

Remembering Bergen-Belsen – 15th April 1945

The life of Mala Helfgott was vastly different to those of any 21st Century child. Born in 1930, Mala and her family lived in Piotrków Trybunalski, a town in Poland. They lived here happily for nine years, until 1939, when they fled East due to Nazi Occupation. At only nine years old, the prospect of leaving home was challenging for Mala, and even more so when upon their return, the whole family were forced into the newly sanctioned ghetto, the first in Poland.



Conditions within the ghetto were awful, so Mala was sent, with her cousin to the city of Częstochowa, around 100 kilometres from their home. Due to the two girls being Jewish, it was decided that they would travel individually, one week apart. It is impossible to imagine the emotions Mala must have felt, being sent away from her family into a place of uncertainty and the unknown. Upon arrival at Częstochowa, the girls stayed with a family, yet their lives there were ever changing also.

After some time, Mala returned to her hometown, yet her younger cousin Idzia, who had been sent to stay with another family, did not return. Within the ghetto, the situation was no better than when she left. There were continued collections of the inhabitants, who were taken into the nearby woods to be executed – Mala lost her mother and younger sister in this way. The trauma of the last few years was still not over and continued well into her teenage years.

In 1942, Piotrków Trybunalski ghetto was liquidated, with Jews sent to various camps across Poland. As a 12-year-old girl, Mala was split from her father and brother and forced into slave labour until she was 14. It is impossible to comprehend the thoughts and feelings that must have been present within Mala during the early stages of her life, a time when many of us have fond memories of school, friendships and security.

Following her two years as a slave labourer, Mala was sent to Bergen-Belsen in Cattle trucks with appalling conditions. She was ill with typhus at the time of liberation on the 15th of April 1945, yet the kindness and compassion of the British soldiers has remained with her all these years. The soldiers showed love despite the horrors, going the extra mile to care for and tend to all. During the liberation, there were accounts of Chaplains attending the dead and dying in prayer, while comforting those who were still living. From the atrocities committed by the Nazis, the compassion of the British flourished, touching the lives of many who were present within Bergen-Belsen. For Mala especially, she held great admiration for the British who treated her and others like equals, as *'human beings'* after *'so many years of abuse'* and suffering.



The camp of Bergen-Belsen differed from the camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau or Treblinka yet was in every aspect as inhumane. During the war, approximately 50,000 people were murdered within Belsen, although not through execution. As a result of brutality and neglect, starvation and disease ran rife throughout the camp, leading to slow, painful and debilitating deaths for many. It is no surprise then that the liberation of Bergen-Belsen not only brought relief to those incarcerated but impacted greatly the livelihoods of numerous British soldiers.

It has been said that *“many never recovered from the trauma of what they encountered”*, as in spite of years of frontline warfare, pain and bloodshed, hardened soldiers found themselves *“completely unable to sleep”* the following night, and for many after. Private Emmanuel Fisher stated that *“words cannot adequately describe what I saw”*, a sentiment shared by so many of the British, who felt unequipped and unprepared to face the horrors that they found within Bergen-Belsen.

It is for that reason, among many, that remembering the liberation of Bergen-Belsen is essential. We have a duty and a responsibility to preserve history and ensure that horrors akin to these are never repeated. It is critical that we remember these events in order to not only honour those who died, but also to commemorate those who lived through and endured the atrocities committed within Belsen.

The actions of the soldiers, and memories of all who experienced Bergen-Belsen make it even more essential that we not only “remember”, but actively educate and challenge the younger generation. In a time when unity is required more than ever, we must not just practice “toleration”, or passive “remembrance”, but active, committed and diligent education. Consequently, the 75th Anniversary of the liberation of Bergen-Belsen must not be forgotten. Through the actions of the UCL Centre for Holocaust Education and our Beacon School work, The Holocaust Education Trust and others, alongside other schools and organisations, each play their part in contributing to our responsibility to educate and remember, the goal to ensure the honouring of all those impacted by Bergen-Belsen will be achieved.

By Benjamin