

L'Chayim

Light broke on the horizon. Surprise and fear washed over the thousand bodies standing in the courtyard. We had been herded outside in the black of the night, waiting for death that would come before the morning. Barking dogs and barking men ushered us into what we assumed would be the last formation we'd ever make, other than the formation of our bodies in graves. And yet morning had arrived and we were still breathing, our bodies shaking. Several women on the outside of the herd started laughing. Why? The guard towers were empty. No guards stood around us, ensuring that we remained in our herd. No one was keeping us here, except the barbed wire fence. For the first time in six years, we were free, but freedom at the end of a war comes at a price.

The days that followed our liberation felt like years. British soldiers flooded into the camp and didn't know how to deal with emaciated humans. They gave us food, but many people ate too fast, so fast that their stomachs exploded. Death was normal to us, and yet the death of each newly free person broke our spirits again. Those who didn't die were sick for days because we had food but not the bodily tools prepared for the onslaught of calories and nutrients. What a sick joke: here's food and freedom, but your body is too destroyed to appreciate either. And, in the midst of this evil irony, I saw the women around me as individuals with personalities and voices, and not simply as fellow Jews on their way to the slaughter. The Nazis had dehumanized us, but we had also dehumanized ourselves; we hadn't allowed ourselves to form connections to one another because, if the Nazis had anything to say about it, we would all be dead by morning. Those personal relationships and friendships on which I thrived as a child disappeared for six years. And now, with that single ray of light breaking through the Bavarian cloudbank, British soldiers brought us our freedom and a new chance at life. I'm young and should be hopeful. It's so hard to be positive after witnessing my brothers and sisters brutally butchered simply for existing. And yet, hope filled the void left by the death and destruction we had witnessed.

The next months were all a blur. In typical Jewish fashion, we built a community as quickly as one could snap his fingers or order 2,000 people into the gas chambers. We turned death into life. Within 10 months of liberation, many of the women I had befriended were married. Some were even pregnant with new Jews who would never know the terrors we endured, new children with a fighting chance at life. There could be no greater gift from Gd than that.

The motions of life became a routine once more. Rebuild. But this place could never be a home, never a comforting place. Rebuild. Create more Jews to replace the beautiful souls that were lost. Rebuild. Push the pain further and further back from your consciousness because you have to rebuild. As much as it hurts, we were given a second chance at life. It's ours for the taking. With the horrors behind us, it's time to rise from the ashes and the despair. To life: *L'Chayim* .

Sarah Broniscer
Margolin Hebrew Academy, Grade 12