

Attachment II

Jews "On the Edge"

1944: Between Annihilation and Liberation

Central theme for Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 5774

Prof. Dina Porat

Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day 5774 (2014) is marked by the situation of the Jews in 1944 – exactly 70 years ago. The expression "on the edge" is taken from Nathan Alterman's poem *Joy of the Poor*, which so aptly expresses the feeling which prevailed that year among the Jews of Europe, who were in the throes of a double race on which their very lives depended. On the one hand, cities from east to west, such as Vilna and Minsk, Warsaw and Riga, Belgrade and Sofia, Paris and Rome, were being liberated from the yoke of Nazi Germany; the Red Army was advancing, and the western Allies continued to bombard Germany, their landing in Normandy tipping the scales still further. On the other hand, in the same year, the Jews of Hungary were sent to Auschwitz, the Lodz and Kovno ghettos were liquidated, the last of their former inmates were deported and murdered, and death marches were initiated from the liberated territories to the heart of what remained of the "Third Reich." It was a year in which everything depended on the scales of time, and the Jews remaining in Europe were asking themselves: will the Red Army from the east and the Allies from the west arrive before the Germans come to murder whoever is still alive? Or, as Alterman wrote, which ending will come first? Events were occurring very swiftly, one after the other, raising serious questions in their wake.

In March 1944, the Germans invaded Hungary and immediately commenced preparations for the swiftest and most organized deportation any Jewish community had ever witnessed: From the middle of May, over 430,000 Jews from Hungary were sent almost exclusively to Auschwitz, where the vast majority was murdered in the space of two months. A ray of light that year was the beginning of the return of the remnant of those exiled to Transnistria, a region in southern Ukraine where conditions were among the most horrific. At around the same time, Zionist youth, other Jewish activists and neutral diplomats stepped up their rescue activities in Budapest, eventually contributing to the survival of over 100,000 Hungarian Jews. However, in June, Jews from the Greek island of Corfu were rounded up and deported, and in July, the Kovno ghetto in Lithuania was liquidated. Nazi ideology, which was centered around the burning desire to kill every single Jewish individual, dictated such efforts even in the final year of the war, when the Germans needed every means at their disposal to fight at the front, including the urgent requirement for trains to bring them equipment and arms, and for every pair of hands that could still work to produce for them weapons that would turn the tide of the war in their favor.

In June, the "Auschwitz Protocols" were disseminated around the world. This detailed account, written by Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler, two young Jews who managed to escape from the infamous concentration and death camp, exposed for the first time the central role of the camp in the extermination system. Shortly afterwards, with the liberation of Majdanek, the hard labor and death camp next to Lublin, actual gas chambers were revealed for the first time. The industrialization of murder, the technology that acted in the service of Nazi ideology, the ability to commit crimes of such enormity in secret and over such a long period of time – all of them still deeply disturbing – were finally exposed. Following these events, the Jewish jurist Raphael Lemkin coined the phrase "genocide" in 1944, and participated in the drafting of the UN convention for its prevention approved in 1948.

In October, an uprising in Auschwitz was staged by the *Sonderkommando*, the group of Jewish prisoners tasked with the unspeakable job of handling the bodies of the murdered victims. They blew up one of the gas chambers with the help of explosives smuggled in to them by a group of young Jewish women. The question we must ask ourselves is, from where did these men and women, imprisoned in this indescribable place, draw the strength to organize, band together, choose the right moment, and actually hope to succeed?

These events are at the heart of the tension between annihilation and liberation, a tension that was literally a question of life and death for the Jews at that time, who were living on the very edge.

The author is Yad Vashem's Chief Historian.

1. The 'Children's Aktion' in Kovno, March 27, 1944

I saw shattering scenes. It was near the hospital. I saw automobiles which from time to time, mothers would be approaching, mothers with children, or children who were on their own. In the back of them, two Germans with rifles would be going as if they were escorting criminals. They would toss the children into the automobile.

I saw mothers screaming. A mother whose three children had been taken away – she went up to this automobile and shouted at the German, 'Give me the children,' and he said, 'How many?' and the German said, 'You may have one.' And she went up into that automobile, and all three children looked at her and stretched out their hands. Of course, all of them wanted to go with the mother, and the mother didn't know which child to select, and she went down alone, and she left the car. And a second mother just hung on to the car and didn't want to let go. And a dog bit her; they set a dog against her.

Another mother with two children - I saw that from my window - went and pleaded, and begged that the German should return one child, so he took the girl by her shoulders and threw the girl down ...

Such scenes repeated themselves all day.

From the testimony of Dr. Aharon Peretz, Eichmann Trial

2. The Children's Aktion in the Kovno Ghetto

The *Aktion* against children did not, in fact, ever stop. As the days went by, either through planned forays or whenever a lone child was spotted, children were pounced upon and taken away. Never before had the Germans targeted members of a certain age group, except for the very old, saying: you must all die; none among you shall live. There was in the *Aktion* against children a kind of total, unequivocal decree denying Jewish children the right to exist.

Who were the children who perished, who were executed there: How much life force was cut down during those few days? Each deserved the right to live and raise a family. Even among the small number that survived one can count professors, engineers, scientists, educators, and even a president of the Supreme Court of Israel.

With the help of an expert in statistics and demography of Eastern European Jews, I once tried to measure the relative rate of survival among children in our ghetto. According to his estimates, there were 5,060 Jewish children under the age of fourteen in our city before the war.

Of these, I estimated that about 150 survived.

Therefore, about 4,910 perished.

Thus, about 2.9 percent remained alive.

About 3 in every 100.

And I am one of those three.

Shalom Eilati, born in 1933 in Kovno, Lithuania. In 1941, he and his family were imprisoned in the Kovno ghetto. In 1944, at his mother's initiative, he escaped from the ghetto alone. He immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1946, and became an officer in the IDF.

3. Shavli (Siauliai)

We attest that on July 7, 1944, an order was given to evacuate the Shavli ghetto.

We want our names to be known for the generations to come:

1. Shmuel Minzberg son of Shimon, from the city of Lodz, (Poland);
2. His wife Reisele, née Saks, of Vaiguva;
3. Feigale Saks, her sister;
4. Friedele Niselevitch of Vaiguva, the daughter of Nachum Tzvi.

We don't know where they're transporting us. In the ghetto, 2,000 Jews await the order to go. Our destiny is unknown. The mood is terrible.

May the Kingdom of Israel arrive soon, in our days.

Shmuel Minzberg

Found on the terrain of the former ghetto of Shavli (Siauliai) in Lithuania. Written on the eve of the final liquidation of the ghetto.

5. Izieu

On April 6, 1944, Klaus Barbie led the Gestapo in a raid on a children's home in Izieu, France. Forty-four Jewish children and their seven supervisors were arrested. The children were sent to Drancy and then put on the first available train to Auschwitz. 42 children and 5 adults were murdered in Auschwitz; 2 children and a supervisor ended up in Tallin in Estonia and were put to death by firing squad. Only one of the supervisors, Lea Feldblum, survived.

Among the children deported from Izieu was the eleven-year-old Liliane Gersenstein, who wrote a letter to God only days before her arrest. The letter was found at Izieu after the raid, and forms part of Holocaust researcher and Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld's book: *The Children of Izieu: A Human Tragedy*.

God? How good You are, and how kind, and if we had to count all You have bestowed upon us that is good and kind, our counting would be without end... God? It is You who command. It is You who are justice, it is You Who reward the good and punish the evil. God? I can therefore say that I will never forsake You. I will always be mindful of You, even to the last moments of my life. You can be absolutely certain of that. For me, You are something beyond words, so good are You. You may believe me. God? It is thanks to You that I enjoyed a wonderful life before, that I was spoiled, that I had lovely things that others do not have. God? As a result, I ask just one thing of You: BRING BACK MY PARENTS, MY POOR PARENTS, PROTECT THEM (even more than myself) SO THAT I MAY SEE THEM AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. HAVE THEM COME BACK ONE MORE TIME. Ah! I can say that I have had such a good mother and such a good father! I have such faith in You that I thank You in advance.

6. May 16th, 1944

Our turn came on Tuesday, May 16 [1944]. "All Jews out!" the gendarmes screamed, and we found ourselves on the street. There was another heatwave...

...I see my little sister, I see her with her rucksack, so cumbersome, so heavy. I see her and an immense tenderness sweeps over me. Never will her innocent smile fade from my soul. Never will her glance cease to sear me. I tried to help her, she protested. Never will the sound of her voice leave my heart. She was thirsty, my little sister was thirsty. Her lips were parched. Pearls of sweat formed on her clear forehead. I gave her a little water. "I can wait," she said, smiling. My little sister wanted to be brave. And I wanted to die in her place.

I seldom speak of her in my writing, for I dare not. My sister with her sun-bathed golden hair is my secret....It mortifies me to talk about her in the past tense, for she is present. Her presence is more real to me than my own. My little sister Tsiporah, my little angel scorched by a darkened sun, I cannot picture you as death's hostage. You will remain on our street, on the pavement in front of our house.

Elie Wiesel

7. Auschwitz

Certain images of the days and nights spent on that train invade my dreams even now: anticipation of danger; fear of the dark; the screams of poor Mrs. Schechter, who in her delirium saw flames in the distance; the efforts to make her stop; the terror in her little boy's eyes. I recall every hour, every second. How could I forget? They were the last hours I spent with my family: the murmured prayers of my grandmother, whose eyes saw beyond this world; my mother's gestures, which had never been more tender; the troubled face of my little sister, who refused to show her fear. Yes, my memory gathered it all in, retained it all.

There was sudden trepidation that gripped us when, toward midnight, the train lurched forward again after stopping for several hours. I can still hear the whistle... it feels like yesterday. It feels like now. Through the cracks in the boards I see barbed wire stretching to infinity.

I see myself sitting there, haggard and disoriented, a shadow amongst shadows... My heart thunders in deafening beats. Then there is silence, heavy and complete. Something was about to happen, we could feel it. Fate would at last reveal a truth reserved exclusively for us, a primordial truth, an ultimate postulate that would annihilate or overshadow all received ideas. There was a burst of noise and the night was shattered into a thousand pieces...

Where were we going? It mattered little, for it was the same everywhere. All roads led to the enemy; it was he who would throw open the invisible black door that awaited us. "Stay together," my mother said. For another minute we did, clinging to one another's arms. Nothing in the world could separate us. The entire German army could not take my little sister from me. Then a curt order was issued – men on one side, women on the other – and that was that. A single order, and we were separated. I stared intently, trying desperately not to lose sight of my mother, my little sister with her hair of gold and sun, my grandmother, my older sisters. I see them always, for I am still looking for them, trying to embrace them one last time. We were taken away before I could tell my mother goodbye, before I could kiss her hand and beg her forgiveness for the wrongs I must have done her, before I could squeeze Tsipouka, my little sister, to my heart.

What remains of that night like no other is an irremediable sense of loss, of parting. My mother and my little sister left, and I never said goodbye.

Elie Wiesel

8. Arrival at Auschwitz, 1944

The climax came suddenly. The door opened with a crash, and the dark echoed with outlandish orders in that curt, barbaric barking of German in command which seems to give vent to a millennial anger.

A vast platform appeared before us, lit up by reflectors. A little beyond it, a row of lorries. Then everything was silent again. Someone translated: we had to climb down with our luggage and deposit it along the train. In a moment the platform was swarming with shadows. But we were afraid to break the silence: everyone busied himself with his luggage, searched for someone else, called to somebody, but timidly, in a whisper.

A dozen SS men stood around, with an indifferent air. They did not interrogate everybody, only a few. And on the basis of the reply they pointed in two different directions...

Someone dared to ask for his luggage: they replied, "Luggage afterwards."

Someone else did not want to leave his wife: they said "Together again afterwards."

Many mothers did not want to be separated from their children: they said, "Good, good, stay with the child." They behaved with the calm assurance of people doing their normal duty of every day...

In less than ten minutes all the fit men had been collected together in a group. What happened to the others, to the women, to the children, to the old men, we could establish neither then nor later: the night swallowed them up, purely and simply.

Primo Levi, deported to Auschwitz in February 1944, where he spent 11 months. Of the 650 Italian Jews in his transport, Levi was one of twenty who survived.

9. The Demolition of a Man

There is nowhere to look in a mirror, but our appearance stands in front of us, reflected in a hundred livid faces, in a hundred miserable and sordid puppets...

Then for the first time we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man. In a moment, with almost prophetic intuition, the reality was revealed to us: we had reached the bottom. It is not possible to sink lower than this; no human condition is more miserable than this, nor can it conceivably be so. Nothing belongs to us anymore; they have taken away our clothes, our shoes, even our hair; if we speak, they will not listen to us, and if they listen, they will not understand. They will even take away our name: and if we want to keep it, we will have to find in ourselves the strength to do so, to manage somehow so that behind the name something of us, of us as we are, still remains...

It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term "extermination camp," and it is now clear what we seek to express with the phrase: "to lie on the bottom."

Primo Levi

10. Extract from Evidence given at the Nuremberg Trials on the Auschwitz Extermination Camp

M. Dubost: Did you actually see the “selection” when transports arrived?

Vaillant-Couturier: Yes, because when we were working in the Sewing Block in 1944, the block in which we lived was situated just opposite the place where the trains arrived. The whole process had been improved: instead of carrying out the “selection” where the trains arrived, a siding took the carriages practically to the gas chamber, and the train stopped about 100m from the gas chamber. That was right in front of our block, but of course there were two rows of barbed wire between. Then we saw how the seals were taken off the trucks and how women, men and children were pulled out of the trucks by soldiers. We were present at the most terrible scenes when old couples were separated. Mothers had to leave their daughters, because they were taken to the camp, while the mothers and children went to the gas chambers. All these people knew nothing of the fate that awaited them. They were only confused because they were being separated from each other, but they did not know that they were going to their death.

To make the reception more pleasant, there was then – in June and July 1944, that is – an orchestra made up of prisoners, girls in white blouses and dark blue skirts, all of them pretty and young, who played gay tunes when the trains arrived, the “Merry Widow,” the Barcarolle from the “Tales of Hoffmann,” etc. They were told it was a labor camp, and as they never entered the camp they saw nothing but the small platform decorated with greenery, where the orchestra played. They could not know what awaited them.

Those who were taken to the gas chambers – that is, the old people, children and others – were taken to a red brick building.

M. Dubost: Then they were not registered?

Vaillant-Couturier: No.

Dubost: They were not tattooed?

Vaillant-Couturier: No, they were not even counted.

...They were taken to a red brick building with a sign that said “Baths.” There they were told to get undressed and given a towel before they were taken to the so-called shower room. Later, at the time of the large transports from Hungary, there was no time left for any degree of concealment. They were undressed brutally. I know of these particulars because I was acquainted with a little Jewess from France, who had lived on the Place de la Republique...

...In Paris: she was known as “little Marie” and was the only survivor of a family of nine. Her mother and her seven sisters and brothers had been taken to the gas chambers as soon as they arrived. When I got to know her she worked on undressing the small children before they were taken into the gas chamber.

After the people were undressed they were taken into a room that looked like a shower room, and the capsules were thrown down into the room through a hole in the ceiling. An SS man observed the effect through a spy hole. After about 5 to 7 minutes, when the gas had done its job, he gave a signal for the opening of the doors. Men with gas-masks, these were prisoners too, came in and took the bodies out. They told us that the prisoners must have suffered before they died, because they clung together in bunches like grapes so that it was difficult to separate them...

From the evidence of a Frenchwoman, Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, who was a prisoner in Auschwitz, where she arrived on January 1, 1943.

11. Kaunas, August 1944

After the destruction and devastation, I am back in Kaunas for the first time. However, I don't expect to find anyone, because the reports I received from friends say that no one from our family is among the living.

...There was nothing left for me to do but to see with my own eyes the ruin and the horrors, the charred bodies, and the smoking embers of the ghetto.

.... It was not easy to find the place where the house of our collective had stood. There used to be a whole neighborhood here, now heaps of rubbish and burnt bricks.

I look at the ruins. Perhaps I will find something from the past. The body of a wretched friend, a diary, memories, pictures... the fire has consumed it all. There is nothing. Suddenly I remembered that Chaim G., who was here this morning, told me that he had found a notebook and a sign with the number 7 on it. He had hidden both items beneath a large brick.

In fact, after poking around in the smoking heap I found a piece of paper in Hebrew with all kinds of calculations on it. I recognized the handwriting of Yerachmiel and I sank into deep thought. Suddenly I also saw the sign, with a shiny white 7 on it, as though attesting to the essence of the house at "7 Mildos."

I stood there on the mound of ruins for a long time. The house and all its events flashed before me. It was in this house that the scales were turned. Here my best friends had remained. Here they had perished. Here we spent nights and evenings in the bunker...

I snapped out of my fantasies. A group of German prisoners led by Russians was forced to bury the sick [the dead] – something they could be proud of...Without thinking I took the two items to Vilna and they remained with me until I left the city.

Passage from the diary of Dov Levin that was lost and afterward reconstructed in Israel. Dov Levin was born in Lithuania in 1925. He escaped from the Kaunas (Kovno) ghetto and fought with the partisans until the liberation of Lithuania by the Red Army in the summer of 1944. He immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1945.

12. Auschwitz-Birkenau: October 20, 1944

In broad daylight, 600 Jewish boys between 12 and 18 were brought here. They were clad in long, very thin, prison clothing; on their feet they had worn-out shoes or clogs... When they reached the square the Commandant ordered them to undress. The boys noticed the smoke coming from the chimney and realized at once that they were going to be put to death. They began to run around the square in total desperation and tore their hair without knowing how to escape. Many of them broke out in terrible weeping, inconsolable shouts for help could be heard a long way off.

The boys undressed with an instinctive fear of death. Naked and barefoot they huddled together to avoid the blows and stood absolutely still. One brave boy went up to the commander - who was standing near us - and asked him to allow him to live, promising to carry out all the heaviest jobs. He was awarded with blows to the head from a thick cudgel.

Many boys ran to the Jews of the Special Commando, threw themselves round their necks and begged them to save them. Others ran naked in different directions on the large square (to avoid death). The Commander called an SS guard with a truncheon for assistance.

The sound of the clear, young, boyish voices rose minute by minute until it changed to bitter weeping. This terrible wailing could be heard for miles. We stood stiff and paralyzed by the weeping and wailing. The SS men stood there with contented smiles, without the least sign of compassion, and looked like proud victors, driving them into the bunker with terrible blows...

Some boys were still running around the square and tried to escape. The SS men ran after them, hitting out in all directions, until they had the situation under control and finally got them into the bunker. Their joy was indescribable. Didn't they have children of their own?

From the testimony of Salmen Lewenthal

- 13. Five days after seventeen-year-old Pinchas Eisner wrote this letter to his older brother, Mordechai, he was taken from the family home in Budapest to Csomad, in the vicinity of the capital. There, on 3 November 1944, with seventy other Jews he was led to a nearby forest. They were made to dig a huge pit, were ordered to take off their clothes and were then machine-gunned into their self-made grave. At the time Pinchas wrote this letter Mordechai was in a labour camp; he found the letter when he returned home after Budapest was liberated from the Nazis.**

Budapest

16 October 1944 6.15 p.m.

My Dear Brother,

Goodbye! Think of our talk that night. I felt as one with you. I knew that, if it were you whose life would end, I would go on living as if I had lost half of my body and soul. You said that, if I die, you will kill yourself. Think of what I told you, that if you stay alive I will live on within you. I would have liked to continue my life, with you and with our family. Plans, desires, hopes were before me. I longed for the unknown. I would have liked to know, to live, to see, to do, to love... But now it is all over. In the city, Jews were exterminated from entire streets. There is no escape. Tonight or at least tomorrow it will be our turn. At seventeen I have to face certain death. There is no escape. We thought that we would be exceptions, but fate made no exceptions. I always felt the pull of the depth, about which I have written to you...I believe, I also felt, that I would die young. It seems like fate put a curse on each of us. After Yisrael [eldest brother, who died at nineteen] it is now my turn together with my father, mother and Sorele [sister]. I hope you will survive us. Farewell and forgive me if ever I have offended you. (For the first time my eyes begin to fill with tears. I am careful not to cry as there are others present.) Because I loved you and I see you as you smile, (the vein on your brow is swelling) as you are thinking, as you eat, as you smoke, as you sleep and I feel great tenderness, great love and my eyes are filled with tears. Farewell. Live happily, all the best to you my dear brother, lots of success, much love and happiness, don't weep, don't cry. (I felt so bad hearing you cry that night.) Think of me lovingly. Remember me with good heart and, if there is another world (how much I discussed it with you, too – now I'll find out! My poem 'What Will Happen to Me?' comes to my mind...I felt it already then), then I will pray to God to help you in whatever you do. Farewell, my dear only brother! If you are interested to know my state of mind (you see I am thinking of this, too) I will try to describe it and also that of our home.

The calamity started last evening. By nightfall, the Jews of [houses no.] 64 and 54 had already been taken away. There was a pool of blood on the pavement, but by morning it was washed away. I was awake the whole night. R.J. and K.S. [friends] were here. Poor R.J. could hardly stand on his feet he was so full of fright. At first we hoped that the police and the army would protect us, but after a phone call we learned everything. Slowly morning arrived, but the events of the day made our situation hopeless. K.S. came at 6. He was about to faint after he fought with four Nazis who beat him terribly. He barely escaped with his life. He was stumbling and trembling and could not start talking because of what he had seen and been through. I write fast, who knows if I will have time to finish? K.S. offered to take Sorele to a safe place. She promptly jumped at the suggestion and wanted to go immediately. But Mummy stepped in front of her and with a completely calm voice said that she would not let her go because the Nazis might catch them on the street. Sorele was crying and hysterical. She wanted to go, she wants to live. Finally Mother proposed that if I go too then she will give her consent. You should have heard the way she said that. Sorele wanted to go, I

stayed...I could not leave our mother and father. (Do you remember our discussion about hiding in the safe hide of a bear? It came to my mind at once.) So mother did not let Sorele go and K.S. did not force it any longer, he, too, stayed. Sorele cried and screamed, Father was praying the whole night. He still has some hope left, but he is talking about this world as being like a vestibule to prepare ourselves for the real world to come.

Mother and Father are telling religious parables to K.S. about the inevitability of destiny. Mathild [an aunt] is sitting next to us and listens. Sorele is outside and I am writing. I am relatively calm, facing death my thoughts are coherent. (Yesterday at dawn I even wrote a steno-composition, you might find it in my notebook.) It is not fear that I feel but the terribly considered bitter and painful realization of things to come. I hope I'll get it over with quickly, only it will be terrible to see each other's agony. God will help us and we will be over it.

Farewell, dear, sweet Brother. Farewell! Remember me. I hope that I, too, will be able to think of you even from over there. I would like to hug and kiss you once more. But who knows to whom I write these lines? Are you alive?!

Farewell, my dear brother, my sweet Mordchele, live happily.
Kissing you for the last time – till we meet again,

Your Loving Brother

***Hannah Senesz's last poem, below, was written in 1944, in her prison cell in Hungary.
Her mother found the poem and note in her daughter's clothing.***

One-two-three...
Eight feet long,
Two strides across, the rest is dark...
Life hangs over me like a question mark.

One-two-three...
Maybe another week,
Or next month may still find me here,
But death, I feel, is very near.

I could have been
Twenty-three next July;
I gambled on what mattered most,
The dice were cast. I lost.

Beloved Mother,
I can tell you only this: a million thanks, and I request your forgiveness if possible. You alone will understand why more words are not needed here.

With endless love,
Your daughter

Hannah Senesz was a Hungarian Jewess who immigrated to Eretz Israel in 1939 and later volunteered for a daring mission to rescue Jews in her native land. Captured and tortured, she was executed at the age of 23. The letters and poems she left behind have inspired generations of readers.

14. Liberation

....The liberation was very dramatic because German planes flew overhead, not very high. I don't know what they were looking for, maybe for partisans or for the Soviet army. They didn't bomb the [camp]...Because the bridges had been bombed, there were still a large number of German soldiers in Mogilev who were caught by the partisans who led the advancing forces. Those Germans simply surrendered. We could go into the street and we saw Germans sitting on the fence with no weapons, in their clothes, waiting for someone to take them prisoner. It was a strange sight for a little boy to see those Germans. Just yesterday they were conquerors and now they looked wretched and pitiful.

It is interesting that with all the loathing and hatred for the Germans, I don't remember that in my immediate surroundings people went out with axes or something to take revenge on them...There may have been some cases like that...

It amazes me to this day that even though there was so much desire for revenge, people didn't try to kill Germans. Maybe it was because they looked so pitiful. To this day I remember the Germans who were sitting there. They suddenly looked so small, so poor, so miserable that I thought I should reach into my pocket to give them a few coins or something. It was a unique thing to see...

Everyone was curious to see the partisans. They were engraved in our memory as saviors, as the messiah himself. The partisans were more than a symbol of the liberation, and as a boy I was of course curious to see them. Unfortunately, many of the Jews who were in the ghetto were killed by sharpshooters. That was an indescribable tragedy, to reach the day of liberation and then to be killed by a bullet from a German sniper across the river. I remember that there were a number of cases like that in families who lived not far from us.

Victory Day, the 9th of May, found us in Czernowicz. I had recovered, but I was still very weak. As I went to see the soldiers, I began to realize what destruction the war had caused. For me this was a very personal experience, perhaps because I had hoped, in all the years we were in the ghetto, that somehow my father was still alive. The devastation caused by the war and the fact that I was an orphan came home to me very forcefully on Victory Day.

From the testimony of Josef Govrin, born in Romania in 1930. He was deported to various ghettos and camps in Transnistria, eventually being liberated by the Red Army in December 1944. Josef Govrin later became Israeli ambassador to Romania.

15. Liberation: The First Days

In the blink of an eye, at dawn, the Germans were gone. In an instant the death sentence that had been hanging constantly over my head was repealed and was no more. And right away, as a direct result of my great excitement, I felt the need for action, for movement. Staying in one place had been part of the hiding. Now I had to move, to leave, to go on, ever onward, anywhere I wanted, to explore urgently the dream made real.

It was like emerging from a hole after an earthquake, like leaving the ark after the flood. Who was left? What had happened to the rest? The whole point of liberation was to discover that your loved ones had been spared. How else did I imagine what liberation would be like when it came, if not that every member of our family should be reunited, and that we should return to our old home? Failing that, the miracle would be flawed. We must meet, sit down together, and talk and talk and talk. It was a necessary part of the anticipated reunion at the end of it all that we exchange accounts of our experiences. Listen to my story, hear what happened to me....

One hundred and fifty days had passed between my departure from Mother and the day of liberation. One hundred and fifty days of hiding, leading to my rebirth. But after liberation, why shouldn't she come, why shouldn't I meet her immediately?

Mother never appeared, and something lay shriveled inside me for many years, refusing to give up waiting for her to come and reclaim me.

Shalom Eilati

Shalom Eilati was born in 1933 in Kovno, Lithuania. In 1941, he and his family were imprisoned in the Kovno ghetto. In 1944, at his mother's initiative, he escaped from the ghetto alone. On July 14th, 1944 the last transport of Jews left Kovno for Germany, after which the ghetto was destroyed completely, killing all who remained hidden within it. Just sixteen days after the last transport, on July 30th, the Red Army entered the city.