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TABLE 36  

Vida cotidiana en los centros de internamiento: prisiones, campos de concentración, guetos y gulags  
Everyday Life at Sites of Internment: prisons, concentration Camps, Ghettoes, Gulags  

CHAIR  
Gerhard Botz (Austria)  
"From Resistance to survive.”  

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Alexander Prenninger (Austria):  
“Class, Caste and Power: Social structure and Ordinary Life in a Concentration.”  

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Irina Scherbakova (Russia):  

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Regina Fritz (Austria):  
“Inside the Ghetto: Daily life in Hungarian Ghettos.”  

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Oksana Kis (Ukraine):  
“Defying Death, Remaining Human: Ukrainian Women’s Experience in the Gulag.”  

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Atina Grossman  
Michal Louc (Czech Republic):  
Class, Caste and Power: Social structure and Ordinary Life in a Concentration.

Alexander Prenninger
(Austria):

Resumen: En los campos de concentración nacionalsocialistas, la burocracia SS aplicado elaborado esquemas de clasificación de los presos. En la investigación académica, se hicieron muchos intentos de explicar prisionero categorización – que van desde la reducción de los internos con el número de sus prisioneros y la formación de una “masa de serie” para minimizar el potencial de resistencia colectiva mediante el fraccionamiento de los reclusos en grupos diferentes. La vida cotidiana (y la muerte) en los campamentos, en efecto, fue en forma profunda por el diferente tratamiento de los grupos de prisioneros de acuerdo a su estatus oficial (por ejemplo, como Judios, prisioneros de guerra soviéticos, prisioneros políticos, capos, etc.). El análisis de las cuentas de supervivencia, sin embargo, revela una segunda cadena de la estratificación social, en parte se solapan con las jerarquías de oficiales de las SS, sino independiente de la primera gran parte. El a menudo se encuentran estrictamente enfoque centrado en el poder (vertical) (SS, capos y prisioneros) será desafiado por un punto de vista sobre la “sociedad de campamento”, con sus múltiples redes de relaciones sociales entre los presos, los capos, los guardias de las SS y el mundo exterior.

Abstract: In National Socialist concentration camps, the SS bureaucracy applied elaborated classification schemes on the prisoners. In scholarly research, many attempts were made to explain prisoner categorization – ranging from reducing the inmates to their prisoners’ number and forming a “serial mass” to minimizing the potential of collective resistance by splitting the inmates into different groups. Everyday life (and death) in the camps, indeed, was deeply shaped by the different treatment of prisoner groups according to their official status (e.g. as Jews, Soviet POWs, political prisoners, capos etc.). Analysing survivors’ accounts, however, reveals a second strand of social stratification, partly overlapping with the official SS hierarchies, but to a large part independent of the first. The often to be found strictly (vertical) power-focused approach (SS, capos and prisoners) will be challenged by a view on the “camp society” with its manifold networks of social relations between prisoners, capos, SS guards and the outside world.
How was it possible to survive in a concentration camp? This question has been a major focus of both survivors and researchers on the topic. The answers are depending by and large of the conclusions on the societal character of the concentration camps, the “camp society” or “inmate society”. This paper will extend the initial question and rather ask: How was it possible to live in a concentration camp and to which extent could prisoners organize their life. My approach will show that classification schemes imposed by the SS had a strong impact on social behaviour of the camp inmates. However, explanations of the camp as “total institutions” reducing the prisoners to a “serial mass” are challenged through the analysis of survivors’ accounts: Research on oral history interviews with survivors of the Mauthausen concentration camp reveals a second strand of social classification. The strictly vertical, power-focused view on the camp society has to be complemented by a broadened view from which we can identify both forms of class and caste societies as structuring social mechanisms.

Hannah Arendt’s early analysis of the concentration camps shaped a since then broadly accepted view of the camps as “laboratories in the experiment of total domination”, an experiment which aimed at “transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not”. Arendt’s analysis follows mainly Bettelheim’s essay of 1943 in which he assigned the camps also with the function “to provide the Gestapo with an experimental laboratory”. H.G. Adler designated concentration camps as an “experimental ground of evil”. In Sofsky’s terms the concentration camps were “a laboratory of violence”. Zygmunt Bauman uses similar words but exclusively refers to the Holocaust which should be considered as “a sociological breadboard model”. Following Arendt, Giorgio Agamben described the camp in “Homo sacer” as a “biopolitical paradigm of modernity”. Agamben combines Arendt’s analysis of totalitarian governance with Michel Foucault’s research on biopolitics. The aim of the experiment in the laboratory is total domination, an “anthropological reduction” of man himself to what Agamben calls the “homo sacer”. The weakness of the experimental or laboratory theory lies in the fact that neither Agamben nor Sofsky – Arendt didn’t deliver a detailed analysis of the camps – can come to their conclusions without portraying “a whole microcosm of the social” which, obviously, should not exist for the “bare life”, including friendly alliances, barter trade, “organizing” resources etc.

Sociological, psychological and philosophical analyses of the concentration camps therefore give different answers concerning the question if societal structures did exist in the camps. Positions which deny specific social qualities are mainly criticizing the idea of a somehow autonomous acting by prisoners within a total institution. This position is represented by Sofsky who contests that the camp formed a society as absolute freedom of the guards is opposed to absolute “incapability of anything” among the inmates. Survival is only possible by chance or by becoming guilty; hence, survivors are developing in their post-camp life “survivor guilt”.

In Sofsky’s analysis the concentration camps are representing a distinct system of power different from prevalent types of power and governance. “Absolute power” includes the organization of power in social structures, the power of labelling prisoners and defining taxonomy of prisoner categories, a system of categorization which is neither vertical nor horizontal but a combination of both. Effective power is based on the internalization of rules and norms, which prisoners have to follow in order to survive. This internalization process is facilitated by the “camp industry”, which includes prisoner-run industries, labor camps, and slave labor. The prisoners are forced to work long hours in harsh conditions, with little food and little rest. This relentless work schedule is intended to exhaust the prisoners and weaken their ability to resist the authorities. The prisoners are also subjected to constant surveillance and repression, with frequent beatings and torture. The purpose of these measures is to maintain control and to prevent any form of resistance or escape. The prisoners are also subjected to a strict hierarchy, with power concentrated at the top and exercised down through the ranks. This hierarchy is maintained through a system of rewards and punishments, with those who conform to the rules receiving favors and privileges, and those who resist being punished. The prisoners are also subjected to a system of incentives, with those who conform to the rules being rewarded with better living conditions and privileges, and those who resist being punished with harsher conditions.

7 Sofsky, The Order of Terror, p. 23.
collaboration, no need of ideological legitimation, the transformation of the significance of human labour, and sheer violence. Sofsky explicitly denies any social quality to the society of the camp; all human relations are power relations imposed by the SS. The social status of prisoners, therefore, “was determined by the system of categories used to classify prisoners: their power as prisoner-functionaries, by their membership in Kommandos, and by their social and economic contacts with the personnel”.12

Total power, however, has its limits. In his seminal study on “The Society of Captives”, Greshem M. Sykes has highlighted the “defects of total power”. Although Sykes distinguishes government power from terror, many of his findings on the power position of custodians can be applied to the concentration camps. The crucial argument concerns authority:

“In its pure form, then, or as an ideal type, power based on authority has two essential elements: a rightful or legitimate effort to exercise control on the one hand and an inner, moral compulsion to obey, by those who are to be controlled, on the other.”13

We can assume, contrary to Sofsky, that the National Socialist regime, and its representatives in the concentration camps, claimed to have an ideologically legitimated authority for persecuting, imprisoning and killing political and racial opponents of the regime. Sykes, however, points to the second element of authority: “Like a province which has been conquered by arms, the community of prisoners has come to accept the validity of the regime constructed by their rulers but the subjugation was not complete.”14

First, Sykes finds it illusive that prisoners can simply be forced into compliance wherefore “the custodians must fall back on a system of rewards and punishments”. Second, the power system “may also fail because those who are supposed to rule are unwilling to do so” and corruption becomes frequent as guards establish relations with inmates, are “evaluated in terms of the conduct of the men he controls”, and become dependent on the collaboration of inmates concerning his duties.15

Pawelczyńska, who labels the SS a criminal “gang”, concludes for Auschwitz that the SS “disintegrated from within”: “The moral norms that generally exist in criminal groups, but apply only to their members, gradually broke down. Instead of signs of solidarity, a power struggle and internal conflicts of interest took over.” Especially market relations, the engagement of SS guards in the black market system, as a consequence, led to dependencies vis-à-vis prisoners and the undermining of their power position – at least “outside of the immediate control of the milieu to which he belonged”.16 Excessive cases of corruption even led to bureaucratic investigations and the replacement of SS personnel.

If the power of the guards is not infinite, through defects of bureaucracy itself or through individual deviation from camp regulations, we can conclude that, for prisoners, a residual area of free action, individual and collective, can be identified. And that Sofsky’s “serially ordered and coerced mass” behaved in more ways than those imposed by the SS which are essentially linked to the taxonomy of categories. Sofsky therefore follows: “Social ties and group cohesion were only a resource for survival in the camp when they were linked to the formal structure of order, and that was over-determined by the system of categories.”17

Indeed, of the vast literature on concentration camps, from survivors and scholars, the classification and the prisoner categories are emphasized by a large part. The maximum scope of action related to solidarity and resistance is attributed by most of them to political prisoners of communist orientation coming from

12 Sofsky, The Order of Terror, p. 118.
17 Sofsky, The Order of Terror, p. 127.
German speaking countries. On the other side of the scale we find Jewish prisoners who, according to these writings, most likely resemble the anonymous and powerlessness mass.

Maja Suderland recently proposed that differences attributed to prisoners by the SS should not only be seen as imposed but also as categories familiar to the prisoners themselves from pre-camp social life. Social status in European societies was largely defined by gender, class position and ethnicity. Differentiation according to these categories as social mechanism is part of what Neurath called “basic concepts” of society: “The difference between the two societies, the society outside and the society inside the camp, appears in this case to be rather a difference in rules of behaviour than a difference in basic concepts.”

The social space of the concentration camp, therefore, was characterized by structures which resembled by and large those of the social space of societies of the time. Following Bourdieu’s theory of “habitus” individual practices are not only always social practices but at the same time are constituting distinctions and valuations and thus constructing hierarchies of social status.

Both approaches are characterizing the camp society as a “class society”, but their conclusions on the character of “classes” are fundamentally different. For Sofsky, the categorization of prisoners was used as a “mechanism of differentiation”. The classification scheme did not reflect the social structure of the then existing society, but created a taxonomy of prisoners serving primarily segregation and separation: a class system which deeply shaped the inmates’ perception of their co-prisoners and social borders never to be crossed. Suderland, on the contrary, argues that the prisoners were deeply shaped by “basic concepts” of their respective societies and their class positions in these societies. The attempt of the SS to impose a profoundly different structure had only limited success. The camp society therefore was an “extreme case of social life”.

Furthermore, Suderland argues that the social structure of the concentration camps also had traits of a caste system. These traits can be found in stereotypical descriptions of national or “ethnic” groups and especially of Jews and Gypsies by survivors. The racial hierarchy imposed by the SS, ranging from “Aryans” on the top and “Jews” at the bottom can only partly explain such descriptions. The conclusion is rather that differentiation along a caste-like social mechanism was something familiar to the prisoners from their pre-camp life, a mechanism prevalent in European societies of the first half of the 20th century.

Memoirs of survivors from the early post-war years are full of depreciation and disesteem of other prisoner groups: Karl Kautsky, for example, portrays the communists as dauntless opponents of the Nazi regime, Jehovah’s Witnesses as “typical sectarians: narrow-minded, not all there, [...] devoid of humour”, the “irremediable” criminals as “totally uncontrolled and therefore of gruesome barbarism and insatiable greed”, the “anti-socials” as “weak-minded” and “beggars and thieves”. Norwegians are characterized as “good comrades, the Dutch as ”clean and orderly, whereas civilian Russian prisoners formed “a riff-raff of thieves, crook and profiteers”. Similar depictions can be found in David Rousset’s “Concentrationary Universe”: He depicts Polish prisoners as “profound conservatives, passionate anti-Russians and German-haters, but at the same time as bendable and cringing before the masters”. Czech prisoners, on the other side, are “cultivated”, “disciplined” and “showing solidarity”. Jean Lafitte, in his testimony on

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20 Suderland, Ein Extremfall des Sozialen, p. 83.
22 Sofsky, The Order of Terror, pp. 137-151.
23 Suderland, Ein Extremfall des Sozialen, pp. 103-110.
24 Suderland, Ein Extremfall des Sozialen, pp. 117-140.
Mauthausen, complains about the repudiation of French prisoners by other groups: “Scheiss-Franzose!” This was the word with which we were welcomed by the Germans, the Poles and sometimes even the Russians. “You are dirty swines”, said most of the Spanish. “Traitors”, said the Czechs, and so many charges were put on us that the Yugoslavians, too, hated us.”

National, social and ethnic stereotypes were rampant among the prisoners and, despite their radicalization by the SS, reflected principal value measures of the then existing societies; the concentration camp, in that sense, was not a reversed world but rather a distorted picture of reality.\textsuperscript{28} The taxonomy of prisoner categories therefore was of high importance for relations among prisoners. Group formations in the camp often were “continuations of previous group membership”\textsuperscript{29}

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\textsuperscript{27} Jean Laffitte: Ceux qui vivent, Paris 1947, p. 173. \\
\textsuperscript{28} Suderland, Ein Extremfall des Sozialen, p. 230. \\
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Irina Scherbakova
(Russia):

Abstract: The presentation will focus on the shaping of the memory of Gulag, its development in the course of several decades, and its main sources. Both the time frame and the area of the Gulag are causing peculiar difficulties in passing on its memory. Gulags existed several decades and were scattered all over the vast territory of the Soviet Union. As a result, the conditions of life differed greatly from year to year and from region to region. Besides, there is no memorial place left to this day that could serve as an illustration of how the life looked like back in Gulag times. Undoubtedly, personal accounts made by former Gulag prisoners in the 1950–70s are a major source. Importantly, these also include oral testimonies recorded by researchers.

By quoting Memorial’s archive as an example, I intend to emphasize the importance of other kinds of primary evidence, including Gulag prisoners’ letters preserved in family archives; diaries, another source which has become almost extinct; and other sources documenting the nature of life in Gulag.

With Gulag photographs or films almost non-existent, the value of material evidence becomes even more apparent. Lots of items have been collected by the “Memorial” society. These comprise prisoners’ robes and other clothes, everyday possessions, and artifacts made by prisoners such as embroidery, wooden boxes, and other items.
ORAL NARRATIVES
Since the end of the 1980s, a new direction has appeared where Gulag memoirs are concerned — oral narratives composed for tapes or videos.

This form was used in the 1970s by unofficial historians but acquired special importance at the end of the 1980s. It became possible, on a large scale, to interrogate persons who, for one reason or another, had never written their memoirs. For those who could not write for themselves, the oral narrative was a more spontaneous and natural medium. As practical experience has shown, in conversation a person was able to touch on painful and difficult subjects which he could not having himself to put on paper. In addition, the oral form recorded better the vocabulary of conversation, and socio-linguistics gives us a key to understanding the problematic of the Gulag at a deeper level. When speaking, a person is reader to pass on the legends and myths of camp life.

Tapes of such narratives are kept at the Centre of Oral History in the Russian State University of the Humanities, in the archive of Memorial and in the People’s Archive.

MEMORY AND DOCUMENTS
Whereas for several decades our chief alternative historical source was memory, at the beginning of the 1990s documents appeared for the first time. Something happened that nobody had hoped for: the secret archives were opened and all historians rushed from reminiscences to documents.

But what, essentially, are these secret archives? They are what our system thought it necessary to preserve, in other words the system’s memory. And now, after the passage of some years of intense work in the archives by many researchers, we can, at last, try to compare these two memories and see how the one confirms or contradicts the other. Many examples could be quoted, and one of the most substantial is the phenomenon of the year 1937. Because a myth persisted for a very long time that it was the Party nomenklatura that was the chief sufferer. That is one aspect. The other is our notion that 1937 had tens of millions of victims. We now know, thanks to the archive documents, that in the two years of the Great Terror a few more than 1 600 000 persons were arrested and over 650 000 were shot. We also know for certain that the victims of 1937 were by no means only or mainly the Party nomenklatura and that all of these tens and hundreds of thousands were contributed by the so-called ‘kulak’ operation.

Many more examples could be quoted and compared, but the main thing that the archive documents have given us is understanding of how the system worked. And then it became perfectly clear why this system did not conceal the traces of its crimes, did not destroy the archive documents, but, on the contrary, carefully preserved every thing related to the repression. Because such destruction of papers would have been equivalent to destruction of the system itself. Another very important thing is confirmed by the documents, namely, that it is characteristic of any totalitarian model (and of ours especially) to combine the planned with the absurd. That is obvious from the example of the year 1937 itself. The NKVD’s operational order 00447 of 30 July, which gave the signal to begin mass repression, set planned quotas for arrests and executions, which were passed down from above to the regions. On the one hand, it is as though this entire mass-scale operation was carefully planned. On the other, the monstrous dimensions of the repression engendered incredible chaos in the bureaucratic machine. Fulfilling the plan for arrests
obliged the local organs to arrest just anybody anywhere, and in this sense the archive documents confirm the most fantastic testimonies.

The archive sources now available do not in the least detract from the previously special importance of memory as a source, rather do they confirm it. These archive documents (however staggering their exposures) tell us, nevertheless, too little about the fate of the individual who fell (to use Canetti’s language) into the jaws of the state machine that ground it to dust. The point is that in these archive documents the individual literally disappears, he is indeed transformed into mere camp dust. And therein lies the poison and even the danger of these documents. They literally try to complete what the repressive machine did not carry out to the full, namely, to destroy the real human being, leaving only the nameless prisoners. Even when, at last, detailed research into the Gulag archives is begun, these documents which record the rules of living for the prisoners, set the norms for feeding them, the sanitary regulations and so on (and, so far, Russian historians have not, in fact, done this), it will not diminish the value of memoirs as sources. All these data fail to coincide, for quite comprehensible reasons, with what has been preserved in prisoners’ memories. Therefore memoirs continue to be a very important, even though subjective, source for our knowledge of the Gulag.

We can find the individual and his fate nowhere but in these reminiscences.

All that is clear is that the time has come, at last, for a really profound and critical analysis of these reminiscences, which has not been undertaken until recently. Unfortunately, up to now we have failed to direct serious research not into what has been remembered but into how and why it has been remembered.

This puts the eternal problem of truth and falsehood in memoirs in a somewhat different light. Today it is not so important to show that what a person has written is not true. In the situation of glasnost, with access to the archives, it is quite possible to do that. Much more important is it to understand why he has lied, what mechanisms of suppression and self-justification were at work in him, why he shaped his biography this way and not otherwise.

We are still only at the beginning of this work. But, it seems, the time has come for calm reflection on what is meant by remembering the Gulag, remembering the repression.
Inside the Ghetto: Daily life in Hungarian Ghettos.

Regina Fritz
(Austria):

Abstract: On April 16, 1944, about one month after the German invasion of Hungary, the first ghetto was established in Hungary. The ghettos in Hungary differed greatly with regard to housing, provisioning, the ability to make contact with the “outside world”, the extent of violence, etc.

The paper aims not only to investigate the formal differences between the individual ghettos, but also ask how these influenced life inside the ghettos. What degree of freedom was there for the Jewish inhabitants of the ghettos to design how they lived? To what extent was it possible to adhere to religious commandments or to arrange cultural life? What influence did internal or “imported” conflicts have on the life of the ghetto inhabitants? How was violence exercised and experienced in the different ghettos, particularly by the Hungarian gendarmerie? How did the living conditions change over the course of the weeks? How did the ability or the inability to make contact with the “outside world” influence ghetto life?

Research about the daily life in the Hungarian ghettos is made difficult by the fact that the internal ghetto administrations in Hungary were not nearly as established and developed as in other countries due to the Hungarian ghettos’ short period of existence. Thus there is only a limited number of contemporary sources on life inside the ghettos available to historians. Nevertheless, there are some central sources available that allow good insight into the daily life of the Hungarian ghettos: Next to the few surviving diaries and letters from the ghettos that immediately document daily life and experiences of living in the involuntary community of the ghetto, Oral History interviews, which were conducted over the last 40 years are unique sources.
On April 16, 1944, about one month after the German invasion of Hungary, the first ghetto was established on what was then Hungarian territory: in Carpathian Ruthenia, which had been annexed by Hungary end of the 1930s. Within a period of only eight weeks, more than 400,000 Hungarian Jews were collected into over 170 ghettos, so that the ghettoization of Hungary, with the exception of Budapest, was almost completed by the summer of 1944.

The inhabitants of the ghettos were concentrated in special internment camps in the county towns within a few weeks and were deported after a maximum of two weeks to the concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau or – in some exceptions – to the Austrian transit camp Strasshof/Nordbahn. The Jews of Budapest had to move to houses marked with the Yellow Star from mid-June 1944 onwards. These houses were located in the vicinity of factories, stations and other potential allied air raid targets. In December 1944, two closed ghettos were eventually erected in Budapest as well.

As the Hungarian ghettos existed for a relatively short period of time in comparison with ghettos in other occupied territories, their history has so far been somewhat neglected by international scholarship. Thus, only few comparative examinations of Nazi ghettos explicitly address the Hungarian special case and only mention the existence of the Hungarian ghettos in passing. Even Hungarian ghetto research itself, which has slowly been establishing itself since the 1990s, has to date concentrated primarily on questions of the Hungarian collaboration with the German occupiers and on aspects of the local and regional level political decisions made on the erection of ghettos. This work is very welcome in the light of decades of suppression of awareness of the participation of Hungarian administration in the murder of the Hungarian Jews. However, the life and daily routine inside the Hungarian ghettos has long been only a marginal topic in the various historical examinations or has even been entirely left out. The English historian Tim Cole addressed this topic only recently in his work „Traces of the Holocaust. Journeying in and out of the Ghettos“, and was able to use different documents from inside the ghettos e.g. to call to attention the fact that some vocational continuities did persist – particularly in the medical vocations – even after the ghettos had been erected, meaning that some individuals were able to continue working in their profession outside of the ghetto.

My presentation will set out from that point in order to research the multiple layers of daily life in the Hungarian ghettos. After all, research on life in the Hungarian ghettos is not least necessitated by the fact that the Jewish perception of and reaction to the persecution are – as Saul Friedländer has also stressed – an inextricable part of Nazi history and the history of the Holocaust.

The ghettos in Hungary differed greatly with regard to housing, provisioning, the ability to make contact with the „outside world“, the extent of violence, etc. The living conditions depended greatly on how the local administrations realized the measures for ghettoization and how the non-Jewish population reacted to the erection of the ghettos. Thus, the place of ghettoization and the conditions inside the ghettos depended not least on the decisions made by the given mayors. It was up to the mayors to decide in which parts of the city, which streets and which buildings the Jews were to be housed. Altogether, the Hungarian historian László Csősz has identified five different ghetto models:

1. Complete resettlement, housing in camp-like conditions outside of the residential areas in factories or farm buildings
2. Enclosed residential area, often in the former Jewish quarter

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3. Housing in individual, not necessarily neighboring buildings marked by a yellow star
4. Choosing not to erect an enclosed ghetto

Csősz’ fifth model is the combination of models one and two, which existed, e.g., in Kassa, Ungvár or Munkács. In these places, local Jews from the town were housed in an enclosed residential area within the town, while the Jewish population of the surrounding rural area had to move to an internment camp, which was typically located at the town’s outskirts.

Ghettoization in the annexed territories differed altogether from how it was handled in the core of Hungary: It was not only more brutal, but also much less structured.

But how did these formal differences between the individual ghettos influenced life in the ghettos? What degree of freedom was there for the Jewish inhabitants of the ghettos to design how they lived? To what extent was it possible to adhere to religious commandments or to arrange cultural life? What influence did internal or “imported” conflicts have on the life of the ghetto inhabitants? How was violence exercised and experienced in the different ghettos, particularly by the Hungarian gendarmerie? How did the living conditions change over the course of the weeks?

Although most of the ghettos were enclosed, they were not all hermetically sealed off. The degree of openness differed greatly from ghetto to ghetto: In many cases, it was allowed to leave the ghettos for certain hours; in some few ghettos, the local mayor even allowed the inhabitants to leave the site at will, while in others as much as stepping onto the street or the courtyards within the ghetto was forbidden at certain times. How did the ability or the inability to make contact with the “outside world” influence ghetto life?

Last, but not least: Do the sources that are still available from ghetto administration or individual sources such as letters or diaries confirm the long held assumption that only a minority of those interned in the ghettos were subjected to forced labor? An initial analysis of the protocols recorded in the course of the National Committee for Attending Deportees (DEGOB) documentation activities show the opposite: Many survivors report that the inhabitants of the ghettos – especially the men, but in many cases also the women – were forced to work.

In my presentation, I will seek to find answers to these and further questions and describe the in many respects widely differing experiences made in the ghettos at hand of personal documents and the preserved estates of ghetto administrations.

Research about the daily life in the Hungarian ghettos is made difficult by the fact that the internal ghetto administrations in Hungary were not nearly as established and developed as in other countries due to the Hungarian ghettos’ short period of existence. Although the Hungarian ghettos did also have the beginnings of an administration, the organization of religious or cultural life, a health system and provisioning, only the so-called “big ghetto” in Budapest had a somewhat larger scale administrative body. Thus there is only a limited number of contemporary sources on life inside the ghettos available to historians. Furthermore, the actions of war resulted, as in many other countries, in the destruction or loss of many documents.

Nevertheless, there are some central sources available that allow good insight into the daily life of the ghettos: Next to documents by the various Hungarian regional and local political administrative levels (correspondence, ghetto orders, etc), the daily reports sent to the Budapest Central Jewish Council from the ghettos outside of the capital can be drawn on. The few surviving diaries and letters from the ghettos

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4 Csősz: Tettesek, szemtanúk, áldozatok, p. 75.
6 These documents were published in Judit Molnár, Kinga Frojimovics (ed.): Gettómagyarország 1944. A Központi Zsidó Tanács iratai, Budapest 2002.
that immediately document daily life and experiences of living in the involuntary community of the ghetto are further, unique sources. The problem of the scarcity of contemporary sources can further be alleviated by the use of reports that were recorded immediately after the persecution, such as the DEGOB protocols, which documented the personal life stories of about 5000 survivors between March 1945 and June 1946 or the interviews conducted by the British secret service in Rumania with Hungarian refugees in June 1944. It is all the more important to draw on these personal sources in light of the fact that most other documents depict many events only from the perspective of the perpetrators and the collaborators, hardly or not at all reflecting the experiences of the persecuted and thus failing to reflect the multi-layered experiences of persecution. Thus, reports from memory and personal estates are an important addition to the existing source material from administration side.
Defying Death, Remaining Human: Ukrainian Women’s Experience in the Gulag.

Oksana Kis
(Ukraine):

Resumen: En la década de 1940-50s miles de ucranianos mujeres han sido condenadas a larga pena de prisión en los campos del Gulag de acusaciones políticas. A principios de 1945 las mujeres constituían el 30.6 por ciento de todos los presos del Gulag, mientras que los ucranianos quedaron segundo grupo étnico más grande entre los presos. Este artículo explora las experiencias de las mujeres ucranianas de supervivencia del día a día, la resistencia y alojamientos en las circunstancias más brutales de los campos de concentración soviéticos. El estudio se basa en el análisis de los sobrevivientes narrativas personales. Vivir al borde de la muerte, que padece hambre sever, condiciones inhumanas de vida y la carga de trabajo agotador, las mujeres ucranianas utilizan su conocimiento por razón de género, las habilidades y el ingenio para crear y mantener (una ilusión de) la vida normal. Prácticas tradicionales de mujeres (incluyendo la limpieza, la cocina, las celebraciones religiosas, el cuidado de sus cuerpos y ropa, higiene, cantando canciones populares, escribiendo poesías y artesanías) ayudaron a las reclusas para resistir los efectos deshumanizantes del régimen campamentos. La solidaridad de las mujeres y leadership, así como algunas nuevas prácticas de empoderamiento (que actúa como un sacerdote) entre las mujeres se analizan desde el punto de vista feminista.

Abstract: In the 1940-50s thousands of Ukrainians women have been sentenced to long-term imprisonment in the Gulag camps for political accusations. At the beginning of 1945 women constituted 30.6 percent of all the Gulag inmates, while Ukrainians remained second largest ethnic group among prisoners. This paper explores the Ukrainian women’s experiences of day-to-day survival, resistance and accommodation in the most brutal circumstances of Soviet concentration camps. The study is based on analysis of the survivors personal narratives. Living on the verge of death, suffering from sever hunger, inhuman living conditions and exhausting workload, Ukrainian women used their gender-based knowledge, skills and resourcefulness to create and maintain (an illusion of) the normal life. Traditional women’s practices (including housekeeping, cooking, religious celebrations, looking after their bodies and cloth, hygiene, singing folk songs and crafts) helped female prisoners to withstand dehumanizing effects of the camps regime. Women’s solidarity and leadership as well as some new empowering practices (serving as a priest) among women are analyzed from the feminist standpoint.
In the mid 20th century tens of thousands of Ukrainians were sentenced to long-term imprisonment in the Gulag camps accused of political wrongdoings, so that in 1951 Ukrainians constituted one fifth of the Gulag population, and remained the second most numerous ethnic group there.1 The proportion of women among the Gulag detainees increased drastically during the same period - from 7.6 percent in 1941 to 26 percent in 1944. At the beginning of 1945 women constituted 30.6 percent of all Gulag prisoners, and their number continued to grow.2 Young women from Western Ukraine sentenced to long-term confinement for real or alleged collaboration with the Ukrainian nationalist underground movement represented a large share of the female political convicts in the 1940-50s.3

It was impossible to determine the exact number of people who were through the Gulag system from the late 1920s-50s and how many actually survived. Scholars agreed that even the most accurate calculations are approximate with a total of about 25-30 million prisoners, of whom approximately 13.2 million detainees died while serving their sentences in camps and prisons.4 Demographers of the Gulag do not provide these data disaggregated by the victims’ gender, but it is clear that thousands of women survived the Gulag and managed to return to their “normal life” after many years in confinement. How was that possible? What helped them to hold on in the harshest living conditions, when their rights, resources and opportunities were so extremely restricted?

The first attempts to comprehend women’s lives in the Gulag were made as soon as the first former female prisoners (primarily foreign citizens) managed to leave the USSR in the late 1940s and 1950s and ultimately published their memoirs describing the lives of the Gulag inmates. Apparently the first serious informational break through was in the late 1960s and 1970s when first comprehensive autobiographical novels of Russian and Ukrainian survivors were published in the West. The possibility for thorough research on the Gulag as a complex phenomenon did not exist until after the collapse of the Communist regime. In the 1990s scholars were granted access to previously classified archival documents, and Gulag survivors and their descendants began to speak openly about what they had been through. As a result, a number of solid studies on Gulag history were published in Russia and elsewhere.5

Scholars thoroughly examined the origins, structure and functioning of this punitive institution, the Gulag economy and demographics, as well as its political role for the totalitarian regime. The everyday life of prisoners however received rather limited scholarly attention. Only a few studies focused specifically on gender peculiarities of women’s experiences in the Gulag.6 In addition, several volumes of personal testimonies of female survivors of the Gulag [translated into English] came out in print drawing scholars’

attention to women’s gendered experiences in confinement. In spite of a sufficient pool of primary source materials (oral histories, memoirs, autobiographies) available in Ukraine and elsewhere, Ukrainian women’s lives in the Soviet concentration camps and prisons have not as yet been the primary focus of any historical anthropological research.

This paper will discuss how while living on the verge of death, suffering from severe hunger, inhuman living conditions and an exhausting workload, Ukrainian women still found ways to defy the dehumanizing effects of camp regimes and to preserve their human, gender and ethnic identities. This study focuses on Ukrainian women’s experiences of serving sentences in the Gulag camps and prisons from the mid 1940s, when the number of Ukrainian female political prisoners grew drastically, until 1956, the beginning of the mass release and rehabilitation of political prisoners after the denouncement of Stalin’s cult of personality. This research is based heavily on personal testimonies of Ukrainian female survivors of the Gulag (oral historical interviews, as well as written memoirs and autobiographies). Women’s narratives are analyzed to explore women’s survival and accommodation strategies in these extraordinary circumstances, as well as forms of resistance to and transgression of the camps regime resulting from women’s specific gendered knowledge, skills and everyday practices. The chapter will examine how women’s gender-based knowledge, skills and traditional practices equipped them with necessary tools to create and to maintain a semblance of “normal life” where basic cultural values and social identities were preserved and performed.

WOMEN IN THE GULAG: A GENERAL OVERVIEW OF LIVING CONDITIONS

A brief overview of typical living conditions and regime in the camps where female political prisoners served their sentences is necessary to understand the extreme challenges women confronted on a daily basis in the Gulag.

Summarizing female survivors’ personal testimonies one can reconstruct relatively accurate picture of everyday life in the camps. Women usually lived in wooden barracks, tents, or dugouts where from few tens to a hundred persons were packed in one large room. Rows of two-story beds and a big plank table were the only furnishing. Bedding was usually limited to a mattress (if there was any) made of straw or other dry natural materials (grass, leaves etc.). The heating system consisted of an iron barrel adjusted to serve as an improvised wood stove located in the middle of the room. Because of poor insulation and primitive heating, it was very cold inside the barracks in the wintertime. Detainees could not dry their wet outerwear and shoes after walking several kilometers in rain from their remote workplaces. There was a serious problem with hygiene: on average women could take common baths two or three times per month, while their clothing was disinfected at high temperatures. Women recalled a strong stench steaming from dirty bodies and clothes, as well as from festering wounds to be intrinsic features of a camp life. In overcrowded barracks women also suffered from sleep deprivation, which further deteriorated their already poor health. The situation was aggravated by lice and bed bugs attacking the inmates exhausted...
bodies at night,\textsuperscript{14} and those itchy bites became easily infected sores, resulting in further complications for women’s health conditions.

Female prisoners of the Gulag were considered universal workers, so they were employed in all kinds of jobs, including physically demanding and hazardous ones (lumbering, earthmoving, construction of industrial plants and railroads, mining, etc.). The prisoners were stripped of most civic rights, therefore no protective norms of the Soviet Labour Code applied to them. “In the year 1951-52 winter was unprecedentedly cold even for Norilsk. The temperature dropped (taking wind into account) to 74 degree below freezing mark. The metals on the railroad were breaking apart because of that cold. Our duty was to replace the broken rails...”\textsuperscript{15} In women’s memoirs one can find numerous testimonies of injuries and casualties at work sites.\textsuperscript{16}

In fact, the prisoners’ work merely severe exploitation of cheap human resources. For instance, in 1949 the level of mechanization of lumbering was 18 % on average with the remaining work in the Gulag performed manually.\textsuperscript{17} The Gulag economy was unprofitable: poor planning, mismanagement, corruption and plundering caused wasting huge resources, and human resources above all.\textsuperscript{18}

The prisoners food allowance was regulated by several Gulag by-laws with regard to the types of work performed; an actual portion depended on the prisoner’s fulfillment of the established production rate ("the norm"). In general, the diet was poor, with critical lack of proteins and vitamins; often the ingredients were of bad quality and stale. By and large, inmates received insufficient, nonnutritious, low-grade food and suffered from hunger in most cases.\textsuperscript{19}

As a result, prisoners massively suffered of deseases such as scurby, dystrophy, nycatolia, etc. caused by the excessive work load and a severe Siberian climate combined with a poor diet. All the female prisoners of Gulag – even the healthy and young ones - exhausted their physical resources soon after detention, and after a few years spent in camp their heath was irreversibly undermined.

**NATION AS AN IMAGINED AND A REAL COMMUNITY: (RE)ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS**

National belonging and ethnic descent apparently played a significant role in the camps’ informal social structures: inmates of the same ethnicity formed close circles/groups and maintained a certain distance from the rest. As Anne Applebaum correctly pointed out, ethnic/national solidarity proved to be one of the most efficient strategies of survival in the Gulag.\textsuperscript{20} Many former prisoners in their memoirs refer to this fact using Ukrainian or Baltic women’s groups as exemplary cases of strong informal communities of compatriots providing their members with mutual support of all kinds.\textsuperscript{21}

Remarkably, the former Gulag inmates of different ethnic origin (Russians, Jews, Polish, Germans etc.) always mention Ukrainian women as an exemplary group held together with a number of common features.\textsuperscript{22}

“We looked all the same, but we were different. There were women of different ethnic background: Latvians, Estonians, Germans, Russians, Koreans, Jews, but we Ukrainians constituted the majority. We were united by the same injustice, and we all were political prisoners who thought and believed in truth (…)\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{14} Neskorena berehynia,134; Anna Ivanytska also spoke on this issue: Anna Ivanytska. Interview recorded in August 2009. Archive of the Memorial museum of totalitarian regimes “Territory of Terror”. Collection 1, register 1; see also Kokhanska, Z Ukrainoiu, 267
\textsuperscript{15} Yefrosinia Kersnovskaia, Naskalnaia Zhyvopis’ (Rock paintings) (Moscow: SP Kvardat, 1991), 337
\textsuperscript{16} Neskorena berehynia, 134-135
\textsuperscript{17} Analysis of the Gulag economic activity and financial reports proved that the use of the prisoners work was inefficient – the cost price of the goods produced by the Gulag enterprises was much higher than elsewhere. See: Ivanova, Gulag, 251
\textsuperscript{18} Ivanova, Gulag, 240-243
\textsuperscript{19} Neskorena berehynia, 124, 134; Vnamysti, 209.
\textsuperscript{20} Applebaum, Gulag, 380
\textsuperscript{22} Wally Schliess, “Christmas in Vorkuta,” Our Life 1 (1957): 4
We made groups on the national basis, despite the fact that we worked in different brigades. There were highly intelligent women among us, but there were also many regular peasant girls who self-sacrificially brought their health and youth on the altar of struggle for the justice”.23

Ukrainian women developed their solidarity on a national basis. Belonging to a group of people who share the same cultural, political and religious views, values and norms helped women to overcome the detrimental effects of detachment and isolation from their natural social and cultural milieu. Staying together was the key factor in preserving presence of mind necessary to endure all the ordeals women had to deal with.

“Our unity, our readiness to help one another in a difficult moment, an awareness of our common fate and the fact that we all are here for our common great idea of liberation struggle, a struggle against the barbaric tyranny – it helped us to live through all those horrors”.24

Despite the gender segregation of prisoners and a strict prohibition of any contacts, men and women felt an urge to communicate and did so. An illegal “post service” evolved in the Gulag. The internal secret correspondence played an important role in the detainees subculture: it helped to establish and to maintain contact with comrades, friends or beloved ones, to share thoughts, memories and dreams, as it facilitated circulation of important information among the inmates. From women’s memoirs one may learn about various ways of secret messaging among prisoners, while washrooms and bathhouses served as main “post offices”.25 "We used to leave messages on small pieces of paper in hidden places. Many boys and girls maintained correspondence with one another, the youth from Western Ukraine was very united”.26

For women the main incentive to seek contact with male prisoners was a hope to find traces of their beloved ones (a husband, a brother or a father) as quite often all the family members of a political convict ended up in the Gulag. A little note of a few kind words, a postcard or a small hand-made gift served as tokens of women’s moral support for their male counterparts, meant to prevent their despondency. Since this activity was forbidden, people caught passing down messages were severely punished, usually by putting further restrictions on their already limited rights.

“We have gotten lots of messages from men, because everybody wanted to get a warm woman’s word. We exchanged letters without guys to hold up their spirit, but [...] one had to bear responsibility for that [...] as sometimes you throw [message] successfully, but sometimes they catch you [...] We exchanged letters via bathhouse and washroom. If [the guards] find a message – you have to bear responsibility for that, they would punish you [...] I always threw those messages [over the fence] very well, I was good in that [...] One had to stay in a punishment cell for that, or they could deny you to write a letter [home], or they forbid to go to kiosk. Those were three form of punishment.”27

In fact, the internal correspondence among the inmates helped them to (re)create a national micro-community, a kind of Ukrainian diaspora in the Gulag, so the prisoners could affiliate with and benefit from its moral and material support.

One of the aims of the Gulag system was the complete disintegration of a prisoner’s personality: inmates were systematically degraded and abused in different ways to break their psyche. In addition, due to the terrible living and work conditions they found themselves on the verge of physical exhaustion, so that the basic instinct of survival was meant to take over any humanistic values, social norms and cultural ideas. Complete isolation from the rest of society served that goal – pulled out from the familiar system of

23 Neskorena berehynia, 124
24 V namystyi, 150-151
26 Neskorena berehynia, 65
27 Interview with Daria Husiak., recorded in June 2009. Archive of the Memorail museum of totalitarian regimes “Territory of Terror”. Collection 1, register 1
cultural axes prisoners were expected to lose their basic points of reference and, as a result, become an easy to manipulate dull human mass with no moral principles whatsoever. Letters to and from home represented that last tiny thread which helped inmates to stay connected with their native culture and communities. For many prisoners it was a last chance to maintain that feeling of belonging, which helped them to stay within the framework of culturally defined social norms and moral principles.

“It is difficult to tell what feels a person who is in confinement for ten years [...] A human becomes indifferent to everything, it becomes barbarian. Letter were the only consolation and the only tiny bridge between us and our relatives...”28

This is why in high security camps for political prisoners (katorga, where Ukrainians prevailed) correspondence was either severely restricted or banned altogether.

“Writing was strictly forbidden, it was even difficul to get a paper, a pencil or ink. But we were looking for any possibility to contact with the world all the time. In the monotony of our daily routine every news was like a light beam to strengthen us [...] But the connection to a native home and family was the most desirable [...] We girls were eager to get some information about our family members, relatives, about our towns or villages.”29

Women’s stories inform about prisoners will to find various ways to get around the restrictions and bans. Often camp civilian workers who sympathized with the detainees helped them to mail out their letters. The inmates’ handmade postcards represent a peculiar type of the Gulag art.30 These were amateurish drawings with colored pencils or ink, with a pen or just a stick, sometimes in watercolors or gouache. The themes of these pictures are recurring: the natural landscapes, flowers, children, boy and girl in love, the conventionalized horseshoe (traditional symbol of good luck). Remarkably, one can find no barbed wire or bars, or other symbols of captivity on these postcards.31 It is clear that prisoners preferred to visualize and share their memories of and dreams about freedom and normal life, of which beauty of nature and family happiness constituted essential elements.

Occasionally female political prisoners received parcels from home. Usually the parcel content was shared with other less fortunate inmates. Every parcel turned into a special event not only because of what was inside (food, clothing, hygiene items and other little things of real value in a camp). Their special significance was related to a feeling of belonging to a family circle from which a woman had been taken.

“In the barrack there were many people who received parcels from home [...] They maintained a womanly guise, they lived with the interests of their families [...] and that gave them certain ground under their feet, as it usually is when one feels a family care and support.”32

Feelings of national belonging, shared misfortune as well as a common dream for freedom created a strong sense of both an imagined and a real national community among Ukrainians in the Gulag camps. Correspondence within and beyond the Gulag was essential to restoring and maintaining the broken connectedness with a national collective.

RESTORING THE "NORMAL ORDER": STRUCTURING SPACE AND TIME IN A CAMP

Women in the Gulag found themselves in a situation, which differed drastically from their usual daily lives. The way women arranged their living in camps and prisons represent an interesting case for historical-anthropological study from a gender perspective. Living on the verge of death, Ukrainian female prisoners

28 Pozniak-Skrypiuk, Meni bulo, 96
29 Schliess, "Post service," 7
30 Ukrainian museum holdings contain numerous examples of these artifacts, see http://gulag-museum.org.ua accessed 9 March 2014
31 Kateryna Peleshchysyn, “Malodostizhenni aspekty tvorchosti vyaznyv stalinslykh tiurem i laboris” (Understudied aspects of creative art of prisoners of Stalin’s camps and prisons), Naukovy zapysky Lvivskoho istorychnoho muzeiu 4(2) (1997): 57-70
32 Surovtsova, Spohady, 324; see also: Schliess, "Post service," 7; similar story was told by Volodymyra Kbryk-Senyk: Neskorena berehynia, 119
used their gendered knowledge and skills, as well as resourcefulness and mother wit to (re)create a semblance of a “normal” mode of life in barracks.

A barrack did not remotely resemble any regular housing (neither a village cottage, nor a town apartment), but for the female inmates it was the only shelter they had. Guided by traditional ideas of how living space was supposed to be arranged and what a woman should do to keep it in proper order (including cleaning, interior design, flower-growing, etc.) prisoners showed enormous diligence in creating and maintaining relative comfort inside and around the barracks.

“Girls from the Western Ukraine, women from recently incorporated territories, young women who were the real picture of health. The transformation that their industrious hands wrought in Hut Number 2, to which they has been assigned, were simply miraculous. The floor planking was polished to a gleaming yellow. The grazy windows, made of bits of broken glass clued together, sparkled like crystal. Green branches of dwarf pine embelished the corner posts of bunks, and straw pillow were touchingly draped with emboidered hand towels”.33

In fact, barracks and the surrounding territory – no matter of their actual condition - obtained a new meaning for the inmates; that place turned into a substitute of a home, to be treated as one’s own habitable and well-attended place. Barracks turned into places of certain “collective privacy” from the regime represented by camp administration. The camp authorities actually had rather limited control over the detainees’ lives in barracks, except for regular searches for prohibited items. Despite all the restrictions and bans, all kinds of forbidden activities took place in there.

Secret celebrations of religious holidays were some of those. Former female prisoners from other ethnic groups recall Ukrainian women attaching special significance to celebration of Christmas and Easter. Women’s memoirs from Gulag camps prove that these two holidays served as the major reference points in the prisoners’ mental calendar, in fact they provided structure for the whole year of detainees’ otherwise extremely monotonous life in a camp.

In spite of strict prohibition of any religious practices and lack of basic religious attributes necessary for carrying out Christian holidays, women showed exceptional purposefulness, assertiveness and resourcefulness in preparing and carrying out those celebrations. They usually began accumulating some foodstuff well in advance, making a reserve of sugar, oil, and grains from small bits taken daily from their already scarce food rations. This collection was used later to cook something resembling holiday meals. Besides these “treats”, women hand made other attributes of holidays from anything available (fabric and paper scraps, pieces of wood or wire, etc.). They aimed to conduct the celebration as close to the traditional scenario as possible, with major rituals and attributes in place. Stefania Chaban-Haval described preparations for Easter in a camp in Norilsk in 1955:

“Easter was coming. A few days before that holiday all people in the barrack did not eat their evening portion of bread (…) On Saturday we made “cakes” of porridge. We invented Easter bread from regular bread. Easter eggs were made of clay and colored with paint used for writing banners. We brought green tree branches, covered tables with whatever was available. All that “beauty” was put on the table, cheered up with green branches, and everybody felt really in holiday mood then… Easter arrived. Everybody dressed up in whatever cloth people had from home, but everything was clean. The barracks were in order. We are prepared for the liturgy “.34

The mass represented the apotheosis of a celebration when women (partially or in full) reconstructed the normal church liturgy performing the roles of a priest, a deacon and a choir.

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34 V’namysti, 17
“Everybody hurried to finish all the chores by noon. Then we were going to pray, or, as we called it, to attend a “divine service”. It was not a real divine service, but a common prayer in one of the barracks [...] And to keep it in secret, we had to changed barracks and goup every Sunday, so that our meetings did not attract attention of the administration. We prayed quietly in front of a locket or a little icon which somebody managed to retain”;35 "For that [common prayer] they penalized us, they threw us in the punishment cell, divested us of a right of correspondence. They were taking away beads, little icons, and the prayer books during the searches. But they were unable to take away our prayers”.36

Paradoxically, under conditions of nearly total deprivation, the practice of common prayers and liturgies was a completely new experience for Ukrainian women. As a matter of fact, this was the first time the women had the opportunity to play central roles [serving as a priest or deacon] in Christian church rituals. Therefore, curiously enough, one may arguably define their new religious experience as a kind of empowerment allowing women to get access to a sphere and activities previously completely closed and denied to them. The former female prisoners recalled those moments with pride and excitement.

What is more, following the customs of Christian holidays, Ukrainian women tried to avoid or to minimize hard work on that day. Remarkably, they were prepared to face penalties for refusing to work on the holiday: many times they openly confronted camp officials claiming their right to observe the tradition properly.37

For female prisoners these celebrations served as another avenue to maintain, perform and represent their most significant social identities (gender, ethnic, and religious) in the milieu deliberately designed to strip prisoners of their selves, to depersonalize them. As such, these practices challenged the totality of the regime’s control on prisoners’ bodies and minds. Reconstructing traditional ceremonies and performing corresponding ritual roles, women in fact maintained their connectedness to their native culture, and as a result, it facilitated their loyalty to core cultural values and social norms intrinsic to their distant native communities.

PERFORMING FEMININITY: TO BE A WOMAN NO MATTER WHAT

One of the main goals of the Soviet repressive machinery was suppression of the prisoners will to resist the totalitarian regime by eroding theirs personalities. Stripping prisoners of any attributes or markers of their social identities was a key mechanism to achieve that goal. Women’s awareness of their femininity being challenged or even endangered in the camps is noticeable in virtually every story. Women either expressed their grievance on loosing their feminine features or described their efforts in sustaining them.

“A “zone” [...] was a kind of a massive human unit of female gender [...] We developed new conditional reflex of gregariousness [...] but despite all that we remained humans of female gender”.

Mandatory use of dark colored (gray or dark blue) and baggy uniform, banning any accessories or decorative elements, restricting access to means of hygiene and other limitations served that goal. With bitterness women recalled their appearance in confinement:

“At every step they tried to persuade us that we are not human beings [...] We wear the men’s clothing, the boots are too big...”, 39 “We looked like exhausted human phantoms which did not resemble the human...”.

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37 Pozniak-Skrypiuk, Meni bula, 45; similar stories could be found in many recollections, see for instance: Ihor Derevyany, “velykden’ za gratamy”, Den’. 18 April 2012 http://incognita.day.kiev.ua/velikden-za-gratamy.html; V namysti, 15-19.
38 Pozniak-Skrypiuk, Meni bula, 96
39 V.V.Dvoyienko and O.F.Serhiyenko (Kharkiv: Prava liudyny, 205), 41
beings”.40 “Wearing shot through greatcoats and caps with ear flaps and soldiers’ pants we looked like scarecrows, and not like girls”.41

In spite of an absence of basic necessities and amenities, women did their best to take care of their bodies and appearance according to their concept of femininity. They hand-sewed underwear from scraps of fabric, made alterations to baggy and repaired worn-out clothing, decorated it with embroidery, did each other’s hair, etc. One must not forget that many items necessary for such endeavors were prohibited in the Gulag prisons and camps: the list included all kinds of needles, scissors, knives, as well as mirrors, cosmetics and stationery, among others. Those items were taken away if found during regular searches in cells and barracks. But the will to remain women pushed female detainees to take the risk, to break the rules, to spend the scarce free time to look feminine.

“When spring came, we took off our greatcoats. We started making skirts and blouses from those soldier clothes, and we turned into girls again! Only boots didn’t really fit to such costume…”42

Remarkably, women did not do all that to please or to attract men, as there was virtually no male population around to impress. It appears that maintaining their feminine look served another goal: it was one of those meaningful elements of their (bygone) “normal life”, another point of reference helping women to remember who they are and not to dissolve in the melting pot of Gulag. These practices should be understood as a form of a peaceful resistance to the Gulag totalitarian order.

TRADITIONAL WOMEN’S ACTIVITIES: EMBROIDERING AS SOCIAL NETWORKING

One might quite logically assume that female prisoners of the Gulag whose major goal was a mere survival, would not be willing to spend their, remnants of, time, energy and extremely limited resources for anything but rest or sleep. The memoirs of the former Ukrainian detainees however testify to the opposite: not only were many women actively involved in traditional women’s pastime on a regular basis, but they also took those activities very seriously and practiced them with true commitment.

One gendered traditional women’s activity – embroidering – acquired new meaning and a special significance in camps and prisons. While sewing was widely practiced by all female detainees mainly for practical reasons, traditional embroidery served a completely different purpose in confinement. For Ukrainian women embroidery was an easily recognizable marker of their Ukrainianness as well as a uniquely feminine way to manifest their gender identity.

In the context of Gulag realities traditional embroidering turned into a special craft because here it required remarkable skills, ingenuity and proficiency. Since needles and scissors were strictly prohibited for prisoners, women showed extraordinary resourcefulness: prisoners used fish bones for sewing and embroidering, while scraps of fabric and threads were obtained from worn out clothing. Embroidered items – of virtually no value aesthetically or pragmatically – gained special symbolic meaning in the context of prisoners’ social life. Given to a fellow inmate, such an item served as a sign of a particular trust; it was a token of devoted friendship and lifelong bond between people of similar fate, a symbol of their common experience. Many former prisoners of the Gulag kept those memorabilia for the rest of their lives.43

“We girls state convicts (...) decided to give a little joy to our comrades in idea and struggle from the men’s camp, so they could forget about the horrible reality for a moment and go to their homeland, to Ukraine in

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40 Hanna Zayachkivska-Mykhalchuk, Zaruchnitsya imperii: spohady politvyaznia [A hostage of empire: memoires of a political prisoner] [Lviv: PP Soroka, 2009], 73
41 Neskorena berehynia, 96
42 Pozniak-Skrypiuk, Meni bulo, 45
43 One may find numerous examples of the Ukrainian female prisoners’ embroidery in the museum collections in Ukraine, for more information see http://www.gulag-museum.org.ua
their imagination. Every girl found a scrap of fabric and embroidered a napkin with her initials in a corner. After a prayer, we sent our gifts [...] with one convoy guy (there were good people among them, too).”  

In fact, the practice of exchanging embroidered gifts in confinement turned into a method of establishing, strengthening and sustaining social ties; it contributed to formation of a kind of sisterhood – a united Ukrainian women’s community.

**LAUGHING THROUGH TEARS: WOMEN’S LEISURE TIME**

In their memoirs of the Gulag former female prisoners often mention the modest “forbidden pleasures” they secretly enjoyed in the camps. Singing Ukrainian folk songs was perhaps the most popular women’s pastime, which obtained special significance in the camp context. In folk songs women found their consolation; group singing allowed women to release negative emotions and to develop a sense of unity and belonging to a group of common fate. Traditional folk songs reminded detainees of their beloved distant homeland and a happier life. While singing they could both forget their real situation for a while, and fantasize a better future.

“Young girls [...] sang songs with such nostalgia and sincerity which I am not able to describe [...] Girls sang whatever they knew from the freedom, they had no free time to study new repertoire. They sang folk songs, and women from Galicia knew even the contemporary ones [...] Perhaps, in their imagination the singers in the embroidered shirts and their audience went to their unforgettable, inimitable, forever forcefully taken away [past] for few moments.”

Group singing helped women to pluck up their spirits in most desperate circumstances. For instance, girls who participated in the uprising in the Norilsk camps in 1953, and were transferred to one of the high security camps (katorga) in Mordovia, kept their presence of mind:

“Their term of detention has been extended, but they laughed [...] It was summer time, green around us...How could we not enjoy at least this scanty happiness we had in our lives? Every evening we gathered between the barracks in our zone and sang [...] The repertoire was endless. The entire camp used to gather at our evening concerts, some people sang along, while others’ souls were flying over their native lands from where misfortune pulled them out.”

In fact, singing enabled women to restore and maintain a mental connection to their wider national collective in the camp and beyond, to remain a part of their native culture and remember their normal life in the past for the sake of their future. Folk songs served to manifest the Ukrainian women’s national identity and, at the same time, worked as a peaceful resistance against the camp’s regime treating prisoners as emotionless slaves and denying their right to have some joy. What is most important, group singing facilitated further consolidation of the Ukrainian women’s community.

In the 1940s to early 1950s any amateur talent activity was forbidden in the Gulag camps, with a common penalty for the transgressor being a punishment cell (so called BUR - “barracks of tight security regime”). Nevertheless prisoners did practice all kinds of talents in secret. When despair and increasing despondency physically and emotionally plagued exhausted women, a bit of positive emotion from an improvised performance could help to keep presence of mind:

“The general mood was in decline. The number of conflicts was growing, people started to hate everything around them and one another, too. It was very sad –this atmosphere of mutual hostility in a common cage. I decided to relax somehow that tense situation [...] I announced that a circus performance will take place

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44 V namysti, 44-45  
45 Meshko, Ne vidstupliusia, 41, 59  
46 Zayachkivska-Mykhalchuk, Zaruchnytsia imperii, 160
in the afternoon. One can always find people [to volunteer] so in two hours we opened a “stage” in the rear of barracks […] The barracks were laughing, so the goal was achieved.”  

After Stalin’s death and especially after the wave of camp uprisings in 1953-54, the camp regime was mitigated. Special “cultural-educational units” (CEU) were created in virtually all camps to engage prisoners in propaganda activities.47 For many detainees this was an opportunity to express their talents. Remember, being “an artist” meant a considerable improvement of a prisoner’s quality of living as usually these women were partially exempt from work or assigned to lighter jobs.48 The camp theaters often consisted of former professional artists and talented amateurs who completely constructed a performance – from repertoire and script to hand made props and costumes. Women testified that repertoire could include classical works of Ukrainian drama, opera, poetry and songs.49 From women’s testimonies it is clear that such performances served several functions: they strengthened prisoners solidarity and helped express their Ukrainian identity through language and content; they facilitated emotional catharsis releasing the stress and negative emotion suppressed in everyday life, and; they satisfied prisoners’ esthetic needs (women’s creative potential was actualized and manifested).

Overwhelmed with strong emotions, writing poetry became one of the most popular creative activities among female detainees. This activity was strictly prohibited, and the authors were severely penalized if any manuscript was found.

“Then many of our girls were writing poetry, mainly about their love of Ukraine and their longing for the homeland. So did I. It was qualified as “anti-Soviet propaganda by means of poetry of bourgeois-nationalist content.”50

Memories of Gulag survivors preserved innumerable examples of camp poetry. “Poetry did not survive – they were our birthday gifts, recited orally or written on a hard-to-get scrap of paper, just to be destroyed straight away, or it was taken away during the next search”.51 Remarkably, in their memories former female prisoners keep citing poems of their fellow inmates learned by heart, thus bringing their legacy back to their native culture.52

In the camp poets addressed very different themes – from longing for loved ones and nostalgia for a homeland, dreams of freedom and happy life ever after, to various existential reflections on the meaning of life and Ukraine’s destiny. Besides the unquestionable therapeutic effect of externalizing and verbalizing one’s emotional burdens and grievous thoughts, this practice might have had another effect as it helped women to memorialize the most significant images from their normal life. These memories might serve as a life-saving beacon in the tumultuous disorienting experiences in the Gulag camps. At the same time, these activities – strictly forbidden, but nevertheless widely practiced among the female prisoners – appear to be another way to resist the totalitarian regime, which constructed inmates as a faceless crowd.

CONCLUSIONS
The majority of Ukrainian women sentenced to the Gulag in the 1940-50s constituted a distinctive group of political prisoners. Residents of Western Ukraine - unlike many other female victims of Stalin’s Great Terror in the 1930s – had not been indoctrinated by Soviet propaganda for two previous decades, so they were by no means the loyal Soviet citizens. On the contrary, their nationalist political views strongly opposed the Communist ideology. They perceived the Soviet state as an oppressive system against which Ukrainian people should unite in their struggle for independence and freedom. Strong national awareness and understanding of their peoples’ common destiny was one of the key factors contributing to the

47 Surovtsova, Spohady, 278
48 For more information, see: Applebaum, Gulag, 220-226
49 Zayachkivska-Mykhalchuk, Zaruchnytsia imperii, 125; Surovtsova, Spohady, 293.
50 Neskorena berehynia, 131-132; V namysti, 87,153
51 V namysti, 202
52 Meshko, Ne vidstupiusia, 41
53 Numerous examples of the poetries authored by Ukrainian women political prisoners are published in the volume: Invincible spirit.
solidarity among Ukrainian detainees in general and Ukrainian women in particular. Belonging to a cohesive national group in a camp as well as to the Ukrainian nation in a broader sense - as an imagined community - helped women to obtain all kinds of support necessary to survive in the Gulag. Regular correspondence with friends and relatives within and without the camps (despite all the restrictions) helped imprisoned women to sustain their connectedness to the national collective and to preserve their sense of humanity.

Women’s gendered skills and knowledge were used to arrange their living space and time structure in the camps according to the traditional notion of a right and normal order. Examined practices of (re)constructing major elements of normal life in a camp context are considered as women’s gendered strategies of survival in and resistance to the dehumanizing conditions of the Gulag. Otherwise trivial women’s activities and practices (housekeeping, correspondence, sawing, embroidering, singing, as well as amateur poetry and performances) proved to be relatively efficient tools to counteract devastating effects of the camp regime on prisoners’ physical and mental state. In the camps context these activities acquired a new political meaning as they allowed women to preserve and perform their core social identities (gender, national, religious, political), they contributed to consolidation of a prisoners’ community and developed a sense of solidarity among them, which in turn was a key factor for survival. These scraps of the normal life served as beacons in the darkness of their existence in camps as they contained significant points of reference (cultural values, social norms and moral principles) reminding women who they are. These (forbidden but carried out) activities, despite their non-violent nature, could be interpreted as a form of a peaceful resistance to the destructive effects of camp regime. In fact, the very totality of the Gulag system was undermined as women managed to create the little oasis of relative freedom within it. That was an invisible parallel reality, which functioned according to the normal life scripts and was hardly controlled by the Gulag authorities.

In studies on women’s lives in the Gulag it is very important to focus not only on experiences related to women’s victimhood or martyrdom, but to pay attention to forms of women’s agency manifested in gendered practices of survival and accommodation, as well as their unique way of challenging and resisting the brutality of camp regime.
The Czechoslovak Political Prisoners: Identity, Remembrance and Oral History

Michal Louc
(Czech Republic):

Resumen: En su ponencia, el autor analiza el problema de los antiguos presos políticos de la época de la dictadura comunista en Checoslovaquia (1948-1989). Existe ya un número considerable de proyectos de historia oral así enfocados, y muchas entrevistas grabadas en la República Checa. El tema de la dictadura, sin embargo, sigue siendo sensible y vinculado a las distintas políticas de la memoria, las cuales por lo general tienden solamente a compartir los simples puntos de vista del pasado oscuro del comunismo, más que analizarlos. Para discutir el tema de la identidad colectiva y las rupturas y los silencios en las historias narradas por los antiguos presos políticos checoslovacos, el autor utiliza datos provenientes de su propia investigación. La cuestión será examinada comparando fuentes, tanto escritas como orales, particularmente en el contexto de la legislación vigente vinculada con el pasado nacional y el acceso ilimitado a los archivos de los servicios secretos del Estado.

Abstract: This paper is dedicated to the topic of the former political prisoners from the era of the Czechoslovak Communist dictatorship 1948-1989. There have been many oral-historical projects already started and many interviews recorded in the Czech Republic. The topic of the dictatorship remains sensitive and linked to the various politics of memory usually tending to share the simple views of the dark Communist past than to analyze it. The data from my research will be used to discuss the question of the collective identity and the ruptures and silences in the life stories shared by the former Czechoslovak political prisoners. The issue will be examined comparing both written and oral sources particularly in the context of the laws adopted with the task of dealing with the past, the needs of their memory group and unrestricted access to the security services archive files.