



THE

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ACADEMIÆ SCIENTIARUM HUNGARIÆ

*Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary:  
New Histories*

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# The Hungarian Historical Review

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## *Holocaust Victimhood in Hungary: New Histories*

Alexandra Szabó and András Szécsényi  
Special Editors of the Thematic Issue

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# Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global Memory Frames: Digital Storytelling about “Change” and “Liberation”

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This article provides a comparative and intersectional analysis of East-Central European Holocaust testimonies by women survivors narrated in writing at the time of the Shoah and recorded five decades later by the USC Shoah Institute’s Visual History Archive. The comparison explores both the continuities and changes particularly in the beginning and end of the persecution, which are usually associated with the terms “occupation” and “liberation.” I suggest that these conceptualizations prominent in the archive collide with survivor testimonies from the region in that survivors do not interpret Hitler’s rise to power and the German occupation as formative events of the persecution against the local Jewry. Further, I provide a typology of liberation narratives arguing for a multiplicity of interpretation based on survivor narratives countering the popular consensus of liberation as a carefree moment in time. Lastly, I conclude that the regional approach is particularly useful in understanding Holocaust memory in Hungary today as it is conducive to highlighting the specific relation of the global to the local.

Keywords: testimony, framing, East Central Europe, digital storytelling, intersectionality

This article explores the ways in which the global nature of the USC Shoah Institute’s Visual History Archive (further: VHA) shapes Holocaust testimonies. The thematic focus is the analysis of the intersection of global and local memory frames, which becomes manifest in the sections of the testimonies pertaining to the beginnings and the end of the Holocaust. I argue that the archive is unwelcoming to the marginal or even taboo narratives in the canonized memory and conducive to memorializing standardized narratives. Several memory frames collide and merge with one another in the digital testimonies: the “Americanizing”/personalizing<sup>1</sup> and the “Germanizing”/denationalizing<sup>2</sup> Holocaust interpretations, the interpretation of “invasion/occupation” and

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1 According to the “Americanizing” interpretation, the focus of the survivor testimony is personal experience, i.e. witness testimony. Wieviorka, *Era of Witness*.

2 According to the “Germanizing” interpretation, the primary responsibility for the Holocaust lies with Nazi Germany and in particular with Hitler.

“liberation” in line with the local memory cultures, and the counter-narratives emphasizing continuities of persecution. Regarding the beginnings of the Holocaust, the testimonies analyzed in my research stress the continuities of local anti-Semitism or relativize persecution and thus contrast with the overarching interpretation offered by the VHA, which defines the beginning of the Holocaust as the single event of Hitler’s rise to power. Regarding the topic of liberation, I point out that the VHA’s conceptualization of liberation follows the common interpretation of liberation as a joyful moment, and this constitutes another contrast with narratives by survivors from East Central Europe.

Holocaust history has entered the “era of the witness,” and digital storytelling will influence Holocaust memory in decades to come.<sup>3</sup> The process of the “institutionalization” of memory in the online archive involves an element of standardization, therefore it is imperative to analyze what memories are created and disseminated for future generations. The VHA is the primary global repository of Holocaust testimonies, with its 52,000 digital narratives, and its rationale has been the collection of authentic stories (with an emphasis on first-person accounts and, preferably, eye-witness testimony) for the public record (with the conceptualization of testimony as chronological sequence instead of associative process). It has been characterized as offering a “dichotomous view”<sup>4</sup> as an “archive of survival”<sup>5</sup> because of its focus on Jewish regeneration after the war, which has the overtones of a Hollywood-style happy ending.

I analyze the interaction between local and global memory frames (i.e. how women survivors with East Central European origins<sup>6</sup> narrate their testimonies in an “American” archive) by considering these frames not as cultural opposites but as interdependent.<sup>7</sup> As the nation-based interpretative framework would be anachronistic to the multiethnic communities of the region<sup>8</sup> at the time of the

3 Pető, *Digital Memory*, 222.

4 Wolf, *Holocaust Testimony*, 174.

5 Wieviorka, *Era of Witness*, 115.

6 Translations of the video testimony excerpts from the original languages are mine, from Hungarian: Dóra S., Erzsébet G., Piroška D., Olga K., Olga L.; from Polish: Halina B., Halina M.; from Slovak: Margita S. The other testimonies analyzed in this article were recorded in English.

7 Levy and Sznajder, *Holocaust and Memory*, 10.

8 East Central Europe is a dynamic historical concept. The exact understanding of the area as a geographical space is subject to change over time, suffice it to say that it more or less encompasses the current territories of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, excluding Germany and Austria. The elusive delineation of the region relies on certain criteria, as developed by Johnson, two of which I identify that specifically speak to the period of World War II: the experience of multiethnicity and the acceptance of Western Christianity.

genocide<sup>9</sup> and the countries in the region are also similarly situated in terms of the legacy of the socialist memory cultures, I adopt a regional approach. In this analysis of narratives by women survivors, I analyze gender as a relevant vehicle of representation.<sup>10</sup> The aim of my gendered Holocaust analysis will be to “interrogate its very assumptions.”<sup>11</sup>

In my dissertation research, I compare 25 pairs of testimonies by women survivors from East Central Europe written at the time of the Holocaust and then recorded five decades later by the VHA.<sup>12</sup> My sample consists of what I term exemplary and unexemplary narratives taking into account the status of the *bic et nunc* and the video narratives. In doing so, I build on Noah Shenker’s categorization who identifies three types of testimonies in the VHA based on the archive’s internal ratings: exemplary testimonies are the ones deemed most dramatically compelling, unexemplary testimonies are considered the least compelling, and circulating testimonies are displayed in their educational materials to highlight the foundation’s mission. In my typology, the exemplary testimonies include those that became canonized both as written narratives (published and widely popularized in most cases) and as video testimonies (included in the VHA’s online selection<sup>13</sup> and incorporated in their educational materials in most cases), whereas the unexemplary sources are the unknown written (unpublished diaries and memoirs collected as a consequence of local archival efforts<sup>14</sup> in most cases) and the uncirculated video testimonies (sporadically indexed and in the local languages in most cases). In this article I discuss a section of my findings which focuses on twelve video testimonial narratives in detail, half of which are exemplary and the other half of which are unexemplary. The names of the witnesses in the case of the first six are Aranka S., Gerda K., Halina B., Jane L., Olga L., and Vladka M. The names of the witnesses in the case of the second six are Erzsébet G., Halina M., Lidia V., Margita S., Piroška D., Olga K. Half of the survivors self-identify as Hungarian (Aranka S., Erzsébet G., Lidia V., Olga K., Olga L., and Piroška D.).

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9 Bartov, *Eastern Europe as the Site*.

10 Hirsch and Spitzer, *Testimonial Objects*, 368.

11 Peto et al., *Women and Holocaust*, 16.

12 This article presents a fraction of the findings from my dissertation research.

13 The VHA Online collection contains more than 3,000 testimonies from survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust and other genocides. The full collection can be viewed at access points all over the world.

14 This includes the Holocaust Memorial Center’s collection in Budapest and the Jewish Historical Institute’s (ŻIH) collection in Warsaw.

I suggest that the VHA identifies the beginnings of persecution with change and characterizes the end of the Holocaust as spontaneous joy. The beginning of the Holocaust, according to this definition, is premised on the assumption of historical discontinuity. In other words, it is assumed that the survivors would narrate the beginning of persecution as a clean turning point. In the video testimonies analyzed in my research, this can either result in productive tension or interpretative conflict between the interviewers and interviewee survivors.

### *Narratives of the “Beginnings”*

The VHA’s interpretation of the beginning of the Holocaust rests on a notion of abrupt change caused by Hitler’s rise to power. To quote the Foundation’s Interviewer Guidelines, “[t]he interviewee is asked to speak about *his or her* experiences under *German occupation*.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the central question of this thematic block is how Hitler’s rise to power affected the survivor’s life personally. This implies three thematic foci: the assumption of change, the centrality of personal experience, and the equation of the beginning of persecution with Hitler’s rise to power. According to my findings, however, these foci, as assumptions on the basis of which experiences are to be narrated, do not fit the narratives by survivors from the East Central European region for three reasons:

1) survivors narrate the persecution suffered during the Holocaust as a manifestation of the continuation or intensification of local anti-Semitism, and therefore not as a novelty or change;

2) survivors from the region do not narrate Hitler’s rise to power as a decisive moment or a turning point; rather, they narrate their experiences of persecution within local contexts;

3) the VHA’s focus on personal experience and more specifically on eye-witness recollection can be contrary to the survivors’ interpretations of persecution, which can be narrated within a collective, relational framework.

Variations on the questions and suggestions which present the beginning of the Holocaust as a moment of change include: “[w]hen was the big change in inverted commas,” (Lidia V., s.79), “[w]hen did things change,” (Mania G., s.20), and “[l]et us move to the first signs that there was danger ahead” (Halina N.,

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15 Interviewer Guidelines, 7. Emphases mine.



s.34).<sup>16</sup> In Helena M.'s video testimony, the interviewer asks about the change in attitude towards Jews in Poland. Helena is of the view that there was no such change. She replied, "the Poles have been anti-Semitic before," and she considered the political changes as a continuation of general Polish attitudes rather than as a German influence, as reflected in her contention that "it has always been happening in Poland" (s.12). In Halina M.'s video testimony, in response to the interviewer's question "[w]hen did the situation start to worsen for you," the survivor explains that "it did not worsen at all," given that she had had a very happy childhood up until the fall of 1939 (s.42). Although Helena M. and Halina M. have diametrically different messages for future generations (the former stresses the importance of tolerance and the fight against anti-Semitism, whereas the latter voices sentiments of religion-based Judeophobia when she blames the local Jewry for the Holocaust), neither of them follow the suggested narrative of historical discontinuity.

Variations on the question pertaining to Hitler's role in the persecution of Jews include the following: "[h]ow did Hitler's rise to power affect your life personally," (Vladka M., s.4), "[w]hat things did you observe as Hitler rose to power in 1933," (Gerda K., s.31), and "[h]ow was Hitler's rise to power perceived in your community" (Halina K., s.30). These questions often lead to interpretative conflicts between the interviewers and survivors, which becomes evident in Vladka M.'s testimony. The thematic block dealing with her awareness of prewar anti-Semitism leads to a series of follow-up questions as to whether the subject of the discussion is conditions "before the war," "before Hitler came to power," "before Hitler came to Poland," or, as the interviewer, insists "before Hitler became chancellor" (s.4–5). Vladka M. emphasizes that in her understanding, anti-Semitism is rooted in Polish society and the Catholic Church and was not a Nazi German specificity.

However, the interviewer, Renee F., continues to ask provocative (or leading) questions: "[H]ow do you explain that Poland was a stronghold of Jewish culture," "[b]ut Jewish culture flourished in this country which was anti-Semitic," and "[s]o when did you begin to really feel the change" (s.6). Finally, in response to the last question, Vladka M. complies with the expectation to narrate a change in the persecution of Jews which was specifically linked to Hitler's rise to power: "As soon as Hitler was settling in Germany, the stronger the anti-Semitism was felt

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16 However, some interviewers did not refer to change in these segments of the testimonies. A notable example is Halina B.'s interviewer, Adelle Ch., who asks the following question instead: "[C]ould you please explain what the relations were between the Jews and the Catholics, that is the Poles?" (s.25).

and seen in Poland” (s. 6). Most of the survivor testimonies from East Central Europe analyzed in my research<sup>17</sup> do not depict any connection between Hitler’s personal responsibility with and their the survivors’ Holocaust experiences.

Variations on the question emphasizing personal experience include “[c]an you describe how external events started to impact your lives,” (Olga L., s.53), “[d]id you notice that trouble was looming, any signs,” (Dora S., s.12), and “[d]id you also sense that Jews were being persecuted” (Piroska D., s.94). Some responses to these questions point to the perceived continuity of local discrimination and anti-Semitism, for instance as Dora S. put it, “Jews could live but not thrive” (s.12). She narrates the intersection of gender-based and ethnicity-based discrimination in instances when “the Jewish girl could not be best student” (s.12). This meant that though she was the best student in class and even in the whole school, she was not recognized with any distinctions and instead the second-best gentile students received acclaim.

Other testimonies offer evasive responses, as the survivors refer to their gender, social status, or age as an explanation for their lack of awareness. For instance, in response to the question “[h]ow did Hitler’s rise to power affect your life personally,” Jane L. responds that “[i]t did not affect my life personally, in 1933 I was only 9 years old” (s. 28–29). Jane’s testimonial narrative about the prewar and wartime years focuses on her involvement in a youth organization, and her personal experiences are wrapped up in a relational framework. However, the interviewer’s questions, which are more tailored to the survivor’s experience (“[w]hat do you remember about the day your town was occupied” and “[w]ho occupied it”), elicit the story of her personal experience of hiding in the nearby woods with her family, which is narrated as the first event pertaining to her Holocaust experience (s.31). The archive’s focus on personal experience is an effort to enhance the “authenticity” of the survivor testimony, yet personal experience is not necessarily central to the accounts given by East Central European women who survived the Holocaust.

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17 The only survivor in my sample who expresses a connection with Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 is Gerda K., whose native tongue is German, born in Bielitz/Bielsko-Biala (s.31). This may suggest that German-speaking survivors from East Central Europe constitute a specific sub-group in terms of their Holocaust narratives.

## *Narratives of Liberation*

The questions outlined in the Interviewer Guidelines<sup>18</sup> pertaining to the topic of liberation focus on the day of liberation, the first day of being free, and often even more specifically on first catching sight of the liberators.<sup>19</sup> I suggest that the VHA conceptualizes the topic of liberation as a “rapturous moment in time” (to borrow the phrase used by Dan Stone in his characterization of Red Army films and popular films like *Life is Beautiful* and *Schindler’s List*),<sup>20</sup> and, more specifically, as the single event defining the end of the Nazi genocide. However, survivors, and even in some cases interviewers, voice offer counter-narratives to this interpretation.<sup>21</sup> I identify four frameworks of narrating for the narratives of liberation by the Red Army: sexual vulnerability, glossing over or elusion, continuation of persecution, and spontaneous joy.

### The narrative framework of sexual vulnerability

The most prevalent narrative framework in the liberation narratives by East Central European Jewish women survivors is sexual vulnerability, the threat of sexual abuse or violence, evasion, and instances of liberator violence, although when it comes to this subject there is still a lacuna in the scholarship on liberation.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that the narratives about sexual vulnerability are glossed over in the VHA’s video testimonies, which can be attributed to the institutionalization of Holocaust memory in the online archive.<sup>23</sup> This means that the narratives of vulnerability appear either as matter-of-fact stories or as atypical short stories

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18 <https://sfi.usc.edu/content/interviewer-guidelines>.

19 In these segments of the interviews, questions about feelings are often asked, which is in contrast with the approach to emotions in the archive in that such questions are not recommended by the Interviewer Guidelines in general and are consequently rarely asked.

20 Stone, *Liberation*, 2.

21 Most of the survivors whose testimonies are analyzed in my research were liberated by the Red Army. Others were liberated by the British and US Armed Forces. Some camps were liberated by both armies, in which case I took into account both the survivor’s narratives and the archive’s documentation practices.

22 Stone, *Liberation*, 3.

23 Contrary to the prevalent assumption that survivors start to speak about their experiences of sexual vulnerability in their video testimonies, survivors who had been outspoken in their written testimonies at the time of the genocide were unwilling to discuss the topic in their video testimonies recorded in the 1990s. According to Nutkiewicz, the VHA’s leading historical consultant, it was possible to discuss sexual violence during the wartime years, however the topic eventually became traumatizing and taboo in Holocaust memory (Nutmiewicz, *Shame*).

within the narrative style of the interviewees, the majority of which are not indexed as “sexual violence.”

Liberation in Lidia V.’s testimony appears in the context of sexual vulnerability. First, she quickly mentions the liberators as those whom they merely passed by. However, when she returns to the topic, her narrative style changes. She becomes hesitant, and the pace of her speech slows down as she narrates the following:

Lidia: On the following day [i.e. after liberation], as I told you, we met the Soviet soldiers. They were behaving [pause] fortunately [pause] very nicely with us. [Pauses and tilts her head]. They gave us food [pause] and in first days helped us get accommodation. It was not always easy, we could not always get accommodation. (s. 395)

Nina: When did you start going home?

Throughout the eight-hour long interview, the interviewer, Nina W., asks follow-up questions to the topics to which Lidia alludes, though she reverts to a question pertaining to chronology. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the VHA’s interviewers were instructed to devote approximately 25 percent of the length of an individual video testimony to the years after the war, i.e. beginning with liberation.<sup>24</sup> Some suggest that as a consequence of this the VHA testimony is prone to become a more directed conversation, the interviewers ask increasingly polar questions (generally about marriages, children, and the rebuilding of lives).<sup>25</sup> The fragmentariness of the narrative can also be attributed to what Pető terms “silence as the built-in element of narration”<sup>26</sup> in interviews by victims of rape by Red Army soldiers. This appears in this narrative on two levels in that the story itself is interrupted by pauses and the “experience” of sexual vulnerability is glossed over.

The survivor Margita S.<sup>27</sup> was interviewed by Robert S., whose interviewing presence is strong. He asks a variety of questions following the archive’s framing, the local context as well as his own conceptualizations.<sup>28</sup> Due to his probing

24 Wolf, *Holocaust Testimony*, 170.

25 You can read more about this in Wolf, *Holocaust Testimony*.

26 Pető, *Memory and Narrative*.

27 Margita’s self-identification both prewar and postwar is complex. Several languages were spoken in her home, and thus she did not identify as specifically Hungarian or Slovak. She is a perfect example of the multi-ethnic self-identifications of East Central European Jewry at the time.

28 The interviewer first asks questions related to events in Germany: “[D]id your father follow what’s going on in Germany?, [d]id people talk about it?, [s]o you did not follow the political situation?” The

interviewing technique, two modes of narrative about liberation (spontaneous joy and sexual vulnerability) appear in the testimony. Regarding Margita's liberation, he first asks a question following the archive's focus on first-person experience: "[D]o you remember the first time you saw an American soldier?" She replies by narrating her spontaneous joyful reaction and starts recounting her journey home. As Neustadt-Glewe was liberated by more than one allied force, Robert S. raises other questions:

Robert: Were there differences between the liberators?

Margita: The Russians behaved very badly.

Robert: Did they steal from you?

Margita: No, they raped the girls in Neustadt-Glewe, so in one of the rooms we had to put a cupboard in front of the room so that they could not enter, but then they received an order that it is not allowed [...] they were afraid to come near us.

Robert: They were afraid?

Margita: Yes, yes, they were not allowed to enter our barracks. (s. 50)

The interviewer's technique here is indicative of his previous knowledge or assumptions about certain characteristics of liberation by the Soviet army (i.e. his association of "bad behavior" with looting), and despite the fact that he is offering an interpretation of the events to the survivor, he is contributing to the unfolding of a narrative that otherwise might have remained untold. Margita's story is a succinct one, in which she curiously alternates between the third-person plural and the first-person plural as a manner of distancing. Her use of the third-person and the first-person plural could be described as characteristic features of narratives of evasion, as they make a given experience seem either collective, not individual.<sup>29</sup>

Narratives of sexual vulnerability do not harmonize with the expectations of the agents who were crafting the archive, something that becomes especially pronounced in Olga L.'s testimony, which is highlighted with the indexing term "liberator sexual assault."<sup>30</sup> The interviewer, Nancy F., asks generic questions

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interviewer then asks questions more focused on the local political context: "[a]fter the disappearance of the Slovak state, did things change for you, for example people's attitudes" and "[d]id you personally see Masaryk" (s. 12–16).

29 Mühlhauser, *Historicity of Denial*, 36.

30 There are about 1,000 testimonies by Jewish survivors out of the 52,000 that contain indexing terms related to sexual violence, which include for instance "sexual assault" and "coerced sexual activities."

regarding liberation and freedom suggested by the Interviewer Guidelines, and in response, Olga narrates her experience of attempted sexual violence in a village near the Auschwitz camp by the Soviet liberators. The “troupe de choc” arrived in town during the night “in search of enemies” while Olga and her two friends were sleeping. One of the soldiers handcuffed and dragged Olga out to the courtyard with “evident motives.” They struggled, moving back and forth between the courtyard and the room, and eventually the soldier bit off Olga’s wristwatch and she fell into the cellar in the middle of some feathers and Polish locals who were hiding (s. 37). Despite the suggestiveness of Olga’s narrative (or maybe precisely because of it), Nancy F. focuses on the interrelation of freedom and liberation, as if insistently committed to the generic focus of the archive:

Nancy: When did you know that you were liberated, that you were really free?

Olga: *Next day*, because the Russian came and occupied the village and every woman who was in the village was violated and raped that night but bear in mind that *troupe de choc* it was not the real Russian army, I don’t want to defend them, but that is the fact. [...] A few days later I was called to Russian headquarters about this [pointing at her wrist]. He advised don’t complain about the Russian to the Russian, so I said this was an accident, how they treated me. [...] I went back and in this house, *I had the first day of liberation*.

Nancy: What did freedom mean to you?

Olga: [...] that I am not in the concentration camp [...] I had food, I had bread, it was paradise. (Italics mine, s. 38)

Olga speaks of sexual violence as an inevitability of war, though she also emphasizes the role of the army hierarchy in policing (and interpreting) these instances, as does Margita. She initially resists the interviewer’s attempt to frame her experience of liberation by narrating her meeting with a senior officer. Although the chronology of her story is askew, the significance of her narrative, from the perspective of this discussion, lies in her mention of sexual vulnerability as a determining experience of the “first day” of liberation. This echoes Levenkorn’s assertion that “for some Jewish women, the liberation began with rape by the liberators.”<sup>31</sup> Olga uses her account of “the first day” to some

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However, there are numerous instances when sexual vulnerability is discussed in the video testimony, but no such indexing term is applied.

31 Levenkorn, *Death*, 18.

extent in a metaphorical sense to represent her first moment of freedom, which is not identified as a moment of joy.

### The narrative framework of the continuation of persecution

In these testimonies, liberation is narrated as a continuation of persecution in the widest sense of the term. Persecution continued, according to the narratives, in the form of discrimination against Jews, oppression by the liberating/invasive Soviet Armed Forces, and the persecution of the nation. This narrative mode of liberation, which offers a counter-narrative to the VHA's conceptualization of liberation, is particularly characteristic of the narratives by Polish survivors.<sup>32</sup>

Jane L.'s liberation narrative is a very special and rare testimony by a resistance fighter who smuggled Jews from Poland via Slovakia to Hungary. Jane and other members of her group were liberated by the Soviet partisans, who flew them to Moscow, where in the end she was sentenced to four years of forced labor in Siberia as a "dangerous element." In her testimony, persecution continues even after liberation in that her Jewishness was questioned and ridiculed by the Soviet authorities who did not consider her Jewish because she did not know Yiddish (s.193–194).

In Halina M.'s<sup>33</sup> testimony, when the interviewer asks about "future message," she indicates that Polish anti-Semitism must be understood in the context of the isolation of Polish Jews, i.e. expressing traditional anti-Semitic sentiments and delineates two options for the Jewry: either assimilation or emigration (s.251). Furthermore, she stresses the continuity of the persecution of the Polish nation, first by the Nazi Germans and then by the invading Soviets. Thus, her narrative fits in (and strengthens) the framework of Polish national martyrology<sup>34</sup> (s.249–250).

In the case of Olga K.'s testimony, the interview does not always follow a strict chronological order thanks to the interviewer, Anita Cs., who follows

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<sup>32</sup> This narrative framework of liberation was not characteristic of written testimonies, as the main motivation of the survivors was to inform the world about the genocide. These themes do appear elsewhere sporadically in the written autobiographical narratives, however, in the form of factual descriptions.

<sup>33</sup> Halina M. was first persecuted as a Warsaw Jew during the time of ghettoization and, later, as a Polish resistance fighter in a POW camp. Polish self-identification characterizes other Jewish women who participated in the Polish resistance, for instance Halina K., though it is most pronounced in Halina M.'s case. Since she is identified as a Jewish survivor by the archive and this does not contradict her self-identification, I also consider her as such.

<sup>34</sup> Orla and Bukowska, *New Threads*, 179.

instead the survivor's associative narrative style. In some instances, however, Anita introduces topics that have not yet been raised in the interview, for example when she asks whether some women were raped in the concentration camps (s.102), to which Olga responds in the negative, though she offers the following narrative pertaining to the period of liberation:

Olga: Violence happened when we were liberated two weeks later and we were taken to the Soviet zone 40 km away on trains [...] and we were handed over to the Soviet soldiers. These things did happen there unfortunately, to young Jewish girls, to one or two of them, but there were people who saved them.

Anita: How did you spend your way home? (s.103–104)

Unfortunately, the interviewer does not follow up on the survivor's fragmentary story in which the experience of sexual violence is merged with liberation, nor does she offer an open ended question along the lines of "what happened next?" Instead, she steers the narrative back into a chronological trajectory. As a result, not only is liberation not narrated as a specific and joyous event, it is not even discussed in detail in the testimonial narrative. Moreover, since Olga's narrative of liberation is prompted by a question about sexual violence and is contains clear references to the threat of sexual violence, it might be suggested that liberation is narrated as a continuation of persecution in terms of sexual vulnerability in her testimony. Thereby, the continuation of persecution is premised on Jewish identity, national identity, and gender identity in the three testimonies analyzed above.

### The narrative framework of glossing over

Narratives that do not offer a detailed account of liberation as an action initiated by external agents, i.e. the liberators, offer a variety of counter-narratives, starting from narratives of self-liberation, through quick allusions to liberation as part of a chronological recollection, and finally to the total omission of liberation as a specific event from the testimony. The variety of these narrative frameworks can partly be attributed to the different life trajectories and Holocaust experiences of the survivors, yet if we take the most extreme narrative type as an example, the omission of liberation, it cannot be said that there was a correlation between a lack of a historical event and its omission from the narrative. Instead, I suggest that the glossing over or outright omission of any references to liberation in



its traditional understanding can be attributed to the recurring themes (such as Jewish resistance and sexual vulnerability) and, broadly speaking, to the Archive's commitment to thematic coherency.

Lidia V. narrates the first day of freedom as a distinct and separate experience from the event of liberation. The first day of freedom for her was the day on which the camp administration fled the area. As Lidia puts it, “we were the conquerors of town” and “we didn't need any liberator” (s. 391). She further develops her conceptualization of liberation by calling it “our self-liberation” (s. 392). This concept certainly acknowledges the agency of Jewish survivors in regaining their freedom by starting to organize life anew. According to the VHA's interpretation “liberation is typically characterized by the arrival of Allied forces.”<sup>35</sup> In Lidia's atypical narrative, the first day of liberation included “self-liberation,” while the second day brought about the threat of sexual vulnerability, as discussed previously in this article.

In Vladka M.'s testimony, her involvement with Jewish organizations is the continuous thread which links the prewar, wartime, and postwar years. This is equally true of her narrative on liberation, which is part of a chronological recounting of events, an intermezzo before her involvement with the community continues. In particular, the liberation of Warsaw, her return to Warsaw, and her subsequent move to Łódź are all a matter-of-fact listing of events which culminate in her reuniting with the Jewish community and organizing the first events for survivors there (s.28–29). The interviewer, Renee F., does not raise any provocative questions in these segments of the interview, in contrast with their dialogue about the beginnings of persecution analyzed earlier in this article. Instead, she leaves space for the interviewee's thematic focus. Thus, Vladka's narrative points to the conceptualization of liberation as a process instead of a “rapturous moment in time” (to borrow Stone's phrase again). As a result, liberation as an action by the Allied Forces is omitted from the testimony.

The return to the community in Aranka S.'s testimony is even more central to the narrative in which the traditional interpretation of liberation is similarly glossed over. After being liberated from Bergen-Belsen, she joined the men reciting the mourner's Kaddish over the dead (s.34). In so doing, the survivor initiated a double border crossing: she returned to her Jewish community and crossed the gendered boundary to recite the prayer for the dead, from which women are traditionally excluded. At the same time, as Aranka was reciting the

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35 <https://sfi.usc.edu/content/liberation>

Kaddish literally over the heap of dead bodies, she tells of the “first sympathetic caress” by an American Jewish soldier, who put his arm around her in an effort to comfort her (s.35). Aranka’s narrative of liberation follows her interpretation of the events, in which the focus is on her symbolic reunion with the Jewish community and her processing of the loss of her loved ones, which is enabled by Leslie B. F.’s attentive interviewing practice.

The topic of liberation is entirely omitted from the discussion in Halina B.’s testimony, which is an out-of-the-ordinary narrative in that it was filmed on site instead of in Halina’s home, first at the Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation and then in front of the entrance to the Auschwitz camp. The interviewer, Adelle Ch., draws attention to the extraordinary choice of location by asking Halina, “please [to] tell us why you chose this place so that there was a cross there, please tell us why that is so important now” (s.114). This question gives an opportunity for Halina to explain her message for future generations, after which she continues her short narrative about her time in Auschwitz, which comes to an abrupt end with her mention of the forced march (s.135). The interview ends with segments shot outside the camp. Any discussion of liberation is omitted from her testimony, which offers an alternative ending to the majority of testimonies recorded by the VHA.

### The narrative framework of spontaneous joy

Associations of spontaneous joy with liberation appear in the testimonial narratives in three variants: joy as a stock-feature of the narrative, joy over the return to the (political or religious) community, and the joy of romantic love.<sup>36</sup> Erzsébet G.’s narrative offers a perfect example of an expression of joy as a stock feature of an account of liberation. Erzsébet exclaims, “[t]hanks may be given to the liberators even after fifty years!” (s.91). This exclamation was part of her testimony written right after the war and part of what she read out loud during her video testimony.<sup>37</sup>

Joy over return to the community is often narrated by survivors who identified with communist ideals. However, their specific life trajectories color

36 Spontaneous joy over liberation as a narrative framework appears with the same intensity and in similar metaphors in the written testimonies from five decades earlier.

37 In this article there are two such testimonies by Margita S. And Erzsébet G. in which the survivors read excerpts from their written testimonies out loud. These testimonies which are indexed as “literary recital” in the VHA.

the narratives in that liberation as joy is narrated in a different way, for instance, by a communist Hungarian Jewish woman who was a concentration camp prisoner (Piroska D.) and by a communist Polish Jewish woman who was a partisan fighter during the Holocaust (Mania G.). In Piroska D.'s<sup>38</sup> narrative, May 1 appears as a repeated reference: “So well it is 1st of May, I would not have thought I would be free then” (s.221). She associates this date, when the camp administration fled, with freedom. Liberation, strictly speaking, happened on May 2. Erzsébet offers the following description of her encounter with the Soviet liberators on this day: “There were three Russian soldiers and these skeletons jumped on them and started kissing them” (s.224). Thus Piroska’s narrative about liberation contains an expression of spontaneous joy, which, however, is not depicted as an apolitical feeling or as a genderless one, considering her references to International Workers’ Day (May 1) and the women survivors’ reaction when they caught sight of the liberators.

Only one survivor in my sample, Gerda K., offers in her narrative an expression of spontaneous joy at the sight of the liberators. Gerda claims to have met the love of her life that day. She recounts that after having been told that the war was over, the next day she met two American Jewish soldiers. When one of these two soldiers held the door open for her and restored her humanity, this was “the greatest moment of my life” (s.116). Thus, Gerda’s narrative is compliant with the VHA’s intended focus on liberation as a joyous first meeting with the liberators and its emphasis on a happy rebuilding of life after the war.

In this article, I offered a “view from below” of the Hungarian Holocaust by examining narratives given by Jewish women survivors. I offer this discussion as a complement to the more prevalent areas of Holocaust research in Hungary, namely that of perpetrator history and the involvement or collaboration of the gentile population. Local and global memory frames meet, merge, and clash in survivor testimonies from the online digital archive that at best provides productive tension between the archival expectations and survivors’ testimonial narratives, and at worst results in interpretative conflict. The VHA’s volunteer interviewers were trained by the VHA in recording chronological life story interviews for historical and educational purposes, which in some cases

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38 Piroska D. offers a rare combination of religious and political identification in her testimony. She considers herself a liberal Jew and a communist who was persecuted because of her political activities during the Holocaust. Indeed, she was incarcerated in Ravensbrück as a political prisoner. However, she is identified as a Jewish survivor by the VHA, and since this does not contradict her self-identification, I also consider her as such.

resulted in their perseverance in asking questions closely following the archive's interpretation of the Holocaust. In contrast, in other cases, they molded the Interviewer Guidelines to the specific survivor's narratives and their styles. The emergence of alternative memories and counter-narratives is reliant on the dialogue with the interviewer and the "impact" of this dialogue on the testimonial narrative in the ways in which they approach the archive's interpretation of the beginnings and the end of the Holocaust.

I argue that the VHA's assumption about change, a turning point in the beginning of the Holocaust, rests on a thesis of historical discontinuity, which is a long debated topic in research on the relationships between anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. The account given by most of the survivors from East Central Europe whose testimonies are analyzed in this article do not fit this interpretative framework. Instead they constitute counter-narratives of the survivors' experiences in the region. The narrative analysis of liberation may contribute to the bypassing of this interpretation inherited from the Cold War, a tradition which still affects Holocaust memory. This analysis offers alternative interpretations to the common understanding of liberation in several ways. In terms of agency, liberation can be conceptualized following survivors' understanding of self-liberation instead of an action via external agents. In terms of temporality, liberation can be approached as a process instead of a "rapturous moment in time." In terms of its emotive impact, liberation was remembered by some of the survivors as the continuation of persecution and sexual vulnerability, rather than as an event of spontaneous joy. Moreover, as the four narrative frameworks identified in this article intermingle in the testimonies, intersectionality as an analytical tool is especially useful in that the categories of Jewishness, gender, and political identification co-create Holocaust memory in the online archive.

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