





## Hidden away for seven decades: The identification and interment of ashes from the Dachau concentration camp

**Kevin Alter and Edward C. Halperin, MD, MA**

Edward C. Halperin, MD (ΑΩΑ, Yale University School of Medicine, 1979), is Chancellor and Chief Executive Officer at New York Medical College/Touro College and University System

**T**he first Nazi concentration camp opened in Dachau, Germany in 1933, and was in operation until 1945. It is estimated that 200,000 to 228,000 prisoners passed through the camp during this 12-year period, and more than 40,000 died.<sup>1,2</sup>

When Allied forces approached Dachau there were 30,000 prisoners in the main camp, and about the same number in satellite work camps.<sup>1-3</sup> On April 29, 1945 the U.S. Army's 45th Infantry Division liberated the camp after a brief battle with the guards. At the time of liberation about one-third of the prisoners were Jewish.<sup>4</sup>

### **An unusual gift**

One of the soldiers who visited the camp shortly after its liberation was U.S. Army soldier David Walter Corsbie, Jr., from North Carolina. Corsbie, stationed near Munich, was originally a B-24 bombardier but transferred to courier and clerk service for the 364th Fighter Squadron of the Army Air Corps after a doctor grounded him due to an erratic heartbeat.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the U.S. Army liberated Dachau, Corsbie was sent from Munich to visit the camp, a distance of about 28 kilometers (17 miles).

Corsbie met a Jewish prisoner who was stabbed bilaterally in the clavicular regions by the Germans. He was left for dead, but was discovered by U.S. soldiers. This prisoner showed Corsbie the camp and told him that the Nazis had sometimes compacted the crematorium ashes into round, cake-like objects to be sent to the next of kin upon payment of a fee. Family members were told that the prisoner died of an infectious disease, and, therefore, cremation was required. Since the Nazis cremated many thousands of bodies in mass ovens, there was no way of knowing if an individual ashcake contained the remains of one individual or several people.

## Hidden away for seven decades

The prisoner told Corsbie, “Take this, so you will remember what happened here.”<sup>5,6</sup> Corsbie placed the ashcake in a cigarette case he had been given by a local German family he had befriended.

After the war, Corsbie returned to North Carolina and found work repairing address printing machines. He was deeply scarred by what he saw at Dachau, and cringed whenever the topic was brought up.

### Guardians of obeisance

Corsbie was provoked to tell his wartime experiences when his teenage son, Joseph, suggested that he was “just a pencil pusher” during the war, unlike other fathers who were “real soldiers.” This brought the elder Corsbie to impart his wartime experiences and reveal his numerous mementoes, including enlistment and discharge papers, uniform, dog tags, and medals.

Joseph then asked about the ashes in the cigarette case. Corsbie began to shake and cry. Martha, Corsbie’s wife and Joseph’s mother, instructed her son, “Stop it. He doesn’t want to talk about it.”<sup>5,6</sup> That was the end of the war stories until shortly before Corsbie died in 1986 when he told Joseph the full story of the ashes.

In 2012, following two heart attacks, and facing his own mortality, Joseph knew it was time to do something with the ashes.

“It’s like I became the guardian of memory. I had to make sure they weren’t forgotten. They were innocents,”<sup>5</sup> Joseph explained when he contacted a cousin who took possession of the ashes.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum declined to accept the ashes because they do not accept human cremains. The Dachau Concentration Camp Memorial Site did not respond to inquiries.<sup>6</sup> The family then reached out to North Carolina Rabbi Jennifer Feldman who, in turn, contacted Sharon Halperin, Director, The Center for Holocaust, Genocide, & Human Rights Education of North Carolina. Halperin, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, agreed to take possession of the ashcake.

Halperin showed the ashcake to her husband, Edward Halperin, MD, MA, who located a laboratory at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York to verify if the ashes were human. This laboratory developed techniques to identify human proteins in ashes following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

### Specimen analysis

The white/beige, 34 x 37 millimeters wide and 19

millimeters thick specimen was firm, with a waxy surface (Figures 1 and 2). No bone fragments were identified on inspection or by X-ray imaging.

Specimen samples were ground to a powder which was demineralized with acid, and proteins were extracted with urea. Proteins were digested to peptides with trypsin and then concentrated. Peptides were separated by high performance liquid chromatography and analyzed by mass spectrometry.<sup>7</sup> Abundant cutaneous keratin was viewed as a possible contaminant since it could have been the result of prior handling of the ashcake.

Protein analysis was conducted on samples taken from the surface as well as the middle of the ashcake.

Nine proteins from collagen 1 and alpha 1 were found at 99% confidence on the surface of the specimen. One of the peptides was specific for both human and non-human primates; six were specific to human and non-human primates as well as other animals—one was consistent with *Pteropus alecto* (black flying fox or bat), and one was consistent with *Condylura cristata* (star-nosed mole), which is only one amino acid different from human, and could also be a human polymorphism.

There was also evidence of hemoglobin alpha (HBA) peptides that are shared by humans, *Pan paniscus* (bonobo), *Talpa europaea* (European mole), and rhinoceros. Hemoglobin beta 1 (HBB1) was also found on the surface consistent with human and non-human primates and other animals.

To rule out surface contamination, and because finding collagen and hemoglobin as surface contaminants is not expected, a second analysis was performed on samples taken from the center of the specimen.

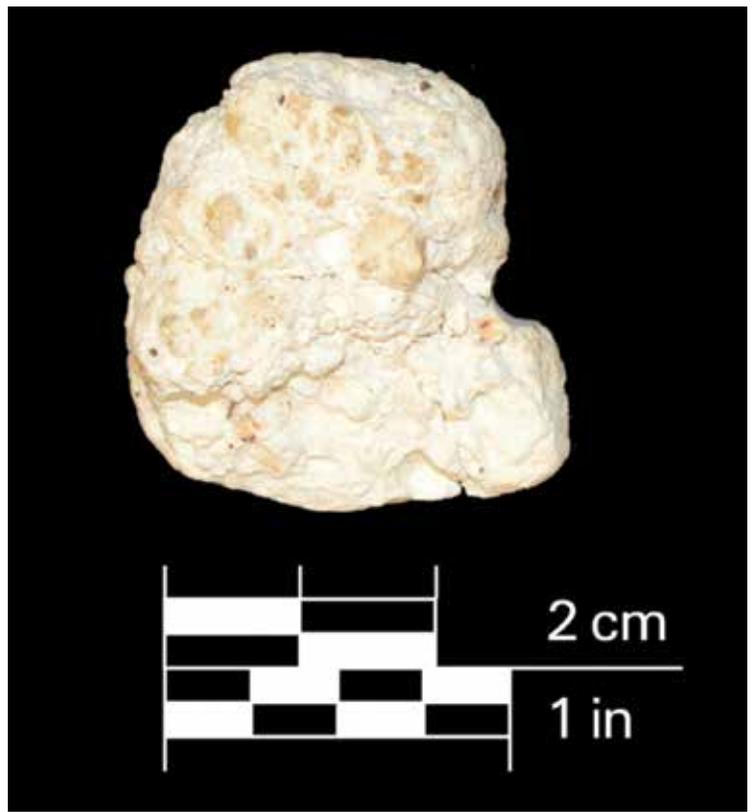
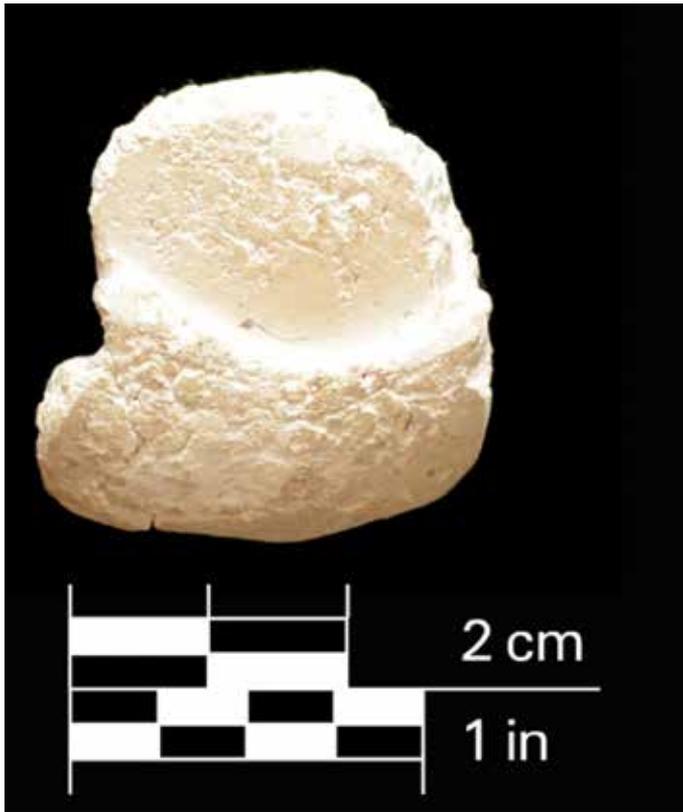
Six peptides of collagen 1 and alpha 1 were found. Five were specific to human and non-human primates and other animals, and one was consistent with *Pteropus alecto*, similar to the sampling from the surface. One peptide of HBA was also found.

Collagen and hemoglobin would not be expected from simply touching the cake as they are not proteins found on fingers. Although the HBA and HBB1 peptides are shared by several species, the only species common among the peptides identified is human.

Using the contextual evidence (i.e., non-human animals were not cremated at Dachau and several of the species listed above are not native to Europe) we concluded that the cremains came from one or more humans.

### A proper interment

Three questions arose regarding the disposition of



Left, anterior photograph of the specimen taken prior to the analysis conducted by the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York, 2014. Right, posterior photograph of the specimen.

the ashes:

1. Should they be displayed in a museum or buried?
2. It is unknown if the ashes contained the cremains of more than one individual, and it is impossible to tell the religion(s) of the cremated individual(s). If the ashes were to be buried, should they be buried in a Jewish cemetery?
3. If they were to be buried in a Jewish cemetery, how would Jewish prohibitions against cremation be handled?

A history professor advised that the story of the ashes could be told as well by photographs and prose as by their physical display. Furthermore, the public display of human cremains would offend the sensibility of some people, as demonstrated by how some Native American groups had demanded the repatriation of human cremains on display in museums for burial on tribal lands.

Joseph had recently been ordained by a nondenominational church movement of ex-Roman Catholics. He wanted the ashes “to be buried with dignity” in “sanctified ground.”<sup>6</sup> But where?

Originally established to hold political prisoners of the Third Reich, Dachau incarcerated a large and diverse

population—Communists, Social Democrats, Anarchists, alleged spies, anti-Fascist resistance fighters, Poles, Russians, French, Yugoslavs, Austrians, Germans, Czechs, Jews, and Roman Catholics.<sup>1</sup> Insofar as a significant proportion of Dachau’s inmate population were Jewish, and the Nazis cremated bodies in groups, it is probable that a portion of the ashes were cremains of one or more Jews. The decision was made to propose burial of the ashes in a Jewish cemetery, but how should the issue of burial of ashes, which is contrary to the Jewish tradition of only burying the intact body, be addressed?

Reverent treatment of the body of the deceased is viewed by Jews as a biblically-ordained precept. Cremation of the body of a deceased Jew is a gross desecration strictly forbidden by Jewish law. When a person mandates cremation, the ashes cannot be interred in a Jewish cemetery.<sup>8</sup>

According to Jewish law, a person is only held accountable for his/her actions when they are done willingly and with full cognizance of their implications. The prohibition of cremation does not apply to an individual cremated against his/her will. The justification in the book of Deuteronomy (22:25–27) for parsing this distinction is:

But if the man finds the damsel that is betrothed in the

## Hidden away for seven decades

field and the man take hold of her, and lie with her; then the man only that lay with her shall die. But unto the damsel thou shalt do nothing; there is in the damsel no sin worthy of death....For he found her in the field; the betrothed damsel cried, and there was none to save her.

The role of consent to, and cognizance of, the implications of wrongdoing in determining a violation of Jewish law are commented on in the *Talmud*.<sup>9-11</sup>

Since the ashes were the result of cremation done without the consent of the victims, and per the precedents established by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, two North Carolina Rabbis ruled it permissible to inter the ashes in the Durham Hebrew Cemetery.<sup>12</sup>

### Coincidence or divine intervention?

As the story of the Dachau ashes unfolded, Michael Israel, Chief Executive Officer of the Westchester Medical Center in Valhalla, New York observed:

I do not perceive myself as an overtly religious person, but I cannot help think that, of all the kitchens in the world, why did these ashes end up in Sharon Halperin's kitchen?

And, of all the women in the world, Sharon just happens to be married to Edward Halperin, the Chancellor and CEO of New York Medical College.

And, Edward Halperin is the only person I know who is strange enough to look at a lump of ash-like material and say, "Okay, let's take it to the laboratory and run a protein analysis on it," rather than just look at the ashes and say "Oh my, isn't that interesting?"

And, Edward Halperin just happens to know someone, who knows someone, who leads him to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner of the City of New York.

It's hard for me to believe that this is just a random sequence of events. It sure sounds to me like there was some sort of guiding hand involved in all of this.

### A final resting place

The journey of the ashes from Dachau to Durham ended with a funeral on Sunday, May 25, 2014, 69 years after they were given to David Corsbie for safekeeping.

The ashcake was placed in a pine box with the Star of David mounted on its top and lowered into a grave. The Mayor of Durham, two rabbis, several Holocaust survivors and their descendants who never had the opportunity to bury the cremains of family members killed in the Holocaust, veterans, and more than 200 spectators found

comfort in the ceremony.<sup>13</sup>

A sculpture was placed on the burial site of the ashes along with a permanent descriptive marker 11 months after the burial.

Seventy years after David Corsbie received the ashes, the sculpture and marker tell the story and remind visitors of the atrocities of the Holocaust, and the tens of thousands of individuals murdered at Dachau.

### Acknowledgments

Thank you to Drs. Bradley Adams, Donald Siegel, and Heyi Yang from the New York City Office of the Chief Medical Examiner for their assistance in sample analysis, and comments on the manuscript; Professor Karin Shapiro, Duke University History Department, for advice on the disposition of the ashes; Drs. Julia de la Garza and John Fallon (AQA, Albany Medical College, 1973) Department of Pathology, New York Medical College, for their assistance in arranging the specimen analysis; and Rabbis Daniel Greyber and Jennifer Feldman, of the Durham-Chapel Hill, North Carolina, Jewish community.

### References

1. Berben P. Dachau, 1933–1945: The Official History. London: Norfolk Press; 1975.
2. Sachar AL. The Redemption of the Unwanted: From the Liberation of the Death Camps to the Founding of Israel. New York: St. Martin's Press; 1983.
3. Ziemke EF. Army Historical Series: The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany 1944–1946. Center of Military History, United States Army, Washington, D.C.; 1975: 252–3.
4. Holocaust Encyclopedia. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. [www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?moduleID=10005214](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?moduleID=10005214).
5. Freedman SG. A Resolution at Last for a Father's Unsettling Legacy. The New York Times. April 4, 2014.
6. Joseph Corsbie in discussion with Edward C. Halperin, MD, MA.
7. Scripps Center for Metabolomics and Mass Spectrometry. [http://masspec.scripps.edu/mshistory/whatisms\\_details.php#Basics](http://masspec.scripps.edu/mshistory/whatisms_details.php#Basics).
8. Rosner F. Modern Medicine and Jewish Ethics. Hoboken (NJ): Yeshiva University Press; 1986.
9. Talmud Nedarim 27a.
10. Talmud Bava Kama 28b.
11. Talmud Avodah Zarah 54a.
12. Bar D. Holocaust Commemoration in Israel During the 1950s: the Holocaust Cellar on Mount Zion. Jewish Social Studies. 2005;12: 16–38.



Left, the sculpture that was placed over the grave and was unveiled 11 months after the interment of the Dachau ashes in the Durham Hebrew Cemetery.

Below, Rabbi Jennifer Feldman, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, stands next to the sculpture created by Michael Roig, Carrboro, North Carolina.



13. Ghert-Zand R. Remains of Dachau victims to come to rest in North Carolina. The Times of Israel, May 24, 2014.

The author's address is:

Administration Building  
40 Sunshine Cottage Road  
Valhalla, NY 10595

E-mail: [edward\\_halperin@nymc.edu](mailto:edward_halperin@nymc.edu).