

# National Days of Remembrance

## LIBERATION 1945

When I was liberated in 1945 by the American Army, somehow many of us were convinced that at least one lesson will have been learned—that never again will there be war, that hatred is not an option, that racism is stupid . . . I was so hopeful.

—Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, during a June 2009 visit to the Buchenwald Concentration Camp with President Barack Obama, reflecting on his feelings at the moment he was freed

As Allied soldiers were closing in on Germany in the spring of 1945, they encountered dozens of concentration camps and were suddenly confronted with the reality of Nazi atrocities. The few surviving victims fully experienced the depths of human evil and depravity. For the soldiers, however, even the brutality of war did not prepare them for what they encountered.

Upon seeing Buchenwald, a member of the 333rd Engineers Regiment stated, “My feeling was that this was the most shattering experience of my life.” A US Army chaplain trying to make sense of the carnage wrote to his wife, “This was a hell on earth if there ever was one.” After photographing Buchenwald, Margaret Bourke-White wrote to her editor at *Life* magazine, “The sights I have just seen are so unbelievable that I don’t think I will believe them myself until I’ve seen the photographs.” One American journalist wrote, “Buchenwald is beyond all comprehension. You just can’t understand it, even when you’ve seen it.”

And that was the problem. Survivors and other eyewitnesses understood and believed. But would the world? General Dwight D. Eisenhower grasped this problem and, after visiting a subcamp of Buchenwald, he addressed his staff: “I want every American unit not actually in the front lines to see this place. We are told the American soldier does not know what he is fighting for. Now, at least he will know what he is fighting against.”

Eisenhower not only understood that this was a war that at its very essence was a struggle for the freedom of peoples and the ideals on which civilization is based, but also that the horror was so extreme that it might not be believed.

Realizing that a failure to believe would be a danger for the future of mankind, he ordered other soldiers to visit the camps and encouraged journalists and members of Congress and the British Parliament to bear witness as well. He wanted others to be, just as he was, “in a position to give *first-hand* evidence of these things if ever, in the future, there develops a tendency to charge these allegations merely to ‘propaganda.’” And ultimately he was right.

Sixty-four years later, standing at Buchenwald with Elie Wiesel by his side, President Barack Obama acknowledged the value of bearing witness: “We are here today because this work is not finished. To this day, there are those who insist that the Holocaust never happened—a denial of fact and truth that is baseless and ignorant and hateful. This place is the ultimate rebuke to such thoughts, a reminder of our duty to confront those who would tell lies about our history.”

President Obama referred to the Holocaust as “our history,” understanding that Holocaust memory belongs to all of humanity. Because unlike the battle-hardened soldiers who liberated the camps and brought freedom to Europe, we now know that the unthinkable is thinkable. We know all too well the human capacity for evil and the catastrophic consequences of indifference in the face of evil. And we now realize that to preserve human freedom, **what we do matters.** Every day each of us has the potential to shape the world in which we live. By keeping these stories of freedom alive and building on Elie Wiesel’s original hope, each of us must work to promote human dignity and confront hate whenever and wherever it occurs. As the American soldiers who unwittingly became liberators understood, our future depends on it.