

Liberation from Concentration Camps: The Complexity of Concluding the Holocaust Narrative

NINA KOVALENKO

It is certainly tempting to look for a clear beginning, middle, and end in every story. When depicting the Holocaust, choosing to end the story with the liberation of inmates from concentration camps can be all too satisfying: after all, the experience must have been a joyful one for those survivors who triumphed over Nazi evil. However, this is a much oversimplified way of looking at liberation. Though many Holocaust survivors felt euphoric upon being freed, liberation was not a neat, happy conclusion of their suffering. Many survivors experienced and witnessed illness due to intense deprivation after the Nazis left the camps. Additionally, liberation aroused a range of conflicting emotions in survivors. In early post-war testimony, survivors discuss how they sought to get revenge on their persecutors after liberation. By contrast, in later memoirs, survivors tend to focus on the hopelessness, fear of the future, and revival of numbed feelings that freedom brought. This disparity in the aspects of the experience that survivors choose to emphasize suggests that the complexity lies not only in the reality of the experience, but also in trying to uncover it. Every testimony is shaped in part by the context in which it is given and its intended audience. As the survivors' vantage points shift, they present their stories in different ways. Thus, in order to understand the differences in contemporary and later reflections, the survivors' vantage points must be kept in mind.

Though liberation aroused a plethora of troubling emotions in Holocaust survivors, the initial joy and euphoria of the experience should not be overlooked. As British, American, and Soviet soldiers appeared in concentration camps in the winter and spring of 1945, former inmates realized that they no longer had to answer to the Nazis or fear their persecution. Edith P., who was liberated from Salzwedel, recalled in a 1980 interview that when American soldiers opened the gates to the camp, "the [Nazi] boss was running and he [the American] shot him. I still see him lying there, with his beautiful shiny boots that I was shining an hour before. And I had no pity on him. And we were liberated and he said, 'Everybody goes!' And everybody went crazy. Crazy!"¹ In this part of her interview Edith P. reflects on the jubilation that flowed through the camp in the moment of liberation, as well as her lack of pity for a fallen Nazi boss when she realized he no longer had any power over her. Martin S., who was twelve years old when the Americans liberated him from Buchenwald, recalled the moment of liberation in a 1986 interview: "When [the American soldiers] finally came in and you saw the jeeps roll in, you saw the different uniforms, you realized it's over. Tremendous, tremendous high. As a matter of fact, I don't even remember being hungry!"² According to Martin S., as soon as he was absolutely certain that Buchenwald was going to be liberated, the happiness he felt was of such magnitude that it even overshadowed his extreme hunger, which had preoccupied his thoughts throughout his time at the camp. As prisoners realized that the Nazis had been defeated and that their reign of terror had come to an end, they experienced feelings of elation.

The reaction of jubilation was more common and more prolonged among those survivors who were able to share the experience of liberation with a loved one. For instance, Heidi Fried, who survived Bergen-Belsen with her younger sister, recalls how she happily spent her time after liberation trying to attract the attention of British soldiers: "The weather grew warmer, the sun shone and the birds sang to us in our new-found freedom. I was a young girl again. One interest eclipsed all others: boys... Life flowed easily in the former barracks... We thought neither of the past nor of the future."³ Fried, who shared her experience with her sister, was able to concentrate exclusively on the present after liberation, on recuperating and gaining strength both physically and emotionally. Likewise, Fela Bernstein, who was reunited with her sister shortly after her liberation from Belsen, noted that "the times of crying was [*sic*] past. Now was the time for the good life... I was young, I had no worries. I didn't think a great deal of anything."⁴ With her sister by her side, Bernstein managed to focus on the present and retain positive memories of the summer of 1945, which she considered to be carefree. Conversely, Bertha Ferderber-Salz lost her sister-in-law in Belsen shortly after liberation. In her memoir, Ferderber-Salz recalls the experience of liberation with bitterness and criticizes the British relief effort: "They did not even do the little they could have done... There were no doctors, paramedical aid was not provided, and very little food

Nina Kovalenko is a senior from Noblesville, Indiana. She will graduate from Indiana University Bloomington in May 2011 with a major in history. She will then take the skills she learned while earning her degree to study at Harvard Law School. The Indiana University Department of History awarded this essay the 2011 European History Prize for the best undergraduate essay on any topic relating to European History.

¹ Joshua M. Green and Shiva Kumar, ed., *Witness: Voices from the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 202.

² Greene and Kumar, 203.

³ Hedi Fried, *Fragments of a Life: The Road to Auschwitz*, trans. and ed. Michael Meyer (London: Robert Hale, 1990), 167-168.

⁴ Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 159.

was supplied.”⁵ Finding joy in liberation was difficult for Ferderber-Salz because she had recently lost the last remaining member of her family. Thus, those survivors who were able to lean on a loved one for support after liberation found joy in the experience more easily than did those survivors who had lost their entire families.

Though it may be tempting to end the story of the Holocaust on a redeeming and triumphant note, with Allied tanks rolling into concentration camps and former prisoners cheering their liberators, the joy that survivors felt immediately after liberation was actually part of a long-term, multi-faceted response to the experience. Physical hardship and suffering certainly did not end with the defeat of the Nazis. Some prisoners fell ill before liberation and missed out on the triumphant moment altogether. Renée H., who was liberated from Bergen-Belsen at the age of eleven, stated in a 1979 interview, “One of the saddest things of my life has been that I have no recollection of the liberation because I was totally ill with the typhus. I have no recollection of what happened when the English came to Bergen-Belsen, none of the things that people told me afterwards about the joy... I was very near death.”⁶ Renée H. was not able to share in the joyful moment due to illness, from which she recuperated after the British had liberated the camp. Likewise, Esther Brunstein, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto, Auschwitz, a labor camp, and Belsen suffered from dysentery and typhus before liberation. At the “Liberation of Belsen” conference, which took place in London in 1995, she shared, “I remember slipping slowly into an unconscious state of mind with occasional moments of lucidity... When I awoke from a dreadful nightmare there were friendly, smiling faces around me telling me it was all over... I felt cheated for not having the memory of experiencing the initial exhilarating moment of liberation.”⁷ To end one’s depiction of the Holocaust with the triumphant moment of liberation would be to ignore the experience of people such as Renée H. and Brunstein, who were too ill to take part in the joyful moment and recovered from their illnesses after they were liberated.

Likewise, many former prisoners continued to fall ill after Allied troops had liberated the concentration camps. The effects of years of deprivation and unsanitary conditions could not be reversed quickly. Video footage of Belsen nine days after liberation shows patients suffering in their hospital beds, as well as soldiers carrying typhus patients on stretchers.⁸ Lucille Eichengreen, who was liberated from Belsen in April 1945, recounts her experience after liberation in a later memoir: “Like so many others, I became ill... My kidneys were not functioning well, and I was in constant, almost unbearable pain. Large boils began to appear on my neck and shoulders; they opened, drained, and healed, but new ones took their place. The British doctors had neither explanations nor medication.”⁹ After the initial euphoria of liberation, survivors had to deal with the physical suffering that resulted from years of malnutrition, which could not be significantly alleviated by the liberators. Primo Levi, who was liberated from Auschwitz, shared a similar experience. As he recalls in a later memoir, “I lay in a feverish torpor... tormented by thirst and acute pains in my joints. There were no doctors or drugs. I also had a sore throat, and half my face had swollen; my skin had become red and rough and hurt like a burn; perhaps I was suffering from more than one illness at the same time.”¹⁰ The experiences of Eichengreen and Levi provide two examples of intense physical suffering after the arrival of the liberators at two different concentration camps. Sadly, the Nazi defeat did not bring with it the cure to illnesses that resulted from years of intense deprivation.

Additionally, when liberators brought food into the concentration camps, former prisoners often could not control the amount they consumed; many became very ill and even died due to overeating. Colonel Edmund M., who was a first lieutenant in the Sixty-fifth Infantry, which liberated Mauthausen concentration camp, noted the following in a 1989 interview: “One problem that we had there with the inmates immediately... was that because of the very incapacitated physical condition of the inmates, that they would be unable to tolerate any large amount of food, particularly rich food. They had to be very, very careful that they did not eat too much food at once. Otherwise, it could kill them.”¹¹ Liberators recognized that it would be extremely dangerous for former prisoners to overeat, but those who had been dreaming about being able to eat as much as they wanted after years of starvation found restraining themselves difficult. Werner R., a Mauthausen survivor, recalled in a 1987 interview the horrific effect of the distribution of American K-Rations, which consisted of meat, cheese, and biscuits, among other foods: “Now this produced a tremendous death rate, instantly. People were eating that stuff and got diarrhea, and there was nothing in the world to stop it... It was like poison. So I don’t know how many hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people just died right there from that food which was given to them.”¹² Former prisoners who had survived Nazi persecution died upon their release as their bodies proved incapable

⁵ Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation*, 153.

⁶ Greene and Kumar, 203.

⁷ Jo Reilly et al., ed., *Belsen in History and Memory* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 213-214.

⁸ “Bergen-Belsen, nine days after liberation,” *Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive at USHMM*, http://resources.ushmm.org/film/display/main.php?search=simple&query=belsen&cache_file=uia_tMiAIR&total_recs=65&page_len=25&page=2&rec=38&file_num=2709.

⁹ Lucille Eichengreen, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 131.

¹⁰ Primo Levi, *The Reawakening*, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 20.

¹¹ Greene and Kumar, 206.

¹² Greene and Kumar, 207.

of processing large amounts of food after years of intense deprivation. And those who did not die from overeating still suffered severely. For instance, Martin S., who was liberated from Buchenwald, recalled in a 1986 interview, “They [the Americans] cooked a lot of pork... And I remember there were doctors in camp, prisoners [who] kept going around saying, ‘Don’t eat this! Your bodies can’t take it.’ I don’t remember whether I paid much heed, but I know I overdid it... I was deathly sick because our systems were not used to it.”¹³ Thus, it is important not to assume that liberation was a happy ending for Holocaust survivors because physical suffering did not cease with the defeat of the Nazis. Many prisoners were ill both during and after the moment of liberation. Likewise, many prisoners, who had been starving for years, became ill and died due to overeating once food became available.

In addition to facing physical suffering after liberation, Holocaust survivors also struggled to deal with a range of conflicting emotions. Understandably, many survivors were overcome with hatred for the Nazis and a desire for revenge. Video footage of the liberation of Belsen shows a crowd of women gathered around two truckloads of Nazis leaving the camp. Some of the women are cheering and clapping, while others angrily rush after the Nazis as the trucks pull away.¹⁴ Many of the interviews conducted by psychologist David Boder shortly after the war also show how survivors acted upon their hatred of the Nazis and want for vengeance. For example, in his interview, Jurek K. recalls the atmosphere in Buchenwald as the Americans approached the camp. When both the prisoners and the Nazis realized that the Nazis had been defeated, the Nazis fled into the woods and the prisoners ran to search for them. Jurek K. states, “In the first two hours we found seventeen SS men hidden in the woods, one [up in] a tree... They took all the weapons from another SS man [and] shot him down from the tree... All the SS were herded into one block, and a few people were detailed to guard them. Now the Germans had to remove their hats for us, because we forced them [to]. And they were abused until the Americans came into the camp.”¹⁵ This episode from Buchenwald shows the prisoners’ desire to perform the same violent and humiliating acts that the Nazis had performed when they were in power.

Benjamin P., who had been in the Warsaw ghetto, Majdanek, Monowitz, and Dora-Mittelbau (a subcamp of Buchenwald), also described his thirst for revenge after liberation. In his interview, Benjamin P. states, “I struck down a few people. Yes, killed dead. I, too, tortured a few people. And I also did the same things with the German children as the SS men did in Majdanek with the Jewish children. For instance, they took small children by the little legs and beat the head against the wall until the head cracked.”¹⁶ Benjamin P. discusses his actions unapologetically, expressing that he wanted to do to the Germans what they had done to Jews and that the Germans deserved his revenge. Though many survivors felt joy as they were liberated, this feeling was accompanied with or followed by an intense desire for revenge, which the survivors enacted by using the same violent and humiliating means that the Nazis had used against them.

Another compelling account of revenge can be found in Tadeusz Borowski’s *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, a collection of stories based on his time in Auschwitz and Dachau. Borowski describes how a group of former prisoners, recently liberated by the Americans, tortured a brutal guard: “At last they seized him inside the German barracks, just as he was about to climb over the window ledge. In absolute silence they pulled him down to the floor and panting with hate dragged him into a dark alley. Here, closely surrounded by a silent mob, they began tearing at him with greedy hands.”¹⁷ This image of survivors after liberation is not full of ecstasy, but rather fraught with an irresistible craving for violence. Borowski goes on to say that when the American soldiers came to talk to the former prisoners in their blocks about allowing the criminals to be punished lawfully instead of enacting their lawless revenge on them, they hid the guard on a bunk under a straw mattress and blankets and sat on him. Afterwards, when the soldiers left, the “entire block, grunting and growling with hatred, trampled him to death.”¹⁸ This account, written shortly after liberation and first appearing in 1948, frankly describes the vicious response of the liberated to their former oppressors.

Borowski’s description of the atmosphere in Dachau after liberation is especially interesting in comparison with Elie Wiesel’s description of the atmosphere in Buchenwald. In his memoir *Night*, which first appeared in French in 1958, Wiesel writes, “[Food’s] all we thought about. No thought of revenge, or of parents. Only of bread. And even when we were no longer hungry, not one of us thought of revenge. The next day, a few of the young men ran into Weimar to bring back some potatoes and clothes—and to sleep with girls. But still no trace of revenge.”¹⁹ Wiesel’s portrait of survivors differs strikingly from those discussed above. According to Wiesel, survivors did not even contemplate committing brutal

¹³ Greene and Kumar, 207.

¹⁴ “Burial at Belsen,” *Steven Spielberg Film and Video Archive at USHMM*, http://resources.ushmm.org/film/display/main.php?search=simple&query=Belsen&cache_file=uia_cJgLIw&total_recs=56&page_len=25&page=1&rec=21&file_num=193.

¹⁵ Donald L. Niewyk, ed., *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 116.

¹⁶ Niewyk, 134.

¹⁷ Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), 161.

¹⁸ Borowski, 163.

¹⁹ Elie Wiesel, *Night*, trans. Marion Wiesel (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 115.

acts of revenge and at worst “slept with girls.” However, the story Wiesel tells in the original version of his memoirs, written in Yiddish, is different: “Early the next day Jewish boys ran off to Weimar to steal clothing and potatoes. And to rape German girls. The historical commandment of revenge was not fulfilled.”²⁰ Here, Jews are clearly committing acts of lawless retribution against Germans, though Wiesel does not think these acts are significant enough to count as the revenge that Jewish history and tradition demands. Both the brutality and the strong thirst for revenge are notably missing in the later French version. As Seidman argues, when Wiesel published the French version of *Night*, he was writing for a French Catholic audience as opposed to a Jewish one.²¹ Thus, he created a version of the survivor that would not alienate a broader, non-Jewish audience. Wiesel’s rewriting of his memoirs suggests how survivors may alter their appraisals of liberation in order to appeal to certain audiences.

While interviews and accounts produced shortly after the war tend to be factual and provide a narrative of events, later memoirs tend to focus more on survivors’ internal experiences. As a result, many later testimonies discuss the lack of hope that survivors dealt with after liberation. After the trauma of the Holocaust, survivors had a difficult time believing that they could lead happy lives. For example, when recounting how she witnessed a starving man eating the flesh of another man after liberation, Eichengreen writes, “I was paralyzed. I had seen and experienced much, but this man left me shaken. What had we become? The Germans had succeeded in reducing us to subhumans. Would we ever be normal again? It seemed impossible. Despite our liberation, I was totally without hope.”²² Eichengreen thought that a normal life was no longer attainable for people who had been forced to resort to unimaginable extremes in order to survive and felt hopeless regarding her and other Jews’ futures. Levi discusses another kind of hopelessness in his memoir: “So for us even the hour of liberty...filled our souls with joy and yet with a painful sense of pudency, so that we should have liked to wash our consciences and our memories clean from the foulness that lay upon them; and also with anguish, because we felt that this should never happen, that now nothing could ever happen good and pure enough to rub out or past.”²³ Liberation made Levi realize that no matter what good befell survivors in the future, the scars with which years of oppression had left them would never heal. Furthermore, Joseph K., who was liberated at age nineteen, stated in a 1979 interview, “For the longest time after liberation, I didn’t want to live. I had nothing to live for. Somehow, in my deep recesses, I was hoping to live to see Germany destroyed. And I did live to see that. After that, there was nothing.”²⁴ During the war, Joseph K. set his sights on one hope: to see the defeat of his oppressors. Once that defeat came and he was faced with returning to a world destroyed, he could find no other motivation for survival. Likewise, after liberation many survivors lacked any hope that they could return to a normal life, heal, and find a reason to live.

In addition to feeling a lack of hope, survivors also harbored uncertainty and fear regarding their futures. For those who had lived under unimaginably horrific conditions for years, readjusting to a normal life seemed a gargantuan, perhaps impossible task. For example, in her memoir *Saving the Fragments: From Auschwitz to New York*, Isabella Leitner writes, “From time to time it dawns on us that we have been detached from the rest of humankind. We will have to relearn how to live, how to hold a fork, how to live with the family of man. Too great a task. The resources within us will have to stand up to a nearly impossible struggle.”²⁵ For Leitner and her fellow survivors, the time immediately after liberation would involve a period of readjustment, a frightening and overwhelming prospect that they were not sure they could handle. Likewise, survivors who realized after liberation that their life could never be the same were anxious about starting anew without their immediate family or friends. For instance, Eichengreen writes, “Until now I had not been conscious of the fact that the one short happy period of my life was gone, never to return. I was physically and emotionally scarred. My family and friends no longer existed. Everything and everyone important to my life were gone forever. Slowly I realized that I could not turn back to what had been but only toward something different, unknown, and uncertain.”²⁶ Survivors like Eichengreen knew that whatever the future held in store for them would be entirely unfamiliar, which frightened them.

The task of returning to the normal world and of living an unknown life without loved ones could seem so overwhelming that survivors often felt completely inadequate when faced with their liberty. Levi articulates this feeling in *The Reawakening*: “For the whole day we had been too busy to remark upon the event, which we still felt marked the crucial point of our entire existence; and perhaps, unconsciously, we had sought something to do precisely to avoid

²⁰ Eliezer Wiesel, *Un di velt hot geshvign* (Buenos Aires, 1956); quoted in Naomi Seidman, “Elie Wiesel and the Scandal of Jewish Rage,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996), 6.

²¹ Seidman, 8.

²² Eichengreen, 125.

²³ Levi, 16.

²⁴ Greene and Kumar, 214.

²⁵ *Images from the Holocaust: A Literature Anthology*, ed. Jean E. Brown, Janet E. Rubin, and Elaine C. Stephens (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group, 1997), 410.

²⁶ Eichengreen, 131.

spare time, because face to face with liberty we felt ourselves lost, emptied, atrophied, unfit for our part.”²⁷ According to Levi, survivors avoided discussing liberation because they felt too weak and unprepared to deal with what came next. Before liberation, concentration camp prisoners lived entirely in the present, focusing only on their own survival. After liberation, however, survivors were forced to consider the future, which often appeared frightening and intimidating.

Another reason that many survivors feared the future after liberation is that their homes and communities had been completely destroyed. Simply put, they had nowhere to go. Some survivors believed they might not have a single living relative or friend remaining, and the lack of knowledge to the contrary certainly weighed against the joy of being liberated. Hanna F., who had no reason to believe that anyone she knew had survived the war, described her state of mind after liberation in a 1980 interview: “I had no desire to live. I had no place to go. I had nobody to talk to. I was just simply lost, without words. I know that everybody is killed. It took me a while till I met my husband after the war.”²⁸ Hanna F., who was the sole Holocaust survivor from her family, did not want to face her future after liberation because she felt like she did not belong anywhere. Additionally, Perla K., who was in Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, and a forced labor factory before she was transferred to Dachau and liberated from there, was extremely apprehensive regarding her future because she did not know what remained of her home or her family. In a 1990 interview, she stated, “The doctor told me, he say, ‘You’ll be all right. You’re going [to] Greece again.’ But I say to myself, ‘Going [to] Greece? To do what? Who is there? I don’t know who is going to come back, I don’t know anything.”²⁹ It was difficult for survivors to remain hopeful because they did not know if anything from their past had evaded destruction. Without the option of returning to their past lives, survivors had no idea what they were supposed to do next. Furthermore, Edith P., who was liberated from Salzwedel at age 25, described her experience as follows: “I recall the same afternoon, I sat down on a big stone and said to myself, ‘And what now? What’s going to happen to us now? We’re all free—are we really free? Where’s the family? I’m a young person who had a sheltered, innocent life, and what am I going to do now? Who’s going to take care of me?’³⁰ Prior to the war, Edith P.’s family had always looked after her. Consequently, she was frightened when she realized that she had to fend for herself. Even if there was a possibility that survivors’ family or friends were still alive, the survivors did not know how to begin their searches. Many survivors who did not have a place to return to or did not know the whereabouts of their families were at a complete loss after liberation as to how to start life anew.

After liberation, when survivors were no longer preoccupied with their own survival, they experienced a resurgence of previously numbed feelings. As Eichengreen writes in her memoir, “[liberation] revived feelings that had long been numbed by the daily struggle for both mental and physical survival—feelings of guilt, loneliness, and utter devastation... There was only renewed sorrow for the dead and little hope for the living. Liberation had come quietly, and it had brought with it the realization that thousands of us had not lived to see this moment.”³¹ As survivors realized that many or all of their loved ones had not survived with them, they were overcome with grief. Likewise, they felt isolated and guilty, wondering why they had survived and so many of their loved ones had not. Levi expresses this same idea in *The Reawakening*: “In the very hour in which every threat seemed to vanish, in which a hope of a return to life ceased to be crazy, I was overcome—as if a dyke had crumbled—by a new and greater pain, previously buried and relegated to the margins of my consciousness by other more immediate pains: the pain of exile, of my distant home, of loneliness, of friends lost, of youth lost and of the host of corpses all around.”³² Levi experienced a feeling of total loss as he contemplated both the things he missed and the death that surrounded him. Thus, when survivors were able to expend their energy on something besides maintaining their physical security, their thoughts moved to the larger significance of the tragedy they had just experienced, causing emotions that had been buried to rise to the surface.

More specifically, many survivors experienced intense feelings of loneliness and isolation after liberation as they came to terms with the fact that they no longer had family or friends to whom they could turn. Rabbi Baruch G., who ended up in a Russian hospital in Theresienstadt after liberation, discussed this idea in a 1984 interview: “I remember after liberation, I suffered probably more from the loneliness and isolation, more than during the Holocaust period... I would find myself crying, and quite frequently, feeling there’s no one—there’s no one around me that cares what I do and what I don’t do.”³³ Similarly, Norbert Wollheim writes, “We were free from the whip and the pistols and machine guns of the SS criminals – and yet the invaluable gift of the new freedom could not entirely make up for the sense of frightening personal

²⁷ Levi, 17.

²⁸ Greene and Kumar, 218.

²⁹ Greene and Kumar, 215.

³⁰ Greene and Kumar, 218.

³¹ Eichengreen, 126.

³² Levi, 18.

³³ Greene and Kumar, 214-215.

isolation, the certainty of the infinite loneliness within ourselves.”³⁴ Survivors who could not share the joyous experience of liberation with their loved ones were forced to dwell on the fact that they had lost those closest to them. Though millions of people lost family members in the war, many Jews lost their entire immediate family and thus felt that they were totally alone in the world.

The particularity of the Jewish experience of liberation from concentration camps is evident when the testimony of Jews is compared with that of non-Jews. Non-Jews also suffered amidst the horrific conditions in the concentration camps, but their outlook on the future differed because they were not faced with returning to a world destroyed. For example, Herbert J., an American prisoner of war who was interned in Mauthausen, recalled liberation in the following manner: “When [my own outfit, the Eleventh Armored] liberated the camp and I was able to identify myself and those who were still alive, I was right back in my own outfit again. They said something about prisoner of war and whatnot, but, you know, I said I’d just as soon forget about it. . . . The fact that I was in the camp was something that I wanted to forget at the time.”³⁵ While Herbert J. may not have been treated as brutally as the Jewish prisoners in Mauthausen, he experienced and witnessed atrocities in the camp. However, unlike the Jews, he knew exactly where he belonged when the war ended: in his outfit, and then in the United States with his family. Additionally, Vera Laska, who was interned as a political prisoner in Auschwitz, Gross-Rosen, and Dora-Mittelbau as a result of her active participation in the Czech Underground Railroad, noted in a 1996 interview that though she did not necessarily feel the constant threat of the gas chambers like the Jews did, she was not aware of being treated differently than the Jewish prisoners.³⁶ However, after liberation Laska was able to return to her home and her family in the Czech Republic and begin working for the war crimes investigations. Thus, Jews’ experience of liberation differed significantly from that of non-Jews because many non-Jews had a place to which they could return after the war, while many Jews had nowhere to go because their communities and their way of life had been destroyed.

Historians must be careful not to oversimplify complex events. Accordingly, in this case, it is important not to assume that liberation was a happy ending for all Holocaust survivors. Though concluding the story of the Holocaust with the joyful moment of liberation may be convenient and comforting, this strategy disregards the entirely new set of difficulties with which Jews were forced to deal after they were freed from the Nazis. After liberation, Jews were faced with debilitating and sometimes deadly illness, a desire for revenge, and feelings of hopelessness and fear regarding the future. Likewise, they were overwhelmed by a revival of feelings that had previously been numbed by their preoccupation with survival. Liberation was certainly not the end of the story for Jews, and it should not be the end of the story for historians trying to comprehend their experience.

³⁴ Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation*, 154-155.

³⁵ Greene and Kumar, 214.

³⁶ “Vera Laska, Political Prisoner: Power of Resistance,” *USC Shoah Foundation Institute* (2007-2010), <http://college.usc.edu/vhi/education/living-histories/lesson.php?nid=713>.