

By **STEPHEN BLEYER**

“**L**et me live a few more days ... I want to see the day of liberation.”

These were the words whispered by the “old man” who occupied the lowest tier of a triple bunk next to mine in larger F, the so-called hospital lager of Auschwitz-Birkenau. This infirmary was in effect a waiting room for the dying skeletons.

I was 14 years old in January 1945. The “old” emaciated man lying next to me must have been 50 years old. I listened to him for days. We knew that all our lives were hanging on a very thin thread. We knew he did not have very long to live. I listened to him describe his children. I heard about his wife, about life in his village somewhere in Hungary. Notwithstanding his suffering, in spite of his wretched condition, for reasons that are difficult to comprehend, he wanted to see the day of “liberation.”

Some short days before the first Russian officer walked into our miserable graveyard for the living, symbolizing at last the moment of liberation, the blades of straw that had dropped on the face of this 50-year-old “old man” from the bunk above him, remained unnoticed. He was liberated by death from something that, in the strange language of Birkenau, was called “living.”

We were all looking forward to that day of “liberation.” What was it really that we were expecting? My dreams were surreal, just like our celebrations are surreal to many of us today! Sometimes my dreams of liberation included a return to the embrace of parents, grandparents, family and friends, who in fact had been swept away by this in-



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fernal conflagration. Sometimes my dreams of liberation were more like nightmares of an anguished and tortured soul that was not prepared to face reality after an existence suspended between life and death.

Only some weeks earlier, the gas chambers and crematoria were a reality of the unreal world of the lager. Some days after our liberation, the thoughts of survival that had dominated our lives were superseded by the realization that hundreds of thousands had been destroyed by those demonic instruments of death manipulated by human beings.

In spite of it all, with all its contradictions, liberation also symbolized a renaissance, the triumph of the human spirit. That human spirit now has to cry out in an injured world. We must not tolerate any physical or spiritual subjugation of human beings anywhere on this globe.

Stephen Bleyer is the president of the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre.

Shema

*You who live secure
In your warm houses,
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:*

*Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.*

*Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.*

10 January 1946

(Excerpted from *Primo Levi: Collected Poems*, translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann, Faber and Faber Limited, London, 1988)