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“The first time I saw my father cry” – ego-documents by children from the Szeged region on the Holocaust

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ABSTRACT

Szeged was the main deportation centre for Southern Hungary, in June 1944 three trains departed from here. The first train went to Auschwitz, where most people were killed upon arrival. The second train was uncoupled, half going to Auschwitz. The train’s second half and the third transport ended up in Strasshof near Vienna, where most people survived. The setup of these transports resulted in Szeged’s Jewry having an exceptionally high survival rate, including children and elderly. The current paper serves as a collection of ego-documents by Jewish children from Szeged, their lives in concentration camps, and their immediate post-war lives.

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Expanded introduction

In June 1944, five Jewish leaders were sitting in a shed in the brick factory of Szeged and, by German command, made various lists of their fellow Jews. Without knowing the purpose of the lists, they decided who ought to get a chance of survival. After the war, these lists were lost. In a research project in 2020/2022, an international research team led by the author of the current article tried to reconstruct the final list created by the Jewish leaders and the other transportation lists of Jews deported from Szeged in the last days of June 1944. The research was done based on archival material and testimonies, complemented by state-of-the-art data science. The current paper describes the events around the deportation through the eyes of children who were deported from Szeged.

Szeged’s Jewish Community in Hungary was established more than two centuries ago and has a rich cultural and historical heritage. Similarly to other Jewish populations in Europe, many Jewish citizens from Szeged were murdered during the Holocaust. The Hungarian authorities deported 437,000 Hungarian Jews in less than two months. In many cases, no records have survived on the deportation, neither on the Hungarian side nor at the destination, which in most cases was Auschwitz. The majority of the deported were killed within 24 hours of arrival, with no records. As a major regional centre in Southern Hungary, the city of Szeged was the main deportation centre for the surrounding villages (Csongrád County) and parts of current Northern Serbia, the Bačka region, at that time under Hungarian

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occupation. Approximately 2,000 Jews living near Novi Sad in Bačka were ultimately transported to Auschwitz or Strasshof in April and May 1944 via Szeged. In June 1944, 8,617 people, including all the Jews of the surrounding cities and villages, were deported from Szeged in only three days.

The first train went to Auschwitz, where most victims were murdered. The second train was uncoupled. Half of the train went to Auschwitz and half to Strasshof, a labour camp north of Vienna. The third train was also sent to Strasshof, where most Jews survived. A small group consisting of 66 people on the third train were transported to Budapest. Because of the organisation and destination of the transports of Jews from Szeged, the post-war Jewish community of Szeged was one of the most intact Jewish communities in the Hungarian countryside. It had an exceptionally high survival rate, estimated at 50–60%, including babies, children, and elderly. In the case of Szeged, this also means that a relatively large number of testimonies and memoirs from people of all ages and backgrounds are available. Several questions can be raised regarding both the process of the deportations and the reconstruction of the events: How do children remember the events? How precise are their memories? How do they recall their parents' role during the time of the displacement?

The current article is a collection of texts written by child survivors within the framework of a research project¹ conducted in the Szeged Jewish Community (SzJC). The main sources of the current paper are published testimonies of survivors who were legally children at the time of the deportation. These are supplemented by supporting documents from the newly catalogued, indexed and partly digitised archives of the Szeged Jewish Community,² the regional and national archives, the already existing background literature, and various Holocaust-related online databases as well as genealogical sites.³ In 1944, § 1 of Act XX of 1877 defined the age of majority for both men and women as beginning at the age of 24.⁴ Because Jewish children as young as 14 years old were included by law in the category of eligible forced labourers from 1939⁵ on, in the current paper, the definition of childhood has been restricted to children who were at most 14 years old at the time of the deportation.

The history of the deportations from Szeged has been researched mainly by Judit Molnár (Szeged University) and others. In 2004, the Hungarian Research group of Yad Vashem Archives (leader: László Karsai and Judit Molnár), together with Kinga Frojimovics (Director of the Hungarian Section in Yad Vashem Archives), conducted a basic categorisation of the documents of the Szeged Jewish Community related to the Holocaust and recorded them on microfilm. The Szeged Jewish Community keeps a copy of these microfilms, and another copy, including a digitised version, is kept by Yad Vashem. The most extensive and most recent work on the history of the deportations to Strasshof from Szeged was published by Kinga Frojimovics and Judit Molnár in 2021.⁶ Several researchers have dealt with testimonies from children from various aspects. Some of their work has focused on testimonies of children transported to Strasshof. Cohen and Horváth explored the immediate post-war testimonies of child survivors.⁷ Horváth's article offers an in-depth analysis of the testimony of a child survivor and tests the usefulness of testimonies from children.⁸

Some quotes from Zsolt Urbancsok's study of Hungarian children's testimonies from the Holocaust⁹ have been used for the present article.

Sources

The present article aims to analyse the events of the year between May 1944 and June 1945, as described by survivors who were children at that time through ego documents – records written in the first person providing a personal account of the author's life, including their emotions, perceptions, and memories – that were produced later in adulthood. The events of this year include the ghettoisation of Jews in Szeged, their deportation, the months of displacement, and finally their liberation and return.

Testimonies often describe even minor events and enable the reconstruction of the sequence of events. However, these first-hand accounts are often imprecise. In some cases, they originate from survivors who were children during the Holocaust. Nevertheless, these testimonies, too are essential to reconstructing the details. Accounts of personal experiences describe different aspects of the selection process and offer a unique view of events. The testimonies reflect coping skills and strategies and how, when and on what basis pre-existing networks were used to ensure that a family's members would be added to the list of the third transport.

Due to the high number of child survivors from the Szeged region, several testimonies and memoirs can be used to evaluate the events through children's eyes. Most of these children were deported and stayed together with their closest family members during the Holocaust, which is reflected in their writings. Many of them were old enough to remember the most important events of the tragic year of 1944–1945. A common motif in their accounts is the presence of their parents and grandparents, which must have eased the trauma.

As the basis of the article, the author has chosen various autobiographical accounts and memoirs – formal and less formal, all written by children born or grew up in Szeged or its neighbouring towns. The article aims to describe how five children from the Szeged region experienced the events. The five children are the following:

Iván Wollner-Bódis was born in 1937 in Szeged, and he was deported together with his mother, grandparents and great-grandmother.¹⁰

Veronika Szöllös, b. 1937 in Szeged, was deported together with his parents and maternal grandparents. All of them survived. Her maternal grandmother, Mrs László Hoffmann, née Ilona Szigeti, used to be the director of the Szeged Jewish Kindergarten, and she set up a kindergarten during the displacement.¹¹

Vera Gara, b. 1933 in Vienna, is the granddaughter of Márk Pick, the founder of the Pick Salami factory. She was deported together with her parents.

Ichak Wolster, b. 1931 in Szeged, was deported together with his grandmother.

Pál Bárdos, b. 1936 in Makó, was deported together with his mother, grandparents and younger brother.

Memories from the ghetto – May 1944

The German army occupied Hungary on 19 March 1944, and the fate of the Jews of Hungary was finalised. In Szeged, on 29 April 1944, chief count Sándor Tukats instructed

deputy mayor Béla Tóth to establish the city ghetto. The mayoral decree on the ghettoisation of Jews was issued on May 17, and the ghettoisation of the local Jews was planned to begin on May 22.¹² The ghetto consisted of designated buildings around the Old and the New Synagogue, with the synagogues and the community building in its centre.¹³ Iván has vivid memories of the German soldiers who oversaw the implementation of ghettoisation:

We were taken away in May '44. I was to start school in October. I remember the German soldiers outside our house. There I saw one of them drying his back with a towel. Until then, I had always been wiped. First, we were put in the ghetto in Valéria Square, then we were transferred to the brick factory.¹⁴

The most extensive account of the events was written by Veronika Szöllős, aged seven at the time of the deportation. She remembers how her pocket money was taken away.

In Szeged, the synagogue and its surroundings were ghettoised, fenced off with board fences. We also had to move and were crammed into an apartment with several other families. By then [the time of the ghetto], Dad was with us. I used to say he had returned home just in time for deportation! We were with Grandpa and Grandma too.

Before being taken to the brick factory, everyone had to enter the community centre building. In the main hall were huge paintings of the former presidents of the community wearing Hungarian ceremonial dress! As good Hungarian Jews, Jewish Hungarians, Hungarians of the Mosaic persuasion, I do not know what. However, it also shows how assimilated the Jews of Szeged were. Everyone had to unpack in the room where the gendarmes were sitting and give them jewellery, money, everything. I had a little money I had saved up, twenty fillér coins and ten fillér coins. I approached the gendarme and asked him, 'Do I have to give my collected money?' He said yes. And I poured all the change into his palm. Then they were very restrictive with our belongings, but fortunately, we still had some warm clothes. My father had a leather jacket lined with sheepskin, which became a lifesaver the following year. My father was incredibly practical, I think those two years on the front improved him a lot in that respect.¹⁵

Memories from the brick factory

The evacuation of the ghetto began on 16 June 1944, when the Jews were taken to the territory of the Szeged brick factory, a transit ghetto. The Jews of nearby settlements had already been taken there. Thus, there were 8,617 people in the brick factory, slightly less than half of whom originally lived in the city.¹⁶ Eventually, out of the 3,827 people in the Szeged ghetto, 3,095 were moved to the brick factory. 737 people were exempted from deportation for various reasons.¹⁷

Iván Wollner-Bódis was also deprived of his school bag. According to his memories, however, this happened in the brick factory.

I had nothing with me but my leather schoolbag, which I would take to school in the autumn. I complained to a German doctor that they had taken it away from me, but he said not to worry, I would get a nicer one in Germany. Then we were put into wagons in the station.¹⁸

Veronika Szöllős has memories from her days in the brick factory and the creation of deportation lists.

Then we left to the brick factory. The march from the ghetto to the brick factory seems like a nightmare. [...] I do not know how much of what I remember as my memory and how much of it comes from family stories, but I do know that in the brick factory, there were people who went mad, people who committed suicide, and people who gave birth. They took the sick out of the hospital, the insane, and the women who gave birth. We were lying on the floor; I do not know what it was. There was some water, and there was a latrine, I think. And the food that we took with us. I think we were there for about three days, and then we had to be separated, the old people and the children. I was terrified that Mother was over there, and we were here. Somebody was shouting into a loudspeaker, there was a big meeting, I could not understand anything, I just remember being very scared. Then we were herded together again, which is probably when Mum went to [rabbi] Frenkel.

We had great luck; it was a fantastic miracle that we could stay together. Because, for example, most women had no support, as the men were already in the labour service. In addition, the chief physician of the Honvéd Hospital even took my father out of the ghetto and sent him to the brick factory to work. I recently learned that he also told my father to try to prolong his stay in the brick factory as long as possible to get on the third train.¹⁹

Ichak Wolster also remembers the march to the brick factory and the harsh conditions they had to endure.

After an hour's march we arrived at the brick factory. The brick factory was located on the outskirts of the city. The large courtyard was fenced. Long wooden blocks used for drying bricks were standing empty and we had to sleep there. The latrines and water taps were at the end of the yard. There were gendarmes outside the fence. There was a platform at the top of the yard, where the camp commander and his assistants sat at a table. From there they announced orders over a loudspeaker. Twice a day they distributed food. At noon soup, which they called goulash, and some kind of stew without meat, and black coffee with a piece of bread in the evening. Luckily for us the weather was good. We were not cold, but sleeping on the concrete floor was difficult. We were in the brick factory for two weeks. We were happy when they announced that we were moving on.²⁰

Vera Pick had very similar memories. She too remembers having slept on the concrete floors. She recalled how an SS officer took away her most important personal items:

When we were taken into the middle of the road, the guards and the local people stood on the sidewalk and laughed and made jokes about us. First, we were taken to the brick factory where we slept on concrete floors. We could walk around that place. On one occasion, when I returned to the room where we slept, I looked for my prayer book, watch, and diary (autograph book)—I had taken these with me from our home. All three items were essential to me. My father told me: "They are in the big basket where the SS man is. They ordered that possessions must be surrendered." I went over to the guard and took my three items out of the basket, in which there were many other things belonging to other people. I told the SS officer, "This belongs to me, and I want it." He let me have my belongings back. It is a miracle that all three items came back after a year spent first in a work camp and then a concentration camp, but my mother kept them—how I do not know. I lost the wristwatch after the war when I was out with friends, but I managed to keep the other two mementoes.²¹

The transport

From here, they were transported in three days to three locations: Auschwitz, Budapest and Strasshof. The first train left Szeged on June 25 and arrived in Kassa on the 26th. It had 3,199 passengers, of whom 2,747 were killed. The subsequent transport left on June 27 to

Auschwitz, to which wagons from the Bácsalmás ghetto were also attached. Thus, a total of over 6,000²² people were sent to Auschwitz. Part of this train was disconnected at Felsőzsolca under circumstances that remain unclear, and 2,737 of its passengers were directed to Strasshof. The other part of the train passed through Kassa with 3,737 passengers,²³ out of whom an estimated 3,332 did not survive.²⁴ The third train, with 1,684 people aboard, left Szeged on June 28. It never reached Auschwitz because it was directed straight to Strasshof. In Budapest, a group of 66 people travelling in the last 'selected' car was disconnected, and they were transported to the ghetto set up in the Aréna Road Synagogue. According to Braham, based on Lévai, 5,739 people in the second and third transports were sent to the Strasshof camp in Austria. The majority survived the ordeal.²⁵ Children only had a chance of survival if they were in the detached part of the second or third train.

The experiences of transportation are similar in the accounts of the children. Their parents and grandparents did their best to provide the best possible conditions for the children on the train. Iván recalls how her mother and grandparents took care of him during that terrible travel and how he lost his great-grandmother on the journey:

On the road, my grandfather would sometimes hold me up to the window to catch my breath. My great-grandmother travelled with us for a while, and then she died. She had diabetes and her insulin was stolen. My mother and grandparents stayed with me. My grandfather brought one thing with him: the writings of Schopenhauer. It was his Bible; he wrote notes in it. I still have this book. It influenced my whole life, and some of my later research is based on it. The train left for Strasshof.²⁶

Ichak has vivid memories of the brutality of the soldiers who pushed Jews into the wagons:

We queued up again early in the morning and marched to the train station. A train was parked on a separate track a little away from the station. Cattle trucks, with open doors and wood-paneled windows. Suddenly the gendarmes disappeared, replaced by German SS soldiers alongside each wagon. One of them stood guard with a dog, and the other two pushed people up into the wagons with the rifle. "Los, los!" They shouted and pushed the people upwards. When the wagon was full, they closed the door. We sat close together in the wagon. There was no room to move, it was dark, only a little light filtered in through the small window, which was sealed with barbed wire. Two young men climbed up to the window to look out. The others asked them to stand aside and let us get some light and air. An SS lad handed in two buckets, one for water, the other for excrement. The train started towards Auschwitz. We had been travelling like this for two days when suddenly they changed direction. We found out what had happened after the war. The mayor of Vienna called Eichmann and asked him to send workers. Eichmann ordered our train to be directed to Vienna. That was how I escaped Auschwitz for the second time.²⁷

Veronika remembered another aspect of the terrible trip. She was travelling with her parents and grandparents who all did their best to shield her from the horrors insofar as possible:

Three trains left Szeged, and it seemed he knew that the third train was not going to Auschwitz. Then came the wagon. Dad had the skill of squeezing us into a corner of the wagon next to a window. There were little windows like that, and opposite us they had a little corner fenced off with suitcases and luggage, and there was a bucket, and everyone went there to use it as a toilet. The wagon was packed, it is just unimaginable today. It was madness! We were on the train for days. I do not have too many memories of it. Maybe I slept a lot. But I do know that at one point my mother looked out the window, and said that we were crossing the Hungarian border. In the

wagon we ate what we had. My parents brought a box of sugar cubes. I remember receiving sugar cubes one at a time when I was starving. However, I do not remember much else. I used to say that I was under the protection of four adults, and that four adults would not let a child starve.²⁸

Vera Pick was a couple of years older than Veronika and also has memories of the people around her in the wagon, including how they had to find ways to relieve themselves.

It was the end of May and very hot. The doors of the cattle cars were locked. We hardly had any food or water. The train started to leave, and we did not know where they were taking us. Some people died and some went crazy, mainly the elderly. One lovely old lady demanded a bathtub from her son and could not understand why she was not provided with one. He was a doctor (in fact, my paediatrician) and happened to have some medication, so he could calm his mother down for a little while. We had no hygienic facilities; everyone used whatever they could, like a pot or a cup.²⁹

During transportation, George (György) Mandler was born on the train in early July. The events were recounted to him by his mother:

On June 6, 1944, the Jews in the area were gathered in the brick factory in Szeged, and three weeks later, on July 1, they were put in a wagon, including my mother, who gave birth in the other wagon. Fortunately, there was Uncle Sanyi Nuszbaum, who made all the difference. He cut the umbilical cord with my mother's nail clippers. It is a miracle I survived. Two days later the wagon arrived at Theresienstadt, a labour camp.³⁰

Months in Austria

Iván's strongest memories from the time of deportation are linked to smells and tastes. Some of the events, like how he was saved when becoming very ill, must have been recounted to him afterwards. But despite him being only 7 years old, he still remembers several details from this time:

Nevertheless first we came to the Jihlava River in the Czech Republic. That is where my mother's parents were drilling poles, i.e., driving long wooden poles into the riverbed. They put us up in the Jewish community centre there. One day I became very ill, and, in my delirium, I wanted to jump out of the window. A dentist in Szeged saved my life by cutting away the infection in my fingernails. Then we moved on to Bergen-Belsen. This trip proved more bearable; it was not so hot in the wagon. As we arrived, we were disinfected. The smell of chlorine has made me nauseous ever since.

In the mornings, we were lined up for appel in the mud. We were given thin slices of bread to eat. My mother often gave me hers. And I would crawl under the barbed wire to the other camp, where Polish Jews were being given boots. A Polish woman took off her wooden shoes and put on a pair of boots. I got my mother that wooden shoe so she would not be barefoot. One day I got measles. They took me to the hospital. There were two beds in the room. A sick girl occupied one. I liked the idea of being there with her. They gave me milk too, but it froze by morning in that cold. One night my mother came to visit me. A Hungarian guard helped her to get through. [...] I remember in Porlitz—where we were working on regulating the river—I received a chocolate cake for my birthday from my grandmother. She made it from beans. She undertook to clean the latrine instead of others in exchange for their portion of beans. She used the beans to make the cake. It probably did not taste like cocoa, but it was very delicious. [...] From here we went on to Bergen-Belsen. My grandmother died on the way because she had diabetes and did not get her insulin.³¹

Vera Pick was taken to Strasshof and from there to Loitzendorf. She has vivid memories of her father crying after arriving in Strasshof. This must have been a traumatic and emotionally charged experience for her and her family. Another strong memory of hers is how a local Austrian family helped them in several ways for three months. Her memoir sheds light to several details on their everyday life, their working and living conditions through the eyes of a child:

After a few days, we arrived at Strasshof in Austria and were told to get out of the train. We found ourselves in a huge open field where we sat on the grass. We also slept there. That was the first time I saw my father cry. We were standing there, and his tears started to flow. Many people with small children were taken straight to Auschwitz where Dr Mengele was playing God, deciding who should live and who should die. Again, we were put in cattle cars and seventeen of us were told to stay together. After days, we arrived in Melk, Austria, and from there we were taken by truck to Loitzendorf, a village five hundred metres high on Jauerling Mountain. It was a small village that had, and still has, about 100 families.

We were taken to a barn that became our home for the next few months. In our group, there were two children besides me, a brother and sister: Gabriela, who was 12 years old, and Peter, aged nine. The adults had to work in the forest every day from morning till evening, cutting the trees, sawing them, and putting them in a particular order—arduous work, especially for those who had never done anything like it. The second day, after work, my mother went down to the village. She could speak excellent German, even the dialect spoken in this part of Austria. She knocked on the door of a farmer's house. The farmer's wife came out and asked her very politely what she would like. My mother introduced herself and so did the woman, and my mother said she would like some bread, butter, eggs, milk, and whatever else Frau Lagler could give us. "I have money," said my mother, "and I can certainly pay you." Frau Lagler answered, "I can give you everything you ask for and I will not take any of your money, but the one thing I cannot give is milk. They are very strict about it. We have to give it to the army."

The little girl who stood next to her, who was her 12 year old daughter Mitzl, looked at my mother and said, "Ich habe Ziegen die gehören mir, und ich werde Ihnen, Frau Pick, die Milch bringen wenn es dunkel ist damit mich niemand sehen kann." (I have goats that belong to me, and I will bring you milk, Mrs Pick when it is dark enough that nobody can see.)

During the three months that we were in Loitzendorf, Frau Lagler's mother, Frau Theresia Binder, baked bread for us, and the women let my mother use their kitchen for baking cakes for their family on Sunday mornings while they were at Mass in Maria Laach am Jauerling. [. . .] Our seventeen-member group did not stay at Spitz very long. Soon we were taken back to Strasshof to be regrouped. We were put into cattle cars again. The train stopped in Hanover, and we had to walk nine kilometres to the concentration camp, Bergen-Belsen.

By that time, it was December 1944. Food was scarce, and we had no proper shoes or clothes to keep out the wind and cold. On the way to the camp, my father, then 61, was beaten by a Ukrainian guard for no reason. He had lost much weight and was covered with boils and sores, and by the time we got to the so-called "family camp" he was taken next door to the section for sick people . . .

Bergen-Belsen was designed to hold 10,000 prisoners, but by the end of the war, more than 60,000 prisoners were detained there. We had hardly anything to eat. Sometimes it took days before we received a black-looking soup with some beetroot in it, pulled directly out of the ground. It is still hard for me after so many years to eat beetroots. How it tasted then is and I think always will be in the back of my mind, but we were hungry and ate it.

My father died on my mother's birthday on February 17, 1945. She was with him because a guard took her from our camp to the other camp. She saw him over the wired fence just a few days before his death. His death shook me very hard, but at the time, and for a year afterwards, I could not speak of him, let alone express my grief. Like the others in the camp, I was numb from the trauma of our situation, and had to concentrate on getting through one day at a time.³²

After three more days of travelling, we arrived in Strasshof. This was a concentration camp near Vienna. The train stopped outside the camp. We got off and were told not to take any luggage, and they would take us there by car. The men of a commando in striped uniforms appeared and took the dead out of the wagons. Many old and sick people could not stand the journey and died on the way. Among them was Uncle Robert. He had had too much to drink in his pub before, and the journey killed him.³³

Pál Bárdos has vivid memories of a cruel SS guard and he experienced physical violence the consequences of which he still bears today. Pál also describes how he started a school for his younger inmates.

We stood in the pouring rain, the wind blew through us, and we were so cold. The children were lined up in size, next to me a boy named Perlmutter. He was taller than me, his sister was on the right, a girl the same age as me, then others, and at the end of the line my brother and then an aunt from Szentes and her three-year-old daughter. (. . .) We had appels several times daily, which rarely passed without a beating. We avoided the limping guard if we only could. We could not do it now because we had to stand in the pouring rain. (. . .) I was almost beaten to death; I have been deaf in one ear ever since. (. . .) I got out of the mud with a feeling: is that it? Is that what adults are capable of? The strong ones? Men with guns? The Führers? The limping guard threw me against the wall, slammed the lock on his side bag, took out his revolver. What will it [death] be like? I thought . . . then the light of a flashlight ran through my neck, I heard the camp commander, and my mother dragged me into the cinema. [. . .] With the permission of the camp's leader, and even on his order, I opened a school and taught six-year-olds, including my brother, to read and write. We read from the Miriam prayer book. Calculation and arithmetic. Sports. I taught poems just like my grandmother had taught me.³⁴

Veronika Szöllös remembers how women were humiliated upon disinfection. She was at least partially back to normality when her grandmother opened a school for them in one of the barracks.

Days later we arrived in Vienna, where we experienced a bomb attack. We were not allowed to leave the closed wagon, sirens were sounding, bombs exploded, but I think our train was not hit. [. . .] We were then taken to the Strasshof distribution camp. There they had extensive barracks with raised wooden bunks with raised headboards, but they were completely bare. I remember that the men in the camp had to work. They had to cover the roofs of the barracks with tar paper. Their food was called Dörrgemüse, which was dried vegetables cooked in water. Very lousy food. I remember that in the Strasshof camp the family was together, we were all in one barrack. We had been there for maybe two or three days when they ordered the men and women to undergo separate disinfection. When we went from the ghetto to the brick factory and marched in a long line, it was extremely humiliating. It was a similar thing, this so-called disinfection. Everyone had to strip naked and put their clothes in the disinfectant. In those days, nudity was not as natural as it is today. That was the first time I saw women who were naked because they were wearing a sheitel, a wig. It must have been particularly difficult for them [i.e., Orthodox women], because my mother and women of her age who were similarly minded went to the beach in bathing suits. [. . .] Mum found a piece of bacon somewhere in her bag or pocket. She would tear it up with her fingernails and we would eat that piece of bacon together because there was nothing to eat

all day. Nothing, not even a sip of water. I remember sitting there, my mother crying, and we were munching on that piece of bacon. . .

I do not remember much about our stay there. However, soon we were herded onto a train, and we made our way to a village in Czechoslovakia called Unterthemenau, which is in the Moravian part of the Czech Republic. It is very close to the border, and at that time the Germans who occupied Czechoslovakia gave all the villages German names. It was originally called Postorna. From here we went either on foot or by lorry, perhaps more on foot, to a brick factory where bricks and ceramics were made. The factory, the Rakonitz Ziegel und Steingefäßfabrik, was surrounded by a fence, and it was the camp area itself. I remember that there was a German guard at the gate, there was no way out, and by the time we got there, there was a long barrack. [. . .] The barrack was arranged so that there was a large common corridor at the end of which there were bunks with two floors. . . We, grandmother, mother, and I, had a place on an upper bunk, but the men were separated. As there were few men, they slept at the far end of this common corridor in four or five bunks, and the women in the larger rooms. We slept right to left with Mum and Grandma, and I slept in the middle. The straw bags were filled, but there was a board in the middle, so they were always trying to move me around so that I was not lying on the board.

The director or foreman, I do not know who, asked if there was a teacher in the group. And then there was my grandmother. She gathered the children and brought the Ukrainian children to us. The brick factory had big kilns with workshops on top of them, which were very well heated rooms. I remember that the barracks were heated too, so I do not remember us being cold. They assigned a room for Grandma on top of the ovens, provided seating, benches, a blackboard, and I think a German textbook. And Grandma, in her genius, engaged children of different ages and languages. We played gymnastics, did arithmetic, I do not know what we did, but we were always doing something. The factory managers gave us an unlimited supply of rotten bricks, so we could make clay, and then we would go into the yard and find thistles, and Grandma would make all sorts of toys with us from the thistle grains. She used all the tools she had to entertain the children.

The factory had a latrine, but they made a special little area for the children where we could sit on it. But sometimes we went outside and used gunnera leaves as toilet paper. It was a big area, I remember, at least for a child. I even remember having one of my teeth pulled out, and of course there was no anaesthetic. They hid it from me, pulled it out, poof, I was quite well, and it bled for at least 24 hours afterwards. They said I had a vitamin deficiency, so the bleeding would not stop. [. . .]

The front line was quite close, there were constant air raids, and they said it was a military target because it was an electrical centre. So, we were exposed to bombing. Then we would die, and this huge mass of water, which was the swollen lake, would come down unhindered, sweeping away the village, all the inhabitants in it, and our relatives with them. It was very frightening. When the air raid came and my grandmother and I were in the cave, I crawled to the entrance, looked at the bombers through the branches and prayed to God, dear God, that the pilots would not find out that this was a military target. Let them go somewhere else. . . [After the liberation, in April 1945] My parents were wondering in front of a house [near Vienna] and finally knocked. A woman came out who let us into a beautiful, brilliant house. It was not a house of luxury, it was a simple farmhouse, but we were completely soaked and muddy to the skin. . . My father asked in German if we could get some food. And then the woman took us into the kitchen and started heating soup on the stove. Then she brought everyone a separate plate, which was a great experience for me, that everyone gets a whole plate of soup. There were three of us sitting at the kitchen table, and my father was sitting opposite me, and the steaming soup and steam from the warmth of the apartment humidified his glasses. And then—I still remember that feeling—it was as if he were blind. And I experienced the

feeling that my father, whom I looked up to, whom I considered very excellent, who was everything, became an unfortunate beggar. Who begs for little alms and then we would leave the house and we would not know where we were going to sleep and he had no idea how to provide us with anything we needed to sustain ourselves. It was a very shocking experience.³⁵

Liberation – April 1945

Iván recounted how he experienced the first days of freedom which also included an uncertain future for them:

In April '45, the British liberated Bergen-Belsen, put us on a train and threw us off the wagons at the edge of a forest. We were left there at a complete loss and without food. By that time, I would have eaten my cattle turnip, which I did not do in Bergen-Belsen, which is why my mother always gave me her ration of bread. We went begging in the surrounding villages, where we climbed up to the tanks and showed the soldiers where we were in the forest. [...] We stayed in a village called Hillersleben. The flat next door to us was occupied by Spanish Jews, who would not talk to us because we were only Hungarian Jews. After the Americans left, the British came a few days later. And half the food was gone. Then came the French, who brought us nothing to eat, and then the Russians, who took everything from us. One night two Russian soldiers came in, strangely enough they brought brandy and bacon and asked my mother to drink with them. She had no choice, but fortunately she could hold her liquor very well, drank the two soldiers under the table, and they both passed out. We finally escaped from the Russians.³⁶

Due to her mother's illness, Vera was separated from her upon liberation and had to spend six weeks without her. She remembers the anxiety and the loneliness:

Liberation took place on May 6 1945. The Red Cross came into the camp and sorted the people according to which country they had come from. My mother became ill with typhus after liberation and was transferred to a separate barracks with all the others with that infectious disease. I was terrified, and as she left on the open truck I cried and begged her to come back to me telling her, "Please do not leave me like Father did!" I was with other survivors, some from our camp, but thousands from elsewhere with no family members. No one particularly cared about me. We survivors were focused on ourselves because we had to be, to keep going.³⁷

Back to Szeged

Previous studies have shown that after the horrors of the Holocaust, the returnees did very often face several difficulties in the countries they returned to. Of course, those who attempted to flee or were deported could not take their belongings with them. For many survivors of the Holocaust, returning to their old homes after the war was a difficult and emotional experience. While some could return to their homes and communities relatively quickly after the war, others found that their belonging exchanged owners, and their homes had been destroyed or taken over by others. In some cases, survivors found that their homes and communities had been rebuilt or taken over by new residents. Iván lost his grandfather upon returning to Szeged due to a misunderstanding with tragic consequences.

We had just returned home from Bergen-Belsen when my lawyer grandfather defended an accused Arrow Cross soldier in court. He was shot in the newspaper. My Jewish grandfather!

The poor man was beaten up by a Russian soldier shortly afterwards, and his only eye was punctured, and he died in hospital. The soldier probably asked him for water, my grandfather refused to give him any, but why, whether he did not want to or did not understand what the Russian wanted, is unknown. There was a military procedure, my grandmother received a few hundred forints. My grandfather did not have many friends, he did not like people very much. Both he and my grandmother had a certain degree of snobbery. Fortunately, my grandfather's diary from Bergen-Belsen has survived, and I am translating it into English. My mother and I returned to Szeged, where strangers moved into our flat. I started school, right from the second grade, because in the concentration camp, my grandfather taught me to read, write and count.³⁸

Vera, aged 12, was old enough to remember the bitter realisation that their flat had been occupied by others who openly told renounced that their return was not at all expected or cheered upon:

We returned to our flat, rang the doorbell politely and said we had just come from deportation, and that we used to live here. Now we live here, the new residents said, and bang, they slammed the door. Then we left. Well, what could we have done? That flat had already been given to them, or maybe the landlord had rented it out. We did not even know what we had a right to after they had completely excluded us. We had been tricked, they tried to kill us but failed, and now we can talk back? My mother returned six weeks later with swollen legs, weighing 46 kilos, and very weak but with a strong will to survive. We managed to get back to Budapest, Hungary—this time on a proper train—and a few days later, back to where we had started from Szeged. That was on June 22, 1945. People looked at us in amazement and declared, "We really did not expect to see you again." What a great greeting that was!

Once again, going back to our home, we found nothing but the four walls—not a chair, not a bed, no cutlery, no plates. We had to start all over finding the basics, and at that time we had no money. Some things piled up in the schoolyard and the synagogue, and a man distributed the necessities to people. I remember that my mother burned the wooden pillars of our bunker for firewood. [. . .] I want to mention here that during the one year in the camp, we only had a spoon to eat with, even though we did not need too much. After the war, I had to learn again to eat with a knife and fork. My father had always considered good manners and correct behaviour very important, including good table manners. I remember how, when I was a young child, I was often sent to the little table to eat when I took a big piece of food or did not sit still. Everything seemed confusing and hard after our return for quite a long time. I could not bear to mention my father or anything about him for a whole year, even when friends wanted me to.³⁹

Conclusion

Survivors who were children during the deportation have extensive memories of the events. These memories support our existing knowledge of what happened. With the help of these testimonies, the lives and experiences of minors can be reconstructed. The recollections of Holocaust survivors who were children at the time of deportation can provide valuable insights into what happened during these tragic months in the Hungarian Holocaust.

Six decades after the deportation, Pál Bárdos – already at an age similar to his grandmother's at the time of deportation – summed up in an imaginary letter to his grandmother how in the decades after the Holocaust, people found ways to rebuild their lives with remarkable resilience and strength. Despite the long time which passed since the horrors he experienced as a child, the memories still linger. As a child, he saw things no child should ever have to see. The letter below and the memories quoted above from

surviving children demonstrate that despite the young age of these witnesses, their testimonies and memories are crucial to the understanding of the Holocaust.

Dear Grandmother! I was in Traiskirchen. You often mentioned in your life (I am sorry, you need to know, you repeated everything more than enough between the ages of seventy and eighty) that you want to get back there. You often expressed the desire to use the money in your wallet and the silk scarf on your head to walk down the street, from the camp to the factory, on the sidewalk. Having money. Since we were not only prisoners but also [considered] thieves and beggars. In a headscarf since we were forbidden to walk with our heads covered. If you had a shawl, you might have forgotten to give due respect to the Aryans who passed by. Also, on the sidewalk, because we were only allowed to walk on the road back then. I report that I was in Traiskirchen with a cap on my head because it was raining. My pocket is full of euros, this money is going around here. Out of my free will, I walked on the sidewalk and on the road and strolled. Nothing happened, I did not feel anything. I feel obliged, as your grandchild, to tell you about this educational case. Sending you hugs with unchanged love: Pali.⁴⁰

Notes

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3. The author would like to express her gratitude to Mrs János Horváth, née Terézia Löw, Mrs George Gara, née Vera Pick, István Salamon and Katalin Varga, who recounted their memories of the deportation process in Szeged in June 1944. Jonathan Valk has provided valuable insights and feedback on an earlier draft of this article.
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12. Randolph L. Braham, *A magyar holocaust* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1988), 2:55.
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17. Judit Molnár, *Zsidsors 1944-ben az V. (szegedi) csendőrkerületben* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Kiadó, 1995), 172.
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21. Vera Gara, *Least-expected Heroes of the Holocaust: Personal Memories* (Ottawa: Vera Gara, 2011), 10.
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23. According to these data, the number of people in the second transport is $2737 + 3737 = 6474$ people.
24. Michael Honey: 'Research Notes on The Hungarian Holocaust'. Available at: <http://www.zchor.org/hungaria>. Last accessed: May 8, 2021.
25. Braham: *A magyar holocaust*, 2:57. In In 2022, in a research project conducted by the author of the current paper, the different and contradicting data on the number of deportees have been compared and reconciled. Dóra Pataricza, 'Put my mother on the list too!' - Reconstructing the deportation lists of the Szeged Jewish community. DeGruyter, *Tracing and Documenting Nazi Victims Past and Present*, eds. Henning Borggräbe, Akim Jah. Arolsen Archive, 2022, 297–319. doi:10.1515/9783110746464-017.
26. Hermann, *Hiányzó történetek*, 36.
27. Wolster, *Küzdelmes út*, 26.
28. Veronika Szöllős, centropa.org.
29. Gara, *Least expected Heroes*, 11.
30. György Mandler's story in Hermann, *Hiányzó történetek*, 54.
31. Hermann, *Hiányzó történetek*, 36. The same recollection is cited by Klára Bódis, the sister of Iván Wollner-Bódis in: Frauhammer, „Eltűnt családok nyomában”, 40.
32. Gara, *Least expected Heroes*, 13–18.
33. Wolster, *Küzdelmes út*, 26.
34. Urbancsok, *A holokauszt gyermekei*, 73–74.
35. Veronika Szöllős, centropa.org.
36. Hermann, *Hiányzó történetek*, 39.
37. Gara, *Least expected Heroes*, 19.
38. Hermann, *Hiányzó történetek*, 39.
39. Gara, *Least expected Heroes*, 19–20.
40. Pál Bárdos, *Emlékkönyv* (Budapest: Aura, 2004), 90.

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