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Hungarian Guards of a Concentration Camp: Interactions and Atrocities in Bergen-Belsen

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Abstract: Bergen-Belsen is one of the biggest and most significant concentration camps in the history of the Holocaust. In this paper I reconstruct. 1. The Hungarian Camp between December 1944 and April 1945. 2. The evacuation and settlement of Hungarian military troops to the Bergen military training camp. (Truppenübungsplatz Bergen). This camp is also called as Bergen-Hohne Military Training Area. 3. The interactions between the Hungarian Jewish prisoners and the members of the Hungarian units between the two camps. 4. The controversial paths and memories of the atrocities against the Jews committed by Hungarian soldiers. The main focus of my study is a comparative analysis on the similarities and differences among the actors' fragmented contemporary and postwar narratives: the perpetrators, the liberators and the victims on the activities of and killings by the Hungarian soldiers. I analyze ego-documents (interviews, testimonies and other correspondences) of the survivors and perpetrators of digital collections and primarily from the Archives of Gedensktätte Bergen-Belsen and from the Military Archives (Budapest). I also explore the most significant military files as well based on the Archives of the Bergen-Belsen Memorial.

Keywords: Bergen-Belsen; concentration camp; DP camp; Hungarian survivors; liberation

Abbreviations

ÁBTL	*Állambiztonsági Szolgálatok Történeti Levéltára* (Historical Archives of the Hungarian State Security), Budapest, Hungary
FVA	Fortunoff Video Archives for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University, USA

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GBBA	*Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, Archiv* (Bergen-Belsen Memorial, Archives)
HIL TGY	*Hadtörténeti Intézet és Levéltár, Tanulmánygyűjtemény* (Military History Institute and Museum, Archives, Collection of Narrative Sources) Budapest, Hungary
HDKE	*Holokauszt Emlékközpont, Gyűjtemény* (Holocaust Memorial Center, Collection) Budapest, Hungary
IWM	*Imperial War Museum*, London, UK
VHA	*USC Shoah Foundation - The Institute for Visual History and Education*. University of South Carolina, USA

1 Introduction: Background History and Research Questions[1]

Bergen-Belsen was one of the largest concentration camps in the history of the Holocaust. The camp was situated in the Luneburg Heath (*Lüneburger Heide*) and was run by the SS Main Economic and Administrative Office (*SS-Wirtschafts- und Verwaltungshauptamt*). The total number of inmates between its establishment in 1943 and liberation (April 15, 1945) is estimated to be around 120,000. The camp-complex also played an important role in the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. There were tens of thousands of Hungarian Jewish citizens and also some Hungarian Roma who were deported there in several turns throughout 1944 and 1945, which makes Bergen-Belsen one of the most significant concentration camps in the history of the Hungarian Holocaust. Similarly to the rest of inmates, the SS forced the Hungarian deportees and prisoners into conditions of slavery. They were held in captivity in the Men's Camp *(Männerlager)* and in the Women's Camp *(Frauenlager)*. In both sections prisoners were subjected to severe starvation and catastrophic sanitary conditions which led to an immense deathrate. From December until the liberation, the commandant of the camp was Josef Kramer *SS-Hauptsturmführer*, one of the most brutal SS-officers in camp history. Between June 1944 and April 1945, there were some special Hungarian groups that the SS held in confinement as "exchange Jews" – which historian Nikolaus Wachsmann refers to as an "anomalia" (Wachsmann 2015, 337). These "privileged" inmates were detained in the "Hungarians' Camp" *(Ungarnlager)*, a unique family camp sector inside the broader camp, called the Exchange Camp *(Austauschlager)* of Bergen-Belsen. They were kept as hostages in exchange for Germans interned abroad, or for some form of material gain. (Billib 2014, 92–108; Billib 2020, 12–21)

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Not long before the liberation of Begen-Belsen, the SS evacuated the Exchange Camp on Heinrich Himmler's order, but only a fraction of the prisoners reached the planned destination: Theresienstadt (Terezín, Czech Republic). The other evacuees were liberated by allied troops. The rest of the Hungarian inmates stayed in Bergen-Belsen that had turned into "death camp" by then (Lavsky 37–41). In the meantime, the British troops arrived at the overcrowded concentration camp, which they entered on April 15, 1945, not long after the majority of the SS staff had fled the area. The liberators experienced circumstances they had never been explained or prepared for. They found more than 50,000 inmates, most acutely sick and starving. Among them were thousands of Hungarian Jews. The prisoners had been without food or water for days before the arrival of the Allied forces. More than 13,000 corpses in various stages of decomposition littered the camp ground. About 500 people died per day, primarily from typhus (Celinscak 2015, 160–177; Flanagan-Bloxham 2005; Shephard 2006, 201–205). Typhus, typhoid fever, and tuberculosis were all present in the camp. In the first two weeks after the liberation, 15,000 former inmates also died from complications of typhus, long illnesses, starvation and inadequate treatment by the British.

The liberators' first tasks were also shockingly difficult. Firstly, they had to restrain and end epidemic diseases, and eventually set up a hospital for treatment. In parallel, they had to supply water and food for the survivors. The major problem was nourishing the inmates when – in Bergen-Belsen – at least a quarter of them were unable to digest what was given to them. After the first weeks of solid food provided by the British, medical treatment and sanitation had to be solved (Flanagan-Bloxham 2005). Some 21,000 people needed medicine and hospitalization. The British set up a clinic in the former Wehrmacht hospital nearby. By May 19, all ill survivors were taken care of. However, the British were unable to handle the problems of thousands, who needed special, complex, long-term treatments and therapy; with special regard to those, who suffered mental or physical distress. In the former military garrison of Bergen Military Training Area (*Truppenübungsplatz Bergen*) of the Wehrmacht, the British allied forces established a Bergen-Belsen displaced persons camp (DP Camp) for the "remnants" of survivor Jews of North-Western Germany. This camp existed until 1950 (Lavsky 2002).

In the last phase of the war, in December 1944, Hungarian military units were evacuated from Hungary and settled in the aforementioned garrison of the Bergen Military Training Area and Barracks (called training area and the barracks hereafter). This area was initiated in 1935, and completed two years later for the military training purposes of the Wehrmacht's armored units. The training area covered over 280 sq. km, touching the concentration camp from the north and almost reaching the southern border of the small town of Bergen. Large barrack complexes held more than 15,000 soldiers, each were built on the western and eastern edges of the training

area. By an enlargement in 1940, the training area at Bergen had become the largest training area in Nazi Germany, which was divided into a West Camp and an East Camp. During the war, a number of other barracks, buildings, garages, depots and horse stables, recreational facilities as well as a hospital were also built there. In the years of war, the whole area and the barracks were continuously used for troops before they were sent to the front. In 1940, a Prisoner of War (POW) Camp was established nearby, called *"Stalag XI C (311) Bergen-Belsen",* and later Fallingbostel POW Camp (Wagner 2020, 76–77). In late March 1945, the SS evacuated the Mittelbau-Dora concentration camp and its sub-camps located in the Harz Mountains. Around 20,000 prisoners, including thousands of Hungarian inmates were forced to move to Bergen-Belsen. They were housed in buildings of the barracks that had been handed over to the SS and turned into a sub-camp of the nearby concentration camp. This sub-camp existed from April 8 to April 15, 1945 (Heubaum and Wagner 2015).

The concentration camp and the training area were strictly separated in many ways. However, on certain points of the training area the Hungarian soldiers still managed to get in contact with the concentration camp prisoners and some interactions were possible among them, between December 1944, and April in 1945. What makes the presence of the Hungarians special is the fact that Belsen was the only concentration camp that was guarded by Hungarian military forces during its existence. While much research has been done about the Hungarian prisoner groups of Bergen-Belsen by historians (Billib 2014, 92–108; Huhák 2018, 243–95; Huhák and Szécsényi 2014; Szécsényi 2019, 175–191; Szécsényi 2022), so far no work has focused on the peculiar and unique role of the Hungarian military units of the military training area. Only minor observations and sporadic mentions can be found in the secondary literature (i.e. Celinscak 2015; Cramer 2011), or defensive studies, that aim at minimizing the responsibility of the Hungarian guards (i.e. Babucs 2005; Tóth 2015).

The main goal of this study is to reveal the nature of the relationship between the Hungarian military units and the Hungarian prisoners of the concentration camp, with special regard to the soldier guards' role in the atrocities committed against the inmates of Bergen-Belsen in mid-April 1945. In this sense, the paper discusses two kinds of actors: the soldiers, and the prisoners. On the one hand, I focus on the Hungarian military men as a group (in some cases as perpetrators of atrocities and killing of prisoners); on the other hand, I observe mainly Jewish survivors, as the victims of the previous group. The paper is divided into two major parts. The first one, based primarily on the current secondary literature, gives a general overview on the evacuation of Hungarian military units to the Bergen Military Training Area and Barracks. Since there is no adequate secondary literature about the military evacuation to the West, I use the former soldiers' testimonies. The second, main part of the paper focuses on two principal questions, which complement each other. At

first, I investigate the various impressions, interactions between the Hungarian prisoners (the victims), and the members of the Hungarian military units (perpetrators) before the liberation, with special regard to how the survivors and the members of the Hungarian military units perceived and thought of each other. The basis of this chapter consists of contemporary diary entries, postwar testimonies, interviews of the former inmates, and largely contemporary accounts of the British or postwar narratives by former Hungarian soldiers. Secondly, I try to reconstruct the main characteristics of the guarding itself. The discussion about the Royal Hungarian Army's participation in the genocide of the Jews has a long history, especially in relation to the Eastern front massacres (Ungváry 2015). However, the myth of a "clean army" has been deconstructed in the past decade by military historians and Holocaust researchers. I argue that by exploring the fragmented military records and various narrative sources, it seems that some Hungarian units participated in such activities in Belsen that could be interpreted as crimes committed against Jews. This way, the framework of my paper is a comparative analysis on the similarities and differences among the actors' fragmented contemporary and postwar narratives. The analyzed sources have different value and liability. I could only find one contemporary source: a diary; but I generally turn to postwar ego-documents even if they were written right after the events addressed or decades later, due to the general lack of narratives of the major actors from that time. I analyze survivor interviews, testimonies and other correspondence, as well as the interrogation file reports and testimonies of the military units' members, including the perpetrators. I access these from digital collections, primarily from the Archives of Bergen-Belsen Memorial and from the Archives of the Military History Institute and Museum, Archives in Budapest.

2 Hungarian Military Troops in the Bergen Military Training Area

From May 1944 onwards, Hungary was becoming one of the Second World War's main theaters in Europe. The *Jászberény I/II* Tank Batallion – a unit of the *József Nádor 1.* Tank Regiment – was dropped into Hungarian territory. Its leadership established an independent rookie-training tank regiment in mid-November, 1944. This new, First Recruiting Regiment (*I. Újonckiképző Ezred*) conscripted military officers and non-commissioned officers from the Military Cadet Academy *(Ludovika Akadémia, Budapest)*. Its commander, colonel László Bercsényi was appointed by the chief of staff of the Hungarian Army. The First Recruiting Regiment was equipped only by self-propelled anti-aircraft vehicles and light tanks (*Ansaldo, Nimród, Toldi*,

and *Turán* combat cars), and other insufficient vehicles. That is why the chief of staff of the Royal Hungarian Army decided on training the soldiers in Germany, where they had access to adequate and appropriate vehicles from skilled Wehrmacht officers. In late November, Bercsényi was ordered to prepare the regiment for relocating to the barracks, which was also commonly called as the "Bergen panzer school" (*Bergen Panzerschule*). The regiment left on December 2, 1944 from the Párkány-Nána training camp by train and reached Bergen – most possibly – on December 3 (Bagi 1983, 38). The officers were allowed to bring their closest family members with them. In the training area, the units participated in basic and battle training with the *Turán* combat cars, but the Wehrmacht provided them *Pz III*. and *Pz. IV*. combat cars as well (Babucs 2005, 51). In February 1945, the German camp commander ordered the regiment to a combat operation alongside the Germans, but Bercsényi prevented his troops to participate. Instead, on April 9, he sent lieutenant György Kemény to Berlin with a letter for colonel General Jenő Major in order to ask for his instructions. General Major, then chief inspector of the Hungarian military troops in Germany, also refused the German orders (Tóth 2015).

There were two other Hungarian military units evacuated to the military training area also in December 1944. The Prince Csaba Anti-Tank Cadet School of Marosvásárhely (*Csaba Királyfi Marosvásárhelyi Hadapródiskola)* arrived at the barracks on December 9.[2] Their commander, colonel Jenő Altorjay, was known for his closeness to the Germans, yet he was the only Hungarian member of the German-Hungarian delegation of April 12, which negotiated the cessation of fighting and the surrender of Bergen-Belsen to the British. The second unit was the Rifle Training Cadet School of Esztergom *(Esztergomi Lőiskola)*, which arrived in Bergen on December 8 as a battalion under the command of colonel Zoltán Baló. The latter consisted of approximately one hundred men.[3] The Ludovika Academy officers and students were also eventually directed to Bergen instead of the original evacuation point (Grosskirchen), where they arrived on January 9. In January, some of the troops were accommodated at the Munster military training area (*Truppenübungsplatz Munster*) north of Bergen. The total number of Hungarians in the barrack is estimated at 2500–3000.[4] Based on the testimony of John Proskie, Squadron Leader of the Royal Canadian Air Force, the Hungarian garrison was stationed at the panzer school and was made up of 2506 soldiers and 281 family members (Celinscak 2022, 112).

The Hungarian units were housed in separate buildings of the military training area. The regiment, which made up the majority of the Hungarian army stayed in barracks. Lajos Szabó, former private of the First Recruiting Regiment recalls:

2 Brief Report, May 10, 1955, ÁBTL.

3 Command No. 13., April 30, 1945. GBBA.

4 Testimony of Miklós Éder, 16, n.d. HIL TGY.

> [Our military camp] is a beautiful barracks town, a huge armored training center with a large training area in the north. […] Behind a high but nicely constructed wire fence, a two-lane main road ran between the buildings, separated by a garden lane. It was the first time I had seen a road resembling a highway. Four single-storey barrack buildings enclosed the training area between them, and the restaurant and canteen building opposite enclosed the unit.[5]

There was a nursery and school for the officers' children and their wives were well cared for. The officers also published their own newspaper. From the end of January, their daily exercises were regularly disrupted by frequent British aerial bombardment and from the second week of April, by the British front that extended several miles, and by the German-English clashes. On the whole, the officers lived comfortably: their barracks ("huts") were equipped with modern facilities and bathrooms, contrasting sharply with the conditions in the neighboring concentration camp, where an epidemic of typhus broke out in January killing tens of thousands (Shephard 2006).

When the representatives of the British and the German armies signed the truce agreement on April 12, the majority of the SS departed from the concentration camp with the exception of seventy-seven SS-members (men and women), and camp commander, Kramer himself. The truce agreement also regulated the guarding of Belsen until the British forces assumed authority over the whole camp. Before British troops occupied the larger area around the concentration camp at 8 a.m, April 13, the British headquarters had transferred control of the camp from the SS to the Wehrmacht – and thus the Hungarian forces – based on the truce document. The First Recruiting Regiment consisted of 1042 servicemen (Szekeres 2005, 242) constituting the largest number of guards, but some members of the two cadet schools could also have fulfilled guard duties under the command of colonel Altorjay, altogether approximately 1400–2000 people[6] (Celinscak 2022, 11). Hungarian guards took over at 8 a.m. on April 13, and were in charge especially of the outer perimeter of the concentration camp (Celinscak 2015, 68–69). In the first hours, colonel Altorjay, head of the Hungarian colony, gave an order to colonel Baló, freshly appointed commander of the guards, to do the detail-instructions of "fortifying, composing and organization" of the guards under the supervision of captain Baumgartner of the Wehrmacht. The Hungarian guards consisted of experienced soldiers housed inside the camp under the command of captain Wiszkidenszky. The younger ones, mostly cadets and draftsmen, guarded the outer perimeter under the supervision of lieutenant Géza Ujváry.[7] After the British took over, the cadets also guarded the barracks, from where the Hungarian units were relocated into huts nearby the forest, whilst

5 Testimony of Lajos Szabó, 8. n.d. HIL TGY.

6 Testimony of John Molnár, 25. n.d. HIL TGY.

7 Report, April 17, 1945. GBBA.

the liberated prisoners were brought there, too (Bagi 1983, 43). As a result, Jewish survivors were moved into the buildings of the barracks that had been left by the Wehrmacht in the first weeks of April, and then emptied by Hungarian troops. The first unit of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, namely the Special Air Service patrols and groups were entrusted to make the Wehrmacht forces surrender on April 15, 1945. With this, the Allies liberated the concentration camp. In the following days, the British-Canadian forces kept pushing forward in Bergen-Belsen and de facto took over the management of the liberated concentration camp, as well as the training area and the barracks. The disarming of the SS members left the Hungarian forces intact. What made the takeover unique is that the British kept the Hungarians in their guarding positions for the next two days, until the afternoon of April 17, when they received new tasks from the Britons. This was necessary, because the new rulers of Bergen-Belsen had to deal with the elimination of a serious epidemics and the treatment of the survivors in the camp. On the other hand, the German and Hungarian soldiers remained largely unrestricted, allowing them guarding and walking around the area with rifles, hand grenades and machine guns, even after April 15. In their book, historians Donald Bloxham and Ben Flanagan mention Emmanuel Fischer of the 32nd Casualty Clearing Station, who found this situation "strangely comical," writing: "Everywhere were Germans and Hungarians armed with rifles and hand grenades. […] It was quite a common sight to see an armed Nazi walking out with his wife or his best girl" (Flanagan-Bloxham, 2005, 18–19). The camp guards, housed in huts in their forest dwellings, were allowed to hunt in the forest during their breaks on duty, and to trade food, cigarettes, and tools with the local population in the surrounding villages. This is how they could supplement their meager salary, which was not abolished even under British rule. After the first two days, the British released the guard unit and the German soldiers from guard duty. The Hungarian colony moved entirely to Munster from the quarters near the forest.

The first two weeks after the liberation of the concentration camp were a period of liquidation of the camp. At first, about a hundred soldiers helped to collect and bury the bodies. The British camp authorities led by C. H. Montague held the concentration camp area under quarantine until the end of May, and the initially woeful shortage of military doctors was compensated by recruiting English and Belgian medical students. Thanks to the heroic efforts, bodies of former prisoners and those who had died in the first weeks after the liberation were buried in mass graves.[8] The British started burying the dead by the thousands on April 17, 1945 at the latest.[9] The interring had lasted until May 19, when the last survivors were taken to the former

8 Testimony of György Kemény, 106–107, n.d. HIL TGY.

9 Medical Appreciation, April 30, 1945. GBBA.

Wehrmacht barracks nearby that had been converted into an emergency hospital. In the days after liberation, former SS members carried out the interments – a "dirty work" – as punishment. Recollections all speak of the terrible conditions of the prisoners, the shocking and demoralizing sight of the corpses lying around, and the fact that many of their comrades on guard contracted typhus, and then infected others.[10] After the former camp grounds had been cleared of the corpses the British assigned new tasks, which involved changing the function of the concentration camp: the survivors and the huts of the former concentration camp area (Camp I) were gradually disinfected on the spot, and disinfected persons were provided appropriate food regarding their condition. Some survivors were temporarily housed in buildings converted to hospitals where their supervision and temporary care was entrusted to Hungarian soldiers. This complex work was carried out by brigades of soldiers who were organized according to their original troops.[11] At the same time, until the end of May, the transfer of the uninfected, but weak and sick survivors had been going on to the evacuated Bergen barracks, from where the Wehrmacht troops had previously been moved to a POW camp. The British established different sections ("Camps") within the barrack grounds. First, a complex of hospital buildings (Camp II) was set up here. The Hungarian soldiers had to remove all the old furniture and secure beds. Those guards, who were no longer contagious, were moved to other parts of the hospital or to the former barracks building (Camp III–IV) depending on their state of health. During the process that lasted until June, the Hungarian soldiers had to be at the direct disposal of the British military doctors in the various sections of the camp, and under British orders, they had to participate in the transfer, the auxiliary work necessary for medical care, the purchase of materials, sanitation, etc. However, they were also in charge of the cleaning and burning of the typhoid-infected huts in the quarantine area of Camp I (The last barracks were burned on May 21). Still in April, the British forced the Hungarian soldiers to collect all the German weapons in the former concentration camp grounds and also in the military training area, handing them over to their guards along with their own service weapons. The diary of John Michael Hargrave gives, among other things, a vivid picture of the work of the "Hungies" who worked under his command from April 30 to the end of June. In Camp III, recruits and military porters were also on kitchen duty (Hargrave 2011, 31–32).

Hungarian troops were never legally considered prisoners of war. During their stay in Bergen, "special armistice conditions" were always in force and the troops were not disbanded. After the ongoing evacuation of the *KL* (concentration camp), their service in the camp was terminated on May 3, and they were transferred back to

10 Testimony of György Kemény, 106–109, n.d. HIL TGY.

11 Testimony of József Szekeres, 121, n.d. HIL TGY.

the Bergen barracks, where they spent the rest of their time under British supervision. They were essentially without work, until August 1945 and up until January 1946, when the home army units were transferred to various POW camps in Germany and Hungary.

In the following sections, I am going to focus on the interactions of the Hungarian military units and the Hungarian inmates before, during and after liberation, basing my work mostly on the narrative sources of the victims.

3 Attitudes, Interactions and Interpretations: The British, the Hungarians, and the Jews

Until now, the literature on the Hungarian camp guards in Bergen-Belsen and the presence of Hungarian troops in Bergen has generally focused on the regiment, because British and Canadian narrative sources mention only the largest contingent (see for example: Celinscak 2022, 53, 55, 207). It should be noted, however, that some members of the Rifle Training Cadet School of Esztergom also participated in the guarding, although their number is unclear and probably small.[12] All three Hungarian units were politically and ideologically quite diverse as a consequence of the general policy in the Royal Hungarian Army. The Chief of Staff, the Ministry of Defense, and the key figures such as the senior officers of the armed forces mainly belonged to the group of right-wing, avid Nazi supporters since the German occupation of Hungary (March 19, 1944). The majority of junior officers and the military personnel remained rather apolitical, however the anti-Jewish and anti-Soviet propaganda of the Horthy-regime as well as the ruling Hungarian government's pro-Nazi politics must have had an impact on them (Ungváry 2015, 14–90). In the British military reports and in the soldiers' depositions in the communist People's Court in postwar Hungary, we occasionally find descriptions about officers who were rude, pro-German and hateful towards the survivors who were predominantly Jewish, while on duty in Bergen. A subordinate described Altorjay as "a rude, stern man who was not liked," in a description of the post-war State Security Service, adding that he was also a fanatical "Hitler worshipper".[13] László Regéczy Nagy, a military training school officer, was strongly pro-German, calling his opponents "Bolsheviks, Jew-worshippers" and considering Germans a superior race. László Pató, who will be discussed later, was also a member of the far-right, radical, anti-Semitic Arrow Cross party *(Nyilaskeresztes Párt)*[14] and regularly greeted others with the Arrow

12 Testimony of Gábor Sinay, 9, n.d. HIL TGY; Testimony of Vilmos Kovács 5, n.d. HIL TGY.

13 Report, May 30, 1956. ÁBTL.

14 Report, November 25, 1958. ÁBTL.

Cross-slogan "Perseverance" *(Kitartás).*[15] On occasions, the first British and Canadian military records portrayed the members of the Hungarian military colony in a negative light, which could be explained by a general Nazi hatred. In an intelligence report written in May 1945, Hungarians were simply described as cruel and ruthless men. For example, according to British military officer Derrick Sington, "almost all Hungarian soldiers were primitive creatures who had become accustomed to absolute obedience. […] They were the most cruel and primitive manifestations of fascism in all of Europe, influenced by their semi-illiterate soldiers" (Cramer 2011, 79–90). On the other hand, some of the liberators rather described them as "useful people" for the British. The first impression of Leo Heaps from the first British Airborne Division of the Special Air Service was that the guards "were very servile" (Celinscak 2022, 67). Michael John Hargrave, a medical student from England, who worked as a doctor in Bergen-Belsen after the liberation of the camp, remembered the Hungarians as hard-working, against whom he was understandably prejudiced, but this feeling gradually dissipated as they were working together day after day. Nevertheless, Hargrave made his superiority show and treated his Hungarian subordinates harshly. His diary entry of May 7 bears witness:

> At 7:45 on the morning of 7 May, the medical officer arrived at barrack 217 in Camp I. [the KL] but was angry to find that despite his order on the previous day, the Hungarian prisoners were not there yet. So, he rushed to them, summoned them, and said that he urgently needed "Zwei Hungarians." The Hungarian militiamen, of course, immediately got up, saluted and went with him. Until he gave further orders, they stood guard in the barracks. "Without them it would have been impossible to keep order." (Hargrave 2011, 31–32)

It is difficult to reconstruct what information the Hungarian Jewish inmates had about the training area with the barracks in their neighborhood and when they first learned about the Hungarian soldiers. Survivors' narrative sources (whether contemporary or later ego-documents) are rather brief about the Hungarian soldiers, moreover the survivors' narratives combine different interpretations. The common feature of all of them is that they did not distinguish the Hungarian military units from each other using the collective term "Hungarian soldiers" for all of them. Due to their condition, the infected prisoners who lay in agony all over the camps struggling to survive for weeks after liberation were unable to give a detailed description of the Hungarian military men. In the period before April 12, descriptions of the "Hungarian soldiers" occur only sporadically.

Several sources agree that the Hungarian soldiers displayed slightly negative feelings towards Jewish survivors including the Hungarian ones. An especially dark picture was drawn by those who were evacuated via "death marches" from camps in

15 Report, May 30, 1956. ÁBTL.

Eastern Europe to Bergen-Belsen during the first months of 1945. These thousands of Hungarian Jewish prisoners were swarming along the fence of the training area upon arriving to the concentration camp. According to testimonies, confused, shocked, or angry soldiers were shouting at the crowd of lame, emaciated prisoners;[16] in other cases, the deportees were shocked to hear Hungarian words from among the camp's officers.[17] Some even heard a familiar tune from the soldiers in the distance after arriving at the concentration camp.[18] From the end of March 1945 onwards, members of the Hungarian military appeared several times at the fence near the concentration camp, laughing at the *Häftlings* (prisoners), ridiculing and humiliating them because they saw that there were many Hungarians among them.[19] According to David Polatschek's recollections, soldiers ridiculed the prisoners making them even more indignant; "I will never forget it," he recalls.[20]

At the end of February, Belsen was the last stop of Rózsa Basch's "death march" from Auschwitz that lasted several weeks. Upon arrival, she saw Hungarian soldiers practicing by the side of the highway, throwing stones at them for fun.[21] Basch's next encounter was what the then sixteen-year-old György Bognár also wrote down in his diary: the members of the *"Volksdeutsche"* SS (ethnic Germans originated from Hungarian territories) rounding up the exchange prisoners to take them on transport for Theresienstadt in early April 1945. These *"Volkdeutsche"* spoke to the prisoners in Hungarian, and, for Bognár, those few hours when both groups had a chance talking Hungarian to one another had turned the last hours before the transport into a positive experience.[22]

Survivors had entirely different impressions of their first encounter with the Hungarian military units. Seventeen-year-old Lívia Greiner from Győr was recovering from typhoid, when she witnessed Hungarian military men burying corpses in trenches. One of them thought that the girl approaching was an old woman because Greiner had lost so much weight through her illness that she resembled a skeleton. This encounter was her first experience with Hungarian soldiers.[23]

On the other hand, Hungarian servicemen had already been deployed under British rule to carry out a series of humanitarian activities regarding the survivors. This help had mitigated the survivors' earlier suffering, and due to this, a certain sense of thankfulness appears in the sources. András Herskovits considered the

16 Rella C. Interview, 2005. FVA; Anna Paszternák Interview 1996. VHA.
17 Zoltán Hirsch Interview, 2000. VHA.
18 József Regős Rosenthal Interview, 1995. VHA.
19 Zsuzsanna Hajós Dabrónaki Interview, 2000, VHA; Yehudit M. Interview, 1993. FVA.
20 David Polatschek Interview, 1998. VHA.
21 Rózsa Basch Pálos Interview, 2011.VHA.
22 Diary of Bognár, April 1945, HDKE.
23 Lívia Greiner Révész Interview, 1999. VHA.

conscientious Hungarian soldier looking after him a savior. In the hospital barracks, living condition were cramped yet survivors felt grateful because they had access to food.[24] For example, Therese Frankl remembers this period predominantly through the fact that deportees received bread from the soldiers.[25] Familiar gestures reminding of home eased the survivors' memories. For example, Margit Jákli, then 25 years old, remembers a Hungarian soldier lying in a hospital barrack in Camp I with a feverish inflammation of the veins, asking her in his fever dream about the people she had remembered.[26] Eventually, the soldiers themselves became prisoners of war, and in their new situation, they sought out contact with their former prisoners, who were growing stronger: progressing in their mental and physical recovery. With this, new friendships were forged in Camp III.[27]

Soon, for the first time the British doctors started appreciating the work of the Hungarian officers. For example, according to lieutenant M. W. Gonin's notes of May 1945, after the evacuation, it was the members of the Hungarian Tank Battalion, who were cleaning the emptied barracks from which the sick survivors had been transferred to the hospital set up in Bergen.

It is worthwhile to connect these mixed, diverse Jewish memories with the Hungarian military men's also fragmented recollections about the survivors. Zoltán Babucs, a Hungarian military historian incorrectly states in his study – referring only to former private Imre Bordás' memoir – that none of the Hungarian military servicemen had been aware of the existence of the nearby concentration camp until March 1945, when they caught the smell of burning flesh of the camp's crematoria (Babucs 2005, 51). Some Hungarian soldiers' postwar testimonies have disproved the claim of Babucs. In his memoirs, private Lajos Szabó recalls that on his arrival to the military training area on December 6, he realized that there was a concentration camp nearby. He noticed thin men in rags collecting wood in the forest belt between the concentration camp and the training area and the barracks. Stunned Hungarian military men shouted at the prisoners in the concentration camp, to which they received a frightened response in Hungarian. Szabó's recollection is all the more extraordinary because communication with prisoners was strictly forbidden. In addition, he noted that on the same day, some of them crossed over to the "Jewish camp" where women in fur coats sunbathed in front of the barracks and others drank coffee.[28] The soldier's observation corroborates his words, for it is clear from Szabó's description that he was in the privileged Hungarian part of Bergen-Belsen.

24 András Herskovits Interview, 1998. IWM.
25 Terézia Frankl Melkner Interview, 1997. VHA.
26 Margit Jákli Berkes Interview, 1999. VHA.
27 Olga Braun Szentgyörgyi Interview, 2001. VHA.
28 Testimony of Lajos Szabó, 17, n.d. HIL TGY.

The explanation for this is that at the time, the *Ungarnlager* (the Hungarians' Camp) served also as a detention camp for the second batch of the Kasztner Group. The admission of Hungarian SS soldiers to this concentration camp with severe restrictions was a very exceptional event. Confirmed by another soldier's memoirs, it could only happen, because on their first day the military laboratory toilets did not work properly, so the SS allowed hundreds of soldiers to use the special *Sonderlager* toilets inside the camp.[29] Unfortunately, the rest of Szabó's memory is not confirmed by any other source. Most military men date their first contact with prisoners in Bergen-Belsen to the first half of January, which is partly contradicted by the prisoners' recollections, and in any case, soldiers could see them through the fence or had to have a few minutes of contact with prisoners during military exercise. For example, according to the diary entry of lieutenant Jenő Koltai, who was engaged in training recruits, he first saw the prisoners on January 7, when he was exploring the part of the concentration camp beyond the woods and the barbed wire,[30] while others dated a similar event to the second half of February.[31]

In light of the sources, it is clear that many interactions must have already occurred between the Hungarian military men of the training area and the Hungarian Jewish prisoners of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp by the time the British forces liberated Belsen. Their attitudes were mostly (but not always) negative towards each other according to the cited sources, however, it should be pointed out that physical atrocities, or violence against the prisoners were not committed until the concentration camp's military takeover by the British.

4 Hungarian Guards at Bergen-Belsen: Atrocities and a Failed Investigation

Despite the relatively large amount of Jewish personal accounts and ego documents about the Hungarian forces in the historical literature, we can only read scattered, and brief mentions of Hungarian soldiers taking part in the atrocities and murders of prisoners while guarding the concentration camp between April 13 and 17, 1945, – i.e., while they were on guard duty (Celinscak 2015, 68–71; Cramer 2011, 79–84) – but a photographic record confirms beyond doubt that prisoners were shot from the watchtowers (Bardgett 2006, 148). In what follows, I will outline the main survivor and military narratives based on the very vague sources that have

29 Testimony of Miklós Éder, 16, n.d. HIL TGY.
30 Testimony of Jenő Koltai, 22, n.d. HIL TGY.
31 Testimony of Oszkár Toperczer, 17, n.d. HIL TGY.

prevailed, and then attempt to assess the events with the help of the equally incomplete military interrogation documents.

The violent behavior of some military servicemen as guards can obviously be seen in the light of the anti-Semitic (political) socialization of the soldiers, while this arguably could not be the only factor behind their aggression. Perpetrator violence is still a rare topic in the academic discourse on concentration camps, furthermore, it primarily focuses on the crimes (brutality, physical or non-physical violence or cruelty) committed by the SS and never the Hungarian guards. "[P]hysical violence in the concentration camps is neither evident nor self-explanatory but rather the result of a complex interplay between ideology, institutional setting and social dynamics," writes Mailänder Koslov (2010, 36). According to Karin Orth, the guard personnel were not a homogeneous or static group in the concentration camps. Adapting Orth's conclusion into the Hungarian personnel at Bergen-Belsen, a shared functional socialization defined them based on strong comradery, and masculine attitudes as well (Dillon 2013, 376; Orth 2010, 48, 51). In Dan Stone's term, the Hungarian guards could easily be "typical perpetrators", because many of them were imbued with radical ideas, and as soldiers, ready to act (Stone 2021, 94–95). There was a high degree of mutual social control in the camps, however, direct physical violence and brutality have always been present (Buggeln 2014, 6). It is fathomable that the Hungarian soldiers were informed about the extraordinary brutality of the SS in Belsen under Kramer's reign, which is why they could have been adapted to the cruel atmosphere.

Marc Buggeln sorted physical violence against inmates into nine forms, but only two of them ("murder in every degree" and "shot trying to escape") seem to be applicable to the Hungarian soldiers according to the fragmented sources (Buggeln 2014, 208–209). Yet, I argue that Hungarian perpetrators rather seem to have carried out "violence as social practice" (Mailänder Koslov 2010, 3–146) or "interplay of actors" (Mailänder 2015). In the following, I will discuss the actors' slightly fragmented and highly confusing interpretations about what happened between the different groups of Hungarians.

Lajos Szabó was the only one to describe in detail how the Hungarians were appointed to guard after the SS had freely, albeit hastily escaped under the terms of the armistice agreement on April 12, 1945. According to his testimony:

> The old Hungarian soldiers occupied designated guard posts inside the fence, we recruited outside the fence. With my rifle, I took up position at the second, but permanently closed main gate. The prisoners watched all this in silence, suspicious, not understanding why it was happening, and neither did we.[32]

32 Testimony of Lajos Szabó, 17, n.d. HIL TGY.

Survivors' accounts agree about those few days while Hungarians were guarding Bergen-Belsen. These accounts seem to imply that most of the thousands of Hungarian prisoners came into contact with Hungarian military men during this period, and they did not understand what the soldiers were doing there. Some inmates, in their confusion, thought the guards were Danube-Schwabens. The Hungarian guards had to wear a white armband on their left arm[33] as a sign of the British-German armistice, the so-called neutrality, which also symbolized their status. According to a Czech Jew, Judith Jaegerman, the Hungarian guards on duty shot at anyone of whom they thought was a good target, and apparently took great pleasure in hitting someone. On one occasion, she saw the guards jokingly shoot and end up killing one of two sisters who were crawling on the ground, sick with typhus (Jaegermann 2004, 51–52).[34] Seventeen-year-old Edith Barnstein, who had been deported from Auschwitz to Belsen shortly before, said that the soldiers also fired from the guard towers and killed a member of her group, but she could not remember the date.[35] The same was confirmed by Anna Askerger[36] and Ilona Fischer,[37] both of whom also spoke of soldiers shooting into the crowd from the watchtowers, without giving a date. Zsuzsanna Hajós from Keszthely, who was deported from Auschwitz in an open cattle-truck, arrived at the camp on April 8. On April 13, Hajós witnessed a Hungarian soldier shoot from the guard tower at a friend of hers, who had been with her since Auschwitz. Her friend's only "sin" was going to the latrine.[38] Lilly Kertész also remembers this date, especially the hours immediately after the departure of the first unit of the 63rd Anti-Tank Regiment, and added that "shots were fired from all angles at night, at people, at the ground, and at the barracks, too, only "for fun" (Kertész 1995, 212). According to Maria Holländer's testimony before the military tribunal in Celle, sometime after the SS had left Bergen-Belsen but before the arrival of the British troops, Hungarian soldiers had been shooting at Jewish prisoners for merely approaching the fence and one of the gates.[39] László Lukács, who shot Czech prisoners in the head on March 23, was later arrested.[40] Lukács was a rabid anti-Semite, according to the records of the military court from June. Finally, yet importantly, Pál Lichtenstein, a 22-year-old native of Berehovo, who had also been to Auschwitz, on April 12 witnessed a German cook shoot a prisoner for trying to steal a

33 According to a testimony, not everybody knew that they were not German soldiers. Elias S. Interview, 2005, FVA.

34 This was also verified by another testimony: Anna and Carl S. Interview, 1980. FVA.

35 Edith Barnstein Interview, 1998. VHA.

36 Anna Askerger Interview, 1997. VHA.

37 Ágnes Ilona Fischer Rotschild Interview, 1997. VHA.

38 Zsuzsanna Hajós Dabrónaki Interview, 2000. VHA.

39 Holländer, May 4, 1945. GBBA.

40 Lukács, 14 June 14, 1945. GBBA.

carrot. The Hungarian guards in the camp saw this but did nothing.[41] In the narratives, this period appears as a terrible day full of horrors. To those who remembered the events, nothing seemed to have changed compared to the previous period. This feeling was exacerbated by the draconian austerity of the quarantine camp at Belsen: a battalion of recruits marched through the camp every morning, wearing armbands and carrying submachine guns.

In addition to the shootings, other atrocities also occurred. According to the testimony of a former Jewish prisoner Zuzsanna Hajós, on the morning of April 15, just before the British arrival, the Hungarian soldiers in charge of the concentration camp moved a group of prisoners to another part of the camp, as a punishment for allegedly illegally hiding clothes and food (which had turned out not to be true). While a boy and his sister were there, they heard tanks approaching and saw the British with the white five-pointed star on their tanks. Even then, the Wehrmacht members threatened to shoot the siblings if they moved from the spot. The boy scrambled away but his sister, who spoke German well, was brave enough to answer in German: *"Look at the British! They will shoot you!"*[42] In his memoirs, a 16-year-old boy from Kolozsvár (now: Cluj, Romania), who had been transferred from camp Dora to Belsen in March, recalls that he sneaked out of the camp on April 15 to go to the nearby villages to get food. He managed to procure meat and received a bicycle as a gift, as well. On his way back, Hungarian guards saw him and tried to shoot him, but in the end, they spared his life in exchange for the food and the bicycle (Grünfeld 2007, 78).

It is not clear from the fragmented recollections exactly how many murders took place, nor are there sources to verify. In any case, it is likely that the guards shot several prisoners, and that this happened in the morning hours between April 13–15, in the "grey zone," when the SS had already fled but the British army had not yet arrived. There is no evidence to confirm claims about mass murders (Bergen 2016, 301; Cramer 2011, 80).

In their postwar testimonies, former guards tried to deny the atrocities committed against the prisoners. Oszkár Toperczer, a former captain of a recruiting regiment, echoed the opinion of many of his comrades: "The Hungarian guardsmen who kept order in a difficult situation actually deserve praise, not punishment."[43] Even decades later, Hungarian soldiers still refuted acts of transgression and crime committed by the former guards in the concentration camp. The trials and the documentation concerning the sentences are unknown, only from the fragmentary investigative material can one reconstruct the proceedings against the individuals,

41 Lichtenstein, June 4, 1945. GBBA.

42 Zsuzsanna Hajós Dabrónaki Interview, 2000, VHA.

43 Testimony of Oszkár Toperczer, n.d. HIL TGY.

and based on that, gain a different insight. What is certain, however, is that the British camp authorities were keen to investigate the alleged atrocities. In the Bergen and Munster military training areas, the military police interrogated "dozens" of soldiers from May 1945 onwards, for which prior permission had to be obtained from the British camp commander. In May, 16 Hungarian soldiers were arrested and detained on this basis (Arrested Hungarian soldiers, undated). It is not known why, but their detention lasted for a long time without the soldiers wanting to confess. In September 1945, 10 officers were finally transferred from the camp prison to Celle, the British seat of the military tribunal. The British were reluctant to hold any trials in the Bergen or Munster barracks for fear that the camp survivors might rebel against sentences they deem lenient leading to riots. However, Félix Oksay, who at the time of his arrest was accused of involvement in the murders,[44] and Brúnó Zamoray were released for unknown reasons (Cramer 2011, 81) creating a new situation in which they could expect a more rigorous investigation than the lax approach taken thus far. The lawyers of the War Crimes Investigation Team (WCIT) had to draft an indictment collecting a number of reports and some written testimonies. The commanders of the three Hungarian units – headed by colonels Bercsényi, Balló and Altorjay – were also interrogated in connection with the atrocities, the last of whom was detained on suspicion of war crimes.[45] All three officers denied that they or their soldiers had been involved in any criminal activity. In addition, Altorjay, as a senior commander of the Hungarian troops, stated that between April 13 and 15, he had been paying special attention to the Hungarian guards in the concentration camp and repeatedly requested reports from lieutenant Géza Ujváry, who was the de facto commander of the Hungarian camp guards beside captain Király (who presumably had escaped before the investigation, and his case had not been investigated at all). Nevertheless, Ujváry did not visit the concentration camp because the Hungarian guards there were under the German commander-in-chief and not under him. Altorjay stated that the Germans had kept all information from him out of jealousy.[46] According to a report, "there are many clues and proofs that before April 15, the Hungarians together with the SS carried out a number of crimes and murders in the guardhouse against the prisoners of the camp."[47] The charges against the leaders were subsequently dropped, who were then released from custody in September.

After collecting the verified statements, the WCIT submitted them to the Military Government Court in London for a decision. This Court of Appeal dismissed the claim

44 Arrest of Oksay, 1945 May. GBBA.

45 Report on Baló, and Altorjay, June 14, 1945. GBBA.

46 Report of Mérő, September 17, 1945. GBBA.

47 Report of the WCIT, June 13, 1945, GBBA.

on jurisdictional grounds; therefore, no charges were brought against the witnesses at Celle.[48] László Pál Gulyás, Sergeant of the Cadet School of Marosvásárhely, confirmed in court that Félix Oksay had fired from one of the guard towers at prisoners gathering for food distribution. This incident is most likely identical to the one mentioned in the prisoners' statements earlier, but Major and Gulyás did not confirm the murder of their comrade, and in fact, according to their testimony, Oksay accidentally shot an officer, Sándor Bagonya, in the arm while on guard duty, who later died of the infected wound.[49] In addition to the murder charges, some police officers were arrested, too.

In drawing up the indictment against the other accused, it was for the Military Court at Celle to prove at trial that the charges against the arrested persons were well founded and that they had participated in the offenses or had given such orders. This task was made all the more difficult by the fact that, according to a report of July 21, two hundred regular soldiers and six officers had escaped starting from the liberation of Belsen. The WCIT assumed that some of them had escaped prosecution because of their crimes and could not be interrogated.[50] In July, it was considered to prosecute the Hungarian soldiers who had been arrested along with the SS officers, but this idea was eventually dropped.

Yet, interrogations continued throughout the summer. Although the minutes have not survived, reports reveal many details about the guards. Regulations for the Hungarian guard, signed by commander captain Wiszkidenszky, precisely described the guards' duties and responsibilities. Accordingly, guards were provided with live ammunition for submachine guns, which were to be used only in an emergency and not to cause fatal injury. At the end of the shift, the duty officer had to check the ammunition.[51] Lieutenant Gyula Gombos, one of the commanders of the guards, testified that he had ordered for prisoners to be treated "in the most cruel way." His order was that if 40 prisoners gathered in one place, the soldiers were to shoot into the crowd.[52] This testimony is consistent with the prisoners' testimonies described above, i.e. the fact that shots were fired into the crowd. Moreover, the other memoir shows that on Gombos' orders, shots were also fired at prisoners who had simply left their block territory.[53] These serious, unrelated allegations clearly show the militia's intentions to fulfill the commander's order.

Apart from witness interrogations and arrests, not much else happened until September 1945. An article published in the Daily Worker in early September 1945

48 Report on Gombos, September 14, 1945. GBBA.

49 Depositions of Cren, Major, Juhász, August 1, 1945. GBBA.

50 Report on the Hungarians, July 21, 1945. GBBA.

51 Regulation, April 14, 1945. GBBA.

52 Report of Frantisek Oren, August 10, 1945. GBBA.

53 Report of Julius Ivanic, August 10, 1945. GBBA; Report of Julius Toth, August 8, 1945. GBBA.

about the special position of Hungarian soldiers in detention caused a little stir because it stated that despite the SS trials in Lüneburg, Hungarians were still not afraid of reprisals. Finally, Gyula Gombos was tried for war crimes in Celle between December 22, 1945 and January 2, 1946, and accused of ordering the shooting of prisoners. However, he was not convicted due to insufficient evidence. The shooting order could not be confirmed for lack of official documents. The court also sought the opinion of captain Clarke, head of the military legal team in Lüneburg, who concluded that Gombos could not be considered a war criminal. The military prosecutor was able to call three witnesses in support of the prosecution, including Officers István Major and József Borsos, both members of the fifth Company of the recruiting regiment under Gombos' direct command, who testified that they had been present when Gombos gave the order to shoot the prisoners.[54] However, the court took into account the testimony of 22 soldiers who had not been camp guards but were prepared to testify in defense of the officer. The court, therefore, acquitted Gombos, and transferred him to the prison camp in Wolfsburg.[55]

On December 3, 1945, László Pató was brought before a military court in Celle, and on December 6, the trial of Géza Ujváry followed. Both were charged with war crimes. Pató was charged with the murder of two unknown prisoners on April 15. Ujváry was charged with the murder of prisoner Bella Freundlich on April 14, 1945. However, both trials ended in 2–3 days: the court ruled that there was not enough evidence to convict them, and the defendants were acquitted. Important witnesses, who with great difficulty eventually appeared in the courtroom, were not called on the trial for unknown reasons (Cramer 2011, 82–84); according to the British military record of the trial, four witnesses gave clear and detailed testimony about the murders of the two military men. Ujváry not only shot Bella Freundlich, who was trying to pick up a carrot, but also fired into a crowd standing outside the food storage, wounding several deportees and killing one. On the other hand, no witness could corroborate Pató's murder.[56] The military court was supposed to give a fair verdict in exceptional circumstances, as the trial of staff sergeant Károly Vajna shows. Vajna was arrested in the camp on August 8, 1945, but his trial did not begin until December 11, in nearby Gifhorn.[57] According to the indictment, Vajna had shot civilian prisoners of war in Belsen. Although both witnesses (former prisoners of war of Czechoslovak and Romanian nationality) testified incriminatingly, Vajna's guilt could not be proven because neither witness appeared in person at the trial, but the defense called seven Hungarian officers who provided alibis. Despite the fact that the

54 József Borsos, István Major, August 16, 1945. GBBA.
55 Military Government Celle, February 9, 1946. GBBA.
56 Pató and Ujváry, December 28, 1945. GBBA.
57 Vajna Report, September 3, 1945. GBBA.

defense witnesses gave rather contradictory testimonies, the accused was eventually acquitted. Unfortunately for Vajna, he was again charged with war crimes at the military court in Celle on January 2, 1946, although his appointed defense counsel questioned the jurisdiction of the court, both, because he was already a demobilized soldier and because the shooting of the prisoners referred to in the indictment might have been committed after April 12, 1945, i.e. during the armistice. As no witnesses could be found to confirm the murder, Vajna was acquitted in Celle and released in September 1946 (Cramer 2011, 82–84). Apart from those, all Hungarian soldiers were acquitted for similar reasons.

5 Conclusions

Perhaps because of the media attention and Nazi/Germanophobic sentiment that followed the liberation of the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, British military legislation was primarily designed to investigate and sanction the illegalities and war crimes committed by the SS. Hungarian servicemen came from the recruiting regiment and other military units and were entrusted by the liberators themselves with guarding the camp, and who, for months, actively – and ultimately successfully – participated in eliminating the tragic conditions. For this reason, the military judiciary tried to stall the investigation of the Hungarian murders and atrocities, and did everything possible to ensure that the accused were acquitted during the trials, regardless of the substantiating value of testimonies against them. The ongoing desertions and departures of witnesses, and the soldiers themselves in the second half of 1945 played into their hands. It can also be said that the Hungarian guards violated their own regulations when they used live ammunition to take human lives.

Had the members of the First Recruiting Regiment and the rifle training cadet schools of Marosvásárhely and Esztergom been interrogated about their involvement in collective war crimes, the Britons would probably have had to answer for their own responsibility, too. Neither the survivors' narrative sources, nor military records have confirmed the Hungarians' collective responsibility. It is likely, that motivated by the logic of wartime violence and partly by individual anti-Semitism, some members of the Hungarian military units committed excesses and at least one or probably several murders of Jewish survivors in the days before the camp had completely been evacuated. The events described above also highlight the problematic use of the term "liberation" or "liberators" in the context of concentration camps from a number of perspectives. After all, the Hungarian guarding servicemen could just as easily be considered guardsmen allied with the Nazis as they could be considered special-status military units operating under British command.

From the victims' perspective, liberation did not automatically mean freedom. Survivors suffered from different stages of trauma. Almost all of them had diseases and were extremely weak. Most of them even had been debilitated by agonizing conditions long before the Allied troops came in the camps. The liberated Jews' agony was often coupled with hallucinations, and almost incurable conditions. Haunted by their terrible experiences they felt deeply sad and bitter. Survivors were exhausted and weak. Although the 63rd Anti-Tank regiment liberated the deportees and proclaimed that "you are free", the majority of the survivors did not feel free; many lived in a kind of "half freedom" in the following months (Szécsényi 2022, 163–168), and suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome for their whole life affecting the subsequent generation, who were also often traumatized by the experiences (Bakó and Zana 2020).

The issue of atrocities occurred and the interactions between Hungarian prisoners and guardsmen can be considered a highly disputed chapter of the Royal Hungarian Army in the Second World War in Hungarian military literature. Atrocities committed by Hungarian military troops on the Soviet front during the Second World War have long divided Hungarian historians. However, the *Historikerstreit* (historians' dispute) launched in the last 15 years between intellectuals and historians in often politically motivated debates have not resulted in satisfactory and fruitful outcome until date. As a by-product of the general, highly-politicized circumstances, researchers have tried to avoid research topics regarding the Hungarian military guarding tens of thousands of prisoners in concentration camps. The examples in my paper can be interpreted as new details, and even serve as evidence that have been missing from historical knowledge so far. Namely, proof of the Hungarian military units' controversial activities against prisoners, the numerous individual abuses and even murders. A comparative study about the interaction between the units of the Hungarian Royal Army sent to Germany in 1944–1945 and Jewish Holocaust survivors in other camps may also provide new answers for a better understanding.

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