

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

Nadia Wheatley

I vividly remember my reaction when I discovered that my father had worked at Belsen.

This revelation came in 1983, a few weeks after his death, when his widow sent me an old press clipping, together with a note saying she'd found it among his papers and she supposed I had better have it. Feeling as if I should handle it with tongs (and not just because the paper was brittle with age), I picked it up. Dated 22 February 1947, it was from the newspaper in my father's hometown in northern England, and was typical of a small-town newspaper piece.

Titled 'Hexham Man's New Post in Germany', the article explained that Colonel JN Wheatley had recently been appointed chief medical officer for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRAA) in the British Zone, where he would have overall responsibility for some 280,000 Displaced Persons (DPs) living in makeshift camps. As I skimmed through the account of the work he had been doing in Germany for the two years prior to this appointment, I found myself coming to a dead halt at the information that 'Col Wheatley was medical superintendent of the Belsen camp hospital'.

Belsen! Although I was aware that this must have been *after* the time when it was a Nazi concentration camp, nevertheless the very name made my blood run cold. Simultaneously there came into my mind's eye a photograph (or was it a moving image I had

seen in some documentary film?) of naked corpses – already looking like skeletons – being bulldozed into the pit of a mass grave. A few moments later, still holding the page of newsprint, I was astonished to be feeling an unaccustomed benevolence towards my father, even a sense of dawning comprehension. Ah, so this was why the man was so difficult, so cold! Did it even explain his habit of whistling through his teeth – a single monotone note, more of a hiss really than a whistle – as he blocked out everyone and everything around him? And indeed, did whatever my father had experienced at Belsen explain, if not excuse, his treatment of me, and of my mother?

*

As reality set in, memories began to flow. While my father's connection with Belsen was completely new to me, the fact that both my parents had worked for UNRRA in post-war Germany had been a part of my knowledge even before I could print the alphabet letters that made up the acronym of the world's first international aid agency. Indeed, one of my first picture books was an album containing the photos of the strange-looking people who were my parents' friends and colleagues from that period, as they gathered in June 1948 to celebrate the marriage that had taken place earlier that day at the British Consulate in Hamburg; a bare ten months later, my mother gave birth to me in Sydney. Although I never knew even the names of the wedding guests, the DPs with whom my mother and father had been working in Germany were to me real flesh and blood, because through the first six years of my life a steady stream of people whom my parents had known in various camps came to live in the flat that was attached to the side of our house. Forbidden to bother them, I paid my visits in secret, and as I lay in bed at night the sound of voices talking and singing in Polish used to come through my nursery wall with its Beatrix Potter frieze; sometimes, too, there was the sound of crying.

Yet if my neighbours brought something of the history of post-war Europe into my middle-class suburban world, I felt there to be an even more powerful link between myself and the people who always seemed to be summed up by a couple of alphabet letters. I knew from fairy stories that the naming of a child involved

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

the bestowal of something magic, and whenever I pestered my mother to tell me why I was called 'Nadia' (a most peculiar name in 1950s Anglo-Australia) she would reply, in her breeziest manner, 'Oh, I named you after one of the DPs.'

'Who?'

'Nadia, of course.'

'Nadia *who?*'

At that point, my mother would sigh volubly and light up a Craven A, and as she would die when I was nine years old, I would learn from her no more details about my namesake, and indeed nothing more than a picture-postcard version of the Germany where she had spent four demanding and even dangerous years. Yet while my love for my mother made me store up every scrap of personal information I had ever garnered from her, my father was a completely different matter

And so, when I received the newspaper clipping that was my sole legacy after his death, I put it into the box where I kept my parents' wedding album and my mother's UNRRA shoulder-flash and the other memorabilia from the time that immediately preceded my birth. It took more than three decades before I went to Belsen and began finding out what my father had been doing there.

*

It is September when I first arrive at Bergen-Belsen. Bypassing the sleek silver bunker of the Documentation Centre, I make my way into the vast open area of the *Gedenkstutte* (Memorial), where the earth is still wearing its summer cladding of the tiny flowers typical of the Luneburg Heide, or heath. Notwithstanding the daintiness of this pinkish mauve groundcover, this is a topography as stripped to its bare bones as the bodies in the mass graves that rise out of the flat earth like Neolithic barrows.

HIER RUHEN 800 TOTE APRIL 1945 . . .

HIER RUHEN 1000 TOTE APRIL 1945 . . .

HIER RUHEN 2500 TOTE APRIL 1945 . . .

HIER RUHEN 5000 TOTE APRIL 1945 . . .

Even my schoolgirl German is up to translating the terrible arithmetic that is recorded in the signs on the stonework facing of the mounds. At each of these collective burial sites there are

simple offerings that other visitors have made: a red candle, a line of pebbles, a bunch of twigs, a small basket of heather. As I remember (or feel as if I remember) the bulldozer with its terrible load, the starkness of these anonymous graves seems to me to say all that can be said about a genocide, and much more poignantly than the dozen or so individual tombstones – including one bearing the names of Anne and Margot Frank – that seek to personalise death. Despite the sign carefully explaining that these memorials ‘have only a symbolic meaning. They do not mark graves’, the one for the Frank girls is decorated with bunches and pots of flowers, photographs, pebbles and handwritten messages addressed to the young diarist whose own writing has touched so many lives.

If the earth beneath Anne’s gravestone is empty, so is the landscape. Here the visitor wishing to map the memories needs to walk the place; there are no buildings – either original or facsimile – to give an idea of the size or form of the seventy or so huts where some 40,000 prisoners were once crowded together. (‘This isn’t Disneyland,’ the Gedenkstätte’s archivist says to me a little later on this memorable day. And when I see the historical photos displayed at the Documentation Centre I discover that, after the liberation, the British burned the huts to the ground – primarily to stop the spread of disease, but also to symbolise the destruction of the Nazi regime.)

Making my way towards an obelisk and commemorative wall that mark the western perimeter of the Gedenkstätte, I arrive first at a stone memorial, erected at the time of the first anniversary of the liberation and commemorating ‘Thirty thousand Jews exterminated in the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen at the hands of the murderous Nazis’. A couple of hundred metres on, a wooden cross stands ‘in memory of about fifteen thousand Polish men, women and children who were martyred in Bergen-Belsen’. In front of the wall (itself covered with inscriptions in various languages), another stone commemorates the lives and deaths of *Juden* and *Sinti und Roma*, of *Zeugen Jehovas* and *Homosexuelle*, as well as *Soldaten aus der Sowjetunion und aus anderen staaten*. The English-language text on yet another stone declares it to be ‘in remembrance of all Jewish and non-Jewish Turkish citizens who were murdered in Bergen-Belsen 1943–1945’.

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

Although it is at this point that I begin to become aware of the complexity of this memorial site, which reflects the many layers of the camp's history, it is only later that I discover that the assumption I brought with me – that Belsen was primarily a *Jewish* camp – does not reflect the way it was initially 'marketed' to the English-speaking public. Indeed, one of the most shocking things I would subsequently discover about the history of Bergen-Belsen is that, at the time of the liberation, the British authorities and media were at pains not to mention the fact that the majority of the concentration camp's inmates (both the living and the recently dead) were Jewish. This was in line with the policy of the British Ministry of Information during World War II, which dictated that stories about the enemy's atrocities 'must deal with indisputably innocent people. Not with violent political opponents [such as socialists and communists]. And not with Jews.' It would take some decades before the historiography would correct this gap in the record, and even today Belsen is often seen as the site of one of Britain's 'finest hours', rather than as a place of Jewish mourning.

*

In fact, the camp did not begin as a place to detain prisoners – Jewish or otherwise. Innocuously enough, the huts were erected in 1935 as temporary housing for 3000 German labourers who were engaged to build an extensive set of barracks for the *Wehrmacht* (German army) to use as a Panzer Training School. Situated a couple of kilometres south of the barracks in the vicinity of two villages, named Bergen and Belsen, the camp would later acquire both their names. In 1940, the *Wehrmacht* used some of the now vacant huts to accommodate 600 French and Belgian prisoners of war. The following year, barbed-wire fences and watchtowers were erected when the camp was prepared to receive the 21,000 Soviet POWs who arrived in July. Without adequate housing, many spent the coming winter in burrows they dug into the earth. By the following March, two-thirds of these prisoners had died of hunger, disease and exposure to the cold. While some of the survivors remained in the 1200-bed camp hospital, the rest were sent out into the surrounding area on work details.

It was in April 1943 that the major change began to take place in the purpose and administration of the Bergen-Belsen camp, and in the composition of its inmates. While the Wehrmacht continued to hold POWs in its hospital to the north of the camp's main road, the part of the site – representing half the area – lying to the south of the road was taken over from the military by the SS, the black-uniformed paramilitary elite that had begun as a security guard for Hitler and by now was responsible for implementing the Final Solution to the 'problem' of the Jews and other enemies of the German state. Notwithstanding this ultimate goal of exterminating all Jews from the territory of the Reich, the Bergen-Belsen 'holding camp' (*Aufenthaltslager*) included an area (unique in the entire concentration camp system) that was established to hold certain special Jewish prisoners whom the German Foreign Office hoped to be able to exchange for German nationals imprisoned abroad.

Only a small number of exchanges were ever made, and conditions in what was called the Star Camp (because of the yellow star that occupants had to wear on their clothing) were far from easy. However, contrary to a widely held misapprehension, Bergen-Belsen was not an extermination camp. This indeed was a major difference between the camps established on German soil and the camps in the conquered territories to the east of the German border. It was in the east that certain camps were equipped with the gas ovens and other infernal devices that provided the mechanism for Hitler's Final Solution.

Despite this important distinction between the eastern and western camps, the boundary blurs because, over the last months of its history, Bergen-Belsen began to receive prisoners who had survived extermination camps in the east and had been sent to the west in advance of the Soviet army. The 8000 women who came from Auschwitz included the two Frank girls. By now the huts were so full that many of the women were provided only with tents for the coming winter; holes in the ground served as toilets. Faced with a camp that was bursting at its seams, in January 1945 the SS took over the northern half of the site from the Wehrmacht and used it for an enlarged women's camp. This did little to ease the overcrowding. As the Death Marches brought more and more prisoners from camps in Poland, Hungary and

the Soviet Union, the population of Bergen-Belsen increased from 15,000 in December 1944 to 42,000 in March 1945. Yet in the lunacy of that time, 6700 Bergen-Belsen inmates were herded into train-carriages and sent on journeys back towards the east. Despite this, by early April the camp was so full that when another 15,000 prisoners from the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp arrived, they were housed at the nearby Wehrmacht barracks.

Meanwhile, the regime hardened in December 1944 when Josef Kramer, former commandant of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, was put in charge of Bergen-Belsen; other SS personnel from Auschwitz (including women) joined his staff. As part of a deliberate policy that could be described as a form of extermination, the provision of food – always minimal – dropped to starvation level. Water was contaminated and in very short supply. The sanitation facilities collapsed and huts were soon ankle-deep in faeces. Yet as winter gave way to spring, an even worse peril appeared. Spread by the lice that infested the huts as well as every article of clothing and bedding, an epidemic of typhus killed people who had managed to survive years of hunger, forced labour and even the threat of the gas chambers. The number of deaths rose from 7000 in February to 18,000 in March; a further 9000 people died in the first two weeks of April. As the camp's crematoria could not keep up with the death rate, corpses were left to rot in the huts and on the ground; by mid-April there were 10,000 lying unburied among the living and the barely living.

Ironically, it was the typhus that triggered the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. As the Allied advance from the west pushed closer and closer to the camp, some members of the German military began to fear that the epidemic could spread into the civilian population if the guards were to flee and prisoners were to escape into the countryside. On 12 April, a couple of Wehrmacht officers alerted a nearby unit of British military to the problem, and the area of the concentration camp became a negotiated zone of surrender. Into this no-man's-land a trickle of British soldiers began to arrive on 15 April 1945. Dispensing with the double-barrelled German name, they simply called it 'Belsen'. The images recorded by the Army Film and Photo-

graphic Unit over the next few days would immediately make the name a byword for evil.

*

Although I have subsequently researched the statistics and the timeline, the layers of history first begin to separate for me during my initial exploration of the memorial site, when I come upon a metal relief map showing how the different areas of the concentration camp were used. With this as my reference point, I walk the country again, this time following the bilingual information pillars that indicate the position of the Women's Camp, the Star Camp, the Tent Camp and so on. Yet the more I manage to locate the areas indicated on the map, the more I come to feel that I am somehow missing the thing I initially came to find. Where in this multi-layered landscape of memory is the Displaced Persons Camp where my father was medical superintendent?

In the Gedenkstätte's Documentation Centre, a display of photographs and artefacts covering 1500 square metres takes me through the timeline of Prisoner of War camp, Concentration Camp and Displaced Persons Camp. Yet there is so much here to comprehend that I still find myself confused as to how the DP Camp slotted into the map. As well as this extensive public area, the bunker-like building houses a library and an archive, and (with a cheek that now makes me blush) I go up to the woman seated at the information desk and ask if it might be possible to talk to the archivist. An hour or so later, I meet the man who looks after not only the Memorial's extensive collection of records, but also the families of survivors and liberators who keep turning up here, seeking a way to understand the scraps of memory that have been bequeathed to them. By the time I catch the bus back to the town where I am staying, I have twelve pages of hastily scribbled information about the DP camp, as well an invitation to come back and work in the archives.

When I return, some six weeks later, to begin my research, the trees surrounding the memorial site blaze with the gold of autumn leaves and the pastel carpet of heather has been replaced by the vibrant colours and velvet textures of moss and fungi. The air is crisply cold but completely still, and in my lunch hours I can walk in total silence, usually seeing no one but a handful of

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

workmen who are cleaning the inscription wall and obelisk, in preparation for the commemoration of the seventieth anniversary of the liberation, which is to take place in April 2015. By this second visit I know that while this Memorial holds the story of the concentration camp, the sequel lies a couple of kilometres away as a crow might fly over the woodland.

*

The day after the British army's first tentative foray into the camp, the Deputy Director of Medical Services, Brigadier HL Glyn Hughes, drew up a plan. From the start it was clear that the key to ending the typhus epidemic was to get rid of the lice. In addition to dusting all the survivors with DDT, this meant (as I have mentioned) destroying the huts. As this would render the camp's inmates homeless, alternative accommodation urgently had to be found. The obvious solution was the extensive facilities of the nearby Panzer Training School, now called Belsen Camp II. With this, history came full circle, because the huts of the concentration camp had first housed the labourers who had built the barracks.

Under Glyn Hughes's plan, the system of triage established at Belsen reversed the usual order of prioritising the most acute medical cases. In a restricted report made to Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force, it was noted that:

The situation as to nutrition and starvation is so critical that it has been necessary to attempt to select individuals as to chances for recovery. The result is that those individuals so obviously near death will receive no care in order that the available means may be applied to those who have some prospect of recovery.

Making such decisions over life and death was difficult emotionally as well as practically, and it is easy to see why many of the liberators were haunted for years by what they had seen and done at Belsen. At the same time, for those survivors who witnessed such choices being made about family members and comrades, it was easy to feel that not enough was done. Although the liberation of Belsen has long been proclaimed as one of the

great triumphs of British forces in World War II, some commentators have recently pointed to serious shortcomings in the provision of medical aid. Notably, the deaths of 14,000 people – most of them Jewish – in the month after the liberation can be cited as evidence of failure on a grand scale. While the critics maintain that the number of deaths could have been reduced if the British army had allowed Jewish relief agencies into the camp, half of these deaths occurred in the first terrible week, before any teams of volunteers were able to arrive. However, the anti-Semitism evident among sections of the British government and the British military explains why some Jewish community leaders at the time felt that there had been deliberate discrimination. Also, there were indeed problems with the delivery of medical services, caused by confusion in the military chain of command as well as the fact that the troops who arrived at Belsen were not trained to deal with a humanitarian crisis. Shortage of transport and the camp's location in the middle of a battle zone did not help.

Despite these circumstances, over five intense weeks beginning in mid-April, a massive relief operation was mounted by a small number of military medical officers and soldiers, together with volunteers from a range of agencies, backed up by a hundred young London medical students. It was a struggle waged on two fronts. As one contingent toiled in the original Belsen camp to provide water and food and sanitation, and to get the dead buried as quickly as possible, the other contingent supervised the creation of an emergency hospital comprised of 13,500 beds at Belsen Camp II. By 21 May, some 29,000 survivors had been ferried by field ambulance to the former German army barracks, where they were dusted with DDT and housed in what became, for a couple of months, the largest hospital in Europe.

It is on my second trip to Belsen that I am given the privilege of visiting the place that was originally built as a Panzer Training School, which was subsequently transformed into a Displaced Persons Camp and which finally became the British army base that is currently the home of the battalion known as the Desert Rats. As with the place that I now think of as 'the other Belsen', this landscape has memories stacked, layer upon layer.

*

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

If the site that is now the Memorial has no Disneyland-style recreations, Hohne Camp is like a vast Wehrmacht theme park, a life-size model of a vintage 1930s German barracks. Despite the modern vehicles on the roads and the British Tommies in the canteen, where I am taken for lunch by the hospitable Welsh civilian who is the army's assistant liaison officer, I feel as if I have fallen into a time warp.

I have read that, in the time of the Reich, this *kaserne* housed 15,000 troops, and as I am driven around the base I am rendered speechless both by the sheer size of the place and by the way everything seems to be endlessly replicated. Here, the main unit of design consists of a square parade area enclosed on three sides by five two-storey blocks of living quarters; these complexes are set up and down the wide streets of the barracks in a dizzying array of mirror images. It was these 'squares' that in April/May 1945 were converted into the emergency hospital, with beds (requisitioned from local civilians, sometimes at gunpoint) ranged in rows out in the open and also inside the dormitory-style rooms of the buildings. Within a couple of months, as the survivors regained their health, clusters of these squares became the separate camps that housed the Jewish and gentile DPs. Both were predominantly Polish nationals, and one of the initial sticking points was the British government's refusal to recognise the distinct cultural and racial identity of the Jews. Eventually, after the Christian Poles were evacuated either to their homeland or to other assembly centres, this camp became a self-governing Jewish community. With a shifting population of up to 12,000 men, women and children, it formed the largest Jewish centre in Germany until the disbandment of the camp in 1950.

The hundred or so residential buildings were by no means the sum total of the camp. One of the few pieces of good fortune in the Belsen story was the fact that this *kaserne* began as a state-of-the-art facility for the Reich's soldiers, who were provided with a cinema, a concert hall and an air-conditioned tent-theatre that seated 5000. For the DPs, these became important community meeting places. Yet it is when I am taken to the building known as the Round House – formerly the mess for the German army officers – that my eyes really pop out. A framed photograph shows this building in 1936 with a large ornamental lake in front;

that is now gone, but the facade is intact. So is the enormous dining room, with its crystal chandeliers. Empty now, but it is easy to imagine it in the heyday of the Reich, with the uniformed officers feasting and carousing; less easy to imagine it when the Round House was an outpost of the emergency hospital and this room alone held 300 beds in which the starving victims of the Third Reich were fed the thin gruel that was all their depleted metabolisms were able to digest. By July 1945, it was an isolation ward for patients with incurable tuberculosis. A month later, when my father arrived at the camp, most of the TB cases had been evacuated to Sweden and the remainder had been sent to the part of the barracks that had once been a *lazaret* or military hospital, and which had been renamed the 'Glyn Hughes Hospital' in honour of the brigadier who had developed the plan for the medical relief of Belsen.

In the extraordinary little private museum that a retired British soldier has set up in the cellars of the Round House, I see photographs of this hospital, but when I ask to be taken there I am told that vandals recently got into the building and caused such damage that it is now too dangerous to enter. Given the difficulty that was the mark of the relationship between my father and myself, this barrier against going to the place where he actually lived and worked seems fitting. Yet as my journey has brought me so far, I push a bit and my kindly guide agrees that we can at least look at the hospital from the gate. Getting there involves a ten-minute drive around the back of the military facility, and then along a country road to a deserted area of woodland. (Now I understand how the vandals weren't spotted.) By the time I stand at the entrance to the old *lazaret*, the autumn evening is drawing in and the photograph I take of the towered building at the end of the avenue of leafless trees has the palette and atmosphere of a scene from a Cold War spy movie.

Yet this appearance is deceptive. I have allowed the past to lull me into anachronism. As I unravel more of the history of the Belsen Displaced Persons Camp, I find myself in a story that is as contemporary as the latest failed peace talk in the Middle East, or breaking news about the conflict over the borders of the Soviet Union.

*

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

It is springtime when I return to the deserted hospital. The sky is blue and the branches of the trees lining the roadway down to the main building are now clothed with leaves of an almost fizzy shade of green that we don't have in the Australian bush. This vibrant rebirth of nature seems symbolic of the renewal of life that came in April 1945 with the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, which I have come to commemorate. Today I am with a busload of Belsen survivors and younger family members of survivors, making a tour of the DP camp as a kind of prologue to the official ceremonies of the seventieth anniversary, which will happen in two days' time. Despite the illustriousness of my companions, for safety reasons the gates to the hospital are locked, and we all stand at the barrier, poking our cameras through the bars to take our snaps. Suddenly a woman cries out, '*All the children! All the children born here, stand in front of the gates!*'

There are five of them – three men and two women. All around my own age, or perhaps a year or so older, they were born in the Glyn Hughes Hospital between 1945 and 1950, and as they line up now for a photo opportunity, camera shutters click and click again. After the Holocaust, every new life was especially precious, and today everyone wants a picture of these children who were born against the odds.

Despite the many differences between the backgrounds of these survivor-children and myself, the thing we have in common is that we are all engaged on a quest to find our pasts; like me, they obviously crave information – any fragment of information, no matter how small. So when finally the cameras are put away and the group is disassembling, I go up to one of the five and tentatively ask, 'Would you like to see a photo of some babies in the hospital?' I take out of my bag an A3 photocopy of a spread from the *Nursing Mirror* magazine dated April 1946, showing a montage of scenes inside the Glyn Hughes Hospital, including one of an Australian doctor, Phyllis Tewsley, with half a dozen newborn babies in the nursery.

Would they like to see it! Not only the five who were born here but also everyone in earshot crowds around the photocopied page – and me. Where did this come from? How did I happen to have it? Indeed: who am I?

I point to one of the other photos, which shows my father,

posed as if he is discussing some important medical matter with the matron, and I explain my connection with this uniformed bureaucrat. Immediately, the woman whom I think of as the organiser starts arranging the five 'children' in front of the hospital gates again, but this time with me in the middle, holding the photomontage. It would be unbearably rude to jump out of shot but, as cameras snap, I feel invidious, ashamed. If they had known Dr Wheatley, I find myself thinking, they would not have been so quick to include me.

Although the records of his administration make it clear that my father ran the hospital very efficiently, there was a problem with his attitude towards the people in his care. A month or so after he took over the role of superintendent, a French-speaking DP doctor who was in charge of the Medical Inspection rooms wrote a comprehensive report on the camp, in which he stated that 'Dr W' had a 'more correct and friendly manner' than his predecessor, but 'unfortunately it does not seem that he has a better understanding of the state of mind (*états d'esprits*) and the needs of the DPs'. Even more damningly, the UNRRA archives contain a fragment of text from an article published in late 1945 in an American Jewish weekly newspaper, which (in the translation provided from the original German) declared that 'the UNRRA hospital is under direction of an Englishman Whitley, who only employs former German doctors and nurses who were not quite innocent of the big destruction work'.

Whatever truth there is to this allegation about the culpability of his medical team, it is the case that there were seven German doctors (some of them former Wehrmacht officers) and 131 German nurses working at the Glyn Hughes Hospital in my father's time, and there is evidence that he was both favourably disposed towards his German staff and reluctant to employ Jewish personnel. It is small comfort to me that his views were shared by a number of much more senior UNRRA officials, including the Chief Medical Officer for the British Zone (Australian advocate of racial purity, Sir Raphael Cilento) and the Director of Health for the European Office. The aid organisation's official response to complaints on this politically charged issue was that it had inherited the German medical personnel when it had taken over the Glyn Hughes Hospital from the British military,

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

but the tone of the internal correspondence on this matter reveals an attitude of systemic anti-Semitism.

*

Two days after this bus tour to the old hospital, Mr Ronald Lauder, speaking on behalf of the World Jewish Congress at the ceremony held to mark the seventieth anniversary of the liberation, points out that anti-Semitism is once more on the rise in Europe. 'Today a Jewish boy wearing a yarmulke,' he declares, 'cannot walk down the street in Paris or London or Copenhagen without fearing for his life.'

Sadly, the same might be said about a Muslim girl in hijab, I think as I write down his words in a soggy notebook. By Sunday, the blue skies have changed to grey clouds and intermittent showers, and as I sit looking at the obelisk through a sea of black umbrellas, the weather seems the objective correlative of this ceremony that is one of mourning rather than celebration. That is only appropriate, of course, and one thing I notice in the morning's program is that there is no British representative listed among the speakers. Twenty years ago, at the time of the fiftieth anniversary, there were complaints that the event had been a glorification of the liberators, to the exclusion of the suffering of Belsen's Jewish victims. That, of course, was in line with the way the media had presented the story to the British public in April 1945. The upshot was a conference of historians and survivors held in the United Kingdom a few months later, and the publication of a book, *Belsen in History and Memory*. It was after that 1995 conference that the historiography of Bergen-Belsen (at least, the material written in English) began to change.

Certainly on this occasion, testimonies in a medley of languages are given by survivors from Poland, Hungary, France, Israel, America and Ukraine, as well as by a member of the Sinti and Roma community. As the President of Germany stands unsheltered in the rain and expresses his perplexity as well as his regret that the history of Belsen could ever have occurred, I find myself realising another thing that is conspicuously absent from the proceedings. Although the shuttle bus on which I travelled to the Gedenkstätte went through three police check points, I can see no sign of security at the site itself, and the minders

around the *Bundespräsident* are so discrete that when by accident on my arrival I ended up walking in the middle of the official entourage, I only realised who my companions were when I found my progress being tracked by half a dozen television cameras. Some days later, when I mention the event's low-key security to one of the Memorial staff, he delicately observes, 'We cannot allow the place to look like a concentration camp.' In this, as in all matters, I am awed by the sensitivity not just of the people who work at the Gedenkstätte but of the state government of Lower Saxony, which oversaw the organisation of the anniversary and indeed pays the huge ongoing costs of the Belsen Memorial. I find myself trying to imagine a similar level of official recognition being accorded to the victims and survivors of Australia's frontier wars.

After the speeches are over and dozens of wreaths (including one, I see, in honour of Belsen's homosexual victims) are laid at the Inscription Wall, it is fitting that we move from the site of the Horror Camp to the other Belsen, where the 29,000 survivors started their new lives.

Here the British come into their own, putting on lunch for a few hundred guests in the splendiferous dining hall of the Round House. Just as a wake provides mourners with a much-needed chance to relax and revive their spirits after the catharsis of a funeral, this is a welcome opportunity for those who have travelled from far and wide to catch up with old friends. Soon people are moving about between the tables and spilling out onto the terrace, where some sunshine is finally breaking through the clouds. By the time the official part of the proceedings begins, there is such a hubbub going on that I need to move close to the platform to hear what is being said.

'Who's that?' I ask a nearby military bod as a man in an elegant lounge suit delivers what is clearly the key speech in praise of the role played by Belsen's British liberators.

'That's the Duke of Gloucester,' I am told in a hushed tone. I must appear unimpressed, because I am swiftly advised: 'He's the Queen's cousin.'

Whatever his lineage, his words seem to fall on mostly deaf ears, but as the Duke finishes his address, a frail-looking man with a gentle face hastens up the steps in what is obviously an

unscheduled conclusion to the formalities. Promising he will say only two words – and indeed he is almost as brief as his promise – the new arrival graciously presents the Duke (now halfway across the platform) with a book of which he is the author. As I hear him quietly describe it as testimonies of the children of Holocaust survivors, I realise this to be Menachem Rosensaft, yet another Glyn Hughes Hospital baby, and one whose parents were major players in Belsen's political history.

Menachem's mother, Hadassah (Ada) Bimko, managed to survive Auschwitz concentration camp despite the deaths there of her parents, her husband and her young son. Having qualified as a dental surgeon before her deportation, she gave what medical aid she could to her fellow prisoners, both at Auschwitz and later at Belsen concentration camp, and she was also part of the unsung team of survivors who supported the British military's medical efforts in April/May 1945. Within a month of moving to the DP camp, Dr Bimko became a member of the Central Committee of Liberated Jews in the British Zone of Germany, an organisation founded by Mittelbau-Dora survivor, Yossele (Josef) Rosensaft, whom Hadassah later married.

A brilliant political tactician and propagandist, Josef Rosensaft used the name and reputation of Belsen for all it was worth, and quickly won international support (especially in America) to his cause. In a two-pronged campaign, he demanded that the British government change its position on the Mandate of Palestine and open the gates of immigration to provide the homeland of *Eretz Israel* for the *She'erit Hapletah* – the 'surviving remnant' left after the Holocaust. Simultaneously, he pressured the British authorities in Germany to recognise Jewish Displaced Persons as a nation, and indeed to make Belsen DP camp a segregated haven for Jewish survivors. Although at first the British resisted on both fronts, it only took a couple of years before they were forced to give in. Belsen DP camp became (as I have mentioned) a self-governing Jewish community; as for Rosensaft's other demand, the outcome needs no elaboration.

As I watch the son of this man who was anathema to the British government unostentatiously make his gift to the somewhat bemused representative of the British crown, it is for me one of the great symbolic moments of this day. Yet if this reconciliatory

handshake seemingly passes without notice, it also makes me conscious of another historical event soon to occur in this remarkable place. Within a few months, the British army, which has been based here since the DP camp closed in 1950, is due to leave. While the adjacent training area will remain in the hands of NATO, the German military who will take over the barracks will not require such a huge complex of buildings. Having already seen what has happened to the Glyn Hughes Hospital, I expect that much of this weird Wehrmacht wonderland will soon also fall into irremediable disrepair.

Later, as the day's pilgrimage of remembrance moves on to the Jewish cemetery at the base, I hear people worrying out loud about whether it will be looked after, when the British are gone. Unlike the mass burial sites of the concentration camp, the graves here are individual, yet many of the tombstones bear the single word '*Unbekannt*' (Unknown): a poignant reminder that those who are buried here managed to survive until the liberation, and even a month or so beyond, but succumbed before their identities could be recorded.

This final and comparatively small commemoration is very much a Jewish community event, and I feel honoured that it was one of the five 'children' whom I met the other day outside the hospital gates who has insisted that I come along. While there are military flourishes to the proceedings (including a bugler playing the 'Last Post' and even – strange to my Australian ears – a rousing chorus of 'God Save the Queen'), this is a religious service. Earlier today, in the testimony of one of the survivors, we were reminded that no fewer than 2000 children were born in the Belsen DP camp. 'It was these children,' Dr Ernest Mandel told us, 'and *their* children and grandchildren, who defied the Final Solution.' And as I hear the strength of the voices of these survivors and their family members joining in the recital of the Mourner's Kaddish, I realise that this new life represents the hope that came to Belsen on 15 April 1945.

*

A few days later, returning alone to the Gedenkstätte to continue my work in the archives, I begin by walking the site, as I first did eight months ago. Today the sky is blue again, the crowds with

Belsen: Mapping the Memories

their black umbrellas have disappeared, and the only sign of Sunday's events is the blaze of wreaths that lines the Inscription Wall. Yet even when these, too, are gone, the remembering will continue. The very earth of Belsen maps the collective memory of those who survived here, as well as the many thousands who died. Stripped back again to the bare bones of landscape, the place itself bears continual witness to its history.

Griffith Review