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## ***Kinderweihnachten* 1944 in Ravensbrück: Memories of Austrian Romni Ceija Stojka as World Literature<sup>1</sup>**

### **Abstract**

Ceija Stojka, Austrian Romni writer, artist, and survivor of three concentration camps, tells in her first memoir the story of a children's party in 1944 in Ravensbrück concentration camp, the *Kinderweihnachten* [Children's Christmas]. The poignant narrative joins numerous others by inmates from several countries in various languages—in print and archival sources—as works of world literature. An examination of the most notable variation in the individual renditions about who actually organized the party—the camp's officers or the inmates—leads to an analysis of Stojka's initial particular belief that the officers were the organizers and her subsequent reflections on why she might have come to this conclusion. This essay examines that belief within the context of Romani cultural concepts, and especially that of *baxt*, meaning both happiness and luck.

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<sup>1</sup> “Children's Christmas” (my translation; unless otherwise noted, all translations in the essay are mine). This essay expands on research for my annotated English translation of Ceija Stojka's memoirs. I thank Pacific University for supporting my sabbatical year 2018–19 to complete the research, translation, and writing. I am indebted to the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst/German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) for a stipend to research in the archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial during that sabbatical year. I am grateful to the archivists and scholars in the Archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial, including Cordula Hundertmark, former Deputy Director and Head of Scientific Services Department; Monika Schnell, Head Archivist; Matthias Roth, Researcher; Dr. Insa Eschebach, former Director of the Ravensbrück Memorial; and Dr. Sabine Arend, former Head of the Repository, for helping me locate resources. I also thank Bärbel Schindler-Saefkow for sharing her knowledge and presentation “*Kinderweihnacht im KZ–Ravensbrück 1944: Eine wahre Geschichte.*” I am indebted to Nuna Stojka for providing valuable information about her mother-in-law, Ceija Stojka, and Karin Berger for generously sharing her time and knowledge. I also thank Hayden Christensen for assisting in editing the final manuscript, supported by a Summer Undergraduate Research and Creative Inquiry grant at Pacific University.

## 1. Biographical and Historical Background for Ceija Stojka's Narrative

In her first memoir, *Wir leben im Verborgenen: Erinnerungen einer Rom-Zigeunerin* [*We Live in Secrecy: Memories of a Romni-Gypsy*] (1988), Austrian Romni artist, writer, and activist Ceija Stojka (1933–2013) tells the poignant story of a children's party that occurred at Christmas time in 1944 in Ravensbrück concentration camp.<sup>2</sup> Her narrative joins numerous others by inmates from several countries in various languages as they tell of one evening when children in the camp were allowed to have treats and partake of various traditions—singing carols, viewing a puppet show, admiring a decorated tree—to celebrate the holiday. Stojka was an 11-year-old inmate in the camp. She had already survived over sixteen months in Auschwitz-Birkenau and had been transported to Ravensbrück before an estimated 4,200 to 4,300 Roma and Sinti men, women, and children were gassed as part of the liquidation of the so-called “Gypsy Camp” [Zigeunerlager] on the night of August 2–3, 1944 in Auschwitz-Birkenau. After some six months in Ravensbrück, Stojka was deported to Bergen-Belsen and was interned there until the camp's liberation on April 15, 1945. She was fifty-five when she published her first memoir. Her account of the children's party is one of the only known published renditions of the story from the perspective of a Romni child survivor. She also created a remarkable painting of the event, which is now housed in the Ravensbrück Memorial archive (Ill. 1).

The Ravensbrück concentration camp lay about ninety kilometers north of Berlin and was situated next to the resort city of Fürstenberg on the Havel River. The camp opened in May 1939 and was the largest concentration camp built exclusively for women in the German Reich. Ravensbrück was intended for groups whom the Nazis considered enemies of the state—such as communists and Jehovah's Witnesses—and those deemed inferior, immoral beings, “asocials”—such as prostitutes, criminals, disabled, and “Gypsies” [Zigeuner]. The camp was not offi-

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<sup>2</sup> Stojka's memoir first appeared in 1988. An edition with this first memoir and her second one, entitled *Reisende auf dieser Welt*, which had been published in 1992, appeared in 2013 with some changes. The German quotes in the footnotes will come from the 2013 edition. Quotes into English will come from my translated edition *The Memoirs of Ceija Stojka* (2022) cited as *Memoirs* with the page number following.



Ill. 1: Ceija Stojka, “Weihnachtsessen in Ravensbrück, 1944,” Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück/ Stiftung Brandenburgische Gedenkstätten (cited as MGR/SBG) V1616 L2. Photograph by Matthias Reichelt. Reproduced with permission from MGR/SBG and the Stojka Family Estate.

cially designated as a camp for Jews, and only about 10 percent of the prisoners were Jewish. From 1941 to 1945 the camp complex contained a men’s camp. Between 1939 and 1945, some 120,000 women and children, 20,000 men, and 1,200 female youth were registered as inmates in Ravensbrück. Deportees came from over thirty nations and ethnic groups, and the variety of languages they spoke was most likely just as varied.<sup>3</sup> Romani women and children were interned in Ravensbrück from its earliest years. The first transport of minors aged fourteen and above arrived in the camp in July 1939 with a transport of Sinti and Roma women from the Burgenland in Austria (Eschebach 2020, Buser 2011). Stojka, when arriving at Ravensbrück, remarks on the presence of numerous women

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed history and description of Ravensbrück see Strebel (2003).

and children in her barracks (*Memoirs*, 58). According to incomplete lists of arrivals in the camp, an estimated 881 children—from two to sixteen years old and from eighteen different nations—were imprisoned there, of which Roma and Sinti children comprised a major part.

Archival documents and published witness accounts by adult women inmates present several other published and non-published versions of the 1944 Christmas-time festivities. Some were written down at the time of occurrence and others were compiled immediately after the liberation of the camp. Some are included in first-hand witness statements while others were passed down orally through generations. Some, such as Ceija Stojka's account, were written, told, and published many years after the event. The genres include memoirs, poetry, witness accounts, interviews, and newspaper reportages. The versions at hand today arose originally from speakers of many languages, including Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Russian, and Hebrew, who were interned in Ravensbrück for the various reasons listed above. The narratives are largely housed in the archives of the Ravensbrück Memorial and thus translated into or documented in German.<sup>4</sup> The exact nature of the festivities as described by participants and witnesses varies, depending on the inmate's age, nationality, ethnicity, location of her barracks, and role in the camp.

Damrosch describes the process whereby a text becomes world literature: "A work enters into world literature by a double process: first, by being read as literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin" (Damrosch 2003, 6). Owing to the variety of languages and nationalities as well as the diversity of narrative forms that the stories about the Ravensbrück 1944 festivities represent, I argue that Ceija Stojka's piece has become world

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<sup>4</sup> See Bobkova (2018), Breur (1997), "Das Weihnachtswunder von Ravensbrück" (1993), "DÖW [Dokumentationsarchiv des Österreichischen Widerstands]/Wien; Sammlung KZ-Ravensbrück" (2000), Freyberg, Jutta von and Ursula Krause-Schmitt (1993), Hozáková (1995), Hunger (n.d.), Jarzycka (1946), Katzenmaier (1996), Knapp (2003), Lundholm (1998), Mangold (2002), Möbius, Dagmar (2010), Müller (1981), "Nur deshalb sind dem Tode wir entronnen, damit wir an dem Frieden bau'n": Zum Internationalen Friedenstag d. Frauen in Ravensbrück am 10. September 1949 (1949), Phillips und Schnell (1999), Rolfi and Bruzzone (2016), Salvessen (1993), Schulenburg (1983), Stanislaw (1946), Stojka (1999), Stojka (2003), Stojka (2013), Vermehren (1946), Vetter (2003), and Wiedmeier (n.d.). In the scope of this essay, I cannot examine the details of all these narratives.

literature. Her story, however, is more than just one single independent piece of literature that has moved into the broader world beyond its linguistic (German) and cultural (Romani) point of origin. Rather, the narrative has transcended the focus that Damrosch places on the individual work to become part of a larger world literary phenomenon encompassing several individual narratives of many linguistic and cultural points of origin. While one can read each individual rendition of the story in and of itself, varying accounts collectively tell the world of the remarkable events related to the children's celebrations in Ravensbrück concentration camp at Christmastime, 1944, and the overarching story deserves to be told over and over again.<sup>5</sup>

One cannot deny, however, the marked variances between the content of the stories, whether in the descriptions of preparations for the ceremony, the exact nature of the celebrations, the times the celebrations occurred, the people who were present, or the reactions of the participants. One main notable variance concerns the organizers of the festivities. Stojka's narrative implies that the SS officers and guards were largely responsible for organizing the event. In contrast, several other stories emphasize how the women inmates were the main instigators and organizers. The extent to which the SS was involved in actually facilitating and sanctioning the events remains fully unknown. My analysis attempts to show how the differing accounts suggest that the reality probably lies in the middle of these two conflicting views with both parties having some amount of responsibility. Stojka's viewpoint, as that of the other inmates, depended on her particular circumstances in the camp. My comparison of many narratives investigates how Stojka processed her experiences in light of stories about the camps that continually surfaced. On the one hand, Stojka observed life in the camps from the perspective of a child. On the other hand, she also often locates her memories within others' collective experiences. Ultimately, I interpret the root of her interpretation within cultural values and beliefs stemming from her upbringing as a Lovara Romni. Taken together, individual nuances in Stojka's and

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<sup>5</sup> Further artistic projects and public presentations have taken the event of the children's Christmas festival at Ravensbrück to be true. On December 13, 2014, the WN/BdA Berlin and Lichtenberg organized an event to commemorate 70 years since the Ravensbrück Children's Christmas Festival 1944. The Tandra-Theater staged a play called "1944 – Es war einmal ein Drache" ["1944—Once Upon A Time There Was A Dragon"] based on the story by Bodo Schulenburg (1983).

the other women's stories emerge as world literature through a collective narrative of resistance, hope, caring, solidarity, and resourcefulness.

I must first stress, as scholars of Holocaust memoirs have continued to prove, examining the similarities and differences in accounts of what happened in the camps does not mean to judge which rendition is right or wrong, but rather to demonstrate the complexities of such stories and the processes whereby people, and especially children, form and formulate memories and then continually revisit those memories as adults.<sup>6</sup> Ceija Stojka's writings, artworks, interviews, and conversations reveal that she was constantly reexamining her past and incorporating new revelations about life in the camps that other survivors and researchers were espousing with her own memories. After the war, she traveled extensively throughout Austria as she worked selling carpets at markets and fabrics door to door. In her daily life, she kept herself informed of current events by regularly viewing television news reports and listening to informative radio broadcasts. She admits that news could spark memories or cause her to reinterpret those memories.<sup>7</sup> Her narratives thus also stand as works-in-progress that engage readers in the reciprocal, ongoing process of memory recollection. Examining her stories within the context of the collective teaches researchers and readers to be especially fastidious in providing sources and resources for stories and information. Scholars need to recognize the "fragility of memory" (Schacter 1996) to recall, revise, distort, and forget as well as the individuality of perspective incurred by the vastness of the camps and the multitudes of victims and perpetrators. The process of gathering contextual narrative webs inspires readers, in the words of Christopher Browning, to look "at memory not in the collective singular but rather in the individual plural, not collective memory but rather collected memories" (2003, 39).

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<sup>6</sup> It is impossible to list all the studies about Holocaust survivors' memories and the process whereby they revisit those memories over and over, sometimes with variations, as well as the relationship between trauma and memory; relevant studies include those by Caruth (1996), Felman and Laub (1992), Jonathan Friedman (2002), and Lawrence Langer (1995).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, in her interview with Karin Berger (*Memoirs* 205–206).

## 2. Ceija Stojka's Narrative in the Context of Other Women's Narratives

Ceija Stojka's story begins by relating how "[e]nmal" (Memoirs 62)<sup>8</sup> the entirety of the camp commanders, SS-men and SS-women were standing around the main square and talking amongst themselves. The female guard supervisor, *Oberaufseherin*, Dorothea Binz and another brutal female guard Rabl,<sup>9</sup> then came over to the prisoners looking friendly. This caused the inmates to wonder what was going on, surmising that the change in composure must have to do with fear, perhaps towards the Allies approaching and the National Socialists' demise. The guards announced that the commandant had invited them to a Christmas celebration. "Es gibt Kuchen und warme Milch. Um sechs holen wir euch ab" (Stojka 2013, 45).<sup>10</sup> After being led to another barracks—a move that Stojka stresses was totally out of the ordinary, for the children were never allowed to move very far from their block—she describes the room, which matches her painting: "Die Baracke war sehr festlich hergerichtet. Ein langer Tisch stand in der Mitte, ganz in Weiß und viele Bänke waren hingestellt. Am Barackenende war ein großer, wunderschöner Christbaum, darauf hingen Gold- und Silbernüsse, große Äpfel, gelbe und rote" (Stojka 2013, 45–46).<sup>11</sup> Stojka notices from the calendar on the wall that it was December 24, 1944. The children were delighted in receiving warm milk with sugar, cake with raisins, a piece of bread, and an entire sausage. But rather than devouring all the goodies for themselves, many of the children had the same idea: to hide some of the food to bring home to

<sup>8</sup> "[O]ne time" (Stojka 2013, 44).

<sup>9</sup> Ceija Stojka refers numerous times in her memoirs to the *Oberaufseherin* Dorothea Binz, who was notorious for her cruelty to prisoners. My research into the identity of SS-guard "Rabl," to whom Ceija refers here and in paintings, led me to two possibilities. The first could have been Margarethe Rabe, who was born on October 2, 1923 in Neustadt/Glewe. The other "Rabl" could have been Emma Raabe. She was born on September 3, 1882, and thus would have been sixty-one and sixty-two years old when Ceija was in the camp.

<sup>10</sup> "There will be cake and warm milk. We'll pick you up at six" (*Memoirs*, 62).

<sup>11</sup> "The barracks was very festively decorated. A long table stood in the middle, all in white, and many benches had been arranged. At the end of the barracks stood a big, beautiful Christmas tree with gold and silver nuts hanging on it, and big apples, yellow and red" (*Memoirs* 52).



their mothers. “Das war die Rettung!” (Stojka 2013, 46).<sup>12</sup> She continues to conjecture as to why the SS were being unusually good natured, as she remarks that an SS-man saw them, but just laughed. After eating, the children had to sing the German Christmas carol “Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht” (Silent Night, Holy Night) for the guards. At the end of the evening, the children were all allowed to bring an apple, some nuts, and a branch from the tree back to the barracks. Upon returning to the barracks, their mothers received them with relief. Sidi Rigo Stojka, Ceija Stojka’s mother, had tears come to her eyes upon seeing the children and the luxuries they brought back. The festival ultimately gave them hope: “Wir alle glaubten, jetzt wird es vielleicht ein bisschen besser” (Stojka 2013, 47).<sup>13</sup>

Other narratives prove clearly that festivities did occur in Ravensbrück around Christmas time in 1944; they are all noteworthy, but not all reports involve children. According to one account, the women in the Siemens camp, which lay outside the main camp, had stolen paper rolls from the factory and had made drawings using charcoal from the oven (Arend and Eschebach 2018, 160). In the Polish barracks, Zofia Pociłowska had made a manger from plexiglass plates stolen from airplane production facilities and paper (Arend and Eschebach 2018, 160). The German political prisoner, Lieselotte Thumser-Weil, extols Christmas 1944 as one of her best Christmases. She was twenty-seven years old and did not have any children. She describes three women who went from barracks to barracks in the middle of the night holding candles and singing Christmas songs in Russian. In the midst of severe hunger, filth, and chaos: “Da stehen nun drei Menschen und bringen Dir eine Freude – für mich war das das Licht des Lebens. Wenn die drei Frauen beim Klauen des Rupsfensackes erwischt worden wären, wäre sie erschossen worden” (Freyberg and Krause-Schmitt, “Nur weil ich mich stur gestellt habe.” Interview mit Lieselotte Thumser-Weil 16).<sup>14</sup>

Regarding festivities specifically for children, numerous stories exist, mostly ascribing to the women prisoners the roles of instigators and

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<sup>12</sup> “That was our salvation,” she exclaims (*Memoirs* 63).

<sup>13</sup> “We all believed that things might get a little better now” (*Memoirs* 63),

<sup>14</sup> “Then suddenly three people are standing there and bringing you happiness—for me that was the light of my life. If the three women had been caught stealing even a burlap bag, they would have been shot.”



main organizers. A poem by an anonymous Austrian prisoner refers to the phenomenon as “Das Weihnachtswunder von Ravensbrück.”<sup>15</sup> One inmate states in a private witness account: “Weihnachten 1944/45 wurden 400 Kinder in Ravensbrück heimlich beschert. Unter einem Weihnachtsbaum wurde ein Kasperltheater aufgebaut.”<sup>16</sup> An Italian political prisoner, Bianca Paganini Mori, reports that the German prisoners put up a beautifully decorated tree in the barracks, began to sing Christmas songs, and called everyone over (Rolfe and Bruzzone 2016, 259). Survivor Maria Wiedmeier saw the entire production as an initiative not only for the children, but also for the mothers. The adults prepared songs, saved food from any packages they might have received, and found leftover materials to make dolls, clothes, balls, and toys to give to the children. The mostly Polish women in Block 1, where the kitchen was, prepared three extra open-faced sandwiches for each of the 400 children. Women in many barracks gathered 20 tables and tablecloths, and the outside workforce brought little Christmas trees into the camp. For Wiedmeier, the entire festival was a success: “Nie im Lagerleben haben wir so glückliche Kinderaugen gesehen!”<sup>17</sup>

Charlotte Müller, a German communist resistance fighter during the war, also credits female inmates with initiating the idea for a children’s party. She describes the initiative as occurring in “einer kleinen Gruppe von Kameradinnen” (“in a small group of comrades”) (Müller 1981, 167). They decided to stage a puppet theater and to ask inmates to give up food to give to the children at the festivity, and to enlist the help of inmates to make presents for the children. Most difficult, Müller states, was to get permission from the camp’s administration. Müller and the others reasoned, however, that with the Red Army closing in on Berlin and the daily retreats of the German Army, the camp officers and guards might panic and begin to regret the horrors they had committed. They thus might allow more benevolent acts such as the children’s Christmas party to atone for their actions and to try to prove their good-hearted-

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<sup>15</sup> “The Christmas Miracle of Ravensbrück”; “Das Weihnachtswunder von Ravensbrück (1993), 16.

<sup>16</sup> “At Christmas 1944/45 400 children in Ravensbrück were secretly given presents. A Punch-and-Judy puppet show happened under a Christmas tree” MGR/SBG, SlgBu, Bd 04 Kinder Bericht 39.

<sup>17</sup> “We had never seen such happy children’s eyes in the camp’s life” (MGR/SBG Bu\_Bd\_34 Ber. 635, 2).

ness. Müller went with a group of fellow inmates to ask head guard Binz if they could stage a party, who did not immediately say “yes,” but wanted to know the details first. Müller claims not to have told her about the presents, and that Binz finally did give permission. Preparations went on as planned, with inmates organizing the puppet theater show, collecting food from the extra rations, and making gifts. Some women were punished when bits of fabric and yarn that they had stolen from their work in the tailor shop were discovered by the SS in the Blocks (Müller 1981, 167–70). Müller states that Edmund Bräuning, the Schutzhaftlagerführer and assistant to the camp commandant Fritz Suhren, and the female guard supervisor Binz entered the party ceremoniously at the beginning and Bräuning gave a quick welcome to the children, but then left abruptly after the choir sang and the children became sad (Müller 1981, 177–78).

German political prisoner Ilsa Hunger confirms Müller’s account by describing various women in each block throughout the camp organizing different parts: sewing, knitting, stuffing, constructing from any old materials they could find, to make piles of toys, dolls, clothing, and balls. She also describes the puppet show they wrote with a prince and princess, robbers, magicians, and an evil dragon. They made little gift packets with apples, baked goods, bread, jam, anything they could find and save. She states that they received permission from the camp administration, at first only to put on the puppet show, but not for distributing presents. According to her, the presents were hidden throughout the barracks, so that in the end, the children received them anyways. 500 children aged two to fourteen attended, and, according to Hunter, they were delighted at the puppet theater. She claims that for children and adult prisoners alike, the festivities instilled in them hope and a will to live, despite the miserable conditions.<sup>18</sup>

Hermine Jursa, an Austrian communist in the resistance movement who was in Ravensbrück from 1941 until its liberation in 1945, mostly describes the organizing, building, and staging of the puppet theater. At first, she states, the women organized everything “secretly” amongst themselves, dividing up the tasks. The Czechs made the puppet heads while the Polish painted them and sewed the clothes; Toni Bruha wrote the fairytale for the show, and Hermine Jursa acquired the theater from the furniture-making shop in the men’s camp. But then, she states, the

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<sup>18</sup> “Weihnachten im KZ” in: *“Nur deshalb sind dem Tode wir entronnen, damit wir an dem Frieden bau’n”* (1949, 6–7).

SS caught wind of the event and could not do anything to stop it. Consequently, they assumed credit for its staging and gave their permission (Berger et al. 139–40). Vera Bobkova, a Soviet prisoner, states that the camp leaders decided suddenly before Christmas 1944 to organize a celebration with presents for the children. The prisoners were forced to sew dolls, bears, cats, and other toys from rags. The Russians interpreted this sudden gesture of goodness as a sign that: “die Faschisten stehen mit einem Fuß am Grabe” Vetter (2003, 58).<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Perspectives on the Organizers of the Children’s Christmas Festivities

The idea that Ceija Stojka’s testimony gives a certain amount of credit to the SS for organizing the party gives readers pause to consider why she might have had this perspective. As with other child survivors, Stojka witnessed life in the camps from a very personal perspective.<sup>20</sup> Rumors and stories circulated constantly as hunger, violence, and fear could distort concepts of time and place. Children especially were confronted with actions that they could not comprehend, explain, or recognize within the scope of their own life experiences. In an interview from 1999 in the Bergen-Belsen archive, Stojka recognizes that her rendition of the SS planning the party might have been based on rumors she heard as a child: “Ja, es hat eine Weihnachtsfeier gegeben in Ravensbrück, die organisiert wurde von den SS-Männern von Auschwitz, hat, also haben wir’s gehört. Was wirklich wahr ist, das weiß ich nicht, wer es wirklich organisiert hat [...]” (Stojka 1999, Cassette 2, TC 18:06).<sup>21</sup> Later, in 2003, in an interview conducted in conjunction with the exhibit on female guards at Ravensbrück, Stojka mentions the possible existence of rumors about the organization: “[...] also das habe ich aber auch erst jetzt gehört, dass es nicht die SS waren, Ich dachte immer, dass es die SS Frauen waren. Und die SS Männer die Güte gehabt haben und uns dann zu Weihnach-

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<sup>19</sup> “the fascists are standing with one foot in the grave.”

<sup>20</sup> See Eschebach (2020, 1–2); Hiemesch (2017, 404).

<sup>21</sup> “Yes, there was a Christmas celebration in Ravensbrück that was organized by the SS-men of Auschwitz, that’s what we heard. What’s really true, I don’t know, who really organized it.”

ten, also einmal 1944 eingeladen haben. Aber die Enttäuschung habe ich fünfzig Jahre später erfahren, dass das die Lagergemeinde war” (Stojka 2003, 9).<sup>22</sup>

Again, Stojka’s revisiting what she might have understood as a child in comparison with what others might have heard or experienced does not negate either’s experience of the event, but rather shows the complex process of memory building that continually digs deeper and deeper into her dark past. The truly unbelievable goodness of the party contrasts significantly with the horrific events and changes happening at the end of 1944 and the beginning of 1945. These included the presence of many children in the camp, Himmler’s order of a mass exterminations to begin at the Ravensbrück women’s camp, the mass shootings that occurred in Ravensbrück in the winter of 1944–45, the building of gas chamber and crematorium, and the sterilizations of “Gypsy” females. For this reason, the fact that the Nazis could have allowed the women to organize such an event might still be unfathomable to some survivors such as Ceija Stojka. In his talk at the commemoration of the 74th year since camp liberation, Dr. Richard Fagot, a Jewish nine-year-old boy in Ravensbrück in 1944, recalled the Christmas party as “ein Erlebnis, das einen riesengroßen Eindruck auf mich gelassen hat.”<sup>23</sup> He remembered living in Block 22 at the time with 28 people, some of them Roma and Sinti women, some German prostitutes. From the party, he remembered the warm lighting and the little bags with sugar cubes. He also insisted that the party was organized by the SS, not by the inmates. In such a system of tyrannical terror, he believed, the mothers would have stood no chance in having an influence on the organization of such a party.

Some survivors, also in contrast to Ceija Stojka’s account, do not depict the festivities in such a positive light for the children, but these renditions are mostly from observers who were adults at the time. Georgia Peet-Tanewa explains that most of the children were Jewish or from

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<sup>22</sup> “so I also just now heard that it wasn’t the SS. I always thought that it was the SS women. And that the SS men had the goodness of their hearts and then invited us to Christmas, one time in 1944. But then I was disappointed to learn fifty years later that it was the camp community.”

<sup>23</sup> “an experience that left a huge impression on me.” Dr. Richard Fagot, “Zeitzeugen-gespräch,” [Witness Conversation] at the “74. Jahrestag der Befreiung Ravensbrück,” [74th-Year Commemoration of the Liberation of Ravensbrück] 13 April 2019.

Greek-Orthodox countries, and hence had never experienced a Christmas celebration. The celebration was, according to Peet-Tanewa, more for the organizers than for the children in the camp. That is why she does not say anything: “[...] wenn sie dann all diese Klischees bringen, leuchtende Kinderaugen usw” (Arend and Eschebach 2018, 161).<sup>24</sup> Again the political prisoner Charlotte Müller describes the children starting to cry when the camp choir began to sing “O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum” [Oh Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree]. She believes their sadness was due most likely the memories that so many of them might have had of more cheerful past Christmas celebrations at home. The children did cheer up and laugh at the Punch-and-Judy puppet performance (Müller 1981, 178). Likewise, again the Austrian communist resistor Hermine Jursa observes: “Die Kinder haben nicht lachen können. Diese Blicke! Wie wenn sie sagen möchten: Gibts [sic] so etwas? Erst nach und nach, wenn der Kasperl lustig war, haben manche gelacht. Aber alle hatten große, traurige Augen. So etwas hatten sie noch nie gesehen, sie haben doch immer Aufseherin und Häftling miteinander gespielt” (Berger et al. 1987, 140).<sup>25</sup>

Obviously, the details of the children’s Christmas festivities vary according to the memories, as well as the ages, ethnic groups, nationalities, barracks locations, and reasons for internment of the women who tell of their experiences. The necessity to relate the details here is to display these variations in the context of a composite world literature. Analyzing situational reasons for the divergences, and especially for Ceija Stojka’s story, emphasizes the specific influential factors of her age and Romani ethnicity that make her perspective unique and noteworthy. Related to age, her view as child is, unfortunately, is a rare one, for most of the children who would have witnessed the event most likely perished in the next couple months or, if they did survive, have not published anything about the party. Besides the above-related oral description given by Richard Fagot in his public talk, the only other comparable telling occurs

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<sup>24</sup> “when everyone then brings in all these clichés, sparkling children’s eyes, etc.” (Private interview with Gabriele Knapp; printed in Arend and Eschebach 2018, 161).

<sup>25</sup> “The children couldn’t laugh. These looks! As if they wanted to say: Is this really happening? Only after some time, as the puppet performance became funny, did some of them laugh. But they all had big, sad eyes. They had never seen anything like this, they only had always seen a female guard with a prisoner playing.”

in Sarah Helm's book *Ravensbrück*, in which she devotes a chapter to "A Children's Party." She does not, however, provide exact sources for her information, which seems to be based on a combination of published and unpublished survivor accounts and on Helm's own personal interview with a Jewish child survivor, Naomi Moscovitch, seven years old at the time of the party, and living in Israel at the time of the interview. I thus hesitate to include her findings among the archival sources I cite here, although they are interesting. Helm states how the organizers recorded planning a party amongst themselves without telling the camp officials, but then fractures broke out because the different groups, largely national in nature (French, Polish, Belgian, Russian, German) on the party committee started to disagree. When the date for the event came under question, Dorothea Binz agreed that the organizers could use the entire Block 22 for the event, but "only children would be admitted, along with twenty organizers. No mothers or camp others must attend" (Helm 2016, 476). According to Helm, the inmates did all the preparations: a Czech artist made puppets for a puppet show, a Siemens worker from the camp found foil for decorating the tree, French prisoners used rags to make toys, the kitchen provided bread and butter, Norwegians and Belgians donated sugar from their food parcels, because they were the only prisoners receiving food parcels at that time.

Helm claims that Oberaufseherin Binz and Schutzhaftlagerführer Bräuning were in attendance at the party, but she paints a much bleaker picture than renditions such as Ceija Stojka's, writing as an adult from a child's perspective. Helms cites from Sylvia Salvesen's *Forgive—but Do Not Forget* (without giving the exact source): "As soon as the party began, however, things started to go wrong" (Helm 2016, 476). The children were so starved and weak that they could hardly move; some even had to be carried to their chairs, and most could not laugh at the puppet show. A specific children's choir had practiced to perform, in which Naomi Moscovitch sang, but when the choir began singing "Oh Christmas Tree" many children started to cry. In her rendition, after the singing, her mother came and stood outside the window and shouted to Naomi and her brother that they had to get out quickly because this was not their religion, and they should not be celebrating. She then talks about hearing from others about an explosion: "The others told me that the Germans threw hand grenades in the window and that was how they wanted to finish off all the children" (Helm 2016, 479). Ceija Stojka's rendition does not support this account of the bombing, and neither does any

other written testimony. Helm, however, gives contrasting information: “and yet several other surviving children remember something similar” (Helm 2016, 479). She explains: “As no written evidence survives of the bombing, and the adults didn’t talk of it, it is hard to believe the story, and yet, as this is the way the children remember things, for them it is clearly true” (Helm 2016, 480). Herein lies perhaps the crux of the matter and the importance of Ceija Stojka’s narrative. The memories of the children who remember the day are true.

Memories of the organizers have appeared in various forms throughout the past seven decades, passing varying renditions along which have contributed to the emerging collective memories. Ceija Stojka’s account belongs to the collective with individual twists based not only on the stories she might have heard as a child, but also on the perpetual sense of hope that resurfaces many times in her narratives. Additionally, Ceija Stojka’s memoirs, and the story of the Childrens Christmas offer material for the burgeoning research on child survivors of the Holocaust, and more broadly on children who have experienced war, violence, political upheaval, and forced migration—a subject that remains all too relevant in our contemporary times. Indeed, the value placed on testimonies by child survivors has intensified since the 1990s as scholars and readers have come to appreciate the perspectives that the so-called “Generation 1.5” offer on life in the camps. Susan Rubin Suleiman formulated this term for the generation that stood between “Generation 1”, or the adult survivors and “Generation 2,” the children of those survivors who were born after the camps (Suleimann 2002). Whereas child survivors who relate their stories have heard remarks such as: “What do you know—you were only a child”, researchers have come to recognize the importance of children’s perspective on the terror that was occurring around them, and that the children actually took active roles in everyday life in the camps.<sup>26</sup> In relating how the children stole food to bring home to their mothers throughout the party, Ceija Stojka’s narrative shows how children can maintain control of their own actions and thoughts and offer hope to subsequent generations. While child survivor memoirs demonstrate how important support and protection from family and friends were, they also prove that children were not helpless and passive victims. In his observations on Bergen-Belsen, upon liberating the camp, Captain

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<sup>26</sup> See Buser (2011), Eschebach (2020), Gring (2014), Hiemesch (2017), and Rahe (1994, 1995, 2002, 2012).



Derrick Sington, commander of the British unit that led the liberation, describes in his account the many children who were “unnaturally mature”; in the face of dealing with situations related to sick and dead family members, such children “became expert at organising food and medications” (Sington 1946, 173–74). Plunged suddenly into a violent, horrible, deadly world, children such as Ceija Stojka had to assist in finding food and clothing, in providing care to sick and injured family members, and in dealing with perpetual death.

#### 4. Reflections on Ceija Stojka’s Perspective as a Romnja and the Concept of *Baxt*

Related to Ceija Stojka’s Romani heritage, the story of the children’s Christmas festivities also belongs to one of several poignant narratives in Stojka’s memoirs in which survival ultimately becomes based not on individual physical or moral fortitude or lack thereof, but rather on whims, good fortune, happenstance, and, in some cases, even a kind of *deus ex machina*.<sup>27</sup> The way in which Ceija Stojka writes about these events ties in with the concept of *baxt*, a term in the Romany language that loosely means both happiness and luck, as with “*Glück*” in German, and also entails complex correlations between codes of honor.<sup>28</sup> As a main pillar of Romani morality, *baxt* will come to Roma who have lived an honorable life. Stojka could never understand what she as a young child with an innocent honorable soul could have done to deserve the Nazis’ classification of her as dishonorable. For example, upon having to sew onto her clothes in Ravensbrück the black triangle indicating that she was “asocial” and “*arbeitscheu*”, she asks: “Aber wie konnte ich *arbeitscheu*

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<sup>27</sup> In passages about Bergen-Belsen, she claims to have been saved from starving to death when the SS served pea soup served to the inmates of Bergen-Belsen during the final months before liberation (*Memoirs* 152–53). See the glossary entry “The liberation of Bergen-Belsen” in my translation of the *Memoirs* for interpretations of such narratives as instances with inexplicable motives that provide hope in times of despair (*Memoirs* 2022, 220–221).

<sup>28</sup> See Matras (2015, 86–96), Stewart (1997, 21–22; 165–66), and Solimene (2006, 116–22) for further explanations on the complex concept of *baxt*, as well as my interpretation of *baxt* as a motif in the stories of Austrian Rom writer Samuel Mago (French 2020).

sein, ich war ja noch ein Kind!” (Stojka 2013, 38).<sup>29</sup> Whereas many survivors have felt so-called “survivor guilt,” which often necessitates finding a particular person or event that becomes responsible for life and death, thereby relieving the burden of individual guilt and forming a collective around those who survived, Ceija Stojka, in contrast, gives no indication in her works of possessing guilt for having survived while others died. Instead of focusing on her own sentiments in relation to the dead, she, as a Romani child and adult, honors the dead and their special significance for her life and that of other Roma. In many scenes in her memoirs, especially in the third one about Bergen-Belsen, the child Ceija and her playmates Burli and Rupa crawl into corpses to find warmth and protection. In this manner, as Paula Toninato observes in her essay in this volume, “the dead become protectors and symbolize the continuity between generations that enable the Roma to exist,” while reciprocally, “the survivor provides their silenced memoirs with a voice, thereby giving meaning to their atrocious death” (Toninato 2023, 145–165). Ceija Stojka’s beliefs in divine justice were strong, as were her own drive, a kind of moral and ethical obligation she felt to tell her story, not necessarily for herself, but for future generations. To borrow from an observation that Karin Berger made to me, Ceija Stojka did not want to hate the Nazis because she believed that where such strong feelings of hate exist, could exist also strong feelings of love. Berger, in her own research and personal interviews with Roma survivors, also stated that she had not ever come across evidence of such survivor guilt among Roma, and my own research corroborates that assertion thus far. Here, the belief in *baxt* might play a role in determining responsibility for survival and for the optimistic view of a child about the SS’s role as organizers of the festivities.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “But how could I be work-shy? I was still only a child!” (*Memoirs* 57).

<sup>30</sup> Worthy of mention here are other written and visual works by Ceija Stojka in which she depicts Christmas as being both joyous and tortuous. In her personal notebook from 2002, for example, she describes the Christmas of 1942 right after her father had been arrested and then, as she learned later, deported to Dachau and subsequently gassed in Schloss Hartheim as a victim of the T4 euthanasia program: „Es War Weinachten 1942 Der Vater in Tachau Der Christbaum Brante Lichterlo 6 Kinder mit mit Mutter in der Baletzgasse 42, 16. Bezirk Verfolkt u gejakt Von dem Braunnen Vollk des Atolf Hitlers Reschiem Er jakte die SS Soltaten mit iren Fangnetzen auf uns alle” [transcribed as Stojka wrote] [It was Christmas 1942 Father in Dachau The Christmas tree is ablaze with fire 6 children along

Despite the immediate joy the Christmas festivities bestowed upon Ceija Stojka and her mother, the improved conditions for which she and her mother had hoped did not occur. In the deepest despair during the last days of Bergen-Belsen, her mother exclaims: “Why haven’t they killed us yet? That’s incomprehensible. It would be a lot better if we didn’t have to suffer anymore” (*Memoirs* 70).<sup>31</sup> But Ceija Stojka and her family do not give up, and her narratives continue to reflect that hope. The sentence immediately following her mother’s desperate question anticipates the forthcoming liberation, as she exclaims: “But then the sun shone again” (*Memoirs* 70).<sup>32</sup> With that liberation came further trials and tribulations as the family took almost four months to return to Vienna, only to live through subsequent decades of denied requests for financial restitution for the lost years. The *Kinderweihnachten* circulated in her head until she was able to write and paint about the extraordinary event, still very much from her child’s perspective, yet as an adult not riddled with survivor guilt, but rather feeling blessed with her calling to tell the story to future generations and to fight against forgetting. Ceija Stojka’s narrative about the children’s Christmas at Ravensbrück stands in the company of other pieces in world literature that, as a collective, tell the many stories of one major event in world history.

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with their mother in the Baletzgasse [Paletzgasse] 42, 16th District Persecuted and hunted down By the brown-shirted people of the Adolf Hitler regime He had the SS soldiers hunt us all down with their dragnets.] (CST\_26\_2002\_12\_23\_bis\_2003\_03\_18\_(35).tif). Her desire to keep alive precious childhood memories of happy times contrasts with the horrific reality overshadowing the idyllic scene. This same desire seems to be surfacing in the retelling of the Children’s Christmas at Ravensbrück. I thank Carina Kurta of the Ceija Stojka International Association for finding this passage for me. In another of Ceija Stojka’s story “Weihnachten” [Christmas] she connects three Christmas celebrations—1942, 1944, and 1995—whereby the final one brings her back to joyous, free times, “[...] wie einst die Rom ihre Weihnachten draußen auf der Wiese feierten, als sie in ihren Wagen waren. Auch damals hatten sie alles, was sie brauchten. Heute ist es einfach, denn heute ist die Welt frei, was du brauchst, kannst du dir kaufen.“ ([...] just like the Roma celebrated their Christmas outside when they were in their wagons. Then, too, they had everything they needed. Today it’s easy because today the world is free; you can buy whatever you need”). (Stojka 2001, 297)

<sup>31</sup> “Warum haben sie uns noch nicht umgebracht? Das ist unbegreiflich, es wäre ja schon besser, wenn wir nicht mehr leiden müssen” (Stojka 2013, 57).

<sup>32</sup> “Doch dann schien wieder die Sonne” (Stojka 2013, 57).

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