

## Is Brotherhood Powerful?

### Male Mutual Assistance in the Slave Labor Camp of Markstädt

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## Abstract

Shawn Gumbleton: Is Brotherhood Powerful? Male Mutual Assistance in the Slave Labor Camp of Markstädt

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The existence of male mutual assistance within the Nazis' concentration camps is often not acknowledged or misunderstood. Most prior studies have assumed a universal, femininely gendered concept of mutual assistance which men could not fully live up to. However, research into the slave labor camp of Markstädt, an almost exclusively male camp, shows extensive evidence of mutual assistance. One hundred twenty-five videotaped interviews of the Shoah Foundation's Visual History Archive were viewed for this project, and while the constraints of the interviews' structure often did not result in a full sharing of participants' history, mutual assistance is seen to be as equally important to men as it was to women. The strict discipline enforced by the camp's Jewish elder impeded the formation of mutual assistance, but men shared their friendships and partnerships willingly, although not in traditional feminine terms.

To Lydia Cuffman, Sara Janes, and Jen Kosmin, who helped keep me sane during the writing of this.

The experiences of Jewish prisoners within the Nazi concentration camps is certainly a depressing subject, which is commonly thought of as revolving primarily around work, beatings, starvation and murder. Yet to study only these phenomena is to complete the task of dehumanization begun by the Nazis, for actions that we can recognize as human occasionally shone within the camps as well. Prisoners were not nameless soulless shells, but rather craftsmen, merchants, husbands, wives, children and friends. One of the ways that especially this last category can be examined is through the study of mutual assistance groups.

Mutual assistance groups within concentration camps were only possible under “relatively predictable and stable conditions,” according to Shamaï Davidson, one of the first researchers of the phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that those in more trying situations lacked physical capability either to move about or to socialize, or that exhaustion, the lack of food, and an understandable general sense of paranoia and despair impeded prisoners’ cooperation and led instead to a desperate struggle for resources. When mutual assistance groups did form, members worked together to alleviate both the physical and psychological dangers of the camps, and generally focused on the acquisition and sharing of food, and the provision of social contact within what was otherwise a world of strangers. Prisoners most often chose to support each other in pairs of close friendships, but others sometimes joined even larger groups.<sup>2</sup> Both men and women engaged in mutual assistance groups of various sizes, but exactly how they did so is still a matter of some confusion and controversy, which I hope I can begin to clarify

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<sup>1</sup> Davidson, Shamaï. “Group Formation and its Significance in the Nazi Concentration Camps. *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences*, Vol. 22 No. 1-2 (1985). P. 41-50.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

through research of men's and women's behavior. For now, I focus on men, for their role in mutual assistance has received the least attention. Furthermore, I have chosen to examine men's formation of mutual assistance groups specifically within Markstädt, a slave labor camp belonging to what was known as "Organization Schmelt," a network of slave labor camps run during the war in occupied Poland.

### Historiography

Early studies of individual camps more often focused on the processes of domination and extermination, and the structure and hierarchy of the political system that ran the camps. Eugen Kogon's *The Theory and Practice of Hell: the German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them* (1950), while an extraordinary book, is, above all else, an explanation of concentration camps as a means of understanding Nazi politics, and as such is occupied with the policies of and rationales behind "perpetrators" of the Third Reich's crimes, rather than their victims. Victims, although present throughout the book, remain in the background and only one chapter deals with their psychology. Moreover, Jews are the special focus of only one chapter, as they were only a minority among the inmates in Kogon's camp, Buchenwald.<sup>3</sup>

Over time scholarly camp analyses have become more varied and nuanced, leading to case studies of individual labor camps, the Jewish prisoners inside them, and their daily lives. Hermann Langbein's *People in Auschwitz* (1972) broke ground by showing how people within Auschwitz made friends, cooperated, resisted and struggled

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<sup>3</sup> Eugen Kogon, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: the German Concentration Camps and the System Behind Them*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950).

to survive. Langbein purposely treated the subjects of his book as individuals, and not as mere cogs in a simple totalitarian machine.

And as the practice of professional, academic history turns more social, psychological, and cultural, the psychological and sociocultural analysis of Holocaust victims has followed. Nechama Tec has written books such as *Defiance* (1993), which is about the formation of the Bielski partisan group during World War II, and its inner workings, and *Resilience and Courage* (2003), which examines the different ways that male and female Jews were treated and responded to their persecution, without succumbing to oversimplification based on stereotyped gender behavior. Lawrence Langer wrote *Holocaust Testimonies: the Ruins of Memory* (1991), which above all else is about the loss of not only victims' families and friends, but also their connection to the world the rest of us inhabit. Simultaneously, scholarly awareness of the forced labor camps has increased. Felicja Karay has written on Skarzysko-Kamienna and Hasag-Leipzig, two camps run for the German industrial giant Hasag.<sup>4</sup> Bella Gutterman has written a case study of the Gross-Rosen camp network.<sup>5</sup> Both Karay and Gutterman incorporate everyday Jewish life into their case studies, with emphasis on prisoner relations and the formation and dissolution of mutual assistance groups. And Christopher R. Browning has recently written an in-depth case study on the prisoners of the Starachowice labor camps, and how the social developments within the prisoner

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<sup>4</sup> Respectively, *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarzysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996) and *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labor Camp For Women: The Struggle for Survival, Told by the Women and Their Poetry* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

community there differed from other labor camps.<sup>6</sup> All these works help us to better understand the dynamics of Jewish prisoner communities under the Nazis, but none of them focuses on the formation of mutual assistance groups among the prisoners. These groundbreaking studies nevertheless enable us to better understand the agency of individual prisoners, their survival strategies, and their needs for community.

Very little historiography exists on Organization Schmelt in any language. The University of Wrocław's Alfred Konieczny has written the most, with a few articles in both German and Polish.<sup>7</sup> As documentation on Organization Schmelt is largely missing, both Bella Gutterman and Sybille Steinbacher have incorporated Konieczny's research, alongside their own archival research, into their own administrative and regional case studies, neither of which focuses on Organization Schmelt.<sup>8</sup> For both authors, Organization Schmelt provides important background information, but is not the subject. Due to perceived lack of sources, Organization Schmelt has never been the focus of a book-length dedicated study, and its existence is nearly unknown, being overshadowed by such networks of concentration camps as Auschwitz and Gross-Rosen, as well as by the death camps.

### Mutual Assistance Groups and Their Historiography

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<sup>6</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Alfred Konieczny, "Die Zwangsarbeit der Juden in Schlesien im Rahmen der 'Organisation Schmelt,'" *Beiträge zur Nationalsozialistischen Gesundheit und Sozialpolitik: Sozialpolitik und Judenvernichtung, Gibt es eine Ökonomie der Endlösung* (1983), vol. 5; Alfred Konieczny, "Organizacja Schmelt" i jej obozy pracy dla Żydów na Śląsku w latach 1940-1944 (Wałbrzych: Państwowe Muzeum Gross-Rosen, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2008; Sybille Steinbacher, "Musterstadt" Auschwitz: Germanisierungspolitik und Judenmord in Ostoberschlesien. Munich: K. G. Saur, 2000.

In the study of mutual assistance groups, one common assertion is that women were “better” equipped or more inclined than men to form and maintain mutual assistance groups, through either a higher essential or socially encouraged capacity for sharing, or being more adaptable to conditions or more naturally family-oriented than men. My argument takes issue with this view; I believe men engaged in partnerships and friendships just as often as women, but were and are less socially encouraged to talk about them. When they do, they tend to use differently gendered descriptors, replacing “sharing and caring” with “partnerships and contacts.”

It is of course important to explore the differences between men and women in order to understand both. Joan Ringelheim makes an excellent case for the study of women in the Holocaust as being necessarily separate from that of men. Traditionally men’s experiences were the accepted template, and generalizations about men were often assumed to apply to all victims. Ringelheim reasonably takes strong issue with Lawrence Langer’s view that the elucidation of different reactions to the Holocaust between genders only leads to a vicious game of competitive victimization, arguing instead that while “the Holocaust is defined by death,” research into it can still tell us valuable truths about the lives of men and women who experienced it.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman take a moderate line towards the issue in their co-edited book *Women in the Holocaust*, reasoning that while Jewish women and men occupied different social spheres in both West and East Europe, and that some difference in their reactions

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<sup>9</sup> Joan Ringelheim, “The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust,” and Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” both from Ofer, Dalia, and Weitzman, Lenore J., eds. *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 340-350 and 351-363.



to the Holocaust were inevitable, this does not mean “some victims should be praised for their coping skills (or blamed for their lack of them).” Likewise, they point to Gisela Bock’s critique that as we study gender differences, we must keep our eyes fresh to notice similarities between the genders as well, even when we might not expect them.<sup>10</sup>

Another balanced view on female and male mutual assistance groups is Jane Caplan’s, from her recent co-edited volume *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*. In her chapter entitled “Gender and the Concentration Camps,” she agrees that women seemed to “more often” form closer bonds than men did, but recognizes that this may only be a result of women being “more able to conjure up the life-sustaining quality of these friendships, as well as having recourse to an unselfconscious imagery of family that came less easily to men.” Caplan recognizes that men may appear “more ambivalent” about the masculine qualities of independence and comradeship, and warns against the automatic usage of “intimacy” as an exclusively female trait, as men were frequently dependent on one another in the camps.<sup>11</sup>

Sadly, other academics do not always follow the moderate and qualified line that the above historians walk. Sybil Milton’s “Women’s Survival Skills” is instead an unabashed celebration of feminine superiority in the realm of survival, sparing no chance to quote female survivors who called men “unprincipled egoists” and took up broom and

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<sup>10</sup> Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, “Introduction.” Ofer, Dalia, and Weitzman, Lenore J., eds. *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

<sup>11</sup> Jane Caplan, “Gender in the Concentration Camps,” Jane Caplan and Nicholas Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 94.

dustpan to fight the danger of uncleanness, while men apparently wallowed in the mud.<sup>12</sup>

Judith Tydor Baumel writes in her book *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* that Shamai Davidson, who in his research on mutual assistance groups catalogs such important factors as childhood and ghetto relationships and cultural backgrounds, fails to include gender as a criterion of analysis.<sup>13</sup> For her part, Baumel analyzes the experiences of the *Zehnerschaft*, a mostly ten-person group of mutual assistance that had its roots among female prisoners of the Plaszow labor camp, and survived successive transfers to Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen intact. They came from the same area of Poland, Galicia, were mostly educated in the Beth Jacob (Orthodox) religious school system, and had family ties.<sup>14</sup> The *Zehnerschaft* was a family-type unit, with mother figures and daughter figures.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, it is difficult if not impossible to imagine men as either mother or daughter figures, which is a reason why the automatic imposition of female qualities and categories upon members of mutual assistance groups serves to excommunicate men from this realm, and should be avoided. Stranger is her refusal to compare the *Zehnerschaft* to Davidson's own example, a group of six Hungarian Jews in Buchenwald. Instead of a mother figure, they had a father figure twice their age, who implemented such commandments as "thou shalt not speak of food

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<sup>12</sup> Sybil Milton, "Women's Survival Skills," In *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives in Interpretation*, 3rd edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Baumel 72-3.

<sup>14</sup> Baumel, 73.

<sup>15</sup> Baumel, 87.

or invoke the image of food,”<sup>16</sup> “thou shalt not speak of family members” or “(family) festivals,”<sup>17</sup> and “thou shalt not be deprived of your human dignity; you are not a number, you are a human being.”<sup>18</sup> I cannot see much difference between Davidson’s and Baumel’s parental examples.

Nonetheless, Baumel rejects Milton’s explicit theory that women helped each other while men only competed.<sup>19</sup> In her view, the idea that men and women are divided “into two conceptually independent classes” is antifeminist. However, Baumel does state that women, while not holding a monopoly on what she terms “sharing and caring,” were socially encouraged to perform such acts and therefore had greater potential to form mutual assistance groups in crisis situations. Implicit in that encouragement of women’s potential is the idea that women formed such groups quicker and with more zeal than men, as “the sharing factor . . . had its roots in pre-crisis feminine behavior patterns.”<sup>20</sup> This seems to be little different in substance from Milton’s argument, despite the obvious differences in tone and complete lack of triumphalism in Baumel’s case. The problem still lies in the way in which mutual assistance groups are described and thought of: femininely gendered terms. While women certainly seem to be more readily able to “share and care,” it is important to remember that mutual assistance and cooperation do not depend solely on the transfer of pre-Holocaust familial roles and habits of emotional

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<sup>16</sup> Likely to avoid grumblings and teasings about food. An interesting contrast to Milton, who relies solely upon women’s testimony that only they refrained from talking overmuch about fantasies, while men wholeheartedly engaged in them.

<sup>17</sup> Preventing homesickness.

<sup>18</sup> Self-explanatory.

<sup>19</sup> Baumel, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

bonds, but also that pragmatism and calculation can lead to mutual assistance which in turn can result in emotional bonding.

Felicja Karay is of the opinion that women had intrinsic strengths that men lacked within the camps. “Women suffered less from hunger, kept themselves as clean and adequately clothed as possible, and were more likely to be able to get along with those in authority at whatever level.”<sup>21</sup> These theories do not appear completely airtight, however. Hunger can be explained by the comparatively more strenuous labor men were forced to perform, as well as the need for their larger bodies for more nourishment. In numerous testimonies men clearly state their awareness of the need for cleanliness and good hygiene within the camp environment. That women might have been able to “get along with those in authority” is hardly a good thing when one thinks of informants or kapos, and in any case men and women often were equally all *too* adaptable, choosing to work for the Nazi-created hierarchies instead of with each other.

Moreover, examples of women failing to behave according to the stereotypical gender role of “sharing and caring” are all too plentiful. For example, in her book *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labor Camp for Women*, Karay details the bitter infighting between women of Russian, Polish, Jewish, Czech, Ukrainian, French, and other ethnicities. Polish prominents protested camp commandant Wolfgang Plaul’s decision to promote a few Jewish women into kitchen positions, which was seen as the territory of the Polish inmates. Plaul, who held absolute power, inexplicably backed down and replaced the Jewish women with Poles. Karay insightfully reads this as a ploy by Plaul to set the Polish contingent up for a fall in the eyes of their Häftlinge cohort by facilitating their making themselves into a group to be envied and distrusted by virtue of their

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<sup>21</sup> Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, 98.

prominence.<sup>22</sup> Whether the result of Plaul's cynical calculations or not, Polish women as a contingent were hated in the camp. Irena Pelka-Senko, a Polish survivor, remembers Russian women calling her and other Polish women the "bitches" and "masters" of the camp. Ukrainian women would boast to Poles of their "boys," threatening that personal retaliations would come with liberation by the Red Army.<sup>23</sup>

Despite this account of hostility between women based on ethnicity, ethnic rivalries certainly did not occur only among women, as we will see when we turn to the slave labor camp Markstädt, the focus of this essay. Indeed, Western Jews sent to Markstädt suffered greatly due to their lack of ability to communicate with the Polish Jews who dominated the camp. But Hasag-Leipzig's outbreak of ethnic Realpolitik serves to remind us that if women can fall short of the moral pedestal some prefer to put them on, then men deserve their own look – not to compete in the game of competitive victimization that Langer is so understandably wary of, but because nobody as yet has done research into their formations of mutual assistance groups.

One of the reasons that scholars have concluded that men did not partake in mutual assistance groups is the way that male prisoners' physical appearances appeared to their female counterparts, who saw the physical condition of men as being worse than theirs. Numerous Jewish women have commented on the pitiful sight of Jewish men in the camps. Often far from mirrors and their minds deadened by starvation, work and mental abuse, prisoners of both sexes sometimes had difficulty comprehending their own physical suffering as it would be seen from outside. This could result in shock from seeing another prisoner in terrible condition. Women and men, often fenced away from

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<sup>22</sup> Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig*, 117-118.

<sup>23</sup> Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig*, 119.

each other and forbidden to meet, usually saw each other only rarely. These sudden sights of men, unalloyed by frequent viewings of the progression of degradation, may have intensified the shock felt by women seeing men.

These women were outside the experience of men, looking in. During pre-war Jewish life, men held the top positions in society, as they did in most places across the globe. Here, however, they had fallen as low as the women watching, a farther fall in station relative to the female watchers. Numerous female testimonies show that the overwhelming belief among female survivors was that the conditions faced by men were worse than those faced by themselves. Harder manual labor and a loss in social stature from their previous heights combined, most women felt, in men's more painful status.

But gender itself is not a determinant of the formation of mutual assistance groups. Since the claim that women were more suited to forming them is a general one that speaks of all women and all men, it can be addressed with a case study of men from any camp, not just the death camps, labor camps or Markstädt in particular. We have the inspirational stories of Primo Levi in his memoirs to show us that men indeed did cooperate and form fast friendships in Birkenau, as did men in Markstädt.<sup>24</sup> Care must be taken to avoid the use of gendered language when discussing mutual assistance groups, as "sharing and caring," so often overused in these discussions, are qualities that women would be more eager to attribute to themselves than men. Men might prefer terms such as partnerships and friendships. Indeed, one argument of this study based on individual testimonies is that men tend toward their own unique vocabularies and concepts of mutual assistance when narrating their experiences in Markstädt.

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<sup>24</sup> Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996, orig. 1958), 119-122, 155.

## A Few Notes on Methodology

Raul Hilberg once stated that the Nazi planning and policies of the Holocaust cannot be determined primarily through the memories of its survivors, and that official documents must instead be used.<sup>25</sup> He was excoriated for this in the Israeli press, but he was correct: history cannot be effectively researched through the voices of those who were not present. Similarly, the lives of survivors within the concentration camps cannot be understood solely through the use of German or Allied documents. One must ask those who were there, or interpret their words, in order to gain a clear understanding of their histories.

But this approach raises a long and often angrily debated question about the use of testimony: *can* testimony from camp survivors impart an accurate understanding of what they experienced? The survivor Elie Wiesel and other figures who have weighed in on the subject, such as director of the film *Shoah* Claude Lanzmann, say no, although they do so for different reasons. Wiesel has said “There are really neither words nor means to capture the totality of the event . . . In spite of the testimonies, memoirs and superhuman efforts of survivors, we will never know how Auschwitz and Treblinka were possible – for the killers *as well as the victims* (italics mine).”<sup>26</sup> Gary Weissman, drawing on Edward T. Linenthal’s *Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America’s Holocaust Museum*, opines that Wiesel prefers to think of the Holocaust as a “sacred mystery” that

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<sup>25</sup> Browning, *Collected Memories*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Elie Wiesel, “A Survivor Remembers Other Survivors of the Shoah,” in *New York Times*, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1985.

can only be remembered, not understood.<sup>27</sup> I agree with Weissman when he says that this is unhelpful to even the layman: “What is remembrance without understanding?”

Lanzmann is less interested in protecting mysteries than he is in condemning attempts to pierce them: “there is an absolute obscenity in the project of understanding . . . there is something that is for me an intellectual scandal: the attempt to understand, historically, as if there were some sort of a genesis of death.”<sup>28</sup> This conception of an unknowable, metaphysical Holocaust is by definition irrational, but one must remember that those who experienced the Holocaust have had little frame of reference of mass genocide to place it in until fairly recently. It does not seem to me insensitive to say that it may be easier for a historian in 2010, with the recent examples of Rwanda, Cambodia, and the Sudan, along with recent renewed research into the Armenian genocide, to place the Holocaust into a larger context of human-perpetrated and human-suffered genocide, than it was for earlier generations for whom the Holocaust was truly a rift in the progression of civilization.

Problematic in the use of testimony are the potential motives of the witness, the researcher, and the process of collecting the testimony. The witness may have difficulties relating the events that took place, because of the intervening passage of time, the incommunicability of the events, the desire to protect one’s good name, and the desire to protect others, to bring up just a few. These problems will return later in the essay.

The researcher can succumb to the temptation to treat Holocaust testimony as containing something inherently redeeming about humanity, as each testimony by

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<sup>27</sup> Gary Weissman, *Fantasies of Witnessing: Postwar Efforts to Understand the Holocaust* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 89-90.

<sup>28</sup> Claude Lanzmann, quoted in A. Colombat, *The Holocaust in French Film* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), 303.



definition ends in individual survival. Zoë Waxman, in her book *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, comments on efforts by previous researchers such as Terrence Des Pres and Martin Gilbert to find something redeeming about humanity within prisoners' survival. Des Pres claims that "for survivors the struggle to live – merely surviving – is rooted in, and a manifestation of, the form-conferring potency of life itself."<sup>29</sup> Gilbert likewise claims that "simply to survive was a victory of the human spirit."<sup>30</sup> Waxman ably contrasts this with other survivors' statements that they experienced nothing that enriched their spirit while in the camps, and that morality within the camps was warped so greatly by everyday individual necessity, that such acts as stealing the food from, or clothes off of the dead was seen as practical while the same acts perpetrated against a living prisoner would be the height of monstrosity.<sup>31</sup>

Waxman's conclusion about the lack of redemptive message to be found in Holocaust testimony is deeply influenced by the writings of Lawrence Langer. Above all else, Langer concerns himself with preserving the tragedy of the Holocaust at its conceptual center. Given the immensity of the Holocaust, this would seem to be a simple matter, but Langer disagrees. Because of their past, survivors come from a "different world" than their friends and family members, and there is a gap between those two

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<sup>29</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 177, quoted in Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* (London: Fontana, 1987) 828, quoted in Zoë Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>31</sup> Waxman, 161.

worlds that cannot be traversed with complete understanding.<sup>32</sup> In the sharing of testimony, Langer sees and deplores the need of some listeners to, instead of grieving, be uplifted through experiencing the lives of people who can easily be seen as living saints or martyrs on the cross of prejudice and modernity. In his eyes, this is “building a monument to hope on the rubble of decay.”<sup>33</sup> His preface to *Holocaust Testimonies: the Ruins of Memory* ends with the words “the Holocaust threatens to be a permanent hole in the ozone layer of history, through which infiltrate the memories of a potentially crippling past. These testimonies remind us how overwhelming, and perhaps insurmountable, is the task of reversing its legacy.”<sup>34</sup> The difficulty of true understanding between the survivor and the listener also leads to potential ostracization of the survivor as the listener, uncomfortable with the dark truth of what he hears, withdraws emotionally from the witness.

Langer’s view seems at first glance similar to Wiesel’s. However, while Wiesel clearly prefers there to be an uncrossable gap between today’s reality and what he sees as the inherent metaphysical mystery of the Holocaust, Langer has no wish for there to be a disconnect between the witness and the listener, and deeply regrets its existence. Hence, Langer’s findings are more easily usable by the historian. Langer’s words make sense: how can one fully understand the tragedy of the Holocaust, by listening to those who have been irreparably wounded by it, and whose frames of reference are skewed by that trauma?

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<sup>32</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), x.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 165.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

I believe that this dilemma is identical, or at the least very similar, to the age-old problem of objectivity in history. Can it be done? Every historian seeks to portray the world objectively, yet has only a single subjective viewpoint to experience it with. Like Xenon's dichotomy paradox, the historian continues to progress towards pure truth through the use of documents, eyewitnessing, and other sources, yet is doomed to never quite reach it. But if the task of writing history is Sisyphean, then one should remember Camus's conclusion that Sisyphus, knowing the impossibility of his task, still performs it proudly.

Prisoners could only write very little while in the camps, as they were subject to mental and physical exhaustion. During those few minutes a day when they had the time and capability to keep records, camp regulations often prohibited them. This leaves only the memories of the survivors as the necessary source. This leads to a new problem: survivors do not make up the majority of prisoners, and as such are not entirely representative of the whole. But the minority survived, and it is these survivor testimonies that must be used. And of that minority, only some have chosen to share their stories, for their own reasons. These reasons include the remembering of perished friends and family members, the need to communicate to the rest of the world the trauma they experienced, the feeling of a duty to bear witness, and others. But of those survivors who have chosen to tell their stories, only a minority speaks of mutual assistance groups within its testimonies. How best to sift through this haphazard pile of testimonies, in order to get a clear picture of the formation of mutual assistance groups in the slave labor camps?

The best solution to this problem is to concentrate on one particular camp, with a large number of survivors who have given testimonies, so that the wider context of the camp can be firmly established. Together with knowledge of the camp culture and internal politics, the stories of the survivors can be analyzed in order to understand how and why mutual assistance groups were formed. To that end, I have conducted archival research on testimonies from survivors of one of the larger camps operated by Albrecht Schmelt's *Organisation Schmelt*, Markstädt.

The Markstädt survivor Abraham Kimmelman was interviewed by David Boder, a psychologist from the Illinois Institute of Technology, in 1946. The series of seventy interviews that Boder conducted comprise the first instance of electronic recording of Holocaust witness testimony, and have subsequently been archived on the IIT site. Excerpts have been published in a written collection entitled *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival*.<sup>35</sup> The title, chosen to represent the immediate postwar timing of the interviews, implies a certain purity of perspective, as the later years of foggy memory and shaping of memory by public media had not yet occurred. However, Christopher R. Browning has in his book *Collected Memories* taken some issue with the perception that “earlier” automatically equals “better,” as the more general context of the events and Holocaust consciousness had not yet formed within the witnesses’ understanding of what had happened to them, and certain emotional traumas had not yet become possible to communicate. Furthermore, he found in his research into the slave labor camps in Starachowice that his expectations that survivors’ memories would

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<sup>35</sup> Donald L Niewyk, ed. *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

coalesce into geographically determined group, communal memories were happily unfulfilled.<sup>36</sup> But one should not forget that later testimonies can still be subject to self-censorship. As a survivor grows older and more distance from the Holocaust is gained, he or she (if lucky) amasses more loved ones, and more self-esteem, which that survivor will likely feel a need to protect in later life. Procedural differences in the collection of testimony matter as well, as we will see. Kimmelman's Markstädt testimony is marked by his extreme yet understandable disillusionment over Jewish inhumanity within the camp, and by his bleak opinion of modern psychology in its claim to a progressively greater understanding of humanity's thought processes. Kimmelman's information on how Markstädt was internally administered is a very helpful supplement to my prime source of data, the collection of videotaped testimonies of the University of Southern California's Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education.

Founded in 1994 by Steven Spielberg, and now administrated by the University of Southern California, the Shoah Foundation's goal was to tape and store as many survivor testimonies as possible. As of this writing, the Shoah Foundation now holds over 50,000 taped interviews from across the world. In the Shoah Foundation's collected interviews, survivors do not always speak about friendship, resource sharing, or mutual assistance groups. But those who do, either willingly or inadvertently reveal the importance placed upon them. One of the strengths of being able to watch taped interviews is the access to non-verbal communication it affords. As I argue that men were just as likely to engage in mutual assistance groups, yet less willing to talk about them than women in the post-war public sphere, watching what survivors do is just as important as the words they say. Sudden pauses, tears, crying, smiles, and laughter are all important signs of how a subject

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<sup>36</sup> Browning, *Collected Memories*, 47.

feels, and changes in demeanor while discussing certain subjects also indicates the depth of emotion the subject feels at that moment, no matter his or her words. The visual aspect is very helpful, leading one to conclusions that otherwise may not have been apparent.

Use of the Visual History Archive entails the above advantage but also brings some difficulties. Every Visual History Archive interviewer was trained by the Shoah Foundation in the practice of interviewing, and additionally was provided with a prescribed interview structure and script of questions usable for organizing the thoughts of the witness. Interviewers were encouraged to stick to the prescribed structure and list of topics deemed most important by the organizers. This rigid format guided the testimonies into a repeated narrative of a happy life in pre-war Poland, the horrors of the Holocaust, eventual liberation, and finally the triumphal reconstruction of life and renewal of family and friends. Each interview ends with a rather celebratory family group session in which family members and friends praise the survivor for the courage to survive and thank him or her for sharing the story, which is often called “inspirational.” Somewhere, Lawrence Langer is punching a wall.

In contrast, the Fortunoff Archive at Yale took a different method towards testimony: rather than use a standard list of questions as those working with the Shoah Foundation did, each survivor was encouraged to tell “his or her own story.” Those running the Fortunoff Archive are very clear on where the mastery of life story lays: with the eyewitness.

The Archive's interviewing methodology stresses the leadership role of the witness in structuring and telling his or her own story. Questions are primarily

used to ascertain time and place, or elicit additional information about topics already mentioned, with an emphasis on open-ended questions that give the initiative to the witness. *The witnesses are the experts in their own life story*, and the interviewers are there to listen, to learn, and to clarify.<sup>37</sup> (italics mine)

The Shoah Foundation's methodology has been a cause for concern for many historians. Christopher Browning expresses his frustration with "interventionist interviewers" at the beginning of his book on Starachowice, but does add that on occasion these interviewers were able to convince witnesses to expand on relevant and helpful topics when the witness would otherwise have skipped to the next event. This was a double-edged sword however, as such helpful occurrences in interviews were sadly weighed out by the "shutting down" of fruitful digressions into potentially interesting topics.<sup>38</sup>

While Browning's issues with the VHA are generally procedural and practical, Annette Wieviorka's are ideological, as she feels that testimony should only be an individual process, without interference. In her book *The Era of the Witness*, Wieviorka decries what she sees as the VHA's mass production of Holocaust witness testimony, saying that the goal is to establish a cookie-cutter and triumphant narrative of Holocaust survivors. This does not allow survivors the opportunity to express their feelings about their own lives, being instead in thrall to the VHA's own agenda. "The survivor has been replaced by a concept, that of transmission."<sup>39</sup> This goal is faulty, says Wieviorka, because it is impossible to tell the story of the Holocaust through the amassing of

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<sup>37</sup> Fortunoff Archive. <http://www.library.yale.edu/testimonies/about/index.html> (Accessed March 7<sup>th</sup>, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Christopher Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*. (manuscript) (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010).

<sup>39</sup> Annette Vieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, Translated by Jared Stark (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2006), 111.

individual testimonies, which generally contain little self-analysis or awareness of the larger whole.<sup>40</sup>

The standardized VHA narrative follows Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* in that both have a "happy ending," according to Wieviorka. This goes hand in hand with what she refers to as the "Americanization of the Holocaust," a mass-produced endeavor underwritten by big business with the aim of making the Holocaust an endless source of inspirational stories for American consumption.<sup>41</sup> She likens the Fortunoff Archive, her avowed favorite in an invented competition between archives that need not exist, to "a small grocer threatened with disappearance by the superstores, or like a small tailor competing with a large clothing manufacturer."<sup>42</sup> Holocaust survivors who choose to film their testimony for the VHA are thus likened to lumpenproletariat shoppers at Wal-Mart. She concludes her section on the VHA and its testimonies with the words "But above all, Steven Spielberg's fame spills over onto them and gives them the impression that they are basking in the light of his celebrity."<sup>43</sup>

What to say about this? First, I sincerely doubt that any survivor's motivation to tell his or her story in front of family and friends, about the worst period of his or her life, has much to do with a desire to ride Steven Spielberg's coattails. The Holocaust is much more famous than Spielberg. Second, I believe that Wieviorka is sublimating her own inner complaints about American life and culture in her writing. Third, she is right, but to only an extent: the VHA is imperfect. Does that mean we should divorce ourselves

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 113.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 117.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 125.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.



from the use of it on moral grounds, because it has an agenda which manifests itself in the form of an established narrative? No. The use of the VHA is problematic, but it is hardly the first source whose intentions must be carefully deconstructed and taken into account. The sheer number of testimonies makes its use worthwhile, even if every single testimony may not discuss the topic we are interested in researching, and even if we would ourselves have organized things differently.

Witness testimony is difficult to use, but published official documents on prisoner life are rare. Objective truth may be unreachable through stories subjectively told, but the belief in an objective truth was laid aside by most historians decades ago, and the attempt is still noble and worth the effort today. Care needs to be taken to confront the prejudices within the researcher, the witness and the organizers of testimony, but this can be done and should be done, for the survivors' own voices are necessary to listen to, no matter the attendant difficulties.

When one types Markstädt into the VHA archive's search engine, 234 results are returned. Across all languages, 218 of those are male and 16 are female. 166 are in English. Sadly, a sizable minority of these interviews (roughly 25%) deal only with deportations to Fünfteichen, Markstädt's successor camp. But even after these are subtracted from the list, the researcher is left with 125 English-language interviews that contain substantive information on Markstädt, a healthy number for purposes of analysis.

Markstädt, a Zwangsarbeitslager of Organization Schmelt

“Organization Schmelt” was the first network of Jewish slave labor camps in occupied Poland during the Second World War, run by the Special Plenipotentiary of the SS-Reichsführer and SS and Police Commander for Labor of Non-German Nationals in Upper Silesia.<sup>44</sup> This Special Plenipotentiary was SS-Oberführer Albrecht Schmelt, who was given supreme power over Jewish labor in Upper Silesia by the order of Heinrich Himmler on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1940.<sup>45</sup> Schmelt was the police chief of Breslau from July 5<sup>th</sup> 1934, which gave him early lessons in the Nazi procedures of anti-Jewish persecution and likely helped make him a natural for his new role.<sup>46</sup> Noteworthy was the fact that Albrecht Schmelt and his fief were directly under the command of Himmler, and were otherwise independent of the SS hierarchy in occupied Poland or the General Government. This unusual power would even extend to Schmelt’s ability to stop Auschwitz-bound trains of Western European Jews that traveled through his territory and have work-capable Jews taken off. Schmelt’s new Jews would then be placed into his forced labor camps instead of sent to Auschwitz for later selection or death. Schmelt committed suicide in May 1945.

The camps were centered within the newly-annexed region of Upper East Silesia, but eventually expanded into parts of Lower Silesia and the Sudetenland. Local councils of Jews, led by Jewish elder Moshe Merin, decided who among their population would enter into the Schmelt system. In some cases, volunteers were asked for, and were promised better living conditions than in the ghettos.<sup>47</sup> German business clients then

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<sup>44</sup> “*Sonderbeauftragten des Reichsführers SS für den fremdvölkischen Arbeitseinsatz in Oberschlesien*”

<sup>45</sup> Steinbacher 138-9.

<sup>46</sup> Gutterman, 44., Ludwigsburg B 162/16817 pg 4.

<sup>47</sup> Sam Blumenfeld, VHA interview #56.

rented their bodies and labor directly from Schmelt's organization itself, paying Schmelt for each worker.<sup>48</sup> These clients generally were either associated with the construction of the Reichsautobahn or with war industries. In contrast to many systems of Nazi camps, within Organization Schmelt and the forced labor camps of East Upper Silesia as a whole, the pragmatic concerns of economic gain and wartime production for Germany's armed forces took precedence over ideological, anti-Semitic ones.<sup>49</sup>

But by early 1943, the drive from Berlin, especially by Heinrich Himmler, to end the too-slow process of gradual "destruction through labor," where Jewish labor was specifically planned to be "in the true meaning of the word, exhaustive," was partially successful. This policy change to what Christopher R. Browning calls the immediate "destruction *of* labor," instead of their economic exploitation, became too strong for local interests and the armaments industry to resist.<sup>50</sup> Schmelt's camps were born before the Final Solution, when the Nazi plan for Europe's Jews was still one of expulsion. As the momentum behind the Final Solution grew, Organization Schmelt was greatly affected, and Albrecht Schmelt's downfall began. Himmler ordered what he considered the less important camps (those that did not work directly to produce armaments or ammunition, instead concentrating on items no "true" soldier needed, such as uniforms and boots)<sup>51</sup> to be shut down, while the camps he deemed necessary for the war effort were to be absorbed into the camp networks of Gross-Rosen and Auschwitz, SS concentration

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<sup>48</sup> Bella Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life: Jewish Forced Labor and Survival in the Gross-Rosen Camp System, 1940-1945* (New York: Berghahn, 2008), 44-46.

<sup>49</sup> Steinbacher, 140-1.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher R. Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

camps that had labor components but whose primary raison d'être was not productive labor.<sup>52</sup> During this process, Organization Schmelt was dismantled.

The conditions within concentration camps, death camps, and labor camps were varying shades of brutal, but resources for daily survival were badly lacking in all three. Food was scarce, and prisoners in the concentration and labor camps and those who survived selections at the death camps were worked far beyond the sustenance provided by their allotted daily rations of food. The normal ration within Schmelt's labor camps was a watery bowl of soup and a chunk of bread that was meant to last the entire day, although workers had great difficulty in rationing this food. More commonly, the whole piece of bread would be eaten quickly, when not being traded for cigarettes or other goods available either legally or illegally within the camp. The food was given out in the evening, after work was completed for the day. "Breakfast" was simply ersatz coffee before work.<sup>53</sup> As a result, workers were in a constant state of starvation. Prisoners were offered little clothing, and what they did have was frequently little beyond rags. Shoes were wooden and ill-fitting, resulting in foot wounds that made walking and working painful, and frequently became infected. Sanitation was lacking. Along with other forms of physical deprivation and beatings, physical survival was terribly difficult for prisoners.

Those Jews who survived selections felt alone and abandoned, with their families having been already murdered in their stead. The new company of strangers from different areas of Europe, speaking different languages, who seemed alternately dead inside, or savagely self-interested, or who socialized only with those prisoners they already knew, were no replacement for a new prisoner's friends and family from home.

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<sup>52</sup> Ludwigsburg B162/16817, pg 16.

<sup>53</sup> Zigmund Bochenek, VHA interview #1585.

And those who had volunteered or been taken from their families and newly arrived in the forced labor camps that made up Organization Schmelt were scarcely better off. Visits home were few even in the beginning, and eventually became forbidden.<sup>54</sup> Workers in the Schmelt camps as well as those in other camps needed to socialize, to feel that they were cared for.

Prisoners would form mutual assistance groups – friends, alliances, sharing cooperatives – in order to survive. Numerous survivor testimonies describe the necessity of such groups for survival. The emphasis is often on sharing and distribution of food, but the social and emotional benefit created by being in the company of friends who cared for one’s well-being could also persuade one to persevere rather than surrender to the fate of the Musselman.

Markstädt was a forced labor camp about 30 kilometers east of Breslau, and was likely built in late 1941 or early 1942.<sup>55</sup> Markstädt held somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 people from all over Poland.<sup>56</sup> In addition to Polish Jews, Organization Schmelt received transfers of Jews from the Netherlands and Belgium, some of whom were sent to Markstädt.<sup>57</sup> Nearly all were men, alongside a small minority of roughly one hundred twenty women. The languages spoken by prisoners were primarily Polish and Yiddish, although all learned German at Markstädt to some extent, some of them becoming

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<sup>54</sup> Ann Kirschner, *Sala’s Gift: My Mother’s Holocaust Story*. New York: Free Press, 2006.

<sup>55</sup> Sam Blumenfeld, VHA interview #18894.

<sup>56</sup> Binem Altman, VHA interview #35973. The exact number is hard to determine, based on fluctuations of prisoners. Some prisoners were not entirely sure of the dates they were there. Three to four thousand is a composite number reached by averaging the counts of those survivors who seemed to remember the best and stayed the longest.

<sup>57</sup> Lola Herz, VHA interview 28786.

fluent.<sup>58</sup> Prisoners there worked for a variety of firms, including Berthawerk AG, a subsidiary of Krupp.<sup>59</sup> At Markstädt, prisoners built an armaments factory for Krupp that would produce anti-aircraft guns. This entailed hard manual labor -- pouring concrete, breaking and carrying rocks, and similar activities.<sup>60</sup> In addition to construction of the factory itself, Jewish workers built, improved and maintained the rail system that connected Markstädt to industrial suppliers and other camps.<sup>61</sup> Jewish workers were assigned to twelve-hour shifts with sometimes one-hour walking times from their barracks. The camp was closed in January or February of 1944, with its work-capable (*arbeitsfähig*) laborers transferred to the nearby *Arbeitslager* Fünfteichen, built with labor from Markstädt, and under the central control of the *Konzentrationslager* Gross-Rosen system. Those who were not deemed work-capable at Markstädt's final selection were sent on a "sick transport" instead to Ludwigsdorf, a veritable death sentence since they were assigned to work with industrial chemicals involved in the manufacture of ammunition, an especially and infamously lethal assignment. These prisoners were fed even less than before, another indication of the turnover through death that was planned.<sup>62</sup> Jewish prisoners who went from Markstädt to Fünfteichen all reported much more stringent rules and oppression in Fünfteichen, a camp controlled and guarded

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<sup>58</sup> Lola Herz, VHA interview 28786.

<sup>59</sup> Gutterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life*, 67.

<sup>60</sup> Sam Blumenfeld, VHA interview 18894. The VHA's own site says that prisoners were contracted out to the following organizations and firms: Krupp; Berthawerk AG; Grün u. Bilfinger AG; Sauerstoffwerk (IG); Henkel u. Sohn; Borsigwerke; Holzmann AG; Mathies AG; Karl Bartel; Beth of Lübeck; Esser, Goebel, Gottwald, Hess Hutta, Kaufmann, Kreutz u. Lesch, Paul u. Klomb; Prestel, Speer, Wenland, Christoph u. Unmack AG; Glatzer Bau-Ring; Baustelle Dyhernfurth; Arge (Arbeitsgemeinschaft) in Breslau; Wayss u. Freytag; Bassow oder Barow, Breuer, Förster, Goetz Grünberg, Huber, Isert, Heinrich Keller, Kleiber, Meerlaender, Julius Schalhorn (Berlin), Urbanski; and Zweibel u. Knobel.

<sup>61</sup> Jacob Birnbaum, VHA interview # 10387.

<sup>62</sup> Zigmund Bochenek, VHA interview #1585.

directly by SS personnel. This difference in administration makes Markstädt a useful camp for analysis, as survivors' accounts of both camps may be contrasted at a later date to obtain a better understanding of how the comparatively better conditions in the Schmelt camps may have played a role in formation of mutual assistance groups.

### The Man at the Top

Camps were run this way. There was the German administration. And the Kommandant... and the, you know, the watchmen. That was the Germans – that was *outside* the camp. You know, they were usually *attached* to the camp. But the main thing was counting. You see. So the Judenälteste was responsible for the counting. How many people got to work, how many people died, you know, that [sort of] accounting.<sup>63</sup>

The kapo system of concentration camp administration pitted prisoners against one another through the granting of positions of authority and special privileges to a select few. The expectation was that a prisoner's jealous guarding of his privileges combined with his new political rank would result in the prisoners' cruel self-policing. This in turn would mean less work for administrative staff, and the lack of prisoner unity created by dividing prisoners against one another meant there would be less of a chance of revolt. The Nazis were largely successful in meeting this goal,<sup>64</sup> and the kapo system was mirrored across every "concentration camp" they operated, from the true original "Ka-zets" (*Konzentrationslager*) of the 1930s to the later vast expansion of the camp system, including extermination camps and the slave labor camps. In the exclusively

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<sup>63</sup> Jacob Birnbaum, VHA interview #10387.

<sup>64</sup> I say they were "largely successful" only for accuracy's sake; stories of pleasant, helpful kapos do exist but only do so in a tiny minority.

Jewish slave labor camps administrated by Organization Schmelt, each camp was run on the inside by a head kapo known as the *Judenälteste*<sup>65</sup>, or “Jewish Elder.” While the scope of power allotted to the *Judenälteste* by the German guards differed by location, at each camp his task was above all to act as the enforcer of German regulations among the prisoners. According to survivors’ stories however, in Markstädt the scope of power allotted to Markstädt’s *Judenälteste*, Baruch Majster, was unusually expansive. German guards seemed content to let their *Judenälteste* make his own rules within the camp, and this trust was repaid in full.

Baruch Majster’s background is difficult to establish. His hometown was the Silesian village of Szczakowa, and evidently served in the Polish army in 1939, according to survivor Abraham Kimmelman.<sup>66</sup> Prior to his position at Markstädt he was the *Judenälteste* of at least one other of Schmelt’s labor camps, Eichtal.<sup>67</sup> A survivor from there, Abraham Gluck, described Eichtal as “not such a bad camp.” However, his description of Majster immediately begins with the fierce denunciation of Majster as similar to a member of the “Gestapo! He dressed better than a general, with diamond rings that he’d take from the people that used to come . . . When I was beaten, he stood there with the camp leader . . . he was a German!”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Or alternatively *Lagerälteste*. Kapos themselves are often described as either “*Kats*” (executioners) or *Schieber* (pushers). As the different terms are often used by different testifiers to refer to the same men, I have chosen to stay with one term for each in the interest of clarity.

<sup>66</sup> Interview with Abraham Kimmelman conducted by David Boder, [http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA\\_en](http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en) (accessed March 10, 2010)

<sup>67</sup> Guttterman, *A Narrow Bridge to Life*, 54. Abraham Gluck, VHA interview # 26537.

<sup>68</sup> Abraham Gluck, VHA interview # 26537. Gluck’s reference to Eichtal as “not such a bad camp” refers to the availability of food and to the privileges allowed prisoner workers in the early days of the war, such as letter-writing and the ability to receive parcels sent by relatives, programs that operated across the Schmelt network of camps. Both the food and the privileges would disappear as the war stretched on.



Denunciations of kapos and *Judenältesten* are common in testimonies, as they were literally the living representations of the betrayal of Jewish and humanitarian solidarity within the camps. But calling somebody a member of the Gestapo reaches whole new levels of hate and disdain. Gluck's words are matched and raised by fellow Markstädt survivor Harry Ferens, who says Majster was "like a Hitler." This evidently stems from Majster's micromanagement of the daily lives of the prisoners. "He came into the barracks and he ordered us to do things that no one would have ordered us to do – when to get up and when to go to sleep and when to wash."<sup>69</sup> Charles Glass likens Majster to a "dictator," sarcastically commenting that he had "more to say there than the Germans!"<sup>70</sup> Jacob Birnbaum derisively calls him "the king of the Jews."<sup>71</sup>

Majster is described by all as extremely handsome, impeccably dressed man who cultivated the image of a German officer. In addition to Gluck's comment above, we have David Fierstein, who calls Majster "beautiful" and "intelligent." "Who knows what kind college he got."<sup>72</sup> Charles Glass comments on his elegant "officer's boots."<sup>73</sup> Kimmelman describes Majster as "a man with a whip in his hand, beautiful boots, a good jacket, dressed warm and beautiful."<sup>74</sup> This was an obvious attempt to be seen, and feared, in the same way that the Germans were: to be seen as "other," different from his fellow Jews.

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<sup>69</sup> Harry Ferens, VHA interview # 4906.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Glass, VHA interview # 15474.

<sup>71</sup> Jacob Birnbaum, VHA interview # 10387.

<sup>72</sup> David Fierstein, VHA interview # 213.

<sup>73</sup> Charles Glass, VHA interview # 15474.

<sup>74</sup> Interview with Abraham Kimmelman conducted by David Boder, [http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA\\_en](http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en) (accessed March 10, 2010)

Majster's methods of control of Jewish prisoners were generally harsh. Kimmelman states in his postwar testimony that new arrivals in Markstädt were beaten by fellow Jews immediately after disembarking from their transport trains, to the dismay and protest of the German guard who had brought them there. This German guard intervened, leaving Kimmelman ashamed that a Nazi had to protect a Jew from another Jew. Beatings and executions were commonplace. Jacob Birnbaum, whose words open this section, was to be "transferred" to Auschwitz for falling asleep on the job.<sup>75</sup>

This level of control over prisoners' daily lives was and is standard in prisons today. But one would expect a certain level of understanding and sympathy for one's fellow Jews, which was sometimes present in other Organization Schmelt camps such as Eichtal and Bunzlau. Survivor Henry Guterman contrasts the *Judenälteste* Grosman of Bunzlau with Majster. Grosman was known as a man who would look out for his fellow prisoners, and tried to look after those who were sick by finding them easier work to perform. Majster was more concerned with showing the Germans that the prisoners were under his control. When a policy of extra food for good work was enacted, Guterman's brother received a second ration of soup and gave the second platter to Guterman. When Guterman walked past Majster with his platter, an outraged Majster hit him in the face, making him drop his soup.<sup>76</sup> This unnecessary act of enforcement of camp law, that nobody worth extra food should receive extra food, is probably indicative of Majster's stance on mutual assistance. Since resources such as food, clothing and shelter were controlled by Majster, individual efforts by prisoners to share them were a challenge to

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<sup>75</sup> Jacob Birnbaum, VHA interview #10387.

<sup>76</sup> Henry Guterman, VHA interview #51011.

both his authority within the camp, and to the understanding he had with his German masters that he could be trusted to maintain order. In her chapter of *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories*, Jane Caplan, writes that within political concentration camps “camp discipline dictated that inmates should not be able to trust one another, and hence any close friendship was liable to be broken up by the guards.”<sup>77</sup> There are no accounts of friendships being broken up in Markstädt through Majster’s orders, but it is thinkable that prisoner alliances could pose a threat to Majster’s rule.

There were limits to Majster’s cruelty, and they were the same factors that often enabled the formation of mutual assistance among prisoners: hometown ties. Aron Greenfield was protected by Majster because they came from the same town. When Greenfield was caught by the German guards while smuggling potatoes into the camp, Majster intervened with the Germans. Pretending not to know Greenfield, Majster told the guards that he would personally take care of the punishment. He then hit Greenfield a few times, and told his accompanying kapos (in German) to beat Greenfield “a hundred times.” He then quickly added in Polish to the kapos, “he’s my Landsmann, don’t actually hit him.” The whipping took place out of sight, with Greenfield shouting in fake pain while standing close to the window. Majster then kicked Greenfield and told him to return to his barracks.<sup>78</sup>

But in most circumstances, Majster was a willing collaborator with the German guards and the businesses that used Jewish labor. Greenfield tells us a useful story of Majster’s attitude towards the prisoners under his command. When a prisoner was

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<sup>77</sup> Jane Caplan, “Gender in the Concentration Camps,” Jane Caplan and Nicholas Wachsmann, eds., *Concentration Camps in Nazi Germany: The New Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 92.

<sup>78</sup> Aron Greenfield, VHA interview #29777.

caught in the middle of his suicide attempt by hanging himself in the barracks, Majster called all the prisoners out at appell the next morning. He then said to them all, "If you want to kill yourself, be my guest. Life is not a picnic here. And I don't blame you. But you do *not* do it in front of the others. Go to a toilet, kill yourself, get it over with. You don't interrupt these people - these people have to go to work tomorrow morning. You're waking them up, you make their life miserable, they can't go back to sleep because you're disrupting everybody." Majster then beat the prisoner in front of the Germans.

According to Greenfield, "That's how life was cheap. This is why the Germans trusted him."<sup>79</sup>

Like Greenfield, not all survivors have a completely negative view of Majster. Benny Javasky says he understands the pressure Majster was under, and believes that the camp had to be run strictly so that order could be preserved. His memories are of a strict but fair Majster, with several unfortunately corrupt guards under him who were to blame for the abuse of prisoners. This is an outlying opinion, however. From the numerous testimonies of survivors who both have something to say about Majster and can compare him to other *Judenältesten*, it is clear that he was a relative tyrant. What is more, as seen from Guterman's testimony and others, his strict rule over the lives of prisoners resulted in a decreased level of mutual assistance.

#### Apprentice to Robin Hood: Mutual Assistance Groups Away From the Barracks

It is important to emphasize that not all of the prisoners' activities took place within "the camp," which in this case were the barracks and associated infrastructure that

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

maintained the lives of the prisoners such as the kitchens. Prisoners worked in the factories, or on the railroad tracks which led to them, or for the many small supplying companies that were not located in the camp and from which Krupp ordered goods and services. Majster had little direct control over what went on outside his personal kingdom: he could ask for prisoners to inform on each other, and any illicit goods brought back to the camp were seized if found. But it was on the work crews, away from his control, that many survivors claim they found relief in the form of food and friendships. And these came from what at first glance seems a very unlikely source that merits a closer look: their German foremen and other civilian workers they encountered.

Jack Zisner felt lucky to be at Markstädt, as he was aware through rumors of the stark differences in discipline and cruelty between factory slave labor camps and SS concentration camps by this point in time. Zisner stayed in Markstädt through 1943.<sup>80</sup> After arrival in Markstädt, prisoners from his transport were divided into groups of twelve. Zisner was extraordinarily lucky to be grouped with eleven other members of his hometown. The group, led by a Jew named Fischer, worked at Grün and Bilfinger AG, a contractor who helped build the Krupp arms factory.<sup>81</sup>

Zisner and his hometown cohort participated in a most unusual mutual assistance group while in Markstädt. I say unusual because the leader of the group was their German supervisor, a man named Wilno. As described by Zisner, Wilno was a former member of the German Communist Party, and hated Hitler and the war. He was also a pacifist, who shot off two of his own fingers to get out of military service. In keeping with his pacifism, Wilno was a very sensitive overseer, and frequently condemned the

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<sup>80</sup> Jack Zisner, VHA interview #53946. Dates related were imprecise.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Zisner, VHA interview #53946.

fact that Jewish prisoners (Baruch Majster and his Jewish police) would kill fellow Jews. Wilno would make cloth caps for prisoners through the “organization” of materials, sell these caps outside the camp, and then return to camp with extra food for his workers. Wilno’s exploits, as narrated by Zisner, show that there was an extensive black market run out of Markstädt. The members of his work group were complicit in this black market, in which Wilno was in all likelihood a major participant in, if not its founder. Instead of working on their assigned construction project, Zisner and other members of his group were often sent by Wilno into the Krupp factory on missions to steal such items as nails, paint, and paper to be later sold. The workers would be stopped at the door by the Wehrmacht soldiers guarding the factory, but Wilno’s name would be enough to let them pass, as the guards likely had their own deal with Wilno. In addition to food, Wilno would also acquire hot water and have workers wash themselves and their shirts, a vital way of retaining one’s humanity and hygiene, both of which led to longer lives. On days when the group was forced to actually work at their assigned tasks, Wilno would make it clear to his charges that he hardly cared about the preciseness and industriousness of their work, and would often disappear during working hours. In his interview, Zisner with a happy, sly expression on his face, calls Wilno “a thief.” It is clear that he views Wilno as a sort of Robin Hood figure, and holds him in very high regard.<sup>82</sup>

Wilno’s black market and his eager co-option of his workers into it straddles the line between a mutual assistance group, which we normally think of as run “by Jews for Jews,” and that of having a German (or at any rate, “civilian”) patron. But while Wilno may have started the group, it is obvious through Zisner’s testimony that he and his co-

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<sup>82</sup> Jack Zisner, VHA interview #53946.

workers happily participated in it and saw themselves as vital parts of it.<sup>83</sup> Cooperation between the Jewish members within it must be assumed, and Zisner's excited, animated facial expressions throughout his retelling prove the great emotional impact that inclusion in this group had on him and his confederates. Here is a case of Jewish men organized into a group that actively went out and improved their daily lives through mutual assistance.

I surmise that part of Zisner's lack of reluctance in discussing this story is twofold. First, it is a case of "the good German," a story that many Jewish survivors are happy to relate when their own survival afforded them the opportunity. Secondly, it can be said to be a "masculine" sort of mutual assistance group. It involves stealing, spying, and striking blows against the hated Nazis through work slowdown and pilfering. This was hardly the sort of mother-daughter, substitute family group that Baumel describes as the norm.<sup>84</sup> Yet it shows that men cared for each other as well, when the caring took on masculine characteristics.

Zisner also participated in a more typical mutual assistance group. At 4am, an hour before the other prisoners would wake up, Zisner would steal potatoes from his early morning, part-time kitchen job. Zisner would then sew them into his shirt sleeves and bring them back to his barrack. There he would share them with his friends, who would in return make his bed<sup>85</sup> and shine his shoes. In the Lager, Zisner was happy to

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<sup>83</sup> As they obviously were. Wilno could hardly have crept around the camp and work sites, stealing items himself – it was much less obvious (and probably acceptable to those who were supposed to be guarding these areas) to have Jews do it for him.

<sup>84</sup> "Although all self-help groups acted as a substitute family, the phenomenon appears to have developed faster and deeper among women than among men." Baumel, 91.

<sup>85</sup> By "make" I assume "clean" would be more appropriate, as Markstädt beds were usually straw laid into a wooden bunk.

say, "potatoes were gold." His ability to organize potatoes for his barrackmates was apparently too well-known, and Zisner was once viciously beaten by a kapo who wanted Zisner to bring back cakes for him, which were available to kapos in any case. But again, an unusual thing occurred. A Jewish doctor in the camp infirmary not only healed him, but gave him his daily ration of bread, telling Zisner to "get well." At this point in the interview, Zisner's face suddenly changes from his fairly happy, conspiratorial expression, and he briefly cries.<sup>86</sup> His tears show the depth of emotion felt as a result of this gift, and it tells us one of two things. Either the doctor was already a friend of Zisner's, and this is an instance of members of a mutual assistance group assisting each other in times of need, or it is merely an instance of a man in Markstädt nobly going far out of his way to help another man survive. Either possibility helps prove my argument that men could care for each other within the confines of the camp, even if that was not communicated in traditionally feminine terms.

#### "Turning Tricks" and Other Forms of Mutual Assistance

While there was a "black market" within the camp itself, (and it is important to remember that a "black market" does not necessarily need a dark alleyway to set up shop in, but was in the case of Markstädt rather an aggregate of different illegal transactions across the camp), it seems to have been limited in comparison to camps such as Auschwitz. One must keep in mind that Auschwitz was much larger than Markstädt, but another way to judge the extent of the underground economy is by per capita participation. How many prisoners engaged in black market activities? Here again,

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<sup>86</sup> Jack Zisner, VHA interview #53946.



according to the recorded testimonies, the number seems low, with many prisoners outright denying that any such activity took place, while others who were participants claim it did. The context in which these witnesses spoke must be taken into consideration: they knew that their testimonies would be public knowledge, and furthermore would be viewed by their families. It is understandable that a witness would, knowing the change in context from the slave labor camp to the present, omit mentioning certain events that took place within Markstädt. Another factor that likely caused difficulty in engaging in black market activities is what I have mentioned above: the strict enforcement by Baruch Majster of the camp's rules.

Abraham Kimmelman discusses prisoners "turning tricks" in Markstädt during his interview with David Boder. "Turning tricks" here refers to ways of using the black market and one's associations with fellow prisoners to obtain food and other resources. Kimmelman states that men sold their shirts from home, or sold their allotment of cigarettes to civilian workers, for food. Kimmelman was himself at least an occasional trader, and was one caught trading his cigarettes to a Czech civilian worker for bread. Kimmelman's interview was conducted immediately postwar while he was still in a displaced persons camp, and here he had nothing to lose by telling Boder of the circumstances.<sup>87</sup>

Elias Burstyn, while not engaged in "organizing" or trading for food, was nevertheless a partner in a mutual assistance group that was just as dedicated to survival. His group approached survival from a different direction: that of shirking work. He and other Jewish prisoners worked as painters, painting both inside and outside. When

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Abraham Kimmelman conducted by David Boder, [http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA\\_en](http://voices.iit.edu/interview?doc=kimmelmanA&display=kimmelmanA_en) (accessed March 10, 2010)

outside painting roofs, he and the other workers would cooperate in the surreptitious pouring of small amounts of paint into the roof's gutters in order to run out of paint quicker. When painting inside, they would occasionally relax while propping the ladder in front of the doorway, to ensure that their German foreman (who was the opposite of the good-natured Wilno) would not intrude unexpectedly.<sup>88</sup>

One striking case of mutual assistance was an arrangement that operated between the camps of Markstädt and Blechhammer. When Henry Green's brother Isek was sent to Markstädt, Henry despaired, for Isek was useless at physical labor. Luckily for Isek, he had a gift for penmanship, which brought him into the local office for a pipe-laying firm that contracted with Krupp. Examples of Isek's penmanship, according to Henry, were sent back to company headquarters in Germany to show his proficiency. Isek's good relationship with his Gentile officemates brought him extra food. After learning of this arrangement through Henry, Henry's *Judenälteste* at Blechhammer sent Isek the following offer: take care of the *Judenälteste's* girlfriend's father (who also worked in Markstädt) by sharing his extra food, and the *Judenälteste* would see to it that Isek's brother Henry would be looked after in turn.<sup>89</sup> One wonders what other types of mutual assistance groups may have existed between camps, given how complicated this one seems to have been.

### Ostjuden and Westjuden

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<sup>88</sup> Elias Burstyn, VHA interview #6009.

<sup>89</sup> Henry Green, VHA interview #37486.

Relations between Polish Jews and those from other countries are barely referred to in the Markstädt prisoner interviews. Sam Bronner was aware of the Jews who came from the West – from Belgium, Holland, and France, in his recollection. They survived briefly in Markstädt because “the camp was not a Ka-Zet.” Regardless, they only lasted for two or three months in Markstädt. Bronner’s explanation for this is that Polish Jews lived harder lives than those of Western Jews.<sup>90</sup>

Nathan Zajdband agrees, but goes further to state that the Westjuden barracks had barbed wire strung around them, and that the difference between “Ostjuden” and “Westjuden” was intentionally created and aggravated by Markstädt’s German guards. Zajdband remembers being told by the Germans that his problems, and the problems of Ostjuden as a whole, were the fault of the Westjuden, and assumed that they were told the same. Zajdband remembers only Dutch Jews, and specifically remembers that the two groups were forbidden from conversing. He does recall that the Dutch spoke some German, and that language barriers between the two groups of Jews were not an issue. The Westjuden were also sent to work in different areas than the Polish Jews, and returned to their closed off barracks at night.

Zajdband does agree with Bronner that Polish Jews were tougher than the Jews from the West, and that the relatively softer Westerners, who had not lived through the years of occupation and previous Polish discrimination, had a harder time surviving in Markstädt. He too uses the time frame of two or three months for the limit of the Westerners’ survival.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Sam Bronner, VHA interview #7649.

<sup>91</sup> Nathan Zajdband, VHA interview #33572.

It is clear from these two accounts that the two groups had trouble finding common ground, to the Westerners' detriment. Neither group spoke the others' home language, though they might have been capable of limited communication in German. Polish chauvinism probably did not have to be taught to the Polish Jews, however. Language is a chief component of nationalism, and even the Polish Jews in Markstädt had difficulty in trusting each other, as prisoners would often eat their nightly bread immediately instead saving it to last throughout the next day, for fear that their neighbor in the barracks would steal it during the night. Zajdband's blaming the two groups' poor relations on the Germans shows analysis of the situation, but it is likely self-exculpatory. In the absence of any firmly stated reasons, I fail to see why the Germans would go to the trouble of erecting barbed wire around the barracks of Jews from the West, or why they would be assigned to different work details. Work crews in other, larger camps contained Jews from many different countries of origin. I think there is something else that occurred here, something darker. Perhaps Majster decided that these Jews, to whom he owed no loyalty at all and who had no support within the camp's already existing hierarchy, were perfect for assigning to the more physically punishing forms of labor. Unfortunately, without more sources, I cannot prove this.

### The Cook, His Friends, His Wife, and Her Worries

Sam Bronner worked in Markstädt's kitchen as a cook. He was put there by Markstädt's first *Judenälteste*, as the two were once neighbors in the same town. We see

here the importance of shared town kinship in the formation of networks.<sup>92</sup> In his interview with the Shoah Foundation, Bronner is very proud of the fact that he was able to “help his friends out” due to his position. After the war people would tell him, he says, that “thanks to you I’m alive today.” His way of providing extra food entailed avoiding the control system that determined how prisoners were fed. In Markstädt, all prisoners received a punch card for their evening meals. When a prisoner received his meal, Bronner would simply “re-punch” the previous day’s hole, keeping that day’s box unpunched. Bronner’s friends could then go to the adjoining kitchen with the unmarked meal card and in so doing receive twice the intended amount of food for that day, an incredibly significant advantage given the general scarcity of food and reluctance to distribute it.<sup>93</sup>

While Bronner speaks of the pride he feels for having been able to feed his friends, it is probable that when not immediately needed, this extra food would be traded by his friends for other resources. In other camps, the provider of food in arrangements like this would receive a cut of the proceeds from any downstream transactions, but Bronner says nothing in his interview about any resulting financial deals. This does not necessarily mean that he did not personally benefit from his generosity, but since other male survivors often have few qualms about admitting black market transactions, the fact that he does not mention them here means one of two possibilities. First, that in the taping of his interview he is showing off for his wife (who was taped shortly after him) and is reluctant to admit anything that would take away from his perceived generosity. Second, that his friends were truly his friends, and while they may have paid him back for

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<sup>92</sup> Sam Bronner, VHA interview #7649.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

their extra rations in some way, that the behavior in question typified what is traditionally considered a mutual assistance group. In any case, to bring up the rest of his friends might have destroyed the narrative he was creating in the telling of his story, which was his meeting of his future wife.

Samuel Bronner met his future wife Helen while in Markstädt, while she was a seamstress repairing the clothing of workers. He pursued her and repeatedly attempted to supply her with extra food, but she wouldn't accept. In her own interview, she explains why:

"... he wanted to help me, and I wouldn't take. I was proud."

"He wanted to give you more food?"

"He wanted to give me food."

"And why wouldn't --"

"I wouldn't take."

"Why --"

"My mother used to say, 'you take from a boy then you gotta marry him.' I didn't know that I was gonna marry him later." (chuckles)<sup>94</sup>

Sam was able get Helen the highly coveted job of a kitchen worker, peeling potatoes. He does not explain exactly how, but a reasonable assumption would be that he was able to call in favors with friends to grease the wheels. This was undoubtedly beneficial for Helen, given the realities of the camp and its underground economy. She now had access to food to share with her friends, or at least was able to use her access for trading purposes for other resources in Markstädt. It was clear by this point that Sam had

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<sup>94</sup> Helen Bronner, VHA interview #7651.

a relationship in mind for the two of them that did not consist merely of being co-workers. But as seen in the dialogue above between Helen and her interviewer, Helen refused to become Sam's "girlfriend." It is useful to explore the sometimes vague definitions of "boyfriend" and "girlfriend" in the labor camps.

Felicja Karay, writes on what were euphemistically called "cousins" in the Skarzysko-Kamienna camp. One form of "cousin" relationships differed little from economic transactions. Men privileged enough to be in the prominent class of prisoners, with resources readily at their disposal, would court young, attractive women with food and clothing. Menasze Hollender's testimony appears in Karay's book and is reprinted here:

Young girls, alone and attractive, brought from Majdanek barefoot and in rags, became an object to be purchased, "cousins" of the camp elite. For a piece of bread and a pair of shoes, they would do anything their patrons wanted. Most of the girls had no other choice. If they didn't give in to the will of a prominent one they could expect only hunger, hardship, and often death.<sup>95</sup>

A poem from Skarzysko-Kamienna goes as follows: For soup, for soup/For a piece of bread/Girls will spread their.../Just between you and me/They'll do it even/When there's no need.<sup>96</sup>

Male-female bonding in the slave labor camps, while frequently tied to resource exchange, was not always (or perhaps even mostly) the trading of sex for resources. Men

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<sup>95</sup> Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow*, 137.

<sup>96</sup> Karay, 139.

and women, as always, had a very real need for emotional connections with one another, and voluntary pairing off in Skarzysko-Kamienna was common.<sup>97</sup>

It was difficult for male-female relationships to occur in Markstädt, due to its lopsided ration between men and women (with only 120 women to roughly 3,500 men at the time of the Bronner's meeting). *Judenälteste* Baruch Majster had his whole family, including his wife, sister, and three brothers join him in his family quarters, and Dora Bochenek in her interview states that other well-off women were able to and did pay to be sent to Markstädt to live with their husbands.<sup>98</sup> But the prominente, as always, were the exceptions.

Other men competed for the attentions of the few women in Markstädt. Bochenek remembers, as a young girl, being terrified by the men in the camp. Men would approach her and declare "Girl, you are mine." A former boyfriend of her sister claimed her as well, although it is not clear from her attitude whether he did this in order to protect her or not. Regardless, she was terrified, and although she considered asking Majster to intervene on her behalf, fear of him made her decide not to. Bochenek volunteered to be transferred to Faulbrück instead.<sup>99</sup>

The subject of male-female relationships in the concentration camps is understandably controversial, and survivors often do not want to revisit it, especially in front of friends and family. Miriam Jacobs refuses to discuss it in her testimony, which is part of another rare wife-husband couple who were both at Markstädt. In her Markstädt, men and women were always separate. When asked directly by the interviewer, she

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<sup>97</sup> Karay, 138.

<sup>98</sup> Dora Bochenek, VHA interview #1584.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.



states that the women had no relationships, and no boyfriends. “We were *regular* girls.”<sup>100</sup> Her emphasis on the word “regular” shows that to her, male-female relationships were essentially, either as seen then or now, as prostitution. Simple, good girls would not engage in such behavior. This is not borne out by the other testimonies on the subject, and is a good reminder of the difficulty of approaching camp moral issues with the moral paradigm of today – some subjects just cannot be discussed by some people.

### Losing a Friend

For Jacob Birnbaum, Markstädt was his second labor camp. Things were more “rigorous” than in his first, Anhalt, though whether he refers to the general pace of labor and its physical taxation, or to camp culture is not made clear. He and nearly everyone else he knew at Markstadt were involved in the construction of a factory for Krupp. Birnbaum had previously had what he called a “food connection” in Anhalt, a prisoner who came with him to Markstadt. In Markstadt, things were “chaotic.” As new transfers arrived, they sought out workgroups of higher status and lower mortality – kitchen work, unsupervised work, assignments where theft and “organization” – the art of trading stolen goods for other goods through connections, barter and diplomacy – were permissible. After Birnbaum’s friend and connection found a safe spot for himself, he did not bring Birnbaum with him, and acted coldly towards him. Birnbaum felt betrayed and alone,

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<sup>100</sup> Miriam Jacobs, VHA interview #49931.

after “all that I had done for him.”<sup>101</sup> In his interview, Birnbaum pauses slightly as he remembers this, again showing the emotional pain that marked the loss of a friend, especially in circumstances that Birnbaum sees as treachery. Birnbaum was now in a new camp without a friend, a most unenviable position. That Birnbaum would recognize this shows how important friends were to men, and for our purposes, the importance of the *knowledge* of that importance.

Birnbaum, now without connections, ended up in one of the most physically punishing details in the camp – smoothing out the ground where railroad tracks were to be laid. This was a 12-hour shift, with a walking commute of one hour each way. Although he was able to ration his daily bread (which he was quite proud of), malnutrition and accidents took their toll on his body, and he developed painful, oozing boils.<sup>102</sup> His ability to preserve his ration speaks of the self-discipline that some other scholars of the Holocaust have often assumed was absent from men’s capabilities.<sup>103</sup>

### A Sphinx with a Crack in It

Max Fischel, in his VHA interview, does not talk too much. Short answers are the norm, after which his interviewer patiently waits and hopes for more. Sometimes his answers are difficult to believe, as when he remarks that in one of the work camps he stayed in, there was no lack of food and plenty of sleep. As he talks, there is a distant

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<sup>101</sup> Jacob Birnbaum, VHA interview # 10387.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Milton, “Women’s Survival Skills.” In this essay, Milton describes women as pragmatic savers and requisitioners of food, while men were only able to “discuss their favorite banquets and restaurants.” 120.

smile on his face that never reaches his eyes, or for that matter curves up or down in response to anything either he or the interviewer says. Barracks were made “of wood.” People got along “pretty good.” It is clear that Max Fischel, Holocaust survivor, does not want to relive his past or share it in any meaningful way. Perhaps his wife or children put him up to the interview.<sup>104</sup>

Only rarely does Fischel’s opacity allow a hint of the man within, and those moments are when he talks about friends. His German supervisor, like Zisner’s above, was “a nice man, nice man,” bringing food for Fischel every day. Another similarity to Zisner’s case is that Fischel’s supervisor was a German who did not care for the other German workers – “If every German was like him . . . He was afraid of the Germans. He had to hide the bread in his tool box.” Food rationing otherwise was minimal, but Fischel had another contact who would bring in food, a friend who worked in the kitchen for the German Wehrmacht guards of the camp. This friend would bring home food every night, give it to Fischel, and then Fischel would himself share this extra food with yet another friend. This last friendship would continue after the war, and Fischel would be present at his friend’s son’s Bar Mitzvah. “I still see him in Florida.”<sup>105</sup> And here his smile is genuine, not the plastic, easy-going shield of a smile that he wears throughout the rest of the interview.

Fischel chose to share only with this one friend, and this friend was also from Fischel’s home town. This was often the case. Sam Bronner’s position in the kitchen was due to a shared township with a Lagerälteste as well, and this kinship based on past

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<sup>104</sup> Max Fischel, VHA interview #45879.

<sup>105</sup> Max Fischel, VHA interview # 45879.

commonalities matches the behavior of most other male and female mutual assistance groups.

Other close male friendships existed. Isak Granek was hidden by his Jewish work crew leader after Granek contributed to a traffic accident between trucks at their worksite. “And that’s why I’m here, most probably. Whenever we see each other . . .” Granek is overcome by emotion, unable to continue.<sup>106</sup> This example and Fischel’s help refute the essentialist theory that only women were capable of intimate relationships.

The above findings from male survivors of Markstädt illustrate what scholars such as Nechama Tec and Caplan have already discovered, but which other scholars still find hard to believe: that men engaged in mutual assistance groups as well<sup>107</sup> as women. They might see them differently – as things to be dismissed as natural, as signs of weakness, as too emotional to share with others, especially in the context of a taped interview with a family reunion at the end. But they existed all the same.

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<sup>106</sup> Isak (John) Granek, VHA interview 22877.

<sup>107</sup> In both meanings of the word “well.”

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