

Ignatz Bubis Reflects on His Liberation in 1945 (1995)

Abstract

Ignatz Bubis was born in 1927 in Breslau, then part of Germany (today the Polish city of Wrocław). In 1935, two years after the Nazi rise to power, he moved to Poland with his family. Between 1941 and the end of the war, he lived in the Deblin ghetto and different forced labor camps. After the war, he settled in West Germany. He joined the Zentralrat der Juden and in 1998 was the chief challenger to German writer Martin Walser in the controversy over Walser's claims that the Holocaust was being instrumentalized in German politics and culture as a so-called moral cudgel [*Moralkeule*]. Below is a conversation between Bubis and journalist Hans Sarkowicz in which Bubis recalls his experiences at the end of the Second World War and discusses the apparent disappearance of Nazis from postwar German life.

Source

Hans Sarkowicz: Mr. Bubis, in 1945 you were liberated by the Soviet army in Czestochowa. What was your journey like from Breslau, where you were born in 1927, to Czestochowa, to the labor camp of a munitions factory?

Ignatz Bubis: In 1935 my parents and I went to Poland, to a village called Deblin, where my maternal grandparents lived. They went first, after my grandfather found a job for my father—one in which he could be continue in his line of work at a shipping company. When we arrived there, my brother Chil was still with me. He died in May 1935 from appendicitis. My oldest brother, Jakob, had already emigrated from Germany with my sister in 1933. I went to school in Poland for four more years. And then came the war. On that day, the first of September 1939, I should have started at a Polish high school, but bombs were already falling, so I didn't go to school anymore until Poland was occupied. Then I was able to go to school for a few weeks until Jews were no longer allowed to attend any school at all. The start of 1940 was the end of my education. My mother died at the end of 1940. And in February 1941, a ghetto was formed in Deblin. Right at the beginning of the war, my oldest brother and my sister went to the part of Poland that later was occupied by the Soviet Union. After that it was just me and my father, and later also my paternal grandfather, who came to live with us in 1941. I was in the Deblin ghetto, where I occasionally worked as a mail carrier, until mid-September 1942, at which point the ghetto was razed and most of the residents were deported. I myself was sent to a forced labor camp, but still in the same place, Deblin. I worked at the air base in cement construction and railway construction until the end of June 1942, when the inmates of this camp were also deported; then I came to the munitions factory in Czestochowa, where we also lived in a camp. That is, we lived in a camp and the production of munitions took place on the same premises.

S.: What was your life like in the camp and the munitions factory towards the end of the Second World War?

B.: First of all, we were guarded by Ukrainians who belonged to the SS, volunteers. Also there was a camp commandant who lived outside of the camp, a German named Bartenschläger. And then there was also a Jewish camp commandant. He was named Jolles. The work camp and munitions factory where I worked was called "Warta Werk." I worked there from morning until night at a so-called crimping machine. This machine was used to make bullets for carbines. Apart from the monotonous work, there was no protection whatsoever; for that reason, we came in contact with gunpowder, and very many people became ill with jaundice. Surprisingly I never got sick. We waited and waited to see whether the Red Army might eventually approach, since, in that case, we could

expect to be deported again, in whatever direction. And this is what actually happened. At the beginning of January 1945, the deportations began in small groups, also from this camp. Then around January 14 a larger group left, and we were supposed to be deported, too, on the sixteenth. This information was only “latrine information,” as we called it, but such rumors generally proved to be correct. The whole night from the fifteenth to the sixteenth [of January 1945] we could hear gunfire, and in the morning when we normally were supposed to appear at 6:00 for roll call, some others and I just lay under our straw mattresses. When the roll call began, we didn’t come out [of the barracks]. I don’t even know whether anyone came out. To this day I still don’t know. I only know that then there was silence. There was silence in the camp, which was unusual. And because we were under our mattresses, where we would have been easy to find, we crawled out and went outside, and no one was there. The guard towers were empty. We ran out of the camp and just headed east. We didn’t know where we were going, but we went east because we knew the Russians would be coming from that direction. We were barely outside town when the first Soviet tanks came toward us, and we embraced one another, knowing this was the end. Our joy was very great, but suddenly I became aware of my loneliness. In the camp I was together with several hundred people, of whom I knew at least half. And at lunch we got soup—it was just warm water with a few vegetables in it, but we got this every day at noon. Suddenly that, too, was gone. The six of us stood in the road wondering what would happen now.

The tanks drove past. No one took care of us. This was the front, after all. So we started walking east again. We followed the street signs from Czestochowa toward Radom, which is 100 kilometers east of Czestochowa, because if you wanted to go from Czestochowa to Deblin, you had to go via Radom. We spent the night at a farm, and to this day I still don’t know how we got them, but the next day we had bicycles. We couldn’t have bought them, since we had nothing, and also nothing to trade. Whether we stole them outright, or whether the farmers who had given us lodging also lent them to us, I cannot say. In any case, we rode away on these bicycles. We headed to Radom, and then we heard that there was a provisional government in Lublin. So we rode to Lublin. And it was actually true that Jews were gathering there, in Lublin, Jews who had survived in whatever camps or with the partisans. Everyone was going to Lublin. There was also a committee that was giving the survivors soup and provisions. It was also possible to be registered there. We got a room—it was still the six of us—in some kind of apartment, where we all lived together. But we were alive, and we were free. There, I attempted for the first time to find out whether my sister and my brother were registered somewhere, since if they had survived, they would surely have been liberated a long time ago, since that area was liberated by the Soviets already in the winter of 1944.

S.: Did you notice any changes in people then? Were you not afraid of Polish people, some of whom were still antisemitic?

B.: Nothing antisemitic happened in Lublin. Only later were there riots. I also talked to people who were in Deblin after the liberation and came from there to Lublin. There, in Deblin, the mother and sister of a friend of mine, who today lives in Sweden, were murdered—by Poles. They went straight from Czestochowa to Deblin and lived there for one week. And then my friend went out, and when he came back home, his mother and sister, who had also survived Czestochowa, were dead. His father and two of his brothers had been killed in the Nazi era. After that, the last Jews living in Deblin—it was only around ten families—also came to Lublin. Lublin was suddenly the center for liberated Jews, also Hungarian or Romanian. Whoever had survived in Poland or in the liberated part of Germany came to Lublin. Later I went to Lodz, to Litzmannstadt. For practical reasons I lived with my uncle, my mother’s brother. And when he moved to Lodz, I went with him. From there I went to Breslau. But the city had become unfamiliar to me and there were refugees living in our apartment. Then we heard that there were “DP camps” in Germany. These were camps for “displaced persons.” There was one such camp here near Frankfurt, in

Zeilsheim. There was another in Berlin-Schlachtensee. My uncle left a bit sooner, and shortly after him I also came to Berlin, to the “DP camp” in Schlachtensee. But after three days I didn’t want to stay at the camp. For me, it was just another camp. My uncle, my mother’s brother, who had not previously been a German citizen, was required to live in the camp first. But those with connections to Germany were allowed to live in the city right away, so I went to West Berlin and then later also lived part of the time in Dresden, so I always commuted between West Berlin and Dresden.

S.: On the day of your liberation, could you have imagined that you would one day live in Germany again and that you would even become deeply politically engaged in this Germany?

B.: Certainly not. I did not want to live in Germany. I only came because it was possible to emigrate from Germany. But I had not made up my mind about whether I wanted to go to Palestine—since at that time there was still no Israel. Many people then were going illegally to Palestine. When the ships were captured, they were all interned in Cyprus. Others went to Canada, many to America, and some even to Australia. My uncle went to America in 1949, but I also wanted to become independent of my uncle. I didn’t want to always be the nephew living at his uncle’s house. I settled in Germany little by little. But my first intention was to go away from there.

S.: At that time, would you have thought it was possible that staunch National Socialists and antisemites could develop into the democratic citizens of a democratic state?

B.: I could not have imagined that. And strictly speaking, this isn’t really what happened. In the Soviet-occupied zone there was the sense that only former members of the resistance were living there. And to an extent this was not much different in the West. Life went on. Suddenly there were no more Nazis. The fact that ultimately there had to have been someone who committed all these crimes was repressed: they weren’t there, they were interned or in prison. There were no bad guys, there were only the others. I had no illusions. I knew it wasn’t really like this—that everything hadn’t changed overnight. Today, it is different because there are three or two generations of adults who were born after the war. The second generation by this time is 20, 25, or 30 years old, and I have no problems at all with this generation. I also have no problems with the older generation, but when I meet someone who is my age or a bit older, I often wonder, what did he do? And then I think to myself: it’s better not to know.

Source: Ignatz Bubis, Interview with Hans Sarkowicz, in *„Als der Krieg zu Ende war...“: Erinnerungen an den 8. Mai ’45*, edited by Hans Sarkowicz. Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1995, pp. 100-05.

Translation: Elizabeth Tucker

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