

**When the Nazis realized that the Allied troops were approaching, they decided they did not want to get caught and they also determined that they did not want to leave any evidence behind of their actions; therefore, in many camps, records were burned, buildings were blown up, and camps were evacuated. In some cases, those in the camps were killed; this was done intentionally, eliminating anyone who was a victim of Nazi actions so those individuals could not be witnesses in trials and/or tell the world what transpired. The action of killing in this context was called liquidation. Below, read the italicized paragraph as well as the boxed area to examine an example of one of these orders.**

## The Nazi Order for the Evacuation or Liquidation of Prisoners – 1944

### *Excerpt from a Nazi Memorandum on the “Clearance of Prisons”*

*As the Germans retreated westward before Soviet military forces in 1944, the fighting drew ever closer to the death camps and other prisons maintained by the Nazis in Poland. The Nazis were determined to keep the Red Army from liberating any of these prisoners—presumably because they were witnesses to their murderous activities. Nazi officials thus ordered inmates to be evacuated, if possible, or else killed. The majority of the prisoners in the death camps were indeed evacuated as the Russians approached. The following document is dated July 1944 and comes from the commander of Nazi security forces in one of the Polish regions.*

4143 TOP SECRET

To: The Branch Office for the attention of SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer Thiel—or acting deputy—in Tomaschow.

Subject: Clearance of Prisons.

... I again stress the fact that the number of inmates of the Sipo [*Sicherheitspolizei*—Nazi security police] and SD [*Sicherheitsdienst*—S.S. security police] prisons must be kept as low as possible. In the present situation, particularly those suspects, handed over by the Civil Police [*Ordnungspolizei*] need *only be subjected to a short, formal interrogation*, provided there are no serious grounds for suspicion. They are then to be sent by the quickest route to a concentration camp, should no court-martial proceedings be necessary or should there be no question of discharge. *Please keep the number of discharges very low.* Should the situation at the front necessitate it, early preparations are to be made for the total clearance of prisons. Should the situation develop suddenly in such a way that it is impossible to evacuate the prisoners, the prison inmates are to be liquidated and their bodies disposed of as far as possible (burning, blowing up the building, etc.). If necessary, Jews still employed in the armament industry or on other work are to be dealt with in the same way.

The liberation of prisoners or Jews by the enemy ... must be avoided under all circumstances nor may they fall into their hands alive.

**The evacuation of a camp often resulted in a death march. This was a long, relentless march – often without food or water – to either another camp or to no specific location; the goal was to put as much distance as possible between the marchers and the Allied troops.**

## Striving to Survive Until Liberation – 1945

### *Excerpt from an Interview with Holocaust Survivor Henry Oertelt*

*Henry Oertelt was imprisoned at Auschwitz along with his brother and survived the death march to Germany in January of 1945. They were then transferred between several different camps during the closing months of the war. Their existence became a race against time, as they struggled to avoid death until they could be liberated by one of the Allied armies.*

We were loaded up again, and we were taken to a camp called Flossenbürg, which is located in northeast Bavaria. Flossenbürg was a camp designed to hold 5,000 prisoners. When we arrived there, there were about 140,000 there. At that time though, we were not assigned to any working place anymore. We would be kept busy in head counts from morning to evening. Prisoners just dropped on the spot. It was an automatic thing that the prisoners next to them would have to carry them away, putting them on big body piles, who then eventually would be thrown onto some trucks and would be taken to the crematorium and burned.

Nothing else happened there. That's the way it was. Except, I developed something very, very miserable. I developed a growth under my left arm here that started to grow and grow, and eventually developed into the size of an orange, a big orange, grapefruit almost... I was fairly helpless. My brother was constantly with me there. And suddenly an order was given that they were looking for one thousand men that would be able to be mustered out for a work command to be taken out of the camp, not too far away, where they intended to build an airstrip. So we went by the doctors, and I tried to hide this thing, but the doctors noticed, and they sent my brother this way [to the work detail] and kept me on the side of being kept in the camp. And this was the way I was there until we finally were ordered out of the camp.

We were put into the column. We were now moving out. And we were marching now between the American lines, back and forth. The American lines tried to encircle the German contingent. And it was like maybe three, four, five miles from one side to another. We came there, the shooting got closer, we turned around, marched back. And so, nothing to eat at all we received. We actually pulled grass out of the ground—old, dried-up grass. Now it is April 20th of 1945. The new grass hadn't grown yet. And so, we are marching and marching...



Now you got to imagine the group of marchers there. Most of them are literally skeletons. Skeletons with bones and skin pulled over who tried to drag themselves along according to the speed as the guards on our sides provided. And this was not like a Sunday afternoon stroll, I can assure you. And of course these weak, wretched souls would stumble over the slightest pebble on the road that we marched on and would fall to the ground. At which moment, the guard came and would shoot them in the head. At the end of the column was a truck. The bodies were picked up and thrown onto the truck.

I weighed eighty-two pounds, and with that I was not the skinniest guy on the block by any means. There were guys, really, that couldn't have weighed more than sixty, sixty-five pounds. You couldn't believe that these guys were still moving along—trying, knowing that liberation is near, trying to hold themselves up as much as possible. Didn't have a chance. Didn't have the strength. They just succumbed.

And so therefore I was trying to fight my hallucinations—I started to hallucinate. And I knew when somebody hallucinated, they usually soon lost their control and would fall and then the shot would come. And so I started to hallucinate, and I tried to talk to myself, “hey, don't let it happen.”

And as it turned out, some guy behind me yelled, “hey guys, look, turn around.” And I turned around, and I saw what I still consider the most beautiful sight of my life: a contingent of American armored vehicles coming down the hillside with their American insignia on it. And our guards, of course, at that moment took off in all directions.

And then we stopped. We stopped. And saw at that moment the commander of the American outfit stop in front of us and directed us back to the one road where there was an American Red Cross contingent. He says, “it's just a quarter of a mile up that one road. They are there, they are waiting for you there already. Sorry we

couldn't come any sooner to you," he said. And he made a remark that sounded to us utterly ridiculous. He says, "now anyone that wants to walk that quarter mile, just go that way, not this or that." And so we said, "my gosh, walking?" He said, "otherwise there will be trucks and jeeps to pick you up, don't worry about it."

Anyway, while these vehicles were coming by, they were shooting out of their turrets. They were actually a fighting contingent, fighting the Germans. They're shooting, but while they were riding by and shooting, they opened the hatches and threw out all kinds of ration boxes, the military ration boxes.

All of a sudden, we had eaten something, and I said, "you know something, this man said we don't have to walk." Now it starts to occur to me, now that I had something in my stomach, that I'm a free man... "How do you feel about walking? You know something, we now can walk at the speed that we want to walk. You know, if we make a few steps and we want to sit down, we sit down. Can't we do that now?" Just like little children that learned to walk. All of a sudden it occurred to us that that is possible.

And so we decided to walk, ... and it took us nearly four hours, I believe, or more, to walk that quarter mile. In the mean time the jeeps came up and down that road. I think we were the last ones in.

And finally we made it... There was a tall Red Cross guy in front of me, American Red Cross uniformed man. And he wanted to have my food box. That was the moment I lost it, you know? "No," [I said], "this was the first possession. You'll never get your hands on that. No way!" Then it all came in focus. And then that's when I actually collapsed... I was on my back for about a week. And they fed us, actually, with broth and light things. Very, very much controlled.

And then after a week [the Red Cross man] said "here's your box back."

Source: Oertelt, Henry. Videotaped interview conducted by Solomon Awend, 21 November 1995. Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation, Testimony 7069.

*"I turned around, and I saw what I still consider the most beautiful sight of my life: a contingent of American armored vehicles coming down the hillside with their American insignia on it."*



**Liberation of the victims of the Holocaust** spanned almost one year as Allied troops came across concentration and extermination camps. As best as they could, they provided food, clothing, shelter, and medicine to those who survived the Nazis' atrocities. Photographs and videos were also taken of the conditions and realities of the camps in order to provide permanent evidence of what occurred.

**About Liberation** As the Allies retook control of lands that had been occupied by the Germans, they 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 horrific 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, including Auschwitz-Birkenau, which they liberated on January 27, 1945. This day has been chosen to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day. 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 shocked and surprised them. They encountered tens of thousands on the verge of death, as well as piles upon piles of corpses. Although unprepared, the Allied liberators tried to help the survivors; however, many still died in the weeks after liberation.

From Echoes and Reflections

## **Encountering the camps for the first time was often an experience that both shocked and horrified the Allied troops.**

By spring 1945, the Americans and the British were entering Germany from the west as the Soviet army continued to advance from the east. A few days later, US General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme commander of the Allied forces in Europe, and US Generals Omar Bradley and George S. Patton, Jr., toured Ohrdruf, one of the first concentration camps the Americans liberated. Eisenhower later wrote, "I have never felt able to describe my emotional reactions when I first came face to face with indisputable evidence of Nazi brutality and ruthless disregard of every shred of decency. Up to that time I had known about it only generally or through secondary sources. I am certain, however, that I have never at any other time experienced an equal sense of shock."<sup>1</sup> He went on:

I visited every nook and cranny of the camp because I felt it my duty to be in a position from then on to testify at first hand about these things in case there ever grew up at home the belief or the assumption that "the stories of Nazi brutality were just propaganda." . . . I not only did so but as soon as I returned to . . . headquarters that evening, I sent communications to both Washington and London, urging the two governments to send instantly to Germany a random group of newspaper editors and representative groups from the national legislatures. I felt that the evidence should be immediately placed before the American and British publics in a fashion to leave no room for cynical doubt.<sup>2</sup>

Eisenhower insisted that Germans from a nearby town visit the camp to see what had been done in their name. In addition, he required American soldiers to tour the camp, so that they could see the evil they were fighting.

From Facing History