

Jewish Historical Studies

Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England

Article:

“If all of the sky were paper”: the Jewish chaplains at Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Part 1.

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How to cite: Lewis, J.M. “If all of the sky were paper”: the Jewish chaplains at Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Part 1’. *Jewish Historical Studies*, 2021, 53(1), pp.57-82. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.jhs.2022v53.004>.

Published: 14 March 2022

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal’s standard double blind peer-review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open Access:

Jewish Historical Studies is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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“If all of the sky were paper”: the Jewish chaplains at Bergen Belsen concentration camp. Part I^{*}

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From 11 April 1945 Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, and other camps with their numerous satellite camps were liberated by the American army and Bergen Belsen and its adjacent camps, on 15 April, by the British. On the Eastern Front, Soviet troops had entered Auschwitz in January 1945. The liberation of the concentration and extermination camps in the closing phase of the Second World War has received abundant and recent scholarly attention.¹ One of the less-explored aspects of this topic is the role of the military chaplains who served there with Western Allied forces. Among them were the British chaplains Leslie Hardman and Isaac Levy and the American chaplain Abraham Klausner. Each later wrote in detail of their experiences; Hardman’s narrative is essentially pastoral, Levy’s organizational and Klausner’s an amalgam. In relation to Belsen, the historian Hagit Lavsky has concisely summarized the role of chaplains: “The rabbis were thus not only religious functionaries but also rescuers in the broad sense, providing crucial moral support in the early days when conditions were at their worst, but also strengthening the hand of German Jews seeking to build new communities – Greenbaum and Munk in Hamburg and Celle, Goldfinger in Brunswick, and so on.”²

In this article, the first of two, the character of the Jewish chaplains’

1 Joanne Reilly, *Belsen: The Liberation of a Concentration Camp* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998); Hagit Lavsky, *New Beginnings: Holocaust Survivors in Bergen Belsen and the British Zone in Germany, 1945–1950* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2002); Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015); also Stone, *Concentration Camps: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 3; Jane Caplan and Nikolaus Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2010); Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Little, Brown, 2015).

2 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 93.

* I am most grateful to Professor Michael Berkowitz for his incisive critique of a draft of this paper.

work in the camps will be explored. I consider their role as “rescuers in the broad sense”, the Americans (more concisely, as this is a subject in itself) in the camps which their army liberated and the British at Belsen. In the second article, to be published in the next issue, I shall consider the tensions and conflicts which arose as the British chaplains at Belsen struggled to perform this role of rescuers. These arose between chaplains and the military authorities and, less predictably, between chaplains themselves, which is an aspect that has not previously been addressed.

The American and British chaplains were among the first to confront the unspeakable reality of the camps. In order to situate the ordeal which they faced some context is necessary.

Background

As late as April 1945, and even at the moments of “liberation” of the camps, the war was not over. The Allied armies were taking casualties daily and wrestling with the manifold demands of war. Germany was a battleground awash with vast numbers of destitute and desperate people of many nationalities – displaced civilians, refugees, military deserters, forced labourers, former camp inmates, and survivors of death marches including Allied prisoners of war. Many of the camps were discovered only when the Allied armies came upon them. There was no plan for their liberation and relief and the armies had to improvise.

“The concentration camps embodied the spirit of Nazism like no other institution in the Third Reich. They formed a distinct system of domination . . . In all the SS set up twenty-seven main camps and over 1,100 satellite camps over the course of the Third Reich, though numbers fluctuated greatly as old camps closed down and new ones opened.”³ The ubiquity of satellite or subcamps is not always appreciated, and their locations have continued to be identified over the decades. Auschwitz, for example, had some forty regional subcamps within its *interessengebiet* (“area of interest”), of which there is little trace today. Some of them afforded greater chances of survival as security was less and “selections” for the gas chambers did not take place there. One was at the village of Rajsko, where greenhouses from that era today give no clue to its former role. At another, Budy, which was home to a women’s penal company (*strafkompanie*) of slave labourers, a virtually unknown massacre occurred

3 Wachsmann, KL, prologue.

by German women prisoners of dozens of Jewish women prisoners from various countries.⁴

Democratic societies have difficulty in understanding political regimes of a different character. “[A]ccustomed to think in liberal, pragmatic categories . . . [t]he effort to overcome such basic psychological handicaps is immense.”⁵ In late 1942 and early 1943 “the normal imagination could not cope with the scale of the annihilation process. . . . The barriers to comprehension were now immense and the attempts of the National Committee to revive the interest of the public throughout 1944, in pamphlets such as *Continuing Terror* were generally unsuccessful.”⁶ In Walter Laqueur’s view, the difficulty and delay of Jewish leaders and of the public in Britain, America, and Palestine in accepting the ample evidence about the “final solution” “was a failure of intelligence and imagination”.⁷ Raul Hilberg, the author of *The Destruction of the European Jews*,⁸ wrote that there were those “in the United States and Great Britain for whom the reports of what was happening in Axis Europe meant very little, for whom persecution of any kind meant very little, until they underwent the shock of seeing something with their own eyes in 1945. They saw the camps.”⁹ British Members of Parliament visited Belsen, and the British government adopted a strategy of “seeing is believing” in selecting its official delegation to visit Buchenwald. The British chaplain Isaac Levy recalled the incredulity of Jewish audiences in Britain when he related his experiences. Yet the western camps liberated by the Americans and the British were not specifically extermination centres. Their very awfulness initially acted as a barrier to an understanding that they were not the worst of the Nazi camps, and it took some time before it was realized that the eastern camps were fundamentally different from those in the west.¹⁰

4 Michael Berkowitz, *The Crime of My Very Existence: Nazism and the Myth of Jewish Criminality* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2007), 97–107.

5 Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth about Hitler’s Final Solution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1980), 206.

6 Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination: A Social and Cultural History* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), 179, 186–7; the National Committee for Rescue from Nazi Terror was established in March 1943 at Burlington House, London.

7 Laqueur, *Terrible Secret*, 199.

8 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1985).

9 Raul Hilberg, “The Significance of the Holocaust”, in *The Holocaust: Ideology, Bureaucracy and Genocide*, ed. Henry Friedlander and Sybil Milton (New York: Kraus International, 1980), 96.

10 Kushner, *Holocaust and the Liberal Imagination*, 212, 222, 330 n. 43, 208, 215 respectively.

Jewish chaplaincy

At Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen, and other camps and satellite camps thousands of Allied troops found themselves in the role of liberators, rescuers, and carers. The ordeal which confronted them was like no other. Large numbers of people from many countries, many barely alive, starving, sick, and traumatized, who against all odds had survived unimaginable persecution, were a new and unanticipated category of victims of war.

The role of military chaplains has always been to provide religious, spiritual, moral, and welfare services and support to serving men and women. Functioning within an ordered military structure, Jewish chaplains had been doing so in both world wars. For what was to confront them in the camps, however, they had no anticipation or training. Minuscule in number and needing support as never before, they received all too little. To some of their rescuers the survivors presented initially as an amorphous mass of semi-humans who were unlikely even with treatment and care ever to recover their health and their humanity. Others of the rescuers, including some of the chaplains, found within themselves the faith and the humanity to engage with survivors as people, and people capable of recovery.

The persecution and suffering inflicted by the Nazis had fallen disproportionately on Jews, who had been the majority of the inmates of the camps and were the majority of the survivors. As they struggled to grasp the unbelievable idea that they had been liberated and that their persecutors were no more, some affirmed their survival by asserting their Jewish identity in any way that they could, even screaming out to their liberators that they were Jews. The Jewish chaplains, British and American, felt an affinity with them and a responsibility for them. In trying to care for them the chaplains far transcended their official role. At the outset chaplains and others tried to provide food and basic medical care ahead of the military relief efforts. Jewish chaplains pressed the military authorities, national officials, and national and international Jewish organizations for supplies, relief teams, and further chaplains. The British chaplains used their periods of home leave to do so, to speak and write about the horrors which they had found in the camps, and to explain the fact, initially unacknowledged, that most of the victims were Jews and that the catastrophe was primarily a Jewish one. Realizing the

imperative need to try to reunite survivors with each other and with family and friends abroad, Jewish chaplains from the first days of liberation collected the names of survivors and information about them, published lists of them, and, sometimes in breach of regulations about the use of military post, facilitated survivors writing letters to relatives and friends around the world. These efforts formed the basis of what became the Allied-operated tracing service, which in 1955 became the International Tracing Service under the aegis of the Red Cross.¹¹ Jewish chaplains acted as intercessors and advocates for the survivors to the military authorities and assisted the survivors’ organizations which emerged. They facilitated community publications in the camps which criticized official policies including Britain’s Palestine policy. Some American Jewish chaplains were influential in changing official American policy and practice.

Within a world of military conformity, chaplains were individualists accountable to their calling and their consciences as well as to worldly authority. Lacking any training for dealing with survivors they responded spontaneously to the suffering before their eyes. They utilized their personal initiative and contacts to provide immediate relief and aid, determined the extent of their own involvement, and prioritized the care of survivors over that of their own troops. The tasks which they assumed did not sit easily with their official military duties. Chaplaincy became a form of unprecedented activism, at times bringing Jewish chaplains into conflict and even disciplinary encounters with the military authorities. Confronted by the indescribable reality of the camps, some of the Jewish chaplains performed with physical resilience, moral courage, and extraordinary achievement, sometimes at medical and disciplinary peril to themselves. Some proved unequal to the unprecedented task, and some brought to it a denominational religious focus that was inappropriate and obstructive.¹²

11 Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 128.

12 Alex Grobman, *Battling for Souls: The Vaad Hatzala Rescue Committee in Post-Holocaust Europe* (New Jersey City, N.J: Ktav Publishing, c. 2004), 5; Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame: American Jewish Chaplains and the Survivors of European Jewry 1944–1948* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 6, 9–11, 18, 22–4; Deborah Dash Moore, *G.I. Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 235–9; Albert Isaac Slomovitz, *The Fighting Rabbis: Jewish Military Chaplains and American History* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1999, 2001), 103–8.

The American Jewish chaplains

Chaplain Max Braude wrote that “We beg, we borrow, we steal, we cajole, we cuss, and we get the stuff that is needed.”¹³ Chaplain Eugene Lipman took food from US Army food dumps to feed survivors. Chaplain Herbert Eskin forced German farmers at gunpoint to slaughter cattle and stole cattle from them. He “borrowed” army trucks and six Jewish G.I.s for late night raids on German grocery stores for food, slipped back into barracks before dawn and unobtrusively distributed food to survivors. Eskin later turned the German occupants out of their apartments in Stuttgart and installed 150 homeless Jews in them. He was disciplined by the US Army, culminating in a general who had seen the concentration camps telling him to continue with his work.¹⁴ Chaplains Eli Bohnen, Eli Heimberg, and David Eichorn freelanced and manoeuvred to secure transport, food, supplies, religious articles, and medical aid. They gave a Torah scroll which had been hidden by a German official on Kristallnacht to Jews in a satellite camp, gathered lists of survivors, sought to reunite families and to rescue Jewish children, re-established Jewish communities, and raised money from Jewish soldiers and from Jewish congregations in the U.S.A.¹⁵

At Dachau, Chaplain Abraham Klausner conducted services and funerals, organized survivors, established separate medical care facilities for Jewish survivors who were terrified of other nationalities and of the German medical staff, and intervened to save 1,200 frightened survivors from being marched to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp where there were many Poles who had worked for the Germans during the war. He managed to return a surviving child to his father, although the child later died. He began a Yiddish newspaper, *Unzer Weg* (Our Way), organized censuses of survivors at twelve camps, and began a programme of reuniting victims with surviving family members. Realizing the need to compile and publish systematic lists of survivors, within a month he compiled and arranged to have printed a first volume of *Sharit Ha-Platah* (The Saving Remnant) listing the names of survivors, of which he ultimately published six volumes.¹⁶ Some survivors suspected that their spouse had died and,

13 Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 39.

14 *Ibid.*, *Rekindling the Flame*, 49–50, 63, 91–2.

15 Dash Moore, *G.I. Jews*, 235–9.

16 *Sharit Ha-Platah* (Bavaria, 1945), in Special Collections and University Archives, Amherst Libraries, University of Massachusetts; repr. (South Deerfield, MA: Schoen Books, 2021).

desperate to regain their humanity, wanted to marry again. Klausner conducted many marriages, sometimes being reprimanded for making insufficient enquiries about the death of the spouse before doing so. He encouraged survivors accommodated in the Russian zone of Berlin to move to the American zone before it was too late to do so. An increasing irritant to the army, he was removed back to the United States in July 1946 and discharged. In January 1947 he contrived to return to Germany and to resume his service as an army chaplain. “By establishing a unique relationship with the army, he had acquired the freedom to act exclusively on the Jews’ behalf and significantly improved their lot.”¹⁷ The Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer wrote of Klausner:

He stole and he cheated and he lied, because his aim was to enable “the people”, his favourite term for the survivors, to rebuild their shattered humanity. He was a U.S. officer who had gone AWOL, repeatedly threatened with court-martial, an officer unattached to any unit – surely the only U.S. officer unattached to any unit, perhaps in all U.S. military history. He bluffed his way into getting accommodation for his people, improving their provisions, establishing hospitals. He became a power in the American zone in Germany.¹⁸

Chaplain became involved in a wide range of illicit and illegal activities on behalf of DPs. Chaplain Abraham Haselkorn illegally used his military status to pressurize French church officials to surrender Jewish children whom they had hidden and were still retaining, established an orphanage for Jewish children in a large empty house in Le Mans, and arranged for its funding.¹⁹ Klausner illegally carried a gun as he scoured the Bavarian countryside in search of survivors in hiding.²⁰ Chaplain Philip Bernstein held undercover negotiations with the U.S. Army to allow more and more Jews into the American Zone, protecting and supporting them after the Kielce pogrom in Poland in 1946. The vault in Bernstein’s office served as a warehouse for diapers and children’s shoes, while his wife – presumably in the United States – functioned, as Klausner described her, as its supply

17 Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 61.

18 Abraham J. Klausner, *A Letter to My Children: From the Edge of the Holocaust*, intro. Yehuda Bauer (San Francisco: Holocaust Center of Northern California, 2002), x. See also Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 128; Slomovitz, *Fighting Rabbis*, 103–8; Grobman, *Battling for Souls*, 20–21, 177–8; *Rekindling the Flame*, 39, 42–3, 129–31, 173–5.

19 Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 24–9; Philip S. Bernstein, *Rabbis at War: The CANRA Story* (Waltham, MA: American Jewish Historical Society, 1971), App. 6.

20 Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 63; Dash Moore, *G. I. Jews*, 235–9.

officer.²¹ Klausner commandeered army transport to enable groups of survivors to travel in various directions, and Chaplain Eugene Lipman supervised an assembly point for them in Prague. They and Rivkin and Bernstein and others worked to facilitate the passage of Jews who sought to reach Palestine, including working alongside soldiers of the Jewish Brigade of the British Army, who were clandestinely engaged in getting people across the Alps and to secret ports of embarkation.²² Stationed near a DP camp at a former Nazi military headquarters at St Ottilien near Munich, to which 750 survivors of Dachau and Buchenwald had been transferred and where a hospital had been established by Jewish doctors, two American Jewish private soldiers, Robert Hilliard, aged nineteen, and Edward Herman, twenty-five, launched a humanitarian aid campaign, using media advocacy and public relations strategies, to improve the conditions for survivors, for which the army threatened them with court martial and punishment such as transfer to the Arctic Circle.²³ Herman, later a successful entrepreneur, actually personally purchased the army PX (post exchange) store of food and supplies, which he gave to St Ottilien.

Rivkin and Bernstein were made directly responsible to General Eisenhower's deputy, General Lucius Clay. In August 1945 Chaplain Judah Nadich was appointed as the first "Advisor to the Commanding General on Jewish Affairs".²⁴ With the authorities struggling to deal with unprecedented circumstances of bewildering complexity, American Jewish chaplains became an instrument of changes in U.S. policy and practice, including towards support for Zionism and Jewish immigration to Palestine. Appalled by the insensitivity of the American government towards concentration camp survivors, a group of U.S. Jewish chaplains including Rivkin and Klausner were instrumental in harnessing political pressure, which ascended to President Truman. The law professor Earl G. Harrison was the country's representative to the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees. In June 1945 the State Department appointed

21 Klausner, *Letter to My Children*, 136.

22 Dash Moore, *G. I. Jews*, 235–9; Louis Barish, *Rabbis in Uniform: The Story of the American Jewish Military Chaplain* (Literary Licensing, 2012); Grobman, *Battling for Souls*; Klausner, *Letter to My Children*, 45–6; Greg Palmer and Mark S. Zaid, eds., *The GI's Rabbi: World War II Letters of David Max Eichorn* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

23 Robert L. Hilliard, *Surviving the Americans: The Continued Struggle of the Jews After Liberation* (New York: Seven Sisters Press, 1996), esp. 80, 87–9, 146–50.

24 Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 145; Slomovitz, *Fighting Rabbis*, 103–8. Among the successors to Nadich in that appointment was Chaplain Philip S. Bernstein; Grobman, *Battling for Souls*, 76, 229–30.

him with Truman’s sanction to assess the situation of Jews in Europe by touring the DP camps and inquiring into the conditions and needs of DPs with particular reference to Jewish refugees who might be stateless or non-repatriable. A nine-page letter about the conditions of the survivors written, printed, and circulated by Privates Hilliard and Herman reached Truman, causing Harrison to call at Hilliard’s home in New York to read his letters over the past months to his mother about these conditions and to conclude that he believed them.²⁵

Klausner changed Harrison’s scheduled itinerary to include the worst locations, which had been omitted, and in Yehuda Bauer’s view decisively influenced his report.²⁶ Harrison and his delegation visited some thirty camps in Germany and Austria, including Bergen Belsen where he interviewed the British chaplain Rev. Isaac Levy. Harrison grasped that Jews faced unique problems, including their need to be reunited with their families and their desire to leave Germany immediately for Palestine, and that they had to be recognized as a nation and be accorded a status separate from other DPs. The ensuing Harrison Report castigated the military treatment of survivors still kept behind barbed wire and made far-reaching recommendations, which were implemented by the U.S. government. On the ground, however, survivors often continued to be treated by the American military as social outcasts, an irritant, and a nuisance. Klausner would give them warning ahead of sometimes violent American military raids in search of black market food and goods. Harrison’s recommendation that a hundred thousand Jewish DPs be permitted to settle immediately in Palestine was transmitted to the British government but was not accepted.²⁷

The British Jewish chaplains

Initiated in 1892, Jewish chaplaincy became integrated into the chaplaincy structure of the British Army. The First World War began with one British Jewish chaplain and ended with nineteen, together with three Australian chaplains effectively under British Jewish chaplaincy command. By the end of the Second World War more than fifty Jewish chaplains, including twelve locally recruited in Palestine, were serving with British forces around the world.

25 Hilliard, *Surviving the Americans*, 191–4.

26 Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 72–7. Klausner, *Letter to My Children*, x, 67–76.

27 Grobman, *Battling for Souls*, 218–19.

Several British Jewish chaplains served for varying periods at Bergen Belsen. In their role as rescuers in the broad sense, they had less room to manoeuvre than their American counterparts. They were far fewer in number. Britain's national culture was less disposed to challenging authority. Its Jewish community was less assertive than that in America, felt more comfortable with maintaining a lower public profile, and was perhaps generally more ambivalent towards Zionism. Casting a long shadow was Britain's Palestine policy. United States policy was indifferent to it and some Americans who confronted the reality of the camps became hostile to it. Nevertheless the British Jewish chaplains also exercised an influence on British policy and practice.

The British commitment to liberal values, and especially individual freedom, led to a revulsion against Nazi methods. For the British government the idea of the Jews constituting a race was seen as a Nazi concept. Its view was that the "Jews must be treated as nationals of existing states" and as "a purely religious community, on the same national footing as their fellow citizens". When in the summer of 1944 Chief Rabbi Joseph Hertz asked that the Jews of Hungary, who were facing deportation, be given British protected status, the response was that "it is not the policy of HMG to regard Jews as belonging to a separate category. It is felt that discrimination of this kind savours too strongly of the Nazi attitude towards Jews": Tony Kushner has written that the stubbornness and homogeneity of the British government's response to the Jewish catastrophe was due to the politics not of indifference or antisemitism but of liberal ambivalence.²⁸ Influenced by its policy on Palestine, the British government failed to acknowledge that Jewish survivors had to be treated on their own terms and resisted showing them any special treatment:

From the very beginning the British ignored the Jewishness of the victims of the Nazis. However horrific their testimonies in connection with Bergen Belsen and regardless of the compassion they felt for the victims of the Nazis as human beings, they did not even bother to mention that most of the victims were Jews. As a result, the British adopted a policy whereby the Jews were treated just like all the others in terms of their nationalities, and this was true even in respect to German Jews. According to British policy, there were only two legitimate categories: (1) enemy Germans and Nazi collaborators and (2) victims of the Nazis and allied collaborators.²⁹

²⁸ Kushner, *Holocaust and Liberal Imagination*, 198–201.

²⁹ Hagit Lavsky, "The Experience of Displaced Persons in Bergen-Belsen: Unique or Typical Case?" in *"We Are Here": New Approaches to Jewish Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany*,

The British authorities did eventually recognize the need to treat Jewish survivors differently from non-Jewish DPs. This was “largely due to the efforts of the few Jewish Chaplains and Relief workers who have been enabled to bring relief and comfort to the inmates”.³⁰

Bergen Belsen

Bergen Belsen “occupied a relatively special place within the National Socialist concentration camp system.”³¹ Initially in 1940 a prisoner of war camp, it became in April 1943 an *Aufenthaltslager* (civilian detention camp) and came to be regarded as a *Krankenlager* (sick camp) from which people were not expected to recover.³² Centred on a brick-built military barracks which had served as a Panzer training school and ultimately a complex of camps, it gradually became absorbed into the vast concentration camp empire administered by the SS. In December 1944 Josef Kramer was sent there as its commandant from Auschwitz and then Natzweiler, where as commandant he had learned his trade.³³ As the camps in the east were evacuated in the face of the Russian advance, Belsen became a dumping ground for prisoners who had survived death marches and transports. From 15,257 at the end of 1944 the camp population had grown to 44,000 by the end of March 1945. “As the camp grew, so did chaos, disease and death, with devastating speed.”³⁴ By March 1945 the food supply had failed completely, Allied bombing nearby had disrupted the water supply, and Belsen had subsided into chaos. Some 18,000 people died in March, and by April 500–600 prisoners were dying every day. After some attempt to burn corpses in the open and then to drag them into large pits, all attempts to bury the dead were abandoned and corpses were dragged away from the huts until, as exhaustion increased, they became piles around the

ed. Avinoam J. Pratt and Michael Berkowitz (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 229; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 51–2; Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak, The Liberation of Belsen, 1945* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005; Random House, 2006), 161–2.

30 Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 145, 233 n. 24; Wiener Holocaust Library, London (hereafter, WHL), Lady Rose Henriques Archive (hereafter, HA), MF Doc. 52, HA 6A 3/3/1-3, June–July 1945 (Summary of Reports on Position of Jews in Germany).

31 Eberhard Kolb, “Bergen-Belsen 1943–1945”, in *The Nazi Concentration Camps*, ed. Yisrael Gutman and Avital Saf (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1984), 331–42.

32 National Army Museum (hereafter, NAM) file 2014-12-3 (Documents concerning Bergen Belsen Concentration Camp), Interim Report on collection of evidence at Bergen-Belsen Camp, 27 April 1945.

33 *Ibid.*, inc. statement of Jan Belunek.

34 Wachsmann, KL, Belsen.

huts. Typhus, tuberculosis, dysentery, and starvation took hold, and cannibalism occurred.³⁵

Bergen Belsen comprised two principal camps. Camp no. 1, the “death” or “horror” camp, had, according to Stone, 40,000 diseased and dying inmates at the time of liberation. Camp no. 2, the “upper” camp, a short distance away, was centred on the military barracks and, again according to Stone, had 16,000 inmates who were starving but did not have typhus. There were three other camps nearby.³⁶ A contemporaneous British Army record put the number of people at Belsen over 15–19 April at 52,292. Lavsky puts the number there at liberation at around 60,000.³⁷

After crossing the Rhine, the 11th Armoured Division of 8 Corps of the British Second Army was approaching. In order to prevent the spread of typhus beyond the camp by prisoners roaming the countryside, two Wehrmacht colonels approached the forward headquarters of the 159th Battalion on Thursday 12 April 1945 under a white flag, offering a local truce which, after negotiation, was accepted.³⁸ Belsen was the only camp to be surrendered by the Nazis in the middle of a war zone. On the morning of Sunday 15 April the 11th Armoured Division fought its way to Belsen. The main body of tanks paused only briefly to approach the wire perimeter and then swept on. Behind them troops who had been earmarked to enter the camp moved towards the gates.³⁹ After soldiers of the Special

35 Holocaust Encyclopaedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org>; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 11–18, 22, 31, 47.

36 Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 83; Caplan and Wachsmann, *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany*, 189, refer to Belsen as five camps in total.

37 NAM file 2014-12-3, Statistical Record of Belsen Camp, which lists numbers of deaths, burials, etc. from 15–19 April to 26 May 1945; Stone, *Liberation of the Camps*, 83; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 39.

38 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 7, 8, 22; Battle Log of 8 Corps, Rhine to Baltic, sheet 84, 12 April 1945, 1133 hours, Royal Army Chaplains' Museum, Shrivenham, Oxfordshire; War Diary of 63 Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, including Report on Belsen Camp by Lt. Col. R. I. G. Taylor, DSO, MC, annexing the truce agreement, Royal Artillery Museum, London. Taylor was the first Allied Military Commander at Belsen: NAM file 1994-09-30, Photocopied Supplement to British Zone Review: An account based on Official Reports of the uncovering by the British Army of the Belsen Concentration Camp and of the action taken during the vital days to minimize the suffering of the 60,000 inmates (published by the Control Commission for Germany, n.d.), 2; WHL, file 1232/3/3, Notes on Belsen Camp by Col. H. W. Bird, 102 Control Section, Second Army, in command at Belsen from 30 April 1945; London Metropolitan Archives (hereafter, LMA), ACC/2805/06/05/001, Chief Rabbi's file on Bergen Belsen.

39 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 214 n. 33; Joanne Reilly et al., eds., *Belsen in History and Memory* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 249; Reilly, *Belsen*, 22–3.

Air Service, who were providing a reconnaissance screen for the tanks, the first British soldiers to arrive on 15 April were no. 14 Amplifying Unit, an armoured car with a powerful battery of loudspeakers. Comprising Lieutenant Derrick Sington and three non-commissioned officers who between them had five European languages, the unit was designed for psychological warfare.⁴⁰ Sington, the author in 1946 of one of the first studies of Belsen, had a Jewish father who was descended from a long line of German business people. An Oxford-educated journalist then aged thirty-seven, he had closely followed German politics in the 1930s and, unusually for British soldiers, had a passionate hatred of National Socialism and a strong ideological commitment to the war.⁴¹

Cautioned against making any loudspeaker announcement for fear of stirring up the inmates, Sington entered Belsen with the commandant Kramer standing on the running board of his armoured car.⁴² The Army recorded “Personnel arrived at Belsen Concentration Camp 1600, found all officials wearing white arm bands and carrying white flags. The take over is going smoothly.”⁴³ Although British Intelligence had known the rough location of the camp, the British Army arrived with no plan to deal with it. Nothing had prepared them for what they found. On their first sight of the camp many of the soldiers threw up. At the outset everything was hasty improvisation. The Army recorded “Conditions at Belsen Concentration Camp 4868 worse than anticipated. Request American one man packs be made available for prisoners.” Sington was later to say, as were many others, that what confronted the soldiers had been beyond description and beyond comprehension. “Three thousand British troops were faced with a problem in mental and moral reconditioning which might have defeated an equal number of psychiatric experts”.⁴⁴

The British Second Army had two Jewish chaplains, Major Reverend Isaac Levy and Captain Reverend Leslie Hardman. Like most of the British chaplains, both were ministers of the centrist Orthodox body of British Jewry, the United Synagogue. Both later wrote of their experiences.⁴⁵ The

40 Reilly, *Belsen*, 23–9.

41 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 33–4.

42 *Ibid.*, 33, 34, 217 n. 5; Derrick Sington, *Belsen Uncovered* (London: Duckworth, 1946), 7.

43 Battle Log of 8 Corps, Rhine to Baltic, sheet 107, 15 April 1945, 1745 hours.

44 *Ibid.*, 16 April 1945, 0145 and 0400 hours; Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, 152; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 23, 29–32, 38, 135, 191–3; Imperial War Museum (hereafter, IWM), London, A70 308-1, 2; 337-1, 2, 3 (films re Bergen Belsen).

45 Isaac Levy, *Witness to Evil: Bergen Belsen 1945* (London: Peter Halban in association with European Jewish Publication Society, 1995); Leslie H. Hardman and Cecily Goodman, *The*

Senior Jewish Chaplain (SJC), based in London, was from 1944 Rabbi Israel Brodie (who became Chief Rabbi in 1948).⁴⁶

In Britain, press reports, broadcasts, and film footage from Belsen focused on the horrors of the camp and the actions of the rescuers rather than on the fact that most of the victims were Jews. The first reports to highlight this fact were from Jewish chaplains. The front page of the *Jewish Chronicle* on 4 May contained a full and poignant report from Levy of what he and Hardman had found at Belsen. Alongside it was a report from Buchenwald, which had been liberated by American troops.⁴⁷ The reports from chaplains were lengthy, detailed, and accurate, describing the determination of some of the survivors to live and the ardent Zionism of some of the younger groups and appealing for urgent help. Even as people at home began to view cinema newsreels and read newspaper accounts, the reality within the camps was near to indescribable.

Captain Reverend Leslie Hardman

Born in 1913, Reverend Leslie Hardman ministered to the community in St. Anne's on Sea and then to the Chapeltown Hebrew Congregation in Leeds. Married with then two daughters, he applied early in 1940 to join the army as a chaplain and was initially refused because, with Isaac Levy having been accepted earlier, there were said to be insufficient Jewish soldiers to justify another Jewish chaplain. Early in 1942 he was accepted. He joined the army on 30 July 1942 and attended the training course for chaplains at Chester College for two weeks from 1 August 1942.⁴⁸ Hardman was appointed the Jewish chaplain to the East Central District of Eastern Command, covering the five home counties, responsible also for RAF personnel and for the Americans until their own chaplains arrived. On 11 November 1944 he embarked for Ostend, but his ship turned back

Survivors: The Story of the Belsen Remnant (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1958); see also Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 92–4.

46 Having served as an army chaplain on the Western Front in 1918 Brodie so served again with the British Expeditionary Force in 1940, being evacuated from Dunkirk. In December 1940 he was “translated” to serve as the Royal Air Force Senior Jewish Chaplain in the Middle East. When in January 1944 Dayan Marks Gollop had to stand down as the overall Senior Jewish Chaplain through ill-health, Brodie was selected to succeed him and in March 1944 “translated” back into the army.

47 *Jewish Chronicle* (hereafter, JC) 4 May, 1, 8, 9; see also 27 April, 1, 9; 25 May, 5; 8 June 1945, 1; Reilly, Belsen, 88.

48 JC, 7 Aug, 9; 28 Aug 1942, 10; *Menorah*, 45/2 (Summer 2009): 19.

in the Channel as the ship ahead was attacked by the Luftwaffe. Eventually reaching Dieppe, he was one of six chaplains sent to the headquarters of 21 Army Group in Brussels, whence he was posted to 8 Corps Rear of the Second Army in Holland. Billeted near Eindhoven, Hardman had poignant experiences, including meeting Jewish children who had been trained to deny that they were Jewish and a Jewish family who had survived in hiding. During Hanukah an old man arrived and made a hole in a potato for a little oil which he lit for Hanukah, as he had done while in hiding. The man had buried his goods in the gardens of some houses; Hardman located the houses with the help of the local burgermeister and, accompanied by some Jewish soldiers whom he had assembled, prevailed on their owners to dig up and restore the man’s property.⁴⁹

By 1945 Hardman was the Jewish Chaplain to 8 Corps of the British Second Army.⁵⁰ On the second day of Passover he crossed the Rhine. He related the start of his experiences of Belsen:

The day after the entry of the British troops into Belsen on April 15, 1945, I returned from Holland to my regimental headquarters at Celle. When I arrived I was greeted with a brooding, heavy stillness; over everything was an ominous hush. I went into the mess and found several officers, all of them strangely quiet. They greeted me in silence. I asked,

“What’s happening? What’s wrong? – there seems to be a peculiar feeling . . .” One of them came over to me; he said reluctantly: “We’ve uncovered a concentration camp.”

He turned his head away, but not before I caught the pity in his eyes.

The Colonel sent for me, and I went with a stone instead of a heart. I found him grim and white faced; something had changed him too.

“Keep a stiff upper lip, Padre”, he said. “We’ve just been into Belsen concentration camp, and it’s horrible; but you have got to go there; you’ll find a lot of your people. It’s too late to go now, go tomorrow morning.”⁵¹

Hardman recorded that the colonel used the words “ghastly, hellish, indescribable”. He described how the following morning, which was Monday 16 April, he drove at reckless speed the distance of some twelve miles from Celle to Belsen. Signs nailed on almost every tree said “Danger-Typhus”. He showed his pass to the two British soldiers guarding the entrance and walked into camp 1. A girl, her face dark brown after (as he later learned) having being burned, made to throw her arms around

49 IWM 17636, 19577 (Hardman, oral history 1997; BBC Radio 4, 1999, sound).

50 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 68–9.

51 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 1.

him. With the instinct of self-preservation he jumped back. Instantly he felt ashamed; she understood and stood away from him. They walked together into the compound keeping their voluntary “no man’s land” between them. Dozens of emaciated bodies, naked and semi-naked, were huddled together. Hardman asked if they were asleep. The girl replied that they were dead and had been there for days.

As we walked on, towards us came what seemed to me to be the remnants of a holocaust – a tottering mass of blackened skin and bones, held together somehow with filthy rags. “My God, the dead are walking!” I cried aloud, but I did not recognise my voice. “They are not dead” said the girl. “But they soon will be.”⁵²

Over the next few days Hardman worked, as Rev. Levy wrote when he first found him, like a maniac.⁵³ The huts contained corpses, were infested by typhus and lice, and smelled abominable. Hardman recorded that the doctors would not go into them and that at the start none of the doctors knew what typhus was.⁵⁴ Powdered with DDT from head to foot, Hardman went into some of the huts. He talked at length with survivors, smoked, listened to them, tried to help them to slacken their tension, fed them, and distributed cigarettes.⁵⁵ From one hut there was a cry from people who asked him to go into the hut. They said that he could not save them but asked him to save a famous Jewish historian who was among them so that he could tell their story.⁵⁶ Hardman’s ability to speak Yiddish, which was the vernacular language of many Eastern European Jews, enabled him to communicate with survivors in a way in which other relief workers could not. He heard many stories of bestiality by the Germans, and witnessed evidence of cannibalism. Hardman wrote innumerable “chits” from his notebook for everything and gave them to survivors. “Chits” represented the resumption of authority, replacing “requisitioning”, which meant theft. On sheet after sheet of paper he recorded the names and addresses of survivors and everything that they could tell him about relatives and friends anywhere in the world, much of it barely sufficient to start enquiries, who might be able to be traced.⁵⁷

52 *Ibid.*, 1–3. When this was written in 1958 the term “holocaust” did not have the meaning which it later assumed.

53 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 15.

54 IWM 17636.

55 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 12, 18.

56 IWM 19577.

57 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 17, 22–3, 110.

Pits were dug alongside piles of bodies, into each of which some five thousand corpses had to be pushed by bulldozers of the Royal Engineers brought in for this task. As the bulldozer brought the bodies to the edge of the pit SS men working under the instructions of a British officer took what bodies they could grasp and threw them into the common grave. As each pit was finished a combined service was held by chaplains of different faiths and a noticeboard was erected stating the approximate or actual numbers of the dead and the date when the pit was closed.⁵⁸ Hardman conducted burials of some twenty thousand people, the first on Friday 20 April. He recorded that he turned to the officer in charge:

“Is it not possible to show some reverence to the dead?” “Padre, I deeply regret it, but we must bury them as quickly as possible; apart from the ghastly sight, there is the danger of disease.” His voice was gentle with understanding and I knew that something of my bitter sadness had reached him. “We shall let you know when we have finished”, he said. “Come back then; you will wish to say some prayers, I’m sure.”

Hardman invited the Protestant Padre to say the first prayers. The Padre replied that it would be more fitting for Hardman to do so, as most of the dead were Jewish. Hardman conducted other burials in mass graves dug for 1,000, 5,000, and 8,000 bodies.⁵⁹ Doubtless he selected readings from the Jewish Burial Service. He recited the Kaddish, over and over, at every burial, although there may not have been the *minyán* (quorum) of ten Jews that is required to recite it. Hardman recorded that at one point one SS officer became human for a moment and rushed out of the camp, and soldiers shot him dead.⁶⁰

On the fifth day of liberation – 19 or perhaps 20 April – Hardman witnessed one Fanya Perier, who must have been an inmate, playing “God Save the King” on a piano.⁶¹ On the first Friday evening in the camp, 20 April, he conducted among twenty or thirty survivors the traditional service which inaugurates the Sabbath. It ended with the Kaddish and the survivors singing *Hatikva*, “The Hope”, a melody of life and redemption which was to become the national anthem of the new state of Israel. The recording is infinitely poignant.⁶² One Friday evening in a hut in which

58 NAM file 1994-09-30, 6; Reilly, *Belsen*, 28; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 44.

59 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 16–17, 24, 31, 51–2; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 11; IWM 19577.

60 IWM 19577, 17636.

61 IWM 30528 (service at Bergen Belsen) (Hardman, sound).

62 IWM 19577, 30528.

some people were alive and some dead, a woman with a baby asked him to make Kiddush.⁶³ Hardman suffered from diarrhoea, contracted from making Kiddush on a Friday evening in one of the huts where there was water from a tank which somebody had fallen into. On another or perhaps the same occasion he suffered an attack of dysentery from sharing the concoction which the inmates had contrived to make as a meal. The BBC reporter Richard Dimpleby asked Hardman to conduct a service in Hebrew and English.⁶⁴

In the days and weeks after liberation thousands of inmates died. At the outset the soldiers saw something out of hell, and gave them their bully beef and biscuits. A large convoy of lorries with food and water arrived on the morning of the day that Hardman arrived, 16 April.⁶⁵ One inmate, Elisabeth Sommer-Lefkovits, recalled the arrival of huge cisterns of water and of food. The food which the inmates were given at the outset was unsuitable for starving people and some of it contributed to their deaths.⁶⁶ An expert in the relief of famine in Bengal, Dr Arnold Meiklejohn, was brought in by the authorities. His Bengal famine mixture saved many, although Hardman had to explain to him that the mixture was too sweet for the taste of Jews, who needed something of a more sour taste. Dr Meiklejohn later acknowledged that until then he had not understood why detainees had refused to eat it.⁶⁷

Virtually unsupported at the outset, Hardman's achievements were remarkable. The very presence of a fellow Jew and a rabbi⁶⁸ with Star of David insignia in the British Army gave heart to many inmates. Hardman spent long hours talking with them, and visited and fed the seriously sick. The speed and efficacy of the British response has been subsequently much debated.⁶⁹ Constantly frustrated by what he saw as ponderous British bureaucracy and realizing sooner than most what had to be done, Hardman railed against what he saw as the army's dithering and delay and the lack of progress in the early days. To him, "They were too slow".

63 IWM 17636.

64 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 30; IWM 17636.

65 War Diary of 63 Anti-Tank Regiment, Royal Artillery, inc. Report on Belsen Camp by Taylor; NAM file 1994-09-30, 3.

66 Elisabeth Sommer-Lefkovits, *Are You in This Hell Too? Memories of Troubled Times 1944–1945* (London: Menard Press, 1995), 62–3; NAM file 1994-09-30, 3.

67 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 99–101; IWM 17636, 19577.

68 Like most British Jewish ministers of that era, Hardman had not in fact been ordained as a rabbi, but was naturally assumed to be one.

69 E.g. Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 193.

Initially there were two British medical units at Belsen. The Eleventh Light Field Ambulance comprised some two hundred men commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Mervyn Gonin, who was a general practitioner and a Territorial Army officer. The unit was trained to follow British tanks into battle and evacuate their wounded. Casualty Clearing Station 32 (32 CCS) was a mobile surgical unit commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel James Johnston, a regular army officer, which comprised two operating teams with ancillary staff including eight nurses. As a regular officer, Johnston was made senior medical officer at Belsen. Brigadier Hugh Llewelyn Glynn Hughes, the Chief Medical Officer to the British Second Army, arrived in Belsen on the first day, Sunday 15 April, and remained in overall medical command there for many months, arriving there in the evenings after the work and fighting of the day.⁷⁰ In the early days the medical task seemed hopeless. Rev. Levy recorded talking with the medical staff of 32 CCS who “were relaxing after a long and gruelling day and were drinking heavily, sinking into a state of complete intoxication. ‘If we were not to drink,’ they said, ‘we would go stark, staring mad. We are doctors and are supposed to heal, but this task is hopeless. They die on us as soon as we touch them’.”⁷¹ From improvised beginnings there ultimately arrived at Belsen, under Hughes and Johnston’s pressure, two British field hospitals, together with a group of traditionally starched “QAs” (Queen Alexandra’s army nurses), further consignments of British nurses, ninety-seven British medical students (who when they departed were replaced by 150 Belgian medical students), and even German doctors and nurses.⁷² By the end of May the hospital established in the military barracks of camp 2 was the largest hospital in Europe, with 14,000 beds and 13,000 (Shephard) or 15,000 (Levy) patients.⁷³

In the very early days Hardman appealed to Colonel Johnston, who allowed him to set up a “first-aid centre” in camp 1, the death camp. With Doctor Natolski and Lieutenant Marian Tatarczuk, who were both Polish political prisoners, and Stephen Green of the British Red Cross, Hardman created the first improvised hospital at Belsen in what had been the SS pharmacy, which contained some medical supplies. Hardman got it cleaned up by SS women, and doctors and nurses among the inmates

70 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 44, 45, 48–9, 220 n. 21; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 19.

71 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 11. Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 67.

72 NAM file 1994-09-30, 6.

73 NAM file 1994-09-30, 6; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 89, 115, 129–30, 237 n. 13; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 24.

helped to establish it. There was space for about a dozen beds, with two patients to a bed, so that it accommodated twenty to thirty sick people at a time. Serving in the first four weeks of liberation as a miniature hospital, its staff struggled to save lives, caring for critically ill people until they could be evacuated to the new hospital in the military barracks.⁷⁴

Natolski, Tatarczuk, Green, and Hardman each assumed a specific role. Hardman's was to secure food. He foraged the countryside for food, bringing in, he said, within forty-eight hours food which took the army a week to obtain. He shot a deer, strapped its carcass to his vehicle and brought it in. He induced a unit of Polish troops living on a farm to send in milk, vegetables, and eggs for, as he told them, starving Polish troops encamped nearby, and they did so for a week.⁷⁵ There were cows on a farm, and a Polish officer brought in their milk. Derrick Sington wrote:

But Captain Hardman's energy and ingenuity were indefatigable. He found tinned milk, peas and porridge in Hungarian Red Cross parcels, which should have reached the political prisoners long before but which had been retained in the pharmacy by the SS for their own use. He obtained chocolate, cocoa, coffee, rice and fresh milk by requisitioning [doubtless meaning theft] and appealing. One lecture of his to an RAF unit secured a large quantity of rice and chocolate – whether officially or unofficially nobody knew.⁷⁶

The units of British soldiers were rotated every few days, as conditions were too ghastly for them to be there longer. Quaker relief teams arrived at Belsen. They included Jane Leveson, who was initially the only Jewish woman working in the camp. She wore a Star of David emblem on her uniform, and so became the focus for requests from Jewish internees. When he heard that she was there, Hardman asked for her and, according to one of her colleagues, Elizabeth Townley Dearden, “pinched” her to help him in his medical centre. In early May 1945 she worked with him in camp 1. Jewish relief agencies also arrived, including the Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad (JCRA), formed in Britain, for which Jane Leveson also worked. She asked that the agency send out religious items, including *tallesim* (prayer shawls). One group of survivors got hold of

74 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 35–6; Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, 60–65, 73; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 194.

75 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 47–8; IWM 19577.

76 Sington, *Belsen Uncovered*, 60–65.

a tallit which they used as a tablecloth; Leveson wrote that the Yugoslav Army chaplain was furious when he saw it.⁷⁷

Over time, Hardman organized education for the children. He created a postal service for survivors to try to communicate with their families and encouraged people to write to all their relatives. The British treated the survivors as ex-prisoners of war and Army regulations allowed them to send only prisoner of war postcards with formulaic phrases such as “I have been captured by the enemy” and “I am well”. Against regulations Hardman and Levy allowed letters to be sent through the military postal system. A young boy who had seen his parents murdered had gone out to kill Germans but had found that he could not. Hardman had him equipped with a battledress made by the army tailor and a bicycle and appointed him to be a postman, collecting and delivering letters. Much later Hardman officiated at his wedding. People were reunited through the postal service, including two sisters who were ultimately reunited with their brother in Havana in Cuba.⁷⁸ Eventually it became possible to bury people individually, and Jewish chaplains conducted individual funerals of people whom surviving inmates recognized as a relative or a friend; the first person whom Hardman buried was Esther Iskowitz, whose sister Shoshana had survived.⁷⁹

A Jewish nursing sister-in-charge of one of the two hospitals, each with about 150 beds, wrote in May 1945 that there was a Jewish army chaplain who, she was told, was working like a Trojan, not on the hospital side but on the “dirty” side, where he had a flock of about forty thousand.⁸⁰ Hardman recorded how he fell into bed every night exhausted. In his dark moments he pondered mankind’s endless intolerance of Jews. He found it very difficult to praise God and was made to question, but got no answers. In his black moments he asked himself if God had deserted him but when help came recognized the Divine Presence. At one point he did not think

77 Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 84, 111, 159, 160, 222 n. 18, 232–4 nn. 9, 10; IWM 15626 (Jane Levy [née Leveson], sound); 15625 (Dearden, sound); LMA, ACC/3121/C/11/007/03/D/016 (JCRA re Germany, etc., report by Jane Leveson of 6 May 1945).

78 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, x, 39–41; Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 22. IWM 17636, 19577.

79 Wellcome Library, London, RAMC/1790 (Reflections of Forty Years Ago – Belsen 1945, by Dr D. T. Prescott, second-in-command of the 11th (British) Light Field Ambulance, 1985); “You Don’t Have to be Jewish”, with Leslie Hardman and Gena and Norman Turgel, BBC Radio, 13 April 1975.

80 LMA, ACC/3121/C/11/007/03/D/016 (Jewish Committee for Relief Abroad [JCRA], re Germany, etc., letter, May 1945).

that prayers suited the conditions, and for three or four days he rejected religious ritual and could not don his tallit and tefillin or recite his morning prayers. He concluded that God had given “man free will” and that it was “man who had done this, not God”. Hardman questioned his faith but concentrated on practical actions to save people. “Do things between man and man and leave God alone”, he later said, reflecting a view within Jewish philosophy that since evil is ultimately beyond human understanding the correct Halakhic response to it is to confront it pragmatically.⁸¹

Rev. Dr. Louis Morris Sanker (born in 1909 and married) ministered to Bristol Hebrew Congregation. He joined the Royal Air Force Volunteer Reserve on 1 September 1944 and was appointed on 17 November the Senior Jewish Chaplain to the 2nd Tactical Airforce Rear in the rank of Squadron Leader. Sanker arrived in Belsen some ten days after its liberation and spent a week there. He arranged for Air Force units to contribute everything they could spare to alleviate the suffering there, and vast quantities of food and supplies were donated. One Royal Air Force Reserve squadron went on biscuits for two days to allow the white bread to go to Belsen. Sanker took Hardman to a Royal Canadian Air Force unit, and after Hardman had talked with their officers the medical officer ransacked his whole medical room and the officers contributed and sent in truckloads of food and medical supplies.⁸²

At one point an American Jewish Padre arrived at Belsen. Hardman told him that after local foraging for food an order had come that no food was to be brought into the camp other than that provided by the authorities. The next day the American arrived in an ambulance packed with loaves of white bread, which were discreetly unloaded and distributed. Suffering from starvation, some people died clutching the loaves in their hands. Hardman sent five sick Lithuanian girls with the American chaplain Joseph Shuboff to an American army hospital. Years later he met these women, who were well, in Israel.⁸³

Hardman’s book narrates numerous poignant human stories in which his pastoral role is the constant theme. Against orders he hospitalized one

81 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 32, 35, 41, 44–8, 55, 58, 104; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 68–73, 194; IWM 17636, 19577.

82 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 46–8; IWM 17636, 19577; JC, 25 May, 7; 1 June 1945, 9.

83 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 48; IWM 17636, 19577; Grobman, *Rekindling the Flame*, 62. Shuboff, from Boston and originally from Lithuania, is referred to in the testimony of Kurt Kupferberg as having conducted his wedding in Berlin at Purim in 1946: USHMM, Archives RG-50.462*0016.

inmate by stopping an ambulance and putting the person in it, perhaps saving their life. For this he was roundly castigated by Colonel Johnston, although he recorded that Johnston later apologized. He helped a husband and wife who had found each other alive in the camp to find the will to live again. He counselled a woman doctor who as an inmate had achieved miracles, to whom one of the British medical officers had proposed marriage. As life and hope slowly returned he conducted weddings. He encouraged a couple who had previously been engaged to renew their relationship and ultimately officiated at their marriage. He conducted the wedding of Sergeant Norman Turgel and Gina Goldfinger from Kraków in Poland, who wore a wedding dress made from British parachute silk.⁸⁴

After a while Hardman stayed in one of the houses outside the camp and was given a small room in the camp as an office, to which hundreds of people came to seek his help. One man came to ask if Hardman had something for Shabbat and Hardman gave him a tin of sardines. Seeing Hardman’s *tefillin* in his cupboard and shaking with emotion, the man asked to don them, which he had not been able to do for four years, and did so. Hardman gave him the *tefillin* to keep. The man left the tin of sardines on the table, and Hardman ran after him and put it in his pocket. Fifty years later, in 1995 or 1996, Hardman met this man in Los Angeles, well and prosperous.⁸⁵

Flanked by two other chaplains, Hardman conducted an open-air service at the festival of Shavuot on 18 or 19 May for some two hundred people in the square of the barrack buildings. As a photograph now in the Imperial War Museum shows, they were mainly women; Hardman speculated that perhaps the men could not bring themselves to believe. Before the Reading of the Law the chaplains recited the *Shema*, the core declaration of faith. They also sang *Hatikva*; some American Jews criticized Hardman for that, and only Derrick Sington backed him up.⁸⁶

These two other chaplains were the Polish Rabbi B. Goldfinger and the Yugoslav Rabbi Dr. Herman Helfgott. Rabbi Goldfinger was of the French Army and served in Brunswick.⁸⁷ Rabbi Helfgott was a chaplain in the Yugoslav army who was captured by the Germans in 1941 and liberated

84 “You Don’t Have to be Jewish”; Gena Turgel, *I Light a Candle* (London and Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995), 131–2; the Turgels settled in London and had children and grandchildren; Gina Turgel died in 2018.

85 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 31, 33, 53, 56–57, 66–73, 79–83, 90–98, 111–12; IWM 19577; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 141.

86 IWM 19577.

87 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 92, 97.

by the British near Celle in Germany in 1945. He made his way to Belsen, arriving there on 30 April, and threw himself into the work of the Central Jewish Committee which had been established there by former inmates. Isaac Levy recorded that he was a handsome young man with a striking personality and a beautiful singing voice, who enjoyed great popularity and made a distinctive contribution to the work of the committee and to maintaining the morale of the inmates. Later, in July 1947, the British authorities granted him recognition as the Chief Rabbi within the British Zone, where he was considered the foremost Halakhic authority and was consulted by the Rabbis of Celle and Hanover.⁸⁸

One British officer told Hardman that he had been a Blackshirt but that when he saw Bergen Belsen he “became converted from fascism” overnight. Even in Belsen Jewish chaplains had to face hostility. An officer from Australia or New Zealand said to Hardman that he must be used to this as his people had suffered for centuries. Hardman spat on the floor and left; later Colonel Bird came and apologized for this. On another occasion a newly arrived officer said that the majority of “these people” were “bloody Jews”. Hardman sobbed, a non-Jewish padre gripped him, and the officer apologized. At one point a lieutenant-colonel from headquarters accused Hardman of being a Zionist spy, and prepared a charge sheet citing various offences. Hardman took the document to Bird, who tore it up. Later a major from Second Army questioned Hardman about this lieutenant-colonel, who in the event was sent back to England.⁸⁹

Hardman had two periods of leave in England, one for seven days, which he utilized to address many meetings about Belsen and to appeal for assistance for the survivors. In Britain a man spotted his wife in a Pathe News film of Belsen. He was given a still from the film, and when Hardman was on leave showed it to him. To Hardman it was obvious that she was dead. He could not bring himself to tell the man this, and said that when he went back to Bergen Belsen he would enquire.⁹⁰

88 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 58; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 68–9, 92, 117, 135. Helfgott (1913–2002) was born into a Hasidic family in Yugoslavia. He went to Israel in 1948 and joined the Israeli Army as a chaplain, taking the name Zvi Asaria. From 1953 he served in Germany as the Rabbi of Cologne and Hanover, and worked to develop relations between Germany and Israel, to which he returned in 1962. He wrote books on his wartime experiences (*We are Witnesses* [Jerusalem: Yad Vashem Publications, 2010]), on the Jews of Cologne and Lower Saxony, on Samson Raphael Hirsch, on the position of Jews in Germany in 1960, and on the Jewish calendar.

89 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 54–5, 87–8; IWM 17636, 19577.

90 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 90; IWM 17636, 19577.

Initially some of the liberators were unable to treat survivors as “normal” human beings. This may have been a psychological coping mechanism. Language depicting the inmates as less than human was prevalent across many of the personal testimonies of nurses and others.⁹¹ Many witnesses referred to a mass, almost a herd of animals, not to individuals. Major J. R. Phillips, who was the Adviser in Psychiatry to the Second Army, admitted that on the first of his three visits to Belsen he had thought it impossible to believe that people who had been so badly treated could ever recover. A medical student considered his time wasted in treating a patient “because even if she survives she will never be a useful member of the community”. Stirred by patients’ cries for food, the nursing sister Molly Silva Jones wrote that “nothing we could do was enough to attempt to restore these sub-humans to some form of mental and physical health”. Even Levy’s reaction after his first visit to Belsen was: “I am certain that 90 per cent of those who survive will never be really normal. They have suffered too much.” Hardman despaired of this attitude, and believed that with sufficient care and concern the majority of the internees would make a full recovery. He understood, and tried to explain to his fellow officers, that the survivors had been subjected “not only to a deliberate extermination of themselves as a people but to a disintegration of their souls”.⁹²

Identifying strongly with his fellow Jews and unable to maintain the “stiff upper lip” which his colonel had enjoined on him on the first day, and which was then lauded as a feature of the British character, Hardman was infuriated by what he saw as the dithering bureaucracy of the early days. Resorting to self-help and viewed as an individualist rather than a team player, he became an increasing irritant to the authorities. He recorded that he took a “very independent” stance, nobody wanted him, and he was not invited to the daily army conferences (although his memoir implied that he had participated in them). Dr Meiklejohn warned him that he was

91 Jane Brooks, “‘The nurse stoops down . . . for me’: Nursing the Liberated Persons at Bergen-Belsen”, in *One Hundred Years of Wartime Nursing Practices 1854–1953*, ed. Jane Brooks and Christine E. Hallett (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 217, citing language such as “the poor emaciated creatures feebly trying to wash themselves”, “animals”, “Even now after six weeks of good food they still eat like pigs”, “although we fight to save them [the babies who were being born “all the time”], God knows why, I can’t think they’ll ever be any good”.

92 Reilly, Belsen, 41; Jane Brooks, *Negotiating Nursing: British Army Sisters and Soldiers in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 171–3; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 72.

being talked about at every army conference, and Sington, who remained at Belsen until August 1945, warned him to be careful.⁹³

On 24 June the survivors created a Central Jewish Committee to represent their interests. Hardman acted initially as its temporary chairman and then as its unofficial spokesman and as an intermediary between it and the authorities, trying to remain impartial but inevitably at points being distrusted by both and, as mentioned, being accused of acting as a Zionist agent. At one point he took Josef Rosensaft, the Jewish leader of the camp, to meet SJC Brodie at army headquarters.⁹⁴

Hardman spent two months in Bergen Belsen. He recognized, at least later, that it had been arranged by the army for him to leave. When he departed there was a farewell gathering for him.⁹⁵ Determined to tell the world, Hardman spoke of his experiences. In an unattributed article in the *Jewish Chronicle* of June 1945, all but certainly by him, entitled “Jewish Inmates at Belsen Camp – what is needed now”, the writer described how all of the relief work had been a matter of stage by stage. He appealed for the inmates to be taken out of lager life and allowed to resettle wherever in the world they wished, including Palestine. “In God’s name and all that is noble and dear in life, I appeal to the Government to hear my plea.” By the time that Hardman left there were two other Jewish chaplains at Belsen.⁹⁶

Leslie Hardman thought of what he called a poem: “If all of the sky were paper, and all of the trees were pens, and all of the waters were ink, there would still not be enough material to describe the sufferings at the hands of the Nazis.”⁹⁷

93 Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 84; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 72; IWM 17636, 19577. The U.S. chaplain Abraham Klausner was also excluded from army conferences.

94 Levy, *Witness to Evil*, 46; Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 85–7, 100; Reilly, *Belsen in History*, 229.

95 IWM 19577; Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 113; Shephard, *After Daybreak*, 158.

96 JC, 29 June 1945, 12; LMA, ACC/3121/E/02/052 (Board of Deputies: Concentration Camp Reports); Hardman and Goodman, *Survivors*, 108.

97 IWM 19577.