

High-Flying Hero

Tuskegee Airman recounts chilling Holocaust story in *The Luft Gangster* documentary.

Robin Schwartz

Special to the Jewish News

His voice still quivers when he speaks about the fateful morning of April 29, 1945. Even now, 71 years later, Tuskegee fighter pilot Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson remembers the sights, the sounds and the gut-wrenching emotions of that day like it was yesterday.

Jefferson, 94, a Detroit native and one of the first African American fighter pilots in U.S. history, was shot down during a World War II mission over German-occupied southern France in 1944 and held as a prisoner of war for nine long months. Eventually, General George S. Patton's 3rd Army liberated the POW camp, bringing him one step closer to freedom and home. But, the rush of excitement quickly turned to horror as Jefferson and other American soldiers unwittingly became eyewitnesses to the atrocities of the Nazi concentration camp, Dachau, where more than 200,000 people were imprisoned and 41,500 were murdered, according to a memorial website.

"We knew they were Jews — but the background as to why they were there and why they were being killed, we had no idea," Jefferson said, explaining that prisoners received no news from the outside world during their capture. "Whatever you see. Whatever you've seen, whatever you can think — double it. Horrible ... Man's inhumanity to man."

The airman recounts his harrowing experience in the documentary *The Luft Gangster: Memoirs of a Second-Class Hero*, which was just released on iTunes May 22 and is now available in 60 countries. ("Luft gangster" or "air gangster" is the term the Nazis used to describe American pilots during the war.)

The project was produced and directed by Michael Rott, 36, and his parents, Sheldon and Carol Rott, all of West Bloomfield, through their Ferndale-based production company Dynasty Media Network.

"It's important for us to keep the story alive because we're finding there are so many people who have no idea of what the history is," Arthur Green III, says in the documentary. The late president of the Detroit Chapter of the Tuskegee Airman passed away in 2015 before the project was completed.



U.S. Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) pins the Bronze Star Medal on Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson at the Detroit NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner.

'IT WAS BESHERT'

The Rott family believes their chance encounter with Lt. Col. Jefferson at Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills in 2013 and the sequence of events that led to the making of the 70-minute documentary were *beshert* (meant to be). Sheldon Rott had gone to the synagogue that night to mark his father's *yahrzeit* (death anniversary) and was unaware Jefferson would be a special guest speaker. After hearing the Tuskegee Airman's riveting story, Rott invited Jefferson to the family's Ferndale studio to record an interview with the hope of preserving the story. The more he heard, the more he knew the story needed to be captured and distributed to a wider audience.

"This is a story where the Civil Rights Movement meets the Holocaust," Sheldon Rott explains. "We started shooting the interview and the story took on a life of its own."

The family became so passionate they funded the two-and-a-half-year film project themselves. Jefferson's story not only provides an eye-opening account

of the Holocaust, it also paints an ugly picture of the racism and segregation African Americans endured here at home. Jefferson, who was born in Detroit in November 1921, talks about experiencing ethnic hatred at an early age. He graduated from Chadsey High School, which he describes as "98 percent white" at the time.

"Here's a man that grew up in a white neighborhood, had to fight his way home from school every other day as a kid, couldn't get a job because of the color of his skin, couldn't get a mortgage for a house after the war because of the color of his skin, and the list of domestic racial abuses goes on and on," Mike Rott explains. "You would never know that he had a single bad day when you talk to him. Everyone just wants to hug him when they meet him."

Jefferson graduated from Clark College in Atlanta. He volunteered for the Army Reserves in 1942 when he was rejected from flight training. While waiting for deployment, he attended Howard University in Washington, D.C., before being selected for the military program at

Tuskegee Army Airfield in Alabama. After the war, he was a teacher with Detroit Public Schools for more than 35 years.

"By the time WWII ended, the Tuskegee Airmen owned the best combat record escorting B-17 and B-24 bombers over Germany, Nazi-occupied France, Italy, etc.," Rott says. "White bomber crews began to request them as escorts because they knew the 'Red Tails' were the best and they were fearless. The significance of their contribution during the war shattered racist attitudes."

AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

The Luft Gangster has received rave reviews and won several awards following screenings in 25 cities nationwide, most recently at the GI Film Festival in Washington, D.C., and at two Washington, D.C., area high schools. From February to April, it was available for viewing on American Airlines flights. In May, a portion of the film was shown during the annual Detroit NAACP Freedom Fund Dinner where Jefferson was awarded the Bronze Star Medal for heroic service. In

Photos by Russell Levine

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Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson, one of the first U.S. African American fighter pilots

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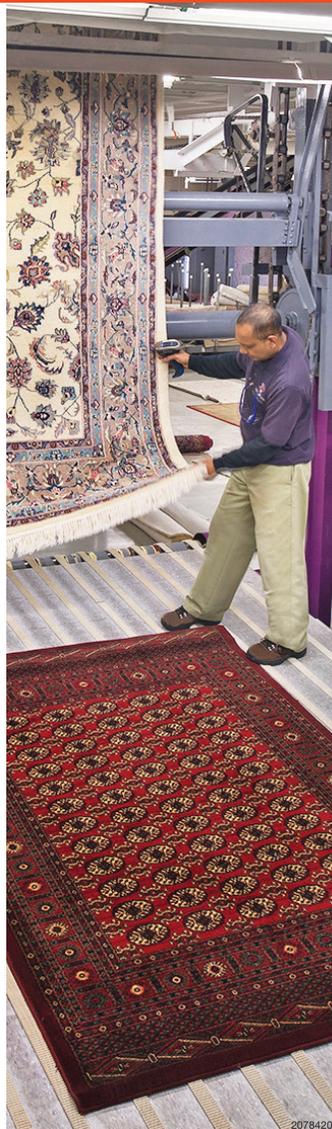
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July, the documentary will be available "on demand" via Comcast.

"This film is an important and powerful educational tool," Rott says. "Our dream is to raise the funds needed to have it shown in high schools and colleges nationwide and even worldwide and to continue producing socially conscious, engaging and entertaining films."

From a serendipitous meeting at a local synagogue three years ago to the completion and distribution of the documentary, it has been an incredible journey for the Rott family. Mike and Sheldon Rott were even inducted as honorary Tuskegee Airmen for their efforts. They hope people will learn and continue to learn from the film for generations to come.

"We all possess extraordinary capabilities if we can ignore the naysayers and stay focused on our goals," Mike Rott says. "I hope the film in some way ignites that little spark in people through Alex's remarkable experiences. As a society, we still have some



Sheldon and Michael Rott, both of West Bloomfield, flank Lt. Col. Alexander Jefferson.

work to do, but maybe this documentary can provide education, inspiration and promote tolerance, peace and understanding, while highlighting the horrors of racism, bigotry and genocide. I hope everyone enjoys the film. It was truly a labor of love." *

details

To learn more about *The Luft Gangster* or to purchase a copy of the film on DVD (\$14.99) or BluRay (\$22.99), go to www.luftgangstermovie.com.