

Holocaust Remembrance Program Helps Us Forgive, But Never Forget

APRIL 16, 2018

Privilege and honor were not adequate words to describe the presence of both a survivor and a soldier at Winston & Strawn's Holocaust Remembrance Day program on April 12. David Wolnerman and Birney T. Havey, who met for the first time the day before our program, were both at Dachau Concentration Camp on liberation day—April 29, 1945. Many of the hundreds of attendees shed tears as these “national treasures” recounted their stories, guided by Rebecca Erderling, author of *Rescue Board: The Untold Story of America's Efforts to Save the Jews of Europe*.



At just 13 years old, Mr. Wolnerman said, the Germans took him from his home in Poland under the false promise that his mother would be safe if he went to work at the camps. He was taken to Auschwitz in 1941, where he made the impulsive decision to say he was 18, keeping him alive but giving him the unimaginable job of pushing other prisoners into the gas chambers. He was sent to clean up war rubble in the Warsaw ghetto and was later moved to Dachau. During his five years as a prisoner, “there was no water, no bread. I was on my knees like a baby with typhus. If it wasn’t for God I wouldn’t be alive.” At 91, Mr. Wolnerman is the last known Holocaust survivor in the state of Iowa.

Mr. Havey, wearing an “ike” jacket decorated with battle and commendation medals, served as a combat paratrooper in World War II. He described himself as a junior historian growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, aware of the events of the times and certain the United States would join its allies on the battlefields of Europe. “If you weren’t in the Army you were some kind of a nut,” he said of his decision to enlist after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Havey arrived in Europe for the Battle of the Bulge and crossed into Germany in February 1945. Living in a hole in sub-zero temperatures, he said, “we were conditioned” and “we never thought about the war ending.”

The year before the Battle of the Bulge, Ms. Erderling explained to Winston firm members, alumni, clients, and friends, President Roosevelt created the War Refugee Board under public pressure for the United States, to rescue people persecuted by the Nazis. This liberation effort, while saving tens of thousands of lives, was not to interfere with the successful prosecution of war.



On the day that U.S.-led forces arrived at Dachau, recounted Mr. Havey, they were greeted by skeletal prisoners standing back from the electrified fence and yelling joyously. “None of us can imagine what these prisoners went through,” he said. “Their treatment by the Nazis was beyond description.” The soldiers gave the prisoners all of their rations and spent a day and a half at the camp killing Nazi guards. The soldiers had to proceed to Munich to win the war, so relief workers came in to care for the survivors. “The U.S. was so united,” Havey said, still astounded at the life he led. “There were thousands of displaced persons—we fed them all.”

Mr. Wolnerman, usually consumed with thoughts of bread and nothing else, wondered about the unusual disappearance of all the Nazi soldiers for a time that day. “Nobody believed he could be free, could be alive, nothing,” he said. The liberators who arrived in Dachau spoke many different languages. One of them said “I’chaim,” which means “to life” in Hebrew, to Mr. Wolnerman, and gave him his chai medallion. In Judaism, the word “chai” is synonymous with the number 18—the prisoner number 160344 tattooed on Mr. Wolnerman’s arm adds up to 18, and the false age he gave at Auschwitz was 18. “I’m a lucky man,” he frequently says.

From the time he was liberated, it took Mr. Wolnerman five years to get to the United States. He worked as a pressman in Cleveland and later moved to Gary, Indiana, where he had located his sister, also liberated from the concentration camps. “I came to the U.S. because it’s the best country in the world. I had two sons, and they got an education that I never had. Education is something they can never take away from you.”



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