

Exclusive *Zman* interview with the grandsons of Harry Truman and of a Jewish lieutenant who was on the planes that dropped the atom bombs

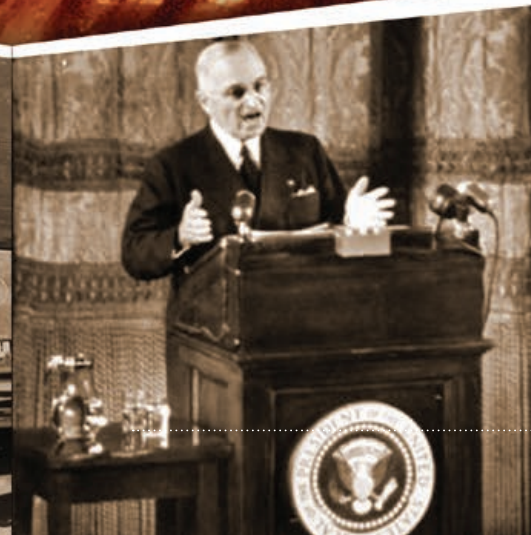
- *Shimon Rosenberg*

Legacy of Hiroshima

As European Jewry was targeted for annihilation by Nazi Germany, American Jews enlisted in the US Army to help in the European theater of war. Lesser known is the involvement of Jews in the Pacific, where many served with distinction in the US Navy and Marines.

Among them was Lieutenant Jacob Beser, a young Jew from Baltimore, who played an important role in the deployment of the atom bomb. He not only designed a vital trigger component, but was the only US serviceman on board both planes that bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

*Now, 68 years after the bombing that altered the course of history, *Zman* speaks to Ari Beser, his grandson, and Clifton Truman Daniel, a grandson of the president who authorized the bombing. The two met at a recent event in Hiroshima to listen to tales of survivors and encourage the world to learn the lessons of the tragedy.*



April 12, 1945, was a typical day in a very atypical time. World War II was still raging in Europe, as the Allied armies closed in on Germany from all sides. Thousands of American soldiers were sacrificing their lives each day to return peace to an upside-down world. It was afternoon when Vice President Harry Truman received an urgent telephone call to rush to the White House.

Truman's heart began pounding. It was very unusual for him to receive a summons. In his less than three months as vice president, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had barely spoken to him at all. He was left in the dark about the affairs of government, the conduct of the war in Europe and the president's plans.

Considering Roosevelt's extremely fragile state of health and the lack of news from him for days, the call could mean only one thing. But Truman was not prepared to consider that the man who had led the nation for the past 12 years might no longer be alive.

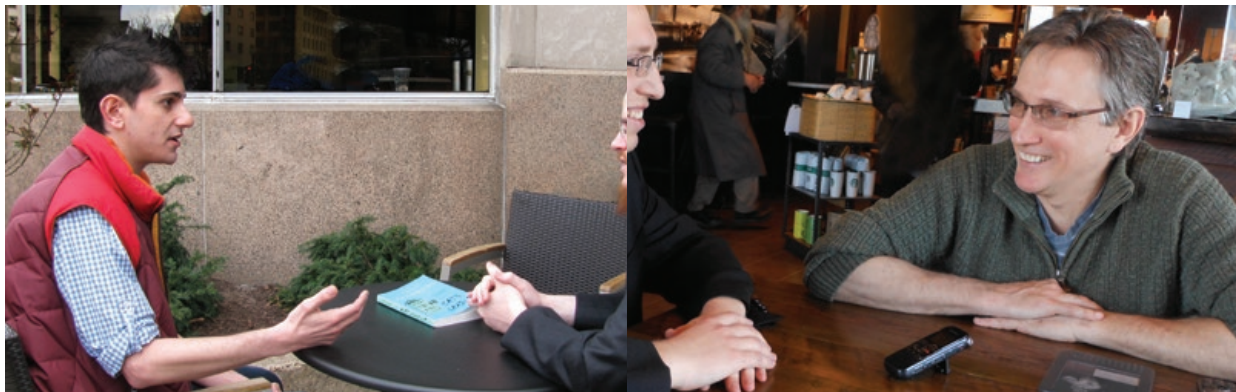
It was 5:25 PM when Truman reached the White House. He was greeted by a haggard-looking Eleanor Roosevelt. With a quiver in her voice, she bluntly informed Truman, "Harry, the president is dead."

Ever the gentleman, Truman asked, "Is there anything I can do for you?"

But the indomitable First Lady was not to be bested, even in her grief. "Is there anything I can do for you? For you are the one in trouble now."

How right she was. Harry Truman was still a relative unknown in the capital. He had lived on a farm until the age of 33 and had then been involved in a business that failed when he was 38. (Truman refused to declare bankruptcy on principle, and he worked for years to pay off the debts.)

Until the age of 50, when he landed a seat in the US Senate, few had ever heard of Truman. Now, just 10 years later, he suddenly found himself at the helm of the country as it was fighting the worst war the world had ever seen.



Zman interviews Ari Beser, grandson of Lieutenant Jacob Beser, in Washington DC.

The American public was very skeptical about the abilities of their new president. Many felt that he was unworthy of filling the shoes of the legendary Roosevelt. In some way, Roosevelt's death came as a double blow. He had encouraged the populace to fight on during the particularly difficult early years of the war, and his calming presence reassured a frightened nation about its future. His successor, however, had very little political experience and they questioned his qualities as a leader: "If Harry Truman can be president, so can I."

In fact, even though he had been elected vice president, Truman still remained largely unknown. As his grandson, Clifton Daniel tells us, "I can't count how many times I heard the story from World War II veterans who told me that when Roosevelt died and they heard that that my grandfather took over, their reaction was, 'Harry who?'"

No president ever reached the White House as unprepared as Truman. He had served as vice president for just 82 days. Never once during that time had he been invited to sit in on Roosevelt's cabinet meetings. Regarding the war raging across three continents, he was only as informed as the general public that kept up with the newspaper reports.

Yet, this unassuming and unprepared man would be faced with one of the most terrible and pivotal decisions in history: whether or not to use the atom bomb.

Zman speaks to Clifton Truman Daniel, grandson of President Truman, in Chicago.

The Jewish Lieutenant

On that April 12, the day Truman was sworn in as president, 24-year-old army lieutenant Jacob Beser sat in his airplane high above the deserts of the American west. He was preoccupied with special maneuvers in preparation for a historical mission that was to dramatically speed up the conclusion of the war.

All across America the nation grieved for the beloved president who had carried them through the terrible war. However, Lieutenant Beser had little time for mourning. He had been chosen to join a top-secret group training for a very unique mission: deployment of the atom bomb. As a member of this special group, Beser had designed one of the critical components of the bomb. Not only that, he would be the only person assigned to two atom bomb missions—the only two such bombs ever used in war in the history of the world.

Jacob Beser was born in Baltimore, Maryland, to a Jewish family that had lived in America for generations. His grandfather, who came from Hannover, Germany, had fought with the Union Army in the Civil War. His father had been sent with the American Expeditionary Force to fight the German army in World War I. This pitted him against his cousins, who fought in the German army at the front lines. Circumstances of this sort were not unusual, especially among the

soldiers from Baltimore, home to a significant number of people of German descent.

Jacob himself was an engineering student at Johns Hopkins University when World War II broke out. Within months, news of the horrific persecution of European Jewry at the hands of the Nazis began filtering into the US. Beser was deeply shaken by this news, particularly since he had cousins who were trapped in Nazi-occupied nations. His father's family lived in Germany and his mother's family was from Eastern Europe. Like many other young Jews at the time, Beser volunteered to join the war effort in order to fight Nazi Germany.

Beser's grandson Ari described for us how his late grandfather learned of the Holocaust raging in Europe:

My great-grandmother Roisa was a Jewish heroine. Her name has been memorialized in the Jewish museum in Baltimore. During the war, she found 30 homes for Jewish orphans from Germany. She herself took into her home around 15



Lieutenant Jacob Beser next to the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima.