In April of 1945, unbeknownst to most Americans, the liberation of Buchenwald had begun.

However, one Brooklyn resident was notified of each of the concentration camp’s post-war milestones as they unfolded. Sandy Schulman received the news of everything from its first Jewish service to the relocation of its former prisoners through letters from her husband, a U.S. soldier at the time.

"Yesterday we visited something that you might have already read about in the newspaper or heard about over the radio," wrote Pvt. Hyman Schulman on April 11. "Not very far from here, there is a concentration camp."

The note goes on to describe the camp as having “bodies lying around made in the most grotesque positions” and a “crematorium where the bodies were burned after being [pulled] out of the lime pits in which they were first thrown.”

"The stench was nauseating, the sight ghastly, and the feeling we had for such barbarians could only be imagined," wrote Schulman.

His letter is part of a collection of over 1,000 World War II correspondences between the then-newly married couple. The more than 6,500 pages, after languishing untouched in an attic for 70 years, have been organized, scanned and made digital. The New York Times first reported the story.

The digitizing was done with the help of the nonprofit organization, POBA: Where The Arts Live, a self-described “virtual cultural arts center,” that promotes and preserves the work of unrecognized artists from the 20th and 21st centuries.

In the case of the Schulman letter, a project devoted to preserving the art of letter writing took on new meaning as the significance of the works emerged.

“When I began to understand the historic importance of where Hy had been ... I realized that we had something that was really important to preserve,” said Jennifer Cohen, a POBA founder. “As well as a great love story,” she added.
During the course of his army career, which began in 1942, Schulman wrote almost every day to his Brooklyn-based wife. Letters describe fighting and being injured in the Battle of the Bulge, for which he received a Purple Heart, as well as being appointed an aide to Rabbi Herschel Schacter, a Jewish chaplain.

“You can’t imagine how appreciative I am,” wrote Schulman on receiving the position, which allowed him to leave the front lines. “I know that I was a good soldier, darling, not the bravest by a long shot but a good, steady fellow who kept his fear within him, but how long can a fellow go on that way ... [?]”

Due to his background, Schulman’s position, at first temporary, became permanent.

“We were both brought up as very observant Jews,” wrote Sandy Schulman in an email to The Jewish Week. “In addition to getting an assistant he could really rely on with Hy, Rabbi Schacter also got someone who could actually help lead services.”

One particular service stands out in Schulman’s letters.

“We started making arraignments for a Jewish service to be held within the camp,” Schulman wrote to his wife on April 24. “It was the most inspiring thing imaginable. Try to picture my darling, men who were in all different phases of physical conditions. From those who appeared healthy to those who were half starved, all Jews, all inspired by their newfound freedom, all full of emotion at attending their first free Jewish service in about 10 years.”

Such devotion to the Jewish faith was something Schulman found continuously among the newly liberated prisoners. In another letter, dated April 28, around the time of Passover, Schulman recalls handing out matzah to 1,500 people in Buchenwald, who waited patiently to eat until the proper blessing was recited by a rabbi.

“When it came to dividing other stuff it was an entirely different story,” wrote Pvt. Schulman. “They all clamored and pushed to get as much as they could.”

Among the POBA collection are Schulman’s photographs of Buchenwald and its prisoners as well as letters written in Yiddish years later that were sent to Schulman by survivors whom he helped reunite with family members after the war ended.

They also contain accounts of other notable events such as the death of President Franklin Roosevelt and VE Day.

However, for Sandy Schulman, whose husband died in 2013 at 91, the letters remain more of a personal relic. Though during his lifetime, Hyman did not wish to relive the events that he witnessed, Sandy Schulman now relishes the romantic moments found in the exchange. Her favorite moment: when Hyman managed, with the help of the Red Cross, to send over roses in honor of their anniversary, which also happened to fall during the Battle of the Bulge.

“For them, this was a very personal correspondence,” said Cohen. “They certainly knew that they were living in extraordinary times. But this was really the correspondence between a young, recently married couple in love, waiting to be reunited.”