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Abraham Klausner interview 2/14/95

SWB: Rabbi Klausner, can you tell me about the first time that you came ... opened the concentration camps, and what were the impressions you had and what effect on you did it have?

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: My um particular experience was to enter the Dachau concentration camp in 45, May of 45, I was attached to a hospital unit called the 116th evacuation hospital. I was given no instruction as to what I would do nor did anybody advise me. I just found myself with the medical team in the camp. And the, I had to determine what I was to do, and that of course was a development which began with my coming and lasted with a period of practically, approximately five years.

SWB: You told once about how difficult for you to actually go up and enter the camp, can you tell me about that?

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well my first experience with uh the liberated was terribly devastating, by virtue of the fact that I realized that they weren't liberated. The camps were open so to speak, but the people weren't uh taken in hand and uh comforted and provided with necessities and told that now you'll have a place to sleep, things to do and they'll

be a program of some sort for your uh repatriation or delivery to-to-to uh some security, what they were do- what was done was they were put back behind barbed wire. They uh occupied more or less the same uh ambience that they uh occupied uh before the liberation, with the exception of course, they weren't going to be killed. And they were going to be fed. Dachau was an exception in the sense that

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they were also going to be taken care of medically. We had uh three medical units, the 116th, the 127th evac, and the tenth field hospital which was nearby at another camp called Allach. And for a short period of time, oh perhaps uh four to six weeks maybe a little longer, the hospital units uh drawn from the military, remained in the area taking care of the immediate problems of the uh sick and the dying.

SWB: Tell me about first going through the gate and then going into a barrack for the first time.

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well I came uh into Dachau at night uh, and uh I saw nothing except the main square coming through

the big gates. And of course uh I waited for the morning quite anxiously and when morning came uh I uh walked through the barbed wire gates into the barracks area, and uh selected one of the barracks. I entered and there met the first of the survivors. Uh it was a uh difficult experience for me because I was not confident that uh I could serve a purpose. I had nothing to offer, I had nothing to give. People needed amenities, needed attention of various kinds, and I had nothing, but nevertheless there I was in Dachau and I felt I had to do something, and so I entered the barracks and stood there, terribly disturbed. Here we were in a period of liberation and the people were still in barracks, stretched out on shelves, there were three rows of shelves, nothing other than the shelves, there wasn't a-a-a-piece of linen of any kind, there wasn't a bar of soap, there wasn't a chair, place to sit down, it was just a uh, a uh dirty uh-uh situation and uh here were the people uh either stretched out on the shelves or uh moving about listlessly. Paid no attention to me as if I didn't exist. No one came towards me to say welcome or uh what is it you

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want. They just uh, I was just an apparition. Until one uh, one uh of the liberated, of the survivors walking around came, stared at me and finally looked up at me and uh, asked me a strange question. I remember it very distinctly. He asked me if I knew his uncle, gave me his name, in Toledo. And I was taken aback, that was the first conversation that I had with the, with the liberated. And I stood there lost, not knowing what to do or what to say. I was wearing a raincoat at the time and in my pocket I had little cellophane packages of Bizouzet, they were these little uh uh symbols uh that the Jewish welfare board had made and delivered to chaplains for distribution to soldiers and for a moment I thought I would take out a few of these and hand them out. But as I thought about it I thought that would be ugly, it would be to-to-to to respond to a great tragedy with a little icon of some sort didn't s-seem to be the proper thing to do. And then I was saved. I call it the epiphany. A voice came from one of the uh, one of the shelves, very thin voice, crying so to speak, and uh it said to me, I had a brother, we grew up together in our village but my brother left and went to the United States and there became a Rabbi. And he continued to speak but at that point, uh, when he said he became a Rabbi, I interrupted him and said I know your brother. He is here in Europe. And then the voice began again to cry and say, don't be compassionate for the sake of compassion, he assumed that I was just going to be nice, uh, but it was uh, a strange moment. I said no uh, my voice over his uh, I'm gonna bring

you your brother. And I left the barracks at that moment because I couldn't handle it beyond that. And uh, on the outside of the barrack, I now felt that there was a purpose in my coming, if nothing more, I was gonna bring him his brother. Of course people ask me, when I tell the story,

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how did you come to this uh, this moment. Well I traveled with 250 officers uh, in the United States to Scotland, England, across the channel, we were in box cars across France, in the back of the bulge in the Battle of the Bulge, and that voice, the lilt in that voice I had heard it before, and to me there was no question about it, and-and and I was so familiar with the rhythm, the lilt of the voice, that I immediately assumed that the voice that I heard in the boxcar, n- in the travels, was it the brother. And uh it turned out I was correct, I uh, found the brother and I brought them together. This was my first, not only experience, it was the thing that uh, that uh encouraged me to an odyssey that stretched over uh the four or five years working with the displaced persons.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: No uh, first of all uh, I saw it only from the so-called area of Dachau. I didn't know what was happening beyond the gates of Dachau at the moment. Uh, I was confident in those days that it wasn't really a serious problem, the sick were being taken care of by the 116th evac. And uh I knew, I was confident that the next day or two or three days that all the great American institutions, especially the Jewish institutions would be there. And uh they would do what had to be done to-to-to give these people the redemption that should have been offered them.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well when uh the-the-the question that this-this figure asked me about his uncle in Toledo bothered me. I just didn't dismiss it. And I began to think about

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it and I realized that it wasn't really a-a question, it was a prayer. Uh, the man wanted to be connected with life

again, with a relative, so uh, that started me off on the project which became known as the Sheritaplaytom[?]. I-I immediately walked out of one section of-of the camp where, into another, and I got a hold of some of the um, the survivors that were walking around and I said, we got to start listing the names of uh who has survived, and we-we established a formula, we would get the name, date and place of birth, and the fact that they are presently...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#2]

SWB: Can you tell me about religious ceremonies for the survivors early on, do you remember any instances where people prayed....

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: I uh, wasn't uh, aware of uh a religious uh factor playing a role in the sense of ritual or things of that sort uh. Uh there were little moments which were of a religious nature uh that I was involved with but uh, it didn't seem to be something that had to be represented uh, assuming that it was felt. For example, I had decided that we would have a, uh a kind of a Thanksgiving service at one of the camps, uh, in Munich, at the edge of Munich. And uh I had a case of uh prayer books, the JWB, the Jewish Welfare Board prayer book that was prepared for soldiers, and I came and there was a big assembly of survivors, and uh we passed out the prayer

books, and when the service began, there wasn't a prayer book in sight, it completely disappeared. I didn't

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understand then at the moment what was happening but later of course it all became clear to me. The, there were moemtns which were ritually connected, which spoke about religious practice. I could tell you the story of uh, of some women that I had found in the Alps. I was on my way to Italy because uh, we were going to establish a kind of a, escape route, of getting survivors over to Italy where they would be able to take the illegal ships to Palestine. And on my way, traveling with a doctor, always traveled with a doctor, I hit upon a sign that indicated that in one of the valleys of the Alps, there were some DP's. So we made that trip, it was a difficult trip, we finally came to the end of the valley actually, and uh found a series of barracks, and entered one in which there were quite a number of Hungarian Jewish women. And we were the first uh to connect with them in terms of the world Jewish community and these women. And it was my practice of course to carry lists of names in my pocket, and I pulled out all the lists and I put em on the



table and they all fell on the table, starting to scratch for the names to see if they could connect with one of the names. And while this was going on, a young girl, I don't know, maybe 16 or 17, walked out of this area of this room and returned in a little while with a prayer book. I didn't know it was a prayer book at the moment. And then she held it up from the distance and said see what I have. It's my prayer book. And then she added to that, I brought it from the ghetto. Of course this, [laughs] this was a kind of excitement because I knew the procedure by this time, that you couldn't take anything into, in-into a concentration camp. [coughs] People were stripped of any possessions they had and there was no way of carrying a prayer book into a camp and uh holding onto it, and I of course asked, how did you do it, and she told me that when they gave her her first

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allocation of bread, they gave her a heel of a loaf, and she cut or tore a slice but not completely, made a hinge of it. And then dug out the crumbs in the heel of a loaf of the bread, and put her little prayer book and carried the bread with her and of course bread was something you weren't going

to, you weren't going to steal one from the other, and so forth. Y- this was one of the religious elements in terms of uh, uh then of course in time uh, as people settled in the camps, they took on their uh religious practices, and I dealt with them accordingly. The Klausenberg Rabbi, the great Hassidic leader whom I found in Dachau, we nourished him back to health and then brought him to Feldafing, he had some disciples, and so we have a whole history with him. I found uh in one of the uh, buildings, in Munich, a large uh-uh Polish Hebrew library that the Nazis had uh had uh confiscated. And every time I would pass the building, I'd go in and take a few of the volumes and then on my way to one of the camps I would drop them off so that the people who were interested uh, would have uh, have the text of the tradition in front of them. Uh, religion didn't play a-a dominant role in the sense that we were doing things religiously. Religion manifested itself in terms of the behavior of the people as they related to the faith prior to their coming into the camp and uh, whatever the camp uh would uh allow them.

SWB: Tell me your impressions of the problems that existed in most of the DP camps very early on. Describe the conditions.

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The camps, to begin with, were not Jewish camps. They were collecting points. Other words, Dachau was liberated and uh the people in Dachau were in

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Dachau. Now the Feldafing camp which was uh south of Dachau, came about because when the American forces came through the area, particularly the community of Tutzing, they found this company of survivors, that is of DP's, that the Germans were moving from one place to the other to get them away from the oncoming allied forces. But by the time uh the Americans got there the Germans have fled and the people were there. And now it became the job of Army to do something with them, so they assigned an officer and said, do something with them. And they ended up in what we call an SDAP school, this was a school uh that uh-uh that trained the children of the elite, Nazis, for positions, for positions in-in-in in the party and in the government. And so these people were then pushed into this camp, same thing happened in Landsberg, a series of camps called the Kalfering camps. Uh, same thing happened in Mithenwald, and we had wherever we went there were these collecting points, and each one was handled differently depended upon who was handling it, there wasn't a general policy, there wasn't a program, there wasn't an, a department within the military to say we're going to take care of these people. There

wasn't an institution, the UNRHA wasn't there, the American Joint Distribution Committee wasn't there, no one was there. And so it became a makeshift operation and depending upon the officer in charge, you'd get either a better or a worse situation. But the camp itself was really incapable because of, to handle the people and so you had a kind of a, tragic uh, uh I wouldn't call it poverty but absence of any uh sensible response to the people that had suddenly been liberated, and that became one of the first problems. Secondly, the fact that they were locked up, barbed wire, they couldn't they had no freedom, couldn't get out one in the morning and say I'm going to take a walk through the,

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through- through the village, or the countryside. Uh, they had no name, no name was allowed them. They didn't have an identity card. They were just a mass of people which the army was gonna herd from one place to the other, and that became the basic element with which we had to deal.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The uh logic of the situation was not something that that we debated or the people, the people uh-uh reflected on. The people, uh, faced the problems of their own connections, their own identity, and so that was their primary concern. Uh, what was happening to the perpetrators, the Germans and so forth, this really was not something that we were, just about to-to-to waste our energy on.

SWB:

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#3]

SWB: Tell me also about the problem that existed early on of mixed nationalities in the displaced persons camp, why was that a problem.

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The problem of the camps uh was in terms of the mixture that the animosities between the groups persisted even though they had in one form or another commonly been oppressed by the Germans. Once the liberation took place, old animosity surfaced, and some became quite intense. And uh we would be faced with the reality that

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from day to day people were actually killed, and uh, the dead rose in number and uh, it was obvious to me that uh, something had to be done. Secondly, in terms of the Jewish survivor, I felt that in order to restructure a living pattern and to uh uh excite some kind of a cultural development or a return to a- a previous rhythm of life, we couldn't do it in a mixture. There was no way of uh dealing with one group and not dealing with another group. And uh I wasn't prepared to serve other than a response to the Jewish survivor. And so I decided that we're going to have to have segregated or Jewish camps. And so I took the matter up with some military figures and they were against it, but eventually we devised a way in which they would not have to take a position in favor of separate camps, and yet allow me to create Jewish camps.

SWB: Did they simply not understand...

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: They were prompted by a, the general American concept of uh of uh multiculturalism, in other words, as one officer said to me, after all we're Americans, we're we-we uh uh are proponents of democracy, of-of containing people within a common objective. And here you're coming and saying to, to us after the war which we

fought in terms of a democratic uh concept that you're going to go back on it and you're gonna separate the people. And I said theoretically, you're absolutely correct. But in practice, it just won't work at this time and in this place. And so uh, we were able to make a kind of a deal which I was able to create, the camps.

SWB: Tell me about what length people would go to find surviving members of their families.

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RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The-the compulsion, or the drive was so great that people broke out of camps and walked, traveled, there weren't any forms of transportation across Czechoslovakia, Poland, into Russia, looking for uh, for-for uh, fragments of families, and people came out of East Europe into Munich, and we set up a large tracing program. Besides the-the books that were published uh we had a center in Munich at the Deutsches museum for, where people came from all over Europe and uh, uh came asking about their family. Interesting thing was that we put a table out in

the lobby, so to speak, people would come and tear the pages out of the book and we would have to feed the table with books and then we would nail the pages down so they would last a little longer. But if a person came and found no name in the book, they would go over to the wall, it was a very large wall, and they write a note on the wall saying for example, I was here, addressing it to a parent or to a child. I've been looking for you, and I will be here or going there so that there'd be some point at which they might be able to connect. We were very much involved in looking for children in uh Eastern Europe, people who had left their children either with Christian friends or others. Wanted to find those children and so we had to set up a program for the search of children, which was haphazard but in many cases it was very effective.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well uh, as I came to know the-the-the contours of the problem and realized that Dachau was only one little place, and that throughout Bavaria, there were pockets of survivors and news came to me, military people

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start coming to visit Dachau, and uh soldiers would meet me and say I just came from, uh from uh, Eschwega, and uh there are so many Jews there and say some words about them. Well I pursued every one of those rumors. I would go to each one of these places, find out who was there. Uh, I would then inform them what their rights were, I would check and find out what the food situation was. I would collect their names and I would give them copies of other places that I had already had. And slowly when I would come back to Dachau I would then have some of the people join these names to others, and uh after a while I went up to the town of Landsberg and found uh a printer. It was not legal for printers to operate after the war, you had to have military permission, the military wasn't giving out permission for any kind of uh printing of newspapers or anything of print nature. And then with a cup of coffee, I mean a can of coffee or tea or something, chocolate, cigarettes, which uh these things were uh negotiables, we would get uh the books published and then we'd have to distribute them. We'd get people going to Poland to take some books, or to Hungary or to Rumania and so forth. In fact, I had a man come from Kobna, a Christian, who brought me a child. And with the child he brought a page of the book, and in the book he said here is the name of the father of this child. Handed me the child and the page, and I w- returned the child to his father. Uh, in time, after we left the Deutscheisch museum,

we-we were forced out of there, political situation was such that we were in tension with each other, that is I and the army. We moved to a building on Ziebertstrasse in Munich and there opened a very broad and detailed search department which became quite uh, quite an institution. People from all over Europe came, left names, and there were follow-ups, had a whole volunteer staff working, and out of that came

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one of the Sheri Table Ta books, the last one. Which is a, a compilation of all the names of all the books in that final, and it was printed by the United States army.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: It was organized according to camps first, the original books. Uh, the best that we could do at that time was to get the name of the survivor, the place and date of birth, this was about as much information that we could handle and we thought that would be at least some kind of a resource which would help people locate one another.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: I uh, remember that very clearly. I was driving into the camp of Feldafing, and whenever I drove in, the people would congregate around the car as I came in, so it would move very slowly, and they would shout to me all kinds of things. Their complaints or just a general greeting or something. It was a kind of a festival situation when I came into a camp, and I came in one day and there was a tall figure, angry looking like a prophet, and he shouted out to me and he said Chaplain, we need a newspaper, and my response of course was always positive. I says, okay, you'll have a newspaper. Of course I had no idea how you have a newspaper, but, if he wants a newspaper let's see what can be done. And so I got to know this person, he turned out to be uh a person from Kobne, his name was Shalatin at the time, Levy, he had been a young journalist and he had worked uh in uh as a journalist, and uh, we then started to explore how we could uh publish a newspaper. Well, we needed paper. That wasn't a big

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problem because there was a paper mill in Dachau. And uh by this time uh the com- new commanding officer of Dachau and I were, were kind of uh, agreeable to each other. And uh we worked together. And there were things that I could do for him that he was unable to do. And so, when I made requests, the command was uh, was responsive. So the paper wasn't a problem. The question was the type. Uh, I wrote a [laughs] a request to the American organizations for a Yiddish...

[CAMERA RELOAD]

[CR#4]

SWB: Okay, you're still telling me about the type.

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The problem then came up about the type. A rumor had come down from Frankfurt to the area that somewhere in Frankfurt the Germans had hidden or salvaged or kept, we don't know, some Hebrew or Yiddish type. So uh Levy uh offered if I would provide for his transportation, cause of a problem, he was a DP, he couldn't travel, he had no identity, couldn't get out. And there was at that time really no way of moving about. If I would get him to Frankfurt somehow uh, uh he would pursue the rumor. And I did, I put him on a military train with special orders and he got to Frankfurt and he found a uh basically a handful of type that the Germans for some reason had not destroyed. And he brought it back and uh, we-we got a, printing establishment uh where we could go to work and uh could only

set one page at a time of the newspaper and then had to break it down and set the next page, until we got to be able to uh, get additional type somewhere. And so the newspaper began, we got the paper from Dachau, we got the type from uh

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Frankfurt, and uh we were in business, and never missed a week. Unterveg was published every week from the beginning of uh og uh, well the end of uh 45 until uh, uh the whole scene was uh closed down.

SWB: You must have somewhere in Europe when Ben-Gurion came. Tell me where you were....

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well I was with Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion uh came uh to-to Germany and uh he met with uh with-with uh Eisenhower, uh, Judge Rifkin who was the advisor to Jewish affairs took him to see Eisenhower and then uh he came down to Munich and he, I joined him there, first he spoke, he was the speaker at our uh-uh-uh call it uh convocation of the central committee which met in the Rafthaus, the city hall of Munich. And then I took him uh through the camp

situation, took him up to St. Tetillion, a hospital, up to Landsberg, Feldafing, so forth. And uh just uh made sure that he saw what uh we were all about.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well it of course meant a great deal in the sense that uh, here was a figure, a personality which uh which uh represented to them that there was a reality beyond the camps, that there was a world and there was a, there was a battle, and there was a voice, there was a-a promise that uh as he indicated uh his theme was we're going to get you out of this, there's going to be a land, and there's going to be a new home. Uh, it uh, it was a tremendous encouragement for the people whether they wanted to go to-to the, then it was Palestine or later it'd become Israel or not was immaterial. The same thing happened when the Jewish

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brigade came through uh, uh Germany after all they were Jews, they were in uniform, they were strong and proud, expressive people and again they became a symbol for the

people more than anything else that uh these are our people, and uh, uh we were going to be redeemed. I don't think the people ever felt for a moment that this was going to end badly, that uh somehow all this is nightmare which continued after liberation is going to end. And here are our saviors.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well I didn't uh really disobey them, I just didn't obey them. I didn't take an action against anything. Now the first action that I took which was contrary to a-a military order was that after uh, uh we were in Dachau the first six or eight weeks, the 116th evacuation hospital was ordered out, because actually this was not part of uh military procedure, bringing a military hospital into a civilian situation. But it was something that uh, that the army decided to do as far as Dachau was concerned. But uh, uh all other soldiers were on uh rest and recreation except for these units, and so they tried to get them out as quickly as possible, and the first unit that they ordered out was the 116th for rest and recreation. I was a member of the 116. Nobody paid attention to the fact that I had a role that I created for myself, but the unit moves, you're part of a unit, military orders, and so, bulletin board announcements, 16th is leaving, and told where it's going and the following officers will be in the first unit. I was in that unit. I did what the army told me, I got on a truck that morning, and uh rode off. Came to a rest center, everybody got off the truck, I stayed there a moment, I said

what am I gonna do here, this is not where I want to be. As

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the last truck was turning around to go get the other section of the 116th, I jumped back on the truck and went back to Dachau. I got off the truck before truck g- entered the camp, waited until the unit was gone, and then I walked back into Dachau and said here I am. And continued to do what I was doing.

SWB: But didn't you do that for a very long time?

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Oh yes, it went on for years, I kept uh-uh, I kept dodging the uh, the uh instructions and uh [cough] uh then of course I got involved in military policy as to when the army under George Patton wanted to clear munich out of uh out of uh DP's, I interfered. And I told the DP's not to go. To stay, and that brought me in conflict with the military uh structure and uh we had to uh work this out. Sometimes we did it well and sometimes we did it poorly, but I remained. And continued the battle.



SWB: Why?

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Well that's a difficult question to answer, why. I was just, uh as a human being had just committed myself heart and soul to this phenomenon. I had, to me it was, there was no choice. Here was a world that was in desperation and I came on the scene. Why, I don't know, but I was there, and I wasn't going to leave it, and I wasn't going to, going to permit the-the-the survivors the Jews in particular to be treated the way the policy was intent upon treating them.

[SYNC MARK 5]

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RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: The enormity of the problem was simply in the fact, that here you had a people that was once a, a an effective working, dreaming doing people, creative, capable people, suddenly, torn from everything that represented their humanity, and now that they were liberated they weren't given back that humanity. They weren't

clothed, they weren't schooled, they weren't permitted to travel, they weren't permitted to do anything, not to take their name, their dignity, couldn't mail a letter to anyone, even if they wanted to take the letter and give it to a soldier, and say send this to my family in the United States or in London or France, it was against the rules. You were not allowed to connect, and what you're dealing with in this period of liberation is a period of degradation, of keeping this human being less than human in every conceivable way. Not responding to a single aspect of his sublimity. And that became a problem and I was disturbed by it. And being disturbed by it, I, my battle was to give these people back their humanity, give them their names, connect them to family, tell them where they are in the scheme of things, and uh, just to help them to help themselves back to a uh, a dignity that uh, they were entitled to.

[CUT]

[NEWSPAPER-CR#5]

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Here's a collection of the newspaper that we published called Unzravey. And this particular issue which is dated January of 46 headlines the fact that Ben-Gurion, uh, /fortsuance/ Ben-Gurion was about to arrive. He was of course the first international figure that was going to come into the scene, up to the time of Ben-Gurion

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no one of any significance representing the larger Jewish community was on the scene, but now Ben-Gurion was going to come and the people were being excited by the fact that at last there would be some kind of a physical presence which would inspire them towards a redemption of their uh their lives.

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: Here in this early issue there's a page uh devoted to my role, uh they liked to refer to me as the iron lieutenant because of the manner in which I-I-I took their cause before the uh military and the philanthropic organizations and uh, uh I responded with the long article called One of you, which is also included in this collection

SWB:

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: This is the portrait of a great Jew and the second one is the iron lieutenant.

[CUT]

[SYNC MARK 7]

RABBI ABE KLAUSNER: This is uh volume 2 of the series Sheri-Tablay-Ta, the collection of the survivors. And uh this one uh is dated July 1945. Uh here as a foreword I uh indicated what rights the people had, specifically, they did not have to return to the countries from which they came though they were being compelled to return. And I insisted that uh they stand fast against that policy. On this page we have for this volume a list of camps where we found

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pockets of survivors, beginning with Durkheim, Mieldorf, and so forth all the way down uh-uh to uh-uh Mithenbau and others. And what we did is collected the names, the birth date, and uh, the uh place from which they came, and indicated where they were at the moment. For example this group here were in a camp called Turkheim. Uh, here we have a group of uh Polish Jews and here we have Hungarians and so forth. Uh they are separated according to the countries from which they came. And these volumes eventually were

combines in one major volume which was produced actually by  
the United States Army.

[END]

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