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The Life and Times of Fiorello's Sister, Gemma La Guardia Glück

Stateless American and Jewish Deportee from Budapest to Ravensbrück in 1944

Louise O. Vasvári

Abstract: Gemma and Fiorello La Guardia were born in New York to a Jewish mother from Austro-Hungarian Trieste and an Italian Catholic father. The impoverished family returned to Europe when the siblings were teenagers, where both ended up having sustained relationships with Budapest (where their mother is buried to this day). As a youth Fiorello worked for the American Embassy in Budapest and in Fiume, while Gemma married a Hungarian Jew and lived for 26 years in interwar Budapest, from where her family was deported in June 1944. This study aims to treat the La Guardia family's (mostly obfuscated) Jewish origins and Gemma's memoir, which is an important if too scant testimony of her interwar life in Budapest and to the deportation and destruction of an unusual Hungarian Jewish family, as well as an early documentation to the horrors of Ravensbrück. Nevertheless, details of the Gemma's life in Budapest, as well as about the probable causes of her brother's decades-long strained relationship with her are obfuscated in her memoir. Through interwar Hungarian and U.S. newspaper records from 1930s, I document the problems caused for Fiorello in his American political life by his sister having revealed details of their family origins.

Keywords: *Fiorello La Guardia, Ravensbrück, Wartime Budapest, Gemma la Guardia, Samuel Shneiderman*

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Introduction

Gemma La Guardia Glück (1881–1962) was the older sister of legendary Italian-American Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945.[1] She was born in New York to a Sephardic Jewish mother from Austro-Hungarian Trieste and a lapsed Italian Catholic father. For thirty-six years she was married to a Hungarian Jew, Herman Glück (1868–

[1] Throughout this study I will refer to Gemma la Guardia by her first rather than last name, to distinguish her from her brother. It should also be noted that Fiorello spelled the family surname in one word, LaGuardia, while Gemma used the original Italian spelling, La Guardia. Therefore, I will follow these two distinct spellings in speaking of each sibling.

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1944), whom she met in Trieste and with whom she subsequently lived in interwar Budapest and had two children. In June 1944, the family was deported, her husband and son-in-law perished, but since Gemma's relationship to Fiorello made her invaluable as a political hostage, she and one daughter, Yolanda, and infant grandson, Richard, were interned in Ravensbrück women's concentration camp. She was classed in the camp among the *Prominenten*, prisoners the Nazis hoped to use for exchange of prisoners. Due to her status, she was spared hard labor, which likely allowed her to survive in spite of her advanced age. When, after almost a year of captivity, she and her daughter and grandson were transferred from Ravensbrück to a Berlin prison, where they were liberated, Gemma was sixty-four. The life of the three survivors as Displaced Persons (DPs) in postwar Berlin was also excruciatingly difficult, as they spoke no German and had no money or identity papers or any way to prove they had been imprisoned. Nor was it easy for them to gain entry to the United States, as, according to the laws of the time, Gemma had become stateless, having lost her U.S. citizenship upon her marriage, while her daughter, born in Budapest, only had Hungarian citizenship. Her brother refused to get the family preferential treatment, and it was only because of her husband's confirmed death in Mauthausen that Gemma finally regained her American citizenship. She was only able to return to New York in 1947, no more than four months before her brother's death. Her remaining life was spent under constrained circumstances, living in obscurity in Long Island City, Queens, in a low-income public housing project, which, ironically, had been built by the LaGuardia Administration.

This study aims to treat the La Guardia family's (mostly obfuscated) Jewish origins and Gemma's memoir of deportation from Budapest. However, it will also be necessary to discuss aspects of Fiorello LaGuardia's political life, to explain his sustained anger at his sister, in part for causing him grief when he was elected mayor of New York in 1933, by bragging about the family's history to the Jewish periodical *Egyenlőség [Equality]*. The information she gave to the periodical was then picked up by American papers in garbled form, and even decades later continued to be repeated erroneously in biographies of Fiorello La Guardia.

Gemma wrote her memoir shortly after her return to the U.S., but it was published only fifteen years later and only months before her death in 1962, with the aid of writer and journalist Samuel L. Shneiderman. It was published much earlier than most Holocaust memoirs, yet received scant attention, especially considering that it concerned an American and the older sister of one of the most famous and beloved political characters of New York City, who was also a vocal anti-Nazi activist during World War II. This first edition of the memoir carried the bland title *My Story* and featured a cover photo of Gemma in old age. In 2007, Holocaust scholar Rochelle Saidel incorporated Shneiderman's long out-of-print edition—originally published

twenty-five years earlier—into an expanded volume. Saidel is also the author of *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück* (2004). The new edition appeared with additional research and primary documentation, a new, catchier title—*Fiorello's Sister: Gemma La Guardia's Story*—, and with a handsome cover photo of the author not in old age but as a young girl, circa 1898.

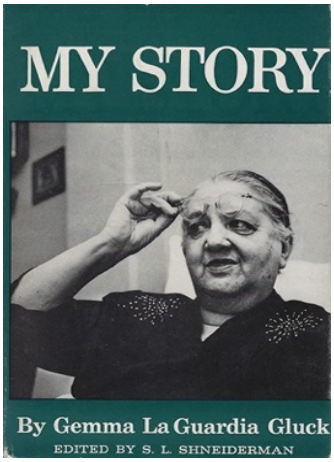

Figure 1. *S. L. Shneiderman's Original 1962 Edition of Gemma La Guardia Glück's Memoir and Rochelle Saidel's 2007 re-edition* [Courtesy of LaGuardia and Wagner Archives.]

Gemma La Guardia's memoir is an important, if too scant, testimony to interwar life in Budapest and the subsequent deportation and destruction of an unusual Hungarian Jewish and Italian-American immigrant family. It is also an early testimony to the horrors of Ravensbrück, including the existence of gas chambers there, the prolonged suffering of the surviving members of the family as displaced persons in postwar Berlin, and, sadly, the enduring impact of wartime trauma on subsequent generations. Nevertheless, the author's memoir obscures details of her life in Budapest, as well as the likely causes of her brother's decades-long estrangement from her. Interwar newspaper records both from the U.S. and from Hungarian newspapers and other documentation, including Fiorello LaGuardia's own unfinished memoir, reveal a more complete picture of the complex La Guardia family feuds, which exist to this day. Finally, as Saidel points out in her Prologue, Gemma's memoir is also a saga of European history from pre-World War I to post-World War II. And, one might add, Gemma La Guardia's family story through three generations is also a vignette of U.S. emigration history and the frequent return migration left mostly unmentioned in American history books.

Although Gemma wrote her memoir soon after arriving back in New York in 1947, it is certain that it would never have been published had it not been for the fortuitous intervention, in the last year of Gemma's life, of Samuel L. Shneiderman, the prolific Yiddishist, author and journalist. In order to understand his particular determination to publish Gemma's memoir, it is necessary to mention Shneiderman's little known life's work, and especially his publication in 1945 of the first Holocaust eyewitness memoir in the U.S. by the Polish teenager Mary

[Watten]berg (which much antedated Anne Frank's memoir in English in 1952, although that came to displace it totally in the fifties).[2] Mary and her family survived because, due to her

[2] Shneiderman was born in Poland as Szmuel Lejb Sznajderman (1906 –1996). In the early thirties, he emigrated to Paris, where he became one of the most successful Yiddish journalists of the interwar period. In 1940, he managed to reach New York with his wife and daughter, but most members of both of their families were annihilated in Poland. In the U.S., the couple devoted their lives to preserving the cultural world of Polish Jews and the Yiddish

mother’s American birth, they were treated with special consideration as *Prominenten* in the Warsaw ghetto by the Nazis, just as Gemma La Guardia and her daughter were in Ravensbrück. Ultimately, both Mary and Gemma were, to different degrees, unable to deal with their Jewish heritage, which Gemma obfuscated, while Mary, later living under her married name, totally denied her past identity.

Gemma La Guardia Glück’s Recollections of Her Family Origins

Gemma La Guardia’s memoir, like many such works written by amateur writers, is cut up into many short chapters. The first three deal with her family origins, a sketchy family chronicle of memories of childhood with Fiorello in New York and in the U.S. Western Territories at the turn of the century, and the family’s return to Europe. She recounts, too briefly, her happy years and married life in cosmopolitan interwar Budapest before her deportation. She only says as much as she is interested in divulging about each period of her life. The main emphasis of the memoir is understandably on Gemma’s tragic experiences in Ravensbrück and on liberation with her daughter and grandsons as displaced persons in Berlin, concluding with a final return to New York only months before her brother’s death.

The La Guardia family story begins against the backdrop of the great wave of U.S.-bound migration of the 1880s that brought the parents, Jewish Irene Luzzatto Coen (1859–1915), born in the Austro-Hungarian port city of Fiume, and lapsed Catholic Achille Luigi Carlo La Guardia (1849–1904), from Foggia, at the time part of the *Regno delle Due Sicilie*, to America.

Figure 2. Gemma La Guardia’s parents, Irene Coen La Guardia and Achille La Guardia [LaGuardia and Wagner Archives]

The couple married in 1880 and they immediately sailed to New York on their very wedding day. Their first child Gemma was born in the new country the following year, in the then-immigrant Italian enclave of Greenwich Village. Her brother Fiorello was born a year later, and a second brother, Richard, in 1888. At the time the southern part of Greenwich Village—part of which is still today called Little Italy—became a bustling Italian enclave, where over 50,000

language. Due to space considerations, it is not possible to discuss here Shneiderman’s illustrious career, nor his publication of Mary [Watten]berg’s diary, its very curious afterlife and its relation to Gemma La Guardia’s diary, but see Vasvári, “Samuel L. Shneiderman.”

Italians settled between the 1880s and 1920. Achille La Guardia was unusual in that he brought over a bride so early, as from the 1880's to 1910s, 77% of immigrants from Italy were male.

To this day, New York City is the Italian-American capital of the U.S., and the memory of Fiorello LaGuardia lives in LaGuardia Place, where in 1994, a life-size bronze statue was erected of the diminutive and stocky mayor (perhaps five feet tall), depicted in a combative pose (Brown).

Figure 3. Statue of Fiorello LaGuardia in LaGuardia Place in Greenwich Village [Wikimedia Images]

The La Guardia family did not settle down in Greenwich Village permanently because Achille La Guardia, unable to find steady employment locally as a musician, joined the 11th US Infantry as a bandmaster. In 1885, rather improbably, the emigrant family moved out West, into a harsh frontier life, where Achille was transferred four times to remote frontier installations in the U.S. Territories. During the second half of the century, in the rapidly developing Westward expansion, the U.S. Army had ordered troops into the American West to protect and defend the new settlements established there on what were then still Indian territories, where the largely dispossessed natives were living on reservations and where the army often represented the only law and order (West). The La Guardia family lived first in Fort Sully, in South Dakota Territory, then in two forts in Arizona Territory, isolated Fort Huachuca, on the Mexican border, in Cochese territory, which had been made into a permanent U.S. Army camp in 1880, and finally in Fort Whipple, established during the U.S. Civil War, which was also made a permanent base in 1879 (although Arizona was admitted to the Union only in 1912). In her memoir, Gemma lyrically recounts some adventures with the local Indians, but, in fact, rough and forbidding conditions prevailed in the remote outposts, and the harsh frontier life there must have been particularly difficult. Gemma also praised her mother's positive interactions with the local Indians and how she could even communicate with them in Spanish because she spoke Ladino

(or Judeo-Spanish), the Sephardic Jewish language. Gemma's mention of her mother's care and good relations with the local Indians is of interest in the context of a recent book, *Military Wives in Arizona Territory: A History of Women Who Shaped the Frontier* (Cleere), which shows through women's diaries and letters how army officers' wives, who often accompanied their husbands, played an important role in the American frontier. However, Achille La Guardia was

not an officer, and he was a foreigner, so the family's life must have been particularly constrained; Gemma does make a brief mention f this, indicating that they were not considered socially acceptable in the rigid Army social structure.

The whole family was musical, and at home, they formed a family orchestra, in which Gemma played piano and Fiorello the cornet. Fiorello, who himself wrote a very sketchy and impersonal memoir (unfinished at his death), did write in more detail about the siblings' musical education by their father, who taught Gemma violin, mandolin, and piano, and Fiorello banjo, cornet, and trumpet, all the while screaming at them if they made the slightest mistake. Fiorello also praised his childhood in South Dakota and Arizona even more than did Gemma, claiming it as a great adventure that made him into the man he became. Interestingly, while Gemma's memoir is full of her clever brother, Fiorello, in his memoir, does not even mention her, and both make only cursory reference to their younger brother, Robert, who was actually born in the Western Territories. Fiorello also recounts even less about their parents than does his sister, not even providing his mother's name and certainly not divulging that she was Jewish.[3]

Figure 4. The musical LaGuardia family in the 1890s, while living in Fort Whipple, Arizona Territories [Wiki Images]

[3] Fiorello's memoir, limited to the first part of his life, *The Making of an Insurgent, An Autobiography, 1882-1919* (1948), consists of material dictated by him during the last six months of his life and published only the year following his death.

Figure 5. The young Fiorello La Guardia with a trumpet [Wiki Images]

In Gemma’s brief idealized rendering of her youth, there is no discussion of why her parents, from such different religious, social-class, and even regional backgrounds married, nor acknowledgement that her parents must have come to the new country solely due to economic constraints and became “return migrants” to Trieste two decades later because of the same reasons. The family’s ongoing migrant history was like that of many other poor immigrants to America at the time, when return migration was overall roughly 35%. In some cases, particularly among Italians, the percentage much higher (Samu, Abramtzky *et al*).

Significant information, not detailed by Gemma about her parents, is available from various archives and from biographies on Fiorello LaGuardia, and it testifies that they were indeed a curiously ill-suited couple. Achille La Guardia, who rebelled early against both his conservative Catholic family and the Church, left home at the age of seventeen to seek his fortune through his musical abilities. In 1866, he entered the Italian army as a musician and served until the end of the Italian Revolutionary War in 1870, then spent time in Switzerland, and even as a military band leader in India, and later as an Austrian band leader in Trieste. In 1875, he tried his fortune in a first immigration to the U.S. as a shipboard musician on the Hamburg line and as an entertainer in a Long Beach, New York hotel. After ten years in the U.S. his luck ran out and he returned to Trieste, where he quickly met and married Irene Coen Luzzato. In contrast to her husband, Irene was the oldest of five children of Abramo Isacco Coen (1833–1871), born in Split, which at the time belonged to Austria, and Fiorina Luzzatto (1833–1901), born in Trieste. She was a member of a prominent family with roots in Trieste dating back to the eighteenth century. Although her own immediate family was poor, the Luzzatto family included intellectuals and religious and political leaders, with close ties to Italian unification efforts and liberal groups. Even Luigi Luzzatti, a Prime Minister of Italy before World War I,

and Rabbi Samuel David Luzzatto, a famous Italian leader of Neo-Orthodoxy movement are both included in the impressive family genealogy (Rudavsky). [4]

Although Trieste is where Gemma's parents met and quickly married and where she herself was to find a Jewish husband, she makes no mention of what an appropriate place it was for such unusual marital unions. The political-cultural-ethnic ambivalence and financial wealth of the port city of Trieste, suspended between Italy and the Danube Basin, was for two hundred years the main port of the multi-national polyglot Habsburg Empire. In the nineteenth-century the Trieste Jewish community was the largest ethnic-religious minority in the city and enjoyed a privileged situation, with many engaged in international finance or commerce. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many Jews, like Gemma's family, became more and more Italianized, and interfaith marriages were significantly higher than in the rest of the empire. After 1870, the majority of couples chose a civil marriage, although, for Jews, marrying a Catholic rarely meant converting (Catalan 90-91, Klein 44, 77-78). This was the case of the La Guardia marriage, as well, where in their marriage certificate Achille declared his religion as *nessuna* ('none') but the bride was listed as *israelita.* Nevertheless, even in assimilationist Trieste, the marriage of such a couple is likely to have represented at least downward social mobility for the bride and advantage for the talented but even poorer groom.[5]

In the U.S., while both La Guardia parents were Italian speakers (although first language speakers of very different dialects), the family shared the uneasy tension of being immigrant and, above all, wanting to be American and eager to be integrated but worried about exclusion. This tension was typical of early-twentieth-century immigrants. As a result, the children were encouraged to become Americanized, by being allowed to speak only English at home and by being sent to Episcopalian Sunday School. They clearly did not want to think of themselves as Jews, a fact that will also be apparent in various later sections of Gemma's memoir as well as in Fiorello's. Throughout their subsequent lives, both Gemma and Fiorello were careful to represent themselves as Christian, although there is no evidence that either ever was formally baptized into the Church.

In spite of the parents' apparent eagerness to Americanize their children, the family took several long return trips to Trieste during the father's six month furloughs every three years. Finally, in 1898, after Achille La Guardia had received an army discharge because of multiple illnesses, the whole family returned to live in Trieste, where their father leased a rundown seaside hotel, which he ran with some success. Gemma wrote that the family did not realize how sick he was, but he passed away five years after their return. She reports of her brother Fiorello that he was so ambitious and smart that, in their new life in Trieste, the American consul in

[4] For additional information about Achille La Guardia see Foraker (n.d.) and about Irene Luzzato see https://archives.sharlothallmuseum.org/articles/rose-garden-honorees/2/irene-coen-la-guardia-b-1859-d-1915. On the Luzzato family see also https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/luzzatto. Columbia University has some family manuscripts of the Luzzato family but they do not tie the name to Gemma or Fiorello at all: https://blogs.cul.columbia.edu/jewishstudiesatcul/2020/10/12/the-luzzatto-family-at-columbia/. Another Luzzatto relative, Carolina Coen Luzzatto (1837–-1919) was a prominent intellectual and journalist in the Adriatic Irredentist movement, participating in the political struggle to claim Trieste and Gorizia for Italy. She also worked in the female emancipation movement (Catalan).

[5] For a broader understanding of geo-cultural identity formation in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Trieste, see Laven and Baycroft's "Border Regions and Identity".

Budapest hired him as his secretary and subsequently appointed him acting consul in Fiume. Nevertheless, Fiorello soon decided to return to the U.S. to go to law school, while their brother Richard got a job in the Cunard shipping and cruise line, made five trips, and then also settled in New Jersey (where he died at age 47 in 1935). It was only Gemma and her mother, who had been denied an adequate widow's pension by the U.S. army, who remained in Trieste, with Gemma supporting the two of them by giving English lessons.

Gemma's mention of Fiorello's ambitions and his return to the U.S. is a very sketchy version of the nearly five important years between 1901 and 1906 he spent working at diplomatic posts in Hapsburg Budapest and Fiume (now Rijeka). While Fiorello was indeed ambitious, he also did not want to work for his father in the hotel and was at loose ends. He lacked a secondary school diploma or adequate knowledge of Italian, because, as mentioned earlier, in the U.S. the La Guardia parents had prohibited their children from speaking Italian at home. When his father died in 1904, thanks to the patronage of two diplomats, Raymond Willey and Frank Dyer Chester, Fiorello was lucky enough to begin a modest career in the American Consular Service, which was to serve as a great experience for his later American career.

Wiley, the U.S. vice consul in Budapest as well as the consular agent in Fiume, who had been an acquaintance of Achille La Guardia, gave the eighteen-year old Fiorello a recommendation for a post as a clerk at the American Embassy in Budapest (located at Akadémia utca 1).[6] It was thus that, from 1900 to 1903, Fiorello served as the consular clerk and assistant for Chester, the U.S. Consul General in Budapest, who was to become his second very important protector. Chester, a Harvard-educated Boston Brahmin, became from his 1887 posting in Budapest a popular and respected but rambunctious figure in Hungary.[7] In spite of Fiorello's lack of any academic credentials, he nevertheless saw enough promise in his protégé that he hired him. Chester also advised him that he could be useful by learning languages and supported him in studying Italian, Croatian, and, presumably, some Hungarian. Nevertheless, Chester also warned Fiorello that his ethnicity and lack of university degree would keep him from advancing in the Ivy League-educated consular corps (as no doubt would have his short, pudgy physique and rumpled looks among WASPish diplomats). Fiorello's duties in Budapest

[6] *Igazságügyi közlöny* Sep. 27, 1900, *Magyarország tiszti címek névtára* 1902, p. 866, *Pester Lloyd* May 15, 1902.

[7] Chester (1869–1938) was such an exceptional figure in Hungary at the time that it is perhaps worth quoting some of the contemporary opinions on him. For example, in 1887, the *Vasárnapi Újság* [June 30] reported that the young Harvard-educated Orientalist and linguist, who had arrived from a two-year posting in Damascus was, after only one year in his Budapest posting, already speaking good Hungarian. He eventually became Consul General, and, throughout his time in Hungary, he was active in many social and religious groups, even being recorded in 1907 as a paying member of the Unitarian Church. In that same year there was a major celebration of Chester's tenth anniversary in office in Hungary, where Count Albert Apponyi, the renowned aristocrat and politician, read his laudation an exorbitant praise of Chester for having learned Hungarian faultlessly ['tökéletesen'] and for his interest in Hungarian literature (*Magyarország* [March 12, 1907] and *Pesti Hírlap* [March 15, 1907]). In fact, Hungarians were so smitten with Chester as a friend of Hungary that even years after he had left Hungarian newspapers kept track of him. For example, in *Magyarország* [April 14, 1915] it was reported that Chester, now back in the U.S, gave a talk in which he not only praised Hungary and talked about Unitarianism but recited, both in Hungarian and English, the first strophe of Mihály Vörösmarty's "Szózat," which is regarded as the second national anthem of Hungary, besides Kölcsey's poem "Himnusz."

chiefly consisted in making out consular invoices and taking applications for visas and American passports, but he was very pleased with the city, stating in his memoir that:

> Budapest was at the height of its glory in those ten years before the first World War smashed the Austro-Hungarian Empire forever. One could hear more good music in Budapest in 1902 and 1903 than in Vienna. The town was considered the gayest in Europe (qtd. in Kaufman 36).

In 1903, when Wiley resigned his own post in Fiume, he recommended Fiorello to replace him. With special dispensation, Chester was able to get him assigned to that post, but, since Fiorello was only twenty years old, he could only serve as Acting Consular Agent until he turned twenty-one. He served in his post in Fiume between 1904 and 1906, dealing especially with big shipping lines like Cunard, which were transporting immigrants to the U.S., whose ship Carpathia transported Hungarian emigrants from Fiume to New York every two weeks (McCart 42; Debreczeni).

Figure 6. *The Port in Fiume, circa 1900* [Wikimedia Images]

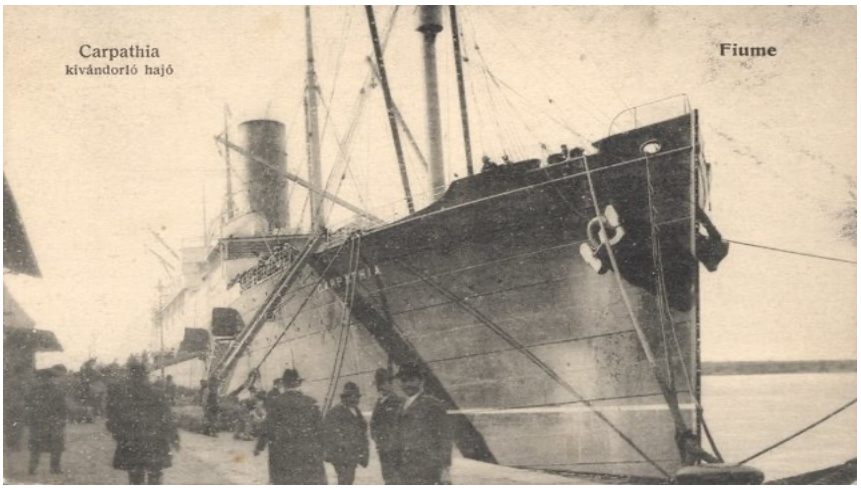

Figure 7. *The Cunard Ship Carpathia, which transported Hungarian emigrants from Fiume to New York, 1903* [Wikimedia Images]

When, unsurprisingly, Fiorello failed to get either a promotion to Consul-General in Fiume or to Belgrade, he decided to return to the U.S. Following his peripatetic consular career, in 1906, at the age of twenty-four, Fiorello arrived in New York on a Cunard steamer. Unlike the many immigrants on that ship, he spoke English and was an American, but, like them, had few connections and no money. However, by the following year and until 1910, he held a job as an interpreter for Immigration Services on Ellis Island for German, Yiddish and Croatian immigrants, during which time he received his high school equivalency certificate and a law degree from New York University. Later depictions of Fiorello's life make exaggerated accounts of his multilingualism, including the claim that he spoke Hungarian, of which there is no proof, and in his autobiography Fiorello never mentions Hungarian. Back in New York, after a rough initial start, Fiorello was soon on his way to a steady rise in the local political world, including seven terms in Congress as the first Italian-American, and crowned by an unprecedented series of three four-year consecutive terms, from 1933 to 1945, as the famously reform-minded Mayor of New York, who fought corruption and transformed New York's public services.[8]

Figure 8. *Fiorello LaGuardia in his office in Ellis Island*
[Library of CongressBain Collection; Wiki Images]

Gemma La Guardia's Life in Budapest

In 1908, Gemma married one of her English-language students, Herman Glück, a Hungarian Jew thirteen years her senior, originally from Makó, who was employed by a bank in Fiume and with whom she moved to Budapest after a few years. In the second chapter of her memoir, where she writes about her courtship and marriage, she details the anecdote of how she warned all her suitors that she would bring her mother, her sewing machine and her piano to the

[8] On Fiorello's early consular career, see Mangiafico. For details of his spectacular rise in American politics and his role in the creation of a Modern New York, during which period he instituted many reforms to combat urban poverty, rebuild decaying infrastructure, and put the unemployed back to work, see, among others: Kessner, Kaufman, and Brodsky.

marriage, and how Herman was enthusiastic to all three. She extolls the wonders of her thirty-six year marriage to Glück and of her love for Budapest, but provides only the most superficial details of her life there. Also left unmentioned by Gemma is that her marriage caused her to lose her American citizenship because the U.S. Expatriation Act of 1907 had decreed that U.S. women who married non-citizens were to be stripped of citizenship.[9] When the First World War began, hundreds of women found themselves affected by this law and many had to register as enemy aliens. As we shall see, the loss of her citizenship was to cause Gemma serious problems when she sought to return to the U.S. after the war.

Gemma's marriage was announced in several newspapers, from which we can learn that the exact title of Herman Glück's position in Fiume was "a Fiumei Kereskedelmi Bank Részvénytársaság sorsjegyosztály vezetője" ['Head of the Lottery Department of the Fiume Economics Bank Inc.']. Only in the announcement posted in the Neolog Jewish weekly *Egyenlőség* (Equality) do we find the details of the couple's marriage as a Jewish ceremony officiated in Fiume by Dr. József Frank, although the text is totally garbled, with the family name spelled as La Guordia and with Gemma said to be the daughter both of her actual father, whose name is feminized to *La Guordia Achilla*, and of her brother, who is identified as *La Guordia Fiosello,* the former American consul in Fiume.[10]

Throughout her memoir, Gemma carefully represents herself as a believing Christian, but in the second chapter she also emphasizes that religion, both Christianity and Judaism, had been an important part of her early life. She recounts that her father was very tolerant and had the children learn by heart the Hebrew prayer "Sh[e]ma Yisrael" ['Hear, O Israel'], which he insisted they recite every evening at bedtime. He was proud of his wife's family, and Fiorello was named after their Jewish grandmother Fiorina. She emphasizes that, like her father, she respected her spouse's religion but she attended church in Budapest during their marriage:

> We were married in my family's house. Out of respect for my husband's religion, the ceremony was performed by a rabbi. Herman was not a religiously observant man and often during our years in Budapest I had to remind him to go to the synagogue on the High Holy Days, especially on the Day of Atonement, which the Jews call Yom Kippur. On that holiest of days the synagogues of Budapest were filled to overflowing with people from every walk of life. As for myself, I used to go to church (20).

Gemma recounts briefly that, for the first years of their marriage, she and her husband lived in Fiume, where Herman had a job in a bank but then he was transferred and they moved to Budapest, where he had, as she put it, "an excellent position," and, after work, he also translated books, movies and commercial correspondence in six languages. She does not specify when the couple and her mother moved there, but it must have been before the war since her mother died and was buried in Budapest in 1915. To this day, the mother lies in the Jewish cemetery, her grave marked with a modest stone bearing the inscription: "Irene La Guardia, 1859–1915."[11]

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[9] Unsurprisingly, American men who married foreign women were permitted to keep their citizenship, and, from 1855, most foreign women who married Americans had also been granted citizenship (Bredbenner).

[10] *Magyarország* Dec. 18, 1918, *Pesti Hírlap* Dec. 18, 1918, *Egyenlőség* Dec. 27, 1908.

[11] Szilágyi published an article, with a photo of Irene La Guardia's grave, "Egy elfelejtett sír" ['The Forgotten Grave'], but the information about Fiorello is erroneous. He claims that Fiorello got his consular job in Budapest because he already spoke several languages and that *magyarul tökéletesen beszélt* ['he spoke perfect Hungarian']

Figure 9. *Grave of Irene Coen La Guardia in the Kozma Street Jewish Cemetery (Section 28, Row 9, Grave 1)*

Two daughters were born in Budapest to Gemma and her husband: in 1911, Yolanda, known in Hungary as Jolán, and seven years later, Irene. Yolanda was to marry a Hungarian Jew, Ernő Dénes in April 1943 [*Ujság* Apr. 18,1943], and gave birth to a son, Richard, in 1944. She was to share Gemma's deportation, while Irene, who emigrated to the U.S. in 1938 as a violinist and subsequently married there, was spared their wartime suffering. Gemma proudly states that, after the birth of her second child, she began to teach English again. She describes her years in Budapest as "the beautiful life," concluding that next to New York she loved it best of all the places she had been, and that it had the same cosmopolitan atmosphere as New York, but without the hustle and bustle. She makes no mention of any antisemitism in interwar Hungary or even of the rightist Horthy government, but only praises the Hungarians she knew as people "who were so kind and hospitable, well-educated, and ambitious" (22). Nor does she mention any personal relationships, nor allude to world events, including how the First World War affected their lives, but she does describe in detail their apartment at Nagymező utca 43:

> a lovely eight room apartment with needlework and fresh flowers in every room, and a library with books in six languages. Several instruments, silverware, jewelry, money. Now all these things are only memories (22).

In contrast, after the war, when writing to her brother, she had referred to it as a six-room apartment, where everything was destroyed and stolen, but she did not care because she and her daughter and grandson were alive.[12] The building, which still stands today, was declared a *csillagos ház* in 1944.[13]

[12] See in Saidel, *Gemma LaGuardia Gluck*, the Appendix of Letters between Gemma and her brother, July 1945–May 1947.

[13] https://www.csillagoshazak.hu/#overlay=hazak/VI. Last accessed: 8.12.2025

Figure 10. *Nagymező utca 43. today [Utcatér.hu]*

In her memoir, after the brief introduction to her family’s life in interwar Budapest,, Gemma jumps chronologically to the immediate antecedents of her family’s deportation in 1944 and to the story of her imprisonment in Ravensbrück and the subsequent postwar suffering in Berlin. However, to understand the dynamic of her difficult relationship with her brother, especially as it will play out after the war, it is necessary to mention how her talking freely to the press in 1933 later damaged their already strained relationship. Apparently, sometime after he returned to the U.S., he had asked Gemma and their mother to join him in the U.S. but she stayed in Trieste, supporting herself and her mother by teaching English. Again, over his objections, a couple of years later she married the considerably older Herman Glück and settled with him in Budapest, as a result of which the siblings fell totally out of touch for some time (Kessner 444). But the big break in their relationship occurred when Fiorello won a spectacular victory in his first term as mayor of New York in November,1933.

Within days a reporter from *Egyenlőség*, excited by the “szenzációs hír” [‘sensational news’] of the world-famous mayor’s sister living in Budapest, appeared on Gemma’s doorstep. She and her husband sat for an interview, with the latter doing most of the actual talking, given that her Hungarian was inadequate. The resultant article appeared on November 18 on the frontpage, with the headline “A newyorki új polgármester édesanyja a Pesti Szentegylet rákoskereszturi temetőjében alussza örök álmát” [‘The newly elected New York mayor’s mother sleeps her eternal sleep in the Budapest Cemetery of Rákoskeresztúr’]. It also said that her grave is tended by the Pesti *Chevra Kadisa Szentegylet*, whose directors, Dr. Henrik Endrei and Miksa Kremer have sent a congratulatory letter to Mayor LaGuardia. The reporter details that he is sitting in the apartment in Nagymező utca of Herman Glück, who is a German, English, French and Italian *levelező* [‘correspondent’] in the [*Magyar Általános*] Hitelbank [‘Hungarian General Credit Bank’]. Herman recounts the family tale about Achille La Guardia teaching his children a Jewish prayer, which Gemma will repeat decades later in her memoir. He also states that although the La Guardia children were raised Protestant, Gemma “önként áttért a zsidó hitre és vallásos életet él” [‘converted of her own will to the Jewish faith and leads a religious life’], which is in total contradiction with what she will repeatedly claim about herself in her memoir.

Herman also brags about their good relations with Fiorello and reports that Fiorello also spoke excellent Yiddish (but he makes no claim for him speaking any Hungarian).[14]

The day following the appearance of the *Egyenlőség* article, the German-language *Pester Lloyd* also visited Gemma in her home to learn more about what they referred to as an "unverhofften Sensation" ['an unexpected sensation'].[15] This article reports that the family lived in a well-furnished home and that Gemma, who was happy to give an interview, says she met her husband, who "beherrscht" ['has a command of'] five languages, in Trieste when her brother was still there and that it was after the war that they came to live in Budapest (but this information is problematic, given that her mother was already buried in Budapest in 1915). She also says she visited her brother in New York in 1924 and was amazed at the role he played there as Congressman.

The large-circulation tabloid, *Az Est* (Nov. 9, 1933) also took an interest in the La Guardia story. However, rather than copying the *Egyenlőség*'s sensational revelation, it repeated parts of an article it had published four years earlier (Oct. 3, 1929) when LaGuardia had first run unsuccessfully for mayor. In that earlier interview Gemma proudly recounted the story of her brother's life in a carefully edited form, divulging only that "anyánk fiumei születésű" ['our mother was born in Fiume'], without naming her. She also bragged about the six languages her brother spoke "perfektül" ['perfectly'] but made no mention of Hungarian. The catchy conclusion of the interview was that she claimed that her brother had told her that once he has achieved what he wanted to in life he will come to live in Budapest, "mert sehol sem lehet olyan szép az élet mint Budapesten" ['because nowhere can life be as beautiful as in Budapest']. The very next day, the paper followed up the article with a photo of Gemma contemplating her brother's portrait photo.

Figure 11. *Photo of Gemma La Guardia Glück admiring a photo of her brother* [Az Est Nov. 10, 1937]

The revelations from *Egyenlőség* of the La Guardia family's Jewish origins naturally

[14] Versions of this article were picked up by some other Hungarian papers: see *Magyar Hírlap* (Nov. 18, 1933) and *Zsidó Néplap* ['Jewish People's Daily'] of Uzhorod, Ukraine (Nov. 24, 1933). It was actually *Napló* (Nov. 14, 1933) that printed a story first about the election of La Guardia with the catchy title, "Magyarul is tud New York új polgármestere" ['New York's New Mayor Also Knows Hungarian'] and adding the erroneous information that one of his younger sisters lives in Budapest without adding anything about the origins of the siblings' mother.

[15] The *Pester Lloyd* article appeared on November 9, with a follow-up on November 17, which reports more on Irene Coen's gravesite.

quickly spread to the U.S. The Hungarian-language *Amerikai Magyar Népszava* (Jan. 17, 1934) in New York City published a retouched version of the *Az Est* photo, without a story, only with the comment that this interesting photo had arrived from Budapest. Other New York newspapers also had picked up the story, including *Der Tog* ['the Day'], a New York City Yiddish daily, and, in English, the *Jewish Daily Bulletin* (Nov. 20, 1933). However, in this last paper the title of *Egyenlőség* was garbled as the nonsensical "egyen Loeseg," which it then accused of being a Budapest pro-Nazi newspaper, that had revealed La Guardia's origins by publishing the inscription on a tombstone of his mother in a Budapest Jewish cemetery, misinformation that was picked up by other news sources.

Four years later, in 1937, when Fiorello was re-elected to his second term as mayor, the daily *Ujság* once again picked up interest in him in a series of articles.[16] One article was about an anti-Hitler speech he gave in New York. Another article reported that, when the *Budapesti Izraelita Szentegylet* as guardians of his mother's grave wrote to congratulate him, he replied that she was from the Coen Luzatti family and cousin to a Prime Minister, and that both he and his mother were very proud of this connection. Nevertheless, the article ends with the reaffirmation that "La Guardia nem zsidó, jó protestáns" ['La Guardia is not Jewish [but] a good Protestant']. A third article reported that, when Fiorello's old friend from Budapest sent him a telegram of congratulations on his re-election, he replied in a long, handwritten letter. In the letter, he claimed that he had good memories of Budapest and that his constant wish was to visit again but for the next four years he would not have time to visit his sister and his mother's grave. The most detailed article in *Ujság* [sic] reported on a new interview with Gemma, who is described as "alacsony, enyhén molett, csillogó fekete szemű hölgy, rosszul beszél magyarul" ['a short, roundish woman with glittering dark eyes and bad Hungarian']. In an interview, Gemma recounted that during her 1923 visit to the United States, she spent half a year with her brother Fiorello and another half with her other brother, Richard. She noted that her daughter accompanied her, and that Fiorello, then a widower, wished to adopt the child. However, she makes no mention of this extended return visit in her published memoir. The article notes that the family lived "szerény viszonyok közt" ["under modest circumstances"], but that Gemma explained her brother refused to send money, claiming it would make America poorer. He also told her that had she been unmarried or widowed, he would have helped, but since she had a husband, it was his responsibility to support her. More notably, Gemma recounted that a private

[16] The *Újság,* which billed itself as a liberal daily, published "La Guardia New Yorki polgármester Hitler ellenes beszéde" ['New York Mayor La Guardia's Anti-Hitler Speech''] (March 6, 1937); "La Guardia" (April 18, 1937, p. 9); "La Guardia ismét New York polgármestere" ['La Guardia Again New York's Mayor'] (Nov. 4, 1937; "Fiorellónak hétmillió gyermeke van" ['Fiorello Has Seven Million Children'] (Nov. 5, 1937, which is repeated in *Új Kelet* [Nov 9, 1937]; there is also a silly article in a column called "Szinházi pletykálkodás" ['Theater Gossip'] (Aug. 28, 1938) about a Hungarian woman artist who delivers earth from Fiorello's mother's grave to him in New York in order to gain his influence (a story that is repeated by *Múlt és Jövő* [Dec. 1, 1939]).

detective had recently visited her, inquiring about her mother's family. She realized the visit was prompted by Fiorello's political enemies, who were attempting to link him to Béla Kun by confusing their mother's maiden name, Coen, with Kun.

By 1938, the fascist daily *Magyarország* ran an antisemitic campaign against LaGuardia, but not finding his Sephardic maternal roots of sufficient interest, it insisted on turning him into a Hungarian Jew. First, there appeared a fabricated article in which he was accused of having been expelled from the American Legion for providing large government funds to the American Communist party. But the paper was even more motivated to invent the fiction that LaGuardia's grandmother was a Hungarian Jew from Munkács, which was supposed to prove that there was no difference between the Kohns and the Schwartzes and the nicer-sounding La Guardias. The article further suggested sarcastically that, if things got too hot for him in the USA, La Guardia might try to flee and cross the ocean and return home to Hungary, hiding his Jewish identity under the Hungarianized name Gardos (Aug. 17, 1938). In an article a few months later (Nov. 6, 1938), *Magyarország* now made not only his grandmother but LaGuardia himself a Hungarian, a "galiciai származású Magyarországon átvándorolt izraelita" ['A Jew of Galician origin who wandered through Hungary'], while two years later they characterized him as the "szép szavú de csúnya negroid szemita kinézésű" ['well-spoken but ugly negroid Semite looking'] half-Jewish mayor of New York (Nov. 6, 1940).

For Fiorello, the much-publicized revelations about his Jewish ancestry had to have been extremely uncomfortable personally and politically, since, throughout his career, he had carefully chosen to be identified only as a Protestant Italian-American. For example, during a contentious congressional campaign in 1922, when Henry Frank, a Jewish opponent, accused him of antisemitism, in response he rejected the accusation publicly. But he sent an open letter in Yiddish to his opponent, offering to debate him in that language. Frank, who did not know Yiddish, was forced to decline and he lost the election.

Fiorello was one of the earliest and most confrontational opponents of the Nazi regime. His 1933 campaign for mayor coincided with the rise of Nazism in Germany, and he publicly supported boycotts against German goods and appeared as a fiery speaker alongside Jewish leaders in anti-Nazi rallies. For example, in a public address as early as 1934, he warned that part of Hitler's program was the complete annihilation of the Jews in Germany. But there were always political questions as to what degree he was using these attacks for his own political advantage with Jewish voters. It is true that, not to risk antagonizing his Italian-American electorate before the war, he did not similarly attack Mussolini, declining to criticize him even after the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Some of the most virulent criticism against him in the U.S. came from the American right-wing press. For example, during Fiorello's 1937 re-election campaign, *Time* news magazine suggested that his attack on Hitler was to gain favor with the electorate, as "in New York City, as any political nose-counter knows, the hooked far outnumber the Aryan noses" (Esposito and Esposito 50). In 1938, at a rally of almost 20,000 in Madison Square Garden, after the division of Czechoslovakia and the Nazi "Kristallnacht" but still three years before the U.S. entered the war, Fiorello increased his attacks. Convinced that the Naziregime was set to start another world war he called this regime a great threat to world peace. (For more details on Fiorello's anti-Nazi efforts, see Esposito and Esposito, Cyprin and the cited biographies of his life.)

If the political and antisemitic-tainted attacks in the U.S. against Fiorello were constant, in Nazi Germany he was pilloried, often pictorially. A good example is the book *Die Juden in USA – Über 100 Bilddokumente*, produced by the Nazi party, which also circulated in the U.S. among the German Bund. The book featured unflattering news photographs of celebrities and Jews in the U.S., with insulting captions. The cover and eight additional photos depicted the short and rotund LaGuardia in grotesque poses, often seen eating and one comparing him to a gorilla. Interestingly, more than half of the 105 photos come from the American Associated Press.[17]

Figure 12. *Unflattering Photo of Fiorello LaGuardia on the cover of* Die Juden in USA– Über 100 Bilddokumente

During the war, Fiorello regularly appeared in public demonstrations, including once again in Madison Square Garden in 1942, demonstrating against the murder of Jews in Europe. And, most famously, on April 19, 1944 he appeared on the steps of City Hall before a mass demonstration, in which thousands of Jews had marched from a synagogue to commemorate the 40,000 Jews who had perished in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising one year earlier. At this event, Fiorello predicted the imminent downfall of the Hitler regime and warned the Nazis that they would pay for their crimes. Less than a month later, Gemma was arrested in Budapest. She always claimed that she had become a target of the Germans because of her famous brother being an outspoken warrior against the Nazis. However, this also potentially saved her life, as she was not deported to a death camp but sent to Ravensbrück as a *Prominente* for potential political exchange.

[17] The volume, compiled by one Dr. Hans Diebow (1895–1975), saw six editions (Scharnberg). A similar publication with antisemitic caricatures and photos, including of La Guardia, was the French propaganda magazine, *Le cahier Jaune*, by André Chaumel, published between 1941 and 1943.

Figure 13. *A commemoration of the first anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising in New York. Mayor LaGuardia is in the front and center.* [‘TRANS.’ YIVO Institute for Jewish Research]

Gemma La Guardia’s Memoir of Her Deportation from Budapest

After dedicating the first two chapters of her memoir to her family background, Gemma begins Chapter Three, “Storm Over Budapest,” by writing that “the war came slowly to Budapest.” Hungary had entered the war in 1941, but she had still been able to go on teaching for four years and had not been harmed. Her family believed, as she put it, that Horthy was only maneuvering to keep his country from direct involvement. Germans demanded Hungary’s plentiful food, and scarcity set in, but it was only with the March 19 German occupation “that the real trouble began” (25). Her husband lost his job but was kept on to do work in secret and had to be replaced by several employees, since he worked in eight languages. Gemma does not give details of the new anti-Jewish legislation enacted, or even about the imposition of the wearing of the Jewish star, nor of any friends or relatives who were victims. She recounts only that, on May 12, the police barged into their home with the excuse of looking for a hidden short-wave radio transmitter. They accused her of communicating on the transmitter with her brother, but after a three hour search they left, stealing all the family’s stored provisions. The family thought this was the end of their tribulations but, on June 7, Gemma was arrested by Gestapo officers. Her husband asked to accompany her, and both of them were taken to a prison in Buda and from there to Mauthausen by train. Gemma writes that this was one of the worst camps. She reports that the camp was mostly empty in 1944 when she was there, and prisoners only appeared in numbers later when crowding grew everywhere. When questioned, she testified that she had not seen her brother in over twenty years. Twelve days later she was transferred to Ravensbrück, never to see her husband again. She realized in retrospect that an attractive woman who had come to her house pretending that she wanted to study English or German and told her how she loved Fiorello, must have been a spy. She thought the arrest might have been occasioned by an article in a Nazi propaganda paper complaining how a sister of the notorious Fiorello LaGuardia, Hitler’s greatest enemy, could be allowed to be living in Budapest. Gemma did not seem to know or remember the author of the article, but he was the fascist Ferenc Rajniss (1893–1946), who wrote several incendiary articles in Spring 1944, claiming that Fiorello LaGuardia’s relatives were directing enemy pilots with a secret radio receiver. Rajniss, a fascist journalist and

politician in the Szálasi government, was involved in several notoriously antisemitic news outlets, *Magyar Futár, Esti Újság,* and the weekly *Új Magyarság.* He was tried as a war criminal and executed by firing squad in Budapest on March 12, 1946.

Gemma was correct in her assumptions about the timing of her arrest, but she was not to know the details until almost two decades later. As I discussed in my recent related article in *Múlt és Jövő* ("Samuel L. Shneiderman") it was the 1961 discovery of a curious secret wartime communique that revealed that Gemma La Guardia had been held as political prisoner in Ravensbrück, to be kept alive for a possible prisoner exchange on direct orders of Eichmann. The report, discovered by Yiddishist scholar S. Shneiderman who was covering the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, also detailed that she was racially a "first-degree *Mischling*" and therefore considered a Jewess. In June 9, 1944, in a report from Budapest, signed by Veesenmayer, the author writes:

> Budapesti hatóságaink letartóztattak egy Gemma Glück La Guardia nevü zsidó nőt, nevezett New York hirhedt zsidó uszitó főpolgarmesternek Fiorello La Guardiának a huga. Letartoztatták tovább a Zichy Klára zsidó grófnőt. [...] mind a ketten eltitkolták vagyonukat és egyik sem viselte a zsidó csillagot[18]
> ['Hungarian authorities arrested a Jewish woman called Gemma Glück La Guardia, the younger sister of the infamous Jewish inciter mayor Fiorello La Guardia. They also arrested Klara Zichy, Jewish countess [...] both hid their fortune and neither one wore the Jewish star.']

Gemma arrived in Ravensbrück, 56 miles North of Berlin, on June 30, accompanied by two guards. Ravensbrück was established in 1939 as a labor camp rather than as an extermination camp, in which 120,000 to 130,000 people are thought to have passed through in the course of the war, only a fraction surviving. It does not fit easily into Holocaust narrative, as it was unique in several aspect. It was a key training facility for thousands of female guards for other camps and the only camp especially for women, some who came with children, some who gave birth in the camp, and some who were lesbians. And it was a place where some 80% were political prisoners, from all nationalities in Nazi-occupied Europe, including European Russia. Their numbers also included spies, members of the French resistance, Communists, Jehovah's Witnesses, social outcasts, academics, Polish aristocrats, "Red Army girls." Some of the prisoners were kept for possible prisoner exchanges. The largest single contingent were prisoners from Poland, while the percentage of Jews was always relatively small in comparison to other categories: perhaps 20% at some periods by some estimates. Almost all the official records at Ravensbürg were destroyed by the Germans as the war was ending, so most of what is known is through personal accounts.

[18] The report is reprinted as "Aláírás Veesenmayer" in *Magyarország*, Aug. 1, 1969, but the author's identity is not recognized in the article**.** He was Edmund Veesenmayer (1904–1977), a high-ranking German functionary who worked for Eichman and was sent to Hungary in March 1944 as the Reich Plenipotentiary. Although little known today, he was a major Holocaust perpetrator who was tried in six different courts for war crimes and sentenced to twenty years, commuted to ten. (https://europebetweeneastandwest.wordpress.com/2021/01/24/a-henchman-in-hungary-edmund-veesenmayer-war-by-another-name-part-one/).

This study does not allow for an analysis of the important research available today on Ravenbrück. However, because the diary of Germaine Tillion (1907–2008) was both the earliest and the most important witness account, I feel it is necessary to mention her work.[19] Tillion was a French ethnologist and *resistante*, who spent three years in Ravensbrück and whose mother was gassed there in 1945. She kept a diary at huge risk, in a unique, albeit monstrous situation for a fervent anthropologist to do fieldwork. She wrote three books on Ravensbrück, in which she combined personal memories with analysis inspired by her training as an ethnologist and by her postwar research. Her first account, published in 1946, which she later described as stripped of all that seemed personal to her, was re-edited and expanded 43 years after liberation in a 1973 book, and again further expanded in 1988. The composite work has a dozen chapters, each extensively covering a theme, topographic accounts of the camp’s special layout, resistance efforts, and sociological descriptions of the prisoners and various guards. Tillion concludes that chances of survival were 5 in 100 on average, but individuals’ chances varied depending on ties, especially political, and for Hungarian Jews the number was effectively zero. Tillion died at 100 in 2008, and, in 2015, she was interred in the Pantheon along with fellow *resistante* Genevieve de Gaulle-Anthonioz, niece of General de Gaulle, with whom she had been deported in the same convoy.

Figure 14. *Inmates at Hard Labor in Ravensbürg* Konzentrationslager [Bundesarchiv Bild]

[19] Ravensbrück has begun to receive long overdue scholarly attention during the last two decades, each important but with a different focus: Morrison, Schindler-Saekow, Schäfer, Saidel, *The Jewish Women*, Agassi, Helm, and *Zwangsarbeit*. Morrison does not focus on Jewish women or provide the remembrance of individual prisoner’s daily life. Schäfer studies especially the medical experiments on inmates. Saidel began contact with survivors at the fiftieth anniversary of camp’s liberation in 1995 and interviewed many former prisoners and their descendants, and she has a chapter on Gemma’s memoir (109-120). Agassi was daughter of Margaret Buber-Neumann, who spent four years in Ravensbrück as a political prisoner. She and her team interviewed 138 survivors on three continents and collected data on thousands. Helm also sought out survivors. For a series of photos, which cannot be reproduced here, see https://www.vintag.es/2015/01/pictures-inside-ravensbruck-hitlers.html For a partial list of survivor memoirs, see https://www.ravensbrueck-bg.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Gedenkstaetten/Ravensbrueck/wd/pdf/Recommended_Publications_Ravensbrueck.pdf. Last accessed: 08.12.2025

Figure 15. *Display at the Ravensbrück Memorial Site of Pictorial and Name Record of Camp Inmates* [Bundesarchiv Bild]

Ravensbrück was meant to hold 15,000 prisoners but by the time Gemma arrived it held 40,000. Six days after her arrival in Ravensbrück, she was taken to the elite block, where she was not required to work and had a bed to herself but was given the same food as the other prisoners. Her status at the camp as a *Prominente* also meant she had more possibility to become an eyewitness to a broader range of camp life. She called Ravensbrück an industrial center, dominated by Siemens.[20] Some women became electricians, carpenters, plumbers, while the Polish women worked mostly in the kitchen. The camp even became a dressmaking and furrier center, as there were many women with talent. Gemma noted details of the set-up of the camp and the daily routine of the prisoners, the beatings, the starvation, the cold, deprivation, illness, slave labor, punishments, medical experiments, relationships between prisoners and the guards, and political meetings and other clandestine resistance activities. Unlike Tillion, she did not try to keep a diary, which means she had to write down her experiences from memory and piecemeal, years after liberation. She organized her material thematically into a dozen chapters.

Gemma, as Tillion before her, also testified to the existence of gas chambers and crematoria in Ravensbrück, which some other scholars have tried to deny. Her bed was near a window in Block Two, so she could actually observe the crematorium, whose effects on the living she describes in poignant detail:

> As I could sleep little, I watched the grim flaming smoke pouring out of the chimneys of the crematorium. And, oh, the terrible odor. We could force our eyes shut, but we could not keep the stench of death away from our nostrils. When we were awakened at four A.M., the first thing we saw was the flaming smoke, the first thing we were aware of was the smell (28)

[20] Siemens, then known as Siemens und Halske, a big complex in the vicinity, was the company that most exploited women workers in electrical, chemical and steel plants (*Zwangsarbeit*).

In a later chapter, she explains that the gas chamber, which was built in November 1944 on orders of Himmler, was working constantly during Easter week 1945, to get rid of evidence before "Russians" arrived.

Gemma emphasizes in her memoir that she was not attempting to convey a particular message; nevertheless, the solidarity among camp inmates—something she herself helped foster—emerges clearly throughout the narrative. For example, she asked for the privilege to start an international table, which brought together thirty-four women from twelve nationalities that the Nazis were trying to turn against one another. These women called her *Mutti* and confided their problems to her. She also took up her profession, teaching underground English classes at danger to herself and to her students. In her classes, there were also many nationalities, a considerable number of whom were Russian, among them many doctors and nurses. They were very good students but seemed to distrust the other nationalities, although everyone shared the same fate. She said that her teaching gave her "the most gratifying hours I spent in Ravensbrück" (44).

Gemma briefly mentions many individual women, both among the guards and among the inmates. She remarks that there were one or two decent women among the female Nazi *Aufseherinnen* ['guards'] and confirms—without divulging any gruesome details—that the cruelest guard was Dorothea Binz (1920–1947). Binz, although one of the youngest among the guards, was the *Oberaufseherin* ['Head Warden'] of the camp, and known as the "brutal executioner." She was executed for war crimes in 1947.

Figure 16. *Dorothea Binz dressed in uniform, and at the Ravensbrück 1947 trial, flanked by female guards from the Royal Military Police* [Public Domain Photos]

Gemma claims that a the special feature of the camp was the presence of many women with children, recalling in particular a Hungarian with four children, and many pregnant women accused of *Rassenschande* ['racial disgrace/miscegenation']. She describes the children with special attention:

> There were many mothers with children in Ravensbrück. The little ones, of whom at one time there were perhaps five hundred, added a note of special horror and tragedy to the atmosphere of the camp. They looked like little skeletons wearing rags. Some had no hair on their heads. Nevertheless, they behaved like children, running around and begging things from their elders. They even played games. A popular one was Appell, modeled on the camp's daily roll calls (46)

There are chapters in Gemma's memoir devoted to the description of different groups of women inmates. The Bible students are described as having strength of character but always trying to convert others. In "The Rabbit Block," she recounts that the Nazis selected for horrendous experiments the most healthy and beautiful Polish girls, except a Ukrainian and a German from the Bible group. The chapter "Comrades in Misfortune" is devoted to short vignettes about half a dozen women she names, detailing their loyalty how to her. She recalls two women who later lived in New York and would greet her on her birthday and the many women who wrote in her little memory book at a sad Christmas celebration they held. The most detailed description is about Dr. Gertrud Luckner (1900–1995), who was a Christian social worker in the German resistance and who, in 1966, was named as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem (Petuchowski). Another chapter is devoted to the *Prominenten* inmates, among them Madame Sarussel, wife of the mayor of Tunis; Madame Winkelkompes [sic],[21] wife of the mayor of Cologne, whose husband was poisoned at a dinner given by Hitler; Josephine Ptacnikova, whom Gemma called an Austrian countess; Olga Himmler, who was imprisoned because of her *Bett-Politik* involvement with a Polish officer in Warsaw, and who, on the basis of Gemma's story, was one of Heinrich Himmler's relatives; Frau Hoffner, wife of Reichswehr General Hoffner, involved in the plot against Hitler, and many more.[22] She also writes about a heroic but unfortunately unnamed inmate doctor who was an ardent antifascist and performed "miracles," getting medicines and substituting the mortally ill for others condemned to death (71).[23] She is less charitable to the lesbian inmates she referred to as "perverts," about whom she opined that:

> I was told that in the punishment block they found others like themselves and bore their suffering well (65).

Different camps used different badge systems to identify inmates, with political prisoners made to wear an inverted red triangle, but political prisoners who were also considered Jewish were made to wear a yellow upright triangle underneath a red inverted triangle, so the two combined to form a Star of David. Later in the war, in some camps, Jewish political prisoners wore only a yellow bar over the red triangle to indicate their double status.

[21] The *Oberbürgermeister* of Köln was actually Peter Winkelkemper, details of whose death in 1944 are unclear (https://www.rheinische-geschichte.lvr.de/Persoenlichkeiten/peter-winkelnkemper/DE-2086/lido/57c932053b9326.79453837#:~:text=Von%201941%2D1944%20war%20er,in%20eine%20katholische%20Familie%20geboren). Last accessed: 08.12.2025

[22] Josephine Ptacnikova and Olga Himmler are not identifiable.

[23] On the overwhelming heroism of many women inmate doctors, see Vasvári, "Annak átka,".

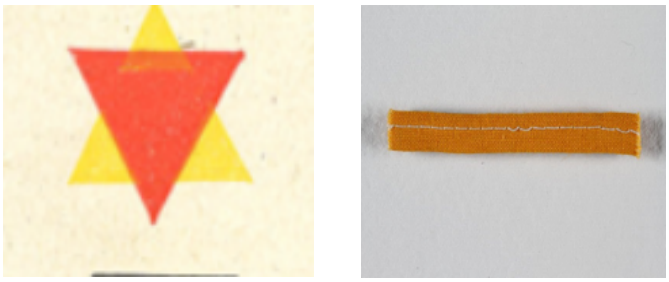

Figure 17. *The double triangle Jewish star, the most common badge for political prisoners, and an unused yellow stripe patch found by U.S. forces at a concentration camp, used as evidence at war criminal trials.* [USHMM]

In Ravensbrück, Gemma was doubly classified as both a political hostage and a Jew and hence was obligated to wear a yellow stripe superimposed on the red triangle. However, even in the context of inmate life she was intent on declaring her Christian identity by disclaiming the meaning for her of the compulsory yellow stripe. She recounts that there was a woman who was forced to wear the Jewish sign but kept on insisting that she was Christian and should be allowed to take it off; that woman supposedly also urged Gemma to take off her yellow stripe, since she was not a Jew either. Gemma replied that she had been assigned to wear the stripe as her husband was a Jew and “I have been married for thirty six years to such a good Jewish husband, I am proud to wear *their* sign” (68, emphasis added).

As the camp was being prepared for evacuation, Gemma was put in a group destined for the gas chamber but was spared at the last minute because of who she was, unlike her comrades. Throughout her time in the camp, she had not known that seven weeks after her own arrest her daughter Yolanda, her daughter’s husband, Ernő Dénes, and their five-month-old son, Richard, were also arrested. Ernő was sent to Mauthausen, but Yolanda and the baby were interned in solitary confinement at Ravensbrück. The mother and daughter did not know of each other’s presence until they were reunited during evacuation, on April 14, 1945. Fifteen-month-old Richard was in such bad shape that he could not hold up his head, was unable to grasp, and had no teeth, so that Gemma was worried about how they would be able to bury him. The family faced getting shot but they were spared once again at the last minute and transported in a second-class train compartment to a jail in Berlin. During the Russian attack on the capital, the prison doors were thrown open and they found themselves in a city they did not know and without money or identification. With bombs falling all around them, they lived eleven days in an air raid shelter, eating only some dry bread. Their unspeakable existence in Berlin was almost impossible to grasp, with Gemma concluding: “I must confess ironically that this was the worst moment of my imprisonment” (89).

While Gemma’s memoir offers moving personal vignettes of life in Ravensbrück, it can provide little new information of historical importance on concentration camps. More interesting are the final chapters about her shattered little family’s life as displaced persons (DPs) in Berlin and her struggle to be repatriated to the U.S., as she had lost her American citizenship and her daughter and grandson only had Hungarian citizenship. In recent Holocaust research, the boundaries have been pushed to the postwar period, including research on Jewish DP’s temporary settlement in Occupied Germany from spring 1945 to the late 1940s, a dimension of the Holocaust that had received sparse attention. Most were the *She’erith Hapleitah* [‘surviving remnants’], the Hebrew term coined for all European (including Southern European Sephardic)

survivors, but most particularly for those who gathered in Germany between 1945 and 1947. They numbered around 250,000, with Poles and Hungarians in the majority, some spending several years in DP camps, or living on their own as DPs in an inhospitable host country.

With nowhere to go in the chaos of the immediate postwar, Gemma and her daughter also remained in Berlin as DPs, trying to survive. After a while, American reporters covering the fall of Berlin, who found out about their presence, brought them rations and helped put Gemma in touch with her brother, who was in the last months of his third term as mayor of New York.[24] Although the Red Cross had kept LaGuardia informed of her whereabouts in Ravensbrück, he lost track of her in Berlin until he learned she had been liberated. By the summer of 1945, Gemma has re-established contact with him through the Red Cross and wrote to him to try to find her and her daughter's husband and to get them soon to the U.S. But Fiorello, known as the consummate incorruptible politician and one who followed all laws, refused to give his sister special treatment in any way, or to use non-legal means even for correspondence. As there was yet no proper connection between U.S. and Germany, it took him three and a half months to reply to her through the American Red Cross. He wrote her that he was doing his best to have them sent either to Sweden or England or Portugal or Italy, but there were many unsurmountable obstacles. She could not be given preferential treatment because, as he wrote, her case was the same as that of hundreds of thousands of DPs. When they were finally able to speak in person through the channels of the Radio of New York, he emphasized again that her case was the same as that of hundreds of thousands of other DPs, which was made all the more difficult by the publicity she has received by talking too much to reporters. However, from that point, he began to wire her $150 a month, which he would not do earlier when it was illegal for Americans to do so. He also reminded Gemma that he would have to sponsor Yolanda and her child, but there were restrictive American immigration policies and, unless the law changed, they may not be able to enter for some time. Gemma writes that, when they spoke on radio hookup, she found him unsentimental, brisk and businesslike, and that he also told her that the less she spoke the better it would be, since he had already become the subject of much international discussion. Perhaps he had good reason for his fears, as he trusted her discretion very little, given the political problems she had caused him with her interviews in Budapest two decades earlier, where she divulged their Jewish origins on their mother's side. Finally, Fiorello was able to arrange for them to get a short-term visa in January 1946 to live temporarily in Copenhagen, where conditions were better, and they ended up waiting there until they were able to leave for the U.S.

[24] *Múlt és Jövő* **(**July 10, 1945) in "La Guardia nővérét megtalálták Berlinben" ['La Guardia's sister found in Berlin'] also reports that they found Gemma and her daughter in Charlottenburg, an elegant suburb. She wants to go back to Budapest for news of her husband and son-in-law but, if it is impossible to live there, she wants to return to the U.S.

Figure 18. *Gemma La Guardia, her daughter Yolanda, and grandson Richard, in May, 1946.*

For Gemma, being her brother's sister only offered limited assistance—ironically so, given that in April 1946, Fiorello was appointed by President Truman as Director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), overseeing international postwar relief efforts and nearly 25,000 staff worldwide. Disillusioned with the politicization of the organization's mission, he resigned his post, effective December 31.[25] He personally visited DP camps in Germany, as shown by the photo below, accompanied by Saul Sorrin, an American Jew, who served as director and field supervisor of UNRRA for the American Zone in Occupied Germany. In his new job, Fiorello still insisted on using only proper channels and in June, asked State Department for visas for Yolanda and Richard to travel with Gemma to New York. It took a year, but in May 1947, they finally received the letter that they were cleared to travel to the U.S.

Figure 19. *Fiorello LaGuardia as UNRRA Director General in conversation with an unidentified official during a visit to the* Neu Freimann *DP camp in München in 1946* [USHMM, Courtesy of Saul Sorrin]

[25] There were unfounded rumors in the Italian press that LaGuardia was to be named Governor of Trieste when it was detached from Italy and made a Free Territory (1947–1954) under the responsibility of the United Nations Security Council (*Szabad Szó* July 7, 1946).

Gemma reports that it was only once they were in Copenhagen that she found out from a newspaper article that her husband had died, including the cruel details of his death. Now being able to prove that she was widowed, she thus regained U.S citizenship, although her daughter and son still needed visas. She reports that she talked to a Dr. Zoltán Klár, who had befriended her husband, and who told her that he had been killed in an "extra-cruel way," on which she does not provide any additional details. She adds that Klár had been a member of the Hungarian Parliament and was head of some two hundred doctors in Mauthausen, many of them well-known, and that he was only one of five who survived (112). A long article in *Magyar Nemzet* provided the gruesome details of Dr. Klár's report on how Herman Glück died of starvation in the notorious *Russenlager* in Mauthausen, but it still stated that there is no news of Fiorello's sister. (Sós).

In the article, Dr. Zoltán Klár (1894-1966), who ran the so-called *Russenlager* hospital in Mauthausen – built in 1941 by Russian prisoners of war – recounts that he is writing a book on the inmates imprisoned there, and gives details of Herman, who was originally in the *Prominenten* political block, where he was the only Jew. He suffered from heart disease, but his death was caused by four drunken SS men, who savagely beat him and some other prisoners too, and from which he suffered a rib fracture. The commander, who knew the war was ending, did an unprecedented thing, which was to punish the four perpetrators with 25 club beatings. The perpetrators got their revenge by shutting Herman in the Jewish block, where, as Klár recounted, the sick old man had to lie naked in -25 degrees Celsius and received only half a liter of soup a day. He died of starvation in March 1945.[26]

Epilogue

When Gemma got to return to New York, she was penniless, already in her late sixties, and suffering from heart trouble, but in her memoir she expressed in the following words her great joy at arriving in May 1947:

> I never dreamed that the true meaning of the Statue of Liberty would be revealed to me...when I returned to America as a weary, shattered survivor of the Holocaust the Nazis had unleashed on the lands of Europe. Only then did I see it in the same light as millions of other refugees have seen it (9).

[26] Klár is another hero forgotten by history, who would deserve a separate study. After the war, he returned to Budapest, where he founded an organization to aid Jewish victims. In 1949, he managed to move to Paris and in 1952 to New York, where he was the editor of the liberal Hungarian-language weekly, *Ember*. He was involved in some successful lawsuits when he accused several Hungarian emigres of being former Arrow Cross criminals. As a result, the fascist Hungarian-American *Hídfő* ran an ongoing hate campaign against him, accusing him of "titkos kommunista manipuláció" ['secret Communist manipulation'] and "lipótvárosi pökhendi fajvédősködés" ['Lipótváros style arrogant racism'] (Nov. 11, 1959; March 25, 1964) . He died in 1966 in New York. See https://www.jta.org/archive/dr-klar-jewish-editor-of-hungarian-language-paper-dies-in-new-york. Last accessed: 08.12.2025.

Figure 20. *1947 Press Photo of Gemma La Guardia's return to the U.S. from Denmark with her daughter and grandson.*

But her joy was not to last, because her brother, who already looked gaunt when she arrived, died of a quick pancreatic cancer four months later. She told a reporter that he had been planning to buy them a little house and to provide for the boy's education but died before he could make any such arrangements. For the remaining fourteen years of her life, she lived with Yolanda and her grandson in Queensbridge Houses in Queens, the largest public housing project in the nation, built in 1939 by the LaGuardia administration. She died on November 1, 1962, having lived just long enough to see the publication of her memoir and Eichmann's execution in May 1962.

Yolanda died in 1982 at age 71. As a niece of the late New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, she merited a *New York Times* obituary, which mentioned that she had been born in Budapest and had attended the Budapest Conservatory of Music. However, there was no mention of her wartime imprisonment as a political hostage in Ravensbrück. Her son, Richard Denes died of COVID in 2020, one of the youngest survivors of the Holocaust, who throughout his life had never fully recovered from his suffering (Saidel, "LaGuardia's Great Nephew"). Irene La Guardia Roberts, Gemma's younger daughter, who left Hungary before the war and who is, curiously, never mentioned again in her mother's memoir, died in 1996. She had three children, one of whom, Gladys McMilleon, complained in a recent newspaper article about Fiorello's callous treatment of her grandmother. The article claims that LaGuardia also turned Irene away when she came to New York in 1938 and begged to live with his family instead of having to return to Europe on the verge of war. According to Gladys, "He [LaGuardia] was great for everybody but did not do anything for his own family" (Vincent). Various descendants of the three branches of the family, who did not even know each other or know about Gemma's memoir, were in the end acquainted with Gemma's life and met each other due to the publication of Rachel Saidel's new edition.

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