

THE LUXURY CONSTELLATION: NEW YORK CITY AND ITS SUBURBS

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# History Makers

By Dan Burstein

## A Medal of Honor for Sargent William Shemin... A Century Long Odyssey

I AM IN THE EAST ROOM of the White House on June 2, 2015 for what is turning out to be the most amazing family reunion I could ever have imagined.

At the podium, President Barack Obama is presenting the Medal of Honor to my 86 year-old cousin, Elsie Shemin-Roth, and her sister, Ina Bass, who are both daughters of Sargent William Shemin, a man who fought bravely in World War I almost a century earlier. This is an extremely rare posthumous presentation of the Medal of Honor, the military's highest award for battlefield valor, in consideration of Sgt. Shemin's "extraordinary heroism and selflessness, above and beyond the call of duty."

William Shemin, whom we knew in our family as Bill, was a younger first cousin to my grandmother (Leah Shemin). Leah—my father's mother—and many of my Shemin relatives had their origins in a small town called Orsha in what is today Belarus. Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this Russian town near the Dnieper River had a population of about 13,000—a little more than half of them Jewish. My grandmother's branch of the family, and a whole generation of our forebears, including Bill Shemin's parents, fled Tsarist pogroms, famines, and a general lack of opportunity in Russia to come to America in the late 1800s and early 1900s. (If you've seen *Fiddler on the Roof*, you can imagine Orsha back then, even though *Fiddler* is set in Ukraine, a few hundred miles to the south).

Like William Shemin, who was born in Bayonne, New Jersey in 1896, my father was a first generation American, born in the Bronx in 1915 to Russian immigrant parents. As my father made his way through high school, college, and law school, Bill Shemin would give him his first job working in the greenhouse Bill ran after he had returned from WW I, obtained a forestry degree at Syracuse University, and established his business growing trees, flowers and plants on Boston Post Road in the Bronx.

In 1958, when my family, including my grandmother, were living in southern California, Bill Shemin traveled across the country to visit us. I remember as a five-year-old going to meet him for the first



SARGENT WILLIAM "BILL" SHEMIN  
JULIE O'CONNOR PHOTO OF HISTORIC  
SHEMIN FAMILY PHOTO

time at Union Station in downtown Los Angeles. Coming off the train with his wife Bertha, he seemed very old (of course he was then about the age I am now—early 60s—but as I said, I was five). He had the limp that came from his wartime injuries and the shrapnel he took in his leg. The "war to end all wars" had also left him deaf in one ear. He still talked about his 1918 experiences as if they were yesterday. And despite his injuries, his personal sacrifice, and all the death and destruction he had seen, he talked about the U.S. Army with the reverence of a true patriot.

My vision of Bill Shemin is indelibly etched in the region of my brain where childhood memories are stored. As we gathered in the East Room of the White House, where so many important presidential statements have been made and so much history has occurred, my five-year-old first impressions flashed through my mind.

My cousin Elsie worked for 15 years to arrive at this miraculous day in 2015. She proved the case that Sargent William Shemin, by all rights, should have received the Medal of Honor for his heroism in the trenches and killing fields under German gunfire during a

three-day battle in the Vesle River Valley near Bazoches, France in August, 1918. But because of the anti-Semitism that prevailed in the U.S. military at the time, this award eluded him. He received a Purple Heart and a Distinguished Service Cross, yet it was extremely difficult for a Jewish soldier from that era to receive a Medal of Honor.

Elsie went through incredible hoops and obstacles to make her case, not to mention having to work her way around hundreds of bureaucrats and naysayers who told her at every step hers was an impossible undertaking. Amazingly, she even arranged for bipartisan legislation to be passed in Congress—in the form of a bill named for Sgt. Shemin—allowing the military to re-open cases from World War I to reconsider soldiers for the Medal of Honor if they had been passed over because of discrimination. And this in an era when hardly anything gets through the U.S. Congress on a bipartisan basis! Elsie has the magic touch—as well as her father’s determination and persistence to get the job done. Her passion to see justice done is contagious.

Tears are welling up in my eyes as I listen to President Obama say:

“Well, Elsie, as much as America meant to your father, he means even more to America. It takes our nation too long sometimes to say so – because Sergeant Shemin served at a time when the contributions and heroism of Jewish Americans in uniform were too often overlooked. But William Shemin saved American lives. He represented our nation with honor. And so, it is my privilege, on behalf of the American people, to make this right and finally award the Medal of Honor to Sergeant William Shemin.”

The President is thanking what he calls our “whole platoon of Shemins” (there are more than 60 of my Shemin relatives gathered for this occasion, including our then 26-year-old son, David Burstein) for turning out today. William Shemin has been a larger-than-life legend in our family for a long time. Now, the President of the United States is sharing his story with the nation, the world, and with history. President Obama and his speechwriters have distilled the essence of Sgt. Shemin’s story well:

Growing up in Bayonne, New Jersey, William Shemin loved sports – football,



the war, and posters asked if he was tough enough, there was no question about it – he was going to serve. Too young to enlist? No problem. He puffed his chest and lied about his age. And that’s how William Shemin joined the 47th Infantry Regiment, 4th Division, and shipped out for France.

On August 7th, 1918, on the Western Front, the Allies were hunkered down in one trench, the Germans in another, separated by about 150 yards of open space – just a football field and a half. But that open space was a bloodbath. Soldier after soldier ventured out, and soldier after soldier was mowed down. So those still in the trenches were left with a terrible choice: die trying to rescue your fellow soldier, or watch him die, knowing that part of you will die along with him.

William Shemin couldn’t stand to watch.



**TOP TO BOTTOM:** SARGENT WILLIAM “BILL” SHEMIN, US ARMY OF OCCUPATION 4TH INFANTRY DIVISION, VALLENGARD (ON THE RHINE RIVER), GERMANY, MAY 1919. JULIE O’CONNOR PHOTO OF HISTORIC SHEMIN FAMILY PHOTO  
HENRY JOHNSON FOUGHT WITH THE 369TH INFANTRY, KNOWN AS THE HARLEM HELLFIGHTERS, ONE OF THE FIRST REGIMENTS TO LAND IN FRANCE. JULIE O’CONNOR PHOTO OF A PAUL THOMPSON PHOTOGRAPH FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHS AND PRINTS DIVISION, SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY

wrestling, boxing, swimming. If it required physical and mental toughness, and it made your heart pump, your muscles ache, he was all in. As a teenager, he even played semi-pro baseball. So when America entered

He ran out into the hell of No Man’s Land and dragged a wounded comrade to safety. Then he did it again, and again. Three times he raced through heavy machine gunfire. Three times he carried his fellow soldiers to safety.



The battle stretched on for days. Eventually, the platoon's leadership broke down. Too many officers had become casualties. So William stepped up and took command. He reorganized the depleted squads. Every time there was a lull in combat, he led rescues of the wounded. As a lieutenant later described it, William was "cool, calm, intelligent, and personally utterly fearless."

When he came home, William went to school for forestry and began a nursery business in the Bronx. It was hard work, lots of physical labor – just like he liked it. He married a red-headed, blue-eyed woman named Bertha Schiffer, and they had three children who gave them 14 grandchildren. He bought a house upstate, where the grandkids spent their summers swimming and riding horses. He taught them how to salute. He taught them the correct way to raise the flag every morning and lower and fold it every night. He taught them how to be Americans.

William stayed in touch with his fellow veterans, too. And when World War II came, William went and talked to the Army about signing up again. By then, his war injuries had given him a terrible limp. But he treated that limp just like he treated his age all those years ago – pay no attention to that, he said. He knew how to build roads, he knew camouflage – maybe there was a place for him in this war, too. To Bertha's great relief, the Army said that the best thing William could do for his country was to keep running his business and take care of his family.

Elsie has a theory about what drove her father to serve. He was the son of Russian immigrants, and he was devoted to his Jewish faith. "His family lived through the pogroms," she says. "They saw towns destroyed and children killed. And then they came to America. And here they found a haven -- a home – success – and my father and his sister both went to college. All that, in one generation! That's what America meant to him. And that's why he'd do anything for this country."

The White House day is a great celebration of William Shemin, a step forward in the ongoing fight against anti-Semitism, and a wonderful occasion for our family. But given President Obama's commitment to fighting discrimination on multiple fronts and to pursuing an inclusionary and diverse vision of America, our Jewish American family hero is sharing the spotlight on this day with Private



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:** FROM THE WILLIAM SHEMIN COLLECTION NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH MILITARY HISTORY PINNED DOWN NEAR THE VESLE RIVER (FRANCE) DURING EARLY AUGUST 1918, SHEMIN LEFT THE SAFETY OF HIS TRENCH ON THREE SEPARATE OCCASIONS, RISKING HEAVY ENEMY FIRE TO RESCUE WOUNDED SOLDIERS. WHEN HIS COMMANDING OFFICERS WERE KILLED OR INJURED, HE TOOK CONTROL OF HIS PLATOON UNTIL HE WAS INJURED ON AUGUST 9, 1918. HE RECEIVED THE MILITARY'S SECOND HIGHEST HONOR, THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS, FOR HIS VALOR. PHOTO BY JULIE O'CONNOR TAKEN AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AMERICAN JEWISH HISTORY, PHILADELPHIA

SGT. HENRY JOHNSON OF THE 369TH INFANTRY REGIMENT FOUGHT BRAVELY DURING A WWI BATTLE IN FRANCE IN WHICH HE AND A FELLOW SOLDIER WERE BADLY OUTNUMBERED BY GERMAN SOLDIERS. JOHNSON BECAME ONE OF THE FIRST AMERICANS TO BE AWARDED THE FRENCH CROIX DE GUERRE, FRANCE'S HIGHEST AWARD FOR VALOR, ON FEB. 12, 1919. JOHNSON WAS POSTHUMOUSLY AWARDED THE PURPLE HEART IN 1996 AND THE DISTINGUISHED SERVICE CROSS IN 2002. PRESIDENT OBAMA AWARDED THE MEDAL OF HONOR POSTHUMOUSLY TO BOTH SGT. WILLIAM SHEMIN AND TO SGT. HENRY JOHNSON, FOR CONSPICUOUS GALLANTRY ACTIONS DURING WORLD WAR I ON 6/2/2015. (PHOTO: PUBLIC DOMAIN)

SISTERS INA BASS AND ELSIE SHEMIN-ROTH CLASP HANDS AND ARE THRILLED TO RECEIVE OUR COUNTRY'S HIGHEST MILITARY AWARD, THE MEDAL OF HONOR, AS PRESIDENT OBAMA BESTOWS IT ON THEIR FATHER, SGT. WILLIAM SHEMIN POSTHUMOUSLY 97 YEARS AFTER WWI. TAKEN IN THE EAST ROOM OF THE WHITE HOUSE ON JUNE 2, 1915. PHOTO BY DAN BURSTEIN



Henry Johnson, an African-American soldier from the same era, who also performed notable acts of bravery in World War I, and was similarly passed over for the Medal of Honor owing to discrimination.

The President makes the connection between the stories of William Shemin and Henry Johnson:

Today, America honors two of her sons who served in World War I, nearly a century ago. These two soldiers were roughly the same age, dropped into the battlefields of France at roughly the same time. They both risked their own lives to save the lives of others. They both left us decades ago, before we could give them the full recognition that they deserved. But it's never too late to say thank you. Today, we

present America's highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, to Private Henry Johnson and Sergeant William Shemin.

He goes on to explain Henry Johnson's story from his enlistment in the all-Black 369th Infantry Regiment, known as 'The Harlem Hellfighters.'

At the time, our military was segregated. Most Black soldiers served in labor battalions, not combat units. But General Pershing sent the 369th to fight with the French Army, which accepted them as their own... And in the early hours of May 15, 1918, Henry Johnson became a legend.

HIS BATTALION WAS IN Northern France, tucked into a trench. Henry and another

soldier, Needham Roberts, stood sentry along No Man's Land. In the pre-dawn, it was pitch black, and silent. And then – a click – the sound of wire cutters.

A German raiding party – at least a dozen soldiers, maybe more – fired a hail of bullets. Henry fired back until his rifle was empty. Then he and Needham threw grenades. Both of them were hit. Needham lost consciousness. Two enemy soldiers began to carry him away while another provided cover, firing at Henry. But Henry refused to let them take his brother in arms. He shoved another magazine into his rifle. It jammed. He turned the gun around and swung it at one of the enemy, knocking him down. Then he grabbed the only weapon he had left – his Bolo knife – and went to rescue Needham. Henry took down one enemy soldier, then the other. The soldier he'd knocked down with his rifle recovered, and Henry was wounded again. But armed with just his knife, Henry took him down, too.

And finally, reinforcements arrived and the last enemy soldier fled. As the sun rose, the scale of what happened became clear. In just a few minutes of fighting, two Americans had defeated an entire raiding party. And Henry Johnson saved his fellow soldier from being taken prisoner.

Obama explains that even though former President Teddy Roosevelt wrote that Johnson was one of the bravest men in the war and France gave Johnson its highest award for valor, "his own nation didn't award him anything... His injuries left him crippled. He couldn't find work. His marriage fell apart. And in his early 30s, he passed away." The Medal of Honor ceremony is an attempt to right that wrong posthumously, symbolically.

My cousin Elsie has charged all of us in the extended Shemin clan with continuing to tell the story of her father, William Shemin, and linking it to the story of Henry Johnson (posthumously upgraded to Sargent Johnson), making the connection President Obama made that day in 2015 between two brave Americans way back in 1918 who were among the many war heroes never honored fully in their lifetimes because of religious and racial discrimination and bias. But Obama's idea, like cousin Elsie's, was a hopeful one – we can do better. Even if it takes a century, we can correct past mistakes, as long as we can face up to them and do the right thing.

A LOT HAS HAPPENED since the White House ceremony in 2015. Last year we attended a ceremony at William Shemin's gravesite at the Baron Hirsch cemetery on Staten Island where the Army unveiled a special Medal of Honor designation for his burial place. This was a powerful moment in its own right. Jim Pritchard, the son of one of the wounded men Bill Shemin physically dragged from the firing line to safety during the firefight in August of 1918, told the story of how every year at Thanksgiving his father used to say that if it hadn't been for Bill's courage and bravery, none of the further generations of Pritchards would be here today, because Jim's father would have died right there and then in the German killing field. Then, David Frey from the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at West Point spoke about the challenges of combating anti-Semitism in the modern world.

In March of this year, we visited the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia – a museum affiliated with the Smithsonian – which had just opened a show entitled *1917: How One Year Changed the World*. The show focused on three world-changing events of 1917 affecting America and the Jewish community – the entry of the United States into World War I, the Balfour Declaration (which laid the basis for England to begin to recognize the need for a Jewish homeland in the Middle East), and the shock of the 1917 Russian Revolution that overthrew the Tsar and ushered in the Soviet state. 1917 was also the year that William Shemin enlisted in the Army and went overseas to fight.

As my wife and I toured the museum show, a surprising but warm feeling came over me as I looked at William Shemin's memorabilia featured alongside major recognizable artifacts of world history. Here are the handwritten notes that became the Balfour Declaration. Over there is the original decoding of the German "Zimmerman Telegram," used by the British to encourage Woodrow Wilson to enter WW I in alliance with the British. And here, in the center of the show, is Bill Shemin's Army uniform, his wartime baseball spikes, his gas mask, his awards and decorations, and the Medal of Honor itself! A man I knew as a child, a man who is at the center of much legend and lore in our family, is now taking his place as a figure representative of some of

the larger trends that shaped the history of the modern era.

IT IS MARCH OF 2017. I am telling the story of the White House Medal of Honor ceremony in 2015 to a friend I haven't seen in a long time. I am explaining this unusual coming together of "a whole platoon of Shemins" and a group of people involved with keeping alive the traditions of the heroic all-Black regiment of WWI era, the Harlem Hellfighters. Many of us gathered there were descendants of Russian Jewish immigrants or African slaves. Obama spoke so movingly that day about how even though it took almost 100 years to properly recognize William Shemin and Henry Johnson, the great thing about America was that our democracy eventually corrects its mistakes.

And as I told this story to my friend, I broke into tears all over again. Mostly because it is such a moving story to me about the beauty of American democracy and the American Dream, as well as the fact that I have such a close personal and family connection to the story.

But I realize I am also shedding a tear in some measure because I am finding it hard to imagine a similar ceremony with similar meaning taking place in today's White House, not even two years later.

I think of the new battles we have in our times with anti-Semitism, racism, and hate and intolerance of all types. I am thinking of a growing wave of attacks on minorities and immigrants in America and troubling incidents around the world. And then I think of the courage of people like Bill Shemin, and his fearless daughter Elsie, and I think not only how proud I am to be related to them – but that somehow, it will be alright. Not without a fight – because that's the essence of what their experience shows. But justice will prevail. Eventually. \*

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*Dan Burstein and Julie O'Connor live in Weston. Dan is a venture capitalist and the author of 14 books. Award-winning photographer Julie O'Connor created the first non-Western door poster with "Doors of Tibet" in 2003, which became the basis for her interest in doing her book, "Doors of Weston: 300 Years of Passageways in a Connecticut Town" published in partnership with the Weston Historical Society.*