The long journey back home
As a teenager Werner Angress escaped Hitler, as a young man he fought for America against Nazi-Germany. As an retired man he returned to the city where he was born: Berlin. The 83-year old former professor for history is one of the very few Ritchie Boys who live in Germany today.

At War Against Their Home

By Christian Bauer

Marching through bullets
On June 6, 1944 at 6:30 am Allied forces land in Normandy.

Operation "Liberation"
For four months lasted Werner Angress' training at Camp Ritchie, Maryland. Shartly before D-day he was assigned to an Airborne Division. He knew that he would have to jump behind the German lines.

Jump into the unknown
The night before D-Day, 23year old Werner Angress got on board of a C47 for his very first parachute jump. The landing was soft. But Werner lost contact with his unit.

Country

*On D-Day the secret mission of the "**Ritchie Boys**" began: German emigrants in US uniforms fought against Hitler's Wehrmacht*

Swimming to the frontlines
For months the soldiers had practised for this day: Photographer Robert Copa, pioneer of the embedded journalists,shot about 100 pictures of landing at Omaha Beach. Only few are preserved today.

The war in sketches
In three sketchbooks soldier and artist Si Lewen kept his impressions. Balloons protected the invasion fleet against the German air force.

The art to survive
A gun instead of a paintbrush: Artist Si Lewen served on the Western front – At the Rhine, border between Germany and France

"I wasn't a real soldier – and I did not want to think like a soldier.

The paratroopers of the 508th Regiment on board the C47 have blackened their faces and swallowed pills to overcome their fear. They're on their way to France, destined to jump in behind the German lines. The nose of their aircraft is decorated with a cartoon: Donald Duck in swimming trunks, ready to dive. The caption reads: "Son of the Beach". Staff Sergeant Werner Angress knows that it's not going to be that easy. It's the early hours of June 6th, 1944 – D-Day.

In only a few days Werner Angress will be 24. Seven years ago he fled Germany and enlisted in the United States military. Now he is sitting beside the open door of a C47, waiting to make his very first jump, at night, under fire, without any training at all.

Over the Normandy coast the enemy anti aircraft fire is becoming determined and deadly. Werner Angress is watching as the airplane next to them is being hit and plunges. He could easily have chosen a safer way to France. He has a special assignment: He's a Ritchie Boy, a German fighting against Germans.

They called themselves Ritchie Boys because they had graduated from the Military Intelligence Training Center at Camp Ritchie, Maryland – a school for intelligence, propaganda, and psychological warfare. For those who knew Ritchie, this camp was the most unusual of all US Army installations during the Second World War. Many of the trainees were young emigrants from Germany and Austria, most of them of Jewish origin. Surprisingly their story has remained untold until today even – though it is of the kind from which heroic epics are fashioned. They were hounded by the Nazis, fled their homeland under threat of death, and returned to Europe in American uniforms.

Werner Angress hasn't swallowed his pill. He will need all his senses. He has the right to refuse to jump this first time. If he loses his courage he would be taken back in the empty C47 to England. But then he would have deserted his comrades who have become a second family to him.

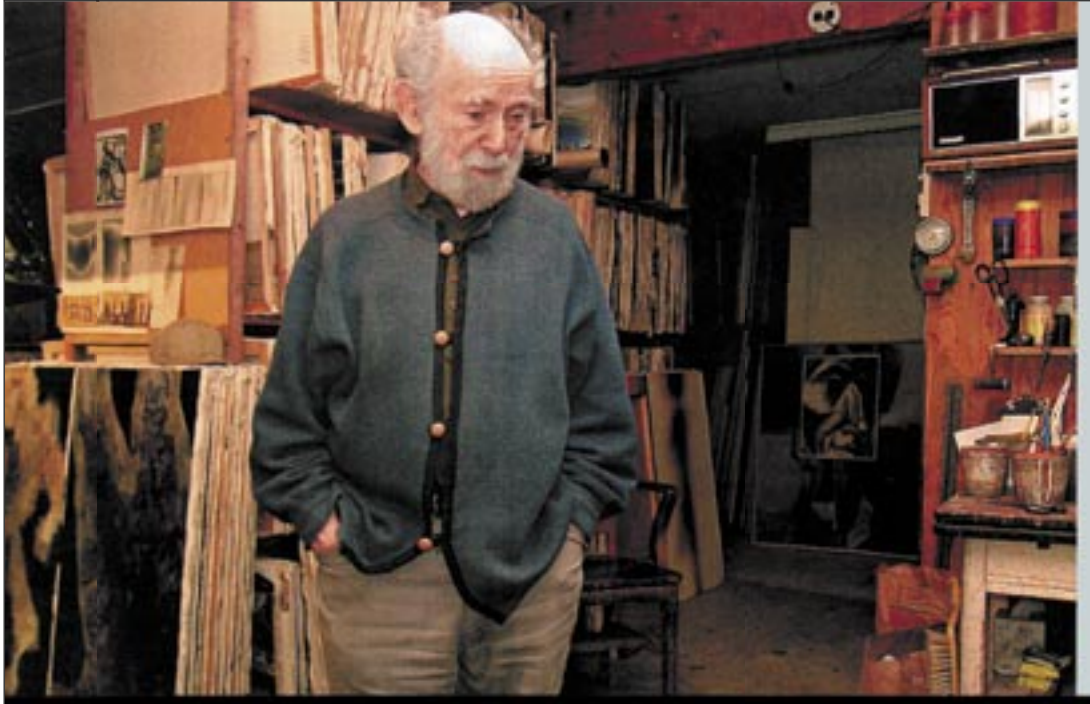
Dropping through the air under his chute he has a dream-like vision. Below him in the light of the full moon is an orchard. A terror-stricken white horse is galloping between the apple trees, tearing its way from fence to fence, trapped. Werner Angress' parachute settles into a tree, tangled in the branches. His landing is soft, but he is alone. He will find out much later that his pilot had panicked and veered from the prescribed course, dropping Werner´s unit far from its target.

June 6th 1944 is the day for which the Ritchie Boys had yearned and prepared themselves for years. They had escaped the Nazis and helplessly they had to watch as Hitler's war machine conquered Europe piece by piece. Only when Germany declared war to the USA three days after Pearl Harbor, they were released from their agonizing wait. No longer would they flee. Now they could defend themselves with weapons in their hands.

It was not a given of military thinking that German-speaking emigrants like Angress would be sought and chosen for training at Camp Ritchie. They were "enemy aliens" after all. German agents could be among them. But the Pentagon recognized the potential of these young men. They were highly motivated. America had saved their lives, and they understood the language of the enemy and his psychology better than anybody else. ▶

The Ritchie Boys: The untold story of wartime heroes.

Military training for intellectuals
In Camp Ritchie, Maryland, young immigrants from Europe prepared for their mission. The prominent writers Klaus Mann und Stefan Heym were part of the team.



The intellectual soldier
After Si Lewen joined the US Army, he was trained in propaganda and psychological warfare in Camp Ritchie.

The dead never sleep
Si Lewen's experiences at the frontlines, and his visit of Buchenwald have marked him for life. War has always been a subject of his art. Now, at 85, the artist is working on an autobiographical series of paintings.

I wanted to do my job as good as possible." – Si Lewen

Most soldiers at Fort Ritchie spoke English with a heavy accent, but their IQs were far above the average of other American units. "In any other military setting we would have been misfits, outsiders," explains Si Lewen, a painter who grew up in Berlin. "Instead of the usual gossip, we discussed politics, philosophy and art. We were intellectuals." The punch-card machines at the Pentagon sent the elite of the exiles to Camp Ritchie. One of them was Klaus Mann, the son of the Nobel Prize winner Thomas Mann. In a letter to his mother he wrote, "Italian, German, French, Polish, Czech, Norwegian are spoken all over the place. And there are so many familiar faces! The place is jumping with old friends! You might think you were in a club or a café in Berlin, Vienna, Paris, or Budapest." Among the leading figures in Ritchie were also the publicist Hans Habe and the writer Stefan Heym who had just sold his novel Hostages to Hollywood. Many years later Heym became the chaima of the first German Bundestag after the reunion.

Many Ritchie Boys were not just intellectuals, but also, fundamentally, pacifists. Si Lewen had already left Germany on his own in 1933 when he was only fourteen years old. "I hate all wars," he says, "but this was different. I had run away as soon as Hitler came into power. But I knew I had to go back and do whatever I could."

Si Lewen landed on Omaha Beach in Normandy shortly after the invasion had begun. His task was especially dangerous. He was to drive a truck with loudspeakers as close to the German lines as possible, broadcasting an appeal to surrender. Standing on the ship's rail tears were streaming down his face. "In my wildest dreams of revenge I wouldn't have imagined to return to Europe with such an armada of battle ships, cruisers, destroyers and troop ships." He kept a record of the scene in his sketchbook, the tense faces of the GIs, the dead bodies on the beach. "My whole body was shaking, my heart was racing that I thought my chest would burst. I prayed."

At about the same time Guy Stern landed on Utah Beach. He also had come to the USA alone in 1937 at the age of fifteen. He belonged to an IPW-team, which was to interrogate German prisoners of war. At Ritchie Guy Stern, Werner Angress, and others like them had to memorize the complete history of German units, including the names of their officers. They studied German equipment and tactics and knew them as well as any German sergeant major. Dozens of times they practiced interrogation methods at Camp Ritchie, knowing how to threaten, to flatter, and to fraternize. "We worked harder, both in Camp Ritchie and in the field than anyone could have driven us," says Guy Stern.

While Guy Stern interrogated his first prisoners in Normandy, Werner Angress struggled behind the German lines to find his unit. Every day more and more dispersed GIs gathered around him. During daylight they hid in the woods. Their emergency rations were soon exhausted, and the hunger became unbearable. On the eighth day a French farmer, whom they had paid to provide them with food, betrayed them to the Germans. A German unit surrounded the lost soldiers and opened fire. Werner Angress was wounded on the left thigh.

The German officer who interrogated him after they had surrendered had no idea that this blond-haired, blue-eyed American was a countryman, a Jew, born and raised in Berlin. ▶

Action, please!
A film team is shooting a mock arrest for a military training film at Camp Ritchie.

A serious Game
The Germans are coming: US soldiers dressed up in German uniforms give the training a realistic look.

German for Life
Guy Stern landed in France as an interrogator for German POWs. Today the 82 year old is Professor for German Studies in Detroit.

Günther turns into Guy
At 15 Guy came to America alone. The family he left behind was murdered by the Nazis. During his High School years in St. Louis he earned his living as a busboy.

"I was terribly squeamish. But when I saw the dismembered bodies on the beach, I was suddenly cured." – Guy Stern

But Angress' name raised suspicion. "Are you of German descent? Where were you born?" Angress didn't want to name a big city like New York or Chicago. Lynchburg, Va. seemed less risky. The German jumped up, excited: "Lynchburg? I was there! In 1926, as a young man!" Angress was shocked. But quick on the uptake he asked, "Have you been back since then?" The German shook his head, and Angress knew that he was saved. "Sir, Lynchburg has changed a great deal since then!" Playing chess in a bunker under siege in Cherbourg, he made friends with his captor.

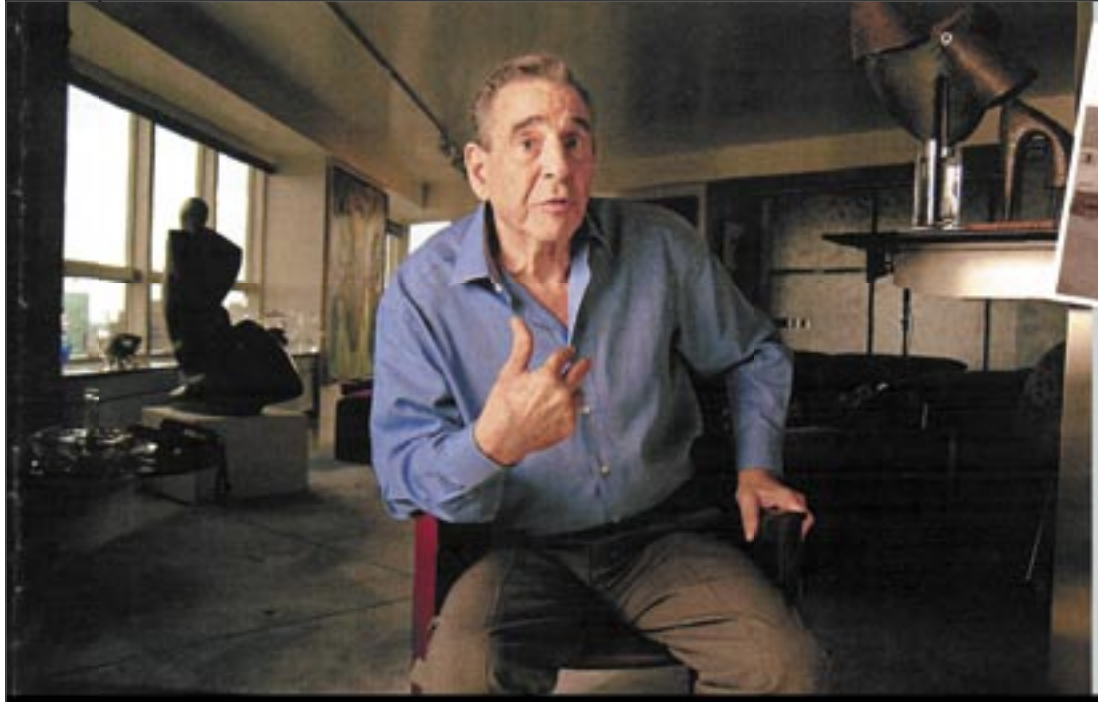
When the Ritchie Boys returned to Europe they were in far greater danger than the regular GI. Though they were supposed to carry no photos, letters, or souvenirs of their earlier life in Germany in their packs, the American dog tags included the soldier's name, his serial number, and an initial indicating his religion. Werner Angress decided to let his be marked with a "P" for Protestant rather than an "H" for Hebrew. His friends didn't want to accept that and accused him of insufficient pride and courage. He replied dryly, "I'm going to the front, not you." This precaution now saved him from deportation. After twelve days, on Werner Angress' 24th birthday, the Germans surrendered to the Americans. Werner was free. Before he said farewell to the Wehrmacht officer, Werner decided not to reveal his true identity. "I couldn't do that to him. I thanked him and told him I hoped that he would be treated just as well as he had treated us." He never saw the German again.

The Second World War was the first war in the age of mass media. Though the British were a few years ahead in the arts of intelligence and propaganda, the Americans applied their principles of industrial production to the training of officers and troops. Nearly thirteen thousand GIs passed through courses at Camp Ritchie between 1942 and 1945. Hollywood-influenced methods of teaching supplemented the industrial assembly line approach. For motivation the instructors showed films like "Kill or Be Killed" by the Ritchie Boy Hanus Burger from Prague. They arranged regular and realistic stage enactments, depicting the dissemination of military propaganda and the interrogation of German prisoners, and trained the future propaganda officers in the plywood scenery of a small German town. In the vincinity of Ritchie suddenly German soldiers would appear out of the underbrush. They frightened the farmers in this little backwater of Maryland. They must have thought the German invasion had already begun. But hese were Americans in German uniforms, trained in German tactics, who provided "the enemy" for the Ritchie Boys.

Most unsavory of all was the reenactment at Camp Ritchie of a Nazi Rally. Imitating the Berlin Sports Arena, the Camp's hall was decorated with Swastikas, and Nazi banners were hung from balcony to balcony. Hitler was played by an actor with a glued-on moustache, and Goebbles and Goering were also represented. The Horst-Wessel Song was sung, and the Sieg-Heil salutes could be heard far down the quiet little valley.

During combat the Ritchie Boys operated in a team of six people – three men in a jeep each. They were most successful when they interrogate the German soldiers in the shock of imprisonment. "If necessary we interrogated 48 hours straight, keeping ourselves awake with coffee pills or whatever it took," says Guy Stern. The Ritchie Boys gathered information about the strength of the enemy, their equipment, the position of their guns, but also about their fighting morale. ▶

A German village in Maryland
A fake German village served as training ground for the Ritchie Boys. The new classes watch the action.



A serious game
Fred Howard in Germany:
He interrogated captured SS-men, threatening to turn them over to the Russians – and got the information he sought.

After the war
Fred Howard, who was Fritz Ehrlicher before his emigration in1939, is a successful designer and businessman in New York.

"Europe was raped by a well-oiled military machine." **– Fred Howard**

They forwarded their reports to military headquarters. The typewriter is their weapon – not the gun.

When the constant bombardment of the German supply lines did not show the expected success, Guy Stern interrogated the railway workers amongst the prisoners and learned that the Wehrmacht kept stack of prefabricated railway tracks at their disposal that allowed repairs within hours. When the front moved into Germany, there was fear that the Germans might use gas like in WW I as a last resort. He devised a simple yet very effective method to determine whether the enemy is preparing for gas warfare. He had the prisoners lined up and called: "Everybody with a gas mask: step forward!" Most of the Germans didn´t move. Guy received a Bronze Star for his mass interrogation method.

According to the Geneva Convention the German POWs only had to provide their name, rank, and serial number. But the Ritchie Boys were well prepared for the cat-and-mouse game necessary to pry out more information. Their trump card was every German´s fear of being sent to Russia. Guy Stern disguised himself as "Kommissar Krukov". He wore a fantasy uniform and carried out the interrogation, shouting and cursing at the POW in broken German. Behind him in his tent was a large photo of Stalin with a forged dedication, "To My Dear Friend Krukov, Joe Stalin." Guy´s partner Fred Howard, whose name was Fritz Ehrlich prior to 1939, played the role of the good American. He would rescue the German officer from being sent to Siberia in exchange for good information.

Not long after the landing in Normandy Guy Stern discovered in the stack of pay books taken from new POWs the name of an officer from his hometown who had been a buddy in his sports club. He decided to interrogate him. In the middle of the night the German was brought into Guy Stern's poorly lit tent. Suspicious by Stern's detailed questions the man tried to recognize his interrogator in the shadows, but in vain. Just one question Stern didn´t ask, "What has become of my family.

The beginning of the Battle of the Bulge shortly before Christmas 1944 produced the greatest challenge for the Ritchie Boys. All along the front Ritchie Boy teams had gathered information about an impending German attack. But their warnings went unheard. The Germans broke through, and SS units in American uniforms penetrated the American lines. These fake Americans posed a deadly threat for the Ritchie Boys. With their strange accents the Ritchie Boys easily could be mistaken as Germans in disguise. Parols like "whistling thistle" – nearly unspeakable for German tongues – increased the danger.

A trivial incident nearly cost Werner Angress his life: When he saw two GIs washing a plucked chicken in the water supply of a farmer, he calls at them in English but with a heavy German accent: „Leave it – the people here are drinking from it!" Suddenly he stares in the muzzles of two carbines. Only his comrade's persuasion saves him from being shot as a spy.

A couple of days later Angress himself had the finger on the trigger. He was ordered to threaten a German POW with execution if he did not provide valid information about the size and position of his unit. ▶

Typically German
Replicas of German tanks, made of wood and cardboard, were part of the training in Camp Ritchie.

Messages raining from the sky
How do you persuade the Germans to surrender? Drop flyers above their lines. "I surrender" spelt in phonetic German.

Holocaust horror Germany had surrendered, but the full horror was discovered only now. Ritchie Boys on a visit at Camp Dachau.

The Ritchie Boys were victors – not victims

A moment that even after sixty years fills the German emigree with shame: "I counted to eight. The poor guy started to talk. But he didn't know any more than we did." Till today Angress is shocked that at this moment he might have become a murderer.

In May 1945, when Hitler´s Reich collapsed, Si Lewen arrived in Buchenwald. „I was wondering whether I would know anybody there. But even if so, I could not make them out. They were unrecognizable as human beings." Lewen broke down and checked into the nearest field hospital. Total amnesia shrouds the months after his return to the United States. "For years" he says, I couldn't shake a German's hand at all. "There was always the question: Where were you when all this happened? Only now I came to realize that by saving lives, I saved German lives, too. And, I'm proud of it!"

Shortly after Germany surrendered, Guy Stern drove to his hometown Hildesheim for the first time in eight years. It was a sad return. Allied bombers had almost completely destroyed the town in the last weeks of the war; the streets of his childhood were buried under the debris. Guy Stern still hoped to see his sister, his brother and his parents again. But he had to learn in the months after that they perished in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The Ritchie Boys played an important role in the early years of post-war Germany. They were active in the de-Nazification and at the Nuremberg Trials, in military government and administration, in rebuilding Germany´s radio and press.

Only a handful of the soldiers trained in Camp Ritchie stayed in their old home country. Most returned to the USA and started civilian lives, as Americans at last. The beginning of the Cold War cast a shadow over their return. Those who had left Nazi-Germany for political reasons were disappointed that the wartime alliance between the Americans and the Soviets was shattered. They realized that they might have won the war, but not the peace they hoped for.

The Ritchie Boys were successful through their ingeniousness and creativity. They reacted fast and in unconventional ways. Their war was different. What would normally be unacceptable in any army – disrespect for an empty routine and formulaic discipline – proved essential to their success. Perhaps as a consequence they all built remarkable careers in science, academics, and business. They became professors, attorneys and judges, ambassadors, journalists and media figures.

Fred Howard now lives in New York; he became a successful designer and business man. Guy Stern is Distinguished Professor of German at Wayne State University in Detroit. He has been decorated in Germany with both the Goethe Medal and the German Cross of Merit. Werner Angress was a Professor at the Department of History at Berkeley and SUNY. He returned to his old hometown and today lives in Berlin. His fight against Hitler had a personal happy ending: He found his mother and brothers in Amsterdam where they survived the war in hiding.

Si Lewen was a rising star in the New York art scene in the fifties. But the experiences in the war never lost its hold of him. Up to today he is painting the terrors that torment his soul. "No picture, no movie can recreate war", he says. "There is a smell, a stink to war. When bodies explode and all the insides fly out, together with the gunpowder, there's a terrible stink. If people would just smell it they would become pacifists." ■