

WITNESSTODAY

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Holocaust Remembrance Day The Liberation of Auschwitz

On November 1, 2005, the United Nations dubbed the 27th of January to be the official International Holocaust Remembrance Day. This date was specifically chosen as it marks the momentous day when the prisoners of the Auschwitz death camp were finally liberated.

With the approach of the Red Army, the Nazis began evacuating Auschwitz, sending its inmates to the hitherto unthreatened concentration camps lying farthest from the approaching Allied forces in the heart of Germany. Nearly 60,000 prisoners were forced to go on these death marches, many of whom did not survive. This meant that only about 7 thousand people remained in Auschwitz at the time of liberation. Nonetheless, for those survivors, this time of liberation marked a victory. As the concentration camp with the highest death toll, Auschwitz has become the symbol of



Soviets opening the gates of Auschwitz.
Credit: reddit.com

the barbarity of the Holocaust. Hence, every year, on the anniversary of the camp's liberation, the world comes together in remembrance of the atrocities of the Holocaust and the month when it all finally came to an end.

The Jewish Commander Who Liberated Auschwitz

Lieutenant Colonel Anatoly Shapiro was a Ukrainian Jew and the highly decorated Soviet officer

who commanded the liberation of Auschwitz. He led the 1085th 'Tarnopol' of the Soviet 322nd Rifle Division- an elite force which was called into immediate action on January 25th, 1945. Shapiro and his men were among the first to fight their way towards Auschwitz and face the desperate Nazi resistance. The Germans exhausted their last feeble attempts to maintain control and possession of their atrocious secret - the complex that was Auschwitz, but as the Soviets pushed forward, they scrambled to destroy the evidence of their crimes and flee.



Auschwitz liberator
Anatoly Shapiro.
military.wikia.org

On the morning of January the 27th, Shapiro and the Red Army broke through the final forces and entered the camp, to behold unimaginable devastation. "I had seen a lot in this war," explained Colonel Shapiro, "I had seen many innocent people killed. I had seen hanged people. I had seen burned people. But I was still unprepared for Auschwitz..." The scene was one of utter, unimaginable horror.

Upon entering the hospital, the Soviet soldiers were met with the terrified screams of the Jewish children who called out "We are not Jews!" The children had mistaken them for German soldiers and were terrified for their lives. This, recalls Shapiro, "was the hardest sight of all." The Nazi's inhumane crimes were inconceivable, and the Soviets were horrified by what they beheld upon entering Auschwitz.

On January the 27th, 1945, the inmates of Auschwitz, many of whom were Jewish, were liberated by the soldiers of the Red Army. And in fortuitous providential defiance of the Nazi attempt to annihilate the Jewish race, among these rescuers was a fellow Jew.

Sources: *After Hitler: The Last Ten Days of World War II in Europe* "The Jewish Combat Commander Who Liberated Auschwitz," by Martin Sieff. Strategic Culture Foundation

Project Witness Announces 5th Annual International Holocaust Conference on February 14 and 15

DEBORAH SCHECHTER

All Project Witness conferences are fueled by the urgent awareness that the Holocaust represents a devastating yet spiritually-elevating era in Jewish history. Over the past 4 years since it started offering its annual conferences, Project Witness has assembled experts who have addressed a variety of Holocaust-related topics with empathy and expertise. Based on extensive feedback, we know that these conferences result in expanded awareness of the importance of Holocaust Education and related communal outreach. At this year's 2021 two-day virtual Project Witness Conference that will take place Sunday, February 14 and Monday, February 15, internationally known Holocaust scholars and educators will once again do their part by sharing their expertise with a distinguished audience of principals, administrators, educators and members of Jewish communities from across the United States and the world.

This year's conference topic, ***Plunder and Profit: Pre-War Jewish Property; Post-War Looted Wealth***, will undoubtedly give rise to much thought as we review together the tragic damage — physical, emotional, spiritual, and financial — that was meted out to Jews during the Holocaust. Together we will explore many situations, including the “legalization” of plunder and profit in their various vile manifestations, the modern-day embodiments of *Haratzachta*, *V'Gam Yarashta*, the emotional impact of recovering or never finding lost treasured family items, the connections between lost or recovered objects and the shaping of memory, and the responsa regarding stolen *sifrei kodesh*.

Sadly, as more and more survivors leave us, the gap between the Holocaust era and today's young people is growing wider and wider. Nowadays, far too many of our

Jewish children and teens have minimal or no knowledge whatsoever about what happened to our nation approximately 80 years ago. Those of us involved in Holocaust Education know that that terrible time must serve to educate and empower our Jewish youngsters to recognize the threats posed by anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial. Yet more and more Jewish children feel detached from the story of their own people. It therefore behooves us to make sure that the next generation of Jewish children, teens, and young adults accept their roles as the transmitters of the history and the spiritual faith that have kept our nation alive throughout the centuries.

The programming for this exclusively virtual event was developed to serve Project Witness aficionados from across the United States and the world. You will be able to plan your attendance to fit comfortably into your time zone. There will be three sessions: Sunday and Monday morning, and Sunday evening, thereby hopefully enabling everyone to participate at some point during the conference.

Nowadays, in 2021, world events and the surge of anti-Semitism often mirror events that took place before and during the Holocaust era. Our goals for this very important conference are to provide much food for thought for educators and for those for whom the message of the Holocaust resounds loudly and clearly. We trust that the material covered in this conference will find its way into hundreds of classrooms and will be transmitted to Jewish communities at large. We encourage you to make your reservations as early as possible by contacting *Project Witness* at 718-305-5244 extension 244.