Career of art book collector Jaffe a real page-turner

When you ask Arthur Jaffe to describe his Army service in World War II, he chuckles. He's about to repeat a sentence spoken to hundreds of literary buffs and antisocial college kids before.

His crinkled eyes stare bashfully at his feet. "Let me get you a book on that." His voice is gruff, traces of a northeastern accent bleeding through the word "book."

Jaffe, an ex-Nazi interrogator for the United States Army, disappears from his office at the Mata and Arthur Jaffe Center for Book Arts in Boca Raton. Two minutes later, he slaps on his desk a slender, slightly worn hardcover.

The book binding's curled and torn but the title is legible: "HISTORY: The 2d Mobile Radio Broadcasting Co."

Now 90 years into his quietly remarkable life, Jaffe is synonymous with rare book collecting in Palm Beach. He established the Book Center at Florida Atlantic University in 1998 when he and his late wife, Lois, donated 2,800 titles to the university. There now are 12,000.

And after 13 years curating Boca Raton's Jaffe Center for Book Arts and its treasures, he marked his birthday on May 7 with an announcement: "I'm retiring."

"I don't have quite the physical energy to sustain the collection anymore," John Cutrone brings a fresh energy to it," he said, referring to the Book Center's new director and 10-year employee.

In response, the library is hosting a summer-long Jaffe-centric display at the Book Center. Dubbed "Time Flies When You're Having Fun," the 50-piece retrospective (through Aug. 10) amasses trinkets from his military service and also displays artist books donated to Jaffe as birthday presents.

**Soldier to "Collector"**

During wartime, Jaffe was a soldier's soldier. When the Japanese struck Pearl Harbor, the Butler, Penn., man was Army reserve and tapped for active duty. His tactical company landed at Omaha Beach during D-Day and braved an onslaught of gunfire. Although the 2nd could fire weapons as well as any hard-helmetGI, they excelled in another form of combat: psychological warfare.

From a well-hidden French bunker, commanding officer Jaffe ordered 145 men and 20 soldiers to become well-oiled propaganda machines. They barked orders over the loudspeaker for Germans to surrender. They broadcast radio messages on French airwaves that pledged to fight and clothe any Nazi who surrendered.

Jaffe's preferred form of propaganda was inking, drawing and printing leaflets that ridiculed Nazis, which were packed into artillery shells and fired into German camps. Among his favorites were maps revealing the positions of American troops and Passierschein, or safety passes.

"It's a white flag. 'Save your own life,' we said. All you'd do is fill out your name, rank, serial number on the leaflet and you won't be shot at," Jaffe said. "It's a part of war most people don't know about. Thousands of Germans surrendered."

In post-war Germany, Jaffe bartered cigarettes and chocolate — currenies then as good as money — for his first batch of rare books: a classical Greek-to-Hebrew translated Bible. His reasons were less than glamorous: "I'd never seen classical Greek in print before. It's a real scholar's book. But hey, it only cost me two packs of cigs."

"FAU likes calling Jaffe a "collector." That always seemed strange to the bookish Delray Beach retiree, who only casually hunted for collectible books after the war and ran his family's chain of small-town department stores in western Pennsylvania before retiring to South Florida in the 90s. "Collector" is too pigeonholing. Too purpose-driven a word. Instead, he "assembled the books over a lifetime."

"Why did I like books? I was an introvert that way," Jaffe said, unwrapping a purple Hershey's Kiss (he's a chocoholic) and letting it melt on his tongue. "Books are like beautiful people. They each have different births and history and purpose. They have one thing in common: They're all aesthetic objects and I bought them for personal satisfaction."

**Leaving the center**

Since 1998, a pristine third-floor wing of the Wimberly Library at Florida Atlantic University has carried Jaffe's name. His Center for Book Arts boasts the most eclectic passel of unusual titles in South Florida. These books won't necessarily melt the eyeballs of a literature professor hunting for rare first-editions of Milton or Dickens (although there is a smattering of poetry and novels). These are strictly artists' books, each crisp page meeting Jaffe's painstakingly exacting brand of aesthetic regardlesss of literary value.

Books can be children's pop-ups, silk-screened broadsides, woodcuts (words and pictures carved into slender wood blocks), or even the Hebrew alphabet scrawled on an ornately-stitched quilt. Every ink droplet of calligraphy, hand-drawn illustration or one-of-a-kind binding must pass muster. Books can be sculpted into the shapes of pentagons or resemble hands clasped together.

He traces his memory for what sparked his passion for books and settles on two recollections. During Arthur's childhood, his father, Max, hand-built bookcases back home to shelve the family's immense library. The second was meeting his first wife, Lois, a University of Pittsburgh professor, at a wedding. Their first date? A restaurant dinner inside the Peabody Book Shop at Charles Street in Baltimore. Without missing a beat, he proposed marriage after the meal. Lois thought he was crazy at first but accepted. She shared his passion for harvesting books before she passed away.

Within the "Time Flies" exhibit, some of Jaffe's fondest collectibles rest in glass cases at the wing's entrance, along a second-floor landing and near the first-floor circulation desk. There's a 300-year-old "Guier Bible" that Jaffe found in Massai territory in Kenya and a $5,000 edition of Shakespeare's "Hamlet" that took 17 years to hand-illustrate and bind.

There are stranger literary oddities still, such as a book crafted into slices of a cake and a red-stained book shaped like hands. A diary of Jaffe's wartime service sits in the first-floor lobby while a TV flashes a photo slideshow of Arthur in his formative years.

"For my birthday, people sent me letters telling me, in one fell swoop, I changed the character of the library," Jaffe said. "I didn't know I had an effect on it. The impact I leave here may be the joy I inspire in others."

"Time Flies When You're Having Fun" runs through Aug. 10 at the Jaffe Center for Book Arts, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton. Call 561-297-0455.