

LIBERATION ■ ABE SURVIVES A DEATH TRAIN

Abram Piasek was 12 years old in 1940 when the SS entered his town of Bialobrzegi in Poland and killed or deported most Jewish residents. He was separated from his parents and sister, whom he never saw again. For two years he endured forced labor in a weapons factory in the Radom camp in Poland and then was sent via Auschwitz to the Vaihingen camp in Germany, where he repaired airfields cratered from Allied bombing raids. After several months he was transferred to the nearby Hessental camp to work on railroad maintenance. In spring 1945 as Allied troops approached, the prisoners who could walk were put on trains to be transported deeper into Germany.

Before the liberation, we were put on cattle cars. This has to be about two weeks before the liberation. And we had no idea where we were going. They put us on a train from the Hessental camp—a labor camp, which was about a few miles [from Vaihingen]—that was a real slaughterhouse. And they took us away. They loaded up the cattle cars, and we were going back and forth for a couple days, and we had no idea why we were going back and forth.

All of a sudden the train stopped. The train stopped because the American Air Force bombarded the locomotive. We couldn't get out from the cattle car because it was locked from the outside. Some people got out because their cattle cars were locked from the inside. So one guy was yelling "what's going on?" and he opened the cattle car, and as we opened up we saw the SS running away. They dropped their weapons, they were running away. And the people [camp inmates] from the Polish army, they picked up the weapons and started shooting the guards. I didn't see it, but I heard the shots. They were killing them.

I didn't realize I was going to be liberated. I was liberated instantly: we had no idea. Actually, we were supposed to end up in Dachau. That was the train to Dachau—that was the last stop. We stopped a few miles from Dachau. And at that time, we were liberated. They bombed the locomotive, and the army was coming fast. I was 17. When the Germans took me away from my home, I was 12. When I was liberated, I was 17.



Hessental airfield with craters from Allied bombing, 1945



Abe Piasek in 1946

We had no idea what we were going to do, so we sat on the crater where they had been bombing. And then I saw a guy coming out from a jeep, or a tank or a big truck, who was black. That's the first time I'd seen a black person, and I had no idea who they were. And of course at that time they were segregated, and so that's the first thing I saw.

Then we were running around wild, me and my friends. And we were actually starting to rob places in the town. We went into banks,

into jewelry stores. And I was looking for bread, but my friends were looking for jewelry. They sure enough got the jewelry, but I was not interested in the jewelry; I was interested in bread.

They stopped us—the MP [Military Police]—and they brought us to a camp, Feldafing, near Munich. It was run by UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Admn.]. We threw away our [prisoner] uniforms and got regular clothes. After that we were robbing the trains, really robbing the trains, because we were wild. We robbed the trains; we threw out the suitcases. Maybe about 10, 15 of us. You know, there was everything you can think of in the suitcases, but I still wasn't interested. I was interested in eating food.

Then Patton and Eisenhower stopped us. Patton told the people from camp that if you don't stop robbing the train, he was going to put barbed wire around the camp. But the people didn't like that. So Eisenhower came, and they promised him that nobody would rob the trains again. And he told Patton not to put wire around it.

In a couple weeks, when we got used to the camp, they had all the teenagers line up outside the barracks. And they told us we were going to go to another camp, Foehrenwald. All the young people, I would say from 15 to 25, we were put in that camp.

I was there from 1945 till 1947. And meanwhile we were learning a trade. We were learning how to dance. And they brought in all the girls, you know, and romance was going on.

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busy constantly, from morning till night, till we went to sleep. So we couldn't even think about what had actually happened to us. Our minds were in left field, because nobody talked about it. Nobody. For so many years to be locked up—didn't think about it.



UShMM/Marc Block
Generals Eisenhower and Patton inspected the Feldafing displaced persons camp, Sept. 17, 1945, after President Truman ordered Eisenhower to improve the living conditions of Jews in DP camps in the U.S. occupation zone.



UShMM/Marion Pritchard
Survivors learning carpentry in Foehrenwald, ca. 1945-1947

I was learning to be a carpenter. But I really wasn't—I didn't care for it. But anyway, we went to school. We were learning Hebrew. The teachers were Israelis, the Israeli soldiers, from the Palmach.* And we were learning, and the food was good, and we were gaining weight, and a lot of the people, the elderly people, got married. And two years, from 1945 to 1947, the camp almost doubled in population, with babies being born.

We forgot that we had been in a [concentration] camp because they didn't let us remember, and I think that was good. They were really trying to get the kids away from what they went through. We were

* The Palmach was the elite brigade of Jewish soldiers fighting for the establishment of the state of Israel, which was created in May 1948.



Shirley and Abe with their children at the Statue of Liberty, 1956

name is Shirley.” I said, “Can I talk to her?” And he said, “Sure.” So I talked to her and made a date. And we went out to a hamburger place—I didn’t have any money, very little. And I didn’t like her at the beginning. When I came home, another guy said, “How is she?” I said, “She’s ok.” “Do you like her?” I said, “No.” “Can I have her telephone number?” I said, “No, I’m going to take her out once more.” So I did, and from then on, it’s history. I came in ’47 and in ’49 I was married.

When I got married, I worked in a few jobs. Shirley’s father was a carpenter, so I helped put in the carpets, put in linoleum. Then I joined the National Guard, and then I joined the army. In ’49 there was a depression here—very hard to find a job, so I joined the army. Then Shirley got pregnant and we had a baby, and that’s how I get out from the army. From 1950 to 1955 I was in the reserves.

After that, I went to get a bakery job, because my wife’s sister’s friend’s friend knew the owner from the bakery. So I got a job right away. And since then, I’m still baking.

I never talked about it until, I would say—of course, my wife knew, a lot of people knew that I was a displaced person. But we never got in a discussion about what happened until the ’80s. That’s the first time I opened up. I was interviewed by Spielberg.* And then they said, you have to speak in schools, to tell your story. So I did. So I started to talk about it. Very difficult.

Abe and Shirley have two children, eight grandchildren, and one great-grandson. They moved to California in 1975 and later to Florida, as Abe continued his profession as a baker. In 2009 they moved to Raleigh to be near a daughter. Abe continues to speak to students and other groups in North Carolina about his Holocaust experience.



Abe Piasek (right) with camp liberator George Rose and Mr. Rose’s wife, April 29, 2015, at the North Carolina General Assembly remembrance of the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Dachau concentration camp

ONLINE RESOURCES

- “Holocaust survivor Abe Piasek discusses the time he spent as a prisoner,” *The Daily Reflector*, Greenville, NC, April 29, 2016
www.reflector.com/News/2016/04/29/Holocaust-survivor-details-harrowing-experiences.html
- “Holocaust survivors emotionally reunite with soldier who helped free them,” *People*, April 30, 2015
people.com/human-interest/holocaust-survivors-meet-george-rose-soldier-who-freed-them-from-dachau/
- Displaced Persons camps (USHMM)
 - ♦ Feldafing encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/feldafing-displaced-persons-camp
 - ♦ Foehrenwald encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/foehrenwald-displaced-persons-camp

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* Steven Spielberg, the Hollywood film producer, founded the Shoah Foundation in 1994 (now at the University of Southern California) after working with Holocaust survivors while filming *Schindler’s List*. The Foundation has recorded interviews with over 55,000 Holocaust survivors, including Abe Piasek, who was interviewed in 1995.