

Local survivors describe the moment of their liberation

Sam Sander, liberated by Americans from a work detail in Germany

“The afternoon of that day – all of a sudden they disappear - and the afternoon of that day the American Army came in to that little town and the shooting was goin’ on so much that the American Army pulled back out. I did not know they was American Army, but they looked different than the German Army. That’s all I can say. And I stayed in that office and then I went in on a farm to get away from the buildings, because of the shooting. A day later the American Army came in in full blast and that was the day of liberation – April 14, 1945. I call it my second birthday. And I met the company commander, which was the 759 Light Tank Battalion that liberated me. And the company commander at that time was Major Miller that I remember, recall his name. And he told me to stay with them and the next morning we had breakfast and my breakfast consisted of pancakes – but I’m not gonna say how many. I ate enough of ‘em and then we went up to lunch and they made fried chicken. Never in my life have I eaten before fried chicken. And I think that was a delicacy in Europe. I told ‘em what I need, I needed a change of clothes, because I’ve gotta get out the clothes that I have on, which was the striped uniform – infested with lice and dirty and all that – after all, we wore it about three years. So he went, and he gave me a pair of his pants. Well, he was no little man. He weighed right around three, three fifty – I would say. When he gave me his pants you could put two of ‘em like me inside. He told me, “Don’t worry, if you stay long enough with us, you’ll fill ‘em up.”

Bertha Gutovitz, liberated by Soviets from a work detail in Czechoslovakia

“After a long time, a long, long time, we heard that the Russians are coming. I don’t know how this rumor came to us, but we heard it. So, after as I say, a long time, one morning we get up and we were ready to go to work – one pushes the other to go out to work. Nobody’s coming to pick us up. So we look at each other and we talk, “what’s happened, what’s happened?” So, one of the girls said, “You know what? We don’t even see the officers – the German women.” There were German women officers then. So, we said, “What? Something must have happened.” So one asked the other to go outside and take a look. And one says, “I don’t wanna go, you go.” And she say, “I don’t wanna go, why don’t you go?” Finally this goes on for hours and hours and nobody comes to see you. Nobody takes us to work or nothing. One of the girls, she was one Lithuanian. She says, “I’m going. We’re going to stay like this a whole day. I’m going.” She was a beautiful little girl and she comes in screaming and says, “The Russians are here. We free! The Russians are here.” So, we all run out at the street and we see all the Russians around. The Russians are running around like wild, you know. They don’t know what they doing and what they want. So, they take us out from this building. It was a big building. And they take us about ten miles to where there must have been a concentration camp before, because there was barracks and it was empty. So they take us over there and they say to us girls, there must have been 300 of us, “You stay here, we bring groceries and everything. Some of your know how to cook. You gonna have enough for three weeks.” After this, we stayed there probably about two three weeks. We have enough food to eat. We have water. We have food. We have everything. The girls decide, everyone is from a different town. They decided that they wanna go home and they gonna see if somebody is alive after the war. So my two girlfriends and myself, we decided we go to Poland.”

Clara Grossman, liberated from a death march by Soviets in Poland

“So we walked on down to the little road. We walked into this farmhouse and no one was there. It was empty. We didn’t know where we were – what town or what area. I think it was like seven, eight or maybe ten of us – some of my cousins and maybe some friends from our home town. We were there for like five days, maybe a little longer. And then, one day we heard the bombing and the war noises coming closer and closer. And one day five Russian officers on horseback came in and we put out the white flag. And we said, “We are from a camp nearby.” One of the officers came and gathered us in one room and he said, “Look, I would advise you girls to leave. The troops are coming through here.” We gathered as much food as we could, you know, carry with us and started walking into Lublin. We walked into Warsaw and we finally found a train that was going to Krakow and we had no money. And, you know, finally they let us go on the train. We were still shaved, no shoes, just rags, head filled with lice. We were filthy dirty. We never had no bath, only the showers that they gave us – maybe once or twice. Sick. And we got to Krakow and then slowly somehow worked our way to the Hungarian border and into Budapest, and back to finally to Nyirbator.”

Bronia Roslawski, liberated from a transport by Americans in Germany

“They took 12,000 young women and we walked miles and miles. And when the night came, they put us in barns. They came with the open train. The wagons were open. And they were taking us to different places and finally they took us to Salzwedel. And Salzwedel let us in and I was liberated in Salzwedel. In Salzwedel in April 19 – the fourteenth or fifteenth of April. And the Americans came in and this was a beautiful day in my life when the Americans came in and liberated us. So when the Americans came in they sprayed us with like you’d spray for bugs – you know, what you call it - DDT. They sprayed us. They gave us clean clothes. They burned the barracks. They took us out from the barracks. They put us in the barracks where the soldiers lived. They gave us to eat. They told us not to eat too much – very careful. And there was a captain, was standing - they took out a table and he was standing (indicated on it) and he said, “You’re free. We take the town of Salzwedel, you’re free. You’re goin’ be back to bein’ human beings like you were before. Don’t worry. We are goin’ to help you.” That was the most prettiest day I have ever in my life seen – my happiest day. And then they said, “You can go wherever you want to.” After a while, not right away. They said, “You can go wherever you want to.” I said, “I’m not goin’ back to Poland. It’s too many pain for me. I don’t want to be in Europe ever!” I said to the American people, “I lost everybody. You are my father, and you are my mother. You are everybody I have in the whole world and whatever you will go, I will go with you.” And the Americans took me and we went to Braunschweig.

Sonia Warshawski, liberated by the British at Bergen-Belsen

“The day of liberation it happened ... I was shocked, you see, on the day of liberation. I was working in this barn. The day ... this particular day we knew something was going on because all of the SS women were there who were in charge of us did not ... maybe like from ten you could see maybe three. So I was kind of very, very curious. Something was telling me... I could feel that something was going on and we knew it too. So I said,

“I’m going to latrine.” The latrine was outside. I was walking out to the latrine and I could see far away, through the fences, coming some already ... you could hear the roar of the ground of some tanks that are coming. And I got so excited. Instead of stay on there and wait over, I wanted to tell the girls ... to share my ... what I was seeing. So until I was coming back, all the men from the men’s camp tore up all of the opening and they came ... and they were running [unclear] hungry to get those rutabagas, even though with dirt and every...”

Interviewer: Chaos kind was [unclear].

“The chaos, yes. That’s right. And on top of that they still had two SS men watching. Guards, two guards watching the kitchen around and they start shooting. As soon as I was coming in, all the girls were already standing up because we knew there is something going on and I was pushing myself back to my place to sit where I usually was sitting there on the bench. I could not do it because they were old, you know, like a wall. All the girls were standing and he was shooting.”

Interviewer: Where did you get shot?

“Right there. See. The bullet came in here and the bullet came out here. It’s in the middle of my heart and it’s in the middle of my lungs. When the bullet goes in into your body, you really don’t feel it until something like, “Oh, I see blood is coming out of my mouth.” And the second bullet hit another girl in her arm, because it was such a close, you know, distance. Suddenly I see the blood. I said, “My God.” I said, “I’m dying.” And I was still swallowing the blood like I would say maybe I will live still a little longer swallowing the blood and I was beside myself. I said, “I went through already the hell and here in the day of liberation, I have to die.” It’s something I couldn’t accept this. Meanwhile, already the tanks were in front of the kitchen and the ... and I’ll never forget this Russian, because we also had Russian men in the men’s camp where they escaped from the ... they got caught by the Germans, let’s put it this way. And they put them also in the camp. This Russian fellow picked me up and he took me to the window to see ... he said in Russian to me, “Look out and you see.”

Abe Gutovitz, liberated by Americans at Buchenwald where he was hiding in a pile of bodies

”And then when the SS men turned to the other side, it was hundreds of people, you know in the bunch, you know, in that place. And he turned to the other end to pushing and beating the people, and pushing and beating. There was three of them – one in every edge, you know. When he went to the other edge, helping that other guy, something happened there. A guy was fall down or something or somebody beaten I didn’t see, I couldn’t hear because it was a big, you know, territory. So, when he moved in other corner, I layed down on the ground and crawled on my knees and on my hands. It was laying hundreds of people on the left side, where I was – dead bodies, you know. And I covered me with the bodies and just leaved my nose with eyes, you know, a little bit to see. And I was there, and hear all the noises and beating and beating. So, finally, I don’t remember, if you asked me, what I ate yesterday, but this, I will remember all my life. That was a Wednesday afternoon, about two o’clock, April 11, 1945. I saw the tanks, American, running in the streets, you know in Buchenwald. I didn’t move. I couldn’t push away. I didn’t feel my right arm, I didn’t feel my left arm. Everything was numb. I couldn’t move my legs at all. I was seven nights and eight days covered with these bodies without a

drop of water. I don't say one word, or help me God, that's not true. And I kept talking to me, "oh, my God. That's to be my end? I prayed all the years to live and see the end of that bastard and now I have to die." And I started to use the fingers and I started to do everything in my power. I couldn't feel nothing in me. Everything was numb. Finally, my left arm started to wiggle one finger. I said, "Oh my gosh, maybe I can do something." And I was working and working with one finger and then start the other and then I start with these two fingers on my right arm, because my left arm, I couldn't lift up to see the tank, so somebody grab me or so help me. Finally, I got American from God or something. It happened. I still believe in God. Said that happened to me. It started to working my right fingers two and I took my right arm because my left arm was much weaker and pushing and pushing and pushing. And wiggling two fingers only, not with all of them and then started another finger – just three and pushing and pushing then passed through a tank. And so he said, "Somebody's alive there!" He stopped the tank and took me out. They took me to the nearest town was called Weimar. The nearest town from Buchenwald was called Weimar. It's in the map in Germany. They took me to a sanitorium that was for American soldiers, you know, wounded. I stayed there not long. They sent me to Munich, Germany to a big sanitorium. And I remember one thing. It was standing above me on the whole body was standing bottles above me through my veins feeding, I don't know what, talking about me. At that time I couldn't move."

Isak Federman, liberated by British troops at Sandbostel, a Neuengamme subcamp

"Typhus was all over the place. One day they brought in a transport of the last of the Hungarian Jews. And I went with another guy to take a barrel of soup for the newcomers. And of course, by that time, I think most of us were like animals. And this guy and I took that barrel of soup into the latrine and we literally ate that hundred gallons of soup by ourselves, the two of us. And of course, after that I was sick and full of typhus, diarrhea, high fever. And I found myself, the only thing I remember, that I was under a water pump trying to stay alive. Two buddies of mine, dragged me over there to that water pump and they kept pumping the water on me. And the only thing that I remember, is that I saw a British tank come across the wall. And the next thing that I remember, two or three days later, I don't remember and I was cleaned up and I was hooked up, being fed intravenously and a British captain was standing over and he said in Yiddish, "what is your name." I weighed 80 pounds. And this doctor Bloomfield, in later years, we went to visit him in Manchester, England. Ann and I went to visit him. He told me that I had two hours to live and that they really saved my life. I was in a field hospital – a British field hospital. I spent six seven weeks, I don't remember, couple months, and they put me back together. I survived. A lot of us didn't."