

## 24-11 Remembering the Holocaust (1945)

William McConahey,  
Dorothy Wahlstrom

During the winter of 1944–1945, the advancing Red Army seized German extermination, or death, camps, which had been built in Eastern Europe to slaughter Jews and others, from all areas of German-occupied Europe. The following spring, the advancing armies of the Western Allies liberated German concentration camps within the Reich itself. Originally built to terrorize “enemies” of the Nazi regime, these had increasingly become forced and slave-labor camps during the war. Large numbers of those imprisoned within them died—from overwork, malnutrition, disease, and brutal treatment—or were murdered. Here, two Americans recall the concentration camps that they helped free during the final weeks of the war in Europe.

*Source:* Recollections of Dr. William McConahey and Dorothy Wahlstrom, excerpted from *Witnesses to the Holocaust: An Oral History*, ed. Rhoda G. Lewin, 202–203, 214–215. Copyright © 1990 by Jewish Community Relations Council / Anti-Defamation League of Minnesota and the Dakotas.

### (a) William McConahey, Medical Officer at Flossenburg with the 337th Infantry

As we moved into Germany we started hearing about the concentration camps at army briefings. April 23 our division liberated Flossenburg, and I went in there next day.

Flossenburg held 15,000 prisoners but there were only about 1,500 left. The German guards had marched out about 13,000 toward Dachau, to get away from our advancing army. It was a very poignant, sad-looking road because they were marched out carrying blankets or maybe a jacket, but they were too weak to carry things, and they'd dropped them along the way.

A few very emaciated prisoners were wandering around in blue and white striped prison garb. My jeep driver spoke German, so he had conversations with many of the prisoners. They were from all over Europe—Poles, Russians, Czechs, French, Belgian, Spanish. They had a lot of Jewish people there, of course, but many were political prisoners, from the underground, or just people picked up by the Gestapo because they thought they were anti-Hitler. They all bore the scars of beatings and being knocked around.

The camp was laid out in very neat barracks style, with two big barbed wire fences around it. Running through it

was a little railroad with a little pushcart like you see in coal mines, pushed by hand, to haul bodies to the crematory.

Three inmates, pretty much zombies, were still burning bodies in the crematory because prisoners were still dying left and right, and for sanitation you had to do something! About sixteen corpses were lined up to be burned. They were just skin and bone, each one weighing about forty pounds, I'd guess, because you could pick them up with one hand. One fellow opened the furnace door, and there were a couple of bodies in there, sizzling away.

We saw the beautiful houses where the S.S. guards lived with their women. Then I walked into the barracks, very drab and cold, with three tiers of bunks on each side. It was nothing but boards—no mattresses, no straw, nothing. Each bunk was big enough for one, but they said three slept there every night.

I visited the “hospital” where they brought prisoners to die. They'd put them on the bare wooden floor with straw on it, and they'd lie there in their own excrement and vomitus, until they died.

Some prisoners, their spirits were broken, they were just shells and they'd lost the will to live. Some were so close to death you couldn't feed them because they hadn't eaten for so long their stomachs were atrophied, and if they got food

in, they vomited and bloated and obstructed. We tried to get them back on small feedings very slowly, over a period of weeks, but we couldn't save them. We felt terrible. They were dying under our eyes, and there was nothing we could do.

After the war ended, we drove to Dachau one day. Dachau was much bigger than Flossenburg. Again, we toured the barracks and saw the crematories, six big ovens. Outside were thousands of jars stacked up, the charred bones and ashes of people who had been burned there. I was told they used these for fertilizing the gardens, and that sometimes they would send a political prisoner's family a box of bones, anybody's bones. We saw the whipping posts, the torture chambers. It was obviously degradation and terror and horror and suffering, just like Flossenburg, only on a bigger scale.

It was those concentration camps that made us realize what we were fighting for. We really felt this was a holy crusade to wipe out this diabolical regime. We have sadistic bums and misfits and psychopaths in this country who could do what the S.S. did in Germany, but Hitler gave them a rank, a uniform, a purpose and a mission, and encouraged them.

The infantry medical corps was not like *M.A.S.H.* or the movies. Unless you're there, unless you're in combat, and fight the battle, and crawl on your belly under machine gun bullets, and dig a foxhole in the rain, and get shelled, you can't understand what it's like. We were with the infantry, having the same life as they were having, and the same death they were having, too.

The war marked me for life. I realized that making a lot of money or being a big shot, that wasn't as important as doing something worthwhile. To really be a person was what counted.

**(b) Dorothy Wahlstrom, Captain with the  
127th Evac Hospital, Whose Unit Entered  
Dachau on May 3, 1945**

The dead and dying were all around us. Piles of naked dead were stacked beside the crematorium and inside. Dachau

was certainly a calculated attempt by the Nazis to desecrate not only the body, but also the mind and spirit.

We set up ward units in the S.S. barracks. Dead dogs lay in the kennels nearby, killed by our military after survivors told us they were used to tear away parts of prisoners' bodies on command. Survivors told us infants were torn limb from limb as their mothers watched. They told us that prisoners who could no longer work were used as live targets for machine gun practice. They mentioned other unspeakable atrocities—medical experiments, torture chambers—horrors too terrible to think up without having experienced them.

Each of the two hospital units at Dachau, the 127th and the 116th, was equipped to care for 450 patients at one time, but each unit cared for 1,500 or more at peak times.

We felt we were dancing with death. We couldn't get away from it, and wondered if it would ever stop. We couldn't care for everyone, and often we could not admit a patient until another one died or was discharged from the hospital. It was truly heartbreaking for our medical officers to have to choose the people they thought might live and leave the sickest ones to die. Of those we thought would live, seven or eight stretchers were lined up in front of each ward in the morning—people who had died during the night.

The severely malnourished did not tolerate increased rations too well, and dysentery was out of control. We had double bunk beds for our patients, and the diarrhea was so severe it leaked from bed to bed. Many were so emaciated that even with the care we gave them, it was too late.

The diseases were those that go with filth and lack of sanitation. One and one-half tons of DDT powder were used in dusting the camp to get control of the infected lice that spread typhus. Perhaps 20 percent of the camp population had active tuberculosis.

I wish I could describe the smells and the silence of death. Even now, certain sights and sounds can remind me of that pain, that suffering, that sorrow and loss and anguish and degradation.

I find comfort in the sacred Scriptures that record that the Lord will vindicate His Israel, and that there will always be a House of David. I am truly grateful to the Lord for having allowed me to serve His people.

## 24-12 Letter to President Roosevelt (1939)

### Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein (1879–1955), perhaps the most famous scientist of the twentieth century, left his native Germany when the Nazis took over the country and accepted a post at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. A pacifist, Einstein nevertheless wrote a letter on August 2, 1939, to President Roosevelt informing him of the military implications of recent developments in atomic physics. President Roosevelt responded by appointing an advisory committee to investigate the matter, which led to the creation of the Manhattan Project, America's successful effort to build an atomic bomb.

*Source:* Albert Einstein, letter to President Roosevelt, August 2, 1939, from *Einstein on Peace*, ed. Otto Nathan and Heinz Norden (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), 294–296. Copyright © 1960 by the Estate of Albert Einstein.

*Albert Einstein  
Old Grove Road  
Nassau Point  
Peconic, Long Island  
August 2, 1939*

*F. D. Roosevelt  
President of the United States  
White House  
Washington, D.C.*

SIR:

Some recent work by E. Fermi and L. Szilard, which has been communicated to me in manuscript, leads me to expect that the element uranium may be turned into a new and important source of energy in the immediate future. Certain aspects of the situation seem to call for watchfulness and, if necessary, quick action on the part of the Administration. I believe, therefore, that it is my duty to bring to your attention the following facts and recommendations.

In the course of the last four months it has been made probable—through the work of Joliot in France as well as Fermi and Szilard in America—that it may become possible to set up nuclear chain reactions in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated. Now it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future.

This new phenomenon would also lead to the construction of bombs, and it is conceivable—though much less certain—that extremely powerful bombs of a new type may thus be constructed. A single bomb of this type, carried by boat or exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

The United States has only very poor ores of uranium in moderate quantities. There is some good ore in Canada and the former Czechoslovakia, while the most important source of uranium is the Belgian Congo.

In view of this situation you may think it desirable to have some permanent contact maintained between the Administration and the group of physicists working on chain reactions in America. One possible way of achieving this might be for you to entrust with this task a person who has your confidence and who could perhaps serve in an unofficial capacity. His task might comprise the following:

a) To approach Government Departments, keep them informed of the further developments, and put forward recommendations for Government action, giving particular attention to the problem of securing a supply of uranium ore for the United States.

b) To speed up the experimental work which is at present being carried on within the limits of the budgets of University laboratories, by providing funds, if such funds be required, through his contacts with private persons who are willing to make contributions for this cause, and perhaps also by obtaining the cooperation of industrial laboratories which have the necessary equipment.

I understand that Germany has actually stopped the sale of uranium from the Czechoslovakian mines which she has taken over. That she should have taken such early action might perhaps be understood on the ground that the son of the German Under-Secretary of State, von Weizsäcker, is attached to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institut in Berlin, where some of the American work on uranium is now being repeated.

Yours very truly,  
A. EINSTEIN

## 24-13 Draft of Press Release Announcing the Use of the Atomic Bomb (1945)

Henry L. Stimson

Given the increasing bloodiness and brutality of World War II and the massive scientific and engineering investment in developing the atomic bomb, it was nearly inevitable that, once built and successfully tested, the weapon would be used. Germany surrendered in May 1945 before the successful testing of the atomic bomb, so the first—and to date, only—atomic bombs employed in war were dropped on Japan that August. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson (1867–1950), who served Presidents Roosevelt and Truman throughout World War II, prepared the following draft press release (July 31, 1945), explaining the new weapon and justifying its use to the American people. The announcement was to be released by President Truman after the bomb was used.

Source: Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Online Documents Collection. July 31, 1945.

July 31, 1945.

Dear Mr. President:

Attached are two copies of the revised statement which has been prepared for release by you as soon as the new weapon is used. This is the statement about which I cabled you last night.

The reason for haste is that I was informed only yesterday that, weather permitting, it is likely that the weapon will be used as early as August 1st, Pacific Ocean Time, which as you know is a good many hours ahead of Washington time.

This message and inclosure are being brought to you by Lt. R. G. Arneson, whom Secretary Byrnes will recognize as the Secretary of the Interim Committee, appointed with your approval, to study various features of the development and use of the atomic bomb.

Faithfully yours,  
Henry L. Stimson  
Secretary of War.

[Enclosure]

Draft of 30 July 1945.

\_\_\_\_\_ hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on \_\_\_\_\_ and destroyed its usefulness to the enemy. That bomb has more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It has more than two thousand times the blast power of the

British "Grand Slam" which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare.

The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet. With this bomb we have now added a new and revolutionary increase in destruction to supplement the growing power of our armed forces. In their present form these bombs are now in production and even more powerful forms are in development.

It is an atomic bomb. It is a harnessing of the basic power of the universe. The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.

Before 1939, it was the accepted belief of scientists that it was theoretically possible to release atomic energy. But no one knew any practical method of doing it. By 1942, however, we knew that the Germans were working feverishly to find a way to add atomic energy to the other engines of war with which they hoped to enslave the world. But they failed. We may be grateful to Providence that the Germans got the V-1's and the V-2's late and in limited quantities and even more grateful that they did not get the atomic bomb at all.

The battle of the laboratories held fateful risks for us as well as the battles of the air, land and sea, and we have now won the battle of the laboratories as we have won the other battles.

Beginning in 1940, before Pearl Harbor, scientific knowledge useful in war was pooled between the United States and

Great Britain, and many priceless helps to our victories have come from that arrangement. Under that general policy the research on the atomic bomb was begun. With American and British scientists working together we entered the race of discovery against the Germans.

The United States had available the large number of scientists of distinction in the many needed areas of knowledge. It had the tremendous industrial and financial resources necessary for the project and they could be devoted to it without undue impairment of other vital war work. In the United States the laboratory work and the production plants, on which a substantial start had already been made, would be out of reach of enemy bombing, while at that same time Britain was exposed to constant air attack and was still threatened with the possibility of invasion. For these reasons Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt agreed that it was wise to carry out the project here. We now have two great plants and many lesser works devoted to the production of atomic power. Employment during peak construction numbered 125,000 and over 65,000 individuals are even now engaged in operating the plants. Many have worked there for two and a half years. Few know what they have been producing. They see great quantities of material going in and they see nothing coming out of these plants, for the physical size of the explosive charge is exceedingly small. We have spent two billion dollars on the greatest scientific gamble in history—and won.

But the greatest marvel is not the size of the enterprise, its secrecy, nor its cost, but the achievement of scientific brains in putting together infinitely complex pieces of knowledge held by many men in different fields of science into a workable plan. And hardly less marvellous has been the capacity of industry to design, and of labor to operate, the machines and methods to do things never done before so that the brain child of many minds came forth in physical shape and performed as it was supposed to do. Both science and industry worked under the direction of the United States Army, which achieved a unique success in managing so diverse a problem in the advancement of knowledge in an amazingly short time. It is doubtful if such another combination could be got together in the world. What has been done is the greatest achievement of organized science in history. It was done under high pressure and without failure.

We are now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise the Japanese have

above ground in any city. We shall destroy their docks, their factories, and their communications. Let there be no mistake; we shall completely destroy Japan's power to make war.

It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26 was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth. Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.

The Secretary of War, who has kept in personal touch with all phases of the project, will immediately make public a statement giving further details.

His statement will give facts concerning the sites at Oak Ridge near Knoxville, Tennessee, and at Richland near Pasco, Washington, and an installation near Santa Fe, New Mexico. Although the workers at the sites have been making materials to be used in producing the greatest destructive force in history they have not themselves been in danger beyond that of many other occupations, for the utmost care has been taken of their safety. A scientific report of the project will be made public tomorrow.

The fact that we can release atomic energy ushers in a new era in man's understanding of nature's forces. Atomic energy may in the future supplement the power that now comes from coal, oil, and falling water, but at present it cannot be produced on a basis to compete with them commercially. Before that comes there must be a long period of intensive research.

It has never been the habit of the scientists of this country or the policy of this Government to withhold from the world scientific knowledge. Normally, therefore, everything about the work with atomic energy would be made public.

But under present circumstances it is not intended to divulge the technical processes of production or all the military applications, pending further examination of possible methods of protecting us and the rest of the world from the danger of sudden destruction.

I shall recommend that the Congress of the United States consider promptly the establishment of an appropriate commission to control the production and use of atomic power within the United States. I shall give further consideration and make further recommendations to the Congress as to how atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence towards the maintenance of world peace.