On May 7, 1941, a month short of his 21st birthday, Werner Angress was inducted into the U.S. Army. Having fled Nazi persecution, spent time in Amsterdam and immigrated to America, Werner was not at all sure what was in store for him. Nor did he know what had happened to his father, mother and two brothers. "I only know one thing," he wrote in his diary: "there is no laying flat for me, there is no time..."
without fighting and without longing.”

Along with almost 2,000 recruits who were native speakers of German, Angress attended an eight-week military intelligence training course at Fort Ritchie in Maryland — and subsequently served as an intelligence officer in Europe.

In “Sons and Soldiers,” Bay Area author Bruce Henderson (who has written some 20 books of nonfiction, including “Rescue at Los Baños: The Most Daring Prison Camp Raid of World War II”) draws on archival sources and interviews with “Ritchie Boys” to tell the stories of six young refugees from the Third Reich — Angress, Victor Brombert, Stephan Lewy, Martin Selling, Manny Steinfeld and Guy Stern — who joined American combat units, interrogated German POWs, collected information about the location and strength of enemy troops, and searched for their loved ones.
“Sons and Soldiers” does not exactly tell an “untold story.” After all, three of Henderson’s subjects (and many other Jewish refugees) have written memoirs. Many, many writers have examined the difficulties of leaving Nazi Germany and getting accepted by “host” countries; the experiences of Jewish American soldiers in World War II; life and death in concentration camps; and the search for family members among the “displaced persons” of Europe.

That said, Henderson is a skilled storyteller. “Sons and Soldiers” records concrete acts of courage, commitment, compassion (and, of course, unspeakable cruelty) that may well move — and perhaps motivate — his readers.

Again and again, the Ritchie Boys remind us of the role played by luck in matters small and great. We learn that Steinfeld’s mother arranged for a visa permitting Irma, her daughter, to immigrate to England. Two days after it arrived, the Nazis invaded Poland, England declared war on Germany, travel between the two countries was suspended, and Irma remained in Josbach. Had Angress accepted a buddy’s offer to join him for drinks in his large slit trench, he too, would have been killed by an artillery shell. And had Angress not had a chance encounter with a survivor of a concentration camp on the streets of Boizenburg in May 1945, Ludwig Ramdohr, the brutal Gestapo chief at Ravensbrück, may not have been brought to justice.

Henderson admires the Ritchie Boys, it seems clear, because they never lost touch with their humanity. During his training as an interrogator, Angress recoiled at having to wear a swastika-adorned Wehrmacht uniform. In the field, Henderson indicates, Stern reveled in dressing as Commisar Krukov, and threatening to send uncooperative prisoners to the Siberian salt mines. Stern also convinced his superiors to approve for distribution a faux interrogation report claiming that his unit had captured Hitler’s “latrine orderly,” from whom great secrets had been extracted. More poignantly, Lewy recalled the time he aimed his pistol at a prisoner and forced him to dig his own grave, and lie in it. The tactic worked, but Lewy concluded, then and there, that the end does not justify the means, and never did such a thing again.

Along with so many combat veterans, Henderson’s Ritchie Boys testify to the horrors of war. Seared into Brombert’s memory was “a young German lying under an apple tree with his mouth agape in apparent agony, as if echoing Edvard Munch’s The Scream.” Brombert saw cows “bloated in grotesque positions,” on their backs with legs pointed in
the air, “their rotting heft serving as cover for soldiers.” He saw drivers, gunners and mechanics trying desperately to crawl out of the escape hatches of their tanks and scorched beyond recognition; their vehicles when overturned “looked like mutilated prehistoric beasts with gutted bellies.” Nor could Brombert forget “the stench: spilled fuel and cordite from spent ammunition, mixed with burnt human flesh.”

Although he remained acutely aware of “the greater cause — the fight against Hitler and the Nazis” — Brombert found these scenes (and his firsthand experiences with soldiers too exhausted or frightened to leave their foxholes, even to relieve themselves) “tough to bear.”

Intent on paying homage to the resilience, values and valor of his Ritchie Boys, Henderson does not press this point. But his narrative invites readers to wonder whether World War II was the last “good war,” a conflict in which the enemy was so evil, the cause so just, the stakes so high, and all the alternatives so much worse that the carnage and the “collateral damage” was and should have been accepted. Reluctantly.

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Sons and Soldiers

The Untold Story of the Jews Who Escaped the Nazis and Returned With the U.S. Army to Fight Hitler

By Bruce Henderson

(William Morrow; 429 pages; $28.99)