

Handout – Impact of the Holocaust on Jewish People – Survivor Testimony

Helen Grossman

“April 15th the British Army walked into Bergen-Belsen liberating us. They couldn’t believe their eyes. They never knew that this camp existed. They just drove in their big military trucks and could smell the decomposed bodies. There were fourteen thousand dead bodies lying on the open surface in April. It was the fifteenth of April, a very warm spring because I remember sitting outside and sunning ourselves, warming ourselves before the liberation. When they drove in they announced in every language that we are free. I didn’t feel free. Everyone said ‘Why don’t you go out and see the English are here!’ and I said ‘Where would I go? Whom have I got?’ So we stayed in the barracks and the English, the British came in and the smell, the stench pushed them back. They came in overalls and gas masks.”



Madeline Deutch



“I was 18 but I was in fact only 13, because those years were nothing. Those were erased from my life. So I was 13 years old in an 18 year old girl’s body. And I didn’t know anything. I was a frightened little girl. I could not communicate with anybody except the immediate family: my mother’s sister and brother-in-law and their son, their only son. And then we went to New York – again my mother’s aunt and her cousins. I couldn’t go to the street, I was petrified. I was afraid that the Nazis were still out there. I was having nightmares for years and years. For many years. I was still reliving everything. The trip to Auschwitz, the beatings, the killings... I live with this, for years and years. I still live with it, but I don’t have these horrible nightmares any more, except occasionally.”

Rosa Ivankowski

“Let’s say I’m glad it’s over.

You’re glad what’s over?

“Everything is over, it’s behind us, everything we’ve gone through. Sometimes I wonder we could go through all those years. So many years of the running all the time. All the time being afraid. And you know what, it never goes away. Even now, when you see something, you get right away a kind of... you’re afraid. It stays with you.”



Martin Weiss



“Life in the Displaced Persons camps gave people hope for the first time since they left their home. Almost every person there had lost parents, siblings, extended family, and many friends. As people started to feel better, they embraced life with zest. No one in the camps had a home or income, but still they mustered their resources and hopes for a new future. What they possessed was humanity

and hope in spite of their predicaments. Soon many countries opened their doors to Holocaust survivors and people emigrated anywhere that would accept them. Many went to... Israel and many to the United States, South America and Australia.”

Ruth Webber



“I was very bitter after the war, towards everybody. How they allowed me to go through such misery, for so long. And then on top of it I didn’t even know for a few months that my mother survived, or my father (which he didn’t). And I was terribly angry at everything and everybody. Because nobody even cared after I survived, that I survived. I had to be protected even after that. When we

were in the orphanage in Krakow we were not allowed to go out because some people felt that we should not have survived. And it was not safe to go out from the house that we were kept in, and the garden. That was the only place that we were allowed to go...”

Leah Hammerstein

“We started to organise, not only to have a gathering point for Jews to come to, but also to send out people to look for liberated Jews, you know? Because, when people were liberated by the Soviet army, the first impulse of people was going back to their places. That was the natural instinct – to see if somebody survived, if the house survived, if something can be rescued. So I was assigned to do that... We were travelling criss-cross Poland, looking for surviving Jews. And we found them. And sometimes these meetings were so packed with emotion, I lack the words to describe it, you know? Because the idea that we are really survivors couldn't sink in yet. You were full of apprehensions that maybe it will change again, you know? For years you lived like a hunted animal. It gets into your psyche. It's very difficult to get rid of that feeling that you are not in danger any more. All these self defence mechanisms are still with you, you know. And in many cases people were reluctant to admit that they were Jews. In many places they didn't want to talk to us...

It was like slowly coming back to life.”



David Benedikt



“We arrived early in 1946. I have never been back to Europe and I have no intention of ever going back to Europe because I can only deal with my experiences the way you deal with an infestation - just by physically distancing yourself from it. The whole of Europe to me is a graveyard of my people. I have seen them die. And I have come out of the camps with an abiding love for my people because I saw them die with their heads up in the overwhelming number of cases.”

Murray Pantirer



“I came to Krakow. And I walked in in mine apartment. And I told the woman immediately, ‘I absolutely don’t want nothing from this apartment. Everything that was in that apartment belonged to us. I didn’t care for it. I only want to write down a little note: ‘If anybody from my family, or by miracle somebody survived, I am the second son of Lazer Pantirer. I survived, and I’m registering myself in the

Jewish community of Krakow. Where I’m gonna be, I don’t know.’

So she said, ‘Sit down, have a cup of tea.’ She send her son to the militia. The militia came up and said, ‘Why did you come here to make troubles?’

I said, ‘What kind of troubles did I make? I just wanna put down my address, my apartment, I wanna put down my name.’

And then we, I told you we got some material, so we start selling it on the street, so either they will say ‘You don’t buy stuff from a Jew’, or they will say ‘Look, they said they killed them, but look how many they are.’ So I was among two Jewish boys or three Jewish boys trying to change for livelihood for stuff that they needed. They didn’t want us.

And in my ear they’re constantly saying, ‘Jew, go to Palestine.’”

In the camps, the DPs lived unhygienic and hopeless lives. They lived in crowded conditions, usually in large barracks, with no private space or family rooms; their diet was monotonous and scanty; their clothing was shapeless. They usually displayed little initiative and many did not want to work. They felt that it was enough that they had been forced to work in the past - now it was their turn to rest. They tended to be short-tempered and distrustful of strangers, and even regarded their friends and the committees and institutions around them with suspicion. Many threw off all discipline...”

- Israel Gutman and Avital Saf (eds.), *She'erit Hapletah 1944-1948, Rehabilitation and the Political Struggle*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 1990. p 519

Elizabeth Wise



“And [the other prisoners] said, we’re not going to let you die, we pull you out from here. And that’s what saved my life. And they pulled me out from the barracks, they were much stronger than I was – they did the same death march with me. We’d been together for 7 months, and somehow they were much stronger. Anyway, they pulled me out, put me on the

stretcher...and put in the ambulance car, and the ambulance took me to the Revien, the hospital. And I remember ... that my hair [was cut] because it was full of lice, and [they] washed me with good hot soap and [water], and put some DDT powder [insecticide] on me and a blanket around me. And I found myself in a clean room, in a bed, sheet and everything there. And that’s all what I remember for 6 weeks, 6 solid weeks – for 6 weeks I had absolutely no memory at all, I had no idea what I was doing there, what’s happened with me, I was too weak, too sick, to remember anything. And after 6 weeks, I start to get out of the bed and walk around, just holding whatever I could hold. And [in] the next bed in front of me, there was a girl, and I went to her bed, I said, ‘What you doing here?’ The same question from her: ‘What you doing here?’ We were 6 weeks in the same room - we didn’t recognise each other, we didn’t notice each other. We’ve been together for months and months. She was so sick like me. And after 6 weeks, I start to learn to walk. I was so skinny, I was a tall girl, and my leg went always close to [the other] leg and I always fell over and they have to help me to get up. Very, very hard to learn to walk when you are [an] adult. Anyway, I learned to walk somehow. I was there for another 6 weeks and doctors came and they decided that I’m not healthy enough to stay there...the Red Cross [was] taking people who are still sick to Sweden and I would be one of them.”