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ERZSÉBET FRANK, THE COSMETICIAN DEPORTED FROM MISKOLC TO THE JUNKERS-MARKKLEEBERG CONCENTRATION CAMP, WHO WROTE A CAMP DIARY IN VERSE IN THE STYLE OF JÁNOS ARANY

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1. Introduction

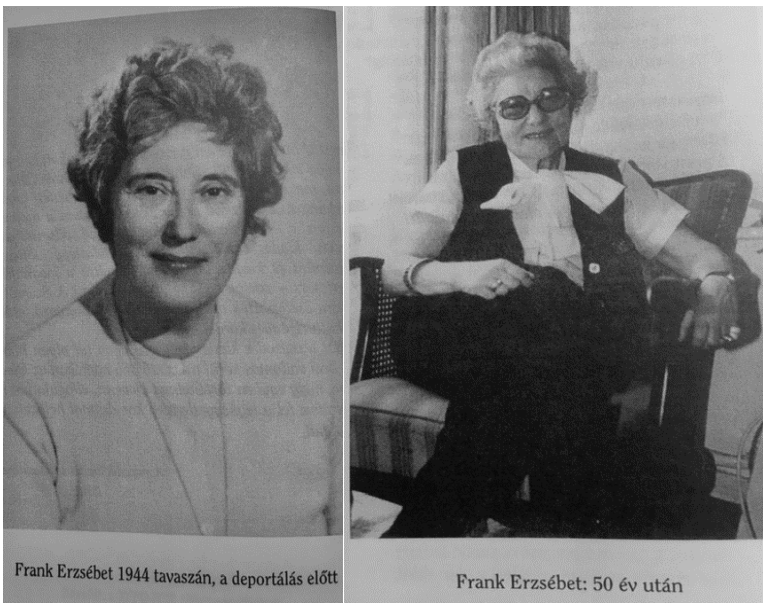
As I have discussed recently in two articles in *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat* as well as elsewhere, Holocaust life writing by Hungarian women is still too little known and has essentially not entered into the Hungarian Holocaust canon.[1] The aim of one part of my larger ongoing project of recuperating Holocaust women's life writing is to rehabilitate the works of over half a dozen wartime and immediate postwar Hungarian women, whose writing was published soon after liberation, or in some cases not published at all. My goal is to enhance our appreciation of the range and complexity of the testimony provided by female life writing, as a gender-centered reading of these marginalized histories can provide insights into how gender inflects the traumatic experiences of wartime. Beyond analyzing the wartime narratives of these women, I have also tried, mostly through the aid of old newspaper records, to reconstruct at least fragments of their earlier personal and professional lives and gendered self-identity within the difficult political circumstances of interwar Hungary and during the war itself, as well as in their postwar lives, whether in socialist Hungary or in immigration.

Here I discuss one such war diary/memoir, Erzsébet Frank's evocatively titled *365 nap: Vallomás a poklok tüzéből* [365 Days: Confession from the Fire of Hell],[2] an account of her year from ghettoization to liberation, which was among the early

[1] Louise O. Vasvári, "Izsáki/y Margit *Ország a keresztfán* (1945) című műve a szerző zavaros politikai identitásainak kontextusában," *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat* 12, no. 2 (2022); Louise O. Vasvári, "Family Microhistories and the Social History of Twentieth-Century Hungary: *Biri mama deportálási emlékirata.*" [The Deportation Memoir of Mama Biri] (1949) and the Kieselbach Series *Sorsfordulók* [Turns of Fate]," *Hungarian Cultural Studies* 15 (2022): 94-132, http://ahea.pitt.eduDOI:10.5195/ahea.2022.466; Louise O. Vasvári, "Kisért a múlt: Jámbor Ági memoárja és zene karrierje az Egyesült Államokban," *Múlt és Jövő* 2022, no. 2 (2022): 59-76; és Louise O. Vasvári, "Szerepjátszás és identitás Fehér Lili 1945-ben megjelent *Nem ér a nevem: egy szökött zsidó naplója* című művében," *Társadalmi Nemek Tudománya Interdiszciplináris eFolyóirat* 11, no. 2 (2021): 1-19, https://ojs.bibl.u-zeged.hu/index.php/tntef/article/view/43610/42606.

[2] Frank Erzsébet, *365 nap: Versben írt vallomás a poklok tüzéből* (Miskolc: MUSZ Felsőmagyarországi Csoport, 1946. Repr. Budapest: Uránusz, 1996).

testimonies published in Hungary. In this work Frank (Picture 1) details her deportation, along with her sister, Kató, to Auschwitz in June 1944, their suffering first as slave laborers in Plaszów-Krakow and then in in the Junkers Aircraft and Engine Factory and Slave Labor Camp in Markkleeberg, outside of Leipzig in Germany, and their final death march and liberation in April 1945. Amazingly, it was in Markkleeberg that Frank was able to write occasional poetry – most of which has been lost – and to create this lengthy documentary poem in the form of a verse diary, written in paired couplets, in imitation of the style of the Hungarian national folk epic of János Arany's *Toldi* (1846). Frank stated in her "Forward" that everything in the book was true and that she believed that writing about suffering lightened her suffering and saved her life.



Picture 1. Photos of Erzsébet Frank at age 26, shortly before her deportation, and fifty years later, both published in the second, 1996 edition of *365 Nap*

Neither the original 1946 edition of *365 Nap*, nor the 1996 reedition provides any biographical data on Frank beyond repeating that she was born in Mezőkeresztes in Northern Hungary and that she was a cosmetician who never wrote before or after the camp. However, she did produce significant occasional poetic works while still in Markkleeberg. While most of her poems (some of which were performed as songs in the camp) did not survive the war, her touching manuscript poem "Sweisserok" ["The Welders"] is housed in the United States/Washington D.C. Holocaust Museum (USHM). "Sweisserok," whose title employs the German word *Schweisser* [welder] with a Hungarian plural ending, describes the daily life and friendship of twelve female welders, her fellow prisoners, whom she also sweetly calls *sweisserka*, all listed by name and characterized individually in the verses. It is

possible that Frank herself was not aware of the survival of this poem because it was carried on the death march and saved by another of the surviving women, who emigrated to the U.S. and eventually donated it to the museum, as I shall discuss below. But first it is important to try to provide more information on both Frank's prewar and postwar life, for which it will also be necessary to rely on a memoir written by her husband Illés Kormos,[3] augmented by information excavated from a miscellany of prewar and immediate postwar newspaper accounts. As I have tried to show in the earlier articles in this series, I believe that it is impossible to access the tormented writings of these women without also gaining some understanding of their personal lives and of the cultural milieu in which they lived before 1944, as well as in their postwar lives.

2. Fragments toward a biography of Erzsébet Frank (and of her husband, Dr. Illés Kormos)

Erzsébet Frank was born in 1918 in Mezőkeresztes, located forty kilometers from Miskolc, in the southeastern part of Borsod County in Northern Hungary. Because neither the 1946 original edition of her *365 Nap* nor the reedition offer any biographical data, I have attempted to provide at least fragmentary information about her life through newspaper accounts and even through newspaper ads she placed, supplemented by information on her postwar life from the autobiography of her husband, Illés Kormos. Frank's parents, as their obituaries in local newspapers testify, remained in that small town until their respective deaths: her father, Menyhért Frank, in 1939, at the age of 61, and her mother, Maria Rosenblatt, in 1941, at the age of only 53. Her father was born in 1878 in Tard, not far from Miskolc. Before World War I, he already appears to have run a café in Miskolc, in 1922 he is listed as renting a historic inn, which is the property of the church, and in 1924 he is listed as a wine dealer, with all these occupations being precisely the areas of the food industry most overrepresented by Jews.[4] From 1925 to 1937, he is listed as renting and managing a 150-acre agricultural property on the outskirts of Mezőkövesd from one Samuel Burger from Miskolc – by comparison to which the Lutheran Church held 271 acres in the same town and the Roman Catholic Church owned 70 acres.[5] From early in the century, Menyhért Frank's name regularly appears as a contributor to Jewish charities, as well as in increasingly important community activities. For example, on May 19, 1928, a laudatory reference to him appears in the *Miskolci Estilap*, which describes the active social life in Mezőkeresztes, one supposedly free of sectarian antagonisms, although still lacking its prewar momentum. The article cites the

[3] Kormos Illés, *A régi szép időkről: Memoár a huszadik század világából* (Budapest: Uránusz, 1998).

[4] Csíki, Tamás, „A miskolci izraelita kis- és középpolgárság az I. világháborút megelőző évtizedekben," *A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve* 33-34 (1995), 418. http://mek.niif.hu/02000/02097/html/csiki.htm.

[5] Tóth Kálmán, *Mezőkeresztes története* (Miskolc: Magyar Jövő, 1929).

example of Frank, who was a member of the town council, as was at the time the custom to elect a Jew to that body in Miskolc. Two years later, on June 9, 1930, the same newspaper reports in some detail about how after the death of József Cseh, the chief rabbi of Mezőkeresztes since 1912, there was a big celebration on the installation of the new rabbi, who also married Rozsika Cseh, daughter of the deceased. The main figure singled out in the article as running the festivities and even hosting the celebratory lunch is Frank, the leader of the Orthodox congregation. On June 1, 1939, the *Magyar Zsidók Lapja* reports on his death, calling him not a renter but a *földbirtokos* [landowner] and saying he was the longtime president of his congregation and a figure whose body was accompanied to the cemetery by Jews and those of other denominations alike. Menyhért Frank's life illustrates the history of Jewish life from before World War I through the interwar economic, social and political period of the supposed assimilation and social integration of the Jews.[6]

Mezőkeresztes had three Jewish elementary schools, which Erzsébet Frank must have attended because her name is later listed in the *Izraelita Hitközségi Polgári Leányiskola* [Israelite denominational school for girls] in Miskolc (established in 1919), which she left in 1925, and from 1926 her name appears in the renowned *Református leánygimnázium* [Calvinist high school for girls] in Debrecen, where she was a mediocre student, and failing in French, which is interesting in that she later would claim to have received a diploma in cosmetology in Paris. By 1935 or earlier, she was running her own cosmetology business in Miskolc, initially out of her apartment at 13 Szemere Street. She was also very active socially, ran cosmetology training courses and became the president of the guild's examination committee. In short, I have been able to gather enough fragmentary newspaper data about Frank to ascertain that she was a clever and ambitious young woman, who was not just a cosmetician, but created what was probably the most exclusive beauty salon in that city. On July 17, 1936, Frank posted a notice (Picture 2) in *Magyar Jövő* advertising that she had returned from her Parisian study tour and was now able to resume offering the most modern aesthetic treatments and beauty products. By now she was no longer working out of her apartment but a retail space in the same building, and she regularly continued to post ads in several local newspapers.

Picture 2. Advertisement of Frank's business after her return from Paris

[6] See Csíki, „A miskolci," on Miskolc Jewry's higher-level role in economic development and extraordinary social mobility than that of the gentile population.

On December 18, 1937, *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hirlap* reported at some length on a public talk that Frank had held at the Israelite women's group's afternoon tea in the town's most elegant venue, the Abbazia Coffeehouse (Picture 3), which was part of the hotel by the same name, owned by József Bíró.

Picture 3. The Abbazia Coffeehouse in 1937.
Photo by István Ábrahám, Courtesy of the *Magyar Kereskedelmi és Vendéglátóipari Múzeum* [Hungarian Museum of Commerce and Hospitality]

In the talk, Frank recommended that for women to achieve an advantageous economic position in the workplace it was important to maintain their youth and flexibility. She also advised on modern theories of beauty and a healthy lifestyle, which included avoidance of late-night card playing and smoking. Her talk was likely not unusual, as in the late thirties the Jewish-owned Abbazia Coffeehouse regularly hosted events by specifically Jewish social groups. There were two Jewish women's organizations, with the Israelite Woman's Club, founded in 1847, the far older than the group where Frank gave her talk, but both provided overall aid of the needy and ran a soup kitchen for all denominations. The *Miskolci Estilap* in its issue on June 7, 1931, also advertised a jovial evening in the same coffeehouse of the *Pro Palesztina Szövetség Herzl Köre* [The Herzl Circle of the Pro Palestine Alliance], a mildly Zionist social group, which, along with a mizrachist religious group, had been formed in the 1920s. They both had a low membership, as Zionism was not popular in Hungary at the time – unlike in neighboring Czechoslovakia and Romania. By the end of the 1930s, however, all religious, cultural and social Jewish organizations would be banned.[7]

[7] Sziszkoszné-Halász Ildikó, "Organisations and Institutions in Miskolc in the Interwar Period," *Studia Historyzne* 56, no. 4 (2013),

In 1938, on February 20, in the *Miskolci Estilap*, Frank's name is listed among several hundred guests attending the Carnival ball of the same Jewish women's organization that had hosted her talk. Some guests attended in evening clothes, others in costumes and masks. Frank was listed among those appearing in costume. Interestingly, the article only focuses on the costume of one guest who came as Prof. Albert, his white lab coat decorated with peppers, a very timely masquerade since it was in 1937 that Albert Szent-Györgyi had won the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine. The article also notes that the mayor, the police chief and other important personages also attended the Jewish event, as was the custom.[8] It was clearly professionally important for Frank to appear prominently at such events, as she also placed newspaper advertisements offering full make-up for those planning to attend the ball.[9] During 1941, Frank also regularly placed classified ads for a maid with cooking skills or ones to sell a seal coat with a muff, a thresher, a His Master's Voice gramophone, used men's and women's clothing and even used sacks, and an *amerikai iróasztal* [American desk] – apparently a roll-top desk – which, judging by the date of the ads and the strange miscellany of items offered, were probably items from her recently deceased mother's household.

In the 1930s, in the wake of the Great Depression, anti-Jewish legislation was increasingly promoted by the increasingly rightist government, and by 1940 some 3000 Jews in Miskolc had lost their voting rights and nationality after the passage of three anti-Jewish laws by Parliament in 1938–41 that effectively restricted the Jewish presence in economic, professional and cultural life. When Jews in neighboring countries had already been decimated, Frank's cosmetics salon still continued to be extremely successful, as detailed in the woman's section of a local newspaper report "Hol készül a női szépség?"[10] [Where is women's beauty prepared?], which began with the assertion that "a nő kifogástalanul szép legyen – kozmetikai szempontból" [a woman should be impeccably beautiful in terms of her make-up) and proceeds to describe in detail how this result can be achieved in Frank's elegant salon. Most of the article is actually devoted to describing the elegant modern furnishings in the various rooms of the salon, each decorated in a different color, and then pointing out Frank's enormous, framed Parisian diploma that adorned one of the walls. Then the elegant newfangled tools are highlighted, such as an electric face iron, a rejuvenating oxygenation sprayer, and an infrared heat lamp, all used for skin treatment, and finally, the various creams and other beauty products that lined the glass cases.

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https://cejsh.icm.edu.pl/cejsh/element/bwmeta1.element.oai-journals-pan-pl-96410/c/oai-journals-pan-pl-96410_full-text_0c6cf3cb-5ec3-4288-a906-7354c35d33e3.pdf.

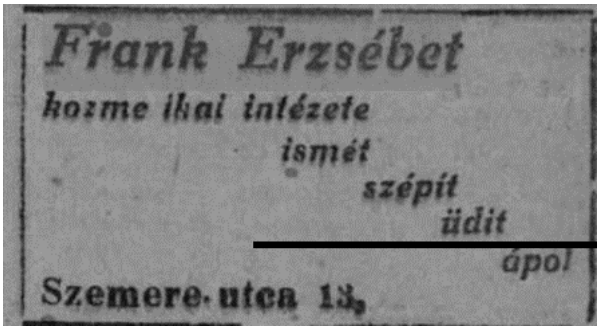
[8] See Csíki, „A miskolci," 305.

[9] In *Magyar Jövő*, January 28, 1940.

[10] *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, April 5, 1942.

To give an idea of the political atmosphere in which the foregoing laudatory article was written about Frank's salon, we can look at Zoltán Bíró's article in the Miskolc fascist daily *Magyar Élet* on August 23, 1942, entitled "A százéves miskolci és borsodi zsidó kérdés" [The hundred-year-old Jewish question in Miskolc and Borsod]. In this the author attempts to prove how the Jewish population in Miskolc has grown from "three families" to 16,000 in one hundred years, explaining that at the time of the 1920 census, there were 11,300 Jews living "a miskolciak nyakán" [off the people of Miskolc] and by the1939 census, twenty percent of the population of Miskolc were Jews, which in 1942 meant about 16,000 Jews "szegényére Miskolcnak" [to the detriment of Miskolc]. Actually, Béla Zsedényi had already studied the problem in great detail in his *Miskolc szellemi élete és kulturája* and concluded that "Miskolc a magyar vidék legerősebben elzsidózódott nagyvárosa" [Miskolc has become the most heavily Jewish city in the Hungarian provinces].[11]

The last newspaper trace of Frank before she disappeared into deportation in the summer of 1944 is from April 6 in *Felsőmagyarországi Reggeli Hírlap*, where she placed an ad to hire a female apprentice, which must have been a desperate and futile attempt to replace a Jewish employee she was no longer allowed to employ. Details of her life in deportation during the 365 days she describes in her book will be discussed in the next section. Here it can be noted that after the war, as early as September 1945, Frank's name reappeared in Miskolc[12] in short advertisements announcing that her cosmetics salon is "once again" ready to beatify her clients, but now the address given is not that of her prewar elegant salon but her apartment at 13 Szemere Street (Picture 4).



Picture 4. Advertisement of Frank's salon from 1945

Between 1945 and mid-1947, Frank continued working out of her apartment, but by May 1947 she had once again managed to obtain a salon and continued to place regular advertisements (Picture 5), primarily in *Szabad Magyarország* and *Felvidéki Népszava*, the former being the newspaper of the Hungarian Communist Party and

[11] Zsedényi Béla, *Miskolc szellemi élete és kulturája* (Miskolc: Magyar Jövő Kiadó, 1929), 58.
[12] *Felvidéki Népszava*, September 29, 1945 and *Szabad Magyarország*, September 25, 1945.

the latter that of the Social Democratic Party. As before, she advertised skin care and cosmetics, but now also a dubious-sounding hormone treatment and even something very new, "amerikai lábszőrtelenítés" [American leg depilation]. Even in the U.S. it was only in the early 1940s that leg hair removal became a widespread practice, due in part to the wartime shortage of nylons and women resorting to liquid stockings, which only worked on hairless legs.[13]

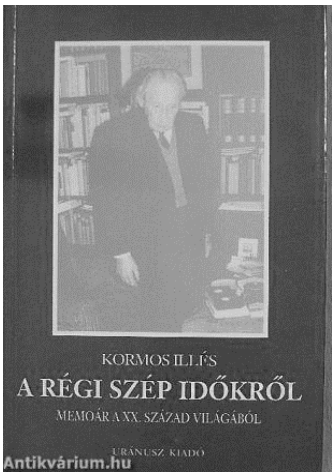
Picture 5. Advertisement for hormone treatment in Frank's shop

On the same page that this ad was published there also appeared an announcement from the Miskolc Orthodox Jewish Community about the erection of a memorial for the 14,000 martyrs from Miskolc and Borsod-Somló Counties who had been collected in the Miskolc brick factory, deported to Auschwitz and did not return.

From 1948 to 1950, Frank reappeared, now listed in the Budapest telephone book as a cosmetician, and she also placed ads for her business at an elegant downtown location on Váci Street. However, for all further information about her subsequent life, we have to turn to the memoir written by her husband, the lawyer, Dr. Illés Kormos, *A régi szép időkről: Memoár a huszadik század világából* [About the Good Old Days: A Memoir from the World of the Twentieth Century] (Picture 6), which he published in 1998, at the age of ninety-eight, and dedicated to his wife, who had encouraged him to write it.[14] Kormos's brief one-hundred-page memoir is divided into three parts, his life in Miskolc, his life in Budapest, and his memories of Düsseldorf, where the couple emigrated in 1950. Since he only met and married his wife after the war, the first part about his prewar life in Miskolc and his student year in Paris in 1927 provide no information on her biography, but it does offer an interesting view of the privileged life of the son of a well-to-do Jewish family. The second part on the Budapest life of the couple offers many details relevant to Frank's postwar life, while the last part is not really about their emigration to Düsseldorf. They are rather rhapsodic, bittersweet recollections of Kormos's youth in Miskolc – including even the local whorehouses – and the fate of his old friends.

[13] Women's Museum of California, "The History of Female Hair Removal," 2017, https://womensmuseum.wordpress.com/2017/11/22/the-history-of-female-hair-removal/.

[14] Interestingly, two years earlier he had translated Saul Friedländer's *Reflections of Nazism* (1982) to Hungarian as *Náci antiszemitizmus* (Budapest: Uránusz, 1996).



Picture 6. Cover of the memoir by Illés Kormos

Born in 1900 in Miskolc into a well-to-do family, Kormos describes the best year of his life as the time he spent in Paris in 1927, paid for by father, who sent him 46 dollars per month while his sister Lujzika sent him food. He offers an interesting description of Hungarian émigré life in Paris of the time, where many Hungarian artists and journalists congregated at the Rotonde, where he enjoyed a daily espresso. On his return home, he was listed as a member of the bar in Miskolc from 1928 to 1943, and there are numerous newspaper accounts of his cases. He survived the war in the labor service, but few others from his large family did, except for his sister – with whom he lived for the rest of his life. In 1945, he was called upon to become a *népügyész* [prosecutor],[15] which he was not politically in a position to refuse, but he managed to be relieved of his post after six months by reason of illness. He had always opposed the death penalty, but he admits he had to prosecute one case that led to a death sentence. He was even required to issue the order to execute, but he gives no details. The case was, however, covered in excruciating detail in the local *Felvidéki Népszava* on August 4, 1945, which describes how one András Tóth committed a series of unspeakable crimes, from rape and subsequent bloody beating of two Russian women, through torture and killing of several Jews in the labor brigade, to having them pull his cart even though he had a horse.

Illés describes how Erzsébet Frank and her sister came back very thin in May 1945, but he mentions only in passing that she wrote in the midst of her factory work at the risk of her life and that she managed to carry the written work with her. In 1946, Illés reopened his office at 21 Hunyadi Street, and the following year Frank became his wife, while her sister married Pál Galló, also a lawyer from an established Miskolc Jewish family. In 1948, the Illéses moved to Budapest, where

[15] This term was introduced in 1945.

Frank continued her very successful career on Váci Street in the building that also housed the trendy Anna Café. Later, they managed to make an apartment exchange and she had a two-room *kozmetika* [beauty salon] in their new place on Vörösmarty Square, which was frequented by famous actresses. They enjoyed a few good years of theater, opera, and concerts, but then came the deportations to the countryside. The Gallós were sent to Hortobágy, where Pál Galló ran a *traktor* [tractor] and Katalin Frank milked cows. Illés and Erzsébet, who had no children of their own, managed to take care of their seven-year-old niece, and when her parents were released, they also came to live with them in the capital. When the couple would have been required to give up their private work and join a work cooperative, they left for Düsseldorf, but Illés does not really explain how they lived there. It is therefore likely that while he was retired, his much younger wife continued to work in her profession.

In 1996, at the time of the publication of the second edition of *365 nap*, Erzsébet Frank was still alive, as she was in 1998, at the publication of Illés's memoir, but I have not been able to find out the date of her death, as it is not listed in any Hungarian source, probably because she died in Germany. The last notice I have of her is that she and her sister were interviewed in Budapest in 2001 by their former fellow inmate, Zahava Szász Stessel, for her indispensable *Snow Blossoms: Hungarian Jewish Women in an Airplane Factory in Markkleeberg.*[16] Stessel studied German archives and spoke with dozens of women survivors and created a mosaic of their recollections as a collective (auto-)biography. She also provides additional information related to Frank, as discussed in the next section.

3. Erzsébet Frank's deportation from Miskolc and work as an SS slave laborer in Plaszów-Kraków and Markkleeberg

The ghetto in Miskolc was established on May 9, 1944, with ghettoization finished by May 20 and its emptying on June 5, with Jews being sent to a brick factory, where they were housed in open drying rooms, without sanitation and basic necessities, not even water. Torture chambers were set up, in which more than one hundred people were tortured or killed and several committed suicide. Although most of the perpetrators escaped punishment after the war, András Oláh, the lieutenant of the *gendarmerie* was executed after the war. The surviving ghetto inmates, among whom were Erzsébet Frank and her younger sister, Katalin, were deported to Auschwitz between June 12 and 15. While the exact numbers cannot be known, of the some 8,900 deported from Miskolc, approximately 80% would perish.[17]

[16] Zahava Szász Stessel, *Snowflowers: Hungarian Jewish Women in an Airplane Factory in Markkleeberg* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009).

[17] For a coherent brief overview of the deportations in the area, see Csíki Tamás, "A holokauszt Borsod, Abaúj és Zemplén megyékben," *Történelem és Muzeológia* 2, no. 2 (2015): 61-67, http://tortenetitar.hermuz.hu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Csiki.pdf, és Csíki,

From Auschwitz the Frank sisters, judged fit for work, were first sent to the Plaszów concentration camp in a suburb of Kraków, which was initially a camp for Jews rounded up from the general region of Kraków but, later, also many Hungarian Jews, particularly women, were sent there.

Several months later they were sent back to Auschwitz, where they had to pass selection again, but managed to find their way into another transport and after a three-day difficult trip they arrived at the *Frauenaussenlager des KZ Buchenwald-Markkleeberg*, in a suburb of Leipzig, which was initially established in 1944 as a women's forced labor subcamp of the Ravensbrück Camp and later of Buchenwald. The camp came to serve as the *Junkers Flugzeug und Motorenwerke* factory for the manufacture of aircraft parts. The first transport of 500 women from Auschwitz arrived on August 30, 1944, the second of 200 women on October 15, and the last two arrived from Bergen-Belsen. Among the inmate slave laborers in Markkleeberg were some 1,300 Jewish women from Hungary and 250 French resistance fighters. All worked twelve-hour shifts under inhuman conditions, but the French women lived in separate barracks and had little contact with the Hungarians. Those who could no longer work were condemned to death by being sent back to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen.

In charge of the overall operation of the Markkleeberg slave labor camp, including the inmate labor force, was *SS Oberscharführer* [chief guard] Alois Knittel (1896 – 1962), sent there from Buchenwald, who is mentioned regularly in Frank's writings – but never by name. Zahava Szász Stessel recalled that Knittel, only a sergeant by rank, ended up with this privileged job because he was too old to fight on the Eastern front. Survivors agreed that at the beginning he was less malicious and when he was in a good mood, he called every girl Sara (the Nazi designation for all Jewish females), and they in turn referred to him as *öreg* [old (man)]. However, with the arrival of ever-increasing numbers of prisoners and with the German military situation at the front turning grave, he became much crueler, beat many prisoners, and shot some during the death march. Although a few days after the war, several of the Hungarian women inmates recognized him among prisoners of war and some eventually also testified against him, in the end he was never brought to trial.

The camp was evacuated on April 13, 1945, as the Americans were approaching. Some 1,500 women were marched to Theresienstadt, but fewer than half arrived: only 703 survivors registered in Theresienstadt. Most of the missing perished, but some escaped along the route, which Frank mentions in her work, writing that,

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Tamás, "A miskolci zsidóság a Holocaust időszakában," *A Herman Ottó Múzeum Évkönyve* 40 (2001): 335-346,
http://epa.oszk.hu/02000/02030/00033/pdf/HOM_Evkonyv_40_335-345.pdf.

once again, just as at the beginning of their deportation from Miskolc, she did not try to escape.[18]

The slave labor that thousands of Hungarian women like Erzsébet Frank and her sister performed is an important aspect of a vast and complex Nazi bureaucratic system of *Zwangsarbeit* [forced labor] that, in a collaboration between industry and government, sustained the German economy and the economic needs of German industry in the Third Reich during World War II. Private industry profited from the slave labor of Jews, whose labor became indispensable to the German war effort. The German-operated *Arbeitslager*, or work camps, increased massively as the war progressed. By the end of the war, virtually all surviving concentration camp inmates had spent at least part of their captivity "leased out" by the SS to private companies, particularly to German defense firms, such as Tyssen, Krupp, and IG Farben. It is estimated that about twenty percent of Hungarian Jews sent to Auschwitz were used as forced labor and of these, some 20,000 survived. Paradoxically, some Jews – and many Jewish women, who were preferentially chosen for some types of labor – likely survived the Holocaust because they were temporarily exempted from genocide due to the Third Reich's economic interests and labor shortages. At the same time, it is also true that tens of thousands of Jewish concentration camp inmates sent to Germany for slave labor were already marked for death through labor and would have perished had the war lasted a few months longer.

The most detailed works to date on Jewish forced labor is by the Berlin historian Wolf Grüner,[19] who argues that the focus placed by most historians on concentration camps has diverted attention from the enormous proliferation of forced labor sites. He aims to disentangle the intricate relationship between forced labor and mass murder as a central feature of the Nazi persecution of Jews. However, Grüner's work does not deal specifically with women, nor does it deal with Hungary, for which we need to turn to Zahava Szász Stessel's monumental study. She was born as Erzsébet Szász (1930–20??) in Abaújszántó, and she was deported with her sister Katalin (Picture 7) when they were fourteen and thirteen, respectively. They were first in Auschwitz, then in Bergen-Belsen and Leipzig, and ended up in Markkleeberg, like the like Frank sisters, but they were over a decade younger. They were among the youngest and smallest built prisoners, who had

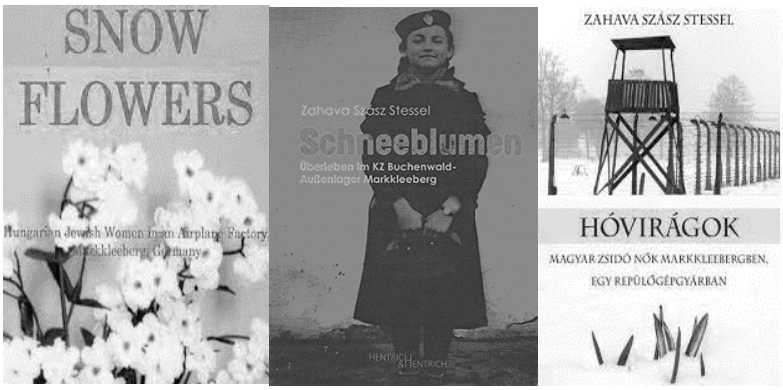
[18] It was primarily the French *résistantes* who escaped during the death march, as has been recently documented by Justine Picard in her biography of Catherine Dior, the beloved younger sister of Christian Dior, who, arrested in 1940, was sent to Markkleeberg from Ravensbrück. After the war she became the inspiration behind the legendary fragrance Miss Dior that Christian Dior launched alongside his New Look collection in 1947. Justine Picard, *Miss Dior: Muse et Resistante, Le Destin Insoupçonné* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021).

[19] Wolf Gruner, *Jewish Forced Labor under the Nazis: Economic Needs and Racial Arms, 1938-1944,* transl. by Kathleen M. Dell'Orto (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Marc Buggeln, *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

great difficulty even reaching the machinery. Stessel wrote that part of what saved her life was that, because she was too small to work on the machine, she was given the lighter task of sweeping up metal fillings that fell to the ground.

Picture 7. Sixteen-year-old Katalin Szász in the Indersdorf DP Camp Near Munich, 1946 https://www.jugend-im-kz.de/en/zahava-szasz-stessel

Erzsébet Szász and her sister were the only survivors from her family. After the war, she moved to Palestine, where she changed her name to Zahava and was married, but later emigrated with her husband to New York, where she became a university librarian and wrote two books. Her first book, originally her doctoral dissertation entitled *Wines and Thorns in Tokay Valley*, was published in 1995. It was a study of her small winemaking hometown and its Orthodox Jewish community, in an area noted for Tokay wine, where the town's Jewish merchants were instrumental in making the wine internationally famous. *Snow Flowers,* her second book was about Markkleeberg. It was translated into German by students of the Rudolf-Hildebrand Gymnasium in Markkleeberg in 2001, into Hungarian by the title *Hóvirágok: Magyar zsidó nők Markkleebergben egy repülőgyárban* in 2015, and into Hebrew in 2018 (Picture 8). She wrote that the title of the book refers to the humanity and solidarity among the female prisoners in the camp, which, like snowflowers, were never extinguished, even under snow and ice.



Picture 8. Covers of the English, German and Hungarian editions of Stessel's book

In *Snow Flowers* Stessel describes how the women found relief in sentimental Hungarian songs and poetry[20] and in this context discusses how Frank wrote her poetry: by keeping her papers in the closet next to her machine at the factory, writing only a few lines at a time. Writing in secret, next to a noisy machine and in danger of getting caught, she said that she could think only in two lines at a time, which she wrote in rhyme. She felt that her life was given a purpose by writing, and writing was much appreciated by the other women. While she never asked for payment, the others would share their portions of bread with her and do some of her chores so that she would have more time to write. When the girls returned from work, they might be greeted with a poem in which Erzsébet put the latest news about the camp, rhymes that immortalized various *Aufseherinnen* [overseers], and some even served as a kind of gossip column. Frank also wrote work she later said she was ashamed of, such as the poem she was commanded to write for the camp commander Alois Kittel's silver wedding anniversary. Frank knew German and composed new lyrics to the tune of the popular war song *Lili-Marleen*, sung by one of the girls, who could sing in operatic solo, and accompanied by others in impromptu orchestra with buzzing and humming and makeshift instruments, and banging on pots. The singer was probably Ibolya Kail Gábori – who was the main camp singer and would sing popular Hungarian marching songs and popular hit tunes – accompanied by an orchestra of four or five girls, to create the semblance of an orchestra. The audience participated by humming to the tune, while Frank, in the name of the girls, showered the couple with best wishes, although not without a bit of humor in the ending:

> Wir sagen jetz alles
> Was uns am Herzen lag:
> Weniger Zählappell und je öfter Zulage.
> Erleben Sie in Glücklichkeit,
> Sehr viel Freude mit Gesundheit
> Die Diamant-Hochzeit,
> Die Diamant-Hochzeit.
>
> We now tell you all
> What is in our hearts:
> Less roll call and more often extra food, please,
> So may you live in happiness, in health and joy,
> And may He bless your diamond jubilee,
> Your diamond jubilee.

[20] 177-179.

Knittel was pleased with the song and the presentation, and the camp received a container of extra food that day.

Most of Frank's occasional poetry is not known to have survived, although some of it may have been kept by women who carried it on the death march, as was the case with her long poem, *Sweisserok*, in which she described the friendship and daily lives of twelve slave labor welders, the group of women who were given a special task of attending to the welding machines in the factory. Because they engaged in a technical type of work, they had to pass a test for both coordination and concentration and good eyesight, for which the factory representative selected twelve girls from the first arrivals to Markkleeberg. They used goggles against the strong light and the splinters from the machines but no face masks or protective clothing, and the special gas for welding was harmful for their lungs. Szász Stessel did not know if the German engineer who tested and selected the girls knew there were three groups of sisters among the twelve.[21] Frank lived in the same barracks with the group, and admired how they got along so well, although they had previously not known one another. The extant two-page manuscript of the poem is decorated with an enlarged ornamented initial capital letter in the style of illuminated manuscripts, and it is further illuminated by a variety of border garlands and, most importantly, in the upper margin by striking cartoon portraits of all twelve welders, in two groups on either side of the title. The illustrations are the work of a fellow slave laborer, possibly named Gizella, who drew the girls with overalls, work goggles and short hair. All the women are named in the poem, as is one man, a gentile Flemish political prisoner, with whom two of the girls were in love. Because the twelve girls and the Flemish prisoner worked outside, they were able to share daily information with the others.

After the April 1945 death march, ten of the twelve "welders" survived, which speaks to their support system. One of the women named in the poem is Erzsébet Zucker, along with her sister, as the *két Zukker* [two Zuckers], the later Elizabeth Mermel, born in 1924 in Sátoraljaújhely. It was Erzsébet Zucker who carried the poem about the welders during the death march, and took it with her much later when emigrating to the U.S. In 1993 she donated it to the USHM. Their site[22] provides a hazy image of the two-sheet manuscript, which, as it can be seen (Picture 9), was folded in eights and subsequently pasted. The poem, written in February 1944, starts like a fairy tale, with the words *egyszer volt, hol nem volt* [once upon a time]. Unfortunately, most of the original Hungarian text is virtually unreadable in the image available at the site, which also provides an English translation.

[21] Stessel, *Snowflowers,* 131ff.

[22] https://perspectives.ushmm.org/item/erzsebet-frank-the-welders/collection/artists-and-visual-culture-in-wartime-europe.

Picture 9. A copy of the original poem *Sweisserok*

Sweisserok

Egyszer volt hol nem volt, volt Németországban
Markkleeberg városában, Lipcse szomszédságában.
A szép hármas blokkban a huszonkettesben
Élt példás rendben és csendben ott tizenkettesben.
Egymást mind szerették, lágerben ez nagy szó
Egyetértesében élt a tizenkét sweisseló. [*sic.*]

Szobájuk szép rendes, blokkunkban a példa
A priccsük mind kettes, függönyük madeira.
A lyukak kivágva, kivarrva nem voltak,
Mert himző pamuthoz jutni már nem tudtak.
Nyolc órát dolgoztak, tiszta volt ruhájuk.
Rendesen mosdottak, szép volt frizurájuk.
Pulóvert is kaptak, lábukon harisnya,
Hetenként fürödtek, overáljuk tiszta.

Egyszer volt, hol nem volt, ez el is hihető
Így élt a blokkunkban tizenkét heggesztő.
Zulágot is kaptak, jó étvággyal ettek,
A faszung osztásnál ők nem verekedtek.
A fele minden nap reggeli siktában
Szép csendesen és rendben ment be a vasgyárba.

Szerényen dolgoztak, nem volt egy megváltás
Ha két óra tízkor bejött a felváltás:
Adri, Lili, Magda, Herta és Rózsika;
Hatodik volt köztük madérás Rózsika.
A másik csoportban volt három testvérpár

Két Lerner, két Zukker meg volt a két Trattner lány.
Adri a Lilinek nem volt bár testvére,
Mint Sziami ikrek jártak a WC-re.
Herta volt Magdának kenyérben partnere.
De sajnos pechére a csíkosat szerette.
Nem ismertem soha életüknek titkát;
Kit kedvelt a Flamand, Alizkát vagy Hertát?

Tizenkét heggesztő élete egy álom,
Tizenkét monogram tucat vöröstálon.
Nem is volt a gyárban olyan, ki nem tudta,
Hogy negyed háromkor fut be hat sweisserka.
Ez volt a friss ujság mindennap a gyárban
Csoda-e mindenki oly nehezen várta.
Megjelent minden nap pontosan délután,
Kivéve vasárnap, tizenkét óra után.
A vezércikkben mindig a fassung volt benne
Hányban van a kenyér, mivel lesz megkenve?
Ezután ez volt a legnagyobb téma.
Nincs e véletlenül mára marharépa?
Arról is meséltek, volt-e láger botrány,
Milyen kedvében volt Lucifer, Obershar?
Leadták ők azt is legtöbbször pontosan
Lucifer hány kokszot kobzott el a blokkban.
Tizenkét Sweisserka itt köszönöm Néktek,
Hogy Ti nekünk mindig mindent elmeséltek.
Éljetek tovább is szép csendben es rendben
A Huszonkettesben: így tizenkettesben!
[Once upon a time in Germany, at Markkleeberg the city, Leipzig vicinity,
In a pleasant block of number three, room twenty-two,
Quietly, in exemplary order, the welders lived.
They all loved one another, which was remarkable in camp.
Together they were the twelve welders, in complete harmony.

Their room was neat, the pride of the block.
Beds were two tiers, curtains of eyelet/Madeira? embroidery.
The eyelets were not embellished,
As thread for stitching couldn't be obtained.
The welders worked eight hours; their clothes were clean.
They received pullovers and had stockings on their feet:
They enjoyed the weekly baths, their overalls were clean.

Just like the fairy-tale, it was scarcely believable,
How the twelve welders lived in our block.
They got "Zulag," ate it with gusto.
At food distribution they didn't fight.
Half of them worked the morning shift every day;
They marched to the iron factory with tranquil placidity.

Efficiently they worked, with good skills,
Then, at ten past two, the new shift arrived:
Adri, Lili, Magda, Herta, and Rózsika;
The sixth member was Maderas Rózsika.
In the other group were three pairs of siblings:
Two Lerners, two Zuckers, and two Trattner sisters.
While Adri was not Lili's sister,
They, like Siamese twins, walked to the W.C.
Herta was Magda's bread partner.
Unluckily, they both liked the one with the stripes.
I have never known the secret of their lives;
Who the Fleming favored, Alizka or Herta?

Twelve welders whose lives were like a dream,
Twelve monograms upon a dozen red plates.
No one in the factory could help but know
That at 2:15, six welders would be rushing in.
They were the fresh news daily in the factory.
No wonder that their arrival was so eagerly awaited.
Their report about the menu was the "editorial."
In how many portions was the bread divided, and what was spread on it?

The "talk of the town," of course, was
Whether we would have rutabagas that day.
They told us of ongoing scandals in the camp,
What was the mood of Lucifer or the Oberscharführer.
They usually reported correctly
The number of coal portions Lucifer confiscated in the blocks.
Twelve little welders, here I thank you.
For the way you always tell us everything.
May you keep on living in order and serenity,
The twelve of you in room twenty-two.]

4. Erzsébet Frank's verse diary, *365 Nap* (1946), as victim testimonial poetry

Holocaust Studies have understandably placed primary critical focus on testimony in the form of realistic prose accounts to the detriment of more self-conscious literary forms such as fairytale or poetry, or have tended to treat Holocaust poetry as a separate and self-contained genre.[23] But just as, for example, ghetto and camp diarists were meant to bear witness, writing poetry during the Holocaust in response to traumatic events was also a valuable means of resistance and even survival and allowed the authors to exert some control over their life and even provide community support. As we have seen, this mechanism is evident in the

[23] For an overview of the now expanding critical literature on documentary or witness poetry, which cannot be covered here, see Ilana Rosen, "Israeli Documentary Poetry about Coming of Age in the Early Statehood Period," *CLCWeb Comparative Literature and Culture* 22, no. 1 (2020), https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/3/.

case of Frank's *Sweisserok*, a poem which was considered important enough to be carried on the death march by one of the inmates immortalized in its verses. Holocaust poets typically used traditional rhyme forms that carried obvious traces of their literary education with its required school memorization, a memory of which could also provide for the authors and their inmate audiences a needed sense of order and a sense of their earlier identity that helped them carry on.[24] And often the camp inmates would attach the poems they wrote in the camp to tunes known in their country.[25]

While most Holocaust poets employed various lyric forms, Frank's work was unusual in that she composed both her *Sweisserok* and her monumental *365 Nap* in the twelve-syllable paired narrative verse used most famously in János Arany's Romantic epic *Toldi* (1846), which by the second half of the nineteenth century was considered among the major works of Hungarian literature and between the two world wars was required school material for memorization.[26] As mentioned, Frank attended the Debreceni Református Kollégium, where she was likely taught poetics by its renowned director, Koncz Aurelné, Ottilia Karácsony, as listed in the 1926 *Iskolai Értesitő*. The long verse form could function as a kind of recitative, akin to the musical passages in operas that deploy the rhythm of the speaking voice, making it a practical choice for Frank, who, according to Zahava Szász Stessel's testimony cited above, composed her work in small bits, while working on the factory floor.

Even in those rare, fortuitous cases, in which both the poet and the poetry written during the war survived, few published works emerged, and if so, then usually only many decades later. Frank's work was probably published because its publication was sponsored by the Miskolc branch of the survivor group *Munkaszolgálatosok Szövetsége (MUSZ)* [Forced Laborers Association] as a historical record rather than for its poetic value. Frank presumably originally composed her diary in some form in the Markkleeberg slave labor camp. According to her husband's memoir, Frank and her sister arrived back in Miskolc as early as May 1945, and, as already noted, by September 1945 she was advertising in the local paper the reopening of her cosmetics business. *346 Nap* was published in December 1946, but it is impossible to know how much of it she may have added to the original verses she had written in the camp or revised in the intervening year. Judging by the publication history of other similar early works, it is likely that the published version is actually at least a partially reconstructed diary. To cite only two comparative Hungarian-language (prose) examples, Zimra Harsányi claimed that she wrote the first part of her

[24] Andrés José Nader, "The Shock of Arrival: Poetry from the Nazi Camp at the End of the Century," *Poetry Today* 21, no. 1 (2000): 151-186.
[25] On this see Moshe Hoch, *Voices from the Dark: Music in Ghettos and Camps in Poland* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2002).
[26] Nyilasi Balázs, "The Folk Poetry of János Arany," *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai* 1-2 (2002): 115-127.

memoir, *A téboly hétköznapjai: Egy diáklány naplójából* [Everyday Life of Madness: From the Diary of a Schoolgirl] published in 1966 in Plaszów and later reworked it during her recuperation in a hospital. Then she republished it in emigration in other languages under the name Ana Novak. Another example is the diary/memoir of Olga Lázár (1926–2019),[27] by interesting coincidence also a cosmetician from Miskolc, who kept a diary in Allendorf with the help of her Miskolc campmates. Her manuscript was only published in 1987, although some parts of it had appeared as early as 1969. In the case of this work, it also cannot be determined how much of her original diary was revised.

It is likely that the original circulation of *365 Nap* did not extend far beyond the group of survivors in Miskolc that sponsored its publication. Fellow Holocaust survivor and author Béla Zsolt provided a one-paragraph prologue to the volume, which offered no information either about the author or its composition, stating only that one had to have survived Auschwitz to be able to write about it, quoting as authority Goethe's line: "wer nie sein Brot mit Tränen ass" [who has not eaten his bread with tears]. The limited, rather brief local reception of the work by liberal and leftist publications was positive but without agreement on how to characterize its genre. Zsolt's own Hungarian Radical Party's weekly, *Haladás,* called it a *verses elbeszélés* [verse narrative][28] with a simple rhyme, and a deep travelogue about the author's journey through the flaming hallway to hell. The short-lived (1945–1948) Social Democratic *Felvidéki Népszava*[29] called the work a chronological diary of the horrors of Hitler's hell and of fascism, made no mention of Jews, and said that it would have been better to write it in prose. The Smallholders' Party's *Miskolci Hirlap*[30] referred to it as a verse diary about the most horrendous two years of Hungarian Jewry that only those who had themselves gone through it would fully understand.

The second edition of *365 Days* was published in 1996 for the fiftieth anniversary of its first publication. It was edited by Ferenc Bónis (1932–2019), a distinguished music historian from Miskolc, who also published Illés Kormos's memoir two years later, in which he wrote in the Epilogue that he had known *Illés bácsi* [Uncle Illés] from childhood. Although Bónis also knew the couple well in their later years in Düsseldorf, he unfortunately offered no information about Frank's life, nor did he mention that she had written other poetry in the camp. However, he at least provided two photographs of Frank. It is possible that at the time of the second edition Frank herself was not yet aware that her *Schweisserok* had been saved by one of her mates and contributed to the USHM. Bónis wisely judged that it was not worth trying to define the genre of the work as chronicle, poetry, diary, or

[27] Lázár Olga, *Életem szörnyű naplója* (Miskolc: Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén Megyei Levéltár, 1987).
[28] November 28, 1946.
[29] Deceber 1, 1946.
[30] December 1, 1946.

historical testimony because it was all of these. This second edition received only occasional mention in Hungarian bibliographies, while the USHM site, which discusses Frank's *Sweisserok*, only notes the 1996 edition and not that her work was first published as early 1946.

365 Nap is divided into twelve chapters of unequal length, arranged chronologically, with the longest sections devoted to the initial collection in the Miskolc brick factory, the Plaszów and the Markkleeberg camps. While duly describing the horrors faced by all at each station of their calvary, unlike in her *Sweisserok*, here Frank primarily describes personal details of her life and her own reactions to the endless horrors that surround her. Her brief preface is a very traditional prayer to God for helping her survive for a year and for helping her write the truth when she is neither a writer nor a poet: *csupán egyszerű nő, mint sok ezer másik ... egyszerű szavakkal mondom el én itt egy évi utamat* [merely a simple woman, like a thousand others ... it is with simple words that I narrate here my year-long journey].[31] Here it is worth contrasting the brief collection of poems with those by the German Elsa Dormitzer, whose *Theresienstädter Bilder* [Pictures of Theresienstadt] also appeared as early as 1945. It has a richer preface, dedicated to her *Schicksalgenossen* [companions of fate] in the camp, whom she addresses warmly in the familiar plural form as *euch* [you] and reminds them how in the camp she read them from this poetry, in this way referring directly to the original composition of these poems in the camp.[32] Unfortunately, nowhere in *365 Nap* does Frank make mention of her own writing in the camp, nor even of any of her companions of fate whom she so admired in her *Sweisserok*, thus providing no clue as to the actual chronology of its composition.

Frank recounts that after the Germans occupied Hungary, in the vain hope of saving herself she volunteered for so-called defense work in the fields, but all she got from the shoveling was that it helped train her for later difficult physical labor in the camps. In this context it is of interest that in May 1944 the *főispán* [lord lieutenant] of Borsod County, *vitéz* Emil Borbély-Macky, reported sarcastically that "ma minden zsidó kapálni szeretne" [today all Jews want to hoe the ground] and that labor groups of thirty were being sent to villages under military surveillance.[33] Borbély-Macky subsequently played a major role in the ghettoization and deportation of the Jews of Borsod County, so that his name was added to the list of criminals, but he was not brought to justice because he was killed in 1945 by unknown assailants.

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[31] Frank, *365 nap*, 9.

[32] Sandra Alfers, "Elsa Dormitzer's *Theresienstädter Bilder* (1945): Poetry, Testimony, and the Holocaust" *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 5 (2015): 139-159. https://journals.openedition.org/eac/.

[33] Csíki, "A holokauszt."

Frank laments that if she had not been so cowardly, she and her sister Kató could have gone into hiding. However, they were taken to the Miskolc brick factory, along with some 24,000 Jews from all classes and walks of life, collected from neighboring areas in fourteen barracks. In the collection center, all had to give up *ékszer, pénz, karóra, jobb bőrtáska, arany töltőtoll, zálogcédula* [jewelry, money, wristwatches, good leather bags, gold pens, and pawnshop receipts]. She recounts that she felt most sorry about losing her trusty gold watch: "pontos, jó karórám, nagyon nélkülöztem/minden holmim közül, mit a falnál hagytam" [Out of all my belongings which I had to leave at the wall, I missed my good, precise wristwatch most].[34] Compare an even more terrible description of a similar scene in Salgótarján, as described by Zsuzsanna Ungerleider Szegő, where it was not a nameless policeman who confiscated her watch, which she had received for her thirteenth birthday, but her own teacher, now dressed as an officer:

> És bent a sátorban, – meglepetésemre – tiszti egyenruhában a volt iskola igazgatóm, földrajztanárom, Nagy Antal állt. Én éppen elékerültem. Átvizsgálta a kézicsomagomat, majd rápilantott a karórámra. Miközben azt levette, a következőt mondta: "Zsuzsám, rendelet van. Zsidónak nem lehet karórája. Nem is lesz már rá szükséged." A függönnyel elkerített részen pedig a bábák a nők hüvelyében keresték még mindig az aranyat. [35]
>
> [And once I was in the tent, I was surprised to see Antal Nagy, my former principal and geography teacher, now dressed in an officer's uniform. I ended up in front of him. He examined my bundle and then glanced at my watch. As he took that off my wrist he said: "My dear Zsuzsa, there is a regulation that a Jew can't have a wristwatch; anyway, you won't be needing it any longer. On the other side of the fence, the midwives were searching for gold in women's vaginas.]

The loss of one's wristwatch is a very common theme that stands out as a special loss in so many similar descriptions, in part because especially young girls often received their first watch, along with a diary, on their thirteenth birthday. In a sense, as the geography teacher states, the lost wristwatch will not be needed in that alternate world where, as Frank herself will state later, prisoners will lose the senses of place, date, and time.[36]

Frank describes how they took in those Jews who were thought to be well-to-do and torture them to gather information about what they had hidden. Many were beaten to death, while others committed suicide after having been tortured.

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[34] Csíki, "A holokauszt," 15.
[35] Szegő Andorné. "Életrajz." Centrópa, 2008.
https://www.centropa.org/hu/biography/szego-andorne.
[36] Frank, *365 nap*, 43.

Warned by her jeweler that he had been forced to report she possessed some jewelry, she confessed right away to avoid torture. Already in this terrible place, the first of several of her "suitors" that she will describe appears, one of the torturers, who starts to stroke her hair and propose to help free her. She does not accept because she wants to go back to her sister in the brick factory, where she arrives just in time for them to be loaded onto a cattle car on June 11. She and her sister were happy to be together, and they swore to each other that they would make it through together.

On arrival in Auschwitz four days later, Frank still had managed to keep a few intimate belongings, a few photos, a dry piece of bread, and a toothbrush, and was especially guarding her identity papers and her beloved old *Bible*, but she soon found they were allowed to keep only glasses and shoes. Frank dispatches their loss of clothing, their hair being shaved, and their grotesque rags, which virtually all female camp memoirists describe in gruesome detail, in a few verses, calling the women dressed in prison rags looking like a masquerade,[37] at least to this reader an ironic reminder of the yearly Miskolc Jewish women's charity masquerade events she had attended.

Frank explains that the Slovak and Polish block leaders hated the Hungarian women so much and that their beatings were revenge for having been in the lager and having lost their relatives, when the Hungarians were still sleeping in freshly made beds and enjoying the summer on the beach, their concerns still revolved around the newest fashions, and their bad days were measured by disappointments in love. In other words, once in the camp, she quickly understood that too many Hungarian Jews, who were to become the last victims of the Holocaust, had been almost oblivious to the tragedies that befell the Jewish communities in neighboring countries and had not believed that what happened there would happen to them.

After eight days in Auschwitz, Frank and her sister manage to find their way onto a transport to Plaszów-Kraków. They receive new clothes and even underwear, and she is randomly allotted a checked blue *dirndl* [folk dress in Tirol]. Some on the transport still feared they were to be taken to be gassed, to which she countered: "de ez nevetséges; innen a halálba/miért küldenék tiroli ruhába?*"* [but that's ridiculous; why would they send her to her death in a Tyrolian dress?].[38] In Plaszów-Kraków, six hours away, the situation is much better, and she meets many people she knew, even two of her students from her cosmetics shop. Although the work is terrible, she feels that she still looks relatively good: "nem festettem rosszul, élénk volt a szemem,/ 'kövérkének' hívott hálótársam menten" [I didn't look bad, my eyes were bright,/my bunkmate called me 'chubby'].[39] Some of the girls have a rich Polish *lovag* [cavalier], and two weeks after her arrival, Frank, too,

[37] Frank, *365 nap*, 35.
[38] Frank, *365 nap*, 47.
[39] Frank, *365 nap*, 54.

attracts the attention of a handsome and cultivated Pole who has, in her words, an excellent management job in the main shoe repair shop. He brings her a gift and offers to help her and even her sister, but she rejects the offer, not without commenting that she knows that the Polish women there do not have her moral values. Soon after she is solicited by another suitor she refers to as the *Luxemburg-kápó*, who promises to dress her and include her on his work team. He is such a gentleman that when she rejects him, he even bows and kisses her hand. Her third suitor is another Pole, who waits for her every day with a small gift but does not ask for anything in return. Finally, she meets a German soldier who offers her half a loaf of bread. They agree to meet the following day, but suddenly, after six weeks in Plaszów, because the front is nearing, the Hungarian women are transported back to Auschwitz. A hundred Hungarians are jammed in a car that should transport six horses or forty people, but then another thirty Poles are pushed in, who take the spots near air and take control of the car.

As the women arrive back in Auschwitz, they can smell burning flesh. Soon their own bodies are again under siege: their heads are shaved again, and they are given random rags for clothes with no underwear, and they are tattooed. Frank does not question why they had escaped being tattooed on their initial arrival two months earlier, but it was because in the summer of 1944, with the arrival of excessively large Hungarian transports, the tattooing system broke down for lack of ink. Among all these horrors the women's greatest sorrow is that their hair, now two months grown, is shaved again, causing them to suffer the loss of their gendered body image:

> Pedig hogy gondoztuk! örültünk is nagyon,
> Már hogy nőni kezdett a plasowi napon
> Egyetlen örömunk és nagy büszkeségünk
> Hajunk választéka volt, és nem volt tetűnk!
>
> [And yet how we had taken care (of our hair), we were so happy,
> That it had started to grow again in the sun in Plaszów
> Our only happiness and great pride
> Was that our hair had a part and we didn't have lice!][40]

Such hatred takes hold of Frank at this loss of the last vestiges of dignity that she says she began to hate even herself and that she lost all empathy towards others, but she did still manage to hold her sister's hand. Her lament on behalf of all the women shows how the loss of hair could turn women into an indistinguishable mass, deprived of individual and gender identity. Versions of similar descriptions abound in women's Holocaust testimonies. Compare the description of another Hungarian Auschwitz inmate, Judith Magyar Isaacson, almost half a century later

[40] Frank, *365 nap*, 73.

of the shame the women suffered.[41] She describes how they would pay with bits of bread to obtain pieces of cloth and rent a needle from which to make a kerchief and concludes that "we women were a strange sex, I decided; we sustain our sanity with mere trifles. Even in hell. Yes, even in hell."[42] See also the virtually unknown testimony of German survivor, Eva Ostwalt (1902–2010),[43] who had worked in a Siemens labor camp near Ravensbrück; she lived to be 108, and at the age of ninety-eight still had very great pride in not having been shaved and not having had lice in the camps:

> Haare waren ein Stück Lebenswillen. Sie waren mein Besitz, was Besitzlosigkeit bedeutet, können sie nich vorstellen. Ein bischen Bindfaden, eine Nadel, ein Faden waren solch ein grosses Glück für uns.[44]
>
> [Hair represented a piece of life will. It was my property, and you cannot imagine what having no property means. A bit of twine, a needle, a thread, were such source of happiness for us.]

The final camp Frank and her sister are sent to is Markkleeberg, as part of a Hungarian women's transport of five hundred. After another most difficult three-day trip, they arrive on September 13, and are at first full of joy that each prisoner receives two blankets, soap, and her own spoon, there are only ten in a room, there is bearable food, and the *Oberscharführer* [camp director] seems tolerant. Curiously, although she again mentions that here, too, she met many people she knew, she never specifically says that the great majority of the inmates in Markkleeberg were Hungarian women. They work in twelve-hour shifts, half at night, half during the day. Her job in the airplane factory is very difficult: she describes hard, boring work, and oil that filled her flesh, the constant fear of bombing, wearing the same clothes month after month, and her hatred for her German civilian boss, who still believes that Hitler will win. After her litany of suffering, she ends by saying that she had totally forgotten that "nők is voltunk egyszer!" [we had once been women!]. It is under these circumstances that she wrote the German poems to the camp director and her encomium to her fellow inmates, but curiously not in this section or anywhere in her work does she make a single mention of writing either poetry or her verse memoir in the camp.

In the course of the fall and winter of 1944, four more transports arrive, so that the lager grows to 1,600 inmates, tuberculosis spreads, and food rations become

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[41] Judith Magyar Isaacson, *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
[42] Isaacson, *Seed*, 77.
[43] Eva Ostwalt, "*Ich sterbe vor Hunger!" Kochrezepte aus dem Konzentrationslager* (Bremen: Donat Verlag, 1999).
[44] Ostwalt, *Ich sterbe*, 166-167.

more and more meager. The camp leader, who had been tame at the beginning, becomes cruel and punishes and beats the women and sadistically has their hair cut as punishment. As winter arrives, although the storehouse is full of coats and sweaters, they receive no warm clothing, and they are forced to stand in the cold in just overalls. The only good memories that Frank can describe are the so-called latrine news, which is where they receive news of the outside world, including word of Szálasi in Hungary and the progress of the war. More and more foreign workers arrive, many of them communists, and they are good to the women. On April 11, the prisoners are still told that they would have to stay and work, but two days later the camp is in confusion and they hear from a French worker that the Americans would soon arrive. Then began the final death march, accompanied by the camp commander and his wife, and he was himself now in bad shape, with his formerly elegant clothes now hanging on him. During the march Frank's sister wants to give up, but she somehow managed to keep up their spirits, although she admits that she was again too cowardly to try to escape. They dig potatoes out of the ground with their fingernails and wonder if their end will be a bullet or starvation, but miraculously after five more days of marching, as they are approaching Terezin, they realize they are free and that food and clothing await them, and so is "*az Édes Szabadság*" [sweet liberty]. In a brief epilogue in the second version, Frank merely thanks God for having given her another fifty years but says that even fifty years is not enough to forget all the horrors.

As Erzsébet Frank stated at the beginning of her verse testimony, she was not a poet but just a simple woman, but even when the *kleine Leute* [little people] speak of their own hopes, traumas, and bitterness, they are telling us about history from their own experiences and perspective. It is precisely by recovering such individual fragmentary histories, which personalize events in ways that other sources cannot, and by writing "the obscure into history," that social history can be better recovered from the micro-historical vantage point of the victims of the Hungarian Holocaust. As I have studied elsewhere, diaries and other diverse, less studied documents, including letters, photographs, and recipes, provide invaluable resources for understanding the experiences of the victims of war, but so can testimonial poetry. The value of such poetry may lie more in the powerful experiences undergone by the author rather than in the quality of the poems so that we cannot evaluate such works solely via classical aesthetics and narrow generic boundaries, but need to recognize poetry's broader potential and function, both in helping the writers survive individually and collectively, and for providing us with rich personal details of their torment.

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