

Lukas Nievoll

Experiencing Persecution

Space and Place in the Testimonies of Two Teenage Holocaust Survivors

Abstract

This article focuses on the testimonies of two teenage Holocaust survivors who were deported from Hungary via Auschwitz-Birkenau to Gusen II concentration camp. I pay attention to a key aspect of human experiences of displacement and persecution: Notions of place/space and map-making in the example of two Holocaust testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.

Introduction

Marvin N. was fourteen years old when he, together with his parents and seven siblings, was deported from his hometown of Yasina, in present-day Ukraine, to an unknown destination.¹ At around the same time, in the spring of 1944, but 200 kilometres to the west, seventeen-year-old Chaim K. and his family were also forced to abandon their home in the Hungarian city of Sátoraljaújhely. They moved into the newly established ghetto of the city. Unknowingly to the teenagers, their life trajectories intersected when both were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. While most of Marvin's and Chaim's family members were killed upon arrival in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the two boys were selected for slave labour in the German armament industry. Both arrived on the same transport at Gusen II, which was an extension of the Gusen camp – a camp that had existed since 1940, just four kilometres west of Mauthausen's main camp.² Gusen II served the purpose of housing thousands of slave labourers for the construction and operation of Messerschmitt's underground aircraft factory in St. Georgen an der Gusen.³

This article focuses on the stories of the two teenage Holocaust survivors based on two testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.⁴ The interviews, conducted in 1984 in North America, are sources that can be consulted to engage with one particular aspect of the Holocaust: the experiences of Jewish men and

1 Due to its multiethnic history, the town bears many names. For this article, I use the spelling that Marvin N. mentions in his testimony.

2 According to the transport list, Chaim K. and Marvin N. were registered on 28 May 1944 in Mauthausen and then taken to Gusen I. The transport consisted of a total of one thousand people categorised as "Hungarian Jews". See *Transportliste* 28 May 1944, Mauthausen Memorial (MM), MM/50 and *Zugangsbuch der Politischen Abteilung*, MM/Y36.

3 On the secret underground armament project "Bergkristall", see Bertrand Perz, "KZ-Zwangsarbeit für eine rationelle Rüstungsproduktion im Luftkrieg. Neue Dokumente zur Genese der unterirdischen Flugzeugfabrik 'Esche II' ('Bergkristall') der Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg in St. Georgen an der Gusen", *coMMents – Chronicle of the Mauthausen Memorial: Current Studies*, no. 1 (March 2023): 20–54, <https://doi.org/10.57820/mm.comments.2022.02>.

4 Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony (HVT 3058), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library; Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony (HVT 0360), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library.

teenagers who were selected and deported as forced labourers to underground armament projects in the heart of Nazi Germany.⁵ Chaim K. and Marvin N. not only arrived in Gusen II on the same transport, but they also spent a considerable amount of time in an extremely violent camp that was connected to one of the largest and longest-lasting underground armament projects in the entire *Reich*.⁶ In this paper, I take a space-sensitive approach to the testimonies, examining experiences of displacement and persecution in the changing landscapes of the Holocaust.⁷ I focus on Marvin's and Chaim's experiences of dis-place-ment, movement, confinement, and violence. How do they narrate changing home-spaces and how do they reflect on previously unknown places that were radically different from the security and intimacy of the places of their childhood and youth? What do they mention about their relationship with Gusen II, a closed space characterised by daily violence where movements and pauses were forced and dictated, where stability and even basic biological needs were lacking?

On a methodological level, I refer to Yi-Fu Tuan's concepts of space and place, as they foreground the perspective of human experience. One of his definitions is that "place" is associated with security, stability, and felt value, and "space" with freedom, openness, or infinity.⁸ However, experiences of place and space were radically altered and took on different meanings for people who were persecuted and deported, which is why I also rely on Hannah Pollin-Galay's treatment of "places and non-places".⁹ In this respect, she is interested in "the types of maps and voids that the witnesses plot out in their own words and physical actions on the recordings".¹⁰

In the first part of this article, I will contextualise the origin of the testimonies and the archive in which they are stored. In addition, I will give a brief historical overview of the Gusen II concentration camp. This is followed by short biographies of Chaim K. and Marvin N. up until their arrival in Gusen II. In the main part of the article, I will devote my attention to the complex descriptions of places and voids referred to by Chaim K. and Marvin N. in their testimonies. This includes physical topographies and geographical descriptions of space, but also scenes of violence, radical spatial disorientation, and placelessness that appear in the witness's verbal map-making.¹¹ In my conclusion, I will reflect on the examples of metaphorical map-making taken from the testimonies and highlight the similarities and differences in their narratives. Furthermore, I will discuss the role of the body as a space integral for Chaim and Marvin in the process of testifying to their experiences.

5 The Visual History Archive of the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation also houses many testimonies from Holocaust survivors who share persecution trajectories similar to those of Chaim K. and Marvin N. and whom the *Schutzstaffel* (SS) also deported to Gusen II.

6 Gusen II, together with Gusen I and Mauthausen, was liberated by American troops on 5 May 1945.

7 See Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016).

8 See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 3–10.

9 Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 202–207. Pollin-Galay adopts the concept of non-places from Marc Augé. Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1995). She refers to the concept of non-places the following way: "[w]e should start with the observation that, in terms of human perception, non-places are real. Scenes of radical spatial disorientation appear in survivor narratives from all three settings [what she calls "ecologies"] under examination. The idea that the Holocaust created a geographic rift is not merely the cant of theorists but an outcome of many survivors' embodied experiences of extreme violence. The most sophisticated attempts to link physical topography with a verbal account of ghetto and camp imprisonment should not and cannot circumvent a witness' assertion that, at certain points, there was no such connection." Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 204.

10 Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 204. In contrast to Pollin-Galay, however, I do not intend to analyse different ecologies of witnessing but will focus on individual experiences of space and place as expressed in the two testimonies.

11 See Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 202–207.

Building an Archive: Affiliate Projects of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies

As mentioned in the introduction, the two testimonies on which this article is based are part of the Fortunoff Archive, which is housed at Yale University.¹² The archive's predecessor, the Holocaust Survivors Film Project (HSFP), was founded in 1979 in New Haven, Connecticut, and can be described as a grassroots effort by survivors to record experiences of the Holocaust.¹³ The archive became an "archive" in 1981 when it was made possible for the project to deposit 183 testimonies at Yale University Library.¹⁴ Like other testimonies in the 1980s, the testimonies used for this article were not recorded in New Haven but deposited there by affiliate projects. These projects, whose volunteers were trained by representatives from the Fortunoff Archive, extended the scope of the archive tremendously.¹⁵ Chaim K., for example, was interviewed in Vancouver, Canada, on 29 February 1984 as part of the Holocaust Documentation Project. Between 1983 and 1993, the Vancouver project was housed at the University of British Columbia and operated under the direction of Dr. Robert Krell, who had survived the Holocaust in hiding in the Netherlands.¹⁶ Chaim K. was interviewed by Ernest "Ernie" Forrai, the project coordinator, who was himself a Hungarian Holocaust survivor who had switched roles from interviewee to interviewer.¹⁷ Marvin N.'s testimony was also recorded as part of an affiliated project, the Holocaust Archive Project that was sponsored by the National Council of Jewish Women/Cleveland Section. Between 1984 and 1985, at least 133 testimonies of Holocaust survivors, righteous gentiles, and camp liberators from the greater Cleveland area were recorded in this context.¹⁸ The interview with Marvin N. was conducted on 5 November 1984 by the psychologist Donald K. Freedheim.¹⁹ At the time that the two survivors testify to their experiences, which they did in English, they are well-established members of the communities into which they had immigrated. Chaim K. is fifty-seven years old and has his own law office in Vancouver. He is married and has two sons and two daughters, two of whom he mentions quite proudly as practicing law as well.²⁰ Similarly, Marvin N., who is fifty-five at the time, lives with his family in Beachwood, Ohio, in the Cleveland area. He is the founder and owner of a construction company and has two sons, a daughter, and a two-year-

12 In this regard, I would like to thank Stephen Naron, who made it possible for me to work with these unique testimonies.

13 See Stephen Naron, "Archives, Ethics and Influence: How the Fortunoff Video Archive's Methodology Shapes its Collection's Content", in *Interactions: Explorations of Good Practice in Educational Work with Video Testimonies of Victims of National Socialism*, ed. Werner Dreier, Angelika Laumer, and Moritz Wein (Berlin: EVZ, 2018), 41–51, 43.

14 As Stephen Naron mentions, this was enabled by Yale's president A. Bartlett Giamatti and by Geoffrey H. Hartman, who was a survivor and distinguished professor of literature. *Ibid.*, 44.

15 *Ibid.*, 44.

16 This Vancouver initiative came after a similar national Holocaust documentation project inspired by Dr. Krell that ran from 1981 to 1983 under the Canadian Jewish Congress. For a project description, see "Holocaust Documentation Project", Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, accessed 1 September 2022, <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/entities/11104>.

17 Between 1983 and 1996, 185 testimonies were recorded as part of this project and at least eleven were conducted by Ernest Forrai. See "Collections", Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, accessed 1 September 2022, <https://collections.vhec.org>.

18 For an overview of all the affiliate projects of the Fortunoff Archive, see "Affiliate Projects", Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, accessed 1 September 2022, <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/about-us/affiliate-projects>.

19 Donald K. Freedheim is now a professor emeritus in the Department of Psychological Studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. He conducted several interviews for the Holocaust Archive Project of the National Council of Jewish Women in Cleveland.

20 Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony.

old grandson. At the beginning of the interview, he is also pleased to announce that his eldest son got married the day before the interview.²¹ The settings in North America in which they testify and in which their children grew up differ substantially from their own childhood experiences in Europe.²²

Marvin N. and Chaim K. – Childhoods in Yasina and Sátoraljaújhely, Deportation to Auschwitz and Selection for Slave Labour in Gusen II

Marvin N. was born as Miklos N. on 10 October 1929 in Yasina (*Kőrösmező* in Hungarian) which, at that time, was the easternmost settlement of the First Czechoslovak Republic and located directly on the border with Poland. Before the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, this mid-sized Central Carpathian town of around 10,000 inhabitants had belonged to Hungary.²³

The region was one of the poorest in Czechoslovakia, and in 1930 the town's Jewish population amounted to around 1,450, fluctuating slightly until 1939.²⁴ Like many Jewish children in Yasina, Marvin grew up on a farm in a lower-class Orthodox home together with seven siblings – five brothers and two sisters. He attended the local public school and, according to him, it was a city in which the various religious communities were well-integrated, at least until 1939. He attributes this to the fact that, until then, Czechoslovakia was a democratic state. He does, however, mention Christian anti-Semitic sentiments from local “Catholic fanatics” who “hated the Jews”.²⁵ The political situation changed considerably in March 1939 when, following the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, Hungarian forces captured Yasina as well as other towns in Carpathian Ruthenia.²⁶ The Jewish population was successively excluded from the social and economic life of the town, which resulted in neighbours and friends turning away from the family. Marvin was forced to end his education. Even though most of the Jews of Hungary remained relatively safe until 1944, the situation was different in Yasina. The town's sawmill served as a collecting and transit point for the Jews who had been rounded up as “aliens” in various parts of Hungary and its newly attached territories by the National Central Alien Control Office (*Külföldieket Ellenőrző Országos Központi Hatóság* [KEOKH] in Hungarian) in the summer of 1941.²⁷ By 19 August, as many as 15,567 Jews had been transferred across the border from Yasina to German-occupied Poland and then further on to German-occupied Ukraine, where almost all were shot in a massacre at Kamenets-Podolsk on 27 and 28 August.²⁸ Among the victims were also Jewish families from

21 Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony.

22 Pollin-Galay has demonstrated profoundly how language and the location of testimony influences the process of testifying. According to her concept, both testimonies belong to the ecology of English-language (North) American testimonies, whereby survivors draw truth from the events they have witnessed through recreating personal experience in narrative. Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 5.

23 See “The Jewish Community of Yasina”, ANU – Museum of the Jewish People, accessed 30 August 2022, <https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e206354/Place/Yasina>. In the interview, Marvin mentions that he is not sure if he was born on 10 or 30 October 1929, a fact that is discussed later in this article.

24 Ibid.

25 Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony.

26 For a comprehensive overview of the Holocaust in Hungary, see Randolph L. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), and Zoltán Vági, László Csósz, and Gábor Kádár, *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2013).

27 The KEOKH was the agency that had jurisdiction over foreign nationals living in Hungary. For a more detailed account of the roundups and massacre of “alien” Jews in Carpathian Ruthenia, see Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 32–37.

28 Ibid., 33. The massacre at Kamenets-Podolsk was the first five-figure massacre of Jews during the Holocaust.

Yasina. Such developments were observed with fear by the members of the Jewish community of Yasina, who found themselves in a state of limbo because of the mass deportations they witnessed and the roundups that were occasionally conducted in their hometown. In his testimony, Marvin recounts this episode sometimes anachronistically but very dynamically, emphasising various trains going through his hometown. He mentions that Jews were being taken “around the clock” and from all over Czechoslovakia, and that “the Hungarian puppet regime” brought them to Poland from where there was no return.²⁹ Marvin suggests that his family was also supposed to be taken to Poland to be shot or executed at the Dniester River, where “they executed most of the Jews”, but that his family survived due to his mother not speaking any Hungarian and thus turning away the police.³⁰ Additionally, he recounts in detail how, during this period, he was rounded up by the “SS or whatever” downtown and taken across the border, but that he survived by running away and back home.³¹

The Jews of Carpathian Ruthenia were among the first to be deported after the German army had entered Hungary on 19 March 1944. On the first day of Passover, 16 April, the Jews of Yasina (then officially Kőrösmező) were rounded up for deportation. On the next day, they were forced to march to the nearby cemetery, where they had to undress themselves and were robbed of their valuables.³² After remaining at the cemetery for a few days, the Jews were sent to the ghetto of Mátészalka, which had been established within the Jewish quarter of the town. Approximately 18,000 Jews were concentrated in the ghetto and the first deportation transport for Auschwitz-Birkenau left on 19 May.³³ Marvin’s family managed to stay together during the ordeal, including his mother, who took care of Marvin’s younger brother who was born at the end of 1943.³⁴

Chaim K. was born on 7 December 1926 in the Hungarian town of Sátoraljaújhely, on the border with Czechoslovakia and 200 kilometres to the west of Yasina. He was the youngest of eight children. From the age of three, Chaim attended a local Hebrew school, later a Jewish day school, and then a yeshiva. He recalls having had a happy childhood and good relations with non-Jews in his Christian neighbourhood until 1936 and 1937.³⁵ In the late 1930s, Antisemitism in the city increased and Chaim experienced insults on the way to and from Jewish day school, and quite frequently scuffles with Christian children. Although various anti-Semitic governmental orders, decrees, and laws worsened living conditions for most of the Jewish communities of Hungary in the early 1940s, the situation deteriorated dramatically following the German invasion of Hungary on 19 March 1944. At the time, two of Chaim’s older brothers had already been drafted into the Hungarian military-related labour service system, leaving Chaim, their youngest sibling, at home with his parents.³⁶ The German troops occupied Sátoraljaújhely as one of the first cities in Hun-

29 Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid. I refer to this episode in more detail later in this article. He mentions that whoever took him had green uniforms at the time and that he did not have any knowledge about the names of troops until later.

32 See “The Jewish Community of Yasina.”

33 Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 121.

34 Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony.

35 Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony.

36 Thousands of Jewish males of military age who were categorised as “unreliable” and hence “unsuitable” to bear arms were included in this scheme. These men were provided with tools and forced to work primarily in the construction of roads, mines, railway lines, and fortifications for the military in Hungary as well as in many Hungarian- and German-occupied regions of Ukraine and Yugoslavia. They were organised into military formations under the direction and control of Hungarian officers and guards. Jewish men were also employed to maintain roads, clear minefields, remove snow, and transport ammunition along the frontlines, particularly in Galicia and Ukraine. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 37. One of Chaim’s brothers died in Stalingrad in 1942.

gary. At the time, the town's Jewish population amounted to around 4,150 and the Nazis employed the same rapacious tactics as in other towns with a larger Jewish community: they arrested the Jewish leadership, extorted ransom and valuables from the Jews, and set up a Jewish Council.³⁷ A few days later, a ghetto was established in the so-called "Gypsy section" of the city.³⁸ Chaim and his parents had to move from their home into a courtyard within the confines of the newly established ghetto. In total, 15,000 Jews of Zemplén County, including the communities of Mád, Sárospatak, and Taktaharkány, were concentrated in the Sátoraljaujhely ghetto.³⁹ Chaim and his family were on the first transport that left the local train station for Auschwitz-Birkenau on 16 May 1944.⁴⁰

After brief stays in Auschwitz-Birkenau, both youths were taken to the Mauthausen concentration camp complex, and a few days later the SS transferred them to Gusen II. In late 1943 and early 1944, the Nazi leadership strove to move parts of the armaments production underground because the Allied forces had achieved air superiority in Europe. Such a large-scale tunnel and armament project was also planned in the immediate vicinity of the Gusen I concentration camp, which had existed since May 1940, five kilometres west of the Mauthausen main camp. For such large building projects, the SS needed thousands of workers to excavate and extend the tunnels.⁴¹ Due to a general labour shortage in the German war industry at the time, the SS resorted to transporting Jews, primarily from Hungary and to newly established concentration camps like Gusen II. The logic behind this process was to spare Jews, like Chaim and Marvin, from immediate extermination in order to basically work them to death as slave labourers under immense pressure and horrendous working conditions. To accommodate the newly arrived prisoners, a spatially separate new "protective custody camp" called "Gusen II" was built about 500 metres west of Gusen I from the winter of 1943 and 1944 onwards.⁴² Compared to Gusen I and Mauthausen, Gusen II was a makeshift camp lacking proper sanitation as well as food. Further, medical aid there was scarce. The camp is remembered by many survivors as a place of death and destruction, not only because of its deficient infrastructure, but also due to the brutal mass murder of inmates deemed "unfit for work".⁴³ With the constant arrival of transports from other camps, the number of prisoners in Gusen (including Gusen II) reached about 16,000 in June 1944.⁴⁴ The first transports consisted of thousands of Jews from Hungary and later thousands of Jews from Poland, who were selected for slave labour or evacuated by the SS from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Płaszów, and Flossenbürg. Furthermore, non-Jewish Poles captured in the

37 See "The Jewish Community of Sátoraljaujhely", ANU – Museum of the Jewish People, accessed 30 August 2022, <https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e240552/Place/Satorialjaujhely>.

38 See Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 120.

39 Ibid.

40 The Jews of Sátoraljaujhely were deported in four transports between 16 May and 3 June 1944. Braham, *The Politics of Genocide*, 120.

41 See Betrand Perz, "Rüstungsproduktion im KZ-Lagerkomplex Mauthausen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg", in *Überleben durch Kunst: Zwangsarbeit im Konzentrationslager Gusen für das Messerschmittwerk Regensburg*, ed. Reinhard Hanausch, Roman Smolorz, Mark Spoerer, and Bernhard Lübbers (Regensburg: Dr. Peter Morsbach Verlag, 2012), 77–90.

42 Christian Dürr and Ralf Lechner, "Das Konzentrationslager Mauthausen-Gusen 1938–1945", in *Mauthausen und die nationalsozialistische Expansions- und Verfolgungspolitik. Europa in Mauthausen*, ed. Gerhard Botz, Alexander Prenninger, and Regina Fritz, vol. 1 (Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2021), 213–262, 250–252.

43 See, for example, the testimonies of Jan Chodakowski and Alojzy Freilich in Katarzyna Madoń-Mitzner, ed., *Errettet aus Mauthausen: Berichte polnischer ehemaliger Häftlinge des NS-Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen-Gusen* (Warsaw: History Meeting House, 2010), 170.

44 Szabolcs Szita, *Ungarn in Mauthausen: Ungarische Häftlinge in SS-Lagern auf dem Territorium Österreichs*, Mauthausen-Studien 4 (Vienna: Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2006), 148.

Warsaw Uprising, as well as a large number of Italian and French prisoners, were transported to Gusen.⁴⁵ Among the thousands of prisoners arriving in the summer of 1944 were seventeen-year-old Chaim K. and fourteen-year-old Marvin N., who were on the first transport that arrived in Gusen with Jews from Hungary on 28 May 1944.

Places and Voids in Holocaust Testimonies

Now that we have placed our protagonist's testimonies in historical context, I will devote the next section of this article to an analysis of the complex descriptions of the places, voids, as well as changing spaces that are referred to by Chaim and Marvin in their testimonies. Let us first turn to Marvin's testimony.

Bordertown

In the first minutes of the interview, the interviewer asks Marvin when and where he was born, and after Marvin gives his date of birth and names "Yasina, Czechoslovakia" as his place of birth, the interviewer asks again "[i]n Czechoslovakia, where, where is that?"⁴⁶ Marvin replies: "[t]hat was, that was, that is or was in the Central Carpathians and it's the border, it borders Czechoslovakia and Galicia. Otherwise, we were right on the border of Poland." In his answer, Marvin first uses the past tense to further locate the town that he was born in and, in the end, he does not clearly specify where "that [the town] is or was" before giving some further geographical details about the location of Yasina. The ambiguity of tenses indicates that, even though the town in which he was born might still exist and might even bear the same name, there has been a shift in the relationship to the place he "calls or called" home. What adds to this ambiguity is the fact that he was born in 1929 in a town that had belonged to the First Czechoslovak Republic, a state that just ten years later would cease to exist after its dismemberment and Hungary's occupation of Carpathian Ruthenia in March 1939. Five years later, in March 1944, it would change hands again as Nazi Germany occupied Hungary, and at the time Marvin was interviewed in 1984, the town of his childhood belonged to the Soviet Union. Today, it is part of Ukraine.

In his testimony, Marvin does not say much about the topography of his home other than that his family had a farm. However, he mentions the geographic coordinates of Yasina as a border town several times in the interview, so that the town in relation to the border becomes a reference point for knowledge and information. When asked about his education, Marvin does not initially talk about school at all, but states: "[...] we used to have in our place over there a short-wave radio and being us by the border, so we also, we listened daily from London and all that – current events, what's going on." Narratively, he connects "our place over there", which also includes a contrasting position of himself to "over there", to the location of Yasina as a border town, with knowledge and information that was obtained in less traditional ways. School was not the only source of "current events" and "what's going on" for Marvin. The short-wave radio, it would seem, connected his home in the Central

45 Concerning Hungarian Jews, see Szita, Ungarn in Mauthausen, 144–160. See also Bertrand Perz, "Gusen I und II", in *Der Ort Des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, vol. 4, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, ed. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 371–380.

46 Marvin N. Holocaust Testimony. If not indicated otherwise, all the quotations in this chapter are from the testimony of Marvin N.

Carpathians with distant London and the world. It appears that “being us by the border” has a number of meanings or consequences. On the one hand, it was a reflection of Yasina’s geographic location where he and his family lived, while on the other hand, it can be read as a matter of identification with the place where they could “be” or “were” them(selves). Marvin also mentions that, in addition to listening to the radio, they received information about various events from people who fled to Yasina from across the border with Hungary after the German invasion of Poland in September 1939. These two spatial features of home in a border region are also the reason why he states later in the interview that “[w]e knew what the Germans are doing with the Jews” even before the community of Yasina was physically affected.

In his testimony, Marvin expresses that he felt fear when he was young. For him, the security and stability of the place he grew up in – the value of home – was threatened even before any local altercations ever took place. During the testimony, the interviewer asks Marvin when he first felt that there was a real threat to his family. Marvin indicates that the first time he felt a threat to his family and the whole community was after Hitler’s invasion of Poland in 1939, but then adds that ever since the “crystal night [...] there was no place for the Jews, nowhere”.⁴⁷ What Marvin describes is not the tangible environment of a “landscape of fear” but the psychological state of it.⁴⁸ Not only did the Nazis create what can be called “tangible landscapes of fear” for Jews in the parts of Europe that they controlled politically in 1938 and 1939, but, according to Marvin, fear also transcended borders. In this sense, the Nazis succeeded in penetrating individual and communal (Jewish) spaces, altering to varying degrees how people felt, interpreted, and experienced the idea of home as a space. For Marvin, home then could not be interpreted anymore as a “fortress” which was built to defend its human occupants against threats, but it rather turned into a constant reminder of human vulnerability.⁴⁹ This becomes clearly visible with the changes in relation to border space. The unknown and open space beyond or “across” the border changed insofar as from 1941 onwards it almost certainly meant death. For Marvin at the time, being taken “across the border” meant death. This stands in close relation to something else Marvin recalls in his testimony. In the beginning, he mentions that Yasina’s livelihood was lumber: “[a]ll huge forests, otherwise, we could cut lumber for hundreds of years and we would never cut it out.” Later in the testimony, Marvin returns to the forest as a rather ambiguous space – that can mean life or death. He tells a story of when he and other Jews were rounded up “downtown” and forced to “cross the border”, focusing on motion rather than time and place or geopolitical coordinates. He escaped by running away, stating: “I took a chance, I just ran away and it was mostly forests.” “Forests” then immediately prompts him to explain that most of the people were executed “off limits to civilians in some areas that civilians didn’t go through”, a statement which indicates a transformation of “forests” into (uncivilised) spaces of death. In this case, however, the secret and vast space of the forest made it possible for a “small and slick” kid, as Marvin describes himself, to survive: “I ran back, I mean it took me a couple of days to go through the, it’s all forest you know and I had to visualise where I’m at and stay away, stay away from the public and I came back home, nothing happened.” Forest is described as both a place of mass murder and a place of refuge and hiding for Marvin. In both cases, the woods

47 Here he is referring to the November pogroms (the “Night of Broken Glass”) of 9 and 10 November 1938.

48 I have borrowed the term “landscapes of fear” from Yi-Fu Tuan. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979). In the book, Tuan is interested in fear as a theme in human society overall.

49 Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear*, 6.

shielded activities and provided camouflage through dense vegetation.⁵⁰ This moment of disorientation, however, is still treated by him as part of being in Yasina, in the vicinity of his home, a place to which he would eventually return.

Disorientation and Loss

Marvin's treatment of geography, however, changes when he arrives at the day of the deportation. The section of the interview in which Marvin recounts his family's and the community's deportation from Yasina to Auschwitz is marked by *dis-place-ment*, disorientation, and loss. He describes the literal "animal wagons" into which they were loaded and stated that "they round[ed] us up like cattle", employing an animal metaphor to illustrate the treatment of the community. For the period between his forced departure from Yasina and his arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau, he mentions vague descriptions of place. He tells of being taken by train to "Hungary" and staying in "a cemetery" for several weeks "under the open sky", indicating a sense of disorientation. When he talks about the whole family being taken to the train station in Yasina, he also includes the story of his youngest brother, who was born in "October or November of 1943" and was only a few months old at the time of the deportation. Marvin states: "[a]nd it just so happens unfortunately that I remember all my brothers, the names, sisters and I just cannot remind myself what my mother and father named that child." What he mentions is not only the unfathomable loss of his mother and his younger siblings, who were selected for gassing upon arrival in Auschwitz-Birkenau, but he hints at a gap, a void, something he cannot name – the name of his younger brother. In the interview, there is a second loss that belongs to a similar register, although not quite the same. Later in the interview, when Marvin is asked about his fifteenth birthday when he was at Gusen II, he says that he cannot remember it. He then goes on to say that he has another "problem" with his birthday. The other "problem" Marvin alludes to is that he cannot remember if he was born on 10 or 30 October 1929 – he cannot remember "his" date. Marvin says to the interviewer that it is not a thing of the mind, because "it's all there". He locates this knowledge about himself and a significant part of his identity in Yasina, the place of his birth. However, "it's Russia right now", turning it into a foreign place to which he has no access. For Marvin, displacement is connected to losses relating to the most basic elements of his identity, such as the name of his brother or his birth certificate, thus causing irrevocable voids, fragmenting his personal narrative.

Crowdedness and Social Life

From Auschwitz, Marvin was deported to Mauthausen concentration camp in May 1944. In his testimony, he does not really dwell on his experiences in Mauthausen but emphasises that he was taken to Gusen I and then Gusen II, which he locates in kilometres from Mauthausen.⁵¹

50 On the complex connection between the Jews and the forest, see Tim Cole, "Nature Was Helping Us: Forests, Trees, and Environmental Histories of the Holocaust", *Environmental History* 19, no. 4 (October 2014): 665–686, and Suzanne Weiner Weber, "The Forest as a Liminal Space: A Transformation of Culture and Norms during the Holocaust", *Holocaust Studies* 14, no. 1. (2008): 35–60.

51 Like Marvin, many former prisoners mention the distance in kilometres or use time (approximately an hour) as a reference to highlight the proximity between Mauthausen's main camp and Gusen. First, most had to

One of the first questions the interviewer asks in relation to Gusen is about the “living arrangements” and where he slept, upon which Marvin shortly laughs after repeating the phrase “living arrangement” aloud. He does take the interviewer’s question seriously, but it seems as if there is a gap between the phrase and his experiences, which causes the bodily reaction. He describes the situation in the “blocks” as one of crowdedness, coercion, and death, stating that he woke up several times next to people who had died during the night and that “they forced us into [the beds] like herring or fish”. To counter this statement, the interviewer intends to open a narrative space for the interviewee to describe some form of agency with a cautiously formulated follow-up question about social interaction between inmates, asking: “[w]as there any, any degree of social interchange such as I’m so and so, I’m from so and so?” When Marvin hears the word “social” in this context, he drowns the interviewer out with two clear nos (underscored by shaking his head), then says: “[y]eah there was I mean, but, but everything was depressed. There was no hope otherwise.” For Marvin, it is not possible to express the interactions between the prisoners in the concentration camp in connection with the signifier “social”. He underscores this again in a similar manner later in the interview, when he is asked a second time about “social life” and “social exchange”. Here, Marvin hints at the process of shifting social practices in the context of concentration camps because he was confronted with an extreme society dominated by coercion and violence.⁵² Yet, there is an instance when the interviewer once more asks if he had some friends he remembers, which Marvin confirms:

[y]eah, yeah, yeah, I had some friends otherwise we get, otherwise Gusen II, this was my place, I settled down and this was the place where I stayed. So I met some friends, some boys what they were, they were assigned to work in the kitchen and we kind of corresponded and we met [...].

The term “friends” prompts him to briefly talk about relationships with other prisoners. He even changes the register in this sentence, describing the camp with place-like qualities as one would do with something familiar: “my place”, “I settled down”, and “the place where I stayed”. Even though this is in stark contrast to his general narrative, he reports that in this extreme environment he was on friendly terms with boys of his age.⁵³ Nevertheless, for Marvin there is an incompatibility with his experiences and what he would describe as “social life”, because in the end he comes back to describing the quotidian horrors of Gusen II: “[b]ut there was no such things as social life or anything, the only social life over there is seeing those horrible things every day, how different[ly] they executed those people that was the only social life over there.”

Death and Violence

Marvin was fourteen years old in the spring of 1944 when he was transferred to Gusen II. During the section about Gusen II, Marvin introduces camp topography mainly in connection to the activities he was forced to carry out and in terms of

make the journey on foot, so this description comes from personal experience, and second, “Mauthausen” was much more well-known (at least in the United States) after 1945 than Gusen II – and certainly so at the time of the interview. By placing Gusen II (and also Gusen I) geographically close to Mauthausen, Marvin connects the possibly unknown place to the signifier “Mauthausen”, which had already become synonymous with concentration camp terror.

52 See also Maja Suderland, *Inside Concentration Camps: Social Life at the Extremes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

53 See also Suderland, *Social Life at the Extremes*, 160–192.

movement. He was assigned to two different labour groups, alternating between them. In the first, he had to carry the dead from the latrine of Gusen II to the crematorium at Gusen I. In the other, he had to collect the faeces from the Gusen II camp latrine. At Gusen II, there was a centralised latrine for more than 10,000 prisoners which, according to Marvin, served also as a collecting point for the bodies of prisoners who had been killed or had died the previous day. He describes it as a “long place when you were in there” that also “housed all the dead people. They brought them from all blocks and they mounted them up and that [is] what my job was.” This statement confuses the interviewer as he does not quite understand the processes and spatial relations Marvin describes. The interviewer, it seems, does not understand the origins of the corpses piled in the latrine, or where Marvin and his group were taking them. Marvin then goes on to explain that the crematorium was in Gusen I, “two miles” from Gusen II, and that the corpses were transported there by wagon. Although at this point Marvin had already mentioned the task of how he and other people were forced to pull the wagon with corpses, the interviewer inquires “[w]hat pulled the wagon?”, expecting Marvin to name an object rather than people, upon which Marvin replies “[u]s, we did.” Generally, Marvin very meticulously describes carrying corpses from the latrine to the crematorium, mentioning specific details of the wagon, like the rubber wheels, how he threw corpses onto the wagon, how many corpses fit onto the wagon, and where they unloaded them. For Marvin, ever-present death meant labour and was taken for granted. What Amos Goldberg highlights in connection with narrating strategies about dead bodies in Holocaust diaries can also be observed in Marvin’s testimony: “[d]eath [...] went from a shocking human event to a purely biological phenomenon.”⁵⁴

During the interview, which is characterised overall by many questions and a constant engagement between interviewer and interviewee, Marvin sometimes actively directs the interviewer toward topics he wants to mention in connection to Gusen. This happens, for example, when he talks about the almost daily killing of prisoners. Marvin states: “[t]hey rounded ‘em up and, and took ‘em to a place over there. And you also have to ask me how they executed those people.” Upon a short “yes” uttered by the interviewer, he then describes what happened in the “place over there” in which the killings took place:

[t]hey had two barrels of water and they put, I don’t know what kind of poison it is, Klorax,⁵⁵ they put that in the water and, and it went so fast you could have a line of two, three hundred people, and that’s all you had to do [...] they just push those heads in and by the time, push it in, and just took ‘em out and you were deader than hell, split seconds, that’s how fast it went.

He underlines the story with movements of his upper body and hands, with which he demonstrates in front of the interviewer how quickly the prisoners were put into the barrels and how fast the functionary prisoners killed them. In this case, it is Marvin who opens a narrative space in which he attends to an experience of extreme violence and death. In addition to his words, he gives his narrative about the killing of people an immediacy and physicality through his body. For Marvin, death was fast and approximate, just “over there” because “there was no escape” for him.

Due to his forced labour in transporting corpses from one camp to the next, it was possible for him to access spaces and move between spaces that were off-limits to

54 Amos Goldberg, *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 15.

55 It is likely that he refers to a bleaching agent that was used to prevent the spreading of diseases in areas where corpses were collected, such as the washing facilities.

most other prisoners.⁵⁶ He was allowed to move in a place where almost all movement was regulated and controlled. Marvin also equates movement within the camp as having given him more knowledge about what happened, and he mentions this fact also in relation to being a witness: “[s]ee, I used to see more things because [...] I used to go out from one concentration camp into the other concentration camp, so I used to get out of the gate and come into another gate.” He indicates that, as a witness, he may have different (also maybe more) stories to tell because he had been able to enter different (more) spaces than many other prisoners. In this quotation, Marvin also highlights the gates of Gusen I and Gusen II as threshold spaces that one had to pass to exit from and walk into the camps and which were the only ways of exiting and entering. At the end of the episode on Gusen II, he also describes camp officials killing people by allowing them to freeze to death. What he describes is a transformation of the *Appellplatz*, the roll call square, into a temporary death space. In the winter of 1944 and 1945, more than 1,000 Polish prisoners who were apprehended by the Nazis during the Warsaw Uprising were deported to Gusen II.⁵⁷ Marvin tells the interviewer that in

sub-zero weather [...] they chased them out on a place right over there where we used to have an *Appell*, roll call, otherwise every, every night when we had a roll call, a big, huge place, they took off all their clothes, left them over there – frozen to death.

The roll call area was a central, open space in every concentration camp. This place, however, did not have a social function, nor did it serve to create a public sphere. On this “big, huge place”, the prisoners were condensed into an anonymous mass, reduced to data on a balance sheet, at least twice every day. In this case, the prisoners were deprived of any – already inadequate – protection against the environment and forced to stay in the square. When telling the story, Marvin relates to us how the concentration camp is also a frightening auditory space: “[a]nd all those noises, all those noises, noises, noises [...] till they died and in the morning, they were all, everything was frozen and we had the same job to do [...] we took ’em down and had ’em cremated.”

Isolation and Vulnerability

After having discussed parts of Marvin’s testimony in detail, let us turn to the second testimony. At the beginning of his testimony, Chaim K. introduces Sátoraljajhely, the town in which he was born in 1926, as an important centre of Judaism. It was the birthplace of the Hasidic movement in Hungary and had an Orthodox community as well as a Status Quo one. Chaim mentions growing up in a “poor” family and that the “family’s wealth” consisted of “four, sometimes five cows” without owning any land.⁵⁸ He describes his childhood as “happy”, despite the economic situation of the family, but it consisted mostly “of learning and work”. Chaim states that the family’s house was at “the end of the city”, that the next Jewish family was “a kilometre away”, and that he lived in a Christian neighbourhood. For him, the situa-

⁵⁶ Because he was assigned a function as a prisoner, he could, because of this position, move around with greater freedom than others.

⁵⁷ For the experiences of this group, see Piotr Filipkowski, *Oral History and the War: The Nazi Concentration Camp Experience in a Biographical-Narrative Perspective* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019), 133–148.

⁵⁸ Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony. If not indicated otherwise, all the quotes in this section are from the testimony of Chaim K.

tion deteriorated in 1936 and 1937, when Antisemitism increased locally. He recounts being involved in scuffles on the way to and from Jewish day school because he was recognisable – “marked”, in his words – as non-Christian because of his short ear curls. Chaim asserts that it was also his ear curls that made him recognisable as a Jew when he saw German soldiers enter his town. In his testimony, he describes his first encounter with German troops as follows:

[s]ince I was living [in] the fourth or the fifth house from [...] where the city starts and they were coming from the outskirts, from Slovakia towards Sátoraljaújhely, and my first encounter was they noticed obviously my ear locks and my first encounter was with the German army shouting: *Jude* [Jew], *Jude*, *Jude*.

As a geographic reference, he picks up again the location of his home, but this time not relative to the city centre [at the end of the city] but at the point where the “city starts”. There is a sense of increasing vulnerability and isolation that accompanies his testimony. Whereas growing up with Christian children initially “wasn’t so bad”, people in his environment became increasingly hostile and anti-Semitic, leaving him feeling “marked”. Furthermore, he also mentions that at the time of his encounter with the German troops, he had been “left alone at home” because his sisters had moved out and his two brothers had been conscripted into the Hungarian military-related labour service system. Additionally, and like Marvin with Yasina, Chaim locates Sátoraljaújhely as a border town. As he mentions, on 19 March 1944, German troops just crossed the border from Slovakia into Hungary and occupied the city. In this sense, by that time he “was left alone at home” in an anti-Semitic environment “at the end of the city”.

A Threshold Space – “Making Animals Out of Humans”

Although Chaim admits that he did not understand the political situation at the time, being forced to move from his home “further downtown” is a “mappable experience”. The ghetto was established within three or four streets in the city centre and, despite the crowdedness and lack of basic necessities, it was still a clear point on a landscape that he understood.⁵⁹ This is best expressed by the fact that Chaim is still able to locate the place where he, unbeknown to his parents, hid jewellery before they were transported to Auschwitz:

[s]omehow I had the feeling that I will return, they will not, because I stole the jewellery and wrapped it in some rags and the place [...] was a stable for cows. [...] On the wall, there was a stick [indicating] where they were hanging the things for the horses you know [...] and I took a line down, an imaginary line, and I made a hole there and I hid it there.

Chaim mentions that this stable was also the first place he went to when he came back to Sátoraljaújhely before leaving again for good. The family was selected for the first transport to Auschwitz and when they passed the gate of the ghetto on the way to the station, the group was checked for valuables. This resulted in Chaim’s first physical encounter with a German, when he tried to take Chaim’s tefillin. Because he resisted, he “got a little bit with the rifle butt” in his back. The last place in Sátoraljaújhely to which he addresses his attention in his testimony is the station. According to him, the railway station had a building “like a warehouse” which “was used for trains coming back from the front to delouse the trains”. He recounts that, after the people were

⁵⁹ Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 209.

cramped into the closed cattle cars, the train was pushed into the “warehouse type of structure” for approximately an hour. He recalls this episode as follows:

I think this was the first taste of trying to separate you from being a human being, to make you already some kind of an animal because they let in heat and that was hell there. [...] I guess their intention was to make sure that you make an animal out of you, not a human being and this was the first stage in that process.

In his narrative, the railway station of Sátoraljaújhely serves as a threshold space.⁶⁰ It was not only the place from which they departed to an unknown destination and in which they were separated from everything that was familiar to them, but the beginning of a process to which he refers several times later in his testimony: making animals out of humans – a different moral space.

Knowledge and Truth

The interviewer, Ernest Forrai, who himself is a Holocaust survivor from Hungary, stands out in the testimony as being very restrained, letting Chaim tell his story. In one instance, however, it is his intention to make Chaim reflect on what Ernest Forrai calls “truth” and “no truth”. While Chaim recounts his arrival in Auschwitz, the interviewer asks what they were told before being deported and regarding where the train would take them. Chaim answers that the only thing mentioned was that they would be sent to a “work camp” in an unknown location and that “everything will be fine”. The question prompts him to say: “I had no idea what Auschwitz means because in the geography when I was studying in public school there was no mention of Auschwitz [...] it didn’t mean to me anything.” Almost simultaneously, Ernest Forrai adds: „Oświęcim was not on the map.” In this sense, they refer to Auschwitz not even as a *non-place* but as non-existent in their geography, or even on their world map.⁶¹ The signifier “Auschwitz” carried no meaning. Yet, as the following quotation shows, the question resonates much deeper with Chaim. He says:

[w]hat I must bring to your attention is that the group I was in with, was a very religious group and the philosophy of that group was we do what God’s will is and we don’t question. So they were not if you, if I would be there today, with my outlook of life would have been different and I was the product of that group, and we are not supposed to question things and this is God’s will [...] I was the product of this society even though trying to rebel. So when you ask this question ‘didn’t you know’, no, yes and no, we didn’t dare to think that [...] the god whom we revere and fear has something like this in store for us.

For both the interviewer and interviewee, the question of knowledge and information about the Holocaust is one of importance.⁶² Forrai asks questions that re-

60 “Spatial threshold” refers to Paolo Giaccaria’s and Claudio Minca’s treatment of the Agambenian definition of the camp-as-a-space-of-exception: Paolo Giaccaria, Claudio Minca, “Topographies/topologies of the camp: Auschwitz as a spatial threshold”, *Political Geography* 30, no. 1 (2011): 3–12, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2010.12.001>.

61 Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 204.

62 Concerning the distinction between information about the Holocaust and the knowledge gained from its reception in memoirs, see Maria Ferenc Piotrowska, “All Those Rumors Occupy People’s Thoughts ...: On the Relationship between Rumors and Knowledge about the Holocaust in the Warsaw Ghetto”, *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 8, no. 11 (2018): 139–158, and Amos Goldberg, “Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted”, *Jewish Social Studies* 21, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 91–125.

volve around the transformation Auschwitz has undergone between the war and the interview in 1984. Particularly in North America at the time, Auschwitz had become a symbol of the Holocaust, a place on the world map that people knew. His question, therefore, was intended to enable Chaim to (re)establish a gap between his experiences, which was an experience of “not-knowing”, and a now better-established general knowledge of Auschwitz. This is also a point which Chaim tries to make, yet we should pay special attention to the way in which Chaim changes the question into a general epistemological one that exceeds ideas of place alone. The interviewer asks Chaim whether they were told where they were going, and what they were told about what they were going to do. He, however, changes the interviewer’s question into „[d]idn’t you know?“ This produces a kind of moral conflict, an accusation embedded in this question, and one that Chaim cannot resolve adequately. It seems as if this question has been with him for some time. Chaim’s reflections indicate that he views the question of knowledge as tied to that of finding a place in the religious community to which he belonged, whose “product” he was, with whose rules he did not always agree, and against which he in certain instances tried “to rebel”.

Underground

After only several days in Auschwitz, at the beginning of June 1944, Chaim was transported to the Mauthausen camp system and ended up in the branch camp of Gusen II. In his testimony, he describes it as a “new camp [...] that could not have been more than a year or two old” because it was “muddy”. Chaim describes this “newness” as an additional burden for the prisoners. In addition to their actual work, they had to go back and forth to the quarry to carry big rocks for paving the camp. In his testimony, he also hints at the quarry as a location, where older prisoners were mistreated and killed. In relation to that, he describes Gusen II as a place of reversed generational relations. In the “normal” society in which he was raised, Chaim was taught to “respect old age”, and he mentions that in the camp “they respected more young age”. According to him, young people were better treated and, if available, received additional food rations. Making sense of this reversal of generational relations, he concludes: “[a]s I said I’m sure that the ulterior motive wasn’t the love of the young person but what can we get out in a sense of labour from you.”⁶³ Chaim was assigned to a labour detachment that worked on building tunnels for a large underground airplane factory in the town of St. Georgen, located a few kilometres from Gusen II. Although many other survivors testified explicitly to the horrific conditions and violence connected to tunnel work, Chaim describes it more subtly. He worked the night shift, twelve hours a day for twelve months, underground. This was only possible by forcing the prisoners to perform inhuman labour, and he mentions how gruelling and fast-paced life was in the camp. In addition to tunnel work, he went to and from work in open rail cars, stood in line, ate, was deloused, and, additionally, there were often air raid alarms in 1944 and 1945 during which the SS forced

63 What Chaim K. refers to here is a process that was adopted by the SS and the industries that benefited from the use of concentration camp labour. Although inmates like Chaim, who were categorised as “Jews”, were still at the bottom of the social hierarchy within the camps, the prisoners were also treated according to the importance of their labour and occupational qualifications. The SS could thus weigh up the factors of “maintaining the workforce” and of the “extermination” of certain groups. Marc Buggeln, *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 63. See also Stefan Hördler, “Rationalisierung des KZ-Systems 1943–1945. Arbeitsfähigkeit und Arbeitsunfähigkeit als ordnende Selektionskriterien”, in *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus*, ed. Marc Buggeln and Michael Wildt (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2014), 349–370.

the prisoners out of the barracks and onto the nearby fields. Even before he mentions having proper food, Chaim says in the testimony: “[m]y biggest desire was that whenever I’ll be free to have an uninterrupted three-hour sleep, that was my biggest desire because that’s what I missed the most because there was no time for it.” For him and other prisoners, there was hardly any time to pause, only forced movement. This pressure and the inhuman economisation of labour established by the SS were fatal for those prisoners who could not keep up with the merciless pace. Through his narrative, it also becomes clear that he spent much more time underground in St. Georgen than in the camp itself. This also becomes obvious in his treatment of place. He was imprisoned at Gusen II, but he does not really refer topographically to the camp much, apart from the fact that he was housed in “Barrack 8”.⁶⁴ It is the underground tunnels in St. Georgen that appear more central to his personal experience of space during this time, as he states: “[w]e dug in into a mountain and we created tunnels, streets, there was a whole city under this ground.”⁶⁵ Although more research is needed on Jewish prisoners, the testimonies suggest that conditions of work and life in Gusen II from 1944 onwards were similar to that of Mittelbau-Dora:

[...] the prisoners were no longer solely treated according to their nationalities and categories of incarceration, but rather in keeping with the importance of their labor and occupational qualifications. This created situations in which the SS and the industries that benefited from the use of concentration camp labor could weigh up the factors ‘maintaining the workforce’ and ‘extermination’, an approach which often led to hybrid forms that were adapted to the current availability of labor and the value of each individual worker, without consciously considering the tenets of a specific program or ideology.⁶⁶

Conclusion

At the end of the testimony, Marvin mentions that he is very proud of the United States, that it is the greatest country on earth, and that it means everything to him. There is no other country in the world like it.⁶⁷ The testimonies of Chaim K. and Marvin N. are narratives that move through time and space. They are narratives of transformations that are confirmed by the scenery that surrounds them at the time of the interview – a scenery that was very different from the one into which they were born.⁶⁸ The pre-war stories of Marvin and Chaim share similar features: growing up in poor orthodox Jewish families in border towns of almost the same size; being forced into a ghetto, before deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau; and arriving with the same transport in Gusen II.⁶⁹ There are episodes in each testimony that show remarkable similarities. Chaim and Marvin both recall a Polish Jew who, upon arrival

64 There is one exception, when he recounts the story of a Jewish prisoner who supplied the SS with information about his fellow prisoners and who was killed as a result.

65 An overview of the building project can be found in Perz, *KZ-Zwangsarbeit*, 20–54. See, for example, the memoirs of the French Gusen II survivor Bernard Aldebert, who also included drawings in his account of work underground: Bernard Aldebert, *Chemin de croix en 50 stations. De Compiègne a Gusen II. En passant par Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Gusen I* (Paris, 1946).

66 Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 63.

67 Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony.

68 Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 206.

69 Although there is a chance that the two teenagers could have met each other at some point, there are no indications that they did.

in Auschwitz-Birkenau, told them in Yiddish what to do and where to go during the selection process. In both testimonies, the two survivors talk about how their short stature as teenagers allowed them to often blend in with the masses of people to avoid beatings or being bitten by dogs. Both not only testify with and through their words, but also with and through their bodies. Literally and figuratively, the body of the survivors is a space in which the experience of the Holocaust has irreversibly made its mark.⁷⁰ At the end of the testimony, Chaim, for example, leans forward and shows the interviewer a scar on the back of his head, inflicted by an SS man with a rifle butt when Chaim was caught conducting Yom Kippur services in a barrack of Gusen II.⁷¹ He and Marvin also relate to the violent praxis of getting a strip shaved on the head several times a week, which left them marked as belonging to the camp and not the outside world. The body as a personal integral space became heavily politicised in the camp. In this sense, the camp was also directed against the body – it was a continuous attack on its vulnerability.⁷²

Despite the many similarities between their two testimonies, they expressed notions of space and place quite differently. This difference is reflected in how they create their narratives and map their experiences. Scenes of spatial disorientation are more radically apparent in Marvin's testimony. This was also probably because he was younger at the time. For him, leaving his home in Yasina, a place that was already at the time in a period of transformation, could be described as the start of a journey through a sequence of *non-places* – that is, places that historically existed, and obviously had topographical features, but to which Marvin cannot establish a connection. However, as Hannah Pollin-Galay asserts: "Holocaust witnesses are engaged in verbal map-work throughout their testimonies, and their stories contain much more than climatic moments of disorientation."⁷³ This is true not only for Marvin's testimony in general, but especially for his treatment of Gusen II. One could argue that, for Marvin, Gusen II also constituted a non-place, a place that was disorienting, characterised by violence, and that shifted social relations to the extreme. In the interview, the impression arises that he is sometimes not even sure whether what he experienced belongs in the register of the "social". Yet, there are instances when the camp is described as something familiar with place-like qualities. As Maria Giuliani Vittoria and Roberta Feldman have argued – and as exemplified in this article – a dynamic model of people-place bonds should also consider including negative emotional relationships to places: "[t]he places where Nazi lagers were located are certainly 'places' with a strong emotive value, in particular for Jewish people."⁷⁴ For Chaim, his experience is somewhat mappable throughout his testimony. Placelessness is not so much in the foreground. Yet, there is a geographic rift that extends to a moral level. As described above, the train station in his testimony serves as a threshold space, not only between home and the unknown, but also between different moral spaces. He was transferred into a moral space in which people were transformed into animals, and where generational relations were turned upside down. Chaim experienced Gusen II quite differently to Marvin, who in his testimony described daily violence in the camp in more detail. Chaim spent most of his

70 Janine Fubel, Annika Wienert, "'Körper' und 'Raum' im Kontext der Holocaust- und Genozidforschung: Eine multiperspektivische Einführung", *Zeitschrift für Genozidforschung* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 159–189, 179.

71 Chaim K. Holocaust Testimony.

72 On the extermination of the Jewish body, see Boaz Neumann, *Die Weltanschauung des Nazismus. Raum – Körper – Sprache* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010).

73 Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 205–206.

74 Maria Giuliani Vittoria and Roberta Feldman, "Place Attachment in a Developmental and Cultural Context", *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 13, no. 3 (1993): 267–274, 272.

time in the tunnels, performing monotonous physical labour, forced to move to a predetermined rhythm, in and out of the camp and its associated underground tunnels.

As the examples above have shown, attending to descriptions of place and space in Holocaust testimonies not only reveals more about people's personal trajectories but can help us to approach the question of how the perpetrators' quest for violent transformation was experienced by their Jewish victims.⁷⁵ They also indicate the different meanings attached to places and show how spaces are transformed.

Bibliography

- Aldebert, Bernard. *Chemin de croix en 50 stations. De Compiègne a Gusen II. En passant per Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Gusen I.* Paris, 1946.
- ANU – Museum of the Jewish People. “The Jewish Community of Yasina.” Accessed 30 August 2022. <https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e206354/Place/Yasina>.
- ANU – Museum of the Jewish People. “The Jewish Community of Satoraljajhely.” Accessed 30 August 2022. <https://dbs.anumuseum.org.il/skn/en/c6/e240552/Place/Satoraljajhely>.
- Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity.* London and New York: Verso, 1995.
- Braham, Randolph L. *The Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary.* Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000.
- Buggeln, Marc. *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Cole, Tim. “Nature Was Helping Us: Forests, Trees, and Environmental Histories of the Holocaust”. *Environmental History* 19, no. 4 (October 2014): 665–686. <https://doi.org/10.1093/envhis/emu068>.
- Cole, Tim. *Holocaust Landscapes.* London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Dürr, Christian, Ralf Lechner. “Das Konzentrationslager Mauthausen-Gusen 1938–1945”. In *Mauthausen und die nationalsozialistische Expansions- und Verfolgungspolitik. Europa in Mauthausen*, edited by Gerhard Botz, Alexander Prenzinger, and Regina Fritz, 213–262. Vol. 1. Vienna, Cologne, and Weimar: Böhlau, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.7767/9783205212171.213>.
- Ferenc Piotrowska, Maria. “All Those Rumors Occupy People's Thoughts ...: On the Relationship between Rumors and Knowledge about the Holocaust in the Warsaw Ghetto”. *Rocznik Antropologii Historii* 8, no. 11 (2018): 139–158.
- Filipkowski, Piotr. *Oral History and the War: The Nazi Concentration Camp Experience in a Biographical-Narrative Perspective.* Berlin: Peter Lang, 2019.
- Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University. “Affiliate Projects”. Accessed 1 September 2022. <https://fortunoff.library.yale.edu/about-us/affiliate-projects>.
- Fubel, Janine, and Annika Wienert. “Körper’ und ‘Raum’ im Kontext der Holocaust- und Genozidforschung: Eine multiperspektivische Einführung”. *Zeitschrift für Genozidforschung* 19, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 159–189. doi.org/10.5771/1438-8332-2021-2.
- Giaccaria, Paolo, and Claudio Minca. “Topographies/Topologies of the Camp: Auschwitz as a Spatial Threshold”. *Political Geography* 30, no. 1 (2011): 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2010.12.001>.

⁷⁵ Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing*, 260.

- Giuliani Vittoria, Maria, and Roberta Feldman. "Place Attachment in a Developmental and Cultural Context". *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 13, no. 3 (1993): 267–274.
- Goldberg, Amos. "Rumor Culture among Warsaw Jews under Nazi Occupation: A World of Catastrophe Reenchanted". *Jewish Social Studies* 21, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 91–125. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jewisocistud.21.3.04>
- Goldberg, Amos. *Trauma in First Person: Diary Writing During the Holocaust*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017.
- Hördler, Stefan. "Rationalisierung des KZ-Systems 1943–1945: Arbeitsfähigkeit und Arbeitsunfähigkeit als ordnende Selektionskriterien". In *Arbeit im Nationalsozialismus*, edited by Marc Buggeln and Michael Wildt, 349–370. Munich: Oldenbourg, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783486858846.349>.
- Madoń-Mitzner, Katarzyna, ed. *Errettet aus Mauthausen: Berichte polnischer ehemaliger Häftlinge des NS-Konzentrationslagers Mauthausen-Gusen*. Warsaw: History Meeting House, 2010.
- Naron, Stephen. "Archives, Ethics and Influence: How the Fortunoff Video Archive's Methodology Shapes its Collection's Content". In *Interactions: Explorations of Good Practice in Educational Work with Video Testimonies of Victims of National Socialism*, edited by Werner Dreier, Angelika Laumer, and Moritz Wein, 41–51. Berlin: EVZ, 2018.
- Neumann, Boaz. *Die Weltanschauung des Nazismus. Raum – Körper – Sprache*. Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010.
- Perz, Bertrand. "Gusen I und II." In *Der Ort Des Terrors: Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, vol. 4, Flossenbürg, Mauthausen, Ravensbrück, edited by Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel, 371–380. Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006.
- Perz, Bertrand. "KZ-Zwangsarbeit für eine rationelle Rüstungsproduktion im Luftkrieg: Neue Dokumente zur Genese der unterirdischen Flugzeugfabrik 'Esche II' ('Bergkristall') der Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg in St. Georgen an der Gusen". *coMMents – Chronicle of the Mauthausen Memorial: Current Studies*, no. 1 (March 2023): 20–54. <https://doi.org/10.57820/mm.comments.2022.02>.
- Perz, Bertrand. "Rüstungsproduktion im KZ-Lagerkomplex Mauthausen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Messerschmitt GmbH Regensburg". In *Überleben durch Kunst: Zwangsarbeit im Konzentrationslager Gusen für das Messerschmittwerk Regensburg*, edited by Reinhard Hanausch, Roman Smolorz, Mark Spoerer, and Bernhard Lübbers, 77–90. Regensburg: Dr. Peter Morsbach Verlag, 2012).
- Pollin-Galay, Hannah. *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Sunderland, Maja. *Inside Concentrations Camps: Social Life at the Extremes*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.
- Szita, Szabolcs. *Ungarn in Mauthausen: Ungarische Häftlinge in SS-Lagern auf dem Territorium Österreichs*, Mauthausen-Studien 4. Vienna: Federal Ministry of Internal Affairs, 2006.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Landscapes of Fear*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1979.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
- Vági, Zoltán, László Csósz, and Gábor Kádár. *The Holocaust in Hungary: Evolution of a Genocide*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2013.
- Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre. "Holocaust Documentation Project". Accessed 1 September 2022. <https://collections.vhec.org/Detail/entities/11104>.
- Weiner Weber, Suzanne. "The Forest as a Liminal Space: A Transformation of Culture and Norms during the Holocaust". *Holocaust Studies* 14, no. 1. (2008): 35–60. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2008.11087211>.

Lukas Nievoll studied English and History at the Karl-Franzens-University Graz and the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Between 2019 and 2021 he worked in the research project “Digital Landscape of Remembrance (DERLA). Persecution and Resistance under National Socialism – Documenting and Mediating” at the Centre for Jewish Studies at Karl-Franzens-University Graz. Since October 2021, Lukas Nievoll has been a university assistant at the Institute for Modern and Contemporary History at the Johannes Kepler University Linz, where he is working on his doctoral thesis on the topic of space and violence at the Gusen concentration camp. In 2022 he was a Junior Fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) and is currently a Doctoral Fellow at the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah (FMS) in Paris.

Email: lukas.nievoll@jku.at

Quotation: Lukas Nievoll, Experiencing Persecution – Space and Place in the Testimonies of Two Former Teenage Holocaust Survivors, in S:I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. Documentation. 10 (2023) 1, 75–94.

https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0123/art_lnie01

S:I.M.O.N.– Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. is the semi-annual open access e-journal of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies (VWI) in English and German.

ISSN 2408-9192 | 10 (2023) 1 | <https://doi.org/10.23777/sn.0123>

This article is licensed under the following Creative Commons License: CC-BY-NC-ND
(Attribution-Non Commercial-No Derivatives)