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Jewish Children and Teenagers Surviving the Last Deadly Months of the Holocaust in Bergen-Belsen

Abstract

Opened in 1943, the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp near Celle, Germany, held at least 3,000 children and adolescents, most of them Jewish. In 1944, a process began in which thousands of prisoners died intentionally in Bergen-Belsen. Bergen-Belsen served first as an “evacuation camp” for prisoners from concentration camps near the front; from the summer of 1944. However, it also functioned as a transit camp for women and girls, many of them Polish, who were sent to subcamps for forced labour. Furthermore, it was used as a (cynically called) “rest camp” for prisoners who had been sent to concentration camps on Reich territory as sick and unfit for work. They died from deliberate neglect, as they were not cared for. In the last months of the war, between January and April 1945, some 80,000 to 90,000 people arrived at the camp.

This article focuses on children’s experiences and their adaptation to camp life despite death, murder, starvation. The evaluation and analysis of these testimonies and interviews with child survivors, who report from the perspective of adults today, shows that children had a specific view of the concentration camp that differed from that of adults and, at the same time, helped the children to cope with everyday life in the camp. In the oral histories or eyewitness accounts of survivors, there are repeated references to the “quicker” adjustment of children and adolescents compared to older prisoners. Nevertheless, the memories of that time never left them. The testimonies of Jewish child survivors serve as crucial historical evidence, particularly in an era in which Holocaust scholarship faces challenges such as distortion, denial, and revisionism.

At the time of writing, the world is at the eve of commemorating the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the liberation of the camps. There are still a few Jewish child survivors of the Holocaust who went through Auschwitz, Bergen-Belsen, or other camps under German administration in Nazi-occupied Europe. At the end of the war, and on their way to a new life, they often had a double burden to carry. Their parents, often preoccupied with their own concerns, were survivors themselves. The children had survived the camps under the most difficult and horrible conditions, often marked by the loss and death of loved ones. The child survivors had witnessed death, starvation, and crime. Despite this burden, many of them showed great resilience and started families of their own.¹

1 See the online exhibition “Whoever Saves a Life...” *Life Stories of Children of the “Lost Transport”*, curated by the author and Thomas Irmer. This exhibition was developed in 2021 and 2022 and initiated by the Technisches Denkmal Brikettfabrik ‘Louise’ Domsdorf. It is based on interviews with Jewish child survivors of Bergen-Belsen who survived the “Lost Transport”, and with their descendants.

In all the concentration camps which belonged to the central administration *Inspektion der Konzentrationslager* (IKL, Inspection of Concentration Camps), there were minors among the prisoners, even in the very first camps that were established right after Adolf Hitler came to power in January 1933.² The best-known example of a teenager who was a prisoner in a concentration camp is that of the German-Jewish girl Anne Frank from Frankfurt am Main. Her diary is a “cornerstone of the culture of remembrance” not only in the Federal Republic of Germany³ but also worldwide. It is a paradigmatic example of the persecution of children and young people under the Nazi regime. After the Frank family had been discovered in their hiding place in Amsterdam, the then fifteen-year-old Anne Frank was deported with her sister and mother via the transit camp Westerbork in the Netherlands to Auschwitz-Birkenau⁴. As the Red Army advanced and the Auschwitz camp system was disbanded, more than 60,000 prisoners were evacuated to Germany on death marches by foot, in wagons, and by train. Countless Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners died on the way or were murdered by the guards, the killing machine, and the Birkenau staff, who arrived on German soil and continued the killing. Anne and her sister Margot died shortly before the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in April 1945.

Like countless other Jewish children and young people, Anne did not survive the Holocaust and was unable to bear witness to the atrocities, be it in a diary or to the world. The life of children in Bergen-Belsen is described below using the example of the *Sternlager* (Star Camp). This was a subcamp in which the Jewish prisoners were held hostage, and they lived there in a situation that was different to the other camps. The existence of these Jewish children on German territory was an exception, as the camps on German territory were made “Jew free” in October 1942. Against the background of the unfolding genocide of European Jews, being sent to a concentration camp meant for Jewish children and young people their temporary survival under inhumane conditions.

The Historical Background of Bergen-Belsen⁵

At the end of April 1943, the *SS-Wirtschaftsverwaltungshauptamt* (SS-WVHA, SS Economic Administration Headquarters) set up a camp on part of the Stalag XI C/311 POW camp near Celle, about fifty kilometres north of Hanover, where Jews with foreign citizenship or “Palestine certificates” were interned from 6 May.⁶ Jews living in the four separate sections called residence camp – the Special Camp for Polish Jews, the Neutral Camp, the Star Camp, and the Hungarian Camp – were considered hostages and were to be exchanged for Germans interned abroad or for financial compensation. From June 1943, these four parts of the camp were referred to in SS-WVHA correspondence as the Bergen-Belsen “detention camp”. Although

2 Verena Buser, *Überleben von Kindern und Jugendlichen in den Konzentrationslagern Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz und Bergen-Belsen* (Metropol Verlag, 2011).

3 Wolfgang Benz, “Mythos Anne Frank”, in *Als Kind verfolgt. Anne Frank und die anderen*, ed. Inge Hansen-Schaberg (Metropol Verlag, 2004), 99–108, 99.

4 Verena Buser, “Children”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Auschwitz-Birkenau*, ed. Sarah Cushman, Joanne Pettitte, and Dominic Williams (Routledge, forthcoming 2025).

5 An extensive list of literature on the camp’s history, trials, and survivor memories can be found on the website of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial, <https://bergen-belsen.stiftung-ng.de/de/forschung-dokumentation/literatur/allgemein/>.

6 Hans-Heinrich Nolte, ed., *Häftlinge aus der UdSSR in Bergen-Belsen. Dokumentation der Erinnerungen* (Peter Lang Verlag, 2001).

the concentration camp was under the control of the SS-WVHA, the prisoners did not perform forced labour for German war production.⁷ Only prisoners in the Star Camp were made to work from the age of fifteen.

In 1944, a process began in which thousands of prisoners died in Bergen-Belsen. The reasons for the mass deaths lay in the fact that, in the course of the dismantling of the concentration camp system from 1944 onwards, Bergen-Belsen fulfilled three additional functions in addition to its reception of “exchange hostages”. Bergen-Belsen served as an “evacuation camp” for prisoners from concentration camps near the front. From the summer of 1944, it also functioned as a transit camp for women and girls, many of them non-Jewish Polish women, who were sent to subcamps for forced labour.⁸ Furthermore, it functioned under the cynical name of a “rest camp” for prisoners classified as sick and unfit for work in concentration camps on Reich territory, which in reality meant that they died by omission at Bergen-Belsen because they were not cared for at all.

In the final months of the war, between January and April 1945, some 80,000 to 90,000 people ended up in the camp.⁹ Due to a lack of capacity, the concentration camp was gradually expanded: additional camp areas were built in the so-called “Prisoners’ Camp II” for men and in the large women’s camp, as well as in the “tent camp” for female prisoners. When the former commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Josef Kramer, took over the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp in early December 1944, prison conditions were further tightened. The SS appointed a camp elder, Walter Hanke, and non-Jewish Kapos who had worked in the concentration camp for years took command of the prisoners, who had previously lived under Jewish self-administration. Due to the constant deterioration resulting from the increasing expansion of functions, the Jews in the “detention camp” suffered from inadequate care, extremely cramped conditions, and deteriorating hygienic conditions, which led to the rapid spread of disease. In everyday life, the satisfaction of basic existential needs almost exclusively determined people’s actions and thoughts. When British troops entered the camp on 15 April 1945, they found more than 10,000 unburied corpses.¹⁰

Jewish children and adolescents, but also non-Jewish minors, were among the prisoners in all of the abovementioned sections of the Bergen-Belsen camp complex. The different functions of the various camp areas within the entire Bergen-Belsen camp complex, as well as the individually motivated exercise of power by SS personnel, had a decisive influence on the living conditions of the children and young people housed here. Although the sources of SS provenience describe the conditions, they give no indication of what the reality of the concentration camp was like and how the prisoners responded to these conditions. The prisoners shared the common experience of living in uncertainty. It was completely unclear how long their forced, violent imprisonment and the war would last.

The following study focuses on the memories of Jewish child survivors and their attempts to reconstruct their survival strategies, thoughts, and experiences. They were usually written long after their time in Bergen-Belsen and therefore reflect the survivors’ memories of their time as children.

7 Thomas Rahe, “Bergen-Belsen, Stammlager”, in *Der Ort des Terrors. Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager*, eds. Wolfgang Benz and Barbara Distel (C.H. Beck Verlag, 2008), 187–217.

8 Alexandra-Eileen Wenck, *Zwischen Menschenhandel und “Endlösung”. Das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen* (Schöningh Verlag, 2000), 339–347.

9 Thomas Rahe, “Das Evakuierungslager Bergen-Belsen”, *Dachauer Hefte* 20 (2004): 47–57, 49.

10 Rahe, “Bergen-Belsen, Stammlager”, 187.

The Bergen-Belsen Star Camp

The majority of the more than 4,000 Jews imprisoned in the Star Camp came from the Netherlands and they were imprisoned together for almost two years. In addition, there were at least 400 Albanian Jews as well as women and children who were imprisoned in Bergen-Belsen as relatives of French prisoners of war. In total, around 5,400 people passed through this part of the camp, whose accommodation was moved several times within the Bergen-Belsen camp complex. The daily life of the inmates of the Star Camp was characterised by compulsory roll calls and forced labour, to which prisoners were conscripted from the age of fifteen, meaning that children were exempted from the forced labour. The Star Camp was therefore the only subcamp in the Bergen-Belsen complex in which children were largely unsupervised by adults during the day. Here, too, families were separated by gender, and children up to the age of fourteen generally stayed with their mothers, who therefore figure prominently in the memories of child survivors. Family members could visit each other at night, usually between 7 and 8 p.m.¹¹

In contrast to other concentration camps, the proportion of children among the inmates of the Star Camp was extremely high at 18 per cent. The death rate among children was lower than among adults. About 93 per cent of all registered and deceased prisoners of the Star Camp were older than eighteen years. The proportion of deceased children up to and including the age of fourteen was 4.6 per cent.¹² One child survivor retrospectively surmised that the children had “more resilience” and that this was probably related to the fact that parents, if they were able to, passed on their food rations to their children.¹³ The living conditions of teenagers in the Star Camp were no different to those of the adults and children. Arieh (Leo) Koretz turned sixteen in July 1944 and recorded this date in his diary, which he kept between July 1944 and March 1945:¹⁴ “[w]hat a birthday [...]. My mouth is a bit better, but I still find it difficult to eat. The boils have not changed, the whole camp suffers from them.”¹⁵

Daily Life, Play, and the Adaption of Jewish Child “Hostages” in Bergen-Belsen

Adolescents and children over the age of three had to stand for roll call every day. The only exceptions were the sick and mothers of children under three.¹⁶ Regardless of the weather conditions, the roll calls could last two to three hours, but sometimes took up to nine hours, especially if the count was wrong or someone was missing. Former prisoner Hanna Lévy-Hass reports on one roll call: “[o]r the children who know no joy. Fear, nothing but fear. [...] They hide their heads under some rag, snug-

11 Wiener Holocaust Library, London Bialoglowski, Mrs. W. – Amsterdam. Teaching school at Westerbork 1943–1945, Eyewitness Accounts: Doc. No. P.III.h. No.835. (Westerbork), Reel: 58: 3.

12 Research in the database of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial Archives (BBMA).

13 Interview with Sonni (Sonja) S., 1989 und 1990 in Ramat Gan, BBMA, BT-662: 10.

14 Koretz, Arieh (Leo). 1992. Bergen-Belsen. Tagebuch eines Jugendlichen 11. 7. 1944–30. 3. 1945 (published 1992 in Israel), translation, BBMA: 18.

15 Ibid., 21. As the prisoners suffered from vitamin deficiency, they developed eczema in their mouths.

16 Thomas Rahe, “Aus ‘rassistischen’ Gründen verfolgte Kinder im Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen”, in *Kinder und Jugendliche als Opfer des Holocaust*, eds. Edgar Bamberger and Annegret Ehmman (Dokumentations- und Kulturzentrum Deutscher Sinti und Roma/Gedenkstätte Haus der Wannseekonferenz, 1995).

gle up to the grown-ups to seek protection against the cold and terror.¹⁷ Children were also at risk of wetting themselves during the roll call. A mother of two small children reported that, in such a situation, several mothers formed a circle around their son, in the centre of which he could urinate.¹⁸ Challenging for the children, however, was having to remain motionless for hours on end. One eleven-year-old girl recalled that her mother fainted during a roll call in winter. As she was not allowed to help her mother up, she had to stand for two hours in the uncertainty of whether her mother had died.¹⁹ After roll call, mothers and fathers went to forced labour, where they worked under SS guard. The children returned to the barracks or remained in the camp. One female survivor remembered that her daughter, who was left alone during the day, repeatedly suffered from the fear that her parents would leave her because of the daily separation.

During the day, many children were running through the camps, where they quickly learned that it was better to avoid the SS. When the SS approached, Moshe N. said, he hid. For him, the children who came into contact with the SS were “stupid”, because they were not protected from beatings by the SS.²⁰ As George Eisen impressively showed in his pathbreaking study on “Children and Play in the Holocaust”,²¹ playing appeared everywhere: in the ghettos and camps, too, so of course also in Bergen-Belsen. There, children “teased” each other, as one boy who was deported from the Netherlands as a child reported about the teasing of the Albanian Jews: “[w]e didn’t understand each other from the beginning, and we teased each other. The children from Albania made fun of us: ‘Holland destroyed’. And the Dutch Jews would say: ‘Albania broken.’”²² Several child survivors also reported that they collected ‘silver strips’ dropped by Allied planes and played with them.²³ However, many of the children also reported an “activity” that they spent hours doing, which was to remove the lice that infested a large proportion of the inmates. In order to avoid illness, mothers repeatedly made sure that the children took care of their personal hygiene. Two boys who lived in the men’s barracks reported that they had “a lot of fun” finding and killing the lice.²⁴

After a few months, hunger was rampant among all the prisoners in the Star Camp area. As a result, the children quickly learnt to “organise” themselves, and several boys developed a trick during the kitchen rounds: “[a]nd we often succeeded [...] some of us came into the kitchen with the empty cans and [then] very quickly threw ourselves on this pile of turnips, under the coat [...] and [then] we chose the right moment and threw the turnips into this camp, where the second group of children was waiting [...] and then we went through the gate without these things [...] these turnips, that was a very important addition to our meal.”²⁵ Other children were delighted to be able to carry empty trays back to the kitchen after the meal, as this gave them a chance to lick up the leftovers.²⁶ However, most of the children also knew that it was important to hide their food so that it would not be stolen by other prisoners.

17 Hanna Lévy-Hass, *Vielleicht war das alles erst der Anfang. Tagebuch aus dem KZ Bergen-Belsen 1944–1945* (Rotbuch-Verlag, 1979).

18 Video interview with Shelley C., 16. 11. 1999, BBMA.

19 Transcript of interview with Francine C., 12. 11. 2000, BBMA, BT-1100: 7.

20 Video interview with Moshe N., 27. 3. 2000, BBMA, BT-452/453.

21 George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games among the Shadows* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

22 Report by Haim Peles, s.d., Yad Vashem Digital Archives (YVDA), O3.5342.

23 Aluminium strips were dropped by Allied planes to confuse German radars.

24 Video interview with Paul und Rudi O., BBMA.

25 Transcript of interview with Raoul T., 23. 5. 1995, BBMA, BT-933: 10.

26 *Ibid.*, 10.

Several of them had birthdays during their imprisonment, such as Haim-Yair Peles, who on his eighth birthday received pictures painted on cardboard of the presents he would have received if he had been free. Several children sang songs for him that day, and game was organised in which the child who laughed the most received a small doll made of wool from Peles' mother.²⁷

Mothers and Children

Mothers' supportive actions and care play an important role in the testimonies of many child survivors.²⁸ This corresponds to the actual prison situation in which it was the mothers who structured their children's daily lives, maintained some sort of routine, and tried to keep a vestige of "normality" in everyday life. Many of them also slept side by side with the children at night. They taught the children how to organise their meals and looked after their hygiene. Others improvised and sewed clothes for the children out of blankets. Time and again it is emphasised that the shared accommodation with the mothers was of enormous importance. One boy, who was almost twelve years old at the time, summed up his imprisonment in Bergen-Belsen as follows: "[w]ell, that can be summed up as being hungry, that can be summed up as being together with people you didn't know, but with whom you made acquaintance. [The mother] was with us. So that was already [...] something immeasurably important. Being with your mother is worth all the [...] gold in the world."²⁹ Albert, who was twelve years old at the time, gives his personal account: "[w]e children [...] were with our mothers. And that was a protection for us, an essential protection. Our mothers might have known something, but they didn't tell us. But we were so full of trust, because we were with our mothers, that we didn't ask ourselves any questions."³⁰ Mothers tried to keep the children occupied as much as possible. Batsheva M. remembers her mother teaching her to knit with threads from a blanket. When she finished something, it would be unravelled and the girl would knit again.³¹

Henry A. says that, when he was imprisoned, he felt that nothing would happen to him as long as his parents were with him.³² Ultimately, mothers and fathers were unable to protect their children from having to deal with adult problems and decisions at an early age. Especially towards the end of 1944, many were unable to provide their children with sufficient food. One former prisoner reported that "[t]he end was getting worse and worse. Some days the soup was thin [...] there was nothing left. [In the evening, some evenings, there was nothing left. I cried to my mother: 'Mama, Mama, I'm hungry'". She continued: "[i]t was said in the camp that if she slept with the camp elder, Albala, she would get a voucher for soup, and I was so hungry [...] that one day I shouted: 'Mama, sleep with Albala so I can have soup!'"³³

In many cases, however, the children formed close bonds with each other because of the lack of adult presence. Children in the Star Camp experienced that, over time, the adults were no longer able to look after their needs. As noted in an interview on

27 Report by Haim Peles, 7.

28 Diana Gring, "Zwischen "Familie im Lager" und "Lagerfamilie": Kinder und ihre familiären Beziehungen in Videointerviews mit Child Survivors des Konzentrationslagers Bergen-Belsen", in *Bergen-Belsen. Neue Forschungen*, eds. Habbo Knoch and Thomas Rahe (Wallstein Verlag, 2014).

29 Transcript of interview with Albert B., 7.9.2000, BBMA, BT-1067: 8.

30 Ibid., 9.

31 Video interview with Batsheva M., 23.3.2000, BBMA.

32 Video interview with Henry A., 20.10.2002, BBMA.

33 The witness remains anonymous at this point, as this episode was not included in her published memoirs.

18 May 1993, held in the Bergen-Belsen Memorial Archives, one former detainee even said that the adults could not be trusted.³⁴ For some children, siblings of the same age or older sometimes took the place of their parents. This was also important for younger children, who could keep each other occupied during the day.³⁵ A twelve-year-old girl lost her twin sister in Bergen-Belsen.³⁶ After her sister died, the girl made a conscious decision that a friend should take her sister's place.

Death Becomes “Normal”

At the Star Camp, many children were confronted with the sight of the dead for the first time in their lives. What this meant to the children and how they dealt with it is best understood through the accounts of contemporary witnesses. In a way, death had become an integral part of the children's everyday lives. Since the children were not forced to work, many of them wandered around the camp during the day, looking for different ways to occupy themselves with games that seemed strange to outsiders. Sara A. remembers the children betting on who would die the next day. Moshe N., who was housed with his mother and sister, saw corpses for the first time in Bergen-Belsen and was forced to learn “how easy it is to die”. From the perspective of an adult, he judges his behaviour as a child as “terrible”, as he became accustomed to the sight of the dead.³⁷ He reports that, after a while, he became an “expert” at judging whether someone was “already dead or not. [It was a game [...]. Today I no longer know how I did it. [...] Terrible [...], I can't believe it [...], it was a game with the dead. [...] We had nothing to do, nothing, we didn't work.”³⁸

However, a witness who was already an adult at the time was also able to observe that everyday life in the camp was reflected in the games played by the children who were not assigned to work. Moshe Nordheim's mother remembers that the children wanted to find out whether someone had already died or not, and held feathers under their noses to test this.³⁹ Francine C., who was eleven years old at the time, recalls that they ran around the camp and found a way of coping with the daily increase in the number of dead: “[w]e walked around, we kicked in the puddles, we counted the dead. I compared the piles of dead, because they were piled up like tree trunks [...]. We also played ‘see the dead, look at them’. Oh, this one's feet are like this, oh, and this one, he's ugly, have you seen this one, he's got twisted hands! That too, that was another horrible game, that's the life of the children in the camp, we went to the latrines, we watched the people.”⁴⁰ Moshe N. explained how children “adapted”: “[c]hildren are like animals [...]. [...] If you put a child in the jungle, a child learns that you can live in the jungle, a child can adapt [...]. That's how we were, we weren't civilised anymore, our parents are still trying [...] to stay a bit civilised [...]. Death or life, the way an animal in the jungle looks at a dead animal, it doesn't make such a big noise because the animal is dead [...] and it goes on, that was the life for me too, as a child, I remember. It brought me a lot of difficulties [when] I came back, [settling] back into normal life.”⁴¹ The constant sight of corpses led children and adults to get used to

34 Interview transcript Sieg M. and Ronnie A., 18.5.1993, BBMA, BT-452/453: Bl. 7.

35 Video interview with Batsheva M.

36 Video interview with Naomi R., 22.4.2004, BBMA.

37 Video interview with Moshe N.

38 Ibid.

39 Video interview with Shelley C.

40 Transcript of interview with Francine C., 7.

41 Video interview with Moshe N.

them as a kind of protective mechanism. This helped them to survive. Another girl recorded: “[w]hen people ask me to describe my camp, I always say it’s [...] the biggest disgust in the world, the biggest rubbish dump in the world. In a rubbish dump you see plastic bottles, you see tins of food, instead we saw corpses.”⁴²

Secret Lessons and Schooling

Many adults, aware of the cruel daily life of the children, sought a way to keep them occupied. The adults’ main motive was probably that the children had nothing to do during the day and were behaving in ways that were typical of camp life. Louis Tas recorded the children’s reactions on 18 June 1944: “[t]he children here are hopelessly wild. The ‘lessons’ are concocted from laziness, incompetence, bigotry and badly processed Zionism. Mams (who is now a teacher) tells how, when the children are bored with their lessons, they ‘rattle off’ a Hebrew song, the words of which they don’t understand.”⁴³ Hanna Lévy-Hass points out in her diary that there were many adults who scolded the children’s behaviour and demanded severe punishments. Lévy-Hass was clearly aware, however, that the atmosphere to which the people were exposed was not conducive to positive reinforcement of the children: “[a]s if there could be any talk of education, as if children could be made to be nice and polite in this monstrously inhuman environment, where nerves are excessively tense, where adults hit, insult and steal from each other, where they shamelessly insult each other in the crudest way, where everything is polluted and distorted.”⁴⁴ Men and women from Star Camp looked after the children, either in groups or individually their own children. Shelley Cohn-Nordheim, for example, set herself the goal of practising arithmetic with her children so that they would not go wild.⁴⁵ She made sure that her son Moshe, eight years old at the time, taught his sister Hebrew letters and reading. In the absence of writing utensils, the children had to memorise what they had learned. Max Hakkert took on a group of six-to-ten-year-olds to teach with five women.⁴⁶ There were fifty to sixty children in each class. Hakkert estimated the number of children at around 1,000, with evidence of 888 children. Hanna Lévy-Hass was also involved in teaching a group of children, about 110 of them, aged between three and fifteen.⁴⁷ A twelve-year-old boy still remembers learning Hebrew letters written on sand in the camp.⁴⁸

The adults’ reports also articulate their own psychological needs and the need to engage with the children. Feelings of inner emptiness or loss and separation from relatives were to be compensated. Taking care of the children was a way of escaping from everyday life. Karl Ochsenmann, also a prisoner in the Star Camp, described the inner state of the prisoners: “[t]he pressure and mockery emanating from these barbarians [the Germans] grew to such an unimaginable anti-humanity that the enslaved were deprived of all joy in their existence. This kind of life made people feel useless. We suffered physically and morally.”⁴⁹ Another former Star Camp pris-

42 Transcript of interview with Francine C., 11.

43 Loden Vogel, *Tagebuch aus einem Lager* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 28. “Mams” is his mother.

44 Lévy-Hass, *Vielleicht war das alles erst der Anfang*, 12.

45 Video interview with Shelley C.

46 Max Hakkert, *The Horrors of Bergen-Belsen* (s. ed., 1945).

47 Lévy-Hass, *Vielleicht war das alles erst der Anfang*, 11.

48 Transcript of interview with Raoul T., 3. 12. 2002, BBMA, BT-933: 9.

49 Report by Karl Ochsenmann, *Jüdische Jugend in den Lagern*, Spring 1946, YVA, <https://collections.yad-vashem.org/en/documents/3549212>, 17.

oner recorded her awareness of her isolation in October 1944: “And now we were once again hot with envy of all those outside, beyond the barbed wire, who have the opportunity to admire human cultural achievements in all the many museums. That is just as enviable [sic] as the envy of the physical food out there in the world, for us who see only ugliness and dirt.”⁵⁰ On 18 November 1944, Lévy-Hass recorded how she found meaning in this task, despite the difficult circumstances: “[i]n spite of everything, the work with the children continues. I cling desperately to even the smallest possibility of gathering the children together and preserving in them and in myself at least a little awake spirit and a minimum of feelings of human dignity.”⁵¹

Classes were held only until the entire Bergen-Belsen camp complex was overcrowded, which made any educational activity impossible. The focus then became on meeting basic existential needs.

The Birnbaum Family’s Orphanage

Under the direction of Helene (Henni) and Otto (Yehoshua) Birnbaum, the Star Camp provided accommodation for orphans or children whose relatives had died in Bergen-Belsen.⁵² The orphans’ area was located in a women’s barrack, with two chambers in the middle that were originally used to store corpses.⁵³ The Birnbaums and other prisoners, including their sixteen-year-old daughter Sonja, looked after around fifty children aged between four and fourteen.⁵⁴ They had already received important support from Frederika Melkman in the children’s barracks in Westerbork. Her husband Joseph wrote in his Hebrew-language memoirs how his wife and their “adopted” child Nicky (Nikkie) were removed from the list of deportees to Auschwitz on the eve of these being deported to the extermination camp, as a result of Mrs Birnbaum’s indirect intervention with the three men of the Jewish Committee in Bergen-Belsen who were responsible for the list to be sent to the SS in preparation for the deportations. She argued convincingly on Mrs Melkman’s behalf: “[w]ithout Mrs Melkman we would not be able to carry out the work in the children’s home.”⁵⁵ The Birnbaum couple did not have to do forced labour for this job, nor were they initially called up.⁵⁶ By exchanging cigarettes and “organising”, the Birnbaums often ensured that the children were fed a little better and were after a while able to move from the mortuary to another barrack.

At the age of twenty, Liselotte Lehrmann arrived on a transport from Westerbork transit camp to the camp, which was mainly made up of orphans. At first, for six weeks, she was responsible for these children as a night watchwoman. She remembers that the children were generally very restless and suffering from their past experiences. She reports: “[t]he nights were anything but peaceful. There was always cry-

50 Wiener Holocaust Library, London, Tagebuch der Frau Zielenziger, 29 September–20 November 1944, Eye-witness Accounts: Doc. No. P.III.h. No.1118 (Bergen-Belsen), entry as of 12 October 1944: 4.

51 Ibid., 38.

52 All five of the Birnbaums’ children (Sonja, Regina, Jacob, Zvi, and Susanna) survived the camps and together wrote a book in memory of their parents: the Birnbaums, *For It Is a Tree of Life* (self-published, s.d.). My heartfelt thanks go to Zvi Birnbaum for the gift of this book.

53 Memories of Joschua Herschel Birnbaum, BBMA, without signature: Bl. 14.

54 Ibid. According to Yehoshua Birnbaum, all of them survived the camp.

55 Willy Lindwer, *Kamp van hoop en wanhoop: getuigen van Westerbork, 1939–1945* (Balans Publishers, 1990). I would like to thank Prof Dan Michman for sending me the book excerpts.

56 Ibid., 17 f.

ing and restlessness. Some children were caught in their hiding places, some came to the camp in other ways, but there was not a single child who was not injured and had not suffered some kind of trauma.⁵⁷ It was often difficult to keep the children calm. With the orphans, all born between 1936 and 1943,⁵⁸ there were Dutch Jews who had been hidden in the Netherlands but were discovered and sent to Westerbork.⁵⁹ From there they were transferred to the “exchange camp” on 13 September, where at least one of the young children was reunited with his parents.⁶⁰ Some forty-eight orphans and three accompanying women were sent to Theresienstadt by the Bergen-Belsen camp administration in mid-November 1944. All the children were ill and had to be quarantined there for the time being.⁶¹

However, many of the children living in the Star Camp also witnessed the slow deterioration and eventual death of one or both of their parents. One former inmate recalls that one day she saw two girls warming themselves over the still warm body of their mother, who had died during the night.⁶² In several cases, the Birnbaums arranged for orphaned children to be transferred from the adult prisoners’ barracks to the children’s barracks. In his notes, Joschua Birnbaum tells of an eight-year-old boy and his father who died in the camp: “[t]he poor man, who may have been a handsome figure in the past, was disfigured by oedema and swelling in his face and was thin to the bone. He couldn’t get out of bed that day until the SS man drove him out with blows from a stick. A few days later he was taken to the crematorium to be burned.” And of the boy’s mother, who was herself undernourished, he wrote: “[h]is mother was ill in the women’s barrack, and he, who had his bed in his father’s barrack, always came to help his mother. His mother didn’t last long either and died in the barracks.”⁶³ Joschua Birnbaum tried to get the boy out of the barracks, but the boy was emaciated and could barely stand on his “skinny little legs”.⁶⁴ In addition, the boy, who was in close proximity to his father’s body, could barely speak because of his weakness. Birnbaum, himself severely weakened by malnutrition, managed to carry the boy into the children’s barrack. He reported: “[w]e cautiously began to feed him some soup from the camp ration. As he wouldn’t eat anything, feeding him was a bit of an educational exercise. It was quite a while before he felt hungry and asked for food himself. [...] In the barracks he didn’t want to get out of bed for a few days, and without turning his face he looked around with his big sad eyes.”⁶⁵

Presumably, the endeavours on behalf of the children strengthened the Birnbaums on a daily basis. In his memoirs, Joschua Birnbaum writes that “[f]or the children in our care, we were prepared to fight the murderers, and thanks [sic] to our physical weakness.”⁶⁶ By early April 1945, more than fifty children were living under the Birnbaum’s care.⁶⁷

57 Memories of Liselotte Anholt-Lehrmann, *Ein Blick zurück* (German translation of the Hebrew book *BeMabat Le’achor*, published 2002 in Israel), BBMA, 5.

58 Daphne L. Meijer, “Unknown Children: The Last Train from Westerbork”, in *Children and the Holocaust*, ed. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 93–100, 97.

59 Thomas Rahe, “Jüdische Waisenkinder im Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen”, *Dachauer Hefte* 14 (1998): 31–49.

60 Diary Zielenziger, in WL, P. III. h. No. 1118: 5.

61 Meijer, *Unknown Children*, 94.

62 Video interview with Shelley C.

63 Memories Birnbaum, 16, f. 53.

64 *Ibid.*, 25.

65 *Ibid.*, 26.

66 *Ibid.*, 24.

67 Rahe, “Jüdische Waisenkinder im Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen”, 44.

As part of the transport of a total of 7,000 prisoners from the “exchange camp”, the Birnbaums and their orphans were also forced to board the train. Some of them had children with them whose parents had remained seriously ill in Bergen-Belsen. The smallest boy, “Schmuel”, was only seven years old.⁶⁸

15 April 1945: The Liberation of Bergen-Belsen

Between 6 and 10 April 1945, some 6,700 surviving prisoners from the “detention camp” were deported to Theresienstadt. At the same time, many more people from evacuated concentration camps were transported to Bergen-Belsen. One of the trains reached Theresienstadt on 21 April, while the other two were liberated at Farsleben/Magdeburg on 13 April and near Tröbitz/Lower Lusatia on 25 April. The orphanage inmates from the Star Camp were also on the “lost transport” which ended up in Tröbitz in Brandenburg.⁶⁹ According to British estimates, 500 children were in the camp when it was liberated on 15 April 1945.⁷⁰ British troops found more than 10,000 unburied bodies in the main camp. Images of a liberated Bergen-Belsen went around the world and quickly became synonymous with the horrors of the Holocaust. Hadassah Rosensaft, who was transported from Auschwitz to Bergen-Belsen in November 1944, is quoted as saying after her liberation that “[f]or the majority of the liberated Jews in Bergen-Belsen, there was no ecstasy, no joy at liberation. We had lost our families, our homes. We had no place to go, no one to embrace, no one waiting for us anywhere. We had been liberated from death and the fear of death, but not from the fear of life.”⁷¹

On Liberation Day, 15 April 1945, fifteen-year-old Hetty Verolme gave a short interview to a BBC reporter. When asked about her worst experience, she described the following incident. Her father, who had been ordered to work, was wearing a scarf around his neck. Two SS men saw this and took one end of the scarf in each hand and hung him up.⁷² In simple terms, the girl described her vivid memories of her imprisonment at Bergen-Belsen. The medical staff who entered the children’s barracks experienced the following situation: “[a]t first the children were afraid of the doctors, and when they appeared they huddled in a corner and hissed like frightened kittens, but it was not long before the fear gave way to an affectionate and pitiful trust.”⁷³ Questions such as “where are my loved ones?” and “where are my friends and family members?” were of existential importance to Bergen-Belsen survivors. Search⁷⁴ was synonymous with clarification – to know about peoples’ fates, to know what happened, to gain a clear understanding or knowledge of one’s situation – which was not

68 Memories Birnbaum, 28.

69 For the memories of the Birnbaum children, see the online exhibition “Whoever Saves a Life”, <https://verloren-ertransport.de/birnbaum-children.html>.

70 *The Times*, 19 April 1945.

71 “Holocaust Survivor Hadassah Rosensaft Describes the Day She Was Liberated from a Nazi Extermination Camp”, in *In Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century*, ed. Robert Torricelli, quoted in Menachem Z. Rosensaft, “The End and the Beginning”, in *Children and the Holocaust*, ed. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2004), 117–136, 119.

72 Transcript of interviews in Hetty Verolme, *Wir Kinder von Bergen-Belsen* (Gulliver Verlag, 2004), 338.

73 Dorothy Macardle, *Children of Europe. A Study of the Children of Liberated Countries; Their War-time Experiences, Their Reactions, and Their Needs* (The Beacon Press, 1951), 241.

74 “Search” in general was defined as the localisation of displaced children on a mass basis with the aim of reuniting them with family members or relatives. The “tracing” activities included both the identification of individuals for which the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration had received tracing requests, and the tracing of individuals by the so-called “Child Search and Registration Teams”.

simply related to a mere localisation.⁷⁵ Hope was closely linked to the wish to clarify if family and friends had survived or perished in the Holocaust. That deep hope mobilised an inner strength among survivors, compelling them to move throughout Europe in search of their loved ones. The reunification of Jewish children with surviving relatives was among the first of the priorities of Jewish and non-Jewish transnational operation aid organisations.⁷⁶ The testimonies of Jewish child survivors in the Belsen displaced persons camp, collected in the early post-war period, remain a moving and unique source for understanding children's experiences of the Holocaust and the rehabilitation work carried out for the youngest survivors.⁷⁷ Listening to child survivors is an essential part of understanding the youngest survivors of genocide and the horrors they were defencelessly exposed to, and in accompanying them on their journey to a new life. The children who lived and survived the horrors of Bergen-Belsen are the last living witnesses of the Holocaust. They can still tell us how the Holocaust began, on the streets, in schools, and in kindergartens. We should listen to them to learn lessons for today. The testimonies of child survivors serve as crucial historical evidence, particularly in an era in which Holocaust scholarship faces challenges such as distortion, denial, and revisionism.

75 On the issue of search, see also Tehila Darmon Malka, "I Am Filled with Hope That My Son Is Still Alive: The Search for Missing Children after the Holocaust", *Legacy* 10 (2017): 24–36; Tehila Darmon Malka, "Mi Makir, Mi Yodea? Mihippusei Kerovim Be'Eropa Le'ahar Hasho'a Ve'ad Lamador Lehivus Kerovim", *Israelis* 3 (2011): 47–69, in Hebrew.

76 Verena Buser, *Starting Anew: The Rehabilitation of Child Survivors of the Holocaust in the Early Postwar Years*, eds. Sharon Kangisser Cohen and Dalia Ofer (The International Institute for Holocaust Research/Yad Vashem, 2019).

77 Boaz Cohen, "And I Was Only A Child: Children's Testimonies, Bergen-Belsen 1945", *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 12, nos. 1–2 (2006), BELSEN 1945 *New Historical Perspectives*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17504902.2006.11087171>.

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