



Remembering Bergen-Belsen

75 years after Bergen-Belsen's liberation by British soldiers on 15th April 1945, NGHS students Ellie Moffat and Lucy Edwards share their learning about the infamous concentration camp

I looked to the right, I looked to the left and I thought, "We're free. We're free to do what? To die?" We're free but what does that mean, being free? We're lying on the ground, without food, without water, in a state you can't describe. It's impossible to describe it! How are we free? What does that mean, being free? Free to do what?

Isabelle Choko

Bergen-Belsen survivor

History of Bergen Belsen

Bergen-Belsen has a complicated and extensive history which acts as a symbol of the change and development that occurred within Nazi Germany, moving from a military base, to a Prisoner of War and work camp in 1940, to a concentration camp in 1943, before liberation in 1945. However, liberation by British Troops on 15th April 1945, was not the end of the story, as it became a Displaced Persons camp up until July 1950. The camp is different to others, as it was not purpose built, and therefore didn't have gas chambers, it also had the "Star Camp" which was reserved for people who could be exchange for German troops and as a result these people were treated slightly better, for example, being allowed to wear their civilian clothes. By 1945, the camp was completely overcrowded after approx. 85,000 prisoners had been sent to Belsen following the evacuation of concentration camps on the front lines. The Nazis surrendered the camp to the British as they could no longer control the outbreak of Typhoid, and around 53,000 prisoners were liberated at this time. However the British soldiers were not expecting to find the extent to which disease



and starvation had taken over the camp, and how the victims were left to perish. The troops buried around 20,000 bodies in mass graves, and these are one of the few things that remain after the camp was burned to the ground due to the uncontrollable spread of disease. However, it is estimated that around 52,000 people died at Bergen-Belsen and their names only live on in the memories of those left behind.

Our visit to Bergen-Belsen

When I signed up for the trip to the Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp, I had very little idea of what it would entail, apart from a pre-and-post visit seminar and the taxing one-day visit to the camp itself, situated near the city of Hannover in the north of Germany. However, after arriving outside the concrete walls surrounding the camp on a cold, grey morning, it became apparent that the pre-visit seminar, while useful in providing factual information, couldn't have hoped to describe the experience of walking into the camp itself.



Inside the camp itself, it was just unbelievable. You just couldn't believe the numbers involved...This was one of the things which struck me when I first went in, that the whole camp was so quiet and yet there were so many people there. You couldn't hear anything, there was just no sound at all and yet there was some movement - those people who could walk or move - but just so quiet. You just couldn't understand that all those people could be there and yet everything was so quiet... It was just this oppressive haze over the camp, the smell, the starkness of the barbed wire fences, the dullness of the bare earth, the scattered bodies and these very dull, too, striped grey uniforms- those who had it - it was just so dull. The sun, yes the sun was shining, but ... Everything seemed to be dead. The slowness of the movement of the people who could walk. Everything was just ghost-like and it was just unbelievable that there were literally people living there still.

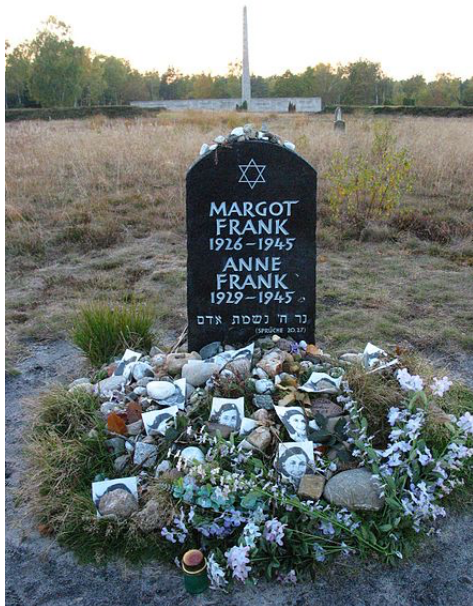
Major Dick Williams, Supplies and Transport Branch, VIII Corps Headquarters

When imagining the experience of visiting the site of so much death and torment, it is easy to imagine yourself becoming overwhelmed by emotion in response to the atrocities committed there. The reality, however, turned out to be much different. Most of the former site is simply a large field bordered by woodland, after the camp itself was burned down by its liberators to control the spread of typhus, and the primary feeling it evoked was a dull sense of emptiness. It was serene, beautiful even, marred only by the knowledge of what had transpired there 75 years ago, and the various mass graves dotting the landscape. 'Hier ruhen 5000 Tote'.

It was standing at one of these graves, marked by raised mounds of earth that made their size uncomfortably apparent, that the gravity of what had happened to these people hit me. Before, I understood that thousands of people had died, but it wasn't until that particular moment that the significance and scale of this was clear. Seeing the small overall memorial to the people that died there, and a smaller, scattered number of individual headstones drove home the disparity between the sheer number of people and the individual remembrance for them. It is sad enough to know that the prisoners in the camp suffered horribly, but for the vast majority of them to only be remembered as a faceless statistic was another blow.

Memorial stones

Another aspect of the visit included studying the individual headstones, which noticeably had a symbolic significance only as they did not mark the resting place of the dead, and could only be built if you could prove that this person died at Bergen-Belsen. The memorial stone to Margot and Anne Frank who both died at Belsen was clearly well-visited, as shown by the many pebbles placed upon the headstone in the traditional Jewish tradition of showing respect for the dead. The other memorial stones at the site, however, were significantly less well attended. We were able to spend some time studying these and were struck by the diversity of backgrounds of those who lost their lives at Belsen. We saw stones commemorating people from Salonika, Warsaw, France and elsewhere; the memorial stones acted as a stark reminder of all the families unable to bury their loved ones.



We also learnt a surprising amount about the aftermath of liberation, an aspect of the Holocaust often overlooked, by visiting the Displaced Person's Camp, an area of refuge for people that could not or would not return to their homes, where they slowly attempted to rebuild their lives. Finally, a visit to the nearby visitor's centre was again informative regarding the many different ethnicities and groups that existed within the camp at various stages. An interesting aspect of the architecture of the visitor's centre was that the parts of it that extended into the camp grounds itself were raised off the ground, as the entire site is treated as a cemetery, which cannot be built on in Jewish tradition.



To end the day, all of the different schools participating in the trip gathered around the Jewish memorial for a ceremony commemorating the people who died in the camp, taking a minute to silently remember all of the individuals who tragically lost their lives, a theme we will be carrying on in our Legacy Project, a series of activities planned in the Post-Visit seminar and soon to be implemented in school, so that the memory of Belsen and everyone who was imprisoned there will not be forgotten.

-Lucy Edwards



Reflections on Bergen-Belsen

Here we saw skeletons walking. Their arms and legs looked like matchsticks, the bones protruding through their ragged remains of skin. And the eyes bulged out grotesquely from their skull-like faces. Some were dressed in rags, others were naked. The stench that arose from that camp and the overall atmosphere made us think that we'd just been pushed through the gates of hell.

Renee Salt, survivor of Bergen-



Above: The unveiling on 15th April, 1946 of the Jewish memorial stone at Belsen. The inscription on the memorial stone reads 'Earth conceal not the blood shed on thee!'

Below: two former women inmates weep over the mass graves



I think that this whole experience has given me the opportunity to not only learn and reflect upon the horrors that occurred at Bergen-Belsen but also the lasting effects of the Holocaust and the impact that antisemitism and other prejudices have on the lives of people today. The trip itself is an indescribable experience, but extremely valuable and this was in part due to the fantastic group of guides and educators who were understanding and pragmatic throughout our experience. I think that visiting a former concentration camp is something that everyone needs to take the time to do, whether that be Belsen or one of the other camps you can visit. I found the site itself was quite bleak and desolate, which I had been aware of, but in some ways made it difficult to mourn. Furthermore, I thought that the memorial was respectful and fitting and the ceremony at the end of the day was emotional as it gave us the time to consider everything that had taken place at the site. The sheer volume of the mass graves is something that I was unable to comprehend but the few markers that existed were what upset me most, as it highlighted how nameless and detached the graves truly are. We received a powerful message from survivors that, this is why their stories must be remembered as it undermines the Nazis' attempt to eliminate all memory of what took place at this time. Our discussion on the demonisation of the Nazis was also interesting as it had been incomprehensible to me, how people could act in such an inhumane way towards others. However, it is vital that we look at these people as humans, because it was humans who did this to others, and could do this again. I hope this message will be reflected through our Legacy Project and that our experiences will help others to understand what took place at Belsen and how these stories play a part in the Holocaust.

-Ellie Moffat

