

★ APRIL 1945 ★

*'I remember the bombings. I remember standing outside hoping that we would get bombed.'*

— Sonia Weitz of Peabody, who survived Auschwitz



*'We did not take any prisoners of the SS that day. It was a sense of fair justice.'*

— Ellsworth Rosen



*'I went into the inferno at the age of my bar mitzvah. I was 13.'*

— Samuel Pizar



*'War was more rational than what we saw in the camps.'*

— Paul Parks



*'I said to the prisoners: Der Krieg ist aus für Sie. [The war is over for you].'*

— George Kaiser

## Liberators, survivors remember

"camp," Parks assumed the officers meant a German army camp.

Once Parks walked into Dachau, he realized why his unit was sent there. In addition to building bridges and doing engineering work, the unit, which sat at the bottom of the army hierarchy, was a burial squad. Bodies in Dachau were everywhere, many stacked up next to the crematoriums like cordwood waiting to stoke a fire.

Thus did a group of black soldiers become liberators for thousands of Jewish prisoners.

"We'd seen death," said Parks. "We'd seen an awful lot of that. But war was more rational than what we saw in the camps. Some of the ovens were still warm when we got there."

Made up of the poor and the young — Parks, for instance, had never been more than 60 miles from Indianapolis before the war — the black platoon had looked up to the German soldiers, admiring them for their loyalty and efficiency. But what they saw at Dachau staggered them: piles of gold teeth in heaps out in the open, German guards with pictures of emaciated, nude female prisoners in their pockets.

"To hear these people, they were so intelligent. They were so bright. They seemed to know so much. You had to wonder, 'What had gone wrong?' " Several members of Parks' platoon became ill. Others began to beat and to kick the German guards.

Parks radioed for medicine and food, then walked around Dachau in a state of shock. After several hours, reinforcements arrived. So did a chaplain, a rabbi. Parks, 20, sat down with him on the road.

"I kept saying, 'Why Jews? What did they do? Did they fight the Germans? What did they do?'"

The rabbi answered: "Nothing."

"It doesn't make sense," the young Parks responded. "Why were they killed?"

"They were killed because they were Jews," the rabbi said.

The young Parks sat by the road and thought. "I understand that," he said finally. "I understand that because I've seen people lynched just because they were black."

### 'I had no place to go'

While Parks was at one end of Dachau, George Kaiser, a 23-year-old Jew from Grove Hall in Roxbury, was in another part, walking through barracks filled with prisoners who stared at him from triple-tiered rows of bunks — shelves, really — set into the wall three feet apart. He had stumbled onto Dachau by accident: a supply truck he was operating was driven off the road by German fire. In the only platoon German he knew, Kaiser told the prisoners: "Der Krieg ist aus für Sie." [The war is over for you.]

But the war was not over for them. Sick with typhus, running a high fever, hallucinating, consumed by thirst, Sonia Weitz, 16 years old and weighing 60 pounds, was too weak to move from her bunk in Mauthausen concentration camp when her sister ran into the barracks to report that all the Nazi guards had disappeared and the gates to the camp had been thrown open. The Americans had liberated Dachau on April 29; by May 6, they were in Mauthausen, near Linz in Austria.

"I had no place to go," says Weitz, who now lives in Peabody. During the course of the war, the Nazis had killed her mother and her father, her aunts and uncles, cousins and friends from the ghetto in Krakow, Poland.

"I spent three years in displaced person camps," says Weitz, her voice quiet, her eyes distant. "We didn't know [about our family]. For many years we hoped that some people had survived. . . for three years all we did was search for family. Nobody ever came back." Weitz later counted up the members of her family who had been killed during the Holocaust. She stopped counting at 89.

"People knew that something terrible had happened uniquely to them," says Sylvia Rothchild, a Brookline writer who has written extensively about the Holocaust. "They didn't realize that it had happened to everyone. That was the hardest part of all. They came back to their villages and every Jewish person was dead." It was like a second death. Not only had individuals been destroyed but a whole world and a way of life had been wiped out. Many survivors plunged into depression.

"They had been saved," says Rothchild. "But they had lost everything."

### His Passover story

Ellsworth Rosen, a Brookline-based fundraiser for Hebrew University in Jerusalem, tells the story of his liberation of the concentration camps to his family every year at Passover, the holiday that commemorates the deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt.

He tells of opening up a cattle car on a railroad siding and seeing hundreds of Jews packed inside. Some of the Jews looked at him and began talking in Yiddish. He responded with what little Yiddish he had learned as a boy. The Jews in the railroad car were astonished. "A Jewish soldier," they kept repeating — such a thing was unimaginable to them after what they had lived through.

In recent years, groups in California and Canada have launched a well-financed campaign to discredit the history of the concentration camps, to claim that the Holocaust never happened. They have deluged newspapers with newsletters and ridiculed accounts and testimony by survivors.

Survivors have turned to the soldiers like Rosen who walked into the camps unknowing and unprepared, as witnesses to what happened, as authorities to a time when, in the words of Rothchild, "the world went crazy."

When the soldiers returned to the United States, many never talked about what they had seen in the camps. Kaiser never reported what he had seen to US Army authorities. He just said that he had been delayed delivering supplies. And he kept quiet until Boston University placed a newspaper advertisement asking soldiers who had helped to liberate the camps to come forward and participate in an oral history project. Parks declined invitations to be honored publicly as a "liberator," although he became involved in many Jewish causes.

Many survivors kept quiet, too, some because they believed Americans did not want to hear about what had happened. Sonia Weitz, by contrast, dedicated her life to teaching about the Nazis had done and today heads a Holocaust Center on the north shore.

No one has remained unchanged by what he or she saw.

"I have this picture in my mind," says Paul Jacobson, a Revere pharmacist who helped liberate Mauthausen in Austria. "It was a girl in a black dress. She is behind the barbed wire and she is reaching out her hand. She is saying, 'Can you get me out?'"



TOO WEAK TO EXULT: A SURVIVOR AT BELSEN

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## DID ALLIES KNOW? SOME ANSWER 'YES'

About a month before he walked into a small concentration camp near Buchenwald and saw bodies strewn about like animals in a slaughterhouse, Lewis Weinstein, then a lieutenant colonel on Gen. Eisenhower's staff and now a Boston lawyer, met in Paris with an aide to Franklin Roosevelt and asked him: "Is it true that Jews are being killed? Is it hundreds of thousands?"

"That's nonsense, it's exaggerated," the aide responded. "It's not that many."

A few months later it became clear that millions of Jews had been killed in Nazi concentration camps and millions more in ghettos and mobile killing operations.

How much did the Allies know about the concentration camps? And why didn't they do anything about them?

In a new book, "The Abandonment of the Jews," University of Massachusetts Professor David Wyman, who is not Jewish, concludes that Allied leaders knew about the concentration camps as early as summer, 1942, and that Roosevelt knew about them by December 1942. That month, Roosevelt met with a group of Jewish leaders who gave him 30 pages of evidence smuggled out of Europe that documented the roundup of Jews, the deportations to camps like Auschwitz, Dachau and Buchenwald, and their being gassed to death.

According to a record of that meeting, Roosevelt told his visitors: "I know everything you're saying there, and more, and it's all true."

Yet it was not until 1944 that the United States set up a poorly funded War Refugee Board that helped save about 200,000 Jews in Hungary — after millions of others had been killed.

Wyman and other scholars conclude the US and other Allied governments knew about the gas chambers, slave labor camps and crematoria but did nothing.

The reason, they say, was anti-Semitism and a fear among officials in the State Department and British Foreign Office that if the Allies rescued Jews — "refugees" as some referred to them — they would have to allow them to settle in the United States, Britain, and Palestine.

"To have rescued the Jews would have meant allowing lots of Jews to enter here," says Wyman. "The State Department didn't want it, a lot of Congressmen didn't want it and the public didn't want it. There was still a lot of anti-Semitism and anti-immigrant feeling."

Newspapers, including the New York Times and The Boston Globe, ran stories about the murder of Jews but the stories were often buried inside the paper. A Globe story in June 1942, reporting that 700,000 Jews had been murdered in Poland, ran on Page 12.

"If the Jews in 1941-45 were as well organized in America as they are now, the Holocaust would not have had as many deaths," says Weinstein, who later persuaded Eisenhower to visit the concentration camps. "We would have had a majority of Congressmen understand [what was happening]."

The United States also refused to bomb the crematoria and railway lines that fed the camps. When members of the Jewish underground pleaded with the War Department in 1944 to bomb the rail lines leading to Auschwitz, it refused, saying it could not spare planes from the war effort.

But Allied planes regularly bombed targets in and around Auschwitz, twice striking a synthetic oil facility in the camp itself. "I remember the bombings," says Sonia Weitz of Peabody, who survived Auschwitz. "I remember standing outside hoping that we would get bombed."

But the planes never attacked the gas chambers and the ovens nearby. The help never came.

— JONATHAN KAUFMAN

## TWO WHO SHAPED THE ERA

They came to power at about the same time. In the early 1930s when the world faced the Great Depression and its many consequences, and after more than a decade of dominating the world stage, they died in the same month, April 1945, as one's armies were crushing the other's.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Democrat, four times elected President of the United States, the spirit behind the New Deal, died at the age of 63 on the 12th, in Warm Springs, Ga., of a stroke as his country's armed forces were closing in on the Germans and the Japanese in the culmination of a struggle in which he had played a leading role since its beginning in 1939. He was succeeded by Harry S. Truman, who had been elected Vice President the previous November.

Adolf Hitler, 56, committed suicide by cyanide capsule in the Chancellery in Berlin on the 30th, his Third Reich a pile of ashes and rubble around him. Admiral Karl Doenitz assumed the reins of government.



FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT



ADOLF HITLER