

Szécsényi, András

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Half-freedom. Post-war experiences of Liberated Hungarian Survivors of German concentration camp Bergen-Belsen (1945)

András Szécsényi / szecsenyiandras@gmail.com

Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security, Research Department, Budapest

Abstract

My goal is to explore how the members of the liberated Hungarian inmates lived in "half freedom" in German DP camp Hillersleben, and Swedish sanatoria camps right after the liberation of the concentration camps and from May to August 1945 until they first managed to leave their temporary camp dwellings. My narrative is based mostly on ego-documents of Hungarian survivors of Bergen-Belsen, which is part of a research project on the Hungarian inmates of Belsen and their liberation and return.

Keywords

Displaced Persons' Camp – Holocaust – survivor – half-freedom – Jews – concentration camp – sanatoria camp – Bergen-Belsen – Hillersleben

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Sources and Methodology

The paper focuses primarily on the activities, and emotions of those Hungarian Jews who were liberated as Hungarian inmates and lived in “half freedom” in German DP camp Hillerlsleben, and Swedish sanatoria camps right after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen. From May to August 1945 until they first managed to leave their temporary camp dwellings. I use the phrase “Hungarian” in terms of people who were Hungarian citizens before their deportation from Hungary in 1944, mainly Jews; or citizens of Hungary who had been reckoned as Jews by the Hungarian anti-semitic laws and decrees, issued from 1938 onwards, either they belonged to the communities of “Israelites” or Christians.¹ Exploring emotions, personal perceptions, motives, and activities requires the using of the victims’ personal narratives. In order to be able to explore the most important components of their post-war experiences I turned to utilize ego-documents. Based on Noah Benninga’s opinion about the historians’ approaches to Holocaust diaries and testimonies, we can divide them into two different groups: the previous case researchers would use ego-documents for fact findings, while others were interested in personal information. Representatives of the first category, as Raul Hilberg says the „perpetrator documents” by the Nazis are far more valuable than the narrative sources of the victims related to fact findings.² Despite of the high anti-factuality of the ego-documents, these sources on the other hand contain many imagined, constructive elements instead in connection with the personal experiences. These circumstances make them much more valuable than than the perpetrator documents concerning this topic.

According to Gérard Genette’s conclusion, if the narrator and the author of a narrative source is the same person, one can talk about a non-fictional narrative.³ However much I agree with Genette’s statement, the most important factor to me is how the survivors experienced their traumas and other life-situations, not the factual elements of their memories, which can never be present fully in the ego-documents. In other words: not the reality, but the interpretation of the reality make these sources indispensable. As Benninga formulated: “*It is clear that memory and retelling involve elements of performance, storytelling and rhetoric, alongside unconscious deletions and substitutions. Despite this, in the context of bearing witness, these stories still appear to uniquely refer to the subjective experience of the Real.*”⁴

Diaries are the „primary documents of subjective history”, and this statement is also true for testimonies.⁵ These personal constructions are autonomous themselves, creating divergent, subjective realities.⁶ Based on Cristopher Browning’s researches we can say

1 Don, Y.: *The Economic Effect*, pp. 63–82.

2 Benninga, N.: *Holocaust Testimony*, pp. 414–432.

3 Genette, G.: *Fictional narrative*, pp. 755–774.

4 Benninga, N.: *Holocaust Testimony*, p. 428.

5 Gyáni, G.: *A napló mint társadalom*, p. 27.

6 K. Horváth, Z.: *A történelmi tanúságtételről*, pp. 297–302.

that these autonomous texts and oral testimonies couldn't congeal into collective memory; the simultaneous interpretation of them is rather perceived as collected memories.⁷

There are many historians who have been researching mostly the non-contemporary ego-documents of Holocaust survivors. Some of them think that the majority of the survivors write about their sufferings not categorically (closed dialog), but they open their interpretation of their memories for the future. Based on Alan Rosen's determination we can categorize these historical sources by the aims of its writers/storytellers as the following: 1. to tell what happened to them. 2. to provide evidence for moral questions. 3. „religious obligatory” which means talking about the sufferings.⁸ My analysis focuses on all of these questions from a special aspect. My key questions are concerning just the experiences of the Hungarian survivors: how they lived in the first months after the war, how they got over their suffering or even the traumas and last but not least how they summarize moral problems.

The personal materials, with special regard to the narrative sources – diaries, correspondences and testimonies – related to the camps and the first weeks after the liberation have peculiar significance. Inmates kept diaries quite rarely in Nazi concentration camps due to the harsh conditions and because of the inmates' fear of the inspecting German authorities, which was most commonly the SS. The case of Belsen differed from the others; This camp was situated in the Luneburg-flatland (Lüneburger Heide) of North-Western Germany and was a special camp in the SS camp-system. Belsen was established in 1943 by the SS. One part of Belsen was serving as an exchange camp of privileged groups of Jews. Among other groups, a total of about 16,000 Hungarian captives were deported to Belsen in several turns in 1944–1945, and thousands were detained in the Exchange Camp [Austauschlager] sector.⁹ This camp has given the world more diaries than all the other camps combined as a result of its privileged position. Half of them were written by Hungarian „häftlings”.

In some cases the diarists described their present experiences by metaphors in order to emphasize the peculiarity of the post-liberation feelings. The survivors often formulated in the testimonies as if they were still in the DP camp.¹⁰

Some of them incorporate significant informations about the immediate afterlife. They often combine the elements of physical and mental injuries in these sources. Erzsébet Scipiades was remembering as follows: *“My aunt was brought to Auschwitz, me to Bergen-Belsen with my mother. I was just 20, my mom was 42. She died there beside me from hunger. The camp was liberated by the English. Scattered bodies all over the grounds. The bodies were ditched by dumpers, I also helped them in this work. The English soldiers set up big tents, I brought my mom into one of them. She was so weak and the doctor said she will be dead. My*

7 Browning, C. R.: *Collected Testimonies*, p. 39.

8 Rosen, A.: *The Holocaust Witness*, p. 451.

9 About the Exchange Camp, see principally: Rahe, T.: *Das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen*, pp. 187–220.

10 Van Alphen, E.: *Caught by Image*, pp. 97–113.

mom died indeed and was heaped by the others. They were lying for three days in one heap. I had visited her every day until they all were ditched. I haven't able to talk about it for 40 years..."¹¹

My paper tries to use these kinds of different characteristics of various narrative sources of the former victims from Hungary in order to give an authentic summary of the topic. I have conducted extensive researches in significant collections of the Holocaust Memorial Center (Budapest, Hungary), Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen (Germany), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington D. C., USA) and in the Wiener Holocaust Library (London, UK) for the last years. I could also explore the secondary literature on the last phase of Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, and about the flourishing number of secondary sources of the DP camps in general. These texts not just complement occasionally the personal narratives, but always help to frame the political background. Among these secondary sources I have to highlight Mark Celinscak's epic book (2015),¹² and his sourcebook (2022)¹³ about the liberation process of the camp, focusing on the Canadian perspective; Celinscak's monography is based not just on archival files, but contemporary and posterior narrative sources of the inmates and liberator soldiers. This book's methodology had a great effect on me while I was writing this paper.

The first part of my paper is about the liberation and the evacuation transports of Belsen, April, 1944, and summarizes the DP-life in Germany at that time according to secondary literature. The second part gives a general overview of the Hungarian Jews of Hillersleben and the Swedish sanatoria camps, based on both historiography findings and primary sources. The last part explores the most significant characteristics of the experiences of the liberated Jews in these camps especially by ego-documents.

The liberation of Bergen-Belsen and the evacuation transports

Not long before the liberation of Belsen (15. April, 1944), the SS determined to evacuate the Exchange Camp: This sector was divided into four parts, the biggest one was the so-called „Hungarian Camp” (Ungarnlager).¹⁴ They were all “prominent Jews” as part of the “exchange program” of Heinrich Himmler,¹⁵ so they were treated differently by the SS and were held in a separate sector of the exchange camp area. The evacuation of the Exchange Camp, which was in a state of chaos in its final days, was ordered by Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS on 4. April. Himmler wanted to put people who were still capable of working to effective use for the Nazi cause. These kinds of evacuations, which could also be described as death marches, had already been on the agenda for months when the German state was collapsing. Bergen-Belsen was also an evacuation

11 Scipiades, E.: *A zsidó betét*, p. 9.

12 Celinscak, M.: *Distance from the Belsen Heap*.

13 Celinscak, M.: *Kingdom of Night*.

14 Billib, S.: „Infolge eines glücklichen Zufalls ...”, pp. 92–107.; Billib, S.: *Das Ungarnlager in Bergen-Belsen*, pp. 12–21.

15 Breitman, R.: *Himmler and Bergen-Belsen*, pp. 74–79.; Bauer, Y.: *Jews for Sale?*

destination: tens of thousands of people, including several thousand Hungarian Jews, had been brought (or forced to walk) to the camp from the eastern camps close to the front lines (such as Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen) between December 1944 and early April 1945.¹⁶ The target of the evacuation from this „*Death Camp*”¹⁷ was Theresienstadt (today: Terezín, Czech Republic). The SS has initiated three transports on three consecutive days.¹⁸ The first train, full of Dutch and Hungarian inmates – later referred to as the “lost transport” in the secondary literature – departed on April 8. It had to return, as American bombers destroyed the tracks several times. This train finally stopped on a riverbank to the south of Berlin, on the edge of Tröbitz, and this is where the Soviet forces liberated the “passengers.” Another transport departed from Bergen-Belsen on April 10. Its passengers were also almost all Hungarian Jews. The latter reached its destination: the train, equipped with three days of food per person, reached Theresienstadt after 12 days with heavy loss of life, where the Soviet forces liberated the prisoners.¹⁹ The third evacuation transport departed with about 2,500 prisoners on April 7. Its passengers were brought mainly from the Hungarian camp of Belsen, which meant 1528 people brought from Hungary. They didn’t get food during the evacuation.²⁰ The train came up against an advancing American armored unit between Farsleben and Zielitz in the Magdeburg area on 13. April. The Wehrmacht soldiers who had been guarding the prisoners had fled the previous night, and the prisoners were waiting for the allied units.²¹ The liberated inmates were carried to a nearby village Hillersleben by the Americans. Hillersleben was a newly established Jewish Displaced Persons’ (DP) camp where they were housed.²²

In the meantime the British troops finally arrived at the overcrowded Bergen-Belsen and entered it on 15 April 1945. Its liberation, the word most commonly used for surrender was not a moment of celebration. The liberators experienced such circumstances which they were never prepared for or explained.²³ They found more than 50,000 inmates, most acutely sick and starving. Among them were thousands of Hungarian Jews. The prisoners had been without food or water for days before the Allied arrival. They were dying at around 500 per a day, primarily from typhus.²⁴ Typhus, typhoid, and tuberculosis were all present in the camp. In the first two weeks after the liberation, 15.000 former inmates also died from the consequences of the typhus, long illnesses, starvation and the non-adequate treatment by the British. Who survived soon

16 Approximately 60.000 deportees were brought to Belsen from these camps. See Blatman, D.: *The Death Marches*; Hördler, S.: *Ordnung und Inferno*.

17 Lavsky, H.: *New Beginnings*, pp. 37–41.

18 Kubetzky, T.: *Fahrten ins Ungewisse*, pp. 150–176.

19 Szécsényi, A.: *Hillersleben*, pp. 470–490.

20 Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Israel (YVA). ID 3729724. Testimony of Dr. Josef A. Stark, regarding his experiences as an inmate in Bergen-Belsen and his liberation while on a train transport near Farsleben, 13 April 1945.

21 Rozell, M. M.: *A Train near Magdeburg*, pp. 287–355.

22 Szécsényi, A.: *Hillerleben*, pp. 470–472.

23 Celinscak, M.: *Distance*, p. 77.

24 Shephard, B.: *After Daybreak*, pp. 201–205.

succumbed to typhus, malnutrition or sheer exhaustion. The first step of the liberators was also shockingly hard. Firstly they had to restrain and end epidemic diseases and finally set up a hospital for healing.²⁵ Parallel with this they also had to supply water and food for the survivors. The major problem was nourishing the inmates when – in Belsen – at least a quarter of them were unable to digest what was given to them. After the first weeks of hard diet (“*Bengal famine mixture*”) provided by the British they had to solve the medical treatment and sanitation. 21.000 people needed medicine and hospitalization. The British set up a hospital in the former Wehrmacht hospital of Belsen. By 19. May all the ill survivors were being cared for. However the British were unable to handle the problems of the mentally and physically ill people who mostly needed special, long-term treatments. The British allied forces established Bergen-Belsen DP camp partly in the territory of the former concentration camp in order to gather the North-Western Jewish remnants. This camp existed until 1950.²⁶

Taking care of the survivors and keeping them alive was a general problem right after the liberation of the KL’s in Germany, April-May 1945. After the liberation of the concentration camps, the Allied forces and the medical units of the Anglo-Saxon and American troops were not able to find a quick solution for the problems of the extremely huge amounts of sick, wounded, starving, infectious people.

The troop commanders immediately called attention of aid organizations²⁷ in order to help them in healing. This happened in the DP camps of Bergen-Belsen itself, and in Hillesleben as well. The survivor Jews had to concentrate in such camps, where their physical and mental health was treated until they could repatriate to their homelands.²⁸ In the spring and summer of 1945 at least two dozen Jewish DP camps were established where Hungarian Holocaust survivors waited for their fates to change for the better.²⁹ While the civilian and POW residents of the postwar non-Jewish DP camps were forced to repatriate, in the case of the Jewish DPs, there was no consistent policy on this question. The initial policy of the Allies was to return the survivors from all over Europe to their homelands as quickly as possible. But many of them could not or did not want to return to their former homes. In the summer of 1945, tens of thousands of liberated Jews were gathered in such camps in the American and British zones of Germany, particularly young adult males under the control of the French, British or American military administration, and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration

25 See ego-documents on the general sanitary and medical situation: Remembering Belsen: Eyewitnesses record the Liberation. ed. B. Flanagan, D. Bloxham, London–Portland 2005.

26 The British authorities also established a DP camp for Poles; this camp operated until the last victim returned to Poland in September 1946. Liedke, K.-Römmer, Ch.: *Neuanfang*, pp. 242–256.

27 International Red Cross, UNRRA, World Jewish Congress, American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee.

28 Between May and September 1945, some 6 million Holocaust survivors were repatriated by the UNRRA. The Hungarian Jews were not repatriated by the UNRRA, they got home individually in the second half of 1945. Cohen, B.: *The Jewish DP Experience*, p. 412.

29 The most significant books on Jewish DP camp history: Mankowitz, Z.: *Life Between Memory*; Königseder, A., Wetzel, J.: *Waiting for Hope*; Lavsky, H.: *New Beginnings*; Grossmann, A.: *Jews, Germans, and Allies; We are Here*; Holian, A.: *Between National Socialism*.

(UNRRA).³⁰ UNRRA had reached an agreement in late 1944 with the Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Forces, (SHAEF). Based on this agreement UNRRA was subordinated to SHAEF in the territory of the former Reich.

In the first weeks after the war UNRRA had not adequate staff members. In the lack of their presence the Allied military forces performed the necessary functions. The commanders designated 12.000 soldiers for taking care of the Jewish survivors crammed into DP camps. Despite the increasing number of Jewish DP camps, 40% of the survivors who were carried into DP's in the German territories under Allied control died in the first weeks.³¹ The biggest DP's of the British and American occupying zones developed into huge detention camps of survivors, where the survivors had the opportunity to start their lives over. During this long process families were established and baby boom started as time was going by. However the Jewish DP camps were controlled in 1945, these new camps were getting to be similar to real cities: the Jews elected their own inner administration, established bureaucratic offices and even parties existed. Survivor newspapers were beginning to garner a considerable presence in these camps: until 1950 150 newspapers existed, 80 in German territories.³² By these articles written by the liberated people the „individual survivors” were becoming „public survivors” due to the heavy interest of the western media.

Hungarian survivors in DP camp Hillersleben, and in Swedish sanatoria camps

Hillersleben

The Hillersleben DP camp was organized by the American military in April 1945. The medium-sized camp lay on the confines of the British, American, and Soviet occupation zones, and a peculiar circumstance arose when, in the spring and summer of 1945, the leadership of the camp switched twice within a short period of time. At first, the camp was under the leadership of the Americans who liberated the area. The British then assumed this role in June, and the Soviets took over in early July. Originally, Hillersleben served as a flight station for the German Luftwaffe (since 1937) and as an experimental site for armored vehicles. Accordingly, the complex consisted of two parts: a barrack and the officers' quarters and the related outbuildings (hospital, kitchen, etc.). It was a lowland camp surrounded by trees and wire fencing and separated from the village only by the ploughlands. There were both functional buildings (the kitchen, the hospital, the commander's premises, a theatre, a cinema etc.) and spaces (a graveyard, a soccer field, and a pool) in the camp. The denizens of the displaced persons camp were placed in the fully equipped apartments which had been used by the officers (the so-called

30 Lavsky, J.: *New Beginnings*, pp. 31–33. For the Hungarians see Szécsényi, A.: *Hazatérés*, pp. 66–86.

31 Marrus, M.: *The Unwanted*, p. 332.

32 Taft, M.: *From Victim to Survivor*, pp.75–76.

Beamterviertel, or officers' quarter), which, in the absence of reliable data, we can only hypothesize were located in the 20 yellow-painted, single-floor residential blocks. The actual camp command has ordered that a private military guard be posted to each house in the initial period (until June, 1945).

Swedish camps and sanatoria

As in the case of many liberated concentration camps, the International Red Cross was one of the major actors who aided the recovery of yesterday's "häftlings" of Belsen. First, nursing staff was sent to the Belsen hospital, and experiencing its inadequacy, they organized the setup of Swedish refugee camps. Their goal was to organize their transportation to Sweden, where the prisoners could have gotten into refugee camps, which partly fulfilled the criteria of the DP camps, but provided more than those. This operation had an antecedent, the so-called Bernadotte-transport. According to estimations cca. 20 000 mainly Scandinavian Jewish people and political refugees could be evacuated from the camps in the following 8 months with the buses of the Red Cross.³³ In the possession of these experiences, the allied forces turned to the Swedish government on 20 April 1945 through the UNRRA with the request to organize another evacuation with the involvement of the Swedish Red Cross. More specifically, the transportation of 10.000 liberated people to Sweden within 6 months for treatment and rehabilitation purposes, who were previously deported to concentration camps. After the positive reception, a Red Cross evacuation office was established with headquarters in Lübeck. The evacuation operation had been focusing on Bergen-Belsen from the beginning, since, on one hand, it was one of the biggest camps, and on the other hand, this camp became the symbol of the 'Nazi barbarism' by the mass film and radio recordings of spring 1945.³⁴

Therefore, it is no surprise that 7000 people out of the total passengers of the Swedish exportations, conducted by several transports between 23 June and 25 July 1945, were recruited from exactly here. About one third of the 7000 Bergen refugees were on the brink of death, skin-and-bone, infected, and only one third of them were in bearable condition. Most of them were Hungarian, Polish and Dutch people. We are primarily talking about women, because they were more worn away by the physical difficulties caused by the SS. The mothers could not be separated from their children, so they were travelling together with their children. Some were taken away from the Bergen DP, others from the Celle hospital. First of all, the 'Swedes' were separated into standalone barracks and quickly registered. According to my estimates filtered from different statistical data, 2000 Hungarian Jews were exported in such way. The prisoners were usually transported to Lübeck by military ambulance buses, and on authorized ferryboats from Lübeck to Malmö, or in rare cases, on military ships to Stockholm. The Malmö harbour was a distribution junction, where almost everyone has passed through during that sum-

33 The most significant literature on the evacuation: Koblik, S.: *The Stones Cry Out*; Hindley, M.: *Negotiating the Boundary*, pp. 52–77.; Persson, S.: *Escape from the Third Reich*.

34 Haggith, T.: *Filming the Liberation*, pp. 89–122.

mer. They usually spent a few nights here, in the refugee camp set up temporarily at the edge of the port.³⁵ The members of each prisoner transport were conveyed further from Malmö to the Red Cross transit camps, which also functioned as sanatoria, set up at different parts of the country. The settlings were carried out in great masses by the medium-sized buses typically painted in white and grey, depicting big red cross symbols on their sides, used during the Bernadotte-operation. The correlations between the Bergen-Belsen transports and the previous Bernadotte transports have manifested in the choice of location as well.³⁶ Most of the camps were located at the edges of countryside cities, in buildings surrounded by parks, fences. The next cities served as sanatoria camps among others: Stockholm, Visingsö, Sigtuna, Billingen, Eskilstuna, Lokabrunn, Växjö, Göteborg, Örebro, Alingsås, Ribbingelund, Karlstad, Kalmar, Landskrona, Österkorsberga, Risbrunn, Almhult, Lund, Katrineholm, Uppsala, Norköping. Since they required hospital treatment, the Swedish Red Cross had mostly rented summer houses, villas and school buildings for the purposes of the camps. 4 to 30 people were situated at the same time in each halls of the camp buildings, under clean, good conditions.³⁷

In the Swedish sanatoria camps the survivors were provided with nutritious and healthy caretaking, medical and dentist treatment. They spent months, or occasionally 2 years here. Especially from the spring of 1946, the Red Cross declared them to be recovered and gradually dismissed the lager-dwellers from the camps. They practically had no chance to get home in 1946, unless money was sent to them from home, by which they were able to do this. The Hungarian government was unable to help, but did not want either.³⁸ Most of those who wanted to return got home on their own in the autumn of 1946. There were some who didn't even want to return home: it was either due to the disappointment in Hungary, or due to the rare but successful integration into the Swedish society. The dispersion of the sources, the lack of literature make it difficult to give an overall picture of the refugees. The so-called ego-documents, that is, the self-centered narrative stories serve as the primary sources on the camp life.³⁹ It is important to emphasize that these sources, with their own subjectivity, provide very few factual data, but provide many other different kinds of information. These camps don't have any international typology and scientific descriptions either. Malmö was primarily a distribution camp. In many, it triggered similar feelings as Straßhof an der Nordbahn, which distributed a part of the Hungarian contingent taken to Sweden, to labour camps around Vienna in the summer/autumn of 1944.⁴⁰ At the same time, they use the term

35 Collis, R.: *The Ultimate Value*, pp. 102–103.

36 See especially: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington D. C., USA (USHMM), 2004.714. RG Number: RG-60.4111. Swedish Red Cross Aid for prisoners in Germany, 1945. 271–274; USHMM 2004.714.1 | RG Number: RG-60.4111. Film ID: 2740. Swedish Red Cross Aid for prisoners in Germany.

37 USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (USC Shoah), Code: 51295. Interview with Erzsébet Widder, 2000.

38 Huhák, H.: *Magyar deportáltak életútjai*, pp. 147–185.; Huhák, H.: *A várakozás narratívája*, pp. 190–206.

39 These ego-documents I use in the followings can be found here: Szécsényi, A.: *Felszabadult magyar*, pp. 197–235.

40 Szita, S.: *Utak a pokolból*, pp. 25–47.

transit camp in the documents of the Red Cross, which is not completely suitable, as the majority was staying here only for one or two days, not for a longer time.

The situation was different for the camps following Malmö. The overlaps between the latter and the German DP's (1945–1953) were evident. The inhabitants of the camps were registered and nursed in both types. Genuine camp circumstances were existing. Closed areas with their own strict rules. It was not possible to leave the camps without the permission of the Red Cross camp management. Temporality also reckons the Swedish camps beside the DPs. At the same time, four characteristics separate them from the Jewish DP camps of the continent at the time: on the one hand, these camps were not subject to military supervision and provision. They were not in once abandoned buildings surrounded by fence, but mostly in schools, villas surrounded by green environment. That is, fundamental differences can be discovered in regards of feelings in the contemporary testimonies. On the other hand, these Swedish camps were sanatoria, their main task was medical treatment. Even though there were hospitals in the German Jewish DPs camps yet, they had a much more complex functionality. The bigger ones turned into actual small towns with time. But these Swedish sanatorium/refugee camps never did. On the contrary, the Swedish population regarded the habitants of the camps at the edge of the towns as refugees, and their dwelling spaces as refugee camps. The reluctance towards them had dissolved only after long months. In their eyes, most of the Hungarians did not possess their own freedom, they remained strangers to whom help must be provided, so that their lives can become full again. Therefore, a kind of common identity of these ex-prisoners has evolved in front of the locals. Most of the Hungarians who got into the camps did not denote their dwelling places here as a camp, but as a hospital, a sanatorium, which refers to the fact that they experienced significant differences from the circumstances they had experienced during the weeks after the liberation, in the Jewish DP camp of Belsen. Overall, we can say that we are far from seeing a unified picture about the Hungarians living in the Swedish camps between 1945 and 1946 at this stage of the research. Even the peculiarity of exploring these kinds of camps can also add a lot to the understanding of the fate of the post-war Jewish refugees. Therefore, it was desirable to reconstruct the narrative of the camps of the Swedish refugees not only from Hungarian aspect, and to insert the results coming from this into the history of the refugee issue.

Living in “half-freedom”: Hungarian Jewish experiences between persecution and homecoming

The first experiences of the Liberated Jews

It took three to four days before considerable reinforcements reached the camp and for larger scale organized relief efforts to commence.⁴¹ The landscape in Belsen or in

41 Celinscak, M.: *Distance*, p. 78.

Farsleben and Hillersleben in the first two weeks after the liberation was shocking both for the liberators and the survivors. The sight of the 150.000 lying corpses, or “walking deads” or “living skeletons” as the liberators called them was extremely stressful for everybody including the Jewish people. As a woman remembered to a moment of the first days, „they [the British] turned around when we undressed, but I don’t think they even regarded us as women.”⁴²

The survivors are suffered from different stages of trauma. All of them had diseases and were extremely weak. Most of them even had been agonizing long before the Allied troops came into the camps. The agony often coupled with hallucinations, which transferred them into strange, almost incurable conditions. Haunted by their terrible experiences they were feeling deep sadness and bitterness. These feelings kept carrying on their physical weakness. Although the 63rd Anti-Tank regiment liberated them and proclaimed: “*you are free*”,⁴³ the majority of them did not feel themselves free.

One of the most relevant contemporary sources is the diary of Gabriella Trebits. Trebits was keeping a diary during the final weeks of the camp life and the first period of the liberation. This young Hungarian woman was writing about her typhus-infection and her general impressions. She reported about in detail, day by day, how she and the rest of them weren’t able to accept the fact of their freedom. Based on the diary we can say that the mental and physical agony influenced the image of their future prospects. In her entry on 31. April she wrote: „*I survived. But I’m just alive. What would life give to me in the future to forget all these things? Will I see again the colors, taste the tastes? Could I ever work again, step on my crippled feet or play the piano with my crippled arms? My tooth went wrong [...] Not a single hair remained. They were all shaved.*”⁴⁴ This entry represents the general depression of the survivors, which prevented them from feeling free from the memories of persecution. Being aware of their poor health and the loss of their relatives, some of the survivors suffered from harder psychological consequences as well, such as death wish and suicidal tendencies.

Not all liberated prisoners were feeling the same agony and depression in the first days. Some of them, mostly those whose physical conditions remained relatively good, showed the opposite effect, which was euphoria right at the sight of the liberators. Being overcome by euphoria the survivors could not stand showing almost irrational happiness and joy towards their liberators. They often described the first days as feeling freedom. However the consequence of this state of mind didn’t last long and they also sunk into lethargy as it happened with the most of the survivors.

When the British came into the camp, they opened the food storages of the SS and let the liberated eat what they wanted. The skeleton-like people were eating voraciously as much as they could, which caused them pain, serious gastritis. A large amount of the overeaten people died within two days after the overeating. This kind of death increased

42 Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University. ID: mssa.hvt.3564. Interview with Yehudit M., 1993.

43 Shephard, B.: *After Daybreak*, pp. 33–42.

44 Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, Archiv. BO 4173. Diary of Gabriella Trebits.

the fear of the future among the liberated Jews. The contemporary narrative sources often highlighted the tragedy of their fellow sufferer.

During the weeks of liberation, after the SS had left the camp on 12. April, Hungarian soldiers remained on site to guard the camp. The Hungarian military personnel continued guarding after the liberation in the first week as well. The 2000 Hungarian, largely unrestricted and armed soldiers made the liberation feel more surreal for the survivors.⁴⁵ They were treating the inmates brutally, even the fellow Hungarian captives. The soldiers also committed many phisycal atrocities, about what dozens of survivors remembered. Many of them also recalled their swearing, that caused fear and bitterness. “God damn you and die”,⁴⁶ “Stinking Jews are you still alive?”⁴⁷, shouted them through the fences. They even participated in several killings during the muddled times of the handover to the British Army. The behaviour of the Hungarian guards increased the fear of the Jews even in the first days of the liberation of Belsen. The ego-documents of the Hungarian Jews often mention that they did not feel free due to the Hungarian guards even after the liberation. The first weeks within the fences of the Jewish DP camps put the Jews patience to the proof because of the temporary circumstances: they were brought into untidy, messy hospitals and barracks crammed with other sick people. This incoordination was increasing the liberated people’s frustration. Erzsébet Nádas, who was liberated in Mauthausen and then on May 9 was hospitalized in DP camp Wels was writing in her memoir: “*I couldn’t have believed where we were brought by the Americans, if they didn’t tell us, this was a displaced persons camp. I thought we were brought into another concentration camp.*”⁴⁸

While liberation is a well-describable term in the survivors’ mind and memory, since they had been deprived by the sufferings from the Nazis until April 1945, we cannot talk about freedom. Based on the sources, in the first weeks, the two terms – liberation and freedom – did not overlap with each other.

The change in the perception of liberation: half-freedom

During and after the cure from infectious diseases, the liberated Jews were housed in hospitals, DP camps and sanatoria. There were people who begged to be let go, others wanted to stay. In the case of the Swedish group the liberated people were picked for the transports almost randomly, maybe at express medical pressure, for which they also felt a growing revulsion towards their liberators.⁴⁹ In Belsen and Hillersleben the first

45 Cramer, J.: *Belsen trial 1945*, pp. 79–84.

46 Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University. ID: mssa.hvt.3412. Interview with Margó K., 1992.

47 Fortunoff Video Archive For Holocaust Testimonies. Yale University. ID: mssa.hvt.3564. Interview with Rella C., 2005.

48 Holokauszt Emlékközpont, Gyűjtemény (Holocaust Memorial Center, Collection – HDKE), Budapest, Hungary 2011.979.1. Testimony of Stellner Éva, 69–71.

49 See narrative sources of Hungarian survivors. For example: Interview with Gáborné Révész, 2018. Made by Heléna Huhák, András Szécsényi (held by the author) etc.; USC Shoah, Code: 51730. Interview with

direct, long-term interactions between the Jews and the American and British military and medical staff can be observed. However grateful the liberated Jews were for their liberation from the Nazi horror, this positive approach often coupled with negative elements or even turned into antipathy and fear. The Allied forces did not know how to treat them. The lack of empathy of the liberators was quite a common subject in the Hungarian narrative sources. Due to the lack of adequate medical staff before the Red Cross and UNRRA personnel arrived in the DP camps, the American and British doctors regularly hired German nurses to take care of the Jews. The presence of the German nurses caused fear and panic several times.⁵⁰ Stronger, furious and desperate survivors sometimes abused not just the German nurses, but the English medical staff as well.⁵¹

Significant differences can be read from the survivors' statements regarding their migration to Sweden and the time spent in the Swedish camps, but the Holocaust survivors regularly mention the unsympathetic behaviour of the English medical staff and the Swedish Red Cross.⁵² They often described this initial stage by the words "violent" or "ruthless", making them unable to get separated from the lager-experiences in this 'half-existence'.⁵³ Even the selection for travelling was often against their will.⁵⁴ It was an experience of public humiliation for them because they had to shower in groups, in the presence of the Red Cross supervisors in the Malmö harbour. Their clothes were confiscated and burnt. And the following disinfecting was akin to the Nazi monstrosities. Therefore, the Bergen liberation and the conscience of getting to Sweden was not connected to the feeling of freedom. They still felt like prisoners.

The once-pursued Jewish people mention drastic changes regarding the period after the first weeks of arriving to the Jewish DP camps, and to the Swedish camps. The line of positive experiences was closely connected with the new spatial circumstances and the long-term residence as displaced persons and refugees.⁵⁵ In this second period, which more or less overlapped with the late spring and summer months of 1945, they had already gained enough strength to be able to deal with other things than to get more food and gain more calories and other prime necessities. In the meantime they were also getting over their agony as well. First, they were mesmerized by the landscape, which was in stark contrast to the dirty, infectious period of the previous months of the SS lager-life. What once has been "dark, dense endless forest" turned to be the symbol of regeneration.⁵⁶ Especially the green surroundings, the clean bedclothes and the warm water enchanted them. The Swedish sanatoria were often described as "villas". Several

Magda Bácskai, 2001; Interview with Fehérvári Andrásné Szebeni Erzsébet, 2017. Made by Heléna Huhák, András Szécsényi (held by the author).

50 Ben-Sefer, E.: *Surviving survival*, pp. 105–106.

51 Kemp, P.: *The British Army*, p. 144.

52 USHMM 2004.714.1. RG Number: RG-60.4112. Film ID: 2740. Swedish Red Cross Aid for prisoners in Germany, 1945.

53 HDKE 2014. 16. Testimony of Klára Márton and Miklósné Halász, 30–32.

54 Zander, U.: *The Holocaust*, pp. 343–383.

55 USHMM, 2016.189.1. RG Number: RG-66.007. Selected records from the Sigtuna Foundation in Sweden.

56 Barzilai, Y.: *Till first Morning Light*, p. 61.

Hungarian holocaust survivors “felt like heaven” there.⁵⁷ Spatiality seems to have played a significant role in most of the former inmates’ lives; In Hillersleben the Jewish survivors were housed in the apartments of the former officers’ quarters. These apartments with all modern conveniences were in total contrast of the barracks of Bergen-Belsen where they lived before. „Maybe the washing machine of our clean apartment was the first one in my life” – remembered a Hungarian deportee.⁵⁸ Parallel to the re-establishment of the psychological conditions women commonly strived to make the surrounding area (rooms) clean. György Bognár, a then 16 years old boy from Budapest, who was brought to Hillersleben, in his diary explored the most important places, “functional landmarks”⁵⁹ of the camps. Based on the entries we can clearly see how the Jewish survivors were transforming from sick, agonized people into healthy survivors. Their positive attitude towards the medical staff of the hospital of the DP camp and their future was in strong connection with their various opportunities to use the camp institutions, like in his case the cinema and the soccer playground.⁶⁰ Experiencing the fragments of freedom, what we could call half-freedom, as an event was a key to elaborate hopes and plans, and as such also to physical recovery, given the opportunities.

The same happened with those hundreds who were in Sweden. The first impressions of feeling the freedom appeared only in the summer months. As soon as they got better, the Red Cross nurses took them to concerts, to the cinema, to have fun. Many of them also learnt the Swedish language, which proved to be useful. Several Hungarians have designated Sweden as the beginning of the “second life”.⁶¹

As they were getting healthier and had opportunities to leave their beds, they re-discovered several elements of emotions: smells, colors, and tastes. A former deportee, Mária Elek remembered that “her eyes had got unused to percept colors for such a long time.”⁶² The fact that the weather was already warm in the late spring and summertime of 1945 was related to the feeling of freedom. Thus, the warmth, with healing and humane circumstances, were in contrast to the inhumane world of the dark, cold barracks. “As we got the violet field, we were all collapsing in ecstasy, into the green grass. [...] Now in the greenery flowers were blossoming. We were walking rapturously by this warm, sunny day, which meant the miracle of liberation, and turned spring from winter, freedom from captivity. This warm weather made humans from us again, free men who go anywhere and anytime they want.”⁶³

The survivors were getting better day by day and in some cases they were also getting overwhelmed by happiness and joy. Joy of gradual healing, and from psychological reasons. In addition, the humane behaviour proved to be crucial to feel some kind of freedom. They were getting to accept the efforts of the staff, and the ‘lottas’ (the Red Cross

57 See for example: USC Shoah code: 51295. Interview with Erzsébet Widder, 2000.; Kato Feuer (Bloch): Napló, közel 50 év után. USHMM Accession Number: 1994.A.0150. RG Number: RG-02.209.

58 Koltai, F.: *Pápa-Bergen-Belsen-Pápa*, p. 96.

59 Devlin, A. S.: *The „Small Town”*, pp. 60–61.

60 HDKE 2011.15.1–2. The diary of Bognár György Bognár, p. 70.

61 For example: USC Shoah, code: 24938. Interview with Franciska Koltai, 1997.

62 HDKE 2011.846.1, Testimony of Hollós Alfrédné, Elek Mária, p. 309.

63 HDKE 2011.846.1, Testimony of Hollós Alfrédné, Elek Mária, p. 310.

nurses in Sweden) for their mental healing can be counted here as well. Positive experiences attached to the sanatoria, the Red Cross nurses and doctors are also explained in the ego-documents.⁶⁴ The survivors had the opportunity to communicate with impunity: friendships, social relationships, even love relationships were born at this time.

After upgrading the physical condition the residents of the camps tried to make themselves ready to repatriate. Meanwhile they were hastening the pass of time by leisure time activities within the barbed wire. The newspapers of the DP camps founded by the survivors played significant role in expanding the boundaries of freedom in the Hungarian survivor' minds. The editors of these papers were eager to address their English-speaking liberators on matters that they deemed highly significant at the time politically or economically.⁶⁵ But they reported on the everyday life as well. The editorial boards were under the control of the camp commandans. Their main goal was to lead the readers back into the civil life they had left behind in 1944 by the humorous, entertaining or informative content. They wanted to reshape their lives and create prospects for the future. In the summer of "*the year zero, 1945*"⁶⁶ the displaced persons desperately desired to put down their new roots.⁶⁷ The camp commanders also strived to egg the former prisoners on in going back to their style of living as much as possible in these artificial, regulated environments, however their current life situation couldn't totally or partly satisfy them. Many attended or even participated in such camp-events like cabarets, dance parties. For these occasions, especially women did their hair and pulled on the best clothes. These customs were kind of rituals by which little fragments of their former civil life in Hungary were relived. In Hillersleben the former Casino building of the Luftwaffe functioned as a theater and a dance hall. In the summer a cinema also opened for the displaced persons. In the sanatoria camps of Sweden the "*lottas*" also frequently produced cultural programs. György Bognár designated the diverse cultural scenes of Hillersleben as one of the fragments of the free life for which there had always been a great interest.⁶⁸

Yet, even with all this, they didn't experience the completeness of freedom. There always were boundaries of free living for the former deportees. First of all, in these places they lived in the same forms of living – camps – surrounded by barbed-wire fences as well. The barbed-wire reminded many survivors of their persecution, loss and of course, Bergen-Belsen.⁶⁹ Although here they were not forced to labour by the SS or nobody threatened their lives, their daily routine was restricted by strict rules even so. The DP camps in Germany were controlled by the allied military forces, and in Sweden by the strict rules of the Red Cross. Curfew existed in all these camps, although the residents were allowed to leave camps more often as their physical and mental conditions allowed.

64 USHMM Archives, 2016.189.1. RG Number: RG-66.007. Selected records from the Sigtuna Foundation in Sweden.

65 Taft, T.: *From Victim to Survivor*, pp. 75–76.

66 Lukacs, J.: *1945, Year Zero*.

67 Schlichting, N.: *Life After the Liberation*, p. 225.

68 HDKE 2011.15.1–2. The diary of Bognár György Bognár. p. 95.

69 Shephard, B.: *Belsen*, p. 152.

In spite of these circumstances, they regularly felt that “*we didn’t know what to do with our freedom.*”⁷⁰ Most of the displaced persons wanted to return home, but they did not have the opportunity to leave the camps until they more or less physically recovered.

Many ego documents are full of complaints about the food and clothing supplies. The narrative sources also explore the active, conscious desire for things to change. As time went by they all wanted to get back the life they had left with the deportations. They also worried about their relatives. However the liberated Jews had the opportunity to get connected with their family members and friends in Hungary, their desire to meet with them in person was constantly increasing. Many people described these months as „*half existence*” between captivity and freedom. We have to mention that those Jews who came from the Ungarnlager of Bergen-Belsen often reported that the general circumstances of the DP camps were even worse, than the former privileged living conditions within the concentration camps. „*Our freedom would have been given to us, but we couldn’t accept it. [...] To go home? Who could have enough courage returning home in an insecure route?*”⁷¹ It was a ‘half-existence’ for them: missing the family, losing the loved ones, insecurity was often mixed with anger towards the homeland and the future-related perplexity in many of them.

Summary

Most of the historical narratives on the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps use the term ‘freedom’ in strong connection with the liberation, despite the obvious contradictions between the two notions. In spite of the rich historical literature on the Jewish DP camps, and about the post-genocide era from many perspectives, historical scholarship has not focused on the investigation of ego-documents (testimonies and diaries) of the survivor groups yet. By the wider analysis of their narrative sources historical researchers would get clearer impressions of the displaced person’s experiences and life situations. There are many interpretations of what the term “Holocaust survivor” and “victim” is and how their images have changed in the public discourse of the last fifteen years. Based on the Hungarian displaced persons’ narrative sources of Hillersleben and the sanatoria camps of Sweden, historical research should be extended to the territory of the victims and survivors own interpretations. The first months living in the DP camps are easily comprehensible as being in a “*waiting room*”.⁷² In the aftermath of liberation – at a time when many survivors were experiencing not the joy of freedom but rather the pain of feeling lost in the world – survivors bore witness not only for themselves, but for those they had lost.⁷³ They were also feeling lost between their painful recent past and the uncertain future. Agreeing with Andrea Reiter we can say, this waiting room

70 HDKE 2011.811.1 Testimony of Sándorné, Gábor. 24–25.

71 HDKE 2011.977.1 Testimony of Anna Linksz, 140.

72 Schlicting, N.: *Life After*, pp. 224–225.

73 Waxman, Z. V.: *Writing the Holocaust*, p. 185.

position brought new identities into the survivors' lives, due to the shockingly new conditions concerning their future prospects.⁷⁴ These new personal half-free liberated camp survivor identities', inner coherency kept modifying depending on three factors: their ongoing healing, the particular camp's circumstances and individual reasons, primarily upon their mental constitution at the time. As Jean Amery formulated: „*Freedom is not an immutable space to be captured once and for all. It is a permanent process of more and more new liberations.*”⁷⁵ The liberated Jews were not inmates anymore between liberation and homecoming or emigration, but were not even feeling free. As time passed they were getting more comfortable in this half-freedom existence.

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⁷⁴ Reiter, A.: *Narrating the Holocaust*, p. 24.

⁷⁵ Amery, J.: *On Suicide*, p. 72.

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