THE 1939 SOCIETY: LIBERATION STORIES

JOSEPH ALEKSANDER

Soon after we arrived in Buchenwald we heard bombing and artillery fire, and we all hoped that allied forces were coming closer. The guards asked for volunteers to be sent to a work camp with better food and living conditions. They had set up a table with food in front of the barracks to lure out the prisoners. The group that volunteered was marked out into the forest. We heard a volley of shots, and we knew that those people were being murdered. The Germans knew the allied forces were coming closer and wanted to eliminate as much of the horrible evidence as possible.

When there were no more volunteers, they started removing us forcibly. We realized that we had come too far to be murdered, especially when liberation was knocking at our doors. Several of us crawled under the foundation of the barracks and stretched out in the mud for three days.

May 11, 1945 was the day we first heard and then saw the American army tanks crushing through the gates of the camp. Some of the guards resisted and were shot, and some surrendered. Although we were all skin and bone and barely alive, we were rejoicing that we were liberated and finally free.

“Muselman” was the expression used in the camps for people like us. I don’t know why. The name just stuck. My weight was approximately 100 pounds, down from my normal weight before the war of 165.

The liberating servicemen were furious at the German population for their cruel and sadistic treatment of innocent people. They gathered Germans from surrounding towns and villages and forced them to walk around the camp and look at the human misery and cruelty that their people were responsible for.

The Germans protested that they knew nothing about it. *"Wir haben doch nicht gewust."* Of course living around the concentration camp with all the atrocities and smell from the crematorium, they must have known all about this situation.
The Americans showered us with good, rich food. Unfortunately because our stomachs were not used to that, many of us became very sick with diarrhea and dysentery. Most of us wound up in hospitals.

I became very seriously ill with "*fleckfeever*"—typhus. I was in the hospital for two weeks, burning up with a very high temperature. I remember being constantly wrapped in ice-cold sheets to bring down the fever. After my recovery, I noticed that many veins were protruding from on my legs and also that my back was bent out of shape. This bothered me a lot because before the war, I was involved in several sports, as I belonged to a Jewish athletic club called the "Macabi" and I had been in very good shape.
I was alive but this was tempered with the sad knowledge that my entire family had been wiped out with the exception, I hoped, of my older brother who had emigrated to America.

Joe Aleksander speaks of his experiences at the Museum of Tolerance

ENGELINA BILLAUER

April 15, 2005 marks the 60th anniversary of a very important day in my life. After three years of misery, hunger, separation from parents and just plain hell on earth, it was the day of our liberation.

The day started in typical fashion as we pulled dead and half-dead bodies to a place designated by the German SS men. One difference was that the German men and women, the Hungarian guards were wearing white armbands, but we did not know what that meant.

As I recall, at about 3 PM, we noticed a tank coming through the gate of the camp (Bergen Belsen). Shortly thereafter, in many languages, we heard the following announcement: "We are the British Armed Forces and we are here to liberate you. Many of us ran to the soldiers and kissed their hands, and then hugged and kissed each other.

Our liberators were not prepared for what they found: Piles of dead and half-dead bodies and many people too sick and weak to even get on their feet. Hunger and disease were everywhere. The first thing I did along with my sister and our friends was to find some water and wash ourselves. Secondly, we moved out of our typhus-infected barracks and into the empty barracks that had been vacated by the SS women. They and all the guards were arrested, and we were thrilled to witness that event.

The British were somewhat unprepared for what they found and thus did not have proper food for the survivors. Thus many died after liberation because their digestive systems were unable to handle the food they were given. I was fortunate to contract typhus after liberation and was able to obtain care from some of the many foreign doctors who had come to treat us. I will be forever grateful to them and the British army for their efforts.

ROSE BURK

I arrived at Camp Berghof in 1943, where I worked in a kitchen. One day, a little girl wanting some food came to the window with a dish. When I returned with the food, she was gone and instead I was greeted by a German officer. She slapped me and said, "Tomorrow you must report to Gracie, the executioner." As I waited for Gracie to come sentence me to death by drowning, I was left to ponder my own mortality.

But as I painfully waited, I heard Russian planes fly over us. I saw all the guards running. I felt like the sky had opened up for me. I was in shock and could not hold back my tears.

Next, we were walked by SS guards over to Bocborg, as we were welcomed by people from the UNRAH. Unfortunately, this was not the end of my nightmare. As I turned down the wrong street, I fell into the hands of some of the SS guards. They mocked me and proceeded to beat me, hitting me in the face several times. I fell to the ground from this savage beating and was knocked unconscious.

Eventually I found my way back to the UNRAH. I then went to Coffering and met some Polish survivors who were very kind to me and turned out to be the family of my future beloved husband, David.

DAVID BURK

Unfortunately, David is no longer with us. He was in a number of camps from 1939 to 1945. While in the camps, David was responsible for building railroads. When he was liberated, the first words from his mouth were, "I must go back to Poland to see if any family is alive.

Unfortunately, to his horror, no one had survived except a single uncle. David was told by the people in Lodz that if he wished to live, he would have to leave and never return. David and his uncle left under cover of darkness to the city of Coffering where they had family. That is where he met his beloved wife, Rose. They were married in 1946.

My birth name is Majlech Cukierkopf. I was born in a small town called Ryki in Poland on January 23, 1918. Ryki was between Warsaw and Lublin. My family was very Orthodox and consisted of one sister and three brothers.

When the war started in 1939, I was already in Warsaw. That day, I wanted to return to my hometown, Ryki. I didn't have any transportation back, and after seeing the bombardment, the panic, the helplessness in Otwock, I decided to walk the 100 Km. back to Ryki.

During the war, I escaped to the divided Russian part of Poland, to a city called Molczad, where I became a refugee. Just six months later, we were told all refugees can register to go back to their hometowns. All of my friends felt there wasn't any life in the Soviet Union, and they registered. But I felt I had nothing to go back to, so I stayed. Everyone boarded the trains in Brectlitwak, but instead of going back to their cities (the Russians didn't want to take them there), they were taken to Siberia.

I was a refugee for two years in Molczad. One morning, I heard on the radio that Germany had attacked the Soviet Union. They offered me the opportunity to join the Judenrat. I turned it down, but because of that, I was afraid I would be killed. Eventually, I traveled to Dvoritz, from which young people working in a quarry cutting stone were being sent to the front. I escaped to the forest, because I felt I would be killed. News coming from all the big cities was that many people were killed there. I was wounded in the leg in the forest but I didn't want to go back to Dvoritz.

I was told there was a hospital in the forest and that a Dr. Atlas would be able to remove the bullet. I was taken to him on a wagon. But Dr. Atlas said he was not a doctor here, but a fighter. After some persuasion, he operated and removed the bullet. A week later we went together with other Partisans to attack Dreczyn and take revenge.

I promised the people in Dvoritz that I would come back to take them out. When I returned, the Judenrat threatened to kill me if I rescued anyone. I was able to take out only one man, Lazer Novitzky. The night we escaped, everyone was killed in the lager. Had we stayed over night, we would have been killed too.

I became a Partisan in Otrat Barba. We organized ourselves to fight and put mines and do whatever we could to destroy the Germans while we saved the lives of our own. Eventually we went to another Pusche and another Otrat where I met my wife, Miriam. We spent several months in the forest and with the other Partisans blew up German trains.

As the Russians advanced, the Germans started escaping through the forest, and many were caught by our Partisans. There was a lot of shooting and many people were killed when the liberation was near. We then found out the Russians had come to liberate us in 1944.

RUTH FENTON

The date of May 5, 1945 will be forever inscribed in my memory. It is the day of my liberation from the depths of purgatory.

I had been in the Auschwitz concentration camp when a group of about 500 women (me among them) were put into locked cattle cars one dreary, dismal day in the latter part of October, 1944. We traveled for four days and nights until we arrived in Lenzing, Austria, at a branch of the notorious Mathhausen concentration camp.

Though still in shock and despair, we were amazed to see the beauty of the snow-capped mountains of the Alps and the lovely wood-carved cottages. I had just been released from the hospital where I was in quarantine for infectious diseases due to scarlet fever. This left me very frail and weak. Because of this, I stayed in the camp a few days longer. As soon as I was deemed able, I was assigned to a command digging ditches in a labor camp where 100,000 people from all over Europe, including prisoners of war, were forced laborers in the factories of Lenzing for the German Wehrmach.

Winter in Austria was extremely harsh. The ground was frozen solid. We worked in rain and snow after marching in ice and snow—sometimes even barefoot—accompanied by SS men and women and their vicious attack dogs. We returned to the camp where a watery soup was the only food awaiting us. Our clothes and shoes were always wet and we had to wear these same garments the next day, even though they were still drenched.
The days and weeks passed in continuous anguish, hopelessness, and tremendous feelings of despondency. Then rumors came of the Allied bombardment of some Austrian cities. Spring arrived, but our lives remained shattered without hope or change—only uncertainty. The hunger was unbearable. Often we made do eating leftover potato peelings and coffee grounds.

Then, one morning in early May 1945, we awakened and were astonished to find that the SS guards had disappeared during the night. They were replaced by Hungarian Iron Guards who had been attached to the SS. For three days we had no food. Rumors flew that the Guards were planning to poison our water, but they did not have time to commit this treacherous act.

In the afternoon of May 5, 1945, the first tank with an American soldier broke through the gates of Hell. This American GI came into our camp. I will never forget him and the look in his eyes. He was about 6'3" with blond, bushy eyebrows. When he saw us, he immediately crossed himself, tears streaming down his cheeks.

What a sight we were. Our heads had been shaven, our eyes were sunken caverns, and our filthy striped uniforms hung on our skin and bones. He immediately ran to his tank and brought us his own food rations. The soldiers who followed him did the same.
We could not be jubilant. We were still in shock—too numb in our hears with pain and sorrow to feel any emotion, but especially that of joy. We did not know whether any members of our families had survived this Holocaust. Unfortunately, it was rare to find any relative who did manage to live through this.

I will always remember Mr. Cheve, the American official who took me with a delegation to Evensee, a branch of the concentration camp Mauthausen with 30,000 inmates. There we saw mountains of dead bodies as well as human forms reduced to waking skeletons. At this camp, a few of us found some of our relatives.

The American Red Cross did a marvelous job of resettling us into a former Hitler Jugen Resort. They set up a field hospital and a kitchen and slowly nurtured us back to life. As we drove in open trucks through the streets of Lenzing, Austria with the American GIs, we proudly held the American flag, realizing that we were free at last!

ROSE FUTTER

My Liberation Day

On May 8, sixty years ago, I was reborn. It was Tuesday, 2 PM and the concentration camp (in Peterswaldau, Germany) was quiet. No line-up; no roll call; no obscenities shouted by the SS women who guarded us; no screams from the tortured girls.

"Am I dreaming?" I wondered. Fearfully, we walked to the iron gates. All of a sudden, men from the neighboring concentration camp, looking like ghosts, called to us, "Open the gates! You are free! The War is over! The SS left!" One thousand women turned to stone.

"Is it true?" we asked one another. I remember lifting my hands to heaven. "Thank you, Dear G-d," I said. "I am alive!" I started running and running. Then it dawned on me: Where am I going? I had no home, no country, no relatives—only me and my sister in the whole world.

I looked around. The sun was shining, the lilacs were blooming, the birds were chirping, and my heart was breaking. Five years of my adolescence were robbed from me, and still I had no where to go. "I've triumphed over Hitler," I thought, "but at what cost?"

SAM GOETZ

Day of Liberation

Sunday, May 6, 1945. My day of liberation; a day that will always live with me; a day forever etched in my memory. For the first time in almost three years, I was not awakened by the screams of either kapo or block leader, my body did not receive any blows, I did not have to take part in roll call. How did I look this morning? I really don't know. I had not seen my face for three years. There were no mirrors in the concentration camps.

Sunday, May 6 was a cool morning, although spring was in the air. The sky was blue, the camp strangely quiet. The SS guards were gone from the observation towers, replaced by older looking men in Wehrmacht uniforms. I left Block No. 6 and made my way toward the main gate. I crossed the dreaded roll call square where a few people were milling around. The eerie silence of the square, normally punctuated by SS screams, seemed unnatural. The camp was still surrounded by barbed wire.

I was unable to fully comprehend the enormity of this Sunday morning. My body was weakened and my mind unable to respond positively to the sudden change in the morning routine. I felt very weak as I approached the main gate, but I could still walk.

People gathered around the gate. I was standing very close to it when an SS man motioned to me and three others to follow him. Too weak to resist, I left the main gate with three other inmates

and entered a guard house located about fifty yards away from it. From this guard house, the SS observed the outgoing and incoming groups of prisoners and harassed prisoners if they were walking too slowly or if the row of five was uneven. Now deserted, I entered it to find a desk in the corner facing a large window overlooking the main road leading into the camp, a large round clock on the wall, and all kinds of weapons—hand grenades, pistols, and rifles—scattered on the floor.

The SS man ordered us to pick up the weapons and place them behind the guardhouse. We lay the guns down in the grass. I made several trips in and out of the guardhouse. But suddenly my eyes registered an unbelievable sight. A tank moved slowly up the road. Some distance behind it, I saw another tank. The first tank made a sharp right turn to face the gate of the concentration camp.

The gate opened. A figure in an olive brown uniform emerged from the tank. I glanced at the clock on the wall—it was eleven minutes past one. As hollow-cheeked figures emerged from the gate and swept the GI off his feet, I saw a large white star on the tank. At that moment, I finally became a free man.

For the first time in six years I was free. Overwhelmed by the events transpiring around me, I stood in silence, watching the crowds of emaciated humans surrounding the American GI. They kissed his hands and touched his uniform, as if touching a saint. Each of us wanted to make sure that the man was real, that the tank was real, that this was neither an illusion nor a dream created by our anxious minds.

ZELDA GORDON

The Story of My Liberation from the Nazi Death Camps

I was born in Grodno, Poland. At the time of Hitler's occupation of my town I was a teenager and I lived with my mother, Fruma, and my father, Jacob. My father died from illness two months before the war broke out. I also had four brothers (Leon, Daniel, Aaron, and Joshua) and two sisters (Tamara and Deborah) all of whom were married with children. All of these people perished in the ovens of Treblinka and Auschwitz.

After surviving six death camps including Treblinka, Majdanek, Lublin, Blizin, and Auschwitz, I was put on a train once more. On January 1, 1945, that train entered Bergen-Belsen. On April 14, 1945, we heard rumors that the guards and the captain of the camp had run away because the liberating armies were approaching. We thought that the Germans would probably blow up our camp with mines to destroy the rest of us. But the English army approached the camp the very next day, April 15. The guards were found and rounded up. That day, I witnessed the German commandant and all the Nazi guards digging three large graves in which thousands of corpses were buried.

Right after the liberation, the barracks of Bergen-Belsen were burned. We were all sprayed with disinfectant, and we slept in the Nazi soldier quarters. The first thing we had to do was register our names in survivor books. Of course, I had no place to go. So we waited to see what the future would hold.

In the middle of May, two young men came to Bergen-Belsen from Munich, among others looking for loved ones. To my great surprise, they were looking for me! They told me that they had survived in Dachau thanks to a man from Grodno who had taken care of them while they were together in the camp. After discovering that I had survived, this man, my cousin Ely Grodziensky, asked these men to find me and bring me back to Munich if I wanted to come.

They journey from Bergen-Belsen to Munich was a rough one, and it was another miracle that I survived. There was no public transportation because the trains and train stations were bombed

out. They found a food truck driver with whom we caught a ride part of the way. But as we came closer to Hanover, Germany, the open truck made a left turn too quickly. There were fifty of us packed in and no sides to hold us, so everyone fell out of the truck! Many people had to return to Bergen-Belsen injured, but I managed to escape unharmed. The two men and I walked the rest of the way to Hanover, following the train tracks. As we came closer to the city, we found a coal freight train going to Munich. We climbed aboard and slept on top of the coal barrels. It took us four days to get there, but we finally arrived in Munich, where I met Ely.

Ely and I never stayed in a displaced persons camp. In Munich we registered affidavits to go to three places: the United States (because Ely had a brother who had moved there after the first World War), Sweden (because Ely had a sister there), and Israel (where we decided we would go illegally if we had to). We agreed that we would accept the first affidavit that was approved. Luckily for us, our registration to go to the U.S. came first.

JEFFREY GRADOW

Liberation Story

I lived with my parents and two younger sisters in Mlawa, a town close to the German border. On September 1, 1939, when I was 14 years old, the Germans invaded and the occupation began.

Because the police were looking to arrest my father, the two of us headed east, ending up in Bialystok where we tried in vain to bring over the rest of the family. In June 1941, the Germans attacked the Russians and threw a grenade into the house where my father and I were staying. My father was killed. I was left to wander the streets until a neighbor took me in. Soon, I was forced into a labor camp, where I was required to clean the streets, cut down trees, and lay the trunks on the highway to pave the road. There was little food, and I was forced to work from dawn to dusk.

I decided to escape into the forest and eventually met up with and joined a group of Jews and Russians in a camp in the woods. There was a shortage of guns but because of my skills, I was chosen to use one. In 1941, the various groups hiding in the forest were separate and loose entities. Their goal early on was mere survival. Later, they became more organized and aggressive. Their mission changed from mere survival to attempting to disrupt the Germans and their accomplices.

I was sent out on missions at night, sometimes unable to return to the same base camp. The base camps were built as follows: They dug out a hole about 4 to 5 feet deep with shovels, cut down birch trees, and used the branches as vertical support. Tree trunks were placed diagonally across the hole. Then they laid leaves and smaller branches to fill the small holes. The dirt that had been dug out was placed on the leaves to help keep the hole warmer during the winter months. My partisan group slept in the hole on top of some makeshift bunks made of smaller tree branches. About 15 people slept in each bunker. Some of the partisans served as watch guards while others

slept. My group consisted of about 100 to 150 partisans, mostly men, but some women—Jews or former Russian officers or soldiers.

In 1943, Russian paratroopers were dropped into these woods in an attempt to unite the local partisans. We cut telephone lines, fought with local police, and tried to blow up railroad tracks. In late 1943, my group began receiving supplies from Russian military planes, including dynamite, guns, and grenades. I participated in blowing up railroad tracks which derailed a train. I also participated in bombing local police stations. One of our more important and successful assignments was securing a bridge the Allies needed and making sure the Germans didn't blow it up.

Eventually we partisans living in the woods between Bialystok and Berenovitch were absorbed into the Russian army. Fighting with the Russians, I was injured in a battle near my home and was hospitalized for 6 months. Upon my release, I was 20 years old. Returning to my hometown, I discovered that not one of my family (including extended family) survived. In 1949, I arrived in New York City, the United States of America.

SIG HALBREICH

Another transport of sick prisoners arrived toward the end of March 1945. Among them was Otto Kosdaz, a non-Jew from Austria, who called himself a doctor but, in fact, was only a student. "Sig, I was told to replace you," he said, "but you will be my assistant."

I didn't have any specific duties but I continued my work against the Germans. The more of us who remained alive, the more difficult it was for the Germans. I admitted younger prisoners into the hospital when there weren't enough beds, crossed people off the transport lists, and hid young prisoners during the selections by pushing them from one room to another. Otto knew what I was doing but ignored it. A problem arose, however, when Otto took over. He was jealous of the relationships I had with the other members of the hospital staff. I was warned that he was trying to get them to write complaints about me. Fortunately, his attempts failed.

In the beginning of April, I was called to the main secretary's office. "Sig," he said, "a transport of sick people is leaving tomorrow, and you have been assigned to be in charge of it."

This was it for me: no one from the hospital staff ever went on sick transports. There was no doubt that those transported were going to be exterminated. I suspected that Otto had informed one of the SS doctors that I had been hiding people.

I tried to get my order switched, but there was nothing that could be done. The order came from one of the SS doctors. It became clear to me that if I wanted to live, I would have to jump the train at the earliest possible opportunity. This was the first time in more than five years that I seriously contemplated escape.

I took the afternoon off to prepare for my departure. While I was discussing my escape with Janek, sirens began to sound. Looking up, we saw American planes flying overhead—bombs began to drop from them. Instinctively, Janek and I, along with other prisoners, ran out of the camp. We ran toward the fields at the edge of town and mixed with hundreds of civilians who were fleeing their town. Nearby, the chief of police was running with his wife and two children, each of them carrying a suitcase.

"Come on," he hollered to Janek and me. "You'll help us carry."

We were annoyed at this, but also felt we had to: we were still prisoners. As soon as the bombing stopped, the planes descended and started machine-gunning the throngs of townspeople who had since turned around and were heading back to the city. Luckily, we were in the center of thousands. Being stopped by the chief of police had turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

We carried the suitcases back to his house. Once inside, the wife told us to sit down. She gave us real coffee and bread. After we ate, he told us to get ready. "I have to take you back to the camp," he said.

"Why do you do this?" we asked. "Don't you understand the Americans are close? They will march in here any day now. Please let us stay here, and when they arrive, we will testify that you saved our lives. You will be free—you and your family will have nothing to worry about."

"I cannot do that," he replied. "I am a German and so long as I am in uniform, I have to take my orders and obey them."

"Listen to them," begged his wife. "Let them stay here until the Americans come."

Sirens went off again. Immediately, he turned off the lights and began to change his mind. As soon as the sirens stopped, though, he reverted to his former position. All of us, including his wife, begged him to reconsider—she even got down on her knees and begged him to listen to us, but it was no use.

At about 1 AM, he escorted Janek and me back to the camp. A light drizzle was falling, but what we saw was more chilling. Fires burned silently. The towers had been demolished. And the bodies, thousands upon thousands, lay everywhere.

"Why did you bring us here?" we demanded.

"I cannot help it, he answered.

"Well you're partly involved here," I said, "and we don't want to have any more to do with you." We left him standing there and walked into the camp.

Janek and I searched among the ruins for two dry beds, which we found in the corner of one of the hangars. About a dozen men were also there. We slept silently, deeply.

We awoke to the sound of sirens and the explosion of bombs; it was 9 AM. We ran outside and saw American planes dropping bombs on the city. Those of us who were able ran out of the camp. Passing the fields, we kept going until we reached the forests above town. SS men and soldiers were constantly marching through the area, searching for prisoners. We would have been shot or taken prisoner and used for their protection. We saw them leading the prisoners they had caught and overheard that they were being taken to jail.

For over a week we hid during the day. At night we went down to the fields to pick potatoes and squash. By the ninth day, everything seemed quiet; soldiers had not passed through the area in four days. We could see the camp and a little town from where we were. There was no activity there.

We watched as one of our men went down to the closest village; when he reached the bottom, he turned around to us and started waving. All of us went down. The Americans were already occupying the town of Nordhausen and our camp. This was our first him the war was unofficially over.

Excerpted from Sig Halbreich's book, Before and After.

SIGI HART

As a survivor of Auschwitz and Buna Monowitz, I do celebrate my second birthday on April 15, 1945. That's the date I was liberated from the Bergen-Belsen Camp by the British.

At the Death March that began January 19, 1945, I walked from Auschwitz to Gleiwitz and then to Dora. At the end of March 1945, the Germans took us from Dora Nordhausen by train on flat cars on a death ride. The British and Americans mistook us for Germans troops and strafed the train with machine guns.

We finally reached Bergen-Belsen where we spent two weeks without any food ration.

When the British troops finally arrived—April 15, 1945—they started to repatriate us. Since I spoke French (having been interned in France in many camps) the British transferred me with all the other French citizens to Paris even though I was a German Jew born in Berlin.

I was one of the very lucky people to find my mother alive and well in Toulouse, France. From my mother I learned that my father had survived in Rome, Italy. My sister was able to reach America in 1944 after the Americans arrived in Italy, and my brother was now in Palestine, where I immediately got the British to send me legally.

GEORGE HERSCU

I was born in Bucharest, Romania, a son of Liza and Jacob Herscu. We moved from Bucharest to the city of Roma in the province of Molsova.

My father and his family were very Orthodox Jews. He was a furniture manufacturer, and the director of a small business bank as well as the gabay in the synagogue. An only son, I had three sisters.

Anti-Semitism was always rampant in Romania, but the situation got worse around 1939 during the pogroms and with the Nationalist Green Shirt Party (the Legionnaires) coming to power with their leader Cornelin Costreann. The Romanians fought alongside the Germans against Russia.

The worst of it started on June 21, 1931. My father was arrested with up to 600 other Jews and held hostage in one of the synagogues. The rest of the family was divided and interned in forced labor camps. We had to wear the Star of David. We persevered until August 22, 1944 when we were liberated by the Soviet Army.

After the liberation, there was no reason to stay in Romania. I went over the border and became a displaced person in Austria and Germany. My three sisters immigrated to Israel in 1948 after the creation of the State of Israel. In 1950, I immigrated to Australia and married Sheila Bloom, a Jewish girl who was living there.

I became a permanent resident of the U.S. in 1996 and run a real estate development business.

The "1939" Club has meant a lot to me and for the rest of my life, I will always support the Club.

BEN KAMM

The Final Battles

Toward the end of the war, with the Germans headed for defeat and the Russian front nearly liberated, all Polish partisans were ordered back to Poland to carry on the struggle there. We were 1,200 Polish citizens. . . mostly Jewish. We just walked from the Ukraine back to Poland.

The partisans reconstituted themselves into a new group named for the well-known Polish Communist living in Russia, Wanda Wasilewska. The group continued to receive airdrops from Russia including such needs as ammunition, mines, medicines—even commanders. We also

received regular reports from Radio Moscow. I made a daily habit of listening to the news and became friendly with the radio operator, who became my steady girlfriend.

The Wanda Wasilewska brigade had two objectives: to distribute weapons to the local population and to get as many people to fight as possible. Our troops fought the Germans in what sometimes amounted to full-scale battles. Once such battle took place shortly before the end of the war. The Germans sent thousands of soldiers to get rid of us. I listened to the news from Russia, so we knew they were coming. Having encircled miles of forest, trapping us, the Nazis launched a fierce attack, using every weapon at their disposal. But we held firm. Finally, after sixteen hours of combat, we succeeded in breaking through the German line and forcing their flight.

A few months later, Germany surrendered, and the war was over. Across Europe the Partisans laid down their weapons and went back home. But for me, there was no home to which I could return.

I am proud of having fought with three different partisan groups and of my part in destroying 549 trains which contributed to the defeat of Germany. But I'm saddened too. I can't forgive people who killed innocent babies, innocent women, innocent people. . . they killed the best of us. And I'm sorry that more or our Jewish boys and girls did not have the same opportunity to do what I did.

Excerpted from the Jewish Partisan Educational Foundation Study Guide.

FRED KLEIN

Freedom Is A Glass of Milk

I called them the Dark Drums of Freedom. The artillery of the Red Army was very near, and we had stopped going to work in the factory in town. I was hardly able to work. I weighed some 70 pounds. One day, an SS man called me to the electrified fence, gave me a container with the rest of his pudding, and said, "Hitler is dead." I didn't react at all.

The last roll call was strange. The commander said, "You are being transferred to a civilian guard. I hope you will not complain about your treatment." Next, each of us got a loaf of bread, a half pound of margarine, two pounds of potatoes, and a big pot of soup. I devoured everything in eight hours and became very sick.

The SS fled, but the watch towers were still manned by German civilians with armbands and machine guns pointed inward over the electrified fence. During the night, the civilian guard disappeared. A prisoner discovered the fence was no longer electrified. Someone made a hole in it, and the prisoners began to escape.

I was barely able to walk. But my cousin Bobby half-dragged me to the forest where we rested. I was so sick to my stomach that I thought I would die. In the morning, the Drums of Freedom became silent, and an eerie silence prevailed. It was May 8—VE Day—but we did not know it.

Weak and sick, we slowly started descending toward the town. Not yet used to freedom, we looked for guards with whips and police dogs. Supporting Bobby, I wondered, "Could we ask for a glass of milk? They won't do anything to us."

We entered the outskirts of the town, which was deserted. Suddenly, a young soldier in a strange uniform appeared—he must have been sixteen years old. He signaled us to enter a house and take what we needed. He was a member of the Soviet army. When we hesitated, he began tearing the clothes off our backs, forcing us to enter the house. The oven in the kitchen was still hot. Bobby discovered a whole goose in fat in a jar and went berserk. Grabbing an attaché case, he began to stuff it in. I went to the bedroom and lay down fully clothed. I slept for 24 hours.

When I woke up, I discovered that Bobby had disappeared. The town was deserted—just a few liberated prisoners searching for food, in vain. All of the businesses had been looted. I found some cereal and other prisoners discovered a cow. The Russians did not pay attention to us, but we had the right diet and a head start. Most liberated inmates did not make it—they could not digest regular food anymore.

MARY KLEINHANDLER

We spent the whole night in the shelter. I must have drifted off to delirium again, because the time flew by quickly. The next morning, men came into the shelter and shouted, "The Germans are gone! We are liberated! The Americans should be here any minute now!"

An electric current ran through our bodies. Everyone, save the sick ones, stood and erupted in jubilation. There was so much crying, laughing, shouting, embracing. We all went crazy with joy. Free! Free! *Befried!* What a scene!

We blinked furiously as we emerged from the darkness and into the sunlight. The day was crisp. It was April 28, 1945—the very first day of our freedom—and I was eager to drink in every last bit of it. We could still hear shooting; the thunder of exploding bombs followed us as we marched from the bunkers to the Germans' dining hall. Still no sign of our liberators. All we knew was that our persecutors had abandoned the camp.

All the tables and chairs had been pushed aside to make room for us. A picture of Adolph Hitler, decorated with red flags and Swastikas, hung over a small stage at the front of the dining hall. It didn't take long for the picture and bunting to come crashing down. The girls stomped on the picture, smashed the glass, and tore the Furher's devilish face to bits. I never thought I'd live to see the day.

Too sick and weak to join the festivities, I lay on the floor, beneath a window. But I took in the scene, recording every precious moment of it in my memory. At the same time, I was curious about what was happening outside. And as I kept watch at the window, I saw the main gate fly open. Suddenly soldiers in khaki uniforms and helmets with rifles slung low over their shoulders spilled into the compound. Their faces, half-hidden by their helmets, were grimy and their uniforms covered with dust. "Americans!" was the outburst of joy. "The Americans are here."

Anyone who could get up ran outside, whooping, laughing, crying to meet our liberators. All I could do was lift my head to observe the scene. There was so much rejoicing. The soldiers and the girls embraced, wept, and shouted all at once. As bighearted as they were, the Americans had little to offer us, but with tears streaming down their faces they emptied their pockets and shared with everyone whatever they had. One soldier distributed cigarettes, another biscuits. One had a bottle of liquor and gave everyone near him a swig. I envied those who were strong enough to participate in the euphoria.

It was the first time I'd met Americans or witnessed their generosity. One soldier standing near the window only had some sugar cubes to offer. At this, my mother sprang up, ran toward him, and put out her hand. When she returned, she placed a cube of sugar in my mouth. At this moment, at the taste of the sugar, I started to weep like never before. Tears streamed from my eyes and rolled down my neck.

"Why are you crying now?" My mother asked. "We are free. We are liberated. We survived. This is not the time to cry!"

But I just couldn't stop. The taste of it, the sweetness. I hadn't savored so much as a granule in years. It brought a rush of saliva to my mouth and with it a flood of memories: A lump melting slowly on my tongue while sipping coffee and milk as I chatted with my best friend in a café on Piotrkowska Street in Lodz after a movie. My brother and I conspiratorially sharing our blocks of chocolate. The luxurious taste of it in my grandmother's rich butter cookies and babkas. The scent of baking had so perfumed her warm kitchen. That sugar cube suddenly crystallized the level of deprivation we'd all endured. And for what?

As I wept, the memories just kept flooding in. The cruelty, the filth, the greed, the starvation, the hatred, the viciousness, the sheer injustice of it all. No matter what happened now, no matter how free we were in theory, we would never be free in fact. We had lived with darkness and danger too long for our souls to return to the way they had been. How could we, when so much was lost and corrupted?

And I was ill. I had the tragic, bittersweet sense that I had survived the six black years of war and was finally liberated only to lose this last battle with typhus. "Mama," I said between sobs, "I'm so sick. My life is slipping away. I think I'm going to die now."
"No," she shouted, falling to the ground, hugging and shaking me at the same time. "You are not going to die. You will live. You will be reunited with Arthur, and we will all go to America. *You will not die!*" By her words and their forcefulness, by her utter willpower, she interrupted my moribund reverie. She knew that "Arthur" was the magic word.

"Oh, yes," I murmured, pulling my thoughts toward the future and hope. "I will live to see Arthur." The vision of his smiling face, his sincere brown eyes brought me back, gave me the strength to fight a little longer against the specter of death. I rallied.

DAVID KLIPP

Memories of 1945

My last camp, Ahlem, was evacuated on Friday, April 6, 1945, leaving behind in the enclosure inmates unable to be included in the march to Bergen-Belsen. I was among them.

On Saturday, April 7, an SS officer arrived at the camp in an open truck and ordered all 19 of us to climb in. He drove us to the "Schutzenplatz" in Hanover where the SS housing quarters and other facilities were located. A gray haired army general stood at the gate instead of the SS guard who was normally there. Our SS officer reported that he'd brought 19 prison inmates to be executed. The general told him, "The army is composed of soldiers, not executioners." We were then ordered off the truck and the SS officer drove off.

All this happened at the gate and I could hear the exchange very well despite the shots and other noises coming from the advancing Allied Forces.

Not far was a French prisoner of war camp, and they signaled us to come there. They explained to us that there was a possibility that German units might return and that we should not wear the concentration camp uniforms. There was a storage building not far away where the German uniforms were kept. We were advised to break in and change our clothes. That we did, and with their help we hid in the ruins of bombed houses.
The American tank unit entered Hanover on Wednesday April 11, 1945.

I told the American officer in the lead tank that we were 19 ex-inmates of a concentration camp. With the help of a Jewish-American soldier, we understood each other. He asked me to be the liaison between the Americans and the prisoners and wrote a note permitting me to walk around at any time, regardless of the general prohibition.

In the meantime, ex-inmates from other camps in the Hanover area started to come to town. With a few others, we established an organization to work on behalf of the their interests.

Shortly afterwards, the British replaced the Americans. They ordered the German authorities to work with us and to extend to us every possible help.

Our office was called “Hauptausschuss Fur Ehemalige Politishche Haftlinge,” commonly known as the KZ Ausschuss. Numerous ex-inmates from various camps were given food ration cards and pocket money to move where ever they wanted and try to find some surviving relatives. I was a board member until I left for the United States in April 1950.

This appeared in the 1990 Yearbook

SALLY KORN

The story of my liberation is a more complicated tale than even I would have ever anticipated.

I had been hiding in the woods with a group of about 50 other Jewish concentration camp escapees and Polish men in eastern Poland near the city of Bobkra. Our group learned that Bobkra was free of Germans. The Soviets had passed through on their advance west. We also heard that some Germans were nearby and that a convoy was to pass through, which the men in our group decided to attack. The attack was a success. But staying in the woods was now too dangerous for us. We believed that we would overtake Bobkra and thereby liberate ourselves.

Getting to Bobkra was dangerous. We had to pass Ukranian villages. The Ukranians had collaborated with the Germans, and they too despised the Jews. We heard that these villagers suspected there were Jews and partisans hiding in the woods. We were fearful that their dogs would detect us and give us away.

At dawn we arrived in Bobkra, surprised to see the city was abandoned. We were exhausted, and entered some of the unlocked buildings to sleep, using our meager bundles for pillows. But some Ukranians did see us and informed the Germans of our presence.

Later that morning, explosions from cannon shells hit the part of the city in which we were hiding. Everyone ran outside. The bombing involved many city blocks, and we ran from building to building trying to avoid getting hit. We also heard machine gun fire, as if we were on the front lines. We were unable to escape the shooting until we got to the outskirts. From there, we saw a Soviet battalion and walked toward it, signaling that we were not enemy combatants. But as we joined the Soviets, a German plane appeared and began to strafe us. Everyone ran in circles or fell to the ground for protection. The Soviets shot back, and eventually the plane left.

We realized it was not safe there. The Soviets instructed us to walk eastward, toward Soviet occupied territory. None of us were familiar with the area, but we walked on a highway that had woods on either side. Someone heard the rumble of a tank behind us—it was a German tank. Our group split up, running into the forest on both sides of the road. As we ran deeper and deeper into the woods, we heard the tank firing shots at us.

When we were out of immediate harm's way, and in fear and frustration, some of the Jewish girls in my group began breaking off vines that were covered with berries and eating the fruit. They threw the broken branches on the ground. It was not until some time later that I realized this had been our saving grace.

Our group continued to walk until we stopped on a hilly area that was sparsely wooded. From there we were able to see a fair distance. The Polish men became uneasy and planned to leave the area as soon as they could. One of my companions heard a Pole say that if we tried to follow them, they would have to shoot us.

We felt scared and doomed. But fate was on our side. The group that had escaped to the other side of the highway began to worry about our whereabouts. When they felt it safe to cross the highway, they started searching for us. They found the freshly broken vines and knew they were on the right track. Eventually they spotted us. Reunited, we continued our journey, encountering many other dangerous situations. As Jews attempting to escape our extermination from the Germans, we were caught in the life and death struggle between them and the partisans.

But a few days later, we crossed a major highway where hundreds of Soviet soldiers were crossing in both directions. We could tell from their equipment that the war in our area was over. We made contact with the Soviets, pleading with them to let us ride on their trucks. I decided to go to the city of Lvov, which had already been liberated by the Soviets.

In spite of the many hardships and difficulties we experienced on our road to liberation, fortunately no one in our group was killed and only a few men were slightly injured.

DINA AND ISAAC KORNBAUM

My mother was Dina Fainkind and my father is Isaac Kornbaum. My mother was in the ghetto of Lodz until nearly the end of the ghetto. Then she and my grandmother were taken to Auschwitz, where my grandmother perished in the selection process. Mother was then transferred to Ravensbruk and then to a women's camp by the Elba River.

As the war was coming to a close, the Germans told my mother and the other Jewish prisoners not to rejoice because they had wired the camp with explosives, which they would ignite the next day. However, early that next morning, when the Germans heard a report that the Russians were hours from the camp, they ran away, fearing for their lives.

My mother and the other Jewish women were left alive. They were liberated by the Russians. The American army soon followed.

My mother, who was under five feet, weighed less than 80 pounds, and the bones of her skeleton were clearly visible under her skin. The sores from malnutrition on her legs were so deep, they were not healed a year later, when she met my father. The liberators brought food to the surviving Jewish prisoners, but unfortunately some died from overeating. My mother said that although she was starving, she controlled her eating in order not to get sick. But her severe malnutrition and the harsh conditions she endured did require hospitalization in a hospital supervised by the Americans.

When my mother was released from the hospital, she returned to Poland but found no one left from her family. She made her way to a Kibbutz in the Polish city of Lignitz that was run by the Jewish Zionists. This was where my father met her, fell in love with her, and married her.

After the pogrom in Kielce, my parents stole their way across the border to Austria and a displaced persons camp on the American side run by the organization named UNRA. My parents left all of the documents and even their families' photos behind, when they stole across the Polish border illegally. The displaced persons camp was near Kassel, Germany. I was born on year

later. My parents gained liberty and kept their love, family, Jewish traditions and religious practices, and democracy.

Submitted by Brenda Brams, daughter of Dina Fainkind and Isaac Kornbaum.

PAULA LEBOVICS

The Boots

The last German patrol left on January 20, taking with them the remainder of prisoners. Anyone able to walk was taken away. All the children in (*Kinderblock*) block 7 in E-camp, better known as the *Zegeuner-Lager* (gypsy camp) in Auschwitz-Birkenau were left. Right after that, the electric wires around our camp were knocked out by a bombing.

We were free. . . .No Germans, no supervision, no electricity, no food! We'd had no food since the Big March on the 18th of January. Luckily, I'd found a moldy bread hidden and overlooked in an empty storeroom.

With my immediate hunger under control and the remainder of my bread securely in sight, I began to feel the freezing cold that was penetrating my body. I was wearing only a light garment, and I'm not sure whether I had shoes on.

The ground was covered with snow and where I looked I could see mounds protruding from flat the flat grounds. It looked like a white blanket covering the sleeping bodies beneath it—those were the ones who either never made the Big March or the following Last Patrol. They were the ones who were murdered or succumbed to starvation or sickness. I thought of myself as tough and indifferent to death and suffering. I was this little animal child, clawing and doing anything and everything to survive. I was properly trained in these tactics by this time. Still, every time I looked at a corpse, an knife went through my body as if I were the one being killed.

I recall joining the other children in a series of expeditions to find clothing. We walked through to the next camp, D-Lager, where again mounds were everywhere. We walked into the barracks where I knew my brother Herschel lived before the Big March. I don't know what I was looking for or what I didn't want to find. I saw a body on a lower bunk, and again a stab when right through my heart, and the sour taste of shoe soles (that sour spew of my earliest childhood memories) in my mouth. I held my breath. . . It wasn't my brother, thank God.

We found the storeroom. There were mountains of clothes and shoes. I dressed myself in many layers of clothes. Finally I felt warm and I thought to myself, *"I'll never be cold again."* There was a lot of chatting—maybe even laughter—as we looked at each other and compared our finds. But when it came to finding a pair of shoes, the story goes like this:

Just imagine standing in front of a tall mountain of unpaired shoes, boots, and sandals of every style, color, and size. It wasn't this small pile of shoes neatly tied up in pairs of my childhood memories. This was an overwhelming sight, and its true meaning I did not connect with or want to connect with until much later.

I dug in and started grabbing wildly at anything and everything. I glanced over to see what the other children were coming up with. I saw one of the girls putting on a pair of BOOTS. A thought went through my brain: *I want and I must have BOOTS too.*

Can you picture yourself trying on your mother's shoes when you were a baby? Well, that's how it was. I had such little feet, and the BOOTS I tried on were so big that they came way over my thighs. I could have fit both of my feet into them. The task became insurmountable. However, the harder it got, the more determined I became to find BOOTS.

It was getting late, and I was scared to go back alone and in the dark. I found a deep camel-color felt and leather-trimmed half-BOOT that fit much better than all the others. But I realized with disappointment after a while that finding the mate was an impossibility. Frustrated, I started to grab at anything. I found a white felt and black leather-trimmed half-BOOT. It was bigger, taller, and a completely different style. . . . how wonderful. . . I had BOOTS. Little did I anticipate or care that felt does not keep out the moisture. . . I had BOOTS.
Looking back, I can see that they did not succeed completely in breaking my spirit. . . I was still a CHILD.

Paula Lebovics was 11 years old when she was liberated from Auschwitz.

BARBARA LEE

The Will to Survive

With the invasion of Poland by the Germans, life in Chrzanow, my hometown, changed greatly. I had hope to have a normal childhood like that of other children. Instead, I became an adult over night. I had to learn to fight for survival.

I had been brought up to love and respect other people. My parents had also instilled in me the importance of charity and respect for the poor and sick. My father belonged to the "Hevra Kedusha" of our community and was dedicated to assisting the dying.

One day, the Germans ordered us to assemble in the city's square so that identification papers could be issued to us. It was just a pretext to round up Jews and it was then that my father was torn away from me. I was left crying and feeling helpless. I had the feeling that I was in hell and devils were dancing around me dressed in German uniforms.

Desperate, I pleaded with the Germans to release my father. To no avail. They were ruthless and without feeling. They took him away almost like a beast takes away his prey. I kept on begging for my father's release to the point of endangering my own life. I kept asking myself why they are taking my father away. I man who had harmed no one! A great human being. But my questions went unanswered.

Suddenly, I found myself at the age of eleven in charge of my family, my two younger sisters and my mother. With my father's deportation, my mother collapsed and was unable to tend to our needs. Instead of spending a carefree childhood, playing with friends, going to school, I had to hid in bunkers and live in constant fear of being discovered and arrested.

My brother was the next victim. At the age of 14, he was taken to a slave labor camp to work in a stone quarry and from there to concentration camp. After the liberation, I found out that he died of starvation in camp.

The rest of my family, mother and sisters, lived in the ghetto in one room. Every night we were afraid to go to sleep, fearing the Germans would come to take us away. We would take nightly refuge in a cellar right under our room. One of us had to stay back to alert us if the SS were approaching and to cover the trap door leading to the cellar. More than a cellar, it felt like a torture chamber without air or light.

One night they did come. My youngest sister was on vigil that night. We heard heavy footsteps and brusque commands asking her if anyone else was in the house. Then we heard silence. She was the third victim in our immediate family. How can I describe our feelings—we had to hold our breath, but our hearts were bleeding and our lips crying without emitting any sound. We felt so helpless. I wondered to myself how a mother must feel when her child is torn from her. I could feel my mother's pain flowing into my body.

The next morning, when we came out of our hiding place to get some food, we heard German-speaking voices coming our way. My mother and I quickly descended into the cellar leaving my remaining sister to cover the opening to our hiding place. She hid in a nearby closet. The Germans searched the house methodically, thrusting bayonets into furniture and knocking on walls. Soon they found her and took her along. I can still hear resounding in my ears her desperate screams: "Mamma! Mamma! I don't want to go."

Here we were, my mother and I, helpless and paralyzed. I was shaken by fear and anger. I felt as if as if someone had torn flesh from my body. Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind. Should we give ourselves up or should we fight for survival in the hope that one day we could be witnesses to the unspeakable cruelty perpetrated on children by the so-called "master race." By this time, however, we were aware of what would be in store for us too.

When quiet returned to the room above, my mother and I tried to lift the lid that covered our hiding place. We were unable to raise the lid, no matter how hard we tried. We were resigned to our death as we lacked oxygen and were getting weaker and weaker. After many attempts and with superhuman efforts, I was able to push the lid up, but in the process I knocked over a chair.

We were terrified that the noise would alert our Gentile neighbors who, in the past, had collaborated with the Germans.

Reassured that we had not been discovered, and after much effort, my mother and I were able to leave our hiding place and in the dark of night, disguised as Poles, we fled.

Trying to rejoin the rest of our family—grandmother and aunts—we discovered that they had all been deported to Auschwitz.

My determination to survive at all cost carried me through the many years of suffering I had to endure. A determination to survive, to tell the rest of the world of the atrocities perpetrated by a so-called "civilized nation."

BERNARD LEE

A Last Farewell

Liberation came to me by the American Army, May 1945 in a concentration camp near Munich, Germany. Liberation came after six years of indescribable torture, starvation, and humiliation. As inmates of various concentration camps, we had to witness the most horrible atrocities carried out by the Nazi hordes.

And now I was free again. I thought it was a dream from which I would have to wake up sooner or later. It took some time to absorb this new reality. I had to make the adjustment from slavery to freedom. I felt as if I were born again.
Reality, however, set in. I started asking myself questions: Where do I go from here? What does the future have in store for me? How do I get started to build a new life for myself?

That is when I starting thinking about my family. When I was taken to a labor camp, May 1941 by the Germans, I left behind my parents, four sisters and four brothers. I hoped and was convinced that some members of the family were alive. I searched for them all over Europe.

When I finally grasped the cruel truth that I had lost my entire family, I asked myself over and over again: Why was I the only one to survive? Even today, so many years after the actual event, it is very difficult and painful for me to think that they went to their deaths believing that I had died. Today, more than ever, it is painful not to have them around me and share their love. More than ever do I realize what that family meant to me.

BEBA LEVENTHAL

On the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Liberation: My Day of Liberation, May 3, 1945

Ordinarily, the Day of Liberation should be a long-awaited day, a day of great joy. But it was a day that most of us thought we would not survive to see—this, for reasons you will soon see.

But in order to understand and to penetrate into our lives, which hung as if in a spider web, one must first become acquainted with the place from which we were liberated: Camp Stutthof. This was the last stop in my wanderings from one camp to another. Stutthof was a small village on the Baltic shore in *Ost Preisen*—East Prussia—still part of Germany some 36 kilometers from Danzig. This was a terrible death camp, complete with crematorium, also known as the "Auschwitz of the north." We were forced to haul bricks from one spot to another and to dig graves—sometimes thinking they would be our own. Everything was gray and cold from rain an dirty snow.

This was the worst camp I had been in, and all of us who had been sent there were convinced that we would not emerge alive. Some 110,000 prisoners passed through this international camp—people from 40 different nationalities including Poland, Italy, Norway, Hungary, Russia, and even China and Mongolia. Mostly, though they were Jews—over 52,000—coming from the Baltic countries, Poland, and transfers from Auschwitz. It is believed that some 3,000 survived.

The Russian front began moving closer to Eastern Germany and Poland, but we in the camp knew nothing of this. A typhus epidemic was raging among us, and every morning we would see who had not gotten up for the "*apel*"—the roll call formation. Then the sanitation aides would go into the barracks to carry out the corpses. The crematorium worked ceaselessly. The transports being driven or walking there will always appear before my eyes. Horrible!

It became clear that the number of prisoners in the camp was growing ever smaller either due to executions, transfers to other camps, or death marches. Then, on the morning of April 28, 1945, the Germans drove us out of the barracks and began to count us. They formed fairly small groups and dragged us to the Baltic shore. We were shoved into small boats. Ours was a cement barge. Some SS men were with us. The boat set sail along with the others. It was crowded and dirty aboard. There was no food or very little. The people were sick, some with typhus, others severely malnourished. There was much activity at sea around us—many boats were involved. It seemed that the camp was being evacuated. The skies above were not calm either. Allied airplanes bombarded the boats and whatever else they could.

I can see clearly before my eyes the large ship "Kob Arkona" as it passes us. Male prisoners stand on the top deck in their prison uniforms and round caps. They're stout fellows, not starvelings like us. They appear self-satisfied, and they're certainly not Jews. We all wondered were they might have come from. Early the next morning, as we were circling in the same waters we suddenly spotted the stern of a ship sticking out of the water. It was the "Kob Arkona" that had been bombed, and all its prisoners now lie in a watery grave.

And so we circled and dragged about for some for or five days in the Baltic Sea. As to the conditions aboard, one must not speak. Some of us began drinking sea water, which is dangerous, and they fell ill. The atmosphere was that of panic. Rumors spread that an explosive device had been placed aboard and that it would be set off, drowning us all. Anything was possible among the Germans. Others said a few Norwegian prisoners had disconnected the bomb. Still it is difficult to imagine the panicked state that ruled over us.

Around the first or second of May, toward late afternoon, we noticed that we were approaching the shore. Our SS guards lowered a rubber raft from the boat and some of them departed. We believed we might be free because the Norwegians told us that the British and American armies were close by. But it was not so.

The SS men who had remained brought our boat closer to shore—between 50 and 150 meters. They ordered us to jump into the water, to wade ashore, and not to turn around or look back. We did so with our last strength. As we ran or crawled toward the beach, we heard shooting—the SS were firing at us and some in our group were killed in the water. But mostly they shot at the captives who had not managed to jump overboard, those who clung to the rails or were holding on to the sides of the boat. I looked back and saw that one of those was my relative—Senitsky—who had a club foot and was unable to jump. As he realized what was happening, he shouted at me with his last breath, "Beba, remember the date!"

We could not watch this and barely dragged ourselves to the shore, which was covered with thick growths of tall bushes. Somehow we managed to crawl among them and hide. There we found Russian POWs who had made a fire and were cooking a soup from the cows or sheep they had slaughtered. We saw on Americans or British. The Russians shared their fatty soup with us, but many were sickened by it after having starved for so long.
And so we lay there on the cold, wet ground for a day or two, and no one came to rescue or liberate us. But on the third of May, British soldiers appeared in the late afternoon and began to evacuate us. I didn't know who they were but we, the remnants of the long and dangerous voyage, were delighted. The British soldiers took us to a nearby military hospital in a submarine base in the city of Neustadt in northern Germany. Some German wounded soldiers were still in one section.

I couldn't believe we had been brought to a large ward with beds and sheets and blankets. Oh, how long since I'd seen these! But my wonder and joy were short-lived. German doctors came around to examine us. I noticed uniforms from the Wehrmacht or the SS under their medical robes, and I was convinced that they would kill us here or end us with injections or other means. My mind was working so much in this vein that I was determined not to allow any injections or other medical procedures.

That first night in the hospital was difficult—people were sobbing or groaning in pain. No one could sleep. At dawn we saw that many of our friends from the boat were unable to endure and had died in the night. Oh, what a tragedy on that day of liberation!
And so my first day of freedom passed in pay and in joy and in wonder.

English translation by Hershl Hartman.

JACK LEWIN

Thoughts from Before and After Liberation

After marching endless hours in deep snow in the evacuation from the K.Z. Trzebinia (a branch of Auschwitz) on January 17, 1945, we finally reached the field outside the gate of Auschwitz where we stopped for a rest. Our camp commandant, an SS officer, ordered 100 people who couldn't keep up with the march to step out.

I was the first volunteer. Within 10 minutes, there were a hundred more. As I looked around at our group, I realized I'd made a mistake. I was surrounded by half-dead, broken bodies, shadows of creatures from another world. I'm sure they thought the same when they looked at me. I was overcome by a great fear. Here we are in Auschwitz, within reach of the gas chambers and the crematoria, and we—one hundred perfect candidates for extermination. What do they need us for? I knew right then that this was the end.

But suddenly a wonderful change came over me: the great fear that had struck me when I assessed the appearance of my group of volunteers left me completely. Instead, a warm feeling of calm and deliverance came over me. I knew that my whole family was gone, so it was no more than right for me to join them. And with these thoughts, I was ready to face the inevitable.

One other thing helped change my mind. I was terribly tired after the long march. Every limb ached, especially my feet. My entire body cried out for a bit of rest. One thought dominated my entire being: where could I sit down, even for a moment?
I had already decided that the end was inevitable. I was familiar with the procedure: shower, gas chamber, cremation. I knew that before entering the gas chamber, we would no longer be guarded where we got undressed. While I was undressing, I thought I would be able to sit on the ground, stretch out my aching legs, and rest. From that moment on, I could think of nothing else. In fact, the image of my sitting on the ground like a prince would not leave me. The thought of rest was transformed into my only fantasy and made me forget about reality.

As we know, that end never came about. Our group of 100 half-dead souls was distributed over several Blocks and the SS guards left. I and a few others were assigned to the surgical hospital, Block 28.

Ten days later, Saturday the 27th of January, 1945 at 3:00 PM, a detachment of the Soviet Army marched into Auschwitz and liberated us.

It has been a long time since that day, and I am constantly tortured by thoughts about all my closest relatives and friends who did reach the final end. What were their final hours like? The last moments before the very end? Those minutes when they realized where they were headed—what had they thought? Were they afraid? If so, what did that fear do to them? And perhaps, perhaps they departed calmly?

At times when I'm alone, I close my eyes and try to enter their thoughts during the last moments before the end. Even though I know it's impossible, I do it anyway. I want, as much as it may be possible, to share the final moments with those who were closest to me.

None of the survivors will uncover that great secret, no matter how close they themselves may have come to the same end. I can only hope that those closest to me were not dominated by fright or despair but by the wonderful feeling of deliverance and expectation of reuniting with those who had preceded them on that final road.

JACK LEWIN. AUSCHWITZ # b-10237. This was translated from Yiddish by Hershl Hartman.

ESTHER LIVINGSTON

In the beginning of March 1945, I completed a six-week march. We arrived at a small labor camp near the Baltic Sea where we joined other concentration camp victims. We stayed in that camp for a short time.

In the afternoon of March 9, we were lined up in the courtyard by the Germans and told to go to the barracks and gather our belongings. We were marching again because "the goddamn Russians are very close. The old, weak, and sick were told to stay behind. Wagons would be sent for them later. (Those wagons never came, and they were found dead after the liberation.)

We began to walk at nightfall, marching through the melting snow in a forest all night long. We had to hold onto each other so we would not get lost, and when I bent over to eat some snow, a German hit me over the head with his rifle butt. My head began to swell immediately.

We arrived in the city of Chinow that morning and realized that all of the Ukranian and SS guards were gone. We were put in a barn to rest, where we met Russian prisoners. They told us to be brave because the Russian army was near; they had heard the tanks and machine guns. I fell asleep in the straw, and when I woke up, the Russian prisoners and the SS guards were gone. The Russians had been taken away and shot.

We looked through holes in the wood; we couldn't see any guards and we heard tanks nearby, so we went out one by one through loose planks in the wall. There were no guards and some Russian tanks, but at the sight of the prisoners, they closed their hatches immediately. The second or third tank stopped. We later learned that they had thought they'd come upon an asylum because they hadn't heard of the concentration camps.

We prisoners found a dead cow and jumped on it. I couldn't get to the cow because bigger people were in the way. So I found a piece of bread and was eating it when two men came up to me. The first pulled out a knife and demanded the bread. "It won't make a difference if I live or die," I said to him. The second man slapped his companion and asked if he was crazy. "This is a little

girl," he yelled. "She found the bread so it's hers." They let me keep it. I went back to sleep because there was nothing else to do. I already knew that my family was dead.

Chaya Aronowicz, a woman I had walked with, had been looking for me. Chaya pulled me out of the barn and made me come to an abandoned house that she, her sister, their daughters, and several other prisoners were staying in. The Germans had left in such a hurry, the stove was still hot. We asked three Russian officers to stay with us because we feared the Germans' return. The officers stayed, and as a favor to us, killed a turkey for us to eat. The two older women cleaned the turkey and made egg-drop soup with some flour, also using the officers' share of canned peaches and pears to make a feast of sorts. While they cooked, I went out to find more food.

There was a dairy in the village; I found it and a vodka factory next to it. Behind the vodka factory, were some Russian soldiers with 10 of the SS officers they'd caught. I recognized the officer who had hit me with his rifle, and I told the Russian guard. The soldier gave the German the same injury. He then noticed that I wasn't wearing shoes and was bleeding from blisters on my heels. He took the smallest guard's shoes and gave them to me. I never wore them. Shortly thereafter, all 10 German guards were shot.

The soldiers found the vodka factory and became very drunk. They began looking for German girls to rape. Next door to her house, a 16-year-old German girl was thrown out of the window, having been raped and killed by the Russians. When they couldn't find German girls, the Russians began looking for the Jewish girls they had just liberated.

ELISABETH MANN

I was 19 years old in May of 1945. It had been a year since my family and I were taken from our home in Hungary and since I had witnessed the murder of my parents and little brother in Auschwitz. I was starved and beaten down but I still believed I'd be saved.

Since the Germans, at this point, were retreating from the Russians, they moved us from place to place and we ended up in large open building on the outskirts of Hamburg, Germany. I hadn't eaten even a crust of bread for about two weeks and was ridden with lice.

I went to go outside to go to the bathroom. The SS at the door shouted at me and stopped me from leaving. A lady in a blue uniform with a Red Cross arm band walked toward us and said "Let her go" and the SS stepped aside. I ran to tell the others that we were going to be freed and one woman tried to choke me saying that "You're always saying we're going to be free."

We were packed onto cattle cars again, though it was less crowded than when we were first taken. I, along with 2 German soldiers and about 80 women survivors were on a train bound for Sweden where the Red Cross would take charge of us. When we came to Padbourg, Denmark, the train stopped so we could transfer from the German train to a Swedish one. As soon as the train

stopped, I jumped off. I knew I was free. There were Danish men and women and children at the train station who brought milk and cheese and bread for us.

A woman came up to me and gave me a bottle of milk but someone stole it from my hands. I began to cry. The woman told me to wait and she'd come back with more milk. I didn't wait. I began to walk. A man saw me and began to cry. I assume it was because of my appearance. I was 80 pounds, with a shaved head, and dressed in a tattered inmate uniform. He gave me money to buy something. I went into a nearby bakery and asked for milk but they had none. The woman behind the counter packed a bag full of bread, gave it to me and smiled. Everyone was very kind.

Outside the bakery, the woman who went to get me milk came up on her bicycle and invited me back to her apartment, where she gave me the best cup of coffee I had ever tasted. She then took me to the store and bought milk for me and my friends. Then she put me on her bicycle and ran along side me all the way back to the train. There were flowers in the windows and Danish women were waving white handkerchiefs and smiling at me. When we got back to the station, my train was already gone.

While I waited for another transport train, a van came by with 2 Danish Red Cross women. They took me, and two others who had missed the train, to the hospital where we were examined, disinfected and bathed. They gave us clean white underwear and dresses and food. Three Germans shared our ward at the hospital and claimed to be survivors. I knew from their healthy appearance that they were lying.

We were all taken to the Sweden-bound train the next morning. Since we had already been bathed and deloused, they put the 6 of us in a separate compartment from the others. The 3 Germans immediately took three of the seats which left me having to lie down in the mesh luggage carrier above their heads. They thought I was sleeping while they went through their case and took out photographs of themselves in SS uniforms, tore them up and threw them out the window.

When we arrived to Sweden, the authorities asked the Germans who they were. They claimed to be inmates. They then asked me if I knew who they were. I simply said no. While I knew they were Nazis, I just couldn't start my free life by ruining someone else's. I was just happy and grateful to be free. I believed G-d should deal with them.

This was submitted by Elisabeth's son, Thomas Mann.

MAURICE (MIODOWNIK) MOORE

April 23, 1945

I escaped the Warsaw Ghetto on June 22nd1941 and reached the city of Plonsk. I worked on a farm, was interned in two labor camps, and resided in Plonsk until its ghetto was liquidated to Auschwitz on November 10, 1942. After ten days at Auschwitz, I volunteered to work in a coal mine, Jawishowitz, a sub-camp of Auschwitz.

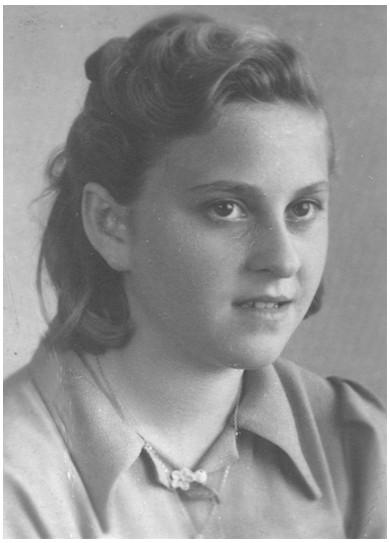
After working as forced labor in this coal mine from November '42 to January '45, I was evacuated to Buchenwald. We marched for many hours and finally reached the open cattle train that would take us to Weimar. We embarked on a heavy, snowy day to march to Buchenwald from Weimar. Having to wait for permission to enter the camp, we slept on the snow overnight. The following morning, about half the prisoners were dead. We finally entered the camp on January 22. I was taken to various sub-camps of Buchenwald, back and forth, and finally returned to Buchenwald.

On April 10, I was taken by train to an unknown destination. The train was attacked by American airplanes, and many prisoners were killed. The remaining prisoners were then removed from the train. We walked during the night and hid in the daytime in small forests on the way to Bavaria. On April 21, while marching on a highway in Bavaria, I volunteered to dig graves for our fallen brothers. It rained all the next day. We were exhausted and wet. The large group of prisoners had moved on—only a few were left behind to do the burials. It became impossible to continue. There was a farmhouse in the distance. As I spoke German, I told the guard that we needed rest and warmth. We went to the farmhouse around midnight. The farm lady knew who we were. She took our clothes to dry and made us a thin soup. She told us to eat slowly as our stomachs were not used to food. We slept on her kitchen floor over night.

The next day, April 23, we had to find and join the larger group. We followed the German soldier in charge and found ourselves in Newburg Vorn Walde. No German soldiers were to be seen. The houses had out white flags. Our guard disappeared. We realized that soon we would be liberated.

The American soldiers came in tanks. They handed out food and candy bars. Some of the people gobbled the provisions and died because their bodies could not adjust so quickly to the food. The Americans brought nurses and doctors. We were assigned a place to stay for a few weeks within the farming community. I remained there until July, when I left for Poland to look for my family.

MARY NATAN



My name is Mary Natan, nee Maniusia Rybowska. I was born in Lodz, Poland on April 28, 1929, the youngest of five siblings.

In 1939, at the age of 10, my whole family and I had to move into the Lodz Ghetto, where I had to work in a dress factory in order to be eligible to receive a miserly, watery soup. I had no schooling.

In August 1944, I was deported to Oswiencim, where, because of my age, I was selected for the oven. But luck was with me. I was saved by a Hungarian girl who worked there.

I was reunited with a cousin, but after six weeks, we were deported to Bergen Belsen, where we lived in tents. Subsequently, we were sent to a factory where we manufactured parts for planes and tanks, but because of my age, I was allowed to work in the kitchen.

In 1945, we were liberated by the American army. I was one of five hundred children adopted by Mrs. Lenore Roosevelt and taken to the States.

ZENON NEUMARK

Escape

My liberation came on April 13, 1945, in Vienna, Austria. I had been living there for several months, masquerading as an Aryan Pole, working as an electrician in a private firm and renting a room from a local Austrian family. I had led a fairly normal life but I had to be constantly on guard: I was an escapee from a Labor Camp near Vienna (brought there as a prisoner from the Warsaw Uprising of 1944); my identity papers were false; my boss was a rabid Nazi and my landlord's son had recently volunteered for the Waffen SS.
Beginning in April 1945, two Russian armies encircled the city and the fall of the city was only a matter of days. Life in the city became even more disorganized than it was under bombardments, and a great number of people, myself included, stopped going to work; the entire population spent most of its time in shelters. In the last days of the war, several of the women in our shelter were feverishly altering Nazi banners, flags that had once been proudly displayed from the fifth or sixth floor windows of the building, reaching all the way down to the first floor. The women now stripped the swastikas and the white circles from the banners, leaving solid red material that would be hung out to welcome the victorious Red Army. The switch of political side seemed to have come rather easily to them…

The thirteenth day of April was a bright, sunny day. Around mid-morning, I was gazing idly out of my second-story window when I saw two Russian soldiers appear in the street below. Instantly, a feeling of euphoria rose within me. A feeling of joy and happiness came over me. After almost six long and tragic years, this was the moment of my liberation from the Nazi yoke! The war had finally ended. I was free! I had survived!

I turned from the window, and without a word to my landlords, ran down the staircase as if the building were on fire. I chased after the soldiers and embraced and kissed each of them. They stared at me, astonished and speechless. In my excitement, I neither identified myself nor told them why I was so happy.

The next morning, I got up very early determined to find the Russian headquarters. Despite my lack of any military training, I wanted to volunteer for service in the Russian Army. Unconcerned that the war would end in another few weeks; I wanted to do my part. I packed a lunch in my backpack and, to the surprise of my hosts, left the house. On my way I stopped every officer I met and told each the same story: that I was from the Allied country of Poland, that I was a Jew, that I was hiding in Vienna under a false name, and that I now wanted to volunteer to fight the Nazis. And the answer from each one was the same:

"Go to the headquarters."

I started walking in the direction the Russians were coming from. Then I followed the newly strung telephone lines, noticing that the bundles of wires thickened, as I got closer to the command post. Finally, three hours later, I found myself explaining the purpose of my visit to a

junior officer on the outside perimeter of the Russian Army headquarters. Suspicious about who I was, he wouldn't allow me to come close to an officer with any kind of authority. Instead, and on his own, he determined that the Soviets did not need me, did not want me, and most importantly, did not trust me. From the questions this junior officer asked, he insinuated that because it would have been impossible for a Jew to survive in Nazi Vienna, much less to have lived in hiding through most of the war, that therefore I must be a Nazi collaborator seeking to switch sides now that the war was lost. "You cannot be a Jew. The Fascists killed all the Jews," he stated flatly.

After examining my Polish documents he concluded, with remarkable perception, that he couldn't rely on my documents to establish my identity, since by my own admission, they were false. Certainly his suspicion about people switching sides was not unfounded. Hundreds of thousands of foreign laborers in Germany, including the 20-plus Russians and Ukrainians who had worked with me at the electrical firm, made such a switch. They now wanted to hide their past by volunteering to serve with the Red Army.

In the first week following the Russian takeover of Vienna, it was officially announced that Vienna was now under a new authority, the "Russian Komandatura." I went in search of other Jews, to seek out others who had survived. Although I often thought that I was the only Jewish survivor in Vienna, some inner voice told me that I might be wrong. I walked to the place in the First District where Vienna's main synagogue had once stood, in the area of Judengasse and Judenplatz.

When I reached the site of the synagogue, which was now a pile of rubble with twisted steel beams sticking out in all directions, I found at least 20 other Jews roaming around who just like me, were looking for other Jews. Most were natives of Vienna who had managed to survive the entire war, some even with the tacit approval of the authorities. One of them claimed to be a rabbi; another happened to be from Warsaw. The latter had been captured during the Warsaw Uprising and brought here the same way I had been. He was quite a few years older than I, around 40, but we were drawn to each other, perhaps because of the great similarity of our experiences. He was Ivo Wesby a former conductor with the Polish Philharmonic. To the best of my knowledge, he and I were the only two Polish Jews who survived the war, at least a part of it, hiding in Nazi Vienna.

When a few days later the Jewish Kultusgemeide opened its doors, I registered under my real, original name of Neumark; my number was 28.

ISIDOR NUSSENBAUM

Excerpts from my Memoirs

At dusk on March 9, 1945, an eerie silence fell over Rueben. I was lying in the barn among those sick and close to death. Supposedly, all Jews with the exception of those in the death barn had been evacuated by the SS, and camp security had been turned over to teenagers and elders of the *Volksturm*. The only sound that could be heard in the barn was the muffled moans that arose from the suffering men in their final hours.

Several days had passed since the barn inmates had been abandoned to their fate. Suddenly, the crackling of small arms fire shattered the stillness of the night. Intermittently, there were sounds of artillery shells exploding in the distance. Then the barn door opened. I looked up to see two Russian soldiers cautiously enter. They advanced carefully with rifles ready and reconnoitered the barn, searching for the enemy. None was found. The members of the *Volksturm* had deserted their posts in haste and in panic during the night.

A prisoner who spoke Russian entered the barn unexpectedly and greeted the soldiers. He had been hiding and had avoided the evacuation. He told the soldiers that Rueben was a prison camp for Jews. The Russians then identified themselves as members of an advance reconnaissance unit. They ordered us to remain in the camp and await the main body of the Russian troops that were still fighting the Germans nearby and were advancing toward the camp.

During the night, the shooting intensified. Sounds of exploding artillery shells mingled with the rapid fire of shrieking Katuscha shells and small arms fire. I looked up at the small window on my right. Streaks of brilliant flames slashed through the night sky. Once, during a period of silence, I could hear a man whisper to his neighbor, "Friend, do not overreact. The excitement can cause a heart attack and kill at our long-awaited hour of liberation.

At dawn, March 10, 1945, I heard rumbling noises from a distance. I remembered that sound from a German newsreel that I'd seen in September 1939 when the German army moved hundreds of tanks toward Poland. In time, the rumbling turned into a thunderous roar that shook the ground.

It took all the strength and determination I could muster to pull myself upright and look out the window. In front of me was an awesome scene. I had waited for this day since my deportation to the east. The long-awaited liberators had arrived! A Russian army unit was passing in front of the death barn.

A seemingly endless column of tanks roared by. Their turrets were closed, guns pointed forward, as they rolled westward in pursuit of the retreating enemy. The tanks were painted with strange letters and symbols. An array of red flags fluttered from some of them. A few foot soldiers crouched on the tanks. On both sides of the tanks, the endless column of infantry moved cautiously along the road with their rifles ready to fire. The foot soldiers—mostly Asians,

Mongolians, and Uzbeks, were dressed in heavy, quilted uniforms and caps. They were short, squat and bow-legged.

I slumped back to the floor, exhausted by the excitement of what I had seen.

TWO NIGHTS LATER

I heard my brother Siegfried, of Blessed Memory, shouting in his limited Russian, *"Ja Niemetzki Iwre. Ja Bill Piet Gadu ba Concentrazia Lager"*—I am a German Jew, and I was five years in a concentration camp.

Suddenly, out of the darkness came a sharp, frantic command, "*Stoi Tovarichie. Ne Straelie Na Verch!"*—Stop comrades. Do not shoot. Get out! The soldier at my bedside quickly withdrew his bayonet. After all the soldiers had left the room, the officer turned to us and spoke in Yiddish. "Ich bin a Yid."—I am a Jew. I'm a Red Army officer and these soldiers are under my command. We are searching for German army stragglers that may be hiding. *Kinder* (children) sleep well.

In the morning, the officer returned with a Siddur. Then, as if to emphasize his religious faith, he started to read the *Shma*—"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is one. He then advised us to leave the farm village immediately and seek medical assistance in a nearby town. He promised to arrange the needed transportation.

A few hours later, the officer returned and assisted me to a waiting army truck that stood in front of the farmhouse. Siegfried managed to walk to the truck and climbed up unassisted. The officer ordered the waiting truck to take us to Lauenburg in Pomerania.

SALLY ZIELINSKI ROISMAN

I was born on October 2, 1930 in Sosnowiec, Poland to an Orthodox family of eleven children. I was taken to and worked in a labor camp ,Graben, near Gross Rosen in 1943. In February 1945, I was transported after a death march to Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp. Stricken with typhus, barely alive, I was liberated by the English army along with my two older sisters, Edja and Mania, to whom I own my survival. I lost three brothers, two sisters, and both my parents in the Holocaust.

During the time after my liberation, we lived in Germany where, because I had very little schooling being the youngest surviving sibling, my older brothers and sisters made it possible for me to continue my education with private tutoring. I studied mathematics, accounting, English, French and literature. In 1951, we all immigrated to Melbourne, Australia. I worked at the Australian National Airways as a teletypist. While on a pleasure trip to Israel and New York, I met

my future husband, Sol Steve Roisman, born in Hartford, Connecticut. While in New York, I worked for the Dell Publishing Co. in the accounting department.

Steve and I married in 1959. We returned to Australia and had two daughters, Helen and Roslyn. In 1965, we returned to America, this time to Los Angeles. In 1986, we lost our dear daughter Helen in an accident. It continues to be extremely hard to survive the loss of one's child. Our daughter Roslyn is happily married and we have a beautiful and intelligent granddaughter, Nicole, who gives us lots of naches.

I still cannot resolve my opinions and feelings of man's inhumanity to man. And I still cannot comprehend my own strength to be able to lead a comparably normal life after going through the hell of Bergen Belsen.

Shortly before my retirement, I decided to do something only for myself. I took up painting and took crash courses in order to advance as fast as possible. I had wonderful teachers at Beverly Hills Adult School. I painted figuratives, still life, and biblical images. As painting requires total focus, it helps me deal with my pain.
Over the years, I have won several awards from the Pacific Art Guild for my work. In 2001, I had a one-woman art exhibit at the Westside Jewish Community Center which was written up in the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Jewish Journal* and the *Beverly Press*. One paper said: "What Ann Frank did for literature, Sally Roisman does with color." The Beverly Press had a photo of me with one of my biblical paintings—that of a Rabbi holding the Torah surrounded by Chassidim. The caption: "Holocaust survivor paints to help ease the pain."

I feel I owe my survival to both my parents who planted a deep spiritual seed of love, hope, and purpose. I am happy to leave a legacy not only of sadness but also an impression of hope and beauty for humanity.

HERBERT SCHWARZ

Vienna, Austria

03/03/25

I departed from Vienna to Riga, Latvia in 1941. I worked in a camp in the Ghetto in Riga, doing 1,000 jobs until the next stop, Smarden Torfstechen, a small camp with 200 men and women and 150,000 mosquitoes. Torf was in the swamp region and during normal times, only prisoners who had committed major crimes were imprisoned there. It was extra punishment to have 150,000 mosquitoes feeding on you!

I was taken back to Riga to work at a camp seven days a week, ten hours a day plus marching and singing to job sites. As the Russians came closer and closer, one ship—a troop transport—took

3,000 of us to Germany. We arrived in Danzig to be transferred to Stutthof. But when typhus broke out, whoever could run boarded a train, cattle-car style, to Buchenwald.

I was moved to Zeitz and in the winter of 1944 got bombed by Allied bombers trying to destroy our workplace, which produced gasoline chemically from coal dust. We were bombed back to Buchenwald for a death march to reduce the camp with 120,000 men from 32 nations.

We tried to hide out to wait for Mr. Patton's 3rd army. After the death march, there were only 40,000 of us left. The liberation was quick. Ten tanks came up the mountain and the German guards ran down the other side—gone like a mirage—and we were free.

As history tells us, free in body was not free from years of camp or peace of mind.

The consequence of four years of starvation and much anguish, the new revelation that "you are now the only survivor of a whole family"—the only member of a family of hundreds of close and far relatives one did not digest so easily. For four years, the only driving force was to survive hunger pains 24 hours a day. This was the job of the day, everyday. This all set in after the liberation. And where to go? Everybody had his own idea.

I went back to Vienna, the only logical place to await the return of whoever else survived, but nobody came.

So in 1949, alone, without money, English, or relatives, I went to pitch my tent in LA.

SAM STEINBERG

I was born on September 1, 1928 in Tomaszow, Mazowlecki, Poland. I was the youngest in a family of five. My older brother, Pesach, was two years older than me. My sister, Fela, was four years older.

I lost my mother and sister on October 30, 1942 to the Treblinka gas chambers. In 1943, my father Abraham, my brother and I were sent to a work camp named Blizin in Poland. Pesach became sick with typhus. Late in 1943, my father died of a broken heart and starvation.

In the beginning of 1944, Pesach and I were sent with other inmates to Auschwitz, where our names became numbers: Pesach became B1839 and I became B1840. After a couple of months, I was transferred to Birkenau. My fate was more promising than Pesach's. He was taken to the gas chambers because of his illness. I was lucky that I looked like a child and was sent to the children's barrack where food was plentiful. This helped me survive the other two camps, Flossenburg and Oranenburg, where I was forced to do extensive hard labor in a stone quarry. We all worked in terrible weather conditions with very little food.

Fearing the Russians' approach, the guards loaded us on open freight wagons and moved us deeper into Germany. Relying on snow and, if lucky, a piece of bread, we tried to sustain our lives. But in the middle of April 1945, we were stopped by the Allied planes. We were removed from the train and started the famous death march, during which half the people were lost.

I survived and was liberated by the Americans on April 24, 1945 in Neunburg Biren, Germany. I was lucky that two other survivors who were 14 years my senior were liberated in the same place and felt sorry for me. One of the gentlemen, Maurice Praw, had family in America and was able to leave for the U.S. in May 1946. We communicated with each other and he convinced me to come to the U.S. I was able to join him in Los Angeles in August, 1946.

ISABELLE SZNEER

September 1944

After two and a half years of hiding, fearing for our lives daily, not knowing what the next minute may bring us, living in despair, hoping that we would survive these horrible years of fear and agony, we'd made it. We survived. We could not believe that we'd made it. My father, my mother, my sister—we were alive, the nightmare was over. We were free to go back to our home and start anew.

At first we were careful. Was it a dream? Were we really liberated? What if it turned out that the Germans would mount a new offensive? What could we do? Where would we go? Luckily it was true. We could start living as free human beings again.

But then the tragedies began. Our families and friends were gone, deported, killed, burned, martyred.

It took until 1945 for us to find out to what degree we, the Jews, had suffered. Six million humans were gone.*Isabelle Szneer nee Lubinewski, Brussels, Belgium*

SALLY WASSER

April 15, 1945 will remain as one of the most memorable days in my life. It was a moment in time that has lasted a lifetime. I was the day my sister Rachel and I were liberated from Bergen Belsen Concentration camp in Germany. My days there were endless, filled with hunger and little hope, just the basic human desire to survive and keep close to my sister. There was no point in even asking why this place existed or what happened to the life I had known with my wonderful parents and sisters and brother.

Suddenly we heard a voice that seemed like an angel coming from above. The voice spoke in English with a British accent and the sound resonated throughout the camp. It was Rabbi Hartman, fonder of the London Synagogue, chaplain of the British troops saying, "You are all free!" We were not sure what we were hearing. It was a voice of humanity, something we had not heard for years.
In the days just before the liberation, there was an unusual routine to the camp. We were not sent out to do any work. There was no food, and illness was rampant. We, of course, had no idea what was going on and that the Germans were losing the war. We only knew that our situation was becoming worse than the days before. And then we heard those wonderful words. Survivors who were lying on the ground, near death, heard those wonderful words and wanted to stand and reach for the sky in gratitude. Some actually dropped to their death.

We could not speak any English, but we desperately wanted to thank those British soldiers. We did not have gifts, nor any flowers to present to them. So we found among ourselves one person who could translate. We finally found our voice and shouted, "Long live the British army!" What a sight we must have been! Human skeletons cheering the army.

Rabbi Hartman tried to feed the hungry, but they were too sick to eat. There was a lot of dysentery and typhus. My sister Rachel was one of the more ill. She could not move. Rabbi Hartman created an emergency clinic. I was chosen to help in this clinic in the early days of the liberation. This simple act of helping one another was our first return to civilization—to once more utilize our minds and energy for the betterment of human existence rather than just surviving.

Bergen Belsen was liberated at the same time as other camps. It was a confusing time. Where should we begin in putting our lives back in order? Everyone started to dream of seeing loved ones. A few days after the liberation, a friend had rushed over to me. "Sally, Sally," she shouted, "you're brother is at the gate!" This was truly a hallucination. I ran like never before. I hadn't seen my brother in two and a half years, yet there he stood on the other side of the barriers, beautifully dressed in a leather jacket and white scarf, leaning on his bicycle with his brilliant

blue eyes smiling at me. He had been liberated earlier and had heard that there might be women from his home town in Bergen Belsen. He traveled with a friend who as a fellow survivor of forced labor. That friend later became my beloved husband, Harry Wasser.

Even though we were all free, life was treacherous in Germany. The survivors remained in Bergen Belsen, taking over the better barracks and creating a small city. We started life anew. I was married in Bergen Belsen. There was no money for gifts, so everyone brought flowers and all were invited. You could not imagine that a place of so much horror and death could become a place of such beauty and celebration.

The most ironic part of all was that it was in Bergen Belsen, a place where the Germans tried to annihilate the Jews, that I give birth to my firstborn, Martin. This was a true tribute to those who did not survive.

I was reunited with Rabbi Hartman at the 40th Anniversary of the Liberation at the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Los Angeles. I lit the memorial candle with my grandson Jeremy at my side. We have never forgotten those who perished or the families we loved so dearly.
Sally Wasser survived the passing of her husband, Harry Wasser, and continues to live a fruitful life in Los Angeles along with her children and grandchildren.

JENNY ZAVATSKY

I was in the Lodz Ghetto, Auschwitz/Birkenau, Stuthof, and the last place was Dresden, where I worked as a slave laborer. When Dresden was bombed in February 1945, our factory was bombed too.

We began a march that lasted until our liberation. We marched every day for about 30 miles a day and then we slept in barns at different farms along the way. My mother and sister were with me. One night, after we'd been walking for two weeks, we awoke, but we were unable to wake my sister. She had died in her sleep. We had to leave her there and continue walking. The last week of the march, my mother got very weak and could not walk anymore. The Germans now provided some wagons for the sick. I guess the war was ending, and they wanted to appear human.

One day, while we were walking, we realized that the Germans had disappeared. We were close to Prague, Czechoslovakia. In all the commotion--people shouting we were free—I lost track of the direction that the wagons had taken. I was separated from my mother who had been with me all through the war. I was 13 at the time, and all alone, I thought. But my mother's friend took me under her care. We walked to Prague, where the Red Cross located my mother. She was very ill, but recovered. In fact, she lived to be 96 and died in January 1995.

From our family of five, my mother and I were the only survivors. After Prague, we lived in a displaced persons camp in Landsberg. There, my mother remarried. Her new husband was also a survivor; he had lost his wife and seven children.

We waited in Landsberg for four years to come to the United States. We immigrated in 1949. My mother and stepfather were married for 40 years. I became his child and he was a Zaddie to my children. So this is how I was liberated.

MICHAEL ZELON

My Road to Freedom

Very rarely to I think or talk about my life in ghettos and forced labor camps. Who could imagine, or who would believe the inhumane suffering I went through? Subconsciously, I suppressed my incomprehensible experience. Now, I think the time is ripe to slowly open my gruesome past.

I would like to share with you my road to freedom. My brother and I were interned in Czenstochowa HASAG Warta labor camp. On January 10, 1945, we could hear the heavy artillery of the Russian guns. We felt that our liberation was only a matter of days. Returning from the factory where I worked, I encountered my German *Meister* (supervisor) Anderson, who said, "For us, the sun is setting; for you, the sun is rising." I was scared to look in his eyes.

In the camp, spirits were high with discussions about our immediate future. We did not trust the Germans, but there was nothing we could do. We went rather late to sleep (8 men on a 6-foot-wide plank bed), to rest for the next factory shift.

Suddenly, a big commotion erupted in the night. The Germans started loading inmates into cattle cars for Germany. My younger brother, Bill and I decided to hide or escape. We started to investigate the way out. Slowly, under the cover of darkness (it was about 6 AM), we went into the German administration and security building with not a living soul in sight. We stumbled into the mail room full of packages addressed to Germany. We opened some. I found a new dark suit that fit me perfectly. I was dressed in an elegant suit with no shirt on my back. We started moving out.

There was no guard in front of the building. We ventured into the street outside the camp. The streets were covered with snow. Some German soldiers lay dead on the sidewalk. German trucks stood there, engines running, with no drivers in sight. At the gates of some of the buildings, we could see Polish residents, so we asked them, "Where are the Germans? Where are the Russians?" They directed us southeast, toward the Russians. We felt free and thought that nothing could happen to us.

After a while, we saw very short Russian soldiers (Calmuks?) in felt boots, with machine guns over their shoulders, cautiously hugging the walls of buildings. Otherwise, the streets were absolutely

empty. Suddenly, from nowhere, a Russian officer on a horse approached us and commanded us to "*Lezeej"*—lie down. We did. The gun in his hand terrified us. Without questioning us, he said, "You are German spies" (*Germanskie spoiny).* Lying in the snow, we tried to explain that we were Jews (*Yevreye*) escaping from a forced labor camp. His reaction was "*davai*," to walk in front of him and his horse. We did.

It was a long walk. Leaving the city, we found ourselves on a highway. On one side, one could see little scout planes and on the other a lot of German POWs behind a wire fence. A few hundred meters ahead, a number of cars were parked on the highway shoulder. As we approached, we could see some Russian officers. We were reported as "German spies" to a very big guy sitting on top of a car with maps spread all over. To me, he looked like a general.

"So, you are German spies," he said.

"No," we protested, "We are *Jevreye*—Jews. We ran away from a German labor camp."

He looked at us with a friendly smile and said in perfect Yiddish, "*Ihr seit Yehudim*—you are Jewish." He continued in Yiddish that in traveling from Lemberg to Czenstochowa, he did not encounter one Jew. Then with a friendly gesture, he said, "Now you can go to your *Mame* and *Tateh* for this is a dangerous front." With best wishes, he assigned a Russian officer to lead us out of the danger zone.

And so we continued our very eventful travel to our home in Plonk, Poland, to find out about the loss of our young parents and two sisters.