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AMERICANS BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE:
THE LIBERATOR'S EXPERIENCE IN WORLD WAR II

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ABSTRACT

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Master of Arts in History

In April of 1945, members of the United States Army liberated numerous concentration camps and forced labor camps in Germany and Austria. These servicemen were the first Americans to witness the aftermath of Nazi Germany's racial war against European Jewry. As camp liberators, American GIs and their commanding officers became a vital component of the Holocaust story. In addition to encountering, and in some instances rescuing, individuals incarcerated in the Reich's concentration camp system, American liberators were the eyes and ears of a nation that, until the emancipation of the camps, widely dismissed atrocity stories from overseas as propaganda. In liberating the camps, American soldiers witnessed, in a unique way, the true nature of the Holocaust.

The liberation of the camps proved to be a daunting task. U.S. soldiers were unprepared for the vast death and tremendous human suffering they encountered. For some GIs, the sights and smells of the camps provoked great sorrow, disgust, and even rage, which occasionally led to acts of vengeance. Despite the strong emotions the horrors of the camps provoked, however, there were a number of liberators who focused their attention on the survivors and worked diligently to improve their condition. The interactions between camp victims and their rescuers greatly impacted both parties, and

in some instances, led to relationships that continued through the years. As these friendships endured, however, so too did the haunting memories of the Holocaust. Many American soldiers reported suffering terrible and disruptive after effects as a result of their time in the camps. Despite the distress of recalling their experiences, however, several liberators have engaged in public speaking and education as a means of teaching younger generations about the consequences of intolerance and prejudice. Their stories, in conjunction with survivor testimonies, help keep the memory of the Holocaust alive and serve as a safeguard against genocide.

Introduction

“When a people is sent to its death, all others are threatened. It is all humanity which is threatened... They killed the Jews, and it was mankind that was killed; and you, liberators, stopped this process.”¹

-Elie Wiesel, 1981

This excerpt, taken from Elie Wiesel’s speech to the audience at a 1981 International Liberator’s Conference, highlights the important role that Allied military men played during the Second World War. Wiesel reminded those in attendance, and subsequently the world at large, that although it was the Jewish community that Nazi Germany slated for destruction, all of mankind suffered a great tragedy in the events of the Holocaust. A loss of humanity occurred when the world silently watched as the Third Reich created and enacted genocidal policies and carried these directives to their horrific conclusion. While the majority of the German population failed to protect individuals and groups persecuted by the Nazi government, and the world remained doubtful of the atrocity “rumors” from overseas, it was the men of the Allied Expeditionary Forces that took action. Elie Wiesel, Chairman of the Holocaust Memorial Council and Buchenwald Concentration Camp survivor, credits liberators with saving prisoners left to perish in the camps and ending the destruction of mankind.

During World War II, Allied Forces waged an epic battle against Germany’s Third Reich. In the final months of the campaign, Allied servicemen encountered the racial war Nazi Germany perpetrated against European Jewry. In numerous European cities, Hitler’s regime constructed forced labor and concentration camps, which were used to incarcerate the nation’s “enemies,” and established death camps in which many

¹ Brewster Chamberlin and Marcia Feldman, eds., *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987), 16.

lives were extinguished. As the United States Army, a component of the Allied Expeditionary Forces, pushed through Germany and Austria on a quest to defeat Hitler's regime, its battle-hardened men discovered "work" camps such as Buchenwald, Nordhausen, Flossenburg, Dachau, and Mauthausen, along with various satellite camps. These servicemen became the first Americans to witness the atrocities Nazi Germany had exacted on humanity. In time, they would liberate thousands of prisoners held captive within the concentration camp system.

Since the end of World War II, numerous scholars have made great efforts to document the Holocaust – the Third Reich's systematic murder of millions of individuals. At the center of the story are the men, women, and children who survived their internment within concentration and death camps. Survivor accounts and diaries have been meticulously preserved in order to ensure that humanity never forgets the tragic events that unfolded in Europe. These testimonies are meant to instill tolerance in future generations as a bulwark against genocide. An equally important facet of the Holocaust's legacy is the liberator's experience.

Liberator accounts are invaluable in helping readers understand and come to grips with the reality of the Holocaust. American soldiers were the eyes and ears of a nation, which until the emancipation of the camps, continued to doubt reports regarding the atrocities the Third Reich had committed. Indeed, many believed accounts or claims were nothing more than wartime propaganda fashioned to inspire hate for the enemy. American liberators, along with the men and women they saved from certain death, witnessed the crimes committed against camp inmates, relayed their tales, and therefore brought the Holocaust to the attention of the world community. The Holocaust was no

longer a Jewish or European tragedy, but had worldwide repercussions, for if one nation is permitted to destroy members of its population and no one protests, other nations can easily follow suit.

Being a witness to the Holocaust, however, came at great cost. For many American servicemen the memories of what they saw, heard, and smelled while liberating the victims of German aggression held their minds hostage. The inhumanity they encountered behind the gates of the Third Reich's most notorious camps deeply affected American liberators. GIs and their commanding officers possessed little to no knowledge of these facilities or their true functions, and so they suffered profound emotional, physical, and psychological responses to the Holocaust – effects that followed many into the postwar years. Soldiers were overcome by tears, filled with rage, or sickened to the point of vomiting when they came face to face with starved inmates and the dead. They often remarked that the killing and cruelty carried out in these “death factories” was beyond anything they had seen on the battlefield. Yet, despite the misery, stories of hope and understanding emerged. Moved by what they witnessed in the camps and impacted by their interactions with those they liberated, some military men formed special relationships with survivors – friendships that continued for the rest of their lives.

The liberators' response to Hitler's crimes against humanity has been preserved in documentary film footage, military reports, media and press releases, and servicemen's testimonies and narratives. It warrants examination. The liberators' experiences provide a unique, yet complementary perspective to that offered by survivors. While the survivor's experience reveals man's capacity for cruelty, as well as the undying will to persevere through extreme adversity, the liberator's experience reminds the world of man's ability

for self-sacrifice and compassion. The American soldier's account demonstrates what the Holocaust meant for those who were not directly persecuted by the Nazis yet were still deeply affected by the blatant destruction of human life. Recalling Elie Wiesel's words, "When a people is sent to its death, all others are threatened," many liberators have chosen to spend the postwar years engaging in public outreach as educators and public speakers, as they value awareness and education as the most effective tools against racial hatred and prejudice.² Like Holocaust survivors, concentration camp liberators have a story to tell from which lessons of tolerance, humanity, and understanding can be extracted – a story that is not only part of the historical record but can also serve as a safeguard against future tyranny.

² Chamberlin and Feldman, eds., 16.

Chapter 1: Destruction of a People

“Speed! Speed! Never mind the human victims. The work must proceed and be finished in the shortest time possible!”³

*-SS General Kammler
Director, Construction Branch of SS
Supreme Headquarters*

These words, exclaimed by a German Schutzstaffe (SS) General, reveal that Nazi Germany had more on its agenda than the expansion of the nation through the conquest of nearby territories. In addition to war, the regime, led by Nazi party leader Adolf Hitler, established a series of concentration camps throughout Europe to exploit manpower from inmates – labor that fueled Germany’s war machine. With Hitler at the country’s helm in 1933, Germany rose from the ashes of a deteriorating economy and began its climb to power. Promises of prosperity, new land, and retribution against the countries that had stripped Germany of its glory following World War I earned the new leader national support. Soon he had secured absolute control over the Fatherland. Germany’s totalitarian government, the Third Reich, employed racist propaganda as its primary tool in winning the hearts and minds of the country’s people. With the backing of the nation, Hitler set his sights on neighboring Poland and initiated the Second World War.

The Nazi regime’s 1939 invasion of Poland sparked a fierce war between nations. The Allied Expeditionary Forces would answer this assault with an intense campaign against the Third Reich and find that they were fighting a war on two fronts – one on the European battlefield and a second in the picturesque towns that quietly concealed German concentration camps. It was in these camps that the Nazi government implemented its plan for forced labor and racial cleansing. The U.S. Office of the High

³ William J. Aalmans, ed., *The "Dora"-Nordhausen War Crimes Trial* (Dachau: Prosecution Staff, 1947), 10.

Commissioner for Germany's 1951 report titled *Landsberg: A Documentary Report* discloses the German Nazis' multi-part plan for world domination and genocide. It also brings to light the ruthless endeavors in which the Nazis were willing to engage to achieve their objectives. A primary factor influencing German war policy was the government's strong prejudice against non-Aryan peoples. The report states, "The concept which underlay the design and aggressive action [taken by the Reich] was the idea that the Germans were a master race destined to conquer, subjugate and enslave the inferior races of the east..."⁴ Aided by his elite group of military leaders, Hitler set his master plan in motion – a plan that ultimately would bring war once again to the European continent.

War began with the invasion of lands east of Germany, an indication of Hitler's determination to acquire an abundance of territory needed to increase the size, population, and the industrial and agricultural capacity of the Nazi State. Next, residents of these conquered territories were removed to concentration camps where they were forced to labor for the German war effort or were executed in retaliation for the death of German soldiers during the Eastern campaign.⁵ The personal property of those taken from eastern areas was also confiscated, adding to the victor's stockpile of wealth. Absolute domination of these newly acquired territories was to be attained through the elimination of eastern traditions, which would be achieved by repopulating the land with Germans who would propagate Nazi culture.⁶

⁴ United States Office of the U.S. High Commissioner for Germany, *Landsberg: A Documentary Report* (Frankfurt: The Special Publications Branch, Public Relations Division, 1951), 59.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

Non-German peoples were not the only targets of Nazi wartime policies. Germans residing in occupied regions were also subjected to Hitler's "resettlement program," which ordered their removal from the East and relocation to the Reich. This was done without the citizens' consent. As new residents of the Fatherland, these individuals were expected to support the new regime and become productive members of German society. Those who refused would face harsh punishment, imprisonment, or death. Having placed these civilians under Nazi rule, the regime then sought to neutralize menacing political opponents.

Germany's Third Reich would not tolerate any opposition to its policies regarding war, expansion, and racial purification. Therefore, the government silenced anyone questioning or protesting the regime's initiatives, or the new German way of life. This was necessary to ensure Hitler's complete control of Germany and its people. The Reich's war plan laid out effective procedures for dealing with political dissidents. It ordered, "The elimination of all actual and potential opposition by the extermination of political leaders and those who had any promise of becoming political leaders in opposition, or their collection and removal to concentration camps."⁷ Again, the Nazis' master plan mentioned the use of concentration camps for the purpose of imprisonment and punishment for all those individuals who made themselves adversaries of the state. Of course, what defined an "enemy" was left to the government's interpretation.

The final point in the German scheme for war and racial cleansing focused on what the regime perceived as its greatest enemy – ethnically inferior individuals and groups. Among those who made up European society's "undesirable" elements, due to either physical impairments or being of non-Aryan descent, were the mentally and

⁷ Ibid.

physically disabled, gypsies, homosexuals, and most notably, members of the Jewish community. Although the Nazis looked upon all of these groups with abiding contempt, they regarded the Jewish people with particular abhorrence and specifically targeted this group for destruction. The Third Reich ordered, “The elimination of Jews, occasionally by deportation, but generally by outright slaughter.”⁸ At the center of this strategy were the concentration camps and death camps in which the Nazis implemented the Final Solution – the systematic murder of the Jewish people.

Prior to 1933, German prison camps were used to incarcerate political dissenters. Following the election of Adolf Hitler as German Chancellor, however, these camps took on a new and more specialized role. Oswald Pohl, General of the Waffen SS (Hitler’s protection squads pivotal in the establishment of concentration camps and death camps and the administration of the Final Solution) stated, “The custody of prisoners for the sole purpose of security, education, or prevention is no longer the main consideration.”⁹ Now, prisoners were not only incarcerated but were also subjected to forced labor. The outbreak of World War II led to a great demand for munitions and the rise of war industries. This translated into a need for workers. Unlike most nations, who in a time of conflict, appealed to their citizens with patriotic pleas to join the war effort, Nazi Germany resorted to enslavement. Therefore, all individuals and groups labeled “enemies” of the German nation, for either racial or political reasons, were rounded up and transported to one of the various prison camps. Officials categorized these camps as either “work” or concentration camps used to exploit human labor, or as death camps in

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “The Concentration Camp Program of Extermination Through Work,” *A Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust*. Florida Center for Instructional Technology, last modified 2005, accessed December 5, 2011, <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/DOCSLA13.HTM>.

which genetically inferior individuals would be annihilated. Following the establishment of these camps, the Nazis enacted the “extermination through work program,” which provided the country with the labor needed to wage war, but ultimately served as its weapon against racial contamination.

Germany’s “work program” was founded on principles that devalued the human lives it exhausted while extracting countless hours of manpower from prisoners under the most excruciating circumstances. Accordingly, life in the camps was fraught with peril. Inmates were treated cruelly and suffered under the constant threat of death from guards who took pleasure in debasing their captives. Initially, prisoners assigned to this program were to come from previously established prison camps and consisted of convicts and asocial elements of the population.¹⁰ From February 1942 to the end of January 1943, the Reichsfuehrer-SS and the German Chief of Police declared that 35,000 workers were required to fill posts in munitions factories.¹¹ The order read, “As of now, all eastern workers or such foreign workers who have been fugitives, or who have broken contracts, and who do not belong to allied, friendly or neutral States are to be brought by the quickest means to the nearest concentration camp.”¹² The majority of these workers were Polish nationals.¹³ If they did not prove an efficient workforce, however, Hitler would order the transport of Hungarian Jews into the camps for use in armament factories.¹⁴

¹⁰ “Use of Slave Labor in German War Industries,” *A Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust*. Florida Center for Instructional Technology, last modified 2005, accessed December 5, 2011, <http://fcit.usf.edu/holocaust/resource/document/DOCSLA12.HTM>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Great numbers of Jewish prisoners were obtained through the liquidation of ghettos, which the German government established as a means to segregate racially “unclean” members of society from German citizens. Others were acquired through search and detainment procedures carried out in cities with large Jewish populations. These individuals were then loaded into trains and transported to either a concentration camp, where they became part of Germany’s involuntary workforce, or were carted off to a death camp for immediate elimination.

Upon arrival in the camps, inmates destined for Germany’s “work program” were stripped of both their personal belongings and their identity. The SS confiscated all the possessions the detainees had carried onto transport trains, including documents, photographs, and valuables. Inmates were ordered to remove their clothing and stand naked for inspection. Those fit for work were given camp uniforms and were taken to dilapidated and overcrowded barracks where they were made to live in meager conditions. Those who failed to pass Nazi scrutiny, either due to illness, physical weakness, or age, were exterminated. Individuals imprisoned in the concentration camp system received tattoos consisting of numbers, which became their only form of identification. These markings signaled that they were now property of the camp with which the Third Reich could do as it saw fit.

Once prisoners were processed, the camp’s administration was quick to set men and women at work in various war industries. In April of 1942, SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Oswald Pohl outlined the work regiment to be implemented in the camps.¹⁵ First, Pohl

¹⁵ “Oswald Pohl,” *Jewish Virtual Library*. The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, last modified 2012, accessed September 7, 2012, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Pohl.html>.

named camp commanders as the authority overseeing the employment of camp labor.¹⁶ “This employment must be, in the true meaning of the word, exhaustive, in order to obtain the greatest measure of performance,” he declared.¹⁷ Next, to ensure that war production carried on in a timely manner, he laid out the measures to be taken regarding work in the concentration camps.¹⁸ No daily limit was placed on the number of hours an inmate worked and camp commanders determined the length of the workday, which often depended on both the type of industry and production demands. In fact, Pohl stated, “Any circumstances which may result in a shortening of working hours (eg. meals, roll-calls) have therefore to be restricted to a minimum which cannot be condensed any more. It is forbidden to allow long walks to the place of working and noon intervals for eating purposes.”¹⁹ Camp administration placed no importance on the inmates’ physical comfort, allowing little to no time for rest and recuperation. Likewise, officials paid little regard to prisoner health. No set schedule for meals was guaranteed, denying prisoners the needed sustenance to perform the grueling tasks the Reich had imposed. Inevitably, the poor conditions under which inmates lived caused a reduction in productivity, which led to punishments such as decreased food rations, which in turn perpetuated a continued decline in performance.²⁰ Clearly, inmates were trapped in a vicious cycle that would ultimately lead to their death either through starvation or punishment. This of course, was the goal of the “extermination through work” program.

¹⁶ “The Concentration Camp Program of Extermination Through Work,” *A Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust*.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ “Use of Slave Labor in German War Industries,” *A Teacher’s Guide to the Holocaust*.

Besides concentration camps, the Nazi regime constructed six death camps in Poland for the disposal of all individuals and groups seen as a threat to the pure German way of life – Auschwitz, Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Majdanek, and Treblinka.²¹ These camps were established for the administration of the Final Solution. As Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler, the head of Germany’s Gestapo, relayed to all camp commandants, “The Fuhrer has ordered that the Jewish question be solved once and for all and that we, the SS, are to implement the order.”²² Initially, Jews were shot in the back of the head and their lifeless bodies were tossed into mass graves. When this method proved too taxing on the killers, the SS began gassing the innocents. Death camps, such as the infamous Auschwitz, which was opened in 1940 under Himmler’s orders, were equipped with gas chambers for this very purpose.²³ Such chambers were referred to as “special purpose baths” and inmates were deceived into believing they were simply being disinfected before entering the camp and joining the general prison population.²⁴ According to a Soviet report on Auschwitz, “People earmarked for annihilation thus unsuspectingly entered the premises for disinfection, undressed and from there were herded into the special purpose bath – that is, into the gas chamber where they were wiped out by cyclone poison.”²⁵ The dead were then removed and taken to the “ovens” – brick crematoriums built to incinerate the bodies and conceal evidence that mass murder

²¹ Jackson Spielvogel, *Hitler and Nazi Germany: A History*, 5th Edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2005), 281.

²² Ibid.

²³ Kevin Mahoney, ed., *1945: The Year of Liberation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1995), 41.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

was being conducted in the camp.

Millions of people perished under the Nazi regime's work programs and killing operations. Individuals, whose only crime was opposing National Socialism or being of a race that the Reich considered impure, were removed from their homes, torn from their families, and burned on the pyres of Nazi hatred. News of the actions carried out in the concentration and death camps traveled overseas; however, these tales were often dismissed as propaganda. The American public, recalling World War I stories of German barbarity that had been devised to incite anger and retaliation against that nation, believed the claims of German inhumanity in the Second World War were merely a ploy to provoke disgust and draw Americans into a war against the Nazis. Moreover, antisemitism was prevalent in America in the 1940s. Therefore, the "rumors" amounted to nothing more than stories that fell on deaf ears. This, in conjunction with the inability to believe that any society was capable of such behavior, prevented the greater world community from taking immediate action to rescue and aid those being persecuted.

The American public continued to ignore atrocity "rumors" until U.S. combat units entered the gates of concentration camps. Despite the uncertainty of what they would find behind the barbed wire fences and the human misery that emanated from the camps, American military men entered Nazi camps and rescued the men, women, and children the SS held captive. These unfortunate prisoners had received "special treatment," which left them in a physical and psychological state that rendered even the toughest combat soldier speechless. Nearly all the men who entered into what they could only describe as "hell," found that the experience was more than their hearts and minds could comprehend. Nevertheless, these soldiers provided a second chance at life to all those

inmates clutching to what seemed to be their last breath, and became eyewitnesses to an event the world could no longer ignore.

Chapter 2: Entering Hitler's Hell

In the spring of 1945, Allied Forces were firmly embedded in Europe and making their final push toward Berlin. Their primary objective was to rid the European continent of the Nazis and ultimately cause the Third Reich's collapse. American soldiers searched and seized numerous German towns and villages, ensuring that these municipalities were free of enemy troops. While going about the business of war, some Army divisions "happened" upon, or received orders to secure, compounds called "concentration camps." "While we were going through Germany capturing the German towns, did we know at that time that concentration camps did exist? There was absolutely no knowledge of any concentration camps," said Sergeant Harvey Metalsky of the U.S. Army's 10th Armored Division.²⁶ Many U.S. soldiers admitted that they had little to no knowledge regarding concentration camps prior to their deployment overseas; however, some servicemen did state that they had heard about the camps before landing on European soil, yet had terribly miscalculated the brutality practiced by Hitler's SS. As one GI revealed, "... the majority of us in my unit [42nd Infantry Division] were not aware of the Nazi efforts to exterminate the Jews – certainly not its scope, nor its effect on the world..."²⁷ Still others, despite circulating "stories" about the camps, did not believe these Nazi institutions existed. One member of the 104th Infantry Division confirmed as much. "Although there had been rumors about concentration camps, which we dismissed as exaggerations," he

²⁶ Yaffa Eliach and Brana Gurewitsch, eds., *The Liberators: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberation of Concentration Camps* (Brooklyn, New York: Center for Holocaust Studies Documentation & Research, 1981), 34.

²⁷ Sam Dann, ed., *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1998), 140.

recalled, “we were stunned by what we found – an absolute abomination.”²⁸

For many of the American men who fought against Germany’s Reich, the discovery of concentration camps along their battle routes proved unfathomable. Soldiers found it difficult to trust their senses, as they could not imagine the suffering the SS had inflicted upon camp prisoners. “When I got there I just couldn’t believe my eyes,” said one soldier.²⁹ Numerous American liberators shared this disbelief. Whether U.S. servicemen had prior knowledge of the concentration camps or were completely unaware of their existence proved irrelevant. Soon, they would receive a swift and graphic education in man’s capacity for cruelty and murder.

Allied Forces liberated multiple concentration camps. Each camp held unique horrors for the members of the United States Army who passed through its gates. No words could better describe the misery discovered within these facilities than those spoken and written by the men who liberated them. Since many concentration camps mirrored each other in structure and function, an examination of military accounts describing the Buchenwald Concentration Camp complex, Camp Dora-Mittelbau’s forced labor practices, and the death found in Dachau all paint a vivid picture of the liberators’ experiences in the hell Hitler and his SS units had worked so diligently to create.

²⁸ Robert H. Abzug, *GIs Remember: Liberating the Concentration Camps* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 1994), 21.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Buchenwald: Built for Murder

“Into the prison camp at Buchenwald, in an enclosure originally built for 8,000, the Germans crowded 60,000 prisoners and gradually exterminated them. It was a spectacle of stark misery, utter degradation and grim death.”³⁰

*-Dr. Philip Lief
(First Army, 3rd Auxiliary Surgical Group)*

Opened in Weimar, Germany in 1933, Buchenwald functioned as both a work camp and an “extermination factory.” Like most concentration camps, Buchenwald subjected inmates to starvation, backbreaking labor, beatings, and illness exacerbated by filthy and crowded living conditions. This led to the deaths of approximately 200 prisoners per day.³¹ On April 11, 1945, with Allied Forces in close proximity, Buchenwald’s administrators fled the scene. The following day, the United States Army liberated the complex, toured the site, and documented the SS’ atrocities.

A large complex, Buchenwald consisted of several buildings, each serving a specific purpose. Entering the main gates, American GIs first encountered the “Little Camp.” This structure was the prisoners’ living quarters, which proved entirely inadequate to house the large prison population. Inside this dilapidated shack, internees slept on wooden shelves rather than conventional beds. Sixteen prisoners rested on each twelve-foot by twelve-foot shelf, which were then stacked three high with only two feet of clearance between each level.³² From the Little Camp, prisoners were transferred to the “Regular Barracks,” which offered no improvements in regard to living conditions.

³⁰ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 15.

³¹ Lt. Col. F. Van Wyck Mason, *Report On German Concentration Camp For Political Prisoners At Buchenwald On The North Edge Of Weimar*, 4 May 1945, p. 1; 17.11 Historical Reports – First U.S. Army – Jacket 9 thru 10; Numeric-Subject Operations File 1943 – July 1945; Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331, Box 151; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

³² Ibid.

No heat was provided except for the warmth from a single blanket. Even that was not guaranteed to each prisoner and often all they had was the body heat generated from sleeping on top of each other.³³ Sanitation was also lacking, which forced prisoners to live and sleep in their own excrement. The constant presence of human filth generated an unbearable odor and accelerated the transmission of disease. Accommodations such as those found within Buchenwald were common throughout the concentration camp system.

American troops also toured Buchenwald's "Hospital" and "Medical Experimentation Building." They quickly realized that these two facilities were nothing more than a place for prisoners to die. Inmates who entered the infirmary were not given medication or therapy, as there was none to give.³⁴ Therefore, a large number of patients suffered from infections, typhus, and tuberculosis.³⁵ The hospital was staffed with "professional criminals" who decided which prisoners would receive treatment based on their ability to pay.³⁶ Further abuses occurred when so-called "doctors" administered lethal injections to inmates and performed operations and amputations for no other reason than to torture patients.³⁷

The Medical Experimentation Building was also notorious for inmate deaths. Here, prisoners were deliberately infected with viruses such as typhus, in what Nazi doctors claimed was an effort to eradicate this and other diseases. Liberators found no basis for this claim, and questioned the integrity of German doctors practicing "medicine"

³³ Van Wyck Mason, 2.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *The Buchenwald Report*, trans. David A. Hackett (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), 210.

³⁷ Hackett, trans., 212.

in the camps. In a personal letter to his wife, John Golec, member of the 7th U.S. Army, shared his feelings regarding the Third Reich's "good doctors." "The doctors," he wrote, "are now claiming that they have performed certain experiments, [that] if successful, would answer the medical world's problems on the cure of certain diseases."³⁸ Doubtful of the Nazis' intentions, Golec continued, "But hold on ... do you think that these Nazi bastards would have released the results to the world ... would they give the world the benefit of their discovery for the betterment of mankind?"³⁹ After witnessing the conditions in the camps, Golec came to believe that Nazi experiments were intended to serve only the Reich's interests. He concluded, "Whatever the Nazis did, whatever they planned was not for decency or science ... If these experiments were successful they would inoculate only the Germans and would let the rest of the conquered people suffer."⁴⁰ Nazi doctors, who had once taken an oath to help and comfort the ill, were now criminals responsible for numerous crimes against camp inmates. Evidence demonstrating that no successful treatments were found and all patients succumbed to their diseases ultimately confirmed Nazi guilt.⁴¹

American GIs were also only troubled by the Nazis' medical claims, but also struggled with the human consequences of these experiments. A member of the 4th Armored Division recalled his encounter with Buchenwald's patients, or at least their

³⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group RG-09, "Liberation," Sub-group 034, "John Golec Letter Relating to the Liberation of Dachau," 1 microfiche, 3.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Egon W. Fleck and 1st Lt. Edward A. Tenenbaum, *Buchenwald: A Preliminary Report*, 24 April 1945, p. 12; 17.11 Historical Reports – First U.S. Army – Jacket 9 thru 10; Numeric-Subject Operations File 1943 – July 1945; Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331, Box 151; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

remains. He stated, “What I saw was the most macabre, unbelievable thing ... They had large pits where they tossed parts of human organs from medical experiments.”⁴² Sights such as this were customarily found within the camps. They testified to the extent the regime devalued the prisoners’ lives – forcing cruel medical practices upon them and then casting their mutilated bodies into the dirt as if the victims were not human beings but mere refuse.

American liberators also viewed the camp’s “Body Disposal Plant,” otherwise known as the crematorium. Inmates who died as a result of punishment, disease, or starvation were collected daily and delivered to the brick crematorium.⁴³ Only a select group of SS members were allowed access to the disposal plant, which they used to incinerate approximately 400 bodies within a ten-hour day.⁴⁴ The Nazis believed that they had developed a rather efficient means of concealing Buchenwald’s large number of inmate deaths. All that remained of the victims were bone and ash, which were easily discarded. Camp administrators, however, had failed to “tidy up” prior to their sudden departure and so shocked American troops discovered human remains throughout the complex. One GI testified, “Heavy metal trays had been pulled out of those [crematorium] openings, and on those trays were partially burned bodies. On one tray was a skull partially burned through, with a [bullet] hole in the top; other trays held partially disintegrated arms and legs.”⁴⁵ The Nazis showed no respect for the deceased, as multiple bodies were thrown together into the ovens making their remains unidentifiable.

⁴² Abzug, 12.

⁴³ Van Wyck Mason, 2.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Harry Herder Jr., “The Liberation of Buchenwald”, *JewishGen*, last modified 2011, accessed September 19, 2011, <http://www.jewishgen.org/Forgottencamps/Witnesses/HerderEng.html>.

Following incineration, the dead did not receive a proper burial. Such brutal treatments troubled liberators who looked upon the scene in dumbfounded silence. Those who could muster a response simply uttered, “I had enough. I can’t take it anymore.”⁴⁶ They then exited the body disposal plant, leaving behind the still warm ovens that had been in operation just hours before their arrival.

The “Strangulation Room” held further evidence of the atrocities carried out against Buchenwald’s inmates. This building sat adjacent to the crematorium and was the final destination for prisoners sentenced to death as a result of some infraction. After the condemned inmate was tossed into the room, an SS man placed a noose around the prisoner’s neck and hung him on hooks. If death was not immediate, the inmate was struck savagely on the head with a wooden mallet.⁴⁷ The SS attempted to sanitize this room before the Allies arrived. According to *Buchenwald: A Preliminary Report*, written on April 24, 1945, soldiers who entered the “Strangulation Room” testified, “Its walls were freshly painted to cover the blood stains, and the row of meat hooks along the ceiling, on which living victims were impaled, has been removed. The holes from which the hooks were taken have been plastered over.”⁴⁸ The SS’ attempts to hide the strangulation room’s true purpose proved futile, for it was not difficult for American soldiers to decipher what occurred within its walls.

The Buchenwald complex was representative of most of the Nazi camps found throughout the occupied territories. The majority of the concentration camps liberated by American Forces possessed comparable structures, which were also used in a similar, if

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Van Wyck Mason, 3.

⁴⁸ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 12.

not identical, manner to inflict the highest degree of misery upon inmates. Therefore, the descriptions of Buchenwald's main structures and the actions carried out within them give an accurate depiction of the conditions and crimes liberators uncovered in the various camps they entered. Although the name of the "extermination factory" differed, its agenda remained the same.

Camp Dora-Mittelbau: Toiling in the Tunnels for Nazi Germany

*"In a caravan of trucks we rushed into a job which proved fantastic and unbelievable to an American; a job distasteful and sobering; one created by the fantastical inhuman Nazi machine. We found out the full meaning of the words 'concentration camp.'"*⁴⁹

-Medic, 104th Infantry Division

The Army medic who uttered these words found that prisoners endured more than deplorable living conditions and harsh treatment while held in the concentration camp system. In fact, members of various U.S. Army Divisions learned first-hand that certain camps functioned as forced labor camps where the Nazis carried out their "extermination through work program." Dora-Mittelbau, a sub-camp of the larger Nordhausen complex, was just one of several "work" camps that kept inmates in a constant state of anguish – from the moment they woke up in the morning until their weary bodies collapsed at day's end.

Established in August of 1943, Dora-Mittelbau Concentration Camp was constructed near a mountain peak called the Konstein. Within the Konstein was an abandoned mine, which the SS Branch of Construction planned to enlarge in order to

⁴⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Record Group RG-09, "Liberation," Sub-group 037, "William E. Bracey collection relating to Nordhausen," 1 microfiche.

accommodate the production of V-1 and V-2 rockets.⁵⁰ Inside the vacant mine, and later munitions factory, was an elaborate tunneling system dug by Dora's inmates. Like all concentration camp internees, these workers were denied sufficient nutrition and endured savage beatings. Moreover, they also worked in some of the most dangerous and inhumane conditions found within the labor camps. American liberators were the first to discover and report on Dora-Mittelbau's infamous tunnels. A GI serving with the 29th Infantry Division entered Dora and reported, "After taking heavy fire from turrets above a barbed enclosure, my men and I smashed through the gates, and witnessed the sight of dead bodies and human beings in the worst state of degradation."⁵¹ Atrocities were carried out against a population of between 75,000 and 80,000 prisoners who passed through Dora during its years of operation.⁵² Not surprisingly, thousands expired from overwork, exhaustion, and appalling treatment.

Prisoners assigned to Dora's work detail were not housed in the ramshackle barracks that were commonly found in concentration camps. In fact, these inmates received no proper shelter as a reprieve from their workday. As the transcript from *The Dora-Nordhausen War Crimes Trial* documented, "There was no place at all to house the prisoners who had to start working in the tunnels immediately."⁵³ Laborers were forced to sleep and live in the same tunnels they spent their waking hours excavating. Prisoners

⁵⁰ Col. C.B. Mickelwait, Theater Judge Advocate, *Nordhausen Concentration Camp: Information Regarding Alleged War Crime*, 29 May 1946, p. 1; Folder Title: 99 Nordhausen, Flossenburg, Sachsenhausen, Mauthausen; Theater Judge Advocate's Office United States Forces, European Theater APO 757, Record Group 466, Box 4; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

⁵¹ Abzug, 22.

⁵² William J. Aalmans, ed., *The "Dora"-Nordhausen War Crimes Trial* (Dachau: Prosecution Staff, 1947), 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

slept on stacked, wooden bunks, breathing in the dank and stale air that permeated the caverns. No fresh air circulated throughout the work site.⁵⁴ The SS also limited the time inmates spent outside the factory's confines. The same trial record stated, "In the first months they [workers] saw daylight once a week only for the sole purpose of a roll-call on Sunday afternoon."⁵⁵ Following this routine activity, laborers were sent back to work inside the dismal mine.

Prisoners suffered in a multitude of ways while held within Dora. Thirst and starvation were common throughout the camp. Workers never received enough food and drinking water was often non-existent. Workers hunted for leaky pipes from which to extract drops of water to quench their thirst.⁵⁶ In the direst of circumstances, when no droplets could be found, inmates drank their urine.⁵⁷ This, along with the lack of running water for bathing and the absence of sanitation, led to the spread of disease. A war crimes document revealed, "Latrine facilities consisted of barrels cut in half, placed in front of the entrance of the sleeping tunnels. Thousands and thousands of prisoners were flocked together in those tunnels, so the filth and lack of sanitation brought lice, dysentery, and other diseases in their worst form."⁵⁸

Besides disease, the type of work performed in the camp also contributed to a high mortality rate. For example, no machinery was used to excavate the tunnels. Instead,

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Mickelwait, 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Aalmans, ed., 10.

the SS made laborers expand the tunnels using nothing more than their hands.⁵⁹ As anticipated, the lack of tools caused extreme fatigue, which led to a decrease in work performance. This was met with swift and harsh punishment. According to one Nordhausen report, “The SS guards shot laborers on the slightest pretext ... Beatings were frequently administered by SS guards and Kapos without the slightest reason therefore.”⁶⁰ Prisoners were executed for leaving the work site for any reason, including bathroom breaks.⁶¹ Indeed, SS guards willing to shoot prisoners for taking care of a basic need, such as using the latrine, had no reservations about executing workers for poor work productivity.

Grueling work schedules also added to the prisoners’ hardships. Dora-Mittelbau’s “employees” were assigned to one of two work shifts, each consisting of twelve hours of uninterrupted and intense labor.⁶² Four thousand prisoners were assigned to each shift and were required to work seven days a week without consistent meals, recuperation, or medical attention in the case of an injury.⁶³ In addition to the long hours of tunnel work, the SS demanded extreme haste from workers constructing the munitions factory’s passageways. One report documented, “One of the worst conditions was the speed with which everything had to be done. Prisoners were driven constantly, hurry, hurry, hurry!”⁶⁴ Inmates who could not keep up with the SS’ rapid work pace were eliminated.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Mickelwait, 2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Aalmans, ed., 10.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Life in the tunnels was fraught with danger. The SS regularly detonated explosives to expand factory tunnels and inmates were often injured or killed by blasts that thundered inside the mine. The detonation also filled the air with debris, making it difficult for prisoners to maneuver within the mountain.⁶⁵ Men resting from their work shift were often rained on by stones and suffocated by dust.⁶⁶

Peril also came in the form of punishment for alleged sabotage. Laborers accused of such acts were bound, gagged, and hung before their fellow inmates, serving as a deterrent against future offenses.⁶⁷ According to camp guards, sabotage consisted of “infractions” such as crafting an eating utensil from a discarded piece of metal.⁶⁸ Certainly, such a deed posed no threat to tunneling operations; however, the SS labeled these innocuous actions as sabotage in order to needlessly punish workers. Of course, all concentration camps had a degree of risk associated with incarceration; however, the addition of exhaustion from incredible manual labor made Dora-Mittelbau particularly hellish. American liberators were witnesses to the horrific conditions Dora’s laborers endured and the incredible toll living in the tunnels took on their bodies.

On April 11, 1945, the United States Army liberated 700 inmates from Dora-Mittelbau. They were all in a state of extreme physical deterioration.⁶⁹ Considering them too weak to be evacuated from the camp, the SS left these individuals behind to perish. These victims provided proof that the simplest comforts, such as food, water, and proper

⁶⁵ Mickelwait, 1.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Aalmans, ed., 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Kevin Mahoney, ed., *1945: The Year of Liberation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1995), 20.

bathroom facilities, were deliberately withheld from Dora's slave population. Certainly, all enlisted men, regardless of the nation they fought for, understood that war brought on certain hardships: food and supply rations, casualties, and widespread destruction that often forced people to seek shelter in less than comfortable locations. The deplorable conditions found in Dora-Mittelbau, however, exceeded those found in most of Europe's war torn cities. Populations living outside the concentration camp's fences did not live in utter squalor, endure senseless abuse, or slave away until death freed them. Unable to comprehend the cruelty displayed in the camps, one liberator simply asked, "Why?" A survivor explained, "In Hitler's conception of conquering the whole world, he desired to enslave all peoples, not as mere slave laborers, but in addition he tried to completely break the human mind, to put it on a level with common animals."⁷⁰ By accomplishing this, Hitler would transform the German into a "superman" and elevate his ego to an untouchable level.⁷¹ Dora-Mittelbau, along with other "work" camps, was not established simply to extract manpower to fuel Germany's war, but was constructed so the Nazis could perfect their process of complete degradation against those they enslaved – to eliminate the humanity from those they imprisoned. This notion astounded American liberators who became witnesses to the camp's destruction of a people.

⁷⁰ Lt. Col. Walter J. Fellenz, *Impression of Dachau Concentration Camp*, 6 May 1945, p. 9; Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau; Reports of Investigations 1943-1945; Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical..., Record Group 338, Box 7; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

⁷¹ Ibid.

Dachau's Dead

*"It was like approaching a rail siding in any small size Western town where the appearance of thirty or forty box cars on a single track, lonely and desolate, is not a sight uncommon. As I neared the cars; however, I saw death and destruction of human lives at its height."*⁷²

Walter J. Fellenz, 42nd Rainbow Division

This passage from Lieutenant Colonel Walter J. Fellenz's military report addresses the death he discovered outside the perimeter of Dachau Concentration Camp. His account confirms that Nazi aggression was not confined to the boundaries of the camp, but spilled beyond its walls. Lieutenant Colonel Fellenz was one of many American servicemen who encountered Holocaust victims before entering the front gates of a Nazi camp. Once inside, American soldiers were taken aback by the physical conditions within these facilities – the filthy barracks, torturous practices, and ceaseless suffering. All of these elements weighed heavily on the liberators who braved the camps. It was the immense human loss these Nazi institutions produced, however, that truly sickened the American combat soldier. The gruesome scenes of death they encountered at Dachau forever scarred these men.

On a cold and cloudy April afternoon, members of the 157th Infantry Division, famously known as the Thunderbird Division, and a comrade unit dubbed the Rainbow Division (42nd Infantry Division) closed in on Dachau.⁷³ Before entering the camp's eagle-adorned main gate, the men of these units stumbled upon "Nazi handiwork," which left many of them horror-stricken. Outside Dachau's walls were open boxcars sitting

⁷² Fellenz, 1.

⁷³ Capt. Isaac T. Danos to The Adjutant General, Washington, D.C., *Historical Records*, 10 April 1945, p. 16; WW II Operations Reports, 1940-48, 42nd Infantry Division; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 407, Box 9138; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

motionless on damaged train tracks.⁷⁴ The 42nd Division's Lieutenant Colonel reported, "Each of the forty cars contained the skin and bones of men and women, their bodies half clothed in rags – dead."⁷⁵ The victims wore the pajama-like uniform synonymous with concentration and death camp incarceration, and they lay atop each other in various positions, with arms and legs jutting out from all directions amid the pile of corpses.⁷⁶ The abused bodies sat in their own excrement because travelers were not permitted to leave the train cars to use the latrines during the journey to Dachau.⁷⁷ The physical condition of the bodies indicated that starvation and exposure were not the only causes of death aboard this extermination train. Some of the victims had been shot by SS guards for failing to lie flat on the boxcar's floor.⁷⁸

The American men who discovered these victims often referred to them as "skeletons." This term was commonly used to describe camp inmates who suffered from extreme starvation, which altered their appearance to such an extent that no other word better described their physical state. One rescuer recalled, "Most of them were naked and all of them were skin and bones. Honest, their legs and arms were only a couple of inches around and they had no buttocks at all."⁷⁹ The emaciated train riders received starvation rations before boarding the train and were then locked inside the boxcars for twenty-

⁷⁴ Fellenz, 1.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Michael W. Perry, ed., *Dachau Liberated: The Official Report by The U.S. Seventh Army* (Seattle, Washington: Inkling Books, 2000), 29.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Fellenz, 2.

⁷⁹ Dann, ed., 22.

seven days without food.⁸⁰ Their corpses were then left outside Dachau's walls, awaiting incineration in the camp's crematorium – a task the Nazis had failed to complete before the U.S. Army overran the camp.

According to a camp report, approximately two thousand lives were lost on the train destined for Dachau.⁸¹ This statistic stunned American liberators. Of course, U.S. soldiers involved in a brutal war anticipated a tremendous loss of life. The dead found aboard Dachau's train cars, however, were not war casualties. Instead, these men and women were the victims of Nazi hatred and racial prejudice. These individuals were forced to starve and suffer from the elements while en-route to Dachau, where undoubtedly, every last bit of energy would have been extracted from them until death came calling. Liberators had difficulty understanding the Nazis' logic that undergirded this heinous crime and were therefore overcome with rage and a thirst for vengeance. Seeking retribution against the SS, one combat soldier reported, "All [GIs] clutched their guns a bit tighter, squared their jaws and walked forward with a grimmer purpose in mind."⁸² Some soldiers became physically ill from the sight of the victims – they turned their heads away and vomited. Other GIs became grief stricken and could not hold back tears.⁸³ Still, some GIs remained hopeful that survivors would be found and searched for movement within the boxcars, disregarding the human excreta and corpses that touched

⁸⁰ Fellenz, 2.

⁸¹ Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, eds., *Dachau and the Nazi Terror: 1933-1945 Studies and Reports* Vol. 2, 2 vols. (Dachau, Germany: Verlag Dachauer Hefte, 2002), 16.

⁸² Emil P. Navta, Asst. Adj. General, to Commanding General Seventh Army, APO 758, *Transmittal of Unit History*, 22 May 1945, p. 5; WW II Operations Reports, 1940-48, 45th Infantry Division; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 407, Box 9414; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

⁸³ Benz and Distel, eds., 16.

their hands as they sought out the living. Liberators rescued seventeen inmates from the train. Elation, however, was short lived. The rescued prisoners died despite receiving medical attention.⁸⁴

Liberators were offended by the location of Dachau's death train. The boxcars were stopped on tracks that were located in an area frequented by German citizens. American soldiers found it unsettling that the SS permitted the train to remain in public view and that the city's residents seemed unaffected by the 2000 corpses lying in the open air. One soldier recalled, "This grisly spectacle was outside the walls of the camp – along a widely traveled road inside the city of Dachau where Bavarians passed daily."⁸⁵ Liberators began to question the German public's integrity, unable to determine if those who lived nearby were too afraid to protest the SS policies or if German society actually condoned the killings. Seemingly, the latter was true, as one GI revealed, "The civilians were looting a SS warehouse nearby. Children pedaled past the bodies on their bicycles and never interrupted their excited chatter."⁸⁶ Soldiers now struggled to cope with both the horror displayed outside the camp and the grim possibility that Germans, and most alarmingly young Germans, had grown so callous that death and decay did not trouble them. American soldiers believed that the German public's inaction against the crimes of the SS demonstrated a loss of humanity – a notion that disturbed many of them both at the moment of liberation and in the postwar years.

Leaving the train behind and passing through Dachau's threshold, Army

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Leo V. Bishop, Frank J. Glasgow, and George A. Fisher, eds., *The Fighting Forty-Fifth: The Combat Report of an Infantry Division* (Nashville, Tennessee: The Battery Press, 1978), 185.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

personnel found the camp saturated in death. Liberators quickly learned that the sight of corpses and the putrid odor of decomposition were common characteristics of the camp, and these would continually assault their senses as they attempted to rescue Dachau's inmates. Ironically, at first glance, the camp's appearance seemed anything but ominous. Lieutenant Colonel Fellenz confirmed this when he testified, "One could imagine from the impressive massiveness of the gray administrative buildings and barracks, the fine lawns, great walls and black, iron-grilled gates that you were approaching a wealthy girls' finishing school in the suburbs of one of our great cities."⁸⁷ He even refers to the "German finishing school" as "beautiful;" however, this would prove erroneous. Crossing the manicured lawns and passing through its embellished gates, American liberators discovered that Dachau held no splendor.

Once inside, the human remnants of Nazi crimes besieged the American troops. One infantry report estimated the number of dead at one thousand and attributed the deaths to illness and starvation. These inmates, however, were merely the corpses found within the camp's barracks. Many more victims would be found in Dachau's storage warehouse. Passing through the warehouse's doors, one liberator recounted, "This large building contained the naked, dead bodies of over 4000 men, women, and children, thrown one on top of the other like sacks of potatoes."⁸⁸ This same soldier went on to describe the smell as "terrific," and stated, "I vomited three times in less than five minutes; it was the most revolting smell I have ever experienced."⁸⁹ Additional victims were found throughout the camp. Numerous liberator accounts mentioned the piles of

⁸⁷ Fellenz, 2.

⁸⁸ Fellenz, 7.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

victims stacked twenty to fifty high amid Dachau's various buildings.⁹⁰ All of these lifeless bodies bore the marks of starvation and physical abuse.

Though ultimately inescapable, death was not always visible in Dachau, or in the numerous other liberated camps throughout the occupied countries. In many instances, the SS left only traces of murder behind for Allied Forces to uncover. For example, although no corpses were found on Dachau's "execution grounds," there was no question that countless souls had perished on this site. A thirty-foot long and four-foot high mound marked the location where inmates, sometimes six at a time, were forced to kneel facing the bulging earth as SS guards shot them in the back of the head.⁹¹ Thousands of men, women, and children were slaughtered at this location. The loss of life was so great that the 42nd Infantry Division's Lieutenant Colonel stated, "The mound of earth was still wet from blood."⁹²

Whether liberators encountered the physical remains of inmates or only impressions of death, American servicemen were gravely affected by what they found in the camps. Of course, Dachau's victims were not the first encounter the American military had with death. After all, by April of 1945, most soldiers had seen more combat than they wished – campaigns that had produced astounding casualties. Nevertheless, the sight of inmates victimized by the Nazis and killed in the name of racial and political ideology proved especially difficult for American troops to comprehend. An Operations Report written by men of the 157th Infantry Regiment captured their struggle as they tried to come to terms with the victims found in Dachau. The report reveals, "Veterans of

⁹⁰ Dann, ed., 20.

⁹¹ Fellenz, 6.

⁹² Ibid.

innumerable battles, men to whom death was an everyday occurrence in one form or another couldn't stand the sight of death at Dachau. Even Graves Registration Men, calloused by their job of handling hundreds of corpses, sickened here.”⁹³ Clearly, Dachau had a profound effect even on men who had seen the worst of war. Men whose primary task it had been to tend to fallen soldiers whose bodies had been pierced with bullets or torn open by shrapnel were nonetheless overwhelmed by the casualties in the camps and lost their composure behind Dachau's gates.

Although the names of the Nazi camps differed, the discoveries liberators made did not. Most camps' structures resembled those of Buchenwald, with its dilapidated barracks, “hospitals” built to ensure anguish, and gas chambers used to extinguish lives. Enslavement, like that carried out in Dora-Mittelbau, was a common practice of the SS. Mass death, as demonstrated in Dachau, was characteristic of all concentration camps since the annihilation of targeted groups was the Third Reich's ultimate goal. Buchenwald, Dora-Mittelbau, and Dachau demonstrated the horrific conditions and suffering liberators witnessed as they trekked through Germany, emancipating Nazism's victims. All liberator experiences were laden with uncertainty, as the men of the U.S. Army never truly knew what they would discover as they passed trepidatiously through the gates. One-time “rumors” had become truth as soldiers uncovered evidence of vile Nazi behavior. Undeniably, a pall of inhumanity blanketed every camp and left U.S. troops in a state of shock and despair – feelings that could only begin to be remedied by the signs of life they would eventually discover in the camps.

⁹³ *History of the 157th Infantry Regiment (Rifle)*, 4 June 1943 – 8 May 1945, p. 165; WW II Operations Reports, 1940-48, 45th Infantry Division; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Record Group 407, Box 9413; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

Chapter 3: Life Among the Dead

“The handing over of the camp is not to be considered. The camp is to be evacuated immediately. No prisoner shall be allowed to fall into the hands of the enemy alive.”⁹⁴

-Heinrich Himmler, 1945

Reichsfuehrer-SS Heinrich Himmler sent this evacuation order to Dachau’s Commandant in answer to questions concerning the approaching enemy (the Allied Expeditionary Forces) and what was to be done with the prisoners still housed in the camp. Although Germany was losing the war, Himmler insisted that concentration camp prisoners were property of the Reich and were not to be relinquished to the Americans. Therefore, on April 26, 1945, SS personnel began evacuating Dachau’s prisoner population, forcing seven thousand inmates to walk to an alternate camp. These evacuations were later dubbed “death marches” because many prisoners did not survive the long distances between locations, and those who could not keep pace with the group were shot.⁹⁵ Of course, many of Dachau’s internees were in no condition to make the journey. Consequently, Himmler devised a plan to deal with inmates unfit for evacuation. He sent a subsequent telegram to the camp’s commandant authorizing the use of military planes to drop napalm bombs and gas on the remaining prisoner population.⁹⁶ Fortunately, such bombings were never carried out.

Historical evidence shows that SS members in Dachau and other camps did not fully comply with Himmler’s orders to evacuate or terminate all prisoners before the

⁹⁴ Heinrich Himmler, SS-Reichsfuehrer, to Oswald Pohl, SS-Obergruppenfuhrer, Germany, 14 April 1945; Persons and Places Case File (Dossier File) 1944-1949; Records of the Judge Advocate General (Army) – War Crimes Branch, Record Group 153, Box 8; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

⁹⁵ “Dachau,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 11, 2012, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005214>.

⁹⁶ Nerin E. Gun, *The Day of the Americans* (New York, New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1966), 54.

Allied Forces arrived. Although the SS did force numerous prisoners on death marches, many inmates were left behind and ultimately rescued by American troops. In fact, it was not uncommon for SS officials to flee the camps for the sake of their own self-preservation, leaving prisoners unattended until aid arrived. The most blatant demonstration of defiance against Himmler's orders, however, came when SS guards, with a white flag in hand, surrendered a concentration camp to the United States Army. Seemingly, despite Himmler's refusal to accept Germany's impending defeat, SS members foresaw the Reich's imminent collapse and chose to abandon its objectives of racial purification and enslavement. Thus, Himmler's attempts to prevent the rescue of concentration camp prisoners had failed. In various cities throughout Germany and Austria, U.S. military personnel overran concentration camps and found men, women, and children awaiting aid and freedom that would come in the form of an American military uniform.

Meeting the Americans

"Walking in first I was greeted with the most spectacular ovation ever paid me. Behind that gate hundreds of prisoners were in formation and when I walked in they were so happy to see an American soldier that they all started yelling, screaming, and crying. To these people my appearance meant freedom from all torture and horror surrounding them."⁹⁷

-Staff Sgt. Albert J. Kosiek, 1955

This passage, from Staff Sergeant Albert J. Kosiek's personal account captures the immense emotion that marked Mauthausen's liberation. According to Kosiek's narrative, two SS captains, accompanied by a member of the American Red Cross,

⁹⁷ Staff Sgt. Albert J. Kosiek, "Liberation of Mauthausen (and KZ Gusen I, II, & III)," *KZ Mauthausen-Gusen Info-Page*. KZ Gusen Memorial Committee, accessed November 20, 2011, <http://www.gusen.org/kosiek1x.htm>.

willingly surrendered the camp's 12,000 prisoners and 400 SS guards to his army unit.⁹⁸ Once inside Mauthausen's gates, Kosiek and members of his platoon were met by a great mass of prisoners who could not contain their joy. Understandably, individuals that had undergone long-term abuse and deprivation, and had survived the ordeal, reacted expressively when Americans arrived in the camps. Kosiek's account implies that liberation was a joyous event; however, there were some occasions when tension and disorderly behavior accompanied freedom. For example, Kosiek reported that an apprehensive feeling followed the initial meeting between survivors and American troops. He noted, "The platoon was tense, each man looking grimly down the sights of his gun ready for anything."⁹⁹ Kosiek never revealed the source of the unnerving feelings that overcame the army unit. Was it due to the SS men still residing in the camp and the fear that they would launch an assault against the Americans? Or perhaps it stemmed from the inmates' appearance, which Kosiek described as "hardly resembling human beings."¹⁰⁰ Whatever the cause, feelings of uncertainty loomed over the men as they prepared to engage the SS and their captives.

Military accounts documenting the liberation of concentration camps demonstrated that members of the U.S. Army were correct in approaching the camps with caution. Case in point, among Dachau's 33,000 survivors, there were SS guards who, unlike Mauthausen's administration, refused to hand over the camp without an altercation. Brigadier General Felix L. Sparks, who served with the 157th Infantry Regiment, described the climatic first moments of Dachau's liberation. "As the main gate to the

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

camp was closed and locked,” he recounted, “we scaled the brick wall surrounding the camp. As I climbed over the wall following the advancing soldiers, I heard rifle fire to my right front.”¹⁰¹ Refusing to surrender, Dachau’s guards held their positions in guard towers and, armed with rifles, waited for liberators to walk into their line of fire. The Americans engaged in a gun battle with the SS. By the time Brigadier General Sparks made his way to the shoot out, the conflict had ended and members of Company I were escorting SS guards away from the area.¹⁰² According to Sparks, the Americans apprehended approximately fifty German troops who had been hiding in various locations throughout the camp.¹⁰³ Undeniably, liberators faced great risk and possible death when they took command of the camps.

Combative SS members were not the only threat to American troops. At times, the very inmates they attempted to rescue posed a risk to their safety. For example, while securing Mauthausen, American soldiers stumbled upon a kitchen riot that required the use of force to defuse the situation. In an attempt to alleviate their hunger, camp inmates had invaded Mauthausen’s kitchen and were using their hands to ladle soup from the bottom of pots into their mouths. Meanwhile, other starved prisoners stole and brutally fought over chicken.¹⁰⁴ Understandably, these survivors were reacting to the effects of extreme starvation and saw the absence of the SS as an opportunity to devour whatever food they could find. To the already unnerved soldier, however, survivors appeared irrational and possibly dangerous. Therefore, it was necessary to restore order. Shouting

¹⁰¹ Brigadier General Felix L. Sparks, (1990). *Dachau And Its Liberation* [Monograph]. Retrieved from Oklahoma Department of Libraries, 10.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Sparks, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Kosiek, “Liberation of Mauthausen.”

in Polish, a U.S. soldier attempted to stop the prisoner uprising. His efforts, however, were unsuccessful. He was forced to shoot his weapon into the air to halt the hunger driven melee.¹⁰⁵

Besides riotous behavior, American GIs witnessed individual survivors acting in a disturbing manner. Here again, hunger played a role in influencing frenzied behavior among the former inmates. Certainly, the sight of prisoners scavenging for food was common. One particular inmate's attempts to consume the contents of a jagged-edged can of food, however, alarmed an observing soldier. The GI stated, "He [the prisoner] had it with both of his hands jammed up against his face, trying to get his tongue into it to lick the contents and lick the top lid and the sides of the can, and the blood was pouring down his face, and he was acting totally insane..."¹⁰⁶ The promise of a few morsels of food seemed to outweigh the self-inflicted injuries the prisoner sustained from the can. In response to the unsightly display of animalistic behavior, the soldier knocked the can away from the survivor and disposed of it so no other prisoners would mimic this behavior.¹⁰⁷ This single moment was so upsetting to the young GI that he confessed that he could not erase the image from his mind. In fact, he admitted that this became the experience by which he defined the Holocaust. He stated, "So in my nightmares, that's what I see. And to me that's what the holocaust was ... It wasn't the death, it was a torment of the kind that can reduce a human being to subanimal status."¹⁰⁸

Factors other than starvation contributed to uncivilized behavior among survivors.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Hirsh, *The Liberator: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 242.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

A June 7th military memorandum regarding Mauthausen's liberation reported that survivors participated in "looting" and "thievery," grabbing up all items of value following the departure of the SS. The memorandum read, "It was necessary to resort to rather strenuous disciplinary methods, which have been progressively relaxed as the residents have demonstrated increased capacity for social responsibility."¹⁰⁹ Recalling the conditions camp prisoners were forced to endure, it is not surprising that they reacted rashly when their captors departed. Indeed, the notion of freedom completely overwhelmed some of the inmates and caused them to behave as if some sort of madness had impaired their judgment. Thus, for a moment, they resembled the broken people Nazi Germany had taken such efforts to create through its program of degradation. For an instant, survivors posed a danger to the American GIs who had emancipated them, requiring these soldiers to use force to return them to civility.

Although many survivors acted hysterically when the United States Army rescued them from the Reich's plan of extermination, there were some prisoners who, instead, began establishing some sense of organization and life after the SS fled the camps. Such was the case in Buchenwald. Here, prisoners played a role in ousting the SS from the camp, thus preventing further abuses. According to survivor testimonies, the SS had planned to evacuate Buchenwald's population, which meant certain death for numerous inmates. The evacuation, however, was thwarted by the actions of Buchenwald's inmates. Reportedly, a prisoner escaped from the camp and made his way to the nearby city of Weimar. There, he mailed a letter to Buchenwald's commandant, warning him that Allied

¹⁰⁹ Lt. Col. M. J. Proudfoot, Chief, Operational Analysis Section, *Memorandum NO: 1: Concentration Camp at Mauthausen, Austria*, 7 June 1945, p. 3; Folder Title: SHAEF/G-5/2711/7; Numeric-Subject Operations File, 1943 – July 1945; 105 Reports & Summaries of Field Operations Jacket 1 to 2; Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331, Box 218; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

paratroopers had been dropped in the area around the camp and Allied tank divisions were en-route. The letter spelled out the Allies' intentions to hold the SS man accountable for his crimes, and warned him that this would be his final chance to cooperate with Allied demands.¹¹⁰ Frightened, the camp's administration fled and all measures against the inmates were stopped. Consequently, American liberators did not encounter enemy fire when they appeared on the scene, nor did they find a horde of people ravaging the camp. According to one military report, "... instead of a heap of corpses, or a disorderly mob of starving, leaderless men, the Americans found a disciplined and efficient organization in Buchenwald."¹¹¹ In the absence of the SS, the inmates had established a camp committee that represented each nationality within the camp, and was charged with keeping order among the prisoners. This was a welcome sight for the American troops who took charge of Buchenwald's 21,000 inmates.¹¹²

Although the process of liberating Buchenwald remained orderly, its liberators were still plagued by anxiety. The physical appearance of those incarcerated in the camps was a prominent theme among liberator narratives, and may have been an additional cause for the apprehension many soldiers experienced. GIs expressed that they were awe struck by the physical changes camp prisoners had undergone – transformations that left them in such a deteriorated state that they no longer resembled human beings. One American witness described such a moment. "On sight of an American uniform," he recalled, "a horde of gnomes and trolls seems to appear like magic, pouring out of

¹¹⁰ Egon W. Fleck and 1st Lt. Edward A. Tenenbaum, *Buchenwald: A Preliminary Report*, 24 April 1945, p. 4; 17.11 Historical Reports – First U.S. Army – Jacket 9 thru 10; Numeric-Subject Operations File 1943 – July 1945; Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters, World War II, Record Group 331, Box 151; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

¹¹¹ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 6.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

doorways as if shot from a cannon.”¹¹³ This statement addresses both the prisoners’ appearance, as well as the strange manner in which they moved when they greeted their rescuers. The description continued, “Some [survivors] hop on crutches. Some hobble on stumps of feet. Some run with angular movements. Some glide like oriental genies.”¹¹⁴ Here, prisoners are compared to non-human creatures such as “gnomes” and “trolls” and were said to have moved in an unnatural manner, hopping, hobbling, or gliding. Inmates had suffered to such a degree that their bodies and movements no longer mimicked those of healthy human beings. What remained of the once vibrant men and women imprisoned in the concentration camp system truly stunned American liberators.

Many GIs recalled nerve-racking moments when they spoke about their involvement in the liberation of concentration camps. They also, however, noted the extreme joy former inmates expressed – elation that often caught combat soldiers off guard. Russell L. Stump, a tank gunner with Company F of the 92nd Calvary Recon Squadron, 12th Armored Division, vividly remembered the liberation of Landsberg and the pure delight emancipation brought to its inmates. “These Jewish men were mobbing the American soldiers, climbing on the jeeps and tanks and embracing and kissing them, until it interfered with our progress,” Stump recounted.¹¹⁵ Survivors were so overcome with the thrill of freedom that they often lost control, showering the Americans with affection before their liberators could secure the camp. Stump not only witnessed this show of gratitude but was a surprised recipient of it. He continued, “One of them climbed

¹¹³ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Corporal Russell L. Stump, *Sworn Deposition*, 6 October 1986, p. 1; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, “Liberation,” Sub-group 008, “Liberation of Landsberg and other camps,” 1 microfiche.

up to my tank turret, and grabbed me around the neck. He kissed me on the cheek so hard and long it felt like he had dislocated my jaw.”¹¹⁶ When Stump freed himself from the survivor’s embrace, he saw that tears were pouring down the grateful man’s face. Clearly, the moment of liberation was emotional for both survivors and their rescuers. This, however, was only the beginning of an experience that would have a lasting effect on all those involved. Once the camps had been secured and tears of gratitude had been shed, liberators began interacting with the survivors. Inmates who had previously been faceless strangers, a mass of diseased and foreign speaking prisoners, became individuals with stories that could now be told and lives that would now continue because the men of the U.S. Army had arrived.

Meeting the Survivors

“Our detail leader hand-signaled me to the right toward a small outbuilding. I approached at an angle and sidled up alongside an open window. I have a recollection of a torn blanket hanging from the sill. An antiseptic odor was commingled with the stench of death. Inexplicably, it seemed I was looking into a vacated infirmary. There, on a reasonably clean slab floor, lying stretched out on a pallet, was the lone abandoned form of a young man.”¹¹⁷

*-Pfc. Norman A. Thompson,
(G Company, 242nd Regiment, U.S. Army)*

Private-First-Class Norman A. Thompson participated in the liberation of Allach, one of Dachau’s satellite camps. While searching the camp, the twenty-year-old soldier spotted a male survivor that had been so ravaged by Nazi captivity that Thompson was unable to determine the man’s age. He commented, “He [the survivor] seemed anywhere

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Sam Dann, ed., *Dachau 29 April 1945: The Rainbow Liberation Memoirs* (Lubbock, Texas: Texas Tech University Press, 1998), 111.

between his teens and thirty.”¹¹⁸ The individual was unable to move or stand and displayed the usual signs of malnutrition and abuse. As Thompson recalled, “The sunken cavity where his stomach should have been was edged by ribs that jutted out from the tight peel of skin that covered them. Ashen skin was drawn tight over distended joints; swollen knees and elbows.”¹¹⁹ The man’s facial features were described as “gaunt;” however, it was the inmate’s eyes that truly struck the American soldier: “His great, round eyes were light blue-gray, and they smiled.”¹²⁰ Thompson and the young man never spoke to one another. In fact, they exchanged nothing more than a smile before the soldier moved on to secure the camp. Nevertheless, the wordless interaction made a profound impression on the GI. Several years after the war, he still contemplated the infirmarium patient’s fate. He wondered, “Did he survive – or were we too late? I like to think that we were not – and that sometimes – just as often as I think of him – he also thinks of me.”¹²¹

Thompson’s encounter with the infirmarium patient was representative of numerous meetings between liberators and survivors. His description of the survivor’s physical state mirrors that of the majority of prisoners rescued in the spring of 1945. Also, often times, the moments shared between survivors and liberators were brief and few words, if any, were exchanged. Certainly, this was the case with Thompson; however, the brevity of the encounter did not make the experience any less meaningful. In fact, the amount of time soldiers spent in the camps, whether it was mere minutes or hours, did not determine the

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Dann, ed., 112.

impact the camps and the survivors had upon them. Indeed, there were numerous occasions in which American servicemen spent ample time aiding prisoners and so came to know them on a personal level. An examination of some of the memorable moments shared between survivors and rescuers reveals the profound effect the experience had on both parties.

The discovery of women and children in concentration camps provoked some of the most heartfelt responses to the Holocaust. Lea Fuchs Chayen was one of many women rescued from Salzwedel, a satellite camp of the Neuengamme complex (part of the larger Buchenwald Camp).¹²² In 1997, she wrote about the day the men of the 84th Infantry Division saved her life. Chayen recounted, “A U.S. soldier jumped off the tank, opened the gates and announced, ‘You are free.’”¹²³ Bursting with gratitude, she tried to say “thank you,” but all words failed her. She explained, “It seems that the excitement of that morning was too much for my dilapidated condition.”¹²⁴

After gaining control of Salzwedel, the U.S. Army made arrangements for the female survivors to be taken to more suitable quarters – a German training school. According to Chayen, “The buildings were pleasant and roomy and our liberators had expelled all the cadets, after having them clean the place for us.”¹²⁵ The survivors were given soap, clean linens, hot meals, warm showers, and clothing. “We had the normal facilities of a dining room and we sat on chairs at tables, like human beings again,”

¹²² “The 84th Infantry Division,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 11, 2012, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10006138>.

¹²³ Hirsh, 94.

¹²⁴ Hirsh, 95.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

Chayen recalled.¹²⁶ She also remarked on the ample availability of help: “There were always several Army people present to make sure that all was well, and all this at a time when the United States was still fighting a war.”¹²⁷

The U.S. army attempted to supply these female survivors with all the items needed to begin their return to normalcy; however, it was their compassion that most impressed Chayen. She noted, “The most astonishing thing I found, then and today, was how wonderfully kind they were to us. How remarkable it was that under the dirt, disease, rags, and lice, these soldiers could see human beings, young girls. Their kindness and their thoughtfulness gave us back our belief in the human race.”¹²⁸ After witnessing the grim conditions the women endured, American soldiers did everything in their power, despite the ongoing war, to help these victims. In fact, GIs even attempted to entertain the women in hopes that they would experience laughter once more – to alleviate the mental strain imposed by their time in Salzwedel. “In the evenings, time and time again, there would be a knock on the door and soldiers would come in and do conjuring tricks or other silly things to get us to laugh or at least smile again,” said Chayen.¹²⁹ Clearly, liberators went to great lengths to comfort the women they freed from Salzwedel. Consequently, fifty-two years later, these men were still in Chayen’s thoughts. “I stand in awe and thank you not only for liberating me,” she declared, “but for being so humane, efficient and kind. God Bless you.”¹³⁰

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Hirsh, 96.

Chayen’s liberation account indicates the extents to which American servicemen went to save female survivors. Her retelling of the event also reveals the lasting impression the Americans’ actions had – she continues to sing their praises decades after the war. This was not an uncommon response to liberation and, in some cases, the chance meeting between female survivors and American soldiers resulted in much more than a heartfelt thank you.

In May of 1945, the SS abandoned Gerda Weissmann, along with a number of female slave laborers, in an old factory building. Shortly after the SS departed, Ms. Weissmann spotted an approaching vehicle. “All of a sudden,” she recalled, “I saw a strange car coming down the hill, no longer green, not bearing the swastika, but a white star.”¹³¹ American GI Kurt Klein was one of two men in the vehicle.¹³² He inquired as to whether any of the prisoners spoke German. Weissmann responded that she spoke English. Klein then asked about the presence of additional “ladies” in the factory. His use of the term “ladies” surprised Ms. Weissmann. She explained, “I have to tell you I weighed 68 pounds. My hair was white. And you can imagine, I hadn’t had a bath in years. And this creature asked for ‘the other ladies.’”¹³³ The kind words signaled to Weissmann that Kurt Klein did not view the survivors as diseased untouchables, but as human beings worthy of compassion. Next, Weissmann motioned toward the factory where the other women resided. Klein then opened the door and held it for Weissmann to pass – a show of respect that Gerda Weissmann had not experienced for some time. She

¹³¹ “Gerda Weissmann,” *Personal Histories: Individuals*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed September 20, 2011, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/phistories/phi_individuals_kurt_gerda_klein_uu.htm.

¹³² Kurt Klein was a German immigrant to the United States whose parents were deported to Auschwitz during World War II.

¹³³ “Gerda Weissmann,” *Personal Histories: Individuals*.

stated, "... in that gesture [he] restored me to humanity. And that young American today is my husband."¹³⁴

Gerda and Kurt Klein's story demonstrates that many survivors and liberators shared a profound experience. Obviously, not all encounters between American soldiers and female survivors resulted in marriage, but these stories do illustrate the impact camp women had on their rescuers, as well as the effect the liberators' actions had on the women they saved. Kurt Klein described the event as "shattering." He, like most liberators, had never witnessed women kept in such a dismal state. "It was an indescribable scene. There were women scattered over the floor on scraps of straw, some, some of them quite obviously with the mark of death on their faces," Klein later testified.¹³⁵ Such a sight prompted American GIs to try and restore these women to health, and subsequently, to life. In the process, the American combat soldier revealed his capacity to retain a gentle kindness amid a ferocious war.

Child victims also tugged at the GI's heartstrings. A military report on the Buchenwald concentration camp documented the American troops' reaction to the discovery of adolescent camp victims. The report read, "Most remarkable is the sight of the children, six to fourteen, most about twelve [years of age]."¹³⁶ Undeniably, the Final Solution did not discriminate based on gender or age. Buchenwald alone held seven hundred children captive, or at least this was the number of children still alive when the

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ "Kurt Klein," *Personal Histories: Individuals*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed September 20, 2011, http://www.ushmm.org/museum/exhibit/online/phistories/phi_individuals_kurt_gerda_klein_uu.htm.

¹³⁶ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 14.

Americans took custody of the camp.¹³⁷ Like their adult counterparts, children were housed in filthy and crowded barracks. They resided in wooden barns and slept on vermin-infested straw atop wooden shelves.¹³⁸ John Farinella, a member of the Tenth Air Force Disarmament Group, reacted to Buchenwald stating, “Disgust. You couldn’t believe what you were hearing, and what you were smelling was not nice. It just was disgusting. It changed a beautiful day to one of horrors. . . . You couldn’t conceive of human beings treating others in this manner.”¹³⁹ Numerous American servicemen shared Farinella’s sentiments and struggled with the reality that children were forced to dwell in this environment. Perhaps more striking than the conditions in which these children were found were the words one child survivor uttered to an American GI. Addressing his liberator, a teenage boy simply stated, “I want nothing from you, only that you never forget what you hear or see here.”¹⁴⁰ Despite prolonged neglect, the young survivor did not request food, water, or clothing, but simply asked that the Americans, and subsequently the rest of the world, remember the events of the Holocaust.

While interacting with the camps’ youngest survivors, liberators made another poignant discovery. Among those imprisoned in the concentration camp system were children who had never known freedom – children who had spent the entirety of their young lives in the camps and so knew no life other than the one they lived under Nazi rule. Pfc. Harry Herder Jr. met one such child while on duty in one of Buchenwald’s guard towers. Herder recalled, “He [the boy] was young, very small, and he spoke no

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Joseph J. Preil, ed., *Holocaust Testimonies: European Survivors and American Liberators in New Jersey* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 271.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

English. He was dressed in bits and pieces of everything, ragged at best, and very dirty. He chattered up a storm and I could not understand one word.”¹⁴¹ Finding that the two were unable to communicate with one another, Herder quickly withdrew a chocolate bar from his jacket. He was sure that the sight of such a well-known treat would break any language barrier. The chocolate, however, prompted no response from the child. The sugary snack was as foreign to the child as the English language. Herder recounted, “He had no idea what it was or what he was to do with it. I broke off a corner and put it in my mouth and chewed it. I broke off another corner and handed it to him and he mimicked my actions.”¹⁴² Having to teach the child how to eat chocolate was Herder’s first indication that the boy had never been outside the camp’s gates. Camp inmates later confirmed this assumption. Surprised, Herder exclaimed, “The only life he [the child] knew was that of the concentration camp. There was no way he could have known about chocolate candy before this afternoon. That flipped me.”¹⁴³

A unique relationship developed between Herder and the boy of Buchenwald. Intrigued by the seemingly happy child, Herder began feeding the child’s thirst for knowledge regarding the free world, and the young boy became the soldier’s temporary escape from war and brutality. Herder admitted, “I pretty well ignored what happened in the rest of the camp ... My whole world shrank to the inside of the fourth floor of the tower and the young boy.”¹⁴⁴ He spent his four-hour guard tower shift in the child’s company, teaching the boy simple English words and even dressing the child in his

¹⁴¹ Harry Herder Jr., “The Liberation of Buchenwald”, *JewishGen*, last modified 2011, accessed September 19, 2011, <http://www.jewishgen.org/Forgottencamps/Witnesses/HerderEng.html>.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

combat gear, which provoked laughter – a sound rarely heard while on a tour of duty.¹⁴⁵ Of course, the discovery of children in the camps was a huge blow to soldiers' morale. Ironically, however, interactions with these young survivors were also a source of joy for the American GIs who met them on liberation day. One military report noted, "They [children] rush about, shrieking and playing, playing where the smell of death is still thick in the air."¹⁴⁶ The sight of children engaging in merriment amidst the camp's decay demonstrated that there was still life in the camps; life to be saved and enjoyed. Herder affirms this notion when he refers to his time in Buchenwald's tower as "pleasant." This was undoubtedly due to the young survivor whom he referred to as "a joy scampering around."¹⁴⁷

In truth, the majority of the encounters that happened behind concentration camp gates proved emotional for GIs. Remarkably, the plight of complete strangers roused the emotions of the military men who attempted to save them. There were some instances, however, in which the victims were not unfamiliar to their rescuers. Soldier accounts reveal that on some occasions, liberation meant an unexpected reunion with family. These meetings proved especially moving.

Jewish-Americans were among the soldiers who participated in the liberation of the camps. Whether native-born Americans or immigrants to the United States, a number of these soldiers had family members residing in Europe during the Second World War. Many of these relatives became victims of Nazi persecution and were detained in the concentration camp system. Therefore, it was not unheard of for Jewish-American GIs to

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 14.

¹⁴⁷ Herder Jr., "The Liberation of Buchenwald."

encounter their kin wasting away in the camps.

Lee Merel, a Jewish-German, was just one of a number of liberators who freed family members from Nazi persecution. Merel fled the antisemitism that plagued Germany in the 1930s. Accompanied by his parents and older sister, he landed on American soil in 1935. Following the outbreak of the war, Merel enlisted in the United States Army, where he confessed that he was a victim of antisemitism.¹⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Merel was determined, as an American soldier, to stop the Nazi war machine from dominating the European continent. He fulfilled his military duty serving as a combat engineer and then later as a member of surveillance intelligence. Fluent in the German language, Merel was essential in interrogating Nazi POWs. Among those he questioned was the head engineer of Krupps Works, a factory that utilized concentration camp slave labor.¹⁴⁹ Of the time he spent overseas, Merel remarked that the liberation of the “Gardelegen Concentration Camp” was one of the most memorable events of his military career.¹⁵⁰ As the leader of a unit consisting of 125 men, Merel and his comrades were instructed to save as many of the camp’s living prisoners as possible. There were two thousand survivors among the three to four thousand dead.¹⁵¹ Merel’s account of his reunion with a particular survivor explains why Gardelegen proved unforgettable.

Following a day of tending to Gardelegen’s survivors, Merel strolled through the camp and encountered a figure lying on the ground. “I thought the body was dead,” he

¹⁴⁸ Preil, ed., 279.

¹⁴⁹ Preil, ed., 280.

¹⁵⁰ Lee Merel states that he liberated “Gardelegen Concentration Camp,” however there is no evidence that such a concentration camp existed. It is believed that when he refers to such a camp, he is referring to a camp in close proximity to the town of Gardelegen.

¹⁵¹ Preil, ed., 280.

recalled. “And that body just had enough strength to grab my ankle to show me that this person was alive.”¹⁵² Soldiers moved the male survivor to a hospital tent where he began his recovery. Merel later returned to check on the gentleman and learned that the man was deaf and mute. He described the meeting with the survivor, “As we started to talk, and I could sign a little bit because I had such a cousin when I was a very young boy ... He was able to read lips and I do speak German very fluently. We started to talk, and the more we talked, one thing brought to another and pretty soon I discovered he was my first cousin.”¹⁵³

Although Merel had escaped with his immediate family to the United States, much of his extended family remained in Europe. Consequently, his cousin, along with a number of other family members who remained in their homeland, became victims of the Nazis. Fortunately, Merel was able to save his cousin from Gardelegen and later assisted in his transfer to the United States. Although his cousin escaped death, approximately twenty of Merel’s family members were lost during World War II, many of whom died in the Holocaust.¹⁵⁴ According to Merel, his experience with Gardelegen’s survivors left him questioning his religious beliefs. This was not an uncommon reaction from soldiers. Still struggling with issues of faith years later, he concluded his 1992 Holocaust interview by saying, “Morality and humanity is lost much too quickly in the daily struggle for living.”¹⁵⁵ Merel, along with his comrades in arms witnessed first-hand the cost of lost humanity – senseless human devastation.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Preil, ed., 279.

¹⁵⁵ Preil, ed., 281.

Lee Merel's unique experience suggests that some American soldiers who liberated the camps were directly affected by the Reich's persecution of the Jewish people. Although Merel was never held captive in the concentration camp system, his extended family, like those of other American soldiers, suffered and died under Nazi rule. For example, a GI who served with the 71st Infantry Division and who participated in the liberation of Gunskirchen Concentration Camp in Austria reported, "... a sergeant of our group of five raced out of one building, his face flaming with rage. The sergeant, a Jewish boy of Polish descent, had found three of his relatives lying in the filth of that barrack."¹⁵⁶ Several accounts such as these have been found among liberator testimonies and narratives, and demonstrate that the American soldier was not untouched by the Holocaust.

American troops were not only shocked by the discovery of family members behind camp gates, but were also astonished to find their brothers-in-arms imprisoned by the Reich. The Nazi regime had taken numerous U.S. soldiers prisoner following skirmishes fought in Europe's war zones. Although this was one of war's realities, the Reich's decision to transport captured troops to concentration camps rather than POW camps demonstrated a unique cruelty. A preliminary report regarding Buchenwald confirmed that American servicemen were in fact held prisoner in the camp. Usually, American captives were given POW status, which distinguished them from the general prison population and ensured acceptable treatment. In Buchenwald, however, this was not the case. Reportedly, 170 American aviators were held hostage in an area separate from "common" prisoners. They were kept in the "tent camp" which, like the shelters

¹⁵⁶ Major Cameron Coffman, PRO, 71st Infantry Division, to PRO, Third Army, 5 May 1945, p. 3; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, "Liberation," Sub-group 024, "71st Infantry Division records relating to the liberation of Gunskirchen," 1 microfiche.

housing concentration camp inmates, proved inadequate. The tent camp, constructed of canvas, provided no protection from the weather. According to the report, American POWs were stripped of their shoes and made to sleep in these tents or outdoors in the frigid cold.¹⁵⁷ As a result, one American died from pneumonia and others fell ill.¹⁵⁸ In this instance, there was little difference between the conditions in which POWs and concentration camp inmates dwelled.

American GIs were also held prisoner in Berg am Elster (Berga), one of Buchenwald's satellite labor camps. Although Berga was classified as a POW camp rather than as a true concentration camp, again, there was little distinction between the two facilities. Like slave laborers in "work" camps, American soldiers held in Berga were forced to work for the Reich. The conditions in this POW camp varied little from those in Buchenwald. According to a 1983 article by Ray Weiss titled "Soldiers of Berga," 350 Americans were forced to toil in Berga where they suffered from malnutrition, were subjected to abuse, and literally worked to death.¹⁵⁹ The article acknowledges, "What happened in Berga is believed to have been an isolated incident of German brutality against American prisoners."¹⁶⁰ Nevertheless, this isolated incident had powerful ramifications for the men who were held prisoner, as well as those Americans who rescued them.

Private-First-Class Bernie Melnick, one of Berga's POWs, spoke about his ordeal

¹⁵⁷ Fleck and Tenenbaum, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ray Weiss, "Soldiers of Berga" [Article first appeared in *Fort Myers News-Press* on May 1, 1983], p. 27; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-04, "Concentration and other camps," Sub-group 028*01, "Records and photographs relating to American Jews held as prisoners of war during World War II," 1 microfiche.

¹⁶⁰ Weiss, 28.

decades after the war. During the Battle of the Bulge, Melnick, along with numerous American GIs, was captured and taken to Bad Orb Stalag IXB, a POW camp. Melnick stated, “Life was cramped, but the food, shelter and treatment provided by the Germans were satisfactory.”¹⁶¹ This, however, would change following the SS order to remove all Jewish prisoners, including Jewish-American prisoners, from the POW camp. As Weiss reveals, “The German guards assured them [Jewish prisoners] everything would be fine, that they were being sent to a quiet place, a farm or factory.”¹⁶² Now, Jewish-American POWs were re-categorized as slave laborers. However, Weiss notes, “Stories had circulated by then about Jews being exterminated in concentration camps. The men worried that the same fate awaited them.”¹⁶³

Once in Berga, American soldiers endured identical living conditions as their concentration camp counterparts. Americans slept in crowded barracks on straw-filled mattresses, and were given one charcoal stove, which provided little heat. Besides their worn military uniforms, POWs received no blankets or adequate clothing. In regards to nutrition, a GI stated, “The one main meal each day consisted of a bowl of hot water with few unidentifiable objects floating on top.”¹⁶⁴ Their work regiment consisted of hard labor. According to Weiss, “The American POWs worked seven days a week from sunrise to sunset, boring rock out the middle of a mountain.”¹⁶⁵ One POW recounted, “At least one American died each day. Yet, few men tried to escape. Most could muster just

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Weiss, 29.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

enough energy to walk.”¹⁶⁶ Melnick reiterated the severity of the situation stating, “Toward the end, we were walking zombies. Once four guys tried to escape and they were caught and shot through the head.”¹⁶⁷ Indeed, in the eyes of the Nazis, an American military uniform meant no reprieve from torture or death.

Escape was not an option for the Americans at Berga. Fortunately, in late April 1945, the 11th Armored Division and members of Company D, 712th Armored Division, liberated Melnick and his comrades from the camp.¹⁶⁸ Upon seeing the approaching Americans, Melnick forgot the exhausted state of his body and hurried to meet his liberators. He recalled, “I ran over to some tank and the commander picked me up and lifted me inside. I was hysterical. Between that and having dysentery, I s--- all over the place.”¹⁶⁹ Melnick, and many American POWs suffered from various ailments such as jaundice, lice infested wounds, extreme starvation, and typhoid.¹⁷⁰

Typically, liberators met survivors with some hesitation. This was attributed to the soldier’s uncertainty regarding the prisoners’ reaction to their presence or from the fear of contracting diseases from ill inmates. “They looked so bad – if you gave them anything, they wanted to respond by hugging you, and I was just afraid to get a disease from them,” confessed one liberator.¹⁷¹ In liberation episodes involving fellow soldiers, however, rescuers cast these fears aside and embraced American POWs despite their

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Hirsh, 145.

¹⁶⁹ Weiss, 31.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Hirsh, 121.

physical state. Unlike foreign camp victims, Melnick and the other American GIs were not quarantined and given aid in the camp, but were evacuated to English and French hospitals where they received immediate attention.¹⁷² According to Weiss, “The 11th Armored Division brought them [American survivors] to the city of Cham, where they took over a building and quickly converted it into an emergency hospital.”¹⁷³ One POW stated, “The care couldn’t have been better, and the empathy was fantastic. They couldn’t do enough for me.”¹⁷⁴ The United States Army was so enraged by the Nazis’ treatment of American soldiers that protocols governing the dissemination of camp diseases and the transportation of victims were ignored and POWs were swiftly removed from Berga.

A number of Jewish-American soldiers did become direct victims of the Holocaust. They were captured, singled out, imprisoned in concentration and labor camps, and made to suffer conditions that mirrored those of the general prison population. American GIs who rescued their comrades from these camps struggled with the reality that the Reich would subject military men to such ill treatment. “It wasn’t supposed to happen to American boys. But it did,” exclaimed one shocked U.S. soldier.¹⁷⁵ Of course, American servicemen understood that the capture of POWs was common, however, they believed that certain rules of war would govern the treatment of military men under enemy imprisonment. The sight of American POWs in varying degrees of health and starvation, and often displaying signs of physical abuse, was proof that no such rules applied. American survivor Morton Brooks stated, “I never realized how bad we looked

¹⁷² Weiss, 31.

¹⁷³ Hirsh, 144.

¹⁷⁴ Hirsh, 146.

¹⁷⁵ Weiss, 31.

until I saw other people's faces when they saw us for the first time."¹⁷⁶ Clearly, American liberators could not conceal their utter disbelief from the fellow soldiers they rescued. Now, the Holocaust was no longer a European tragedy, but had extended its reach beyond European borders and into American lives.

Expressions of Gratitude

In addition to powerful encounters with camp prisoners, American liberators noted the emotional displays of gratitude survivors expressed. Elated to be free again, many camp inmates made concerted efforts to thank the American men who put a stop to Nazi persecution. These gestures made a tremendous impression upon GIs. The image of the grateful survivor seldom left their thoughts following liberation, provoked intense emotions, and even served as a source of inspiration that reinvigorated the men who would soon return to the battlefield.

In his testimony regarding the liberation of Dachau, Private-First-Class James Dorris spoke of his encounter with a male survivor who was so appreciative of his new freedom that he gave away his only possession to the young GI. Although the survivor's token of gratitude would be deemed worthless by anyone beyond the barbed wire fences, Dorris found it to be invaluable. In fact, the inmate's gesture left him filled with emotion and endowed Dorris with a new perspective regarding the war.

Entering Dachau, Pfc. Dorris was immediately overcome by the human anguish that pervaded the camp. Desperate for relief, he stated "This is what Hell is like ... God, get me out of this place."¹⁷⁷ His initial impulse to flee was doused by the sight of living

¹⁷⁶ Hirsh, 145.

¹⁷⁷ Hirsh, 200.

prisoners roaming the camp's grounds. A single inmate approached Dorris and asked the young GI if he had a cigarette. He responded, "No."¹⁷⁸ In truth, the soldier had four or five packs of cigarettes in his pockets. He was, however, concerned that the sight of a single cigarette would send the prisoners into a dangerous frenzy since he had just witnessed survivors wrestling and beating fellow inmates over mere scraps they found upon the ground. The survivor ran back to his barrack and then returned. To the GI's surprise, the prisoner was not requesting the cigarette for himself. Dorris recalled, "... he [the survivor] stuck his hand through the wire fence, and he had a little tiny rusty can. Took the top of [*sic*] off it. Inside was a cigarette butt about, oh, maybe three quarters of an inch long. It was all water-stained, and he handed that to me, and he said, ... 'This is in thanks for rescuing us.'"¹⁷⁹ Immediately, Dorris had a change of heart regarding his time in Dachau. He stated, "Well, that just really got to me. Tears came to my eyes, and I had a complete different change from the way I had felt just two minutes before, and I thought, 'I'm really doing some good here.'"¹⁸⁰ Understandably, the campaign against the Nazis and the visual horrors of the camp weighed heavily upon this American soldier, however, the brief encounter with a grateful Dachau survivor gave the ordeal a new meaning. Despite the repugnance of war and the camps, this GI was "doing some good" by entering the camp and rescuing the living.

Most survivors had nothing material to offer to those who had saved them. Nevertheless, they found ways to express their immense gratitude. Again, the smallest gesture from a weak inmate proved invaluable. For example, after liberating Dachau, an

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Hirsh, 201.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

American soldier recalled meeting escaped survivors along the road. He described these former inmates as “the walking dead” and noted the difficulty with which they moved.¹⁸¹ Yet, despite their physical discomfort, one survivor found the strength to express his appreciation. “He could hear our jeep coming before we got to him. With the most painful effort he turned toward us, brought himself to attention and saluted. The amount of effort to do that was more, far more, than he could spare,” stated the liberator.¹⁸² The recipient of this simple, yet profound gesture, vowed to always remember this display of respect and strength as he continued his campaign against the Germans.

Remarkably, the individuals the Nazis labeled as weak and parasitic to the world became symbols of perseverance for many combat soldiers. After meeting the survivors, U.S. infantrymen knew why they were fighting this war. It was not simply a fight to stop Germany’s domination of the European continent; it was a battle to restore the humanity that had been lost when the Nazis came to power and the world neglected to stop their predatory actions. The survivors’ expressions of thanks signaled to liberators that they had fulfilled more than their duty on the battlefield. American troops had rescued individuals from annihilation.

Initially, camp victims were seen as an anonymous mass of filthy and emaciated people. This changed the moment American GIs entered the camps. Through life saving action and their willingness to listen to the survivors’ stories of loss, they enabled camp victims to become more than just statistics. They became people returned to humanity.

They were human beings who expressed pure delight at the sight of an army jeep

¹⁸¹ Louis P. Lochner, “The Death Camps,” p. 119; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, “Liberation,” Sub-group 002*01, “Articles concerning the liberation of Landsberg and Hurlach,” 1 microfiche.

¹⁸² Ibid.

carrying representatives of freedom, sorrow over their tremendous loss, and appreciation toward the liberators who delivered them from evil. They also had a powerful effect on their liberators, provoking emotions such as disgust and grief over the display of Nazi cruelty against camp inmates, as well as strength and inspiration drawn from the survivor's determination to celebrate another chance at life. Truly, liberation was an unpredictable and powerful experience, which would ultimately color the American soldier's view of the enemy.

Chapter 4: Reaction and Retribution

“I could see no reason for what had happened in the camps. At night, I could see the faces of the people in the camp in front of my eyes, despite the fact that we had been through a very bad shooting war where you knew people were getting killed. But the camp was something completely outside the war. I can see shooting somebody in a war, but the technical and completely inhuman way of handling people, reducing them to an ‘it,’ disturbed me quite a lot.”¹⁸³

-S/Sgt. Paul P. Lenger, 1974

Staff Sergeant Paul P. Lenger spoke these words in a 1974 interview in which he recounted his experience in Ohrdruf, a Buchenwald subcamp. Lenger, like many American soldiers, understood war’s consequences, yet he struggled to comprehend the Reich’s treatment of camp prisoners. He discovered that the Final Solution was something altogether unique. Although individuals incarcerated in concentration and forced labor camps no longer posed a threat to the Reich, the Nazis continued to torment and degrade them. This treatment of military and civilian prisoners was completely foreign to American troops. Of course, U.S. forces took numerous German soldiers captive during World War II; however, their handling of these prisoners in no way resembled that of the Nazis. War’s rules of engagement did not permit such cruelty. The Third Reich, however, paid no heed to the rules that governed warfare. Thus, American liberators were forced to face the reality of the Holocaust. The United States Army had prepared GIs for war; however, the Final Solution was not a conventional war. Major George B. Wood, a chaplain with the 82nd Airborne, was correct when he declared, “This

¹⁸³ Yaffa Eliach and Brana Gurewitsch, eds., *The Liberators: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberation of Concentration Camps* (Brooklyn, New York: Center for Holocaust Studies Documentation & Research, 1981), 4.

is not war as conducted by international rules of warfare. This is murder such as is not even known among savages.”¹⁸⁴

The Nazis’ inhuman behavior often provoked American servicemen into action, either in the form of aid, or in some instances, retribution. For liberators, there was a marked difference between the Allies’ campaign against the Nazis and the Third Reich’s use of the concentration camp system to exterminate entire populations. An examination of the Gardelegen Massacre highlights the distinction between war and the Final Solution.

Combat vs. the Camps

On April 16, 1945, the men of the 2nd Battalion, 405th Infantry Regiment, 102nd Infantry Division uncovered a horrific event. While trekking through the German city of Gardelegen, they stumbled upon a barn containing the smoldering remains of 1100 prisoners.¹⁸⁵ These inmates had been evacuated from various concentration camps in an SS attempt to inhibit their rescue. Originally, they were destined for Oranienburg, a city north of Berlin. The damage to Germany’s rail system prevented their transport.¹⁸⁶ Thus, the inmates were taken to Gardelegen where they met an appalling fate.

On the evening of April 13, 1945, the SS, along with several regular German soldiers, forced the prisoners inside one of Gardelegen’s large barns. They soaked the straw covered floor with fuel and set it ablaze. They then locked the doors, trapping the prisoners inside, surrounded the barn, and machine-gunned anyone who tried to escape.

¹⁸⁴ Michael Hirsh, *The Liberator: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 280.

¹⁸⁵ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 29.

¹⁸⁶ Ben A. Smith Jr., Chief War Crimes Branch, to Mr. Rockwell, *Memorandum: Kreis Gardelegen Massacres*, 28 July 1947, p. 1; Folder Title: Gardelegen 99; Country Subject Files, 1946-1951; Extradition Board; Records of the U.S. High Commissioner For Germany, Record Group 466, Box 4; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

Next, the captors taunted their victims. According to a military report, “They even went so far as to cry out that those still alive were to make known that fact and their lives would be saved. All who responded were shot.”¹⁸⁷ As flames licked at their skin, some prisoners attempted to escape by digging underneath the barn’s walls. These individuals were gunned down as they emerged from beneath the structure.¹⁸⁸ American troops found these victims exactly as they were at the moment of their death – badly charred and riddled with bullets. “At the time we got there,” one U.S. soldier recalled, “the bodies were stacked up six or seven deep, mostly concentrated at the doors.”¹⁸⁹ The crowded doorways made clear that panic had overwhelmed the prisoners as they attempted to escape. Viewing the crime scene, it was not difficult for American GIs to imagine the terror and anguish these victims had suffered before succumbing to the flames.

The Gardelegen Massacre was unlike anything U.S. soldiers had seen thus far in the war. The burning of live, unarmed prisoners was not an act of war, but an act of unrepentant brutality. Ben Berch, a member of the 102nd Infantry Division, 701st Tank Battalion, emphasized the difference between war and Gardelegen: “Now here were men [American soldiers] who had been through some very fierce fighting. Men who had been in tanks that were torn open, pieces of metal ripped right through them ... All kinds of

¹⁸⁷ Smith Jr., 2.

¹⁸⁸ Kevin Mahoney, ed., *1945: The Year of Liberation* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1995), 69.

¹⁸⁹ “William Ned Cartledge Interview,” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00021001000.pdf>.

horrors these men had been through, beyond everything. But this wasn't war. ... This was total horror.”¹⁹⁰

Many American liberators expressed disgust after viewing the aftermath of the Reich's crimes. Despite their military training, they often remarked that they were ill equipped for what they encountered off the battlefield and behind concentration camp gates. A member of the 71st Infantry Division stated, “You'll never see any[thing] like it in training manuals or practice code books.”¹⁹¹ There were no military procedures in place for the rescue of thousands of emaciated and dying prisoners because no one had foreseen such a situation. For numerous American soldiers, hearsay and limited military intelligence had been their primary sources of information, and even these failed to adequately prepare them for their encounter with Hitler's Final Solution. George E. King, a member of the 11th Armored Division, 3rd Army, explained, “Of course, we had all heard rumors and reports ... of what was taking place in these places, but the actual experience was almost unbelievable ... And it was something you were totally unprepared for ... You might be intellectually prepared for it ... but to experience it is a totally different thing.”¹⁹² Most liberators concurred with such an assessment.

Rank and file members of the U.S. military were not the only battle-hardened men affected by the Nazis' treatment of prisoners. Members of the U.S. Army's upper echelon also commented on, and reacted to, German atrocities. In fact, in his wartime correspondence, General Dwight D. Eisenhower remarked on the misery found in

¹⁹⁰ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 30.

¹⁹¹ Corporal Jerry Tax, “And Afterwards,” *The Seventy-First Came...To Gunskirchen Lager*. Remember.org, accessed November 20, 2011, http://remember.org/mooney/text_only.html.

¹⁹² “George E. King Interview,” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00055001000.pdf>.

Ohrdruf. “The things I saw beggar description ...” Eisenhower wrote, “The visual evidence and the verbal testimony of starvation, cruelty, and bestiality were so overpowering as to leave me a bit sick.”¹⁹³ He also noted fellow General George S. Patton’s reaction to the camp, revealing that Patton refused to enter a structure containing the bodies of starved inmates. “He [Patton] said he would get sick if he did so,” Eisenhower recalled.¹⁹⁴ It was reported that General Patton did become physically ill after viewing the camp’s dead, a telling reaction from a military figure that was not known for expressions of empathy toward either soldiers or victims. General Omar N. Bradley, who accompanied Generals Patton and Eisenhower into Ohrdruf, also wrote about his experience in the camp. From his words, it was clear that none of the U.S. Generals present that day were immune to the horrors of Ohrdruf’s barbarism. While viewing bodies that bore the signs of cannibalism, General Bradley disclosed, “Eisenhower’s face whitened into a mask. Patton walked over to a corner and sickened. I was too revolted to speak.”¹⁹⁵ Evidently, American generals who had certainly seen numerous bloody campaigns had difficulty stomaching Ohrdruf’s sights. Indeed, death in the camps was unlike death on the battlefield. General Bradley confirmed, “For here death had been so fouled by degradation that it both stunned and numbed us.”¹⁹⁶ These seasoned war veterans’ reactions made clear that the Holocaust was beyond the bounds of war.

¹⁹³ Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years: IV* (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins Press, 1970), 2616.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Caleb Carr, ed., *Omar N. Bradley: A Soldier's Story* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999), 539.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

American Justice?

“And we cried not merely tears of sorrow. We cried tears of hate. Combat hardened soldiers ... cried tears of hate. Then we stood aside and watched while the inmates of the camp hunted down their former guards, ... We stood aside and watched while these guards were beaten to death ... In truth, it might be said that we were completely without feeling. Deep anger and hate had temporarily numbed our emotions.”¹⁹⁷

*-David Max Eichorn, May 1945
(U.S. Military Rabbi)*

In his military report for the first week of May 1945, Rabbi David Max Eichorn, recounted in detail the emotions that overcame him and the American soldiers that he accompanied into Dachau. Although particular to the Dachau experience, his observations describe equally well the various other camps, structures, and ditches that were filled with the Reich’s victims. American servicemen were not only overcome by grief, but also harbored hate for the SS officials who had created such human devastation. In his report, Rabbi Eichorn declared, “To die from a bullet is so easy and so quick, many said. But to die slowly, in mind and in body, from torture, humiliation and hunger is much worse.”¹⁹⁸ The tears the Americans shed for those in the camps often led them into action. At times, this action was compassionate. At times, it was vengeful.

In his personal narrative, Private Colvin Caughey, a machine gunner with the 21st Armored Infantry Division, described the deeply felt, and sometimes conflicted, emotions American soldiers experienced when they encountered Nazism’s victims. After stumbling upon lifeless inmates lying in roadside ditches and SS members forcibly marching columns of prisoners to an unknown location, Caughey and his platoon were consumed by an anger that demanded an immediate response. “There was a mass rage among our

¹⁹⁷ Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, eds., *Dachau and the Nazi Terror: Testimonies and Memoirs*, Vol. I (Dachau, Germany: Verlag Dachauer Hefte, 2002), 53.

¹⁹⁸ Benz and Distel, eds., 54.

men that filled the air,” he noted. “It could be felt. This happens occasionally in war and produces extreme violence.”¹⁹⁹ This, however, was not a combat situation. The Americans were not taking on an enemy assault. Instead, they were viewing the Final Solution in progress.

An extreme reaction to such extreme cruelty may have been inevitable. Having witnessed the Nazis in action, Caughey later explained, “On this day it was apparent no prisoners would be taken alive. The German soldiers had two choices; fight to the death ... or feign [*sic*] death and hope they would be overlooked.”²⁰⁰ Some German soldiers did attempt to fake death to avoid American retaliation but were unsuccessful. “I saw one of the guards lying on the ground about forty feet from the road.” Caughey recalled, “I had seen enough dead men to recognize death when I saw it. He was not dead, only pretending. I too was angry enough to kill.”²⁰¹ Within minutes, the machine gunner took aim and fired on the Germans. Surprisingly, he did not hit a single enemy soldier. “As I pulled the trigger it felt like someone had grabbed my rifle and it moved. The bullet struck the ground only a couple inches over his [the German’s] head. I felt God had moved the gun to prevent what I was about to do.”²⁰² A man of faith, Pvt. Caughey believed that God had intervened. He concluded, “... as a Christian I could not kill. I must love, even my enemies.”²⁰³ Although enraged enough to contemplate retaliation and

¹⁹⁹ Colvin Caughey, to Raymond Buch, *Experience at Mauthausen*, 1 November 1984, p. 1; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, “Liberation,” Sub-group 018*01, “Testimonies Concerning the Liberation of Mauthausen,” 1 microfiche.

²⁰⁰ Caughey, 2.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

even to fire upon the defenseless enemy, Caughey's faith compelled him to abandon his attempt at revenge. Other soldiers, however, did not refrain from punishing the Germans. As Caughey recounts, "In the distance, 300 yards, I could see several German soldiers in the field with their hands high, trying to surrender. I also saw the stream of tracers (used in machine guns) streaking toward them, but high. The tracers became lower and soon the Germans fell."²⁰⁴

Another incident of "American justice" took place in Dachau. According to a document from the Headquarters of the Seventh Army, Office of the Inspector General, dated June 8, 1945, an American Lieutenant was involved in the execution of four Dachau guards. "At the entrance to the back area of the Dachau prison grounds," the report noted, "four German soldiers surrendered to Lt. William P. Walsh, ... in command of Company "I", 157th Infantry. These prisoners Lt. Walsh ordered into a box car, where he personally shot them."²⁰⁵ Lt. Walsh's initial shots failed to kill the guards. A soldier identified as Private Albert C. Pruitt finished the task.²⁰⁶ GI testimony stated that the executed Germans were wearing medic emblems, however, there was considerable doubt that they were in fact members of a medical unit.²⁰⁷ Nonetheless, Lt. Walsh made his displeasure with the "medics" known before gunning them down. According to one GI's testimony, "Witnesses say that before shooting the men, Walsh had screamed at them

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Lt. Colonel Joseph M. Whitaker, *Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*, 8 June 1945, p. 1; Folder Title: Report of Investigation Concerning Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau; Fraternalization by General Officers of HQ XXI Corps to Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau; Reports of Investigation, 1943-1945; Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical, And Support Organizations, Record Group 338, Box 7; National Archives at College Park College Park, Maryland.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Hirsh, 196.

about being medical personnel and allowing the horrible things he'd just witnessed along the train tracks [the deliberate starvation and subsequent death of numerous inmates].²⁰⁸ Determining what role, if any, these Germans played in the deaths of the inmates was of no importance to Lt. Walsh. The dead were evidence enough of their guilt and their negligence warranted immediate punishment.

According to the same document, Lt. Walsh was also involved in additional crimes inside Dachau. It was reported that seventeen German POWs were machine-gunned after their removal from guard towers near Dachau's main gates.²⁰⁹ According to Lt. Walsh, American soldiers fired on the SS only after they made threatening movements toward U.S. troops. His claim, however, was called into question and the action was subsequently investigated. The Office of the Inspector General concluded its inquiry stating, "This investigation indicates an apparent lack of comprehension on the part of the investigating officer of the normal disorganization of small unit combat action and of the unbalancing effects of the horrors and shock of Dachau on combat troops already fatigued with more than 30 days continuous combat action."²¹⁰ Despite the discrepancies in the description of the incident, the shooting was deemed a consequence of battle fatigue in conjunction with Nazi crimes that proved intolerable for American soldiers.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Whitaker, 1.

²¹⁰ Lt. Gen. Wade H. Haislip, *Untitled and Undated Document Regarding the Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau*; Folder Title: Report of Investigation Concerning Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau; Fraternalization by General Officers of HQ XXI Corps to Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau; Reports of Investigation, 1943-1945; Records of U.S. Army Operational, Tactical, And Support Organizations, Record Group 338, Box 7; National Archives at College Park College Park, Maryland.

Retribution did not always come at the hands of the Americans. A number of U.S. soldiers admitted that although they did not participate in acts of vengeance against the enemy, they did not prevent others from attacking camp guards. Harry F. Allen, a combat engineer, recalled one such episode. After taking in Dachau's awful sights, Allen stated, "It was unbelievable. The first reaction was anger. And the second reaction was to retaliate."²¹¹ The GI never confirmed whether he, or members of his unit, took action against the guards. He did, however, admit that the Americans made no attempts to shield the SS from the prisoners. Taking into account the hell these prisoners endured, Allen explained, "That's why we, I guess, held the guards so that the prisoners could get to them. We felt like they were entitled."²¹² Recounting the prisoners' actions, he stated, "They got to them [camp guards], as weak as they were. Of course, they just overwhelmed them, and all they could do was beat them and pummel them and hit them with whatever they could find."²¹³ Eventually the Americans stopped the assault, but not before allowing prisoners to repay their captors for their unspeakable deeds.

Still, not all liberators allowed survivors to assault camp personnel. Julius Bernstein, a former member of the 12th Armored Division and liberator of a concentration camp in Landsberg, Germany, described his surprise when a former inmate attacked a German guard he had taken into custody. Bernstein recalled, "As I was escorting him to the waiting truck to be transported to the rear area to a prisoner of war interrogation point, one of the twelve survivors [found in the camp] sneaked up behind me and my prisoner

²¹¹ "Harry F. Allen Interview," *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00001001000.pdf>.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Ibid.

and sank a piece of 2” x 4” board into his skull. He dropped like a rock.”²¹⁴ Determined to safeguard the remaining SS members present in the camp for the purpose of interrogation, Bernstein helped evacuate these individuals before the camp’s survivors could injure or kill them.²¹⁵ Although some American soldiers sought instant retribution against camp administrators, some U.S. servicemen did suppress their rage and left matters of judgment and sentencing to the War Crimes Commission.

Reaction to the Holocaust did not always involve retaliation. Some liberators overcame their initial anger and focused on providing immediate aid to camp victims. Father Edward P. Doyle, a former Army Major who served with the 104th Infantry Division, recalled the commitment Americans made to saving Nordhausen’s ill and dying prisoners. Doyle described U.S. soldiers as “angels of mercy” who immediately set to work. “The first and monumental task was to administer to the living,” he reported. “Here the American G.I. was superb working under the direction of the equally heroic doctors, together they saved the savable and put forth their best effort in the cause.”²¹⁶ Numerous GIs in various camps acted as Doyle described. They evacuated the infirm, set up hospital tents, and fed the starving.²¹⁷ Many rescuers felt compelled to improve the survivors’ conditions. Often times, they were ill equipped to meet the needs of these individuals,

²¹⁴ Julius Bernstein, *Transcription of Julius “Ed” Bernstein’s Tape*, p. 3; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, “Liberation,” Sub-group 008, “Liberation of Landsberg and other camps,” 1 microfiche.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Army Major Edward P. Doyle, “I Was There,” *Nordhausen*. National Timberwolf Association, accessed December 5, 2011, <http://104infdiv.org/TESTIMON.HTM>.

²¹⁷ Leo A. Hoegh and Howard J. Doyle, *Timberwolf Tracks: The History of the 104th Infantry Division, 1942-1945*, p. 331; Folder Title: 31011-0 (27332) Timberwolf Tracks-The Hist. 104th INF. DIV.; 104th Infantry Division, 3104-0 to 3104-0.3; WWII Operations Reports, 1941-48; Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1917-, Record Group 407, Box 11946; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

however, they made the determined effort to do whatever they could to comfort those they saved.

The desire to help extended to entire army units. The 104th Infantry Division's After Action Report for 12 April 1945 documented one of the U.S. Army's rescue missions. According to the report, "The Surgeon [of the 329th Medical Battalion] took over 9 apartment houses in the vicinity [of Nordhausen] to which to evacuate the living people. The buildings were cleaned out by Company D, 329th Medical Battalion. All ambulances and trucks available in the Medical Battalion were utilized in evacuation of the patients to the houses."²¹⁸ The First Army also established food trucks to feed the prisoners.²¹⁹ Actions such as those described in the report demonstrated that despite the harrowing scenes that conjured deep feelings of hate among American soldiers, there were servicemen who emphasized rescue rather than retribution. For the moment, the living survivor took precedence over the German enemy. "The gun and the pursuit of the enemy was dropped and all hands turned to the job here and now ... helping the helpless," stated Doyle.²²⁰

Another noteworthy liberator reaction to the discovery of the camps was "psychological numbing." Undeniably, many American rescuers were traumatically affected by their experience in the camps. Often times this reaction was immediate and visible to both the survivors and fellow soldiers. Some liberators, however, displayed little to no emotion when dealing with victims. This was not necessarily because they

²¹⁸ *Supply And Evacuation Annex To After Action Report, 104th Infantry Division*, 1-30 April 1945, p. 10; Folder Title: 0.3 A/A Rpts. 104th Inf. Div.; 104th Infantry Division 3104-0.3 to 3104-0.7; WWII Operations Reports, 1941-1948; Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1917-, Record Group 407, Box 11948; National Archives at College Park College Park, Maryland.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Doyle, "I Was There."

were devoid of human compassion. Instead, it was a defense mechanism, which some U.S. soldiers used in order to “cope” with the situation. For them, disconnecting from the victims was the only way to complete their liberation mission. Robert H. Abzug, author of *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps*, explains the technique: “These soldiers found themselves capable of confronting the awful tasks of sorting the living from the dead, breathing the fetid air, and walking amidst untold human misery only by partially shutting off their senses and emotions. They also distanced themselves from the scene around them by making a basic distinction between themselves and the dead or liberated.”²²¹ Captain John Henry Baker Jr. of Company B, 260th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Army engaged in psychological numbing by disassociating himself from survivors, viewing them as “foreigners who didn’t speak our language.”²²² The language barrier that existed between this American liberator and the alien survivor was enough to anesthetize the soldier from reacting emotionally. Baker revealed, “I don’t think we were as disturbed as much as we probably were later after realizing what had happened. We didn’t realize these things at the time. We were . . . front line troops, living day to day, doing a job.”²²³ For the moment, the detachment from camp victims allowed soldiers to focus on rescue. Reality, however, set in with time and American liberators would eventually have to come to grips with their experiences.

²²¹ Robert H. Abzug, *Inside the Vicious Heart: Americans and the Liberation of Nazi Concentration Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 40.

²²² “Captain John Henry Baker Jr. Interview,” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00004001000.pdf>.

²²³ Ibid.

German Guilt

After tending to the living, the U.S. Army began the task of burying the dead and sanitizing the camps. This job proved too much for the Americans to handle without additional aid. As the war still raged across Europe, resources were limited. Thus, the American Army ordered German citizens to assist in clearing the camps. Many of these civilians claimed to have had no knowledge of the camps or their operations. Others confessed that they were aware of the camps, however, they did not know about the severe treatment the SS imposed upon the inmates. American soldiers questioned these claims. Liberators often wondered what role, if any, German civilians played in the administration of the Reich's policies. In an attempt to gain answers to these troubling questions, the Seventh U.S. Army conducted an investigation of Dachau's townspeople. They concluded:

“We had been lied to.” These words crop up again and again ... When asked whether they [townspeople] realize that in the last three months a minimum of 13,000 man [*sic*] have lost their lives within a stone's throw of where they live, they claim shocked surprise. When asked whether they ever saw transports of the dead and dying pass through the streets along the railway ... They insist that most of the trains came in at night, and that they were sealed cars.²²⁴

Although the townspeople eventually admitted that they had “limited” knowledge of what had occurred in the camp, they quickly countered with the question, “What could we have done?”²²⁵ This was a common response voiced by German citizens. Seemingly, fear kept Dachau's residents silent. The Seventh U.S. Army's report noted, “Although the population as a whole realized the utter bestiality of the SS and the nauseating

²²⁴ Michael W. Perry, ed., *Dachau Liberated: The Official Report by The U.S. Seventh Army* (Seattle, Washington: Inkling Books, 2000), 36.

²²⁵ Perry, ed., 37.

occurrences beyond the barred gates of the camp, they were afraid even to say anything – much less do something – because the shadow of the camp hung over them as well.”²²⁶

The majority of American soldiers present at the time of Dachau’s liberation disregarded the townspeople’s explanation for their inaction. They simply could not accept their claims, and this influenced their reaction toward German civilians.

The attitudes expressed by Dachau’s townspeople resonated throughout Germany. Therefore, when extra hands were needed to clean out the camps, the U.S. Army was quick to force the German public to witness the consequences of their government’s actions. In various locations throughout occupied territories, Germans were summoned to duty within the camps. In Nordhausen, the 104th Infantry Division oversaw German citizens who removed and buried camp victims. Its unit history noted, “Hundreds of the male citizens of the town were ordered to the camp, where under guard, they worked several days carrying litter cases and collecting corpses by hand. They dug mass graves on a prominent hill near the camp and carried the corpses through the town to the graves.”²²⁷ In Gardelegen, the Army Signal Corps filmed citizens carrying 1100 crosses that were eventually used to mark the graves of the inmates killed in the barn massacre.²²⁸ In Landsberg, Colonel Edward F. Seiller, head of the 12th Armored Division’s Military Government section, ordered Germans to remove their hats while digging a mass grave – a show of respect for the dead. He then addressed the townspeople stating, “You may say that you weren’t responsible for all this, but remember you stood for the government

²²⁶ Perry, ed., 38.

²²⁷ Hoegh and Doyle, 329.

²²⁸ United States of America War Office. *Death Mills, 1946*, Operational Film 111-OF-19, ARC: 36082, Distributed By Amazon.com for NARA, DVD.

which perpetrated atrocities like these.”²²⁹ He added, “This is a prime example of your vaunted German culture.”²³⁰ It was not unusual for division leaders to use these moments to chastise the German people. This was demonstrated in the Allied speech given at the burial service for the victims of the Wöbbelin Concentration Camp. The statement read:

The Allies shudder because they never dreamed or visualized that human leadership supported by the masses could so debase itself as to be responsible for results like those who lie in these open graves. You Germans shudder for reasons of your own. Some of you, having been a party to this degradation of mankind, shudder for fear that your guilt will be determined, as in fact it will. Others among you shudder because you let depravity of this character develop while you stood still. The civilized world shudders on finding that a part of its society has fallen so low.²³¹

To ensure that all citizens, male and female, truly grasped the reality of Nazi persecution, the Allies ordered the townspeople to tour the camps and become witnesses to the Holocaust. The film, “Nazi Concentration Camps, 1945,” was shot at General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s request and documented camp crimes, as well as the German public’s reaction to the after effects of the Holocaust. To ensure the authenticity of the film’s footage and accompanying photographs, the documentary’s disclaimer stated, “[the images] constitute a true representation of the individuals and scenes photographed; they have not been altered in any respect since the exposures were made.”²³² Of course, viewers must take into account that the perspective of the Holocaust presented in the film

²²⁹ Louis P. Lochner, “The Death Camps,” p. 115; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09, “Liberation,” Sub-group 002*01, “Articles concerning the liberation of Landsberg and Hurlach,” 1 microfiche.

²³⁰ Lochner, 116.

²³¹ *Statement Delivered at Hagenow, Germany, on 8 May 1945 at Public Burial Service for 144 dead uncovered at Wöbbelin Concentration Camp*, p. 2; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-04, “Concentration and other camps,” Sub-group 002*01, “Records relating to Wöbbelin concentration camp,” 1 microfiche.

²³² United States Army Signal Corps. *Nazi Concentration Camps, 1945*, Compilation Film Report 238.2, ARC: 43452, Distributed By Amazon.com for NARA, DVD.

is that of the photographer's; however, the images are nonetheless authentic and carefully document the German citizens' behavior while inside the camps.

In the film, U.S. Army soldiers are seen escorting Ohrdruf's townspeople through the camp. Although viewers do not hear the German citizens' conversations, no words are needed to determine their attitudes. For instance, male observers remain expressionless despite the misery that surrounds them. They stand stoic, with their hands tucked in their coat pockets or with their arms crossed in front of their bodies.²³³ The Americans' initial presumption that the German people are unfeeling thus appears accurate. As the film progresses, Nazi party members are seen reluctantly, and only after receiving coercive nudges from American soldiers, entering a shed containing dead bodies in various stages of decomposition. The film captures a young U.S. Military Policeman pushing a German Major inside the structure. Finally, expressions of disbelief begin to cross the men's faces. For many, this is their first encounter with the human reality of the Reich's murderous policies. Upon leaving the shed, one man claps his hands together and mouths inaudible words – his sorrowful eyes and frown reveal his disbelief. Another German rubs the sides of his face with his hands and shakes his head from side to side as if to say “No!” Or, perhaps, he is vainly attempting to shake the images of the dead from his mind.²³⁴ As the tour concludes, the film's narrator declares, “All denied knowledge of what had taken place at Ohrdruf.”²³⁵ Indeed, these German citizens now understood the high price of their ignorance.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Ibid.

German women were also ordered to view their government's handiwork. At a concentration camp in Arnstadt, Germany, the same film shows 1200 Weimar citizens briskly walking toward the camp. Men are dressed in suits and women wear skirts and blouses, carry purses, and sport neatly styled hair. The German citizens smile and engage in conversation as they walk alongside military vehicles. They conduct themselves as if they are on a cheerful Sunday outing rather than about to encounter the brutal conclusion of the Final Solution. The film's narrator comments, "They act as if this is something being staged for their benefit."²³⁶ The men and women even have the audacity to smile at the cameras documenting the day's events. This reaction prompts one to wonder if these Germans truly did not understand the mission of the camps since they expressed no apprehension regarding what they might find once they reached their destination. Their demeanor, however, drastically changed once they passed through the camp's gates.

Inside Arnstadt, visitors were first made to view camp artifacts such as vivisections of prisoners' organs and a human head. Smiles swiftly turned into expressions of horror. Two men are then seen escorting a female visitor away from the scene. She could not stand upon her own two feet after viewing the evidence of Nazi sadism. Next, civilians are led into the prisoner barracks where an American GI unwraps an inmate's bandaged foot to reveal that his toes had rotted away – the result of untreated trench foot and proof that the SS provided no medical care for prisoners. The Germans leave the scene holding handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses.²³⁷ Evidently, they could not handle the stench of rot for only a few minutes. Prisoners, however, had to

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

endure this odor on a daily basis. As the tour comes to an end and the camera spans the crowd, few Germans are smiling. This was an indication to the U.S. Army that the civilians finally comprehended the true nature of the Reich's policies.

The U.S. Army not only sought German accountability for the Holocaust, but also wanted to document the event for the entire world. Doing so would finally put to rest the unfounded belief that German crimes were nothing more than fabricated stories to muster hate for the enemy and support for the Allied cause. Thus, William Quinn, Intelligence Officer for the United States Seventh Army, ordered an official report on Dachau to be written in order to preserve the historical event for posterity. He stated, "I was so astonished that I decided that right there and then I would document this genocidal aspect and also the torture and medical aspects of what I'd seen."²³⁸ Working with the Office of Strategic Services, the head of his Counter Intelligence Corps, and photographers, Quinn set to work recording all aspects of the camp, including its establishment and administration, and the townspeople's reaction. The result was a comprehensive documentation of the workings of a concentration camp. Ten thousand copies of the report were printed and distributed. It became the first, in-depth look inside the Nazis' pursuit of the Final Solution.

American liberators also felt the need to recount what they saw in the camps. Indeed, a number of soldiers wrote home about their ordeal. This allowed them both to document the event as well as to disseminate information confirming that the "rumors" were in fact true. In a letter to his parents, Al Sommer Jr., a member of the U.S. military (rank and branch not stated), wrote about the "ugliness" he uncovered in a concentration

²³⁸ Brewster Chamberlin and Marcia Feldman, eds., *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987), 33.

camp. He also addresses the issue of public knowledge and the need to convince the world that the events had taken place. “You have read in newspapers and magazines of German concentration camps, the camps where slave laborers were confined, tortured, and killed,” he writes. “In print, it seems perhaps true, but the thought never really finds its way into that ‘inner sanctum’ of realization, which is a result of personal experience. I, like all of you, read of these places, and murmured, ‘How awful.’”²³⁹ As a result of his experience, Sommer Jr. now knew that the narratives that appeared in American publications were not “perhaps” true, but were unquestionable fact. Now, his parents too had received confirmation regarding the stories – information they would most likely share with others. Sommer Jr. expresses the importance of his written words stating, “I want this letter placed in a very safe place, for it is my personal memorandum of something I personally want to remember, but would like to forget.”²⁴⁰ Despite the “ugliness” that he would like to erase from his mind, this GI recognizes the importance of remembrance and awareness.

The mission to inform the American public did not end with the Army’s official reports and the soldiers’ personal letters. General Eisenhower also brought German atrocities home to the American public by requesting that a congressional committee travel to Europe and view the evidence the liberators had uncovered. They were expected to share their experiences with the nation. General Eisenhower’s request to General George C. Marshall read:

We are constantly finding German camps in which they have placed political prisoners where unspeakable conditions exist. From my

²³⁹ Al Sommer Jr., *Personal Letter to Parents*, 8 April 1945, p. 1; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-09.056, “Al Sommer Jr. Letter Relating to Ohrdruf,” 1 microfiche.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

own personal observation, I can state unequivocally that all written statements up to now do not paint the full horror.

In view of these facts, you may think it advisable to invite about 12 congressional leaders and 12 leading editors to see the camps. . . . Such a visit will show them without any trace of doubt the full evidence of the cruelty practiced by the Nazis in such places as normal procedure.²⁴¹

Following this request, members of Congress visited the camps and became witnesses to Nazi inhumanity. Understanding that the magnitude of the devastation displayed in concentration and labor camps might prove too unbelievable for the public, General Eisenhower enlisted the aid of the clergy to verify the crimes committed against the helpless. A telegram from the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Expeditionary Forces stated, “It is our considered opinion that such a delegation [of clergy] would further help establish beyond debate acceptance by the American people of the truth of these conditions.”²⁴² An article in a July 1945 edition of *Army Talk*, A U.S. military publication, verified that the stories shared by liberators, the official reports written following the liberation of the camps, and the images captured by the Army Signal Corps and media correspondents, that appeared in American newspapers and magazines, did in fact have an impact on public opinion. The article concluded, “There seems little doubt that accounts of German atrocities are accepted by an overwhelming majority of Americans as plain, uncolored, if revolting truth.”²⁴³

²⁴¹ Alben W. Barkley et al, *Report on Atrocities and Other Conditions in the Concentration Camps in Germany* (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1945), 1.

²⁴² SHAEF Main, From Allen, to AGWAR for Surles, *Request for Delegation of Clergy to Visit Camps*, 1 May 1945, p. 1; Special Staff Adjutant General’s Division, Executive Section, Decimal File 1945, 000.5-2; Allied Operational and Occupation Headquarters. World War II, Record Group 331, Box 125; National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

²⁴³ “What the Homefront Thinks,” *Army Talks: Legacy of Fascism*, 10 July 1945, Vol. IV No. 9. p. 5; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-10.137*18.

Indeed, what began with the liberator's entrance into the camps turned into the American Army's campaign to educate the public regarding Nazi actions during the Second World War. Certainly, holding Germany accountable for its crimes, tending to the survivors, and bringing the truth about the enemy to light proved gratifying for American liberators. Still, many American rescuers struggled to cope with their experiences in the camps. For them, the battle continued into the postwar years and shaped the remainder of their lives.

Chapter 5: Forever Changed

“Today I know your name. But to me, all of us, all of us who became brothers in that short instant of liberation, you will always remain the Unknown Soldier, the myth, and it matters not whether today ... you scarcely remember the episode of that afternoon in the course of an almost endless expedition. Even if you should read these lines, you won’t be able to understand what your brief appearance meant to us, to what extent it changed our lives, our way of thinking, our very gospels.”²⁴⁴

*-Nerin E. Gun, 1966
(Dachau Survivor)*

In this passage, author and Dachau survivor Nerin E. Gun notes that despite the possibility that American liberators might not recall the day they freed the camp’s inmates, the moment was nonetheless profound for the survivors. According to Gun, liberators had a tremendous impact on camp prisoners, not only on their physical survival, but also the way in which they viewed mankind. He wrote, “You made us suddenly understand that the world was still composed of human beings, that there were still men who were ready to give up their lives to save ours, without trying to strike a bargain, without asking anything in return.”²⁴⁵ Gun refers to the rescuers as “unknown soldiers” because the American men who entered Dachau on his day of liberation were strangers – men who owed Nazi Germany’s prisoners nothing, and yet gave them everything. He stated, “It was you, unknown GI, coming from the shadowy edge of the field, with your submachine gun in your hand; you, carefree, brave and daring GI, who made men of us again.”²⁴⁶ For Gun, it was of little importance that these soldiers might not remember the faces of those they saved. The liberator’s fading memory did not detract from the enduring impact his actions had on survivors. Unbeknownst to Gun, however, the

²⁴⁴ Nerin E. Gun, *The Day of the Americans* (New York, New York: Fleet Publishing Corporation, 1966), 19.

²⁴⁵ Gun, 20.

²⁴⁶ Gun, 21.

memories of liberation day did not diminish in the minds of the liberators. To the contrary, these memories were firmly embedded in the American soldier's mind, and in many instances, made a lasting impression.

Suffering Indefinitely

Holocaust victims had undergone an ordeal that catastrophically altered their lives. Following liberation, a number of survivors admitted that they continued to experience feelings of hopelessness despite their freedom. This could be attributed to their poor physical state, the loss of their possessions, and, most notably, to the death of numerous family members and friends. Returning to life would require a great effort, and some would never fully recover from their experience in the camps. The same was true for some American liberators. Of course, the liberator's experience differed significantly from that of the survivor's; however, their role as rescuers and eyewitnesses left many of them with mental and emotional scars that time would not erase.

The liberator's battle did not end with his discharge from military service. Once home, many American soldiers suffered from flashbacks due to their service overseas. Interestingly, these flashbacks were not always the result of combat. On a number of occasions, U.S. troops identified concentration camps as the source of their continued torment. These episodes came on suddenly and without warning, wreaking havoc on the liberator's life. For instance, Corporal Forrest Robinson, a former military policeman with the 104th Infantry Division, recalled the ferocity with which his memories of Nordhausen came flooding back. Returning to the camp's barracks decades after the war, Robinson recounted, "In a searing flash, horrid memory swept over me, and I could see it all once again – row upon row of devastated human bodies, emaciated, starved, mutilated,

gray, and rotting in the hot sun.”²⁴⁷ Robinson’s account demonstrates how fresh the liberation experience could remain in a soldier’s mind.

In his recollection, Corporal Robinson gives a vivid description of the flashback he suffered while revisiting Nordhausen, yet he does not mention the methods he used to cope with the unwelcome assaults on his mind. Other liberator accounts, however, provide further information about the ways in which GIs tried to ease the mental and physical toll flashbacks took on them. For example, Private-First-Class Harry Herder Jr. suffered for decades from his memories of Buchenwald. “Over fifty years ago,” he recounted, “I went through a set of experiences that I have never been able to shake from my mind.”²⁴⁸ According to Herder, “They subside in my mind, and then, in the spring always, some small trigger will set them off and I will be immersed in these experiences once more.”²⁴⁹ It is no coincidence that these memories rush to the forefront of his mind every spring – the time of year Buchenwald was liberated by American forces.

Herder noted that “some small trigger” often sparked his mental return to Buchenwald. For many veterans, these triggers included a certain smell (a burnt smell was most often mentioned), a sound, or an image. For Herder, the culprit was a photograph of a dying inmate that appeared in an issue of *LIFE* magazine. He stated, “I have seen that photograph several times in the years since [the liberation of Buchenwald], and every time I see it my stomach rolls a little, my mind goes into some kind of a dance,

²⁴⁷ Michael Hirsh, *The Liberator: America's Witnesses to the Holocaust* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 67.

²⁴⁸ Harry Herder Jr., “The Liberation of Buchenwald”, *JewishGen*, last modified 2011, accessed September 19, 2011, <http://www.jewishgen.org/Forgottencamps/Witnesses/HerderEng.html>.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

and it takes me a little time to return to normal.”²⁵⁰ A single image on the page of a popular magazine was enough to send this battle-hardened soldier into physical and mental agony. In fact, he confessed that his experiences in Buchenwald gave him many sleepless nights that continued to plague him over the years.²⁵¹

To relieve the turmoil his memories had caused, Herder resorted to writing as a form of solace. He stated, “The degree of immersion [into my memories] varies from year to year, but there is no gradual diminution with time ... This year I set those memories on paper, all of them ... I hope for catharsis. I do not expect a complete purging – that would be expecting too much...”²⁵² Realizing that he could not cope with the feelings and memories that stemmed from his involvement in Buchenwald’s liberation, he decided, “If I can get these memories to crawl deeper into my mind, to reappear less vividly, and less frequently, it will help.”²⁵³ To achieve this, he penned his experiences for all to read. He believed that sharing his feelings and recollections would help lighten the weight that they had come to exert on his life. He also acknowledged, however, that this was a great sacrifice to expect from his readers. Therefore, he asked them for forgiveness and explained why he must draw them into the darkest moments of the war. As Herder began his tale, he wrote, “I am now attempting to thin those feelings out. And I use you, the reader. I must purge these feelings on someone, and if I have readers, it is they I am using. I apologize to you, and I ask for your understanding.”²⁵⁴

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

Although he hoped writing would prove therapeutic, he left readers wondering if they had assisted in his recovery. No follow-up narration was provided. Nevertheless, his attempt to purge Buchenwald from his memory confirms that the horrors of the camps followed liberators home.

Although Herder wrote to cope with his flashbacks, other U.S. soldiers used “denial” as a mechanism for forgetting. This technique was a preventive measure that helped to block out the sights and smells of the camp in order to lessen their influence on the GI’s mind. In truth, denial was much like psychological numbing and yielded similarly unsatisfactory results. Gerald Virgil Meyers of the 80th Infantry Division explained, “[We] tried to go into a mode where [we] didn’t let what [we] were experiencing at Buchenwald affect [us] emotionally. We’d been hardened to the effects of war, seeing people killed and seeing injured laying along the road.”²⁵⁵ Despite the combat these men endured, Meyers soon understood that even the most seasoned war veteran was still susceptible to the ill effects of human indignity. Although he initially stated, “This [experience] was actually just something else that happened in a war,” he later found these words to be untrue.²⁵⁶ Buchenwald was much more than “just something else that happened in the war.” It was a site of unheard of torture and deprivation. Therefore, attempting to undermine the camp’s emotional and psychological effects by simply denying its scenes of human destruction proved futile. “Years later,” Meyers admitted, “denial didn’t work.” He continued, “I would be going to sleep, and I would think about it [Buchenwald]. And it affected me probably more after the war than it did at

²⁵⁵ Hirsh, 54.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

that particular time, because I was used to seeing people killed and wounded.”²⁵⁷ Oddly, the routine death associated with combat had shielded Meyers from Buchenwald’s immediate impact. This, however, was a short-lived defense. After the war, he discovered that there was no mental or emotional safeguard against Buchenwald’s depravity.

Nightmares were another consequence of bearing witness to the Holocaust. Many U.S. soldiers reported having had hellish dreams shortly after their involvement in the liberation of the camps. These dreams, like flashbacks, forced GIs to relive their experiences. Nightmares were also often triggered by an event or image. This was true for Corporal Bernard L. Hansen, former member of the 411th Field Artillery Group who witnessed the aftermath of the Gardelegen Massacre. In a 1980 interview, Hansen described Gardelegen, “It was unbelievable. I don’t know how to describe it ... To see thousands of dead people burned.”²⁵⁸ This scene of death had become ingrained in Hansen’s mind. Thus, it was hardly surprising when he revealed, “I had had nightmares and I can recall nightmares about this, and then it went away. And I didn’t think about it really much until I saw the *Holocaust* [an NBC miniseries that aired in January of 1978].”²⁵⁹ This film sparked in Hansen a recurrence of nightmares that had, until that moment, subsided. Similarly, his agreement to participate in a Holocaust remembrance project also set off a flurry of frightening dreams. While speaking to an interviewer, Hansen acknowledged, “I didn’t talk about it, think about it, but after you called ... After

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ “Bernard L. Hansen Interview,” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00048001000.pdf>.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

you called me with that first interview, that night I had a nightmare.”²⁶⁰ Hansen did not describe his dream to the interviewer; however, his account demonstrates the ease with which these seemingly dormant memories could be awakened.

In most cases, a liberator’s nightmare depicted actual events, or events very similar to his own personal experiences. George E. King, however, had a particularly troubling dream in which he played an unfamiliar role. “Oddly enough sometime the dream will turn out that you are the victim,” he explained. “You are captured and you go through this agonizing labor of trying to escape. In these cases you are always moving in slow motion, as if you were up to your hips in mud. You are making a maximum effort to run, but you are just barely moving”²⁶¹ Interestingly, King did not dream about his participation in the liberation of Mauthausen, but instead, became one of the camp’s prisoners. Since he had never actually been a victim of Nazism, he could only imagine, based on what he had encountered in Mauthausen, the hopelessness prisoners felt when they realized that there was no escape. Therefore, in his nightmare, King saw that freedom lay just beyond Mauthausen’s gates, yet was unattainable.

Examining King’s liberation account further, the reason why he dreams that he is one of the victims of the SS becomes clear. One contributing factor is his personal guilt regarding the Allies’ late arrival in Mauthausen. Describing his feelings at the moment of liberation, he stated, “It was embarrassment. Why didn’t we get here yesterday or last

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ “George E. King Interview,” *Witness to the Holocaust Project*. SAGE: Selected Archives at Georgia Tech and Emory, accessed November 21, 2011, <http://sage.library.emory.edu/data1/Sage/0608/01/00/CF/LI00/06080100CFLI00055001000.pdf>.

week or last month?”²⁶² Indeed, King was plagued by the notion that a swifter response by the United States Army would have saved many more lives.²⁶³

King’s understanding that there was nothing uniquely European about the Holocaust also contributed to his nightmare. The Final Solution was simply hate in practice. Therefore a comparable occurrence could happen again in any city, town, or on any continent. “This is the lesson we have to learn – it could happen here. If we needed an excuse, if we need a reason, if we need to solve our problems somehow, tomorrow it could be the Jews and the next day it could be the Baptists ... It could be somebody,” King declared.²⁶⁴ This soldier knew that any member of society could become the scapegoat for another group’s or government’s anger – he understood that anyone at any time could be hate’s next victim. This fear emerged in his dreams and transformed him into a victim of persecution.

Still another consequence of liberation was silence. For some liberators, what awaited them behind concentration camp fences was so disturbing that there were no words to adequately describe the emotions it evoked. Even if these men had been able to find the words, the ordeal of sharing their experiences was too much to bear. For this reason, some American GIs kept the memory of the camps a secret from their family and friends for many years. Only later in life did some choose to talk about the Holocaust.

Sandy Hirschhaut, former member of the 29th Infantry Division, was only twenty-three years old when he stepped through the gates of both Dachau and Buchenwald.

Liberating one concentration camp was taxing on any American GI; however,

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

experiencing two camps proved overwhelming for this young soldier. He described the camps, “I saw the ovens. I saw the people dying. I saw the gas chambers, and I saw the results. There were bodies stacked up four or five feet high, for hundreds of yards; line after line, . . . Nothing in life prepares you for that.”²⁶⁵ Although Hirschhaut spent only a brief amount of time in Dachau and Buchenwald, the psychological damage had been done. He stated, “It was so horrific. I don’t think I thought of it in terms of anything I’d ever experienced. I just could not understand man’s inhumanity; man’s conquest of man.”²⁶⁶ The Holocaust was so unlike any previous historical event that American liberators had difficulty wrapping their minds around the Reich’s deeds. The experience troubled Hirschhaut for over sixty years.²⁶⁷ For decades he chose to remain silent, never disclosing what he encountered in Nazi Germany. Recognizing the value his experiences held for younger generations, however, gave Hirschhaut the strength to talk about his wartime years. Later in life, he spoke to high school children about the camps. This was a difficult step in his personal fight to come to grips with the Holocaust. He admitted, “It was hard to talk about for a while, but it’s getting easier.”²⁶⁸

A Legacy of Hope

The Holocaust was a tragic event that caused unfathomable despair during and after the war. Surprisingly, however, amid the stories of painful loss and disconcerting memories, there exists tales that sustain hope for change. A number of American liberators have commented that although they were completely astonished by the

²⁶⁵ Jeff Donaldson, *Men of Honor* (Ashland, Oregon: Hellgate Press, 2005), 35.

²⁶⁶ Donaldson, 39.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Donaldson, 40.

staggering degree to which the Nazis tormented “inferior peoples,” the Reich’s actions did not leave them completely downtrodden. In fact, many U.S. soldiers have stated that they experienced a profound transformation as a result of the Holocaust. Viewing the results of racial hatred, some GIs made it their personal mission to help survivors move forward and begin life anew.

Alvin Ungerleider, former platoon leader with the 29th Infantry Division, participated in the liberation of Dora-Mittelbau. The sights that assaulted his senses were so ghastly that he felt a compelling need to help survivors both during and after emancipation. Customarily, American troops entered the camp, apprehended the SS, and aided the survivors as best they could before the pursuit of the enemy called them away. The process was no different for Ungerleider. Once active duty had come to an end, however, he remained in Germany and worked in Displaced Persons camps (camps set up to house refugees and camp victims until repatriation). Here, he continued to feed and provide medical supplies to the Reich’s victims.²⁶⁹ He also became personally involved in the repatriation process of displaced persons – an often lengthy process that left refugees waiting months for release. Whenever possible, Ungerleider helped these individuals contact their family members in the United States.²⁷⁰ His efforts sped up the repatriation process, allowing victims to reunite with their relatives and begin their road to recovery. Ungerleider continued in this role until early 1948. His calling to aid and protect the helpless, however, continued well into the postwar period. Ungerleider stated,

²⁶⁹ The National Museum of American Jewish Military History, *Rescue & Renewal: GIs and Displaced Persons* (Washington, D.C.: The National Museum of American Jewish Military History), 5.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

“My help to displaced persons has had a lasting effect on my life, and it was one of the things which made me decide to stay in the Army for 35 years.”²⁷¹

Marvin Dorf, who served with the 92nd Calvary Reconnaissance Squadron, 12th Armored Division, also went beyond the call of duty to help Holocaust victims. On April 1, 1945, Dorf encountered a train filled with Jewish prisoners from a nearby armaments factory in Munich. The train was in mid-transport when American planes fired upon it. The Allied action damaged the train cars and killed several of the laborers.²⁷² Dorf returned to his commanding officer and requested permission to rescue the travelers trapped in the boxcars – prisoners who were currently under German guard. Accompanied by eight men, he returned, engaged in a gun battle with the guards, and liberated the detainees.²⁷³ Dorf continued to assist these survivors after their rescue. “One of the survivors spoke to me and asked a favor,” he recounted. “At his request, I wrote to his brother in New York and informed him of the liberation and his survival.”²⁷⁴ Although this might seem a rather simple request, since Dorf was on active duty and in the middle of a war, finding the time to write and mail a letter was no small task. Nevertheless, he did as the survivor had asked and reunited this victim with his brother. The reunion took place in Dorf’s parents’ home. On the day of the gathering, the GI exclaimed, “My experience that day in April 1945 was the happiest and the saddest day of my life.”²⁷⁵ Indeed, the sight of the victims in the boxcars filled this liberator with

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² The National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 7.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

sorrow, however, the ability to give them their freedom and help one survivor reunite with his loved one brought joy to an otherwise horrific moment.

Although some American liberators took an immediate role in improving the survivors' circumstances, other soldiers became long-term advocates for change in the years following the war. With the threat of Nazi Germany terminated, a number of American war veterans turned their attention to the task of ensuring that the Jewish community, as well as other groups and individuals, were never again the targets of persecution. Albert Schwartz, member of the 104th Infantry Division and Nordhausen liberator, did this by personally taking action against Nazi war criminals and collaborators. Aghast that proponents of hate were finding asylum on American soil, Schwartz wrote a U.S Senator after the war, protesting the admittance of Nazi scientist, Arthur Rudolph, into the United States.²⁷⁶ This was just the start of his involvement in issues concerning Nazism and Jewish affairs. As a Jewish-American, Nordhausen had a particularly significant impact on Schwartz. "Many of my friends still don't feel as deeply about being Jewish as I have since this experience," he explained. "It affected me deeply. Since then I have been very active in Jewish causes."²⁷⁷ Indeed, Nordhausen had strengthened Schwartz's identity as a member of the Jewish community and compelled him to work for the preservation of his culture.

Many American rescuers shared Albert Schwartz's sentiments and so became active in Jewish issues. For instance, in his postwar account, Abe Cheslow, former tank gunner with the 20th Armored Division, stated, "As far as the effect on my life, it made

²⁷⁶ Robert H. Abzug, *GIs Remember: Liberating the Concentration Camps* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 1994), 21.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

me look over my shoulder to see who was doing what to Jews ... It made me loyal to Jewish culture and heritage ... I do support a synagogue and I have worked for Israel.”²⁷⁸

Like Cheslow, Mauthausen liberator Kalman Zitwer, also worked to relocate Jewish victims of the Holocaust. Witnessing the consequences of the Reich’s persecution of a people, Zitwer worried about the continued safety of those he rescued. Therefore, he helped orchestrate the removal of 104 survivors from Germany. According to Zitwer, the majority of these survivors emigrated to Palestine, where he hoped they would remain safely out of hate’s reach.²⁷⁹

A Call For Education and Tolerance

*We are still haunted by the warning of the Holocaust: that the incredible can become credible, that the impossible can become possible, if we do not act as we should in time.*²⁸⁰

-Anonymous, 1985

This excerpt, from a remembrance ceremony memorializing the six million lives lost in the Holocaust and honoring liberators who put an end to Nazi rule, warns those in attendance that unless the world stands vigilant against intolerance, the evil that rose up in Nazi Germany could resurface once again. Perhaps it would be in a different city or nation, and perhaps a different people would be slated for termination, however, the possibility still remains. The Holocaust has taught the world that the propensity for unparalleled cruelty lies latent in human nature. It takes but the right charismatic leader to bring it to the surface. Therefore, it is the world’s continued task to thwart future acts of

²⁷⁸ Abzug, 33.

²⁷⁹ The National Museum of American Jewish Military History, 17.

²⁸⁰ *Yom Hashoah V’Hagvurah: Memorial Observance For the Six Million Jewish Victims of the Holocaust*, p. 3; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Record Group RG-04, “Concentration and other camps,” Sub-group 002*01, “Records relating to Wobbelin concentration camp,” 1 microfiche.

inhumanity. Although the Jewish community has been at the forefront of this battle, numerous American liberators have joined the fight to prevent the seeds of hate from sprouting in future generations. A great many American liberators have done this by simply testifying to the horrors of the Holocaust and sharing their experiences with interviewers and authors who have then published their liberation accounts for public consumption. Other war veterans have contributed to documentary films that tell the harrowing tale of the Holocaust or have joined with public and private organizations, such as the Shoah Foundation, The Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust, and The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, to help document and preserve personal testimonies regarding the Final Solution and its impact on mankind. All are noteworthy contributions to preserving the memory of the Holocaust. Still other American liberators have chosen to become public speakers who visit with audiences and educate society about the dangers of racial hatred. It has become the life's work not only of survivors, but liberators as well, to ensure that the Holocaust never fades from the public's memory.

One American GI who continued to make a meaningful contribution to preserving the memory of the Holocaust and its victims is Sergeant Leon Bass. As an African-American soldier at a time when racial tensions ran high in the United States, Bass was no stranger to racial prejudice. Deemed a "second class citizen," a member of an inferior race, he and many African-Americans suffered harassment, violence, and even death at the hands of their white counterparts. As he recalled, "There were constant conversations, because there was a lot of unhappiness about the fact that we were sent to do a job, to help make some democracy work, to make freedom a reality, when many of us felt that

we didn't even have it ourselves."²⁸¹ Nevertheless, a man devoted to honor and patriotism, Bass volunteered to fight in the U.S. Army as a member of the 183rd Engineer Combat Battalion, 3rd Army.²⁸²

While fighting in Germany, Bass encountered Buchenwald. Accompanied by a few of his comrades, Bass visited the camp a few days after its liberation. He recalled, "We all expressed horror. We were aghast at what we saw. How deep that feeling was is hard to say. I cannot even speak for myself, in terms of how deep it hit me because I felt that I pushed it aside. I sort of covered it up; I didn't want to deal with that. It was too traumatic."²⁸³ Unable to cope with the sights before him, Bass confessed, "I didn't speak to any one else that day. The shock was just too much."²⁸⁴ The inability to talk about Buchenwald extended for Bass into the postwar years. In fact, he remained silent until he became a high school principal in 1970. As an educator, Bass recognized the lesson his story held for his students who, generations younger, had difficulty fully grasping the truth about the Holocaust. According to Bass, his involvement in Holocaust awareness came after a survivor, at the request of a Jewish teacher, visited his school and addressed the student body. He recalled, "It was right in the midst of the Black awareness and our students who were predominately black in this school, 97%, they were really gung-ho about civil rights and their liberties and so forth. When she [the survivor] began to speak about these things that had happened to her family and the human waste that had gone on

²⁸¹ Yaffa Eliach and Brana Gurewitsch, eds., *The Liberators: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberation of Concentration Camps* (Brooklyn, New York: Center for Holocaust Studies Documentation & Research, 1981), 22.

²⁸² Joseph J. Preil, ed., *Holocaust Testimonies: European Survivors and American Liberators in New Jersey* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 266.

²⁸³ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 23.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

for years, they couldn't believe it. They thought that she was giving them another tall story."²⁸⁵ This episode suggests that the memory of the Holocaust, only thirty years following the war, was beginning to fade. School age children, who undoubtedly attended history classes, had no knowledge of, or did not believe, that the Holocaust had taken place. Bass was compelled to step forward and set the record straight:

While she [the survivor] was talking I relived my total experience just that fast. I saw the faces of the youngsters, and I stood up and said to them: "I was there. I saw." And for the first time I began to share my experience. It came off the back burner. It came to the fore. And as I talked I saw the survivor's face light up because she felt that her message was now getting across. Here was somebody that the youngsters related to, could look to. And they listened then, more intently, to what she had to say. They saw the tattoo on her arm, and they listened to her cries of anguish as she told the story about her parents and her sisters and brothers.²⁸⁶

It took a visiting survivor and the children's skepticism of her account to jolt Bass into sharing his Buchenwald experience. Although delayed, his decision to speak up had a powerful impact on the children in attendance. Now, Bass understood that remembering Buchenwald, and everything that transpired behind its gates, was an important educational tool in the campaign against prejudice. Decades later, the Holocaust proved relevant in the fight for tolerance – the acceptance of people of all races and creeds. Leon Bass participated in the March on Washington, the civil rights movement, and became an active member of the Holocaust Council in Philadelphia.²⁸⁷ Since that day in his school auditorium, Bass stated, "I haven't stopped speaking."²⁸⁸

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 25.

²⁸⁸ Eliach and Gurewitsch, eds., 23.

Leon Bass is just one standout example of a Holocaust witness who, after some time, focused his efforts on educating the public about the appalling consequences of intolerance. In truth, there are numerous World War II veterans who share Bass' compassion for persecuted peoples and have answered the call to keep the memory of the Holocaust front and center so that youngsters and adults alike can continue to learn from this historical event. Another is Jimmy Weldon. A native Californian, Weldon continues to speak to elementary school children about his service in the war and his interaction with Holocaust victims. At the young age of 23, Weldon served in Patton's Third Army and, although he was not part of the unit that initially liberated Buchenwald, he entered the camp shortly thereafter. "You can't imagine such a thing," he recounted. "They [survivors] were barely able to sit up and you could see they wondered, why am I still alive? They were confused. There were open cubicles [in the barracks] with hundreds of nude bodies." Brought up in a devout, religious household, Weldon, a man of great empathy, was greatly affected by what he experienced in Buchenwald.²⁸⁹

In order to honor the millions of souls lost in the Holocaust and commemorate those who survived, Weldon became an advocate of Holocaust remembrance. In his endeavors, he came across school-aged children who expressed doubt regarding the Reich's persecution of the Jewish people. He believed that teachers were failing to properly educate students about the Holocaust. Angered, Weldon emphasized the truth about the Final Solution by discussing his Buchenwald experience so as to discredit Holocaust deniers. This war veteran was also troubled by the notion that the passing of survivors and liberators would result in society's forgetting of this poignant event.

²⁸⁹ Jimmy Weldon (World War II Veteran and Buchenwald Eyewitness), telephone conversation with the author, February 3, 2011.

Through public talks, Weldon hoped that his story would become part of the historical record – a tale that his audience would pass on to future generations.²⁹⁰

²⁹⁰ Ibid.

Conclusion

*It had been a long and costly journey, and we overran the concentration camps and looked back with a better understanding of what we had seen. We knew it had been a journey worth every step of the way. Let's preserve inch by inch the way to freedom.*²⁹¹

*-Lieutenant General James M. Gavin
(Wöbbelin Camp Liberator)*

Lieutenant General James M. Gavin was correct in his declaration that the road to freedom was a lengthy and arduous journey. Although differently, both camp inmates and their liberators suffered from Nazi Germany's murderous policies. For survivors, the Third Reich was a relentless predator driven by hate and racial prejudice, which was intent on destroying European Jewry. Hitler and his regime exhibited a loss of humanity that survivors, until the liberation of the camps, believed mankind would never recoup. American liberators, however, were the antithesis to the Nazi's pursuit of a superior race through the extermination of "inferior" peoples. The American soldier's arrival in the camps and his acts of compassion signaled to survivors that hope still existed for mankind. Indisputably, camp prisoners had suffered an immense tragedy. Upon liberation, however, they discovered that they did not stand alone in their fight to begin life anew. The Third Reich had failed at its objective to completely destroy Europe's Jewish population because men of the United States Army, along with their Allied counterparts, had braved the unknown and secured for them a second chance at life. Liberation meant that survivors now had the opportunity to share their stories of loss and perseverance – tales rich with lessons about the perils of intolerance. Liberators too, had an important story to tell – narratives that yielded warnings that the world would hopefully heed.

²⁹¹ Brewster Chamberlin and Marcia Feldman, eds., *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (Washington, D.C.: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987), 161.

Liberators bore unique witness to the “long and costly” journey to freedom that survivors endured. Through discussions about their respective experiences survivors and liberators preserve the “way to freedom.”

The spring of 1945 first brought the concentration camp system into the public eye. The world was nothing less than shocked. American liberators, much to their surprise, became the bearers of truth and the world’s eyewitnesses to the consequences of a government gone awry. The Third Reich exacted an unparalleled assault on man, and liberators answered this attack with compassion and strength. U.S. troops were deeply affected by their experiences in Nazi camps. Liberation not only brought about freedom, but also led to the formation of relationships, troubling memories, and a need to remember. They played a key role in the survival and recovery of camp victims, and yet their contributions have received limited attention from scholars.

Thus far, survivor stories, as well as those of the perpetrators, have dominated the field of Holocaust Studies. Certainly, the survivors’ experiences and testimonies, along with a study of the perpetrators and their actions, are paramount in the telling of the horrors of the Holocaust and educating the world about the dangers of remaining silent while fellow members of the human race fall victim to persecution.²⁹² The liberator’s experience is also a critically important component of the legacy of the Holocaust, and yet it is often not treated as such. In truth, American liberators were instrumental in informing the public about Nazi perpetrated genocide and the dangers of prejudice. Witnessing Nazi aggression firsthand, their stories corroborated survivor accounts, which a once skeptical public had difficulty accepting.

²⁹² Currently, survivor stories are at the center of Holocaust studies, however, it took many years following the Holocaust before these accounts were given due attention.

The liberators' experiences also provide profound insight into the effects the Final Solution had on free peoples. For example, although the majority of American liberators were never detained in concentration camps or forced labor camps, their entrance into these factories of death caused them emotional and psychological distress. The discovery of family members and fellow soldiers imprisoned in the camps proved that the Holocaust's reach could be personal. The Americans' role as liberator and unintended victim proved that the Final Solution impacted populations not directly targeted by the Nazi regime. They also learned, firsthand, the consequences of inaction. The world community was slow to respond to the pleas of those victimized by Nazi oppression, which resulted in unfathomable suffering and a tremendous loss of life. Through their experiences, liberators share these lessons with the public, while advocating for social awareness and justice. This is their continued contribution to mankind. Collectively, liberator and survivor accounts explicate the story of the Holocaust and together, serve as a powerful warning against prejudice, intolerance, and genocide.

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