

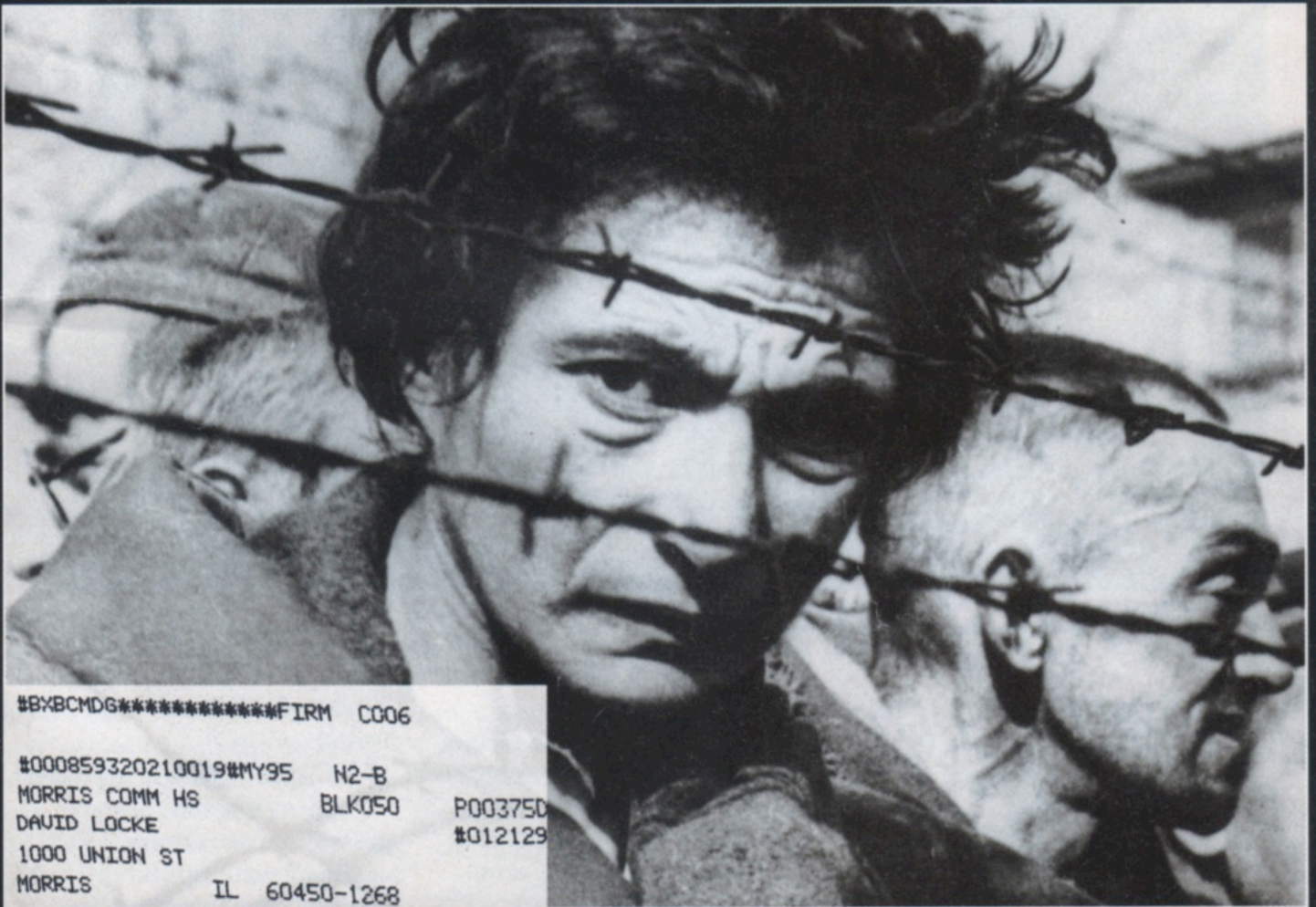
Newsweek

January 16, 1995 : \$2.95

EXCLUSIVE
**HILLARY
CLINTON**
ON 'THE FIGHT OVER ORPHANAGES'

THE LAST DAYS OF AUSCHWITZ

50 Years Later: Untold Stories From the Death Camp



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THE LAST DAYS OF AUSCHWITZ



Camp prisoners,
after liberation on
Jan. 27, 1945

Fifty years after the end of the death camp, survivors tell untold stories of resistance, love and liberation



ON THE AFTERNOON OF Jan. 27, 1945, Sal De Liema, a 30-year-old Dutch Jew, five months resident in Auschwitz, ventured into the snow outside his barracks door for the first time since the Germans had evacuated the camp nine days earlier. He had climbed into his bunk on Jan. 18 expecting the SS to blow him up along with the barracks, but as the alternative was a forced march to an unknown destination through the icy Polish winter, De Liema chose to die lying down. He slept four days, then survived by sucking on sugar cubes foraged by another prisoner who had stayed behind. On Jan. 27 he felt better, pulled himself to his feet, and walked out the door and through the gate of the camp. The first thing he noticed were a number of furry brown dogs in the snow. He thought, "Gee, what nice little dogs." Then they started to move. The dogs were Russian soldiers in fur caps and white camouflage, who had just liberated the camp. In Auschwitz even deliverance came in the guise of absurdity.

Also in Auschwitz at that time, a young Soviet colonel struggled to understand an apparition. Retired Lt. Gen. Vasily Petrenko, the only surviving commander among the four Red Army divisions that encircled and liberated the camp, was a hardened veteran of some of the worst fighting of the war. "I had seen many people killed," Petrenko says. "I had seen hanged people and burned people. But still I was unprepared for Auschwitz." What astonished him especially were the children, some mere infants, who had been left behind in the hasty evacuation. They were the survivors of the medical experiments perpetrated by the Auschwitz camp doctor, Josef Mengele, or the children of Polish political prisoners rounded up after the ill-fated revolt in Warsaw the previous fall. But Petrenko didn't yet know that. "I

THIS STORY WAS REPORTED BY ANDREW NAGORSKI IN EUROPE, JEFFREY BARTHOLET IN ISRAEL, AND MARTHA BRANT AND BRUCE SHENITZ IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA. IT WAS WRITTEN BY JERRY ADLER.

thought: we're in a war. We've been fighting for four years. Million-strong armies are battling on both sides—and suddenly you have children. How did they find themselves there? I just couldn't digest it." Only later did Petrenko realize that this was a place where children were brought to be killed. By the hundreds of thousands they had vanished into thin air,

and a half who had passed through it, most of whom left behind only their hair and the smell of their burning bodies, just 65,000 were still there in January 1945. As the Russians advanced from the east, the Nazis retreated to Germany, providently bringing their prisoners to kill along the way. Only about 7,000 stayed behind to be liberated by the Russians, many of them near death.

the Nazis did. For that matter, Auschwitz is still claiming victims, as some survivors realize that the pain of their memories does not diminish with age. The Italian writer Primo Levi, author of "Survival in Auschwitz," threw himself down a stairwell in 1987. "Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured," wrote the Austrian Jewish philosopher Jean Amery,



and Petrenko's troops marched by the ashes of their bones.

Caught up in a great war, the world took no special notice of the event. The big news in The New York Times that day was that Soviet troops had swept to the Baltic. Buried in a long list of the towns overrun by the Red Army was Oswiecim, the Polish name for Auschwitz. The place was by then a virtual ghost town, only with a ghost population the size of Philadelphia. Of the approximately million

The survivors suffered from malnutrition, depression and the wounds of terrible abuse

And liberation did not put an end to their dying. Albert Grinholtz, a French Jew, remembers Mongol soldiers of the Red Army riding into the camp on horseback. "They were very nice," he says. "They killed a pig, cut it in pieces without cleaning it and put it in a large military pot with potatoes and cabbage. Then they cooked it and offered it to the sick." The effects of that meal on people on the edge of starvation were nearly as lethal as anything

who took his own life 33 years after the Nazis failed to take it from him.

Better never to have been born at all, perhaps, than to live through Auschwitz. Of course, the Carthaginians probably felt that way, too. Each generation marches into history dripping the blood of its respective massacres. But Auschwitz, and the Holocaust of which it was a part, have a unique place in the annals of human slaughter. When Rwandans beat their neighbors to death with clubs, we take it as