



SURVIVORS & LIBERATORS: A COMPLEX LEGACY

Note: This short essay was written in April 2025 to commemorate the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe and of the liberation of Europe – and hundreds of thousands of Jews – from Nazi tyranny.

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The 2025 March of the Living marks the 80th anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe and the liberation of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Hitler's camps, and in hiding places all across Europe.

As Allied forces liberated the camps, they came face-to-face with the full brutality of Nazi Germany and their war on the Jews. Convinced that future generations would not believe the gruesome atrocities his troops were seeing – or even worse, deny the facts - General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II, insisted that large scale photo and film documentation of Nazi death camps be undertaken. Soviet troops also documented the evidence of the atrocities they witnessed upon liberating Auschwitz-Birkenau on Jan. 27, 1945 and elsewhere.

Of the almost 3 million Jews sent to Hitler's death camps, very few survived - nearly all of them from Auschwitz-Birkenau. (In the weeks before the liberation of Auschwitz, approximately 56,000 prisoners were evacuated on death marches – in the course of which 15,000 perished on the way.)

Large numbers of Jews were deported to other camps (concentration camps, forced labor camps, etc.), where they perished as well.

Historians estimate that among the survivors of the camps liberated in 1945, about 90,000 Jews were still alive in the camps freed by Allied troops on the day of liberation. Tragically, many of them perished in the days following - leaving between 60,000

and 70,000 survivors to begin a new chapter in their lives.

At first glance, these moments of liberation might be viewed as overwhelming instances of elation and positive experiences – after all millions of people were freed from the merciless grip of Nazi Germany.

But for many of the Holocaust survivors, these were not necessarily moments of unbridled joy. For some, it came with the realization that not a single member of their immediate family – parents, grandparents, children, siblings, uncles and aunts – were alive. They were literally alone in the world – strangers to everyone on planet earth. “What now?” was the first question many survivors had on their minds almost immediately after liberation.



9-year-old Miriam Ziegler at the barbed wire in Auschwitz on the day of her liberation by Soviet troops. (Miriam is pictured second from left, with her arm outstretched showing the number tattooed on her.)

When the Soviet Army liberated Auschwitz-Birkenau on Jan. 27, 1945, they found some 7,500 prisoners alive there and in the

surrounding camps.

Among the prisoners were hundreds of children including Miriam Ziegler:

“I was 9 years old when I was liberated. I remember standing at the wires.... This is when we saw the Russian soldiers were coming in on their trucks and walking and marching. And we couldn't believe it - No more Nazis over us. And my feelings were, now what? What's going to be now?”

For many Holocaust Survivors, there was no home to return to – either their homes had been destroyed, or had been occupied by others, who greeted them with surprise that they were still alive, even with open hostility. Threats of murder were also not uncommon, which tragically, were sometimes acted upon.

The situation for the liberators was also not without its challenges.

Many liberators testify that as they were entering the camps, they could hear the gunfire of Nazi soldiers in the process of executing prisoners moments before their arrival. Others testify they arrived in one camp minutes after the Nazis herded thousands of prisoners into wooden barracks and burnt them alive.

The liberators described the universal horror and shock they felt when they first saw the prisoners who barely survived the Nazi atrocities – and the piles of bodies surrounding them of those who did not survive.

Many of the emaciated prisoners were on the verge of death and sadly many of them did not survive for more than a few hours or days after the moment of liberation. Some of the prisoners, while physically alive, could not understand or even comprehend what liberation meant, or believe they were being freed from the years of torment they had just undergone.

Some of the American liberators testified, that until they saw these “walking ghosts”, they had no idea of the extent of the brutality visited upon the Jews by the Nazis – and only now did they fully understand the evil they were combating. Decades later, many of the liberators still experienced nightmares of their first encounter with these beaten, starved and tortured Jewish prisoners, surrounded by piles of corpses too numerous to count.

According to the testimony of some American liberators, among the last words uttered by those who perished, were desperate pleas for “vasser... vasser”-“water, water”. One liberator remembers a prisoner just saying the words “too late, too late” – before expiring in front of his eyes.

American chaplain Rabbi Eli Bonin, who liberated Dachau in 1945, wrote this to his wife Eleanor: “Nothing you can put in words can describe what I saw there. The human mind refuses to believe what the eyes can see. All the stories of Nazi horrors are underestimated rather than exaggerated. I shall never forget what I saw there, and in my nightmares the scenes still recur..... No possible punishment can ever repay the ones who were responsible.”

Soviet soldiers who liberated Auschwitz on January 27, 1945, had similar responses to their American counterparts. Here are a few excerpts from their testimonies:

Alexander Vorontsov:

Until the end of the war, I worked as a film cameraman. What I saw and filmed there was the most horrible thing I ever saw or filmed. I don't think even our army command had an idea of the scale of the crimes committed in this largest of concentration camps. They were practically skeletons, covered with skin, their eyes staring blankly. These memories will be with me for the rest

of my life.

They looked at our soldiers with fear in their eyes because they didn't know that these were Soviet soldiers, liberators, and so they were expecting the worst, death... We explained to them who we were and why we came here, because they did not understand who we were and why we came. Both women and men would cry. Some began to smile a little through tears.

David Dushman: They were all standing there. All with uniforms. Just eyes, just eyes. It was very, very terrible.

Mykola Karpenko: We saw a huge pile of human waste, clothes, shoes, braids, hair, and remains of human bones. I have a feeling of hatred when I think about Auschwitz.

Moisey Malkis: Two women came up to me, one of them started clapping her hands, and the other was just happy. One of them gave me a kiss.

Otari Amaglobeli: There was total atrophy, just bone and skin from all the hunger.....Many were starved beyond recognition. Every other one had a stomach ulcer rather, multiple ulcers. Because they hadn't eaten anything. Total avitaminosis (from long-term lack of vitamins).

While many – perhaps even most – survivors showed remarkable resilience and courage in rebuilding their lives after liberation, their victory was never complete, as the loss of their loved ones was never far away.

But the survivors also expressed unending gratitude to the soldiers – American, Soviet, British, and Canadian – who liberated them, and to their adoptive countries around the world who allowed them to strike roots, rebuild their lives, and begin new families. In return, these same survivors contributed immensely to the fabric

of life in the communities and in the countries that gave them refuge and welcomed them to their shores.

As one American liberator, Eli Heimberg, who entered Dachau after its liberation on April 29, 1945, wrote: “Despite the horrors of the Holocaust, a new spirit arose among most of the survivors. From out of the ashes of despair, I witnessed the resurgence of a people taking their place once more in society, retaining their compassion and a continuing will to learn and pursue their culture.

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