



Weavers from Trautenau: Jewish women's accounts of the experience of forced labor in 1940-1944. Review essay

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Janine P. Holc, professor of political science at Loyola University in Baltimore (Maryland, us), focuses in her research on Poland as well as other countries of Eastern Europe. In numerous publications, she has addressed democratization processes in this region, including Polish–Jewish relations, anti-Semitism, and contemporary modes of Holocaust memorializing. In her latest book, entitled *The Weavers of Trautenau: Jewish Female Forced Labor in the Holocaust*, published in 2023 by Brandeis University Press, Holc expands the scope of her research, focusing on experiences of Jewish girls and young women from the Zagłębie region (mainly from Sosnowiec, Będzin, and nearby towns) who were deported to the Sudetenland at the end of 1940 and forcibly employed there in textile factories operating in close proximity to Trautenau (Trutnov in today's Czech Republic).

In the years 1940–1943, these factories operated as a part of the Schmelzt Organization (Ger. *Organization Schmelzt*) established by Heinrich Himmler to take advantage of the human resources of the Zagłębie region. Run by *SS-Brigadeführer* Albrecht Schmelzt, the organization connected about 162–177 labor camps operating in the Upper and Lower Silesian provinces as well as in the Sudetenland area. A total of approximately 50,000 people were employed, most of whom were Polish Jews originating from Upper Silesia. Laborers worked in quarries, on road construction, as well as in mines, armaments factories, textile plants, and in heavy industry.¹ Despite difficult living conditions and insufficient food supplies, the mortality rate was relatively low in the Schmelzt Organization camps. This was caused not by the humanitarianism of the camp personnel, but rather by the desire to increase efficiency and maximize the use of forced labor. As a result of allegations of financial abuse made against Schmelzt, the organization was dissolved in late 1943. A number of the labor camps were closed, and others were taken over by Gross-Rosen and transformed into concentration camps.

Due to the small number of archival materials available to researchers as well as their dispersion across archives in several countries, the system of the Schmelzt Organization forced labor camps has been up until now studied only to a limited extent.² Discussing the course of her research, Holc describes the obstacles she

1. For more on the Schmelzt Organization see: A. Konieczny, “Organizacja Schmelzt” i jej obozy pracy dla Żydów na Śląsku w latach 1940–1944, “Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis. Studia nad Faszyzmem i Zbrodniami Hitlerowskimi”, vol. 15 (1992), pp. 281–314.
2. See: S. Steinbacher, “Musterstadt” Auschwitz: Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien, München 2000; W. Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Aims, 1938–1944*, New York–Washington 2006; M. Kryl, L. Chládková, *Pobočky koncentračního tábora Gross-Rosen ve lnářských závodech Trutnovska na nacistické okupace*, Trutnov 1981.

encountered in the process of gaining access to the historical source materials. In the introductory part of the monograph, the author writes:

The structure of the Gross-Rosen subcamp system, its relationship to the Schmelt Organization, and the role of local business in northern Bohemia was challenging to research. A truly transnational historical phenomenon, the task of tracking down documents [...] took me to many locations.³

Although the research started at the Gross-Rosen archives in Wałbrzych (Poland), where Holc encountered documentation regarding the Parschnitz camp, further searches led her to archives in the United States (Joint Distribution Committee Archives, New York Public Library, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), Great Britain (Wiener Library), Poland (Archiwum Gross-Rosen, Archiwum Państwowe w Katowicach), Germany (Bundesarchiv Lichterfeld), Czech Republic (Muzeum Podkrkonoší v Trutnove, Státní Oblastí Archiv v Liberec, Státní Okresní Archiv Trutnov, Státní Oblastí Archiv v Zámrsrk), and Israel (Yad Vashem Archives).

Elaborating on the collected archival sources, Holc was able to develop several threads of the history of the Schmelt Organization camps in 1940–1944, making significant contributions to exploring this important and yet only partly recognized chapter of the Holocaust history at large. Aiming at contextualizing the forced labor system created by Schmelt in East Upper Silesia within the wider framework of the Nazi concept of the use of forced labor, Holc focuses on the textile factories operating in the Trautenau area, most of which, at the beginning of 1944, were transformed into Gross-Rosen sub-camps and liberated by the Red Army in May 1945. In the context of other Nazi forced labor camps, these facilities were rather atypical. As Stephan Lehnstaedt proved, up until mid-1943 they constituted a ‘hybrid-type’ of forced labor in which Jewish workers had a certain degree of mobility, were able to receive some compensation and had access to social welfare services.⁴

While the historiographical aspects of the Schmelt operation were researched by Holc thoroughly and meticulously discussed in the monograph, in the complex, multidimensional narrative of the book these historical and geographical details create a timeline and spatial context for the analysis of experiences of forced labor as presented in accounts of the 125 Jewish girls and young women from the Zagłębie area who worked in the textile factories in Trautenau, Parschnitz, Ober Altstadt, Gabersdorf, Bernsdorf, and Schatzlar. The young weavers (then aged

3. J. Holc, *The Weavers of Trautenau. Jewish Female Forced Labor in the Holocaust*, Waltham, Massachusetts 2023, p. X.

4. S. Lehnstaedt, *Coercion and Incentive: Jewish Ghetto Labor in East Upper Silesia*, “Holocaust and Genocide Studies”, vol. 24 (2010), no. 3, pp. 400–430.

11 to 20) were recruited in late 1940 and transferred to the Trautenau area convinced that by going to work for German companies they would have the power to save other members of their families who remained in Zagłębie. Despite the emotional suffering caused by the separation from their families, difficult living conditions, and the persecutory environments of the textile factories, most of these girls and young women survived the war.

In her monograph, Holc builds on current scholarship aimed at understanding the Schmelz forced labor system as it was described and interpreted by the Jewish girls and young women. She gives voice to the survivors whose accounts were recorded – mostly in the 1990s – for the Shoah Foundation. From over six hundred testimonies available as video recordings and archived in a Visual History Archive (VHA) in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, Holc selected one hundred and twenty-five interviews given by women who were the most victimized by the camp experience and investigated how the survivors described the circumstances in which they were taken to the labor camps; how they responded to displacement and separation from their families; how they coped with the shortage of food and medical supplies; how they adjusted to twelve-hour work in factories operating textile machinery; and how they coped with the despair of realizing – after returning to their homelands in 1945 – that most of their family members had been deported to extermination camps only two years earlier.

Pursuing these questions, Holc embeds her research within the literature that includes the scale and forms of persecution inflicted on the Jews by the Nazis and – on the other hand – research on the variety of survival strategies and modes of reacting to this oppression. Analyzing the testimonies of the young Jewish weavers, Holc focused specifically on the dynamics of social relations between the Jewish forced laborers inside the barracks and in the factories, which she examined in the wider context of the socially constructed system of Nazi exploitation and violence. While addressing these issues – Holc declares them as the essential research goals of the whole project – the author also analyzed relationships between the Jewish female forced laborers and the local non-Jewish females (who were also employed in the textile facilities in the area).

Furthermore, Holc examined the impact of the arrival of new groups of Jewish forced laborers who were sent to the Trautenau region from Hungary in 1944, as well as an incoming transport of the Jewish men in early 1945, for whom the area became a destination in their death march. Pursuing questions of individual choices and the motivations of the Trautenau women survivors, Holc did not underestimate the sensitive topic of sexual violence in the camps as well as sexual assaults experienced by the Jewish forced laborers during encounters with Soviet troops in May 1945.⁵

5. J. Holc, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

Although the monograph offers a broadened perspective on research into the complex social relations in the Nazi labor camps during the Second World War, Holc has not limited her efforts to examining the content of the interviews in terms of specific topics but has created a space to engage with the methodological debate regarding the status of the testimony (in particular the Holocaust survivors testimony in a visual form). The Author declares:

[I intend to] stay attentive to the specificity and contours of the testimony practice, including the interviewer–interviewee dynamics, choices by testimony-givers to diverge from expected chronologies, disruptive emotional moments, and the mediating role of the technologies used to record and present testimony to audiences.⁶

Holc approached visual recordings as complex narratives subject to interpretation. Building on Noah Shenker’s work,⁷ she examined the process of testimony-giving as an institutionally embedded social practice that unfolds in front of the camera. Focusing on how the conditions of the filming process (including the presence of cameras, lighting and microphones in the interviewee’s house) and other circumstances of the recording schedule required by the Shoah Foundation (such as pre-interview interactions with interviewers, the training the testimony-givers undergo, introducing the family members at the end of the filming session, using a standard questionnaire to channel every interview toward specific directions, etc.), Holc aimed at determining how those factors shaped the final account.

However, in the theoretical part of the monograph, Holc does not only address testimonies as curated archival recordings but also presents them as texts operating with specific patterns and narrative strategies. Referring to Hannah Pollin-Galay’s works,⁸ Holc examines by what linguistic means the interviewees articulate particular events and experiences; when they generalize and introduce the collective “we” perspective or include a personal view by introducing the form “I”; in what circumstances and to what end they introduce words and phrases in Yiddish, German or Polish; where general terms are introduced while referring to particular figures; and where the names of individuals occur. She also examines how meanings are negotiated between the interviewer and interviewee during the recording process.

Holc also approaches the accounts as “visual artifacts” whose forms are embedded in the specific patterns adopted by the Shoah Foundation at the stage of set

6. *Ibidem*, p. 10.

7. N. Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, Bloomington, Indiana 2015.

8. H. Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony*, New Haven, Connecticut 2018.

preparation and during the filming, including focusing on the interviewee's physical presence and therefore emphasizing their facial and body expressions. As those elements become an important part of each account, Holc not only includes the characteristics of the testimony-givers' physical movements and emotional expressions in her monograph but also aims to interpret them as culturally mediated and gendered elements of the interview.

Furthermore, Holc addresses the process of curating, digitalizing, and cataloguing the testimonies as archival records, approaching them as technical and cultural mediation embedded in the archival infrastructure of the Shoah Foundation. She analyzes the interface created by the institution and examines how the use of specific tools provided to enable searching the labeled segments of interview for specific phrases and keywords might determine the modes of browsing and use of the archival content available through the Internet site.

Discussing the accounts of former women forced laborers, Holc finds that they constitute a rather coherent historical source material. The women not only shared similar camp experiences but also had the same origins in Zagłębie and belonged to a common ethnic and religious environment. While acknowledging the commonality of these experiences, Holc still focuses on the individual character of each story. She writes:

The testimony givers went through the same persecution journey at the same time, subject to the same perpetrators, and trapped in the same barracks. Yet they were individuals who brought their own insights and coping strategies to their situations as girls and who made their own meaning of their survivals as adults.⁹

According to these assumptions, Holc does not encounter the interviewees only as witnesses of the past, whose accounts supplement historical research in terms of developing specific topics and incorporating personal motivations, emotions and individual perceptions of persecution.¹⁰ Instead, she approaches them as insightful observers of other people's behavior and motivations; as the archivists of the history of their own families and of the fate of their companions in camps; as the active creators of individualized survival strategies, and as subjects of their stories and open to introspection and reflection on their own biographical experience.¹¹

Examining each recording meticulously allowed Holc to gain an insight into the unique nature of the war-time experiences of the survivors and also to understand the variety of strategies used by each of them while building the autobiographical

9. J. Holc, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

10. C. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*, New York 2010.

11. J. Holc, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

narratives several dozen years later. In this context, the question of age, defined not as the number of years but as “intersubjective self-understanding of how one fits into a family, culture, and moral universe experienced as Jewish”,¹² has been recognized by Holc as crucial for her analysis and influences the concept of the whole monograph. She argues:

Dominant definitions of ‘childhood’ vary by culture and historical time period. Even within cultures ‘childhood’ is a contested category, often interpreted to reinforce ethnic and class hierarchies. It can be problematic to consider those under the age of ‘adulthood’ to have agency; some categories of children are presented as ‘acted upon’ rather than actors, while others’ agency is over-emphasized.¹³

In this quotation, Holc raises questions regarding cultural conditions related to the understanding of age as well as the social perception of agency that depends on age.

Referring to the works of Debóra Dwork,¹⁴ Joanna B. Michlic,¹⁵ and Rebecca Clifford,¹⁶ Holc focuses on the agency of the Trautenau region camp survivors in showing how the self-identification of the girls and young women (as expressed in the accounts in the context of age and gender) shaped interviewees’ choices and actions and constituted the frame through which they narrated their forced labor memories. Exploring these issues, Holc goes beyond the simple dualism of perceiving the survivors as either “actors” or passive “objects” of other people’s decisions and actions. Analyzing how multiple frameworks of self-identification coexist in particular narratives of the Jewish women forced laborers from Trautenau region, Holc demonstrates that they perceived themselves as “children;” this socially and culturally embedded self-understanding framed their responses to the persecution experience and was essential to sustain their self-identities. She writes: “[...] the coerced textile workers at the Trautenau factories thought of themselves as children, and as children of someone, a contextually embedded self-understanding that shaped their responses to persecution.”¹⁷ In this quotation, Holc shows in particular how the girls and young women positioned themselves within their families. Analyzing phrases the interviewees used when referring to their self-identifications, in the further part of the book Holc proves that the testimony givers – already as adults

12. *Ibidem*.

13. *Ibidem*, p. 17–18.

14. D. Dwork, *Sexual Abuse, Sexual Barter, and Silence*, “Holocaust Studies”, vol. 27 (2021), no. 4, pp. 1–6.

15. J. Michlic (ed.), *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–present: History, Representation, and Memory*, Waltham, Massachusetts 2017.

16. R. Clifford, *Survivors: Children’s Lives After the Holocaust*, New Haven, Connecticut 2020.

17. J. Holc, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

– express different aspects of childhood and young adult subjectivity – vulnerable and susceptible to being manipulated by the Nazi authorities and the factory owners but at the same time physically strong and mentally resistant.

By placing the testimonies of Jewish women at the center of her analysis, Holc discusses specific subjects in a chronological manner, citing fragments of several testimonies and highlighting individual experiences of particular testimony-givers. Unlike researchers who, striving to build a coherent historical narrative, ignore elements and motives that would have the power to disturb the coherent structure of the story, Holc resists any generalization by taking into account individual observations and experiences that would deviate from the accepted patterns of both historical narratives and collective memory, following in this way Alexandra Garbarini's postulate to encounter the complexity of Holocaust survivors' experiences.¹⁸ Therefore, by emphasizing the multi-layered nature of each account and accentuating the nuances contained in each of the testimonies, Holc does not impose an overly integrated image of past events on readers.

Analyzing the accounts of the experiences of the forced laborers, Holc was able to expand the research field toward several new topics (including the role of family bonds in the camp survival process) and to develop other themes (such as emotional and moral suffering resulting from experiences of violence and loss), which have been discussed in the literature only to a limited extent. In addressing these issues, she proposed a new perspective. She distances her work from the "extremity view" invoked by most of the researchers, who argue that the character of social relations in the camps resulted from harsh conditions, dehumanization, physical harms and general trauma caused by extreme persecution, hunger and constant threat of death.¹⁹ Instead, the specificity of the Trautenau region camps allowed Holc to apply a different approach to study these issues. These camps – as Holc proves – were characterized by a developed social life, while the status differences among the prisoners were based mostly upon language ability, education and physical appearance. Analyzing the testimonies of the survivors and comparing individual and collective experiences regarding specific events, Holc addresses social relations in the textile factories by referring to the term "relationality," which denotes social practices where an individual is a part of the network of relations embedded in an "anti-hierarchical," personal approach and oriented toward promoting efforts to support others.

The structure of Holc's monograph reflects the complex nature of the issues discussed, including theoretical considerations regarding the status of video testimony; individual and group perspectives on the social life in forced labor camps

18. A. Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust*, New Heaven, Connecticut 2006, pp. 3–4.

19. M. Buggeln, *Arbeit & Gewalt: Das Außenlagersystem des KZ Neuengamme*, Göttingen 2009; *idem*, *Slave Labour in Nazi Concentration Camps*, Oxford 2014; F. Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp*, Amsterdam 1996.

in the Trautenau area; issues regarding the role of gender and age in these experiences as well as the historical and spatial aspects of the Schmelt Organization labor system. In the first chapter of the monograph, Holc draws on the testimonies discussing the memories of girlhood in traditional Jewish families in Zagłębie, as remembered by the survivors. Here, she addresses not only issues regarding the adult testimony-givers' understanding of their position as girls and young women within their families in the late 1930s but also their experiences of coping with difficulties in the early stages of Nazi restrictions and then their trauma of being brutally taken away from their environments. As self-identification – as remembered and narrated by Jewish survivors – is central to the main arguments of the book, Holc revisits these issues in the subsequent parts of the monograph.

In the following chapter, the author expands the historical and spatial context of the Schmelt Organization's activities, presenting how the small businesses in the Trautenau area became a part of the complex network of the Nazi forced labor system. Holc also presents the Nazi occupation of Zagłębie area here, documenting the formation, development and the transformations that occurred within the Schmelt system in 1940–1943.

In chapter three, the author addresses the complex social worlds of the textile factories as shaped not only by relations between the Jewish forced laborers but also by relations between them and their German and Czech non-Jewish co-workers, who secretly provided them with extra food supplies and offered other forms of aid. Drawing on testimonies of the survivors, Holc discusses working and living conditions as experienced and narrated by the girls and young women (including restrictions on access to food and medicines) as well as limitations regarding movement and communication with the outside world. Addressing these issues, Holc includes information regarding the processes of textile production, showing how the demands of the work shaped social life within the camps.

The fourth and fifth chapters discuss – applying a historical perspective – details regarding the work of three specific textile facilities in Schatzlar, Bernsdorf and Gabersdorf that operated within the Schmelt Organization. In chapter four, building on the accounts of the survivors of these three plants, Holc analyzes how the testimony-givers describe their experiences of confinement and of forced labor. Here, Holc examines testimony-giving practice as developed by the Shoah Foundation, focusing on how the interview techniques interact with interviewee's memories and with social and cultural expectations regarding how the Holocaust narrative should be constructed. In chapter five, Holc again engages directly with testimonies of the survivors to explain the impact of institutional changes that occurred in the camps in late 1943 and later on in mid-1944. First, she presents Himmler's decision to increase SS supervision over the Schmelt system, which finally led to the transformation of the labor camps into concentration camps working under the administrative surveillance of Gross-Rosen. Building on testimonies shows

how these events changed the situation of Jewish girls and young women in these camps, impacting social relations in the camps and introducing new persecution practices. In the subsequent part of the chapter, Holc elaborates on how the arrival of a group of traumatized Jewish women from Hungary who had been sent from Auschwitz-Birkenau – where they had experienced violence and deprivation – brought to Trautenau detailed knowledge regarding the Nazi extermination policies toward European Jews.

In chapter six, Holc revisits the issues of building and maintaining social relations in the camps. Referring to recent scholarship regarding social relations in the difficult conditions of detention, Holc analyzes how the testimony-givers address the ethics of sharing food, protecting the ill and weak as well as exchanging goods and favors, cultivating such social activities as knowledge-sharing, different forms of cultural activities (including singing and playing together, making-up poems and songs, etc.) as well as creating autograph-books (memory-books) that were supposed to create an impression of a ‘normal’ social life. Additionally, since within the Schmelz system the laborers were allowed to receive letters and packages from their families in Zagłębie, Holc analyzes how this correspondence was valued by the young weavers. These items were perceived as objects symbolizing an emotional connection with family members.

While in chapter seven Holc explores the testimonies of the survivors to discuss masculinity and the longing for personal, intimate relations with Jewish men, chapter eight raises issues of liberation in May 1945, which included the arrival of Soviet troops who delivered food and medical supplies but also brought the threat of sexual assault. In the concluding ninth chapter, Holc centers on the female testimony-givers as active agents and producers of knowledge rather than passive, traumatized victims. She discusses the narrative strategies applied by the adult women in the testimony-giving practices when analyzing the content of each narrative in terms of social relations in the camps as well as in terms of creating strategies for sustaining their self-identification as Jews, children and young women.

While the large Nazi concentration and labor camps, as well as the death camps where millions of Jews were persecuted, tortured and killed, have been discussed in the literature, the history of the several small textile factories operating in the Trautenau area within the structures of the Smelt organization, where about 3,000 Jewish girls and young women were detained and exploited, has been studied and narrated only to a limited extent. Filling this gap, *The Weavers of Trautenau* is not only appealing because of its main topics but also because of the methodological approach applied by Holc when examining testimonies of the survivors and analyzing them in the theoretical contexts of both gender studies and Holocaust studies. The particular value of this publication is the method adopted by Holc to combine archival sources and testimonies as well as the way she approaches

the video accounts while intertwining individual and collective perspectives. Referring to a wide range of the survivors' voices the author was able to illuminate – with great sensitivity – several aspects of everyday life of the Jewish female forced laborers, studying at the same time particular aspects of the social relations in the camps.

Illuminating in a nuanced manner the post-war testimonies of women traumatized by persecution, separation from families and other painful experiences, Holc maintains empathy for her subjects as well as a highly ethical approach. Constructing the sophisticated structure of the monograph and organizing the collected materials, she centers testimonies, interpreting the accounts in the wider context of Nazi systems of exploitation and harm. Introducing new source materials and linking a problem-based approach with a chronological approach, she is able not only to reconstruct various historical details but also to present the possibilities of interpersonal relations in the camps and to reveal administrative changes taking place within the forced laborers' communities.

Supplemented by a number of visual materials, the list of the testimony givers, the list of archives consulted by Holc in pursuit of historical sources, detailed notes to each chapter, and an extensive bibliography and expanded index, the monograph is an interesting and complex study. It should be of interest to readers not only who are engaged in Holocaust studies, but also gender studies and various areas of research that refer to testimonies (and especially video accounts). While the theoretical and methodological aspects of the book might be considered difficult for those readers who are not involved in academic research, the monograph might also be a satisfying read for people who are interested in Second World War history, and the war-time history of the Zagłębie area, as well as issues regarding labor camps and the occupation experiences of women.