

THE FIRST DAY OF FREEDOM

When The war was over I was working as an interpreter for UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation). I worked and lived in a Displaced Persons Camp near Hannover, Germany. The camp was a showcase for visiting dignitaries, the British MPs and American journalists. One day we had a very special visitor: Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt.

I remember her well: tall, impressive, with a loping gait, slightly bending forward. One could not call her pretty by any stretch of imagination but one was impressed by her forthright manner, and goodness and strength of character were clearly visible in her face and behavior.

After the camp inspection was over one of the journalists in Mrs. Roosevelt's entourage asked me if I would agree to be interviewed. Reluctantly, I agreed. After some questions, covering my past and present circumstances, the interviewer surprised me by asking what had been my most memorable experience. As close as I can remember, this is what I told him:

The days were getting longer; the sun rose earlier and had some warmth to it. We were slowly thawing out and almost stopped shivering after the long cold winter of 1944-45. The day it happened for me and my fellow inhabitants of the barracks in Salzwedel Labor Camp was April 14, 1945. Something was in the air; we could feel it and breathe it. We were almost too scared to believe it, but the end was at hand. A new beginning was dawning, we held our breath. All of us—the women prisoners, the forced-laborers of the cruelest war in the world, were out in the open roll-call area, standing and waiting.

It was quiet, the bombs ceased falling, the cannons were silent, no planes droned overhead. The world stood still.

A woman held a bouquet of flowers (where she got it I could not imagine). And then it happened. The dark green heavy—armored tanks with White star burst through the double barb-wired gates of the camp and an enormous cry rose from our lips as we welcomed our liberators. **WE WERE FREE!**

The German camp commander held a white flag and stood with bowed head on the steps to the military headquarters. The German guards still remaining in the camp had white bands on their sleeves.

WE WERE FREE!

The friendly faces of the GIs were grinning at us in wonder, as we climbed the tanks and lorries, screaming, crying or struck dumb at this momentous event in our lives. **WE WERE FREE!**

Nothing in the world could equal this feeling. The years of oppression were over, the heavy load of suffering, pain, fear and despair was lifted from our hearts as though by magic, replaced by hope. WE WERE FREE!

We could dream again, the future was ours again. It was almost too much for us, this awesome feeling of elation, this tremendous change in our lives happening in one instant.

WE WERE FREE!

“Yes” I told my interviewer, “The first day of freedom was the most memorable day in my life.”