THE POWER OF LANGUAGE:
COMMUNICATION, MEMORY, AND GREEK JEWS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

Robin Margaret Buller

A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Department of History.

Chapel Hill
2015

Approved by:
Karen Auerbach
Chad Bryant
Konrad Jarausch
ABSTRACT

Robin Margaret Buller
The Power Of Language: Communication, Memory, and Greek Jews During the Holocaust
(Under the Direction of Dr. Karen Auerbach)

Reflecting on his experience in Auschwitz, Primo Levi wrote, “Survival [in a concentration camp] depended on an inmate’s capacity to readily carry out commands.” Familiarity with the language of those in charge was critical and, typically, that language was German. The multilingual Greek Jews of Salonika, whose non-Germanic linguistic background isolated them from the majority of the prisoner population, serve as an excellent case study through which to we can understand the relationship between language and survival during the Holocaust. This study concentrates on two Salonikan Jewish sources: the oral testimony of Eli Benyacar and the written memoir of Léon Perahia. Through close analysis of these two rich accounts, this study demonstrates the centrality of language to everyday concentration camp interactions, collective identity, and prisoner resistance. It introduces the concept of “linguistic power” as a framework for understanding hierarchies and explores the role of language in memory.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my ever-supportive advisor, Dr. Karen Auerbach, for her unwavering guidance and unparalleled feedback during the process of writing my thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to my committee members Dr. Chad Bryant and Dr. Konrad Jarausch for their advice and insight. Dr. Doris Bergen, my undergraduate advisor, led me to this topic, and it is thanks to her that I ventured down this academic path. I cannot express my appreciation enough to Erika Perahia Zemour, Director of the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, who introduced me to her father’s memoir. The members of my cohort at UNC Chapel Hill tirelessly edited, commented upon, and co-commiserated over drafts of this thesis, and for that I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank my loved ones—my wonderful parents, my sister and editor, Adrienne, and, of course, Mark—for being such a wonderful support system.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................................1

CHAPTER 2: SEPHARDIC SALONIKA: A BRIEF HISTORY .................................................................10

CHAPTER 3: “WE COULDN’T UNDERSTAND A WORLD!”: EARLY EXPERIENCES IN AUSCHWITZ ......................................................................................................................15

CHAPTER 4: “GREEKS AND NON-GREEKS”: ETHNIC SOLIDARITY THROUGH SHARED LANGUAGE ..........................................................................................................................24

CHAPTER 5: ACQUIRING LINGUISTIC POWER: BRIDGING GAPS THROUGH NON-JEWISH LANGUAGES ..........................................................................................................................35

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................................44

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................................................47
1. Introduction

Eli Benyacar was just fifteen years old when he arrived at Auschwitz late in the evening of April 10, 1943. After five days crammed in cattle cars, he and nearly three thousand other Salonikan Jews poured out of the crowded train and onto the station platform. It was cold for April, and the rain that fell on the scrambling Greeks paired with blinding floodlights and screams of “Raus!” only added to the discomfort and unease of the scene.

In Salonika, Benyacar had spoken Greek and Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, yet he had gleaned enough broken German from selling cigarettes to occupying Wehrmacht soldiers on the streets of the port city to understand that able-bodied men aged sixteen to forty-five were being siphoned off from the children and the elderly. When a German guard asked for his age, Benyacar was quick to think on his feet.

“Wie alt bist du?” demanded the SS officer.

---

1Eli Benyacar, Interview 15115, Segment 3 (56:00-1:06:00), Visual History Archive (cited hereafter as VHA), USC Shoah Foundation: 2011, accessed September 18, 2015.

2Steven B. Bowman, The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940-1945 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 88. Bowman calculates that there were 2,750 individuals on the transport that left Salonika on April 5, 1945 and arrived at Auschwitz on April 10, 1945.

3Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, is the Jewish adaptation of the Spanish language that emerged when the Diaspora was expelled from Spain. Officially, Ladino refers to its written form, and Judezmo, its spoken. However, the current trend in scholarship is to simply use the term “Ladino” for simplicity. Bernard Spolsky, The Languages of the Jews: a Sociolinguistic History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 290. Sarah Abrevaya Stein, Making Jews Modern: the Yiddish and Ladino press in the Russian and Ottoman Empires (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), xiii.

4Benyacar, Interview 15115, Segment 2 (35:00), VHA.
“Sechzehn,” lied Benyacar, desperate to stay with his two older brothers.\(^5\)

Fortunately for him, this small exchange meant that he was selected for labor, and did not suffer the same fate as his parents and two sisters, who were sent directly to the gas chambers.\(^6\)

His German was not strong enough, though, for him to understand what was happening to him, his family, and his compatriots.

Along with five hundred and thirty four other Salonikan Jews, Benyacar and his brothers stood in the rain for several more hours before they were directed on foot to the Birkenau labour camp.\(^7\) Finally, in the early hours of the morning, they arrived at a large wooden barrack; once inside, they were ordered to line up to receive forearm tattoos of their prisoner numbers. The person giving out the tattoos was, himself, a camp inmate. However, he was from Poland, and the Greek prisoners had no way to communicate with him. Benyacar recalls feeling entirely powerless as a result of this isolating language barrier. “We couldn’t speak Yiddish, we couldn’t speak German,” he explains in a 2011 interview, “We were a bunch of dummies!” Although he knew a few words in German, his knowledge of the language was far too sparse to enable him to translate his limited vocabulary into the language of the Eastern European Ashkenazim. Already, after Benyacar’s first few hours in a concentration camp, language had proven to be both an instrument of and an inhibitor to his survival.

\(^5\)“How old are you?”, “Sixteen.” In his Shoah Foundation interview, Benyacar recounts this dialogue in the German that was used.

\(^6\)Rena, Menachem, Esther (b. 1926), and Dora (b. 1933) Benyacar were all selected for immediate execution. Yad Vashem Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, Pages of Testimony 38667, 38669, 38672, accessed September 18, 2015. http://db.yadvashem.org/names/search.html?language=en

\(^7\)A total of 537 males from this transport were selected for labor and were assigned numbers 114094–114630. 246 women, numbered 40537–40782, were also selected for labor. 1, 967 were sent to the gas chambers immediately upon arrival. Bowman, The Agony of Greek Jews, 88.
At the time of Benyacar’s arrival, Greek Jews remained a relatively new addition to the camp’s demographics. The first transport had left Salonika less than a month earlier, and so it was uncommon for one to encounter a Greek-speaking prisoner with much camp experience. However, one Polish Jew named Léon Yachael, who was coordinating the new inmates, had lived in Greece before the war, and could speak Greek, German, and Yiddish. Hoping to acquire some comforting information, the Salonikans asked Yachael where their families had gone.

“See those chimneys up there?” Yachael asked in Greek, gesturing, “That’s where your families are. They’re all burned.”

This fact was so unfathomable to Benyacar and his compatriots that they, in turn, grew furious at Yachael. “We wanted to kill him,” admits Benyacar. However, Yachael was telling the truth. Indeed, it was because they encountered an experienced prisoner with whom they shared a language that Benyacar and his fellow Salonikans first learned about the hideous realities of concentration camp life.

Benyacar’s story speaks to the central position of linguistic background—that is, the language(s) with which a person has past experience and that encompass(es) their linguistic repertoire—in the experiences of concentration camp prisoners. The concentration camps instituted by the Nazi regime during the Second World War had culturally heterogeneous prisoner populations, yet a significant number of inmates had experience with Germanic languages. The majority of Jewish prisoners in the Lagers (camps) were Eastern European Ashkenazim, and so belonged to an ethnic group that largely spoke Yiddish, a Jewish language with German roots, along with German, Polish, Russian, or any other number of regionally-dictated languages. Accordingly, most were able to communicate with guards as well as fellow

---

8Benyacar was on the seventh of nineteen transports to leave Salonika with Auschwitz as their final destination. Ibid., 85.
prisoners, and their linguistic background could prove to be a useful survival tool that Jews who spoke neither German nor Yiddish lacked.

Greece’s Sephardic Jews are one such population.⁹ Having settled in the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century after expulsion from Spain, the group spoke a variety of languages including Ladino, Hebrew, Turkish, Greek, Italian (out of interactions with Venetian traders and colonizers) and French (as a result of Francophone missionary schools). German, however, did not feature in the group’s linguistic mosaic. The Greek Jewish experience, then, is a compelling case study that exhibits the exclusion that resulted from belonging to a linguistic minority in a Nazi concentration camp, as well as the communicative potential that emerged from having such a multilingual ethnic background.

This study will concentrate on two sources: the oral testimony of Eli Benyacar and the written memoir of Léon Perahia.¹⁰ Through close analysis of these two rich accounts, it will demonstrate the centrality of language to everyday interactions, collective mentalities, and chances of survival in Nazi concentration camps. While these two individuals themselves have similar backgrounds—they both grew up in middle-class Jewish households in Salonika, a city in Northern Greece, and spoke fluent Greek, Ladino, and French—their unique stories shed light on the different ways in which linguistic knowledge, comprehension, and expression molded camp experiences. Their tales illuminate the nuanced functions of known versus acquired languages, the extent to which a language could act as a bridge with a separate community, and the ways in which it could further entrench the intra-connectedness of members of a single ethnic group.

---

⁹Sephardic Jews, or Sephardim, are the Jews who resided in Spain before expulsion in the fifteenth century and retained elements of Spanish culture and language in the Diaspora. The term that refers to Sefarad, the Hebrew name for the Iberian Peninsula.

Indeed the effects of these linguistic connections were both abstract and tangible; they served the humanizing purpose of facilitating personal interactions and friendship while simultaneously performing the survival-based function of facilitating the exchange of information, food, and other material goods.

However, Benyacar and Perahia’s experiences also elucidate the duality of connection and isolation that arose from speaking such a marginal language as Ladino. On the one hand, and most pronouncedly in the early days of imprisonment, it was difficult for many Greek Jews to communicate with guards and other prisoners, while on the other it enabled individuals to covertly share information with their compatriots, making the obscure language a survival tool in its own right. Further, this paper elucidates the central role that language played in the shift of the position of Greeks in the camp’s hierarchy over time, and demonstrates how language facilitated their transition from marginalized to influential prisoners.

Furthermore, parallel analysis of these two sources addresses questions about the different roles that Jewish and non-Jewish languages played in day-to-day interactions. The choices that Salonikan Jews made to communicate in Ladino, Greek, or French carry weight. These decisions emphasize a specific part of an individual’s identity—be it religious, national, or cultural—while simultaneously de-emphasizing other elements. Additionally, when it comes to the acquisition of new languages, we see our subjects learning German and Polish, but not Yiddish. It is possible that learning a new non-Jewish rather than a Jewish language had a practical function—that is, Yiddish would have been looked down upon by Nazi officials.

11In defining “Jewish languages,” Spolsky argues that a language only becomes Jewish after it becomes isolated from the language out of which it developed. He argues that it isn’t until after the language continues to be spoken in a different linguistic environment that it becomes distinctly “Jewish.” So, for example, while the Sephardic Jews spoke Spanish while they lived on the Iberian Peninsula prior to 1492, “Judeo-Spanish” only arose in the wake of expulsion, emerging as a result of the language evolving over generations without regulation from a “standardizing” force. Spolsky, The Languages of the Jews, 141.
Further, because of the similarities between German and Yiddish, learning German enabled communication with both guards and East-Central European Jews, while Yiddish only opened lines with the Ashkenazim. However, we must ask whether this phenomenon reflects the existence of an exclusionary divide between Ashkenazi and Sephardic prisoners, one in which an element of resentment prevented one group from interacting with the other in a constructive manner.

These two narratives, composed years after the events they discuss, are grounded in each survivor’s memory of their time in Auschwitz. Questions about the reliability of individual, or personal, memory are naturally raised as a result of the reality of cognitive decline with old age as well as simple human error. As Christopher Browning writes, eyewitness testimony can only retain its value as a credible historical source if it is “subject to the same critical analysis and rules of evidence as other sources”. If the accounts of Holocaust survivors are viewed as irrefutable because of the sensitivity of the events they describe, the legitimacy of testimony becomes questionable, and events risk being de-historicized. To legitimize these sources, then the scholar must consider a wide source base so as to identify consistencies and inconsistencies among accounts. While this paper is structured as a close study of two particular sources, the claims that it makes are grounded in extensive research of a number of survivor testimonies and memoirs that speak to the issues that will be discussed in the following pages.

---


This article introduces the concept of “linguistic memory,” a term that refers to the languages through which memory is both retrieved and articulated. The notion of linguistic memory builds on Pierre Nora’s theory of “sites of memory” in that, here, language has a mnemonic function. Communicating in a specific language brings up certain memories to which that language is attached. Furthermore, it has the function of audibly connecting individuals to a collective, ethnic past. Linguistic memory is also tied to the linguistic technique with which an individual’s memories are conveyed. While Benyacar’s testimony is oral, Perahia’s is written; whereas Benyacar recounts his story in English, a language that he learned after immigrating to Canada in the 1950s, Perahia relates his tale in his French, one of his native languages. The person who listens to Benyacar’s testimony interacts differently with his linguistic memory than does the individual who reads Perahia’s. Accordingly, this paper will show how the ways in which individuals communicate the past impact their memory of communicating in the past.

Collective memory, too, influences the ways in which Benyacar and Perahia retrospectively characterize the Greek Jewish community at the time of its destruction. Building off of Maurice Halbwach’s foundational theory that collective memory rests in a group’s belief that their members possess a shared experience, this study will show that a shared language functions as a unifying mnemonic indicator that, in a similar fashion, constructs a shared past.¹⁵


include those of: Alfred Aboav (Video 1673); Esther Barzila (Née Matalon, Video 1666); Dario Gabbaï (Video Numver); Yvette M. Lennon (Née Bonita Assael, Video 1926).
In considering the weight that these two individuals place on language in defining Greek, Sephardic, Greek Jewish, and Salonikan identity, we can draw conclusions about the intimately connected, even dependent, relationship between linguistic and ethnic identity more broadly.

Finally, in addressing linguistic background during a time of crisis, an analysis of the Greek Jewish experience during the Holocaust intervenes in fields beyond Jewish history and Holocaust studies. It enables us to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which language shapes and is shaped by trauma, power, and vulnerability. Building off of Michel Foucault’s assertion that knowledge forms the foundation of power, this study demonstrates that linguistic capabilities—themselves a form of knowledge—perform a similar function.\(^\text{16}\) In an environment that attempts to strip individuals of agency, “linguistic power” remains an accessible force for both resistance and survival.

In considering these questions, this paper addresses two lacunae in the field of Holocaust studies: the understudied experience of Sephardic, and more specifically Greek, Jews in the Nazi genocide, and the role of language in victim experience and survival. Traditionally, surveys of the Holocaust devote the majority of their pages to the experience of Eastern and Central European Jews. When they do address the Sephardim, it is typically with reference to the Jews of France or, less frequently, Italy, rather than those of the Balkan Peninsula.\(^\text{17}\) Although Sephardic Studies has gained more ground in recent years, its publications are largely early modern in content, and so public understanding of the Holocaust continues to follow a predominantly


Ashkenazi narrative. The East European Ashkenazim numerically dominated concentration camp demographics, a fact that this paper does not dismiss and that is critical to understanding the Holocaust. Rather, it aims to contribute to new efforts to remedy the marginalization of the Sephardic experience in Holocaust historiography and in demonstrating that despite their relatively marginal numbers, the Sephardim’s experiences highlight the usefulness of approaching the Holocaust from a linguistic-historical angle. In considering the ways in which language could be, and was, wielded by two Salonikan Jews during their time in Auschwitz, this study also builds upon scholarship that emphasizes the multicultural and multiethnic past of Greece’s Sephardim, demonstrating the ways in which the group’s layered identity was manifested linguistically in the 1940s.

---


2. Sephardic Salonika: A Brief History

The culture of Salonika’s Jewry was the product of myriad external influences over centuries. The population had roots in Sephardim who, after being expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the late fourteen hundreds, found refuge and ultimately settled in the Ottoman port city and its environs, joining a small community of Judeo-Greek-speaking Romaniote Jews who had already resided in the region for over a millennium. With them, the Sephardim brought Ladino, the Judeo-Spanish language that would continue to be a defining part of the community’s ethnic identity in both its written and spoken forms well into the twentieth century. This linguistic “cultural tool,” which implicitly connected Salonika’s Jews to their Iberian past generations later, continued to develop according to the political contexts in which it was used; after centuries of living under Ottoman rule, the city’s Jewish population spoke a form

---

20Jews were expelled from the Kingdom of Spain in 1942 with the signing of the Alhambra Decree (Edict of Expulsion). In Portugal, the situation was a little different. King Manuel signed the expulsion order in 1496 (to take effect in 1497), however, in the end, force conversions were practiced. This lasted until 1535 and the implementation of the Portuguese Inquisition, which successful formally expelled all of the country’s Jews by 1545. Benbassa, Sephardi Jewry, xxxix.


22Stein tells us that Salonika was one of the Mediterranean’s largest markets for Ladino newspapers out of Constantinople until the 1930s. Stein, Making Jews Modern, 5-6. Bea Lewkowicz argues that as recently as the late twentieth century, the Jews of Thessaloniki continued to describe their families as being “from Spain” rather than from Greece, or even Thessaloniki, despite the fact that it had been five hundred years since their ancestors migrated from the Iberian Peninsula. Bea Lewkowicz, The Jewish Community of Salonika: History, Memory, Identity (Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2006), 76-83.

23Sociocultural anthropologist James. V. Wertsch describes “cultural tools” as conduits for the memory of a group’s past that are actively “distributed,” intentionally and unintentionally, among members, and are thus the agents that make memory a “mediated action.” James V. Wertsch, Voices of Collective Remembering (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
of Ladino that had adopted some Turkish vocabulary as well. Although Salonika was annexed by Greece in 1913, the Salonikan Jews of the 1940s retained the linguistic elements that they had gleaned from years of Ottoman Turkish influence.

Yet another linguistic layer was added to the identity of Salonika’s Jewry when, during the nineteenth century, the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), a Franco-Jewish cultural association, directed its energies to the Jews of the Eastern Mediterranean. Establishing over sixty Jewish schools in the Ottoman Empire and North Africa (including seven in Salonika), the organization embarked on civilizing missions to “Westernize” the ostensibly backwards “Eastern” Jews, teaching them the traditions and languages of Western Europe. By educating Salonika’s Jews in the French language, the AIU hoped that the Sephardic population would make “moral progress,” and that this perceived shift in values would strengthen their societal position and, if possible, claims to emancipation. The presence of the AIU precipitated a linguistic shift among Salonika’s Jewry. Mothers who had attended Alliance schools as young girls brought their linguistic skills into the domestic sphere. Because they communicated in

---

24 Spolsky, *The Languages of the Jews*, Ch. 11.

25 Thessaloniki and the rest of Greek Macedonia was officially annexed by Greece after the Second Balkan Wars with 1913’s Treaty of Bucharest.


27 Founded in 1860, the AIU was not created with the express purpose of establishing international schools. Rather, it was established for the more general purpose of being the world Jewry’s “central moral authority [that would] unite the dispersed children of Israel (les disperses d’Israël).” The institution’s three published statutes do not explicitly refer to education. The do, however, demonstrate the extent to which the AIU believed eastern Jews to be inferior and in need of guidance. They read: “The society of the Alliance Israélite Universelle has as its goals 1) to work for universal emancipation (de travailler partout à l’émancipation) and towards the moral progress of the Jews 2) to lend effective support to those who suffer because they are Jews 3) to encourage all publications designed to bring about these results.” AIU, “Manifeste de juillet 1860,” in *Cent Ans d’Histoire: L’Alliance Israélite Universelle et la Renaissance Juive Contemporaine*, ed. André Chouraqui (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1965), 407; “Statuts de l’Alliance Israélite Universelle, Fondée en 1860,” *Bulletin Alliance Israélite Universelle* (Troisième Série, No. 37), (Paris: Siège de la Société, 1912), 211.
French with their children, entire generations grew up as native French speakers. The language was absorbed into their already rich linguistic repertoire, and was spoken alongside Ladino, Greek, and Turkish. Young people continued to speak French as a primary language well into adulthood, with many hoping that it would open up career opportunities for them in the revered West. At the time Salonika’s Jewry was deported by the occupying Nazi regime, four AIU schools remained active in the city. The Alliance’s continuing presence, combined with the persistent use of French in households, meant that the language remained a significant part of the community’s collective identity and linguistic makeup in the 1940s.

After Greece annexed Salonika and the province of Macedonia from the Ottoman Empire in 1913, an additional ethno-linguistic layer was superimposed onto the identity of the city’s Jewish community. Fearing cultural diversity, the young country’s nationalist regime instituted a program of “Hellenization” and implemented measures to establish a purely Greek culture in the region. Ladino and Hebrew street signs that lined the buildings in the city’s historic Jewish quarter were painted over and replaced with Greek lettering. The government also funded educational programs that made Greek language lessons mandatory for all citizens, including Jews. As such, a new generation of Salonikan Jews grew up with Greek as their primary language of daily use, speaking it in the classroom and among friends, while relegating Ladino, French, and Italian to the religious and domestic domains.

---

28 Rodrigue, Images of Sephardi and Eastern Jewries in Transition, 80.

29 Ibid., 35.

30 Ibid., 16.

31 Fleming, Greece: A Jewish History, 85.

32 Spolsky, The Languages of the Jews, 63. Joshua Fishman, in his study of New Jersey’s Hispanic community, argues that there are five “domains” of linguistic use: family, friendship, religion, education, and employment. He asserts that the stability of a language can be estimated by considering the “domains” in which it is utilized, and that
Eli Benyacar and Léon Perahia grew up in Salonika during the age of “Hellenization,” and were members of the new Sephardi-Greek generation. They were young men when, in April 1941, German and Italian forces invaded Greece. While Italy controlled the southernmost parts of the country and its islands, Germany administered most of the mainland (including Salonika) and, in 1942, introduced legislation to expedite the Final Solution in Greece. The occupying Nazi regime forced Jews to wear yellow stars of David on their chests, banned Jewish children from attending school, and closed Jewish-owned businesses. By July 1942, the majority of male Salonikan Jews were working in forced labor camps, and in February 1943, fences were erected around the Baron Hirsch ghetto,\(^{33}\) locking the majority of Salonikan Jews into what would soon become a transit camp.

The deportation of Balkan Jews commenced in the spring of 1943. On March 4, approximately 4,000 Jews were sent from southern Bulgaria to Treblinka, an extermination camp in Eastern Europe.\(^{34}\) From March 15 to August 10, 1943, nineteen transports carrying roughly 48,000 Jews left Salonika with Auschwitz as their final destination. After Italy pulled out of the war in September of the same year, Jews living in southern Greece, who had until this point been safe from the deadly anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime, were exposed to new dangers.\(^{35}\)

---

The name of the Baron Hirsch ghetto refers to the Salonikan neighborhood in which was located. It centered around the Baron Hirsch hospital, which was named after its benefactor, Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a German-Jewish philanthropist. Bowman, *The Agony of Greek Jews*, 66.

During the war, Thrace, a region that encompasses the northeastern Greek coastline as well as parts of Bulgaria, was controlled by Bulgarian Nazi forces. The Jews that were transported to Treblinka were Greek and Ladino speaking Sephardim.

Because the Italian fascist regime did not have the same “racial” goals as did the Nazis, Jews were safer under Italian occupation than they were under German administration. After Greece was invaded in 1941, the Axis armies divided up occupation, with Germany administering most of the Greek mainland (including Salonika) and Italy
swiftly solidified control of Athens, and from April to August of 1944, transported between 6,000 and 8,000 Jews from Attica and its environs to Auschwitz. With international help, the anti-Nazi resistance movement in Greece had grown strong by the fall of 1944, ultimately liberating the Greek mainland from Axis control by October of that year. But before then, approximately 60,000 Jews arrived at Auschwitz from Greece. Around 47,250 of those individuals were gassed upon arrival, with 12,750 having been selected for forced labor in a work Kommando. Fewer than 2,000 survived to see the camp liberated.

Eli Benyacar and Léon Perahia were among the few Greek Jews who survived the Holocaust. Their experiences in concentration camps were largely shaped by their unique linguistic backgrounds and demonstrate means through which language both affected and was affected by changes in the prisoners’ status over time. Their stories show that in their earliest days in Auschwitz, a lack of German proved isolating and potentially life-threatening; even the narrowest German vocabulary could mean the difference between life and death. We then see how, after the initial shock of arrival dissipated, individuals focused on building connections with fellow Greek Sephardim, using Greek and Ladino as private communicative tools. As time passed, new languages could be acquired within the setting of the concentration camp, which, as these testimonies tell us, could greatly impact a prisoner’s chances for survival.

controlling most southernmost parts of the country along with all of the Ionian and most of the Aegean islands. Bowman, *The Agony of Greek Jews*, 58-78.

36 Crete and a number of other Aegean islands were not surrendered to the Allies until May, 1945.
3. “We couldn’t understand a word!”: Early Experiences in Auschwitz

Eli Benyacar’s memory of his first days in Auschwitz underscores the confusion and isolation that Greek Jews initially experienced, linking their exclusion to their unusual linguistic repertoire. He and his compatriots had no knowledge of their location, did not understand the significance of having their skin branded with a number, and did not know the implications of having their heads and bodies shaved. The new arrivals had no comprehension of why, after seven days without sleep, they were roused from their crowded bunks at five o’clock the following morning and herded outside of Block Twenty-One. “I didn’t know what was going on,” recalls Benyacar.37

Ultimately, it was through experience rather than explanation that Benyacar discovered the realities of concentration camp life. That day, he, his two brothers, and their thirty-odd blockmates were assigned their first job: loading corpses into trucks to be taken to the crematorium. The work was physically and emotionally exhausting, and when Benyacar returned to his bunk that evening, he broke down. “This is the life in the camp,” he realized.38

Benyacar attributes his early feelings of ignorance and helplessness to the linguistic culture of Greece’s Jews, paradoxically painting the myriad languages spoken by the community as a deficiency. “We spoke Spanish and Greek or French and Hebrew,” he explains, listing the rich array of languages with regret in accented English: “This is the only four languages that was

37Benyacar, Interview 15115, Segment 3 (1:08:00), VHA.
38Ibid, Segment 3 (1:09:00).
popular between the Greek Jews.” Indeed, for Benyacar and his fellow Greeks, being fluent in four tongues meant little if none were spoken by the concentration camp’s non-Greek majority. “We had Polacks over there, and we had Germans. We couldn’t understand a word!” Benyacar states, emphasizing the necessity of knowing one of the two dominant camp languages in order to acquire information. He suggests that the Greek Jews as a collective felt surrounded by masses that shared a communicative advantage, characterizing Polish and German as the only valuable linguistic capital.

This value is made evident by how beneficial Benyacar’s extremely limited knowledge of German proved to be. The few key words and phrases that he learned in Salonika selling cigarettes to occupying German troops drastically change his fortune, enabling him to lie about his age and, thus, be selected for labor. The context in which he acquired his German vocabulary, too, is relevant in that the language of commerce would prove to be extremely practical in a concentration camp environment. In performing transactions with German soldiers, Benyacar learned verbs that had to do with trade, nouns related to desired goods (food, cigarettes), as well as numerical terminology. This vocabulary, while narrow, allowed Benyacar to maneuver within the camp’s communicative framework, which was one that rewarded those who had the ability to conduct pragmatic interactions.

Léon Perahia’s memories of his early days in Auschwitz are marked by similar feelings of confusion and ignorance. Perahia, who was on the ninth transport of Jews from Salonika to Poland, arrived at Auschwitz on April 16, 1943, three weeks after Eli Benyacar. He and his

---

39 Here, Benyacar is referring to Ladino as “Spanish” because of the language’s Spanish roots; Ladino speakers frequently term it as such. Ibid, Segment 3 (1:02:00).

40 Ibid.

compatriots did not understand the gravity of having been separated from their parents during the initial selection process, believing them to be alive in another sector of the camp. They soon learned the true fate of their family members through an interaction with another Greek-speaking prisoner. An older man from Salonika, Perahia writes, visited their barracks that first evening to share his knowledge with the new arrivals. “My brothers,” he began, “do not think about your parents or your children, for they have all been burnt. If you don’t believe me, go to the windows or the door. You will see the flames billowing out of the chimneys and you will smell the odor of burnt flesh.” They believed that the man was insane until they followed his advice and, looking out the window of their desolate barrack, saw the crematorium for themselves. The group was rendered speechless by this tragic news and, without a word, spontaneously began to sing a Ladino folk ballad, Mamma. This act of solidarity, uniting the group through their ancestral Spanish tongue as well as the language of music, moved everyone, including the group’s Blockälteste, to tears.

Perahia’s interaction with the older Salonikan—much like that of Benyacar and the Greek-speaking Polish Jew, Léon Yachael—provided him with critical information about the nature of the camp. Prior to encountering an individual with whom he shared a common language, Perahia had no way of learning about the dangers that surrounded him and his Greek comrades other than first-hand experience. Perahia’s Blockälteste, a Polish-Jewish intellectual, was well aware that in the Lager, such ignorance could be life-threatening, and so he called

42“Mes frères, dorénavant ne pensez plus à vos parents et à vos enfants, parce qu’ils ont été tous brûlés. Si vous ne me croyez pas, sortir donc aux fenêtres ou à la porte: vous verrez les flames sortir des cheminées et vous sentirez l’odeur de la chair brûlées.” Perahia, Mazal, 26.

43For further reading about the role of music in Nazi concentration camps, see Shirli Gilbert, Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005). More specifically, the chapter “Fragments of Humanity: Music in Auschwitz,” discusses in depth the functions of folk songs that connected individuals to their lives before the war and that served as a form of communal emotional escape, relief, and assurance (144-195).
Perahia into his quarters to pass along some valuable wisdom. Although originally from Poland, the Blockälteste had lived in France, and so the two were able to communicate in French. 44

The fact that Perahia and the Blockälteste, neither of whom were French, communicated in the French language is significant, highlighting the persisting relevance of a language that was introduced to the Salonikan Jewish community in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was through speaking this culturally adopted, non-Jewish language that Perahia was able to transition out of a position of ignorance and isolation into one of comparative knowledge and connection. While he did experience the confusion that so often characterizes survivors’ memories of their arrival to a concentration camp, he was able to overcome it through language.

The Blockälteste explained to Perahia that he had been moved by the group’s song and wanted to help him survive so that such a beautiful voice would not die. 45 Accordingly, he gave him a list of tips that would aid him in his survival, some of which explicitly underscored the importance of language. “If you can withstand the hunger but not the beatings, learn German,” he advised, “and if you can resist the blows but not the hunger, learn Polish.” 46 These words of caution, which bear a tone of grim humor, demonstrate the specific functions that a background in each German and Polish carried, with the former shielding a prisoner from violence and the latter saving him from starvation. Further, the quip speaks to the way that prisoners characterized other, albeit more privileged, prisoners in opposition to German guards. It shows that they

44 Perahia writes, “Le chef du Block était un Juif polonaise qui venait de France, et c’est en français qu’on se parlait.” So, it is possible that he means that the Blockälteste was from France but that his family was of Polish origins. However, it seems more likely that he means that he was a Polish Jew who had been in France prior to deportation, which is what this essay assumes. Perahia, Mazal, 31. Perahia’s background in the French language stems from the fact that his family was well-off during his childhood and so paid to send him to a private school (possibly one run by the AIU, although the source does not specify) in which he learned French. Ibid., 17.

45 Ibid., 27.

46 “Si tu résistes à la faim et pas aux coups, alors apprends l’allemand. Si tu résistes aux coups et pas à la faim, apprends le polonaise.” Ibid.
associate material advantages with people who spoke Polish, who were often political prisoners and criminals. According to this description, the camp’s economy was the prisoners’ realm of influence. Conversely, violence and punishment occupied the German sphere. This distinction blurs issues of power and testifies to the different ways in which “linguistic power” was both wielded and interpreted by those living in the camp.

Additionally, the exchange indicates that prisoners were conscious of the advantages of speaking these particular languages, and in certain cases actively pursued learning them. While in this instance, fluency in French enabled Perahia to receive advice from a Polish Ashkenazi Jew, he would need to learn one of the two dominant camp languages in order to increase his chances for long-term survival. Indeed, the dark joke carries with it a paradox. On the one hand, it conveys a sense of hopelessness, suggesting that without knowledge of German or Polish one would be more vulnerable to the two leading causes of death in a concentration camp: violence and starvation. On the other, it implies that the prisoners can act to remedy their state of linguistic disadvantage, and that individuals could exert agency through language. “Linguistic power,” evidently, was something that could be earned.

Unlike Benyacar, Perahia does not discuss having learned German prior to his deportation. He did, though, have frequent encounters with occupying German soldiers while still in Salonika. When forced labor became mandated, he was assigned a post on German ships repairing the maritime equipment because of his engineering background. This position, being less strenuous than others, was highly coveted, and so Perahia had to interview for it, during which a translator facilitated communication between him and the German *Kommandant*. This exchange further underscores the language gap that existed between most Greeks and Germans.

---

47 After Perahia left secondary school because his parents could no longer afford the tuition, he became an apprentice to a mechanic. Then, in 1938, he entered engineering school. Ibid., 27.
While it is possible that Perahia learned some German words or phrases during his time in forced labor, that he fails to mention it suggests that what he did learn was not enough to make a noticeable difference in his linguistic exchanges upon arrival in Auschwitz.

Perahia’s lack of a German linguistic background is further emphasized by his tendency to write certain words or phrases used by German-speaking camp guards in their original German form, rather than translating them for a memoir that is otherwise composed entirely in French. When recounting his first five days in the camp, a period during which he and his compatriots were still in quarantine, Perahia emphasizes his memory of the ritual of being ordered to remove and replace one’s cap, recalling the German term for the action: “From morning to evening, we were marching on the spot and doing Mützen ab, Mützen auf.” He uses the specific German phrase to explain the movement, inserting the untranslated term into a French sentence. These German words have been retained in his linguistic memory, and are recalled and articulated in a distinctly sensory manner. The fact that the source is written also adds an element of intentionality to Perahia’s phrasing. Unlike oral testimonies such as Benyacar’s, which are often more candid, written memoirs allow the author to carefully review their diction, meaning the words that are ultimately published have been deliberately and carefully selected.

The way that Perahia injects the German phrase into a French sentence is grammatically awkward, jarring even. It is not woven smoothly into his syntax; he writes that all day, the prisoners were “doing Mützen ab, Mützen auf,” and not that they heard the order, “Mützen ab, Mützen auf,” or that they were commanded to remove and replace their Mützen. While the phrase is an imperative command, Perahia uses it as a noun. This suggests that while he was in the

---

48“Du matin au soir, nous faisions de la marche sur place et du ‘Mützen an, Mützen auf’.” Ibid., 27. The correct German phrase preposition is not an but ab, and so I have altered it to ab for the purpose of this study.
camp, Perahia and his non-German speaking compatriots heard the command not as a string of words, each with its own meaning, but as a single unit. For them, the phrase “Mützen ab, Mützen auf” took on new linguistic significance and became the nominal term for the action of removing one’s cap.

This manipulation of language demonstrates how language acquisition in the camps was not the simple comprehension of new vocabulary, as the existence of various Holocaust lexicons might falsely suggest.\(^{49}\) Rather, prisoners interpreted and transformed elements of multiple languages, incorporating them into a new and complex language system. Ludwig Wittgenstein would argue that the approach through which a non-German speaker responded to, understood, and subsequently used German phrases is a variant of a “language game,” for the words themselves are meaningless sounds until an individual applies significance to them and utilizes them for a certain purpose.\(^{50}\) Here, the aims of the “language games” that Perahia plays are twofold. First, he comprehended the order of “Mützen ab, Mützen auf” during his imprisonment to ensure self-preservation. Second, he employs the phrase when giving testimony, giving it a mnemonic purpose. And, indeed, this mnemonic phenomenon is by no means unique to Perahia. Benyacar, too, recalls orders to remove and replace his cap in the German with which they were originally communicated.\(^{51}\)

The forced cohabitation of individuals from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and their ensuing efforts to communicate with one another produced what Tadeusz Borowski


\(^{51}\)Benyacar mentions *Mützen* (although he uses an alternate pronunciation that further reflects the ways in which language was transformed as well as acquired by camp prisoners) when he discusses the morning routine at the camp: “The music was when we used to go in the morning and we used to be *Mützen ab, Mützen ab*, you know, take your hats, you know, while walking, you know.” Benyacar, Video 15115, Segment 3 (1:22:00), VHA.
called “Crematorium Esperanto,” a pidgin language that was unique to Nazi concentration camps. The development of camp pidgin was very much a response to the linguistic isolation that inmates experienced in their earliest days of imprisonment, and reflects the extent to which prisoners adapted and expanded their linguistic repertoires to increase their chances for survival. However, as linguistic populations incorporated new words and phrases into their daily vocabularies, they by no means abandoned the use of their mother tongue (or tongues) in its pure form. As will be shown in the subsequent section, at the same time as the Salonikan Sephardim were actively learning and utilizing elements of different languages, they were also intentionally continuing to communicate with one another in Greek and Ladino, actively employing their community’s own, unique languages. These languages, which had at first carried potentially fatal risks, would quickly prove valuable.

---


53 Not just Greeks but prisoners of all linguistic backgrounds communicated in the camp pidgin which, similarly, incorporated words and phrases from as many languages as were spoken in the camp. Greek words, too, were incorporated into the Esperanto and used by prisoners of non-Greek backgrounds. For instance, “klepsiklepsi,” the word for theft, derived from the greek, “to steal”: κλέψει. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity*, trans. Stuard Woolf (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 79.
4. “Greeks and non-Greeks”: Ethnic Solidarity Through Shared Language

In August of 1943, Eli Benyacar was called up for a “selection.” Such events, in which camp guards culled certain prisoners out from their Kommando, almost always carried with them great peril. While at times prisoners were simply “selected” to join another work group, at others they were chosen for medical experiments or for execution. In the case of Benyacar, the SS was singling out prisoners to transfer to a camp in Warsaw.

Over the course of the previous four months of grueling manual labor, Benyacar had lost his two older brothers. Early on, the middle brother was selected to work at the Buna Rubber factory, and after losing contact, Benyacar never learned what became of him. His oldest brother, Abraham, fell ill not long after. Benyacar recalls that after his brother was released from the hospital, he was completely emaciated, and so was sent to Block 31—the “quarantine” barracks. In these barracks prisoners did not have to work; instead, they simply awaited death. Ultimately, Benyacar was able to persuade a “nice” Kapo to have Abraham removed and brought back to Eli’s bunk. Tragically, by the time this Kapo arrived at the office (Schreibstube) to ask about Abraham, it was too late. “Went to a guy, gave number 114192, takes a look, says the number is gone already,” explains Benyacar, “That’s when I lost my brothers.”

From a familial standpoint, Benyacar was at this point alone in the concentration camp. However, a number of Salonikan and Greek Jews with whom he could communicate remained

---

54 This is the camp term for the process by which prisoners executed en masse. Typically, prisoners would be forced to stand outside for hours, and sometimes demonstrate physical ability by moving or running about. The weakest prisoners were then “selected.” Their numbers were written down, and they were ultimately separated from the rest of the prisoner population and sent to the gas chambers.

55 Benyacar, Video 15115, Segment 3 (1:15:00-1:20:00), VHA.
alive. As this section will demonstrate, the bond of a common language proved strong, fostering ethnic solidarity and functioning as an instrument of survival. Indeed, Benyacar felt connected to his compatriots, and when he was ordered to be a part of a “selection,” he began to cry. Although he had lost his entire family, he had been able to build relationships with other, Greek prisoners, and still felt a sense of self-worth and purpose as a result of this community.

“Stupid,” his Kapo snapped, “you go to Warsaw. Go! You should go!”

Benyacar continued to resist, explaining that he would have a better chance for survival if he were to remain in Auschwitz.

“No, no,” repeated the Kapo, “I’m from Warsaw. Over there, is no gas chambers.”

And so, Benyacar found himself on a cattle car bound for Warsaw. He and a few hundred other prisoners were being sent to the Polish capital to clean up what remained of the Warsaw Ghetto, which lay in ruins after the Germans had crushed the uprising that spring. They were stripped of their prisoner uniforms and given civilian clothes with red marks painted onto the backs of their jackets to prevent them from running away; unlike Birkenau, the Warsaw camp had no fences.

---

56Ibid., Segment 3 (1:25:00).

57The Warsaw camp was colloquially called “Gęsiówka,” after the adjacent Gęsia (Goose) Street. A total of 3,683 Jews, who were nationally Belgian, Dutch, French and Greek, were sent to the work camp from Auschwitz. Jürgen Stroop, the camp’s Kommandant, gave orders for no Polish Jews to be allowed to join the labor force. However, there were a few Polish speakers scattered among the prisoners who were able to make contact with locals in Warsaw while working in the ruins of the ghetto, and so the Jewish laborers were not as isolated as Stroop had intended. Contrary to the information given by Benyacar’s Kapo, Gęsiówka had a crematorium on site, although its construction was not completed until June of 1944 (Benyacar discusses this in Segment 4, 1:32:00). However, the outbreak of the Warsaw uprising meant that the crematorium was never used. During the uprising, the Polish Resistance liberated almost 400 Jewish prisoners from the camp. These prisoners, who were primarily from Hungary and Greece, went on to fight with the Polish partisan movement. Edward Kossoy, “The Gęsiówka story. A little known page of Jewish fighting history,” Yad Vashem Studies 32 (2004): 323–350.
In fact, the Germans took numerous measures to ensure that the prisoners did not escape. A large number of the Auschwitz prisoners sent to Warsaw were Greek.\footnote{The exact number of Greek Jews who were sent from Auschwitz to Warsaw continues to be debated. Ber Mark estimated that there were 400 Greeks in the camp. More recent calculations cite figures ranging from 1500-3000. Only twenty seven of them would ultimately survive the war. Ber Mark, \textit{The Scrolls of Auschwitz} (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1985), 141. Bowman, \textit{The Agony of Greek Jews}, 108-110. Yad Vashem The Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, “Clearing the Ruins of the Ghetto,” in \textit{Voices from the Inferno: Holocaust Survivors Describe the Last Months in the Warsaw Ghetto}, accessed on November 8, 2015. http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/warsaw_ghetto_testimonies/gesia_camp.asp} According to Benyacar, this disproportion was intentional, and the SS deliberately selected Greek Jews for the assignment because they could not speak Polish. Thus, the guards would not have to worry about the prisoners communicating with the local civilian population. This strategy elucidates much about how Nazis and concentration camp authorities perceived language and multilingualism among prisoners. First, it is evident that they were aware that Greek Jews were unlikely to share a common language with Polish civilians. However, it was not uncommon for Poles to have a background in French, a result of French having been the language of the intellectual elite during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and remaining a mark of class during the twentieth century. Thus, we can infer that the SS was ignorant to the fact that many Salonikan Sephardim were fluent in French. Moreover, that the administration neglected to consider the linguistic capabilities of not only Greece’s Jews but also Poland’s educated elite speaks to parallels that run between the Nazi perception of both Slavic and Jewish inferiority and cultural ignorance.

Furthermore, that concentration camp authorities knew Greek Jews would be unlikely to share a language with Polish civilians implies that the officials were aware that the Jews of Greece had been linguistically disadvantaged—or, at least, isolated—in the concentration camp setting. Any number of scenarios could have led to this knowledge. The SS could have observed firsthand how Greek Jews failed to interact or avoided verbal contact with their East and Central European counterparts; they could have been directly informed about the phenomenon by
privileged prisoners or Kapos (which would say even more about how important a prisoner’s linguistic background was considered); or they could have attempted to communicate with a Greek prisoner themselves and encountered the likely language barrier. Regardless of how camp authorities learned about the unusually isolating linguistic backgrounds of the Jews of Greece, their cognizance of this phenomenon demonstrates that the power of language was not underground knowledge that prisoners alone considered and shared. On the contrary, consciousness of the utility of language was pervasive throughout all camp ranks, and was exploited by prisoner, guard, and bureaucrat alike.

In the case of the Warsaw camp, the SS attempted to exploit the Greek Jews’ linguistic isolation. They were aware of the relationship between language and power and used linguistic ability (or lack thereof) as an instrument of control. In their minds, because Greek Jews did not know Polish, they would be entirely powerless in an urban labor camp. Although there were no physical fences confining the prisoners, the SS could rely on a very literal language barrier to perform the same function.

True to plan, the Greek Jews were mostly unable to communicate with civilians in Warsaw. However, in selecting a linguistically unusual yet homogenous group, the camp authorities constructed a camp dynamic that was drastically different from that of Auschwitz. Rather than remaining obscure languages of a disadvantaged minority, Greek and Ladino became primary languages of day-to-day prisoner interactions. Because Salonikan Jews constituted a significant proportion of the prisoner population, members of the group were often assigned privileged positions in the camp’s workforce. Leon Yachael, for instance, the man who had bluntly told Benyacar’s transport about the deaths of their families, became the head of their entire Arbeitslager, or work camp. Using his elevated position, he appointed other Greek Jews to
work under him as Kapos.\textsuperscript{59} Achieving strength through numbers, the Jews of Salonika soon dominated the prisoner hierarchy.

Eli Benyacar was assigned a post in the camp’s kitchens, a coveted assignment that Benyacar was able to keep when, as a result of an impending Soviet invasion, the prisoners were marched from Warsaw to a camp that was deep within Germany’s borders: Dachau. Working as a Kartoffelschäler, or potato peeler, Benyacar had direct access to valuable food supplies. Stealing rations was forbidden, but this did not stop Benyacar from using whatever kitchen scraps he could scavenge to fry up potato latkes for his fellow Greeks at night.\textsuperscript{60} Soon, Benyacar discovered a way to steal, or ‘organize’, entire pots of soup. Of course, he could not overtly share the illicit rations with his compatriots, and so each night he would hide two forty-liter vessels and use Ladino to communicate the location to his compatriots. “I couldn’t give [the soup] to them,” explains Benyacar, implying that the transferal had to occur in secret, “[so] I used to scream [the location] in Spanish.”\textsuperscript{61} By conveying his hiding place in Ladino, Benyacar ensured that no guards would be able to decode his message. He reclaimed a language that had previously inhibited its speakers who, in coming from a community that spoke Ladino, likely did not also speak German or Polish. He transformed it into a survival tool—an instrument with which he was able to covertly share information with his compatriots—and, in doing so, inverted the linguistic power dynamic that camp authorities had attempted to construct. In employing a linguistic background that was deemed a weakness by the SS, Benyacar resisted his proscribed,
submissive role both literally (by stealing food for prisoners who were meant to subsist on minimal levels of nourishment) and figuratively (by defying ethno-linguistic expectations).  

Benyacar’s testimony not only exhibits the avenues by which a linguistic minority could employ their obscure language for their own benefit, but also the ways in which language is tied to ethnic solidarity. In conveying the location of the hidden soup pots in Ladino, Benyacar does more than evade the ears of camp guards. He speaks in a language that only Greek Jews could understand, deliberately ensuring that only his compatriots could access the stolen food, thereby exhibiting distinct support for members of his own ethnic community. Further, Benyacar was aware of his group’s particular sense of unity. He remarks, “in the camps, there were Greeks and non-Greeks,” implying that the solidarity of Greece’s Jews was especially striking, standing out from that of other ethnicities. This statement recalls this paper’s earlier discussion of experiences of exclusion, and suggests that Greek Jews like Benyacar viewed the rest of the camp population (that is all non-Greek groups) as one homogenous mass. In his eyes, if an individual was not Greek, that meant that they had the ability to communicate and interact with other non-Greek prisoners from around Europe, and so belonged to an indiscriminate, all-encompassing category.

This isolation from the majority exists in conjunction with increased unity among members of the minority. Benyacar describes this social division in a manner that suggests the

---


63Benyacar, Video 15115, Segment 4 (1:52:00), VHA.
two categories are opposing, inflexible, and impermeable; according to him, an individual can only belong to one group. Further, he implies that one’s membership to either category is not the outcome of an active decision, but rather the result of innate characteristics. As such, one cannot shift between parties. As a result of this supposed permanence, belonging to a small, fixed ethnic community like that of the Greek Jews carried resounding overtones of loyalty.

Benyacar also emphasizes his steadfast loyalty to his compatriots by conveying memories beyond that of his underground soup operation. For instance, he recalls how he helped a fellow Greek Jew, Zakiniko Namias, to avoid performing manual labor when he was sick. He explains that he had already taken Namias, who was younger and perhaps less savvy than Benyacar, under his wing, and so was particularly concerned when he simultaneously fell ill and was assigned the graveyard shift. Benyacar took advantage of the network of Greek Jews who now occupied privileged positions in the camp’s hierarchy, and approached Léon Yachael to see if Namias could be exempted from work until his health returned. Yachael, regrettably, did not possess the authority to exempt a prisoner from labor, and so Benyacar resolved to work the night shift in Namias’ stead. Such an act was a willful disregard of the camp’s rules, and in performing it, Benyacar put his own life in danger. He chose to sacrifice his own safety for the sake of a compatriot, thereby placing group loyalty ahead of personal survival.

Although Benyacar hoped that the switch would go unnoticed, a Greek kapo recognized him almost immediately. He recalls that the kapo, Demotika, saw him in the line of prisoners and called out to him angrily, asking what he was doing showing up for the incorrect shift. He charged over to Benyacar, but only pretended to beat him, dragging him away from the rest of the Kommando only to hide him in the Red Cross Barrack. Demotika did not want Eli to risk

---

64Benyacar, Video 15115, Segment 4 (1:51:00), VHA.
working a full day and night shift without rest, and so put him to bed to protect his health. While the argument can be made that Benyacar’s pretending to be Namias for the night shift is the result of personal as well as ethnic loyalty, the same connection cannot be made with regards to Demotika’s response. He, too, risked his own well-being by acting against camp rules to protect Benyacar, a compatriot with whom he was acquainted, but not particularly close. Here, we see an act of loyalty materializing out of what is, arguably, pure ethnic solidarity.

In juxtaposition to the quality of unity that Benyacar’s soup anecdote exhibits lies the phenomenon Primo Levi refers to as the “gray zone.” According to Levi, the term refers to the moral ambiguity that shrouded decision-making in the concentration camp world. Prisoners who prioritized the survival of themselves or their friends fall into this “gray zone,” for in doing so they concurrently diminished another individual’s chances of survival. When one took resources for their own—albeit desperate—purposes one was simultaneously ensuring that the materials would not fall into the hands of another individual who may also have needed them to preserve their own life.65 Benyacar’s soup theft, although risky and, in many ways, selfless, falls into this “gray zone.” In concentrating his efforts on the survival of his compatriots, he was also neglecting the wellbeing of non-Salonikan prisoners. And, according to Benyacar, his participation in this ethnically based triage system was conscious. He admits that he was concerned about “organizing” exclusively for his compatriots, saying, “I used to steal for my group.”66 Evidently, ethnic solidarity must by definition be paired with ethnic exclusion.

---

65This term was coined by Primo Levi in his essay, “The Gray Zone.” He argues that prisoners who tread in the “gray zone” fall somewhere between the labels of “victim” and “perpetrator,” but that it is not a term of moral judgment considering just how ubiquitous this “gray zone” was. Primo Levi, “The Gray Zone,” in The Drowned and the Saved (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 36-69.

66Benyacar, Video 15115, Segment 4 (1:52:00), VHA.
Benyacar’s testimony not only exhibits the unity and support that came with belonging to such a close-knit group, but also alludes to how individuals qualified their own identities and tied their conceptions of self to language. It is undoubtedly significant that Eli Benyacar shouted the location of his hidden soup pots in Ladino. Presumably, he did not communicate their whereabouts in French for risk that other, non-Greek prisoners would have understood his message. However, the Greek language would have been equally as incomprehensible as Ladino to a non-Salonikan Jew. And so, the question begs: why did Benyacar use Ladino instead of Greek? Why did he choose to use the language of his forefathers rather than the language that he and his compatriots had spoken in school and on the streets? To the Jews of Salonika, Ladino was the language of domestic and spiritual domains. It was distinctly Jewish, and individuals who had grown up during the 1920s and 30s would have spoken it primarily with older relatives and religious teachers. Among members of their own generation, though, Greek was the primary language of daily use.

This generational linguistic divide was largely due to the educational policies put in place by Eleftherios Venizelos, a First World War hero who led Greece’s post-war nationalist government. As a result of these policies, Benyacar’s age group attended state-run public schools that prioritized teaching the newly standardized Greek language. This regime aimed to stamp out the particularities of ethnic minorities and to transform their linguistic landscapes in order to incorporate them into what they envisioned would be a linguistically and culturally homogenous Greek society.\(^67\)

\(^67\) For more information on the impact of Venizelist policies and the “Great Idea” (in Greek, “Μεγάλη Ιδέα,” or Megali Idea, a term that refers to aspirations of pan-Hellenism and re-invigoration of a dominant, traditional Greek Orthodox culture) on the linguistic habits of Greek youth in the interwar period, see “Germans and Jews in Greece,” Chapter Two in Bowman, The Agony of the Greek Jews, 24-39.
Thus, by deciding to communicate in Ladino rather than Greek, Benyacar placed the linguistic manifestation of his ethnic identity over that of his national. He resisted the linguistic conformity that was pushed upon his community by the Hellenic state and demonstrated that despite the regime’s efforts, he had retained his linguistic heritage. One explanation for this linguistic choice could be that Benyacar was attempting to reclaim the Jewish identity that nationalist regimes, both Greek and German, had sought to extinguish. He simultaneously rejected the standardized characteristics that were approved and encouraged by the Greek state and embraces ethnic pluralism—more specifically an ethnicity that was expressly persecuted.

In expressing his ethnic (Jewish) over his national (Greek) identity, Benayacar was also bringing his fifteenth-century Spanish roots into the present. His linguistic choice speaks to Salonika’s Sephardic community’s persistent “cultural memory” of their Iberian past. Here, the Ladino language is a mnemonic tool that merges the “distant” with “recent pasts” as well the present. When Benyacar recounts the soup anecdote, he refers to Ladino as “Spanish,” further demonstrating the extent to which the memory of an ancestral past formed a very real part of his

---

68 Lewkowicz, in her interviews with Jews living in Salonika during the 1990s, found that they would speak about their family’s migration from Spain as if it were a recent development. Although the Sephardic Jews were expelled from Spain in the late fifteenth century, they relate their ancestral history with phrases such as “we had learnt Spanish in Spain;” “We came from Spain;” “Spanish, the language our grandparents brought when they came in 1492 from Spain because Queen Isabelle had expelled us.” Even with the inclusion of the date of expulsion, the fact that the interviewees use the first person plural (“we”, “us”) creates the effect of placing themselves among those who physically travelled across the Mediterranean to the Ottoman Empire five centuries earlier. Thus, in addition to persisting cultural elements that promoted a more passive association with the group’s Spanish past, such as speaking Ladino or living in neighborhoods named after regions in Spain, Salonikan Jews actively affiliate themselves with Spain by placing expulsion at the forefront of their personal narratives. Lewkowicz, The Jewish Community of Salonika, 80-82.

69 The term “cultural memory” was first introduced as “Kulturelle Gedächtnis” by Jan Assman, who built off of Maurice Halbwach’s theory of “collective memory” and Aby Warburg’s notion of “social memory,” arguing that the two forms of memory merge within a cultural framework. “Cultural memory,” Assman writes, “is characterized by its distance from the everyday,” is “fixed,” and combines the “three poles [of] memory (the contemporized past), culture, and society (the group.” Jan Assman and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” New German Critique 65 (1995), 129.

70 Lewkowicz, The Jewish Community of Salonika, 76.
and his generation’s collective identity. Here, “linguistic memory” comes to the fore. During his imprisonment, Benyacar connected with and remembered his culture’s Iberian origins through the expression of language. Furthermore, in a testimony given decades after the events, Benyacar makes sure to convey to the interviewer the fact that he and his comrades spoke in Ladino during their years of imprisonment. At times, he even vocalizes Judeo-Spanish phrases and nicknames that were used in the camp, thereby utilizing language, and more specifically multilingualism, both to connect with his own memories of the past as well as to communicate them with another individual.

The relationship of a cultural memory of expulsion or exodus to a collective identity speaks to a broader trend that took hold of Jewish diaspora communities in the twentieth century. In reaction to the establishment of the nation state, Jewish communities expressed firmer ties to local or regional, religious, and ancestral identities. As Rebecca Kobrin asserts, the arbitrary construction of the nation state conflicted with and did not adequately support the complex ethnic and spatial identities of Jews whose “daily lives [took shape] in spheres located both above and below the purview of the state.”71 She writes that Jews who emigrated from Eastern Poland after the Second World War then express their collective memory of “homeland” in a way that transgresses the national framework. In a similar vein, the Salonikan Jewish community just so happened to be situated within Greek borders when the Hellenic State expanded into Macedonia in 1913, and so the Greek identity that was imposed upon them was superficial in comparison to their historic Iberian identity. The community’s “linguistic memory” and the persistence of Ladino, though, demonstrate that despite the nationalist regime’s efforts, Salonika’s Jews could not be purged of the Spanish elements of their cultural memory and

71Rebecca Kobrin, Jewish Bialystok and Its Diaspora (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 8.
collective identity. Evidently, the structure and expectations of the nation state was not a framework to which the group could conform.

At the same time as it is clear that, linguistically, Benyacar is placing his ethnicity above his nationality, a contradiction emerges in the fact that Benyacar refers to members of his community as his fellow “Greeks.” While the linguistic characteristics that he expresses are not reflections of “Greekness,” the term that he uses to label his group is. When the Salonikan Jewish community was all but destroyed in 1943, they had lived under Greek rule for a mere two decades. However, to say that their years of exposure to Hellenization made a negligible impact upon the group’s self-conceptualization would be inaccurate. The collective identity of Benyacar’s generation, especially, was complicated by the addition of this new stratum onto an already multi-tiered identity, and the manner in which Benyacar recalls his interactions with his compatriots reflects the interplay of these many layers.

As this section has shown, the interaction of language and ethnic solidarity impacted the experiences, and chances for survival, of Salonika’s Jewry. In a large part, this was due to the persistence of a unique and deeply entrenched collective identity and cultural memory. At the same time, this section has demonstrated that, through language, new layers can be added to such an identity. The following section will build on the notion of obtaining new identities through learning a new language. It will illustrate how linguistic acquisition was not limited to the broken words or phrases that formed “Concentration Camp Esperanto.” Indeed, some prisoners reached high levels of competency in new, non-Jewish languages, which would enable them to associate with different prisoner communities. Ultimately, these connections opened opportunities for survival that would not reach a prisoner who remained stationary in the camp’s complex linguistic network.
5. Acquiring Linguistic Power: Bridging Gaps Through Non-Jewish Languages

As previously described, Léon Perahia built early connections to camp authority figures through music and the French language. He was aware that he was in good favor with the Blockälteste, and so was irked when the man ordered him to run errands while his barrack mates remained in their bunks.72 The Blockälteste, though, was keeping him out of harms way; he sent Perahia out of the barracks so that he would escape a selection for sexual medical experiment subjects. Subsequently, the same Blockälteste told him to report that he was healthy after it had been announced that anyone with malaria would be excused from labor for the day. Perahia heeded the advice, and while he was working, everyone who had malaria was sent to his death in the gas chambers. Evidently, the ability to interact through French and music with a privileged prisoner who was otherwise of a different ethnic and linguistic background had an immediate and positive impact on Perahia’s chances for survival.

The Blockälteste spread word of Perahia’s musical abilities, and soon Perahia found himself singing in the Kapo’s barracks. He recalls that every other individual in the room was a Polish political prisoner, and that many had positions in favorable work details as engineers or mechanics. The Polish Kapos were so impressed with Perahia’s musical performance that, out of a desire to keep him around, they had him transferred to a new Kommando. While he was still doing manual labor—foraging spikes for constructing railroad tracks—he was surrounded by Polish day laborers, a situation that would prove advantageous to Perahia for two principal reasons. First, because day laborers were employed civilians who lived outside of the camp, the

72. "J’étais son chouchou, non?" Perahia, Mazal, 27.
work environment was generally safer than those with exclusively slave laborers. Individuals were treated more humanely; this particular work group, for instance, was fed their lunch from the bottom of the soup pot, meaning that they had potatoes and meat in their bowls rather than just broth. Second, and according to Perahia, most important, in finding himself in the company of Poles, he began to learn their language.73

Perahia did not passively and discreetly pick up a few words here and there. To the contrary, he actively engaged with the language learning process. Perahia wanted to learn Polish, indicating his awareness of its potential linguistic power. His enthusiasm tells us that Perahia was conscious of the fact that Polish was one of the camp’s dominant languages—not only in terms of number of speakers, but also in terms of number of speakers in advantageous roles. He knew that it was a tool that he could employ to improve his chances for survival, and so actively sought its acquisition. His attention to his linguistic development is further demonstrated through the observations that he makes on the particularities of the Polish language. He documents his various misunderstandings, writing that the Poles would often use the word “pierounie,” which he later learned meant “flash” or “lightning.” However, the term sounded very similar to the Greek work “pirouni,” meaning fork. And so, Perahia turned to the men and said “Why does it matter if you have a fork or a spoon, where is the grub?”74 It was through exchanges like these, he wrote, that even in their misery, they made sure not to lose their sense of humor.75

73J’ai eu de la chance de me trouver avec ces Polonais parce que j’ai tout de suite commencé à apprendre leur langue.” Perahia, Mazal, 31.
74Ils disaient aussi le mot pierounie (éclair). En grec, piroúni veut dire fourchette. On disait alors: ‘Peu importe, fourchette ou cuiller, où est la bouffe?’,” Perahia, Mazal, 36. Perahia is likely misspelling the Polish word piorunie, which means “lightning,” and can be employed to signify that something occurs suddenly or quickly. Transliterated, the Greek word for fork, “pírouni,” is πιρούνι.
75Ibid., 37.
The Polish day workers responded to Perahia’s eagerness to learn and took it upon themselves to teach him their language. They, too, became actively invested in his linguistic development, implying that these individuals who already possessed knowledge of one of the camp’s most significant languages were both aware of the linguistic advantage to which they were privy as well as willing to share their valuable linguistic asset. The Poles also grew compassionate toward Perahia; out of concern for his health, they gave him extra food supplies.\textsuperscript{76} Other laborers were not the only people with whom Perahia grew close as a result of his linguistic progress. He built a relationship with the Krupp Plant \textit{Kommando}’s Kapo, as well, and was fluent enough to ask him for lighter work. As a result, he was assigned a guard post at the plant’s south door—a job that was not physically exhausting, and that therefore enabled him to preserve valuable calories.\textsuperscript{77} These gestures of kindness show how linguistic knowledge and the connections that emerged as a result of shared language led to access to tangible resources and privileges that could aid survival.

After some time, Perahia was transferred to a different area of the camp. His new \textit{Kommando} was based in Auschwitz rather than Birkenau, where he had worked since his arrival. In leaving his previous barrack, Perahia also had to leave the individuals with whom he had built connections: his \textit{Blockaltester}, the Polish Kapos, the day laborers, etc. He had to start anew, and was in much the same position as he had been when he had first stepped off the train from Salonika weeks beforehand. Unfortunately for him, the \textit{Stubendienst} (Orderly) with whom he first interacted in Auschwitz had a temper. Upon his arrival, as a way of physically demonstrating who held power, the man violently beat Perahia. Perahia vividly recalls the

\textsuperscript{76}“Par scrupule, les Polonais me donnaient aussi des choses à manger.” Ibid., 31.

\textsuperscript{77}Ibid., 38.
Stubendienst yelling at him in German, emphasizing the tone in which the abuses were conveyed rather than the words themselves which, of course, Perahia would not have understood. He uses an ethnic slur, writing that “to hear a German (un Bôche) angry is like hearing a dog bark,” conveying both how frightening as well as how meaningless the Stubendienst’s words were to Perahia. He continues the dog metaphor, writing that “because he knew the language of barking, he was named Stubendienst.”

Perahia tells us that the man, who was an Austrian Jew, rose in the ranks of camp prisoners because of his knowledge of the German language. Once again, we see how prisoners were aware of the advantages that came with speaking the language of the perpetrator, be it German or Polish. That Perahia singles out how the Austrian Stubendienst acquired his privileged position suggests, as well, that privilege through language is a trend he feels is essential to convey to the reader. He does not subtly imply that the man’s linguistic background helped raise him to a position of authority. Rather, he firmly delineates his theory to the reader, alluding to his confidence in the role that “linguistic power” played in constructing the prisoner hierarchy of the camp.

Perahia would have had no support after his violent encounter with the Stubendienst had his Kapo from Birkenau not told the Polish day laborers that he had been transferred. The mechanics went to Auschwitz to retrieve him, and found him in a terrible state. Fortunately, they were able to bring him a doctor, medicine, and food, ultimately saving his life. The connections that Perahia made through his acquisition of the Polish language, then, were not connections of convenience. Indeed, the Poles exerted marked effort to assist Perahia, potentially risking their lives.

78 Perahia, Mazal, 36.
79 “Comme il connaissait la langue d’aboiement (l’allemand), on l’avait nommé Stubendienst.” Ibid.
own safety to ensure that of someone to whom they owed nothing. Nationally, ethnically, and religiously speaking, Perahia was an outsider to their group. However, in learning the Polish language, he inserted himself into their community. He was adopted by this group of Polish Christians, and as a result, they felt an obligation to rescue Perahia from the Auschwitz Kommando.

This support network, woven with the thread of a common Polish language, is reminiscent of the solidarity that emerged among Greek prisoners. In the case of the Salonikan Sephardim, their obscure linguistic background isolated them from the majority of other prisoners. Their exclusion, in turn, united them as an ethnic collective. Their ability to communicate with one another in Greek and Ladino, though, was the result of sharing a common ethnicity. Benyacar described what he saw as a bipolar camp demographic, claiming that the population consisted of “Greeks and non-Greeks,” not Greek speakers and non-Greek speakers. As discussed in the previous section, this characterization implies a level of impassivity between these allegedly impervious categories. However, as Perahia’s experience of learning Polish and his subsequent integration into a community of Polish Christians has demonstrated, such distinctions were not as absolute as Benyacar suggests.

The process of language acquisition exposes the porous nature of the camp’s ethno-linguistic communities. In learning Polish, Perahia by no means became an ethnic Pole. However, he was unquestionable absorbed into their support network, one based on a common identity that was grounded in speaking Polish. Whereas for the Salonikan Jews, being part of the Greek collective meant that one spoke both Greek and Ladino, for the Polish Christians, speaking the Polish language enabled one to join the Polish community. For each scenario, a
shared language was the common denominator. However, while for one it was the byproduct of belonging, for the other it was the catalyst.

In joining the Polish Christian community, though, Perahia by no means abandoned his connections to his compatriots. In addition to learning Polish, Perahia acquired some German through his day-to-day interactions with camp officials, and he used what little German he had to ask if another Salonikan Jew, whom he simply calls “Levi,” could join the Krupp Plant Kommando.80 He used his newly acquired linguistic skills as well as the personal connections that he had build as a result of his ability to communicate to ensure the well-being of a fellow Salonikan. Evidently, Perahia was aware that he was in an advantageous work force and he wanted to ensure that members of his community also benefited from his circumstances. This selfless act exhibits the persistence of ethnicity as an instrument of solidarity, even after an individual has for the most part ceased interacting with members of their own ethnic background and begun to engage, instead, with a new community.81 Far from being mutually exclusive, the two networks are complementary. Perahia’s new connections with the Polish-speaking camp elite expand the possible ways in which he can help his fellow Salonikans, enabling him to act as an intermediary who can open up his linguistically isolated compatriots to the advantages that his new linguistic skills have afforded him.

Perahia’s tendency to employ his knowledge of the Polish language to aid his fellow Salonikans extends past his desire to aid a specific individual, as we see with his treatment of

80Perahia, Mazal, 41. For more information on the Krupp munitions factory, which was located near the Auschwitz complex of Monowitz in the same area as were the Buna and I. G. Farben factories, see: Geoffrey P. Megargee, ed., United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

81In her study of Portuguese Conversos in early modern Amsterdam, Bodian argues that ethnic allegiance is the most persistent communal phenomenon in human history, for it transcends and interacts with other aspects of collective identity, such as religion, language, and a shared communal past. Bodian, Hebrews of the Portuguese Nation, xii.
Levi. Indeed, he utilizes his new linguistic advantage to help compatriots with whom he was not acquainted, as well. For instance, he observed that the non-Jewish Poles did not consume their soup rations.\footnote{Perahia, Mazal, 42.} Presumably, they brought much more appealing meals with them from home. As a result, the 
\textit{Kommando} had fifty liters of soup to split between seven people. Even after the Jewish prisoners had had their fill, there was always plenty leftover. Knowing how desperate others were for food, Perahia asked the Polish workers if he could take the leftover soup back to his other friends in the camp rather than let it go to waste. They obliged and, much like Benyacar had done in Warsaw, Perahia organized for the cauldron to be left in a secret location for a select group of Salonikans to access.

Because of Perahia’s ability to communicate in Polish and the subsequent connections that this enabled him to make, he was ultimately promoted, and given charge of the \textit{Werkhalle Union Kommando}’s three mechanical divisions.\footnote{Ibid., 48. What Perahia here calls the \textit{Werkhalle Union} factory is an Auschwitz munitions factory often termed the Weichsel-Union-Metallwerke. Female workers from this factory were involved in 1944 \textit{Sonderkommando} revolt at Birkenau, risking their lives to smuggle gunpowder out of the factory and into the hands of crematorium workers.} According to Perahia, he used his position of power to improve the situation of other Jewish prisoners. He even encouraged them to work less hard, an act that certainly put his own life in danger. His position of authority paired with his benevolence towards other prisoners meant that other Salonikans began to seek out Perahia’s help. A group of young men from Salonika came to Perahia when they learned that their 
\textit{Kommando} was to be sent to the \textit{Krematorium}.\footnote{Perahia, Mazal, 50-51.} The youths were from the \textit{Maurerschule}, or masonry school, a section of the camp in which males aged thirteen to twenty-five were trained
Sympathizing with their plight, Perahia recorded the young Salonikans’ prisoner numbers and brought the list to the *Arbeitsdienst*, an incident that once again demonstrates the persistence of ethnic solidarity despite linguistic connections to another ethnic group. The *Arbeitsdienst* then ensured that the young Salonikans were all transferred to the *Werkhalle Union Kommando*. Ten days later, all of those who remained at the *Maurerschule* were executed.

This anecdote emphasizes the advantages of the relationships that Perahia fostered with Polish-speaking authority figures through his acquisition of their language. While earlier we saw that he was able to scheme to have a single individual transferred to a more favorable work assignment, here Perahia arranged an entire group of individuals who had already been scheduled for execution to be spared and moved to another workforce. We see how through connections made possible by his linguistic abilities, Perahia’s own position within the camp hierarchy improved over time. His personal advancement, moreover, had a trickle-down effect, as the extent to which he was able to aid his fellow prisoners expanded alongside his power.

That the young men of the *Maurerschule* knew to ask Perahia for help speaks to the extensive covert communication networks that existed in the concentration camp setting. Prisoners shared intelligence with one another, relying heavily on common languages to pass along information that would contribute to one another’s survival. In this particular case, the Salonikan youths working as bricklayers would have learned about Perahia from fellow Greek- and/or Ladino-speaking Jews. Thereafter, they would have pleaded for help from Perahia in one of their shared tongues, as well. Next, Perahia—the linguistic liaison—communicated with his

---

85 Here, Perahia writes “*Mauerschule*” (literally, “wall school”) rather than “*Maurerschule*” (“mason school”). This is presumed to be a typo, for he goes on to define it as a masonry school in French, writing that it was an “*école de maçonnerie*.” Ibid., 50. This facility within the camp trained young prisoners to create and lay bricks.
superior in Polish on the youths’ behalf. This sequence of exchanges illustrates the complexity of
the camp’s prisoner support networks. Almost by necessity, these were multilingual systems—
webs of communication that were just as diverse as the prisoners who used them.
6. Conclusion

Far from the silent, regulated, and lifeless machines that the Nazi regime had intended them to be, concentration camps, especially larger camps like Auschwitz and Birkenau, were dynamic spaces. While undoubtedly oppressed, prisoners were also active participants in the camp system, employing agency to resist decisions from above in attempts to take control of their own survival. They reacted to and resisted against the structures that were imposed upon them. Some of these acts of resistance were aggressive, pitting violence against violence, as exemplified by better-known events such as the prisoner uprising of Sonderkommando II.86 Others, while perhaps less overt, were nonetheless acts of defiance.

The cases of Eli Benyacar and Léon Perahia, two Greek Jews from Salonika, speak to the myriad roles language played in prisoner resistance and survival. In contrast to the initial isolation experienced by Greek Jews, who were linguistically disadvantaged due to their lack of fluency in the camp’s dominant languages, their obscure linguistic backgrounds transitioned from burdensome to beneficial. Their stories demonstrate how language functioned as a survival tool, enabling prisoners who spoke uncommon tongues to covertly share information with other members of their ethno-linguistic community. Their ability to communicate with one another, made possible by a shared ethnic background, in turn fostered a sense of ethnic solidarity. Salonikan Jews exhibited a tendency to aid other Salonikan Jews, prioritizing the survival of their compatriots and exhibiting a distinct sense of unity that emerged as a reaction to exclusion

from other major ethno-linguistic groups. Their stories also illustrate the advantages that accompanied the acquisition of competence in a dominant camp language. We observe through Benyacar’s testimony that even the most limited knowledge of German could have a decisive impact on one’s chances for survival. Perahia’s memoir further underscores this trend, and takes the phenomenon of language acquisition one step further to exhibit the impact that achieving fluency in Polish could have on a prisoner’s position within the camp’s power hierarchy.

While this study considers the particularities of the Salonikan Jewish experience, it also makes claims about the relationship of language to themes that are broadly applicable. Benyacar and Perahia’s testimonies speak to the relationship between language and trauma, elucidating the avenues by which linguistic (in)ability can exacerbate or lessen a traumatic experience. In addition to showing how shared language can strengthen an already existing sense of ethnic identity and unity, they also demonstrate the extent to which linguistic acquisition can enable an individual to penetrate seemingly impervious ethnic barriers.

This study sheds light on the complexity of prisoner relationships during the Nazi genocide. It shows that day-to-day prisoner interactions were shaped by linguistic abilities, as well as the expectations that authority figures had of prisoners’ linguistic capacities. Prisoners purposefully employed and acquired languages, and were often well aware that languages could function as instruments of survival. Benyacar and Perahia did not passively submit to incomprehension or the disadvantages that accompanies it, but actively sought to overcome linguistic barriers. They were conscious of “linguistic power,” and employed it to their own advantage.

Finally, the central role of language in a prisoner’s experience is mirrored by the essential part that language plays in their memory of life in a concentration camp. For these two particular
sources, “linguistic memory” is an inherent element of recollection. It is articulated in its vocal and written forms, and used to communicate the multilingual mosaic of camp life to listeners and readers. Further, through “linguistic memory” language functions as a mnemonic device, and is employed to retrieve memories of certain scenes and interactions that occurred in a language other than the source’s native tongue. That linguistic memory would be a natural course of recollection for Holocaust survivors conforms with the multilingual nature of concentration camps. Accordingly, incorporating exploration of “linguistic memory” into historical study will open up new windows of analysis, enabling scholars to situate and engage with the past in a new theoretical framework.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


http://www.ushmm.org/online/hsv/person_view.php?PersonId=4892960


http://db.yadvashem.org/names/search.html?language=en