

## From the Testimony of Shmuel Krakowski about the Liberation from Theresienstadt

I woke up that day, just as on the day before, and all the previous days – very, very hungry.

We lay on the bare floor, prisoners closed in a prison within a larger prison. We had arrived here a fortnight earlier with the death march from Rehmsdorf, a subcamp of Buchenwald. We were more than 4,000 Jewish concentration camp prisoners when they took us out of Rehmsdorf in the early days of April. Only 500 of us reached the Czech town of Terezin, which had been transformed by the Nazis into a Jewish ghetto, known by the German name Theresienstadt. All the others were killed or died on the way. Among those who perished were some of my closest friends from our underground youth organization in the Lodz ghetto: Rysiek Podlaski, Abramek Kociolek and Sruled Krajkowski.

They locked us into the huge building called Hamburger Kaserne. Those outside the gate, the resident prisoners of Theresienstadt, were more lucky. They at least had some freedom to move through the few streets of the ghetto. We knew the Third Reich had collapsed, and that our liberation was a matter of days or even hours. Unfortunately, for people exhausted after the suffering of the death march and years of starvation, those hours of waiting for the liberators to come seemed very long. Each hour stretched to eternity. Many of us were in agony, as was one of my best friends Lutek Nachtstern. There was no longer any doubt that for these people the liberation would come too late. For the rest of us it was a tragic race; which would happen first – the liberation or death from starvation?

I don't remember who was the first that morning to look out of the window. I well remember his cry of joy: "Boys, the Russians are here". Thus, we were liberated.

With many others, I decided to run out immediately and welcome the liberators. Many of us were not able to do so. They were too weak to move, but had no choice but to lie and wait for the liberators to come and bring them food, and to arrange medical treatment.

The gate of the Hamburger Kaserne was still closed. A Czech policeman stood outside and tried to persuade us to remain within, because, as he said, we were an epidemic danger for those outside. It sounded like nonsense to remain imprisoned after the liberation had finally come. We refused to obey and stormed the gate. The Czech policeman gave up and disappeared. We soon found ourselves on the road outside the ghetto. There we saw several Red Army tanks, a military supply truck and a few Russian soldiers on bicycles escorting a huge column of German prisoners of war. Germany was defeated and we saw it now with our own eyes. This was the day we had been waiting for.

We were very hungry, so the first thing we did was to ask the Russians to give us something to eat. The soldiers were extremely friendly to us but didn't have much to offer. The only thing they had in their supply truck was sugar, a lot of sugar, and salted pork. I preferred to satisfy my hunger with sugar. I remembered how a few days earlier a doctor in the Hamburger Kaserne, who was also a prisoner, warned us to be very careful of what we ate when the day of liberation came, because we had suffered prolonged starvation. I decided that the pork would be too fat for my starved stomach.

I ate the sugar. I remembered that in normal times sugar was used only for tea and cakes. Now I ate spoonfuls of sugar. This strengthened me, and maybe even save my life. It was a wonderful feeling which I hadn't experienced for almost five years. I could now eat as much as I liked. I knew I would never be hungry again.

We were told that German soldiers were in hiding in the vicinity. They tried to remain hidden until nightfall and then escaped under the cover of darkness. We were asked to help the Russians comb the area and find the Germans. This we were more than happy to do. We were supposed to move in a scattered line into a wooded area with which we were not familiar. We had no idea whether it was a large forest or just a few acres of trees.

I soon lost sight of my friends on the left and right and felt quite lonely in these unfamiliar surroundings. Suddenly, from behind the trees a tall, fat German soldier appeared. I was terribly frightened. I had no arms. What if he decides to shoot me? Shall I die a few hours after being liberated? Fortunately, the

German raised his hands and I saw that he was more frightened than I was. His whole body trembled, and he screamed like a madman:

“Hitler kaput. Ich was kein Nazi! Hitler kaput. Ich war kein Nazi“ [Hitler is finished. I am not a Nazi].

Encouraged by his behavior, I took him to the road. Some of my fellow ex-prisoners appeared with “their” Germans. All of them tried to convince us very loudly and very nervously that they had never been Nazis. They had always hated Hitler.

“Look, none of them was a Nazi. How, then, was it that the Nazi regime succeeded in holding out to this very day?”, said one of my friends.

Those captured Nazi soldiers seemed to be more frightened of us than of the Russians. I thought I knew the reason. The Nazis knew that those who survived would tell the world the story of their barbarity.

By afternoon I felt very tired and decided to go back to Theresienstadt, to the Hamburger Kaserne. I had no other place to go, and I also wanted to see how my friends who had remained there were feeling.

As I walked along the road two uniformed men on bicycles came up to me. At first I didn’t recognize them. They were not wearing those German uniforms which unhappily we had gotten so familiar with during the past sad six years of war. Neither were they the uniforms of the Red Army soldiers of whom we now saw so many around us. It took me a few minutes to remember. These were the uniforms of the Polish Army which I hadn’t seen since that tragic September in 1939.

“Polish Army?” I asked the men.

“Yes” was the answer.

The two men introduced themselves. They were Jews, officers of the Polish Armored Corps, which had been fighting until the day before some 30 kilometers distant from this place. They had been told that there was a large concentration camp of Jewish prisoners in the vicinity and they were eager to see their liberated brothers. I told them I was one of them and volunteered to be their guide.

We reached Theresienstadt and entered the first barrack. Here were women, mostly from Poland and Hungary, who, like myself, had come with the death

marches from other concentration camps. They received the officers with indescribable joy.

“Our brothers! Jewish officers! At last, at last, you are with us!”

They shook hands, kissed each other and cried with joy. The officers asked many questions. They were eager to know where the women came from and all the details of their suffering in the ghettos and camps. One after the other, the women told their story of their unbelievable experiences under the Nazis. The stories were interrupted with expressions of great happiness: to be able to sit here, secure, with Jewish officers, to tell them their stories, knowing that Nazi Germany had come to an end and would never rise again.

Suddenly, one of the women asked the officers, to tell their story in turn, the story of soldiers at war. And then almost immediately, the mood of all of us changed. The joyful atmosphere disappeared, giving way to grief and sorrow. The lieutenant told his story. He was from Vilna. He had been mobilized into the Red Army. He had fought in many battles and was wounded at Stalingrad. After recovering he was transferred to the newly-created Polish Army. Times changed for the better. They defeated the Germans and continually moved westward. To their great sorrow, in all the liberated places they found no Jews. The Germans had murdered an entire nation – our nation. After entering Poland, the lieutenant asked for a few days leave to visit his native Vilna. “There I found only my stones, the familiar buildings and streets with none of the people who used to live there before”, the officer told us.

In liberated Lublin the only Jews were the soldiers in the Red and Polish armies, as well as some Jewish partisans who came out of the forest. On the long march through Poland, in the hundreds of towns and villages through which they passed, there were no more Jews. Everywhere there were only extermination sites and mass graves. Theresienstadt was the first place they had met so many Jews, thousands of Jews who had survived the Nazi rule. Thus, we learned that our fate was much worse than we had expected. 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 had come too late, much too late.

**Source: *The Anguish of Liberation- Testimonies from 1945*, edited by Y, kleiman and N. Springer- Aharoni (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1945) ,pp 13-16**