The Medic: Life and Death in the Last Days of WWII, and: The Souvenir: A Daughter Discovers Her Father's War (review)

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Strong themes and imagery in Minty's work almost obscure the fact of her well-honed craftsmanship. She achieves her power without resorting to excess of diction, metaphor, rhetoric, or quirky play with punctuation. In the web of human relations, she avoids sentimentality; in the depths of the unconscious, she resists portentousness. *Walking with the Bear* witnesses to the maturity of this poet, whose many awards during thirty years of publishing include *Poetry*'s Eunice Tietjens Award and the Mark Twain Award from the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature. If previously she was best known in the Midwest and in California, she now merits the attention of readers from coast to coast.

Leo Litwak, **The Medic: Life and Death in the Last Days of WWII**, Algonquin Books
Louise Steinman, **The Souvenir: A Daughter Discovers Her Father's War**, Algonquin Books

Reviewed by Gaynell Gavin

Despite the plethora of writing about World War II, two books illustrate that there is still much of value to tell of this era. In his memoir, *The Medic*, written more than fifty years after the events that he relates, novelist Leo Litwak brings a fiction writer's sense of craft to a compelling, well-paced narrative of his own wartime experiences. Although writing nonfiction, Litwak discusses forthrightly in his book's prologue the inherent difficulty in distinguishing "events as they were and as they have become in memory" while disclosing his invention of names and "composites of people, places, and units." Thus, early on, he gives readers a context for the interrelated roles of narrative, memory, and imagination in constructing memoir, especially when recalling individuals, places, and events half a century after they occurred.

The son of Russian Jewish immigrants – whose survival of virulent anti-Semitism, civil disturbances, and World War I in Europe was remarkable – young Litwak was disappointed initially at his assignment to a medical detachment. "Medics carried no weapons. They operated under the rules of the Geneva Convention and had the status of noncombatants . . . I had imagined myself an armed, vengeful warrior." Yet before the war's end he found that he had "followed [his] heart and was glad [he] was a medic without a gun." The journey that led to his conclusion predictably included treating U. S. soldiers (including close friends) and enemy troops in instances ranging from minor injuries to loss of limbs and loss of lives.

While Litwak's narrative voice is direct, complex issues thread the tapestry of this wartime story, and none is more important than the issue of race that Litwak describes as "woven into the fabric of American life. Pull on it and everything would come apart." With understated irony, he illus-

trates repeatedly the fascism and racism prevalent among U.S. soldiers sent forth to defeat fascism in Europe. While the most intense feelings of fascist racial subordination were reserved for African Americans, as a Jew, Litwak occupied a peculiarly intermediate spot on the U.S. racial spectrum, illustrated many times in many ways but never more clearly than by the buck sergeant who inquired, "Is it true, Leo, a Jew is just a nigger turned inside out?" As the son of a Detroit labor organizer and union president among troops where union members trying to obtain "a living wage and safe working conditions" for coal miners were widely condemned as unpatriotic, class issues complicated the racialization of Litwak's experience.

Finally, this memoir expresses remarkable concern for the effects of war on women. Sustained in part throughout the war by strong parental love, Litwak was especially close to his mother of whom he said, "She would always be with me." Perhaps this strong connection to a female presence helped him later to reexamine the supposed "choices" made by rural German women who traded sex for food or commodities. "It was convenient to believe that these were farm girls, familiar with animal nature . . . The truth is few of us examined our beliefs. We took what war offered us." Further, in an important contribution to historical accuracy, Litwak disabuses history of the conventional notion that Nazi troops avoided sex with Jewish women by relating in detail and with compassion the liberation of a group of Hungarian Jewish women who "had been used as prostitutes for German troops." Yet paradoxically and conversely, he acknowledges frankly that he was "the master" and his German mistress, "the occupied," in a relationship based on "the eroticism of that inequality." Nonetheless, Leo Litwack's memoir, with nuanced introspective facets connected to the great public national and international concerns of our time – race, class, gender, genocide, and war – make me glad as a reader that Litwak, the young medic, "followed [his] heart" and survived to tell this story.

Louise Steinman's book, *The Souvenir*, is an intriguing mix of memoir, biography, literature review, and history. Although raised in California rather than the Midwest, Steinman, like Leo Litwak, was the descendant of Jewish immigrants and born to parents who loved their children deeply. Despite Norman Steinman's success in business as a pharmacist and his paternal affection for his children, Louise Steinman learned in early childhood that her father's "anger – infrequent but explosive" had not existed before the war, was related to it, and that "[w]hatever happened to him . . . in the war was off-limits."

After her parents' deaths, while cleaning out their condo in 1991, Steinman found "a metal ammo box" containing "hundreds of letters my father wrote home to my mother from the Pacific War. In one of those envelopes was a Japanese flag with handwritten characters inked across

its fragile face." Thus began the journey that made the daughter, in part, her father's biographer while deepening her historical and psychological understanding of the Pacific theater. She recalls her almost idyllic California upbringing through the lens of memoir. Her journey deepened Steinman's understanding of the love that permeated her childhood, supported as she was by a father who "worked long hours so that my siblings and I could attend summer camp, so that my brilliant older brother could take special math and science classes" and who fought to make his children's world safe from fascism. Never uncertain of her parents' love, Steinman comes to recognize their sacrifice of "personal pleasure to ensure the well-being of their children. Our well-being *was* their pleasure."

Although reading each letter had the effect of "detonating a landmine of longing for [her] father," over many months Steinman did read his letters that covered the mundane, the heroic, and the immeasurably tender. In October, 1944, from New Caledonia, Norman Steinman wrote to his young wife:

> The boys had caught [a doe] and were taking it for a mascot. Then some dumb bastard shot it and . . . left it to die.
>
> Our boys found it the next day down the creek, and the medics brought it in on a litter and tried to save its life. They fed it condensed milk with an eyedropper, but the doe finally died. . . .
>
> I guess I'm not descriptive enough to relate how the medics worked over the animal and how our whole company was interested in its welfare.

Four months later, after surviving a particularly severe battle at Umingan in the Philippines without injury, he again wrote his wife, "You . . . were my inspiration always – whenever I was too tired to go on – and whenever I was too tired to dig a hole – I always thought of how much I have to come back to – and I'd go on."

Eventually, Louise Steinman found someone to translate the Japanese flag's inscription "To Yoshio Shimizu. . . ." After reading in her father's letters of his regret over taking the flag, Steinman began another fascinating journey – her search to locate the family of Yoshio Shimizu and return the flag. Incorporated into this quest is Steinman's search for understanding of her father's war that led her to extensive research. She intensively interviewed veterans of the Pacific theater and read a wide variety of sources. Race is a prevalent theme in Steinman's book as in Litwak's. Specifically, she examines racial dehumanization, demonization, and hatred among nearly all World War II participants.

It may be impossible to do justice to Steinman's complex achievement in a review of this interdisciplinary, interwoven text that includes biography, history, psychology, and memoir. Steinman's search for understanding deepens her readers' comprehension of the far-reaching effects of war

on the soldiers who fight it, their descendants, and other members of their families. Steinman and Litwak write narratives that leave us with the "irreconcilable desires" of war's aftermath, which Steinman articulates:

> When he returned home from the war, my father wanted to "bury" his memories. But when he stood in front of [a friend's] grave, as an expression of respect, he vowed to keep that visit "always with him. . . ." He wanted to never forget and he needed to never remember.