

AUDIO-VISUAL INTERVIEWS OF GYPSY AND JEWISH VICTIMS OF NAZI GENOCIDAL POLICY:

Reflections on Language, Memory and Narrative Culture

Stephen D. Smith, Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles

The USC Shoah Foundation Institute has 51,219 testimonies listed in its Visual History Archive at the point of publication. The majority of the testimonies (48,893) reflect the experiences of Jews affected by Nazi racial persecution. There are also groups of testimonies in the archive which help understand the effects of National Socialism upon a range of victims or those active in responding to it.¹ Among these is a collection categorized as 'Sinti and Roma Survivors'.² They are further defined as 'Interviewees who were targeted for persecution under laws and/or policies against Sinti and Roma ('Gypsies')'. The 407 interviews in this category were taken in 18 countries³ and in 17 languages.⁴

¹ At the time of publication the breakdown of number of testimonies in the Visual History Archive is: Jewish Survivors: 48,893; Rescuers and Aid Providers: 1,132; Sinti and Roma Survivors: 407; Liberators and Liberation Witnesses: 362; Political Prisoners: 261; Jehovah's Witness Survivors: 83; War Crimes Trials' Participants: 62; Survivors of Eugenic Policies: 13; Homosexual Survivors: 6.

² This study will not distinguish Sinti and Roma and will use the term 'Gypsy' throughout.

³ Countries where interviews of Gypsies were taken: Austria: 5; Belarus: 3; Bulgaria: 5; Czech Republic: 3; France: 1; Germany: 10; Hungary: 2; Italy: 3; Latvia: 6; Moldova: 16; Netherlands: 1; Poland: 181; Romania: 7; Russia: 10; Slovakia: 6; USA: 4; Ukraine: 135; Yugoslavia: 9.

⁴ Languages in which Gypsy interviewees opted to give testimony: Bulgarian: 5; Czech: 3; Dutch: 1; English: 4; French: 1; German: 15; Hungarian: 2; Italian: 3; Latvian and Russian: 1; Polish: 181; Romani: 24; Romanian: 3; Russian: 103; Russian and Ukrainian: 4; Serbian: 9; Slovak: 6; Ukrainian: 42.

For the purpose of this study I have referenced three German Gypsy interviewees who gave testimony in English, all three of them residing in the United States of America at the time of their interview. In addition, the study references a single Jewish survivor who is of similar age, gender and national background to the Gypsy interviewees as a control text. All four interviewees were interned at Auschwitz-Birkenau and settled in the United States after their experience during the Holocaust.

Interviewee Profiles

Julia Lentini, born Julia Bäcker, in Eisern, Germany, 15 April 1926, to a Romani Gypsy family. The family lived in their own home in Bickenkopf, Germany, and travelled for work during the summer months. Her parents, Johanna and Ludwig Bäcker, had 15 children. The family was deported to Auschwitz in March 1943 and interred in the Gypsy Camp in Auschwitz-Birkenau. 11 of the 17 Bäcker family members survived.

Wellesina McCrary, born Wellesina Geisler-von-Adlersburg, somewhere in Germany, sometime during 1933, into a travelling Gypsy family. Her parents Alfred and Blaujak Lakrin had four children of whom Wellesina was the youngest. The family was deported to Auschwitz on an unknown date. Her father, two aunts and three cousins survived.

Ella Davis, born Ella Wittich in Stuttgart, Germany, on 10 September 1934. Her parents, Alvin and Sophie Wittich, had four children. Ella was deported to Mauthausen, Auschwitz and several other camps. Ella, her parents, her sister Popla and brother Horst survived. 37 members of her extended family were murdered.

Eva Hommel, born Eva Mosbach in Stettin, Germany (now Szczeczyn, Poland), on 19 August 1934. Her parents, Erich and Vera Mosbach, had only one child and practised traditional Judaism. Vera Mosbach's father was German and this made her a *Mischling* (of mixed race) according to Nazi racial laws even though her grandmother was Jewish. All five of the family survived the Holocaust. The Jews of Stettin were the first Jews of the Third Reich to be deported in February 1940. Erich Hommel was the only Jewish male in Stettin to survive.

Narrative Tradition, Language and Literacy

The narrative traditions of the Jews and the Gypsies are very different. Within the Jewish tradition, the focus on literacy, sacred texts and liturgy has meant that Jews have transmitted their history and traditions through written text. Gypsy communities have relied on an oral tradition to convey their customs and family histories. The audio-visual medium is a new medium, but it acts merely as a carrier for a narrative style already established within the tradition of the respective interviewees. Narrative is shaped by language structure, vocabulary, chronology, myth, story, cultural references, sacred tradition, historical facticity, etc., and all these play their part in the structure of the narrative in the audio-visual medium. Observing how these narrative traditions form expectations of interviewer and interviewee, and in turn are also conditioned by the expectations of the viewer, is part of the critical framework of 'reading' audio-visual testimony. These interviewees are all part of an established narrative tradition and contribute to

it by agreeing to be interviewed on camera – even where the traditional setting in front of the video camera is different.

Narrative in the context of audio-visual testimony is structured around the basic building block of language, so language determines the narrative experience.⁵ At the outset of her interview, the interviewer asks Ella Davis:

Tell us your name and spell it!

Davis leans forward as if to avoid the camera; she shakes her head with a somewhat embarrassed expression and whispers to the interviewer:

Oh, I can't do that.

The interviewer continues without hesitation:

Tell us your name!

The interviewee then answers:

Ella Davis, *geborene* [born] Wittich.⁶

The interviewer had assumed a certain level of literacy which Davis did not possess. It was not only the lack of literacy on Davis's part, but also the lack of cultural literacy of the interviewer, who is off camera, that creates this awkward first moment of the interview. The interviewer placed the interviewee in the difficult position of not being able to answer the first question she is asked. The second observation from this opening scene is that it becomes obvious that German words are going to be part of her English language testimony. Although it is short, Davis's very first sentence is in German. The challenge of spelling is also evident in the case of Wellesina McCrary, who is asked on several occasions to spell names of people and places. She attempts to spell the names using her forefinger to draw on the table as an aid. She does not manage to spell her own name successfully and in most cases struggles to complete the spelling of other names she is asked. By insisting on asking the interviewee to spell names, while knowing that she is not spelling them accurately, the interviewer places the interviewee in the invidious position of being unable to answer the question asked. This also introduces spelling inaccuracies to the testimony, thereby defeating the purpose of asking for a spell-check in the first place.

The use of German words in the English-language interview is prevalent across all three interviewees of Gypsy descent. Julia Lentini, whose English is the most fluent, still uses conjunctions in German throughout, such as *oder* (or) and *also* (and so), as well as occasional nouns such as *Gemüse* (vegetables) and *Kartoffeln* (potatoes) and occasional idiomatic phrases: '*Grenze zu Grenze*' (border to border), when referring to their summer travelling. Wellesina

⁵ In its wider sense, the 'narrative' representations of the Holocaust have many expressions. The 'narrative' of a museum is not limited to text, but encompasses the juxtaposition of text with still images, video and experiential space. A song has narrative, as does a theatrical performance or documentary film, all of which are narrative representations used to frame the experiences of Jews and Gypsies.

⁶ Interview of Ella Davis, 43666, 13 July 1998, Tape 1: 00:57, held at Visual History Archive, University of California Shoah Foundation Institute (henceforth VHA SFI). – In the excerpts from the interviews, words in square brackets [] indicate explanatory notes added in the transcript.

McCrary relies more heavily on her German vocabulary to express words she does not know or cannot remember in English. She is sympathetic to the interviewer and the viewer by always attempting to translate the term into English, although she is not always successful. On several occasions, she turns to her American husband who is off camera to seek assistance with the translation. By contrast, Eva Hommel, who was born around the same time and in the same country as Wellesina McCrary and Ella Davis, and also migrated to America after the war, uses no German vocabulary in her testimony and does not struggle with spelling names and places. While it is obvious that higher levels of literacy will lead to a different use of language, it is also important to be aware of this factor as it shapes what is said, and sets a different expectation on the narrative for the viewer.

Names, Family and Loss

Julia Lentini's testimony begins by describing how she was 'born under the stars'. Her family travelled from April to October to trade the wicker baskets that her father made during the winter months. As a result, she was born away from their hometown of Biedenkopf. She places emphasis on how important the summer travelling was to the family, both economically and culturally, although she refers to them having a 'steady home', by which she means that they were settled in a house in Biedenkopf. She describes the annual Gypsy fair held in Aachen and how her father would trade horses and buy a new wagon each year to accommodate all 15 children. The focus in her testimony is on a way of life and the importance of family and being together.

This focus on family unity contrasts strongly with the loss of family, including the loss of their names. Wellesina McCrary was one of four children. She tries to recall her siblings' names:

My brother, I know his name was Romanus, then ... [hesitates] ... Lilac, and the other one, I don't know her name. Someone said it was Shimla, but I don't know.

Wellesina also hesitates over her mother's maiden name. When the interviewer asks what her mother's maiden name was, she is not certain, but thinks it could be 'Lakrins', then due to her uncertainty, is unable to spell it.⁷ The lack of these names in her immediate family tree clearly demonstrates that conversation about the family's past has been completely absent since her experience. In any conversation about the family, her sisters' names would have been mentioned. She tries to explain this missing information:

I was a young girl, I did not think about remembering names ... and a lot of things I pushed out of my mind too ... I don't even want to remember things ... I get very disturbed about them.⁸

Ella Davis is also unable to complete the list of her nine siblings. She lists six, then pauses to think, trying to retrieve the other three from her memory. The interviewer, who had not been keeping count of the number of names Ella lists, appears not to notice that she is trying to remember the others and asks the next question. Three names of her closest relatives murdered by the Nazis are consequently not recorded in the archive.

⁷ Interview of Wellesina McCrary, 42510, 19 July 1998, Tape 1: 12: 30, held at VHS SFL.

⁸ Ibid., Tape 1: 07:15.

Unlike the three Gypsy interviewees, Eva Hommel was an only child and, unusually, all of her small extended family survived. She provides a rationale for her lack of siblings:

At that point (1934), if you [as Jews] had one child, that was already courageous because Hitler was already in power and when you think about it most of the people we know of the same age bracket, they are all single children.⁹

By stating this, Eva implies that the Jews are somehow aware of the severity of the threat that lay ahead. In stark contrast to the Gypsy testimonies, where family is security, for Eva's parents, family represents insecurity, which contrasts with Julia Lentini's mother, who had her youngest child in 1939. Whether this was the real reason behind Eva's parents' decision not to have more children is a moot point, although entirely plausible, certainly by 1935 after the introduction of the Nuremberg Laws. More significantly though, it is a demonstration of how telling her family's personal historical narrative is inextricably linked to the wider, unfolding historical scenario. In Eva's depiction of family life, the Hommel family become reluctant actors in the history of the Third Reich. The Gypsy interviewees appear to focus on immediate personal experience and are less aware of the dangerous utopian plans of the Third Reich. It is doubtful whether Eva understood that at the time, although she was a child of the Nazi era, lived her first 11 years entirely in the Third Reich and was highly attuned to the dangers. As she recalls her childhood, her whole past is conditioned and focused through the lens of the Nazi era. Living with the lethal threat of National Socialism did not shape her identity. It was her identity. This difference of experience is not qualitative in terms of measuring personal suffering, but does demonstrate the difference the family environment, and the prevailing social conditions, had on the interviewees.

Chronology, Sequence, Themes

The narratives of the Roma interviewees are distinctly less formed around chronology and sequence than around themes. There is a sense within Eva Hommel's narrative of time unfolding and events happening sequentially along the timeline. The Gypsy testimonies do follow a chronological logic, but themes, such as family, or loss, or culture tend to form groupings of content, rather than sequential events.

When Wellesina McCrary is describing her childhood prior to the war, she also describes going to buy buttons and having to return with five Mark to provide for the family. It then becomes clear that she is talking about her role after the war – by which time her father was remarried with five more children and she is reliving a new childhood.¹⁰ The interviewer realizes that this thematic skipping is occurring regularly, so begins to ask her to confirm where the events she is describing fit in chronologically.

In the first few minutes of her testimony, Ella Davis skips from describing her neighbourhood to being 'put away':

⁹ Interview of Eva Hommel, 2140, 23 April 1995, Tape 1: 06:30, held at VHA SFL.

¹⁰ Interview of Wellesina McCrary, 42510, 19 July 1998, Tape 1: 09:30, held at VHA SFL.

What kind of a neighbourhood did you grow up in?

In a normal neighbourhood ...

Was there Gypsies in that neighbourhood?

Yes there was.

Was there like a tribe?

You know, when you are Gypsy you got them trailers und everyone had children ... [especially] Gypsies, they got a bunch of children ... We stayed together all the time ... When they get you, you can play no more. You're finished, you can neither go in school no more. [We] not did nothing, und (and) they took *uns* [us] *von* [from] *die* [the] school, and you never go back no more. They just took you and put you away.

Before we talk about that, I want to know a little bit more about how you grew up ... Tell me about your grandparents.¹¹

The interviewer was trying to obtain basic background information about her family life, but Ella leaps directly to the end point of the narrative. She apparently sees no purpose in talking about school unless it involves school being taken away, because the key memory of school was of losing her education:

Ella, tell us a little bit about what kind of a child you were.

I was a little girl. I started going [to] school. Then they stopped me.

Ella also chooses not to dwell on describing the family, as her family was removed from her. Her past does not involve an unfolding narrative, but a final consequence, which makes everything else inconsequential. In her mind, childhood was defined by one fact:

They just took you and put you away.

In a similar chronological shift, Wellesina McCrary describes her 'first memory' of her mother:

[S]he took us all, and we went in this *Tiefwagen* ... An animal carrier ... what carries cows and stuff. My mother, she took this box *oder* (or) suitcase and we had in there cream o'wheat and some sugar and some dried milk and they took that from us and threw it in the street.

Who took that?

When we went [to] the camp ... They opened up that suitcase ... And they throw all that stuff in the street. So we didn't have nothing to eat [on the journey]. Nothing.

¹¹ Interview of Ella Davis, 43666, 13 July 1998, Tape 1: 04:25, held at VHA SFL.

Wellesina replaces the memory of her mother in childhood with the moment when her mother is standing on the street – with no ability to feed and care for her frightened children – as the defining image of her mother. She has not understood the question she was asked about providing the first memory of her mother, but rather recalls the defining memory of her mother – a mother who was stripped of her motherhood. The chronological shifts in the Gypsy narratives, therefore, appear to serve the purpose of focus – on those things which matter most and follow a thematic link.

Mixed Identity

Ella Davis comes from a mixed cultural background as her father was German. She is asked to reflect on the way in which her parents and family on the Gypsy side created a cultural framework for her identity:

What kind of stories were passed down in your family? Did you hear your stories?

No.

Your mama didn't tell you stories?

No, she not telling no stories.

Do you recall any special activities you did with your Gypsy relatives?

No.

Did you see yourself as German first or as Gypsy first?

As German, *und* [and] then later as Gypsy, as I could go nowhere.

And what about your family, did they all consider themselves Germans first?

No, Gypsy.

And what about your father ...?

My father was German, he was in the army.

In this short interchange, the interviewee demonstrates the cultural confusion of living in a mixed family. She identifies herself as German, adopting the identity of her father. Her extended family have a strong Gypsy identity, but perhaps because of the mixed marriage and more settled lifestyle, they evidently do not give her a strong Gypsy upbringing. It is the same for many Jewish children of mixed marriages, where, too, it is the Nazis who first defined their Jewish identity through racial persecution. Eva Hommel was Jewish but also had a mixed background, although one generation removed from Davis. Her mother had a German father, but chose to bring her daughter up in a traditional Jewish home. Eva states that her father came from an 'Orthodox Jewish background' and her mother had a 'Jewish upbringing'. Her parents 'observed the holidays but not the Sabbath'. Although the family was not observant, they were certainly surrounded by other Jewish families as she says that her 'friends were Jewish friends – children

of friends and acquaintances'.¹² The identification of Gypsies of mixed parentage as *Zigeunermischlinge* was defined in August 1941, with a number of categories, assessments and rules for determining what action to take.¹³ For the Jews, the *Mischling* rules were defined in 1935 with the Nuremberg Laws and were applied almost universally. In the case of the two interviewees, *Mischling* status had no impact and did not alter their chances of survival.

Jews, Gypsies and the Third Reich

There were similarities and differences between Jews and Gypsies according to Nazi ideology, law, doctrine and practice. Ideologically, National Socialism was driven by racial purity and this extended itself to the creation of a utopian society – racially pure, socially manipulated. The instruments deployed were designed to achieve those utopian goals – racial and social. In practice, this meant there was a constantly changing picture as the Nazis pursued their biological goals in the social sphere with increasing effect.¹⁴ The implementation of the race laws had profound consequences for the Jews and Gypsies through the most brutal form of social engineering – genocide. The difference between how the two groups were treated appears to lie in the timing and intent. The Nazis were anti-Semitic from the outset. Jews were not welcome in the 'Thousand-Year Reich', and that was codified in law by September 1935. Jews had little doubt about the risks they ran. If the Nazis' primary mental disposition was a racist view of social questions,¹⁵ it was then only a matter of time before the Gypsies, seen as social misfits and a nuisance, would have their fate confirmed through the racial laws. As these interviewees all confirm, the Gypsies themselves were entirely unaware of this creeping danger, especially in Germany, where they had a level of integration into the Reich and its infrastructure:

I wanted to be in the BDM [*Bund Deutscher Mädel*]¹⁶ ... [but was] never allowed to join anything like that ... because mother would not let us.¹⁷

Julia Lentini may have felt the peer pressure and seen no reason not to join the BDM, but her mother understood that her daughter would not be welcome. Julia does not say so explicitly, but there is a sense that German Gypsies knew that National Socialism would not welcome them; although they also appeared to believe that it would not harm them either.

One example of how it was impossible for the Gypsies to foresee their fate was in the relationship of some families to the military.¹⁸ All three Gypsy interviewees had family performing military service. Julia Lentini's oldest brother, Ludwig Bäcker, was in the army from 1939 to 1943. Wellesina McCrary's father was drafted in against his will. Although the date is not exactly clear from her testimony, she does remember that he refused to respond to the draft

¹² Interview of Eva Hommel, 2140, 23 April 1995, Tape 1: 09:25, held at VHA SFL.

¹³ Lewy (2000), pp. 102–6.

¹⁴ Zimmerman (2006), p. 136.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁶ The 'League of German Girls' (or literally, Maidens) was the Nazi female youth organization.

¹⁷ Interview of Julia Lentini, 5891, 12 November 1998, Tape 2: 08:20, held at VHA SFL.

¹⁸ This relationship to the state was unique to German Gypsies and would not apply to Gypsies who came under occupation later.

and was arrested as a consequence. She recalls that he was sent to 'the front', although she does not provide any further details. Julia's brother Ludwig was relieved from the military only in March 1943 when the Bäcker family was deported from Biedenkopf. He was subsequently interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau and then Dachau. Ella Davis's father was German and had married a Gypsy woman. He was also in the military.

There were several stages to Nazi policy relating to military service for Gypsies. From 1937, they were to be excluded from serving, but this rule was not applied universally. In 1941, the military confirmed that no more Gypsies or part-Gypsies would be called up. It took until 1943 for the last of the Gypsies to be released from service.¹⁹ This mixed picture was not uncommon especially where Gypsies were of mixed descent, and even applied to a small number of men of mixed Jewish descent.²⁰ This meant that a sense of loyalty to the Third Reich and faith in its goodwill was maintained within the family – as one of the family was a serving soldier. They had little reason to think that the Nazi regime would punish them for their service. The Nazis did not want the Gypsies to serve on racial grounds, but they did not implement their own decrees, thereby giving a false sense of security to families who were serving. Had Ludwig Bäcker been discharged earlier, awareness within the Bäcker family of their impending fate may have come earlier. This false sense of security is reminiscent of the Jewish veterans of the First World War who had served in the German Army and believed that their patriotic service to the '*Vaterland*' (Fatherland) would exempt them from deportation. This was true of Eva Hommel's father, who had been captured by the French during the First World War:

He was 50 per cent disabled during the First World War ... He had a metal plate and one lung and one kidney ... When some of the other men were taken to Buchenwald, he was not taken because of it.²¹

In Eva's account, the theme of her father's service does in fact play a positive role in their survival. Because of his service, he is allowed to continue to practise when other Jewish doctors are denied a licence. This meant that when he was deported to Lublin and later to Budzyn, he was able to secure work in the ghetto and later the camp as a physician, and was appointed by the SS to work as a physician on several occasions, thus extending the life and survival chances of the family. Eva is very clear throughout her account that this was a tactic used by her father to enhance their chances of survival.

In the Gypsy testimonies, there is a sense that the Gypsy community was inadvertently trapped by ambivalence, which had severe historical and narrative consequences. Historically, the Gypsies had more freedom for a longer period, but they were also less well prepared, mentally and physically, than the Jews for the genocidal events that followed. Ella Davis describes her family's arrest and how her father reacted to their arrest as a member of the armed forces:

¹⁹ Kenrick and Puxon (2009), pp. 29–30.

²⁰ Mark Bryan Rigg did extensive research into soldiers of Jewish descent who served in the German armed forces, many of whom were granted the right to serve by Hitler directly, or whose identity was covered by their superiors. It is, therefore, highly plausible that some men of Gypsy descent were still serving deep into the war period. For more information about men of Jewish descent in the German forces, see Rigg (2002).

²¹ Interview of Eva Hommel, 2140, 23 April 1995, Tape 1: 10:55, held at VHA SFI.

Early in the morning at 4 o'clock, them Nazis came und knocked in the door and tell them they want the Gypsy woman with the children. My daddy said, 'No, I am working for the people, I am in the army, I am fight[ing] for the country' ... and they got *uns* [us] still out. So after that my daddy have to go too. While *er* [he] tipped the picture down and dropped it on the floor.'

The picture of who?

Of ... Hitler. [He] stepped on it, broke it. My daddy, *er* [he] say, 'Why should I do that [be deported] when I fight for the country?'

The family was sent to Karlsruhe jail. Ella describes how her father was crying and repeating that he was serving the country and that he would not allow his family to be treated this way.

In the narratives we are comparing, the shock felt by the Gypsy families demonstrates the less fatalistic sense of their involvement in the atrocities of the Third Reich. Even in the narratives, they position themselves as incidental victims rather than a central part of the Nazi racial world order. Eva Hommel's narrative is clear that the Jews knew from the outset that the Nazis were their enemies, even if they did not yet understand how far the Nazis were prepared to go with their genocidal rhetoric. The question is how much of the narrative of the Jewish testimonies is refracted through the lens of the post-war Holocaust narrative, and how much was really understood at the time.

Understanding Unfolding Events

Julia Lentini refers to the fact that they were no longer able to travel in the summer of 1940.²² She is not aware that this is due to the Settlement Decree of October 1939.²³ She makes no mention of racial persecution when referring to this restriction, aligning her testimony with some historians and legal experts who agree that this measure was for wartime security and not a form of racial persecution, notwithstanding the fact that this decree did not apply to non-Gypsy nomads.²⁴ The family worked in the factories in Biedenkopf with no option but to remain and work. When, in March 1943, the Nazis came to arrest the family, they were also taken entirely by surprise. Julia describes how the *Bürgermeister* (the town mayor) came to their home and told the family personally that the house had been surrounded, but that there was nothing to fear as they were being taken to Frankfurt to have their family tree checked.

Eva Hommel's narrative is more fatalistic, yet she shows her father as an actor, determining the outcome and never surprised by the next twist of Nazi brutality. She describes her father in the Lublin ghetto with a clear sense that he was in control of his own destiny. His wife and daughter were moved from Lublin to the Piaski ghetto, but he was requested to stay behind to attend to the health of the ghetto population, and also to treat the German armed forces.

²² Interview of Julia Lentini, 5891, 12 November 1998, Tape 2: 10:13, held at VHA SFI.

²³ The *Festsetzungserlaß* of 17 October 1939 prohibited all 'Gypsies' and 'Gypsies of Mixed Blood' from leaving their registered place of residence.

²⁴ Kenrick and Puxon (2009), p. 24. Kenrick and Puxon point out that discussion around the issue of racial persecution was explored as a legal matter relating to compensation after the war.

He was treating the SS at that point, also he had no fear ... [I]e said to one of them, 'If I treat you, I can inject you with air just as much as with medicine. I have nothing to lose if my family is gone.'²⁵

Erich Hommel appears to be entirely aware of what was happening to him and his family and takes risks to change the outcome. This translates itself into Eva's narrative, even though it is highly unlikely that she understood this at the time as a seven-year-old child.

When 15-year-old Julia Lentini arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau from Frankfurt, she was still totally unaware of the threat the camp represented. She was placed in one of the kitchens to work and complained. Her workmate explained to her just how lucky she was. At the same time, nine-year-old Eva Hommel was in Budzy work camp. She describes being given the role of 'companion' to the commandant's daughter:

How did the commandant ... treat you?

I did not have anything ... to do with him ... except try to avoid him as much as possible.

Why?

I don't think you would want to draw the attention of any of the SS toward you.²⁶

Nine-year-old Eva is conditioned with sufficient survival techniques to work in the home of the commandant – which was privileged work – but she is acutely aware of the boundaries necessary to extend her chances of survival. The difference in the narrative does not relate to the innate ability to survive, but the difference of experience. The Gypsy teenager is not yet as aware or conditioned to the brutality of the regime.

Families in the Camps

All three Gypsy families were deported as entire families. The Gypsy camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau was established following Heinrich Himmler's Auschwitz decree of 16 December 1942²⁷ to accommodate the deportation of Gypsies from a number of countries as Nazi policies towards the Gypsies became genocidal. A 'family camp' holding 10,000 inmates, in which women and children were kept in some barracks and men in others, was established in late February 1943. There were 20,600 registered admissions to the family camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, which does not represent all of the Gypsies deported there and interned in other parts of the camp, or those killed on arrival, the number of which is not known. Of those registered and given numbers, 3,800 were accounted for as being transported out to other camps. Approximately 4,000 were gassed in two separate liquidation actions. The remainder – 12,800 – died in the camp through disease and starvation.²⁸

²⁵ Interview of Eva Hommel, 2140, 23 April 1995, Tape 1: 27:06, held at VHA SFI.

²⁶ Ibid., Tape 3: 01:15.

²⁷ Kenrick and Puxon (2009), p. 36.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 139–40. – For the Auschwitz *Zigeunerfamilienlager*, see also Rainer Schulze's article in this volume, pp. 147–59.

Julia Lentini describes the shame experienced by her mother as they entered the family camp:

Now comes the finale ... here's my mother with her big boys, in the nude ... [A]ll she could say was stay together ... [T]hey started to shave you ... it was the worst thing for my mother ... [M]y mother only lived three months after that, my dad three months after that.²⁹

The shameful experience of being dehumanized through the process of stripping, shaving and tattooing is palpable in Julia's words and in the emotions she displays on screen. She is not aware that it was unusual for a mother still to be with her children at this point in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She provides valuable data when she describes how babies were tattooed on the leg – as was her four-year-old brother. The presence of children was not unique at Auschwitz-Birkenau, but the relatively high numbers of children per family meant that the proportion of children was a feature of the Gypsy camp. The interviewer asks Julia if it was unusual for families to stay together.³⁰ Julia fails to understand her question. At that point in her historical narrative, the Gypsy families were together – but they were in Auschwitz after all. The interviewer is trying to encourage her to identify that it was a privilege in some way still to be together there. But as Julia recounts the death of her mother and then her father, and considers the abysmal living conditions they lived in as a family, she is not open to a comparative suffering, by saying it was better to be together than not.

Was there any difference between the way in which the prisoners were treated?

No! ... The end is the same, I don't care who they were ... We all went through the same thing ... We all had the diseases; some of them were in the kitchen, some of them played in the orchestra, everyone had something ... some of them could not make it.³¹

Treatment of the different groups of prisoners in the camps was not identical, as most Jewish children never made it that far, and many of the inmates in other camp sections of Birkenau were on more severe regimes. Unbeknown to Julia – even at the point of interview – the odds of survival were considerably higher for her family at that point, just by making it that far. 11 of the 15 Bäcker children eventually survived, including her four-year-old brother Karl.

Selection Narratives

In narratives describing the arrival of Jews at Auschwitz-Birkenau, there is a similar pattern to the process. The narrative sequence usually involves disembarking, being harassed into the process of selection, being deceived about the intention of lining up, being inspected, deceiving the selector when asked about age or trade (or both), being divided into right and left columns, realizing what these columns meant (life and death), which often involved one or more family members being separated or choosing to switch sides, thereby choosing death, or miraculously being united on the line selected to live. Of all the scenarios described in Holocaust survivor

²⁹ Interview of Julia Lentini, 5891, 12 November 1998, Tape 2: 22:16, held at VHA SFI.

³⁰ Ibid., Tape 2: 27:01.

³¹ Interview of Julia Lentini, 5891, 12 November 1998, Tape 4: 04:58, held at VHA SFI.

interviews, this sequence, with small variations and different styles, is almost identical and follows a clear pattern. Of course, the selection process was routine and therefore repetition in the narrative is to be expected. Eva Hommel describes her arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau in a predictable pattern (with a few unexpected variations):

You get chased out with shooting and yelling. You line up supposedly to go the showers. They look at your arm; if you did not have a tattoo they gave you one.³² We had one from the preceding camp so we didn't get the number, the 'KL' was enough. And then you had to line up to pass the inspections of the SS.

You were about ten years old?

That's right, 1944, ten years old.

How did you pass the inspection so young?

I told them I was 15. My mother told them her father was not Jewish at that point, hoping that would help a little [laughs], but we were still in Auschwitz ... My mother was sent to the right side of the line. I was sent to the left of the line.

Which meant?

Well, the right side was the working line. The left side was the gas chamber. So my mother wanted to join me on my side of the line.

Neither one of you knew what the lines meant at this side, did you?

You could see the people, right? So you could estimate ... if you have a line of elderly people and children and a line of women who were ... workable.

What were you thinking?

It's not the kind of thing where you think, 'Gee, I am going ...'. You don't think ... these things happen in a flash, you don't spend time thinking about it as such. My mother wanted to go to my side of the line. One of the guards was nice enough to let me go to her side of the line. That's how I survived.³³

Wellesina McCrary also arrived at Auschwitz-Birkenau. She probably arrived at a different platform³⁴ from an early phase in the camp's history, so the process may not have been so clear. Her narrative is very different from that usually expected:

³² This is a variation from the normal narrative as tattooing usually happened after the selection process. It may be that Eva Hommel has the sequence wrong, or there may have been some curiosity about the few arrivals who already had a tattoo and were looked at by some functionary while they were lined up waiting.

³³ Interview of Eva Hommel, 2140, 23 April 1995, Tape 3: 14:06, held at VHA SFI.

³⁴ The infamous *Rampe* (ramp) where the trains entered the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau was only introduced in early 1944 for the arrival of the Hungarian transports. Prior to that, trains arrived about 500m away. There was also a selection process there, but there was not as much space and it was not as well organized as the new platform where Eva Hommel and many of the Jewish survivors of the 1944 transports arrived.

Were orders given to you [on arrival]?

Well, you had to go here, they had to go there. And then if you was ... I guess ... Jewish, or you had children or stuff like that they would put you here and other people would [be] put ... [T]hey kinda sort 'em out like, you know, you're sorting out stuff.

Was there a selection?

Like, what do you mean 'selection', like what, like how?

The term 'selection' is in common usage and well known by those who have read Holocaust literature, among survivors and used widely in documentaries and films, and it was assumed to be common parlance among Auschwitz inmates. Yet this survivor does not link the term 'selection' to what was happening on arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. This throws the interviewer, who had assumed that all Birkenau inmates used the term in their daily language. The interviewer continued:

Like for workers?

Well, that came later when we was in the building ... [T]hey would say, 'You go here and you go there.'

Wellesina understood the selection to which the interviewer was referring as the process she underwent later to be given a work detail, which is not what the interviewer actually meant. The interviewer is not satisfied that she has heard an adequate description so she asks again, this time with prompts, hoping to secure the appropriate arrival sequence:

When you first arrived, do you remember the process of arriving?

They take your name ...

Did they give you a number?

Yeah, they gave me a number, then later you get the number on your arm.

When you first arrived, did they give the number on something else?

Like what?

Like on a piece of cloth or ...?

I don't remember that too much. I remember we went there and we got off and somebody called us ... in[to] that barracks there, and I think that's what they was doing, they were giving a number ... I don't really remember that, because I [had] a number on my arm and I don't even know how that got there.

You don't remember how it got there?

My father took it off. He told me what it was. He took a straight razor and just went over it like that [sweeping motion with hand across forearm] ... that was after I came out of the camp, in Germany.

Do you remember what the number was?

113802.³⁵

Were there letters in it?

KZ, before the number.³⁶

The sequence described by Jewish survivors seems to be a narrative construct built around a real set of sequential events, but in which the survivor confirms his or her presence at that particular place and process through the use of the same expected narrative device. As that device is not known to Wellesina, she does not describe the same experience in the same way. The interviewer is perplexed because she has heard the narrative mechanism many times. When Wellesina does not provide the interviewer with the experience she is expecting to hear, she persists until she is satisfied that enough elements are present for it to be credible, before moving on with the interview. Even the tattoo description defies convention as Wellesina is not interested in how the tattoo got there (by the perpetrators), but rather how it was removed after the war (by her father).

What is common is that both interviewees appear to make an error in their references to the letters in their tattoos. Eva Hommel makes reference to her tattoo having the letter 'KL'. It is possible that this was correct because 'KL' referred to *Konzentrationslager* (concentration camp), but the standard letter-based tattoo when not a number was 'KZ', referring to a *Ka-Tzetnik* (an inmate of the *Konzentrationslager*). Wellesina McCrary obviously knows about the 'KZ' convention, but as a Gypsy in the camp, her tattoo was likely to have been prefixed by a 'Z' – referring to her identity as a *Zigeuner* (Gypsy).³⁷

Myths in the Making

When the interviews of Julia Lentini and Wellesina McCrary were selected for this study, it was not apparent from the archive that the two interviewees were related. It was only on listening to both testimonies and learning sufficient information about the two families that it became clear that the two women were related.³⁸ The two interviewees describe a similar episode. Julia's account is longer and more detailed:

I took a can (of meat) and I stuck it under my arm ... I was just gonna go to my door to give them (the girls in her barracks) the thing ... and 'Halt [Stop]!'. I turned around. '*Nummer zwei thousand acht hundert eins* [Number 2801], Halt [Stop!] ... [She] walked

³⁵ It is probable she remembers her number wrongly as the highest number in the Gypsy camp was Z.10849. Kenrick and Puxon (2009), p. 140.

³⁶ Interview of Wellesina McCrary, 42510, 19 July 1998, Tape 4: 18:25, held at VHA SFI.

³⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Holocaust Encyclopedia, 'Tattoos and Numbers: The System of Identifying Prisoners at Auschwitz', <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10067056> (accessed: 2 August 2010). This is a summary of the tattoo usage at Auschwitz, including the use of the 'Z' in the Gypsy camp.

³⁸ As neither witness refers to the other by first and family name, there is insufficient evidence for the archive to cross-reference their names. The precise nature of their family relationship is still unclear, although it is likely that Julia Lentini is Wellesina McCrary's aunt.

right up to me, put her hand right in there. Well! She said, 'Where did that come from?' I told her I worked in the *Magazin* [store] the last couple of days and I was taking [it] for the girls in the block. So she wrote down what I said and took down my number ... The commander called me out and asked me where I got this thing, and I told him the same thing. He said, 'Are you sure that old soldier [who worked with her] didn't give it to you?' I said, 'No sir, I did it on my own'. He said, 'Do you want to change your mind?' I said, 'No'. I wasn't too worried about anything ... they could only kill me ... There was a double hand grenade box, like milk boxes ... I had to step on that and put my hands behind my back ... There was a hook that they hooked me on with a cord ... Right after that, they took one box off ... now they took off the next box ... I don't know how long I hung there ... quite a while ... The next night when it was *Appell* [roll call], when the whole camp had to come out ... they took out an ordinary square bench ... They called my number out. In front of all those people ... the whole camp ... the two Nazis there told me to put from my waist down ... and then he said, 'Put your feet in this,' and you are bending over and they take your hands and you are tied ... Then he called out '*hundert und fünfzig* [one hundred and fifty]!' ... *is weil* [because] I stole the food from the kitchen. I think ... they said 25 and I passed out ... and they [kept going] to 75 and they had [to] stop because the blood was splashing through the dress. I did wind up in the sick block ... I woke up in there and I was in bed.³⁹

Wellesina McCrary recounts the following episode when her 'aunt' called her to the window of the kitchen block where she was working. She recalls that she was given a pot of meat, which she put under her armpit to take to the other girls in the barracks, but was apprehended by the block leader, who said:

'Aha you are stealing, you old Gypsy?' I said, 'I wasn't stealing, it was just sitting there so I took it'. She took me to ... that Mengele thing ... He said, 'I am going to find out where she got it from'. I don't know if he said that or not, but anyway, what they did, they tied my hands on the back of my back, and then they sit me on three boxes of hand grenades. They stand me up on top of that and they had my hands tied and then they put my hands on the top of the hook that was behind my head and every time I said I didn't know, they would kick the box ... And then they would say again, 'Where did you get it from?' and I couldn't tell because if I did, my aunt would have got killed. So they kicked the next box off there and my hands went higher and higher and that wasn't enough, so they took me down off there and took me to ... to some kinda place. Anyway, the next day they took me and tied me to a table, and they beat the hell outa me. And then my aunt came and she took me loose and dropped me in that hole [in the corner of the barracks] ... and I couldn't sit down, sleep *oder* [or] ... I stayed in there for a long time, couldn't go to the bathroom or nothing.⁴⁰

The stories are so similar that I can only surmise that they are the one and the same event, but that one of the women has adopted the story as her own. Maybe they had almost identical experiences. Or maybe it is a new family story to be passed down.

³⁹ Interview of Julia Lentini, 5891, 12 November 1998, Tape 4: 22:30, held at VHA SFI.

⁴⁰ Interview of Wellesina McCrary, 42510, 19 July 1998, Tape 5: 1:40, held at VHA SFI.

Conclusion

Jews and Gypsies both suffered genocide through the racial policies of the Nazi regime. All four of the interviewees in this study were subjected to racial persecution, deportation, and incarceration in Auschwitz-Birkenau, where their complete annihilation was planned. The Nazis had intended that none of them should ever live to testify and provide the insights these interviews give us. How they understand their past, the history of the Third Reich, their own experience and that of others around them, how they frame their experience within the narrative tradition they are used to, with the vocabulary at their disposal, differs considerably. What this briefest of insights demonstrates is a rich and diverse struggle to find the words and place them in our world in an intelligible way. It seems that the narrative traditions and historical experiences of the German Gypsies and German Jews will provide us with insights that are entirely different in the telling, but no less important, into understanding the suffering and consequences of genocide for their respective communities.

Further Reading

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