

BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

**Jewish Prisoner Functionaries (*Kapos*) in the Concentration  
and Extermination Camps of the Holocaust –  
Survivors' Testimonies and Judgmental Attitudes Given the  
Perspective of Time**

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## **Abstract**

This work is concerned with the perceptions that Holocaust survivors have regarding the phenomenon of Jewish prisoner functionaries (JPFs, also known by the term “*Kapos*”) in the concentration and extermination camps during World War II and examines the dilemmas that survivors experience when looking back at issues related to the roles of the JPF. During the earlier years after the establishment of the State of Israel, the phenomenon of the JPFs was somewhat subdued. Over the years, however, there have been signs of a relative change in the attitude that Israeli society, in general, and Holocaust survivors in particular have toward the phenomenon as a result of changes in worldview and given the many years that have since passed. This is also due to new concepts that have been revealed in many studies and works of literature and the arts, leading to new concepts of judgment and even to feelings of empathy for the JPFs in the camps. This change has come about through appreciating the cruel conditions that life in the camps entailed and the understanding that JPFs were also victims, their being regular prisoners who did not choose these roles for themselves and were trying to survive in any way possible (Geva, 2016; Hakel, 2012 ; Levine, 2015; Glasner-Heled & Bar-On, 2009).

During their senior years, Holocaust survivors may retrospectively observe their past experiences in an attempt to reinterpret and integrate their experiences as they approach the end of their lives. This reflection is important in understanding how past events are interpreted by people of this age in the present, given the perspective of time, and (Neugarten, 1979; Erikson, 1968, 1982). Coping with old age is more complex for Holocaust survivors and, therefore, reflecting deeply on memories from their Holocaust period and appreciating how they comprehend those past events today, given the ensuing time, contributes to how they cope with their age and to the power of their present situation (Rosental, 1993). In light of this postulation, it is useful to observe what changes, if any, have occurred in Holocaust survivors’ perceptions of the phenomenon of JPFs over time and to observe what dilemmas this may entail for them.

## **Rationale and research questions**

This study aims to broaden the understanding of the phenomenon of JPFs by interviewing still-living Holocaust survivors (who were not JPFs themselves) about the

issue. Gathering this testimony is important given the declining numbers of this population. This study also aims to examine whether they have undergone a change in attitude toward JPFs and if they now see the issue in a different light than during or immediately after the war, given the amount of time that has elapsed in the interim. The study also focuses on various dilemmas concerned with the issue of the JPFs, thus opening the door to discussing educational and value aspects and, given the importance of this topic, address whether the subject of JPFs and its underlying dilemmas has a place in the educational curriculum and, if so, what the ethical perceptions of the survivors interviewed in this study can contribute to the legacy of the Holocaust for future generations.

Based on the above, this study interviewed Holocaust survivors to answer the following five questions:

1) “Who are you, Kapo?” How do the survivors, in retrospect, understand which criteria were used by the German command for choosing JPFs, what were the motives of the prisoners in taking on the role, and what are the survivors’ views regarding the prisoners’ readiness to accept the role?

2) What did the interviewees think of the JPFs’ behavior in executing their roles during and directly after the war, and currently (at the time of the interview) and what were their judgmental attitudes?

3) What methods did the interviewees take to cope with the phenomenon of JPFs?

4) What relationship (if any) did JPFs have with the interviewees after the war, and, in retrospect, what were their attitudes and dilemmas about the phenomenon, and have these attitudes changed given the amount of time that has passed since the end of the war?

5) Do the survivors believe that there it is necessary and/or valuable to discuss the subject of the JPF more thoroughly in the educational framework in middle and high school? (At present, the subject is barely touched upon in the learning program regarding the *Shoah*.)

The methodology was qualitative, which is appropriate for arriving at an in-depth understanding of the JPFs’ role in the concentration and extermination camps and elucidating the survivors’ attitudes as per the research questions. Data collection

consisted of focused, in-depth, partially structured interviews. This allowed the interviews to touch on the specific points through the use of specific guided questions determined in advance (although the exact wording was not specifically set), yet still allow the opportunity to explore ideas and raise further questions during the interviews, depending on the specific answers received (Shakdi, 2003, 2011). Such a method of data-collection allows demonstrating empathy toward the participants and building a feeling of trust and openness between the interviewer and the interviewee (Blazer, 2004). The study population included 12 Holocaust survivors (four female, eight male) who had undergone forced labor in concentration and/or extermination camps between the years 1941-1945, and who were able to give testimony with respect to JPFs whom they encountered during their interment. The survivors' ages ranged from 85 to 92 years, the average age at the time of the interview being 90. When choosing the group, an effort was made to include survivors of both genders and who were of sound mind.

## **Findings**

The findings described in this study combine the results obtained through administration of the research questions in comparison and in consideration of findings mentioned in the existing literature as a result of previous research. The first question examined the survivors' opinions as to what criteria were used by the German command for selecting JPFs, what they believed were the reasons that the prisoners agreed to take on the role, and their attitudes regarding the JPFs' willingness to accept the role. The answers received to this question also served as a basis for the questions to follow.

The answers to this first question revealed that the survivors understood that some/most JPFs were chosen against their will and were forced to perform this job. In general, the German command chose Jewish prisoners who were relatively older than most of the other prisoners, who were physically large and strong, who were masters of the German language (to facilitate communication), and who demonstrated leadership qualities. The answers to question one also revealed that the survivors understood that the JPFs were themselves prisoners and given the harsh circumstances of the camps, had agreed to accept their roles to hopefully improve the living conditions for themselves and their family members who were also in the camp. They saw it as a survival strategy.

The second question examined how the participants judged the JPFs' conduct. The participants described three different types of behaviors exhibited by the JPFs: **1)** cruel, violent behavior in response to other prisoners' failure to comply with camp rules; **2)** behaviors that changed depending on whether or not members of the German command were present; and **3)** humanitarian, empathetic behavior, which was expressed by attempting to smuggle extra bread rations to the other prisoners and/or in reducing punishments that they had been ordered to carry out. The participants' judgmental attitudes with respect to JPF behavior included the following: understanding the position of the JPFs given that they were forced to take on the role and their desire to survive, alongside expressions of anger from some of them, understanding the connection between a JPF's behavior and his personality, and finding it difficult to take a judgmental stand.

The third question examined the ways that the participants coped with the phenomenon of JPFs in the camps and discovered the following approaches: **1)** acceptance of JPFs as part of the organization and policing of the camps; **2)** trying to introduce/ingratiate themselves to the JPFs, as an attempt to form a close relationship to alleviate conditions in the camp; **3)** attempting to receive special attention from the JPFs by revealing their own special talents or skills; **4)** distancing themselves from the JPFs; **5)** focusing on thoughts and dreams of their families and homes as a way to distract themselves from the JPFs; **6)** displays of solidarity among the prisoners in the camps and a feeling of the will to survive.

The fourth question examined whether any of the former JPFs had any place in the lives of the survivors after the war. Some of the participants recounted that they had followed the trials of the "*Kapos*" that were conducted during the 1950s and 60s in Israel (some were even present at some of the trials), some did meet with Jews who had served as JPFs, and others even sought out JPFs who had saved them in the camps to thank them and express their indebtedness. The fourth question also asked if and how the participants' attitudes and dilemmas regarding this issue had changed in retrospect. The responses indicated that most of the participants tried to repress their memories regarding their experiences with the JPFs, and indicated that the emotional and physical trauma they felt as a result of their war experience were usually connected to their treatment by the JPFs.

Their judgmental attitudes could be categorized into five types and attest to a change in the survivors' perceptions of the JPFs' behaviors given the reality of the camps and the realities today: **1)** understanding of the JPFs' roles in the structure and organization of the camps, understanding that their willingness to take on the role was a result of their desire to survive the conditions of the camp, and understanding that these prisoners were unable to refuse; **2)** avoidance of generalizations and accepting that the JPFs' behavior was a direct result of their personalities; **3)** questioning the ability of people who were not in the camps to judge the issue of the JPFs; **4)** pointing the finger of accusation at the German command as who was responsible for the conduct/behavior of the JPFs; and **5)** expressing forgiveness and acceptance of the JPFs and their behaviors in the camps alongside a certain feeling of anger, which may stem from the possibility that the survivors are processing their experiences differently, given the perspective of time.

The fifth question asked whether the survivors felt that the Shoah-study curricula in junior and senior high schools should expand teaching about the JPF phenomenon. This question was important in that it allowed the researchers to better understand the contribution that time had on the way the survivors perceived their experiences thereof. Here there were three opinions: **1)** outright rejection of expanding the issue and the dilemmas that it raises, given the elapsed time and given that it is a complex and abstruse issue for students to understand; **2)** support for expanding the topic, citing that future generations need to know the facts regarding JPFs and have the opportunity to discuss issues related to this topic; and **3)** the opinion that the issue should be mentioned, but not in depth and discussed with respect to the perspective of time.

Overall, this study verifies the conclusion that in the survivors' views, the actions and behavior of the JPFs were part of the reality of life in the camps and that different prisoners coped in different ways in order to survive. The judgmental opinions of the survivors reflect the difficulty they have, given the perspective of time, in judging JPFs, uncovering the absolute truth, and also changing their attitude regarding this issue as a result of the time elapsed, a change that was observed during the interviews. This study supports the claim that with time, survivors are able to express relatively more candidness and understanding with respect to the cruel conditions of life in the camps

and to rationalize that the JPFs were victims, and simply typical prisoners, who had not chosen to be there and who were forced to take upon themselves this complex role. Similarly, the study revealed that survivors found it difficult to judge the behavior of the JPFs after so many years, given their lack of objectivity due to the fact that they live under proper conditions today. Finally, the study discovered that in the opinion of the participants, the subject of JPFs should be addressed in the junior and high school curricula, going into the issues involved, but in a moderate way and from the perspective of time.

### **Study's contribution**

Practically, this study offers new testimonies from Holocaust survivors, through which we can learn about changes in their worldviews with respect to the JPF phenomenon given the perspective of time and how they today have reexamined this topic. Another contribution is with respect to the Holocaust education program in the upper school divisions, and, based upon the opinions of the survivors, the need for teaching this issue as part of the program and the direction that it should take. Finally, this reexamination confirms the impact that examining this phenomenon in all its aspects can make and contribute in the formation of memories of the Holocaust, with a stress on the significance of documenting survivors' testimonies as a legacy for future generations.