



Ferenc Laczó

“I could hardly wait to get out of this camp, even though I knew it would only get worse until liberation came”<sup>1</sup>

## On Hungarian Jewish Accounts of the Buchenwald Concentration Camp from 1945–46

Contrary to influential assertions on the early postwar silence surrounding the extermination of European Jewry, in Hungary, as in a number of other countries, extensive documentation of the Holocaust had already begun in the 1940s. In addition to postwar trials, published memoirs and early historical works, thousands of Hungarian Jewish survivors articulated their experiences in the offices of the National Relief Committee for Deportees (DEGOB) in 1945–46. However, these sources have not yet been systematically analyzed and early witness accounts in particular remain heavily underrepresented in historiography. This study is an effort to begin to redress this imbalance by examining 349 DEGOB accounts that discuss Buchenwald, a major Nazi concentration camp and a contested *lieu de mémoire*. It reveals that returnees defined, represented and assessed Buchenwald in varying ways, their perspectives depending not only on factors such as when and where they stayed in the camp and what they had to endure while there, but also on which other camp they arrived from and the conditions under which they traveled. My analysis of early Hungarian Jewish accounts of Buchenwald also reveals that while a number of interviewees understood their escape from the group of Jewish prisoners within the camp as the key to their eventual survival, others tended to use ethnic labels to identify the perpetrators of violence against them. Moreover, two major narratives were circulating regarding the liberation of the camp: the accidental Nazi failure to complete their program of extermination and another involving a successful uprising of the inmates against their tormentors. Last but not least, the paper argues that some of those who survived Buchenwald and subsequently entered the DEGOB offices showed clear awareness of the Nazi extermination program, but they preferred to discuss it in indirect ways.

Keywords: Hungarian history, Nazi concentration camps, Jewish witness accounts, Holocaust reception, discourses of violence

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1 Quoted from DEGOB Record Number 3587. All translations from both Hungarian and German are mine. (I left German terms in my English translations if they were used in the Hungarian original.)

*Witness Testimonies prior to the Era of the Witness*

This study is a contribution to the recuperation of early Hungarian Jewish perspectives and voices on the Holocaust.<sup>2</sup> Studies of the Holocaust are an important and influential field of contemporary history, together with accounts of witnesses that have become part of psychological and sociological investigations and also entered broader cultural debates. Nonetheless, the incorporation into mainstream historiography of the plethora of witness accounts produced by Holocaust survivors immediately after the World War II has only begun.<sup>3</sup>

The disinterest and even ignorance of such early voices is linked to how historiographies of the Holocaust have typically framed their subject. On the one hand, the systematic extermination of European Jewry during World War II seemed so complex and generally incomprehensible that any profound understanding seemed to require a slow and gradual process and substantial time. On the other hand, it has also been recurrently emphasized that, due to the psychological consequences of their persecution, survivors were not able to articulate their experiences immediately either.<sup>4</sup> Until now the Holocaust has been broadly understood as an event that acquired wider political and cultural significance only several decades after the war for two main reasons: the generally belated recognition of the scope and coherence of the Nazi program of extermination and the silence of traumatized survivors.

Such narratives are currently facing a serious challenge: a substantial body of scholarship has already been published offering a plethora of evidence to discredit notions of early postwar silence and repression.<sup>5</sup> Without questioning the increased importance of Holocaust remembrance that has been observable

in more recent decades,<sup>6</sup> this new wave of scholarship aims to show in particular that Jewish survivors were anything but mute during the early postwar period. David Cesarani, editor of one of the most important collections demonstrating this point, insisted that Jewish survivors, “if anything, succeeded too well, too soon” in commemorating the Holocaust *avant la lettre*, and it would therefore be much more appropriate to inquire into the early postwar “deafness” of the surrounding world than to continue discussions of supposed Jewish silence.<sup>7</sup>

This article draws on all of the 349 testimonies in the collection of the National Relief Committee for Deportees in Hungary (*Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*, DEGOB) that make references to the Buchenwald concentration camp.<sup>8</sup> My choice of Buchenwald as a case study was determined, apart from the crucial circumstance of the availability of rich and diverse accounts from 1945–46, by the fact that Buchenwald was one of the largest and oldest camps in a Nazi German environment<sup>9</sup> and has remained a contested lieu de mémoire ever since.<sup>10</sup> Not only is Buchenwald very near Weimar, one

6 For an interpretation of Holocaust remembrance in the age of globalization, see Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, *Erinnerung im globalen Zeitalter: Der Holocaust* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2001).

7 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. For the United States, see Hasia Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love. American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). In a rather similar manner, rather than asking whether substantial evidence about the persecution and murder of the Jews of Europe was already around earlier (it was), Mary Fulbrook believes it is more essential to inquire when, how and why later generations started to emphatically connect with these experiences. See the ongoing research project led by Mary Fulbrook titled *Reverberations of War: Communities of Experience and Identification in Germany and Europe since 1945* (funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council).

8 Whereas most of these records are in Hungarian, nearly 20 percent (altogether 69 of them) are in German. Two reports repeat parts of previous reports: 757 is partly identical to 756 and 1675 to 1673. With the exception of record 738, all witnesses seem to have been Jewish.

9 On the history of Buchenwald as presented by the contemporary *Gedenkstätte*, see Gedenkstätte Buchenwald, ed., *Buchenwald Concentration Camp 1937–1945. A Guide to the Permanent Historical Exhibition* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010). On Buchenwald in the context of the camp universe, see Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, and Christoph Dieckmann, eds., *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager: Entwicklung und Struktur*, vols. 1–2 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1998) as well as Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, eds., *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, vols. 1–9 (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2005–2009). On concentration camps, see Wolfgang Sofsky, *Die Ordnung des Terrors. Das Konzentrationslager* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1992).

10 For the first major study, see Eugen Kogon, *Der SS-Staat – Das System der deutschen Konzentrationslager* (Munich: Karl Alber, 1946). For accounts recorded immediately upon the liberation of the camp, see David A. Hackett, *The Buchenwald Report* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995).

2 I would like to thank Vera Scepanovic and Anna Lujza Szász for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

3 These accounts were thus produced long before what Annette Wieviorka called “the era of the witness” (which, according to her, only began after the Eichmann trial). See Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006).

4 On the political aspects of trauma discourses, see José Brunner, *Die Politik des Traumas. Gewalt, Gesellschaft und psychisches Leiden* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, forthcoming). For a critique of many contemporary references to cultural trauma, see Wulf Kansteiner, “Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor,” *Rethinking History* 8 (2004): 193–221.

5 This happens simultaneously with silence becoming an important research object in its own right. See, among others, Efrat Ben-Zeev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War. A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

of the symbolic centers of Germany,<sup>11</sup> but it was also heavily instrumentalized under the East German Communist regime.<sup>12</sup> There were fierce debates about Buchenwald after 1989, too, especially concerning the Soviet camp that was in operation there after 1945.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it appears all the more intriguing and relevant to inquire how its survivors discussed this major Nazi camp before canonical interpretations emerged and stereotypical images took form.

The largest part of this paper offers a qualitative analysis of early Hungarian Jewish accounts of Buchenwald based on close reading. On the general level, I am interested in how survivors articulated their experiences soon after their release from the camp—despite the immense difficulties of verbalizing their sufferings and in the absence of widely agreed discursive frames.<sup>14</sup> More specifically, I address the following questions: how did Hungarian Jewish survivors define, represent and assess Buchenwald in 1945–46? How did they retrospectively describe the condition they were in while there? How did they discuss their experiences of violence? Did they employ ethnic labels in their accounts and, if so, when and how? How did they narrate the liberation of Buchenwald? Finally, how did they perceive the Nazi program of extermination in the immediate aftermath of the war? Before going into these details, however, I address in the following sections the historiographical context and offer a quantitative description of the backgrounds of the interviewees.

### *On the Historiographical Context*

Drawing on evidence in a wide variety of languages and covering a host of European countries (such as Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Poland), the 2012 monograph by Laura Jockusch entitled *Collect and Record!* has shown that from the late nineteenth century onwards the Jews of Eastern Europe developed new techniques of documentation in reaction to anti-Jewish violence.

11 Jens Schley, *Nachbar Buchenwald: Die Stadt Weimar und ihr Konzentrationslager 1937–1945* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1999).

12 See Volkhard Knigge and Thomas A. Seidel, eds., *Versteinertes Gedenken. Das Buchenwalder Mahnmal von 1958*, vols. 1–2 (Spröda: Pietsch 1997). Lutz Niethammer, ed., *Der "gesäuberte" Antifaschismus. Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald* (Berlin: Akademie, 1994).

13 On the Soviet special camp that triggered fierce polemics after 1989, see Volkhard Knigge and Bodo Ritscher, *Totenbuch. Speziallager Buchenwald 1945–1950* (Weimar: Stiftung Gedenkstätten Buchenwald und Mittelbau Dora, 2003).

14 On the difficult relationship between pain and language, among other fascinating issues, see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain. The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

More concretely, they came to understand the collection of witness accounts as an essential part of their scholarly-commemorative response to human-made catastrophes. Jewish survivors of the Holocaust would subsequently apply these techniques to the unprecedented crimes committed during World War II.

The collection of witness accounts was thus an eminent part of the agenda of the historical commissions and documentation centers that were launched as soon as the Nazi genocide was over.<sup>15</sup> In some cases, such as occupied Poland or France, Jews in fact initiated the documentation of their destruction at the hands of the Nazis while it was still taking place.<sup>16</sup> As a consequence, manifold Jewish sources on the Nazi *Endlösung* were created and a broad array of publications was completed before the end of 1940s—only to be largely neglected and almost fully forgotten afterwards and remain underexplored to this day.<sup>17</sup>

*Collect and Record!* also highlights the seminal contributions made by Jews originating from Eastern Europe to these early postwar endeavors. Jockusch explains that Polish Jewish survivors were the crucial actors, not only in Poland but also in France—the other major center of documentation discussed in her book. On the other hand, Jockusch unfortunately makes no reference to early postwar developments in Hungary. This is all the more regrettable since not only was approximately every third victim of Auschwitz a Hungarian Jew but Hungary was one of the countries with the largest group of Holocaust survivors in this period—and has remained so since.

Due, above all, to this large and active group of Jewish survivors, Hungary made an impressive start in producing detailed knowledge about various facets of the Nazi program of extermination, with a clear focus on “the fate” of Hungarian Jewry. In spite of severe problems related to social reintegration, material restitution and the local culture of commemoration, early Hungarian efforts to document the Holocaust were manifested in several major ways.<sup>18</sup> Publications by the controversial Hungarian Jewish journalist-turned-historian Jenő Lévai provided substantial overviews of the Hungarian Holocaust in the

15 Laura Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012).

16 On the history of the Ringelblum archive of Warsaw, see Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

17 Jockusch explicitly aims to retrieve these “remarkable efforts from oblivion and establish their rightful place as the foundation stone for later historical writing on the Holocaust.” Jockusch, *Collect and Record!*, 17.

18 On these problems, see Regina Fritz, *Nach Krieg und Judenmord. Ungarns Geschichtspolitik seit 1944* [After War and the Murder of the Jews. Hungarian History Politics since 1944] (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012).

second half of the 1940s.<sup>19</sup> Lévai's works belong among the earliest empirically based presentations of the Holocaust in any country, even if they were also responsible for the invention of several historical myths.<sup>20</sup> Second, crimes committed against Jews during the war years played highly prominent roles in the early Hungarian postwar trials.<sup>21</sup> Third, Hungarian Jewish witness testimonies took various forms immediately after the war. In spite of being omitted in a recent guide to the field of Holocaust literature, Jewish survivors published dozens of memoirs in Hungarian before the onset of Stalinism in the late 1940s.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the altogether twenty-nine interviewers working for the National Relief Committee for Deportees (*Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*, DEGOB) project alone created over 3,500 interview-based files in 1944–46, making it the largest pool of such sources apart from the Polish one.<sup>23</sup> The three main tasks of the National Relief Committee for Deportees were to help the repatriation of survivors to Hungary, provide social aid, and pursue projects of documentation. By September 1946, in addition to the interviews, DEGOB also created altogether 30,000 files on Hungarian Jewish survivors and 120,000 on people who perished during the Holocaust.<sup>24</sup> Members of DEGOB's Information Bureau were also present at major postwar trials to record parts of Jewish concern. Last but not least, they established a collection of Hungarian Jewish-related press materials featuring over 10,000 articles.

19 In English, see Jenő Lévai, *Black Book on the Martyrdom of Hungarian Jewry* (Vienna: Central European Times Publishing Company, 1948). On Lévai and the early Hungarian historiography of the Holocaust, see my “Jenő Lévai, the First Hungarian Historian of the Holocaust” (forthcoming).

20 Earliest Holocaust historians who are comparable to Lévai include Szymon Datner, Filip Friedman, Matatias Carp, Léon Poliakov, and Joseph Wulf. On Wulf, see Klaus Kempter, *Joseph Wulf. Ein Historikerschicksal in Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

21 See Andrea Pető and Ildikó Barna, *A politikai igazságszolgáltatás a II. világháború utáni Budapesten* (Budapest: Gondolat, 2012).

22 See the Bibliography compiled on the website of *Zachor Alapítvány*, accessed July 27, 2013, <http://www.emlekezem.hu/bibliografia/bibliografia1.html>. For their omission, see, for instance, David Roskies and Naomi Diamant, *Holocaust Literature: A History and Guide* (Walton, Mass.: Brandeis UP, 2013). I would like to thank Ilse Lazaroms for discussions on this point.

23 In the summer of 1945, the ever expanding collection came into the possession of the Documentation Office of the Jewish Agency for Palestine. It was in turn taken over by the World Jewish Congress on June 15, 1945. For further details, see the overview of 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 David Bankier and Dan Michman, eds., *Holocaust Historiography in Context. Emergence, Challenges, Polemics and Achievements* (London: Berghahn, 2009).

24 The two major aims of this activity were to produce a statistical overview of Hungarian Jewry after the catastrophe and be able to provide information on relatives.

DEGOB recorded over 3,500 interviews in a mere year and a half. The first one in the collection was conducted in December 1944 and the last in April 1946. The Organization of the Jews of Hungary from Outside Budapest (*Magyarországi Zsidók Szervezete Vidéki Osztálya*) conducted numerous interviews in the spring of 1945 that were later incorporated into the DEGOB collection. The central establishment of DEGOB in Budapest began to add its own by early summer of the same year. The length of the records produced varies from just a few paragraphs to dozens of pages. On average, however, they are mostly concise and descriptive pieces of one to four pages that only occasionally address more complex interpretative questions and largely avoid strongly emotionally charged matters.<sup>25</sup>

To help the work of the interviewer and standardize the contents, a questionnaire with twelve major themes was gradually developed. This 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; the way home. Ultimately, the thousands of early post-Holocaust Hungarian witness accounts were the result of semi-structured interviews, and they could well be considered co-products of interviewer and interviewee.<sup>26</sup>

The fact that the impressive early postwar Hungarian Jewish efforts remain heavily underrepresented in contemporary English-language scholarship (Jockusch's monograph being only one, though a key example here) is arguably part of an even larger problem, namely the rather peripheral position of Hungarian scholarship on the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup> Several current priorities of Holocaust research, including the incorporation and analysis of survivor testimonies, remain only

25 In my assessment, some of the most complex and valuable testimonies in the Buchenwald sample are DEGOB Records Number 177, 1902, 2569, 2789, 3237 and 3497.

26 The records show signs of post-interview editing as well, some going as far as to employ the phrase “the usual” to describe some of the drastic experiences many had to endure. See DEGOB Records Number 2920, 3128, 2514, among others.

27 For a nearly complete bibliography of publications on the Hungarian Holocaust, see Randolph L. Braham, *A magyarországi holokauszt bibliográfiája*, vols. 1–2 (Budapest: Park Kiadó, 2010). For a critique of Hungarian Holocaust historiography, see Gábor Gyáni, “Helyünk a holokauszt történetírásában,” *Kommentár* 3, no. 3 (2008): 13–23. For an elaborate reaction to this critique, see László Karsai, “A magyar holokauszt-történetírásról. Válasz Ablonczy Balázsnak, Csíki Tamásnak, Gyáni Gábornak és Novák Attilának,” *Kommentár* 3, no. 6 (2008): 91–104. While several leading historians of the Hungarian Holocaust, including Judit Molnár, Gábor Kádár, and Zoltán Vági, have drawn on evidence from the DEGOB collection, huge

marginally present in Hungarian historiography. It is indicative of this larger trend that some of the most important recent contributions to the prehistory and implementation of the Hungarian Holocaust devote exclusive attention to the perpetrator side and the mechanisms of destruction, without studying the reactions and behavior of the victims.<sup>28</sup> My paper aims to redress this imbalance by examining 349 DEGOB accounts that discuss Buchenwald, a major Nazi concentration camp and a contested *lieu de mémoire*.

### *Interviewees, Ghettos and Deportations*

Hungarian Jewish deportees experienced and narrated their time in Buchenwald in different ways depending on where they came from, how they arrived there, when and how long they had to stay and, last but certainly not least, what happened to them while they were there.<sup>29</sup> Since some of the 349 protocols that make reference to Buchenwald contain contributions from more than one person, they include the accounts of altogether 393 interviewees.<sup>30</sup> The files contain basic information on the background of most of these individuals. With the exception of two people who were born in Germany, all of the 393 interviewees came from the enlarged wartime territory of Hungary.<sup>31</sup> Even though the collection cannot make claims to representativeness, not even regarding the group of returnees, comparing the characteristics of this Buchenwald sample with the whole group of DEGOB interviewees still promises to yield important insights.

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parts of this large corpus remain practically unexplored. On oral history collections and their (limited) use by historians, see Éva Kovács, András Lénárt, and Anna Lujza Szász, “A magyar holokauszt személyes történetének digitális gyűjteményei,” *Buksz* 23, no. 4 (2011): 336–51.

28 Krisztián Ungváry, *A Horthy-rendszer mérlege. Diszkrimináció, antiszemitizmus és szociálpolitika Magyarországon* (Pécs: Jelenkor, 2012). Gábor Kádár and Zoltán Vági, *A végső döntés. Berlin, Budapest, Birkenau 1944* (Budapest: Jaffa, 2013).

29 While the first interviews in the collections are from late 1944, no Buchenwald-related interview could be conducted prior to the end of the war.

30 While some of the names of the interviewers are missing or proved illegible, I could identify them in 332 out of 349 cases. The 332 interviews that deal with Buchenwald were conducted by 21 interviewers. Margit Obláth conducted 35 of them, György Lázár 30, Lili Reiner 28, Franziska Pollák 27, Otto Rauch 25, Klára Vincze 24, Margit Weiss 23, Lilly Blau 17, Márta Bíró 16, Teréz Alexander 13, Márta Gutmann, Klára Kandel and Miksa Weisz 12, Ilona Haas 10. The remaining seven interviewers conducted less than ten interviews each. It ought to be noted that, with the exception of three males, all of the 21 interviewers were female.

31 The territory of Hungary was enlarged four times between 1938 and 1941 to incorporate regions that the country had ceded to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia (officially the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes until 1929) at the end of the First World War.

Prior to my textual analysis, I will therefore describe the sample of interviewees with particular attention to their gender, age, locations of ghettoization, and routes of deportation.

Due to the gendered manner of deportation and especially the almost exclusively male camp society of Buchenwald, there is a great gender imbalance in my sample. Only thirty of the 393 individuals are female, i.e. less than one in thirteen.<sup>32</sup> This sharply differs from the overall proportion of men and women in the DEGOB collection as a whole, where men constitute a very slight majority of 51 percent. The contrast is all the more striking since significantly more women than men were interviewed in the case of certain regions that include Kárpátalja (Subcarpathia), from where most of the Buchenwald interviewees came.<sup>33</sup>

In the overwhelming majority of cases (386 out of 393), the year of birth of the interviewees is also indicated in the files. All of them were born between 1887 and 1933. Thus, when they returned to Hungary and entered the offices of DEGOB in 1945–46, the oldest among them was 58 while the youngest merely 12. Their average age was 27.85, with a significant majority below 30. This closely resembles the overall sample of interviewees, in which the average age was 27.3.<sup>34</sup> It is conspicuous that nearly half (172 out of 386) of the interviewees were born between 1924 and 1929, i.e. were past 16 but not yet 22 in 1945.<sup>35</sup>

Regarding the location of ghettoization, the information is less systematic and the entries are not entirely consistent.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the 243 cases give

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32 The separation of men and women and, more generally, the gender question is addressed in a number of reports such as the following: DEGOB Records Number 730, 2570, 3128, 3158, 3213, 3290 and 3348.

33 69.2 percent of all interviewees from this particular region are women, notwithstanding the heavily male-dominated group that has been to Buchenwald. “A DEGOB-jegyzőkönyvek túlélőinek nemek szerinti megoszlása,” [Gender Distribution of Survivors in DEGOB Records], accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showarticle=51>.

34 In the Buchenwald sample, 119 were still in their teens and 117 were in their twenties in 1945, while 65 were in their thirties, 59 in their forties and merely 26 in their fifties. “A DEGOB-jegyzőkönyvek mintájának életkor szerinti elemzése,” [transl.], accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showarticle=52>.

35 The two most common years of birth are 1927 with forty and 1924 with thirty-four individuals. If the 30 individuals between 22 and 25 were added, the percentage of those between 16 and 25 would amount to 52.33 percent. Those aged between 16 and 25 also constitute a majority of 53.7 percent in the whole group of interviewees. Thus, the Buchenwald sample does not strongly differ from the whole in this respect either. “A DEGOB-jegyzőkönyvek mintájának életkor szerinti elemzése,” [transl.], accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showarticle=52>.

36 Not only do some entries refer to concentration (*koncentráció* in the original) but in twenty-five cases the entry refers to labor battalions. (It does so through the employment of various terms, most frequently

a reasonably reliable estimate of the regional origins of the interviewees. The results prove both unequivocal and striking. The most commonly appearing ghetto names are those of Munkács (Мукачеве in Ukrainian) with 39, Ungvár (Ужгород) with 35, Beregszász (Берегове) with 25 and Szeklence (Сокирниця) with 21, all of which are in Kárpátalja (Subcarpathia).<sup>37</sup> Mátészalka in Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg County is mentioned 16 times as the location of ghettoization and is therefore fifth on the list and first within the territory of postwar Hungary. Mátészalka is followed by Huszt (Хуст), Iza (Іза), Aknaszlatina (Солотвино), Felsővisó (Vișeu de Sus), Nagyszőlős (Виноградів) and Técső (Гячів). With the sole exception of Felsővisó from Máramaros (Maramureș in Romanian) County, each of these places is in Kárpátalja as well.<sup>38</sup> If we added Budapest with its multiple locations of “concentration,” there are twelve cities in the sample in which at least five of the interviewees were ghettoized, and nine of these twelve are in Kárpátalja.<sup>39</sup> These nine cities account for nearly two-thirds (157 out of 243) of all known cases—surpassing even the disproportionately high percent (48.6) of interviewees from this region in the DEGOB collection as a whole.<sup>40</sup>

In the case of 362 individuals, the various camps to which they were deported are listed at the beginning of their files. These entries can be divided into three large groups: 198 were taken to Auschwitz, while 123 were not.<sup>41</sup> Third, there are 41 cases in which Buchenwald is not included in the list of camps to which they were taken, but the name is referred to in the text in

one way or another. Of the 198 who had been to Buchenwald and had to go through Auschwitz too, 121 were taken from Auschwitz directly to Buchenwald and 70 arrived there through various alternative locations in between.<sup>42</sup> The most common patterns in this group of 198 individuals are the following: 38 of them were taken to four different camps and arrived at Buchenwald directly from Auschwitz. 20 of them were taken to Auschwitz and then to another camp before they arrived in Buchenwald where they were eventually liberated. 18 were taken to three camps but had to travel directly from Auschwitz to Buchenwald.<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the second group, the 123 Hungarian Jewish individuals who were taken to Buchenwald but not Auschwitz typically were deported from Hungary directly to Buchenwald. According to the list of camps at the beginning of the files, 38 of them were in two camps, 17 in three and 14 in four after first being deported to Buchenwald. Another common pattern was to have been at two camps, but to have been taken to Buchenwald twice: there are altogether eleven such returnees among the interviewees.<sup>44</sup> There is another significant cohort of nine interviewees who were not taken to Auschwitz, but rather were taken to three different camps, arriving in Buchenwald as the last of these three.<sup>45</sup>

*muszos*, the colloquial short form to refer to the person who had to perform it.) Some places in Budapest were concretely named, such as KISOK-pálya, Teleki tér, Bethlen tér or even “csillagos ház” (literary “house with a star,” in which Jews were forced to live in Budapest between June and late November or early December of 1944). Buchenwald is also mentioned twice as the place of ghettoization.

<sup>37</sup> On the Jewish history of this region, now see Viktória Bányai, Csilla Fedinec, and Szonja Ráhel Komoróczy, eds., *Zsidók Kárpátalján. Történelem és örökség* (Budapest: Aposztróf, 2013).

<sup>38</sup> Ignác Romsics, *Az 1947-es párizsi békeszerződés* [The Paris Peace Treaty of 1947] (Budapest: Osiris, 2006).

<sup>39</sup> Twenty-four locations are mentioned three or fewer times. There are several important Jewish centers among them such as Debrecen, Kassa (Košice), Kolozsvár (Cluj), Nagyvárad (Oradea) or Máramarossziget (Sighetu Marmajiei).

<sup>40</sup> “A DEGOB-jegyzőkönyvek túlélői a régiók szerinti megoszlás tükrében,” [transl.], accessed August 2, 2013, <http://www.degob.hu/index.php?showarticle=54>.

<sup>41</sup> Auschwitz is alternatively listed as Birkenau or as Auschwitz-Birkenau. Those who have not been to Auschwitz were typically deported already under Arrow Cross rule. The largest group here consists of those who claim to have traveled exactly 18 days to arrive in Buchenwald in December 1944. See DEGOB Records Number 392, 552, 1309, 1762, 2032, 2127, 2245, 2319, 2327, 2601, 2724, 2785, 2786, 2839, 2847, 2862, 2988, 3213, 3289, 3471, 3480, 3520 and 3553.

<sup>42</sup> This path is depicted in *Fatelessness*, a semi-autobiographical novel by Hungarian Nobel prize winning author Imre Kertész. Upon his return from Buchenwald, the main character of the novel, György Köves visits what appears to be the DEGOB offices (without the name of DEGOB being mentioned in the book). See Imre Kertész, *Fatelessness* (London: Vintage, 2004). I ought to note that there is an individual in the sample who has been to both but was deported to Buchenwald before Auschwitz (that is why the two numbers combined do not amount to 198).

<sup>43</sup> Slightly smaller numbers of Hungarian Jews were forced to travel in alternative ways: 18 were taken to five camps with no major one between Auschwitz and Buchenwald. 17 interviewees were similarly taken to five but did not travel directly from the former to the latter. 16 were taken to four camps and traveled on an indirect route from Auschwitz to Buchenwald. 13 were “only” taken to these two camps. 10 were taken to six camps, but traveled directly between the two, and 11 were taken to six, while traveling indirectly, and so on.

<sup>44</sup> These four groups combined thus add up to nearly two-thirds of all cases (80 out of 123).

<sup>45</sup> In addition to these common routes, there is also a great diversity of more peculiar ones. For instance, one individual was taken to four different camps and twice to Buchenwald, but while the first time around he arrived from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, he was later returned from elsewhere. The strange fate of another Hungarian Jew led him to experience conditions in six different camps. He was taken to Auschwitz, then later taken back to Buchenwald, but did not travel directly from the former to the latter. There were many such atypical examples.

### *Perspectives on Buchenwald: Bare Life in a Multiethnic Setting*

The DEGOB accounts of Buchenwald practically unanimously describe the conditions of their train journey to Buchenwald, a topic most famously depicted by Jorge Semprún in his *Le Grand Voyage*, as hardly bearable.<sup>46</sup> The arrival in Buchenwald tends to be described in nearly identical ways too. Numerous accounts explain that it involved the loss of the last items of personal property, a mass shower and being given inmate clothing. Several reports explicitly refer to the experience of being reduced to a mere number within the camp.<sup>47</sup> Many files contain observations concerning the camp as a whole, such as references to its enormous size and the density of its population.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, as I will aim to show, later experiences and the interpretations of these experiences upon liberation, and, consequently, the overall assessments of Buchenwald, strongly diverge. There is no clear consensus in the files regarding the kind of establishment Buchenwald was either. Several Hungarian Jewish witnesses testifying in 1945–46 spent only a few days or weeks there and understood Buchenwald to be a distribution center (*gyűjtőbely* or *gyűjtőtábor* in Hungarian).<sup>49</sup> Many other witnesses referred to it as a concentration camp, whereas some thought it was a death camp or even an extermination camp.<sup>50</sup>

Hardly any of the accounts relating personal experiences in Buchenwald map the camp, suggesting that Jewish inmates were not at all in a position to gain any detailed knowledge of it. There is only one account that at least aims to list the main parts of the camp, and does so in the following manner: “there were

three camps here: the small Lager, the Zeltlager and the great Lager.”<sup>51</sup> Beyond this, there is the occasional reflection on the faulty nature of memory, such as “my memories of it [of Buchenwald] were blurred by later horrors.”<sup>52</sup> Such statements could also lead to explicit admissions of having no real knowledge of the camp. For instance, one of the reports states that, “my memories of Buchenwald were erased by later horrors.”<sup>53</sup> Other inmates reflected on their forcefully restricted perspective: “this was a gigantic Lager and we could not see much of it,”<sup>54</sup> or referred to the lack of time they had to get acquainted with it: “I only stayed in Buchenwald for a very short time, six or eight days, and so I could not get any real insight into what was going on in the camp.”<sup>55</sup>

Discussions of Buchenwald camp society recurrently highlight its multinational<sup>56</sup> or multireligious, i.e. Christian and Jewish, character.<sup>57</sup> One Hungarian Jewish witness remarked that Buchenwald was not established specifically for Jews.<sup>58</sup> Another witness listed various kinds of inmates: “those captured belonged to different categories: there were political Jews, homosexuals, criminals, so called action Jews, such as those from the June action.”<sup>59</sup> On the other hand, several reports underlined that in this multiethnic camp Jews were either segregated, specially discriminated, or both.<sup>60</sup> Some survivors offered estimates of the number and proportion of Jews. One of them stated that 10,000 inmates were Jewish out of altogether 60,000.<sup>61</sup> Another maintained that

51 DEGOB Record Number 3290.

52 DEGOB Record Number 952.

53 DEGOB Record Number 2319. Other witnesses complained about their complete loss of memory. See DEGOB Records Number 2052, and 2319.

54 DEGOB Record Number 2176.

55 DEGOB Record Number 611.

56 DEGOB Records Number 177, 1313, 1348, 3095, 3402 and 3497. On the relations between experiences in this multiethnic camp and the postwar propagation of the European idea in France, see Ronald Hirte, Hannah Röttele and Fritz von Klinggräff, *Von Buchenwald (,) nach Europa: Gespräche über Europa mit ehemaligen Buchenwald-Häftlingen in Frankreich* (Weimar: Weimarer Verlagsgesellschaft, 2011).

57 DEGOB Record Number 489.

58 DEGOB Record Number 2235. On Jews being mixed with Russian prisoners of war, see DEGOB Record Number 2968. A rather surprising aspect of the accounts is that relatives hardly appear and references to friends in the camps are practically absent too. (It is indeed exceptional that the death of a friend is mentioned in DEGOB Record Number 1692.)

59 DEGOB Record Number 2377.

60 On the question of segregation, see DEGOB Records Number 1729, 2865 and 3290. Forms of anti-Jewish discrimination in Buchenwald are discussed in DEGOB Records Number 1183, and 1436.

61 DEGOB Record Number 1178.

46 Jorge Semprún, *The Cattle Truck* (London: Serif, 2005).

47 On this see, for instance, DEGOB Records Number 87, 952, 1750, 2618, 2623, 2789, 3091 and 3587.

48 On the size of the camp, see DEGOB Records Number 608, 669, 730, 1228, 1687, 2176, 2601 and 3402. On the population density among the prisoners, see DEGOB Records Number 1109, 1333, 1348, 1570, 1727, 2019, 2052, 2319, 2601, 3074 and 3440. A number of people were taken to Buchenwald but not interned there because the camp was already too full. For such stories, see DEGOB Records Number 90, 161, 1328, 1364, 1757, 1884 and 2798.

49 These notions or their semantic equivalents are found in DEGOB Records Number 83, 363, 911, 1178, 1348, 2386, 2706, 3071 and 3158. To quote from DEGOB Record Number 3587, “In Buchenwald everybody was assigned to an *Arbeitstransport*.”

50 For concentration camp, see DEGOB Records Number 651, 1318, 3290, 3291 and 3515. For death camp, see DEGOB Record Number 716. Buchenwald is called “Germany’s greatest extermination camp” in DEGOB Record Number 3103, while the German expression *Vernichtungslager* is used in DEGOB Record Number 177. Another inmate perceived Buchenwald as so deadly that he was convinced he needed to leave at all costs. DEGOB Record Number 696. Another survivor also associated Buchenwald with certain death. See DEGOB Record Number 3261.

there were 80,000 inmates and only three blocks of Jews in the whole camp,<sup>62</sup> while a third asserted that there were around 30,000 Jews in Buchenwald at the beginning of April 1945 (i.e. shortly before liberation).<sup>63</sup>

In his book *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben maintained that power confronted bare life in the camps without mediation.<sup>64</sup> His statement finds much support in the accounts of Hungarian Jewish Buchenwald survivors. These reports refer not only to “indescribable” forms of suffering,<sup>65</sup> terrible humiliations,<sup>66</sup> purposeless brutality and sadism,<sup>67</sup> and occasionally even to one’s own dehumanization (more on this question below),<sup>68</sup> but also extensively dwell on basic circumstances and elements of life, such as the possibilities to sleep and eat, occasionally including the amount of weight lost,<sup>69</sup> as well as the extreme cold that was described as being especially severe during the long hours of senseless waiting at *Appell* (roll call) outside.<sup>70</sup>

In the following two excerpts, one finds concise lists of many of these negative experiences:

We were undressed and our few remaining belongings were taken away. We were brought into a small room where three to four people slept in every bed. We were given pasta soup and bread but were so weak

62 DEGOB Record Number 489.

63 DEGOB Record Number 2623.

64 Agamben argued that insofar as camp inhabitants “were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute biopolitical space ever to have been realized.” Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 97.

65 The term indescribable appears in several records, including DEGOB Records Number 2096, 2706, 2786 and 3029. Somewhat curiously, the word “indescribable” could appear alongside “the usual,” attesting to the early difficulties of finding a language to describe the process of extermination. See DEGOB Record Number 857.

66 DEGOB Record Number 1616.

67 DEGOB Record Number 2789.

68 DEGOB Records Number 1178, 1348, 2132, 2789, 3068 and 3587.

69 DEGOB Records Number 664 and 3587. DEGOB Record Number 2865 provides reflection on the food question: “I speak so much about food because at that time nothing else interested us. Food meant life.” In another report, one reads about the delusional mistaking of dead bodies for food. See DEGOB Record Number 3103.

70 DEGOB Records Number 395 and 3291. As I noted above, the time of arrival could matter a great deal in terms of how Buchenwald was experienced and described later. Those who were deported in December 1944 arrived in the winter and the experience of freezing was among their most frequently discussed memories. The experience of waiting is highlighted, for instance, in the following reports: DEGOB Records Number 1676, 2374, 2475 and 3237.

that we could hardly eat. We were given very poor trousers, our coats were even worse, and we got a blanket each. The roll calls were very long and we suffered a great deal due to the cold. Our treatment was the worst imaginable. The SS men were walking around with their huge dogs and shot those who tried to escape.<sup>71</sup>

In Buchenwald, 1,500 people were put into a single block. We slept on wood in our clothes and shoes. We suffered a lot. My weight went down to 32 kilograms. The Capo of the SS would beat us for no reason. Roll calls lasted two to three hours per day. We had to get up at 5:00 am, got black coffee, one loaf of bread for six people and three-quarters of a liter of soup. We had no blankets and felt very cold. Many died of exhaustion. Life there was unbearable.<sup>72</sup>

In short, the Hungarian Jewish accounts of Buchenwald are replete with descriptions of experiences of freezing, severe hunger, the lack of space, and brutal violence (from above but occasionally also among inmates, to which I will return below). Nonetheless, as already noted, the overall assessment of the camp was far from uniform.

Several Hungarian Jewish survivors evaluated their time in the camp in extremely dark colors, “the days I had to spend in Buchenwald were the most horrible of my life.”<sup>73</sup>

We were subjected to the cruelest treatment there, we had to step on dead bodies, people were constantly in pain, whining and shouting due to the lack of space, but no one cared. The provision of food was also the weakest imaginable. I had to put up with awful suffering caused by hunger too.<sup>74</sup>

Such thoroughly negative assessments of Buchenwald are accompanied by somewhat more positive memories. In the DEGOB collection, one finds statements on how Buchenwald had “good” or at least “better” food,<sup>75</sup> that the treatment here was “relatively mild,”<sup>76</sup> even “quite decent,”<sup>77</sup> the inmates

71 DEGOB Record Number 653.

72 DEGOB Record Number 1430.

73 DEGOB Record Number 3314.

74 DEGOB Record Number 3471.

75 DEGOB Records Number 60, 83, 1852 and 3033.

76 DEGOB Record Number 1994.

77 DEGOB Record Number 2657.



were “relatively free,”<sup>78</sup> there was all in all “less suffering”<sup>79</sup> and the camp was “quite bearable.”<sup>80</sup> Another survivor called it his “luck” to have been taken to Buchenwald.<sup>81</sup> “I stayed ten days in Buchenwald, where I was put into the Zeltlager [tent camp] and this place felt like a holiday compared to Auschwitz.”<sup>82</sup> Other survivors highlighted that they had nothing to do in Buchenwald and all they could do was lie around.<sup>83</sup> According to some witnesses, life could be “monotonous,” even “boring” there.<sup>84</sup> Ironically, still others experienced Buchenwald not as a place of suffering and dying but of sickness and recovery: these witnesses got sick elsewhere and essentially gathered their experiences of Buchenwald in its hospital where they were eventually liberated.<sup>85</sup>

### *Living and Dying in Buchenwald*

The most crucial question to emerge from the witness accounts concerning Buchenwald appears to be how inmates struggled to survive and how they died there. Numerous survivors described the condition they were in as between life and death. According to one of the reports, the food that was provided “was too little to survive on but too much to die.”<sup>86</sup> Similarly, another explained that the food was minimal, “too little to live but a little too much to starve.”<sup>87</sup> A third stated that “we were half dead already at the train station,” i.e. even before they would have arrived in Buchenwald.<sup>88</sup>

Four of the DEGOB files discussing Buchenwald even refer to the concept of *Muselman* (in three cases the expression is used in Hungarian, i.e. as *muzulmán*), a term in the vocabulary of the camps that was used derogatively to refer to

those who were exhausted, starved and lethargic to the point of being resigned to their death.<sup>89</sup>

Dead bodies were lying in front of the blocks. When the camp was being emptied, I felt that I could not join them and decided to lie down among the dead. I stayed there for 36 hours until the whole camp was gone. Then I stood up with great difficulty. At that point, I was rather dead than alive since I could barely move.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to discussing the human condition between life and death, many accounts refer to one or several causes of death. The various forms of dying mentioned include freezing to death,<sup>91</sup> starvation,<sup>92</sup> being shot,<sup>93</sup> even being bombed by the Allies,<sup>94</sup> death through the brutal treatment of SS men,<sup>95</sup> or dying in the shower “simply” under the weight of falling water.<sup>96</sup> Some reports list numerous causes: “People died from diarrhea, typhus or exhaustion. The sick were supposedly murdered with injections. The crematorium was in constant operation.”<sup>97</sup>

Some of the 349 reports also include data on the number of survivors. There is little disagreement in the DEGOB files on the number of survivors who were in Buchenwald at the time of liberation. All the numbers given fall between 20,000 and 24,000.<sup>98</sup> There is greater variance on how many inmates were there previously. The numbers given climb from 70,000 to 80,000 and 90,000. Only one of the reports adds the temporal dimension to explain that the number

89 DEGOB Records Number 731, 1966, 1995 and 2865. The quotes are the following: “teljesen legyengültem, és ‘muzulmán’ lettem” (DEGOB Record Number 731). “Az 1400 emberből 1083-at, mint muzulmánt elvittek Auschwitzba” (DEGOB Record Number 1966), “Épp akkor állítottak össze egy muzulmán transzportot Buchenwaldba és onnan Auschwitzba. Ebbe a transzportba kerültem én is.” (DEGOB Record Number 1995), “Die Menschen waren alle Muselmänner” (DEGOB Record Number 2865). Three out of these four refer to the previous condition of the speaker. Another witness discusses his complete resignation to his fate, though without using this expression. See DEGOB Record Number 848.

90 DEGOB Record Number 669.

91 DEGOB Record Number 2623.

92 DEGOB Record Number 2096.

93 DEGOB Record Number 226.

94 DEGOB Record Number 1228.

95 DEGOB Record Number 1851.

96 DEGOB Record Number 1788.

97 DEGOB Record Number 1333.

98 The numbers are the following: 20,000 (DEGOB Record Number 32), 21,000 (DEGOB Records Number 327, 370, 1430 and 1788), 22,000 (DEGOB Records Number 33 and 3373), 24,000 (DEGOB Record Number 1582).

78 DEGOB Record Number 416.

79 DEGOB Record Number 1039.

80 DEGOB Record Number 1177.

81 DEGOB Record Number 327.

82 DEGOB Record Number 1966.

83 For the former, see DEGOB Record Number 1939. For the latter, DEGOB Record Number 1972.

84 For the former, see DEGOB Record Number 3253, the latter is found in DEGOB Record Number 1830.

85 For such stories, see, among others, DEGOB Records Number 189, 192, 551, 1309, 1808 and 3091.

86 DEGOB Record Number 66.

87 DEGOB Record Number 857.

88 DEGOB Record Number 237. In his recollection of an encounter with men who had been in Buchenwald, a Hungarian Jewish witness who had not been in the camp said of them, “these men were like the living dead.” DEGOB Record Number 885.

increased from 40,000 to 100,000 once camps farther east were dissolved and the Nazis moved their inmates further west.<sup>99</sup> Understandably, it was much more difficult for survivors to estimate the number of the dead than the number of the liberated. In fact, there is only one report that provides concrete figures regarding how many people had been murdered: “51,000 people were executed while I was there.”<sup>100</sup>

Numerous Hungarian Jewish interviewees were liberated in Buchenwald, and several of them told relatively detailed stories of their liberation (more on this below). Far fewer seem to have survived the death marches to make it subsequently to the DEGOB offices.<sup>101</sup> While many accounts refer to camp inmates being taken away just prior to liberation, there was hardly any knowledge of how many people were actually taken or what was done to them.<sup>102</sup> Some exceptional evidence is provided by a witness who arrived in Buchenwald just before its liberation and on the way there had observed the dead bodies of those forcibly removed only to be murdered.<sup>103</sup> In this regard, only two files provide concrete figures. One of them states that three-quarters of the 35,000 people who had to leave Buchenwald at the last moment were subsequently murdered.<sup>104</sup>

99 For 70,000, see DEGOB Record Number 32. For 80,000, see DEGOB Record Number 1430. For 90,000, see DEGOB Record Number 33. For the story of increase from 40,000 to 100,000, see DEGOB Record Number 1902. Some other accounts also refer to the arrival of further inmates from the East. See DEGOB Records Number 1995 and 3499. Otherwise the passage of time between arrival and liberation or departure is often barely apparent, confirming how difficult it must have been to mark the passing of time under the conditions in the camp. At the same time, the decline of living standards in Buchenwald is a recurrent theme of the reports, see DEGOB Records Number 327, 1313 and 1902. On the death marches out of Buchenwald, see Katrin Greiser, *Die Todesmärsche von Buchenwald. Räumung, Befreiung und Spuren der Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2008). On the death marches in general, see Daniel Blatman, *The Death Marches. The Final Phase of Nazi Genocide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

100 DEGOB Record Number 226. This witness also describes the method of murder (shooting through a hole in the wall) in detail.

101 For such rather exceptional cases of survivors of the death marches, see DEGOB Records Number 1584 and 1811.

102 The reverse was also the case: a witness who was forced out of Buchenwald right before liberation could not tell whether those who had remained survived. See DEGOB Record Number 2463. (This also shows that evidence already gathered through the DEGOB interviews was not necessarily shared with the interviewees at the time of their interview.)

103 DEGOB Record Number 552. The expression death march appears in report 3029. Some others were returned just as evacuations began (DEGOB Records Number 2052 and 2096) or arrived essentially at the time of the liberation of the camp (DEGOB Records Number 477 and 552).

104 DEGOB Record Number 565.

According to the other, 60,000 were murdered in the last minute. Most of them had been taken to Buchenwald “from neighboring camps” shortly before.<sup>105</sup>

### *Violence and Ethnicity*

Not only do the reports identify multiple causes of death, they also tackle the question of violence in alternative ways. On the following pages, my aim will be to identify patterns of how violence was discussed at the DEGOB offices. First of all, Hungarian Jewish survivors often connected their discussion of violence to that of ethnicity. Perpetrators were repeatedly ethnically labeled, even in texts that otherwise largely refrained from employing such labels. Second, survivors rarely affirmed their Jewishness. In all likelihood, this had to do both with the “Jewish” context of the interview situation, making more explicit statements unnecessary, as well as the fact that the perpetrators used Jewishness as a negative, even diabolical marker during the extermination process and so it was most dangerous to be assigned to this category until liberation.<sup>106</sup> Furthermore, the refusal to respond to orders directed at Jews was a key element of numerous accounts, as were successful attempts to acquire a different ethnic marker. Third, the processes of dehumanization under the terrible conditions of the camp and, more concretely, the level and forms of violence between inmates are among the most controversial aspects of the Holocaust.<sup>107</sup> Some of the early survivor accounts are distinguished precisely by the fact that they address these morally highly controversial issues more openly than many later, more pietistic and sanitized representations of the Holocaust.

105 DEGOB Record Number 756. While exact numbers prove impossible to ascertain, current estimates put the number of victims of the death marches out of Buchenwald at around 13000.

106 Exceptions include DEGOB Record Number 2046 and DEGOB Record Number 2203. According to the first, Jewish practices were performed upon liberation: “There was a Jewish rabbi among the Americans. We held a mass after which we sang the Hebrew anthem and he gave a mezuzah to all of us.” According to the second, the loss of life among members of the Jewry was lamented in the following manner: “Hundreds of people passed away, doctors, lawyers, talented people, the best of Jewry.”

107 Since Jews were obviously completely innocent in terms of the Nazi accusations made against them, it is a non-negotiable cultural standard to have them depicted as innocent victims of the Holocaust. This is fully understandable and even morally laudable. The debate on the choices Jews made during the Holocaust and, more generally, their forced involvement in the process of their own destruction has led to bitter controversies and has often focused on the role of the Jewish councils. An insightful early examination of the topic is Isaiah Trunk, *Judenrat. The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation* (New York: Stein & Day, 1977).

The ethnicization of violence is manifested in relatively simple discursive forms, such as in the following excerpts: “I simply could not continue my work any longer. The Polish Capo, who was supposed to supervise us, saw this. He beat me badly with his gun and kicked me too.”<sup>108</sup> “Our supervisors were Christian Poles who treated us in the cruelest manner.”<sup>109</sup> “We had to bear a lot from the Poles, who would beat us with decks and dongs.”<sup>110</sup> “We spent four weeks there and had no work to do, but the Polish Capos responsible for us did us considerable harm.”<sup>111</sup> “The SS orders were carried out by Ukrainian youth who would constantly beat us.”<sup>112</sup> These statements confirm that there was a complex hierarchy of ethnic groups in Buchenwald and Hungarian Jews tended to suffer everyday abuses not at the hands of German Nazis, but rather at those of Eastern European collaborators whom the Germans recruited through various means.

The most frequently reported case of avoiding the potentially lethal Jewish label was when, shortly prior to the evacuation of Buchenwald, Jews were called to the *Appellplatz*. The stories told by several survivors were almost identical in this regard. “When the Jews were called, I did not go, and so when the Americans liberated the camp I was still alive, even if sick.”<sup>113</sup> “The next evening all the Jews were gathered on Appellplatz. I sensed the danger and with a few others, I decided to return to the small Lager. The next day the order ‘Appell Juden antreten’ was repeated, but I did not show up then either.”<sup>114</sup>

Stories of escape that center on the refusal to be identified as Jewish by the Nazis were accompanied by those focusing on the successful change of the ethnic marker. “I cannot tell what happened to this fellow of mine. I got hold of a Yugoslav badge, which I put on my coat, and I qualified as an Aryan from that moment onwards,” explained one of the survivors.<sup>115</sup> “The next morning an Appell of the whole camp was called. Three SS men selected Jews to be taken to work in a factory. I managed to go over to the Russians. The next day, I was transported to Theresienstadt alongside them,” another recalled.<sup>116</sup>

In addition to such changes of ethnic belonging in the camp, some survivors indicated that they managed to qualify as Christians. “I stayed at a carpenter shop and was again registered as a Christian. When I heard the megaphones shout ‘Sämtliche Juden antreten’, I thought that this could only get me into trouble and went over to the Christians instead.”<sup>117</sup> “In the children’s block, the Blockältester [barrack leader] was Czech. After much effort, he managed to arrange to have the bureau of the Lager register us as Christians.”<sup>118</sup>

Not all Hungarian Jewish survivors of Buchenwald had such good fortune in their attempts to escape the genocidal anti-Semitism of the Nazis, and many of them had much darker episodes to narrate. Accounts of scenes of humiliation were unavoidably accompanied by the sense of having been dehumanized and were thus the most painful to recall. Nonetheless, such memories were not fully repressed in 1945–46.<sup>119</sup> Some survivors would explicitly state that they were dehumanized in Buchenwald: “I cannot tell the day or the date, we were no longer humans at this point, we lived like the most misfortunate animals.”<sup>120</sup> Others would describe awful scenes of humiliation in some detail:

Putting the food of the hungry masses into the middle of the Appellplatz was one of the amusements of the Lagercommandant [SS officer, commander of the camp]. Given the signal, the masses of people ran for the hot food in the cauldrons and trampled each other. The cauldron was turned around and the food was lost. The SS official was very amused at this.<sup>121</sup>

Another survivor discussed how the deported related to the psychological problems of others in the context of their own dehumanization by providing the following example: “Many became hysterical. Nothing describes better how rough we became than the fact that we hit these crazy ones, not least to acquire more space.”<sup>122</sup>

This quotation touches on the controversial question of violence by and among the inmates. A less radical reference to this issue runs as follows: “we

108 DEGOB Record Number 177.

109 DEGOB Record Number 487.

110 DEGOB Record Number 906.

111 DEGOB Record Number 940.

112 DEGOB Record Number 3520.

113 DEGOB Record Number 323.

114 DEGOB Record Number 2657.

115 DEGOB Record Number 289.

116 DEGOB Record Number 1163.

117 DEGOB Record Number 2100.

118 DEGOB Record Number 2524.

119 Perhaps the chief symbol of depersonalization remains the aforementioned reduction of individuals to numbers upon arrival. DEGOB Record Number 2132 succinctly formulates this link: “I was given my prisoner’s clothes and a number. I ceased to be a human being.”

120 DEGOB Record Number 1178.

121 DEGOB Record Number 2789.

122 DEGOB Record Number 3587.

were taken to shower and made to wait there for hours. We felt great hunger. People started fighting like animals just to get a little water.”<sup>123</sup> In the course of a more radical discussion of this problem the claim is made that the almost starved inmates of Buchenwald killed each other.<sup>124</sup> Last but not least, three former workers of the Buchenwald crematorium offered an account at the DEGOB office that is in many ways exceptional, not least of all because it narrates their own violent acts, including how they mistreated Germans after liberation (more on this report below).<sup>125</sup>

Without meaning to assess the level and types of violence among the inmates of Buchenwald on the basis of these scattered references, I would conclude by noting that one of the major causes of violence seems to be its previous experience.<sup>126</sup> The DEGOB records indicate that Hungarian Jewish survivors of the Holocaust may often have constituted exceptions to this more general pattern—even if not all of them proved exceptional in this respect. Sustained attempts at dehumanization can prove effective. Such acts are evil in themselves, but also in their consequences, and need to be condemned accordingly.<sup>127</sup>

### *Stories of Liberation and Resistance*

Stories of having remained sick or of having contracted illnesses after liberation are much more typical of the sample as a whole than the aforementioned singular case of violent revenge. The arrival of the Americans thus did not constitute a complete break in the life of every witness. The treatment they were given may have been a dramatic improvement, but many of them first stayed in the same hospital building.<sup>128</sup> Notwithstanding recurrent references to continued poor health, apart from the day of arrival, no day was more often discussed than

that of liberation.<sup>129</sup> Its date was usually specified too, though survivors gave a number of different ones. April 11, 1945 was most commonly given.<sup>130</sup>

In the DEGOB offices, two major stories were told regarding the liberation of Buchenwald. One referred to the Nazis and their last minute plan of extermination, a story of the narrowest and most dramatic escape from looming Armageddon, though often narrated in a rather dry manner. The other was a leftist narrative of resistance and successful uprising that contributed to the later canonization of the heroic story of Buchenwald under the Communist regimes. Both of them were told in alternative ways and are therefore worth exploring in some detail.

In the case of the former plot, the following three examples may illustrate the contrast between style and content: “During the last week they tried to exterminate the whole of the Jewry. I was sick and was hospitalized.”<sup>131</sup>

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 just an hour in advance and hindered the execution of their plan.<sup>132</sup>

I only found out later that we were in mortal danger. The SS Commandant of Weimar had ordered the execution of the whole Lager but they did not have enough time. The Americans were already very close and the Lagercommandant of Buchenwald decided to flee. We were thus saved from certain death.<sup>133</sup>

123 DEGOB Record Number 2365.

124 DEGOB Record Number 1500.

125 DEGOB Record Number 1232.

126 Harald Welzer writes of *autotelische Gewalt* or self-serving violence, most recently in Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle von Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 2011).

127 The point is made in relation to torture by Leszek Kolakowski, “My Correct Views on Everything” in idem, *Is God Happy? Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 2012).

128 Such stories are in fact so frequent that it appears those who had been declared sick had a better chance of surviving the last moments in the camp than the nominally healthy, because they were left behind, while the latter were forced into death marches.

129 The liberation of Mauthausen has recently been analyzed in Anna Lujza Szász and Júlia Vajda, “Mindig van éjség.” *Pillanatképek Mauthausen felszabadulásáról* (Budapest: ELTE Eötvös Kiadó Kft., 2012).

130 It can be found in DEGOB Records Number 538, 664, 756, 810, 818, 841, 855, 905, 906, 1349, 1582, 1590, 1687, 1692, 1946, 2052, 2203, 2227, 2492, 2706, 2760, 2789 and 2973. Other accounts mentioned April 12 (DEGOB Record Number 565), 13 (DEGOB Record Number 226), 14 (See DEGOB Records Number 540, 669, 675, 2720, and 3373, making April 14 the second most common reference.), 15 (DEGOB Record Number 2519), and April 25 (DEGOB Record Number 645) May 6 (DEGOB Record Number 498) or simply “the beginning of May” (DEGOB Record Number 258). There is a case where the camp discussed appears to have been falsely identified as Buchenwald: DEGOB Record Number 2576 claims that Buchenwald was liberated by the Russians on May 15.

131 DEGOB Record Number 1219.

132 DEGOB Record Number 1582.

133 DEGOB Record Number 1994.

Another witness tells the same story from a particular angle: he explains that he heard about the plan of extermination from an SS man who towards the very end of the war attempted to strike a deal with the surviving Jews.

Suddenly they wanted to take us to Buchenwald. An SS man, who was among our custodians and who was an ethnic German from Poland, told us that the SS had been given orders to take us to Buchenwald and murder us all there. He treated us well and expected us to justify his behavior once we fell into the hands of the Americans.<sup>134</sup>

In another report, one finds a more controversial way of narrating the plans and practices of the SS. In this report, a Hungarian Jewish survivor largely reproduces the rather apologetic story he came to hear from a friendly German soldier:

The SS were told in the spring [of 1945] that those who would want to exterminate the Jews should apply. A German soldier who treated me very well told me this. Grenades were handed out and 600 Jews were supposed to be killed, but very few men applied and nothing came of the plan.<sup>135</sup>

In addition to the narrative conveying the sense of impending doom that accompanied the experience of liberation, another one was in relatively wide circulation regarding the last moments of the Nazi camp that concerned the uprising of the inmates and their defeat of the SS. One Hungarian Jewish witness even claimed to have participated in it:

We took rifles from the external factories into the camp earlier and now we finally rose up against the SS. There were 200 of us and many of us died. The SS consisted of around 400 men. We took many of their rifles and so we managed to acquire more weapons and were ultimately victorious.<sup>136</sup>

According to another survivor, some French inmates but especially the Russian prisoners of war were the key actors in the successful uprising: “Another

134 DEGOB Record Number 2160.

135 DEGOB Record Number 1228. On the voluntary participation of ordinary men in the Nazi genocide, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998).

136 DEGOB Record Number 3497.

Frenchmen managed to cut the wires by sacrificing his life. Electricity was gone. Russian prisoners of war got hold of rifles in the nearby ammunition factory and defeated the SS in six hours.”<sup>137</sup>

Another version of the self-liberation story held that cooperation between the inmates and the American liberators led to the successful operation: “With hidden weapons and American help, the Häftlings [Inmates] captured 90 percent of the SS men.”<sup>138</sup> An alternative narrative focused on the Spanish inmates of Buchenwald while also assigning a significant role to the Americans:

By this time the white flag flew over the entrance of the camp. In the meantime we found out that the Spanish inmates had managed to cut the high-voltage cables and attacked the SS from behind, getting hold of their weapons. They captured some 200 of them. In subsequent days, the Americans captured the rest.<sup>139</sup>

Not only did these heroic stories of liberation have strong political connotations in early postwar Hungary but several accounts included explicit statements regarding the benevolent role of Communists in the camp.<sup>140</sup> According to one such story,

German, French and Russian comrades hindered the evacuation of the camp, which would have meant certain death. They provided us with packages from the French Red Cross even though they were not supposed to be given to Jews. It is thanks to Hungarian Communists that the majority of Hungarian Jews managed to return home from Buchenwald.<sup>141</sup>

Other accounts emphasized how well-organized and powerful the Communists were among the inmates of Buchenwald. One account argued that “the Communist organization was in control of the situation in the Lager,”<sup>142</sup> while another explained that “there was a very strong Communist organization in Buchenwald, they even managed to provide the last transport with 200

137 DEGOB Record Number 1232. The idea that the inmates managed to communicate with their subsequent liberators is also found in DEGOB Records Number 1349 and 2789.

138 DEGOB Record Number 327.

139 DEGOB Record Number 2789.

140 See DEGOB Records Number 162, 1228 and 2132.

141 DEGOB Record Number 324.

142 DEGOB Record Number 1687.

rifles,”<sup>143</sup> whereas a third maintained that “the leaders and the Blockaltersters were German Communists and Social Democratic Party members, Frenchmen and Dutch. The camp had its autonomous leadership, which would distribute the little they had received from the Germans in a just manner.”<sup>144</sup>

### *Survivors Approaching the Program of Extermination in 1945–46*

Hungarian Jewish survivors of Buchenwald might not have possessed all the evidence on the extent and coherence of the Nazi Judeocide in 1945–46 but several DEGOB accounts strongly suggest that they grasped the basic features of the unprecedented program of extermination and were also well aware of the means that were used to murder the large majority of Hungarian Jews (i.e. the use of gas).<sup>145</sup> Various accounts make references to the crematorium of Buchenwald—one of them being the account of Hungarian Jews who had to work there. Other survivors addressed one of the basic tensions at the heart of the German war economy: the program of economic exploitation and that of extermination were only reconcilable within limits beyond which Nazi Germany had to determine its priorities. Some persecuted Jews not only discovered this tension (which was way too often “resolved” in favor of extermination), but often argued that, when it came to their specific cases, the recognition of the value of their labor overruled the politics of genocide.

At the same time, even those Hungarian Jewish survivors who seemed fully able to grasp as early as 1945–46 the basic features of the catastrophe that befell Jewry were struggling to find ways to describe it. As part of this, they employed conventional phrases that could only prove misleading in the case of the Holocaust. For instance, one of the witnesses used gendered discourse, as if only adult men had been murdered, while others had survived: “The cold was unbearable, every single day seven or eight people passed away in each wagon.

They were simply thrown out and onto the roads. Many of these men are still expected to return home by their mothers, wives and children.”<sup>146</sup>

Other survivors addressed the program of extermination but had problems doing so in direct speech. In the two locations of the Buchenwald sample where the extermination of European Jewry was most explicitly referenced, the form chosen was that of the dialogue: “The Blockältester remarked to us ‘Dirty miserable Jews, you believe that even if the Germans were to lose the war, we would not have the power to kill you all? Either way, you will not leave this place alive!’”<sup>147</sup> A second report offers an even more explicit but similarly dialogical instance: “When I slowly entered the gate of Buchenwald, an SS man hit me. I asked him why he had done this and he answered me, ‘You are a dirty Jew and we sentenced all of you to death.’”<sup>148</sup> The choice of the particular form, i.e. making a German Nazi speak, is all the more conspicuous, since otherwise it was hardly ever employed in these records.

The method of gassing appears in two notable places. One witness referred to his fear of being gassed in the following manner: “I looked around and saw that the place was used for showering. I immediately thought that we would be gassed, that this must be the reason why so many people had been herded into such a place.”<sup>149</sup> Another witness maintained that gas was actually in use in Buchenwald to murder those whose labor was not needed:

When a larger group needed to be burned, they were taken to Buchenwald, where four crematoria were in operation day and night. They told people that they would have to take a shower, they were given soap and towel and then they arrived in a room with showers. When all of them were inside, they closed the door and let gas enter through the showers. The Germans had one single goal: to murder everyone who was no longer useful for them, who could not work for them, was sick, too old or just a small child.<sup>150</sup>

As already noted, there were discrepancies between different agencies of Nazi Germany during the program of extermination on the question whether

143 DEGOB Record Number 1694.

144 DEGOB Record Number 3048.

145 The expression *Vernichtungslager* appears in 144 DEGOB files (in nine instances it is incorrectly spelled). Notably, more than two-thirds of these 144 documents are otherwise in Hungarian. Various Hungarian translations of *Vernichtungslager*, such as *megsemmisítő tábor*, *megsemmisítő láger* and *megsemmisítő lager*, were used as well but each less than ten times. *Gaskammer*, the German expression for gas chamber, can be found in 60 of the files, its Hungarian equivalent *gázkamra* in 163.

146 See DEGOB Record Number 2134. DEGOB Record Number 2706 discusses how people were burned alive. The interviewee added that he did not know whether this happened on purpose or by accident.

147 DEGOB Record Number 3587.

148 DEGOB Record Number 1808.

149 DEGOB Record Number 3587.

150 DEGOB Record Number 2789.

the priority was extermination of the Jews or the exploitation of Jewish labor. Several DEGOB reports refer to this tension. According to one, for instance,

An SS man, supposedly a Hungarian doctor, arrived from Buchenwald in January 1945. His opinion was that people should not be murdered but given time to rest, so they could be made to work again. I heard that he was the one to initiate the transport of some 1,200 Häftlings, including me, to Buchenwald.<sup>151</sup>

There are two further brief discussions on how working as a prisoner for the German war economy could prove lifesaving in the context of the immoral rationality of certain perpetrators: “Since they were satisfied with our work, they sent back a message stating that the factory owner needed us. This is how we escaped death.”<sup>152</sup> Second, “they were satisfied with our work and needed it too. It would have made no sense to employ superfluous cruelty and thereby make us unfit for work. They would have thereby robbed themselves of their work force.”<sup>153</sup>

The crematorium of Buchenwald was usually briefly discussed, for instance, “I got the worst impressions upon arrival. The crematorium was the first thing I saw. I do not need to emphasize how uncomfortable I felt.”<sup>154</sup> Or to cite another example, “There was a crematorium in Buchenwald too. On average, there were 5,000 deaths per day.”<sup>155</sup> By far the most detailed evidence was offered in the report in which inmates who had to work there discussed their experiences:

We worked at the crematorium of Buchenwald for some three weeks. Our job was to move the coal from the wagons to the basement. There was a five meters deep pit in the courtyard of the crematorium. Due to the narrowness of the space, the misfortunate ones selected for extermination had to push each other. They pushed each other into that pit, whether they intended to or not. The murderers of the SS helped this process from behind while their cronies stood below. The latter pushed iron hooks through the maxilla of the poor victims and they hanged them up on the wall there in the basement like cattle hangs in the meat shop. They started hitting them with rubber that had some wires in it too. We heard terrible shouting and crying. We would have

been executed too, had the Americans not arrived. They only let the employees of the crematorium live for three months.<sup>156</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Contrary to influential assertions on the early postwar silence surrounding the extermination of European Jewry, in Hungary, as in a number of other countries, extensive documentation of the Holocaust had already begun in the mid-1940s. Long before the era of the witness, in addition to the postwar trials, published memoirs and early historical works, thousands of Hungarian Jewish survivors articulated their experiences in the offices of the National Relief Committee for Deportees (DEGOB). The above analysis of 349 Hungarian Jewish accounts of Buchenwald concentration camp recorded in 1945–46 describes this select group of DEGOB interviewees in terms their gender, age, locations of their ghettoization and routes of deportation. Beyond quantitative issues, the paper has in turn focused on definitions, descriptions and assessments of Buchenwald, on discussions of the prevailing conditions, various manners of dying and states in-between life and death, on how the experience of violence and ethnic identifications were discursively related, on stories of liberation, resistance and chance escape, as well as on the scattered references to the overall Nazi program of extermination.

The study of these early accounts reveals that whereas a number of witnesses understood their escape from the Jewish camp group as the key to their eventual survival, many tended to employ ethnic labels to identify the perpetrators of violence against them, and this frequently meant references to Eastern European collaborators. It also becomes clear that previous camp experiences, such as experiences in Auschwitz and horrible train journeys, often provided bases for comparison that made Buchenwald appear in a less unfavorable light—in spite of the brutal violence, severe hunger, terrible cold, insufficient space, poor hygiene, harsh working conditions and, ultimately, mass death. At the same time, some of those who survived Buchenwald and were interviewed at the DEGOB offices shortly afterwards were clearly aware of the general characteristics of the Nazi program of annihilation, though they preferred to discuss it in indirect ways in the immediate aftermath of its horrors.

151 DEGOB Record Number 857.

152 DEGOB Record Number 2046.

153 DEGOB Record Number 3033.

154 DEGOB Record Number 3261.

155 DEGOB Record Number 33.

156 DEGOB Record Number 1232.

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