Jewish Survivors in Germany after WWII 1945

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Prisoners Forced Onto "Evacuation Marches"

Clandestine photograph of prisoners marching to Dachau.

By the beginning of 1945, Allied forces had liberated large parts of Europe under Nazi control. American and British troops had reached the German Reich's western borders, and the Soviet Red Army had advanced to its eastern front. The surviving prisoners of the Auschwitz concentration camp were liberated on 27 January. In most German camps, in order to ensure the liberators didn't discover them, prisoners had been forced by their guards onto "evacuation marches". Thousands of already dangerously weak prisoners died in the final weeks of the war due to cold, hunger and violence at the hands of their captors.

The Red Army Reaches Berlin

Soviet tanks on the streets of Berlin, May 1945.

The Red Army reached the suburbs of Berlin by mid-April, encircling and finally besieging Nazi Germany's capital. The capture of the city was then followed by weeks of heavy fighting against the *Wehrmacht* for control of every quarter. Civilians were forced to remain in houses, cellars and bunkers; while supplies of food, energy and water were close to collapse.

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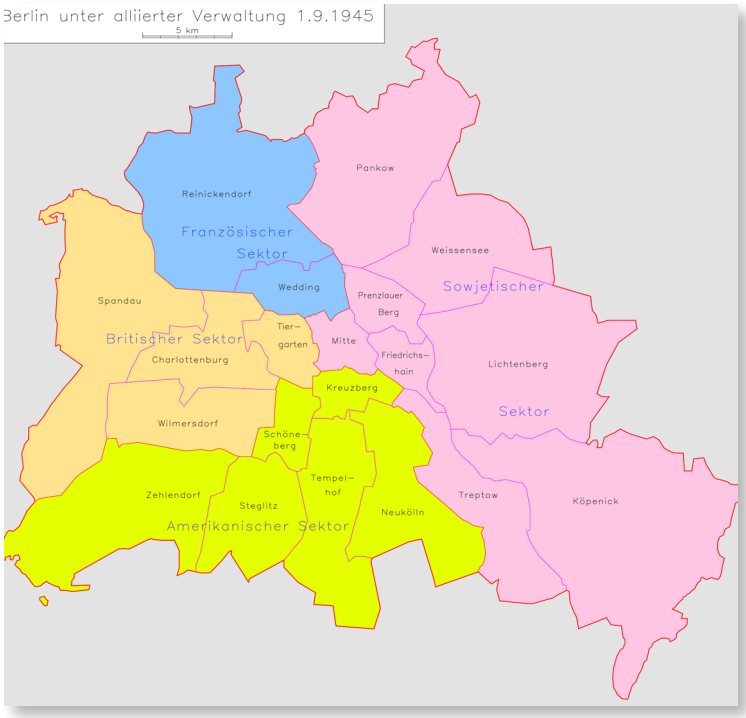
Keitel signs surrender terms, 8 May 1945 in Berlin.

On 30 April 1945, Hitler shot himself in the Reich Chancellery. Two days later, on 2 May, the Red Army had occupied the entire city. With the German signing of the declaration of surrender, the Second World War in Europe formally ended on 8 May 1945. The four occupying powers—the Soviet Union, the United States, Great Britain and France—took over administration of all of Germany and Austria. They retained complete control of Germany until 1949.



Map of Berlin under Allied control, September 1, 1945. The colors mark the four different sectors: blue the French, light brown the British, yellow the US, and red the Soviet sector; the lines within show the outlines of the 20 districts of the city of Berlin.

Berlin was initially under Soviet control. Following agreements reached between the Allies, troops from the other occupying powers arrived in Berlin in July 1945. The city was divided into four sectors: French to the north, British to the west, American to the southwest and the Soviets remained in the eastern part of the city. The district of Neukölln, where the Frankenstein family had their first apartment, was situated in the US sector. All over Germany the Allies enacted provisional laws including the abolition of discriminatory and repressive Nazi laws, the prohibition of Nazi organizations, and provisions for the sentencing of Nazi war criminals.

The new or re-established political parties on the left and centre, a rapidly growing free press and resurrected artistic community were working on a new beginning for the country. "Hour Zero" was the term commonly used to describe this particular period of German history.

But, although a majority tried to ignore it, Germany's Nazi past hadn't disappeared. Observers described the attitude shown by many Germans as "sullen"; that most Germans perceived themselves as victims of the war who had been betrayed by a tiny Nazi elite. Hardly anybody admitted personal or collective responsibility for Nazi atrocities.

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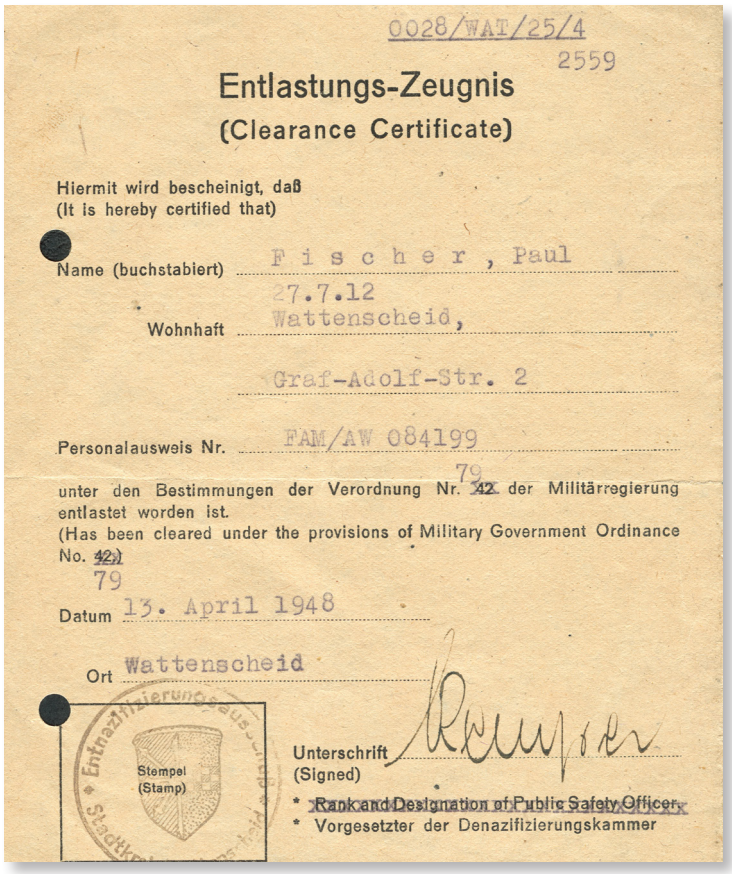
The street signs are replaced.



0028/WAT/25/4
2559

Entlastungs-Zeugnis
(Clearance Certificate)

Hiermit wird bescheinigt, daß
(It is hereby certified that)

Name (buchstabiert) F i s c h e r , Paul
27.7.12
Wohnhaft Wattenscheid,
Graf-Adolf-Str. 2

Personalausweis Nr. FAM/AW 084199
79

unter den Bestimmungen der Verordnung Nr. ~~42~~ der Militärregierung entlastet worden ist.
(Has been cleared under the provisions of Military Government Ordinance No. ~~42~~)
79

Datum 13. April 1948

Ort Wattenscheid

Stempel (Stamp)

Unterschrift (Signed)

* ~~Rank and Designation of Public Safety Officer~~
* Vorgesetzter der Denazifizierungskammer

Clearance Certificate of a German citizen, issued by the local denazification chamber in the city of Wattenscheid/Westphalia.

The pressing issue of restoring daily life in a devastated country made it easy to ignore a broader debate about its recent past and this remained the case until the silence was finally broken decades later.

The process of "denazification" was supposed to have been carried out quite consistently by checking every adult German's individual past. But in the course of time former Nazis issued each other with mutual certificates of good character, and the shortage of staff made it easy for many to find jobs in the public sector again. Some Nazis even managed to obtain testimonies from Jewish survivors; either by blackmailing them or otherwise making arrangements such as offering to help them restore their former careers. In all, programmes of denazification and democratic re-education fell by the wayside, overshadowed by the growing conflict between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union, which came to be known as the Cold War.

For those Jews who had survived in hiding, the moment of liberation presented a final risk: as many Soviet soldiers had been told that there were no Jewish survivors in Germany at all, when they did find Jews emerging from hiding places, they didn't believe them. Instead, they suspected these individuals of being Nazis passing themselves off as Jews, and they reacted without mercy. Like Walter, some survivors were lucky enough to find a Jewish soldier whom they could convince of their Jewishness. But in other cases, Jewish men were shot by Soviet troops upon their liberation in Berlin. This also happened to some of their Gentile male rescuers.

Jewish survivors had to cope with many major challenges after their liberation. Berlin Jews who had survived in concentration camps, in hiding, or under the protection of so-called mixed marriages called on the city's administration and the Jewish congregation to give them the legal status of *Victims of Fascism*.

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This picture was t was taken at the annual manifestation to honor the Victims of Fascism in Berlin on September 14, 1947 and shows several groups of Berlin Jews with posters naming Jewish clubs and statements of remembrance (like: "The illegals").

In Berlin, 7 768 Jews had been registered by the Jewish congregation up to the spring of 1946. This didn't even amount to five percent of the former Jewish congregation which in 1933 had totalled over 160 000 members. As these survivors were completely destitute, they were given somewhat higher food rations than the Gentile population as well as clothing and accommodation. They were still confronted by antisemitism, and sometimes even jealousy and felt estranged and distrusted within a German population still so deeply influenced by its Nazi past. Therefore they distrusted their neighbours' intentions, and the majority of German Jews wanted to leave the country as soon as they were able to.

Even the re-established Jewish congregations in Germany described themselves as being "in liquidation" as they expected to close down in the near future due to dwindling membership figures. Although they didn't at first plan to become permanent institutions in post-war Germany, in the course of time it became apparent that not all Jews could or would emigrate and in 1950 the Central Council of Jews in Germany was established as a permanent umbrella institution for the Jewish congregations and the roughly 15 000 Jewish residents left in Germany.

The care of all those in Europe who had been liberated from concentration camps or forced labour camps posed a great challenge. There were about 250 000 European Jews among the millions of displaced persons. They had lost everything—their families, their possessions, their hometowns—and they needed temporary housing and medical care. Paradoxically, such facilities were mainly set up in occupied Germany and Austria with the American and British occupation forces overseeing the construction of so-called Displaced Persons (DP) camps in their particular territories. These were administered by a Jewish administration, while the Allies and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) were responsible for supply issues. As many of the camps' residents sought to immigrate to Palestine, Zionist organizations became active in these camps. But the British, being the ruling power in Palestine, wanted to restrict Jewish immigration in order to avoid unrest among the native Arab population. The British authorities issued only 1 500 immigration visas per month. Leonie Frankenstein and her sons received these coveted documents at the turn of 1945-46 and were thus able to legally travel to Palestine. But they belonged to a minority. Like Walter, until the founding of the State of Israel on 14 May 1948, about 70 000 Jewish immigrants had to resort to clandestine means to reach Palestine.

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Graphic design: Cecilia Undemark Péterfy

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