

Making of
HOME OF THE BRAVE
When Southbury Said NO! to the Nazis



A Personal Reflection on the Effort
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Acknowledgment

Making the documentary was a team effort. Working with Rabbi Eric and Reverend Shannon was one of the great experiences in my life. Experiencing the professionalism and skill of film maker Scott Sniffen was magical. I want to thank Chris Gardner for his encouragement in putting this booklet together.

Although I have tried my best to recall the events that happened accurately, I realize the limitations of personal memories.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the brave people who lived in Southbury in 1937. I hope that through the documentary their story will serve as a model for citizen advocacy.

The Making of

Home of the Brave: When Southbury Said NO! to the Nazis

Introduction:

Over the last decade I have been involved in bringing attention to an important story that happened in Southbury, CT in 1937. The story was known by a few in Town but almost unheard of outside of Southbury. Our efforts resulted in an impressive documentary that has touched thousands of people who have seen it. One of the questions often asked is “How did you come to make this documentary?”. This essay is my answer to that question.

Prologue

In the 1930’s there was a rebirth of the German American Bund¹. It had been an authentic German American club to celebrate solidarity with the German culture by generations of descendants of German immigrants. It was like many other immigrant organizations who were new to America and wanted to celebrate their heritage. In the case of the German American Bund, it was taken over in 1934 by a group that was inspired by Hitler’s “New Germany”. This Hitler-adoring group demanded allegiance and loyalty from every US citizen who was of German descent. Its membership growth in the 1930’s was impressive as were their well-attended rallies and parades. By 1937 they had converted about two dozen existing German American culture camps that existed around the country into training camps where Mein Kamp was studied along with military drills and Nazi salutes. Most of these camps were in the Northeast for that is where most people lived in the

¹ Bund just means group in German. However, the name took on a more sinister connotation in the 1930’s.

US at that time. However, there were other camps in Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles areas.

In September 1937, land was purchased by The Bund in Southbury, CT with the intention of building a brand new camp that would be their largest. It was to be called Camp Von Stueben. (Von Stueben was a Prussian military officer who served in the Continental Army under George Washington.) Through the efforts of the Town and especially Minister Lindsay, the German American Bund's efforts were thwarted.

How I learned of the Southbury Story

In 2004, my wife and I moved to Southbury, Connecticut to open a Bed and Breakfast in an antique home. We knew almost nothing of the town's history. Soon we met the Town's amateur historian, Joyce Hornbecker, who told us about the role our house had played in Southbury becoming the "first Government to stop the Nazis". It seemed like a hyperbolic statement. In the early 1990's, as Town Clerk, Joyce had found a copy of the original Southbury Zoning Ordinances that were approved in 1937 in response to the Bund's plan to build Camp Von Stueben. She brought this to the attention of newspaper reporter Chris Gardner who did some more research and wrote an article at that time. This brought the story to more people's attention.

After retiring as Town Clerk in the late 90's, Joyce wrote a pamphlet of the history of the Town. The Bund story from 1937 took up several paragraphs. This included the fact that the Zoning Regulations were crafted by a committee that was led by Albert Aston, the former owner of the house where our Bed and Breakfast was located (and the great great grandson of John Moseley, who built the house). Based on this limited information, I would tell many of our B&B guests the story and the role that one of the home's previous owners had played. I could see that the story resonated with many guests.

In 2006, when the genocide of Darfur was in the news, the Jewish Synagogue in Southbury, Temple B’Nai Israel, presented an evening program that included a Powerpoint presentation by Rabbi Eric Polokoff about how Southbury stood up to hate and fear in 1937 by keeping the Nazis from building Camp Von Stueben. Rabbi Eric had learned about this from the article written by Chris Gardner that appeared soon after Rabbi Eric had moved to Southbury. The Rabbi worked with the Southbury Historic Society, Chris Gardner and the newspapers archivist to put the Powerpoint presentation together.

Although I was familiar with the basic outline of the story, the additional research he had done plus the photos he had gathered made the story come alive. I told him the story should become a movie or documentary and although he agreed, nothing came of it. I tried in vain to get someone with connections to the arts to find a way to tell this story, but to no avail. I then took the Powerpoint presentation and converted it to a video with narration by me based on the script that Rabbi Eric had included. I wanted the voice to be Rabbi Eric’s but we could not find the time to get it done. I uploaded it to YouTube where it definitely did not go viral. I think I only got one comment and it was quite anti-Semitic.

In 2009, we had a B&B guest who was very interested in the story. Reverend Shannon Wall had just been called to the South Britain Congregational Church which had played a pivotal role in the 1937 story. No one at the Church had mentioned the important part that the building and their former Minister played in the story. Reverend Lindsay, the minister in 1937 was one of two Congregational Ministers who rallied the community to stand up and say NO! She began to do even more research on the story and its characters. For example, she was able to trace where Minister Lindsay moved to after he left Southbury. Through the efforts of her Mother, Reverend Shannon was able to get in touch with his three daughters, two of which recalled vividly the days when the German American Bund came to Southbury.

I also tried to do my own research at the Southbury Historic Society with the intention of trying to write a historical novel based on the events in 1937. I began to see that what I had recognized as a good story had become not only a great story but an important story to tell about how a community can respond to hate and fear. Alas, I made little progress on the writing as a new opportunity came my way that was very time consuming.

Whenever I saw Reverend Shannon or Rabbi Eric we would say “we have got to make that documentary someday”.

The Commitment

In early November 2011, I was elected as the First Selectman of Southbury. A few weeks later I was asked to give some introductory remarks at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service that is held annually with clergy from Southbury and Woodbury. After the service, Rabbi Eric, Reverend Shannon and I were in a back room of the Methodist church where the service had taken place. It was like the proverbial joke that begins with a rabbi, minister and a politician walk into a bar.

As I recall, I was mentioning that in 2012 Southbury would have its 225th anniversary as an incorporated town and that I wanted to celebrate that with various events. Rabbi Eric pointed out that 2012 would be the 75th anniversary of when the town of Southbury rose up to stop the Nazis.

It was immediately obvious that this was the moment to create the documentary. We knew that the town’s response in 1937 began with sermons by the town’s 2 prominent ministers on the Sunday before Thanksgiving. Now we had our date for the premier of our documentary – the Sunday before Thanksgiving in 2018. One year away!

Now all we needed was a film maker and money to pay her. None of us had experience with making a documentary. That is why we did not

realize how audacious it was to contemplate doing all of that in one year. But we were committed.

We also committed that night to having an event to celebrate the 75th anniversary, undertake an essay contest and develop a classroom curriculum that could be used in showing the documentary in high school classes. Got to have a dream!

Getting Organized

We decided that an important first step was to expand our committee. We asked Republican American reporter Chris Gardner to join because of the work he had done to “unearth” the story. Joyce James from the Southbury Historic Society and Revered Walter (Scooter) Pittman of the United Church of Christ were also asked to join. Under normal circumstances, a First Selectman in Southbury could have easily earmarked \$10,000 to \$20,000 for a documentary on something as significant as this. Believe me, the town has wasted much more than that on other activities. However, I was the first Democrat to be elected in over two decades, and the second one ever². I knew I had to be very careful how I spent money as there were many Republicans looking to find that I had done something wrong.

That meant we needed to start raising some private money to support a filmmaker. However, all we had was an idea. But we did not even have an outline or even a description of the documentary.

One issue was that we needed some financial entity to receive and hold the money. Again, for political reasons, I thought that donations should not come to the Town³. We asked the Southbury Historic Society if they

² The previous Democrat had won because of displeasure with the incumbent Republican. He lasted one term.

³ My first issue as First Selectman was when I challenged the legality of the Library Board creating bank accounts using the Town’s Federal ID number without any authorization and maintaining those accounts outside of the

would be the keeper of the funds raised. This also allowed donations to be tax deductible. Thankfully they agreed.

Shannon, Eric and I began sending emails and making phone calls to people we thought might be interested in providing financial support. Many were receptive and pledged support. We also reached out to the Connecticut Community Foundation (CCF) and the Western Connecticut Jewish Federation (WCJF). Shannon was able to get a significant gift from Dr. Amy Fowler.

While fund raising was going on, we also began to identify possible film makers. Reverend Pittman brought Scott Sniffen to our attention. Scott was a professional film maker who had done many films for the Southbury United Church of Christ; his movies of the youth ministry projects had been very well received.

We were meeting about once per month at Town Hall. But the clock was ticking. As spring arrived, we realized we needed to start work if we were going to meet our November premiere date. We issued a request for proposals and received several back from interested film makers. Scott was our choice. However, his price was about twice as much as the money we had raised so far.

One problem was timing with both the CCF and WCJF. Although they were positive in their response, they could not commit until they completed their funding cycles. We were in a bind. If we did not give Scott the green light, our premiere date of November 2012 would be missed. If we did not get the money we expected and signed a contract with Scott, the Southbury Historic Society might be liable for the difference. The SHS had not made that commitment when they agreed to hold the funds.

purview and procedures of the Town's fiscal office. I was accused of trying to take "their" money when in fact it was the Town's money.

At an eventful meeting in June, I offered that I would personally guarantee the difference between what we raised and what Scott was charging. That was about \$5,000. I received some incredulous looks. By that time, I had become convinced that making this documentary was very important. I also was quite confident that the CCF and WCJF would come through.

This released a logjam and with that Scott had his green light to begin preparing a documentary. He had four months to do it. By any reasonable standard this was not enough time.

We Need Stories and Storytellers

Part of impetus for making the documentary sooner rather than later was the ability to capture oral history from those who were living in Southbury in 1937 or who knew of stories from their relatives. We had a very positive story in the local newspaper about our effort and it included a request for people to come forward. The response was positive.

As noted, Reverend Shannon's mother had been able to find the Lindsay daughters in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Arrangements were made to have Scott travel to interview them. Needless to say, they were excited to learn that the town was bringing so much attention to their Father after so many years.

We also knew of Lillian Wentworth, a Southburian who was in college in 1937. She had written her Master's thesis on the German American Bund. Her uncle, Judge Hicock, played a role in the story. Needless to say, Lillian was quite taken by the events in 1937. We had seen her thesis but did not know if Lillian was alive or where she lived. Luckily, she heard about our effort through the newspaper and called up Scott. Scott was very excited to get this call and began to look around for his calendar to find a date and time for Lillian to come to from New Jersey to Southbury. During the pause in the conversation while Scott was

looking for his calendar she declared “Well you better hurry up, I am ninety-nine years old”. It was a thrill for Lillian to not only be interviewed but to live long enough to see the premier of the film.

Another interesting result of this article on our effort to make the documentary was that it put us in touch with Arnie Bernstein. Arnie was an author from Chicago who had started to write the first comprehensive book about the rise and fall of the German-American Bund. He had created a Google Search to show him links to anything that appeared on the internet about the German American Bund. That is how he found out about us.

Although we were pretty sure that no other Community did what Southbury did, we were not positive. Arnie gave us confidence as he told us that we were the one and only, and that despite his extensive research, he had not heard or seen anything about the Southbury story. As he told us, the Southbury story became a pivotal part of his book; the beginning of the downfall of the Bund⁴.

We had also done some outreach to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC and they also confirmed that they had nothing in their archives about the events in 1937.

All of this made us more confident in the importance of making our documentary.

Get Your Tickets

Scott had his hands full as he was doing the interviews and simultaneously working on how to tie it altogether to tell a story. In retrospect, I had no idea how difficult his task was, especially given the fast approaching date of November 18, 2012.

⁴ Arnie’s book is called [Swastika Nation: Fritz Kuhn and the Rise and Fall of the German-American Bund](#)

The events in Southbury in 1937 were highlighted by two amazing things. Once the community was made aware of the Bund's interest in building their largest training camp at a site they had purchased in Southbury, a town meeting was called. In those days, these meetings were held at 3pm at Town Hall. A crowd would have been 15 people. For this meeting, 100's showed up and the meeting was moved to the South Britain church for a standing room only event. At that meeting, the town's leadership did the unthinkable in this new England farming town; they proposed zoning regulations that would limit what could be done on someone's property. Forming a committee to write the zoning ordinances was approved; these would include an interesting prohibition on training in the military arts, unless condoned by the US Government. Within two weeks the commission completed the zoning ordinances which were approved at a subsequent meeting. They also approved a resolution condemning the Nazi philosophy and calling on the Governor and President to intercede in the spread of Nazism. Not bad for a small farming town of 1,200 that did not have a Jewish community.

In early November, three weeks before the premier, we announced that free tickets were available. Our goal was about 100 people and we had in mind serving some refreshments that would go with the people. At about that time. Scott released a four-minute trailer with some scenes from the documentary⁵.

The day after tickets were made available, we had taken names for over 100. I thought, no problem; we will arrange for a second showing. By the third day we had over 200 names on our list. It was time to once again, look for another venue. We went to the hotel in town which had a larger room, but within a few days, we were over 400 tickets distributed. I then called the High School to see about their auditorium. They already had plans for that Sunday, but with some strings to pull,

⁵ He still had not finished the documentary and there were 3 weeks to go!

the were willing to do some rearranging. It was great to see the political office used for this purpose. The auditorium's capacity was 800 and we distributed those tickets very quickly. Eventually we would have to have more showings the following week for those we could not accommodate on that Sunday afternoon.

One of the highlights of the day was that Reverend Lindsay's three daughters came up to Southbury for the premier. They had not been back to in some 70 years. On Friday night at Temple B'nai Israel, there was a tribute to Reverend Lindsay. On Sunday morning at South Britain Congregational Church there was also a tribute. At one point during the weekend, when so much praise was being given to their Father, Carol, the youngest daughter, turned to me and said "and we just thought he was little-old country preacher". They were elated with the weekend. The oldest daughter, Lois, reflected on the weekend and noted the words attributed to Edmund Burke, "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing". And she said in 1937, the people of Southbury did something.

The documentary has gone a long way since then and I am so proud that I was able to play a role in bringing that story back to life.

Desperate Phone Call Before the Premier

On the Friday night before the premier, I received a call from Dr. Robert McWilliams. He had just come from the Southbury Historical Society's museum. They had put together an excellent exhibit showcasing the artifacts they had about the 1937 story. In addition to the zoning regulations that the town approved in 1937, they had also approved at that Town meeting, they also approved a Resolution to the Governor and US President imploring them to do all they could to stop the menace of Nazism. I knew of the resolution, but I had never read it. Dr. McWilliams had read the resolution and said he was moved to tears when he read it at the museum. He begged me to read it during the ceremony on Sunday.

I immediately read the resolution and realized that although time was tight in the agenda, Dr. McWilliams was absolutely right. A copy of the resolution is included at the end of this essay.

The Finishing Touches

Scott was working furiously to finish the video and it was only days before the premier weekend that he had a draft final for Reverend Shannon, Rabbi Eric and I to review at his home on his television. We were very impressed.

Scott then suggested (well, maybe demanded is a better word) that we use some of the money we raised to get a High Definition projector for the High School auditorium. I agreed, but honestly did not really know what that meant.

What it did mean was that the images that we had seen on his television were so much more vivid and the sound of such high quality it was like a different movie than we had seen days before. It was the same as seeing a blockbuster movie at a theater; only we were in the movie! Everyone was so impressed including Lillian Wentworth who traveled from New Jersey and of course the Lindsay daughters (along with spouses, children and grand-children).

Since we had filled the high school auditorium, we agreed to show the documentary at Town Hall on two successive evenings during the coming week. The room was packed with standing room only. Easily another 300 people saw at Town Hall.

Many wanted copy of the DVD's. Copies were made and distributed by the SHS as well as from the Office of First Selectman. What a great Christmas or Hanukah gift!

Epilogue

The response to the premier was very gratifying. When I saw the energy and excitement building prior to the premier, I asked Scott to

make a second documentary about the weekend. By that time, we had raised more money than we needed for the original documentary. That film captures the pride that so many residents felt at seeing their community portrayed so positively.

There was talk of an Oscar nomination, but Scott explained that the first step was to be chosen and awarded at a film festival. We supported Scott in this effort but alas it did not get the recognition it deserved.

Meanwhile we continued to show the documentary to school groups, libraries and houses of worship. We arranged to have it shown at the Legislative Office Building in Hartford and the US Capitol in Washington DC.

On a visit to Washington, DC in January 2012⁶, I brought a copy of the DVD to the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. They expressed interest but said that the focus of the museum was on Europe, where the Holocaust took place. However, the historian said that recently there had been discussion about a new exhibit to focus on what was happening in America prior to and during the Holocaust. Our story might just fit into that. Six years later, that exhibit, called “Americans and the Holocaust⁷” opened. The Southbury story plays a pivotal role in the 5,400 square foot exhibit. It occupies a hallway that has no other story in it. As the curator, Rebecca Erbelding says, it can’t be missed and that was done deliberately to showcase the story of Southbury. Ms. Erbelding confirmed that in her six years of working on the exhibit she had found no other story like the Southbury story. And if not for our film, she would never have known about it.

⁶ We went to be there for newly elected Senator Christophe Murphy’s swearing in.

⁷ Originally this was to be called “Americans and the Nazis”, but given events in the US prior to the April 2018 opening, it was felt that the title would bring unwelcomed attention.

Southbury, Conn.

RESOLUTION

WE, THE PEOPLE OF THE TOWN OF SOUTHBURY, CONNECTICUT, citizens of the United States of America, in mass meeting assembled, after calm and careful deliberation, find that:

WHEREAS, there has recently been purchased a tract of land within our township for the avowed purpose of using same for a recreation and concentration camp of Nazi-American youths, and,

WHEREAS, from documentary evidence and other good and sufficient reasons we believe these camps to be governed and directed by a foreign government inimical to our continuance as a democracy, and,

WHEREAS, in furtherance of their designs against our national unity and sovereignty the agents of this foreign government are teaching these youths the philosophy of Naziism, drilling them in Nazi-German military tactics with the expressed purpose of dominating our national affairs to the profit of Naziism and Germany, and,

WHEREAS, these activities can only be construed as unfriendly acts of conspiracy and invasion;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED THAT, we, the citizens of Southbury, secure in the liberties and privileges bequeathed us by our fathers, and sincerely determined to hand this precious heritage to our children, do, hereby petition and pray the President of the United States, the Senate, the Representatives in Congress and the Governor of our State, to employ the power vested in them to abate, dispel and destroy this menace to our constituted government.

IT WITNESS of the sincerity of our purpose and our determination to protect our government against the insidious attacks of alien forces,

WE HEREBY attach our signatures this 23rd day of November, 1937



When Reverend Lindsay’s oldest daughter, Lois saw the documentary in November 2012, she handed Scott Sniffen a piece of paper that had a quote attributed to Edmund Burke:

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

She then turned to Scott and said “And Southbury did Something”.