

Liberation of Theresienstadt – Dr. Margalit Shlain

“On the evening of May 7, 1945”, writes Jacob Jacobson, “the official announcement was received that the capitulation was signed and that the war is over”.

But in Theresienstadt the war was not yet over. **On May 8, Theresienstadt became a war zone of the retreating German army.** The rumble of cannon was heard throughout the day and the night. According to the testimony of Menashe (Munish) Mautner, Dr. Benjamin Marmorstein warned of rash acts, *“since the Nazi army was moving by day and night along the camp. Twice they threw hand grenades into the camp ... I myself was concussed by a hand grenade that landed in front of my window”.*

In the evening a Russian shell hit one of the houses and a few people were wounded. At nightfall the shooting increased and suddenly voices were heard: **“Hurrah”, “a red flag”, “the Russians are here”, as the first Russian tank entered the camp** and was welcomed with shouts of happiness.

“The iron gates were opened ... the Russian soldiers entered victoriously and distributed chocolate, tea, cigarettes and more ... the German street signs were removed fast by the Czechs, music was played continuously on the central square and people danced. The Russian’s horses grazed on the lawn and the place could not be recognized”, Kaethe Breslauer related.

Timeline of the liberation:

February 5, 1945 – A transport of 1,200 Jews left on a train to Switzerland.

April 15, 1945 - 425 Danish Jews were taken by busses of the Swedish Red Cross

April 16, 1945 – a special delegation sent by Kurt Becher, the new commissar of all concentration camps appointed by Himmler, arrived in Theresienstadt to guarantee the safety of the ghetto’s Jews.

The delegation consisted of Obersturmbannfuehrer Hermann Krumej and Hauptsturmfuehrer Otto Hunsche, accompanied by Dr. Rudolf (Rezsoe) Kastner – representative of the Joint who proposed that a representative of the Red Cross remain in Theresienstadt until the arrival of allied forces; Krumej accepted the proposal.

May 2, 1945 – Paul Dunant, representative of the Red Cross arrived, to stay in Theresienstadt.

May 5, 1945 – Obersturmfuehrer Karl Rahm, camp commander, leaves Theresienstadt.

May 8, 1945 – Germany capitulates. Theresienstadt was liberated in the evening hours by Soviet soldiers.

Starting April 20, until May 6, 1945, a wave of about 13.000 people arrived in Theresienstadt, the camp and its situation changed completely, nearing anarchy. With the last transports arrived prisoners evacuated from concentration camps near the frontlines, from Poland, Germany, Austria and the Czech lands, before allied forces could liberate them. In the six last weeks before liberation they brought additional distress and diseases to the ghetto.

On May 2, Dunant came to live in Theresienstadt and remained there until May 19, 1945. He stayed at the town hall and held daily meetings with the Council of Elders to solve the immediate problems and prepare for liberation.

On May 3, Dunant announced that *“people whose immediate repatriation to their homelands was requested by relatives from other countries may leave Theresienstadt as soon as possible and he saw as his duty to prepare everything for that day. In the meantime his first duty was to prevent incidents in Theresienstadt as far as possible”*.

At this meeting the preparations for the return of Theresienstadt Jews to their home countries were discussed; also solutions for those who are not able or willing to return to their countries of origin and the isolation of people infected by typhoid fever from the rest of the population.

Dunant reported to the Council on his visit at the “Small Fortress” and that some thousand prisoners with typhoid fever will be moved to hospitals in Theresienstadt; a team of physicians and a bacteriologist from Prague as well as medicines will arrive.

On May 6, 1945, news came from Prague that there is fighting with SS and about escapees shot on the road from Theresienstadt to Prague. As the fighting neared, escapes from the camp ceased. **Kaethe Breslauer** testified: *“Through the window we could see air battles above nearby Leitmeritz ... we saw fully loaded trucks and private cars speeding on the road – the Nazis are trying to flee before the enemy’s breakthrough”*.

According to Dunant’s order, all flags were removed so as not to provoke. A never-ending convoy of tanks started moving in the afternoon towards Prague and at the same time a train with the last transport arrived in Theresienstadt, which also added to the burden of the Jewish self-administration. **Alisa Ehrmann-Shek wrote in her diary:**

“From Buchenwald, Dachau, Ravensbrueck, men and a few women, two cars with children, open cars, ceaselessly pouring rain since the morning. Four from Theresienstadt and mainly Russian prisoners of war, Yugoslavs, Rumanians, Poles, Slovaks, Hungarians, a few Jews, Gypsies, 59 train cars, about 1200 persons, the cars are loaded: 50-80, but a part are almost empty ... The SS men disappear in an instant. Two SS men did not want to go on and surrendered their weapons. The Red Cross did not show up and so we had to do the work ourselves, like always” ...

Muniek Kaufman who had arrived in Theresienstadt two weeks before liberation, described how they came to Theresienstadt, how they were welcomed, the difficulties faced by those receiving them and the feeling of safety in the ghetto:

“It is hard to describe the impression we got seeing the Jews, Jewish women and children. Many people cried from happiness ... They welcomed us with friendliness and began taking care of us from the first moment ... when they related to us from the first moment as human beings, they had to change that after a few hours ... because each of us was an animal ready to kill for a crumb of bread. How much strength and stamina the Terezin Jews had to gather to keep order among us ... though there were still two weeks until liberation, we did not see SS men and felt safer than on the transport”.

Jacob Jacobson wrote:

*At the end of April the representative of the Red Cross arrived and the town came under the protection of the International Red Cross. The SS men, whose preparations for leaving were coming to an end, began to disappear ... **As a sign of liberation, cigarettes were distributed, an enjoyment strictly denied to ghetto prisoners.***

On May 5, 1945, the SS commander left the camp ... on May 7, the official announcement was received that the war is over. In the next night and the day after gunfire was heard. There were also a few dead ... The day passed uneasily and in tension. In the dusk of evening suddenly a shout was heard: *“The Russians are here!”* Everybody

able to run to what previously was a forbidden area, the "Aryan street" outside town, ... toward the endless stream of Russian tanks, cannons, soldiers and trucks loaded with bundles.

A Page from the Diary of Michal Beer (Stecklmacher):

May 9, 1945. For a long time I did not write in my diary, today, after a great event I peeked into it and read parts from the first days of my life in Terezin, about transports leaving and other difficult things. Now I want to go on with a better new life that began for us yesterday.

Boom, boom ... what is this, shooting? ... Under gunfire that lasted the whole day the ghetto waited silently how fate will decide. Will it be destroyed or allowed to survive until war's end? At nightfall the shooting moved away and so the tension. Suddenly a woman's voice was heard, in Yiddish: "A roite fun!" "A red flag!" In the streets of the ghetto that were full of people after the threatening silence, sounds of joy were heard – the ghetto breathed with relief – we succeeded to survive!

The News that so Many who Hoped for this Day did not Live to Receive

In our room at the girl's home, we talked, before taking leave, and we arrived at the common conclusion that only on us, the young ones, on our generation, depends how the world will look in the future. Will there have to be another horrible war, denying people happiness and serenity, with so many victims?

A medical unit of the Red Army with medical equipment joined the medical team from Prague to take care of the 500 people sick with typhoid fever that were diagnosed in Theresienstadt until May 6, 1945; and of the 2,950 additional patients diagnosed up to May 19. The typhoid epidemic began to recede only after all the typhoid patients were isolated in a hospital. On June 13, 1945, the epidemic was over. 920 people paid with their lives and about a dozen of physicians and nurses.

Following the military and political events, Dunant shortened his stay in the camp. On May 19, 1945, he transferred command of the camp to the Russian officer, major Kuzmin and left Theresienstadt.

On May 14, 1945, eng. Georg Vogel was nominated to head the camp, by order of the Czechoslovak autonomous regime and the orderly repatriation of people to their home countries or their move to other countries got under way.

On the day of liberation there remained in Theresienstadt:

A. Out of those who came to Theresienstadt until mid-April 1945 –

7.503 survivors from the Protectorate Bohemia and Moravia
5.300 survivors from Germany
1.311 survivors from Austria
1.295 survivors from The Netherlands
1.396 survivors from Slovakia
1.168 survivors from Hungary

17.973 total of survivors

B. 11.765 people evacuated from concentration camps that arrived in Theresienstadt between April 20 and May 6, 1945

29.738 survivors were in Theresienstadt at liberation

This breakdown does not include:

1.200 - 1.400 prisoners evacuated from concentration camps who arrived in Theresienstadt on May 6, 1945;
1.200 who went to Switzerland on February 5, 1945, and 425 taken to Denmark on April 15, 1945.