

In Honor of International Holocaust Remembrance Day

Liberated but Not Free: Life After Liberation

---Mirta Glasman

On January 27, 1945, Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi concentration and death camp, was liberated by the Red Army. This date was designated by the United Nations General Assembly as **International Holocaust Remembrance Day** through resolution 60/7, passed on November 1, 2005. It commemorates the genocide that resulted in the death of 6 million Jews and 5 million other victims, including Roma, homosexuals, the handicapped and other opponents of the Third Reich, by the Nazi regime and its collaborators.

As Allied forces and Soviet troops advanced across Europe in a series of offensives against Nazi Germany, they encountered concentration camps, mass graves, and numerous other sites of Nazi crimes. Soviet forces were the first to overrun a major Nazi concentration and death camp, Majdanek, near Lublin, Poland, in July 1944. On January 27, 1945, Soviet troops liberated the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and death camp, where they discovered more than six thousand prisoners, including young children, who had not been evacuated by the SS and sent on death marches*. American soldiers also witnessed evidence of Nazi atrocities as they headed into the interior of Germany, liberating major concentration camps such as Buchenwald (April 11, 1945), Dachau (April 29, 1945), and Mauthausen (May 6, 1945). American, British, Canadian, and Soviet troops freed prisoners from their SS guards, provided them with food and badly needed medical support, and collected evidence of war crimes.



Feldafing, Germany, Postwar, Women and children in the DP camp.
Yad Vashem photo collection

Did the survivors' suffering end after liberation?



Mittenwald, Germany, 29/01/1946, A wedding in a DP camp.
Yad Vashem photo collection

Sadly no. The two million Jews who survived the Holocaust while living in ghettos, camps, the forests or in hiding, continued desperately to look for surviving relatives. Usually, their attempts were in vain. When they returned to the towns where they lived before the war, they received a hostile welcome. Many of the locals feared that the Jews would demand restitution of the property they had stolen. In the first months following liberation, antisemitic gangs murdered approximately 1,500 Jewish survivors in Poland alone. The Kielce pogrom, on July 4, 1946 became a symbol of the precarious state of Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust. As a result, survivors moved on to Western and Southern Europe en route to the Italian coast joining displaced persons camps with the assistance of the *Bricha***.

At the war's end, the Allies gathered hundreds of thousands of survivors in DP camps in Germany, Austria and Italy. Conditions in these camps, especially at the beginning, were very difficult. Many of the camps were former concentration camps and German army camps. Survivors found themselves still living behind barbed wire, still subsisting on inadequate amounts of food and still suffering from shortages of clothing, medicine and supplies. Survivors found themselves "liberated but not free".

How does one keep living after liberation?

Survivor Eliezer Adler's memories during his days in a DP camp recalls:

They would take a hut and divide it into ten tiny rooms for ten couples. The desire for life overcame everything - in spite of everything I am alive, and even living with intensity.

We took children and turned them into human beings.... The great reckoning with the Holocaust? Who bothered about that... you knew the reality, you knew you had no family, that you were alone, that you had to do something. You were busy doing things. I remember that I used to tell the young people: Forgetfulness is a great thing. A person can forget, because if they couldn't forget they couldn't build a new life. After such a destruction to build a new life, to get married, to bring children into the world? In forgetfulness lay the ability to create a new life...



Bergen Belsen, Germany, 1946, A group of orphans in the DP camp. Yad Vashem photo collection



Austria, Photograph of a group of men at the St. Martin DP camp, 1946. Yad Vashem photo collection

Many survivors kept silent for many years, either out of a wish not to burden their children, or because they themselves wanted to forget in order to establish their lives.

There were 250,000 people living in these camps by the end of 1946 and despite the suffering, the survivors managed to organize a vibrant Jewish life, which incorporated educational and cultural activities, religious worship and political activism. The astounding rate of weddings and births in Jewish DP camps transformed the era of Holocaust rehabilitation into an era of literal rebirth. Thousands of weddings occurred in the first months of liberation as lonely survivors paired off. Weddings became major events in the camps and many became mass celebrations for the entire camp community. By the end of 1946, Jewish DP camps had the highest birth rate of any Jewish community in the world. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC)** survey indicated that nearly 750 babies were born each month in DP camps in the U.S. zone.

Life in the camps in occupied Germany was regarded by most of the Jewish refugees as a temporary arrangement. They sought to leave Germany, and in many cases, Europe as a whole. Survivors demanded free immigration, particularly to eretz Israel, the land of Israel. The JDC worked alongside DPs, helped with food and clothing, underwrote educational endeavors, and provided money for organized underground immi-

gration to eretz Israel, known as *Aliyah Bet*. Due to the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the changes that were made to US immigration legislation, there were increased opportunities for many of the Jews in the DP camps to emigrate. All the DP camps closed by 1950, except for Föhrenwald in Bavaria, Germany, which remained operative until 1957. Most of the displaced persons immigrated to Israel and about one-third of the 300,000 Jewish DPs immigrated to the United States, Canada, Australia and the Latin American countries. Several thousand settled in Europe, including in Germany itself, and reestablished communities that had been destroyed in the Holocaust.

Some of the wounded survivors couldn't carry on with their lives. Others eventually healed and began a new life , but the scars persisted forever.

International Holocaust Day it's a yearly wake up call that reminds the world about the serious consequences of racism and hatred. The commemoration encourages us to reflect on the relevance of our mission as an educational center for the Holocaust, other genocides and human rights.



*Bergen Belsen, Germany, Josef Rosensaft signing a petition at the DP camp against British policy in Eretz Israel.
Yad Vashem photo collection*

**Death March: In January 1945, the Third Reich stood on the verge of military defeat. As Allied forces approached Nazi camps, the SS organized "death marches" (forced evacuations over long distances under guard and in extremely harsh conditions) of concentration camp inmates, in part to keep large numbers of concentration camp prisoners from falling into Allied hands.*

***Bricha: the Hebrew word for "flight, escape. It was the name given to the postwar, organized illegal emigration from eastern Europe into the Allied-occupied zones DP camps and Palestine or Israel*

****JDC: Founded during World War I, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) was the first Jewish organization in the United States to dispense large-scale funding for international relief. After WWII, JDC's relief activities, emigration aid, and rescue operations were critical.*