Source Publication

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The Discovery of an Unknown Holocaust Testimony: The DEGOB Protocol of a Spouse

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Abstract: This is the source publication of a yet undiscovered DEGOB protocol from 1945 taken by survivor and interviewer Erna Galosi, recording her husband Elemer Galosi's testimony after returning from Bergen-Belsen to Budapest. The protocol was found in its original form by their great-granddaughter at home after decades of unvoicing the struggles and tragedy the family had survived. This testimony is first published here by Alexandra M. Szabo.

Keywords: Bergen-Belsen; Budapest; degob; Holocaust; survivor testimony

1 Introduction

Immediately after the Second World War was officially over, and the Hungarian capital was liberated, Jewish survivors who had not been deported and had survived the Shoah in one of the ghettos, the yellow-star houses of Budapest, or in hiding, were the first to help those who returned from labor and concentration camps. As József Pásztor describes in his private writings, the surviving Jews of Budapest immediately focused on their strength and instinct to regain consciousness after liberation by looking for those who had been taken away:

> It begins when masses surge to the surface from the basement dens, from hiding in the air-raid trenches and the bolt holes. … Beyond the horrible sight of the ruins of houses, and the unburied corpses lying in the streets and courtyards—the first thought was to look around: who is still around and who is missing? To determine the number, if there is a number, of how many of us have survived. What happened to our relatives, the elderly and the children, our husbands and wives who had been violently torn apart; what happened to our once cozy home?[1] (Horváth 1997, 19–20)

1 Originally quoted in Hungarian, own translation.

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Pásztor, who later becomes a leading figure for Jewish aid organizations in Hungary, describes the willpower of those survivors who remained in Budapest, and whose only wish was to find their families and friends once the bombings were over. This general reaction culminated in grassroots organized establishments that helped deportees who were stuck abroad and wanted to return home, or who returned in terrible physical and mental shape immediately after having been liberated abroad. One of the first relief organizations was the National Committee for Attending Deportees (hereafter DEGOB, following the Hungarian abbreviation of *Deportáltakat Gondozó Országos Bizottság*) established in March 1945. DEGOB's main office on Bethlen Square in Budapest served as a "center for arrival" which was visited by a large number of returning deportees. Besides the workers of DEGOB, the Red Cross was also present throughout the country attending to the arriving deportees at different train stations. According to the statistical data by the committee, 82,144 deportees went to DEGOB offices in 1945 and an additional 1187 in 1946 (Horváth 1997, 25). One of the main reasons that the Bethlen Square office seems to have been an important hub for deportees is that information about relatives was most likely to be available there.

The three main tasks of the organization were to offer aid to the recently arrived deportees, document all obtained information, and send expeditions to previous concentration and displaced persons (DP) camps in order to bring back survivors to Hungary. By the end of 1945, 26 expeditions had already been initiated and thousands of survivors were repatriated (Braham 1997, 1252). The task of bringing survivors back home intertwined with efforts of obtaining and providing information about lost relatives. Lists of Hungarian displaced persons and the deceased were gathered from the expeditions, which were supplemented by the registers of names that the returning deportees had brought back to Budapest from DP camps. The tremendous amount of information and the flux of people were difficult for the committee to keep sufficiently organized, therefore the committee "ashamedly admits that a lot was dealt with imperfectly, and several times the returnees had to spend the night on the floor of the halls, stairways, and the courtyard (next to the ghetto graves)"[2] (DEGOB 1946, 5).

While the newly appointed ministers of the transitional Hungarian state did not pay serious attention to Jews who had been deported, remaining more focused on the exploration of Hungarian prisoners of war and banished civilians, the context of the hardships of 1945–46 is important to note. The city had been bombed and the infrastructure systems collapsed making it difficult for people and news to travel relatively large distances. There was a serious paper shortage in Hungary at the time; political parties and publishers lobbied, competing with one another, for more and

2 Original in Hungarian, own translation.

more fascist books to get on the scrapping list in order to be recycled in the Neményi paper factory. However, reproduction eventually had to halt due to the exhaustion of the coal supply (Scheibner 2014, 56). This is probably one of the reasons that knowledge about the daily operations and micro-perspectives of DEGOB are rather scarce today. The structural establishment and changes of the committee were recorded, yielding a foundational understanding about DEGOB that has been extensively researched and written about by Rita Horvath (Horváth 1997). While DEGOB workers conscientiously recorded a considerable amount of information, including individual recollections, we hardly have any knowledge about their own individual lives or their approaches to recording this history.[3]

Through the continuation of the tradition *khurbn forshung* (Yiddish for 'research on destruction') that Laura Jockusch's research uncovers, DEGOB was one of the 14 documentation committees and centers established in postwar Europe to join the largescale efforts of collecting and recording personal experiences that bear witness to what had happened to Jews in persecution.[4] Employees of the Hungarian committee typed up protocols of testimonies based on the interviews they conducted when attending to deportees. According to the registry book, along with the original copies in the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives in Budapest, there are 3662 protocols that contain serial numbers and three that do not. The altogether 3665 protocols, however, does not consist of the entire database, as Horváth reveals that the World Jewish Congress took over the documentation of DEGOB on June 15, 1946, and the report written by the head of the Hungarian division Ilona Benoschofsky, enumerates 4600 protocols (Horváth 1997, 51).

A possible means to finding the missing protocols is to consult *all* those archives that hold Holocaust related documents in collections of organizations that were in any way in connection with the committee, such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; and of personal and family papers from survivors. Such research, while feasible, takes considerable time and money as related documents and the protocols themselves can be scattered all over the world since numerous groups of Holocaust survivors emigrated from Hungary in 1945–6, in 1948–9, and again in 1956.[5] Moreover, documents and manuscripts in connection to the work of DEGOB could also be dispersed anywhere, both in institutional or private archives.

The publication of the source material that this short study introduces presents precisely such an example. In the summer of 2019, I met an undergraduate student in

3 An aspect that would result in an interesting research project especially in the light of the tradition of *khurbn forshung* (*Research on destruction*) see: Jockusch 2012.

4 Jockusch 2012.

5 For data on emigration from Hungary to Palestine/Israel, the US, Canada and other countries, see Karády 2002 and Stark 1995.

Budapest who discovered a box in her home, containing some work papers that had belonged to her great-grandmother, who as it turned out had worked for DEGOB. I met with Erna Gálosi's great-granddaughter Dóra, who after asking her family, not only told me the story of how Erna became an interviewer for DEGOB but also showed me the papers that Erna had carefully stored in her family home. Erna knew French and German, so she had been immediately hired to work for DEGOB as she could also speak to foreign-language speaking survivors, and do administrative tasks regarding international relations. She had applied to work as a secretary or typist for the DEGOB committee because she had been unable to wait idly for her husband Elemér to return from deportation, and had wanted to be in the front line when survivors from all over arrived to the DEGOB offices. Because of her persistence, Erna had succeeded in meeting her husband upon his arrival from Bergen-Belsen, but she did not stop working for the committee and kept on conducting interviews, during when she also took her husband's testimony.

The protocol that includes Elemér Gálosi's recollection of what had happened to him in persecution is, however, not among the general collection of DEGOB protocols held in the Hungarian Jewish Museum and Archives. The protocol does not contain a serial number, which suggests that Erna decided to keep this testimony in her private archive. The decision not to register the protocol raises several questions, including ethical ones, while it is also a strong marker of the agency of those survivors who worked on recording history directly after the war. Why did Erna want to keep her husband's testimony a secret if she had typed it up and had kept the required structure of the DEGOB protocols? What led her to keep their memories to themselves when, as a DEGOB worker, she precisely knew the weight of her work? Perhaps, she did not want to keep Elemér Gálosi's protocol only to herself but still wanted to safeguard it for her family? What was the reason for her decision to store the protocol in a box in her private home? Does the content of the testimony underpin the Gálosis' motivation to keep it inaccessible to others outside of the family? Or was it, perhaps, a decision to lock away their memories even from themselves? Finally, what does this say about those survivors who strenuously collect and record in the immediate postwar era? Is this an uncovered example of the distinction between the private, communal, and public displays of remembrance for Holocaust survivors?[6]

Elemér Gálosi's account is a unique and rich protocol among the DEGOB testimonials. Already at first glimpse, the length of the typed document is outstanding, which comes as no surprise knowing the relationship between the interviewer and the

6 For a discussion on the delineation between secret, communal, and public memories see Wiener Wiesenthal Institut für Holocaust-Studien, "October 18, 2012 – Christopher R. Browning: Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony: The Case of the Starachowice Factory Slave Labor Camps," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pBGlyjmkb4A, last accessed 28 November 2022.

interviewee. The protocol is nine pages long, while the average length of the available DEGOB protocols is usually two to four pages.[7] The language of the document is Hungarian, the interview was conducted and the protocol was typed in the headquarters of DEGOB under Bethlen Square 2 in the seventh district of Budapest (VII. Bethlen tér 2) on June 25, 1945. Erna also visited other DEGOB homes in Budapest to conduct interviews with survivors, based on the found DEGOB box that contains the several notes she had kept: among them the Erzsébet Woman's School (Nőiskola) at 37 Ajtósi Dürer Lane (Ajtósi Dürer sor 37.) is listed, as well as the DEGOB Branch Office at 9 Nyár Street in the Seventh District of Budapest (VII. Nyár utca 9.) (Appendix Figure 1).

This publication does not contain answers to the posed questions, nor is it an analysis of the historical events recorded in the protocol; it only provides contextual details to the source publication and initial avenues of inquiry that the database of the source, the DEGOB Committee's work, itself raises. The annotation of the original historical document therefore is only partial, but deliberately so, with the intent of keeping the historical value of the protocol itself untouched. Unique to the DEGOB protocols is the use of the "camp language" (*Lagersprache*), that is how the German words are used by the Hungarian and/or Yiddish speaking Jews who had been deported and liberated from Nazi labor, death and concentration camps.[8] Generally, the survivors used the German words in their testimonies the way they had heard them in the camps, therefore the words the DEGOB interviewers typed occurred as the conveyance of the pronunciation allowed it to be understood and not by correct German spelling. Therefore, some terms and words used in the protocol are annotated in order to keep the original spelling within the text intact.[9]

2 The Original Protocol Translated to English by Mariann Köves

2.1 Protocol

Recorded on July 25, 1945 at the Headquarters of the DEGOB (National Committee for the Care of Deportees), 2 Bethlen Square, Seventh District, Budapest,

7 There are some rare cases where the protocols are exceptionally long, for example two survivor accounts from Szeged: protocol No. 3555 is 45 pages long and protocol No. 3575 is 32 pages long.

8 For language of the camps, see Levi 1988.

9 For further reference of specific translations and meanings, there are two glossaries available online. One specifically connected to the DEGOB protocols is found under http://degob.org/?glossary; and a more general glossary at https://www.jewishgen.org/forgottencamps/general/languageeng.html.

Present: Elemér Gálosi.
Born: Marosberkes, January 31, 1905.
Occupation: Mechanical engineer.
Last place of residence: Budapest.
Deported from a safe house[10].
Camp: Bergen-Belsen, December 15, 1944 – April 7, 1945.

The aforementioned person presents the following:
At noon on December 4, 1944, two Arrow Cross[11] officers and several policemen appeared in a "Protected House" in the Újlipótváros, who lined up the residents of the house, and having selected the fifteen to sixty-year-olds of both sexes, escorted them to go to the Szent István Park for "work". Everyone's protective passport was in order, of course, as they had already been checked several times by similar units in the previous days. Other groups from the surrounding houses were also gathered in the square, but no one from the bodies issuing the protective passports (nunciature, Swiss embassy) was seen, except for a Swedish embassy representative, who enquired, to the extent it was possible, whether there was anyone belonging under their protection; there happened to be someone, but that person stayed, just the same, as we did. My small child and wife stayed in the protected house, the police trying to reassure her that they were taking us "only to work". As during the sorting process in the house, a healthy woman was allowed to stay behind for her sick husband's sake, it seemed that this sorting for work was actually carried out with a relatively humane attitude. In the square, however, there were genuine Arrow Cross officers led by a gangster in civilian clothes, who was directing the whole assembly, while the district police officers, including some ranked lieutenant colonel, were merely subordinates,[12] and here we could already see that our fate was controlled exclusively by them. Before the departure, a military line-up was ordered. We were a mixed group of women and men; the majority of us, of course, never knew what a line-up was, nevertheless, the Arrow Cross commander-in-chief took it very badly that the line-up was not quite orderly; so he jumped at, and with his revolver shot at an approximately sixty-year-old man who stood a few centimeters out of the line; we thought it was just a warning shot, considering that the victim was unharmed, i.e. he remained standing and Reserve Captain T. standing right next to him witnessed the

10 Safe houses were a part of the so-called "international ghetto" in Budapest that was a part of the rescue efforts by Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg. This establishment helped Jews holding certificates of protection with the authorization of Sweden and other neutral countries to escape deportation. For further reading, see Jangfeldt and Watson 2021, Smith 1987, Vajda 2016.

11 This refers to the Arrow Cross Party of Hungary, a fascist organization that controlled the Hungarian government from October 1944 to April 1945.

12 *Subordinates of the Arrow Cross – note by translator.*

bullet pass through the flesh of his[13] neck. The Arrow Cross commander then removed the old man and sent him home. Eventually our march of several hundred men set off, on one side with the police, and on the other, the Arrow Cross guards as escorts. The policemen were trying to calm us down, speaking in a decent tone, and were obviously disgusted by this task they had been delegated to do, as opposed to the Arrow Cross men who were leading the march using a harsh tone, with swear words and cursing. We were directed towards the Teleki Square, we still did not know what was to happen, because despite our isolation we knew that just a few days before, housings had been set up at the Teleki Square, from where those with yellow badges went to work every day. Even though the Arrow Cross were very careful and kept us from daring to break ranks by threats of shooting us on sight, thanks to the twilight, some managed to escape by blending in with the passers-by on the street. We stopped only for a few minutes at the Teleki Square, where we were joined by even larger groups from the houses there, and directed straight to the Józsefváros railway station, where having been separated into groups of men and women, about 60–65 of us were herded into a wagon. This work was done by the gendarmes, who then remained with us as train attendants. The manners of the gendarmes was not comparable to that of the police, but rather closer to that of the Arrow Cross. It is also worth mentioning that the loading into the wagons at the station was witnessed by the German colonel S.S. Einhorn.[14] The train's chief gendarme sergeant's cruel and rough behavior was manifest several times on the way, both in words and in deeds. Naturally, the wagon doors were locked from the outside, and the prospect of an immediate shot to death was raised in the event of trying to escape. Some wagons had open windows, but others were fitted with completely impenetrable bars, without any openings wide enough to obtain water or food. Our wagon was fitted with a medium wide grid, which did not allow escape, but proved suitable for getting some food through it later on. The journey itself was very slow, with constant halts, and we still didn't know where we were taken, although the assumption that Germany would be our destination was obvious at the time. Our guides strictly forbade us to have any contact with the outside world, but we still found ways to get food and water at the stations. As we were approaching the border we were only able to get something at higher and higher prices. The peasants brought us water; at first, we paid only 5 to 10 *pengős*[15] for a bucket, later they charged us several times more. It should be noted that at that time a kilo of bread cost 40 *fillérs*.[16] Officially, it occurred only once during the six-day journey through Hungary that we got food, and even

13 *Referring to the sixty-year-old man – note by translator.*
14 *Name corrected in pencil afterwards to Eichmann.*
15 *Currency at the time – note by translator.*
16 *Pence amount of currency – note by translator.*

then not on their own initiative, but some among us collected a larger sum of money from the whole train. This happened at the station in Ács, where we were stranded for almost a day and a half. The sum amounted to about 40,000 *pengős,* which was given to the lieutenant gendarme, who then, in fact, gave us three or four pieces of dirty boiled potatoes and a single carrot per person; in money, the whole food was worth about a thousand *pengős*. There were, however, quite a few who came without any food or even supplies, as they had been accommodated at Teleki Square and had gone to work from there every day. On that evening, when we were loaded into the wagons, they had been brought back to Teleki Square, which was the collection point, however, they had not been allowed to go up to their accommodation, but had been directly joined to us. Thus, all their belongings had been left behind. Being stuck at the Ács railway stop gave an opportunity to a couple of our fellow passengers to escape; when the wagons were opened for fleeing, some of them succeeded, but there was someone who was caught and beaten up badly by the sergeant major; another young boy, who managed to get a little further, was shot in the thigh, "It is a pity I didn't get him in the head" the gendarme said. In the end, after having covered a journey that under normal circumstances would take one day in six, we reached the border and stopped at Zürndorf station in Burgenland. At that time, we could not have had any direct experience of the camps in Germany, and we had quite different ideas about the fate of the Jews deported to Germany after hearsay. We still believed that really the deportees had all been at work over there, probably according to their qualifications, and it was perhaps even a relief to be rid of the bloodthirsty, belligerent Arrow Cross bandits who had been picked from motley thugs, and thus we would live to see the end of the war, which as we knew would end very soon, under "organized German" conditions. At home, for months we had known from the news, apparently deliberately spread by the Gestapo, that those who worked abroad had bearable conditions, and those who were unable to work were also cared for. We were afraid that the gendarmes would deprive us of all our valuables at the border, but this did not happen, so we were simply handed over to an S.S. officer, who then counted us precisely and transferred equally seventy people to each wagon respectively. At the same time, we were given warm food, bread, cheese and margarine, which was just what we needed, because we had all run out of the little we had brought with us. It was here that a few hundred victims who arrived on foot from Pest also joined us; I will talk about them later. Soon we were on our way again, and could carry on taking guesses at our fate. We rode at fast-train speed through Austria and then Germany, stopping only for minutes even at the big station, so we weren't able to obtain water at all causing us the most agonizing suffering. At the completely deserted Austrian and German stations, there was not the slightest possibility to obtain anything. The public was not even allowed on the platform where we stopped, but their hateful attitude was still noticeable. At one of the

stations, a railway employee, who eventually took pity on us, wanted to fetch water, but was immediately caught by some kind of official and was led inside (*the building-translator*) among curses. At the Gotha station, we were lastly allowed to get water, so we finally recovered somewhat after our agonies. After a four-day travel through Germany day and night, we got to Hannover and soon arrived at the Zelle[17] station. By then we had been travelling for ten days, completely crowded, with little food and even less rest, and no opportunity to wash up. At first we had tried to help each other in solidarity but it was a very mixed group: individuals of completely different ages, different occupations, most having been to military and Arrow Cross forced labor, or having had dark memories of Gestapo internment camps and Arrow Cross cells, separated from their families, in a precarious fate, in the worst possible state of nerves; i.e., for those who had already had a weakened condition and bad nerves, the signs of nervous breakdown started to show.

All the deprivation and the terrible overcrowding had inevitably led to arguments and fights, not once. Very few could contain themselves by the time we had finally been pushed onto the rails of one of the Zelle[18] stations: Bergen. In the open air, however, we regained our senses, and the whole train of about 2000 people, mostly from Pest, some who had worked forced labor in Pest, set off on foot; and we reached the Bergen-Belsen prison camp after walking an approximately 7-km stretch. The terrible desolation of the camp was immediately apparent; otherwise, it seemed maintained and clean; behind the wire fences, we saw groups of different nationalities; as we walked along the main road, the prisoners were crowding to the fences here and there, mostly in striped clothes or with different badges, shouting for bread in Polish, German, and Dutch. Many of us still had some, because at the border post we were given a considerable quantity, so we threw it in to them, not yet knowing what a treasure bread was! In any case, it was striking to see the ferocity of animals with which they were throwing themselves at it, snatching it from one another; immediately inspectors showed up who tried to drive them away with sticks. Our group moved into Block 13, where we found Hungarian men, women and children. We had to move our belongings to another part of the camp to be searched; the Hungarians warned us to put everything we could into our pockets, and indeed, there were no strip searches, and we got our belongings back the next day. Of course, with some things missing. Eventually, we could keep all the clothes we had brought with us: even all our small items and blankets. We soon ended up with the Hungarian Jews already there; we remarked that they were all deportees from the countryside, mainly from Debrecen, Szolnok, Szarvas, Békés and other places in the Alföld area, who had been consigned agricultural and industrial work in Austria for the summer.

17 Correct spelling is *Celle*.

18 Correct spelling is *Celle*.

Their clothing was their own, but after months of hard work, it was very worn and tattered, and they also had their own belongings; most of them still had some food supplies, because they had brought something with them from their work and not everything had been taken away from them. These families from the countryside had come to Austria directly from the ghettos in Hungary, so they did not yet know, neither did we, about Auschwitz, Rawensbrück[19] and the other horrors in Germany. They had only been here a few days when we arrived, and there were about 2000 of them altogether. So we were in a prison camp, but without any particular harm. Our section of the camp had a Hungarian commander from among us, and in the individual barracks we also chose platoon commanders, barrack commanders, etc. As I had mentioned, we were completely uninformed about how Jewish deportees were generally treated in other camps, or even in other blocks in this very same camp. Our provisions and housing conditions were quite poor, but we did not yet know that we were perhaps in the most exceptional situation among all of our brothers and sisters suffering in Germany. Upon our arrival, we were taken to a disinfection room, where we were also given our things back and then settled in our barracks. The biggest problem was the crowdedness of the barracks: two of us laid in a bed already narrow for one person, and in three bunks above each other; the weather was not very cold there, so we were not very cold even in our unheated wooden plank barracks. We tried to keep the place tidy and clean, and there was always cold water available in the bathing facilities. We did not have to do any work; we only had to keep the barracks and our block tidy. Food consisted of coffee (5 dL) for breakfast, a liter of soup at noon, for the evening we got soup twice a week and the rest of the days coffee, but on those occasions we also got so-called *Zubuss*:[20] honey, jam, cottage cheese and *Wurst*[21] always of very good quality, but in extremely small portions. In addition, we received about 10 g of margarine or butter a day, and 250–300 g of bread. The main course at noon was a liter of soup or vegetable stew, mostly made of turnip with some potatoes, rarely cabbage, of very little nutritious value, and we were given such small quantities of the more nutritious meals that the daily calorie intake did not exceed 1000 units. There were quite a large number of Hungarian doctors among us, who then dispersed in the barracks carrying out their altruistic medical work; initially we had some medicine on us, but soon we had run out, and we received almost nothing from the Germans. We had already had many sick on arrival, mainly those from Budapest, who had been joined us at the border station, because they had been coming on foot for about three weeks from a cursed place: the assembly point at the

19 Correct spelling is *Ravensbrück*.

20 Correct spelling is *Zubuße*, which was the German term that Hungarian survivors used in their testimonies referring to extra rations.

21 German term that Hungarian survivors used in their testimonies referring to sausage.

Óbuda brick factory. They had been covering 20–25 km a day, women and men, many of them aged 60–70, and on the way, a lot of them had already perished from illness, from deprivation, and from the torture and the deadly bullets of the Arrow Cross. I had a few personal acquaintances among them, in the worst state of health; they said they had been marching for three or four days without any food, because the Arrow Cross had taken away everything they had, even their blankets, and they had slept rough in the rain. Already at this time, a large number of those with a weaker immune system had enteritis, and at this stage, there was almost no medical charcoal or any other medicine at all. Later, the medical facilities improved; the Germans set up a separate hospital barrack, and some medications were available, so our doctors organized an outpatient clinic. Patients were able to get slightly better food supply, there were volunteer nurses, but unfortunately all this was not enough to provide adequate help in the event of a serious illness, so deaths occurred every day. At first, there were two or three, later seven or eight cases a day, so in the end 10–15 % of us had died in the camp in Bergen Belsen during our four months there. Slowly, we gained information about the areas surrounding the camp. In the rest of the camp there was generally no production either, only chores to sustain the camp: kitchen, food transport, sewerage, alterations, workshops etc. However, from our section of the camp nobody was taken away even for these jobs. In later months, it occurred, but rather only on a voluntary basis by our comrades who were not yet too weak, as it involved some extra food, so they were happy to do it. To what we owed this exceptional treatment, we are still not sure today. It is, however, probable that they had some purpose in mind for us, and even our leaders believed that there had been negotiations with the Swiss Red Cross in the sense that they would exchange us for medicine or other consideration. Those S.S. officers or non-commissioned officers with whom the command had a direct contact called us *Schonungslager*[22] indeed; even if we did not hear this officially, we were treated distinctively from the other camp quarters, as is clear in comparison to the other camp areas and obvious from the above. Although our part of the camp was strictly segregated, we discovered through the neighboring camps, and through the grapevine that there were other Jews of other nationalities, such as Polish, Slovak, Dutch, Yugoslav, French, and Spanish Jews in a similar exceptional situation to ours. Many more transports arrived in the months of December and January after our group: Hungarian Jewish women, and at other times Hungarian Jewish men. We got to know that many of us had relatives among the women, and then we corresponded with them clandestinely; but they were not placed in *Sonderlager*.[23] They got worse food than we did, they also had to work in part, their accommodation was much worse, and their supervisors were Polish Jewish women, whose long years spent in the camps had

22 *Protection camp – note by translator.*

23 *Special camp – note by translator.*

made them hostile and ruthless. The relatives naturally tried to reunite with their close family members by asking the superiors, but unfortunately, apart from one or two cases, this effort failed. Many had their immediate relatives, wives or daughters perishing in such circumstances, as it were a few steps away, without them being able to help, although the slightest kindness might have saved lives. This camp of Hungarian women counted about 30,000 persons at the time of liberation; many of us went back to B.B.[24] later, after liberation, and only then did we learn what a terrible devastation starvation, disease, and ill-treatment of the last weeks had caused. At the beginning of February, we were transferred to Block 40, which was also there. Into our abandoned barracks, mostly Hungarian Jewish boys arrived from Bor and other labor camps. This section of the camp must have numbered about 10,000. All the horrors of the German camps that we had heard about since were also present in this camp section. Vague shadows in bare bones, wearing a single striped cloak were traipsing, under the cruel Ukrainian Kapos' supervision, they were ordered to "*appell*"[25] or to stand outside for entire days until they collapsed and were beaten to death. There were between 400 and 500 deaths a day, there was a day when 800 died; they themselves had to push their own dead piled on carts in front of our camp, that is to say, heaps of naked bones and skin. According to our information, cannibalism had also occurred among these unfortunate victims whose fate could not be compared to that of humans or animals. I do not think that anyone had survived from this part of the camp; actually two of them had managed to escape to us as we were leaving Bergen Belsen, who then confirmed and supplemented what we had directly seen. In this dreadful environment in Belsen, in our *Sonderlager* we had a tolerable life under more humane conditions. There were also a lot of worthy intellectuals among the families from the countryside: doctors, lawyers, farmers, teachers, many rural rabbis and other religious believers of the Orthodox church. Among those from Pest, there were many journalists, artists, engineers, teachers, people who had travelled the world, therefore a kind of cultural life began to form with many interesting lectures, entertainments and artistic performances. The Orthodox held daily services at the prescribed time, and readings were given on Saturdays from the copies of the Torah, which had also been brought by the people from the countryside. I don't know if there could have been another case where, like at ours, Passover matzah was baked, for which the Germans provided special flour (of course only for a few pieces of Passover matzah which was needed for the Seder), and during Easter they even allowed a special Easter meal for about 200 people, providing potatoes instead of bread. Otherwise, about a hundred people ate "kosher" food all the time, i.e. officially, no meat was put in their soup of turnip at noon. The

24 Abbreviation of the Bergen-Belsen camp.

25 *Appell* originally means the camp roll call, here used as a verb meant to stand in the queue or order of the camp roll call for an extensive amount of time and/or under extreme conditions.

Germans arranged a *Kinderheim*[26] for mothers with small children or children without relatives. Children under the age of one were given half a liter of milk daily for the entire time. In several cases, the children were also given extra sugar. We also received a Swedish Red Cross parcel at Christmas and one before Easter. Medical care had also improved, and we all received a typhoid vaccination. All of this sounds quite nice, but the reality was terribly bleak, unfortunately. From February onwards, the diet was steadily deteriorating, the main course of turnip soup was extremely poor, edema and enteritis began to appear en masse, bread rations were not given regularly, sometimes only 150 g, and the *Zulag*[27] rations were reduced in several cases, so by March and April, everybody had become very weak in general. All this was accompanied by the major enemy: lice, which was proliferating in huge numbers in our *Sonderlager*, too. According to medical reports, some were literally devoured by them. But for this, one had to practically abandon himself mentally and physically, trade his food for cigarettes, etc. Unfortunately, we had no hygiene products at our disposal apart from cold water, and at the end of March, a serious disinfection was carried out finally, so from then on we were rid of our bloodsuckers, and seen that we left the camp soon afterwards, we had recovered in this respect more or less. On the one hand, by then the steady weakening of the food supply had caused the most agonizing starvation, so in a few months, the majority of us would have inevitably perished, for that reason alone. It was only natural that everyone carefully guarded his meagre ration, which in turn led to the fact that solidarity had basically disappeared, everyone was vigilant that nobody else should get a crumb more at the rationing, and there were many arguments and quarrels over either perceived, or actual grievances of this kind. The vermin in the cramped sleeping quarters, the terrible overcrowding wore the people more and more down; petty larcenies and thefts of food and clothing were commonplace, so our life was also very miserable. With their encouraging words to persevere, certain barrack commanders played a truly noble role in maintaining our strength; for most of us the high standard performances of our camp poets and singers, which often went beyond mere entertainment, were a really important factor for our steadfast perseverance and confidence in our escape. Our journalists organized a news service. Needless to say, one of our greatest difficulties was the total isolation from the events of the outside world which had surrounded us for months from our arrival. We didn't see even a sign of a newspaper. After long weeks, a scrap of a newspaper somehow reached us, from which we could not learn anything, of course. The immediate events of the war also eluded us. Once we heard a big air raid from the direction of Hanover, and the next day, indeed, we got no bread because the bread factory had been bombed. It was only the continuous flight of American planes passing overhead that led us to the optimistic

26 *Children's home –note by translator.*

27 Here *Zulag* translates to all camp food that was put on bread (sausage, jam, etc.)

conclusion that the end could not have been far away. Then, once, in March, we found flyers in which the Crimean conference of the three allies was commemorated, and some of the major news of the war about the battles at the Rhine and under Berlin were published. One can imagine how this news, truly from up above, passed from hand to hand like a treasure. Our newspaper editors, as I have said, had already started to organize a serious news service. In one way or another, French radio broadcasts managed to reach us through certain medical connections – I do not know through how many channels – and although we received the news and reports of the huge offensives with some disbelief, we began to see our hopes realized. At the same time, and not without reason, we were apprehensive about how the S.S. would make our final days unforgettable, or, knowing their despicable, killer mentality, destroy us. By this time, we had learnt[28] a lot from those who arrived later. In the meantime, the combinations concerning our transport to Switzerland or Sweden were still ongoing, and only with this could we explain the special treatment, which, when looking at some groups, could sound quite nice for an outsider (Twice we were given Red Cross cards in order to write to our relatives at home, but that turned out to be just window dressing.) For the time being not to abroad, but they really wanted to transfer us to another, better camp. The preparations for this had been going on for several weeks, and finally, the *Sonderlager* of about 4000 people, did indeed leave in three groups on April 7. We believed that our destination would be Theresienstadt. It was a great joy for us to leave this terrible camp where we had left many of our good friends and relatives. We used to escort them on their last journey as far as the barbed wire of the Block gate, and from there the Ukrainian driver took them to the incinerator. Once it happened that one of our young comrades was killed by a lethal bullet of an S.S. guard, i.e. he went out in the evening to steal carrots. The whole camp had to walk around the victim laid out in the yard. The others fell victim to the various diseases, or died due to the terrible Budapest-Hegyeshalom death march. Fortunately, for us, there had not been any epidemic. Our deteriorated, starving bodies without medicine would have been a sure prey, just as in the other camps. As I have already mentioned, on April 7, I set out with the first group from the desolate, soulless environment of months of barbed wire, roofless barracks, wet sandy soil and S.S. watchtowers. We finally got out and, even if still to an uncertain fate, at least rid of this cursed place. On the way out, we had a last glimpse at the half-dead of Block 13, and then, followed by a dense group of S.S. guard escorts assigned to us, we headed out again to the Bergen station. Besides the great losses, our number had grown with two new-born "prisoners" who had been born in Bergen-Belsen. A wretched procession covered the march again, a mixture of men, women and children, all shabby, hungry, carrying bundles and rucksacks. Miraculously, 70–80 year old women with a year of suffering behind them were still making

28 … *about the events – note by translator.*

their way home. We were provided with a few days' supplies. We were loaded into wagons at the station, only then we were merely 40 to 50 in a car, mostly in passenger cars. Our guards generally did not show any particularly harsh attitude we had been used to, nor did they ask how many of us there were. We set off in the direction of Berlin, before Berlin we turned south, and we stopped in a valley after three days' of travel, not far from Magdeburg. On the way we met some *Häftling*[29] trains, about 100 people must have been crammed in an open wagon, and were taken to Bergen. We met some of them later: they had had a horrid experience there, their journey itself was terrible, to say the least; anyone who dropped something and bent down to recollect it, was crushed by the others. At the larger stations we saw the utmost destruction everywhere, otherwise we were not even locked up; we were allowed to move about quite freely. We were still stalling the next day, and our train leader told us that there were American outposts about 20–25 km away. Some S.S. men disappeared, others started to act in our favor, handing out things, hardly guarding us; we had very little food left, so many sneaked out to nearby villages: here and there we managed to get something. We experienced a rather dangerous situation the following night: in our immediate vicinity a German artillery started firing at American planes; our train also had an anti-aircraft cannon that also interfered, so there could easily have been a major trouble, but fortunately, our train was not hit by any bombs. The next day we were steadfast waiting for the big event, it was already announced from a few nearby villages that the white flag had been raised; in the afternoon, the first messengers came: they had met an American tank, they would be here soon. In the early afternoon, the redemption that we had been waiting and hoping for months happened: the American tanks appeared. Of course, most of the camp filed out to meet them, and our remaining S.S. men were immediately captured and taken away. Shortly afterwards food was sent from a nearby village by American Red Cross trucks, and the next day everyone was sick in their stomachs. We stalled for another day after our liberation, but then in a mood of boundless joy. The Americans immediately set to work to find suitable accommodation for us; ordering carriages from the villages and transporting us to Hillersleben, a former military camp nearby. April 13 was the day of our never-to-be-forgotten liberation, and on the 15th we were already in Hillersleben, where we were housed in the private homes of officers' families and in various other buildings; in the best accommodations they could find. A hospital was immediately organized, with the participation of American and Hungarian doctors. We had several hundred patients at this time, chiefly with diarrhea and fever, and soon afterwards several cases of camp typhoid, paratyphoid and stomach typhoid. The totally exhausted organisms could not cope any longer. Most of the Hungarian doctors were also so weak that a large number of American doctors and nursing staff had to be brought in, with

29 *Prisoner – note by translator.*

plenty of medicine, and later, German army doctors and nurses, too. Unfortunately, despite all their caution, the typhus claimed many losses, so some 200 died out of the 2000 freed people. Eventually, the epidemic was brought under control. The hospitals gradually emptied out. The Americans paid attention to everything: housing, food, clothing, and constant health checks. But we were still missing the contact with the outside world very much. Even though the final defeat of the Germans, i.e. the conclusion of the armistice, was to happen only in three weeks from then, we were impatient to get in touch with those back home. Unfortunately, this did not happen, although it was the most important for us, as we had no reliable information about Budapest and our families, nor about our relatives in the countryside. We waited to be contacted by a Jewish organization, but this only happened to the extent that a Joint commissioner from Paris came to collect children up to the age of 14 who wanted to emigrate to Palestine, and took them to Paris. We had no other complaints, and also we could not have, except that we could not get in touch with our relatives. It was here that we got to know our comrades of other nationalities in Bergen Belsen: Polish, Lithuanian, Latvian, Yugoslav, Greek, Slovak, Dutch, French, Italian Jews, who were altogether between 500 and 600. Those from the West were soon repatriated, followed by the Slovaks, then the Poles left westwards, and finally the group of Hungarians, Romanians, and Yugoslavs remained. We were becoming increasingly impatient for some sort of an official action, but nothing like that happened; the English speaking command was eventually replaced by a Russian one, given that we had fallen into their zone of occupation, which we expected would make it easier for us to return home. The Russian command was also most considerate, and we had the most cordial relations with both, the American and Russian military, even holding cultural performances and football matches in each other's honor. As official procedures were still delayed, but we were not hindered in our freedom of movement, individual expeditions had started off, initially only to the nearby camps in order to seek out relatives; but later groups formed and started the journey home. Unfortunately, we still had no access to any news, so we had no information of the fate of these independent groups and each new group seemed to be yet another rather uncertain venture. After I had had enough of the situation, and having regained my strength, I, too, set off with several of my friends, and we arrived at the Czech border without any problems. From there, with the help of the Czech authorities and the Hungarian delegation in Prague, I arrived home after five days of train travel without any problems.

My future plans: my wife and child have survived the torments of the Pest ghetto; I have found them here, but I lost all of my other relatives. For now, I carry on working in my old job.

Signed: Elemér Gálosi, Mechanical Engineer MA.

The protocol was recorded by: Erna Gertler[30]

30 Erna Gálosi signs the interview with her maiden name, Erna Gertler.

Appendix

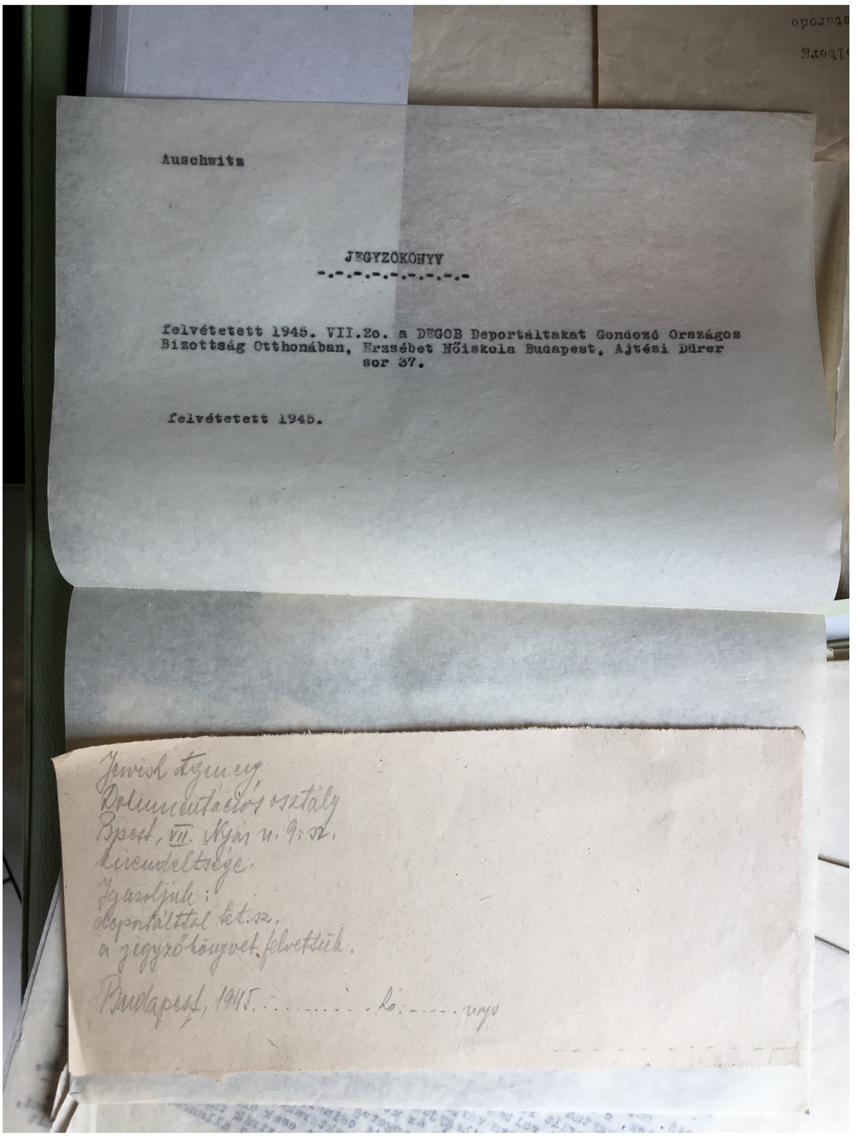

Figure 1: Personal photograph of manuscripts and notes taken by Erna Gálosi.

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