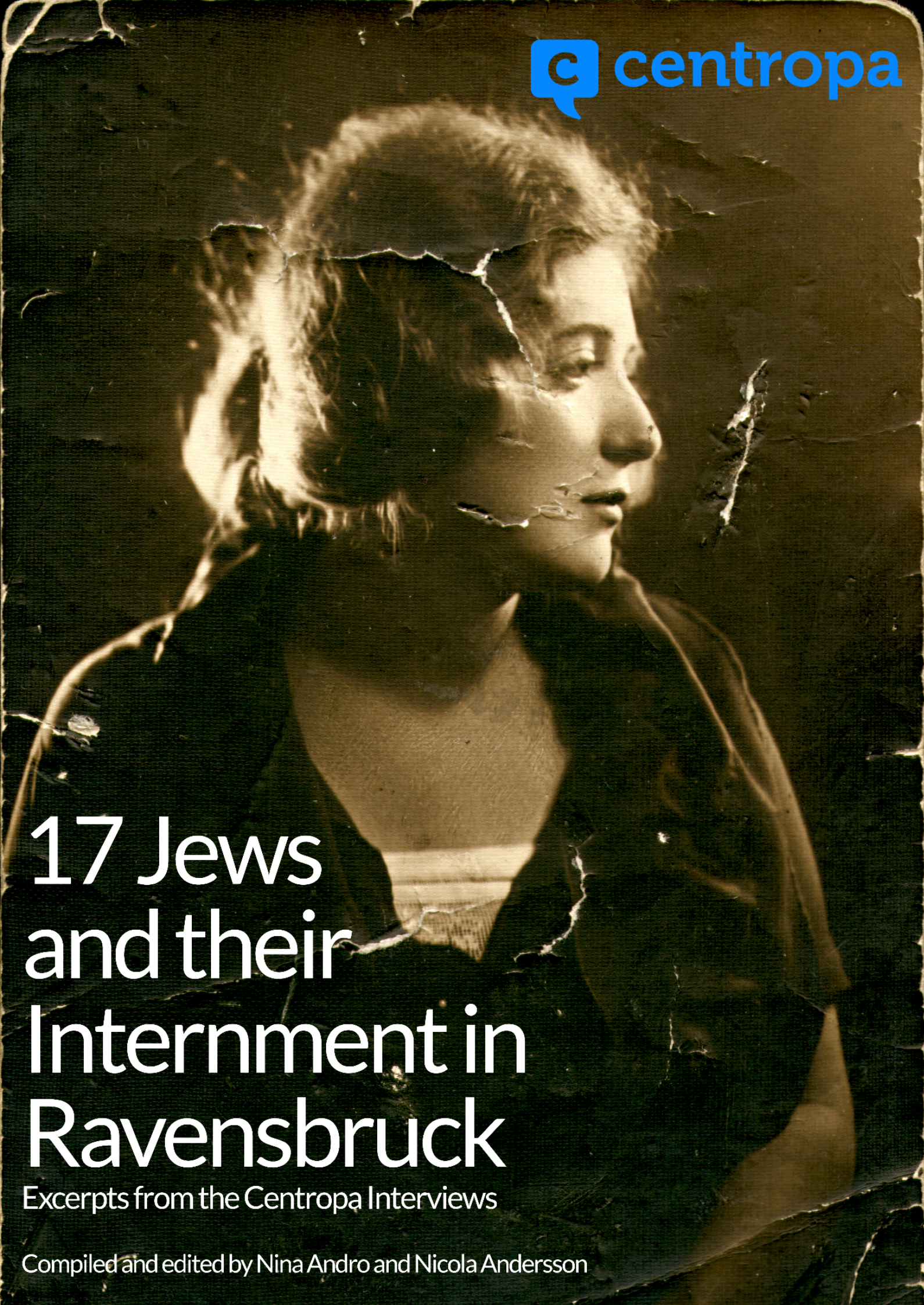

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17 Jews and their Internment in Ravensbruck

Excerpts from the Centropa Interviews

Compiled and edited by Nina Andro and Nicola Andersson

“There was a small table, and a female soldier brought something red in on a tray, that looked like some kind of meat. They told me later it was a calf gland [thymus gland]. But I couldn't tell what it was. They cut my thigh open and sewed it into me. The International Red Cross examined it and said they had performed medical experiments on me.”

– Mariann Szamosi

“When we were still in the *Waschraum*, something like a bathroom, we didn’t know what would come out of the showers, if it was gas or water, because we already understood the seriousness of the situation. So I asked a French prisoner who was there to keep order if I could drink the water. And she answered, ‘It’s all the same, whether you die now or later’. This was such an introduction to reality. It was water, not gas, that came out of the shower heads.”

– Ema Panovova

“In Ravensbrück we all prayed that they would send us back to Auschwitz because it was just indescribable. I think it was the worst camp there was. Above all, we weren't in blocks, there were just these tents. These sloping things, like tents, were called '*zelta*' [from the German '*Zelt*' - tent]. And they packed us in there, I don't know how many into one tent. It was like putting 200 people in a tent for four or five. All you could do was sit, one on top of another. You went [relieved yourself] where you sat; they didn't let us out at all. At each other, on each other, it was pouring over my head; I don't even know who it was doing it [relieving themselves] on me... And so there we sat like that. Ravensbrück was the worst camp. The worst.”

– Teofila Silberring

Cover image: Leonora Acs, the mother of Mariann Szamosi. She was murdered in Ravensbrück in 1945. Photograph taken in Budapest, 1924/25.

All images are accredited to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, from the Centropa (Central Europe Center for Research and Documentation) Collection, unless otherwise stated.

Introduction

Centropa is a Jewish historical institute based in Vienna, Budapest, Hamburg and Washington. The first phase of our activities began in 2000, with an oral history project that spent ten years interviewing 1,200 elderly Jews still living in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Baltics and the Balkans. We never used video in our interviews, and we did not focus solely on the Holocaust. Instead, we asked our respondents to tell us stories about the entire century, just as they lived it, and we digitized 24,800 of their old family pictures and documents, all of which they annotated for us. There has never been an oral history project like this before; it is too late to attempt one now. Please visit our website, www.centropa.org, to find the English translations of our interviews and the annotated photographs. For academics wishing to access the original language word-for-word transcriptions, please contact our office in Vienna (office@centropa.org).

Female prisoners at Ravensbrück, 1939.

The Concentration Camp System

From 1933, the Nazi party built a number of camps intended to detain so-called "enemies of the state" initially in Germany, and later in many other European countries as well. Most prisoners were detained in the early concentration camps for political reasons (e.g: Communists, Socialists, and Social Democrats) or for being classified as 'asocial': this included criminals, homosexuals, Roma, Sinti, and Jehovah's Witnesses. The Nazis created different kinds of camps, with the most infamous being the concentration camps: camps where prisoners were held under extremely harsh conditions. Under this label, there were also forced-labour camps (where the forced labour of prisoners was used for economic gain by the Nazi regime), transit camps (temporary holding facilities for prisoners on their way to death camps), prisoner-of-war camps (which were used exclusively for Allied prisoners of war), and killing centers (whose sole purpose was the systematic execution of large numbers of prisoners).

In many forced-labour camps, prisoners were purposefully malnourished and exposed to lethal working conditions and brutality. The camp authorities wanted them to perish while still extracting the maximum amount of labour out of them. Prisoners were sometimes leased out to private firms, with their wages being paid straight to the SS: this served the dual purpose of meeting labor shortages at the time as well as economically benefiting the German Reich. Medical experiments were carried out on prisoners in numerous camps, which they often did not survive or were left permanently disabled by. From 1933, the entire concentration camp system fell outside the jurisdiction of the German law system, meaning that all authority lay with the SS and police who ran the camps.

After the implementation of Hitler's "Final Solution" to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe in 1941, the Nazis began to build large killing centres in occupied Poland, which had the largest Jewish population of all the occupied countries at that time. These camps were designed to kill large groups of people as quickly and effectively as possible, at first using mobile gas vans (poisoning prisoners with carbon monoxide gas from the van's exhaust pipes) and later gas chambers (using the pesticide known as Zyklon B or carbon monoxide). Only a small percentage of those imprisoned in Nazi camps survived.

As the Allied forces began to surround Germany towards the end of WWII, thousands of prisoners in camps in occupied countries were sent on forced 'death marches' and 'evacuation transports' on foot and by train. They were directed towards camps further away from the front lines, to prevent their capture by the Allies. Conditions in camps became more horrific due to severe overcrowding, disease, exposure, and starvation, and death rates soared in those last months of the war. By the end of WWII on 7 May 1945, more than 6 million Jews had been murdered by the Nazis; four million in concentration and extermination camps, two million more through massacres in the territories conquered and occupied by the Wehrmacht.

Sources:

Nazi Camps. Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/nazi-camps

Concentration Camp System: In Depth. Holocaust Encyclopedia, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/concentration-camp-system-in-depth?series=10

Aerial photograph of Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Ravensbrück: The Camp

The Ravensbrück concentration camp was built in 1939 near Fürstenberg, Germany: it became the largest women's concentration camp in the German Reich and the second-largest in size after Auschwitz-Birkenau. After its inauguration, the camp was constantly expanded to accommodate more and more prisoners. In 1944, a large tent was erected to accommodate the swelling numbers of prisoners who came as a result of the 'evacuation transports' (prisoners who were evacuated by rail and foot from camps close to the frontlines as the Allied forces advanced towards Germany). Factories were constructed within the camp perimeter where prisoners were initially forced to do so-called 'women's work', such as sewing, weaving, and knitting. In April 1941, a small men's camp was built within the grounds, and in June 1942, the adjacent "juvenile protective custody camp" was taken under the camp's control.

From 1941 onwards, Ravensbrück became a death camp. Thousands of women, children, and men were shot and later burned in the camp's crematorium. In early 1945 a gas chamber was constructed. By the end of the war, Ravensbrück boasted over 40 satellite camps with over 70,000 predominantly female prisoners, whose forced labor was mostly used in agriculture, local industry and armaments production. From 1942 onwards, many women from Ravensbrück were also forced or coerced into prostitution: they were made to work in the brothels set up in many other concentration camps which were created in order to 'reward' outstanding male prisoners. Often the women were promised that they would be released after six months if they volunteered for this job: however, they were never set free. Beginning in 1942, Ravensbrück also became one of the main training camps for female SS guards.

Just before the end of the war, the International, Danish, and Swedish Red Cross evacuated about 7,500 inmates to Sweden, Switzerland, and France. The camp's commandant forced the remaining 20,000 prisoners on a death march towards northwest Germany in early April 1945. When the camp was liberated by the Soviets on 30 April 1945, they found only 2,000 severely ill inmates: many of these people died shortly afterwards.

Between 1939 and 1945, an estimated total of 120,000 women and children, 20,000 men, and 1,200 teenage girls (in a "juvenile protective custody camp") were imprisoned in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, although the real number was probably much higher. This number included more than 30 nationalities (with the highest percentages of prisoners coming from Poland (36%), the Soviet Union (21%), the German Reich (18%, including Austria), Hungary (8%), France (6%), Czechoslovakia (3%), the Benelux countries (2%), and Yugoslavia (2%)), thousands of political prisoners, and thousands more Jewish, Sinti, and Roma people. Tens of thousands of prisoners were murdered or died from the lethal living conditions, starvation, disease, exposure, and horrific medical experiments conducted in the camp.

After its liberation, the Red Army used the camp buildings as barracks, and much of the area fell into disrepair (such as the crematorium). The first memorial ceremony was held there in

1948 and subsequently has been held annually. On 12 September 1959, the “Ravensbrück National Memorial” opened, along with the first museum in 1960, for which survivors from all over Europe donated keepsakes, drawings and documents from the time they spent imprisoned in the camp. Since 1984, the camp’s former-SS headquarters have housed the memorial's permanent exhibition, which today is known as “The *Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp: History and Commemoration”* exhibition.

Sources:

1939 - 1945 Ravensbrück concentration camp. Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück. https://www.ravensbrueck-sbg.de/en/history/1939-1945/

Ravensbrück. Holocaust Encyclopedia.
https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck

Ravensbrück concentration camp memorial in 2008.

MARIANN SZAMOSI

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Klara Laszlo
Date of interview: February 2004

Mariann Szamosi as a little girl in Nagykörös, 1933.

Read Mariann Szamosi's biography here
Click here to see her family pictures

Mariann Szamosi was born in 1928 in Budapest, Hungary, but grew up in Nagykaros. She had a happy childhood in a big family home, describing her family as "a family of love, music and literature". Her father owned a fruit and vegetable company with her uncle, but they, unfortunately, went bankrupt in 1941, whereupon Mariann's family moved to Budapest to live with her grandparents. In March 1944, when Mariann was 16, she had to drop out of school because of new anti-Jewish legislation. Her family went into hiding in a friend's home, but they were found by the Arrow Cross in December 1944 and put on a train to Ravensbrück. There, she lost her mother and grandmother, and medical experiments were conducted on her. She recalls how, towards the end of April 1945, the Germans suddenly abandoned the camp and the Russians arrived two days later. She recovered and located some surviving family members in Szeged, but lost both her parents in the Holocaust. In 1947, at the age of 20, Mariann moved to Pest to live with an old friend and continued her studies, becoming a school director. She married in 1950 and had two daughters with her first husband, and gained a step-daughter from her second marriage in 1965. She faced antisemitism in Hungary throughout most of her career, but at the time of interviewing she was still working full-time at a book publisher at the age of 76.

"They put us in train cars in Komarom and took us to Ravensbrück. My father was taken by another train, we can only guess that he went straight to Dachau, but maybe from Dachau he ended up in Auschwitz. The two trains went parallel. After a long freight train ride, we arrived in the village of Furstenberg on December 24th, where there was a concentration camp, Ravensbrück. They took us into the camp when we arrived and we had a night of freedom, we slept on the ground. The next morning they took away every last little trinket we had. After a cold shower, we had to remove all our clothes, we got a kind of rag instead, and they took us to Barrack 31. We were there for two months. Every day, there were constant

appeals for mercy, it was very difficult to bear, and it was very cold. It's close to the Baltic Sea. My mother got very sick, either with kidney stones or cancer. A prisoner doctor examined her and talked to her. My seventy-five-year-old grandmother was in better condition. They sometimes took me out of the camp to do all kinds of nasty work, sometimes they didn't. When I could, I tried to conserve energy so I'd stay strong, it was frightening.

They were unnecessary jobs. They took me to a place where I had to shovel sand and earth. Around and around, on top of the other, for no reason. I had a clever excuse. We were put in lines when they gave out the work, and once, when we started to go, I just did a 180-degree spin. They asked me how I got to go back. I said they didn't need me, and I came back. So I didn't have to do too much of this terrible work but stayed in the barrack. That was my occupation for the day.

My grandmother had a lot of spirit in her. There was a Czech prisoner who was a Jewish woman, a very upstanding woman, who encouraged us. It could have been at the beginning of March when the evacuations started. They brought people from Auschwitz, there wasn't even an empty barrack for them, they just put them in something called a *zeltlager* [tent camp in German]. It was a tent in which there weren't even beds. The people laid on the ground and slept. I went over there looking for acquaintances, and I found some, I think those people were in a horrible situation. There was an awful upheaval in the camp, one *appel* [roll call] for the other, these groups, those groups.

One night my mother said that they were collecting only young people, taking them, and they hid me under the bed. They went out and never came back: we never saw each other again. I was left there all alone. I was already in a terrible state, then they disappeared and I was worse. They put me in a different block, there I got some kind of skirt I had to throw away because it was so full of lice. In minus - I don't know - ten or fifteen degrees [Celsius], I would wrap myself in a plaid blanket instead of having some clothes on me. Then I wound up in another block. They took everybody left inside to do ditch digging work. One time, I fell down on the way to work and I couldn't get myself up. The *Aufseherin* [woman overseer] set a dog on me, it grabbed my arm and pulled me after. The prisoners at these times always stepped in to help, lifted me up and carried me to the worksite. There, they stuck me in the corner of a ditch, then took me home, supporting me on either side. But I don't have to say that when we got back in the evening, at the roll call, they discharged me from service. What they told us was that the sick and weak were taken to the so-called *kinderlager* [children's camp]. We didn't really know then what it was, we just guessed everything. We smelled the stink of burnt flesh. We just couldn't accept these monstrosities, plus I always hoped that I might get to go where my mother and grandmother were. The next morning they collected this group, I was one of them, to take them to the *kinderlager*. I guess my lust for life was too great. I knew German, so I went over to the German SS Head Supervisor woman and I told her that I'm sixteen years old and I feel I'm capable of working and to let me go back. She did. Well, I didn't work after that, because by evening I was even worse.

How I ended up in the tenth block, the *revier* [hospital], I can't say, surely somebody helped me. The fact is, I woke up in the hospital. It was a kind of sham hospital. The mentally ill

were there, the wretched who screamed hideously, occasionally they were taken away. And my great luck was that I met Gracia Kerenyi there. She was a very religious Christian girl who went from one prison to the next, eventually from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, because at her university she put up anti-German posters. Gracia was a language talent who knew German and English. In the hospital there, she got a position of trust. She deloused and took temperatures. She was a year older than I was, we came from the same family background. We became really good friends and she helped me a lot. I had a fever once, I had banged my leg, and they put me in an elimination group again – she came in and got me out.

It was a sham hospital, and they did experiments. They x-rayed me, and the doctor said I had tuberculosis, so they immediately pumped my lungs full of air. It was pretty painful. The doctor checked me and gave me everything. He did quite a lot of examining and watching us. Once he ordered me into the surgery. Surgery?! There was a small table, and a female soldier brought something red on a tray that looked like some kind of meat. They told me later it was a calf gland [thymus gland]. But I couldn't tell what it was. They cut my thigh open and sewed it into me. The International Red Cross examined it and said they had performed medical experiments on me. I had a lot of medical certifications about it, but I never understood a word of it. I was there in the hospital, laying on a bed with a Romani woman, who died there next to me. That was about the middle to the end of April. And all at once, the Germans left. We stayed there for one or two days in complete stasis. The people who could walk broke into the warehouse and found an incredible amount of Red Cross packages. They dumped the boxes at the main road; food, chocolate, milk powder, sardines, canned meats, and we ate that. I remember that I only ate chocolate, very carefully, so I didn't get sick. Two days later the Russians arrived.

It was miraculous! They came in two columns, hanging in bunches off the tanks, playing guitars. And those who were still in good shape jumped up on the tanks. In an hour and a half, they had set up their goulash cannons [portable cooking vats] and cooked soup and potatoes. They transferred us, those of us who were left, within a week, and turned the whole place into a Russian hospital. All at once, it was full of Russian doctors and nurses. They healed us. That was in the first days of May, and on the 22 of August 1945 they let us go. They healed the scar on my leg but I was still feverish, plus I had to fill out: I weighed thirty six kilos [79lbs]. Then we left in Red Cross buses. We had no idea that we weren't going home. It never occurred to us that we were going somewhere else.”

Photograph: MARIANN SZAMOSI IN FRONT OF THE HUNGARIAN MEMORIAL IN RAVENSBRÜCK

Image taken in Germany, 1989.

Mariann Szamosi visiting the Ravensbrück Memorial for Hungarian victims in 1989.

Read Mariann Szamosi's biography here
Click here to to see her family pictures

"Two or three years ago, the MAZSIHISZ [Hungarian Jewish Congregational Union] organized a memorial tour for me to the place where we suffered; where my mother and grandmother died. There's a memorial wall for all the nations who died there. We took wreaths there. In the picture, the short, white-haired woman in the foreground is Katoka Gyulai, who was the savior, organizer, and mentor of the Ravensbrück group. It was a very beautiful ceremony, you can't see it here, but the local young people from there arranged our trip. There's a functioning museum at the gate of the camp."

Film: MARIANN SZAMOSI – THE WOMEN WHO TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING

Watch the film here

"This is the story of an assimilated, well-to-do Jewish family living in Nagykoros. When Mariann's father lost his business, the family moved to Budapest and Mariann watched as her mother and grandmother took charge of running things.

They were sent to the women's concentration camp of Ravensbrück in northern Germany; only Mariann returned alive. Now in her 80s, Mariann is still running her own publishing company."

Document: MARIANN SZAMOSI'S VERIFICATION OF DEPORTATION

Document created in Prague, 1945.


Maďarský Červený kříž, Praha
Magyar Vöröskereszt, Prága
104/3884

Usměrňovací list. — Irányító levél.

Posílám do Maďarska maďarské státní občany:
Útba indítom Magyarországba a köv. magyar állampolgárokat:

Deo Mariannae. / 1928. V 12. /

Směr jízdy: Praha - Bratislava - Budapest.
Útirány: Prága - Bratislava - Budapest.

počtem:
összesen:

Žádají se československé a ruské úřady a orgány, aby umožňovaly návrat jmenovaných do vlasti.
Kéretnek a csehszlovák és orosz hatóságok és közegek, hogy nevezettek hazatérését elősegítsék.

Výše jmenovaní přijeli z koncentračního tábora Ravensbrück
Prahu dne 1945.

1945 aug 21

DEGOB

Platí pouze k pobytu v Praze na 48 hodin od vyhotovení.
Csak 48 óráig tartózkodásra jogosít Prágában, a kiadás napját is beleszámítva.

Mariann Szamosi's certificate of deportation issued by the Red Cross in Prague, 1945.

Click here to view the document
Click here to read Mariann Szamosi's biography
Click here to see her family pictures
Watch the film here

"This letter of directive served as verification when I came back from the camp. We took a Red Cross bus home. The International Red Cross took us from Ravensbrück to Prague. We stopped in Prague to get this verification and then a bus took us from there, but only to Komarom, I don't even know why. From there we came across the bridge on foot into Hungary, then by train to Pest, and straight away to the DEGOB [National Committee for the Care of the Deported], where they interviewed us. The DEGOB seal is on the paper there. This always served me as verification of my deportation."

Photograph: LEONARA ACS

Photograph taken in Budapest, 1924/25.

Leonora Acs, Mariann Szamosi's mother, in Budapest, Hungary, 1924/25.

Click here to view the image
Click here to read Mariann Szamosi's biography
Click here to see her family pictures

Leonora Acs was the mother of Mariann Szamosi. She was murdered in Ravensbrück in 1945.

"This is a very pretty picture of my mother, Leonora Sebestyen, from her youth. She was already a young woman here, so I think this picture was taken sometime in the mid-1920s. This was also taken by a photographer, but who it was or when I don't know. It looks to me like a picture from her childhood.

My mother, Leonora Sebestyen, was born in 1904 and probably died in Ravensbrück. My mother spoke very eloquently and attended acting school for a while. But nothing came of that, and most likely due to financial reasons, she had to quit. She became a housewife and lived at home. Both the boys, Erno and Lajos, were trained as lawyers, and for my grandfather to afford that expense, his two daughters had to find husbands from wealthy families. That was the cost of educating the boys. The girls succeeded. My parents were probably recommended to each other. The marriage didn't come from passionate love or intimacy. It was an honourable, decent marriage. My father came back from detention after the First World War, it had to be in 1925, then they were married in 1926."

PIROSKA HAMOS

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Eszter Andor
Date of interview: April 2004

Piroska Hamos in Mátyásland in 1935.

Click here to read Piroska Hamos's biography
Click here to see her family pictures

Piroska was born in 1912 in Balassagyarmat as the eldest of three siblings. Her young mother committed suicide in 1920, after which her father, a tailor, moved their family to Budapest and remarried in 1921. Piroska married her second cousin, Imre Hamos, in 1929, when she was just seventeen and he was thirty years old. They had two daughters and a son. When the anti-Jewish legislation came into effect in Hungary in May 1944, they moved in with Piroska's parents instead of going to the city's ghetto. Her husband, Imre, was taken away for forced labour and shot in Balf, in 1945. Piroska was deported to Ravensbrück in November 1944 with her sister, Etel. In April 1945, they were sent on a death march for ten days with no food or water, until they were abandoned by the German guards one night. Eventually, they managed to find a train heading back to Budapest: Piroska arrived home on 29 June 1945, one day before her thirty-third birthday, and rejoined her beloved step-mother and children, who had survived the war. Afterwards, Piroska studied and became a chartered accountant and auditor.

"It was on posters that every woman under the age of thirty five should appear on the KISOK field, complete with food for three days and I don't know what else. So I went to the KISOK field with my sister, but in the evening of the first day, those whose husbands were in forced labour were allowed to go home. The next day they had to come back and then we didn't go home again. It happened sometime around the end of November 1944. Both of us went by foot as far as Zundorf, which is somewhere close to Hegyeshalom on the Austrian border. There, we were driven into railway cattle cars, men and women together, and the doors were closed on us. It was terrible. I can't even describe this trip. We weren't given any food or drink, we couldn't go to the toilet; one of the corners was the toilet. I don't remember anymore how long this journey, this nightmare, lasted.

We travelled as far as Hamburg, where they kicked out all the men, and then the freight train pushed on with the women, actually going backwards. Of course, we didn't know anything because we couldn't see out, so only when the train stopped again did we see the name of the station: Fürstenberg. It was through this nice, friendly-looking little place that we arrived at a concentration camp surrounded by barbed wire, where we were received by dogs and SS soldiers. This was Ravensbrück.

We only stayed here for two weeks. It was horrible. There were four or five of us on a narrow plank-bed. That's where I saw women with shaved heads for the first time, and where Etel cut my beautiful, almost waist-length hair, which was worn plaited around my head, with her nails scissors, which she still had at that time. This was because I was scared of lice, and of being shaved bald. After two weeks we were put into train carriages again, and we were taken to a different camp. This was Leipzig, as we heard later. Luckily, my sister and I were taken to the same place, but they never knew that we were sisters, because she was called Schneller and I was called Hamos."

Film: PIROSKA HAMOS – LIFE ON THE DANUBE

Watch the film here
Click here to read Piroska Hamos's biography
Click here to see her family pictures

"Piroska Hamos was born in Balassagyarmat, a small town in North-Eastern Hungary in 1912, to the family of Armin Schultz, a gentleman's tailor. Her mother Jozefin died very early. Piroska had one sister, Etel, born in 1912. When their father remarried, they moved to Budapest, where Piroska went to school. She started at a commercial high school but dropped out after two years when she married her second cousin, Imre Hahn.

Imre, born in 1899 in Budapest, worked as a clerk at the Hungarian Royal River and Sea Shipping Stock Company. Imre had a rowboat.

Piroska and Imre converted in 1934 because Imre worked for a state company which did not like employing Jews. However, they were still treated as Jews when the anti-Jewish laws were introduced in Hungary. Imre was taken to forced labour and died in Balf a little before their liberation. Piroska and her sister were deported to Ravensbrück (both survived). Piroska's daughters were in the Budapest ghetto with Piroska's sister-law, Klari. Piroska never remarried and raised her two daughters alone. After the war, she worked in the Ministry of Health. She died at the age of 93 in 2005."

EMA PANOVOVA

Slovakia
Interviewer: Unknown
Date of interview: Unknown

Ema Panovova as a young girl with her mother, Olga, in Holic, 1929.

Click here to read Piroska Hamos's biography
Click here to see her family pictures

Ema Panovova was born in 1925 in Holic, Czechoslovakia (modern-day Slovakia). Her father, Emil Neuwirth, was a doctor, but he died rather young of typhus. Her Jewish mother, Olga, remarried a Russian immigrant who was also a doctor, and he later saved Ema's life by proving in court that she was his daughter, thus making her only half-Jewish. In 1944 her step-father obtained false documents for the family to flee Czechoslovakia. They were sheltered by sympathetic strangers but were eventually recognised during a round-up and deported. Ema and her mother were sent to Ravensbrück.

"Once a German from Holic came and he recognized us in a roundup. We were all caught. They first took us to Vlckova Street, to a Secret Police station. My father was kept there, whereas my mother and I were brought to Sered and on 6th December we were transported to Ravensbrück. The transport was originally routed to Auschwitz, but, fortunately, Auschwitz didn't accept us.

"From the distance, we saw houses which were similar to the houses built in our neighborhood. I couldn't believe everything I heard before and at first, I was happy that the rumors weren't right. I said to my mother that we would live and work there. On the gate, there was the inscription '*Arbeit Macht Frei*', so I thought I was right. In this camp [Ravensbrück] with its jungle law, under horrible conditions, and where only a few could keep their humanity, even there I found some solidarity and help.

When we were still in the *Waschraum*, something like a bathroom, we didn't know what would come out of the showers, if it was gas or water, because we already understood the seriousness of the situation. So I asked a French prisoner who was there to keep order if I could drink the water. And she answered, 'It's all the same, whether you die now or later'.

This was such an introduction to reality. It was water, not gas, that came out of the showerheads. Most of the girls had their heads shaved; I was somehow lucky that I wasn't shaved. We were wet, it was December, Ravensbrück is located in the north, and we had to stand outside… I don't know what to say about the concentration camp, it was horrible. It was really horrible…

I survived half a year there, but it marked me for the rest of my life. I caught renal (kidney) tuberculosis and I wouldn't have survived four or five years in a concentration camp, as some girls did."

ZSUZSANNA HERCZOG

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: unknown
Date of interview: 2007

Zsuzsanna Herczog in 1945

Click here to read Zsuzsanna Herczog's biography [in Hungarian]
Click here to see her family pictures

Zsuzsanna Herczog was born in 1927 in Budapest. Her parents divorced in 1937. She had one older brother who died during forced labor. On 1 December 1944 she was deported to Ravensbrück, then on 19 January 1945, moved to Freiburg [Germany], where she worked in a factory for aircraft parts. She was liberated during a death march in the beginning of May, near Karlsbad. She returned home in 1945, worked as a clerk, married and had 2 children.

"We arrived on the evening of 8 December and saw the sign for Ravensbrück. We had no idea where it was. We knew it was very far away, I think we guessed it was somewhere over Berlin. We immediately had to get out of the wagon, where many dead people were left, and we waited outside all night. I was so apathetic that I just stepped over the dead.

We were not given clothes, so we stayed in what we came in. They took us into the big Zelt [tent (German)]. There was a small Zelt and a big Zelt. There was no more room in the barracks, so they put up tents with three-storey beds. There were three of us on each bunk, so nine in one bed. There were very few boards, so you had to move very carefully or you would fall on each other's heads. I somehow managed to get a place on the top bunk. At least there was some air.

At dawn, we had to go to the Appellplatz [assembly point (German)]. The Frau Aufseherinnen, the inspectors, shouted "Aufstehen, aufstehen!" [Get up! (German)] They put us out at 5 o'clock in the morning, at 8 o'clock the camp command or whoever came, then it was the Zahlappell [headcount (German)]. They did the headcount in two minutes, but until then we had to stand there motionless in rows of five. We were very lucky not to be menstruating. Only one girl had started, which was terrible, because there were no hygienic provisions. But then no one else. They gave us bromine, they said the bread had bromine in it.

After the Zahlappell we were taken to work. It was always absolutely pointless. Earthwork was done by giving you a shovel and carrying a pile of earth from here to there and from there to here. Sometimes it happened that they took us to sort and arrange dishes and various looted things. There were beautiful tableware items, sometimes even with leftovers dried on them.

We were very afraid of the Revier, the hospital, we tried everything to not get in there. Once we were all taken in, we were examined as women. I was a virgin, so I got away with it relatively lightly. They did something to some of the women, but I don't know anything more than that about it.

We ate Wassersuppe, Gemüsesuppe [water and vegetable soup (German)]. When we had Gemüsesuppe, we took out the little vegetables that were in it, squashed them, and put it on the bread, so we didn't have to eat the bread plain. One of the girls managed to keep a knife, and we were able to cut the 12 kg of bread we were given for one day into 10 slices. It was very good when we got a little bit of Zulage [supplement (German)], a piece of Marmalad [jam (German)] or a piece of margarine, one day this, the next day that. I got diarrhea there. I had to go out one night. I was looking for the latrine, and almost got there, when one of the "nice" Aufseherinnen saw me. What am I doing here, I said 'zum WC' [to the toilet (German)]. You can't go out at night, and she hit me. Well, then I pooped my pants in fright. That was the only time I got a beating. That's how every day went.

When several transports had already left, we got into the small Zelt. That was a big deal. The beautiful three-storey beds there had more boards, so you didn't have to be so afraid about falling off. This and the fact that it was smaller, made it better there.

Ravensbrück was a women's camp in fact, where there were mainly French and Poles. We looked with great envy at the barracks where the French were, because they were very well arranged. Muskat [nutmeg (German)] in the window! They had been living there for a long time. Most of the supervisors, Stubenälteste, Blockälteste [room commander, barrack commander (German)] were among them, and there was a Polish woman, a Polish Countess, who knew nothing in Hungarian but „Hátra! Hátra!" ["Get back! Back!"] All we knew about her was that she was a countess and a prostitute.

We had different signs, different colors sewn on our clothes. We had a red triangle with our number on it and, because we were Jews, a yellow stripe. For common criminals the stripe was light green, for prostitutes it was pink. So we were differentiated by why we were there. Germans were also there, for different crimes.

I got out of Ravensbrück relatively quickly. They sorted out those who were fit for work, and on 19 January, my birthday, I was selected for a transport. Not many, perhaps fifty or sixty of us, were in that group. We got a "beautiful" balloon jacket with a big black multiplication sign on the back, and I also got a "nice" little dress. The dress was so worn that you couldn't even tell it was prisoner-striped. It was quite a light shade of blue.

We traveled for three days by wagon to Freiburg [Germany], where there was a factory for aircraft parts. We were delegated there, to use a fancy word."

"I was at the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Ravensbrück camp two years ago [in 2005]. It was organized by the NÜB [Nácizmus Üldözötteinek Országos Egyesülete], the National Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution, and 18 of us

participated. I always said that I didn't want to go anywhere, but then it somehow occurred to me that I would like to go and see it again. I found nothing. That camp had been completely liquidated. We were looking for the Zelt, it was nowhere to be found.

It was Russian-occupied territory, and they covered all the tracks. The Germans have a different attitude. There are memorial pillars, statues, plaques everywhere, and we were received with tremendous kindness. It turned out that there is an association there, too, which is mainly made up of French people.

There were lectures and events, and the boys who escorted us took us in their own car to the Uckermark camp, which was not far away. It was a regular Vernichstunglager, or extermination camp [camp with gas chambers], which we didn't even know about at the time.

The trip went very well. What I could see, is that the current generation of Germans feel remorse and no longer deny. For example: they told me that one group went to a nearby town by bus, went into an espresso shop, and asked for a particular black coffee. The owner served them and asked where they were from. They said they had just come from Ravensbrück, where the 60th annual meeting was being held. And he started: 'How awful! You have survived this! How could this have happened, how could such a thing have happened! No way you're paying me now, no, it's the least I can give you!" The children at school had a small vase made for each survivor as a memento. So they live knowing that it happened, not denying it, like they do here."

LILLY LOVENBERG

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Ildiko Makra
Date of interview: May 2004

Lilly Rosenberg in Beregszasz, Hungary, in 1942.

Click here to read Lilly Lovenberg's biography
Click here to see her family pictures

Lilly Lovenberg was born 1918 in Hetyen, Subcarpathia (modern-day Ukraine). Her parents, Maria Klein and Jakab Rosenberg, ran a family farm and general store, they were one of only three Jewish families in their village. They had 6 children: 3 girls and 3 boys, however only Lilly and one brother survived the Second World War. After being forced to sell the family business, the family was taken to the Beregszasz ghetto in April 1944, into an old brick factory. A month later, they were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau. She and her sister were subsequently forced to march to Ravensbrück, where they were forced to quarantine for three weeks. After this they went on to Malchow, where Lilly worked in an underground munitions factory. By the time of liberation on 2 May 1945, Lilly weighed just about 39 kilograms. She returned with her severely-ill sister to Prague, who died of typhus in a hospital. Lilly returned home alone in July, 1945. She soon married Lajos Lovenberg, an orphan, in March 1946. They studied and graduated from accounting school together, and had two children.

"Then in the morning, they started for the trains. They gave us two slices of bread for the trip. And we had a backpack, which I had saved. It's in the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel.

We thought they were taking us to Germany. We didn't know what day it was. We had to walk to the trains for nearly two days straight. Then we had to stop because there weren't any more trains, they had to give them to the army, they needed transport. They put us in a giant tent, a thousand of us slept on the bare ground. They brought us soup, but it was so salty that we couldn't eat it. It was nettle soup.

Then, two or three days later, a train came and took us to Ravensbrück. There we were in quarantine for three weeks. We got soup at noon. It was a huge camp. Some went out to work. There was so much sadism and cruelty.

They beat up the prisoners; they were dirty, and muddy. It wasn't like in Birkenau, or in Auschwitz, that there was a number on our arm, but instead there was a huge swath of lime

on their backs, and a cross on their clothes. You could see they were prisoners from far away. They were numbered, but their backs were marked.

They didn't take us to work, we were under observation in quarantine, to make sure we didn't bring any typhus or diseases in. Beds were side by side. Next to me there was a woman, she was very glad to be in her own clothes. It turned out that she was the wife of the Captain of the Budapest Police.

I asked her, 'Well, how did you get here?' She said, 'They called my husband in for interrogation once and he never came home. I went looking for him, I waited and waited, they said he would come. Then I asked to speak with my husband. They told me to get dressed, take some clothes with me, and they brought me here. Here I am. I don't know anything about my husband.'

They then transported us further. We traveled for days in the train, and arrived in Germany one night, in a small camp 200 kilometers from Berlin, Malchow."

"In Ravensbrück, when we went to sleep, our room was next to the kitchen. They brought the big pots of soup from the kitchen and when the guard left, I immediately counted out the exact moment, poured out a plate, we both drank it, then I washed it and put it away. That's how I stayed alive."

TEOFILA SILBERRING

Krakow, Poland
Interviewer: Magdalena Bizon
Date of interview: November 2004

Teofila Silberring in Krakow, 1934.

Click here to read Teofila Silberring's biography
Click here to to see her family pictures

Teofila grew up in a Polish-speaking family in Krakow. She lost her mother in 1939 when the Nazis, who had occupied Poland, shot her mother as she protested the confiscation of furniture from her apartment. After the dissolution of the Krakow ghetto, she was separated from her remaining family and worked in the Schindler factory. From there she was transported to Auschwitz, where she received a typhus injection under Dr. Mengele and was eventually forced on a death march to Ravensbrück. When she returned to Krakow, she found that her entire family had died and she went back to school at the age of 20. She eventually married, had children and chose to remain in Krakow.

"And that was the worst, that journey; it was called the death march, because we walked... I walked to Leipzig. Walked! In snow like this. It was winter at the time, it was in January, 23rd January, as far as I remember [the Auschwitz death marches set off between 17 to 21 January 1945; in all 56,000 prisoners]. Snow up to here [shoulders], 20 degrees below zero, and me in one shoe. A Dutch shoe, it was called. These clogs that were typical in Auschwitz. As we walked, that sound that nobody could bear, of those clogs. It was so characteristic... And the snow, red, literally. Because if you stopped, stood for a moment...

I'd never have thought that you could sleep while you walk. We learned to, took it in turns with our friends. We walked four in a row and the people on the outside supported the one who was asleep, we took it in turns. I could sleep as I walked. Whoever stopped for a moment... The road was littered with corpses, these red bloodstains on the white snow. Awful. They shot if you just... it was enough to stand for a moment. And we helped each other to survive - in fact, all four of us survived. I had one friend, Helenka Groner. We were very close. She died two years ago. She was a lot older than me; she was already married

then. She had a son my age; he died in Plaszow. Her husband, Groner, had died in Plaszow too. She was with me from Auschwitz. We lived somewhere near each other, then in that death march we walked together, and we stayed together until the end.

That journey was terrible. Terrible. And so we reached the camp in Leipzig. There they gave us some parsnip, and although we were dying of hunger, we couldn't eat it, it was so awful. We were there, that was a transit camp, and then they put us in Buchenwald. In Buchenwald it wasn't so terribly bad, perhaps a little better. But good, there was no question of that. And then there was an ammunition factory there. We worked, making these - I don't know, lids. There weren't only Jews there. There were also Hungarians, Romani. After that we went to Ravensbrück.

In Ravensbrück we all prayed that they would send us back to Auschwitz, because it was just indescribable. I think it was the worst camp there was. Above all, we weren't in blocks, there were just these tents. These sloping things, like tents, they were called 'zelta' [from the German 'Zelt' - tent]. And they packed us in there, I don't know how many into one tent. It was like putting 200 people in a tent for four or five. All you could do was sit, one on top of another. You went [relieved yourself] where you sat; they didn't let us out at all. At each other, on each other, it was pouring over my head; I don't even know who was doing it on me... And so there we sat like that. That was the worst camp, Ravensbrück. The worst.

One day the Red Cross supposedly came along. It was the Bernadotte [9] campaign, that doctor Bernadotte. They were taking people from Ravensbrück to Sweden. But to us, when we saw the truck with the tarpaulin, it was obvious that it would be to our deaths. And we all fled. No-one was giving in... They had difficulty catching maybe 100 people out of those thousands. After the war I found out that they were in Sweden. And how many fell dead, because we wouldn't let ourselves be caught? You just fled, so they shot. Later it turned out it was some agreement between Germany and Sweden. If I'd known, I would have got in. But who could have known?

After that typhus raged. Terrible. That was truly the worst camp of all the ones I was in. There was typhus, the Germans were a little afraid of an epidemic, so we, the healthy, were sent to Malchow. That's a small place outside Ravensbrück, that camp belonged to Ravensbrück. From there the Allies first liberated me, and then the Russians came in [the Russians liberated Ravensbrück on 29th/30th April 1945].

The Allies were astonished by how we looked, but they didn't take any closer interest. We were terribly black. Full of dirt too, because towards the end we didn't live in huts but outside, under some trees. 'Good Lord, how black you are! What have you been doing?' We asked for food; they had some tinned food, so they gave it to us, but no-one could eat it. An awful lot of my friends died when they ate it: because we threw ourselves on it, but we weren't in a fit state. I thought I could eat half the world, but one bite and you couldn't eat any more.

The Russians there in Malchow behaved terribly. They killed two of my friends. Raped and killed them. I was stupid enough to go and look for my friends. I didn't realize. I was an idiot. And I went, I asked these Russkies [pejorative term for Russians] where they'd gone to. And they just waved their hands. They could have raped and shot me just the same.

We didn't even know that the war had ended. We just stood there, there was no camp any more, nothing, but we were afraid to go out. The Germans had ordered us to stand, so we stood. The Allies came through, the Russians came through, and still we didn't believe. Well, there wasn't any radio, there wasn't anything. It was only when some Greeks came along, these ragamuffins: 'Hitler kaput! Hitler kaput!' they said. They gestured something to us, implying that the war had ended, that we could go home."

GERTRÚDA MILCHOVÁ

Bratislava, Slovakia
Interviewer: Martin Flekenstein
Date of interview: August - September 2006

Gertrúda Milchová (middle) with her mother (left) and sister (right) in Trnava, 1946.

Click here to read Gertrúda Milchová's biography
Click here to to see her family pictures

Gertrúda Milchová was born in 1923 in Bratislava, Slovakia. Anti-Jewish laws meant she was unable to finish her schooling and when she caught wind of coming deportations, she fled to Budapest to stay with relatives. Her mother and sister later joined her, however all three were caught in 1943 and imprisoned in Ricse internment camp. She and her mother were later put in the Nagykanizsa jail, and from there deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. They survived the time in Auschwitz by sorting the clothes of new arrivals, until their forced march to Ravensbrück and the Malchow sub-camp. She and her mother were fortunate to remain together and reunite with Gertrudá's sister as they made their way home after the dissolution of the camp. After resettling in Trnava, Slovakia, Getrudá trained as an engineer, had a daughter, and worked at a paper and cellulose research institute until her retirement.

"At night we marched, and during the day they herded us into these large shelters, they were probably some sort of open hay stores. When the evacuation started, we had only some light shoes that we'd found in those piles in 'Canada.' My mother was a very practical woman, she cut apart a sheet and we wrapped our feet in the strips of cloth. That saved our feet from getting frostbitten. When we had the daily rest, we laid down on the rags, and dried them with our own bodies. Then we'd wrap them around our feet again. Those women that had high boots, or other shoes, got frostbitten feet. We arrived at Ravensbrück. That was another calamity.

We arrived at Ravensbrück in February, and it was still freezing. Due to the fact that the camp's capacity had long been exhausted, they built something like a circus tent in the courtyard. They put beds in it, and herded us in. The way they gave out food was that they'd herd us outside, and as we went back in one by one, they gave us our share. It was very dangerous, because a person could lose his place on a bed. My mother stayed inside, I got one portion, a miserable one too, and that's what we lived on. The hunger there was severe. The biggest calamity wasn't that we didn't have anything to eat, but that the thaw began. It warmed up, and the whole base on which the tent stood began sinking. When something fell from the bed, what little you had, a comb or spoon, it was lost. The Ravensbrück command

didn't know how to deal with the masses of people that were there. They divided them up into external camps, which however weren't concentration camps, but work camps. That's how we ended up in Malchow. There the hunger was absolute. They still needed laborers for work in the forest, and so I applied, hoping that we'd get some sort of soup. But again, that same water with three little carrots like normal. Of course it was dirty there, and you couldn't wash. That was at the end of March or in April, and you could already feel the German Reich decomposing.

Then, they wanted to take us from Malchow to Terezin, but they didn't manage it, because the front was already there. By then we weren't accompanied by the SS, but by soldiers. We arrived in an area that some of them were from. Well, and then they saw that there was nothing anywhere, no food or anything; from hunger we were opening potato cellars and eating raw potatoes, and that kept us going. They said: 'You know what, do what you want!' And left us there. It wasn't anything dramatic. Suddenly we were free. Dirty, hungry, and wanting to live. You've got to know that, that year, the spring was beautiful. The sun was shining, by the roads there were fruit trees blooming. That buoyed a person."

MAGDA FRKALOVA

Bratislava, Slovakia
Interviewer: Zuzana Slobodnikova
Date of interview: May - June 2006

Magda Frkalova in Bolmut, 1939.

Click here to read Magda Frkalova's biography
Click here to to see her family pictures

Magda was born in 1925, in Zlatna na Ostrove, Slovakia. She ran away to her aunt to escape first transports, however as the situation grew more dire in Subcarpathian Ruthenia she clandestinely traveled back to her family. Her father had a presidential exception to the deportations, but was ultimately captured and deported. She, her mother and brother tried to hide their status as Jews, but eventually they were caught by the Gestapo and jailed in Bratislava, 1944. From there they were sent to Auschwitz, then she and her mother were sent on to Ravensbrück. At the end of the war they were sent on a death march, however Nazi guards deserted the group along the way and they were able to return to Slovakia.

"They loaded us into cattle wagons again and sent us to Berlin. In Berlin they separated us. The men and women were separated. That's the last time in my life that I saw my brother Imrich. It was horrible.

We were in the wagons like that for eight days. The conditions were horrible. Many of our fellow sufferers already went insane on the way there. Older people were already dying during the trip. Some people threw us bread as the train passed by. At the border, when the train was standing still, they stuck a piece of bread through these little windows, and that's all we had to eat. From Berlin they transported us by train to the Ravensbrück concentration camp. There our suffering continued. It was a concentration camp, where they also cremated. Every night the chimneys there were burning. Dead bodies were being burned in ovens, and there was a terribly sweet smell. Once, a transport from Hungary arrived. People arrived on that train in desolate shape, barefoot, and right away they sent them to their deaths.

My mother and I were together the whole time. When we arrived there, she was only 40, and so they left us together. I tried to survive in all sorts of ways. I ate everything they gave us. Soup, if you could call it that. They made it from turnips, beets or potato peels, and there was even sand in it. But if you want to survive, you don't care. I terribly wanted to live, I wanted

to survive and so I also forced my mother to eat as well. But she didn't try very hard. At the end, she only weighed about 40 kilos! It was truly terrible in the camps. Terrible.

The German women that were guarding us were horrible. I tried to speak as little German as possible, so as to not draw unnecessary attention to myself. But it also happened that once as I was working a German woman looked at my hands and said to me: 'You've wearing nail polish? Where did you get it?' But of course I wasn't wearing any nail polish, my nails were simply shiny. So that's also what I told her. She beat my hands and fingers. Or it also happened, and fairly often, that they'd unwrap their food in front of us, and would parade in front of us and show us how they're eating fresh bread and other things. It was horrible, because we didn't have a bite to eat, and were very starved.

But alas, we prisoners also didn't get along very well with each other. The older women, who'd been there from 1942, were already these sort of block leaders, who for example, issued food rations. So the ones that wanted to push their way to the front, or asked for more food, would be beaten, even with the ladle they were using to dole out the food. As I've already said, the food there was terrible, and in short supply. I know that for Christmas we got a piece of bread, and I also know that I found it terribly delicious. Well, and for New Year's we got a meatball.

For New Year's 1945, the Germans made up a story that we'd been singing. But that wasn't true at all. We had no desire to even think about anything like singing. They punished us, of course. They had us stand for roll call for two days straight. It was very cold, and snowing. No one had any socks, nor good shoes, not to mention clothing. My only luck was that I had wooden shoes, which protected me a bit against the freezing cold and damp. Otherwise these roll calls took place every day. Many, many people couldn't handle it and died right there. The cold was terrible, we had no hair, because they'd shaved us bald as soon as we'd arrived, or cut our hair very short, and the clothes we had were useless. They were horrible.

One day they sent us on a death march. We walked for several days. We were walking to some harbor town. Those that couldn't handle it were dying on the way, or the Germans themselves were killing them when they saw that they were exhausted. They were throwing their bodies just like that into the ditch by the road. We got little rest, and when we did, they stopped somewhere by a swamp. We were so exhausted that we lay down even there.

But one night the SS soldiers disappeared, and all we found were their uniforms left at the side of the road. They took things that the prisoners had had with them, and ran away. They knew that the Allies were approaching, and didn't want to be caught. So in the end we never got anywhere. Lucky for us, too. Because later, some decades after, I once read in the paper that those that arrived in the harbor towns were burned alive.

So that's how our stay in Ravensbrück ended. We set out for home. I weighed around 50 kilos, and my mother was emaciated, and was only around 40 kilos. But nothing worked anywhere. We didn't know what to do. So 14 of us got together and set out for home. In one German town they stopped us, said that we couldn't go any further, as the Russians were

approaching. As long as we were meeting American soldiers, they weren't taking any notice of us. But when the Russians arrived, they wouldn't leave us alone. On our way home, we passed many empty houses, and we spent the night in one of them. Some Russians arrived as well. So right away I told my mother that we should go sleep up in the attic, in the straw. It's a good thing we did. Because in the morning, when we woke up, the others told us that those disgusting Russian soldiers had raped them.

The Russians then told us that we couldn't continue onwards because we were spreading typhus. That was of course not true. But they needed someone to work for them. There were 14 of us women, and they had us sew uniforms for them. About four of us knew how to use a sewing machine, and while we sewed the uniforms, the rest sewed on buttons and so on. Well, it was quite bad. What else can I say."

Photograph: MAGDA FRKALOVA BEFORE DEPORTATION

Photograph taken in 1943 in Bratislava, Slovakia

Magda Frkalova before deportation in 1943

Click here to view the image
Click here to read Magda Frkalova's biography
Click here to to see her family pictures

"This is the last photograph of me before I was arrested in Bratislava and transported away. It was taken in 1943. Then everything took place quickly. At the Gestapo they asked my mother where her husband and her other children were. So she told them that her husband had already been taken away, and that her daughter was in Bratislava. She didn't know where I lived, but my brother knew. I'd told him, because my mother had pressured both of us, that if we were going to keep everything from her, she'd jump under a streetcar. So my brother softened me up and I told him my address. I shouldn't have done that. They would never have found me. But at the Gestapo they began to beat him, and he told them where I lived. It was already nighttime, and I heard some steps coming up the stairs. I heard the jackboots kicking. It was midnight, and I knew that they were looking for me. I'll never forget that date: it was 13th October 1944. After being jailed at the Gestapo in Bratislava, my mother, my brother Imrich and I were transported to Sered. That was 15th October; we'd been in jail for two days. At the time my brother was only 15. He was still this half-child. We were in the Sered camp for only two days, because the transports were constantly departing from there. So they sent all three of us to Auschwitz. But there they didn't accept us. They loaded us into cattle wagons again and sent us to Berlin. In Berlin they separated us. The men and women were separated. That's the last time in my life that I saw my brother Imrich."

ARTUR RADVANSKY

Prague, Czech Republic
Interviewer: Martina Marsalkova
Date of Interview: June 2005

Artur Radvansky's wedding photo in Prague, 1946.

Read Artur Radvansky's biography here
Click here to see his family pictures

Artur Radvansky grew up in Radvanice with two younger brothers; his father was a store owner and his mother was a seamstress. As a child, he learnt German from an aunt who was from the Sudetenland. After the German invasion of 1939, the teenage Artur tried to flee to Poland with his father but was caught on the road and sent to Buchenwald. There, his father died of starvation in his arms. In April 1942, he was sent to Ravensbrück, then to Sachsenhausen in September 1942. He worked in the infamous 'shoe-testing' workshop and a brick factory and was also part of an unsuccessful prisoner uprising. Artur was transported to Auschwitz on 15 October 1942, where he was tattooed with his prisoner number and assigned to work in the hospital, and later the gynaecological ward. While in Auschwitz he also met his future wife, Alzbeta. He was sent on a death March to Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen, on 17 March 1945, from which he was liberated by the American Army on 6 May 1945, albeit as a severely ill man. Artur returned to Prague after regaining his strength, only to find out his whole family had perished in the Holocaust. In Prague, he met up with Alzbeta again and they were married in 1946. Artur went on to study and work as a chemist. Together, Artur and Alzbeta had two children, Jiri and Anna. Artur has been an active member of the Jewish community of Prague since the 1970s.

"In April 1942 I got into Ravensbrück. In Buchenwald they loaded us onto a train, where we traveled in relatively decent conditions. There were about sixty of us in one wagon, plus about ten German soldiers. We arrived in Ravensbrück at the Furstenberg station, and from there they drove us to the camp in cars. Here we also first had our hair cut, were washed and clothed. Because it was March, we also got winter clothing such as a coat, cap and boots. They put us all into the Jewish block, into block No. 5. Once again we got blankets, which we had to give back during the day, sheets and a pillow. We slept in three-story bunks. In those I would always take the middle one, because there it wasn't so cold, but neither overly heavy and exhausted air, so you could breathe well.

Together with several dozen young Jews I got into a 'workplace' where they disinfected laundry. We carried lice-ridden laundry to the ovens, and in such a way that we had these sacks on us, into which we stuck the laundry, so we wouldn't catch the lice. Then we'd stick it

into the oven and there it was disinfected using Zyklon B. That's where I first met up with it. When the clothing was in the oven, you would then wear a gas mask and sprinkle Zyklon B on this grille, from which at 25 degrees Celsius hydrogen cyanide would start to emanate. In this way the laundry would undergo disinfection for a half hour. Then the ventilators would kick in, which carried away the hydrogen cyanide. But we weren't present for this. This was done by members of the SS. After a half hour we'd return, remove the laundry from the oven and carry it. We carried it on our backs, and not a few of us were half-poisoned from it. The guys from the Sudetenland, who were working there with us, had also warned us to not sniff the disinfected laundry. At that time no one yet knew how Zyklon B would be used in the future.

It was unpleasant work, but the good thing there was that the SS didn't guard us, but members of the Wehrmacht, who didn't yell at us, didn't beat us, there were even a few Sudeten Germans among them, who spoke Czech and gave us bread. At the same time, they had to be on the lookout for the SS. In that case they would warn us with the agreed-upon 'Ächzen' [German for 'groan']. I also met Jewish boys from Bohemia there, there were about five of them. One of them was a friend of mine. He was named Herman and was from Mikulov. In the end he died in Dachau, where his name is on the plaque of those who died.

We did this work for only about two months, but it was pleasant for us, because we could rest while doing it. Then I was again assigned to the bricklayers. We lined factory heating ducts. These ran beside the women's camp, which was separated from ours by a double fence. When during our work we saw the women for the first time, we were told to come to the fence at 12 o'clock, when the guards in the towers changed, which took about ten minutes. So I had an opportunity to ask about my mother or someone from Radvanice. The women asked for me in the typing pool, but unfortunately I didn't find anyone. They also helped us with food. We'd pass a jam bucket underneath the fence attached on a string, and would then put some cooked food with potatoes in it. Sometimes, when they sent raw potatoes, I'd make potato dumplings from them. We'd grate the potatoes on a grater that we'd made ourselves, strained the water through a piece of cloth, added some grated hard bread, which was obtained by the foremen. We then added margarine and salt to the leftover water and ate it as soup. It was a risk for all, for us, the foremen and the women, because we were under the strictest orders not to communicate with them.

I was also present at a second selection at Ravensbrück. They were picking out young people, on which the SS were testing new medicines. Most of the selected people then returned around July without arms, legs, basically cripples. I was lucky that they didn't select me there. About two years ago I found out the name of the euthanasia institute where these atrocities were perpetrated. It was the Sonnenstein castle, near Pirna.

Once we also stood on the assembly square for 36 hours, because one German prisoner had tried to escape. After 36 hours they found him, half dead, and hung him right before our eyes. I think that after that beating he didn't feel much anyways. While we were standing on the assembly square we couldn't even go to the toilet, and of course, eat or drink. We got food only on the third day after, and very little, because the capo of our block, some Fritz Meser, a

Czech, who was with us in Buchenwald, was profiteering with our food. He was your basic killer. When he took a liking to someone's gold teeth and the person didn't allow them to be pulled out voluntarily, he beat him to death. He and his pal, the Viennese Jew Schmied, stole bread from us and traded with the SS.

In August or September 1942 we again went onto a transport, because everyone in the camp that wasn't absolutely necessary had to go to the East. But we knew that there were extermination camps in the East. Before we got to the East, they transported us to Sachsenhausen."

KATÓ GYULAI

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Bihari Józsefné
Date of interview: 2005

Kató Gyula skiing in 1942

Read Kató Gyulai's biography here [in Hungarian]
Click here to see her family pictures

Kató Gyulai was born into a secular Jewish home in Budapest, 1919. She and her elder sister Évi were summoned and sent on a death march in October 1944 from Budapest in the direction of Germany. First they were in Ravensbrück, then Kató was taken to a labor camp in Spandau, after which she never saw her sister again. Kató returned home in November 1945, never married and had no children. She worked as a bank official, secretary, embassy employee, cultural attaché, and lecturer at a ministry. She has been an active member of the National Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution [NÜB] since its foundation in 1957, for a while she was even vice-president. After the war, in 1947, she felt the urge to record and write down her memoirs, the story of her deportation. It was only in 1995 that it was published in Hungarian [Gyulai Kató: Stációk Óbudától a pokolig. In Emlékezések: A koncentrációs táborok felszabadulásának ötvenedik évfordulójára, A Magyar Auschwitz Alapítvány -- Holocaust Dokumentációs Központ kiadványa, szerk. Bakó Ágnes, Szabó Éva, Verő Gábor, Budapest, 1995] and in 2001 it was also published in German [Kató Gyulai: Zwei Schwestern. Geschichte einer Deportation, Hg. v. Linde Apel und Constanze Jaiser, Metropol-Verlag, Berlin, 2001].

"First they took us to Ravensbrück, we were there for a few weeks, which was terrible. There were hundreds of us in that particular horrible Zelt, a huge military tent. It was said to be fifty meters long, slightly less wide, but it couldn't have been much less. There were no beds, no bedding. Back then we still had our own blankets, we put them on and underneath ourselves. That was it, nothing else. For a while we had our own clothes, later we got the striped ones. There was no toilet, but there were a couple of buckets in one corner of the tent, which always filled up at night, and we lay so close to each other that it was impossible to get to them comfortably. I had diarrhea all the time, day and night, and one night I had wet my pants by the time I got out. I had no others. I went in vain to the SS women, I told them what had happened and asked for another pair. "We'll go to the block. We'll go there. Not here, there aren't any here, there in the block, there you'll get some." Well, we didn't go to the block.

Everyone had a number, by then we only had a number. We had no name, just a number. But it wasn't tattooed, that was only in Auschwitz. We had a ribbon that had the number on it, we had to sew it on our clothes. 28700- I don't know. Mine had the last number 8, Évi's 7.

We celebrated Christmas there. Besides Jews, there were also political prisoners, not only Hungarians. Some of us who were there as political prisoners are still alive. There were also Hungarian Gypsies and Poles. They were taken to a block. We were the only ones still there in the tent. It was a terrible time. Every day there felt like a year. One day they came and told us to pack our things for the next day. We packed up, we thought we were going to the block. Then they said that those who were going to work would go in the afternoon. Évi and I tried to stay there so we could both go, but nothing worked.

At one point we found out that we were going to work. A factory owner came and selected people. When the German asked me, "Kannst du arbeiten?" (Can you work?), I said, I'm happy to work. Because it was said that those who work have better conditions. I can't do hard work, but I like to work. I was first in the queue, followed by Évi. She wasn't even asked, she was put aside. Évi, poor thing, was so thin, she was all skin and bones. She had some kind of scarf or cap on her head, which made it even worse, because it shrunk her head. She wasn't needed. We were desperate. But I had to go, they took us to Spandau [in Spandau, a suburb of Berlin, there was a huge prison which at that time functioned as a labor camp, those deported here worked in a military plant a few kilometers from the camp]. I never saw Évi again.

When in 1957 I read in the newspaper that the National Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution [NÜB] had been formed, I immediately wrote to them that I had been waiting for this for a long time and would like to participate. I received an answer right away about when to apply, and from then on I did this work, which continues to this day.

Our main task was to work with people who had been deported, so we met often. First we held meetings. We announced that this committee had been set up, and we welcome former deportees to attend the meetings, to come and do the work that we do. To help people believe that, however unbelievable it seems, what happened, happened, and it needs to be talked about.

Each camp has its own camp group. We have collected the names from each camp, as far as possible. Keeping the groups together, keeping them informed, attending international committee meetings, that's my main job. I still use my German language skills.

Each camp has an international committee and they have a meeting every year at the place where the camp was. In Auschwitz, Buchenwald or wherever, they meet there every year. Except us, the Ravensbrückers. We have our meeting in a different member state every year. We've had it twice. One year it was in France, then in Vienna. Every year. Except for the numbers ending in five and round numbers, we hold them in Ravensbrück, so it just so happens that we are celebrating the 60th year there. I've already written what I'm going to say at the inauguration of the Zelt, because I've been asked to make a speech. There will be a publication about all the camps, and I've written the text for that too. I have already sent it. I have a very good relationship with them, that’s the truth.”

JULIA (JUCI) SCHEINER

Targu Mures, Romania
Interviewer: Ildiko Molnar
Date of interview: October 2002

Juci Scheiner (left) and a friend in Targu Mures, 1956.

Read Julia Scheiner's biography here
Click here to see her family pictures

Julia Scheiner was born in 1913 and spent most of her childhood in Romania. She was trained as a pianist but opened her own beauty salon. In 1944 she was deported to Auschwitz and spent almost 8 months there. From there she was sent to Birkenau, then Ravensbrück and on to the sub-camp of Malchow. She was forced on a death march and when she was unable to keep walking, she managed to survive through good fortune.

"After 18th January they took us to Ravensbrück. This at least wasn't a death-camp. Ravensbrück always reminds me of the rudeness of a female doctor. By the time we arrived there my shoes had been stolen, but I had managed to get some wooden shoes, much larger than my feet, so I lined them with rags. I had to wear those open shoes in the winter and they hurt my feet, which were all covered with sores. When we arrived there, I was happy to hear that we must wash up and we'd be able to see a doctor.

I cleaned my feet thoroughly and went to her for something to more rapidly heal the sores. She said those were not scabs, but dirt. She took a clip, grabbed my scab by its side and ripped it off, so the flesh was visible. We didn't do anything at Ravensbrück, apart from the time spent looking for lice on our own clothes. I only spent four weeks there. I even remember that we were sleeping four in a bed - you can imagine how 'fat' we must have been, if there was room for four of us. I slept beside a Polish girl, and my clothes looked so miserable she pitied me and gave me a sweater before they sent us off again. I had never had lice until then.

Then they took us to Malchow, a small town. [Malchow was a sub-camp of the Ravensbrück concentration camp.] Not far from the town there was a camp. They took us there. While we were walking across the town, the local Germans stood at the window smirking and laughing, and had fun watching us. The way we looked, they had something to laugh about. After we got out of the town, we went onto the road. Those who received us in the camp examined everyone for lice. It turned out I had lice.

They had been on the sweater the Polish girl had given me. Then they separated everyone with lice, but instead of sending us to get washed, they put us in barracks with others who also had lice. The atmosphere was much more humane, though. That's what I remember about Malchow. When we were taken away from there, the locals had been affected by the course of the war; there were empty houses, and those who remained there looked at us with their heads bowed, depressed. The exultation had disappeared.

They sent us off to Magdeburg, but we didn't know where we would end up. We had no food for six days. The train stopped in Magdeburg and they handed a letter to a woman who was then in charge of us. The letter probably said that they had to retreat because they were really cornered, as the Americans and Russians were closing in.

I remember that the station was bombed. We were some 100 meters from the station and it was beautiful [the play of light] - if only we had been there just to watch it... It was a beautiful sight, but the truck was so packed, we couldn't move. We couldn't even raise our hands.

They left us there because I guess they thought this way they wouldn't be bombed. Shortly after the bombings stopped, the train started off, and we traveled quite a while. Then we got off and continued on foot.

While walking a dog bit my leg, so I couldn't really walk, plus I was tired. One of the more decent soldiers put me on the carriage that was carrying their things. When we arrived at a field that was surrounded by a fence, and even had a gate, they took me off the carriage and sent me to the closest group standing by.

They began asking me why I had come to their group, and told me to go away. So I joined a mother from Budapest and her daughter. When we had to walk again, they told us that anyone who felt they couldn't go further should stay put because there was a truck coming to take them away somewhere. We knew the story all too well, but I still wanted to stay there because my leg was hurting very much. I wanted to put an end to everything.

This lady with her daughter wouldn't let me, 'You are coming with us! Take my arm and you'll be able to walk just like us.' I took her by the arm and walked, but after a while I felt it was too much for me. Then the girl told me, 'Juci, don't drag mom, let's walk in one line.' When she asked me the second time, I said I would fall behind. I figured I would slowly fall behind, and when I was the last one in the group, there would be nobody there.

I managed to do that and I collapsed on purpose, but two German soldiers came to me and told me in German, *'Los, weiter machen!* Come on, keep it up!' - this had always been their motto. I didn't want to get up, but after a while I had to because they made me. I walked a few steps and then I said I wouldn't go any further, and told them to shoot me - I am sure they didn't shoot me, merely because I told them to do so. And because they knew the whole fuss, the war was coming to an end. In the next village - I don't know what it was called - the soldiers handed me over to the mayor.”

ZSUZSANNA SZEGŐ

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Andor Mihály
Date of interview: 2008

Andorne Szegő and her son 1973

Read Zsuzsanna Szegő's biography here [in Hungarian]
Click here to see her family pictures

Zsuzsanna Szegő was born in 1928 in Mezőcsát. She grew up in Salgótarján as the only child of Lenke and Béla Ungerleider. She was deported in June 1944 from Salgótarján to Auschwitz-Birkenau, and after a short stay in Ravensbrück, was taken to a work camp in Neustadt bei Coburg in September 1944, where she and her mother worked until April 16th 1945, when the camp was evacuated. After two weeks in a death march, they were liberated somewhere along the way. She returned home together with her mother to Salgótarján, married and gave birth to two children. She opened a small knitting workshop, where she worked till 1997, when she retired and moved to Budapest.

"We arrived at Ravensbrück, which was a distribution camp. The camp was full, they couldn't fit anyone into the barracks, so they put up circular tents, but there was no room there either. For two days we stood in front of the Ravensbrück gate, where the ground was covered with black coal cinder. By the evening we couldn't stand it any longer, so we sat down and slept the whole night in the black dust. From our faces to our toes, even our nice new clothes turned black. The next morning we were let in, got in the shower, and washed ourselves with warm water. We could wash our heads easily because we were bald. We were put in a barrack with four-storey bunks. We finally slept on bunks, not on the floor. We spent ten days there until we were called out to work. This barrack, which seemed heaven for us at first, was so full of fleas that you could sweep them off the bed. Then the lice ate us.

Between the *appel*s [roll calls] we were looking around. There were all kinds of nationalities, French, Belgian. We met a French girl who went to the conservatory and when she found out I was Hungarian, she whistled the Liszt Rhapsody for me. We had to undress there too, and walk around. We were given some injections, I don't know what kind.

After a few days we were moved out of the barrack to a tent, where we slept on the ground again. One morning news came that this tent was moving, we were going to the railway

tracks. Four hundred of us were taken there, and there we waited for the wagon. In the meantime, there was a roll call. My mother and I had the problem that the list of the first hundred ended with Zsuzsi Ungerleider. That meant they would have put us in different wagons. Next to Mum was someone who was separated from her sister. We quickly changed names, I became Kató Weintraub and she became Zsuzsi Ungerleider. This caused quite a lot of complications, because for a long time I did not listen out for the name Kató Weintraub.

Finally, our wagon arrived and we were taken to the Siemens factory. We traveled with the wagon for about two days and arrived in Neustadt bei Coburg [*Neustadt bei Coburg - in northern Bavaria, one of the subcamps of the Buchenwald concentration camp*], or more precisely, a camp with barracks was built outside the town, next to the factory. From then on we had a human life."

AGI SOFFEROVA

Znojmo, Czech Republic
Interviewer: Zuzana Strouhova
Date of interview: December 2005 - February 2006

Agi Sofferova in Prague, 1946.

Read Agi Sofferova's biography here
Click here to see her family pictures

Agi Sofferova, née Kahan, is from Subcarpathian Ruthenia, then part of Czechoslovakia. She was born in Mukachevo in 1923, as the youngest of eight children. She and her mother were deported to Auschwitz in January 1945, her mother did not survive, yet Agi was reunited with her sister there. They worked in the kitchen there, and were later transported to Ravensbrück. From here they were taken on a death march until they were lberated by Russians and returned to Czechoslovakia. She married Josef Soffer, whose first wife and son did not survive the war. They then had two daughters, Ruzena and Vera. Mrs. Agi worked in a nursery school, and her younger daughter Vera, who until the revolution worked as the principal of a nursery school in Znojmo, followed her in this occupation.

"On January 18th the Russians were approaching the camp. [Editor's note: The Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated by the Russian army on 27th January 1945.] The Germans wanted to blow it up, but somehow they didn't succeed. So they drove us off onto a death march. Helena and I experienced it together. Twice. If something had happened to one of us, the other wouldn't have survived either. You were at the end of your rope. So, the first march was in January. One hundred twenty kilometers in three days. We walked to Breslaw [in Polish Wroclaw], which was in Poland. There they loaded us onto open wagons and drove us to Ravensbrück. I remember how cold it was. We were sitting in open wagons, and then they left us outside in Breslaw all night.

The second march was in April. That one was perhaps worse than the one in the winter. The weather was beautiful, you walked and walked, you had to walk, because if you didn't, they would shoot at you and leave you lying there. But the survival instinct is strong. In that month of April they wanted to have us walk to Terezin, but that didn't happen, because the front was on all sides, and we couldn't go there. For a long time we walked here and there.

The Germans drove the prisoners further west, because they wanted to be captured by Allied soldiers, the Americans. They were terribly afraid of the Russians. The SS women already had civilian clothing under their SS uniforms. They were horribly afraid of bombing.

One hundred twenty of us women remained. Somewhere in Germany, I don't exactly remember the name anymore, you know, it's long ago now, but it was somewhere by the Elbe, because we crossed the river there and then back again, and then burrowed under some hay in some stable. Even though that German, the owner, didn't want to let us in, the horse has to have peace and quiet. There was also one SS soldier with us, he probably had something with one of the prisoners, so he stayed with us and protected us. We stayed under that hay, and then the next morning you could hear the scouts, Russian scouts. The second day, when there was shrapnel falling already, the owner of the horse was lying there, spread-eagled, dead. The Russians were fighting a little ways away from there. Well, and then the Russians liberated us.

What happened to the other German I don't know, after that we separated. Only ten or twelve of us that knew each other best went together. We confiscated a horse and wagon and on it made our way from Germany to Czech. I was so weakened that they sat me on the wagon, and my sister too. The horse took fright and the wagon turned over. That could have been it for us, but luckily nothing happened. Just Helena sprained her ankle, and nothing happened to me. We must have been close to the border, because we soon arrived in Usti nad Labem. But that trip was full of hardships. One Russian would give, another would take. They wanted to rape us. We just barely managed to fend them off, really."

GYÖRGYI POLGÁR

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Vera Faragó
Date of interview: 2004

Györgyi Polgár 1943

Read Györgyi Polgár's biography here [in Hungarian]
Click here to see her family pictures

Györgyi Polgár was born in Budapest in 1925 as the youngest child. She grew up in a secular Jewish home with four siblings. She was taken on a death march from Budapest at the end of October 1944, to Gönyű (Hungary), and from there by ship to Dachau. After a short stay in Ravensbrück, Györgyi went to Spandau, where she spent around 6 months working in a munitions factory. She was liberated in Oranienburg and returned home to Budapest between the end of June and beginning of July, 1945. After the war she worked as a social worker for Joint, then as a clerk. She married Ferenc Polgár and had a daughter, Éva. After the October Revolution in 1956, the family fled to Vienna, and from there in 1957 they emigrated to Caracas, Venezuela, where Ferenc's sister lived. At the beginning of the 1980s Györgyi divorced her husband and in 1988 she moved back to Budapest.

"Then they put us in wagons and took us to Ravensbrück. In retrospect, I estimate that we spent about twelve days there [Dachau]. We left on 19 December. In Ravensbrück there were huge tents where we could neither lie down nor sit down, there were so many of us. It was there that we first saw people from Auschwitz. It was such a shocking experience that I can still see it in my mind's eye: a group of people, women in striped coats, standing far away from us, who no longer looked human. At least, according to our understanding at the time, they could not have been humans. It was horrible. I don't know if they were moved on afterwards or what happened to them. Afterwards we had to fend for ourselves. We slept, mostly standing or leaning on each other, we were so terribly cramped.

I don't remember what we ate, but we must have gotten something, as we survived. I remember queuing to wash ourselves. There were two queues. One was at the entrance, we didn't know about the gas chambers then, so it didn't feel as though we were going to a gas

chamber. They didn't take us there, but they could have done. We wouldn't have given it a second thought, because we hadn't heard about them at that time. When we went in we still wore our own clothes, maybe a coat, and maybe even a bag, I don't know. We had to take everything off, and were only allowed to keep our shoes on. I was wearing a good, strong high-top shoe. My mother only let me go out in these, which she had made for me when I was in high school. I came back in those too, they never took them away. I might have put a pair of scissors in my stockings. I thought, I'll look for my clothes when we get out. But we didn't come out the same way we went in. We had a bath and everyone's hair was cut, though mine wasn't. Why not? Maybe I missed it by chance. I don't know, and I didn't protest, there was no way to protest there. It was quite a problem because it was much more unpleasant to wash it, and also, it fell out. So, it wasn't better that it wasn't cut. On the way out, they threw us some clothes from a table, because we couldn't get the old clothes back. No camisole, no underwear, nothing. As we came out, I was left with an ankle-length sheer summer dress without underwear, a wet head in December, and my shoes and tights.

On the way out, the women who were going in threw things at us, those who had things, and I got some pink flannel cloth which I could put on, it was big enough and kind of blanket-like. I had that with me for twelve days. I wasn't cold because there were so many of us in the tent. Where did we go to the toilet and did we clean ourselves? Somehow, I'm sure. And we could go outside, otherwise we would have had to pee ourselves. We could lean against each other, but it was terrible because there were so many of us that we could practically only stand. The only way to sit down was if a lot of people stood up. Those twelve days in Ravensbrück were terrible. But at the same time, when I think back, we were not tortured. It was torture itself. But we were still all together, you got the same as the others.

Afterwards they put us in wagons, and they did it in such a way - I think deliberately - that we were only a few, which meant you could freeze to death. I was still in that summer dress... There must have been about six, eight, ten of us to a wagon. It looks like I survived, maybe the others did too. We were taken in wagons to the prison in Spandau, on the outskirts of Berlin [*Spandau was a huge prison, which at that time was a labor camp, the deportees working in a military factory a few kilometers from the camp*]. The prison back then was a huge camp complex of many buildings."

KLARA MARKUS

Maramarossziget, Romania
Interviewer: Emoke Major
Date of interview: October 2004

Klara Markus (on the left) with her sisters and friends in Carei, 1939.

Read Klara Markus's biography here
Click here to see her family pictures

Klara Markus was born in Nagykaroly in 1914, the youngest of the three daughters of Jozsef and Rozika Kaufmann, who owned a grocery store. After Klara's father died in 1917 of heart disease, her new stepfather ruined the family fortune and left them. Klara grew up speaking Hungarian and remembers being on very good terms with their Christian neighbours and playmates. After graduation, Klara became a typist and later worked in an umbrella factory in Budapest. She lost that job when the anti-Jewish laws were passed in Hungary, and she was deported to Dachau from Budapest on 15 October 1944. From Dachau, she was sorted to Ravensbrück, then Spandau-Berlin and Oranienburg (a sub-camp of Sachsenhausen), from where she was liberated by the Russian Army. Klara arrived home in Nagykaroly on 11 September 1945, only to find out that she was the only member of her family who survived the Holocaust. In 1946 she met Endre Markus, a doctor, and on 15 March 1946, they were married after a romance of just one week. Klara and Endre had a son and a daughter together.

"I was taken away from Budapest on 15th October 1944. First they took me to Dachau [today Germany]. This was the sorting place, we didn't work there, we were only taken to labor camps from there: Ravensbrück [today Germany], Spandau-Berlin [a suburb of Berlin, Germany], Oranienburg [sub-camp of Sachsenhausen in Northern Germany, 35km from Berlin].

I also remember that when our turn came to be gassed, they took us to the gas-chamber, but they ran out of gas. A woman came in and said, 'Na, das ist schön! Kein Gas mehr.' [German for 'How nice! We ran out of gas.'] We worked in an ammunition factory.

There was a very decent man, an old man, the master, who used to bring me some bread or something in secret. I don't think that it was bread, but then what was it? I know he brought me something secretly. There were decent people even among them. I was liberated from Sachsenhausen.

The Russians came in, but we were like animals, we weren't aware of anything, we were dazed, and later I found out that the Germans had been giving us bromide all that time, they put it in the tea and everything else. We didn't have our menstruation, and were sedated, so there was nothing to doubt or think about.

Only when the bromide wore off did we wake up and realize what had happened. But even then we had no idea what was happening, because we remembered nothing."

EGON LOVITH

Cluj-Napoca, Romania
Interviewer: Molnár Ildikó
Date of interview: March 2003

Egon and Margo Lovith in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in 1946.

Read Egon Lovith's biography here
Click here to see his family pictures

Egon Lovith was born in 1923 in Romania, the son of Max Lovith, from Ukraine, and Berta Pardesz, from Lithuania. His father, Max, was a Swiss-trained watchmaker, who fought in the Russian army during World War I. Max emigrated to Mexico in 1922, and Egon and his mother, Berta, joined him there in about 1925. Egon finished his elementary school education there in Spanish, but after his father died in 1934 of stomach cancer, Egon, his mother, Berta, and his sister Irenke (who was born in Mexico in 1932) moved back to Romania. As a child in school and as a young man in the workplace, Egon experienced anti-semitism continuously. While working a number of odd jobs from about 1938 to 1944, when he was deported, Egon painted and sculpted after hours in the hopes of one day becoming a painter. His grandmother, mother, and sister were killed during the Holocaust, and his wife, Margo (who he met at the end of the war), was in Ravensbrück.

"Margo had undergone a horrible treatment in Ravensbrück: they sterilized her. The women were stripped naked and their hair was shaved. When it was Margo's turn she went up to the barber but the SS woman suddenly told the barber, '*Nein, dieser nicht die Haare schneiden!*', don't shave the hair off this one. Margo later told me, 'I was almost on my knees begging her to cut my hair because I couldn't stand to have lice. The SS woman couldn't be convinced. [She probably didn't let Margo's hair be cut because she wanted it so badly.] Margo stood in line and went to the shower. After being liberated it was a great surprise to see Margo with long thick black hair among all the women who had short hair. I didn't see it at first when I saw Margo in the kitchen because she was wearing a kerchief. But all of a sudden she took the kerchief off and shook her head and all her long black hair fell down. 'Oh my Lord, why do you have so much hair? What happened?' and so she told me."

KORNELIA ESZTER SEREBRENIK (NEE ENGELMANN)

Budapest, Hungary
Interviewer: Anna Földvári, Klára Lázok
Date of interview: 2004-2005

Serebrenik Kornélia around 1930

Read Kornelia Eszter Serebrenik's biography here [in Hungarian]
Click here to see her family pictures

Kornelia (Nelly) was born in 1915 in Gyonk, Hungary, to Olga and Vilmos Engelmann. In 1937 she married for the first time and moved to Novi Sad, where her first husband, Erno Bokor, had a prosperous factory. They had a very happy, but unfortunately short marriage. Erno was murdered during the Novi Sad raid in January 1942. She moved back to her mother in Gyonk with her children. The 2 sons were deported to Auschwitz together with their grandmother, and died there. In April 1944 Kornelia was deported from Budapest to Birkenau, later she was moved to Auschwitz, then in January 1945 to Ravensbrück. She was liberated from Mecklenburg, and returned home on foot in August 1945. After the war she married Laszlo Serebrenik, and gave birth to 2 sons. In 1948 they moved to Kassa [Kosice], then around 1950 emigrated to Vienna, where they lived in a refugee camp for 7 years until they succeeded in moving on to New York, and from there to El Paso. In El Paso they ran a church warehouse and jewelry shop, which they sold in 1980 and moved to Huston to be close to their older son's family.

"At the end of January 1945, around the 20th, the Russian front came, and that's when the camp [Auschwitz] was evacuated. We had to walk for a few days. We had to cling together because the ground was frozen like a mirror, and anyone who fell down was told five times to get up, and if she didn't get up, was shot, and we kept going. They then put us in an open coal wagon and we were taken up to Ravensbrück.

They put me in a block in Ravensbrück, somehow brought us something to eat, but there were no cars, no cars were running. Then they put us in a block with homosexual German women, I think. They put us in beds, but four to one bed, so we could only sit, and it was

terribly cold. There was a big drum stove. We would put the bread there and when it was all stale you could eat, and that was as good as it got.

Then they put us on a train, a proper train, and took us to Mecklenburg. That was in January 1945. There was no food, no bath, no clothes, no possibility to change clothes. They put us in a camp for prisoners of war. Here we also got put together with a lot of German homosexual prisoners. This camp was a subcamp of Ravensbrück. I slept in a room on the ground. At night everyone stretched out, we were full of clothes and hair lice. The bread was green and moldy, but we ate it, there was nothing else. I lost a lot of weight. There were American, English, Russian, all kinds of prisoners of war, French too, and they told us the news. There was an aircraft factory, and I was selected to work there [*This was probably in Neustadt-Glewe (Mecklenburg, Germany). The camp was a subcamp of the Ravensbrück women's camp, which was set up on 1 September 1944. Some 5,000 women prisoners were taken here after the evacuation of Auschwitz and were employed in the construction of the airport, the Dornier Works aircraft factory and in digging trenches.*]. When there was work, I always volunteered. The job was to plant trees to camouflage the planes because the British had come and were bombing. We had an SS guardian woman with us and she was shaking when the British planes came. And we were joking, laughing. You are not afraid? What is there to be afraid of? We wished a bomb would fall on us. We had nothing to be afraid of.

In the last week there was a "selection". A doctor with a Red Cross nurse came and we had to walk in front of him. Those who were weak were taken out. A little girl from Szeged was with us, we begged, she said she couldn't take it anymore. Poor thing, she was only skin and bones. They took her away.

At the last minute they took us out to dig a trench. We could no longer walk, we couldn't carry a shovel, we were so weak. The Wehrmacht was waiting for us outside, they said they were starving too, because there was nothing to eat. They gave us a potato or two. They said, it's fine for you, but what about us? The Germans ran, they were already running away. They didn't know which way - they were afraid of the Russians.

Then one day in May, they opened the gate for us and a big Russian gunner came in. We were in striped clothes. A Ukrainian woman kissed his hand and then kissed the ground. We went into the warehouse, but there was no bread because the Ukrainian girls had taken it. I found a can of fat, and then we had a good meal. Afterwards we moved into a villa, but it was very dirty because the Ukrainian girls were there. They went into town to steal and came back with a horse cart and furs. We went in too and sat in front of the church, and the Russians came with their katyusha, the ground was shaking. [*The Soviet-developed weapon known as the "katyusha" or "Stalin's organ" (BM 13) was actually a small rocket-propelled grenade launcher. It was unsuitable for use against point targets because of its wide dispersion, so the stock (32 to 54 rockets) was fired in a series from a truck or tank-mounted launcher. It was mobile and difficult to locate. It was named after the variable sound of the projectiles of different sizes.*] There were no people there. The population had run away, the whole town was empty. Everybody ran away. The houses were unlocked. We took skirts and blouses for ourselves. The most interesting thing was when I looked at the inside pocket of a skirt and what was written there? Lopi Ritzmanstadt. It was a skirt belonging to a Polish Jewish girl, which we might have made ourselves in the Kommando. And they sold it there, everything they took from the Jews went to the German people.

One night French prisoners of war came looking for accommodation. One of them was from Toulouse. I told him that my brother was at a university in Toulouse, and he asked me to go with him. The other girls - there were five of us - said they wouldn't go. I didn't go either. The Frenchman went to the American zone and we stayed in the Russian zone.

I came home [to Budapest] in August. We went by foot."