
The Children of Buchenwald - A Story for Our Times by Robert Krell, M.D.

I am a child survivor of the Holocaust. In May of 1945, I was returned to my parents after being hidden with a Christian family for nearly three years. I was five years old.

My good fortune in having survived the war as a Jewish child in Holland was multiplied a thousand-fold by the miraculous survival of my parents. The odds against the three of us making it were enormous. Of 108,000 Dutch Jews deported to primarily Auschwitz and Sobibor, 5500 returned. (At the Dutch transit camp Westerbork, lists of names were kept of every Dutch Jew deported. The departures took place weekly. There were 19 trains to Sobibor.)

In 1942 my father had parents and two sister, my mother had parents, two brothers and a sister. By 1945 all had been murdered. My mother and father were orphans, the only survivors.

Of German's war on Jews, that waged against children was so determined, so vicious, words fail. One and one-half million children from Holland to Greece, from Czechoslovakia to France, from Germany to Rhodes, were hunted down and slaughtered in the most gruesome and sadistic manner.

Adult Jews targeted for annihilation were forced to work as slave labour. But children and the elderly served no useful purpose and were deemed expendable. There was no mercy. Mercy had died also.

It is no surprise then that only a

comparative handful of children, several thousand at most, survived concentration camps. A larger number escaped certain death through hiding - in forests, caves, convents, and with Christians who remembered their Christianity.

On April 11, 1945 American troops stumbled into Buchenwald. They found thousand of starving men in barracks, living skeletons waiting to join the piles of skeletons already heaped outside. In Barracks number 66 they found hundreds of Jewish children, starving and emaciated. They numbered about one thousand. They were the remnants of the death marches from Aushwitz and elsewhere.

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As the Soviet army approached Auschwitz, the Germans force marched 61,000 prisoners still able to walk, westward in the midst of winter. In early March 1945, ten to twelve thousand persons who survived walking in snow, dressed in rags and without food, arrived in Buchenwald. They were added to the 47,000 inmates already there.

All this was apparently not enough, for 26,000 prisoners, mostly Jews, were then loaded onto 50 railroad cars for Dachau, near Munich. All aboard the trains died of hunger, cold, or asphyxiation.

Of the one thousand youngsters to survive these murderous events, 427 were repatriated to France (others to England and Switzerland).

I was given the convoy lists by Judith Hemmendinger with whom I am co-authoring a new edition of her book “Survivors: Children of the Holocaust.”

Judith was a young woman born in Frankfurt, Germany, whose family moved to Paris in 1929. Her father was arrested in 1939 by the French for being a German and later by the Germans, for being a Jew. Eventually he was deported to Auschwitz and killed in September 1943. The remaining family fled to Switzerland in a perilous journey. Judith worked for the OSE, an agency to assist children and she heard of the thousand Jewish children found at Buchenwald.

She went to France to meet the boys and soon became a Director of a home to nurture them back to health, physically and emotionally.

Professionals at that time were ill-equipped to handle a group of brutalized children whose homes and families had been destroyed and who were bereft of any feelings of security. Instead, they were filled with mistrust. Some psychologists and psychiatrists considered them to be “sociopaths” and said they were beyond recovery. The boys themselves felt like animals (although they had seen animals treated better by their German masters) and behaved aggressively. People like Judith began to restore to them a sense of self. Each boy was addressed by name. For years they had been a number. Gradually they learned not to hoard or steal. There was no need. There would be food again tomorrow. Then they learned to cry again.

One day a man came to speak to the assembled boys. They jeered him, they refused to listen. Then he rolled up his sleeve, revealed his tattoo and stood silently, tears streaming down his face.