

# Surviving the Holocaust

## An Analysis of the Female Experience

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“The Holocaust has become the defining moment of 20th century humanity, from which the world is learning about what we are as individuals, about the human capacity for good and evil, about the power of states and institutions to shape the world in hideous ways.”

- Berenbaum as cited in Andrews, 16

In order to learn from these events, historians rely on survivor memoirs and uncovered primary documents to reveal truths about the Jewish experience. Until recently, this material has assumed a male-centered perspective. That is, the experiences of Jewish men have been

documented and generalized as if they were as true for women as they were for men (Kaplan, vii-xi). The past few decades have witnessed the production of works by scholars such as: Marion Kaplan, Judith Baumel, Myrna Goldenberg and Lenore Weitzman, which focus on the female experience. The discussion of women's experiences in the Holocaust provides a more comprehensive view of the atrocities which occurred under the Nazi regime. The examination of women's unique experiences provides a missing element of what we must now see as an incomplete picture of Jewish life during the Holocaust (Ofer and Weitzman 2). It would be false and misleading to say that women's experiences during the Holocaust were totally different from those of men. The Nazi policy targeted Jews as Jews, and the primary status of Jews was their 'race', not their gender. However, just as historians examine the experiences encountered by Jews of different religions and social backgrounds, it is necessary to make the same enquiries on the basis of gender to study different horrors of the same hell.

This paper will discuss the experiences of Jewish women in the Holocaust during the 1940s focusing primarily on the events which took place in Polish concentration camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. This discussion will observe the strength and courage of Jewish women who were victims of Nazism but who were also active agents of their own survival. This paper will also examine how the female body was violated through sexual humiliation and abuse within the camps. More importantly, it will address how and why the Jewish female body was targeted for its biological nature. In addition, this paper will look at the unique coping strategy of socialization in which women adopted 'surrogate families' and 'camp sisters' as means of protection, psychological and emotional support. Finally, this paper will observe how the socially created female gender role associated with the domestic sphere (cooking, sewing and cleaning) as well as the role as a compassionate nurturer (mother, sister and caretaker of the family) provided Jewish women with attributes that would allow them to cope, adapt and survive, even more so than their male counter-parts in the camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Thus, the Jewish female experience of the concentration camp was unique. The gender roles which marginalized Jewish women in pre-war Western

Europe were the very attributes which helped sustained them, while their biological inherency targeted them for death.

In order to understand the experiences and endeavours of Jewish women within concentration camps it is necessary to recognize their pre-war roles. In Western Europe during the 1930s, men and women lived in gender-specific worlds. In most Jewish families, married men were responsible for the economic support while women were responsible for the family and household, even if they had vocation experience (Ofer and Weitzman 3). Although specific experiences of women depended on their class, cultural and socio-political stature, Paula Hyman explains that by the turn of the 20th century most Jewish families had adopted the bourgeoisie model of living in which men provided the physical security of the family while the psychological and spiritual well-being was provided by women (Hyman in Ofer and Weitzman 26-31). As living conditions worsened following the instigation of the Nuremburg Laws in 1935, Marion Kaplan observes that Jewish women were expected to “make things work” by coping with the ever-shrinking resources needed to sustain a family and a household (Kaplan 42). Women took on the psychological responsibility of raising the spirits of children who were harassed by Nazi teachers, and supported depressed husbands who found themselves out of work, fearing deportation and violent assault. Even before the rise of the Nazi power and the implementation of the Nuremburg Laws, which stripped all Jews of basic civil and human rights, Jewish women were marginalized within their own communities. During this time women could not vote or hold political office (Hyman in Ofer and Weitzman 29-30). In addition, they were excluded from the public sphere of business, politics and higher education. They relied on contacts from social groups for interaction and involvement in society within and beyond their Jewish communities. Marion Kaplan observes that the “loss of friends and the decline of sociability in the neighbourhood...affected Jewish women more than men, because women were more integrated into and dependent upon the community and more accustomed to neighbourly exchanges and courtesies” (Kaplan 40). Jewish women of the pre-war era thrived within the confines of the domestic realm and within the social networks they established in the Jewish community. Their roles exposed them to unique experiences, social milieus and social

networks, and endowed them with distinct spheres of knowledge, expertise and skill which would later be used to face the Nazi onslaught.

At 3 A.M. on November 10, 1938, the November Pogrom struck like lightning, shattering the shops, homes, synagogues and ultimately the lives of Jews in Germany. The night would later be called Kristallnacht (Crystal Night) to reflect the abundance of shattered glass in public areas and from the ruined homes and Jewish businesses (Kaplan 125).

Women's primary image of the November Pogrom was not of glass but of flying feathers. Feathers, from torn bedding and pillows, covered the internal space of the home and symbolized the loss of physical and psychological well-being. Women were tied to the safety and personal control of the domestic inner space. Their detachment from this haven upon deportation to ghettos and camps was one of the most profound initial shocks to their lifestyles and psyches. The pogrom represented the intensification of political disenfranchisement, economic strangulation and social segregation of the Jews that had begun in 1933. It was the culmination of years of anti-Semitism and political manipulation and was the turning point in the Nazi plan to solve the "Jewish Problem". The November Pogrom was a catalyst emigration out of Germany. Roughly 270 000 Jews fled Germany in the years before Jewish emigration was banned in October of 1941. Those thousands of German Jews and occupied Jews then faced the fate of Nazi concentration, forced-labour and extermination camps. Auschwitz-Birkenau is one of the most infamous of these camps. It was erected shortly after the Nazi occupation of Poland. In March of 1942 Auschwitz began the systematic gassing of prisoners. Many of the survivor testimonies accounted in this paper are from those who miraculously survived Auschwitz.

In 1942, with the intention of exploiting prisoner labour, the Nazis decided to open a special section for women prisoners of Auschwitz called Auschwitz II of Birkenau. Similar to Auschwitz, most concentration camps were sexually segregated. This was conscious effort by the Nazis to demoralize prisoners by separating them from loved ones as well as to prevent procreation of "life unworthy of life". However, as we will examine later, these sexually homogenous environments produced unique gender interaction in which women's mutual assistance and spiritual resistance grew and flourished in the face of tremendous crisis.

Female narrative accounts of their experiences in concentration camps echo fears of sadistic violence, separation of family, fear of rape, sterility, nakedness, humiliation, starvation and forced labour. Although it will be discussed that women's identity as caregivers and home-makers and their prior experience in the domestic realm enhanced their likelihood of acclimatizing to the hellish environment of concentration camps, one must realize that survival was by chance. In a realm of sadistic violence death was random and sudden and even though certain elements assisted in day-to-day survival it was the will of the guards which sentenced prisoners to life or death.

Upon their arrival to Auschwitz, both male and female prisoners faced the selection process which separated them from family members. They were stripped of their belongings and sent through a selection process in which most of them were sent directly to gas chambers.

“A loudspeaker ordered: ‘men to the left, women to the right,’ and the truncheons insured that the order was obeyed. I gave my father a quick kiss and told him to hurry so as not to be hit. After I had taken a few steps, I heard the crack of a whip and a cry. Was it my father? I shall never know.”

- Freid as cited in Baumel 22

The women and children were in separate lines from the men, thus women were left with the responsibility of their children, and because young children as well as the elderly were automatically sentenced to death, women had to cope with the unbearable choice of whether to send their children off to the gas chambers alone or to die with them. Marion Kaplan notes the experience of one mother who had to choose between going to her death with her child or trying to hide from that child during the selection in order to save her own life (Kaplan as cited in Baumel 25). This was not a choice that men had to endure, but was one of the unique pains of womanhood during the Holocaust. As mothers and therefore caregivers, the overwhelming majority of women went with their children to the gas chambers (*ibid*). Yet more often women simply had no choice, Nazi policy wrote their fate.

The next step, selection for labour, was usually a more difficult endeavour for women than for men due to biological factors. While Nazi policy in regard to the destruction of its enemies was not gender specific, Nazi practice was. Although both male and female survivors of the Holocaust recount similar memories of violence, humiliation, deprivation and terror, women's narratives tend to echo themes unique to their biology. Women as child bearers and generators of the Jewish race were uniquely at risk because of their marked maternal as well as sexual bodies. The fear of rape caused great anxiety among women, while it is rarely mentioned by men. Despite the fact that the 1935 Law for Protection of German Blood and German Honour prohibited intercourse between Aryans and Jews, rape was still a prevalent occurrence and a fear in the minds of Jewish women (Goldenberg in Ofer and Weitzman 336).

Pregnant women or women with small children were automatically sentenced to death in concentration camps. A pre-eminent focus of the Nazi's 'Final Solution' was the extermination of children. Children were feared objects who symbolized the continuation of the Jewish race (Glass 172). "Jewish women...were connected to the 'race struggle' of National Socialism because they carried the next generation of Jews" (Ringelheim in Ofer and Weitzman 340-350). Thus, women experienced the Holocaust as a "double victim", targeted because they were both a Jew and a Jewish woman (Goldenberg 1996: 78). The duality of their body, both Jewish and female, posed a threat to the Third Reich's ultimate goal.

In Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's memoir, she describes how Dr. Josef Mengele smiled as he ordered the death of all newborns and their mothers (Nomberg-Przytyk 69). Mengele explained, "there is no place on earth for Jews...it would not be humanitarian to send a child to the ovens without permitting the mother to be there to witness the child's death" (Mengele as cited in Nomberg-Przytyk 69). It is also noted that Mengele forced mothers of twins to participate in his 'medical experiments' in which the mothers injected substances into the newborns and watched them squirm until they died (Baumel 25). Another of his experiments forced mothers to leave newborns unattended and to observe how long it took for their bodies to shut down in the absence of food or drink (ibid). Although men and

women were both victims of Mengele's and other scientist's experiments these are examples of those unique to women. In addition, women who secretly gave birth within the camps were attended to by midwives who commonly drowned the babies in order to ensure the mother's survival. Gisela Perl, a Jewish obstetrician vowed to abort pregnancies to save the lives of women. She wanted to protect these women from the violence she witnessed: "[Pregnant women] were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach...then when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory – alive" (Perl as cited in Goldenberg 1995: 96).

In addition, those inmates found with traces of menstrual blood on their uniform would automatically be killed. The Nazis thrived from the power they commanded over prisoners. To influence biological function and ultimately cause the cessation of the female menstrual cycle (amenorrhea) through malnourishment, allowed the Nazis to truly control the lives of female inmates. The psychological effect of amenorrhea on female prisoners was great. The cessation of the female cycle among most prisoners occurred after the first month or two of internment and resulted in the fear of not being able to bear children if they survived. Gerda Klein feared that she would never again menstruate and thus, even if she did survive, she would eventually give Hitler a victory (Klein in Ofer and Weitzman 155-156). The possibility of forced sterilization terrified her and all women in her situation. Myrna Goldenberg recounts experiences of four women imprisoned in Auschwitz, who endured daily roll call in a kneeling position for hours (Goldenberg 1995: 97). Their daily ration of food consisted of one litre of soup and so-called coffee which was meant to feed five women. Their preoccupation with amenorrhea led them to believe that their food was poisoned with chemicals that stopped their menstrual cycle.

Female survivor memoirs depict gender-differentiated humiliations and abuse. Judith Baumel suggests that Jewish women, even those who were not particularly observant in religious practice, held strong identities as Jews and tried to behave in accordance with Jewish values (Baumel xvii). These female values of propriety and modesty were immediately violated when women were strip searched by SS men upon arrival at camps. Girls and women who were not chosen for immediate death underwent a process of sexual humiliation

including: exposure, crude body searches for hidden jewelry, painful shearing of their hair, and sexual ridicule. Lidia Rosenfeld Vago, a Romanian Jew and a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, recalls entering a hall in which several male barbers were in the process of cutting and shaving the hair off dozens of naked women. She expressed “the culture shock [that] proceeded as the female bodies were stripped of their fig leaves and exposed to the lascivious gaze of German soldiers...it was a fleeting, terrifying, agonizing thought” (Rosenfeld Vago in Ofer and Weitzman 275). This experience of psychological and physical trauma stripped the women not only of their clothes and hair, but symbolically stripped them of the elements which distinguished them as feminine creatures in control of their own bodies. The Nazi’s intentionally dehumanized and sexually humiliated these women in a process of psychological torment. Although this psychological abuse was successful in dehumanizing women into walking zombies, some women were able to find an inner strength to defy it. Women like Lidia chose not to let this act and the torments of the soldiers dehumanize and degrade her; instead she “looked through them...in an act of defiance” (ibid).

Similar to Lidia, Livia Bitton Jackson experienced spiritual defiance in the faces of sexual degradation. Livia was fifteen years old when she was deported to Auschwitz where she was shorn of clothing and hair, yet found her nakedness ironically protective. She states, “a burden was lifted. The burden of individuality. Of associations. Of identity. Of the recent past” (Goldenberg 1996: 91). From that moment on Lidia and thousands of other women became members of an exclusive group, inmates of Auschwitz. Even though guards tried to dehumanize prisoners by tattooing them with numbers to reduce their identity to a mere code, within this loss of self importance women were able to band together. Women united in the wake of their daily ordeals and found solace in sharing their experiences and memories of the past. In the hellish concentration camps, solidarity was a means by which women could share their horrors, provide support, protection and make the best of an unbearable situation.

Actively resisting their fate and maintaining Jewish identity are not reactions unique to women. Yet one reaction that does seem to be uniquely feminine is the tendency for women within concentration camps to form long-lasting female relationships that were a

source of mutual assistance and strength (Gurewitsch xviii – xix). Women provided support systems known as *Lager Schwestern* ('camp sisters'). These 'camp sisters' were small groups of unrelated female inmates who formed surrogate family groups. Surrogate families played an imperative role in the acquisition of sustenance. Camp sisters accepted the responsibility for each other's survival, by sharing food, risking punishments, and providing physical care. One prisoner discovered ways to force her 'camp sister' to eat, and taught her to redden her cheeks before each SS selection (Goldenberg in Ofer and Weitzman 331). A female German-Jewish survivor of Auschwitz explained surrogate families were "the best way to survive. You needed others who helped you with food or clothing or just advice or sympathy to surmount all the hardship you encountered during all those many months and years of incarceration" (cited by Goldenberg in Ofer and Weitzman 337). Sarah Nomborg-Przytyk recalls the devastation she felt following the humiliation of being shaved; she felt so dehumanized and alone that she prepared a noose with which to hang herself. However, a fellow inmate found her and provided her with bread, a warm sweater and boots to restore her physical being and promised friendship in this time of need (Nomborg-Przytyk 328). This is just one in many instances in which camp sisters provided assistance in the darkest hours of camp life. Other instances show a woman who gave her slice of bread to a starving friend and another who did her sick friend's work (Goldenberg 1996: 86). Despite the constant torture of concentration camps, life was made easier by the mutual solidarity of 'camp sisters'. Judith Baumel suggests that one reason for the occurrence of 'camp sisters' and surrogate families among women rather than men, is a reflection of traditional social conditioning of women towards the responsibilities of motherhood and family (Baumel 91). Women are mothers by right of biology, therefore, they are predestined with characteristics of motherhood which involve nurturing, protection and close bonds. Whether or not they identify with and evoke these characteristics is a reflection of their social situation. Women's conversation in the camps focused on past memories, meals and family life as well as their dreams of the future. Thus, through socialization and adaptation to their camp surroundings they were able to create a world within the world of the Nazi camp. This psychological detachment from their worldly

surroundings allowed both men and women to 'escape' the present by focusing their thoughts on the past and future.

While the capacity and the experience of nurturing gave women a mental and emotional advantage, other routine feminized skills became essential in contributing to their survival. The traditional role of the Jewish domesticated housewife would be essential in their adaptability and innovativeness when dealing with clothing and hunger. "Many female survivors believe that their training and experiences as traditional housekeepers and family care-givers contributed to their survival" (Goldenberg 1996: 90).

Upon arrival to concentration camps, prisoners were given uniforms regardless of size or condition. While most men passively accepted these rags, women immediately went to work mending them with whatever tools they could fashion (Bondy in Ofer and Weitzman 8-9). One survivor accounts that even though women were marked for annihilation in extermination camps, "[they] began to repair their dresses the first day" and used what few supplies they could salvage to stretch the use of the material (Goldenberg in Ofer and Weitzman 332). The skill to sew pockets on oversized clothes, in which one could hide potato peels or salvaged garbage, was an innovative technique of survival.

Felicja Karay suggests that unlike men, women adopted strategies to avoid personal deterioration (Karay in Ofer and Weitzman 298-299). "Although many men stopped washing and shaving, the women continued to pay attention to personal hygiene; they kept their bodies and hair clean, mended their clothing, and maintained a human and even feminine appearance" (ibid). Washing, if only in a ritual sense, apart from reasons of health and sanitation, was necessary to survival. Those who stopped washing, thus admitting a spiritual and moral defeat, soon died (ibid). In addition, starving men and women dealt with hunger in different ways. As caretakers, women had learned self control, selflessness and the skills to adapt to the changing needs of children and husbands. Men, one survivor observes, "had to learn behaviours that women already knew" (Koonz in Goldenberg, *Lessons Learned* 80-82). Men fantasized about splendid meals in the past, while women organized menus and planned ways to stretch what little food they were given (Goldenberg 1995: 96). Women took a creative and active approach in dealing with the issue of food preparation and hunger.

Sharing recipes and cooking techniques with ‘camp sisters’ had a powerful psychological effect as it reflected a commitment to the future. In contrast, very few men had to the level of experience in the kitchen to form a bond with other men that would allow them to transcend their present situation through sharing experiences of the past.

As women cleaned their surroundings, mended torn and ragged clothes, created menus to alleviate hunger, and nursed and nurtured one another, they were able to take some control and responsibility for their well-being. This conveyed the sense that women were actively repressing their fate by improving their chances for survival. Although their fate was ultimately in the hands of the Nazis, such defiance helped sustain a psychological and physical optimism and an inner strength to survive. On the contrary, men appeared deeply depressed and passive in their efforts to survive. This could result from the fact that Jewish men had dominated Jewish women through their positions in both political and professional sectors of society. Under the Nazis, men were deprived of the use of their usual duties and thrust into faceless, humiliating slave labour. In addition, men were forced to survive in conditions where women held the upper hand. While men were displaced from their traditional realms of living, women were faced with an increase in their traditional roles and an extension of their gendered and inherent female abilities. Although, in most cases, Jewish women in pre-war Germany were marginalized from society, it was these skills that were deemed ‘feminine’ and unnecessary for men, which proved to be the essential skills for survival in a life-threatening situation such as the Holocaust.

Although Jews faced the same ultimate fate along the path to extinction, “each gender lived its own journey” (Mary Felstiner in Ofer and Weitzman 8). The survival strategies adopted by those women who passed the initial selections, were unique methods of adapting to persecution. Women’s mutual assistance groups, in particular, were a primary method of coping with the camp environment. In addition, pre-war training in domestic matters such as sewing, food preparation, and personal hygiene, placed them in a better position for survival when a torn uniform meant death and a properly prepared potato peel meant one more day’s survival. It is vital to acknowledge the duality in which women were targeted both as Jews and as females. This does not suggest that they suffered more or less

than their male counterparts. However, it does suggest that their experiences were unique and worthy of separate investigation. A gendered analysis of the Holocaust is a vital step toward understanding the complete experience of what was one of the most horrific events in the history of mankind.

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