

Dr. Louis Tankin

[Age 92] Son of a doctor, the urologist wrote about his unforgettable WWII experiences as a prisoner of war.

By Frederick N. Rasmussen
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Dr. Louis Haberer Tankin, a retired Baltimore urologist who wrote of his experiences as a prisoner of war during World War II, died from complications of a stroke Thursday at Ruxton Health and Rehabilitation Center. The Pikesville resident was 92.

Dr. Tankin was born in Baltimore and raised on Milton Avenue near Patterson Park. As the son of a surgeon, he was from an early age interested in a medical career.

"He didn't want to be a doctor for money or status. He wanted to be a doctor because he loved and wanted to help people," said a son, Alan C. Tankin of Newburg, Mo.

He was a 1932 graduate of City College and earned a bachelor's degree from the Johns Hopkins University in 1936. In 1940, he graduated from the University of Maryland School of Medicine and completed an internship and residency in urology at Sinai Hospital.

Dr. Tankin, who was called "Tank" during World War II, was a reserve officer when called to active duty in 1941. He joined the Army Medical Corps and as a battalion surgeon participated in the invasion of North Africa in 1942, and landed at Normandy on June 10, 1944.

In August 1944, Dr. Tankin and two other soldiers from his unit were captured in France as they tried to pass through German lines to rescue several wounded American soldiers.

Finding a letter in Dr. Tankin's dispatch case from Associated Jewish Charities, the German officer asked, "You are a Jew?"

"When I answered, 'Yes,' he said, 'No, Jews don't fight,'" Dr. Tankin wrote in an unpublished memoir.

"Pointing to a tree, I said, 'See the leaves? This is how many Jews are coming to fight you.' He immediately ordered his men to take me to a barn, where they stood me against the wall and aimed their rifles at me. Enraged, I shouted to my aide, 'If they shoot me, let the unit know.' The officer ordered his men to lower their guns," he wrote.

While aboard a boxcar on a prisoner of war transport in the Paris railroad yards, Dr. Tankin was ordered to examine an ill American GI. "When I turned him over, he said, 'Dr. Tankin, what are you doing here?' Before the war, he had been one of my father's patients in Baltimore," he wrote. "I told him when he got home to let my father know where I was. And he did."

Dr. Tankin eventually was taken to Oflag 64, a POW camp in Szubin, Poland, where he and fellow prisoners survived on rations of "two potatoes and a seventh of a loaf of bread per day," he wrote. "On Sundays we received some meat, but it could be from any part of the horse. On one occasion we had the head."

As Russian forces approached, the Germans abandoned the camp, leaving Dr. Tankin behind to care for prisoners too sick or severely wounded to march through the snow to Germany.

Dr. Tankin and the remaining prisoners were transported by the Russians to Odessa, where he sailed by ship to Naples, and finally to New York, arriving at Fort Meade in April 1945.

"I feel my experiences between 1941 and 1945 gave me the ability to understand others and their problems, to expect great things from people, but also not be surprised by the horrible things they can do to one another. I saw inhuman treatment and dastardly destruction. I also saw compassion and magnificent sacrifices," he wrote in a 1995 article in the Maryland Medical Journal.

"A piece of bread, a blanket and shoes, the sound of laughter and the chatter of children," he wrote. "The look in the eyes of both young and old. A feeling of security. These are the things we take for granted until the day they are no more."

In his unpublished memoir, Dr. Tankin wrote of the survivors of the POW camps: "Many of them have never recovered fully from the physical and emotional trauma they underwent. They had to endure hunger, infections, malaria, wounds, forced marches, no clothing, beatings by psychopath guards and sadistic officers."

He attained the rank of captain and his decorations included the Purple Heart and Bronze Star.

After the war, Dr. Tankin established a private practice in an office on Eutaw Place and later moved to Park Heights Avenue. He was chief of urology at what became Northwest

Hospital from 1965 to 1980. He retired in 1990.

From 1960 to 2000 when he moved to Pikesville, Dr. Tankin lived on a 5-acre farm on Painters Mill Road in Owings Mills, where he kept and rode appaloosa and Arabian horses. He also was an avid collector of Western art and painter of miniature military figures." He used to call himself the 'Jewish Cowboy,'" his son said.

He was a member of Oheb Shalom Congregation.

Services were Sunday.

Also surviving are his wife of 65 years, the former Ruth Ember; two other sons, Robert M. Tankin of Millersville and Harry J. Tankin of Yardley, Pa.; a brother, Richard S. Tankin of Evanston, Ill.; three grandsons; and two great-grandsons.