

An Orthodox Jewish American Soldier in India during WWII

By Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg

Meet Tech. Sgt. Alfred Gross, Jewish GI



U.S. Army Tech. Sgt. Alfred Gross in the field, India. (All photos courtesy of Warren Gross.)

Alfred Gross served in India with the United States Army during World War II. Born in Piestany, Czechoslovakia (now a city in Slovakia) on November 8, 1917, three years later he emigrated with his family to Duquesne, Pennsylvania, where the Grosses were the only religious Jewish family¹.

In 1940, Gross enlisted and was among the first American troops to be deployed in 1943 to the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theater. He was a technical sergeant assigned to the 464th Coast Artillery Anti-Aircraft Battalion, serving in Calcutta (now Kolkata), then forward to Lido in Assam, and finally making it "over the hump" to China. For his efforts, he was awarded the Asia-Pacific Ribbon, three battle stars, a good conduct medal, and even a Chinese honor medal.

Gross was granted an honorable discharge at the end of the war, in 1944, returning to his family home in western Pennsylvania. It was there that he met American-born Edith Prizent at a social sponsored by a Zionist group in Pittsburgh.

The couple married in 1950, settling in McKeesport, a small city 15 miles from Pittsburgh, where they raised three sons. Alfred opened with his brother Sidney a furniture store in nearby Glassport, which was one of the rare retail businesses to be closed on Saturdays for Shabbat and every Jewish holiday.

After his wife passed away in 1993, Alfred cut his ties with his business and area, and moved to Miami Beach, Florida, to be near his son, Cpt. Dr. Warren Gross and his family. Tech. Sgt. Gross died on May 18, 2004. All during his war-time service, his son said, Gross prayed with *tefillin* every weekday morning and ate meat only when kosher food was served at observant Jewish homes in Calcutta.

After Gross passed away, it fell to his son Warren to sort out his mementos, papers, and photographs – a fortunate happenstance for this article's authors who are friends and neighbors of Warren. As we leafed together through voluminous, yellowed-with-age picture albums, we were delightfully surprised to discover photographs and papers that documented not only Alfred Gross's personal experience, but also shed light on the untold story of Jewish American GIs in India, their struggles to maintain Jewish observance, the institutional efforts to make them comfortable in an alien setting, and of greatest interest to us, their interactions with local Jewish communities. What emerges is a portrait of hospitality and a bond of faith that transcended cultural chasms. Most of Gross's experiences with Indian Jews were in Calcutta, of course, although Jewish soldiers were stationed throughout India, encountering and interacting with Indian Jews in Bombay (now Mumbai), Cochin (now Kochi), and Karachi (now in Pakistan).²

Welcome to Calcutta

"Official," military, and commercial encounters



RELIGIOUS SERVICES	
FRIDAY EVENING—7:30 P.M.	MADHEN DAVID SINAGOGUE 109, Canaling Street, Calcutta.
SOCIAL — CULTURAL	
ONEG SHABBAT—FRIDAY 9:00 P.M.	JUDAN CLUB 5, Madge Lane, Calcutta.
WEDNESDAY—4:30 P.M.	OPEN HOUSE TEA, LADY EZRA 5, Kyd Street, Calcutta.
THURSDAY—SUNDAY 8:30 P.M.	OPEN HOUSE—DINNER Mrs. G. Gubbay, Jubilee Court, Harrington Street, Calcutta.
SUNDAY 8:00 P.M.	DANCE—JUDAN CLUB
OPEN DAILY 9:00 A.M.—8:00 P.M.	JUDAN CLUB CANTEN
KOSHER MEALS DAILY	

Jewish GIs had a wealth of free-time activities from which to choose, from shopping and sightseeing (left) to worship, social and cultural pursuits (right). Note that kosher meals were offered daily.

Arriving in Calcutta, Jewish GIs were welcomed by the American Red Cross, the local Jewish Welfare Board, numerous commercial establishments of Calcutta seeking their patronage, and by hospitable Jewish families in Calcutta. Newly arrived American GIs were given *The Calcutta Key*,³ a catalogue of do's and don'ts (do see the sights, don't drink the water) and resources for shopping (including what to buy and a guide to bargaining), eating ("sample some Indian food and ... Chinese items"), sightseeing, religious services, banking, postal services, climate, Indian people, and allied forces. A "Where to Get It" section featured tailors, pharmacies, film processing, jewelry, repairs, transportation around town, entertainment, and the like. A word of welcome from Brig. Gen. R. R. Neyland (who encouraged soldiers to keep "an open mind" and introduced them to an all-purpose Hindi word, "Teek-Hai" or OK) happily concludes, "[T]he people here like us. They think we're all right. Thanks to the good behavior of the American soldiers who preceded you, a friendly welcome from these folks awaits you. If you behave equally as well, a similar welcome will await your buddies who follow you in here."⁴

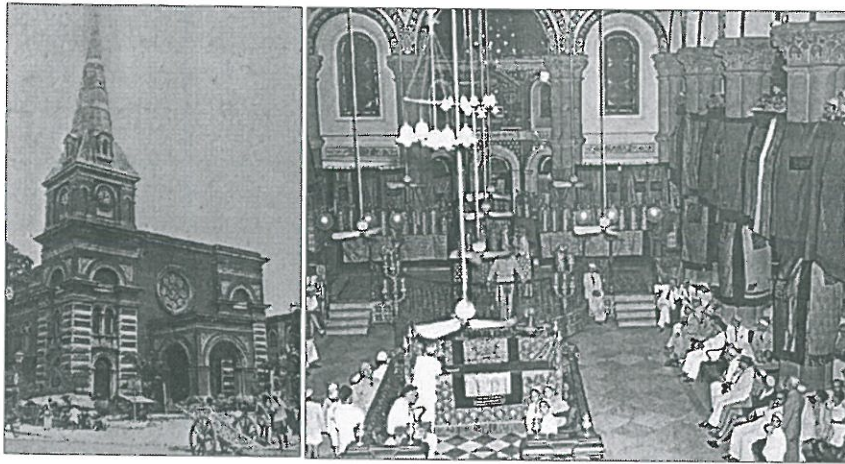
American troops got on well with Indians – arguably better than did other allied forces. Writing in *Swarjya* magazine, Shefati K. Chandan noted "Americans were well aware of the psychic distance between the British and Indians in colonial India. Americans, however, could become friends to Indians, the GIs were told. Without the 'normal affectations' of the non-Indian dealing with the Indian ... the Hindu comes to the realization that the Americans endowed with feelings that are very much human." A general bonhomie prevailed because "the Americans are markedly more self-deprecatory and light-hearted than the British visitors were. Laugh, the GIs did. They were tourists in a foreign land, not imperialists."⁵ A story that still circulated in Calcutta contrasts the British cricket match at which Indians served tea and carried bats to an American choose-up baseball game in which Indian bearers ("servants") were invited to play.⁶



Gross making his way around Calcutta by

Calcutta – Interaction with the Local Jewish Community

Calcutta has always been a thoroughly cosmopolitan city, with its populations of Hindus and Muslims of course, but also Sikhs, Jains, Armenians, Chinese and, yes, Jews. Gross seemed to relish the cultural riches there, visiting Hindu temples, shrines, funeral sites (the Nimtalla Burning Ghats), and the latest British and American films at lavish cinemas. But his most significant links were those he forged with the local Jewish community, as did many American and British Jewish soldiers stationed there.



Exterior and interior (decorated for Simchat Torah) of Maghen David Synagogue, built in 1884 by Elias Ezra in memory of his father David Ezra, who made his fortune in the real estate trade of Kolkata.

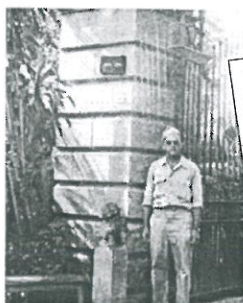
The first half of the twentieth century marked the high point of Jewish life in Calcutta, which came to include Jewish refugees fleeing conflict in the SBI theater.⁷ The community began in the early nineteenth century, and a hundred years later, they were highly placed in industry, real estate, commerce, law, politics, the arts, and even horse racing.⁸ Jewish families were among the elite of Calcutta, and although never approaching the British and other communities designated as "European," their small community provided mayors, military leaders, writers, manufacturers, educators, traders, bakers, and even a race horse owner.

The Jewish community numbered 3,800 at the outbreak of the war,⁹ embellished by several thousand refugees from Burma where the Jewish community was threatened by the Japanese occupation.

The wealthiest among them was Benjamin Hye Nissim Elias ("B.N.E."), whose business acumen helped to raise the standard of living of the entire community.¹⁰ He made his first fortune exporting tallow, rope, twine, and longline, later adding opium to his wares, which found ready markets in Singapore and Hong Kong.¹¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, he turned his attention to China, amassing a fortune in the opium trade. He invested heavily in manufacturing, especially jute products, and then moved into tobacco, insurance, and real estate, and expanded the electrification of the city. His business footprint grew markedly during the intra-war era.¹² World War II and the presence of foreign troops in Calcutta enhanced his economic position; during this time, the military authorities requisitioned a third of his tobacco products. Demand far outstripped supply, but the end of the war saw a business decline for his specialized markets.¹³



Alfred Gross at Calcutta's 19th-century Jain temple, dedicated to Sri Sitalnath.



Dear Alfred,
with our best wishes
and regards - from
the pair of us at
3. Kyd Street Calcutta
June 1945.



The Ezras' Calcutta estate, right, boasted a private zoo, per the desire of the master of the house, an animal lover. The Ezras regularly opened their home to soldiers for meals and social gatherings. Tech. Sgt. Alfred Gross, at the Ezras' front gate, left, dined there weekly.



Sir David and Lady Ezra on the grounds of their Calcutta estate.

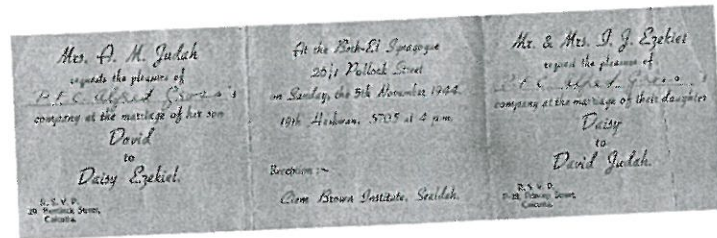
The Jewish family of the day that had the greatest impact on the GIs was the Ezras. Like the Elias clan, with whom they partnered along with the Sassoons on a number of ventures, the Ezras were entrepreneurs of the highest order. Among their many projects: the "grandest synagogue east of Suez," the Italian Renaissance-style Maghen David (splendidly restored in 2017) and the landmark Esplanade Mansions, built in 1910 as residences and later, during World War II, leased out to the U.S. government, which housed its American Library there.¹⁴

At "[T]he lovely home of David Ezra" – in its heyday, a palatial mansion (at 3 Kyd Street) boasting a marble façade with pillars, sprawling grounds and even a private zoo – and "[his]... wife Rachel, a member of the well-known Sassoon family of Bombay and a gracious hostess..."¹⁵, the Ezras occupied a central role in Calcutta Jewish life, both socially and in the synagogues. Sir David and Lady Rachel were exceptionally gracious to the soldiers, for whom kosher, home-cooked meals were more than welcome. Gross dined at their table twice a week.¹⁶

The couple's greatest gift to the soldiers was a Torah scroll, whose dedication Gross described: "I attended a ceremony today which I shall remember as long as I live. Our Chapel was presented with a Scroll of Law by Sir David and Lady Ezra... Our Chapel is located in the jungles of Northern India [so suburban Calcutta must have seemed to the Pittsburgh dweller]. The Chaplain, Captain Seligson, marched into the Chapel with the Torah, followed by the ranking officers of the British and American army. Chaplain Seligson read a portion of the law, and after the ceremony we all approached and had a closer view."¹⁷



Troops join U.S. Army Capt. and Chaplain David J. Seligson (center, wearing glasses), who dedicated a Torah scroll, gifted by the Ezras for Jewish soldiers in the field, at Calcutta's Maghen David Synagogue, built by the Ezra family.



Gross was befriended by a number of leading Calcutta Jewish families, including the Judah and Ezekiel clans, who invited him, above, to a wedding, and by Sumra, Menasseh and Hannie Linyado.

Gross commented of India's Jews, "They are intense Indian patriots to whom nationalistic aspirations of their country are dear. At the same time they are true exponents of Orthodox Jewish beliefs and loyal to the Zionist

movement."¹⁸ Elsewhere, we have written about Zionist outreach in India since the opening of an office there in 1903.¹⁹

Chaplain Seligson was none other than "... a nationally known Reform rabbi and an eloquent orator who held the pulpit at Central Synagogue in Manhattan..."²⁰ The rabbi was deeply touched by his experiences with the Army in India: "Rabbi Seligson was among the first Jewish chaplains to volunteer for service overseas during World War II. As an Army chaplain, he held Passover seders for hundreds of soldiers in Calcutta, India, and comforted those hospitalized with jungle fever in Burma. He traveled the old Burma Road in a jeep with Christian chaplains, hosting Sabbath services before sundown to avoid the malaria-infected mosquitoes that emerged at nightfall. Although Rabbi Seligson went on to achieve national prominence, his chaplaincy to soldiers in wartime was his touchstone. 'I feel that it was the greatest work that I have done in my entire ministry,' he wrote in his memoir, *Rabbi, Chaplain and Burra Sahib*." ('Burra Sahib' is Hindustani for something like 'a great leader' or a respected elder relative.)

Gross also became friendly with other leading Calcutta Jewish families, including the Linyado²¹ and Gubbay²² families. He enjoyed their hospitality and cooking, but some GIs enjoyed Calcutta Jewry even more: "There were many (Calcutta) Jewish women who married GIs and British soldiers of Jewish background."²³

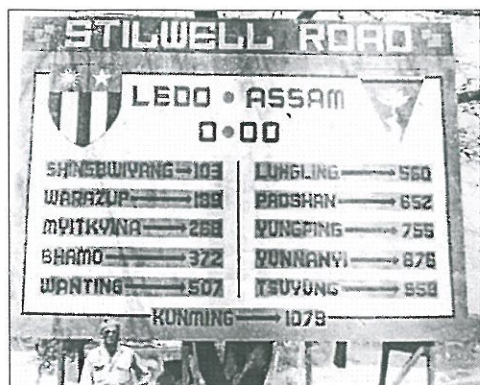


Gross and his fellow Jewish GIs in 1944 were able to enjoy the festival of Purim, including traditional hamantaschen cookies and groggers (noisemakers).

Assam – Strategic Importance and Gross's Role

After a time, Gross was deployed to Ledo in far northeastern Assam, the most important forward post in the eastern front. By the time he got there, the Japanese had taken Burma and were threatening India proper. Scarcely remembered today, the China-Burma-India (CBI) theater was "World War II's longest active battlefront."²⁴

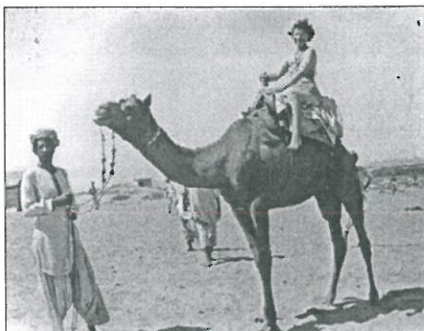
Ledo was also a staging post for the campaign to support China in defending itself against the steamrolling Japanese. Under the command of General Joseph W. "Vinegar Joe" Stilwell, American troops built what became known as the Stilwell Road, the key supply route to China. The Stilwell Road was built by 15,000 GIs, the majority of whom were African-Americans who traversed the peaks of the eastern Himalayas and dense jungles of Burma to connect the Burma Road that ran from Lashio, a railhead in central Burma, to Kunming in western China – all told, a little over a thousand miles. Once the Japanese cut the road, the Allies relied on air to supply Chinese soldiers.



Gross, lower left, on the pivotal Stilwell Road, built by 15,000 GIs, the majority of whom were African-Americans. In Ledo, Gross trained in technical air support, maintaining planes that carried supplies to China.

At Ledo, Gross trained in technical air support. He maintained planes that were used to carry supplies to China.

By 1945, Gross himself was sent "over the hump" to China where he distinguished himself, winning the aforementioned honors. From there, he returned to western Pennsylvania, and like so many other GIs, he set about marrying and raising a family, all the while remaining devoutly Jewish.



On his way back home after the war in 1945, Gross passed through Karachi, now in Pakistan, where he had time for a little sightseeing and hitting the beach with fellow GIs, including this camel-riding WAC.

Notes

¹ The authors had several conversations 2015-2018 with Gross's son, Warren, about his father's life and military service.

² On his way back home after the war, Alfred passed through Karachi, now in Pakistan. Among his snapshots is one of a WAC (member of Women's Army Corps, then the female branch of the U.S. Army) riding a camel on a beach. Remarkably, that woman, Jean Gelb, is the cousin of co-author Nathan Katz. Her photo appears at the end of this article.

³ Published by the Information and Education Branch of the United States Army Forces in INDIA-BURMA at Calcutta in 1945.

⁴ *The Golden Key*, no pagination.

⁵ Shefati K. Chandan, "American GI Life in India during Second World War," *Swarajya* magazine (June 17, 2017). <https://swarajyamag.com/world/American-gi-life-in-india-during-second-world-war> (Accessed June 18, 2017).

⁶ Hogan, David W., *India Burma: The U.S. Army Campaigns of World War II* (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center for Military History, no date).
www.history.army.mil/brochures/indiaburma/indiaburma.htm. (Accessed March 27, 2017), p. 6.

⁷ Rabbi Ezekiel N. Musleah, *On the Banks of the Ganga: The Sojourn of Jews in Calcutta* (North Quincy MA: The Christopher Publishing House, 1975), p, 442

⁸ Esmond David Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages: A chronicle of Calcutta Jewry* (London: Brookside Press, 1986), vol. I, pp. 468-471.

⁹ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, p. 9.

¹⁰ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, pp. 318-357.

¹¹ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, p, 326.

¹² Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 335-6.

¹³ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 335-.

¹⁴ "Heritage Structures of Bengal" (January 8, 2014).

¹⁵ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 264.

¹⁶ Alfred Gross, "Letter from the Jungles of India," *The Jewish Criterion* (Pittsburgh, October 15, 1943), p. 18.

¹⁷ Gross, "Letter from the Jungles of India," p. 18.

¹⁸ Gross, "Letter from the Jungles of India," p. 18.

¹⁹ Nathan Katz and Ellen S. Goldberg, *The Last Jews of Cochin: Jewish Identity in Hindu India* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 253.

²⁰ Laurie Goldstein, "David J. Seligson, a Reform Rabbi, Dies at 92," *The New York Times* (August 6, 1999).

¹⁹ Ezra, *Turning Back the Pages*, 177.

²² Torey Avey, "Potato Bhajee" (recipe/ gastronomic anthropology), <https://toriavey.com/> (December 8, 2011).

²³ Jael Silliman, "War Years: Jewish Brides for GIs and British Soldiers." www.jewishcalcutta.in/files/original/eeb339.c7ad1d09033909ab036b531e4e./df (Accessed March 26, 2017).

²⁴ Webster, Donovan. *The Burma Road: the epic story of the China-Burma-India theater in World War II* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), p. 8.