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# New Jersey JEWISH STANDARD

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Sid Schonfeld of Tenafly is surrounded by his young friends at Yeshivat Noam, where he told of his experiences in World War II. See page 4.



# Disarming visit to second grade

Sid Schonfeld shares stories about the army

JOANNE PALMER

TEANECK — When Sid Schonfeld of Tenafly walked into the second-grade classroom at Yeshivat Noam here last week, two days after Pearl Harbor Day, set to talk about his World War II Army experience, the 18 children there already had some questions in mind.

“Were there dogs in the army?” one asked. “Did you have one?”

Schonfeld considered his answers with the same solemn respect he showed the children throughout his half-hour visit.

“Yes, there were dogs, but they were in special units, and they were there not to play with but to help people,” he said. And “no, I didn’t have one.” You couldn’t have a pet in the Army, he explained; everything, even animals, were there for a reason.

Schonfeld, born in Germany in 1923, came to the United States in 1936. He was at Yeshivat Noam to talk about World War II with the second-graders, mostly born in 1997 or 1998, who were finishing up a unit about it.

Schonfeld and his parents moved to a farm in New York’s Catskill Mountains when they first came to this country; he became bar mitzvah there. “I went to a one-room schoolhouse in Leeds, N.Y.,” he said. “I was in eighth grade, but the teacher sat me with the first-graders because I didn’t speak a word of English.” That proved a powerful incentive; he learned quickly, he added.

Soon they moved down to the city. “My father

worked as a dishwasher for \$12 a week, and my mother cleaned houses for \$3.75 a week,” he said later. “I was a delivery boy for a grocery store in Washington Heights, and I made \$4 a week, plus tips. But on Sundays I had a suitcase full of kosher cold cuts, and I sold them on a regular route that I developed. So at the ripe old age of 13, I earned more on that route than my regular salary and my parents’ combined.”

When he was 19, a high-school graduate, Schonfeld told the second-graders, he was drafted, eventually rising to the rank of staff sergeant. After basic training in Texas, he was shipped from San Francisco to New Guinea and then to Manila. “There were 5,000 soldiers on that boat,” he said. “The Navy had boats in front of us, on both sides of us, and in back of us to protect us. We only had one meal a day on that boat, because it took so long to give all of us food. It was a big meal, and we ate it very slowly.”

The children were fascinated with the details of army life, and they wanted to know whether Schonfeld had met other Jews. When they learned that he had been a quartermaster, in charge of provisions, one asked, “Why did you choose that job?” “In the army, you don’t get to choose,” came the answer. “The army tells you what to do.”

Schonfeld was in Manila, he told the children, after the war against Hitler was over. He was part of “the liberation army. We helped to make the country free again.” When he was there, he came across a communi-



Rabbi Chaim Hagler introduces Sid Schonfeld to the second-graders at Yeshivat Noam.



From top, staff sergeants Herb Rosenbaum, Sid Schonfeld, and Walter Ullman show off their stripes.



Sid Schonfeld, center, and men from his company pose with a New Guinean man and his daughter. Schonfeld was able to talk to New Guineans in German, a language taught to them by Christian missionaries.



Sid Schonfeld, 1942.



A street in Manila, 1945.



“This was high-class living,” said Schonfeld of the tents in which he and his company lived in New Guinea.



ty of 50 Jewish families, German refugees who had made their way first to Shanghai and then to the Philippines. "They had no food, no clothing, no beds to sleep on," he told the children. Putting into practice the lessons of tikkun olam that he had learned in early childhood, Schonfeld made sure that those families' basic needs were met. "The more good we do, the better we feel," he told the second-graders.

Yeshivat Noam's principal, Rabbi Chaim Hagler, took the opportunity to blend that lesson into the school's message. "He could have said that there is nothing that he could do," Hagler said. "But he didn't. Each one of you has the power to help someone, just like Mr. Schonfeld did."

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## "The more good we do, the better we feel."

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"Those Jewish families assimilated into the Philippine economy and life," Schonfeld said later. "They built a synagogue in Manila that people visit when they go there; I understand that it's beautiful."

The children wanted to know whether Schonfeld got to meet other Jews. "Yes, I did," he told them. Many of his friends, including many of the doctors and nurses at the hospital where he worked for a time, were Jewish, and he took three or four nurses to Shabbat services most Friday nights. And did he carry a gun? Yes, he did, he answered, but not with any comfort, and certainly with no pleasure. "It had to be cleaned every week, and whenever I could I paid someone else to clean it," he added.



Schonfeld and his wife, Hilde, stood together in Washington Heights in 1941.

But army regulations demanded that he carry it when he escorted the nurses to shul.

Schonfeld talked about the Jewish chaplain he'd known; he played poker with the rabbi, he said. When the rabbi won, Schonfeld would give him the money he'd wagered to use for tzedakah. When Schonfeld won, on the other hand, no money would change hands. "So playing poker with him was giving tzedakah," he said. When one child said that his grandfather had been a U.S. Navy chaplain, "you should be very proud of your grandfather," Schonfeld told him.

Where did they sleep? another child asked. In tents, with wooden floors made of the wooden boxes in which the tent canvas had been packed, Schonfeld answered. And did they get attacked at night? a small voice asked. "Yes," Schonfeld answered, "but there were no casualties." "Did you get to spend time with your family?" asked another child. "Only after basic training," replied Schonfeld; it was three years from then until the war's end, when he was sent home. There was a silence in the classroom, as the children tried to understand the concept of not seeing their families for that long.

When Schonfeld finally did return home, he went to City College at night and worked for a food importing firm during the day. Eventually he founded his own firm, S. Schonfeld Co., which became SSC International and then Mitsui Foods, Inc. It is Schonfeld who is in large part responsible for the shift in American food preferences from tuna packed in oil to water-packed tuna, the industry standard today. Married for 53 years to the late Hildegard Schonfeld, he's the father of two and the grandfather of five; active in the local community, he was honored by the Jewish Theological Seminary this year with the Erich Holzer Community Service Award.

Back in Yeshivat Noam's second-grade class, there was a final question. "Was the army fun?" a child asked. Schonfeld paused.

"I wouldn't really say it was fun," he said. "But it was something that I had to do."



Schonfeld, right, and a bunkmate in 1945.

# Rabbi brings Jewish spirit to the heartland

SHIRA HIRSCHMAN WEISS

**W**hen former Teaneck resident Jonathan Gross traveled to Omaha in 2001, he never thought he would end up making a home there.

"My mission was to inspire the Jewish community with Torah learning and enthusiasm for it," said Rabbi Gross, 26, "but I knew very little about Jews in Omaha and their desire for spiritual growth."

At the time, Gross was a student of Yeshiva University's Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary (RIETS). He was visiting the Nebraska community as part of YU's Annual Blanche Schreiber Torah Tours, a program through which hundreds of students visit North American Orthodox Jewish communities to infuse spirit and passion into Jewish holiday celebrations.

His energy left quite an impression on members of the community.

Despite keeping in touch with those he met, Gross never anticipated the phone call he received in June: Rabbi Howard Kutner, a former YU and RIETS alumnus, was stepping down and the community needed a new rabbi in August. Was he up to the task?

It was not a simple determination for Gross, whose wife, Sara, was in medical school in Los Angeles at the time. The Grosses explored their options and Sara determined that she could conduct her medical research rotations at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

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## "He has brought a whole new light to our synagogue and to the community."

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"This was an opportunity to enrich lives," said Sara Gross of the move to Omaha. "I had to make it happen so that we could give the gift of Torah and open our home to families that expressed a desire for spiritual fulfillment."

In August, Jonathan Gross assumed the Omaha pulpit.

Donald Gerber, a congregant of Beth Israel, said that in the short time Gross has been his rabbi, "he has brought a whole new light to our synagogue and to the community." Gerber added: "Suddenly, many new families with children are coming to Shabbat services to see what it's all about, looking forward to discovering the fun of being Jewish."

Gross has created programs for adults (single and married), senior citizens, and children of all ages. He pays close attention to what interests community members and has invited scholars from across the country to speak with them and address those topics, Gerber said.

He and his wife opened their home for Shabbat and Jewish holiday meals and have brought YU students into the community on holidays through Torah Tours.

Gerber said that Gross is responsible for a "renewed vision of the community and its growth." He noted that the Omaha Jewish Community Center and the Beth Israel building had recently been renovated to accommodate the synagogue's expanding membership.

The Jewish population of Omaha exceeds 6,500. As Gross puts it, by providing Torah learning and engaging activities related to Judaism, he hopes "to enrich as many lives as humanly possible."

Shira Hirschman Weiss is a writer and public relations consultant in New York.



PHOTO COURTESY OF YESHIVA UNIVERSITY  
Rabbi Jonathan Gross