

Micro-encounters of a Canadian Jewish Chaplain with Belgian and Dutch Survivors

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No amount of training could have prepared Samuel Cass for his work in northwestern Europe between the Fall of 1944 and V-E day. Within weeks of his arrival, he was meeting with survivors and witnessing the physical evidence of the destruction of European Jewry in Belgium, France, and the Netherlands. In April 1945, he arrived in Camp Westerbork shortly after it was “liberated” by Canadians. I have studied some of Cass’s reactions to those events, which he revealed in his detailed correspondence with his wife Annabel in Montreal. I was not, however, satisfied with limiting my analysis to his perspective and wanted a finely granulated study of actions and reactions. I thus focused on finding evidence of other reactions to events that Cass described.

In this paper, I analyze two micro-encounters. The first examines an address by Cass to a group of survivors in Antwerp. In his correspondence, Cass explained his strategy for aiding survivors, but we also have indirect evidence of a Polish Jewish soldier who spoke at the same event and chose a different strategy, and direct evidence of how an American soldier who reacted to both. The second examines the bewildered reactions of a Canadian journalist to the Jews liberated at Westerbork, Cass’s differing understanding, and the reactions of the survivors themselves (as revealed in a diary and testimony). The study of these “micro-encounters” draws close attention to the fluid and complex relationship between “liberators” and survivors.