

CASE STUDY IN FALSE MEMORY: THE LIBERATION OF BUCHENWALD

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ABSTRACT

The inevitable disappearance of living Holocaust survivors has encouraged efforts to gather as many testimonies from survivors (and liberators, veterans, rescuers, and others) as possible before this generation passes from the scene. These testimonies are treated with reverence and respect, and may not be approached with an appropriate skepticism given the difficult and complicated conditions under which the memories were formed and recalled. Some of these testimonies contain false memories: memories individuals have adopted as their own from some other source, or have fabricated. The liberation of Buchenwald is used as a case study to examine the place of false liberator and survivor testimony in public discourse about the Holocaust. The role of institutions such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and others in presenting such testimonies to the public is discussed.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

George R. Mastroianni is an experimental psychologist interested in the Holocaust. His previous work has focused on the role of social influence, including obedience and conformity, on perpetrator behavior, the WWII twin research of Kurt Gottschaldt, and the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison in 2003. His works include *Of Mind and Murder: Toward a More Comprehensive Psychology of the Holocaust*; *Misremembering the Holocaust: The Liberation of Buchenwald and the Limits of Memory*; and *Rumors of Injustice: The Cases of Ilse Koch and Rudolph Spanner*.

AUTHOR NOTE

This paper is based in part on research done for my book *Misremembering the Holocaust: The Liberation of Buchenwald and the Limits of Memory*. Several of the examples discussed in this paper are explained more fully in the book.

CASE STUDY IN FALSE MEMORY: THE LIBERATION OF BUCHENWALD

The appearance of the miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978¹ both reflected and stimulated growing interest in the topic in American society at the time. In the decades that followed, public engagement with the Holocaust continued to expand, and the voices of many survivors, WWII veterans, and others who in many cases had not thought or spoken about their Holocaust experiences for many years began to be heard. The testimony of those who had lived through the momentous events of the Holocaust was and is recognized as a unique and valuable, but perishable, historical resource. Partly in anticipation of the inevitable passing of this generation from the scene, ambitious efforts to acquire and preserve records of the personal reports and recollections of Holocaust survivors have been undertaken. Interviews have been conducted and transcribed, and thousands of hours of audio and video recordings have been made. Some of these efforts are systematic and professional, others are less formal.

Within just a few years of the first airing of the miniseries *Holocaust* in 1978, something else with important implications for our understanding of the historical events associated with the Holocaust (and everything else) occurred: the internet. A person who had just viewed *Holocaust* in 1978 and wished to learn more about what had been seen would have had to search libraries, newspaper archives, and other sources to learn more. A person with a newfound interest in the Holocaust today would most likely type the word *Holocaust* into an internet search engine. Typing the word *Holocaust* into Google currently produces about 137,000,000 results. Some of the material found among those

results is scholarly material produced by competent researchers and writers in which the lay person can have considerable confidence.

Scholarly materials are not the only ones to be found on the internet, though. News stories, videos of speeches and presentations, materials archived and produced by museums, by advocacy groups, Holocaust deniers, individuals with a connection to or interest in the Holocaust, and much more may also be found. Some of this material is accurate; some contains misinformation and disinformation. All of it can be available on the internet more or less indefinitely, as there is no formal mechanism which judges the truth of internet content, and the content has no real expiration date.

HOLOCAUST “TESTIMONY”

A significant portion of the 137,000,000 Holocaust-related items residing on the internet are connected in some way to what is often referred to as survivor (or liberator, perpetrator, or rescuer) *testimony*. Many survivors have written books or memoirs about their experiences; many have contributed their personal recollections in the form of interviews with scholars, or with reporters writing stories about Holocaust remembrance events, or in formal audio or video records made specifically to be added to large collections of such material maintained specifically for the purpose of preserving this information before it is lost forever. Such collections may be found at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum², at the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive³, and at the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies⁴, for example.

The term “testimony” is not used in a legal sense in this context, which might imply that it is given under some kind of oath, though the use of the term may confer an

air of gravitas or credibility to statements made by Holocaust survivors because of its legal connotations. Statements made by Holocaust survivors are, however accorded special credibility by most of us, based solely on the status of the provider as a Holocaust survivor. Many of us seem to think that when a Holocaust survivor talks about Holocaust-related events, what we hear can be trusted as true: we are not inclined to approach statements made by Holocaust survivors about their experiences with the same skepticism with which we might approach non-Holocaust-related recollections offered by people of similar ages and circumstances. We may also fear that questioning the testimony of a survivor may be mistaken for questioning the Holocaust itself, bringing with it the risk of appearing to be a Holocaust denier.

Privileging these memories may also in part be an act of reverence: the moral and emotional significance of the Holocaust is so monumental that it simply seems wrong to question survivor's statements. It feels somehow inappropriate to treat stories told by Holocaust survivors in the same way that we treat more mundane material. Many people also mistakenly believe that memories that are associated with significant trauma are inherently more trustworthy than other memories: how could someone possibly misremember such important and traumatic events, we think? But people do misremember such events. Memories of Holocaust survivors are no more likely to be accurate than any other memories, and may sometimes be less so: the nature of Holocaust survivors' experiences may actually have made it more difficult for some of them to remember some events accurately.

FALSE MEMORIES

Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus and her colleagues have studied the conditions under which so-called false memories may arise. Two factors that often contribute to the development of false memories are the misinformation effect and the occurrence of misattribution. The misinformation effect refers to the power of post-event information to shape our recollections of our past experiences. Loftus' now-classic demonstration of this effect⁵ placed research participants in a laboratory in which they watched a short film that portrayed a minor automobile collision. After watching the film, the research participants answered questions about what they had seen on the film. One question asked them to estimate the vehicles' speed at the time of collision. The question was asked of different participants with subtle variations, however. Some participants were asked how fast the vehicles were traveling when they CONTACTED each other; others were asked how fast they were traveling when they SMASHED each other. Bearing in mind that all participants had viewed the same film, Loftus' then-surprising finding was that there was a measurable and significant difference in the estimated speed of the vehicles at the time of collision depending solely on the way the question was asked. Participants who were asked about vehicles that SMASHED each other reported higher speeds than those who had been asked about vehicles that merely CONTACTED one another.

This deliberate manipulation may seem a bit contrived, but the effect is real, and it is sometimes the case that interviewers of Holocaust survivors, who are not always professionally-trained historians, make mistakes in asking questions that can distort survivor memories in just this way. This exchange, between an interviewer and a US Army veteran named Harry Herder, Jr., who popularized a false story about his

participation in the liberation of Buchenwald, is a good example. The interview resides in the collection of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum:

Interviewer: “Did you see the gas chamber at Buchenwald?”

Herder: “Did I see...?”

Interviewer: “Mm hmm. The gas chamber at Buchenwald.”

Herder: “No. In fact I thought of it later. Well in fact at that time we didn’t even know there was such a thing as a gas chamber.”

Interviewer: “I see.”

Herder: “Yeah...and it was a room next to the furnace but we never thought to go in there and it was only after we got home and heard all the nonsense that we thought well my God, there must have been one there someplace.”⁶”

Only there never was a gas chamber at Buchenwald. The leading, falsely premised question asked by the interviewer persuaded Herder that there must have been a gas chamber “there someplace” at Buchenwald, though there was no such structure. Herder then invented a specific location for the gas chamber: the room next to the furnace (in the crematorium). This kind of misinformation can sometimes set the stage for another powerful memory-distorting mechanism: misattribution.

Misattribution occurs when we adopt information obtained through external sources as a personal memory. A common everyday example many of us have experienced occurs when we hear a story about ourselves in our early childhood told by our parents or others, and come to believe we remembered the events ourselves. This is sometimes called “source confusion”: another version happens when we can’t remember if a particular incident really happened, or if it occurred only in a dream.

Misattribution is most likely to occur when there are abundant sources of post-event information to misattribute to our own memories. Many survivors, liberators, and soldiers did not talk much about their wartime experiences in the decades after WWII, for a variety of reasons: in essence, they actively avoided exposing themselves to post-event information. A survivor who did not talk about or hear much about events related to their wartime experiences might thus be in a good position to recall those events accurately when the attempt at recall was made later. Until the early 1980's many survivors, liberators and veterans were in exactly this position. But once interest in the Holocaust exploded after the appearance of *Holocaust* in 1978, the public square was increasingly saturated with information, true and false, about the Holocaust.

In 1982, the film *Sophie's Choice*⁷ appeared; in 1985, *Shoah*⁸; in 1993, the same year the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened, *Schindler's List*⁹. These films generated discussion, news stories, and were followed by still more Holocaust-related films. Survivors of the Holocaust and veterans who had seen or participated in the liberation of the camps were sought out for interviews, were invited to speak at various public events, and began to think again about events that had for many been buried since the end of WWII decades earlier. The flood of Holocaust material inevitably led to instances of misattribution. One well-known example is the iconic scene of "selection" by the notorious SS physician Josef Mengele on the ramp at Auschwitz. This scene has been presented dramatically many times, and some survivors of Auschwitz who were known to be in the camp at a time when Mengele was not present there have nonetheless come to remember witnessing this scene themselves: they have misattributed the scene encountered on film to their own memory¹⁰.

That some survivors or veterans might come to misattribute a scene from a film or a story heard on the news to their own experience should be neither surprising nor especially concerning. Our life histories are riddled with false memories, many of which accompany us throughout our lives without our awareness of them, or any harm arising from them. But some survivors and veterans have developed elaborate false memories of their experiences during the Holocaust and World War II. In some cases, these false stories have been uncritically accepted and actively promoted by well-known Holocaust memorial organizations, such as the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum¹¹ in Washington, D.C. the Holocaust Center for Humanity¹² in Seattle, the National WWII Museum¹³ in New Orleans, and even the Public Broadcasting Service¹⁴. In one case, a veteran's false memory enmeshed a genuine survivor in a false narrative that was widely promoted at the *March of the Living*¹⁵, an annual remembrance event held at Auschwitz.

THE LIBERATION OF BUCHENWALD: PERFECT STORM FOR FALSE MEMORIES?

Buchenwald was a Nazi concentration camp located near the town of Weimar. Founded in 1937, Buchenwald housed mainly German political and criminal prisoners in its early years. Many Jews arrested during *Kristallnacht* in late 1938 were also sent there. As the war turned against the Germans in 1943 and later, and as the Russians closed in on Germany from the east, many thousands of prisoners of all kinds were evacuated from camps further east, swelling the population of Buchenwald and other camps and creating catastrophic conditions in them.

Buchenwald was liberated on April 11, 1945, by U.S. forces. There were more than 21,000 prisoners still in the camp at liberation, many of whom were in desperate

need of food, water, sanitary services, and medical help. The United States Army occupied Buchenwald until early July, 1945, when it was turned over to the Russians, though most of the prisoners had been evacuated by late May. General Dwight Eisenhower (who never visited Buchenwald) saw the camp as an opportunity to show the world “what we had been fighting for” and encouraged and facilitated visits by delegations of dignitaries, reporters, and American soldiers. Thousands of soldiers visited Buchenwald during the period of American occupation, and of course stories, photos, and films about Buchenwald appeared in newspapers, magazines, and newsreels around the world.

Buchenwald makes an interesting case study for false Holocaust memories because chance seems to have created a kind of perfect storm of circumstances conducive to the production of false memories concerning the camp and its liberation. Psychologists talk about three stages in memory: encoding, storage, and retrieval. Encoding is the process of getting environmental stimulation (sights, sounds, sensations) into a form in which it might be potentially stored in the brain. An important component of this part of the process is *attention*: much of what we experience in our lives goes unremembered because it does not attract our attention. Storage is the representation of information in our brain. This is a physical and physiological process: memory is a change that takes place in networks of neurons in our brains, and memories are subject to loss or degradation during storage. Retrieval is the process of bringing a memory back into conscious awareness. This stage of the process can be affected by a variety of factors: we have already mentioned the misinformation effect and misattribution.

REMEMBERING BUCHENWALD: A SPECIAL CHALLENGE FOR VETERANS

Let's consider the special circumstances of Buchenwald separately for veterans (especially American soldiers) and survivors in the context of these three stages of memory. The last months of World War II in Europe were very fast-paced. The armored spearheads of American forces moved many miles per day as German resistance collapsed: soldiers encountered village after village, engaged in skirmish after skirmish, heard strange-sounding name after strange-sounding name. One might think that a prison camp like Buchenwald would have been such an unusual sight that it would have drawn soldiers' attention and so be encoded and remembered distinctly, but there were hundreds of thousands of prisoners of all sorts in Germany: slave laborers from occupied countries, prisoners of war, Germans who were imprisoned by the Nazi regime. Soldiers encountered and freed prisoners with appalling frequency, seemingly everywhere they went. It should not be surprising that soldiers might, decades later, have confused events involving prisoners that occurred in one place with those that occurred at another. Eisenhower encouraged as many soldiers as possible to see Buchenwald, making it possible for thousands of soldiers to be briefly exposed to the camp as truckloads of them were brought to Buchenwald to witness its horrors for a few hours and then return to their units. That this experience might have become entangled with others in their memories is to be expected.

As for storage, most forgetting takes place right away: memories that are not encoded and rehearsed are quickly forgotten. Memories that are encoded may be stored for a very long time, as there are no known limits on the duration of long-term memory. Some degradation may take place during long-term storage of memories as we age and

the ravages of time and declining health take their toll on our brains. Occasional retrieval and discussion of memories can help to preserve them, though anyone who has ever attended a family or school reunion knows that this is a double-edged sword, as stories can evolve and change with repeated re-telling as well.

Soldiers' Buchenwald memories are probably most affected by weak encoding and by retrieval-related factors. Because Buchenwald was deliberately made into a media event, opportunities for misattribution abound. Some of this misattribution may have occurred at the time, as there were many newspaper stories, newsreels, and films about Buchenwald. Iconic images, such as that of a table of artifacts that displayed samples of preserved human skin with tattoos as well as a lampshade (without tattoos) that was alleged to have been made of human skin led soldier after soldier to describe tattooed-skin lampshades they had "seen". Extensive publicity was also given to other camps, such as Bergen-Belsen in the British zone, Auschwitz, which had been liberated by the Russians in January, 1945, and Dachau, liberated a few weeks after Buchenwald by American troops. Veterans' and survivors' accounts sometimes confuse features of these camps: for example, many veterans and survivors report having seen a gate with the motto "Arbeit macht frei" at Buchenwald, though there was no such gate at that camp. Auschwitz and Dachau did have gates with that famous motto, however, as did Gross-Rosen, Oranienberg, and Theresienstadt.

For many veterans, discussing and thinking about their wartime experiences in connection with the Holocaust occurred after a fast-forward of fifty years or more. Material that might be misattributed to their own memory had, by the 1990's, proliferated and expanded dramatically. In addition to all the material that had been available in the

weeks and months after the end of World War II, there was now a wealth of contemporary material: films, books, interviews, discussions at unit reunions, speeches at Holocaust remembrance observances, exhibits and displays at museums. And the availability of such material has continued to grow, making it harder and harder for veterans continuing to age and decline in health to sort information they remember from information they may have heard or seen somewhere else.

REMEMBERING BUCHENWALD: A SPECIAL CHALLENGE FOR SURVIVORS

Encoding memories must have been a special challenge for survivors of the Nazi camp system. Prisoners were often shuttled from camp to camp, especially in the chaotic last days of the war, as the Nazis hastily evacuated camps threatened by Russian military advances. Camp life itself was hardly conducive to the accurate encoding of memories. Many prisoners did not have access to watches or calendars, and their lives were characterized by a deadly routine of roll-calls and work details, punctuated by unpredictable and often horrific events like beatings and executions. Tagging particular events to a particular time and place would be quite challenging under such circumstances.

Storing memories in the brain requires energy. Reading the harrowing accounts of survivors of the Nazi camp system impresses one most of all with the degree of physical compromise with which prisoners had to contend. Prisoners were chronically hungry and thirsty, often seriously debilitated by sickness and disease. Such conditions do not make the storage and retention of memories impossible, but neither are these conditions likely to have made it easy for prisoners to have encoded and stored memories as effectively and accurately as people not subjected to such privations.

Survivors of Buchenwald would confront the same challenges in accurately retrieving memories, such as the staggering amount of post-event information available for misattribution to their own memories, as would veterans. Buchenwald survivors confront at least two additional challenges, however. First, it is the case that it is easier to retrieve memories when we are in a state that closely approximates the conditions that existed when we encoded the memory, than if we are in a state that is markedly different. Because survivors were in what many have described as an alien world, utterly different from their later lives in so many ways, this “state-dependent memory” might well work to compromise their capacity to retrieve memories weakly encoded under the dire conditions in the camps years later, living now under very different conditions. Of course, some of these memories may have been so distinctive, so emotionally significant, that these obstacles would have been strongly encoded and retained, and survivors’ memories would be amazingly accurate. Many survivor memoirs contain just such material.

Second, there was a deliberate and concerted effort in East Germany after the war to distort the Buchenwald liberation story that affected many survivors. Much of the day-to-day administration of the Nazi camp system was delegated to the prisoners themselves. In the case of Buchenwald, the prisoner hierarchy was dominated by so-called “reds:”¹⁶ political prisoners who were mainly German communists. Buchenwald is located in what became the Soviet zone of occupation, and this eventually became the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. The facts that the Nazis abandoned the camp on the morning of April 11, that prisoners took control of the camp after the guards had left, and that the camp was then occupied by American forces, who provided massive material support to the prisoners, were not considered to be a politically acceptable story by the

communist authorities. Instead, a myth was created that cast the German communist prisoners as heroes in a pitched battle against the SS guards, “storming” the guard towers and “seizing control” of the camp on April 11 and making it possible for American forces to enter the now-prisoner-liberated camp two days later. This myth is known as the “*Selbstbefreiung*” myth, from the German for “self-liberation”.

This myth was taught as the truth in East German schools and celebrated in East German popular culture until the reunification of Germany in 1990. Survivors who came into contact with the *Selbstbefreiung* myth were thus exposed to very specific and detailed (but false) post-event information describing this supposed day of combat that was available for them to attribute to their own memories. In this case, misattribution was deliberately encouraged, aided and abetted, by the East German government for political purposes.

FALSE MEMORIES OF THE BUCHENWALD LIBERATION

VETERANS

RICK CARRIER

The veterans whose false memories of liberating Buchenwald are most widely known have not, for the most part, written books: their claims are generally found on the internet in speeches, stories about them written by reporters, or sometimes essays they have authored. Frederick Goss Carrier, who was known by the nickname “Rick”, is such an example. Carrier served in the United States Army in Europe during World War II. A member of a Combat Engineer unit, he was first sent to England and from there landed in Normandy on D-Day. His unit traveled through Belgium, stopped briefly at Fort Eben-

Emael, and then moved north to the Rhine River and east through central Germany as the Ruhr Pocket collapsed in the spring of 1945, finding itself in what is now the Czech Republic at war's end.

As was the case for many veterans, Carrier did not talk much about his wartime experiences after returning home. Carrier's friends Allan Sanford and William Daniel Grey both recalled that Carrier only began to talk about his wartime experiences very late in life:

A lasting friendship soon developed between Sanford, his wife Shannon, and Carrier and life partner Lynn Ramsey — although only recently did he become aware of Carrier's role in World War II. "It was around four years ago that he started talking about it," said Sanford of what happened at Normandy and Buchenwald. "Before that, it was always just, 'Well, yeah, I was in an engineering battalion.' ". Grey had similar recollections: "Up until about 10 years before he died, I never knew he was in the Second World War. Nobody ever had any idea that's the kind of person he was before we knew him." ¹⁷

Carrier had, however, submitted an unsolicited 70-page manuscript to the Army Center for Military History in 1994 describing his wartime experiences. This document¹⁸, rich in detail about Carrier's experiences, contains no mention of Buchenwald whatever. It is not completely clear exactly when Carrier began telling his Buchenwald liberation story. According to Carrier's life partner Lynn Ramsey:

Tracing his newfound willingness to speak about the war back to their 2012 trip to Poland, Ramsey noted the emotional impact that meeting other concentration camp liberators had on Carrier. Prior to that, she said, "he was interviewed a few times about the war, typically around Veterans Day, but he never mentioned Buchenwald."¹⁹

Many articles about Carrier may be found on the internet, which also hosts many videos of Carrier giving speeches and presentations, in which he tells his story of liberating Buchenwald. Before telling Carrier's story, though, we should note the true story of the liberation of Buchenwald. We have a relatively clear picture of what really

happened when Buchenwald was liberated, which can be reconstructed from the records of US Army units involved, and from a detailed history created by Buchenwald prisoners in the days and weeks after liberation. Sometime on the morning of April 11, 1945, an announcement was made over the loudspeaker system at Buchenwald instructing all German personnel to evacuate the camp immediately. SS and other personnel were eager to avoid being captured amidst the squalor over which they had presided, and departed quickly. Some guards continued to occupy the guard towers for a few hours, but decamped as the sounds of battle approached. The prisoner functionaries, led by German communists, began to organize the camp and establish order in the absence of the Nazis. By mid-afternoon this had been accomplished. We know that a group of four American soldiers from the 6th Armored Division, 3rd Army, visited Buchenwald late on April 11th and made brief contact with prisoners, after which they left the camp and moved on. It also appears that elements of the 37th Tank Battalion, 4th Armored Division, passed through or near Buchenwald earlier in the afternoon. Buchenwald was definitively occupied by American troops on the morning of Thursday, April 12, when the 80th Infantry Division was assigned the task of consolidating and administering the camp.

Carrier's liberation story begins on April 10, 1945, his twentieth birthday. Carrier claimed to have arrived in the town of Weimar, Germany, which is only a few miles from Buchenwald, on the afternoon of April 10 looking for construction supplies. He says he was directed to Buchenwald by a clergyman, and drove to the camp in the company of the Gauleiter's (a regional Nazi Party official) assistant and an escaped Russian POW. Carrier says he drove his jeep to a gate with the motto *Jedem das Seine* (to each what he deserves) formed into the wrought-iron, where he encountered emaciated prisoners.

Carrier then claimed that a fire-fight erupted between prisoners and SS guards, in the course of which the clock over the *Jedem das Seine* gate was struck by machine-gun fire and permanently stopped, at 3:15. He quickly piled back into his jeep with his two companions and returned to Weimar. He claims to have reported what he had seen to higher headquarters, whereupon he was ordered to return to Buchenwald early the next morning (April 11) and to force entry into Buchenwald so that an American armored column might enter. Carrier claims to have done so, blowing open the *Jedem das Seine* gate with detonating cord, an explosive material that he wrapped around the padlock. According to Carrier, the broken padlock was caught by an emaciated prisoner and taken as a souvenir, after which the armored column of thousands of troops entered through the now-open gate and occupied the camp²⁰.

Carrier's story of approaching the *Jedem das Seine* gate occurred on April 10, but on this date Buchenwald was still garrisoned by its full complement of several thousand SS and other personnel. Carrier talked about the *Jedem das Seine* gate as if it were located on the perimeter of the camp, as if this is how entrance to Buchenwald might be gained. But this gate is actually located near the geographic center of the Buchenwald complex as it existed at the time. This gate is indeed on the perimeter of the area in which prisoners were secured, but in order to reach this gate on April 10 Carrier would have had to pass through hundreds of yards of surrounding camp facilities still occupied and guarded by well-armed soldiers. This is simply impossible.

Carrier's story of combat between prisoners and guards during the liberation of Buchenwald is consistent with the heroic but false *Selbstbefreiung* myth concocted by German communist prisoners and promoted by the communist East German

government²¹. The story of the clock being stopped by gunfire during this battle also comes from this myth. Post-liberation photos show the clock keeping time: it was deliberately and permanently set at 3:15 only many years later when the site was developed as a memorial, to document the supposed moment of liberation.

RICK CARRIER MEETS IRVING ROTH

Despite the fact that Rick Carrier's fanciful liberation story can be easily debunked with a few minutes' work, he gained and continues to posthumously enjoy a great deal of notoriety on the basis of this story. It was Carrier's putative connection to another New Yorker, Irving Roth, that led to extensive publicity for both men, which is still easily viewed on many internet websites. An emotional April 20, 2012 story in the *Wall Street Journal* by Martin Sobczyk ("At Auschwitz's Gate, a Reunion") recounted the story of the "reunion" between Rick Carrier and Irving Roth:

"In April 1945, Irving Roth, a starving teenage Nazi concentration-camp prisoner, met Rick Carrier, a young American soldier who blew the locks off the gates at Buchenwald. On Thursday, the two now-elderly men rode together on a bus to visit Auschwitz, another German death factory, for a large-scale memorial honoring Holocaust victims. Overcome by emotion, Mr. Roth told Mr. Carrier and other liberators in the group: "The Messiah has arrived! You! People don't know what the Messiah looks like, but I know!"²²

Sobczyk reports that Carrier and Roth were "reunited" by the March of the Living²³ in October, 2011. Carrier and Roth would subsequently appear together, each telling their own stories of the Buchenwald liberation, though no one seems ever to have questioned the inconsistencies between the stories of the two men, or the differences between Carrier's account of the liberation and the historical record.

Irving Roth was a very active Holocaust survivor who tirelessly shared his inspiring and compelling life story. He was associated with the Temple Judea of

Manhasset²⁴, Long Island, and was an active and prolific public speaker, whose many speeches and presentations, delivered nation-wide, may readily be found on the internet. Roth was imprisoned at Auschwitz, survived a death march to Buchenwald in early 1945, and was liberated from the camp when American forces arrived in April. The version of Roth's liberation story found in his most recent presentations is that on April 10, he was assembled with other Jews to be removed from Buchenwald on a death march, which would have exposed him to incredible danger. He was miraculously saved from this fate by a sudden American bombing raid on the nearby town of Weimar. According to Roth, the Nazis knew that if they persisted in the death march despite the air raid, the Jews might escape, and/or the Nazis might themselves be injured or killed, so the march was called off and Roth returned to hide in the camp during the day of the 10th and the night of the 10th/11th of April, 1945. Sometime on the 11th of April, Roth says that he was visited in his barracks by two American soldiers, one white and one Black, who took note of the desperate condition of the prisoners, left, and returned with a vat of split-pea soup with ham to feed the prisoners.

Roth says that the soup was delivered to him by American soldiers on April 11, though we know that the only American troops present at Buchenwald on that day passed through the camp very quickly without rendering any aid to camp inmates. Perhaps Roth may have confused the date on which the events he recounted occurred, which must have been April 12 or later. In his book, *Bondi's Brother*, written in 2004, Roth says that he was visited by two American soldiers, one white and one Black, and that the Black soldier, with tears running down his face, gave Roth a chocolate bar. In his book, Roth says that the split-pea soup was delivered by prisoners, not by the American soldiers.

Some of these details may have crept into Roth's narrative from other sources. There was a very well-known controversy that played out in New York in the 1990's concerning the film *Liberators: Fighting on Two Fronts in World War II*, a PBS film that made the claim that Buchenwald and Dachau were liberated by Black soldiers of the American Army. These claims could not be substantiated, and the film was withdrawn by PBS and has never aired since. Roth may have been aware of this controversy and incorporated this racial aspect into his story. One detail that suggests that this memory may be a misattribution from the *Liberators* controversy is that Roth describes the Black soldier as crying during his encounter with prisoners. This same detail was included in a news story by a survivor named Benjamin Bender²⁵ years earlier which played an important role in the development of the *Liberators* controversy, and it reappeared in other survivors' accounts: several survivors later described meeting Black soldiers during the liberation, in varying circumstances, and many of these stories include the detail of the weeping (and also usually described as large and muscular) Black soldier.

Sobczyk's story in the *Wall Street Journal* clearly claims that Carrier and Roth actually met at Buchenwald, and were then reunited seventy-odd years later. Neither Carrier's nor Roth's story taken on their own offer any hint as to when such a meeting between Roth and Carrier might have occurred. Carrier's story places him at Buchenwald mainly on April 10th, when Roth says he was hiding in the camp. Carrier's participation on April 11 was (he said) confined to blowing the lock off the gate and allowing the entry of the armored column, though one wonders why a column of tanks and armored vehicles would need Rick Carrier's help to get through a gate. Roth's encounter with the two

soldiers was reported by Roth to have occurred on April 11, though it must have been later, if it occurred at all.

The real problem, though, is that the events Rick Carrier described simply did not happen. He did not liberate Buchenwald, and so played no role in liberating Irving Roth. I corresponded with Mr. Roth before his death, explaining my skepticism about Rick Carrier's story, and asked for his thoughts. This was his reply:

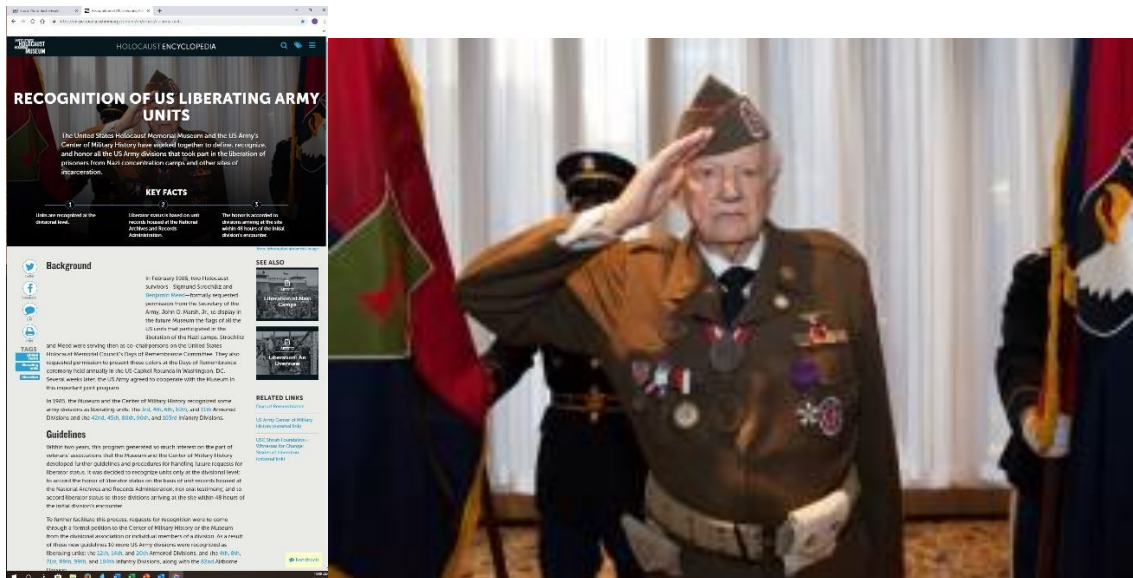
"I am replying to your E-mail regarding Rick and his story on the liberation of Buchenwald. As you may know I was incarcerated and liberated from Buchenwald C.C. on April 11, 1945. I have been speaking and writing on the issues on the Holocaust for more than 50 years. My recollections of that day are vivid and I hope not fictitious.

I did not know any of the American liberators and chose to believe Rick as he told the story. I had no reason to believe that he made it up."²⁶

Mr. Roth's gracious credulity seems very characteristic of the attitudes many of us adopt with elderly veterans, liberators, and survivors. Mr. Roth's recollections about his liberation from Buchenwald were personal and were deeply intertwined in his life story, a story that he saw as holding significant lessons for others, a story that he shared again and again with the best of intentions. Mr. Roth may simply not have known the historical details of the actual liberation of Buchenwald, as they were not relevant to his purpose, and so did not recognize that Carrier's story was false.

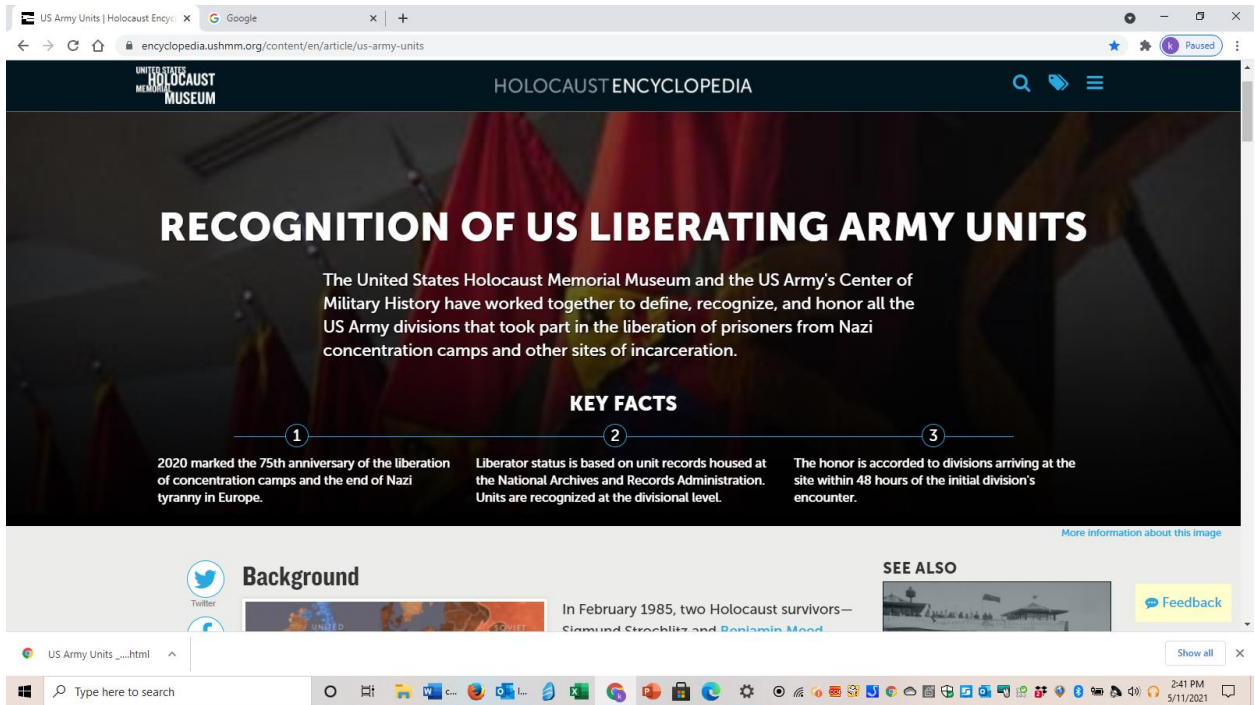
The same may not be said of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). The USHMM advertises its website as "...the world's leading online authority on the Holocaust...available in 16 languages and...visited in 2015 by more than 16.5 million people representing 211 countries and territories"²⁷. The "Holocaust Encyclopedia" section of this website contains a page that honors the Army Divisions

that are credited with liberating the camps at the end of WWII. For many years, this is what that page looked like:



The bemedaled man saluting in the banner is Frederick Goss “Rick” Carrier. I believe that photo was taken at the US Capitol during one of the annual “Days of Remembrance” ceremonies, but I am not sure of this. I do know that this man, chosen by the USHMM to represent US liberating units, was a complete imposter insofar as any connection to liberating Buchenwald goes.

Aware that the USHMM simply might not have known that Carrier was an imposter, having accepted his claims at face value as did Irving Roth, I shared my skepticism and the reasons for my doubts with the Museum on March 15, 2020. The following day, I received an email that said in part, “We strive to make sure everything is accurate so our staff will look into these concerns”²⁸. A few days later, I noticed that the photo of Rick Carrier had been removed. The webpage now looks like this:



Curious as to whether this meant that the USHMM now recognizes that Carrier was not actually a liberator, I again contacted the Museum and asked if this was the reason for the photo change. On March 19, 2020, I received an email from the Museum that read in part, “The content of the Holocaust Encyclopedia is frequently updated. For the article you queried, we have recently chosen an image that better reflects the focus of the page, which discusses liberating divisions.²⁹” Carrier’s speeches and presentations telling his false story, widely accessible on the internet, continue to receive positive comments nearly daily.

LEO HYMAS

Leo Hymas was also an American soldier who served in Europe in WWII, and Hymas also developed an elaborate false memory of liberating Buchenwald. Hymas lived in the Pacific Northwest, and his story was energetically promoted for many years by the Holocaust Center for Humanity (HCH) in Seattle. The HCH sponsored many visits to schools and other organizations by Mr. Hymas, and his story was prominently displayed on the organization's website. Like Rick Carrier, Leo Hymas only began telling his story of liberating Buchenwald late in life. Hymas was oddly fuzzy on the date of the liberation – he sometimes claimed it was April 5th, on other occasions claimed April 8th or 9th. His story is that his unit was assigned to support an attack on the town of Weimar (the town was never attacked – it was surrendered peacefully to the 80th Infantry Division on April 12, 1945) and that some time on the morning of the liberation he and three other soldiers (Hymas was a machine-gun operator) were ordered to investigate a fence that had been spotted through some woods. Hymas reported that he and his comrades approached the fence and used a bangalore torpedo (essentially a pipe filled with explosives) to breach an electrified 12-foot-high barbed wire fence, and then engaged a group of SS officers in a firefight. Hymas claimed that he and his three comrades killed or captured fourteen of these SS officers, recognized as such by their black uniforms, and entered the camp, which he soon learned was Buchenwald. Hymas and the others then ran into the various barracks buildings, looking for guards, but encountered only horrific scenes of emaciated prisoners.

Of course, Hymas' fanciful story of fighting his way into Buchenwald can easily be shown to be false on many accounts. First, the narrative constructed by the prisoners

of Buchenwald contains no description of any events remotely like the ones claimed by Hymas, on any date. The Germans abandoned the camp on the morning of the 11th, and the prisoners took over. Americans arrived in force the next day. Second, we know from Army records that Hymas' unit was engaged in a fierce battle at around the same time Buchenwald was being liberated, but that battle was taking place in Siegburg, some two hundred miles west of Buchenwald. That Hymas was in Siegburg rather than at Buchenwald we know because Hymas himself tells us that in his very first combat experience, one of his comrades, PFC Vincent DeMarco, was killed by his side. Army records show that PFC DeMarco was killed on April 12, 1945, near Siegburg, Germany. Hymas could not have been in two places at the same time. Third, many of the details Hymas included in his story, such as his descriptions of the uniforms worn by the SS officers, appear to have been wrong, perhaps contaminated by post-event information.

Again like Rick Carrier, Leo Hymas' false story brought him attention at the highest levels. On March 27, 2013, then-President Barack Obama visited the Israeli Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem. Rabbi Israel Meir Lau mentioned having met "liberator" Leo Hymas on a visit to Seattle in his remarks that day. And yet again like Rick Carrier, Leo Hymas' posthumous fame is undiminished: Youtube videos of his testimony about liberating Buchenwald continue to attract laudatory posts nearly daily.

One place you will no longer find information about Leo Hymas is on the website of the Holocaust Center for Humanity (HCH) in Seattle, once an enthusiastic booster of Hymas' story. The HCH included Hymas as a member of its Speaker's Bureau, and facilitated many presentations by Mr. Hymas at schools and other organizations. News stories reporting on these events may still be easily found on the internet. I contacted the

HCH and expressed my skepticism of Hymas liberation tale, and learned that the HCH had heard other concerns about his story before my contact with them. I shared the reasons for my skepticism with the HCH, and some of the Hymas material began to disappear from the HCH website. The HCH website was recently redone, and now all material (save a very few stray references you will still see if you type his name into the website search bar) relating to Leo Hyams has been expunged. I inquired as to whether the Hymas material was removed because the HCH agreed that his liberation story was false, but received no reply³⁰. As far as I know, the HCH has made no attempt to explain to the public why a story they once promoted so enthusiastically has now completely disappeared from their programs and materials.

Leo Hymas' testimony was collected in a nearly two-hour interview for the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. That testimony is available there, and at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which maintains copies of many USC Shoah Foundation interviews³¹. Hymas' USC Shoah interview is also available on YouTube, where it continues to receive many positive comments.

A film³² featuring Holocaust survivor Klaus Stern and Leo Hymas entitled *Liberation* was produced in 2008 by Tacoma, Washington public television station KBTC. Hymas recounts his false Buchenwald liberation story in the film, failing even to get the date of the liberation correct. I contacted KBTC, and after investigation of the matter the station decided to remove the film from the internet streaming library maintained by the Public Broadcasting Service³³.

HARRY HERDER, JR.

Harry Herder, Jr., fought with the 5th Rangers in the European Theater during WWII and also served in combat during the Korean War. Herder has provided testimony which may be found in the collections of the USHMM, as well as the USC Shoah Foundation. There is a first-person account authored by Herder that is readily accessible on the internet³⁴ that tells his false story of the liberation of Buchenwald. On April 11, 1945, Herder says he was riding atop a tank that crashed through the live electric fence surrounding Buchenwald, shorting the live wires against the ground. He encountered emaciated prisoners, and saw black smoke billowing from the crematorium chimney. Herder reported that officers from his unit were called upon to shut down the crematorium fires.

The narrative produced by survivors of Buchenwald makes clear that no events like the ones described by Herder happened at Buchenwald on April 11. Other elements of Herder's story show clear evidence of the misattribution of post-event information to Herder's story. For example, Herder reported that the gate over the camp entrance read "Arbeit macht frei" (work makes you free) an inscription that was indeed found at Auschwitz and some other Nazi camps. At Buchenwald, there was "Jedem das Seine" built into the gate, and a wooden sign above that read "Recht oder unrecht, mein Vaterland" (my fatherland right or wrong). Buchenwald survivors reported that the camp crematorium had not operated for several weeks prior to the liberation because of a shortage of fuel. There was no black smoke billowing over Buchenwald on April 11, and no one was needed to shut down the crematorium, because it was not operating at the

time. Herder also reported spending time with prisoners while on guard duty that described freezing and rewarming experiments conducted on prisoners at Buchenwald. There were horrific research experiments conducted on prisoners at Buchenwald, but not of the sort described by Herder. Those experiments were conducted on behalf of the Luftwaffe at Dachau.

Herder's story is an excellent example of the ease with which a false story can live and proliferate on the internet. A 2016 book by Jill Sherman titled "*Eyewitness to the Liberation of Buchenwald*"³⁵, a children's book, is a good example. This book cites a webpage containing Herder's story and proceeds to relate Herder's false liberation story as if it were the truth. To make matters worse, the book also cites an article by David Irving, a notorious Holocaust denier, apparently unaware of his viewpoint. Jill Sherman is apparently not a Holocaust scholar, but Holocaust scholars have also been fooled by Herder. Dan Stone cites the same Herder website as Sherman in his book *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath*³⁶, a scholarly work published by Yale University Press. Herder's testimony may also be found in the archives of the USHMM³⁷.

J. RAY CLARK

J. Ray Clark wrote a book called *The Fiery Furnaces of Buchenwald: Journey to Hell* that appears to be marketed mainly on the internet. Clark was active in veteran's organizations in Indiana, but does not have as widespread a presence on the internet as do Carrier, Hymas, and Herder. His book is in the USHMM archive, however³⁸, and is available for "research" in digitized form from the archive. Clark's book contains this preposterous account:

“We jumped off early on 10 April 1945 and advanced north of the city, engaging in two or three fire fights as we encountered pockets of resistance. Then we lost contact with the enemy. About 10:00 AM, we approached what appeared to be another slave labor camp. The machine gun guard towers did not return our fire and as we got closer, we could see prisoners at the fences. It was obvious that the German troops had fled. On entering this camp, we received the shock of our lives.

We had liberated the infamous Buchenwald Concentration Camp. Inside the camp, we found a cadre of slave laborers, who were killing and burning other prisoners. Later, we learned that they had been threatened by the departing Nazis, ‘If you quit burning them, we will come back and burn you’...

This camp was commanded by a woman, Ilsa [sic] Koch, ‘the Bitch of Buchenwald’. In her office, we found polished skulls of various (adult and children) sizes used as paperweights, and lamp shades made of tattooed human skin on every desk. Also some tattooed skin had been stretched over boards and was used as wall hangings. You could almost see your reflection in the shiny skulls, and the skin looked and felt like parchment.”³⁹

Clark was also interviewed as part of the Veteran’s History Project at the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress, and an audiotape and transcript of his interview may be found as part of the “Experiencing War” series, a companion to the Ken Burns documentary “*The War*”⁴⁰. The interview is associated with a link to “Concentration Camp Liberators” for Episode Seven of *The War*. The interview⁴¹ tells substantially the same false story about Buchenwald as is found *The Fiery Furnaces of Buchenwald*, though the incorrect date (April 10) is omitted. The book includes a mix of fact and fiction: for example, Clark correctly reports that Colonel Normando Costello, Commander of the 319th Infantry Regiment, 80th Infantry Division, negotiated a peaceful surrender of the city of Weimar (this occurred on April 12). In fact, a portrait of Colonel Costello hangs in the Weimar *Rathaus* today in honor of his efforts to spare the city and its inhabitants from the effects of a destructive battle. Clark embellishes the events with this false account:

“Next, we jumped off toward the city of Weiner [presumably Clark means Weimar] (population 50,000). As we approached the city, we were assured that the burgomaster (mayor) had surrendered the city to our regimental commander, Colonel Norman [sic] Costello. However, as we were moving into the suburbs, a die-hard SS unit opened fire with rifles, burp guns, and light mortars. This ambush killed and wounded a number of fine, young men who were respecting white flags of truce that flew from every window. Many innocent German civilians lost their lives as a result of this breach of faith. We simply called in artillery, tank, and air support, and leveled six or eight city blocks.”⁴²

It is unclear what events Clark is describing here, as no shots were fired when American forces peacefully occupied Weimar on April 12. There was a firefight between a group of German soldiers and officers, as well as *Volkssturm* members, and American troops near the village of Troistedt on April 11. Troistedt is about ten kilometers southwest of Weimar, but this action did not resemble the events reported by Clark. Clark may have confused the occupation of Weimar with some other action, or may simply have embellished the story.

Ilse Koch, wife of the first Commandant of Buchenwald, was never the commander of the camp; in fact, she was arrested by the SS with her husband, imprisoned in Weimar, and then left the camp when she (but not her husband) was released from custody in August 1943. The outrageous assertion that prisoners murdered and burned and other prisoners after the SS had evacuated the camp is completely unique to Clark as far as I know.

“WITNESS TO THE HOLOCAUST”

Dr. Frederick Crawford, Director of the Center for Research and Social Change at Emory University in the late 1970’s, helped produce a television program called *Witness to the Holocaust*. A transcript produced as part of the 1981 International Liberators Conference may be found in the Special Collections of the Woodruff library at Emory

University. Leo Pine, who was the white commander of the all-Black 183rd Combat Engineers (of which more in a moment) reported that he saw gas chambers at Buchenwald, and explained how prisoners were murdered there. Of course, there were no gas chambers at Buchenwald. Pine also remembered the “Arbeit macht frei” sign, which many liberators and survivors incorrectly attribute to Buchenwald.

Pine had earlier been interviewed by Crawford on September 7, 1978, and a transcript of this interview may also be found in the Special Collections. In this interview Pine relates a story that has much in common with the story of Stefan Jerzy Zweig, a young Polish boy who was the inspiration for the book *Naked Among Wolves* by Bruno Apitz. Pine claims he was importuned to take the child, who he called Yankala, with him, which seems unlikely, as the boy’s father was in the camp. Pine specifically mentions a movie that he thinks might have been made about the story, so it is possible that he was misattributing something he had seen, heard or read to his memory.

Pine clearly misremembered many details: he says in the interview that even a few days after liberation there was no American troop presence and no medical support, which we know to be false. Pine says that he looked through the window of the commandant’s house and saw “magnificent light shades made out of tattoos”, and that he was then “led through the gas chambers”. He repeats a story about Ilse Koch tying the legs of pregnant women together while they were in labor, causing them to die. Interestingly, Pine seemed a bit unsure about the gas chambers in this interview, contradicting his earlier statement about being led through the gas chambers by saying that he didn’t see the gas chambers, and that “I don’t know how much of this I remember as being true”.

The interviewer (Kaethe Solomon) elicited from Leo Pine that he had been the white commander of an all-Black unit, the 183rd Combat Engineers, and that he had taken a truckload of his Black soldiers with him to visit Buchenwald a few days after it had been liberated. A few months later (April 9, 1979) Crawford interviewed William A. Scott III, an African-American soldier who apparently was one of those who had visited Buchenwald with Pine. It is possible that Scott met survivor Alex Gross (of whom more in a moment) at the time of this interview.

SURVIVORS

I mentioned Benjamin Bender earlier in connection with the *Liberators* controversy. The letter that Bender wrote to the Editor of the New York Times in 1985 was in response to an article about the memorial ceremonies at Buchenwald that were held on the fortieth anniversary of the April 11, 1945 liberation by John Tagliabue. Buchenwald is located in what was still East Germany in 1985, and the memorial celebrations were shot through with the false narrative of the *Selbstbefreiung*, which was the official East German version of the story. Tagliabue repeated this uncritically in his report, and to his credit Bender rose to partially correct⁴³ this tendentious version of the liberation with the correct one: American troops first entered Buchenwald after the SS had abandoned the camp on the morning of April 11. Ironically, though, in helping to dispel one myth, Bender may have helped to create another: that Buchenwald had been liberated by Black soldiers.

The idea that the liberation of Buchenwald involved Black soldiers may have originated with Dr. Frederick Crawford, mentioned earlier in connection with the testimony of Leo Pine and John Glustrom. Crawford interviewed several members of the

183rd Combat Engineer Battalion, an all-African-American unit. Two members of this unit, Leon Bass and William A. Scott III, engaged in outreach about their experiences in which they discussed their visit to Buchenwald. While details of their recollections are a bit fuzzy, it seems clear that these men visited Buchenwald a few days after the liberation, probably on April 17, 1945. Leon Bass was introduced as a liberator of Buchenwald at the 1981 International Liberators Conference sponsored by the United States Holocaust Memorial Council at the US State Department. Elie Wiesel described his liberation experience at this Conference in 1981, but did not mention that his liberators were Black.

Benjamin Bender's letter was published in 1985. He described his liberation this way:

"I was liberated at the Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald on April 11, 1945. For me it was a glorious day, full of sunshine, an instant awakening of life after long darkness. The recollections are still vivid - black soldiers of the Third Army, tall and strong, crying like babies, carrying the emaciated bodies of the liberated prisoners."⁴⁴

Bender also published a memoir in 1995 entitled *Glimpses: Through Holocaust and Liberation*⁴⁵, in which he repeated his recollection of the moment of liberation:

"I stood ten or fifteen yards from the main gate. The huge roll call square was full of American soldiers, General Patton's best, tall black men, six footers, with colorful scarves around their necks. I had never seen black men before. They were unreal to me. The soldiers were trying to help, carrying inmates on stretchers, some dead, some dying and stretching out their hands and saying, "Brother, I'm dying, give me your hand." The soldiers were in shock, crying like babies. They gave them their hands."⁴⁶

In 1989, Elie Wiesel was quoted in the New York Times as follows:

"The most moving moment of my life was the day the Americans arrived, a few hours after the SS had fled", he recalled in a telephone interview from his home in New York. "It was the morning of April 11"... "I will always remember with love a big black

soldier”, he went on. “He was crying like a child – tears of all the pain in the world and all the rage. Every one who was there that day will forever feel a sentiment of gratitude to the American soldiers who liberated us.”⁴⁷

Several other survivors include this element, the “big Black soldier crying like a baby”, in their liberation stories. Henry Oster, whose memoir *The Kindness of the Hangman*⁴⁸ contains many problematic statements, says that one of his liberators was “a huge muscular black man, standing in the middle of this barbed wire prison, with tears streaming down his face.”⁴⁹ Oster also described the white soldiers present as cold and distant, while the Black soldiers were, he says, more compassionate.

Rabbi Israel Meir Lau also reported that his liberators were Black, though he was really only repeating what he says he heard from his brother:

“We all stared at the six soldiers, one of whom was black. We knew they were the saviors we had been awaiting for such a long time...

I was just under eight years old. Many of the events of that day I do not remember directly, but rather through the words of others who described them for me decades later.”⁵⁰

Rabbi Lau was a colorful and prolific speaker, and seems to have adapted one particular story to suit several purposes. In his book *Out of the Depths*, Lau describes an incident at Buchenwald after the liberation in which an American staff car stopped near him, and “a giant American” grabbed him by the heels and a shoulder and hoisted him into the air, proclaiming to the Germans nearby:

“Do you see this little boy? This is who you have been fighting for the past six years. Because of him you started a world war. He is the enemy of National Socialism, the Nazis’ archenemy. A little Polish boy! You murdered his father and mother, and you almost murdered him as well! You followed the Fuehrer – for this? You followed him in blind faith – for this?!”⁵¹

Elsewhere in this book Lau has Kareem Abdul-Jabbar telling this same story, but identifying the soldier lifting up the little boy as William “Smitty” Smith, an African-American soldier who was a friend of Abdul-Jabbar’s father. Mr. Smith served in the 761st Tank Battalion, an all African-American unit that fought across Europe. In 2014 Lau recounted yet a third version of this story in a speech, but this time it was General George S. Patton himself who lifted up the little Polish boy⁵². Felix Weinberg, in his book *Boy 30529: A Memoir*⁵³ recalls that the liberators of Buchenwald were American soldiers, “most of whom, to my particular delight, were black.”⁵⁴

Alex Gross was a Buchenwald survivor whose memoir *Yankele* contains this liberation story:

“Because of my semi-conscious state, many of the details of that day and the next remain a blur. But as long as I live I will never forget the feeling I experienced at the first glimpse of those armored American vehicles and tanks rolling into Buchenwald...Even though the vehicles were covered with mud, they looked to me like magnificent carriages built for the highest royalty. The world’s finest jewels could not have looked more splendid. I was certain they were driven by angels. When the top of one of the turrets opened, I saw a helmet and then a black soldier’s face. I had never in my life seen a black man before. I felt that he was surely an angel sent by the Almighty to save us. I therefore concluded that all angels were black”⁵⁵.

Alex Gross’ memoir describes a liberation that incorporates many elements of the false *Selbstbefreiung* myth. His book also includes many apparently fabricated stories, including a “Bitch of Auschwitz” who he says chopped the arms off boys around him on the *Appelplatz* at Auschwitz. Gross wrote *Yankele* in 2001. Alex Gross had been interviewed by Frederick Crawford of Emory University sometime in the late 1970s (in an interview recorded in 1983 in the USHMM archives⁵⁶, he said it had been five or six years earlier) at which time he had been introduced to a “black gentleman” who was probably William A Scott III, one of the Black soldiers who had visited Buchenwald with

the 183rd Combat Engineering Battalion several days after the liberation. This meeting may have taken place at the same time as Scott's April 9, 1979 interview with Crawford. Gross identified Scott as the soldier who had been his savior, though this is impossible: Scott only arrived at Buchenwald days after the liberation (probably the 17th) and was a photographer, not a tanker.

Eugene Weinstock, a Hungarian Jew who was deported to Buchenwald in December, 1943, wrote a memoir entitled *Beyond the Last Path: A Buchenwald Survivor's Story*. Weinstock's description of the liberation includes an incident that did not happen, as far as I know: Weinstock claims that the *Gauleiter* in Weimar called a guard tower on the day of liberation to notify the guards at Buchenwald that sixty demolitions experts with truckloads of explosives were on their way to Buchenwald to destroy the camp and its occupants. Prisoners had by this time taken over the abandoned camp, and it was a prisoner who took the call, according to Weinstock. A short time later the sixty sappers arrived with their truckloads of explosives, but immediately surrendered to the American occupiers.

Jack Werber's Buchenwald memoir, *Saving Children: Diary of a Buchenwald Survivor and Rescuer*⁵⁷, contains an elaborate but apparently false story in which he claimed to have seen a lampshade made of the tattooed skin of his friend Hans when he volunteered to do masonry work repairing the Koch home after Buchenwald was bombed on August 24, 1944. Ilse Koch had actually left Buchenwald a year earlier, and the contents of the Koch villa had been shipped to Czechoslovakia by the SS authorities investigating the Kochs. Werber also described an "SOS" signal laid out by prisoners in earthenware pots, which he says was seen by American pilots and initiated the liberation,

and that this had been validated by American pilots after the fact. He also repeats the story about the clock having been stopped at 3:15, and some widely repeated myths (that Buchenwald prisoners were given soap made from the fat of murdered Jews, for example) and some other claims about Buchenwald that are apparently unique to him. He reported that prisoners were given food that had been adulterated with ground glass, for example, and that the coffee served prisoners contained poison. He claimed that Ilse Koch wielded the real power in the camp after her husband was arrested. He is at some pains in his book to ensure that the reader does not credit the United States with liberating Buchenwald: “It’s important to stress that, contrary to popular opinion, it was the Underground, and not the U.S. Army, that liberated the camp.”⁵⁸

Irene Zisblatt, one of five survivors featured in the Oscar-winning Steven Spielberg film *The Last Days*⁵⁹, also offered apparently false testimony about Ilse Koch, wife of Buchenwald’s first Commandant. Zisblatt, whose Holocaust memoir *The Fifth Diamond*⁶⁰ has been challenged⁶¹ as implausible, claimed to have been transferred from Auschwitz to Majdanek with a group of young girls because Ilse Koch wanted to harvest their young and unblemished skins in order to produce objects such as lampshades. Zisblatt probably heard stories about alleged human-skin lampshades made from tattooed inmate skin at Buchenwald, and confabulated this story about Koch. Ilse Koch was in prison in Weimar at the time Zisblatt says she was in Majdanek.

Harold Berkman was an American soldier in WWII whose testimony⁶² is now featured as part of the educational program at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans. Berkman claims to have been one of the first soldiers to liberate Buchenwald, and his unit, the 80th Infantry Division, did arrive at Buchenwald on April 12, 1945.

Berkman's testimony contains three factual inaccuracies: he claims that the ovens at the crematorium were still warm when the camp was liberated, though we know that the ovens had not operated for weeks because of fuel shortages. Berkman also claimed that Dwight Eisenhower visited Buchenwald, but this is false: Ike never visited the camp. Finally, Berkman says that the mayor of Weimar and his wife committed suicide after being forced to inspect the horrors of the camp. In fact, it was the mayor of Gotha, Germany, and his wife that took their own lives⁶³ after witnessing the horrors of Ohrdruf, a camp that Eisenhower did visit. I attempted to alert the National WWII Museum to the inaccuracies in Berkman's testimony, but neither email nor phone messages were ever answered.

CAVEAT LECTOR?

My intent in this paper is not to cast doubt on the accuracy of Holocaust testimony in general. Preserving the recollections of survivors is a vital way of ensuring that the lessons of the Holocaust survive to enlighten future generations. The testimonies on which I have focused have not been selected on the basis of any comprehensive, systematic or rigorous process. Rather, these are simply materials that come to hand most readily when common internet and library-based search procedures are employed and the liberation of Buchenwald is targeted. That said, it is clear that liberator and survivor testimonies often contain errors and inaccuracies. Some of these errors and inaccuracies are trivial, while others are more significant. Some Holocaust scholars have long recognized the limitations of survivor testimony as a source of historical truth. The late Lucy Dawidowicz put it this way: "Survivor accounts of critical events are typical of all

testimony, that is, they are full of discrepancies⁶⁴”. We can extend this observation to liberator and veteran accounts, as well.

How pervasive is the problem of false Holocaust testimony? We can’t say definitively, but a fascinating book by Pascal Cziborra entitled, “*KZ-Autobiografien: Geschichtsfälschungen zwischen Erinnerungsversagen, Selbstinszenierung und Holocaust-Propaganda*”⁶⁵ offers some clues. Cziborra systematically surveyed a narrow slice of Holocaust testimony: that of women and girls who had been imprisoned at the Flossenburg concentration camp. Cziborra found about forty-five written testimonies from women who survived Flossenburg, and determined that five of them were largely false, including those of Strummer and Zisblatt. About forty percent of the testimonies contained some errors, varying from minor discrepancies in timing to more significant lapses. Of course, it is impossible to generalize from this sample to all Holocaust testimony, but surely these results suggest that the liberation of Buchenwald is not a completely isolated case.

If we acknowledge that some Holocaust testimonies contain inaccuracies, how should we deal with them? The USHMM Permanent Exhibition features a film called *Testimony*⁶⁶. Noah Shenker recounts this episode during the making of the film:

“Despite this rhetoric of pure, direct access to testimonial truths, creating testimony was a highly edited and contested process. Once the new testimonies were recorded in May 1992, Bradley and the main museum planners, including Raye Farr, Shaiké Weinberg, and Michael Berenbaum, collectively reviewed the new footage to select segments for inclusion in the final cut. The reviewing committee expressed particular concern with ensuring the exclusion of footage that challenged the museum’s commitment to historical authenticity. One testimony, for example, raised suspicions that the unnamed witness had embellished, if not outright concocted, his story. In arguing against inclusion, Farr referred to the witness as a ‘fantasist.’: “It’s genuine and sincere but he is imagining.” Michael Berenbaum agreed: “If in doubt, leave it out.”⁶⁷”

Berenbaum's dictum seems not just prudent but vital when applied to an exhibition or film, but what about material to be included in a publicly-accessible archive? The questions that arise here are more complicated. It would be extraordinarily difficult, expensive, and time-consuming to vet the testimonial material contained in the USC Shoah Visual History Archive, for example. But these archives contain material that we know to be inaccurate.

Deli Strummer was a Holocaust survivor who was sponsored by the Baltimore Jewish Council (BJC) as a speaker. A high-school teacher whose class heard Strummer speak became suspicious about elements of her testimony, which he thought might be inaccurate. He raised these concerns with the BJC, which found them credible enough to commission an investigation into her testimony by noted Holocaust scholars Lawrence Langer and Raul Hilberg. Langer and Hilberg concluded that the accuracy of Strummer's testimony was questionable, and on their recommendation the BJC asked Strummer to stop presenting this testimony. She refused, and the BJC severed ties with her. But Deli Strummer's testimony can still be found in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, and in the USHMM collection, in both cases with no warning to users that the testimony has been determined to be false by reputable Holocaust scholars.

My own experience with Holocaust institutions and museums is that attempts to alert them to inaccuracies in Holocaust testimony are generally met with skepticism and indifference. On the two occasions on which I've seen such institutions actually change their presentations after being made aware of problems with testimony, this has been done grudgingly, with no public or private admission as to why the changes were made. Holocaust institutions routinely assert that the accuracy of their exhibits and presentations

is of paramount importance to them. Why, then, is there so much testimony known to be false (such as Deli Strummer's) or suspected of being false (many of the cases I have described) that continue to be made available to the public by these institutions without comment?

I think one reason for the apparent reluctance of historians and journalists to challenge survivor testimony is fear of being branded a denier. The Holocaust occupies a very special place in the public mind in the United States, and questioning the word of a survivor is fraught with the potential for a very emotional backlash. The risks associated with calling out false survivor or liberator testimonies would seem to be greater for individual historians or journalists than for institutions, but if anything, institutions appear to be even more resistant to admitting their mistakes or appropriately identifying questionable testimony. Large organizations, especially ones unaccustomed to challenge or criticism, sometimes find it difficult to maintain accountability.

Human memory is a remarkable but frail and fallible faculty that serves us well enough under ordinary circumstances, but can sometimes lead us significantly astray. Many of the conditions under which memories relating to the liberation of Buchenwald were formed and remembered were not conducive to accurate recall. This fact, coupled with our reluctance to engage these memories with an appropriately skeptical attitude, and with the apparent reluctance of memorial institutions to admit their mistakes and thereby educate the public on the care with which these testimonies should be read and interpreted, suggests that misinformation about the liberation of Buchenwald will be around for a very long time to come.

NOTES

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- ¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0077025/>
- ² <https://www.ushmm.org/>
- ³ <https://vhaonline.usc.edu/login>
- ⁴ <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/>
- ⁵ Loftus, E. F., & Palmer, J. C. (1974). [Reconstruction of auto-mobile destruction](#): An example of the interaction between language and memory. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal behavior*, 13, 585-589.
- ⁶ Oral History Interview with Harry J. Herder Jr., USHMM, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn80099>, retrieved 8 July 2019. 26:37-27:15.
- ⁷ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0084707/>
- ⁸ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090015/>
- ⁹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0108052/>
- ¹⁰ Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015). P. 122.
- ¹¹ <https://www.ushmm.org/>
- ¹² <https://www.holocaustcenterseattle.org/>
- ¹³ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/>
- ¹⁴ <https://www.pbs.org/>
- ¹⁵ <https://www.motl.org/>
- ¹⁶ This nomenclature was based on the color of the triangles sewn on prisoners' uniforms. In the early years of the camp's existence, the "greens" dominated the camp hierarchy – criminals.
- ¹⁷ <https://www.amny.com/news/rick-carrier-91-blazed-through-the-20th-century-as-a-renaissance-man/#:~:text=AMNY%20Newsletter-,Rick%20Carrier%2C%2091%2C%20Blazed%20Through%20the%2020th,Century%20as%20a%20Renaissance%20Man&text=Rick%20Carrier%20with%20life%20partner,2012%20March%20of%20the%20Living.&text=Carrier%2C%20known%20to%20all%20as,at%20the%20age%20of%2091.>
- ¹⁸ Frederick Goss Carrier, "A Teenager's Experience in the First Wave Assault Onto Utah Beach", April 25, 1994.
- ¹⁹ Ibid
- ²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbzbmsRKhAY>
- ²¹ This is known as the *Selbstbefreiung* (self-liberation) myth.
- ²² Martin Sobczyk, "At Auschwitz's Gate, A Reunion", Wall Street Journal, April 20, 2012.
- ²³ <https://www.motl.org/>
- ²⁴ <https://www.temple-judea.com/>
- ²⁵ Bender wrote a letter to the editor of the New York Times on April 22, 1985, titled "I was liberated at Buchenwald on April 11, 1945" recounting his liberation story. Bender's story also appears to be a false memory. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn505590>.
- ²⁶ Irving Roth, personal communication, January 18, 2020.
- ²⁷ <https://www.ushmm.org/information/about-the-museum>
- ²⁸ Personal communication, Sara Bloomfield, March 16, 2020.
- ²⁹ Personal communication, Sandra Kaiser, March 19, 2020.
- ³⁰ Personal communication, HCH, August 12, 2019.
- ³¹ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/vha35983>
- ³² <https://www.pbs.org/video/full-focus-liberation/>
- ³³ Personal communication, Phil Kane, 1/24/2022.
- ³⁴ <https://remember.org/witness/herder>
- ³⁵ Jill Sherman. *Eyewitness to the Liberation of Buchenwald*. (Mankato, MN: The Child's World, 2016).
- ³⁶ Dan Stone. *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and its Aftermath*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
- ³⁷ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn80099>
- ³⁸ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/bib19105>

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- ³⁹ J. Ray Clark, *The Fiery Furnaces of Buchenwald: Journey to Hell*. (Raleigh, NC: Pentland Press, 1996). Pp. 100-101.
- ⁴⁰ <https://kenburns.com/films/war/>
- ⁴¹ <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.00602/>
- ⁴² Clark, *Fiery Furnaces*, p. 96.
- ⁴³ Bender's letter read in part: "The survivors of Buchenwald owe their lives to the American people and not to the 'resistance fighters'. The short resistance uprising took place hours before the American forces entered Buchenwald". There actually was no such uprising. Given that between 20 and 30 million Russian soldiers and civilians were killed during WWII, though, and the approximately seven million casualties inflicted on the Germans (including four million killed) on the Eastern front, the Russians certainly deserved some credit for liberating Buchenwald, as well.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Bender, Benjamin. *Glimpses: Through Holocaust and Liberation*. (Berkeley, North Atlantic Books, 1995).
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 161-162.
- ⁴⁷ Kamm, Henry. No Mention of Jews at Buchenwald. *New York Times*, March 25, 1989.
- ⁴⁸ Oster, Henry, and Ford, Dexter. *The Kindness of the Hangman: Even in Hell, There is Hope*. (Manhattan Beach, CA, Higgins Bay Press, 2014).
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 143-144.
- ⁵⁰ Lau, Israel Meir. *Out of the Depths: The Story of a Child of Buchenwald Who Returned Home at Last*. (New York: Sterling, 2005). Pp. 65-66.
- ⁵¹ Lau, Depths, pp 71-72.
- ⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SkJZtKARYe4>
- ⁵³ Felix Weinberg. *Boy 30529L A Memoir*. (London, Verso, 2014).
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 114.
- ⁵⁵ Gross, Alex. *Yankele*. (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2001). P. 81.
- ⁵⁶ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn508092>
- ⁵⁷ Jack Werber, with William B. Helmreich. *Saving Children: Diary of a Buchenwald Survivor and Rescuer*. (New Brunswick, NJ, USA, Transaction Publishers, 1996/2014).
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 111.
- ⁵⁹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0174852/>
- ⁶⁰ <https://www.amazon.com/Fifth-Diamond-Irene-Zisblatt/dp/1648049575>
- ⁶¹ <http://holocaustcontroversies.blogspot.com/2010/01/irene-zisblatt-diamond-girl-fact-or.html>;
<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/questionable-testimony-in-holocaust-doc-is-grist-for-deniers/>
- ⁶² <https://www.ww2classroom.org/node/330>
- ⁶³ <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/ohrdorf-concentration-camp>
- ⁶⁴ Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *A Holocaust Reader*. (Springfield, NJ: Behrman House, 1976), pp. 10-11.
- ⁶⁵ Cziborra, Pascal. *KZ-Autobiografien : Geschichtsfälschungen zwischen Erinnerungsversagen, Selbstinszenierung und Holocaust-Propaganda*. (Bielefeld, Lohrbe Verlag, 2012).
- ⁶⁶ <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn1003323>
- ⁶⁷ Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015). P. 93.