

This Day in Jewish History / The rabbi who saved the Dachau survivors passes away

Allied forces liberated the concentration camps but didn't consider what to do with the desperate survivors, until U.S. Army chaplain Abraham Klausner made them see.

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On June 28, 2007, Abraham J. Klausner, the rabbi who in the days and years following the liberation of Dachau did so much to assist the survivors there and in other concentration camps in the U.S.-occupied sector of Germany, died at 92. Rabbi Klausner was resourceful and persuasive. Mainly, though, he was someone confronted with a situation that so cried out for action, he felt he had no choice but to take on the bureaucracy of the world's greatest military power to try and ease conditions among those who had been liberated in name only.

Abraham Klausner was born on April 27, 1915, in Memphis, Tennessee, one of the five children of Joseph Klausner and the former Tillie Binstalk. Both of his parents were Jewish immigrants from Central Europe: Joseph – the owner of a dry-goods store – was born in Hungary; Tillie was born in Austria.

Abraham grew up in Denver and attended the University of Denver, graduating in 1938. He followed that with training as a Reform rabbi, at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati. After ordination, in 1943, he worked briefly at a synagogue in New Haven, Connecticut, before joining the U.S. Army as a chaplain.

Entering Dachau

When he enlisted, Klausner didn't think he would see much action in Europe, where the war was winding down, so volunteered for service in the Pacific Theater. The army, however, sent him to Germany, where, as a lieutenant in the chaplaincy corps, he was assigned to the 116th Evacuation Hospital, which entered Dachau in May 1945, several days after its liberation.

What he saw, of course, shocked and appalled him.

There were some 32,000 Jewish survivors at Dachau, a concentration camp situated northwest of Munich. Initial shock at the conditions encountered was followed by realization that the U.S. military had little idea of what these victims had endured or what they needed – and in many cases, it had no desire to know. It wasn't just material needs such as food, clothing and medical care. Klausner also had to make the powers-that-be understand that these Jewish victims, now defined as “displaced persons,” could not be expected to return to the homes they had been expelled from by the Nazis; nor could they be held together with their former captors, who were now themselves Allied prisoners.

Even after Klausner's unit was transferred, and the unit that replaced it transferred as well, he kept sneaking back to Dachau to work with the survivors.



Rabbi Abraham Klausner in military uniform, 1945. (Photo by Abraham Plotkin / Wikimedia Commons)

Healing and helping

Understanding how urgently these Jews wanted to reunite with other surviving family members, he set up an information center in Munich, and also published – and distributed internationally – books with lists of survivors' names and details.

“Bereft of relationships, reduced to a number tattooed on the arm, they sought to discover through me a thread which would weave them back into a reality they once knew,” he wrote in his 2002 memoir, “A Letter to My Children: From the Edge of the Holocaust.”

When the U.S. government sent law school dean Earl Harrison to Germany in July 1945 to assess conditions at camps in the American sector, Klausner spent two months as his guide. It was Harrison's recommendation that led to the creation of the position of Adviser to the Commanding General on Jewish Affairs, which was filled by Rabbi Judah Nadich.

The following April, Klausner led Passover seders on two successive nights in Munich – one for survivors, the other for American GIs.

In 1948, Klausner was involved in recruiting nurses and pilots for the newly independent State of Israel. The following year, he became senior rabbi at Temple Israel, Boston, and began pursuing a PhD at Harvard Divinity School. And from 1954 until his retirement in 1989, Klausner was rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in Yonkers, New York.

Rabbi Klausner's other books include the 1986 "Weddings: A Complete Guide to All Religious and Interfaith Marriage Services." Though officiating at interfaith weddings is a controversial point for many Jews, Klausner believed clergymen shouldn't reject the decision of a couple when they've decided to marry. "I don't think this is the role of religion, which should heal and help," he told The New York Times in 1989.