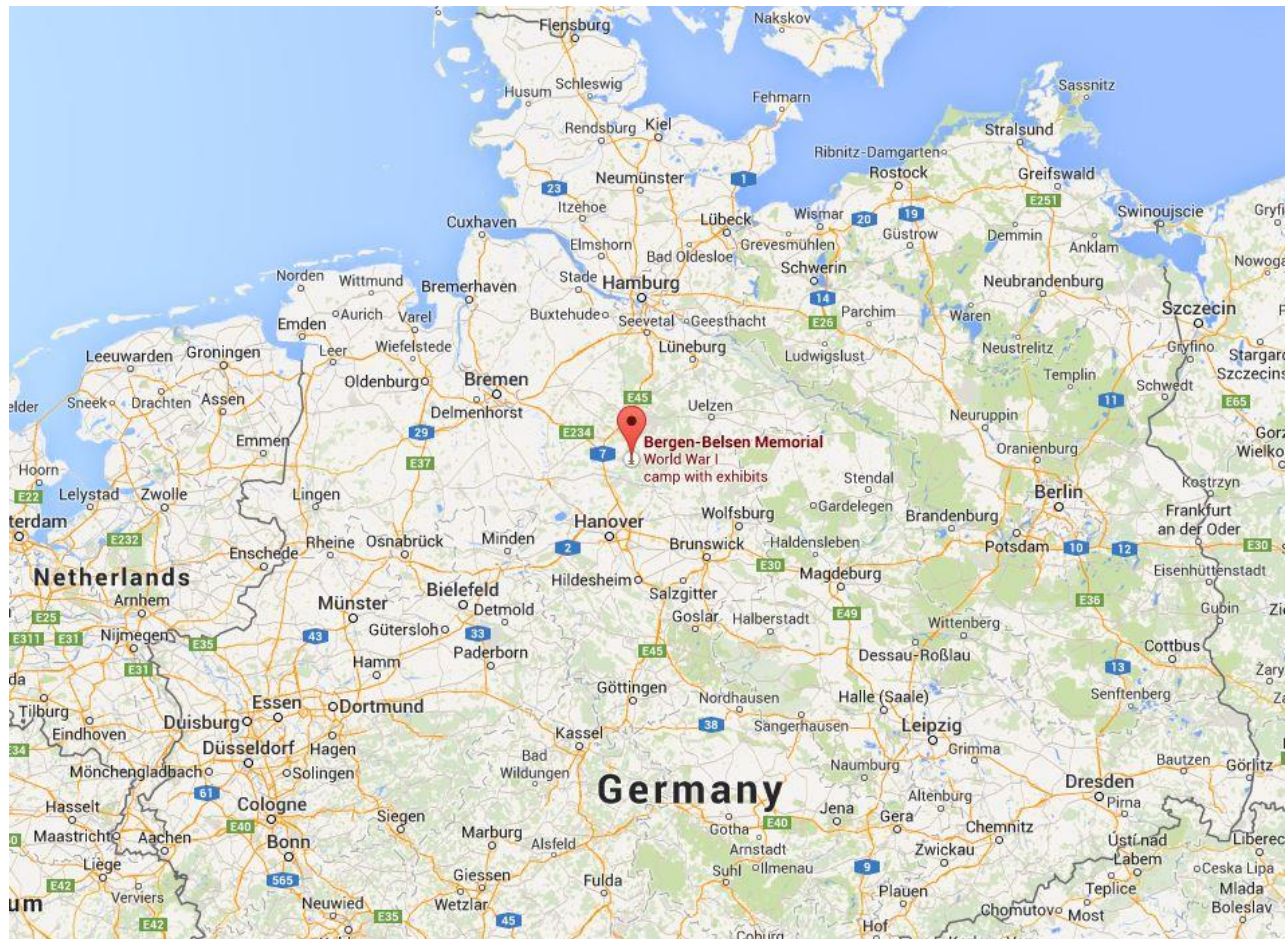


# Bergen-Belsen

German Concentration Camp

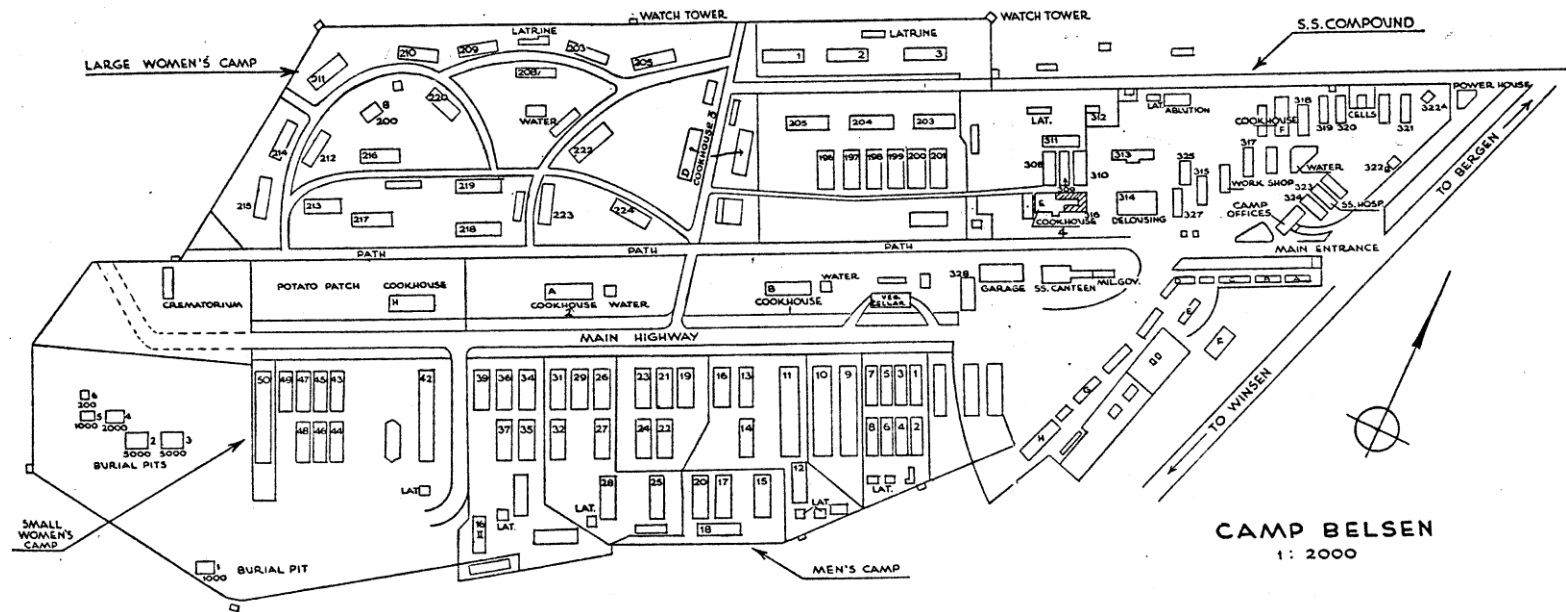
A teacher's guide from **Tikvah**



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# When was Bergen-Belsen camp first set up?



Bergen-Belsen camp was established in 1940 as a prisoner-of-war camp. It was expanded in 1941 to accommodate the increase of Soviet prisoners.

# For what purpose?

- The Nazis set up a military camp in Bergen in 1935 and the construction workers who built it had their own camp which was to form the base for Bergen-Belsen
- In 1940 the construction workers camp was converted to house French and Belgian prisoners-of-war.
- Between 1941 and 1943 the camp was expanded to house many thousands of Soviet prisoners-of-war. It is estimated over 40,000 of those prisoners died there.
- From 1943 part of the camp was handed over to the SS for them to imprison Jews and others who were valuable alive and who might be exchanged for money or for captured German nationals.
- Various groups of prisoners, largely Jews, passed through the camp. Some groups were released in exchanges. However, in 1944 the camp was officially designated as a concentration camp.
- In late 1944/early 1945 the camp became a “dumping ground” for prisoners from other concentration camps which were being approached by Allied troops.



Ladislaus Lob, aged 11, was one of the occupants of Bergen-Belsen. He was transferred from a ghetto in Northern Transylvania to Bergen-Belsen. He was one of the 1,684 Jews registered as arriving in Bergen-Belsen as part of a deal between Rezső Kasztner (a Jewish member of the Aid and Rescue Committee in Budapest) and Adolf Eichmann (the SS controller of Jewish deportations to extermination camps). At the end of 1944 some 1,600 Jews, including Ladislaus, left Bergen-Belsen for the safety of Switzerland. Ladislaus now lives in Sussex.

# Who were the occupants, nationalities, minority identities over time?

- French and Belgian prisoners-of-war were the first occupants of Bergen-Belsen. After Germany invaded Russia in 1941, the occupants became predominantly Soviet troops.
- In 1943 the “special camp” was created to house Polish Jews.
- The “neutrals camp” housed Jews from neutral countries such as Spain or Turkey.
- The “star camp” comprised Jews transferred from the Netherlands.
- A “recuperation camp” was formed to take sick and injured prisoners from concentration camps.
- A “Hungarian camp” was formed in 1944 and severe overcrowding starts forcing the creation of a “tent camp”.
- Many thousands of new prisoners (largely Jews) of all nationalities arrived from other camps after completing “death marches”.
- Widespread typhus broke out.



# Who were the Liberators and when?



On 15 April 1945 British soldiers of the 21<sup>st</sup> Army Group (a unit of the Oxfordshire Yeomanry) entered Bergen-Belsen and found 60,000 prisoners, nearly all in very poor health (14,000 of those subsequently died). In the previous two years it is estimated that a further 36,000 had died, as many as 10,000 lay unburied inside Bergen-Belsen when the British arrived. The camp commandant, SS Captain Josef Kramer (above), was arrested immediately. He was subsequently executed after his trial.





Brigadier Hugh Llewellyn Glyn-Hughes responsible for the relief effort at Bergen-Belsen



British troops enter Bergen-Belsen for the first time with loudspeakers to announce the liberation.

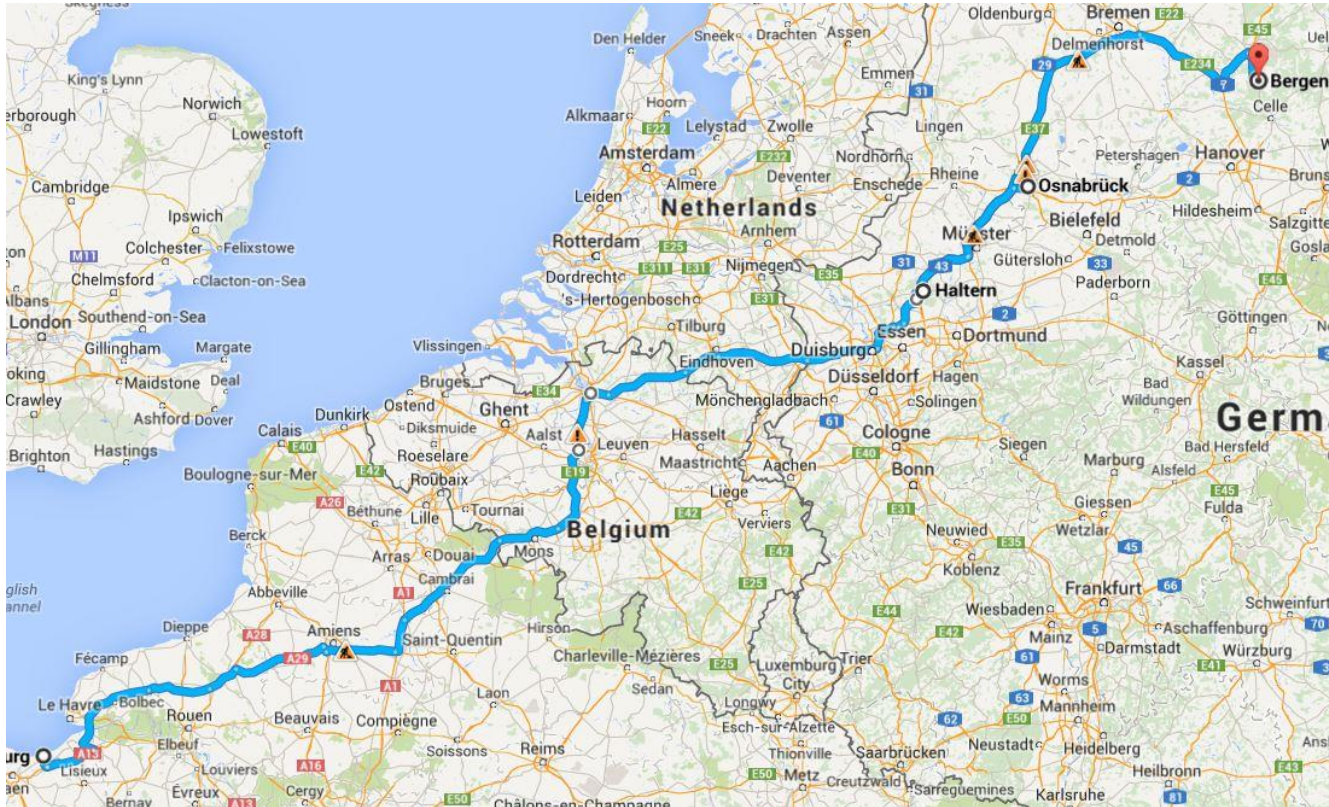


The 95 volunteer medical students from London who arrived on 2 May to save as many lives as possible



British troops preparing food

# Liberator journey



The approximate route of some of the British Army units which fought their way across France, Belgium, the Netherlands and into Germany when, almost by accident, they came across Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

# Video testimonies of liberators



## Quotes from Liberators

**Sergeant Norman Turgel, 53 Field Security Section, British Intelligence Corps.**

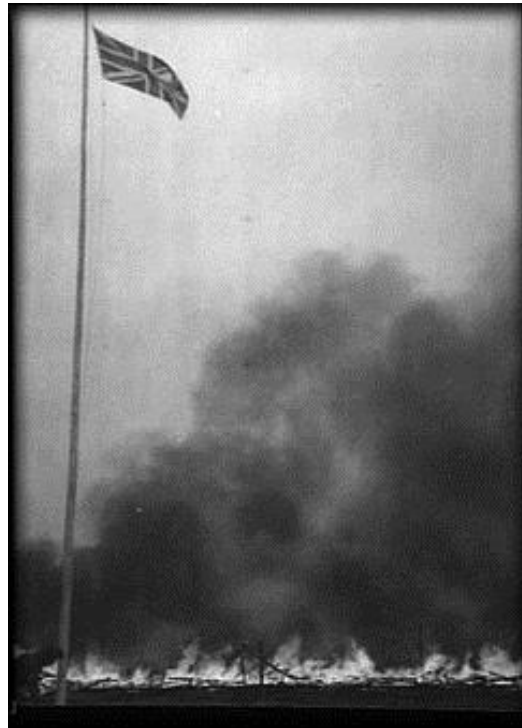
“On April 18, three days after our arrival, I woke up and could not get out of bed. I was paralysed. That happened to two or three of our chaps. We simply could not walk. When the doctor came and stuck pins in our legs, we felt nothing. This lasted for 24 hours, and they put it down to shock on our nerves from the horrific sights we’d seen.”

**Major Alexander Smith Allan, 113 Light Anti-Aircraft Regiment**

“It was quite an unexpected sight that we met.....what was before us came to light in the morning....It was a gruesome and horrible sight that I will never forget, never.”

**Captain (later Major) W R Williams (writing to his son on 18 April 1945)**

“Everything and more you’ve read are absolutely true. I’ve seen everything and can swear to it. Anyone you meet, pass it on. I never believed all the fantastic stories we’ve heard, read about, and the atrocities committed by the SS men and women. But after being here 4 days, boy – some experience.....”



Destroying the typhus-ridden barracks



## Quotes from Liberators

**C.J. Charters. 37 Kinema Section RAOC, BLA. Letter of 15 May 1945.**

“The full story of Belsen has yet to be written, but when the day dawns of its publication this most brutal, inhuman and ghastly Hell on earth will be revealed to the whole world.....I do not believe in gloating and publishing the sins of another whether that be a man or a nation, but this is a crime of which the whole world should know....”

**Major Ben Barnett.**

“The things I saw completely defy description. There are no words in the English language which can give a true impression of the ghastly horror of this camp.”

“I find it hard even now to get into focus all these horrors, my mind is really quite incapable of taking in everything I saw because it was all so completely foreign to everything I had previously believed or thought possible”.

**Gunner George Walker writing home.**

“This letter will read like fiction, but I swear that as sure as there is a God in heaven what I have told you is the Gospel truth.”

# **Quotes from Liberators**

## **(Impact on Germans brought into the camp)**

It was not only the British soldiers who were appalled by what they found, ordinary German soldiers and nurses were similarly affected:

**Rev Father Edmund Swift, SJ, Roman Catholic Chaplain to 81 British General Hospital.**

“On the first day of their gruesome task of burying the corpses, a party of the Wehrmacht [German] soldiers broke down completely. Having deposited about two dozen bodies in the grave, a corporal ripped off his Iron Cross and stamped it in the ground. The rest of the company followed suit and tore off their badges and decorations in sheer disgust.”

**Extract from After Daybreak – The Liberation of Belsen, 1945 by Ben Shephard**

The German nurses brought in to work in the Human Laundry [a place set aside to wash inmates from the concentration camp huts] were initially hostile. They ‘laughed, joked, were definitely truculent, made no effort to get things ready for the job in hand, damned if they were going to work for the something British.’ But when the first patients started to arrive, ‘those nurses stood with their mouths open and gazed horror struck as those bodies were brought in, first one then another started to sob until almost the whole sixty were weeping. There was no more truculence after that.’ The ‘humanity and professionalism’ of these Germans soon wore down British hostility. ‘Those girls worked like slaves’. [Lt Colonel Mervyn] Gonin wrote.....



# Displaced Persons' camp

- Bergen-Belsen, unlike most concentration camps, became a major Jewish Displaced Persons' camp shortly after liberation and was located in the former Wehrmacht barracks.
- Thousands of former prisoners, having regained their health, tried to find out the fate of their families. The majority had to come to terms with the fact that they had lost most, if not all, of their close family.
- Many could not face returning to the place from where they had been deported and where they felt they would not be welcome. Therefore they had to search for countries which would accept them as refugees.
- Unfortunately, many thousands were destined to be in the camp for several years as the Allies would not allow them to emigrate in large numbers to the places they wanted to go to (primarily the USA and Palestine).
- The camp became the largest Jewish community in the whole of occupied Germany and the original numbers were added to by migrating Jews, coming from the Soviet Union and elsewhere, after finding that they could no longer live in countries where they had previously resided.



British soldiers and medical staff together with women liberated at Bergen-Belsen, after an extended period of recuperation. Some remained stranded there for several years. These women, mainly from the Hitler and Adler families from Oradea in Northern Transylvania, did not typically return home, but emigrated to various parts of the world.

# A poem from the liberated

The first verses of a longer poem written by **Aranka Klein** a Jew from Nyíregyháza in Hungary , a town close to the border with Northern Transylvania. She was deported to Auschwitz, but was liberated from Bergen-Belsen.

**April 15, 1945 – Bergen Belsen**

White flags flew inside the gates  
Heavy British tanks were shaking our  
barracks  
As they rolled outside the gates  
It was music to my ears  
I knew, I'll be freed.

"Let's go!" I cried  
"To greet our liberators."  
I and some friends, ran outside  
The guards saw us  
"Aim, fire" the bullets were flying.

The passion to shoot  
With our liberation didn't stop  
Just shoot one more, kill us all  
Was their bequest  
The Nazis' last call.

Some of us were injured  
Some were dead...  
I wished that I was dead.

But it wasn't the wish of God  
He restored my faith  
He helped me survive  
The heroic British Army  
Opened the gate  
I was free.

## Acknowledgments

- Slide 4. Map drawn by Derrick Sington (a liberator) from *Belsen Uncovered*, London: Duckworth, 1946
- Slide 6. Photo from *Rezső Kasztner* by Ladislaus Lob, (Pimlico)
- Slide 8/9/13. Photos courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London
- Slide 11. Video courtesy of the Imperial War Museum, London
- Slide 12/15. Quotations from various sources, but including *Remembering Belsen* by Ben Flanagan and Donald Bloxham (Valentine Mitchell) and *After Daybreak* by Ben Shephard (Pimlico)
- Slide 17/18. Photo and poem courtesy of Yad Vashem

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