

Howard Cwick, Liberator Eyewitness to History

Howard Cwick was born in the Bronx, New York, on August 25, 1923, to Samuel and Sarah Cwick, both Polish immigrants. Howard had an older sister, Sylvia. A younger sister, Gladys, died in infancy. The Cwick family spoke both English and Yiddish, kept a kosher home, and attended synagogue three times a week. Howard went to school at P.S. 100 in the Bronx before going on to Brooklyn Technical High School. When he was seven years old, Howard received his first camera and became interested in photography.

Howard worked as a machinist before enlisting in the United States Air Force in October 1942. After being injured in the crash of a training flight, he was transferred to the 281st Combat Engineer Battalion at Camp Butner, North Carolina. There Howard encountered an antisemitic sergeant, who repeatedly harassed him and other Jewish soldiers.

In November 1944, Howard's battalion left the United States and landed in England. Howard's unit engaged the enemy in the bitter cold throughout France but still knew nothing of the existence of Nazi camps. Entering Germany at the beginning of 1945, Howard's unit arrived outside of Weimar around April 10. Howard was ordered to Headquarters Company for an assignment but unwittingly got into a jeep that instead went to Buchenwald. Upon arrival at the camp gates, Howard's first impressions were of the utter quiet and the unbearable stench.

After he entered the camp, Howard walked around in a daze for a time while trying to comprehend the unimaginable sights of death and suffering all around him. As he made his way through the camp, he took photographs of what he saw. By the end of the first day, hundreds of soldiers, medics, and officers had arrived at Buchenwald.

On the second day, while the medics were busy treating survivors, the local citizens were forced to walk through the camp to view what the Nazis had done. Even as the townspeople claimed not to know about activities and conditions in Buchenwald, Howard and fellow soldiers found in the cellars of local homes Red Cross packages intended for camp prisoners. For his part, Howard immediately developed some of his pictures of Buchenwald and sent all the negatives home.

Discharged in 1946, Howard married his wife, Claire, in 1948 and graduated New York University with a master's degree in education. Claire and Howard had a daughter, Laurie, and a son, Steven. During his career, Howard taught industrial arts at local high schools. Many years after the war, upon hearing students remark that the Holocaust couldn't have been as bad as it was being portrayed, Howard began sharing his photos and recollections of Buchenwald. At the time of his interview in 1997, Howard had one grandchild and another on the way.