

Hillersleben: Spatial Experiences of a Hungarian Jew in a German DP Camp, 1945*

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The paper focuses on Hungarian Jews who had been deported from Hungary to Bergen-Belsen and ended up in a Jewish displaced persons camp (hereinafter referred DP) before the liberation near the settlement of Hillersleben in the Magdeburg district of Sachsen-Anhalt, one of the states of Germany from April to September, 1945. In the first section of this paper, I explore the historical framework of this Hungarian group based on the current historiography and some narrative sources. In the second (main) part, I offer a case study in which I analyze the spatial experiences of György Bognár, a survivor of this aforementioned group. This camp alone did not play any special role from the perspective of Hungarian survivors. On the contrary, it provides evidence of the typical experiences of Jews in Germany in 1945. Giving voice to ego-documents and mainly to Bognár's diary, I offer an account of how a 16-year old Hungarian Jew perceived and described the space in which he lived in this “half-life” between concentration camp and liberation. Primarily by using his diary entries, I attempt to offer insights into the spatial experiences of the DPs, though I also draw on other sources. I also explore the main markers of the maps he drew of the camp. I compare these sources with the notes I took during a visit to the site in 2016. My primary goal is to use spatial analyzes of the available narrative sources to further an understanding of how someone in one of the DP camps perceived his surroundings. In the last section, I reflect briefly on how the territory and the space of the former DP camp changed function after the camp was closed.

Keywords: Hungarian Holocaust, Bergen-Belsen, Hillersleben, DP camp, concentration camp, diary, deportation, evacuation, mental map

Introduction

The Hungarian historiography hasn't dealt with the history of the approximately 14,000 Hungarian Jewish people who were deported to Bergen-Belsen.¹ International research, in contrast, has focused prominently on this giant camp

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1 British-Canadian troops who liberated the camp referred to it simply as Belsen. This term was then used by the media and in the historiography to refer to the camp, but for the sake of precision, I refer to

complex since the 1990s,² as well as on the systematic and multi-aspect discussion of the history of the German camps.³ The evacuation of Belsen, which was in a state of chaos in its final days, was ordered by Heinrich Himmler, *Reichsführer* of the SS on April 4. Himmler wanted to put people who were still capable of working to effective use for the Nazi cause. These kinds of evacuations, which could also be described as death marches, had already been on the agenda for months when the German state was collapsing. Bergen-Belsen was also an evacuation destination: tens of thousands of people, including several thousand Hungarian Jews, had been brought (or forced to walk) to the camp from the eastern camps close to the front lines (such as Auschwitz and from Gross-Rosen) between December 1944 and early April 1945.⁴ The target of the evacuation from Bergen-Belsen was Theresienstadt (today: Terezín, Czech Republic). The SS has initiated three transports on three consecutive days. The first train, later referred to as the “lost transport” in the secondary literature, departed on April 8. It had to return several times, as American bombers destroyed the tracks several times. This train finally stopped on a riverbank to the south of Berlin, on the edge of Tröbitz, and this is where the Soviet forces liberated the “passengers.”⁵ Another transport departed from Bergen-Belsen on April 10. Its passengers were also almost all Hungarian Jews (mostly from the Hungarian camp, a camp within Bergen-Belsen that was established in July 1944, and from the labor camp parts of the larger camp). The latter reached its destination: the train, equipped with three days of food per person, reached Theresienstadt after 12 days with heavy loss of life, where the Soviet forces liberated the prisoners.

it as Bergen-Belsen. An exception to my contention concerning the Hungarian secondary literature is the literature produced regarding the so-called Kasztner group. Porter, *Kasztner's Train* and Karsai and Molnár, *The Kasztner Report*, 17–49.

2 Concerning the reasons in detail, see: Reilly et al., *Approaching Belsen*, 12–14.

3 Rahe, *Das Konzentrationslager Bergen-Belsen*, 187–220.

4 For the two classic writings concerning the evacuation of Bergen-Belsen, see: Blatman, *The Death Marches* and Hördler, *Ordnung und Inferno*.

5 Concerning the evacuation of the camp primarily building on survivor narratives, see: Kubetzky, *Fahrten ins Ungevisse*, 150–76.

Hillersleben as a Space of “Half-Freedom”

In addition to the abovementioned two trains, there was another one which departed with more than 2,000 prisoners on April 7.⁶ Its passengers were brought Hungarian camp of the the Bergen-Belsen camp, which was already overcrowded and where a typhus epidemic had broken out.⁷ The train came up against an advancing American armored unit between Farsleben and Zielitz in the Magdeburg area on April 13. The Wehrmacht soldiers who had been guarding the prisoners had fled the previous night, and the prisoners were waiting for the allied units. Of the roughly 2,000–2,500 prisoners on the train, 1,528⁸ had been deported to one of the concentration or extermination camps from Hungary.

History instructor Matthew A. Rozell, who has offered an account of the story of the train and the liberation of the prisoners it bore exclusively on the basis of narrative sources.⁹ According to the recollections of the American armored soldiers (units 12 and 13 D of the American armored battalion 743) and of the survivors, the prisoners were euphoric when they saw the American “liberators,” and this moment became a lifetime memory for all of them.¹⁰

The Americans accommodated the ex-prisoners in the nearby village of Farsleben for the next two or three days, i.e. April 13, 14, and 15. They moved them into the houses owned by the locals, and they commandeered food and supplies for them. For the first time in months, the roughly 2,000–2,500 survivors were given normal medical care, slept in beds. However, many of the people who recalled the events noted that, as was the case among other Holocaust survivors, the famished liberated prisoners often overate, meaning that they ate the high-caloric foods immediately and as quickly as possible, and this often led to serious medical complications and even death. Sources reveal little about the reactions of the local Germans. The Hungarian memoirs mostly

6 For accurate details and dates (in daily breakdown) of the three evacuation routes on the map, see: Bucholz, *Bergen-Belsen. Kriegsgefangenenlager 1940–1945*, 188.

7 The fact that the term “Ungarnlager” itself was unknown in the Hungarian Holocaust literature until very recently indicates the absence of historical memory. Weiczner, “*Ez most a sorsod kiüldözött zsidó*,” 267. Today, a study an overview of the Hungarian camp is available: Billib, “Infolge eines glücklichen Zufalls...,” 92–108.

8 Three of them were died during the evacuation. Thank you for the informations to Bernd Horstmann (Bergen-Belsen Memorial).

9 Rozell, *Magdeburg*.

10 The photograph taken during the event is one of the best-known photographs about the tragedy of the Shoah up to this day. Rozell, *Magdeburg*, 10–15.

note their alleged insensitivity. Their reactions may have been influenced by the fact that the American forces were compelling them to provide accommodation for the liberated prisoners and that the arrival of the Allied forces also meant the inevitable slaughter of their animals and the utilization of their workforce. According to Ingeborg Moritz, a local German woman with whom historian Heléna Huhák and I did an interview (to my knowledge, this is the only source on the events from the perspective of a local resident), her family was shaken by the sight of the survivors and helped them by providing milk, food, and beds, for which the liberated inmates were very grateful.¹¹

Over the course of the next few days, the Americans gathered the former prisoners together and transported them with buses and carts to a DP camp established for Jewish survivors in spring 1945 near an adjacent settlement about ten kilometers away, near Hillersleben. The camp was one of the more than one hundred DP camps for Jews, which were in operation for shorter and longer periods of time between 1945 and 1957. The military (and later the administrative) authorities in the zones of the victorious powers uses these camps as places to house liberated prisoners who had survived the holocaust. Hillersleben was one of the at least two dozen DP camps where Hungarian Holocaust survivors waited for their fates to change for the better.¹² While the civilian and POW residents of the postwar non-Jewish DP camps for the most part were forced to repatriate, in the case of the Jewish DPs, there was no consistent policy on this question. In the summer of 1945, tens of thousands of liberated Jews were gathered in such camps in zones of Germany, mostly young adult males under the control of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.¹³

One could refer to Hillersleben as a transit camp if one were to focus on the interim period before repatriation, but one could also consider it a relocation camp, as Hillersleben was where the allied forces placed individuals who had been liberated in each region (mostly from concentration camps) or gathered from the area. The term “relocation camp” indicates the temporary nature of this moment between the two longer periods. (It indicates that this was an interim period of collection and distribution between captivity and freedom,

11 Interview with Ingeborg Moritz, 2016.

12 The most significant books on Jewish DP camp history: Berkowitz and Patt, *We are Here*; Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*; Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism*; Königseder and Wetzell, *Waiting for Hope*; Lavsky, *New Beginnings*; Mankowitz, *Life Between Memory*; Myers Feinstein, *Holocaust Survivors in Postwar Germany, 1945–1957*.

13 Lavsky, *New Beginnings*, 31–33.

which was a phase in the larger process which was already familiar to some of the Hungarian survivors in Hillersleben.) Last but not least, one could also refer to Hillersleben as a refugee camp, as its denizens were refugees in the eyes of the military leadership and the local inhabitants. Most of the time, the survivors' narratives simply describe their temporary habitation as a camp or sanatorium, suggesting that the survivors' primary concern and, later, their strongest memory was recovery and healing.

The Hillersleben DP camp was organized by the American military in April 1945. The camp lay on the confines of the British, American, and Soviet occupation zones, and a peculiar circumstance arose when, in the spring and summer of 1945, the leadership of the camp switched twice within a short period of time. At first, the camp was under the leadership of the Americans who liberated the area. The British then assumed this role in June, and the Soviets took over in early July.

Originally, Hillersleben served as a flight station for the German Luftwaffe (since 1937) and as an experimental site for armored vehicles. Accordingly, the complex consisted of two parts: a barrack and the officers' quarters and the related outbuildings (hospital, kitchen, etc.). It was a lowland camp surrounded by trees and wire fencing and separated from the village only by the ploughlands. There were both functional buildings (the kitchen, the hospital, the commander's premises, a theatre, a cinema etc.) and spaces (a graveyard, a soccer field, and a pool) in the camp. The denizens of the displaced persons camp were placed in the fully equipped apartments which had been used by the officers (the so-called *Beamterviertel*, or officers' quarter), which, in the absence of reliable data, we can only hypothesize were located in the 20 yellow-painted, single-floor residential blocks. The actual camp commandship has ordered that a private military guard be posted to each house in the initial period (until June).

The Spatial Perceptions of a Survivor

I attempt to offer insights into the experiences of the people who were temporarily accommodated in Hillersleben by using one survivor's diary and, more specifically, examining the author's perceptions of space. The diary of György Bognár is one of the most precious sources on the Hillersleben Hungarian group's history. The manuscript can be found in the Budapest Holocaust Memorial Center's

Repository.¹⁴ The surviving sources reveal little about Bognár himself. We know that he was born in Budapest in 1928 to a middle-class Jewish family and he lived in the eight district of the capital with his parents. He was a secondary school student in 1944 when he was taken from his home, made to wear a star of David to identify him as a Jew, and forced to clean rubble. He ended up on Teleki Square, from where he was deported to Bergen-Belsen in December 1944.¹⁵ He struggled through the phases of camp life alone in the Hungarian camp. He began writing his diary when he was deported, and he wrote entries more or less continuously, sometimes in booklets and sometimes using sheets of paper he had found. Important events occurred of which there is no mention in his entries, suggesting that he was not always able to make entries, and he wrote about many events a few days or in some cases a few weeks after they had taken place, including the evacuation and the treatment he was given in the camp hospital.

Unconventionally, in my analysis of Bognár's diary, I do not offer a "close reading." In other words, I do not provide a careful, focused discussion of specific passages from the text, as I would not be able to do so within the framework of this relatively short article.¹⁶ Instead, I provide an "integrated historical intuitive analysis" of the section of the text between the middle of April and the end of July 1945 in accordance with the sectioning by Éva Kovács, and not a qualitative analysis.¹⁷ I am convinced that, in part because of the dearth of diaries on which we can draw, this kind of analysis of ego-documents best furthers an understanding of the life in this camp and this moment of "transitory existence" at the end of the war.

In this case, I'm mostly confining myself to only one aspect of Bognár's diary. I analyze his space-related approach, through which I can reconstruct the mental map which took form in Bognár mind. In other words, I seek to discover how he perceived and visualized the environment in which he was living. Bognár's drawn maps can be analyzed to give insights into the underlying mental maps that have shaped them. Historians have taken up mental/cognitive maps as theoretical constructs over the course of the last 30 years in their

14 The diary of György Bognár. Holocaust Memorial Center, Repository. 2011. 15.1–2. (Hereinafter I will refer to it as "Diary," indicating the date of entry and the page number from the typewritten script.) Excerpts from Bognár's diary were published in a sourcebook in 1995, but this publication didn't cover the months he spent in Hillersleben.

15 Bakó et al., *Emlékezések*, 432.

16 The parts about the period in Hillersleben come to more than 150 typewritten pages.

17 Kovács, "Post-testimony."

discussion of mental images of physical spaces.¹⁸ In regards to the Holocaust, after the incursion of “spatial turn” into Holocaust Studies,¹⁹ the innovative works²⁰ of British historian Tim Cole could be considered groundbreaking in this field. Building partly on environmental psychology works, Cole associated the historical examination of the micro- and macro-environments with the most diverse levels of empirical and emotional experience. I confine myself only to some typical representations of space in my discussion. Furthermore, in regards to the text, I do not address issues such as identity,²¹ the consumption of food, communication, or the importance of travel and homesickness within the history of perception. Where possible, I have compared Bognár’s diary entries with the notes and photographs I took in the area of the Hillersleben camp in April 2016 during my visit to the site.²²

“Hillersleben, the City of Liberated Jews”

Bognár experienced the evacuation as a trauma, since compared to the compound, he was the denizen of a Sonderlager, which means the circumstances in which he lived in Bergen-Belsen were exceptional. The prisoners received better provisions and they did not have to work. The diary entries offer a portrait of a weary, frustrated, angry teenage boy who didn’t let anyone near him during the journey on the train. The negative overtones in the entries did not change with the liberation at Farsleben. The entries give an image of terrible hassle and chaos, showing the uncertainty of the general state of war and also the doubts and the duality of fear and hope which troubled Bognár at the same time. For a long time, he seems to have feared the possible return of the Germans, worrying that they might find the broken, empty wagons. Later, like the others, he managed to beg for food in Zielitz and in Farsleben. “And then,” he writes,

18 Götz and Holmén, “Introduction,” 158.

19 Fogu, “‘A Spatial Turn,’” 218–39.

20 See Cole, *Traces of the Holocaust*, and Giordano et al., “Geographies of the Holocaust,” 1–17.

21 Although microenvironments, especially the “home,” play the most important role in identity formation. Altman, *The Environment and Social Behavior*.

22 I have made a site visit to the area of the former camp using special permit in April 2016 together with Heléna Huhák. I would like to thank Daniel and Klaus-Peter Keweloh, amateur researchers of the local history of Hillersleben, for their help and advice during the visit and since. We prepared photo documentation of the buildings, and to the extent possible, we identified the buildings recognizable from the diary and other ego-documents.

“the nice Sonderlager-life was over.”²³ This entry, dated April 13, 1945, clearly indicates that Bognár did not experience the train trip or even his first “free” day after the train trip as freedom, but he found it much more comparable to the circumstances in which he had lived in Bergen-Belsen.²⁴ His rather bitter entries from the middle of April confirm that even on the second day of the liberation, “he was still being accommodated in the train car, which otherwise was empty.

Bognár was one of the former prisoners who “overate” during the first days, and he arrived in Hillersleben with stomach pains²⁵ His situation was worsened by the fact that most of his companions had already been given accommodations in the buildings by the time he had arrived. Over the course of the next few weeks, he changed his dwelling place five times within the camp,²⁶ which meant that moving remained a constant experience for him. In the first days, he complained that he had to live in a “barrack,” i.e. a dwelling established temporarily among the stone buildings for those who were taken to Hillersleben later and couldn’t get be given lodging in the stone buildings. The crowded wooden barrack, in which he did not have his own room, reminded Bognár of the Bergen-Belsen barracks, and he “constantly strove to get an apartment.”²⁷ He also wanted to move out of the barracks because in the “technical school” (the former military training school), he was accommodated with some people who stole from him on the first day and even took his gramophone.²⁸

At the end of April, with the help of the American camp commandership, he managed to get into an apartment in one of the stones buildings together with two other people, Miklós Frommer (Miki) from Makó, who was about the same age as Bognár, and Iván Pál Medgyesi, who was from Budapest.²⁹ This was not his final destination, however, because over the course of the next weeks, like the other camp dwellers, he was moved again. This situation was a result of the general lack of organization, as displaced persons from different countries were constantly arriving in bigger and smaller groups from the former concentration camps, and they had to be given accommodations and then grouped according to nationality and, when possible, family. According to Bognár’s diary, in the early days, it seemed as if the camp were being pillaged, as the people who were

23 Diary, 13 April 1945, 124.

24 Diary, 134. posterior entry on April 27, 1945.

25 Diary, 14 April 1945, 127.

26 For its analysis, see: Huhák, “Szabadok voltunk.”

27 Diary, April 27, 1945, 141.

28 Diary, April 26, 1945, 136.

29 They both were born in 1929. Farsleben name list database. Archives, Bergen-Belsen.Memorial)

arriving were searching for available apartments, and if someone managed to move into a certain dwelling first, he or she acquired a claim to that dwelling. Bognár himself must have been slow to catch on, as by the time he realized what was going on, all the buildings he visited already had denizens.³⁰ In the end, the American camp commandership provided accommodations for Bognár with two other Hungarian boys in another small room, which already had a bathroom. Bognár notes in his diary that “this is fair enough for me.”³¹ They were given lodgings in a domicile in which an Orthodox Jewish family had already been given housing, but they lived in the other room. This did not bring an end to the process of moving, however. An American soldier came on April 28 and told them that they had to empty the building by 6 PM because Soviet soldiers were coming from Magdeburg and would be given accommodations in their lodgings. 8 to 10 similar buildings shared the same fate. The dwellers were forced into the street, and they were permitted to take refuge in the attic of the house on the other side of the way. The three of them were allowed to remain in their dwelling places for that night. “We are the wandering Jews,” Bognár wrote. The next day, an American soldier came for them. They were shown the buildings in which there were still available lodgings, and in the end, all three of them were moved into a four-room apartment, where nine Spanish Jews had already been housed, including two families.³² The “Spaniards” moved out on May 6, and they left Hillersleben, so Bognár and the other two boys were able to move out of the kitchen and into the room.³³

The diary entries offer a vivid image of the surroundings. The first apartment in Hillersleben is described as spacious compared to the number of denizens, with “big rooms.” However, when I visited the site, I didn’t find any apartments in the block in question which could have had spacious rooms. Rather, they had smaller rooms of only a few square meters. Presumably, Bognár was given a misleading impression on the first day when he saw the apartment with many rooms, despite the fact that he and his companions were given lodgings in an untidy kitchen equipped with a stove and cabinet. A bunkbed was put in the room.³⁴ Bognár may well have been troubled both by the inconvenience of having to move and by the crowdedness of the dwelling, not to mention the fact

30 Diary, April 27, 1945, 149–50.

31 Diary, April 26, 1945, 137.

32 Diary, April 28–29, 1945, 155–57.

33 Diary, May 7, 1945, 171.

34 Diary, April 30, 1945, 160.

that he had difficulty communicating with the people with whom he shared the spaces, though he did not write about this in a negative tone in his diary entries. After a while, he resigned himself to the necessity of sharing the spaces with others. Indeed, he actually took a liking to them, so much so that, that in the end, they didn't want to be separated. When he moved into his final dwelling place in the camp at Stalin Platz 1 on June 18, he did not do so alone. Rather, Miklós and Pál made the move too. By this time, hundreds of former concentration camp prisoners had left Hillersleben, but the three boys were still only given a room that was 20 square meters, a fact which suggests that the camp was still crowded. The room had beds and furniture which was in decent conditions, however. Once the boys managed to tidy up the room and make it a little bit cozy, Bognár became fond of this station of his time in Hillersleben. Of course, another person had already been given lodging in the other room of the two-room apartment.³⁵ According to Bognár's diary entries, the first thing which he added to his mental map was the space itself, i.e. the room and the kitchen, and the views from this space. Then came the whole apartment, the building, and then gradually the whole camp. They tried to make the rooms livable and cozy, and they tried to repair the beds as soon as possible. They even put a flower on the table: "First of all, I obtained paper, a fountain pen, and a small notebook. This is important for posterity."³⁶ In his entries, Bognár describes his dwelling places (the room, later the two-room and the four-room apartments, including the corridor and attic) several times and in detail. One has the impression that, after his experiences in the crowded barrack, the crowded train, and the upheavals of the first few days in Hillersleben, he was beginning to have a different experience of space. The joy Bognár may well have felt seems to have prompted him to note the condition of the main room and of his own room again and again, and in remarkable detail. Almost every diary entry includes mention of the radio, which was part of the interior of the apartment, and of his habit of listening to the radio.

In addition to the furnishings, Bognár also mentions the external space accessible from the room several times. "By the way," he writes in an entry dated April 27, "our room opens onto the square, there is a tree in front of it. The sun shines in beautifully in the morning and one hears the sound of spring birdsong."³⁷ After a while, his room, the clean air, the sight of the green trees, and the warmth even raised his spirits. The more distant square, the buildings, and the

35 Diary, June 19, 1945, 221.

36 Diary, April 26, 1945, 148.

37 Diary, April 27, 1945, 152.

public spaces also appeared in his entries soon, and Bognár slowly came to know the whole camp. He expressed his thoughts about the whole of the camp:

It is a small town. As we enter the gates—as there are some gates—we see yellow buildings with several stories. Soon, we see the well-tended square. American motorcycles rush over the surfaced road. People are queueing in front of the canteen for lunch. Milk is being distributed at the hospital right now, the milk and the bread are handed out through the window. Alterkaserne 86, where the American hospital is now, has been completely emptied. New equipment was added, through the window we can see the kitchen, where excellent meals are cooked. The Hungarian delegation's office is in the canteen, it is a very nice, classy room with wooden paneling. And the writing desks [in the office – A. Sz.] are arranged like in Pest. The streets are clean, German workers are going out and cleaning every day. Tinned food is now being unloaded from a car near the canteen and the EO [Economic Office – A. Sz.], American cars are bringing food without pause. If we go through the crossing gates, we get to the train station, the technical school, and even the other factories and experimental buildings are found here. Only Americans are here now. The villas are the other way. This is where the liberated Jews live. One-story buildings equipped with the most modern conveniences. They are identical, and they look pretty nice, with a partly gray and partly brown design. To get there, we can go on the motor-road, and then we see container gardens on the one side and a bigger park on the other side. A small footpath runs through it, which continues in Hermann Göring Strasse. The former street is Berkerstrasse. There is a small pond and a small creek in the park, which also has a waterfall. Small gardens are among the villas with flower gardens and container gardens. Everything is nice and green. Hitler Strasse is the first side street. Then comes Siegerplatz, a finely landscaped square. Usually everything is very nice, and one can clearly see that military officers lived here. One hears the sounds of happy footfalls on the street. Jewish women are showing off and flirting with the American soldiers. Others are taking home some lunch. Bicycles are passing us on the flat street. American soldiers are rushing with the fire engine. Everything is game and sports for them. This is an international city. You can hear the slow sounds of Hungarian, then swift Polish, Slovak, and the melodic French one after another, and only the soldiers speak English. I haven't been to the neighborhood yet. I could see the village from our previous apartment, I could see through the train bridge. There are windmills next to the high road. This is typical of this region. The American reinforcements are constantly

marching along the high road. Thousands of cars every day. We can even see trains passing by. It's possible to travel now. There's great silence and tranquility. The birds are tweeting in the morning, it's like a vacation spot, and we are still kept from home. The Dutch men already got their train tickets to return home. I wish we could be there as well.³⁸

Bognár describes the camp as a real multi-national, bustling little town (this image conforms to the spatial experiences of the other Hungarians in the camp)³⁹, though he may have exaggerated its size. The visit I made to the site in 2016 supports the content of Bognár's diary: what he saw at the time, the partly demolished and ruinous former barracks and DP camp, must have been grandiose and city-like. His diary entries offer an image of a jumble of real squares, streets, and communal and private buildings, some of which had been partly demolished or had partly collapsed and some of which were in an untended condition. This image corresponds with the three undated maps Bognár drew (as he admitted in his diary) during his tranquil hours in his room.⁴⁰

Drawing on the scholarship of Andrea Dúll, Heléna Huhák offers the following observation concerning the complex process of creating a mental map: "During the mental mapping of an environment [...], its metric information, the directions, distances, axes, scales etc. might be distorted, and size alteration, position dislocation etc. might occur typically in accordance with emotional significance."⁴¹ In his diary Bognár offers no explanation of why he drew the maps. He may have drawn them after he had settled into the camp. According to his diary, he began working on them on May 6.⁴² He did not simply draw the intersections, boundaries, and the most significant sites of the camp. Rather, he drew the geographical layout of the streets with the utmost accuracy and with a fine sense of proportion. This suggests that he had been to the places several times and he knew them well, and he didn't simply map the path from his lodgings to the canteen and the hospital.⁴³ The precision and detail of Bognár's maps are, perhaps, not surprising. As Ann Sloan Devlin suggests in her discussion of cognitive mapmaking, residents of small towns can acquire remarkably detailed

38 Diary, April 27, 1945, 150–52.

39 For example: George S, interview, 1955; Katalin S., interview, 51127.

40 Their location: Holocaust Memorial Center, Repository, 2011. 25.1.

41 Huhák, "Bergen-Belsen a deportált magyar zsidók élettörténeteiben."

42 Diary, May 6, 1945, 191–92.

43 Beginning with his entry on June 5, Bognár more and more frequently referred to the fact that he had walked to specific locations in the camp which previously had seemed faraway to him or that he went sunbathing to some grass-covered areas of the camp.

knowledge of the human geography of a town in a relatively short period of time.⁴⁴ Bognár's mappings of the environment in which he lived indicate the five qualities identified by Kevin Lynch as essential to the mental images in the minds of people who live in a given urban space: paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks.⁴⁵ Bognár was so accurate that, during my visit to the site, I could easily orientate myself on the streets among the remaining buildings on the basis of his maps.

Some buildings which I was able to identify on the basis of the diary and the name of some of the public spaces deserve particular attention.⁴⁶ The functions of the spaces written about in the diary and drawn on the maps have changed. Previously, they served national socialist military purposes; they were workplaces and partly dwellings for hundreds of soldiers, air force officers, pilots, SS-members, and officers.⁴⁷ One of the important spaces was the “hospital,” which had a key role in the survival of György Bognár and other camp denizens and which Bognár referred to in his diary as an “outpatient clinic,” a term he had heard or read in German in the barracks.⁴⁸ He realized early on that there was a waiting room and a treatment room in the center and that he had to stand in the queue for an incredibly long time. Initially, patients were treated by physicians recruited from the ranks of the survivors. Bognár had a devastatingly critical opinion of them. But when the Americans took over the management of the hospital, everything changed. Professional medical care was made available.⁴⁹ Bognár was taken to the hospital due to high fever on May 10, 1945, and the physicians determined that he too was infected by the typhus epidemic which broke out at the time. The hospital was his new home until June 1. He didn't write in his diary during his treatment and recovery. The first entries in which he mentions his experiences in the hospital were written in the first days of June. During his time in the hospital (when at times he suffered hallucinations), he does not seem to have thought about questions of space (or at least there

44 Devlin, “The ‘Small Town’ Cognitive Map,” 58–66.

45 Lynch, *The Image of a City*. Nowadays, cognitive maps are interpreted as the social relationships of the spaces and the citizens. Wilhelm, “Kognitív térképek,” 35.

46 Accordingly, Bognár's entries focus on the natural space as well. Since the “spatial turn,” we have known that the natural landscape is not a stand-alone space. It can be interpreted as the unity of natural and social spaces. Torre, “The ‘Spatial Turn’ in History,” 1127–41.

47 Several brochures and postcards which were spread for propaganda purposes beginning in the late 1930s confirm this. Most of the former buildings are now in a ruinous condition or have been destroyed.

48 Diary, April 27, 1945, 145.

49 Diary, April 27, 1945, 147–48.

is no mention of any such reflections in the diary entries he wrote about his time there), but he did reflect, after his period of convalescence had come to an end, on his more immediate environment. He makes mention in his entries of the allegedly dirty halls and small hospital rooms. In his retrospective entry in June, he wrote that, after a while, he “really wanted to get ‘home.’” This is the first reference in his diary to the modest apartments, rooms, and kitchens described above as “home.” His broader home (i.e. the camp) was increasingly empty. He describes the organized departures of prisoners of different national backgrounds (Czech, Slovak, Greek, French, Spanish) in groups or on their own more and more often beginning on June 2.

Toponyms have an important role in Bognár’s mental map, although as cognitive linguists have suggested, this is not necessarily so in all cases. The cognitive map and the memorization of toponyms arise from the same cerebration, but the names of the places are not necessarily required for the identification of the places.⁵⁰ Bognár uses geographical names in the first entries in his diary. It is strange that this was also true in the period he spent in the DP camp, initially, at least, but when drawing the maps, Bognár used the National Socialist names of the public spaces. Reading about streets named after Hitler or Hermann Göring⁵¹ might be grotesque (some of the street signs were still visible in 2016), but navigating in the crowded space may have been much more important for Bognár, and the names that were in use were of great assistance in this. Bognár himself also lived on Sieger Platz 8, and from here, he moved to Sieger Platz 2 on April 19.⁵² The changes in the history of the camp were reflected in the names as well. The use of National Socialist street names started to fade by June, which is when we first come across mentions of Roosevelt Strasse.⁵³ The change to Soviet control of the camp in early August brought changes in the names of the “small town’s” public spaces as well. The new names also had symbolic meanings. Bognár began to refer to what had been known as Hitler Platz as Stalin Platz at this time in the diary. We observe a similar process in the case of the aforementioned “center for ambulatory care” as well.

50 Reszegi, “A mentális térkép és a helynevek,” 95–100.

51 There was also a “value-neutral” public space name as well, e.g. Barbara Strasse. In other cases, such as the words indicating certain occupations, the German terms were used in the diary simply as borrowings for no ideological reasons. (E.G. using the word “Schwester” instead of nurse.)

52 Diary, April 28, 1945, 153.

53 Bognár wrote the American president’s name incorrectly in the entries. He spelled it “Roosewelt.” During my visit to the site, I saw no trace of this sign, unlike the National Socialist signs. This may explain why the Nazi public space names were used for so long in the diary.

Bognár used the term “ambulancia” in German origin, and in doing so, he seems deliberately not to be using the term Belsen hospital, which had had referred to in earlier entries as the “revier.”⁵⁴ It is also noticeable that he begins to use the term “villa” to refer to what had been the Wehrmacht barracks. The term was probably used by the Americans, but it is also possible that it was used by other prisoners. He never writes about a camp, only about buildings. However, the buildings in the photographs which I took during my site visit are not villas, but simple two-story and three-story residential buildings. It is easy to imagine that after the crowdedness of Bergen-Belsen and the trains, Bognár actually saw his dwelling as nicer than it really was. The case of the word “canteen,” or “Kantin,” is another clear example of an instance when Bognár used German terms. This word was written on the wall of the former barracks, which explains why it came to be used among the displaced persons in the camp.

Other places are also mentioned, such as the theater, which Bognár mostly refers to with the term “casino,” which also matches the Nazi usage. It was an important venue in National Socialist times as well, since this space, which is an odd one out among the buildings used by the military officers, could function as an auditorium. Hitler and Goebbels went to this building in 1942.⁵⁵ Bognár mentions in one of his entries from June that the camp staff and the displaced persons organized a so-called “mixed party” here. He grasped the importance of the casino: “The asphalt streets of Hillersleben are slowly being filled at around 6 o’clock, and the people are marching towards the Casino in bigger and smaller groups to have fun, laugh, and forget.”

Later entries in the diary from the end of June contain references to the areas set aside for sports, including the place where ping pong tables were located and a space used as sports field, where soccer games were played. The diary offers no details concerning the space where the ping pong tables allegedly were located, and even after having consulted the other potentially relevant sources, I was unable to locate this space during my visit to the site. In contrast, the soccer field is easy to identify on one of Bognár’s maps. A memorable match was played here on July 9 between the Italian and Hungarian ex-prisoners, who, unlike the Czech, Yugoslavian, German, and French ex-prisoners, were still present in huge

54 This is the common name of the infirmary of the healthcare part of the camp system maintained for the prisoners. The same term was used for the military infirmaries as well.

55 The surviving photographs testify to this. Today, the images are in the possession of the Keweloh family in Hillersleben.

numbers.⁵⁶ Bognár was a witness to the match, and his diary entries suggest that he cheered for the Hungarians who were playing, together with another 1,000 displaced Jewish camp dwellers. He also notes that most of the fans came to the venue from Roosevelt Strasse, which, on the basis of the map drawn weeks before, suggests that the audience consisted of camp dwellers, not the Soviet military commandership or the German villagers. After the overwhelming Italian victory, “the audience marched along Churchill and Eisenhower Strasse in compact order, almost endlessly—in accordance with the local dimensions, of course—to participate in the dance tonight where the very best of Hillersleben [camp] appeared.”⁵⁷

In Bognár’s text, space-related experiences are often connected to concrete emotions. Like in the case of his earlier cited entry from April 28, when he mentioned the sounds of birdsong in his room, he noted that the mood “resembles a vacation.” Many texts have been written about Bognár’s experiences of space and his experiences of cooperation with his roommates during the long days and weeks spent organizing, idling, and healing. For example, they had to agree on who would walk the one kilometer to the “canteen” to get lunch at a given time, as this was considered work, or who would do the washing up and when.⁵⁸

If we read the diary from the perspective of experiences and perceptions of space, the perspective of the entries changes with the passage of time. Initially, Bognár was writing carefully, often about the negative aspects of life in the camp, irrespective of the fact that he gradually discovered every corner of his new dwelling place. However, from the end of May and especially in and after June, when he presumably had grown accustomed to the circumstances and had finished moving and had recovered from his treatment in the hospital, he seems to have accepted the conditions in Hillersleben. Partly due to the summer heat, partly due to his health, and also because the camp became a psychological inland, he spent a lot of time outside, and even his descriptions of healing and eating, which in earlier entries had been lengthy, are comparatively short. He seems to

56 Approximately 1,343–1,458 Hungarian survivors remained until the early August in the camp. Arolsen Archives 3.1.1.3. Reference Code: 849000. List of former deportees in camp Hillersleben, 30. 7.1945. (World Jewish Congress, London); Arolsen Archives, 3.1.1.3. Reference Code: 261000. List of liberated Jews in Hillersleben, 3. 8. 1945 (World Jewish Congress, New York); Arolsen Archives 3. 1. 1. 3. Reference Code: 8805610. Hungarian and Yugoslavian Jews at Hillersleben, 8. 8. 1945. (AJDC, Paris)

57 Diary, July 9, 1945, 241–42. A Soviet-Hungarian soccer match was played in the same place on July 9. *Idem*, 247–48.

58 Diary, April 26, 1945, 142.

be thinking more and more about the past, and he begins to wonder how he will get home and what will be waiting for him at home, and his perceptions of space begin to change. With the passage of time, the camp increasingly becomes a space of relaxation and cogitation, thus losing its earlier significance. “Life continues in Hillersleben” he writes on June 8.⁵⁹ He got used to his situation, his “small town” life. There are no references to the world beyond the camp fence on the map drawn in early May. However, once the typhus outbreak had passed, the camp dwellers were free to move about. In early June, Bognár began going to the village regularly. He has also visited the buildings of the adjacent former Wehrmacht barracks.⁶⁰

Instead of Conclusions: The Continuity of Absence

The narrative descriptions of space in György Bognár’s diary and the maps he drew of the camp in which he was lodged offer a solid foundation on the basis of which we can construct an image of the whole DP camp. Bognár’s expressive entries, which are rich with data and are based on observations he made over the course of months, suggest a detailed cognitive map of the spaces, and as far as the accuracy of this cognitive map is concerned, my visit to the cite suggests that it was precise and reliable. The actual physical maps which he drew and his narrative maps (his diary entries) provide an important source for the study of this DP camp and a source on which studies of similar camps can also draw. In this article, I have drawn primarily on this source in my discussion of the conditions in the Hillersleben camp in 1945 (or at least one person’s perceptions of these conditions). This discussion, used alongside other ego-documents and archival sources, could provide a good basis for a more comprehensive study of the circumstances of Hungarian Jewish groups in DP camps.

Liberated prisoners arrived in Hillersleben continuously over the course of the summer, and as time passed, more and more people left to return home or to continue their journeys as survivors of the war and Holocaust.⁶¹ Bognár’s last diary entry was written on July 20, the day when he left the camp.⁶² By the end

59 Diary, June 8, 1945, 197.

60 Diary, June 11, 1945, 210. This was the first entry about the “walks” Bognár took in the village and the contacts he made with people outside the camp.

61 The sources on which my following comments are based are private individuals living in Hillersleben (April 2016) and the website of the settlement (<http://www.hillersleben.eu>)

62 Like most of the Hungarian prisoners in Saxony, Bognár, and on July 30, 1945, he made it to Magdeburg, where he was entitled to ration cards on the basis of the displaced persons ID he was given

of August 1945, the camp was empty, and the short-lived DP camp was closed. As part of the history of the war and the Holocaust, Hillersleben was largely forgotten for decades, as were the histories of many displaced persons. The area of the former Wehrmacht barracks became a military training ground for the German Democratic Republic in the 1950s and people were therefore not allowed to visit it. After German reunification in 1990, it was occupied by the allied German army (*Bundeswehr*). The *Bundeswehr* sold the area, together with the decaying and ruined buildings, to a Hamburg-based private firm in the 1990s, and this firm established a field of solar panels in the area. In the spring of 2016, half of the former camp's buildings were still standing, with equipment which had been used by the GDR military therein. The last buildings were demolished in October 2018.

The small Jewish cemetery in the area of the camp and its commemorative plaque and the commemorative plaque in the Farsleben town cemetery⁶³ commemorate the Jewish dead and the Jewish survivors of the DP camp. Local remembrance of the Hillersleben camp has been practically marginalized. Were there any call for remembrance or commemoration, any attempt would be hindered by the fact that much of the site has been destroyed. The area can never become a cultural heritage space, as the connection between the community and the space has been severed.⁶³ However, spaces are still opening up for different forms of historical recollection. For this, however, it would be necessary to explore the history of the camp, which has survived several periods (including discussion of the history of the Hungarian displaced persons). Furthermore, one would also need to see more research on the fates of postwar displaced persons in regards to the Holocaust and the issue of the refugees.

by the Hillersleben camp management. He managed to take the Leipzig train with his mates, and he then took a cargo train which was going to Dresden, but the train under Soviet authority went to the town of Doberlug-Kirchhain, where he got to the local DP camp. From here, he finally managed to get to Hungary through Prague with the help of the Red Cross. Cf. for example DEGOB-protocol no. 2208. Bognár resettled in Budapest and started a family. He was later involved in the activity of *Nácizmus Üldözötteinek Országos Egyesülete* (National Association of Victims of Nazi Persecution). His date of death is unknown. Bakó et al., *Emlékezések*, 432.

63 Uzzell, "Where is the Discipline in Heritage Studies," 328–29.

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