Liberation: Theme Overview

One and a half million Jewish children perished in the Holocaust. At liberation, the few children who had survived the Holocaust emerged from concentration camps and places of hiding. Many found themselves orphaned. Most who had survived were adolescents and the majority of them were boys. For the most part, only those who were older and strong enough to work had been able to endure the hardships in the camps. Liberation signified their release from captivity.

Liberation was also a time during which survivors were confronted with the enormity of what had happened and the extent of their losses. Only about one percent of Jewish children alive at the beginning of the war survived to its conclusion.

In the period immediately following liberation, children along with other survivors began their search for family. They traveled by foot and hitched rides on jeeps or trains. Communications and travel were difficult in Europe as the war-torn countries struggled to re-build. Some children returned to their homes and found them destroyed or occupied by strangers. Their communities were decimated and scattered.

Many children began a round of displaced persons (DP) camps looking for parents, brothers and sisters. Once they were convinced that their search was in vain they drifted back to DP camps like Fulda, Feldafing and Aglasterhausen.

To find the thousands of children lost in the post-war chaos and to reunite them with their families, teams from the Red Cross, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and Jewish aid agencies combed Europe looking for "unaccompanied" or orphaned children.

Some of the orphans were gathered up in makeshift orphanages like Kloster Indersdorf or sent to DP camps. Relief organizations cooperated to gather names of survivors and distribute the lists to the various refugee camps.
I was a teacher at the Peterswald Children’s Home for almost a year. The Jewish community had set up the home to take care of Jewish children who had lost their families in the Holocaust.

I wanted to preserve the orphans’ memories of their lives before and during the war. The Jewish Historical Institute of Warsaw made me an official interviewer and asked me to record their stories. After school, the children would come to my classroom and talk to me while I wrote down their stories. They seemed glad to tell me about their parents, their families and all that had happened to them. I think it made them feel very close to me afterwards.

I have five Notebooks filled with the children’s stories. Most of the orphans later immigrated to Israel. One of the boys, Jack Kuper came to Canada as part of the War Orphans Project. I met him again more than fifty years later when he was in Vancouver to do research on the war orphans for a film that he produced.

Shia Moser
My parents and most of my brothers and sisters did not survive the Holocaust. I survived by being hidden in a convent in Belgium. The nuns had taught me to always look like I was praying in order to pass as a Christian. This picture was taken just after the war was over. Even then, my instinct was to pose with my hands folded in prayer.

This picture was taken during mealtime in the orphanage where I was placed after the war. I was nine or ten at the time. I remember hating the porridge. I didn’t make any friends, I was a serious child and I never cried. I would love to see some of these children today. I feel like I know them.

The red ribbon that I am wearing in my hair was my most prized possession. Every night before bedtime, I used to wash the ribbon and wrap it around the iron bed railings, in order to straighten it out. It was absolutely priceless to me.

Mariette Rozen
I was one of the 430 youngsters who survived Buchenwald concentration camp. We remained in Buchenwald for about three months after liberation because there was nowhere else to go. I remember that a French journalist came from Paris and wrote an article titled "J' Accuse," ("I Accuse") accusing the world of indifference towards us. As a result of public pressure, the French government let us into France and even offered us French citizenship. We were put on a train to Ecouis, a town in northern France. I can still remember the relief of leaving that forsaken place of Buchenwald as we crossed the border into France.

En route, one of the kids Joe Dziubak got off the train and wrote the Yiddish words "Vo sind unsire elterin?" ("Where are our parents?") on the outside of the car. Joe was really speaking for all of us. We had all just begun to realize how few of our family members were alive.

Robbie Waisman
I was liberated from Buchenwald concentration camp on April 11, 1945 at the age of fourteen. We were marched from the inner camp to better housing in the former SS barracks. We were each given a bed and clean sheets. I remember being examined by many doctors and nurses, and the Red Cross writing down our stories. Some of the adult survivors gathered up all the children and began to take charge of us. I had no idea that there were 430 children scattered throughout Buchenwald. While I was imprisoned in Buchenwald I had thought that my friend and I were the only children there.

An army officer took this picture of us children being led out from the camp. I am one of the children at the back of the group in the centre. I asked the officer for a copy of the picture because I wanted it to take it home to show to my family. At the time I didn’t yet know that my parents and most of my family had not survived. I realized that my survival was an absolute miracle and this photograph marked that moment for me. My sister Leah and I were the sole survivors of our family.

Robbie Waisman
Greta Fischer was a member of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) team sent to Germany after the war to find and care for "unaccompanied" and orphaned children. This photograph shows the International Children's Centre established by UNRRA at the convent of Kloster Indersdorf in Germany. Greta appears with two Polish children, a brother and sister who have just arrived at the Children's Centre. Greta is examining the children’s baggage for pieces of identification.

Children of all ages and nationalities began to arrive at the Children's Centre as soon as it opened. Many children were found by the American military or by UNRRA personnel. Others found their way on their own. Greta took to sleeping close to the front door so that she would not miss the quiet knock of a young orphan in the middle of the night.

For most of the non-Jewish children, their stay at Kloster Indersdorf was brief. They were either reunited with family or repatriated to their countries of origin. The Jewish children were the last to leave. When UNRRA closed the Children's Centre at Kloster Indersdorf in 1947, Greta Fischer accompanied the last group of orphans that immigrated to Canada as part of the War Orphans Project.