

Deaf Survivors' Testimony: An Edited Transcript

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In the summer of 1997, Donna Ryan and I interviewed a dozen deaf Hungarian Jews. Although neither of us speaks Hungarian nor uses Hungarian sign language, we believe that this transcript is a reasonably accurate English translation of the narratives that follow. Our initial interviews with a dozen Hungarian deaf Jews occurred in the summer of 1997 in Budapest. I conducted them with the assistance of Hungarians who translated from spoken Hungarian to spoken English. Our sign language interpreter, Vilma Dostal, translated to and from signed Hungarian to spoken Hungarian. Ryan operated a video camera and took notes throughout the interviews. The following summer, we were able to bring four of the survivors to Washington, D.C., to participate in the "Deaf People in Hitler's Europe, 1933–1945" conference. Again, with the aid of Vilma Dostal and survivor Harry Dunai, who is fluent in both signed Hungarian and American Sign Language, the survivors—Peter Farago, Miklos Klein, Klara Erdosi, and Judit Konig—shared some of their experiences with the audience. We used two translators for spoken Hungarian and spoken English. In the summer of 1999, I interviewed Harry Dunai at his home in California. Using American Sign Language, Dunai corroborated and amplified some of the information provided earlier by the other Budapest survivors. The following summer in Budapest, these same survivors spoke to the students and an assemblage of the Hungarian Association of Deaf Jews. Mrs. Dostal interpreted and yet another Hungarian translated from spoken Hungarian to spoken English. In total, we have used four different translators for spoken Hungarian to spoken English. In addition, Donna Ryan and I have communicated in gesture and shared Hungarian and



Survivor panel testifies at “Deaf People in Hitler’s Europe” conference co-sponsored by Gallaudet University and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1998. Seated left to right: Peter Farago, Miklos Klein, Judit Konig, and Klara Erdosi. Courtesy of Gallaudet University Department of Government and History.

American signs with these survivors one on one in social situations since 1997. The basic narratives that these survivors have communicated to us and others have remained constant. We have added clarifying comments in brackets.

Survivor Testimony

Klara Erdosi: Camp Experiences, Including Ravensbrück

Arrival at the Camp

They were very rude with us, the soldiers. We were eighty to a hundred pushed into a wagon [cattle car]. Everybody wanted to find themselves a better place . . . as well as for their baggage. The windows were very tiny and the train started. At night the train stopped. We got off. For about seven days, the train went until we arrived. . . . [at Ravensbrück] I could see many children. They were very dirty and disheveled. My heart was hurting from watching this. I was patient, I was trying to control myself. We lay down in a huge yard. The next day they called us, they undressed us completely naked, they shaved off all our hair, they gave us prisoner uniforms At a table in a corner they were putting the hair into packages, a whole pile of gold, a pile of watches, a pile of photographs, a pile of shoes, clothes were—we were looking in this huge hole, I was trembling. We received this prisoner uniform, we put a kerchief on our head, everybody retained their shoes. This was very odd to be bald.



Klara Erdosi's family photo. At far left, Klara at age thirteen. Mid-picture is her sister with her fiancé. Courtesy of Mrs. Erdosi, Budapest.

Everybody was very cold. We were there for about two months. I met two other deaf people, two other deaf women. There were three of us. Three of us were in one bed, with a doctor's daughter. I got very scared because I found some lice. I told my sister, "I found lice." She said, "What, are you nuts? Everybody got lice." "Everybody?" I asked. "Don't you bathe?" "No," she said. "Everybody got lice." It was very strange.

One deaf woman was very ill; she had dysentery. She asked for some underwear. I had only two pair. She was arguing with me that I should give them to her. The other women's legs were completely swollen.

We were working in the mud, sweeping the area in January . . . There were high-ranking officers sitting at a table. My sister warned me, to make sure I don't show them that I limp because my legs were frozen. You could see that anybody that showed any kind of imperfection or limp, they would separate them right away. My sister spoke German. Therefore, I was stepping very carefully, nobody would notice that I was limping . . . I told all the deaf people how they'd separate us and abuse us. They [the other deaf prisoners] said, "Don't you like the deaf?" I said, "I listen to my sister and I try to be with her. Maybe we would go to a better place."

Two weeks later . . . my sister she was separated and she . . . said that I [Klara] am deaf and can work, and together they took us. The next day, I said bye. I said farewell to my deaf friends—only after the war did I find that all my deaf friends had died.

Work at the New Camp, Near Leipzig

It was written on my papers that I was deaf. As a deaf person, they wouldn't let me work in this [munitions] factory. They were beating us with whips quite frequently. Everybody would receive beatings. Those that died, it happened that those that—either they couldn't control themselves from bowel movements, and they put them out into the yard . . . where they froze to death. I was sent out to dig out the graves, and I was the 'crier' because I would cry. I would dig graves for these people that froze to death. First all three [other prisoners] were taken to dig graves, but afterwards the two were separated and I was left the only one because I cried the most. My hands were hurting . . . it was very cold. I wasn't strong. My sister was much stronger than me. I was digging the graves. We were fighting. We stole from each other.

A woman found out, one of the soldier women found out that I was a hairdresser, and twice a month I had to go and do her hair. [Other times] I had to go to the toilet to clean, or to clean off the snow.

My sister got beaten very often, and it hurt me quite a bit because I couldn't do anything to help her, because if I tried to help they would beat me as well. I have very terrible memories of this, my leg hurt terribly, I cried, cried.



***Peter Farago: Experiences as a Ten-Year-Old Child
at Bergen-Belsen***

They sent us from the train and they separated us from our mothers. I was crying, I wanted to be with Momma, I wanted to be with my mother. They chased me back. Amongst the children I was there and I was completely disoriented, helpless. The only thing I was lucky that there was a saving angel. A Polish boy [named Pavel] was a child of deaf parents, about fourteen or fifteen years old, blonde, blue-eyed, tall boy. He took my hand, he said, "Don't sign." I was very scared, I was wondering why shouldn't I sign. He said again, "Don't sign." I said, "I can't hear." He said, "Be quiet." He was holding my hand as my brother and he said, "Just relax." Amongst the children, I don't want to make up stories, but there were about two thousand. I was amongst two thousand children. When I was a young kid, I didn't care about this, but now I remember how spoiled and what a crybaby I was. And Pavel said, "Don't sign. Don't use hand signals." And I always did whatever he told me and I followed his advice.

Everyday we went, we were taken to a place where we used oil cloth to wash the [munitions casings], and the German soldier gave me some bread. Every night he gave us some kind of a black soup and carrots and beets . . . I couldn't understand why, as a ten-year-old what—many children got sick and died.

Liberation

Pavel was much stronger than me, always stood by me, and he told me that American soldiers or Russian soldiers were coming, but I'd never forget there was huge bombing going on. There were dust clouds everywhere. You couldn't see anything . . . One child died from the—during the bombing. Many children . . . Pavel was my savior.

The war finished, Pavel said to me "The war is over." He said he was returning to Poland to his home. Maybe his parents are still alive. "And what should I do?" I asked him. I felt I was all alone in the world.

[Hungarians] told me that we should start walking. I was very skinny . . . For about eight or ten days we were walking, we were begging for food wherever we could. I couldn't cry at that stage. I could see the others—I was just following with them. We—when got into Hungarian territory but I still couldn't understand, I didn't know for sure that we were in Hungary. . . . I was a young kid, and there again I was begging for food. I was afraid of—very hungry, and I was a very pretty child and they felt sorry for me. I can never forget this. We arrived [Gyór, near the Austrian border]—accidentally I noticed my mother's back. I said, "Mom, mother," and my mother just fainted on the spot. Just a moment [tearful, Farago recomposes himself].



Peter Farago upon his return from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, 1945.
Courtesy of Peter Farago, Budapest.

My mother became so sick, she was trembling, I got very scared. I was afraid for her. And then she finally got up . . . I told her we were going to Budapest. And I'll never forget we were on the train in 1945, the first of May we arrived . . . where we received money, clothes. Unfortunately, I was full of fleas, they had to shave our hair. My mother didn't have fleas, just me . . . I can never forget.

After Arriving Home

Everything valuable that I had was all stolen from us. My mother said, "Doesn't matter as long as we're alive." They moved us to Budapest and we lived there. In 1983, my mother passed away from cancer. I nursed her, she died in my arms. I nursed her for thirty-seven years and it was too short a time for me.

Schuchman: Peter, you said that Pavel told you not to sign. How did the two of you communicate?

Peter Farago: He always told me what to do, but he was very . . . subtle about it. I didn't know why he was so—why he was always hiding messages. I realize now had they found out, they would have killed me. I have three saving angels. First, on the wagon [railroad car] towards Auschwitz, they bombed the train tracks and the train had to turn around—had to return, make a detour towards Austria. I was with my mother at that stage. In Bergen-Belsen, Pavel was the other one that saved my life. I don't want to meet Pavel right now. I'm very worried what might have happened to him. I'd rather not find out. The meeting would be very painful for me.



Judit Konig: The Budapest Ghetto

From the throes of death we escaped three times . . . I cannot describe. My life was very sad indeed. We were, on November 4, 1944, we had papers. We were walking . . . with a pass—authorized pass. One of the deaf people, I am grateful to him. It turns out that the pass originated from Raoul Wallenberg. My mother paid a lot of money to get this certificate. I cannot describe . . . When they took us to the Mexico Street, on the whole way . . . we had to walk with raised arms. Everything that was on us was stolen . . . For fourteen days, we were in semi-prisoner status. Mrs. Galambos, my friend, she had a tiny infant. In this house we were, to tell you the truth, I admit we were stealing, because every house

we went in we ripped whatever we could and we turned it into diapers and whatever we needed. But, thank God, we survived. Now that infant is 54 years old, I'll never forget The Arrow Cross was coming and we were alive They found us and took us to the ghetto We wanted to stay together, but it didn't succeed. They [Arrow Cross] put them on a train [but] I disappeared—from the—I knew what would happen to me if I got on that train.

[Later recaptured and marched to the Danube River] I was shot three times in three different places of my body. I had a very sad life. It destroyed my life I can't talk more about this, it hurts. I would like to finish this, I don't have any family. I'm all alone, all alone. It's horrible . . . I don't want to talk about anything anymore. Thank you very much.



Judit Konig proudly displays her yellow star.
Courtesy of Judit Konig, Budapest.

Miklos Klein**Deaf Members of the Arrow Cross**

They never helped us. When I was in Budapest, I was hiding all over the place. They were hunting down the deaf [sic]. . . He [deaf member of Arrow Cross] was looking for Jewish families. He would arrest Jews and expropriate their valuables. He always wore a weapon and an armband. [His] wife went to school with me. His wife happened to be Jewish. One day I met him and he asked me, "What are you going to do—What are you looking for?" I told him he'd better watch out because I was strong . . . [but, he] was just laughing. I told him to be careful, "Your wife is Jewish, don't do anything foolish." He was really stealing a lot of valuable suitcases, but he was, he had a lot of suitcase—He was a robber. Four or five deaf were with him together in this. I don't know where they took all the stuff that they stole. But this is what I could remember of him and his gang.

Labor Brigade and Bergen-Belsen

I received my induction notice and I went to . . . a labor camp. Many, many of us were there. We had to make a trip to Budapest [where] they gave us a medical examination. They denied that I was deaf. They said that I could hear and that I was just pretending. The doctor nevertheless gave me a certificate. . . . I escaped constantly [After several episodes of escape and rearrest], I couldn't find any safe place In the Deaf Mute Institute in Mexico Street, there were many, many of us. I thought there I would be lucky and nobody would bother me. Early in the morning, there was a raid. They surrounded the ghetto and they took us . . . Judith was there, with her mother The next morning, they put us in wagons and they took us About eighty of us were crammed into a [train] wagon. There was no air, no oxygen, nothing to drink. In ten days slowly we were advancing toward the border. At the border, they gave us something to eat—salted rice. We asked for water. They said, "No, we don't have any." We started the train again—towards Bergen-Belsen. In three days, we arrived at Bergen-Belsen. We were very thirsty Those who could speak German were reading all the signs We were in a concentration camp. We did not know how many people were in the concentration camp. They took everything from us. All of our packages; everything that was with us. They separated the elders from the young ones. Twelve

deaf mutes together—we were together. In the concentration camp, we suffered quite a lot. That was the reality. Somebody was listening secretly to a radio. We listened to Voice of America. We succeeded to hear that the liberation of the Jews was imminent. They took us to Czechoslovakia. One died, of the twelve deaf, in Czechoslovakia. Klein Lajos died on the train. Ten of us remained, survived. We didn't go any further. We stopped there. There was a lot of bombing, air raids. That train wagon toppled over. The American troops liberated us . . . There were other pockets of resistance. They still were fighting.

Liberation from Bergen-Belsen.

I was very very skinny, I was just skin and bones. Slowly, slowly I was starting to recuperate. The American doctors were helping me. I was fortified some. The American soldiers left and the English



Miklos Klein upon his return from the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, 1945. Courtesy of Miklos Klein, Budapest.

soldiers came. And then the next wave was the Russian soldiers who took charge The Russian said, "What are you doing now? You cannot stay here. Go home. Don't stay here." Among the ten deaf, two died, eight returned home. Under the Russian flag we arrived home. It took us quite a while for the journey, about twelve days, and when we arrived in Budapest, we saw the horrible state of affairs in Budapest.

