



The End of War and Liberation

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The End of War

In the summer of 1944 Soviet forces advanced through Poland and approached the south-east of the country. The Nazi administration governing the area realized that the Soviet troops were almost at Auschwitz, and decided to evacuate a large group of prisoners. A decision was made to evacuate a large group of prisoners from the camp. Thousands of prisoners, Polish, Czech and others interned in Auschwitz were moved to Germany to work in different war industries. As much evidence as possible of the mass murders was destroyed. All gas chambers and crematories in Auschwitz-Birkenau were dismantled and eventually completely destroyed in January 1945. Prisoners who had worked there were killed, to prevent them from telling about their experiences. Large amounts of records were burned, including lists of Jewish prisoners.

Soviet Troops liberate Auschwitz-Birkenau

On the 17th of January, six months after Soviet troops had liberated Majdanek, they took the city of Cracow. When the Nazi leaders learnt that enemy troops were so close to Auschwitz, a decision was made to move the rest of the prisoners. Almost 60 000 of the 65 000 predominantly Jewish prisoners still in the camp were driven out in the severe January cold on so called “death marches”. Those too weak for the strenuous march were shot by the SS-guards or left to die by the roadside. After having walked for hours, sometimes days, they were loaded onto railroad cars and taken to different concentration camps in Germany or Mauthausen in Austria. Thousands of people died or were killed on the way.

On the 27th of January the Soviet army reached the town of Auschwitz. 7 500 prisoners were found in different camps around the town. Most of them were ill and dying in the cold barracks lacking water, food and heat.

At that time Lea Gleitman was still in Bergen-Belsen. It would take several months before she was liberated.



The Majdanek concentration and extermination camp.



Child survivors of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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Allied forces frees camps in Germany

During the spring of 1945 Soviet troops took the Baltic States, Northern Poland and Eastern Germany. They liberated camp after camp in these areas, among them Stutthof, Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück. At the same time Allied troops advanced from the West. In the middle of April American forces reached the concentration camp of Buchenwald and British forces went into Bergen Belsen, where they found thousands of corpses and 60 000 severely ill and starving prisoners. 10 000 of them died from typhus and malnutrition during the first weeks after the liberation. The sight of thousands of unburied corpses and extremely emaciated prisoners met the soldiers in every camp. Very quickly radio reports and newspaper articles spread all over the world, and only now did many understand the magnitude of the Nazi extermination policy.



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Bergen-Belsen concentration camp after the liberation.

Germany surrenders

On the 8th of May people all over the world celebrated the end of the war, but for the thousands and thousands of liberated concentration camp prisoners a struggle to survive had just started. Most of them were ill and malnourished. Many died during the first few months after the liberation. The survivors did not know what had happened to their relatives. They were too exhausted to plan for the future. Refugees who had been hidden or living far away in the Soviet Union came back to Europe, and the situation grew more and more chaotic. The Allied armies tried to help as many people as possible. Eventually several relief organizations participated by giving medical aid, food, clothes and housing to the former prisoners. So called DP-camps were established, camps for people who had no place to go to (displaced persons in English).



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Germany capitulates.

"Displaced persons"

A large part of the non-Jewish refugees returned to their home after some time, except for some people who had lived in areas now part of the Communist Soviet Union. Most of the Jewish ex-prisoners did not want to return to their former homes. No one awaited them, and they were afraid of persecution. A fear that proved to be justified. In several places in for example Poland, returning Jews were persecuted or even subjected to deadly attacks.

Many refugees applied for visas to different countries in Western Europe, USA, Canada, Australia, South Africa and South America. But these states had strict immigration rules. Many Jewish refugees also wanted to go to Palestine, but the British who governed the area did not allow any immigration. but the British who governed the area did not allow any immigration.

Even though numerous attempts were made to solve the situation, people lived in camps for many years to come. It would take several years before most of the refugees had managed to leave the DP-camps. In 1952 all camps, except one, were closed. By then the United States had absorbed almost 600 000 “displaced persons” and other refugees, including more than 80 000 Jews, Canada and Australia approximately 150 000 refugees each. The State of Israel was established in 1948 after a referendum in the United Nations, where Sweden, the United States and the Soviet Union, among others, voted in favor of a partition of the British mandate Palestine, into a Jewish and an Arab state. Already before the Jewish state was declared tens of thousands of Jewish former concentration camp prisoners and other survivors had been smuggled into the British mandate by Jewish and Zionist organizations. Even after the establishment of Israel tens of thousands of Jewish refugees from war-stricken Europe continued to arrive, all together the country took in several hundred thousand. Left in Europe were 250 000 ill, handicapped and elderly people. They eventually received citizenship in Germany or Austria. A small group was allowed to move to other European countries like Norway and Sweden.

Lea and her sister Miriam left the DP-camp at Bergen-Belsen and travelled to Sverige in early May 1946.



Peace celebrations in Stockholm on the 8th of May 1945.

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