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Traces of youth: reconstructing Hungarian women's lives during the Holocaust

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on archival, theoretical and methodological approaches to a set of prisoner registration cards from the Arolsen Archives. It argues that the cards make a unique contribution to the history of the Holocaust, which goes beyond their subjects' experiences of the camp system. While historians have employed similar documents to chart the history of Jews in the concentration camps, this article suggests methodological ways for using the cards to tell a history of Jewish life, too. It reveals how the biographical nature of the cards provides personal information for those who would otherwise be dehumanized. In so doing, it builds on Dan Stone's suggestion that it is possible to write a social history of the Holocaust using records from the Arolsen Archives, by identifying specific elements in the sources that achieve this. It also presents how digital humanities mapping tools can use data from the cards to visualize and analyse trends in their subjects' lives and in the broader Jewish experience. Finally, it acknowledges the limits of the cards as sources and identifies how – when other sources are available – they can be combined with memoirs, testimonies and post-war documentation to illuminate archival silences and reveal personal agency. For many victims of the Holocaust, however, cards like these are the only remaining trace of their lives. As a result, this article suggests innovative approaches for using Arolsen Archive material to tell a social history of the Holocaust, thus challenging preconceptions about camp documentation.

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Introduction

On 15 August 1944, a selection took place in the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. One thousand Hungarian Jewish women were rounded up and transported to an armaments factory in Hesse, Germany, known as Allendorf.¹ There, they lived in a camp called Münchmühle, a subcamp of Buchenwald concentration camp. When they arrived at the camp, they were registered into the Buchenwald

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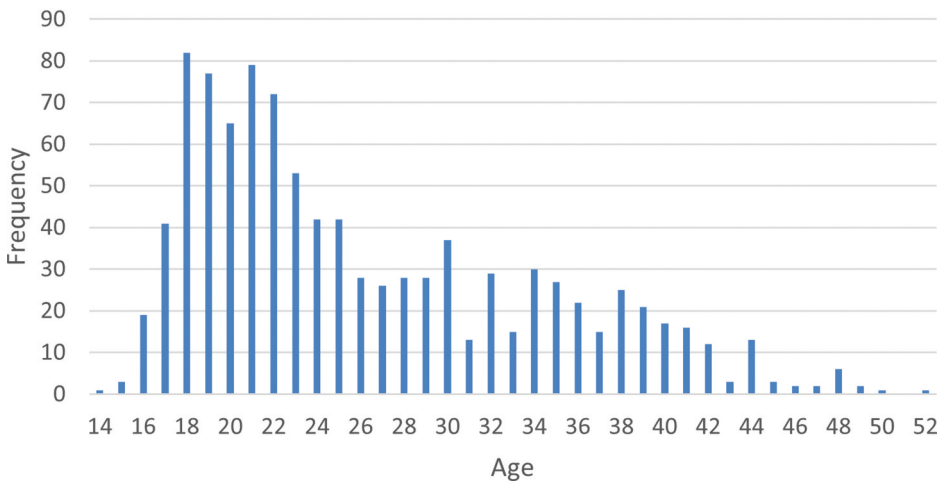
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records and a prisoner registration card (Häftlings-Personal-Karte) was created for each individual.² These cards recorded their basic biographical information as well as their history in the camp system. They contained their name, date of birth, place of birth, last known address, the name and address of a relative, date and reason of arrest, the camps they were interned in, and the names of their parents. The cards also had a place for personal details on their physical experience, although these were not recorded for the women in Allendorf. Now, the cards are held in the Arolsen Archives and available digitally through the International Tracing Service (ITS) Digital Archive.

This article reflects on archival, theoretical and methodological approaches to the prisoner registration cards. It argues that the cards make a unique contribution to the history of the Holocaust, which goes beyond their subjects' experiences of the camp system. While historians have employed similar documents to chart the history of Jews in the concentration camps, this article suggests methodological ways for using the cards to tell a history of Jewish life, too.³ It reveals how the biographical nature of the cards provides personal information for those who would otherwise be dehumanized. In so doing, it builds on Dan Stone's suggestion that it is possible to write a social history of the Holocaust using records from the Arolsen Archives, by identifying specific elements in the sources that achieve this.⁴ It also presents how digital humanities mapping tools can use data from the cards to visualize and analyse trends in their subjects' lives and in the broader Jewish experience. Finally, it acknowledges the limits of the cards as sources and identifies how – when other sources are available – they can be combined with memoirs, testimonies, and post-war documentation to illuminate archival silences and reveal personal agency. For many victims of the Holocaust, however, cards like these are the only remaining trace of their lives. As a result, this article suggests innovative approaches for using Arolsen Archive material to tell a social history of the Holocaust, thus challenging preconceptions about camp documentation.

For its analysis, this article focuses on prisoner registration cards from one transport and – more specifically – from those on the transport who were aged 18 or younger when they arrived at the camp. This is because 18 (as well as 16) was considered by many as an age milestone that enabled them to prove their worth in the camp system.⁵ Focusing on the cards of those in this age range reduces the sample to 155 cards and enables us to ask specifically gendered and aged questions of them. As the below graph shows, while the women on this transport were aged between 14 and 52, its demography was skewed towards the youth, with the average age on the transport being 26.26.⁶ Moreover, 155 (15.5%) of them were aged 18 or younger when they arrived in Allendorf. Youth and gender were, therefore, defining features of the transport. Methodologically, drawing on young women's cards makes it possible to explore certain themes by using their biographical information; it focuses on a specific generation of Hungarian Jewish youth, within a set geopolitical context. As a result, the cards – created as a means of administering the camp system – can be reinterpreted as a source for social history.

Age Frequency of the Allendorf Transport



This article is divided into four sections. The first explores the historiographical context and methodological work done thus far on using ITS documents for a social history of the Holocaust. It also introduces the use of Geographic Information Science (GIScience) for historical research, reflecting on how these developments can be applied to the prisoner registration cards. The second section identifies what data in the cards reflects on interwar Jewish life and outlines how the cards can be used to tell a history of Jewish assimilation and geopolitics. Following chronologically, the third section reveals how the cards give insight into their subjects' lives during the Second World War and contain references to the wider Holocaust in Hungary. Finally, the last section addresses the cards' use as sources about the concentration camp system. As a result, this article reveals how multiple voices – that of the victim, Hungarian perpetrator and German perpetrator – emanate from the cards depending on the details read. Throughout, the article identifies the strengths of the cards as sources and the unique contribution they make to each specific part of their subjects' history, evaluating where their contributions are most impactful and where they act instead as a starting point for further research.

A social history of the Holocaust

After the war, the Buchenwald card index was transferred to Bad Arolsen in Germany to form part of the ITS. For decades, successive organizations, including Allied governments and the International Committee of the Red Cross, used the documents at Bad Arolsen to support restitution claims, reunite families and search for missing people. In 2007, these materials were opened to the public as the Arolsen Archives, with a digitized collection available at seven access sites across the world and much also available online. This includes over 30 million documents and over 50 million Central Name Index cards and comprises of a vast array of documents relating to the concentration camps, deportations, post-war trials and tracing attempts.

Research using ITS material is still in its infancy, with the first monograph published by Dan Stone in 2023 and a second soon to be published by Jennifer Rodgers.⁷ Other works have outlined the key themes of the archive, addressing its scope, components, and potential uses.⁸ In some of his early reflections on the Arolsen Archives, Dan Stone argued that the ITS could be used to write a social history of the Holocaust.⁹ Stone proposed that by following the trajectories of individuals through the archive – and, therefore, through the wartime camp and post-war restitution systems – it would be possible to tell a humanized history of their lives and experiences. In his monograph, however, Stone's chapter on the camp system relied mainly on testimonies provided to the post-war US War Crimes Commission and deposited in the ITS, as well as on correspondence between various German institutions.¹⁰ Even in Stone's own work, therefore, camp documentation relating to individuals was passed over in favour of the memories of survivors.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising, given that camp documents do not – on the surface – lend themselves easily to telling a social history. Indeed, historians writing such histories often prefer to use testimonies or interviews, noting that 'official records . . . usually say little about the daily life of the workforce, and particularly about slave workers'.¹¹ Those who have used ITS sources in their histories often stress their limitations, either implicitly or explicitly. In a chapter about Elie Wiesel's transport from Auschwitz to Buchenwald, for example, Kenneth Waltzer used ITS documentation merely as a starting point for his research, to define its parameters as focusing on one set of individuals.¹² For the remainder of his chapter, Waltzer drew extensively on interviews from the USC Shoah Foundation (Visual History Archive) to explore their experiences through their memories. More explicitly, Christine Schmidt warned against extrapolating details from ITS material without corroborating them with other sources, pointing out that many details in ITS records from concentration camps have errors in them.¹³ Similarly, Ildikó Barna and Alexandra M. Szabó stressed the need to combine ITS material with that of other archives, showing how this cross-examination provided new information, gave a deeper understanding of people's lives and enabled them to explore certain silences in the ITS archive material.¹⁴

These are important limitations of ITS material and should be considered when handling camp documents. They should not, however, stop us from developing methodologies for using camp documents themselves. For many victims of the Holocaust, camp records like prisoner registration cards are the only surviving trace of their lives. Where there are no post-war testimonies, interviews or contemporary personal documents, the cards provide us with the only possible means of acknowledging the individual victim. For Stone, using camp documentation in this way constituted an 'act of ethical repair: seeking to recover the fates of individuals who would otherwise remain unknown and thus rehumanising them'.¹⁵ Here, Stone echoed Leora Auslander, who argued that 'it is an irony of history that the sources generated by the Nazi regime inadvertently provide a rich image of the lives of the people it was trying to kill'.¹⁶ In light of this, Auslander saw 'no reason to accept the Nazis' purpose and therefore leave these lives deeper in the shade than they need be'. Using perpetrator documents to tell a history of Jewish life, however, requires more than affirmations of its moral character. This article builds on Stone and Auslander's positions by identifying specific methodological practices for using camp documents.

It also builds on existing approaches and practices in this area. In his book on the Holocaust in Hungary, Tim Cole gave an example of reading the Jewish experience from so-called 'perpetrator documents'. In his work on receipts from non-Jews whose carts were used to concentrate Jews into the ghettos, Cole showed how they revealed experiences of forced movement, dispossession of property and overcrowding.¹⁷ As a result, Cole showed how documents produced as part of perpetrating the Holocaust can be read, instead, as indicators of the Jewish experience. This article takes such analysis further, by identifying not only the Jewish experience but, also, the victim voice. While they may appear on the surface as institutional documents, the cards are, in fact, subjective sources. Not only do they indicate what German administrators understood to be important they, also, show what information prisoners offered up and how they sometimes manipulated this to what they perceived would be their benefit, such as by lying upward about their age. Identifying and drawing attention to these instances reveals how individuals exercised a modicum of agency in the concentration camps. It also reveals how multiple voices emanate from the cards, which represent not only the camp administrator but, also, the individual represented by the card.

Indeed, while the cards do form a larger mass of camp documents, at their core they are a personal record of an individual. Understanding them in this way enables us to ask them questions rooted in social history, such as around the themes of age and gender. The cards provide both specific details on these attributes and opportunities for gendered and aged inferences based on other details from the cards, such as their location and family. This article understands gender and age as performative, social and polysemic categories, which impact their subjects' experiences in a variety of ways.¹⁸ By applying the lens of youth in this way, we can draw new inferences about what other pieces of information on the cards meant from the perspective of a young person. Youth as a category of analysis thus pushes us to consider how, for example, the spatiality of their last known address relates to narratives of schooling, friendship and community. Similarly, applying gender to the cards changes how we think about transports within the concentration camps and of forced labour as a gendered experience. Together, approaching the cards from the perspective of gender and youth moves them into a new theoretical and conceptual space, where factual information about location, parents and time can be interpreted as indicators of a deeper specific and subjective experience.

Throughout this article, maps are used to visualize the experiences represented in the cards and place them into their national, regional and local contexts. Mapping takes location data from the cards and presents it in a way that enables us to think better about the potential meanings and experiences behind the spaces they inhabited. As Geographic Information Science (GIScience) has developed in recent years and become increasingly accessible to historians and those in digital humanities, maps have shown themselves to be powerful tools for historical analysis.¹⁹ In the field of contemporary human rights and genocide, scholars have been quick to point out that while GIScience can help identify the scope and scale of atrocities, qualitative research on the narratives of individuals experiencing persecution is essential.²⁰ This represents broader criticisms of GIS mapping that place the static, singular location information and its lived experiences on two sides of a dichotomy.²¹ Yet, as Maja Hultman has shown, GIS can be used as a prism through which qualitative sources can be evaluated.²² Indeed, for a subject like the Holocaust, where a considerable amount of this information is known, GIScience mapping can contribute a more analytical function.

Scholars of space and place in the Holocaust, including Tim Cole, Anne Kelly Knowles and Alberto Giordano, have identified how space and social practices had a ‘mutually constitutive’ relationship, as well as how mapping can situate individuals at certain physical places, with important repercussions for ideas about complicity in genocide.²³ This article visualizes locations mentioned in the cards on maps using GIS, placing geographic coordinates onto a base map of Hungary. In so doing, it allows us to view the cards, both individually and as groups, in a way that facilitates and encourages spatial analysis.

When the prisoner registration cards were created, their aim was to serve a function in the concentration camp system, keeping track of individual prisoners as they were transferred from camp to camp. Reinterpreting them as a historical source, however, reveals much more about their subjects’ lives. While historians have traditionally assumed that concentration camp documents speak only about the camp system, recent research has shown how sources produced through the process of persecution can tell a history of Jewish life, too. This is not just possible; it is vital. By treating a prisoner registration card as a testament to a life, it rehumanizes those who were treated as inhuman. It reveals otherwise lost details about Jews’ lives before and during the Holocaust. And, above all, it gives a voice to those who left no other trace.

Interwar Jewish life

Although not designed as a source of information about the interwar period, the cards do, in fact, possess a significant amount of data on this period. Details about their date of birth, place of birth and their last known residence – sometimes even down to the street and house number – provide an insight into their early lives and childhoods. This also gives an insight into the spread of Jewish communities geographically, both within specific cities and across whole countries and territories. By focusing specifically on the cards of those 18-years-old or younger at their deportation, it is possible to draw specifically youth-relevant inferences from the location data on the cards. In this way, thinking about the geopolitical context of individuals – an element easily identifiable from their place of birth and residence – becomes more than a general observation on society, prompting us instead to think about potential experiences of schooling, family and social relations.

One of these elements is the deep level of assimilation that the Jewish communities had in Hungarian society. This is particularly visible through the last known address indicated on the cards. This entry is imperfect, as it does not consistently record the same information for each card. In some cases, it details the deportation centre or the ghetto from which the individual was deported, while in others it shows the last address that they lived in freely. In the selection of cards here, the latter is the most common. This makes it possible to pinpoint the physical location of Jewish family homes within larger cities. From the city of Miskolc, for example, there are 29 individuals in this sample of cards, of which the last known address of 25 of them is identifiable on a modern-day map (Figure 1). By mapping their last known addresses, we see that while many of them lived in the centre of the city, they were spread across its central streets, rather than in a specific area. This is suggestive of integration, pointing towards a Jewish community geographically diffused rather than concentrated within a specific Jewish quarter. Thinking about young people, it shows us that the quotidian journeys that they would have taken – to

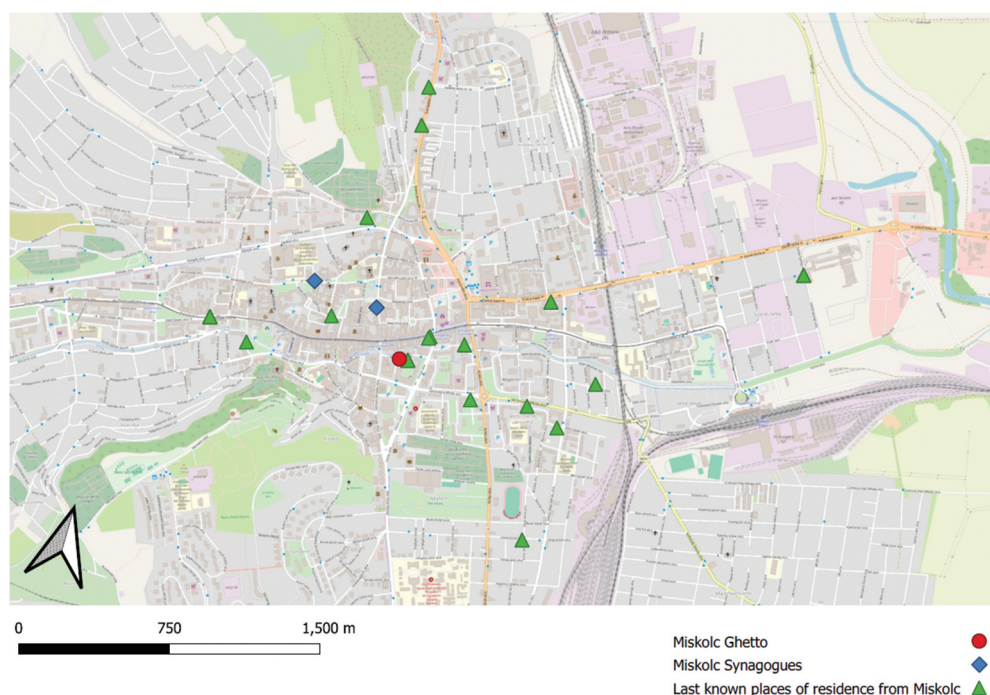


Figure 1. Map visualization of the last known addresses of women in the sample from the city of Miskolc, made using QGIS based on data from the Arolsen Archives cards. Map also indicates the locations of the two synagogues in Miskolc during the war, and the position of the Miskolc ghetto.

school, to shops or even just for exercise and pleasure – would pass through and within areas that were distinctly non-Jewish. Young people would, therefore, come into daily contact with non-Jews. Indeed, these are themes that we are familiar with from memoirs and interviews with survivors about the pre-war period.²⁴ Mapping the location data from the cards points to these experiences, revealing the geographies of assimilation.

The cards also situate their subjects temporally. By recording their date of birth, it is possible to place them into the temporal context of interwar Hungary, a time of growing antisemitism. Born in the 1920s and 1930s, these young women grew up in an era where Jews were often used as scapegoats for national antagonisms, carrying the blame for territorial losses after the First World War.²⁵ This antisemitism differed starkly from that of earlier decades and centuries, as blood libel ideas were replaced with a more modern, political and racial antisemitism.²⁶ In 1920, Numerus Clausus laws were introduced limiting – at least on paper – the number of Jews in education and employment to their proportion of the national populace. While this law was not rigorously enforced, its existence marks a shift in popular and legal discourse towards a legally acceptable form of antisemitism. It is into this ‘process of internal Nazification’, as one historian has put it, that Hungarian Jews were born in the 1920s.²⁷ This was followed in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Nuremberg-style racial laws against the Jews, forbidding intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews, excluding them from full participation in various professions, and limiting their participation in the economy. While the cards do not tell us how their subjects experienced these, by indicating their ages, we can infer this as the

environment within which they came of age. As the generation born into this surge of antisemitism, young people's lives were shaped by the contradictions of assimilation and antisemitism from the very start. Such inferences can be made for all ages represented on the cards. Those who came of age before or during the First World War, for example, would be situated into the more integrationist social context of Hungary in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Inferring these experiences from the dates of birth and place of residence forms a vital part of the process of interpretation that transforms the cards from administrative documents into historical sources that enable us to hear the voice of the victim.

Combining the details given in the cards of location and date of birth, it becomes further possible to consider the broader geopolitical context within which these young people lived. This is because they show how some of the women came from territories which in the 1920s were held by other countries, including modern-day Slovakia, Ukraine, Romania and Croatia. Using the place of birth listed on the registration cards, we see that 29 of those in this sample were from these territories, mapped below (Figure 2). Observing this enables us to think about the regional specificities and differences between territories. For those born in territories not held by Hungary in the interwar period, they grew up in a different national context to that of their parents. While their parents had grown up as part of Hungary, they now found themselves raising a family as part of both Jewish and Hungarian minorities within another nation-state. As Hungarians attempted to grapple with

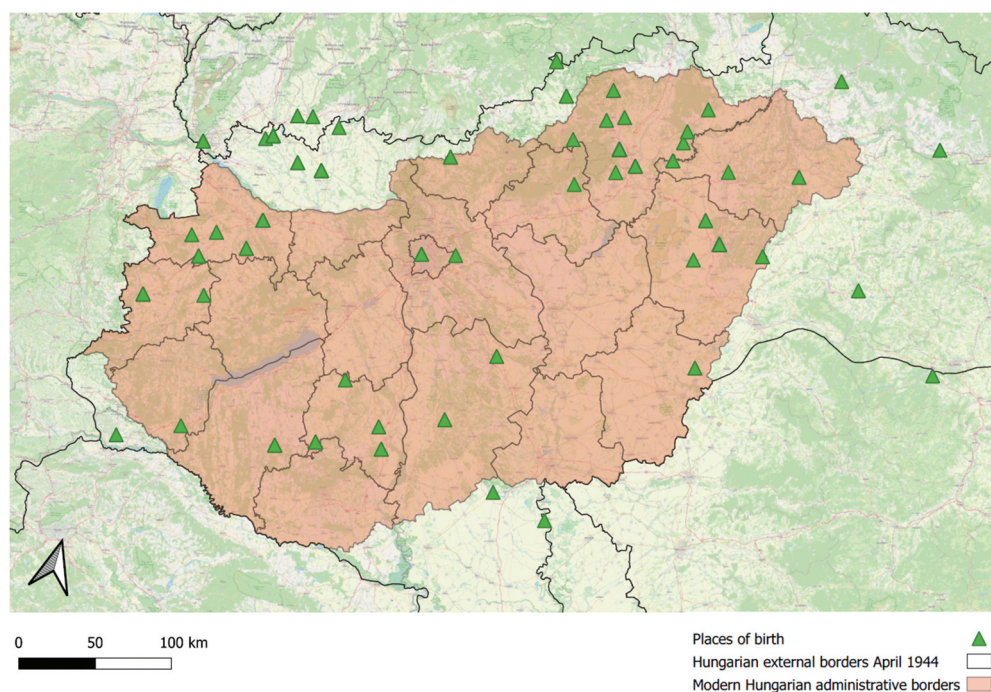


Figure 2. Map visualization of the women's places of birth, made using QGIS based on data from the Arolsen Archives cards. Locations are plotted on Hungarian external borders as at April 1944 as well as current (similar to Trianon Hungary) borders which are shaded, to show which of the women were born in areas annexed by Hungary during the war.

understanding life as a minority, so too did the Jews. Indeed, the Hungarian historian István Deák argued that, as the Jews were deeply assimilated, they faced many of the same challenges as non-Jews in this regard.²⁸ While this may have been the case overall, there remain Jewish and regional specificities that should not be overlooked.²⁹ These are especially important for the Jewish youth, who had no memory of Hungarian rule. Chief among the factors that shaped these young Jews' early lives was the constitution of the Jewish community and its relationship with the state. While the majority of Hungarian Jews in Trianon Hungary belonged to the liberal Neolog tradition, in Transylvania 150,000 of the 190,000 Jews belonged to autonomous Orthodox communities.³⁰ Conversely, in Transcarpathia and Slovakia, Jews were exposed to Zionist ideas and Jewish nationalism much more than in Trianon Hungary, where the Neolog leadership were still committed to assimilation.³¹ As a result, the pre-war childhoods of the 29 Hungarian Jews from outside Trianon Hungary considered here emerge as separate. By recording their dates and places of birth, the cards allow us to place these individuals into a specific geopolitical space, with its own religious and cultural markers.

The details that the cards give about these geopolitical spaces are, however, only snapshots. They catch information at the time of birth and the time of deportation, but not in between. Yet, it is this period that was a crucial time for those in the territories Hungary lost in 1919. In the latter years of the 1930s and the early 1940s, parts of these territories were reclaimed by Hungary, through a series of awards and annexations. These started with southern Slovakia in November 1938, followed by Transcarpathia in March 1939, Northern Transylvania in September 1940, and finally parts of Yugoslavia in December 1941. Territorial changes interrupted young Jews' development significantly: nationality changes forced them to adapt to a new environment, necessitated changes in everyday life, and was often accompanied by the mass movement of people – part voluntary, part forced.³² These events are absent from the cards, as they were not perceived as relevant for the camp administration. This exposes a stark difference in the approach to the cards for camp administrators and historians and reveals a major limitation of the cards. It, also, points to a larger issue that cuts to the core of Holocaust research: that of understanding persecution as something that took place outside of the confines of the concentration camp system, too. The cards, focused as they are on the camps and the details needed to facilitate their functioning, can, therefore, only give us an insight into certain parts of this broader history.

The Second World War and Holocaust

Nonetheless, the cards do contain subtle references to the wider Holocaust, including their experiences of the war, Hungarian slave labour and the ghettoization process. Comparing the places of birth with the last known address listed on the cards, for example, reveals a history of movement, as a proportion of the young women lived in a different place during the war than where they were born. Details on the cards about family members' occupations and locations enable us to build a picture of their possible fates and the impact that this had on the young women's lives, revealing how their male relatives were often conscripted into slave labour. Finally, small and occasional references to Hungarian ghettos provide an insight into the process and spatiality of ghettoization. These details reveal another voice within the cards – that of the Hungarian perpetrator.

Out of the 155 women in this sample, 41 of them list a different place of birth to their last known place of residence. As the sample is focused only on those aged 18 or younger at the time of their deportation, their age suggests that most were still living with family and had not yet established their own independent lives. On the whole, a difference in their place of birth and last known residence thus illustrates not a natural change of residence associated with coming of age, but a whole family movement. The reasons behind this are, of course, unique to each circumstance and incredibly varied. It is reasonable to assume, however, that the outbreak of war and wartime pressures were common causes of movement across the country. In fact, as almost half (44.1%) of Hungarian Jewry lived in rural 'comitats', Jews often experienced several periods of ghettoization as they were moved from smaller ghettos to larger deportation centres.³³ Indeed, a map of ghettos in Hungary shows 173 ghettos but only 55 loading sites for deportations, highlighting how movement within Hungary was a necessary component of deportation.³⁴ Movement interrupted bonds that young people had made with their neighbours, friends, teachers and others in their communities, causing what Simone Gigliotti termed 'social death through objectification', as people were treated as if they were 'the freight of the Final Solution'.³⁵ Gigliotti's work recognized the destructive consequences of movement, but focused mainly on the space of the cattle car, arguing that they composed 'the first physical testimonial of transit'.³⁶ The high number of cards with a different place of birth and last known residence, however, suggests that a broader definition of the 'transit experience' is needed – one which acknowledges the movement that took place pre-deportation, too. These two snapshots in time and place thus reveal instability and change at much earlier points than traditionally understood.

The cards also give an insight into their subjects' wider families and contain subtle references to the Holocaust in Hungary. The cards recorded the names of their subjects' parents and sometimes those of siblings, too. They also recorded the name and address of a relative. For the cards from Hungary, the listed relative was almost always male and was sometimes the father. Many have a note in German recorded next to the address of their relative, which reads 'Arb. Dienst' for 'labour service'.³⁷ By recording this, the cards reveal a specifically Hungarian element of the Holocaust – the *Munkaszolgálat*. This was the mass conscription of Hungarian Jewish men of 'working age' (generally those aged 21 and over) for slave labour.³⁸ Over the course of the war, these removed over 100,000 husbands, fathers and brothers from the family unit, many of whom never returned.³⁹ Although none of the women in this sample were taken into the *Munkaszolgálat*, it is often mentioned on their cards through their references to their male relatives. With this information, the cards reveal the thoroughly gendered nature of persecution in Hungary, where men were subject to conscription but women were – for the most part – not. Moreover, the cards tell us something about the composition of the *Munkaszolgálat*, as an overwhelmingly male environment which pushed ideas of masculinity into confined spaces. When the camp administrators recorded these details, they did not do so to record information about the *Munkaszolgálat*, but to detail the address of a relative. In fact, the camp administrators had no connection to the *Munkaszolgálat*, which operated largely under the control of the Hungarian government and army and was rarely connected to the concentration camp system. The cards, therefore, accidentally provide an insight into their existence and, through inferring their meaning, the gendered nature of persecution in Hungary.

The Munkaszolgálat is not the only Hungarian specificity that was recorded on the cards. While the last known address listed on the cards often records the last place they lived in freedom, some recorded the address of the ghetto they had been incarcerated in before deportation. This is the case, for example, in Judith Lazar's card. The card records how Lazar was born in 1927 in Sarkadkeresztúr in south-east Hungary, but was living in the town of Szolnok, around 100 kilometres away during the war. Whereas almost all the other cards in the sample note a street name for the last known address, Lazar's card reads as 'Cukorgyár', the Hungarian word for 'sugar factory'.⁴⁰ This gives a valuable insight into the process of ghettoization and its Hungarian character. Indeed, the history of the deportations from Szolnok charts how Jews were first concentrated in the local synagogue, Jewish school and community buildings, before being transferred on 16 June 1944 to the grounds of the local sugar factory.⁴¹ This intensely local element of the Holocaust, visible through one word in the card, is an important part of the history of ghettoization in Hungary. It is important to note that in most cards there is no reference to a ghetto or a deportation centre. The chaotic way that they were produced in the concentration camp environment, where multiple languages were spoken and not always fully understood, created the possibility for pieces of information like this to be recorded by accident. These flukes in the system in fact offer an opportunity for us to identify elements of the local history, as with the Hungarian perpetrator figures here.

Furthermore, by situating her in the Szolnok sugar factory in June 1944, Lazar's card gives us an insight into her experiences of ghettoization and deportation. In their reflections on the geography of the Holocaust, Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole and Alberto Giordano coined the term 'geography of oppression', where perpetrators created and implemented physical spaces through which their persecution of the Jews could be felt.⁴² By referring to the sugar factory ghetto, Lazar's card directly names one of these geographies of oppression and reveals how local spaces were repurposed for persecution in Hungary. While her card does not provide more details on Lazar's own subjective experience of this process, by placing her in the physical space it is possible to infer the general conditions and experiences from other sources and histories of the ghetto. This included the violent expropriation of property, invasive body searches and inadequate food, water and sanitary provisions.⁴³ While many of the cards do not describe the ghetto like Lazar's does, for those that do, it is important to recognize how small details on the cards can indicate larger experiences. This broadens the contribution the cards make to the history of their subjects, drawing attention to Hungarian specificities not otherwise visible.

The concentration camp system

When it comes to the women's incarceration in the concentration camps, the cards provide a large amount of specific information that makes a significant contribution to our understanding of their history. This is largely because this context brings them closer to their original function as documents that catalogued the individual's place within the camp system. Each card lists the date that its subject arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau, thus also indicating the time (a few days' previous) when they were deported from Hungary. These dates vary across the period of two months, with the earliest on 6 June 1944 and the

latest on 17 July 1944, covering almost the entire period when Jews were deported from the country. Because of this, it becomes possible to calculate the time that the women spent in ghettos in Hungary, which were only established from April 1944. Moreover, the date of arrival in Auschwitz also tells us about how long they had to endure daily life there. As all the women were transferred to Allendorf on the same transport, leaving on 15 August 1944 and arriving on 17 August 1944, the time they spent in Auschwitz-Birkenau – calculable by measuring the time between the two dates on the card – is also an indicator of their experiences in the extermination camp. It would be an oversimplification to suggest that simply a longer time in the camp was an indicator of a ‘worse’ experience – if such a calculation were even to be possible – but it is certain that the longer a woman remained in the camp, the more she was exposed to the dangers of selections, brutal treatment and harsh conditions. Indeed, many post-war testimonies have described this time in harrowing detail, retelling the traumatic and devastating impact it had on their family, friends and selves.⁴⁴ By providing specific information on the amount of time spent in the camp, the cards directly relate to their subjects’ experiences there.

The cards also reveal how some of the women exercised agency, through lying upwards about their age when the cards were created, possibly believing that being perceived as older would help them survive. This becomes visible only when the cards are matched with documents from other archives that contain their true ages, and so further demonstrates the importance of conducting research on the cards within wider material, alongside that held at Arolsen. Out of the 155 women on the transport who were aged 18 or younger, 32 of them hold prisoner registration cards with a date of birth different to that on other documentation. We see this from the dates of birth recorded on interviews for the USC Shoah Foundation (Visual History Archive) and United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, post-war refugee and tracing documents in the Arolsen Archives, and testimonies deposited in the Yad Vashem Archives.

In these 32 cards, all but two of them list dates of birth which make them appear older than they are on other documents. The distribution is as follows: two cards list a date of birth one year younger, 12 cards list a date of birth one year older, five cards list a date of birth two years older, five cards list a date of birth three years older, two cards list a date of birth four years older, two cards list a date of birth five years older, and three cards list a date of birth six years older. All but seven of these changes move their ages up to 18 or above, and only one presents an age younger than 16. The reasons for these inaccuracies cannot be known for certain, but the most likely explanation is that they were deliberate changes presented by the women themselves. This is because many prisoners were aware that age – alongside strength and fitness – was one of the guiding categories on which selection at Auschwitz was made.⁴⁵ By stating that they were older than they actually were, the women sought to project an image of themselves as fit and strong, thus increasing their chances of being selected for labour. When the cards recorded this – inaccurate – information, they, therefore, also recorded a sign of how the women actively subverted the camp authorities. Recognizing this enables the women’s voice to come through the cards, reinterpreting perpetrator administrative documents into sources about survival strategies and individual choices.

The cards also clearly indicate the transfer of the women from Auschwitz to the Buchenwald subcamp of Allendorf, listing the date that they arrived in Allendorf. In so

doing, they catalogue the process of transports of forced labour from camp to camp. This reveals the moment in time over the summer of 1944, when Auschwitz acted as a so-called 'murderous labour exchange', killing the majority of those who arrived while dispatching transports of forced labour to camps across Germany, Austria and elsewhere.⁴⁶ This signified a marked shift in policy during the Holocaust, as the increased need for forced labourers saw Jews being brought back into Germany.⁴⁷ On an individual level, this enables us to consider how the young Jewish women acted within this environment. Transports out of the camp were often viewed as the best way of surviving. Post-War interviews attest to the fact that many women tried hard to be selected for the transport, risking beatings by sneaking across into line.⁴⁸ The cards do not detail any of this activity explicitly, but their reference to the transport is an indicator of the events that took place. By recording the transport, this entry on the card thus represents a moment that had significant life-or-death meaning to the individuals involved.

While the cards only state the name of the camps and the date of their arrival in them, not any further details about them, they nonetheless make it possible to understand much about the women's lives there. A three-page report from Captain J. A. Boucherat of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration written in April 1946 described Allendorf in detail.⁴⁹ Allendorf was a munitions factory in Hesse, Germany, approximately 18 kilometres east of Marburg. There, foreign forced labourers worked alongside the 1000 predominantly Hungarian Jewish women transferred from Auschwitz specifically for the purpose of producing armaments. The women's jobs included filling bombs with the correct chemicals and other assembly-line duties. They worked there until 27 March 1945, when they were sent on a death march towards Bergen-Belsen, although many escaped on the way. Interviews with the women in this sample corroborate this report and also tell of their personal experiences.⁵⁰ Indeed, these experiences are well documented, both by 50 Shoah Foundation interviews and a local history project in Germany.⁵¹ When the cards recorded the name 'Allendorf', therefore, they thus carried an indicator of a camp fundamentally different to Auschwitz and of an experience of forced labour in latter-war-time Germany.

Conclusion

The last date recorded on the cards is that of the women's transfer to Allendorf. All events after this point are not recorded, as the cards become frozen in time. Up to this point, however, they provide multiple snapshots of the women's lives – from their date of birth, their deportation and their arrival at Auschwitz, to their transfer through the concentration camp system. As this article has shown, the cards tell us much about the background of these women: of their lives during the interwar period, navigating assimilation, antisemitism and geopolitics; of their experiences of the Second World War and persecution, including specifically Hungarian elements and perpetrator figures; and of their journey through the concentration camp system. It is possible, therefore, to use the Buchenwald prisoner registration cards to start to tell a social history of the Holocaust.

There are many aspects of this history to which the cards cannot contribute. This article does not seek to suggest that the cards are the ideal source for this work; rather, it suggests potential further ways in which we can utilize camp documentation to contribute to our attempts at reconstructing lives affected by the Holocaust. The cards, like

any other source, are limited to the details they contain and their particular perspective. They reflect the subjectivities of their creators – the German administrators in the camp system – but, also, of their subjects, containing (sometimes intentionally inaccurate) details that the women provided. As a result, it is sometimes possible to see the women's own voices come through the cards. However, as this article has shown, finding this voice in the cards is not straightforward. On the surface, the cards are merely administrative documents, relating to the concentration camp. For decades, they have been used – by the International Tracing Service and by historians alike – for the purposes of tracing individuals' trajectories through the camp system.

This article suggests a new way of viewing the cards and similar camp documentation. It presents methodological approaches that read against the grain, revealing a history of Jewish life, rather than simply of persecution in the camps. Doing so requires paying close attention to the details recorded in the cards and considering what they tell us about their subjects' lives. It also requires us to bring knowledge about the historical, political and geographical contexts to bear on the sources, revealing how biographical details on the cards are indicators of specific experiences. These approaches have been demonstrated throughout this article. They are also brought together here, outlining specific methodological approaches for each piece of information on the cards.

Date of birth

Using the women's dates of birth, it is possible to calculate the demography of the transport. This gives an insight into the priorities of the German slave labour industry, as well as how age acted to define opportunities for work and, therefore, survival in the camps. Their dates of birth also reveal the era within which they grew up and its associated political and social environments. This situates the women temporally, suggesting the kind of experiences of antisemitism or assimilation they may have had before their deportation. Finally, by using other sources to expose instances where women lied about their age on the cards, histories of agency and the voice of the women themselves start to become visible.

Place of birth

As with their dates of birth, knowing the women's places of birth situates them both geographically and in the specific religious, social, and cultural backgrounds associated with different locations. Mapping a large number of cards from one transport reveals the diversity of locations women came from before deportation. Furthermore, combining their places of birth with their age show the specific geopolitical changes that they would have lived through. This is particularly important for the history of the Holocaust in Hungary, where multiple territories were annexed during the course of the war.

Last known residence

The detail collected for their last known residence – often down to a street address – makes it possible to map their exact position in their city/town/village. Visualizing individuals with geographical reference to the wider Jewish and non-Jewish communities

reveals themes of assimilation, integration, separation and daily life. By focusing specifically on young people's cards, we can ask these geographies more specific questions about journeys to school, shops and exercise. Furthermore, comparing the place of birth and last known residence listed on the cards reveals pre-deportation movements. While the reasons for this movement are not recorded on the cards, they draw attention to its existence.

Name of family and name and address of a relative

By recording these names, the cards provide a further testament to those who suffered persecution during the Holocaust. As their age meant that many of the women's parents were murdered upon arrival to the camp, the cards can thus form a memorial to lives lost. The address of a relative also gives insight into where Jews who had not been deported lived. In the case of Hungary, this also provided important references to the slave labour battalions, revealing both the figure of the Hungarian perpetrator and the gendered nature of this persecution.

Date of arrival in Auschwitz

The date of arrival in Auschwitz indicates when they entered the camp system. This places them into the wider history of the camp and the developing Nazi policies on extermination and slave labour.

Camps and date of transfer to Allendorf

Listing the camps they were subsequently sent to, and the dates of these transfers, makes it possible to calculate the time spent in Auschwitz and other camps. While this is not a direct indicator of their experience in the camp, it does add to our understanding of their incarceration. Furthermore, the recording of multiple camps reveals the process of slave labour distribution and movement. By naming the exact camps the women were sent to, the cards make it possible to identify different experiences at different points of time.

These approaches show how camp documentation can be used to tell a social history of the Holocaust. The prisoner registration cards are not perfect sources for this work, but they do provide valuable information on the women's lives, and the details they contain can serve as a starting point for further research. As with any other source type, they have particular strengths and weaknesses. This article has shown where the strengths of the cards lie and what more they aren't able to tell us. It has, also, suggested tentative innovative approaches to the material that reveal more about the personal lives of individual Jews during the Holocaust. These approaches are particularly important for those victims who left no other material trace. For those whose only remaining record is a prisoner registration card, we surely have a duty to use these sources to try to reconstruct their life, and tell the history of who they were.

Notes

1. Transport list from Auschwitz to Allendorf, August 13, 1944, 1.1.2.1/129637175/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.
2. Prisoner Registration Cards CC Buchenwald, 1.1.5.4/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.
3. Schmidt Van der Zanden, "Women behind Barbed Wire," 71.
4. Stone, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Arolsen Archives for History," 13–33.
5. Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust*, 172; Gil, "From Radom to Vaihingen via Auschwitz," 313.
6. Statistical analysis of Transport list from Auschwitz to Allendorf, August 13, 1944, 1.1.2.1/129637175/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives. Note: Analysis of the transport list recorded in the USHMM encyclopaedia of camps and ghettos puts the average at 27.25 years. This is because their analysis has not taken into account the women who lied about their ages. See: Brinkmann-Frisch, "Allendorf (KZ Münchmühle)," 301–4.
7. Stone, *Fate Unknown*; and Rogers, *The Archives of Humanity*.
8. Brown-Fleming, *Nazi Persecution and Postwar Repercussions*; and Borggräfe et al., *Tracing and Documenting Nazi Victims*.
9. Stone, "The Memory of the Archive," 69–88; Stone, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Arolsen Archives for History," 13–33.
10. Stone, *Fate Unknown*, 113–60.
11. Uziel, "Jewish Slave Workers in the German Aviation Industry," 157.
12. Waltzer, "Moving Together, Moving Alone," 46.
13. See note 3 above.
14. Barna and Szabó, "Excavating Voices in a Cross-Archival Approach."
15. Stone, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of the Arolsen Archives for History," 32.
16. Auslander, "'Jewish Taste?' Jews and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Paris and Berlin," 307.
17. Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust*, 32–43.
18. Valentine, "Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood," 48; Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," 123; Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," 93; and Balint, "Coming of Age During the Holocaust," 24.
19. Martí-Henneberg, "Geographical Information Systems and the Study of History," 3; and Burleson, *GIScience for Genocide Studies*, 135.
20. Madden and Ross, "Genocide and GIScience," 523.
21. Lafreniere and Gilliland, "'All the World's a Stage': A GIS Framework," 226.
22. Hultman, "The GIS Prism," 127.
23. Haas, "Transformations of the 'Private,'" 332–50; Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes*, 4; and Knowles et al., *Geographies of the Holocaust*, 4.
24. Testimony of Shosh Bechar (Edith Potok), henceforth 'Testimony of Edith Potok'; and Lidia Gaspar Interview, Visual History Archive at the USC Shoah Foundation (henceforth VHA)/7990, seg. 3; Magda Brown Interview, VHA/758, seg. 7.
25. Case, *Between States*, 180.
26. Ránki, *The Politics of Inclusion and Exclusion*, 13; Nemes, "Hungary's Antisemitic Provinces," 155–218; Szele, "Racist Politicking and Antisemitism in Fascist Discourse," 181; Miron, *The Waning of Emancipation*, 155–218.
27. Lacsó, "The Radicalization of Hungarian Antisemitism until 1941," 48.
28. Deák, *Essays on Hitler's Europe*, 152.
29. Klein-Pejsova, *Mapping Jewish Loyalties in Interwar Slovakia*, 143.
30. Keren-Kratz, "The Politics of a Religious Enclave," 366.
31. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 94, 102.
32. Rieber, "Repressive Population Transfers in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe," 18.
33. Mendelsohn, *The Jews of East Central Europe*, 99.

34. Holocaust Magyarország 1944: Jew Collecting Operative Zones in Hungary [cartographic Material], (Jewish Agency for Israel: Sollun Bt., 1994).
35. Gigliotti, *The Train Journey*, 36, 207.
36. Ibid., 206.
37. See, for example: Prisoner Registration Cards CC Buchenwald – Erzsebet Goldschmied, 1.1.5.4/7575315/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.
38. Braham, *The Hungarian Labor Service System*, 2.
39. Rozett, *Conscripted Slaves*, 48.
40. Prisoner Registration Cards CC Buchenwald – Judith Lazar, 1.1.5.4/7637414/ITS Digital Archive, Arolsen Archives.
41. Lohse, “Szolnok,” 378.
42. Knowles et al., *Geographies of the Holocaust*, 3.
43. Schwimmer Jenőné Interview, VHA/50539, seg. 15; Kádár and Vági, *Self-Financing Genocide*, 195; and Fritz and Novak-Rainer, “Inside the Ghetto,” 634.
44. Éva Péter Interview, VHA/51796, seg. 46; Hedwig Landau Interview, VHA/54568, seg. 13; Ibolya Brandl Interview, VHA/51312, seg. 57; Tamar Berman Interview, VHA/21205, seg. 68; Alice Ruda Interview, VHA/8911, segs. 44 & 60; Marta Keller Interview, VHA/19123, seg. 50; and Kuzena Deutschová Interview, VHA/27212, seg. 34.
45. Heberer, *Children during the Holocaust*, 172; and Gil, “From Radom to Vaihingen via Auschwitz,” 311, 313.
46. Bloxham, “Jewish Slave Labour and its Relation to the ‘Final Solution’,” 165.
47. Allen, *The Business of Genocide*.
48. Lidia Gaspar Interview, VHA/7990, seg. 26; Livia Kelemen Interview, VHA/51698, seg. 31; Iby Kery Interview, VHA/3352, seg. 64; Katalin Zamiar Interview, VHA/1317, seg. 70; Ibolya Brandl Interview, VHA/51312, seg. 60; Eva Erdős Interview, VHA/1313, seg. 40; Susan Steiner Interview, VHA/37623, seg. 49; Edith Luster Interview, VHA/18431, seg. 61; Hedwig Landau Interview, VHA/54568, seg. 21; Marta Guttman Interview, VHA/7867, seg. 65; and Magda Brown Interview, VHA/758, seg. 47.
49. UNRRA Report on Allendorf by J. A. Boucherat, April 4, 1946, YVA/ T.R.10/3636, 34–6.
50. Eva Erdős Interview, VHA/1313, segs. 40 & 44; Katalin Zamiar Interview, VHA/1317, seg. 72; Magda Brown Interview, VHA/758, segs. 50, 56; Iby Kery Interview, VHA/3352, segs. 87–8; Livia Kelemen Interview, VHA/51698, segs. 66–7; Collection of Songs from Allendorf, YVA O.76/555; and Rózsi Eiländer DEGOB Protocol, YVA O.15 E/1073, JM/32373, 1068–9.
51. See Brinkmann-Frisch, *Documentation- and Information-Center Stadtallendorf*.

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Yad Vashem Archive

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