

U.S. Army Soldier, Liberator and Witness

Content warning: This story contains disturbing depictions of a soldier's first-hand experiences of liberating a concentration camp where prisoners had been abused and starved.

To the Army and Buchenwald

Nathan Schaeffer was born in 1922 in New York City where he was raised and lived until he married. He joined the U.S. Army in 1942 as a combat engineer and once his training was complete, he was sent to Durham, North Carolina where he was deployed overseas to Europe in 1943. His unit served in England, France, Germany, and Austria.

As Allied troops began to defeat Nazi Germany across Europe, they also started to discover the concentration camps where millions of Jews and other people groups were held prisoner and killed.

Nathan was in Germany in April 1945 when U.S. Army troops advanced on Buchenwald, a particularly brutal concentration camp and the largest in Germany.



American soldiers enter Buchenwald, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

Buchenwald was set up on a wooded hill outside Weimar, Germany, and it housed up to 86,000

prisoners shortly before liberation. As Nathan's unit approached the road leading to Buchenwald several miles still to go, Nathan began to notice a terrible smell.

"What is that?" he asked.

"No clue, but I hope it isn't gas. We don't have gas masks," a fellow soldier said.

Nathan sniffed the air. "I don't know, but it reeks of death."

The smell intensified as the soldiers got closer to the camp. Nathan and the other soldiers pulled handkerchiefs and cloth from their pockets to wrap around their faces to dull the smell. Several men vomited, the odor was so overwhelming.

Buchenwald finally came into view with its tall wire fences and guard posts at every corner, none of them occupied.

As they entered the grounds, the first thing Nathan saw to the right of the gate was a huge wagon piled with the dead—more than he could have counted. He felt sick as he realized that this camp had been a place where thousands of people had been mistreated and killed. The smell that was so overwhelming was the stench of death.

To his left was a two-story building that still had a guard who was quickly captured. When they approached the windows and doors, he saw that it had been some kind of medical facility. There were a few young children inside, half-starved, their eyes seeming as large as their small faces.

Outside another building there were piles and piles of what Nathan thought were stones and dust, but as he looked at it, an officer came up and asked quietly, "Do you know what that is?"

Nathan shook his head no.

"Bones. Those are ashes from the furnace. The Nazis were burning the bodies of the dead."

In the moment, it was hard to understand all he was seeing. While Nathan was Jewish, and he knew that Hitler and the Nazis had treated Jews and other people poorly, he had no idea it had been this inhu-

mane. No one they had come across as they marched across Germany had even hinted that the conditions were this terrible. He had no words.

As awful as it was to see the dead, those who had survived looked like walking skeletons. Many prisoners had been forced to try to evacuate the camp before the U.S. Army arrived, but many were left behind. The Jewish prisoners were severely emaciated, and soldiers immediately began emptying their packs and trucks of food to help, but the people could not ingest the candy bars and calorie dense meals. Their bodies weren't able to process it after living on such meager meals for so long. Many got sick. Some died.

As the soldiers began to assess the camp and prisoners, Nathan and his unit inspected the living quarters where prisoners had been kept when they were not working twelve hours a day or more.

The beds in those small barracks were just thin wood slats that people slept on with no mattress or cushion, stacked two and three high like bunk beds. Nathan had learned to camp and sleep in unusual quarters and even on the ground in his time with the Army, but nothing came close to the discomfort he saw at Buchenwald.

The next day, Nathan was eating his breakfast when a short youth approached him. The teen was only four feet tall, and Nathan was surprised to learn that he was eighteen years old—only a few years younger than Nathan himself. Nathan stayed with him for several hours, slowly feeding him a cup of soup, making him take his time to avoid illness.

It was hard to know how to feel. The entire experience was overwhelming—from the smell to the horrors that those living had endured to the grief of knowing that so many people were murdered there in the camp.

In the evenings when the soldiers gathered around to eat their meals, they invited the former prisoners to sit with them, to eat, but most refused, staying in the shadows, digging in the garbage cans to find small morsels of discarded food, even though they had been offered the same food as the soldiers.

Nathan couldn't understand why they wouldn't sit and eat with the soldiers. It was much later that he realized they were afraid and in shock, still unsure

how to approach this new set of guards. Most had been treated so inhumanely for so long that it was difficult for them to trust anyone.

It took a couple of weeks to inspect the camp, to bring in the necessary officials and doctors to assess the inmates and help them build their strength before they could be transported into the nearby cities to begin reintegration in displaced person camps throughout Germany and across Europe.

Nathan and his unit worked in a couple other camps as well, some with conditions as horrible as Buchenwald, others that seemed to fare better.

In one particular work camp, Nathan noticed a marked difference in the facilities and treatment of prisoners.

"What kind of labor did the prisoners do here?" he asked.

"They worked to keep the factories and the mills going."

Nathan learned that the Nazis had invited the Red Cross to inspect this camp, making it look like the conditions at all the camps were more humane. He later learned that there were several camps like that set up across Europe to hide their crimes and fool the international community into thinking prisoners were being treated better than they were.



U.S. flag flies at half-mast at Buchenwald to honor the dead, 1945 (photo via ushmm.org)

Heading Home, Changed

When Nathan returned home, newspapers around the world had finally printed the pictures of the terrible crimes and treatment evidenced in the camps.

Family and friends asked Nathan about his experiences, but he struggled to find the words to tell them how awful it had been. Like many other soldiers and service members who had witnessed the concentration camps first-hand, Nathan had nightmares about what he had seen, and he suffered with depression for a number of years.

On one hand, Nathan was incredibly proud to have served in the U.S. Army and to have been there to provide a little relief in the midst of so much human suffering. On the other hand, he could never forget the horrors he'd seen across Europe: the evidence of hate, discrimination, and evil that was determined to destroy an entire group of people.

Nathan and the other service people who experienced the shock of the war and the Holocaust spent many years educating the next generation and demanding that the United States and all human beings work to remember the atrocities of the Holocaust to ensure that nothing like it ever happened again.

Source:
Schaeffer, Nathan. Interview. SCE-TV and the South Carolina Council on the Holocaust, 1990.

Nathan Schaeffer

Teacher's Guide

If you haven't taught first person survivor testimonies before, we highly recommend reading [this guide](#) from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Before you read:

1. Define the Holocaust.
2. What is a first-person testimony or account?
3. What role do first-person testimonies play in understanding history?

Questions to think about as you read:

1. Why did Nathan go to Europe?
2. Why were the U.S. soldiers surprised by the conditions in the camps?
3. How did the U.S. soldiers try to help the survivors?
4. Why didn't the Holocaust survivors trust the U.S. soldiers who'd come to liberate them?
5. Why do you think it was important for Nathan and other service members to educate others back home about what they witnessed during World War II?

Final reflection:

1. What will you remember most from this liberator's story? How does it add to your understanding of the events of the Holocaust?