

1<sup>st</sup> Place Essay Winner  
Laila Brustin  
Nashville School of the Arts  
Grade: 11

Liberation & Recovery:  
Reflections on the 75th Anniversary of the Liberation of Nazi Death Camps

Liberation is sudden and bright, shocking and difficult to comprehend. Entering freedom after enduring endless hardship and suffering at the Nazi death camps was intense and profound. The liberated cried, prayed, shouted, and jumped. Others were numb, unable to believe that freedom had arrived. Then there were those, with all of their power, strength, and might, who danced.

Dancing as a form of self-expression is as ancient as the Pharaohs. Having witnessed a miracle and been liberated from Pharaoh's rule, Miriam gathered the Israelite women at the Red Sea. Through dancing, they rejoiced and declared their freedom. From slavery in ancient Egypt, through the mass murders of the Holocaust, until the creation of modern-day Israel, Jews have shared a generational connection through dance.

Survivors of the Holocaust were entering into a life which had been stolen away. Family, communities, and homes had been taken from each person. For most, the future was uncertain. However, even in the midst of incertitude, Holocaust survivor George Salton remembers the hope felt when reaching liberation: "Everyone was jumping and dancing and trying to embrace them and kiss the American soldiers." Even in their weakest state, there was celebration.

After liberation, survivors went to displaced persons camps. The road to recovery was long, and to this day is still being reached. In the displaced persons camps, survivors were trying to acclimate and return to as normal a life as possible. Even with complete uncertainty and healing scars, there were still moments of celebration, hope, and ruach (spirit). In the Zeilsheim camp, the power of dance was felt. The children in the camp came together and performed. They still had the strength and spirit to celebrate freedom despite being incredibly young and having experienced incredible loss. Similarly, in the displaced persons camp in Hasenhecke, Germany, Jews came together and danced after the UN Partition Plan went through in 1947. Other events, too, affirmed the resilience and liberty of these pieced-together communities. In Landsberg, Germany, Freida Weinreich, a survivor and Memphis resident, met her future husband, Sam. Both the sole survivors of their families, the couple married and began to rebuild their lives together. These moments of love and perseverance gave room to believe in a life beyond the horrors of the Holocaust.

Finally, in 1948 the state of Israel was formed. Jews from all across Europe came together to create a community that shared the same connection of Judaism and force of resilience. There was always uncertainty for the future, and always the horrors of the past. However, there was still hope and room enough for dancing and celebration. The early chalutzim (pioneers) of Israel created a unifying culture to integrate into one nation. Hebrew was revived, new music was composed, and Israeli folk dancing was created. The dancing was intersectional in culture and encouraged solidarity. Building from scratch, Jews were finding their life once more.

In the recent anti-hate satire film, *Jojo Rabbit*, dancing with vitality and freedom, was brought before the eyes of everyday people. Jojo, a ten-year-old Hitler youth, and Elsa, a Jewish

refugee hidden in his house, share a moment of hope. Jojo asks, “What will you do when you are free?” Elsa replies, “I will dance.”

These words are a reminder that dancing allows for the power of hope even when the world is unpredictable. The survivors of the Holocaust faced hardship but found the unimaginable strength to continue life and share their stories. From the first moments of liberation through the endless journey of recovery, the survivors have remained hopeful and strong in ways that will be remembered and recounted forever.