

Context card 4: The end of the Second World War

The Holocaust only came to an end when Nazi Germany were defeated and the Second World War ended. From the summer of 1944, the wartime **Allies**, the Soviet Union in the East and the Allied forces of Britain and America in the West forced the German army to retreat after a series of defeats. As the Soviets advanced into German – occupied Poland at the end of 1944 and the start of 1945, Jewish slave labourers who remained alive began to be moved to other camps further into Germany, away from the advancing armies. The Nazis didn't want any witnesses to their crimes yet they also wanted to use Jewish prisoners for slave labour.

These forced marches took place on foot and on cramped **freight trains**. Conditions were so terrible on these marches that the prisoners themselves gave them the name 'the death marches'. Prisoners were not given food or water and if they could not keep up or tried to escape, they were shot by their guards.



'The death marches were the final phase of the Holocaust, a period of suffering which the boys remember with dread. Their loved ones had been murdered, most of them two or three years earlier. Their experiences of



slave labour had weakened and frightened them. It was more than five years since they had known anything they could call a home, family life, security, childhood itself. As the death marches ended, overtaken by the allied forces, those marchers who were still alive were at the very limit of their capacity to survive.' Martin Gilbert 'The Boys'.



For many of 'The Boys', Theresienstadt would be the final camp of an agonising journey. Theresienstadt (Terezin) had been set up by the Nazis as a 'model' ghetto in Czechoslovakia. Between 1941 and 1944 more than 33,000 Jewish people had died there of starvation and disease. A further 88,000 had been deported to death camps in the east where they had been murdered. At the end of April 1945, Theresienstadt was one of the few camps still in German held territory and more than 15,000 death marchers had arrived there.

As the Allied armies advanced they discovered many camps, all containing survivors and the bodies of dead prisoners. When **liberation** came for survivors they were often very weak and ill and indeed many continued to die as a result of the brutal treatment that they had suffered. Liberation meant the start of a long process of mental and physical recovery and the search for any surviving relatives. Some survivors, like a number of 'The Boys' made their way to their home towns in the hope of finding friends and relatives. Often, they quickly realised that they were not welcome and that there were few, if any, survivors to be found. As they had no homes to go to many realised that they would have to start again, in another country.

