LIBERATION OF AUSCHWITZ – 75TH ANNIVERSARY

RABBI DAN MOSKOVITZ

The following was written on the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz by Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter.

I share it tonight in memory of his father and all of those who fought to liberation not only the concentration camps, but the whole of Europe from tyranny. We tend to focus, rightfully so on the victims and the survivors of the Shoah, but on this the 75th liberation of Auschwitz I would like us to focus on its liberators, the young men, some no older than 18/19 years old who fought and died by the hundreds of thousands so that millions would be free, millions would not be

murdered and that the world would bare witness to the millions that were, among them 6 million Jews, their living testimony of what they saw as they came through the gates of hell is the eye witness evidence that this horror did happen, that we can never forget, and never allow it to happen to anyone again.

Here is his story:

On April 11 or April 12, 1945, my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, aged 27, entered the Buchenwald Concentration Camp located outside of Weimer, Germany.

My father joined the American Army in the summer of 1942 because, as he later wrote in an essay I found, “I felt this was the right thing to do. I didn’t mean to wave a flag or demonstrate my patriotism. I simply felt that this was the normal, natural, healthy and proper thing for a young Orthodox rabbi to do.” After my father graduated from the Army Chaplain School at Harvard University, he served in New Orleans, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and Greenland. He later succeeded in getting transferred to Europe where he was assigned to the VIII Corps, and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. He was then part of the Army group that pushed eastward on the German Autobahn. They arrived in Weimar

towards the beginning of April 1945. There, he wrote, “a friendly colonel, a nice fellow, approached and said to me, ‘You know, this may be of interest to you: we just got word that our troops penetrated a place called Buchenwald. It is some kind of–I think–a concentration camp. We don’t know what went on there or what is going on there.’”

As made his way towards Buchenwald in his Jeep, he started to shake.

My father spent the entire rest of his life describing what he saw in Buchenwald and what he did during his 10 weeks there. His work focused on a number of different areas: he tended to the psychological needs of survivors; he worked hard to reunite families; he founded

a kibbutz outside Weimar for young survivors preparing to make aliyah; and he organized a transport of children to Switzerland.

But it is the prayer service my father led at Buchenwald in 1945, captured in one iconic picture, that has perhaps remained his most enduring memory.

The caption to the picture, which occupies a full wall at Yad Vashem, as well as my father's obituary in the New York *Times*, among other places, asserts that the service took place on Shavuot, the first night of which fell on May 17 in 1945. Yet other sources cite that the service fell on Pesach Sheni ("the Second Passover"), which corresponds to the

fourteenth day of the Hebrew month of Iyyar, or April 27, 1945.

I believe, however, that the service took place on a Friday night, perhaps one even closer to the day of liberation. In a description of a service my father led, which closely mirrors the scene depicted in this picture, my father wrote: I walked into the Kinohalle (Cinema Hall) on Friday evening and there were at least 1000 people packed to the rafters. I got up on a small platform. I had a little G.I. prayer shawl and started with "*Shalom Aleichem*" and slowly but steadily we were singing and praying. I had no prayer book. I had nothing other than my voice (without a microphone). Yes, I did have one

very interesting something which I carried with me throughout my military career. I had a little *chupah*; sometimes the chaplain was called upon to officiate at a marriage ceremony. So I brought this little canopy, embroidered "*mazal tov*" in Hebrew lettering, and put it on my little table serving as my "lectern." In a paper cup I poured some grape juice from the mess hall, and recited Kiddush. I led the service and after it was over, many many people gathered around me and I'll never forget those moments! Everyone spoke Yiddish; the lingua franca was Yiddish. "Do you know where is . . .?" "I have an uncle who lives in Chicago." "I have a niece who lives somewhere in . . ." And

on and on it went. They remained with me until late in the evening.

An unpublished memoir from the archives of Yad Vashem, written by Abraham Gottlieb-Ahuvia, also refers to a service led by my father "yesterday . . . in the Kino. There Jews prayed, welcoming in the Sabbath."

Twenty-five years after the liberation, a Buchenwald survivor, Jack Breitkopf, described the first religious service he attended after the war held in "a house on the camp which the Nazis had used for motion pictures." He said that on that night, which he said was "just a few days after Passover," my father, Rabbi Herschel Schacter, "distributed matzoh . . . We thought

we would never eat matzoh." Does this indicate that the service took place on Pesach Sheni when there is a custom to eat matzoh? Perhaps. But perhaps not, since on Passover that year the Nazis still controlled Buchenwald, and thus eating matzoh was unthinkable. Perhaps my father offered matzoh to the survivors after Passover, and at his earliest opportunity.

In an as yet unpublished memoir by survivor Isaac Leo Kram, who died in March 2013, he makes reference to two Friday night services led by my father, thus making it even harder to determine the exact circumstances of the service depicted here. Translated from Hebrew, Kram's detailed description of the service my

father led on the second Friday night after the liberation, April 20, 1945, is beautiful:

Today in the evening all Jews were invited to a festive prayer in the “Cinema” Hall. Because of the mix up of nationalities in Buchenwald, the Cinema Hall was to serve as a House of Prayer for the Jewish inmates from 6:00 to 7:00 and from 7:00 and on there was scheduled to take place the Communist gathering. I was therefore not at all surprised when I entered the Cinema to see on one end a Star of David on a silk *parochet* (ark cover) and on the other end red flags, small green trees, flowers, and a large picture of Stalin. Yes, this is Buchenwald, every nation in its corner and nevertheless all united

by their tragedy and by their struggle against their joint enemy, the plague of Nazism.

The Jewish chaplain was a middle-aged man, with an intelligent face, “modern,” precisely a rabbi in the American style. But he was full of sweetness, with a Jewish sensitivity like one of the East European Jews (indeed, his father was from Galicia). Parenthetically, he speaks Yiddish well and also a clear Hebrew with a Sephardic accent.In accordance with his instructions, “military prayer books” were distributed to the Jews who were present (regretfully about 400 out of 3,000). I too am fortunate to receive one of them. We begin to pray the evening service, all the assembled singing “*Lechu Neranena*,” in

the American style. A Jewish American soldier helps the rabbi with his singing. Present at the prayer service was also the Jewish officer Rosenberg who is part of the American command.

In the middle of the service we are surprised by the visit of the American Camp Commander. The assembled jumped up and welcomed the honored guest with stormy applause and with shouts of *hedad* (Hurrah)! The Commander delivers a short speech that the rabbi translates into Yiddish.

“You are the remnants (*she’arit ha-pleitah*) of the Jewish nation,” says the commander in his address, “the children of that nation that, in these few years, suffered more than any other nation throughout history. You, who merited to remain alive and see with your own eyes the end of your tormentors, strengthen your faith and trust in your God that He will comfort you and help you establish a new life in a new world in which will reign righteousness and justice, in which no nation shall be persecuted because of its race, in which each nation shall live in accordance with its faith, practices and religion.” Tears flowed from most of those present hearing the words of the Christian commander whom the rabbi introduced and

described as a genuine lover of the Jewish people [and] as one of the “righteous ones of the nations (*hasidei umot ha-olam*).” Once again shouts of joy and applause. The commander remained seated throughout the entire Evening Service.

After the prayers, the rabbi delivers a short speech in which he emphasizes the closeness of American Jewry to its brothers suffering in Europe. To their regret, they have hitherto not had the power to help us in a practical way but now he requests of the refugees present here to gird themselves with patience. Behold, this is still a military zone and priority needs to be given to all military needs. However, soon

Jewish aid organizations, especially the Joint, will appear and then they will be able to fill the needs of every individual.

In particular, in his address the rabbi warned against those who say, “Behold how much have I suffered until now as a Jew. From now on I will cut myself off from my nation and my religion!” Such desires are found among us and I have already encountered them here in certain circumstances. The rabbi said that in America, Israel and other parts of the world there is still a strong Jewry which is ready at every moment to help you. “Do not despair and do not be quick to leave your people. Behold, your personal fate is testimony to the fact that no person in the world can destroy our people. For thousands of

years they pursue us, in every generation they stand up against us to destroy us, and, nevertheless, we are alive! Believe in the eternity of our people! Place your hope in 'the eternity of the Jewish people will never be denied (*nezah Yisrael lo yishaker*).'"

Before my father died, he reflected during a dinner that took place in New York City in April, 1970, which celebrated the 25th anniversary of the liberation of Buchenwald. He said, "This is a simcha for these people. They don't forget those who died in the gas chambers, who suffered torture, but they are joyous to be alive in this land of freedom."

We share both those sentiments today,

70 years after the liberation.

I share them again with you tonight, this week as we commemorate the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the dawn of yet another, among so many Jewish redemptions.