

**French women and Nazi concentration camps. A  
study of the testimonies of French female survivors**

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A thesis  
submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree  
of  
Doctor of Philosophy in French  
in the  
University of Canterbury  
by  
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University of Canterbury  
2002

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## **Abstract**

This thesis is a study of the experiences of French women deported to Nazi concentration camps during World War Two, conducted with reference to an extensive corpus of published and archival autobiographical testimonies written by French female camp survivors. The testimonies of French male survivors and non-French writers are also utilised to a lesser degree as supplementary and comparative sources. The thesis aims to contribute to concentration camp scholarship by configuring a hitherto unrealised comprehensive portrait of the French female body of writing, elucidating how French women depict their camp experience, their responses to the unique challenges of testimonial writing and the gender specificity of this literature.

Focusing on those aspects which are most significant within the testimonies of French women, the study demonstrates how social and biological gender specificity shape and particularize the narratives of these women. It also encompasses the pivotal theme of inmate relations, revealing the simultaneous externalization and redefinition of the notion of prisoner privilege which occurs in these writers' portrayal of hierarchical prisoner interaction, as well as the marked emphasis which French female survivors place upon the concepts of solidarity, mutual aid and collective structures. The purely textual level is also examined, detailing both the variety of responses to the issues of testimonial writing manifested by these writers and the cross-narrative authorial conception of the testimony as ultimately problematic. These areas of inquiry combine to yield a portrait of a highly complex testimonial genre, characterized by often unresolved tensions which are reflective of the complex and consistently nuanced nature of the wider camp experience.



## **Acknowledgements**

Thanks must go to a number of people who have assisted and supported me during my time as a Ph.D student. Firstly, I owe thanks to the always supportive staff of the French department at Canterbury, and especially to Pierre Daprini, my supervisor, whose unfailing interest, encouragement and good humour, together with his wealth of knowledge, has made the doctoral experience an overwhelmingly positive one. I also thank Ken Allott for his assistance with final formatting, and the University of Canterbury and those associated with the Brownlie Scholarship for the financial support and funding provided during the writing of this thesis.

On a more personal level, I owe thanks to my parents, Diane Carson and Peter Jellyman, for their support (both financial and moral) over many years at university. To Kylie and Dion Vincent for their ongoing support. And especially to Andrew for his patience and understanding over the past three years, without which the thesis would not have been written.



## Glossary

The Nazi concentration camp system spawned a range of terms which were commonly used across the network of camps, and which thus appear frequently within the extracts of testimonial literature cited in the thesis. The following are among the most widely utilised (note, however, that testimonies manifest many variations in the spelling of these terms).

**Appell:** Roll call.

**Appellplatz:** The square where roll call was held.

**Arbeit:** Work.

**Arbeitsstatistik:** Labour records office, which assigned prisoners to different work details.

**Aufseherin:** SS supervisor.

**Aufstehen:** The command to get up.

**Aussenlager:** External, satellite camp of a larger camp.

**Betrieb:** Workshop, factory.

**Bettkarte:** Card allowing temporary exemption from work.

**Blocksperr:** Curfew, in which prisoners were confined to their barracks and forbidden to circulate within the camp.

**Blokova** (also **Blokowa**, **Blockälteste**, **Blockältester**): Barracks chief or supervisor, responsible for order within the barracks and the distribution of rations.

**Bunker:** Bunker or dungeon used as a prison within the prison, usually for torturing or isolating inmates.

**Canada** (also **Kanada**): The storeroom at Auschwitz where various goods stolen from prisoners upon arrival were housed, and where many prisoners worked sorting and despatching these items to Germany. The Nazis encouraged those they deported to bring their valuables with them, hence the enormous wealth amassed at this depot.

**Effektenkammer:** Storeroom housing prisoners' confiscated personal belongings.

**Coyas** (also **cojas**, **coias**): The tiered camp beds.

**Häftling:** A camp prisoner.

**Kapo** (also **Capo**): Prisoner leader of a work unit.

**Kinderzimmer:** Infants' block.

**Kommando:** Work unit comprised of camp prisoners.

**Lager:** The concentration camp.

**Lagerälteste:** The camp leader, or highest ranking prisoner within the camp hierarchy, responsible for implementing SS orders within the camp.

**Lagerkapo:** Chief Kapo of the external work details.

**Lagerpolizei:** The prisoner police corps, charged with maintaining order within the camp confines.

**Lagerstrasse:** The central camp street.

**Lapin:** Prisoner term for those inmates subjected to Nazi medical experiments.

**Muselmänner, Musulman:** Prisoner slang denoting an inmate in the catatonic state of advanced starvation and exhaustion, for whom death was near.

**N.N (Nacht und Nebel):** Nazi expression designating political prisoners who were destined to disappear in the camps without trace.

**Revier:** The camp hospital or infirmary.

**Schwester:** Nurse.

**Selection (also Selektion):** Process by which a member of the SS determined which prisoners were to be exterminated. Usually this involved the prisoners passing naked before the selecting officer, who motioned them to either the left or right depending on whether they were designated for life or death. Only those inmates deemed fit for further labour were accorded the right to live.

**Sonderbehandlung:** Special treatment, the Nazi euphemism for extermination.

**Sonderkommando:** Isolated Jewish work crews forced to aid in the process of extermination within the crematoria and gas chambers. These units were themselves regularly exterminated *en masse* and replaced.

**Strafblock:** Punishment barracks, where conditions were particularly harsh.

**Strafestehen:** A form of punishment which required the prisoners to stand immobile outdoors for extended periods.

**Stücke:** Derogatory term for camp prisoners, roughly translatable as a "thing".

**Stubendienst:** Assistant or deputy to the blockova, in charge of a room or section within the barracks. Usually distributed the food rations.

**Verfügbar:** Prisoner who was not inscribed in a fixed work group, but who was available for placement in any Kommando.

**Waschraum:** Washroom.

**Zimmerdienst:** Prisoners charged with the cleaning of the barracks, and thus exempted from external work details.

**Zugang, Zugänge:** New, inexperienced prisoners who were as yet uninitiated into the ways of camp life and thus frequently victimized by other inmates.



## Introduction

To embark upon any field of study which falls within the broad parameters of Nazi history is by no means to enter virgin territory, and the experience of prisoners interned in German concentration camps during World War Two is certainly no exception. The generalized camp phenomenon has spawned a massive body of critical literature — literature which spans, among other genres, the philosophical, the socio-biological, the psychoanalytical, the behavioural and the purely historical. And of course, this proliferative corpus coexists with innumerable films and novels which cater to the seemingly insatiable public appetite for material documenting this aspect of World War Two history. Within such a context of apparent saturation, one might well question what new areas of scholarly pursuit remain within the confines of the *univers concentrationnaire*.

The study of testimonial concentration camp literature, however, remains in its infancy. Survivors of Nazi camps have produced numerous autobiographical testimonies, engendering a genre which defies ready categorization. For the camp testimony is frequently a somewhat fluid hybrid of factual testimony and subjective narrative, of the historical and the personal, the ingenuous and the calculated, in which the author may oscillate between the often irreconcilable roles of analyst, witness, victim and avenger. Undeniably subjective, such texts tend to be relegated to the rank of poor second cousin to more traditional comprehensive and distanced cumulative historical studies; useful as primary witness material, but by the same token somehow suspect in their lack of objectivity, broader analysis or demonstration of causal logic. As such, camp testimonies have been frequently incorporated as evidential sources within wider historical studies, but considerably under-emphasized as an autonomous, independently valid corpus.

And yet their value is inestimable. For a study of camp testimonies allows us to configure a more direct, non-interventional conceptualization of the camp mechanism, its contours and nuances dictated by those who lived the experience rather than those who seek to elucidate it from afar. The way in which survivors writing their own experience envisage and delineate the camp phenomenon without the guiding hand of the historian, the aspects which they themselves elect to accord the greatest significance — elements which may not correspond to those thematic spheres elevated to prominence by historians — , and their responses not only to the camp experience but also to the far from facile task of conveying it, collectively render the

corpus of camp literature a rich area of investigation. So, too, do those very aspects of testimonial literature which may commonly be dismissed as its weaknesses. While cognisance of the inevitable moral expectations of the potential reading public, for example, may certainly influence the writer's choices and self-presentation, the authorial response to this influence — what is written and what is consigned to the subtext — may create significant textual indicators which tell us much about the real dichotomy between camp morality and conventional societal mores. At the same time, the testimony's inherent lack of omniscience and objectivity, its close-range (and thus inevitably imperfect) focus upon that contained area of camp life experienced by its author, affords a uniquely personal perspective which cannot but be fundamental to the study of history. For what is the collective concept we term "history" if not the sum of individual experiences and personal chronicles? And does not the cardinal constitutive role of the individual experience in weaving the macrocosmic fabric of history, then, render the subjective source deserving of greater historical attention? If it is indeed the brief of history to promote the greatest possible understanding of any given era, the comprehensive study of such testimonial sources as an entity *sui generis* must be deemed of unarguable significance.

The designation of testimonies penned by French women as the primary focus for such testimonial analysis is, however, no accident. Within the work of those critical writers who have initiated a focus upon testimonial literature to any significant degree (most notably Marlene Heinemann, Alain Parrau, Michael Pollak and Annette Wieviorka), the testimonies of French women as a group remain unexplored, and to a large extent subsumed within more general investigative approaches which, while they may consider the female or the French aspect, do not comprehensively synthesize the two. At the same time, the specific experience of women within the camps is an area which begs for further investigation. For while the issue of gender may define and shape many aspects of the female camp experience, general studies of the *univers concentrationnaire* all too often remain firmly rooted in the traditional triumvirate of approaches whose thematic focus centres upon either ethnicity, religion or nationality, perpetuating an image of gender homogeneity which implies the universality of the male experience and leaves the specific experience of women largely undocumented. The experience of women prisoners, then, is frequently either accorded a purely quantitative value (utilised primarily to augment the volume of concentration camp knowledge and documentation) or relegated to the role of one of the multitude of components of the Jewish experience: a mere subtext of the religious or ethnic story rather than a valid area of study in its own right. And although scholars such as Marlene Heinemann, Carol Rittner and John Roth, and Joan Ringelheim have done much to redress this inequity with genderized analysis of the wider female Holocaust experience, there remains considerable work to be done with regard to the experience and writings of specific groups of women prisoners.

This thesis, then, posits a dual objective: to configure a comprehensive picture of the testimonial writing of French women (its themes, focus, textual influences and narrative approach), and — where applicable, for gender is by no means always the predominant defining feature of French women’s narratives — to establish the gender specificity of this literature and delineate those aspects which render it unique and divergent from the texts penned by male survivors. To this end, I have elected to address four broad principal issues, which constitute the four extended chapters of the thesis and whose selection as defining themes has been determined by their axial role within the texts of French women writers.

The first chapter of the thesis will be devoted to the significance of innate gender specificity within the French female testimony, seeking to determine how the most elementary facts of gender definition shape and particularize the themes, focus and testimonial responses of the writers within our corpus. Here I shall examine the manner in which the synthesis of structural gender specificity, pre-internment gender socialization and female biology is manifested within the testimonial genre, and what image of the female concentration camp experience is configured by this unique *mélange*. This initial chapter, by the very nature of its subject matter, will of necessity assume a somewhat more descriptive character than those which succeed it.

The investigative perspective will then widen beyond the realm of overtly gender-dictated responses to a more macrocosmic analysis of the testimonial responses of French women writers to their fellow inmates and the principal camp mechanisms. Chapter Two will analyse how French female writers approach the theme of vertically structured inmate relations or, more precisely, the system of prisoner privilege which accorded certain inmates dominion over others, thereby instigating a pervasive and far-reaching structural individualism. The comprehensive authorial externalization and refusal of this “grey zone”, both through lexical manipulation and through the sustained passive characterization of the self as analyst, observer or victim, and the wider themes engendered by this narrative stance will constitute the focus of this chapter. The third chapter will then invert the analytical approach to consider the antithesis of this vertical perspective, examining French women’s testimonial responses to non-vertically structured inmate relations, and investigating the characteristics and significance of solidarity and group cooperation within French women’s writings and their divergence from the texts of their male counterparts. This chapter will also seek to penetrate beyond the basic narrative level in order to investigate the *reasons* for the marked emphasis upon inmate interaction within these writings, and to analyse the subtextual indicators which temper and subvert the ready valorization of solidarity and which therefore shape the reading of these narratives. The fourth and final chapter of the thesis will aim to build upon and extend this progression beyond thematic analysis to a greater focus upon the textual level, interpreting the testimonies as constructed texts which weave together a variety of internal and external influences, and examining how French women writers

respond both to these influences and to the multifarious problems of translating the camp experience into narrative form. By thus synthesizing the thematic and the purely textual, I hope to effect a balanced analysis of the many levels at work within the French female camp testimonial genre.

In pursuing this broad structural outline, the thesis will draw upon a substantial body of French female testimonies (see appendix for a brief authorial biography), whilst also encompassing French male testimonies and non-French texts for comparative and descriptive purposes. The relative lack of critical interest in French female testimonial literature is certainly not attributable to a dearth of sources, and in establishing the principal corpus of texts to be studied I have endeavoured to incorporate a variety of authorial and testimonial “types” in order to delineate the most comprehensive portrait possible of the French female testimonial genre. The narratives which will feature in the forthcoming chapters therefore run the gamut from Jewish to non-Jewish writers, from the ardent resistant to the apolitical survivor, from those texts penned immediately after the war to those whose genesis occurred many decades later, and from those which appear as published texts to those held as archival submissions, the latter sourced from the FNDIRP<sup>1</sup> archives in Paris. Despite the accumulation of such an extensive base of seemingly diverse resources, however, the testimonial genre as a whole remains constrained by an inherent bias and fundamental homogeneity which cannot pass unremarked. For any such corpus is — irrespective of the researcher’s choices as to which texts to employ — characterized by the simple and common bias of survival, whereby only those who did not perish in the camps remain to author a testimony, a notion which Primo Levi has famously expounded:

We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the ‘Muslims’<sup>2</sup>, the submerged, the complete witnesses<sup>3</sup>.

Testimonial literature, then, will always be restricted to the experience of those “incomplete” witnesses who evaded the most extreme camp experience. And, at the same time, the fundamental demands inherent in the authorship of a written text engender a further commonality, with the camp testimony tending to be penned by a certain, somewhat limited, “type” of survivor — one who has access to sufficient resources, education and writing skills to accord her experience

<sup>1</sup> FNDIRP is the acronym for the Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Résistants et Patriotes, situated at 10 Rue Leroux, 75116, Paris.

<sup>2</sup> “Muslim” or “Musulman” was the term which in camp vernacular denoted those prisoners who had reached the most extreme state of starvation and exhaustion, and who were thus rendered incapable of any degree of normal responses or actions. Jean Améry describes them thus: “The musulman had no conception of good or bad, of admirable or mean, of spiritual or material. He was an unsteady corpse, a bundle of physical functions on its last breath”. Once a prisoner reached this state, death was all but inevitable, and usually followed soon after. The Polish doctor Wladyslaw Fejkiel attests that the term “musulman” was coined due to the resemblance of these hunched prisoners to a group of praying Arabs. See Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) p.370.

<sup>3</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Penguin Group, 1988), pp63-64

textual form. In practice, this means that middle class French women (be they racial or political internees) assume the dominant voice in French female testimonial literature. Michael Pollak also makes the pertinent observation that most texts originate from survivors who were aged between 16 and 40 at the time of incarceration (a result of the clearcut age bias of Nazi exterminative policy), and from those who entered the camp towards the end of the war, and thus endured a shorter stay which enhanced their prospects of survival<sup>4</sup>.

This basic narrative homogeneity is not, however, indicative of a concomitant sameness in textual quality. Any discussion of textual quality sits uneasily with a subject matter such as this, where the horrific nature of the experience undergone by the author, and her role as testifying witness afford the narrative an aura of quasi-inviolability from such questions. And yet, it is undeniable that some testimonies display greater richness than others, be it by virtue of the deployment of literary device, a certain overt and rigorous sincerity of approach, or a particular richness of observation and detail which goes beyond the external to afford a real insight into inmate psychology and responses. In reference to the general process of testifying, Primo Levi alludes to this qualitative discrepancy with the observation that “[...] among the testimonies, written or heard, there are [...] those that are unconsciously stylised, in which convention prevails over genuine memory”<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, the thesis will return most frequently to a selection of core narratives within the corpus which eschew such stylization to yield the greatest depth of analysis. Certain non-French texts which are similarly richly nuanced and therefore apt to evoke general camp concepts and sentiments with particular succinctness will also be encapsulated within this reference strategy, although these will for the most part be utilised only in the context of general description of aspects of camp experience. The first chapter, which focuses upon the role of female biology and socialization in defining the thematic focus of the female testimonial genre, will, however, also draw upon non-French narratives to a limited extent due to the fact that the subject matter is often generic to female texts as a whole and remains largely undefined by national demarcations.

With regard to reference strategies, it is worth noting too that my study of French female testimonial narratives encompasses the writings of any and all French women deported to German concentration camps who have produced written texts concerning their deportation experience<sup>6</sup>. In adopting this widely inclusive analytical approach, I am certainly sensitive to the school of thought which argues that the Jewish camp experience — highly specific and

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire. Essai sur le maintien de l'identité sociale* (Paris: Éditions Métailié, 1990), p.196

<sup>5</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.53

<sup>6</sup> In practice, this categorization is limited to the two principal categories of racial and political prisoners, for, not surprisingly, those deported as criminal prisoners tend — undoubtedly for reasons of education or fear of moral reprobation — not to figure amongst the ranks of testimonial writers.

frequently significantly more traumatic than that of their non-Jewish countrywomen — should be studied in isolation or accorded thematic prominence within any study whose parameters include the Holocaust. Simone Lagrange, one of the core testimonial writers who will figure prominently in my research, embraces just such a tendency in her testimonial conclusion which places the emphasis firmly upon the differences between the Jewish and the non-Jewish experience:

La différence ne se trouvait pas dans les souffrances de l'enfermement, de la séparation d'avec les leurs qu'elles allaient peut-être retrouver après la Libération. La différence était dans notre vécu, les sélections tout au long de notre détention, et surtout la sélection, la première, celle qui séparait les familles dès la rampe d'arrivée de Birkenau [...] La séparation à jamais...<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the fundamental framework of the Jewish experience is far from analogous to that of other prisoners, founded as it is on the elementary dissimilitude that, for the Jewish inmate “[...] dès son entrée dans le camp de Birkenau ou de Monowitz, en tant que main d'oeuvre, celui-ci est déjà un survivant, et toute sa détention va se dérouler sur le fond du génocide”<sup>8</sup>. In predicating my research upon the more global topic of French women's testimonies as a whole, however, I do not intend to imply the homogeneity of their experience, but rather to accord significance to the experience and writings of *all* French women who suffered within the camps, irrespective of their racial or political status. Annette Wieviorka's articulation of the importance of any suffering and loss, regardless of its origins, is certainly apposite here:

Voir sa mère partir pour la chambre à gaz parce qu'elle a les cheveux blancs ou parce qu'elle est juive provoque le même désespoir, et participe, en dernière analyse, du même système, celui de la 'vie indigne d'être vécue'. Il n'y a pas de hiérarchie dans la souffrance<sup>9</sup>.

Where the particular experience of French Jewish women renders their testimonies significantly divergent from those of their non-Jewish counterparts, however, these differences will be analysed within the thesis.

And finally, a few words are necessary regarding perhaps the greatest difficulty confronting the researcher navigating within the realm of testimonial literature — a difficulty which stems from the nature of the texts as essentially personal histories shared by ordinary women who have endured and survived immense suffering and cruelty. Sympathy, pity and respect for the experience which the testimonial writer has undergone may render us hesitant to deconstruct her narrative; when one is confronted by a first-hand account of suffering it may seem somehow inappropriate to initiate a commentary which probes the deeper levels of the text

<sup>7</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née: adolescente à Auschwitz* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), pp191-192. See also Sylvain Kaufmann, *Le livre de la mémoire* (Paris: Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1992), pp407-410.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps* (Paris: Éditions Belin, 1995), p.88. The fundamental specificity of the Jewish experience is reflected in sobering statistics: of all those deported from France, 59 percent of political and criminal inmates returned after the war, compared with a mere 3 percent of the 76, 000 deported Jews (Ibid, p.88).

<sup>9</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide. Entre la mémoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Plon, 1992), p.204

in order to ascertain textual influences and patterns. Michael Pollak has referred to the difficulty inherent in

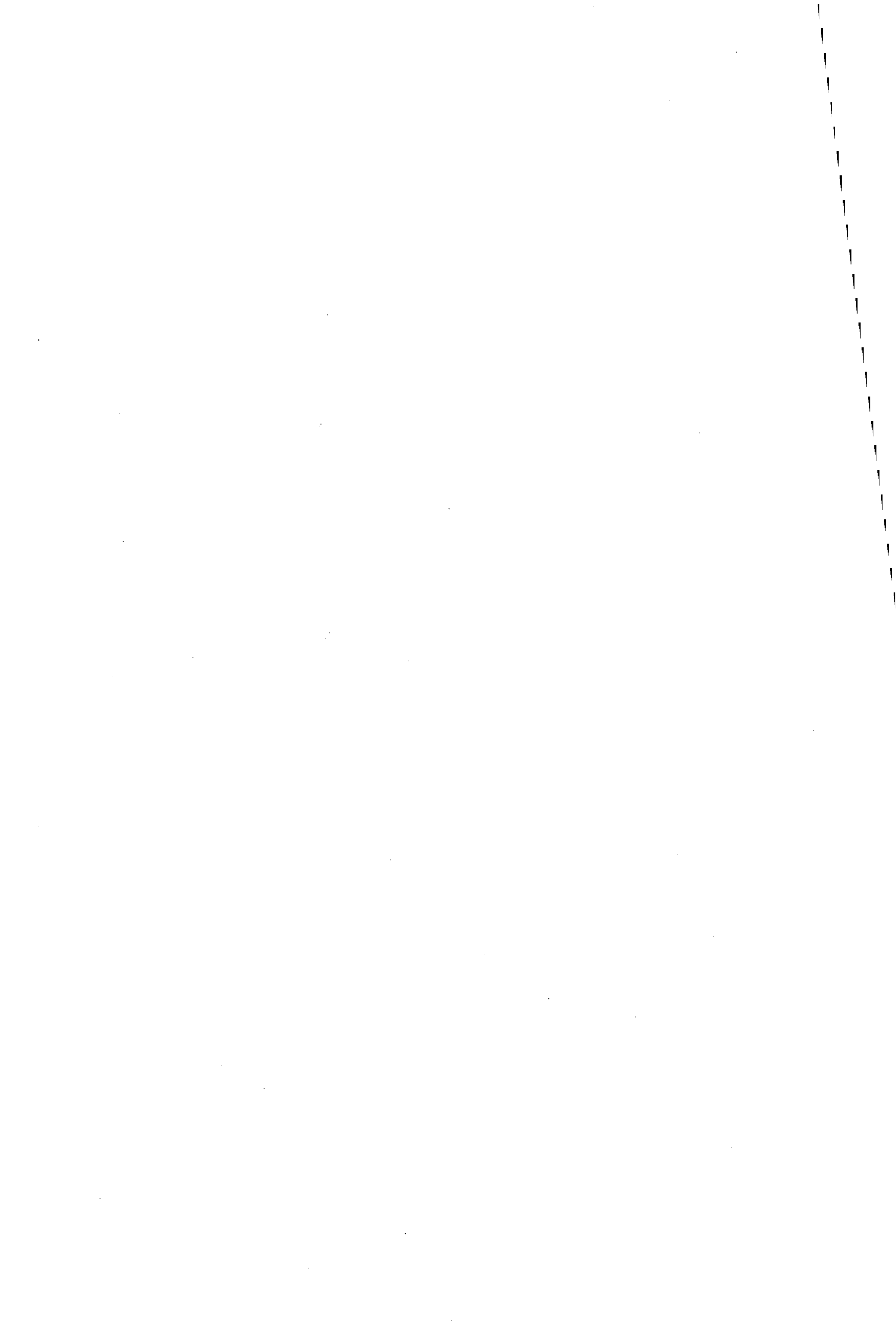
[...] le processus qui consiste à étudier ‘scientifiquement’, c’est-à-dire froidement et à distance, des choses qui suscitent les réactions affectives les plus extrêmes, et qui sont d’ordinaire abordées dans le registre ‘chaud’ de la révolte, de la dénonciation ou de l’indignation<sup>10</sup>

and this same quandary is indeed operative here. If we are to fully understand the testimonial literature of French women, however, it is necessary to adopt a critical and dispassionate viewpoint which endeavours to suspend the status of the testimony as “sacred text”<sup>11</sup> — inviolable and immune to deconstruction by virtue of its subject matter — in order to effect the degree of narrative analysis necessary for a comprehensive reading of the many levels and indicators contained within these texts. Such deconstruction will occur particularly in the latter part of the thesis; its objective never to criticize the efforts of the authors to disseminate the reality of the camp experience nor to diminish the message of these testimonies, but rather to promote a fuller reading of them in all their complexity.

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Pollak, *L’expérience concentrationnaire*, p.182

<sup>11</sup> The concept of the testimony as sacred text will be developed further in Chapter Three.





## Chapter One — Gender Specificity

*“Très vite on fait naître un autre moi: un petit mouton rasé, rayé, docile, que de grosses bêtes noires et dentues bousculent vers un destin fragile...”<sup>1</sup>*

The reader first entering the realm of concentration camp literature encounters a genre whose themes and parameters appear broadly consistent, inscribed as they are within the ubiquitous mechanism of horror, degradation and terror which was the Nazi camp system. Within this broad textual homogeneity, however, perhaps the most logical point of commencement for any analysis of the testimonial literature of French women is the simple yet widely impacting fact of elementary gender differentiation. How, in other words, did those factors which were innate or particular to women inform the female camp experience and effect a testimonial conceptualization which was not analogous to that of their male counterparts? Such a line of inquiry reveals a bifilar specificity to be operative within women’s deportation experience. Firstly, the framework of the camps imposed upon female prisoners a structural gender specificity based upon genderized camp policies and practices. At the same time, the innate gender derivative factors which defined the responses of women to the camp milieu also enacted a pivotal role. For every prisoner entered the concentration camp imbued with a raft of gender-related physical and psychological characteristics, be they tangible and ineluctable (such as biological function or the individual’s degree of physical strength) or fluid and potentially pliant (perceptions of identity and social role, genderized values). In the case of French female inmates, the physical and biological characteristics particular to women, together with the pre-internment socialization and identity of French women in the World War Two era, may be seen as particularly instrumental in shaping their experience of the concentration camp. This initial chapter will therefore examine this particular synthesis of structural and innate gender specificity and its role in demarcating a uniquely female experience, and — *ipso facto* — a primary narrative specificity in French female testimonial literature.

Irrespective of the particular camp (and despite the often vastly differing conditions incarnated in the varying Nazi camp categorizations<sup>2</sup>), the *univers concentrationnaire* as a whole

<sup>1</sup> Magda Hollander-Lafon, *Les chemins du temps* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1977), p.19

<sup>2</sup> Nazi concentration camps were accorded varying categorizations which ranged from the most severe and rapidly exterminative “Level 3” camps through to the “Level 1” camps where conditions were supposedly more conducive to survival. In practice, the latter often simply denoted different, slower means of extermination such as starvation or harsh labour. Eugen Kogon delineates these categories thus: “L’office central de gestion économique SS (SS-WVH) a créé trois degrés de camps de concentration. Le 1er degré (camps de travail) était la forme la plus douce du système; le 2e degré aggravait les conditions de vie et de travail; le 3e degré était le ‘moulin à os’, d’où il était extrêmement rare de sortir vivant. L’intention de la Gestapo — qu’elle ne put jamais réaliser entièrement — était de placer au 3e degré tous les criminels, homosexuels, Juifs et certains détenus

was unitary in its objectives and attendant structure. Formulated to a strict structural and ideological format, it was designed to achieve two fundamental intermediary aims — namely the calculated dehumanization of the enemies of the Reich (regardless of gender), and the economic exploitation of this human resource for German profit — before arriving at the ultimate and primary goal of extermination<sup>3</sup>. Jean Mialet articulates this multi-faceted camp programme:

[...] l'organisation des camps de concentration s'inspirait d'une conception rigoureusement logique et scientifique [...] les camps avaient pour objet de liquider physiquement les adversaires internes ou externes du Grand Reich, dans les conditions les plus rentables pour l'Allemagne [...] Aussi, les conditions d'emploi, de nourriture, de vie, d'hygiène étaient-elles calculées pour que cette mort intervînt au bout d'un temps défini [...] Les souffrances qu'elles provoquaient avaient l'avantage supplémentaire de satisfaire le besoin de vengeance des nazis et de rendre aussi terrible que possible le châtement que méritaient les sous-hommes qu'étaient leurs ennemis<sup>4</sup>.

From the moment of arrival in the camp, therefore, every prisoner was subjected to the comprehensive dehumanization which formed a central tenet of concentration camp policy. Stripped of clothes, hair and possessions, and divested of any distinguishing external individuality, the prisoner was immediately deprived of identity to become a mere product of the camp system. Names were obsolete, with inmates instead being required to memorize and respond to the German pronunciation of their number — a supremely impersonal numerical emphasis which was most famously incarnated at Auschwitz with the tattooing of a prisoner's number on their forearm upon arrival in the camp<sup>5</sup>. This systematic effacement of the prisoner's external identity was paralleled by complementary Nazi policy aiming to effectuate a concurrent psychological metamorphosis, in which the prisoner would commence an inexorable descent into a state of animalism. To this end, camp structures were specifically conceived to suppress and distort civilized human responses. The limited food rations allocated to prisoners are a case in point, resulting in starvation and the attendant behavioural transformation delineated by Lucie Adelsberger: “Whoever has known true starvation knows that hunger is not merely an autonomic animalistic sensation in the stomach, but [...] an attack on the whole personality.

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politiques qui lui paraissaient particulièrement dangereux...” (Eugen Kogon, *L'état SS — le système des camps de concentration allemands* (Paris: Éditions de la Jeune Parque, 1947) p.33). Some camps metamorphosed from one category to another during the war, such as Ravensbrück which was equipped with a functioning gas chamber from January 1945.

<sup>3</sup> Here it is imperative that a distinction be made between extermination and concentration camps. For those (usually Jewish and Gypsy) prisoners deported directly to extermination camps, extermination was effected immediately upon arrival and these intermediary objectives were therefore redundant. There were four dedicated extermination camps (Chelmno, Belsec, Sobibor and Treblinka), along with Auschwitz-Birkenau, which combined the functions of extermination and concentration camps. Although the concentration camps also worked to exterminate prisoners (by means as diverse as gassing, shooting, disease, torture and starvation), and also often contained gas chambers, they are distinguished from the extermination centres by their parallel function as labour camps, and by the consequent possibility — however slim — of survival. Gitta Sereny provides an excellent explanation of this distinction in *Into that Darkness — From Mercy Killing to Mass Murder* (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd, 1974), pp98-100.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Mialet, *La haine et le pardon: le déporté* (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1997), p.35. Note that for reasons of concision and fluidity of style, I have elected not to separate and indent quotations within the text.

<sup>5</sup> Such tattooing was usually performed only upon Jewish prisoners.

Hunger makes a person vicious and undermines her character”<sup>6</sup>. Backbreaking labour, virtually non-existent hygiene measures and perpetual, often random, punishment and beatings constituted further measures collectively aimed at reducing inmates to the psychological level of beasts in relation to their Nazi “masters”. The vernacular of the camp consolidated the non-entity of its inmates, bestowing upon them the universal appellation of “Stucke” or “things”. Hence the concentration camp environment effectively created a neatly self-justifying façade, metamorphosing the enemies of the Reich into dirty, degraded and dehumanized beings who, in the words of Robert Antelme “[...] se sentai[en]t alors contesté[s] comme homme[s], comme membre[s] de l’espèce”<sup>7</sup>, and whose appearance and behaviour appeared in itself to furnish the most persuasive justification of the treatment meted out to them<sup>8</sup>. Such was the common fate of all prisoners (with the notable exception of *Kapos* and other privileged prisoners who will constitute the focus of our next chapter), irrespective of their gender.

In the context of such indiscriminate and universal dehumanization, structural gender specificity appears at first glance to be an irrelevant concept in the concentration camp environment. And yet, closer examination reveals it to be a veritable keystone of Nazi camp policy. On the most basic level, strict division by gender was encoded in Nazi doctrine for all concentration camps. Camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau which incarcerated both male and female inmates<sup>9</sup> maintained a partitioning into men's and women's camps, with this divisionist policy being further encapsulated by the existence of uniquely female camps. The largest of these was Ravensbrück which did, however, house a small adjoining male camp — Germaine Tillion gives figures for January 1945 of 7875 male prisoners and 45919 females in the two Ravensbrück camps<sup>10</sup>. Although male and female work commandos could cross paths on the work site, the work parties were maintained in separation by their SS guards and interaction was limited and perilous for inmates. Any sanctioned exception to this official sexual partitioning was rare, as Simone Alizon articulates in her description of the singular occasion when her female commando worked briefly in conjunction with male prisoners in her early days at Auschwitz: “Ce n'est que plus tard que nous comprîmes combien cette rencontre avait été étonnante car nous n'avions plus eu [...] l'occasion de travailler en compagnie de détenus hommes. Les SS prenaient grand soin de ne pas nous laisser approcher les uns des autres”<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, this gender based division was so firmly entrenched as to be sustained even in the context of extermination, with men and women being sent to left and right respectively prior to

<sup>6</sup> Lucie Adelsberger, *A Doctor's Story* (London: Robson Books, 1996), p.45

<sup>7</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p.11

<sup>8</sup> See Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.72 and p.123 on the widespread Nazi and *Kapo* perception of non-privileged prisoners as deserving of their own fate.

<sup>9</sup> Auschwitz-Birkenau was the largest Nazi concentration camp for women, with at least 120,000 women registered there. See Vladimir Pozner (ed), *Descente aux enfers. Récits de déportés et de SS d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Julliard, 1980), pp256-257.

<sup>10</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988), p.106

<sup>11</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1996), p.141

the initial selection for the gas chambers upon arrival at Auschwitz<sup>12</sup>. For all its rigid structural implementation, however, gender segregation was often breached within the camp confines, particularly at Auschwitz as male specialists entered the women's camp to effect repairs or other designated tasks<sup>13</sup>. Olga Lengyel notes that from November 1944 guards were no longer posted the length of the barbed wire separating the male and female enclosures at Auschwitz, thus facilitating spoken exchanges despite the fact that "[...] les rencontres étaient en principe interdites comme avant"<sup>14</sup>. And of course the policy of strict sexual segregation was noticeably weakened, if not entirely destroyed, in the early months of 1945, as the evacuation and merging of diverse camps in the face of the advancing allies caused a real breakdown in the structure, discipline and policies of the concentration camp mechanism, pooling inmates indiscriminately in camps such as Bergen-Belsen and Mauthausen.

In its functional state, however, this punctilious observation of the principle of sexual division is essentially indicative of the importance the Nazi regime accorded to gender and of the structural implementation of gender specificity in the camp system. It may perhaps appear paradoxical that even within the context of dehumanization (with its presumable attendant doctrine of suppressing both human characteristics and social demarcations), Nazi policy continued to actively foster gender distinctions. And yet, this focus on gender-related factors may in fact be construed as one more integral component of the doctrine of dehumanization. To achieve comprehensive dehumanization, it was necessary for the SS to also *desexualize* their enemies and eliminate this pivotal aspect of their human function. What better means of desexualization than to separate the sexes, thereby removing the referential other which is the focus of heterosexual sexuality? At the same time, this gender separation served to dissolve family units, thereby nullifying the significance of familial roles which were for both genders (and particularly for women in the World War Two era) often a defining element of an individual's existence and self-image. Gender was thus firmly structurally encoded in the

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<sup>12</sup> Claudia Koonz in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), pp290-291. Koonz notes that "In procedures that defy belief, even when the 'deportees' at extermination camps were to be murdered within a few minutes, camp officials scrupulously followed the ritual: men to the left and women to the right".

<sup>13</sup> Note that critical and testimonial sources vary greatly in their assertions of the degree to which the gender segregation policies of the camp could be subverted. Some testimonial accounts (such as Gisella Perl and Olga Lengyel) imply a relative ease of contact with male prisoners within the Auschwitz compound, while others (such as Simone Alizon) note the extreme difficulty of such interaction. Historians and survivor historians are equally divided: Józef Garlinski, for instance, asserts that although contact between men and women was punishable, it was difficult to keep them apart due to the movements of male specialist workers (*Fighting Auschwitz* (Connecticut: Fawcett Crest, 1975), p.153), a view echoed by Michael Pollak (*L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.66), while Vera Laska, in *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1983), attests that "On the few occasions when male prisoners entered the women's camp for repairs, they came under guard" (p.25). Most accounts do, however, mention the possibility for women prisoners with privileged positions within the prisoner hierarchy to enter into contact with their visiting male counterparts. It would appear, then, that inter-gender contact was often circumscribed by privilege and the opportunities for in-camp circulation and bribery that this entailed (refer to Chapter Two).

<sup>14</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà* (Paris: Éditions du Bateau Ivre, 1946), pp177-178

*univers concentrationnaire* as an indispensable tool to be wielded in the process of dehumanization.

Concomitant, however, with this generalized Nazi approach to gender and sexuality (essentially non-gender specific in that its separatist policy targeted and impacted similarly on both sexes), a more specific and direct assault on female sexuality and identity was also discernibly entrenched in concentration camp policy. Indeed, gender remained one of the few defining factors in a camp system devoted to the suppression of individual differences<sup>15</sup>, due largely to Nazi focus upon the biological and reproductive capacities of women prisoners. With their potential to produce offspring and perpetuate the enemy population<sup>16</sup>, all female inmates constituted a particular menace to Nazi supremacy, although the Nazi emphasis upon so-called racial purity and the development of an undiluted, Aryan “master race” (encoded since the Nuremberg Laws of 1935<sup>17</sup>), saw Jewish women prisoners pose an especially elevated reproductive threat in the eyes of their captors. As a result, the sexuality and fertility of women prisoners became prime Nazi targets, and it is this genderized, reproductive-based assault upon women prisoners which assumes a prominent thematic position in French female narratives and which constitutes the first — and perhaps the most significant — element of their testimonial specificity.

The testimonies within our corpus thus bear witness to a raft of structural procedures whose common objective was the comprehensive suppression of female fertility. Firstly, women (particularly in the uniquely female environment of Ravensbrück, but also in the vast majority of cases at Auschwitz) were subjected in the early period of their camp experience to gynaecological examinations. Although male prisoners also underwent genital examinations in some instances, their experience usually consisted of a somewhat cursory examination. René Chavanne, for instance, describes being compelled to present his genitals for inspection upon arrival at both Hinzert and Buchenwald: “On passa ensuite devant un gars muni d'une balayette, il trempait celle-ci dans un seau de grésil [...] un coup sur la verge que l'on devait tenir du bout des doigts dans la position allongée — c'est rigolo n'est-ce pas?”<sup>18</sup>. Such experiences were not only less invasive than that undergone by their female counterparts, but also relatively innocuous, with minimal potential repercussions for men's general health or fertility. Women, on the other

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<sup>15</sup> Claudia Koonz in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.291

<sup>16</sup> The “enemies” of Nazism covered diverse categories within the camps, designated by colour-coded triangles sewn on prisoner garb; red for political internees, green for professional criminals, black for asocials, yellow for Jews and (in male camps) pink for homosexual prisoners. Prisoners were, however, frequently attributed an incorrect coding in apparently deliberate Nazi attempts to foster an atmosphere of mistrust and thereby thwart solidarity and the ready establishment of alliances.

<sup>17</sup> Among the Nuremberg Laws of 15 September 1935 figured the decree that German citizenship belonged only to those of “German or related blood”. The “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour” was also passed, whereby marriage or sexual relations between Jews and Aryans were prohibited. (Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.23).

<sup>18</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé* (Metz: Éditions Serpenoise, 1993), p.166

hand, usually experienced an internal examination performed in the absence of even nominal sterilization or hygienic precautions, in which the same instrument or glove was routinely used for all inmates without disinfection<sup>19</sup>. The collective testimony *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück* describes “[...] sur une sorte de lit, examen vaginal et rectal, ceci fait simplement au doigt, dans des conditions d’hygiène tout à fait relatives”<sup>20</sup>. This practice placed female inmates in real danger of receiving any diseases transmitted from a previous patient, as well as of contracting an infection from the unsterilized instruments which could jeopardise not only their fertility but also — in an environment whose lack of hygiene and medical facilities could render even the smallest infection potentially fatal — their life. Not surprisingly, given its potential for both humiliation and danger, French female testimonies manifest a quasi-universal emphasis upon this female-specific aspect of camp procedure, conceiving it as a considerable health risk and repeatedly articulating their fear at the possible physical repercussions. At Ravensbrück Jacqueline Richet, for instance, attests that “[...] nous passons toutes à la fouille vaginale. Le même gant, mal désinfecté, sert à cette opération; nous craignons toutes les contagions et nous en éprouvons beaucoup d’ennuis”<sup>21</sup>. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec also dwells upon the potential danger of the exercise: “La femme est brutale, mais heureusement la phrase de Maman me préserve d’un examen plus approfondi et plus dangereux. Dangereux, car ici on ignore l’asepsie”<sup>22</sup>, whilst Simone Alizon mentions the same lack of disinfection at Auschwitz (“Nous étions angoissées car nous avons pu nous rendre compte que cet examen se passait sans aucune désinfection, ni des instruments qui allaient des unes aux autres sans plus de précaution, ni des sujets à examiner”<sup>23</sup>), although she too manages to escape with a cursory examination due to a sympathetic doctor who recognises her youth.

More prominent in female testimonies, however, is the reiterative focus upon the theme of covert anti-reproductive structural tactics. Amenorrhoea was virtually universal amongst women prisoners after a certain period in the camps. Evidently this may be attributable to both the scarcity of food and the mental upheavals endured by prisoners, with the cessation of menstruation occurring naturally if a woman is undernourished, and often also as a consequence of psychological trauma<sup>24</sup> — both of which figured among the few constants in camp life. And yet, the theme of authorial certainty or suspicion of substances being secreted in camp food in

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<sup>19</sup> The reason for these vaginal inspections remains ambiguous. While the male genital examinations appear to have been motivated by a cursory attempt at disinfection, the purpose of female gynaecological interventions was usually either related to a search for hidden valuables or simply a pseudo-medical intervention designed to humiliate women inmates.

<sup>20</sup> Amicale de Ravensbrück, *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p.80

<sup>21</sup> Charles, Olivier and Jacqueline Richet, *Trois bagnes* (Paris: J. Ferenczi et Fils, 1945), p.139

<sup>22</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J’ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück: la victoire en pleurant* (Paris: Perrin, 1991), p.156

<sup>23</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.172

<sup>24</sup> *Dorland’s Medical Dictionary* (Philadelphia: W.B Saunders, 1994) defines dietary amenorrhoea as the “cessation of menstruation accompanying loss of weight due to dietary restriction” (p.55), while the *Penguin Medical Encyclopedia* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.29 also states that “[...] the condition can be a symptom of all kinds of illness, including emotional upsets”.

order to suppress menstruation (and thus also fertility), is too pronounced and too common a feature of female testimonies to ignore. Reference is made uniquely in female testimonies to bromide, saltpeter or other chemical substances in the food, suggesting that this was a further structural policy implemented solely as an assault on female fertility. Hence we see Simone Saint-Clair, a prisoner at Ravensbrück, asserting that camp soup and coffee were doctored in this manner: “L’effet du bromure qu’on met dans le ‘café’ est rapide, comme rapide aussi la poudre stérilisatrice que contient la soupe. Au camp, les femmes ne sont plus des femmes...”<sup>25</sup>. Similarly, Livia Bitton Jackson relates the panic amongst the women upon learning of the bromide apparently secreted in their food for sterilization purposes:

With amazement we all realize that menstruation ceased in the camps. The first week after our arrival there were many menstruant women [...] then menstruation ceased abruptly. There is bromide in our food we are told by old-timers. Bromide is supposed to sterilize women. The Germans are experimenting with mass sterilization<sup>26</sup>.

Such concerns are cautiously echoed by Françoise Maous: “ [...] la dénutrition, la terreur et peut-être (mais je ne l’ai jamais su exactement) le produit qui donnait un goût si affreux à la soupe, avaient complètement interrompu nos règles”<sup>27</sup>, and even reach the very young Francine Christophe: “Et puis on se chuchote à l’oreille que l’ainée des B n’a toujours pas ses règles! À cause de toutes les cochonneries que les Allemands mettent dans la soupe”<sup>28</sup>.

If such an approach was indeed common practice within female camps, it would seem to furnish a persuasive further example of the manner in which female fertility was directly targeted by Nazi policy. For if it is true that the dietary régime was deployed as a medium for repression of female fertility, it would appear that women alone were subjected to a comprehensive and all-encompassing sterilization attempt beyond isolated medical experiments. However, the absence of primary Nazi documentation regarding this attempted female dietary sterilization renders it all but impossible to ascertain the veracity of such alleged policies. The proof advanced by testimonial authors is certainly tenuous. Simone Saint-Clair supports her assertion of chemical intervention by the citation of an article published in 1945 by Dr Karl Traub, which revealed Hitler’s plan that “[...] une substance végétale, incolore et inodore, mise dans les aliments, devait provoquer une stérilité totale et définitive sur tous les peuples — hommes et femmes — des territoires conquis par la Wehrmacht”<sup>29</sup>. The abstract conceptualization of such a generalized objective — one of many ambitious schemes propounded by the Nazi régime which never reached fruition — certainly does not prove that this scheme was ever functional in the specific environment of the camps. Jutta Bendremer documents the case of Jenny, a Polish woman who continued to menstruate throughout her internment despite weighing barely seventy

<sup>25</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes* (Paris: Éditions Jules Tallandier, 1945), p.79

<sup>26</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.80

<sup>27</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553* (Paris: Le Comptoir, 1996), p.51

<sup>28</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée, une enfant dans le monde des camps 1942-1945* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1996), p.107

<sup>29</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.79

pounds as potential evidence of dietary suppression of menstruation: “She credited this inconvenient anomaly to the fact that she never drank the tea or coffee that the inmates received. Although no-one was certain, most prisoners felt the Germans doctored soups or other liquids to cause the menstrual cycle to cease”<sup>30</sup>. Once again, however, the evidence is highly inconclusive, based as it is upon an individual, potentially aberrant, case. And, although somewhat more detailed, Olga Lengyel’s argument is no less easily refuted. Lengyel attests that:

La mystérieuse poudre chimique qui entrait en forte dose dans notre nourriture n’était peut-être pas étrangère non plus à l’arrêt des règles. Je n’ai pas pu avoir personnellement la preuve que les Allemands additionnaient notre ordinaire d’un produit destiné à émousser chez les internées l’instinct sexuel. J’ai cependant de bonnes raisons de croire qu’il en était ainsi. C’étaient les surveillantes allemandes qui s’en chargeaient, ne laissant pas ce soin aux internées travaillant dans les cuisines. Quoi qu’il en soit, la Lagerälteste, les blockovas et leurs Stubendienst, ainsi que les employées des cuisines, qui ne mangeaient pas l’ordinaire du camp, étaient pour la plupart exemptes de troubles menstruels<sup>31</sup>.

The uninterrupted menstrual cycles of these privileged prisoners would seem to be readily explicable not by the fact that these inmates ingested a different diet from their non-privileged fellows, but rather by the *quantity* of their diet and their infinitely lesser exposure to malnutrition and starvation<sup>32</sup>. For it is well-documented that many privileged prisoners in fact illegally appropriated the food of those below them in the hierarchy<sup>33</sup> and would therefore have been equally susceptible to any secreted chemicals — a fact which Suzanne Birnbaum, for one, fails to recognise in her inherently contradictory statement which implicates prisoner functionaries in food theft whilst simultaneously exempting them from the supposed physical effects of this very same diet: “Je ne sais quels produits chimiques les Allemands mettaient dans la soupe et le pain, outre le brome, qui nous calmait les nerfs, mais c’était radical pour toutes les femmes. Seuls les chefs de blocs, les chefs de chambres, qui nous volaient notre nourriture, étaient bien réglés”<sup>34</sup>.

Many other female writers in fact dismiss the dietary sterilization theory as implausible, instead attributing their loss of fertility to starvation and the camp régime. As Eva Tichauer (Auschwitz) comments: “[...] J’ai cru longtemps qu’on nous droguait pour obtenir ce résultat. Je ne le pense plus. Nous devenons amenorrhiques simplement naturellement, parce que nous menons une vie épouvantable”<sup>35</sup>. Her views are echoed in *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*:

<sup>30</sup> Jutta Bendremer, *Women Surviving the Holocaust* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997), p.59

<sup>31</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.149

<sup>32</sup> Reska Weiss’s testimony is also worth noting here for a detail which is particularly uncharacteristic, appearing in no other narratives. Weiss, a Hungarian Jew, asserts that upon arrival in Auschwitz the menstruating women were told to step forward and were handed sanitary protection with the declaration “Only this once will you need it, for none of you will ever menstruate again” (*Journey Through Hell* (London: Valentine, Mitchell and co, 1961), p.41). This declaration is particularly abstruse with regard to the issue of chemical suppression of fertility, however, failing to render explicit the reason (chemical or “natural”) for the future cessation of menstrual periods. Odette Améry, in *Nuit et brouillard* (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1945), makes the equally ambiguous statement that during an early medical examination at Ravensbrück “[...] les SS montrent un grand souci de la statistique en ce qui concerne les femmes qui n’ont plus leurs règles” (p.63).

<sup>33</sup> Refer to Chapter Two

<sup>34</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue* (Paris: Éditions du Livre Français, 1946), p.28

<sup>35</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J’étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz* (Paris: Éditions L’Harmattan, 1988), p.80



“Nous ne sommes pas droguées, mais simplement carencées et sous-alimentées. Les prisonnières qui ont droit aux colis, qui travaillent aux cuisines, sont réglées. Notre organisme économise ses réserves, évite toute dépense inutile...”<sup>36</sup>. Indeed, with the privilege of hindsight we must concur that it is more likely that these latter writers were correct in their assumptions, given that Dr Paulette Don-Zimmet, who has undertaken the most comprehensive study of this question, has demonstrated “[...] qu'il aurait fallu une dose importante de bromure pour traiter ainsi un effectif de 40 à 70 000 femmes, ce qui aurait été coûteux et aurait demandé des manipulations qui n'auraient pu échapper aux prisonnières des cuisines”<sup>37</sup>, and that no definitive sightings of the treatment being administered to the prisoners' food have been recorded<sup>38</sup>. Thus, the concept of mass sterilization via food was in all probability one more product of the active rumour mill which is stressed in so many testimonies<sup>39</sup>. This does not, however, render it any less significant as a feature of the reality of women's concentration camp experience, given that women's *belief* in the existence of such a systematic structural approach was instrumental in defining their experience and therefore in determining the female testimonial emphasis<sup>40</sup>.

More concretely indicative of the Nazi desire to suppress the fertility and function of women as reproductive beings, however, were the policies relating to pregnancy in the concentration camp, an issue which we shall later consider in greater detail. Although these policies often varied over time and between camps, they served a common objective; namely to thwart the ability of women to produce healthy, valid offspring. At Auschwitz, pregnant Jewish women were initially selected upon arrival for immediate extermination, or, if they failed to declare their condition, killed immediately it became apparent. In September 1944, these women received the authorization to remain alive and to give birth in Auschwitz, although a further order simultaneously deprived them of the nourishment necessary to nurse their newborn babies<sup>41</sup>, thus effectively implementing a programme of infanticide. A similar evolution occurred for non-

<sup>36</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.170

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p.170.

<sup>38</sup> Although Olga Lengyel does assert that a kitchen worker informed her of such drug administration, her claim remains unsubstantiated by any evidence other than hearsay and is uncorroborated by other testimonies. Lengyel's text on this issue reads as follows: “Once I discussed it with an inmate who worked in the kitchen. She confirmed that the order was to mix this substance in all the food given to us. ‘For heaven's sake, get me a little of the powder’ I pleaded. ‘If I ever get out of here it will be another bit of evidence against them’. ‘I can't get any’ she replied. ‘The SS woman mixes it into the food herself. Nobody else is allowed to go near it’ “ (*Five Chimneys* (Hertfordshire: Mayflower Books, 1972) p.95). Interestingly, this assertion of a direct conversation with a kitchen worker is not present in Lengyel's original text (which appeared in French in 1946), but only in the much later English version of 1972. The sometimes dramatized presentation of this later version could possibly indicate that this conversation fulfils the role of dramatic narrative device rather than originating in actual circumstance.

<sup>39</sup> See, for example, Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, p.86

<sup>40</sup> Note too that many testimonies mention that on the rare occasions where women did menstruate, they were subjected to severe abuse from the guards as a result. In *Le sel de la mine. De Lyon à Beendorf* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1990), Raymonde Guyon-Belot, for instance, remarks that such women “[...] vivaient un vrai calvaire”, having no access to sanitary protection and being beaten by the SS for being “dirty” (p.178). Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne also writes that any trace of blood was severely punished and could mean selection for extermination. See *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort* (Paris: JC Lattès, 1997), p.44.

<sup>41</sup> Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1948), p.85

Jewish inmates at Ravensbrück, which moved from a policy of drowning or strangling babies at birth, to allowing newborns to live towards the end of 1943 and even creating a *kinderzimmer* to house them in September 1944, whilst providing nothing for their survival and thus ensuring that all died by the age of two or three months<sup>42</sup>. This eventual cross-camp policy of allowing pregnant women to live but not to nourish their babies thus afforded these women the right to retain their tenuous hold on life only as their ability to bring forth and nurture valid offspring was negated, thereby clearly exemplifying the significance which the Nazi hierarchy attributed to the suppression of female fertility and sexuality, and the direct linkage between extermination and biological function.

It is important to note, too, that experimental sterilization procedures were also practised on a number of women within the camps, although such procedures were by no means universal amongst women inmates and applied to selected, isolated groups only. Dr Adélaïde Hautval, a French doctor at Auschwitz, has provided extensive testimonial documentation of such experiments, detailing procedures such as the introduction of caustic liquid into the uterus<sup>43</sup> (under the direction of Professor Clauberg), the attempted sterilization by radiation and X-ray undertaken by Dr Schumann and the subsequent removal of the ovaries of these latter patients, resulting in severe abdominal pains, vomiting and peritonitis<sup>44</sup>. These experimental subjects were mostly selected from amongst Gypsy or Jewish female inmates, although the sole extensive French female first-person account of sterilization procedures occurs in the testimony of Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu, a non-Jewish French woman deported to Ravensbrück for resistance activities. Along with four Gypsy inmates, Dumilieu was subjected to vaginal injections which succeeded in rendering her infertile<sup>45</sup>. Although sterilization experiments were not exclusively performed upon female inmates (male prisoners were also subjected to sterilization attempts by means of x-ray radiation or castration<sup>46</sup>), they constituted a significant element of the Nazi assault on female fertility<sup>47</sup>.

The specificity of French female testimonies does not lie solely in the delineation of such a pluralistic structural offensive on female fertility, however, but also in their pronounced and

<sup>42</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, pp203-207

<sup>43</sup> Vera Laska cites the injection of such substances as jodipin, a substance called F12 and citobarium diluted with water (*Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.181).

<sup>44</sup> Dr Adélaïde Hautval, *Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1991), pp75-77. See also Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.119, Olga Lengyel *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, p.268 (on female sterilization experiments at Auschwitz including radiation, surgical intervention and the use of short wave rays), Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, pp306-308, *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.218, Olga Wormser and Henri Michel (eds), *Tragédie de la déportation 1940-1945: témoignages de survivants des camps de concentration allemands* (Paris: Hachette, 1955), pp343-344.

<sup>45</sup> Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu, *Moi, un cobaye* (Paris: SEFA, 1975), p.145

<sup>46</sup> Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.124

<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, however, despite what can only be described as the ferocious Nazi determination to defeminize and desexualize women prisoners, women were evidently still regarded in sexual terms and as sexual beings. This is evidenced by the Nazis "employing" female prisoners in brothels serving privileged prisoners in selected male camps — a tacit recognition of the sexuality of female prisoners and its potential power.

highly emotive narrative responses to it. Here the testimonies within our corpus manifest a palpable clash between structural camp policy and the gender roles and societal values of the World War Two era which so often functioned to augment the trauma of the camp for women inmates — a clash which results in a unique testimonial emphasis. For it must be emphasized that the role and predominant identity of women in France around the time of World War Two tended to place significant emphasis upon the familial context. Although many French women worked and undertook higher education<sup>48</sup>, France remained a society in which women were still denied complete participation in the public sphere by the absence of full female suffrage and as such were (in the broadest legal terms at least) identified with the familial, rather than the public, societal framework and its attendant roles of mother and carer. James McMillan notes that

Given the modesty of women's progress in the wider spheres of employment and education, one is obliged to conclude that after the First World War, as before it, the position of women continued to be defined principally in terms of their role in the family. In the eyes of many moralists motherhood rather than employment still seemed the proper goal of women's existence<sup>49</sup>.

Indeed, the importance of family and fertility for women was inscribed in French laws of the era which, aiming to boost the French birth rate, manifested a strong familial and reproductive emphasis, as Georges Dupeux's summation demonstrates:

Dès 1920, une loi avait été votée, qui réprimait rigoureusement l'avortement et la propagande anticonceptionnelle. Le versement d'allocations familiales avait été rendu obligatoire pour tous les employeurs par la loi du 11 mars 1932. À la veille de la seconde guerre mondiale (décret-loi du 29 juillet 1939), le gouvernement avait pris un ensemble de mesures connues sous le nom de *Code de la famille*, qui comportait, outre le relèvement et l'extension des allocations familiales, l'institution de primes à la première naissance et de prêts aux jeunes ménages<sup>50</sup>.

Inevitably, then, for many women there existed a tight linkage between their predominant societally-prescribed role as mothers and childrearers and their own personal identity and self image.

The multi-pronged camp assault on female fertility is therefore commonly conceived and accentuated within the French female narrative not as a purely physical menace but rather as a severe attack on the identity and social role of women prisoners. For those without children, the potential loss of fertility is often presented as jeopardising their entire future (already a shadowy, highly uncertain concept in the perilous camp environment), prompting them to question both their desirability as future wives and their purpose and direction in life without the possibility of motherhood and raising a family which many had assumed to be rightfully theirs. Through the *leitmotif* of infertility, these writers establish a theme of ongoing, unremitting emptiness and desolation, effecting a despairing conceptualization in which the camp experience, even if they succeed in surviving it, cannot be finite and parenthetical but must continue to dominate their

<sup>48</sup> France in fact had the highest percentage of working women in Europe during this period. See Georges Dupeux, *La société française 1789-1970* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1972), p.230.

<sup>49</sup> James McMillan, *Housewife or Harlot: the Place of Women in French Society 1870-1940* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), p.125

<sup>50</sup> Georges Dupeux, *La société française 1789-1970*, p.215

lives through the prescription of a barren and equally desolate future. Consider, for example, the following extract from Fania Fenelon's text, which follows the female orchestra members' discovery of used sanitary apparatus in a double bass case. Although the women realise the fortuitousness of being released from the practicalities of menstruation within the harsh camp environment, this pragmatic sentiment is eclipsed by a much stronger and more primal emotion:

Cependant, à cet instant, toutes envient l'inconnue malpropre, et Margot, la Tchèque, résume le sentiment général: 'J'aimerais être à sa place', que Hilde, songeuse, complète: 'Cela est très pénible de ne plus connaître cette période impure, on ne sent plus femme, on est comme des vieilles!'. Timidement, la grande Irène s'inquiète: 'Et si 'après' elles ne revenaient pas?'. Ses paroles suscitent un mouvement d'horreur, c'est comme un courant de terreur qui nous traverse [...] Des catholiques se signent, des femmes récitent le Shema, toutes cherchent à exorciser cette malédiction que les Allemands font peser sur elles: la stérilité. Après cela, comment dormir? Le rire a été chassé par la mise en péril de ce privilège sacré: un ventre fécond. Celles qui en sortiront devront-elles payer le malheur d'avoir été ici de cette secrète mutilation: ne plus être femme? [...] Alors, nous restons éveillées avec cette peur qui gîte en nous<sup>51</sup>.

Here Fenelon portrays the range of emotions elicited by the spectre of infertility — fear, envy towards those who remain unaffected and a real sense of a loss of femininity and their distinction as women.

Nowhere, however, is this integral correspondance between fertility and identity, and the subsequent fear for future existence born from the threat to fertility, more patently illustrated than in Livia Bitton Jackson's testimony. Although Hungarian, the fears voiced by her compatriots are broadly representative of the testimonial emphasis of female inmates of any nationality<sup>52</sup>:

There is bromide in our food, we are told by the old-timers [...] The Germans are experimenting with mass sterilization [...] This information causes panic among the inmates and at first many refuse to eat the cooked food, determined to survive on the bread ration alone. Soon hunger wins and the food is consumed as before [...] But the topic does not die. Married women keep wondering about the bromide in their food again and again. Will they bear children again? What will their husbands say when they find out? Perhaps less of the food will cause less of a damage. Some try to eat less and the conflict is painful. Rejection of a means of survival for the sake of a dubious gain<sup>53</sup>.

This extract provides a particularly telling insight into female perceptions of fertility, with these inmates articulating the view that their reproductive capacity is in fact so focal to their existence that they are prepared to embrace starvation in order to preserve it. Despite the dubious rationale underpinning this logic (given that the female reproductive system requires a healthy,

<sup>51</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre* (Paris: France Loisirs, 1976), p.142

<sup>52</sup> The testimony of Giuliana Tedeschi, an Italian Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz, is also worth noting on this point. When it is rumoured that the Italians are destined for fertility-based experiments, Tedeschi notes: "I was overcome by a wild desperation. My deepest, most intimate femininity was anguished and rebelled. I thought of my body brutally mutilated, its vitality hacked away, of being forced to surrender that most female function that nature had imposed. 'This body, this body do you understand, it's not even mine anymore, it's my husband's, my daughter's. I want a child, another child!'. Memories of early motherhood [...] flooded back like a torture, a physical need". See *There is a Place on Earth: a Woman in Birkenau* (New York: Random House, 1992), p.45.

<sup>53</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.80

nourished body to function effectively), those writers who portray the contemplation or undertaking of such an action in order to retain their fertility render explicit the unexpected and, to the reader, seemingly highly unequal conflict between hunger (the basic desire to eat and survive) and their desire to remain fertile — a conflict which is uniquely female and illustrative of the way in which gender-related societal values and psychological identity could prove determinant in women's experience of, and responses to, the camp environment. Nowhere in French male testimonies is there evidence of such a perceived dilemma, nor indeed of any real concern for the question of fertility. This discrepancy is in all probability attributable not only to social conditioning (which tends to emphasize fertility as a female area whilst synchronously focusing male identity within the professional realm and away from the sphere of family and childrearing), but also to the fact that men in the camps did not experience visible tangible evidence of a loss of fertility as occurred with the cessation of female menstruation<sup>54</sup>. Moreover, unlike women who systematically underwent dangerous gynaecological procedures, men were not universally and knowingly exposed to the danger of infertility in any comprehensive or readily identifiable fashion. Rather, their experiences were limited to isolated (although often devastating) experiments on selected individuals, thus effectively limiting their awareness of the risk of reproductive damage. Female testimonies are therefore unique in their consolidation of the theme of extensive trauma and conflict in relation to the issue of fertility, engendered by the veritable clash between a societal and biological identity which hinged upon female fertility, and a camp system which functioned to suppress and negate this reproductive capacity.

Fertility is not the only area, however, in which these testimonies exhibit a particularly emphatic narrative tension as female gender-based perceptions or identity collide with the basic structural framework of the concentration camp environment. The issues of nudity and modesty are similarly significant, for French women in the World War Two era lived in a society in which female sexuality remained strongly associated with ideals of modesty and respectability. To the vast majority of French women deported to German camps who have produced testimonies of their experience, any display of public nudity or revealing of the body to strangers, or in many cases even family, was anathema — an unthinkable breach of a social code which valued female modesty and decency. And yet, this code was comprehensively and forcibly violated from the moment women entered the concentration camp. Be it Auschwitz, Ravensbrück or any other camp, the formula was universal and undeviating — inmates were ordered to

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<sup>54</sup> Note that Michael Pollak, however, asserts that male prisoners did in fact experience trauma at comparable physiological changes in the camps. After describing the shock felt by women at the loss of menstruation, Pollak asserts that "Dans le cas des hommes, l'événement équivalent, mais moins fréquemment rapporté, est l'absence de toute érection spontanée, particulièrement au moment du réveil, ainsi que de pollutions nocturnes" (*L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.266). Given that mention of this particularity is almost entirely absent from French male narratives, it cannot, however, be regarded as a comparably significant testimonial theme. See also Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart. The Human Condition in Modern Mass Society* (Illinois: Free Press of Glencoe Illinois, 1960), p.198. Bettelheim mentions the male fear of impotency within the camps and its manifestation in masturbation and homosexual practises.

remove their clothes and undergo the entire initial disinfection process (inspection, shaving, showering) completely naked. Often this nudity was prolonged for extended periods outside the block on completion of the initiation, in full view of the entire camp. Nor was it an exceptional, singular trauma. Rather, such enforced nudity was generally repeated numerous times throughout a prisoner's camp experience, under various guises ranging from disinfection (sporadically and perfunctorily performed within some camps and also a quasi-universal precedent to any change of camp), to punishment, undressing for selections<sup>55</sup> or even, in a typical manifestation of Nazi illogicality, dental examinations<sup>56</sup>: “Nous devons prendre l'habitude de la nudité, car tout est prétexte à nous faire mettre à ‘plume’, suivant l'expression d'une de nos camarades”<sup>57</sup>. The narrative significance accorded to this undermining of women's socialized responses is indisputable, with the loss of modesty figuring as a dominant theme within female depictions of the initial disinfection process. Most chart an emotional progression which commences with the incredulity expressed by Nadine Heftler and Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec respectively:

Quoi? Il faut nous déshabiller entièrement devant ces Waffen SS armés de matraques?... Mais ce n'est pas possible, nous n'allons quand même pas nous mettre toutes nues devant eux! Il suffit peut-être d'ôter son manteau? Mais pas du tout, les fouets claquent, les gifles et les coups de bottes sont délivrés...<sup>58</sup>

and again: “Mais, dis-lui donc que nous, on s'met pas nues dehors. On a de la décence, on n'est pas des p... comme eux, bandes de vaches.”<sup>59</sup>. Incredulity is quickly replaced, however, by embarrassment, humiliation and a sense of acute vulnerability at the unaccustomed exposure of the physical self to complete strangers. Nelly Gorce is representative (“De toute notre pudeur nous souffrons. Quelle humiliation d'être ainsi devant nos ennemies hurlantes et nos camarades effondrées”<sup>60</sup>), as is Simone Lagrange:

Une Kapo me fera pencher en avant pour voir si tous mes poils ont bien disparu. Riant de mon humiliation, et pour s'amuser un peu plus sans doute, elle repasse la tondeuse sur mon corps. Je [...] me mets à trembler, sans plus savoir si c'est de froid, de rage, de colère ou de désespoir<sup>61</sup>.

Moreover, the trauma inherent in this enforced nudity was further exacerbated by Nazi staffing policies. Whereas male prisoners were generally supervised by male guards only, female inmates were often guarded by SS personnel of either sex<sup>62</sup>, and it was common practice

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<sup>55</sup> The general and seemingly innocuous term “selection” was employed throughout the Nazi camp network to denote the process of determining which prisoners were to be exterminated. Prisoners were usually required to undress and parade before a member of the SS, who would assess their physical condition with a cursory glance and pronounce them as either fit or unfit for further labour — the latter categorization signifying that they were to be exterminated.

<sup>56</sup> Dental examinations were undertaken not out of any concern for prisoner welfare, but in a quest for gold teeth which could be extracted for Nazi profit.

<sup>57</sup> Jacqueline Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.99

<sup>58</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1992), p.34

<sup>59</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.156

<sup>60</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995), p.27

<sup>61</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.55

<sup>62</sup> Odette Améry gives figures for Ravensbrück of 200 male SS guards and 100 females (*Nuit et brouillard*, p.34)

to employ male SS guards in the disinfection area<sup>63</sup>. Invariably, these male guards mocked the sexuality and appearance of the women prisoners, subjecting them to a sexual harassment rarely endured by their male counterparts, as Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe (Ravensbrück) and Simone Alizon (Auschwitz) both attest: “Nous sommes nues, gênées au possibles, humiliées. Un SS nous passe en revue: les Françaises sont jolies. Quelle épreuve pour nous!”<sup>64</sup>, and again:

Les SS des deux sexes vinrent, plusieurs fois et longuement, avec des expressions goguenardes, de mauvais rires et probablement des plaisanteries grivoises, regarder ces Françaises, prétendument si élégantes, réduites à cette apparence de ‘sous-femmes’<sup>65</sup>.

Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec details a comparable sexual humiliation at the hands of the SS male guards on arrival and disinfection at Ravensbrück:

Oh! Prima, disent-ils en riant et indiquant une pauvre vieille dame aux chairs avachies par une longue vie. Devant les corps jeunes, les plaisanteries ne manquent pas et doivent être obscènes car leur rire est gros et celles d'entre nous qui comprennent l'allemand ont rougi violemment. Ils vont à leur besogne et d'autres leur succèdent, et, nous, prisonnières, il nous faut rester droites, nues, cinq par cinq, dans la cour du Revier...<sup>66</sup>.

The impact of this episode on Toulouse-Lautrec and her compatriots is far from negligible, with the women expressing emotions running the gamut from shame, humiliation and embarrassment to confusion and anger as their sexuality is exposed and ridiculed by the soldiers. Most indicative of the extent of the emotional trauma engendered by the assault upon their modesty and sexual dignity, however, is the ferocity of their response, with Toulouse-Lautrec accentuating the causal relationship which sees the women collectively vow immediately after this experience never to forget this treatment and to consequently raise their children to hate the Germans as a direct result of it. Toulouse-Lautrec herself endorses this general consensus: “Je regarde dégoûtée ce spectacle de chair humaine, si misérable. Je veux fixer à tout jamais dans mon esprit cette vue de la déchéance, afin de me souvenir toujours de ce que les Allemands ont fait de nous, êtres libres”<sup>67</sup>. Although Vera Laska’s assertion that these aspects of the camp experience were “[...] the most shocking of all the shocks, a deep blow to their very womanhood. The depravity of the men [...] was one of the cruellest tortures to which women were subjected in the concentration camps”<sup>68</sup> is undoubtedly hyperbolic given the wider camp context of extermination, starvation and disease, Toulouse-Lautrec’s testimonial emphasis upon the fiercely vengeful avowals of her *camarades* is patently illustrative of the devastating effect for women of enforced nudity, loss of modesty and sexual humiliation.

<sup>63</sup> As gender segregation became increasingly fragmented towards the end of the war, sexual degradation was also implemented by certain male *Kapos*, as Suzanne Wilborts notes at Mauthausen: “[...] elles ont dû subir une visite ignoble, toutes nues, devant une centaine de personnes. Des prisonniers de droit commun allemands, voleurs ou assassins, les faisaient monter sur un haut tabouret; l’un d’eux éclairait la femme ainsi perchée avec un gros projecteur descendu du plafond, pendant que les autres cherchaient les poux ou autres petites bêtes, soi-disant fort mal placées. N’insistons pas, les détails ne peuvent s’écrire”. See *Pour la France: Angers, La Santé, Fresnes, Ravensbrück, Mauthausen* (Paris: Charles Lavauzette, 1946), pp139-140.

<sup>64</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance* (Paris: Éditions Graphein FNDIRP, 1998), p.60

<sup>65</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.116

<sup>66</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J’ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, pp157-158

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p.156

<sup>68</sup> Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.27

It should be noted, however, that (contrary to many dramatized portrayals of the camp milieu in film and literature) the one area of sexual discrimination which might be expected to be rife in a camp environment utilising male guards for the supervision of women prisoners — namely rape or sexual assault — is almost entirely absent from French female testimonies<sup>69</sup>; a fact which is explicable by the strict rules forbidding the SS to engage in such interaction and the severe punishment meted out to them for doing so<sup>70</sup>. Vera Laska's words are apposite here:

Considering the tens of thousands of women incarcerated in the camps, rape by the SS was relatively rare. While it is a fact that the SS could — and did — do as they pleased with any female inmate, raping them was not their preference. First of all, most of these women looked unattractive, without hair, dirty, smelly. Second, if caught in intercourse with an inmate, the SS were punished, usually by being shipped to the Russian front [...] If caught in the act with a Jewess, they could be shot for defaming or defiling the master race<sup>71</sup>.

Consequently, those French women writers who do refer to such sexual assault usually do so only in documenting its non-existence within their camp experience, as exemplified by Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe: “Je n'ai pas connu de cas de viol, même pas par les gardiens qui étaient pourtant des brutes épaisses. Notre sexualité, à nous autres femmes, avait disparu”<sup>72</sup>.

As one might expect, the responses of French women writers to the imposition of nudity also vary significantly depending on their age at the time of incarceration. While humiliation underpins all of the testimonies on this point, older women appear to manifest greater difficulty in mobilising coping strategies — such as the bravado or vows of vengeance displayed by their younger counterparts — when confronted with the contravention of ideals of dignity and modesty. Denise Dufournier remarks upon this generational differentiation in her depiction of her naked compatriots under the shower: “Dans l'impudeur révoltante de cette exhibition, des jeunes riaient par bravade, mais les vieilles femmes ne pouvaient se départir de l'humiliation qu'exprimaient leurs yeux hagards et le tremblement de tous leurs membres”<sup>73</sup>. Many of these older women find the humiliation of allowing their families to see them nude almost equal to that of their exposure in the presence of strangers. Thus, in the midst of her own confusion, Simone Lagrange remarks on her mother's discomfort at the enforced nudity before

<sup>69</sup> Micheline Maurel in fact refers to the public preoccupation with the idea of SS rape of female prisoners in notes included in the preface to her testimony: “‘Alors, est-ce qu'on vous a violée?’ C'est la question qu'on m'a posée le plus souvent. Finalement je regrettais d'avoir évité cela. J'avais manqué par ma faute une partie de l'aventure et cela décevait le public...”. See *Un camp très ordinaire* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957), p.10.

<sup>70</sup> In particular, the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour” of 15 September 1935 listed imprisonment, hard labour or transfer to the war front as punishment for Aryan-Jewish sexual relations. See Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986), p.15.

<sup>71</sup> Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.26. Note that some authors subscribe to an opposing view (such as Józef Garlinski — *Fighting Auschwitz*, p.151 — who asserts that the SS found their easiest sexual conquests within the camp and were so corrupt as to be undeterred by the threat of punishment). These latter authors are in the minority, however, and the absence of the theme of rape within our corpus of testimonies must be read as evidence that French inmates, at least, were not greatly affected by this form of assault.

<sup>72</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe in Guylaine Guidez, *Femmes dans la guerre 1939-1945* (Paris: Perrin, 1989), p.315

<sup>73</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück* (Paris: Hachette, 1945), p.36



her daughter: “Maman s'approche de moi, les mains crispées sur le bas-ventre. A l'évidence, elle est mal à l'aise...”<sup>74</sup>. Raymonde Guyon-Belot observes a similar sentiment when the women are forced to strip for a medical exam: “[...] comme les personnes âgées étaient humiliées de pareilles vexations, parmi elles, certaines étaient avec leur fille qui ne les avaient jamais vues dans cet appareil”<sup>75</sup>. What appears to have made a lasting impression upon younger women, however, (most notably those who entered the camps as adolescents) was the spectacle of other women's nakedness, and particularly that of older women whose nudity unveiled the hitherto concealed ravages of time — a spectacle which evokes responses of revulsion or horror and therefore testifies to just how unnatural the abolition of modesty and privacy is to these women. Hence Toulouse-Lautrec's allusion to the horrors of Dante in her portrayal of collective female nudity:

C'est une vision dantesque que ces corps, pour la plupart déformés et défraîchis. De vieilles peaux sèches et épaisses, parcheminées. Des poitrines flétries, des fesses avachies, des corps parsemés de boutons, d'autres parcourus de cicatrices [...] Des corps tourmentés, noueux, aux chairs mortes et flasques [...] Certaines visions de l'Apocalypse doivent être ainsi et je revois quelques dessins réalistes d'êtres cagneux, tordus par la souffrance, qui ressemblent étrangement à ces femmes debout qui, nues, attendent la visite médicale...<sup>76</sup>.

Nadine Heftler, who was aged only 15 when incarcerated at Auschwitz, reiterates this distaste when confronted with a view to which she was similarly unaccustomed: “[...] c'est vraiment un spectacle affreux que de contempler toutes ces femmes nues; les unes ont des ventres tombant en quatre ou cinq replis, les autres portent des cicatrices d'une césarienne, certaines enfin ont une poitrine qui leur descend jusqu'au ventre”<sup>77</sup>. Penning their testimonies immediately after the war and thus remaining closely attuned to their own youthful perceptions, these two writers document the sight of female nudity as a visual affront — a shocking and altogether unsavoury reality from which they had previously been protected and whose intrusion into their consciousness is unnatural and unsolicited. Their reaction therefore serves as one more example of the significance of the concepts of modesty and dignity amongst female prisoners, revealing the sense of distaste and acute dislocation experienced at their demise.

And yet, despite the universality of enforced nudity in the concentration camp system, the extreme emotions which dominate French female testimonial literature regarding the loss of modesty and sexual dignity do not figure prominently in male accounts of comparable experiences. Not only were male prisoners not socialized to regard modesty as a defining element of their masculinity, but they were also not generally exposed to sexual humiliation by guards of the opposite sex, as women routinely were. André Courvoisier's general observation that women in the camps “[...] subirent une déchéance humaine bien plus grave que nous qui

<sup>74</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.55

<sup>75</sup> Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.158

<sup>76</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.157

<sup>77</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.35

connaissances déjà les injustices et mesquineries de notre temps régimentaire”<sup>78</sup> is also relevant here, for it is particularly noteworthy that male prisoners were relatively accustomed to limited privacy from their experience of military service. The apparently lesser level of trauma occasioned by these dual differences in gender socialization and camp practices is evidenced by the treatment of this aspect of camp experience in male testimonies. When enforced nudity is in itself featured in male writings, it tends to elicit reactions which are far removed from those of women inmates. Instead of the emphatic shame, confusion and distress commonly accentuated by women writers, many French male writers simply manifest comparatively moderate embarrassment or a certain bemusement. Bernard Py (Dachau) comments that “Il est un peu gênant de se voir totalement nus les uns les autres pour la première fois”<sup>79</sup>. His depiction of their initial nudity is infused more with a sense of the bizarre than the traumatic, particularly when he describes how the men share the remains of their food whilst naked: “[...] et je trouve cocasse ce pique-nique que nous faisons debout, nus, civilement”<sup>80</sup>. His bemusement is shared by René Chavanne, who passes over his description of nudity at Hinzert with the somewhat offhand comment “c'est rigolo n'est-ce pas?”<sup>81</sup> when the men are required to present their genitals for inspection. Later, at Buchenwald, the same situation is similarly described, with a sense of the ridiculous eclipsing humiliation as the dominant sentiment: “C'était humiliant, dégradant, mais nous ne pouvions nous empêcher de sourire en voyant l'aspect que revêtait alors nos amis”<sup>82</sup>.

Indeed, few French male inmates dwell at length on the issues of nudity or modesty, with most favouring the type of cursory description utilised by Aimé Bonifas, here describing the initial disinfection: “En un instant, je suis dépouillé de tous mes vêtements, absolument nu, rasé à la tondeuse électrique... Je ne suis plus désormais que le Haftling 20.801”<sup>83</sup>. Bonifas manifests no concern at the loss of modesty, respectability or sexual dignity. Instead nudity is alluded to briefly only within the context of the dispossession of identity which, for him, constitutes the most significant trauma. In a descriptive tendency shared by many male writers, his nakedness is therefore portrayed as merely one of many constitutive elements in this process, and not a singularly overwhelming, localised trauma as it was for so many women. And therein lies the essential difference. Amongst male writers, this compulsory nudity is deemed traumatic only in its wider, overarching contextual framework in conjunction with a raft of other occurrences (tattooing, shaving of hair, Nazi brutality), and their dire implications connected to the loss of identity, the beginnings of dehumanization and the inception of an acute sense of personal vulnerability. For French women, however, even before the onset and accumulation of

<sup>78</sup> André Courvoisier, *Un aller et retour en enfer* (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1984), p.175

<sup>79</sup> Bernard Py, *Dans le malheur de Dachau j'ai trouvé un bonheur 1944-1945* (Paris: Éditions Saint-Paul, 1995), p.13

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, pp13-14

<sup>81</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.166

<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.241

<sup>83</sup> Aimé Bonifas, *Détenu 20801 dans les bagnes nazis* (Paris: FNDIRP Graphein, 1999), p.39

these additional traumas, the initial fact of nudity is in itself depicted as singularly traumatic, and it is therefore certainly reasonable to deduce that the dehumanization process was experienced more completely and immediately by women. Thus when Eva Tichauer is ordered to undress upon arrival at Auschwitz, she describes the women removing their clothes and clearly establishes the commencement of their dehumanization from this early juncture: “Il y a là des femmes, mais aussi des hommes, avec et sans uniforme. Je fais vite, d'autres traînent de honte. Le processus d'avilissement est commencé”<sup>84</sup>. The immediacy of her pronouncement would appear to furnish compelling evidence of the early infiltration of the dehumanization process into the psyche of female prisoners, through its linkage to, and assault upon, ingrained social values of particular significance to women.

Moreover, testimonial literature also yields evidence that this particular social value may have been eventually annihilated — or at least fundamentally altered — for most women by the repeated practice of compulsory nudity over the passage of time spent in the concentration camp. The recurrent, persistent and unmitigated devaluation of the notions of modesty and privacy (coupled with the need for women to adapt to a whole new mode of existence and attendant scale of values in the camps), effectively served to usurp their position as primary female social values and to render many women acclimatized, if not all but immune, to the ordeal of nudity after a certain period in the camps. Francine Christophe, for example, evokes the totality of the loss of modesty amongst women after months in the camps in her description of the train transfer of certain privileged inmates from Bergen-Belsen, where all stripped completely nude: “Nous nous dénudons complètement, hommes, femmes, enfants, et nous nous épouillons comme des singes au zoo. La lutte contre le pou typhique...”<sup>85</sup>. Here the new values of the camp (namely survival and the fight against disease) have comprehensively superceded such anterior ideals as modesty, whose superfluousness within the reality of the concentration camp is patently evident. Vladimir Pozner also makes the pertinent observation that women in those camps where selections occurred underwent a mental transition which saw them move from shame at enforced nudity to fear of it as the harbinger of the selection process<sup>86</sup>. Other women writers, in contrast to the comprehensive effacement of modesty implied by Christophe, attest to a veritable psychological schism on the part of female prisoners, whereby exposure of the body before the SS — whom the prisoners came to regard as non-human — eventually elicited little reaction from female inmates, while any enforced nudity in the presence of their fellow male inmates (during camp transfers or towards the end of the war as evacuations and the large-scale movement of the prisoner population broke down gender segregation) remained traumatic. Macha Ravine's comments illustrate this mental rift:

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<sup>84</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, p.58

<sup>85</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.116

<sup>86</sup> Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.160

Nous étions mille femmes dans la tenue d'Eve. Nous avons perdu la pudeur devant les Nazis dans de multiples scènes où ils nous considéraient comme des cobayes. Eux, ne comptaient pas non plus pour des humains à nos yeux, mais dans le camp circulaient les hommes internés du kommando de désinfection et nous nous sentions blessées dans notre dignité<sup>87</sup>.

Whether the eventual obliviousness to physical exposure is portrayed as partial or complete, however, the real assault effected by the concentration camp experience upon this learned social value is clearly established in female testimonial literature.

Similarly, the enforced transformation of the prisoner's external appearance and the outward desexualization of women prisoners constitutes a further sphere in which testimonial literature attests to the encroachment of the camp mechanism upon gender-informed values and identity with a particular impact upon women inmates. As we have seen, prisoners were subjected to a comprehensive dehumanization process at the outset of their camp experience, whose objective was the elimination of any distinguishing external identity. To this end, clothes and personal items were confiscated and prisoners were provided with mismatched, ill-fitting and worn cast-offs amounting to little more than rags, or sometimes (usually for non-Jewish inmates) with striped prison uniforms. Heads were shaved, although this was by no means a universal practice. Ostensibly it was performed at Ravensbrück if lice were deemed to be present, but in reality the rationale governing the practice was often entirely arbitrary or determined by the whims of those charged with the disinfection process, as Odette Améry notes: "[... les cheveux]. Leur sort dépend des parasites qu'ils abritent, des inscriptions du dossier, et de l'humeur de la surveillante de service. Un jour, tout un convoi de travailleuses volontaires, qui faisaient escale, sera rasé par une garde"<sup>88</sup>. Entire convoys not infested with lice could therefore be shaved or one or two prisoners only could be selected for shaving. Eva Tichauer also asserts that race was the deciding factor in Auschwitz, with non-Jews being permitted to retain their hair<sup>89</sup>, although once again this practice was far from consistent<sup>90</sup>. In addition to the removal of hair and clothes, women also lost virtually all feminine traits after a certain period in the camps, with the ravages of starvation effectively causing breasts to disappear and eliminating the shape of the female physique: "Breasts began to sag [...] then became virtual hanging empty sacks... then the empty sacks became shorter. Eventually the skin too was absorbed and the breasts disappeared completely. We were all like men. Flat"<sup>91</sup>. Women prisoners were thus reduced to

<sup>87</sup> Olga Wormser and Henri Michel (eds), *Tragédie de la déportation*, p.99

<sup>88</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.25

<sup>89</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, p.58

<sup>90</sup> Nadine Heftler, for example, who was a Jewish prisoner at Auschwitz, did not have her head shaved at the initial disinfection and was merely subjected to a crude haircut — the criteria being based in this instance not on race but on lice: "Si quelque malheureuse se trouve en possession de poux [...] elle se voit tondre la tête entièrement. Pour les autres, on se contente de leur couper les cheveux à la garçonne" (*Si tu t'en sors*, p.34). Note, however, that Heftler did indeed have her head shaved a few weeks later at the whim of a Blockova who subjected her entire block to such treatment.

<sup>91</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* p.74

androgynous figures devoid of any distinction as females, their gender suppressed both in appearance and in function.

All too easily dismissed as trivial, this comprehensive effacement of the individual's recognisable external appearance was often in fact tantamount to a veritable dissolution of personal self-image for women socialized to a close affiliation of the inner identity with the external self. For appearance (and particularly hair) was not only a manifestation of femininity, but also a common expression of female individuality and identity. Indeed, the expunging of feminine appearance and the trauma inherent in this external metamorphosis for women is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the removal of hair and the emphatic responses of female writers to this process. An analysis of female testimonies reveals the shaving of hair to be almost disproportionately feared and dreaded by women inmates, who express a range of emotions from persistent disquiet to sheer terror at the prospect. Francine Christophe's writings, for example, dwell upon the extreme fear of such shaving, which colours not only her experience of the initial disinfection ("J'ai si peur qu'on me tonde!"<sup>92</sup>), but also virtually her entire stay in the camp. Her testimony manifests a continual, reiterative focus upon hair and her very real fear of losing this last representation of her femininity: "Qu'on ne me tonde pas, oh non, qu'on ne me tonde pas"<sup>93</sup> and again "Je tremble à l'idée d'être tondue. Je crois bien que ça devient une hantise"<sup>94</sup>. Christophe's testimony must, however, be treated with caution, given its problematic nature due to her extreme youth at the time of her incarceration. Hence the narrative emphasis upon her fear at losing her hair could conceivably be interpreted either as a mere childish fear of relinquishing the girliness to which young girls often cling or, conversely, as a sharply telling reflection and assimilation of the adult responses to loss of femininity which dominated her immediate surroundings.

Regardless of how we choose to interpret it, Christophe's testimony is not, however, unique in voicing such fears relating to the loss of hair. Rather, they are echoed to varying degrees in the accounts of many other French women who have reached, or are nearing, adulthood. Nadine Heftler, for instance, whose head is reshaved right at the very end of her concentration camp experience, portrays the loss of her hair as so traumatic as to eclipse virtually all else, to the point — inconceivable to the casual reader — that she would even consider delaying her release from the concentration camp and return to France until it has grown back: "L'idée de rentrer en France la tête rasée (car, au fond, j'espérais bien la revoir, notre France) me remplissait de désespoir et je me disais qu'il vaudrait mieux retarder mon retour et attendre que mes cheveux repoussent juste assez, pour qu'on puisse me tracer une raie!"<sup>95</sup>. Such

<sup>92</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.75

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, p.85

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, p.99

<sup>95</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.175

comments from a Jewish — and therefore highly vulnerable — prisoner in the midst of the extermination machine that was the Auschwitz death camp are certainly effective in establishing this aspect of camp experience as a significant testimonial theme and in challenging reader preconceptions regarding the many degrees of trauma inherent in the camp milieu. Simone Lagrange, too, is reduced to tears as her head is shaved:

Lorsque la première mèche de mes cheveux me tombe sur les genoux, je ne peux retenir un cri tant cela me paraît terrible! Je sanglote pour des cheveux? Voilà qui fait rire une femme soldat qui les ramasse, les rassemble et les garde pour sans doute s'en faire une perruque. Je ne peux retenir mes larmes de honte car je suis encore plus complètement nue ainsi que cela me paraît impensable, cette atteinte à la dignité humaine<sup>96</sup>.

Inherent in the loss of hair for Lagrange, therefore, is not only an acutely experienced cognisance of the assault upon her dignity as a free human being, but also a sense of nudity and vulnerability which is suggestive of the integral part hair plays in her psyche and the image she presents to the world. Like outer garments, hair allows a woman to “clothe” her inner self in an image of her choice, and without its protection Lagrange feels naked and exposed. In this same vein, Ana Novac (a young Hungarian Jew whose testimony was one of very few journals to be brought out of the camps almost intact), provides us with perhaps the most telling indication of the intimate relation women could experience between the inner and outer self in her description of undergoing the shaving process: “Une douleur si déchirante me transperce [...] Il me semble que tous les tourments, toutes les pertes sont douces à côté de celle-ci! [...] Comme si la tondeuse m'avait coupé de moi-même”<sup>97</sup>. And of course, this integral connection between hair and self-definition was particularly strong for religious Jewish women, whose public status as women was closely linked to the hair and the manner in which it was worn, as Sybil Milton notes: “Religious Jewish women who, once married, kept their hair covered under either a wig or a scarf, felt both a physical and a spiritual nakedness, thus unprotected and exposed to the whims of their Nazi tormentors”<sup>98</sup>. The strength of this identity-appearance linkage, and the resulting trauma when the linkage is brutally ruptured<sup>99</sup>, should therefore dissuade us from trivialising the loss of hair as insignificant within the wider context of women's concentration camp experiences, and reiterate the significance of pre-internment gender-related values and socialization in defining the focus and extent of women's trauma upon entering the concentration camp environment, and thereby also the narrative emphasis elected by these writers.

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<sup>96</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.54

<sup>97</sup> Ana Novac, *Les beaux jours de ma jeunesse* (Paris: Éditions Balland, 1992), p.34

<sup>98</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.225

<sup>99</sup> Hair was also often strongly linked to female sexuality, with the shaving of women's heads constituting a deliberate attempt to *desexualize* women. During the post-occupation Purge, women who had engaged in sexual relations with the German occupiers were frequently punished by having their heads shaved — their actions were regarded as a sexual crime, and removal of their hair to dispossess them of this sexuality was deemed a fitting punishment. Such a course of action is clear evidence of the connection between hair and sexuality, whereby an attack on the former is seen to constitute an assault upon the latter.

It is here, too, that we must make a distinction between prisoners such as Heftler, Novac and Lagrange (Jewish and incarcerated on a racial basis and not as a result of political engagement), and those French women who were imprisoned for resistance activities, and note that although often considerably divergent in their narrative emphasis, it is evident that both groups of writers tend to articulate comparable reactions in this sphere. Many female resistance activists (such as Nelly Gorce, Denise Dufournier and Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, to cite but a few) present narratives characterized by strongly held resistance ideals, which inevitably heavily colour their testimonial responses, self-characterization and approach to the concentration camp. The oft-articulated view of these writers that by engaging in combat of their own volition they had freely elected to sacrifice their lives and accept any consequences (as evidenced by Gisèle Guillemot's assertion that:

Quel qu'ait été le parcours des déportées résistantes, elles avaient en commun le fait de savoir pourquoi elles étaient là [...] Elles avaient choisi de combattre le Nazisme pour défendre des valeurs sans lesquelles la vie est intolérable et elles entendaient bien continuer leur combat en captivité<sup>100</sup>)

commonly results in a narrative focus upon their attitudinal acceptance or embracing of camp trials — presumably including the destruction of their external appearance and femininity — as their means of contributing to the cause and continuing their chosen combat. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, for instance, interprets the disinfection process and its attendant comprehensive dispossession of belongings and appearance as a release from the class differences dividing French women and therefore an opportunity to discover their real selves (“Maintenant plus rien ne nous distingue: les conditions sociales, classe, profession, tout cela n'existe plus. Ils ont voulu nous détruire et pourtant, plusieurs ont pris vraiment conscience de leur 'être' à cet instant”<sup>101</sup>), just as the camp's removal of external trappings allowed them to focus on their inner selves and ideals: “[...] être libre, être soi-même, avoir ses idées propres, être vrai, pur, un [...] nous nous libérerons par l'intérieur de nous-mêmes [...] Abandonne tout, abandonne-toi, tu trouveras tout”<sup>102</sup>.

And yet even within such a testimonial approach in which many camp occurrences may be situated within the context of sacrificing for a glorious cause, the loss of hair (and its attendant connotations of female identity) remains a singularly frightening prospect which is rarely so readily assimilated or rationalized by even the most ardent of resistance writers. In the same narrative cited above, Chombart de Lauwe asserts that — in the midst of all the other camp horrors — the women continually feared the lice inspection throughout their incarceration, since the discovery of lice would result in the loss of their hair: “Cette petite cérémonie est inquiétante. Plusieurs y perdront ou reperdront leurs cheveux, et c'est une chose à laquelle nous

<sup>100</sup> Gisèle Guillemot in *Espoirs au féminin*, (Paris: FNDIRP, 1999), p.27

<sup>101</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.60

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, pp62-63

tenons encore”<sup>103</sup>. Nelly Gorce (another French woman whose narrative is dominated by resistance ideals and a notable emphasis upon self-sacrifice) also describes the trauma occasioned by the shaving process, and her attendant determination to conceal her inner reaction from her captors. Commencing with a qualification of her own response as stupid, Gorce’s depiction betrays a subtle sense of shame at her own preoccupation with this aspect of her camp experience — a preoccupation which the reader senses she deems unworthy of her higher ideals and which thus instigates a subtle underlying tension between Gorce’s responses as a resistant and as a woman inmate:

Stupidement je supplie: ‘Mon Dieu faites que je ne suis pas tondue, Mon Dieu, je vous en prie, faites...’. Déjà je sens sur ma nuque le froid des ciseaux, puis avant même que j’aie pu dire ouf, la tondeuse électrique a rendu mon crâne aussi nu que ma main. J’enrage. En moi sourd une colère folle. ‘Ah! Les brutes!’ Il ne faut surtout pas que ces femelles voient ma peine. Je ris comme d’une bonne plaisanterie et réclame une glace... je regarde mon visage de petit garçon en clamant bien fort me trouver ravissante<sup>104</sup>.

Similarly, Gorce’s description of the reaction of her Resistance companions to the shaving process — a reaction marked by sympathy, unease and a vague embarrassment — is revelatory of the extent of the trauma it entailed for all female prisoners, regardless of their ideological or racial categorization:

Chaque fois que l’une d’entre nous sort de la fouille pour aller à la douche, ce sont des exclamations navrées si elle est tondue. Les deux jumelles sont au désespoir; elles ont toutes deux de ravissantes chevelures. Pour l’instant, Françoise est sur la sellette. Ça y est, un ‘oh’ navré. Pauvre Françoise! Une voix réclame comme tout à l’heure: ‘Tournez le dos aux douches, elle a été trop chic’. Nous nous détournons toutes pour ménager la pudeur de notre camarade<sup>105</sup>.

Micheline Maurel, too, goes so far as to deem the loss of hair a foretaste of death for her fellow political prisoners, so deeply did it affect them:

Je crois que l’un des premiers chocs, après les coups et les chiens de l’arrivée, c’est d’être tondue. Et pour celles qui ne sont pas tondues cette fois-là, c’est de voir la tête des autres [...] Pour beaucoup de celles qui à Romainville étaient encore coquettes, se maquillaient et se frisaient, c’était déjà presque un trépas. Il n’y avait pas de miroir, mais il y avait les vitres, et ce froid autour de la tête, et ce vide, et le regard des autres<sup>106</sup>.

This highly traumatized reaction to the assault on their femininity engendered by the shaving process is therefore one area in which French women’s testimonies concur, regardless of often deep-rooted authorial social, political or ideological differences<sup>107</sup>.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, p.81

<sup>104</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, pp28-29

<sup>105</sup> Ibid, p.28

<sup>106</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, p.19

<sup>107</sup> The exceptional case of Olga Lengyel is worth noting here. During the initial disinfection process, an officer puts Lengyel to one side, ordering that she be spared the shaving of her hair. Lengyel’s response is interesting: ‘Mieux valait, me dis-je, rester avec mes compagnes. Au mépris de la consigne, je me présentai donc à la tonte’ (*Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.42). Here Lengyel’s desire to retain commonality with her group in fact surpasses her attachment to her external identity — a fact which presages the strong group orientation of female inmates which we shall examine in Chapter Three. A desire to remain inconspicuous may also be operative here. Note that Lengyel also asserts (p.42) that those women whose hair was merely cut in irregular tufts suffered from a particularly ridiculous appearance and in fact envied their *camarades* who were shaved.



Having discerned such a trend within French female camp narratives, it is also imperative, however, to question whether this is indeed a female-specific testimonial trend, or whether it may in fact be widely manifest regardless of pre-internment gender socialization and perceptions of identity. The evidence lies overwhelmingly in favour of the former supposition. On the whole, male testimonies manifest little of the anxiety and trauma expressed by women writers in relation to the loss of hair. Certainly, the experience is consistently documented within male writings, and certainly it is qualified as an unpleasant, humiliating occurrence, but there is little evidence of extreme *fear* at the prospect of shaving, nor of the emotive connection to hair which women manifested at its loss. René Chavanne's description of the shaving process is typical in its summary approach, devoid of emotional emphasis:

On passa à *Effectifkammer* où l'on dépose ses vêtements puis l'on passe devant deux ou trois hommes munis de tondeuses électriques qui, en moins de temps qu'il ne vous en faut pour le dire, vous tondaient la tête, les dessous de bras, la poitrine, le pubis, l'anus. On passa ensuite devant un gars muni d'une balayette...<sup>108</sup>

Furthermore, none of the male writers studied reiterate any ongoing, persistent apprehension at the prospect of being shaved throughout their camp experience, suggesting that it simply was not the fearful spectre for men that it was for women. This is not to suggest that any sort of value judgement should be inferred from such a gender distinction — in no way should one conclude that male prisoners were consequently less “shallow”, more focused on issues of greater significance or more readily adaptable to the concentration camp environment. Rather, it is a simple difference born of the differing emphasis of male and female socialization prior to internment, which created varying degrees of trauma for each gender with regard to the diverse trials thrown up by camp life — consolidating the “same hell, different horror” scenario succinctly articulated by Myrna Goldenberg<sup>109</sup>.

Indeed, the marked accentuation of the assault upon the female physical aspect and its inherent trauma is testimonially discernible not only with regard to the loss of hair, but also on a much wider scale. Many women writers manifest a persistent awareness of the general physical effects of camp life, referring to and lamenting their loss of physical attractiveness in the course of their testimony<sup>110</sup>. Catherine Ammar, for example, documents the deteriorating appearance of her breasts as a symbol of her camp-induced unattractiveness: “On avait fait d'ailleurs un concours des plus vilains seins, un jour sous les robinets glacés où en fraude quelques Françaises allaient se laver... Les voix se partageaient entre Céline et moi, toutes deux jolies femmes avant-guerre!”<sup>111</sup>. Compare this to male writers, whose references to their appearance tend to occur within the context of socialized indicators of masculinity, such as loss of strength

<sup>108</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.166

<sup>109</sup> Myrna Goldenberg in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.38

<sup>110</sup> Note too that the ideal of beauty shifted from societal norms to reflect the starvation-dominated camp environment — fleshy, rounded figures (which represented health and survival) became the camp ideal (See Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, p.283)

<sup>111</sup> Catherine Ammar, *Témoignage de déportation* (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris), p.4

(as with Jean Mialet who laments the weakness of his “grotesque” physique which was once that of a sportsman<sup>112</sup>) or the diminishment in their personal stature noted by Primo Levi, who emphasizes the dichotomy between his recognized intellectual stature and his unsavoury camp appearance: “I took my degree at Turin... and while I say it I have the definite sensation of not being believed, of not even believing it myself; it is enough to look at my dirty hands covered with sores, my convict’s trousers encrusted with mud”<sup>113</sup>. Other French male prisoners allude to their outward aspect uniquely within the functional context of survival, detailing their physical state or deterioration at any given time solely as an indication of their wellbeing and chances of survival.

Within the general emphasis upon the destruction of female appearance, the linkage between a woman’s clothing and her femininity is also a focus of many women’s writing. During the disinfection process, Gisella Perl notes that the floor was littered with garments “and many lovely things so essential to true femininity”<sup>114</sup>, establishing the implication that femininity is primarily reliant on outer trappings and that when women are dispossessed of these trappings, their femininity is synchronously curtailed. Odette Améry’s text supports this idea, adopting an almost defensive tone in emphasizing the significance of female apparel within the extreme camp milieu:

Bien sûr c’était peu de chose, une ceinture qui manquait, des godillots de soldats, une robe trop longue; bien sûr, il y eut beaucoup plus terrible, les maladies, la saleté, les coups, la mort. Mais ces petits riens rendaient chaque instant plus lourd. Ils sont le charme, la richesse de la vie d’une femme. Nous, nous étions pauvre de tout<sup>115</sup>.

Most indicative of the connection between women’s self image and their clothing, however, is Livia Bitton Jackson’s description of the singular importance of the occasion when some of the women are given real clothes to wear:

Our happiness knows no bounds. The new clothes have transformed us from nonentities into people. From sexless, ageless, shapeless digits into girls! The clothes have given us dimensions. Some of the girls brush their budding hair with wet fingers into provocative styles, pinch their cheeks to achieve surprisingly becoming complexions [...] The effect is quite startling<sup>116</sup>.

Jackson goes on to describe how the German civilian who worked next to her in the factory initially failed to recognize her in her new clothes:

The smile of recognition in his face, the surprised look in his eyes, reveals the extent of the change in my appearance. And I feel like a human being. My outlook on life has changed. Old Mr Schneidel’s reaction, the reaction of a free individual [...] is of paramount importance. His look of approval validates my new self image. It re-creates my world<sup>117</sup>.

<sup>112</sup> Jean Mialet, *La haine et le pardon*, p.96 and p.99

<sup>113</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man* (London: Sphere Books, 1987), p.112

<sup>114</sup> Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, p.44

<sup>115</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.84

<sup>116</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), p.155

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid*, p.155

A complete transformation of her self image is therefore effected by the acquisition of “real” clothes, testifying to just how strongly Jackson’s sense of identity was informed by her appearance. Indeed, Simone Alizon intimates that the Nazis were aware of the particularly tight appearance-esteem connection for women and specifically wielded it as a weapon in degrading female inmates. She describes the ridiculous appearance of the Jewish women who are clothed in ill-fitting, ragged civilian clothes rather than the striped uniform of the other prisoners, noting that she never witnessed the imposition of a comparable external humiliation upon male inmates:

Leur tenue était plutôt une parodie de vêtements [...] si aucune d’entre elles ne pouvait se voir elle-même, elle voyait les autres. Comment n’auraient-elles pas souffert de leur tenue que les SS avaient voulu grotesque? Souffert de l’humiliation gratuite et de l’avilissement délibéré qui leur était infligé? [...] Devant les premières Juives vêtues ainsi j’eus le coeur serré. J’étais révoltée [...] J’avais mal pour elles. J’avais mal pour toutes les femmes. Jamais je ne vis un détenu homme ainsi accoutré, ainsi ridiculisé. Peut-être y en eut-il, plus tard, à Auschwitz, mais je n’en vis aucun au cours de ma déportation. C’était cela être une ‘sous-femme’!<sup>118</sup>.

Moreover, French female testimonial literature also furnishes frequent evidence of the fact that, conditions permitting, women made every attempt to recapture their femininity through the reassertion of a degree of control — however minimal — over their appearance. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe notes that femininity assumes particular significance for women when conditions are ameliorated to any degree: “On voit même quelques essais timides de coquetterie: celles qui ont la chance d’avoir encore une chevelure la coiffent avec soin [...] nous sommes encore des femmes et certaines parviennent même à être jolies dans leur robe lamentable”<sup>119</sup>. Similarly, Raymonde Guyon-Belot testifies to the strength of women’s desire to maintain their appearance in her descriptions of both their continued attention to their hair despite their extreme and perpetual fatigue (“Chaque dimanche, nous nous occupons réciproquement de nos cheveux”) and of the women stealing electrical wire from the factory in order to put their hair in curlers at night, in defiance of the very real risk that they would be executed for attempted sabotage of Nazi material if caught<sup>120</sup>. Given the close affiliation between appearance and self esteem, the attempts to beautify hair and clothing which form a *leitmotif* in French women’s camp writings must be interpreted not merely as superficial posturing, but rather as one means of re-establishing female identity and the morale which was vital for negotiation of the camp milieu. Lise Lesèvre’s text makes explicit the interdependence of appearance and morale:

C’était très important pour le moral de se soucier de son aspect physique [...] on sentait la fin lorsqu’une fille se laissait aller. Il y avait des jeunes filles qui volaient de la craie à l’usine pour se rosir les lèvres. Moi, je volais de la soude pour me laver la tête. Mon bien le plus précieux, c’était le petit bout de miroir que j’avais gardé depuis la prison de Montluc. Lorsqu’on me l’a volé, je ne pouvais plus me coiffer, j’étais démoralisée<sup>121</sup>.

<sup>118</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, pp160-161

<sup>119</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.97

<sup>120</sup> Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, pp178-179

<sup>121</sup> Lise Lesèvre in Ania Francos, *Il était des femmes dans la Résistance* (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1978), p.416. Note also Reska Weiss’s comments on this point: “My first impulse was to concentrate on making myself more presentable. Under the circumstances this may sound ludicrous; what real relation was there between my

The maintenance of one's appearance could also be quite literally a matter of life and death in the context of selections, where the SS could select for extermination not only those women who appeared the most ill and emaciated, but also those they deemed unattractive or too old, as an older French female prisoner at Ravensbrück devoting herself to improving her outward aspect attests in Christian Bernadac's collective text:

Je sais ce que je fais. Tout à l'heure, ils vont passer. Mes cheveux blancs me feront désigner pour le 'camp de jeunesse'<sup>122</sup> et là on me tuera [...] Donc vous mélangez un peu de suie à une noisette de margarine. Vous obtenez une très belle teinture pour les cheveux. S'il vous reste encore une petite boule de graisse, vous ajoutez de la poussière de brique. Ce fond de teint vous redonne un peu de couleur aux joues<sup>123</sup>.

And beyond the primary fact of survival, Ana Novac's depiction of the discovery of a tiny mirror in a coat pocket when new clothes are distributed, and the ensuing stampede as the women attempt to catch a glimpse of themselves, also illustrates the continued significance attached to the outward appearance as an element of female identity: "Même devant la marmite, je n'ai jamais vu de têtes plus avides. 'À moi... pour un instant seulement... je t'en prie!'. Cent mains tendues vers la bienheureuse..."<sup>124</sup>. This perpetual awareness, and where possible modification, of their external identity is therefore a consistent feature of women's testimonial camp writings.

And yet, a very few women writers manage to conceive the destruction of their physical identity and individuality as a semi-positive force, a sort of protective cloak affording anonymity and an element of refuge. In reducing women prisoners to a non-feminine generic mass (unrecognisable as individuals with their shaven heads and emaciated physiques), the Nazi system conferred upon them a degree of uniformity, whose potential benefits could be twofold — allowing women to remain essentially anonymous and thus to some extent psychologically removed from the humiliation of having their bodies subjected to SS scrutiny, and propelling them towards a greater determination to foster their inner identity. At the initial disinfection process, Simone Alizon articulates how the effacement of her external identity thus allowed her

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newfound spiritual resistance and the unsightly rags on my body? But in a subtle sense there *was* a relationship, and from that moment onwards, throughout my life in the camps, I knew this for a fact. I began to look around me and saw the beginning of the end for any woman who might have had the opportunity to wash and had not done so, or any woman who felt that the tying of a shoelace was wasted energy. I thus realized that it was important for me to improve my appearance" (*Journey through hell*, pp84-85). See also Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, p.87 and Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz* (Paris: Éditions Nagel, 1945), p.164.

<sup>122</sup> The "camp de jeunesse" or *Jugendlager* (so called because it was situated on the grounds of a former re-education facility for Hitler youth) formed part of the Ravensbrück camp complex. From January 1945 older female prisoners were transferred there from the main Ravensbrück camp with the promise of increased rations, improved living conditions and a reprieve from labour. In reality, it functioned as an accelerated exterminative centre — rations were almost non-existent and the prisoners were stripped of clothes and blankets and forced to stand outside almost naked for hours on end. The mortality rate for those transferred to the *Jugendlager* was thus extremely high (See *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, pp192-197).

<sup>123</sup> Christian Bernadac, *Déportation (1) 1933-1945* (Paris: France-Empire, 1992), p.288

<sup>124</sup> Ana Novac, *Les beaux jours de ma jeunesse*, p.205. Note that Robert Antelme depicts a similar enthusiasm to regard themselves in a mirror amongst male prisoners, although their underlying motivation in crowding to do so is related less to a desire to scrutinise their appearance than to experience a moment of solitude: "On n'était comme ça que dans la glace, tout seul, et ce que les copains attendaient avec envie, c'était ce morceau de solitude éclatant où devaient venir se noyer les SS et tous les autres" (*L'espèce humaine*, p.58).

to both adopt a psychological distance from proceedings and to focus on her inner strength, thereby effecting a veritable fissure between her inner and outer self:

Leur curiosité malsaine et méchante me laisse insensible. Nous étions méconnaissables et anonymes [...] Dès ce moment [...] je me réfugiais en moi-même [...] peu importait ma nudité ou la dérision de mon costume. Si j'étais extérieurement une autre, en dépit des circonstances cruelles ou dangereuses que j'eus à traverser, je ne perdis à aucun moment le sens de mon identité<sup>125</sup>.

Interestingly, although developing the theme of her inner identity, Alizon (perhaps unwittingly) implicitly testifies to the strength of the linkage between internal and external self for women — implying that had her recognizable external self remained “present” to endure the sexual humiliation at the hands of the SS, she would have suffered a more marked psychological trauma from the process. It was therefore possible — although certainly less testimonially common — for the negation of the female external appearance to be conceived as a *liberating* experience; a veritable release from the constraints of outward associations and identity. Livia Bitton Jackson in fact interprets it as just such a reprieve: “The shaving of hair has another curious effect. A burden is lifted. The burden of individuality. The burden of associations. Of identity.”<sup>126</sup> Both Alizon and Bitton Jackson, therefore, in focusing upon the sense of freedom imparted by the nullification of external identity in fact strongly imply its pivotal role in female identity, whilst also providing a vital reminder that the relation of women writers to their external identity is neither simplistic nor homogeneous. Although women as a whole may manifest a strong psychological connection to their outward aspect, its transformation may represent one writer’s traumatic loss at the same time as another may succeed in conceptualizing it as a form of liberation — a divergence which sounds a timely reminder of the highly individualised nature of concentration camp experiences even within the sphere of common gender definition.

## Maternity

A study of the primary gender specific aspects of French female testimonial literature would remain incomplete without some analysis of a further area which frequently defined the female experience and rendered it widely divergent from that of males — namely that sphere which encompasses childbearing and women’s relation to children, and which may be encapsulated within the broad umbrella term of maternity. Indeed, women’s biological function and status as maternal carers rendered them vulnerable to a wider range of physical and emotional abuse and trauma, on a multitude of inter-related levels. Although not all French female testimonial authors were personally affected by issues relating to maternity, certain narratives are principally defined by this very fact, while many other writers who witnessed the

<sup>125</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, pp116-117

<sup>126</sup> Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, p.77

maternal tribulations of others also devote part of their texts to elucidating its significance for their fellow women prisoners.

The concentration camp context was one in which biological and maternal ties between women and children were recognised, maintained, and indeed often artificially forged. Of the minors arriving at the camps, the vast majority were Jewish or Gypsy children, or, in other words, racially-categorised enemies of the Reich who were deported, irrespective of age, under the auspices of the Nazi drive to systematically annihilate every individual within the race and thus to achieve its definitive extinction<sup>127</sup>. The official Nazi policy regarding these “racial enemies” under the age of 16 was clearcut: deemed by virtue of their youth and inferior strength to be without exploitative value as members of the slave labour force, extermination awaited them immediately upon arrival<sup>128</sup>. In the words of Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz: “Les enfants en bas âge étaient exterminés sans exception puisque du fait même de leur âge, ils étaient incapables de travailler”<sup>129</sup>. Thus, at the initial selection process which took place on the ramp at Auschwitz as each new convoy arrived, every child under 16<sup>130</sup> was theoretically directed to the left<sup>131</sup> and to the gas chamber. They were not, however, sent alone. The perpetual governing principle of ensuring a seamlessly functioning exterminative system ensured that the “women and children” linkage was firmly entrenched in the *univers concentrationnaire*, where, in order to maintain calm and avoid undue unrest arising from familial separation, women were regularly directed with their children to extermination. Little or no relevance was accorded to the reality or authenticity of the maternal relationship, and indeed, such was the strength of the maternal-child linkage in Nazi policy that it was not unusual for a woman standing next to unknown children to accompany them to extermination. By linking women with children under 16 — a group of individuals categorically and unequivocally doomed — Nazi policy therefore right from the outset propelled Jewish women into a position of extreme vulnerability, severely curtailing the opportunities for survival of vast numbers of women by minimising their chances of entering the camp and therefore of profiting from the chance of survival (however slim) which it afforded.

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<sup>127</sup> Political enemies of the Reich or asocial prisoners were usually deported individually, without children or families, since they were perceived as posing an individual, rather than racial, threat to Nazi domination.

<sup>128</sup> Children of mixed race who were accompanied by Aryan mothers were often admitted to the camps. See, for example, Giuliana Tedeschi, *There is a Place on Earth: a Woman in Birkenau*, p.17

<sup>129</sup> Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.54

<sup>130</sup> The age limit for admittance could vary considerably, and was relatively elastic. Olga Lengyel, for instance, notes that it varied at Auschwitz from 12 to 14 years and mentions that this limit too was “sujette à des variations” (*Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.124). Generally, the limit lay somewhere between the ages of 12 and 16.

<sup>131</sup> This seemingly trivial detail (namely the direction in which the condemned and the reprieved were respectively assigned) also varies in many testimonies. Some Auschwitz-based narratives mention that those destined for extermination were directed to the left (such as Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l’au-delà* p.124). Others denote the right as the condemned file (Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers* pp30-31). Despite frequent manipulation by revisionists of such variations in survivor testimonies in order to challenge the veracity of Nazi extermination, these divergent details are in all probability attributable simply to the vagaries of memory and the overwhelming disorientation which characterized arrival at the camps.

However, in the mass of contradictions and exceptions which frequently characterized the concentration camp system, theory and practice did not always converge, and regardless of official Nazi policy, not all Jewish children were exterminated upon arrival. Many in fact succeeded in entering the camps for a plethora of reasons. Some falsified their age and asserted they met the age-defined entry requirements, some were selected to enter for the purposes of medical experiments (as was the case with any twins arriving at Auschwitz, who were subjected to Mengele's "research" on the phenomenon<sup>132</sup>), some were admitted into camps not equipped with gas chambers allowing for immediate extermination, whilst many others (such as Livia Bitton Jackson whose entry was attributable to her "golden hair") simply captured the fancy of the SS selecting officers, and were granted admittance on a whim. The incidental and the circumstantial were similarly instrumental. Gérard Avran, for example, ascribes his own entry into the camp to the fact that he held back to go to the toilet as the convoy disembarked :

C'est ce qui m'a sauvé. En effet tous les jeunes étaient déjà en rang, marchant directement vers les chambres à gaz [...] Je me suis glissé furtivement dans les rangs des hommes adultes [...] Nous avons appris plus tard qu'à part les hommes valides, toutes les autres personnes, dont ma mère et ma soeur, avaient été conduites directement à la chambre à gaz<sup>133</sup>.

Still other children were born in the camps to pregnant women whose condition escaped selecting officers at the initial selection, in contravention of the Nazi policy destining all pregnant Jewish women to immediate extermination. Children accompanying political or "asocial" prisoners, whose non-racial categorization sanctioned their entry to the camp, also swelled the infant population. And almost universally, children admitted to the camp system were placed in women's camps and thus fell under the care of female prisoners, with the notable exception of adolescent males whose falsely-declared age had gained them entry to the men's camps.

It is within this broad context, then, that the testimonies within our corpus detail the myriad of immensely far-reaching problems relating to maternity in the camps. And the portrait which they sketch is overwhelmingly bleak, encompassing both material and emotional issues and evoking a *leitmotif* of maternal powerlessness and persistent trauma. On the material level, the average female inmate without hierarchical privilege or contacts facilitating the acquisition of extra food or parcels — a category to which most French and Jewish women subscribed<sup>134</sup> — was confronted with the virtual impossibility of procuring adequate food to nourish a growing

<sup>132</sup> SS doctor Josef Mengele (famous for his role in the selection process at Auschwitz) was particularly interested in the study of twins as a means of rapidly boosting the Aryan population. He therefore subjected many twins to experiments presumably aimed at determining how to replicate multiple conceptions, although manifesting little interest in the mothers of these twins. See *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, pp311-314

<sup>133</sup> Gérard Avran, Online testimony, p.21. Available: <http://www.multimedia.com/contreloubli/imprimer.html>

<sup>134</sup> It was relatively rare for French women to receive parcels in the camps, since they were usually forbidden to Jewish prisoners and also, at certain periods, to prisoners classified as "NN" — a category which included many French political prisoners. *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, however, mentions (p.103) that for a short period between February 1944 and the liberation of Paris some rare parcels arrived from France, although when such parcels did succeed in reaching French prisoners they were usually extensively plundered before the inmates received them. Towards the end of the war, many prisoners (including Jewish inmates) also received parcels from the Red Cross.

child. Supplementary rations for children were all but non-existent at Auschwitz (Nadine Heftler writes that “[...] aucune nourriture, dans le camp, n’avait été prévue pour les nouveau-nés. C’était à la mère de les nourrir; or, le plus souvent, elle en était absolument incapable”<sup>135</sup>), and merely initial tokenism at Ravensbrück, as Nelly Gorce notes:

Lorsque une mère arrivait au camp avec son enfant, elle recevait pour lui une seule louche d'une sorte de bouillie d'avoine graissée avec du bouillon d'os; parfois, si la mère réussissait à être bien en cour auprès des Polonaises, elle recevait un peu de lait. Combien avons-nous vu de ces pauvres petits, traînés dès trois ans à l'appel et y demeurant immobiles et glacés<sup>136</sup>.

Given the dearth of extra food for children, therefore, the burden of feeding them was overwhelmingly apportioned to the maternal carer. It was, however, highly impracticable, if not impossible, for women to attempt to meet their children’s nutritional needs through sacrificing their own ration, given the significant discrepancy between camp calorie intake and energy expenditure<sup>137</sup>. Embarking upon such a course of action carried a twofold risk: that of rapid starvation and the jeopardization of her own survival, along with the highly probable repercussion of leaving her offspring orphaned and defenceless in the camp. Such an unresolvable dilemma (starvation of the self or the child) ranks among the many “choiceless choices”<sup>138</sup> clearly presented in female narratives. And yet, despite courting more rapid starvation and a greater risk of illness, many testimonies portray mothers persisting in the practice of sacrificing their own food to assuage their childrens’ hunger, as is exemplified by Francine Christophe’s mother, who nourishes her daughter with the meat and vegetables from her own soup: “Maman me donne les siens” and “Maman me donne à manger”<sup>139</sup>. Whilst comparable nutritional sacrifices are discernible in male testimonies by men whose adolescent sons accompanied them into the camps<sup>140</sup>, it is female narratives which most consistently evoke this particular quandary, given that the vast majority of children (and virtually all young children) were placed with them.

The problems encountered by women caring for children in the *univers concentrationnaire*, however, are portrayed within these narratives as running much deeper than the physical and material difficulties they met with in their maternal duties. Rather, the emotional and psychological consequences of this inability to provide for their offspring are widely established as perhaps the maternal carer’s greatest burden, as the camp system thrust upon her the mantle of ineffective parent and its simultaneous legacy of guilt, anger, frustration and powerlessness. Perhaps the most powerful articulation of the guilt to which mothers with

<sup>135</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.126

<sup>136</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.63

<sup>137</sup> Dr Paulette Don-Zimmet estimates the average female ration at Ravensbrück as 856 calories per day (*Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.215), whilst Charles Richet calculates that the daily ration at Buchenwald barely covered 60 percent of an inmate’s energy expenditure (See *Trois bagnes*, pp56-59).

<sup>138</sup> Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.127

<sup>139</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.77 and p.85

<sup>140</sup> Note, for example, the instance in Elie Wiesel’s testimony where Wiesel’s father sacrifices his own ration in order that his son will not go hungry. See Elie Wiesel, *La nuit* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1958), p.73.



children in the camps were exposed is, somewhat paradoxically, furnished by the testimony of a woman who experienced Bergen-Belsen as a child and whose narrative is accordingly penned from this juvenile perspective. Francine Christophe's account of her interaction with her mother and her repeated pleading for elementary necessities which her mother is unable to provide are infused with a duality which is simultaneously illustrative of both the trauma and suffering of the child and the severe emotional pressures confronting the maternal carer. Almost a *leitmotif*, Christophe's plea for food is directed to her mother again and again: "Maman, j'ai faim. Je le lui dis tous les jours pour qu'elle le sache bien"<sup>141</sup>, and "Maman, j'ai de plus en plus faim... je lui tire la manche 'J'ai faim, tu entends, j'ai faim'"<sup>142</sup>, culminating in outbursts which directly accuse and reproach her mother: "Je n'en peux plus Maman. J'ai froid, j'ai faim, j'ai mal [...] Je suis ta fille, non, fais quelque chose. Tu n'es plus ma mère, tu ne fais rien pour moi, je ne t'aime plus, tu entends, j'ai froid" and "J'ai faim Maman, j'ai faim [...] je te le reproche, je te reproche d'avoir faim"<sup>143</sup>. Re-immersing herself within the childhood perspective which cannot comprehend or rationalize the camp mechanism, Christophe portrays the child naturally turning to her mother as the arbiter of her universe with the power to effect change, and subsequently interpreting her mother's inaction as a lack of affection which prompts her to direct her hostility towards the parent as the prime visible source of her misery. The reader is left in little doubt that this enforced erosion of the maternal role constituted one of the most effective forms of Nazi oppression of women prisoners<sup>144</sup>.

The emotional conflict thus far identified within testimonial literature pertaining to maternal carers in the camps may be broadly characterized as passive in nature, stemming from the female prisoner's inherent powerlessness and inability to take action to protect or provide for her children. And yet, closely synthesized with this "passive trauma" is that related to the *active* choices mothers were compelled to make — choices which impacted directly on the welfare, or even the life, of their children. Those writers who witnessed maternal issues in the camps document numerous instances where a mother was forced to subject her child to extremely disagreeable, unpalatable or frightening experiences, thereby enacting the role of perpetual torturer in the eyes of her children in order to ensure their survival. Christophe's protestations at her mother forcing her to wash in icy water in order to maintain some semblance of the hygiene necessary for survival are once again as indicative of the trauma for the mother as for the child: "Je ne veux pas me laver, ça me fait trop mal. C'est pour m'ennuyer que tu veux me laver. Laisse-moi tranquille..."<sup>145</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.89

<sup>142</sup> Ibid, p.91

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, p.95 and p.106

<sup>144</sup> Refer also to Laura Katiga's poem 'Une mère au camp de concentration', in FNDIRP's *Espoirs au féminin*, p.22

<sup>145</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.93

An even more pronounced form of emotional trauma regarding women's active choices as parents is articulated by those testimonial writers who watched their own or other children experience the camp or be designated for extermination as a direct and incontrovertible result of maternal decisions. Faced with imminent arrest and deportation, many a woman had wrestled with the dilemma of whether to leave her children hidden at home to face an uncertain fate, or whether to risk taking them with her and exposing them to whatever unknown trials lay ahead. Françoise Maous describes one woman who — fearing separation above all else — opted for the latter alternative, and who, prior to the train journey to Germany, remained convinced of the wisdom of her decision: “Je me souviens de deux merveilleux petits enfants... leur mère me répétait sans cesse: ‘Je suis bien heureuse de les avoir emmenés; j’aurais peut-être pu les laisser à une voisine mais je n’ai pas voulu m’en séparer; c’est mieux ainsi, n’est-ce pas?’”<sup>146</sup>. Similarly, Olga Lengyel's testimony commences with a depiction of her own inadvertently active role in the death of her children. Having opted to take her family to join her husband upon his arrest, her narrative opens with a declaration of personal responsibility at this decision: “Je me sens responsable de la mort de mes parents et de mes deux fils [...] En suivant mon mari en Allemagne et en entraînant avec moi toute ma famille, j’allais devenir sans m’en douter, l’artisan de notre malheur”<sup>147</sup>. Lengyel then goes on to play a further unwitting role in the death of her eldest son, insisting to the selecting officer at Auschwitz that he is under the age of twelve in an attempt to spare him from any future harsh labour, and thus condemning him to extermination. The ensuing sense of responsibility and guilt at her own actions haunts the remainder of her narrative as she searches in vain for her son. Inevitably, too, many writers also delineate an image of women who knowingly made choices which were detrimental to their children, as their personal survival instinct assumed precedence over all else. These women were thus condemned to live with the often almost unendurable moral and psychological burden of their decisions, as Adélaïde Hautval's text attests:

Puis il y a les mères auxquelles on a dit que si elles voulaient travailler en fabrique elles quitteraient Auschwitz, mais il leur fallait abandonner leurs enfants, les laisser seuls dans ce camp, qu’elles savaient être un camp de destruction. Beaucoup ont accepté, se sont enfuies de ce lieu, quelquefois même poussées par leurs propres enfants qui, conscients, leur disaient de partir. Mais combien aussi ont payé ce moment de faiblesse de remords indicibles les amenant au bord de la folie?<sup>148</sup>.

Compounding the emotional complexities inherent in the testimonial portrait of the maternal carer is the isolation experienced by many mothers, whose attempts to sustain the morale of their children compel them to erect a façade dissembling their own suffering. Francine Christophe alludes briefly to her mother's tendency to conceal her own pain from her daughter, manifesting mild astonishment when she catches a momentary glimpse of her mother's personal

<sup>146</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.37

<sup>147</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.17

<sup>148</sup> Adélaïde Hautval, *Médecine et crimes contre l’humanité*, pp43-44

suffering: “Tiens, elle est malheureuse alors, comme moi?”<sup>149</sup>. With their offspring as their paramount focus, many mothers of young children are depicted perpetually enacting the emotionally taxing role of nurturer, comforter and emotional mainstay in a situation where they were themselves in dire need of emotional support. Furthermore, Christophe’s text also renders clearly apparent how the very fact of having a child with her in the camp could potentially alienate a woman from her fellow inmates, eroding or sorely testing the bonds of solidarity between prisoners. However much women may have been prepared to compromise and support one another in the context of extremely close communal living (a question which will be dealt with at greater length in the third chapter of this thesis), the fact of having a child under one’s protection could significantly and irremediably transfigure the dynamics of any such solidarity. Whereas a woman may well have been prepared to forfeit space, food and resources on her own behalf to aid her *camarades* or her group, she may have been simultaneously disinclined to accept the deprivation of her child of such needs to any degree. Thus, the presence of children in the camps could be a factor adversely affecting, and indeed impeding, the mother’s participation in group solidarity, creating a real tension between the maternal and the collective instinct as she fought to defend her child’s right to survival, inevitably at the expense of others. Hence Christophe’s writings attribute much of the discord and irascibility between the women at Bergen-Belsen to their attempts to protect the welfare of their offspring: “Un crêpage de chignon de temps en temps à propos de rien, ou à propos de soupe... mais les femmes d’ici ne se défendent pas pour elles, elles défendent leurs enfants”<sup>150</sup>.

And yet, despite the plethora of material and emotional problems relating to in-camp maternity documented throughout the body of French female testimonial literature, perhaps the most consistent maternal-based theme emphasized within these narratives is the simple fact of the extreme difficulty of assuming responsibility for the life of another individual in circumstances which barely left women prisoners the emotional or physical strength to focus upon their own survival. Almost all of the testimonies under study depict the psychological and physical condition of women after several months in the camps as a state of barely existing, characterized by chronic malnutrition and an exhaustion so pervasive that intellectual faculties and thought were all but suspended. Barely able to function or register emotion, many women in the camps experienced an incapacity to focus on anything but their most elementary corporeal needs, namely the next meal and the need to rest. Charlotte Delbo is repeatedly articulate on this inability to think or feel: “Je ne pensais rien. Je ne regardais rien. Je ne ressentais rien. J’étais un squelette de froid avec le froid qui souffle dans tous ces gouffres que font les côtes à un squelette”<sup>151</sup>. Those writers who focus upon aspects of maternity situate their depictions firmly within this bleak context, posing the question of how, in such a debilitated and reduced state, a

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<sup>149</sup> Francine Christophe, *Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.89

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid*, p.88

<sup>151</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* (Paris: Éditions Gonthier, 1965), pp73-74

woman could muster the physical or emotional energy to focus upon and protect a child. Moreover, in an environment which was governed by the necessity of prioritising the self for survival, and where sacrificing for another individual could often signify death, how was a mother to care for her child? Nadine Heftler, for example, (who spent time in the block reserved for children at Auschwitz) dwells upon the enormity of the effort required to fulfill the maternal role in the Auschwitz environment, where even a seemingly simple and innocuous act such as visiting a child in the children's block was fraught with difficulty. Not only did the mother have to summon the energy to make the visit (by no means a negligible feat in the context of the sheer exhaustion of daily camp life, whereby the women generally rose at three or four in the morning, enduring backbreaking labour<sup>152</sup> and hours of rollcall until nightfall with minimal calorific intake and where every minute of rest was precious), but she often ran risks associated with leaving her block or work commando — risks which included being rounded up for selection, beaten or punished:

Aux fenêtres et aux entrées du Waschraum, des femmes éperdues font des signes désespérés aux enfants. Ce sont des mères qui ont avec grand-peine trouvé le moyen de venir dire bonjour à leur cher petit. Elles doivent partir au travail, mais elles trouvent cependant quelques minutes, souvent en bravant les coups, pour embrasser leur enfant, tout ce qui leur reste sur terre [...] Elles leur disent deux mots, leur glissent entre les mains un morceau de pain ou une ration de margarine qu'elles ont économisés à grand-peine, puis elles repartent s'enfoncer dans la neige et le froid. Et pour être allées embrasser leur enfant, elles seront battues par une kapo inconsciente<sup>153</sup>.

Similarly, Liliane Rosenberg (a ten year old who was among the first three children to arrive at Ravensbrück) documents the energy and sacrifices required by her mother in order to assure the survival of herself and her two siblings:

Maman subissait tous les affronts et les travaux les plus pénibles sans se rebeller: par amour pour nous. Elle a eu bien du mérite de nous avoir maintenu en vie, grâce à ses soins, ses privations, son inlassable bonté. Sa seule hantise était de ne plus nous retrouver à son retour de l'Arbeit<sup>154</sup>.

French female testimonies therefore reveal the issues associated with caring for children in the camp environment to be multifarious. Whereas it may be argued that some of the difficulties demarcated above also impinged upon male deportees accompanied by their adolescent sons (particularly the concept of witnessing the suffering of a loved one as articulated

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<sup>152</sup> Note that no concessions were made to lesser female physical strength and women were compelled to perform hard labour in the camps, as part of the effacement of traditional gender distinctions noted by Anna Pawelczynska: "Sexual distinctions, which in European cultures had been tied up with the different social and biological roles of men and women, distinctions arising from the division of labour [...] all of these were totally eliminated in camp; traces of these distinctions were reflected solely in the extra possibilities for tormenting and humiliating the prisoners". See Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p.53. At Ravensbrück, for example, women worked at — among other things — building roads and railroad extensions, moving bricks, sand, cement and manure, felling trees, building homes for the SS and labouring in the fields (See also Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.216, and Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, pp406-407).

<sup>153</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.111

<sup>154</sup> Liliane Rosenberg (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris), p.10

by Françoise Maous: “Le plus grand malheur à Birkenau était de n'avoir pas été deportée seule et de voir souffrir à ce point un être que l'on aimait. Je ne le dirai jamais assez. Il n'y a pas eu de calvaire comparable à celui des mères et des filles passées ensemble au camp”<sup>155</sup>), the majority impacted primarily upon women due to the fact that virtually all younger children fell under their care — the very category who were reliant on parental care for their survival in the camps and who were unable to make independent decisions or rationalize their situation. Older or adolescent children (the group most commonly interned in male camps) often manifest a reciprocal sense of responsibility towards their parents in the camps, which significantly tempers many of these issues, as Nelly Gorce illustrates in her depiction of the interaction between a mother and her twenty year old daughter:

Mère et fille s'adoraient et il était touchant de voir leurs attentions reciproques: ‘Je n'ai pas faim’ disait la mère pour que Marie puisse manger sa part, et Marie n'aimait jamais le morceau de margarine qui nous était parcimonieusement distribué le samedi<sup>156</sup>.

Thus, as a result of both the sheer numerical bias which saw the vast majority of children in the camps assigned to female care, and the age of these children, the most pressing issues associated with offspring in the camps occur in the narratives of women prisoners.

And finally, although a central thematic element in only a very few French female testimonies, the fact of in-camp pregnancy must also be addressed here, since the linkage between this female biological particularity and prisoner vulnerability strongly colours the narratives of those writers whose camp experience was touched by it. Although virtually impossible to numerically pinpoint how many women experienced pregnancy in German camps, the figures were undoubtedly significant. Vera Laska quotes Polish Red Cross statistics, estimating that there were over 40 000 babies born inside concentration and labour camps and prisons who were separated from their mothers and usually killed<sup>157</sup>. Given the gender segregation at the heart of the Nazi camp system (and also the malnourished state of most women prisoners which invariably rendered them amenorrhic and thus temporarily infertile), the vast majority of pregnant women in the camp system had conceived prior to their incarceration<sup>158</sup>.

Before examining testimonial responses to the issue of pregnancy, it is imperative that a distinction be made between the policies pertaining to Jewish women and to their non-Jewish counterparts — policies which were vastly divergent for the two groups — and between Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, the two principal camps featuring in French female narratives. For

<sup>155</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.57

<sup>156</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.68

<sup>157</sup> Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.19

<sup>158</sup> In-camp conceptions did also occur to some extent, since sexual relations were possible in certain camps and some privileged female prisoners who enjoyed better nourishment retained their fertility. See Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.67.

pregnant Jewish women, Nazi policy was unyielding and clearcut: as part of the strategy to eliminate the Jewish race in its entirety, any Jewish woman carrying a child was, until September 1944<sup>159</sup>, to be exterminated, with this extermination to be immediate given the negligible labour value of a pregnant woman. As Auschwitz-Birkenau was at the time of French deportations a prolific, fully operational extermination camp, and as most of the French women deported to Auschwitz were Jewish (only one convoy of French non-Jewish female political prisoners was sent to Auschwitz in January 1943), pregnant French women arriving at Auschwitz were usually destined for immediate extermination<sup>160</sup>. At Ravensbrück, and for French political prisoners, however, the situation differed. Firstly, Nazi policy aimed to punish and exterminate political and asocial prisoners individually, as a result of their actions as enemies of the Third Reich, rather than as part of a systematic and comprehensive attempt to exterminate them as a people. As a result, pregnant political prisoners were not singled out for immediate extermination, although any babies born to them represented a useless drain on Nazi resources and were therefore to be killed. Despite the fact that, as previously noted, the officially sanctioned means of killing these babies varied throughout the war period (ranging from compulsory strangling or drowning at birth to post-natal starvation), the effect was invariable, and virtually all babies born to non-Jewish prisoners died within the first two to three months. Secondly, Ravensbrück only metamorphosed into a fully functioning extermination camp at the very end of the war, with its gas chambers not operational until late 1944 or early 1945<sup>161</sup>, and therefore even pregnant Jewish women arriving there before this period were not automatically destined for immediate extermination, although they would often be sent away on transports for this purpose. Generally, however, as noted by Eugen Kogon, "Lorsque, dans un kommando de femmes, on s'apercevait qu'une détenue était enceinte, on l'envoyait à Auschwitz si elle était juive, à Ravensbrück si elle ne l'était pas"<sup>162</sup>. The divergent status of the two camps, then, as well as differing policies for Jewish and non-Jewish women meant that pregnant French women were subject to widely differing fates. What they all shared, however, was the irrefutable fact that their condition exposed them to a higher degree of risk and abuse.

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<sup>159</sup> After September 1944, pregnant Jewish women were permitted to live and give birth in Auschwitz, although their babies were provided with no food, and thus no chance of survival.

<sup>160</sup> Many pregnant women were, however, able to evade this fate and enter the camp, due to a variety of factors. Although unsuspecting of the fate that awaited them, many preferred to remain with their friends or relatives rather than be transferred to the promised rest camp, and hence concealed their condition. Others were warned of the dangers associated with pregnancy by the furtive efforts of those prisoners charged with gathering their luggage as they disembarked, or during the disinfection or quarantine process, who emphasised that pregnancy should on no account be disclosed.

<sup>161</sup> Germaine Tillion (*Ravensbrück*) provides considerable detail on the difficulty of establishing an exact date for the commencement of the functioning of the Ravensbrück gas chamber. Tillion pinpoints the date of construction of the second crematorium (and probably also the gas chamber) as October or November 1944, and estimates that the gas chamber began to function in January 1945. See also Guylaine Guidez, *Femmes dans la guerre 1939-1945*, p.303.

<sup>162</sup> Eugen Kogon, *L'état SS*, p.289

The theme of in-camp pregnancy occurs most commonly in the narratives of female medical personnel, whose role brought them into close confrontation not only with the danger and trauma experienced by pregnant women, but also with a source of personal and professional anguish which was unique to female prisoner doctors. Testimonies by women doctors at Auschwitz (such as those of Olga Lengyel, Gisella Perl and Adélaïde Hautval) focus upon the emotional and ethical conflicts to which the Nazi policy on Jewish pregnancy exposed them, in compelling them under the “*éthique du moindre mal*” to perform secret abortions in an attempt to save pregnant Jewish women from extermination<sup>163</sup>. Gisella Perl, for instance, describes her personal despair at being forced to contravene not only her medical knowledge of hygiene and good practice, but also her own values and ethics in performing such abortions:

No-one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies. After years and years of medical practice, childbirth was still to me the most beautiful, the greatest miracle of nature [...] Every time when kneeling down in the mud, dirt and human excrement which covered the floor of the barracks to perform a delivery without instruments, without water, without the most elementary requirements of hygiene, I prayed to God to help me save the mother or I would never touch another pregnant woman again. And if I had not done it, both mother and child would have been cruelly murdered<sup>164</sup>.

Where pregnant Jewish women had managed to reach undetected the more advanced stages of pregnancy, these female doctors also document the macabre duty which they were compelled to perform in secretly inducing labour and killing healthy newborns, in order to avert the automatic extermination of the mother. Olga Lengyel summarizes the sentiments of these female doctors regarding their unique and gender specific role in simultaneously preserving and destroying life: “*Ainsi donc, les Allemands étaient parvenus à faire de nous des assassins. Aujourd’hui encore, le souvenir de tous ces nourrissons supprimés continue à me hanter*”<sup>165</sup>.

There is, however, a notable dearth of testimonies in which the theme of pregnancy is documented directly from the perspective of a pregnant French woman. Indeed, the testimony of Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne (a non-Jewish French resistance worker interned at Ravensbrück whose baby Sylvie was one of only two French babies to survive the camp proper) constitutes the sole first-person reference in the body of works under study. The general absence of such testimonies is in all probability attributable to the rarity of positive outcomes resulting from pregnancies in the camps, with the extreme nature of the trauma for those whose babies did not survive appearing to exercise a preclusive effect upon the production of a testimony on their experience. The integral correspondance between an ultimately successful pregnancy and the willingness to relive and externalize the experience in narrative form therefore undoubtedly accounts for Aylmer-Roubenne’s singular testimonial offering.

<sup>163</sup> Michael Pollak, *L’expérience concentrationnaire*, p.164.

<sup>164</sup> Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, p.82

<sup>165</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.170

Unique though it may be, Aylmer-Roubenne's testimony is patently illustrative of the extent to which biological gender specificity may particularize and dominate the female camp narrative, with her pregnancy and its attendant issues acting as the focal point of her writing. In describing the experience of her pregnancy at Ravensbrück, Aylmer-Roubenne emphasizes the lack of concessions allowed for pregnant women, and the necessity of concealing her condition, as with any potential physical weakness in the camps: "Je m'aperçus vite qu'être enceinte n'offrait aucun avantage, contrairement à ce que j'avais pensé. Qu'il valait mieux ne pas s'en prévaloir..."<sup>166</sup>. She was therefore forced to endure hard physical labour, until managing to enlist herself in the sewing commando in the latter stages of her pregnancy which, despite its long hours, had the distinct advantage of being indoor, seated work. Her arrival in August 1944 coinciding with a significant diminution in the rations allocated to prisoners at Ravensbrück, and with no supplementary food provided for pregnant prisoners, Aylmer-Roubenne subsisted throughout her pregnancy on a minimal calorific intake:

Des huit cent cinquante calories quotidiennes prévues, nous étions tombées si bas qu'on ne peut l'évaluer [...] Dans ces conditions, être enceinte devient une malédiction. Ni poisson, ni viande, ni oeufs, ni légumes verts, ni fruit, ni fromage, ni matière grasse. Je ne me souviens pas d'avoir étalé sur mon pain le moindre soupçon de margarine [...] A l'époque, j'ignorais tout de la diététique prénatale, aujourd'hui banalisée. Heureusement! J'en aurais été traumatisée<sup>167</sup>.

With a grossly inadequate diet, constant exposure to cold and inclement weather and no respite from long work hours, Aylmer-Roubenne delineates the image of a pregnancy borne in the worst conditions imaginable. And yet, interestingly, despite its undeniable physical trials which could not but exacerbate the trauma of her camp experience, Aylmer-Roubenne conceptualizes her pregnancy as an overwhelmingly constructive psychological influence, furnishing her with the necessary motivation and external focus to eschew the ever-present temptation of a descent into despair and degradation: "Je crois que, pour moi, ce fut moins difficile car je portais mon enfant, je croyais en lui, et il m'a sauvée"<sup>168</sup>. It is therefore simplistic to automatically equate the physical and material trauma of pregnancy in the camp environment with concurrent emotional trauma, with Aylmer-Roubenne's text providing an emphatic reminder that in-camp pregnancy could symbolise hope as well as despair.

Moreover, the divergent camp policies on pregnancy meant that, unlike many of their Jewish counterparts whose conceptions ended in abortion, non-Jewish pregnant women such as Aylmer-Roubenne were also compelled to undergo labour and childbirth in the camps. In so doing they too faced considerable risks relating to lack of hygiene and medical care. Aylmer-Roubenne describes the absence of the most basic equipment in the grotto-like room set aside for births, although not for want of its existence:

<sup>166</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.47

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, pp48-49

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, p.53



Une petite salle étroite, une sorte de couloir, pas d'eau, pas de WC à proximité, pas d'électricité, rien qu'une bougie sur le sol [...] Quand je pense qu'il existait dans le *Revier* une salle de gynécologie parfaite avec tous les instruments d'obstétrique; elle aurait permis de faire des accouchements dans les meilleures conditions d'hygiène possible, de sauvegarder la vie de la mère et de l'enfant. Elle nous était interdite et ne servit jamais qu'aux expériences mutilantes des médecins nazis<sup>169</sup>.

The midwife attending to Aylmer-Roubenne had at her disposal merely scissors, white cotton, paper bandages and a negligible amount of water and disinfectant. Without medical equipment and in the filthy conditions of the camp, even a normal birth held potential danger for the mother, whereas the survival of those who suffered complications during labour often rested purely upon chance. Aylmer-Roubenne recognises the significant role played by luck in her own birth experience, in which complications necessitated a forceps intervention and the furtive borrowing of SS equipment by the midwife:

Là encore, j'avais eu de la chance, beaucoup de chance: Terza était une sage-femme très compétente. Elle aurait pu me laisser sans soin, solution sans danger pour elle, alors qu'elle risqua gros en allant dans l'armoire du Dr Treite emprunter forceps, chloroforme et ouate<sup>170</sup>.

More prominent in Aylmer-Roubenne's text, and in the narratives of those writers who detail the situation of mothers and newborns in the camps, however, is the fact of infanticide — be it in active form whereby mothers remained powerless to intervene as their babies were either drowned or strangled at birth (in the early stages at Ravensbrück) or, after the beginning of 1944, the passive infanticide in which newborns were slowly starved and weakened by the lack of nourishment, care and hygiene provided for them. This extreme trauma is portrayed by Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, a French political prisoner who worked in Ravensbrück's maternity block, and whose testimony joins that of Aylmer-Roubenne in its central focus upon early maternity and the plight of newborns in the camp context. And the situation of these newborn infants was indeed dire right from the outset, with little or no provision made for their health or survival. Aylmer-Roubenne describes how Sylvie remained unwashed for several days since at the birth block "[...] on ne faisait pas la toilette des nouveau-nés. Elle n'était pas prévue avant le dixième ou le quinzième jour. C'était long, quinze jours! Pas de frais inutiles. On nous livrait nos nouveau-nés gluants et sanglants"<sup>171</sup>. The transferral to the *Kinderzimmer* brought little amelioration, with only cold water available for washing "[...] ce qui n'était pas l'idéal pour laver un nouveau-né"<sup>172</sup>. Aylmer-Roubenne and the other mothers in the block were therefore forced to resort to using their morning coffee ration to wash their babies. Nor was the *Kinderzimmer* heated at night, with camp regulations requiring that the babies be left to sleep separately from their mothers in temperatures of -10 to -15 degrees. As a result, large numbers of babies rapidly succumbed to cold or illness. Aylmer-Roubenne also attests that the supplies given to the new mothers at the birth of their child were limited to a bra, a nappy and a small

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p.83

<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p.85

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, p.87

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, p.87

square of blanket, and that they were left to fend for themselves and their child with no advice, and often no idea, of how to do so. Nappies were so scarce that, as Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe mentions: “Il faut laisser crier un enfant mouillé sans le changer, sinon, il n’y aura plus de couches le soir”<sup>173</sup>. Once again, therefore, these narratives portray the quasi-universal circumstance of in-camp maternity, in which mothers were compelled to risk starvation by sacrificing their own rations to procure basic necessities for their babies, as Nadine Heftler witnesses in Auschwitz’s children’s block:

Les mères ont tout sacrifié pour habiller leur enfant; pendant plusieurs semaines, elles ont, chaque jour, économisé une ration de margarine ou de fromage, quelquefois même de pain, pour acheter un misérable chiffon en guise de couche, ou une pelote de laine à une de ces femmes qui ne manquent de rien<sup>174</sup>.

Most significantly, these testimonies all dwell upon the woeful inadequacy of nutritional provisions for the newborn babies. As a general rule, the vast majority of new mothers in the camps were unable to produce milk to breastfeed their babies, given their own often advanced state of malnutrition. Aylmer-Roubenne details the insufficiency of the rations provided for newborns at Ravensbrück which, although already inadequate, were plundered by the foreign nurses and block personnel:

Théoriquement, les nouveau-nés devaient avoir cinq fois par jour un biberon de 75 grammes d’une mixture de flocons d’avoine concassés additionnés d’un peu de lait écrémé sans sucre. Ai-je jamais touché de lait par la voie officielle? Je ne le crois pas. Je dois le peu de lait que j’ai pu donner à Sylvie au sens de l’organisation des infirmières déportées de la *kinderzimmer* Marijo et Annicka, et à la débrouillardise des Françaises<sup>175</sup>.

Even procuring a bottle to feed their babies constituted an almost insurmountable difficulty due to the acute shortage of supplies, and Sylvie was unable to be fed for the first two days until another baby died: “Les biberons étaient en nombre limité [...] il n’était pas possible de les organiser. On devait attendre, pour en avoir un, que meure un nourrisson”<sup>176</sup>. As a result of this perpetual undernourishment, the babies began to slowly starve. Chombart de Lauwe describes their physical transition under the influence of starvation: “Presque tous les jours, on amène des nouveau-nés, assez beaux généralement, mais ils prennent rapidement l’aspect des petits vieux” and “Ils n’ont plus rien d’enfantin, leur figure fripée, minuscule, fait mal à voir [...] d’in vraisemblables petits vieux”<sup>177</sup>. Consequently, the death of the babies in the *kinderzimmer* assumed a regular and inexorable rhythm: “Les enfants meurent. Jour après jour, nous voyons disparaître les petits auxquels nous nous étions attachées”, and “Tous les jours, la place des

<sup>173</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.115

<sup>174</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.125

<sup>175</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J’ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.90. See also Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.123 and Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück, l’enfer des femmes*, p.113.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90

<sup>177</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.113 and p.111

morts est prise par de nouveaux petits malades. C'est regulier, fatal. Là aussi, nous avons cette impression de descente, jour après jour, le long d'un escalier sans fin..."<sup>178</sup>.

The mothers' trauma and sense of utter powerlessness at witnessing the lack of care and hygiene, the inexorable, rapid decline in their babies' health and, in all but the most exceptional cases, their eventual death is the overwhelming focus of all those whose testimonies address the issue of maternity in relation to newborn infants. Not only did these women have to wage a continual battle for their own survival, but they were also compelled to undertake the emotional and material struggle on behalf of their babies, whilst cognisant that their tenacity would almost certainly be in vain: "Maintenir la vie de nos nourrissons fut une lutte permanente à laquelle nous employâmes nos forces qui, elles aussi, étaient bien diminuées. Cependant, rares furent ceux qui dépassaient le stade d'un mois"<sup>179</sup>. Many who had formulated mechanisms to cope with the camp environment found these survival strategies rendered ineffective when a dependent child became part of the equation, as demonstrated by Aylmer-Roubenne whose method of focusing upon the present moment and steadfastly ignoring pessimistic possibilities "[...] était plus facile lorsqu'il s'agissait de protéger l'enfant que je portais, plutôt que celui qui posait sur moi son regard, qui me demandait à boire, qui me demandait à vivre"<sup>180</sup>. Compounding the maternal issues presented within these texts was the fact that even the most basic form of maternal nurturing was denied to these women. Unable to provide food or material necessities for their children, they were equally denied access to them during the night and were prohibited from attending to their babies if they cried, although Aylmer-Roubenne notes that despite the risk of punishment, most mothers persistently contravened this directive.

Obviously, however, no trauma surpassed that of the death of the baby. Of 850 births in Ravensbrück during the period 1944-45, (of which 21 were French) a mere five babies survived<sup>181</sup> — a figure which gives some indication of the considerable amount of new mothers who experienced the death of their newborns. Aylmer-Roubenne describes the suffering of these women and its effect on her own morale:

Chaque matin, on 'ramassait' les petits morts [...] pour le four crématoire. C'est toujours bouleversant et parfois insoutenable. Ces femmes qui pleuraient, gémissaient, hurlaient à la mort, serrant contre elles le petit cadavre. Nous devions avoir des nerfs à toute épreuve pour ne pas sombrer dans le désespoir, nous jeter dans la révolte et poursuivre la lutte pour gagner encore un jour de survie<sup>182</sup>.

De Lauwe's narrative consistently echoes her descriptions of maternal grief: "La maman, toute jeune (17 ans), sanglote, inconsolable, à bout. Pauvre petite, je la gardais dans mes bras, mais que peuvent les mots contre une telle souffrance. Presque chaque jour il y a une mère à consoler

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, pp115-116

<sup>179</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.92

<sup>180</sup> Ibid, p.92

<sup>181</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.209

<sup>182</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.94

ainsi”<sup>183</sup>. The repeated depictions of maternal suffering in the narratives of both of these writers, together with the many wider maternal issues touched upon by authors who witnessed or participated in the care of older children in the camps are therefore demonstrative of how maternity in all its forms could encapsulate a multitude of localised, female-specific traumas whose intensity could eclipse virtually all else in a woman’s camp experience. To this end, the maternal theme figures prominently, if intermittently, in the corpus of French female narratives as a primary aspect of biological gender specific vulnerability, and is frequently instrumental in particularizing the female testimonial genre.

### Gender-specific learned skills and survival

On the whole, therefore, the narratives within our corpus portray the aggregation of socialized concepts, learned values and biological specificity which comprised the generic female identity clashing violently with the rigid mechanism of the *univers concentrationnaire*, functioning as an overwhelmingly prohibitive and impeditive factor with regard to women’s adaptation to camp life and significantly augmenting the trauma of the concentration camp for women prisoners. The common testimonial picture which emerges of the female prisoner as uniquely victimized by gender specificity does, however, tend to be tempered by a concurrent narrative emphasis upon more empowering aspects of female gender specificity. In particular, the *practical* gender socialization of women, or, more precisely, the learned gender-based skills which women developed in pre-camp society, also figure prominently in the testimonial literature of French women, where they are shown exercising a predominantly constructive effect on women’s survival and existence in the camp and creating a discernible positive narrative gender specificity.

Within the camp system, the chances for survival were – theoretically at least — considerably lessened for women as a direct result of their gender. In a generic sense, this disparity stemmed from their perceived lesser work value in a Nazi system whose prioritization of labour capacity was surpassed only by its exterminative function, as Simon Wiensenthal observes: “[...] when concentration camps were overflowing with their victims, women were always the first to be selected for extermination because to the Nazis they constituted less useful labour than did the men”<sup>184</sup>. For Jewish women in particular, this negative gender survival bias was exacerbated by the Nazi perception of Jewish women as reproductive perpetuators of the “inferior” Jewish race — a status which designated them for rapid extermination:

Jewish women were to be killed as Jewish women not simply as Jews — women who may carry and give birth to the next generation of Jews. Although all Jews were to be

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<sup>183</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.117

<sup>184</sup> Simon Wiensenthal in Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.1.

killed, Jewish women's death and survival rates were dependant upon two obvious descriptions: Jewishness and femaleness<sup>185</sup>.

Joan Ringelheim also notes that despite the common supposition that the greater number of men's concentration camps is indicative of a correspondingly higher male death rate, the antithesis may in fact be true, given that entry to the camp system afforded some chance of survival: "It may be that more men ended up in the camp system, but that does not mean that fewer women were sent into that system. It may mean that more women were killed at the outset"<sup>186</sup>.

Despite the seemingly comprehensive nature of this negative structural bias, the practical details emphasized throughout French female narratives suggest that it was to some extent mitigated by women's pre-internment learned skills. For in pre-camp society, domestic household responsibility (cleaning, cooking, sewing, procuring food and basic necessities, coordinating meals, reconciling domestic budgets) fell, almost universally, to women. Regardless of whether the role of homemaker constituted their primary occupation, women predominantly assumed the domestic mantle in the household and consolidated a significant skill-base in these areas. Unlike men, whose learned skills tended to be more tightly affiliated to the public workings of normal society (closely related to the spheres of professional function and career, and therefore quasi-redundant in the concentration camp where these concepts were to a large extent obsolete<sup>187</sup>), women's domestic skills appear to have been by nature readily transferable to the camp environment. Although survival was dependent upon the confluence of a wide variety of factors (factors as diverse as a prisoner's age, race, nationality, language, belief system, profession, class, the particular camp and work commandos to which she was assigned, the period of deportation, the aid accorded by other inmates, personal health, stamina and morale, and the simple fact of luck or chance<sup>188</sup>), "female" skills are presented within these narratives as indispensable elements in the maintenance of women's daily existence, to an extent which clearly establishes an underlying sense of advantageous gender particularity.

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<sup>185</sup> Joan Ringelheim in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.392

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, p.399. Although sometimes configured in terms of race or nationality, general statistics estimating the number of people who perished in the concentration camps are rarely genderized.

<sup>187</sup> Certain career expertise with relevance to Nazi labour requirements (particularly in areas such as engineering, chemistry and construction) could, however, allow prisoners to secure privileged positions in these areas in the camps, thereby increasing their chance of survival. Those who admitted during prisoner registration to "intellectual" professional affiliations, however, often found themselves assigned to the harshest and most degrading work commandos.

<sup>188</sup> On the factors influencing survival see Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.290, Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.73, Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp* (London: Johnathon Cape, 1953), pp122-126, Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, pp53-58. Testimonies and camp historians mention in particular the different level of resistance manifested by different nationalities. Vladimir Pozner, for instance, articulates the general consensus that the French, Dutch and Greeks succumbed easily to disease and exhaustion as they were unused to the climate and work demanded of them, whilst Polish prisoners displayed a higher level of resistance due to their previous acclimatisation to these aspects of camp existence (*Descente aux enfers*, p.95).

Firstly, French female testimonies document the multitude of ways in which the physical resistance of female prisoners was influenced, and indeed enhanced, by their domestic skills and knowledge, and in particular their ability to prepare food, sew, and maintain hygienic conditions. Joan Ringelheim's assertion that

‘Women’s work’ — activities centering around food, children, clothing, shelter, social relations, warmth, cleanliness — may be regarded as the only meaningful labour in a time of such dire necessity. It is only with such trivial — and often trivialized — concerns that life among the oppressed becomes possible<sup>189</sup>

is lent credence by the significance of such activities in the female testimonial depiction of day to day existence. With regard to food and nutrition, these writers testify to stretching limited nutritional resources and developing new combinations of food in order to assure dietary variety. Despite the highly limited nature of the camp diet (consisting of the three all but invariable staples of bread, soup and the unidentifiable liquid termed “coffee”, together with occasional miniscule portions of margarine or sausage), French female testimonial literature details numerous instances of women creatively combining these rations with rare dietary supplements (procured from parcels or “organisation”<sup>190</sup>) or pooling such supplements with friends in order to inject some degree of variety into their diet. *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, for instance, mentions that “On confectionne ces fameux gâteaux d’anniversaire pour lesquels on a conservé pain, margarine et marmalade”<sup>191</sup>. Moreover, the ability to economise, often finely honed from practical management of a household budget, is also readily discernible in many female narratives. Although no negotiable surplus existed in the nutritional resources available to them (with the official food ration in fact grossly insufficient for daily nourishment, and the deficit between calorific intake and energy expenditure inducing rapid malnutrition and starvation), most of these women mention that they somehow managed to economise and trade their bread to “purchase” essential items for themselves or to procure gifts for friends on special occasions. Fania Fenelon describes such economising on the part of her friends for her birthday: “Sur mon lit, s’étalent mes cadeaux, ils sont somptueux, ils ont coûté une fortune de morceaux de pain! Une chemise de nuit en soie, du savon, du dentifrice, un parfum, un jeu de cartes dessiné par la petite Irène”<sup>192</sup>. Numerous too are the examples of female inmates “budgeting” their edible currency in order to mark Christmas in the camps, both with small gifts purchased for their fellow inmates or with the accumulation of a “feast” painstakingly saved from their rations or any extra food they had gleaned. Simone Alizon describes one such incidence at Christmas: “Des réserves avaient été prévues spécialement et une partie des colis, pourtant bien amenuisés,

<sup>189</sup> Joan Ringelheim in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.379

<sup>190</sup> The term “organisation” in camp vernacular signified procuring necessary items by stealing from Nazi resources — a universally accepted practice in the struggle for survival. Note, however, that stealing from one’s fellow prisoners was regarded as morally reprehensible by most of these writers.

<sup>191</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.118

<sup>192</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.325. Prisoners could purchase goods smuggled into the camp by inmates employed in the organisation and despatch to Germany of the personal effects which arrived with each new convoy. The depot co-ordinating this organisation at Auschwitz was known as “Canada”, and was renowned for the diversity and richness of its stock. The payment for these goods (be they banal or luxurious) was in the universal camp currency — that of bread.

gardée en prévision de Noël”<sup>193</sup>, as does Macha Ravine: “À côté de chaque papier se trouvait un petit cadeau: une brosse à dents, une savonnette, une paire de babouches confectionnées avec la laine d’un pull-over usé, un stylo etc”<sup>194</sup>. Given the extreme paucity of their rations, such economising is testament to the existence of real domestic management skills amongst many women prisoners.

Such testimonial trends are also articulated by historians of the camps. In her gender-based analysis of survival patterns inside the concentration camps post-1939, Sybil Milton, for instance, summarizes the way in which women’s pre-camp culinary skills coloured their dietary practices in the camp, asserting that “Since women had been primarily responsible for their families as housewives and cooks, there was some direct correlation between their own survival and previously acquired skills” and that “women also shared and pooled their limited resources better than did men”<sup>195</sup>. However, Milton’s nutritionally-themed analysis must be treated with caution when she develops her argument to establish a comparative opposition between male and female diet-related behaviour with the broad pronouncement that “In the camps, women swapped recipes and ways of extending limited quantities of food. Men could be overheard discussing their favourite banquets and restaurants”<sup>196</sup>. With the tacit reasoning that women’s discussion of recipes fulfilled an inherently pragmatic and useful application in camp life (comprising one more sphere where female nutritional savvy was of practical survival value), whilst the male preoccupation with restaurants signified an impractical, purely fantastical and therefore inferior response to the dietary crisis, Milton’s analysis lies at odds with the overwhelming majority of female testimonies. In almost all the narratives penned by female camp survivors, the discussion of recipes is firmly rooted in the realm of the fantastic, functioning solely as a psychological diversion aimed at momentarily cheating hunger, with negligible possible practical value given the complete lack of resources. Hence Suzanne Birnbaum presents the past-time as purely speculative and imaginary, characterized by hyperbole:

Nous faisons nous aussi des menus, mais imaginaires. Et, crevant de faim en attendant notre pauvre maigre soupe, nous nous invitons mutuellement. Quelles réceptions! Quels festins! [...] Que de choucroutes, de poulets, de jambons, de homards, de couscous, de poissons farcis et de boulettes de toutes sortes avons-nous dégustés, moralement, l’eau nous en venait à la bouche! Mais nous n’avions, réellement, pas la moindre bouchée de pain à nous mettre sous la dent<sup>197</sup>,

as does Françoise Maous:

Ce désir de parler de toutes ces choses dont notre organisme commençait à avoir un si impérieux besoin avait quelque chose de morbide; et les mots prestigieux beurre, graisse, viande, en passant par toutes les bouches avides, leur communiquaient une espèce de jouissance qui, momentanément, nous apportait un petit soulagement. Il y

<sup>193</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.285

<sup>194</sup> Macha Ravine in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.212

<sup>195</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.227

<sup>196</sup> Ibid, p.227

<sup>197</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, pp62-63

avait parmi nous une femme assez âgée qui avait dû être une merveilleuse cuisinière et nous ne nous lassions pas d'écouter ses prouesses. Quelles recettes... compliquées, savoureuses, exemptes de restrictions, celles-là! [...] Et de nouveau, le mirage remplaçait la réalité<sup>198</sup>.

Fania Fenelon's description is even more extensive:

Nous parlons, nous parlons de festins imaginaires, de repas de fêtes [...] le vrai se mélange au faux, la surenchère atteint des proportions inimaginables. Si l'une dit 'Nous avons fait un poulet', l'autre répond: 'Chez moi, c'était une oie, bourrée de marrons' [...] Les gâteaux deviennent des Himalaya. Leur élaboration est fabuleuse: de la crème, des biscuits, du chocolat, des marrons, de la gelée de groseille, de la pâte à choux, du sucre filé, de la crème chantilly et ça monte, ça monte... jusqu'en haut des cojas. Moi, je les fais baver d'envie avec une recette toute simple: 'Les filles, ma mère elle faisait cuire des gros macaronis, elle prenait une seringue remplie de foie gras et flip... dans les macaronis. Passé au four, une merveille!'<sup>199</sup>.

Fenelon herself characterizes her culinary flight of fancy as no more than "[...] une invention de gamine qui en rajoute dans le rêve parce qu'elle crève de faim"<sup>200</sup>. Given the overwhelmingly fantastic nature of these culinary discussions, therefore, they were in large part unrelated to the practical nutritional competencies and knowledge which are presented enhancing female survival prospects within these narratives, and indeed virtually indistinguishable in nature and spirit from the male culinary imaginings documented by Milton.

Beyond the realm of nutrition, however, the testimonial literature of French female inmates is also heavily informed by other gender-related skills acquired prior to internment. Women's awareness of, and particular attention to, general hygiene is strongly evident in their narratives and was inevitably instrumental in combating disease and lowering female mortality rates. Referring to Ravensbrück, Sybil Milton asserts that "Traditional homemaking skills taught to women effectively lowered their vulnerability to death and disease, despite the obviously inadequate lavatory and sanitary facilities"<sup>201</sup> and that "women's traditionally domestic roles as wives, daughters and mothers aided them under conditions of extreme duress"<sup>202</sup>. Indeed, throughout their testimonies, women prisoners manifest not only a perpetual awareness of the primary importance of maintaining hygiene, but also the practical ability to formulate a means of prioritising it irrespective of the conditions. Most of these writers describe according precedence to washing the body and clothing, often detailing the considerable ingenuity required to do so. Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, for example, describes how the lack of available water necessitated the utilisation of snow for washing and the ability to adapt and reconfigure one's personal routine in the absence of basic toiletry products:

Se laver était un souci primordial, je devrais dire vital. Serviette, savon, brosse à dents devaient être organisés. Et quand on n'en avait pas, ou plus, il fallait se laver quand même. Il n'était pas facile de faire sa toilette dans nos blocks surchargés [...] Yvette, mon amie, faisait sa toilette au réveil dans la neige, moi, je manquais de courage, je la

<sup>198</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.53

<sup>199</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.375

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, p.375

<sup>201</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.224

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, pp228-9



faisais le soir. Je me roulais dedans, me frottais avec, vite, je rentrais dans le block non chauffé et je grimpais me réfugier contre Yvette<sup>203</sup>.

The importance accorded to personal hygiene by women prisoners is also evidenced by the narrative portrayal of a dogged persistence in their pursuit of it despite a multitude of not insignificant obstacles. With minimal time and the risk of missing the morning distribution of coffee whilst washing (“Il faut s’habiller vite, faire le lit vite [...] faire la queue devant les cabinets, puis se précipiter pour essayer d’avoir un peu de café, passer au *Waschraum* pour se laver. On n’a généralement pas le temps de tout faire”<sup>204</sup>), and with the extreme difficulty involved in accessing water to do so (“Nous sommes si nombreuses qu’il faut faire des prodiges pour atteindre le mince filet d’eau qui goutte dans la vasque gluante, autour de laquelle s’écrase une foule hétéroclite et répugnante”<sup>205</sup>), the fact that many of these women summoned the sheer willpower to maintain personal hygiene as a primary and non-negotiable objective testifies to the domestic values imbued in them in pre-camp times. Predominant too are the female testimonies which directly and overtly equate the maintenance of personal hygiene to the ability to resist and survive, and any lapse of vigilance in this area to the psychological and physical decline whose inevitable consequence is death. Françoise Maous’ text is illustrative of this attitude, with Maous herself connecting the loss of her will to prioritize hygiene to her general corporeal deterioration and the disintegration of her moral resistance:

Cette époque marque aussi la fin de mon courage. Il m’est pénible d’avouer qu’à partir de cette date, je suis devenue une loque physiquement et moralement. Je suis d’une saleté repoussante sans avoir la force de me laver. Je lis dans les yeux de mes gardiennes le dégoût et le mépris, et dans ceux de mes amies qui luttent encore, la pitié. Elles essaient de ranimer mon courage: ‘Alors, Françoise, pas toi! C’est honteux de te laisser aller ainsi, tu sais bien qu’ici cela signifie la mort’<sup>206</sup>.

*Les Françaises à Ravensbrück* also makes explicit the connection between hygiene and survival: “Par manque d’eau, fin janvier, nous faisons fondre de la neige dans la gamelle pour la nettoyer et se passer une goutte d’eau sur le visage. Pourtant, il nous faut rester propres, c’est vital; celles qui se laissent aller sont perdues”<sup>207</sup>.

A further *leitmotif* in female testimonies is the depiction of the time and effort devoted to the common weekly practice of washing undergarments and the utilisation of Sunday<sup>208</sup> to dry them, as described by Simone Saint-Clair: “[...] quelques femmes ont pu laver leur linge, mais comme il n’y a pas d’endroit où le sécher, elles marchent lentement tenant à bout de bras

<sup>203</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J’ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.63

<sup>204</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.72

<sup>205</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.89. Note that the garments women prisoners were given to wear varied between camps and periods of internment. Many women were given considerably fewer items of clothing than Saint-Clair.

<sup>206</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.125

<sup>207</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.107

<sup>208</sup> Sunday was usually the one “free” day in the camps, although in practice the SS guards often imposed work or exhausting punishments upon the prisoners.

chemises, culottes, bas, qu'elles éventent dans le soleil"<sup>209</sup>. Rarely does this perpetual and quasi-universal preoccupation with hygiene and devotion of the free day to washing appear in male testimonies. Regular delousing sessions are also a feature of the majority of female narratives, such as that portrayed by Pelagia Lewinska:

Bien entendu, nous attendions le dimanche, le bref répit libre d'appel. C'est alors que nous espérions pouvoir nous débarbouiller et nous vêtir. Il fallait nous organiser pour ne pas perdre cette unique occasion. Les femmes se déshabillaient et fouillaient leurs vêtements sur la couchette ou devant le bloc. Les femmes bien portantes saisissaient chaque occasion pour visiter leurs habits [...] Bien des femmes sacrifiaient à la recherche des poux l'intervalle destiné à manger<sup>210</sup>.

The painstaking attention to personal hygiene and adaptation of the basic domestic practices learned in the home thus undoubtedly constituted a significant factor in female survival, with their consistent depiction within French female narratives also effectively countering the image of female prisoners as unequivocal victims of gender particularity.

Interestingly, however, Sybil Milton elaborates further upon the female concern for hygiene, asserting that women in the camps frequently devoted their time to cleaning their barracks and surroundings, not only to assure standards of hygiene but also as a type of therapy enabling them to dominate and reclaim their space: "Women's specific forms of survival included doing housework as a kind of practical therapy and of gaining control over one's space" and "Cleaning not only prevented the spread of disease; it also functioned as did other familiar 'housework' routines as a form of therapy enabling women to gain control over their own space"<sup>211</sup>. Again, Milton's theory — and in particular the close parallel she draws between cleaning and control over personal environment — is highly contestable. In the testimonial context, there is no evidence of non-privileged prisoners at Ravensbrück and Auschwitz devoting themselves to such cleaning of their surroundings. This is due firstly to the relentless and inflexible reality of time constraints. The absolute lack of free time after a day's labour and prolonged roll call, and the plethora of other pressing personal tasks to be performed in any spare moment the women managed to procure is reiterated in many testimonies: "Nous n'avions pas un moment à nous dans le courant de la journée",<sup>212</sup> and even on Sundays

Enfin avions-nous un peu de temps pour nous: pour nous épouiller, nous laver [...] Il fallait s'empresser et bien employer son temps afin de pouvoir faire tout cela à la lumière du jour [...] On nous exploitait toutes, nous, notre temps et notre force, si complètement et avec une telle méthode que nous ne pouvions, à vrai dire, jamais nous permettre le luxe de rencontrer nos camarades les plus proches<sup>213</sup>.

Such a punishing schedule and the utter exhaustion which it engendered rendered it highly improbable that women would elect to dedicate their free time to cleaning of their own volition. Indeed, even in the testimony of a "privileged" prisoner such as Fania Fenelon, who inhabited

<sup>209</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, p.98

<sup>210</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.74

<sup>211</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.227 and p.229

<sup>212</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.75

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid*, p.104

the orchestra block at Auschwitz-Birkenau and who enjoyed more time and space than the majority of prisoners, the women manifest no such desire to “control” their living space by cleaning, and the cleaning of the block or music room is in fact a form of punishment meted out by the *kapo*, to which both Marta and Florette fall victim: “Tiens! C’est elle qui va laver la salle. Qui l’a punie? Pourquoi?” and “Comme punition, elle lui intime l’ordre de laver la salle de musique”<sup>214</sup>. Secondly, the reality of living conditions in the blocks where ordinary or “non-privileged” prisoners were housed was such that it precluded control over their living domain in any shape or form, rendering even the contemplation of such an idea absurd and futile. Pelagia Lewinska, for example, describes the absolute lack of space, the overwhelming sense of suffocation and the inability to even move freely in blocks at Auschwitz where women were crammed in seven or eight to a bunk: “Les blocs où l’on était obligé d’entasser de 800 à 1000 personnes étaient tellement bondés que 7 à 8 femmes couchaient dans chaque cage”<sup>215</sup>, further expanding her description to ask

Comment se mouvoir, se vêtir, se déshabiller, manger, dormir, vivre en général, dans cet entassement de corps humains, dans ces ténèbres complètes? Il était impossible de ne pas écraser le pied à quelqu’un, de ne pas donner un coup de pied à la tête en montant dans sa couchette [...] Il n’y avait pas dans la baraque de place pour rester debout, pour mettre quelque chose, pour s’asseoir; il n’y avait que des passages étroits et des couchettes pour dormir. Il était impossible d’étendre ou d’accrocher nos vêtements mouillés, on devait les garder sur soi ou sous soi. La petite surface étroite qu’on appelait votre place déterminait et limitait tous vos mouvements, renfermait votre bien composé de haillons et de mangeailles qu’on avait reçus; votre attention était toujours tendue pour ne pas égarer quelques pièces de vêtements. Il était interdit d’apporter quelque chose dans la baraque dont tout l’intérieur se réduisait évidemment pour chacune de nous à la seule couchette à laquelle elle avait droit....<sup>216</sup>

In such conditions, the active desire for control over physical space was effectively rendered redundant by its very implausibility. Instead, French female testimonies attest to a tendency to substitute the psychological for the physical and the conceptual for the actual, with these writers evoking their attempts to exert control over their psychological or intellectual space, through such mental escapist techniques as recounting stories, conversing with other inmates and particularly the sharing or reconstruction of cultural or literary elements (literature, plays, songs, poetry). Pelagia Lewinska, along with almost all other female writers, illustrates the women’s desire to escape and seek therapeutic benefit within the realm of culture, rather than any physical endeavour:

Quelle récompense c’était pour moi, ces questions qu’on me posait avec insistance et les prières de ‘raconter’ quelque chose. Dans les ténèbres de la baraque [...] ces simples filles du peuple qui se privaient de quelques rares moments de sommeil pour *écouter*, cette jeune fille qui avait passé une partie de la nuit sur un tabouret, tremblant de froid pour ne pas s’endormir, c’était notre victoire sur l’ennemi. C’est ainsi que

<sup>214</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.204 and p.135. Olga Lengyel (*Souvenirs de l’au-delà*, p.52) also attests to the compulsory nature of block cleaning.

<sup>215</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.54

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, pp55-56

nous défendions l'esprit. Et voici comment nous nous défendions contre la destruction physique<sup>217</sup>.

Finally, and no less significantly in a realm where every privilege was jealously guarded, the cleaning of the block was usually undertaken by the *zimmerdienst*, who were appointed to the position and the attendant privileges it entailed (namely improved rations and exemption from outside work), and who were unlikely to tolerate any perceived usurpation of their position by other women attempting to organise or dominate their surroundings. In short, therefore, despite the continued application of their domestic skills in the camp with regard to individual hygiene, women prisoners appear to have had neither the inclination nor the opportunity to perform the type of cleaning of their surroundings detailed by Milton. Any non-personal cleaning which may have been performed by women in the camps was therefore undoubtedly effected under compulsion rather than in deference to any therapeutic rationale<sup>218</sup>.

One further theme which appears regularly in French female narratives is that of sewing and crafting objects – a skill which is once again closely affiliated to female pre-camp domestic knowledge. Although it may appear hyperbolic to assert that such skills could influence a prisoner's survival, a contextualization of these abilities within the camp environment is revelatory of their incontrovertible and tangible significance. To cite but two examples, any minor transgression of the camp dress code (such as a missing or damaged item of clothing) could provide the SS guards with the opportunity to punish the hapless offender, under the oft-enlisted — and highly ridiculous given the state of disrepair of prisoner garb — accusation of sabotaging camp property<sup>219</sup>. The loss of a vital item of clothing or shoe to disrepair could also prove fatal in the extreme conditions of winter in the camps. In such a context, the ability to patch or repair garments metamorphosed into an invaluable and life-saving skill. The testimonial emphasis upon women sewing and repairing their clothes (although not without much ingenuity in acquiring the materials to do so) is marked, as with these extracts from Fania Fenelon and *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*: “Mes bas sont déchirés... comment les raccommoder?... On se prête une aiguillée de fil, mais il faut attendre son tour, faire queue auprès de celle qui la possède”<sup>220</sup>, and “Le fil et les aiguilles, des bouts de tissu et d'imperméable pour la fabrication de moufles, de pantoufles, de capuchons et autres pièces de vêtement, venaient des ateliers”<sup>221</sup>. Women also enlisted their creative crafting skills as tools to enhance their psychological resistance and reinforce morale, by fashioning gifts or symbolic objects for special occasions

<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p.145

<sup>218</sup> The extreme environments of Auschwitz, Ravensbrück and other comparable camps are here distinguishable from less harsh camps such as the model camp of Theresienstadt, where the more moderate conditions and treatment of prisoners did allow such cleaning. See, for example, Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp* (New York: Berg Publishers, 1989), p.30.

<sup>219</sup> Punishments within the concentration camps were highly diverse (ranging from flogging or various forms of torture to transfer to a harsh labour commando). Most exposed the prisoner to potential physical injury or deterioration, and thus lessened her chances of survival.

<sup>220</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.152

<sup>221</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.227

and thereby effecting a celebratory or less oppressive ambience. Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne and Simone Alizon respectively describe how the women exploited their creative skills to generate a festive atmosphere at Christmas: “On a sacrifié des morceaux de mie de pain, qu’on a modelés pour en faire des étoiles, des personnages, des animaux”<sup>222</sup> and “Modestes présents, soit ‘organisés’ selon les possibilités, soit exécutés par nous-mêmes avec des morceaux de tissu, quelques brins de laine ou de papier”<sup>223</sup>.

The carer mantle which was predominantly assumed by women (who tended to bear the responsibility of caring for children, the elderly and infirm family members in pre-camp society) was a further facet of female societal function which was readily transposed into concentration camp life as a positive survival influence and which is therefore a dominant feature in female narratives. Joan Ringelheim asserts that

Women were able to transform their habits of raising children or their experience of nurturing into the care of non-biological family. Men, when they lost their role in the protection of their own families, seemed less able to transform this habit into the protection of others. Men did not remain or become fathers as readily as women became mothers or nurturers<sup>224</sup>.

Aside from any mutual aid or sense of collective solidarity and obligation which this “carer mentality” may have engendered, however (refer to Chapter Three), it is often presented within these narratives as a complement to the practical domestic skills which enhanced women’s ability to survive, fulfilling the equally fundamental role of preserving the morale which was so crucial for survival. Women’s ability to entertain, comfort and divert the attention of children, for example, was transferred to entertaining one another on many occasions, often through comparable means such as storytelling. Camille Touboul describes her friends’ utilisation of such mechanisms: “Pour la première soirée après ma sortie du *Revier*, mes amies décident de me refaire un moral, elles ont organisé un moment de loisir. Assises sur nos paillasses, chacune doit raconter une journée de liberté”<sup>225</sup>. Similarly, Micheline Maurel depicts women enlisting their entertaining abilities to comfort and distract their *camarades*, particularly through the medium of singing and reciting poetry — a medium in which one of her fellow inmates displays particular talent: “Une des femmes à qui le convoi des 22 000 a dû son bon moral et les meilleurs moments de la captivité, c’est certainement Sissy. Sissy avait une voix si pure que nous aurions pu l’écouter des journées entières”<sup>226</sup>.

Moreover, Claudia Koonz also makes the interesting observation that for women prisoners

[...] the public-private split worked to their advantage. From childhood, they had learned to live in a bicultural world that severed the public persona from private

<sup>222</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J’ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.73

<sup>223</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.284

<sup>224</sup> Joan Ringelheim in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.378

<sup>225</sup> Camille Touboul, *Le plus long des chemins* (Nice: Éditions du Losange, 1997), p.115

<sup>226</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, p.107

feelings; as resisters, they 'instinctively' knew how to appear harmless and even obsequious to their enemies while maintaining their inner integrity. Concentration camp prisoners learned to avoid calling attention to themselves while preserving an internal set of values [...] Resistance meant long-term, collaborative deviousness — pitting wit, not physical power, against the enemy. This quintessentially 'feminine' strategy became universal in situations where resisters and prisoners commanded few of the superficial attributes of normal life and dignity<sup>227</sup>.

This female distinction between the public and private self may therefore arguably be seen to translate into a highly functional camp survival skill, enabling women to outwardly conform and remain unobtrusive whilst maintaining a strong inner life of their own. It is certainly discernible in the testimonial sphere, with Nelly Gorce providing one example of a perpetual schism between the internal and external persona, with her continual determination to present a front which masks her true feelings and ideals from her Nazi captors: "Il ne faut surtout pas que ces femmes voient ma peine. Je ris comme d'une bonne plaisanterie..", and again "Je ris de tout, comme d'habitude, pour reconforter mes compagnes et cacher ma rage"<sup>228</sup>. At the same time, Charlotte Delbo's testimony constructs a further image of positive gender specificity, asserting that women also drew the psychological fortitude essential for survival from their cognisance of the practical and emotional gender-based skills they possessed. In comparison to the men, Delbo notes that "[...] elles se rassuraient quant à elles. Il leur faudrait seulement avoir patience et courage, deux vertus dont elles étaient très sûres parce qu'elles sont de tous les jours"<sup>229</sup>. Hence their conception of patient, strong womanhood served as a considerable psychological support. Delbo underlines how the women also took comfort in their practical usefulness, particularly with regard to the aid they could offer to the men on the other side of the barbed wire fence at Auschwitz:

[...les femmes], dans une détresse tout aussi grande, avaient encore des ressources, les ressources qu'ont toujours les femmes. Elles pouvaient laver le linge, raccommoder l'unique chemise maintenant en loques qu'ils portaient le jour de leur arrestation, couper dans les couvertures pour leur confectionner des chaussons. Elles se privaient d'une partie de leur pain pour la leur donner. Un homme doit manger davantage...<sup>230</sup>.

Lise Lesèvre echoes Delbo's emphasis upon female practical aid when her convoy witnesses the mistreatment of male prisoners during an interlude at Neue-Brem:

Les femmes qui assistent au spectacle pleurent et elles crient 'Nous nous vengerons!'. Et c'est vrai que malgré leurs souffrances qui dépasseront souvent celles des hommes, les femmes tenteront de les aider, quand elles se pourront, se privant de nourriture par exemple pour leur 'organiser' des cigarettes<sup>231</sup>.

It is interesting to note, too, that traditional gender interaction (where it does occur) does not seem to evolve greatly in the concentration camp environment, in which women's role with regard

<sup>227</sup> Claudia Koonz in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.293

<sup>228</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.29 and p.40

<sup>229</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1970), p.11

<sup>230</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>231</sup> Lise Lesèvre in Ania Francos, *Il était des femmes dans la résistance*, p.343

to their male counterparts is consistently portrayed as remaining one of emotional support and domestic nurturing, seemingly untransformed by the alien nature of the experience<sup>232</sup>.

Finally, although unrelated to the practical pre-internment learned skills which enhanced women's chances of survival, it should also be noted that the testimonial literature of French women frequently delineates a further female gender-specific opportunity to influence survival – that which existed to a limited extent for women prisoners through their sexuality. Such opportunities existed particularly in Auschwitz, where there were (albeit highly limited and perilous) opportunities for male and female prisoners to briefly interact when male prisoners came to the female camp to effect repairs or building projects. Certain prisoners occupying privileged positions in the camp hierarchy also enjoyed greater freedom of movement within the camp complex which facilitated such inter-gender contact. Sybil Milton notes that

[...] clandestine heterosexual liaisons did occur, even in Auschwitz, where men were assigned to labour details in women's camps. Brief stolen moments were arranged in potato storage sheds, clothing depots, warehouses, laundry vans, the bakery, the canteen and even in chicken coops<sup>233</sup>.

In such instances, some women were able to procure the commodities essential to survival (from food to clothing, shoes and other practical or even luxury items) from privileged male prisoners in exchange for sexual favours<sup>234</sup>, as Anna Pawelczynska explains: “[...] paid prostitution existed in the camp and the choice of partners was dictated by one's ability to pay — either in the form of help in gaining a better place in the camp structure or, at each visit, in the form of food or better clothes”<sup>235</sup>. Such transactions, limited in many cases either by moral reticence or lack of opportunity, were accessible to and exploited by only a limited number of female prisoners, although the incidence of female sexual exchange for survival was sufficiently widespread to warrant description in several female testimonies. Fania Fenelon, for example, describes her friend Clara's involvement in the sexual market with male *kapos*, exchanging sex for food:

Clara a changé si vite, je ne la reconnais plus. Elle devient affreusement égoïste; pour se procurer de la nourriture, elle ferait n'importe quoi [...] elle plaît aux hommes qui lui font la cour avec du sucre, du beurre. L'écu, avec 20 cigarettes, un tarif élevé, paie à la Tchaikowska ou à une autre *blockowa* la location au quart d'heure de sa chambre<sup>236</sup>.

Fenelon notes that in the camp female sexuality is almost entirely reduced to the role of a commodity for sale in the struggle for survival: “Ici, l'amour, c'est aussi rare que le reste. Ici on

<sup>232</sup> Although male/female interaction may have remained essentially unchanged in the camps, there is extensive evidence of transformation with regard to traditional gender-based *skills*, with women learning “male” skills and vice versa. See Claudia Koonz in Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.293

<sup>233</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.231

<sup>234</sup> Note that only privileged (and therefore well-nourished) male prisoners tended to display any real interest in sexual interaction. The sex drive of most prisoners was comprehensively suppressed by starvation (see Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, pp140-141). Some male prisoners also engaged in sexual exchange within male camps, where a willingness to provide homosexual favours to other male prisoners could afford similar rewards.

<sup>235</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.99

<sup>236</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.164

n'aime pas, on baise: Clara, qui a perdu toute pudeur, est devenue une sorte de fille à *kapos*..."<sup>237</sup>. Gisella Perl also discovers first-hand the existence of the sexual market, when she offers a man her bread ration in exchange for a desperately-needed piece of string, only to find that he will accept no other currency but sex. Despite her refusal, she realizes "how my values had changed... how high the price of a piece of string had soared"<sup>238</sup>. Perl also describes the sexual exchanges she witnessed at Auschwitz:

The latrine also served as a love-nest. It was here that male and female prisoners met for a furtive moment of joyless sexual intercourse in which the body was used as a commodity with which to pay for the badly needed items the men were able to steal from the warehouses<sup>239</sup>.

For certain women, refusal to participate in the system of sexual exchange could have serious adverse consequences. Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu, for example, refuses an offer of privilege in exchange for sex and finds herself the target of continual punishment and torment as a result<sup>240</sup>.

Evidently, this genderized survival strategy was accompanied by a considerable moral dilemma for many women. Did they rationalize and embrace prostitution as a necessity in the battle for survival where the end justified any means, adopting the view articulated by Marlene Heinemann that "[...] in the context of starvation and death, women found that traditional dignity had to be sacrificed"<sup>241</sup>? Or did they retain the morals formulated for women in a society which was completely foreign and all but irrelevant to the concentration camp, a decision which could result in their eventual death? Most testimonies maintain an ambiguous stance on this question, with the majority of French women writers taking care to demarcate this practice as one which they witnessed but remained personally distanced from. Some writers who refrained from utilising their sexuality as a tool for survival nevertheless note that witnessing such transactions wrought a change upon their own values, as Gisella Perl explains: "At first I was deeply shocked at these practices... But later when I saw that the pieces of bread thus earned saved lives [...] I began to understand and to forgive"<sup>242</sup>. Whatever the reaction of individual writers to the questions of morality posed, sexuality was one more area where gender is testimonially portrayed as enacting a significant role in enhancing a woman's prospects of survival.

On the whole, then, an analysis of the corpus of French female narratives reveals that there does indeed appear to be a testimonial specificity deriving from the most elementary factors particular to gender. The unique confluence between the comprehensive structural camp

<sup>237</sup> Ibid, p.175

<sup>238</sup> Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, p.58

<sup>239</sup> Ibid p78. Note that blockovos would also hire their private rooms to their friends for the purpose of such sexual transactions. See Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, pp281-282, and Krystyna Zywulska, *J'ai survécu à Auschwitz* (Warsaw: Éditions Polonia, 1956), p.42.

<sup>240</sup> Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu, *Moi, un cobaye*, p.167

<sup>241</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, p.16

<sup>242</sup> Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, p.79



assault upon fertility, modesty and external appearance, and the particularities of socialization and biology which rendered these aspects especially significant to women incontrovertibly augmented the trauma which French women faced in certain areas of camp experience, thereby creating a discernible “female” testimonial emphasis which differentiates the texts of these writers from those of male survivors. A similar focal divergence is occasioned by the presence of maternal-based themes within many of these narratives, and by the unique conflicts and tensions inherent within such themes. And yet, thwarting the neatly simplistic equation of femininity to elevated victimization, the innate and learned gender specificity of female prisoners does not translate into these testimonies solely as a source of vulnerability. Through the portrayal of the female deployment of pre-internment learned skills within the camps, it also figures as a significant source of practical and psychological strength, and thus as a potential means of survival. The resulting bipartite portrait of the gender-defined French female prisoner as simultaneous passive victim and dynamic survivor is therefore revelatory of the real difficulty of establishing absolutes even within this most straightforward aspect of testimonial analysis, and presages other, more significant, textual tensions (such as those between text and subtext, collective and individual, author and inmate) which will feature in the forthcoming chapters.



## Chapter Two — French Women and Structural Individualism: The Grey Zone

*“Il y a deux clans qui se forment entre les détenues: celles qui s’amusent, qui mangent à outrance, qui reçoivent de belles robes, de la poudre de riz, du rouge à lèvres, et celles qui restent déguenillées, affamées, et misérables. D’un côté on rit, on s’amuse, on danse même; de l’autre, on lutte désespérément pour vivre”.<sup>1</sup>*

As we have seen in the previous chapter, the utilisation of innate gender specificity as a defining focus of the approach to the camp testimony inevitably lends credence to the theorem that significant variables are operative in the narratives of French men and women. And yet, despite serving as a necessary and logical *point de départ* for analysing the particular and specific nature of French female testimonial literature, such a mode of investigation is inevitably limited, succeeding in elucidating but one initial aspect of the entirety of testimonial camp reality. Many more complex, multi-faceted and nuanced aspects of this reality become discernible if we adopt a more macrocosmic analytical approach in which the innate and the biological cede their focal role to the external and the behavioural, as we move beyond the realm of overtly gender-dictated reactions to explore the wider, extemporaneous narrative responses of French women to the concentration camp environment.

The general area of inmate responses is certainly an interesting one. Much has been written on the psychology and behaviour of the SS — behaviour which was prescribed, preordained and rendered largely predictable by a rigid system of training and the systematic doctrinal inculcation of Nazi values. By contrast, the responses of camp prisoners — an ultimately heterogenous group of individuals characterized by vastly disparate backgrounds and beliefs — to the homogenous stimuli of the camp are infinitely more difficult to define and demarcate, and therefore exercise a universal fascination in both critical and testimonial literature. In particular, the broad issue of the relation of camp inmates to one another is an area which — in one guise or another — figures prominently in almost every testimonial narrative and to which it remains notoriously difficult to apportion definitive scholarly conclusions. And within this sphere, one of the most significant realms of inquiry is that area of vertical relations which Primo Levi dubbed the “grey zone”<sup>2</sup>, namely the divisive hierarchical camp system which utilised the lure of privilege to pit prisoners against one another in the struggle for survival, thereby aiming to undermine collective engagement and to create a climate of structurally-imposed individualism

<sup>1</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes* (Ciney: Éditions Marsia, 1945), p.110

<sup>2</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.27

in which inmates would be compelled to exploit one another in order to assure their own comfort and survival.

In seeking to elucidate the testimonial responses of French women to this phenomenon, then, this chapter will commence with a definitional outline of the grey zone, drawing upon both testimonial and critical literature to effect a delineation of its basic, and most common, methods and the practical manner in which it functioned. This initial demarcation in no way purports, however, to be an exhaustive description of the intricacies of the grey zone — a task which is not only a veritable impossibility but also extraneous here. The investigative focus will then shift to address the more central question of the portrayal of the grey zone within French female narratives. How, for example, did French women relate to this hierarchical system? How do French writers perceive, define and conceptualize the grey zone within testimonial literature? To what degree do they portray themselves and their countrywomen espousing or participating in the functionary system? And, equally importantly, why — what factors shaped French responses to this sphere of camp life?

Were there gender divergences within these responses — do the texts suggest that men and women approached the grey zone differently or participated in it to unequal degrees? Did French men and women, in other words, respond differently to comparable external stimuli? Or is it not inevitable that identical causal logic will produce identical effects, and that the testimonial writings of French women will in this sphere find a mirror in that of their male counterparts? Indeed, could it be that the forces at work within this area of camp experience are in fact strong enough to engender a textual uniformity which eclipses the issue of gender? Such are the questions which will constitute the nucleus of this chapter.

### **Defining the Grey Zone**

Aside from the gender differences which were built into the structure of the concentration camp system (and which we have addressed in Chapter One, together with the dissimilarities in gender socialized responses), the camp structure was widely homogeneous for men and women. Its essential framework was universal, and nowhere was this global commonality more evident than in the blueprint governing inmate relations and the internal hierarchy of prisoners, which was applied with a high degree of uniformity throughout the network of Nazi camps.

Prior to their arrival in the camps, the vast majority of prisoners subscribed to the essentially unshaded preconception of camp reality articulated by Olga Lengyel who, whilst harbouring no illusions that camp life would be free of hardship, noted that:

Cependant, une pensée me consolait: il y aurait une égalité dans la souffrance et nous aurions à subir la même oppression et les mêmes oppresseurs. La chose me paraissait alors très simple: d'un côté il y aurait les martyrs, de l'autre les tortionnaires.<sup>3</sup>

Irrespective of the new prisoner's degree of prior knowledge of general camp conditions, extermination strategies and the rationale behind the Nazi camp regime<sup>4</sup>, the fundamental assumptive conceptualization of a camp structure founded upon a clearly delineated, irreductible "us versus them" (or, more precisely, prisoners versus captors) basis was rarely challenged before the inmate entered the camp.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, the ubiquitous nature of this perception in no way signalled its factuality. In reality, the Nazi concentration camp system was far from internally egalitarian, but rather was carefully structured around a distinct prisoner hierarchy. First instituted by Theodor Eicke, commandant of Dachau, in accordance with the Nazi Führer principle<sup>6</sup>, the basic premise of this hierarchy was the delegation to selected prisoners of supervisory responsibilities and power over their fellow inmates. In return for fulfilling such a role, these chosen inmates benefitted from its considerable attendant reward system, including — but by no means restricted to — augmented food rations, ameliorated living conditions, superior clothing, greater leisure time and freedom of circulation within the camp.

These privileged roles encompassed a wide variety of positions, which to a greater or lesser extent constituted the essential fabric of the camp aristocracy and partook of its privileges. At the summit of the hierarchy was the *Lagerälteste*, or head of camp, who wielded authority over all other prisoners, and whose task was to enact the role of camp representative, conveying SS orders to the camp population and ensuring their implementation<sup>7</sup>. Initially, according to Eugen Kogon, this post was singularly occupied, but as the camp populations later swelled, up to three prisoners could share this ultimate role.<sup>8</sup> The *Lagerälteste* was seconded by an external and an internal deputy: the *Lagerkapo* (chief of extra-camp work services), and the chief of administration (responsible for all internal administration staff and the delegation of food and living quarters), both of whom were permitted to choose their personnel freely amongst the

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, p.286

<sup>4</sup> Note that Roger Arnould asserts that "Il est exact de dire que la plupart des déportés français de 1942 à 1944 ne savaient rien des camps nazis; beaucoup n'en avaient jamais entendu parler". See Roger Arnould, *Les témoins de la nuit* (Paris: FNDIRP, 1975), p.85.

<sup>5</sup> The predominance of this preconception is evidenced by the sense of shock expressed in almost every camp testimony at the initial mistreatment to which the new prisoner was subjected by prisoners of longer standing on arrival. Simone Alizon (*L'exercice de vivre*, p.113) is typical: "Où donc étions-nous? Là où des prisonnières battaient d'autres prisonnières, les bouscullaient et leur volaient ce qu'elles possédaient", as is Adélaïde Hautval: "Oh! des prisonnières qui tapent les leurs? Premier contact avec un monde inconnu où le renversement des valeurs fait loi" (*Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, p.30).

<sup>6</sup> Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.363

<sup>7</sup> Eugen Kogon, *L'état SS*, p.62

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p.62

prisoners and often cultivated veritable courts of surrounding aides.<sup>9</sup> A lesser hierarchy functioned within each barrack, which was headed by the *Blockova* or *Blockälteste*, aided by two or three personally chosen *Stubendienst* charged with maintaining order and distributing rations, as well as a secretary, and several *zimmerdienst*.<sup>10</sup> The labour commandos further paralleled this hierarchical structure, under the command of a *Kapo* and various deputies. Further privileged roles were held by those prisoner-functionaries employed in the camp kitchens, as camp police in the *Lagerpolizei* and as medical workers in the *Revier*, and to a lesser extent by those working in the labour bureau (assigning work commandos and compiling transport lists), the *Schreibstube* (Secrétariat), the *Effektenkammer* and Auschwitz's Canada commando or its lesser equivalent in other camps.

With subtle variations this hierarchy functioned comprehensively throughout the realm of Nazi camps, and as such is a keystone of most testimonial accounts, where it is commonly delineated under the comparative guise of the pyramidal structure of a class-based society. Hence Charles Richet's division of Buchenwald into four classes, defined by their social position and material condition:

Jamais dans le 'bagne capitaliste' le plus effroyable, il n'y eut et il n'y aura autant de différences sociales que dans l'établissement 'égalitaire' de Buchenwald. Entre le premier ministre français ou anglais et le dernier clochard des ponts de la Seine ou de la Tamise, il y a, de par la forme démocratique de leurs gouvernements, un principe d'égalité. Chez les bagnards, au contraire, quatre classes. D'abord l'aristocratie 'de droit divin' pour ainsi dire, constituée par les très anciens du camp, les purs Allemands qui, depuis seize ou dix-sept ans sont dans les geôles nazies [...] C'est dans cette aristocratie que se recrutaient ceux auxquels les SS confiaient la vraie garde du camp; d'eux émanaient les ordres. Ils étaient, après Dieu et les SS les grands maîtres de Buchenwald [...] Puis la 'haute bourgeoisie' [...] Si l'aristocratie avait parfois chambre à part, les grands bourgeois n'avaient pas à se plaindre. Ils avaient chacun leur lit personnel. Notre chambre était chauffée, nos vêtements satisfaisants [...] Les médecins, les pompiers, les Lagerschutz, le bureau politique, l' 'Arbeitstatistik' etc faisaient partie de cette classe [...] Ensuite venait la classe moyenne de l'ordre de quinze mille hommes qui travaillaient dans le camp. Ils avaient en général un lit pour deux. Ils portaient souvent un pardessus en hiver. Certains avaient des chaussures. Et puis, tout à fait en bas, il y avait ce que Jack London appelle 'le peuple de l'abîme'. C'était une tourbe sans nom. Nous y fûmes mêlés pendant cinq semaines. Si notre séjour s'y fût prolongé, nous eussions infailliblement succombé.<sup>11</sup>

Pelagia Lewinska's echo of this pyramidal social organisation in her description of Auschwitz illustrates the broad universality of this hierarchical structure from camp to camp, irrespective of gender or the constant flux of camp conditions:

Comme dans un petit État, une organisation sociale se créa au camp qui reposait — pas du tout fortuitement — sur la théorie hitlérienne du peuple, des maîtres et de leur État. Il y avait à la base des couches sociales nouvellement créées, une grande masse grise d'êtres humains travaillant dur. Au sommet, il y avait la classe des dirigeants: les

<sup>9</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, pp80-81. See also Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, pp45-47.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.81

<sup>11</sup> Charles Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.48. Richet worked as a doctor within the Buchenwald complex, hence his self-inclusion within the category of the "haute bourgeoisie".

détenues fonctionnaires. Ces dernières possédaient tout, y compris le droit à l' 'amour' (des SS hommes et des détenus). La gradation passait par des fonctions moins importantes; détenues travaillant au bureau, celles qui étaient employées dans les magasins, ouvrières d'usine et la grande masse des travailleuses agricoles. Les deux derniers groupes étaient les plus nombreux et les plus pauvres. Si les conditions matérielles du camp s'amélioraient, c'était avant tout les fonctionnaires et les couches supérieures qui en profitaient.<sup>12</sup>

Denise Dufournier establishes a similar analogy for the women's camp at Ravensbrück:

Je devais plus tard être frappée par l'analogie qui existait entre la société des prisonnières et la société d'un État libre. Les valeurs en étaient différentes; mais tout ce qui fait le monde y était représenté. Il y avait des riches et des pauvres, quelques puissants et le troupeau passif des *Stücke*. Il y avait des métiers nobles, autour desquels flottait un halo de considération; celles qui les exerçaient formaient l'aristocratie du camp et jouissaient d'un certain nombre de privilèges: meilleure soupe, meilleur gîte, dans les blocs 1, 2, 3 d'ailleurs, sauvagement préservés par les cordons de police.<sup>13</sup>

Significant, tangible socio-economic divisions between prisoners and a distinct hierarchy which truncated inmates into the categories of "haves" and "have nots" were therefore woven into the very fabric of the camp infrastructure.<sup>14</sup>

This hierarchical structure in itself, however, is less notable and less significant than its *modus operandi* — the *manner* in which it operated and the principles upon which it was founded. A deliberate strategical implementation on the part of the Nazi regime, the internal hierarchy functioned only secondarily as a delegatory labour-saving mechanism minimizing SS involvement in the running of the camps, with its primary *raison d'être* being the setting of prisoners against one another in a climate of fear and brutality whose ultimate objective was the undermining of any germination of prisoner solidarity and anti-Nazi unity. The equation for so doing was masterfully simple. To begin with, the camp system created an environment in which some form of privilege was all but essential for a prisoner to survive. Rations were calculated in order that the average *Häftling* existing amidst the mass of prisoners at the base of the camp hierarchy could subsist for little more than three months before succumbing to starvation<sup>15</sup> — provided of course that he did not first fall victim to the fatal exhaustion, pneumonia or host of hostile diseases to which his unprivileged working and living conditions exposed him. As such,

<sup>12</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.135

<sup>13</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, pp64-65

<sup>14</sup> Jean Laffitte (a communist prisoner interned at Mauthausen) also sketches a portrait of this hierarchy which is noteworthy for its attempts to estimate the numerical proportions of the functionary system. Laffitte distinguishes five "classes" within the camps. The "seigneurs" (those who held the chief roles such as camp leader or head of the kitchens) are estimated at one thousandth of the camp population, the block leaders and secretaries at two percent of prisoners, the "classe moyenne" of Kapos, doctors, musicians etc at three or four percent, and the class of prisoners whose job allowed some slight relief from the worst camp experience at ten percent. The remainder of the prisoners — the human slaves condemned to elimination — comprised the remaining eighty-five percent of the prisoner population. See Jean Laffitte, *Ceux qui vivent* (Paris: Éditions Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1947), p.28.

<sup>15</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.76. Note that Nazi policy on rations varied throughout the period under study and between camps. René Chavanne, for example, notes that during Speer's tenure as Minister of Production prisoner manpower was to be kept alive for the benefit of German industry, and rations were consequently improved. (*Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.293).

privilege became the sole apparent form of survival in a world where death seemed all but certain. The competition from other prisoners for life-saving positions was thus calculated to assume the spectre of a direct threat to one's own survival, effecting an attitudinal shift which metamorphosized one's fellow prisoners into the primary, closest and most readily discernible enemy, and highlighted the need to prioritise the self and its survival at the expense of others. As Aimé Bonifas succinctly states "Le génie démoniaque du régime concentrationnaire nazi est de nous avoir placé en situation, nous ses victimes, de nous haïr les uns les autres".<sup>16</sup> In essence then, the system of privilege acted as the cardinal vehicle for the implementation of a precise and pervasive structural individualism. The resultant climate was thus one of fear, brutality, jealousy, denunciation and an over-riding desperation to grasp and retain privilege (and therefore life) at any price.

And that price was highly specific. Having consolidated privilege as indispensable to survival, the Nazi regime also rendered it ultimately conditional. In return for the privilege of survival and various attendant comforts, the prisoner functionary was expected to use his power to perpetuate SS values toward his fellow prisoners — to beat, punish and torture them as often and as zealously as practicable. Only by so doing could he be certain of SS validation and the retention of his coveted role. Moreover, in order to inculcate these Nazi values into the prisoner hierarchy as comprehensively as possible, the SS favoured (although not exclusively) *droit commun* prisoners for the roles of Kapos and blockleaders — prisoners whose criminal past facilitated a smooth metamorphosis into SS mercenaries. Racial and national identity were also significant in the selection of privileged positions, with Aryan inmates (German followed by Polish) generally receiving priority. These prisoners were accorded the absolute power of life and death over their fellow inmates: "Chacun des membres de la hiérarchie, même au plus bas échelon, exerçait le droit de vie et de mort sur les autres prisonnières, sans raisons [...] Chaque prisonnier possédant la moindre parcelle de pouvoir exerçait ce même droit sur les détenus ordinaires."<sup>17</sup> To all intents and purposes, therefore, as Pelagia Lewinska notes "C'étaient, à vrai dire, les détenues nommées par les autorités qui étaient nos chefs directs. L'étendue de leur pouvoir sur nous était si grande que nous sentions peser sur nous la menace de cette épée aveugle plus que la main allemande qui la dirigeait".<sup>18</sup>

With certain inmates thus accepting to act on behalf of the SS against their fellow prisoners, the boundaries of enmity and loyalty, and the starkly defined black and white concept

<sup>16</sup> Aimé Bonifas, *Détenu 20801 dans les bagnes nazis*, p.44

<sup>17</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.144

<sup>18</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.132. It was this direct interaction between prisoner functionary and underling (as opposed to the somewhat more distant role of the SS) which occasioned the situation whereby, as Bruno Bettelheim states, "[...] in the camps, not the SS but the prisoner was the prisoner's worst enemy" (*The Informed Heart*, p.186). Refer also to Hanna Lévy's comments on this chain of power (in Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.255), and to Félix Calatayud-Tormo, *C'était hier — le chemin de l'Europe 1936- 1948* (Paris: Éditions La Bruyère, 1996), pp104-106.



of “us versus them” inevitably blurred into a morally ambiguous grey area where notions of guilt and innocence were no longer unequivocal, as Primo Levi asserts:

[...] the hybrid class of the prisoner-functionary [is the Lager’s] most disquieting feature. It is a grey zone, with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants. It possesses an incredibly complicated internal structure, and contains within itself enough to confuse our need to judge.<sup>19</sup>

The quintessential crux of Levi’s grey zone and the aspect which lends it particular moral ambivalence lies in the fact that many of those who participated in the system of privilege did so in order to ensure their own comfort and survival *at the expense of other inmates*. For, as Alain Parrau points out, the prisoner functionary effectively elected to survive at any price and, within the camp, “ ‘À tout prix’ veut dire: au prix de la vie d’autrui”<sup>20</sup>. Psychoanalysis has advanced many explanations for this individualistic phenomenon, but the majority of critics concur with the essence of Levi’s cogent argument:

If one offers a position of privilege to a few individuals in a state of slavery, exacting in exchange the betrayal of a natural solidarity with their comrades, there will certainly be someone who will accept. He will be withdrawn from the common law and will become untouchable; the more power that he is given, the more he will be consequently hateful and hated. When he is given the command of a group of unfortunates, with the right of life or death over them, he will be cruel and tyrannical, because he will understand that if he is not sufficiently so, someone else, judged more suitable, will take over his post. Moreover, his capacity for hatred, unfulfilled in the direction of the oppressors, will double back, beyond all reason, on the oppressed; and he will only be satisfied when he has unloaded onto his underlings the injury received from above.<sup>21</sup>

Although “the number of prisoners who participated in the apparatus of terror was very small in proportion to the great masses of prisoners who were subjected to that terror”<sup>22</sup>, in every camp this grey zone harboured a number of individuals who were thus prepared to embrace the widespread practice of oppressing their fellow prisoners for their own ends. The specific techniques deployed to effect this oppression are sketched in varying shades and detail in virtually every testimonial document, and were broadly similar across the network of Nazi camps. In the first instance, those prisoner functionaries who actively embraced the SS concept of the functionary system could forge for themselves a lifestyle of comfort and relative luxury, through direct exploitation of the resources of their hierarchically inferior counterparts. One of the primary means of realizing this lifestyle was the appropriation of food officially destined for the mass of prisoners — food which served not only to sustain the physical health and wellbeing

<sup>19</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.27

<sup>20</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, p.117

<sup>21</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.97. The words of Gilbert Dreyfus are also apposite here, as he describes the metamorphosis of those functionaries who have existed at the base of the prisoner hierarchy for long enough to have experienced its most extreme traumas: “Et voici qu’on les pare d’une belle livrée, qu’on les alimente, qu’on les arme. On leur donne les pleins pouvoirs. On flatte leurs instincts criminels. Leur amour-propre s’épanouit. C’est, pour eux, une sorte de revanche sur une société qui les a traités en parias — et dont ils vont pouvoir, enfin, se venger tout à leur aise”. (Olga Wormser and Henri Michel (eds), *Tragédie de la déportation*, p.211). See also Grete Salus in Hermann Langbein’s *Hommes et femmes à Auschwitz* (Paris: Fayard, 1975), p.175, Pelagia Lewinska *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.148, and Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.49.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.44

of its privileged recipient, but also to procure him or her the variety of luxury and necessary items which were available in the intricate market system of exchange flourishing in most camps. The theft of food rations by privileged prisoners occurred in a variety of ways and under a multitude of auspices. From the *Blockova* or *Kapo* and her aides who, charged with the daily distribution of food, set aside copious quantities for themselves before initiating the distribution (“le détournement habituel des *Capos* pour eux et leur petit cour”<sup>23</sup>), to the *Revier* workers who exploited their position to avail themselves of the rations provided for the sick, the functionary role provided endless opportunities. The kitchen staff were similarly well placed in this respect:

Elles accaparaient pour leur usage personnel une partie du ravitaillement destiné au camp, et notamment toutes les pommes de terre, dont nous autres, nous ne voyions jamais la couleur. Elles prélevaient également de fortes dîmes sur les arrivages de confiture et de margarine, non seulement pour leur propre consommation, mais aussi pour s'en servir comme monnaie d'échange.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, René Chavanne asserts that at the satellite camp of Porta Westphalica one third of the prisoners' rations went to the SS, whilst the remainder largely fell prey to the *Kapos* and other prisoner-functionaries who typified

[...] l'esprit d'organisation et de rapine de l'administration interne de chaque camp: À Neuengamme et Porta Westphalica où nous étions sous la tutelle de toute une organisation de droits communs venus de Neuengamme, c'était le pillage organisé par des professionnels du vol et du crime et de ces deux tiers restant, vingt-cinq pourcent disparaissait encore au profit de quelques-uns. Ce qui fait que dans le meilleur des cas, le déporté a perçu moins de la moitié de ce qu'il devait recevoir<sup>25</sup>.

Although inevitably cognisant of such practises, Louise Alcan notes that the SS made no effort to intervene and indeed tacitly encouraged them as conducive to prisoner disunity: “Les Allemands savent très bien que l'on nous vole sur nos rations... Ils laissent faire afin de laisser monter la haine”<sup>26</sup>.

In addition to direct theft, there existed a plethora of further methods by which the prisoner functionary could exploit his or her position to obtain food from non-ranking inmates. Countless scenarios of functionaries accepting nutritional bribes or “payment” from non-privileged prisoners in exchange for temporary immunity from beatings, punishment or certain dreaded tasks are played out in testimonial accounts. In a similar vein, food could be taken from an inmate in exchange for a place in a work commando offering some chance of survival, given that privileged prisoners

[...] avaient toute autorité pour mettre tel ou tel détenu dans un bon ou mauvais commando [...] Alors suivant qu'on plaisait ou non, pour des raisons politiques ou personnelles, on était envoyé dans un camp de mort ou, au contraire, on gardait une place de choix.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.305

<sup>24</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, p.82

<sup>25</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.293

<sup>26</sup> Louise Alcan, *Sans armes et sans bagages* (Limoges: Les Imprimés d'Art, 1945), p.48

<sup>27</sup> Charles Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.45

Those non-ranking prisoners fortunate enough to receive parcels in the camps therefore enjoyed a somewhat more advantageous position due to their ability to negotiate their extra food in return for “favours” from various prisoner functionaries, although here too pillage was operative amongst the functionaries charged with distributing the parcels: “Le vol des colis est une chose organisée dans le camp [...] les gardiennes retirent de ceux qu’on laisse aux prisonnières ce que bon leur semble, pour leur propre consommation. Si bien que souvent, les cartons sont remis, vides, aux détenues”.<sup>28</sup>

Not only could a privileged prisoner thus assure him or herself a varied and more than ample diet, but the food appropriated from other prisoners also doubled as general currency on the camp market. A vast range of commodities could be purchased in most camps (and particularly in Auschwitz where the systematic plundering of Jewish wealth from throughout Europe resulted in a huge stockpile of goods stored in the Canada depot and smuggled out and sold by its workers), with bread acting as the universal monetary substitute:

Le pain faisait également l’objet d’un trafic. Pour les détenus, hommes ou femmes, appartenant à l’hierarchie du camp, la nourriture était la première monnaie d’‘échange’ à partir de laquelle il était alors possible de se procurer les objets les plus variés, les plus inattendus, selon le prix payé, et en proportion directe de la valeur accordée au troc sur le ‘marché’ du moment.<sup>29</sup>

By exploiting the bifilar physical and economic benefits inherent in food appropriation (namely nourishment and purchasing power), prisoner functionaries were therefore suitably positioned to establish for themselves a life of comfort, and indeed — paradoxical though it may appear within the unforgiving concentration camp milieu — often utmost luxury, far removed from that of ordinary inmates. Simone Alizon’s description of the prisoner elite at Auschwitz is illustrative of the extreme dichotomy existing between the elite and their less fortunate counterparts:

Dans le camp des femmes, toutes celles qui avaient un poste important [...] portaient sous leur robe de détenue des sous-vêtements de soie, des bas de même matière, des lainages de belle qualité. La nuit, elles avaient des draps, de fines chemises de nuit, des liseuses. Notre protectrice, vivant dans le milieu des privilégiées, avait les mêmes avantages et portait, dans son cabinet dentaire, des escarpins qu’elle échangeait contre de solides chaussettes de ski, enfilées sur d’épaisses chaussettes de laine, au moment de sortir dans le boue du camp.<sup>30</sup>

Charles Papiernik’s analysis, also pertaining to Auschwitz<sup>31</sup>, completes the picture. After detailing the abject existence of ordinary prisoners, Papiernik goes on to note that

[...] il y avait à Auschwitz des internés qui non seulement étaient plus que rassasiés, mais de leur vie n’avaient jamais, même en rêve, osé espérer tant de luxe. Ils buvaient les meilleurs vins d’Europe, mangeaient toutes sortes de viandes, poissons. Ils

<sup>28</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.123

<sup>29</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.145

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pp145-146

<sup>31</sup> Note that the pampered lifestyle of the elite was particularly exaggerated at Auschwitz, due to the sheer volume of prisoners deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau and consequent massive stockpiles of various commodities which these prisoners brought with them.

dormaient sur des divans et se faisaient habiller à la dernière mode. Ils étaient servis en tout; on leur cirait même leurs chaussures...<sup>32</sup>

This complete and deliberate alienation from other prisoners was consolidated by the perks inherent in the privileged role itself: “On ne travaillait pas toute la journée, on pouvait se mouvoir, se chauffer près du feu, toucher une nourriture meilleure, sans parler de la satisfaction de son amour-propre et d’autres profits à côté”.<sup>33</sup> Shielded from the hunger, cold and exhaustion which dogged ordinary prisoners, enjoying greater freedom of movement, energy and the leisure to establish relations and regain some sense of normality, and in most cases exempted from the constant, all-pervasive fear of selection, a veritable chasm therefore separated the aristocracy from the proletariat in the camp system. Little wonder then, that the privileged prisoner remained infinitely less vulnerable to the acute simplification of the self common to ordinary inmates, retaining those features of human experience — such as the sex drive — which were commonly superseded by the all-consuming demands of hunger in less privileged prisoners<sup>34</sup>. Nor is it surprising that this camp aristocracy often designated themselves as not only socially but also morally superior to the prisoner non-elite, equating their material and social position with inherent moral right, as Robert Antelme’s lucid description of the mentality of a prisoner intimately involved in the fabric of the grey zone illustrates: “Il était du côté du bien, les coups que recevaient les types durcissaient définitivement cette conscience d’être dans le bien. On ne peut pas recevoir des coups et avoir raison, être sale, bouffer des épiluchures et avoir raison”.<sup>35</sup>

The realm of the prisoner elite was not, however, defined solely by material advancement. Bipartite in essence, the functionary system rested just as firmly upon the concept of power as it did upon material privilege — the latter rewarding and fostering the former. As a microcosm of Nazi totalitarianism, the prisoner hierarchy essentially mimicked the totalitarian system, with power vested in a uniquely downward flow from above. Contrary to the deceptively absolute *appearance* of privileged prisoners’ power (which encompassed the right of life and death over other prisoners and the right to punish and reward as they deemed appropriate or according to caprice), such higher investiture rendered inmate power in the camps a fundamentally conditional and dependent commodity — it could not be exercised freely, and the latitude to wield influence as the functionary saw fit remained essentially limited, functioning only within the confines of the values and systems decreed by the hierarchical superiors on whom his or her power was dependent. Anna Pawelczynska, for instance, asserts that “Prisoner-functionaries, shut off from the camp community, were tied to their superiors — the paid personnel of the camp — in a

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<sup>32</sup> Charles Papiernik, ‘Le 43 322 raconte’ in *Le réveil des jeunes*, No 25: 43-62, Feb 1946, p.53. See also Robert Waitz in Roger Arnould’s *Les témoins de la nuit*, pp177-179.

<sup>33</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.100

<sup>34</sup> Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, p.134 and p.140

<sup>35</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’espèce humaine*, p.193

relationship of direct dependence and obedience”<sup>36</sup>, whilst this hierarchical dependence is also highlighted within the testimonial context by both Primo Levi (“[...] without regard to ability and merit, power is generously granted to those willing to pay homage to hierarchic authority”<sup>37</sup>) and Pierre Nivromont: “Ces intermédiaires [...] sont tenus à une obéissance absolue et à assurer l’ordre dans le camp”<sup>38</sup>. In the Nazi camp system, the “values” of cruelty and brutality, together with the systematic dehumanization, and in many camps the progressive extermination, of non-privileged prisoners, formed the contextual framework within which the prisoner functionary was given leave to manoeuvre and apply his power.

Hierarchically transposed, SS values therefore inevitably permeated the prisoner elite, becoming a cornerstone of the functionary system throughout the Nazi camp network. Overt and demonstrable cruelty was the *sine qua non* of this system, and essential if a functionary was to retain his position<sup>39</sup>. Fania Fenelon stresses this point:

Quand une fille se trouve brutalement en présence de cette atmosphère atroce, son instinct lui commande de réagir. Elle apprend très vite que, pour vivre, il faut plaire aux nazis, que pour les satisfaire, il faut agir comme eux, alors seulement ils ont confiance. C’est la seule garantie de survie qu’on puisse avoir ici.<sup>40</sup>

Many privileged prisoners comprehensively assimilated such Nazi values, and testimonial accounts abound with detailed descriptions of physical and psychological abuse, sadism, torture and murders carried out in the name of their camp function. Jean Mialet provides one anecdote amongst many when describing his *Kapo*:

Pour une vétille, il se mettait à cogner avec une sauvagerie qui faisait flamboyer ses petits yeux bleu métallique. Il frappait à coups de botte au bas-ventre; c’était sa spécialité. On lui connaissait une centaine de victimes déjà qu’il avait tuées à coups de bâton ou de talon, ou par le travail à mort comme il disait. On avait peur en le voyant  
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Simone Lagrange describes a parallel culture of functionary brutality in the female camp at Birkenau:

J’avais rapidement compris qu’il me fallait plus encore que des Allemandes elles-mêmes, me méfier des *Kapos*, dont la férocité s’acharnait sur tout ce qui passait à leur portée[ ...] Il m’est souvent, par la suite, arrivé de dormir debout, appuyée à ma pelle. Combien de détenues sont mortes pour avoir été surprises ainsi assoupies sur leur outil de travail, par ces damnées?<sup>42</sup>

Such cruelty constituted the primary and most rudimentary condition of privilege, and the threat of the withdrawal of privilege should this brutality falter was constant. Pierre

<sup>36</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.50

<sup>37</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.32

<sup>38</sup> Didier Epelbaum and Pierre Nivromont, *Matricule 186140; histoire d’un combat* (Boulogne-Billancourt: Éditions Michel Hagege, 1997), p.134

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Bettelheim’s observations on the nuances of this cruelty are interesting: “A prisoner’s position of power was always one of being able to protect *and* to kill — almost never of being able to protect or to kill — because without killing one’s enemies, one did not retain power” (*The Informed Heart*, p.178).

<sup>40</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.198

<sup>41</sup> Jean Mialet, *La haine et le pardon*, p.135

<sup>42</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.69

Nivromont, for example, asserts that “[...] à Buchenwald, un *Kapo* de carrière ne le reste qu’autant qu’il tue dix détenus par jour car la carrière doit être une antichambre de la mort”,<sup>43</sup> whilst Fania Fenelon attests to the overtly-articulated SS demand that those prisoners employed to subjugate their fellow inmates approach their task with the utmost zeal “[...] sous peine de retourner à sa condition première, et même d’être gazée, que si l’on fait preuve d’une grande conscience dans l’exécution des ordres et d’un zèle louable”.<sup>44</sup> Although, as we shall soon see, many prisoners inverted their functionary role — mobilising their privilege to covertly aid those beneath them in the hierarchy —, they too were compelled to enact a pretence of cruelty in the presence of the SS or their superiors in order to elude demotion<sup>45</sup>. It should be noted, however, that there were few limitations applied regarding the maximum extent of functionary violence, as Primo Levi points out:

A lower limit was imposed on their violence, in the sense that they were punished or deposed if they did not prove to be sufficiently harsh, but there was no upper limit. In other words, they were free to commit the worst atrocities on their subjects as punishment for any transgressions, or even without any motive whatsoever. Until the end of 1943 it was not unusual for a prisoner to be beaten to death by a *Kapo*, without the latter having to fear any sanctions. Only later on, when the need for labour became more acute, a number of limitations were introduced: the mistreatment the *Kapos* were allowed to inflict on the prisoners must not permanently reduce their working ability; but by now the malpractice was established and the regulation was not always respected.<sup>46</sup>

Whilst fear of forfeiting one’s hierarchical position acted as the propulsive incitement behind the cruelty of many privileged prisoners, this fear was not solely linked to the prospect of returning to the miserable conditions of general camp life, but also to the possibility of revenge enacted by those prisoners who had hitherto been the victims of the erstwhile functionary’s actions. Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler, in summarizing the *Kapo* phenomenon, attests to the cardinal role played by the fear of reimmersion in the logic of the hierarchical functionary system: “Il doit [...] aiguillonner ses hommes. De la minute où nous ne sommes plus satisfaits de lui, il n’est plus *Kapo*, il couche de nouveau avec ses hommes. Il sait alors qu’ils le tueront

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<sup>43</sup> Didier Epelbaum/Pierre Nivromont, *Matricule 186140; histoire d’un combat*, p.73

<sup>44</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.232

<sup>45</sup> Note that some historians and critical commentators — in particular Terrence Des Pres with *The Survivor: an Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) — place significant emphasis upon the fact that the deployment of overt cruelty in the presence of the SS could serve merely as a cover for more prevalent covert functionary altruism. In so doing, such writers effect a veritable redefinition of the grey zone, casting it as an essentially positive camp force. Such an emphasis is, however, usually in response to a specific textual objective (as with Des Pres’ desire to demonstrate how prisoners *survived* the camps), and tends to ignore the hierarchical prominence of *droit commun* prisoners and their widespread abuse of the functionary system.

<sup>46</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp30-31

dès la première nuit”<sup>47</sup>. Testimonies by male prisoners in particular, emphasize how a *Kapo* fallen from grace would be beaten by his fellow prisoners, and often killed<sup>48</sup>:

C'est ça un *Kapo*... Mais si par hasard, ça ne remplit pas son rôle de façon parfaite, c'est dégradé, c'est remis dans le rang. Par conséquent, c'est tué par les co-détenus immédiatement... À ce moment-là, personne ne dit rien, et les SS ne diront rien. Tant qu'il fait son boulot, il est protégé<sup>49</sup>.

Even if a functionary had refrained from abusing his position, Maurice Voutey asserts that his re-integration into the rank and file of inmates remained doubtful, if not destined to fail: “Même s'il est resté humain — comme au camp on peut rester humain! — même s'il n'a pris la place d'aucun autre candidat aux privilèges, un *Kapo* traîne derrière lui tellement de haines et de jalousies que, retombé dans le rang, il ne survit guère”.<sup>50</sup>

Consequently, as with any hierarchical society, it was strongly in the interests of every highly-placed functionary who reaped its benefits to actively perpetuate the system and impede its potential demise. To this end, a certain (albeit limited) loyalty existed amongst the prisoner functionaries, together with a collective instinct prompting them to defend one another and the system in which they worked from any threat emanating from below. Thus, Levi describes the reactions of the Auschwitz *Kapos* faced with rebellion by a new prisoner in the form of retaliatory blows: “Anyone who commits it must be made an example of: other functionaries rush to the defence of the threatened order and the culprit is beaten with rage and method until he's tamed or dead. Privilege, by definition, defends and protects privilege”.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, functionaries often covertly contrived to undermine order and discipline in the camp for fear of rendering their own role redundant, instead cultivating a climate which was essentially the antithesis of their official objective in order to retain and prolong their usefulness. Robert Antelme furnishes one such example, in his description of the chaos which ensued each morning as 500 men fought to receive their bread ration, compounded by the *Kapos*' refusal to heed any organisational attempts by the prisoners to impose discipline and restraint on the distribution process: “[...] nos *Kapos* faisaient tout, au contraire, pour compromettre une discipline — que nous étions les premiers à vouloir imposer — qui aurait supprimé leur raison d'être ou en tout

<sup>47</sup> In Hermann Langbein, *La résistance dans les camps de concentration nationaux-socialistes 1938-1945* (Paris: Fayard, 1981), p.38

<sup>48</sup> It is probable that there is some difference of degree in the reactions of male and female prisoners in this context. For, while female survivors mention beatings given to ex-functionaries, the killing of a fallen *Kapo* remains undocumented in French female accounts. Although it may differ in degree between the genders in various camp circumstances — note for example Odette Améry's comments regarding the cramped train transports to which prisoners were often subjected, whereby “Durant des voyages semblables, les hommes, eux, s'entre tuaient. Nous, nous nous battons seulement.” (*Nuit et brouillard*, pp139-140), — violence remains a common reaction amongst both genders in such situations.

<sup>49</sup> Didier Epelbaum/Pierre Nivromont, *Matricule 186140; histoire d'un combat*, p.74

<sup>50</sup> Maurice Voutey, *Prisonnier de l'in vraisemblable (ou l'extravagance du rêve): quatre saisons à Dachau et dans les camps du Neckar* (Précy-sous-Thil: Éditions de l'Armançon, 1995), pp93-94

<sup>51</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.26

cas ne leur aurait pas permis d'être les demi-dieux du Kommando".<sup>52</sup> And in order to maintain his or her position and ward off competition from other individuals and factions, the prisoner functionary was often engaged in an intricate web of jealousy and intrigue, characterized by the denunciation and discrediting of opponents and the constant manipulation of the system.

In such an environment, where the perpetuation of the system and the retention of privilege were paramount, it was perhaps inevitable that the dominant societal values of those in power would undergo some form of metamorphosis, shifting and regrouping to adapt to camp conditions and the mechanisms governing the camp hierarchy. Accordingly, critical and testimonial literature betrays a widely discernible attitudinal shift amongst the active participants in the grey zone, away from seemingly superfluous pre-camp societal values such as charity, honesty and industriousness towards a laudatory validation of the one requisite commodity which was essential if a prisoner was to navigate the functionary system, fulfill their role in it and ward off competition (and by extension to survive). That commodity was force. Given that only the strongest prisoners could hope to wrest themselves a privileged position and, most importantly, exhibit the mental and physical fortitude necessary to maintain it, force (in its dual sense of both strength and physical coercion) became the overarching societal covenant, the dominant element *par excellence* in the camp system.

In this respect, there appears to be little or no gender divergence. Both male and female testimonies are rife with references to the predominance of the law of the jungle, and the survival of not only the fittest, but the strongest. René Chavanne is typical ("Comme partout, les bonnes places étaient réservées aux plus forts [...] je crois que l'argument frappant était de loin le plus convaincant"<sup>53</sup>), whilst Olga Lengyel and Nelly Gorce respectively illustrate that within the exclusively female competitive camp arena, comparable tenets also prevailed: "A Birkenau, comme dans la société préconisée par les philosophes nazis, régnait la loi du plus fort; les puissants seuls avaient droit au respect, et les faibles et les vieux ne pouvaient même pas espérer la pitié"<sup>54</sup>, and "C'est la jungle, les plus hardies écrasent les autres"<sup>55</sup>. Odette Améry details how this emphasis upon force pervaded every aspect of camp life: "Car ici, tout se gagne à coups de poings. Une place dans les rangs, une chaise dans la salle à manger, et la misérable tasse d'eau chaude noirâtre du matin"<sup>56</sup>. Robert Antelme goes further, asserting that force

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<sup>52</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.134. François Cochet also emphasizes that the Kapo "[...] tire toute la justification de son rôle dans la notion de rétablissement de l'ordre aux yeux des SS. Il lui faut pour cela jouer de perversité. Laisser par exemple un certain désordre s'établir lorsque les yeux du SS ne sont pas posés sur son groupe pour mieux sévir à coup de schlague lorsque le SS regarde" (François Cochet, 'L'historien face au témoignage artistique: une journée très ordinaire dans les camps de concentration' in *Créer pour survivre* (Paris: FNDIRP, 1996), p.40).

<sup>53</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre rechauffé*, pp211-212. See also Jean Maillet, *La haine et le pardon*, p.185

<sup>54</sup> Olga Lengyel, *Souvenirs de l'au-delà*, p.288

<sup>55</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.94

<sup>56</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.69



served not only as a societal law in the camps but also as a replacement moral code in a world where traditional measures of truth and goodness were no longer practicable or relevant. Thus force came to be equated with moral right: “La force était la seule valeur qui risquait de les convaincre de l’humanité d’un détenu [...] Elle pouvait devenir alors vaguement synonyme de vérité, de bien”.<sup>57</sup> Inter-prisoner relations were therefore frequently coloured by such new moral assumptions, with the strong inspiring admiration and respect and the weak arousing the disgust or revulsion associated with the inherently bad, as Françoise Maous observes in the reactions of the *Revier* nurses at Auschwitz:

Plus un être était charmant, doux, pitoyable, plus elles le détestaient. Elles n’aimaient que la dureté, la raillerie. Celles d’entre nous qui faisaient preuve de méchanceté envers les autres avaient droit à une tranquillité relative et parfois même à une double ration de soupe. Mais sur les faibles, elles s’acharnaient sans pitié [...] Les larmes, surtout, excitaient leur mépris, leurs sarcasmes et déchaînaient leurs rires.<sup>58</sup>

Such reactions are illustrative of the extensive reach of the system of privilege, which not only defined physical survival and inmate interaction but also rendered societal norms and values — and with them many gender differences — potentially elastic, if not fully dysfunctional.

Within this realm in which force and physical dominance assumed the role of governing social principles, those at the base of the societal pyramid (starved — in both a literal and metaphorical sense — of force and its attendant advantages), remained bereft of any form of social influence or control. Unlike extra-camp manifestations of totalitarianism, the structure of the concentration camp spawned an absolute totalitarianism in its pure and most “utopian” state, as Primo Levi emphasizes with his assertion that the camps

[...] reproduced the hierarchical structure of the totalitarian state, in which all power is invested from above and control from below is almost impossible. But this ‘almost’ is important: there never existed a state that was really ‘totalitarian’ from this point of view. Some form of reaction, a corrective of the total tyranny has never been lacking [...] Only in the *Lager* was the restraint from below non-existent and the power of these small satraps was absolute.<sup>59</sup>

Although the prisoners could theoretically appeal to the higher authority of the SS in dispute of a *Kapo* or functionary’s decision, such a course of action was at best self-destructive and at worst tantamount to suicide, given that the inmate was likely to receive not only a beating from the SS, but also more severe punishment from the functionary involved: “Oser s’attaquer à un *Capo*, c’était jouer avec sa vie”.<sup>60</sup> The non-privileged prisoner was thus, in theory at least, perpetually condemned to navigate within the hierarchical subterrain, incarnating the role of powerless victim, without recourse to justice, advancement or hierarchical influence.

It should be noted, however, that certain non-privileged prisoners did attempt to manoeuvre latitudinally and penetrate the grey zone at this ground level, moulding for themselves

<sup>57</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’espèce humaine*, p.207

<sup>58</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A.5553, p.80

<sup>59</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.31

<sup>60</sup> René Chavanne, *Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.325

a vacuum in which they might proffer their services to neutralize the menace which emanated from those above them in the hierarchy. To this end, an inevitable culture of flattery and servility sprang up around the fringes of the privileged circle, comprised of prisoners seeking to advance their own position, or merely hoping to please or render themselves useful to the prisoner functionaries in order to minimize beatings and punishment, or to be assigned a job which would offer some chance of survival. Pierre Nivromont, for instance, describes “[...] un transfert, de strate en strate, du pouvoir sado-terroriste [...] À tous les étages, des flatteurs entretiennent le sadisme de ceux de dessus et ces brutes encouragent la servilité de ceux de dessous [...] un système écrasant”<sup>61</sup>, whilst Pelagia Lewinska asserts that “Les couches supérieures traitaient les inférieures avec hauteur et mépris. Quant à ces dernières, elles enviaient souvent les autres et s’aplatissaient devant elles”.<sup>62</sup> Such responses therefore functioned to perpetuate the prisoner hierarchy, implying a tacit admission of, and participation in, the system of privilege. Often, privileged prisoners became surrounded by a court of attendants, who performed tasks for them or simply validated their role through flattery and support, in exchange for a desired commodity — be it food, leisure or simply peace:

The elite of various ranks attracted ‘courts’ of deputies and helpers. A place in the hierarchy of authority enabled one to delegate any unpleasant or burdensome activities to other prisoners, who in exchange would be given a shelter from hard labor and enough to eat [...] The level at which one lived was only one indicator of social position. Another was the size and composition of a notable’s ‘court’. A notable might employ not only a domestic staff (to cook, wash, clean), but also tailors or seamstresses, shoeshiners, hairdressers and masseurs<sup>63</sup>.

The offer of sexual services in exchange for “protection” from a privileged prisoner has also been well-documented, and accounted for much of the homosexuality practised within the concentration camps. Elie Cohen, in his assertion of the comprehensive suppression of the sex drive amongst non-privileged prisoners, concedes “That there were prominents who practised homosexuality appears very likely to me, and also that they bought the objects of their love for food, by placing them in the less hard labour groups etc”.<sup>64</sup> Cohen’s supposition is repeatedly borne out by testimonial evidence from both genders, with Aimé Bonifas, for example, describing the prevalence of such reciprocal arrangements:

De même que la majorité des Allemands du camp, ils s’adonnent à la pédérastie, et se satisfont avec de jeunes russes [...] Ainsi, que ce soit au *Revier*, dans les blocks ou dans les Kommandos sévit la caste des petits Russes ou des petits Polonais qui s’arrogent tous les droits, protégés par les puissants du camp. Ils nous font beaucoup de mal. À ma connaissance, peu de Français ont accepté ce rôle ignoble malgré les avantages certains qu’il comporte: nourriture, bonne place de travail.<sup>65</sup>

Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu articulates a comparable example of lesbianism for material protection in her description of a Polish girl at Auschwitz who “[...] sans avoir pour

<sup>61</sup> Didier Epelbaum and Pierre Nivromont, *Matricule 186140; histoire d’un combat*, p.135

<sup>62</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.135

<sup>63</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.81

<sup>64</sup> Elie Cohen, *Human Behaviour in the Concentration Camp*, p.141

<sup>65</sup> Aimé Bonifas, *Détenu 20801 dans les bagnes nazis*, pp68-69

l'homosexualité une attirance particulière [...] était pourtant devenue la maîtresse d'une Allemande quinquagénaire, dont les faveurs lui permettaient de survivre dans des conditions de confort relatif".<sup>66</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, inter-gender functionary sexual protection was also an option for female survival<sup>67</sup>.

This then, is a limited outline of the operational structure of Levi's grey zone: the system which created a veritable no-man's land between prisoners and captors, with an accompanying raft of moral and ethical issues. The purely functional structure sketched above which forms the skeleton of the privilege system should, however, by no means be read as its entire reality. Indeed, it was fleshed out with an infinite variety of nuances, variations and complexities — as diverse as the individuals who formed its corps. In particular, it should be noted that certain camps manifested a movement towards an internal politicization of the functionary system, through the gradual strategic replacement from within the camp of criminal or asocial prisoner functionaries (the green or black triangles) with their political counterparts, with the aim of transforming the practical reality of the system of privilege by exploiting it to ameliorate camp conditions and aid those prisoners at the base of the hierarchy. This transition was most notable at Buchenwald and in the men's camp at Auschwitz from 1943<sup>68</sup>, where political prisoners were particularly successful in gaining ascendancy and tempering the negative effects of the grey zone<sup>69</sup>.

### Writing the grey zone

To investigate the portrayal of this grey zone within the testimonial genre, however, is to brave a veritable minefield of potential analytical problems, which inevitably shape and configure the field of research. These issues require delineation at the outset, in order that the analysis may be contextualized within a credible framework with the flexibility to recognize and absorb potential distortive influences. Any conclusions must therefore be read and interpreted through

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<sup>66</sup> Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu, *Moi, un cobaye*, p.24. Some homosexual relations within the camps were, however, authentic and founded upon genuine emotional intimacy. Consider, for example, the relationship between Marta and Irène depicted in Fania Fenelon's *Sursis pour l'orchestre*.

<sup>67</sup> Hanna Lévy, for instance, documents this heterosexual interaction within the realm of the grey zone: "Young girls [...] thoughtlessly seized the chance offered by the sad circumstances. They devour all they can find, they booze, flirt, dance, laugh, get clothes and silk stockings — all this kind of life offered by the *kapos*" (in Vera Laska, *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust*, p.256). See also Krystyna Zywulska, *J'ai survécu à Auschwitz*, p.42.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Pollack, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.285

<sup>69</sup> This functionary replacement tended to occur as positions arose which required particular skills or intellectual ability, and which were therefore assigned to political prisoners rather than criminal or asocial inmates. These well-placed prisoners could then recommend or assign other political prisoners to significant posts within the camp infrastructure (Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.106). See also Hermann Langbein, *La résistance dans les camps de concentration nationaux-socialistes*, p.39.

the filter of this same cautionary framework. Let us take a moment, then, to examine those elemental factors exerting a significant influential force upon our analysis.

Firstly, given the inherent intangibility of the grey zone which, by its very nature, eludes concrete boundaries, it remains all but impossible to impose any firmly demarcated boundary on this sphere which could be utilised to facilitate the evaluation of an inmate's practical or attitudinal participation in it. As Levi, with his perpetually cautious approach to the issue of judgement, emphasizes, every inmate, merely by existing within the camp system (and particularly by surviving it), entered the realm of the grey zone to some degree, however infinitesimal or apparently innocuous:

Many were the ways devised and put into effect by us in order not to die: as many as there are different human characters. All implied a weakening struggle of one against all, and a by no means small sum of aberrations and compromises. Survival without renunciation of any part of one's own moral world — apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune — was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.<sup>70</sup>

Lawrence Langer reiterates this notion of universal moral compromise, asserting that the Nazi camp regime shattered

[...] the bond between the human and the moral — and not only for the culprits. The Nazis left no room for the *exemplary* value of human behaviour: the authentic martyrs in the deathcamps, who voluntarily chose death when through some compromise they might meaningfully have chosen life, may be counted on the fingers of two hands. This is not to denigrate the victims, but to describe accurately their moral situation, which was not of their own making.<sup>71</sup>

Nor could any inmate categorically attest that they would remain uninvolved in the grey zone and its inherent compromises: "There is no camp prisoner who could responsibly state for certain that, if attacked in the weakest part of his being, he would not have been capable of committing an offense against the most important (moral) norms. Those who managed to survive because the camp terror did not strike their weakest point were very fortunate".<sup>72</sup>

Thus an individual who may have vehemently opposed the static principles inherent in the grey zone, and whose testimony may be characterized by overt and repeated repudiation of its very essence, is unlikely to have remained wholly uninvolved in its wider mechanism. Did the individual never escape or seek to escape a certain work commando, a transport or, more significantly, a selection? Rare are those individuals who did not (even rarer are those who did not and survived), and any of these actions were almost certain to be carried out or accepted at the expense of another individual who would be called upon to fill the vacant space — a privilege bought, in other words, to the detriment of a fellow inmate. Such is the situation incarnated by Denise Dufournier, a staunch resistant who is given the opportunity to escape a transport for

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<sup>70</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.98

<sup>71</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival: the Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), p.x

<sup>72</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.143

which she has been nominated, when a Belgian nurse offers to exploit her privileged position to remove Dufournier's name from the list:

Cependant, lorsque je me trouvais au bloc 22, je compris que cette fissure observée dans le système était ma sauvegarde. Pourtant un scrupule naissait en moi: n'était-elle pas aussi une injustice? Ma place vide allait-elle être comblée par quelque camarade malade ou invalide moins apte que moi à supporter le travail? On m'assura que les remplaçantes allaient être prises dans d'autres blocs, sans doute chez des Allemandes ou les 'triangles noirs'. Je me décidai à profiter de la chance qui m'était échue...<sup>73</sup>.

Dufournier's ultimate decision to utilise the opportunity accorded by the mechanism of the grey zone (rationalizing her actions with the assurance that only prisoners external to her existence and loyalties will be affected) may therefore be construed as participation in it, regardless of her avowed reasons for needing to do so (in this case her revulsion at the idea of fabricating German munitions). Dufournier herself, however, given her strongly articulated resistance ideals (inextricably linked to the notions of prisoner unity and solidarity), would undoubtedly find the mere suggestion of her attitudinal acceptance of any component of the grey zone morally abhorrent.

The boundaries of this sphere therefore exist in a state of perpetual shift and flux — elusive and impossible to pinpoint given the myriad shades of perception and reality which existed amongst the camp population. For the purposes of this analysis in relation to French narratives, a loose, working definition of the grey zone must suffice — namely participation in any form of functionary privilege which *consciously exploits or abuses another individual or group in order to prioritise one's own survival*.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, a distinction must of necessity be established between those who may have succumbed to a singular action of this nature — an action which was essentially exceptional — and those whose participation in such abuse was ongoing. Anna Pawelczynska touches on a similar issue with her disclaimer that her reflections in this area

[...] do not apply to one-time situations in which a prisoner's psychological resistance broke down and collapsed in the face of immediate danger or under the influence of physical torture exceeding his endurance. He was not ostracized from the prisoner community because of it — his witnesses understood.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>73</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, pp65-66

<sup>74</sup> Compare this definition of the "active" grey zone with the instances in which testimonial protagonists acknowledge some degree of passive complicity in the system, but remain personally distanced from any active exploitation of others. To cite but one example: Jacques Furmanski describes those who agree to sing or dance for the Kapos in exchange for food: "Humiliation, dégradation, des hommes rampent comme des bêtes pour sauver leur vie. Je vois devant moi un copain, chanteur connu et homme de valeur, revenir après ce spectacle me dire: 'J'ai chanté, j'ai mangé, quel dégoût de moi-même. Je me croyais incapable de m'abaisser à tel point. La faim, la faim, mon frère' " (in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.85).

<sup>75</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.126. The *Sonderkommando* (special commando) should also be noted here as a particularly special case. This group of prisoners was selected to perform the tasks associated with extermination; tasks which ranged from helping prisoners to undress for the gas chambers, to extracting gold teeth and collecting valuables, to removal and cremation of the bodies. Although their position was theoretically "privileged" (they had access to luxury items, food and alcohol), and although this apparent privilege functioned at the expense of other lives, this *Sonderkommando* exists largely outside of the grey zone. For, even to the most hardened criminal, the position constituted a torment rather than a privilege, and every

The second issue which is central to any testimonial study of the grey zone is no less significant. In analysing the interaction with the grey zone portrayed within the narrative context, it is with a degree of caution that we must approach the concept of inmate “responses”, and particularly the attributing of any epithets such as “free will” or “choice” to these responses. The concept of a freely chosen or indeed rationalized response in the concentration camp is a highly perilous one, as Lawrence Langer notes: “Extreme environments may still tolerate minimal choices, but words like ‘choice’ and ‘freedom’ are so modified by the threat of atrocity that they acquire an unfamiliar resonance in the world of the camps”.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, responses are rarely “free” in the camps, but rather exhibit a tight causal relationship to the starvation process, given that the vast majority of inmates who existed without the benefit of privilege were subjected to a slow and torturous starvation which assailed and undermined their every intellectual faculty, as Estréa Zaharia Asséo points out:

‘Vous verrez, dans quelques temps vous n’aurez qu’une idée, c’est d’avoir un morceau de pain et vous ne pourrez penser à rien d’autre’. Et c’était vrai, je m’en suis rendu compte par la suite. Dans le tourbillon des cruautés que nous subissions chaque jour, il ne restait pas de place pour la pensée. Nous étions hors du monde des vivants... C’est ainsi que, lorsque nous avions soif, faim ou froid, nous éprouvions cela tellement fort que nous étions incapables de penser à autre chose. Cette soif, cette faim ou ce froid obstruaient toutes autres pensées.<sup>77</sup>

Later, Zaharia Asséo is even more emphatic on the all-pervasive and indiscriminate nature of starvation: “Seul un instinct animal me guidait; cela peut manquer de poésie, mais à part le désir de me nourrir, aucune autre idée ne me conduisait”.<sup>78</sup>

In its advanced stages, therefore, this starvation could lead to a psychological metamorphosis in the affected individual, whereby the desire to procure food superseded normal thought processes, impeding the prisoner’s decision-making ability and rationalized responses:

In the initial phase of starvation people with a little character still managed to keep themselves in check, to preserve their human dignity, and their particular ethical standards, but in the next phase all ethical restraints broke down. The person behaved like a starved animal; he became totally unaccountable for his actions. To keep such people in some kind of social order, physical violence had to be used.<sup>79</sup>

In such a state, choice was therefore replaced by automatism, with the physical needs of the organism usurping conscious choice and dictating its responses. Thus, as Anna Pawelczynska articulates, it is extremely difficult to distinguish conscious, chosen responses from those which were merely starvation reactive:

The ‘social experiment’ conducted by Nazi gangsters in Auschwitz produced the biological results its planners anticipated, causing rapid physical deterioration of a mass of prisoners. This deterioration brought on mental disturbances (the result of the disease of starvation). It is no longer possible to give a precise answer to the question

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member of the *Sonderkommando* was well aware that his position constituted a death sentence: the *Sonderkommando* units — as the ultimate witnesses to Nazi crimes — were periodically exterminated *en masse* and replaced.

<sup>76</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival*, p.42

<sup>77</sup> Estréa Zaharia Asséo, *Les souvenirs d’une rescapée* (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1974), p.79

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117

<sup>79</sup> Wladyslaw Fejkiel in Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.75

of how much of the behaviour of individual prisoners should be interpreted in terms of a limited awareness, or even as unconscious, and how much of it is fully conscious.<sup>80</sup>

In a similar vein, the environment of constant, unrelenting terror which pervaded the camps as a whole was also responsible for various psychological disturbances, which could colour, or indeed govern, prisoner responses.

Consequently, in analysing the responses to the grey zone conveyed in testimonial literature, it is necessary to be aware that we may be analysing not an elective response, but merely a reflexive, physically-induced reaction. While it is true that certain individuals did escape the mental transformations wrought by starvation and the environment of terror to retain their lucidity and conscious choice, cognisance of the co-existence of rational and non-rational motivations should sound a warning that moral judgements or gender comparisons relating to moral values based upon responses to the camp environment are highly problematic. Indeed, any attempt to pass judgement must remain tempered by the moral ambivalence of the contextual reality. Of the utmost significance is the fact that *all* prisoners were victims of the Nazi camp system, and that any compulsion to engage in the grey zone may potentially be read as simply one further element of the inmate victimization and dehumanization whose objective was to reduce prisoners to such a level. Robert Jay Lifton summarizes this pivotal concept thus: “Quels que soient les comportements individuels, les déportés étaient potentiellement menacés, tandis que les nazis étaient potentiellement menaçants. Toute évaluation des comportements à Auschwitz doit reposer sur cette distinction”.<sup>81</sup> To some degree the suspension of judgement, then, is also a necessity when entering the realm of the grey zone.

Moreover, the testimonial act itself, and the forging of a narrative in which the author is an active protagonist, must inevitably impact upon how the grey zone is conveyed. In testimonial literature, as with any form of autobiographical writing, the element of self-awareness and image-awareness remains ever functional — a silent, but omnipresent textual regulator. Regardless of the fact that the motivation for testimonial writing is often attributed by its author to a higher, more all-encompassing and widely-applicable ideal than the author’s individual experience (and these ideals are many and varied, ranging from the compulsion to bear witness and the desire to provide a voice for the dead, to a wish to articulate the atrocity experienced in an effort to preclude its future repetition), the testimonial genre simultaneously acts as a presentation of the

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.125

<sup>81</sup> Robert Jay Lifton, *Les médecins nazis. Le meurtre médical et la psychologie du génocide* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1989), p.43. Note also Terrence Des Pres’ comments: “Under normal circumstances, assistance in crime is condemned as there is a *choice*. But in extremity there may be no other way to live. Although this opens doors to hypocrisy and corruption, it cannot be avoided. The luxury of sacrifice or choosing death to resolve irreconcilable moral conflicts is meaningless in a world where any person’s death only contributes to the success of evil” (*The Survivor*, p.100). See also Hermann Langbein, *La résistance dans les camps de concentration nationaux-socialistes*, p.43.

self to the world, and therefore — to some extent at least — inevitably constitutes an exposition of the self, its values and behaviour. As such, the testimonial writer cannot but be cognisant of the impossibility of writing in a vacuum free of judgement and analysis — her written experience, the portrait she delineates of her self and her actions, will be filtered through the lenses of the social morality and ethics regulating contemporary civilised society (which are, for the most part, utterly foreign to those governing concentration camp life). As Michael Pollak points out, the testifying survivor is all too aware that her account will be judged by the morality of a society demanding impossible heroic behaviour:

La simple anticipation d'une telle exigence rend extrêmement difficile toute communication sur l'expérience concentrationnaire, dans la mesure où il est très peu probable que ceux qui écoutent soient capables de se défaire de préceptes moraux et de conceptions de la dignité dont le caractère absolu constitue justement une bonne part de leur efficacité ordinaire.<sup>82</sup>

Few testimonial authors could remain oblivious to this dichotomy between normal and camp morality, and few too would overcome their reluctance to depict their own comprehensive rupture from accepted morality and penetration into the grey zone sphere, if such a phenomenon did indeed occur. Even if the author effects a deliberate stylistic subjugation of the self to the collective experience, it is relatively rare that the collective “we” (the group with which the author identifies) is not attributed an assemblage of moral values and behaviour broadly compatible with normal society and unsusceptible to significantly violating accepted moral codes. Raymonde Guyon-Belot’s narrative technique of attributing herself another name within the narrative (despite publishing the testimony with the authorial recognition of her own name) nevertheless endows this partially anonymous self with expected moral values, therefore negating the distancing effect and its potential for embracing the moral ambiguity of the camps. The self-awareness inherent in the testimonial genre, therefore, whilst not necessarily invalidating the veracity of the memoir, may incontrovertibly colour its emphasis and approach. Resistance, national unity, altruism — all are concepts which may be important to the writer, or perceived as important to the reading public, and which may therefore shape the focus of the testimony. To this end, an analysis of French responses to the grey zone whose primary basis is testimonial literature cannot be interpreted as a definitive, conclusive account of French involvement in this area, but rather more simply as merely what it purports to be: an analysis of how the grey zone is *treated* in the testimonial context.

It should also be noted here that those inmates who penned testimonies are unlikely to be those who participated in the greatest excesses of the system of prisoner privilege. Although there are testimonial accounts from prisoners occupying the higher echelons of the camp hierarchy (most notably medical staff and political prisoners who managed to infiltrate these posts at the expense of the criminal factions), these accounts are usually written by politically

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.250



aware prisoners who exploited their privilege (or claim to have done so) for the wider benefit of others. In other words, these writers lay claim to a certain moral justification for their involvement in the system of privilege — a mitigating circumstance, as it were, which neutralizes many of the surface moral tensions inherent in the participation in this sphere, and paves the way for a broad acceptance from the reading public. The criminal and asocial faction of prisoners who held high-ranking posts simply as a means of comfort and survival, harbouring little pretence of altruistic motives for doing so, would be least likely to contemplate entering the testimonial arena — not only were many ill-equipped to do so (the writing of a testimony presupposing a certain level of literacy which some of these prisoners did not possess), but they too would be all too aware of the certainty that their behaviour could not fail to be judged and condemned by a society to which camp realities were alien and abstract. It is with these factors firmly in mind that we will turn to address the question of French responses to the grey zone.

What perceptions or picture of the grey zone, then, are yielded by the French female testimonial context? The primary and most widely pervasive textual phenomenon is that of *externalization* of the grey zone — the repeated, comprehensive demarcation of the grey zone as external, other and predominantly foreign to the self and its experience. Although the French female writer — and note that this tendency may equally be applied to their male counterparts, for it manifests little or no gender differentiation — may often and repeatedly emphasize the prevalence of the grey zone in the camp as a whole and enact the role of *victim* in this sphere, the active exploitation of others and abuse of privilege (our working definition of the grey zone) remains largely estranged from the personal testimonial experience. In a field of study where the multiplicity, complexity and fluctuations of individual realities render collective generalizations problematic, testimonial reality paradoxically invites this all-embracing conclusion. The vast majority of French female testimonies maintain a studied disengagement from any internalization of the grey zone, both on their own behalf and that of French inmates as a whole. The “eux” and the “nous” presupposed at the entry to the camp remain functional divisions for these authors, although the boundaries defining the “eux” have shifted and expanded, to encapsulate those “other” (quasi-universally non-French) prisoners who actively participated in the grey zone system at the expense of their fellow inmates. This textual cultivation of a physical and psychological distance between the self and the grey zone and the attribution of a climate of tangible otherness to this sphere is effected by a synthesis of techniques, which run the gamut from narrative distancing by means of lexical manipulation, to the repetitive casting of the French narrator in the position of passive observer, to overt and often impassioned declarations disassociating French prisoners in general from the active abuses of the grey zone.

To begin with, then, the testimonial externalization of the grey zone is discernible via subtle but nonetheless highly effective narrative techniques. When describing the grey zone and its worst excesses, most of the authors under study employ a distancing lexicon which creates a

spatial remove between the author and the actuality, utilising a vocabulary of observation and passivity which places the writer firmly outside of this aspect of the camp experience. Consider Jacqueline Richet's exposition on the abuse of privilege and the general involvement of prisoners at Ravensbrück in actions detrimental to others:

Le vernis civilisé s'effrite rapidement et l'on voit des femmes du monde n'être pas les dernières à se conduire comme des harengères [...] L'éducation n'est plus un soutien et on assiste, devant la faim, à des effondrements lamentables. Les unes trompent la surveillance, se font servir la soupe deux fois, ce qui laisse une camarade sans pitance, les autres chargées de partager la margarine ou le saucisson [...] coupent des parts inégales à leur profit, d'autres encore trichent sur les marchés conclus [...] J'en ai vu d'autres rire aux brutalités des SS pour éviter des coups<sup>83</sup>.

Richet's description of this key aspect of camp experience is characterised by a lexis based firmly upon observation, where "l'on voit", "on assiste à" or "j'en ai vu" the responses articulated. Not only does this vocabulary of seeing and witnessing imbue the testimony with the authenticity and inherent credibility of an eye-witness account, but it also situates the writer at a distinct remove from the sphere of conduct she witnesses. And indeed, Richet's objective here appears to be twofold: she is not merely furnishing a description of the responses and behaviour of certain prisoners and the prevalence of such conduct in the camps, but is also simultaneously placing herself at a calculated distance in the role of observer, constructing a lexical buffer zone separating herself from her testimonial description, and a deliberate textual cleavage between observer and actor.

This approach is echoed throughout French female testimonial literature. Not only do numerous other authors employ the lexical strategy of distancing by deploying the vocabulary of witnessing — by nature the antithesis of participating — as an integral part of their general description of the functionary system (as with Odette Améry's assertion that "On a vu à Ravensbrück des princesses, des femmes cultivées martyriser leurs compagnes à plaisir, simplement parce qu'une schlague les rendait plus puissantes"<sup>84</sup>), but the juxtaposition of opposing pronouns to create a distinct "elles/nous" polarization serves as a further language-based externalization of the grey zone. In many French female testimonies, prisoners participating in the grey zone are not singled out by name or function, but are repeatedly designated as "elles" — a distinctly other, distant entity unrelated to the narrator and her fellows. This lexical partitioning is further compounded by the frequent contrast of "elles" with "nous" — a lexical choice for the designation of the self and the *camarades* with whom the narrator identifies which is suggestive of greater community than the more impersonal "on", and which therefore establishes two distinct opposing groups. The following extract consolidates one such polarization, both through the implicit emphasis upon an irrefutably "other" categorisation for the prisoner aristocracy — denoted by the repetitive "elles" — and in the construction of an "elles/nous" opposing tension: "[...] elles distribuèrent et surveillaient

<sup>83</sup> Jacqueline, Olivier et Charles Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.128

<sup>84</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.51

le travail, partageaient les rations, nous plaçaient pour l'appel et elles nous battaient aussi fort que les Allemands. Elles nous punissaient, elles expédiaient des détenues au bloc 25, elles condamnaient à mort"<sup>85</sup>. Such subtle syntactical and lexical emphasis which underscores the suggestion of French exteriorization of the exploitation inherent in the functionary system is widely discernible in the majority of French testimonies<sup>86</sup>.

Moreover, the French female inmate is also cast in the role of an observer, a non-participant in the abuses of the grey zone in many more overt ways. The French female narrator repeatedly depicts scenes in which she physically witnesses the actors and the theatre of the grey zone. As a passive protagonist, she observes the workings of the grey zone, analyses, condemns, passes moral comment and expresses horror, but remains a non-participant in the perpetuation of abuse. Simone Saint-Clair, for example, incarnates the quasi-typical image of the French writer as witness and moral commentator, describing from an external position, and pronouncing judgement upon, the actions of the privileged prisoners working in the *Revier*:

Or, nous sommes écoeurées des agissements du personnel des *Reviere*s. À chaque distribution de soupe, les filles de salle plongent leur grande louche, tout au fond du bidon, pour saisir 'le meilleur, l'épais'; et remplissent, à ras bord, une dizaine de gamelles qu'elles mettent de côté pour le repas du soir (gamelles des blockovas, stubovas, infirmières). Puis elles se servent dans d'autres gamelles, toujours de la même manière, pour le repas en cours. Après quoi, elles partagent ce qui reste entre les prisonnières.<sup>87</sup>

Saint-Clair observes their exploitative actions, but plays no role in them; she remains excluded from the sphere of action and powerless to do anything but express a moral condemnation. Simone Alizon's portrayal of the camp police also takes place from a witness perspective, with a strongly implied moral denunciation:

Nous eûmes une terrible démonstration de leur férocité sur l'une de nos camarades [...] Lorsqu'elle tenta de prendre de l'eau, on la frappa. Elle voulut se défendre. La polizei s'acharna sur elle, la roua de coups, lui jeta des gamelles d'eau, au point qu'elle revint trempée au block. Si je n'avais pas assisté au début de la scène, j'en aperçus la fin et je la revois, titubante, sous les coups qui continuaient de pleuvoir.<sup>88</sup>

The narratives of their male counterparts are testament to the apparent universality and non-gender defined nature of this passive self-characterization amongst French writers. Maurice Voutey provides a pertinent example at the execution of two Russian inmates at a small camp in the Neckar region, where the SS demand a *Kapo* to perform the execution and Voutey portrays

<sup>85</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.132. See also Élisabeth Will in Olga Wormser and Henri Michel (eds), *Tragédie de la déportation*, p.212.

<sup>86</sup> Robert Antelme's text, for example, demonstrates the existence of a comparable oppositional lexical emphasis amongst male writers. Antelme also constructs a clear opposition between "eux" and "nous" with his repetitive use of "ils" and his assertion that the food "they" eat is "ours": "[...] cette catégorie de détenus que l'on appellera l'aristocratie du kommando... Ils mangeront, ils fumeront, ils auront des manteaux, de vraies chaussures... Le pain supplémentaire qu'ils bouffent, la margarine, le saucisson, les litres et les litres de soupe, ce sont les nôtres, ils nous sont volés. Les rôles sont distribués: pour qu'ils vivent et grossissent il faut que les autres travaillent, crèvent de faim et reçoivent les coups" (*L'espèce humaine*, p.52).

<sup>87</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, p.173

<sup>88</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.123

himself witnessing the tension tormenting the prisoner-functionary standing in front of him. Voutey focuses on the back of the *Kapo's* neck, attempting to penetrate the functionary's mind — a forceful image of his exclusion from the mental world the *Kapo* occupies. The *Kapo's* dilemma is external to Voutey, who observes and analyses it, but has no involvement in it or understanding of a reality which is so alien to him: “Moi ce que je lis au mouvement de cette nuque... c'est seulement qu'il a peur. Une peur que je ne comprends pas”<sup>89</sup>. His subsequent speculative analysis of how and why *Kapos* become involved in the machinery of the camps is equally external: “Il a voulu devenir leur valet ou il a dû s'y résigner pour tenter d'être utile, pour, en briguant une place de *Kapo*, éviter pis encore et ainsi avoir la possibilité de servir la cause commune... peut-être sans grand débat intérieur”<sup>90</sup>. Similarly, André Courvoisier places himself firmly outside the realm of the grey zone in characterizing himself as a censorious witness to the dishonest actions of his blockleader:

Mais ce que je vis dans la journée me fit reprendre rapidement le chemin de la carrière. Willy et l'interprète qui était sa 'minette' trafiquaient la nourriture, prélevant de la marmelade du fût métallique qui avait été apporté des cuisines, ajoutant de l'eau à la place, pour que le volume reste le même, tout en 'touillant' avec un grand baton. Me rendant compte du manège, je fis en sorte d'avoir toujours le dos tourné pour ne rien voir<sup>91</sup>.

So definitive is Courvoisier's self-externalization from the grey zone that he emphasizes his preference for returning to the rigours of the quarry rather than perpetuating contact with it. The image of Courvoisier turning his back on Willy's exploits certainly constitutes a further strong authorial statement of his refusal to interact with the grey zone system, although he makes no attempt to explore the implications of silent complicity that this refusal to see might entail. Robert Antelme, on the other hand, highlights his distaste for any interaction with the abuses of the grey zone which removes him from the role of observer-witness and suggests any involvement (however minimal) in its workings. The obligation to call the *Kapo* by his first name is thus presented as singularly disturbing:

Je n'ai jamais échappé à la honte d'appeler un type comme Fritz par son prénom. C'était comme si je me chargeais d'une requête de sympathie, comme si je témoignais ainsi d'un souci et presque d'une obligation naturelle que j'aurais eu à le connaître intimement, fraternellement. Appeler ainsi celui qui n'avait pour fonction que de schlaguer et, plus tard, de tuer, donnait le ton de l'hypocrisie substantielle des rapports qui existaient entre ces *kapos* et nous.<sup>92</sup>

Antelme's acute discomfort at the usurpation of his role as non-participating observer and witness to the grey zone thus consolidates the pivotal significance attributed to this passive role within his testimony. Comparable examples are prolific throughout the body of French testimonial literature and could be cited *ad infinitum*.

<sup>89</sup> Maurice Voutey, *Prisonnier de l'in vraisemblable*, p.93

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p.94

<sup>91</sup> André Courvoisier, *Un aller et retour en enfer*, p.55

<sup>92</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.164

Observer, analyst, moral commentator — these, then, are the elemental roles which characterize French testimonial treatment of their relation to the abuses of the grey zone<sup>93</sup>. Victimization, however, is an equally significant feature of French female testimonies. The externalization of the French protagonist from *participation* in the abuses of the grey zone, in no way means she remains untouched by these abuses and exempted from the role of victim. And, once again, a universal thread unites the testimonies of both genders here. Just as the majority of French testimonies converge on the portrayal of the French as non-participating witnesses to the abuses and exploitations of the grey zone, so they all, as a rule, furnish a myriad of examples of the French as victims of the grey zone's excesses, invariably at the hands of inmates of other nationalities. Almost every testimony yields illustrations of the French in the role of grey zone victim (beaten, punished or deprived of food by privileged prisoners) but for the sake of brevity a few illustrations only must suffice. Micheline Maurel is typical in her description of the reign of an exceptionally fierce *blockova* imported especially to impose order upon the French, and the excessive punishment this German woman meted out to the French inmates:

Jamais nous n'avons été autant battues. Schuppe était pourtant, elle aussi, une prisonnière. Elle portait elle aussi le rayé et le coiffe-tout. Mais elle avait dû jurer de se réhabiliter aux yeux des SS et de leur montrer ce dont elle était capable [...] Elle interdisait aux Françaises d'aller au *Revier*. Les femmes à bout de force qu'elle renvoyait au travail tombaient pendant l'appel ou mouraient le soir même. Peu lui importait. Sous le règne de Frau Schuppe, nous passions souvent la journée du dimanche à faire du *straffstehen* [...] Frau Schuppe requérait pour le bloc 3 des privations de soupe et des corvées supplémentaires [...] C'est à cause d'elle que le bloc 3 était si souvent puni [...] C'est à cause d'elle en grande partie que les Françaises mouraient si bien [...] quand elle jetait à terre une Française pour la piétiner, ses yeux flambaient, elle souriait, elle jouissait...<sup>94</sup>.

Constance Liégeois (a Belgian inmate) stresses the victimization of the Belgians and French not only with regard to punishment, but particularly concerning the acquisition of food at Ravensbrück, asserting that the Russian and Polish women occupy "[...] les meilleurs postes et leur souveraineté les rendent méprisantes à notre égard. Que l'on distribue le café ou la soupe, elles s'octroient le privilège d'être mieux servies, ceci évidemment au détriment des Belges et Françaises"<sup>95</sup>. A parallel situation exists in the work commandos: "À la distribution de la nourriture, les Polonaises et les Russes sont servies les premières: tant pis s'il ne reste rien pour

<sup>93</sup> Note that Adélaïde Hautval is something of an exception here. In her depiction of the indignation felt by herself and her fellow doctors as they watch the functionary nurses aid in the removal of Jewish patients from the *Revier* for extermination, Hautval maintains the role of observer to the grey zone, but is far from unequivocal in the casting of herself as an uninvolved bystander. Rather, her observer stance is undermined and rendered questionable by an awareness of her own passive complicity: "Mais alors Elly L. nous fait remarquer que nous aussi nous sommes lâches et qu'il n'y a qu'une question de nuances qui différencie l'attitude active des infirmières de la nôtre qui est passive et accepte" (in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.186). When Hautval's refusal to undertake a task which will result in the death of some of her patients means that a colleague ultimately shoulders the burden instead, Hautval muses further on the issue of her complicity as an observer to the grey zone: "Actuellement encore je me pose la question si, pour garder 'bonne conscience', on peut admettre que quelqu'un d'autre se charge d'une besogne qui risque d'être pour lui un sujet de tourment dans la suite. Je ne puis y répondre" (*Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, p.37).

<sup>94</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, pp85-87

<sup>95</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.89

les Belges et les Françaises”<sup>96</sup>. Simone Saint-Clair is more specific in her presentation of the French as victims, governed in the Ravensbrück barracks by prisoners of other nationalities who “[...] ont naturellement toutes les complaisances envers leurs compatriotes, mais aucune pitié pour les Françaises”.<sup>97</sup> She describes how these privileged prisoners beat and punish the French women and steal their rations, concluding

Nous serons toujours soumises au même régime: brutalité, injures et délation. Il est vrai qu’on a placé à ces postes ‘des triangles noirs et des triangles verts’... et, ainsi, peuvent s’expliquer bien des haines s’élevant dans nos coeurs de Françaises pour les Polonaises ou Tchèques qui nous maltraitent...<sup>98</sup>

The role of victim, common to most French portrayals of the grey zone, is therefore inevitably accompanied by varying emotive expressions of powerlessness, frustration, hatred and bitterness.

This sustained exhibiting of the French in the role of victims of the grey zone, however, also ultimately consolidates their seemingly immutable externalization from it. In emphasizing that she was compelled to enact the role of victim of the functionary system, the testimonial protagonist (be it the author or the collective “we” denoting the group of compatriots) remains effectively estranged from the active role of exploiter, torturer, abuser. Whereas the victim may be subjected to the abuses of the grey zone and therefore part of its mechanism, the nuances of their role are pivotal: they are, as Simone Saint-Clair asserts above, “soumises à” this regime rather than involved in it; the oppressed rather than the oppressors, the passive recipients who bear the consequences of the grey zone rather than the active perpetrators who manipulate and exploit it. Their role is definitively and overwhelmingly reactive.

It should be noted here that, of course, testimonial writers of other nationalities often also externalize themselves and their testimony from the grey zone, both through describing it as an observed phenomenon and emphasizing their personal role as victim or non-participant<sup>99</sup>. This sense of distance from the grey zone is, not surprisingly, a widely discernible tendency, given, as we have seen above, both the type of prisoner most likely to produce testimonial documentation and the perceived moral expectations of the reading public. Widely discernible, although not universal: consider the Hungarian Elie Wiesel’s presentation of his own semi-internalization of grey zone values when his father is beaten and Wiesel’s anger at this eventuality is directed not at the system which perpetuates such brutality, but at his father for failing to defend himself adequately: “[...] si j’étais en colère à ce moment, ce n’était pas contre le *kapo*, mais contre mon père. Je lui en voulais de ne pas avoir su éviter la crise d’Idek. Voilà ce que la vie

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p.91

<sup>97</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.72

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p.72

<sup>99</sup> To cite but one example, Krystyna Zywulska clearly documents her personal refusal of the grey zone and refusal to beat other prisoners when she is given a baton (*J’ai survécu à Auschwitz*, pp80-81).

concentrationnaire avait fait de moi”.<sup>100</sup> What is particular to the French body of testimonies, however, is the fact that French writers tend not to construct and demarcate this externalization solely on a personal level as a simple assertion of their own lack of involvement in the grey zone, but rather stress their externalization on a national level, extending it to the French as a whole. Such widely-attributed national externalization of the grey zone would indeed have been less plausible from a Polish, German or Czech testimonial author, given that these nationalities dominated the positions of privilege in most camps.

Many French testimonies are unequivocal in their assertions that the French occupied no place in the abuses of the grey zone system. The comments by Odette Améry and Simone Alizon are representative: “Ni les Françaises ni les Russes, sauf des cas très rares, ne vendent leur honneur contre le droit de choisir les meilleurs morceaux dans la soupe, ou celui de battre leurs compagnes de misère”<sup>101</sup> and again:

Il n'eut pas de *kapo* parmi nous (les Françaises) et si d'aventure cela s'est produit, ce fut en accord avec les camarades. Cela ne durait pas. Nous ne savions ni voler ni battre les autres détenus, à de très rares exceptions près, quelquefois chez les hommes, parmi d'habiles droit commun.<sup>102</sup>

Germaine Tillion categorically states that “[...] il n’y a pas eu de Françaises mouchardes à Ravensbrück”,<sup>103</sup> whilst Suzanne Birnbaum isolates French women at Auschwitz not only from the sphere of abuse of others, but also from the general sphere of flattery and servility which surrounded the grey zone:

Je n’ai jamais vu aucune Française cirer les bottes des Allemands ou des SS. Les Polonaises l’ont fait et allaient même jusqu’à nous dénoncer lorsque nous faisions quelque chose d’interdit. Tout cela pour garder les places qu’elles occupaient, ou pour recevoir un ‘rab’ de soupe, de temps en temps.<sup>104</sup>

Aimé Bonifas echoes this repudiation of the grey zone amongst French males with his insistence that few French prisoners participated in the widespread exchange of sexual favours for food (“À ma connaissance, peu de Français ont accepté ce rôle ignoble, malgré les avantages certains qu’il comporte...”) <sup>105</sup>. He also articulates the oft-expressed theme of internal French harmony, noting that not only were the French removed from the perpetuation of the abuses of the grey zone in the wider camp system, but that the grey zone itself also became inoperative, null and void as it were, whenever French inmates were grouped amongst themselves with the opportunity to self-regulate their living and working conditions. Bonifas describes his time in a barracks with 21 French men as an oasis in his camp experience for this very reason:

Parce que nous sommes entre Français, qui se comprennent, qui veulent s’entraider, toute une vie de communauté s’établit [...] chez nous, il n’y a jamais de cri ou de

<sup>100</sup> Elie Wiesel, *La nuit*, p.88

<sup>101</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.34

<sup>102</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.311

<sup>103</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p.192

<sup>104</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, p.65

<sup>105</sup> Aimé Bonifas, *Détenu 20801 dans les bagnes nazis*, p.69

coups une fois dans la chambre, rarement un vol. Parce que nous avons pu organiser notre vie entre Français, cette chambre est [...] un îlot de paix dans le bagne.<sup>106</sup>

Nelly Gorce outlines a similar climate at Ravensbrück, where the grey zone and its abuses become redundant amongst the homogeneous group of French women:

Comme le block est divisé en deux parties semblables, nous aurons donc deux chefs françaises, chacune entourée d'un état-major de huit femmes nommées *Zimmerdienst*, ou filles de service, assurant le nettoyage du block. En principe, la *Zimmerdienst* est toute-puissante, elle a le droit de bousculer, battre, embêter qui ne lui plaît pas. Comme nous restons entre Françaises, cela ne se produit pas et nos compagnes assurent d'une façon charmante leur service.<sup>107</sup>

Indeed, any French participation in the exploitation of the grey zone is largely portrayed as exceptional and confined to the criminal French faction. Although certain French *droit commun* prisoners are shown penetrating the grey zone system — consider the sharply drawn portrait of Lucien in Robert Antelme's *L'espèce humaine* — their criminal identity tends to supersede their nationality in the eyes of their compatriots; they are presented as primarily criminal in essence rather than French, and thus essentially discounted from the depiction of collective French behaviour. Exceptional, however, is the singularly striking and extensively described example of a non *droit commun* French individual embracing the grey zone which occurs in Fania Fenelon's *Sursis pour l'orchestre*. Here the Jewish Clara progresses through the various stages of grey zone participation, moving from sexual exchange with a *Kapo* to filling the *Kapo* role herself upon their transfer to Bergen-Belsen with cruelty and sadism:

Clara, déplacée dans un block voisin du nôtre, se grise de coups et de cris, cogne sur des malheureuses déjà épuisées, et pour être plus sûre de sa force, elle n'hésite pas à choisir les plus faibles. Elle se pavane: 'Mon block a le meilleur rendement', dit-elle avec une suffisance de SS.<sup>108</sup>

However, Clara's assimilation of these abuses is consistently portrayed as exceptional and a function of a personal aberration stemming from a personality characterized by gluttony and the inability to control her personal appetites. She is contrasted with Florette (the other French *Kapo* who repeatedly spurns any involvement in the abuses of the grey zone and instead utilises her position to aid her fellows), whilst also acting as a foil for Fenelon as narrator, whose condemnation of Clara's actions further consolidates her own externalization of the grey zone and validates her role as moral commentator. More briefly, Odette Améry mentions Claudie, a French prisoner in her block who was the sole French inmate to succumb to the lure of the grey zone: "Elle ne résiste plus [...] au plaisir de faire tous les petits travaux clandestins de la chef de chaîne, abominable Puf à triangle noir. Faible et envieuse, elle sera la brebis galeuse de notre admirable block 32".<sup>109</sup> Once again, this prisoner serves as a rare exception to the generally-

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p.76. See also Renée Jolivot, 'Mes prisons, le récit d'une Française au grand coeur' in *Le progrès*, Lyon, 4-5, 16 Aug 1945.

<sup>107</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, pp30-31

<sup>108</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.369

<sup>109</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.90



portrayed rule, her actions throwing into sharp relief the collective externalization of the grey zone comprehensively attributed to French prisoners as a whole.

Two broad roles, then, dominate any initial examination of French testimonies with relation to the grey zone — that of observer and that of victim. Both are unequivocally external, removing the protagonist from the role of active participant. A brief examination of one French female testimony in somewhat greater detail will afford an insight into how such externalization was developed and consolidated within the confines of the testimony. Let us turn then to *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, an account by Françoise Maous, a Jewish French woman interned at Auschwitz-Birkenau from May 1944 until Russian liberation in January 1945.

Maous's testimony follows three broad movements, progressing from a period in quarantine to a stay in the *Revier* and then on to the *Weberei* commando<sup>110</sup>. In each stage, the externalization of Maous and her compatriots from the grey zone is further consolidated by a defining interaction with the grey zone and its participants. The first real depiction of the grey zone arises with the description of the new *blockova* assigned to Maous' quarantine block — a young Polish woman who manifests an extreme cruelty toward her French charges and takes it upon herself to drastically reduce the ration allocated to them. Led by two of their compatriots who speak German, a small contingent of the French women approach the *blockova* to protest at her actions:

[...] en dépit de la haine toute particulière que cette femme, comme ses semblables, nourrissait pour nous, les Françaises, [...elles] décidèrent d'aller la trouver et de lui expliquer qu'avec huit cuillères de soupe par jour, il était impossible de vivre [...] Quand elles eurent fini leur exposé, elle saisit les deux premières qui étaient venues à elle, les roua de coups avec une telle force sous nos yeux que nous pensions qu'elle allait les tuer, puis elle leur ordonna de se mettre à genoux les bras tendus et, dans chaque main, elle leur mit un lourd tabouret.<sup>111</sup>

Here, Maous establishes a synchronous individual and collective externalization from the grey zone as she incarnates the typical dual roles of observer and victim — simultaneously observer on an individual plane as she watches and describes the punishment meted out to their interpreters “sous nos yeux”, and victim of the collective deprivation and mistreatment of the French inmates. Not only are the French women firmly excluded from participation in the sphere of power and privilege and its attendant abuses, but even their attempt to negotiate or interact with those who implement these abuses is futile. Their effort to do so sees its perpetrators propelled firmly and viciously back into the role of passive victims, as encapsulated by the fitting description of the punished women holding the heavy stools aloft — an image which consolidates their role as victims who shoulder the punitive weight of the grey zone.

<sup>110</sup> The *Weberei* was the weaving commando.

<sup>111</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, p.56

Afflicted with scarlet fever, Maous then gains entry to the *Revier*, where her self-distancing from the grey zone is further affirmed. Here the grey zone is represented by the Polish nurses, who “[...] étaient là strictement pour profiter des avantages de la situation, mais étaient absolument incapables”<sup>112</sup>. Maous articulates their attitude thus:

Plus un être était charmant, doux, pitoyable, plus elles le détestaient. Elles n’aimaient que la dureté, la raillerie. Celles d’entre nous qui faisaient preuve de méchanceté envers les autres avaient droit à une tranquillité relative et parfois même à une double ration de soupe. Mais sur les faibles, elles s’acharnaient sans pitié<sup>113</sup>.

Initially, this description appears to bely Maous’ marked distancing from the grey zone. With her inclusive linguistic approach which denotes those who internalize this attitude as “celles d’entre nous”, Maous appears not to be establishing acceptance of the grey zone attitude as inherently other to herself and her *camarades*. This distortive remnant of her rather collective literary approach is quickly cancelled out, however, by the moral judgement which follows as Maous watches one of these nurses attack a defenceless patient. Her denunciation of this act and the attitudes which inspire it serves to dissociate Maous from the grey zone and render it inherently external to her own values and experience: “Jamais je n’oublierai ce spectacle dont la bassesse aurait réjoui les yeux des Allemands en leur prouvant à quel degré ils avaient réussi dans leur démoniaque exploitation de la lâcheté humaine”.<sup>114</sup>

The final section of the testimony, in which Maous gains a place in the *Weberei* commando, also sees the French placed firmly in the role of grey zone victims. With a production quota requiring the women to produce a set amount of work (under the sinister threat of having their numbers taken if they fail to meet the allotted quota)<sup>115</sup>, the prisoners charged with work supervision utilise their privilege to aid the Polish women and victimize the French: “Elles distribuèrent le matériel avec une injustice incroyable, en réservant aux Polonaises les morceaux qui pouvaient se travailler. Les Françaises n’avaient que des morceaux inutilisables, des bérets pleins de poux”.<sup>116</sup>

This period of Maous’ experience also provides the testimony’s final, and perhaps most powerful, evocation of the French externalization from the grey zone, with a scene which definitively casts the testimonial protagonist as observer, at once excluded from and victim of the grey zone:

Tout à coup, j’aperçois la porte ouverte d’une petite pièce servant de chambre à la *blockowa*. Je m’approche et je vois [...] un petit lit confortable recouvert d’une peau de mouton blanc, une petite table devant un feu, un bon feu de bois! Comme une folle, je m’approche, croyant de loin sentir la chaleur. La vue de ce feu me fascine, je

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p.63

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p.80

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, p.81

<sup>115</sup> The taking down of a prisoner’s number held highly sinister overtones at Auschwitz. At the very least it could signal loss of a place in the commando and demotion to an external work detail, at worst selection for the gas chamber.

<sup>116</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, p.105

veux m'éloigner mais je reste là à contempler la *blockowa* qui, assise devant sa table, chaudement habillée, dévore ses tartines beurrées avec du café fumant [...] Comment décrire la sensation éprouvée ce matin-là devant ce spectacle, cette chaleur, ce lit? Je désirais trop tout cela, et j'ai crié de désespoir, ma douleur de quitter Line était infime comparée à ce besoin physique. Tout à coup, la *blockowa* m'aperçoit, elle se lève comme une furie, 'Weg!' ('hors d'ici!'), et elle me frappe au visage. Puis elle voit les plaies de mes pieds nus, car je n'ai pu entrer dans les sabots ce matin, je les ai à la main, elle m'en arrache un, me le lance sur le pied avec rage: 'Chausse-toi!'. Sous l'effet de la douleur, je perds à demi connaissance.<sup>117</sup>

Here the narrative portrayal of exclusion and externalization reaches its apogee, with the comforts and privileges procured by the *blockowa* at the expense of others remaining utterly alien to Maous, compartmentalized in a clearly demarcated physical space which is other to her — the forbidden room — and which she cannot penetrate. This tangible observer externalization is coupled with the violence of corporeal victimization in the *blockowa*'s attack. Mute, with no voice in the scene apart from an inarticulate cry of despair, Maous incarnates exclusion in every aspect of her experience. The barest hint of moral ambiguity pervades her text, however, by dint of her depiction of her desire for the perceived comforts as a physical need eclipsing all else which "je désirais trop". The subtext is subtle but insistent, and begs the question: given the apparently overwhelming strength of her desire for these elements, would Maous have embraced the grey zone in order to claim them if the opportunity presented itself? As in many testimonies, the question remains unasked and the potentially disturbing deeper reaches of the subject are left unexplored. As a consequence, Maous' narrative — although in many other respects figuring amongst the most rigorously lucid and transparent accounts — typifies the wider French testimonial tendency in which the grey zone is at once presented and obscured, at once delineated and rendered opaque, as the authorial emphasis upon externalization of its abuses largely eclipses a more profound and nuanced examination of its potential effect upon the author. The testimony thus remains confined to an oscillation between the roles of victim and moral analyst/observer, firmly distanced from any involvement in the exploitation of the functionary system.

In this way, the marked refutation and externalization of the abuses of the grey zone constitutes a widely discernible theme across the general range of French testimonies. The overwhelming general impression from a broad reading of these testimonies is that French inmates — both male and female — observed and were subjected to the active exploitation of the functionary system but (apart of course from the non-testifying and rarely-mentioned French *droit commun* contingent), remained removed from participation in its abuses. To accept such a broad commonality as the entirety of testimonial reality, however, is an oversimplification. Indeed, the further nuances in this area are many and varied. What about French participation in the functionary system? (For, despite their oft-articulated refusal of the grey zone's abuses,

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p.136

many testimonies do depict French inmates who occupy posts in the hierarchy or privileged work assignments). How do testimonies treat this participation in the system itself? And, if externalization is the general, collective truth of French testimonies, where are the divergences and authorial variations? Are they in the realm of gender? Indeed, are there any significant differences beyond this widespread conceptualization of the grey zone? If we now pose the question of *why* the grey zone is not internalized by French authors, and why it remains largely external to their testimonial experience beyond the realms of observation and victimization, we can begin to address these questions.

Firstly, leaving aside the fact that such externalization may, to a certain degree, be interpreted as a universal testimonial particularity, the primary reason why the exploitation of the system of privilege does not feature in these accounts as a French phenomenon is an inherently simple one: the mechanisms and strong national bias which were operative within the concentration camp system severely curtailed French prisoners' chances of accession to privileged posts within the camp hierarchy, and therefore, by extension, of indulging in exploitation of the grey zone and assimilation of its values. As a national group, French inmates infiltrated the concentration camp system significantly later than their German and Polish counterparts, many of whom had been interned since well before the war. By the time French deportation commenced in 1942, therefore, German and Polish inmates were firmly ensconced in the important roles in the hierarchy of most camps, resulting in a general distribution of privilege to other prisoners of their own nationality and relative exclusion of the French<sup>118</sup>. Such nationalistic favouritism was, as Anna Pawelczynska notes, highly characteristic of the camp environment:

The rescue strategy of reserving the best places in the camp structure for one's intimates was applied universally. Characteristically intimacy (besides blood relation or previous acquaintance) was defined by nationality. Linguistic and cultural barriers were so strongly experienced that in the extremity of the concentration camp situation only a person of the same nationality could be counted on in the long run.<sup>119</sup>

At the same time, French prisoners found themselves confronting significant linguistic barriers, in a camp system where German was the universal means of communication. Primo Levi, although asserting that the Italians were hindered to a greater degree than the French in this respect, provides an analysis of the importance of communication in the camp which is universally applicable:

We immediately realised [...] that knowing or not knowing German was a watershed. With those who understood them and answered in an articulate manner, the

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<sup>118</sup> Hence Élisabeth Will's description of the national make-up of the prisoner elite: "Cette caste comprenait presque exclusivement des Allemandes, des Polonaises et des Tchèques, c'est-à-dire les premières venues à Ravensbrück. L'entrée de cette hiérarchie semblait jalousement interdite aux Françaises". See Élisabeth Will, 'Ravensbrück et ses kommandos' in *De l'université aux camps de concentration. Témoignages strasbourgeois* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1947), p.343.

<sup>119</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.107

appearance of a human relationship was established [...] whoever did not understand or speak German was a barbarian by definition; if he insisted on expressing himself in his own language, indeed, his non-language, he must be beaten into silence and put back in his place, pulling, carrying and pushing, because he was not a *Mensch*, not a human being [...] The greater part of the prisoners who did not understand German [...] died during the first ten to fifteen days after their arrival [...] If they had been able to communicate with their more experienced companions, they would have been able to orient themselves better.<sup>120</sup>

Not only did an ability to speak German influence a prisoner's chances of survival, therefore, but also his or her chances of entering the functionary system. To become a prisoner-functionary, or even to gain the most minimal of privileges, it was essential to build some form of relationship with other prisoners in the hierarchy, and how was one to effect such interaction without that most basic tool — linguistic comprehension? Indeed, many testimonies refer to fluency in German as the basic and non-negotiable prerequisite demanded when privileged positions were on offer, given that the ability to understand and implement orders from above was a pivotal aspect of a functionary's role. Consider the two episodes when Reska Weiss was offered the opportunity to participate in the grey zone, both of which were preceded solely by a questioning of her German-speaking abilities: "Ordering me to step out, he [the commandant] asked me if I knew any German, 'Yes', I replied. 'You will be a *kapo* in charge of five thousand women' he said, and off he went"<sup>121</sup> and again " 'Do you know German?' he roared. 'Yes' I replied tremblingly. 'Then you will be a nurse'"<sup>122</sup>. As a result, the majority of French prisoners found themselves deprived of the most basic marketable commodity facilitating access to power and privilege, and as such, precluded from penetrating the functionary system *en masse*.

Later arrival and linguistic handicaps were not, however, the sole impediments to French penetration of the system of privilege. Common to virtually all French testimonies is the assertion that the French as a national entity were despised and treated with particular contempt by their fellow prisoners of other nationalities. Within a camp climate which perpetually fostered hatred and suspicion, such sensitivity to hostility and conviction that the world was conspiring against one were all too natural sentiments<sup>123</sup>. French testimonial authors (together with their Italian counterparts), however, emphasize and dwell upon this hostility to a significantly greater degree than authors of other nationalities, asserting that the widespread derision which they encountered was specifically pegged to their nationality and positing this national prejudice as a critical and tangible factor impeding their negotiation of the camp environment. This perception

<sup>120</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp70-72. On the significance of knowledge of the German language for prisoners in the camp environment, refer also to Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, pp192-192, and Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.291.

<sup>121</sup> Reska Weiss, *Journey Through Hell*, p.85

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid*, p.86

<sup>123</sup> Conflicts between different nationalities were a consistent feature of camp life, as Anna Pawelczynska notes: "[...] national conflicts on a large scale were kept up and grew more intense whenever authentic conflicts of interest arose in connection with the winning of dominance in the camp power structure by one nation (besides the Germans)" (*Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.66).

is echoed repeatedly throughout the body of French testimonies, varying in its reasoning and explicative argumentation, but undeviating in the perpetual insistence that the French occupied the very lowest rungs of the camp national hierarchy. Odette Améry, for instance, attributes the general hatred for the French at Ravensbrück to jealousy (“Les ‘Franzouzes’<sup>124</sup>, dont on jalouse la fierté, la force de caractère, sont les bêtes noires de tout le monde, je commence à m’en apercevoir”)<sup>125</sup>, whilst also emphasizing their unequal position in the camp hierarchy: “Je m’apercevrai vite, au camp, que les Françaises ne sont pas du tout les égales des Allemandes”.<sup>126</sup> Germaine Tillion makes a comparable assessment of the hierarchical position of the French at Ravensbrück: “[...] nos compatriotes se situaient au plus bas de la hiérarchie occulte du camp, au degré le plus misérable de l’échelle des misérables, et qu’aucune d’elles n’occupait un poste lui permettant de circuler et d’apporter le secours d’une parole à l’une de nous...”<sup>127</sup> For Bernard Py, the general contempt for French prisoners as a whole stems from their inability to withstand the harsh physical conditions of the camp and consequent high illness and death rate: “Se précise ainsi, une hiérarchie physiologique et psychologique dans laquelle nous sommes les derniers”<sup>128</sup>, and again “Nous sommes méprisés, nous les Français, les moins adaptés”.<sup>129</sup> Edmond Michelet’s reasoning is more detailed and worth citing at length:

Cette situation qui nous parut intolérable avait plusieurs causes. Les Tchèques, même les plus ignorants, nous reprochaient Munich; les Polonais nous attribuaient, à nous seuls, leur effondrement de septembre 1939; les Allemands eux-mêmes [...] conservaient à notre égard une supériorité de vainqueurs. Personne ne semblait avoir entendu parler d’une résistance française. Notre humiliation était totale. En dehors de cette indignité qui s’attachait à nous pour des motifs dont tous n’étaient pas également justifiés, il y avait le mépris dont nous étions l’objet pour des raisons d’un autre ordre. Nos compatriotes avaient d’abord la réputation de ne pas savoir se laver, de manquer complètement d’hygiène. Et puis, on leur reprochait de ne pas accepter en silence non seulement les injustices dont ils étaient les victimes, ce qu’on aurait à la rigueur admis, mais non plus celles dont ils étaient les témoins<sup>130</sup>.

Perhaps most cogent is Robert Antelme’s description of the hierarchical condemnation of the French:

Ils se voyaient traités, eux, Français, non seulement par les Nazis comme les pires ennemis du nazisme, mais aussi par des gens qui étaient leurs ‘semblables’, par des ennemis comme eux des nazis, avec une hostilité spéciale, sans raison. Il nous semblait ainsi, en arrivant, que nous étions les détenus les plus pauvres, la dernière classe des détenus.<sup>131</sup>

<sup>124</sup> “Franzouzes” was a derogatory term denoting French women.

<sup>125</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.60

<sup>126</sup> Ibid, p.61

<sup>127</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p.139

<sup>128</sup> Bernard Py, *Dans le malheur de Dachau, j’ai trouvé un bonheur*, p.65

<sup>129</sup> Ibid, p.66

<sup>130</sup> Edmond Michelet, *Rue de la liberté, Dachau 1943-1945* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1955), p.43. See also Pierre Durand, *La résistance des Français à Buchenwald et à Dora* (Paris: Éditions Messidor, 1991), p.58, Pierre Nivromont and Didier Epelbaum, *Matricule 186140, histoire d’un combat*, p.139, and Yves Béon, *Planet Dora. A memoir of the Holocaust and the birth of the space age* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), p.19.

<sup>131</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’espèce humaine*, p.16. Note that André Courvoisier is an exception to this general rule, in fact asserting that his French nationality facilitated his passage in the camp of workers assigned to the Heinkel factory. He mentions, for instance, gaining admittance to the *Revier* due to his nationality, and asserts that (in contrast to the Russians, Yugoslavs and Czechs) French and German inmates “[...] pouvons bénir nos

The French-articulated testimonial perception that French prisoners were treated with such contempt as to allow very few opportunities to penetrate the functionary system is, needless to say, incomplete, and rooted in a vantage point which was far from unbiased. As we shall soon discover, French prisoners did indeed occupy some privileged positions, particularly in the latter part of the concentration camp regime in such camps as Buchenwald, Dora and Auschwitz, where political prisoners gradually wrested control of certain sectors of the functionary system and often accorded greater weight to political affiliations or professional expertise than nationality when delegating privilege. The high number of French doctors exercising their professional function at the central Buchenwald complex is a case in point. Testimonial bias aside, it is true, however, that in the overall camp scheme, the general percentage of French prisoners holding privileged positions was comparatively low, for the particular synthesis of reasons we have delineated — later arrival, communication difficulties, and national prejudices. All of these factors therefore combined to create a broad lack of opportunity for the French to enter the grey zone and enact its values. This very real deficit goes some way to explaining why the abuses of the grey zone are so comprehensively externalized and refuted in French testimonies as a whole — irrespective of whether they aspired to or not, the authors of these accounts, be they male or female, were generally precluded from carving themselves a niche in the camp hierarchy.

Some way to providing an explanation, perhaps, but not the whole way. For there is another, more significant, discernible rationale underlying the fact that French testimonial authors do not portray themselves and the vast majority of their compatriots either actively utilising and exploiting the functionary system for their own benefit, or internalizing its value system. And here — rather than in any genderized sphere of difference — is where the most significant divergences in the treatment of the grey zone in French testimonies become apparent. For those authors interned as political prisoners (and note that such a definition denotes only those who were active in a political or resistance sense prior to their internment, rather than the sizeable non-Jewish French sector whom the Nazi regime grouped under the inexact, indistinct and highly deceptive umbrella of political “red triangles”<sup>132</sup>), testimonial literature reveals a focus upon what may perhaps most accurately be termed a parallel hierarchy — an alternative,

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nationalités”. Courvoisier designates the Italians as the most hated national entity in his particular camp. Similarly, Yves Béon, at Dora, mentions that it was the Russians who were “[...] the lowest of the low, the very scum of the earth” (*Planet Dora*, p.56).

The perspective of survivors of other nationalities with regard to French inmates is also worth noting here. Many mention French individualism and indiscipline as negative factors in their assessment of French prisoners. Eugen Kogon, for instance, notes that “[...]leur individualisme très accusé et leur niveau intellectuel généralement très élevé leur causèrent de nombreuses difficultés qui auraient pu être évitées” (*L'état SS*, p.415). Any expression of active dislike of the French is, however, rare.

<sup>132</sup> This “red triangle” categorization often included French volunteer workers — French inmates who had volunteered to aid the German war effort and who were interned in the concentration camps for various infractions. Most of these volunteers were therefore not affiliated with any form of political resistance. Refer to Guylaine Guidez, *Femmes dans la guerre 1939-1945*, p.301.

self-regulated hierarchical testimonial reality functioning parallel to the central hierarchy of functionary power and privilege which defined and informed the general camp experience. More precisely, many French resistance or political writers conceptualize their experience either within a rigid, firmly delineated “political” identity, or, in a more pronounced manifestation, within a form of moral class system, where they and their political compatriots occupy the upper hierarchical echelons, and constitute a veritable aristocracy. Resistance ideals and values form the definitional criteria of this vertical structure, and the arbiters of these ideals often manifest a discernible sense of privilege at belonging to such a hierarchy. Although essentially unacknowledged in a wider sense by those who did not subscribe to its principles, for many of these writers this parallel hierarchy appears to furnish them with a sense of moral privilege and ascendancy which in many ways serves as a textual substitute for the material rewards and hegemonic satisfaction of the functionary system. As such, it cannot be overlooked as an impulsion behind the testimonial externalization of the grey zone; in attributing significance to, and situating the writing of their experience within, an alternative hierarchical system whose practices are often diametrically opposed to those of the functionary hierarchy, it is unsurprising that the grey zone and its contrasting values and approaches remain external and inherently other to the testimonial writings of many French political prisoners. Let us examine this parallel hierarchy and its far from inconsequential effect on the testimonial portrayal of the grey zone in greater detail.

To begin with, this parallel “political” testimonial reality is often characterized by a certain inegalitarianism, and it is this aspect which compels us to delimit it as frequently hierarchical in aspect, rather than merely an alternative value system. As with the functionary system of privilege, prisoners were not deemed by those within this hierarchy as all inherently equal in their common struggle against the Nazi enemy, but rather occupied defined positions in its structure — a structure which was built upon perception and values rather than any tangible power, position or privilege. Indeed, material and hierarchical camp reality were all but irrelevant to this coterminous reality. Rather, the fact of being a Gaullist, Communist or an engaged resistant or, in other words, the active embracing of anti-Nazi political values, lent one a figurative or practical niche in the system and the attendant recognition of one’s like-minded fellows. Resistance-based testimonies are rife with allusions to this implicit hierarchy and the perceived elevated standing of those prisoners affirming resistance values. Nelly Gorce’s text provides a particularly pertinent illustration, as she struggles to combat the comprehensive domination of hunger and restrain herself from joining in the general discussion on food and recipes:

*J’ai honte de me laisser dominer par ces contingences futiles, c’est indigne de moi. Je devrais occuper mon esprit de pensées plus élevées, et je rage de me découvrir semblable à ces pauvres êtres victimes du hasard ou de leur esprit de lucre qui ne voient dans leur malheur actuel que les privations matérielles et la perte de leur joliesse. Je suis là pour d’autres raisons, nos souffrances sont la rançon du pays. Les*



miens sont libres. Par notre sacrifice, les bottes allemandes ne foulent plus nos trottoirs [...] Je souffre, soit, mais la France vit<sup>133</sup>.

Here, then, Gorce actualizes a distinct and overt bisection between herself as an active and aware “political” and the non-political prisoners, those “pauvres êtres victimes du hasard”. The hierarchical nature of this segregation, with the non-political prisoners cast firmly and irrefutably in the inferior role, is clear. Not only are these prisoners attributed the epithet “pauvre”, thereby characterizing them as inspiring pity rather than respect, but their mentality and responses are clearly denoted as inferior, as “indigne de moi” and arousing shame when Gorce finds herself mirroring their behaviour. Gorce’s self-conceptualization is on a different, and by implication higher, level from these inmates — a plane where her thoughts and responses stem from the elevated ideal of sacrifice, and where the political motivation underlying her presence in the camp sets her apart from those prisoners unengaged in political activity. If we compare this self-exposition to the attitudinal stance common to those occupying and abusing positions in the camp functionary system and their sense of superiority towards non-privileged inmates (as exemplified by Robert Antelme’s *kapo* who “[...] méprisait ceux qui ne mangeaient pas, et qui étaient maigres: ils n’étaient pas de son rang”<sup>134</sup>), it becomes clear that Gorce’s narrative approach is similarly hierarchical, comparable in structural conception if antithetical in values. Indeed, Anna Pawelczynska’s observation on the grey zone that “the world of the camp was no longer divided into ‘us’ (fellow-prisoners) and ‘them’ (the killers); now it was ‘we — the powerful’ and ‘they — the defenceless’”<sup>135</sup> may be seen to coexist in the testimonies of many political prisoners with this more focal concurrent hierarchy delineating “we — the politically and morally aware” and “they — the unaware”.

Gorce’s alternative hierarchical conceptualization of the camp population finds an echo, with varying degrees of emphasis, throughout the general body of French resistance-based testimonies, regardless of gender. Many of these writers aim to consolidate the construction of a textual differentiation between themselves as active resisters and combatants and other prisoners (often including their compatriots) who, in their unawareness of the significance of the higher resistance ideals, may be portrayed as pitiable, passive or merely insignificant — but generally lower in the moral hierarchical stratification. Maurice Voutey provides an indication of the cross-gender commonality of this attitude right from the outset of the camp experience, when his fellow French resister inmates voice their disbelief at their internment and treatment in the camp:

C’était intolérable. Ils étaient français. Combattants français qu’on devait traiter dignement, comme un soldat doit être traité par un autre soldat! Dans l’honneur!

<sup>133</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.100

<sup>134</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’espèce humaine*, p.72

<sup>135</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.49

Qu'on ait osé nous tondre et nous avoir entièrement rasés [...] D'ailleurs le général de Gaulle allait faire quelque chose, intervenir...<sup>136</sup>.

This initial disbelief at the lack of respect for their role typifies the kind of self-differentiation which will later crystallize into the perception of a second hierarchy within the camp system. André Courvoisier is also quick to distinguish the position of French resistant inmates from their compatriots near the beginning of his testimonial offering, his description clearly segregating inmates into two distinct categories:

La moitié de ces malheureux étant innocents n'auront pas comme nous, la même force, la même trempe, pour supporter les vexations et les privations qui leur seront infligées, alors que nous, résistants, heureux d'être encore vivants après arrestation et interrogatoires, la flamme d'amour pour notre pays nous soutiendra...<sup>137</sup>

A similar sense of hierarchy is established by Constance Liégeois who, although Belgian, juxtaposes the destinies of French and Belgian inmates to the extent that her testimony is applicable in this context. Liégeois voices the general contempt of French and Belgian resisters towards the “vulgar” French volunteer workers, a sentiment which is expressed unanimously in almost every French Ravensbrück resistance testimony: “Elles se font passer pour politiques mais ce sont des travailleuses libres et trafiquantes du marché noir [...] Franchement, nous n'avons pas de chance avec nos consœurs françaises”<sup>138</sup>, and again: “[...] sentant l'abîme qui les sépare des prisonnières politiques, jalouses, elles nous font une vie intenable”.<sup>139</sup> Liégeois' later reaction to receiving orders from a non-political inmate at Mauthausen is similarly evocative of her attitude towards the non-initiated: “[...] stupéfiées de l'audace de cette femme — fille de joie — qui ose nous commander, nous, prisonnières politiques, nous demeurons sidérées”<sup>140</sup>. If, as Robert Antelme asserts, the characteristic of any hierarchical aristocracy is a discernible “mépris” toward others<sup>141</sup>, Liégeois's avowed disdain for her non-political co-inmates would certainly appear to fit such a categorization. With a group of French resisters, Liégeois and her *camarades* form “[...] un clan à part, ou ne seront

<sup>136</sup> Maurice Voutey, *Prisonnier de l'invraisemblable*, p.30

<sup>137</sup> André Courvoisier, *Un aller et retour en enfer*, p.30. This distinction is echoed again and again in resistance testimonies, ranging from the blatant (as with Charles Richet who clearly situates the French resistance contingent above and beyond the undesirable element of French prisoners: “Avoir été déporté en Allemagne n'est donc pas un brevet de civisme, et nous refusons toute assimilation avec les souteneurs ou maîtres chanteurs qui partageront notre sort”, *Trois bagnes*, p.40), to the more subtle intimations of pity for those deemed to be lacking the awareness and discipline of resistance prisoners, as articulated by Olivier Richet as he characterizes the political prisoners as morally and intellectually superior in their attempts to enlighten the minds of others with the recounting of resistance anecdotes: “Il faudrait passionner ces types pour quelque chose d'autre que pour la soupe ou la faim [...] mais a-t-on le droit de priver ces malheureux de leur sommeil, se demandent ceux qui tentent d'améliorer par l'esprit les tristes conditions de leur vie”( *Trois bagnes*, p.181). Micheline Giraudon's archival testimony is also typical in its emphasis upon the instructional role of resistance inmates: “Nous avons été, en toute modestie, au combat les premières en connaissant bien les raisons pour lesquelles on se battait, ce qui n'avait pas toujours été le cas pour d'autres qui se sont trouvées au camp sans trop savoir comment cela leur arrivait, et à qui il a fallu expliquer beaucoup de choses...” (p.11).

<sup>138</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.87

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*, p.58

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, p.86

<sup>141</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.176

admises que les nôtres, dont la conduite est irréprochable”.<sup>142</sup> This “clan” or select society is yet one more manifestation of the way in which the concurrent political hierarchy maintained a deliberate distance between those who inhabited its upper echelons and those who did not share its values<sup>143</sup>. And indeed, the undeniable sense of moral segregation underpinning this hierarchy often engendered a sentiment of alienation amongst those who perceived that they were relegated to its lowest ranks, as Yvonne Pagniez acknowledges: “C’est un des pires supplices de notre bagne, cette promiscuité [...] avec des créatures totalement dévoyées, qui se haïssent entre elles et nous poursuivent souvent d’une haine féroce, parce qu’elles nous sentent sur un autre plan moral”.<sup>144</sup> Simone Veil (a French Jewish woman) further illustrates the segregationist effects of the resistance social order from the perspective of one relegated to the outer:

Les déportées résistantes nous tenaient à distance. Surtout qu’on ne confonde pas nos situations. Déjà au camp, à l’occasion de très exceptionnelles rencontres, j’avais constaté cette fracture entre nous, cette forme de mépris que beaucoup avaient à notre égard.<sup>145</sup>

Although certainly widespread in French political testimonies, this sense of hierarchy is, however, by no means universal. Simone Alizon, for instance, although noting the existence of such perceived distinctions among other political prisoners in the camp environment (“Les vraies résistantes étaient parfois entre elles, plus ou moins méprisantes pour les malheureuses qui n’avaient pas ‘fait leurs preuves’”<sup>146</sup>), takes issue with a testimony written by an un-named fellow political prisoner which focuses upon the inherent superiority of those in the upper reaches of this hierarchy: “Peut-être le temps qui passe fait-il perdre une juste vue des choses?... Elle se plaignait que les déportées, non résistantes, avaient été un poids pour les premières. Où donc avait-elle senti cela?”<sup>147</sup>. Despite her refusal of this aspect of the resistance-based hierarchy, however, Alizon repeatedly emphasizes her own identity as an authentic “red triangle” and thus situates herself firmly within the accompanying “political” reality.

Within the camp, then, adhesion to this particular “political” reality appears to have allowed French political prisoners to maintain their value system if not intact (a veritable impossibility given the reality of camp life), at least semi-functional in principle, whilst also tempering their initially widespread exclusion from the camp hierarchy by furnishing them with an alternative sense of personal identity which was far removed from their frequent consignment to the lowest hierarchical rung as a camp nonentity. The potential *textual* function of this

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<sup>142</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.88

<sup>143</sup> Note that this sense of difference even appears to have filtered down to children in the camps. Francine Christophe, for example, mentions her reaction upon finding out that a French prisoner to whom she had previously been close was in fact a *droit commun*: “Bah! Nous n’irons plus le voir, on nous a repérés” (*Une petite fille privilégiée*, p.84).

<sup>144</sup> Yvonne Pagniez, *Scènes de la vie du bagne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1947), p.68

<sup>145</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, p.249

<sup>146</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.321

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid*, p.322

coexistent reality, however, is somewhat more multifaceted. On the one hand, it may be seen to consolidate still further the self-distancing of the author from the blatant amorality of the central functionary hierarchy. In this respect, the *non-dit* becomes a particularly significant textual presence — in situating the testimonial self firmly within and prioritising this alternative, opposing hierarchy and its implied values, the unarticulated subtext may be seen to simultaneously imply a non-participation in the grey zone and all it represents. The *non-dit* is left to reaffirm the unbroken continuance of conventional morality silently demanded by the reading public. Secondly, the sustained emphasis upon an author's placement in a parallel reality which defines him or her as overtly "political" may also in part signify an authorial awareness of the unequal valorization of testimonial genres, in accordance with Michael Pollak's assertion that dominant perceptions "[...] valorisent les victimes de la persécution politique plus que celles de la persécution raciale".<sup>148</sup> It may well be, therefore, that a political author's focus upon a concurrent, morally legitimate hierarchical entity and attendant secundarization of the grey zone is a primary element of a process of self-definition, and that the consolidation of authorial identity as unmistakably "political" (and thus aligned with simplistic public perceptions of "good" in the concentration camp) holds greater significance for these authors than the grey zone<sup>149</sup>. It should be noted, though, that however much these authors emphasize their resistance identity and adhesion to the ranks of political inmates, their sense of hierarchy is a generalized one and their testimonies as a whole remain essentially non-militant. As Pollak rightly notes, any overtly militant testimonial approach risks forfeiting its universal legitimacy and alienating significant sectors of the reading public<sup>150</sup>, as well as compromising the diuturnal potential of the narrative.

This concurrent political-based reality may be seen as significant with regard to the testimonial portrayal of the grey zone not only as a negative entity (negating and minimizing the grey zone in the narrative context), but also as a positive or active textual aspect, defining and legitimizing any interaction with the functionary system by situating it within the "autre plan moral" to which Yvonne Pagniez refers. Just as the prisoner functionary system centred upon the values of force, authority, power and strength, so too this alternative hierarchy proclaims a value system of its own with regard to the question of privilege. In this arena there is a general consensus uniting testimonies by French political prisoners — a code of practice, as it were,

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<sup>148</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.34

<sup>149</sup> Interestingly, Charlotte Delbo is a notable exception to this hierarchical trend. Although a political prisoner, Delbo largely refuses reference to any external identifications in favour of a rigorous textual reimmersion within the camp experience. The extracts on various aspects of camp life which constitute Delbo's text look to nothing beyond the immediate experience, in order to portray the all-consuming nature of a given moment in the camp. The self-awareness of a survivor recounting her experience to the public and keen to situate herself within the resistance schematic is therefore largely eclipsed by the uncompromising ground-level perspective of an inmate unable to focus beyond the terrors of camp life. Indeed, the grey zone is infinitely less prominent in Delbo's texts as a whole, remaining as it did outside of her immediate experience and thus estranged from her narrative strategy.

<sup>150</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.211

which is repeatedly alluded to in these narratives (regardless of divergences in political affiliations), and lends them a high degree of commonality. It may be briefly synopsised thus: that it was acceptable for a French political inmate to utilise the functionary system and its privileges for his or her own survival, but not for the exploitation of other prisoners. The political prisoner participating in the functionary system also assumed the responsibility to aid others wherever possible and practicable.

It is to a male narrative which we will briefly turn for an outline of this general code of conduct, for Robert Antelme provides perhaps the clearest and most succinct summation of it in his comparison of the attitudinal and practical participation in the functionary system exemplified by two interpreters: Lucien, a *droit commun* inmate and Gilbert, a political prisoner. Whereas Antelme defines Lucien as working solely for the SS and the Kapos, effecting a one way dialogue which never places him in the position of prisoner interpreter, Gilbert, by contrast,

[...] fut l'interprète des détenus, c'est-à-dire qu'il ne se servit de la langue allemande que pour tenter de neutraliser les SS, les *Kapos*, les *meister* [...] Il remplissait son rôle de détenu politique, il prévenait, il couvrait les copains, il leur servait de rempart. Alors, être interprète n'était pas simplement une planque, c'était aussi une risque supplémentaire.<sup>151</sup>

The essential contrast between the generic *droit commun* kapo and the political functionary lies in this assumption of responsibility toward others, that "rôle de détenu politique" which Antelme portrays as conspicuously absent among non-resistant functionaries:

Pour ces droit commun allemands, la qualité de *kapo* — qui pour un politique devait surtout comporter des responsabilités à l'égard des camarades détenus, dans le même sens où pour Gilbert la qualité d'interprète en comportait — n'était que le moyen de quitter le rayé, de puiser à volonté dans les rations des détenus, de devenir eux-mêmes, au camp, des hommes d'une nature différente de celle des détenus, d'acquérir [...] le pouvoir absolu.<sup>152</sup>

As the sole French political inmate navigating within the functionary system in Antelme's text, Gilbert repeatedly personifies the ideal political functionary, utilising his position for altruistic ends and steadfastly refusing the exploitation of others.

This "political" code of functionary conduct is a defining thematic *leitmotif* throughout the resistance-based French narratives within our corpus. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, for example, underlines the general altruistic objective and sense of responsibility for the wider good governing the political prisoner's approach to the functionary system: "Dans tous les camps, des résistants ont tenté d'occuper, pour le bien de tous, des postes tenus jusqu'alors par des droit commun, tandis que les *Kapos* se mettaient généralement au service des SS pour leur propre bénéfice".<sup>153</sup> For Odette Améry, responsibility is also the guiding principle. She describes the political prisoners in her convoy as "[...] un tout homogène, conscientes des responsabilités qu'elles ont acceptées depuis le jour où elles ont décidé de combattre pour la

<sup>151</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.133

<sup>152</sup> Ibid, p.133

<sup>153</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.187

liberté".<sup>154</sup> When Claudie, a member of her convoy, proves the exception to the behavioural rule by participating in the abuses of the grey zone (working for and endorsing a cruel *blockova*), she is portrayed as violating the functionary code of conduct which defines political prisoners and is summarily dismissed from categorization amongst their ranks: "Elle n'a plus rien de politique".<sup>155</sup> In a similar vein, Myriam (the French interviewee featured in Pollak's *L'expérience concentrationnaire*), attests that the fact of being a political prisoner brought with it a schematic of responsibilities with regard to the functionary system, asserting that upon her appointment as a doctor in the *Revier* at Auschwitz, she was contacted by the political network and formally made privy to the "official" political code of conduct.<sup>156</sup>

The political or resistance identity and attendant accepted code of functionary conduct, then, appears to be the primary influence upon the treatment of the grey zone and functionary system in the testimonies of French political prisoners as a whole. And given that such a shared conception of admissible "political" conduct serves as the defining feature of these narratives (acting as the elemental mechanism dictating the testimonial conceptualization, definition and responses of French political prisoners to the grey zone), it is clear that the concept of any gender divergence must be of ultimately lesser testimonial significance in this particular sphere. Indeed, in the context of a strong resistance-based value system governing the attitude of these prisoners to power and privilege in the camps (not to mention those universal factors – such as international antagonism and linguistic isolation – defining the grey zone experience of French inmates as a whole), it must be acknowledged that a level of commonality was created for all French politicals which eclipsed or superseded any real gender differences. The identity of a given resistance author as French and as political dictates his or her response to the grey zone system to a far greater extent than whether they are male or female, relegating gender to a secondary role which is of little consequence here. And thus, while the grey zone features as a pivotal concept within French women's testimonies, the context of its portrayal is significantly less gender defined and more universal than many other realms of camp experience.

This essential commonality is clearly evident if we examine exactly how actual French participation in the functionary system — with regard to those French prisoners who did in fact manage to procure a privileged position — is treated in the testimonial setting. For these political writers, be they male or female, such participation is firmly contextualized within the confines of the concurrent political reality, with the attendant values and code of conduct forming the moral and conceptual framework within which it is presented. *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück* is representative of the general tone with the assertion that resistant inmates "[...] refusaient d'entrer dans la hiérarchie du camp, sauf dans les postes où elles pouvaient se rendre utiles à

<sup>154</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.55

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid*, p.151

<sup>156</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.164

leurs camarades”.<sup>157</sup> If we turn now to examine one or two selected texts by French political prisoners in greater detail, we will forge a clearer picture of the extent to which the scheme of resistance values pertaining to active interaction with the functionary system informs their testimonial approach.

Nelly Gorce provides a useful starting point. The general tone of her text leaves no doubt that Gorce places herself firmly within the sphere of resistance ideals, with numerous ardent declarations of her belief in the cause characterizing her testimony as a whole: “Notre sacrifice n’est pas inutile, nous pouvons mourir, ce ne sera pas en vain puisque notre martyr aura servi, dans une faible mesure, à bouter l’ennemi hors de France”<sup>158</sup> and again “[...] il serait presque doux de disparaître du monde pour une belle cause, alors que nous sommes ivres de notre foi et convaincues de la beauté de notre tâche”<sup>159</sup>. Gorce’s portrayal of herself and her fellow resisters as soldiers fighting for a cause is strongly suggestive of her pride at belonging to this extra-camp reality: “J’ai lutté, tu le sais, en soldat, j’aimerais avoir la récompense offerte à ceux dont le sang a imbibé le champ de bataille”<sup>160</sup>. Unsurprisingly, then, her textual interpretation of French participation in any form of privilege corresponds closely with that of the coexistent political reality, focusing almost exclusively upon self-distancing from exploitative or abusive functionary behaviour and aiding others.

Although Gorce stresses the somewhat closed nature of the functionary system to the French women (asserting with regard to their German co-inmates that “[...] leur esprit d’entraide était très poussé; dès qu’une place était libre, elles y casaient une des leurs”<sup>161</sup>), she provides several examples of French women occupying positions of minor privilege and thus wielding its accompanying power over their fellow inmates. Right from the outset, where the group of eight French women who are accorded the role of *Zimmerdienst* in quarantine “[...] assurent d’une façon charmante leur service”<sup>162</sup> and refrain from utilising their power to maltreat others, Gorce establishes what will be a largely consistent positive testimonial approach to the French occupation of privileged positions. Later, Gorce herself actively seeks out the role of *Zimmerdienst*, citing her resistance principles, and more specifically her desire to escape

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<sup>157</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.329. Whether such conceptualizations postdate the camp experience and are primarily a testimonial phenomenon is a delicate issue and one which is all but impossible to verify. It is, however, an aspect of the grey zone which Levi, for all the comprehensiveness of his discourse on the subject, accords little emphasis. Although it is no doubt true that “[...] the harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with the power” (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.28), is it not equally evident that a prisoner with a strong value system, acquiring a position with extra nourishment removing him from the effects of starvation psychosis and allowing a degree of rational thought will utilise the position in accordance with his value system?

<sup>158</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.53

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p.70

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, pp116-117

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, p.44

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, p.31

selection for a commando fabricating German munitions, as the rationale governing her participation in the functionary system. Here, then, Gorce depicts her own manipulation and utilisation of the system of privilege in order to uphold resistance ideals — a realignment of the functionary system to render it a resistance-based tool rather than a tool for the exploitation of others. At the same time as she reinterprets its uses and objectives, Gorce also portrays her participation in privilege as a means of helping others, mentioning that “En compensation, nous recevions une double ration de soupe, ce n’était évidemment pas à dédaigner et cela m’a souvent aidée à grossir le rata d’une vieille amie dont la faim était continuelle”.<sup>163</sup>

At one stage, Gorce’s privileged position also requires her to distribute the soup; an experience which Gorce again fits squarely within the value system of a political inmate, synthesizing the twin themes of aiding others and assuming responsibility for fulfilling her role with fairness and justice in the face of moral ambiguity:

[...] s’il est chaud, je n’en ai jamais assez, cependant j’aime en conserver un bidon pour rechauffer après l’appel les malades et nos compagnes plus âgées; alors, c’est la ruée, chacune voulant être la plus vieille, l’une d’elles simule même souvent l’évanouissement pour m’attendrir; je voudrais contenter chacune et surtout être juste [...] Comme c’est difficile! Le pire est l’heure de la soupe [...] Le drame est lorsque apparaissent de petits brimborions de viande. Comme il n’y en a pas pour tout le monde, celles qui les reçoivent sont soupçonnées de favoritisme et je me fais huer. Comme j’ai pris ma tâche à coeur, comprenant si bien que le moindre tort que je pourrais involontairement faire à mes compagnes leur enlèverait un peu de leur potentiel vital, je vis dans une tension extrêmement pénible.<sup>164</sup>

The emphasis on the responsibility inherent in this privileged role, and the weight which Gorce attributes to this responsibility (to the extent that it metamorphoses into a mental torment) are closely assimilated to Robert Antelme’s interpretation of the responsibilities of political prisoners. Gorce concludes her presentation of herself as responsible political with an unequivocal affirmation of her refusal to utilise this position to exploit others for her personal gain, when a woman offers her a bread ration as bribery for meat from the soup: “Indignée, j’essayai de lui faire comprendre l’injure qu’elle me faisait en me proposant ce marché et lui interdis de m’adresser désormais la parole”.<sup>165</sup> Her response is characterized by both a subtle sense of pride at her adhesion to the resistance hierarchy (which allows her to feel insulted at being asked to renege upon these values) and an emphasis upon the inherent intransigence of her stance, which will tolerate no negotiation. Gorce’s testimonial portrayal of her own stance therefore clearly dissociates her from the grey zone as such — the interspersed engagement with the functionary system with strong reminders of her resistance beliefs forging an unmistakable correspondance between the two.

Nor is the narrative dominion of these political functionary values (non-exploitation of others, aiding fellow inmates) by any means gender determined and exclusive to female French

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, p.66

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, pp72-73

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, pp73-74



political inmates. An analysis of Sylvain Kaufmann's *Le livre de la mémoire*, (a male political testimony which features French participation in the system of privilege) yields comparable attitudinal emphasis. Although incarcerated as a racial prisoner, Kaufmann was also an active resistant, with his testimony therefore displaying the predominant characteristics of the political prisoner's value system. Kaufmann's narrative is particularly interesting by virtue of the significant opportunities he is given to participate in the functionary system (opportunities which he attributes to his Aryan appearance and general demeanour), and thereby to incarnate political values. On the first occasion, a hated prisoner functionary accords Kaufmann the job of secretary — a role which allows him unlimited access to food and warmth. Kaufmann's emphasis, however, is not merely on his own good fortune, but on his manipulation of the system in order to provide practical aid (in the form of food) to his friends:

Ouvrant un large placard il me dit le plus naturellement du monde: 'Tu as là tout ce que tu veux. Pain blanc, café, sucre, miel, vodka, cigarettes à volonté'. Je me contenterai du repas de midi, abondant par rapport à l'ordinaire du camp, et riche en pâtes, haricots et autres légumes. Je connaîtrai bientôt les heures où Rudi s'absente, les copains en profiteront pour venir au ravitaillement, repartant avec un morceau de pain, des biscuits, après avoir bu un café brûlant bien sucré. Rudi doit bien se douter qu'il m'est impossible d'avoir un tel appétit, mais jamais il ne me fera la moindre remarque.<sup>166</sup>

This aid extends even to prisoners whom Kaufmann does not know personally:

Un jour frappe à la fenêtre de mon bureau un garçon qui ne fait pas partie du groupe que je fréquente. Enhardi par le nombre de tasses de café qu'il m'a vu sortir vers des amis assoiffés d'une boisson chaude, il me demande s'il peut en avoir une tasse et peut-être un morceau de sucre. Je cherche la tasse la plus grande que je puisse trouver et lui mets trois morceaux de sucre. Ses yeux deviennent des boules de loto de stupéfaction.<sup>167</sup>

Kaufmann also utilises his position and the influence it brings him to act as an intermediary selling jewels, exchanging much of his profit for medicine to benefit the prisoners in the *Revier*.

On his transfer to Dachau, a similar situation arises, with Kaufmann gaining the coveted position of block leader, along with its attendant advantages of supplementary rations and respite from outdoor work. Although Kaufmann accepts in order to assure his own survival ("Je pense en toute sincérité qu'au moins autant que n'importe qui, je mérite ce poste de confiance et de survie assurée"<sup>168</sup>), his avowal to effect change in the way the block is run and the appointment of assistants betrays his political value base: "Je me promets de changer la règle que j'ai toujours vue appliquée, celle du planqué éternel chargé de ces besognes de tout repos pour faire, à tour de rôle, bénéficier de la corvée des hommes dont l'état physique nécessite une journée de repos"<sup>169</sup>.

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<sup>166</sup> Sylvain Kaufmann, *Le livre de la mémoire*, pp232-233

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p.241

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, pp292-293

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p.292

With all of these actions, Kaufmann therefore strongly incarnates the values typifying French political prisoners in the testimonial context and the type of structural metamorphosis the practical application of such values could touch off. In utilising his positions of power to supply variously food, medicine and much needed rest to those beneath him in the camp hierarchy, Kaufmann may be seen to be effecting a veritable inversion of the grey zone system through active intervention at its middle level. The downward flow of power which characterizes a tyrannical system is interrupted and reinterpreted by Kaufmann's deliberate attempts to change accepted practices — attempts which transform the objective of this power in its passage from higher to lower hierarchical echelons from oppression to aid, and which constitute something of a reinvestiture of power towards those at the base of the hierarchy. Such practical application of the functionary values of political prisoners may also be regarded as highly beneficial for the self-esteem of the functionary involved, in line with Michael Pollak's dictum that "Chaque fois que les prisonniers osent sortir d'une conduite de soumission, ils parviennent à rétablir l'estime de soi et le sentiment d'avoir prise sur la réalité"<sup>170</sup>.

For those resistance writers whose portrayal of French political participation in the functionary system stems not from their own experience, but from a description of the acts and attitude incarnated by another individual, the picture presented is strikingly similar<sup>171</sup>. Simone Alizon, a political prisoner who experienced both Auschwitz-Birkenau and Ravensbrück, describes Danielle, a French dentist, who, due to her profession, initially becomes the sole member of the "haute hiérarchie" from their convoy. Once again, this representative of the French political prisoners is portrayed as utilising her position principally to aid others: "Contrairement à la plupart des détenus, hommes ou femmes, ayant une fonction dans le camp, elle ne fit jamais le jeu des SS. Elle fit, au contraire, ce qu'elle put pour nous secourir [...] Ce fut la première chance inouïe du convoi"<sup>172</sup>. She is perpetually described influencing and ameliorating the living conditions of her fellow prisoners ("notre protectrice faisait jouer ses relations pour tenter de placer les camarades dans des kommandos moins durs"<sup>173</sup>), whilst the

<sup>170</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.268

<sup>171</sup> Examples of such positive characterization of other French prisoners in the functionary role are far too numerous to detail here at any length. Particularly noteworthy, though, are the glowing descriptions of French medical workers who are generally cast as "[...]des modèles de dévouement et d'abnégation" (Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, p.115). See also the depiction of French medical staff in the narratives of, among others, René Chavanne, Aimé Bonifas and Léon Mazeaud in *Tragédie de la déportation*, p.309. Also of interest in a more general sense are Yvonne Pagniez's emphatic portrait of Madeleine's positive use of her role as interpreter (*Scènes de la vie du bagne*, pp174-175), and Paul Tillard's depiction of the transformation of the work atmosphere under the command of red triangle kapos whose goal "[...] n'est plus de harceler les hommes harassés de fatigue, mais de les préserver" (*Le grand livre des témoins* (Paris: Ramsay/ FNDIRP, 1995), p.235).

<sup>172</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.114

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid*, p.212. Note that Alizon's depiction of the positive functionary role enacted by this dentist (the communist prisoner Danielle Casanova, who died of typhus in Auschwitz) is echoed in other texts written by members of the same convoy. Adélaïde Hautval, for instance, describes Danielle's actions on behalf of her *camarades* thus: "Avec une vision claire de l'avenir et des données possibles, elle se fixe tout un programme: leur procurer des 'emplois', voler pour elles des médicaments, détourner des victuailles, prendre sur sa ration propre et

“chaîne de solidarité entre politiques”<sup>174</sup> also secures Alizon herself a job in the privileged and sheltered Raisko commando.

Significantly, however, Alizon’s description of the participation in the functionary system by French political inmates is not devoid of dissension, and it is here that Alizon is particularly useful in exemplifying a further aspect of the relation of such prisoners to the system of privilege. While there may have been a broad commonality in the resistance-based approach to the functionary system and an overarching convergence of values amongst this group of French inmates (in particular hinging upon the dictum that privilege should be utilised where possible to aid other prisoners), the reality of the concentration camp environment meant that this could only ever be a loose, non-schematic commonality — a tentative approach rather than an absolute. Given the type of choices confronting those operating in many areas of the system of privilege, an irrefutable right or wrong moral choice was often far from evident, and a rigid set of prescribed values governing the behaviour of political prisoner functionaries was therefore a veritable impossibility. Lawrence Langer is particularly emphatic on this point, stressing that camp choices were in no way comparable to conventional moral choices:

As one wavers between the ‘dreadful’ and the ‘impossible’, one begins to glimpse a deeper level of reality in the deathcamp, where moral choice as we know it was superfluous and inmates were left with the futile task of redefining decency in an atmosphere that could not support it<sup>175</sup>,

and again:

[...] little discredit falls to these victims, who were plunged into a crisis of what we might call ‘choiceless choice’, where crucial decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victim’s own choosing<sup>176</sup>.

Consequently, for French political prisoners, participation in the functionary system was not, and could not be, simply a formulaic matter of utilising their privileged role solely to survive and to help others. By their very nature, these roles demanded deeper involvement, unpleasant choices and the perpetual manipulation of other prisoners and the system. Consider the doctors in the camp *Reviers*, who were forced to designate patients both for selections for extermination and for reception of the limited number of medicines available. Here, the issue at hand is less one of aiding other prisoners than of deciding *which* prisoners should be aided, and granted the right to live. The prisoner doctor’s power could be considerable, but it was essentially finite, and he or she was forced to manoeuvre and apply any attempts to aid others within the limited confines of a system which dictated that a certain number of prisoners must be sent to their

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surtout leur apporter jour après jour un soutien moral sûr et constant. Jusqu’au bout Danielle restera fidèle à ce programme — toujours” (*Médecine et crimes contre l’humanité*, p.32). See also Marie-Elisa Cohen, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris), p.4.

<sup>174</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.233

<sup>175</sup> Lawrence Langer, *Versions of Survival*, p.74

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid*, p.72

death. In this sphere, the application of the political functionary's dictum of aiding others was, as always, interpreted within its contextual reality, with the political doctor's resultant decision usually involving condemning those patients who were beyond help to extermination or the deprivation of medicine and thereby according the healthier patients a chance to live<sup>177</sup>. Similar dilemmas were confronted by doctors with regard to pregnant women (did they abort a foetus or kill a baby in order that the mother should live?), and by those political inmates compiling lists for transports or selections, who, as Terrence Des Pres notes, were forced to use death as a stratagem in sending away the "undesirable" camp element and retaining their political counterparts:

And what this demanded of individual prisoners was the capacity to face moments of hard choice'. Life was saved by using death strategically, and this involved a moral dilemma which members of the underground simply had to accept and live with, no matter how difficult and cruel, no matter how hurtful to innocence<sup>178</sup>.

Unable to aid everyone, if the French political functionary had the chance to save or aid another prisoner through the mechanism of the grey zone, who should they aid and for what reason?<sup>179</sup> "Tant de fois", attests Adélaïde Hautval, "on se trouve en face de tels problèmes, et pour les résoudre on est seule avec soi-même, car l'absolu ne semble plus exister"<sup>180</sup>.

It was this type of opaque moral choice which lay at the root of the phenomenon which is discernible in Alizon's testimonial offering — that of factionalization amongst French political inmates. Given that French political functionaries were forced to make individual choices as to who would benefit from whatever aid they might be in a position to offer, the results of these choices could lead to considerable tension between members of the "parallel hierarchy". Alizon, for example, gives voice to this tension in her strong criticism of the attitude of the French dentist (a communist) and her fellow party members, for their politicization of the aid accorded to their fellow inmates. While these women worked to aid their compatriots as a

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<sup>177</sup> The comments by a camp doctor to a patient which are featured in Wormser and Michel's *La tragédie de la déportation* provide a clear insight into the tactics adopted by medical staff and the rationale underlying them: "Il y a actuellement, dans le camp, me dit-il, trois fois plus de malades que je n'en puis accueillir. La guerre sera finie dans cinq ou six mois au plus tard. Il s'agit, pour moi, de faire tenir le coup jusque-là au plus grand nombre possible. J'ai choisi. Vous et d'autres, vous vous remettez lentement [...] Je vous garde. Et — écoutez-moi bien — je fais entrer ceux qui ne sont pas très gravement atteints, qu'un séjour au *Revier* peut sauver. Ceux qui sont perdus, je les refuse. Je ne peux pas m'offrir le luxe de les accueillir pour leur offrir une mort paisable. Ce que j'assume, c'est la garde des vivants. Les autres mourront huit jours plus tôt; de toute façon il seraient morts trop tôt [...] Je ne fais pas de sentiment, je fais de l'efficacité. C'est mon rôle [...] Tous mes confrères sont d'accord avec moi, c'est la voie juste. Mais nous ne pardonnerons jamais aux Allemands d'avoir contraint des médecins à faire un tel choix pour respecter leur vocation. Chaque fois que je refuse l'entrée à un moribond et qu'il me regarde avec stupeur, avec effroi, j'ai l'impression de commettre un assassinat" (pp301-302). See also Adélaïde Hautval, *Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, p.45 and p.52.

<sup>178</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.128

<sup>179</sup> Terrence Des Pres also sets out clearly the wider stratagem adopted by camp resistance movements in engagement with the grey zone — namely that it was imperative that "special" prisoners be protected: "A prisoner was 'special' precisely to the degree that he or she participated in resistance activities. Experienced members had to survive if the underground was to remain organized and effective. In the end everyone in camp would benefit" (*The Survivor*, p.125).

<sup>180</sup> Adélaïde Hautval, *Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, p.45

whole, Alizon (a non-communist political prisoner) asserts that they simultaneously reserved the best positions with the greatest chances of survival for the intellectuals comprising the higher party ranks, choosing to prioritise these individuals and thereby instituting a politically selective approach with regard to the issues of aid and survival: “Un autre membre de cette hiérarchie suffisante dit un jour devant moi: ‘Il faut sauver les cadres. On trouvera toujours des militants de base’. Ce fut mon tour d’être profondément indignée en entendant cette remarque”,<sup>181</sup> and again “[...] on sauva les cadres en premier, presque dans les tout premiers jours, en les plaçant dans des kommandos où les conditions de vie étaient infiniment moins dures. Cela fut fait si secrètement que, sauf les voisines immédiates, personne n’en sut rien”.<sup>182</sup> At the same time, Alizon argues that this selective approach was synthesized with a lack of respect for those resistance prisoners deemed as non-intellectual, as she illustrates with the following incident:

Une des six avait été envoyée pour faire du nettoyage au laboratoire. Cette jeune femme, au ravissant visage, était dans le civil ouvrière d’usine [...] Ce fut la poignée de scientifiques, membres de notre convoi appartenant à la hiérarchie de Parti, qui renvoyèrent, vite et méchamment, dans les champs notre gentille amie. Son niveau intellectuel n’avait pas été jugé digne de nos distinguées diplômées. Cette fille si charitable fut profondément blessée par leur attitude et n’oublia jamais l’affront qui lui avait été fait.<sup>183</sup>

Even the dentist whom Alizon has perpetually lauded as their unflinching protector, is depicted as manifesting a comparable disengagement from the non-elite amongst the French resistance inmates:

Notre dévouée protectrice elle-même, lorsqu’elle venait jusqu’à notre block, ne ralentissait jamais son pas en passant auprès des camarades; sauf si elle connaissait l’une ou l’autre personnellement. Elle filait droit vers les responsables sans accorder un bonjour, un sourire ni un geste de la main à ‘sa base’ et aux autres détenues françaises. Cela m’étonna et me choqua de la part d’une grande dirigeante [...] Si les responsables politiques ont été d’une solidarité sans faille concernant l’entraide matérielle, il n’en fut pas de même sur le plan moral.<sup>184</sup>

The tendency of the communist prisoners to value political particularity above all else, to prioritise intellectualism and the perpetuation of the party over individual survival, therefore constitutes the functionary choices of one group of political prisoners. Alizon’s criticism of the particular choices of this faction of political prisoners within the wider overarching value

<sup>181</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.271

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid*, p.272

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, p.271

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*, pp272-273. Note that Alizon was not alone in perceiving and criticizing this particular variable of political factionalization: René Chavanne, too, expounds upon this theme at length, describing the actions of communist prisoners at Buchenwald, and adding: “Je ne leur reproche pas de nous avoir envoyés, nous les jeunes gaullistes [...] vers les commandos de Dora et de Porta, sachant parfaitement ce que cela voulait dire quant à l’espérance de vie [...] Je leur reproche, par contre, de n’avoir jamais osé l’avouer et même de l’avoir nié” (*Le cadavre réchauffé*, p.238). See also Pierre Nivomont, *Matricule 186140, histoire d’un combat*, p.143. Indeed, after the liberation of the camps, prominent communists such as Marcel Paul were frequently accused of sheltering their fellow communists at the expense of the lives of other prisoners. Annette Wiewiorka articulates the blurred demarcations of aid and collaboration: “Là où Marcel Paul, le Colonel Manhès et les autres membres du Comité des Intérêts Français voient la continuation de la Résistance en France, d’autres raisonnent en termes de collaboration avec les SS et de privilèges” (*Déportation et génocide*, p.217).

structure of French political inmates, is therefore illustrative of the tensions and dissension which existed within the political sector with regard to the functionary system, as a result of the moral ambiguity inherent in a code of conduct which could not provide more than loose demarcatory boundaries and which propagated the necessary evil of applying selectivity to prisoner aid. Such factionalization of French political prisoners is, however, ultimately less testimonially significant than the wider value system which they shared. This value system provided a governing structure for the testimonial articulation of French political participation in the system of privilege, allowing these authors to maintain an externalization of its abuses, and yet still portray French participation in a functionary system textually redefined by their own parallel reality and set of values.

Here then lies the real dichotomy, the real area of divergence in the testimonial treatment of the grey zone, and it is not a gender divergence, but rather a divergence based essentially upon the factors underlying a testimonial author's incarceration. Where the testimonies of both political and non-political female prisoners manifest the comparable phenomenon of placing the French protagonist in the role of victim or observer and thus externalizing her from the abuses of the grey zone, the contextualization of this distancing does differ. As we have seen, political prisoners tend to remove their experience from the sphere of the grey zone and its abuses, both by situating themselves within a parallel value-based hierarchy where the functionary hierarchy is rendered less significant, and by firmly defining any participation in the functionary system within the schematic of "political" values and responsibilities. Amongst non-political prisoners however (those interned for racial reasons, through mischance, or, more specifically, not as a result of any active engagement of their own), these mechanisms do not appear to be active and the predominant narrative focus is quite simply upon their exclusion from the grey zone.

For this latter group of prisoners, the testimonial portrayal of the grey zone appears to be characterized solely by externalization of its abuses and maintenance of the victim/observer role. The grey zone and the functionary hierarchy are not textually eclipsed in the writings of non-political authors by the moral superiority of another, alternative hierarchy, nor by a referral to any wider code of values beyond the individual. The testimonial account of Françoise Maous, which we examined in some detail earlier, is a case in point, with the entirety of Maous's interaction with the grey zone defined solely by the acts of witnessing and victimization, with no further context applied.

This is not to suggest, however, that the interaction of non-political French female inmates with the grey zone occurred in a vacuum devoid of values, and that these prisoners made no attempt to make positive moral choices (in so much as such a concept could exist in the camp environment). Where these authors did come into contact with the grey zone, attempts to make such positive choices are frequent indeed, but they are generally individualized choices,

undertaken without referral to any wider, prescribed set of values or any sense of responsibility derived from the prisoner's incarceration categorization. Eva Tichauer (a Jewish prisoner arrested for racial motives who embraced communism during her incarceration) provides one example in the early part of her testimony prior to her personal renaissance as a self-avowed "political" prisoner. Tichauer witnesses the *blockova* stealing from the rations of non-privileged prisoners and is offered an extra bowl of soup to buy her silence:

La *blockova* voit que je regarde, elle me sert pour acheter ma complicité. C'est ainsi qu'arrivent à vivre aux dépens de leurs camarades les cadres pourris par les SS. Cela fait partie de leur organisation: trouver des aides bourreaux plus ou moins conscients parmi les déportés eux-mêmes. Cela ne m'aurait servi à rien de refuser ce bol de soupe qui me redonnera des forces. Mais cela me révolte en même temps.<sup>185</sup>

Her minimal participation in the grey zone awakens such self-disgust that Tichauer asserts that she cannot continue to live in such a way: "Il faut vivre autrement ou mieux vaut mourir. Je ne deviendrai pas loup, je resterai un être humain".<sup>186</sup> Tichauer cites general humanist values and the desire not to descend into animalism as the reasons for her rejection of such participation in the fabric of the grey zone. Assessing her actions as wrong purely in an individual and personal sense, there is no textual tension between any avowed self conceptualization as a political prisoner and this act. Later Tichauer also describes a defining moment where she steals potatoes from the camp kitchen and realizes that her actions are depriving her fellow prisoners rather than the SS enemy.<sup>187</sup> Tichauer returns the potatoes, asserting that she will no longer steal as it is counterproductive to solidarity, but will "organise" — an approach which constitutes an act of resistance. Her decision thus illustrates that non-political prisoners were often equally as concerned with resisting the Nazi system as their political counterparts, although choices such as Tichauer's stem primarily from individual, rather than "political", interpretations of moral choice<sup>188</sup>.

Moreover, opportunities were particularly rare for French non-political prisoners to participate in the functionary system and thus to portray their choices and values at functionary level. Where French prisoners as a rule *did* manage to penetrate the functionary system, it tended to be in their role as political prisoners, appointed by other like-minded inmates in camps where "red triangles" had managed to gain ascendancy over the criminal and asocial factions. Many of the truly non-political French authors under study here therefore simply never have the opportunity to participate in the grey zone on any other level than that of victim or observer — Birnbaum, Heftler, Maous, Lagrange, Zaharia Asséo and Alcan all fall into this category. It is therefore unsurprising that externalization and exclusion from the grey zone tend to constitute the entirety of their testimonial interaction with it.

<sup>185</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, p.90

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid*, p.90

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid*, p.114

<sup>188</sup> Note, however, that these choices remain nuanced and coloured by the camp environment. Tichauer has no qualms (p.80) about stealing gloves from the bunk of a prisoner employed in the Canada commando, knowing that this prisoner will be in a position to replace them the same day.

Within these more focal divisions, then, testimonial gender divergences in the realm of the grey zone and functionary system remain largely minimal. With regard to women prisoners (amongst whom, as we shall shortly discover, the group mentality and concept of solidarity were particularly significant), it is tempting to utilise the question of solidarity to construct gender divergences within the grey zone. One could cultivate the argument that where solidarity and the group mentality were operative, the grey zone was consequently less significant, given that it relied principally upon an exploitation of others and an internal disunity which extensive solidarity by its very nature would preclude. The subsequent conclusion would be that if solidarity is indeed more prevalent amongst women prisoners, the grey zone must therefore be less operative and indeed less pervasive in female camp life. To reason thus fails to address the reality of the issue. Indeed, the two are far from mutually exclusive, and if solidarity was operative amongst prisoners, the grey zone could still flourish. This was because solidarity, as we shall soon see, tended to operate not universally, but rather in small, defined pockets, and thus a group whose camp experience was defined by a real and tangible collective mentality may still have utilised the grey zone and exploited others external to their circle for the benefit of the group. Hence we see the Polish women who are perpetually pinpointed by French female authors as among the most intimately involved in the grey zone simultaneously displaying a strong sense of solidarity amongst themselves<sup>189</sup>. In fact, perhaps, the most significant influence that any greater female solidarity exercises on the testimonial portrayal of the grey zone is in emphasis — in diminishing the testimonial emphasis placed upon the grey zone by according greater weight to the significance of group interaction. This trend is indeed evident, as we shall see, in the majority of French female narratives. We shall now turn to examine the issues of solidarity and collective survival strategies, and the extent to which they define French women's testimonial writing.

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<sup>189</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, for instance, asserts that Polish women “faisaient preuve d’un chauvinisme odieux” (*Toute une vie de résistance*, p.92).



## Chapter Three — Solidarity and the Collective

*“ Je crois que la plupart des déportées qui ont eu la chance de survivre disent à peu près la même chose. Elles ont connu la barbarie mais aussi la fraternité et, pour cette raison, cette expérience n’a pas détruit leur foi en l’humanité”.<sup>1</sup>*

In this chapter, we shall progress beyond the confines of the grey zone to a wider, and perhaps more gender pertinent, examination of the question of inmate relations. For not only was the camp experience of the vast majority of French prisoners extrinsic to the structural, if not the influential, parameters of the functionary system, but the shadow cast by this system — far-reaching and suffusive though it may be — by no means constitutes the definitive testimonial focus with regard to inmate interaction. Indeed, certain scholars of camp literature conceive the broad sphere of inmate relations in terms of an eternally abstruse paradox which sees testimonial depictions of the selfishness or egocentricity of camp reality coexist closely with instances of solidarity or mutual co-operation. Marlene Heinemann articulates this quintessential conflict thus:

One of the curiosities of Holocaust memoirs is that the vast majority contain contradictory evidence about the predominance of selfishness over co-operation in the concentration and death camps. General statements about helping and comradeship stand side by side with assertions that the Nazi system set people against each other and that selfish responses were the norm. Some memoirs emphasize such egocentric responses as stealing food, rejecting communication with other inmates or limiting concern to one’s own suffering or safety. But sometimes the same accounts, or others, stress the comforting power of conversation, the saving of comrades’ lives or the pain of seeing others suffer [...] Each Holocaust memoirist must come up with a balance in writing about the tension between the egocentric and co-operative aspects of the experience, and this balance varies considerably.<sup>2</sup>

Terrence Des Pres echoes Heinemann’s assessment, both in his delineation of the existence of such a conflict and in the necessity of determining in which direction the prisoner’s personal balance will fall:

Help one another. Every man for himself. The conflict is classic, and nowhere more starkly stressed than in the concentration camp ordeal. For as soon as survivors wake to the reality of their predicament they must choose. They must decide which view will govern their behaviour and their perception of camp life as a whole...<sup>3</sup>

Des Pres also suggests that many testimonies synthesize both these antithetical elements, resulting in an apparent textual contradiction: “[...] a contradiction which occurs so often in reports by survivors that it amounts to a double vision at the heart of their testimony”.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, Online document. Available: <http://www.fndirp.com/>, March 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, pp81-82

<sup>3</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.97

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p.97

The critically-perceived existence of this binary tension between two seemingly irreconcilable forces thus obligates us to examine the second blade of this double-edged sword. We have already analysed French women's testimonial responses to the individualism and self-privileging upon which the grey zone was built, but what then of the flip side of the coin — namely, the issues of solidarity and mutual aid? Is there indeed a “double vision” of egoism and solidarity characterizing French female testimonies? Or if these testimonies, as we concluded in the previous chapter, comprehensively externalize the former, do they therefore default to a vision whose primary emphasis is the latter? And if, as our examination of the grey zone ultimately implied, gender differences were narratively equalized under suffering and the influence of wider prisoner self-conceptualizations, can the same testimonial gender normalization be seen to hold true for the question of solidarity? An appraisal of how non-vertically structured inmate relations are defined and portrayed in the narratives of French women prisoners is therefore imperative if we are to configure a comprehensive picture of female testimonial reality.

In confronting the issue of solidarity in the testimonies of French women prisoners, then, this chapter will initially be structured around a bifaceted investigative nucleus. Following a broad examination of the contextual framework influencing solidarity within the camps, we shall firstly address the question of female collective engagement. Is there, for instance, testimonial evidence of a collective culture amongst French women, a tendency to form bonds with fellow inmates and create discernible groups — do they exhibit, in short, a group mentality? Is the group prioritized in the testimonial context, and if so, how? In other words, if indeed such a culture of collectivity does exist, how is it structured and depicted — what shapes does it assume, what are its particularities, its limitations? Secondly, we will turn our attention to the concept of mutual aid, interrogating to what extent these testimonies portray women helping each other, displaying solidarity and visible “altruistic” behaviour, and the significance of such portrayals within the narrative context. Subsequent to the analysis of these inter-related dual strands of group bonding and mutual aid in the core female testimonies under study, our investigation will then proceed towards a comparison with those of their male counterparts, with the objective of establishing whether these aspects are in any way specific to the female testimonial milieu — is it, in effect, an area of real gender divergence? And finally, we shall attempt to penetrate beyond the primary level of received textual reality to examine the motivations and influences inherent in the female authorial process. Here we shall survey those factors which might impinge upon the testimonial significance of solidarity and the collective for women writers, whilst also challenging the primacy of the text as cardinal thematic indicator to analyse the subtextual portrayal of solidarity and the wider textual effect actuated by the treatment (both tacit and overt) of this thematic accentuation.

Such a genderized approach to the issues of solidarity, collectivity and mutual aid in the camps is, however, by no means the object of universal approbation by scholars of camp history, and it is therefore imperative that we pause to consider the criticisms which Joan Ringelheim advances with regard to this investigative emphasis. Ringelheim is an unusual paradox — a writer described as the “founding mother”<sup>5</sup> of women’s Holocaust studies who has produced incontrovertibly significant work centred upon female solidarity, friendship and group bonding in the camp and Holocaust context (specifically with regard to Jewish women), and yet who has latterly raised perhaps the most fervent and articulate critical voice questioning the validity of a genderized evaluation of these concepts. Indeed, in her essay entitled *Women and the Holocaust: a Reconsideration of Research*, Ringelheim effectively and overtly nullifies and invalidates if not her conclusions themselves, at least the rationale underlying them. Here Ringelheim suggests that the inevitable application of the cultural feminist framework to the study of female solidarity in fact serves to glorify the female experience and that her research in this area therefore elevated bonds between women to the status of a tangible “gain”. According to Ringelheim, it changed

[...] respect for the stories of Jewish women into some sort of glorification and led to the conclusion that these women transformed ‘a world of death and inhumanity into one more act of human life’. It was important, perhaps even crucial, for me to see choices, power, agency and strength in women’s friendships, bonding, sharing, storytelling and conversations in the camps and ghettos...<sup>6</sup>

Ringelheim argues that the implicit glorification which underlies any emphasis upon greater solidarity amongst women simultaneously minimizes and trivializes their oppression, by distorting the context in which it is presented:

It is interesting to look at differences between women and men. It is even interesting to see, if we can, whether women maintained themselves either better than or — perhaps more accurately — differently from men. However, the discovery of difference is often pernicious because it helps us to forget the context of these supposed strengths — oppression — and to ignore the possibility that they may be only apparent. To suggest that among those Jews who lived through the Holocaust, women rather than men survived better is to move toward acceptance or valorization of oppression [...] Oppression does not make people better; oppression makes people oppressed<sup>7</sup>.

She leaves no doubt of her negation of a genderized approach to this area of inquiry when she adds:

My attempt, then, to emphasize friendships among women in the camps gives a false or misleading impression that oppression is only external and not internal as well [...] In the work represented in Part I, I seemed to be saying that in spite of rape, abuse and murder of babies; in spite of starvation, separations, losses, terror and violence; in spite of everything ugly and disgusting, women bonded, loved each other [...] the focus on friendship, affection and so on distorted our understanding of a larger situation in which that experience may have played only a small role [...] The talk about friendship allowed those of us who heard the stories to admire these women, even to receive some peace and comfort. It helped to lessen the terrible surrounding

<sup>5</sup> Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.373

<sup>6</sup> Joan Ringelheim, ‘Women and the Holocaust: a Reconsideration of Research’ in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* No 10: 741-761, 1985, p.754

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.754

sounds of the Holocaust. This 'woman-centred' perspective and the questions it addressed were misguided.<sup>8</sup>

This highly circumspect approach to the evaluation of any aspect of the Holocaust which may be deemed "positive" — under the apprehension that any such emphasis will negate and minimize the horror of the overall experience — is certainly not unique to Ringelheim. Rather, it represents a widespread, and one might suggest misguided, trend encompassing a variety of areas of inquiry. This tendency is perhaps most succinctly expressed in the words of the authors of a study on rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe, plagued by comparable critical demurrals with regard to their own field of study:

In the recent past, many voices expressed a wariness of such an investigation and its focus — a fear that it could mitigate the gravity and extensiveness of the devastation. The fear was that shining light on the rescue behaviour of non-Jews would somehow brighten and thereby deny the darkness of the cavern<sup>9</sup>.

However, the convincing general riposte with which these same authors counter such scholarly reticence is equally apposite in the context of our current analysis, in its assertion that "the history of the Holocaust requires 'keeping faithfully a double memory... a memory of the best and of the worst' (Camus). Repression of either side of the ledger both distorts history and paralyzes the future"<sup>10</sup>. Beyond this broad truth, more specifically at issue here is the validity of any study of solidarity in the concentration camps (does it contain an implicit valorization which minimizes the suffering of those interned?), and, more particularly with regard to Ringelheim's argument, the introduction of gender into such a study (does it paradoxically morph into an antifeminist device trivializing and palliating the oppression of women?). Ringelheim's self-negation of her own analytical approach constructs a justificatory obligation for any researcher navigating within this field.

It is of particular import to note that the study to which Ringelheim refers (and thus also her criticism of the rationale underlying this study), is based upon *interviews* with female camp survivors. The interview context is highly particular and ultimately responsive in nature; thematic emphasis is largely spawned from interrogative stimulus, whereby it is the interviewer who assumes the directional role and to a large extent determines the aspects of experience addressed by the respondent. Ringelheim therefore encouraged her subjects to expound upon the issues of female special resources and solidarity. Within this interactive context, then, it is certainly relevant to question the validity of an emphasis upon solidarity, given that such an accentuation may be externally designated. What, however, if the choice of thematic emphasis is not ours? Within the written testimonial realm, the survivor, of her own initiative (and we shall examine the wider influences at work upon these writers in the latter part of this chapter), chooses which aspects will receive her attention. If solidarity, group bonding and mutual aid figure prominently

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.755

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality* (London: Collier Macmillan, 1988), p.x

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.xiii

in female testimonies, the choice of whether this is a “worthwhile” or justifiable area of study belongs no longer to the historian, but to the survivor, and the question of whether it valorizes oppression is rendered all but redundant — it demands examination as a feature of female testimonies. For would it really be reasonable to suggest that that very same emphasis which is apparently mistakenly pursued by historians is equally “misguided” if it simultaneously occurs in a body of primary sources? Similarly, if there appears to be a real discrepancy between the testimonies of male and female survivors in this area, then the genderized comparison must be introduced in any thorough and comprehensive study of testimonial literature. Our current analysis of the literature of deportation (a study of the testimonies themselves, whose focus is the interpretation and evaluation of authorial content rather than simply the bare presentation of historical fact) certainly obligates us to embrace such a dictum, although it also has thought-provoking wider implications concerning the role and function of the historian. Surely the duty of any historian is to reflect and diffuse the emphasis of witnesses, rather than to assume the deific decision of what is worthy of attention, and what constitutes an admissible approach? Is it not futile to debate the historian’s direction in isolation, estranged from extempore witness orientation? Does the historian have the right to act as arbiter of the public perception, censoring what needs to be expunged or emphasized in order to ensure that the public receives the “correct” (in this case suitably horrific) impression of the experience of any particular group of individuals, and by what standards are these boundaries set? Whose is the most important decision as to what aspects to stress — the witness or the historian? And how honest a picture do we get if the historian perpetually assumes the role of decision-maker?

On a different, but no less significant, note, Ringelheim’s assertion that any emphasis on female solidarity in the camps inevitably glorifies women’s experience and thus contextually trivializes their suffering, is wholly predicated upon the implicit extra-camp assumption that solidarity or group bonding is a euphemism for moral superiority or an inherently “good” or “worthy” response to the camp environment. Ringelheim’s elemental postulation appears to be that friendship, sharing or bonding equates to a *superior* means of coping and will be interpreted as such by the audience of any research on the subject, hence the “glorification” which she deplors as a foregone conclusion. Certainly, in problematic situations thrown up by normal society, interactive, non-insular responses founded upon co-operation may merit general valorization. To decontextualize the camp environment by applying conventional societal mores, however, is to court misinterpretation. Indeed, any extensive examination of female solidarity and group bonding in the concentration camp would render explicit that such dynamics are not uniformly laudable in the camp environment (a fact to which Ringelheim alludes obliquely in a later brief comment that female solidarity may be akin to tribalism in nature but, strangely, does not employ to validate or qualify her own research). Rather, these aspects of camp experience may be regarded as simply one more form of coping within the camps, neither inherently better nor worse than many others. As we shall shortly discover, female solidarity and collectivity was

by no means universal, nor was it purely altruistic in many cases — it could serve as a means of exploiting others at the expense of one's own group, it could be opportunistic and it could certainly be self-serving. Often, it constituted a means of survival in itself, whether in a psychological sense (with the group providing an alternative source of focus to the stark reality of the camp), or assuming a practical form, providing connections and enhancing survival prospects through the pooling of emotional, physical and tangible resources. And, in the extremity of the camp environment, it is injudicious not to acknowledge the potentially active manifestation of the concept of altruism as a form of self-consideration — a possibility advanced by Samuel and Pearl Oliner in their study of *The Altruistic Personality* :

Skeptics such as Machiavelli and Hobbes would argue that humans are incapable of acting out of any other motive than their own self-interest. Even those who might have a more benevolent view of human behaviour — such as Helvetius, Plato, Marx, Freud and mainstream psychologists — suggest that people rarely act out of any motive higher than enlightened self-interest [...] enlightened self-interest counsels helping others in light of reciprocal claims. Thus, what appears like altruism turns out at best to be intelligent consideration of the self.<sup>11</sup>

To assert, therefore, that a focus upon female solidarity and bonding will automatically valorize the actions of these prisoners and minimize their oppression is to be content with a cursory analysis which fails to take account of the entire contextual reality. Any study which is extensive enough to examine the motivations underlying such bonding, and the many forms it could assume will pre-empt the automatic equation of solidarity and bonding with valour.

What, then, of Ringelheim's question whether it is "[...] a methodological and theoretical mistake to look at women and the Holocaust from the vantage point of their difference from men rather than from that of oppression"?<sup>12</sup> This too is contestable. "Sex", say Piliavin and Unger, "is always a relevant social variable whether we like it or not. Sex can affect any social interaction"<sup>13</sup>. Extreme though the environment may be, the concentration camp is also a society in itself — based on the aforementioned social interaction — and gender cannot then be irrelevant. Whereas the context of oppression in general may be well researched, the specific particularities of women's experience — or female oppression — derived from such a genderized perspective can only ameliorate the body of knowledge in this area. Moreover, studying women's experience with reference to its difference from men does not *preclude* a vantage point based upon oppression as the oppositional and tacitly mutually exclusive structure of Ringelheim's question appears to suggest — it is, quite simply, female-specific oppression. Unquestioningly, we delineate groups based upon specific experiences in research on the concentration camps — we study, among others, the reality experienced by Jews, Gypsies, resisters, homosexuals and various ethnic or religious groups and how they differed from the global reality of the whole. There is no widespread suggestion that such approaches based on

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Oliner and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality*, p.5

<sup>12</sup> Joan Ringelheim, 'Women and the Holocaust: a Reconsideration of Research' in *Signs*, p.758

<sup>13</sup> Jane Piliavin and Rhoda Unger, 'The Helpful but Helpless Female: Myth or Reality?' in Virginia O'Leary et al, *Women, Gender and Social Psychology* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Ltd, 1985), p.150

comparative difference are fundamentally flawed or misguided. Why, then, should gender be an invalid area of investigation, especially if it is a field rich in particularities? Is it due to a lingering uneasiness that the genderized approach will privilege differentiation and unearth divergences which place men and women on an unequal footing? If such is the historical reality, then so be it. For the alternative is infinitely less palatable — if we extend Ringelheim's suggestion to its ultimate reductionist conclusion (that our focus should be oppression as a whole rather than comparative differences), we run the very real risk of reducing history to a broad and lifeless schematic of generalities.

Whatever conclusion one draws on the moot point of the validity of a study of female solidarity in the camps, a cursory glance at the camp environment would initially appear to render this debate redundant. For the reality of the camp milieu brooks no argument: in contextual terms, the potential for prisoner solidarity was minimal if not altogether impracticable. The procedural systems of the camp network were specifically devised by its planners to comprehensively and plurally inhibit the germination of inmate solidarity, with pervasive and efficacious anti-solidarity mechanisms embedded in its very structure. As Pelagia Lewinska notes, the SS command responded actively and consciously to the danger of prisoner solidarity:

Jetées dans un abîme de misère, désarmées, nous aurions pu nous sauver et vivre en opposant à nos bourreaux l'arme de la solidarité, de l'union cimentée par un amour fraternel. Cependant, les organisateurs du camp avaient prévu d'avance cette éventualité si dangereuse pour eux et ont tout fait pour la rendre inopérante<sup>14</sup>,

and again

Rien n'était fortuit à Oswiecim<sup>15</sup>. Les Allemands tenaient à ce que nulle communauté ne pût être formée au camp. Que nous ne puissions nous entendre entre nous, nous organiser, exécuter un plan. Ils créaient des conditions matérielles ayant pour but de nous abaisser moralement, de semer entre nous des germes d'antipathie, de haine<sup>16</sup>.

The multitude of divisive mechanisms employed to this end are readily identifiable within the camp system. As we have seen, the functionary system utilised privilege to set prisoners against one another in an environment which offered survival at the expense of inmate unity, thereby constituting "[...] le plus sûr moyen" according to Adélaïde Hautval "d'empêcher un esprit de solidarité conséquent entre détenus"<sup>17</sup>. This grey zone framework was, however, seconded by a further, equally precise structurally-instigated stratagem aimed at the preclusion of solidarity — a seemingly paradoxical approach posited upon a simultaneous coalescence and deft interplay of the coaxial yet polarized concepts of separation and juxtaposition. The first of these strands, namely the theory of separation and rupture, was instituted in a variety of ways. Frequently, for instance, prisoners would find themselves subject to block transfers, for reasons which often remained unfathomable. When this occurred the occupants of a block were often

<sup>14</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.126

<sup>15</sup> *Oswiecim* is the Polish translation of Auschwitz.

<sup>16</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.129

<sup>17</sup> Dr Adélaïde Hautval, *Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, p.31

split up and grouped in different barracks — a highly effective strategy for thwarting burgeoning relationships, given that circulation between blocks was often plurally curbed by camp regulations, time constraints and the ominous *blockspierre*. A similar disruptive effect was actuated by the frequent illnesses to which prisoners were exposed. The exceedingly harsh nature of camp conditions rendered inmates vulnerable to a seemingly infinite number of illnesses, not to mention the injuries sustained through perpetual violence and beatings. Those numerous prisoners who were no longer able to withstand the rigours of roll call and daily labour were obliged to enter the camp *Revier* in search of a brief respite (it goes without saying that such an action was usually only undertaken with extreme reluctance, given that in those camps where selections occurred, the *Revier* was inevitably the favoured point of commencement). In many camps, contact with the *Revier* was expressly forbidden to prisoners not admitted to its confines, thus further rupturing ties of friendship which may have been established in the blocks or labour details. When (or more precisely, if) the invalid exited the *Revier*, he or she was usually assigned to a completely different block and work commando than those inhabited previously, necessitating the painstaking forging of new relationships. Louis Martin-Chauffier emphasizes the significant effects of these divisive techniques:

[...] les changements perpétuels de block ou de places de travail pour empêcher que se nouent des amitiés reconfortantes, tout était combiné pour isoler, séparer, démoraliser, humilier l'homme condamné à la détresse solitaire dans un univers continuellement hostile<sup>18</sup>.

Even if inmates did manage to withstand illness and camp fluctuations, separation was also effected in a temporal sense. The absolute lack of free time engendered by the comprehensive nature of prisoner exploitation was a significant factor in minimising the potential for prisoner interaction:

C'est seulement le soir qu'on pouvait faire un brin de causerie avec les connaissances. On nous exploitait toutes, nous, notre temps et notre force, si complètement et avec une telle méthode que nous ne pouvions à vrai dire, jamais nous permettre le luxe de rencontrer nos camarades les plus proches. Ce qui aurait pu nous rendre plus fortes, cet appui mutuel, était pour nous réduit au minimum<sup>19</sup>.

More tangibly, inmates were often compelled to depart the camp on one of the many “transports” which were a common phenomenon in the majority of *bagnes*. If a prisoner was designated for such a transport, she could find herself separated from her *camarades* for transferral to another camp, to factory work, or to extermination. And selections, of course, served as the ultimate rupture of bonds established within the camp — there was always the risk that in forming an attachment to another individual within the camp system, the mechanisms of extermination would tear asunder the bond formed, leaving the individual doubly bereft and vulnerable. Consider Yvette Baumann's testimony on the efficacy of separation as a psychological, as well as physical, preclusive to solidarity:

<sup>18</sup> Louis Martin-Chauffier in *Le grand livre des témoins*, p.211

<sup>19</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.104



À Auschwitz, on comprenait vite qu'il valait mieux ne pas s'attacher. En colonne par cinq, on se serrait pour avoir chaud contre les filles qu'on avait appris à connaître. Soudain, la colonne était partagée en deux, par le milieu. Où étaient les amies? Après deux ou trois cents opérations de ce genre, on ne connaissait plus personne<sup>20</sup>.

The active separation of inmates was, however, countered by an antithetical concept with an identical anti-solidarity objective: the judicious and extreme juxtaposition of prisoners so as to render them intolerable to one another and promote conflict. The convolution of these two strands formed a neat equation; if one separates like-minded individuals and pushes together individuals with little common ground, the result is inevitable antipathy and discord. To this end, general living conditions were manipulated to frustrate the establishment and maintenance of amicable relationships. Political prisoners were forced to live in close proximity with criminals and asocial inmates. The fusion of a disparate mix of nationalities in the international melting pot of the camps is a further case in point. As Micheline Giraudon mentions, the linguistic incomprehension engendered by this international *mélange* was frequently the cause of disputes and greatly hampered the creation of an atmosphere of solidarity:

[...] comme partout c'est difficile parce qu'il y avait la difficulté de la langue et les nazis s'étaient organisés de manière à mélanger suffisamment, quand ils le pouvaient, les races et les nationalités, pour créer des difficultés entre les individus. Parce que, quand on ne se comprend pas, si par exemple une femme prenait [...] un seau d'eau, et bien si deux femmes se précipitaient en même temps et qu'elles ne parlent pas la même langue, c'était obligatoirement celle qui tirait le plus fort qui l'avait. C'était une question de rapport de force physique; il était absolument impossible de s'expliquer puisqu'on ne parlait pas la langue. Si on avait eu la possibilité de se comprendre certainement que les choses auraient été beaucoup mieux [...] on aurait été beaucoup plus solidaire encore<sup>21</sup>.

And where this juxtaposition did yield any sort of homogenous grouping, it was powerfully undermined by the assignation of the role of block leader to those "black or green triangle" prisoners adept at promoting and maintaining prisoner disharmony.<sup>22</sup>

This policy of juxtaposition is also discernible in a further tribulation voiced repeatedly in the testimonial context, namely the veritable impossibility of existing to any degree harmoniously in the overcrowded, overpopulated camp environment. Exploiting to its utmost limits the longstanding maxim that familiarity breeds contempt, the camp mechanisms ensured that the non-privileged blocks teemed full to bursting with inmates crammed several at a time into bunks in which movement was severely constrained. Many survivors attest that this overcrowding, together with the impossibility of ever enjoying a solitary interlude, or a moment of quiet away from the incessant noise, was among the most painful trials of camp existence:

On arrive à ne plus se supporter les unes les autres. Les conditions de vie sont par trop impossibles. La voisine, c'est l'ennemie qui nous enlève un peu de place, qui, peut-être, cherche à nous voler. Impossible d'être seule ne serait-ce qu'une minute, une seconde! [...] Ce côtoiement journalier, heure par heure — même avec nos meilleures

<sup>20</sup> Yvette Baumann in Ania Francos, *Il était des femmes dans la résistance*, p.402

<sup>21</sup> Micheline Giraudon, (unpublished testimony), p.8.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.33

camarades — devient un supplice. Nous sommes épuisées par cette vie infamante; nos nerfs sont à fleur de peau. Pour des peccadilles, des paroles blessantes sont échangées sur un ton aigre-doux. Le moindre petit rien prend une ampleur ahurissante [...] On entend, dans les blocks surpeuplés, des accusations absurdes de 'l'avoir fait exprès', des criaileries épuisantes, des jurons inutiles. Le pire, c'est le mot dur d'une amie à bout de nerfs, de ne plus pouvoir se souffrir à certains moments<sup>23</sup>.

Pelagia Lewinska echoes this depiction:

En nous forçant à vivre en masse pendant vingt-quatre heures, en rendant impossible toute vie personnelle, ils ont tenté ainsi de nous rendre odieuse la vie collective, de détruire tout réflexe de fraternité et de solidarité [...] Toujours au milieu d'une foule, comprimées par sa masse. Jamais seule<sup>24</sup>.

In such a claustrophobic environment, where irritability and conflicts were inevitably omnipresent, and the sole desire was often naturally enough to flee the onerous presence of others, the maintenance of solidarity and the forging of real bonds must indeed be presumed arduous.

Further exacerbation of these conflicts occurred by virtue of the Nazi approach to discipline, which upheld the maxim of collective punishment — yet another form of juxtaposition which forced prisoners into unwanted close inter-relation. If one inmate was punished for a perceived misdeed, it frequently happened that the entire work commando or block also shouldered the punishment, be it supplementary hard labour, deprivation of food, prolonged exposure to the elements by virtue of an extended roll call or a myriad of other equally painful situations<sup>25</sup>. In its most extreme manifestations it was not uncommon for inmates to be executed under the auspices of collective responsibility. Such responses were designed to foster prisoner resentment, bitterness and anger toward those of their peers perceived as the cause of this additional suffering, as well as to ensure that the collective — through fear of punishment — exercised a tight restraining influence on potential individual rebellion<sup>26</sup>. In these manifold guises, then, the simultaneous fusion and segregation of the prisoners' existences was practised as a fundamental anti-solidarity mechanism.

And of course, beyond this anomalous coalescence, the very nature of concentration camp existence was almost wholly inconducive to friendship and bonding with others. Under the influence of starvation, disease and a complete absence of hygiene, which rendered one's own survival a constant and exhausting battle, demanding an emotional and physical energy often surpassing the diminished reserves of the prisoner, the theoretical chances of an inmate initiating any sort of investment in anyone else must be deemed slim. Hunger, in particular, acted as a

<sup>23</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.115

<sup>24</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.163

<sup>25</sup> Henryk Swiebocki asserts that in Auschwitz collective responsibility was utilised less consistently after 1943 (*Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.505). His assertion does not appear to be borne out by French testimonies, however, which maintain collective responsibility as a relatively consistent feature of their experience irrespective of date.

<sup>26</sup> Bruno Bettelheim has explored the theme of Nazi-enforced collective responsibility and its implementation of group control over the individual in some detail. Refer to *The Informed Heart*, pp139-144.

highly preclusive force with regard to solidarity, and it was a phenomenon which touched every non-privileged prisoner, irrespective of the location of their internment. For starvation carved its ravages not only physically, but also mentally and proved capable of completely transforming the thoughts and reactions of its victims, subsuming previously deep-rooted values and attitudes: “La faim [...] favorise les mauvaises pensées en même temps qu’elle affaiblit le corps”<sup>27</sup>. As Charles Richet puts it: “Ces hommes qui avaient perdu dix, vingt, trente kilos, parfois plus, n’avaient pas les mêmes réactions que les sujets normaux”<sup>28</sup>. Whereas their normal and desired reaction to the camp environment might be to aid and respect others, the disease of starvation often rudely quashed any preconceived ideal of solidarity. Magda Hollander-Lafon, for instance, attests that “[...] pour un morceau de pain, nous ne nous connaissons plus: nous écrasons notre semblable sans scrupules”<sup>29</sup>. An excerpt from Françoise Maous’ text is particularly apposite in demonstrating the incompatibility of hunger and solidarity, as she describes coveting the contents of a Polish prisoner’s parcel:

J’essayais de détourner les yeux mais une force invincible m’obligeait à tourner la tête et, presque toute la journée, avidement, je la contemplais. L’eau emplissait ma bouche, mes mâchoires se crispaient... je me souviens parfaitement d’avoir été en proie aux pires instincts criminels; si j’avais pu, j’aurais froidement tué, pour un seul de ces colis, cette femme qui ne m’avait rien fait<sup>30</sup>.

Starvation and the organism’s intense need for nourishment therefore could not fail to impact on inmate relations, and in many cases to inhibit solidarity, in the camp environment.

And finally, the horrific reality of the camp milieu, where the prisoners’ daily existence was played out to the constant accompaniment of death and abuse, could engender a veritable effacement of “normal” human reactions, promoting an insular attitude incompatible with solidarity and interaction with others. The necessity of desensitization and withholding reaction to the suffering and death of others in order to maintain both psychological equilibrium and physical survival was paramount, as Bruno Bettelheim points out:

[...] to react emotionally to what one saw was frankly suicidal. That is, a prisoner who noticed mistreatment was punished, but only mildly when compared to what happened if his feelings carried him away to the point of trying to give help. Knowing that such an emotional reaction was tantamount to suicide, and being unable at times not to react emotionally when observing what went on, left only one way out: not to observe, so as not to react. So both powers, those of observation and of reaction, had to be blocked out voluntarily as an act of preservation<sup>31</sup>.

Such a canon of non-reaction to the plight of others could not only curb voluntary inmate interaction, but also stifle the most basic empathetic responses. Robert Franqueville exemplifies the eventual consequences of this enforced non-reactive stance: “Les exécutions et les flagellations dont nous étions souvent les témoins forcés commençaient à laisser indifférents, même les plus sensibles. Lors d’une double pendaison, je me surpris à siffler tout bas une

<sup>27</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.102

<sup>28</sup> Charles Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.60

<sup>29</sup> Magda Hollander-Lafon, *Les chemins du temps*, p.36

<sup>30</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, pp77-78

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p.155

chanson. J'en étais moi-même révolté"<sup>32</sup>. Desensitization to others was further consolidated by the unappealing, often filthy and lice-ridden appearance of other (non-privileged) inmates, which did nothing to invite intimacy or even basic interaction. Terrence Des Pres has written particularly eloquently on this aspect in his study of "excremental assault" in the camps, asserting that the filth and defilement which were an integral element of the camp experience constituted yet another deliberate Nazi assault on potential solidarity:

How much self-esteem can one maintain, how readily can one respond with respect to the needs of another, if both stink, if both are caked with mud and feces? We tend to forget how camp prisoners looked and smelled, especially those who had given up the will to live, and in consequence the enormous revulsion and disgust which naturally arose among prisoners. Here was an effective mechanism for intensifying the already heightened irritability of prisoners towards each other, and thus for stifling in common loathing the impulse toward solidarity<sup>33</sup>.

Contextually, then, the odds were seemingly immutably stacked against the predominance of solidarity amongst women in the concentration camps, through the maintenance of an environment where individualism, discord and indifference were concomitantly promoted on a multitude of levels.

And yet it is important to acknowledge that the dominion of these elements was far from absolute, and that there also existed certain inexorable factors countering such structurally-conceived individualism and inclining inmates toward collective engagement or interaction. The natural, human reaction to cling to one's fellows in adversity and to seek consolation in a sense of community or solidarity (albeit a seemingly minimal weapon against the comprehensive individualistic structure delineated above) is certainly relevant here. Similarly, the desire for some form of culture and human interaction also inevitably generate an impulsion to engage in group relations, as does the practical realization that survival may be more effectively maintained within the context of a degree of collective co-operation, whereby resources or ideas may be shared and protection may be sought in group strength. That which Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier terms "la solidarité de la lutte contre l'occupant"<sup>34</sup> was also a particularly important ideal for political inmates. In essence, therefore, ill-matched though the adversaries may seem, the camp environment may be seen to be characterized by a fundamental tension, a perpetual clash between the individualistic and the collective, the structural and the instinctive — an opposition, in other words, between the singular and the group.

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Franqueville in *Le grand livre des témoins*, p.212

<sup>33</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, pp60-61. Note that the architectural historian Robert-Jan Van Pelt in his essay on Auschwitz entitled 'A Site in Search of a Mission' questions Des Pres' assertion that this excremental environment was deliberately implemented by Nazi policy: "Des Pres is incorrect that the defilement was the result of the SS's desire to exercise total power. The root cause was an inadequacy of design, a lack of willingness on the part of bureaucrats far away from the camps to allocate more than a minimum of financial and material resources for the camp's construction [...] Yet intended or not, the result was the same" (in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.130).

<sup>34</sup> Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris), p.4

For the majority of French female authors, this tension appears to be decisively testimonially resolved in favour of the collective. Such a collective resolution is widely presaged and intimated at the most elementary narrative level through basic textual indicators, most notably the inclusive linguistic technique commonly utilised by these (and indeed most other) survivors to collectivize their narrative. Particularly prevalent is the articulation of general camp experiences in the voice of the French collective, whereby the “nous” rather than the first person singular holds narrative sway to varying degrees. In this way, the collective coexists with, and sometimes even eclipses, the self as the axis around which the narrative turns. Terrence Des Pres rightly notes that the trend for collective texts is a generalized one: “Books by survivors are invariably group portraits, in which the writer’s personal experience is representative and used to provide a perspective on the common plight. Survival is a collective act, and so is bearing witness”<sup>35</sup>.

Certain authors further augment this generalized narrative collectivization through more radical or atypical authorial techniques. Yvonne Pagniez, for example, adopts an unusual “eye of God” approach for much of her testimony, in particular the *Kermesse de la misère*<sup>36</sup> which consists of delineating a collage of non-personal scenes to guide the reader around the camp and capture the essence of camp life. Inevitably, through her often omniscient position looking down on the experience, Pagniez reconfigures the narrative perspective and the stature of herself as participant, situating her camp self as merely one among many others, minimized to the collective size. Pagniez’s personal experience is therefore presented as ancillary to the experience of “nous”, the French convoy. Raymonde Guyon-Belot, although completely different in her approach, manifests a comparable collective orientation. Guyon-Belot attributes herself a pseudonym in the narrative, replacing the *moi* with the third person identity “Jacqueline”. By renaming the self, and placing it amongst the collective, she downplays the importance of the singular narrative entity, subverting its narrative supremacy. For Germaine Tillion, by contrast, the dominance of the collective is asserted through the equalization of her own testimony with that of others. Tillion’s personal testimony is interspersed with those of others which are accorded comparable significance; she enlists a variety of external testimonies to illustrate the camp experience in the same way as she mobilises her own experiences. The resultant emphasis lies strongly upon the collective experience of women at Ravensbrück.

It is interesting, too, to note in passing that many of these women writers posit a collective objective which secundarizes the individual to the wider unit as the propulsive force behind their narrative. Marie-Claude Vaillant Couturier provides an apt illustration: “Nous n’avons qu’une volonté pendant des mois et des années, c’était de sortir à quelques-unes

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<sup>35</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.38

<sup>36</sup> Yvonne Pagniez, *Scènes de la vie du bagne*, p.63

vivantes pour pouvoir dire au monde ce que c'est que les bagnes nazis"<sup>37</sup>. Here the objective is firmly collective, with the "quelques-unes" carrying the implication that it was less important *who* in particular survived than that survivors existed in order that the collective ideal was served. The supremacy of the collective over the *moi* becomes a particularly central thematic thread for many political prisoners, such as Denise Dufournier, who deputize the individual to the resistance cause:

Qu'importait donc notre destin personnel puisque toutes les cloches de la victoire commençaient à tinter à nos oreilles, puisque notre présence trouvait sa pleine valeur et sa merveilleuse justification? Qu'importait que notre corps pérît puisque notre âme était sauvée<sup>38</sup>.

Here the individual is overtly dethroned within the narrative, assuming the secondary role of corporeal instrument to the "soul" or reality incarnated by the wider collective ideal.

Whereas these broad narrative and thematic strategies are certainly indicative of a generalized tendency to collectivization in French female testimonies, this emphasis assumes its most definitive and tangible form through the presentation of the group or group bonds in the testimonial context. As we shall soon discover, the group unit is widely posited as a focal element of the female testimonial experience, assuming the role of the primary structural unit in the majority of these testimonies.

The provenance of these female bonds and group units was usually tightly correlated with the circumstances of arrest and deportation. For many French women, bonds were consolidated during sometimes prolonged ante-deportation incarceration in French prisons — bonds which constituted the bedrock for interactive units in the concentration camps, as these women clung to the familiar in a perilous and incomprehensible environment. Such transit prison bonds were particularly common amongst political prisoners who, unlike racial deportees, were usually deported alone, bereft of the initial companionship of family members. Nelly Gorce exemplifies this genre of group formation:

Au gré des sympathies réciproques se sont formés de petits groupes. Le nôtre est idéal. Nous sommes cinq, toutes très jeunes, moi seule suis mariée. C'est en tournant en rond dans la cour de Montluc, pendant le quart d'heure de promenade qui parfois nous était accordé, que nous nous sommes connues [...] Ainsi, mot à mot, au bout de quatre mois, nous avons énoncé le maximum de nous-mêmes et étions devenues amies<sup>39</sup>.

Gorce's group remains unchanged when all five women are deported concurrently to Ravensbrück.

Such simultaneous deportations were not always the norm, however, with many political prisoners experiencing deportation from French prisons in random, unfamiliar groups as their

<sup>37</sup> Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, (unpublished testimony), p.23

<sup>38</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, p.97

<sup>39</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.11

individual cases were processed. For innumerable women, then, (both political and racial deportees) the arduous train journey to the concentration camp or the initial quarantine period with one's convoy afforded the greatest opportunity of forging bonds, with the convoy therefore commonly becoming the primary basis for lasting group relations. Numerous, for example, are the testimonial citations of relationships cemented on the train to Germany, as with Fania Fenelon and Clara who meet on just such a journey where "[...] nous nous faisons le serment de ne jamais nous quitter, de tout partager"<sup>40</sup>. These convoy-based groups may comprise family members (for example mothers and daughters who unite with other individuals), previous acquaintances from the same town, or strangers either recognising like-minded individuals or simply grouping together with those nearest to them.

Both affinity and fortuity enacted roles in the consolidation of initial female camp bonds. For some inmates, relations were largely circumstantial — the women who were in closest proximity to them during the journey or their early camp life became those to whom they responded, offering a degree of familiarity which became the basis for more durable bonds. Some, like Louise Alcan, manifest ambivalence as to exactly how their group was conceived, recognising only that it was in response to an inherent need: "Notre petit groupe s'est formé on ne sait trop comment. Nous comprenons qu'il faut s'entraider. Nous n'avons rien"<sup>41</sup>. For others, the group to which one adhered was a conscious and reflected choice. Simone Alizon illustrates such a volitional choice in her selection of a group for herself and her sister, determinant upon her own intuition of what group qualities were requisite for her survival — in this case a unit whose focus will allow her to maintain a sense of personal morale:

Un groupe de ces savantes attira immédiatement mon attention et je proposai à Marie de nous joindre à celles qui parlaient d'autres choses que de recettes de cuisine. Leur attitude me paraissait la plus propre à garder le moral en dépit de tout. Cette intuition a représenté une chose étonnante car, si ce groupe s'est tragiquement éclairci, une poignée de celles qui le composaient a survécu et j'ai passé tout le temps de ma déportation en leur compagnie, jusqu'à la libération<sup>42</sup>.

It is important to note too, that the preponderate underlying basis for such relations was almost exclusively a national one. Deported in national groups, women tended to identify very strongly with their linguistic and cultural peers in the midst of women of many ethnic backgrounds who conversed in a variety of different mother tongues. Exceptions to the rule of national grouping were, however, to be found amidst women exercising a professional function amongst inmates of other nationalities (for example international groups of prisoner doctors who lived and worked together, and thus forged bonds within this context), or amongst those with militant or highly developed political affiliations (such as certain communist prisoners), whereby common ideology transcended national barriers.

<sup>40</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.28

<sup>41</sup> Louise Alcan, *Le temps écartelé* (St-Jean-de-Maurienne: Imprimerie Truchet, 1982), p.30

<sup>42</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.150

The group, then, is generally presented as the foremost structural unit by these writers and it is, for the most part, a well-defined unit. For the female testimonial context yields evidence not only of the repeated, persistent accentuation of the group as a focal point of these testimonies, but also of clearly discernible specificity in the shape and form of these female bonds, which are commonly testimonially defined by a schematic of definite and broadly consistent particularities. Firstly, although a narrative approach based upon the generic “nous” is widely deployed amongst these authors to denote the wider sphere of the shared experience of themselves and the somewhat vague collective entity of their *camarades* or convoy, those who form the real focus of the writer’s collective experience usually form a clearly delineated inner circle, who are etched in sharp relief against the background of the more shadowy, ill-defined figures of the other women who share the narrator’s situation. A persistent particularity of the female testimony is the attribution of distinct shape and form to this internal closed unit, whereby the bounds of the narrator’s personal collective are highly defined in both contours and character.

For many female authors, such delineation of the inner group occurs through the attribution of a numerical precision or sobriquet, or a detailed description of its members — or indeed a juxtaposition of the two. Nelly Gorce provides one example of such a dual delineative approach. As we saw earlier, her group of five was formed at Montluc, where right from the outset Gorce distinguishes its precise parameters (“Nous sommes cinq”) and effects an individual description of each of the other four members, of which her portrayal of Miane forms but one example: “Miane est plus réservée [...] Elle s’intéresse à toutes les sciences, à tous les arts. Son esprit constamment en éveil, son sens critique la portant à juger êtres et choses la feraient notre aînée si une certaine naïveté ne la rendait très petite fille”<sup>43</sup>. With its individual constitutive elements and collective configuration thus distinguished, Gorce reiterates both upon arrival in Ravensbrück, also giving the group a name denoting its outlines (“les Cinq”), and an identity based upon their approach to camp life, in which bravado and outward optimism figured prominently:

Dès le lendemain de notre arrivée, le club des Cinq s’était reformé, Marie-Claude, Hélène et Michou habitant dans deux lits au troisième étage, Miane et moi au second [...] Ne nous quittant jamais, nous avons lié nos turbulences et formions le groupe des jeunes toujours prêt aux corvées, riant de tout et chantant sans arrêt<sup>44</sup>.

Gorce’s group is thus bestowed with a distinct shape, form and character, which remain throughout the narrative.

Other narratives display comparable techniques. Raymonde Guyon-Belot, for example, attributes a definitive outline to her group of friends: “Des groupes se formaient suivant l’âge ou les affinités, les groupes sociaux. C’est ainsi que se forma réellement notre équipe de six

<sup>43</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.12

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p.32



jeunes filles et femmes, arrêtées à Lyon ou la région pour faits de Résistance”<sup>45</sup>. This group is subsequently referred to as “notre équipe de six”, or “le groupe de six” — clearcut in its form and boundaries. Simone Alizon also places a strong focus on her own group of six — a group whose bonds and identity are consolidated somewhat later in her testimony following the rapid death of many of their other compatriots: “Nos relations se modifièrent au fur et à mesure que notre nombre diminuait [...] Nous survécûmes toutes les six, nous protégeant mutuellement mais ne nous passant rien. Toutes les six, nous ne nous quittâmes plus...”<sup>46</sup>. Yet again, “notre petit groupe des six”<sup>47</sup> is the precise demarcative moniker by which the group is perpetually denoted, whilst Alizon later goes on to further delimit the group by describing each of its individuals at length and attributing an identifying epithet to the five others. Douce, Sérieuse, Grincheuse, Clémentine and Gracieuse<sup>48</sup> thus form the confines of the group. However shortlived, Simone Lagrange’s group is similarly well defined:

Parmi les détenues italiennes se trouvait une jeune fille, presque une enfant, âgée de seize ans tout au plus, une fille triste et seule qui s’était, sans un mot, jointe au groupe que nous formions, maman, Jacqueline et moi. Déjà une petite Française, Rachel, nous avait rejointes ainsi que la cousine de Jacqueline, Reine, un peu plus âgée que nous. Nous étions donc six maintenant<sup>49</sup>.

For others, the boundaries of the group are significantly more confined but nonetheless equally evident. Sometimes the group simply consists of the writer and one or perhaps two close friends, strongly differentiated throughout the testimony. Micheline Maurel’s testimony, for instance, is characterized by a small, defined group of three. The group’s boundaries are clearly delimited through the sharing of food, with any supplementary food divided amidst Maurel, Michelle and Mitzy<sup>50</sup>, although it is made equally clear through their more consistent and intimate interaction that the friendship between Maurel and Michelle is paramount within the small group. Whatever its manifestation, the distinct shape and form of the French female group unit is certainly noteworthy as a quasi-ubiquitous testimonial phenomenon which throws the narrative focus sharply upon the collective culture.

A second particularity of the female testimonial genre — equally notable in its cross-narrative consistency — is the overwhelmingly familial nature of these group bonds. The term familial does not, in this context, denote the traditional, pure definition of biological, blood or dynastic relation (although members of a group could in many cases comprise blood relatives), but rather the reconstruction of family-type units in the functional sense; namely a unit of inter-related individuals drawing support and identity from the whole. In short, women’s testimonies

<sup>45</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.145

<sup>46</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.203

<sup>47</sup> Ibid p.274

<sup>48</sup> Ibid, pp275-76. Note that the emphasis upon these small groups contradicts somewhat the assertions of Leo Eitinger, who maintains that for prisoners in general “[...] stable pairing was the most common type of interpersonal relationship [...]the pair was their basic unit of survival” (in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.475)

<sup>49</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.67

<sup>50</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, p.102

attest to the formation of female *non-biological families*, through their repeated depiction of group bonds or ties of friendship within a familial framework defined by overtly familial vocabulary. Simone Alizon typifies the basic use of such kin-based descriptions in her assertion that the members of her group “[...] devinrent solidaires comme les membres d’une même famille”<sup>51</sup> and “[...] furent comme des soeurs”<sup>52</sup>. This descriptive emphasis on familial relation is sustained throughout her testimony, with later references to the fact that “[...] nous étions, entre nous, soudées comme les doigts d’une main”<sup>53</sup> and that “J’aimais ces femmes... une affection fraternelle nous unissait les unes aux autres. Nous étions toutes ensemble, à chacune, une seconde famille”<sup>54</sup>. Raymonde Guyon-Belot effects a comparable emphasis upon shared identity and familial interaction:

Nous formions beaucoup plus qu’un groupe d’amitié, chacune s’inquiétait de toutes les autres, nous étions toutes les fois où cela était possible toutes les six ensemble formant presque un seul corps car nous avions de chacune une connaissance totale [...] Les déportées du camp de Beendorf ne se souviennent pas de nous d’une façon personnelle car elles nous voient toujours toutes les six ensemble [...] Nous formions ainsi une vraie famille sachant tout du passé de chacune, respectant les idées, les manies, les façons d’être des autres<sup>55</sup>.

For the young Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec in the relatively privileged conditions of the wagon commando at Ravensbrück<sup>56</sup> these familial relations take the form of a game, with the constitution of a delineated mock family within her group of friends — a group which casts Toulouse-Lautrec in the role of daughter to a designated adoptive “Papa” and “Maman” and which gives a humorous form to the very real bonds which unite them:

Nous formons là une drôle de famille, mais bien unie. Elle est d’ailleurs très large. Ma mère à moi est le petit-fils de Bérangère et de Marcelle. Suzy est notre grand-père à toutes; Lucienne est le gendre. Quant à Wanda, du bureau, elle est notre notaire. Et le 18 avril, jour de mon anniversaire, elle a réussi à dresser un acte notarié sur parchemin, signé et contresigné de mes parents, me reconnaissant pour fille, sinon naturelle, tout au moins légitime. Que de fous rires!<sup>57</sup>.

Synopsized by *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, French female testimonies emphasize the formation of “[...] de véritables familles, où les plus âgées tenaient lieu de mères, les plus jeunes se sentaient des soeurs, les plus fortes soutenaient les plus faibles”<sup>58</sup>.

The testimonial effect of this familial identification is far from negligible. As a descriptive narrative device, the sustained and widespread utilisation of the familial analogy in female testimonies may be seen to imbue the collective structure with multiple layers of meaning and association. In redefining it as a family, rather than simply a group, these authors attribute the collective to which they belonged an identity of its own. A family, by definition, manifests its

<sup>51</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.201

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.202

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p.274

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p.277

<sup>55</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.176

<sup>56</sup> This wagon commando constituted the lesser Ravensbrück equivalent of Auschwitz’s “Canada” commandos.

<sup>57</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J’ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.262

<sup>58</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.227

own persona — it carries a name, a shape, characteristics and traditions. In short, it assumes an identity beyond the sum of its parts. In attributing the group such a dynamic identity, these female authors attest to the singular importance of the collective — it is a real and tangible entity, and its role within the narrative, by implication, is indispensable. Without this wider identity, the portrayal of the protagonist would remain incomplete — fingers without a hand, to borrow Alizon’s analogy, or disembodied limbs of the “seul corps” to which Guyon-Belot refers, lacking the completion and identity of the whole.

At the same time, the familial correlative also accords the group a certain status, an immediate significance. Familial bonds, in a societal context, are recognised bonds — they traditionally bear an aura of validity, authenticity and durability. Representative of an inherent continuity, such ties are perceived as the inverse of all that is simply convenient, dispensable or subject to the vagaries of circumstance. In the testimonial context, then, what more effective means of impressing the validity of the collective than by deeming it a veritable family unit, thus inevitably lending it the weight of the myriad of associations inherent in such a designation and crystallizing its bonds as implicitly real and valid? Thus the kin-based parallelism may indeed be read as compelling testament to a common authorial desire to highlight the importance of the female group, for it becomes well nigh impossible to dismiss or minimize these bonds if they are couched in the language of familial authenticity.

The widespread testimonial depiction of the female group as a *bona fide* non-biological family unit does not, however, appear to function solely as a descriptive device deployed to emphasize the significance of the collective culture to the female experience. As Claudia Koonz points out, the segregation of the sexes within the camps constituted a pivotal element of Nazi dehumanization, endeavouring as it did to effect the deconstruction of family ties and thus to extirpate the most fundamental of emotional bonds. It is therefore unsurprising that prisoners attempted to combat this deliberate familial breakdown by constructing new clan-type bonds with other inmates “[...] for they carried with them the family as memory and model on which to build new ties”<sup>59</sup>. And indeed, many of these women emphasize that maternal instinct formed the tangible, derivative basis for certain bonds formed in the camp environment, suggesting that such bonds were born of typical familial instincts, and shared a real structural linkage to the familial model. Simone Lagrange, for example, testifies to the maternal instinct which prompted her mother to “adopt” teenage children in the camp, thereby laying the foundation for a familial group:

Certains enfants étaient seuls et abandonnés. Deux fillettes, Jacqueline, qui devait avoir mon âge, et sa soeur Marcelle, qui semblait être la plus jeune, s’étaient approchées de nous... Comment Maman aurait-elle pu rester insensible devant le désarroi de ces enfants, elle qui devait penser à mes jeunes frère et soeur, elle si maternelle?<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Claudia Koonz in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.292

<sup>60</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.37

Joined by other young women in similar circumstances, the group is established on the *materfamilias* model: “Nous étions donc six maintenant et, l’union faisant la force, nous n’avions pas l’intention de nous laisser séparer”<sup>61</sup>. Françoise Maous describes a similar scenario founded upon the relation between younger and older women, and the assumption of roles predicated upon maternal lines:

Denise et moi avons adopté Line. Line avait seize ans quand elle était entrée dans ce noir cachot [...] Ma petite fille que j’ai aimée [...] Tous les soirs, tous les matins, son petit visage redevenu enfantin était tout près du mien et mon plus grand supplice, après l’horrible *Aufstehen!* qu’elle n’entendait jamais, était de devoir l’éveiller et de voir ses yeux s’ouvrir sur cet enfer<sup>62</sup>.

Maous’s relationship with Line is definitively cast within a parental mould, with Maous and Denise assuming the roles of carer, supervisor and nurturer, and the unit which the three women form is therefore familial not merely in description but also in configuration. Even where the group does not hinge upon real age differences which naturally promote the replication of parental/ progeny type relations, the maternal relationship may also figure in the internal organisation of the group, as Raymonde Guyon-Belot notes:

Geneviève, à peine notre ainée, était notre mère à toutes [...] il émanait d’elle une sagesse, une maturité, qui contrastaient avec la fougue et la vivacité des cinq autres, elle était notre interprète particulière et nous donnait les conseils qu’elle jugeait utiles sur un ton impératif. Nous obéissions sans mot dire...<sup>63</sup>.

Imitative familial roles (and particularly the maternal role) then, are an oft-cited testimonial feature of the female collective, rendering the non-biological familial blueprint not merely a generalized descriptive device, but also an apparent compositional reality.

Perhaps the most interesting discernible feature of the female group, however, is its apparent adaptability and condition-specific nature with regard to the camp environment. Evidently the *raison d’être* of the non-biological family was the replication or reconstruction of real familial ties in their absence in the camps, in order that the practical and emotional resources of such a unit might furnish its members with the wherewithal to combat the isolation of camp life. There is, however, subtle but insistent testimonial evidence that these camp-begotten groups may in fact have challenged the dominion of biological familial relations within the camps in certain cases, and may certainly have proved more beneficial to their members, as a result of being spawned by, and specifically adapted to, the camp system. Such a supposition has its inaugural basis in the fact that many of these testimonies qualify the biological or natural family unit as a dual emotional and practical liability, by virtue of the twofold difficulty of witnessing a loved one experience the trauma of the camp environment, and of attempting to be responsible for the survival of another. Eva Tichauer’s comments are particularly pertinent here: “Je suis sûre que je ne serais pas revenue de déportation si ma mère était entrée au camp. Je n’aurais pu supporter de la voir décliner et mourir. Mon amour pour elle m’aurait ôté toutes mes forces, je

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.67

<sup>62</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, pp85-86.

<sup>63</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.195

l'aurais suivie. Cela aussi est une de mes chances"<sup>64</sup>. Here Tichauer (whose mother was, in fact, gassed upon arrival at Birkenau) is, horrifically, forced to concede that the death of her mother, in removing her as a factor in Tichauer's camp existence, constituted part of her own good fortune — the "luck" which left her a survivor rather than a mere statistic of Auschwitz. Tichauer thus overtly attests to the compromising effect internment with close family members could exert upon survival. The ties which bind them were too close, too strongly linked to the past, the emotional bonds too intensely experienced and longstanding, to be adaptable to the camp environment, and to allow such family members to devote their full attention to the precarious navigation of the camp system. In a practical sense, too, biological relations could impede survival as an inmate's own struggle to dodge the perils of camp life was inevitably hampered by concurrent attempts to assure the survival of a family member and by a deep-seated sense of responsibility for doing so. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe exemplifies the type of practical sacrifices many family members felt compelled to offer and the emotionally draining conflict which could ensue: "Maman s'affaiblit beaucoup en ce moment. Elle se donne un mal fou pour m'aider, me procurer quelque nourriture en supplément. Nous nous disputons. Je ne veux pas accepter qu'elle se prive..."<sup>65</sup>.

By contrast, the non-biological familial units formed in the camp were, for the most part, consolidated under incarceration conditions in direct response to the camp and its structure, and were therefore inherently more adapted both to the camp milieu, and to the needs of their members. Responsibility for others was less a rigid moral imperative dictated by blood ties than a contextually malleable, wherever possible concept which recognized of necessity that according aid to others was not always feasible, whilst the camp-occasioned unit also lacked the heavy weight of past associations and the possibility of jeopardizing them. Raymonde Guyon-Belot directly asserts that the friendship of the group was more conducive to survival than familial bonds: "L'amitié très étroite qui unissait notre groupe de six fut déterminante. Les duos mère-fille étaient plus fragiles tant il est insupportable moralement et physiquement à chacune de voir l'autre subir des sévices"<sup>66</sup>. The underlying suggestion here (somewhat paradoxical given the persistent familial analogy for the camp group unit) is that the bonds of non-biological group units formed in the camp did in fact differ in some essential nature from family ties — that it was somehow less "insupportable" to witness one's closest camp friends struggle in the relentless camp environment. One can only assume that this is simply because these relationships were born of such an environment and inherently adapted to it; they had known no other context than the harsh reality of incarceration.

<sup>64</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, pp68-69. See also Louise Alcan, *Le temps écartelé*, p.31.

<sup>65</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, pp127-128

<sup>66</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.197

The condition-specific, milieu-responsive nature of the camp units portrayed in these testimonies is also evident in their compositional particularities. As was evidenced by Alizon's decision to join a group prioritising intellectual activity in order to maintain morale, many of these groups were based upon the acquisition of specific elements the prisoner needed to survive. Many brought together individuals with diverse talents and resources, promoting the survival of the group by furnishing its members with access to different strengths. Raymonde Guyon-Belot's group displays just such a mutually advantageous interactive function: "Cette amitié très violente, totale, soudait le groupe tout en respectant les particularités de chacune et en utilisant au profit de toutes les compétences et les talents des unes et des autres"<sup>67</sup>, and again "Ainsi notre groupe était constitué de personnalités aux caractères différents mais les qualités, les connaissances et les défauts de chacune étaient utilisés comme le sont, dans les couvents toutes les compétences et toutes les incompétences"<sup>68</sup>. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, in describing her friend Nicole, articulates how two friends could unite to form the two halves of a whole, each providing practical attributes the other lacked: "Nicole m'était devenue indispensable. Elle avait l'énergie et l'optimisme qui me manquaient, et aussi une vue objective de la situation"<sup>69</sup>. For Nadine Heftler, a comparable sharing of personal talents and resources occurs with Estelle, who constitutes the other half of Heftler's bipartite unit: "Alors, nous décidons, Estelle et moi, 'd'organiser' de la soupe par n'importe quel moyen [...] Estelle n'est pas très sûre d'elle-même pour ce genre de sport, moi au contraire je me trouve tout à fait dans mon élément"<sup>70</sup>. The talents which Estelle lacks are thus compensated by her tight relationship with another individual who possesses the much-needed proficiency. In this way, groups forged within and specifically tailored to the concentration camp system could often meet the needs of female inmates in a way that biological ties could not, superseding biological relations in their practicality and significance for survival. For the most part, therefore, those women with biological family in the camps simultaneously place significant testimonial emphasis upon their adhesion to a non-biological group.

Inevitably, though, the co-existence for some women prisoners of familial and non-biological relations in the camp was generative of not inconsiderable tension, as conflicting loyalties and personal needs made themselves felt. The case of Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec is clearly illustrative. Here we witness a conflict between Toulouse-Lautrec's own camp needs (supported by the group) and the demands placed upon her by familial ties with her mother — a conflict in which the group ultimately exerts a stronger pull. As the prisoners board the train for their return voyage to Ravensbrück from the satellite camp of Torgau, Toulouse-Lautrec's mother entreats her daughter to join her in the sick wagon to which her functionary role has

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.152

<sup>68</sup> Ibid p.157

<sup>69</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.202

<sup>70</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.164

consigned her, whereas Toulouse-Lautrec expresses a conflicting desire to journey with her group of friends:

Nicole m'encourage: 'Viens avec nous, ce n'est pas bon cette ambiance de maladie'. Mais maman se fâche: 'Tu m'abandonnes' [...] 'Tu viens?' dit Nicole. Que Maman comprenne que pour moi, il vaut mieux être loin de ces pleurs et de ces cris. Il me semble par moments que je perds mon équilibre. 'Tu as voulu me lâcher' me lance encore Maman au moment où le train démarre. Le sort en est jeté. Dans le fond à gauche du wagon, notre groupe de dix se resserre...<sup>71</sup>.

In this instance, the support and positive environment which the non-biological family can offer temporarily supplants biological ties, thereby attesting to the significant role of female camp adapted units.

Our analysis of the group in the French female testimonial context has therefore thus far yielded certain particularities linked to its role as a dominant and focal textual element — its often distinct shape and form, its frequently familial nature in both description and structural manifestation, and the apparently elevated adaptability and condition-specific nature of the non-biological unit. It is vital, however, that we focus upon one further central feature of the phenomenon of female groups in the camps — that of the essentially divergent nature of this phenomenon in the testimonies of Jewish and non-Jewish French women. Indeed, the aspects we have examined above pertain more readily to non-Jewish political prisoners whose camp experience tended to be characterized by greater stability allowing a degree of interactive consistency necessary for the formation and maintenance of cohesive inmate units. By contrast, the experience of Jewish women was significantly more fragmented and infinitely less conducive to sustaining group relations. Jewish women were pursued relentlessly for extermination and perpetually singled out for punishment by virtue of their race — factors which meant that their camp experience was defined by the need to run, to hide, to escape the extermination machine, and thus to frequently change blocks and work commandos, and *ipso facto*, jeopardise any close relationships. They were also subject to direct extermination in far greater numbers than their political counterparts, meaning that any bonds formed ran a greater risk of being ruptured by the killing mechanisms of the camps, as well as often enduring worse conditions and thus falling prey more readily to the disruptive forces of illness and disease. Many also had limited access to stable work commandos and found themselves in constantly changeable labour circumstances. As a result, their testimonies are characterized by flux, transience and interruption as they move within the camp, attempting to elude the focus of their captors and confronting illness and selections in an atmosphere of perpetual pursuit — a pattern which is clearly mirrored in the parallel fluctuation and limited sustainability of their group relations.

Amongst these Jewish women, then, the salient feature is the infinitely more problematic sustainability of group relations. The *tendency* to form groups and to seek out close

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<sup>71</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, pp208-209

relationships is equally evident within their narratives (witness Simone Lagrange's initial delineation of a distinct group, Françoise Maous' bond with Line and Denise, Louise Alcan's strong, if constantly dispersed, small circle of friends and Nadine Heftler's perpetual search for *camarades* as she constantly changes jobs and blocks and evades selection), but these bonds are all too often interrupted or definitively ruptured, and remain rarely viable in the environment to which they are subjected. To enlist the four women cited above as examples, Lagrange's group is decimated, Maous experiences separation from her friends, Alcan maintains a powerful and recurrent thematic thread of sadness and despair at the loss of contact with friends and Heftler is unable to sustain adhesion to any wider group unit beyond her individual friendship with Estelle for any significant period of time. Indeed, it is in Heftler's words that the essentially fluctuating nature of the Jewish experience, and the manner in which the formation of groups differed for Jewish women finds its most cogent articulation:

Je suis maintenant habituée tout à fait à vivre seule, à changer souvent de block, à faire des connaissances, quelquefois des camarades, très rarement des amies, à les perdre, à en refaire d'autres, à retrouver certaines; je ne me sens jamais complètement isolée et je commence à connaître beaucoup de gens<sup>72</sup>.

Evidently, the search for interaction with others is no less palpable in these testimonies, but its manifestations are certainly less sustained and consistent in an environment which did not allow the wider group to take root as decisively as in the experiences of non-Jewish French women. Suzanne Falk further illustrates the particularity of the Jewish experience with regard to group relations. Although Falk was able to maintain relations with four other women whom she had known closely for years through their shared scouting experience, she presents their persistent bond as exceptional in the Jewish camp environment and solely a function of their pre-internment intimacy, without which it would have been all but impossible to forge and maintain relations:

Et si je n'avais pas été arrêtée avec ces filles que je connaissais, je ne serais jamais rentrée parce que perdue, paumée, avec les Polonaises, les Tchèques qui ne parlaient pas ma langue. Je ne voudrais pas dire des bêtises, mais je ne sais pas qui s'est fait des amis au camp — à moins d'avoir travaillé dans les commandos spéciaux, privilégiés — parce qu'on était constamment dispersés, constamment dans d'autres commandos, constamment dans des conditions différentes, perdus, constamment déracinés<sup>73</sup>.

Ruth, one of Michael Pollak's interviewees, echoes the complex situation of Jewish women:

[...] le changement fréquent d'affectation à tel ou tel bloc, à tel ou tel commando de travail, toute l'organisation de la vie dans le camp rendait difficile, voire impossible, les chances de garder ou de nouer des liens durables. Il s'ensuit que les petits groupes d'entraide formés pendant les convois se décomposaient souvent assez vite après l'arrivée au camp. À cela s'ajoute le règne absolu des kapos, caste à part qui, pour maintenir son contrôle, avait [...] tendance à ne pas laisser se mettre en place des réseaux d'entraide et de solidarité<sup>74</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, then, the testimonies of Jewish women therefore often manifest the group characteristics delineated previously with regard to only one or two close friends with whom they are able to maintain relatively consistent contact, rather than a circumstantially impracticable

<sup>72</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.74

<sup>73</sup> Suzanne Falk in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.90

<sup>74</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.108



wider group. The relationships of Françoise Maous with Denise and Line, Nadine Heftler with Estelle, Louise Alcan with Fernande and Simone Lagrange with Jacqueline are clear examples.

The exception to this very general assertion of the difficulty of sustaining wider group bonds amongst Jewish women, however, occurs when French Jewish women are afforded the opportunity to move away from the typical camp conditions experienced by Jews to some form of privilege, and its attendant constancy or relative stability. Fania Fenelon is one such anomaly, with her privileged position in the orchestra at Birkenau allowing her to remain within a stable, and essentially isolated, group for the majority of her incarceration. Eva Tichauer also illustrates this principle. The first part of Tichauer's narrative manifests no real sense of group bonding, and it is only when Tichauer manoeuvres a transfer to the scientific *Pflanzenzucht* (plantation) commando and the privileged role of biologist that she individually describes the women with whom she works and articulates the significance of her friendship with them, delineating a tangible group<sup>75</sup>. Evidently, Tichauer's previous, typically Jewish experience had precluded the consolidation of such a consistent group. Suzanne Birnbaum too, fails to note any real group bonds until she enters the relative privilege of the potato commando, where "Nous formions un groupe sympathique; Berthe, Marie, Olga, Lily, Germaine, Régine, Lise, Liliane et moi"<sup>76</sup>.

Whatever the divergences created by Nazi racial categorizations, the fact remains that the camp unit (be it the tighter, smaller unit typical of Jewish women, or the more diverse variants of their non-Jewish counterparts) assumes a central role in the French female narrative. For final consolidating evidence of its testimonial significance we need look no further than a thematic *leitmotif* which is voiced with the utmost emphasis in virtually every one of these narratives, almost without exception — that of the extreme, persistent and overwhelming fear of being separated from the group and the solidarity it offered. This fear is often articulated at the outset of the testimony as a generalized desire to remain within the familiarity of one's wider group — the convoy -, and later augments to a localized and sharply intense sentiment of fear of separation as bonds of friendship or group ties are developed and attributed greater weight within the narrative. Françoise Maous, for example, on her first night in Auschwitz makes the general assertion that "Nous nous sommes serrées les unes contre les autres, cette nuit-là, en nous jurant de ne jamais nous séparer".<sup>77</sup> Later, once her friendship with Line and Denise is established, the central significance of this group renders her anxiety at potential separation so strong as to dictate her movements within the camp: "Nous avons tellement peur d'être séparées que pas une minute nous ne nous quittions"<sup>78</sup>. Simone Alizon expresses a parallel concern: "Marie et moi prêtâmes une grande attention à ne plus être séparées des autres

<sup>75</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, pp94-98

<sup>76</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, p.86

<sup>77</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, p.41

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p.85

camarades. Chacune faisait la même chose. Nous avons un tel besoin les unes des autres...<sup>79</sup>. Louise Alcan is brief and to the point (“Nous avons une terreur panique de la séparation”<sup>80</sup>), while Renée Jolivot elucidates the dire consequences of any such separation:

[...] mais si l'on supportait beaucoup à Ravensbrück en courbant les épaules, il est une chose dont personne ne voulait: la séparation. La séparation c'était la chute morale, le désarroi, l'angoisse, la peur, tout ce qui, à plusieurs, nous combattons tantôt chez l'une, tantôt chez l'autre. L'isolement au milieu d'étrangères, c'était la mort<sup>81</sup>.

These excerpts must be read as representative of innumerable others which, for the sake of brevity, cannot be cited here. *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück* summarizes their essence with the conclusion that the cohesive, familiar structure of the collective was essential:

Ce que nous redoutions dans tous les cas, c'était de nous trouver isolées, noyées au milieu d'étrangères ou même de Françaises inconnues. Garder une boussole: le réconfort de nos camarades, même de camarades récentes et occasionnelles [...] garder un minimum de cohésion nous était aussi nécessaire que le pain<sup>82</sup>.

Moreover, this fear of separation from the collective is often portrayed as so deeply permeative as to propel many of these women to brave significant risks in order to remain with their particular unit. Take Simone Saint-Clair, who stresses that “[...] nous nous raccrochons les unes aux autres, plus que jamais. La pensée que nous pourrions être séparées nous angoisse. On se sent tellement plus fortes quand on est ensemble”<sup>83</sup>. She goes on to describe being designated for a transport with her friend Gaby, an event which leaves the other members of her group terrified at the prospect of separation. Their immediate reaction is to nullify the fragmentation of their collective entity, regardless of the potential dangers of an unknown transport: “Quand elles ont appris cela, Lily et Jeanne, atterrées, ont décidé de se joindre à nous comme volontaires”<sup>84</sup>. Information gleaned from prisoner functionaries does indeed reveal the transport to be “bad”, necessitating the precarious extrication of all the group members from it. Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe also recounts how several prisoners slipped covertly into a transport for which she was designated (“elles veulent accompagner leurs amies”<sup>85</sup>) and how, even when rumours abounded about the danger of the convoy, her refusal to contemplate separation convinced her to remain amongst those delegated:

Le bruit court qu'il s'agit d'un 'mauvais transport'. Pour moi, même si je n'avais pas Maman, je partirais, car j'attends trop longtemps le départ de ce camp [...] et surtout, ce serait trop dur de se séparer, avant la fin, des camarades avec qui j'ai vécu tant de mois, tant d'épreuves<sup>86</sup>.

Germaine Tillion's summation is useful, although we will address the gender equalization which she attributes to this sphere later in the chapter:

<sup>79</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.148

<sup>80</sup> Louise Alcan, *Sans armes et sans bagages*, p.31

<sup>81</sup> Renée Jolivot, 'Mes prisons, le récit d'une Française au grand coeur' in *Le progrès*, 16 Aug 1945, p.4

<sup>82</sup> *Les Françaises à Ravensbrück*, p.132

<sup>83</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, p.165

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p.167

<sup>85</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.132

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, p.132

[...] une autre raison que la raison déterminait les comportements des déportés, aussi bien hommes que femmes, Français que Polonais, détenus d'Auschwitz que prisonnières de Ravensbrück: tous et toutes ont cherché d'abord à ne pas être séparés de leur groupe d'origine; même dans les secteurs les plus atroces d'Auschwitz, on avait peur des transferts. Cela se comprend, car le groupe donnait à chacun une infime protection (manger son pain sans qu'on vous l'arrache, retrouver la nuit le même coin de grabat), mais il donnait aussi une sollicitude amicale indispensable à la survie. Sans elle, il ne restait que le désespoir, c'est-à-dire la mort. A Ravensbrück, les Françaises qui cherchèrent à partir dans un convoi le firent *toujours* pour rester avec leur groupe, et nullement dans l'espoir de trouver ailleurs un bagne moins dur<sup>87</sup>.

Given the multitude of more concrete terrors contained within the camp environment, the fear at the prospect of separation expressed by these writers — a fear which often extends far beyond mere apprehension to attain the proportions of sheer terror — may appear disproportionate to the reader. Equally surprising is the fact that the threat of rupture of the collective should spawn such seemingly illogical responses as the accompanying of one's group on unknown or reputedly "bad" transports, thereby effectively prioritising the maintenance of the group over greater certainty of survival. It is, however, the very disproportionate nature of these portrayed responses which is revelatory of the significance of the collective in these accounts. The collective assumes the role of a protective zone, a quasi-talismanic force within whose sphere any ordeal is rendered infinitely more bearable. Indeed, it is elevated within many of these texts to a position of singular significance with regard to the prisoner's ability to negotiate the camp environment, unmatched by any other phenomenon such as chance, luck, ruse or intelligence<sup>88</sup>.

Thematically prominent, then, and repeatedly prioritised, the collective culture figures strongly in female French testimonies. How exactly, though, are these bonds manifested in tangible terms? Women may conceive their camp experience collectively and structure their narratives around group bonds, but does this mean that these collective bonds translate into solidarity and mutual aid and that the balance of these testimonies is weighted against egoism and in favour of solidarity? Is there evidence of women aiding each other and in what ways? How are the concepts of solidarity and mutual aid manifested in the testimonial context, and how significant are they in this context — are they a dominant textual force?

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<sup>87</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p.209

<sup>88</sup> Interestingly, Sybil Milton suggests that the Nazi regime was only too aware of the significance of the collective for women as a whole. Milton cites a letter penned in March 1939 by SS Lieutenant-Colonel Max Koegel, the head of Ravensbrück, in which he attests to the need for detention cells at Ravensbrück due to the fact that "It is impossible to maintain order if the defiance and stubbornness of these hysterical females cannot be broken by strict confinement, since no more severe punishment can be used in a women's camp. Denial of food does not suffice for discipline and order in women's camps". Milton asserts that "Koegel's letter is important for two reasons: it reveals first, that the worst punishment allowed for German female inmates was solitary confinement and not corporal punishment; and second, that the Nazis recognized the importance of camp friendships and bonding in women's resistance and survival". (Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, pp222-223).

In the extreme, aberrant concentration camp environment, the concept of solidarity — like any other appellation whose boundaries and meanings have acquired the ring of familiarity from general usage — assumes a vastly different shape and signification, transfigured by its surroundings. The widespread, contemporary banalization of the term “solidarity” to denote any show of support or vaguely defined sense of unity is comprehensively divorced from its actualized meaning within the camp confines, where solidarity necessarily entailed a definite commitment, be it ongoing or momentary. To show solidarity to another inmate required that a prisoner committed her time, her energy or her attention (all of which, in the camp context and in the throes of starvation and its attendant physical and psychological transformations, were highly limited commodities) in an act which, however small, generally required considerable effort and which could often constitute a risk to her own life, even if only at the most basic level of causing momentary inattention to her personal fight for survival. Furthermore, the boundaries or yardstick of what constituted the greatest degree of solidarity towards another individual shifted on their axis, as the following text from Pelagia Lewinska at Auschwitz illustrates:

Nous nous sommes juré avec une de mes amies et comme preuve de notre attachement mutuel, de ne pas abandonner l'une ou l'autre mourante dans la boue. Il semble invraisemblable que tendre la main à un être humain qui tombe puisse être la preuve du plus grand attachement et pourtant, c'était ainsi. Aider quelqu'un à se lever de la boue, cela signifiait se décider à rester dans la boue avec lui. Les SS [...] frappaient et faisaient mordre par les chiens aussi bien les malades que celles qui restaient en arrière pour les aider<sup>89</sup>.

This passage is particularly telling of the divergent definition of solidarity in the camps, where helping someone who has fallen in the mud — a banal and innocuous action in everyday life — morphs into an example of extreme, life-risking solidarity. Or, as Krystyna Zywulska conversely articulates, the presumably commendable qualities of zeal and application to one's work often denoted a lack of solidarity in the camp context, creating as they did a pace or standard which weaker fellow prisoners were incapable of matching:

Certains groupes voulaient ralentir le rythme du travail; comme d'autres avaient déjà fini de creuser leur carré, celles qui n'avaient pas terminé le leur étaient rudoyées et battues. 'Ne fais pas tant de zèle, on ne va pas te décorer'... Mais ces reproches étaient vains. Sans qu'on sache comment, certaines avaient encore des forces et ne s'occupaient pas de leurs compagnes<sup>90</sup>.

As always, then, contextualization is fundamental when analysing the concept of solidarity, and the preconceptions of non-camp society need often be suspended in order to evaluate actions or responses which contemporary surrounds may render apparently inconsequential or nugatory.

Within this redefinition of solidarity and aid, these concepts are indeed a dominant textual force throughout the body of female testimonies. Terrence Des Pres asserts that “[...] some minimal fabric of care, some margin of giving and receiving is essential to life in extremity”<sup>91</sup>, and this “margin of giving and receiving” assumes significant proportions in

<sup>89</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.63

<sup>90</sup> Krystyna Zywulska, *J'ai survécu à Auschwitz*, p.77

<sup>91</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.37

French female narratives, under a multitude of auspices and in seemingly infinite manifestations. If the grey zone was externalized and distanced by these authors, its polar opposite — solidarity — is to a large extent embraced and assimilated in their texts. This internalization is achieved through the focal weight attributed to this concept, on two levels. The primary, and perhaps most immediately discernible manifestation of solidarity occurs on the practical level of mutual aid and tangible support between female inmates — that which might perhaps be termed practical solidarity.

Perhaps the most common form of this practical solidarity — and also the most significant given its prized status as a rare and vital commodity constituting the focal point of camp life — was the sharing of food which is operative in some form or another in all of our core testimonies. Within the boundaries of their friendships or groups, most of these women testify to scrupulously sharing any extra food with the other members of their particular unit. Micheline Maurel provides one such example, consistently portraying the reciprocal division of any coveted supplementary nutritional resources with Michelle. This voluntary sharing of food resources is, however, certainly not delineated without conflict in Maurel's account. The extreme scarcity of food available to Maurel and Michelle renders them often incapable of extending this practical solidarity to Mitzy, the third, somewhat more peripheral member of their group. Such a situation occurs, among other instances, when Michelle procures an egg:

Cet oeuf lui posait un cas de conscience. À l'époque, Mitzy était déjà bien avec Mme Montigny, femme à colis. Nous lui en voulions un peu, car cette amitié n'allait pas sans quelques avantages comestibles dont nous étions exclues. Fallait-il partager l'oeuf avec Mitzy? [...] Nous l'avons mangé toutes les deux seules<sup>92</sup>.

Consistent sharing between the core members of the unit, but difficulty in extending it beyond these confines thus characterize Maurel's account, exemplifying the sacrifice involved in such an action and its implicit significance in the camp-defined scale of solidarity.

Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that this type of food sharing within the group is testimonially evident across virtually every strata of French female camp experience. Evidently, it was considerably less demanding for those in more privileged positions which facilitated the acquisition of food to effect such distribution amongst their friends (as is evidenced by Simone Alizon's description of the pooling of vegetables amongst the Raïsko workers "[...] au profit de la collectivité petite ou grande"<sup>93</sup> or Suzanne Birnbaum's provision of potatoes to her *camarades* during her time as a member of the potato commando<sup>94</sup>). And yet such apportioning of food was by no means confined to these individuals, but comprehended even those devoid of privilege. Simone Lagrange, for example, as a non-privileged Jewish inmate transferred from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, existing at the lowest level of prisoner non-entity where starvation

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<sup>92</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, pp102-103

<sup>93</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.262

<sup>94</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, p.89

carved the greatest ravages, also articulates the sharing of cocoa and milk from a Red Cross parcel with Jacqueline and the others in her newly formed group, and the great effort which this act cost her: “Bien sûr, je partageai avec mon amie de toujours ainsi qu’avec les cinq Belges de notre groupe, très solidaire, mais je dois avouer qu’il m’a fallu un très grand courage pour me séparer de ma mixture”<sup>95</sup>. Simone Saint-Clair, a non-privileged political prisoner at Ravensbrück, describes participating in both the receiving of shared food (through her friends who occasionally receive parcels and “[...] m’aident à compléter de leur mieux un menu vraiment trop maigre, par une sardine, une cuillerée à café de sucre”<sup>96</sup>), and later, when she is able to receive food in return for her translation skills, in the giving of food resources. Here Saint-Clair receives “[...] des suppléments de soupe et même quelques crudités que je partage, naturellement”<sup>97</sup>. This form of solidarity was also sometimes extended beyond the immediate closed circle of friends, as Monique Nosley attests: “Certaines d’entre nous ont reçu des colis par la Croix-Rouge suisse dans lesquels se trouvaient de grosses boîtes de sardines. Il n’était pas question de les manger toutes seules. Nous les avons donc distribuées dans tout le block jusqu’à épuisement”<sup>98</sup>.

Here Saint-Clair’s “naturellement”, Lagrange’s “bien sûr” and Nosley’s “il n’était pas question” are telling additions. The vast majority of these women functioning within groups or smaller units of friendship portray the sharing of supplementary food as a natural obligation, a requisite and non-negotiable component of the group solidarity in which they participate. This suggests that solidarity within these units was tacitly constructed around a firm tenet of reciprocity, where the benefactor could also expect to enact the role of recipient. No vague concept, then, female testimonial solidarity appears to rest firmly upon a practical foundation comprised of action rather than mere rhetoric and a pragmatic approach in which altruism and personal benefit were closely affiliated. At the same time, however, this pivotal form of solidarity may be seen to extend beyond a simple “tit for tat” exchange, with the mutual trust necessary for sustaining such reciprocity in the harsh camp context potentially exerting a more profound and deep-seated influence upon prisoner relations. Terrence Des Pres’s highly insightful observations as to the significance of food sharing and other forms of gift giving as a means of combating dehumanization within the camps best illustrate this flow-on effect:

Exchange brings people together and makes them conscious of their worth in each other’s eyes. Self-interest turns to goodwill, and the gift relation becomes one of the constitutive structures of social being. Through ritual and exchange the dehumanizing effect of xenophobia and mistrust [...] is transformed into trust, acquaintance, respect, conditions which bring men together... food sharing was a mode of human interchange through which the survivor’s all but defeated humanity could be regained and kept going<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>95</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.113

<sup>96</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.76

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131

<sup>98</sup> Monique Nosley in *Le grand livre des témoins*, p.235

<sup>99</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, pp139-140

In some testimonies, moreover, there is evidence that this sense of obligation to the group assumes more extreme forms, prompting inmates to not only share their supplementary food, but also to deprive themselves of their basic rations for other members of their group. Raymonde Guyon-Belot provides the most notable example:

Notre groupe de six faisait l'expérience de la faim et de l'obligation d'une entraide totale et permanente entre nous; c'est à Ravensbrück qu'a été cimentée cette petite communauté qui ne s'est jamais désunie. Notre solidarité prenait à ce moment des allures qui paraîtraient plus tard ridicules. Ainsi notre premier jour à Ravensbrück, Michelle, qui avait conservé quelques rondeurs, voulait à tout prix nous partager sa soupe en disant: 'Je n'en ai pas besoin, je n'ai pas faim, c'est vous cinq qui devez manger, je suis assez grosse'<sup>100</sup>.

Constance Liégeois, at Waldheim, describes a similar scenario:

La solidarité est toujours aussi forte. Les vieilles dames se privent de leur pain pour le donner aux jeunes qui souffrent de la faim. Nounou me fait croire qu'elle reçoit une tartine de l'une et l'autre et m'oblige à partager avec elle. Par contre, me méfiant de ses affirmations, ne voulant à aucun prix qu'elle se prive pour moi, alors qu'elle maigrit épouvantablement, je lui remets ou bien les minces rondelles de saucisson, ou le fromage, ou le petit bout de pâté de viande que nous recevons pour le souper<sup>101</sup>.

It must be emphasized, however, that such actions are not truly typical of the majority of female French testimonies. The incident in Guyon-Belot's text occurs at the outset of their camp experience, before the reality of starvation has exerted a real influence, and can therefore be attributed more to timing than to any real trend, whilst Liégeois' internment is played out in somewhat more privileged conditions than the majority of French women. Guyon-Belot, for all her emphasis upon the extreme solidarity incarnated by her group, also concedes that such an action would later appear "ridicule". For the most part, the personal ration (already insufficient for subsistence and calculated to achieve the slow and inexorable starvation of the prisoner) necessarily remained sacrosanct for these inmates, and their practical solidarity appears to be exactly that — practical and dominated by a necessary pragmatism.

Food sharing, however, is but one of the ways by which group bonds translated into practical solidarity. Physical support plays a comparably prominent role in these testimonies. Numerous in virtually all female French accounts are citations of women physically supporting one another, literally holding one another up, dragging each other along when one is unable to move or shielding one another from the elements or physical danger. Particularly significant is the fact that these acts of physical support are presented not merely as examples of solidarity, but as defining acts which quite literally constitute the difference between life and death. Female bonds thus move beyond the merely conceptual boundaries of a delineated "family" or group and are actualized to become a direct vehicle for survival.

Examples of this physical support are prolific, and a few representative illustrations must therefore suffice. Particularly common and repeatedly cited is the support which women

<sup>100</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.163

<sup>101</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.64

accorded to one another during roll call. This support ranged from holding up sick friends whose infirmities might otherwise have been noted by the S.S and *Kapos* supervising the *appel*, resulting in selection or beating, to using the group accord to provide warmth for its members, through a rotation system in which women took turns at assuming the external position at the ends of the row and sheltering others from the cold. Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne describes this widespread group technique and its life-saving effects: “Pour tenir, nous faisons ce que nous appelions ‘se mettre en mouton’. Les troupeaux se serrent les uns contre les autres, les moutons du bord protégeant ceux du centre. Il en fut qui échappèrent à la mort grâce à cette solidarité!”<sup>102</sup>. The portrayal of the work commando also gives rise to innumerable evocations of situations where women whom illness or injury had rendered too weak to work were sustained and assisted by their companions, whose actions thus shielded them from the dire consequences of being singled out as inapt for labour in the Nazi war machine. Simone Lagrange, for example, is bitten by a dog set upon her by an SS guard, and experiences such aid from her *camarades*: “J’avais très mal et le sang continuait de couler de mes plaies. Mes camarades firent mon travail à ma place et m’aiderent lors du retour au bloc, me soutenant tant qu’elles le purent. C’était cela la solidarité, l’humanité”<sup>103</sup>. Perhaps the most powerful and prolific instances of physical support are described within the context of the death marches<sup>104</sup>, where the concept of practical aid is often carried to its utmost limits as women are depicted propping up, dragging or carrying those who were unable to walk any further, and who thus risked becoming the victim of an SS bullet. Hence Constance Liégeois describes the march to Mauthausen: “Des vieilles femmes à bout de souffle, des malades chancelantes, supplient de les abandonner à leur triste sort. Jamais! Aussi longtemps que nous en aurons la force, nous traînerons nos soeurs avec nous”<sup>105</sup>. Eva Tichauer also tells how Rosette, unable to walk, is placed by her friends in the SS chariot they are obliged to pull “[...] qui devient plus lourde, mais une vie humaine en dépend”<sup>106</sup>. Tichauer herself is also supported by her friends, who hold her up during the march and prevent her compulsive ingestion of the dirty snow: “Mes camarades prennent peur et croient que je deviens folle. Alors deux après deux, elles me saisissent sous les aisselles pour me faire marcher entre elles. Elles m’empêchent de me baisser et de ramasser encore et encore cette neige sale”<sup>107</sup>.

<sup>102</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J’ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.50

<sup>103</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.75

<sup>104</sup> “Death marches” is the expression used to denote the marches which many camp inmates were forced to undertake between one camp and another towards the end of the war, as the SS evacuated camps such as Auschwitz in the face of the Allied advance. Thousands of prisoners perished on these lengthy marches, succumbing to starvation, exhaustion and the wintry conditions. Those who were unable to continue were shot at the roadside by the SS guards.

<sup>105</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.100

<sup>106</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J’étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, p.126

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p.126



In many cases, too, the practical intervention of other group members during an author's illness is qualified as a defining moment in her survival of the camp experience. Simone Saint-Clair asserts that the aid of the group was literally life-saving when she was confined to the camp *Revier*, where she was cured due both to the medicine sourced by her friends and to their constant care and attention ("Gaby, Toto et Alma sont mes sauveurs. Gaby me cuit des potages de flocons d'avoine ou de pommes de terre sur le poêle du bloc 10 et Toto m'apporte souvent du *schleim*"<sup>108</sup>), whilst Charlotte Delbo provides a particularly memorable example of such critical assistance when she is rendered ill and delirious by an overwhelming thirst. Incapacitated by dehydration, Delbo is aided by her group, who not only arrange for her to be part of a work commando where water is available, but protect her to access the water: "Accrochée à mes camarades [...] je me suis laissé guider — c'étaient surtout elles qui veillaient à ne pas me perdre, car pour moi, je n'avais plus le moindre réflexe et sans elles j'aurais aussi bien buté dans un SS que dans un tas de briques"<sup>109</sup>.

Beyond these rather sketchy categorisations, practical aid is portrayed functioning in hundreds of different ways. From the pooling of resources within the group (as with Raymonde Guyon-Belot's friend Michelle who shares her new boots around the group of six by turn<sup>110</sup>, or Louise Alcan's depiction of her group of friends donating slices of their bread ration so that each member of the group in turn would have the "money" to purchase warm clothes on the camp market<sup>111</sup>), it also encompasses the utilisation of influence or privilege in favour of friends and the concealment and protection of other group members. It ran the gamut of variations, depending on circumstances, as Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne synopsizes in describing the actions of her friend Yvette, credited with ensuring the survival of Aylmer-Roubenne and her unborn child:

Elle avait toujours chaud, j'avais toujours froid. Elle me réchauffait. Auprès d'elle, j'étais bien. Elle m'aidait à marcher, me soutenait, la neige collait aux semelles de mes patines, je glissais, je tombais, elle me relevait [...] J'ai dit le danger du froid, la somnolence mortelle. Yvette ne m'a pas laissée m'endormir<sup>112</sup>.

Furthermore, practical aid is typically portrayed not as rigid or unyielding in its form, but rather as flexible, fluid and highly responsive to the rigours of camp life. The harsh and the tender are therefore often synthesized in the provision of help, in accordance with a prisoner's needs. Hence Aylmer-Roubenne's portrayal of the aid accorded by Yvette is not confined to the aforementioned genre of action, but also encompasses the more severe or necessarily brutal aid meted out by her friend. When Aylmer-Roubenne fears that she will lose her reason, Yvette's response is swift and effective: "'Je vais te faire voir si tu vas devenir folle!' hurla Yvette qui

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p.176

<sup>109</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, pp43-44

<sup>110</sup> Dr. Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.183

<sup>111</sup> Louise Alcan, *Le temps écartelé*, p.30 and also *Sans armes et sans bagages*, p.28

<sup>112</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.62

m'assena trois paires de claques aussi violentes que celles de la Gestapo de Versailles. Ce traitement brutal me remit les idées en place!"<sup>113</sup>.

Notably, too, the prevalence of mutual aid extends beyond the immediate group in the female testimonial context, to encompass French women as a whole. Just as these authors effected a pluralistic externalization of the French from the sphere of the grey zone, so they for the most part establish a parallel marked nationalistic linkage to the question of solidarity. This linkage may assume a generalized form, as is exemplified by Camille Touboul's allusion to the breakdown of solidarity — a phenomenon from which she is careful to except her countrywomen. Her remarks on the prevalence of bread thefts are qualified by the somewhat sweeping assertion that "[...] je suis fière de le rapporter, aucune des Françaises, jamais même dans les périodes les plus difficiles, n'a volé quoi que ce fût"<sup>114</sup>. Numerous too are the specific examples cited of French women providing practical aid to their compatriots, beyond the confines of their own particular group of friends. In this respect, the same or similar incidents recur in a number of testimonies. Suzanne Wilborts' description of the *wagoneuses* at Ravensbrück (whose privileged position allowed them the unique advantage of wearing one woollen undergarment when searched upon their daily re-entry into the camp) is one of many. Wilborts asserts that "[...] les regards d'envie des pauvres camarades gelées aux appels leur enlèvent tout le plaisir que cet adoucissement leur procure"<sup>115</sup>, prompting these women to depart for work each morning without an undergarment, braving the cold in order to bring back a garment each evening for another French woman: "L'on vit ainsi, jusqu'à ce que toutes les femmes de la baraque fussent pourvues de lainages, les pauvres 'wagoneuses' grelotter pendant les heures dans le froid du matin"<sup>116</sup>. Simone Saint-Clair, Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe and Jacqueline Richet, among others, emphasize this same occurrence. In a similar vein, the factory incident described by Jacqueline Richet is cited in several other Ravensbrück testimonies. Here a French woman rushes to the aid of her friend as she is beaten by an SS guard, supported by a general display of French solidarity: "Nous nous rendons compte de ce qui se passe et toutes, nous posons nos outils et nous dirigeons vers les Françaises menacées. Les surveillantes et les ouvriers croient à une émeute. Ils s'effraient et ramènent S à sa place"<sup>117</sup>. Later the French women are collectively punished, although Richet asserts that the national defensive mentality remains intact: "Ce traitement odieux a créé entre nous une fraternité nouvelle et notre solidarité devient proverbiale dans le camp"<sup>118</sup>. The "legendary" solidarity of the French women is therefore firmly enshrined in the majority of these testimonies, linking the French as a whole to the concept of comprehensive mutual aid. Interestingly, many

<sup>113</sup> Ibid, p.78

<sup>114</sup> Camille Touboul, *Le plus long des chemins*, p.88

<sup>115</sup> Suzanne Wilborts, *Pour la France*, p.112

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, p.112

<sup>117</sup> Charles, Jacqueline and Olivier Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.110

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p.115

testimonies by women of other nationalities also allude to the powerful reach of French female solidarity<sup>119</sup>.

What is difficult to render readily visible within our analytical confines, however, is the sheer cumulative weight of this practical aid. The examples enumerated above form but a fraction of the instances cited in female French testimonies, almost all of which emphasize numerous illustrations of practical solidarity throughout their testimony. This aid is a constantly reiterated thread which, by virtue of accumulation, assumes a considerable thematic presence and morphs into a veritable testimonial *leitmotif*.

Extensive though it may be, it does not, however, monopolize the testimonial portrayal of solidarity. The second, and equally significant, constitutive element of solidarity is evident on the emotional plane, as these writers constantly stress the importance of the affective bonds which unite them and furnish them with a psychological crutch or form of coping. Emotional and moral support, which ameliorated women's ability to maintain the psychological equilibrium necessary for dealing with the camp environment, lies at the heart of female prisoner interaction, with women describing the central significance of being comforted, nurtured, cheered or merely even experiencing the empathy of the group. Simone Alizon articulates the sense of emotional safety and refuge from the harsh camp world which these affective bonds promoted: "Notre sollicitude, notre politesse réciproque nous faisaient un rempart moral contre la dureté ambiante [...] Ensemble nous formions, les unes pour les autres, une forteresse amortissant la violence qui nous entourait"<sup>120</sup>. Friendship and group bonds are thus cast in the role of a protective cocoon, allowing women to feel cared for and significant in an environment which cultivated anonymity and indifference, and providing a reassurance which was essential for maintaining morale. These ties also allowed women access to the emotional resources of their friends, who could provide moral support and encouragement when other members of the group fell prey to the apathy or discouragement which could be so fatal in the camp context. As Raymonde Guyon-Belot notes, such sharing of emotional resources was vital, given the inevitable inconstancy and fallibility of one's own inner reserves: "Les esseulées qui voulaient le rester, se privaient d'un soutien quasi indispensable, car il est vain de croire que le cran, la force de caractère, l'espérance sont sans faille au cours des jours, des semaines, des mois et des années"<sup>121</sup>. Louise Alcan echoes the significance of this emotionally syndetic approach: "Il suffit que l'une d'entre nous soit découragée pour que les autres la remontent"<sup>122</sup>. Just as these women describe utilising each other's practical competencies, then, so they also delineate a comparable pooling of emotional resources.

<sup>119</sup> See, for example, Ana Novac, *Les beaux jours de ma jeunesse*, p.203

<sup>120</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.217

<sup>121</sup> Dr Raymonde Guyon-Belot, *Le sel de la mine*, p.197

<sup>122</sup> Louise Alcan, *Sans armes et sans bagages*, p.52

And, as practical aid was also portrayed as circumstantially variant, so too is this moral support highly fluid and quintessentially adaptable, often varying between writers. Emotional assistance in the guise of nurturing or comfort, for instance, is prioritised in many — although not all — female testimonies. When Charlotte Delbo finds herself in the throes of an emotional crisis in the working commando, and expresses her inability to go on, her friend Lulu conceals her in order that she may cry, offering comfort throughout her ordeal: “Lulu travaille et guette. Parfois elle se retourne et de sa manche, elle essuie mon visage”<sup>123</sup>. Eventually Lulu informs her that the Kapo is coming and she must work. She speaks “[...] avec tant de bonté que je n’ai pas honte d’avoir pleuré. C’est comme si j’avais pleuré contre la poitrine de ma mère”<sup>124</sup>. This last image is particularly significant in its connotations. Suggestive of nurturing, comfort and protection, it implies that these pivotal aspects of emotional solace could be afforded by interaction with one’s fellows. And yet other women spurned such overtly tender forms of interaction, unwilling to risk potentially breaching the wall of stoicism which was so necessary for confronting camp reality. Simone Alizon is one such inmate, categorizing the tactile comfort accorded by the group to a *camarade* who breaks down in tears as fundamentally exceptional: “Nous entourâmes discrètement cette camarade jusqu’à la fin de sa crise de désespoir. L’une d’entre nous fit aussi une chose qui faisaient partie des actes tacitement interdits... elle prit notre compagne dans ses bras et la berça comme aurait pu le faire une mère”<sup>125</sup>. More robust forms of moral support, such as those based upon humour, mockery and sarcasm constitute the norm for Alizon’s group, as they help each other to maintain a prudent distance from any crippling descent into sensitivity: “Toute sensiblerie eût été mortelle. Nous réagissions souvent par des bons mots d’une efficace cruauté, nous moquant de nous-mêmes et des autres”<sup>126</sup>. Although such psychological coping mechanisms do not rely directly on support or consolation, they remain highly dependent on the interactive group medium. Other authors portray affective support in a vast array of further forms, often through the most simple gestures such as visiting the *Revier* to bid a friend goodnight or offer a few brief words of comfort, as exemplified by Renée Moreau at Ravensbrück:

En prenant mille précautions, je vais lui faire un signe d’amitié derrière le carreau; parfois, lorsque l’horizon est à peu près calme, elle entrouvre la fenêtre, sa couverture sur le dos pour ne pas prendre froid. Je lui passe un petit mot de réconfort que j’ai écrit sur un papier d’usine...<sup>127</sup>.

Whatever their personal needs, Alizon emphasizes that every member of the group knew “[...] que l’appui moral du groupe était fondamentale pour une éventuelle survie. Nous étions liées pour le pire, là où l’égoïsme individuel et les jérémiades n’avaient plus leur place”<sup>128</sup>. Indeed, Françoise Maous claims that the influence of emotional solidarity was so far-reaching as to

<sup>123</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, p.121

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, p.121

<sup>125</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, pp173-174

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, p.202

<sup>127</sup> Renée Moreau in *Le grand livre des témoins*, p.236

<sup>128</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.199

directly affect her physical wellbeing, asserting that the chronic diarrhoea which plagued her throughout her camp life often ceased completely upon reunion with her friends.<sup>129</sup>

Amidst the multitude of female testimonial depictions of emotional solidarity, Charlotte Delbo perhaps most strikingly encapsulates the central psychological significance of the group, with a scene devoted to elucidating its cardinal role. Whilst on an external commando labouring in a ditch, Delbo is separated from her *camarades* and left to dig alone. This distancing from the support of her friends leads her to despair:

La présence des autres, leurs paroles, faisaient possible le retour. Elles s'en vont et j'ai peur. Je ne crois pas au retour quand je suis seule. Avec elles, puisqu'elles semblent y croire si fort, j'y crois aussi. Dès qu'elles me quittent, j'ai peur [...] Dès qu'on est seule, on pense: À quoi bon? Pourquoi faire? Pourquoi ne pas renoncer [...] Au milieu des autres, on tient<sup>130</sup>.

Delbo thus clearly articulates the role of the group as purveyors of emotional strength and hope. When the individual will weakened, the collective will and the emotional strength of the group enacted the pivotal role of psychological safety net, intercepting the dissolution of morale to carry the individual. Delbo's emotional wellbeing is thus inextricably linked to the solidarity offered by others, and the withdrawal of this emotional mainstay is presented as singularly devastating. It is interesting to note that nowhere here, despite her active resistance affiliations, does Delbo invoke any suggestion that her fervour for the cause might be sufficient in itself to sustain her psychological resolve in the absence of the group. For ideals and causes in this moment of Delbo's experience are subsumed within the infinitely more elementary reality of the ditch, where the equation is simple — the immediate emotional support of the group is the single defining factor which might allow her to keep potentially fatal despair and apathy at bay. Posited firmly upon a strict repositioning of the self within the narrative, with a refusal to deviate from the limited focus of her own camp-prescribed vision and a resistance to extraneous explanation, wider analysis or generalization, Delbo's narrative conveys an especially notable realism and sense of authenticity. Within the context of such an account, the significance attributed to the concept of emotional solidarity is thus infused with particular import.

Furthermore, affective bonds are also depicted as particularly significant facilitators of psychological escape from the harsh reality of camp life. Through the bonds of friendship, most of these women attest to being able to regularly effect a mental escape from the confines of the camp, by means as diverse as storytelling, theatre, celebrations or simply by virtue of conversation and learning about one another. Whatever the medium, the universally common element here is a temporary transcending of camp reality, characterized by momentary obliviousness to the camp surroundings. For Nelly Gorce, this mental escape occurs by virtue of conversations with a friend reminiscing about their native region

<sup>129</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.64

<sup>130</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, pp118-119

(Dès que j'avais cinq minutes de répit, Marie venait sur mon lit et nous parlions de nos montagnes, du Pilat, des courses que nous y avons faites, de la Jasserie où toute la jeunesse sportive se donne rendez-vous le dimanche, et de nos randonnées à skis. Souvent nous oublions le lieu où nous nous trouvons et seule l'heure de la soupe peut nous ramener à la triste réalité<sup>131</sup>),

whilst Constance Liégeois cites her group deploying shared memories of their varied imprisonment:

Qu'une de nous flanche, aussitôt nous lui faisons miroiter d'autres ciels que celui qui plane trop lourd au dessus de nos têtes [...] puisant à grandes brassées dans notre sac à souvenirs, nous rappelons les anecdotes comiques que nous avons vécues à Aix-La-Chapelle<sup>132</sup>.

Others, such as Simone Alizon's group of six, dissociate themselves from their surroundings simply by delving into one another's lives and experiences:

Au fil de semaines nous parlâmes de nous-mêmes, de notre enfance, du milieu dans lequel nous avons vécu. Nous fredonnions, entre nous, des chansons — chansons du folklore ou chansons nouvelles ou passées dans le répertoire populaire [...] L'un des rares dimanches de repos, nous nous donnâmes un premier échantillon de nos talents. Quatre d'entre nous chantaient [...] Pendant un moment, j'oubliai où je me trouvais et tout notre malheur<sup>133</sup>.

Sometimes the mental escape afforded by friendship assumed more concrete or structured proportions, as with the theatre piece mounted by Charlotte Delbo and her *camarades* at Raïsko, or, in non-privileged conditions, with covert meetings of groups dedicated to maintaining a degree of intellectual faculty. To this end, many survivors describe gatherings devoted to lectures, poetry and general debates<sup>134</sup>. In these varied guises, friendship and solidarity with others thus provide the primary testimonial framework for psychological mobility within the camp confines.

This broad sketch of solidarity and mutual aid must, however, be qualified with the note that the degree of privilege experienced by a prisoner at any given time or the fluctuations in camp conditions may certainly impact upon the presentation of solidarity (both practical and emotional) within the testimony. Any attempt to arrive at a definitive, narrative-based conclusion upon the relationship between ameliorated or deteriorated conditions and the degree of solidarity is, however, highly problematic, given the predominant lack of consensus amongst these women writers on this issue. It is, in fact, one of the few areas of inmate interaction where the body of female testimonies does not display a high degree of cross-narrative commonality. Certain authors attest to a discernible diminution of solidarity, aid and general amicable relations when conditions improve — a conclusion which would perhaps appear indicative of the underlying practical basis of solidarity as primarily a survival strategy, most active when most imperative. Louise Alcan figures amongst their number, with her observations on the decline of general

<sup>131</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.69

<sup>132</sup> Constance Liégeois, *Calvaire de femmes*, p.82

<sup>133</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, pp203-204

<sup>134</sup> See, among many others, Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, pp105-106 and Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, p.56

solidarity when she is transferred to the privileged confines of the Raïsko commando at Auschwitz:

Il y a beaucoup de mesquineries, de petites histoires, de jalousies. La solidarité est rétrécie si l'on peut dire. Il n'y a pas ce même coude à coude devant la mort qu'à Birkenau. Cela m'attriste, m'écoeure. J'en parle à Stéphane et lui dis: 'C'est peut-être parce que nous sommes moins nombreuses'. Elle me répond: 'C'est surtout parce que ces femmes sont moins malheureuses'. C'est vrai, elle a raison<sup>135</sup>.

Conversely, however, other authors such as Charlotte Delbo or Eva Tichauer intimate that any improvement in camp conditions allowed women to focus more upon others, given that there was some relaxing of the relentless struggle for survival which was so all-consuming and necessarily self-focused as to allow room for little else. Whatever their perception of the general relation between conditions and solidarity, however, most of these female writers emphasize solidarity within their personal collective *throughout* their testimonies. The inner group unit is widely portrayed as absolutely consistent in its solidarity, irrespective of fluctuating external factors and the responses of women outside its confines — to all intents and purposes, it remains testimonially sacred, seemingly exempt from the wider negative vagaries of camp existence. Thus, for all Alcan's professed despair at the breakdown of solidarity, her own small group remains unaffected by its wider decline. And, while the attitudinal relation between conditions and wider solidarity may be difficult to define due to discrepancies between testimonies, what is certain is that surrounding conditions impacted on the *type and degree* of solidarity that was possible. Perhaps Marie-Elisa Cohen's archival testimony best illustrates the point:

Quand on est dans le pire des dénuements on ne peut rien pour les autres, on le peut quand justement on a un peu sauvé sa peau, c'est une chose qu'il faut comprendre. Dans les débuts de Birkenau, ce qu'on faisait pour les autres c'était des micro-choses. Par exemple, j'ai toujours été reconnaissante à une copine qui m'a donné des gifles un jour où j'étais en train de tomber dans les pommes, parce que si on m'avait emmené au bloc 25 à ce moment-là, je ne serais pas en train de raconter tout ça. C'était des très petites choses mais après on a essayé d'aider celles qui avaient besoin qu'on les nourrisse<sup>136</sup>.

Inevitably, then, acts of solidarity were particularly difficult for women at Auschwitz, where conditions were often notably worse than those at Ravensbrück.

Regardless of these minor discrepancies, solidarity assumes a central role in French female testimonies, by virtue of sheer textual emphasis in the many forms noted above. However, the explicit linkage of solidarity to survival — a linkage which is sustained and repeated throughout the body of female testimonies — should not be overlooked as an equally significant means of effecting the textual centralization of female mutual aid. Consider, for example, the words of Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe who concludes her testimony with the assertion that prisoners "[...] attestent que la solidarité a été une force de survie"<sup>137</sup>, and refers to "[...] la

<sup>135</sup> Louise Alcan, *Sans armes et sans bagages*, p.70

<sup>136</sup> Marie-Elisa Cohen, (unpublished testimony), p.20

<sup>137</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.162

solidarité grâce à laquelle, hier, nous avons été maintenus en vie”<sup>138</sup>. Magda Hollander-Lafon alludes to the solidarity of her *camarades* with the unequivocal proclamation that “Je sais que je leur dois la vie”<sup>139</sup>, whilst Louise Alcan’s response to the question of why she did not perish in the camps also makes explicit the solidarity/survival connection:

Pour ma part, la réponse est que chaque fois que je me suis trouvée au camp dans le plus grand danger apparent, des amies m’ont aidée, que ce soit par un vêtement plus chaud, un changement de travail, un médicament donné au risque de la vie de celle qui me l’a remis<sup>140</sup>.

Marie-Elisa Cohen is particularly emphatic on this issue:

[...] ce qui a permis à beaucoup d’entre nous de tenir: la solidarité absolument admirable sans laquelle beaucoup d’entre nous ne serait pas rentrés. S’il n’y avait pas eu cette solidarité, cette confiance réciproque que nous avions les unes envers les autres, s’il n’y avait pas eu des camarades pour nous donner des gifles quand elles voyaient que nous nous trouvions mal à l’appel ou pour nous aider un petit peu quand nous étions découragées, pour nous remonter le moral [...] je suis sûre qu’au total, il serait rentré beaucoup moins de survivants des camps, et pour notre convoi en particulier, nous n’aurions pas été 49 à revenir<sup>141</sup>.

These affiliative examples, to which many more could be added, are significant in emphasizing the concept of solidarity beyond the mere repeated presentation of its varied manifestations. For was not survival the primary and ultimate goal of every prisoner interned within the concentration camp system? And does not the testimonial marrying of solidarity to this central objective thus accord it an unparalleled textual prominence?

## Solidarity and Gender

The question remains, however, whether the specific features of female solidarity and collective relations (distinct groups, familial, camp-adapted structures and the persistent juxtaposition of practical and emotional aid) are in fact particular to women or universal in the testimonial context. Is the tendency to predicate the narrative upon solidarity and the collective as a bipartite central theme a uniquely female proclivity? What testimonial substance exists to support generalized, often vague and unsubstantiated assertions such as those of Germaine Tillion (“Il me semble que, dans les camps de femmes, l’appui amical fut plus constant, plus solide, plus réparti”<sup>142</sup>) and Sybil Milton (“[...] the degree of group cohesion and noncompetitive support available to women seems markedly greater than among men”<sup>143</sup>)? The posing of such a question is certainly not without wider contextual foundation. Given that numerous gender-based studies (not to mention societal stereotypes) suggest significant

<sup>138</sup> Ibid, p.192

<sup>139</sup> Magda Hollander-Lafon, *Les chemins du temps*, p.42

<sup>140</sup> Louise Alcan, *Le temps écartelé*, p.81

<sup>141</sup> Marie-Elisa Cohen, ‘Les 31 000’ in *Le patriote résistant*, No 519: 6-7, Jan 1983, p.6

<sup>142</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p.196

<sup>143</sup> Sybil Milton in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.230



divergences in the way males and females inter-relate, it is surely simplistic to assume that testimonial reality is entirely non gender-specific in this area.

Indeed, before we consult the testimonies themselves on this question, it is worthwhile casting a brief, if somewhat guarded, glance towards the field of social psychology. Research in this field suggests that women may in fact have been socialized to manifest different responses to the concepts of group interaction and aiding others *before* entering the camp, thus presaging testimonial gender divergences within this sphere as a logical and inevitable phenomenon. In their female-focused gender-comparative study of societal helping behaviour entitled *The Helpful but Helpless Female: Myth or Reality?*, (a study based, it must be stressed, upon normal society with no reference to concentration camps), Jane Piliavin and Rhoda Unger provide several germane conclusions. The authors assert that gender differences are discernible right from the moment of “pre-attentive processing” (the initial decision whether or not a given situation merits attention and aid), due to the existence of “[...] socialization factors, social interaction factors and possibly biological differences that lead to differences in how men and women perceive and are aroused by the problems of others, and how they assess the costs of acting or refraining from action”<sup>144</sup>. Men and women, it seems, tend to exhibit non-parallel thresholds for defining need, with studies revealing that women manifest a more marked and rapid response to those in need of aid, and are prone to be

[...] more innately sensitive to the distress of others, particularly to the distress of infants. This would have provided some evolutionary advantage. It is, however, also very clearly the case that girls are strongly socialized to be sensitive to the needs of others. As Staub concludes: ‘The results with both children and adults suggest that consideration for others is a more salient and important value for females than for males [...] It is our network of cognitions — thoughts, beliefs and values — that guides, on the one hand, our perception of our environment and the manner in which we process those perceptions, and on the other hand, our affective responses [...] consideration for others’ feelings and welfare is likely to lead to empathetic emotional responses’<sup>145</sup>.

It would appear then that, in normal societal circumstances at least, women are indeed socialized to a greater response to distress and are thus more readily inclined to offer aid. Might we therefore reasonably expect that female inmates entering the concentration camp would display a greater tendency toward mutual aid than their male counterparts and that their testimonies would be reflective of this trend?

With regard to the concept of the group and the formation of bonds with other individuals, Kenneth Dion’s work on *Sex, Gender and Groups* may also have some relevance, although spatial constraints will allow us to touch but briefly upon his findings. Dion asserts that females tend to assume the role of “socioemotional specialists” in a group environment, a role predicated upon maintaining solidarity and reducing tensions within the group, as opposed

<sup>144</sup> Jane Piliavin and Rhoda Unger, ‘The Helpful but Helpless Female: Myth or Reality?’ in Virginia O’Leary et al, *Women, Gender and Social Psychology*, p.169

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p.157

to the more task-oriented mentality of male group members.<sup>146</sup> He also alludes to a coalition-forming experiment conducted by Vinacke and Arkoff in which the presence of a stronger group, rather than individualist, mentality was evident amongst women. Within this game-based experiment, women were more likely than men to form alliances including all group members, to divide all winnings and to refrain from taking advantage of weaker members:

Women presumably adopt an 'accommodative' strategy characterized by concern for others and a desire for fairness in distributing outcomes. The behaviour of men, on the other hand, was said to reflect an 'exploitative' strategy aimed primarily at winning the game, exercising power and maximising one's own payoff<sup>147</sup>.

Moreover, his analysis suggests the particular strength of female bonds and relationships: "[...]women's friendships and interactions with others of their sex are more intense and rewarding than are men's"<sup>148</sup> and further, that "several kinds of data, independently gathered by different investigators, point to a conclusion that [...] female bonds are stronger than male bonds"<sup>149</sup>. Once again, such conclusions imply that female pre-internment socialization would dispose women towards a stronger group mentality and towards a more ready formation of intimate bonds within the concentration camp.

The extreme environment of the camps, where the battle for survival eclipsed most other considerations, where terror and suffering were constant, where every previously upheld value could be nullified or inverted is, however, far removed from the milieu in which these psychological conclusions were reached. How much weight, then, can we attribute to these findings, contextually divorced from the normative societal circumstances which engendered them? It is all but impossible to tell. The conclusions of social psychology have a certain hermeneutic value for our study, positing the concept that socialization would appear to set the scene for greater female helping behaviour and group bonding in the camps and therefore partially explaining *why* solidarity and the group were important aspects of female camp life and female testimonies. They must, however, be approached with extreme caution. For if civilization was stripped away in the camps, would not its derivative socialized responses be concurrently extirpated, meaning that what these writers observed and experienced was camp-induced rather than pre-assimilated? Or would remnants of these anterior responses persist? Although we have indeed noted in Chapter One that certain pre-camp socialized responses appeared to remain functional throughout female internment (for instance the equation of female identity with fertility and subsequent fear of camp-engendered sterility, the awareness of appearance and the desire to manifest femininity wherever possible), others (notably female body modesty) appear to have been present only at the outset of the experience, and were rapidly eliminated by repeated exposure to camp reality. Where the ultimate objective becomes purely and simply survival,

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<sup>146</sup> Kenneth Dion, 'Sex, Gender and Groups: Selected Issues' in Virginia O'Leary et al, *Women, Gender and Social Psychology*, pp295-6

<sup>147</sup> Ibid, p.297

<sup>148</sup> Ibid, p.301

<sup>149</sup> Ibid, p.301

normal preconceptions and responses — no matter how strongly ingrained — may certainly be significantly skewed. These conclusions, then, merely provide us with a broad idea of the schematic of genderized responses with which men and women entered the camp, and to establish a more accurate picture we must of necessity turn to the testimonies themselves.

How, then, to approach this complex field of study? Precedents for even a broad testimonial gender comparative approach are few. Marlene Heinemann has made a rare attempt at gender conceptualization of this area, and her observations on the issue of methodology are particularly valid. Heinemann points out that it is particularly important to compare like with like in such an analysis, given that varying degrees of privilege, and particularly the different experiences to which Jews and non-Jews were subjected, can potentially skew gender comparisons on the issue of inmate relations, eliciting varied responses whose differences are representative not of gender, but of hierarchical and structural anomalies:

To find analogous pairs of male and female authored memoirs which can yield meaningful comparisons, several limitations need to be observed. It cannot be ignored that the discovery of exactly comparable situations among different inmates, even in the same camp, is impossible. However, one can reduce the extraneous elements by comparing death camp inmates only with other death camp inmates, rather than with inmates in camps devoted to the punishment of political prisoners. Furthermore, within the same camp, it makes little sense to compare ordinary inmates working primarily at outdoor manual labour with privileged inmates working in camp offices [...] Individual differences among privileged jobs seem less important than the fact that the individual's own struggle for survival could for significant stretches of time recede from being paramount. Divided into the two main groups of privileged and non-privileged, the narratives can be questioned as to whether peer relations could contribute to survival. Furthermore, Jewish prisoners should be compared with other Jews [...] who were treated with significantly more brutality, selected for the gas chambers more often, and experienced much hatred from other inmates.<sup>150</sup>

However, the resultant comparative method adopted by Heinemann (which involves matching analogous male/female pairs for comparison) is by no means entirely satisfactory. Although Heinemann's arguments are highly cogent, the narrow scope of her method restricts her ability to arrive at definitive and widely applicable conclusions. Even within a seemingly homologous pairing — take for example that of Fania Fenelon and Izaak Goldberg, both privileged Jewish inmates — Heinemann's conclusions are hampered by the incomplete similarity of their experiences, and she is constrained to enlist a third testimonial voice (that of Gisella Perl) to achieve a more credible sense of analogy. Not only is this method limited in execution, it must also be deemed open to misappropriation by less responsible scholars than Heinemann: Within the vast body of camp testimonies, it would be a relatively simple matter to select pairs of narratives which support any chosen critical argument, regardless of whether this argument is in fact representative of the testimonial norm. At the same time, it remains extremely difficult to categorize any given narrative into one of Heinemann's "two main groups of privileged and non-privileged", given the diversity of experience often contained within one

<sup>150</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, p.85

narrative, which can (as with Charlotte Delbo, to cite but one example) encompass both of these spheres. Thus, whilst acknowledging the rationale behind this approach, I propose a variation on this methodology, approaching the field as a whole whilst maintaining an awareness of the general degree of privilege dictating the narratives under study. Such an approach is indeed facilitated by the general commonality of French testimonies which, as we saw in our examination of the grey zone, tend to remain outside the sphere of real functionary privilege.

If we accept the findings advanced by Bruno Bettelheim, it would appear that our analysis of testimonial gender divergences in inmate interaction will prove singularly unambiguous and neatly oppositional — the presentation of the concepts of solidarity and the collective as dominant elements of the camp experience which characterizes female narratives will be notably absent from male accounts. For Bettelheim, whose analysis of prisoner behaviour and psychology is based exclusively upon male prisoners and may therefore be presumed to be indicative of the male experience, is adamant that bonds of friendship and sustained emotional interaction were minimal amongst men in the camps. Bettelheim asserts that prisoner interaction was limited by a dearth of emotional energy:

Despite the gradual withering of old emotional ties, no new ones were apt to be formed in the camps to replace them. Emotional energy was continuously being drained because of the vital energy needed for mere survival. It could not be replenished by friendships with other prisoners because there was almost no emotion free to offer in support of others, and far too many occasions for friction, if not active hatred<sup>151</sup>.

He goes on to claim that most prisoners eschewed the constancy of meaningful friendship in preference for the greatest interactive variety possible, in order to avoid emotional involvement, and that those male friendships which did exist within the camps remained essentially limited and superficial:

Within his own barracks room every prisoner who hoped to survive had anywhere from three to five 'comrades'. These were not real friends; they were companions at work, and more often in misery. But while misery loves company, it does not make for friendship. Genuine attachments just do not grow in a barren field of experience nourished only by emotions of frustration and despair<sup>152</sup>.

No such neat antipathetical reality exists, however, for Bettelheim's conclusions on the veritable non-existence of strong male friendship are simply not borne out by the majority of male testimonies, among French writers at least. Perhaps the words of André Courvoisier, as he despairs at the prospect of a return to Sachsenhausen without his friends after being caught sabotaging in the Heinkel commando, provide the most fitting summation with which to illustrate the testimonial universality of friendship and positive inmate interaction:

Tout être humain mis en collectivité dans les pires conditions arrive malgré tout à se recréer une cellule de société par l'amitié qui lui tient lieu de famille, de tribu, choisissant ceux de sa langue, de sa religion, de sa couleur, qui lui sont le plus proche

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<sup>151</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p.196

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid*, p.231

pour s'unir contre l'adversité, contre l'ennemi commun. En ce moment, chacun sent qu'il vient de tout perdre...<sup>153</sup>

It is patently evident from Courvoisier's text, and from the body of French male testimonies under study as a whole, that solidarity and a sense of the collective are certainly not confined to female narratives. Bettelheim aside, there is no contesting the fact that French male testimonies also display evidence of strong friendship between inmates and significant acts of mutual aid. It is also apparent, however, to any reader of a large body of both male and female testimonies that the emphasis upon solidarity appears significantly more marked in the writings of female survivors. Distinct though this impression may be, the precise exegetic reason for such a perceived divergence is not immediately discernible. The most rudimentary explanation lies in textual emphasis and the simple proportion of the text devoted to the concepts of solidarity and the collective — a proportion which tends to be much greater in female French texts where it often, as we have seen, reigns unchallenged as a central theme. In addition to proportional weight, however, the portrayal of solidarity and the collective does in fact subtly but significantly differ between male and female accounts, both in nature and in emphasis. Without deviating too far from the female testimonies which constitute our focus, a brief study of certain dominant characteristics of male testimonies in this particular sphere will allow us to delineate what is particular to female narratives in this widely shared realm.

Firstly, the nature or mode of solidarity presented in French male testimonies is of unarguable significance here. Overwhelmingly, the presentation of solidarity is primarily practical in basis<sup>154</sup>. We witness a myriad of instances of male aid based upon action, where prisoners are portrayed doing, giving, performing. These authors depict the sharing of food, the pooling of resources when conditions allow, the physical support offered by friends and the practical intervention where possible to extricate friends from dangerous work commandos or situations — a portrayal which is closely correlative with the emphasis of their female counterparts. However, in contrast to the tendency of female testimonies to synthesize practical and emotional aid, and to emphasize the central nature of emotional exchange within their camp experience, the practical often occurs largely in isolation in the male testimony. Robert Antelme is a case in point. Although solidarity is not a strong theme in his testimony (with its emphasis upon the sheer misery of camp existence and the difficulty of maintaining any focus beyond that of survival), its manifestations in the text are almost wholly based upon practical support. Indeed, the singular outstanding instance of emotional exchange occurs at Christmas, where the men converse and share details of their former lives: “[...] ils ont essayé de raconter des histoires. Ils

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<sup>153</sup> André Courvoisier, *Un aller et retour en enfer*, p.144

<sup>154</sup> Aimé Bonifas is an exception here (*Détenu 20801 dans les bagnes nazis*, p.44 and p.115), indicating the significance of conversation for himself and his fellow Christian, Albert. The treatment of this aspect is, however, relatively perfunctory.

ont parlé de leur femmes et de leur gosses”<sup>155</sup>. This incident is, however, a function of Christmas and the sentiments it inspired — essentially exceptional and atypical.

Sylvain Kaufmann’s testimony, although very different from Antelme in his camp experience as a Jewish prisoner within the larger camp systems of Auschwitz, Dachau and the Warsaw ghetto, exemplifies a comparable tendency. While the affective may be significant to Kaufmann, it is the effective which is the focus of his not inconsiderable portrayal of solidarity. Kaufmann’s *camarades* are for the most part introduced into the narrative under the auspices of food sharing or other practical aid, rather than for any affective interaction. They tend to materialize for the purposes of concrete aid (as with Adolphe who “[...] me voyant sans doute affamé, il m’a donné la moitié la plus épaisse de sa gamelle, je ne l’oublierai pas...”)<sup>156</sup> before receding into the background again. The same is true for the interaction which Kaufmann directs towards others — he describes himself at various times procuring clothes and resources for other inmates, taking water to the new arrivals and relinquishing the last of his own water to his friend Charles — all acts based firmly upon practical activity. And this practical phenomenon is echoed in many male testimonies, with food sharing in particular often constituting the primary basis of relationships. Indeed, some writers, such as Bernard Py, emphasize the perfunctory, non-emotional nature of any other interaction beyond the practical:

Chaque moment, exigeant une adaptation constante, nous absorbe si bien que nos intelligences et nos esprits ne s’élèvent guère, nous parlons peu, nos mots commentent sobrement ce qui se passe. Au jour le jour il faut ‘assurer’, c’est cela notre préoccupation, le sujet essentiel des brefs échanges<sup>157</sup>.

Perhaps the clearest example, however, of the highly functional portrayal of male inmate relations and solidarity is furnished by Primo Levi, in his depiction of his friendship with Alberto. Clearly, Alberto is a highly significant figure in Levi’s camp experience, and the relationship is of singular importance to Levi. And yet the friendship is conveyed almost entirely in terms of action and practicality: “We two are bound by a tight bond of alliance, by which every organized scrap is divided into two equal parts”<sup>158</sup>. Note that not only is their relationship demarcated in the concrete terms of food sharing, but that Levi also utilises non-emotive vocabulary when describing their bond, deeming it an “alliance” and thereby imbuing it with strong practical connotations. These connotations are reiterated in later descriptions too, where the basis of their relations remains that of shared resources: “We were inseparable: we were the two Italians [...] for six months we had shared a bunk and every scrap of food organised”<sup>159</sup>. When Levi succeeds in procuring a job as a chemist Alberto is pleased “[...] both because of

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<sup>155</sup> Robert Antelme, *L’espèce humaine*, p.114

<sup>156</sup> Sylvain Kaufmann, *Le livre de la mémoire*, p.163

<sup>157</sup> Bernard Py, *Dans le malheur de Dachau, j’ai trouvé un bonheur*, p.52. See also Yves Béon’s comments on the practical nature of group bonds as a means of survival (*Planet Dora*, p.58).

<sup>158</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.144

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid*, p.161

our friendship and because he will also gain from it”<sup>160</sup>, demonstrating how the practical figures strongly in their response to one another. If we juxtapose this “alliance” with Charlotte Delbo’s portrayal of her friend’s comfort as a “mother’s breast” or the “climat affectif” so fundamental to Simone Alizon<sup>161</sup>, it is apparent that a real, albeit subtle, gender divergence is operative here.

And it is not without effect in creating a wider sense of difference. The privileging of the practical over the emotional in the portrayal of male inmate relations and solidarity ultimately acts as something of a minimizing force in this particular sphere. Given that there is not the same emphasis upon emotional investment which renders the theme of solidarity such a pivotal feature of most female testimonies, it is inevitable that a broad survey of male narratives does not yield the parallel impression that solidarity permeated the *entire* experience of the author. As a consequence, its textual weight appears somehow diluted and incomplete; the cumulative presence of the other as a positive interactive entity certainly appears lessened. It is worth noting, however, that this textually-derivative impression may to some degree be divorced from camp reality. For in the extreme conditions of the concentration and death camps, practical aid — whose influence upon survival was direct and immediate — was undoubtedly of the utmost significance. The testimonial reality, however, suggests a subtle inequity between the male and female portrayals of positive interaction which is inevitably read as a less complete and pervasive male emphasis upon solidarity.

And this is indeed the crux of the textual reality of French male testimonies — although solidarity is certainly evident therein, it appears to be accorded not only less quantitative representation, but also less focal and thematic emphasis than in the narratives of their female counterparts. There are, of course, always exceptions to the general trend, but a broad juxtaposition of male narratives reveals that a veritable peripheralization of the concept of solidarity is widely operative on many levels of these testimonies.

On the one hand, female narratives manifest a marked tendency to establish the other as narrative reference point. “Elles ont dominé ma vie là-bas” asserts Françoise Maous<sup>162</sup>, and indeed, in innumerable instances, friends are presented as the stable centre of the female inmate’s camp existence, serving as the referential compass by which she orients and defines herself in the camp environment. Most of the female testimonies under study manifest a repeated turning towards this central axis, either through persistent reaffirmation of the significance and solidity of their camp bonds (“notre amitié est plus solide que ces rocs battus par la mer. Il faut

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p.145

<sup>161</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.207

<sup>162</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.84

aux assauts de la vague douce ou furieuse des siècles pour les fissurer"<sup>163</sup>) or, if distanced from this implied centre, through the sustained expression of a desire to reorient themselves towards it. Hence Geneviève de Gaulle dreams in solitary confinement not of escape or better conditions but of reuniting with her camp *camarades*: "Rêver seulement de vous retrouver, de partager la mauvaise boisson, le pain gris et dur, la soupe où nagent quelques rutabagas... et surtout la douceur d'une main serrée, la tendresse d'un regard"<sup>164</sup>. Conversely, the model of the male narrative, if such a thing can be said to exist, tends to be more individualistic. Friends appear and are celebrated when they do, but they enact a more secondary, supporting role and are considerably more peripheral in terms of reference. It is relatively rare to find a male testimony which ceaselessly places other prisoners as the primary points of reference. Olivier Richet's description of enforced disruption to prisoner placement within the block in order to preclude the development of friendships is telling: "Ne possédant, en effet, plus rien, chacun d'entre nous s'attachait à son lit, à sa table, à ses camarades et il fallait, chaque fois, briser toutes ces attaches, ce qui est beaucoup plus pénible que vous ne pouvez le réaliser"<sup>165</sup>. Here the *camarades*, while enacting a relatively significant role throughout Richet's testimony, are simply one of a list of important elements for his wellbeing rather than its referential centre.

The comparative male de-centralization of positive interaction is further consolidated by a less explicit linkage of solidarity to survival. While it is patently obvious that the many manifestations of solidarity (food sharing, supportive intervention and the myriad of forms of practical aid) could in fact impact significantly upon male survival, this linkage is accorded less overt testimonial recognition. The persistent female assertion that solidarity was an absolutely pivotal element (if not the central component) of their survival (consider Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne's assertion that: "Au *Lager*, l'autre pouvait être la lumière, la solidarité sans laquelle dans cet enfer nous n'aurions pu survivre"<sup>166</sup>.) remains unparalleled in emphasis and pervasiveness by male testimonies. While some male writers do make brief reference to the contribution of their fellows to their survival (as with René Chavanne in the extreme circumstances of his final train journey), these references are overwhelmingly less sustained and emphatic. Notably more common is the suggestion that solidarity and survival are to a large extent irreconcilable. Bernard Py, for example, becomes convinced of this incompatibility when he shares his coat with a *camarade* whilst working in an external commando, and subsequently faints on the march back to camp: "Cette faiblesse, une hypoglycémie, me persuade qu'un certain partage, ici, peut se payer cher et je commence à me renfermer sur moi-même"<sup>167</sup>. The downplaying of this linkage in comparison to female camp memoirs thus inevitably affords the wider male presentation of solidarity less import: in an environment where survival was the

<sup>163</sup> Nelly Gorce, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, p.123

<sup>164</sup> Geneviève de Gaulle Anthonioz, *La traversée de la nuit* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998), p.17

<sup>165</sup> Olivier, Charles and Jacqueline Richet, *Trois bagnes*, p.166

<sup>166</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.55

<sup>167</sup> Bernard Py, *Dans le malheur de Dachau, j'ai trouvé un bonheur*, p.59



common objective of prisoners, any lesser emphasis upon solidarity as an essential tool for survival may be seen to function — even if unwittingly — as a comparative devalorization of the very significance of positive interaction and mutual aid.

And finally, a certain peripheralization of the concepts of solidarity and positive inmate interaction occurs in several male testimonies through the presence of a strong counter thematic thread which focuses upon the ephemeral or illusory nature of solidarity. Whereas the emphasis in the vast majority of female testimonies is firmly placed upon the *strength* of solidarity (with, as we shall shortly discover, the limitations of this concept contained to the implicit level within the textual *non-dit* or, in rare cases, articulated as a decidedly lesser sub-theme), it is common for their male counterparts to dwell upon its weaknesses or its impotence against the might of crushing camp mechanisms — a theme of anti-solidarity which parallels, and sometimes eclipses, positive interaction. Where we see French women writers as a rule presenting the triumph of solidarity in the camps (within national confines amongst their fellow countrywomen at least), male testimonies often portray solidarity as frustrated more often than it succeeds in overcoming camp conditions — and where it does succeed, it is often within the closed, highly specific context of a particular culture (the strong Christianity of Aimé Bonifas and his friends, for instance, or the sense of military honour and responsibility of Jean Mialet and his fellow officers).

Instances of a concurrent anti-solidarity theme are diverse in male testimonies, running the gamut from the impossibility of prioritising anyone other than the self, to the shallow or transitory nature of inmate relations and the ultimate necessity of indifference to others. Once again, Robert Antelme's comprehensive testimony provides a powerful illustration of such narrative tendencies. Despite certain manifestations of practical aid within his testimony, Antelme effectively devalues the concept of solidarity with his intimation that it is quintessentially limited:

Il savait qu'entre la vie d'un copain et la sienne propre, on choisirait la sienne et qu'on ne laisserait pas perdre le pain du copain mort. Il savait qu'on pourrait voir, sans bouger, assommer de coups un copain et qu'avec l'envie d'écraser sous ses pieds la figure, les dents, le nez du coigneur on sentirait aussi, muette, profonde, la *veine* du corps: 'Ce n'est pas moi qui prends'<sup>168</sup>.

Antelme therefore deconstructs the apparently solid basis of solidarity which is presented in so many female testimonies, rendering visible the rather flimsy skeleton of a phenomenon whose ultimate focus upon self-privilege renders it, in the final analysis, weak and merely cosmetic. This fractionation of solidarity by stripping away its outer layers to arrive at a decidedly insubstantial core is consolidated by Antelme's later depiction of inmate interaction as shallow, fleeting and founded upon the needs of the self rather than of others — a portrayal which further prevents it establishing a positive thematic foothold. Here Antelme describes his interaction with a *camarade* in his work commando, with whom he gets on well and hopes to remain working.

<sup>168</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.23

However, their interaction is negated by Antelme's characterization of it as both self-serving and evanescent:

On croit aussi qu'on pourra parler ce soir à l'église. On le croit vraiment. Pourtant, il suffira que tout à l'heure, pour une raison quelconque [...] nous nous séparions, et nous ne nous connaîtrons plus. Chacun a parlé pour soi, pour se montrer les richesses, car à haute voix on les voit mieux. Ce soir, devant le guichet, on attendra tellement la soupe que même si nous sommes voisins, nous ne nous dirons peut-être rien. Demain, on ne se dira peut-être pas bonjour. Déjà tout à l'heure on sera avec un autre; il expliquera comment sa mère fait le flan, parce qu'il a besoin de parler du flan, du lait, du pain. On l'écouterà, on verra le flan, le café au lait; on s'invitera à manger, parce qu'en s'invitant on voit encore plus de viande, plus de pain. Et, s'il y a du rab de soupe ce soir, celui qui aura invité le copain à manger avec sa femme, le bousculera peut-être<sup>169</sup>.

The immediate juxtaposition of implied solidarity with nullifying camp reality therefore renders the anti-solidarity emphasis a considerable and dominant thematic thread in Antelme's text, overshadowing the concept of successful solidarity.

It should be noted, however, that Antelme's text is in many ways unique amongst male testimonies. With his determinedly lucid, universal perspective and insightful approach to the camps, his narrative is comparable more with Charlotte Delbo than with many of the other male writers whose accounts are more closely filtered through the lens of their personal political, military or religious stance. If, in passing, we compare Delbo and Antelme within this particular sphere, there is indeed a notable divergence. Unlike many female testimonial authors, Delbo is careful not to over-emphasize the spatio-temporal significance of solidarity and to accord it an implicit constancy which would intimate that it was continual and uninterrupted in female camp reality. Such an implicit continuum is prohibited by the structural framework of her testimony, in which Delbo intersperses episodes where she is portrayed alone in her contemplation of and struggle with camp reality with evocations of the group and their aid. To this end she utilises the stream episode to remove the group from both memory and the narrative, subordinating them to the self as it takes precedence: "Il est certain que ce jour-là j'étais avec elles. Alors que je les vois nettement dans tous les endroits où nous avons travaillé, je ne les vois pas du tout à côté de moi, le jour du ruisseau"<sup>170</sup>. And yet, despite her intimation that it was often necessary to privilege the self, her portrayal of solidarity where it does occur is, as we have seen, strong and unflinching, repeatedly successful in aiding herself as protagonist to face the realities of camp life. Antelme's recurrent theme of the inherent insubstantiality of solidarity is a far cry from Delbo's emphasis upon its essential strength.

The somewhat particular nature of Antelme's testimony should not, however, categorize him as unique amongst male writers in illustrating this tendency, for it is equally evident in many other male narratives (although certainly not all — Aimé Bonifas and André Courvoisier are notable exceptions). Jean Mialet displays a particularly persistent emphasis upon this theme of

<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p.49

<sup>170</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, p.54

anti-solidarity, which finds its most pronounced manifestation in his repeated portrayal of the frustration of any germination of solidarity amongst the French. Mialet repeatedly bemoans the individualism of his fellow French inmates, and their refusal to form collective bonds and aid one another. “Non, il n’y a rien à faire pour que, spontanément, ils s’unissent et s’organisent devant le péril extérieur!”<sup>171</sup>. On several occasions, Mialet describes his attempts to organise some form of mutual assistance with other French prisoners working in the mines at Dora — attempts which are met with minimal response, of which the following is typical: “Ici c’est du chacun pour soi. Ne compte pas sur moi pour ta tentative d’organisation qui est totalement inutile”<sup>172</sup>. Mialet repeatedly asserts the need to “[...] guérir les Français de leur habitude de se méfier les uns des autres, de refuser l’action et même la réflexion collectives, de s’entre-déchirer a priori”<sup>173</sup>, referring throughout the text to “leur incapacité à s’unir”<sup>174</sup>. This leitmotif of anti-solidarity is so emphatic within Mialet’s testimony, and expressed with such vehemence verging on bitterness, as to almost undermine the strong solidarity which Mialet later experiences with his friend and fellow officer Sesmaisons in the context of their shared pre-incarceration training and values. Although this particular friendship is presented as an instance of exemplary solidarity, it remains to some extent negated by the wider norm of failed, frustrated solidarity — ultimately an exception to the disheartening rule.

And, although not featuring amongst the ranks of French writers, Primo Levi’s summation of inmate interaction demands citation here, for it is particularly apposite in representing this generalized anti-solidarity trend in male narratives. After telling Klaus that he had dreamed that they were dining together in warmth and comfort at his home in Italy, Levi undermines his own image of mutual aid and comfort: “Poor silly Kraus. If he only knew that it is not true, that I have really dreamt nothing about him, that he is nothing to me except for a brief moment, nothing like everything is nothing down here, except the hunger inside and the cold and the rain around”<sup>175</sup>. Indeed, solidarity in Levi’s narratives is in many respects reduced to “[...] tacit pacts of non-aggression with neighbours”<sup>176</sup>. The tendency to mitigate or oppose instances of mutual aid, friendship and solidarity with a wider undermining theme of the impotence of solidarity against the camp regime and its inherent insubstantiality in the face of suffering thus contributes to the peripheralization of solidarity in many male narratives, effectively cancelling out its status as a central narrative component. Such overtly-expressed subversion is minimal in the female body of texts.

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<sup>171</sup> Jean Mialet, *La haine et le pardon*, p.66

<sup>172</sup> Ibid, p.85

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p.85

<sup>174</sup> Ibid, p.89

<sup>175</sup> Primo Levi, *If This is a Man*, p.141

<sup>176</sup> Ibid, p.62

Female testimonies thus appear loosely specific in their treatment of solidarity by plural virtue of the extent of solidarity portrayed (a coaxial portrayal inclusive of emotional as well as practical assistance), the centralization of solidarity as both referential narrative focus and means of survival, and the largely positive portrayal of solidarity which focuses to a greater degree on its strength than its frailty. If, in concluding, we cast a brief glance at the general male testimonial approach to the collective and the group, it becomes equally apparent that certain broad divergences are operative in this sphere. Comparatively speaking, the testimonial reader is left with the distinct impression that the male approach to the collective is significantly more *generalized* on two primary levels. Firstly, although the majority of male narratives convey a strong sense of the collective through the narrative approach (again utilising the testimonially-generic first person plural of “nous” or “on” to denote a powerful sense of commonality with fellow prisoners), their portrayal of the group unit appears to remain largely at this generalized level. Unlike the clear delineation of an inner circle of friends which is a pervasive feature of the body of female testimonies, the male group appears less demarcated, somewhat more vague and indefinite in nature. Friends are named as they appear and recede from these narratives, but the confines of a specific, localised group are rarely given concrete tangible form. Robert Antelme, for example, asserts that solidarity “[...] existait entre des groupes de trois, quatre copains”<sup>177</sup>, but he never delineates any such group. While his narrative is predicated upon the collective “nous”, the “we” denoted is “we” the convoy as a whole, rather than “we” the specific group. Sylvain Kaufmann exhibits a comparable tendency. A significant group of friends surround Kaufmann (“l’amitié ici est un luxe rare et je l’apprécie à sa juste valeur”<sup>178</sup>), but they are for the most part ill-defined; a vague collective rather than any contoured entity. Others, such as Jean Mialet, accord more definite form to those around them with descriptions of certain characteristics<sup>179</sup>, but effect these descriptions individually, in relation to the self only, rather than as any defined and recognizable group. René Chavanne and André Courvoisier are exceptions to this rule, both briefly naming those who formed the nucleus of their camp collective. The wider tendency, however, is for a generalized, non-specific sense of community in which friendships, although powerful, exist as a somewhat vague entity.

The second feature engendering a sense of generalization in the male portrayal of the collective is, in comparison to female camp memoirs, a relative depersonalization in the depiction of the other individuals who comprise the collective. In contrast to female testimonial authors, who tend to expound in greater detail upon the personal qualities and characteristics of their closest camp friends — consider, among others, the descriptions of Yvonne Pagniez, Nelly Gorce, Simone Alizon, Eva Tichauer and the chapter devoted to her companions in Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne’s account — many French male authors maintain a curiously distanced

<sup>177</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.135

<sup>178</sup> Sylvain Kaufmann, *Le livre de la mémoire*, p.231

<sup>179</sup> Jean Mialet, *La haine et le pardon*, pp200-204

narrative approach to others in their camp community. Often those individuals who make up the group surrounding the author appear as little more than names who may be portrayed as highly significant to the author's camp experience but who are not accorded attributes or any real personal characteristics. Even René Chavanne and André Courvoisier who, as we have noted, did delineate distinct inner groups, simply name the members of these groups rather than personalizing them with further distinguishing characteristics. Chavanne, too, calls the members of his group by their full names throughout his testimony, thus reinforcing a peculiar sense of distance and formality in his portrayal of those closest to him. Nor is the collective widely attributed the familial emphasis of female testimonies; Courvoisier is an exception with his brief allusion to "notre famille, c'est-à-dire notre collectivité"<sup>180</sup>, but the reference is neither sustained nor emphatic. Robert Antelme even extends this sense of depersonalization into the realm of death, implicitly divesting the deceased *copain* of individual characteristics to render him a mere component of a highly generalized collective: "La mort du copain est une catastrophe. Mais la catastrophe ce n'est pas seulement que *ce* copain soit mort. C'est que l'*un* de nous meure, que la mort arrive sur nous"<sup>181</sup>. Inevitably, then, the minimal characterization of the male collective unit thus renders the individuals who comprise it somewhat two dimensional. Their presence within the narrative is consequently lessened and the role of the collective — depersonalized and somewhat abstract — comparatively reduced. Such a broad assessment of the less focal role of the collective is consolidated by the male depiction of the prospect of separation from one's friends; while regret, sadness or apprehension at the prospect of isolation figure in many of these narratives, the sheer terror and sense of a fracturing of the self which many female accounts prioritise are conspicuously absent. The female testimonial depiction of positive inmate interaction and the group unit, while echoed in the narratives of their male counterparts, therefore remains largely unmatched in textual emphasis and prominence.

## Behind The Mirror

The image which female testimonies present to us, then, is clear and largely consistent — delineated, adaptable collective entities which manifested strong practical and emotional solidarity, and which were therefore an essential factor in survival. And yet it is imperative to remember that whilst the testimonial genre, with its agenda of bearing factual witness, aims to effect a reflection of camp experience, the angle at which the author elects to position the mirror and therefore the image with which the reader is confronted may be influenced by a multitude of factors. The authorial choice of this solidarity-centred angle therefore begs further analysis and cannot necessarily be read as a definitive echo of reality, nor as the complete reflection. This is in

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<sup>180</sup> André Courvoisier, *Un aller et retour en enfer*, p.72

<sup>181</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.100

no way to impugn the veracity of the memoirs, nor to pretend that the degree of authorial manipulation is a calculable, verifiable entity which can be determined with any real degree of certainty. Indeed, such manipulation, together with the vagaries of memory which aggrandise or reduce aspects of an experience for any given individual, is inherently fugacious and will never be fully apparent. A comprehensive analysis of the question of solidarity in female testimonies must, however, examine the potential factors impinging upon this angle of vision. Beyond camp reality, what quiescent influences, in other words, may exert themselves upon the author and contribute to the extensive emphasis upon solidarity in these testimonies?

A few words are first necessary regarding the context of such an investigation. While testimonial-focused studies are rare, analyses of *why* a given emphasis may exist in a body of testimonies remain virtually non-existent. Certain critical authors may speculate upon biosocial or psychological theories to explain why solidarity, for example, existed within the camps, but most remain silent on the issue of why it may be presented in the text — and the two phenomena are not necessarily synonymous or interchangeable. Wider *textual* influences, in other words, are almost entirely skirted. And the reason is simple — an analysis of textual influences necessitates deconstruction of the survivor's text, examining it not only as a historical source, but also as a constructed document in which the portrayal of historical fact may coexist with other operative forces or impulsions. Such deconstruction is a delicate path, and one which, understandably, many are reluctant to tread. For survivors' testimonies, by virtue of the unique nature of the subject matter and the extreme horror of their experiences, in many ways assume the role of sacred texts. One is always wary that critical fractionation of these texts and a focus on aspects beyond the testimonial message *per se* may somehow detract from the horror experienced by these authors. And, of course, the current climate of "revisionism" only exacerbates such fears. Historians may be reluctant to provide fodder for revisionists who, in the absence of concrete evidence, may seize upon the deconstructed testimony — no longer presented as an inviolable historical entity — as evidence for their misguided arguments. Consequently, the testimonial portrayal of solidarity has not been fully explored. Even Marlene Heinemann, who in fact strikingly deconstructs certain elements of testimonial characterization in her study, confines her explanation of the unrivalled prominence of solidarity in female testimonies to a Freudian explanation for its in-camp existence<sup>182</sup>, alluding but briefly to textual influences. In keeping with Michael Pollak's assertion that "[...] les témoignages doivent être considérés comme de véritables instruments de reconstruction de l'identité, et pas seulement comme des récits factuels, limités à une fonction informative"<sup>183</sup>, however, any study of the portrayal of solidarity in

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<sup>182</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, pp111-112. Heinemann's argument is based upon Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), and its theory that, unlike males, females are not constrained to relinquish their primary attachment to the mother as they mature and therefore maintain a more continuous pattern of attachment to others — a pattern which may explain the predominance of female solidarity and group interaction in the camp context.

<sup>183</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.12

female testimonies remains incomplete without the more nuanced, shaded picture of such a wider analysis.

We have already discussed in the previous chapter the nature of testimonial writing as a form of self-exposition, and evidently this concept is again certainly pertinent in this sphere. Just as the consciousness of self-presentation may have exerted a certain influence upon the narrative externalization of the grey zone's abuses for these authors, so conversely the internalization or embracing of solidarity — presumably a ubiquitously meritorious concept in the eyes of society — as a central element of their experience may potentially be affected by this awareness, constituting part of the construction of identity inherent in testimonial writing. In this general vein, Marlene Heinemann has made insightful observations about the construction of character and identity of narrator protagonists in the general testimonial context, distinguishing two types of narrator — the self-effacing (who emphasizes the impotence and victimization of the prisoner by minimizing the role and autonomy of the self) and the self-dramatizing, whose focus is their personal resistance and therefore a more idealized presentation of the self<sup>184</sup>. However, with regard to testimonial solidarity, many of these women present a dual incarnation of these character types, portraying both a “self-effacing” solidarity stemming largely from a passive position where the self is the victim recipient of aid, and a “self-dramatizing” perspective through the presentation of their own provision of aid towards others. Camille Touboul is a particularly strong example of this juxtaposition, concurrently stressing both her own invaluable support of Esther and the aid she herself receives from Estelle<sup>185</sup>. And, indeed, in this area the distinction is but a nuanced one. Even if the narrator adopts a self-effacing emphasis upon solidarity (where the solidarity displayed by her fellows rather than herself is accorded prominence), this characterization of French women as a whole as “solidaires”, caring or nurturing necessarily and implicitly also encompasses and positively implicates the narrator, as a member of this designated group. Whether the concept of solidarity is presented through direct or indirect association with the self, therefore, it can certainly be seen to contribute to narrator identity. As such, it is worthwhile noting that a narrative emphasis upon solidarity may not only be an articulation of female camp reality, but also a synchronous form of positive self-projection and identification.

At the same time, the portrayal of solidarity, engagement with the group and active relations with other prisoners certainly has significant wider implications for prisoner identity. For political inmates in particular, many of whom conceptualize their internment as an active continuation of their resistance activity or sacrifice, the focus upon solidarity within the camps may be especially pivotal. It has often been commented that there was little organised resistance activity amongst female inmates, by contrast with the highly structured, political male resistance

<sup>184</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, pp47-48

<sup>185</sup> Camille Touboul, *Le plus long des chemins*, pp59-60

movements which emerged at Buchenwald and Auschwitz. And, while female resistance functioned in many ways within the camp system<sup>186</sup>, it is indeed true that its fluid, often apolitical and unstructured character renders it less readily discernible within camp history. Many female political testimonial authors, however, mitigate this oft-remarked absence by positing the solidarity which dominates their narrative as the nucleus or crux of female resistance. Consider, for instance, Micheline Giraudon's assertion that the aid proffered by French women to their comrades in the *Revier* constituted an act of resistance: "C'était encore une forme de résistance et surtout de solidarité"<sup>187</sup>. Anna Pawelczynska supports the female linkage of solidarity to resistance, defining all forms of aid rendered to another as resistance ("Every proof of loyalty and sympathy, every hour of a shared life of the imagination [...] was part of the arsenal of collective defense and thus an element of the resistance movement"<sup>188</sup>) and asserting that offering aid to another inmate was often significantly more difficult than active resistance for unprivileged prisoners. "Militer, ici" proclaims Robert Antelme "c'est lutter raisonnablement contre la mort"<sup>189</sup>, and this, by means of solidarity, is indeed the primary form of resistance presented in female testimonies — by aiding one another on a practical or emotional level, these women enhanced the prospects of survival and thus resisted the exterminative objective of the camps. As such, the textual emphasis upon solidarity may be seen to consolidate the "political" identity of the author, and validate her identity as an active, authentic and combative resistant within the camp context, in the absence of more organized resistance structures.

The relevance of this textual suggestion of prisoner activity, however, extends beyond political prisoners. The engagement with others suggested by any emphasis upon solidarity tends to re-cast the characterization of the inmate, transforming her from the dehumanized level of the passive victim to that of a thinking agent capable of establishing relations and human interaction. Re-invested with the power of choice, the prisoner engaged with others appears less passive, less vulnerable to the vagaries of fate, luck and chance. Such connotations may be a subtle but significant authorial corrective for the portrayal of the Jewish prisoner, often misguidedly condemned for passivity and lack of action in the deportation context as a whole. At the same time, many political prisoners base their testimony upon the broad principle of the self as an active, thinking individual who can be instrumental in determining her own destiny through

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<sup>186</sup> Common forms of female resistance included, among others, sabotage, smuggling of clothes, food and medicine, recomposition of transport, labour or selection lists by prisoner functionaries, concealment of ill prisoners and evasion of work. See Anna Heilman in Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, p.133. Note too that female prisoners were involved in the *Sonderkommando* uprising at Auschwitz in October 1944, with the explosives used in the revolt being smuggled into the camp by female Jewish factory workers (See Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.31).

<sup>187</sup> Micheline Giraudon, (unpublished testimony), p.6

<sup>188</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.119

<sup>189</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine* p.43



knowledge and lucidity. Heinemann notes that “[...] the resistance story is typically told by a self-dramatizing protagonist, one who maximizes dignity and personal control over fate by demonstrating successful resistance”<sup>190</sup>. Hence we see, for example, both Germaine Tillion and Denise Dufournier respectively placing textual emphasis upon the role of their own decisions and actions: “Cette nuit-là, je décidai de vivre, après délibération [...] je décidai en tout cas de faire ce qui me paraîtrait le plus sage au fur et à mesure des événements. Cette décision est la seule chose qui m’ait soutenue jusqu’à la libération”<sup>191</sup>, and similarly: “Je décidai de m’initier à ces subtilités en même temps que se fortifiait en moi la résolution de diriger toutes mes facultés vers un seul but: ne pas partir en transport”<sup>192</sup>. In both of these texts, the *je décidai* is accorded particular significance, and personal choice and action loom large in the portrayal of the self as prisoner. In this genre of testimony, therefore, the associations of choice, agency and activity which are implicit in the concepts of solidarity and engagement with others may indeed be mobilised to quash the characterization of the self as passive entity, and particularly to counter the implicit testimonial passivity of the prisoner inevitably consolidated through the externalization of the grey zone, in which she is invariably self-cast in the inactive guise of observer, analyst or victim.

Personal characterization and identity, then, may be tightly interwoven with the narrative portrayal of solidarity, but we must equally be aware of the potential influence of the broader societal context, in which gender stereotypes and expectations may also be operative with regard to the testimonial process. Is it, in fact, the survivor who freely selects her own thematic focus or are these areas shaped (consciously or unconsciously) by wider societal forces? A female-initiated emphasis upon solidarity and group bonding may well be the result of preconceptions or stereotypes of female behaviour; the aspects an author emphasizes may be closely correlated with what she perceives she *should* emphasize. Given that, according to the social psychology of Unger and Piliavin, “[...] women generally describe themselves as empathetic and nurturant, or at least hold these qualities as ego-ideals. Refusing to help a dependent other should, then, be more costly for the average woman than for the average man”<sup>193</sup>, we might reasonably expect concepts such as friendship, bonding and mutual help to figure prominently in the self-conceptualization of female testimonial writers. Or, in other words, the author’s perception of “female” qualities, roles and responses may effect a veritable *feminization* of her text. With regard to this hypothesis it is certainly worth noting, however, that the emphasis on bonding and solidarity spans the vast majority of French female testimonies, irrespective of the date of publication. These dates of publication range from as early as 1945 through to the late 1990s, during which period the roles of women in society have evolved considerably, to a less

<sup>190</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, p.47

<sup>191</sup> Germaine Tillion, *Ravensbrück*, p.265

<sup>192</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, p.64

<sup>193</sup> Jane Piliavin and Rhoda Unger, ‘The Helpful but Helpless Female: Myth or Reality?’ in Virginia O’Leary et al, *Women, Gender and Social Psychology*, p.163

widespread and overt emphasis on the female as nurturer. We might therefore expect that if the testimonial focus on solidarity was a result of societal stereotypes, it might appear somewhat diluted or minimized in the later testimonies. The fact that it does not would appear to preclude the dismissal of the centralization of solidarity and the group in female narratives as a mere reflection of societal perceptions.

Potentially more significant with regard to the consistent female focus upon solidarity, however, are certain literary traditions appurtenant to the act of testimonial writing. Marlene Heinemann, for instance, makes the brief observation that female writing of memoirs or autobiographical prose may in fact be particularly inclined to treat affective themes and to dwell upon personal relations:

Even if the Holocaust is radically different from 'ordinary' subjects, the act of writing memoirs by survivors and non-survivors has basic resemblances. Estelle Jelinek's survey of men's and women's autobiographies indicates that women write more personally than men, even if they have had more successful careers. They write more often than men of friends, spouses and children<sup>194</sup>.

The essential implication underlying Heinemann's suggestion is that female solidarity in the camps may not in fact have been particularly prevalent, but rather that the testimonial emphasis upon it could derive quite simply from a female literary quirk or characteristic, its roots originating in literary process and presentation rather than in camp reality. Such a hypothesis would, however, be difficult to sustain with any real credibility. The unprecedented subject matter created by the concentration and death camps is surely too far removed from any previous autobiographical themes to allow the presumption of a simple transposition of normal methods or tendencies of memoir writing — it is, intrinsically, resistant to literary normalization. Indeed, numerous are the testimonial authors who affirm the theoretical necessity of creating an entirely new literary approach in order to fully convey the concentration camp experience, and some (most notably Charlotte Delbo) take steps within their narrative to do so. This supposition is borne out by Heinemann herself, who also notes that genderized literary theories do not concur with Holocaust literature, given that women are authors not only of self-effacing memoirs, but also of the traditionally male self-aggrandising autobiographical genre<sup>195</sup>. The extreme nature of the experience is surely such that it eclipses or modifies existing trends.

What is undeniable, however, is that the extensive emphasis upon solidarity may be a feature of the testimonial *objectives* which these writers hold. Beyond the common overarching goal of the transmission of truth and the creation of a voice or a memorial for the dead lie a myriad of testimonial objectives, affiliated to what the testimonial exercise represents for each author. Some authors posit the testimonial act as an opportunity to exorcise the terror and

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<sup>194</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, p.83

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid*, p.76

suffering of their experience through an affirmation of its positive or less traumatic aspects. Hence Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec's disclaimer:

Vous qui lirez ceci, vous connaissez déjà le camp de Ravensbrück [...] Toutes ces choses incroyables, et pourtant vraies, les camarades vous les ont racontées, sous diverses formes. Et je ne veux pas insister sur ce côté tragique. Je veux rappeler à nos camarades qui ont lutté avec moi et qui ont retrouvé leur vie normale et leur équilibre, que nous n'avons pas versé que des larmes, mais que nous avons aussi eu de bons moments<sup>196</sup>.

This avowed textual directive therefore inevitably sets up a focus upon group interaction, upon solidarity and friendship as the primary basis for these "bons moments". Others attest to a desire to portray what they perceive as the lesser known aspects of camp existence. Yvonne Pagniez's testimony concludes its central focus upon solidarity, the "secret face" of the camps, thus:

Certains m'accuseront d'avoir faussé la perspective. Il est sûr qu'au regard superficiel le camp apparaît seulement [...] comme la plus vaste entreprise d'avilissement de l'homme qu'on ait jamais vue [...] Mais il est un autre visage, plus secret, de notre bagne. Je plains ceux qui ne l'ont pas connu, car seul le rayonnement de son intime lumière donnait le courage de durer [...] le miracle de charité que des êtres d'exception [...] ont fait étinceler dans nos ténèbres<sup>197</sup>.

Although Terrence Des Pres asserts that solidarity often appears minimised in camp texts in general, due to a more pressing desire on the part of survivors to portray the horror of their experience ("survivors stress the negative side of camp existence because their accounts are governed by an obsessive need to 'tell the world' of the terrible things they have seen. This determines not only the kind of material they select to record, but also the emphasis they give it"<sup>198</sup>), the antithesis is true of some writers, who aim to show how prisoners survived and lived, rather than merely how they perished. The logical result is a text which accords the concept of solidarity a prominent position. Consequently, this disparate conglomeration of objectives cannot fail to impact upon textual direction and emphasis, and assumes a particularly significant expository role with regard to the pre-eminence of solidarity in many of these female texts.

Infinitely more elusive to analysis is the role of memory in the testimonial portrayal of solidarity. With the passage of time, it is certainly conceivable that memory may gloss over and minimize daily irritations or ill feeling. Time and distance inevitably act as generalizing, rather than detailing, forces, and it may well be that the testimonial process allows for the creation of a generalized portrayal of solidarity, from which elements of dissent or conflict have to some extent been eroded. Or, indeed, that the powerful role of post-war prisoner associations may effect a gradual fusion of individual and collective memory in which solidarity evolves to a ubiquitous element of camp experience, as the author experiences that which Levi terms "[...] the piling up of the experience of others, true or presumed, on the layer of one's own"<sup>199</sup>. It is

<sup>196</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.127

<sup>197</sup> Yvonne Pagniez, *Scènes de la vie du bagne*, pp194-195

<sup>198</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.99

<sup>199</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.53

therefore entirely possible that “[...] son ‘moi’ de déportée se confond avec le ‘nous’ des Françaises déportées”<sup>200</sup>.

Essentially, the act of penning a testimony is an act of repackaging — repackaging of both emotions and events in a comprehensible format — and this repackaging of memories may certainly create new areas of emphasis. It is particularly interesting to note that the only testimony which was written entirely as an immediate journal within the camp — thereby minimizing much of the post-camp repackaging — is also the only female work under study which does not exhibit a sustained thematic emphasis upon inmate solidarity. Indeed, Ana Novac’s testimony tends rather forcefully toward its antithesis, underscoring the fragility or negativity of those aspects which many other testimonies present as the positive manifestations of female solidarity. Her rebellion against expected group culture through the refusal to share an item of supplementary food with her work companions results in her describing herself as “excommuniée”<sup>201</sup>, her portrayal of solidarity is at best fragile and highly selective, unable to overcome either the disparity between privileged and non-privileged prisoners (“Et les odeurs! Son cou crasseux, je ne l’ai jamais remarquée avant! Mais comment en parler, moi qui me douche tous les jours?”<sup>202</sup>) nor the lack of commonality between inmates. Her oft-expressed resentment at the enforced culture of sharing and mutual aid suggest that this solidarity was not always either a natural or willing female response to the camps, but could be a response imposed by others. Could it be that the “raw” nature of Novac’s document as both a diary not originally designed for an audience and as the testimony of an adolescent less concerned with what she is *expected* to portray, provide us with a closer account of the reality of solidarity? It is impossible to draw conclusions based upon this single example which may in fact be more attributable to Novac as an individual than to any wider reality. And of course, Novac is not a French inmate, and her responses may well be indicative of a cultural approach which differed from her French counterparts. She does, in fact, refer to the solidarity of French prisoners, asserting that “ce sont des tigresses les unes pour les autres”<sup>203</sup>, and thereby implying an inherent difference between her own and the French reality. Inconclusive though it may be, the issues of memory and self-editing raised by Novac’s testimony are certainly thought-provoking in the context of any analysis of solidarity.

The factors delineated above, then, figure among the most significant potential influences at work upon the testimonial portrayal of solidarity — influences whose inherent intangibility within the testimony means that they may, for the most part, merely be posited for consideration in the guise of hypotheses elusive to final conclusion. Equally important for our analysis and

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<sup>200</sup> Michael Pollak, *L’expérience concentrationnaire*, p.245

<sup>201</sup> Ana Novac, *Les beaux jours de ma jeunesse*, p.107

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, p.126

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid*, p.173

significantly more conducive to concrete conclusions, however, is the *effect* of this portrayal. For if many of these testimonies are thematically weighted towards solidarity, do they therefore unwittingly create exactly that effect which we saw Ringelheim so vehemently warning the camp historian to guard against? More precisely, do they to some degree minimize the oppression of the camp environment by accentuating its positive face of human aid and interaction? Is the theme of Ringelheim's critical warning actually *incarnated* by the testimonies themselves?

To some partial degree, the response must be affirmative. A cursory reading of these texts may indeed give the initial impression that the terror, oppression and stark horror of the camps was to an extent mitigated by the solidarity and mutual aid manifested by these women inmates. However, this textual counterbalance is by no means absolute, and is tempered by a more careful reading. Indeed, it would be a mistake to discern in these testimonies an essential symmetry whereby the "wrongness" and moral ambiguity of the grey zone and other crushing camp mechanisms are neatly countered by the ethical clarity and "good" of solidarity. Symmetry and coherence were alien concepts inside the concentration camp, rendering neat opposing structures or moral stances non-viable — a fact which is unavoidably reflected in the testimonies of these authors. However emphatic the author's focus upon mutual aid and interaction as a positive force within the testimonial realm, there are always textual lacunae and unvoiced implications which thwart symmetry and prevent the estimation of this solidarity as an absolute positive or balancing force. "L'écriture" according to Stephanos Rozanis "vit dans le voisinage du silence. Le silence dans l'écriture est une absence qui devient présence et une présence qui devient absence [...] Dans l'écriture comme dans la nature, le silence est un silence éloquent"<sup>204</sup>, and indeed, the weight of the *non-dit* is of the utmost significance in this particular sphere and must be read along with these texts in order to arrive at a full picture of their presentation of solidarity. For if we continue to penetrate beyond the face of the mirror which is overtly presented to us as readers, the positive implications of solidarity and collective engagement which may appear to neutralize the terror of the testimonial landscape are in fact tempered, and even undermined, by other discernible textual indicators — indicators which reveal a solidarity which is often not only highly limited but also dictated by practicality and even self interest. In short, we are confronted with a subtextual image which compels us to redefine the testimonial reality of collective interaction and mutual aid.

To begin with, the interaction evoked in these female testimonies can only be deemed *selective* solidarity, for it is in no way conceptualized as comprehensive, universal or constant. Rather it functions according to commonality of language, race and nationality, and even within these confines it remains essentially limited to small units of inmates. Particularly prevalent is the evidence of a lack of solidarity between differing international groups, who are generally

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<sup>204</sup> Stephanos Rozanis, 'Écriture et silence dans les camps de concentration', in *Créer pour survivre*, p.77

presented as perpetual enemies existing within an atmosphere of rivalry, hatred and mistrust. Pelagia Lewinska's summation is demonstrative:

Nos souffrances [...] faisaient naître parmi nous des griefs qui s'exprimaient avant tout par les haines nationales. Plus notre situation était mauvaise et plus la passion chauvine s'accroissait. Et c'est précisément les détenues qui avaient eu auparavant à peine la notion de leur appartenance nationale qui devenaient les 'patriotes' les plus bruyantes et les plus acharnées<sup>205</sup>.

Although some narratives mention the establishment of friendships with non-French inmates, these bonds are testimonially rare and relatively exceptional, given "[...] notre aversion récente pour tout ce qui n'était pas Français [...] notre féroce indifférence pour tout ce qui n'était pas nous"<sup>206</sup>. Infinitely more numerous are the multitude of depictions of real international conflicts, where French women engage in verbal or physical battle with women of other nationalities, and repeatedly voice their dislike or disapproval of other national entities. Fania Fenelon summarizes these conflicts, although implicitly dissociating herself from them through her avowed disapproval and frustration at their existence:

Cet ostracisme me rend enragée, partout le même nationalisme borné, le chauvinisme le plus étroit. Les sionistes méprisent celles qui ne le sont pas. Les Allemandes traitent les Polonaises comme des inférieures. Les Aryennes ne perdent pas une occasion de nous désigner comme des boucs émissaires de toutes les calamités, elles se réjouissent quand tombent les punitions. N'apprendront-elles jamais rien?<sup>207</sup>.

Other writers stress this lack of wider solidarity, although those who bear the brunt of their dislike are varied. While Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe attests that "Seules les Ukranniennes et les Russes du Block 28, nos voisines, nous témoignent de l'affection"<sup>208</sup> (implying the complete lack of such amicable behaviour from women of other nationalities), Odette Améry, also at Ravensbrück, cites their Russian block mates as veritable enemies:

Nous faisons chambre commune avec les Soviet-Union, ces jeunes infirmières russes capturées à Stalingrad et en Crimée [...] Nous avons souvent maille à partir avec elles. L'une d'elles, à l'appel, se met à étrangler purement et simplement Mme Puren, vieille dame normande, sous prétexte que celle-ci la gêne. Nous dégageons notre amie juste à temps. Bagarre générale!<sup>209</sup>.

Chronological divisions between nations were also not without significance, and new prisoners often bore the (somewhat illogical) brunt of considerable illwill from those of other nationalities interned for longer periods, centred upon a resentment that the newer arrivals had enjoyed the comforts of home while their more seasoned counterparts suffered in the camps. According to Terrence Des Pres, the conflict between national groups in any given camp eased only when a unified political underground gained the strength to control resistance camp-wide<sup>210</sup> – a situation which never fully occurred in the main female camps. Whatever the specific divisions, the

<sup>205</sup> Pelagia Lewinska, *Vingt mois à Auschwitz*, p.150

<sup>206</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.90

<sup>207</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.316

<sup>208</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.87

<sup>209</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.100

<sup>210</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.122

“frequent fights between prisoners of different nationalities”<sup>211</sup> are a dominant presence in almost all of these female testimonies, creating a backdrop of discord and violence against which the theme of solidarity is set.

Nor, despite the common emphasis upon general French solidarity, was positive interaction universal among French inmates. Apparently minimal incidences such as that mentioned by Françoise Maous (who describes sharing a bed with four other French women disgusted at her state — “dures et cruelles, elles ne m’aiment pas”<sup>212</sup> ) are significant in allowing us to discern the non-universality of what is often generalized as a comprehensive truth. Even amongst those women who shared French nationality, the delineation of small groups meant that these units competed against one another (and thus against their fellow countrywomen) for food and scarce resources. Several accounts attest to women from the same convoy battling for clothes and particularly food: “Ce combat de fauves autour des marmites [...] L’instinct crie plus fort que tous les commandements de la morale et les consignes de civilisation”<sup>213</sup>. As we discovered in the previous chapter, veritable class divisions are also narratively evident amongst French prisoners: resistance inmates invariably shunned their non-resistance compatriots (especially the volunteer workers), certain political prisoners looked down on those performing munitions work (“Nous les regardons un peu de haut, car nous avons toujours refusé ce genre de travaux”<sup>214</sup>), while other French women maintained divisive class-based ideas within the camp, as exemplified by Nadine Heftler with her implied superiority over those women who were “vulgaires” or who “[...] émanaient d’un milieu qui, je crois, n’était pas très recommandable”<sup>215</sup>. Odette Fabius, too, mentions a petition initiated by several French women demanding that those prisoners of aristocratic background be grouped in a special block, “[...] afin qu’elles ne soient pas soumises à la promiscuité de certaines Françaises, très pénible pour elles”<sup>216</sup>. In spite of generalized proclamations of French unity, the details of testimonial reality thus reveal that solidarity was often limited to those who displayed commonality with the self. The non-universality of female solidarity is therefore illustrative of its essentially selective application — for all its often elevated thematic prominence, the reader is aware that it cannot be construed as a comprehensive element of female camp life.

And it is this very non-universality discernible behind the presentation of female solidarity which impels us to attempt to penetrate its reality more deeply. The testimonial reality of French female solidarity is, as we have seen, tight units consisting of a small number of individuals banding together against a wider backdrop of dissension and competition. Its non-

<sup>211</sup> Micheline Maurel, *An Ordinary Camp*, p.21

<sup>212</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, pp133-134

<sup>213</sup> Yvonne Pagniez, *Scènes de la vie du bagne*, p.171

<sup>214</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.153

<sup>215</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.48

<sup>216</sup> Odette Fabius in Guylaine Guidez, *Femmes dans la guerre, 1939-1945*, pp307-308

comprehensive, segregated structure can therefore be interpreted not merely as a framework predicated upon generosity, community consciousness and selflessness, but also somewhat paradoxically as essentially antithetical to altruism. Inevitably, these small units of inmates, whilst defending and aiding one another within the group, competed against other prisoners vying for the same coveted objective — survival. In innumerable instances, then, any solidarity displayed towards one’s own unit was manifested at the direct, and often necessarily ruthless, expense of other inmates.

Françoise Maous’s testimony furnishes a particularly pertinent example. Whilst labouring in the *Weberei* commando, the prisoners must produce a certain quota of material. Those whose production falls short at the close of the working day are invariably inscribed upon the *liste noire*, destined to disappear without trace. Maous describes the terror of one particular working day, where she is unable to procure sufficient raw material, and a strict control is announced pending. In despair, after the *Oberkapo* destroys her work, Maous finds herself empty-handed near the end of the day: “Tout à coup, je sens une main qui se glisse sous ma table. C’est Yvette... Elle me tend, oh miracle! une belle natte solide, il y en a au moins quinze mètres. Elle sourit: ‘Je l’ai volée à une Polonaise, prends-la vite!’. Je suis sauvée”<sup>217</sup>. Here we are presented with an instance of presumably laudable French solidarity, and yet the implications of the *non-dit* undermine the positivity of the gesture and prevent us from valorizing it as an unconditionally “good” or “right” concept. For the subtext presents us with an inescapable parallel and simultaneous reality — that the Polish woman from whom the material was stolen will be condemned to death for her inadequate production. Maous makes no overt reference to this reality, confining her focus firmly to the solidarity of her friend, her own escape from death and her perpetual objective: “Ce qu’il faut, c’est rester à la *Weberei*. Ce qu’il faut, c’est ne pas être parmi les redoutables numéros appelés”<sup>218</sup>. That the realisation of this objective may rest upon the quashing of another prisoner’s identical goal is not presented as significant in the text. This act of solidarity, knowingly committed at the expense of another inmate, therefore evokes the simultaneity and inextricability of the apparently polarized concepts of solidarity and the exploitation of others within the segmented group structures.

It also renders apparent the essential paradox characterizing and redefining the notion of solidarity in the camp context — that indifference to others might, in fact, be a necessary feature of workable solidarity. Consider the example of Claudette Bloch-Kennedy who was moved to share her water with some foreign prisoners and was then confronted with “[...] la déception de mes camarades qui attendaient cette gorgée quotidienne comme leur unique réconfort.”<sup>219</sup> The consequence of this incident is Bloch-Kennedy’s decision to cultivate an attitude of determined

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<sup>217</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, pp109-110

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid*, p.110

<sup>219</sup> Claudette Bloch-Kennedy in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.71



indifference to others in order to promote the survival of her group: “Et désormais j’ai marché sur les corps de nos compagnes étrangères sans voir leurs bras tendus, sans entendre leur prière, car j’espérais au moins sauver huit femmes tandis qu’il était évident que je ne pourrais pas en sauver vingt mille”<sup>220</sup>. And if solidarity must then necessarily often occur at the expense of others, was it still a quintessentially altruistic concept, or was in it fact something else altogether? Given the segregated structures of solidarity presented in these testimonies, must it not be asked whether protection of one’s group (or one’s means of survival) at the expense of others is not simply a broader version of the comparable individualistic protection of the self at the expense of others? An examination of unvoiced but nonetheless readily perceivable textual elements therefore allows us to reconstruct our conceptualization of testimonial solidarity in line with ambiguous camp morality, and to conclude that, like so many elements of camp experience, it was neither wholly laudable nor condemnable. Ringelheim’s fears of a “glorification” of female experience by virtue of this emphasis thus appear more and more unfounded. Although solidarity may be overtly valorized in many of these testimonies, their subtexts betray that it was in many cases a survival strategy which was not necessarily morally “right” in a world where absolutes could not exist. As such, the more emphatic testimonial evidence of solidarity in female accounts is indicative not necessarily of a *better* approach to survival than that portrayed by male testimonies, but merely of a *different* approach<sup>221</sup>.

Beyond its non-universal, segmented structure, the ambiguous status of solidarity as a valorized concept is also evident in many of the other characteristics of the female solidarity presented by the testimonial context. We have already seen how these authors repeatedly link practical and emotional solidarity to survival, positing both of these concepts as real expedients for successfully negotiating the camp environment. As a means enhancing survival (the ultimate objective of every inmate), the support of other prisoners or a group was inevitably a highly valuable commodity, and indeed it does appear somewhat “commoditized” within the subtexts of certain testimonies. By the “commoditization” of solidarity, I would suggest that certain of its attributes appear to be embraced by these authors simply as an instrument for survival rather than due to our automatic assumptions of altruism or sympathy for the plight of others. This is by no means to imply a criticism of such an approach, but merely to elucidate the fact that solidarity can be practical, opportunistic and even exploitative in nature — it is not necessarily a disinterested concept. Once again, then, the subtext of these testimonies functions to inhibit a global valorization of solidarity.

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid, p.71

<sup>221</sup> Indeed, many narratives intimate that solidarity was not always the best means of survival. Not only did it necessitate searching for new coping strategies if the group was separated, but it also left the prisoner vulnerable to the suffering of others, as Renée Mettée points out in describing the extreme difficulty of witnessing and assimilating the suffering of a close friend: “S’il est possible et bon de surmonter sa propre souffrance, il est un stade où l’on se sent incapable de traiter de même la souffrance d’autrui. Et nous découvrîmes que, sans être altruiste, il est bien plus facile de supporter sa propre souffrance, contre laquelle on peut lutter, que celle d’autrui dont on est littéralement accablé” (*Le grand livre des témoins*, p.234).

For a relatively clear example of such a practical or opportunistic manifestation of solidarity, we need look no further than Nadine Heftler's *Si tu t'en sors*. Heftler's narrative effects an unmistakable linkage of bonds with other inmates to survival or wellbeing, and it is under these auspices that the narrator portrays her pursuit of relations with others. Until her mother is admitted to the camp *Revier*, Heftler remains almost entirely aloof from the other prisoners. It is only when her mother's company and protection are removed and pure practicality dictates that a substitute be found that she initiates external friendships:

En effet, tant que Maman était auprès de moi, j'étais entièrement satisfaite et ne demandais rien d'autre [...] Il y avait maintenant la place pour des amies; aussi, surtout par faiblesse, étais-je portée à parler à beaucoup de personnes et éprouvais-je même l'impétueux besoin d'en faire des camarades<sup>222</sup>.

The effective substitution of her new camp friends to fill her mother's role here constitutes a strategy to allow Heftler to continue to negotiate the camp environment. The initiation of bonds is clearly linked to the struggle to survive; when Heftler articulates her decision to fight to remain alive, she immediately suggests the formation of friendships as a component and result of this decision:

Ou bien j'allais me laisser mourir ou, au contraire, je décidais de continuer à vivre, seulement, dans ce cas, il fallait dès maintenant commencer à lutter... On était en septembre et les premiers froids se faisaient sentir. Cependant je luttais! Instinctivement je cherchais à me faire des amies<sup>223</sup>.

Bonding with others, then, appears as a practical measure, simply one more component of the fight to resist extermination. Indeed, Heftler's adaptable approach to friendship points to her capitalizing upon relations with other inmates on a strongly pragmatic and somewhat disposable basis, in which the role of emotional attachment is certainly minimized:

Je suis maintenant habituée [...] à changer souvent de block, à faire des connaissances, quelquefois des camarades, très rarement des amies, à les perdre, à en refaire d'autres, à retrouver certaines, je ne me sens jamais complètement isolée et je commence à connaître beaucoup de gens<sup>224</sup>.

Evidently, the nature of Heftler's experience as a Jewish prisoner contributes significantly to the fluctuating character of her bonds of friendship and her consequent practical approach to these bonds.

Jewish or non-Jewish, however, the pragmatic, the opportune and the exploitative are discernible in many of these testimonial portrayals of solidarity. Sometimes the references are direct, as with Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe's allusion to the French women who "[...] se sont liées avec l'une ou l'autre des 'lapins'<sup>225</sup>, plusieurs par amitié, d'autres par intérêt, car elles

<sup>222</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, pp70-71

<sup>223</sup> Ibid, p.70

<sup>224</sup> Ibid, p.74

<sup>225</sup> The "lapins" were a group of young Polish women selected for pseudo-medical experiments at Ravensbrück. Often extremely deformed after these experiments, they were targeted for selections due to the compromising evidence they constituted against the actions of Nazi medical personnel. Many testimonies articulate the universal sympathy of other prisoners towards their plight, citing the attitude towards and protection of the lapins as an exception to the general lack of international solidarity.

reçoivent des colis et les partagent”<sup>226</sup>. Fania Fenelon’s description of the solidarity displayed by her fellow orchestra members when she is ill is somewhat more ambiguous:

Les jours où ça va plus mal [...] mes amies m’apportent leur aide [...] Personne ne doit savoir, surtout pas Mandel qui m’enverrait au Revier [...] En se taisant, mes camarades prennent le risque d’être punies, on ne doit pas garder une malade dans un block. Moi absente, avec cette incapable de Sonia à leur tête, les filles redoutent que ce soit la fin de l’orchestre...<sup>227</sup>.

Fenelon articulates the risk to themselves which her *camarades* shouldered by such solidarity, but also the risk which they ran in withholding their aid, namely the demise of the orchestra and the consequent loss of their privilege and means of survival. Given that the latter peril was probably the more grave, and is a thematic *leitmotif* immensely feared by the orchestra members in Fenelon’s narrative, the reader cannot but conclude that this solidarity was based largely upon self-preservation, and that while altruism may certainly have been involved, practicality served as its primary impulsion. We are left to ponder whether the orchestra members would have offered their support so readily to Fenelon without this self motivation, particularly in light of the often divided and conflict-ridden atmosphere which Fenelon depicts amongst this international group of women. It is worth noting, too, that certain critical commentators appear reluctant to articulate this nonetheless testimonially discernible commoditization of solidarity (here again the concept of the testimony as “sacred” text undoubtedly enacts a prohibitive role). Terrence Des Pres is the most prominent example, infusing his text with repeated assertions of the uniformly altruistic basis of inmate solidarity<sup>228</sup>.

The cultivation of a friendship with a fellow inmate which is underscored with ambivalence, or even dislike, is a further telling reminder of the often predominantly pragmatic or practical basis for solidarity. Such subtextual implications are discernible in Simone Alizon’s narrative. At the camp of Behndorf, Alizon gives voice to her irritation and barely concealed animosity towards one of the core members of her group of six, with whom she has previously noted a certain tension:

J’eus cependant l’inconvénient majeur de garder, pour moi seule depuis le groupe d’origine, la charmante Grincheuse! Au bout de trois ou quatre mois, je ne pouvais plus la supporter et je dus me livrer à de subtiles manoeuvres pour changer, avec une autre camarade, passant de l’équipe de jour à l’équipe de nuit, toujours dans le même atelier, afin de ne plus la voir et d’échapper ainsi à ses tracasseries. Celles-ci

<sup>226</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.91.

<sup>227</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.320

<sup>228</sup> Des Pres asserts that “The survivor’s experience is evidence that the need to help is as basic as the need for help, a fact which points to the radically social nature of life in extremity and explains an unexpected but very widespread activity among survivors [...] gift giving” (*The Survivor*, p.136). His intimation that gift giving or food sharing practices, with their establishment of reciprocity and debt (“[...] men and women give in expectation of return and those who receive feel bound to repay”) are based as much upon the need to help as the need to receive aid through reciprocity is subjective, and a product of his unmistakably affirmative stance regarding human nature and behaviour in the camps. Des Pres’s depiction of solidarity as altruistic response leaves little room for the testimonially evident possibility of solidarity as survival commodity, and his unique focus upon the positive aspects of inmate survival, while highly cogent, render his text somewhat prone to a sense of imbalance.

m'importunaient tant que je compris, à vingt ans, ce que pouvait être la haine des vieux époux qui ne peuvent plus se supporter<sup>229</sup>.

Given that affinity and empathy are almost entirely lacking here, her previously constant relationship with this member of the group can therefore be presumed to have existed solely for its practical benefits or, more precisely, for the purposes of survival. A similar thread of semi-antipathy underlies Ana Novac's relationship with Sophie. As the two youngest members of the convoy, their friendship appears to be based upon a need for mutual protection and company, rather than any real rapport. Indeed, when Novac's friend Judy is separated from her at the outset of their experience, Novac asserts with regard to Sophie that "je désirais de toute mon âme que ce fût elle qu'on eût emmenée, et que Judy fût restée"<sup>230</sup>. Throughout the testimony, her friendship with Sophie is portrayed as awkward and ambivalent, often characterized by distance and resentment. Novac notes that "Notre amitié aussi est exsangue, froide, comme si nous communiquions à grande distance à travers un élément étranger"<sup>231</sup>, whilst also professing resentment at the obligation to share her extra food with Sophie

Depuis, je m'efforce de déposer assez consciencieusement mes offrandes sur l'autel de l'amitié. 'Je m'efforce', voilà qui ne sonne pas très amical. Et ce n'est vraiment pas avec les meilleurs sentiments que je lui réserve la moitié de toute mangeaille qu'on me refile au dépôt<sup>232</sup>.

Although the ambivalence of this friendship may in part be linked to Novac's adolescence, this very adolescence (together with the unique nature of her testimony as an in-camp journal) also permits an immediacy and a raw honesty on the subject of such relations which the wider self-awareness of maturity may prohibit.

Significantly, Novac also touches upon a further aspect of solidarity which subverts its consolidation as a purely altruistic textual counterbalance — that of the emotional or psychological benefit which the *benefactor*, rather than solely the recipient, reaps from such interaction. Novac, for example, in a rare moment of international solidarity in which she aids and comforts a group of Greek women, relishes the opportunity to feel needed and to assume responsibility: "Elles ont besoin de moi! Ne peut sentir le charme de ces mots que celui qui a été 'le petit', le 'protégé'. Jusqu'ici au camp, j'ai eu quantité de 'nourrices'"<sup>233</sup>. An element of self-gratification, related to her youth and desire to invert the casting of herself as a child in need of protection, thus underlies her provision of solidarity towards these women. More universally applicable, however, and particularly revelatory are Novac's comments on the generalized psychologically advantageous nature of solidarity for the party who extends it toward others: "C'est tout compte fait moins épuisant que de tourner autour de mon 'Je' comme un manège

<sup>229</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, pp334-335

<sup>230</sup> Ana Novac, *Les beaux jours de ma jeunesse*, p.17

<sup>231</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>232</sup> Ibid, p.125

<sup>233</sup> Ibid, p.177

autour de son axe”<sup>234</sup>. To aid or to interact with others thus provides an alternative focus beyond the self, a form of psychological evasion from one of the worst constraints of the camp — namely, the preoccupation with one’s own misery and precarious existence in the camp environment. Terrence Des Pres refers to “the debilitating fear which mere self-interest generates”<sup>235</sup>, and it must be recognised that the extension of solidarity towards others may to some degree constitute an attempt to frustrate the dominion of this fear, to shift the inner focus away from contemplation of the predicament of the self and thus to keep potential despair at bay. In his *Remarques sur le moi dans la déportation*, Marcel Dambuyant points out that the interaction with friends benefits the self in re-establishing a sense of respect and self-valorization:

On se reconstitue aussi autour et à l’aide des camarades, ou plutôt on s’empêche de se perdre: la fidélité aux camarades proches, qui est grande, se confond avec la nécessité de conserver son moi. On se reconstitue par le bienfait d’une conférence qui nous rend le monde vrai; ou par la bénédiction qu’est la découverte d’une amie — notamment parce que cela réintroduit en nous le respect: l’arrêt devant un être qui nous paraît précieux et qui par là nous redonne à la fois du prix et un ‘dedans’<sup>236</sup>.

Anna Pawelczynska also notes that protection of others was morally advantageous for the benefactor:

If, thanks to the co-operative effort within small groups, the weakest member was protected, that — in the broad categories of values — was mutual defence. The weak member gained a chance of biological survival and had that important feeling of support. The stronger members were defending, in these most difficult of circumstances, their own moral position<sup>237</sup>.

The persistent subtextual blurring of the boundaries between altruism and self-privileging, empathy and practicality, reciprocity and opportunism thus renders the valorization of solidarity uneasy at best. And yet the concept of solidarity as a testimonial counterbalance to the horror of camp reality is also effectively dismantled by an infinitely more elementary truth in which moral nuances play no part — that of its inescapably limited character. No matter how great the female testimonial emphasis upon mutual aid and solidarity, its power and its reach remained essentially restricted by camp conditions — by hunger, by fear, by the impotency of prisoners against the power of their captors. In all of these testimonies, regardless of their emphasis upon solidarity, there is evidence of the inevitable female inability to match and counter the might of the camp conditions with solidarity, for camp mechanisms were so overwhelmingly crushing that solidarity could never be a remotely equal opposing weapon — “[...] its power to oppose the ungoverned ferocity of the camps”, according to Lawrence Langer, “faltered before

<sup>234</sup> Ibid, p.182

<sup>235</sup> Terrence Des Pres, *The Survivor*, p.34

<sup>236</sup> Marcel Dambuyant, “Remarques sur le moi dans la déportation” in *Journal de psychologie normale et pathologique*, 43-61, Apr-Jun 1946, p.50

<sup>237</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz*, p.63. Note, however, that in reaping the benefits of solidarity a prisoner would often be constrained to forfeit aspects of her independence. For solidarity was often highly conditional upon the individual accepting the established norms of the group, as is evidenced by Simone Alizon, whose ability to conserve her bread ration aroused the hostility of her group, forcing her to eventually conform by eating her ration immediately in order to retain their goodwill (*L’exercice de vivre*, p.169).

the sterile cruelty inherent in the system”<sup>238</sup>. This evidence may be merely implicit (evoked by the helplessness of prisoners as they watch their friends suffer and fall victim to various forms of extermination), or it may be clearly articulated. Although these limitations are incontrovertibly subordinated to the wider theme of the strength and significance of female bonds (unlike many male testimonies where failed, frustrated or superficial solidarity may assume the pre-eminent role), they re-establish a sense of proportion which is significant in ensuring that the textual emphasis upon solidarity does not truly negate or mitigate the horrors of camp reality. These limitations find overt voice principally in those narratives most concerned with creating a highly nuanced portrayal of camp reality, and which secondarize the depiction of the self to this overriding objective. Hence Charlotte Delbo, Simone Alizon and Françoise Maous — all Auschwitz inmates who maintain a particularly lucid and transparent testimonial approach — provide the strongest evocations of a solidarity limited by the oppressive weight of camp conditions and the unavoidable necessity of heeding one’s own survival instinct.

Perhaps most explicit in articulating the inevitable limits of solidarity is Simone Alizon, who addresses this question at the outset of her camp experience, as she describes an occasion where the French women are forced to remain standing outside, watching a Jewish woman attempt to free herself from a ditch in which she is trapped.

Nous qui aurions pu l’aider. Ce jour-là, il nous restait des forces [...] nous aussi nous voulions vivre. Nous n’avons pas bougé. Ce fut ma première leçon de pitié tempérée. Tempérée par la peur de la mort [...] Quel est donc cet instinct de survie, si violent, si puissant qu’il vous rend lâche alors même que la vie n’a plus de sens?<sup>239</sup>

The inaction of Alizon and her *camarades* in light of the probability that their attempts to help would result in their own punishment or death is demonstrative of how solidarity necessarily remained constrained by the survival instinct. The *leitmotif* in Alizon’s description of the limits of solidarity is the evocation of a genuine impulsion on the part of women prisoners to offer solidarity and to help another individual — a desire which collides with the inability to overcome the conditions and actualize this aid. This pattern is illustrated when the women are forced to return to Birkenau from their commando at a run, where we see Alizon reaching out to one of the members of her familial group of six, and being apologetically refused as the other woman’s survival instinct is forced into precedence:

Je lui dis ‘s’il te plaît, tiens-moi car je vais tomber’. Elle de me répondre: ‘Je le voudrais bien mais si je te tiens, je vais tomber aussi’. Chacune alors se cramponna à sa seule volonté [...] Lorsque cette camarade me répondit, je sus qu’elle disait la vérité, car elle n’avait jusque-là refusé son aide à personne [...] De plus, c’était une des six. Mais à ce moment-là, elle relevait du typhus<sup>240</sup>.

Alizon makes explicit the ultimate powerlessness of solidarity against camp reality, asserting that “Nous savions en dépit de notre attention mutuelle, qu’en cas de grave danger nous n’aurions

<sup>238</sup> Lawrence Langer in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, pp614-615

<sup>239</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.127

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid*, p.250

rien pu faire pour secourir la camarade en difficulté”, and that in the end solidarity remains quintessentially conditional — conditional upon the fact that one’s own survival is not directly threatened: “Chacune de nous était occupée et préoccupée de sa survie et de la survie de l’autre, car une grande tendresse nous unissait. Pourtant notre ‘moi’ passe toujours en premier. Je n’ai pas échappé à la règle commune”<sup>241</sup>. Although this delineation of the limits of solidarity is incontrovertibly eclipsed in Alizon’s narrative by her portrayal of the group of six and the significance of their mutual aid, its existence is significant in thwarting any facile or misleading casting of solidarity in the role of all-powerful mitigator.

It is interesting to note, too, that where the limitations of solidarity are overtly voiced, the theme is often linked to a strong sense of shame — shame that the solidarity which is so significant a part of these women’s experiences could not be constantly equal to camp threats and could not always transcend the structurally imposed imperative of fighting for one’s own survival. Primo Levi has written eloquently on the question of shame, asserting that it constitutes a quasi-universal phenomenon amongst prisoners, and pinpointing as exempt from its reaches only those involved in the in-camp political network who “[...] had the strength and possibility to act within the Lager in defence of and to the advantage of their companions”<sup>242</sup>. Shame is by no means a universal presence in the body of female testimonies, although where it is manifested it may be seen to be broadly compatible with Levi’s theory. For the most part, it appears to be confined to those women authors whose testimonies temper their focus upon solidarity with intimations of its limits as well as its power. In accordance with Levi’s delineation, when these authors are unable to extend aid to others, when they cannot act “in defence of” their *camarades*, shame permeates their narrative.

Accordingly, we witness Françoise Maous evoking the relationship between incomplete solidarity and shame at both the beginning and end of her testimony. The first such expression of shame occurs when Maous and her fellow inmates fail to lend their support to the two girls who approach the *blockova* in search of extra food for the block, and who are severely punished for their actions: “Nous avons été très lâches ce jour-là, comme beaucoup d’autres jours, de ne pas nous joindre à ces courageuses petites filles qui s’exposaient pour nous toutes”<sup>243</sup>. Later, as she awaits the arrival of the Allies along with the other ill prisoners in the *Revier*, Maous expresses a similar sentiment:

Je suis, moi aussi, souvent très cruelle quand, après tant d’efforts, je traverse le bloc en serrant contre moi la précieuse boîte de conserve pleine de soupe chaude. Je vais très vite pour ne pas entendre les voix suppliantes de mes compagnes françaises: ‘Je meurs de faim, Françoise, juste une cuillère, donne-m’en un tout petit peu...’. Et il y a celles, plus nombreuses, qui ne demandent rien mais regardent [...] Je ne suis pas

<sup>241</sup> Ibid, p.227

<sup>242</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.55

<sup>243</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.57

fièvre de la femme que j'ai été dans ces moments-là, rien ne rend plus méchant que la vraie souffrance<sup>244</sup>.

Charlotte Delbo's narrative is also revelatory of the connection between the inability to maintain solidarity and profound authorial shame:

Je vois la petite Aurore. Elle est malade, épuisée par la fièvre [...] Elle a soif. Elle n'a pas la force de descendre au ruisseau. Et personne ne veut y aller pour elle.... Ses yeux implorant et je ne la regarde pas. Je sens sur moi ses yeux de soif [...] et j'ai honte. Et chaque matin je reste insensible à la supplication de son regard et de ses lèvres décolorées par la soif, et chaque matin, j'ai honte après avoir bu<sup>245</sup>.

And yet, these same two survivors also, as we saw earlier, emphasize the unparalleled strength and significance of solidarity within their narratives, meaning that shame and exaltation therefore coexist within their portrayal of the sphere of inmate interaction.

And indeed, such is the conflicting reality of the female testimonial depiction of this broad area. Egoism or solidarity — each inmate, said Des Pres, must decide at the outset of their experience which attitude will govern their behaviour and in which direction their personal balance will fall. Across the body of French female testimonies, however, the balance does not fall. Rather, it remains suspended, for although solidarity may be accorded overt testimonial pre-eminence, the insistent presence of the subtext prevents resolution in either direction and perpetuates an underlying flux. Limited in reach, pragmatic, commoditized, competitive, ultimately selective and yet also literally lifesaving and indicative of real devotion and altruism — solidarity encompassed all of these variants and the body of female testimonies does not allow us to settle with certainty on either aspect. In this particular sphere the paradox of the camps — the inextricability of right and wrong, moral and amoral — is truly incarnated, for where choosing to aid a *camarade* can mean the death of another, where collective aid and interaction can equate to individual gain, where solidarity and self-privilege can overlap in so many ways that solidarity may function as an element of camp oppression rather than simply as an antidote to it, it becomes apparent that ethical clarity could no longer exist. Far from obscuring or mitigating the oppression inherent in the camp context, therefore, the central position accorded to the concepts of solidarity and group protection in French female narratives casts the spotlight upon its deeper reality, elucidating the extent of its reach in permeating every aspect of the prisoners' experience.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid, p.161

<sup>245</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, pp83-84



## Chapter Four — Comment Écrire?

*“Se taire est interdit, parler est impossible”.<sup>1</sup>*

The analysis of solidarity and group interaction in the previous chapter provided some indication that the testimonial process is infinitely more complex than the simple conversational exercise of translating experience into writing. While Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec’s assertion that “[...] ce livre a jailli spontanément de mon cœur”<sup>2</sup> may perpetuate the notion of an inherently spontaneous and unmeditated testimonial process whose hallmarks are emotional immediacy and candour, the testimony inevitably remains firmly inscribed within the act of writing for an audience — an act which presupposes interpretation, editing and restructuring as much as mere transcription. Michael Pollak’s comments on the significance of the testimony’s status as constructed text are apposite here:

[...] les sources elles-mêmes sont construits [sic]. D’où la nécessité, dans le cas de sources biographiques, de s’interroger sur les stratégies narratives et les postures adoptées, ainsi que sur les contraintes de justification qui pèsent sur les personnes qui, dans des situations variées, sont amenées à rendre compte de leur vie<sup>3</sup>.

The study of French female testimonies would thus remain incomplete without a more specific examination of the testimony as textual entity, necessarily contoured and circumscribed by narrative, as well as thematic, concerns.

Throughout the body of French female narratives the fundamental significance of the testimonial exercise is underlined by the common assertion that the prisoner’s primary in-camp objective of survival was not purely monofaceted, but rather encapsulated a binary aim — to survive *and* to communicate her experience to the outside world, thereby giving voice to the suffering of her fellow inmates. Simone Saint-Clair attests to this veritable compulsion to articulate the camp reality, and the extent to which survival is tightly bound up with a sense of literary responsibility and obligation:

Écrire ce que j’aurai vu et vécu, crier au monde la vérité telle qu’elle me fut révélée, voilà quel devint mon but. Ce but se transforma en devoir quand, me penchant au chevet de camarades mourantes, celles-ci eurent pourtant le courage de murmurer: ‘Vous écrirez, n’est-ce pas, tout ce que nous avons souffert... Il faut qu’on sache’. Je le leur promis<sup>4</sup>.

Simone Lagrange’s camp experience is apparently characterized by a comparable bifilar mission in which survival and testimony are equally indivisible: “Mais serons-nous un jour de retour? Oh! oui, il faut que je revienne car il faut que je raconte, il faut que je me souviene! Il ne faut

<sup>1</sup> Elie Wiesel, *La nuit*, p.9

<sup>2</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J’ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.9

<sup>3</sup> Michael Pollak, *L’expérience concentrationnaire*, p.22

<sup>4</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.13

pas que tout cela tombe dans l'oubli"<sup>5</sup>. Inevitably, however, those who did return and direct their attentions to such an objective — namely the dissemination of their experience in the written form of self-directed narrative rather than the necessarily more passive submission to the external control of a judicial testimonial process — were confronted with the complex practicalities of giving tangible form to their experience within what amounted to virtually uncharted territory in the French literary realm. Moreover, few of these women (Charlotte Delbo, Odette Améry and Simone Saint-Clair excepted) had harboured literary aspirations prior to their deportation, and most were certainly not experienced writers. How, then, were they to convey the unimaginable horror, degradation and terror of their camp experience in written testimony? What kind of form and shape do they give to their experience? What kind of overt or tacit responses do they display to the problems inherent in translating the camp experience into narrative form — not only of how, what and when to write, but the difficulties posed by memory, by the tension between individual and collective perceptions of reality, by a language which seemingly lacked the facilities to elucidate a reality so utterly divorced from its normal context? What does the testimony represent to these women — how do they envisage its role? What influence is exerted on testimonial writing by external or contextual forces such as contemporary public opinion and the date of publication? And are the responses of these French women to the issues of testimonial writing largely unified or heterogeneous?

Such questions are particularly pertinent with regard to our field of study, for there is a dearth of critical analysis of the testimony as written — as opposed to historical or evidential — document specifically relating to the body of French female testimonies. Alain Parrau has produced a rich analysis of selected French (and Russian) male testimonial writing, Annette Wieviorka has examined French testimonies as a whole, and Marlene Heinemann and Michael Pollak, although prioritising female-authored testimonies, both focus upon texts originating from a wide range of national backgrounds rather than those of French emanation. The responses of French women to the question of how to write their camp experiences thus remain collectively unexplored, with existing studies largely confined to singular analysis of individual authors whose works are deemed to be of particular interest<sup>6</sup>. And yet, it is evident that the writing of French female testimonies certainly begs collective study, given that many of the general conclusions advanced from these non-specific critiques simply do not concur with the trends evident in the writing of these women. Even Jacques Rolland's characterization of concentration camp literature as delineated by a unity of place (the camp itself and the various journeys by road or train) and a unity of tone (essentially founded upon "pudeur")<sup>7</sup> is not easily congruent with the French female body of literature. On the one hand, testimonies by political prisoners in particular display a rather more elastic depiction of place in the context of deportation, which

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<sup>5</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.66

<sup>6</sup> The testimonial writings of Charlotte Delbo, in particular, are the focus of many critical essays.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rolland, 'Matriochki: remarques sur la littérature des camps' in *Études*, No 5: 43-71, May 1991, p.50.

also often extensively encompasses resistance activity in France and incarceration in French prisons. Writers such as Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec and Raymonde Guyon-Belot, for instance, accord a prominent role to pre-Ravensbrück activity and incarceration, devoting approximately half of their texts to these areas. Such an emphasis is shaped by the bifarious particularities of these writers as both *French* prisoners (therefore experiencing often prolonged domestic imprisonment prior to deportation) and as *women* writers who, as we saw in the previous chapter, tend to place a strong focus upon friendships and group relations, many of which were forged within these French prisons. And on the other hand, although a perusal of the body of French female testimonies as a whole may give the impression of a certain parallelism governing these texts due to the common thematic accentuation and the universal, cross-camp application of Nazi mechanisms, it is barely credible to suggest that a unity of tone is operative here. The distanced approach of Suzanne Wilborts, the raw adolescent directness of Nadine Heftler, the irrepressibility and quasi-comedic vein of Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, the bleakly poetic tone of Charlotte Delbo and the patriotic fervour of Nelly Gorce, among others, are demonstrative of the existence of broad tonal variations. Indeed, this essential variation (subtle and circumscribed though it may often be) is perhaps the foremost characteristic of the corpus of French female testimonies with regard to the act of writing. While the testimonies as a whole describe analogous events (transport to the camps, arrival, disinfection and its dehumanizing processes, quarantine, roll calls, hunger, fleas, work in various commandos, illness, exhaustion, abuse, filth, punishment, mortality and selections for extermination or transport), they are frequently highly divergent in their depiction of these experiences and the author's approach to many of the core issues of testimonial writing. Far from being random or indiscriminate, however, such variety is largely inscribed within wider determinant trends or patterns relating to narrator self-characterization, the date of authorship, the reason for deportation, camp privilege and the author's conception of the testimonial genre.

If, for example, we pose the primary question of what the testimonial act represents for these women — why they undertake the testimonial exercise and what role they ascribe to it — such divergences become readily apparent. Essentially, the act of testifying is an act of memory — it mobilizes the survivor's conception and retention of events to serve a given memorial purpose. And yet, the group of French female testimonies which form our study certainly do not constitute a homogeneous unit in this regard, manifesting basic and fundamental differences in memory-related objectives. Many of these writers conceive their testimonial exercise on a collective level, asserting that the actualization of memory into testimony occurs with the objective of sharing their experience in order to globally disseminate the reality of the camps and to prohibit a repetition of such events. Eva Tichauer delineates just such a collectivization of memory:

Si je me décide, plus de quarante ans après ma libération, à rouvrir mes plaies et à ajouter mon propre témoignage à ceux de mes camarades qui ont eu ce courage avant

moi, c'est pour accomplir un devoir [...] Je le dois à ces jeunes, qui ont l'âge que j'avais alors et qui m'interrogent pendant un débat: 'Comment avez-vous survécu dans un camp d'extermination?' [...] Je le dois, enfin, au serment des camps, sur les places d'appel, portes ouvertes sur la liberté reconquise, et dont nous voulions être responsables à l'avenir: 'Plus jamais ça!', 'Restons unis pour bâtir un monde meilleur' [...] Je n'écris pas pour moi, ni pour ceux qui ont eu le même vécu mais pour éclairer les générations suivantes à la recherche de leur avenir. La connaissance du passé est indispensable à l'édification du futur<sup>8</sup>.

By contrast, a significant number of French women invoke a personal memory-based objective as the explicative reason for their ingress into the testimonial genre. Some, for instance, envisage the testimony as a medium for exorcising their memory of the camps, effecting a psychological expulsion which will facilitate or complete their reintegration into post-camp life. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec is typical:

Je m'empare aussitôt de ma plume, compagne fidèle, et je vide sur le papier le souvenir trop lourd de toutes ces choses si dures qui m'obsèdent [...] Puis fiançailles, mariage. Je reprends ma plume et, en deux mois, le manuscrit est terminé. Terminées aussi les nuits de cauchemar, les angoisses qui m'empêchent presque de vivre. Le mot 'fin' m'a en quelque sorte libérée. Je suis prête à regarder l'avenir sans être paralysée par le passé. Ecrire est une excellente thérapie!<sup>9</sup>.

Indeed, Toulouse-Lautrec devotes the *avant-propos* of her narrative to an elucidation of the personal nature and genesis of her text, and its inherently circumstantial metamorphosis into published memoir. Fania Fenelon also characterizes her testimonial exercise as a form of personal psychological liberation from the trauma of unwanted memory, explaining her decision to testify after thirty years thus: "Après trente années de silence où je me suis épuisée à tenter d'oublier ce qui ne pouvait l'être, j'ai compris que c'était inutile, que je n'oublierais pas. Je n'avais plus qu'à exorciser l'orchestre!"<sup>10</sup>. Such acts of "exorcism" signify a utilisation of the testimony as a distancing mechanism to effectively loosen the grip of memory. Others, whilst similarly personal in their stated narrative objective, incarnate almost a direct antithesis in their conception of the relationship between memory and text, employing the narrative as a vehicle for tightening their grasp upon memory and conserving it at close proximity. Nadine Heftler asserts that "Si j'essaie de rapporter cette terrible histoire, c'est aussi pour être sûre de la conserver intacte dans mon esprit"<sup>11</sup>, while Françoise Maous evokes a similar desire to perpetuate and sustain her memories of her camp experience:

[...] et brusquement j'ai pensé 'Et si, à force de bonheur, j'allais oublier l'horreur... Si, à force d'être comblée, tout allait s'effacer de ma mémoire...' Alors je me suis levée et j'ai écrit, écrit, écrit, sur un vieux cahier de brouillon posé sur mes genoux, car nous n'avions plus de table<sup>12</sup>.

Whether their objective be to expel or to perpetuate memory, then, these latter writers attest to a personal memorial motivation as the primary impulsion for their testimony. In so

<sup>8</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, pp17-19

<sup>9</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.9

<sup>10</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.10

<sup>11</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.6

<sup>12</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, p.23

doing, they may be seen to implicitly deny or downplay the quality of the text as an audience-oriented document — it is tacitly qualified as an inherently introverted chronicle devised to serve the author's own memory-based needs. Françoise Maous develops this idea in which the notion of a reading public is obscured, if not effaced:

Mais il suffisait de me souvenir [...] Je n'avais nulle envie de 'témoigner' sur Auschwitz, d'autres l'avaient déjà fait et le feraient bien mieux que moi car, détachés d'eux-mêmes, ils essaieraient de tirer la philosophie historique du génocide. Non, égoïstement, je voulais pour moi seule fixer à tout jamais ma propre aventure, vraie donc sans pudeur, sans restrictions<sup>13</sup>.

Evidently, however, such an emphasis upon personal authorial motivation and its attendant candour cannot be equated to insensibility of the reader presence while writing, for many of these same authors are certainly highly aware of self-characterization and the need to guide the reader through the camp experience. Indeed, we need only compare their writings to the unstructured in-camp journal of Ana Novac with its often obfuscatory musings and absence of clear characterization or textual indicators to underscore the indubitably audience oriented nature of their approach. Rather, the seemingly paradoxical determined privatization of these published documents may be interpreted as substantiation of the authorial awareness of the highly delicate nature of the path which they must tread in treating a subject rife with moral issues and complexities, in which the author, who has survived where others did not, may always be suspected of self-justification, as Alain Parrau points out: "Le lien entre survie et privilège rend la figure du survivant suspecte, la fait apparaître entourée d'un halo de questions qui n'osent se formuler directement [...] les témoignages et les oeuvres elles-mêmes entrent dans 'l'ère du soupçon'"<sup>14</sup>. The characterization of the testimony as an ultimately personal act of memory may well be undertaken by these authors to establish from the outset a sense of the non-public bias and intent of their narrative and thus to thwart assumptions of publication influence. If such is indeed the case, it would serve as an early indication that many of these authors conceive the writing of a testimony as inherently problematic — a conception which is, as we shall shortly discover, widespread. It is indicative, too, of the variety inherent within the corpus of French female narratives, which begin their testimonies with quite divergent dynamics and expectations of the role of the text.

This diversity carries over into the general presentation of memory within the wider textual context. The issue of memory constitutes one of the greatest problems at the heart of any testimony, be it written, oral or judicial. For while the recollection of details, facts and individuals is central to the testimonial act, with its objective of furnishing an accurate factual record, human recall is indubitably imperfect and susceptible to distortion from a vast array of influences, of which Rosette Lamont touches upon but a few of the most generalized:

[...] ce projet unique était menacé par tous les facteurs qui peuvent oblitérer ou déformer l'enregistrement mnémorique. Le traumatisme, qui unit victime et

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.24

<sup>14</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, pp89-90

oppresseur, soumet l'édifice du souvenir à l'usure du refoulement. L'ennemi mortel de la mémoire est tapi dans le for intérieur de tout un chacun car le désir profond de l'oubli hante les individus comme les nations<sup>15</sup>.

And yet, French female narratives are noticeably divided in their portrayal of memory, running the gamut from those for whom memory is essentially faithful and entirely reconciled with their testimony, to those who portray memory as problematic, imperfect and often at variance with their testimonial objective. The former are characterized by the absence of the concept of memory from their narrative — it may be presumed to fit easily with the testimony or, even if it does not, the author alludes to no discord. Sometimes this complete harmony between memory and writing is overtly stated, as occurs in the preface to Fania Fenelon's testimony. While her fellow survivors applaud Fenelon's depiction of their experience in the orchestra at Auschwitz and admit that they themselves have forgotten much of their ordeal, Fenelon is adamant as to the faithfulness of memory transcribed in her testimony: "Il y a de la provocation dans l'assurance que leur donne Fania: 'Eh bien, moi, je n'ai rien oublié. Rien!'"<sup>16</sup>. The implication here is that memory serves Fenelon's testimonial process readily and easily, and that reality and testimony remain undivided by any memorial opacity — an inference which is implicitly supported by Fenelon's style of narration with its extensive deployment of dialogue (not a common feature of the testimonial genre due to the veritable impossibility of accurately reproducing any given dialogue at a later date), relative continuity and consequent sense of narrative confidence. A similar theme of ready reconciliation of memory and text is intimated in those testimonies where the narrative is portrayed as enacting a more ongoing role in the process of recall; where, as it is written and accorded definitive form, the testimony effectively *becomes* the survivor's memory. Consider, for instance, Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, who asserts that the writings which form her testimony "[...] sont ma mémoire, je m'y réfère souvent pour retrouver des faits, des dates qui deviennent floues avec le temps"<sup>17</sup>. The typical formula of testimony based upon memory is inverted here as Chombart de Lauwe establishes her memory as being firmly rooted within the testimony, rendering the two entities — the written and the remembered — essentially fused, indivisible and free of conflict.

Many other French women writers, however, are unable to conceive such a comprehensive reconciliation of memory and testimony, defining memory as problematic and elusive and overtly evoking the uneasy relationship between narrative and memory in which the limits and fluctuations of mental recall act to obstruct, rather than facilitate, the act of writing. Micheline Maurel provides one such example, establishing the concept of memory as opaque and idiosyncratic from the very outset of her testimony:

Après avoir lu le manuscrit de ce livre, Michelle m'a dit: 'La réalité était bien plus tragique'. Je le sais bien. En écrivant j'ai buté plus d'une fois sur des souvenirs fermés qui ont refusé de s'ouvrir. Ma mémoire les repousse. J'ai trouvé pour les

<sup>15</sup> Rosette Lamont, 'Charlotte Delbo, une littérature de la conscience', in *Créer pour survivre*, p.145

<sup>16</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, p.9

<sup>17</sup> Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe, *Toute une vie de résistance*, p.7

saisons chaudes plus de souvenirs que pour les saisons froides qui dureraient beaucoup plus longtemps. Des jours les plus pénibles, surtout la deuxième année, je me rappelle les matinées, non les soirées. Je me rappelle les trajets du camp au travail, mais non les retours. Je ne sais si la mémoire refuse de les évoquer ou si elle n'a rien pu enregistrer parce que j'étais trop fatiguée<sup>18</sup>.

In *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, Charlotte Delbo creates a structural echo of Maurel's depiction of the incomplete nature of recall, accumulating fragmented scenes which are discontinuous in form and presented outside of any traditional conception of chronology or temporal continuity. Each scene assaults the reader with striking intensity, appearing almost as a picture branded upon the mind's eye due to Delbo's repeated utilisation of concrete images as the thematic touchstone for numerous excerpts (*La jambe d'Alice*, *La tulipe*) or her stylistic device of building up images to create a descriptive chiaroscuro. The narrative thus functions as an evocation of the reality of memory — a memory which is not coherent, faithful or continuous, but which is characterized by vivid, quasi-pictorial fragments interspersed with lacunae. More specifically, Delbo spotlights the tension between memory and testimony with the excerpt on the stream, which functions primarily not as an anecdote of her camp experience, but as a questioning of memory and ultimately an assertion of its imperfect nature, as she attempts to reconstruct a true memory of the day the women were permitted to bathe in the stream, toys with the various possibilities and finally concedes to her inability to grasp a definite reality:

C'est drôle, je ne me rappelle rien de ce jour-là. Rien que le ruisseau [...] Je ne peux vraiment plus me rappeler quel travail nous avons fait ce jour-là. Je ne me souviens que du ruisseau. Son souvenir a aboli toutes les autres impressions de ce jour-là. Pour reconstituer, il faut que je m'applique à réfléchir [...] La kapo a compté la colonne — certainement puisque cela se faisait toujours — nous avons pris des outils. Mais lesquels et pour faire quoi? Nous nous sommes mises au travail. Avec des bèches? Avec des pelles, ou nos mains nues comme pour les rails et les briques? Je ne me rappelle que la lumière de ce jour-là, parce que le souvenir de cette lumière est associé à celui du ruisseau. Il y a eu — c'était toujours ainsi — un coup de sifflet pour la pause de midi, la mise en rangs et la queue devant les bidons de soupe. Avons-nous mangé la soupe debout, ou assises? Je ne sais pas. Assises, peut-être, puisqu'il faisait beau. Mais assises sur quoi? [...] A quoi pouvais-je bien penser tout en essayant de nettoyer ma peau morceau par morceau? [...] je devais penser à cette dernière douche et aussi peut-être au plaisir qu'il y a à plonger dans une douce eau tiède. Ou bien à toutes celles qui étaient mortes depuis notre arrivée sans s'être passé de l'eau sur le visage. Mais tout cela n'est que souvenir rapporté [...] C'est-à-dire que c'est ainsi que cela a dû se passer car je ne m'en souviens pas du tout. Je ne me souviens que du ruisseau<sup>19</sup>.

Such overt self-questioning of the writer's memory serves not only as an authorial device emphasizing the authentic and real nature of the narrative (reiterating its basis upon actual — if imperfect — memory rather than fiction), but also represents an open confrontation with one of the primary difficulties of testimony writing. As the writer moves from a textually assimilated position within the narrative to the external role of writer struggling to reconcile memory and testimony, the status of the text as memoir is forcibly reiterated. Indeed, it is the relative absence

<sup>18</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, p.13

<sup>19</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, pp52-65

of such a diaphanous approach to the issues of testimonial writing in texts such as Fenelon's which renders them seemingly more novelized in their dialogue with the reader.

While the body of French female testimonies under study therefore manifest varied (and often antithetical) responses to the issue of memory and its relation to the testimonial process, this diversity may be seen to be operative within the wider literary trends and practical situations governing these narratives. Firstly, the treatment of memory by these writers appears to be tightly related to, and even a function of, the author's self-characterization. Broadly speaking, those authors who downplay the role of the self and maintain a non-idealistic, victim-based self-portrait (of whom Charlotte Delbo is a prime example) devote significantly more attention to the problematic nature of memory within their testimony — an approach which is certainly in keeping with a portrayal of the self as victim, essentially reduced to a state of disorientation in which clarity of recall cannot be other than problematic. By contrast, those women who adopt a narrative persona in which action or personal dynamism figure strongly (Fenelon, Gorce and Guyon-Belot are clear examples) appear to reclaim and dominate memory in much the same fashion as they portray the self essentially dominating the camp experience, with memory often a narrative non-issue. Those writers who synthesize elements of the two survivor types, such as Nadine Heftler, tend to allude briefly to memory as a narrative factor. This theory is borne out particularly by Delbo and Fenelon who, as the most self-effacing and self-dramatizing writers within our corpus (to borrow Heinemann's terminology), respectively typify the greatest concern for rendering explicit the vagaries of memory and the most pronounced reconciliation of memory and testimony. Somewhat paradoxically, many of the testimonies which are characterized by a dynamic protagonist (including the three indicated above) were written several decades after the end of the war, engendering the reasonable supposition that memory must constitute a more significant issue in their texts as they struggle with the distortive and extirpative effects of the passing of time. The unexpected dominion over memory and apparently seamless transition from memory to testimony in these narratives is thus illustrative of the fact that the concept of memory in French female testimonies is more a result of the type of testimony and the characterization of the protagonist than of the actual time lapsed — the response to memory, in short, is in many respects a sub-category of characterization.

It is also, however, linked in many ways to the degree of privilege characterizing a writer's camp experience. Those prisoners occupying privileged posts, whose superior conditions of life and work enhanced their ability to combat starvation, were undoubtedly better situated to actively observe, detail and remember their ordeal. By contrast, those who subsisted at the base of the prisoner hierarchy inevitably discovered that faculties of thought and memory atrophied under the relentless influence of starvation and physical suffering, as Charlotte Delbo notes: "Vous direz qu'on peut tout enlever à un être humain sauf sa faculté de penser et d'imaginer. Vous ne savez pas. On peut faire d'un être humain un squelette où gargouille la



diarrhée, lui ôter le temps de penser, la force de penser”<sup>20</sup>. Sylvain Kaufmann elaborates further on the non-privileged inmate’s estrangement from the fundamental dual components of memory — that of observation and recall:

L’homme exténué par le travail forcé, le ventre creux, l’esprit vide, n’avait qu’une obsession: manger dans l’espoir de durer, ne fût-ce que jusqu’au lendemain. Dès lors, il regardait sans voir ce qui l’entourait et ne concentrait son attention que sur sa maigre pitance ou un repos toujours trop court. Pour retenir les images oubliées sitôt qu’entrevues, il fallait plus que de l’espoir, plus que de la volonté. Il fallait la certitude de tenir encore et toujours, de tenir jusqu’au bout du tunnel<sup>21</sup>.

Privilege therefore enacts a cardinal delimitative testimonial role not only with regard to authorial point of view and comprehension of wider camp mechanisms — *what* she could see -, but also with regard to *how much* she may remember, colouring the testimonial response to memory and its categorization as faithful or problematic accordingly. Fania Fenelon, for example, moves at the end of her testimony from the position of real privilege in the women’s orchestra at Birkenau which occupies the vast majority of her narrative to a period in Bergen-Belsen, in which her privilege is entirely removed and she is fully occupied with the struggle for survival. The contrast in privilege between these two situations is mirrored by a contrast in her portrayal of memory — the final pages of the testimony which detail Fenelon’s Belsen experience are marked by both the abandonment of her dynamic self-characterization and of the clarity of memory which characterized her privileged narrative:

Je ne garde pas grand souvenir des jours qui suivent. D’ailleurs, pour moi, cette période de Bergen-Belsen, qui vient de débiter, est chronologiquement obscure, avec des parties effacées. Peut-être est-ce parce qu’elle m’a conduite aux portes de la mort que j’en garde des images à la fois vivaces et confuses. Au fur et à mesure que j’avance vers la fin, elles se morcellent, se fragmentent: un puzzle parfaitement lisible mais auquel il manquerait des morceaux<sup>22</sup>.

The portrayal of memory as true or errant, then, is seemingly reflective not only of the survivor’s innate memorial capacity, but also of both her camp experience of privilege, and the textual reality — dominant, passive or composite — she aims to convey.

The question of collective memory is also a particularly interesting one with regard to the testimonial process, for the degree to which it is embraced or assimilated by testifying authors may determine much of the degree of variation within a given body of camp narratives. Many critics have noted that generic or homogeneous group memories tend to be consolidated as each country formulates its history and conceptualization of deportation, with such collective memory potentially growing inseparable from the survivor’s personal recall<sup>23</sup> — a phenomenon to which we alluded briefly with regard to its potential influence upon the elevated female testimonial portrayal of solidarity. Inevitably, post-war prisoner associations, which held the primary responsibility for co-ordinating and disseminating information on camp experiences, and indeed

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.90

<sup>21</sup> Sylvain Kaufmann, *Le livre de la mémoire*, p.20

<sup>22</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, p.365

<sup>23</sup> Michael Pollak, *L’expérience concentrationnaire*, p.244

for perpetuating the memory of deportation, could not fail to play a central role in the creation of such a collective memory. The notion of distilling the plethora of individual camp realities into a unified, singular memory is certainly espoused in the literature advanced by these associations, as the following early extract from FNDIP's<sup>24</sup> newspaper *Le patriote résistant* exemplifies in its exhortation to deportees to accord it their support: "En y collaborant les déportés et internés en feront une image exacte de la pensée de tous ceux qui furent victimes de la barbarie nazie et du vichysme parce qu'ils étaient l'âme de la Résistance"<sup>25</sup>. The use of the singular in the delineation of *une image exacte de la pensée* is telling, evoking as it does the notion of a sole homogenous memory, despite the fact that the very concept of a precise rendering of collective thought — or indeed collective camp reality — must remain inherently unattainable. Interestingly, Michael Pollak intimates that the efforts of prisoner associations were particularly effective in imbuing survivors with a sense of the significance of shared national memory in France, with his assertion that, in comparison to German and Austrian respondents,

Les sept Françaises qui nous avaient été présentées par l'Amicale étaient toutes, à une exception près, plus hésitantes à parler sur l' 'après' et sur leur réadaptation à la vie civile que sur le camp. Il ne s'agissait pas alors d'un refus, mais d'une incompréhension quant à l'intérêt que pouvait avoir ce récit...<sup>26</sup>.

For these women, in other words, Pollak implies that the pre-eminence of collective memory is apparently so deep-rooted as to render personal aspects which fall outside its confines seemingly unimportant<sup>27</sup>.

A comprehensive study of the finer nuances of the collective memory of deportation in France cannot be undertaken here, for it would necessitate prolonged analysis of association literature and media discourse, as well as the legal statutes relating to camp survivors. Annette Wieviorka, in her detailed analysis of the prisoner associations and the post-war debate surrounding the status and recognition accorded to various prisoner categories, adumbrates its broad outlines in the years immediately after the war — namely a heavy emphasis upon the resistance of French prisoners and their sacrifice for France (congruent with that which Dominick LaCapra terms "the myth of the Resistance [...] the idea, furthered by both De Gaulle and Communists, that all of France with only marginal exceptions was essentially involved in resistance"<sup>28</sup>), and a strong tendency to obscure the specific nature of the Jewish experience within a global conception of the prisoner as patriotic resistant<sup>29</sup>: "S'élabore ici un thème qui dominera largement l'après-guerre : le vrai déporté, c'est le résistant patriote. Comme

<sup>24</sup> Fédération Nationale des Déportés et Internés Patriotes. Later, in January 1946, the term "résistant" was added to the title, and the association became FNDIRP.

<sup>25</sup> *Le patriot résistant*, 1st January 1946

<sup>26</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.246

<sup>27</sup> Note that while Pollak's interviewees may have been reluctant to elaborate on their post-camp reintegration into society, this tendency is not apparent in French female testimonial literature, with many writers exploring this theme in relative depth at the conclusion of their narratives (See conclusion).

<sup>28</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust — History, Theory, Trauma* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p.201

<sup>29</sup> See Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, pp 132-140 and pp141-157

dans les poupées russes, la déportation s'inscrit dans la résistance, elle-même inscrite dans le cercle plus vaste du patriotisme"<sup>30</sup>. Only recently has the pendulum of French collective memory swung in the opposite direction:

Quand se réveillera la mémoire du génocide, elle pourra se nourrir de connaissance accumulée dès l'après-guerre, alors que celle de la déportation se verra appauvrie par l'usage politique qui en fut fait. Les équations simplistes auxquelles elle donna lieu : déporté = résistant = antifasciste; mémoire de la déportation = lutte antifasciste, font qu'aujourd'hui elle est en train de perdre ses repères. Il semble [...] que l'on assiste à un renversement total de la situation d'après-guerre. Alors qu'en 1945 le déporté était le résistant, aujourd'hui, dans l'opinion, le déporté est en passe de devenir le seul Juif<sup>31</sup>.

How, then, do the testimonies of French women reflect and respond to the wider national memory of deportation? To attempt any conjecture upon the influence of such collective memory in the narratives of French women is highly problematic, given the extreme difficulty of isolating the boundaries of individual and collective recall — boundaries which may be unclear even to the author herself. Strong suggestions of an assimilation of certain key aspects of this collective memory are, however, discernible in the broad, undeviating symmetry of French female testimonies with regard to certain themes. The ubiquitous externalization of the grey zone and exceptionally pronounced female assimilation of solidarity, and the explicit and sustained linkage of both of these stances to resistance may be seen to echo the wider French emphasis upon the prisoner as resistant, while most of these women also effect a generic characterization of the French as a whole which often patently exceeds the bounds of what they could possibly have experienced personally. We have already seen how the interpretations of solidarity and non-participation in the grey zone are extended to the French prisoner contingent in its entirety, thereby creating a widely inclusive national image of moral uprightness and stoic resistance consistent with that appearing in much post-war discourse. The somewhat sweeping statements cited in Chapter Two which declare that “aucune des Françaises” was active in roles displaying cruelty to other prisoners certainly betray that collective recall was to some extent influential in the narrative process.

Moreover, this broad national characterization also commonly encompasses the collective notion of the French female prisoner as unyielding patriot. The interaction of French women with many of the most striking aspects of camp reality is frequently portrayed as a confrontation between staunch French patriotism and a somewhat disarmed Nazi mechanism. Hence the widespread description (among political prisoners at least) of the singing of the *Marseillaise* at such junctures as the entry into camp, the undertaking of hard labour or even the transport to extermination. Simone Alizon, for example, effects just such a characterization of the French women as singularly patriotic upon arrival at Auschwitz:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.284

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.430

Brusquement, jaillie de l'angoisse, une voix entonna *La Marseillaise*, accompagnée par toutes dès les premières notes [...] Ce chant pourra paraître dérisoire pour ceux qui n'ont aucune idée de ce qu'étaient les camps d'extermination et peut-être s'étonneront-ils que je m'y attarde tant. Mais ce fut un événement si extraordinaire que tout le camp en parla. Jusqu'au camp des hommes. Cela resta dans les annales d'Auschwitz. Les SS étaient comme tétanisés. Rien de semblable ne s'était jamais produit!<sup>32</sup>.

Denise Dufournier also stresses the admiration of the other, presumably less patriotic and spirited, prisoners at the actions of the French women following their first experience of camp labour:

Une fois arrivées au camp, en rangs impeccables comme de vieux soldats, l'une de nous entonna *La Madelon*. Aussitôt nous nous redressâmes et nous nous mîmes toutes à chanter à pleins poumons [...] Les prisonnières nous regardaient passer, l'air hébété et admiratif. Nous les entendions dire tout bas: '*Französinen!* (Françaises!)' [...] En arrivant devant notre bloc, nous fîmes un tour pour rien, un tour de parade [...] La Stubova était stupéfaite<sup>33</sup>.

The generally-perceived characteristics of the French prisoner contingent which writers of other nationalities often denote as negative traits — most notably their individualism and frequent refusal of camp discipline — are also inscribed by these writers within the sphere of patriotism as positive qualities signifying the French undermining of, and resistance to, the camp system. The implicit pride in Suzanne Birnbaum's assertion that "Nous trouvions parfois le moyen de rire, dans la journée, car nous étions toute une bande de Françaises, réputées d'ailleurs comme ne voulant rien faire, se moquant de tout. Et cela était vrai"<sup>34</sup>, along with her description of her altercation with the *blockowa* when she refuses to obey the order to join a work commando ("La *blockowa* me gifle. Je redis 'Non'. Elle me regifle. Je répète toujours 'Non'. Je couvre ma tête de mes bras et gueule de plus en plus fort 'Non, non, non et non. Je n'irai jamais'"<sup>35</sup>) are demonstrative of the valorization of these "French" qualities. Micheline Maurel also lauds the attitude of her compatriots ("Il suffisait qu'on interdise quelque chose pour que plusieurs Françaises, de l'air le plus innocent du monde, se détachent du groupe et s'en aillent faire exactement ce qu'on venait d'interdire. L'inaptitude à obéir est une grande vertu des Français"<sup>36</sup>), whilst Françoise Maous notes the particular courage of the French women: "[...] il y a énormément de Françaises prises ce jour-là dans la sélection. Elles sont d'ailleurs particulièrement courageuses et ne crient pas"<sup>37</sup>. As Birnbaum and Maous illustrate, this portrayal of patriotism and positive French characterization is certainly not confined to political prisoners, but is also manifested (albeit rather more subtly) in many Jewish narratives — a fact which is unsurprising given that many French women deported as Jews identified less with their Jewish designation than with their national identity. And of course, on a more general level, the sense of collective memory within French female narratives is further underscored by the fact

<sup>32</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, pp112-113

<sup>33</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, p.58

<sup>34</sup> Suzanne Birnbaum, *Une Française juive est revenue*, p.77

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.81

<sup>36</sup> Micheline Maurel, *Un camp très ordinaire*, p.83

<sup>37</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.122

that virtually all French women testimonial writers employ the collective voice to some degree (and overall to a significantly greater degree than their male counterparts), a fact which may in part be indicative of an elevated perception of the testimony as an instrument of collective memory. Indeed, Michael Pollak's assertion that the testimony's perceived validity is dependant upon its status as representative of a group and a cause ("Ainsi, l'expérience concentrationnaire n'est jugée digne d'être rapportée qu'en tant qu'elle fait l'objet d'un vécu collectif"<sup>38</sup>) may in part explain why these female writers embrace many of the key aspects of collective memory and orient their testimonies toward a collective portrayal.

Moreover, if we briefly direct our focus outside of our collection of testimonies to a completely external source whose basis lies in contemporary technology, we are confronted with a potentially forceful suggestion of the generalized predominance of collective memory and the influence of prisoner associations in shaping the French survivor's recall. Although penned by a male survivor, the internet-posted manuscript of Gérard Avran is worth noting in passing for the questions it raises in this regard. Avran's testimony deviates markedly from the norm presented by French survivors (both male and female), in his emphatic assertion of a complete lack of solidarity amongst French prisoners at Auschwitz ("Je n'ai jamais connu le moindre esprit de solidarité entre nous"<sup>39</sup>), and in his insistence that French prisoners were among the most active and culpable participants in the grey zone, particularly French doctors who impeded the entry of their compatriots into the camp *Revier*:

Les médecins, dont de nombreux Français, faisaient systématiquement barrage. Je sais qu'aujourd'hui certains de ces mêmes médecins prétendent que c'était pour nous éviter la sélection pour la chambre à gaz. Mais en réalité, il fallait voir comment ils traitent ceux qui avaient la 'chance' d'être admis<sup>40</sup>.

Could it be that Avran's decision to utilise the non-traditional channel of the internet rather than literary publication to present a view which is so fundamentally at odds with the generally accepted French version of events indicates an attempt to elude the influence of those prisoner associations who "[...] se transforment en 'gardiens de la mémoire'" and "[...] veillent à la transmission de leur expérience, en même temps qu'ils défendent l'image du groupe et de leur association"<sup>41</sup>? If such is indeed the case, it would appear strongly demonstrative of the reach of collective memory and prisoner associations among French survivors as a whole.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.204

<sup>39</sup> Gérard Avran, Online testimony, p.25. Available: <http://www.multimedia.com/contreloubli/imprimer.html>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, p.26

<sup>41</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.246

<sup>42</sup> Note, however, that the reality delineated by Avran should in all probability not be read as a general truth *concealed* by the dissemination of collective memory but rather as a function of his essentially limited camp vision, as *The Buchenwald Report* points out: "People who innocently reported to the infirmary for treatment were often forcibly turned away by the hospital orderlies in order to save their lives. In this strange village, with its hidden paths, its relatively closed off castes and work details, and its loners, there were always some prisoners who despite everything were completely uninformed. Since the reasons could not be stated openly, this seeming 'barbarity' led to the most terrible misunderstandings on the part of fellow prisoners" (David Hackett (ed), *The*

And yet, despite its discernible presence within our testimonial corpus, these female narratives certainly cannot be read as a consistent reflection of French collective memory. Rather, most encapsulate the tension inherent within the very notion of a French collective memory of deportation which must necessarily generalize across a wide range of camp situations and synthesize a combination of prisoner realities whose basis (racial, political, resistant, criminal or circumstantial) was so inherently divergent. Suzanne Falk's comments are illustrative of this tension: "Je crois vraiment qu'il est très difficile de raconter la déportation parce que chaque personne a vécu une chose tellement différente, tellement particulière que ce n'est pas possible de la transmettre"<sup>43</sup>. Hence many of these female testimonies, whilst emphasizing the broad themes of collective memory as propagated in post-war discourse — solidarity, resistance, patriotism, French moral calibre — synchronously undermine and (often overtly) call into question generic recall with the concurrent presentation of more nuanced individual reality or specificity. In this way, the French female testimony tends to function as an often uneasy hybrid of both individual and collective memory, in which the essentially heterogeneous narrative character of these texts is rendered further apparent.

Once again, however, there does appear to be a certain broad pattern to this variation. While the wider societal context may manifest a shift from a national memory dominated by the concept of resistance to a perception in which the Jewish experience prevails, French female testimonies display a chronological transition from generalized to specific questioning of collective memory. For it is particularly notable that collective memory — although consolidated from the time of liberation — appears to be less forcibly and specifically challenged in the testimonies written within a few years of the event. Although most of the French female testimonies penned in the immediate post-war period certainly emphasize the critical importance of individual reality in the camp experience (whereby factors such as privilege, the specific camp, the period of imprisonment<sup>44</sup> and the Nazi-designated category of internment could create absolute divergences between prisoners), they tend to assert this individual reality and dissemble the notion of the absolute predominance of collective memory in more generalized terms. Thus Germaine Tillion, in 1946<sup>45</sup>, whilst embracing the constitutive elements of collective memory in her portrayal of French female solidarity and moral character, concurrently effects a non-specific deconstruction of the validity of generic recall by repeated emphasis upon the unequivocally

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*Buchenwald Report* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1995), p.77). The essentially isolated experience which Avran delineates in his testimony would indeed seem to situate him amongst the ranks of such uninformed inmates.

<sup>43</sup> Suzanne Falk in Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers*, p.13

<sup>44</sup> Conditions in many camps improved somewhat in 1942 as the camp command responded to the need to maintain prisoner labour for the German war effort. This led to a slight improvement in the rations allocated to prisoners in some camps, as well as a diminution in arbitrary punishment and extermination amongst prisoners involved in German labour. Paradoxically, Jewish extermination was stepped up. General conditions worsened considerably in 1944 as the German war effort fell into increasing disarray.

<sup>45</sup> Parts of Tillion's text were written in different periods; that which deals with the experience of the inmates was predominantly penned immediately after the war.

individual nature of reality and the impossibility of reconciling these individual experiences as a comprehensive whole:

Un jour, on collectionnera les témoignages sur les camps de concentration et, ce jour-là, il faudra se souvenir qu'il y eut mille camps dans chaque camp [...] Ainsi, à Ravensbrück, une de mes amies qui venait d'arriver d'Auschwitz entendit deux 'Triangles verts' allemandes de son convoi qui, commentant 'leur' actualité, se disaient l'une à l'autre: 'Quel sale camp ici. On était rudement mieux à Auschwitz'. A Auschwitz, les assassinats n'étaient nullement dissimulés, ils étaient massifs, et, à l'époque en question, on n'exterminait pas à Ravensbrück, pas encore. Quelle combine pouvaient avoir ces deux bougresses à Auschwitz?<sup>46</sup>

It is largely in later texts, however, that this deconstruction of collective memory attains more specific and textually significant proportions, as female authors focus upon and dissect particular aspects of collective perception. It may occur within the political context, as a survivor attempts to rectify, temper or reconstruct images of deportation consolidated to serve political factions over the years. Hence Simone Alizon's text relating to the scientific commando at Raïsko which, within a wider emphasis upon French unity and resistance, disassembles the communist post-war memory of widespread Party solidarity to all French inmates to depict the attitudinal responses and bias underlying this provision of aid. In so doing, Alizon delineates a party characterized by hierarchical sentiments and intransigence toward others:

Si les responsables politiques ont été d'une solidarité sans faille concernant l'entraide matérielle, il n'en fut pas de même sur le plan moral [...] Ceux qui ont des connaissances se croient, parfois, supérieurs aux autres [...] Certaines, ayant pu garder leur santé presque intacte, eurent l'attitude condescendante et méprisante de ceux qui sont détachés des contingences premières [...] Moi qui étais la plus ignorante de toutes, jamais je n'ai échangé la moindre ébauche de conversation avec une des Françaises du 'labo', appartenant à notre convoi [...] j'étais trop insignifiante pour elles<sup>47</sup>.

In a similarly particular vein, certain later testimonies re-establish the specificity of the Jewish experience and challenge the myth of the resistance-based symmetry of French deportation which acts to obscure such specificity. Simone Lagrange is a case in point, situating her testimony firmly within the parameters of Jewish deportation. Although Lagrange was also involved in resistance activities, her text establishes her resistance status as essentially secondary to her Jewish identity as the determining factor of her camp experience. The narrative thus commences with a description of her wartime experiences of antisemitism, and makes explicit the differences between Jewish and political French prisoners, particularly when the former are evacuated from Auschwitz to join their political counterparts at Ravensbrück in January 1945. Although it is inscribed within the wider, overarching emphasis upon solidarity and group interaction which dominates her narrative, Lagrange here implies that this non-commonality limited the reach of solidarity, thereby deconstructing the post-war notion of universal, undelineated positive French interaction:

<sup>46</sup> Germaine Tillon, *Ravensbrück*, p.172

<sup>47</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, pp273-274

[...] nous sommes sales, repoussantes, semblables à de véritables cadavres ambulants et n'inspirons aucune pitié aux autres détenues qui ont déjà leurs propres problèmes. Même le racisme se réveille parmi certaines prisonnières qui furent pourtant, dans une autre vie, des antiracistes convaincues. Comme j'ai eu mal en entendant une Française du bloc 32 dire à l'une de ses camarades, tout en regardant notre maigre troupeau: 'Ce sont les *youtres*. Vois comme elles sont sales, comme elles puent'. Et c'était vrai!<sup>48</sup>.

Indeed, the very title of Lagrange's *Coupable d'être née*, with its accent upon the racial motivation for her arrest, serves to place the textual focus firmly upon Jewish specificity. If we compare it to an earlier Jewish narrative, such as Suzanne Birnbaum's *Une Française juive est revenue* of 1946, the difference is clear. Not only is Birnbaum's narrative rather more generalized in approach — reading more as a generic French testimony than a specifically Jewish account — but, although she is among the few Jewish writers to stipulate this racial particularity in her title, her choice of “Française” rather than “juive” in the subject position is revealing, rendering as it does the former appellation dominant, the second merely descriptive.

The conclusion of Lagrange's testimony is particularly worth citing at length, as the author renders explicit her rejection of a collective memory in which Jewish specificity remains unespoused, unambiguously refocusing memory upon her individual reality with the following text:

Bien qu'à notre retour, en mai 1945, 2500 déportés seulement soient revenus sur les 76,000 juifs envoyés en camp d'extermination, je pense que la France et les Français, horrifiés, ne faisaient pas la différence entre les rescapés de l'horrible [...] Et puis de nombreux juifs préféraient être inclus dans la masse des rescapés, car ils craignaient bien souvent, inconsciemment, la spécification qui leur avait valu la destruction des leurs, de leurs vies! Ils voulaient se fondre dans la masse, passer inaperçus. Ce fut la première erreur, compréhensible, mais erreur quand même, car cela permettrait à certains, qui avaient des raisons de vouloir minimiser la tragédie des juifs, de ne parler que de la déportation dans son ensemble occultant ainsi, durant de nombreuses décennies, la mémoire de la Shoah [...] En effet, comment ne pas remarquer que les femmes de Ravensbrück ne ressemblaient que de loin au troupeau de femmes ayant fait la 'marche de la mort' et qui étaient comme des loques revenant du fond de l'enfer? La différence ne se trouvait pas dans les souffrances de l'enfermement, de la séparation d'avec les leurs qu'elles allaient peut-être retrouver après la Libération. La différence était dans notre vécu, les sélections tout au long de notre détention, et surtout la sélection, la première, celle qui séparait les familles dès la rampe d'arrivée de Birkenau [...] Des cartes de déportés nous furent attribuées; il y eut des cartes roses pour les déportés résistants et des cartes bleues pour les déportés politiques. Comme il n'y eut pas de cartes pour les persécutés raciaux, nous fûmes donc inclus dans la catégorie des déportés politiques et nos droits ne furent pas les mêmes: le monde avait honte. Créer une carte pour les déportés raciaux, il valait mieux ne pas y penser. Et voilà comment notre mémoire fut occultée! [...] Il faut rattraper ces années de silence et de l'oubli des nôtres!<sup>49</sup>.

In this way, the most overt re-evaluation of collective recall and the greatest tension between collective and individual memory appears to occur in later testimonies, as authors respond to the general conceptions and attendant implications which have taken root over the years under the guidance of associations and political factions. It may well be too that the tendency of later testimonies to accentuate the specificity of the survivor's experience, rather than its generic

<sup>48</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.104

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, pp191-193



aspects, is also in part a form of testimonial differentiation from other texts, and thus an implicit justification of the writer's addition to an already considerable body of testimonies. Individual reality, in other words, may become more significant as collective reality is exhausted or banalized.

It is interesting to note, too, that these women writers do not, as a whole, overtly advance a specifically gender-based challenge to collective memory, making little attempt to explicitly question the global non-gender specific approach which characterizes French national collective recall. In all probability, the absence of such an explicit testimonial genderization of generic recall is due to its superfluity within the testimony — in presenting those aspects of camp experience which impacted uniquely or primarily upon female inmates (particularly those delineated in Chapter One such as fertility, maternity and body consciousness), female specificity is readily and indubitably established and needs no further elaboration. Equally, given that the emphasis upon any camp specificity often stems from a desire to assert the elevated trauma of one's own reality, individual gender-based reality may also not be proclaimed in these narratives due to the common conception amongst these female writers that their male counterparts were in fact worse off than themselves and, as we have noted in Chapter One, less readily equipped with the skills and resources to deal with day to day camp existence. Indeed, when the women in these narratives describe a (usually rare) encounter with a commando of male inmates, they invariably express pity and a sense that the suffering of the men eclipsed their own — an attitudinal stance which, although implying gender difference, is not deployed to emphasize female specificity. Charlotte Delbo's text is illustrative:

Le matin et le soir, sur la route des marais, nous croisions des colonnes d'hommes [...] Nous les plaignions parce qu'ils devaient marcher au pas. Nous, nous marchions comme nous pouvions [...] Ils étaient chaussés de soques de toile à semelles de bois qui ne tenaient pas aux pieds. Nous nous demandions comment ils pouvaient marcher avec ces soques [...] Tout tendus à marcher, ils ne nous regardaient pas. Nous, nous les regardions. Nous les regardions. Nos mains se serraient de pitié. Leur pensée nous poursuivait, et leur démarche, et leurs yeux<sup>50</sup>.

Unlike many other aspects of collective memory, then, the non gender-specific approach of national recall remains largely unchallenged by French female survivors.

Rarely, though, does the deconstruction of collective memory occur by direct questioning of the validity of another author's testimony, and it is therefore worthwhile briefly examining Simone Alizon's narrative, which is exceptional in this regard. Atypically, on more than one occasion Alizon introduces memories articulated in other unnamed testimonies to her narrative in order to question their authenticity and factual basis. Note the following extracts:

Les vraies résistantes étaient, parfois entre elles, plus ou moins méprisantes pour les malheureuses qui n'avaient pas 'fait leurs preuves'. Quelque part, j'ai lu le récit d'une ancienne déportée résistante de Ravensbrück. Peut-être le temps qui passe fait-il perdre une juste vue des choses? Il est vrai que les souvenirs, agrémentés de vanité...

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<sup>50</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, p.24

Elle se plaignait que les déportées, non résistantes, avaient été un poids pour les premières. Où donc avait-elle senti cela?<sup>51</sup>,

and again (in a lengthy footnote):

Moi qui ai lu peu de livres sur la déportation, le hasard a voulu que je sois tombée sur deux témoignages, tous les deux, sans doute involontairement, mensongers. Ces deux camarades parlent de ‘primes’ qui nous auraient été proposées! [...] Personnellement, je n’ai jamais entendu parler d’une telle chose. A aucun moment. J’affirme qu’il n’en fut jamais question et démens cette fantaisie de mes compagnes<sup>52</sup>.

The presentation of such conflicting representations of reality has wider repercussions for Alizon’s portrayal of memory. While her objective in introducing and refuting such testimonial variations may be simply the establishment of the veracity of her own reality, its effect is to situate Alizon’s narrative within the wider body of camp testimonies and to point up the potential non-universality of Alizon’s own memories and experience. With the possibility of dissension between survivors, Alizon effectively defines memory as a highly individual, fluid and non-static entity, whilst also deconstructing the idea of a ubiquitous collective French memory. Perhaps more significantly, Alizon’s reference to other testimonies also begs the question of potential cross-authorial influence and opens the way for a discussion of the extent to which these writers may have been influenced by the testimonial writings of their compatriots, and the significance of the date of writing in the construction of the narrative.

For within the wider array of issues which confronted these writers the issue of *when* to embark upon the testimonial exercise is certainly not without significance. For French female authors, this decision must be read in light of the contextual situation impacting upon testimonial authorship in France in the post-war years. The evolution of public sentiment in France regarding camp testimonies was particularly swift. A large number of testimonies were published in France in the years following the war, with 104 narratives appearing between 1945 and 1948<sup>53</sup>, — an elevated figure which is suggestive of a relatively receptive national climate. And yet Annette Wieviorka notes that this climate metamorphosed remarkably quickly to one of “saturation”, in which survivors experienced difficulty in procuring editors for their testimonies and frequently manifested a compulsion from as early as 1946 to excuse themselves in the *avant-propos* of their narratives for furnishing “yet another” camp testimony<sup>54</sup>. Authors of camp memoirs at this time encountered public disinterest in a context where “une grande part de la société française veut fermer définitivement la ‘parenthèse’ des camps”<sup>55</sup>. Inevitably, then, such saturation must have proved influential for French women in electing when to author a testimony, prompting certain survivors to shelve their plans for writing with the rationalization that their responsibility for articulating Nazi crimes was amply fulfilled by the abundance of post-war French testimonial literature. For many of these women, such a sense of testimonial

<sup>51</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, pp321-22

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.335

<sup>53</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, p.15

<sup>54</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, p.174

<sup>55</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, p.49

superfluousness was only curtailed by the later events which they cite as influential in their decision to testify — most notably world conflicts which threatened a recurrence of genocide and the ever more insistent voices of “revisionism”<sup>56</sup> in the late 80s and early 90s — which, together with the realisation that the number of surviving witnesses to Nazi crimes was rapidly dwindling, reawakened a sense of urgency and contemporary relevance impelling them to testimonial authorship. This contextual framework thus explains the emergence of a number of testimonies at this late juncture, and the relative dearth of French female testimonies penned in the 50s and 60s following the immediate post-war glut.

The question of the significance of these often widely polarized dates of authorship with regard to the potential for the author to be influenced by anterior publications is decidedly less clearcut. If, however, we examine the form and style of French female testimonies written immediately after the war in comparison with those penned decades later, there certainly appears to be collective evidence of such a process of assimilation. Note that here we refer to the date of *writing* rather than that of publication (the two are often far from synchronous), as it is this date which is indicative of the potential influences impacting on the construction of the narrative. Those female testimonies written in the immediate post war years display relative diversity in their narrative approach and style. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, writing in 1946, adopts a dialogically-heavy style in which the characterization of the prisoner protagonists and the details of their personal, day to day interaction are highly prominent. Many of the “scenes” which constitute the testimony’s structural framework rely upon inmate dialogue (often comic and finely characterized) rather than conventional description to convey the camp experience. Toulouse-Lautrec thus forgoes a focus upon the setting itself in favour of the equally revelatory depiction of character response and interaction. In the same year, Suzanne Wilborts, on the other hand, presents a narrative which could not be more dissimilar. Unlike Toulouse-Lautrec’s repositioning of the narrative self within the text and close-range, intimate character focus, Wilborts removes herself as narrator to a vantage point of extreme distance, challenging autobiographical convention by writing almost entirely in the third person and identifying the self-based central protagonist whom we follow through resistance activity, arrest and deportation simply as “la femme”. When the narrative shifts to Ravensbrück, the singular perspective is replaced by the equally remote collective “les femmes”. Only once in the testimony does Wilborts lapse into the first person in order to underscore the theme of heroism and resistance among her fellow French women with the weight and credibility intimated by personal eyewitness: “Les conditions de vie étaient abominables et pourtant jamais, dans aucun endroit, je n’ai vu souffrir et mourir avec tant de grandeur”<sup>57</sup>. Yvonne Pagniez (1947) creates yet another distinct style with her interplay of personal testimony and presentation of camp “scenes” from an omniscient perspective. And of course, Charlotte Delbo (who, irrespective of publication dates

<sup>56</sup> Among the most notable exponents of revisionism are Robert Faurisson, Arthur Butz and Paul Rassinier.

<sup>57</sup> Suzanne Wilborts, *Pour la France*, p.53

of 1965 and 1970, must be numbered among these earlier writers since *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* was penned in 1946, and most of *Une connaissance inutile* took form in 1946-47) further augments this diversity with a style which finds echo nowhere else. Delbo's synthesis of prose and poetry and her accumulation of discontinuous glimpses of camp life to create a sense of the temporal and emotional reality of Auschwitz are certainly unique to the corpus of female French testimonies. This diversity amongst early female narratives is also significantly more pronounced than within the body of testimonies penned by their male compatriots, due in all probability to the fact that the greater female emphasis upon solidarity and group inter-relation is more conducive to experimentation with narrative styles centred upon dialogue and intimate scenes of prisoner interaction.

Many of the other female narratives written in the immediate post war period, however, (among them Heftler, Maous, Dufournier, Birnbaum and Saint-Clair) utilise a testimonial format based upon a loosely chronological, first person approach which highlights thematic aspects of camp experience. And it is this broadly generic testimonial "type" which is adopted almost without exception by those writing after this period: Lagrange, Tichauer, Aylmer-Roubenne, Gorce, Alizon, Fenelon, Guyon-Belot, Maurel and Zaharia Asséo all advance variations on this common rubric. Real diversity of narrative approach therefore appears to be solely operative amongst the earliest female French testimonies, and once again the specific context of French testimonial writing may be seen to enact an influential role here. In comparing the French testimonial context with that faced by Russian survivors whose history afforded access to a tradition of incarceration literature, Annette Wiewiorka makes the pertinent observation that

[...] le déporté de France qui veut écrire un livre est privé de toute référence [...] Or toute littérature s'inscrit dans une généalogie littéraire, se réfère à des modèles [...] Ce qui frappe ici, c'est au contraire l'absence de matrice littéraire, due d'ailleurs à l'étrangeté d'un phénomène, celui du camp de concentration, totalement extérieur à la culture politique et littéraire française. La seule référence à un antécédent possible est le bagne, fortement présent par les récits de Cayenne ou de Nouméa et qui sert souvent à désigner les camps, dans les titres ou dans le corps des récits<sup>58</sup>.

Within such a vacuous framework, those French women writing the earliest camp testimonies immediately after the war thus lacked antecedent literary referential structures upon which to model their writing, and were consequently confronted with the necessity of forging a new genre within French literature. As they assumed their largely unprecedented task, these women utilised a relatively diverse array of narrative forms, amongst which the first person thematic chronological type appears to have emerged as the most prevalent. Given the rarity of their deviation from it, those women writing many years later therefore seem to have adopted this type as a precedent, allowing us to tentatively extrapolate as to the high probability of narrative cross-influencing for those writing many decades after the event.

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<sup>58</sup> Annette Wiewiorka, *Déportation et génocide*, p.189

A further date-based trend is discernible here, for the body of French female texts also appears to exhibit a very generalized chronological shift whereby the date of writing effects something of a general transmutation in characterization and narrative approach. Marlene Heinemann's tentative assertion that earlier testimonies tend to favour a resolutely objective narrative mode, whereas later ones employ a more dramatized approach

([...] it appears that memoirs written within a few years of the events described are more likely to [...] follow a soberly documentary strategy than a self-dramatizing pattern [...] There may also be a stronger impulse toward 'objective' and collective memoirs while the memories are still fresh and a turning toward more imaginative, dramatic memoirs after many years have passed<sup>59</sup>)

is to some degree applicable here, with most of the French female authors who engage a self-dramatizing persona and who accord their testimony a more dramatic bent figuring amongst the later dates of writing; Gorce, Fenelon, Guyon-Belot are notable examples. This trend is by no means absolute however, with some earlier writers — particularly those with a resistance background — also displaying elements of this latter categorisation. Such a shift may, however, be seen as logical if we consider the evolving function of the testimony:

[...] le témoignage a changé de fonction. Dans les années d'après-guerre, il visait essentiellement la connaissance, celle des modalités du génocide, celle de la déportation. Son statut était celui d'un document, d'une pièce d'archives. Aujourd'hui [...] le temps a passé, l'historien se méfie d'une mémoire où le passé s'estompe et qui s'est enrichie de maintes images depuis le retour du survivant à la liberté. La mission qui lui est dévolue n'est plus de rendre compte des événements, mais de les maintenir présents. Il doit être un vecteur de la transmission pour les générations d'après<sup>60</sup>.

In aiming to reiterate the long since terminated experience of the camps and to perpetuate its presence within the public consciousness, it is unsurprising that characterization and narrative style assume a somewhat more dramatic guise in later texts.

Here it is worth pausing for a moment to note that Michael Pollak, however, contends that self-dramatizing or heroicizing is rare, if not entirely absent, among female testimonial writers as a whole. In noting the lack of militant female testimonies, Pollak goes on to assert:

Là comme ailleurs se confirme le principe, fondamental, de différence entre les sexes. La propension au grossissement de soi et, ici, à l'héroïsation reflète l'obligation faite à l'homme de reconnaître et de participer pleinement aux jeux et aux enjeux, de pouvoir maîtriser sinon de dominer la réalité en toute circonstance. Dans ce contexte, même l'humour grinçant de Tadeusz Borowski est une manière de revendiquer les attributs de virilité perdus. Son style, en apparence cynique, constitue une tentative d'échapper au sentiment d'impuissance infligé par la perte de toute maîtrise de la réalité au camp. Les femmes, habituées à être exclues de certains jeux de domination, arrivent plus facilement à adopter un point de vue distant sur les jeux les plus 'sérieux'. Et plutôt que d'être 'grinçant' ou 'cynique', leur humour relève de l'ironie, ce mode de distanciation typique des dominées<sup>61</sup>.

Leaving aside the observations on the elevated female deployment of irony (which is certainly discernible, although again perhaps attributable to the fact that female narratives as a whole

<sup>59</sup> Marlene Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, pp75-76

<sup>60</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, p.162

<sup>61</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, pp211-212

manifest greater opportunities for the introduction of elements of humour within the grim portrayal of camp reality due to their more pronounced focus upon personal relationships and intimate interaction), Pollak's wider assertion of a gender antithesis in self-characterization is of particular interest. For his general conclusions are certainly not easily consonant with the French female corpus of testimonies, which manifests several examples of self-dramatizing and quasi-heroicisation of narrator protagonists. Undoubtedly, much of this inference stems from the fact that women performed certain acts within the camps which are invariably interpreted as "heroic" by the reading public, with the inclusion of such acts within the narrative inevitably lending it an element of heroicization. Thus, for example, Simone Lagrange's portrayal of her defiance in refusing to stand at attention for the camp commandant in the anteroom to the gas chamber<sup>62</sup> imbues her text with just such an implicit heroic quality. Equally significant, however, is the fact that Pollak's characterization of women writers as "habituées à être exclues de certains jeux de domination" fails to recognise the status of many French women writers — and precisely those whose texts have the greatest tendency toward self-dramatization or valorization — as political or resistance activists. Consequently, within the context of their arrest and deportation at least — within which the testimony is firmly inscribed —, these women were very much accustomed to roles of involvement and domination, and it is therefore logical that such a mentality would be mirrored and internalized in their testimonial approach. Nor does Pollak account for the changing societal roles and self-image of women writing their testimonies many decades after 1945. Those who penned their narratives in the 1980s or 1990s inhabited a different, infinitely less gender-structured society in which the conception of women's roles with regard to Pollak's "jeux de domination" had undergone a real and tangible metamorphosis. It is therefore highly possible that these writers may have transposed contemporary gender concepts onto their self portrayal, resulting in a more "heroicized" or dramatized presentation of the self as testimonial protagonist. This latter theory is indeed a probable further explanation for the general trend toward more self-dramatizing narratives in the later testimonies which comprise our corpus. And although Pollak makes the general assertion that "[...] les femmes ont laissé nettement moins de témoignages que les hommes"<sup>63</sup>, Annette Wieviorka's more nuanced conclusion that women have provided more testimonies than their male counterparts in proportional terms<sup>64</sup> is suggestive of a female culture which is equally keen to dominate its reality. For does not the very act of writing a testimony constitute a concrete illustration of exactly that "tentative d'échapper au sentiment d'impuissance infligé par la perte de toute maîtrise de la réalité au camp"<sup>65</sup> which Pollak attributed uniquely to the male testimonial author?

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<sup>62</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, pp79-80

<sup>63</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.18

<sup>64</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et génocide*, p.183

<sup>65</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.212

The date of authorship may be determinant not only of the form, style and characterization of these testimonies, however, but also their tone, and indeed the many variations in tone discernible amongst these female testimonies certainly owe much to this factor. While the reason for the writer's deportation in many cases acts as the cardinal tonal modulator, the distance from one's incarceration is also highly significant — what and how the author writes are tightly related to *when* she writes. Those creating a narrative many years after the event usually present a text in which — although the role of the author may be more idealized and dramatically conveyed — sentiments are rather more measured, emotions are more contained and coherent and the sense of authorial emotional equilibrium is somewhat augmented. Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, in 1997, conceives such a delayed testimonial undertaking as a distinct advantage, although her reasoning certainly lies open to argument:

Pourquoi avoir attendu cinquante ans? Je désirais bénéficier d'un certain recul. Je me méfiais des témoignages à 'chaud'. Ils contiennent une part d'émotionnel trop bouillonnante, trop importante, elle peut empêcher d'être un bon témoin. Le temps apaise la violence des sentiments, remet les choses à leur place. Peut-être gomme-t-il quelques détails, des précisions? S'ils se sont effacés, c'est qu'ils n'avaient pas grande importance! Seuls subsistent, alors, les faits importants. Je crois aux témoignages réfléchis. C'est mon opinion<sup>66</sup>.

While it is indeed true that the later passage to writing allows a wider comprehension of the concentration camp mechanism, and is conducive to the more objective and reflective clarity of hindsight, it is also undeniable that the close range emotion of which Aylmer-Roubenne is so suspicious is exactly that which allows the survivor writing immediately after her experience to convey an accurate picture of how she thought and felt at that moment — to effect a quasi-contemporaneous transportation of the reader, in other words, inside her personal reality. For if such emotion is banished or neatly contained many decades after the event, are we effectively contemplating a portrait of the woman as she experienced the camp or as she exists now, estranged from its reality? Aylmer-Roubenne's implicit qualification of a "bon témoin" as one who suppresses or masters personal emotion in the interests of more "pure" or "untainted" factual documentation appears suggestive of a highly circumscribed approach to history in which the particularity of the personal is relatively devalued in the interests of a somewhat bland collective facticity.

The differences in tone occasioned by the date of writing are perhaps most clearly illustrated by a comparison of two writers whose camp experience was remarkably analogous and whose narratives are situated at opposite ends of the chronological spectrum. Nadine Heftler and Simone Lagrange were both French Jewish adolescents deported to Auschwitz (Heftler was 15 at the time of deportation, Lagrange 13). Heftler penned her testimony in 1946, Lagrange fifty years later and this time lapse is readily apparent in the tone of their respective narratives. Although the broad contours of their experience display numerous parallels, particularly in the loss of both parents, Heftler's narrative manifests a notably augmented sense of raw emotion.

<sup>66</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.202

Her bitterness and hatred for the country and its people which perpetrated such a crime are highly visible, violent and unmitigated, compelling her to exhort the French reader to “[...] se méfier à jamais de nos terribles voisins”<sup>67</sup>. Lagrange’s testimony, on the other hand, is considerably more restrained in tone, despite the highly dramatic circumstances in which her father, in particular, was killed<sup>68</sup>. In all probability, the climate of the 1990s in which Franco-German reconciliation was long since realized and had ceased to be a contentious issue accounts for the absence of a comparable perpetuation of national enmity in Lagrange’s account. More striking, however, is the fact that the tone of Heftler’s narrative conveys an unmistakably youthful quality through the directness of her language and her often unsophisticated honesty in expressing her sometimes naïve or unbecoming sentiments regarding camp life. Her impatience with others (“Beaucoup de femmes commencent à pleurer (elles trouvent toujours un prétexte pour se transformer en fontaine)”<sup>69</sup>), or the automatic transposition of bourgeois values and ideas onto camp existence which causes her to condemn those who have “[...] la malchance d’appartenir à un genre aussi vulgaire”,<sup>70</sup> reveal a directness of tone unadorned by the greater concern for the nuances of personal image often imposed by adulthood, and infuse her narrative with a sense of immediacy and rawness. While Lagrange achieves a degree of immediacy with her deployment of various narrative techniques to reposition herself within the narrative (as with the immersed, present tense description of her arrival at Auschwitz), the measured nature of her sentiments — penned by an adult — creates an entirely different tone. Although no less poignant, Lagrange’s narrative inevitably affords us a less close and uncensored view of the adolescent experience of Auschwitz unassuaged by time or distance. It is interesting to note, too, that Heftler’s decision to write her testimony immediately after the war is an exception to Annette Wieviorka’s otherwise generally applicable rule that only those French Jews who were reunited with their loved ones after the war wrote their testimonies immediately: “Affronter l’abîme, seul, par la plume, le revivre, n’est possible que parce qu’on a retrouvé une certaine sécurité affective. Ceux dont la famille a été ravagée écriront plus tard”<sup>71</sup>. Having lost both her parents in the camps, Heftler provides a clear reminder of the difficulty of arriving at definitive generalized conclusions regarding prisoners and their narratives.

## The Problematic Testimony

While the textual elements thus far examined — stated narrative objectives, response to memory and collective recall, the influence of the date of publication — reveal a somewhat

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<sup>67</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.6

<sup>68</sup> During the evacuation march from Auschwitz to Ravensbrück, Lagrange recognized her father in a group of male prisoners. An SS soldier encouraged them to move towards one another to embrace, shooting Lagrange’s father in the head before they could do so. (*Coupable d’être née*, p.98)

<sup>69</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.19

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.48

<sup>71</sup> Annette Wieviorka, *Déportation et Génocide*, p.188



heterogeneous body of narratives, the testimonies of French women do, however, display a tendency to converge in a widespread underlying conception of testimonial writing as ultimately problematic, and in a range of common responses to its most significant issues. Foremost among them are the complexities confronting these authors with regard to *how* to write their testimony. More specifically, the question of language — the organ for according form to the narrative and conveying the survivor's message — recurs both implicitly and overtly as a *leitmotif* in virtually all of these female French testimonies. The overriding theme here is the inherent inadequacy of the existing language of normal, civilised society, which is patently ill-equipped to convey the horrific, unprecedented and fundamentally aberrant reality of the camps. Stephanos Rozanis notes that the exterminative emphasis of the Nazi camp system strips language of its functions and capacity for communication:

Le langage, sous le règne de *l'infiniment mauvais* de la mort perd de sa capacité à interroger le monde et devient une aphonie à l'agonie, un cri sans son. La structure du langage, c'est-à-dire le *matériel* à l'intérieur duquel fonctionne l'écriture, ainsi que le sens que l'écriture cherche à communiquer, se défait quand le signifié est la mort<sup>72</sup>.

This characterization of language as essentially ineffectual is articulated almost *ad infinitum* within these testimonies, as the writer finds herself confronted with the survivor's universal conundrum: the need to describe her experience and concurrent, acutely felt absence of the means to do so. Robert Antelme perhaps best describes this ubiquitous sentiment:

[...] nous ramenions avec nous notre mémoire, notre expérience toute vivante et nous éprouvions un désir frénétique de la dire telle quelle. Et dès les premiers jours cependant, il nous paraissait impossible de combler la distance que nous découvriions entre le langage dont nous disposions et cette expérience<sup>73</sup>.

Not only do French female writers express the impossibility of translating their experience into a language which is essentially foreign to their camp reality and thus lacking in appropriate lexis to convey its concepts ("Je ne sais comment traduire cela dans le langage des hommes libres"<sup>74</sup>), but they also repeatedly confront the chasm which exists between the meaning of a given term in normal society and its signification within the camp. The following text from Simone Alizon is representative:

Aujourd'hui encore, les mots que nous disons — froid, faim, fatigue — n'ont pas du tout le même sens pour nous que pour les autres humains. Nous seuls les ressentons, physiquement, dans toute leur violence douloureuse, leur affreuse désespérance. Nos mots ne sont pas vos mots. Aucun mot ne peut dire notre épuisance, notre désespoir, notre détresse, notre peur [...] Tous les déportés, tous les êtres qui ont subi, ou subissent la torture ou des traitements aussi inhumains [...] savent, eux, dans leur chair, ce que je dis [...] Pour tous les autres [...] cela ne restera que des mots, de pauvres mots, presque vides de sens<sup>75</sup>.

Charlotte Delbo's comments are very similar:

<sup>72</sup> Stephanos Rozanis, 'Écriture et silence dans les camps de concentration' in *Créer pour survivre*, p.79

<sup>73</sup> Robert Antelme, *L'espèce humaine*, p.9

<sup>74</sup> Krystyna Zywulska, *J'ai survécu à Auschwitz*, p.124

<sup>75</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.125

Les mots n'ont pas le même sens. Tu les entends dire: 'J'ai failli tomber. J'ai eu peur'. Savent-ils ce que c'est, la peur? Ou bien: 'J'ai faim. Je dois avoir une tablette de chocolat dans mon sac'. Ils disent j'ai peur, j'ai faim, j'ai froid, j'ai soif, j'ai sommeil, j'ai mal, comme si ces mots-là n'avaient pas le moindre poids [...] Ils sont d'un autre monde et rien ne les fera pénétrer dans le nôtre<sup>76</sup>.

Delbo also deploys other techniques to depict the definitional divorce between conventional meaning and camp meaning, following her lengthy description of her extreme state of thirst at Auschwitz with the comparative societal usage of the term “thirst”, meaningless in the camp context: “Il y a des gens qui disent : ‘J’ai soif’. Ils entrent dans un café et ils commandent une bière”<sup>77</sup>. The inadequacy of language, then, is rooted in a non-parallelism which sees words unable to function as accurate signals and indicators for the camp experiences they are required to denote. And yet, this theme of the impotence of language and the veritable impossibility of conveying the camp reality creates an inherent contradiction at the very heart of the testimony: in asserting that the camp experience cannot be conveyed via normal linguistic usage, the testimonial writer, by the very act of writing a testimony, concurrently implies faith in her ability to do so. It is therefore of particular interest to analyse how these women approach the writing of their testimony and the articulation of camp reality in light of this apparent contradiction.

Overwhelmingly, these women writers assimilate this contradiction within their text by the construction, however unwitting, of a tension between word and reality. In almost all of the texts within our corpus, the survivor effects a disjuncture between language and reality which establishes the two entities as separate, rather than fused or interchangeable. Such a schism is generally consolidated by a commonly deployed formula: the narrator either asserts her inability to describe a given element of her experience, and then — somewhat paradoxically — proceeds to attempt such a description, or describes the facet in question in the guise of an interrogative as to how it can be articulated. If we examine, for example, the scene of the arrival at the concentration camp — common to all our narratives — it is readily apparent that the deployment of the buffer of “comment dire” as a precursor to a difficult description is quasi-universal in these narratives. Simone Lagrange is typical:

Qui pourra dire l'angoisse qui nous a étreintes sur le chemin qui nous conduit à notre bloc? Qui pourra un jour raconter la nuit qui a commencé de tomber, le ciel tourmenté, violet, gris et rouge, la fumée qui monte bien droite vers le firmament, cette odeur âcre et en même temps sucrée qui nous rentre par la bouche, par le nez? Non, je ne crois pas que l'on puisse décrire jamais cette odeur infernale<sup>78</sup>.

Similarly, Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, after preceding her articulation of the initial contact with the camp with the assertion that “L'impression que l'on ressent à cette minute-là est inexprimable en paroles”<sup>79</sup>, goes on to advance a description of this impression:

[...] la peur me coupait les jambes. Elle n'était fondée que sur une impression, une ambiance, une atmosphère. De partout suintait une odeur de mort et d'effroi. La

<sup>76</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Mesure de nos jours* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1971), pp60-62

<sup>77</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, p.49

<sup>78</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d'être née*, p.57

<sup>79</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.129

lourde chaleur de cette journée d'été, la poussière dont nous étions couvertes, la fatigue, la faim, tout cela nous donnait l'impression de vivre un cauchemar terrifiant dont on ne peut se réveiller<sup>80</sup>.

Simone Alizon uses the interrogative formula ("Que dire de l'intense sentiment de fragilité, de vulnérabilité, éprouvé par tous ceux qui ont vécu une telle dégradation de leur être, si totale, si rapide, si brutale"<sup>81</sup>), as does Françoise Maous prior to formulating a comparative description:

Comment décrire l'affolement animal de ce troupeau de femmes, ces ordres incompréhensibles [...] Mais comment nous décrire, puisque personne n'a jamais vu ni ne verra jamais ce que peuvent devenir des femmes réduites à cet état. Très vite, nous avons été un peu semblables à de misérables poupées de son, bon marché, sur lesquelles se serait acharnée une petite fille cruelle<sup>82</sup>.

Paradoxically, even those women who elsewhere imply the relative ease of the testimonial process (such as Toulouse-Lautrec and Maous with their respective assertions that "[...] ce livre a jailli spontanément de mon coeur"<sup>83</sup> and the apparently effortless "[...] j'ai écrit, écrit, écrit"<sup>84</sup>), engage in such textual manifestation of the interstice between language and reality.

The effects of such an approach are multifarious. The questioning of how to articulate the experience drives a disjunctive wedge between the narrative and the experience it recounts, rendering their relation no longer seamless and unified, and thus rupturing the principle of the text as unequivocal reality. Rather, it is replaced by the conception of text as representation, as a mere attempt at description which cannot aspire to be more than approximative and is certainly not wholly adequate. The awareness of a distinct fissure between testimonial language and reality thus renders the camp experience partially inaccessible to the reader, who is maintained at a certain distance and rendered cognisant of the essentially impenetrable nature of that which is being communicated. While Claude Olienvenstein would cite the survivor's principal linguistic issue as attempting to distance and externalize that which is too horrific to be accorded external voice

([...] le langage se condamne à être impuissant parce qu'il organise la mise à distance de ce qui ne peut pas se mettre à distance. C'est là qu'intervient en toute-puissance le discours intérieur, le compromis du non-dit entre ce que le sujet s'avoue lui-même et ce qu'il peut transmettre à l'extérieur<sup>85</sup>),

the reader's difficulty within this testimonial approach is quite the reverse: how to internalize and assimilate that which the guarded mode of language maintains at a perpetual distance. At the same time, this rupture also momentarily distances the author from her own text, removing her from an immersed position within the narrative as protagonist to the role of writer struggling for words. This self-distancing, in a similar vein to the questioning of personal memory, acts to subtly underscore the authenticity of her narrative — in rendering explicit her struggle as a writer to engage a language of accuracy, she reiterates the irrefutably factual nature of her text.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, p.129

<sup>81</sup> Simone Alizon, *L'exercice de vivre*, p.116

<sup>82</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.40

<sup>83</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.9

<sup>84</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.23

<sup>85</sup> Claude Olienvenstein, *Le non-dit des émotions* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1988), p.57

Moreover, the wider emphasis on the survivor's inability to wield language with any real exactitude in relation to the camp experience also destabilizes further aspects of the relationship between reader and text. For doubt must therefore be cast upon the degree to which the language mobilized by the narrator is a reliable textual indicator, and what weight or interpretive value we as readers may confidently attribute to it — a qualm which may colour our entire reading of the testimonial genre. If, for instance, as we noted in the previous chapter, Levi terms his friendship with Alberto an “alliance” while a female author elects a more emotive term to denote a close relationship, can this be read as evidence of the comparatively more practical basis of Levi's camp interaction, or is it simply a linguistic discrepancy, caused by the inherent imprecision of language relating any element of camp life? And if it is merely a linguistic quirk, does it not in part undermine our conclusion of the more practical testimonial presentation of male inter-relation in the camps? The effect of this linguistic ambivalence on our conclusions regarding any element of female experience may thus be far from negligible. Ultimately, however, one must return to the *implicit* faith in language inherent in the act of testimony, for the presumption that all testimonial language is inadequate can only result in a final nullification of the testimony as valid source.

Beyond the difficulties of according linguistic form to the camp reality, these writers are also presented with the more specific problem of conveying the linguistic alienation which dominated the camp experience of French women and which was particularly significant in imparting a sense of impenetrable otherness to the universe in which they found themselves. French women experienced the concentration camp in a language which was essentially foreign to them on a multitude of levels. Firstly, as we have previously noted, German was the official universal camp language. Without a knowledge of German, the negotiation of the camp was in many ways closed to a foreign inmate — not only was she precluded from penetrating many of the privileged positions enhancing her prospects of survival (for which a command of German was often a prerequisite), but she was infinitely more likely to shoulder punishment, be it from the SS or the collaborative prisoner elite, as a result of incomprehension of orders. Secondly, the camp-spawned language with its particular terms and significations constituted a veritable foreign dialect in itself, albeit one which most French women, out of sheer necessity, quickly mastered. Basic terminology such as *Revier*, *Blockova*, *Blocksperrre*, *Selektion* were highly specific to the camp environment, and could not simply be translated in literal terms, pregnant as they were with a wealth of more weighty and sinister implications. Alain Parrau also notes that language was rendered foreign to the prisoner population as a whole due to the destruction of the faculty of speech under the effects of cold, hunger and illness, and the couching of communication in the guise of orders which dispossessed inmates of their ability to respond: “[...] on ne s'adresse pas au détenu en attendant de lui une *réponse*, mais *l'exécution* de

l'ordre. La 'communication' ainsi instituée est bien celle de l'homme avec l'animal"<sup>86</sup>. Consequently, prisoners were compelled to relinquish many of the concepts and significations upon which their former communication was built, in the substitution of the familiar for the unfamiliar which Stephanos Rozanis elucidates:

Le détenu doit apprendre à encombrer sa mémoire de sons atroces et dénués de sens, de visages sans noms, de mots sans fonctions [...] Il doit aussi perdre le souvenir de son ancien langage parce que celui-ci exprime quelque chose qui ne peut l'aider à survivre. Des mots comme 'pays' et 'culture', 'passé' et 'avenir', 'amour' et 'haine' sont vagues, ils ne signifient rien, ce ne sont que des sons<sup>87</sup>.

And finally, Lawrence Langer's assertion that language in the camps was essentially rendered foreign to inmates by the inversion of normal meanings further consolidates the otherness of the camp linguistic experience:

Inversions cancel meaning here [...] Liberators 'oppressed' by compassion; victims shamed by the crimes they witnessed, but did not commit; the innocent feeling guilty, the criminal unashamed; but most of all, the visible failure of good to carry out its historic mission of unmasking and overwhelming evil — such inversions discredit the traditional power of language and the meaning it is accustomed to serve<sup>88</sup>.

Langer is speaking here in somewhat abstract terms, but the inversion of significations occurred at the most basic, concrete level of camp existence too — food was ultimately intended not to nourish the prisoner, but to gradually starve her, work was no longer performed for reward or often even a valid objective, singing and music (often compulsory at various camp junctures such as the march to work) forfeited their roles as expressions of joy or harmony to become elements of oppression, appearance no longer equated to mere superficiality but the exact inverse as the frequent harbinger of life or death in the context of selection or interaction with the SS, doctors were often cast in the role of terminating rather than prolonging life and so on.

In attempting to translate her camp reality, experienced in such a plurally foreign linguistic milieu, into the testimonial realm, the French author's most logical approach might be to enlist the register of camp language — violent, shocking and dominated by slang, foreign lexis and animal terminology. Given that such a use of language would be deemed inappropriate for contemporary receivability, however, most of the women authors under study create a hybrid of normal and camp language. Within this linguistic synthesis terms such as *Blockova* and *Revier* remain untranslated, along with the most common elements of camp lexis. The verb *organiser*, with its peculiar and highly particular nuances (whereby stealing from a fellow prisoner constitutes theft while stealing from the SS equates to a demonstration of commendable survival skills), constitutes one such example, for it has no readily translatable equivalent. Most of these writers also retain the original German when depicting the unfamiliar, abrasive sounds of SS orders. Such a testimonial conjoining of language — which is at once of the normal

<sup>86</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, p.189

<sup>87</sup> Stephanos Rozanis, 'Écriture et silence dans les camps de concentration' in *Créer pour survivre*, p.80

<sup>88</sup> Lawrence Langer, 'The Literature of Auschwitz' in Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (eds), *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, p.606

world and other to it — therefore goes some way toward conveying the particular otherness of the camp experience for French women.

It is also interesting to note that many of these women respond to the difficulty of testimonial writing and the problems inherent in the translation of experience into literature by asserting their lack of literary pretensions. In numerous instances, the survivor emphasizes that her narrative may be read only as a testimony of fact, establishing its literary value as insignificant, if not nonexistent. Simone Saint-Clair asserts that the notes which form her testimony “[...] n’auront que le triste mérite — hélas — d’être vraies”<sup>89</sup>, while Suzanne Wilborts adopts a comparable attitude to her testimony: “Ces quelques souvenirs n’ont qu’un mérite: c’est d’avoir été vécus”<sup>90</sup>. Often this refusal of the literary genre takes the form of an apology, as exemplified by Renée Jolivot:

Ces lignes ne veulent pas être un reportage, seulement un témoignage de ce que fut la vie héroïque, dirai-je, oui, sans grands mots, simplement, comme elle fut, de beaucoup de Français ou de Françaises, qui s’efforcèrent de vivre et de mourir pour l’amour de la Liberté, de toutes les Libertés. Alors j’écris, simplement, comme je sais, comme j’ai vu, comme j’ai senti. Je ne suis pas journaliste, ni écrivain. Que l’on m’excuse<sup>91</sup>.

Evidently, such a distancing of the testimony from any literary genre may, as Alain Parrau and others have noted, stem from an authorial desire to dissociate the testimony from the implications of artifice and fictional bias implicit in the concept of literature, and thus to reassert, by opposition, the primacy of their factual status. To this end, Jan de Volder’s comments on Italian testimonial literature are equally apposite with regard to French female testimonies:

Il s’agit ici d’une constante dans la manière dont les auteurs conçoivent leur propre écriture. Pour eux, dans la majorité des cas, il ne s’agit pas de littérature, pas d’une oeuvre d’art. C’est que leur texte ne satisfait pas à deux des conditions qui sont généralement perçues comme des critères de base de ‘littérarité d’un texte écrit’: à savoir le caractère fictionnel du texte et une certaine stylisation du langage [...] on pourrait parler dans plusieurs cas d’une certaine horreur des aspects littéraires, comme si la ‘littérarité’ venait à nuire à la crédibilité du message, ou à compromettre le processus de communication avec le lecteur<sup>92</sup>.

Théodor Adorno develops this idea further: “Lorsqu’on parle des choses extrêmes, de la mort atroce, on éprouve une sorte de honte à l’égard de la forme, comme si celle-ci faisait outrage à la souffrance en la réduisant impitoyablement à l’état d’un matériau mis à sa disposition”<sup>93</sup>. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec is illustrative of the subscription of many French female testimonial writers to this general reticence, attesting that “je ne veux pas écrire un livre” but instead, and presumably in opposition to such a literary or fictional objective, advancing the image of the narrative self as painter to suggest artistic directness based upon the factual premise of personal observation:

<sup>89</sup> Simone Saint-Clair, *Ravensbrück — l’enfer des femmes*, p.14

<sup>90</sup> Suzanne Wilborts, *Pour la France*, p.15

<sup>91</sup> Renée Jolivot, ‘Mes prisons, le récit d’une Française au grand coeur’ in *Le progrès*, 12 Sep 1945, p.5

<sup>92</sup> Jan de Volder, ‘L’art de la mémoire: notes sur Primo Levi et l’ensemble de la “littérature” concentrationnaire’ en Italie’ in *Créer pour survivre*, pp61-62

<sup>93</sup> Théodor Adorno, *Modèles critiques* (Paris: Payot, 1984), p.135

Ce que je veux, c'est prendre un pinceau, une palette et y jeter quelques couleurs et vous qui regarderez ces couleurs, vous sentirez alors en vous toute la souffrance, les désespoirs et les espoirs de vos soeurs qui ont franchi le Pont de Kehl. Je veux vous faire pénétrer l'atmosphère d'un tableau que j'ai non seulement vu mais vécu, et je m'engage à ne citer que des observations faites par moi seule<sup>94</sup>.

The common authorial rejection of all things literary is evidently not, however, necessarily the definitive solution to the issue of sourcing language and form to convey the camp reality. For a literary bent by no means precludes a testimony from validity. Charlotte Delbo is a prime example, with the poetry element of her testimony, in particular, firmly inscribed in the literary tradition and yet serving as an excellent means of portraying her experience within her testimonial context. Even those writers who deviate into the realm of the novel, such as Krystyna Zywulska, often produce a document of indubitable testimonial value. The authenticity or value of any French female testimony therefore cannot be appraised purely against the criteria of its "non-literary" approach, as Jan de Volder points out with the assertion that the novelized and the documentary must be regarded not as antithetical, but as points on a single continuum:

Témoignage pur n'égalé donc absence de 'littérarité', tout comme la forme romanesque n'implique pas, a priori, l'inaptitude du texte à être reçu comme témoignage ou source historique. Dans les témoignages des rescapés des camps nazis, il y a donc interférence entre les niveaux documentaire et littéraire<sup>95</sup>.

Indeed, Élisabeth Will concludes her testimony on Ravensbrück with the categorical assertion that a degree of literary artifice is in fact desirable if survivors are ever to truly convey to the public the real emotional and affective experience of the concentration camp, rather than merely its bare factual silhouette:

Les lignes qu'on vient de lire ne sont qu'une simple énumération de faits, scrupuleusement conformes à la vérité. Cependant, leur pouvoir d'évocation reste imparfait. Car ce témoignage, dans son objectivité sèche, retrace simplement l'enchaînement des coups du sort, tels qu'ils sont venus nous frapper [...] En somme, pour la rendre pleinement accessible au profane, il faudrait réécrire cette histoire, mais vu du dedans de ceux qui l'ont subie. Quand je me la remémore après trente-six mois de vie normale, elle me fait l'effet d'un rêve monstrueux. Or un travail d'historien, impartial, clair et précis comme il doit l'être, n'épuisera jamais la densité, l'angoisse, les nuances d'horreur d'un mauvais rêve. C'est au romancier qu'il faudrait faire appel pour orchestrer le schéma de tragédie, pour faire des coupes en profondeur qui mettraient le lecteur, ne fût-ce que pour un instant, dans cette ambiance de fatigue, d'oppression et de crainte, dans ce jeu alterné de la lassitude, du dégoût et de l'attachement forcé à la vie. Le tableau serait peut-être plus diffus, mais aussi plus véridique ; moins complet, mais tellement plus émouvant. Seul un récit qui serait une oeuvre d'art saurait restituer, dans son évocation ramassée et poignante, ce que fut véritablement notre existence en enfer<sup>96</sup>.

<sup>94</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.15

<sup>95</sup> Jan de Volder, 'L'art de la mémoire: notes sur Primo Levi et l'ensemble de la "littérature" concentrationnaire" en Italie' in *Créer pour survivre*, p.62

<sup>96</sup> Élisabeth Will, 'Ravensbrück et ses kommandos' in *De l'université aux camps de concentration. Témoignages strasbourgeois*, pp381-382. Jorge Semprun's comments are very similar: "Un doute me vient sur la possibilité de raconter. Non pas que l'expérience vécue soit indicible. Elle a été invivable, ce qui est tout autre chose [...] Autre chose qui ne concerne pas la forme d'un récit possible, mais sa substance. Non pas son articulation, mais sa densité. Ne parviendront à cette substance, à cette densité transparente que ceux qui sauront faire de leur témoignage un objet artistique, un espace de création. Ou de récréation. Seul l'artifice d'un récit maîtrisé

Any such identification by French women of the necessity of skillful literary manipulation in order to fully transport the reader into the camp reality, however, must inevitably further problematize the testimonial process for those inexperienced at deploying the techniques of the novel genre.

Whatever the rationale, then, underlying the common “non-literary” stance (be it to underscore the non-fictional nature of the narrative, a direct result of a given author’s lack of literary experience or a response to the perceived inadequacy of language which leads the author to forfeit complex stylistic manipulation in favour of a reliance upon simplicity and directness to approximate her experience) the result is the common deployment of a simple, unembellished testimonial style. Extensive dialogue is rare (Fenelon and Toulouse-Lautrec are exceptions), the language used is largely concrete and, although some basic imagery, similes and metaphorical devices are used by these writers (the widespread equation of the camps to Dante’s inferno being the most notable), the lack of ready comparisons for such an experience means they remain highly limited. Jean Améry’s discourse on comparative language is certainly relevant with regard to the minimal utilisation of such techniques in female narratives:

It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it ‘like a red-hot iron in my shoulders’, and was another ‘like a dull wooden stake that had been driven into the back of my head’? One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself<sup>97</sup>.

Améry’s rejection of descriptive imagery as essentially redundant in attempting to articulate his physical pain might well be said to parallel the testimonial writer’s skirting of it for the very same reason — its ultimate inability to convey her camp reality. Overt imagery is therefore often shunned in these testimonies in favour of more subtle transitional linguistic movements which detail the writer’s psychological evolution or shifts in sensibility, such as Nadine Heftler’s replacement of her early horrified descriptions of the unappealing spectacle of naked women with a matter of fact, anaesthetised depiction of the nude corpses in later evocations<sup>98</sup>. The resultant direct, relatively simple style manifested in these narratives thus constitutes the type of style which is generally linked to the testimonial process and its presumed documentary objective. Indeed, those authors who deviate from such a direct style — such as Gisella Perl with her highly dramatic, emotive narrative approach — tend to convey a somewhat diminished sense of authenticity as a result.

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parviendra à transmettre partiellement la vérité du témoignage”. See Jorge Semprun, *L’écriture ou la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p.23.

<sup>97</sup> Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits* (London: Granta Books, 1999), p.33

<sup>98</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet in Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t’en sors*, p.viii



The adoption of an authorial perspective or point of view within the testimony is, however, rather more complex. Philippe Chardin explains the dilemma confronting the testimonial writer in this regard:

À quelle distance l'auteur-narrateur doit-il se tenir par rapport aux aspects les plus concrets, les plus douloureux et les plus sordides de cette réalité? Une trop grande proximité comme une trop grande distance présentent des inconvénients dans la perspective de livres comme ceux de Primo Levi qui se proposent à la fois de montrer et de faire comprendre. Dans un cas, on risquera de ne donner à voir de cette réalité que ce qu'en percevaient les détenus; or Primo Levi souligne bien à quel point leur champ de vision était effroyablement restreint dans l'espace (aux limites du camp dont beaucoup ne savaient même pas où il se trouvait en Europe) et dans le temps (le plus souvent à un possible espoir de survie de quelques jours ou de quelques semaines). Dans l'autre cas, on risquera d'escamoter, par une démarche trop synthétique et trop purement conceptuelle, ce qui constituait l'essentiel de la souffrance et de la cruauté dans ces camps<sup>99</sup>.

Such a difficulty — the necessity of delineating the horror of camp reality from both a personal perspective and from a viewpoint which affords some wider “neutral” explanation of the camp system — finds various responses from the testimonies within our corpus which range between two polarized extremes: an approach characterized by distance and omniscience to elucidate and analyse the wider mechanisms of the camp complex, and a testimonial immersion in which the protagonist repositions herself wholly inside the narrative to recreate her limited personal viewpoint. Germaine Tillion, with her detailed historical/testimonial synthesis on Ravensbrück, is the most pronounced example of the former tendency, whilst Charlotte Delbo is all but unique amongst these authors in her antithetical non-utilisation of distanced perspective. Although Delbo occasionally employs the third person to describe camp experiences in general (notably the arrival scene in *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*), she consistently refrains from adopting a wider analytical view, remaining entirely faithful to in-camp experience with her re-assumption of the ground level perspective which dominated her camp existence. While she alludes to her lack of knowledge or understanding of the camp workings or rationale, Delbo makes no attempt to redress such deficiencies from a post-camp vantage point which would be extraneous to her experience. The detailed description of the feet in front of her during the march to work provides perhaps the best example of this concertedly immersed perspective, confined as it is to a focus upon her own vision and experience, and determinedly closed off from the wider landscape and the more comprehensive reality which it represents:

Nous ne sommes attentives qu'à nos pieds. De marcher en rangs crée une sorte d'obsession. On regarde toujours les pieds qui vont devant soi. Vous avez ces pieds qui avancent, pesamment, avancent devant vous, ces pieds que vous évitez et que vous ne rattrapez jamais, ces pieds qui précèdent toujours les vôtres, toujours même la nuit dans un cauchemar de piétinement, ces pieds qui vous fascinent à tel point que vous les verriez encore si vous étiez au premier rang, ces pieds qui traînent ou qui butent, qui avancent. Qui avancent avec leur bruit inégal, leur pas déréglé. Et si vous êtes derrière une qui est pieds nus parce qu'on lui a volé ses chaussures, ces pieds qui vont nus dans le verglas ou la boue, ces pieds nus — nus dans la neige, ces pieds torturés

<sup>99</sup> Philippe Chardin, 'Analyse et narration de "l'événement inouï" — les pouvoirs respectifs de l'essai, de l'autobiographie et de la nouvelle dans l'oeuvre de Primo Levi' in *Créer pour survivre*, pp70-71

que vous voudriez ne plus voir, ces pieds pitoyables que vous craignez de heurter, vous tourmentent jusqu'au malaise<sup>100</sup>.

At one point, Delbo effects an abrupt withdrawal of her narration from within the camp context to state that she is presently writing the text in a café (“ Et maintenant je suis dans un café à écrire ceci”<sup>101</sup>), thereby establishing a striking contrast which serves to reiterate the predominant unity of her ground level perspective.

The majority of French female testimonies are, however, characterized by an incomplete unity of viewpoint, oscillating between the two extremes demarcated above. This type of oscillation is usually discernible both on a macrocosmic level as the author weaves her personal experience with descriptions of camp functions and generalities, and also within the more specific sphere of certain passages elucidating the major elements of her camp experience. Consider, for example, Denise Dufournier's depiction of the arrival at Ravensbrück:

Je crains qu'aucun récit ne puisse jamais exprimer le choc que la mise en scène de cette arrivée produisit sur nous. D'énormes projecteurs nous firent passer sans transition de la nuit la plus complète à une lumière aveuglante; mais cette lumière était sans doute savamment combinée afin de désorienter le plus possible nos esprits<sup>102</sup>

and shortly after:

Nous traversâmes tout le camp jusqu'au bloc 26. Le besoin d'un lit se faisait sentir, de plus en plus violent. Cette fois encore une déception nous attendait : on nous poussa à l'intérieur de cette baraque dans une seule pièce, si petite que nous fûmes obligées de rester debout, serrées les unes contre les autres. L'atmosphère était irrespirable. Les malaises commencèrent. Nous devions plus tard nous rendre compte de l'accueil privilégié qui nous avait été réservé, car les convois de *Zugegangenen*, c'est-à-dire de 'nouvelles', qui nous suivirent n'étaient jamais admis à pénétrer à l'intérieur d'un bloc avant leur incorporation définitive au camp. Ces femmes, qui parfois avaient parcouru à pied plusieurs centaines de kilomètres, devaient 'poser' par n'importe quelle température, debout, dehors, sans recevoir de nourriture, cela pendant trois ou quatre jours et trois ou quatre nuits<sup>103</sup>.

In these extracts, Dufournier is not only subsumed within the text as protagonist, but also steps back to a position of observation to place her own situation within the wider camp context, noting the use of lighting as an element of the Nazi process of dehumanization and disorientation, and providing a wider overview of the usual tactics enlisted during the arrival process. Simone Alizon's depiction of arrival at Auschwitz is characterized by a comparable synthesis of immersion and distance, interspersing the description of her personal experience with the following details of the global Nazi rationale, analysed and assimilated post-event:

C'était un scénario soigneusement mis au point par nos bourreaux. À chaque arrivée de convoi, ils durent améliorer leurs effets. Ajouter, un à un, les détails pouvant accroître l'angoisse jusqu'à son paroxysme. Cette sinistre mise en scène, destinée à provoquer une panique intense, dut être élaborée, méticuleusement, pour tenter de briser les courages et les volontés dès le premier instant. Ce que les SS craignaient

<sup>100</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, p.51

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, p.34

<sup>102</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, pp25-28

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, pp25-28

pardessus tout était que quelqu'un eût un mouvement de rébellion. Il fallait donc que tout aille vite, très vite, et dans l'affolement le plus complet possible<sup>104</sup>.

In a similar vein, Odette Améry (at Ravensbrück) at one point goes so far as to assume an omniscient perspective allowing her to describe the arrival and selection of Jews at Birkenau — a reality which she herself never witnessed<sup>105</sup>.

Such a common interplay of narrative immersion and distance is therefore testament to the authorial desire to strike a balance between personal and wider collective reality. It is also reflective of the particular tension characterizing the position of the testimonial author writing after the event, reconciling a dual perspective in which hindsight, later knowledge and the inevitable post-war overview of events are conjoined with her own in-camp hierarchically-limited perception which constitutes “[...] une expérience singulière à partir d’un point de vue lui-même dépendant d’une place déterminée dans la société concentrationnaire”<sup>106</sup>. In a broader sense, too, this synthesis may be read as a textual manifestation of Levi’s notion that the testimony of the camp survivor cannot be other than partial and incomplete. For Levi reasons that those prisoners who perished in the camps, and not the survivors, hold the exclusive title of true witnesses to the *univers concentrationnaire* :

I must repeat — we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses. We survivors are not only an exiguous but also an anomalous minority: we are those who by their prevarications or abilities or good luck did not touch bottom. Those who did so, those who saw the Gorgon, have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the ‘Muslims’, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception [...] We who were favoured by fate tried, with more or less wisdom, to recount not only our fate, but also that of the others, the submerged; but this was a discourse on ‘behalf of third parties’, the story of things seen from close by, not experienced personally<sup>107</sup>.

The authorial incorporation of a wider perspective and consequent acknowledgement of the existence of a more extensive reality than her own, which cannot be penetrated within a singularly personal discourse, thus implicitly recognises the limits and the incomplete nature of the survivor’s experience.

The choice of perspective also encompasses the further complexity of temporal perspective, or the manner in which the author elects to portray the temporal reality of her camp experience. Many authors, among them Sonia Apelgot, assert that this reality was essentially characterized by stagnation and a sense of the infinity of the moment of suffering:

Et le temps, c’était une notion inconnue. Les heures paraissaient immenses. L’heure de la soupe n’arrivait jamais. Celle du repas du soir non plus. Mais l’appel du matin, lui il était toujours là [...] Toujours là aussi l’appel, l’appel et les coups, les coups et la faim, la faim et les crématoires...<sup>108</sup>.

<sup>104</sup> Simone Alizon, *L’exercice de vivre*, p.111

<sup>105</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.43

<sup>106</sup> Alain Parrau, *Écrire les camps*, p.85

<sup>107</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, pp63-64

<sup>108</sup> Sonia Apelgot, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris), p.43

Maurice Voutey expands on this notion and the difficulty of conveying it within the testimonial context:

Comment revivre la monotonie des jours sans cesse recommencés, la pluie, le froid, la faim, le retour quotidien et quasi rituel des mêmes habituelles brimades, cette répétition des appels [...] Surtout lorsque s'évanouissait l'espoir d'une libération prochaine et que nous ignorions tout de l'évolution de la situation militaire. La monotonie des jours ordinaires où il ne se passait rien, où nous n'étions pas plus frappés qu'à l'habitude, les jours qui n'en finissaient pas, comme si le temps se fût figé...<sup>109</sup>

The non-chronological structure of Charlotte Delbo's narrative is particularly suited to the expression of such temporal immobility, its extracts forming complete and static contained entities, without the progression and sense of movement implied by chronological continuity. Her extract entitled *Le lendemain* particularly captures the concept of distilled time, evoking the heavy weight of time of a prolonged roll call with repetitive depictions of the light, ice and snow of the stark surroundings. The wider status of Delbo's text, which is largely suspended from external time and space<sup>110</sup> also augments the sense of temporal reality. Nothing exists here but the camp — an approach which is particularly successful in portraying the otherworldliness of the camp environment, divorced from outside reality and functioning as a type of *non-monde* devoid of reference points.

Other authors, however, reject such static and isolated portrayals of time. Many situate their narrative firmly within the historical context, providing specific points of commencement (such as Nadine Heftler's text which opens with the precision that "Cela se passe à Lyon. Il est 9 heures du matin, le temps est superbe, nous sommes le 13 mai 1944"<sup>111</sup>), referring throughout their texts to significant contemporary developments in the war or, in the case of those such as Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe and Simone Saint-Clair who were able to take notes within the camp, providing dates and external reference points throughout their testimony. Some of these women also conceive their internment in terms of a climactic movement, adopting the progressive basis of a chronological approach accordingly. Hence Françoise Maous: "J'ai essayé de respecter l'ordre chronologique sans lequel tout récit est impossible. Car ce que j'avais subi jour après jour était allé crescendo jusqu'au jour inespéré, impossible, de la Délivrance"<sup>112</sup>. What is particularly notable, however, is that those narratives penned by French Jewish women tend to follow a discernibly closer chronological outline within their camp experience and thus convey a greater sense of temporal progression than their "political" counterparts. While Michael Pollak attests that the more a prisoner aims to leave a testimony with general relevance or in the name of certain values (as for example with resistance authors), the more likely they are to lean toward

<sup>109</sup> Maurice Voutey, *Prisonnier de l'invraisemblable*, p.55

<sup>110</sup> Note, for instance, how Delbo commences her first narrative in non-specific time and external context: "Il y a les gens qui arrivent... Mais il est une gare où ceux-là qui arrivent sont justement ceux-là qui partent, une gare où ceux qui arrivent ne sont jamais arrivés, où ceux qui sont partis ne sont jamais revenus..." (*Aucun de nous ne reviendra*, p.5)

<sup>111</sup> Nadine Heftler, *Si tu t'en sors*, p.9

<sup>112</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz*, no A5553, p.24

the thematic rather than the chronological<sup>113</sup>, the explanation for the chronological emphasis amongst those deported for racial reasons is undoubtedly practical rather than ideological. As we have already noted, the experience of Jewish women was vicissitudinous, marked by transience and elevated movement within the camp system, and it is no doubt in detailing and chronicling their changing experiences that the narratives of these Jewish authors inevitably assume a greater chronological continuity than that of political prisoners.

Finally, concurrent with the testimonial problems relating to language and perspective are the issues surrounding the fundamental, underlying concepts of authenticity and veracity. Within camp literature as a whole, there exist narratives in which the survivor takes licence with his or her own experience in order to convey a wider camp reality than that personally experienced. The symbolic incorporation of the gas chamber into the narrative is perhaps the most common manifestation, as Geneviève Decrop notes:

La chambre à gaz, déjà au temps des camps, mais surtout après la libération, est devenue le symbole par excellence de la barbarie nazie. Quand on a le sentiment de n'avoir pas de mots pour décrire ce que l'on a vécu, dire qu'on était dans un camp d'extermination dotée d'une chambre à gaz permet de signifier le caractère extrême de l'expérience vécue par une image qui fait immédiatement sens. Aussi, dans de nombreux témoignages, écrits ou oraux, on a vu apparaître des chambres à gaz dans des camps où il fut établi, par les recherches ultérieures, qu'il n'y en avait pas eu. Ainsi se constitue une sorte de mythologie de l'histoire concentrationnaire, qui met à la disposition des survivants une symbolique précieuse, étant donné l'extraordinaire difficulté de ce dont ils ont à témoigner<sup>114</sup>.

Although very rare in the French female testimonies under study, a comparable trend would appear to be operative in Krystyna Zywulska's novelized testimony, in which Zywulska describes seeing an SS man mount a ladder and dispense gas into the gas chamber in view of several prisoners<sup>115</sup> — a highly unlikely occurrence given the secrecy surrounding such operations. This practice of introducing “generic” elements of camp reality into individual memories has resulted in the levelling of criticisms of inauthenticity against certain narratives. Undoubtedly, many French female testimonial authors were aware of such criticisms, as well as the potential for the extreme nature of their subject matter to be dismissed as untrue or exaggerated. Their consciousness of the issue of authenticity is evidenced by the common authorial preoccupation with inscribing the narrative within the parameters of factual testimony (“Ces quelques souvenirs n'ont qu'un mérite: c'est d'avoir été vécu”<sup>116</sup>). Many also further overtly prioritise the concept of authenticity, by taking care to posit their testimony as a narrative demarcated primarily by eyewitness and thus free of conjecture. Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec is representative: “Je veux vous faire pénétrer l'atmosphère d'un tableau que j'ai non seulement

<sup>113</sup> Michael Pollak, *L'expérience concentrationnaire*, p.232

<sup>114</sup> Geneviève Decrop, *Des camps au génocide: la politique de l'impensable* (Grenoble: Presses Universitaires de Grenoble, 1995), pp208-209

<sup>115</sup> Krystyna Zywulska, *J'ai survécu à Auschwitz*, p.174

<sup>116</sup> Suzanne Wilborts, *Pour la France*, p.15

vu mais vécu, et je m'engage à ne citer que des observations faites par moi seule"<sup>117</sup>. Charlotte Delbo, although completely different from Toulouse-Lautrec in testimonial style, also observes the implicit rules of testimony, rendering explicit the distinction between that which she witnessed personally and the experience of others. Hence the story of Lily which Delbo did not observe in its entirety is qualified by the statement that "C'est un des hommes qui travaillaient à la *Politische* qui nous l'a dit"<sup>118</sup>.

It is in analysing the female author's attempts to establish an authentic portrayal of the self in interaction with camp reality, however, that the authorial struggle with authenticity becomes apparent. While we have already documented the widespread externalization of moral compromise which most of these authors effect on the wider level of collaboration with their captors in the realm of the grey zone, they must also find some way of conveying the compromises which inevitably demarcated their own behaviour on a day to day level within a harsh and aberrant world — stealing for survival, battling for space and resources, the inevitable, imposed inaction toward the suffering of others. The responses of many of our authors to such issues reveal their common awareness of the difficulties inherent in this sphere, namely the necessity of portraying the veracity of their experience and actions, and of maintaining a conceptualization of self and morality which will not alienate the reader. For the most part, then, those authors who render such compromises visible again assume a distance from their own behaviour, in a variety of ways. Most common is the phenomenon of doubling of the self. Bruno Bettelheim expressed the idea of the self as being composed of two entities ("[...] the split between the inner self that might be able to retain its integrity and the rest of the personality that would have to submit and adjust for survival"<sup>119</sup>), and many of these authors carry this duality into their testimonies, distinguishing between the camp self (whose actions may not be exemplary) and the real or writing self. Françoise Maous, for example, in describing her refusal to share the food she managed to source with the sick occupants of her block who were unable to procure their own, asserts that "Je ne suis pas fière de la femme que j'ai été dans ces moments-là, rien ne rend plus méchant que la vraie souffrance"<sup>120</sup>. The woman she was in the camp is thus established as distinctly other to her authorial self. Charlotte Delbo's depiction of her present self writing her testimony in a café also serves not only to highlight the incongruity between her present and her camp situation, but also to establish a doubling of the self in which the camp identity is rendered inherently other, a technique also employed by Odette Améry<sup>121</sup>. Others describe their own bestial instincts in a collective register which effectively distances themselves from it. Sonia Apelgot is representative with her substitution of the pronoun "on" for what is essentially an evocation of her personal responses:

<sup>117</sup> Béatrix de Toulouse-Lautrec, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück*, p.15

<sup>118</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, p.78

<sup>119</sup> Bruno Bettelheim, *The Informed Heart*, p.127

<sup>120</sup> Françoise Maous, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, p.161

<sup>121</sup> Odette Améry and G. Martin-Champier, *Nuit et brouillard*, p.54

Cette autre sensation, je ne l'ai pas non plus oubliée [...] Il arrivait fréquemment qu'on vous vole votre pain. Il arrivait souvent qu'on soit privée de soupe pendant une journée. Et le lendemain lorsqu'arrivait la soupe [...] alors on ressentait aussi une impression étrange inoubliable. On se sent devenir féroce, cruelle, bestiale. On voudrait se jeter sur les tonneaux, plonger sa tête dans la soupe pour l'avaler. On se sent capable de manger cinquante litres en un seconde, tant on a faim...<sup>122</sup>.

Nevertheless it is those authors who make such a discernible effort to situate the self — even indirectly — within the blurred morality of the camp, to portray a rounded image of their responses to the camp milieu and to establish an open, transparent approach to the problems of testimonial writing who furnish the testimonies which are the most revealing and arguably the most authentic. For, as Dominick Lacapra notes, authenticity is not solely established by meticulous facticity (“[...] the very concept of ‘authenticity’ is of questionable usefulness, particularly when it is employed as a misleading synonym for accurate reconstruction”<sup>123</sup>), but also through conveying a veracious wider sense of camp reality. And to this end, it is the very problematic nature of many of these French female testimonies and the consequent sense of authorial struggle and narrative tension that they encapsulate which is equally significant as an indicator of authenticity, intimating as it does the alien nature of the camp experience, the unease surrounding it and the fundamental difficulty of reconciling it within any normal parameters.

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<sup>122</sup> Sonia Apelgot, (unpublished testimony), p.43

<sup>123</sup> Dominick Lacapra, *Representing the Holocaust — History, Theory, Trauma*, p.63





## Conclusion

“*Pour moi  
je suis encore là-bas  
et je meurs  
là-bas*”<sup>1</sup>

At its inception, this thesis posited as its primary objective the delineation of a comprehensive portrait of French female testimonial literature. Such a portrait cannot, however, be deemed to be fully realized without some reference to the conclusions of these narratives — conclusions which are in themselves highly significant in bringing into focus some of the broad patterns inherent in our wider analysis.

A very few of the testimonies within the corpus under study manifest a narrative conclusion in the true sense of the word; namely an ending, a *point final*, a finite resolution which intimates that the authorial odyssey has reached its terminus. In such — relatively rare — instances, the narrative is concluded with a positive and definitive image of liberation, evoking the acquisition of freedom or the elation of homecoming. The suggestion is, overwhelmingly, one of implicit resolution — the longed-for end to the suffering of the author and her *camarades*. Fania Fenelon effects just such a resolution, closing her testimony with a scene in which Fenelon and her friends leave the liberated camp to sit in a nearby meadow and savour this simple act of freedom: “Alors, nous nous redressons et, assises, nous commençons à regarder la vie! C’est, pour chacune d’entre nous, comme une nouvelle naissance! [...] Nous nous sentons légères, légères... jeunes, si jeunes... Nous sommes sauvées”<sup>2</sup>. This ultimate declaration of salvation as the final sentence of Fenelon’s text unambiguously closes the chapter of her camp experience. Suzanne Wilborts’ evocation of her re-embarkation upon French soil, with its suggestion of triumphant effacement of the suffering experienced within the camps, is similarly conclusive: “Cette somme de souffrances inouïes est oubliée. Tout est effacé. La France est là, la France est retrouvée libre, le reste n’est rien [...] Ce serait à recommencer demain on le ferait de nouveau. Car pour toi rien n’est trop beau, France, mon pays!”<sup>3</sup>. In thus definitively concluding the narrative, Wilborts, like Fenelon, accords her personal camp reality a somewhat parenthetical aspect. The camp experience is perfectly enclosed within the confines of the text, therefore constituting a seemingly finite interlude within the writer’s life, which is — to all appearances — concluded with the termination of the narrative.

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Une connaissance inutile*, p.183

<sup>2</sup> Fania Fenelon, *Sursis pour l’orchestre*, pp392-393

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Wilborts, *Pour la France*, p.145

Such neatly finite narratives remain, however, firmly in the minority. By contrast, the vast majority of French female testimonies exhibit a real sense of irresolution, whereby the author's joy at her liberation and homecoming — whilst certainly present — is undermined and tempered by the overwhelming difficulties of reintegration into post-camp life. Indeed, most of these writers follow the portrayal of their liberation with a final extract or epilogue depicting their ongoing sense of dislocation, disorientation and alienation within normal society. Far from forging a circular narrative structure in which their despairing departure from France is paralleled by a triumphant return, these authors therefore effect an open-ended testimonial conceptualization in which the camp experience remains continuous and essentially unresolved.

Within such narratives, then, the final portion of the text commonly situates the survivor in a veritable state of limbo, at once returned to normal society and irrevocably estranged from it by the conviction that a part of her remains inextricably trapped within the camp experience. Sometimes the presence of the camp is portrayed as tangible, assuming a physical guise as the survivor struggles with the corporeal legacy of malnutrition, illness or medical experiments. Eva Tichauer, for instance, attests that “Les trente-quatre mois de malheur, de douleur, de terreur ont laissé des traces plus profondes et secrètes que le numéro tatoué. Je n’ai pas pu avoir d’enfants”<sup>4</sup>, whilst Estréa Zaharia Asséo also emphasizes the non-finite nature of the physical ordeal: “Toutes les maladies auxquelles j’avais échappé dans les camps se manifestèrent sournoisement: jambes enflées, estomac serré, angines répétées, douleurs aux membres, vertiges, insomnies...”<sup>5</sup>. More focal in these final extracts, however, is the ongoing psychological reign of the camp experience, with the survivor remaining susceptible to a plethora of phobias, nightmares and generalized anxiety. Simone Lagrange places significant emphasis upon the impossibility of ever mentally leaving the camp:

Longtemps, bien longtemps après mon retour, je me réveillerai ainsi en hurlant, revoyant des scènes terrifiantes. Je réalise que je ne pourrai jamais me remettre totalement de ma déportation, que je suis marquée par elle pour toujours, dans ma tête surtout, avec plus de force encore que par le matricule tatoué sur mon bras!<sup>6</sup>.

And indeed, so strong is her sense of the continuity of the camp experience that she conceives it as similarly dominant within the lives of the second generation: “En effet, les enfants de déportés sont eux aussi les victimes de la persécution subie par leurs parents. Leurs souffrances ne sont pas près de s’effacer. Les Nazis ont fait d’une pierre deux coups...”<sup>7</sup>.

Invariably, too, the French female writer's final words dwell upon the sense of societal dislocation engendered by this inability to banish the camp from her personal consciousness. For many, the all-consuming reality of the camp is portrayed struggling for supremacy with their post-camp surroundings, thereby creating an internal conflict which does little to facilitate their

<sup>4</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J’étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, p.170

<sup>5</sup> Estréa Zaharia Asséo, *Les souvenirs d’une rescapée*, p.124

<sup>6</sup> Simone Lagrange, *Coupable d’être née*, p.157

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.186

societal passage. Denise Dufournier, for example, testifies to a veritable psychological cleavage of the self:

Il y a désormais, en nous, deux 'moi', le 'moi' d'avant identique à celui d' 'après', et puis un autre être indéfinissable, indescriptible, aux réactions incommunicables. Il vit dans une sorte de royaume souterrain, et lorsqu'il apparaît à la surface, il entre inévitablement en conflit avec le 'moi' de la terre, le 'moi' familial, mondain<sup>8</sup>.

Indeed, the survivor's sense of the bipartite nature of her own reality can infuse every aspect of her life, dictating her perceptions and responses. Hence Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne notes her utter inability to take pleasure in normal tasks and situations "[...] car, dans chacun de ces instants de la vie quotidienne se formait désormais un lien, un rapport de continuité, une sorte de liaison subjective avec la vie du camp"<sup>9</sup>. And, unsurprisingly, this all-pervasive duality of consciousness inevitably impacts upon the survivor's social interaction. These authors expound at some length upon the impossibility of conveying their experience of camp life to others, or indeed of establishing any sort of real or meaningful dialogue with those uninitiated in the realities of the *Lager*. This frustrated communication is presented not only as a product of the inability of language to bridge the gap between the camps and normal society which we touched upon in Chapter Four, but also as a result of the profound difference between the survivor and others — a dissimilitude which is expressed repeatedly. "Nous ne savions pas" says Eva Tichauer, "que nous ne serions plus jamais tout à fait comme les autres. Il y a une ligne de partage invisible, impalpable qui met les revenants à part de l'humanité et crée entre eux des liens indissolubles"<sup>10</sup>. Denise Dufournier echoes Tichauer's sentiments: "Notre essence était désormais différente de la leur. Il n'y avait plus entre eux et nous une différence de degré mais une différence de nature"<sup>11</sup>. In short, therefore, the French female testimonial writer typically delineates her post-camp existence as a condition of personal fusion in which camp and non-camp meet, and it is in this fused world — this state of irresolution and duality — that her testimony concludes.

What these conclusions or epilogues may be seen to point up with relation to our broader study, then, is the wider complexity of camp literature, in which resolution is ultimately problematic and elusive. Just as these testimonies conclude in a state of irresolution or balance, in which escape from the concentration camp is non-definitive and the author's post-camp actuality remains a synthesis of past and present, so too must this ultimate lack of resolution, this inherent complexity be read as a mirror of the broader tendencies characterizing the French female testimony as a whole. For in every area of investigation, we are confronted with a sense of duality, a somewhat uneasy suspensive tension which does not allow us to settle with certainty on any definitive or categorical conclusion. The innately gender specific aspects of the French female testimony which constituted the focus of our first chapter, for example, are

<sup>8</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, p.162

<sup>9</sup> Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, p.134

<sup>10</sup> Eva Tichauer, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, pp169-70

<sup>11</sup> Denise Dufournier, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, pp156-157

simultaneously positive and negative, creating a dual image of the female prisoner as a victim of socialization and biology — thereby uniquely vulnerable to augmented physical and emotional trauma in the camp environment — and a dynamic survivor proficient at wielding her female-specific learned skills. In a similarly bifilar vein, the grey zone is at once presented as a prominent theme within these testimonies and downplayed and obscured by authorial responses to it. Whilst the abuses of the functionary system are rendered focal by the emphasis which these writers place upon their own victimization and role as witness, their concurrent externalization and positive redefinition of the grey zone with regard to French functionary prisoners to a large extent downplays the effects of structural individualism by implying the non-universal nature of its dominion and hence its incomplete success. The portrayal of solidarity and mutual aid as a dominant and positive textual force is, too, underwritten by its limited, pragmatic and often non-altruistic character which ultimately sees it assume an ambivalent role and value within the narrative. And even the very act of testimonial writing does not invite ready conclusion — the variety of narrative approaches to many of the issues inherent in testimonial writing (memory, collective recall, the development of a narrative objective) exist concurrently with the homogeneous conception of the testimonial act as ultimately problematic and the deployment of common textual strategies in answer to this conception.

Nor does the realm of gender specificity escape this essential duality. For the narratives of French female camp survivors are at once generic and gender specific. Consider, for instance, the grey zone context in which the conditions pertaining to French prisoners as a whole (isolation, national prejudices and, in the case of political prisoners, the conceptualization of a more focal inmate hierarchy) appear so pervasively within the narrative as to create an essential commonality which all but eclipses gender divergences. And yet this effectively gender-neutral aspect of the French female narrative contrasts sharply with those aspects of gender specificity indicated in our first chapter, and with the real feminization of the French female text which occurs through the extensive emphasis upon bonding, mutual aid and the collective approach to the camp environment. Certainly, it is hardly surprising that the French female writer does not produce a consistently gender-defined “female” text, for she is attempting to reconcile a number of roles, of which her status as a woman is but one — those of victim and survivor, of writer and participant, of woman and dehumanized nonentity, of helpless sufferer and resisting combatant, of a witness who desires to represent the reality of the camp and yet must also represent herself via her autobiographical portrayal. The French female narrative thus cannot be filed within a singularly genderized categorization, but rather reflects the plural realities experienced by its author.

It would appear, then, that perhaps the only conclusion possible with regard to French female testimonial literature is the redundancy of definitive conclusions — the concentration camp experience is not by nature readily consonant with absolutes. If the testimonial genre is

characterized by a series of often unresolved tensions, this does not, however, render it a lesser source. For the problematic nature of reaching conclusions on camp literature may be read as symptomatic of the highly complex nature of the concentration camp itself — an unfamiliar phenomenon so far removed from the bounds of normal experience that it thwarts neat conceptualization, a world in which absolutes of morality and definitive codes of behaviour were rendered inoperable and, like the testimonial genre, consistently nuanced.

Indeed, it is the nuanced nature of testimonial reality which may be seen to lend further weight to the significance of the testimonial genre as a whole, allowing us as to does to penetrate more deeply into the reality of the survivor, beyond the facts presented within many conventional historical studies. As the process of history works to discern patterns, to summarize and to demonstrate cause and effect, it is often inevitable that with the passing of time it also engenders a process of simplification, imposing a certain appearance of order and sequential logic upon historical phenomena. And yet, as the French diarist Léon Werth noted: “L’histoire n’est pas du tout, comme nous en avons l’illusion, une suite de tableaux d’histoire, dont les modèles ont bien posé. Elle est faite d’incohérents mélanges et d’anachronismes”<sup>12</sup>. That the corpus of French female testimonies renders this complexity visible and challenges the simplificative tendencies of historical conclusions — not only by according an undeniably personal face to history but by elucidating the multiple, often conflicting, realities of the concentration camp experience — surely testifies to its significance and to the desirability of further analysis in this field.

To this end, the testimonial genre may prove invaluable in further areas, beyond the camp experience which has been the focus of our current study. In particular, the epilogues and final extracts of these writings which we have touched upon but briefly in concluding certainly yield rich — yet often underutilised — material in the study of the immediate post-war period, articulate as they are on the theme of post-camp societal reintegration. For not only does testimonial literature furnish significant, often extensive extracts in this sphere, but Charlotte Delbo (with *Mesure de nos jours*) has devoted an entire narrative to this very theme — a narrative which is richly nuanced, and which brings together a variety of testimonial voices. Poupette, one of Delbo’s *camarades*, intimates the significance of this post-camp theme:

Qu’il nous ait fallu une volonté surhumaine pour tenir et revenir, cela tout le monde le comprend. Mais la volonté qu’il nous a fallu au retour pour revivre, personne n’en a idée [...] Rentrer, après tout serait facile. Qu’étaient les difficultés de la vie auprès de ce que nous avons enduré et surmonté? Et c’est bien là que nous nous trompons. Et c’est là que nous avons été prises au dépourvu...<sup>13</sup>.

A comprehensive study of both how these women adapted to post-camp life and how they wrote about such adaptation remains to be undertaken. How, too, do these writers’ portrayals of their

<sup>12</sup> Léon Werth, *Déposition — journal 1940-1944* (Paris: Éditions Viviane Hamy, 1992), p.288

<sup>13</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Mesure de nos jours*, p.134

post-camp experiences contrast with other testimonial literature? What factors determine their reintegration into society? Does French women's reintegration occur differently from that of women of other nationalities? Do women exhibit different reintegration strategies than men? How does the camp experience affect their outlook upon and their conception of their role in French society? The responses to these questions lie within the epilogues of these narratives, and constitute a further realm of inquiry which the testimonial voices of these women writers may aid us to explore.

## Appendix

### Testimonial Sources

The following appendix provides brief background details of the principal testimonial sources utilised within the thesis. I have confined this appendix to the French female testimonies which are the focus of the thesis, selecting those which figure most prominently. Some authors, however, (and particularly those who submitted archival testimonies) provide very few contextual details.

**Alcan, Louise, *Sans armes et sans bagages*, (Limoges: Les Imprimés d'Art, 1945).**

Louise Alcan, a Jewish prisoner, was incarcerated at Drancy and deported to Auschwitz in February 1944. Her testimony spans the abject conditions of Birkenau and the more privileged conditions of the Raïsko gardening commando, to which she was transferred in October 1944. Evacuated from Auschwitz in January 1945, Alcan was transferred to Gross-Rosen, Ravensbrück (where she was housed in the infamous tent), Malchow, Leipzig and Olchatz, before liberation by the Americans on April 27th. Her narrative was completed very early (June 1945), and was followed many decades later by a second testimony, *Le temps écartelé* (St-Jean-de-Maurienne: Imprimerie Truchet, 1982).

**Alizon, Simone, *L'exercice de vivre*, (Paris: Éditions Stock, 1996).**

In March 1942, at the age of 16, Simone Alizon was arrested on a charge of resistance, together with her sister Marie. Interned at La Santé, Fresnes, Romainville and Royallieu, she was then deported to Auschwitz in January 1943 as part of the first convoy of French female political prisoners to be deported. (This convoy of 230 women, of whom 49 returned, was in fact the only group of French female political prisoners to be deported to Auschwitz rather than Ravensbrück. Auschwitz later became a primarily Jewish destination). Alizon experienced the Birkenau camp, before securing a position in the privileged Raïsko commando. She was later transferred to Ravensbrück, where she spent eight months, and to Behndorf just prior to liberation. Her sister perished in the camps.

**Améry, Odette and Martin-Champier, Georges, *Nuit et brouillard*, (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1945).**

A journalist arrested by the Gestapo for resistance activity, Améry was held at Fresnes and deported to Ravensbrück in October 1943, in a convoy of 43 French female political prisoners. In December 1943 she was transferred with 17 others of her group to the Barth camp,

where she worked in the Heinkel factory. In February 1944, Améry was returned to Ravensbrück under the edict forbidding NN prisoners to work outside the main camps. Evacuated to Mauthausen by cattle train in March 1945, she was liberated in April by the Red Cross. Améry's testimony is co-written with Georges Martin-Champier, and appeared remarkably soon after the war, in mid 1945.

**Aylmer-Roubenne, Madeleine, *J'ai donné la vie dans un camp de la mort*, (Paris: Éditions Jean-Claude Lattès, 1997).**

Arrested for resistance, Madeleine Aylmer-Roubenne was aged 20, newly married and pregnant when she arrived at Ravensbrück in August 1944, after a brief internment at Fresnes. Her narrative is notable for its documentation of pregnancy and birth in the camp. Aylmer-Roubenne's daughter Sylvie, born at Ravensbrück in March 1945, was one of only two French babies to survive the camp. Following an unsuccessful SS search for Sylvie (who was hidden amongst the prisoners), Aylmer-Roubenne and her daughter were among the 800 women liberated by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945.

**Birnbaum, Suzanne, *Une Française juive est revenue*, (Paris: Éditions du Livre Français, 1946).**

After a brief internment at Drancy, Suzanne Birnbaum was deported as a racial prisoner to Birkenau in January 1944, at the age of 40. In November 1944 she was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, and in early 1945 to Raguhn. Evacuated to Theresienstadt in April 1945, she was liberated there and returned to France in June 1945.

**Chombart de Lauwe, Marie-Jo, *Toute une vie de résistance*, (Paris: Éditions Graphein, 1998).**

Marie-Jo Chombart de Lauwe was arrested on charges of resistance activity in May 1942, aged 18. She was imprisoned at Rennes, Angers, La Santé and Fresnes, before eventual deportation to Ravensbrück in July 1943, together with her mother who also survived the camp. Her testimony documents, among other experiences, her time as a nurse in the infants' block at Ravensbrück. Transferred towards the end of the war to Mauthausen, she was liberated there in April 1945. Her narrative, published much later, was written in 1945.

**Christophe, Francine, *Une petite fille privilégiée, une enfant dans le monde des camps 1942-1945*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996).**

Francine Christophe was 9 years old when she was arrested, together with her mother, as a racial prisoner in July 1942 and deported to Bergen-Belsen via Drancy, Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande. Christophe and her mother were accorded privileged status due to her father's status as an important prisoner of war, and were housed with other privileged inmates at Bergen-Belsen. Christophe's narrative is written from the perspective of the child she was at the time of



her deportation, and is particularly significant for its depiction of a child's experience of the concentration camps.

**Cohen, Marie-Elisa, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris).**

Marie-Elisa Cohen was deported to Auschwitz as part of the convoy of 230 French female political prisoners in January 1943. Arrested for resistance activity, she successfully concealed the fact that she was Jewish throughout her camp experience. Cohen procured a position as a chemist in the Raïsko commando, before being transferred to Ravensbrück prior to liberation.

**Delbo, Charlotte, *Auschwitz et après*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1971).**

Charlotte Delbo and her husband Georges Dudach (a resistance leader) were arrested in March 1942 for resistance activities. Dudach was executed by firing squad and Delbo was imprisoned in France until January 1943, when she joined the convoy of 230 French female political prisoners to Auschwitz. She was eventually transferred to the Raïsko satellite camp, and then to Ravensbrück in January 1944, where she was liberated by the Swedish Red Cross near the end of the war. *Auschwitz et après* is a trilogy comprised of three narratives, which have also appeared as separate volumes: *Aucun de nous ne reviendra* (written in 1946 and published in 1965), *Une connaissance inutile* (written partly in 1946 and 1947, published in 1970) and *Mesure de nos jours* (1971), which documents the return from the camps of Delbo and her compatriots and their attempts to reintegrate into society. Synthesizing prose and poetry, Delbo's narratives aim to convey the reality of the camp experience on both a thematic and stylistic level.

**Dufournier, Denise, *La maison des mortes: Ravensbrück*, (Paris: Hachette, 1945).**

Arrested for resistance activity, Denise Dufournier was interned at Fresnes and briefly at Compiègne, prior to her deportation to Ravensbrück in January 1944. Spending much of her internment as a *Verfügbar* (a casual worker who could be assigned to any job), Dufournier managed to avoid transfer and procure a permanent position in the painting commando in October 1944. She was liberated from Ravensbrück by the Red Cross in April 1945.

**Dumilieu, Anne-Marguerite, *Moi, un cobaye*, (Paris: Sefa, 1975).**

A resistance leader, Anne-Marguerite Dumilieu (or Capitaine Simone) was arrested in July 1944 and tortured by the Gestapo before being deported to Ravensbrück. There, along with four gypsy women, she was selected for pseudo-medical experiments on sterilization and microbial contamination. These experiments (administered by vaginal injection) and their after-effects as Dumilieu attempted to recover and rejoin her *camarades*, constitute the focus of her testimony. Later transferred to a small camp near Ludwigshafen, Dumilieu was then returned to Ravensbrück and transferred to Neubrandenburg before liberation in April 1945. Dumilieu was

rendered infertile by the experiments she underwent at Ravensbrück, and the four other women subjected to the procedure all perished in the camp.

**Fenelon, Fania, *Sursis pour l'orchestre*, (Paris: France Loisirs, 1976).**

Fania Fenelon, a French singer, was half Jewish and was denounced for aiding in resistance activities. She spent nine months at Drancy before being deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in January 1944, where, after a short period in quarantine, she was admitted to the female orchestra — a privileged unit which lived separately from the other prisoners, and which performed concerts for the SS and provided the accompaniment for the prisoners as they marched to work. Her narrative focuses principally on her (largely atypical) experience within this orchestra, where she was employed as both a singer and composer. Transferred to Bergen-Belsen in November 1944, she was liberated in April 1945.

**Gaulle Anthonioz, Geneviève de, *La traversée de la nuit*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).**

A member of the resistance, Geneviève de Gaulle was arrested in July 1943. Deported to Ravensbrück via Fresnes and Royallieu, de Gaulle (the niece of General de Gaulle) presents a narrative largely devoted to the months she spent in isolation at Ravensbrück, separated from her fellow prisoners in an individual cell.

**Gorce, Nelly, *Journal de Ravensbrück*, (Arles: Actes Sud, 1995).**

A mother of two young children and an active resistant, Nelly Gorce was deported to Ravensbrück at the age of 33, via Montluc and Compiègne. Gorce was liberated by the Red Cross just after Easter 1945.

**Guyon-Belot, Raymonde (Dr), *Le sel de la mine. De Lyon à Beendorf*, (Paris: Éditions France-Empire, 1990).**

Raymonde Guyon-Belot, a devout Catholic, was a 23 year old student when she was arrested along with her husband for participation in a Catholic-based resistance unit. She was interned at Montluc from March to July 1944, before deportation to Neuenbren, Ravensbrück and Beendorf, and eventual liberation in May 1945. Guyon-Belot's narrative is notable for its emphasis upon her spiritual faith and its unusual form of narration, in which she accords herself a pseudonym within the text and synthesizes a first person narrative style with descriptions of herself in the third person.

**Hautval, Adélaïde (Dr), *Médecine et crimes contre l'humanité*, (Arles: Actes Sud, 1991).**

Adélaïde Hautval was arrested for intervening when witnessing Nazi mistreatment of Jews, and deported in the convoy of 230 French political prisoners to Auschwitz in January 1943. There she worked as a doctor, and it is her experiences as a medical worker and her desire

to bear witness to the medical crimes of Nazi doctors which constitute the focus of her text. She was later transferred to Ravensbrück and liberated there in April 1945. Her narrative is based on a manuscript written in 1946, and reviewed by Hautval in 1987.

**Heftler, Nadine, *Si tu t'en sors*, (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1992).**

Jewish and aged 15, Nadine Heftler was deported to Auschwitz with her parents in June 1944, via Montluc and Drancy. Her father was exterminated on arrival, her mother succumbed to illness and was selected for the gas chamber in October 1944. Heftler's narrative is marked by considerable fluctuations and movement within the camp and includes a period spent in the camp children's block. Non-literary in style, her narrative was in fact penned soon after the war in 1946, and is notable for its rawness and sense of immediacy. Evacuated in the "death march" from Auschwitz, Heftler was liberated at the beginning of May 1945.

**Lagrange, Simone, *Coupable d'être née*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).**

Simone Lagrange was aged 13 when she was arrested with both her parents as a racial prisoner in June 1944 and deported to Auschwitz. Her mother was exterminated in August 1944, her father shot in her presence during the "death march" of January 1945. Transferred briefly to Ravensbrück and Malchow towards the end of the war, Lagrange was liberated in May 1945.

**Maous, Françoise, *Coma Auschwitz, no A5553*, (Paris: Le Comptoir, 1996).**

Françoise Maous, a French Jewish woman, was arrested and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944, together with her husband, who died in the camps. Her narrative documents the three principal phases of her incarceration (quarantine, a period in the *Revier* and labour in the *Weberei* commando). Maous was also admitted to the camp *Revier* towards the end of her camp experience and remained there at the evacuation of Auschwitz, thereby escaping the infamous "death march". She was liberated at Auschwitz with the arrival of the Russians in January 1945. Although published much later, Maous' narrative was written in 1946.

**Maurel, Micheline, *Un camp très ordinaire*, (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1957).**

Arrested for resistance, Micheline Maurel, a teacher of literature, was deported to Ravensbrück via Romainville in August 1943. After a month's quarantine she was transferred to Neubrandenburg, a small adjunct camp of Ravensbrück, where she worked in the aeroplane factory and later in the gardening commando and as a *Verfügbar*, before liberation at the end of April 1945.

**Pagniez, Yvonne, *Scènes de la vie du bagne*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1947).**

A political prisoner, Yvonne Pagniez was deported to Ravensbrück from Fresnes in August 1944, her narrative commencing with the train journey to Germany and making little mention of her pre-deportation experiences. She was later transferred to Torgau and managed to

escape during a transport — a feat which gave rise to a second narrative detailing her escape (*Evasion 44*, Rennes: Ouest-France, 1978). Written in a somewhat descriptive, often distanced style, Pagniez's narrative aims to emphasize the themes of solidarity and mutual aid.

**Richet, Jacqueline, *Trois bagnes*, (Paris: J. Ferenczi & Fils, 1945).**

Jacqueline Richet was deported from Fresnes to Ravensbrück as a political or NN prisoner in October 1943. Her testimony is presented along with those of two other family members and documents, like that of Odette Améry, her transfer to the camp of Barth and labour at the Heinkel factory. Richet and her fellow NN prisoners were later transferred back to Ravensbrück under the rules of the NN classification. Evacuated to Mauthausen near the end of the war, Richet was liberated there by the Red Cross and returned to France via Switzerland.

**Rosenberg, Liliane, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris).**

Liliane Rosenberg was 10 years old when she was deported with her family in October 1943, entering Ravensbrück with her mother and two brothers. Her brief testimony, written in 1965, focuses upon the situation of children at Ravensbrück.

**Saint-Clair, Simone, *Ravensbrück — l'enfer des femmes*, (Paris: Éditions Jules Tallandier, 1945).**

Simone Saint-Clair, a writer, was arrested as a resistant in December 1943. She was incarcerated at Fresnes and Romainville before being deported to Ravensbrück in June 1944. Her narrative is of particular interest in that it is partly based on a journal written within the camp. Saint-Clair also concludes her text with brief testimonies by other survivors (Cécile Goldet, Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier, Denise Leboucher), with the stated aim of authenticating her own testimony. Saint-Clair was liberated by the Red Cross in April 1945.

**Tichauer, Eva, *J'étais le numéro 20832 à Auschwitz*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1988).**

Jewish and originally from Berlin, Eva Tichauer's family emigrated to France and became French citizens in the 1930s. Tichauer was a medical student in Paris when she was arrested, together with her mother, in the "Vélodrome d'Hiver" raid of July 1942 and deported, via Drancy, to Auschwitz. Her narrative encompasses her experiences at Birkenau and in the more privileged environment of Raisko (where she worked as a biologist), and emphasizes the personal political evolution which saw her embrace communism in the camps. Tichauer endured the "death march" at the evacuation of Auschwitz, passing through Ravensbrück, Malchow and Leipzig before liberation in April 1945. She was the only member of her family to return to France from the camps.

**Tillion, Germaine, *Ravensbrück*, (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1988).**

Having created a resistance unit in August 1940, Germaine Tillion was arrested in August 1942, incarcerated at La Santé and Fresnes, and deported to Ravensbrück in October 1943 in the same convoy of 43 women as Odette Améry and Jacqueline Richet. Tillion's text is a synthesis of testimony and historical study, incorporating not only her personal narrative, but her extensive historical research on Ravensbrück, its mechanisms and its Nazi personnel. Much of her text is also comprised of testimonies by other prisoners and of substantial annexes documenting Nazi extermination facts and strategies. Three different versions of Tillion's Ravensbrück have appeared, in 1946, 1973 and 1988. Tillion was liberated by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945.

**Touboul, Camille, *Le plus long des chemins*, (Nice: Éditions du Losange, 1997).**

Camille Touboul was 22 years old when she was deported to Auschwitz as a racial prisoner. She remained at Auschwitz until evacuation in January 1945, when she underwent the "death march" prior to liberation.

**Toulouse-Lautrec, Béatrix de, *J'ai eu vingt ans à Ravensbrück: la victoire en pleurant*, (Paris: Perrin, 1991).**

Arrested together with her mother for resistance in June 1944, Toulouse-Lautrec was initially interned at Montluc, a period which is accorded a considerable portion of her narrative. In August 1944 she was deported to Ravensbrück and later transferred to Torgau before returning once again to Ravensbrück, where she was liberated with her mother by the Swedish Red Cross in April 1945. Toulouse-Lautrec's narrative adopts a non-literary style, its detailed presentation of successive scenes of camp life placing the emphasis upon the characterization and interaction of those who inhabited the camps. First published in 1981, her testimony was in fact written in 1946.

**Vaillant-Couturier, Marie-Claude, (unpublished testimony, FNDIRP archives, Paris).**

Marie-Claude Vaillant-Couturier was arrested as a resistant in February 1942 and deported to Auschwitz in the convoy of 230 French political prisoners in January 1943. There she worked in the camp *Revier*, and also, as a result of the typhus epidemic at Auschwitz, experienced ten months of quarantine from July 1943 to May 1944 — a circumstance to which she credits her survival. Two months later she was transferred to Ravensbrück, where she remained until liberation.

**Wilborts, Suzanne, *Pour la France*, (Paris: Charles Lavauzelle, 1946).**

A resistance leader, Suzanne Wilborts presents a testimony which is relatively brief and highly distanced in style, narrated in the third person singular. Wilborts was arrested in May 1942 and held at Angers, La Santé and Fresnes before being deported to Ravensbrück in 1943.

A large portion of her testimony is devoted to her experience in French prisons prior to deportation. Wilborts was eventually transferred to Mauthausen, where she was liberated in April 1945.

**Zaharia Asséo, Estréa, *Les souvenirs d'une rescapée*, (Paris: La Pensée Universelle, 1974).**

Estréa Zaharia Asséo's family was Jewish and of Bulgarian origin, and emigrated to France when she was a child. Arrested in June 1944 at Marseille, Zaharia Asséo left her son and daughter in hiding when she was deported to Auschwitz. Her narrative documents her experience of Auschwitz and various other camps in Silesia. Zaharia Asséo experienced the "death march", passing through Ravensbrück and Neustadt before liberation.

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