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Women in the Third Reich and the Holocaust: Different Treatment? Different Response?[1]

Alice L. Eckardt

Strangely enough, this is a fairly recent subject for study. Most of those who initially undertook the work of digging out the facts of the Holocaust as it was enacted across Europe, and writing its history were men, university professors and scholars at a time when many fewer women held those positions, They wrote about the community as a whole, but did not pay attention to possible differences regarding the women victims.

Just yesterday I took down my copy of Isaiah Trunk's massive study, Judenrat: The Jewish Councils in Eastern Europe under Nazi Occupation. There is no index reference to "women", and, as far as I could tell in a quick examination, almost no use even of that word anywhere in its 664 pages! Not even when subjects are discussed where we know women played a major, even perhaps dominant, role as in the educational and cultural activities in the ghettos, not to mention food preparation, nursing, and care of the elderly. Further, when one looks in the indexes of the major history texts on the Holocaust – by Yehuda Bauer, Martin Gilbert, Leon Poliakov, Gerald Reitlinger, and even two women: Nora Levin, and Leni Yahil – again we find no entries that identify women. Gerald Fleming's index cites 3 pages where we find only references to women at Ravensbruck -- their use in medical experiments there, and the number rescued on April 23, 1945 by the Swedish, Danish, and International Red Cross. Only Raul Hilberg gives women more attention: 9 index entries direct us to 21 pages (out of 790), plus 6 other subject headings under which they are covered, such as Abortion – 3 pages, Rape – 3; Sterilization – 12 page references. One is also directed to look under Divorce, Intermarriage, Mixed Marriages.

Even now as women scholars achieve senior positions and as they attempt to identify and study how women were treated and acted during these years, some male critics accuse them of trying to muddy the waters, and of having a "naked ideological agenda"[2] rather than doing genuinely true scholarship of the Holocaust. Yet these women are serious scholars.

Certainly there are a large number of memoirs written by women survivors (a few of them not Jewish) but their works are not used or cited by the male scholars in the field, and their books tend to go out of print faster.

From the very start, in Hitler's ideology, and therefore that of the Nazi (National Socialist Workers') Party, women were secondary to men -- useful in their sphere of the 3 Ks: Kinder, Kirche, und Küche (children, church, and cooking).. The access that at least some women had gained to university education and some work outside the home during the years of World War I

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[1] ~~Delivered at~~ Gallery Talk, Lehigh University, March 9, 2000.

[2] Gabriel Schoenfeld in Commentary, June 1998.

and the Weimar Republic was promptly ended by the Nazi regime. Thus Else Rosenfeld tells in her autobiographical essays how on March 31, 1933 she, a trained social worker and university graduate doing volunteer work in prisons, was told not to visit the prison again. And that was it.[3]

Women were not expected to participate in the political life of the nation. Hitler played up to women in their acceptable roles, and initially appeared to receive enormous enthusiasm and adulation from them. However, when war was begun in September 1939 there was much dismay and concern, but with their men in the armed forces they felt they had to continue to give their full support. (In any case there was no way to register dissent without endangering oneself.) As victories came rapidly and without much harm to German troops, their concern diminished and they welcomed all the goods pouring into the Reich from the conquered countries. Of course when the victories began to deteriorate into mass slaughter as on the front at Stalingrad and the Sixth Army was decimated and its remnants captured, enthusiasm turned sour. Yet what could the women (or anyone) do but hang in there and hope for a turn for the better. There is some indication that the Allied air raids made most Germans more supportive of their government.

But there were exceptions certainly: In a diary kept from 1942 to 1945 (and published after the war) Ursula von Kardoff, a woman living and working in Berlin, wrote how shaming it was that "one can only help Jews secretly and dare not . . . in public unless one wants to risk arrest." She knew – and admired – one woman who was doing a great deal to help these unfortunates, and commented (dryly) on the number of women who, glad to have her taking the risks, salved their consciences by giving her supplies or funds. In another entry Ursula commented on how the very thought of a German Nazi victory filled her with horror. She wondered what had transformed "normally decent, good-hearted people" into servants of the Devil. But she also wrote about a working class neighborhood in Berlin where the German women protested against the SS dragging out Jewish women, children, and men. At the end of Dec. '44 [note how late that is] she wrote: "If what I read about gassing of Jews at . . . Auschwitz is true, there is only one prayer left: 'Lord, deliver us from the evil-doers who besmirch our name by this shame.'" And after learning about the slow strangulation deaths of the conspirators against Hitler: "One has to be very old and very wise to believe in a 'loving' God."[4]

Returning to the Nazis' role for women: There were Nazi clubs for girls, as for boys, with stress on physical fitness, hiking, singing and good camaraderie, and of course indoctrination (subtle or not). During the war years these young people were used to collect clothes and household items for Germans whose homes were bombed.

Another role the Nazis designated for women was that of bearing good Aryan children to SS and other approved men <u>even outside of marriage,</u> in order to build up the new master race.

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[3] Rosenfeld, <u>The Four Lives of Elsbeth Rosenfeld</u> (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1964).

[4] Von Kardoff, <u>Diary of a Nightmare</u> (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1965).

But women could NOT become members of the SS. We are led to believe they were because we know that there were women wearing SS uniforms at some of the concentration and death camps, but that apparently was largely a kind of window dressing to give them frightening authority over the prisoners. (They were also allowed to treat the prisoners as they wanted, and many of them were particularly brutal and sadistic.)

No camps were set up for women until 1938 when the former men's camp at Lichtenberg was changed into one for women. In the next year, shortly before the war was initiated, a new camp was established specifically for women at Ravensbruck and this replaced Lichtenberg. So before the war there were 5 camps for men, 1 for women. Most of the women prisoners there were not Jews, unless they were there for being also: a) a political prisoner (Communist, Socialist, or member of other unacceptable political party; b) a criminal or "undesirable"; c) one of the asocials, which included prostitutes of the lower classes [not higher priced call girls!]; or d) a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses who refused to take the oath to Hitler or salute the Nazi flag (Hitler was called the AntiChrist). Lesbians were not arrested or sent to camps as lesbians; the pink triangle which Judy Chicago uses in her representations was only applied to homosexual men.[5].

Only near the war's end were Jewish women sent to Ravensbruck in large numbers as the eastern camps were evacuated. In the last month of the war Swedish representatives of their Red Cross secured permission from Himmler to take a number of prisoners (not all Jews) out of Ravensbruck. A current study of the Jewish women thus rescued indicates that a number had been "passing" as Gentiles and continued to not want to disclose their Jewish identity even in interviews with the American woman doing them.[6] This lasting fear of being identified as Jews is dealt with in a recent book by Helen Fremont, After Long Silence,[7] written about her mother's refusal to admit to being Jewish and the gradual discovery Helen and her sister made of their mother's real history.

Even when Germany added more camps inside the country after 1939, these still did not include women. (Again, only in the last year of the war were Jews brought there in large numbers from eastern Europe as the Russian forces advanced.) Women prisoners were sent to camps in

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[5] Henry Friedlander, "The Concentration Camp Setting," in Women Surviving the Holocaust, Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim, eds. (New York: The Institute for Research in History, 1983), p. 108. Friedlander says that sexual deviants, including homosexuals, wore the violet triangle, whereas Eugen Kogon says homosexuals (at least at Buchenwald) wore a pink triangle.

[6] Rochelle Saidel, "Survivors' Testimonies: Including the Voices of the Jewish Victims of Ravensbruck Women's Concentration Camp – Rescue in Sweden," paper for Remembering for the Future 2000, July 2000.

[7] New York: Random House (Dell Book), 1999.

other countries -- Holland, Poland, France, Lithuania, Latvia, Italy.

From 1933 to September 1939 Jews could, theoretically at least, leave Germany and the Reich was happy to have them go as long as they left most of their capital and belongings behind. How do we explain this? Had Hitler not decided on mass murder yet, as some argue? Or did he believe the Party and the people were not yet prepared to accept mass killings? Or did he accept it as a means of contaminating and thus weakening the other countries where they would go? It is hard to come to a hard and fast determination of this issue, although my own conclusion is that Hitler had it in mind from the beginning but bided his time..

It appears that women were more eager to leave the Reich than men who felt they must stay because their work and their professions and thus their lives were rooted in Germany. (Language was often a problem also.) However, few countries outside of Europe would accept these immigrants and often even within other European countries men were not allowed to work, at least in their regular fields of expertise. (We have to remember the world-wide depression made most countries unwilling to accept many immigrants, though the barriers to Jews were certainly greater.) Those who, like the Frank family, succeeded in reestablishing themselves in Holland or elsewhere early in '30s, fell again under the Nazi heel in May 1940.

Most people know something of Anne Frank's story of living in hiding with her family for almost two years because of her published diary, though not as many know the rest of the story: her brief period of "freedom" and gaiety at Westerbork transit camp despite its hardships, the three day train trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau (incidentally, the last train from Westerbork to make that trip), the ordeals of that camp, evacuation to Bergen-Belsen sometime before Christmas '44, with starvation and typhus bringing about her death in April only three weeks before British troops liberated the camp.

When Germany attacked Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, thus initiating WW II, the Polish people were almost totally unprepared for the ferocity with which the Nazis not only launched their Blitzkrieg but also set about carrying out their racial theories (according to which those non-Jewish Poles who were allowed to live were to be more or less a slave people).

Men, particularly men in leadership positions – business men, intellectuals, priests, military officers – were among the first to be executed. But all men were felt to be in danger, and especially Jewish men, so their women insisted on the men staying indoors while they went out to do whatever was necessary. Many men fled east into the Russian zone of Poland, leaving their women to make do and take care of children and parents.[8] One such woman was Luba Gurdus

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[8] See Michal Unger, "The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto," Women in the Holocaust, eds. Dalia Ofer and Leonore Weitzman (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1998), p. 123.

whose husband and two brothers did just that.[9]

By the end of 1939 the Nazis began to force Jews into small, dilapidated areas of cities and towns, creating new ghettos, and forcing Jews to form a governing council, a Judenrat, composed entirely of men. Women had to continue to try to feed, clothe, and care for all in the family under the most primitive conditions and shortages of food while men were being forced to labor for the Germans and were being viciously mistreated. As ghetto conditions worsened with terrible overcrowding, lack of food and water and sanitation, and spread of disease, survival came to depend on working in workshops and factories set up by the ghetto leaders to produce what the Reich needed so that Jews might be found essential to Germany. If women had no male protector and intercessor (husband, father, brother), she was in danger of dying of starvation or disease, or of being sent off to a work camp (where conditions could be almost as bad as the death camps became) or to one of the death camps once they were set up in late '41 and early '42. Statistics from some of these ghettos, e.g., Lodz, Poland, show that women survived ghetto conditions better than men even apart from a normally longer life expectancy. To be sure, men's work was often harder than the women's, but it also appears that women coped better with less food and rest, and the harsh conditions. (In the worst year – 1942 – approximately 60% of the men died of starvation.)

When the Judenräte were ordered to supply a certain number for deportation, they selected more women than men. Yet even though the percentage of women deported in the first half of 1942 was higher than that of men – in Lodz, 62.1%, and 61.1 % of the totals – they remained the largest number of ghetto residents! Tragically the percentage of women thus sent off who were in the age bracket of 20 to 40 years was double and sometimes more than triple that of men. The male Judenrat of each ghetto made up those lists. We don't know exactly how they reasoned, since Jewish identity depends (primarily) on a Jewish mother, and since children held the hope for the future; but probably they assumed that men had a greater chance of surviving because the Germans would see them as more valuable. We have no evidence that the men on these Councils knew that the Nazis were determined to eliminate women precisely because they were the potential bearers of new Jewish lives; if they had realized, we would think that they would not have cooperated in that endeavor.

I want to digress from Poland for a moment and mention the one woman who was a member of a Judenrat, as well as a dominant leader in efforts to help the Jewish community of

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[9] Gurdus, The Death Train (New York: Holocaust Library, 1978 & 1987). Surprisingly, Polish Christian children were targeted at least as early as Spring 1941. The Germans wanted to find all those who had proper Aryan characteristics (blue eyes, blonde hair, certain shape of head, etc) to send to Germany for adoption. Now it was their mothers who were frantic, and some even sought out Jewish families with whom to hide their children! Over 4500 were seized in the Lublin area and many vanished into Germany this way and either were never found after the war or refused to be returned to Poland, while many others who didn't satisfy the standards simply vanished.

Slovakia: Gisi Fleischman. Joan Campion of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania stumbled across Gisi (figuratively speaking), went to work to dig out whatever she could about her including corresponding with one of Gisi's daughters in Israel, and has published the results of her work.[10] Gisi was indeed a remarkable woman, a Zionist brought up in an Orthodox home, who wanted to go to Palestine, had the opportunity, sent her two daughters there, but stayed behind in Slovakia largely because of her elderly mother and the need she felt to try to save her Jewish community. She worked – along with the ultra-Orthodox Rabbi Michael Dov-Ber Weissmandel (a second cousin by marriage) – not only to try and find ways to help her own community but also Jews of other countries. Weissmandel spoke of her commitment, her wisdom, and her strong personality, and pointed out that persons who otherwise would have quarreled accepted her leadership. Gisi and Weissmandel had some success until the SS Alois Brunner (an Einsatzkommando officer) was sent to Slovakia to oversee the "Final Solution" of the Jews there. Attempts to use bribery with him (which had worked with some Slovakian officials) backfired and Gisi was sent to Auschwitz in October 1944 where she was killed. Yehuda Bauer writes in a recent essay that he knows of no other woman who did anything similar during the Holocaust.[11]

Now, back to the Polish ghettos: When women were taken into the ghetto work force in larger numbers (initially they represented only 37%), they not only worked long hours in the factories and workshops but then had to bear all the burdens of securing food for the family, cooking with insufficient heat, and doing whatever other house work and family care was needed. ("They did not challenge this role, complain to their husbands, or ask them to take on some of the tasks. Few women imagined ... that they even had the right to ask their husbands to share the burdens in the home."[12])

The one area where women played a major role in ghetto life (apart from those I've already mentioned) was that of couriers who operated outside the ghetto, and between ghettos. They were invaluable in these roles partly because they were more likely to be able to speak Polish without an accent since they attended Polish public schools rather than the cheders or religious schools so many boys were sent to, and, even more importantly, because they could not be irrefutably identified as Jews via circumcision! It is suggested that this latter safety factor enabled them to have more self-confidence, at least on the surface. Furthermore they were more likely to have some contacts in the Gentile world through their pre-war involvement in cultural or community groups. (Leonore Weitzman finds that 69% of those who "passed" – successfully at

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[10] Campion, In the Lion's Mouth: Gisi Fleischmann & the Jewish Fight for Survival (New York & London: Lanham/University Press of America, 1987).

[11] Bauer, "Gisi Fleischman" in Ofer and Weitzman, op.cit., p. 263.

[12] Unger, op. cit., p. 135.

least – were women.) Vladka Meed[13] (her adopted Polish name; her own was Feigele Peltel-Miedzyrzecki) worked out of the Warsaw ghetto, frequently living outside for extensive periods of time. She purchased guns (one at a time usually) and ammunition for the ghetto resistance organization, helped Jews escape from the ghetto and find shelter in the homes of Christians, carried messages between the various ghettos especially regarding resistance efforts, carried supplies, forged documents, took food and money to Jews in hiding, and made contact with survivors in the labor camps and forests. Later she participated in the Polish Warsaw uprising against the German Army and saw the city destroyed just as the ghetto had been.

When the Nazis began to empty the ghettos (in late 1941) and when word filtered back that these deportations were to death camps, some parents sought to find some kind of refuge for their children. The Alexander Donats sent their very young son to a convent, where over time he was taught to embrace the Christian faith fervently as well as to fear and hate Jews. When, almost miraculously, both his parents returned after the war and reclaimed him, it took much patience, understanding, and love to restore his trust.[14]

But we have to backtrack to a time before the death camps, to June 1941 when the Reich opened its war against the USSR. Now special squads of killers, the Einsatzkommandos, were unleashed in all the former Soviet territories, from eastern Poland through Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into Russia and the Ukraine. Yaffa Eliach has written a monumental history of the 900 years of Eishyshok [E-shish-key], a shtetl not far from Vilna, at this time part of Lithuania but before 1939 part of Poland. German troops arrived on June 23, 1941 and promptly handed out pamphlets promising that they had come to liberate the Poles from "this unwanted element" of the "Jew-Communist exploiters." The Germans confiscated the better Jewish homes and other buildings, and ordered them to set up a Judenrat (threatening to kill the rabbi if Jews refused to serve, as they had initially done). As elsewhere, day after day new impositions and humiliations were heaped on the Jews, while new demands were made for gold, silver, foreign currency, fur coats, fine linens, medical supplies, etc., as well as huge quantities of the best in food items (for their horses as well). Jewish women were made to cook, clean and do laundry and other domestic tasks for the Germans, and to scrub the cobble stones in the market square.

Rumors began to come in about Jews being murdered in the vicinity, but the townspeople didn't believe them. And Yaffa's grandmother insisted the Germans (remembering their behavior in World War I) would not kill women and children. The rabbi, on the other hand, believed what Christian farmers were telling him about the massacres going on elsewhere and attempted to rouse his people to put up a fight and die with honor – but unsuccessfully. Some younger Jews, and some of the men decided to flee (believing, again, that the women would be all right), but

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[13] Meed, On Both Sides of the Wall (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979.

[14] Alexander Donat, The Holocaust Kingdom (New York: Holocaust Library, 1963, 1978). Mrs. Lena Donat has a chapter in the book also.

Yaffa's mother Zipporah refused her husband's request that they do that. Nevertheless, the father, Moshe Sonenson, sent the two older children (Yitzhak, 9½ and Yaffa, 4½) to Yaffa's nanny before escaping himself, while the rest of the community was ordered into the three synagogues – all of this on Rosh Hashanah. After three days crowded into the synagogues without food, water, or toilet facilities they were taken to the Horse Market square. A Lithuanian called out names of the prettiest girls and they were taken away – to be gang raped by the Germans and their Lithuanian helpers. The next morning 250 of the young, healthy men were marched into the forest supposedly "to build a ghetto"; machine gun fire was heard. A few hours later more men were taken, and so on. That night while the killers were celebrating the massacre by getting drunk, some friendly Poles managed to help some of the women (still in the Horse Market square) to escape, including Zipporah and her baby son. But Zipporah's mother, and therefore also her sister, refused, still believing that the women and children would not be killed! Zipporah was reunited with her husband and the two older children whom he had already retrieved.

The rest of the Sonensons' story over the next few years is an almost unbelievable saga -- including their spending some months in a hole dug under a pigsty where Zipporah taught Yaffa how to read and write in Hebrew, Yiddish, Polish, German, and Russian, by tracing her fingers in the side of the clay pit. I can't go into more of it except to tell you the end: After the Soviet Army had fought its way back through this area and liberated it from the German forces, and the Sonensons and a few other shtetl survivors had returned to their homes, a Polish AK partisan unit attacked them and killed Zipporah and her new baby son. (The previous infant had been smothered while a group of Jews were hiding from their killers.) Yaffa survived by being covered by her mother's fallen body and the AK did not see Yitzhak or father Moshe in the rear of the small closet (though they raked the area with bullets). The three Sonensons and the other few returnees left their homes and Eishyshok is judenrein today.

When the death camps became operational Jews living in Munich who had been forced to move into a kind of ghetto (the women were housed in part of a convent) began to be shipped east in November 1941 and again at Easter 1942. Even so during all the time Else Rosenfeld was there she arranged for packing and shipping of food and clothes to German Jews who had been sent to Poland. (They learned to send a pair of shoes in separate packages, otherwise the censors would steal them.) Else was not deported at these times but was kept at the convent because the Nazis realized she made their lives easier by coping with situations.

Else had been born to a Lutheran mother and a Jewish father (a physician), and later married a Jewish lawyer (Fritz), who served in the Prussian parliament until he was evicted by Nazi decree.[15] They were able to send their son and daughter to England and hoped to join them there in 1939 once they met all the requirements Germany demanded. Fritz's papers came through but not Else's, although hers were expected soon. She insisted that he leave at once,

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[15] Else's numerous brothers and a sister managed to leave Germany for Argentina early in the Nazi era, and they gladly welcomed Else's step-daughter.

which was fortunate because a few days later the war began. Since Else now was unable to leave, she voluntarily offered her services to the Jewish community of Munich. Finally in August '42 when she knew she would be sent East on the next transport, she agreed to let German friends help her escape and go underground. She said that was the worst of all her experiences because of the imposed inactivity and her worry about endangering her hosts. Yet she led that existence until April '44 when she was led, on a pitch dark night, close to the border of Switzerland and told to walk along a ridge until she came to a Swiss border post. After an hour of stumbling along over uneven ground she fell some 9 feet down an unseen ledge, by a miracle falling onto the Swiss property. Also luckily, as it happened, she broke her leg and had to be hospitalized. Thus she was not shipped back to Germany as so many escapees were. Even so she was not able to contact or rejoin her family in England until April of '46.

In The Netherlands a young Jewish woman, Hava Bornstein, after graduating from high school, trained as a nurse and worked at a number of Jewish hospitals, which gradually were closed and their patients deported. Hava felt she had to work for the underground to fight against the hated Nazis – which she did under the name Elisabeth Bos (and was called Leesha). Toward the end of the war when the man under whom she had been functioning was apprehended by the Nazis, the other men in that underground unit insisted she take over that very large and major underground network which was taking care of over 100 people. But all the information any of them had was the location of just six persons. Somehow in a few days she did manage to locate them all and continued to see that they were supplied with food and money.

Although she escaped any number of times from scheduled deportations, her father, mother, and two brothers were, at different times, sent to Westerbork transit camp and then on to Auschwitz where they were killed, three of them on arrival.[16]

Another woman in Holland was a university student when she had to watch in horror as Germans emptied an orphan home, picking children up by an arm, a leg, or hair, and just throwing them into the truck. Marion decided then and there that she would join the underground and help whomever she could. When she was asked to find a hiding place for a father with three children aged 4, 2, and 4 months, she moved out into the countryside where she found a large house. Others helped her create a hiding space beneath the floor where the family could be hidden during periodic searches. At one of these searches a number of SS men came with a Dutch Nazi policeman. After they had left and the family had come out of hiding the Dutch policeman returned and found them. What was Marion to do? Without any hesitation she reached for a small gun she had been given and killed him. The only problem was what to do with the body? An undertaker had a casket with a body in it ready for burial, and he put the Dutchman's body in it also. No one in the village had liked the policeman and so no one asked questions.

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[16] Leesha Rose, The Tulips Are Red (London: Thomas Yoseloff Ltd. 1978).

Marion felt she had had no choice but to do what she did.[17]

We need to turn our attention to the death camps. Were there differences in the treatment of women and men? At the four camps that were operated simply as death factories (Belzec, Chelmno, Sobibor, Treblinka), I would say no, except that a very few men were kept alive for a few months to do the dirty work of handling the bodies. But at Auschwitz and Maidanek where approximately 10% - 15% of many trainloads were chosen for work until they were of no more use, one difference immediately stands out: All women who had a child by the hand or in their arms were sent to the gas chambers without any thought of anything else. Sometimes Jewish prisoners who were being used to work at the rail terminus would try to persuade a young woman to give the child she held to an older woman, but, not understanding, few women if any did that. Even when women from Theresienstadt, who had been kept at Auschwitz in a family camp for a few months, were slated for execution, they still went with their children even though they already knew what they were doing.

After allowing for that difference (obviously a big one!) I do not find evidence that would indicate any distinctions between the way women and men were treated in these camps. Both were put to hard labor under conditions that we can't imagine surviving, and which, in fact, most did not survive. However, Konnilyn Feig made an extensive study of nineteen of the most important and notorious German camps, and concluded that women did have it worse because "the core of Nazi racial and population policy dealt with women, and . . . anatomy was indeed destiny to the Nazis . . . ." She went on to say that if we dismiss that conclusion, we would be underestimating "the central part played by sexism in Nazi thought and action."[18]

The food, particularly the lack of it, led women to stop menstruating very quickly – which was actually a blessing given the conditions under which they lived. Once they had a decent diet it resumed. Susan Cernyak-Spatz tells that when she worked sorting the possessions of the arrivals (at a place they called Kanada), she had lots of opportunities to get food that people had brought on the trains, and her menses began again. (Fortunately in the baggage she found pads to be worn at such time!)

Was rape a factor at these camps? Generally not. For the men and women were kept in different units of the camp; they were all physically used up by the hours standing at roll calls, the long walk to and from work, and the long hours laboring. Moreover since the women had had their hair cut off and were dressed in the most bedraggled of clothes, there was little to attract

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[17] Marion Pritchard in The Courage to Care, Carol Rittner and Sondra Myers, eds. (New York University Press, 1986).

[18] Feig, Hitler's Death Camps: The Sanity of Madness (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1981), pp. 156, 159, 171; cited by Ofer and Weitzman, op.cit. N. 12, p. 18.

anyone.[19] However, at a forced labor camp Felicja Karay reports that there definitely were rapes, by German supervisors and by male prisoners.[20]

But there was another problem women had which men did not have: pregnancy. A number of women arrived at the camp pregnant, some not even knowing it at the time. What could be done? The SS would not allow babies to be kept and often simply sent the mothers to to be killed at once.[21] So a number of women physicians among the prisoners at the various camps performed abortions on these women, if they weren't too far along in their pregnancies. If the pregnancy was too advanced other women tried to protect the pregnant woman from the guards' view to save her life, helped with the delivery, but then smothered the baby. There was no other way under the circumstances since the SS would have killed it in any case, usually much more brutally, and possibly the mother as well. Nevertheless, it had a life-long effect on some women: some never wanted to have another baby; others wanted children but always felt that something in their maternal nature had been destroyed by the camp action.

I don't want to finish without mentioning two Christian Polish women (again, whom I have met):

Mrs. Placzek of the village of Zarki, not too far from Auschwitz, and her husband risked their own lives and that of their young daughter by agreeing to hide four Jews (a mother, two sons and a daughter). For 18 months the Placzeks cared for their four guests in a small house with no running water or electricity. This meant finding some way to secure food for the four without betraying their presence to the neighbors who might very well have informed the SS. It also meant extra difficulties in having to dispose of body waste without being noticed. All in all it was a formidable undertaking, but one the Polish family never begrudged. Mr. Placzek constructed a brick wall in the basement with a cleverly concealed entrance to a shallow space behind it into which the four could hide during any German search. One evening a friend came to drink some of Mr. Placzek's gooseberry wine, and after several glasses said, "You are hiding Jews." Was that a warning? Or a taunt? No time to debate the question. All of the Zborowskis left and had to find other places to hide, which, fortunately, they were able to do.

In the summer of 1979 when Pres. Carter's Commission on the Holocaust was in Poland Elie Zborowski invited Roy and myself and Robert McAfee Brown (a Presbyterian scholar) to go

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[19] It is reported in several sources that the women made more efforts to cope with the terrible clothes they were issued by sewing with threads pulled from the thin blanket they had and using a splinter of wood as needle. Felicja Karay reports that women in the Skarzysko labor camp kept their bodies and hair clean and mended their clothing, and that this resulted in their being treated more humanely by their supervisors (Ofer and Weitzman, op.cit. P. 305).

[20] Karay reports that at the Skarzysko labor camp there definitely were rapes, by both the German supervisors and male prisoners (Ofer and Weitzman, pp. 289-91).

[21] See Karay, ibid., pp. 290-91.

with him and his wife Diana (another survivor) to meet two righteous Christians. Of course we said Yes. We left Auschwitz (the camp to which the Zborowskis would have been sent had they been caught) together with an American photographer who was recording Eli's story. Mr. Placzek had died by then but we met his wife and daughter. It was a remarkable experience – both good and bad. The good: Mrs. Placzek broke out a treasured bottle of gooseberry wine her husband had made right after the Germans left Poland, and which they had saved for a special occasion. The bad: Throughout the village and in the yards adjoining the Placzek's neighbors glared at us (we were assumed to be returning Jews!), and asked the photographer why he had brought Jews back. While we were having tea a local Communist woman barged in to see who we were and what we were doing there. The photographer was taken to the police station, and Mr. Zborówski followed him there 20 minutes later. The rest of us waited in trepidation for about an hour. We learned that a telephone call had been made to Warsaw to make sure our presence was OK. Probably it was fortunate that we were there with the President's Commission, and that we had already met with top government people in Warsaw. But the hate was something you felt! (Mrs. Placzek still cannot understand why her Catholic neighbors should feel this way since, as she put it, they only did what Jesus would want them to do.)

Another Polish Christian woman who saved a number of Jewish lives was the young and beautiful blonde Irene Opdyke. She had been taken into the home of a top German official to do cooking, housekeeping, laundry, etc. and was treated very well. But when she saw the mistreatment of Jews outside the windows and learned where the long lines were being sent, and then was asked by some Jewish young people if she could hide them, she didn't hesitate to take them into the officer's house! Then one day when she was particularly upset by having seen Jews and their Christian hosts hanged in the town square, she forgot to take the usual precautions with the kitchen door. The seven Jews were there (they regularly helped with her work) when the door opened and there stood the officer. His face blackened with rage as he turned around and walked out. Irene was frantic for her friends (more than herself) so she went to him and on her knees told him that, as a Christian, she could not stand by and do nothing to help these people. She added that she would do it again! The officer calmed down and never reported any of it!

A few years ago Irene spoke at Muhlenberg College; she does a lot of that to encourage young people not to hate or hold prejudices.

Individual stories are multiple, and each has its own tragedy or pathos or element of goodness. Human behavior is not always predictable in such unimaginable situations.

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