

Belsen 75 Legacy Project

The importance of remembering the individual: there's more to the Holocaust than 17 million deaths

By Jack Pennock and Ed Clarke

The Holocaust Education Trust is a UK Charity which runs trips to concentration camps, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen. These are run for Sixth Form students in an effort to preserve the memory of the Holocaust by having Sixth Formers go on to educate their fellow students on their return from the project. My good friend Jack and I were lucky enough to get the opportunity to go on the Belsen 75 Project, which is sending children from all over the UK to the site of the former Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, which was liberated on April 15th 1945 – 75 years ago this year.

The Project has involved a trip to Bergen-Belsen along with a pre- and post-visit seminar where we discussed the trip with our peers from across the southwest. One key message we all wish people to remember is how there are real people at the heart of the Holocaust: people who, as we will show you, can have had completely different experiences during the Holocaust for a multitude of reasons.

At our pre-visit seminar, we had the privilege of hearing from Mala Tribich, a survivor of the Holocaust who was an inmate first at Ravensbrück and later Bergen-Belsen concentration camp between November 1944 and July 1945. As well as talking about her experiences in the concentration camps, she spoke of her time before the war and her experiences in a ghetto in her hometown Piotrków under Nazi occupation, where she was until it was liquidated in November 1944. This is part of her account in which she describes the conditions within Bergen-Belsen:

“There was terrible overcrowding, sanitation in the form of open pits and hardly any food. People walked around like zombies and looked like skeletons; there were piles of corpses and dead bodies lying around everywhere. Typhus was rife and there was an air of utter hopelessness. The degradation humiliation and despair were clearly visible on people’s faces. You could be

History of Bergen-Belsen:

1935 – A camp is constructed for workers building a Wehrmacht barracks near the village of Belsen.

1939 – Germany invades Poland and World War 2 breaks out. By now, the camp at Bergen-Belsen previously used for the construction workers has fallen into disuse.

1940-45 – The former construction site is used as a POW (Prisoner Of War) Camp, with the first inmates being 600 French and Belgian POWs. Soviet, Italian POWs along with nearly 1000 members of the Polish Resistance are held at the camp.

April 1943 – The Southern end of the camp is handed over to the SS, who establish an 'exchange camp' where they house Jewish inmates who they believe maybe of considerable value to the Allies and thus could be traded for German prisoners. The POW camp remains under Wehrmacht (German Army) control.

1943-45 – The camp's size was greatly expanded, with Polish, Dutch and Hungarian Jews all having their own camp sections established.

December 1944 – With Germany now nearing defeat 85,000 prisoners arrive at Bergen-Belsen from December 1944, many having been marched there from camp in Poland such as Auschwitz – over 500 miles away. From 1943, at least 52,000 people die in the camp or from the immediate effects of their imprisonment.

speaking to someone and she would literally drop dead in front of you."

Mala's experiences at Bergen-Belsen are in line with the common view of Holocaust: deeply inhumane and hard to read or learn about. This is all true, but the Holocaust is a much larger story than just the experience of one individual. Indeed, even within Bergen-Belsen an inmates' experience could wildly different. Others such as Paul Oppenheimer, a Jewish German born in Berlin in 1928 and an inmate at Bergen-Belsen from February 1944 to April 1945, had a very different experience at Bergen-Belsen:

"Perhaps it is important to explain that Bergen-Belsen is somewhat of a paradox. Many people portrayed Belsen as 'hell on earth' and the 'inferno of death' and the worst examples of Nazi atrocities. This may be true of Belsen in 1945, and for those prisoners who came from other concentration camps, such as Auschwitz. But there was another, more lenient side to Bergen-Belsen ... for the so-called 'exchange' Jews, and other privileged persons.

...

Our life in Bergen-Belsen, especially during 1944, was pretty dull, tedious and monotonous. Apart from the Appell [Role call] and the meals, there was absolutely nothing to do for the children in the Star Camp ... Any education was officially prohibited, and there was a lack of teaching and reading materials. Nevertheless, there were some secret impromptu school lessons and also attempts at religious education in individual barracks, conducted primarily by the over-65s and young mothers ... One of the children would stand by the door and warn the teachers when any officials approached. There were also occasional birthday celebrations and other events to relieve the boredom."

Paul's experience of Bergen-Belsen was so different to many others just a few hundred metres away from him because he was a so-called 'Exchange Jew' – a person who the Germans believed they could trade for Germans taken

15th April 1945 - Around 53,000 prisoners are liberated by soldiers of the British 11th Armoured Division. The Camp was burned to the ground soon after their arrival to help stop the spread of typhus, as the buildings were too heavily contaminated to be used.

Sept-Nov 1945 - The first trials of SS concentration camp guards and staff take place before a British military tribunal in some of the first war crimes trials of the war. 19 defendants received prison sentences and 11 were sentenced to death.

1945-50 - The Wehrmacht barracks – the one constructed by the workers who had been housed at Bergen-Belsen before the war – is taken over for use as a DP (Displaced Persons) Camp for surviving inmates.

September 1945 - The first monument is erected on the site of the former concentration camp, this one for Jewish inmates.

1951-2015 – After the DP Camp's disbandment in 1950, the British Army of the Rhine (BAOR) take over the former Wehrmacht barracks.

Today – The Bergen-Belsen site is designated as a memorial, and is remembered with marked mass graves, along with individual markers dedicated to individuals who died in the camp such as Margot and Anne Frank, as well as a memorial building which acts as an information centre for visitors. The army barracks is still in use by the German Army, but there are plans to open up a section for visitors to explain the history of the DP Camp that was set up there.

prisoner by the Allies. Paul's status as an Exchange Jew was due to his sister Eve being a British citizen and holding a British passport. As a result, his family received much better treatment than other concentration camp inmates – being kept in a separate area known as the 'Star Camp' – as the Nazis wished for Exchange Jews to be able to report accurately on the good conditions inside the camp.

Another major factor in Paul's different experience of the Holocaust is the date when he arrived in Bergen-Belsen – February 1944. This was nearly a year before Bergen-Belsen experienced a huge influx in prisoners, after many inmates of large eastern camps such as Auschwitz were sent on death marches to the west to escape the approaching Red Army. These prisoners often carried diseases and illnesses, which led to a major outbreak of typhus in Bergen-Belsen near the end of the war, which culminated in the atrocious conditions British soldiers found the camp in upon its liberation.

These two stories of two Bergen-Belsen inmates serve to highlight the radically different experiences people had during the Holocaust, and how the Holocaust holds an important message regarding prejudice and discrimination. Mala and Paul were both interned due to their Jewish beliefs, with Jewish people being one social group the Nazis portrayed as an 'enemy' to the German population, along with many others such as Roma (often referred to as Gypsies in the modern era), Black people, and members of the LGBT community.

Their portrayal by the Nazis as being 'different' is a humbling message to remember, as it is easy to draw parallels with the modern era in a variety of different ways. It is also frightening to see how accustomed we are to separate people and class those not like us as 'different', when in fact these differences are mostly superficial when considering that in fact, we are all one and the same.

Hopefully, the stories of these two inmates will help remind you how important it is for us to remember the individual stories of those who suffered in the concentration camps. As we are now sadly losing many of those who survived, it is up to us to pass their stories on to future generations and keep their memory alive.