Over the years I have grown sceptical of the assumption that World War Two concentration camp prisoners generally lost their individuality shortly after arriving in the camps, as Primo Levi described in «The Grey Zone». This assumption is at the root of what is called survivor’s guilt. Levi and others have described the Nazis’ deliberate policy of stripping prisoners of their personality. The imprisoned were robbed of their names, their hair and their clothes; anything personal was taken away. All the same, I have come to regard survivors as people who should be proud that they did not lose their identities, despite what they went through. Primo Levi himself could hardly have written so beautifully if he had not been so strong. Far from losing his personality, he mentally stored all his experiences in a sort of artist’s mind which he could later unlock, to look at the images which allowed him to testify and warn the world. Try as the Nazis did to destroy people’s personalities, I see evidence that these attempts often failed. That is why many people survived. In the article «The State within the State»¹, I presented an interview with Paul Brusson, the well-known Belgian resistance fighter. In my conclusion, I emphasized what I had learned from Paul about pride in survival, the need for solidarity, and the ability of some people to maintain high moral standards while others fail to do so. I also acknowledged that he had been extremely lucky, and that it was significant that he was not a Jewish inmate. It is generally assumed that the fate of Jewish prisoners was so harsh that they could not keep
their moral bearings. Paul had survived on a firm conviction that mutual support networks were crucial. Luckily, he spoke Spanish, the language of the strongest group inside Mauthausen. And even during the hardest months, he had continued to take care of the way he looked.

In this short article, I aim to expand on these arguments based on past interviews done by my peers and myself. Over the years I have noted the pride many of my Jewish interviewees felt about having survived. But there is something else I wish to explain.

Very few Dutch Jews survived the Shoah. In fact, their survival rate was the lowest of all Jewish populations in Western Europe, comparable only to the destruction of the Jews in Eastern Europe. But despite the near annihilation of Dutch Jewry, the Jewish community of the Netherlands rebuilt itself with amazing success in the post-war decades. This was a truly singular labour of ‘Resurrection’; the religious and non-religious leadership created new institutions, organized relief for orphans, concentration camp victims and people living in poverty, and created new genres of Jewish memorial culture in a country that had, by and large, an overly «heroic» perception of its own attitude during the German occupation. In general, the Dutch view was that all non-Jews in the Netherlands had opposed the Nazis and that there had been widespread resistance. This view is expressed by the image of the February 21 strike, which is seen (especially in the USA) as proof of a massive Dutch resistance. But this view does not reflect historical reality. The Jews were deported before the very eyes of their non-Jewish neighbours, and often with the help of Dutch policemen, railway workers, and the people who fed the 100.000 Jews who were to be deported. This was the society the Jews returned to after the war, where so many had known what was happening to them, and where so few of their own were still alive. They had to reinvent Jewish life and create social cohesion, but to collect the remaining bits and pieces of their culture they were compelled to face the enormity of the disaster that had happened. The world looked desolate and empty because they still remembered the fullness of another world, of their pre-war Jewish community. In the post-war period, it became clear that less than ten percent of the Jews had survived the war.

Sharing their memories with their non-Jewish compatriots seemed impossible. Even sharing them with other Jews was difficult and often painful. If we are to understand this forlorn sense of isolation and how people have coped with it and in some cases (partly) overcome it, it is crucial that we hear the life stories of survivors. The bleak

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2 I. DE HAAN (1997), Na de ondergang. De herinnering aan de jodenvervolging 1945-1995. De Haan described the sentiment in the years after the war, but did not concentrate on the surviving Jews.


5 M. BAKHTIN (1981), The Dialogic Imagination, Austin, p. 12, 13.

world Jews came back to after the Shoah has never been studied from this perspective. Moreover, it has been obscured and distorted by the commonplace image of a «heroic» Dutch wartime resistance and a general solidarity with the Jews, an image that has only recently been called into question. Nor has much research been done on the rise, or resurgence, of anti-Semitism in Dutch society which made survivors’ lives even more difficult in the first post-war decade. Survivors also had a different collective memory. They did not believe in the war stories commonly told by non-Jews. The Jewish memories mostly had to do with betrayal and indifference. The «mainstream» collective memory painted a more positive, and often even rosy, picture of how most Dutch people reacted to the deportation of the Jews3.

Anthropology of Survival

I have often wondered how these survivors found the strength to go on. One way to comprehend this, perhaps the only way, is through life story interviews. In order to understand this strength, however, we must first put life stories in the context of survival in a wider sense. In the research which I call ‘the anthropology of survival’ (and in this context, ‘survival’ implies to continue living), I have focussed on exploring how people have managed to maintain their identity in extreme circumstances and subsequently deal with their traumatic past. Of the early literature on this subject, the most important was the debate between American psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim and his colleague Terence Des Pres4 about the consequences of being forced to relinquish one’s identity in a concentration camp. Later it became an important issue to therapists who were treating victims of mass atrocity and encountering the many irresolvable problems in this endeavour. The question of how people can continue to live with such tragic pasts has been posed since the end of World War Two by poets such as Celan, philosophers such as Jean Améry, and writers, particularly Primo Levi.

Therefore, interviewing Dutch Jewish survivors has been complicated by conceptual difficulties, and many questions have remained unanswered. While doing the interviews, it became clear that every interview is determined by how the interviewee is currently living. It is from present circumstances that a speaker assigns meaning to the suffering people have endured. This constitutes the basis upon which varying self-images are constructed, self-images which are revised and adjusted over the course of time. The resulting identity determines how a speaker interprets the past and his or her own life story. It is precisely because this identity has been traumatized that it is so hard to frame the story. And yet, it has been established that long-term psychological survival depends on the ability to repeatedly reclaim, reshape and reassign meaning to one’s identity. Interviews about surviving the camps are essentially interviews about a person’s struggle with who he or she is. The interviewees endlessly select from the range of identities available to them. They are heroes, in an epic that is inaccessible. It is a story with a past that has become ‘sacred’, as literary scholar Michales Bakhtin would call it5.

People survived the camps through a combination of social skills, physical strength, mental and emotional resilience and by remaining aware that there was another world with alternatives. I was deeply inspired by the recent work6 of Pam Maclean from Australia, who described the persistence of ethics. Survivors had told her about what she called the ethical moment that lies at the basis of much resistance and self-esteem. This research also drew my attention
to Anna Pawelczybska’s *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*. Maclean pleads for a re-evaluation of acts of kindness and caring and for more attention to the role of the Jewish religion against all odds. She rightly notes that Ervin Staub, who wrote on morality in extreme conditions, has shown how, despite extreme suffering, ‘individuals can develop the necessary moral courage’ to act ethically. Staub’s argument centered on the notion that the core issue of morality in extreme conditions is the ability to identify with the perspective of the other. I was surprised by the similarities in our findings.

My examples here come from two projects: The Mauthausen Survivors Project directed by the University of Vienna and the Forced Labour Project currently led by the Fernuniversität Hagen. In the framework of the latter project I proposed to do research on what I called the Miracle of Resurrection. In that project we investigated how the survivors of destroyed communities had picked up the threads of old, largely shattered forms of culture and attached new meanings to cultural and religious symbols of the past while attempting to come to terms with the horrors they had lived through. So we interviewed 10 Jewish survivors of the Shoah.

In all the interviews we were faced with the survivors’ attempts to come to terms with their traumas in a distorted world where knowing what had happened was more difficult than forgetting. They are interviews from a world beyond the world that had been fragmented. We were dealing with many levels of memory and the re-imagining of atrocities, varying from very detailed stories to degrees of amnesia. Silence and defensiveness were signs that the interviewees had no adequate way of representing their traumas. These patterns have been analyzed by therapists from various schools, and the known examples have come from clinical cases except where therapists used written autobiographical literature. As a historian I wish to look within the parameters of my discipline for narratives behind the story. I believe interviews with survivors of the Shoah are also accounts of psychic survival which in turn explain the strength shown after the war. This is not always the case, of course, but here I would like to focus on examples of strong identity and psychic survival.

I recently interviewed Max Koker, who explained to me the importance of self-determination. He told me that he had even managed to pick the unit he wanted to work in (Komando): ‘We tried to survive. You staged your existence within the limits of the margins you had, you tried to take your fate in your own hands.’ He told me that he shut out all feelings and simply tried to survive, but he also explained that he was not ‘apathetic’. He felt he had to remain active and alert. He was young, so he wanted to fight to survive, an attitude similar to that of someone who is still free to act. He was aware that not everyone was capable of such an attitude and said: ‘My father, and older people, they lost their personality so to

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10 Interview with Max Koker, 2005.
11 Interview with Ronnie Goldstein van Cleef by Ellis Jonker, 2005.
12 Interview by Marylyn Tranchant for the Mauthausen Survivors Documentation Project, 2002.
They were no longer the people they had once been. They had a much stronger sense of humiliation. And they could do nothing but obey; they had no way of having any kind of personal life. Those older people no longer lived their own lives. They had enormous difficulty adapting. Whoever did not adapt would die very soon. According to Max, their choices were very limited, but they could choose to help each other.

His is a story of trying to stay intact, like the story of so many interviewees. People had networks and friendships. They were active and ingenious in finding tasks and solutions, and in helping each other. In any case, social class was unimportant. Carpenters and artisans could use their skills, anyone who was strong could try to use this to their advantage. Most importantly, prisoners needed to be strong enough for psychic survival. As Ronnie Goldstein van Cleef said, when describing how she tried to support a young woman who was crying: ‘I said: “don’t cry, don’t give them that pleasure. Don’t show tears, you have to be strong”. I also said so to myself. I refused to be brought to my knees. You were de-personalised all the time. You had to reject that strongly, and I tried in my way. But you never know if you have succeeded.’

Her long life story tells of a successful fight for survival and a show of incredible ingenuity.

David Kept his Dignity

In an interview done in Belgium as part of the Mauthausen project, a former inmate described the high moral standard and deep friendships in the camp that resulted in an organization of prisoners that prevented chaos when the camp was liberated. Mauthausen is a special case, of course, because many inmates were either political prisoners or members of the resistance. The international resistance maintained discipline and high moral standards, so this may partly explain the prisoners’ behaviour. However, by the end of the war conditions in the camp had deteriorated. Many trains had arrived from the east, causing overpopulation and a breakdown of social networks. It would not have been surprising if the organization created by the inmates had been destroyed by the general feeling of uprootedness. As David put it: ‘You know, if you imprison people for two or three years and than you suddenly tell them “you are free”, the mentality quickly changes. People get wild, there is a chance of anarchy. People start lynching, whoever is a murderer will immediately be executed’. But as we know, the International Committee controlled the situation and locked away all food supplies. The aim was not only to prevent theft, but also to protect people against themselves and warn the inmates of the dangers of overeating. Even at that point, there was self-control and social organization.

David was not involved in the organization at that moment. He chose another path during those first moments after liberation. The beautiful landscape of Austria appears before his eyes when he says: ‘I was hungry like everyone else. But I walked through the door, I left the camp. I went to that small stream, I undressed, I immersed myself, and I cried... I cried. Why did I cry? Did I cry because I was free at last? No, (…) I cried out of pride. I was proud. Proud that despite all the suffering (…) all the suffering that we underwent, the hunger, the blows, the misery, the pain, being hurt and wounded, the cold, the humidity… they never managed to get to me, to touch me. They never got hold of my human dignity. I remained a person with human dignity (…), they had given me a number like cattle to be sent to a slaughterhouse, the first thing
they did when people arrived in Auschwitz . . . ’ After those words he is silent for some time, reflecting on what dignity means to him. The concept of dignity is the Leitmotiv in this interview with a man who managed to survive Auschwitz as an adolescent. There, he had found his father, a veteran of the camp system, and had learned to survive from him.

He was keen to see and feel beauty. This was part of his story about remaining a person. Though he realized that the gypsies (as he called the Roma in the barracks next door) were to be killed very soon, his main memory is of how much he enjoyed their music: ‘One night a transport of gypsies had arrived, with hair shaved off, and they still had their musical instruments: violin, basses, guitars (...). Something happened that I still remember with an enormous emotion. When we got back from work in the evening, we were not far away from them. I heard their music, gypsy music. You know you feel it in your gut. It is life, it is love, it is the beauty of nature, the beauty of existence, all of that. And while I am speaking to you, I see that film that is playing in my head, I see a woman coming down near the violin players and near the bass players. She comes down the stairs, she is playful, and she sings. They were pearls, it was so beautiful that I stayed silent. We escaped in spirit. We were no longer in a concentration camp. We were in higher spheres, at high altitude, we felt free, free of all constraints’. You had to celebrate such moments with all your might, with all the vigour you had at that time. That was essential to survive. And then too, he looked at the splendour of the Austrian landscape, even in the harsh camp of Ebensee: ‘It was so beautiful that even with our state of mind, which had lost some of its depth, you could admire nature that was so marvellous, the snow on the branches of the tree, the snow that shone with all its crystals, the snow everywhere. We were surrounded by mountains with snow all around (...)

His story is, above all, about enjoying every good moment and seizing all opportunities. ‘You had to take initiative’ he said. ‘You have to actively seek out events and you should not wait till they come to you.’ Another former prisoner, Ronnie Goldstein van Cleef, gave many examples of spiritually leaving the camp. Fleeing and being active: both were major ingredients for survival.

Sharing food and dignity

David had been strong. He had even given some food he got hold of to a younger boy, who needed it even more than he did, he felt. But this act, which endangered his personal survival, is hidden in his discourse. David ‘edits’ himself out of the story, because to him it is about a young man that did not survive.

Another survivor Ellis Jonker interviewed for the German project recalled how he had profited from the altruism of a younger boy: ‘He was very thin, very thin. He was about my age, also seventeen. We all got a small piece of bread, six centimetres long by 3 centimetres. Every day he took one-seventh of that bread, I don’t know how. The next day he ate that part but he kept two-seventh of the next part. At the end of the week, on Sunday, he owned a whole extra ransom for a day. I can say now that if that man had survived, I would give him everything that one can get in this world. I

13 Interview with Mr. Polak by Ellis Jonker, Amsterdam, 2005.
14 Interview I held in 2005 with Mrs. Evers.
15 Interview with Hennie Leefsma, 2005.
got one-seventh of that extra bread. And maybe you would say that is no more than the equivalent of a quarter of a lump of sugar, but that is not true. It was so important, so ... you’ll never forget that, you just can’t.  

But at other times he gave his own food to the weaker.

Dignity has many forms, and staying polite and respectful is one of them. Bloeme, who I recently interviewed for the second time (our first interview was 23 years ago), said: ‘We had a few survival mechanisms. We counted the dates. Today is September 26, 1944. We were polite to each other. For a long time, we addressed the two older women, one of whom had become my camp mother, as Mrs. so and so. We kept this up for a long time. Not only I did, but the others too. I was the youngest. Whatever small favours we could do for each other, we did. We comforted each other. In the deep despair we would sink into, (...) there was always someone who said «We’ll make it», and the next morning you would say it yourself and listen to your own words.’ She juxtaposes these sentences with a remark that not even a beetle could survive on the barren ground of the camp, ‘No grass could grow there. Strange that, there was nothing.’ Culture and politeness are diametrically opposed to the empty world of the concentration camp. But again the ‘other’ world of the camp is not dominant in her story. It is the positive side of a dark world in which she became aware of her need for deep ties with the Jewish tradition. As she said: «One of my direct camp sisters was very handy. It was nearly Chanukah. The supplies that arrived often came in barrels held together by iron bands to prevent them from falling apart. She salvaged one of those bands and collected oil from the machines in a cup she had got hold of. She didn’t care how those machines were supposed to run without oil. She bent the iron band into a Chanukah menorah, and this was brought into our barrack and lit. (...) One of my two camp mothers, a very pious woman, she knew everything by heart and said the Baruchot, and the Ma’oz Tsur was sung and so loudly that at one point an Aufseherin came to take a look, which gave us a great fright. But all she did was stay and listen. That was my first Chanukah ever, and I’ll never forget it.» She resolved to preserve this inner peace of the Chanukah tradition from then on. After all, she had ended up in the camp because she was a Jew, and being Jewish to her mind was not, and is not, a matter of religion, but of staying true to the rituals of Judaism. This provided her with clarity and peace of mind, which have helped her to survive. Bloeme never ceased to amaze me with her serenity, and I had already asked myself where this inner peace, which was the source of her great resolve, came from. Hers is only one of many stories I have heard about concentration camp prisoners who felt compelled to re-evaluate the role of religion in their lives. Apart from the stories of those who lost all faith in God, there are two other stories. One is of people upholding a tradition as a way of assigning meaning to an otherwise incomprehensible world, and the other is of people actually starting to believe in God. These are not the same.

We interviewed three women from the group Bloeme belonged to. All had survived the same camps. Their three stories make clear how well the group behaved and how much they were able to help each other. They even managed to celebrate anniversaries. Hennie told me that she had celebrated her anniversary and that others had given her half a slice of bread. ‘We were young’, she said, describing how the older women had taken care of them and recreated the family ties they missed so much. The younger women had found a new
mother, and the mothers organized social life. Ronnie Goldstein, who I quoted before, was also part of the group. She vividly described how older women took on her work and made her rest. ‘They took care, they were sweet’. Her Lagerfuehrerin even sent her to lie down in bed when the workload was too heavy for such a small person. She had to lie flat and make herself invisible. Needless to say, the Romanian Fuehrerin took great risks.

In a sense, my interviews are literary descriptions, immensely rich in their diversity. They have shown me that interviews can constitute a historical source that provides some answers as to how people managed to survive. They show how closely people were still connected to each other, how children helped their parents and vice versa. There are several examples of people talking about how they fell in love with another emaciated creature, about how love had made them feel alive. People used all kinds of psychic faculties to see more than misery, to remain aware of the needs of others and to identify with others. They showed incredible altruism and risked their lives in order to help their fellow inmates.

Maybe we came across so many stories like this because we interviewed the youngest and fittest, those who are still alive more than sixty years after the camps. But I doubt that. I contend that the historiography of the Shoah portrays the victim while neglecting the strength of the many who were not depersonalised, those who survived. Of course, these people had luck on their side, but their survival was also a decision.

I believe there is an answer somewhere to the kind of question I posed at the start of this article, when I wondered how people managed to rebuild a community razed to the ground, a community where networks no longer existed and all social cohesion was lost. The answer can be found by looking at the individuals involved as people who managed to connect to others in extreme conditions. Interviews make clear how strong these people must have been, despite all efforts to destroy their identity and their moral world. They did not give in. That is what they want to get across to me: that in more ways than one, they did not give in. And this is why the Nazis did not win.