



## The Anguish of Liberation and Return to Life

This year marks the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II, and the liberation of the Nazi camps. Between Summer 1944 and Spring 1945 the remnants of European Jewry, some 1,200,000 men and women who had been uprooted from their homes, imprisoned and brutally tortured, were liberated by Allied troops.

On Victory Day, when the Allies defeated the Nazi regime in Europe, there was dancing in the streets of New York. In Moscow victory cannons were fired. However, there was no dancing in the Nazi camps. For many inmates liberation came too late; their strength failed them after long years of suffering. Thousands died after liberation, succumbing to the terrible conditions that had been inflicted on them by the Nazis and their collaborators during the war.

Thousands of others died on account of not obtaining the food that their liberators provided, eating too much, or not being able to digest the food that was available.

Shmuel Krakowski, born in Poland in 1926, was deported to Auschwitz and Buchenwald. He describes his feelings after being liberated in Theresienstadt:

“Although we had seen a lot and experienced the worst, we still had hoped, still had dreamed. All those days we had struggled to survive, hour after hour, day after day, there had been no time to grasp the enormity of our tragedy. Now everything became clear. No longer were our families waiting for us; no homes to go back to. For us, the victory came too late, much too late.”

Source: Y. Kleiman and N. Springer-Aharoni, *The Anguish of Liberation*. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1995), p. 16.

Many Holocaust survivors share these sentiments. As prisoners in the Nazi camps, they had to channel all of their physical and emotional energy into daily survival. It was only after their liberation that survivors faced the reality of their existence, the immense scale of their losses, and the fact that they were utterly alone in the world. Yitzhak (Antek) Zuckerman, who fought in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, recalls his emotional state when he was liberated in a town near Warsaw:

“That day, January 17 [1945], was the saddest day of my life. I wanted to weep, not from joy but from sorrow. I am not saying that I wept, but that I wanted to shed tears—for the first time. The tank crews blowing kisses, the flowers hurled at them, the elation of the crowd, the sense of freedom



and liberation, and we—Zivia and I and the dog—standing there among the crowd, lonely, orphaned, lost and only too well aware that there was no longer a Jewish people.”

Source: *Return to Life*. (Beth Hatefutsoth, Ghetto Fighters' House and Yad Vashem, 1995), p. 13.

Immediately after liberation, West European Jews who survived the Holocaust generally returned to their countries of origin. Holocaust survivors who tried to return to their homes in Eastern Europe faced many more difficulties. The Nazi destruction in the East had been all-encompassing. Yehoshua Buchler, upon returning to Topolcany, Czechoslovakia, after the war describes:

“...When I arrived in my town, I met a few relatives and there was great excitement. I asked: ‘Where is father?’ I was certain he was at home.

‘We do not know where your father is.’

‘What, isn’t father at home?’

Then I learned that no one had come back, that I was alone, that I alone had returned.”

Source: Y. Kleiman and N. Springer-Aharoni, *The Anguish of Liberation*. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1995), p. 38.

In addition to grappling with utter despair, many survivors, particularly in Eastern Europe, continued to encounter antisemitism when they returned to their communities. Moreover, in some places Jews who had returned home were met with violent hostility.

Jews from Eastern Europe flocked to Displaced Persons’ (DP) camps in the zones of Europe that had been occupied by the Allies. By the end of 1946, there were approximately 250,000 Jews living in DP camps—185,000 in Germany, 45,000 in Austria, and 20,000 in Italy. The Jewish DPs in these camps married and gave birth to children, set up educational institutions, published more than 70 Jewish newspapers, initiated commemoration projects, and even established theaters and orchestras. Eliezer Adler states:

“...This issue of the rehabilitation of She'arit Hapleta ("surviving remnant"), the Jews' desire to live, is unbelievable. People got married; they would take a hut and divide it into ten tiny rooms for ten couples. The desire for life overcame everything - in spite of everything I am alive, and even living with intensity. When I look back today on those three years in Germany I am amazed. We took children and turned them into human beings, we published a newspaper; we breathed life into those bones...”

Source: Yad Vashem Archives, O.3/5426 [Hebrew]

The survivors in the DP camps in Europe focused their efforts on emigration from Europe to build new and productive lives elsewhere. Many of the DP camp residents strongly declared



their intention to move to British Mandatory Palestine (pre-1948 Israel). Avraham Sadeh, in describing his return to Poland after the war, asks the question that many liberated survivors asked themselves:

“I was demobilized from the army. I walked around the streets and didn’t know where to go. It was obvious to me that I had to get to Israel, but how?”  
Source: Yad Vashem Archives O.3/3975 [Hebrew]

One third of the liberated survivors chose to emigrate to countries other than Palestine/Israel. The majority of these survivors started their lives in the United States, Canada and other Western countries, due to various circumstances. For example, Riva Binder describes why she moved to South Africa:

“After a stay in Rome of two-and-a-half years we found the opportunity to shake off the identity as displaced persons. We tried to leave for Israel, always my dreamland, but the British in occupation there would not allow us entry. When my husband’s relatives in South Africa sent us immigration papers for entry there we applied for permission and eventually, at the end of 1948, were allowed to immigrate there. So we arrived in Johannesburg.”  
Source: Yad Vashem Archives 0.69/58

For decades after emigration from Europe, until today, the trauma experienced by those who had lived under Nazi persecution was so great that it accompanied them, in one form or another, throughout their lives. Primo Levi’s description of his return home after the Holocaust, written over thirty years after his liberation, denotes this situation:

“I found my friends full of life. Awaiting me were the warmth of a secure dining room, the reality of everyday routine, the intoxicating pleasure of writing. I found a spacious and clean bed. But it took me two months to abandon the habit of walking with my eyes fixed to the ground, as if seeking for something to eat or slip rapidly into my pocket to sell for bread. A terrifying dream still visits me from time to time: I am sitting at the table with my family or with friends, or at work, or in a green field, in a calm and tranquil atmosphere, ostensibly free of tension and pain. Yet I feel a subtle and profound terror...everything falls and disintegrates around me...”  
Source: *Return to Life*. (Beth Hatefutsoth, Ghetto Fighters’ House and Yad Vashem, 1995), p. 16.

### **Pedagogical Guidelines**

The story of liberation and rehabilitation after the Holocaust, outlined here in brief, raises a number of crucial pedagogical issues for educators. First, it is a story that is ostensibly peripheral to Holocaust education—beginning, after all, when the Holocaust ends. The International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem puts an emphasis on placing the



Holocaust in context. Therefore, the history of the Jewish world in Europe before the Holocaust is considered an integral part of Holocaust education, on the pretext that in order to understand the extent of the tragedy we must know what was destroyed. The same is true of the period of liberation and the years that followed. By studying the Holocaust's lasting impact on its survivors, we gain a deeper and more complete understanding of the Holocaust.

The staff at the International School for Holocaust Studies is also committed to highlighting the authentic voices of Holocaust survivors and their testimonies.

Clearly, the rehabilitation of Holocaust survivors was not a self-evident fact. In the main, Holocaust survivors have successfully integrated into their societies and have become productive citizens. However, some survivors were unable to return to "normal" life after the trauma of the Holocaust. Among this group were survivors who committed suicide, survivors who experienced severe psychological scarring, survivors who were unable to marry or have children, and others who suffered from a host of problems after the Holocaust. What is remarkable is that the overwhelming majority of Holocaust survivors were able to bring a certain degree of order to their chaotic world. Abba Kovner, a leader of the Jewish underground and partisan movements in Lithuania, reminds us of what could have happened to the population of Holocaust survivors:

"Nor would I have found it surprising if they had turned into a band of robbers, thieves, and murderers [...]. They had come forth hungry, dressed in tattered rags, broken and defeated, and the first thing they wanted was to seek the basic things: bread, shelter, and work. All of this could have deteriorated into the misery of their so-called rehabilitated lives."

Source: A. Kovner, *Mishelo Ve-'alav*. (Moreshet and Sifriyat Hapoalim, 1988), pp. 40-41. [Hebrew]

Abba Kovner's suggestion of what might have become a widespread reality can help prevent us from taking for granted the immense courage that Holocaust survivors displayed in their return to life after the Holocaust.

In conclusion, we must take care to present the survivors' experiences of loneliness and despair after liberation together with their courageous life-affirming actions. There



is a tendency to dichotomize these two central and apparently contradictory experiences, or present them in chronological order: first the survivors despaired, then they overcame their difficulties and rehabilitated. In fact, despair and rehabilitation existed and exist together, in the same people, and often concurrently. Decades following liberation, survivors continued and still continue, to suffer from long-lasting effects of the Holocaust.

The stories of Holocaust survivors during and after liberation provide positive educational messages about human courage and resilience. They show people who managed to overcome the very worst, and affirm human values that we hold dear. At the same time, these stories stress how the Nazi regime managed to continue oppressing Jews long after its defeat sixty years ago.