

"Returnees on the Edge"

This essay focuses on liberation and the way home. It will approximate the journey of a group of women, including my mother, who were deported from Transylvania to Auschwitz. My mother, Vera Lazar, was on the train to Auschwitz on her 28th birthday May 31, 1944, which was the third of six transports from Cluj. After the selections, they were parked in the latrines of the death camp for about three days waiting for a train to Kaiserwald near Riga, Latvia. As the Red Army advanced, the women were shipped to Stutthof near Danzig. A multi-national mix of women were crammed into unheated round barracks with dirt floors near the village of Gutowo, Poland (Gutttau). Their assignment was to build trenches in the icy soil. This was a subcamp of Stutthof's Elbing Complex. "One of the hardest labor detachments" according to the *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*.² On January 17, 1945, they were rounded up for a train to the West, but a bombing foiled this, and they began their death march. About January 20 they set out, walking for six days without additional provisions. Vera was walking with a girl from Dej, "a very religious girl," who by the time they finally stopped for food had died, and Vera was no longer very hungry, only "half alive".

24

Liberation is generally portrayed as a moment of exhilaration, throwing of hats, cheers, kissing jeeps. There are wonderful staged photographs of jubilation and gratefulness, and others marking the stark contrast between the Musselman and the liberators. Those prisoners who had been left behind when the concentration camps were evacuated were the weakest. More often than not survivors encountered their liberators while on death marches, in isolated places, away from the cameras and the fanfare.

Late January 1945 German soldiers came toward Gutowo from several directions. They were seen conferring with the officer in charge of the women prisoners. Night came and the women were stuffed in an empty barn on a large farm. Women continued to die that night in the unheated but covered shelter. Sleeping only fitfully, Vera needed to relieve herself; the Kapo permitted her to step outside. "The sky was so red, so inflamed. I knew something was happening." The five who shared a blanket, imagined not leaving, hiding under the straw to wait it out. "We didn't think the Germans were gone." But in the morning no one came to get them up for roll call. They had a decent German overseer, who shared what information he had with the Kapo before departing. They were cautioned not to go out on the highway. The Germans were fleeing, but they were not gone. Two partisans approached a girl fetching water also instructing them not to leave the farm, and some chickens were sent their way. The barn was isolated on a dead-end path a distance from the highway.³

In another barn near Gutowo, Éva Halmi was awoken by Renée, the group leader (*Lageralt-este*) on January 31 with the shout "We are free". "Unbelievable!" Halmi thought. The SS had not burned the barn, although there was plenty of straw to do so. Immediately, the women went searching for food, cooking everything they found. When the Russian troops arrived, some could converse with them. The soldiers were stunned. It was the first time they saw women inmates. They advised the women to get out of there, because the front was very near and German troops might return.

1 * Associate Professor Emerita, University of Florida, Gainesville, Department of History.

2 See <https://www.ushmm.org/research/publications/encyclopedia-camps-ghettos> (last accessed on 23 January 2024).

3 Magdalena Berkovics also reflects on her fortunate decision to wait a few days even though many in her Stutthof group set off for town. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM] RG-50.106*0177.

After two days some girls in Vera's group went scouting. They encountered some Russian vehicles. Rather than hurrahs and hugs and kisses or rapes and robbery, they were told to go back to the barn and stay put for another day. It was still a battle zone. The barnful of women had been spared the calamity of celebrating liberation by dying from eating too much too soon. The next day the barn load of women walked to town, Nowe Miasto Lubawskie (Neumark), Poland, 19–31 miles away. Along the road "It was really terrible. You saw all the trucks and the dead soldiers on the road."

When they walked out of the farm to their Soviet liberators, Vera no longer had shoes. Instead, she had wrapped her feet in a piece of blanket. The Russian soldiers "right away gave me boots. They gave us food." When an "older" Russian soldier came into the barn, he found a woman who could not make that walk to town. He looked at her bleeding, puss-oozing feet, and he started to cry. "I have a daughter your age." He got a horse and carriage in Nowe Miasto for her and an older woman. The hospital was full, so he put her on one of the baby cots at a Kindergarten. The next day a Jewish doctor and nurse started treating her feet with medication.⁴

In Nowe Miasto some women "bought milk, stuff like that". "I don't know how. Some of us had something to sell, [but] the general public had nothing either," Vera recalled. When asked by the interviewer, if people shared, she explained that people were focused on themselves. Sometimes they shared a little. A doctor directed the 20–25 women to a two-story duplex. The home was in the middle of the city, right next to the bank. But just as they got up the stairs, the bank caught fire. They managed to escape. In the next house, they found money. "Stupid[ly]", Vera still recalls regretfully after decades, "we told the city official, and he took it for himself."

Ellen Hersh's group occupied a house, but when a Red Army Lieutenant came in that night, he found fifteen 'sleepy' women who were losing consciousness from carbon monoxide. The women were pulled from the building out onto the snow. The Lieutenant placed a guard at the door, because "These soldiers don't know any ethics."

A woman was standing on the street in front of her house in Nowe Miasto and invited in another group of women from the Gutowo camp, Halmi recounted in her Holocaust testimony. "She was very nice, Polish." She served them soup. The stove warmed up the room. "We were all comfortable. Some went to sleep immediately," while others "sat around the stove talking". Around midnight three or four Russian soldiers barged in "with their rifles on their shoulders". The soldiers started attacking them. "The girls shouted we're Jewish häftling," but the soldiers didn't care. Halmi "hid in the pantry. We all had diarrhea and vomiting [from eating too much, too soon], but we also had to be very quiet, because of the Russian soldiers." Halmi conjectured that the Polish woman had invited "us in so the Russian soldiers would get us instead of her two daughters."⁵ Perhaps, perhaps not. It was a raw world.

4 Elise Kaye (born Alice Hirsch, September 27, 1927, Cluj), Interview Code [Code] 1694, Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation [USC Shoah].

5 Eva Halmi (Rosenberg), Code 34076, USC Shoah.

Emilia Jakabovitz recalls the diarrhea from drinking too much milk and eating too much cabbage in Nowe Miasto. The Russian soldiers also came around with borscht and cigarettes (the currency of the time), but a mother resisted when the Russians wanted to rape her two daughters. They shot the mother dead. Jakabovitz' group sought out a "Captain David" to protect them.⁶

These survivors didn't have papers. Didn't have money, and they didn't know if they belonged to any place or had anyone. After six weeks they received travel documents. They were then immediately ordered to the train station, which was already packed with people hoping to catch a train. The women slept there three nights. "All of a sudden the militia came looking for us," and they were carted off to jail. There were six in Vera's cell. "We cried. At 8 a.m. they let us out." On the highway they could see the train leaving. "They didn't give us food or warm clothing." It was winter. The women walked until they ran into Russian soldiers in a village. The Czech women in their group talked to them. The soldiers fetched "Tovarish Captain, a Jew," who came with a truck. "He was the best," Vera recalled tearfully. He took them to a restaurant to eat and then gave them a package for their journey by train to Warsaw.

The Jewish soldier is the important, trusted contact. The women refugees did not trust authorities, the general public, or the soldiers. As the women began to move about, they were afraid of everyone including their liberators. It is not that a Jewish soldier would not rape, but they trusted that he would not rape them in this situation. They required generosity and assistance from everyone, and that left them extremely vulnerable. Rape was commonplace.

A collection point for returning and travelling survivors had been set up in the Praga district of Warsaw, which was an oasis in the city of rubble. "It was winter. We were cold. We didn't do anything, ...just waiting for the opportunity to go home."⁷ The International Red Cross and JOINT and other charities tended to the refugees and distributed parcels, which included wrapped foods. Cocoa, instant coffee, chocolate, crackers, biscuits, and cigarettes. "We were there a long time", two–three months.

26

Between 1945 and 1948 the continent was awash with over forty million refugees; one of the great migrations of European history. Through a landscape of ruins, on broken railway lines. Half of Hungary's rail network was destroyed.⁸ People were in motion, traveling on the tops of trains, holding on to flatbeds, walking, hitching rides from one country to another, slipping across borders with flawed documentation or none at all. Some of this travel was circuitous; people searching for each other without benefit of postal service, driven by rumors instead of information. The focus of this paper is on people travelling East, but others were fleeing West. Major connecting routes through Europe were intact within six months of war's end, but still at the end of December 1945, an American Red Cross worker complained that there is no postal service. "By the time something arrives, that person may be elsewhere."⁹ The return was one of crooked and halting travel into the unknown. Each turn was no longer a matter of life or death, but one of perseverance.

Trains were packed with people, but also goods headed for Russia. A group of women survivors traveling to Kosice (Kassa) waited for days at the station, sleeping on the cement floor. When the train arrived, Helen Rodak-Izso's group climbed onto the open flatbed car that was already full of loot. They held onto each other, legs dangling, and after several days they reached Cracow where the Jewish Council office was filled with refugees, eating, exchanging stories, and sharing information. At the Polish-Czech border local people seemed to be waiting for "people like us." A villager gave them a huge, homemade bread.¹⁰

6 Emilia Jakabovitz (April 11, 1928); Code 23403, Shoah (Israel, Hungarian).

7 Vera Freifeld (Lazar), (1916-05-31), Fortunoff, Case ref 497985.

8 Berend, T. Ivan 1996: *Central and Eastern Europe 1944-1993. Detour from the periphery to the periphery*, Cambridge, 6.

9 USHMM, RG-19.018*02, William Perl papers, Letter to Belle, Dec. 27, 1945. For a particular person.

10 Rodak-Izso, Helen 2001: *The Last Chance to Remember*. (Memoirs of Holocaust Survivors in Canada 17). Montréal, 69–71.

A ubiquitous question by interviewers is: "So you wanted to go back to Cluj?" Magdalena Berkovics and many, if not most, others answered, "Yes, by all means," with the qualifier, "Where should I go, and to whom?"¹¹ Berkovics recalled a void, a void of expectations. This is quite different than one of the repeated themes in the literature emphasizing "motivation": imagining being back home, recovering one's career, imagining a future; living because life has meaning.¹² But it was already obvious that going home was not returning to the world of yesterday. The will to meaning is a salvation, but shutting off dreams and wishes was also a survival mechanism. There was a suspicion that a train home was just another disjointed train ride to another way station. "I didn't think anything. Better not to think," my mother responded to a similar question.

Finally, in March Vera was among 5000 people put on a train, but "They didn't take us home, they took us to Chernivtsi" (Czernowitz, German; Cernăuți, Romanian), arriving on the second day of Passover, 1945. The Rabbi had organized a baking of matzah for the first Passover after liberation. Each of the refugees received a piece of matzah and celebrated with the congregation. "They were crying. We were all crying. They cried more than us." Vera teared up in telling the story.

"We could wander around. We had independence." They got small meals and slowly came back to life. "We already made business. I had a little dish in my pack. I sold it; I got a few cents." Jakobovitz concurred. "We went into Chernivtsi and exchanged things. Got some clothes. It was good to get out a bit." ... "We had a permission slip" to be on the streets. "We were no longer completely Häftling."¹³ The refugees were housed in an army barrack, but actors and musicians amongst them put on entertainment.

The Soviets took Ágnes Krausz in a group by wagon to Czernowitz in March. It was spring. "Czernowitz must have been a very pretty town once upon a time," she observed. "They took us all along the city, and the locals came to us." A woman took her home to her mother, who cried when she saw what condition I was in... She told her daughter, see if we stay here this is what you will look like."¹⁴ Through 1946 Chernivtsi Jews would also cross the border into Romania on their way to Palestine.

Vera remembered Chernivtsi as a kind of miracle, a still-alive Jewish city. Chernivtsi was the West Ukrainian cultural center, once thought of as the Jerusalem on the Prut. In theory Vera knew that Jews of Kishinev and Czernowitz had been rounded up and taken to Transnistria. Kishinev's population had been wiped out, but about 50 000 Czernowitz's Jews (about half of the prewar population) including women, children, elderly, and rabbis were still alive. In her memory, the Jews of Chernivtsi had been spared. Individual experience builds concrete images; they can deepen and amplify our experience, but the snapshot view can also distort.

The Russians outfitted them with pants, a khaki shirt and cap. "They didn't have women's clothes. Got men's." Vera boarded the train in the soldier's pants and warm soldier's jacket, and the boots from the Russian soldier at liberation. She figured she could wait to get clothes when she got home. It would be soon. Survivors also learned patience; Vera waited in Chernivtsi three months.

When they left, "the train didn't go in the right direction. We feared we were headed to Siberia, because there were now men, forced laborers on the train." "We were so scared again, what's going to be with us." They ended up in Slutsk, Belarus, 100 km south of Minsk. Primo Levi estimates there were 10,000 people. Men, women and children, Christians, Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims all in one overcrowded space. The latrines had separate doors for men and women, but no partition inside. People slept on the floor. They deloused themselves, mended clothes, even played soccer. Levi "savor[ed] the memory of the canteen at Slutsk". The cooking responsibility rotated weekly amongst the nationalities. During Levi's brief stay, the Hungarians were in charge. "They made fiery goulashes, and enormous portions of spa-

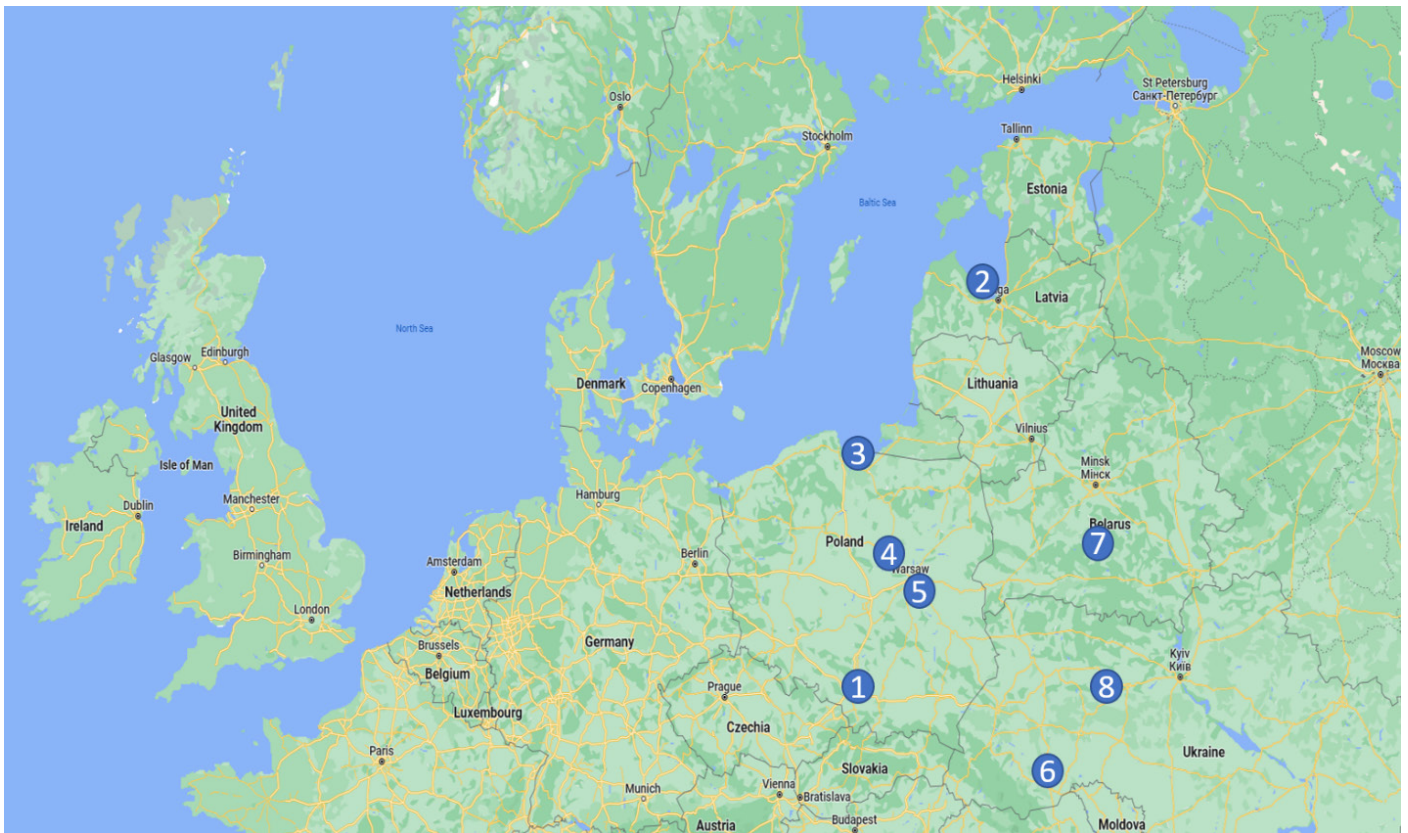
11 Magdalena Berkovics, USHMM, RG-50.106*0177.

12 Viktor E. Frankl 1988: *The Will to Meaning. Foundations and Applications of Logotherapy*. New York

13 Jakobovitz, Code 23403.

14 Dr. Mrs. Barta Gábor (Ágnes Krausz).

ghetti with parsley, overcooked and crazily sugared. ... They had instituted a gypsy orchestra; six peasant musicians, in corduroy trousers and embroidered leather doublets, majestic and sweating," playing the Soviet and Hungarian national anthems, Hatikvah, and csárdáses....It was an 'extravagantly' abundant kitchen. The meals were served in a big, clean, airy dining-hall, at tables laid for eight."¹⁵



28

1. Auschwitz
2. Kaiserwald (Riga)
3. Gutowo (Stutthof)
4. Nowe Miasto Lubawskie (Neumark, Poland)
5. Warsaw
6. Chernivitsi
7. Slutsk

The Russians did not man watch towers or lock the refugees in behind fences. In a walk in the surrounding fields, Levi found his former companion the Greek working as a pimp. Fences around sexual behavior had fallen, just as they had around most social norms. Helen Bamber, a twenty-year old British Jewish Relief Unit worker in 1945, known later for her work with Amnesty International and as founder of the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture, frequented a camp in the British zone of almost entirely young Hungarian Jewish women in these months. She recalled, "With food, their bodies had begun to discover the energy and

15 Levi, Primo 1993: *Reawakening*. New York, 126–127. See also Anissimov, Myriam 1996: *Primo Levi, Tragedy of an Optimist*. New York, 228–229.

fertility that many of them had never experienced. They were suddenly awash with sexuality” and surrounded by soldiers. Bamber was keenly aware of the loss of moorings for these young women who moved into adulthood or back into life without traditional guiding institutions, such as, parents, schools, synagogues, law and order. She sought to offer them guidance. With a twenty-three-year-old former architecture student at its helm, this small camp of 586 residents was a model of self-administration, Earl Harrison, president Truman’s personal emissary on the conditions of DP camps in the fall of 1945, noted in his handwritten records.¹⁶

Amongst the POWs in Slutsk were blacks in American uniforms, and a Soviet leader of some importance. “They took him by plane to see Stalin.” The women assumed this comrade had pled their case, for shortly thereafter a transport was gathered to take them home to Transylvania in August 1945. In Cluj, a bus awaited the train. The new arrivals scanned the name lists plastered on the train station walls. Posters were up in every railway station with the latest news: Who was alive; who was on their way home. “A crowd waited constantly watching those announcements with anguished hearts.”¹⁷ Vera, Böske, and Margaret added their names, and took the bus to the nearby Peter-Paul villa. These were large, elegant twin buildings near the heart of the city. One tower was reserved for women, the other for men. They were provided a hot bath upon arrival. Six women slept in Vera’s room. “We had a nice room. We had food, everything fresh, everything was mostly from JOINT,” and distributed by the local Jewish community organization. Diamanṣhṭeyn Bergfeld recalled the large kitchen. “We were very happy there. It was a nice place. Neighbors and people, we knew” gathered there. Cutting into “a large bread a neighbor brought [was] unforgettable.”¹⁸ Gabrielah Avraham concurred that “They took care of us nicely. But one’s stay was meant to be temporary, about five weeks. And then one had to find what to do next.”¹⁹

As soon as Vera could she ran home through the middle of the city in her soldier pants and “my 45-size boots.” The windows were boarded up. The furniture was there, but the easily movable items were all gone. No clothes. No photos, with the exception of two needlepoints with Jewish themes. No one had wanted those.

Of his own return, editor Henrik Frischmann wrote in *Deportált Híradó (Deported Herald)*, “We found our home robbed, everything was taken away and when we got home, we woke up to the terrible reality and met with ourselves, for our sad, rumpled life!” “In such a state of mind, we helplessly faced our own sad future, which basically had no particular importance, since the individual goals of all of us became so secondary to what the future can offer us, from whom our faith, our most precious things, were stolen.”²⁰ Walking through the rubble of one’s life or finding others had moved into your space, that your things were someone else’s things now, was often a moment of realization or of traumatic closure.

The reception at Vera’s former workplace was much better. The knitting factory hired her back right away with a one-step promotion. She had essentially grown up there and would again work the large manual looms and model the new sweaters, before they were mass produced. “They looked after me. I should have comfort (during working hours).” Arranging the rest of my life was my problem. Another returnee, Avraham, went back to her house, and found the poverty she had left, but much of her extended family soon arrived. They had gone to Torda, just over the border in Southern Transylvania and were not deported.

Vera arrived in Cluj with two companions, Elizabet and Margaret, who became like family, indeed would become family. The men and women in the twin buildings socialized. It was easy to meet. “After we went home, all the girls started dressing up and going out. Then we met those guys and they invited us to go out together” to the Concordi, a nearby places to dance. Those guys were DPs returning from the West: Natzweiler-Dachau, liberated in Ötztal, in the Tyrol. “I didn’t think about nothing, I just went dancing.” Dancing, music were important elixirs. It mat-

16 Harrison papers, USHMM. RG-10.088.

17 Rodak-Izso, op. cit., 77.

18 Diamanṣhṭeyn Bergfeld (September 24, 1922, Baia-Mare, Nagybánya), Code 42534, Tel Aviv.

19 Gabrielah Avraham (december 25, 1919), Code 3911, Shoah.

20 *Deportált Hírlap*, Demokratikus Hetilap (1.) July 8, 1945, 1.

tered again that Zoltán Freifeld was an exceptionally good dancer. But what mattered more is that Vera had known his wife, a Romanian non-Jew, who died in Auschwitz with their two daughters. The women were colleagues at the knitting factory. His wife used to chatter about him before work, while they waited for the doors to open. Occasionally, the two girls, Ramona and Leah, played in the factory courtyard. Vera could trust Zoli. "We needed each other. They needed us and we needed them." And after they married, they would never spend a day apart for over fifty years until my father died at nearly 90. Whether they were a perfect match or not, they knew each other as no one else could know them in their new life in the New World. My uncle Jacob Freifeld married Elizabet Simon (nee Katz). This was the first interclass marriage among the returnees. The third friend, Margaret Albescu, told me (in Cluj) over four decades later that it was a big deal at the time, because it seemed to herald a new egalitarian society. Elizabet's previous husband had owned a downtown grocery store. They were amongst the wealthier Jewish families. My mother once received a coat that Elizabet distributed at a charity event. Elizabet's new husband had been a foundry worker. One day Vera's younger brother appeared. She went faint when she saw him alive and well. They moved into an apartment together, while she dated Zoli.

Bella Nemes returned to Dej (Dés), another city of Transylvania. She was immediately placed in the hospital. Lots of boys visited her, seeking information about their female relatives. Bella's sister returned and immediately married her surviving boyfriend. But Bella also married on March 17, to someone she met at her sister's wedding. When she got engaged, her sister was irate. "Oh, did I get from her. Why didn't you choose that one, this one. He has a store, money. He had house where he lives." Meanwhile, a friend alerts her future husband that he was endangered of selection for work duty in Russia. That Sunday they married. It was Purim, so there was music. She found the one wedding dress in town, and everyone gathered, except the groom, who arrived two hours late, because of car trouble. No one knew they were leaving the next day to Bad Gastein in the American zone. They had no papers or money.

30 The returnees, or DP problem, was at first a medical problem. By the time of return it was mostly a humanitarian problem. Returnees made attempts to start over. Vera returned to work; Jacob started a little factory. But starting up in a time of shortages was difficult, and the government was moving away from private enterprise; he gave up. Antisemitism lurked. The sense of betrayal was personal as well as institutional. Their lives were now littered with people who had once been friends, such as the woman who greeted Vera warmly, but the woman was wearing her coat and did not offer it back.

It is a given that the survivors of the Holocaust suffered severe trauma. After liberation they faced their own physical fragility and then when they got home the enormity of their loss. The Jewish population of Northern Transylvania had been a little over 151 000. After the war (September 1945), this had shrunk to 23–30 000, plus an additional 8–10 000 who didn't return from western countries. Some forced laborers had already returned with the Red Army, then came camp survivors, first from the east and then the west. Some neighbors also experienced loss and also feared revenge by returnees. They looked "shudderingly at the bald, dirty, unkempt returnees". Psychologists complained of the returnees' numbness. They "don't speak much. Returnees may have emerged from the 'chrysalis of ugliness',²¹ but they were still more often than not depressed and lethargic. "They lie on the straw bedding of transient homes and in ... emergency hospitals, and except for the daily reading of the list of the returnees and looking for their lost relatives and fighting for a little food, nothing interests them. They are totally paralyzed," a Hungarian psychologist in Budapest reported.²² Holocaust survivors were seen as ill, irredeemably so many still argue.

21 Belton, Neil 1998: *The Good Listener. Helen Bamber: A Life Against Cruelty*. New York, 107.

22 Kulcsár István 1946: A maradék zsidóság lelki keresztmetszete 1946-ban. Tanulmány. In: *Maradék zsidóság*. Budapest, 1946; cited by Benoschofsky, Ilona 1966: The Position of Hungarian Jewry After the Liberation. In: Braham, Randolph L.: *Hungarian-Jewish Studies*. New York, 240.

They may have been toothless but the women were no longer bald. Citizens and neighbors were resentful that Jews were showered with relief packages. Returning six to nine months after liberation, months of recuperation under U.S. or British care, or the wonderful canteen in Belarus, they didn't have the emaciated look of Musselman. Bombings and the aftermath of the war were experienced by the locals and left them skeptical of Jewish stories of unbelievable suffering. Contested victimhood in Romania and Hungary were raw then and persist. Illness was still a problem, but was now more subtle, private.

Psychological reports empathized with the traumatic experience of survivors and simultaneously cordoned them off as ill, requiring long-term care. A psychological report to the Army headquarters in Wels, Austria, addressed the annoying asocial activities of Jewish DPs: black marketeering, suspicion of those in authority, profound selfishness and rivalry. Their behavior was the consequence of profound insecurity not avarice, the report concluded. The psychologist ranked the damage by country of origin, accordingly, Hungarians, who were "deported only a year ago," were less damaged than Poles.

"Unfortunately, their recovery was made even more difficult by the treatment they received during the psychologically-crucial first few months of their freedom. It is important to note that the psychological damage of this period was predisposed to by their eager hopes for the early solution of their homelessness. Their disillusionment only further embittered them against organized society. Prospects for positive reintegration of survivors was assumed to be bleak. The conditions in the concentration camps were such that generally only the strongest were able to survive. Their 'strength' was not necessarily a physical one. The slum-elements, for example, were physically and psychologically better conditioned to this mode of existence than were the so-called better elements. Intellectuals, for the most part, were too delicately balanced and were the first to succumb. ... usually, the least socially useful elements survived. And these did so only by resorting to methods of the jungle."²³

Such psychological prognoses became a cudgel to limit immigration. These were seemingly undesirable immigrants: They might require social services, did not follow the law, were prone to stealing, added on to the fear of importing Jewish Communists.

Deportált Hiradó, a four-page Jewish weekly published in Szatmárnémeti for six issues in July and August 1945, devoted two pages to name lists of survivors and their locations; provided information on charity kitchens and dormitories. But its articles also encouraged people to work to rebuild society. In his opening editorial in 1945, Frischmann wrote: "I want us not to let this grief that weighs heavily on our hearts, the memories that haunt us day and night, to paralyze us." Through "productive work" they "should announce to the world that despite all humiliation, all deportation and suffering, we want to work for each other, for all of us to build that new world." Grief counselors today would also advise mourners to work, involve themselves in routine activities and sports. But in this case, survivors were asked to pivot, to throw themselves into working for the cause, for "democracy." In its six issues, the paper never used the word "Communism."

The instability led to the interchangeability of many choices. Although the Holocaust over-determined all future-directed actions and decisions related to identity, how to proceed was an open question, sociologist Victor Karády observed. The trauma could be used as the ultimate rationale of ANY identity option from dissipation to activism, Zionism, communism, total assimilation, or emigration. Individuals toyed with one option after the next, from established middle-class status to material apathy; from deep-rooted Magyarism to passionate Zionist militancy.

23 USHMM, Accession number 1991.011, RG-19.009 Records relating to the work of William Ramkey with displaced persons in Allied-occupied Austria, Psychologist's report by Major Beiger and Corporal Katzman, "The Jewish Displaced Persons and Their Rehabilitation." Nov. 19, 1945, Headquarters 83rd infantry division, US Army APO 83.

But on the other hand, they are approached by historians as rational actors. The historical and political literature treats the decisions made by Jewish survivors in the immediate aftermath as thoughtfully constructed commitments, rather than a fitful reaching for straws – a product of grief. Survivors of concentration camps and forced labor had become much more worldly, more savvy, more intuitive, and aware of the range of human capabilities, but that does not mean they were rational actors. In the travel story above people had been buffeted, relying on resources of “resilience” more often than rationality. They maneuvered or passed through too many different scenes and unexpected hurdles and pleasures and adventures to be described as lethargic. There were lots of one-night stands – sexual, political, and/or economic. People often committed themselves, but with a setback, they reversed decisions. In the short run they had to choose between home and a DP camp, the known and the unknown. The odyssey of return through the Soviet zone was one of continuous improvisation. Rather than lethargy the overwhelming emotion was of anxiety, a grasping for food, companionship, and a good deal of fantasy – and resilience. These were women who kept walking on their damaged feet. They watched their bodies refill and menstruation return.

The word “grief” is also used frequently in reference to the Holocaust. Edith Eger, a Hungarian survivor, has written a number of books employing the “survivor’s journey to freedom” as a guide for overcoming grief.²⁴ But there seems to be a sharp disconnect between the usual recommendations of current grief counselors and the expectations made of holocaust survivors in grief. Today, people in mourning are generally cautioned to make no big decisions. And yet that was precisely what people had to do after the war. They had to decide whether to stay or leave, and where to leave to. This involved not just changing homes, but also languages, perhaps professions, and to choose between world views – Hungarian Communism, Romanian assimilation, Zionism, or a multi-cultural democracy (Australia, maybe the United States), or some Latin American country, and between potential spouses in a rush to marry and build families.

32 The Russian photographer Dmitri Baltermant titled his photograph of the 1942 Nazi massacre of Jews in the Crimean city of Kerch “Grief”.²⁵ It documented the departure of the Axis forces from the Russian front and Crimea. The eye fixates on the peasant woman (not Jewish) and then sees the others in the picture. The skeletons are anonymous to us, but not to the grieving women. The original picture has a white sky and more white spaces. Baltermant darkened the sky of the picture. The darkened sky shrouded the emotion and added weight to the grief. The survivors, the grief, rather than the corpses is the subject of the aftermath. But return highlights the white spaces – the missing people, the missing infrastructure, the lack of goods, and worthlessness of money – at least for a while.

24 Eger, Edith 2021: *The Gift: The survivor’s Journey to Freedom*. London; Idem. 2020: *The Gift: Twelve Lessons to Save Your Life*. New York.

25 Shneer, David 2020: *Grief, The Biography of a Holocaust Photograph*. Oxford.

