

The Children's Transport from the Bialystok Ghetto to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz: Analysis of Names on Deportation Lists

by Joachim Albrecht

Several hundred Jewish children from Bialystok were used as hostages by the Nazis and then murdered at Auschwitz. Following is a summary of a long, German-language article that I have written about them, along with their identifying personal details. The full article may be found on my website at juedische-schicksale.jimdo.com.

History of the Children's Deportation

On August 17, 1943, the second day of the evacuation of the Bialystok ghetto, approximately 1,200 Jewish children were selected on Pietrasze field, the assembly point and place of selection outside the ghetto, for a special train to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. About 400 children were taken from the Jewish orphanages; another group had been taken from their parents by force; a third group of adults joined the others in the hope of rescuing the children.

The children were transported on a passenger train that arrived at Theresienstadt on August 24, 1943. The number of the accompanying staff is unknown, but various sources give a number at between 20 and 60. Only two women survived the train ride, and they were transported immediately to Auschwitz.

Upon arrival at Theresienstadt, the children were bathed, given a complete set of clothing, treated and cared for carefully, and given enough to eat—more than the residents of the rest of the camp. They lived together with their caretakers in a camp outside of the ghetto. The ghetto was the town of Theresienstadt itself, but the children were taken to wooden barracks outside the ghetto in order to prevent contact with the ghetto inhabitants.

The children were, however, only pawns in negotiations between the Nazis and the British government, held in Theresienstadt in preparation for an exchange with German prisoners of war for money. Tragically, the negotiations failed because the negotiating partners could not reach an agreement concerning the proposed destination—Palestine or Great Britain.

After failure of the negotiations, the children, together with 53 volunteers from Theresienstadt—doctors, nurses and social-welfare workers—all were deported to Auschwitz on October 5, 1943. They arrived at Auschwitz on October 7 and were gassed and burned immediately upon arrival.

We have many articles, testimonies, memoirs and diaries written about the children's transport by those who were involved in this dramatic episode. One might think that the greater the number of documents, the closer we would approach the truth of what happened. The author's research seems to prove otherwise; the greater the number of



Debora Klementynowska

witnesses and the more details about the number of the children and the accompanying persons transported from Bialystok to Theresienstadt; the number of children moved from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz and about the procedure and sequence of the children transport in both ghettos, the larger the number of inconsistencies in the testimonies.

Focus of the Research

The focus of my research was an analysis of the deportation lists of the children's transport as well as incidents that occurred when the transports were assembled in Theresienstadt and in the Bialystok ghetto.

More than 15 Jewish and Polish witnesses recorded testimonies of their observations of and experiences with this incident, so we may reconstruct relatively well what happened on the first two days of the liquidation of the Bialystok ghetto. What does not exist is a deportation list from Bialystok to Theresienstadt. Witnesses in Theresienstadt reported that the children had small shields around their necks, labeled with their individual information; where the witnesses differed greatly is in their estimate of the number

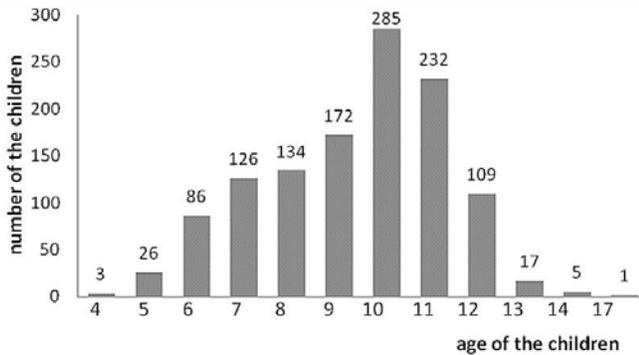


Figure 1. Age distribution of the children in transport Dn/b

of children involved. Analysis of 43 sources has yielded a range of estimates between 800 and 2,000; the author believes that approximately 1,200 is the most likely figure.

Two deportation lists from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz survive today, lists Dn/a and Dn/b, both the result of illegal copying inside Theresienstadt. Analysis of the lists reveals that many different typewriters were used and a number of workers were engaged in making the copies. List Dn/a includes the names of 9 physicians, 37 female and 7 male social workers—Czech and German volunteers, captives in Theresienstadt, who accompanied the children on their pretend freedom journey.

The Dn/b list includes the given names and family names of 1,196 children, their years of birth, birthplace and the given names of their parents. The list has many mistakes—for example, changed names of parents, typing errors and different spelling of the surnames of siblings (such as the siblings Maja Kinche and Sioma Kimsche) Some children seem to have been listed twice; other times it appears that a list may not be complete.

The distribution of the children by age in transport Dn/b is shown in Figure 1 the following diagram.

The distribution is not exact. Some parents, hoping to save their children, changed their age when they were put on the transport, knowing that otherwise their destination would be an extermination camp. (See below the fate of Debora Klementynowska.)

The children came from 29 locations in Poland and Belarus, most from Bialystok. It is difficult to know the gender of some children because of ambiguity related to their Yiddish given names. Some names seemingly were borne by both boys and girls; some given names are unknown. Even the lists of victims in the Yad Vashem database sometimes lack notations of gender. Through the use of special encyclopedias, lexicons and other sources, I concluded—with a probable five percent error rate—that the Dn/b list names 468 girls and 710 boys. Only six sources included the number of individuals in the transport from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz—three cited 1,260 children; one cited 1,196 children; one cited 1,200 children; one cited 1,500 children. The inmates of Theresienstadt were confined to their barracks when the children arrived, but some people did have contact with the children in their first hours in the camp—

the bathroom staff. They reported that the children were very angry and would not enter the bathroom, because there were shields with the word “Gas” and the symbol of skulls. Despite the children’s fears, this was not a gas chamber; rather, the symbols were there because the bathroom also was used for disinfection. Nonetheless, staff needed to spend a long time persuading and demonstrating before the children were convinced that it really was a bathroom.

Other residents saw the children on their way from the rail track (the so-called “Bahnhof Theresienstadt”) to the bathroom and from there to the barracks outside the camp. Some artists drew the group of children on their short stay inside the ghetto. These pictures offer evidence of the incident.

We know almost nothing about the time from August 24 to October 5, 1943, because the social workers, nurses and physicians had no contact with the inmates. Witnesses report that the children’s barracks were silent during the first two weeks, but after that, children could be heard laughing. Only one witness reports having seen the embarkation of the children to Auschwitz at the Bauschowitz railroad station, two miles from Theresienstadt.

Fate of One Individual

Yad Vashem’s Database of Shoah Victim’s Names has only two Pages of Testimony with photographs of members of the children’s transport. One is that of Debora Klementynowski (also Klementynowska), born May 19th, 1938, in Bialystok, murdered on October 7th, 1943, in Birkenau. She is number 748 in the Dn/b deportation list (see Figure 3).

Debora’s mother, Masha Vejnshetjn, the widow of Klementynowski, survived and completed three Pages of Testimony for her daughter and two for her husband.

The first testimony page is dated September 10, 1956. She stated the age of her daughter as five and one-half years, and she thought that Debora had been murdered in 1944 in Theresienstadt. From this we learn that Debora was one year younger than the age given in the Dn/b list. In the second Page of Testimony, dated May 21, 1991, the mother gave the date of birth as May 19, 1938. In column 11 she entered in Hebrew:

של 1000 ילדים לקרמטוריום הובנסה ושם באושיביץ למחנה מגטו הובא ביליסטוק עם טרנספורט

“Deported from ghetto Bialystok with the transport of 1,000 children to the camp Auschwitz and from there into the crematorium.” The third testimony, dated April 1, 1996, includes the photograph above in Figure 2 and the corrected history:

ההשמדה מחנה (של בטרנספורט היתה 1000 ביאליסטוק מגיטו ילדים שווייצר

שנשלחו לאושוויץ ומשם לטרייזנשטד תחילה

(She was in the transport of 1,000 children from the ghetto Bialystok, which were brought first to Theresienstadt and from there to Auschwitz).

These pages demonstrate how little the survivors initially knew about the fate of their children.

Lfd. Nr.	Name u. Vorname	Geb. Jahr	Geb. Ort	Name der Eltern Vater	Mutter
701	Kas Julak	1933	Grodno	Fajwel	Rwa
702	Rozental Samuel	1935	Bialystok	Szaja	Sora
703	Stolarz Chana	1932	Sokolow	Israel	Rohele
745	Myszkowski Zelik	1932	"	Fajwel	Matla
746	" Jankel	1934	"	"	"
747	Szylwiski Sara	1936	"	Wolf	Pradka
749	Klementynowska Debora	1937	"	Isaac	Freka
750	Olson Benjamin	1933	"	Mejer	Peter

Figure 3. Excerpt of from the list Dn/b

In the Ghetto Museum “Terezin Memorial” located at the former Theresienstadt concentration camp, we find Debora’s name on the memory wall in the first room—but with the wrong birth date (see Figure 4).

Debora’s father, Nachum Klementynowski, was a doctor. He was born on October 4, 1906. Before the ghetto was established, the family lived on Sienkiewicz Street 39 in Bialystok, a building that no longer exists. Dr. Klementynowski worked at the Jewish Hospital on Warszawska Street 15. Later, he was a physician in the ghetto hospital. He was murdered in 1944 in Majdanek. I could find no information about Debora’s mother.

Summary

Seventy years after this terrible incident, it still is impossible to find exact answers concerning the number in the children’s transport. Similarly, no source tells if and how many children died in Theresienstadt. I evaluated all testimonies from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which referred to the children’s transport; testimonies of teachers, Hadassa Shprung-Levkowitz and Hela Wolkenberg, who accompanied the transport from Bialystok to Theresienstadt; various testimonies of Dr. Tobias Cytron, who cared for the children in the first days in Bialystok; and all other sources available to me. I think there are no further sources about the fate of these children and so it seems that it is impossible to clarify their fate more exactly.

Notes

1. Bender, Sara: *The Jews of Bialystok during World War II and the Holocaust*. Waltham, Massachusetts, 2008.

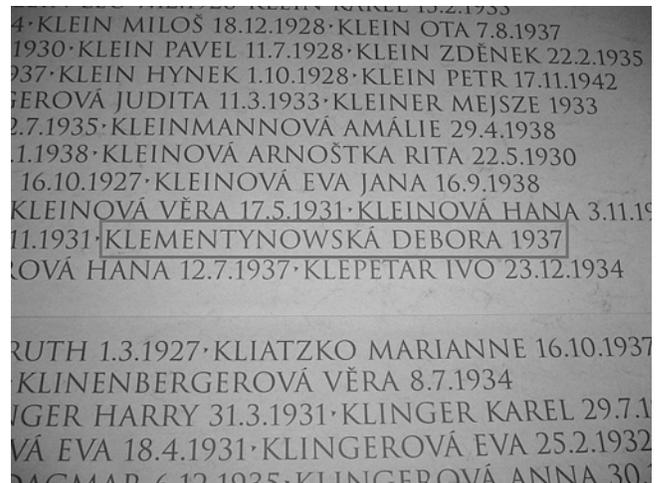


Figure 4. Photograph of the wall in the ghetto museum at Theresienstadt

2. Theresienstadt Martyrs Remembrance Association, Givat Haim Ihud, M.P. Emek Hefer, 38935 Israel: Dapey Keshet, issue 65, August 2008, page 11).

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