

# The Train to Life

By Dina Kupfer

## The Persecutors

*Germany, April 13, 1945*

The Allied Armies were sweeping across Germany, alarming the Nazis. Evidence of their satanic deeds had to be quickly eliminated. The evidence was a mass of dead and dying Jews. German soldiers, terrified of Allied retribution, sent thousands of Jews on death marches from one concentration camp to another, deeper into Germany. The Germans cunningly planned on burying their barbaric crimes along with the still-living skeletons. With minimal clothing and food, many victims died along the way.

In Bergen-Belsen, originally a prisoner-of-war camp that quickly degenerated into a five-section concentration camp, there was much evidence to eliminate. The British forces were only days away. Hurriedly, countless weakened Jewish prisoners were crammed into suffocating freight cars, a few onto passenger cars, and were sent away from the site of their living nightmare. The single purpose of the train trips was to dispose of the helpless victims who would serve as proof of the Germans' devilish deeds.

The frail occupants of one such train, whose destination was the Theresienstadt concentration camp located in Czechoslovakia, experienced an extraordinary escape from certain death.

As it was heading eastward toward the Elbe River, news reached the German train crew that the Soviet army was approaching. The train's direction was hastily reversed, and then it was stalled at Farsleben, Germany, to await further orders.

The next update was soon received; the Americans were advancing from the west. With their enemies closing in on both sides, the German train engineers were instructed to plunge the train into the Elbe River. Along with the death of all the Jewish occupants, mostly women and children, this would be suicide for the estimated 200 German personnel on board.

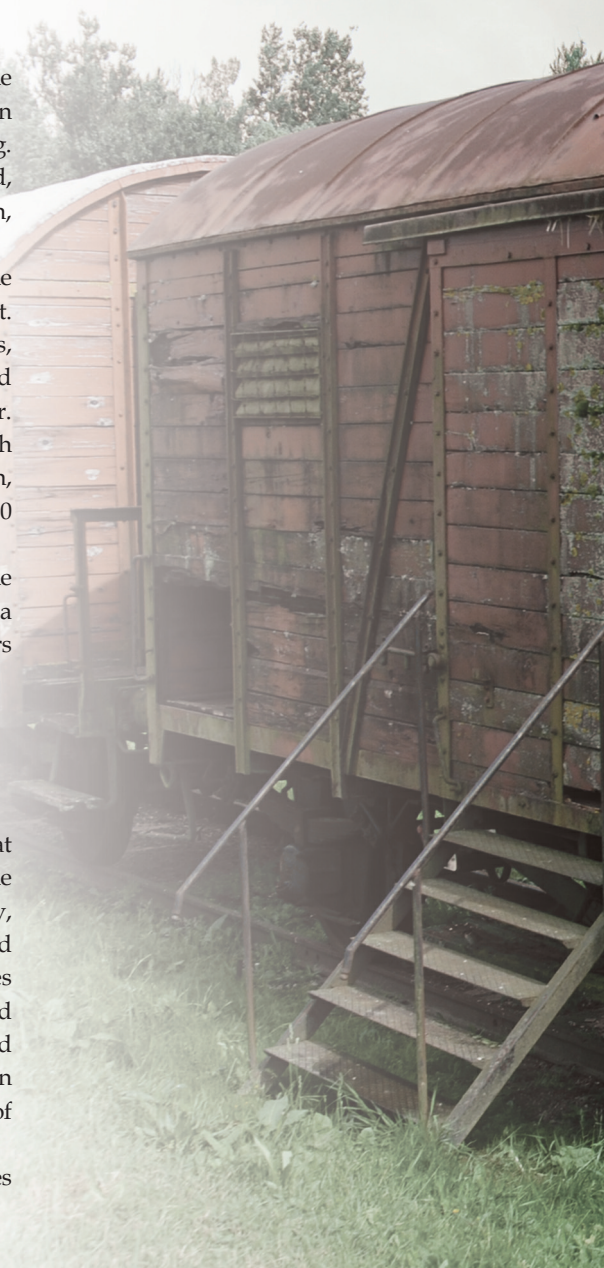
Not wishing to die, they did not obey the order. The train stood idle on its tracks in a little valley in Farsleben; the train engineers were unsure of what to do next.



## The Liberators

As the carnage in Europe raged, a great breakthrough for the Allied Armies came with the successful invasion of Normandy, France, on June 6, 1944. British and American naval and air task forces organized a mass transport of troops and supplies across the English Channel and constructed ingenious artificial harbors in order to dock along the coastal beaches of Nazi-ruled France.

After liberating Paris, the Allied forces





*Even as Holocaust memories fade into the past, clouded by the turbulence of the present, dramatic stories are still unfolding. In the astonishing story presented here, people of today become connected by the events of yesterday, and memories that must live on are*

*shaken loose. We are obligated to safeguard every painful yet precious narrative, for each one tells the history of our nation and the wonder of our survival. Each story is also the confirmation of Hashem's lovingkindness even during trying times.*





proceeded to free Belgium and Holland. The Siegfried Line, Germany's heavy Westwall of defense, had to be penetrated before they could enter the heart of the beast itself.

The 30th Infantry Division, a unit of the American Army National Guard, valiantly launched an attack on this German defensive line. They were the first Allied unit to have entered Belgium and Holland. Now they were leading the way into inland Germany. As the Americans, British, and French were closing in from the western front, Soviet troops were advancing from the east. The combined operation would result in German surrender on May 7, 1945.

It was a group closely associated with the 30th Infantry Division, the 743rd Tank Battalion, that chanced upon the idle train parked on the railroad tracks.

It happened as they were pressing forward to liberate Magdeburg, seventy-seven miles southwest of Berlin. The 743rd Tank Battalion was sent ahead to scout out the area in search of a German ambush. On the way, they entered the town of Farsleben, just sixteen miles ahead of Magdeburg. They did not discover any German resistance, only that hapless train.

The Heaven-sent emissaries had arrived.

Seeing the Allied unit approaching, the German crew rushed to the car attached to the locomotive and tried escaping by driving it away. They were soon taken over by American backup troops.

Liberation had arrived. The train that was meant to be a death sentence for over two thousand helpless Jews was now a train to life.

It was Major Clarence L. Benjamin of the 743rd Battalion who encountered a group of roaming Finnish soldiers, escapees from their prisoner-of-war camp. Having heard that a German train was approaching, they notified the American trooper. Benjamin rushed back to the battalion and ordered tank commanders George C. Gross and Carrol Walsh to drive up with him to investigate.

Finding the long train of grimy cars filled with gaunt bodies, sixty and seventy packed to a car, the Allied soldiers were stunned. The train, a remnant of World War

I that was referred to as a "40 and 8," had a maximum capacity of forty people or eight horses per car. There were over 2,500 suffering Jewish souls on board. Up until that moment, rumors of German cruelty to civilians had been taken as propaganda meant to encourage Allied soldiers. This was their first confrontation with the victims whom the Germans had tried so hard to hide.

"They were packed in there so tightly that they did not have room to sit or lie down, so they just had to stand upright until they collapsed and crumpled to the floor because of exhaustion," described Mr. Frank W. Towers, lieutenant of the 30th Infantry Division, who arrived at Farsleben later that evening. In a recounting of the story, titled "The Death Train at Farsleben, Germany, 13 April 1945," he stated, "They had no ... facilities except a single bucket in one corner of the car, which most could not even reach as the sudden necessity arose. We had liberated a few Allied P.O.W. camps and fed DP camps, but this was the first of the 'tortured Jewish victims' that we had read about but never seen before."

Once they realized freedom had come, those who were able ran toward their liberators, greeting them with deep emotion. They crowded around their saviors and communicate their stories in whatever English they knew. The kind soldiers shared whatever edibles they had handy, but it was far from enough.

As the rest of the battalion and associated troops arrived, food and clothing was rounded up from the nearby town of Hillersleben. The German inhabitants had been warned to vacate the town. The former Bergen-Belsen prisoners were brought to Hillersleben to recuperate and were told they could settle in any of the houses they saw. For many, it would be the first time in years that they had slept in a soft bed rather than on a cramped wooden cot or a wooden "shelf" in a barracks. Sadly, though, some had died on the train, while others died after their liberation from frailty or because their bodies could not tolerate the food they ate.



## The Survivors

This author interviewed several survivors of the Farsleben train. Although their general experiences aboard the train were similar, each shared their own stories, emphasizing different details, since each had been affected in a unique way. For all of them, however, memories of the fateful day that restored them to life are very clear and poignant.

Mr. Benjamin Zev Vorst, born in Holland and currently living in London, was deported from his native country to Bergen-Belsen along with his parents and three siblings. "It was a very big exception," he stresses, "that all six of us survived, *baruch Hashem*... We didn't have to wear the striped suit because we were children. I was eight years old.

"We left the camp on Shabbos, 7 April 1945. Even though it was Shabbos, my father said we had to travel because cholera [typhoid] was spreading and killing people in the camp.

"We had to walk to the train, and it was already getting dark. The Germans didn't look at any identification papers. They just wanted us out of there. It was a long way to the platform, but we had to walk all of it. My father put us right in the front of the crowd because we heard that anyone who ended up in the back of the march would be shot. This wasn't the case here, though, because they didn't have enough soldiers. Not many Germans were looking after us because they had all been ordered away to stop the advancing Allied armies. We were





right in the front anyway, the first in the line. We were hungry and sore.

"The road went through a forest, and I asked my father if I could eat an acorn from a tree. He said I should ask a soldier if I could pick one. I was allowed to leave the line and I went to get one, but it was sour and bitter. I still have the taste in my mouth.

"Then we arrived at the train. We heard mention of Theresienstadt, also called Terezin. There were mainly cattle cars, but there was one passenger car, an old Belgian model with benches. We went in there and it got so crowded! There was an elderly person who had bad legs. She was put in the luggage area.

"The next morning we were driven out. The train stopped a number of times. We traveled for about six days, the children, the elderly... We didn't have food for a few days at a time. Not even water."

Mr. Yaakov Singer, a resident of Boro Park since 1959, was a young child of four. His older sister, Mrs. Brocha Biegeleisen, was eight years old. With a voice that still reveals strong emotion, he asserts, "My memory of it is very vivid, as opposed to anything beforehand. Everything before is a murky puddle of pain, hunger, and terror. That terror... we were hunted down every day."

Their family was originally in the Bochnia ghetto, near Cracow in Galicia, Poland, where Nazis were gunning down scores of Jews on a whim. Their father was able to escape the roundups and acquire priceless forged Argentinean papers. Argentina was a neutral country allied with

Germany, and the Germans were wary of harming any of its citizens so as not to jeopardize their political relationship. Once the small Singer family showed their acquired papers, they were deported to Bergen-Belsen. Although later it also became a concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen was originally a prisoner-of-war camp that also held those of foreign birth whom the Germans hoped to trade for

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some of the German soldiers who had been captured.

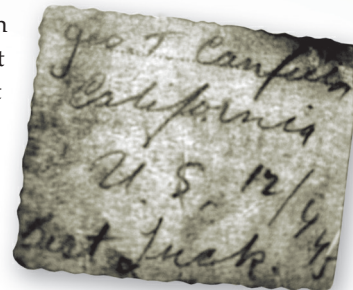
After suffering in Bergen-Belsen for two years, the Singer family was now being evacuated by train. As the old train chugged along, bombs rained down all around it. When a dogfight broke out in the air above it, the sky was bright with explosions. At one point everyone clambered out of the train to take cover in a ditch alongside the tracks. That the train itself was not hit by Allied ammunition was miraculous since it was a strategic objective.

The then-young Mr. Singer suddenly remembered that in the rush to get off the beleaguered train, his father had left behind a small *sefer Torah*, given to him for safekeeping by the esteemed Rabbi Burack\* of Belgium. Rabbi Burack had remained in Bergen-Belsen with his wife because his daughter had contracted tuberculosis and he would not leave her behind. The rabbi asked that if they somehow survived, they should take the *sefer Torah* to a shul. With his father behind him, Mr. Singer raced back into the train to retrieve the holy Torah, and only then took cover in a nearby ditch.

Mr. Singer and Mrs. Biegeleisen remember how those who had managed to hold on to treasured photos of their

missing family members crowded around the American heroes after the liberation, showing them the weathered pictures and hoping and praying that perhaps they had seen them. Their own father gave one of the soldiers a small, precious picture of his missing wife. The war victims did not yet know the scope of the Holocaust and the unlikelihood that the Allied troops had encountered their

relatives. In December of that year, Mrs. Singer's photograph was mailed back to them. On the back, the soldier had written, "George T. Canfield, California, U.S., 12/445, Best Luck." Unfortunately, their mother had been taken to the Belzec extermination camp, from which so few are known to have come out alive.



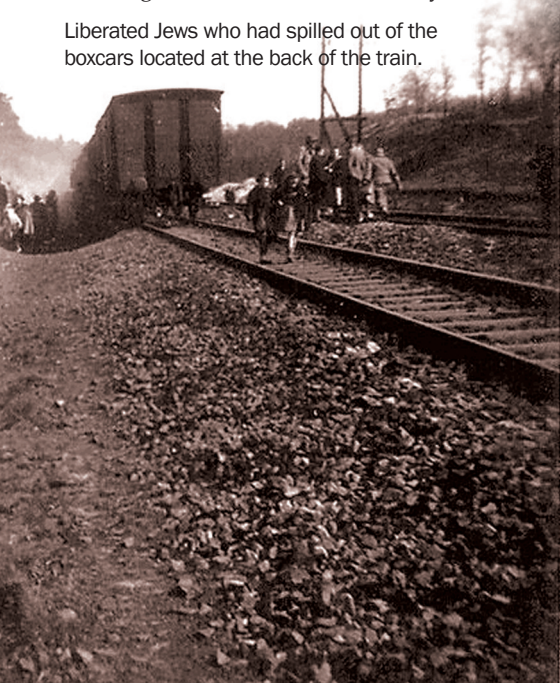
George Canfield's handwritten note to the Singer family.

Every Seder night afterward, their momentous liberation was always a topic of discussion for Mr. Singer's father and his family. Although their personal *yetzias Mitzrayim* was exhilarating, Mr. Singer is quick to add, "We mourn for the six million

Yidden who perished, and always remember the survivors who suffered so terribly, both physically and emotionally, due to the deprivation, torture, and terror."

Mr. Singer is also very mindful of the American blessing of freedom, which has enabled American Jewry to thrive. He feels strongly that one should have deep appreciation and respect for America, especially when current events in Europe prove that hostility toward Jews has not disappeared. Given the unimaginable tragedies of the Holocaust and the current growth of vibrant Jewish communities, he wishes more tribute would be paid to the American liberators who helped many survive. He remembers clearly their

Liberated Jews who had spilled out of the boxcars located at the back of the train.





kindness as they distributed chocolate bars and chewing gum to the starving children, and “their wonderful-smelling shaving lotion.”

Mrs. Dina Spira, whose future husband and in-laws, the Bluzhever Rebbe, Harav Yisrael Spira and his Rebbetzin, *zichronam livrachah*, were on the train, shared some lesser-known details about the experience, which have become a cherished family story.

When the Germans called for those who wanted to leave Bergen-Belsen to board the departing trains, the Bluzhever Rebbe, ruled that it was permissible to travel away from Bergen-Belsen on Shabbos as it was a case of *pikuach nefesh*, when saving a life overrules the usual *halachos*. Their only chance for survival lay in getting on that train, and the Rebbe boarded it as well.

At one point on the overcrowded, rocking train, the conductor sent for Rabbiner Spira, since he spoke German. When he came forward, the German unexpectedly offered the Rebbe a seat, which he declined. The German began speaking of his kindness to Jews. This was his preface to the news that although he was being ordered to kill all the train occupants at the Elbe River, he was stalling so the Allied troops could reach them first.

Before they had the chance to speak any further, other German officers arrived. Seeing a Jew in a place where he clearly did not belong, they furiously demanded to know why the rabbi was standing there. The Rebbe responded immediately that the children on board were wailing for bread, putting them in danger of being heard by the Allied forces. The Germans contemptuously arranged for bread, saying that by the next day the Jews would not need bread.

After returning hastily to his car, the Rebbe was again called to the front of the train. The conductor informed him of a sudden change of plans. As the Elbe River was no longer reachable, he was being ordered to stop at the nearest town, where all the train's occupants would be murdered.

Weighed down by this dire news, the

Rav managed to communicate it quietly to two young men he spotted. Because they seemed to be in better physical condition than the rest of the weakened passengers, he thought they could escape by leaping off the train and taking cover in the forest.

The two men agreed, but as they were making their desperate getaway toward the forest, they heard a tank's rumble. Fearing that it was Germans, they hid. As soon as they realized it was an Allied force, they rushed forward. There were two American soldiers in the tank. When they recognized the men's striped prisoner rags, they put their ready weapons down and listened to the men's pleas that they save the nearby train filled with war victims slated to be murdered.

The American soldiers were forging ahead. One soldier hesitated since heeding the cries of these desperate men would delay them in fulfilling their orders. The other, a Jew named Pinchus Kohn, argued, persuading his fellow soldier to spare the time and save the occupants of the train. (Later, Kohn kept up a correspondence with the Bluzhever Rebbe and visited him several times over the years.)

The two American soldiers met the train as it was coming to a stop in the nearest town, Farsleben. Seeing an enemy tank approaching, the Germans abandoned their deadly plans.

[This account varies from the original in some details. Because the entire unit was advancing toward Magdeburg, this is understood to be another American tank that followed closely before or after Major Benjamin's tank.]

Having been saved at the last moment in Farsleben and then taken to recuperate in Hillersleben, the previous Bluzhever Rebbetzin would say about the train journey that she had experienced, “Everything was *zum leben*, to life.” She was a pillar of optimism and courage throughout that time of unbearable hardship.



## The Link

Hudson Falls High School, New York

July 31, 2001

At a high school in upstate New York, a longtime history teacher, Mr. Matthew Rozell, noticed that with the passage of time there were progressively fewer students responding to his query about relatives who were veterans of World War II. Realizing that a generation was rapidly disappearing, he committed himself to recording personal accounts of heroes who were still alive. This expanded into a remarkable project.

In 2001, one student's grandfather, a veteran named Carrol Walsh, was invited to Mr. Rozell's history class to speak about his wartime experiences. Toward the end of the interview, Mr. Walsh's granddaughter asked if he had mentioned “the train story.” Mr. Walsh shared that while commanding a tank in the 743rd Battalion, he had accompanied Major Clarence Benjamin and George Gross to investigate a train that had stopped on the tracks.

“All of these people, men, women, children, jam-packed in those boxcars — I couldn't believe my eyes... So now they knew they were free, they were liberated. That was a nice, nice thing. I was there for a while that afternoon. You know, you got to feed these people. Give them water. They [were] in bad shape. Major Benjamin



Mr. Matthew Rozell





took some pictures, and George Gross took some pictures too. I have copies of those pictures. [T]hey are down in Florida."

Meticulous about record-keeping and passionate about disseminating information, Mr. Rozell posted the interview on the school's site, along with a written review of the train's liberation, titled "A Train Near Magdeburg," by George Gross.\*\*

A Holocaust survivor living in Australia who remembered little of her tragic childhood contacted the Bergen-Belsen Memorial. She was provided with limited information, but one employee, who had just read the train write-up, directed her to Mr. Rozell's Living History site. She is one of more than sixty other survivors of the Farsleben train who have since contacted Mr. Rozell. The train story was experiencing a revival.

The Hudson Falls High School project was taken to an entirely new level. In conjunction with the still-active Mr. Frank Towers of the 30th Infantry Division, and most recently the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Mr. Rozell and his students have organized four reunions. They brought together train survivors and their heroic liberators in an emotional embrace. The most recent reunion, an impressive three-day symposium, began on September 23, 2009, in the Hudson Falls High School auditorium.

Mr. Frank Towers, a liberator, historian, editor, and now president of The 30th Infantry Division Veterans of World War II organization, says simply but forcefully,

"It is a fascinating story and should be told all over our country, to make the younger generation aware of what really happened — and it did happen. It was not a myth."

In a phone interview, Mr. Rozell responded thoughtfully to inquiries about the importance of his work and any personal link he might have to the Holocaust or World War II.

## As the two men were making their desperate getaway toward the forest, they heard a tank's rumble and hid.

"I don't, I don't [have any personal link]. People ask me the question. I'm not Jewish, and I'm not the son of a World War II soldier or anything. It's important for me as a history teacher to capture as many stories as possible before time runs out, to preserve history before it's lost. And the history began weaving into this amazing story.

"Twenty years ago, Holocaust material wasn't much out there. When I was a student, it was covered in twenty minutes. With students, there's definitely a spark when you speak of the greatest crime against humanity. Students are keen to pick up on injustice. It resonates with them. When they meet [survivors], they make a connection, although they can't relate to it because they never experienced anything like it. It's obvious it won't be possible in five to ten years."

Although none of the survivors interviewed here participated in the historic reunions, several were invited, and they have corresponded with Mr. Rozell and the war veterans, saluting their noble endeavors. Mrs. Spira and Mrs. Biegeleisen did so after reading *Hamodia's* newspaper coverage of the second reunion. They are both Holocaust studies teachers at Brooklyn schools and have found a mission in educating Jewish girls, most of whom are descendants of survivors, about the war era. They explain to students that they are a link between the past and the future, inspiring them to emulate some of what was lost with the

tragic death of the many *kedoshim*.

As a result of the story's revival, Mrs. Biegeleisen attempted to locate George T. Canfield, the soldier who had thoughtfully mailed back the photo of her mother. Although her search was not successful, she is happy to have made contact with the others involved in the wondrous story.

For all the survivors, the liberation of the train is marked indelibly in their

memories as the day of their rebirth. They all repeatedly expressed gratitude toward their liberators, fully cognizant that it is in the merit of these G-d-sent messengers that they lived to raise their own beautiful families. One survivor said poignantly, "In the summer, when I [was] in the country, if I was taking my kids on a train ride ... invariably, I spoke of *that* train ride."

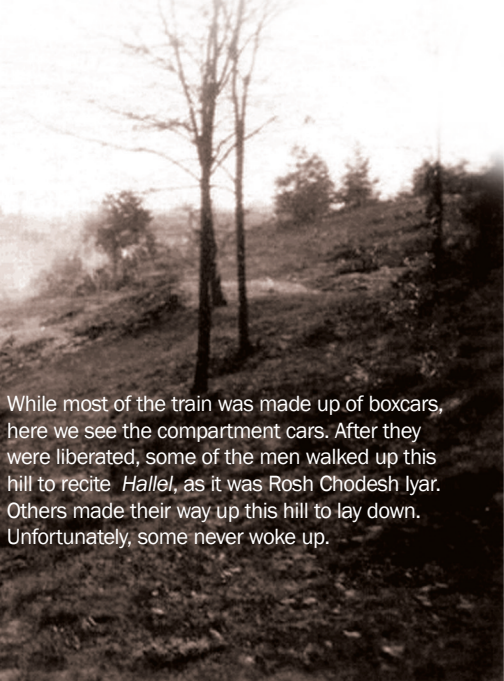
Through the enthusiastic work of one dedicated history teacher and his students, survivors and liberators, now scattered around the globe, were reunited decades later. The train's journey to a dark destination became a journey to life, mercifully rescued by Divine Providence through the heroic American troops. ■ ■ ■

### Author's Note:

Covering this extraordinary story was a moving and humbling experience. I would like to express deep gratitude to these exceptional people who graciously shared their time and sentiments with me: Mrs. Bracha Biegeleisen, Mrs. Tonka Landau, Mr. Matthew Rozell, Mrs. Dina Spira, Mr. Frank Towers, Mr. Benjamin Zev Vorst, Mr. Chesky Weingarten, and Mr. Yaakov Singer.

\*Readers who can provide a first name can contact [magazine@hamodia.com](mailto:magazine@hamodia.com)

\*\*Mr. Gross, who took the historic photographs after the train was liberated, passed away on February 1, 2009.



While most of the train was made up of boxcars, here we see the compartment cars. After they were liberated, some of the men walked up this hill to recite *Hallel*, as it was Rosh Chodesh Iyar. Others made their way up this hill to lay down. Unfortunately, some never woke up.