

Barbara Beuys, *Die Heldin von Auschwitz. Leben und Widerstand der Mala Zimetbaum* (Berlin: Insel Verlag, 2023), pp. 333.

by *Ulrich Wyrwa*

The historian and journalist Barbara Beuys completed her doctorate at the University of Cologne in 1969 with a study on the inaugural speeches of American presidents from 1789 to 1945, then moved to Hamburg as a journalist. While there she also began publishing a large number of historical non-fiction books, for example on the resistance in National Socialist Germany and on Amsterdam under German occupation. She also published a comprehensive overview of the two-thousand-year history of Jews in Europe from Rome to Auschwitz, with a special focus on the Middle Ages, while also providing a picture of the diversity and unity of Judaism in the European era. Beuys also worked intensively on topics relating to women's history, having published a large number of biographies on individual women from the Middle Ages to the present, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, Asta Nielsen and Sophie Scholl. Her latest biography describes the life of Mala Zimetbaum, a prisoner functionary in Auschwitz and resistance fighter against the concentration camp system.

Mala Zimetbaum's life is by no means unknown. A surviving prisoner who was in contact with her in Auschwitz wrote about Mala in his memoirs published in 1979. Then Lorenz Sichelschmidt published the first biography in 1995. This was followed in 2006 by a biography by the French historian Gérard Huber. He conducted extensive interviews with other surviving prisoners who had been in the camp with Mala Zimetbaum. For the title of his biography, he chose the phrase used by Beuys for her book, referring to Mala as a *femme juive héroïque*. Huber's biography was followed ten years later by Italian journalist Francesca Paci's book, and in 2019 the Italian Frediano Sessi published another portrait.

With her biography of Mala Zimetbaum, Barbara Beuys builds on her series of women's biographies as well as her non-fiction books on Jewish history and the history of National Socialism. She traces the life of Mala, who was born in 1918 to a Jewish-Polish family in Brzesko, a small town in Galicia. In addition to describing the family history, it provides an overview of the history of the Jews in the Republic of Poland-Lithuania as well as a look into Jewish life in the small town

that became part of the new Polish state after the First World War. In 1913 the family moved to Mainz, but returned to Galicia four years later, before moving back to Germany, to Ludwigshafen, in 1925. Just one year later, her father left Ludwigshafen for Antwerp with the family following in 1928.

Beuys describes Antwerp as a cosmopolitan metropolis that offered the family a new home. As her father had become blind, Mala was unable to continue her education and had to work in the fashion business. At the same time, she became involved in the Zionist youth movement.

After 1933, Belgium became one of the places of refuge for German Jews, while at the same time antisemitism in the country grew, especially in the Flemish national movement. Beuys links the description of this development with statements about the ever-increasing persecution of Jews in National Socialist Germany. In doing so, she succinctly recapitulated the dynamics of the National Socialist persecution up to the decision to murder all European Jews as well as the antisemitic obsession of the perpetrators. The only critical point to be made is that Beuys has reproduced the thesis, sometimes also put forward in historiography but which does not correspond to historical reality, according to which antisemitism “finally established itself in all strata of society in the Weimar Republic” (p. 154). This ignores the largest mass organization of the German Republic, the Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold, which was dedicated to the fight against antisemitism.

In May 1940, less than a year after the start of the war, the German Wehrmacht invaded Belgium. The first measures against Jews began in occupied Belgium as early as October. Whether Mala joined a resistance group during this time, as isolated later references suggest, remains an open question, according to Beuys. When the fashion shop where Mala worked closed at the beginning of 1941, she lost her job. However, she immediately found a new position in the secretariat of an American-Jewish diamond company. Due to an anti-Jewish ordinance, however, the company was forced to close the following year. The owners offered Mala the chance to emigrate to the USA with them. But out of consideration for her family, she refused. In July 1942, she was arrested during a raid and had to work as a clerk in a Belgian camp. Two months later, she was deported to Auschwitz. At the beginning of 1943, she was used as an interpreter and “runner,” a function that involved passing on reports from the SS-commandant to subordinate offices in the Birkenau women’s camp. As a prisoner functionary, she initially won the trust

of the SS leader. Mala used this function, as Beuys documents from a number of later memoirs, to support other female prisoners, to help them, to give them hope and to encourage them. She also passed along to the prisoners' information that she had obtained in the writing room. These efforts enabled her to save the lives of some of these women. In the summer of 1943, some of the prisoners in the Birkenau women's camp began to resist in various ways. Later reports from surviving women suggest that Mala, who enjoyed the trust of the prisoners, supported them in this endeavor. Beuys speaks of the "double capital of trust" (p. 221) that Mala used.

In autumn 1943, Mala fell in love with a young Polish Catholic prisoner, who was also used as a functional prisoner because of his manual skills. In this function he had access to the women's camp, too. They both supported resistance actions in Auschwitz. In June 1944 they fled the camp together, probably—Beuys argues very cautiously here—to inform the world of what they had seen there. Thirteen days later, however, they were caught by a German border control fifty kilometers south of Auschwitz. Brought back to the camp, interrogated and tortured, Mala once again performed an act of resistance before she was to be murdered. Put on public display she tried to take her own life, cut her wrist with a razor blade and slapped the SS-Unterscharführer in the face with her bloody hand.

Barbara Beuys has traced Mala Zimetbaum's life, primarily from the memories of surviving witnesses but also from the few direct sources available. She meticulously describes the violence and brutal prison conditions, she writes about Mengele's medical experiments on prisoners, which Zimetbaum witnessed, but also about the experiences of Jewish women musicians whom Zimetbaum had helped.

Barbara Beuys has painted a vivid picture of Mala Zimetbaum's life. Although she has not presented a scholarly biography—she has dispensed with annotations and references—her book is nevertheless scientifically sound, as she has primarily drawn on the memories of surviving prisoners who reported on Mala Zimetbaum. How prudently Beuys proceeded in view of the sparse source material is evident not least in her cautious formulations. If the evidence does not allow for a precise narrative, she chooses formulations such as "quite possible that ...", "certainly it will" or "it is conceivable that ...". At one passage, she points out: "The lack of

historical evidence must not lead to misleading theories”, and continues: “What is beyond doubt, however, is that Mala ...”.

Prisoner functionaries had an ambivalent reputation. They were instrumentalized by the camp administrations, were involved in the system of oppression and extermination, and often enjoyed certain privileges because of their functions, including Mala Zimetbaum. Eugen Kogon’s early analysis of the concentration camp system shows that the discipline and surveillance of the camps would not have been possible without the involvement of prisoner functionaries. For Hannah Arendt, they represented “the darkest chapter in the whole dark history.” However, the perfidious strategy of involving the prisoner functionaries in terror and violence also gave them room for maneuvers at times. Mala Zimetbaum used her function as a “runner” and interpreter to provide help and support to other prisoners, and she was able to assist attempts at resistance herself. According to Beuys, women who survived Auschwitz have often reported on Mala’s “human charisma, ingenious actions in the murderous and inhuman camp world” (p. 187). As a functional prisoner, Mala Zimetbaum, as Beuys emphasizes, “followed an inner compass of solidarity and empathy and secretly and deliberately overrode the inhumane laws of extermination policy” (p. 280).

In the first chapters of her biography, Barbara Beuys has also provided insights into the migration experiences of Eastern Jews in the early 20th century. In addition, she regularly wove descriptions of Jewish holidays and religious traditions into her narrative.

Above all, Beuys paints an impressive portrait of a young woman who, with incredible courage, used her role as a prisoner functionary in Auschwitz-Birkenau to help other prisoners and who knew how to utilize the gaps in the system to show signs of resistance whenever possible.

Postscript

Recently, the author Reiner Engelmann,¹ who repeatedly organized educational tours to Auschwitz as a teacher, published a book for young people about the story of Mala Zimentbaum and her Polish friend Edward Galinski, known as Edek.

¹ Reiner Engelmann, *Sie brachten uns Hoffnung. Die Geschichte von Edward Galinski und Mala Zimetbaum* (München: Kinder- und Jugendbuch Verlag, 2024).

Engelmann tells their love story in Auschwitz and their escape and murder. With the story of these two young people, their courage, their bravery and their resistance in Auschwitz, Engelmann meets the broad interest of a clear majority of German young people who, as a representative youth study from 2023 showed, are committed to dealing with Germany's National Socialist past, consider the period of National Socialism to be a decisive phase in German history and want to know more about it.

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