Coming of Age During the Holocaust: The Adult Roles and Responsibilities of Young Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau*

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Introduction

This article explores how young Hungarian Jews reacted to persecution in Auschwitz-Birkenau, viewing their survival through the lens of their youth. It draws on a sample of over 60 video testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA), representing young people ages eleven to eighteen from the ghettos of Nagyvárad, Pécs, Kolozsvár, Ungvár, Nyíregyháza, and Székesfehérvár.[1] By treating this age range as a separate analytical category from adults, it becomes possible to understand how physical and mental activities that were the domain of adults in normal times became the norm for young people as they sought to cope with and survive the Holocaust. Combining oral testimonies with documents and lists from the camp administration, as well as a strong grounding in the historiography of the concentration camp system in general, this article contributes to an understanding of how young people's experiences were formed, lived, and felt inside Auschwitz-Birkenau.

* I would like to thank Dr Nicholas Terry, Dr Zoë Waxman, and Dr Ana Antic for their support, encouragement and supervision. I am also immensely grateful for the discussions I have had with Professor Siân Pooley and those at the Oxford Centre for the History of Childhood, which helped develop my BA History dissertation into this article. Finally, I am indebted to the Holocaust survivors I have had the honour to meet, including Hannah Lewis and Harry Spiro, whom never cease to inspire me to learn and understand more about their experiences.

[1] Based on an analysis of testimonies from the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation. Statistics provided in a further footnote.

Survival at Auschwitz-Birkenau was multifaceted, haphazard, and at times unpredictable; it was influenced by many factors, and no two histories of survival are the same. Indeed, psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Leo Eitinger wrote that when confronted with the emotional crisis of the camp, Jews' responses depended on a wide range of factors including the situation, available resources, and individuals' personalities, maturity, and moral strength.[2] Since this landmark analysis, more detailed studies on survival have emerged. Some, like Ami Neiberger, argued that maintaining illicit bonds of friendship and family helped prisoners stay alive and worked against the camp system as a form of resistance.[3] Indeed, several scholars, such as Leonore Weitzman and Katy Hazan, have emphasized the importance of the family unit to survival and how family roles were transformed by the Holocaust.[4] Others, like Nikolaus Wachsmann, focused instead on how survivors adapted to the "law of the camp," using existing and new skills to adjust to a moral

[2] Leo Eitinger, "Auschwitz – A Psychological Perspective," in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, (eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington, IN: Indianna University Press, 1994), p. 473.

[3] Ami Neiberger, "An Uncommon Bond of Friendship: Family and Survival in Auschwitz," in Ruby Rohrlich, (ed.), *Resisting the Holocaust* (Oxford: Berg, 1998), pp. 133–149.

[4] Leonore J. Weitzman, "Resistance in Everyday Life: Family Strategies, Roles Reversals, and Role Sharing in the Holocaust," in Joanna B. Michlic, (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), p. 62; Katy Hazan, "Les Enfants de Buchenwald," in Jacques Fijalkow, (ed.), *Les Enfants de la Shoah: Colloque de Lacaune, 17–18 Septembre 2005* (Paris: Éditions de Paris, 2006), p. 131.

structure unique to the concentration camp.[5] Furthermore, historians such as Zoë Waxman have shown how individual characteristics, like gender, influenced their experiences of the camp and determined their survival chances.[6] This variety of—sometimes seemingly contradictory— coping mechanisms all influenced how young Hungarians responded to persecution in the camp.

Moreover, as these mechanisms were rooted in the structure of camp society, understanding everyday life in Auschwitz-Birkenau sits at the center of understanding survival. Indeed, historians of the Holocaust have long sought to understand how society in the concentration and extermination camps operated. Here, too, they have proposed a variety of different explanations. Among some of the earliest scholarship on the Holocaust, for example, Elie Cohen examined human behavior and the role of comradeship in the camps.[7] Later, Terrence des Pres' landmark tome explored everyday life and the power of personal solidarities.[8] More recently, Herman Langbein's analysis on people in Auschwitz-Birkenau noted the dangers of demoralization having a significant impact on the chances of survival.[9] These three examples represent the corpus of historiography that has provided a detailed

[5] Nikolaus Wachsmann, *KL: A History of the Nazi Concentration Camps* (London: Little, Brown, 2015), p. 497.

[6] Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 91.

[7] Elie A. Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, trans. M. H. Braaksma (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954).

[8] Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[9] Herman Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, trans. Harry Zohn (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

examination of social organization in camps, based on Nazi structures and reflections of class, gender, and nationality. Each of these factors influenced camp life for the young Hungarians who were deported to the camp in 1944 and played a major role in their survival.

Throughout these studies, however, youth and age have not received a dedicated and specific focus in the historiography of life in Auschwitz-Birkenau. While the image of children and the elderly being killed upon their arrival is almost universally recognized, the role age played beyond the selection ramp is insufficiently acknowledged. Age, in fact, was a crucially vital component of survival in Auschwitz-Birkenau throughout Jews' time there, influencing and shaping their experiences, as young people were propelled into actions and responsibilities that were beyond their biological ages. Recognizing the fundamental role age played in their survival therefore reveals a new and influential category in our understanding of individuals' lives and camp society as a whole.

Age as a category of analysis

As with adults, young people's survival in Auschwitz-Birkenau also depended on a variety of different factors, including their gender, circumstances, appearance, and luck. Many of these can be grouped together into two overarching factors: the criteria that the SS used to determine if someone was fit for labor and the individual actions taken by young people. Exploring children's arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Patricia Heberer singled out the camp as different to other extermination camps like Bełżec, Sobibór, Treblinka, and Chełmno because of its "genuine selections."[10] These, Heberer argues, offered those who fit Nazi criteria an "opportunity for survival," based on their age, strength, and fitness.[11] Concluding research

[10] Patricia Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust* (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2015), p. 170.

[11] Heberer, *Children During the Holocaust*, p. 172.

conducted at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, historian Idit Gil argued that the "official ages for Jewish workers were 16 to 35," although fifteen-year-olds and 44-year-olds sometimes managed to get through selections, too.[12] Sixteen appears an accurate lower age for the Hungarian transports as well. In this sample, 74 percent of those deported under age twenty were over sixteen. This is fully representative of a broader statistical analysis of testimonies from the VHA, where the percentage from the ghettos in question was 75 percent.[13]

This categorization, however, was by no means inflexible: a significant minority of younger people survived selections, while many sixteen-year-olds were sent to the gas chambers, too.[14] Young people's survival chances at selection were not, therefore, wholly the result of a Nazi policy: an element—however small—of individual agency and chance was also present. Many examples exist, for example, of prisoner functionaries warning new arrivals to say that they were older and of prisoner clerks entering false ages into camp

[12] Idit Gil, "From Radom to Vaihingen via Auschwitz: Testimonies and Memoirs of a Transport of Jewish Slave Laborers," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2014): p. 313.

[13] Of the 68 VHA testimonies consulted here, 50 of them (74%) were age sixteen or older in 1944, while eighteen of them (24%) were under sixteen. This trend is mirrored in a broader statistical analysis of the VHA testimonies. Of the 792 testimonies of survivors of Auschwitz from Nagyvárad, Pécs, Kolozsvár, Ungvár, Nyíregyháza, and Székesfehérvár, 429 were aged nineteen and under when they were deported, of which 323 (75%) were aged sixteen or over (ie between sixteen and nineteen, inclusive).

[14] Of the 68 testimonies consulted here, eighteen of these (24%) were under sixteen, while 25% of the total VHA testimonies from the ghettos focused on here were under sixteen.

records.[15] Across age ranges, young people inflated their ages to appear older in the basic belief that they would be viewed fitter if they were older.[16] Although judged individually, siblings and family members often acted together. Family bonds thus interacted with ideas of fitness and age, as brothers, sisters, and other family members took steps to remain together. Recognizing this age boundary and adapting to it enabled a significant minority of young people under sixteen to enter the camp, too. Individual actions, therefore, also contributed to young people's survival. Indeed, from the moment of arrival, during their time in Auschwitz-Birkenau, and when deported to other camps, young people developed a variety of active, conscious mechanisms to adapt both physically and mentally, coming of age very quickly in order to survive.

While conceptions of age are largely missing from histories of camp life, certain elements of young people's experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau have been explored through wider studies. In the mid-1980s, for example, George Eisen pioneered the study of children's play during the Holocaust, making some references to game-type activities in the camps.[17] Furthermore, Sir Martin Gilbert's work on "the boys" provided a narrative account about the

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[15] Nancy Epstein, interview 8637, segment 36, *Visual History Archive*, USC Shoah Foundation (VHA); Alice Mark, interview 2521, segment 20, VHA; Idit Gil, "From Radom to Vaihingen via Auschwitz," p. 311.

[16] Michal Unger, "The Prisoner's First Encounter with Auschwitz," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1986): p. 280; Brana Gurewitsch, (ed.), "Tilly Stimler," *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1998), p. 182.

[17] George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

experiences of some young people who came to the UK following the Holocaust.[18] Later, writing in French, Katy Hazan built on Gilbert's narrative by analyzing the experiences of some of these "boys," drawing insightful conclusions on the "new rules of life" that characterized young people's survival mechanisms in Buchenwald.[19] More recently, Kenneth Waltzer's microstudy on a transport of boys from Auschwitz-Buna (Monowitz) to Buchenwald highlighted the "life-sustaining" power of social relations, echoing Ami Neiberger's argument about bonds of friendship.[20] Similarly, works like Joanna Michlic's research on Jewish youth in German occupied Poland have developed an understanding of how young people engaged with self-help among themselves in a variety of ways.[21] These complement more general studies into Jewish children during the Holocaust, such as Deborah Dwork's understanding of children as "autonomous human beings" and Nicholas Stargardt's assertion that children had an "adeptness" at the skills needed for hiding and underground activity.[22] The emergence of these works opened up discussion on young people, a topic of

[18] Martin Gilbert, *The Boys: Triumph Over Adversity* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996).

[19] Hazan, "Les Enfants de Buchenwald," pp. 131–145.

[20] Ken Waltzer, "Moving Together, Moving Alone: The Story of Boys on a Transport from Auschwitz to Buchenwald," in Michlic, (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe*, p. 103.

[21] Joanna B. Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue: Jewish Children and Youth in German-Occupied Poland," in Patrick Henry, (ed.), *Jewish Resistance Against the Nazis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), p. 318.

[22] Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 254, 257; Nicholas Stargardt, "Children," *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 228.

increasing interest in the public domain as the majority of remaining survivors were adolescents at the time.

As Holocaust historiography looks increasingly at the experiences of young people, conceptualizing youth as an analytical category becomes an essential part of the debate. Developing youth as a category of analysis transcends disciplinary boundaries, with crucial insights from the disciplines of psychology, geography, and history. Psychologist Mark Bennett argued that development to adulthood should be understood through contextual factors including the social capital associated with certain identities.[23] Geographer Gill Valentine problematized youth as a "blurred" and "ambiguous" stage between childhood and adulthood.[24] Historians Mary Jo Maynes and Steven Mintz, writing in the 2008 inaugural issue of the *Journal for the Study of Childhood and Youth*, highlighted how these categories are socially constructed and questioned the impact of these constructions on historical research.[25] More recently, Lindsay Dodd and Laura King's project, Agents of Future Promise, investigated the ideological use of children in modern Britain and France and its impact on them.[26] Concluding the project, they analyzed two aspects of youth: a bottom-up

[23] Mark Bennett, "Children's Social Identities," *Infant and Child Development*, vol. 20 (2011): p. 360.

[24] Gill Valentine, "Boundary Crossings: Transitions from Childhood to Adulthood," *Children's Geographies*, vol. 1 (2003): p. 48.

[25] Mary Jo Maynes, "Age as a Category of Historical Analysis: History, Agency, and Narratives of Childhood," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2008): p. 123; Steven Mintz, "Reflections on Age as a Category of Historical Analysis," *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2008): p. 93.

[26] *Agents of Future Promise*, University of Leeds, accessed 26 July 2020, childrenofthefuture.leeds.ac.uk.

"progressive understanding of citizenship" viewing young people as "active citizens" and, conversely, perceptions of youth as "adults-in-waiting" or "future citizens."[27] These ideas, twinned with understanding youth as a performative, social, and polysemic category, constitute a powerful analytical framework. By understanding the societal values and perceptions associated with different ages, it becomes possible to explore how young people used age-related characteristics in their responses to persecution. When inflating their ages at selection or claiming a profession, young people in Auschwitz-Birkenau constructed a new identity for themselves. This identity linked their age with ideas of adulthood and, by extension, the social values associated with adulthood, such as strength, competency, and independence. In an environment that tested young people's understanding of these concepts, it is vital to reflect on how ideas of age framed their experiences.

Subjective sources for a subjective history

Applying this framework to young Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau reveals much about how individuals coped with persecution, what it meant to them, and the emotional impact and resilience that it entailed. Young people's survival mechanisms were fundamentally subjective and individual: each person responded to persecution in their own way. Exploring these subjectivities requires sources rooted in the individual and personal. As a result, this study draws principally on a collection of video testimonies from Holocaust survivors, housed in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive. Scholars both

[27] Lindsey Dodd, "Children's Citizenly Participation in the National Revolution: The Instrumentalization of Children in Vichy France," *European Review of History*, vol. 24 (2017): pp. 773–774; Laura King, "Future Citizens: Cultural and Political Conceptions of Children in Britain, 1930s–1950s," *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 27 (2016): pp. 389–411.

within and outside Holocaust studies have commented on the utility of oral testimonies, contributing much to research in the fields of social history, everyday history, and emotional history. Indeed, in her seminal research on women in the Holocaust, historian Myrna Goldenberg commented that testimonies were crucial sources to provide insight into the "social context" and "everyday existence" in Auschwitz.[28]

Oral testimonies do, however, bring a unique set of methodological challenges that frame how they can best contribute to research. Analyzing testimonies of Auschwitz survivors, historian Jürgen Matthäus showed how they can be interpreted in multiple ways and raised questions about how far their evocative power can go in bridging the gap of historical understanding.[29] Empirical and theoretical discussions on these questions have developed much in recent years, not least with the publication of several editions of *The Oral History Reader*, which explored methodology, memory, and representation in oral histories.[30] This corpus of theory underpins the approach in this article, analyzing testimony critically for what it can tell us about young people's personal experiences and feelings. Drawing on recent

[28] Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in Roger S. Gottlieb, (ed.), *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 150–151.

[29] Jürgen Matthäus, *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 121

[30] See, for example: Allesandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in R. Perks and A. Thomson, (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 52; Fred Allison, "Remembering a Vietnam War Firefight: Changing Perspectives Over Time," in Perks and Thomson, (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, p. 336; S. Lowry and A. Dake, "Foundling Voices: Placing Oral History at the Heart of an Oral History Exhibition," in Perks and Thomson, (eds.), *The Oral History Reader*, p. 508.

research in how verbal and non-verbal signals express emotion in video testimonies, this article tracks the visual reactions and spontaneous discourse of survivors to gain a deeper insight into their feelings.[31] It will draw on the personal recollections of 69 VHA testimonies spread across six Hungarian ghettos that represent different areas of Hungary and its occupied territories: eighteen from Nagyvárad, seven from Pécs, twelve from Kolozsvár, twenty from Ungvár, seven from Nyíregyháza and five from Székesfehérvár.

Young people's experiences tell us much about how their lives changed in response to life in Auschwitz-Birkenau. As teenagers, they fell into a nebulous category of those too old to be sent straight to the gas chambers as children, but too young for history to consider them uncritically as adult members of the camp. These people came of age during the Holocaust; faced with the terror of Auschwitz-Birkenau, their roles and responsibilities developed far beyond the normative. As the testimonies explored here attest, when cut off from their family networks, many young people formed new relationships and offered each other mutual support. In doing so, they engaged in adult roles of care and protection, thus experiencing an accelerated development into adulthood. Furthermore, they were forced into slave labor that often proved fatal to even the strongest of adults. Actively engaging with their surroundings, young people developed their own coping strategies. These often drew on ideas about age and occupation and what they meant for perceptions of ability and strength. Coming of age early, these young people lost their childhoods, replaced with adult roles and responsibilities as they navigated Auschwitz-Birkenau.

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[31] Khiet Truong, Gerben Westerhof, Sanne Lamers, and Franciska de Jong, "Towards Modeling Expressed Emotions in Oral History Interviews: Using Verbal and Nonverbal Signals to Track Personal Narratives," *Literary and Linguistic Computing*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2014): pp. 621–636.

Young people and slave labor

"You're young, you will survive."[32]

Between late May and early June 1944, seventeen-year-old Penina Bowman was deported from Kolozsvár to Auschwitz-Birkenau. While disembarking from the train, Bowman and her three sisters pinched their cheeks, hoping to appear fit and healthy. Although at the initial selection she was separated from her mother, father, and brother, Bowman was selected to enter the camp. Bowman perceived being selected for labor as the only way out of Auschwitz-Birkenau and became determined to secure a place on a transport to a work camp. Pretending to know how to speak German, she was soon selected for a transport to Weißwasser. There, she worked alongside forced laborers from France in a factory making electronic equipment for the German army.[33]

This experience is typical of young people who succeeded in surviving the initial selection. By using a variety of different mechanisms, those who showed themselves fit for work adapted both physically and mentally to the challenges posed by the harsh camp environment. They took active measures including pretending to be older, claiming a profession, positioning themselves with others, hiding, and even attempting to surreptitiously swap groups if not selected for work. Individual actions like these took place within the context of shifting Axis policies on the use of forced labor, which also significantly influenced their chances for survival.[34] These were both interconnected and separate: an increased use of Jewish slave labor meant that greater numbers of Jews were transported out of Auschwitz-Birkenau to the relative safety of work camps, yet this was certainly not foremost in the minds of those standing on the selection ramp. Both factors must therefore be

[32] Penina Bowman, interview 55128, segment 67, VHA.

[33] Ibid., segment 84.

[34] Wachsmann, *KL: A History*, p. 447.

taken together: the impact of policies and the ways that young people like Bowman acted had a significant impact on their survival.

Young people and slave labor: the impact of Axis policies

Due to this interconnectivity, Saul Friedländer's approach of an integrated history of the Holocaust is crucial.[35] Considering the fate of Hungarian Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, three main contexts are important to note. First, owing to the Hungarian state's mass conscription of Jewish men into forced labor battalions, many able-bodied men within these battalions were not deported to Auschwitz.[36] Because of this, younger male Hungarian Jews may have had a greater chance of being selected for work in the camp. Had these men been deported, too, it is likely that they would have been chosen for work in place of adolescent boys who, by comparison to men, would have been viewed as children. Instead, these teenagers appeared strong, fit, and healthy compared to their elderly relatives and younger siblings. Second, as the war intensified, Nazi policy on keeping Jewish slave labor outside Germany took a U-turn, so to speak. As demand for labor increased, a "vast number of Jewish slave laborers… poured into camps deep inside the old German borders."[37] Finally, when

[35] Friedländer, "An Integrated History," p. 184.

[36] Éva Kovács, "The Experiences of Hungarian Slave and Forced Labourers," in Alexander von Plato, Almut Leh, and Christoph Thonfeld, (eds.), *Hitler's Slaves: Life Stories of Forced Labourers in Nazi-Occupied Europe* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 125; examples of this from the current sample are: Peter Somogyi, interview 10472, segment 6, VHA; Maria Scheffer, interview 4187, segment 38, VHA; Stanley Bernath, interview 56669**,** segment 26, VHA.

[37] Wachsmann, *KL: A History*, p. 447; Franciszek Piper, "Auschwitz Concentration Camp: How it was Used in the Nazi System of Terror and Genocide in the Economy of the Third

attempting to meet this demand, Nazi leadership viewed the Hungarian Jews as the solution, devising plans to use Hungarian labor in the days leading up to the German invasion of Hungary in March 1944.[38] This establishes a paradox within which we view deported Hungarian Jews. Auschwitz-Birkenau was never more lethal than during these deportations, with the majority of those approximately 430,000 Hungarian Jews arriving in the camp murdered immediately. Yet the combination of this Europe-wide U-turn and Hungary-specific policies on forced labor meant that those who were deemed fit and able had a greater chance of survival as they did not have to endure Auschwitz-Birkenau long term. Indeed, although the majority of those who arrived were murdered, transport lists show that a large number of survivors were deported to other camps and factories within days or weeks of their arrival.[39] It was into this so-called murderous labor exchange that adolescent Jews like Bowman were sent.[40] Despite the overwhelming number of Hungarian Jews killed, however, the cumulative impact of Axis policies on Jewish slave labor meant that those deemed fit for

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Reich," in Michael Berenbaum and Abraham J. Peck, (eds.), *The Holocaust and History: The Known, The Unknown, The Disputed, and The Reexamined* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 375.

[38] Documentation of a discussion with Hitler, including a plan to transfer 100,000 Jews from Hungary to forced labor in an aircraft factory, 1944, Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), O.18/10, p. 2; Robert Jan van Pelt and Debórah Dwork, *Auschwitz: 1270 to the Present* (London: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 337.

[39] List of transports to Auschwitz (*Zusammenstellung*), including Jews and non-Jews, 16/05-20/09/1944, YVA, O.18/240, pp. 4–8.

[40] Donald Bloxham, "Jewish Slave Labour and its relation to the 'Final Solution,'" in John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, (eds.), *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, vol. 1 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 165.

work (often older adolescents) had more opportunities to escape the immediate threat of death in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Germany's use of foreign labor therefore played a pivotal role in determining the futures of young Hungarian Jews who were able to work. Traditionally, however, studies on non-Jewish forced labor and the use of Jewish slave labor by the SS have been conducted completely separately.[41] The former's focus on programs such as the *Ausländereinsatz* (the deployment of foreign labor in Germany) and conceptualization of these as completely separate from the latter's focus overlooks the way in which Jewish slave labor was increasingly used inside Germany towards the end of the war. Furthermore, intense debates on the role of ideology and economics as factors motivating the extermination of the Jews have dominated discussions on the use of Jewish slave labor and thus inhibited investigation into its other aspects and interconnectivities.[42] It is important to recognize that German use of forced labor and Jewish slave labor were fundamentally different. In many cases, when Nazi Germany used Jewish slave labor in 1944–45, it continued with a complete disregard for Jewish life, to such an extent that some have termed it "extermination through work."[43] This

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[41] Contrast, for example: Ulrich Herbert, *Hitler's Foreign Workers: Enforced Labour in Germany Under the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) with Benjamin B. Ferencz, *Less than Slaves: Jewish Forced Labor and the Quest for Compensation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 35, 70, 106.

[42] Ulrich Herbert, "Labour and Extermination: Economic Interest and the Primacy of Weltanschauung in National Socialism," *Past and Present*, vol. 138 (1993): pp. 144–195.

[43] Michael Thad Allen, *The Business of Genocide: The SS, Slave Labor, and the Concentration Camps* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 248, 269.

term, however, is simplistic and tars all work camps with the same brush.[44] Some work camps were undeniably horrendous, yet conditions varied significantly from camp to camp and by time period.[45]

As the testimonies in this sample attest, Hungarian Jews were sent to a plethora of different camps across Europe. These included well-known ones like Bergen-Belsen and Mittelbau-Dora and those less so, such as Reichenbach, Freudendorf, and Porta Westfalica.[46] Working on construction in Landsberg, for example, sixteen-year-old István Rizler from Székesfehérvár recalled how there were 50 to 60 deaths per day and that the camp commander "beat many people to death."[47] For others, however, conditions were much better. Upon reaching a factory in Czechoslovakia, Margaret Gelb even called it "heaven" compared to Auschwitz.[48] Similarly, Bowman's proximity to non-Jewish forced laborers was not unique: in one postwar memoir, teenager Rachel Avniel and her sisters recall clandestinely passing notes about the war and sabotage plans between French forced laborers

[44] Marc Buggeln, "Building to Death: Prisoner Forced Labour in the German War Economy – The Neuengamme Subcamps, 1942–1945," *European History Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2009): p. 606.

[45] Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 59; Dan Stone, *Concentration Camps: A Short History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 48.

[46] See, for example: Zsuzsanna Böhn, interview 50267, segment 42, VHA; Max Sands interview 845, segment 43, VHA; Eduard Berkovits, interview 7270, segment 127, VHA; Judit Kaiser, interview 50335, segment 66, VHA; Alex Moskowic, interview 11302, segment 139, VHA; Viorica Glick, interview 11360, segment 41, VHA.

[47] Testimony of István Rizler, YVA, O.15 E/2626, p. 2.

[48] Margaret Gelb, interview 19751, segment 17, VHA.

and Jewish slave laborers.[49] These interactions highlight the complexity of the relationship between forced labor and Jewish slave labor, which cannot, therefore, be viewed as two completely separate entities.[50] Irrespective of the work conditions, acknowledging the existence—no matter how numerically small—of Jewish slave labor inside the German war economy towards the end of the war is a crucial, and increasingly recognized, interconnectivity.[51] Especially for Hungarian Jews arriving at Auschwitz, this offered a chance to be selected for work and thus no longer be subject to the dangers of the roll calls, selections, and brutality in the camp.

Young people and slave labor: young people's actions

Context alone, however, is not enough to explain fully the decisions taken on the selection ramp, as young people themselves took actions that impacted their fate. Having survived selections, George White and his friends theorized why one of their other friends, Tibi, had not survived, even though he was older than them. They concluded that his short stature had acted against him.[52] Indeed, psychiatrist Robert Lifton identified how selection was conducted with a "medical efficiency," a task only doctors "were considered competent to

[49] Rachel Avniel, "And the sun is shining again: Valeria's memoirs" (unpublished manuscript, 1995), pp. 17–19.

[50] Bowman, interview 55128, segment 85.

[51] For those who have developed an integrated approach to these two topics, see: von Plato, Leh and Thonfeld, (eds.), introduction to *Hitler's Slaves: Life Stories of Forced Laborers in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, p. 4; Piotr Setkiewicz, *The Histories of Auschwitz IG Farben Werk Camps, 1941–1945* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2008), pp. 119–120.

[52] George White, "My memories of the Holocaust" (unpublished manuscript, 1997), p. 8.

perform."[53] Similarly, family and community medicine researcher William Seidelman labeled selection as a "medicalized" process, where SS physicians made the choice between death or slave labor based on a "selection of the fittest."[54] Tibi's lack of height had condemned him to death, as—despite his age—the medicalized system of SS doctors deemed him unfit for labor.

Conversely, thirteen-year-old George Citrom arrived at Auschwitz wearing a large winter coat his mother had given him.[55] Reflecting on this moment, Citrom's older sister Edith Ressler observed that "because he was dressed like that... he got into the camp as a short little guy."[56] At thirteen, Citrom was clearly well under the official age to be deemed fit for work. His appearance, however, was enough to save him from the gas chambers.[57] Indeed, in a postwar trial, Pery Broad, a member of the political department of the SS at Auschwitz, stated as much, saying, "Everybody went into the gas chamber who in the opinion of the inspecting SS doctor was not fit to work."[58] Either by chance or by taking active steps to appear fit and able, a significant minority of young people managed to enter the camp this way.

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[53] Robert Jay Lifton, *The Nazi Doctors: Medical Killing and the Psychology of Genocide* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), pp. 172–173.

[54] William E. Seidelman, "Medical Selection: Auschwitz Antecedents and Effluent," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies,* vol. 4, no. 4 (1989): pp. 435–436, 442.

[55] George Citrom, interview 52023, segment 90, VHA.

[56] Edith Ressler, interview 52912, segment 114, VHA.

[57] For a similar story, but from a female perspective, see "Tilly Stimler," *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, p. 180.

[58] Interrogation of Rottenfuhrer Perry Broad, YVA, M.9/759, p. 7.

Once admitted to the camp, young people often used their work positions to their advantage, employing work as a survival mechanism to bolster their physical and mental ability to cope with the situation. Although their workload was generally the same as that of adults, young people developed their own ways of approaching and reacting to persecution and experienced work differently.[59] Indeed, psychiatrists Judith Kestenberg and Ira Brenner argued that "adolescents could work harder and deal with hunger better and more creatively" than adults.[60] While dominant narratives focus on the "destructive force of work," many adolescents, by contrast, approached work in Auschwitz as an escape mechanism and as a way of broadening their support network.[61] In doing so, young people gained both psychological and material support. Committing himself to work, George Kaldore announced that his "soul was still strong."[62] Similarly, seventeen-year-old Judit Kaiser from Pécs recalled, "It was good that we were doing something."[63] By viewing work positively and proactively, young people developed a sense of purpose and boosted their morale.

[59] Helena Kubica, "Children," in Gutman and Berenbaum, (eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p. 421.

[60] Judith S. Kestenberg and Ira Brenner, *The Last Witness: The Child Survivor of the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1996), pp. 21–22.

[61] Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror: The Concentration Camp* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 195.

[62] George Kaldore, interview by David P. Boder, 31 August 1946, Tradate, Italy, transcript,, *Voices of the Holocaust*, accessed 8 April 2019, http://voices.iit.edu/.

[63] Kaiser, interview 50335, segment 58.

Sometimes, work also had a material benefit for them, offering an opportunity to gain access to extra food.[64] Thirteen-year-old Alex Moskovic from Ungvár, for example, described the "lifesaver" potatoes that he smuggled into the camp when he was used as a slave laborer on nearby agricultural land.[65] This stands in stark contrast to sociologist Wolfgang Sofsky's argument that work offered nothing for prisoners other than a "short postponement" until death.[66] It is not meant, however, to challenge Sofsky's apt observation that "terror transforms the social structure and task structure of labor into a situation of life and death."[67] Work remained a dangerous—sometimes fatal—environment for young people. Nonetheless, considered through the personal, subjective, and emotional perspective of young people, it appears that work did provide opportunities for them to use, as Kestenberg and Brenner identified, their "creativity."

Central to this "creativity" were the increased opportunities for mutual assistance. Often, young people teamed up with friends, family, and others in their blocks and *kommandos*, supporting each other. Tibor Schwartz's brother, who worked sorting belongings, brought back cookie crumbs, which Schwartz described as the "best meal I ever had."[68] Working in the kitchen, fifteen-year-old Eduard Berkowitz regularly brought back potatoes, which he shared with other young people in his block.[69] Sometimes, these connections led to more than just sharing food. One of Moskovic's friends arranged for him

[64] Istvan Weisz, interview 10622, segment 80, VHA; Berkovits, interview 7270, segment 104.

[65] Alex Moskovic, interview 11302, segment 113, VHA.

[66] Sofsky, *The Order of Terror*, p. 175.

[67] Ibid., p. 195.

[68] Tibor Schwartz, interview 1158, segment 172, VHA.

[69] Berkovits, interview 7270, segment 106.

to switch to the "*Scheisse Kommando*," a group responsible for cleaning the latrines and through which he had greater access to food and extra items to trade and barter. Remembering this job, Moskovic stated, "Because of that job, possibly, I'm alive today."[70] Recognizing the personal agency of adolescents here contributes further to our understanding of mutual aid, as it shows how young people developed new roles and modes of behavior to take part in the "solidarity" and "methods of organization" of camp society.[71] Exploring self-help among Jewish children and youth in Nazi-occupied Poland, Joanna Michlic argued that an awareness of these complexities acts to "expand the vocabulary" of Jewish responses to the Holocaust and understand their experiences better.[72] Indeed, young people's determined efforts to both show themselves as fit for work and to adapt to gain psychological and material support from work therefore demonstrates a creative combination that revolutionized their responsibilities and helped them survive.

When Penina Bowman arrived in Auschwitz-Birkenau in the spring/summer of 1944, she entered the camp during its deadliest period. Unlike the vast majority of those who arrived with her, Bowman survived the initial selection and was later deported to work in a factory. Throughout her incarceration, she took active steps to present herself as fit for work and adapted, both physically and mentally, to the challenges she faced. The immediate cause for her survival was the decision of an SS physician, guided by the criteria of age, health, and fitness. Behind this decision, however, lay a convergence of shifting German policies, Hungarian labor policies, and individual actions. Bowman, like many other young people, adapted physically and psychologically to life in the camp, enacting adult roles within an environment where the chances of life or death were shaped by broader Axis policies.

[70] Moskovic, interview 11302, segment 118.

[71] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, pp. 152, 160.

[72] Michlic, "An Untold Story of Rescue," p. 318.

Integrating these micro and macro considerations across geographical sites is vital for understanding how young people's own actions and Axis policies changed their experiences and roles and came together to impact their survival.

Mutual aid: Social and family bonds of support

"I was bound to her, because she was the only person that I knew that there was some blood relation, not much but some."[73]

Between late May and June 1944, Susanne Burton and her cousin Olga Graff, ages fourteen and seventeen respectively, were deported from the Nagyvárad ghetto. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, Graff resented her cousin's presence and was berated by other prisoners who asked her, "Why aren't you taking care of your little cousin?"[74] In an environment where families were torn apart on the selection ramp, any relationships that remained were generally highly prized and viewed as opportunities for mutual assistance and support. Indeed, despite Graff not treating her well, Burton remained with her and even risked being beaten when she snuck into line so that she could be with her cousin when deported to Reichenbach in Germany for work.[75]

Auschwitz-Birkenau created an environment that was hostile and destructive to family life. Yet both upon their arrival and during their time in the camp, young Hungarians employed a wide variety of family- and socially oriented survival mechanisms. These fundamentally reshaped young people's place within families and communities, as adolescents took on increasingly adult social roles. Their actions included maintaining existing and constructing new bonds between family, friends, and acquaintances, offering

[73] Susanne Burton, interview 18472, segments 82–83, VHA.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Olga Graff, interview 6577, segments 60, 82–83, VHA.

each other both morale and resource-related support. Traditionally, these mechanisms of mutual aid have been interpreted in two ways: as acts of spiritual resistance and as methods of gaining material benefit.[76] These interpretations have also been closely correlated to perceptions of gender, the former being linked to female prisoners and the latter to males.[77] Upon a close inspection of young people's experiences, however, it is clear that both male and female adolescents engaged with both elements of these interpretations simultaneously.[78]

Furthermore, these relations were much more complex than they first appear: young people's roles were transformed by being in the camp, forced to take on caring responsibilities at a very young age. Also, relations within the groups that formed in Auschwitz were not always harmonious and were sometimes even abusive; for some, like Susanne Burton, the mere proximity of a family member was more important than the extent to which their relationship was emotionally or materially beneficial. Young people employed these mechanisms within the dehumanizing environment in which they were viewed as a number, not an individual or family unit. Understanding this environment, into which Jews

[76] See, for example: Irena Strzelecka, "Women," in Gutman and Berenbaum, (eds.), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, pp. 393–411; Anna Pawetczyńska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, pp. 127–129.

[77] Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986), p. 110; Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell," pp. 151, 162.

[78] Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p. 147; Neiberger, "An Uncommon Bond of Friendship," p. 144; Zoë V. Waxman, "Towards an Integrated History of the Holocaust: Masculinity, Femininity, and Genocide," in Christian Wiese and Paul Betts, (eds.), *Years of Persecution, Years of Extermination: Saul Friedländer and the Future of Holocaust Studies* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 312.

were bluntly and brutally introduced upon their arrival, is pivotal for comprehending fully the complexities of social and family-related survival mechanisms, as the trauma of arrival and camp life had a profound impact on the ways young people sought to manage their relations with others.

Arrival: Families torn apart

Arrival was a pivotal moment in a family's camp experience, even before selection began. Recalling their approach, one mother described existing prisoners shouting into the cattle trucks in Yiddish, "Jewish mothers, throw out your children."[79] As has been seen, selection itself was bipartite: those for work and those for the gas chambers, the latter of which generally included the children and young people.[80] Alongside this, there was an implicit gender bias against women. Pery Broad stated that "mothers with babies were unfit as a rule."[81] Indeed, perhaps the best-known photos from Auschwitz-Birkenau are of the children, accompanied by their mothers, who walked with babies in arms towards the gas chambers.[82]

[79] Memoirs of Fani Sholomon, YVA, O.33/8877, p. 4.

[80] Kubica, "Children," pp. 412–413; Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in Carol Rittner and John Roth, (eds.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1993), p. 227.

[81] "Auschwitz Concentration Camp: Pery Broad – SS Man," *Holocaust Research Project,* accessed 15 April 2019, www.holocaustresearchproject.org.

[82] See, for example: "Last Moments," *Yad Vashem: The Auschwitz Album*, accessed 23 April 2019, www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/album_auschwitz; "Zalman Gradowski: Writings," in Ber Mark, (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 1985), p. 194.

The question "Are you pregnant?" was common on the selection ramp.[83] The fates of mothers and their children—even those not yet born—were therefore inextricably linked.[84] Upon selection, camp guards often refused to let families remain together. Seventeen-year-old Zsuzsanna Böhm described being "torn away" from her grandmother twice by a German soldier at selection.[85] Zalman Gradowski, a member of the Sonderkommando (prisoners forced to assist with the extermination process) recalled that it only took "a blow with a blunt instrument to make you forget you ever wanted to cross to the other side."[86] With families town apart upon arrival, this selection was consequential to their lives: it decided who lived and who died, it established the brutal environment that was so adverse to family life, and it signaled a new phase in young people's lives and in their physical and mental responsibilities.

The psychological repercussions of family separation were immense: selection was an event that would remain seared in the memories of survivors for the rest of their lives. At the time, Graff cried for six weeks after being separated from her mother, who went to the gas chamber.[87] Separated from their families, young people entered the camp "very much alone

[83] Wendy Holden, *Born Survivors* (London: Sphere, 2015), pp. 1, 34, 71; Lisa Pine "Gender and the Family," in Dan Stone, (ed.), *The Historiography of the Holocaust* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 367; Ellen S. Fine, "Women Writers and the Holocaust: Strategies for Survival," in Randolph L. Braham (ed.), *Reflections of the Holocaust in Arts and Literature* (Boulder, CO: Social Science Monographs, 1990), p. 82.

[84] Milton, "Women and the Holocaust," p. 227

[85] Böhn, interview 50267, segment 37.

[86] "Zalman Gradowski: Writings," p. 194.

[87] Graff, interview 6577, segment 5.

and very miserable."[88] In later life, when recalling this separation in video testimonies, many break down in tears at the intense emotion attached to these memories.[89] Overcome with emotion at the memory of when his mother, six sisters and brothers, grandparents, and uncles were selected for the gas chambers, Ernest Elias, who had been deported from the Nagyvárad ghetto at sixteen, exclaimed: "I don't want to cry, but it's coming. Can I help it? I cannot help it. Nobody can help it."[90] Both at the time and in subsequent years, the event of selection upon arrival placed an "untold pressure on individuals" and often left survivors "consumed by feelings of guilt."[91] Feeling unable to carry on life without their parents and siblings, some young people considered suicide.[92] Yet prevailing accounts and historiography on Auschwitz point to relatively low levels of suicide.[93] Indeed, despite the trauma of arrival and the horrific challenges that faced them, young people who survived selection and entered the camp generally engaged far more with consolidating the few familial and friendship relations that remained at their disposal than abandoning all hope.

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[88] "Zalman Gradowski: Writings," p. 195.

[89] Martin Stern, interview 55567, segment 52, VHA; Schwartz, interview 1158, segments 47–49; Ernest Elias, interview 26423, segment 74, VHA; Jenny Kilberg, interview 47957, segments 47, 49, VHA.

[90] Elias, interview 26423, segments 72–74.

[91] Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, pp. 86–87.

[92] Agnes Grossman, interview 16419, segment 61, VHA; Kilberg, interview 47957, segment 57; László Kovács, interview 50219, segment 75, VHA; Magda Fischer, interview 2468, segment 8, VHA; "Reminiscences of Pery Broad," *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS: Rudolf Höss, Pery Broad, Jonathan Paul Kramer* (Warsaw: Interpress, 1991), p. 106.

[93] Zdzislaw Ryn, "Suicides in the Nazi Concentration Camps," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, vol. 16, no. 4 (1986): p. 424.

Just as the breaking of family ties was detrimental to their ability to cope, the maintenance and rebuilding of family and communal links provided much-needed support. This marked a step-change in young people's lives, as they took on responsibility for these networks and contributed to them as adults, not as children. Auschwitz survivor and historian Elie Cohen argues that it was only once people had adapted to the camp structures that they engaged with the "necessity" of comradeship and companionship.[94] Indeed, comradeship—both within families and friends—was vital to many young people's survival in Auschwitz.[95] Yet it began much earlier than Cohen identifies: comradeship existed on the selection ramp, too. Word spread quickly in the arriving transports about the questions people were being asked—age, profession, pregnancy, and so on—and some prisoner functionaries provided "well-given advice" to say they were of working age and had a profession.[96] Determined to remain together, some families resolved among themselves to say that they were fit for work. Eighteen-year-old Judit Kaiser's mother, speaking to the rest of the family, said: "Let's stay together," as they committed to learn how to work.[97] Arriving with his brother, Yeshayahu Deutsch declared that they were carpenters. Turning to his brother, he said, "It's no big deal to bang a nail or saw a board."[98] In this way, young people combined their adaptation to new work with their determination to remain with family members. Once separated, many

[94] Cohen, *Human Behaviour*, p. 182.

[95] Wachsmann, *KL: A History*, p. 500.

[96] Asher Bar-Nir, *A Journey of Survival: A Young Boy's Odyssey from Hungary Through Auschwitz and Jaworznow to Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2010), p. 52.

[97] Kaiser, interview 50335, segment 49.

[98] Hannah Deutsch and Yeshayahu Deutsch, *The Living Testify: Family Portraits of Shoah Survivors in the Village of Nir Galim: Hannah and Yeshayahu Deutsch,* ed. David Strassler (Jerusalem: Gefen, 1997), p. 28.

attempted to swap sides in order to be together. While the chaos of arrival meant that people could often swap lines undetected, they were not always successful, and where they failed, they were generally met with extreme—sometimes fatal—violence.[99] Nonetheless, Jews arriving at Auschwitz clearly made significant attempts to stay together with family members, often risking physical attack to maintain their familial ties.

Adaptation: New roles and mutual support

This determination to remain together continued beyond the initial selection. In her analysis of young people in Buchenwald, French historian Katy Hazan identifies the family unit as a "primary factor" in young people's survival.[100] Indeed, throughout their experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau, young people placed remaining with a family member in high regard. Maintaining this unit, however, required them to adapt to new functions and roles. Sisters Maria Scheffer and Zsoka Prochazka, aged fourteen and fifteen from Pécs, were initially separated from their mother at selection and supported each other during this time. After a few days, one of the other prisoners recognized that they had the same name as one of the prisoner doctors, who turned out to be their mother. Scheffer and Prochazka describe the "huge relief" when they were reunited with their mother, who came "running down the camp street calling our name."[101] Determined not to be separated again, but having been selected for a transport out of Auschwitz, the two sisters took the place of another two in order to remain in the camp. Later, when they were again selected for work in a labor camp, their

[99] Avniel, "And the sun is shining again," p. 10; Oral history interview with Helen Goldkind, Transcript, USHMMA/RG-50.106.0139, p. 7.

[100] Hazan, "Les Enfants de Buchenwald," p. 132.

[101] Zsoka Prochazka, interview 39069, segment 95, VHA; Maria Scheffer, interview 4187, segment 91, VHA.

mother took advantage of a scuffle during the selection to join them.[102] Not only does this example show the actions and risks they took in order to stay together, it also shows the wider network of communication and support that existed within the camp. Scheffer and Prochazka would not have been able to remain in the camp if there had not been another pair of sisters who took advantage of the situation to leave, in this mutually advantageous act. Furthermore, the psychological "relief" and happiness at being together is a testament to the importance that young people afforded to familial and communal support.[103] For them, family ties gave them the "strength to continue," providing a sense of safety, company, and humanity in an otherwise dehumanizing environment.[104]

Numerous other examples exist of instances in which young people took action, however dangerous, to swap transports and change lines during selections to be with family members.[105] Moreover, this was by no means a uniquely female occurrence: Penina Bowman's brother, deported from Kolozsvár, remained with his father in five different camps throughout the remainder of the war.[106] For Jews in Auschwitz, remaining with family provided a sense of grounding and security in an otherwise dangerous and uncertain world.

[102] Prochazka, interview 39069, segment 112.

[103] Nechama Tec, "Individuality and Cooperation in Auschwitz," in Matthäus, Jürgen, (ed.), *Approaching an Auschwitz Survivor: Holocaust Testimony and Its Transformations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 39.

[104] Fine, "Women Writers," p. 85.

[105] Burton, interview 18472, segment 60; Graff, interview 6577, segment 7; Leah Herman, interview 51024, segment 142, VHA; Ester Mark interview 31590, segment 71, VHA; Lillian Berliner, interview 17869, segments 37–38, VHA; Deutsch, *The Living Testify*, p. 13; YVA, O.33/8877, pp. 7–9.

[106] Bowman, interview 55128, segment 67.

Recognizing this, they took great risks to remain together. While Jews of all ages sought to maintain these links, the fundamental shift in young people's position within the family unit is notable. No longer protected by their parents, teenagers were forced to take great risks just to maintain physical proximity to a family member. This new role and increased personal agency on the part of the adolescent is vital for understanding young people's experiences.

While together, young people and their families supported each other in a plethora of ways both spiritually and physically. Ami Neiberger argued that "forming a family in Auschwitz… gave life meaning and offered support and hope."[107] Indeed, the amount of help families provided to each other was immense and varied in detail. At its most basic level, parents gave their children advice on how to cope with the camp and stay alive. In a clear example of the desperation of their situation, Istvan Weisz's father told his fourteen-year-old son, "If they give you shit to eat, eat it."[108] Importantly, advice-giving transcended genders, as fathers and brothers sent clandestine letters to their wives, daughters, and sisters, and vice versa.[109]

Advice was not, however, the only means of support that broke the "not completely impermeable" boundaries of the camp's internal gendered divisions.[110] Families also shared food and other life-saving resources, taking great risks to smuggle these into other parts of the camp.[111] Fani Sholomon, for example, recalls her brother throwing food from across the

[107] Neiberger, "An Uncommon Bond of Friendship," p. 144.

[108] Weisz, interview 10622, segment 53.

[109] Edit Blau, interview 48795, segment 82, VHA; Rózsa Baruchné, interview 50296, segment 82, VHA.

[110] Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 78–79.

[111] Pine, "Gender and the Family," p. 367; USHMMA/RG-50.106.0139, p. 9.

fence that separated them.[112] These actions cut across generations, too, not just from the older to the younger. Thirteen-year-old George Citrom, from Nagyvárad, described a "happy moment" where he was able to smuggle bread, shoes, and other supplies to his mother and sister.[113] In doing so, traditional "breadwinner" roles were reversed, as young teenagers provided their elders with much-needed extra food.

While it is important to recognize the existence of cross-gender support, sharing of resources was clearly simplest and most common between cohabiting members of the same gender. Food was often the subject of these interactions, perhaps unsurprisingly given its centrality to survival in Auschwitz, where prisoners were given very little—usually insufficient—amounts to eat.[114] Brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers regularly shared their bread and used their connections in the camp kitchen or luggage-sorting *kommandos* to bring back extra food for each other.[115] In these ways, families attempted to help each other survive. Likewise, when family members lacked the will and strength to carry on, others would often help them, sometimes in unconventional ways. Fifteen-year-old Eduard Berkowitz, for example, recalled how he "had to punch [his brother] several times" to get him to eat.[116]

Sometimes, overwhelmed by the suffering and loss of family members, some young people lost the will to live and considered or attempted suicide. Agnes Grossman, aged only

[112] YVA, O.33/8877, p. 9.

[113] Citrom, interview 52023, segment 103.

[114] "Reminiscences of Pery Broad," p. 106; Fine, "Women Writers," p. 85; Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: The Nazis and the "Final Solution"* (London: BBC Books, 2005), p. 238.

[115] Schwartz, interview 1158, segment 72; Robert Braun, interview 31471, segment 48, VHA; USHMMA/RG-50.106.0139, p. 9.

[116] Berkovits, interview 7270, segment 73.

twelve, held her sister back as she went towards the wire in a bid to electrocute herself.[117] Similarly, sixteen-year-old Jenny Kilberg spoke of how she "wanted to run to the electric wire but my sisters stopped me."[118] The bonds of assistance between family members were thus incredibly strong and helped save young people's lives, directly or indirectly. Importantly, young people were not merely passive recipients of such help, but active givers of it, too. Not only does this nuance our conceptions of young people's roles, but it also contributes to our understanding of mutual aid in Auschwitz, introducing a new category of actor.

Although proximity to family provided an element of support, young people's lives and responsibilities were nonetheless revolutionized by their arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau. While families had been able to remain largely intact during the ghetto period, the camp radically changed this.[119] In her groundbreaking contribution to the research of the experiences of young Jewish victims of the Holocaust, Debórah Dwork argued that children, like adults, faced the challenges of the Holocaust "as autonomous human beings" rather than marginal figures of peripheral concern in a narrative focused on adults.[120] Even when with family members in the camp, the traditional family norms in which men were the breadwinners and women looked after the family spiritually had been largely destroyed.[121]

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[117] Grossman, interview 16419, segment 61.

[118] Kilberg, interview 47957, segment 57.

[119] Debórah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 261.

[120] Ibid., pp. 254, 257.

[121] Lisa Pine, *Nazi Family Policy 1933–1945* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p. 178; Pine, "Gender and the Family," p. 366.

Young people in Auschwitz-Birkenau saw their parents naked for the first time, in what historian Zoë Waxman labeled an "irrevocable breach of family propriety."[122]

Moreover, young people had to come to terms with the fact that their parents could no longer provide the security that they were used to and were equally at risk as them. Berkowitz recalls how his friend's father was shot beside his son in the barracks, leaving the son "still absent-minded decades later."[123] When parents died in close proximity to their children, their death often marked a further passing of responsibility, especially among males. After surviving with his son in five different camps, as Bowman's father died, he told his son to "look after the girls."[124] The transfer of this responsibility, impossible to fulfill while camp structures pervaded, shows the persistence of ideas about family ties and masculinity and the ways in which young boys were "propelled into adult life."[125] When, however, child and parent were separated but siblings remained together, the support that they gave each other was also fundamentally different to what could normally be expected. Siblings cared for each other in the way that parents cared for their children: sharing food, making sure they ate and were kept safe.[126] Family relations were crucial to young people's experiences of the camps, but they were also relationships most unlike those that had existed before.

These new roles were not limited to family units; they extended to friends and acquaintances who forged alliances, sometimes with bonds strong enough to be called "camp families." In her analysis of camp society, Maja Suderland described how, when one mother

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[122] Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 87.

[123] Berkovits, interview 7270, segment 116.

[124] Bowman, interview 55128, segment 67.

[125] Pine, "Gender and the Family," p. 373.

[126] Schwartz, interview 1158, segment 72; Braun, interview 31471, segment 48; USHMMA/RG-50.106.0139, p. 9**;** Avniel, "And the sun is shining again," p. 17.

fell ill or died, "other women often adopted the children, so to speak, and became 'camp mothers.'"[127] Indeed, scholarship on such "camp families" has focused largely on the experiences of women.[128] This is perhaps unsurprising, given that some of the strongest and most numerous examples of these extra-familial bonds were between female inmates.[129] These links transcended boundaries of age. Zsuzsanna Böhn from Pécs, seventeen upon arrival in Auschwitz, recalls how she formed part of a group of 40-year-old women who "really looked after each other."[130] Similarly, when an older woman returned from a selection to find that Fani Sholomon and another girl had successfully hidden and therefore survived, she rushed to embrace them, exclaiming "my children."[131]

The impact of these relationships was significant. By constructing strong bonds with fellow prisoners, young people developed a support network that helped them cope with their circumstances and avoid what Hermann Langbein termed the "swamp of general demoralization."[132] Auschwitz historian Irena Strzelecka outlined this well when she stated, "Every word of support and good will, every warm and sincere holding of hand, every smile

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[127] Maja Suderland, *Inside Concentration Camps: Social Life at the Extremes,* trans. Jessica Spengler (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), p. 226.

[128] Milton, "Women and the Holocaust," pp. 313–314; Fine, "Women Writers," p. 85; Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender," in Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman, (eds.), *Women and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 337.

[129] Gurewitsch, (ed.), "Miriam Rosenthal," *Mothers, Sisters, Resistors*, p. 194;

[130] Böhn, interview 50267, segment 39.

[131] YVA, O.33/8877, p. 8.

[132] Langbein, *People in Auschwitz*, p. 247.

was of incalculable importance to the haunted and despairing women."[133] Clearly, therefore, the links women built with others strengthened their will to survive.[134]

It is important, however, to avoid viewing this as an all-pervasive rule for how all female prisoners acted in Auschwitz—it is a generalization and should thus be understood as such. Not all women acted this way. Both Waxman and Ellen Fine have identified that at selection some mothers, when forced to choose between their children or survival, refused to acknowledge their children as their own.[135] Evidently, the conditions in the camp had the capacity to radically change people's personalities. Graff resented that her cousin Susanne Burton "attached herself to me" and thus treated her badly.[136] After the war they drifted apart, and when interviewed in 1996, Burton did not know whether her cousin, who had in fact been interviewed in 1995, was still alive or not. Nonetheless, for the time when they were in the camps, Burton stuck with her.[137] The strong bonds that formed between women in Auschwitz-Birkenau, therefore, extended beyond immediate family members to friends and acquaintances, too. These links created comradeship and familiarity in an environment otherwise destructive to family life.[138] Crucially, however, these relationships were not always positive, and it is important to recognize that the potential for abuse continued even within in these structures of otherwise relative safety.

Although relationships between women are relatively well documented, the establishment of male support networks has been largely overlooked. It is important to

[133] Strzelecka, "Women," p. 409.

[134] Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," p. 336.

[135] Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 87; Fine, "Women Writers," p. 82.

[136] Graff, interview 6577, segment 6; Burton, interview 18472, segments 82–83.

[137] Graff, interview 6577, segments 60, 82–83.

[138] Tec, "Individuality and Cooperation in Auschwitz," p. 39.

recognize that similar—although perhaps less formal—bonds existed between male prisoners.[139] While Strzelecka wrote about women meeting for prayer, discussion, and company, scholarship examining bonds between men focuses on how teamwork helped them acquire better resources as "life supporting modes of interchange."[140] Indeed, this outcome is irrefutable: extra food, clothes, shoes, and other necessities for life were central to the relations between men. Moshe Yageel-Izsak, deported from Kolozsvár, recalls how he knew people who worked in the kitchens and "sometimes they were very kind to you" and gave him extra food.[141] Similarly, a "very kind gentleman" "organized" an extra piece of clothing for him.[142] Just as fathers, sons and brothers had looked out for each other, so did friends.

These relationships were not, however, wholly focused on resources. Recalling his deportation from the Nyíregyháza ghetto, Asher Bar-Nir stated that his "greatest worry was that my father and I leave on the same transport as my best friend."[143] Bar-Nir did not know where he was going, or what kind of support he would need there, but he knew that he wanted to be with his friend. Similarly, George White from Mihalyfalvan and some of his friends formed a group in Auschwitz-Birkenau, vowing, "We boys [will] try to stick

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[139] Shawn Gumbleton, "Is Brotherhood Powerful? Male Mutual Assistance in the Slave Labor Camp of Markstaedt," PhD diss., The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 2010, p. 49; Wachsmann, *KL: A History*, p. 501.

[140] Strzelecka, "Women," p. 409; Des Pres, *The Survivor*, pp. 9–11**;** Lawrence Langer, "Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," in Ofer and Weitzman, (eds.), *Women and the Holocaust*, p. 351.

[141] Moshe Yageel-Iszák interview 18516, segment 55, VHA.

[142] Ibid., segment 58.

[143] Bar-Nir**,** *A Journey of Survival*, p. 48.

together."[144] Speculating upon their friend's selection, they nonetheless supported each other when their fathers were sent to Germany for labor. Langbein argued that there was an "instinctive depth to the emergence of social order through help and sharing."[145] Yet particularly for young people, the depth and concern for each other preceded many instances of help.[146] Many of them formed bonds out of a psychological desire for reassurance and company rather than to gain material benefit. Later, these relationships proved materially beneficial, too. Crucially, however, while they may not have been as overtly "familial" as with women's "camp families," men—particularly adolescents—also constructed strong and supportive group networks.

Social and family bonds thus had a significant impact on the survival of young people in Auschwitz-Birkenau and fundamentally reshaped their roles and responsibilities in familial and communal units. Traditional concepts of either wholly spiritual or material structures are insufficient, as young people engaged with both concurrently. Equally, it is important to recognize the complex implications of gender and how family bonds transcended these boundaries even in the camp. In a dehumanizing environment destructive to family bonds, maintaining social links both within existing families and constructing new ones—irrespective of their levels of formality—defied the horrors of the camp. Yet, it is unlikely that when young people did this they perceived themselves as taking part in spiritual resistance. For them, the social and family bonds that they maintained and constructed were about help, support and—ultimately—survival.

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[144] White, "My memories of the Holocaust," p. 8.

[145] Herman Langbein, *Against All Hope: Resistance in the Nazi Concentration Camps*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Constable, 1994), p. 51.

[146] Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," p. 327.

Conclusion

The road to survival for young Hungarians in Auschwitz-Birkenau was complex, personal, and sometimes contradictory. While the majority of Hungarians deported to the camp were sent immediately to their deaths, survivor testimonies and this research show that those whom the SS physicians deemed fit for labor entered not as passive victims but as people who actively generated and implemented their own mechanisms for survival. These were highly varied but contained a common thread of developing a reliance on work, family, and communal support. Young people in particular matured quickly and came of age in the camp, enabling them to respond to the destruction of their pre-camp life by developing ways of coping that were traditionally seen as "adult" and fitting them to their individual circumstances and needs. Explaining this through Jewish agency alone, however, is insufficient for understanding fully how young people survived; an integrated approach, recognizing the impact of broader contexts, such as social norms, psychology, and Axis policies on Jewish slave labor is vital. The convergence of a variety of individual and group actions and broader frameworks thus contributed significantly to the survival of young Hungarian Jews in Auschwitz-Birkenau from the spring of 1944. What has previously been under-researched is the extent to which young people accelerated their development and matured into conscious adults, regardless of age, and bolstered their chances of survival.

Firstly, upon their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau and at subsequent selections, many attempted to portray themselves as fit for labor, taking active measures including pretending to be older, claiming a profession, and changing their physical appearance. If selected for work, young people generally used their positions to better their conditions and those of their family and friends, collecting and trading food and other goods for mutual benefit. Subsequently, the development of family and communal bonds became integral to many young people's experiences. Irrespective of gender, groups of family and friends took great

risks to stay together and maintain contact. Such bonds gave both men and women in Auschwitz-Birkenau strength to continue, allowing them to pool material resources and protect each other. Finally, young people's survival chances were also impacted by broader policy changes and wider contexts. The course of the war, their prewar experiences, and their personal backgrounds and convictions converged to influence how they responded to persecution. These factors stand alongside the actions of young people when they were in Auschwitz-Birkenau and must be considered together with them.

Clearly, therefore, traditional understandings of young people as passive victims in Auschwitz-Birkenau are insufficient and inadequate, as are conventional perceptions that survival in the camp was merely a case of staying alive.[147] Survival, in particular for young people, also included the more complex matters of conscious acceleration of growing up. This manifested itself in the acquisition, destruction, and/or reconstruction of professions, skills, and family and communal relations—activities young people often first experienced in the camp. Commenting on young people's survival in Buchenwald, Katy Hazan stated, "Incontestably [they survived] thanks to their physical and moral force; these go hand in hand."[148] Indeed, reconceptualizing survival to recognize both the physical and mental mechanisms that young people used to cope with persecution in Auschwitz-Birkenau advances a more humane and nuanced understanding of their experiences and builds a more accurate and realistic history of survival.

[147] Cohen, *Human Behaviour,* p. 182.

[148] Hazan, "Les Enfants de Buchenwald," p. 132.