

Reflections on Liberation Holocaust Historian Robert H. Abzug

The tasks for soldiers, nurses, and civilians who entered the liberated camps were in many ways as unprecedented as the scenes they confronted. Simply surviving the assault on one’s senses and sense of reality was a major challenge. Then came the vast effort to bury the dead, to restore basic services and supplies of food and water, and to save those who could be nursed back to life. Indeed the reactions of Allied personnel to the camps and their actions to aid survivors in some ways, constituted profound dramas in their own right.

To understand the soldier’s reactions, we must first understand that, by entering a camp, the American soldier entered another world. Time reporter Percy Knauth, after a few days stay, stated simply: “Buchenwald is beyond all comprehension. You just can’t understand it, even when you’ve seen it.” His exasperated explanation suggested a truth about the camps: each constituted a universe onto itself, with chaos of possibility and confusion and awful reality that bore little relation to normal social and personal

expectations and for which outsiders were never prepared. Comprehending the reality and describing it in language involves comparing it to, or fitting it into, an assumed human order and into the symbolism of language. Those who faced the camps strained at this risk of comprehension precisely because a lack of perceived order compounded the horrors.

Abzug, Robert H. “The Liberation of the Concentration Camps”. *Liberation 1945: The United States Holocaust Museum*. United States: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1945. 37-38.

Reflections on the Liberation of Buchenwald

Rabbi Herschel Schacter First US Army Chaplain to arrive at Buchenwald 1945

I served as a chaplain in the American Army for over three years. I consider it a privilege – a privilege that brought with it much pain and grief and heartache – and yet I truly consider it a privilege to have witnessed, to have participated in the ravages of war, of cities laid waste and homes destroyed and human beings crushed. I especially consider it a privilege, tragic and

grievous as it was, to have come face to face with the stark, bitter, sordid reality of Jewish tragedy.

Yes, I was in that hellhole called Buchenwald within a matter of hours after the first columns of American tanks rolled through and liberated that dungeon on the face of this earth...Our faith is tried, of course, but we remain men and women of faith. We believe in the ultimate

triumph. We must believe or Hitler will have won the war. If, indeed, we can be driven to a negation of our faith in God, in man, in the essential goodness of humanity, we will have handed Hitler a posthumous victory.

Schacter, Rabbi Herschel. “The Chaplains”. *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945: Eyewitness Accounts of Liberators*. Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987. 101-102.

Reflections on the Liberation of Ohrdruff

US Army Lieutenant Meyer Birnbaum

When we reached Ohrdruff, we had to get out of our jeep. Bodies were piled everywhere, making passage impossible...I was totally unprepared for what we found in Ohrdruff. I had heard of the concentration camps of course, but until the moment when we entered Ohrdruff and found the bodies strewn about, I imagined

them to be giant work camps employing slave labor—three meals a day and a bed at night in exchange for unpaid labor. In fact, Ohrdruff and Buchenwald were “slave labor camps” – not extermination camps like Auschwitz and Treblinka, whose whole purpose was to process human beings for slaughter—but my picture

of slave labor was typically rose tinted. Slave labor for the Nazis meant working Jews to death rather than processing them through gas chambers and crematoria.

Birnbaum, Meyer and Yonason Rosenblum. *Lieutenant Birnbaum: A Soldier’s Story*. New York: Mesorah Publications, 1993. 120-121.

WHEN HUMANITY FAILS toolbox

Photo Analysis

- 1 What thoughts do you think might be going through the minds of the newly freed women in this photograph?
- 2 What thoughts do you think might be going through the mind of the American liberator?
- 3 Why are they still behind a barbed wire?
- 4 Based on their clothing and head coverings, what season do you think it was in Austria when they were liberated from Mauthausen?
- 5 Do you think this is what the Allied soldiers expected to find?
- 6 The shaving brush is an important artifact that gives us a glimpse into the role of the soldiers at liberation. What was so significant about a shaving brush that the survivor recipient used it for the rest of his life?

Acts of Heroism **Mission** Beyond Army Tactics

Primary Source Analysis and Questions for Discussion:

- 1 As a Holocaust historian, how does Abzug differentiate the two different types of liberations originally presented by newsreels and Allied photographers?
- 2 Did both “liberations” actually take place?
- 3 What does Abzug feel was the first line of duty for a soldier, nurse or civilian who entered a liberated camp?
- 4 For an eyewitness of the camps, what is the problem with describing the reality of the unimaginable scenes in words?
- 5 Does “human order” allow for images like those of the concentration camps?
- 6 What is the definition of something that is a privilege?
- 7 What is something in your personal life that you consider to be a privilege?
- 8 What does Rabbi Herschel Schacter mean when he says that he considers it a privilege to have participated in the ravages of war?
- 9 Entering the camps as a religious Jewish American Army Chaplain, list what you think may have been some of the challenges for Rabbi Schacter.
- 10 In Rabbi Schacter’s opinion, what constitutes the truth about the Jewish victory of WWII? How is this possible in spite of the over six million Jews who perished?
- 11 Do you agree or disagree with his belief? Explain your reasoning.
- 12 What had been US Army Lieutenant Meyer Birnbaum’s perception of concentration camps before helping to liberate one?
- 13 How does he differentiate a slave labor camp from an extermination camp?
- 14 Many of the cards in this unit focus on the heroism of victims of the Holocaust. How does the Allied involvement in the war and more specifically the liberation of Nazi camps, reveal heroic action?
- 15 What may have been some of the physical and emotional effects of this mission?
- 16 Do you think any Army servicemen came home the same?



Women and children survivors in Mauthausen speak to an American liberator through a barbed wire fence.

Credit: US Holocaust Memorial Museum National Archives and Records Administration, College Park United States Holocaust Memorial Museum #74456, courtesy of Col. P. Richard Seibel Eva Wechsler Pauline M. Bower

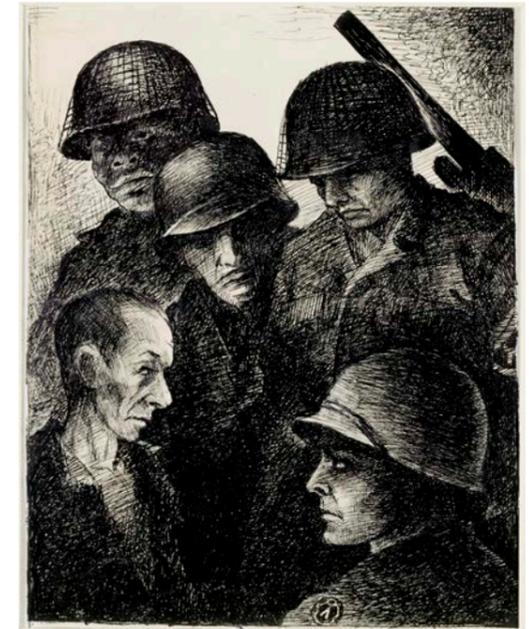
How can we define liberation?

“Say the word liberation and images fill the mind. Crowds celebrating jubilantly, pretty women greeting proud and happy soldiers, champagne flowing like rivers through teeming public celebrations. Thus famous newsreel and

photographs help shape the way we view the various liberations that progressively announced the end of World War II in Europe. But there are those other images, also labeled liberations and equally part of the story of World War II’s end. They depict a dreadful repetition of faces without hope or comprehensions, mounds of bodies piled neatly or littered about on the ground. These

were the scenes that the Allied photographers and soldiers recorded in the Spring of 1945 at places called, among others, Dachau, Buchenwald, Nordhausen, Mauthausen, and Bergen Belsen.” – Robert H. Abzug

Abzug, Robert H. “The Liberation of the Concentration Camps”. *Liberation 1945: The United States Holocaust Museum*. United States: United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1945. 33.



Circa 1945, Germany. Holocaust art by Ervin Abadi. Ink drawing.

Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum #36699, courtesy of George Bozoki

Ervin Abadi, a Hungarian Jew from Budapest, was an aspiring young artist when WWII began. He was drafted into the Hungarian labor service in the early 1940s. Abadi managed to escape, but was recaptured and immediately deported to Bergen-Belsen. When the camp was liberated, his condition was such that he required extended hospitalization. During his convalescence, he created dozens of works of Holocaust art, including ink drawings, pencil and ink sketches and watercolors.



A shaving brush given to Jacki Handelei when he was seventeen by an American soldier after liberation. He continued using it until he was in his seventies.

Credit: Yad Vashem Artifacts Collection