

## 6.2. Speech by Rabbi Herschel Schacter

*Rabbi Herschel Schacter was a U.S. Army chaplain who participated in the liberation of Buchenwald and aided in the resettlement of Displaced Persons after the Holocaust. This reading is an excerpt from a speech given at a conference convened by the United States Holocaust Memorial Council at which eyewitnesses to the liberation shared their memories. In the excerpt Schacter refers to some of the other speakers, including Elie Wiesel.*

*Source: Brewster Chamberlin and Marcia Feldman, eds., *The Liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps 1945—Eyewitness Accounts of the Liberators* (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Council, 1987), pp. 35–37.*

Dear friends, so very very much has been spoken. All of us here, I know, have seen so much, have read so much, and yet I am convinced that we can't begin to fathom the enormity of the cataclysm, of the tragedy that struck our people and so many other peoples of the world.

During the Second World War, I served as a young Army chaplain, perhaps not as young as Leon Bass or Alan Rose, but not much older than they at that time. I worked my way across with front-line combat troops through Europe. I was attached to the VIII Corps Headquarters of the Third Army.

The most unforgettable day of my life is April 11, 1945. I learned from some of the officers in my unit that early that morning our forward tanks had entered the notorious concentration camp called Buchenwald, outside of Weimar. I had heard the name before. My mind's eye conjured up all sorts of images. I quickly ascertained the directions and drove at high speed to Weimar and then to the camp.

As I drove up to the main gate, I was struck by the large German inscription over the gate: Arbeit Macht Frei—what a tragic travesty. I drove through the gate into the open Appellplatz [inspection or roll call area] and there I was in Buchenwald. This was about 4:00 in the afternoon, just hours after the first columns of American tanks drove through and liberated that dungeon on the face of this earth.

I did not know where to go first. Happily, a young American Army lieutenant recognized my Jewish chaplain's insignia, and he approached me almost reverently. He urged that I follow him to see first the crematoria. We've heard descriptions. As I said, we've read, and we've seen pictures. As long as I shall live, I will never, never forget that gruesome scene that is indelibly engraved upon my heart and my mind. There simply are no words in the human vocabulary. Yes, our Polish friend this morning told us how difficult it was for him to find the words in any language.

I slowly approached the site of the huge ovens from which the smoke was still curling upward. I could smell the stench of the charred remnants of human flesh. There were literally hundreds of dead bodies strewn about. Dr. Kelling, you were right, but many of these bodies were not stacked neatly like cordwood. They were just scattered, waiting to be shoveled into the furnaces, which were still hot.

I stood riveted to this scene for what seemed like an eternity, tormented within with searing agony, until I finally tore myself away, my eyes burning from the smoke and, even more so, from my inner rage. I walked back from the crematoria toward the endless rows of barracks still dazed by what I had just seen.

I asked the young lieutenant who was there at my side, and who seemed to know his way around, whether he knew if there were any Jews still alive in this camp. He led me to an area called the Kleine Lager—the little camp within the larger camp. I hurriedly walked into one of the dilapidated, filthy, foul-smelling barracks, and there again I was smitten by an indescribable scene. There on a series of shelves—and again, you've seen the pictures of the series of shelves—were just raw planks of hardwood. From floor to ceiling were hundreds upon hundreds of men and very few boys who were strewn over scraggly straw sacks looking down at me, looking down at me out of dazed eyes. Last night Elie Wiesel so graphically and movingly described how he perceived our eyes. I remember their eyes, looking down, looking out of big, big eyes—that's all I saw were eyes—haunted, crippled, paralyzed with fear. They were emaciated skin and bones, half-crazed, more dead than alive.

And there I stood and shouted in Yiddish, "Sholem Aleychem, Yiden, yir zent frey!" "You are free." The more brave among them slowly began to approach me, as was just described, to touch my Army uniform, to examine the Jewish chaplain's insignia, incredulously asking me again and again, "Is it true? Is it over?"

Indeed, as Elie Wiesel said, I felt that love, that gratitude, that admiration. I ran from barracks to barracks throughout the whole area, repeating again and again the declaration, the scene, the experience. As I moved about, bands of Jews were now following me, pouring out tales of woe, asking me over and over, "Does the world know what happened to us? What will now happen? Where will we go from here?"

I stood among them. As I saw these men—brothers, flesh of my flesh, and blood of my blood—I could not help but think of the old cliché, "There but for the grace of God go I." Alan [Rose] was so right. If my own father had not caught the boat on time, I would have been there.

Thus started a period of about two months during which I spent every day in Buchenwald. I must confess that I paid little attention to the needs of American servicemen who really, at that time, did not need many of my services. I devoted myself—what little energies, what little ingenuity, what bit of initiative a young man could muster—to my new-found flock.

While I could never develop any accurate statistics, my estimate was that there were approximately 20,000 inmates, from every country in Europe, in Buchenwald at the time of the liberation, of whom only about 5,000 were Jews.

We know that Buchenwald was primarily built and maintained for the incarceration of political prisoners and was, therefore, less, less savagely brutal and torturous than the extermination camps in Poland. There were no gas chambers in Buchenwald, only crematoria. And the inmates who were then becoming my friends related to me in harrowing detail how every morning dead bodies were collected in the barracks and in the work stations and were carried off on wheelbarrows to the crematoria. And this was the less brutal? How much more gruesome could the other death camps have been?