

Liberation

The freeing of prisoners from Nazi concentration camps and extermination camps, and from Nazi-ruled areas.

As the Allies retook control of lands that had been occupied by the Germans, Jews in hiding suddenly found themselves free. The Allies also came across many Nazi camps. In some instances, the Nazis had tried to destroy all evidence of the camps, in order to conceal from the world what had happened there. In other cases, only the buildings remained, as the Nazis had sent the prisoners elsewhere, often on Death Marches. However, in many camps the Allied soldiers found hundreds or even thousands of emaciated survivors living in the most horrific of conditions, many of whom were dying of malnourishment and disease.

The liberation of the Nazi concentration and extermination camps began in Eastern Europe when Soviet troops reached Majdanek in July 1944. Soon they found many other camp sites, some of which were camouflaged from the outside. Oftentimes the Soviet authorities did not reveal their findings to the rest of the world. The British and American troops who were approaching from the West did not reach the concentration camps of Germany until the spring of 1945. What they found was unspeakable---tens of thousands on the verge of death, as well as piles upon piles of corpses. The Allied liberators tried very hard to help the survivors, but many died anyway in the weeks after liberation. After the war's end, most of the non-Jewish survivors returned to their homes. However, for the Jews, liberation was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they were now free from Nazi tyranny, free to move on. On the other hand, many of them had nowhere to go and no compelling reason to leave---often, these Jews were the only survivors from their entire families, sometimes from their entire community. Many had no homes left; others began to search desperately for any remnant of family or friends. Many of the Jews ended up in Displaced Persons (DP) camps, sometimes in the company of their former persecutors. Over the next few years the DP's rebuilt their lost lives, usually moving to a place where they had located a relative or friend. Many of the Jews eventually moved to Israel. (see also Displaced Persons, Jewish.)

