

Bernie Lieder WWII vet, Minnesota legislator

He took roads expertise to the Capitol, language skills to war

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As a young man, Bernie Lieder served in the European theater of World War II, helping liberate German towns and camps after the Nazis fell.

Several decades later, after a career as a highway engineer in Polk County, Lieder was elected to the Minnesota House of Representatives, where he served for 25 years. After the Inter-

state 35W bridge collapsed, the Democrat from Crookston helped push through a major transportation infrastructure funding bill that included the first state gas tax in 20 years. He was the last WWII vet to serve in the state House.

Lieder, a witness to history who was known for his integrity and humility, died Aug. 23. He was 97.

“His regard for people and how he talked about people, I think that speaks volumes,” said daughter Sue Dundas, of Wells, Minn. She noted her father was so well liked among his legislative colleagues that people from both parties wanted to campaign door to door for him.

Lieder was born in 1923 at his family’s farmhouse in Greenwood Township, Minn. During his youth, his parents ran a barbershop, butcher shop and a bar and restaurant in Hanover. A grandson of German immigrants, Lieder grew up speaking German and put it to use later in the war, where he served as an unofficial translator between Allied military officials and German citizens and prisoners.

Near the end of the war, Lieder came upon a gruesome scene when retreating Germans burned a barn holding 1,000 prisoners.

He returned to Europe more than a dozen times and was honored in 2009 at Israel’s Holocaust memorial, Yad Vashem, where he laid a wreath and offered a salute.

“There wasn’t a dry eye in the house,” said state Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, who attended the cer-

emony with Lieder and a delegation of state lawmakers.

Lieder made Crookston his home in the early 1950s, as a Polk County highway engineer after the war. There he met his wife, Shirley, and they raised three daughters.

The family enjoyed road trips — during which Lieder pointed out highway-related infrastructure — picnics and even slow-pitch softball games. Lieder found time to pitch for a team into his late 60s. His daughter, Dundas, was the team’s scorekeeper.

Through his work overseeing Polk County’s infrastructure, Lieder unintentionally laid the groundwork for his foray into the state Legislature, building relationships with locals and becoming an authority on transportation issues.

Lieder was elected to the Minnesota House at age 61, serving from 1985 until 2010, when he was defeated by Republican Rep. Debra Kiel. He was well respected by his fellow lawmakers and legislative staffers, whom he cared deeply about, said daughter Heidi Rahe, of Rensselaer, Ind.

“He would have been miserable if he would have retired with nothing in front of him,” Rahe said, adding that her father believed “if you have the ability to do something, you should work on it.”

In 2008, Lieder chaired the House transportation finance committee and helped craft a \$6.6 billion infrastructure plan that promised better roads and bridges. After Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty vetoed the bill, Lieder formed a coalition of urban and rural lawmakers that overrode the governor’s decision.

“When the annals of transportation history are mentioned, there will be a very big mention of Bernie Lieder,” Hornstein said.

Lieder is survived by his daughters: Dundas, Rahe and Jane Whitter; and 10 grandchildren.

A public graveside service with military honors will be Saturday at Elmwood Cemetery in Rockford.

Columnist Curt Brown contributed to this report.

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