

National Days of Remembrance

SELECTED READINGS: LIBERATION 1945

Capt. Herschel Schacter

“I shouted in Yiddish, ‘Shalom Aleichem Yiden, Ihr seid frei. Ich bin an Amerikaner Rav . . .’ (Greetings, Jews, you are free. I am an American rabbi). There they were, looking at me out of their big eyes, haunted, crippled, paralyzed with fear, emaciated, skin and bones, half-crazed, more dead than alive. How they miraculously survived is still a mystery. The braver among them approached me, touched my army uniform, examined the Jewish chaplain’s insignia, incredulously asked me over and over again, ‘Is it true? Is it over?’ I went from barracks to barracks throughout the whole area called ‘small camp’ that was reserved for special brutal treatment to Jews. As I moved about, bands of Jews were now following me pouring out tales of woe, asking me over and over, ‘Does the world know what happened to us? What will happen now? Where will we go from here?’”

Schacter was a chaplain and rabbi who accompanied the 8th Corps, 3rd Army, at the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp in April 1945.

Goodell, Stephen, and Kevin Mahoney. 1945: The Year of Liberation, Washington, DC: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1995, p. 37.

Yitshok Katsenelson

“For Not Lost Is the Hope”

For not lost is the hope of a tree,
even when already cut and felled
it grows again
and blooms
without an end—
The sprouting will not stop.

And when the root gets old amid the dust
and if
the root has ceased
to live deep in the earth—

it only has to sense a bit of water in the depths
to bloom again
completely,
it blooms
and gives
a cutting—
like every planting . . .

Poem translated by Dr. Sarah Traister Moskovitz

“Yiddish Poetry Freed by Translation”: Yiddish Poems from the Ringelblum Archive

George Salton

“I ran in that direction, and as I came onto that place I noticed many prisoners yelling and screaming and jumping and dancing. And there standing amongst them were seven giants, young people. They must have been 18 or 19 . . . American soldiers. There were seven or eight of them standing inside the camp. Apparently they cut the wire and came into the camp. They were bewildered by us. Wild and unkempt and dirty and, I’m sure, smelly people, jumping and dancing and trying to embrace them and kiss them. And I did too. I also joined the crowd and yelled and screamed and somehow knew that the day of liberation has come. It was a strange feeling for me, however, because as I remember it, on the one hand, I was overwhelmed by this unexpected and unhopd-for encounter of freedom, but at the same time, what was happening was outside of me. I didn’t know what to make of it. I knew I was free, but I didn’t count on it. I somehow didn’t know what it meant. And I knew it was great, but I was overjoyed because all people around me were overjoyed and were singing and dancing, and I was 17. I was free, but what it meant I wasn’t sure.”

By the time of his liberation by American forces in May 1945, Salton had spent three years in ten different concentration camps.

Norbert Wollheim

“I remember that very, very well, that morning of May 3, 1945, when we saw the American flag hoisted, hanging from the trees in the forest near Schwerin, and then we realized that we had just been reborn. We had all received a new lease on life. I remember that we embraced each other. I was in a small group of people, and we were laughing, and we were crying. It was a tremendous feeling of relief, but also of burden because we realized that this moment for which we have waited years and years . . . we couldn’t share with those who deserved it—our own families. And we also realized something else, especially the Jewish persecutees—we had no home left to go to. . . . The world was celebrating . . . but we couldn’t dance. We had no right to dance. So, that was the moment of tremendous elation, but also tremendous sadness.”

By the time of his liberation by American forces in May 1945, Wollheim had survived Auschwitz, slave labor, and a forced march.