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Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: the representation of women's Holocaust experiences

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ABSTRACT This article seeks to show that despite women's lives during the Holocaust becoming a growing area of historical interest, there is a reluctance on the part of Holocaust scholars to acknowledge testimony that does not concur with preconceived gender roles, patterns of suitable female behaviour, or pre-existing narratives of survival. The article focuses on both the testimonies of female witnesses to the Holocaust, and the small but rapidly growing body of secondary literature devoted to looking at women's lives in German-occupied Europe, to show how many testimonies are overlooked because they represent difficult experiences.

The historian of the future will have to devote a fitting chapter to the role of the Jewish woman during the war. It is thanks to the courage and endurance of our women that thousands of families have been able to endure these bitter times.[1]

When Emmanuel Ringelblum wrote these words in June 1942, he foresaw that the experiences of Jewish women under Nazism would become an important area of historical interest. Together with his assistant, Cecilya Slepak, and the staff of the secret *Oneg Shabbat* (Sabbath celebrants) society – formed to create a record of the destruction of Polish Jewry – Ringelblum studied the lives of Jewish women and children in the Warsaw ghetto between the winter of 1941 and the spring of 1942, prior to deportation to Treblinka. Slepak provided questionnaires asking the women about their lives, particularly their lives as wives and mothers. Ringelblum's diary, together with some questionnaires and notes, was

discovered after the War in the ruins of the ghetto. It is significant that Ringelblum's words are cited in the introductions to two books on women and the Holocaust: Judith Tydor Baumel's *Double Jeopardy: gender and the Holocaust* [2] and *Women in the Holocaust* edited by Dalia Ofer & Lenore J. Weitzman.[3] His findings have also inspired other recent books on the same theme. Such studies respond to Ringelblum's challenge by focusing on women's testimonies to highlight their moral, heroic or noble behaviour – both in the ghetto and following deportation to the camps. Tydor Baumel, for example, believes that:

Any study of gender and the Holocaust is at the same time both tragic and uplifting. Tragic, as one cannot escape the awareness of how the gender factor supplied an added variable to the calculus of cruelty during a period when human beings were put to a daily moral, and mortal, test. Uplifting, in view of the women, both Jews and non-Jews, who did not succumb to the natural tendency to live for themselves alone and stretched out a helping hand to each other, transcending differences of race, religion and ideology to form a bond of sisterhood. These women, and their acts of kindness, have served as a beacon of light and humanity in an era of darkness.[4]

Although these 'women-centred' readings provide valuable insights into the specificity of women's Holocaust experiences and open up important areas of research – for example, there is some evidence to suggest that more women than men were deported from the ghettos to concentration camps [5] – their focus is almost exclusively on women's roles as 'mothers' and 'caregivers'. For example, an edited collection of oral testimonies given by women who survived the Holocaust is entitled *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters* – the editor, Brana Gurewitsch, states, 'all of the women here resisted their fates. They supported each other like sisters and nurtured each other like mothers' [6] – and has a photograph on the front cover taken in 1945 of five of the women holding their babies. Furthermore, research on women's experiences is generally presented as an addendum, or corrective to existing androcentric work on the Holocaust.[7] *Different Voices: women and the Holocaust*, edited by Carol Rittner & John K. Roth [8], is explicitly intended as a response to the questions, 'Where were the women during the Holocaust?' and 'How do the particularities of women's experiences in that event compare and contrast with those of men?'[9] Such approaches avoid questioning the categories of meaning they have applied to understanding women, and which women have applied to understanding themselves. Closer attention could be paid to how women's experiences are particularly structured by preconceived gender roles, and how their identities have been shaped around gendered beliefs. In contrast, it will be seen that studies of women in the Holocaust favour stories that are seen as suitable or palatable for

their readers, often avoiding those that do not accord with expected women's behaviour or pre-existing narratives of survival. This is exacerbated by the fact that testimony in general is often used to project easy comprehension of the Holocaust – it is employed to make sense of a difficult subject in an easy manner. Using a familiar gendered conceptual framework, to put it bluntly, women's testimonies are often used to show us what we already want to see. However, assumptions about appropriate gender behaviour obscure the diversity of women's Holocaust experiences.

This article focuses on the testimonies of women, not because it is they who are normally excluded from history, but because it is women whose experiences are chiefly controlled by rigid ideas about patterns of suitable behaviour. It is important to show that the categories of meaning usually employed to make sense of the world can hide many layers of understanding. For example, the Holocaust was not simply a battle between good and evil. Nor was it discriminatory towards its victims. No moral test was required for the gas chamber, only one of race. Of course, there were people who performed 'heroic' acts, but, also, there were many who merely did what they had to do, in order to survive. To show that people are fallible, and act just as human beings, is not to demonise them, but to attempt to present a more rounded picture of responses to extreme circumstances.

Studies of women and the Holocaust tend to portray female witnesses in much the same way as child witnesses, as simply being unproblematic victims. Little reference is made to the Jewish women who, as a result of intolerable circumstances, acted contrary to traditional expectations of female behaviour – such as the women who placed their own survival above that of their children, and the few female Jewish *kapos* [10] who came to mimic the behaviour of their SS captors. Fania Fénelon, a member of the women's orchestra at Auschwitz-Birkenau, describes what happened when her former friend, half-Jewish Clara, was appointed *kapo*: 'Clara rose up before us, arm band in place, club in hand ... Everything that was left of the timid, bashful young girl had just disappeared, destroyed once and for all by the environment of the camp'. Fénelon tried to reason with Clara by pointing out that her actions would make her life difficult after Auschwitz:

'Clara, look at yourself! You've become a monster. If you lash out at your friends, you'll never dare to go back home. Remember your childhood, your girlhood, your parents ... Clara, look at yourself!'

Her eyes shone with a positively mineral brightness ... 'Be quiet and listen to me ... it's me who's the stronger, it's me who's in charge. I've heard enough, now get away!'[11]

Responses such as Clara's might well have been the exception rather than the norm, although it would be hard to give figures since women like her are precisely the ones who are least likely to record their testimonies. They are the ones who most want to forget the past, either because the pain of remembering is too great, or because of fears of retribution or condemnation. Yet even the existing testimonies I want to look at show how the complexities of women's responses to the Holocaust resist easy categorisation and attempts to 'pre-empt' them.[12] Here I use the term introduced by Lawrence Langer, in *Preempting the Holocaust*, in the following words:

When I speak of preempting the Holocaust, I mean using – and perhaps abusing – its grim details to fortify a prior commitment to an ideal of moral reality, community responsibility, or religious belief that leaves us with space to retain faith in their pristine value in a post-Holocaust world.[13]

This does not necessarily stem from cynical misappropriation. There is always a danger of imposing our concerns and beliefs on the events of the Holocaust, because we lack the imagination to see that the issues we consider important might not be applicable. Langer cites Tzvetan Todorov's *Facing the Extreme: moral life in the concentration camp* as an example of an attempt to use the Holocaust to find instances of 'human dignity'.[14] Todorov does this through the use of survivor testimony, for he clearly views such testimony as carrying important lessons for the advancement of humanity. However, the point is that Todorov's perusal of Holocaust testimonies did not lead him to an unanticipated discovery of 'moral life in the concentration camps'; rather, he believes that:

There are various perspectives from which the accounts of life in the camps can be read. One can ponder the precise chain of events that led to the creation of the camps and then to their extinction; one can debate the political significance of the camps; one can extract sociological or psychological lessons from them. Yet even though I cannot ignore these perspectives altogether, I would like to take a different approach. I want to look at the camps from the perspective of moral life.[15]

Todorov did not see the need to try to suppress his own personal views of the world when reading the accounts of prisoners of concentration camps, and as such allowed his readings to reinforce his own deeply held convictions about the state of humanity. For Langer, this criticism of Todorov is also applicable to studies concerned with gender and the Holocaust. He uses the example of Judy Chicago's *Holocaust Project: from darkness into light* [16] to demonstrate how an interest in gender, or a commitment to feminist beliefs, often prefigures an interest in the

Holocaust. For Chicago, patriarchy itself is indicted as part of what made the Holocaust possible – she cites as evidence the fact that the architects of the Third Reich were exclusively male.[17] Furthermore, Chicago does not just wish to offer a gendered reading of the Holocaust, but wants to use her beliefs about women to, as Todorov has also attempted to do, rescue the study of the Holocaust from a place of unremitting despair. As Langer has pointed out, the very title of Chicago's book is illustrative of this; she clearly could not envisage a project subtitled 'From Light into Darkness'.[18]

However, I would suggest that Langer goes too far when he claims that, due to the 'severely diminished role that gendered behaviour played during those cruel years' [19], studies of gender in the Holocaust are merely 'preempting the Holocaust'. While I would agree that gendered roles and behaviour, in the same way as many pre-war roles and modes of interaction, were severely challenged by the Holocaust, I differ from Langer in believing that an understanding of the intricacies of gender is important when looking at the testimonies of Holocaust witnesses. Societal constructions of gender must have continued to inform women's (and men's) actions, even if their behaviour did not conform to gendered expectations. The very fact that during the Holocaust women were often unable to meet these expectations has important and often ongoing traumatic repercussions for female survivors trying to not only represent their wartime experiences but also to connect them to their pre- and post-war lives. This article seeks to explore how gender stereotypes have been used in Holocaust writing, in its marketing, and in Holocaust testimony.

In her book *Reading Auschwitz*, Mary D. Lagerwey writes that she:

Easily found evidence ... of women's unique experiences, of sexuality, friendship and parenting, their mutual concern for and assistance of each other, their emotional capacity, their unselfish and sacrificial sharing, and great flexibility – in sum, a moral superiority that even the horrors of Auschwitz could not obliterate. And, true to my expectations, I found that the stories written by men told of personal isolation, personal survival at any cost, ruthless competition, and pragmatic allegiances.[20]

Although she goes on to problematise this, and to state that 'Male survivors framed their narratives in order and coherence, and often de-emphasised emotions' [21], she does not explore the implications of such an observation, namely, that although there may not be inherent gender differences in the expression of emotions, social norms and expectations regarding masculinity and femininity may result in different emotional expressions.[22] The coping strategies of men and women might not be as different as the narrative structures that represent them suggest. What is often overlooked is the importance of gender differences in the *narration*

of experience. Testimonies are not spontaneous bursts of information, but come from careful representation of experience, or the perceived 'appropriateness' of experiences for publication. For example, the development of Women's Studies meant that women's Holocaust memoirs appearing from the mid-1970s onwards emphasise gender-related experiences – such as the loss of femininity, pregnancy and fear of rape – to a much greater extent than is the case in earlier women's memoirs.[23]

Publishers' comments on the book jackets of testimonies also seek to provide black and white accounts of the Holocaust. The blurbs on testimonies of both men and women tend to promote them as cathartic acts of memory, and suggest that by reading them, the reader is performing an act of psychological or even political solidarity. Holocaust testimonies, in other words, can ennoble both writer and reader. In the case of women's testimonies, and particularly those of young girls, this often expresses itself in a sentimentality that has nothing to do with the original concerns of the writer. For example, *Stolen Years*, Sara Zyskind's account of her teenage years spent in the Łódź ghetto, Auschwitz, and then the Mittelstein slave labour camp, is described as 'an odyssey of agony that should never be forgotten ... an epic of love and courage that the reader will want to remember forever'.[24] Nowhere in her testimony does Zyskind state or imply that she views it as 'an epic of love and courage', and she, unlike her readers, lacks the luxury of deciding whether or not she wants to remember it forever. It is the suggestion of emotion, although not of traumatic emotion, that holds the possibility of providing a bond between witness and reader. Women, and in particular young women, are often seen as fulfilling this role.

Anne Frank is the most obvious example of this. Her diary, originally written in Dutch and published in 1947 as *Het Achterhuis* (The Room Behind the House), sold only 1500 copies at the time, but has now become the second most popular non-fiction book in the world under the new title, *The Diary of a Young Girl*. [25] In it, we hear the voice of an intelligent young girl whose life was cut tragically short – she was thirteen when she started to write her diary and fifteen when she died. The 'personal' connotations of diary writing make many people feel that they actually knew Frank: she is an accessible Holocaust witness. However, she herself wrote, 'Although I tell you a lot, you only know very little of our lives ... It is almost indescribable'. [26]

Frank's diary is in many ways ideal for teaching or reading about the Holocaust, while not actually dealing with its horrors. It shows us an innocent young girl who, although hungry and suffering the misery of hiding in cramped conditions, still manages (until deportation) to write of more universally recognised teenage troubles, such as adolescent infatuations and parental disagreements. It does not touch on her

experiences of deportation and life at Westerbork, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen. The recent film documentary, *The Last Seven Months of Anne Frank*, by contrast, uses interviews with six women who knew Frank in the period after her arrest.[27] Their memories of her are intermingled with memories of the concentration camp – for them, the fate of Anne Frank represents not a heroic tale of good over evil, but rather the terrible fate of so many concentration camp inmates. While this hardly undermines the power and value of the diary itself, it does call into question attempts to treat Frank as a ‘symbol of the six million’. In the words of the journalist Anne Karpf, ‘Anne Frank ... has been hijacked by those who want their Holocaust stories to be about the triumph of the human spirit over evil and adversity’.[28] Hence, the most frequently cited of Frank’s statements is ‘I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart’. This seems to have become her epitaph, rather than her last diary entry on Tuesday, 1 August 1944, which states, ‘A voice within me is sobbing ... I get cross, then sad ... and keep trying to find a way to become what I’d like to be and what I could be if ... if only there were no other people in the world’.[29]

To avoid ‘preempting’ the Holocaust, testimonies must not be taken as exhaustive of all Holocaust experiences. Not only are experiences of hiding different to those of living in the camps, but also to life within the confines of the ghetto. Dalia Ofer & Lenore J. Weitzman highlight Emmanuel Ringelblum’s observation that women’s coping strategies and nurturing roles continued under wartime conditions; although they acknowledge this might derive in part from the middle-class bias of Ringelblum’s subjects, they still present as typical ‘women ... fac[ing] overwhelming forces with incredible resourcefulness, courage, and persistence’.[30] In particular, they highlight Ringelblum’s praising of the Jewish woman for her valiant attempts to care for her family. Indeed, this image is clearly evident in many Holocaust testimonies. For example, Sara Zyskind writes of the Łódź ghetto:

Hunger was now stalking the ghetto ... Mother and I didn’t feel the shortage of food so much, for even in good times we had eaten sparingly, but Father, with his healthy appetite, suffered badly from hunger pangs. Mother tried hard to supplement his diet, salvaging every grain of barley or crumb of bread to make an additional meal. To disguise the terrible taste of rotten potatoes we were now receiving, she grated them finely and made fritters out of them. When Father discovered her hidden culinary talents, he responded with good-humoured praise.[31]

No doubt Sara and her mother did sometimes go hungry to spare their father and husband additional hunger. For Dalia Ofer & Lenore J. Weitzman, it is ‘the portrait of a woman who saved her single ration of

bread for her children, or that of a man who volunteered for forced labour because his wages were promised to his family – that restores individuality and humanity to the victims'.[32] But what about the unfortunate women who could not resist eating their paltry bread ration, or the men too exhausted to even consider volunteering for such hard work? Their responses are just as human. The shame at not being able to control one's hunger can produce a terrible self-hatred, as an unknown girl in the Łódź ghetto wrote in her diary:

March 11, 1942 – I ate all the honey. I am selfish. What will the family say? I'm not worthy of my mother, who works so hard ... My mother looks awful, like a shadow. She works very hard. When I wake up at twelve or one o'clock at night she's sewing, and at six a.m. she's back on her feet. I have no heart, I have no pity. I eat anything that lands near me.[33]

Furthermore, the valorising of sacrifice often means that the struggles surrounding temptation are glossed over, although they could traumatise both those who gave in to temptation and those who fought desperately to overcome it. In *Through the Window of My Home: memories from ghetto Lodz*, Sara Selver-Urbach writes:

Only people who participated in the weighing out of provisions in the presence of their whole family know what took place at those times: sharp, suspicious glances directed at the scales, mingled with shame and anger at having reached such a horrible degradation.

I relate these events with a heavy heart because we too, we too, started weighing our food. At first, we tried to justify this new step by claiming that the weighing would ensure an accurate and fair apportioning of our rations, so that no one would be wronged. Still, in our family, we never fought over our food, neither during the weighing of rations nor prior to it ...

But I could not be blind to the naked truth, at least where I was concerned. For I coveted greatly my own portion, and the weighing secured every gramme that was justly mine. A burning shame sweeps over me when I think back to those weighings, and I am consumed with remorse lest I was partial, here and there, to myself and added an extra crumb of bread to my portion when it was my turn to weigh the food, though I know I would restore such a crumb on the very next occasion. And yet, this blot, this disgrace, will always remain with me, this shame at having had to lead such an inner struggle.[34]

Research on the particularity of women's Holocaust experiences is right to draw attention to the role of mother, but this must be put in the context of the difficulty in fulfilling that role under a Nazi regime

ruthlessly committed to destroying the Jewish family. In November 1941, Ringelblum recorded, 'Jews have been prohibited from marrying and having children. Women pregnant up to three months have to have an abortion' [35], while Avraham Tory wrote in his diary in the Kovno Ghetto, 'From September on, giving birth is strictly forbidden. Pregnant women will be put to death', and went on to write on 4 February 1943, 'It was terrible to watch the women getting on the truck; they held in their arms babies of different ages and wrapped in more and more sweaters so that they would not catch cold on the way (to their death)'. [36] Also in the Theresienstadt ghetto a decree for compulsory abortion was issued in July 1943, and afterwards any woman who refused to comply with this order, or who gave birth, was placed on the next transport to concentration camps in the East. [37] Women's responses to this climate of anti-mothering are complex and varied.

In March 1943 when the Nazis began liquidating the Polish city of Lwów, forcing the Jews from the ghetto and murdering thousands, a small group, including several small children, managed to escape into the sewers. They lived in a confined space among the city's waste for fourteen months. One of the members of the group, Genia Weinberg, gave birth to a baby boy, assisted only by her comrades with a pair of rusty scissors and a towel. Needless to say, it would be almost impossible to care for a baby under such conditions. The dilemma was whether to attempt to raise the child at all costs, or to sacrifice its life for the sake of the group since its cries could attract attention. Due to the appallingness of such a choice, it is not surprising that there are differing versions of what happened. The mother herself provides the following version of events that is cited by Robert Marshall in a book entitled *In the Sewers of Lvov: the last sanctuary from the Holocaust*:

The group quickly realized the hopelessness of trying to care for a baby ... The baby's cries would alert people in the street of their presence and so it was agreed, unanimously, that the baby be terminated. It was taken away, killed, and disposed of. [38]

In this account Mrs Weinberg seems to be trying to distance herself both from her baby and from a personal decision to end its life. However, an alternative version of events is provided in the same book by a family called Chiger and confirmed by a woman named Klara Margulies. They recall:

Mrs Weinberg showed no sign of wanting to suckle the baby, so, in order to quieten the little boy's cries, Paulina tried to feed him some sweet water. She dipped a piece of clean material in the water and placed it against the baby's mouth. Instinctively, he began to suck ...

The baby had been given to Genia to hold but she appeared uninterested in it.

The Chigers' daughter, Kristina, who was seven years old at the time, recalled:

I remember seeing my mother crawling towards the baby and trying to give it a little water, and Mrs Weinberg was taking the baby away from my mother. I saw my mother fighting with her, my mother was trying to give some water and Mrs Weinberg was pulling the baby away.

And Ignacy Chiger records:

She [Mrs Weinberg] began to hug the baby closer and closer to herself, covering its face with a towel or rag, supposedly to quiet the sound of his whimpering. But my wife realized that she was in fact trying to suffocate the baby and she tried to pull the cloth away.

The struggle continued for some time until the two women were just too exhausted to continue ... In the morning, the little corpse was lying beside his mother, who had fallen into a sullen trance.[39]

Leopold Socha, another member of the group, was horrified by what happened but, rather than condemning the mother, he developed great affection for her, perhaps realising the trauma that she had been through. If Mrs Weinberg did suffocate her own baby, her testimony of events can be read either as a coping strategy to avoid facing the full horror of what had happened, or as a partial suppression of a painful truth. She can be understood not just as a mother (and perhaps as a bad mother, for failing to live up to the ideals celebrated by Ofer & Weitzman), but as a woman who had perhaps not yet relinquished her hope for a future.

On arrival at the camps, men and women were separated before being murdered in the gas chambers, or being sent to separate camps, or barracks. At Auschwitz, women who refused to be separated from children under the age of fourteen were sent to the gas chambers with them. Mothers were faced with what Lawrence Langer calls 'a choiceless choice' – meaning they could attempt to dissociate themselves from their children in the uncertain hope of survival, or accompany them to a certain death. Some women did not even realise that they were going with their children to their deaths, as the Nazis took pains to conceal the reality of the gas chambers until it was too late. Experienced prisoners, who did know the truth, sometimes tried to tell the mothers to hand the children over to the elderly, for the elderly were already condemned to death on account of their age. However, studies of women in the Holocaust continue the theme of the dutiful mother by suggesting, for example, that on arrival at Auschwitz, 'most women clung to their children (and many

young girls to their mothers) and were sent to the gas chambers with them'.[40] This statement, taken from Ofer & Weitzman's *Women in the Holocaust*, may indeed be true of most women, but there are also exceptions. In his semi-autobiographical work, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* [41], which recalls events he is known to have experienced but are filtered through the voice of 'Tadek', Tadeusz Borowski tells the story of a young woman's attempt to abandon her crying child and pretend no knowledge of it, although she in fact fails and is forced to share the child's fate. It is not easy to make sense of this young mother's response within frameworks of interpretation based on the notion of the dutiful mother.

Pregnant women were occasionally admitted to the camps, either because they were married to gentile husbands, or because their pregnancy was not yet noticeable. Some would undergo induced miscarriages, often as late as the fourth or fifth month. The 'choiceless choice' finds particular expression when women gave birth in the camps. In *An Estate of Memory*, Ilona Karmel explores pregnancy in slave labour camps to understand the moral dilemmas of survival. Karmel, who survived such camps herself, points out that there were many responses to motherhood. For example, she contrasts one woman's 'longing for a child' with another's sense of her unborn baby as 'a tormentor who sucked her strength, snatched every crumb away'.[42] Significantly, newborn children were not allowed to survive: if discovered, it meant certain death for both mother and child. Therefore, many of the inmate doctors decided that such children had to die so that the mother might live. They saved poison for this purpose, and in its absence were forced to smother the babies. Sometimes they managed to kill the baby without the mother's knowledge, in the expectation that this would spare her some measure of pain, but on other occasions she was aware of the situation. In *Auschwitz: a doctor's story*, Lucie Adelsberger remembers, 'One time there was no poison available, and so the mother strangled the child she had just delivered ... She was a Pole, a good mother who loved her children more than anything else. But she had hidden three small children back home and wanted to live for them'.[43]

Ilona Karmel tells us what happened when women did try to save a newborn baby, when Nazi doctors had ordered that the child be placed in cotton wool but not fed anything, including water. The women involved risked their own lives to feed the baby sugar water, but the baby died anyway, its suffering prolonged.[44] Unfortunately, there exists very little surviving documentation written by women while they were actually in the camps. A lack of resources such as paper and writing implements, fear of punishment and the Nazi commitment to destroying any evidence of their crimes are some of the reasons for the rarity of these types of

testimonies. Witnesses writing after liberation describe the incredulity they felt towards their experiences, and the way that any energy they had was used up in the battle to survive from one moment to the next. However, studies of women in concentration camps pay a great deal of attention to stories of mutual support, primarily women who survived with close relatives – daughters, mothers, sisters, cousins. Some realised that in order to survive the camps, they needed to do so by being caring to one another. In her memoir entitled *Rena's Promise: a story of sisters in Auschwitz*, Rena Kornreich Gelissen recalls the words she spoke to her sister whilst in Auschwitz: '[T]his is my dream, Danka – I am going to bring you home. We're going to walk through our farmhouse door and Mama and Papa will be there waiting for us. Mama will hug and kiss us, and I'm going to say, "Mama, I got your baby back"'.^[45]

Women who lost their own families sometimes created 'camp families' in their place. For many this was an important contributory factor in survival, not least emotionally. Such images of mutual care and concern are very moving, but what is problematic is when they are used to obscure the horrors of the concentration camp by introducing a redemptive message into the Holocaust.^[46] This is deeply misleading. Testimonies document the sharp and often violent divisions of prisoners within the camps based on factors like one's position in the camp hierarchy, political affiliation, religious observance or geographical origin. Furthermore, their scope for action was so constrained that caring for someone invariably meant at somebody else's expense. When Rena manages to get her sister a place on her bunk, she acknowledges, 'I do not ask what will happen to the girl who was sleeping next to me ... This is a selfish act, perhaps, but I have a sister who I have to keep alive and she is all that matters'.^[47]

Ultimately, too, prisoners could share their bread, but in most cases could not protect those they loved from starvation, from disease, from brutality or ultimately from death. They continually had to endure situations that in their pre-war lives they could have acted upon. Sara Selver-Urbach tells the following story:

A well-known physician from the Lodz Ghetto was now an inmate in our blockhouse. She broke down completely from the start, lost control over her bodily functions ... Her daughter, who was another of our inmates, did her utmost to conceal her mother's state to protect her. A Kapo who'd noticed the daughter's efforts beat her so cruelly that she fainted. The rest of us, inmates, watched the brutal punishment mutely, stonily, acknowledging in our despair the omnipotence of the laws that governed Auschwitz.

All of us, that is, except Salusha, who had not yet grasped sufficiently the supremacy of those laws (the incident occurred on one of our first days in that camp). To our horrified stupefaction, Salusha's childish voice spoke suddenly, in the deadly silence: 'Why are you beating her? It's so unfair!'

Salusha had barely finished her remark when the fat Kapo burst into a wild fit of laughter, her colleagues – who ruled over our blockhouse with her – joining in the sickening merriment.

'Fairness! She's looking for fairness! Did you hear that?' They screeched raucously, holding their bellies, their faces contorted. One of them imitated in a strident, almost bestial voice, Salusha's outburst, stressing exaggeratedly every syllable: 'Why-are-you-beating-her-it's-so-un-fair-hi-hi-hi ...!'

But the incident did not end there. Far from it!

The Kapo punished Salusha. She dragged her out of the line-up and made her climb on top of the stove which ran the length of the blockhouse. There, she forced Salusha onto her knees, placed heavy bricks in her hands and ordered her to raise hands and bricks above her head, a position which poor Salusha was compelled to stay for some hours. Never again did Salusha ask for fairness and justice.[48]

This failure to be able to intervene results in the corrosion of a sense of self, which is a common theme of many Holocaust memoirs. Women's testimonies in particular highlight the trauma of losing a sense of one's physical self. For example, for many women (particularly religious women) it was the first experience of the showers that eroded their sense of self and will to live. A comparative study of women's and men's testimonies suggests that more women than men describe the trauma of their initiation into the concentration camp world. Women write of the agony of having to stand naked in front of men, of being searched for hidden valuables, of being shorn of all their hair, and of being tattooed. A further step in the erosion of the self was the stopping of their menstruation shortly after arrival in the camps (while this might have been the result of shock or starvation, it was also rumoured that the food the women ate was laced with bromide as part of an experiment in mass sterilisation). This made some women fearful that they would be infertile forever. Some even tried to eat less food in the hope that it would cause less damage. However, hunger generally made this a short-lived strategy.

It can be seen how assumptions about women's behaviour obscure the diversity of their Holocaust experiences. The Holocaust was indiscriminate in its targeting of the Jews – every Jew, male or female, was

condemned to death. The religious, the secular, the educated, the ignorant, the good and the corrupt were all sentenced to the same fate. For those who survived, feelings of guilt can exist regardless of whether or not they are deserved. The identities of women are constructed on the basis of roles such as 'mother', 'caregiver', 'daughter', and testimonies are often selected to reinforce these pre-existing ideas. Many testimonies *do* focus on the desire to fulfil traditional gendered expectations. While in Auschwitz, Rena was determined to prove herself a caring sister. Since she and her sister both survived, she was able to maintain this self-image. Other testimonies describe the split between the desire to meet particular expectations, and the realisation that they could not be attained. Ilona Karmel tells us that when women did try to save a child by secretly feeding it, very often they merely prolonged the child's suffering. Other women such as Clara abandoned all ideals of female (or human) decency and became vicious *kapos*. They refused to acknowledge who they had been, or might be expected to be. Women such as Clara show that under extreme consequences people can act in unexpected ways. And, before arriving at Auschwitz, the young mother described by Borowski might have fulfilled all the criteria demanded of 'mother', but, realising her child was sentenced to die, tried to abandon her in order to live. She, like the majority of those who experienced the Holocaust, did not survive to write her testimony.

Survivors who write testimony can feel compelled to make their experiences compatible with pre-existing narratives of survival. Part of the process of writing a testimony may be to record a story of survival in a way that helps the survivor to carry on with his or her life within a culture in which gender norms are strong. For example, Genia Weinberg might need to deny suffocating her child in order to go on living. For most survivors, Holocaust testimony is rooted in traumatic experience, and the act of writing a testimony involves the rediscovering of an identity – be it witness, survivor, Jew, loving mother, or dutiful daughter, to name but a few. For some, the desire to adopt the role of the witness was present at the time of the Holocaust. The post-war adoption of the role of the witness might provide survivors with a sense of purpose, but they are still survivors of traumatic experience, and not only is their testimony mediated by the present, but also by the myriad factors which play a part in a survivor's narrative. Unfortunately, the distressing stories of people who acted desperately, under appalling circumstances, in order to survive are often overlooked. It is, of course, understandable that many people shy away from confronting the full horrors of the Holocaust, yet this will continue as long as women's testimonies are projected as 'epics of love and courage'.

Notes

- [1] Emmanuel Ringelblum (1974) *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: the journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*, p. 294, ed. Jacob Sloan (New York: Schocken Books).
- [2] Judith Tydor Baumel (1998) *Double Jeopardy: gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell).
- [3] Dalia Ofer & Lenore J. Weitzman (Eds) (1998) *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- [4] Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy*, p. 260.
- [5] See Joan Ringelheim (1990) Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust, in Roger S. Gottlieb (Ed.) *Thinking the Unthinkable: meanings of the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press).
- [6] Brana Gurewitsch (Ed.) *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: oral histories of women who survived the Holocaust*, p. xii (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press).
- [7] Research into the specificity of women's Holocaust experiences has increased greatly since the first conference on 'Women Surviving the Holocaust' in March 1983. The conference was organized by Joan Ringelheim and sponsored by the Institute for Research in History in New York City. See Esther Katz & Joan Miriam Ringelheim (Eds) (1983) *Proceedings of the Conference, Women Surviving the Holocaust* (New York: Institute for Research in History).
- [8] Carol Rittner & John K. Roth (Eds) (1993) *Different Voices: women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House).
- [9] *Ibid.*, p. xi.
- [10] The term 'kapo' is derived from the Italian word *capo* (chief) and was used in the concentration camps to refer to a prisoner appointed by the SS to be in charge of a labour *kommando* of other prisoners.
- [11] Fania Fénelon (1980) *Playing for Time*, trans. Judith Landry, pp. 235-236 (London: Sphere Books).
- [12] It should be pointed out that no study of testimony can be representative of the victims of the Holocaust as the vast majority perished without ever writing down their experiences. While a surprising number of writings were produced during the Holocaust – according to the library at Yad Vashem (The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, established in Jerusalem in 1953) there are more than 300 published diaries – most testimony comes from survivors (the library reports that 3000 memoirs have now been published of Jews who survived the Holocaust).
- [13] Lawrence Langer (1998) *Preempting the Holocaust*, p. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press).
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

- [15] Tzvetan Todorov (1996) *Facing the Extreme: moral life in the concentration camps*, trans. Arthur Denner & Abigail Pollak, p. 31 (New York: Henry Holt).
- [16] Judy Chicago (1993) *Holocaust Project: from darkness into light* (New York: Viking Press).
- [17] Cited in Langer, *Preempting the Holocaust*, p. 13.
- [18] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- [19] *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- [20] Mary D. Lagerwey (1998) *Reading Auschwitz*, p. 75 (London: Sage).
- [21] *Ibid.*
- [22] See Deborah Lupton (1998) *The Emotional Self*, pp. 55-61 (London: Sage).
- [23] See, for example, Judith Magyar Isaacson (1990) *Seed of Sarah: memoirs of a survivor* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press); Livia E. Bitten Jackson (1984) *Eli: coming of age in the Holocaust* (London: Grafton Books); Rena Kornreich Gelissen, with Heather Dune Macadean (1996) *Rena's Promise: a story of two sisters in Auschwitz* (London: Orion); and Giuliana Tedeschi (1993) *There is a Place on Earth* (London: Lime Tree).
- [24] Referring to Sara Zyskind's (1983) *Stolen Years* (New York: Signet).
- [25] Anne Frank (1952) *The Diary of a Young Girl*, trans. B.M. Mooyart-Doubleday (London: Vallentine Mitchell).
- [26] Anne Frank (1989) *The Diary of Anne Frank: the critical edition*, ed. David Barnouw & Gerrold van der Stroom, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans & B.M. Mooyaart-Doubleday, pp. 578-579 (New York: Doubleday).
- [27] Film-maker Willy Lindwer's book of the same name (London, 1999) contains the complete transcripts.
- [28] Anne Karpf (1999) Let's Pretend Life is Beautiful, *The Guardian, Saturday Review*, 3 April.
- [29] Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, p. 336.
- [30] Ofer & Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 10.
- [31] Zyskind, *Stolen Years*, p. 26.
- [32] Ofer & Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 14.
- [33] Yad Vashem Archives, 06/52.
- [34] Sara Selver-Urbach (1972) *Through the Windows of My Home: memories from ghetto Lodz*, pp. 77-78 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem).
- [35] Ringeblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto*, p. 230.
- [36] Avraham Tory (1990) *Surviving the Holocaust: the Kovno ghetto diary*, trans. Jerzy Michalowicz, pp. 114 & 195 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).
- [37] Ofer & Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 7.

- [38] Cited in Robert Marshall (1991) *In the Sewers of Lvov: the last sanctuary from the Holocaust*, p. 125 (London: Fontana Press).
- [39] *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
- [40] Ofer & Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, p. 11.
- [41] Tadeusz Borowski (1976) *This Way to the Gas Ladies and Gentlemen*, trans. Barbara Vedder, p. 43 (New York: Penguin).
- [42] Ilona Karmel (1986) *An Estate of Memory*, p. 242 (New York: Feminist Press).
- [43] Lucie Adelsberger (1996) *Auschwitz: a doctor's story*, p. 101 (London: Robson Books).
- [44] Karmel, *An Estate of Memory*, p. 255.
- [45] Kornreich Gelissen, *Rena's Promise*, p. 73.
- [46] See the quotation from Tydor Baumel on p. 662 of this article.
- [47] Kornreich Gelissen, *Rena's Promise*, p. 72.
- [48] Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home*, pp. 130-131.
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