

American Witnesses

Testimony Introduction



508.784.1945

Welcome to *American Witnesses*, an exhibition created by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. You are about to hear the words of American men and women of the US military who encountered the Nazi concentration camps at the end of World War II, as well as those of Holocaust survivors who were liberated by US troops.

There are several testimonies to choose from. You may listen to any number of them, in any order. Look for the symbol that indicates an audio testimony. When you are ready to begin, enter the number of the testimony you want to listen to.

American Witnesses

US Army Infantryman

Private Hilbert Margol
42nd Infantry Division



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Testimony 1

In the last days of the war, the SS evacuated prisoners from Buchenwald to Dachau by train. Many of the nearly 4,500 prisoners died on that several-week journey. Hilbert Margol describes how he and his twin brother, Howard, came across the so-called "death train" at Dachau. This is his recollection.

So we get orders to pull off to the right side of the road. We all smelled this very distinct odor, very strong odor. One of our jeep drivers came by and he said, "On the other side of those woods, it must be a chemical factory over there."

Well, Howard heard that and he came over to me, and he said, "I don't think it's a chemical factory." And he said, you know, that odor reminded him of when our mother used to go to the kosher meat market to buy a freshly killed chicken. She would take it home, hold it over the gas flame of the gas stove in the kitchen to burn off the pin feathers.

It would burn the skin and some of the fat of the chicken. He said that's the odor it reminds him of. I said, "Well, why don't we go over there and see what is over there." We were curious.

The first thing we saw, we saw a line of railroad boxcars. Now we climbed over between two of the railroad cars and on the other side, some of the cars' sliding doors had been opened by the infantry guys in front of us. That's who we supported. And on that boxcar plus others on that train was [sic] dead bodies and most of them were in very grotesque positions. And, of course, it was easy to see they were all dead.

American Witnesses

Holocaust Survivor

Gina Rappaport



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Testimony 2

Gina Rappaport was liberated by the US Army in April 1945, after spending two years in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in Germany. After her liberation, she wrote down her story. This is an excerpt of what she wrote.

After two years they [the SS] told us to pack our things and go to the station, and they put us on a train which travelled for a [sic] unknown destination. We were seven days in the train travelling very slowly, when we were liberated by the American army on the 13th of April. It was the luckiest day of my life. At that moment I was bathing in the river when I saw the first American soldier from afar. What a joy. I couldn't believe my eyes. I was sure it was a dream, but still it was true.

A few minutes before the American soldiers arrived we were told that we should have to go on foot over the Elbe River. But the American army saved us from a sure death, which we will never forget.

I was also sad this day because I remembered how many people of value had died and couldn't see the liberation and the fall of the barbarian, Hitler. I shall never forget what I owe to the American army.

I hope that I will be able to estimate the right value, what the Americans have done for us. Now, after five years of suffering I shall know how to appreciate the more my liberty.

American Witnesses

Reconnaissance

Sergeant Leon Bass

183rd Combat Engineer Battalion



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Testimony 3

In April 1945, Leon Bass entered the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany as part of an intelligence reconnaissance unit. This is his recollection.

We were in the intelligence reconnaissance section of our unit and we went right to Buchenwald. And that was the day that I was to discover what had really been going on in Europe under the Nazis because I walked through the gates and I saw walking dead people.

And just looking at these people who were skin and bone and dressed in those pajama-type uniforms, their heads clean shaved, and filled with sores through the malnutrition. I just looked at this in amazement and I said to myself, you know, "My God, who are these people? What was their crime?" You know?

It's hard for me to try to understand why anyone could have been treated this way. I don't care what they had done. And I didn't have any way of thinking or putting a handle on it, no frame of reference. I was only 20. Had I been told, I doubt if I could have had, in my mind's eye, envisioned anything as horrible as what I saw.

American Witnesses

War Crimes Investigator

Sergeant Benjamin Ferencz

US Third Army



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Testimony 4

In spring 1945, Benjamin Ferencz began investigating crimes committed by the Nazis. In the area outside the Flossenbürg concentration camp, he followed a trail of mass graves. This is his recollection.

As the camps were about to be liberated, the Germans tried to move the inmates out, those who were still able to walk or to work. They left those behind to be killed or to die, who were too sick. But they marched them out. And they were marching—I think it was from Flossenbürg to Dachau, or one of the camps. And they took them through the woods and they marched at night, and if anybody faltered on the way, they were immediately shot. If anybody paused to try to pick up a potato or to eat a root or something, they were shot.

And I was able to follow this trail through the woods of mass graves—10, 20, 30, 50 killed, you know. And I would get the nearest farmer to, say, dig them up. They would say, “Oh yes, we heard firing last night, there was shooting going on.” “Where was it?” “Over there in the woods.” And I would say, “Let’s go.” And we’d go out to the woods and there would be a newly dug-up place, and I would say, “Get some shovels.” And then stop some Germans on the street, “Take this shovel, dig them up.” And we’d dig up the bodies of people who’d been obviously shot through the head, usually top of the skull was blown off, shot probably kneeling from the back. Some of them were tied still, you know, just lightly covered over with six inches of dirt, something like that. But I could follow the trail of crime being committed all along the way.

American Witnesses

Medic/Prisoner

Corporal Anthony Acevedo
70th Infantry Division



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Testimony 5

On April 9, 1945, German camp guards forcibly evacuated US Army medic Anthony Acevedo and other prisoners of war in the Berga concentration camp. After marching for 15 days, Acevedo and his fellow prisoners were liberated by the 11th Armored Division. This is his recollection.

So, we heard that there were tanks approaching, and we don't—we didn't know whether they were Americans, or French, or English, whatever. Or Russians. But the Germans started to feel the—the heat, and so they wanted us to follow them. And so they push—they pulled the—the rifles against us, and pointed at us, and says, w-we—either we go, or—with them, or they'll shoot us. That's what they wanted to do.

So, as I yelled back at them, and the other medic, I mean, we're medics, and we're t-taking care of these men, and they're dying. One just died—or two just died just a—a while ago. So, how can we go, and—they can't walk any more.

So, before you knew it, they too escaped, and th-the guards turn in our—gave us our rifles. And he says, we'll stay with you. And we started to hear the rumbling getting closer, and th—we—we all started to run towards the highway, and when we got to the highway, the tanks were the 11th armored division, liberating us.

American Witnesses

US Army Nurse

Lieutenant Marie Knowles Ellifritz
130th Evacuation Hospital



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Testimony 6

Marie Knowles Ellifritz was 22 when she tended to the survivors of the Mauthausen concentration camp. Her commanding officer gave the nurses the option not to enter the camp because he couldn't bring himself to subject them to the horrors he had seen. This is her recollection.

The emotional trauma caused by our medical participation in the liberation of the European concentration camps was beyond belief. As Americans and as women we never before had been subjected to such inhumanity to man. And my initial feeling was of a tremendous job to do.

To take in 1,500 patients into a 400-bed hospital had to be madness. That fact became our madness. And it proved to become a tremendous overwhelming job. Clinically, it was a matter of sorting the dead from the living, deciding who would live for at least three days or more, and to make all those we found comfortable and to begin the process of treatment. A tent to keep the patient dry, an air mattress to give them a place to lie down, a blanket to help them keep warm, pajamas to give them some dignity, a small amount of food to nourish them, and plasma to preserve the remaining life and begin them on a road back to living.

Everyone had work to do. The patients themselves helped as much as they could. We deloused them. We moved them out of the larger camp into our tent city and we let the fresh air, the sunshine, the space, and most of all their freedom do its work.

It seemed to take one to three days for us to convince some of them that they were truly free at last. And when that reality came they simply closed their eyes and died in peace and freedom. Some of the patients seemed to know immediately that they were free once again and so they were able to rejoice and begin to make plans for the future. Life force for these patients had begun when the camp's gates were opened by their liberators.

American Witnesses

Combat Engineer

Sergeant Raymond Buch
11th Armored Division



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Testimony 7

While at Mauthausen, Raymond Buch took photographs and filmed rare color footage of conditions at the camp with his own camera. His unit forced civilians to bury the dead in large graves. This is his recollection.

From the German civilians nearby we started to get those people to come up by the truckload, and we told them to dress in their Sunday best, and then we made them dig graves. And we wanted them to see what was going on, and then we had them carry the bodies, load the bodies in the wagons. We took wagonload after wagonload of bodies out to the grave site, which was the soccer field or the sport, they call it the *Sportplatz*.

We made the Germans handle—load them up in the wagons from inside the camp, take them down to the graveyard, the grave site, and unload them, put them down in the graves, side by side, by the hundreds—would be 150 people or so in a row—and side, practically on top of each other. They were such, they were all skin and bones and it was—I have pictures of them and movies which you'll see later, but the bodies were so emaciated that you, you couldn't possibly understand how those people were alive and walking around. The walking dead we called them at that time.

American Witnesses

Paratrooper

Corporal Leonard Linton
82nd Airborne Division



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Testimony 8

Shortly after the 82nd Airborne Division took over the German city of Ludwigslust in early May 1945, Leonard Linton went to the nearby Wöbbelin concentration camp. This is his recollection.

There was this barbed-wire enclosure with an open gate in front. So I left my jeep in front of the gate, stopped the engine, and walked in.

There were several people, maybe 20 or 30 people, milling around outside, obvious survivors of this camp that were in their tattered, striped uniforms. Some of them didn't even have these uniforms. Some of them were in fair shape, but most of them were emaciated and haggard looking, almost ambulatory corpses.

I talked with some of them just before going in and asked them what were they doing there. I couldn't understand why they were still milling around in front of this horrible camp with—of course the German guards had all evaporated on our approach. And they simply said they didn't know where to go.

American Witnesses

Unit Photographer

Sergeant William A. Scott III

183rd Combat Engineer Battalion



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Testimony 9

In April 1945, William Scott entered the Buchenwald concentration camp in Germany. He was 22. This is his recollection.

We drove in and I said, "Gosh, it's not as bad as they say. It looks just like a regular prison."

And we drove around, around some buildings, and then I saw all of these people milling around and they were in terrible shape. And then it was there—like that I realized it was as bad as—in fact, I ended up saying it was worse. And I said, "There's no way you can describe it."

And I took a few photographs outside, and we were told by some of the survivors that over 30,000 had been killed in a two-week period, and that the Germans were trying to kill all of them before we got there.

American Witnesses

US Army Nurse

Lieutenant Beatrice Wachter
51st Field Hospital



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Testimony 10

After arriving at the Nordhausen concentration camp shortly after its liberation, Beatrice Wachter wrote to her husband and described the scene she encountered. That letter was later printed in her local newspaper. This is an excerpt of her letter.

I have seen the most horrible sights that I hope I will never see again as long as I live.... We are taking care of men from a German concentration camp—human wreckage, living skeletons, diseased, infested with lice and maggots, skin and bones.... [13-, 14-, and 15-year-old boys who] looked 60 and 70 years old, with hollowed eyes, sunken cheeks, sores all over—it just isn't human.

[Bodies were all over.] Headless, no arms, burnt to a crisp—little children, some babies, a few women, but mostly men. I'm working in a ward with 60 of these men and the stories they tell!

They were allowed three potatoes and a cup of soup each day; if too weak to work they weren't fed at all. There were 30 to 50 of them who died each day.... They were tied to stakes and beaten—I saw the stakes. They were machine-gunned until their bodies were scattered all over the field in small pieces. We saw hands and legs, parts of brains, lying all over. It was horrible.

I see those rows of bodies, some naked, some with a few clothes on, in front of me now. God, how can such conditions exist?

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Holocaust Survivor

Lucjan Salzman



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Testimony 11

Lucjan Salzman, a Polish Jewish prisoner, was 17 when, in April 1945, he was liberated from the Wöbbelin concentration camp in Germany by the 82nd Airborne Division. This is his recollection.

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, I was overwhelmed by this unexpected and un hoped for encounter of freedom, but at the same time, what was happening was outside of me. I really—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, I was overjoyed because all people around me were overjoyed and were singing and dancing and, and—but I, I was 17. I, I was free, but what it meant I wasn't sure.

American Witnesses

Paratrooper

Private Jesse Oxendine
82nd Airborne Division



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Testimony 12

In early May 1945, the 82nd Airborne Division took over the German city of Ludwigslust and liberated the nearby Wöbbelin concentration camp. Jesse Oxendine entered the camp barracks. This is his recollection.

On the floor they had some straw, and a few of them had blankets, which was a prized possession. But, I walked inside the building and of course there's dead all in there. I saw this one man leaning against the wall, just staring straight ahead. I was going to try to encourage him to go outside, you know, there's so much excitement out there of those that could walk. And here these people were still inside, as they were unable to move.

I walked over and kind of tapped him on the shoulder. And, of course, he fell over. He had died with his eyes open. But, I had made up my mind then after seeing all these, so many people lying around, I would never get excited if I ever saw a dead person again, you know.



American Witnesses

War Crimes Investigator

Chief Warrant Officer Victor L. Wegard
US Third Army



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Testimony 13

Victor Wegard's investigation took him to a town near Flossenbürg called Nammering. The locals claimed they hadn't seen or heard anything related to Nazi crimes. This is his recollection.

Hopped back into our jeeps, continued on N14 about a mile outside of Nammering. Then we got hit with a stench the likes of which I never want to face again.

Rotted corpses. We stopped the jeeps. We took a look along the edge, both sides of the highway. Fresh mounds of earth was [sic] running for maybe a hundred yards. The Old Man got out, pulled the shovel off the rear of the lead jeep, and began digging. Colonel. Began digging.

[Your commanding officer.]

Yeah. He's now uncovering hands, arms, and faces in three feet of soil. The rest of us got out of the jeeps, began digging. Wherever we landed a shovel, there was a body there. And the blood was still oozing from some of them, you could see, it was, these were fresh wounds. Their heads were stove in or the heads were partially blown off, machine gun blasts.

At this point, after several hours of this, we could take it no longer. Someone came up with the bright idea, we had radioed back to Third Army, [they] don't know what we had found, and we were given instructions, or at least Colonel Bates, our team commander, his recommendation was approved, to round up every man, woman, and child back in that town of Nammering and haul them out and let them see what they didn't see.