

BREAKING THE SILENCE AGAIN

Hungarian Jewish witness accounts of the Nazi camps from 1945–1946

by **Ferenc L. Laczó**

The Holocaust has tended to be understood as an event that acquired its current cultural and political significance only several decades after the war. In support of this narrative, it has been emphasized that the full scope and coherence of the Nazi program of extermination was recognized only gradually and belatedly. It has also been assumed that traumatized survivors remained silent, at first. Such assertions on the early postwar silence surrounding the extermination of European Jewry remain influential, but in recent years they have been exposed to a sustained challenge. A substantial body of scholarship has appeared that offers a plethora of evidence on the extensive documentation of what we now call the Holocaust as early as the 1940s. This new wave of scholarship emphasizes that Jewish survivors were anything but silent during the early postwar period. David Cesarani, editor of one of the most important collections demonstrating this point, insists that Jewish survivors, “if anything, succeeded too well, too soon” in commemorating the Holocaust (*avant la lettre*).¹ It would therefore be much more appropriate to critically explore the causes of the deafness of the surrounding world than to continue discussions on the supposed silence of survivors.

Survivors actually created manifold historical sources on the Holocaust and even completed a broad array of relevant publications before the end of 1940s; these sources were largely neglected afterwards and have remained underexplored to this day. As *Collect and Record!*, the 2012 monograph by Laura Jock-

usch, argues, Jewish agents of memory in Europe had in the late 19th century developed modern techniques of documenting anti-Jewish violence and come to understand the collection of witness accounts as an essential part of their scholarly commemorative response to human-made catastrophes.² Jockusch’s book shows how Jewish survivors of the Holocaust subsequently applied these techniques to the unprecedented crimes committed during the Second World War. The collection of witness accounts was thus an important part of the agenda of the historical commissions and documentation centers that were launched as soon as the Nazi genocide was over – or even while it went on, as in Poland and France.³

DUE, ABOVE ALL, to its large and active group of Jewish survivors, Hungary was among the countries that made an impressive start in producing detailed knowledge about various facets of the Nazi program of extermination, with a clear focus on the fate, or the fatelessness, of Hungarian Jewry. Massive quantities and a broad variety of historical sources were created as early as the second half of the 1940s. Crimes committed against Jews during the war years figured prominently in postwar trials.⁴ Publications by the Hungarian Jewish journalist-turned-historian Jenő Lévai provided substantial overviews of the Hungarian Holocaust.⁵ And Hungarian Jewish witness testimonies took various forms. Jewish survivors published dozens of memoirs in Hungarian before the consolidation of Stalinist rule in the late 1940s, while thousands

The victims were able to describe the horror in 1945. But the world was not yet prepared to listen.



of Hungarian Jewish survivors articulated their experiences in the offices of the *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság* (the National Relief Committee for Deportees or DEGOB) in 1945 and 1946.

THE THREE MAIN TASKS of the National Relief Committee for Deportees were to help with the repatriation of survivors to Hungary, provide social aid, and pursue projects of documentation. The committee alone recorded interviews with over 5,000 survivors as early as 1945–1946, making its records one of the largest pools of such sources from the earliest postwar period in the world.⁶ Yet witness accounts remain heavily underrepresented in mainstream historiography of the Holocaust in Hungary, and these sources have not yet been systematically analyzed. This article is an effort to begin to redress this imbalance by examining the DEGOB collection as a documentation project, analyzing two partly overlapping corpuses in particular: the 349 witness accounts that discuss the Buchenwald concentration camp and the hundreds of accounts in the collection that used the expressions *annihilation* or *death camp* or explicitly referred to the gas chambers.

But first a few more words regarding the interviews. To facilitate the task of the interviewer and standardize the contents, a questionnaire with 12 major topics was gradually developed. It defined the major subjects of the interviews as follows: personal data; the situation of Jews at their places of residence; ghettoization and its prehistory; deportation; arrival; the destination of the first deportation, its organization, and life in the camp; labor camps, their organization, and life in them; evacuation; stages following evacuation; liberation; life in the camp upon liberation; and the way home. The focus of the major themes shows that the interviewees were unready, or simply unable, to use a more accurate terminology for the Holocaust – they inquired about “life in the camp” but not death, and asked about “labor camps” but did not specify other kinds of camps. Survivors arguably articulated these crucial facets of the Holocaust in spite of the rather limiting context of their interviews – while the intentions of the interviewing authority directly affected their accounts and influenced what was included in the protocols. The resulting thousands of early post-Holocaust Hungarian Jewish witness accounts were thus the result of semi-structured interviews and could be considered coproducts of interviewer and interviewee. The length of the records varies from just a few paragraphs to dozens of pages. However, most of them are rather concise and descriptive.

Witness accounts of Buchenwald from 1945–1946

My choice of Buchenwald as a case study was determined, apart from the availability of rich and diverse accounts about it from 1945–1946, by the fact that Buchenwald was one of the largest and oldest camps in the Nazi German environment and has remained a contested *lieu de mémoire* ever since.⁷ Not only is Buchenwald right next to one of the symbolic centers of Germany, the city of Weimar, but the memory of the Nazi camp was heavily instrumentalized under the East German communist regime.⁸

After 1989, there were also fierce debates about the history of Buchenwald, especially concerning the history of the Soviet camp that was operated on the former site of the Nazi camp after 1945. There was also debate about the most appropriate way to relate the histories of these two camps to each other.⁹ Therefore, it is all the more intriguing to inquire how hundreds of its survivors discussed Buchenwald before canonical interpretations of it emerged and stereotypical images became dominant. How did Hungarian Jewish survivors define, represent, and assess Buchenwald in 1945–1946? How did they retrospectively describe the conditions they had experienced there and how did they address their experience of violence? Did they employ ethnic labels in their accounts and, if so, when and how? Last, but not least, how did they narrate the liberation of the camp?

SOME OF THE 349 DEGOB records that refer to Buchenwald feature the account of more than one individual and the sample thus includes 393 interviewees. Exploring the sample through quantitative methods with particular attention to gender, age, locations of ghettoization, and routes of deportation has shown that there is a great gender imbalance: only 30 of the 393 interviewees are female (i.e., less than 1 in 13). This was due to the gendered manner of deportation and especially to the almost exclusively male inmate population of Buchenwald. All of the interviewees were born between 1887 and 1933 and a large majority of them were still under thirty at the time of liberation. Regarding the location of their ghettoization, the results prove both unequivocal and striking: the ghetto names most commonly appearing are those of the cities Munkács, Ungvár, Beregszász, and Szeklence, all four of which are in Kárpátalja (*Zakarpats'ka*), a region that Hungary re-annexed upon the destruction of Czechoslovakia in March 1939.¹⁰ For 362 individuals, the camps they were deported to are listed at the beginning of their files. From this information, the entries can be divided into three major groups: 198 were first taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, while 123 were not. Most of these were taken from Hungary directly to Buchenwald. There are also 41 records in which Buchenwald is not included in the list of camps at the beginning, but is referred to in the text.

THE ANALYSIS HAS REVEALED that Hungarian Jewish returnees defined, represented, and assessed Buchenwald in varying ways. The accounts are replete with descriptions of freezing, severe hunger, and brutal violence; nonetheless, the overall assessment of the camp was far from uniform. The perspectives of those who recollected their experiences depended not only on factors such as when and where they had to stay in Buchenwald and what they had to endure while there, but also on which camp they had arrived from and the conditions under which they had had to travel. While numerous survivors described their own condition in Buchenwald as being close to death and no longer fully alive, others compared it favorably with other camps, particularly Auschwitz-Birkenau, or with their horrific train journeys.

The records also reveal that a number of interviewees understood their escape from the group of Jewish prisoners in the camp as the key to their eventual survival – an insufficiently



Left: Hungarian Jews being selected by Nazis to be sent to the gas chamber at the Auschwitz concentration camp, May/June 1944.
Right: Budapest, Hungary – Captured Jewish women in Wesselényi Street, October 20–22, 1944.

studied phenomenon in scholarship on the Nazi camps and the Holocaust. For instance, one explained, “I got hold of a Yugoslav badge, which I put on my coat. From that moment onwards, I qualified as an Aryan.”¹¹ At the same time, several interviewees tended to use ethnic labels to identify the perpetrators of everyday violence against them. These were usually references to Eastern Europeans, mostly Poles and Ukrainians, who served as their barrack leaders in Buchenwald.

Regarding the liberation of the camp, two major narratives were articulated. The first discussed the Nazis’ accidental failure to complete their program of extermination and the chance survival of the interviewee:

There were altogether 80,000 people in the camp. 56,000 were taken away at the beginning of April. They wanted to murder the 24,000 weakened and sick ones, including me, who stayed in Buchenwald. They did not manage to do this since the Americans arrived an hour earlier and hindered the execution of their plan.¹²

The other narrative described the resistance and the successful uprising of Buchenwald inmates against their tormentors – a story that would soon be canonized under communist rule:

We took rifles into the camp from the external factories and finally rose up against the SS. There were 200 of us and many of us died. The SS consisted of around 400 men but we took many of their rifles. This way we acquired more weapons and were ultimately victorious.¹³

Awareness of the existence of annihilation and death camps

The major location of the Hungarian Holocaust was indubitably Auschwitz-Birkenau, but large groups of Hungarian Jews ended up being deported to almost all major camps within the territory of the Nazi Reich. The word *Auschwitz* can indeed be found in the majority of the DEGOB records, in 1895 files.¹⁴ With the sole exception of Neuengamme, which was mentioned in only four records, each camp in the territory of Nazi Germany that had over

100,000 inmates during the Nazi period was referenced in more than one hundred accounts.¹⁵

The collection suggests that even those interviewees whose primary language was Hungarian encoded facets of their terrible camp experiences in German. Whereas the significant minority of German-language accounts found in the collection rarely draw on Hungarian expressions, the Hungarian-language accounts do employ certain German terms, including *Vernichtungslager* (extermination camp). Annihilation camps were developed 1941–1942 and the German term for them appears in 144 of the DEGOB files. Notably, only 45 of these files are in German and the others, more than two-thirds of the 144, are in Hungarian. However, the almost systematic use of this term suggests its recurrence was at least partly the result of editing policies. The Hungarian adjective *megsemmisítő* (literally: annihilatory) was also used in combination with the word for *camp* in thirteen instances, though it was spelled in four different ways – indicating how novel the term must have been in Hungarian in 1945–1946. On the other hand, the German term *Todeslager* appears in just two files, while its Hungarian equivalent *haláltábor* was used 31 times. What is more, seven alternative forms of the Hungarian expression appear in a further 44 records.

UNSURPRISINGLY, HUNGARIAN JEWISH witness accounts most commonly used *Vernichtungslager* and its Hungarian equivalents in reference to Auschwitz-Birkenau. This camp was so labeled in a total of 62 instances or nearly half of all cases. Other camps also called *Vernichtungslager* are Gunskirchen (a subcamp of Mauthausen-Gusen and the last station of horrific death marches in which the majority of the sick and starving inmates were Jews from Hungary) in eleven records and Bergen-Belsen in nine. These are closely followed in number of mentions by Ebensee, Ravensbrück, Stutthof, and Gross-Rosen. In all, 38 different camps were called annihilation camps in at least one file.

Death camp was used to refer to an only somewhat smaller group of camps, 21 in all, but the distribution of the references was significantly different. This term was used in connection with Bergen-Belsen no less than 30 times, much more often than in connection with any other camp. With 14 mentions, Gunskirchen ranked second in this respect too. The third most common refer-

The existence of gas chambers was hard to imagine – even for the inmates at Auschwitz-Birkenau.



Of 230,000 children deported to Auschwitz, only 700 were liberated. (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum Archives)



Arrival of Hungarian Jews on the platform at Auschwitz-Birkenau, May 27, 1944.

ence was to the camp operated in the Hungarian border town of Kőszeg, which five survivor accounts named as a death camp. Each other camp was mentioned three times or less – notably, the term was used merely twice in connection with Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Beyond the importance of editorial policies, the strong pattern in the use of these terms indicates that different labels circulated in different groups of survivors. The frequency with which camps were mentioned provides a fairly reliable sense of their actual importance in the overall history of the Holocaust of Hungarian Jewry. At the same time, the long list of camps referred to in this way also illustrates the power of personal experience as opposed to that of historical knowledge. It is the experience of Guns kirchen that appears to have been the most horribly powerful, offering a counterexample to the close connection between the frequency of specific references and the historical significance of the referent.

HOWEVER, NUMEROUS SURVIVORS did not merely reproduce these terms in accordance with the conventions of their immediate milieu. They used them in individualized and highly conscious ways, often to contest other, lesser definitions of certain camps, most typically as labor camps. The following two cases are illustrative: “Officially, Mittelbau-Dora may have been a labor camp, but in my view it was an annihilation camp. The work duties and their circumstances were such that sooner or later people had to perish there”;¹⁶ Ebensee was “not supposed to be an annihilation camp, but the result was as if it had been.”¹⁷

In summary, while it may be true that annihilation and death camps were only briefly described in many DEGOB witness accounts without any specific arguments in favor of these labels, the collection as a whole provides quantitative as well as qualitative evidence justifying distinctions between different kinds of Nazi camps. In other words, the Nazi war-time policy of operating camps that were different from concentration camps and much worse than them is clearly articulated in these protocols of Hungarian Jewish witness accounts from 1945–1946.

The horrific knowledge of the gas chambers

It is evident that confronting the existence of the gas chambers imposed a heavy psychological burden. Knowledge about the gas chambers was so terrible and so unsettling that many, although already aware of them on some level of consciousness, refused to acknowledge what they had come to know. Characteristically, one former inmate of Auschwitz-Birkenau recalled his outraged protest when he was first told about the gas chambers.¹⁸ One survivor used an especially apt phrase when she said that she had gradually “started to believe what at first seemed unimaginable.”¹⁹ For witnesses, leaving testimony was further complicated by the problems of communication and of conceivability.

Nevertheless, many interviewees discussed when and how they found out about the gas chambers and how they related to this horrific knowledge. Such awareness could, of course, make inmates aware of the need to avoid selections or, if that was impossible, at least do their best not to be selected. However, some who had known about the gas chambers expressed jealousy of others’ ignorance.²⁰ One explained to her interviewer that it was better to die without prior knowledge of what lay ahead.²¹ Some others discussed additional negative consequences of being aware of the gas chambers, such as constant fear and occasional panic attacks.²²

REPORTING ON THE OPERATION of the gas chambers also posed a complex problem because the Nazi perpetrators purposefully sought to prevent detailed reports of them. Not only did the great majority of witnesses perish there – in keeping with the very purpose of the gas chambers – but the Nazis also murdered most of the chief Jewish witnesses, the members of the *Sonderkommando*.

Despite these complications, more than two hundred interview records include references to the Nazis’ most notorious means of annihilating European Jewry. At the same time, however, even when the interviews discuss the conditions and geno-



Budapest, Hungary – Hungarian and German soldiers drive arrested Jews into the municipal theatre, October 1944.



Liberated prisoners. (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum Archives)

cial practices in Auschwitz-Birkenau in some detail, they do not often contain explicit mentions of gas chambers. Survivors who were able to offer more detailed descriptions tended to have had certain tasks and corresponding locations in the camp complex.

The question therefore is which survivors made explicit references to the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau and what kind of information did they convey about them? Since whole families were deported and only few family members managed to escape, the gas chambers were frequently mentioned as the place where close relatives were murdered.²³ This group of interviewees usually did not offer, and probably could not have offered, detailed descriptions of how the annihilation was carried out. Some of them even mentioned that they learned of the gas chambers only upon liberation. Second, some reported that they had come extremely close to being murdered there. Several witnesses discussed their escape from what they called the *Vorraum*, the vestibule, of the gas chambers.²⁴ Moreover, two smaller groups reported on the gas chambers because they were forced to take part in dismantling them or were shown what remained of them upon liberation.²⁵

BY FAR THE LARGEST number of testimonies discussing the gas chambers were given by those who had to work, as one of the survivors put it, in the “separate world of the crematorium and the gas chambers.”²⁶ This could mean working in the *Aufräumungskommando* or in the *Sonderkommando*. The most typical testimony offered by members of the *Aufräumungskommando*, frequently (and imprecisely) called *Brezsinka*, the Polish name of Birkenau, and less often *Kanada*, was given by a female interviewee who had been made responsible for the selection of clothes or packages.²⁷ As a result she had had to work in close proximity to the gas chambers, but the interview record does not state whether she had been to the actual area of the gas chambers.²⁸ However, a few of the interviewees belonging to this group did mention that they had moved between the area of the *Aufräumungskommando* and that of the gas chambers.²⁹

One of the most atrocious aspects of Auschwitz-Birkenau

was that the Nazis forced Jews, on pain of death, to participate in the destruction of their own people. This horrific policy was enforced, most infamously, through members of the *Sonderkommando*, who had to help, with the operation of the gas chambers and crematoria. During their DEGOB interviews, a significant cohort of survivors reported they had been members, and specified some of the tasks involved. For instance, two survivors reported that they had delivered wood and a third that he had delivered coal to the crematorium.³⁰ There was even a survivor who admitted that he had brought the living to the gas chambers and the dead to be burned in the crematoria.³¹ Another witness reported that for three days he was personally responsible for bringing people into the gas chambers and for removing their corpses. He added that for another six days he was assigned an easier job, by which he meant work at a “more modern” gas chamber where he “merely” had to rush and beat people.³²

In conclusion, the DEGOB witness accounts recorded in Hungary in 1945–1946 provide a large sample of the generally horrific but also diverse experiences of witnesses of major Nazi camps such as Buchenwald. The protocols also include largely accurate descriptions of the unparalleled features of the Holocaust by Jewish survivors, such as the creation of annihilation and death camps and, more specifically, the operation of the gas chambers. As a whole, these records show that, alongside profound mass traumatization, a substantial number of Hungarian Jewish witnesses were able and willing to articulate details of their terrible knowledge about the Holocaust shortly after their liberation. If widespread silence was imposed in postwar Hungary regarding the history of the Holocaust, it was certainly not due to the silence of all survivors – it was rather a consequence of how difficult it has proved to confront the responsibility of perpetrators. ✕

references

- 1 David Cesarani, "Challenging the 'Myth of Silence': Postwar Responses to the Destruction of European Jewry", in *After the Holocaust: Challenging the Myth of Silence*, ed. David Cesarani and Eric J. Sundquist (London: Routledge, 2012), 32.
- 2 Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).
- 3 See Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).
- 4 See Andrea Pető and Ildikó Barna, *Political Justice in Budapest after WWII* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2014).
- 5 On Lévai, see my "Documenting Responsibility: Jenő Lévai and the Birth of Hungarian Holocaust Historiography in the 1940s", in *Holocaust Studies* (forthcoming).
- 6 Most of the files are in Hungarian but there are a significant number in German. For further details, see the overview by Rita Horváth, "'A Jewish Historical Commission in Budapest': The Place of the National Relief Committee for Deportees in Hungary [DEGOB] among the Other Large-Scale Historical-Memorial Projects of She'erit Hapletah After the Holocaust (1945–1948)", in *Holocaust Historiography in Context: Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements*, ed. David Bankier and Dan Michman (London: Berghahn, 2009).
- 7 See *Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1937–1945: A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition*, ed. Gedenkstätte Buchenwald (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).
- 8 Volkhard Knigge and Thomas A. Seidel, *Versteinertes Gedenken: Das Buchenwalder Mahnmahl von 1958*. (Spröda: Pietsch 1997).
- 9 Volkhard Knigge and Bodo Ritscher, *Totenbuch: Speziallager Buchenwald 1945–1950* (Weimar: Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau Dora, 2003).
- 10 For the history of the Jews in this region, see *Zsidók Kárpátalján: Történelem és örökség*, ed. Viktória Bányai, Csilla Fedinec, and Szonja Ráhel Komoróczy (Budapest: Aposztróf, 2013).
- 11 DEGOB Record no. 289. All translations are mine. I have relied on the digitalized version of the collection found at www.degob.hu, last accessed July 12, 2014.
- 12 DEGOB Record Number 1582.
- 13 DEGOB Record Number 3497.
- 14 The name Birkenau also appears in 426 records, some of which do not refer to Auschwitz. Monowitz is mentioned in 44 files.
- 15 The camps were Bergen-Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, Sachsenhausen, Stutthof and Theresienstadt.
- 16 DEGOB Record no. 1851.
- 17 DEGOB Record no. 2197.
- 18 DEGOB Record no. 1748.
- 19 DEGOB Record no. 2961.
- 20 DEGOB Records nos. 1802 and 3526.
- 21 DEGOB Record no. 3487. The interviewee also claimed to have left some of the questions of new arrivals unanswered to spare them prior knowledge.
- 22 DEGOB Records nos. 1087 and 1885.
- 23 See DEGOB Records nos. 1, 595, 614, 908, 1149, 1181, 1526, 1547, 1631, 1784, 1932, 2110, 2134, 2136, 2214, 2289, 2379, 2583, 2591, 2808, 2853, 3125, 3524, 3551, and 3593.
- 24 See e.g. DEGOB Records nos. 1267 and 1547.
- 25 For reports on demolishing the gas chambers, see DEGOB Records nos. 407, 1569, 2114, and 2395. For testimony of prisoners who saw the demolished gas chambers after the fact, see DEGOB Record nos. 180, 2060, 2675, and 3275.
- 26 DEGOB Record no. 313.
- 27 The task of members of the *Aufräumungskommando* was to sort and help recycle the possessions taken from inmates on arrival.
- 28 Selecting clothes is specified in DEGOB Records nos. 135, 407, 1426, 1763, 3523, and 3526. Selecting packages is mentioned in DEGOB Records nos. 1063, 1513, 1569, 1938, 2280, and 2817.
- 29 See DEGOB Records nos. 1802 and 3510.
- 30 DEGOB Records nos. 453, 1017 and 2437.
- 31 DEGOB Record no. 581.
- 32 DEGOB Record no. 90.