The victims who liberated Jews
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Hillel Kuttler writes about the Japanese-American soldiers who, near the end of World War II, were among the first to come across Dachau and its emaciated survivors, a story recently retold in a photographic exhibition in the US

(Clockwise from top) Members of the 500-strong Charlie Battery, the all-Japanese 522nd Field Artillery Battalion, smile for the camera near the end of WWII; relaxing during a break in the war; a US Army jeep arrives at Dachau, where the stunned Japanese-Americans will witness the Nazi-perpetrated horror; concentration camp prisoners just after liberation.

Manabi Hirasaki and Joseph Ichiuji grew up in California, Edward Ichiyama in Hawaii, George Oiye in Montana. Larry Lubetzky, Morris Ellison and Dov Shilansky came from Lithuania.

One group had never met Jews. The other didn't know that people with Oriental features could be Americans.

In late April 1945 the paths of these Japanese-Americans and European Jews crossed in a tale that is one of the supreme ironies of World War II.

The chance encounter occurred in the unlikeliest of places – on the winding roads near, and within the walls of, Germany's Dachau concentration camp and its sub-camps.

In the few hours spent together, the 500 stunned soldiers in the US Army's 522nd Field Artillery Battalion absorbed the sight of living skin and bones straggling before them in striped uniforms. And the Holocaust survivors learned that the American GIs or their relatives had been incarcerated earlier in the war for the crime of their Japanese ancestry.

It occurred in a flash, with the Allies pursuing the fleeing German army and on the verge of victory. The speed of the American advance spurred the Germans to abandon Dachau and forsake even the prisoners they were leading on marathon death marches.

The heroic feats in 1944 and 1945 of the predominantly Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team, to which the 522nd was attached in France and Italy before peeling off for the Germany campaign, are the stuff of legend. Its men were considered highly dedicated, and the 442nd RCT earned more decorations than any American unit of comparable size.

President Harry Truman praised them after the war for fighting "not only the enemy, but... prejudice, and you won."

In October 1944 the 442nd achieved victory in one of the greatest battles in US military annals, rescuing all 211 members of the "Lost Battalion" of the 36th Infantry Division that was surrounded by the Germans.

ITS ROLE in the liberation of Dachau is less known, but that is slowly changing. In 1996, Washington's Ford's Theater hosted *The Gate of Heaven*, a stage production about the 522nd's Dachau connection.

And the episode was recently retold in a photographic exhibition in the lobby of the State Department.

Titled "Witness: Our Brothers' Keepers," the exhibition weaves together the distinct stories of the Jewish- and Japanese-American soldiers who witnessed the horrors of the concentration camps.

A forward observer in the 522nd, Yoshiaki Kobatake, is quoted as remarking: "I didn't liberate the survivors – I only entered, that's all."

Interviews recently with some of the battalion's members produced echoes of that refrain. Far from boasting of heroism, the former soldiers, now in their late 70s and early 80s, matter-of-factly recounted what they consider modest, merely human, acts – extending army food rations, a blanket, a coat. They detailed less what they did than what they saw – the freezing survivors, the wet snow, the perfect English spoken by a young inmate.

The Jewish survivors – who were more difficult to locate for this article – mentioned the simple kindnesses extended, one speaking of his being "adopted" by the soldiers, another of receiving a carton of American cigarettes.

While furious as hell for the humiliation inflicted on them by their own government, these proud Japanese-Americans asserted that what the Dachau prisoners endured was another world entirely.

ICHIUJI was there. Three years earlier, the US government had ordered his family out.

As with the Nuremberg Laws, in the US a federal document legalized the discrimination that followed. After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, that paper was President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. It called for the 120,000 people of Japanese descent living on the West Coast to depart for "relocation" camps or to unrestricted areas further inland.

So in March 1942 Kukijiro Ichiuji – who immigrated to Hawaii in 1906 from Izumo, Japan – relinquished his shoe repair business in Salinas, California, and moved his family east to Reedley. Through August they lived on a farm with five other families, picking fruit for a living.

Then the government transferred them again, this time to an internment camp in Poston, Arizona.

"Soldiers were at the [railroad] station guarding us," Joseph Ichiuji said last month in the living room of his comfortable home in Rockville, Maryland. "They had god-damn helmets on. Geez! We hadn't done anything to warrant such treatment."

The passenger train went to Parker, barely across the California line, and the family boarded a bus to the third section of the camp. Ichiuji remembered the two rows of tar-covered barracks – seven barracks per row – and the family's being assigned to unit No. 308.

The barracks contained four units and theirs was at the end. It measured about 20 x 24 feet. Ichiuji, his parents and five siblings all lived there, stringing blankets and sheets across the room for privacy. Barbed-wire fences and armed soldiers ringed the complex.

The family complied with the edicts because "Japanese-Americans pretty well accepted things" and thought "that we had to obey orders," Ichiuji said.

Once in Poston, "you were assigned a number, you had to line up for mess, you had to line up for the toilet, showers. The father no longer [was] the breadwinner of the family, the parents lost control of the kids, and the family rarely ate together."

But in Poston the Ichiujis "got used to camp life so they made the best of it," he continued.

ICHIUJI had completed basic training just days before Pearl Harbor and continued on to Camp Murray in Washington state before he was inexplicably discharged in early 1942. When the Army formed the 442nd in 1943 and recruited in the camp, Ichiuji re-enlisted. But "there were those in the camp known as the "No-No Boys" who refused to join the military after the discrimination they'd suffered, Ichiuji recalled.

He told his mother, Katsuno: "This is my second opportunity to serve my country and prove that I [am] a loyal American citizen... By our showing that we're good fighters and loyal Americans the government may rescind the [displacement] orders and give us an opportunity to be sent back home."

"I'm just lucky because I was in that outfit," said one of the battalion's all-Caucasian corps of officers, First Lt. Albert Binotti, 78, of Marshall, Texas. "They were good, honest, law-abiding, patriotic American soldiers. We had no discipline problem at all. When you told one of those men something, you could go about your business and not worry about it."

Said Hirasaki, who served in the 522nd's communications unit: "It took, I guess, a lot of guts and a lot of loyalty to [enlist] like that because, after all, you were a second-class citizen."

THE 442ND trained at Camp Shelby, Alabama. With his artillery background, Ichiuji was assigned to the 522nd's A Battery. In May 1944, after a year's training and maneuvers, some of the battalion's members boarded a ship in Newport News, Virginia. They reassembled a month later in Naples, Italy, as part of the Hawaii-based 100th Infantry Battalion that fought its way north in the Arno River and Leghorn campaigns.

From there Ichiuji took a boat to Marseilles and a motorized convoy to Biffontaine in the Vorges Mountains. The 442nd helped recapture Biffontaine and Bruyeres.

Ichiuji's battery then joined the forces supporting the infantrymen of the 442nd who rescued the "Lost Battalion," but he wasn't directly involved in the fighting.

By spring 1945, the Germans were beating a hasty retreat to Munich. The fluidity of the situation was such that the artillery was far ahead of the infantry. Members of the 522nd had no knowledge of what lay ahead at Dachau

"We just kind of ran into Dachau because it was six miles [10 kilometers] from Munich, where the S.S. headquarters were. It was a big surprise to us when we liberated some of the sub-camps and saw all of the Jewish prisoners," said Oiye.

The unit's advance scouts had evidently reached the camp first and shot open the gates that the German guards locked while fleeing.

ICHIUJI WAS traveling in a truck that pulled a Howitzer along a curving road by the gate of a Dachau sub-camp when he spotted inmates leaving the grounds. The truck halted after 50 meters.

"The Jewish victims came to us for food around the fire. So we gave them our K and C rations... This was toward evening. It was still light out. I think we stayed overnight, then we took off."

From his vantage point with the C Battery, Ichiyama saw the Dachau survivors "roaming across the countryside, with some making their way toward [us]."

"We didn't really liberate them. They were already out of the camps. It's not like we crashed the gates," said Ichiyama, 75.

> **'The irony was you had people from a concentration camp liberating another... It was very much of a spiritual connection.'**
>
> **– Japanese-American soldier George Oiye**

"As men of good will would have done, we gave them whatever food they could stomach – broth, medicine. Some guys gave them blankets."

Ichiuji, now 80 and retired after a long government career, recalled some of the inmates hacking away at the meat of a dead horse for nourishment.

"When I saw the Jewish victims, it was a pitiful sight. You looked at the faces and you could see the results of malnutrition. I'll never forget that."

He did not enter the camp, but one of his friends, John Ogishima, did. "He told me he opened one of the barracks and it was stacked with skeletons. He couldn't bear the sight," said Ichiuji.

Oiye was inside, too. With a Kodak 620 folding camera that he had smuggled into the service and a 35 mm Kodak seized earlier in the war from an enemy prisoner, Oiye took picture after picture.

Riding up in his jeep on April 30, Oiye first saw "lumps in the snow in the fields" – bodies of inmates who'd collapsed or been shot on the death march. He took no photographs of those victims.

In the camp he looked out on a strange scene. Prisoners in a machine shop were still at work manufacturing German armaments, filing and turning parts, oblivious to their captors' disappearance. Oiye recalled them not as deprived but as "healthy" looking.

"They were cold, barefoot. We tried to feed them. But we were not supposed to. Military orders were not to feed prisoners of war or any people we encountered," said Oiye, 77, a retired engineer in San Jose, California.

He snapped one photograph in the shop and more outside of the liberated men.

Oiye's images and those of Susumu Ito, a fellow soldier in C Battery, fill the "Witness" exhibit, and were also shown at Yad Vashem.

"It was quite shocking [to see] what was done to the lumps in the snow, and see not even skin but just bones.

"My reactions weren't immediate; they came later. One of the emotions I had was anger, and yet I had a feeling of guilt. And the reason for the guilt was not for myself but for mankind, to have degenerated this far and committed this level of atrocity and sin in the sight of God...

"Here we are, American soldiers with families in similar situations but not anywhere near Dachau, liberating concentration camps made up mostly of Jews," said Oiye, who, being from Logan, Montana, was exempt from the Executive Order, but whose sister, Peggy, was interned at California's Manzanar camp.

"The irony of it was that you had people from a concentration camp liberating another. What circumstances could come together so that that sort of thing happens?

"For us to have been even a part of the liberation was quite ironic, mysterious. If our field artillery [battalion] hadn't been split off from our own infantry, we would have been off in Italy. I think it was very much of a spiritual connection."

AT LEAST three Dachau survivors stuck with the battalion as interpreters. Elka Ellison, the widow of one of the men, Morris (Eliaskevic) Ellison, said her husband spoke very little of his experiences with the 522nd. But he was "very devoted" to the unit's Captain William Donigan.

Binotti called Ellison "my right-hand man" who drove jeeps, worked in the kitchen and did "anything that had to be done." Ellison remained a "dear friend," said Binotti, despite the fact that they never saw one another again after the war, when Ellison settled in San Bernardino, California.

Another interpreter remembered by the 522nd veterans was a man named Blum. He and Ellison were friends from Kaunas, Lithuania. After Dachau, Blum apparently settled in Palestine, but no one has heard of him since.

Larry Lubetzky, also from Kaunas, was on a death march toward Switzerland when the German guards fled as the prisoners slept in a ravine.

Awakening before dawn on April 26 and discovering himself to be free, Lubetzky headed for the main road near the village of Hauserdoerfl.

Tanks approached with white stars, American tanks. "I spoke English and they took me under their wing as an interpreter," said Lubetzky, 74, who later immigrated to Palestine and Canada before ending up in Mexico City.

"At this particular moment I lost contact with my fellow inmates. I basically joined the US unit... I say that I was not born in 1925, but in 1945. The Japanese-American unit instilled in me a desire for life again, gave me food, gave me shelter. I still get a telephone call from these people from time to time."

The first one to call was Nelson Akagi of Salt Lake City, Utah. Akagi visited Washington's US Holocaust Memorial Museum about five years ago and searched for Lubetzky's name in a data bank. Rediscovered, Lubetzky began attending reunions of the 522nd. The next one is in October in Hawaii.

"We never expected to see Oriental faces in Germany," said Lubetzky of that first day. "We didn't know about Japanese-Americans. I learned from them that they were also persecuted – in the States – that their families were kept in concentration camps as undesirable aliens. I realized we had similar experiences."

Lubetzky worked most closely with Captain William Ratcliffe, who "became a second father to me."

"I told them about the concentration camp and he asked me to forget most of it, that I'd have a different life. They told me what they had gone through, that they were from California and separated from their folks...

"I feel tremendous warmth, affection, gratitude toward them. To me it was an experience I wish I could have [had for] many more years. There was lots of camaraderie, lots of tears and laughter.

"We had a great time sitting at night by the fireside, having baked potatoes, new foods. A pineapple was outside my range of experiences. We had rice every day, as much as you wanted."

DOV SHILANSKY was another survivor of a death march, a 10-day ordeal. When the Germans fled, the former Knesset speaker remembered, he retraced his steps with a friend, Yaakov Hemilshein, in an ultimately successful attempt to locate their mothers.

"We ran into other prisoners who'd left the camp... They said they had been freed by Japanese-Americans. As we approached the Dachau camp I recognized them. We were very hungry, very weak, with no money.

"We were next to the soldiers and they were making some thin soup. The one who spooned out the soup was a Japanese-American. My friend asked for soup from the bottom of the pot, where it would be thicker. But the soldier said he had instructions not to [give us thick soup] because it would harm us after the period of starvation. We didn't know about this.

"The other thing was that my friend picked up a cigarette butt – in the concentration camp it would have been worth a million – in order to smoke it. The same soldier said, 'Throw it out.' And he gave each of us a package of Camel cigarettes.

"Since then, I love Camel."

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