

LIBERATION ■ ZEV MEETS HIS LIBERATORS

Zev Harel was born in 1930 in Kis-Sikarlo, Hungary (now Borgou, Romania). In March 1944, when he was 14, he and his family were sent to Auschwitz, where he avoided death in the gas chamber by saying he was older. Soon he was sent with his older brother to the Ebensee labor camp in Austria. Separated from his brother, Zev endured hard labor until liberation on May 6, 1945, by the U.S. Third Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron, whose reunions Zev has attended.

Trying to think back on those days and recalling the thoughts and feelings of then, two memories that I have—the finish line, the expectation that I'll get there, and not so much the reasons why. Other than the sense of “keep on going” because the finish line is there and you'll get there, you'll get through, and what it is that will be there. And wanting to get back and to see what happened to my father and mother and to see them again.

On his last weeks before liberation. Our work detail [in a quarry near Ebensee] was across the street from a place called the Marian Guest House. While we were working there—when the SS guards were not nearby—we had all kinds of ways of supporting one another. And we had what I call rescue fantasies: “When this is over, I'll do this and this.” Some of the other people would say “the first meal that I will have my wife cook for me will be this and this.” Or “the first food that I eat will be this and this.” And my fantasy was “when I'm done with this, I will go into that restaurant and order a meal, and not only eat it, but I'll pay for it.” That was one of my rescue fantasies.

The person who owned the quarry that I worked at, he also had horses and cows and the like. And so once every week one of the SS guards would take me there to do work that needed to be done in the barn. The owner had a daughter who was older than me—she was probably about 17 or 18 years old—and she would bring a nice plate and give it to the SS officer so that he could have his meal. But, bless her heart, she would sneak whatever she could, a piece of bread or something that she could bring in and just set there in the barn for me to have to eat. So I appreciated it to this day, and when I had a chance to go back, I personally thanked her for that. [See last page.]

In the last days before liberation, Zev was assigned to the crematorium detail. On May 5, 1945, as the U.S. Army approached, the SS guards fled and the Americans entered the camp the next day.

Already there were the beginning rumors that the American soldiers are not far away, that the Russians are closing in, that the finish line is getting closer and closer. But what we feared is that the Germans will not want anyone who has been part of knowing how they were



Zev Harel (circled) stands with other Ebensee survivors in this famous photograph taken by a U.S. army photographer.

USHMM/Arnold Samuelson; Felix Uhrinek



Survivors gather in the main square of Ebensee after liberation.



Survivors leave Ebensee by cart and on foot.

burning the bodies to be around to tell about it. So I remember the last day in camp that a Russian guy and I who were on the same work detail, that we decided that we'll just hide, and so we hid under an old barrack. We were expecting the Germans to come—it was a dumb thing to do, in retrospect—we were expecting the Germans to come with the dogs to sniff us out—but it was too late already. We had done this dumb thing, just on the spur of the moment.

And then we hear noise and this guy, who was one of the [imprisoned] Russian soldiers, crawls out and looks in and comes back and says, "I can't believe it, the gate is open, and there isn't anyone around." So I came out, and we are going toward the gate, and the gate is open, and so with the flow of people out of the gate—and that's my liberation.

The American soldiers arrived and liberated us. I learned in retrospect that that morning, when the German soldiers were aware that the Americans are nearby, they handed over the guarding to some civil militia. A minute or two after the Germans departed, they just left their posts, and so people just started streaming out of camp. What I recall of that day is just a mass of people walking out and being part of the people that walked. I wanted to get away from Ebensee as far as I could. That's the sensation that I remember carrying with me. I can't really recall any triumphant joy, expressions of joy or any of that thing. It took about two or three days to sink in that we are liberated, for me.

U.S. National Archives



African American soldiers of the 666th Quartermaster Truck Company, 82nd Airborne Division, in Europe, 1945

As we were walking out of the camp, the last thing that I remember is that I fell into a roadside ditch. I had typhoid. So I was in the ditch—not knowing much about what was happening—and there are two or three African American young men in this group. And African American soldiers were not allowed to fight because they were discriminated against. They were in the support units. So a young African American member of that support unit picked me up from the ditch—now try to imagine that—something in the roadside ditch, he picked me up, drove me to the nearby town where he knew that there was a hospital—Linz—which was about ten miles from our camp—took me to the hospital and asked the nurses

to nurse me back to life. So you can have a sense that I am very proud to be an American. I owe my life to the brave American soldiers. And had it not been for those that fought against the Nazis and brought about the defeat of the Nazis—had it not been for that concerned

discriminated-against young African American man that took me from the roadside ditch and took me to the hospital for me to be brought back to life, I would not be standing here and sharing with you.

I asked him [Sen. John Glenn] to help me find that young man that I owe my life to. But I have not been successful.

I tried to find that young man because I wanted personally to have an opportunity to thank him. Over the years I got to know Senator John Glenn who chaired the Senate Special Committee on Aging, and he's also a retired colonel. So I asked him to help me find that young man that I owe my life to. But I have not been successful.



Zev's Israeli passport photo, 1952

After the liberation, my brother, then 19, went to a youth village that had been set up for young survivors. When I recovered and left the hospital, I spent a short time—about three weeks—working with the Russian military in Austria. I was comfortable using Russian and all the Slavic languages, but I wanted to go “home,” so I walked away and went back to the village where I’d grown up. I got home [in January 1946] and fortunately my brother also survived, and the two of us figured out that we didn’t want to stay in the place where we grew up, so we left everything and went back to Germany and I spent time in a displaced persons camp [Bergen-Belsen]. And there I applied for coming to the United States. In order to come to the U.S., someone who wanted to come from another country had to get permission. I had an uncle who agreed to sponsor me and send me papers, but I was waiting and waiting there for the State Dept. to agree and process the papers. Since I picked up languages very easily, during the year I was in camp I learned to speak Russian, to speak

Polish, to speak the various languages. So after spending time and helping the members of the Palestine Jewish Brigade smuggle persons who wanted to go to Palestine, they rewarded me by having me replace one of the Brigade soldiers, and I got to then-Palestine that way. When I got to then-Palestine [July 1946], I was 16 years old. Again I decided to pretend that I was older. I pretended to be 18 years old. I volunteered to serve in the then-Israeli military and I take pride in the fact that I succeeded in contributing to the establishment of the state of Israel.

Zev completed high school and college in Israel and came to the U.S. in 1965 for graduate studies at the University of Michigan, where he met his wife Bernice. After completing his Ph.D. in social work at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, he began a long career as a professor of social work at Cleveland State University.

In May 1995, at the 50th anniversary of liberation, World War II veterans were invited to attend the annual Holocaust commemoration in Cleveland, Ohio, sponsored by the Kol Israel Foundation. Among the attendees was Captain Carl Delau. He was the commanding officer of the 3rd Cavalry squadron that liberated Ebensee camp. We enjoyed meeting each other after the commemoration.



Zev with members of the 3rd Cavalry Reconnaissance Squadron at its 2005 reunion

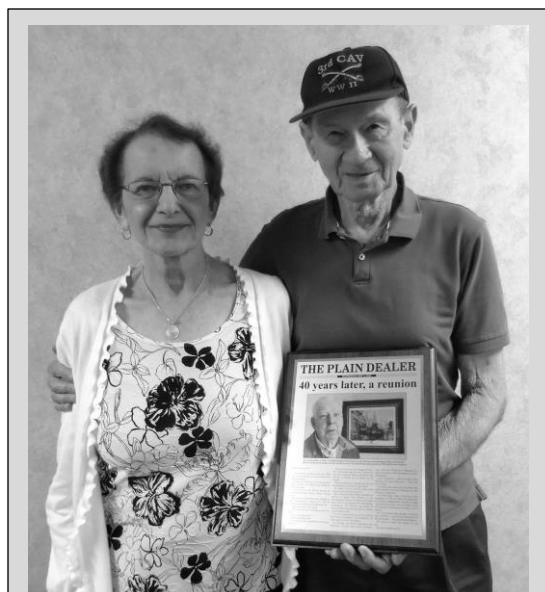
Following the event, we were invited to attend the 3rd Cavalry reunions and did so for several years. They were held in Detroit, Michigan, or Chicago, Illinois. These reunions provided opportunities for the World War II veterans to recall and share their experiences and observations about the war years. It was very special for me to be able to thank in person the veterans who saved my life. In addition, I could highlight the historical significance of their service and the defeat of Nazi Germany. It was also heartwarming to see that it meant something to them to meet the people they had saved and to see that they had a good life. I continued to meet in person with Capt. Carl Delau, who resided in Amherst, Ohio, until he passed away in 2005.

Zev retired in 2009, and in 2013 he and Bernice moved to Greensboro, North Carolina. He continues to make presentations on his Holocaust experience to schools and public groups across the state.

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Oral testimony of Zev Harel, 1984, video, 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ hrs. (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum) collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn505019
- Oral testimony of Zev Harel, 1996, video (USC Shoah Foundation) [Access video via sfi.usc.edu/vha](http://Access%20video%20via%20sfi.usc.edu/vha).
- Oral testimony of Zev Harel, 2005, video, 45 min., (USHMM) collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn78755
- "70 years after liberation, a North Carolina Holocaust survivor tells his story," audio, 19:12, *The State of Things*, March 27, 2015 (WUNC-FM) www.wunc.org/post/70-years-after-liberation-north-carolina-holocaust-survivor-tells-his-story
- Video: Liberation of Ebensee, May 1945, 2:21 (USHMM) encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/film/liberation-of-ebensee-camp
- The Liberation of the Ebensee Concentration Camp (U.S. Army Center of Military History) history.army.mil/news/2015/150500a_ebensee.html

Narrative adapted from: (1) Zev Harel, interview by the Natl. Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section, 23 July 1984; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of the Natl. Council of Jewish Women, Cleveland Section; (2) Zev Harel, presentation at Congregation Shaarey Tikvah, Beachwood, Ohio, 12 April 2005; U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Congregation Shaarey Tikvah; (3) "Mythbuster: Zev Harel, Educator and Gerontologist," Benjamin Rose Institute on Aging, Cleveland, Ohio, 13 July 2010, www.benrose.org/mythbusters/MB_Harel.cfm; (4) Email communication with Dr. Harel, 18 Sept. 2016. Reproduced by permission of Dr. Harel. Images credited USHMM reproduced by permission of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Photographs of Dr. Harel courtesy of Dr. Harel. Photograph of Dr. and Mrs. Harel courtesy of Marianne Wason.



Bernice and Zev Harel, 2016. Zev wears the cap of the 3rd Cavalry squadron that liberated Ebensee, and he holds a plaque displaying an article on his reunion in 1981 with the woman who slipped him food while he was in Ebensee. In the plaque photo is Carl Delau of Cleveland who helped feed liberated prisoners in the camp.

Diane Suchetka, "Forty years later, a reunion," *The Plain Dealer*, Cleveland, Ohio, May 4, 2005 [excerpts].

[Dr. Harel] drove to Ebensee to see the memorial there. But first, he walked to the guest house across the street. "Table for one," Zev told the hostess, his concentration camp fantasy finally coming true.

He sat down and read the menu, decided on the wiener schnitzel, looked up to find the waitress. Instead his eyes met a familiar face. "Will you join me?" Zev asked. The woman sat down in the chair across from Zev.

"Do you remember me?" She looked more closely. "I was the boy who cleaned the stalls during the war."

The dark-haired girl who smuggled food to him, who helped keep him alive, was grown now and running her father's guesthouse. She insisted on treating Zev to dinner, but he refused.

When the check came, he paid, just the way he'd dreamed as a prisoner 40 years before. . . .

Zev won't stop looking, though, for the man who saved him—a pile of skin and bones in a dirty cloth sack—from that ditch at Ebensee. He wants to thank him before it's too late. He wants to thank him, too.