousands of former prisoners were still convalescing, according to Army dispatches from the summer of 1945. He'd been to Dachau on a bread-and-milk delivery shortly after it was liberated. He'd seen bodies decomposing in an open ditch, smelled the rotting flesh. How could he send them back?

"Keep them," he recalled blurting to his men. "We're going to take care of them."

In recent interviews, he struggled to explain why he changed his mind. "I think I identified with them very strongly and instantaneously," he said. He said he also risked losing face with his men. "They were willing to take the chance. If I would have overruled them, I would have been on the wrong side of the decision."

THE SOLDIERS DRESSED the young men in fatigues and boots. Washing dishes, peeling potatoes and hosing down trucks with the GIs, Peewee and Salomon picked up English, including a few curse words. The soldiers initially paid them with candy and cigarettes, later with cash.

When white officers came around, Peewee and Salomon ducked into the mess, a closet or a truck cab. On supply runs, they burrowed under tarpaulins in the backs of trucks. In one close call, Peewee recalled, he hid from a military policeman under a tarp while some GIs sat on it.

By the fall of 1945, many Army units had begun hiring local people so U.S. soldiers could go home. Peewee and Salomon no longer had to hide. They were strong enough by then to live on their own, but they stayed with Lt. Withers even as he transferred to Quartermaster Truck Company 3511 in early 1946, and it moved to the Bavarian village of Staffelstein.

At religious services, the young men sang and clapped to Gospel music. They learned to drive and to shoot. They bartered with farmers for hams, chickens and eggs. Peewee tried baseball, pitched horseshoes, posed in a cowboy hat and botched a batch of biscuits. Lt. Withers bought each a watch. He taught them the English words to "Taps."

Peewee and Salomon spent many evenings talking with the lieutenant. Sometimes he read them tales of Greek, Norse and Roman mythology. But mostly they wanted to hear about the U.S, he recalled later. What kinds of jobs could they find there? Could they get rich?

Though he couldn't answer these questions for himself, Lt. Withers told Peewee and Salomon, "Get to the United States and you'll be all right." He didn't speak of race or anti-Semitism because "they didn't need anything negative," he recalled.

Sometimes Peewee, Salomon and Lt. Withers would sing a German drinking song, "So Sind Wir (Such Are We)." Translated, it went:

*Such are we
We laugh off the sorrow
Such are we
We do our best until tomorrow
Such are we
And so we shall always be
So come drink a cup with me
And sing such are we*

The lieutenant wondered how Peewee and Salomon could remain so happy and gentle after what they'd endured. "They didn't become hateful or hostile in return. They didn't become bitter or apathetic," he would recall. "That was something I've kept with me all my life: that it is possible for someone—me, anyone -- to overcome the obstacles in his path without losing himself and face prejudice without becoming prejudiced in return."

The day Lt. Withers went home in December 1946, Peewee and Salomon waited near his Jeep in Staffelstein. By then, Peewee had an apartment in nearby Bamberg and a job at a machine and auto-repair shop. He and Salomon presented the lieutenant with a photo album embossed with his name. He gave them each a pen and his mother's Greensboro address. Then they saluted before Lt. Withers rumbled away.

In his footlocker in the back of the Jeep rested a picture-postcard Peewee had

given him. It showed Peewee beaming in a U.S. Army uniform, his soft cap at a jaunty angle. On the back he'd written, in English, "To my good friend, Lt. John L. Withers."

FIVE DECADES LATER, the postcard found its way to John Withers's eldest son. John Withers II couldn't get it out of his mind.

He and his brother, Gregory, had been hearing about Peewee and Salomon since they were little. Their father had no stories about ambushing Nazis or shooting Messerschmitts out of the sky. When his sons asked about the war, he talked about Peewee and Salomon.

Mr. Withers told these tales as he, his wife, Daisy, and their sons traveled the globe. After his honorable discharge from the Army, he used the GI Bill and earned a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Chicago. He taught at universities in North Carolina and Michigan before joining the U.S. Agency for International Development, where he spent 21 years on assignments from Laos to Kenya before retiring in 1979 to Silver Spring, Md.

Wherever the Witherses went, they carried photographs of Peewee and Salomon. In John II's eyes, the men became like long-lost uncles. He frequently asked his father why he hadn't tried to find them. Mr. Withers said he wouldn't know where to begin. All he knew was Peewee's real name.

By 2000, that was enough for John II, then 51 and the State Department's deputy chief of mission in Riga, Latvia. On vacation in Germany, he'd detoured to Staffelnstein and questioned natives about the black Army unit.

He received a one-year State Department sabbatical and began his hunt. The first Holocaust-survivor registers he checked had no record of a Mieczyslaw Wajgenszperg. But an Israeli search agency revealed that Peewee had emigrated to the U.S. or Canada. Then Yad Vashem, the vast repository of Holocaust records in Israel, supplied a catalog of the camps he'd been in: Starachowice, Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau. It shocked the elder Mr. Withers, who'd known only about Dachau.

Internet searches on Auschwitz and Buchenwald supplied too many leads to sort through, so John II focused on a place he'd never heard of, Starachowice. That led him to Christopher Browning, a University of North Carolina historian who had collected testimonies of 235 Starachowice survivors. Mr. Browning sent John II to Howard Chandler, a Starachowice survivor in Toronto who had compiled a list of other survivors.

John II called the man one evening in March 2001. Mr. Chandler, whose name was once Chaim Wajchandler, said yes, he had a phone number for Mieczyslaw in Connecticut.

"Oh my God," John II recalled thinking as he scribbled the number. After thanking Mr. Chandler, he dialed. There was a ring, then some high-pitched tones. He dialed again and got the same thing. The number was disconnected.

Had Peewee moved? Or died? John II redialed Mr. Chandler, who said he'd try again. Mr. Chandler called a friend in Israel who supplied a slightly different number. The area code had changed. Instead of calling John II to tell him, Mr. Chandler decided to call Mieczyslaw himself.

A FEW DAYS LATER, in Hartford, Conn., a businessman named Martin Weigen received an unusual phone call.

Mr. Weigen and his wife, Margareta, had married in Germany in 1948. They moved to Israel, where Mr. Weigen had relatives, then back to Germany, and then to the U.S., where Mr. Weigen hoped to make his fortune.

After they arrived in 1956, Mr. Weigen and Margareta shortened their surname, first to Weisberg, then to Weigen. Mr. Weigen was Jewish, but he'd never been religious, and he worried that his daughter and son might suffer discrimination. They were raised Roman Catholic, like their mother.

Mr. Weigen worked days at a machinery company and at night helped his wife run a residential-care home they had bought. He left the machinery company in 1976 when he and his wife bought a second care home, where they housed and fed people who couldn't take care of themselves.

They lived in a big white colonial on two wooded acres where Mr. Weigen liked to feed the birds. "Isn't the nature beautiful?" he would say in his soft Polish accent.

His daughter, Barbara Bergren, and his son, Edward Weigen, worked with him at his two residential-care homes and at a third that Edward bought. At a cottage the elder Mr. Weigen owned on Long Island Sound, he loved to stand at his bar and brag about his grandchildren.

But he rarely talked about the mother, father and sister he'd lost as a boy in Poland. Questions about his childhood and his wartime experiences were met with halting answers and, sometimes,

tears. As he aged, his children worried that his stories might die with him.

Now, on the telephone, Howard Chandler told him someone was looking for him. On an index card, Mr. Weigen jotted a name—“Wichers”—and a phone number. He was a little hard of hearing. He wasn’t sure who “Wichers” was.

He told his daughter, Ms. Bergren, about the message when she was helping at his office on April 3, 2001. The name “Wichers” meant nothing to her, but her dad seemed eager to call. He listened on one phone while Ms. Bergren dialed another.

John Withers II picked up the phone in his home library in Rockville, Md. Propped on his desk was a framed copy of Peewee’s postcard.

“Mr. Wichers?” Ms. Bergren recalled saying.

“Withers,” he corrected.

She didn’t know that name either. “I believe you’re looking for a relative of mine,” she said.

John II’s heart sank. Was Peewee dead? he recalled thinking. He identified himself, and asked if she was related to Mieczyslaw Wajgenszperg.

“Yes, he’s sitting right here,” she said, as she and John II recalled the conversation. “But he has a hearing impediment and if it’s all right with you, I’ll stay on the phone.”

Mr. Weigen cut in from the other phone: “You are the son of Lt. John L. Withers of North Carolina?”

“Yes,” John II said.

Ms. Bergren turned to see her father.

His eyes had filled with tears.

“Dad?”

He whispered: “I know John Withers.”

MR. WEIGEN WONDERED if he would recognize John Withers as he waited, three weeks later, at Gate A-1 of Hartford’s Bradley International Airport.

They were old men now. Mr. Weigen was 72, with feathery white hair and hearing aids. Mr. Withers, 84, wore a tan cap on his bald head and was shorter now than his old friend. The men embraced.

“Lt. John,” Mr. Weigen recalled saying.

“Peewee,” said Mr. Withers.

They were inseparable all weekend, holding hands and reminiscing while their families got to know each other. Mr. Weigen had told his children that a black soldier helped him during the war, but he hadn’t said much more. His wife had asked more than once why he didn’t use the Greensboro address to contact the lieutenant. “He wouldn’t even remember who I am,” Mr. Weigen said he told her.

Now he showed Mr. Withers yellowed photos from their time together, many of which Mr. Weigen’s children and grandchildren had never seen. Nor had they known that Mr. Weigen had been called Peewee. Mr. Withers tried to call him Martin, but Mr. Weigen patted his hand and said, “No, no, John, to you I’m always Peewee.”

John II and his wife started asking Mr. Weigen about the Nazi camps.

Edward Weigen and Ms. Bergren silently worried that this would be too painful for their father. But with Mr. Withers at his side, Mr. Weigen opened up. Over

one dinner that the family captured on videotape, he talked about his childhood and what his father had done for a living. “You ever hear that?” Edward, 43, said to Ms. Bergren. “I didn’t.”

In the past, their father rarely got beyond generalities before he grew quiet, or his eyes welled. Then his children would back off. “His way of survival was that you can’t immerse yourself in that, you have to always move forward,” said Ms. Bergren, 53.

With Mr. Withers it was different. Now when Mr. Weigen’s emotions got to him, according to Edward, “he’d slow down, take breaths,” and then dig deeper into his memories. One day Mr. Weigen told how some food he’d scrounged from an abandoned cellar near Auschwitz made him ill. “Listening to him, you know that this is the first time he has spoken of or thought of it since it happened,” Edward said.

He talked about life in the Starachowice ghetto and described his journey to Dachau. He drew a diagram of the first room the soldiers gave him. He pulled out more photos his kids had never seen, including one of him with his sister, Klara, in the ghetto.

With the help of Mr. Weigen and John II, Edward began his own exploration of the past. He obtained the Jan. 26, 1945, list of Auschwitz prisoners transported to Buchenwald, which included his father. He learned that Mr. Weigen had altered his birthdate at Auschwitz to make himself two years older. He confirmed that Mr. Weigen’s mother, and probably his sister, had died at Treblinka.

In the summer of 2001, the entire Withers family attended the wedding of Mr. Weigen’s granddaughter in

Connecticut. Mr. Withers sent cards, letters and birthday gifts to the Weigen and Bergren children. In e-mails, Ms. Bergren referred to John II as "my new-found brother." In the summer of 2002, Edward and his family visited the Witherses in Maryland. Health problems kept Mr. Weigen from traveling, but this year the families began planning another Connecticut reunion for the fall.

FIVE WEEKS AGO, Mr. Withers stepped off another plane in Hartford, not for a reunion, but to bury Peewee.

Mr. Weigen died Oct. 16. He was 75. He'd been diagnosed with colon cancer in September. Near the end, Ms. Bergren told the doctor, "He's a Holocaust survivor. He can't suffer anymore."

About 40 people attended his memorial service at a funeral home near Hartford. Two easels and an album displayed photos: Mieczyslaw with his sister and mother on a summer day; Peewee and Salomon grinning with a black soldier named Dave; Messrs. Weigen and Withers hugging.

The room fell silent as Ms. Bergren stood and told how Mr. Withers gave her father "a new beginning." She asked Mr. Withers to stand. "For what you did that year to bring him back to us, we will be forever grateful," she said. "We love you for it."

Later Mr. Withers, 87, rose to speak. Behind him lay Mr. Weigen in a mahogany casket, wearing his favorite sweater and clutching a dried rose from his seaside house. Mr. Withers felt sad and a little confused. He'd thought that Mr. Weigen, as strong as he was, would hold on for a few years.

He smiled and said, "My name is John Withers, and I have known Martin longer than anyone in this room." He spoke of how Mr. Weigen had cheered his men, and how his gentle manner would endure in the two families who loved him. Finally, he recited the lyrics to a song Mr. Weigen had sung when he was simply Peewee, "Taps":

*Day is done,
Gone the sun,
From the lakes,
From the hills,
From the sky.
All is well,
Safely rest,
God is nigh.*

