

## Reading 16D

### AFTERMATH AND LIBERATION

#### Question

What do you think are four of the main points in this reading?

In January 1945, the Russian forces, the Red Army, approached Auschwitz. The officials of I.G. Farben and the SS officers of Auschwitz burned records and dismantled Birkenau and Monowitz. By the time soldiers of the Red Army marched into Auschwitz, the Germans had fled. The Russians found 6,000 sick, emaciated prisoners in the “infirmary” of the main camp. Among them were almost 200 starving children.

The Third *Reich* seemed to be falling apart as the Allied troops closed in. On the Eastern Front, the Russian troops fed those survivors they found, then either drafted them into service or sent them to Russia. The Red Army was determined to reach Berlin and continued to move forward, taking little time to help the victims of the camp.

The same help true in the West: the war was still on and to many British and American units, the camps were a distraction from their main purpose. The troops that liberated Landsberg, a concentration and labor camp in Germany, for example, considered the inmates a “problem” and moved on within six days. Prisoners had to be “deloused” and their uniforms burned. They had to be issued new clothing. There was little time to treat the broken victims with proper sympathy.

In April and May 1945, American troops marched into German concentration camps. The Americans were greeted by blank stares from skeleton-like people. The stench and sight was enough to cause physical and mental disorders among the American troops. None of them had been told what they would find in the camps. Most had heard about concentration camps but had little idea that such horrors existed. They were shocked by what they discovered. One of the American soldiers who liberated the concentration camp at Landsberg recalls that “even at its least terrible, it was incredibly terrible . . . It simply boggles the mind . . . You have to not just see it; you have to smell it . . . There was a kind of shock. I think we were in a state of shock. We were unprepared for this . . . There was no cheering. They were just . . . they have given . . . almost given up hope.”

Bewildered, the troops had little choice but to begin to disinfect the Jews of the camps. Many who remembered the same orders to undress and be “deloused” when they had first arrived at the concentration camps were frightened.

Auschwitz had been “liquidated,” that is, taken apart. Over 58,000 prisoners were forced to march in the bitter cold toward Germany. So began the Death Marches. No one was allowed to stop for any reason whatsoever unless the guards stopped the whole column for a brief rest period. Those who fell from exhaustion were shot. Those who stopped for some reason or stumbled were also shot. Small groups of prisoners were

given wagons to push and were forced to pick up the dead bodies and put them in the wagons. When the wagons were full, they had to stop and bury the dead. One survivor remembers picking up a body and hearing his name called. The man was alive. "Let me carry him, he is still alive," said the survivor to the guard. The guard put the rifle to his head and forced him to bury the still living man.

The survivors of these Death Marches were herded into various camps in Germany, the worst being Bergen-Belsen. Tens of thousands arrived within a week. They were crammed into barracks and left to starve. Many of the Germans changed into civilian clothes and ran. Yet, a few guards remained, shooting any prisoners who had the strength to venture out of the barracks. To the very end, then, the "Final Solution" continued. Even as the perpetrators lost the war and ran from the Allies, they tried to finish the task of murdering the Jews.

When the British forces arrived at Bergen-Belsen, they found dead bodies rotting in the mud. Corpses were piled everywhere. The stench of the camp could be smelled for miles. Rats had begun to gnaw on the living, and some of the desperately starved people had begun to eat the flesh of the dead. When the storehouses were opened by the British, those survivors who were able stormed them and raced out with tin cans of food. Many dropped dead within minutes because of the inability to digest food of that type after years of malnourishment. The British then locked the storehouse, began disinfecting prisoners and carefully started to feed them. Many of the British soldiers had to be admitted to hospitals for psychological disorders after observing the horrible conditions.

Other inmates of smaller labor and concentration camps began to escape as the German system crumbled. Many ran into forests seeing refuge in German or Polish homes. Some found sympathetic responses, others were driven away or shot.

The Allies set up displaced persons camps (DP camps) as quickly as possible, and most of the survivors were placed into them. Some spent the next four years in one or more of these camps. Others immediately began thinking about going to the United States or Palestine. Still others returned home, seeking relatives or friends. Of those who tried to return home, many were attacked by native populations. In 1946, in Kielce {kels}, Poland, there was a pogrom. Over 40 Jews who had returned to the city were murdered. In smaller towns across Poland, Slovakia, and parts of Hungary, similar outrages took place.

Jews became more aware that they had lost their homes and had no country. As they returned to their former homes, they found no families left. Survivors tell of losing 50, 60, 70, or more members of their families. "Only then when I arrived back home did I wish I had not survived," said one survivor. "What was there to live for? My parents, my sisters and brother, all my aunts and uncles, cousins, friends, teachers – everyone was gone." Synagogues had been looted and burned. Whole communities had been destroyed – approximately 4,500 of them.

Continuity had been central to Jewish life and culture in Europe. That continuity gave Jews a feeling of things continuing from the past to the present and into the future, a feeling of certainty. That continuity had been broken. With the death of so many children, almost one and a half million, an entire generation had been destroyed. Almost no one over 35 had survived. Traditions that dated back 2,000 years had come to an end. With the loss of continuity, traditions and lives, European Jewish culture, a way of life, came to an end. In that respect, the “Final Solution” was a success.