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"And then We Were Taken to Ravensbrück." Early Oral Testimonies About Ravensbrück and Its Sub Camps

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Abstract: This article focuses on the analysis and interpretation of 15 testimonies collected immediately after the war by David Boder and by the Polish Historical Institute in Sweden with women deported to Auschwitz, evacuated to Ravensbrück in its last two phases and then to Malchow. The study of their statements can provide both a historical overview of Ravensbrück and its sub camps in 1944 and 1945, and help identify the effects of the camp, an overthrown social context, on individuals, women in this case, and groups. The comparative exam of the interviews allows to identify the crucial events and experiences which constitute the core of the interviewees'narration and representation of the events. The situations and episodes they chose to recall may explain their perception of the events and reveals a gendered perspective which affected their memories in terms of the selection of the events and their focus on specific issues. The memories were recalled in relation to social frames, which were different from those the survivors were previously used to and pertained to the context of the camp. These coordinates constitute a net which can provide an insight into the mechanism of memory construction and early representation of the Holocaust.

Keywords: Holocaust; Oral testimonies; memory; deculturation; Malchow; Ravensbrück

1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to analyse and interpret 15 testimonies collected immediately after the war with women who had been deported to Auschwitz, evacuated to Ravensbrück in its last two phases, and ended up in Malchow. Judith

All the quotes from David Boder's interviews can be found at https://voices.library.iit.edu/david_boder; the interviews by PIZ at http://www.alvinportal.org. I kept the transcription of German words as it was in the English translation of the interviews both in Boder's collection and in PIZ.

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Buber Agassi divides the history of the Ravensbrück complex into five periods. About the last two she writes: "Period IV, from August 1944, when Ravensbrück started to become a slave market for Jewish women and girls who had survived until then in Auschwitz and in Hungary, until the end of 1944. The first four months of 1945 until the end of the war in Europe constitute Period V, the last stage of the camp, with thousands of Jewish women arriving from Auschwitz and other disbanded concentration and labor camps."[1] Among the 15 interviews, four were collected by the psychologist David P. Boder, 11 were given by Polish Jewish refugees liberated by the Swedish Red Cross, to the Polish Research Institute in Lund (PIZ), whose leader was Zygmunt Lakocinski. The analysis will focus on the way the witnesses talked about their experience, the spatial and chronological frameworks of their memories, and the episodes they chose to recall. The study of their statements can both provide a historical overview of Ravensbrück and its sub camps, like Malchow in 1944 and 1945, and help identify the effects of the camp, an overthrown social context, on individuals, women in this case, and groups. I will make a comparative exam of the interviews, studying them individually and collectively. As a result, it will be possible to identify the crucial events and experiences which constitute the core of the interviewees' narration and representation of the events.

The comparison between the two groups is also instrumental in recognising the memories of the temporary social group to which these individuals belonged, and to verify the existence of common memories, even though the interviews were collected in two different contexts and with distinct methods. Regarding the interpretation of these early testimonies, two major questions arise. The first one concerns the way the interviewees elaborated their memories and the analysis of the factors which played a significant role in their recollections of the events. Which kind of traumas can be identified in their words? Are there specific traumatic memories which can be explained as related to a gender perspective? The second question pivots on the fact that these survivors witnessed and suffered events which had not belonged to previous human experiences. They were aware of their key role, for instance, Hadassah Marcus, one of David Boder's interviewees, stated:

> I had the occasion to witness everything. We are all living witnesses to what they have done. If we were brought to the Nuremberg Trials, they would definitely have no defence whatsoever. They would absolutely be unable to disclaim anything against us. Because it couldn't be imagined that we will be let out at liberty, and what such living witnesses could give the world.[2]

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1 Judith Buber Agassi, "Five Periods in the History of the Jewish Prisoners of the Ravensbrück Women's Concentration Camp", in *A Holocaust Crossroads: Jewish Women and Children in Ravensbrück*, ed. Irith Dublon-Knebel, (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2010b), p.39.

2 Hadassah Marcus, a 32 years old Polish Jewess from Warsaw, was the only survivor of her large family. She was interviewed on September 13, 1946 at a home for displaced Jews in Hénonville, France.

And they felt they had the duty to let the world know what had happened in detail:

> What I have told are not the *protim* (details) If one should want to relate the details, say about what one had lived through in one minute, one can sit and write a whole year. I figure that from the collected materials the world should know, and she can already form a picture [of] what had happened with us.[3]

How did they describe situations, facts, feelings which were completely new in human experience? Since at that time both groups of interviewees spoke about their vicissitudes for the first time, the identification and the interpretation of the linguistic strategies they used in the interviews can provide an insight into the victims' experiences, perception and representation of the Holocaust.

2 Documentation During and Immediately After the Holocaust

After the liberation of the first camps in 1944, Jewish historians and scholars began collecting Holocaust survivors' testimonies and personal documents in order to depict a full picture of the events seen from the victims' perspective.[4] Philip Friedman, among others, dealt with the methodological issues related to the collection and interpretation of Jewish primary sources. He understood that they could provide both an insight of the Holocaust through a Judeo-centric approach, and information about events which often were not documented by any other source.

According to him, the German sources:

> (…) must be balanced and complemented by Jewish records and statements – interviews with Jewish survivors, reports by Jewish groups and individuals, and biographical materials. Moreover the above-mentioned German sources cover only the political background, the organizational and administrative frame, of Jewish life under occupation. The inner Jewish history, the sufferings and the spiritual life, are rarely or falsely reflected in the German sources, and must be studied in Jewish sources.[5]

3 David Boder, "David P. Boder Interviews Hadassah Marcus" in *Voices of the Holocaust* (1946) https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/marcusH.

4 About early Jewish Historical Commissions and projects see also Jockusch, Laura. *Collect and Record!: Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe*. Oxford; New York, Oxford University Press, 2015.

5 Philip, Friedman, "European Jewish Research on the Recent Jewish Catastrophe in 1939–45." *Proceedings of the Academy*, 18: (1949) 179–211. Also published in Philip, Friedman, (Ada J. Friedman ed.)*Roads to Extinction. Essays on the Holocaust*. (New York and Philadelphia: Conference on the Jewish Social Studies. The Jewish Publication Society of America 1980) p. 503.

Friedman was aware that this material could be biased and not objective to the historian, but he also believed that a new approach was needed, based on psychological and sociological methods, he claimed: "It is now opportune to concentrate and elaborate on the material for the internal history of our people during the Holocaust."[6] At that same time, David Boder, a Latvian born American psychologist, came to Europe to collect interviews with Holocaust survivors who were then living in Displaced Persons' camps and shelters provided by the Joint Distribution Committee. His purpose was to study how the "impact of the catastrophe" had affected the survivors' psyche analysing their linguistic choices.[7] As a consequence of this work, he elaborated a Traumatic Index which allowed him to understand which traumas they had suffered and how they were affected by them. In relation to that, he coined the term "deculturation," an antonym for acculturation, to describe the deprivation of all previous social, cultural frameworks and civil habits to which the Holocaust victims were subjected in the deculturated context of the camps.

In Boder's words:

> The term "deculturation" must be understood as referring to two different concepts: (a) the deculturated or deculturating environment (the verbs are used both in their transitive and passive connotations) and (b) deculturated personality. A deculturated environment such as a concentration camp, slums, lockups of police stations, bombed out cities or any makeshift installation in substitution of standard conditions and attributes of existence is bound to evoke manifestations of subcultural behavior in its victims. On the other hand, deculturation of personality manifests itself not in the physical sub- mission but in the intellectual and affective acceptance of the materially and ethically deculturated mode of existence.[8]

Trauma studies regarding Holocaust victims have developed much in the last decades, but Boder's intuition about the concept of deculturation may be considered original and extremely important because of his socio-psychological perspective of trauma and the attention paid to language, which is of the utmost importance in relation to oral testimonies. This concept anticipates some of the following studies on the characteristics and the effects of Holocaust trauma, and reveals the elements, which may affect the act of remembering and recalling traumatic events.[9] Since

6 *Ibidem* p.561.

7 Boder, David, "The Impact of Catastrophe: I. Assessment and Evaluation." *The Journal of Psychology* 38, no. 1 (1954).

8 *Ibidem*, 35.

9 See for instance the analysis of Holocaust trauma in Hans Keilson, *Sequential traumatization in children* (Jerusalem Magnes Press 1992); About Trauma Studies and the Holocaust see K. Herman and P. Thygesen, *Le syndrome des camps de concentration 8 ans apres la liberation* [The concentration camp syndrome 8 years after the liberation]. In P. Thygesen, *La Deportation dans les Camps de Concentration Allemands et ses Sequelles* (Paris: F.I.R. 1954), 56–72; H. Kielson, "Sequential traumatization of children," Danish Medical Bulletin, 27 (1980), 235–237; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub,

human memories are built within and according to the social frameworks of the context people live in, it is possible to interpret the survivors' testimonies analysing the deculturating elements and their effects on memory.

This psychological and sociological approach, which studies the effects of a deculturated context on individuals and on their representations of the events, is useful from two points of view. Firstly, it allows us to identify the inner perspective of the victims. Examining the episodes and issues the interviewees chose to describe and how, it is possible to see how the historical events were interpreted and recalled, and to identify how trauma affected them. Secondly, it helps to understand the origin and the socio-historical significance of possible inaccuracies, which, instead, are crucial since they are "adjustments" of events the witness elaborates for symbolic, formal and psychological reasons to build a sense of their experiences.[10]

Recalling Friedman's claim about the necessity of getting the complete picture of the Holocaust, it is possible to underline the importance of continuing studying in depth the female experiences and testimonies, which were at the same time similar and different from the male ones. Even though the tragic fate endured by the Jews during the Holocaust was common to both genders, it is important to analyse the specificities of women's condition and the way they recall their experiences. During the Holocaust, inside the camps in particular, women went through specific traumas because of their female features. As Holocaust scholar Lilian Kramer observes:

> Unlike most wars, in which women's suffering is a by-product of the conflict, Nazi Germany's annihilation program made the destruction of Jewish women a strategical objective. […] Because biology was uppermost in the Nazi genocidal ideology, Germans departed from the traditional warfare, which often spared female civilians and children from slaughter.[11]

Women, in fact, were experimented on, subjected to forced abortion and murdered because of their being, or becoming mothers. At the same time, they were beaten, forced to strip, stay naked before men, shaved, forced to work in traditionally male

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Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History (New York, Routledge, 1992); Caruth Cathy, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995), and Caruth Cathy, ed., *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996); Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Heaven, Yale UP, 1991); Ruth Leys, *Trauma. A Genealogy*, (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008). A. Hunter, "The Holocaust as the Ultimate Trauma Narrative." in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J.R. Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2018), 66–82.

10 About oral history and methodology see also Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), 26.

11 Lilian S. Kremer, *Women's Holocaust Writing. Memory and imagination*. (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 1–2.

occupations. This happened as a part of the abnormal routine inside the camps and "not only in the form of breaking rules but often in their implementation."[12] Therefore, women, destined to be anonymous parts of an indistinct mass of prisoners, were deprived not only of their biographical identity, like men, but also of their female characteristics, which were erased. According to Anna Bravo and Daniele Jalla, "[t]he actions on the body, from the shaving to denudation, inspections, medical procedures on the reproductive system, aimed at making them become a neutral object, or a guinea pig."[13] Estera Melchior, interviewed by Luba Melchior in Sweden, depicted clearly this situation.[14] When she was selected in Auschwitz to be transported to Ravensbrück:

> […] thorough body searches were conducted. And the baths that followed them were some of the worst moments of camp life: standing naked before German men; having our hair shorn off; chilly draughts that had been created deliberately; the Lysol that was used to disinfect our bodies and that left our eyes stinging; being changed into filthy, ragged, lice-infested clothes without regard for sizes, rendering us the picture of abject misery and destitution.[15]

These traumatic experiences affected women in their identity and socio-cultural habits, which were infringed by the Nazis'racism and sexism converging against them. Zoe Waxman observed that "[w]omen write of the agony of having to stand naked in front of men, of being searched for hidden valuables, of being shorn of all their hair, and of being tattooed."[16] In fact, "[w]omen's testimonies in particular highlight the trauma of losing a sense of one's physical self."[17]

3 The Interviews

Both projects were planned and carried out by David Boder and PIZ between the end of 1945 and 1946, a transitory moment after the liberation and before the beginning of a new life, a limbo between a tragic past and an uncertain future whose echoes, such

12 Brigitte Habmayr, "Sexualized Violence against Women during Nazi "Racial" Persecution," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 32.

13 Anna, Bravo and Daniele, Jalla, (eds). *La vita offesa*. (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2001), 206. (Translation by the author).

14 Estera Melchior was a Polish student born in Warsaw in 1926. She was interviewed by Luba Melchior on April 25, 1946.

15 Record of witness testimony No. 277, Interview with Estera Melchior, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:103005.

16 Zoe Waxman "Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: the representation of women's Holocaust experiences" in *Women's History Review*, 12:4, (2003) 673.

17 Ibidem, 673.

as the feeling of uncertainty and confusion, can be identified in many of the interviews.[18]

At that time the survivors who were interviewed for the first time did not have a "narrative" to follow, in some cases, though, they recalled what can be called "common group memories" linked to specific episodes, places, events. The expression "common group memories" means that the interviewees, a specific group who lived through the same experiences, revealed memories shaped in the same way in terms of priorities, language, narrative details, which may be considered both an ideal "step" in the formation of Holocaust survivors' collective memory and a part of it. In fact, these common group memories, recalled with the same expressions and following the same patterns, emerged in the different contexts of the Displaced Persons' camps in Germany, Italy, France, and in the shelters or hospitals in Sweden where Boder and Lakocinski's group respectively operated. This happened despite the fact that, as we will see, the interviewing techniques used in the two projects were different.

In both collections, the interviewers paid attention to the narrative details. David Boder focused in particular on what kind of linguistic choices his interviewees made, as a means to understand the impact of trauma caused by the Holocaust. The PIZ concentrated on the survivors' reconstruction of experiences and events for a documentary interest. The different scientific and personal background of Boder and Lakocinski shaped their (and their collaborators') role as interviewer and their interviews' features. Boder's interviews were mostly conducted and recorded in a semi-directive mode, in the language chosen by the interviewees. Later, they were transcribed *verbatim* and translated. Since Boder, coming from the United States, did not have a direct knowledge of the events and was not a historian, there were some misunderstandings about names and dates during the interviews and mistakes in the transcription/translation. Nonetheless, these are very important because when Boder asked for information or clarification about a specific word or a sentence, the interviewee's answer provided interesting metalinguistic reflections. On the other hand, the interviewers in Sweden were mainly from Poland, they had experienced the Nazi occupation and rule. Many of the women whose testimonies are examined in this work were interviewed by Luba Melchior,[19] a Jewish survivor from Poland

18 For further reading about the Boder collection and the Polish Research Institute (PIZ) collection see: Alan Rosen, *The Wonder of Their Voices: The 1946 Holocaust Interviews of David Boder*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Victoria Van Orden Martinez, *Afterlives: Jewish and Non-Jewish Polish Survivors of Nazi Persecution in Sweden Documenting Nazi Atrocities, 1945–1946*, (Linköping: Linköping University Press 2024).

19 About Luba Melchior's role and work see Victoria Martinez, Documenting the Documenter: Piecing together the history of Polish Holocaust survivor-historian Luba Melchior – Document Blog, blog.ehri-project.eu/2022/12/12/luba-melchior (accessed on June 20, 2023); see also Malin Thor Tureby,

who was a PIZ assistant in charge of the Jewish section of the institute. She had been deported to Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and Malchow, therefore, unlike Boder, she could effectively understand and interpret the factual details of the testimonies. These followed the scientific guidelines formulated by the historian Sture Bolin for conducting the interviews and checking their accuracy. A statement was to be signed which provided the witness with a scheme to follow:

> Asked whether, with regard to my internment and my labour at the concentration camp, I possess any particular knowledge about how the camp was organized, how prisoners were treated, their living and working conditions, medical and pastoral care, the hygienic conditions in the camp, or any particular events concerning any aspect of camp life, I state as follows:[20]

The interviews were then checked, substantiated by other testimonies, transcribed *verbatim* and combined with outlines. The material collected by PIZ was considered extremely reliable so that parts of it were used in some of the trials after the war.

The differences between the interviewers' techniques shaped the features of the testimonies but did not change their core. Therefore, it is possible to verify the communication strategies which these women employed, examining the topics of time, space, language, and the selection of memories they made, especially regarding situations when "deculturation" operated.

The survivors often selected some events, like the admittance to the camp, and attributed them a meaning according to a female perspective: they focused on experiences or facts related to their being women, such as their biological features, the emphasis on the lack of privacy, on their physical changes and on the harsh hygienic conditions. About this issue, Tom Lawson observes that "memory process is itself gendered and it is filtered through the gendered assumptions of the survivor and their audience."[21] The memories were recalled in relation to social frames, which were different from the ones the survivors were previously used to and pertained to the context of the camp. These coordinates constitute a net which can be examined and analysed.

"Memories, testimonies and oral history: On collections and research about and with Holocaust survivors in Sweden", *Swedish Government Official Reports, SOU 2020:2, Holocaust Remembrance and Representation. Documentation from a Research Conference* (Stockholm: Norstedts juridik, 2020), 67–92.

20 This statement can be read on the first page of the transcription of all the interviews.

21 Tom Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 298.

4 Memory Frameworks: Space, Time and Language

The interviewees focused on recalling specific events, which became the calendar of their memory and marked the steps of their individual and collective experience, and the spaces, that constitute the topography of their memories. We could also interpret some of the space-time connections in the testimonies as *chronotopes*,[22] adapting Bakhtin's literary concept to the narrative act of remembering. The framework of time is articulated according to macro-events such as their arrival at Ravensbrück, their imprisonment there, their transport and stay in Malchow, the evacuation and liberation, and micro-events like the moments of the daily schedule and events which marked each individual story. All these "moments" are linked to spaces which were part of the abnormal context the prisoners lived in: a topography made of larger spaces, Ravensbrück and Malchow, and smaller temporary places typical of the camp environment.

About the language, in the multi-linguistic context of a camp a special *jargon* was born, the *Lagerszprächa*,[23] whose expressions were in general the same in all the camps, some, though, were specific to define situations typical of a certain camp: the *Zelt*,[24] [Ger., tent] a big temporary tent built in Ravensbrück, for instance. The meaning of these common words underwent a semantic shift: in the survivors' testimonies, they depicted things corresponding to the new objects, concepts and

22 The term *chronotope* was originally used by Albert Einstein in mathematical sciences, Michail Bachtin introduced it in literary studies and provided a definition of it: "We will give the name chronotope (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture." Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by *M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

23 About the *Lagerszprächa* see Wolf Oschlies, "'*Lagerszpracha' zu Theorie und Empirie einer KZ-spezifischen Soziolinguistik*." Zeitgeschichte 13,1 (1985), 1–27.

24 The first mention of the *Zelt* in is on August 25, 1944. Other mentions are on December 11, when 2500 Hungarian Jewesses were put in the tent, on January, 4, 1945 and, for the last time, on February 26. The *Zel*t was then removed after that date. There are discrepancies about the shape and size of the tent described as a 50 meters long Wehrmacht tent or as a round circus one. There was only one small entrance, no beds, no electricity, no water or toilets inside. Information taken from Philipp Grit, *Kalendarium der Ereigniss im Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück 1939–1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 1999).

situations inside the camps, therefore they acquired a different connotative meaning.

Survivors who gave testimonies were usually aware of their difficulty in communicating their abnormal experiences in a common language, which they perceived as unable to express the reality of the camps or their feelings and sensations.[25] Felicia Hauptmann told that she could not describe the psychosis which took the prisoners during the death march from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück "they were overwhelmed by fear or apathy"[26] she could not find a word for that. The witnesses also understood that their listeners or readers could not fully comprehend the reality which they depicted through a usual language.[27]

This is the reason why the interviewees needed to resort to metaphors and analogies to try and explain the complex and tragic reality they had faced, to an audience that had not experienced it. Expressions related to the semantic field of hell, animals, darkness are very common. Also, they used German or camp *jargon* words to describe elements of the camp which could not be expressed in any other language.

5 Ravensbrück

> *"Ravensbrück, Ravensbrück, you are in the abyss [?]. And perhaps one day we will see freedom. Then we shall say to life once again, yes, Ravensbrück, you are the past, the sorrow, the destruction, by the Germans, by the Nazis, of the Jewish people. We the young have faith in life [?]. One must strive to live. But the Germans have besmirched this striving with black ink." There are some more words, but I do not remember them.* (Song sang by the prisoners in Ravensbrück told by Bertha Goldwasser to David Boder in her interview).[28]

25 About this feeling Primo Levi wrote "Just as our hunger is not that feeling of missing a meal, so our way of being cold has need of a new word. We say 'hunger', we say 'tiredness', 'fear', 'pain', we say 'winter' and they are different things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived in comfort and suffering in their homes. If the *Lagers* had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means to toil the whole day in the wind, with the temperature below freezing, wearing only a shirt, underpants, cloth jacket and trousers, and in one's body nothing but weakness, hunger and knowledge of the end drawing nearer." Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*. The Truce. (Translated by Stuart Woolf. London: Abacus, 2013), 151–2.

26 Felicja Hauptman was a nurse born in Krakow in 1916. She was interviewed by Luba Melchior in October 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/attachment/document/alvin-record:103867/ATTACHMENT-0010.pdf.

27 See also Martin Kush, "Analysing Holocaust Survivor Testimony Certainties, Scepticism, Relativism" in *Testimony/Bearing Witness Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture*, ed. Sybille Krämer and Sigrid Weigel, (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 137–165.

28 Bertha Glodwasser was interviewed by Boder at the Jewish Committee home for adult Jewish refugees in Paris on August 4, 1946. She was originally from Poland but was arrested and detained in Drancy. David Boder, "David P. Boder Interviews Bertha Goldwasser" in *Voices of the Holocaust* (1946) https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/goldwasserB.

In January 1945, Ravensbrück, mainly a women's camp, looked much different from what it had been at its beginning and in the following phases: the number of arrivals drastically increased in 1944 and 1945, when approximately 100,000 prisoners were deported there from other camps or occupied countries. This number was almost ten times bigger than that of the deportees who had arrived at the camp in the previous four years. Located in the woods alongside the lake Schwedt, in the proximity of Fürstenberg, Ravensbrück began to function on May 12, 1939, when the first 867 women were transferred there from Lichtenburg: they were German, Austrian political prisoners or Jehovah Witnesses, some of them were also Jewish, who had been arrested for political reasons.

From then on, the conditions inside the camp, the origin of the prisoners and the events of the war shaped its features. In 1939, the small number of prisoners detained in the camp allowed acceptable living conditions, in 1940 and 1941, the arrivals of thousands of Polish women, and later Russians, brought about a change in the camp's population: the Poles constituted the majority of the prisoners for a long time. In 1942, the Jewish women were murdered as part of the implementation of the Operation 14f13, or they were sent to other camps in the East, since Germany, according to Hitler's aim, had to become *Judenfrei*. In 1944, the arrival of the French political prisoners changed the situation once again. Only between autumn 1944 and 1945, thousands of Jewish women were then sent to the camp again as a consequence of the need of manpower in Germany's war production and of the evacuation of the camps in the East.

All the interviewees ended up in Ravensbrück and in one of its sub camps, in this case Malchow.

> Upon completing quarantine, we were loaded aboard railway wagons and transported to Malchow. Malchow had two periods. We arrived at new, unoccupied camp … accommodation conditions were good as was hygiene. The diet was passable. The moment the transport of Auschwitz evacuees arrived, everything changed.[29]

If testimonies about this camp did not exist, we would not know almost anything about it, since most of the documents about the Ravensbrück complex were destroyed. Genia Rotman told her interviewer:

> I witnessed the *Kommandoführerin* (lit. 'work detail leader', Ger.) burning the remaining documents and prisoner lists. I was witness to a conversation between the *Lagerführer* (lit. 'camp leader', Ger.) and the *Kommandoführerin*. He said: "Soon the roles will reverse. We will be the ones in the camp and the *Häftlings* [prisoners, Ger.] will be ruling us. Thanks to your connections you'll be made a functionary, but I can't count on any protection. They're going to take me straight to the chimney." This was a frequent subject of their conversations.[30]

29 Record of witness testimony No. 277.

30 Genia Rotman was born in Lodz in 1918. She was interviewed by Luba Melchior on March 3, 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 194, Interview with Genia Rotman, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:102719.

As Robert Kraft observed:

> Oral testimonies can add to historical knowledge, offering information about victims that cannot be found in any other place. Obscure labor camps and small ghettos where documentation is sparse can be more clearly described through such testimonies.[31]

The spatial framework in their common memory is based on some places, which constituted the topography of their testimonies about the camp: the *Zelt* (tent), the *Appellplatz* (roll call square), the quarantine block, the *Revier* (infirmary), and the numbered blocks. Some others, like latrines or toilets, and showers are perceived more for their absence or unavailability than for their presence. All these spaces marked also the chronological stages of their imprisonment, whose timeline varied according to the moment of their arrival in the camp.

As a premise, it is important to emphasise that in these memories Auschwitz Birkenau, "an unbroken chain of torments and suffering,"[32] often constitutes a term of comparison for the other camps, both for its extreme and traumatic features and the survivors' personal experiences there. Also, in these testimonies, the interviewees' memories often jump from one camp to other, opening digressions in relation to a specific subject, usually about the presence or the lack of elements which were missing or overwhelming in Auschwitz.

"Our mood was better than before. There was no chimney in sight. And the prisoner functionaries were very lenient with us, which was a stark contrast to Auschwitz."[33] stated Genia Rotman, who arrived in Ravensbrück in early November 1944. She made a comparison between the two camps mentioning one of the most significant elements of the Auschwitz spatial memory: the chimney, which represented the symbol and the imminent danger of an omnipresent death.

"The air was bitterly cold, but better than at Auschwitz." said Cecylja Skórecka.[34] During the quarantine, "[w]e regarded Ravensbrück as a holiday resort. Food was served in the blocks – not outside like at Auschwitz – in clean dishes, and everyone got a dish for herself."[35] Again, in the same testimony she said that their "impression of Ravensbrück was quite good. The camp personnel were polite to us, in stark contrast with Auschwitz. For the first time, we encountered prisoner appointees who

31 Robert Kraft, *Memory Perceived*, (Bloomington: IUniverse, 2019), 10.

32 Interview with Estera Melchior (PIZ).

33 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

34 Cecylja Skórecka was a seamstress born in Działoszyce, Poland, in 1907. She was interviewed by Luba Melchior in January 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 174, Interview with Cecylja Skórecka, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:101748.

35 Record of witness testimony No. 174.

spoke to us like human beings."[36] It is noteworthy that the living conditions of the prisoners, which were harsh also in Ravensbrück, were being evaluated by the prisoners not on the basis of the normal pre-war living standards, but in relation to their experience in Auschwitz Birkenau. This can be explained by Boder's recurring observation that the Holocaust was a "deculturating phenomenon, and its impact could possibly be measured by the depression of the level of subsequent needs and demands of its victims."[37]

Those who arrived in Ravensbrück in mid-November 1944, like Helena Szykman,[38] already felt a difference; she compared her experience of the roll calls, one of the *chronotopes* of Auschwitz, with that in Ravensbrück: "The *Appells* exhausted us; they lasted even longer than they had at Auschwitz."[39]

The worsening of the living conditions at that time are recalled by Helena Tichauer, who was evacuated to the camp in January 1945. She told Boder: "Ravensbrueck[40] made on me personally the impression like possible Auschwitz in 1942, cold, disorder, dirt, famine. A chase [pushing around]. They did not know whatever to do with us."[41]

Actually, the impression of Ravensbrück was often different according to the time when the transports from Auschwitz arrived there.

The evacuees from the East, arriving in January and February 1945, had the worst experience. They were left without food, water, waiting weeks inside the *Zelt*, before being sent to the blocks or to the sub camps.

6 The *Zelt* as a Common Spatial Memory

The *Zelt*, which constitutes a constant spatial memory in the testimonies, was a tent erected in an empty space between Block 24 and Block 26, where the ground was quite loose, and no buildings could be built. When, in the summer 1944, the number of the new arrivals began exceeding the housing space inside the camp, that was the only shelter that could be built and was meant to be temporary. The floor was made of bricks and the

36 *Ibidem*.

37 Boder, David. "The Impact of Catastrophe: I. Assessment and Evaluation." *The Journal of Psychology* 38, no. 1 (1954): 35.

38 Helena Szykman was born in Będzin, Poland, in 1915. She was inteviewed by Luba Melchior in October 1946.

39 Helena Szykman was born in Będzin, Poland, in 1915. She was inteviewed by Luba Melchior in October 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 491, Interview with Helena Szykman, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:101748.

40 As transcribed by Boder.

41 David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Helen Tichauer, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/tichauerH.

women, whose number increased as time passed, were left lying there, without any hygienic facilities, despite the fact that most of them were suffering from diarrhoea.

Those who were transported to Ravensbrück in autumn 1944 did not usually stay there for a long time. Rozalia Goldband,[42] sent there at the beginning of October, remembers:

> At Ravensbrück, we were taken to the *Zelt*. It was 1 a.m. We thought it was a gas chamber: we began to clamour, calling out to one another in the hope of dying together. It was raining; we tried to catch the raindrops in order to refresh ourselves. That night was dreadful: [sleeping] on bricks, wet.[43]

From this testimony it is possible to notice once again how deeply the experiences Rozalia and her fellow prisoners had suffered in Auschwitz affected them: they thought they were going to be killed in a gas chamber which had become to them the inevitable outcome of the prisoners' sufferings.

The day after, they were housed inside a block:

> After bathing, we were taken to Block 21. The *blokowa*, (chief prisoner of each block) a *Reichsdeutsche* (German citizen), received us very nicely, ordering us only to keep quiet. We came back to life, because it was warm inside the block. The dining room was heated, and I got a bed in the dining room. We had three weeks' quarantine.[44]

Also Estera Melchior, who got there at the beginning of November 1944, stated that, when they arrived at the camp, "[w]e were led into a tent and spent the night on a dirty stone floor."

According to Cecylja Skórecka, who was in the same transport,

> We travelled two days and one night. At 1 or 2 a.m. the following night, we pulled into a siding not far from Ravensbrück, as was indicated by a nearby board with writing on it. *Aufseherkas* (women guards, from Ger. Aufseherin) and *Postens* (sentries, Ger.) with dogs were already waiting for us. The road to the camp was quite far away. It was a cold night; we were led through a lakeside town. Part of the road passed through a pine forest. Past the forest, there were streets with little houses that we found delightful. A deathly silence hung all around us – it seemed as though the whole area had been deserted – meanwhile our wooden clogs made a tremendous clacking. We were led to the camp. A large iron gate opened before us. We were counted. There were 1,250 of us altogether. We were led into what was called the *Zelt*. It was a stone-floored tent. We were held in the *Zelt* for three days. We were without any water. I drank water from the gutter. On the third day, we were given our first meal. Later, we were taken to the bathhouse. We weren't made to change our clothes this time. We were led to the transport block. All of us

42 Rozalia Goldband, born in Góra Kalwaria, Poland, in 1908, was a seamstress. She was interviewed by Krystyna Karier in March 1946.

43 Record of witness testimony No. 240, Interview with Rozalia Goldband, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:102874.

44 *Ibidem*.

> were housed there together. The block had indoor plumbing, which seemed to us like a luxury. The block had a floor that was washed daily, but we weren't allowed to enter with our shoes on. The beds were narrow and stacked three high. On each bed was a straw-stuffed mattress and a blanket. Each of these rather narrow beds was shared by two people.[45]

Genia Rotman arrived with Estera Melchior, but she was in the first group taken to be bathed the day after her arrival:

> Waiting for us in the camp street were the camp police (made up of prisoners), and they took us to the tent, or "*Zelt,*" as it was called. We stayed there until the following day, at which time we were taken to the bathhouse in groups. In the bathhouse, we were bathed but not given a change of clothing.[46]

When the evacuees from Auschwitz began arriving at Ravensbrück, the stay inside the *Zelt* became longer due to the overcrowding, Felicja Hauptman recalled:

> Around January 25, we arrived at Ravensbrück. At that time Ravensbrück was overcrowded. Prisoners from all of the liquidated camps were being sent there. I was at Ravensbrück for three weeks. Throughout that time, I lay on the ground inside the *Zelt*. People hardly got any food. The level of filth in the camp was terrible - faeces in the street.[47]

The key words which describe the deculturated environment of the *Zelt* are "filth", "hunger" and "to lay" which refer to what Boder in his *Traumatic Inventory* referred to as pertaining to "Direct body violence", "Cleanliness", "Food".[48]

Also Edith Serras[49] used the same words talking with David Boder:

> We were put in a large… There were lying all the Auschwitz people, without food – all without drink… We were not given water to wash. We had no toilet – just nothing. And they began [to] assign us - all the women who had come from Auschwitz to transports.[50]

While the women who were interned in Ravensbrück in autumn 1944 experienced life in the main camp, the evacuees from the East were usually sent to the sub-camps

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45 Record of witness testimony No. 174.

46 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

47 Record of witness testimony No. 487, Interview with Felicja Hauptman, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:103867.

48 Boder, David. "The Impact of Catastrophe: I. Assessment and Evaluation." *The Journal of Psychology* 38, no.1 (1954): 46–47.

49 Edith Serras was born in Edint, Moldova, in 1910, but moved to Paris where she was arrested. She was interviewed by Boder at the Jewish Committee home for adult Jewish refugees in Paris on August 7, 1946.

50 David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Edith Serras, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/serrasE.

immediately after being kept in the *Zelt*, as Lina Stumachin[51] remembered talking with David Boder:

> On 18th of January, during the coldest part of the winter we walked to Ravensbrück. I lived in Ravensbrück I was there for 8 weeks. The misery is indescribable, corpses at every step, the experience was hugely overwhelming. We didn't get any food at all. After 8 weeks we were taken to Malchow.[52]

Nelly Bondy, another evacuee from Auschwitz underlined the absolute lack of hygiene:

> (…) and we arrived in Ravensbrück and they lodged us in … in one big room where there would have been room for perhaps five hundred people but we were twelve hundred.? … we couldn't sleep. We had not even water to wash ourselves with. Nothing. We were covered with lice. All of us. We remained there for 12 days and then we were marched into the very camp of Ravensbrück. And there into a block where it was a bit better. Well, there was no washing conditions, but we could get into other blocks. I got to the blocks where the French lived and there I could have a wash. The food was eatable.[53]

She was allowed inside the camp before being sent to Malchow, this is the reason why she remembered she was given food. Once again, the traumatic experiences are recalled through a comparison between two situations in different contexts, and are usually related to the primary needs, such as food, cleanliness, hygienic conditions.

Rita Benmayor, interviewed by David Boder, stayed in Ravensbrück for four months, and talked about the work she had done there. She was then sent to Retzow and Malchow

> There we, eh, worked on the road again. Carrying stones. We worked there for four months, and then we worked in the Block. [There] were five people sleeping in one bed. It was (*not*?) clean. We had many lice. Four months. We had to carry stones again, worked at the roadside … and then we were transported again, why [because] the Russians came to Ravensbrück.[54]

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51 Lisa Stumachin was interviewed by David Boder in the OPEJ children's home, Bellevue, Meudon, France, on September 8, 1946. She was born in Poland in 1910.

52 David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Lisa Stumachin, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/stumachinL.

53 David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Nelly Bondy, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/bondyN. Nelly Bondy was born in Vienna but lived in Paris. She was interviewed by Boder in the American Joint Distribution Committee office in Paris on August 22, 1946.

54 Rita Benmayor was born in Salonika, Greece, in 1926. She was interviewed in the Jewish Committee home for adult Jewish refugees in Paris on August 5, 1946. David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Rita Benmayor, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/benmayorR. Miss Benmayor is giving here her interpretation of the transport, most likely due to rumors circulating among the prisoners. The prisoners who were not exploited in the factory were usually forced to work outside cleaning the roads, building trenches, etc.

7 Malchow

> They did not know whatever to do with us. We are again transported away to smaller lagers, which were planned for [a] thousand people. And there came three thousand. One can imagine how the conditions for living and nutrition looked about, up to the day of liberation.[55]

All the interviewees were sent to Malchow, a small camp built in the proximity of a gunpowder plant in Mecklenburg. The documentation about the camp was mostly destroyed and its memory was erased until the 1990s, when researchers began working on it.

> The transfer of prisoners from Ravensbrück to the camp that was erected in Malchow to provide cheap labor for the ammunition plant began in the winter of 1943–1944. During the first months, about 900 women were imprisoned in the camp. From the autumn of 1944 until May 1945, with the detention of the Hungarian Jews and the evacuation of the concentration camps in the east, about 4000 women were brought to Malchow. The women were Polish, French, Hungarian, Czech, Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Italian, German, and Greek.[56]

There were actually two phases in the camp: from October 1944 to February 1945, and from February to April 1945. All the testimonies agree on the fact that the dramatic change was brought about by the arrival of the evacuees from Auschwitz and part of the guards who had been working there, among them Luise Danz:[57]

> A new *Lagerführer* arrived, as well as a lady commandant from Lublin, Płaszów, and Auschwitz who was famous for her cruel deeds. She completely overhauled the camp regime. She would demand bribes in the form of diamonds, dresses, coats, etc. You would even have to pay up with bread. And those who fulfilled her demands enjoyed special privileges. (Cecylja Skórecka)[58]

From a camp where living conditions were perceived as bearable and, sometimes, better than in Auschwitz, Malchow became the worst camp in the interviewees' memories. The change was due not only to the number of inmates and the consequent reduction of space and food but also to the implementation of Auschwitz-style practices.

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55 David Boder, David P. Boder Interviews Helen Tichauer, in *Voices of the Holocaust*. 1946. https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/tichauerH.

56 *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945* Vol. I, Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, (Kindle edition), 1211.

57 Luise Danz (1917–2009) was a guard in several Nazi concentration camps, among them Majdanek, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, Malchow. She was known as violent and abusive. Sentenced to life imprisonment in 1947, at the Auschwitz trial in Krakow, she was released for a general amnesty on August 20, 1957.

58 [Cecylja Skórecka]. Record of witness testimony No. 174.

When the first group of prisoners arrived at the camp, they were positively impressed:

> We arrived at a new, unoccupied camp which was [being] set up while we were there. Accommodation conditions were good, as was hygiene. During this period, the diet was passable. We worked at a gunpowder mill that was eight kilometres away from the camp. It was a gruelling route, aggravated by our enormous, heavy wooden shoes that snow would stick to in the wintertime, making it impossible to walk. The work was done in twelve-hour shifts, day and night, preceded by the long march that took over an hour … One positivity was that, in relative terms, we weren't treated that badly. (Estera Melchior)[59]

Rosalia Goldband was in the same group:

> We were the first transport to arrive at Malchow. There were ten barrack blocks. Everything was new and clean. The camp was surrounded by an electric fence. There were no sentry boxes. Six kilometres from the camp, there was a factory in a woodland. It was camouflaged: everything was underground. Incidentally, this was why it was never bombed, not even once. We had a forty-minute walk to the factory. We would work twelve hours at a time in two shifts. In terms of our work, there was nothing to complain about: we were warm and clean.[60]

The distance between the camp and the plant varies from four to eight Km in the testimonies according to the prisoners' perception of the space, measured in terms of pain and suffering. Most likely, the daily journey to the factory plant must have been perceived longer and more unbearable by the women who were in worse physical conditions.

The deculturated environments of the previous camps reduced the expectations regarding living conditions to a minimal level: being warm and clean meant a relative well-being, as we will see later.

Already in mid-December the situation began to worsen, as Helena Szykman remembers:

> The accommodation conditions were not bad, but we were starving. At first, things were a bit better; later, our hunger grew worse and worse. After a few days, we began work at a factory. It was not hard work, but the journey there was long and tiring. We were utterly exhausted and tremendously hungry. There were no selections there; we were treated like ordinary labourers.[61]

Starvation is what the survivors remember most about the camp. It can be considered part of the extermination strategy as Irith Dublon-Knebel rightly pointed out concluding that Malchow, in the last three months of its existence, can be rightly

59 [Estera Melchior]. Record of witness testimony No. 277.

60 Record of witness testimony No. 240.

61 Helena Szykman was born in Będzin in 1915. She was a seamstress and was interviewed by Luba Melchior in October 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 491.

considered not only a concentration and labor camp, but a place where extermination was carried out through work and planned starvation.

> […] the term "extermination camp" as used in the historiography of the Holocaust must be re-examined. The term is usually employed in a restrictive sense to describe only those camps equipped with industrial killing technology such as Auschwitz. The external camps originally erected as labor camps do not fit into this category. However, the events in the Malchow camp during the last three months of its existence call into question the restrictive use of the term by revealing the many different ways in which the Nazis implemented their policy of extermination throughout the camp system.[62]

This second phase of the camp began with a *caesura*: the arrival of thousands of evacuees from Auschwitz via Ravensbrück. That brought about a definitive modification in the living conditions. Genia Rotman, who had been there already for some months remembered:

> Around the end of January, we were ordered to cram in and make room: we doubled up two to a bed, more beds were put into the *Stubes* (rooms) and the dining area was converted into residential quarters. A transport was expected. And, indeed, two prisoner transports came in from Auschwitz after a stopover in Ravensbrück. The camp took on a different character.[63]

It was what Rosalia Goldband called:

> the beginning of Auschwitz-style "organizing," along with filthy, impoverished, and crowded conditions. Typhus broke out and women started dying. Further transports started coming in: Frenchwomen, Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks. At that point, the camp was expanded by an additional two blocks. The camp numbered 4,000 prisoners – people were even sleeping on the floors.[64]

These transports from Auschwitz via Ravensbrück brought with them diseases which had not affected the prisoners in Malchow before:

> Along with the transport from Auschwitz – which had travelled in terrible conditions – came lice, filth, and scabies. We were plagued by scabies, which spread like wildfire and against which we had no prophylactics – there were no ointments or creams. (Estera Melchior)[65]

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62 Irith Dublon-Knebel, "Malchow: An External Camp of Ravensbrück.", *A Holocaust Crossroads: Jewish Women and Children in Ravensbrück*, ed. Irith Dublon-Knebel. (London: Valentine Mitchell, 2010a), 123.

63 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

64 Record of witness testimony No. 240.

65 [Estera Melchior]. Record of witness testimony No. 277.

Lina Stumachin was one of the evacuees: "After 8 weeks we were taken to Malchow, there we were left to starve, that was obvious that they wanted to starve us to death."[66]

The prisoners were well aware of the strategies used by the Nazis to get rid of the prisoners who could not work: "But our hunger was incredible. … Now we saw that death would come slowly as we languished in starvation." (Felicja Hauptman)[67]

Nelly Bondy described the food to David Boder with these words:

> we got three slices of dry bread a day and once a day a kind of so called soup. It was water where they had just thrown some vegetables which were not even clean- which were not washed. And the soup. It was never cooked. It was never warm. [There were] sediments of the earth and I don't know what. Anyway we couldn't eat.[68]

The conditions were so terrible that, when about 2000 women were sent to Taucha, near Leipzig, in March, the new camp "seemed paradise, after this camp of Malchow."[69]

The prisoners who stayed in the camp "were haunted by the spectre of death by starvation. This was all the more painful to us in that we could sense that the war, and, by the same token, our ordeal, was nearing its end," according to Melchior Estera.[70]

When parcels were sent from the Red Cross to Malchow, in April 1945, they were not distributed. Rachela Gottfried declared that "[p]arcels arrived from the Red Cross, but they were not handed over because the *Kommandoführer* [SS man in charge of a labour detail or sub-camp, Ger.] was tormenting us."[71]

Genia Rotman remembered that on April 24, vehicles of the Red Cross arrived in the camp:

> After an hour, *Häftlings* were called to unload food parcels from the vehicles, but the parcels were not issued to us. The *aufseherkas* "organized" the contents, eating some on the spot and then taking as much as they could carry.[72]

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66 David P. Boder Interviews Lina Stumachin.

67 [Felicja Hauptman] Record of witness testimony No. 487.

68 David P. Boder Interviews Nelly Bondy.

69 Ibidem.

70 Record of witness testimony No. 277.

71 Rachela Gottfried was a seamstress, born in Sędziszów, Poland, in 1914. She was interviewed by Helena Dziedzicka in January 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 115, Interview with Rachela Gottfried, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:101246.

72 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

8 Work Exploitation

According to Irith Dublon-Knebel, Malchow "must be regarded as one of the most dangerous camps with regard to work and living conditions" since not trained workers were forced to handle explosive materials.[73]

Gustawa Kaplan underlined this situation in her testimony:

> The work was very dangerous. We had to be very careful – the slightest misstep would set off an explosion. There were many who had lost arms or eyes. There was a hospital at the camp and people were treated there.[74]

And Genia Rotman confirmed that, after the roll calls, prisoners were forced to walk to the factory, which was camouflaged and located inside bunkers.

> They were taken to work by *postens* and *aufseherkas*, the latter of whom would stay with us in the bunker throughout our shift. From the moment we got there, the *postens* would guard the factory; they were always anxious that we might escape.[75]

The prisoners initially worked in two twelve-hours shifts, one during the day, another at nighttime. In the last weeks though the shifts became shorter and then the work was halted.

In March 1945,

> [w]e worked eight-hour shifts, then five-hour shifts. In the morning, we would order our bread and air raid alerts: the first, eight ways; the second, three [sic]. By then, we were each getting an eighth of a loaf of bread [note written above text] which was mouldy [/note]; the soup – made from parsnips – was generally inedible. It was utter chaos. (Helena Szykman)[76]

Due to the developments of the war, the factory

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73 Irith, Dublon- Knebel, *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, 1191.

74 Gustawa Kaplan was born in Cracow in 1905. She was a seamstress and was interviewed by Krystyna Karier in January 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 102, Interview with Gustawa Kaplan, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:101212.

75 Record of witness testimony No. 194; About the same issue Ceciylia Skòrecka declared that "The *aufseherkas* were young; the bulk of them were workers from Malchow who had only recently been inducted into the SS. The Postens, for their part, were older people averaging between fifty and sixty years of age who were no longer fit to serve on the front, mostly Volksdeutsche [ethnic Germans] from Ukraine, Pomerania, Bohemia, and Hungary." (Record of witness testimony No. 174).

76 [Helena Szykman]. Record of witness testimony No. 491.

> was floundering. The raw materials were of poor quality, which led to constant explosions and, in turn, damage to the machines. Repairing the machines took a lot of time; thus, there were work interruptions. It was often we who caused the damage. They threatened to execute us for sabotage, but always ended up punishing us with the standard several hours of standing to attention. (Genia Rotman)[77]

In April 1945, the prisoners were exhausted and could not even walk to the factory: "Due to the approaching front and constant air raids, work at the factory was halted. This was fortunate for us, as most of us had become so exhausted by then that we could no longer walk." (Estera Melchior)[78]

Rachela Gottfried worked there for four months: "In the fourth month, the workforce was reduced. By then, I was so exhausted that I was no longer capable of working. I was so exhausted and starved that I felt near death; I couldn't lift my feet."[79]

The words which mainly recur in the testimonies about working, are linked to the semantic fields of slavery and exhaustion, considered by Boder as traumatic elements of forced labor. And these were not the only ways these women were being led to death. Other kinds of deprivation and mistreatments affected them both physically and psychologically.

9 We Were Dirty from the Lager

The interviewees' testimonies reveal much about their female perspective because part of the common memory of the group is focused on the lack of privacy, hygienic facilities and water to wash themselves. In this common memory the constant elements concerned the physical changes (hair, clothes) corresponding with the deprivation of their identity, the shame and embarrassment for being naked, shaved or unable to control their physiological needs, the constantly frustrated desire to wash themselves. That represented the demolition of their female identity and habits. This is the reason why the lack of water may be seen as a traumatic and symbolic memory. They felt dirty, were full of lice, could not use the bathroom alone and freely, in addition, they had to respond to their physiological needs in front of others. These two last issues were particularly serious when, as it often happened, they were affected by diarrhoea. Also, the evaluation of a "better" or a "worse" camp depended on the possibility to wash themselves as much as on the food.

For instance, Felicja Hauptman said that in Ravensbück "washing oneself took so much effort and energy that women would give up, weakened by starvation. The

77 [Genia Rotman]. Record of witness testimony No. 194.
78 [Estera Melchior]. Record of witness testimony No. 277.
79 Record of witness testimony No. 115.

vermin were eating us alive." Then, "in February, I made it out of that Hell to Malchow … Malchow was a better camp in terms of hygiene: there was water. But our hunger was incredible…"[80]

In his *Traumatic Inventory,* David Boder enlists this both as a as a *cultural-affective trauma* (abolition of traditions of decency and dignity by suspending the separation between the sexes and privacy for bodily care and processes of bowel movements) and under the *appearance, cleanliness and dress* theme (insufficient clothing, clothing that did not fit; failure to provide facilities for keeping clean, lack of soap and water; maintenance of conditions which made it impossible for prisoners to free themselves from lice and vermin.)[81]

In relation to the first theme, we can read what Genia Rotman said about this problem in the factory in Malchow: "We relieved our physiological needs in groups, escorted by the *aufseherka*. The working day lasted twelve hours and the *aufseherka* took us twice during this time."[82] And Cecylja Skórecka, describing the workday in Malchow:

> A special page in the history of our factory ordeals is occupied by the toilet. We weren't allowed to leave the bunker unaccompanied. Trips to the toilet were made under *aufseherka* escort twice during the twelve- hour shift. She would assemble a group and we would all go together. We all suffered from bladder problems because we were insufficiently dressed and fed on a diet of vegetable soup, which had a strong diuretic effect on us. We would often cry from the pain. But if any woman couldn't hold it in and went out to the woods, she would get a beating and be made to stand for several hours in the camp after work.[83]

In addition to bladder problems, there was the diarrhoea, as Tola Sommer said: "We were let out to use the toilet once during our twelve-hour work shift. Anyone with *Durchfall* [Ger. diarrhoea] suffered agony."[84] *Durchfall* was considered the camp illness, this is the reason why many of the interviewees used the German word instead of the expression in their own language.

One of the episodes which is remembered by the survivors from Malchow as a key event in the chronology of their common memory concerns a food poisoning which brought about dysentery in the whole camp. Genia Rotman recalls:

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80 Record of witness testimony No. 487.

81 David Boder, "The Impact of Catastrophe: I. Assessment and Evaluation," *The Journal Of Psychology* 38 no. 1 (1954): 42.

82 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

83 Record of witness testimony No. 174.

84 Tola Sommer, born in Komin in 1918, was interviewed by Luba Melchior in July 1946. Record of witness testimony No. 423, Interview with Tola Sommer, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:103564.

> By the end, the soup was being made from parsnip. The parsnip, unsteamed (*sic*) and undercooked due to fuel shortages, caused food poisoning. People went down with *Durchfall* and became dazed, leading to discoordination (*sic*) and vomiting. Ninety per cent of the camp was ill. After a medical intervention and much persuading, the *Kommandoführerin* ordered that fifty per cent of the soup be made from other vegetables, not just parsnip as before.[85]

Tola Sommer's testimony confirms that event:

> More and more people were ill. The *Revier* was filled to capacity. The soups were worse and worse; they were made from greens and later parsnip. At one point, the soup made the entire camp ill. Only an intervention by a [female] doctor helped reduce the proportion of parsnip in the soup.[86]

Estera Melchior explained the reasons why that food affected them:

> Rarely was the soup made from potato or swede peels; usually it was made from horrible bitter parsnips and, once eaten, often led to cases of food poisoning, vomiting, and diarrhoea. Our conditions grew worse during this period.[87]

Sometimes having a bath, after a selection, was the preliminary step to a transport and involved another trauma, listed under the Boder's medical theme: gynaecological and rectal examinations in search of jewellery or objects of precious metal. This kind of exam, intrusive and abusive, was a form of sexualized violence, as Brigitte Habmayr called it in her study on *Sexualized Violence against Women during Nazi "Racial" Persecution*.[88] It had become usual, as Estera Melchior told the interviewer while speaking about her arrival in Ravensbrück:

"As usual, soon followed a body search and gynaecological examination which aimed to uncover gold and valuables. We were bathed, made to change clothes, and taken to the quarantine block."[89]

Genia Rotman confirmed that:

> The next day, we were escorted to the bathhouse; this took all night because we were taken there one group at a time. We were subjected to a thorough search and gynaecological exam to check if we had hidden any diamonds or other valuables.[90]

85 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

86 Record of witness testimony No. 423.

87 Record of witness testimony No. 277.

88 Brigitte Habmayr, "Sexualized Violence against Women during Nazi "Racial" Persecution," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 29–44.

89 Record of witness testimony No. 277.

90 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

Cecylja Skórecka recalled another episode:

> After three weeks, we were led out into the main street of the camp for inspection. Looking us over was a munitions factory manager who had come from Malchow. He chose the good-looking young women. The next day we went to the *Revier* for a medical examination. We stripped naked. We were taken to a room. On a table sat a uniformed SS doctor; he looked us over while nurses looked at our arms, legs, eyes, and teeth.[91]

When Genia Rotman arrived in Malchow on November 22, 1944, she had a good impression of the camp because of the better hygienic conditions:

> The block was bisected by two corridors; in the middle was the entrance hall – the so-called *Waschraum* (washroom). In the centre of the *Waschraum* were two wash basins, each of which had six taps. The water was always cold. Hygienic conditions were initially good… [92]

The level of cleanliness was measured by Rozalia Goldband according to the absence of lice: "We didn't have lice. However, we only received soap on three occasions throughout that time."[93] The possibility to wash meant a luxury to the prisoners, as Cecylja pointed out:

> The barracks had plumbing. Each block had its own fully equipped *Waschraum*. Fourteen people could wash at the same time – because that's how many taps there were – and there were 120 of us in the block. We considered that a luxury.[94]

Soon, after Genia began working in the gunpowder factory, she understood that she had been wrong:

> The work was dirty. Gunpowder would stick to our skin, yet we had no soap; it caused skin irritation and blisters. We used to 'wash' ourselves with sand and brick. The gunpowder would eat into our skin and there was no washing it out with cold water, especially without soap. Our underwear was only changed once every four weeks, and so we would wash it every Sunday in cold water under the tap (we had no basins). There were stoves in the *Stubes*. We would get ten briquettes per [sic], which was not even enough to heat up the stove. We would save up these briquette rations to light the stove once a week, on Sunday, and dry our underwear.[95]

10 The *Appell*

One of the most frequent topics in the common group memory of the interviewees is the roll call, which marked both their chronological and spatial experience and can

91 Record of witness testimony No. 174.
92 Record of witness testimony No. 194.
93 Record of witness testimony No. 240.
94 Record of witness testimony No. 174.
95 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

be considered a chronotope. All the interviewees talked about the duration of these roll calls which could last many hours in Ravensbrück.

Estera Melchior, who was in the camp in quarantine for three weeks in November 1944, remembered that "This three-week stint at the Ravensbrück camp was the worst, owing to the five-hour *Appell* during which we prayed for death."[96]

To some prisoners, like Cecylja Skórecka, the harshness of the situation was mitigated by the fact that during the quarantine the prisoners did not have to work and could rest:

> The only thing that was hard for us to take were the long, drawn-out *Appell*. Even though we weren't dressed warmly enough, we would have to stand between four and five hours, and the weather was really rather frosty. […] After *Appell*, we would be given some warm coffee, and apart from that we could spend all day lying in bed.[97]

The roll call was also the occasion when women were selected to be sent to the sub camps.

From 1944, Ravensbrück had become a transit camp from which the prisoners were transported to its sub camps, built in the vicinity of existing plants, where the prisoners were exploited as forced labourers. Gustawa Kaplan was in the first group sent to Malchow: "There was another *Appell*, and selections were made for work at a munitions factory in Malchow. The *aufseherkas* told us as much."[98]

The length of the roll calls was another parameter on the base of which the prisoners evaluated the harshness of the living conditions in a camp. When Tola Sommer arrived in Malchow with the first group sent there from Ravensbrück, her good impression of the camp depended on the fact that "an *Appell* was held in the corridor – not outside."[99] Genia Rotman initially thought the same:

> At first, it seemed things would be all right for us there: we were not beaten; we did not work; *Appells* were not long. There was not much food, but we thought this would normalise – that this was merely a rough start.[100]

But after a while "It turned out we were wrong."[101]

Anyhow, usually the roll calls at Malchow were shorter than in Ravensbrück, as Rachela Gottfried observed:

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96 Record of witness testimony No. 277.
97 Record of witness testimony No. 174.
98 Record of witness testimony No. 102.
99 Record of witness testimony No. 423.
100 Record of witness testimony No. 194.
101 Ibidem.

> From there I went to Malchow, where I worked at a munitions factory. We would get up every day at 3 a.m. and stand at *Appell* for two hours. At 5 a.m. we went to the factory and at 6 a.m. our work began.[102]

Cecylja Skórecka confirmed that the *Appells* were shorter but more frequent: they were a means to check if the prisoners were there and working.

> *Appell* was held at 4 and later 4.30 a.m.; at 5 a.m. we set off for work. Work started at 6 a.m. It took an hour to get there. During *Appell*, roll call would be taken by the *Lagerführer* [Ger., (male) camp commandant] and the lady commandant. On our way out we would be counted; we would walk out in fives, under orders to link arms. They considered that a means of keeping us from escaping. On our way into the factory complex we would be counted a second time, and one last time on our way into the bunker. During the shift they would make an attendance list to check whether all numbers (prisoners) were present and accounted for.[103]

And, according to Genia Rotman, they contributed to the prisoners' physical exhaustion, they were

"devastating to our health."[104]

The first roll calls in Malchow represented the time when the camp was being organised and selections for the positions took place. Again, Genia Rotman explained what happened then:

> An *Appell* took place at 11 a.m. It turned out that we had arrived at an empty camp. The *oberka* [chief woman guard, from Ger. *Oberaufseherin*], camp commandant, and SS women came into the *Appellplatz*. They set about organizing the camp. From among us, they selected *blokowas* and *sztubowas* for the kitchen, *Bekleidungskammer*, and laundry as well as two *schreiberkas* [clerks, from Ger. *Schreiberin*]. We were told at *Appell* that we would not get any food until evening and that we would be going to work in a few days.[105]

They were also used as a collective punishing strategy, as Estera Krajanek[106] remembered:

> At Malchow, I worked twelve hours a day at a munitions factory: nights one week, days the next. The work was hard. If any of us did a bad job, we were punished collectively with *Appells*. On more than one occasion, these *Appells* took place at night. We used to cry due to our physical and nervous exhaustion.[107]

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102 Record of witness testimony No. 115.

103 Record of witness testimony No. 174.

104 Record of witness testimony No. 194.

105 *Ibidem*.

106 Estera Krajanek was born in Pabianice, Poland, in 1918. She was interviewed by Helena Miklaszewska in June 1946.

107 Record of witness testimony No. 360, Interview with Estera Krajanek, Alvin, Lund University Library. 1946. https://www.alvin-portal.org/alvin/view.jsf?pid=alvin-record:103290.

Rachela Gottfried remembered one episode:

> Once, the *blokowa* and *sztubowas* [chief prisoners of each block section, from Ger. *Stubenälteste*] made themselves black aprons out of material they had bought from poor *Häftlings* in exchange for some water soup; in punishment for this, we had to stand at an *Appell* from half past six until nightfall the following day, without food, drink, or sleep – and we had just finished the night shift. Afterwards, we had to go back to the factory and toil while being beaten and tortured.[108]

During the *Appell*, selective punishments were issued:

> Once, one of the girls brought a bullet back to the camp. (She was mentally ill.) She hid the bullet under a stone by the block. An *aufseherka* noticed the bullet as she was walking by. It was unknown who had hidden it. An *Appell* was convened, and the entire camp stood from 2 to 5 p.m. In the meantime, it was determined which department the bullet had come from. We were dismissed from *Appell*; the SK [*Strafkompanie*, lit. 'punishment company' (Ger.)], workers, however, were kept behind. They remained in the yard until rations had been issued to the entire camp. *Aufseherkas* were present for the soup distribution. By then, it was already known that the *Kommandoführerin* had ordered that those prisoners' rations be withheld for eight days. (Genia Rotman)[109]

The roll calls marked also the phases of the camp and the split between the first and the second phase of the camp's existence:

> After the arrival of the transport from Auschwitz, fatalities occurred and the *Revier* was full. An all-powerful hunger hung over the camp. Many people had stopped going to work. Women would faint at *Appell*. We would be fed soup made from boiled parsnips and vegetable peels. (Cecylja Skórecka)[110]

It was also remembered as the last event in the camp before the liberation with the White Busses:

> At five o'clock came the signal to wake up. For the first time, we were given semolina porridge for breakfast. An *Appell* was convened and the list was read out. Numbers were torn off and coats removed (only women without pullovers were allowed to keep their coats). We were inspected to ensure we were not wearing a second layer of clothing; then they had us stand in fives and led us away to the white vehicles. (Genia Rotman)[111]

108 Record of witness testimony No. 115.
109 [Genia Rotman]. Record of witness testimony No. 194.
110 [Cecylja Skórecka]. Record of witness testimony No. 174.
111 [Genia Rotman]. Record of witness testimony No. 194.

11 The Liberation

Liberation is one of the events which marked the chronological framework of the survivors' memory. The interviewees were freed in three different ways. A group of them was liberated from Malchow by the Swedish Red Cross with the White Busses on April 26, 1945. Another group waited in Malchow until the Russians arrived, a third group had been sent to Leipzig already in March and was liberated there or managed to escape. Most of the interviewees were in the first group whose common memory is based on the recollection of the feelings of disbelief and uncertainty. "We didn't know if this truly was the beginning of freedom, or rather an act of German duplicity designed to mislead us. Most of us submitted to fate."[112] Felicja Hauptman recalled: "Around 26 April, Swedish Red Cross vehicles came for us and took us to freedom. Not everyone believed that we were truly going to be liberated."[113]

The vehicles from the Red Cross arrived on April 24 bringing parcels and

> [o]n the fine morning of 25 April, a Red Cross vehicle pulled up to the camp's *Schreibstube.* Rumours were circulating that the vehicle had come for the French POWs. A German from the Wehrmacht came outside and demanded a list of all the prisoners, mainly Polish citizens. The *blokowa* informed us that we would be the first block to leave the camp. (Rozalia Goldband,)[114]

In the deculturated environment of the camp, rumours were the main source of information.

> Of course, we never had a newspaper, but the rumors were spreading around rather quickly, but … ah … my … unfortunately very exaggerated rumors and … ah … according. (Nelly Bondy)[115]

Usually they had proved to be wrong or not completely reliable: this contributed to the scepticism of the prisoners, who had been victims of the Germans' misleading and deceiving strategy for years.

> On 25 April, white motor vehicles marked with red crosses appeared outside the camp's wire fence. Most of us did not believe we were being set free, for the Germans had often resorted to sophisticated traps and trickery by cloaking themselves in the guise of the Red Cross. As it turned out, however, these were vehicles belonging to Count Folke Bernadotte's rescue operation, bringing us the liberation and freedom we had long dreamed of. (Estera Melchior)[116]

Estera Krajanek remembered that the prisoners at that time were so exhausted that they became indifferent.

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112 *Ibidem.*

113 Record of witness testimony No. 487.

114 [Rozalia Goldband]. Record of witness testimony No. 240.

115 [Nelly Bondy]. David P. Boder Interviews Nelly Bondy.

116 Record of witness testimony No. 277.

> Red Cross buses came at dawn, and supposedly we were to leave the camp and go free. We didn't believe it, fearing this was yet another gassing selection of some kind. We went anyway because we were indifferent; life did not matter to us… We thought that all of it – the buses, the Red Cross, the Swedes – was some kind of German trickery, and we didn't want to expose ourselves to any danger.[117]

Rita Benmayor and Helen Tichauer,[118] two of the Boder's interviewees, were in the second group, that stayed in Malchow:

> One day and the two days – we had the Russians coming. We walked on the street, just like that, the prisoners alone, and the whole day we were without guard … we went into the houses, we took food, we took clothes … And the Russians gave us much to eat, we fixed ourselves up, we had soap to wash … (Rita Benmyor)[119]

> I remained there. There came the first of May. The first of May was celebrated in our heart as the day of freedom. And the first of May we were, indeed evacuated from the lager Meistro.[120] (Helen Tichuer)[121]

Nelly Bondy and Lisa Stumachin were in the third group. The first one was evacuated from Taucha. From there:

> (…) we were marched on; but we didn't know where to, because we knew … Well, we had to leave Taucha one evening very quickly, and I had a lot of trouble because I couldn't walk. My foot had been frozen and I had very difficult to walk. I … I marched along with them for two days but then I simply couldn't, and I knew I would be shot. I escaped.[122]

Lina Stumachin, instead, was freed by the Russians in Saxony:

> I was sick, my legs were swollen. I decided that I would rest, but homesickness wouldn't let me rest. In my imagination, I saw my house, and those that I had lost would come back to me. [unintelligible] We had to go on foot. A hundred and fifty kilometres we went on foot and pulled with us a wagon with food and some tattered rags. We passed cities in ruins, we met people on the way, who were the same as us, on their way home, they sang happy songs of hope and we were also happy. On the 8th of May I arrived in Cracow and there I was met with my first disappointment. Out of my family who lived in Cracow, I couldn't find anyone.[123]

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117 Record of witness testimony No. 360.

118 Born in Bratislava in 1918, she was interviewed by David Boder in Feldafing displaced persons camp on September 23, 1946.

119 David P. Boder Interviews Rita Benmayor.

120 She meant Mecklenburg but David Boder could not understand the name, so the transcription is phonetic.

121 David P. Boder Interviews Helen Tichauer.

122 David P. Boder Interviews Nelly Bondy.

123 David P. Boder Interviews Lina Stumachin.

Actually, the liberation was not the end of the survivors' suffering. Even though their physical and living conditions improved, the traumas, the burden of the loneliness and the grief were then perceived strongly and deeply.

> We arrived in Sweden. When we found ourselves lying in clean beds, freshly bathed and fully fed, we couldn't believe our good fortune. And right then it hit us that we were alone, without any family; that everything we had, had been destroyed and we were left with nothing. We began to fall into despair. (Estera Krajanek)[124]

They were about to begin a new life and tried to be hopeful despite their losses and dramatic experiences.

12 Conclusions

> I want to say we have learned very much. Still, we are not pessimists. That is we have come to learn … that there is only one reality. The reality of the Evil. But in spite of that we are not pessimists. We have also learned that the potentiality of the human soul is very great. One can stand very much [laughter]. And that is told by a human being who runs around on false limbs. Life is more interesting than death, possibly not easier. (Roma Tcharnabroda, Interview with David Boder)[125]

These early interviews prove to be significant not only for the events they shed light on, but because they anticipate some of the most important issues in Holocaust studies before a collective memory about it was built. In 1946 these women talked about their experiences for the first time, therefore they elaborated a communication strategy, and explained events and details which were not always known. The combined exam of two different groups of interviews, collected in different places, allows to identify how their common and individual memory was shaped and communicated, which factors and frameworks could affect the testimonies' focus, topics, features about a less documented topic like Ravensbrück complex.

The selection of the events and episodes the interviewees chose to recall is extremely telling about the building of their memory: this was very similar in both groups, even though the PIZ interviewees were asked to follow a pre-determined scheme when constructing their testimony. Actually, their memories are recalled following a general to specific structure: usually starting from a general topic, they remembered related episodes and described them in detail. In all the interviews some common topics related to food, the living and hygienic conditions, the relation between the prisoners and the guards' behaviour emerge expressed with the same words.

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124 Record of witness testimony No. 360.

125 [Roma Tcharnabroda, Interview with David Bode]. David Boder, "David P. Boder Interviews Roma Tcharnabroda" in *Voices of the Holocaust* (1946). https://voices.library.iit.edu/interview/tcharnabrodaR.

Since the *deculturated* context of the camps erased the usual social frameworks according to which memories are created, these testimonies show how the survivors' memory and their recollection of the events were affected by the deculturated social context of the camp, perceived as an alternative disturbed world. The coordinates of time and space were those of the camps, where the daily routine and the topography were constituted by new elements. Roll calls, selections, episodes involving the prisoners as individuals and as a group marked the interviewees' memories and were strictly linked to the places where they happened. The past was recollected from an internal perspective which only the survivors of the Holocaust could provide, to an even greater extent regarding places, situations and events which were not documented otherwise, like Malchow.

The technique used in the interviews affected the way the events were recalled, Boder's semi-directive method allowed the interviewees to express their feelings and to make digressions, while Bolin's guidelines and the statement provided by the PIZ at the beginning of the interviews conveyed the testimony's features and did not encourage the expressions of emotions and feelings. They are visible anyway through a careful analysis of the interviewees' linguistic choices: adjectives and verbs pertaining the semantic fields of terror, hell, violence, deception and deprivation are quite common. At the same time, in both groups of testimonies, we can read between the lines that gendered perspective which affects their memories both in terms of the selection of the events and their focus on specific issues, such as their demolition as human beings and women.

When the women were interviewed, the traumatic events they recalled were recent and vivid, their future still uncertain. As Lina Stumachin told David Boder, "They threw us from place to place, maybe finally we will find some place to call our own, where we can live peacefully … freely … not ridiculed … not tormented …"[126]

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