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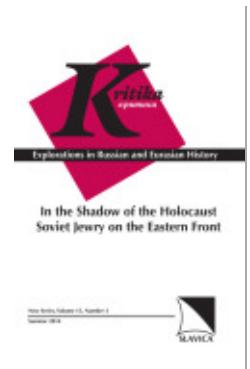
## Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto: How Age and Gender Mattered

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# Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto

## How Age and Gender Mattered

ANIKA WALKE

When Sonia Zaleskaia returned from summer camp to her family in Minsk in June 1941, she found her mother incapable of caring for herself and four children—Sonia, Tsilia, Abram, and Roza: “She had a nervous breakdown when the Germans came; she was completely indifferent, paralyzed. When we had to move to the ghetto, I had to organize everything. I was the oldest sister. When they moved us to the ghetto, Mother did not know what was going on.... I found a peasant who drove our belongings to the ghetto on his cart. I figured I had to give him something, so I gave him our sewing machine and some fabric. That meant we had nothing left to trade with.”<sup>1</sup>

Zaleskaia gives a sense of the multiple dimensions of breakdown that Soviet Jews experienced when German troops occupied the capital of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) and, within a few weeks, established a segregated residential district for Jews surrounded by barbed wire. Zaleskaia also highlights the role of age and gender for the subsequent period of violence, displacement, and starvation. Many adults were paralyzed by the speedy invasion and regime of terror—as were the Soviet authorities; many were arrested or immediately killed. Adolescents often found themselves in charge of supplying whole families with food and other necessities. In the Minsk ghetto, Soviet Jewish adolescents thus faced profound scarcity and violence alongside the breakdown of familiar relationships of support and care.

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<sup>1</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

The narratives of child survivors of the Nazi genocide in the German-occupied USSR help us better understand the distinct features of ghettos in the area that were killing sites rather than transitional spaces of internment. Their accounts draw special attention to the diversity of experience of the Nazi genocide, to how age and gender determined the ways in which people lived under conditions of violence and displacement.

Among the 800,000 Belorussian Jews killed by Germans and their collaborators were parents, grandparents, and other relatives of thousands of young Jews who thus became orphans and struggled for survival on their own.<sup>2</sup> This situation, however, often goes unacknowledged in studies of the Nazi ghettos, the so-called Jewish districts established by the German Wehrmacht or occupation administrations in Nazi-occupied countries. Deborah Dwork's 1991 study is the only significant monograph focusing specifically on the lives of children and adolescents in the Nazi ghettos, but it omits ghettos in the occupied Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Leonid Smilovitskii is one of the few who devote a chapter-length study to children in Belorussian ghettos.<sup>4</sup> Yet age did matter for everyday life within the ghetto. Adolescents were the most vulnerable group in the Nazi ghettos, suffering unduly from hunger, violence, and the psychological impact of terror. They were also highly mobile within the ghetto and able to maintain relationships with peers and adults—such as classmates and teachers—outside the ghetto, suggesting that they were an especially resourceful group. Gender was an additional factor that affected individual survival strategies under German occupation. Specific skills resulting from gendered socialization, access to various forms of employment due to ascribed gender roles, or vulnerability to forms of sexualized violence determined how

<sup>2</sup> Leonid Smilovitskii estimates the number of Holocaust victims in Belorussia accordingly but also points to the ongoing debate about the total number of Jewish civilian victims, where estimates range from 245,000 to 1,000,000 ("A Demographic Profile of the Jews in Belorussia from the Pre-War Time to the Post-War Time," *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, 1 [2003]: 117, 119). See also I. P. Gerasimova, *Vstali my plechom k plechu: Evrei v partizanskom dvizhenii Belorussii, 1941–1944 gg.* (Minsk: Asobnyi Dakh, 2005), 3, 11 n. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991). Recent works on children during the Nazi regime, while including Soviet children, omit the situation in the ghettos for Jewish residents (see, for example, Lynn H. Nicholas, *Cruel World: The Children of Europe in the Nazi Web* [New York: Knopf, 2005], esp. chap. 11). Alternatively, they describe only executions and offer a cursory account of Jewish youth in partisan units (see, for example, Nicholas Stargardt, *Witnesses of War: Children's Lives under the Nazis* [New York: Vintage Books, 2005], 149–52). Only a few sources addressing the German-occupied USSR can be found in Patricia Heberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (New York: AltaMira, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Leonid Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii, 1941–1944 gg.* (Tel Aviv: Biblioteka Matveia Chernogo, 2000), chap. 3.

Soviet Jewish youths were able to respond to discrimination and violence, how they accessed food and related to people in positions of power.

War, terror, and pogroms often destroyed familial bonds, putting children and adolescents in the positions of guardians or breadwinners for remaining parents, grandparents, and siblings. Everyday life in the ghetto thus redefined roles that children as well as women and men took on within families. The ways in which these distinct groups were able to fulfill their tasks largely depended on their age; youths over the age of 14 (male) and 16 (female) were considered employable and thus had access to daily food rations, meager as they were, but younger ones had to find other means of subsistence.<sup>5</sup> Based on oral histories and video testimonies, this essay asks how youngsters such as the ten-year-olds Sonia Zalesskaia and Samuil Volk cared for themselves and others and characterizes their decisions and choices in their quest for survival in the Minsk ghetto after they had lost all adult relatives. Furthermore, the lives of Rita Kazhdan and Elena Drapkina (born in 1927 and 1924, respectively) demonstrate how specific notions of gender both enabled survival and increased individuals' vulnerability to violence in the Minsk ghetto.

Narratives such as these fill a critical gap, because the study of Nazi genocide in Soviet territories cannot rely exclusively on documentation produced during or immediately after the war. Documents of German provenance can be used to trace the occupation authorities' decision making regarding the treatment of Soviet Jewry, but they provide few insights into how ghetto inmates themselves responded to deprivation and violence. Moreover, conditions in the ghettos rarely allowed people to keep diaries, write letters, or otherwise record and describe their experiences.<sup>6</sup> Immediately after the war, Jewish historical commissions began to collect testimonies, especially from children, in formerly German-occupied countries such as Poland and France, but no such efforts were made in the Soviet territories.<sup>7</sup> David Boder was the first to systematically conduct interviews with Jewish survivors, but his collection does not include interviews with people who had been interned in

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<sup>5</sup> Petra Rentrop, *Tatorte der "Endlösung": Das Ghetto Minsk und die Vernichtungsstätte Maly Trostinez* (Berlin: Metropol, 2011), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Christoph Dieckmann notes a similar challenge for ghettos in German-occupied Lithuania in *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Litauen* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012), 2:820.

<sup>7</sup> See Lena Jockusch, *Collect and Record! Jewish Holocaust Documentation in Early Postwar Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Boaz Cohen, "The Children's Voice: Postwar Collection of Testimonies from Child Survivors of the Holocaust," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21, 1 (2007): 73–95.

German-occupied Soviet territories.<sup>8</sup> Statements collected immediately after the war in the USSR, primarily by the Extraordinary State Commission, list human and material losses and German crimes but rarely included descriptions of how Soviet citizens, let alone Jews, *lived* under the occupation.<sup>9</sup> Materials provided in the *Black Book of Russian Jewry* unquestionably fill some of these gaps, yet these accounts pertain to multiple locales; again, they do not provide a comprehensive view of how individuals survived under conditions of violence, forced labor, and trauma.<sup>10</sup> To complement the few accounts of ghetto life that were offered in the immediate postwar period, it is therefore necessary to analyze recently produced oral histories, video testimonies, and written memoirs.<sup>11</sup> Many of the narrators remembering their experience were children and teenagers during World War II. The narrators' age and gender shape these sources by drawing on distinct experiences, and they are thus relevant as categories for the analysis of both experience and memory.

Minsk, the capital of the Belorussian SSR, is an important site to trace such experiences. As a major city located in the former Pale of Settlement, Minsk was home to a significant Jewish population of about 71,000, and it provides a lens onto Soviet Jewish experience before and during the German occupation.<sup>12</sup> Elissa Bemporad recently demonstrated that a focus on a specific place allows us to uncover ambivalences and disparities in human experience. Her *Becoming Soviet Jews* shows that Soviet Jewry did not react to Soviet policies of secularization in one specific way but developed behaviors ranging from active support to forced adjustment, deviance, or defiance.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Voices of the Holocaust," the digital archive of interviews with Holocaust survivors conducted by David Boder in 1946, available at [http://voices.iit.edu/david\\_boder](http://voices.iit.edu/david_boder), accessed 4 January 2014; Donald L. Niewyk, "Introduction," in *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survival*, ed. Niewyk (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>9</sup> The records of the Extraordinary State Commission for the Establishment and Investigation of the Crimes of the Fascist German Invaders and Their Accomplices and of the Damage They Caused to Citizens, Collective Farms, Public Organizations, State Enterprises, and Institutions of the USSR (Extraordinary State Commission) are held at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [GARF]); a selection of these records can be accessed at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) RG-22.002M.

<sup>10</sup> Parts of the collection are accessible in Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry*, trans. and ed. David Patterson (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002); and Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman, eds., *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., I. P. Gerasimov, ed., *Kogda slova krichat i plachut: Dnevnik Liali i Berty Bruk* (Minsk: Asobnyi Dakh, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> D. Romanovskii, "Minsk," in *Kholokost na territorii SSSR: Entsiklopediia*, ed. Il'ia Al'tman (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2011), 590.

<sup>13</sup> Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik Experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7.

This article takes up this claim by focusing specifically on one generation of Soviet Jews, those born after the USSR was founded, and analyzes how they responded to war and genocide in Minsk. Sonia, Samuil, Rita, Elena, and others had grown up during the 1930s in Soviet society, where being Jewish had largely ceased to carry meaning in everyday life, especially for young people. Since the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922, “being Jewish” had been codified as a national rather than a religious identity. Alongside the campaigns to secularize Soviet culture, including the different national cultures composing it, nationality policies of the 1920s and 1930s proclaimed ethnic equality. Officially, there was no discrimination based on Soviet citizens’ national identity.<sup>14</sup>

How did young Soviet citizens of Jewish nationality experience the breakdown of this ideological framework of equality, one that really existed—at least in part—during World War II? How did they live with a war of destruction that obliterated the moral and social fiber of the surrounding society? How did they survive in a context where they could not rely on communal Jewish or state institutions, which had, in the past, often been crucial to address scarcity, violence, and ongoing humiliation? Attempting to answer these questions on the basis of interviews and memoirs, I am conscious of the complex nature of oral history and testimony as products of memory, as being a reconstruction of the past in a present shaped by the impact of time, ideology, and social frameworks.<sup>15</sup> Subjects judged and interpreted their past experiences in the light of specific value systems, including the Soviet emphasis on the patriotic unity of the population or the unwavering role of the Communist Party in securing the defeat of the German occupation, although more recent experiences could also influence the manner in which they represented their experiences. I have discussed this dynamic elsewhere in depth, showing that the destruction wrought by the Nazi regime on Soviet Jewish life influenced the representation of Soviet policies on Jewish and other nationalities and their role in wartime survival. In some oral histories, the Soviet campaigns to erase Jewish culture appear far

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<sup>14</sup> On Soviet nationality policies in the 1920s and 1930s, especially with regard to Jews, see Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*; and Anna Shternshis, *Soviet and Kosher: Jewish Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Luisa Passerini, “Work Ideology and Consensus under Italian Fascism” (1979), in *The Oral History Reader*, 1st ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 53–62; Daria Khubova, Andrei Ivankiev, and Tonia Sharova, “After Glasnost: Oral History in the Soviet Union,” in *Memory and Totalitarianism*, ed. Passerini, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89–101. On the sociality of memory more generally, see Maurice Halbwachs, *Das Gedächtnis und seine sozialen Bedingungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); and Peter Burke, “History as Social Memory,” in *Memory, History, Culture, and the Mind*, ed. Thomas Butler (New York: Blackwell, 1989), 97–113.

less problematic than one might expect; presumably, this was true precisely because they were not aimed at the systematic annihilation of individuals, as was the case under the Nazi regime.<sup>16</sup> Whereas Soviet policies destroyed the institutional framework of Jewish life but offered appealing alternatives, such as the Pioneer organization or access to education, Nazi policies strove to erase the very livelihood of Jews and their lives.

Narratives of how individuals organized their lives under conditions of occupation and genocide allow us to reconstruct these experiences in some detail. As Daniel Romanowsky argues, descriptions of everyday life, especially of extremely traumatic experiences, were hardly the subject of governmental censorship in Soviet postwar society, precisely because the genocide itself was largely omitted from official portrayals.<sup>17</sup> Finally, as a comparative study of postwar testimony and recent interviews by Joanna Michlic shows, “essential episodes of child survivors’ wartime biographies remain durable and almost intact in the child survivors’ memories despite the passage of time.”<sup>18</sup> Attempting to give an account of the diversity of ghetto experience without neglecting its larger framework, this article pays attention to the details of organizing daily life, honing both individual and collective levels in studying how adolescents, as gendered subjects, survived under conditions of genocide and war that laid to waste major parts of the Soviet Union and its population.<sup>19</sup>

## The Minsk Ghetto at a Glance

Minsk is an important case study for understanding the impact of the German war of annihilation on Soviet society and the destruction of Jewish

<sup>16</sup> Anika Walke, “Memories of an Unfulfilled Promise: Internationalism and Patriotism in Post-Soviet Oral Histories of Jewish Survivors of the Nazi Genocide,” *Oral History Review* 40, 2 (2013): 271–98.

<sup>17</sup> Daniel Romanowsky, “The Holocaust in the Eyes of *Homo Sovieticus*: A Survey Based on Northeastern Belorussia and Northwestern Russia,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 13, 3 (1999): 357.

<sup>18</sup> Joanna Michlic, “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources. Reexamining Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders*, ed. Sara R. Horowitz (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2012), 142.

<sup>19</sup> I note spontaneous, independent activity and formation of relationships within and across ghetto borders; the interplay of outside rule, internal autonomy, and environment; the formation of associations or groupings within the ghetto; and the role and opportunity of resistance and cultural mobilization, thereby building off works such as Samuel Gringauz, “Some Methodological Problems in the Study of the Ghetto,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, 1 (1950): 66–72; Dalia Ofer, “Everyday Life of Jews under Nazi Occupation: Methodological Issues,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, 1 (1995): 48; Dwork, *Children with a Star*, esp. chap. 5; Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), esp. chap. 3; and Tim Cole, “Ghettoization,” *The Historiography of the Holocaust*, ed. Dan Stone (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 65–87.

people and communities by the Nazi regime. Both the rapid military advance and the beginning of the systematic killing of Jews reflect the strategies and goals of the war: to occupy Soviet territories so as to capture “living space,” appropriate resources, enslave parts of the population, and exterminate those who were considered subhuman, including Jews, Roma, mentally and physically disabled persons, or enemies such as Communists, Red Army officers, and Soviet professionals.

Minsk was fully captured and occupied by German troops on 28 June 1941, after brutal air raids lasting several days. Immediately, party functionaries, members of the so-called intelligentsia—that is, professionals—and many Jews, were arrested. Up to 10,000 male civilian prisoners, among them many Jewish men, were killed in early July.<sup>20</sup> German Field Commander Karl Schlegelhofer ordered the establishment of a ghetto for the Jewish residents on 19 July 1941, long before the city became the headquarters of the German civilian administration of the Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien, with Wilhelm Kube appointed general commissioner for the region in September.<sup>21</sup> Over a period of five days ending on 24 July, about 50,000 Jews had to leave their homes, cramming into a space of about 200 hectares.<sup>22</sup>

All Jews over the age of ten had to wear a yellow patch of 10 centimeters in diameter on their chest and back.<sup>23</sup> Sixty-four Jewish women were executed in September 1941 because they did not wear the patch in the ghetto.<sup>24</sup> The patch stigmatized Jews who tried to move about freely and made them

<sup>20</sup> V. I. Adamushko et al., eds., *Svidetel' stvuiut palachi: Unichtozhenie evreev na okkupirovannoi territorii Belarusi v 1941–1944 gg.* (Minsk: Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus', 2011), 171.

<sup>21</sup> Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 152.

<sup>22</sup> Estimates of the actual number of Jews who entered the ghetto in the summer of 1941 range from 30,000 to 100,000; recent calculations show that between 45,000 and 55,000 Soviet Jews were trapped in occupied Minsk. Rentrop, *Tatorte*, 114, estimates 45,000–50,000; Romanovskii, “Minsk,” 591, gives 55,000, as does Anne Speckhard, “Minsk,” in *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, 2: *Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe*, ed. Martin Dean (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 1234. There is some disagreement whether these numbers include Jews from German-occupied Poland and from surrounding areas, although there is consensus that beginning in the fall of 1941, ca. 25,000 Jews from Germany, Hungary, and other Nazi-occupied countries were deported to Minsk.

<sup>23</sup> Romanovskii, “Minsk,” 591; “The Minsk Ghetto,” in *The Complete Black Book*, 114.

<sup>24</sup> Daily journal of Police Battalion 322, 30 September 1941, Natsional'nyi arkhiv Respubliki Belarus' (NARB) f. 4683, op. 3, d. 936, ll. 43–45, published in Raisa Chernoglazova, ed., *Judenfrei! Svobodno ot evreev! Istoriia Minskogo getto v dokumentakh* (Minsk: Asobnyi dakh, 1999), 163.



vulnerable: many were thrown in jail or worse when they were discovered on their own and outside the ghetto.<sup>25</sup>

The Minsk ghetto was located in the part of the city most badly damaged by air raids and combat during the invasion. Often housed in damaged properties, 10–12 people shared rooms that used to house 3. As one interviewee recalled, “we slept underneath and on the table.”<sup>26</sup> In addition, residents had to leave behind much of their movable property such as furniture, bedding, pots, and food supplies when they were moved into the ghetto, and they subsequently suffered from hunger, cold, and illnesses that went untreated. The territory of the “Jewish district” was surrounded by barbed wire. As elsewhere, this flexible enclosure testified to the purpose of the ghettos in Belorussia, which were used—to borrow Wendy Lower’s term—as holding pens in preparation for genocide, just as they were in Ukraine.<sup>27</sup> After killing operations, barbed wire fences or guard posts were quickly dismantled; in the case of Minsk, the fence was moved after mass executions, adjusting the ghetto territory successively downward to match the ever-shrinking number of inhabitants.<sup>28</sup>

Internal structures and developments within the ghetto were also shaped by the prewar history of the city and its residents. The destruction of Jewish communal institutions in the 1920s and 1930s meant that there was no communal body that could have provided organized self-help. The absence of a kehilla and of schools, theaters, or other cultural institutions catering to specific Jewish audiences contributed to largely individualized ways of dealing with poverty, humiliation, and death and explains the lack of cultural mobilization and activity in the ghetto.<sup>29</sup> The economic crisis in the 1930s had left many Soviet citizens without monetary savings, expensive jewelry, or other valuables, a lack that stood in the way of trading personal property

<sup>25</sup> Oral testimony of Lisa Gordon, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 4047, p. 5.

<sup>26</sup> Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Wendy Lower, “Facilitating Genocide: Nazi Ghettoization Practices in Occupied Ukraine, 1941–1942,” in *Life in the Ghettos during the Holocaust*, ed. Eric J. Sterling (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 12.

<sup>28</sup> On ghettoization practices in German-occupied Belorussia, see Al’bert Kaganovich, “Voprosy i zadachi issledovaniia mest prinuditel’nogo soderzhaniiia evreev na territorii Belarusi v 1941–1944 gg.,” in *Aktual’nye voprosy izucheniia kholokosta na territorii Belarusi v gody nemetsko-fashistskoi okkupatsii: Sbornik nauchnykh rabot*, ed. Ia. Z. Basin (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2005), electronic document ([www.homoliber.org/ru/kg/kg020108.html](http://www.homoliber.org/ru/kg/kg020108.html), accessed 8 March 2012); Martin Dean, “Life and Death in the ‘Gray Zone’ of Jewish Ghettos in Nazi-Occupied Europe: The Unknown, the Ambiguous, and the Disappeared,” in *Gray Zones: Ambiguity and Compromise in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Jonathan Petropoulos and John K. Roth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 205–21.

<sup>29</sup> Hersh Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto: Soviet Jewish Partisans against the Nazis* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1989), 166.

for food during the war.<sup>30</sup> In the context of the ensuing Nazi genocide, these developments exacerbated difficult material and ideological conditions for Jewish ghetto inmates.

On orders from the German authorities, the *Judenrat*, a Jewish leadership body, was established.<sup>31</sup> Created by the Nazi regime, this committee was designed to help execute plans for exploitation and extermination by registering all ghetto inhabitants and organizing work details. Yet the Minsk Judenrat, especially the first under Il'ia Mushkin, also used its position and authority to assist those in need. A ghetto hospital, an orphanage, and a soup kitchen supported inhabitants of the ghetto unable to work, mostly elderly people and children.<sup>32</sup> First and foremost, however, the Judenrat functioned as a labor office. All males older than 14 years and women over 16 were considered fit for work and required to report to work every day.<sup>33</sup> It was crucial to labor for the Germans, either in one of the workshops located within the ghetto or at sites in the Russian district such as the printing shop and the buildings and factories appropriated by the Generalkommissariat or the German military, in order to access regular food rations, meager as they were. Mikhail Treister, for instance, recalls that he received a bowl of watery soup and 150 grams (5.2 oz.) of bread for the day.<sup>34</sup> Nonworking ghetto inmates were to receive half the amount of rations that workers received.<sup>35</sup>

Mass killings overshadowed the search for food, heating supplies, or medical care and marked the beginning of the systematic extermination of European Jewry.<sup>36</sup> Members of the Einsatzgruppe A, the Security Service (SD), the German police, Latvian and Ukrainian militias, and others killed ghetto inmates either directly in the ghetto or took them to execution sites on the outskirts of Minsk in Drozdy, Blagovshchina, Trostenets, or Tuchinka, where they shot them at trenches and ravines.<sup>37</sup> Other victims were herded

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>31</sup> Order no. 31 of the Security Police and Security Service on the Formation of a Judenrat, NARB f. 4683, op. 3, d. 943, ll. 88–89, published in Chernoglazova, *Judenfrei*, 33. See also Romanovskii, "Minsk," 591.

<sup>32</sup> Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 18, 53.

<sup>33</sup> Rentrop, *Tatorte*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Mikhail Treister, Interview 2324, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Treister, interviewed by author and Eva Determann, Minsk, March 2003; Treister, "Probleški pamiaty," in *Katastrofa: Poslednie svideteli*, ed. Z. Tsukerman (Moscow: Dom evreiskoi knigi, 2008), 303.

<sup>35</sup> Romanovskii, "Minsk," 593.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Browning, *Nazi Policy, Jewish Workers, German Killers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 39.

<sup>37</sup> Romanovskii, "Minsk," 594, 596; Rentrop, *Tatorte*, 139–40.

into gas vans, the so-called *dushėgubki* (soul killers), and asphyxiated while the vans were driven from the town to prepared mass graves.<sup>38</sup>

Drawing on archival documentation and eyewitness testimony, historians have compiled a disturbing chronology of death. Estimates of the overall number of victims vary between 56,000 and 63,000.<sup>39</sup> Between July and September 1941, up to 7,000 Jews were murdered. During a pogrom on 7 November 1941, between 12,000 and 18,000 people were killed, largely in an attempt to vacate housing for Jews from Germany and other European countries who were deported to Minsk and held in the so-called “Sonderghetto,” a restricted space within the ghetto.<sup>40</sup> On 2 March 1942, between 5,000 and 8,000 inmates of the ghetto were killed, many of them unemployed; others were children who had been rounded up in the ghetto orphanage. In the summer of 1942, the Nazi leadership again ordered the killing of so-called “unproductive” Jews, meaning people who were not employed in producing goods essential for the war effort. Within three days, from 28 July to 1 August 1942, up to 25,000 Jews from the Minsk ghetto were murdered.

An initial wave of killings and ghetto destructions in the late summer and fall of 1941 left the majority of Jewish communities in Belorussia dead by the spring of 1942. The Minsk ghetto was an exception; located in the capital of the Generalkommissariat Weißruthenien and the seat of multiple administrative and production facilities, it was maintained beyond this date. Yet the spring of 1943 saw an increase in random killings of Jews that took place daily, both in and outside the ghetto, in preparation for the final closure of the ghetto.<sup>41</sup> Between 21 and 30 October 1943, the Jews remaining in the ghetto—approximately 2,000 in number—were murdered, marking the end of the Minsk ghetto.<sup>42</sup>

Ghettoization and mass murder in ghettos in the occupied Soviet Union were clearly implemented in waves, and their dynamics highlight the connection and conflict between the Nazi regime’s economic considerations and genocidal plans. Christian Gerlach and Christoph Dieckmann highlight

<sup>38</sup> A German prisoner of war (POW) confirmed in interrogations in 1945/46 that such vehicles were used between the fall of 1941 and the fall of 1943 (“Iz Protokola doprosov Karla Bukhnera ob unichtozhenii evreev v g. Minske, 26.4.1945–6.2.1946,” in *Svidetel’stvuiut palachi*, 83–84).

<sup>39</sup> Marat Botvinnik, *Pamiatniki ġenotsida evreev Belarusi* (Minsk: Belarusaika navuka, 2000), 13–21; *Svidetel’stvuiut palachi*, 171–72.

<sup>40</sup> Rentrop, *Tatort*, 159–84, offers a detailed account of non-Soviet Jews’ situation in Minsk.

<sup>41</sup> “The Minsk Ghetto,” in *The Complete Black Book*, 132–38; Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 139; Botvinnik, *Pamiatniki ġenotsida evreev Belarusi*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Botvinnik, *Pamiatniki*, 20; *Svidetel’stvuiut palachi*, 171; Romanovskii, “Minsk,” 597.

similar dynamics in Belorussia and Lithuania, respectively, showing ongoing disagreements between civilian and SS administrations as to whether Jews' labor skills should be used to help provide for military and civilian needs or whether Jews should be murdered as racial enemies.<sup>43</sup> In addition, Gerlach argues, Jews were murdered to prevent scarcity and protest in the occupied territory; they could easily be presented as "useless eaters" and outcasts.<sup>44</sup> The Minsk ghetto reflects this logic in some detail, showcasing not only the use of Jewish labor over a prolonged period but also its centrality to the mass murder of Soviet Jews and Jews deported to Minsk from other countries.

The size of the city, in addition to the longevity of the Minsk ghetto, explains why the bulk of survivors of the Nazi genocide in Belorussia who narrated their experiences came from this particular ghetto. An organized underground network was able to develop and collaborated with partisan formations in forests near the city; several thousand refugees from the ghetto joined these detachments; and some, but not all, survived the war there. Many of these survivors relied on the help of youngsters to escape from the ghetto. Teenagers regularly lead groups of ghetto prisoners into the—precarious—safety of the partisan zone in the forests and swamps surrounding Minsk.<sup>45</sup>

The exact number of those who left the ghetto remains unclear. In the most recent account, Romanovskii suggests that between 6,000 and 10,000 Jews were able to leave the ghetto with help from the underground and partisans, and that half survived until the end of the war. Another 1,000 Jewish people were hidden by acquaintances in the Russian district or survived in hideouts in the vicinity of Minsk.<sup>46</sup> An analyst of Soviet partisan units claims that 1,310 Jews from Minsk arrived in partisan formations.<sup>47</sup> This number likely underestimates the overall number of people escaping from the ghetto, since it includes neither those who left the ghetto and died after doing so nor those

<sup>43</sup> Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), chap. 7.2–7.4; Dieckmann, *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik*, 793–802, 1047–1194.

<sup>44</sup> Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 527. Wendy Lower shows a similar dynamic for Ukraine in "Facilitating Genocide," 133, 137.

<sup>45</sup> Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*; Smilovitsky, "Minsk Ghetto"; Barbara Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto, 1941–1943: Jewish Resistance and Soviet Internationalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Romanovskii, "Minsk"; Z. A. Nikodimova, ed., *Arkhiv Khasi Pruslinoi: Minskoe getto, antifashistskoe podpol'e, repatriatsiia detei iz Germanii* (Minsk: I. P. Loginov, 2010). Reuben Ainsztein highlights the unique position of the Minsk ghetto in the Soviet territories due to the underground's early decision to facilitate escape rather than armed struggle or an uprising in the ghetto: Ainsztein, "Minsk: 'The Ghetto Means Death,'" in *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe (With a Historical Survey of the Jew as Fighter and Soldier in the Diaspora)* (London: Elek Books, 1974), 463–85.

<sup>46</sup> Romanovskii, "Minsk," 601.

<sup>47</sup> Gerasimova, *Vstali my plechom*, 9.

who survived in hiding nor those who incorrectly identified their national identity upon arriving in a partisan detachment, a practice very common at the time to avoid suspicion or ostracism by Soviet partisans. Among the thousands who left the ghetto were a number of children and teenagers who eventually survived the war, and who, decades later and in old age, testified to the factors that enabled them to survive the Nazi genocide and those that made it a constant challenge.

### Orphans in the Ghetto

Sonia Zalesskaia and Samuil Volk had just arrived in a pioneer summer camp near Minsk when German troops invaded the Soviet Union. Following complicated routes, they returned to their hometown, only to confront a family in disarray. Sonia's father had left Minsk with the bread factory where he worked and was later drafted into the army, leaving behind Sonia's mother Nekhama Portnova and four children. Samuil's parents had quarreled over leaving Minsk and eventually split. His mother, Revekka, had pleaded to wait for Samuil's return, but the father chose to abandon the family for fear of finding himself again in German captivity, as he had in World War I.<sup>48</sup>

Sonia regularly left the ghetto and roamed through abandoned homes and factories in the Russian district in search of food, coal, and other essential goods. As a rule, adolescents like her did not wear the yellow patch when they were in the Russian district: Sonia and Samuil took advantage of their youth and never wore the patch, while the older Rita Kazhdan and Vera Smirnova removed it when they left the ghetto, usually in the midst of a worker column.<sup>49</sup>

Young Sonia repeatedly visited her family's previous apartment, by then occupied by a former neighbor. The old man fed her whenever she showed up at his doorstep.<sup>50</sup> Yet the meager yields of Sonia's foraging efforts were insufficient. In the fall of 1941, her mother died of starvation. Family relatives sent Sonia and her siblings to the ghetto orphanage at Ulitsa Dimitrova, 3.

Despite the Judenrat's best efforts, food supplies were insufficient in the orphanage, and older children were encouraged to seek food themselves and return only to spend the night.<sup>51</sup> Sonia continued her trips in search of sustenance: "There were many children, but these were not children, they

<sup>48</sup> Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>49</sup> Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 2001; Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, USHMM RG-50.378\*025.

<sup>50</sup> Sonia Zalesskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute. See also Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii*, 72.

<sup>51</sup> Grigorii Rozinskii, *Deti minskogo getto* (Tel Aviv: Self-published, 2004), 30.

were like living corpses. They were so emaciated ... I brought food for my siblings, but my brother was already incapable of eating. The next time I came, after a couple of days, all three of them had died and had been taken away already. That was three months after the invasion.”<sup>52</sup> Sonia roamed the Russian district for food, and she saw it as a safer place than the ghetto, where raids and pogroms posed a constant threat: “I was in the ghetto only during the night, I left during the day.”<sup>53</sup> She shared the fear of being trapped in the ghetto with other children who left and begged for food at central public spaces. Regular raids targeting Jewish children, however, could quickly turn the Russian district into a trap.<sup>54</sup> Hiding one’s Jewish identity from both German police and local residents was thus an essential strategy for the youths’ survival.

Samuil Volk’s account illustrates the different forms of violence and deprivation experienced by orphaned children in the ghetto. In the early weeks of the occupation, Samuil’s mother feared for her children’s lives and asked them to stay home. Later, Samuil went in and out of the ghetto with great caution, knowing that he must not be seen crossing the wire fence. When Samuil, his mother, and his three siblings found themselves among a column of people being led from Minsk to Tuchinka for execution in November 1941, he understood that he should leave as soon as possible. Once his mother had nodded to him in agreement, he waited for an opportunity to escape. “So I waited until the guards weren’t paying attention. All of a sudden, I saw a woman with a child step out of the column and hide in a doorway. I followed her. I heard bullets flying over my head, and when I turned around I saw that Ziama was running after me. I waited for him and shoved him into the next barn I could find.”<sup>55</sup> Samuil and his six-year-old brother found shelter with their aunt, who also lived in the ghetto. She was unable to provide for the children, however, and sent them to the ghetto orphanage. “There my independent life began, so to speak,” Volk observed.<sup>56</sup>

Like Sonia, Samuil regularly left the orphanage. He teamed up with another Jewish boy, Leva, who “had made contact with some Russian guys

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. Similar accounts of the inability of the orphanage to supply children with food are in Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; “Reminiscences of Albert Lapidus, from Baltimore, a Former Prisoner of the Minsk Ghetto,” USHMM RG-02.174, 27.

<sup>53</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>54</sup> See also “They Were Dealing in Children,” in *The Unknown Black Book*, 248. Vera Smirnova saw many Jewish children held in the basement of the Minsk prison where she was detained for interrogation (Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, USHMM RG-50.378\*025).

<sup>55</sup> Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

at the freight yard. They were cleaning toilets and shoes for the Germans and sold newspapers to them. He took me there, too, and they taught me how to clean shoes.” Laughing, he explains that he procured his equipment “like everyone else. I had two brushes, a rag, polish, a little box that served as a stool.” The laughter indicates that the supplies may have been stolen, although he did not state this openly.

Samuil and Leva slept in the basement and attics of abandoned buildings: “we tried not to go back to the ghetto because it was dangerous to stay there.”<sup>57</sup> The primary danger came from the killing operations, when German and collaborating troops surrounded the ghetto and drove out anyone from a specified area within the ghetto. In these cases, ghetto residents often sought shelter in hiding places prepared in advance, so-called *maliny*.<sup>58</sup> Describing a common experience, Elena Drapkina narrates how she was able to survive a large pogrom on 20 November 1941, but she also draws attention to the ambiguous role such *maliny* played, rescuing some but endangering others:

Some men had covered the space underneath the stairs with plates of tin. In front of it, they mounted a laundry line and hung some rags and underwear to cover the plates, and they made a door. When we got there, there were already so many people that the narrowness itself was dangerous—if someone had fallen, people would have stepped on them, and for lack of air one could have suffocated. . . . We stood like sardines in a can. . . . There was a woman with an infant, and at the moment the Germans were walking up the stairs, the child began to cry. People almost jumped on her, but she began to nurse the baby and he stopped crying. . . . We stood like this for a whole day and the following night.<sup>59</sup>

When Elena and Lenia emerged after the pogrom, Elena’s uncle had been murdered in the living room. The man was one of many older ghetto inhabitants who volunteered to close and disguise entrances to the hideouts, hoping the killers would take mercy on them, or willingly sacrificing their lives to ensure other Jews’ survival.<sup>60</sup> Other accounts reveal that infants were deliberately suffocated when they started crying; sometimes children died in the squeeze.<sup>61</sup> *Maliny* were often a last resort, and the practices in and around

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> The term *malina* means raspberry in Russian. The Hebrew *malon* is a colloquial term meaning hideout or hiding place. See, e.g., Ephraim G. in *Fresh Wounds*, 251.

<sup>59</sup> Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001.

<sup>60</sup> Solomon Khomikh, “Otvoevannaia zhizn’,” in *Katastrofa: Poslednie svideteli*, 424; Mikhail Treister, Interview 2324, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Enta Maizles, “Minsk. Fashistskaia okkupatsiia. Genotsid,” in *Uroki Kholokosta: Istorii i sovremennost’*, ed. Iakov Basin (Minsk: Kovcheg, 2009), 180.

<sup>61</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

them show who the most vulnerable groups within the ghetto were: the very old and the very young. Children thus often chose to leave the ghetto and wait out the violence beyond the barbed wire. Some adolescents who could rely on friends and acquaintances hid in homes or basements in the Russian district.<sup>62</sup>

Samuil was afraid that his brother might fall victim to a raid or one of the pogroms, which often targeted the orphanages and hospital in the ghetto. Samuil Volk says that he “said goodbye” to his brother—that is, concluded that he had died—when he heard that the orphanage had been surrounded and the children inside murdered on 2 March 1942. Days after the pogrom, he went to see for himself, and “there he was, running around with some other children. . . . He had hidden in a pile of dirty laundry. . . . He said to me, ‘I knew you would come at some point, so I stayed here.’” After that, the boys tried to evade danger in the ghetto by sleeping in the Russian district, utilizing, like other homeless youth, ruins, basements, squats, and even cisterns.<sup>63</sup> Ziama returned to the ghetto orphanage only occasionally to wash or eat if the brothers were unable to find sufficient supplies themselves. The constant danger fostered the bond between the brothers. After they were separated again during one of the large killing operations, presumably during the pogrom in late July 1942, the younger boy’s attachment to his older brother grew and he literally clung to him: “He never let me go; once we were outside the ghetto and one of the boys told him I would leave him, he never let me go again. Whenever I wanted to go somewhere, he started to scream and cry. Once he had a bellyache, he didn’t let me get out of bed and I had to go to the toilet with him. He was so afraid I would leave him.”<sup>64</sup>

One of the main places where homeless children like Sonia and Samuil congregated was the freight yard. A substantial group of youths, both non-Jewish and Jewish, gathered there every day to beg for food or offer service to wounded soldiers of the German army who arrived on hospital trains, such as cleaning shoes, selling newspapers, and performing songs and dances in Russian and Yiddish in exchange for food, money, or goods they could sell.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Roza Zelenko and Ol’ga Glazebnaia, interview with author, 11 October 2002, Minsk; Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, USHMM RG-50.378\*025; Mikhail Treister, Interview 2324, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Treister, interview with author and Eva Determann, March 2003, Minsk.

<sup>63</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Vladimir Mordkhilevich, USHMM RG-50.120\*209.

<sup>64</sup> Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>65</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia, Interview 30810, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Vera Vladimirovna Smirnova, USHMM RG-50.378\*025; Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/



Among the youths were several boys who had been smuggled out of the ghetto by women associates of the underground movement and placed in an orphanage in the Russian district.<sup>66</sup> Barbara Epstein describes these efforts in great detail, emphasizing the cooperation between Jews and non-Jews living in the Russian district. The women's rescue efforts were successful because most had known one another as colleagues or union or party activists before the war.<sup>67</sup> It is impossible to determine how many Jewish children were saved by being placed in Russian orphanages in Minsk, partly because they were forced to disguise their Jewish identity, which some never reclaimed. Leonid Smilovitskii estimates that there were up to 500 Jewish children among the 2,000 in all Minsk orphanages.<sup>68</sup>

The directors of children's homes encouraged their charges to panhandle or to work for small payments to acquire food outside the ghetto. Most likely as a form of precaution against the threat of rape or other forms of abuse, however, girls were forbidden to do so.<sup>69</sup> Vladimir Mordkhilevich also reports that his aunt did not allow his female cousin Zhenia to leave the ghetto with the boys, and Elena Gringauz's mother had her daughter stay home altogether.<sup>70</sup> Sonia Zaleskaia further noted that she returned to the ghetto at night after roaming the Russian district in search of food. Although none of the narrators specify the reasons for these restrictions on women's movement both within the ghetto and outside, special danger to girls and women in the form of sexual violence is reported in other accounts and may have influenced their behavior; I return to this subject below.<sup>71</sup>

But the boys were not safe either. German and collaborating troops were free to abuse and randomly punish children and adolescents. Beatings, denial of payment for services, and even raids against crowds of children were daily occurrences. Many children, Belorussian and Jewish, were deported to Germany to be included in the *Lebensborn* program, designed to "Germanize" suitable parts of the population of occupied countries. Other children were

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USC Shoah Foundation Institute; David Taubkin, "Moi gorod, znakomyi do slez," in *Katastrofa: Poslednie svideteli*, 277; Vladimir Mordkhilevich, USHMM RG-50.120\*209.

<sup>66</sup> Taubkin, "Moi gorod, znakomyi do slez," 282.

<sup>67</sup> Epstein, *The Minsk Ghetto*, esp. 171–80.

<sup>68</sup> Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belarusi*, 74.

<sup>69</sup> Taubkin, "Moi gorod, znakomyi do slez," 281.

<sup>70</sup> Vladimir Mordkhilevich, USHMM RG-50.120\*209, Oral Testimony of Elena Gringauz, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.4126, p. 6, 23.

<sup>71</sup> Regina Mühlhäuser, "Between 'Racial Awareness' and Fantasies of Potency: Nazi Sexual Politics in the Occupied Territories of the Soviet Union," in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 199–203.

used to “donate” blood to wounded German soldiers, literally draining them of their scarce bodily resources.<sup>72</sup>

Jewish boys were particularly eager to avoid arrest or close interactions with the police, since some of them were circumcised and would hardly have survived discovery. Accounts of this fear show that the religious practice of circumcision had persisted in the prewar decade despite attempts to secularize Soviet Jews before the war.<sup>73</sup> As a form of protection against discovery, many took on other names: Samuil Volk went by Misha; Vladimir Mordkhilevich chose “Buratino because I was always funny and a little naughty”; and others teamed up as Zhilin and Kostylin.<sup>74</sup> In addition, boys dirtied their faces with soil so as to better resemble other homeless children.<sup>75</sup>

Neither the pseudonyms nor the change of appearance protected these youths from denunciations by other boys, who recognized Yiddish accents or faces from past school attendance. Their accusers thereby renounced the interethnic solidarity inculcated in them in the very classrooms they had shared with Jews. Nor were false names a protection against German officers’ hatred of and retaliation against Soviet patriots stealing weapons: once, 12-year-old Samuil was apprehended and severely beaten because he was suspected of stealing weapons from German soldiers in the restrooms of the train station. Later, his friend Leva confessed that his brother Lenia sometimes mingled with the boys at the freight yard to obtain weapons for members of the underground and partisans.<sup>76</sup> When Samuil dragged himself back to the hideout, because “that was the only place I could imagine [I would] find someone to help me,” he found “Ziama, all in tears. He then cried even more, he was so happy I was alive.”<sup>77</sup>

The fear of discovery, violence, and death never disappeared; combined with living in the streets, it took a huge toll on the orphans’ physical and emotional strength. Like the two brothers, Sonia Zaleskaia spent nearly two years in and out of the ghetto, sleeping here and there, hiding from pogroms, panhandling to feed herself, sometimes supported by prewar acquaintances.

<sup>72</sup> Projektgruppe Belarus e.V., ed., *“Dann kam die deutsche Macht”: Weißrussische Kinderhäftlinge in deutschen Konzentrationslagern, 1941–1945* (Cologne: Betrieb für Öffentlichkeit, 1999); Nikodimova, *Arkhiv*, chap. 2; Rozinskii, *Deti*, 10.

<sup>73</sup> Elissa Bemporad shows the persistence of ritual circumcision among Jewish inhabitants of Minsk, including party members and nonparty members, workers and intellectuals, until the early 1930s (*Becoming Soviet Jews*, chap. 5).

<sup>74</sup> Vladimir Mordkhilevich, USHMM RG-50.120\*209. The names Zhilin and Kostylin are drawn from L. N. Tolstoi’s “Kavkazskii plennik,” where they are the main characters.

<sup>75</sup> Oral Testimony of Leonid Okun, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.6278, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> Samuil Volk, Interview 43231, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

The unsteady supply of food, unstable housing, and constant threat of death drained orphaned adolescents both physically and emotionally. Strong bonds with siblings or other people such as Sonia's former neighbor were essential for surviving in the absence of official guardians.

### Gender, Labor, Violence

The Nazi occupation relied on different forms of violence, several of which were determined by the victims and perpetrators' gender and perceived sexuality. Physical violence, the infliction of injury and death, targeted women and men for different reasons and took different forms. An implicit regime of violence reflected the specific employment opportunities that at specified moments divided the ghetto population—male and female—into the living and the dead.

The Nazi occupants of Minsk directed their policies at a city population disproportionately composed of women. There are no detailed statistics available that indicate the gender of ghetto inmates.<sup>78</sup> Yet it is reasonable to assume a disparity, since many young men over 18 were drafted into the Red Army when the war began.<sup>79</sup> This imbalance was further, and deliberately, boosted when German arrested and executed men between the ages of 18 and 50 shortly after the invasion. On 1 July 1941, all men of draft age were arrested and interned in a makeshift camp near the forest of Drozdy, where several thousand Soviet POWs were already being held behind barbed wire. The conditions in the camp were miserable, food was not supplied, and under an open sky there was no shelter against the hot sun or, later, rain. The horrid conditions upset even a German official, who particularly decried the small number of guards: their paucity encouraged the ruthless use of arms to secure order.<sup>80</sup> Some wives of internees and communist activists were able to rescue a number of men by supplying them with women's clothes. The men put on the dresses and, disguised as civilian visitors, left the camp.<sup>81</sup>

The German military's internment practices soon turned into systematic murder. Selections among prisoners according to national and professional

<sup>78</sup> For instance, the registration lists compiled by the Judenrat in July 1941 have not been preserved (Romanovskii, "Minsk," 592).

<sup>79</sup> Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii*, 68.

<sup>80</sup> Report by Xaver Dorsch, Dienststelle Organisation Todt, to Alfred Rosenberg, Reichsminister für die besetzten Ostgebiete, 10 July 1941, published in Helma Kaden and Ludwig Nestler, eds., *Dokumente des Verbrechens: Aus Akten des Dritten Reiches 1933–1945* (Berlin: Dietz, 1993), 3:25–26.

<sup>81</sup> Reminiscences of Tsilia Iankelevich Botvinnik-Lup'ian about her participation in the Minsk underground, 1941–44 (1 September 1963), NARB f. 4386, op. 2, d. 59, l. 2; "The Minsk Ghetto," in *The Complete Black Book*, 110–14.

categories led to the execution by firing squad of Communists, members of the intellectual and cultural elite, and Jews. In July alone, there were hundreds of Jews among the dead.<sup>82</sup> The special targeting of Jewish men continued during the first raids in the ghettos, when up to 1,500 men between the ages of 15 and 50 were arrested and executed in August 1941.<sup>83</sup> Afterward, assuming that men, and especially male Communists, were the prime targets of Nazi persecution, many men remained inside and avoided public spaces, hiding in attics or other concealed areas inside residential buildings or in the hospital.<sup>84</sup> Securing access to food for families who had lost male relatives or could not rely on wages thus often became the task of boys, adolescent males, or female family members. Employment was their only means of securing a stable supply of food and resources, for in Nazi ideology and war plans, Soviet Jews' right to live was tied to their economic utility. They must provide the labor essential to maintain public infrastructure and produce and repair equipment necessary to win the war.<sup>85</sup>

Rita Kazhdan describes how first her mother and then she herself took on the role of breadwinner. Both of her parents eventually died, killed in ways that targeted them as gendered subjects. Abram Fridman, Rita's father, was murdered because the Nazi regime considered men potential resisters and saboteurs. Rozalia Fridman, her mother, later fell victim to the frantic hunt for 5,000 Jews during the pogrom on 2 March 1942. She was caught while trying to find some food for her children and friends hiding in a *malina*; a militiaman put a child in her arms as she was pushed into the column of those to be killed.<sup>86</sup>

Rita and her ten-year-old brother Grisha were now orphans; at 14, Rita was in charge of her sibling. Rita decided to send Grisha to the orphanage to receive a bowl of watery soup every day, but she also urged him to come home

<sup>82</sup> "The Minsk Ghetto," in *The Complete Black Book*, 110–14; Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 509; "Dok. 72: Rafael M. Bromberg beschreibt Masseninternierungen, den Mord an den Juden und die Einrichtung des Gettos in Minsk bis zur Übergabe an die Zivilverwaltung am 1. September 1941," in *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945*, ed. Bert Hoppe und Hiltrun Glass (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2011), 7:275–76.

<sup>83</sup> Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 2001; Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001; Ekaterina Tsirlina, Interview 28012, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Vladimir Mordkhilevich, USHMM RG-50.120\*209. See also "The Minsk Ghetto," in *The Complete Black Book*, 109–10, 116; "From the Notes of the Partisan Mikhail Grichanik," in *The Unknown Black Book*, 234–35, 237; Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 151–52; Maizles, "Minsk," 178.

<sup>84</sup> Oral Testimony of Sara Goland, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.4126, p. 7; Nikodimova, *Arkhiv*, 19–20.

<sup>85</sup> Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, 576.

<sup>86</sup> Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 2001.

immediately after he had received his meal. “First, because he was the only one I had left, and second, the children’s home was plagued with scabies and lice, dangerous germ carriers, and we had enough of them already.”<sup>87</sup> Rita, assisted by her former classmate Ania Lianders, who also lived in the ghetto, found employment at the tank factory (*Panzerwerk*) run by the German company Daimler Benz.

Cleaning the repair shop and offices of German administrators, Rita received a piece of bread and a bowl of soup every day. Her friend Lidia Parfimchuk worked in the workshop kitchen and often put an extra portion of food into a container that Rita left in a corner near the kitchen. At the end of the workday, Rita picked up this container and took it home.

Elena Drapkina, another young woman who had lost her entire family, was assigned to work at the freight yard. As part of a column of 16 women she would clean arriving trains, remove snow from the tracks, and receive a daily food ration. She was also able to use her employment to acquire additional resources: “Whatever people had left, we took it to work and exchanged it with Russian workers for flour, pearl barley—anything, really.”<sup>88</sup> Such barter was facilitated by the much greater access to food supplies outside the ghetto.

Work sites served as places to exchange valuables, clothes, and household items for food, but they were also spaces of connection with the underground movement. Rita Kazhdan regularly interacted with Russian POWs and Jewish men working in the boiler room of the tank shop. Soon enough, she was asked to collect bullets and other useful things when she was cleaning the upstairs offices.

One of the guys made a container that had a double bottom, and I put the bullets, or carbide, in the lower part, covered it, and on top of it Lidia ladled soup or whatever food was available. I hid the bullets at home until I was able to pass them on to a young man, Iuzik, who took them to partisans; in return he had promised that he would make sure my brother and I would be able to join them.... But after a while he disappeared and didn’t come back, so I was stuck with the bullets. One of my roommates found them when she was cleaning the house. They almost killed me, because if the Germans had found them, they would have killed all of us.<sup>89</sup>

The danger of smuggling materials from the workshops into the ghetto became concrete for Ekaterina Tsirlina and her friend Tsilia Botvinnik, who

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001.

<sup>89</sup> Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, May 2005.

smuggled a number of weapons out of the weapons manufactory where they worked. One day they were forced to watch three men hanged after they were caught engaging in similar transactions.<sup>90</sup> Knowingly or not, Ekaterina Tsirlina and Rita Kazhdan utilized stereotypical assumptions about women to deceive the occupation regime. Notions of passivity, prominent in the stereotypical imagery of women as well as Jews, may have worked to the young women's advantage by discouraging the belief that Jewish women would actively work against the Nazi regime.<sup>91</sup>

Securing employment opportunities outside the ghetto was vital; it provided access to food and connections to potential helpers, and daily absence from the ghetto also offered a form of protection from the terror: the pogroms in November 1941 and in March and July 1942 began only after worker columns had left children, elderly, and other unemployed people behind in the ghetto. Rita Kazhdan's description of waiting anxiously during the mass killing operation of the summer of 1942 highlights both her relief at avoiding the danger, but also her anxiety at the thought that her brother was in the ghetto:

They did not send us home from work; we stayed in the workshop, and in the ghetto there was a horrid pogrom. That time, they took everybody; they dragged people out of *maliny* and houses, everybody. I remember, when we left for work, the sun was shining. But then, as if nature were an accompaniment to this whole act, it started to rain. And for two or three days, I already don't remember how long this was—to us it seemed like an eternity—the rain didn't stop. When the pogrom was over, they sent us back to the ghetto. The ghetto was located around a hill, and as we walked up Respublikanskaia Street, blood was streaming down the road with the water. At the top we saw those who had survived, who had been able to save themselves. Grisha was among them.<sup>92</sup>

Rita's brother had survived in a *malina* that a family friend, the pharmacist Abram Levin, had built in his house. Trying to avoid a repetition of this terrifying situation, young Rita urged her supervisor to employ Grisha.

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<sup>90</sup> Mikhail Treister, Interview 2324, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute; Treister, interviewed by author and Eva Determann, Minsk, March 2003; Ekaterina Tsirlina, interviewed by author, Minsk, October 2002; Tsirlina, Interview 28012, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>91</sup> On the role of women in underground work against the Nazi regime, see Ingrid Strobl, *Die Angst kam erst danach: Jüdische Frauen im Widerstand in Europa, 1939–1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1998). Chaika Grossman also highlights the work of females, especially as couriers, in the Białystok ghetto underground in her memoir, *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Białystok Ghetto* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1987).

<sup>92</sup> Rita Kazhdan, interviewed by author, May 2001, St. Petersburg.

She succeeded, and her brother daily left the ghetto with her, working as a messenger within the workshop, receiving a daily food ration, and evading the trap that the ghetto became during mass raids.<sup>93</sup>

Work places were sites not only of survival but also of aggression and violence. Mentioning once that she was “almost raped,” Rita Kazhdan described how a German worker named Jupp assaulted her: “When this Jupp had already thrown me onto the bed and covered my mouth so that I could not scream—but I also was afraid to scream, because technically I wasn’t allowed to clean the rooms of Germans—this Kruglenitsa [Jupp’s roommate, AW] came, and Jupp went into one corner, I into the other. But that was horrible. Another German wanted to just kill me because once I had not properly put away a broom in the workshop. Things like that, all the time. It was very difficult.”<sup>94</sup>

Kazhdan’s hesitancy to detail these forms of sexual abuse and gendered violence may be attributed to shame, embarrassment, or the desire to hide the events from family members.<sup>95</sup> Such omissions or distortions echo in other accounts. Mikhail Treister, for instance, describes how Sarra Friedman, a housemate, approached three German soldiers for help when the house was on fire. Promising help, they took her away and she never returned. “Even today,” Treister writes, “I try not to think about the end of this episode.”<sup>96</sup> Other witnesses describe how the ghetto commander Adolf Rube chose 13 young Jewish women, forced them to walk around the city of Minsk, then took them to the Jewish cemetery in the ghetto. There the women had to undress and dance in front of the commander and his entourage. Eventually Rube shot them at a pre-prepared pit.<sup>97</sup>

Although we cannot know whether Sarra Friedman was sexually abused, killed, or both, these options are possible and even likely, given numerous reports of the sexual abuse of women in Minsk and elsewhere in the occupied

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Rita Kazhdan, Interview 654, VHF/USC Shoah Foundation Institute.

<sup>95</sup> See Helene Sinnreich, “The Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust,” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 108.

<sup>96</sup> Treister, “Probleski pamiati,” 308.

<sup>97</sup> “The Minsk Ghetto,” in *The Complete Black Book*, 132–33. See also “Reminiscences of Albert Lapidus,” USHMM RG-02.174, 26. Probably the scene described here correlates with Karl Löwenstein’s report on ghetto commander Rube’s punishment of ten Jewish women who did not wear the yellow patch on their clothes while working in a German arms repair shop (Karl Loesten [Löwenstein], “Aus der Hölle Minsk in das ‘Paradies’ Theresienstadt,” Leo Baeck Institute New York, ME 398. MM 50; the manuscript was published as Karl Loewenstein, *Minsk—Im Lager der deutschen Juden*, Supplement, *Das Parlament* 45–46 (7 November 1956): 21.

USSR.<sup>98</sup> Members of the German forces and collaborating militias frequently invaded homes under cover of night to rob whatever possessions were left after confiscations and barter as well as to abuse the residents. Many women and girls were brutally raped and killed.<sup>99</sup> In addition to the actual violence committed, the rapes contributed to the terror, for any woman might be next.

The assault on Jewish women continued in the context of labor assignments and selections. While providing nutrition, work for the Germans also entailed bureaucratic registration and thus increased the likelihood of summary pickup for execution. When the Judenrat refused to assemble 5,000 ghetto residents to be killed on 2 March 1942, German and Lithuanian police killed all the children in the orphanage, a number of the patients in the ghetto hospital, and randomly selected passersby such as Rita Kazhdan's mother. They also culled worker columns returning in the evening to complete the cruel assignment.<sup>100</sup> Elena Drapkina's work detail, a group of women, mounted a truck at the end of the workday. They were taken to the ghetto gate at the intersection of Chornaia and Obutkovo streets. There, Drapkina says: "They made us get off and line up along the ghetto fence. This was night, it was already midnight, it was a moonlit night. I will never forget this scenery. . . . A German guard checked the documents at the gate, and I noticed that he sent those with a skilled worker identity card [*Facharbeiterausweis*]<sup>—</sup>mostly men—to the ghetto; the other ones, younger people and women, to a second column."<sup>101</sup>

Drapkina explains that she took her card, which identified her as a worker—but not as a "skilled worker"—showed it to the guard, and thus passed the control.<sup>102</sup> The only other woman from Elena's column who survived the selection at the ghetto gate was Elena's friend Oktia. "She ran away from the

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<sup>98</sup> "Minsk Hell," in *The Unknown Black Book*, 252; "The Recollections of Dr. Tsetsilia Mikhaylovna Shapiro," *The Unknown Black Book*, 257; Genya Moiseyevna Kobrina, USHMM RG-50.378\*0018; Ida Moiseyevina Brion, USHMM RG-50.378\*0006. See also Solly Ganor, *Das andere Leben: Kindheit im Holocaust* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 81–82; Anatoly Podolsky, "The Tragic Fate of Ukrainian Jewish Women under Nazi Occupation," in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, 94–107.

<sup>99</sup> Oral Testimony of Elena Gringauz, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.4126, p. 12. On such violence in other ghettos in the occupied Soviet Union, see Regina Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2010), 128; and Sinnreich, "The Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust."

<sup>100</sup> Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 74.

<sup>101</sup> Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*



gate and hid in the Russian district. She could do that because she was blond and did not look like a Jew.”<sup>103</sup>

A few days later, two Russian workers offered to obtain a passport for Elena that would identify her as a Polish woman and enable her to leave the ghetto. Drapkina did not go immediately, because she was afraid that she would endanger her housemates or coworkers. Frequent controls and additional marks on people’s coats, identifying the person’s residence and number of residents, helped the ghetto command detect the absence of individuals. If an absence was discovered, all residents of the building were taken hostage and killed.<sup>104</sup> Elena thus waited for a suitable moment, which came after the cruel pogrom in July 1942, when the high death toll cast all data and registration records into disarray. Drapkina left the ghetto immediately after the pogrom. She passed as a gentile woman and found refuge in a farmer’s household west of Minsk before joining a partisan unit.

Leaving the ghetto and joining a partisan unit was the only way to escape certain death. Depending on their age and gender, Sonia Zalesskaia, Samuil Volk, Rita Kazhdan, and Elena Drapkina joined various detachments of guerrilla fighters that strove to sabotage and destroy the infrastructure as well as representatives of the German occupation regime.<sup>105</sup>

### Age and Gender in the Minsk Ghetto

If ever there had been a playful and unburdened childhood for young Soviet Jews in Minsk, it ended right after the arrival of German troops, who steadily increased and refined their system of violence, intimidation, and threat. As Tatyana Gildiner notes, “children in the ghetto did play, but they rarely smiled.”<sup>106</sup> Jewish children who were caught under German occupation had to fulfill roles that, before the war, were largely reserved for adults: working to supply their family and themselves with food, as well as to protect themselves and others against the intrusion of strangers and violence.<sup>107</sup> Schooling is not mentioned even once. This absence points to a stark difference between the Jewish and non-Jewish spaces. Belorussian children were offered an education and other cultural activities, even if the activities and instruction offered were directed according to Nazi ideology.<sup>108</sup> Starving, exposed to the elements,

<sup>103</sup> Elena Drapkina, interviewed by author, St. Petersburg, April 2001.

<sup>104</sup> Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 87.

<sup>105</sup> Anika Wälke, *Pioneers and Partisans: Soviet Jewish Youth Confront the Nazi Genocide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), chaps. 4 and 5.

<sup>106</sup> Tatyana Samuilovna Gildiner, USHMM RG-50.378\*002.

<sup>107</sup> Dwork, *Children with a Star*, 193.

<sup>108</sup> Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev v Belorussii*, 84. On education targeting Belorussian children, see Nicholas, *Cruel World*, 343.

batTLing illness, and fearing for their lives, Jewish youth were physically and mentally exhausted. How many children, Jewish and non-Jewish, fell victim to the Nazi extermination policy is hard to establish. Leonid Smilovitskii notes that children and women were often excluded from Soviet statistics of the dead, and we may thus never know.<sup>109</sup> We can, however, use the existing materials—oral histories, memoirs, and others—to try and reinsert the experiences and perceptions of teenagers and other young people into the historiography of the Holocaust in the USSR.

Surviving in the ghetto largely depended on independently seeking out ways to acquire food, housing, or safety from pogroms. Children and adolescents were particularly vulnerable during killing operations. They were part of the nonworking population and thus had little opportunity to leave the ghetto legally or prove that they served the German war economy, while hiding places such as *maliny* were not safe for children either. Important to both individual and collective responses were informal networks, including Jewish and non-Jewish actors of different ages. Adults who formed an underground network on both sides of the ghetto fence rescued a considerable number of them. Other children and youths from the ghetto continued to interact with people whom they knew from before the war as friends, classmates, and teachers and relied on either peer support or relationships of care familiar from educational institutions.

Rita Kazhdan and, until she was murdered, her mother stand for many young and adult women who provided for their families after male family members had either been drafted into the Soviet army or murdered by the Germans. Whereas in other societies this could have come about as a reversal of prewar gender roles (Poland and its ghettos are one such instance, as described by Nechama Tec), for Soviet families, especially in cities like Minsk, both parents' participation in the labor force and contribution to the household income had been considered normal in the 1930s.<sup>110</sup> Yet labor policies and practices implemented in the 1930s Soviet Union were reversed. Girls and women, many of whom had been employed in the education sector and in administrative positions—or looked forward to such employment—in the prewar period, were now confined to unskilled labor, often as janitors or cooks. This not only devalued the professional training they had acquired

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<sup>109</sup> Smilovitskii, *Katastrofa evreev*, 86–88.

<sup>110</sup> On Poland, see Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 118. On the increased participation of women in the Soviet labor force in the 1930s, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Melanie Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: From "Protection" to "Equality"* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999).

but also made them vulnerable during selections, when skilled workers were favored and unskilled laborers led to execution sites.

The revival of traditional, gendered patterns of labor, whereby daily food provision and other forms of care are relegated to females and the domestic sphere, facilitated survival. Whether it involved smuggling Jewish children out of the ghetto and into children's homes in the Russian district, collecting food and clothes for those in need, or trading equipment and wood smuggled from worksites for food, women took on a significant share of the work.<sup>111</sup> Ghetto inmates also benefited when women found employment in workshop kitchens, granting access to food, or took work as farm maids in the countryside after fleeing from the ghetto.<sup>112</sup>

In addition to the distinct forms of work assigned to women and men, violence and abuse targeted people differently. Most obvious is Elena Drapkina's remark that men formed a disproportionately high number of the skilled workers selected for release during the pogrom on 2 March 1942. Rita Kazhdan's hint at an attempted rape, Mikhail Treister's insinuation of sexual violence against his housemate Sarra Friedman, and Sonia Zaleskaia and many other women's search for cover during nighttime in the ghetto raise the specter of sexual violence as a threat against Jewish persons in the occupied Soviet territories. Allusions such as these convey that underneath the shared experiences of starvation, forced labor, and killing operations was a layer of experience that was determined by gender, including the possibility of sexual violence.

The forms of persecution and violence that targeted women in different ways from men have been examined with regard specifically to concentration camps.<sup>113</sup> The particular situation of gendered subjects in ghettos in the occupied Soviet territories remains largely unexplored. Future research will need to be attentive to the forms and meanings of sexual violence and gender discrimination under Nazi occupation. To broaden our understanding of the role of gender and sexuality for the experience of the Nazi genocide (and historical experience more generally) we must, however, avoid equaling

<sup>111</sup> Smolar, *The Minsk Ghetto*, 54, 66.

<sup>112</sup> Oral Testimony of Elena Gringauz, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.4126, p. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Joan Ringelheim, "The Split between Gender and the Holocaust," in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Leonore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 340–50; Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 150–66; Baumel, *Gender and the Holocaust*. A few chapters examining the experiences of Jewish women in occupied East European territories are contained in Hedgepeth et al., *Sexual Violence*.

notions of gender or sexuality solely with women.<sup>114</sup> It is, for instance, likely that (Jewish) men were also the target of sexual violence in German-occupied Belorussia, acts that may range from enforced nudity and sexual torture to rape and sexual enslavement, though little information has as yet been uncovered.<sup>115</sup> In addition to uncovering *forms* of violence targeted at men based on their sexuality and paying attention to individuals' sexual orientation and how it affected their survival and death, the *function* of sexual violence, which was used by various branches of the occupation forces competing for power over different groups, must be at the center of analysis.

Rita Kazhdan and Mikhail Treister's vague but disturbing remarks on sexual violence within and outside the ghetto encourage further analysis at the nexus of gender and memory. They had difficulty elaborating on these statements, perhaps due to shame or inability to recall or because they never knew. Their difficulty highlights the challenges to reconstructing particular histories of violence and the social nature of memory. Narrators do not simply downplay instances of sexual violence because they consider them less important than the persecution targeting them as members of a national group—a tendency Joan Ringelheim has highlighted.<sup>116</sup> Difficulty elaborating on these violations is also related to their pervasiveness beyond the context of the Nazi genocide. This difficulty thus highlights both the ways in which sexual violence is often committed in secrecy and the role of social taboos preventing the revelation of these violations.<sup>117</sup>

Silencing targeted women in compounded ways. It included the denial of recognition for female Soviet war veterans, a history that has been uncovered by Beate Fieseler, and the active writing-out-of-history of a young, Jewish woman's contribution to resistance efforts, as in the case of Masha Bruskina.<sup>118</sup> Bruskina's name was reinstated and included in the memorial to her group's execution in Minsk only in 2008, after a decades-long struggle by

<sup>114</sup> Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust: Gender, Culture, and Memory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 47–48.

<sup>115</sup> Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen*, 136. The author mentions reports that members of the SS specifically targeted the genitals of young males during beatings, as well as the castration of 56 Jewish men in the ghetto of Bauska (Latvia) in July 1941.

<sup>116</sup> Ringelheim, "The Split between Gender and the Holocaust," 343.

<sup>117</sup> For the Soviet context, see Anika Val'ke [Walke], "Pamiat', gender i molchanie: Ustnaia istoriia v (post-)sovetskoi Rossii i prizrachnaia gran' mezhdru privatnym i publicnym," *Laboratorium: Zhurnal sotsial'nykh issledovanii*, no. 1 (2011): 72–95.

<sup>118</sup> Beate Fieseler, "Der Krieg der Frauen: Die ungeschriebene Geschichte," in *Mascha + Nina + Katjuscha: Frauen in der Roten Armee, 1941–1945. Katalog zur Ausstellung 15.11.2002–23.2.2003*, ed. Deutsch-Russisches Museum Berlin Karlshorst (Berlin: Museum Karlshorst, 2002), 11–20.

scholars against Minsk authorities' claim that her identity was "unknown."<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, silence brought women into close association with Jewish child survivors of the Nazi genocide. First of all, the special targeting of Jews during the Nazi occupation was not typically acknowledged in memory as cultivated by the Soviet state. Second, youth under 18 years of age were not legally considered veterans of the war and thus were not entitled to veterans' benefits.<sup>120</sup> Adolescents occasionally were heroized—especially those who died, such as Zoia Kozmodemianskaia—yet the experiences of Soviet youth were largely neglected in Soviet historiography and not officially part of the history of World War II.<sup>121</sup> Compounded by the denial of distinct Jewish suffering during the war, Soviet Jewish youth thus had no voice in the canon of Soviet war commemoration and historiography. The oral histories, testimonies, and memoirs introduced here, while conveying a decidedly personal standpoint, thereby acquire political importance, as they place youths' experiences in the larger context of the history and memory of Nazi occupation. They help overcome an exclusion produced by means of extreme violence that nearly succeeded in destroying even those few voices we have available.

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<sup>119</sup> Lev Arkadyev and Ada Dikhtyar, "The Unknown Girl: A Documentary Story," *Yiddish Writers Almanac* 1 (1987): 161–204.

<sup>120</sup> Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 5; Oral Testimony of Leonid Okun, Yad Vashem Archives, YV 03.6278, p. 27; Pavel Markovich Rubinchik, conversation with author, St. Petersburg, December 2000; Vladimir Rubezhin, interviewed by author, Minsk, October 2002.

<sup>121</sup> Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers*, 4–5.