At the end of World War II and the Holocaust, in 1944 and 1945, Soviet, English and American soldiers liberated Europe, freeing what remained of European Jewry from forced labor camps, concentration camps, and extermination camps. Jews, and particularly Jewish children and adolescents, were also liberated from their places of hiding and monasteries.

On Victory Day, Europe joyously celebrated its freedom. But for many Jews liberation came too late. Aside from the immediate joy of being freed, this day marked the beginning of their coming to terms with the scale of the destruction and disaster. The life they had known before the war was no longer. Liberation day was the beginning of an almost super-human effort to collect the fragments of life and begin anew.

Many of the liberated Jews succumbed quickly after liberation. The long years of suffering had left their mark, and thousands died from weakness, hunger, diseases, and over-eating in the immediate aftermath of liberation. According to estimates, some 20,000 former Jewish prisoners died in Germany during the first weeks after liberation. The physical condition of those who survived was exceedingly poor, with most suffering from malnutrition and serious diseases, as a result of their living conditions during the Holocaust.

The loneliness survivors faced upon liberation was at times too much to bear. During the difficult war years, the struggle to survive had left little room for thoughts about the fates of their families, loved ones, and former lives. Now that they had been liberated, the survivors were forced to face up to their losses. Their parents, partners, children, homes, cities – their entire world and identity were completely gone.

This recognition resulted in feelings of ruin and despair, at times even in a sense of guilt for having survived while their families had been murdered. Many survivors were left entirely alone, without any family or friends. Some were the last remnants of their communities, without a soul in the world who knew them from their previous lives.

As soon as the Eastern areas had been liberated by the Red Army, in the summer of 1944, Jews began to wander from place to place, searching for their family members, property, and communities. Their return home was protracted and complicated. At the end of the war, Europe was plunged into chaos. Basic means of transportation were lacking, and the transportation that was to be found was irregular. Travelers often fell victim to violence along the way. When survivors arrived at their destination, there was usually no one waiting for them. In rare cases they would meet another family member wandering among the ruins.

Many survivors discovered that their families had been murdered and strangers were living in their homes. In addition, some of the survivors encountered antisemitic violence, particularly in Eastern Europe. In pogroms that took place in Polish towns and cities, 350 Jews were murdered by the end of 1945. The best-known was the Kielce pogrom, in which 42 Jews were murdered.

In Western Europe as well, the Jewish survivors faced many difficulties from their neighbors and the bureaucratic organizations charged with caring for them. Antisemitic incidents and the generally hostile environment led many Jews to organize a spontaneous exodus from Eastern Europe, heading for Germany, Austria and Italy. This flight was organized by survivors, mainly former partisans and soldiers, in an attempt to reach the coasts of the Mediterranean and, from there, the Land of Israel. From their testimony we can learn that, alongside feelings of despair and emptiness, survivors were also filled with a strong urge to live, and a burning desire to return to normality and resume their lives, even if that meant finding a new meaning for their lives.

Many of the Jews had nowhere to go and nowhere to return, and so they remained in the former concentration camps. According to the Allies’ definitions they became Displaced Persons. The survivors, who only a few weeks before had been prisoners in these camps, now found themselves living in them as free people.