HMS Ed Kruszynski - transcript

**Lisa MacVittie** 00:00

I'm the last survivor of the Holocaust in our family.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:04

Behind the words pictures and artifacts in the museum are people whose stories of survival and hope come alive to inspire new generations of upstanders. One by one these stories stir the soul

**Al Miller** 00:18

Can there really be hope for us?

**Bella Ouziel** 00:21

Mine was 40018. My sister was 40017

**Jackie Congedo** 00:28

Holocaust survivors, their descendants, liberators, champions of justice and courageous upstanders ask only this, hear my story, so that the lessons they teach will echo for generations.

**Elisha Wiesel** 00:41

I will never meet someone else like my father. But there are many of us who if we come together, can keep his voice alive.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:48

These stories will change you, they will move you to action, inspiring the best of humanity every day. I'm Jackie Congedo. On this episode, we have author Ed Kruszynski. Ed has published a book called "The Medics Wife" based on the experience of his parents during World War II. His father was a medic who treated soldiers on the beaches of Normandy during D-Day, before being among the first to tend to survivors as American soldiers liberated concentration camps. We spoke with Ed about his experience researching and writing this personal story and what he learned about character strengths along the way.

**Trinity Johnson** 01:28

Ed, thank you so much for being my guest today. I'm so excited to get to know you a little better and talk about your book The Medic's Wife. But before we dive into the book, tell me a little bit about yourself and what brought you to the story.

**Ed Kruszynski** 01:42

Yeah, so a little bit about, about myself, I am the son of the two protagonists in the book. And there was a catastrophic flood in 2006 that uncovered like a huge cache of, of World War II memorabilia from my parents correspondence back in the 1940s. And my dad was a World War II combat medic. Like most of the men that generation, he really didn't talk much about his experiences. And so when we saw what was inside the box, none of us family members had seen any of letters, journals, photographs of my parents during the war, and because my dad didn't want to relive it. But we also learned amazing things about our mother, which were, which was an incredibly remarkable, but this book was supposed to be a love story between two people who made it through the war. And somehow or another, it became a powerful story about things that my father witnessed in the Nazi concentration camps. And, and through those correspondences, "The Medic's Wife" was born. And that's how it all started.

**Trinity Johnson** 03:09

And it's an amazing book, I read it recently. And in my mind, it just played out like a movie. And I love as you said, it really is a love story. And we'll get into some of that about Ed and Mary and this amazing relationship that that we see unfold in the pages. But tell me a little... How did Ed and Mary meet?

**Ed Kruszynski** 03:31

So my parents met in 1941. They they met, working my dad was they both were working in a tool and die shop. And my dad said he, you know, he saw her across the hallway. And he had this kooky idea of writing up a little story and presenting it to her one day after work. And then as they walked home, he said it was he couched it as an important doc work document, she needs to read it at the kitchen table. And it was his way of asking her out through some of the things some of the things that they did while they were working. So it's kind of cute. But they, they they went steady. That's a funny word. But that's what they used back in the day. They went steady for 12 months before my dad was, was drafted.

**Trinity Johnson** 04:25

Amazing. So it was essentially almost love at first sight.

**Ed Kruszynski** 04:31

Yeah, you know, on my, my dad, unfortunately, was ill towards the end of his life and didn't say very much. And two days before he passed away. You know, he hadn't spoken like three or four months. Kind of, you know, was in a catonic state at that point. But he he told my mom that she was the love of his life. So you know if you know if the good Lord over gives you like a window of time to break out of whatever thing that you're in to tell the person you love the most, that they're the love of your life. I thought that was a pretty good thing. So to answer your question from my mom and dad standpoint, probably was love it at first sight.

**Trinity Johnson** 05:09

And it was story very, very touching also, the how they met, and then also how their relationship evolved, right, it was interrupted, yeah, he was drafted.

**Ed Kruszynski** 05:13

Exactly

**Trinity Johnson** 05:15

How did their relationship change before he was deployed?

**Ed Kruszynski** 05:27

Well, the thing is, is back back in the 40s, they... simple things meant a lot to those people. So my mom and dad were both athletic, both competitive. And their idea of a great date is you know, an all out ping pong match. And then the winner would buy the loser a coke float at the at Rudy's Five and Dime. And it was all about like, innocence and just being normal. And then, when the bombs hit, Pearl Harbor, everything turned upside down, and the innocence kind of left - not at that point, but later on, but everything was... the story is about what was good and fresh and decent. And it went to places that were the darkest places in humanity and, and to actually write about, like, the good parts. And then what, what evil really does to human beings, like, my dad was an innocent guy before he went to the war, you know, he, you know, he was 23 year old kid, he fell in love with this girlfriend. And he went to war and saw and did things that no 23 year old person should have to do. And that's the convoluted part of, of, of the story.

**Trinity Johnson** 06:52

And you've already mentioned this, that there was a flood. And that's almost this dramatic opening in the book, right? I was there, I felt that I saw that I saw and felt Mary's fear that maybe all of these family treasures were gone forever. And so it's a combination of family archives, US archives, and historical fiction, through letters, a lot of letters. Can you tell me about your research process, the writing process? How did you put the story together?

**Ed Kruszynski** 07:25

Well, you know, at first it was just going to be, you know, a family narrative. I was just going to put the story together for my kids and my kids' kids, you know that, you know, we had a hero in the family. But in the flood, when when we went through the debris, we found this soggy cardboard box. I mean, we saw the box was filled with photo albums. That was the first part. And these photo albums contained over 200 pictures, but they were submerged in water. So if you remember old time photographs, you know, we we have 1000 on our phone, you know, you can pull them up instantly. But back back in the day, the photographs were in photo albums, and they had plastic over them. But the floodwater floodwaters had gotten inside the plastic, and really damaged all these photos. But we had 200 of them, and you could make things out. And they were very yellow, they had mud splatter.

**Ed Kruszynski** 08:22

But my mother, when you're 86 years old, she didn't care about money. She didn't care about her belongings. She cared about those photos. And she cared about the correspondences that were inside - the correspondences that that she had with my mom and dad. And I kind of like when I built the story if that's what you're asking. I've visualized the movie Titanic where you had old Rose at the beginning, telling the old Rose story to a granddaughter. And then it goes back in time for the majority of the movie, she becomes young young Rose and and she meets young Jack and then at the at the end of the movie, she comes back as old Rose and finishes the story. So that's kind of how I built the book.

**Ed Kruszynski** 09:11

But to answer your your question, once we had the photos, then we these photos were only like a postage stamp big so we digitize them. And that brought out an incredible amount of of rich material. I mean, a normal World War II story has a few pictures of the main character, which is usually a man with a headshot with his uniform on. These photos had my dad in the in the crap. And, and we knew we had something there. But it was my mother's description of the letters in the journals. And then I went to the United States archives to to validate everything that she was telling me and My mom was accurate on every count. And the US archives is a tremendous resource that I didn't know about until I wrote the book. It's free for all Americans, they have a vast amount of historical information that we as citizens of the US have access to. So I found all my dad's records, and several different things. So the the reason why it's historical fiction is, I didn't know the the main characters in the book. And when you start adding dialogue, I didn't feel comfortable calling it like nonfiction like the Band of Brothers. But there's an interesting saying that a historian will tell you what happened. A novelist will tell you how it felt, and I wanted this to be a story, not a book report.

**Trinity Johnson** 10:47

And so fast forward a little bit only because I feel like even though the story really focuses on Ed and his military service, you get a really sent a good sense of who your mother was. And one of the really kind of touching pieces is the interview that's discovered with her. At the end, I don't want to spoil the book by any means. But tell me what... what that was like to have her in her own words, sharing the story in this five hour cell phone interview.

**Ed Kruszynski** 11:22

First of all, my mother vowed that she would never tell the story. My dad, when he came back from the war had difficulty assimilating back into civilian life, like many, many veterans do, and there was a catastrophic issue between my mother and father. And my dad was distraught, my mother gave him an ultimatum. And they talked everything out, my dad was as open as he could be about everything that had happened, what he had seen what he had done. And my mom vowed that she would be his biggest coach, but also move forward, we're not going to talk about the past. So at the time that we found all this information, my mother hadn't seen it in six decades, she vowed never to break her vow to my dad about telling, you know, what he described to her. And then the part of the marketing is some vows are destined to be broken. So when she actually told the story, it was a powerful thing for all of us to watch, and to listen to. When you think about the heroes of the story, I think you'll find at the end that the real hero is not who you think the real hero is. I'll leave it at that.

**Trinity Johnson** 12:45

So you've touched a little on your dad's military experience, I want to jump into that, because that really is the bulk of of what the book focuses on in this as well as the wealth of research that you did. And we talked about that Pearl Harbor was a major turning point, because he was drafted. So also another big piece of his experience. And really 80 years ago this year, would be D Day. So can you walk us through? Yeah, his military experience, especially those experiences as a medic, how did he choose to be a medic?

**Ed Kruszynski** 13:23

Alright, so one of the things that makes the story unique is there aren't a lot of books that are from the point of view of a US Army medic. These guys were in the thick of it, and oftentimes they were they were weaponless. My dad was was a medic, he tested well for that kind of thing. And he went through medical training in the US Army. My parents were married at the time. So my mom was living with my dad on base for 18 months before he deployed over overseas. And that's a big part of the story. My mom, my mom was with my dad when the first German POWs came to America. She saw that, but my Dad's experience on D Day in particular, he led a platoon of 40 medics, my dad rose to staff sergeant. He was always the leader, no nonsense guy. And he led a platoon of 40 medics, and he was an infantry. So he was the his work was he he was going to be attached to an infantry unit. They would land on on a beach, he and his platoon would be attached to the infantry unit there. They'd fight their way to cover and then they would go up to the cliff's they'd knock out all the Germans, the batteries and the the artillery fire that the Germans were providing. My dad would follow the infantry along the way through France. Well, two days before they were supposed to land on D-Day. My dad's captain says, Well, we're changing we're going to be we're taking a Navy assignment and kind of, to cut to the chase, not only did my dad and his platoon land on D-Day on D-Day, but they landed, some of, some members of my dad's platoon landed over 8 times during the D-Day conflict. So on D-Day, D-DAY PLUS one D-Day plus two, which is still very difficult time for the US we haven't we didn't necessarily secure safe passage. But for the first 20 days of those D-Day landings, my dad and his platoon were there multiple times to retrieve living and injured soldiers, both Americans and Germans from the beaches. So, you know, that alone was a story, I could have written a story just on D-Day, that was just one of the things that he witnessed.

**Ed Kruszynski** 15:38

But he, he fought in all five major campaigns. When he came back, he was adorned with metals that he didn't care about, he put them in a shoebox, put them in a closet. But then he, as the war progressed, these medics, they see everything, they hardly get a break. Sometimes, the infantry units, I don't, I don't envy their position, either. They fight in the battles, and then they move on. The medics are always with wounded or injured or so those guys, they don't catch a break too much. But they're also grizzled. They, they, they're tough. They've seen it all. But when my father walked into Buchenwald concentration camps towards the end of the war, he had the most difficult time describing what it is he saw. They, they didn't know what they were getting into. They thought they saw every atrocity possible. And when my dad went in Buchenwald, the word atrocity doesn't even come close. It's like a big word that encompasses so much. And there are things that he saw that that that no one should really see, especially at those ages. Sorry.

**Ed Kruszynski** 17:02

So ended up being that he, I think, as I read these survivor books, from the viewpoint of Jewish survivors, it's about how they survived their perseverance, their, their, their hope, and spirituality got them through. But when you're an American medic, and you go into the concentration camps, you've already experienced several of the things that camp survivors haven't experienced. And not only did my dad see the the camp survivors, but he got to go to places where some of the survivors probably had heard up, but didn't see. So these were the most difficult chapters for me to write. Because you want to get the wording exactly correct. And I don't... "atrocities" I'll use with my grandchild. Words like "medical torture," I'll use with you. And some of the other things that that he saw in those camps. It's it's an emotional thing for me personally, because, you know, I came from Polish immigrants. My family escaped from Poland. And there's a story that, that my mother told me, and it ended up bearing out that there's 1000s of these stories, but two Polish prisoners in Buchenwald escaped. They were recaptured. And normally, the humane way of dealing with that is you would either put them in solitary confinement, or you would shoot them - doesn't sound very humane. But that's what you do when people escaped from a prison and you're in war.

**Ed Kruszynski** 17:26

But the people that ran the camp didn't do that. They beheaded those two Polish prisoners. And they, they shrunk their heads. I mean, these are the things that I'm learning as a son of a man who witnessed those things. They not only shrunk the heads, but they put them on a trophy case, as if, you know, as if they went on a safari. And that that's just one thing. And I don't know how deep you want me to go on some of these other things. But there are other things that I wrote about that I couldn't even believe. But I think you have to write about this stuff.

**Ed Kruszynski** 19:43

Because sometimes people think well, the Holocaust and the concentration camps they were they 80 years ago. It was so far removed from where we are today. But when you think about it, I was born only 17 years out after the concentration camps were liberated. So in my lifetime, it's not that far away. But my dad was was in the concentration camps to treat the survivors. If that wasn't enough, at the end of the war, my dad's platoon was selected to go back into four other concentration camps, Dachau being one, to treat German prisoners. What the Americans did is we turned the tables on the Nazis, not all the Germans were bad, but the American Army wanted the German rank and file to see what their government had done. You know, see the secrets that they've been hiding. And German wounded were sent to the concentration camps for treatment. They weren't obviously sent there to be exterminated. They were sent there to be treated. But while they're there, they witnessed themselves what happened. But my dad's unit was, was responsible for the medical care of German wounded after the war in those camps. So that, you know, the guy went through a lot. And you know, it's it's no wonder he didn't speak very much of it.

**Trinity Johnson** 21:11

Yeah, and thank you, you shared so much, not only, you know, I can hear and feel how this discovery process affected you. And it's always hard to imagine how it affected a parent. So thank you for, for sharing that very difficult piece for yourself. But then a difficult piece of this history. And I'm wondering if part of it not only was a process for you and discovering maybe what you always wondered about your your father? But then how much of that today is part of raising awareness? How important is it to you to share this history so that we're learning the impacts of the Holocaust, even though to your point, it was 80 years ago, right? But why is it important now, for a book like this to be out, and for people to read it and know what happened?

**Ed Kruszynski** 22:06

I think there are two things. The first thing is, I wasn't going to publish this book. I said, I finished it, I sat on it for six months. And I didn't have the confidence to publish it. I'm, you know, I'm grandfather, I'm not a writer, I guess I am now. But it wasn't until the bombs dropped on the Ukraine, that I decided that the story needed to come out. My parents would have wanted me, they wouldn't have kept all this information, if they didn't want somebody in our family to do something with it. I don't know what that thing would have been. But I know that they would have said, "you have to put the story out there." Because the bombs are dropping on the Ukraine, just like they dropped on Poland in 1939. And our family had family there. And I'm not going to try to get too political in my talks. But if Ukraine loses the conflict, then the Red Army borders Poland and back. Before World War One, Poland wasn't a country it was partitioned between three other countries. So is it here we go again, I'm not sure. But I think raising the narrative that are we ready for a global conflict is an undercurrent of what this book is. It's a... it's a book about love. It's a book about spirituality, survival, but it's also a book about - these are the sacrifices that Americans have to make. That's the first thing the second thing that at least I think of, and I've learned through the process is these stories all the all these stories, survivor stories, World War Two books about soldiers that have survived survived the war, by reading those stories, it's an act of remembrance for them, and you're honoring them. But more importantly, in my point of view, it's it's an act of defiance against hatred still, because hates not gonna get the last word.

**Ed Kruszynski** 22:11

I mean, the Nazis burnt books, they tried to rewrite our history. And by writing and reading these books, you're, you're taking your own ancestral strength and you're gonna, you're saying evil's not going to win. We're gonna keep writing. We're gonna keep reading these books. And I think that's why that's why books that are around the Holocaust theme are still selling so well. And my book's hang in there. It's like the little blue train that could you know, it's fighting. But there are top 10 books, top 100 books still today about the Holocaust. It's a powerful story.

**Trinity Johnson** 25:00

Yes, and I think, you know, it illustrates the power of human spirit of perseverance. And we we can't shy away from the loss but also the the spirit of survivors persevering and that resilience, which I also read a lot through your father's letters, his perseverance and resilience, all the letters to Mary, it seems like he was trying to really stay positive. And there were a couple times where he himself admitted that he wasn't being as positive as he felt he should write, especially writing home to his love. Can you talk about some of the strugglese he had? Especially, you've already touched on some of the horrendous things he saw. But just speak to his his resilience, because that really comes through strongly in the book.

**Ed Kruszynski** 25:55

Yeah, I think anytime you're in a conflict like that, and if you're a leader, the, the moral decisions that you have to make are not always black and white. And I, you know, out of the 1000s of people that my dad and his friends saved during the war, it was the handful of three or four that that they lost, or what were the or what were some of the circumstances revolving about that. So I, I think about some of the things he was trying to write, in trying to, in trying to, you know, explain and had difficulty doing it is, I think, you know, I took I took the character test that you that, that the Holocaust Museum offers, you know, I did horribly bad on certain things, and I scored better on others. But the thing that I kind of learned from that is, is there are two types of bravery. There's the, you know, I have a weapon and I'm going to take the hill and everybody's going to be behind me. And, and it's a physical bravery. But I think what the big struggle with people in war is the moral bravery. And my dad struggled with that did it? Did it? Was I brave enough? Did I when I heard cries of "Medic, Medic," did I stay in the foxhole? And just listen to him crying die? Did you know I picked a person to go to the front lines, and they didn't make it. Those are the things that weighed heavily on my dad's mind, "Did I make the right decisions?" Because, you know, he was in this war with three of his friends. And some of them didn't make it back. My dad felt responsible in some of the decisions that he made. So I think those are the things that he had difficulty with.

**Ed Kruszynski** 27:52

And also think, like, you know, what's more important, you know, moral bravery or physical bravery. And I go back to this book, that it's called "The Boy from Block 66." And Moshe Kessler says, I watched a courageous man, save 1000... 1000 kids. And that was his way of saying this person had moral courage. You don't always have to be the brave one. But my dad struggled. And I think I give... I do. I do book clubs, which I've learned is a great excuse to have wine at 130 in the afternoon. And then if you can talk about the book, then you can get to it. But during these book, clubs, they everyone that's my age, or have had people in the war, say, "Your books helped me understand why my... why my relative didn't talk about the things in the war." It to me, it's not what they saw. It's what they they did, whether it was personal, or they didn't do what, when they were in the heat of the battle, what, which way did they go? And I think that's why a lot of people didn't want to talk about the war. And that's why my dad was having difficulty. Describing what he said what he did, that what he experienced, if that makes sense.

**Trinity Johnson** 29:21

Yeah. Yeah. And you briefly mentioned this, that he he did lose a few friends, during the war two people that I feel like it was very intentional that you wrote about these two individuals, specifically, and got a little more detailed, and they're very different experiences and relationships that he had one was with Raleigh, and then a lot of the focus with Dory. And I'm wondering if you can talk about those two and why those two relationships were so I guess central to be focused on so much in the book because they were very touching relationships as I was reading the book, and I think those stuck with your dad, it seems.

**Ed Kruszynski** 30:07

When you read stories of, of war... World War II, as soldiers, as the months go by, they try to not become friends with replacements, you know, people that are they, they try not to because they know they've seen, if you get close to somebody and they die, you take that more personally, they were trying to inoculate themselves against, they were killing machines, they didn't, they didn't have time, they didn't have time for feelings. But when you're in a war with two or three of your best friends, you cannot not be a best friend. And the Raleigh character in the book, stuck with both my mother and father all their lives. My mother was right in there. She, she knew these people, she met their wives, she, she she knew. So Raleigh being one of my dad's best friends. Losing Raleigh was difficult thing for him. And, you know, they, they rallied around the best they could, but I think my dad had a heavy heart on that one. Because, you know, like I said, the circumstances are always gray, you always make decisions.

**Ed Kruszynski** 31:27

Dory is more fun to talk about. Because if you've ever had a grandchild and or kid, any child, really, that's a toddler, and they put those arms around your neck, and they give you a big mushy, wet kiss on your cheek. And they just love to be to be held in an authentic way. My dad was in a war, it was everything was gray, red, crimson, there was nothing good about it. But when he found that kid, and, and immediately had a bond with her, and she gave him a hug. The touching part is I think he realizes - the first time I've ever hugged somebody like this in two years. And, and you know, it was instant love. But then the war was still going on. And everybody, all of my friends, and readers, all said we wanted I can't really say but we wanted to know more about what happened at the end between those two. And I can't really say because if you read the book, I don't want to be a spoiler. But um, I think there might be a second book on the Dory experience. But that was something where I had to write over time, the scene where Dory slipped her hand in to my dads and they walked hand in hand out of the concentration camp was was a powerful image for me. Because when you're writing these stories, you become these people. And the character Dory also symbolized all the children survivors in Buchenwald there was more, you know, we don't really know what happened to Dory. We know she wasn't Jewish. She didn't have the tattoo. We're not really sure exactly. But she she was an orphan. But my dad saw all the kids from block 66 as well. That's another part of the story. But Dory is a sweet part. It's also heartbreaking. It's beautiful and heartbreaking at the same time.

**Trinity Johnson** 33:49

Yes, it because it really does. The way you describe her is when he first found her her being very disheveled and dirty. And here's this almost angelic little girl who has been caught up in this war and in a concentration camp. And then yes, she embraces him. And it wakes up this this tender part of him that had been dormant for a couple years and it's just such a beautiful part of the book and a reminder of the innocence that is still there during a time of war.

**Ed Kruszynski** 34:25

At that moment in time they needed each other she was alone somebody left her and and you know he was lonely so yeah, it was a tender moment. Fun to write but there were times where my office is in my lower level and in the basement and I had to come upstairs a few times. Totally disheveled you know I'm I'm sobbing and you know my wife was lovely said you need to go you to go upstairs and and gather yourself a little bit. And you need to stop writing for Few days because some of these parts are just difficult to write.

**Trinity Johnson** 35:05

And also, it seemed very difficult for your father as well to write, which is interesting. One of the things I found very interesting is he wrote a letter to Mary about Buchenwald and what he saw. But you mentioned he never mailed it. Why do you think? Why do you think he took the time to write it and share everything he had seen and experienced? And then shielded her from that.

**Ed Kruszynski** 35:33

He, Well, first of all, he was he was ordered to remember what he saw in those camps. So I think he was writing it down in his journal, which became a letter for himself and trying to make sense of exactly what it was because it would there were things that, how do you just how do you describe it? Like, how do you describe it? So he tried to describe it as as much as possible. But on my mother's side, if you think about the spouse part, you're latching on to every word, you're reading every letter four or five, six times you're reading, you know, accounts of what's going on at war. And I think my dad said, you know, think it's like us don't, don't send your don't send a controversial email, right away, take 24 hours and look at it. I think I wasn't there. So I'm assuming he took 24 hours and reread it and said, This is not something that you send your wife, who is hoping and praying that you come back, so he didn't send it.

**Ed Kruszynski** 36:40

Also, you should know that all these letters and the journals, they were handwritten. Some in pencil, some ink, they weren't protected in the flood. So they were some some things were unlegible. But if you're the spouse of a soldier, that were sent these letters, you know, almost every word. So that was the powerful part of my mom's testimony is she didn't need the letters tell us what happened. I needed... I needed her to tell me what happened. So I could go and say is this... this really happened? And that's where the U.S. archives came in. And, and ancestry.com to validate all of those things. But to answer your question, he I don't think he sent the letter because it's not a letter you would send? I don't think so.

**Trinity Johnson** 37:39

That's why thank you for sharing that. How, what all do you know about your mother's experience during the war being stateside,

**Ed Kruszynski** 37:49

Her story is just as incredible as is my dad's. First off, I go back to to the book clubs. And I asked the question, I'm like, okay, most of the most people least the book clubs I've given are AARP members like myself, you know, we're at a certain age, and I have to get them back to when they were 20 or 21 years old. Think of yourself as a 21 year old man or a woman, and you dated somebody for eight or nine months. And the war breaks out. And you have to decide whether you you want to get married or not. And the person asks you to get married. The question is, what would you do? Would you say yes to your boyfriend, you know, your love of your life? Would you say yes. And almost every person? Usually it's women, because this question is geared towards the women say, Yes, I would marry my boyfriend before he goes off to war. And then I flipped the question. I say, well, we'll now be a parent or a grandparent, and your daughter who's 21, comes and says, I'm going to marry my boyfriend, and he's going off to war at those same people who are the same people raise their hand and like, Absolutely not. They're not going to get married. So my mom's parents didn't approve of the marriage for those reasons. Can't you wait until afterwards? So it was an interesting kind of case study.

**Ed Kruszynski** 39:16

But my mom herself was she was a warplane parts inspector, and took her job seriously. She worked for a company called Jack Jack and Heinz in Cleveland. They went to a contract from the military and they made warplane parts. My mom was an inspector with her best friend, and she worked seven days a week 12 hour shifts and had one day off a month. And she did that for two years and she saved all of her money. And when my dad came back, she and my dad use their their savings to buy their first store. But my mom worked 30 days in a row got one day off 12 hour shifts. How do you do it? How do you do that?

**Ed Kruszynski** 40:03

One other touching part of the story is, you think about the sacrifices that that generation had to make. There was rationing going on in the United States. And so my mom knew that her little brother needed shoes. So I did an inventory on my shoes. And it's embarrassing. I'll explain that in a second. But my my mom's family, my mother, they got their points and they got their coupons assembled, and they bought my uncle Ray, his pair of one shoes, you get one pair of shoes a year, and they bought him his shoes. So I go back, and I think, gosh, you know, I looked at my closet, and I don't feel like I have a lot of shoes. But you know, when you do the count, it's a double digit. And I'm like, Well, I take a lot for granted. But my mom was thrifty, she was smart. She squirreled away money in her condo, that that's actually part of the reason why we went after the box. She hid money in books underneath counters. But in terms of how moms are, you would never know that. She never talked about her experiences, either. She was our biggest cheerleader. As a kid growing up, both our parents were, they wanted the best for us. And I mentioned early on, if you read the book, it'll be up to you to decide who is the real hero in the story. And if you ask me a question about my mom and dad, I have my own opinions on the hero. And we wouldn't be here if Mary didn't tell the story.

**Trinity Johnson** 41:38

And I think her strength really comes through and how she helps your father adapt post war. And so we want to touch a little on what that experience was like, because we've already talked about the silence, right of not sharing the experiences. But what was striking, and something that I don't think most people think about is the reception of everyday Americans to soldiers returning home. And sometimes I hear this from survivors as well. It's not always as warm. And a lot of times some of the comments and the things that are said in the way someone's treated is very tone deaf. And I think there were a couple of things that you describe, that really then leads to how your mom becomes really his guardian, almost essentially, like socially and a guardian of the story, and your dad's recovery and journey through PTSD. And I'm wondering if you can share a little about him coming home and what reintegrating into society really was for him. And then as a couple.

**Ed Kruszynski** 42:45

The most difficult part, for my father when he came home, was the abruptness of him coming back to civilian life, you know, he was in Starnberg, Germany, administering to patients in Dachau. His commanding officer said, "You have enough points, you can go home." 11 days later he's in the United States. And it's there's no war in the United States. You know, it's people are moving around, they have their lives, they're going to work, they they're talking about Christmas, they're shopping, they, there's lights, there's there's a surplus of goods and services. And, and it was overwhelming, I think, for my dad to to like the shock of like, do these do these people have any idea what we went through? And he had real difficulty with friends or acquaintances or family members that weren't involved in the war? Right or wrong? He did. And especially with people that profited from the war. My dad didn't I mean, he was a staff sergeant and got paid as us as a staff sergeant would. People that worked in war factories, they they were paid on a different pay scale. And so I think it was difficult for him on that. But still, you're... I don't know what it's like to have PTSD. I don't know what it's like to be shell shocked, which is, PTSD is a great scientific term. But my dad was shell shocked. I mean, that's like, he was shot from war. He was still in the war when he came home. So like when your eyes are open, and you're moving about your day, there's enough distractions where you're only thinking about it sometimes. But when you close your eyes at night, and your subconscious takes over, my dad was back in the war, I don't know for how many months he was there.

**Ed Kruszynski** 45:06

But there was something catastrophic that happened between my mother and father that made my mother confront him about not being the same person. You know, I was a little offended by that, in a way, I'm like, Well, you know, how could he, how could he but but you know, when you're now a 26 year old wife and your husband, you haven't seen him in two years, and he comes back, and he's in these dark places. She confronts him. She she did as much as she could, but he would he would he clammed up. And she said, basically, if you don't start talking to me, to help me help you through these things, I cannot keep going this way. And, and that's where we call it tough love. You know, when you're a kid, your parents gave you tough love. But Mom gave Dad some tough love right there. And he had to decide how much or how little he was going to do to save his marriage. And the next day. The way she described it, is he was at the kitchen table. And he told her everything. One time, one time is all you get. He told her everything. And when I say everything, it's mostly the moral decisions he had to make, that were bothering him the most.

**Ed Kruszynski** 46:41

So oftentimes, like before I wrote the book, you know, what, when we say, survivors, or, or, or soldiers talk about their experiences, that's kind of in broad context. It's really, those moral decisions that they had to make when no one was looking that my dad had to explain in some way that my mom would understand it. And, you know, Mom was not always forth, she didn't tell me that they spent 24 hours she didn't, she didn't get into the, you know, the details of every single thing because she's, she's protecting her family. But one of the things, my mom was as street smart as they came, and she knew that she couldn't tell anybody after that conversation, because she didn't want to, if she told her children or sisters or mom and dad, or, you know, whoever wanted to know what what happened. People would ask my dad these questions and trigger these insidious thoughts again, and you know, my dad was a strong human being, and he was not prone to violence. But when you're in a dream state, you're you're not yourself. So, you know, she didn't want to have anybody fear Him or, or having go down these bad rabbit holes. But to his credit, you know, they didn't have treatment for this kind of stuff back then. Maybe they did. I don't know, I didn't research that part. But my mom and dad, self, they put together their own self help program, my dad hung out with friends that had went through the war. My mom said they actually had some conversations about things that were bothering and eventually time heals all.

**Trinity Johnson** 48:36

And he did some work with veterans who came back and had PTSD in later years. And I think that's a beautiful aspect that we most certainly know. He had the same trauma. And then he was able to work through some of his own while helping other veterans.

**Ed Kruszynski** 48:54

Right, exactly. The Veterans Administration hospitals were a big thing for my dad when he retired. He, I think, I think he enjoyed going and talking to other wounded veterans. Because they're, they're in a unique fraternity. And I don't know how deep my dad was counseling, you know, other veterans on PTSD, but I think, towards, you know, when, when he when he was in his 70s, he was more apt to speaking to selective groups about his experiences. He never spoke to his kids about it, but he would speak to other soldiers of some of the things. And there's kind of a funny story here, like so I'm a I'm an uncle, you know, I have nieces. My dad would tell stories to my nephews, you know, the son in laws. And, you know, my brother and I and sister would be like, well, he never He still hasn't talked to us. What did he say to you guys? So like, we would still, you know, share stories, but you know, your parents are always your parents and they're always yielding you for certain things. But we did squeak some some information out of my my nephews and what they learned. But yeah, the I think it helps veterans sometimes to talk to other veterans.

**Trinity Johnson** 50:13

So as we're rounding out our conversation, I have one question that is, is kind of three parts. So I'm looking for three answers here. So our theme this month is strengths in action. And, as you mentioned, we focus a lot at the Holocaust center about our character strengths, and how we can use our strength to affect change, positive change in our community. And I'm wondering, what did you learn about your own strengths and writing this book? But then what did you discover about your parents that you maybe didn't know going into this, and their strengths?

**Ed Kruszynski** 50:50

What I learned about myself, through this whole process is bravery. Bravery is a character strength, I didn't score very well on bravery in the test. I took it as you know, Napoleon, you know, I'm Napoleon, I don't know if I could go and, you know, have it done. But what I learned is, some of the things that I also scored middle on, were things like forgiveness, things like fairness. And, you know, those are tough pills to take, even at my stage of the game. But one thing I learned in a long career is self, self-assessment and self-awareness is, are two things that are important for you to improve yourself. The things you know, character strengths that I was good at, were things that I knew I'd be good at, you know, creativity, humor, gratitude, those kinds of things, those all popped, but the things that didn't pop were, were kind of eye opening. So I think self assessing myself, like, you know, I need to I need to put things behind me, I need to forgive better. In terms of like, how do you make it through? How are you a survivor of a concentration camp? How do you make it through a war? I think things like, at least from what I've read on survivors, things like hope, spirituality, perseverance, those are character traits that a lot of survivors needed to, to have to make it through. It's easy to give up. But you know, if they, if there was a survey of all the survivors, I wonder if they would score high in all those areas? Because I don't know how you would make it unless you'd have hope. Every day, every hour, every minute was a struggle. How do you do it? So from a character standpoint, I think those three things from a survivor standpoint would be important.

**Ed Kruszynski** 53:02

I think, my dad, you know, his character strengths would be prudence, teamwork and judgment. He's a leader, I think about character traits. And teaching those early, you know, early, so our children understand what the right traits are, in what what ones are really important, and why they're important. But the children in Germany, we're being taught similar traits. I think part of it is who's doing the teaching, and what's right and wrong. It's not like Germany, if you take a look at the pictures, the Hitler Youth, you know, we see them as those are the villains, but they were being taught the same things. Bravery, spirituality, you know, fight for the Fatherland, God's with us, those kinds of things. And my brain's not big enough to wrap myself around how you not do that. The only thing I can think of to answer your question on something like that would be who's doing the teaching? And is is, is it? what's right and wrong? So I think about some of that stuff, a lot, and certainly more, you know, thoughtful about things, you know, what I say to people, when they asked me questions, and, you know, I, you know, there are things that still bother me and things that I'm, you know, unsettled about. Did I answer that?

**Trinity Johnson** 54:39

Yes. Yes. And I think you're right strengths. We all have these strengths, right. And unfortunately, they can be used to hurt but hopefully, if we're inspired to and know that we're empowered to we can also use them to help and heal, right. And so, um, my last question it for the day, unfortunately, because there's still so much we could have talked about about this book. And when you when people hear your family's story, what do you want them to take away most from what what you've written?

**Ed Kruszynski** 55:10

You know, I think what I would want people to take away is that there are hidden heroes that walk among us every day. And and oftentimes true heroism goes unnoticed or unspoken. And these stories help illuminate telling a story of a person who might not be able to tell the story. And, and I think the moral of the story is evil never wins. Good always wins. Good always wins. And I know it probably wasn't the answer that you wanted. But that's how I'm thinking this book ends up is to me writing it. My family's legacy. At the end of the day, good, good beats evil, always. And if you get some of that from the book, then I did my job.

**Trinity Johnson** 56:07

Well Ed, thank you so much for for speaking with me today for writing this book for keeping this history alive. And sharing very intimate and vulnerable things about your family, just so that we can be inspired by the stories of history. And thank you for doing that work.

**Ed Kruszynski** 56:26

Thank you. Thanks for having me. There is one other thing though, and that's I'm planning on donating the proceeds of this book a portion of the proceeds. Whenever the podcast is being aired, whatever month that will be the month where my family the Kruszynski family will donate my portion of the profits back to the Holocaust & Humanity Center as our gift to the center.

**Trinity Johnson** 56:57

Thank you so, so much for that. That's very generous. Thank you.

**Jackie Congedo** 57:02

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**Jackie Congedo** 57:41

Executive Producers are David Wise and Jackie Congedo. Managing producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting producer is Joyce Kamen Technical producer is Robert Mills. Technical director is Josh Emerson. Select music is by Kick Lee. This is recorded at Technical Consulting Partners studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.