978-86-82324-95-9

dragana stojanović
lily halpert zamir
batya brutin

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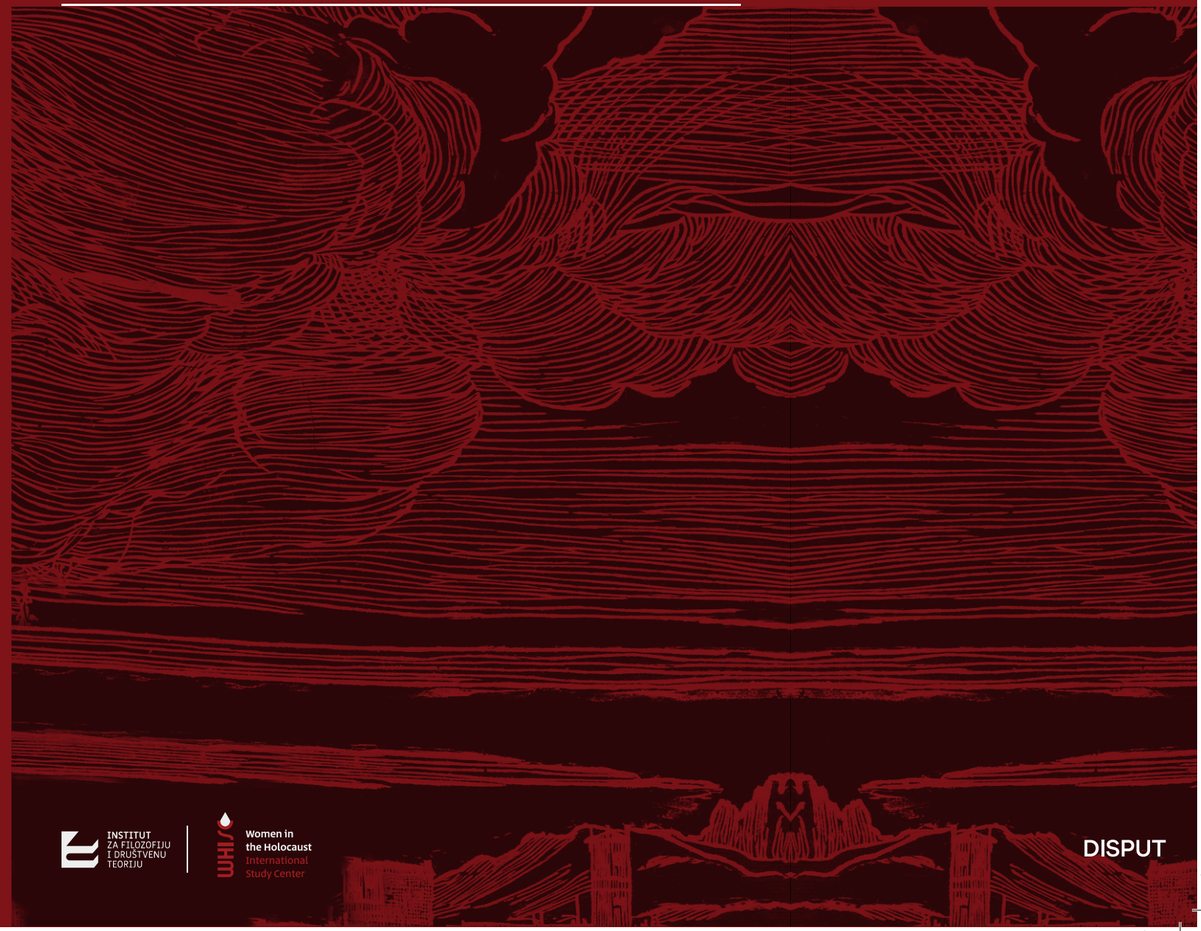

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A Space of Her Own:
Women in the Holocaust

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A Space of Her Own:
Women in the Holocaust

Edited by:
Dragana Stojanović
Lily Halpert Zamir
Batya Brutin

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WHIS
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A Space of Her Own:
Women in the Holocaust

edited volume

Edited by
Prof. Dr. Dragana Stojanović, Research Fellow, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade; Associate Professor, Faculty of Media and Communications, Singidunum University, Belgrade HYPERLINK "https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3761-6338"ORCID 0000-0003-3761-6338
Prof. Dr. Lily Halpert Zamir, Senior Lecturer, David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem
Dr. Batya Brutin, Senior Lecturer, Beit Berl Academic College and WHISC

Published by
Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade
Kraljice Natalije 45, Belgrade
WHISC – Women in the Holocaust International Study Center
Givat Haviva, Mobile Post Menashe, 37850 Israel

For publishers
Dr. Gazela Pudar Draško, IFDT Director
Prof. Dr. Lily Halpert Zamir, WHISC Academic Director
Yaakov Asher, Co-Director, WHISC, CEO of Moreshet institute and Hashomer Hatzair historical division (Havatzelet Group), Givat Haviva

Design and typesetting
Nadežda Todorović and Tijana Radovanović Marković (JedninaDuo)

Proofreading
Lucy Stevens and Patrick Marks

Print run
300

Printed by
Alta Nova, Beograd

ISBN 978-86-82324-95-9 **2025**

This edited volume was realised with the support of Claims Conference – Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

Contents

PART III:

WOMEN'S RESISTANCE: COMMITMENT TO CHANGE

Acknowledgements

The book *A Space of Her Own: Women in the Holocaust* is a collaborative effort by scholars, researchers, and experts aimed at shedding light on the experiences of women during the Holocaust. As editors of this publication, we would like to extend our deepest gratitude to all of the contributors whose insightful research and dedication have greatly enriched this volume.

While all individual contributions to the making of this publication are undeniably equally significant, we would like to express special gratitude to those without whose support and guidance this book would not have been possible.

We would like to thank Prof. Carol Rittner, Honorary President of the Women in the Holocaust International Study Center (WHISC) and Distinguished Professor of Holocaust & Genocide Studies Emerita, as well as Dr. Marsha Raticoff Grossman, Professor of Holocaust Studies Emerita Stockton University of New Jersey, USA, for her encouragement and continuous guidance during the ideation process that preceded and inspired this book.

We are equally grateful to Mr. Yaakov Asher, Co-founder of WHISC and CEO of Moreshet Institute and the Hashomer Hatzair Historical

Division (Havatzelet Group) in Givat Haviva, Israel, for his generous support, patience, and profound trust in our work. His warm and invigorating presence was invaluable during the inevitable periods of doubt and difficulty that come with projects of this nature.

We also thank Mara List Avner from Givat Haviva Educational Foundation for being an integral part of our initiatives in the early stages.

The entire project, with this book as its outcome, would not have been possible without the generous support of The Claims Conference and Mr. Lee Beckman, whose contribution to this book's development was crucial in its success.

We are especially grateful to the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade and their Holocaust Studies Laboratory, Shoah Lab, for their openness and cooperation in facilitating this process, sharing their expertise, and providing their resources, enabling us to produce a result we are proud of. We extend our sincere gratitude to the publishing team of the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory for their dedication and thorough effort, which has hugely contributed to bringing this book to its final form.

In the end, we want to express our heartfelt gratitude for the opportunity to collaborate and learn from one another throughout this process. It was an invaluable and truly inspiring experience.

Editors
Dragana Stojanović
Lily Halpert Zamir
Batya Brutin

The Prologue: Further Towards *A Space of Her Own* in the Holocaust Studies

Dragana Stojanović
Lily Halpert Zamir
Batya Brutin

The exploration of women's gender-specific experiences, traumas, and memories from the Holocaust is not entirely new. However, it still seems that the research conducted thus far has only uncovered the surface of what has not yet been said. In other words, although this book stands upon the courageous shoulders of the already present academic legacy of women's studies within Holocaust research, there is still a strong reason, a need, and an urge to discuss women's lives, sufferings, and resistance activities during the time of the Holocaust, as well as to honor and understand the subsequent silences and struggles etched into their bodies. This becomes even more important as the harrowing experiences of the Holocaust, once alive and present through first-generation survivors, melt into post-memory, where the questions multiply but the answers are not easily obtained.[1]

1 See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012; Janet Jacobs, *Trauma and its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*, New York University Press, New York, 2016; Thorsten Wilhelm, *Holocaust Narratives: Trauma, Memory, and Identity Across Generations*, Routledge, New York and London, 2020.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15028231

The imperative of "Never Forget," no matter the gender of the survivors, includes most of the stories, testimonies, and memories from the Holocaust that have been told. However, it also encourages us to discuss what has been silenced, and the reasons and contexts in which the silence occurred. Regarding women's memories from the Holocaust, as Ronit Lentin says, "not only did survivors find it hard to tell. In many cases there was no one listening."[2] Often connected to bodily memory or underlined by a socially induced sense of shame, these silences were very different for women compared to men, and must be discussed in their own right, and with regard to their own space. Hence, the book *A Space of Her Own: Women in the Holocaust* is a continuation in this direction. This publication presents itself as a kaleidoscope of women's voices, as a texture bringing both survivors' and contemporary researchers' voices into the living dialogue during this period, uncovering women's individual and collective Holocaust memories that have been pushed aside too many times.

Of course, this book is a continuation of an extensive – but by no means complete – body of work on enlightening women's Holocaust experiences from the shadows. From the first conference on women, gender, and the Holocaust held at the Stern College in New York in 1983,[3] to the influential collection of papers edited by Carol Rittner and John

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2 Ronit Lentin, "A Howl Unheard': Women Shoah Survivors Dis-placed or Re-silenced," in Claire Duchen and Irene Bandhauer-Schöffman (eds.), *After the War Was Over: Women, War, and Peace in Europe,* 1940–1956, Leicester University Press, London, 2000, pp. 179–193, 182.

3 Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, "Introduction," in Sonja M Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 1–10.

K. Roth,[4] the research on women and the Holocaust continued into the next couple of decades. In 1995, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman organized an influential conference on Women and the Holocaust at Hebrew University in Israel, which grew into a book of research papers that is today unavoidable in any substantial study of the topic of women in the Holocaust.[5] Up until the point at which publications on women in the Holocaust began to emerge, as Joan Ringelheim stressed, gendered aspects of the Holocaust were mostly silenced, especially when women's experiences were involved.[6] Moreover, as Ann Reading notes, probably the most well-known and reprinted Holocaust testimonies were given by men.[7] Furthermore, as for the Holocaust memories and experiences of women that are well-known, some that gained the most popularity were practically stripped of their specific womanhood-related content.[8] It almost seemed that women's specific Holocaust experiences either did not exist or were not that important.[9] Certainly, women did not suf-

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4 Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Paragon House, New York, 1993.

5 Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1998.

6 Joan Ringelheim, "Genocide and Gender: A Split Memory," in Ronit Lentin (ed.), *Gender and Catastrophe*, Zed Books, London, 1997, pp. 18–35.

7 Such as Jean Améry, Viktor Frankl, Primo Levi, or Elie Wiesel. See Anna Reading, *The Social Inheritance of the Holocaust; Gender, Culture, and Memory*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke, 2002.

8 An example would be Anne Frank's diary. See Catherine A. Bernard, "Anne Frank: The Cultivation of the Inspirational Victim," *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 2003, pp. 210–225.

9 Janet Jacobs, *Trauma and Its Inheritance Among Descendants of Survivors*, New York University Press, New York, 2016; Helga Amesberger,

fer more than men, nor more intensely, but they suffered differently, and this is an important aspect of any gender-responsible Holocaust research. This was successfully highlighted in Myrna Goldenberg's and Amy H. Shapiro's book *Different Horrors/Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*.[10] Although the topic of women in the Holocaust is nowhere near fully explored, researchers continued to publish and share their results in scientific journals, paper collections, and conferences during the 2010s and 2020s. There are also active academic working groups and institutes dedicated to academic and activist research on the women's Holocaust legacy.[11] However, these existing publications and groups should be just the critical beginning, a foundation platform for further research of *spaces of their own*, of women's experiential and memory spaces that connect contemporary readers to the traumatic, yet significant and unavoidable history of the Holocaust.

Alongside the research, Women and the Holocaust, a series of six international conferences in Israel, began in 2002 and lasted until 2013. The series was founded by Prof. Esther Hertzog and Dr. Batya Brutin, in collaboration with Beit Berl Academic College, The Ghetto Fighters'

"Reproduction Under the Swastika: The Other Side of the Nazi Glorification of Motherhood," in Sonja M Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 139–155.

10 Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro, *Different Horrors/Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust*, University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2013.

11 Examples of this activity in the field of the Holocaust Studies would be the Remember the Women Institute, based in New York, USA (https://rememberwomen.org/), and WHISC (Women in the Holocaust International Study Center) (https://www.whisc.center/), based in Givat Haviva, Israel.

House, and Beit Terezin. The series dealt with the following topics: Issues of the Family during the Holocaust, Gender Issues in Holocaust Studies, Childhood and Youth under the Third Reich, and "Her Story": Transference Methods of Women's Biographies and Autobiographies from the Holocaust in a Gendered Perspective.

The only art exhibition about sexual violence against women during the Holocaust – titled *VIOLATED! Women in Holocaust and Genocide*[12] – was initiated by the Remember the Women Institute, New York, in 2018. An international group of thirty artists, including Holocaust survivors, their second- and third-generation descendants, and others, portrayed sexual violence against women during the Holocaust.

This book is divided into three parts, with a total of ten chapters. It covers the research areas of history, social sciences, humanities, art theory, film and literature studies, and local, minority, and educational perspectives on resistance and memory transference. The book does not impose on the reader the imperative to read from the first to the last chapter in that exact order. Because of their multi- and interdisciplinary nature, the chapters can be read separately or in chosen clusters, according to the reader's preference.

The first part of the book, *Women's Bodies: Carrying the Holocaust in One's Flesh*, opens up with Angela Ford's chapter on the conditions that necessitated sexual barter during the Holocaust, directly confronting the reader with a topic that is hard to approach historically, as well as hard to address today, due to complicated and complex moral issues and dilemmas that burdened society in the past, while also continuing

12 Rochelle G. Saidel and Batya Brutin (eds.), *VIOLATED! Women in Holocaust and Genocide*, Remember the Women Institute, New York, 2018.

to haunt our largely patriarchal societies in the present. In the second chapter, following a similar path of trying to understand the hardships of women's experiences in the Holocaust, Natalija Perišić discusses the implications of the Holocaust for a woman, Sophie Zawistowska, after being imprisoned in Auschwitz. Lastly, in the third chapter of this part of the book, Verena Meier discusses the maltreatment of female Sinti and Roma prisoners in Ravensbrück, addressing this power abuse by analyzing the trial against Erika Bergman in East Germany in 1955.

The second part of the book, *Women's Writings, Arts, and Culture*, introduces the topic of leaving traces of memory and survival through the writing and artistic languages of women during and after the Holocaust. In this sense, Batya Brutin discusses art as documentation, taking the case of Halina Olomucki, while Lily Halpert Zamir explores the writings of Lili Kasticher from Auschwitz-Birkenau. Nevena Daković writes about Hilda Dajč and Diana Budisavljević, tracing *l`écriture feminine* of the Holocaust within the setting of ex-Yugoslavia, and Žarka Svirčev analyzes women's Holocaust narratives in the Yugoslav Jewish Almanac (1954–1971). All of the chapters also invoke the questions of locality and local identifications, inviting the reader to think in intersectional directions while contemplating the history and experiences of the Holocaust.

The third part of the book, *Women's Resistance: Commitment to Change*, presents three chapters: Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin writes about the contributions of female Jewish couriers in the Second World War in Poland, Bruna Lo Biundo and Caroline François present the story of Golda Perla and Mindla Diament, two Polish Jewish sisters in the French Resistance, and Randi Becker concludes this part with a chapter on contemporary teaching projects that involve researching local women's history during national socialism. Here, education is also seen as a form

of resistance to oblivion and forced silence, bringing the post-Holocaust phrase "Never Forget" to the present day in its full importance.

Working on academic publications such as *A Space of Her Own: Women in the Holocaust* has been a great privilege for the editors. Since the first international academic conference on Women and the Holocaust in Belgrade, Serbia, in October 2023,[13] we have also been hoping to continue our cooperation through publishing. As the third part of this book concluded, existing Holocaust research, education, and publications still function as essential forms of resistance to the oblivion of women's lives, stories, narratives, and struggles during the Holocaust. We hope that this book will add to the valuable legacy of academic study approaches and publications on women in the Holocaust.

13 The conference has been organized in cooperation with WHISC (Women in the Holocaust International Study Center) based in Givat Haviva, Israel; the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory in Belgrade, Serbia; and the educational organization Haver Serbia.

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Helga Amesberger, "Reproduction Under the Swastika: The Other Side of the Nazi Glorification of Motherhood," in Sonja M Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 139–155.

Catherine A. Bernard, "Anne Frank: The Cultivation of the Inspirational Victim," *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2003, pp. 210–225.

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Part I:

Women's Bodies:
Carrying the Holocaust in One's Flesh

Sex for Life: Conditions that Necessitated Sexual Barter in the Holocaust

Angela Ford

Politics, religion, sex. Some topics are so difficult to discuss that they have been relegated to the category of taboo. One problem with taboo subjects is they are often used by perpetrators to simultaneously abuse and silence victims. Perpetrators count on society to, at best, frown at their mention and, at worst, revictimize those who dare to speak out. Two major topics that are notoriously difficult to discuss are the Holocaust and sexual abuse. What happens when they are combined and a third component – sexual economy – is introduced? To many, this inclusion justifies the opinion that since the sex was voluntary, the "victim" was complicit and is the one to blame for any harm incurred.

This paper aims to investigate the current literature surrounding the use of sexual barter by women in the Holocaust. Since few survivors remain, we probably cannot expect those who are left to speak out about their sexual experiences. We are, however, left with an abundance of survivor testimonies that mention controversial activities undertaken to survive unspeakable conditions. Those who spoke out

Angela Ford, PhD Student, University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas
email: angela.ford@utdallas.edu.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15037808

did so knowing society may not approve of their actions, yet they risked judgement anyway so that their story would be told.

Historian Anna Hájková states that no first-person testimony exists "from women who engaged in instrumental sex."[1] She says, "When survivors mention pragmatic motives in relationships or sexual encounters, they are typically describing other people's actions, seldom their own."[2] Since researchers rely on survivor testimony, and those testimonies are often fraught with shame, I analyze narratives for language that may be an attempt to circumvent stigma. My goal is not to rewrite documented histories but, rather, to view the stories through a lens that is compassionate and open-minded enough to consider the possibility that the encounter or others like it contained a bartering element. Would we view these stories differently if we knew sexual barter was involved? If so, why?

This paper will begin with a discussion of existing scholarship on the topic, primarily as it relates to shame and stigma. Most scholarship is relatively new since discussions of sexuality were not commonplace in the decades immediately following the Holocaust. The paper will then examine survivor testimonies and representation through a 21st century lens that better understands – even if only slightly – the many facets of sexual trauma survival. My goal is to destigmatize the use of sexual barter and put into perspective its use as the survival tactic that it is.

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1 Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2013, pp. 503–533.

2 Ibid.

Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel's *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* is a collection of women's stories of various facets of sexual violence in the Holocaust. In the introduction, the editors acknowledge the relative lack of evidence compared to what we may be accustomed to seeing in historical research. There is very little hard data but, they say, there is "a solid core of testimonies and memoirs by victims and witnesses that serve as evidence. In the absence of official documents, we must accept that a large number of testimonies by victims and witnesses do constitute documentation and proof, however subjective and personal they may be."[3] Holocaust historian Anna Hájková offers guidance on how to study these testimonies. She says we should "look at narratives... for their form, emotionality, stress and omissions, and narrativity" to answer questions about how taboos are defined, created, maintained, and transmitted.[4]

Considering the events of the Holocaust occurred approximately 80 years ago and given that there has been plenty of time and opportunity to gather data, there is relatively little information available about sexual violence or barter during the Holocaust. Much of the literature begins by acknowledging this unfortunate fact and goes on to explain that discussions of sexuality with Holocaust survivors have largely been silenced by shame on the part of the victim, and stigmatization by society. Nomi Levenkron argues that counting the dead is still easier than counting sexual abuse victims since skeletons are more

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3 Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010.

4 Farges Patrick et al., "Forum: Holocaust and the History of Gender and Sexuality," *German History*, Vol. 36, No. 1, 2018, pp. 78–100.

tangible and visible.[5] She says it is nearly impossible, especially this long after the war, to determine how many people were subjected to sexual acts against their will. She says, "...the living women who were raped hide, for they fear the stigma that is likely to cling to them if they reveal what was done to them."[6]

When the war was over and men were brought to trial to answer for their crimes – of which rape was only sometimes considered when "ancillary to other crimes" – the justice system did not jump at the opportunity to convict perpetrators.[7] In some cases, like in the Tokyo court where Japanese war criminals were tried, rape was not even considered a crime but more of a "transgression of the rules of engagement."[8] The lack of justice from the courts only served to embolden perpetrators and legitimize their actions. Meanwhile, survivors who wanted to tell their stories were left to suffer alone and in silence. A survivor's memories and pain belong not only to the individual but to the collective community. By speaking about their traumatic experiences, survivors force their communities to acknowledge the trauma involved as well. Speaking turns "a painful personal trauma into a mortal blow to national pride."[9] If a single person does not want to admit being sexually assaulted, an entire nation certainly would not.

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5 Nomi Levenkron, "Death and the Maidens: 'Prostitution,' Rape, and Sexual Slavery during World War II," in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.) *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 13–28.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Levenkron explains how shame was used as a "social weapon" to keep victims from discussing their experiences.[10] Many women spent their entire lives deeply loving their communities so, to avoid being told that their sexuality had been dishonored by sex with the enemy (whether voluntary or forced.), they would rather risk suffering in silence than bring disgrace to themselves, their family, and their name.[11] In some cases, women who were raped were considered "worthy of condemnation" and "the real enemy" for not having chosen suicide in the face of an impending assault.[12] Had the woman "chosen" and admitted to sexual barter, the vilification likely would have been far worse.

Leading trauma expert and psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk writes about shame in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*. He says that after a person has experienced something as horrible as trauma, it can be nearly impossible to trust oneself or others ever again.[13] These immovable barriers may be one reason why trauma survivors attempt to rewrite their histories. By denying an event occurred the way it did, a person can lead themselves and others to believe there is nothing to be ashamed of and, therefore, no reason for barriers in relationships to exist. He says, "It's hard enough to face the suffering that has been inflicted by others, but deep down, many traumatized people are even more haunted by the shame they feel about what they themselves did or did not do under the circumstances. They despise themselves for how terrified, dependent, excited, or enraged they felt."[14]

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin, New York, 2014.

14 Ibid.

In her article on forced prostitution in the Warsaw ghetto, Katarzyna Person says that victims were not only ashamed to speak of sexually violent events, but this shame was reinforced by researchers who "could not, or perhaps for various reasons did not want to, ask directly about sexual abuse."[15] Of all the atrocities that occurred in the Holocaust, sexual abuse is sometimes still too difficult even for researchers to address. As a result, a Holocaust survivor – as with any survivor of sexual abuse – receives the message that their sexual abuse stories are "too much" for society to acknowledge, too shameful to attach themselves to, or that their experience was simply insignificant. These perceptions further marginalized and silenced women.

Holocaust researcher Katya Gusarov emphasizes that with sexual barter, the term "voluntary" is problematic since it implies that the woman had a choice that was not greatly or entirely influenced by her circumstances as a prisoner in the war. She goes on to emphasize that women did have agency and "even in the most restricted circumstances, women could make decisions."[16] This concept can be difficult to grasp. After all, it seems sex must have been one or the other. But this is not a binary matter. In the Holocaust setting, a woman could have had sex she did not want, and it still not be considered rape because she chose to do it to stay alive. In such cases, sex should not be viewed from a moralistic standpoint but, rather, as a simple and readily available alternative to death.

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15 Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust – The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 2015, pp. 103–121.

16 Katya Gusarov, "Sexual Barter and Jewish Women's Efforts to Save their Lives: Accounts from the Righteous Among the Nations Archives," *German History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, pp. 100–111.

Hájková states in an article on the sexual economy of the Theresienstadt ghetto that sexual barter always contains an element of choice, something rape does not have. Even if the rapist "reward[s]" the victim after the assault, she was not offered a choice and it is therefore not barter."[17] In another article, Hájková defines sexual barter as "an exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection," and that it "was a means by which Holocaust victims sought to ensure their survival as well as an expression of agency."[18] She reiterates that even violent sexual encounters could be considered barter instead of rape if the encounter contained an element of agency.

In the article, Hájková describes some of the more difficult stories of survival that occurred with marginalized prisoners such as homosexuals. Hájková states that sexual barter and queer practices were somehow thought to lessen the integrity and suffering of Holocaust victims. Those survivors endured an additional degree of shame and stigma as their stories were considered "unworthy" of being told, and were overshadowed by those of more "morally pure" individuals.[19] By dismissing stories of sexual barter, history is deprived of important lessons about power hierarchies and alternative means of human survival.

In another article on sex work in the Holocaust, the story of one survivor who sold sex to feed her sick family members raises questions about the shamefulness of sexual barter and the suggestion that her actions

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17 Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2013, pp. 503–533.

18 Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter and the Holocaust," *German History,* Vol. 39, No. 1, 2021, pp. 112–133.

19 Ibid.

require forgiveness. In her efforts to investigate the nature of stigmatization of sexual barter in the Holocaust, Hájková points out that sex work as labor in ordinary circumstances maintains some similarities as far as who has or would have chosen this lifestyle. She also acknowledges that, no matter how much researchers seek out information of that time, two facts remain: sex work viewed as labor inherently differs from sex work in life and death circumstances.[20] The stories that would have given researchers insight into the conditions that necessitated sexual barter will never be heard since many of the storytellers were silenced by stigma and shame and have already died.

Stigma was not only handed out by readers of narratives after the war, but by survivors themselves while still in the camps. In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, authors Carol Rittner and John K. Roth include a story by Giselle Perl, a Hungarian gynecologist and prisoner working in Auschwitz. Perl tells of being shocked by the practice of sex work in the camps – sexual encounters usually taking place in the "fetid atmosphere of the latrine." Perl says her "pride, [her] integrity as a woman revolted against the very idea" until she herself was struck by a sexually transmitted infection. In her position as a doctor, she saw that the items bartered for – food, clothing, shoes – were items that kept women alive. Keeping women alive was her job and she realized that through sex work, these women were doing their part in keeping themselves out of the crematorium. Perl says, "I began to understand – to forgive."[21] Forgiveness implies wrongdoing, and one might ask if

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20 Anna Hájková, "Why we need a history of prostitution in the Holocaust," *European Review of History*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2022, pp. 194–222.

21 Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Paragon House, New York, 1993.

Perl broke through both stigma toward others and personal shame by experiencing conditions that forced her to acknowledge the necessity of sexual barter for survival.

Esther Dror and Ruth Linn write about how shame has caused some women to tell their stories of sexual abuse by claiming the events they discuss happened to someone else, but never them. They write of a young woman named "Leah" who arrived in Auschwitz in 1944 and was then transferred to Bergen-Belsen and a German armament factory before being liberated in April 1945. She and her friends were then sent to a displaced persons camp, and Leah eventually wrote a book about her experiences with sexual abuse in the Holocaust. The book contains interviews by her co-author and recounts her friends' experiences with "sex as a survival resource."[22] She tells of a friend who was sick but taken in and cared for by a wealthy man. The friend had sex with the man as well as his son in return for the care she received. Leah goes on to explain how she was offered a similar proposal by the factory manager but declined and found an "alternate way of obtaining medicine" for her sick mother.[23]

Leah recounts another instance when a man offered her a spoon which she initially understood was a gift. But when the man asked, "'When will we meet?' I then comprehended what it was about and I throw the spoon at him and run off." In another account, American soldiers would look to liberated women for companionship and sex, and the women

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22 Esther Dror and Ruth Linn, "The Shame is Always There," in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (eds.) *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Brandeis University Press, Waltham, Massachusetts, 2010, pp. 275–291.

23 Ibid.

would oblige in exchange for chocolate and silk stockings. She then mentions a Polish song about a woman getting a pat of margarine for giving kisses. "That's what I heard. Anything more about sex – I haven't a clue."[24]

In some cases, sex workers did more than sexually please men or attain goods. In *Ravensbrück*, author Sarah Helm describes how, in 1942, Himmler charged Doctor Sigmund Rascher with finding a way to "revive sailors and airmen pulled out of freezing seas." In an experiment, Rascher arranged to have eight men submerged in freezing water, then each one put into a bed unconscious with one female "prostitute" on each side of him. Blankets covered the three and, when the man eventually warmed up and regained consciousness, he found himself in bed with two naked women. In some cases, the men had sex with the women, which raised their body temperature quicker than if they were alone, but in no case was the experiment more effective than thick blankets and a hot bath.[25] These women were forced to have intimate relations with half-frozen strange men to satisfy the curiosity of sadistic Nazis.

A documentary titled *Love It Was Not* is about a Jewish woman in Auschwitz named Helena Citron. During her time as a prisoner, an Austrian SS officer named Franz Wunsch claimed to have been in love with Helena, treating her with obsessive care. Wunsch was very kind to Helena, her sister Roza, and the other women in her barracks. He gave Helena food, clothes, shoes, sheets – saved her life in many ways. The other women relate the stories: "You could see his love for her. I don't know what she was giving him in return." Another survivor states, "I don't

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24 Ibid.

25 Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück*, Doubleday, New York, 2014.

know what kind of relationship they had." As with many other stories of sexual barter, the reporting of relationships such as these tends to leave out the sexual aspects, with the reason behind the preferential treatment seemingly a mystery.[26]

In the same documentary, Wunsch himself is interviewed in 2003 in what appears to be a garden-like backyard. Wunsch tells his stories, calling Helena his "friend" and "girlfriend," and stating that his boss Kreitzer knew of the relationship and condoned it, saying she was beautiful and "she must have some Aryan blood." Even Josef Mengele knew of the relationship and, uncharacteristically, punished neither of them.[27]

Of Wunsch, one female survivor featured in the documentary says, "He never did anything bad to us. Towards the men, the male prisoners, he was a real sadist." Later, in 1972, Helena was asked to testify at Wunsch's trial. She was asked about her relationship and testified truthfully that Wunsch had been kind and saved her and her sister's life. As a result, Wunsch was found not guilty. Toward the end of the documentary, the other female interviewees state that, after the trial, Helena no longer talked about Wunsch. She was married with kids and had moved on with her life. Helena called her relationship with Wunsch a "little fling," and a "passing infatuation." Love it was not.[28]

Details of their affair beyond a kiss or two were not disclosed in the documentary. What is mentioned by another survivor, though, is that Wunsch was Helena's first love. She was young and had an opportunity

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26 *Love It Was Not*, directed by Maya Sarfaty, performed by Helena Citron, Roza Citron, and Franz Wunsch, Greenwich Entertainment, 2020.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

for preferential treatment for herself, her family, and her friends. In any circumstance, if a young woman is given attention and adoration by an attractive man, she will likely come to feel she is special and deduce that she may even be loved. Whether Helena actually loved Wunsch in the 1940s, the 1970s, or on the day of her death in 2005, or if it was all a ruse to merely stay alive, is irrelevant. Aspects of her relationship with him undoubtedly kept her alive in body, spirit, or both.

Of course, we have no way of knowing what really occurred between Helena and Wunsch beyond what their testimonies tell us. It would be unethical to speculate that their relationship was anything more than what we are told, or that Helena or the other female survivors participated in any other sexual barter (for instance, with Kreitzer or Mengele) to warrant favor for the group. What we do know is that survivors must not only survive in the moment, but in the aftermath as well, and it is possible that one or all of the women agreed on an "acceptable" version and took other details to their graves.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Bessel Van der Kolk tells of the "speechless horror" of trauma and how crafting a coherent narrative is "almost impossible to articulate." He says, "sooner or later most survivors [of trauma] ...come up with what many of them call their 'cover story' that offers some explanation for their symptoms and behavior for public consumption. These stories, however, rarely capture the inner truth of the experience."[29] Perhaps stories of sexual barter are not cleaned up out of shame but rather out of the mind's inability to fully process and communicate what occurred.

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29 Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin, New York, 2014.

Thanks to the testimony of countless Holocaust survivors, almost a century later, researchers have become increasingly familiar with the depravity and horrors endured in concentration camps. Of course, no one has a right to judge the actions any prisoner took to stay alive under those conditions, but when sexual matters arise, so do the walls of shame and stigma. As we have seen in the literature, sexual barter is an area obscured by the judgement of oneself and others, and this judgement caused many survivors to withhold those details to avoid further traumatization of rejection, punishment, or perhaps even death meted out by their own community.

By analyzing nuances in survivor narratives, researchers can uncover data crucial to understanding the connections between extreme trauma and survival. Through modern trauma research, we have a better understanding of how bodies and minds react to sexually violent experiences than we did 80 years ago. As therapy and discussions about sexual assault have become more commonplace, researchers must remember that Holocaust testimonies were written at a time when these traumas were not discussed at all. This means there may be information written indirectly that researchers have yet to discover. If the use of sexual barter were viewed as resourceful rather than shameful, survivors who employed sexual barter strategies – in the Holocaust and any survival situation – would no longer need to hide but could instead be as proud of their wit and courage as any other survivor is encouraged to be.

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Implications of the Holocaust for a Woman: Was Life After Auschwitz Possible for Sophie Zawistowska?

Natalija Perišić

Introduction

William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is a fictional story narrated by Stingo, a young writer-to-be at that moment. After settling into a rooming house in Brooklyn in the summer of 1947, Stingo meets Sophie, a beautiful woman in her late twenties. The occasion of their first encounter is emotionally challenging for Stingo – he is immediately attracted to Sophie, he witnesses a horrible fight between her and her lover Nathan Landau, and he also learns that Sophie is a Holocaust survivor: "I saw for the first time the number tattooed on the suntanned, lightly freckled skin of her forearm – a purple number of at least five digits, too small to read in this light but graven, I could tell, with exactitude

Natalija Perišić, Full Professor, Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade
ORCID: 0000-0001-7678-7321, email: natalija.perisic@fpn.bg.ac.rs.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15037904

and craft."[1] The three (Stingo, Sophie, and Nathan) begin spending time together. The story reveals Nathan Landau, a wealthy New Yorker with a Jewish background, as a promising scientist employed with Faiser, only for it to be discovered that Nathan is actually a doorman there, has been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, and abuses drugs. His occasionally extremely violent behaviors, first of all towards Sophie, can be now "explained." Their relationship during the story is one of obsession and impulsiveness, with ups and downs, and one that finally ends in their joint suicide.

On the one hand, *Sophie's Choice* is a novel about a devastating relationship of love between Sophie and Nathan, with Stingo playing his part too. On the other hand, as the story progresses, Sophie narrates her past to Stingo, to his and to the reader's increasing horror. Sophie's past forms critical and straightforward points of her current life in 1947, containing enablers and disablers of Sophie's post-Holocaust life. Her experience of Auschwitz is one of the most important factors in her capacity to live and integrate into society, not to mention a milestone for the integration and disintegration of her personality. In the text to follow, I explore the sources of Sophie's incapacity to live after Auschwitz, relying primarily on the novel (and speaking from the point of view of a reader who does not necessarily have in-depth knowledge of the Holocaust), which still has an abundance of historical data and facts about the Holocaust, Auschwitz, the Auschwitz camp commander, and Semitism. First, I present universal points about Auschwitz as one of the symbols of the Holocaust, in order to be able to frame and understand Sophie's positionalities during this period. Afterwards, I present

1 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 50.

Sophie's narration of her "personal" Auschwitz experience and events that she witnessed, while also detailing developments that became imprinted within her, impacts that remained until her death. Finally, I pose a number of questions that the novel urges the reader to contemplate.

Auschwitz – Evil and its Servants

Why is the experience of Auschwitz so overwhelming for Sophie, Stingo, and the reader? Why was the experience of Auschwitz, by all means, the determination of the future for those who were there? Here, an important point should be made about the temporal dimensions: Stingo depicts in the 1970s events that occurred in 1947 (with references to the period in connection with World War II), whereas the novel was first published in 1979.[2] By the beginning of the 1980s, the Holocaust, and especially Auschwitz, was part of research, art, and public debate.[3] Still, from the end of World War II to the 1980s, many facts about Auschwitz and its horror were gradually entering public consciousness, both in the U.S. and elsewhere. There was not a lot of knowledge about the Holocaust in the aftermath of the war, even among the Jewish community

2 Zygmunt Mazur, "William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: Can 'Faults' Become Assets?", *Studia Literaria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2015, pp. 153–161.

3 Anke Hilbrenner, "Is There a Collective Memory of Perpetuators? Memory of the Holocaust in Germany from 1945 until Today," in Andrej Mitrović and Milica Mihailović (eds.), *The Kladovo Transport*, Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, 2006.

in the United States of America,[4] and the "puzzle" was yet to be discovered in its totality. Therefore, it is important to look at Sophie and other characters in the novel through their eyes – eyes that saw the events of 1947 – and understand these people in ways that they could have understood themselves and events in their lives.[5] Clearly, Stingo has the benefit of additional understanding, which is mediated by the historical context and undisputable knowledge from the 1970s – nothing of importance for Sophie and Nathan, who were dead long before.

For the purpose of this discussion, it is needless to mention objective, hard data, and numbers discovered in historical science in relation to Auschwitz. Among many others, Hannah Arendt wrote about the "permanent character of the gas chambers whose costly apparatus made the hunting for new 'material' for the fabrication of corpses almost a necessity."[6] Even today, with the extensive evidence available to us, it is extremely hard to explain it. Here, we have a sort of paradoxical situation. On the one hand, as mentioned in the novel and cited frequently, George Steiner claimed that *silence* is the answer, that it is best "not to add the trivia of literary, sociological debate to the unspeakable."[7] Even though we cannot but agree to this, we must assert that literature, and not only literature, cannot be silent on Auschwitz. Therefore, I will

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4 Efraim Zurof, *Operacija poslednja prilika*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2011.

5 Dalia Ofer, "Discussion," in Andrej Mitrović and Milica Mihailović (eds.), *The Kladovo Transport*, Jewish Historical Museum, Belgrade, 2006.

6 Hannah Arendt, "Social Science Techniques and the Study of Concentration Camps," *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 1950, p. 58.

7 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 205.

attempt to reconcile these two positionalities and point to the most important dimensions of Auschwitz, having in mind Sophie's perspective.

Auschwitz was not a place that could be explained by using conventional terms. If we were forced to use one term, it would be the term of evil as evil in itself, both in its universalism (in terms of the massive scale of it), as in its banality and details, and this is what is horrifying: "A horrifying lesson on the ableism of evil"; "evil progresses intentionally and unintentionally, with and without any sense, by itself and in society, according to a plan or circumstances, sober and drunk, with and without the guilty consciousness."[8] Auschwitz was an embodiment of evil: "it was real (objective) structure and organization of evil," made almost perfect there, "with its technology of dehumanization of people."[9] On top of its symbolic representation of evil, Auschwitz was everyday evil, evil to be lived by its internees. The structure and technology of evil in Auschwitz were not enough; Auschwitz needed people – perpetrators and their collaborators – to execute the evil. On the top of the bureaucracy of evil, there was Rudolf Höss, as well as male and female keepers and camp "staff."[10] "Real evil, the suffocating evil of Auschwitz — gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring — was perpetrated almost exclusively by civilians. Thus we find that the rolls of the SS at Auschwitz-Birkenau contained almost no professional soldiers but were instead composed of a cross-section of German society. They included waiters, bakers, carpenters, restaurant owners, physicians,

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8 Nada Banjanin Đuričić and Predrag Krstić (eds.), *Obični ljudi – dobrovoljni dželati: spor oko (nemačkog) antisemitizma*, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Akademska knjiga, Beograd, Novi Sad, 2019.

9 Ibid.

10 Olga Lengyel, for example, depicted "the beasts of Auschwitz," the "angel of death," the "grand selector," etc.

a bookkeeper, a post office clerk, a waitress, a bank clerk, a nurse, a locksmith, a fireman, a customs officer, a legal advisor, a manufacturer of musical instruments, a specialist in machine construction, a laboratory assistant, the owner of a trucking firm... the list goes on and on with these commonplace and familiar citizens' pursuits."[11] Of course, there were "ordinary" people around, indifferent to human misery within the Auschwitz walls, in denial that they could be victims too. To quote Simone Weil from the novel itself, "imaginary evil [...] is romantic and varied, while real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring."[12]

Among many other things, Auschwitz convincingly taught those who were there (and outsiders) about humiliating and making people feel worthless, deprived of everything that was personal to them and their life. Extremely hard living circumstances made internees become antagonized against each other: "Germans constantly sought to put us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful and hateful"[13] [...] "Perhaps the greatest crime the 'supermen' committed against us was their campaign, often successful, to turn us into monstruous beasts ourselves."[14] At the same time, oppression in Auschwitz provoked different forms of resistance, whether that be in the form of a so-called "organization" (which included theft from Germans as a social solidarity), resistance movements, "spoken newspaper," etc. But, despite teaching internees that mankind is full of flaws, and despite leading to deep, existential insecurity and uprooting, it also gave agency to many of them.

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11 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 143.

12 Ibid, pp. 141–142.

13 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, Illinois, 1995, p. 28.

14 Ibid, p. 228.

Olga Lengyel, who was an inspiration for Styron's character Sophie, put it this way: "Yet I saw many internees cling to their human dignity to the very end. The Nazis succeeded in degrading them physically, but they could not debase them morally. Because of this few, I have not entirely lost my faith in mankind [...] It is that hope which keeps me alive."[15]

Getting to know "Sophie's" Auschwitz

Stingo describes Auschwitz as a "fetid sinkhole of her [Sophie's] past."[16] After her father and her husband (both university professors) were killed by Nazis, Sophie moved from Krakow to Warsaw with her mother and two young children, Jan and Eva. In order to feed her very sick mother, Sophie provided "some illegal meat, part of a ham" and was caught with it. She was imprisoned first by the Gestapo. On April 1, 1943, she arrived at the Auschwitz-Birkenau camp and "fell into the 'slow hands of the living damnation'."[17] She spent 20 months in the camp and after its liberation, she was initially accommodated in a center for displaced persons in Sweden, where she tried to commit suicide, even though she was in denial of this. Sophie says: "And this was true, Stingo, I had no more emotions. I was beyond feeling, like there was no more tears in me to pour on the earth."[18] Since she was expecting to go to the U.S., she

15 Ibid, p. 229.

16 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 204.

17 Ibid, p. 203.

18 Ibid, p. 82.

started learning English. Upon arrival in the United States of America, eighteen months after she left Auschwitz-Birkenau, she weighed just 38 kilograms: "She was a rag and a bone and a hank of hair."[19]

The contextualization of "Sophie's" Auschwitz is not possible without the presentation of the most basic identifiers of her persona. As mentioned, Sophie is a Polish-born Catholic, a daughter, a widow and a lover, a mother to two children, an emigrant to the U.S., and a Holocaust survivor. Not only does she have multiple and fluid identities, like any other person, as well as multiple intersections between these identities, but she also has some very complicated intersections, bringing a lot of tension. The defining trait of her identity, for our understanding of her inability to live after Auschwitz, is its female dimension. I will show in the text that follows that being a woman and making choices, particularly "choices" as a woman, devastated Sophie.

The process of getting to know Sophie's identities is very gradual, provoked by intended as well as unintended developments. Both her and Stingo's styles of storytelling are somewhat delayed and non-linear. Even though this does not have to be a rule,[20] it could be that one of the most plausible and realistic options is to reveal "the truth" only after the reader thinks everything is said. The most important things, those that are the most painful for Sophie, are learned by the reader only towards the very end of the novel. As one was able to see in the court process

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19 Ibid, p. 63.

20 Olga Lengyel, an antithetical character to Sophie, starts her narration of Auschwitz in "Five Chimneys" from the very first line by demonstrating her guilt to the reader: "*Mea culpa,* my fault, *mea maxima culpa*!". Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, Illinois, 1995, p. 11.

against Adolf Eichmann, the victims were "putting it aside,"[21] because developments in Auschwitz were existentially devastating and highly traumatizing for them. The second-generation survivors state that they were getting to know about the Holocaust experiences of their parents slowly and gradually,[22] explaining it as a survival strategy for victims and the next generation; in order to go further with their lives, they wanted to forget the horror of the Holocaust and avoid burdening their children. Also, in order to reveal their story, people have to build a trusting relationship with another person, be it even the reader indirectly. People also have to be able to dig into themselves. Their "confessions," as is the case with Sophie confessing to Stingo, must have some kind of consistency; they have to give meaning to their activities, and in order to do that, they have to be able to process events, understand them, and so on. Another angle through which to understand the reasons why victims remained silent was the disbelief conveyed by outsiders. Outsiders knew that life was extremely hard for those in the concentration camps (especially Auschwitz), but they also thought of it as an exaggeration and that the survivors mixed up reality with illusions. Viktor Frankl, another Holocaust survivor and a psychiatrist, wrote a book *Man's Search for Meaning*.[23] The book's alternative title – *Why Have You Not Committed Suicide?* – was actually the most frequent question he was asked by "ordinary" people after the camp's liberation.

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21 Trial of Adolf Eichmann, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVOXYMU-W4qo, accessed 15-08-2024.

22 Based on information I obtained during interviews with second-generation Holocaust survivors from Yugoslavia, held in August 2023 in Šabac, Serbia.

23 Viktor Frankl, *Zašto se niste ubili? Traženje smisla življenja,* Žarko Albulj, Beograd, 1994.

Sophie's living experiences in Auschwitz – "choices," damages, guilt, and emptiness in the end

Sophie narrates to Stingo her guilt for being a survivor: "Why [...] I should feel so much guilt over all the things I done there. And over just being alive. This guilt is something I cannot get rid of and I think I never will [...] I know I will never get rid of it. Never. And because I never get rid of it, maybe that's the worst thing the Germans left me with."[24] Death was considered a definite outcome once a person arrived at Auschwitz: "'I remember his [Hauptsturmführer Fritzch, an SS functionary] exact words,' Sophie told me. 'He said, You have come to a concentration camp, not to a sanatorium, and there is only one way out — up the chimney. He said, Anyone who don't like this can try hanging himself on the wires. If there are Jews in this group, you have no right to live more than two weeks. Then he said, Any nuns here? Like the priests, you have one month. All the rest, three months'." [25] Death was a desirable outcome for many of the internees. Once again, in Sophie's words: "Most of them when they first come there, if they had only known, they would have prayed for the gas."[26]

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24 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 268.

25 Ibid, p. 222.

26 Ibid, p. 222.

There are two central sources of Sophie's "devastating guilt,"[27] two taboos, deeply intersected. As we can glean from the first two sentences quoted under this subtitle from the novel, they are both in connection with the fact of her survival, as well as the method of her survival.

Firstly, her deepest trauma is rooted in her arrival at the camp, the so-called "selection." On the night she arrived at Auschwitz, a camp doctor made her choose which of her two children would die immediately by gassing and which would continue to live, albeit in the camp: "'You may keep one of your children,' he repeated. 'The other one will have to go. Which one will you keep?' (...) 'You're a Polack, not a Yid. That gives you a privilege — a choice.' (...) 'I can't choose! I can't choose!' She began to scream. (...) 'Hurry now and choose. Choose, goddamnit, or I'll send them both over there. Quick!' She could not believe any of this."[28] Of her two children, Sophie chose to sacrifice her eight-year-old daughter, Eva, a decision that devastated her. The motive was her evaluation that the boy had a better chance of surviving in the camp, yet this was not helpful at all – either of the "choices" eliminated her moral obligations as a mother – "no matter what she does, she will violate a moral obligation that she recognizes that she has."[29]

Secondly, Sophie's acquaintance Wanda (who is actually a sister to Sophie's lover during the period of her living in Warsaw after her husband's death), an active member of the resistance movement in Warsaw and later also in Auschwitz, and an example of female bravery there, told Sophie: "'Listen! It all depends on what kind of relationship you strike

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27 Ibid, p. 206.

28 Ibid, p. 451.

29 Suzanne Lynn Dovi, "Sophie's Choice: Letting Chance Decide," *Philosophy and Literature* Vol. 30 No. 1, 2006, p. 176.

up with Höss. So much depends on that, Zosia darling, not only what happens to Jan and yourself but to all of us'. (...) Thus Sophie came to spend her ten days under the Commandant's roof."[30] This was like salvation to Sophie, as she narrated to Stingo: "'I must move quickly if I was to – yes, I will say it, *seduce* Höss, even if it makes me sick sometime when I think of it, hoping that somehow I could seduce him with my mind rather than my body'."[31] Sophie thinks that she can persuade him to put her son into the Lebensborn program; her son would be brought up in Germany by a foster family but alive. Since she was able to perform some secretarial duties (learned while helping her father previously), she became engaged with Höss.

To gain Höss' affection, Sophie deploys anti-Semitism. Namely, she presents to Höss an anti-Semitic paper that her father, a law professor, diligently and devotedly wrote in the form of a pamphlet in favor of the Nazi regime and tries to persuade Höss of her own anti-Semitic feelings. Apart from that, her stance on Jews was rather ambiguous, and "only" instrumental at best in her approach to Höss. Therefore, on top of her "choice" to resist or instead collaborate and cohabitate in the camp, another contradiction and guilt became present – one in connection with her position towards Jews. In the camp, where she can witness firsthand the bravery and resistance of some internees, her learned helplessness and lack of agency seemed so clear and discouraging to her.

And, finally, when Auschwitz is liberated, Sophie is left with nothing: without her whole family, including her children, whose death she considers her own fault, and without any self-respect, leading to self-hatred.

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30 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 366.

31 Ibid, p. 218.

The reader can see Stingo talking about Sophie as the victim and perpetrator at the same time. Still, this is "black and white." We cannot overlook that Sophie was forced to make her choice in abrupt "normality"; normal rules of life could not be applied to Auschwitz, which was all but normal.

Sophie's life after Auschwitz

The framework of Sophie's integration into society after Auschwitz features at least three milestones: experiences related to Auschwitz, being a non-Jewish person, and the reality of living in the U.S. in the aftermath of World War II, rooted in her lack of agency and oppression as a woman.

Firstly, her experiences in Auschwitz had a profound impact on Sophie's post-Holocaust identity and integration. She is damaged by her "choices" and losses, and this urges the reader to adopt a "trauma" lens when attempting to understand her. On the other hand, "she was determined to put behind her the madness of the past – or as much as a vulnerable and memory racked mind permitted – and so for her the huge city became the New World in spirit as well as fact [...] Her whole experience of America was New York – mostly Brooklyn – and eventually she came to love the city and to be terrified by it in almost equal measure [...] She was feeling her way. In every sense of the word having experienced *rebirth,* she possessed some of the lassitude and, as a matter of fact, a great deal of the helplessness of a newborn child."[32] Sophie was

32 Ibid, pp. 86–87.

happy to be able to be alone, as she did not have any privacy in either Auschwitz or Sweden. Music and books fulfilled her life again. She was regaining her health, she found a part-time job, and she found love.

Secondly, would the reader not expect that Sophie is Jewish? In fact, she is not, but her lover is a Jew. Their relationship is very violent. Once again, his character is quite the opposite of what the reader would expect to see: he is the one who is victimizing and hurting her.[33] Previously, I referenced Sophie's anti-Semitic expressions in Auschwitz. Here, I present these same expressions after the Auschwitz experience.[34] The

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33 Michael Lackey describes this plot writing: "In *Sophie's Choice* William Styron commits an unpardonable sin." Michael Lackey, "The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*" *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 39 No. 4, 2016, p. 85. Similarly, Sylvie Mathe writes of Styron's problematic choice of making the main character Christian rather than Jewish, and "his blurring of fact and fiction, which results in a falsification of history." Sylvie Mathe, "The 'Grey Zone' in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice,*" *Etudes Anglaises* Vol. 57 No. 4, 2004, p. 453. On the other hand, narrating of "untypical characters" in *Sophie's Choice,* Zigmut Mazur describes the merit behind the universalism of Auschwitz: "I am not persuaded that Styron wants to 'reverse' [a proper] reading [...] The universalist vision of the Holocaust is precisely what may help prevent future genocide." Zygmunt Mazur, "William Styron's *Sophie's Choice*: Can 'Faults' Become Assets?", *Studia Literaria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis* Vol. 10 No. 2, 2015, pp. 153–161, p. 158.

34 Michael Lackey shows that the question of Sophie's Anti-Semitism was heavily debated among Styron's followers, to ultimately conclude that she was an Anti-Semite, supported by Styron's statement in an interview: "it would be inconceivable for someone like Sophie to be untainted by her father's and country's anti-Semitism." Michael Lackey, "The Scandal of Jewish Rage in William Styron's *Sophie's Choice,*" *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 39 No. 4, 2016, p. 90.

reader is presented with the following words said by Sophie: "Jews! God, how I hate them! Oh, the lies I have told you, Stingo. Everything I told you about Cracow was a lie. All my childhood, all my life I really hated Jews. They deserved it, this hate. I hate them, dirty Jewish cochons!"[35] Still, these feelings are presented in her deep emotional status of disintegration, intensified by her Jewish lover's violence. The reader views this as a cry of anguish, one aimed at Nathan as well as Jews in general. Nathan is a Jew, and she is suicidally in love with him. "She was so chaotically in love with Nathan,"[36] writes Stingo, that she sees him as her only salvation (both practically and metaphorically), her air and her cure. Still, nothing, however strong, could bring her relief from the effects of her 'choice' in Auschwitz.

So, "Sophie's" Auschwitz cannot be abandoned by her, and Nathan questions it continually, asking her how she survived Auschwitz, speculating on her immoral behavior there, calling her Irma Griese and similar, and deeply exploring her anti-Semitic attitudes.

Along with this individual dimension, there is a societal one in relation to two important challenges: first, the role of Slavic nations during the Holocaust; and second, the narration of the Holocaust as a uniquely Jewish trauma and the development of movements to support Jewish victims. The people of Poland, the nation to which Sophie belongs, were frequently seen as perpetuators and collaborators with the Nazi regime during the Holocaust.[37] Moreover, at the time of the events de-

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35 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 329.

36 Ibid, p. 139.

37 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors – The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey,

scribed in the novel, the Holocaust was seen as specific Jewish trauma, with organized movements to support Jews, and Jews alone. There was also the Polish Jews Association of Former Jewish Concentration Camp Inmates & Partisans, which was committed to assisting newly arrived survivors from Europe (Katsetler Farband)[38] and served as an example of survivors' attempts to organize themselves in the United States. However, the reader does not learn about how Sophie engaged with other survivors, nor her interest in building a sense of connection with them. She simply kept her grief private and did not belong to any of the organizations. There is nothing political in her activities. In the displaced persons camp, survivors continued to suffer together, but in migration, they had to make conscious decisions and organize as a group. Sophie did not put any effort into belonging to a community of memory or forming a "group survivor" identity.

Thirdly, what was it like for a survivor to live in the U.S. in 1947? The world, including the U.S., has just started revealing the horrors of the Nazi regime. Styron writes: "Full revelation had been slow yet certain. The first news of the camp atrocities had been made public, of course, in the spring of 1945, just as the European war ended; it was now a year and half later, but the rain shower of poisonous detail, the agglomeration of

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2001; Adam Michnik and Agnieszka Marczyk (eds.), *Against Anti-Semitism – An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Polish Writings*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; Nada Banjanin Đuričić and Predrag Krstić (eds.), *Obični ljudi – dobrovoljni dželati: spor oko (nemačkog) antisemitizma*, Institut za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, Akademska knjiga, Beograd, Novi Sad, 2019.

38 David Slucki, "A Community of Suffering: Holocaust Survivor Networks in Postwar America," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* Vol. 22 No. 2, 2017, pp. 116–145.

facts, piling up at Nuremberg and at trials elsewhere like mountainous unmentionable dungheaps, began to tell more than the consciousness of many could bear, even more than those numbing early newsclips of bulldozed cordwood cadavers suggested. As she watched Nathan, Sophie felt she was regarding a person in the grip of a delayed realization, as in one of the later phases of shock. Until now he simply had not allowed himself to believe. But now he believed, all right."[39] One of the first Holocaust monuments in the U.S. was presented on October 19, 1947, in New York City.[40] Despite that, it is not that the public space was overwhelmed by the horrors of Nazi regime in 1947. For example, and as I already mentioned, there is a specific momentum in the novel, so strongly depicting ignorance of the majority of inhabitants in the U.S. about the Holocaust: one of the lodgers in the house, Morris Fink, re-telling an awful fight between Sophie and Nathan to a horrified Stingo, is confused with Nathan's question to Sophie about Auschwitz: "Asked her how come she *lived through Owswitch.* What did he mean by that?" and added at the end "What's Owswitch?"[41]. Obviously, he did not know about Auschwitz, not even the camp's name. The world, including the U.S., had just started developing the vocabulary of Auschwitz, to depict unprecedented terror from there. On the other hand, there was the U.S., a progressive nation of wealthy people with their American credos, living in a state of post-war optimism and confidently implementing their policies of integration.

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39 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, pp. 301–302.

40 Efraim Zurof, *Operacija poslednja prilika*, Zavod za udžbenike, Beograd, 2011.

41 William Styron, *Sophie's Choice*, Open Road Integrated Media, New York, 2010, p. 201.

Finally, Sophie's lack of agency and systematic oppression as a woman are embedded into her whole life, including the majority of her "decisions" and "choices." She just cannot resist depending on and seeking guidance from her father, Höss, as well as from Nathan. She does everything to please them – it is simply a question of who she is trying to please. It appears to the reader that her tragic end cannot be avoided: "Sophie returns from the grave [...] Spiritually, Sophie died in the concentration camp, but she could not rest until she had unburdened her soul."[42]

Further thinking

Certainly, Auschwitz ended with the world as a whole remaining the same as before those harrowing events. The reader is left shaken and unsettled by Sophie's story and feels empathy and sympathy towards her. Her pain and grief are evident, and resonate strongly with the reader. Clearly, the novel is fictional, and Sophie did not exist, but everything described could have actually happened. Therefore, a series of questions are raised for the reader, who ponders how a "silent shock" turns into a scream, such as: What were the ways in which Sophie tried to live a "normal" life after Auschwitz? What are the reader's feelings and understanding upon finishing the novel? Does he/she feel existential insecurity for himself/herself? Are his/her concepts of justice/injustice, guilt/innocence, cooperation/resistance, morality/immorality,

42 William Sewell, "When Choice is an Illusion: Suppression of Women in William Styron's 'Holocaust' Novel," *Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice* Vol. 9 No. 1, 2017, p. 107.

and “choices” redefined? What is the impact of conceptions of heroic resistance vs. “non-heroic memories” of survivors? What is his/her reaction to traumatizing historical events? How does the novel build up the Holocaust consciousness?

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A "Beast, Merely Covered in Human Skin": The Trial Against Erika Bergman in East Germany in 1955 for Her Maltreatment of Female Sinti and Roma Prisoners in Ravensbrück

Verena Meier

Introduction

In 1955, the former *Aufseherin* of the Nazi concentration camp for women in Ravensbrück, Erika Bergmann, was sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in a trial of the East-German socialist dictatorship of the German Democratic Republic of Germany (GDR). At the time of the German reunification in 1990, when she was 75 years old, Bergmann was still imprisoned after more than 35 years, making her the longest-serving

Verena Meier, postdoctoral researcher, Research Center on Antigypsyism, University of Heidelberg
ORCID: 0000-0001-9195-9951, email: verena.meier@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15038254

convict of the GDR because of Nazi crimes.[1] Survivors of Ravensbrück described Bergmann as a "beast, merely covered in human skin."[2] This depiction is based on the horrors that former inmates had witnessed in the camp, particularly Bergmann's maltreatment of female Sinti and Roma prisoners. The depiction, however, also reflects early postwar portrayals of perpetrators, which highlighted that "ordinary men" – and particularly "ordinary women," who were supposed to be caring and motherly according to the dominant gender norms – were not capable of committing such atrocities.[3] Moreover, the GDR journalist Hol-

1 Der Spiegel, "Büßen für die Sauberkeit," 10/1990, online: https://www.spiegel.de/politik/buessen-fuer-die-sauberkeit-a-c5fa2c34-0002-0001-0000-000013497256, accessed 16-11-2024.

2 Statement by Johanna Czysczon, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st Criminal Senate of the Neubrandenburg District Court, 08.11.11955, Bundesarchiv (thereafter BArch), MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 53. Own translations of German quotes throughout the text; cf. Gerda Zörner (ed.), *Frauen im KZ Ravensbrück*, Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, Berlin, 1986.

3 Doris Bergen, "Ordinary Men and the Women in Their Shadows: Gender Issues in the Holocaust Scholarship of Christopher R. Browning," in Thomas Pegelow Kaplan, Jürgen Matthäus, und Mark W. Hornburg (eds.), *Beyond "Ordinary Men" Beyond "Ordinary Men." Christopher R. Browning and Holocaust Historiography*, Ferdinand Schöningh, Paderborn, 2019, pp. 15–29; Elissa Mailänder, *Female SS Guards and Workaday Violence: The Majdanek Concentration Camp, 1942–1944*, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan, 2015; Wendy Lower, *Hitler's Furies: German Women in the Nazi Killing Fields*, Vintage Books, London, 2014; Alette Smeulers, "Female Perpetrators: Ordinary or Extra-ordinary Women?", *International Criminal Law Review Vol. 15*, 2015, pp. 207–253; Wendy Lower, "Male and Female Holocaust Perpetartors and the East German Approach to Justice, 1949–1963," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* Vol. 24, No. 1 (2010), pp. 56–84; Kathrin Kompisch,

de-Barbara Ulrich perpetuated these images during the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990 in her article on prisoners of the female Stasi prison Hoheneck for the GDR women's journal *Für Dich*: "Although we have grown protective skins in the meantime, we doubt whether we are up to this encounter. Murderers are not all the same."[4]

Erika Bergmann was, however, an ordinary working-class woman, who had no criminal record before her employment in Ravensbrück and who transformed into a ruthless guard in this particular context of mass violence. She had worked in an air munitions factory from October 1937, where she was recruited as an *Aufseherin* at the concentration camp at the request of her boss.[5] She was hired at the women's concentra-

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Täterinnen. Frauen im Nationalsozialismus, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2008; Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women – The Female Auxilliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System*, Schiffer Pub., Atglen, 2002.

4 Holde-Barbara Ulrich, "Ich bin 30. Ich bin ein Mörder. Drei Tage im Frauengefängnis Stollberg," in: *Für Dich,* 7/1990, pp. 20–29, online transcript: https://hoheneck.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/fuer-dich_1990.pdf, accessed 16-11-2024. For further description by a fellow inmate, see Birgit Schlicke, *Knast-Tagebuch. Erinnerungen einer politisch Gefangenen an Stasi-Haft und das Frauenzuchthaus Hoheneck*, Lichtzeichen, Wiesbaden, 2001. For more information on the GDR women's journal, see Sabrina Zachanassian, "Frauenpolitik in der DDR durch die Brille der ‚Für Dich' gesehen," in: *Digitales Deutsches Frauenarchiv*, 29-04-2021 version: https://www.digitales-deutsches-frauenarchiv.de/themen/frauenpolitik-der-ddr-durch-die-brille-der-fuer-dich-gesehen, accessed 16-11-2024.

5 Final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Head of Unit Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, vol. 411–417; indictment of the Neubrandenburg district public

tion camp on April 15, 1943, and was a supervisor at the satellite camp in Genthin from the beginning of 1944 until the end of the war. From 1945 to 1946, she was initially a cleaner in the office of the communist party (KPD) in Alt-Strelitz, and from 1953, she worked as a caregiver in the elderly care facility in the same town. She was a formal member of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED.) but was expelled from the party in the same year that charges were brought against her in 1955. According to her own statements, she was briefly part of the Communist Youth League (KJV) for about two to three months in 1932, but this may be interpreted as a self-exculpatory strategy in the postwar period.[6]

Insa Eschebach has examined how the East German judicial system framed former Ravensbrück *Aufsehrinnen* primarily through an ideological lens, emphasizing their betrayal of "womanhood" and socialist ideals rather than solely focusing on their participation in Nazi crimes. This approach served to align the trials with the GDR's broader narrative of antifascism and moral superiority in comparison to West Germany.[7] Female guards often used their gender roles and perceived

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prosecutor's office against Erika Bergmann, 24. 10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 1–15; interrogation of Erika Bergmann in the Stasi detention center in Neustrelitz, 23.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 33–37.

6 Minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st Criminal Senate of the Neubrandenburg District Court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 37–56, here fol. 39.

7 Insa Eschebach, "Gespaltene Frauenbilder: Geschlechterdramaturgien im juristischen Diskurs ostdeutscher Gerichte, " in: Edgar Wolfrum und Ulrike Weckel (eds.) "*Bestien*" *und* "*Befehlsempfänger*"*: Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945*, Göttingen 2003, pp. 95–117; Insa Eschebach, "Interpreting Female Perpetrators: Ravensbrück Guards in the Courts of East Germany, 1946–1955, " in Theodore Zev Weiss und

subordination to men as a defense, arguing that they lacked any real authority or that they were coerced into their roles. Due to this exculpatory strategy, efforts to hold these women accountable for their actions at Ravensbrück were complicated. The trial against Erika Bergman is only referred to in a few publications and without in-depth analysis, so further insights are brought forward in this analysis.[8] This article provides a critical reflection of the various sources that the secret police of the GDR – the Stasi – had created during the pre-trial investigations and Bergmann's arrest in the Stasi prison.[9] The investigations and trial of Erika Bergmann are analyzed with a critical consideration of the East-West divide and the GDR's propagandistic usage of such trials. Furthermore, it undertakes a gender- and antigypsy-focused critical reflection of the trial.

Ronald Smelser *Lessons and Legacies V: The Holocaust and Justice*, Evanston, Illinois, 2002, pp. 255–267.

8 Michaela Baetz, Heike Herzog, and Oliver von Mengersen, *Die Rezeption des nationalsozialistischen Völkermords an den Sinti und Roma in der sowjetischen Besatzungszone und der DDR: eine Dokumentation zur politischen Bildung*, Heidelberg, 2007; Reimar Gilsenbach, *Von Tschudemann zu Seemann: zwei Prozesse aus der Geschichte deutscher Sinti*, Parabolis, Berlin, 2000.

9 For more details on the Stasi investigating Nazi crimes and a critical reflection of these sources, see Henry Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit. Die geheime Vergangenheitspolitik der DDR*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2005; Dagmar Unverhau, *Das "NS-Archiv" des Ministeriums für Staatsicherheit*, Lit Verlag, Berlin, 2004; Siegfried Suckut and Jürgen Weber (eds.), *Stasi-Akten zwischen Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Eine Zwischenbilanz*, Olzog, München, 2003.

Maltreatments in Ravensbrück and Stasi investigations in 1955

In the postwar trials in the German Democratic Republic of Germany (GDR), Bergmann was accused of mistreating female concentration camp prisoners, which led to the deaths of at least six prisoners, all of whom were Sinti or Roma women. The accused had beaten the German citizen Ida Wagner several times with a truncheon and when she collapsed, Bergmann continued to kick the woman while she was lying on the ground.[10] In addition, Bergmann had set her trained shepherd dog on two female Sinti or Roma prisoners, causing their deaths.[11] The dog

10 Interrogation of Marianne Horn, former political prisoner of Ravensbrück, as witness, 04.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 134–135; confrontation of the accused Erika Bergmann with witness Marianne Horn in the Stasi prison in Neustrelitz, 04.07.1955, and interrogation of Marianne Horn as a witness, 04.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 139–140, 134–135.

11 Interrogation of the witness Marianne Horn, former political prisoner of Ravensbrück, by head of division Lieutenant Bonitz, 04.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 134–135; interrogation of witness Friederike Ziegenhagen, former political prisoner of Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Lieutenant Bonitz, 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 136–137; final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 411–417; indictment of the Neubrandenburg district public prosecutor's office against Erika Bergmann, 24. 0.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 1–15; judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, Bd.3, fol. 57–71, here p. 66.

tore off the breast of an older, exhausted woman. It also maltreated a prisoner under the age of twenty and tore open her body so wide that her intestines bulged out when the dog bit into the woman's abdomen. Bergmann also beat two pregnant women with rubber truncheons and kicked them with her feet; they both suffered miscarriages and died as a result of the abuse.[12] One of them was a Roma woman from Lodz named Olga Grochowa and the other was a singer from Kiev.[13]

After several prisoners escaped from Ravensbrück in the winter of 1943, all other prisoners were forced to stand in the roll call area for several hours.[14] An elderly Sinti or Roma woman, called "Omi Schmidt" by fellow inmates, fainted due to the cold and exhaustion, whereupon the accused asked the other inmates to pour water over the woman lying on the floor. They refused because of the cold and were then abused by the accused with blows. The former *Aufseherin* ensured that water

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12 Final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol 411–417; indictment of the public prosecutor's office of the district of Neubrandenburg against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 1–15.

13 Indictment of the public prosecutor's office of the district of Neubrandenburg against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 8; statement by Johanna Czysczon, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the district court of Neubrandenburg, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 51.

14 Final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 411–417; indictment of the Neubrandenburg district public prosecutor's office against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 1–15.

or liquid manure was nevertheless poured over the elderly prisoner, who suffered a heart attack due to the cold and died on the spot.[15]

The victims of death and abuse were mainly Sinti and Roma women, as Erika Bergmann had been the guard responsible for Blocks 28 and 29, where prisoners of all nationalities – most of whom were labeled "Gypsies," but also Soviet, Polish, French and Czech citizens – were housed, most of whom wore a green and red triangle on their prisoner clothing.[16] According to the recollections of survivors of the so-called "Gypsy Block," around 280 people were housed there.[17] Erika Bergmann guarded various work detachments: a forest detachment for cleaning the fire protection strip, a detachment in the camp for leveling the sand, a detachment for steam paving outside the camp, a detachment for unloading coal, and a detachment in the potato cellar. She was always responsible for supervising 15 to 20 prisoners. For Blocks 28 and 29, she was also responsible for the morning and evening headcount, for supervising the cleanliness and order in the barracks,

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15 Only Friederike Ziegenhagen recalled that it was not water, but liquid manure. Cf. statement by Friederike Ziegenhagen, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 44.

16 Interrogation of Erika Bergmann by District Court Director Dewitz and Sergeant Silm (recording clerk), 24.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 20–23, here Bl. 23; interrogation of the witnesses Marianne Horn and Friederike Ziegenhagen, 04. and 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 134–137.

17 Statement by Marianne Horn, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 54;

and for guarding a detachment doing road work.[18] Witnesses also recalled that the accused had many decision-making powers in the camp and "must have been a major block supervisor."[19] In addition to supervising the satellite detachments with Sinti and Roma women and the daily roll calls, she was also responsible for the release and onward transportation of prisoners to other concentration camps, as well as the punishment of prisoners by fellow prisoners on the punishment block's punishment benches.[20]

After the founding of the GDR in 1949, the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (*Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, or SED.) government transferred the investigations into Nazi perpetrators to the State Security (*Staatssicherheit*, or Stasi). During this period, further investigations were initiated for crime scenes such as the Ravensbrück concentration

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18 Interrogation of Erika Bergmann in the Stasi detention center in Neustrelitz, 23.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 33–37; Interrogation of Erika Bergmann in the Stasi detention center in Neustrelitz, 28.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 44–46; Interrogation of Erika Bergmann in the Stasi detention center in Neustrelitz, 29.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 70–71. Barbara Danckwortt, „Sinti und Roma Häftlinge im KZ-Ravensbrück," in KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme (ed.) *Die Verfolgung der Sinti und Roma im Nationalsozialismus. Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland*, Edition Temmen, Bremen 2012, pp. 81–98; Sybil Milton, „Hidden Lives: Sinti and Roma Women," in Elizabeth R. Baer und Myrna Goldberg (eds.): *Experience and Expression. Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 2003, pp. 53–75.

19 Interrogation of the Estonian witness Endla Kreuz by Lieutenant Bonitz, 20.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 153–157.

20 Ibid.

camp and its subcamps. Investigations were carried out according to the "crimes against humanity" legal basis (Control Council Directive 10, Article II, para. 1, no. c). Pre-trial detention of Bergmann was justified on the basis of Article 6 of the GDR constitution of October 7, 1949, which guaranteed equal rights for all citizens of the GDR and criminalized, among other things, "boycott incitement against democratic institutions and organizations" and the "manifestation of religious, racial and ethnic hatred."[21] Charges were ultimately brought on the basis of Section 211 of the criminal code (murder).[22] The Stasi set up an operational file ("Operativer Vorgang," OV) for this purpose under the code name "Verbrecher" ("criminals").[23] These investigations were also directed against Erika Bergmann, née Belling and known as Koch in her first marriage (until 1945), who had worked as a guard in the Ravensbrück and Genthin concentration camps between 1943 and 1945 and was taken into custody on June 23, 1955, on behalf of department V of the district administration in Neubrandenburg (surveillance of the Stasi).[24] After a short period of interrogation of the accused by the Stasi in the prison in Neustrelitz and of witnesses, the preliminary investigation was completed on September 22. By the end of October, the Neubrandenburg district public prosecutor's office had drawn up the

21 Constitution of the GDR, 07.10.1949, BArch, B 141/57134.

22 Indictment of the public prosecutor's office of the Neubrandenburg district against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 1–15.

23 Report on the Stasi investigation in Neustrelitz against Erika Bergmann, 02.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 347–348.

24 Letter from Stasi department IX in Neustrelitz to department V of the Stasi in Berlin, 08.08.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 339; report on the investigation by the Stasi in Neustrelitz against Erika Bergmann, 02.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 347–348.

indictment and initiated the main trial, which took place on November 8, 1955, before the Neubrandenburg district court.[25] These criminal proceedings, which were conducted under the leadership of main division IX/11 of the Stasi, were thus characterized by the extraordinary pace with which Bergmann was brought to trial.

Survivors and neighbors testifying against and in favor of Bergmann

A total of 12 witnesses were heard in the trial, nine of whom were former prisoners and testified to further abuse, for example of political prisoners in the potato cellar, with most of the abuse resulting in death being inflicted on Sinti or Roma women. Friederike Ziegenhagen was one of the main witnesses in the case of the woman who had been bitten to death in the abdomen and had herself suffered abuse by the dog, who was directed to the victim by Bergmann while the female inmates were unloading coal from the ship. Friederike Ziegenhagen was a former political prisoner from Waren (Müritz) and the main witness in this trial. Her descriptions of the crime were the most detailed due to her proximity to the criminal incident. She herself had worked for the Stasi as a "contact person" from 1955 and was asked to surveil the mother

25 Arrest warrant from Neustrelitz district court, imposition of pre-trial detention against Erika Bergmann, 24.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 19; interrogation protocol for Erika Bergmann in the Stasi prison in Neustrelitz, 23.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 38–39.

of the former guard Margarete Maria Rabe, who lived in Waren, while her daughters had fled to West Germany after the end of the war.[26]

The witness stated that the victim was about 17 years old, that she began to run when Erika Bergmann sent the trained shepherd dog at the Sinti or Roma woman, and that it bit her while she was lying on the ground.[27] The witness underlined her solidarity with and desperate acts of helping the victim: "I myself pulled the gypsy woman away from the dog and threw her into the water because I saw no other way out. She was immediately pulled out of the water by the prisoners' rescue squad. I myself was bitten on the left leg by the warden's dog. We then put her in the boat. She died a short time later. The overseer set the dog on the gypsy several times, and every time the dog bit into the gypsy's abdomen, she pulled it away again and set off again."[28]

The public prosecutor later judged this case to be particularly characteristic of Bergmann's "lust for murder," her "fascist attitude," and

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26 NDR: "I am innocent" – female guards in Ravensbrück concentration camp, https://www.ndr.de/geschichte/ravensbrueckoriginal100.pdf , accessed 08-06-2023. On Margarete Rabe, see Silke Schäfer, *Selbstverständnis von Frauen im Konzentrationslager. Das Lager Ravensbrück.* Dissertation zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades Doktorin der Philosophie an der Technischen Universität Berlin, Berlin, 2002, pp. 208–209.

27 Interrogation of the witness Friederike Ziegenhagen, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Lieutenant Bonitz, 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 136–137.

28 Interrogation of the witness Friederike Ziegenhagen, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Lieutenant Bonitz, 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, Bl. 136–137.

"her inner conviction of the correctness of the racial theory existing at the time."[29]

In her interrogation of Erika Bergmann's case, Ziegenhagen further recalled that when cutting bandages on the ice surface of the lake, "columns kept drowning," most of whom were Sinti and Roma women.[30]

The witness Frida Gruhn, who had also been imprisoned for political reasons, recalled beatings during the roll call and the abuse of children who were about four to five years old and danced in front of the "Gypsy Block": "During the dance, this female guard came again and attacked these children. One of the children was kicked so that he flew against the barracks. The child's mother tried to come to his aid and was immediately beaten by the guard."[31] Minna Ostrowski, another political prisoner, recalled that a Sinti or Roma woman tried to escape and all the prisoners subsequently had to stand until she was caught.[32] One of these women was caught and then beaten to death in the punishment

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29 Indictment of the public prosecutor's office of the Neubrandenburg district against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 11.

30 Interrogation of the witness Friederike Ziegenhagen, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Lieutenant Bonitz, 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 136–137.

31 Interrogation of the witness Frida Gruhn, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Lieutenant Bonitz, 12.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 143–145.

32 Interrogation of the witness Minna Ostrowski, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Head of Unit Lieutenant Bonitz, 12.08.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 269–270.

block by Erika Bergmann for attempting to escape.[33] The witness refrained from describing the abuse in the camp in more detail, as she could not describe the torture in detail "because it was far too cruel."[34] The witness Käte Hippler confirmed that a heavily pregnant Sinti or Roma woman of around 26 years of age gave birth to a child on the road during an external detachment to transport bricks in lorries.[35] Bergmann's guard dog tore the umbilical cord from the newborn and ate it; the exhausted mother was left lying on the road until the end of the working day and Bergmann forbade her fellow prisoners from helping the mother under threat of being deprived of food.[36]

Some survivors showed affection and closeness with the victims who had been maltreated by Erika Bergmann. For example, Marianne Horn testified in the main trial: "My friend, Ida Wagner, the only one left to me because my husband and five sons had already died, was also killed

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33 The Sinti survivor Philomena Franz recalled after the war in her memoirs that her sister was murdered this way. Cf. Philomena Franz, *Zwischen Liebe und Hass: ein Zigeunerleben*, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1992; Philomena Franz: "und dan kam ich an den Galgen," in Susanne Beyer und Martin Doerry (eds.), *"Mich hat Auschwitz nie verlassen." Überlebende des Konzentrationslagers berichten*, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, München, 2015, pp. 86–99.

34 Interrogation of the witness Minna Ostrowski, former political prisoner of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, by Head of Unit Lieutenant Bonitz, 12.08.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 269–270.

35 Indictment of the Neubrandenburg district public prosecutor's office against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 10.

36 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg District Court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 57–71, here pp. 66–67.

by the defendant."[37] She also explained what caused the abuse: the two women walked along the barracks laughing, whereupon the guard set the dog on Ida Wagner and it tore off her breast. The witness had only learned of the death through the internal communication of the prisoners, as Jehovah's Witnesses who worked at the crematorium had told the block elder. In the main trial, the criminal court gave all of the witnesses' testimony unqualified credibility.[38]

Neustrelitz residents who belonged to the accused's circle of friends and acquaintances were also questioned by the Stasi, as well as during the trial, but most of them gave a positive assessment of the accused, concealed Bergmann's closeness to the Nazi regime, and emphasized her membership in communist organizations.[39] The Neustrelitz investigative department of the Stasi's main department IX/11 also inquired whether the comrade and former Ravensbrück camp inmate Rosa Thälmann had been questioned in this case and, if so, whether she had written a report on the conduct of the former inmate.[40] The widow of Ernst Thälmann, who was chairman of the KPD in the Reichstag between 1924 and 1933, was murdered in the Buchenwald concentration

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37 Statement by Marianne Horn, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 54.

38 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 57–71, here fol. 68.

39 Cf. interrogations of citizens from Neustrelitz, 11 and 12.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 169–175.

40 Letter from Stasi department IX in Neustrelitz to Stasi main department V in Berlin, 06.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 296.

camp and was stylized as a symbolic figure of communist resistance in the GDR. As a former political prisoner of the women's concentration camp, Rosa Thälmann subsequently wanted to take on the task of questioning other female comrades who had been imprisoned there.[41] She herself did not recognize the accused in pictures and emphasized that she had been held in the isolated block (night and fog) and in the block for political prisoners.[42]

Self-exculpatory strategies of Bergmann in the Stasi prison

During her first interrogation in Stasi custody, Erika Bergmann admitted that she had beaten prisoners by hand when they were "doing nothing" in the work detachments.[43] She was subsequently interrogated every two weeks in sessions lasting several hours and maintained that she had not mistreated any prisoners, could not remember any beatings in the camp, and denied owning a guard dog or a weapon to "guard" them.[44]

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41 Letter from Stasi main department V in Berlin to Stasi department IX in Neustrelitz, 14.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 409.

42 Letter from Rosa Thälmann to the Central Committee of the SED, 09.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 347–348.

43 Interrogation of Erika Bergmann by district court director Dewitz and Sergeant Silm (minute taker), 24.06.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 20–23, here fol. 23.

44 Cf. interrogation of Erika Bergmann in the Stasi prison in Neustrelitz, 29.07.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 70–71.

The investigators at the Stasi prison in Neustrelitz established that "the accused has continued to lie up to now."[45]

The Stasi's interrogation methods for prisoners in custody included extorting confessions through sleep deprivation, isolation, or disorientation.[46] They also used these methods to obtain a confession from the former concentration camp *Aufseherin* on August 6, 1955. The *Aufseherin* confessed around noon, after she had already been interrogated all night and early morning.[47] During the night, she initially stuck to her strategy of self-exculpation and claimed that she had been with the Sinti and Roma prisoners on an external detachment without weapons or a guard dog and had been supposedly protected by a men's detachment of the concentration camp in the immediate vicinity. She later admitted that she set a trained black shepherd dog on a Sinti or Roma woman while supervising the column unloading coal from the ship because the victim supposedly "didn't really want to work."[48] Bergmann confirmed that the young woman's abdomen was bitten by her dog and that the female prisoner died as a result. It was not until the evening that she had ordered other prisoners to take the lifeless body from the ship back to the crematorium in the camp. When asked what she did

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45 Letter from the Stasi department in Neustrelitz to the district prosecutor's office in Neubrandenburg requesting an extension of the deadline for the investigation, 20.08.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 24.

46 Elisabeth Martin, *"I only adhered to the applicable law," Herkunft, Arbeitsweise und Mentalität der Wärter und Vernehmer der Stasi-Untersuchungshaftanstalt Berlin Hohenschönhausen*, Nomos Verlag, Baden-Baden, 2014.

47 Interrogation of Erika Bergmann by Lieutenant Bonitz, 06.08.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 84–88; 94–96.

48 Ibid. fol. 94.

to save the woman's life, Bergmann replied, "Nothing," and admitted that it would have been possible to take the injured woman to the infirmary. When asked again, she claimed that injured prisoners were not allowed to be taken to the infirmary during working hours. While the subsequent Stasi interrogation at the beginning of September focused entirely on questions about Bergmann's connections to West Germany, exactly one month to the day after her confession, the abuse was discussed and she was asked why she had lied beforehand.[49]

Bergmann withdrew her confession and exonerated herself by claiming that she had been very upset on the day of the interrogation, did not know what to do, and had therefore made statements that did not correspond to the truth.[50] The subsequent interrogation protocols, with continuously repeated questions about the length of stay in the concentration camp and the abuse that occurred, testify to the short answers given by the accused and point to her being worn down by the interrogations.[51]

The Stasi officers in the Neustrelitz prison terminated the investigation after three months of intensive questioning and concluded that the interrogations had been characterized by "mendacity" on Bergmann's part, which was evident in her repetitive denial of the abuse, the carrying of weapons, the bloodhound, and the concealment of the long duration of her stay in the Ravensbrück concentration camp.[52]

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49 Interrogation of Erika Bergmann by Lieutenant Bonitz, 02 and 06.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 106–107, 113–114.

50 Ibid., p. 113.

51 Cf. interrogation of Erika Bergmann by Lieutenant Bonitz, 09.09.1955 and 20.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 122–123; 128–129.

52 Final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 411–417.

The attitude of the accused during the entire preliminary investigation had thus proven, according to the head of the department, Lieutenant Bonitz, "that she was fully aware of the crimes she had committed" and that contradictions in her statements could be seen as deliberate deceptions.[53] At the trial in early November 1955, Bergmann maintained her claims that she had not wielded a pistol or dog as a guard and that she had not abused any prisoners.[54]

The verdict

On November 12, 1955, the Neubrandenburg district court sentenced the former SS *Aufseherin* from Ravensbrück concentration camp Erika Bergmann, née Belling, to life imprisonment in a penitentiary.[55] The court convicted her based on its judgment that she had severely abused female concentration camp prisoners and their children. She was therefore charged with multiple murder in at least six cases in accordance with paragraph 211 (murder) of the criminal code. Both motive and intent (i.e., realizing the consequences of her actions) were proven during the criminal proceedings.[56] The GDR judges ruled that the motives for the multiple murders were that she "supported the policy of extermination and the fascist tyranny, cruelly and by dangerous means, 'by

53 Ibid. p. 417.

54 Minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st Criminal Senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 37–56.

55 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, Bd.3, fol. 57–71.

56 Ibid., fol. 69.

destroying human lives', namely by mistreating and tearing them apart with bloodhounds."[57] In addition, she had acted with intent and a continuation of her crimes could be proven. She was aware of the scope of her crimes, as evidenced by her disguise as a Red Cross nurse after the liberation and her registration under her maiden name in order to hide from prosecution.[58]

Although the public prosecutor's office admitted that Bergmann had deliberately committed murder, it denied that she had willingly placed herself at the service of the Nazi terror apparatus and thus denied her agency in supporting the Nazi regime and its crimes. They said that she had "deliberately destroyed human lives," but that she had been an "unwilling tool of fascism" and had been "educated" to become a "convinced follower" and to commit systematic crimes.[59] The prosecutor thus argued for a sentence of imprisonment instead of the death penalty.

The criminal senate also ruled in favor of a life sentence instead of the death penalty. Mitigating circumstances were also cited in the case of other socialist or communist individuals in the GDR in order to emphasize that they were not perpetrators of crimes of conviction.[60] The verdict justified this mitigating sentence by stating that the defendant

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57 Ibid.

58 Ibid., fol. 70.

59 Minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 55.

60 Eschebach, „Gespaltene Frauenbilder: Geschlechterdramaturgien im juristischen Diskurs ostdeutscher Gerichte"; Eschebach, Interpreting Female Perpetrators: Ravensbrück Guards in the Courts of East Germany, 1946–1955".

had been educated in the "fascist regime and was an 'executive organ' and had been educated by other SS executioners to commit such crimes herself."[61]

Whether such a separation from the SS executioners who educated them to the individuals committing these acts can actually be maintained when assessing the historical circumstances remains questionable. According to paragraph 211 of the criminal code, murders could be punished with the death penalty in the GDR. In exceptional cases, however, this punishment was not appropriate, with life imprisonment the outcome instead.

Assessment of the trial: Considering GDR propaganda in the East-West divide and undertaking gender and antigypsy critical reflections

The preliminary investigations and the conviction testify to the new political orientation of the criminal prosecution in the context of the young GDR state and the anti-fascist founding myth, as well as the German-German system competition and the East-West conflict.[62]

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61 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 70–71.

62 Cf. Annette Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland: Vergangenheitsbewältigung 1949 - 1969 oder: eine deutsch-deutsche Beziehungsgeschichte im Kalten Krieg*, Ferdinand

The final report on the preliminary investigations by the Stasi investigative body in the prison in Neustrelitz begins with "essential investigation results," which can be read as an ideological-propagandistic framing of the actual case. The account begins with a description of the structure of the Nazi regime and the role of communist resistance to said regime, echoing Dimitroff's Comintern theory of fascism: "The fascists feared the danger of being prevented from carrying out their revanchist and aggressive plans by the struggle of upright patriots."[63]

Schöchningh, Paderborn, 2002; Annette Weinke, „Strafverfolgung von NS-Verbrechen in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone und der DDR. Diskussion und Perspektiven," in Jürgen Finger, Sven Keller, and Andreas Wirsching (eds.) *Vom Recht zur Geschichte. Akten aus NS-Prozessen als Quellen der Zeitgeschichte*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2009, pp. 63–73; Ralf Thomas Baus, „Die ‚antifaschistisch-demokratische Umwälzung' in der sowjetische besetzten Zone 1945–1949, in Manfred Agethen, Eckhard Jesse, and Erhart Neubert (eds.) *Der missbrauchte Antifaschismus. DDR-Staatsdoktrin und Lebenslüge der deutschen Linken*, Heder, Freiburg 2002, pp. 100–113; Falco Werkenthin, *Politische Strafjustiz in der Ära Ulbricht* (= Forschungen zur DDR Geschichte Vol 1), Berlin, 1995; Hermann Wentker, „Die juristische Ahndung von NS-Verbrechen in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone und in der DDR," *Kritische Justiz*, 2002, pp. 60–78; Hermann Wentker, *Justiz in der SBZ/DDR 1945–1953.Transformation und Rolle ihrer zentralen Institutionen* (= Veröffentlichungen zur SBZ-/DDR-Forschung im Institut für Zeitgeschichte Vol 51, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, München, 2001; Hubert Rottleuter, „Zum Umgang der Justiz mit System-Unrecht in der Bundesrepublik und in der DDR," *Neue Kriminalpolitik*, Vol. 28 (2016), pp. 251–267.

63 Klaus Bästlein emphasizes that in assessing such politically instrumentalized criminal proceedings in the GDR, a distinction must be made between a) the propagandistic campaigns, b) the preparation of the trial in violation of the rule of law, which was evident, among other things, in agreements between the SED leadership, the Stasi, the public

They turned the "Germany of poets and thinkers" into the "Germany of judges and executioners," set up concentration camps, and used other prisons primarily, according to the final report, as an instrument of terror against the communist resistance.[64] The German people were supposedly robbed of their "true national sentiment" by the "flood of non-human ideologies, which culminated in racial theory" and represented national-chauvinist ideas at its core. The Stasi investigators saw the murderous acts of the fascists as rooted in the fear of the power of the working class and a drive for world domination.[65] The internal terror program had expanded with the occupation policy and, in addition, there had been an accompanying "flood of slander and agitation against the Soviet Union, which not least corresponded to the interests of the monopolistic financiers."[66] The Red Army had put an end to this "haunting" with its victory.

According to the antifascist ideology of the GDR and the content of this report, the "masterminds" were in leading positions in the West German state and would be supported by U.S. monopolists, where they were working on the establishment of a new fascist dictatorship based on capitalism. The people of the GDR supposedly would never submit to

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prosecutor's office and the court or the selection of witnesses and the fact that the outcome of the trial was determined before the main hearing, and c) the verdict itself. Cf. Klaus Bästlein, *Der Fall Globke. Propaganda und Justiz in Ost und Westdeut*schland, Metropol Verlag, Berlin, 2018, p. 88, 152, 181.

64 Final report of the Stasi Neustrelitz, Lieutenant Bonitz, on the Erka Bergmann case, 22.09.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 1, fol. 411–417.

65 Ibid. fol. 413.

66 Ibid.

these fascist aspirations, as evidenced by the fact that they distanced themselves from crimes such as those committed by Erika Bergmann in the concentration camps. The public prosecutor's office and the criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court followed the final report of the Stasi officers in the Neustrelitz prison in their justification of the charges, so that all institutions and actors involved in the prosecution embedded the proceedings in the contemporary political context.

From this socio-political context, the prosecuting authorities also derived their self-image within the German-German conflict according to the minutes of the main trial, stating that the policies of the Bonn government "reflects the full extent of the national betrayal of the West German monopolists and militarists, who fear peaceful reunification and the understanding of the Germans and do everything to thwart it."[67] This reference to West Germany demonstrates the purpose of addressing Nazi crimes while reinforcing the GDR's political and ideological goals. Female perpetrators of Nazi crimes were thus often portrayed as tools of fascism rather than as ideologically committed individuals. This allowed the courts to focus on condemning Nazism as a system rather than deeply interrogating the personal responsibility of female perpetrators. This framing aligned with the GDR's antifascist ideology, emphasizing the system's corruption over individual culpability. The trials aimed to distinguish themselves from the "fascist remnants" in West Germany.

Erika Bergmann and the crimes she was accused of were also subsumed within this interpretation of the fascism theory, for example by the public prosecutor's office, as follows:

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67 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 57–71, here p. 61.

"The defendant Bergmann is also such a fascist element who understood how to evade her responsibility for 10 years under the guise of belonging to the [communist] party. She was involved in the many murders committed by these fascist executioners. Human lives were destroyed as a result of her actions. People were destroyed who were sent to concentration camps for political or racial reasons."[68]

Furthermore, the prosecution emphasized that Bergmann "became a murderer of the lives of upright persons in full awareness out of inner conviction and in full awareness in support of this mendacious fascist system."[69] Thus, she was not portrayed as lacking agency but rather as a committed perpetrator who worked towards the ideals of the fascists.

Antigypsyist attitudes on the part of the accused did not play a role in Bergmann's investigation and subsequent conviction by the prosecution authorities. However, the testimony of former fellow prisoners indicates that the accused and other camp personnel were characterized by such attitudes. For example, the main witness Friedrike Ziegenhagen testified during the trial that after a young Sinti or Roma woman was bitten to death by the dog, the guards remarked that it was "only a gypsy."[70] The witness Anna Ostrowski recalled that a Sinti or Roma woman returned to the camp torn apart by a dog. The camp doctor, who was not identified by name, then said to the guard: "[W]hen they [sic] set the dogs on this beast, they should do it in such a way that it is

68 Ibid.

69 Ibid.

70 Statement by Friederike Ziegenhagen, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11,1995, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 44.

ready for the crematorium."[71] The injured woman then received, "like many others, the Ascension injection," with which the doctor provided active euthanasia. The doctor thus did not perceive the female Sinti or Roma prisoner as a human but instead referred to her in animalistic comparisons.

This kind of dehumanization was also expressed by Erika Bergmann towards Sinti and Roma prisoners. The former political prisoner Marianne Horn described how she and her murdered friend Ida Wagner had been insulted by the warden as "dung cattle" and "pests of the people."[72] She also referred to her incomprehension that the German state was murdering its own citizens and implied that many male Sinti and Roma had fought as soldiers for Germany in the First World War: "We defended our fatherland, what they did to us there, they have to do to the accused now."[73] Antigypsyist attitudes among the employees of the prosecution authorities were not present in the context of these investigations and convictions. The reason for this could have been that the entire proceedings had the character of a show trial and the conviction ultimately served propagandistic purposes.

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71 Statement by Anna Ostrowski, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 50.

72 Statement by Marianne Horn, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 54.

73 Ibid. fol. 55.

Like other post-war verdicts against female Nazi perpetrators, the reasoning behind the verdict shows a distorted portrayal of the accused based on gender stereotypes. The prejudiced basic assumption was that "normal" women were incapable of committing crimes. If they were proven guilty or partly responsible, these women were labeled insane or even bestial sadists.[74] In the indictment, the public prosecutor's office judged, with recourse to gender-specific role expectations, that the accused "especially as a woman [knew] that pregnant women could die from such abuse due to the lack of help within the concentration camp."[75] Accordingly, the prosecution considered the mistreatment of children to be the "height of ruthlessness," as this did not correspond to the image of a caring woman.[76]

Witnesses also denied that the former supervisor had human traits and equated her with her bloodhound. Endla Kreuz testified in the main trial: "I just want to say that there are people who can be trained like dogs, but these are worse than animals, that's how the defendant behaved."[77] Johanna Czysczon also described Bergmann during her testimony in the main trial: "Warden[s] who behaved decently towards the

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74 Alette Smeulers, "Female Perpetrators: Ordinary or Extra-ordinary Women?," International Criminal Law Review Vol. 15, 2015, pp. 207–253, pp. 227–234.

75 Indictment of the public prosecutor's office of the district of Neubrandenburg against Erika Bergmann, 24.10.1955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 8.

76 Ibid., fol. 9.

77 Statement by Endla Kreuz, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 47.

prisoners were also brought to the punishment block. The defendant, however, was a beast, merely covered in human skin."[78] The criminal court included this characterization in the verdict and characterized Bergmann as follows after the personal encounter with her: "The defendant still makes the typical impression of a degenerate person in the main trial, the impression of a fascist concentration camp warden. She showed no remorse, was impassive and cold."[79]

Conclusion

The trial against Erika Bergmann in 1955 reveals how the GDR instrumentalized the courts for a propagandistic portrayal of the antifascist narrative of the GDR, which claimed that all former Nazi perpetrators were running the government, society, and economy in West Germany, while the GDR mainly constituted victims of political persecution. When putting the Nazi perpetrators on trial, it was thus imperative to maintain the narrative that these citizens of the GDR were mainly instruments of the Nazi perpetrators, lacking agency. In the case of Erika Bergman, the court ruled that she was motivated to commit these murders and fully aware of it. The overall antifascist narrative,

78 Statement by Johanna Czysczon, minutes of the public hearing in the trial against Erika Bergman (1 KS 162/55), 1st criminal senate of the Neubrandenburg district court, 08.11.11955, BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 53.

79 Judgment of the Neubrandenburg district court against Erika Bergmann (1 Ks 164/55), BArch, MfS, HA IX/11, ZUV 5, vol. 3, fol. 57–71, here fol. 64, 68.

however, served as an argument for mitigating the sentence to lifelong imprisonment instead of death.

The testimonies of the survivors of Ravensbrück highlight, on the one hand, that there was a solidarity among the female inmates that crossed through the demarcation lines of the prisoner categories. On the other hand, these testimonies also clearly demonstrate that female Sinti and Roma prisoners of Ravensbrück experienced antigypsyism inside the camp.

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Part II:

Women's Writings, Arts, and Culture

Halina Olomucki: Art as Documentation

Batya Brutin

Introduction

Holocaust art serves as a powerful form of documentary expression, capturing the historical and emotional realities of this horrific event. It is often regarded as documentary art, produced in order to document the ineffable for posterity. Artists often draw their personal experiences to convey the trauma associated with this tragic period. Some artworks serve as historical records, illustrating specific events, places, or experiences related to the Holocaust. These artworks can include depictions of concentration camps, ghettos, or acts of resistance. Artists, both male and female, depicted the unbearable conditions of overcrowding, the oppression of body and mind, and the distress of hunger and death. However, there is an essential distinction in the way that women describe the Holocaust events compared to men, particularly in the way they depict themselves in that era.

Dr. Batya Brutin, Senior Lecturer, Beit Berl Academic College, Israel, WHISC – Women in the Holocaust International Study Center, Israel, email: batya.brutin@gmail.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15038324

In this chapter, we will discuss the art that Halina Olomucki (1919–2007), as a young woman, created during the Holocaust, following her experience in the Warsaw Ghetto and several concentration camps.[1] Halina Olomucki, née Olszewski, was born in Warsaw on November 24, 1919. Her father, Andrzej, a newspaper distributor, died when she was five years old. Her mother, Margarita-Hadassa, became the family's provider, supporting Halina and her older brother Mono. Olomucki, a non-observant Jewish family member, attended a Yiddish-speaking elementary school in the city of her birth, showing her artistic talent from an early age.[2] Documentation is a significant element in the artworks of Olomucki during the Holocaust. She recognized the importance of drawings as both a form of art and documentary evidence. After the Holocaust, she testified that,

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1 All illustrations in this article are reproduced with the permission of Miriam Olomucki-Alone, Halina Ołomucki's daughter.

2 Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, New York, Pan Books, 1981, p. 260; Miriam Novitch, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Tom L. Freudenheim, *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps 1940–1945*, USA, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1981, pp. 17, 154; Mary S. Costanza, *The Living Witness: Art in the Concentration Camps and Ghettos*, The Free Press, New York, 1982, pp. 11, 14, 38, 82, 120, 124, 128; Miriam Olomucki-Alone and Ołomucka, Halina *le Crt – De la Destruction a la Résurrection* (*The Scream: From Destruction to Rebirth*), Państwowe Muzeum Oświęcim-Brzezinka, Oświęcim, 1998, (French and Polish); Pnina Rosenberg, *Images and Reflections: Women in the Art of the Holocaust*, The Ghetto Fighters' House, Western Galilee, 2002, pp. 31–31 (Catalog, Hebrew and English); Yehudit Shendar, (ed.), *Virtues of Memory, Six Decades of Holocaust Survivors' Creativity*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 2010, p. 244 (Catalog, Hebrew and English).

"My urge to observe was stronger than my body. It was a need, a motivating need. It was the most important thing for me. I never rationally thought that I was going to die, yet I had this need to paint and record what was happening. I was in the same situation as all the people around me, I saw they were close to death, but I never thought of myself that way. I was up in the air. I was outside of actual experience. My role was to draw, to record what was happening, my job was to observe."[3]

Warsaw Ghetto

Olomucki was eighteen years old when World War II broke out. The Nazis invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 and subsequently occupied the country for the next six years. After a massive bombardment of the city of Warsaw, German troops entered the city on September 29. Following Germany's entrance to Warsaw, they established the Warsaw Ghetto, where Halina and her family were relocated.

The Warsaw Ghetto was the largest ghetto established by the Nazis in all of Europe. On November 16, 1939, Jews were forced inside the ghetto. Although a third of the city's population was Jewish, the ghetto covered just 2.4% of the city's surface area. In addition, a huge number of refugees had been transported to the ghetto, which increased the ghetto's population to 450,000. The ghetto area was surrounded by three-meter-high walls that the Jews built with their own hands under strict and violent guard. The Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto were cut off from the outside world. The living conditions within the ghetto were

3 Rosenberg, *Images and Reflections*, p. 104.

unbearable, caused by overcrowding, a lack of food, and poor sanitary conditions, which led to a desperate struggle between survival and death from disease or starvation.[4]

While being incarcerated in the ghetto, Olomucki portrayed scenes from the ghetto as she experienced them. For example, on the backdrop of a Warsaw landscape turned to ruin by the German bombarding of the city, Olomucki depicted two women carrying their personal belongings on their backs and in their hands, entering the ghetto with fear, uncertainty, and sad expressions on their faces (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Two Women in the Ghetto****, Warsaw Ghetto, 1942. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

In other drawings, she portrayed groups of women imprisoned in the Warsaw Ghetto, with expressions of suffering, agony, pain, and fear (Fig. 2). The figures are emaciated, with a look of sadness and despair in their eyes, and their mouths closed in silence.

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4 Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1982; https://www.yadvashem.org/holocaust/about/ghettos/warsaw.html#narrative_info, accessed 18-09-2023.

Fig. 2. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Figures in the Ghetto****, Warsaw Ghetto, 1943. Ghetto Fighters' House Collection, Israel. Collection, USA.*

The American Holocaust historian Sybil Milton, in her research on Holocaust art, stated, "It seems that women artists in the camps tended to paint more collective scenes... of small groups of women helping each other."[5] She also mentioned that "women set up relationships in small 'family units', based on mutual assistance, which greatly increased their chances of survival."[6]

In several drawings, Olomucki depicts two women, most likely referring to her mother and herself.

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5 Sybil Milton, "Art of the Holocaust: A Summary," in Randolph L. Braham, ed. *Reflections of the Holocaust in Art and Literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990, pp. 147–152.

6 Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," in Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grosmann, Marion Kaplan, (eds.), *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 1984, pp. 297–333.

Fig. 3. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Two Women Sitting****, Warsaw Ghetto, 1943. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

For example, in this drawing, she depicts two women sitting in despair in a crowded, squalid space, looking miserable and lost. The empty bottle on the table in the background points to a lack of food and severe hunger (Fig. 3). Mary Berg, who was in the Warsaw Ghetto, wrote about this topic in her diary on November 22, 1941,

"Hunger is assuming more and more terrible forms. The prices of foodstuffs are going up. A pound of black bread now costs four zlotys, of white bread, six zlotys. Butter is forty zlotys a pound; sugar, from seven to eight zlotys a pound. It is not easy to walk in the street with a parcel in one's hand. When a hungry person sees someone with a parcel that looks like food, he follows him and, at an opportune moment, snatches it away, opens it quickly, and proceeds. to satisfy his hunger...No, these are not thieves; they are just people crazed by hunger."[7]

7 Mary Berg, *The Diary of Mary Berg: Growing up in the Warsaw Ghetto*, Oneworld, London, 2018, p. 110.

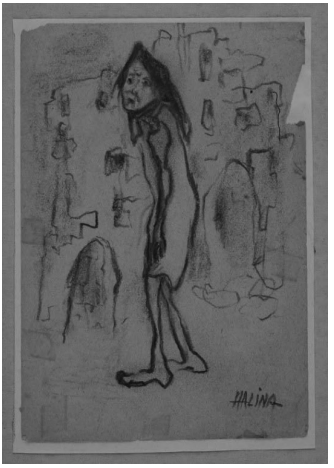

Fig. 4. *Halina Olomucki,* ***A Thin Standing Woman****, Warsaw Ghetto, not dated. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

Olomucki was very sensitive to the suffering of the women in the ghetto, which was caused by the unbearable living conditions and hunger. She also portrayed the figures of individual women, such as the example before us (Fig. 4). Against the background of the ruins of the neglected ghetto, a thin, confused, lost, and frightened woman wearing tattered clothes and a kerchief is seen.

Olomucki worked outside the ghetto, enabling her to smuggle food for her family. In one of her drawings, she refers to the practice of people smuggling food into the ghetto while risking being caught and subsequently shot (Fig. 5).

On the backdrop of the ghetto wall, Olomucki shows a woman bent over by the load of the sack on her back and her front. She looks sad, scared, and disturbed.

Fig. 5. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Smuggling Food****, Warsaw Ghetto, 1943. Yad Vashem Art Museum Collection, Israel.*

While working outside the ghetto, Olomucki managed to smuggle some drawings from the ghetto and give them to a family acquaintance who lived on the "Aryan side."

Majdanek Concentration Camp

In May 1943, Olomucki and her mother were deported to the Majdanek concentration camp, located in a suburb of Lublin, Poland. Established in October 1941, the camp operated until July 1944. The conditions in the camp were harsh, with many prisoners dying from disease, starvation, overwork, exhaustion, or beatings by camp guards. Other prisoners were murdered in mass killing actions. Some of the prisoners were sent directly to the gas chambers upon arrival. In this sense, Majdanek operated not only as a concentration camp but as an extermination camp as well.

When Olomucki and her mother were separated upon arriving at Majdanek, her mother was sent to her death, while Olomucki went through four "selections." Each time, she took advantage of a momentary confusion during the selection and escaped to the line where prisoners were sentenced to hard labor rather than death. On the fourth selection, the Nazis mistakenly sent the group chosen for labor to the gas chamber. On that occasion, Olomucki was in the other group, meaning she survived.[8]

During her imprisonment in Majdanek, Olomucki "was commissioned by the head of the block to decorate the walls of the building. In return, she received improved food rations, which helped her recover."[9] Her artistic talent helped her to obtain higher-quality food and even rescued her from death, while she used some of the materials she received to clandestinely draw women who were imprisoned with her.

Fig. 6. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Self–Portrait After Four Selections****, Majdanek concentration camp, 1943. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

8 Janet Blatter and Sybil Milton, *Art of the Holocaust*, 1981, p. 260.

9 Pnina Rosenberg, *Images and Reflections: Women in the Art of the Holocaust*, The Ghetto Fighters' House, Western Galilee, 2002, (Catalog, Hebrew and English), pp. 86, 104.

One of Halina's first drawings in Majdanek was her agonized self-portrait after four selections (Fig. 6), in which she portrayed a sad, tired, and tormented face with accentuated eyes and a sealed mouth. The lines across the drawing indicate that it was folded; Olomucki hid her paintings so that the Nazis would not discover them; if they were discovered, she would be killed. We know that Olomucki hid her drawings in as many hiding places as possible. Unfortunately, not many of them survived.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp

From Majdanek, Olomucki was sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was tattooed with prisoner number 48652 and a small triangle beneath it. The Auschwitz concentration and extermination camp was a complex composed of over forty Nazi camps and sub-camps. Auschwitz had three main camps: Auschwitz I, located in the territory of a neglected former Polish military base next to the Polish town of *Oświęcim* (town's name subsequently changed to Auschwitz by the Germans), 37 miles west of Cracow; Auschwitz II – Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was built on the land of the village of Brzezinka (village's name subsequently changed to Birkenau by the Germans), about 1.9 miles from Oświęcim (Auschwitz), after evacuating its inhabitants; and Auschwitz III — Monowitz (also, Monowitz-Buna, Buna), a labor camp for the German chemical and pharmaceutical conglomerate factory IG Farben (Interessengemeinschaft Farbenindustrie Aktiengesellschaft, German: Syndicate of Dyestuff-Industry Corporations).

The Auschwitz complex was the only location in which prisoners were systematically tattooed during the Holocaust. In some cases, a letter precedes the serial number, or a triangle is tattooed beneath it. Auschwitz-Birkenau was the central killing place of the Jews. The Jews who were chosen to work were prisoners in this camp, with Halina Olomucki included among their ranks.[10]

Olomucki's artistic talent was also beneficial in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She was requested to continue painting. Even German officers ordered various works from her, for which she received improved food. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, Olomucki created over 200 drawings with materials she collected from her official tasks.

Fig. 7. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Kapo****, Auschwitz–Birkenau, 1944. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

10 Batya Brutin, *Etched in Flesh and Soul: The Auschwitz Number in Art*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 2021, pp. 5–12.

For example, she depicted the Kapo,[11] who was dressed in thick warm clothes, holding a whip or a club in her right hand. Behind her, there is a crowd of emaciated female prisoners with light clothes next to the camp fence (Fig. 7). Olomucki also portrayed the female inmates in Auschwitz-Birkenau Camp in 1945 while still in the camp, depicting them in striped prisoners' uniforms and as crowded, emaciated, and full of despair (Fig. 8).[12]

Fig. 8. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Women in Auschwitz–Birkenau Camp****, 1945. Ghetto Fighters' House Collection, Israel.*

11 Kapos, or prisoner functionaries, were prisoners in a Nazi camp whom the Schutzstaffel guards assigned to supervise forced labor or carry out administrative tasks. Also called "prisoner self-administration," the prisoner functionary system minimized costs by allowing camps to function with fewer SS personnel. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kapo, accessed 18-09-2023

12 Miriam Novitch, Lucy Dawidowicz, and Tom L. Freudenheim, *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps 1940–1945*, USA, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, New York, 1981, pp. 154–155.

Many women prisoners asked Olomucki to draw their portraits or that of their daughters, believing that this was perhaps their last opportunity to be commemorated. They were confident that Olomucki would make it out of the camp alive because, as a commissioned artist, she had a better chance of survival. They asked her to take her paintings with her to the 'outside world' upon her liberation. Olomucki testified: "While I was in Auschwitz-Birkenau, someone told me, 'If you live to leave this hell, make your drawings, and tell the world about us. We want to remain among the living, at least on paper.'"[13]

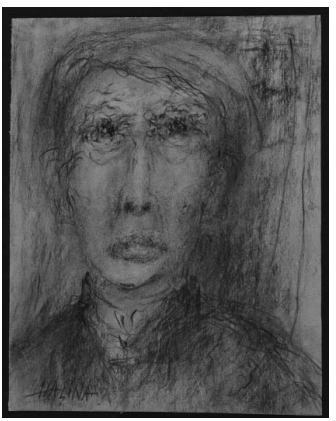

Fig. 9. *Halina Olomucki, Portrait of a Woman, Auschwitz-Birkenau, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

This passage features an example of a portrait of an Auschwitz-Birkenau female inmate (Fig. 9). Despite her efforts to depict the woman's portrait, it cannot be ignored that Olomucki emphasizes the sadness in the woman's eyes, her sealed mouth without a smile, and her serious facial expression.

13 Ibid. p. 17.

Fig. 10. *Halina Olomucki,* ***"Don't Shoot My Mother!,"*** *Auschwitz–Birkenau, c. 1944. Yad Vashem Art Museum Collection, Israel.*

Alongside these drawings, Olomucki also portrayed harsh, inhumane situations around her and those she experienced. For example, she portrayed a young girl begging, crying out in immense pain, asking the unseen Nazis not to shoot her mother, but without success (Fig. 10).

Death March

On January 18, 1945, Olomucki was evacuated, with other women prisoners, from Auschwitz-Birkenau on the Death March to the Ravensbrück concentration camp in northern Germany, which was exclusively for women, and then to the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camp, which was primarily for female prisoners as well.

Fig. 11. *Halina Olomucki,* ***The Death March****, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

Olomucki depicts a convoy of abstract figures huddled together and traveling to the left. A bright yellow sun is shown in the upper right corner to emphasize the unbearable conditions experienced by the transported (Fig. 11).

Liberation

Halina Olomucki was liberated from the Neustadt-Glewe concentration camp by the Allies on May 2, 1945. She stated, "Although my body was liberated from the hell of Auschwitz, my mind remained in the terrifying past. In my first works after the liberation, I revived the memories of those who perished. I saw their worn faces, which, despite hunger, did not lose their humanity nor pride. They live with me still, in my mind and on my papers and canvas. I am keeping my promise to them."[14]

14 Ibid. p. 19.

Fig. 12. *Halina Olomucki,* ***Is This Me?****, 1945. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, USA.*

As soon as the war ended, Olomucki portrayed herself standing naked in front of a mirror and wondered, "Is this me?" Her body looks emaciated, gaunt, hairless, and without the markers of femininity (Fig. 12). Due to this, she looks younger than her age. To the right, on a raised base, we see a vase with flowers, uncertain if they are blooming or wilting.

This is likely a symbolic depiction of Olomucki's feeling that she was close to death and yet was saved. It is a sign of things to come, because she subsequently recovered, studied, built a family, and continued drawing and painting.

After the war, Olomucki returned to Warsaw and married Boleslan Olomucki, an architect. She testified, "After the liberation, I also returned to Warsaw, seeking out drawings I had done and concealed during the Nazi occupation. I found some that I had left with a Polish friend who had hidden them when they were entrusted to him during a forced labor assignment. I also found some badly damaged drawings in the ruins of

a courtyard where I had hidden them behind some bricks. (Probably in the Warsaw Ghetto. BB.)"[15]

Later she moved to Łódź, where she studied at the art academy. In 1957, Olomucki and her husband emigrated to France and lived in Paris, where their daughter Miriam was born. From there, the three of them immigrated to Israel in 1972.

Epilogue

We can see how Halina Olomucki's Holocaust art serves as a powerful form of documentary expression that captures the historical and emotional experiences of this horrific event. She documented the general and personal experiences of women during the Holocaust.

Olomucki left a paramount artistic legacy for future generations in the form of her drawings, through which one can learn about the faith of the Jewish people, especially women –including Olomucki herself – in the Warsaw Ghetto, in the Majdanek and Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camps, and on the Death March. She stated, "This singular goal behind this work is to keep alive the horrors of yesterday, to confront those who would prefer to forget, and inform those who do not know."[16]

15 Ibid. p. 18.

16 Ibid. p. 19.

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The Lily of Birkenau: The Writings of Lili Kasticher[1]

Lily Halpert Zamir

Historical Notes

Auschwitz, the largest and best-known of the Nazi concentration camps, was built in 1940 when the Nazis realized that they had more prisoners than prison space. It was liberated by the Red Army on January 27, 1945. Nine days earlier, as Soviet troops drew closer, all inmates capable of walking – 48,342 men and about 16,000 women, along with another 96 prisoners of war – were dispatched on foot via Austria to other locations in Nazi-occupied Europe. These evacuation campaigns would later be known as Death Marches.

About 6,000 inmates who were too weak to march were left to die in Auschwitz-Birkenau, including some 4,000 women. The last of the Nazis left the camp on January 24, three days before its liberation.

1 The materials in the paper are based on a chapter from my book, *Lili Kasticher – The Woman Who Wrote in Auschwitz*, Moreshet, Givat Haviva, 2022.

Prof. Dr. Lily Halpert Zamir, Senior Lecturer, David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem, Israel, email: lilyzami@gmail.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15038379

In the Hades of Auschwitz-Birkenau, various regulations were imposed with the sole purpose of maintaining a repressive system that sought to break the inmates' spirit and destroy and uproot all traces of humanity among them. One such edict was an explicit ban on any personal possessions, including the possession of paper and writing implements. Those who violated this last prohibition were sentenced to death. We are aware, however, that the *Sonderkommandos* systematically documented the destruction of their brethren – not only in writing but also photographically – realizing that they were the last (and perhaps only) inmates who could attest to the annihilation of European Jewry. Had they been caught in the act, they would have been executed at once. In any case, they were living on borrowed time because the Germans, on Adolf Eichmann's orders, exterminated the *Sonderkommandos* every few months and replaced them with new ones, so that their secret would go with them to their deaths and never find its way outside the camps. The only exceptions to this decree were people with special jobs, such as expert mechanics, furnace tenders, "Room Service"[2] personnel, etc., as Rudolf Hess testified at his trial in a Warsaw court shortly after the war.[3]

Shlomo Dragon, one of the few *Sonderkommando* survivors, attested that he and his comrades wrote out of a sense of mission. Besides keeping records, they collected the diaries they found among the items left behind when people were ordered to undress before entering the gas chambers. The *Sonderkommandos* concealed these items by burying

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2 A *Sonderkommando* unit responsible for quarters, ongoing maintenance, and food management.

3 For a more detailed explanation, see Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbau (eds.), *Auschwitz – Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, 1998.

them in jars and boxes in the yard of Crematorium II, hoping that someone would find them at the end of the war.[4] In his testimony, Dragon, who had worked in the "Room Service" unit of the *Sonderkommandos*, said he made sure that Zalman Gorodovsky, who kept a diary and documented the events of each day in meticulous detail, would be given a bunk near a window, so that he would have light by which to write, and provided Gorodovsky with thermos-like jars in which to bury his works. Clearly, had any of them been caught, all of them would have been executed, but they persisted without fear. After liberation, Dragon recalled where Gorodovsky had hidden his documentation and began digging among the crematoria ruins until he found it.[5] The comrades who were responsible for dividing work among the commando members made sure that those who were engaged in the writing process would have the time and means to do so, namely by assigning them easy tasks. At the end of the war, Shlomo Dragon submitted all of the materials that were written by the *Sonderkommandos* to the Soviet Extraordinary State Commission, which was tasked with investigating Auschwitz. Shlomo Dragon's brother, Abraham, who was also a *Sonderkommando* survivor, stated that they knew no one would remain alive and they therefore had to leave testimony for the world that would follow. Inmates serving as *Kanada Kommandos*[6] risked their lives smuggling in

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4 Shlomo Dragon's remarks are cited in testimony submitted by Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears – Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz,* Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2005, p. 54.

5 For more detailed information about the Magid, see Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommandos in Auschwitz: Coping with Fate and Reality," *Yad Vashem Studies* No. 20, 1990, pp. 273–312.

6 A work detail whose job was to sort goods that the victims left behind on the ramp before their dispatch to Germany. At times, these inmates

pieces of wax to the *Sonderkommandos*, so that the writers could seal the jars and containers in which they hid their notes. *Sonderkommando* Ya'akov Gabai, of Greek origin, wrote roughly 500 pages of documentation about the annihilation of his brothers and fellow Jews. However, the magnitude of the materials made it difficult to conceal them. Gabai was unable to carry all of the documents he wrote on the Death March to Matthausen, but through the act of writing, he committed many of the particulars to memory and submitted them as testimony after liberation.[7] Another *Sonderkommando* of Greek origin succeeded in writing a note reading: "If anyone finds this note, please give it to my wife and tell her that I'm dead." He hid it in the courtyard of Crematorium II. Fortunately, it turned out that he survived. Writing the note, a heroic act, was possible only because the *Sonderkommandos* were afforded special living conditions, including quarters isolated from the rest of the camp and an exemplary organizational structure that ultimately led them to mount a rebellion in October 1944.

Another well-known writing enterprise at Auschwitz-Birkenau involved postcards distributed among inmates by the Germans before they were sent to the gas chambers. They were ordered to write to their relatives in German[8] (those who did not know German were not permitted to write), telling them that they had arrived at a labor camp where the

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had the opportunity to smuggle in some of these goods, risking their lives by doing so, of course. Usually, they looked for food, medicines, and the like.

7 Gideon Greif, *We Wept Without Tears – Testimonies of the Jewish Sonderkommando from Auschwitz,* Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 2005, p. 223.

8 Primo Levi, 'The Gypsy,' in *Moments of Reprieve: A Memoir of Auschwitz*, Penguin Books, London, 1995, pp. 39–46.

work is reasonable and the food is satisfactory; they are treated well, feel good, and hope to see their family soon. These postcards were usually dated several days after they were written, after their writers had already been turned to ashes for some time.

In his story, "the Gypsy,"[9] Primo Levi documents postcard writing, and the distress felt by inmates who did not know German and thus did not participate in the Germans' deceptive postcard campaign. One of them, known only as "the Gypsy," asked Levi to write something in German for him in exchange for a half portion of bread. To Levi's surprise, he pulled out a sheet of paper rather than a standard postcard, asking him to write a letter to his sweetheart. This was a strange and unique situation, not only because the Gypsy had a sheet of paper but also because he showed Levi a picture of his girlfriend that he managed to smuggle with him into the inferno.[10] It is clear that the punishment for possession of either or both of these two "treasures" would be a beating or death, depending on the whims of the officer in charge.

Similarly, we know of Polish inmates, most of them political prisoners or people in contact with them, who kept records in Auschwitz and managed to save their work.[11] The writings of Ruth Klüger, said to have

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9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Dr Wojciech Polosa, Archive Director at the State Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum in Oświęcim, submitted the following items on June 22, 2016: Jerzy Pozimski's notes, in Polish, from June 24 to December 23, 1940; notes in Polish that Wincenty Gawron took with him when he escaped from Auschwitz in May 1942; "Tango Tesknoty," a poem written by Tadeusz Borowski after his arrival in Auschwitz in autumn 1943 and saved by Polish political prisoner Mieczyslaw Szymkowiak; a handwritten Polish

been written in Auschwitz, were recorded in Gross-Rosen, as she herself confirmed in 1994. They indeed describe experiences in Auschwitz, but as she said in her testimony, no one had paper or writing implements there. As such, she was forced to cement everything in her memory.[12]

Maria Yaakub, a Jewish prisoner from Transylvania, was deported to Birkenau in spring 1944. From there, she was deported to Neuengamme and later to Obemheide, where a month before her liberation, in spring 1945, she wrote a diary in Romanian, of which she saved about 51 pages. In her diary, she wrote about a notebook that she kept in Birkenau, where she wrote about her everyday life. The notebook, however, was never found. In her diary, she mentioned that nothing caused her more pain than the loss of that notebook.[13] No trace of the notebook was ever found, and she couldn't explain how she had obtained writing implements, nor what happened to the notebook.

From a historical perspective, Lili Kasticher's Auschwitz writings are worthy of special attention – not so much for their literary value but because of the marvelous human story they tell of a young woman who challenges and 'beats' death through her writing.

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note of unknown date and authorship, discovered in Auschwitz in 1958; a handwritten Russian poem of unknown date and authorship.

12 Andrés Nader, *Traumatic Verses: On Poetry in German From The Concentration Camps, 1933–1945,* Camden House, Rochester, New York, 2007, pp. 52–53.

13 Information about Maria Yaakub was provided by Mr. Noam Rachmilevich, from the Ghetto Fighters' Museum House Archives (Yaakub's diary was listed from March 29, 1945, collections department, file number 1458).

Lili's works may be divided into three principal groups. The first, written in Auschwitz-Birkenau, comprises a collection of poems, mostly her own, alongside a few written by other women in her block, her partners in suffering, as well as excerpts from the *Code of Behaviour,* which she had begun to write in Birkenau and developed later on at the Gross-Rosen Labor Camp in Oberhohenelbe. Through this code, she attempted to institute social order and mutual assistance among her comrades: the female inmates. These oeuvres were written on the reverse side of Auschwitz requisition forms. The *Code* is of immeasurable importance, as it represents an unequivocal promise that within the chaotic realities of the camp, in which every movement and every breath is dictated by the Germans, several Jewish women joined forces to draft their own rules, thereby declaring their moral superiority and freedom of opinion against the Nazi oppressors who sought to render them subhuman.

The second category is made up of poems and drawings from the Gross-Rosen Labor Camp.[14]

The third is a diary that Lili reconstructed from memory after liberation in Israel.[15]

The aims of this paper are to elucidate the audacity and heroism of Lili Kasticher's personality through her writings, rather than to assess their artistic qualities.

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14 These writings will be addressed separately. Lili Kasticher's manuscripts were submitted to Yad Vashem Archives in 1973, including memoirs written in Israel in 1951 (File No. 4–14/0.48 (4064459)).

15 This diary exemplifies Naama Shik's theory concerning autobiographical writings by Auschwitz survivors immediately after liberation.

Lili Kasticher was born in 1923 in Petrovaselo, Yugoslavia, and subsequently lived in Novi Sad (annexed by Hungary in 1941). She was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in April 1944 and had the K.C. number 8965 tattooed on her arm. From there, in November 1944, she was assigned to Gross-Rosen, where she worked at the Lorenz factory until liberation in May 1945. In 1946, she married Nicola Hirt and in 1947, gave birth to her first child, Alex. A year later, the young family immigrated to Israel, settling in Jerusalem, where Lili divorced Nicola Hirt and married for the second time in 1956, giving birth after two years to her daughter, Daniela. Lili passed away in 1973.

Lili's Auschwitz Inheritance

Despite the common belief that female inmates at Auschwitz-Birkenau did not write because of the severe persecution against possessing even a pencil stub or a scrap of paper, Lili insisted on writing and even encouraged her fellow inmates to do so as a means of maintaining a last shred of human dignity. Those "written signs" from the inferno also had an intuitive therapeutic empowerment effect that helped these young women facing their horrible fate, although I doubt if Lili and her friends had been aware of this fact as they risked their lives for writing and creating at Birkenau and later at the Gross-Rosen Labor Camp in Oberhohenelbe. In the second camp, the danger was not that severe. Nowadays, bibliotherapy is well-known as a therapeutic means that helps patients deal with and overcome hardships of their reality and past, but Lili and her fellow inmates obviously had no idea about the concept of bibliotherapy. Rather, they acted out of an instinct for survival.

In an interview published in the Hungarian-language Israeli newspaper *Uj Kelet* ("New East") on February 23, 1951, Lili explained how she stayed alive, revealing the ways in which she obtained pencils, crayons, and paper in Birkenau, a story repeated in a letter she wrote to a Mr. Halmi on December 15, 1963.

Long before her deportation, Lili read a book on handwriting analysis and palmistry. In Birkenau, she would read palms for her fellow inmates, always promising them an encouraging future. One day, she was approached by the Kapo, who asked to have her palm read. Excited by Lili's reading, the Kapo asked her to analyze letters from her boyfriend at the warfront, eager to know if he really missed her. Lili's 'interpretations' always confirmed what the Kapo wanted to hear. The Kapo asked Lili to write letters to her boyfriend for her and to illustrate them, which is how Lili obtained writing implements. She picked up papers from the office floor, hid them in her pocket, and took these materials back to her block mates. Lili wrote mainly at Birkenau, while her friends wrote primarily at Gross-Rosen, where writing didn't endanger their lives anymore.

Lili, on the other hand, wrote very little while at Gross-Rosen, and committed most of her time and efforts to organizing writing contests among her comrades, for which the prizes consisted mostly of food that she had set aside from her own minimal portions. Lili's clear purpose, as she wrote in her memoirs in Israel, was to create a certain social routine that would help the group to survive until liberation.

In Auschwitz, Lili wrote five poems with date-bearing headings and three without, including *The Song of The Camp* and *Where Is Our Homeland?*' whose headings mentioned only the location: Auschwitz. '*The Song of the Camp*' describes the female prisoners' yearning for the landscape

of the Danube, their "homeland," whereas *Where Is Our Homeland*? opens with the eponymous question and concludes with a prayer for success in finding said homeland, where all the women will be free and where each one of them will find that "mother is waiting to be hugged and kissed."

The third undated Auschwitz poem is *A poem for Berta*, which describes the horrible hunger in the camp. Lili refers to the need to write in order to take her mind off her hunger, but surprisingly concludes her verses with "there are no boys here, only girls, not to think of food." From this ending, it can be inferred that the poem was written in her early days in Birkenau, when the female prisoners' hunger for boys was still as strong as their hunger for bread. Another interesting point in the poem is the fact that Lili is referring to her shame at being so hungry that she envies someone else's portion of bread. The existence of shame and libido are signs that she was still in a reasonably good physical and psychological state. The poem was dedicated to Berta, but we have no clue who Berta was, nor why Lili wrote her a poem.

The first two undated poems appear to have been written around the same time, as their themes are very similar, and no mention is made of the camp and its hardships, whereas the third is very different, revealing a somewhat unspoken theme from the female prisoners' experience of Auschwitz: the lack of male company. From these undated works, the reader can learn a lot about Lili's physical and emotional state when she wrote each of the poems.

The first dated poem that Lili wrote in Birkenau was on May 31, 1944, *One Night in Birkenau*. The poem was written on a piece of paper filched from the office with German writing on the other side. It opens with the line: "Thousands of night time fears are chased by the wind, in the

night…"[16] The poem's content expresses the tortures of life in the *Lager* (camp), encompassing all of the terror, loneliness, and hopelessness within the camp. The inmates lived with their nightmares, in which their children (from whom they had been separated, and had likely already been slaughtered in the gas chambers) were asking for a cup of chocolate milk, but the alarm signaling the start of the workday cut the dream short:

"Rise, the sound of the alarm,

The camp bell high in the sky."

To the left of the poem is a miniature illustration of the muddy camp and its wooden barracks.

The poem *To the Doctor at Auschwitz* was written at Birkenau on June 15, 1944, in the same manner – in pencil on a piece of used paper, with a sketch in the upper left-hand corner depicting tiny women raising their hands towards Heaven. In her diary, which she wrote after arriving in Israel, Lili recounts that this poem was dedicated to a female Jewish doctor who risked her life by tearing a piece of cloth from her smock to bandage a wounded inmate. The poem describes the inmates' physical and mental torture and their yearning for the good doctor's sweet words of encouragement: "Stand strong! We shall overcome… Cursed hands will not drain our blood!" The Jewish physicians indeed offered inspiration and substantive assistance, since these were the

16 Kasticher, 'Yad Vashem Manuscripts'; the poems were translated into English by Suli Bruck in July 1973, with subsequent minor emendations by Zvi Ofer.

only things they could offer, as actual medication was highly scarce in Birkenau.[17]

Lili's third poem, *The March is On the Way (*or *Mock Song,* in its Hungarian origin*)*, written on July 30, 1944, describes the women's marching routine, fulfilling the Germans' order that all inmates – men and women alike – must sing on the way to and from work. It was sung to the tune of a well-known march, *Mariska*, describing the inmates' lives with much humor and irony, mocking their miserable conditions:

> "The march is on its way, out of the gate.
> Whoever stays in place gets a kiss on 'the place' ...
> Oh, how wonderful is our fortune of abundance....
> Those who envy our good fortune, should try and be a Jew."
>
> This poem includes a miniature illustration of marching women in the piece of paper's upper left corner.

The fourth poem, *The Women of the Camp*, written in Birkenau on November 11, 1944, expresses joy that another week "has passed, and all are still alive." It tells us of the horrifying starvation that the inmates suffered, yearning for bread as they listened to the sounds coming from their empty stomachs.

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17 Concerning the altruism of Jewish physicians and nurses, see also Vera Wilner's manuscripts submitted to Yad Vashem Archives on October 1, 1998 (File No. 03/10862), 28–30, reporting how they carried dysentery and typhus victims, at risk to their own lives, so that the Germans would not notice them and send them to the gas chambers.

Spring 1940 (written on December 3, 1944) was Lili's fifth – and probably last – poem written at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Unlike all the others, it describes the horrible historical events of spring 1940 that she had witnessed, in which people killed one another as the Danube flowed peacefully through the beautiful green forests typical of springtime in Europe. Lili's post-war notes label the poem *Dreaming of Novi Sad 1940*. Its most remarkable feature is the absence of any reference to the misery of Auschwitz, focusing instead on Lili's account of the Third Hungarian Army's butchering of Serbs and Jews as it passed through the region. This event preceded the mass shootings along the Danube in the winter of 1942, known in Serbian history as "the Cold Days."

The date on the poem is problematic, since we know that Lili was sent from Birkenau to Gross Rosen on November 14, 1944. One possible explanation for this discrepancy might be that Lili didn't know the exact date in Birkenau, while another possibility is that she meant November, but wrote December, since the location mentioned next to the date is "Auschwitz," and the paper is the same paper she used beforehand, stolen from the office in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Lili's Birkenau writings, all in Hungarian, included *Rules of Behaviour*,[18] a guidebook declaring that there is only one chance to survive the hell of Birkenau: acting as a close-knit, mutually supportive group that adheres to the moral values on which its members were raised. "Here,

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18 Lili Kasticher, *Rules of Behaviour*, was a handwritten manuscript found in Lili's diary. Lili's daughter, Daniela Sela, said that her mother told her that she wrote *Rules of Behaviour* in Birkenau, as corroborated in a seminar paper written by Daniela's daughter, Lili Sela Ben-Ami, in *Memories from Auschwitz: The Testimony of Lili Kasticher*, MA seminar paper, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2007. [Hebrew].

there is no longer 'I,' there is only 'we.' And as 'we,' we will be saved if we behave sincerely, sacrificing ourselves for others, displaying good will, never bearing grudges, or reporting others. Only thus can we maintain human dignity," concludes Lili.[19]

Lili's diary entries[20] – or memoirs, to be more precise – describe the birth of a baby in Birkenau. All of the women rejoiced, but they soon realized that it would mean disaster for the mother and everyone else. After considerable hesitation, they decide to give him up. They wrapped him in a blanket and placed him at the entrance to the block, without revealing who the mother was. Lili painfully describes this warm and sweetly breathing creature and refers to the difficult moral dilemma and the decision: giving him up to save the women in her block, including the mother herself.

This incident is apparently connected with a scene described in Lili's poem *One Night in Birkenau*,[21] a dream/nightmare about a boy surrounded by his three siblings, who are waiting for a promised cup of chocolate milk. The camp siren then sounds, robbing the terrified inmates of their dream.

Lili's works reflect the starvation, humiliation, beatings, hard labor, poor hygiene, crowding, fear of death, and feeling of uncertainty that plagued Auschwitz's inhabitants, all of which rendered life unbearable. However, her works also expressed great hope for a much better life in Israel after liberation, as exemplified by the final lines of the poem *Homeland*: "Those who suffered / will rejoice again one day."

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19 Kasticher, Yad Vashem Archives.

20 Ibid.

21 Written in Auschwitz, May 31, 1944.

Lili's writings in Auschwitz-Birkenau raise several interesting points concerning her struggle to defeat death both physically and morally, as she wrote in her diary, "...soft words are life itself." As long as we write, sing, and create, we will remain human.[22]

Had she been caught, Lili's punishment would undoubtedly have been death, yet the result of hard labor and starvation also meant death. Thus, her writing speaks to her struggle to defeat both humiliation at the hands of the Nazis and death, so the "price" of her actions was considered.[23]

Last but not least, Lili's Auschwitz writings refer to some heart-breaking moral dilemmas that she described in her poems and to a certain extent in her diary as well,[24] especially the one concerning the aforementioned female doctor, who always had altruistic solutions that afforded top priority to others and their lives and needs..[25]

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22 Ibid. pp. 12, 15.

23 Ibid.

24 Kasticher, Yad Vashem Archives, p. 13.

25 Such behavior is also described as overtly feminine in educational contexts by Nel Noddings, *The Education of Teachers,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Illinois, 1994.

Conclusions

Lili's writings in Auschwitz, alongside her attempts to encourage her friends to write,[26] are a heroic and unique measure of unarmed resistance, demonstrating her fight and metaphysical vengeance against the Nazis, as well as her struggle to remain human and help her friends to do so too. She realized that as long as the breath of life was within them and their spirit continued to resist the Nazi oppressors, they still had some chance of survival. She derives great mental and spiritual satisfaction from her ability to create, thus proving her humanity and freedom of mind, even in the hell of the forced labor camp. Above all, she exacted her revenge and triumphed over the Nazi oppressors who sought to turn her into an *Untermensch*.

Lili's creativity, due to its therapeutic empowerment, saved her and many of her friends by raising their self-esteem and pride, despite the sadistic, humiliating atmosphere created by the Nazis. The oeuvre of Lili and her block mates will be remembered long after the Nazi era fades into the past and is all but forgotten.

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26 Lili's friend Piri, Inmate No. 86855, encourages the writing of a poem about 'recreation' in Auschwitz. Juci Abraham submitted a poem as well: *A Sweet Dream*. Female inmates' participation in the prize competitions that Lili organized intensified in the Oberhohenelbe Labor Camp, where physical conditions were slightly improved, with a positive effect on the overall atmosphere as well. The inmates were working for the Lorenz plant, which manufactured radio receivers and other electronic devices. They slept on mattresses and two-person platforms in an attic. Once every two weeks, on Sundays (when the factory was closed.), they had time for personal hygiene. Lili used her free time for social activity because she knew that a reinforced spirit would rescue her comrades from death.

In a recent newspaper article, Prof. Dov Kulka inquired: "What was the essence of Nazi Antisemitism?... The Jews, by race, were the biological source of 'the Jewish spirit' ...[that] was the enemy because of its ideas about the unity of the world and equality of humanity... The opposite idea was a conception of inequality among races... and a constant war for survival. They wanted to return the world to its 'natural order', that is, contrary to humanistic ideas originating in Judaism."[27] The present chapter uniquely identifies the transformation of accepting one's fate into a source of creativity that accords dignity and strength to life in a world of brutality and violence, as exemplified by Lili Kasticher, whose creativity turned a chaotic world into an island of sanity and possible survival.

The book *Lily Kasticher, The Woman Who Wrote in Auschwitz*, was published in Hebrew by Moreshet in 2022, and the above-cited article is based on the book.

27 Dov Kulka, *Haaretz* (daily newspaper), April 8, 2013 [Hebrew].

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L'écriture féminine of the Holocaust: Hilda Dajč and Diana Budisavljević

Nevena Daković

"All philosophizing ends at the barbed-wire fence, and reality, which, far away on the other side you can't even imagine or else you would howl with pain, faces one in its totality. That reality is unsurpassable, our immense misery; every phrase describing the strength of the soul is dispersed by tears of hunger and cold; all hope of leaving here soon disappears before the monotonous perspective of passive existence which, whatever you compare it with, bears no resemblance to life. It is not even life's irony."[1]

Two women, Hilda Dajč[2] from Belgrade and Diana Budisavljević from Zagreb, one a Jewess and the other a non-Jewess, one victim and the other a savior, share similar traumatic, intimate, and emotional

1 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 4," *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

2 Dajč is the Serbian version of the Jewish name Deitch. In the absence of an English version, the paper features the Serbian transliteration.

Nevena Daković, Full Professor, Faculty of Dramatic Arts, University of Arts in Belgrade
ORCID: 0000-0001-9704-0727
email: n.m.dakovic@gmail.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15038423

experiences of the camps, seen as "the profoundest tragedy"[3] in the Independent State of Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH). Describing their lives in the Semlin Judenlager[4] and the infamous death camp of Jasenovac necessitates placing their writings at the two extremes of the array of Holocaust female manuscripts, including *Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life and Letters from Westerbork* (1981), *Denik Helgy* (2012), and *The Journal of Helen Berr* (*Hélène Berr: Journal 1942–1944*, 2008). On the one hand, Hilda Dajč is often referred to as "Serbian Anne Frank" as her letters are seen as a shorter, minimalist version of Anne's *Diary* while still retaining the intimacy, extensive range of feelings, and moments remembered and quoted as the most personal and essential experience of the Holocaust. On the other hand, Diana's *Diary* stylistically echoes the writings of male survivors (Levi, Antelme, Amery, Wiesel, the prose of Imre Kertész), supported by the facts and figures but without their philosophical reflection, explorations of trauma, and the experience of humiliation and suffering from the inside of the barbed wire. Her *Dairy* is primarily an outstanding document, an almost perfect court-like testimony about the camps, horrors, and victims, composed with the precision of a history book. It is only in its later parts that it becomes a partial and scarce (auto)biography or factual ego document, which both aligns

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3 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 4," *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

4 Judenlager Semlin, despite being less than 5000 meters away from the center of Belgrade, on the opposite bank of the Sava River, was officially on the territory of the Independent State of Croatia and, thus, part of Croatian system of camps, same as Jasenovac. It was under control of the NDH; it had German guards and only the supplies came from Belgrade, Serbia.

with and contrasts the emotionally charged, affective, and intimate tone of Hilda's letters. Therefore, both the letters and the *Dairy* demand a comprehensive approach and multi-perspective comparison between the two heroines, Hilda and Diana, encompassing their lives, works, writing styles, education, and sacrificial and Samaritan spirit.

Hilda and her letters

Hilda Dajč was born in 1922 "into a wealthy and prominent family of Ashkenazi Jews in Belgrade."[5] Intelligent, sensitive, and talented, she was among the best students of her generation. She commenced her studies of Architecture, which were abruptly interrupted by the Nazi invasion of Yugoslavia and the bombing of Belgrade on April 6, 1941.

During the first months of the occupation, her life remained relatively unchanged since her father, Emil Dajč, secured a prominent position in the "Vertretung der Judischen Gemainchaft, the representative body of the Jewish community in Belgrade,"[6] allowing him to protect his family from the deteriorating living conditions. Despite this, the emphatic, curious, and open-minded Hilda could not ignore the effects of the rapidly growing anti-Semitic measures and legislation. After volunteering at the Jewish hospital, she decided to comply with German orders and "report to the head office of the *Judenreferat*, the Jewish

5 "The Letters of Hilda Dajč," *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

6 Ibid.

Section of the Special Police."[7] On December 8, 1941, along with other Jewish women and children, she became one of the first prisoners in Pavillion no. 3 at the newly established camp, *Judenlager Semlin*. The exact date of her death is unknown, but she was probably killed in a *Gaswagen* somewhere between the end of March and May 10, 1942.

While at the camp, Hilda wrote four letters to Nada Novak and Mirjana Petrović, her high school friends and members of the Literary Society. In the first letter dated December 7, 1941 – the eve before her departure to the camp – she explains her decision as an act of free will, conscience, and duty. Hilda expresses optimism about the assistance she would provide to others in the camp while also lyrically evoking the past. "I will think of you often. You are my fondest memory of the most pleasant period of my life – the literary society."[8]

The second letter, written on the second day in the camp (December 9, 1941), describes daily life at the camp as well as her more personal memories and thoughts. Hilda writes about the books she had brought with her – Heine, Goethe, Pascal, Montaigne, English and Hebrew textbooks – reminding us of the same paradox found in movies like *Silence of the Sea* (*Le Silence de la mer,* Vercors, 1942) and *French Suite (Suite francaise*, Irene Nemirovsky, 2004). People continue to adore and respect German culture and art despite the bestiality and inhumanity of

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7 Ibid.

8 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 1," *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024. The emerging nostalgia is resonant with the one found in another Holocaust diary—that of Helene Berr. For more, see Nevena Daković, *Slike bez secanja: trauma, film, tranmisija*, Fakultet dramskih umetnosti, Beograd, 2020.

the Nazis. The German artistic and civilizational achievements, their music or literature, is not obfuscated by the many atrocities committed in WW2 by the brutal Aryans.

Hilda's reflections are intertwined with a graphic description of the living conditions, revealing her bifurcated emotions and detached perspective, as if she was seeing the world and herself within it from someplace high above and outside her body. In the second and third letters, Hilda speaks about only 80 cm of living space and the dirty straw beddings on the third gallery; of the Košava wind blowing through the barracks and the temperature dropping to below 0; about the latrines a couple of hundred meters away and only two sinks, or merely two taps, that provided water for several thousand people. From the letter dated December 13, we learn that Pavilion no. 3 has become one huge stable "without walls, without barriers, with everyone sharing the same quarters"[9] where prisoners ate nothing but boiled cabbage. Her greatest fear was turning into certainty that her family would soon join her, since the Germans were resolute in making Belgrade the first *Judenfrei* city in occupied Europe. Despite oscillating between pessimism, realism, and cynicism, Hilda concludes: "Other than that, everything is wonderful. Especially our neighbors — the Gypsy camp."[10]

The fourth letter to Mirjana Petrović is distinct from the other three sent within the first week at the camp, as it was composed following

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9 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 3," *Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory*, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

10 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 3," Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

several short meetings that Mirjana and Hilda/the two friends managed to organize at a time when Hilda, alongside other prisoners, crossed the frozen river Sava to meet the staff of the Jewish hospital on the opposite bank. During the last such occasion, the guard prohibited them from speaking, which only aggravated the already bleak situation that the desperate, pale, thin, and silent Hilda had found herself in. "I know there's no hope of our getting out soon (...) Way back when I was a child I was afraid they would bury me alive. And now this is some sort of vision of death. Will there be some sort of resurrection? I've never thought so much about the two of you as I do now. I continually talk with you and yearn to see you, because to me you are that 'paradise lost'."[11]

The silence that ensued after her final words about lost hope was broken only after the war, when her letters were reprinted numerous times. However, contrary to expectations, her story has not been adapted for cinema or television. Instead, the revival of interest in Hilda Dajč can be said to have coincided with the "unearthing" of the story around "Staro Sajmište" / Old Fairground, which involved the story of *Judenlager Semlin*, the Holocaust site where Hilda was held captive. The *Judenlager Semlin* – the camp adapted from the pavilions of the Belgrade Fair and one of the first camps in Europe, established in December 1941 on the outskirts of Belgrade – garnered renewed attention in 1990s as urban planners revised their plans for the broader Old Fairground area (1937 Exhibition ground), which posed challenges.[12] The two interconnected (hi)stories continued the discussion about the Holocaust

11 Hilda Dajč, "Letter 4," Semlin Judenlager in Serbian Public Memory, https://www.open.ac.uk/socialsciences/semlin/en/letters.php, accessed 29-07-2024.

12 There were various proposals, ranged from it becoming the open-air space for cultural events and a site of New Belgrade opera to it being

being erased, pushed into oblivion, or obliterated from the collective memory of people in Belgrade and wider Serbia.

The growing interest resulted in two closely related websites, believed to mark the end of the transmedia storytelling related to *Judenlager Semlin*. The website *Visit to Staro Sajmiste* (https://www.starosajmiste.info/sr/) cannot be properly understood without previously exploring the website www.semlin.info (*Judenlager Semlin in Serbian Public Memory*) cited as its online source. The website *Visit* presents the history of the site, which has undergone radical repurposing a number of times, referencing *Judenlager* as a mere episode. Nevertheless, it is its most important episode – one that sparked the chain of remembrance and debates associated with the memory boom and the emergence of Holocaust studies that swept through Serbia, albeit with considerable delay.[13] The meticulous chronology of the site connects various relatively separate historical episodes, marking the shifts and redirecting memory in accordance with Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory.[14] As suggested by the author, the ongoing processes of ethnic conflicts, decolonization, and civil rights movements in third-world countries – Serbia most certainly being one

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preserved in its original form for exhibition or becoming either Yad Vashem in Serbia or Serbian Yad Vashem.

13 Nevena Daković, and Ivana Uspenski, "The Memory of the Holocaust and the New Hyper/Cyber- Textuality" in: Cornis Pope, Marcel (ed.), *Crossing Borders, Crossing Genres: New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2014, pp. 364–385.

14 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto, California, 2009.

of them – galvanized the memory of the Holocaust while also being spurred and shaped by it.[15]

By insisting on the "remembrance of one history" or memory narrative, the *Judenlager Semlin* serves as a vehicle for the rereading Serbian history of the 1990s. It contains versatile research and multimedia sources about the Holocaust that also shapes post-war narratives (*Remembering Semlin 1945–2008*). One of its greatest merits, at least for this research, is the segment dedicated to Hilda Dajč, which features a well-written introduction, a bio-note, and four letters in Serbian and in English accompanied by the photos and facsimiles.

Among various visual adaptations, the brilliant graphic novel by Aleksandar Zoograf, *The Letters of Hilda Dajč (Pisma Hilde Dajč,* 2018*),* stands out among others of its kind. However, this and other projects such as *Light of the Fireflies (Svetlost svitaca*, 2022) a mobile application, or *Invisible Monuments (Nevidljivi spomenici,* 2016), a multimedia performance and theatrical production, are all part of broader educational projects related to the Holocaust targeting the high school population.

The films based upon Hilda's life and letters are scarce, consisting only of two eponymous short uninventive documentaries made two decades apart: Radoslav Ognjanović's and Svetislav Vucković's *The Letters from Hilda Dajč (Pisma Hilde Dajč)*, made in 1992 and 2019, respectively. The most recent one that premiered on International Holocaust Remembrance Day 2023, *The Fifth Letter of Hilda Dajč* (*Peto pismo Hilde Dajč*), is conceived as a meta-letter dedicated to post generations about the four original letters and their historical context. Through a combination of well-known documentary shots of the Holocaust (including scenes

15 Ibid.

from the Warsaw Ghetto or Bergen Belsen) and the reconstructive fiction parts, it narrates the story of the Holocaust in Belgrade in general and of Hilda Dajč and her letters in particular, using excerpts from the letters as the voice off commentary.

Diana's Diary

Diana Obexer-Budisavljević (Innsbruck 1897) met her husband, Dr. Julije Budisavljević, while he was an internee in the clinic in Innsbruck. The newlyweds. moved to Zagreb, Julije's hometown, where he became a professor of surgery. Though an ethnic Serb from Croatia, he was also of German-Serbian origin and, more importantly, a close friend of the notorious cardinal Alozije Stepinac, allowing him and his family (Diana and two daughters) to enjoy a privileged and protected position. But similar to Hilda, Diana could not calmly and passively witness the suffering of the others, so she chose to become one of the few pioneering humanitarian workers, comparable to other great saviors of (Jewish) children like Oscar Schindler or Irina Sander. Through her Action (known under the German name *Aktion Diana Budisavljević*), she saved more than 12,000 Serbian children from the Jasenovac death camp.[16] After the end of the war, in the new state of Yugoslavia, the Action archive was confiscated from her. In 1972, she returned to Innsbruck, where she lived until her death in 1978.

16 Jasenovac complex was the only concentration camp that had a special children's camp.

The (hi)story of Diana was largely forgotten until the late 1980s and the text – published in the Croatian newspaper *Vjesnik* – that (mis) placed Diana within the official history of World War II, where both the Holocaust and the genocide of Serbs in Croatia were relegated to the margin of the prevailing narrative of the revolution and the newly established socialist state, defined by the motto of brotherhood and unity. Inspired by the newspaper article, Diana's granddaughter, Silvia Szabo, managed to find and translate (from German into Croatian) the *Diary* and have it published in 2003. In the altered political and social context of post-Yugoslavia, the *Diary* became the focal point of the cosmopolitan / European narrative of the noble savior of camp victims; part of the "soft" version of the history suitable for modern Croatia, then still a candidate for EU membership. From a Serbian perspective, her story was the crown argument regarding the ethnic cleansing of Serbs in Croatia, especially in Jasenovac, and became the cornerstone of the new Serbian national victimhood narrative.

Diana Budisavljević begins her diary in October 1941 and ends it in May 1945. The diary contains 388 entries written in a critical, objective, and almost detached style. The entries of uneven length describe the hardships of the humanitarian work and of the everyday life in Zagreb, while the tragic scenes from the camp come to the forefront only on the occasion of Diana`s visit to the camps. Several notes are mere to-do lists (call someone, check about the milk, etc.). In a chronological and bureaucratic manner, Diana writes about contacts with the officials and provides details of the arrangements for the trip to the camp; she even details the various health problems that cause her to stay at home. The longer entries with headings (*Transport from Dalmatia, Children's Hospital,* etc.) are those cited in the screen adaptations.

Even when expressing her sorrow, fear, or shock because of the atrocities she had witnessed, Diana stays calm in a rational, reticent, and male-like way. The general style of the diary could also be described as behaviorist since it sticks to the obvious, to what is seen from the outside, to evidence and fact, and seldom delves into the thoughts or feelings of the author or victims. In a sustained manner, Diana offers physiological and graphic descriptions of almost clinical observations (*Children included babies of only two months; Worms are exiting the bodies of dying children; The dehydrated child died on the pot*), leaving the reader to elicit emotions based on the stated facts.

Moreover, the *Diary* also contains detailed and impartial stories – confirmed by the witness survivors in the films – of the forced labor, Serbian children from Kozara being killed in the camp, and the involvement of the Catholic church. Diana is ultimately the one who comes forward to acknowledge the atrocities and genocide committed by Ustasha in the NDH. These memory facts are used by the Serbian side as crucial arguments about Jasenovac as the "Auschwitz of the Balkans."

With honesty and a measured tone, she provides rational and pragmatic motivation for her work and *Action*. She recognizes that, unlike for the Jewish population, there was no concern for Orthodox Christian prisoners and victims, promptly identifying her own niche where her help was most needed. Diana was not affiliated with any organization or involved in politics; she was simply fulfilling her moral duty. She refused to see the atrocities and suffering as something normal in abnormal and brutal times. She refused to accept, to use Foucault's terms, the normality of insanity, and believed in the duty to fight against it.[17]

17 There is not as much ethical indignation against the perpetrators in the diary as one might expect. The perpetrators are embodiments of the

Assuming the role of savior does not exempt one from experiencing trauma – the loss of Diana's per-war life, scenes from the camp, and, most significantly, the loss of her files containing personal information of children and women. Under the new regime, she became a genuine victim, one who was robbed and humiliated.[18] According to historian Nataša Mataušić, although Diana knew from the beginning that the archive would be taken away from her,[19] she did not expect to be completely excluded from the further work of tracing and uniting the families based on the documents that she knew how to interpret best. Besides, the manner in which the files were taken away from her was cruel, particularly considering that one of the regime's roughnecks was her former co-worker and assistant, a member of the communist party. The leadership of the new multi-ethnic state sought to control historical sources, to create a tightly controlled historiography, thus erasing traces and proof of ethnic war crimes. The files proving that Jasenovac was a notorious death camp, a site of two genocides – the Holocaust and the widely forgotten and forced into historical oblivion genocide of Serbs – posed a serious threat to the official state

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banality of evil – zealous, brutal, mad, but also clumsy and lousy. Sometimes, it seems that Diana's indignation, even toward true monsters like Max Luburic, who was in charge of all camps in Croatia, is more socially and class-determined. On the one side, she is appalled by Ustasha's lack of manners as much as by their sadism and monstrosity but, on the other side, she intuitively agrees with her compatriot – an "officer and gentleman" from Austria who in a reticent way confirms all the horrible rumors about Jasenovac and warns her to be careful when entering the camp.

18 Various narratives use the metaphor of the hunter, as Diana is named after the Roman goddess of the hunt. Metaphorically, in the end, she turns from hunter to prey.

19 Nataša Mataušić, *Diana Budisavljević*, Laguna, Beograd, 2021.

principle of historical "leveling." However, post-socialist and post-Yugoslav ethnohistorical revisionism recognized the trauma of interethnic violence that Diana's files testified to, enabling the past to be rewritten and reinterpreted to serve the current political goals of both Serbia and Croatia. Through Diana's *Diary,* the (hi)story of Jasenovac emerged not only as a disputed memory but also as a double trauma for Serbian victims and Croatian perpetrators. Diana's archive was discovered where it was most likely stored the whole time and used at the most convenient time during the heated debate between Serbs and Croats, regarding not only the number of victims in Jasenovac but also the general nature of the camp.

The growing popularity of the *Diary* inspired new literary and cinematic versions. At least four books based on the original *Diary* deserve mention. *The Heroine from Innsbruck – Diana Obexer-Budisavljević* (Boško Lomović, 2013) is the earliest, rather biased attempt that, however, never got beyond the elementary pseudo-documentary format of gathered testimonies and analysis. The 2017 biographical novel by young Tyrolian writer Wilhelm Kheus is a carefully fictionalized version of Diana's life enriched with episodes written after the testimonies of her collaborators, rescued children, and their families. Her work foregrounded in the title *Diana's List* – clearly alluding to *Schindler's List* (*Steven Spielberg,* 1993) – is neatly contextualized within the official history of World War II and afterward linked with the wars of the Yugoslav breakup, providing a diachronic perspective necessary for the international audience not familiar with the topic. The other title, its Serbian counterpart entitled *Austrian Woman* (*Austrijanka*, 2021), written by Zoran Milekić, is a testimony about the "forgotten heroine of WW2" respected, loved, and glorified by the Serbs. The fourth and arguably the best book is Nataša Matausić's published PhD thesis,

which presents Diana with all her universal, noble values, devoid of national(ist) interpretative predilections. In the Serbian documentary film, hastily made before the Diana Budisavljević revelatory docu-fiction, the segments and events from the *Diary* are complemented by the memories and testimonies of the rescued children as highlighted in the title *Diana's Children* (*Dianina deca,* Slađana Zarić, 2018). *The Diary of Diana B. (Dnevnik Diane Budisavljević,* 2019, Dana Budisavljević) innovatively and thoughtfully recounts the traumatic events that took place, employing a post-traumatic film[20] format characterized by fragmentary non-linear narration and hybridization of diverse film footage – archive shots, documentary interviews with the rescued children, reconstructive fiction – all accompanied, much in Bressonian manner, by Diana's voiceover reading parts of her diary. Docudrama is, (un)expectedly, devoid of the spectacular scenes of violence and overemphasized dramatic moments, while black and white photography is, expectedly, consistent with archival storytelling. As an early film of dissonant memory in Croatia,

it does not define the roles of villains and victims along national lines but rather paves the way for a complementary story of Serbian victims.

Finally, two feature films should be added to the list – *Dara of Jasenovac* (*Dara iz Jasenovca,* Predrag Antonijević, 2021) and *The Children of Kozara*[21] (*Djeca Kozare,* Lordan Zafranović, in post-production) – in

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20 Joshua Hirsch, *Afterimage: Film, Trauma, and the Holocaust* (Emerging Media: History, Theory, Narrative), Temple University Press, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2004.

21 *Children of Kozara*, written by Arsen Diklić in 1986, is the first scenario to mention Diana Budisavljević. However, due to the turbulent times,

which Diana has an episodic *deus ex machina* appearance, rescuing the children from the camp and reuniting them.

Transmedia memory narratives

The variety of literary and screen adaptations – encompassing books, graphic novels, films, and websites – with a large number focusing on the life and work of Diana Budisavljević, while the story of Hilda Dajč remains without a proper film story, possibly map out the trajectory of transmedia storytelling. In this case, transmedia storytelling is also understood as a specific mode of fictionalizing trauma (history/memory) in post-socialism, one that neatly combines documentary (faction) and fiction, resulting in reconstructive and docu fiction. The hybridized multimedia narratives facilitate resolving trauma as a contested and troubled past, transforming it into a multidirectional memory that connects the events of World War II with the experiences of ex-Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s.

The original diary and letters, as historical and ego documents, serve as the basis for multidirectional and cosmopolitan/transnational memory and trauma narratives of the present. Besides being a historical source or playing the role of memory makers, in the context of transmedia storytelling, the transition of the narrative from one media platform to another entails broadening the stories and expanding story worlds.

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the topic was considered inappropriate and delicate and did not receive financial support until 2022.

Fictional adaptations of facts contend with the proximity, diminishing boundaries, and dense overlapping of history and memory, facts and fiction, as well as the traumas of both perpetrators and victims, rendering *l`écriture féminine* of the Holocaust universal. Transforming national memories into multidirectional ones allows the (hi)stories of the past to live in the present.

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Women's Holocaust Narratives in the Yugoslav *Jewish Almanac*

Žarka Svirčev

The *Jewish Almanac* [*Jevrejski almanah*] (1954–1971) was the most significant vehicle of self-representation for the Jewish community in socialist Yugoslavia. It was a multidisciplinary and secularly oriented publication that was aimed at the broader, transnational community. One of the *Almanac's* distinctive roles was commemorating and memorializing World War II. The *Almanac* served as a hybrid memorialization platform, intersecting diverse memory formations. The concepts or strategies of memorialization are organized by genres. In articles and essays, memorialization is consistent with the state's official narrative. The prevailing mnemonic narrative emphasizes the antifascist struggle, the heroic discourse of the partisans' liberation movement, and the collective suffering. In the context of Yugoslav *brotherhood and unity*, the memory of the victims of fascism did not acknowledge their ethnic origin. The state's politics of remembrance did not address the Holocaust. This tendency is also noted by the authors of the *Bibliography of Jewish Almanac*, Biljana Albahari and Vesna Trijić,[1]

1 Biljana Albahari i Vesna Trijić, *Bibliografija Jevrejskog almanaha*, Savez jevrejskih opština Srbije, Beograd, 2023, p. 29.

Žarka Virčev, Senior Research Associate, Institute for Literature and Arts, Belgrade
ORCID: 0000-0002-0244-644X, email: zarkasv@yahoo.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15038967

pointing out that "there are few articles about the Holocaust in Europe in *The Jewish Almanac*. Much more common were the texts about Jews who participated as fighters in the Second World War. Memories and written biographies of national heroes were recorded [...] Of particular documentary importance are the appendices designed in imitation of collective biographies, with names, brief biographical notes, and photographs of the dead".[2]

Nonetheless, the *Almanac* had a noteworthy Literary Section. The editor of the Literary Section was Ivan Ivanji, and within the Section, prominent Yugoslav writers were published (Danilo Kiš, Filip David, Ivo Andrić, Isak Samokovlija, Đorđe Lebović, Ivan V. Lalić). The Literary Section

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2 The representation of the female Jewish community in non-fiction genres also corresponds to this mnemonic pattern. Edita Vajs's text "Women's Participation in Jewish Public Work" is an exemplary reference in this context. Although Vajs mostly focuses on the organized work of women after the war, she traces the origin of networking and activism of Jewish women in the South Slavic region. In the context of WWII, the key figures are female fighters and members of the resistance movement, that is, Jewish women who participated in the illegal actions of the Communist Party during the 1930s. The text's conclusion illustrates the hierarchization of the victims. Vajs concludes that today, Jewish women must continue to actively participate in public life because by doing so, they pay tribute to "comrades who fought and died, and to all those who are not alive because they were Jewish." The articles articulate the (self)awareness of the specific status and suffering of the Jews during WWII. However, Vajs shapes the representation through the official discourse of memorialization. There is a similar discursive practice in biographical articles about Jewish women (communists, illegals, partisans). Edita Vajs, "Učešće žena u jevrejskom javnom radu u Jugoslaviji," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1957/58, p. 155.

incorporated a different strategy than the official discourse of the socialist memory culture "because the theme of the Holocaust was strikingly prevalent in fictional genres."[3] In a monograph dedicated to the Holocaust in Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav literature, Stijn Vervaet shows that during the socialist period, literature pointed to the blind spots of the representation and memorialization of various experiences of the Second World War, i.e., the Holocaust, and, consequently, socialist memory culture was less hegemonic than assumed.[4] Different practices of narrativization of the experience of the Second World War/Holocaust, or in other words, memorialization that intersects in the *Almanac*, allow us to view the almanac platform as a space of articulation of "entangled memory"[5] and of "studying the plurality of competing acts of remembering"[6] and the dynamics, even the dialectic, of mnemonic forms. The *entanglement* refers to the intersection of diverse social,

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3 Biljana Albahari i Vesna Trijić, *Bibliografija Jevrejskog almanaha*, Savez jevrejskih opština Srbije, Beograd, 2023, p. 30.

4 Stijn Vervaet, *Holocaust, War and Transnational Memory Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018, p. 4.

5 The concept of "entangled memory on a theoretical level, brings to the fore the entangledness of acts of remembering. From a synchronic perspective, memory's entanglement is presented in two ways. Every act of remembering inscribes an individual in multiple social frames. This polyphony entails the simultaneous existence of concurrent interpretations of the past. From a diachronic perspective, memory is entangled in the dynamic relationship between single acts of remembering and changing mnemonic patterns. Memory scholars, therefore, uncover boundless crossreferential configurations." Gregor Feindt et al., "Entangled memory: Toward a third wave in memory studies," *History and Theory* Vol. 53 No. 1, 2014, p. 24.

6 Ibid, p. 32.

political, and cultural contexts and viewpoints from both synchronic and diachronic perspectives, that is, subject positions – national, religious, class, and gender – that coexist in the synchronic plane, while some are suppressed in the diachronic plane. The *Almanac* deserves a privileged place in research because it provides insights into how members of the Jewish community discursively shaped self-representation, engaging in dialogue with the dominant socialist culture of memory while also opposing the homogenization of its collectivist-heroic narrative. Moreover, the Literary Section prominently features not just the Holocaust theme but also a large number of female writers.

The works of Yugoslav Jewish female authors have recently attracted increased attention from researchers. In addition to studies dedicated to individual authors, Dina Katan Ben-Zion and Katarzyna Taczyńska have both offered instructional frameworks for further research. Katan Ben-Zion focuses on the fictional works of female authors, offering a comprehensive overview of the work of Jewish women in Yugoslav literature and noting that "the female perspective embedded in their work is unique as it conveys feminine status, position, and outlook in a changed world, while patriarchal conceptions and practices were still deeply rooted in society, along with a new recognition of feminine capacity and potential."[7] Taczyńska investigates literature in its broadest sense (fictional, para-literary, and documentary works), viewing it as the testimony of a specific experience – namely, a non-homogeneous experience of war – and an expression of diverse forms of female subjectivity. Referring to the marginalized position of these authors,

7 Dina Katan Ben-Zion, "A Symphony of Unique Voices: The Literary Testimony of Jewish Women Writers in Post-World War II Yugoslavia," *Studia Judaica* Vol. 21 No. 41, 2018, p. 60. In the text, one can find biographical information about most authors who collaborated in the *Almanac*.

Taczyńska sees them as "representations with a strong performative potential that can initiate a change in the way the past is conceptualized."[8] The title of Katarzyna Taczyńska's paper – *(un)spoken histories* – may be generalized in the context of Yugoslav Jewish women's works. As I will show through the example of women's literature in the *Almanac*, women did speak, write, and testify. However, their testimonies remain on the margins of memory culture because they challenged the revolutionary heroic narrative and the patriarchal configuration of mnemonic signifiers and practices.

The *Almanac's* Literary Section featured Frida Filipović, Julija Najman, Miriam Steiner, Maja Zrnić, Eva Tićak Weiler, Sonja Nahman Premeru, Zora Dirnbach, Ina Jun Broda, Zlata Bojović, Dalia Lea Štern, Mirjana Papo, Vesna Demajo, and Marija Šmolka.[9] It included prose, poetry, and (radio) drama.[10] These texts are highly gendered, originating from

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8 Katarzyna Taczyńska, "(Un)spoken Histories: The Second World War and Yugoslav Jewish Women," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 17, 2023, p. 3.

9 In addition to the Yugoslav women authors who published their texts, in 1967, *Jewish Almanac* published Ešref Čampara's study on Laura Papo Bohoreta's works, translations of Nelly Sachs' poems, and an accompanying study by Ljubiša Jocić.

10 The exception is Ina Jud-Broda's memoir *From my Black Notebook* [*Iz moje "Crne beležnice"*]. It contains the author's memories of people and events from the Dalmatian partisan hospitals composed from anecdotes from the diary that she kept during 1943. At the same time, it is the only para-literary text in the *Almanac* that discusses the participation of women in the Liberation Movement. Jud-Broda's memoirs are engaging; for example, they detail the daily life of partisans wounded and the hospital staff about, the activities of the Women's Antifascist Front of Yugoslavia in Split, her own friendship with nurse Lea, the atti-

a woman's epistemological and experiential position within the Holocaust. The corpus reflects the translation or transition of "communicative memory" into the field of "cultural memory," in Jan Assmann's terms.[11] These texts depict actors, agency, and emotional landscapes absent from official commemorative practices, historiography, and dominant literary production. They seek to legitimize women's specific experiences in the public sphere as traumatic.

Identifying the typical features of this literary corpus is challenging because it entails neglecting the author's specificities and interests. The texts published in the *Almanac*, in the context of the author's poetics, open up several interpretive possibilities. The psychological drama of concealing one's Jewish identity during the war is one of the formative motifs in Julia Najman's books *Making Faces* [Nameštanje lica], Black White [Crno belo], and Places, Events [Predeli, događaji]. In the *Almanac*, this motif in Julia Najman's texts does not play the role of a cohesive factor as in her books, but rather an element of polycentrism of female experiences. A key feature of the *Almanac's* content is the

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tude of the wounded towards female staff, which reflected patriarchal attitudes about women, and the ethos and spirit of the hospital community. Moreover, Jud-Broda's anecdotes are presented in a humoristic tone, one of the most amusing being that the wounded partisans referred to the massage that she incorporated into the rehabilitation process as *marxsage* (marksaža): "Surely, in their subconscious, the combination of modern medicine with Marxism seemed to be the peak of effective therapy." Ina Jud-Broda, „Iz moje 'Crne bilježnice'," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1967, p. 199.

11 Jan Assmann, "Communicative and Cultural Memory," in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, De Gruyter Berlin, New York, 2010, pp. 109–118.

mediation and curation of the diversity of women's experiences during the Second World War, i.e., the Holocaust. Women's experiences are not reduced to one paradigm but rather display generational and class differences, cultural peculiarities, and experience in partisan units, refugees/shelters, and camps. Moreover, the authors open numerous taboo socio-political issues of that time: anti-Semitism, crimes in the Independent State of Croatia, wartime collaboration, and passivity of so-called neutral observers, but also numerous anthropological and existential questions.

In terms of poetics, the psychological story/drama and the subjective, intimate narration or experiences hold a privileged position. As Dina Katan Ben-Zion concludes, "Most of the literature created by Jewish women writers is generally realistic, delivered as a life story of the heroine, written out of an evident urge to 'let the world know'."[12] To put it somewhat more precisely, the realism of the micro-histories of the *Almanac's* women writers, while being documentary-based, with the documentary aspect playing a (necessarily) formative role in these texts, primarily reflects an analytical realism focusing on the psychological and affective states of the heroines, their inner experiences and motivations. Personalization, as shown in prose, for example, is narrated in the first person; the heroine's stream of thoughts is focalized through the narrator's voice, reflecting the affective anchoring of the narrative. This approach allowed for the configuration of traumatic experiences beyond the notion of testimony as "historical material."[13]

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12 Dina Katan Ben-Zion, "A Symphony of Unique Voices: The Literary Testimony of Jewish Women Writers in Post-World War II Yugoslavia," *Studia Judaica* Vol. 21 No. 41, 2018, p. 60.

13 Stijn Vervaet saw literature in the socialist period as crucial to re-conceptualizing the discourse of testimony. Testimonies were used

Furthermore, this approach allowed for unobserved experiences as well as experiences suppressed by social taboos or cultural normalization/stereotyping to emerge.

The *Almanac's* first issue features Frida Filipović's short story "Roses on Porcelain" (Ruže na porcelanu), which depicts the heroine's life story from early girlhood to internment.[14] The author dedicated the story to her mother.[15] The short story contains micro-procedures that later

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in the SFRY to document war crimes (or as a basis for demands for reparations), either for legal or ideological purposes. Therefore, the testimonies were directed towards facts related to crimes or heroic acts, uniting the dominant motifs of suffering and resistance, and so contributing to "revolutionary history." Stijn Vervaet, *Holocaust, War and Transnational Memory Testimony from Yugoslav and Post-Yugoslav Literature*, Routledge, London and New York, 2018, pp. 4–6.

14 Frida Filipović, "Ruže na porcelanu," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1954, pp. 214–221.

15 We learn about this dedication in an interview with Frida Filipovic from 1998, stored in the archives of the American Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. (https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/vha48917). Frida Filipović subtly transposed autobiographical elements into her short stories and novel. They are more concerned with positions and roles (for example, a Jewish woman married to a Serb who had hidden during the war or as prototypes for certain characters) than specific contents. However, there is probably an additional layer of autobiographical experience that, in the absence of something akin to a memoir, eludes readers/potential researchers. In the short story *Roses on Porcelain*, a father who has returned from the Galician battlefield meets with his young daughter, who does not recognize him because she does not remember him. Frida Filipović spoke about a similar event in an interview from 1998, showing the photo taken immediately after her father's return, in which the photographer staged the meeting between father and daughter. The encounter is narrated in a short story in

appeared in various ways in the *Almanac's* women's literary corpus. Several authors write about the pre-war life of the Jewish community, while some authors focus on the war and post-war period, that is, on the experience of the Holocaust trauma. Filipović shows a distinct sensitivity towards the archeology of everyday life of a Jewish family through the presence of numerous items from its material culture and by illuminating intimate family rituals, the synagogue practice, social standards, ethical foundations, and connection to heritage and tradition, as well as their involvement in the broader community's "fate." All these elements in the story function as characterizations or motivations for the character's actions, but they also represent an essential aspect of memorialization. Focusing on the history of private life, which Frida Filipović conveys to us palpably and vividly, is a narrative strategy for remembering a devastated existence and culture. In *Roses on Porcelain*, there is a clear intention to chronicle (one's) life, to archive the experience in its most integral form, that of love, regret, loss, joy, anxiety, hope, and to preserve the memory of life in its uniqueness. We find (and leave) the old woman in the story awaiting the arrival of the police to detain her. Mediating her memories through the narrator/literature is an attempt at remembering her life. The awareness of the inevitability of her violent death emotionally charges the reader. Moreover, *Roses on Porcelain* sheds light on the experience of cross-marginalization in the context of the official culture of remembrance – a Jew, a woman, an old woman. Filipović's narrative can also be seen as an interventionist act in the dominant culture of remembrance and from

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the same emotional register that Filipović used in the interview. In other words, Frida Filipović seemed more interested in literary interpretation and conveying lived experience and the emotional complexity of specific memories than in creating an accurate documentary-style piece conveying empirical evidence on a narrative level.

the point of view of age because the discourse of youth pervaded the socialist culture of remembrance.

A theme that stood out in the *Almanac* was motherhood. Women write about motherhood in a way that redefines traditional views, grounding motherhood in agency not traditionally ascribed to (middle and upper-class) women. Motherhood is not confined to one paradigm but rather depends on the context or the psychological profile of the heroine. There are different moments of crisis and different responses to crises. The ethics of sacrifice and the trauma of separation are thematized in Zora Dirnbach's radio drama "Phoenix from the Ashes" (*Iz pepela Feniks*).[16] The drama contains several micro-narratives: staying in a transit camp, a generational conflict between daughter and father regarding the issues of passivity vs. resistance, the role of helpers or neutral observers, and the separation of mother and child. Although abandoning a child so it could survive can be deemed acceptable from a moral perspective as a response to a categorical imperative, arriving at such a decision is a process and the separation itself a traumatic war experience.

The short story "The Whisper" (Šapat) by Julija Najman focuses on the psychological breakdown of a woman faced with the imminent death of her children. The mother of three children, she was able to rescue the youngest child before leaving for the camp. The semblance of a mother's determination, strength, and endurance, made possible by a skewed perception of reality, collapses after the woman's and the child's departure. The sudden realization that she would never see her youngest child again is at once a painful moment of lucidity – she sees the marks of illness and "old age" on her children and experiences a breakdown: "She thought of everything without thinking of herself. She

16 Zora Dirnbach, "Iz pepela Feniks," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1960, pp. 227–249.

has become the smallest part of all that will disappear. Mother was free at this moment of her life. Mother loved that moment of freedom from her suffering."[17]

In the short story "The Hyenas" (*Hijene*) by Maja Zrnić, the theme is a woman's decision not to be separated from her child, despite the possibility of her child being taken care of.[18] The tension in the story is intensified as the mother becomes aware that death awaits the family and decides not to hand over her daughter to members of another national-confessional community because "no one will get her except the earth." This decision, as well as the woman's insensitive behavior towards her daughter and potential adoptive mother, are presented in the broader perspective of the woman's traumatized and paranoid mind (murder of her husband, intensified stories about the crematorium) and feelings of general vulnerability. However, the absence of the capacity to reason does not abolish the woman in a moral sense. The deviation of the protective attitude, which has detrimental consequences, makes this story entirely atypical in the context of the theme of motherhood in the *Almanac*.

The theme of motherhood is central to Mirjana Papo's short story "A Letter Was Found" (Nađeno je pismo), one of the most outstanding literary pieces in the *Almanac*.[19] Following the camp's liberation, Red Cross workers discover a letter written on a piece of toilet paper by an unnamed woman to her husband and son. The text of the letter is preceded by an introductory note – the narrator's comment on a Red

17 Julija Najman, "Šapat," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1960, p. 301.

18 Maja Zrnić, "Hijene," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1956, pp. 350–354.

19 Mirjana Papo, "Nađeno je pismo," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1964, pp. 273–285.

Cross worker's remark that "it was not like that for them" because they "had everything" – a kitchen, a dining room, barracks with beds, even bathrooms. The order and structure of everyday life, the camp's spatial arrangement which suggest the "normality" indicated, undermine the narrator's voice, whose perspective is marked by the camp experience. The inmate is not objectified but personified in her speech mediated by the letter. The introductory note draws the outside/inside opposition, indicating the (im)possibility of the mediation of experience and the "interpretation" of material traces. The transition to the intimist genre testifies to the formative role of testimony in understanding the camp experience.

In the letter, the woman writes about her relationship with a Jewish boy who secretly stayed in barracks of non-Jewish women after his mother was murdered in the camp. The narrator is staying in the camp as a political prisoner, concealing her Jewish identity. The story is profoundly intense in its psychological analysis, the existential questions it raises, and the emotional charge it carries.

The cruelty of the Nazi biopolitical camp regime, and the emotional state of the heroine, especially her loneliness and need for others, are depicted with intensity. Memories of a previous life combined with the present moment – we learn in retrospect about the woman's family background, deportation, and forced labor in the camp. However, she insists on a sharp separation of past and present, of inner and outer worlds. The emotional bond with the boy and its ethical repercussions as she writes the letter to explain her decision to her husband and son, which we can already sense in the transformation of the pronoun *we*, reflecting her change in identification from family community to camp community to the camp's Jewish community. In the end, we learn that

the letter was written at night when she decided to reveal her identity and die with the boy.

The dilemma she faces is whether one can survive in hiding, knowing that the boy has no choice and that death is inevitable. Is it her duty to survive in order to be a mother to her biological child, or rather to take on the role of mother to a child in extreme conditions? We can understand both decisions in the context of morality devoid of pragmatism and consequentialism. Although she is aware of the necessity of the inversion of ethical principles in the "concentration universe" (the unethical nature of hiding and lying), rational reasons give way to emotional ones - life is not worth living if the boy dies alone. Moreover, we can interpret this decision as confirmation of humanity – accepting motherhood as a social role is an act of humanity based on the ethics of care for the other, especially if the other is weaker or powerless. The story's essential problem is that of choice. It denaturalized motherhood and mothers' decisions – women choose to die with (their) children. The female writers featured in the *Almanac* challenge the self-understanding of these choices and actions, the self-understanding of women's care and sacrifice. Choosing to die with a child, hiding with children, caring for one's own and children's lives, and being separated from children are all traumatic experiences.

Two stories describe sexual violence against women in the concentration camp. Eva Tićak Vajler's short story "A Meeting on the Adriatic" (Susret na Jadranu) takes place in the post-war period and addresses the impossibility of overcoming trauma. The encounter of two women on a tourist trip, Edit from Novi Sad and Lea from Vienna, who "recognize" each other by their tattoos, provides the incentive for them to evoke their experiences in Auschwitz. The delightful Adriatic landscape and

the beauty of the cultural heritage, expressed in poetic tones, disrupt the naturalistic description of life in camp evoked by the "two camp sisters" in their conversation: "The numbers on the hand show that they were there, at the same time even, that they were equally suffocated by the thick smoke and bit by lice and bedbugs, that both were tormented by hunger, exhaustion, diarrhea, typhus, ulcers, itching, and all of this combined, and that all this was happening in a massive cauldron of barbed wires, full of electric tension, where the threads of countless lives hung like a cluster upon cluster of grapes, lined up in rows: thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions... One to the right, one to the left. Those on the left went directly into the crematorium, those on the right into the clutches of perfidious torture, before, finally, also moving to the left."[20]

This shared experience, "the ghostly story of an unforgettable past," however, differs as the conversation unfolds. Edita's narrative, that of a Yugoslav political prisoner in Auschwitz, is more consistent with the topos of heroic resistance. In the camp, Edita contributed to draining the swamp, worked on the railroad, in the laundry facility, and, finally, in the infirmary. She was also a member of a group that secretly distributed news and newspapers, and she had a physical altercation with one of the heads of the camp shortly after the liberation. During the conversation, the SS officers' cowardice, hiding, fleeing, drunkenness, and destructiveness are constantly apostrophized. The camp's liberation is represented through a collective image of formerly enslaved people with verses on their lips. On the other hand, Lea's experience relativized the narrative of resistance and collectivism. Upon learning that members of Lea's family had not survived, unlike her own family,

20 Eva Tičak Vajler, "Susret na Jadranu," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1956, p. 359.

Edita attempts to cheer and motivate her by telling her that there is still joy and laughter in the world and that she will give birth to a child. To which Lea responds:

"Never! You forget that there is a triangle beneath my number, a sign of Jewishness. I passed the tenth block and was forcibly subjected to a gynecological procedure. I was used as a guinea pig for three months. Everything in me is dead.

Edita clings to her brother. How does one respond to that? We should have found a word of comfort and offered support and hope, but the truth is so terrible that there are no answers."[21]

A Meeting on the Adriatic resists both the homogenization of the camp experience and that of post-war narratives that exclude the diversity of responses to traumatic experiences. The representation of the camp experience of two women, Jewish and non-Jewish, points to a difference that is also a fracture in the teleological narratives of the socialist culture of remembrance. Moreover, by raising the question of the purposefulness of memory, that is, the pragmatic nature of forgetting, as opposed to its impossibility, the story also points to the issue of mediation of experience, the limits of understanding, empathy, and solidarity. The absence of an answer at the end of the cited dialogue is a refusal to heroize, mythologize, sacralize, or sentimentalize the violence and suffering to which Lea was exposed, as a gesture of acknowledging extreme suffering. The anthropological pessimism that concludes the conversation between the "two camp sisters" is overshadowed by the social framework that exposes victims to constant re-traumatization because they are unable to forget. Although there

21 Ibid., p. 362.

are not enough indicators in the text, bearing in mind the social context, one can assume that the pressure of patriarchy on the victims' perception and their reintegration into society by fulfilling the expected gender roles is one of the factors contributing to the impossibility of overcoming the traumatic experience.

Sexual violence is openly addressed in *Ricki Is Back* (*Riki se vratila*), a nightmarish story by Julija Najman that explores sexual exploitation in the camp through existential questions of the meaning of return. The story is shaped as a harrowing account from Riki's perspective. Her memories (forcibly) resurface when she is confronted by questions about the fate of Clara, another inmate. Elliptical narration, the semanticization of lacunae, and the reconstruction of broken fragments based on analepsis connect the elements of Riki's traumatic experience (parting with her husband and child, interment in the camp, liberation from the camp). The sexual exploitation to which she was exposed in the camp is depicted through hallucinatory episodes. The story's primary focus is the will to live of the inmates, nourished by Riki, who perish daily, the disintegration, that is, dissociation of Riki's personality, and the strong desire to kill the oppressor. At the end of the story, we realize that Riki never verbalizes her experience: "Riki's lips move without a sound, oscillating between crying and laughing, trembling with fear, retracting as if vanishing, her hands rise, extending widely … she crucifies herself. Clara, my little one! Somewhere under the grass, your hands are laid to rest."[22]

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22 Julija Najman, "Riki se vratila," *Jevrejski almanah*, 1956, p. 357. The play *The Doll* by Đorđe Lebović, published in *Almanac* in 1967, clearly testifies to the impossibility of articulating the experience of sexual violence in the camp and the social perception of this crime. The play highlights that sexual exploitation is among the most sensitive and taboo

Female collaborators of the Literary Section of the *Jewish Almanac* opposed cultural norms that victimize women, but also cultural norms that fail to recognize the various forms of oppression against women and the wide range of traumatic experiences they endured. The literary works of women in the *Almanac* are an authentic contribution to the societal struggle for memory. This contribution confirms that every memory is caught between interpretations articulated from different positions and a clash of disparate mnemonic communities. The writings of women authors in the *Almanac* can be understood as a collective emancipatory project. These women used the almanac as a platform to articulate and legitimize the female experience of the Holocaust.

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topics. *The Doll* shows that people are willing or have the capacity to understand a multitude of actions within the "grey zone" or "choiceless choice" situations (such as the case of Sonderkommandos). However, for the women forced to have sex in camp brothels, it is better to die than to survive. Lebović dramatizes the strength of patriarchal stigma and the redistribution of guilt and responsibility to the victims. Czarnecka and Taczyńska have interpreted Lebović's play *The Doll from Bed No. 21* in detail and suggestively. Czarnecka, Barbara and Katarzyna Taczyńska, "*Lalka z łóżka 21* Đorđa Lebovicia, czyli trauma wojny i opresja wolności," *Teksty Drugie. Teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja*, 5, 2018, pp. 45–64. *The Doll from Bed No. 21* is a slightly modified version of *The Doll* published in the *Jewish Almanac*. The critical difference between the two versions of the text (besides the inclusion of the director's notes in the later version) pertains to the part discussing the Sonderkommandos case: the dialogues are structured differently, and the lines are arranged in a distinct order. In the first version of the text, Vilma's husband demonstrates understanding of their situation; in the second version, his understanding is absent. In *The Doll*, this solution reinforces the isolation of women who were sexually exploited, the patriarchal stigma, and their ultimate culpabilization. A comparative textual analysis of *The Doll* and *The Doll from Bed No. 21* warrants an independent study.

They intervened in the politics of the culture of remembrance of socialist Yugoslavia and in the masculine and patriarchal frameworks that validate categories such as traumatic experiences, victims, and crimes in the social sphere. By forming a mnemonic community, that is, a moral community, the *Almanac* provides a platform for the manifestation of female agency. In this way, women's experience becomes part of general knowledge and shared memory. Female writers featured in the *Jewish Almanac* exhibit extraordinary literary activism. The legacy of that activism ought to be mapped and explored in the context of both Yugoslav literature on the Holocaust and that of later Yugoslav and post-Yugoslav women's traumatic narratives.

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Part III:

Women's Resistance: Commitment to Change

Fabrics of Resistance: The Contributions of Female Jewish Couriers in the Second World War

Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin

In her book *The Days of Destruction and Revolt*, author Zivia Lubetkin, co-founder of the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB) and a fighter in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, acknowledges the contributions of female couriers[1] in organizing Jewish resistance during the Holocaust.

1 Several words are used in literature and historiography to describe these young women who traveled between various Jewish communities such as courier, liaison, and emissary. Lenore J. Weitzman and Sheryl Silver Ochayon propose the term "kashariyot" from the Hebrew "kesher" (connection) to denote their role in connecting Jewish communities, Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust accessed 01-06- 2024; Sheryl Silver Ochayon, "The Female Couriers During the Holocaust," https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/couriers.html#footnote3_mpe6n0n, accessed 01-05-2024. In this paper, I use the word 'courier' as this is the term commonly used in the English language

Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin, Researcher, Södertörn University, Stockholm ORCID: 0000-0002-4741-9779, email: siszymanska@yahoo.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15039032

She asserts that without their efforts, the resistance groups would have been unable to perform all of their activities across the German-occupied zone: "Lonka Kozibrodska, Tema Schneiderman, Havka Folman, Rysia, and Frania Beatus from Dror, Tosia Altman from Hashomer Hatzair, Soyka Ehrlichman from Gordonia, Hela Schipper from Akiva, and others, served as liaisons between the ghettos and the various provinces. They risked their lives scores of times as they traveled from place to place. After each mission, they rested for a few days and then set out once more. One cannot possibly describe this work of organizing Jewish resistance, or the uprising itself, without mentioning the role of these valiant women."[2]

The names listed are just a few of the courageous young women whose clandestine work was crucial for various aspects of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust. Many more existed, some lesser-known or completely unknown because they did not survive to share their wartime experiences. The couriers made significant contributions to the preparation for active resistance, even though most did not engage in direct combat. In fact, in Warsaw (Warszawa) and Bialystok (Białystok), they were ordered to leave the ghettos as their work on the Aryan side was deemed more valuable. Chasia Bornstein-Bielicka was ordered to leave the Bialystok ghetto on the eve of its liquidation and attempted

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and used by some of those women themselves when they reflected on their activities during the war.

2 Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Ghetto Fighters' House, Tel-Aviv, 1981, pp. 73, 75. Please note that the names of the couriers cited in the sources vary in spelling.

resistance, to focus on organizing the liaisons on the "Aryan side."[3] Leah Silverstein (née Hammerstein), who arrived in Warsaw from Czestochowa (Częstochowa) with her friend Julia Fiks in April 1943, just days prior to the ghetto uprising, was told to leave the ghetto due to a lack of weapons and the belief that their assistance would be more beneficial to the organization on the Aryan side.[4] A notable exception was Frumka Plotnicka (Płotnicka), a fighter who fought in the Bedzin (Będzin) ghetto, and who was killed while defending a bunker on August 3, 1943.[5]

The term "fabrics" used in this paper's title reflects the historically female endeavor of interweaving disparate threads to form a stronger whole. It also alludes to Jewish resistance taking many forms, often involving clandestine efforts that either contributed to or supported more explicit measures such as armed combat. While numerous activities can be distinguished, the lines become blurry as most actions involved considerable risk and were potentially conspicuous. While active resistance has historically involved armed combat, taking an intersectional approach which also encompasses gender politics, the broader social dynamics and the psychological and philosophical aspects of power and perception complicates a simplistic understanding of hierarchical contributions. Rather than a vertical notion of what is passive

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3 Neomi Izhar, *Chasia Bornstein-Bielicka. One of the Few. A Resistance Fighter and Educator 1939–1947*, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem 2009, p. 219.

4 Leah Silverstein, *The Memoirs of Leah Silverstein*, Yad Vashem Archives, O.33/5744, p. 65.

5 Frumka Plotnicka (1914–1943) was one of the most active couriers for HeChalutz, Naomi Shimshi, "Frumka Plotniczki," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/plotniczki-frumka, accessed 15-05-2024.

or active, we may entertain a more horizontal definition by amplifying the necessary contributions of female couriers, who were instrumental in building the resistance movement. In this paper, I highlight the couriers' role in establishing contact between Jewish communities in the territories of pre-war Poland, raising awareness of the mass murder of Jews, and the establishment of resistance movements in ghettos.

The stories about Jewish female couriers amplify and bring to the fore their significance, contributing to the ongoing scholarship that questions and attempts to redefine our understanding and prioritization of these historical narratives. Examining the stories and contexts of female couriers' contributions creates a more three-dimensional picture of the various fabrics that held together and supported these movements. Re-reading and articulating the specific events that informed changes in attitudes about the extent of Nazi policies and actions, as well as the very practical nature of the couriers' roles in smuggling arms, food, money, and communiqués, is essential to scrutinize for potential biases. For example, activities formerly deemed peripheral and hence less central to resistance narratives, when viewed through a renewed lens, necessitate a reevaluation of these hierarchical narratives, as they involved remarkable levels of risk, coordination, and subtlety.

The articulation of these narratives is inexorably tied to gender. Historian Avihu Ronen writes that "the initial historiography of the Jewish uprising was written by women who tended to minimize their own role in the events and emphasize their partner. The later historiography was written by men and again the role of the women was reduced. It seems that the time has come to give these women their due."[6] Another

6 Avihu Ronen, "Poland: Women Leaders in the Jewish Underground During the Holocaust," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Wom-

obstacle to bringing awareness to these activities and expounding their significance, which is also linked to gender, is our perception of the subtle and often invisible contributions that may have been deemed less muscular and, consequently, passive, due to outdated and patriarchal standards. This paper discusses the work of couriers through their own stories and those of their contemporaries.

Although the work of couriers was recognized by the wartime chroniclers of Jewish experiences under the German occupation (Emanuel Ringelblum) and by the surviving resistance fighters (Zivia Lubetkin, Yitzhak Zukerman), the activities of Jewish couriers have remained largely overlooked in the historiography of Jewish responses during the Second World War, at least until recently.[7] Most of the couriers operating during the war were women due to the specific dangers faced by Jewish men traveling illegally.[8] These women were affiliated with various underground political parties and youth organizations.

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en, Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/poland-women-leaders-in-jewish-underground-during-holocaust, accessed 05-06-2024.

7 Naomi Shimshi, *The Communication Networks and the Couriers of the Pioneering Youth Movements in Occupied Poland*, M.A. thesis, University of Haifa, 1990. The most extensive article in English on the female couriers was written by Lenore J. Weitzman, "Women of Courage: The Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance," in Jeff Diefendorf (ed.), *Lessons & Legacies VI: New Currents in Holocaust research*, Northwestern University Press, Chicago, Illinois, 2004, pp. 112–152. See also Judy Batalion, *The Light of Days: The Untold Story of Women Resistance Fighters in Hitler's Ghettos*, William Morrow, New York, New York, 2020.

8 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, pp. 84–85; Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the

The couriers' tasks depended on the prevailing German policies against the Jews and reflected the youth movements' reactions to the different stages of persecution. Their responses ranged from establishing contacts between communities to spreading news about mass killings. Following the German and Soviet occupation of Poland in the Second World War, couriers set out to remote Jewish communities to re-establish and maintain connections and to facilitate the restructuring of political and youth organizations. Their work was critical to the success of information exchanges between disconnected Jewish communities. The communication that the couriers transmitted between the ghettos helped gather vital information about German anti-Jewish policies in occupied Poland and the Soviet Union. They enabled the exchange of illegal publications between ghettos, held meetings to organize local programs, and facilitated educational seminars and social activity in the communities they visited.[9]

Frumka Plotnicka, courier for HeChalutz, and later ŻOB, helped to coordinate the movement's operations and to establish branches. She was

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Holocaust," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust accessed 01-06-2024.

9 For more on the tasks of couriers see Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 85; Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Ghetto Fighters' House, Tel-Aviv, 1981, pp. 73–82; Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women. Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust accessed 01-06-2024.

one of the most successful couriers. Zivia Lubetkin described Plotnicka in the following words: "Frumka, who didn't look particularly Aryan and had sad Jewish eyes, traveled everywhere and there wasn't a place she didn't reach. She went as far as Vilna, Kowel, and Bedzin. No other liaison from Warsaw ever made it to Kowel or Brest. She overcame every obstacle. We thought that if we sent messengers to the ghettos to warn the Jews of the approaching danger of extermination, we could help them to organize and resist. We would be able to save Jewish lives. We might succeed in establishing a Jewish defense force, and perhaps, some Jews would manage to escape into the forests. Indeed, the mere arrival of one of our liaisons was a cause of celebration in the ghetto."[10]

Havka Folman-Raban was a member of the Dror movement prior to the war. During the occupation, she delivered movement publications and messages to members living in the General Government.[11] The purpose of her trips was to meet with people, maintain communication, and inform them of what was happening at the center and other branches.[12] Folman recalls: "Sixteen and a-half, seventeen-year-old me was expected to transmit information about an active center, about ideas on resistance, report that there still was a movement, that not everyone was depressed..."[13]

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10 Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Ghetto Fighters' House, Tel-Aviv, 1981, p. 75.

11 Testimony of Ewa Folman, Archives of the Jewish Historical Institute (AJHI) 301/4704, handwritten copy, p. 4.

12 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 85.

13 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 67.

Lonka Koziebrodzka became one of the most active couriers of Hechalutz and Dror throughout occupied Poland. She maintained contact between ghettos in Warsaw, Grodno, and Vilna. On several occasions, she accompanied Yitzhak Zuckerman and others. She delivered newspapers, documents, and money. She also transferred important papers from Cracow (Kraków) to Warsaw for "Oyneg Shabes," the Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto (known as the Ringelblum Archive).[14]

Chaika (Chajka) Grossman, a courier for Hashomer Hatzair, originally from Bialystok, was instrumental in maintaining connections between the Bialystok and Vilna ghettos. She traveled to Bialystok to set up an underground organization in the ghetto to fight the Germans. She maintained communication between the Vilna, Bialystok, and Warsaw ghettos.[15]

When the mass murder began in the East in the summer of 1941, the couriers started delivering news about the massacres and urged resistance activities. In October and December 1941, emissaries of the Zionist youth movements left Vilna for the Grodno, Bialystok, and Warsaw ghettos with news of the mass murders in Lithuania in order to inspire resistance. The number of couriers dispatched to convey the news about the killings of the Vilna Jews indicates that Jewish organizations in Vilna recognized their significance and potential consequences for

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14 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 157–158; see also Sara Bender, "Lonka Korzybrodska," Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women, Jewish Women's Archive, https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/korzybrodska-lonka, accessed 26-05-2024.

15 Chaika Grossman, *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto*, Holocaust Library, New York, New York, 1987.

Jews elsewhere. Tema Schneiderman (Sznajderman) was among the first people who brought the news about the killing of Vilna Jews in Ponary to Warsaw (possibly in October 1941).[16] Other couriers were sent to Vilna to confirm the news, evaluate the situation, and bring more details (among others Lonka Koziebrodzka, Frumka Plotnicka, and Tosia Altman).[17] On her way back, Altman visited Grodno and other communities in eastern Poland. Chaika Grossman also arrived from Vilna with more information about the massacres.[18]

Havka Folman-Raban recalls that because the news about killings in the East was difficult to accept even within youth organizations, their

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16 Ruta Sakowska, "Archiwum Ringelbluma – ogniwem konspiracji," cz. I, *Biuletyn Żydowskiego Instytutu Historycznego w Polsce*, No. 4 (152), 1989, p. 99; Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, p. 80, 90. See also Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 70.

17 Tosia Altman traveled to Vilna after Henryk Grabowski, a Polish youth scout, brought information about the killings.

18 Zivia Lubetkin, *In the Days of Destruction and Revolt*, Hakibutz Hameuchad Publishing House, Ghetto Fighters' House, Tel-Aviv, 1981, p. 84; Chaika Grossman, *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto*, Holocaust Library, New York, New York, 1987, pp. 74–79. Sources vary regarding the time of Grossman's arrival. While she dates it in January 1942, Libionka and Weinbaum estimate it was in February or March 1942, see Dariusz Libionka and Laurence Weinbaum, *Bohaterowie, hochsztaplerzy, opisywacze: wokół Żydowskiego Związku Wojskowego*, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, Warszawa, 2011, pp. 307, 319. Dorka Rubinstein (Akiva) also came from Vilna in the end of 1941 with the information about the fate of Jews in Vilna. Hela Rufeisen-Schüpper, *Pożegnanie Miłej 18: wspomnienia łączniczki żydowskiej organizacji bojowej*, Beseder, Kraków, 1996, p. 35).

"leadership requested additional details concerning what was transpiring in various other cities. In order for the information to be trustworthy, it needed to be gathered by our own people."[19]

Other couriers brought news of killings elsewhere – Liza Chapnik (Czapnik), a communist, learned about the Slonim (Słonim) massacre in July 1941 while she was in the area. She tried to raise awareness of the killings there, but no one believed her.[20] Soon, the refugees arriving from the Wartheland, as well as couriers, brought information about killings in Chelmno (Chełmno).[21]

The couriers were also able to locate survivors of massacres and receive their reports. Oftentimes, the couriers were the only eyewitnesses to the destruction of Jewish communities within the General Government. Havka Folman-Raban and Frumka Plotnicka witnessed the liquidation of the ghetto in Hrubieszow (Hrubieszów), a town in southeastern Poland, in June 1942, and learned about a new camp, Sobibor (Sobibór).[22] Folman-Raban recalled, "We returned to Warsaw and described what we had seen. To our friends, this was the first reliable information about the deportation of Jews from Eastern Poland for extermination. I felt

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19 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 86.

20 Liza Chapnik, "The Grodno Ghetto and Its Underground: A Personal Narrative," in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1998, pp. 110, 112.

21 Maria Ferenc, "*Każdy pyta co z nami będzie." Mieszkańcy getta warszawskiego wobec wiadomości o wojnie i Zagładzie*, Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warszawa, 2021, p. 300.

22 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, pp. 88–97.

they did not believe us."[23] Plotnicka's report on the deportations from Hrubieszów and Miączyn was preserved in the underground Ringelblum Archive.[24] She also delivered information about the Belzec camp. Frumka Plotnicka traveled to Polesie and Wolyn (January 1942) and reported on the destruction of Jewish communities there.[25] She relayed so many reports of deportations that she reportedly called herself a "gravedigger of the Jewish people."[26]

Havka Folman-Raban was sent to verify rumors about the Treblinka death camp and then to ghettos in the General Government to inform them of what was happening. The Jews there refused to believe her. In Radomsko, she was advised to leave as people wanted to turn her in to the authorities for causing panic.[27]

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23 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 86. Similarly, when Chaika Grossman arrived on her first mission in Warsaw in January 1942 to brief the Warsaw Jewish leadership on the killings in Vilna and urge them to organize resistance, she was dismissed. Chaika Grossman, *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto*, Holocaust Library, New York, 1987, pp. 74–79.

24 See „Hrubieszów i inne miasteczka podczas akcji, relacja z 15.06.1942 r.," in Aleksandra Bańkowska (ed.), *Archiwum Ringelbluma. Generalne Gubernatorstwo. Relacje i dokumenty*, vol. 6, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa, 2012, pp. 102–109.

25 Dariusz Libionka, „Pierwszy zarys historii Żydowskiej Organizacji Bojowej," *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, vol. 9, 2013, pp. 311–334.

26 Yitzhak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*, University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1993, p. 156.

27 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, pp. 102–103.

In preparation for the armed struggle, the roles of couriers changed again, and they became involved in various other tasks such as acquiring weapons and smuggling them into the ghetto, establishing contacts with the Polish underground, and organizing places to stay on the "Aryan side." Frumka Plotnicka brought weapons into the Warsaw ghetto by smuggling them in a sack of potatoes.[28] Havka Folman-Raban and Tema Schneiderman smuggled grenades into the Warsaw ghetto by hiding them in their undergarments.[29] After January 1943, Bronia (Bronka) Klibanski was the only Dror courier on the "Aryan side" of Bialystok. Her tasks included purchasing weapons and delivering them to the Bialystok ghetto, gathering intelligence, maintaining communication with other ghettos, and concealing the underground archives of the Bialystok ghetto (created by Zvi Mersik and Mordechai Tenenbaum).[30] Couriers provided logistical support for other leaders of the Jewish resistance working on the "Aryan side" and acted as liaisons between members of resistance groups scattered there. Jewish female couriers were also crucial in maintaining contact with the Polish underground.[31]

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28 Gary Scott Glassman, *The Couriers of the Jewish Underground in Poland During the* Holocaust, unpublished MA thesis, California State University Dominguez Hills, https://www.proquest.com/docview/219980325/fulltextPDF, accessed 29-04-2024; *Zuckerman*, *A Surplus of Memory*, p. 156.

29 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 82.

30 Bronka Klibanski, "In the Ghetto and in the Resistance: A Personal Narrative," in Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut, 1998, p. 180.

31 See for example, Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 108.

Following the extermination of the majority of Polish Jews in killing centers, the couriers concentrated on rescuing adults and children by helping them to escape to the "Aryan side," providing them with false identity papers, securing apartments, visiting them, and providing financial support to them and their rescuers. They also maintained communication with Jewish partisan units hidden in the forests (e.g., Leah Silverstein traveled to groups hiding in the Wyszków forest).[32] Some couriers joined partisan groups and continued to act as couriers for their partisan units; others worked from the "Aryan side." Havka Folman-Raban's task involved moving members of the underground from the ghettos to the forests so they could join with the partisans who were active.[33]

Conclusion

The clandestine nature of the couriers' operations during the Second World War, along with the predominance of women's contributions, have resulted in this facet of Jewish resistance being neglected, as well as the prioritization of particular narratives and the elevation of certain forms of activity to a more prominent status. Most, if not all, actions involved considerable risk and, consequently, can be considered active and with the potential to be "seen." The tasks carried out by

32 Leah Silverstein, *The Memoirs of Leah Silverstein*, Yad Vashem Archives, O.33/5744, p. 83.

33 Havka Folman-Raban, *They Are Still with Me*, Pinkasei Edut, Ghetto Fighters' Museum, M.P. Western Galilee, 2001, p. 108; Testimony of Ewa Folman, AJHI, 301/4704.

the couriers during the war prepared the ground for armed resistance in the ghettos. Much of the work behind the scenes was performed by young female couriers.

The efforts of these couriers broaden our understanding of the mechanisms of survival and resistance against the Nazi regime's genocidal policies. A careful assessment of their activities would deepen our comprehension of the profoundly supportive and influential nature of their activities. It can be argued that without the foundation laid by their risky activities, important bodies of knowledge and intricate forms of resistance may not have come into being.

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The Diverging Fates of Golda Perla and Mindla Diament: Two Polish Jewish Sisters in the French Resistance

Bruna Lo Biundo
and
Caroline François

2024: Towards an official recognition of the contribution of foreign women in the French Resistance

The year 2024 marks two very important anniversaries in French history: the 80th anniversary of the country's liberation from Nazi occupation in August 1944, and the granting of the right to vote to women on 21 April 1944. To celebrate the liberation and the immigrants' contribution

Dr. Bruna Lo Biundo, Independent Researcher, Past/Not Past – Head of Teaching, INA Campus, Paris,
email: bruna.lobiundo@gmail.com.
Caroline François, Office national des combattants et victimes de guerre (ONaCVG), Île-de-France; National Memorial of Women in Resistance and Deportation,
email: caroline.francois@gmail.com.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15039107

to the French Resistance, on February 21, the French Republic honored Mélinée and Missak Manouchian by inducting them into the Pantheon. These resistance fighters of Armenian origin led the renowned Parisian movement known as *L'affiche rouge*, one of the best-known networks of foreign resistance fighters in France.[1] This event, planned over several years, is part of a historiographical and governmental effort to acknowledge the role of foreigners in the Resistance,[2] a process initiated by the induction of Josephine Baker into the Pantheon in 2021.[3]

In this context, the French state has made numerous archives concerning foreigners in the Resistance freely accessible. Among the most valuable sources are the archives of the Prefecture of Police, which detail the organization of resistance networks. Many of these documents are on display in the current exhibition at Mémorial de la Shoah, *Les Étrangers dans la Résistance en France*, curated by historians

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1 The *Affiche Rouge* was a propaganda poster distributed by Vichy France and German authorities in the spring of 1944 in occupied Paris to discredit 23 foreigners who were resistance fighters (members of the Manouchian Group).

2 Stéphane Courtois, Denis Peschanski et Adam Rayski, *Le sang de l'étranger*, Fayard, Paris, 1989.

3 Josephine Baker joined the French Resistance during World War II, serving in the Free French Forces' intelligence services as a second lieutenant in the women's auxiliary corps of the French Air Force. In 1943, she acted as an ambassador for the Free French Forces, touring North Africa, Egypt, and the Middle East. Her Resistance efforts were publicly recognized in 1949 through Jacques Abtey's book *La Guerre secrète de Joséphine Baker*, which featured a commendation from General de Gaulle. Baker's contributions were officially acknowledged on August 18, 1961, when General Valin awarded her the Legion of Honor and the Croix de Guerre with Palm.

Denis Peschanski and Renée Poznanski. On the 80th anniversary of women's right to vote, the curatorial team intended to highlight the contributions of several foreign women who played crucial roles in the Resistance, including Golda Bancic, Irma Mico, Catherine Warlin, Christina Boïco, Dora Schaul, and Julia Pirotte.

The fact that women played a major role in the Resistance has received little attention in historiography, as recognized by historian Denis Peschanski. In a recent interview with *Journal du CNRS*, he identified three reasons for this invisibility: "First and foremost, it is due to their status in society [...]. Secondly, in the case of armed struggle, they rarely use firearms and, as they often go unnoticed, they transport weapons to the sites of attacks, hidden in bags or strollers. However, it is the men who do the shooting. Finally, before the war, they still did not have the right to vote [...] Engagement remained a man's affair."[4]

> **The exhibition *Julia Pirotte, photographe et résistante* (2023)**

In 2023, the decision to dedicate an exhibition[5] to Julia Pirotte served a dual purpose: on the one hand, it aimed to recognize the role of foreign women in the French Resistance; on the other, it sought to introduce the French public to the artistic talent of a photographer whose

4 Denis Peschanski, "Résistantes et étrangères: les invisibles," interview by Marina Julienne, In: *CNRS*, *le journal*, 316, juin 2024, p. 14. Our translation.

5 Mémorial de la Shoah, Paris, March 8–December 31, 2023.

choice of subjects and technique aligns with the tradition of the great humanist photography of the 1930s.

The fate and renown of Julia Pirotte as a photographer are inextricably linked to the destinies of three women whom we sought to highlight in our exhibition: her sister Mindla, who will be presented later in the text; Suzanne Spaak,[6] a Belgian resistance fighter and member of the Red Orchestra espionage network and the French resistance movement National Movement Against Racism (MNCR), arrested and executed by the Nazis in France in 1944 for establishing a network to rescue Jewish children between France and Belgium, and named Righteous Among the Nations in 1985; and finally, Jeanne Vercheval, a Belgian feminist and co-founder of the magazine *Voyelles*, as well as the Photography Museum of Charleroi with her husband Georges. It is thanks to her that a portion of Julia Pirotte's personal and photographic archives has been preserved. Additional archives on Julia Pirotte can be found at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, while copies of her French reports are held at the Mémorial de la Shoah in Paris and at La contemporaine in Nanterre.

This paper focuses on the destinies of the Diament sisters, Golda Perla and Mindla, who were Polish Jewish refugees in France and active participants in the French Resistance during World War II. Through the stories of these two sisters, we aim to honor the many French and foreign women who have long been overshadowed in historiography by the focus on male resistance fighters.[7]

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6 For further information on the life and contributions of Suzanne Spaak, refer to Ann Nelson, *La vie héroïque de Suzanne Spaak*, Robert Laffont, Paris, 2018.

7 Paula Schwartz, "Résistance et différence des sexes: bilan et perspectives," Clio, 1995, p. 1, and Claire Andrieu, *Les femmes dans la Résis-*

Poland, 1910s–1920s

Golda Perla and Mindla Diament were born in the small town of Konskowola, near Lublin, as the daughters of Baruch Diament and Sura Szejnfeld. Their family, like most of the population in Konskowola, was Jewish by religion or family and spoke a mixture of Yiddish and Polish. The row of small houses was built at the end of the previous century to accommodate a large number of mine workers from the poorest rural areas of the country. The communal life afforded by the workers' housing estates ensured a degree of protection in the face of the country's growing anti-Semitism. The two sisters remained attached to this communal way of life and later became involved in trade union activities with the miners while living as refugees in Belgium and France.

After the death of Sura Szejnfeld in 1916, the family moved to Lublin. Mindla and Julia were soon forced to abandon school to work in the city's factories. In this environment, they discovered workers' solidarity and the world of trade unions.

As young girls in the 1920s, they joined the new communist movement. Their prohibited political activities led to the imprisonment of the two sisters, first Mindla and then Golda. Their life in Poland and political commitment had prepared them for the experience of hiding – a clandestine existence that they would encounter when joining the French

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tance, à l'égal et à la différence des hommes, Chemin de la mémoire, https://www.cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/fr/les-femmes-dans-la-resistance-legal-et-la-difference-des-hommes, accessed 15-08-2024.

Resistance. Despite their shared presence on French soil in the 1940s and similarities in terms of trade union and political commitment, the fates of the two sisters were destined to separate very quickly when war broke out. It is these two lives, violently separated by conflict, that we shall describe.

Mindla Diament was one of Julia Pirotte's favorite models. Her portraits capture the reunion of the two sisters in France, after years of separation, struggle, imprisonment, and exile. Mindla was born on February 13, 1910, in the small town of Konskowola, near Lublin, which was a Russian province of Poland at the time. She grew up in a modest Jewish family with her older sister Julia and younger brother Majer.

At the age of 16, Mindla joined the Communist Youth. She soon became responsible for the technical apparatus of the Warsaw Committee of the Communist Party, before gaining responsibility for the youth apparatus at the national level. She took part in numerous union battles and demonstrations. In 1931, she was arrested by the police and sentenced to four years' imprisonment for communist propaganda. In prison, she strengthened her political awareness and possibly even learned the rudiments of French. On the advice of the local Communist Party, she took advantage of medical permission on April 15, 1933, to secretly emigrate to France with the help of International Red Aid.[8]

She arrived in Paris in April 1933, where she became involved with the immigrant labor movement (MOI, Main d'Oeuvre Immigrée) and

8 Corentin Lahu. *La solidarité comme arme: le Secours rouge international, une organisation de défense face à la répression du mouvement communiste (1918–1934)*. Thèse d'histoire. Université Bourgogne Franche-Comté, 2022.

organizations welcoming Polish immigrants and refugees to Paris. She declared herself a political refugee and applied for a residence permit. She was first hosted by Mlle Lejeune in Paris' 20th district and was hired as a domestic. Beginning in the spring of 1937, she came under surveillance by the *Renseignements Généraux*[9] (the French General Intelligence Directorate), which investigated the administrative situation of foreigners in France. During the second half of the 1930s, the political atmosphere and the reception of the emigrants had changed from the 1920s, when the loss of life due to World War I necessitated a substantial supply of unskilled labor to keep factories running. The economic crisis that began in the United States in 1929 spread to Europe in the months and years that followed, severely impacting Germany and spurring the rise of Nazism. In France, the riots of the far-right leagues on February 6, 1934, and the economic crisis led to a rejection of foreign labor and a significantly less systematic naturalization process than before. With no work permit and a temporary visa renewed every three months, Mindla Diament benefited from the solidarity of Communist Party organizations such as the Belleville Workers' Club. In her free time, she was an active participant in the communist sections of the Paris region.

The outbreak of World War II drove her to go underground, and on May 26, 1939, she was granted a 12-month extension of her stay,[10] which expired on May 26, 1940. After this date, she vanished from the radar, caught in the flight of Belgian and French refugees, and likely reunited with her sister Julia, who was fleeing Belgium. The latter photographed Mindla many times on the beaches and streets of Marseille,

9 Archives Nationales de France, 19940440/229.

10 Archives Nationales de France, 19940440/229.

where the two had settled. The reunion between the two sisters was only temporary as Mindla returned to the Paris region. Following the shocking news of the German-Soviet pact and the armistice, communist structures were covertly reestablished,[11] notably through the MOI. Without waiting for the official involvement of the Communist Party in the fight against the Nazi occupiers, which occurred in the summer of 1941, Mindla joined the Resistance. In the spring of 1942, she experienced a profound resonance when she saw the appeal issued with the creation of the FTP (Francs-tireurs et partisans), "Femmes de France, il faut se préparer à la lutte!" ("Women of France, prepare to fight!"). Within the secret organization, a circular was distributed, influenced by the idea of the role of women in society, advocating for the employment of female liaison officers, particularly for logistics and intelligence services. The circular claimed they could "make trips, effectively gathering information from shopkeepers, rental agencies, and farmers. Such well-trained auxiliaries can, under numerous pretexts, infiltrate municipal halls, prefectures, Kommandantur, and police stations to identify the layout of premises." By ensuring multiple appointments (contacts or meetings), the liaison officers enable their leaders to limit the number of appointments and, thus, the risk of arrest. Mindla Diament became a liaison officer, traversing different zones due to her connections in the attached zone via the miners' circles and in the southern zone through her sister Julia Pirotte. Mindla Diament passed leaflets, missives, false papers, and weapons between Paris, the "zone rattachée" (the two northern French departments administered by the Belgian military government), and the southern zone.

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11 Annette Wievorka, *Ils étaient juifs, résistants, communistes*, Éditions Perrin, Paris, 2018.

Women made up a large number of the Resistance: in the summer of 1942, around 35% of the staff of the FTP's inter-regional services were women. Within the FTP-MOI, the number of female members of the Resistance was even higher, with several women holding key responsibilities. Among these women were Cristina Boïco, who was head of the intelligence service (SR) providing targets for the fighters, and Golda Bancic, who managed the technical service in charge of liaison and weapons transport. An FTP-MOI report published in *L'Humanité* in September 1942 paid tribute to these pioneering women fighters: "Honor to these first women fighters, they too will inform the patriots, fight with arms in hand," and urged women to "join the Partisan groups" to succeed the Resistance fighters who fell victim to the brutal repression by the occupying forces supported by the Vichy government. The repression did not spare the female members of the Resistance,[12] particularly those like Mindla Diament who risked crossing the demarcation line several times. Crossing the line was strictly regulated by the German order of October 4, 1940, with prohibitory signs for Jews placed at all crossing points. Mindla Diament put herself at a double risk as both a member of the Resistance and a Jew just weeks after the Vel d'Hiv roundup and August 26 roundups in the southern zone.

In the autumn of 1942, before the Germans invaded the southern zone, Mindla Diament was arrested at a checkpoint in Chalon-sur-Saône, one of the main official crossroads for inter-zone traffic, while she attempted to cross the demarcation line with documents and reports on the activities of FTP-MOI groups. She was imprisoned in Dijon and

12 Thomas Fontaine, *Déporter. Politiques de déportation et répression en France occupée, 1940–1944*, thèse en histoire, Université Paris I, 2013.

then transferred to the Santé prison in Paris. Interrogated and probably tortured, she was deported to Germany on December 3, 1942, in an NN (Nacht und Nebel) transport. There were 13 women and 22 men on this Thursday, as on most "NN" transports, in third-class carriages, men and women separated, when the Paris–Berlin train left the Gare de l'Est. This was the fifteenth group of inmates from the Paris prisons of Fresnes, Cherche-Midi, and La Santé deported with "NN" status.[13] Apart from the fact that all of them, both men and women, were deported with "NN" status, in the majority of cases, there are few links between their fates after their individual arrests. Three types of motives are mentioned: aiding the enemy, illegal possession of weapons, and communist propaganda. Trêve station was the first stop in Germany. The men got off and boarded another train, which took them to the special camp at Hinzert. The women appear not to have stopped at Trier but rather continued to Aachen, where they were incarcerated. Before going to court, the women were transferred from Aachen to Flussbach prison, where they were held in pre-trial detention.

Mindla Diament disappeared into the "fog of the night" following this procedure, introduced in December 1941 to transfer deportees deemed dangerous to Reich prisons for trial and sentencing by Reich courts. A photograph by Julia Pirotte, most likely taken in the winter of 1942, indicates that she was informed of her sister's arrest and tried to discover her whereabouts with the help of her friend, Suzanne Spaak. Tried in Breslau on charges of aiding the enemy, Mindla was sentenced to death. In the case of women sentenced to death or granted clemency,

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13 Fondation pour la mémoire de la déportation. *Livre Mémorial des déportés de France arrêtés par mesure de répression, et dans certains cas par mesure de persécution 1940–1944*, Michel Reynaud, Paris, 2004.

the fact that their file mentions their Jewish and/or Communist affiliations is an important factor in the application of death sentences.[14] Only two of the 13 women deported with Mindla were sentenced to death. Mindla Diament, the only foreigner in the convoy, was one of them. She was guillotined on August 24, 1944. Three people were executed that day in the courtyard of the Kletschkaustrasse prison in Breslau: the communist Marie Durivaux, deported with Mindla on the same NN convoy; and Robert Bassan,[15] one of the leaders of the Hector network, and Jewish like Mindla. Coincidentally, Mindla died on the same day that Julia Pirotte celebrated the liberation of Marseille, in which she had participated.

Like Mindla Diament, some 6,700 women were deported from France[16] to Reich prisons or camps, more than half of whom left from the Fort de Romainville.[17] Almost 25%, like Mindla Diament, did not return in 1945.

After the war, Julia Pirotte traveled to Germany to investigate the fate of Mindla in Reich prisons. She then published an article paying tribute to those women arrested, deported, or sentenced to death in France

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14 Gaël Eismann, "Les femmes condamnées à mort par les tribunaux militaires allemands en France occupée (1940–1944)", 20&21, *Revue d'histoire*, 2023/4 (N°160), pp. 49–71.

15 https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article226210, notice BASSAN Robert, Marius par Dominique Tantin, version mise en ligne le 17 avril 2020, dernière modification le 20 avril 2020, accessed 08–12–2024.

16 Pierre-Emmanuel Dufayel, "Les femmes déportées de France par mesure de répression: nouvelles perspectives", *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, vol. 124, 2017, pp. 144–154.

17 Thomas Fontaine, *Les oubliés de Romainville, un camp allemand en France (1940–1944)*, Tallandier, Paris, 2005.

by the Germans, who were not shot on French soil but whose sentences were carried out in Germany. This French specificity of repression policies has left its mark on the collective memory, which has focused on the resistance fighters and hostages shot, of whom the clearing at Mont Valérien is the symbol.

Awarded the Croix de Guerre[18] posthumously on December 18, 1947, Mindla Diament disappeared from our memories, like many anonymous women fighters who joined the Resistance to help liberate France. The exhibition dedicated to Julia Pirotte's photographic work brings to light Mindla Diament's luminous, peaceful, and determined face, fixed for future generations on her sister's negatives.

Belgium, 1930s: How Golda Perla Diament becomes Julia Pirotte

Julia Pirotte's journey as a photographer and activist is marked by a series of significant events that began with her early involvement in political movements. At the age of 17, she was arrested for her participation in the Polish Communist Youth Movement, an involvement that reflected her deep commitment to social and political causes. This

18 "A liaison officer between the first F.T.P.-Immigrée leadership in the occupied zone and that in the free zone, she joined the Resistance in 1941. She transported weapons and documents, crossing the demarcation line on several occasions. Arrested on the demarcation line, carrying secret documents, she was savagely tortured and beheaded in Breslau, Germany, in 1944."

arrest led to a four-year imprisonment. Upon her release in 1934, Pirotte faced the challenges of a volatile political climate in Poland. With the assistance of the International Red Aid, an organization dedicated to supporting political prisoners and exiles, she managed to escape the oppressive environment of her homeland. Her destination was France, where her sister Mindla had already sought refuge. However, her journey took an unexpected turn when she fell ill while passing through Belgium, necessitating a temporary stay in the country.

During her time in Belgium, Julia worked as a laborer, a period that was both challenging and transformative. It was here that she met Jean Pirotte, a trade unionist whose ideals aligned with her own. Their marriage facilitated her acquisition of Belgian citizenship, a crucial step in establishing her life outside of Poland. While residing in Brussels, Julia Pirotte was introduced to Suzanne Spaak, and she would be marked for life by this experience. Suzanne Spaak recognized her potential and encouraged her to pursue photography, a medium through which Julia Pirotte would eventually make her mark. Suzanne Spaak's gift of a Leica camera proved pivotal; it became an indispensable tool in Julia Pirotte's photographic journey, symbolizing both the personal and professional empowerment that came with her newfound skill.

Determined to hone her craft, Julia Pirotte enrolled in evening classes at the School of Journalism in Brussels, where she formally trained as a photojournalist. This education provided her with the technical expertise and journalistic acumen needed to succeed in the field of photojournalism. Between 1938 and 1939, she secured her first professional assignment as a photojournalist, a significant milestone in her career. She was tasked with documenting the Baltic States for the Foto WARO press agency, an opportunity that allowed her to apply

her skills in a real-world context. This assignment not only marked the beginning of her professional journey in photography but also set the stage for her future contributions to documentary photography and wartime journalism.

1940–1945: Julia Pirotte's French exile

In May 1940, following the invasion of Belgium by Nazi Germany, Julia Pirotte fled to France, seeking refuge from the escalating conflict that was engulfing Europe. She eventually settled in Marseille, a city that became the backdrop for much of her work during the war. Initially, Julia found employment in an aircraft factory, which was a crucial part of the war effort, as well as taking on work as a photographer at a private beach. Thanks to this experience, she learned to photograph crowds, a technique that proved extremely useful during the Marseille uprising.

By 1942, Julia had established herself as a photojournalist for the local press in Marseille. She contributed to magazines such as *Le Dimanche Illustré*, *La Marseillaise*, and *Le Midi Rouge*. Her work during this period was characterized by a keen focus on the harsh realities of life under occupation. She vividly documented the precarious living conditions of the inhabitants of the Vieux-Port, one of the oldest and most impoverished areas of Marseille. Her photography also shed light on the dire situation of Jewish women and children interned in the Bompard Camp, capturing human suffering and resilience in the face of oppression.

In June 1940, the Hôtel Bompard in Marseille was requisitioned by the Bouches-du-Rhône prefecture as temporary housing for German and Austrian Jewish women and children who had obtained visas to emigrate overseas. This group was later joined by Italian refugees and residents of Marseille seeking refuge from the tumultuous environment of World War II. In July 1942, Julia Pirotte visited the camp to document the lives of these displaced individuals, creating one of the few existing photographic reports of the Camp de Bompard. Julia's work highlighted the dire circumstances faced by the camp's inhabitants and served as a poignant reminder of the precariousness of their situation. Just a month after her visit, the women were forcibly transferred to the Milles camp and subsequently deported to Auschwitz, where the majority met a tragic fate. Most of the children, however, were saved through the intervention of an American association, illustrating the complex network of rescue efforts during this period. As the war intensified, Julia Pirotte's commitment to the fight against fascism deepened, leading her to join the French Resistance. Like her sister Mindla, she served as a liaison officer for the FTP-MOI, undertaking the dangerous tasks of transporting leaflets and weapons, as well as forging identity papers, all vital activities that supported the resistance's clandestine operations. She was actively involved in the French Resistance, specifically with the Marat detachment of the FTP-MOI, an immigrant labor movement based in Marseille. Formed in the spring of 1942, the Marat detachment was led by Basil Serban, a former volunteer with the International Brigades, and began its resistance activities in the autumn of that year. This group played a significant role in the Marseille uprising on August 21, 1944, a pivotal moment in the city's liberation from German occupation. As a member of this resistance group, Julia Pirotte not only participated in clandestine operations but also used her skills as a photographer to document the actions of the

maquis, including the sabotage of a railway line near Gardanne in the Bouches-du-Rhône region. Her photographs provide invaluable visual records of the resistance movements and the maquisards' activities, capturing the courage and resilience of those who risked their lives in the struggle against fascism. Julia's dual role as both participant and chronicler of these events underscores the unique position she held within the resistance, offering a rare glimpse into the lived experiences of those who fought against Nazi oppression. Equipped with her camera, she documented the uprising through her photographs, capturing the bravery and determination of those who fought for freedom. These images remain a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit during times of profound adversity and one of the best-known Pirotte's reportage.

As she describes in one of the few writings that remain of her: "The greatest days of my life were those of the uprising in Marseille. Like so many others, I had a score to settle with the Nazis, my parents and my whole family had died in camps in Poland or in the ghettos. I had no news of my sister; a political prisoner said that she had been guillotined. I was with my group of partisans on the 21st of August 1944 at 3pm in front of the prefecture. The fleeing Germans were firing. Crouched down in the shelter of a wheel of a pickup truck, I took my first photo of freedom regained. The enemy was retreating in front of the partisans; it was the beginning of the insurrection."[19]

19 Testimony given by Julia Pirotte to Jeanne and Georges Vercheval, in *Julia Pirotte: Une photographe dans la Résistance*, Musée de la Photographie, Charleroi, 1994.

Photo 1.
Woman serving soup to children.
Bompard Camp, Marseille, France, 1942.
Coll. Mémorial de la Shoah/Julia Pirotte.

Photo 2.
Women sewing next to children.
Bompard Camp, Marseille, France, 1942.
Coll. Mémorial de la Shoah/Julia Pirotte

Photo 3.
The forgery workshop in Julia Pirotte's flat.
Marseille, France, 1944.
© Julia Pirotte/CERCIL–Mémorial de la Shoah/David Diamant.

Photo 4.
Sarkis Bedoukian, Armenian FTP-MOI fighter, member of the Marat group, during the Battle of Marseille, August 21, 1944. He would be killed in front of the prefecture one hour after this picture was taken. Marseille, France, August 21, 1944. © Julia Pirotte/United States Holocaust Museum.

Life after the war and recognition as a photographer

After the war, Julia returned to Poland, which was undergoing significant reconstruction. In 1946, she emerged as one of the few photographers documenting the aftermath of the Kielce pogrom. Her reportage provided a poignant testimony to the pervasive antisemitism that still afflicted her homeland. In the subsequent months, Julia traveled with Polish miners repatriated from France, capturing their experiences through her lens. By 1948, she was covering the World Congress of Intellectuals in Defense of Peace in Wroclaw, where she created humanist portraits of notable participants such as Pablo Picasso, Irène Joliot-Curie, and Aimé Césaire. Concurrently, she co-founded and directed the Military Press Agency from 1946 to 1948.

In 1957, Julia visited Israel to explore the communal life in several kibbutz. Upon returning to Poland, she continued to contribute to the Polish press, albeit at a reduced pace. Her work began to gain recognition in the 1980s, leading to exhibitions in various cities, including New York, Arles, Stockholm, Charleroi, Paris, Warsaw, and Bratislava. On February 15, 1996, she was honored by France with the title of Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres. Julia passed away in Warsaw on July 25, 2000.

By way of a non-conclusion

Placing this study in a French national context contributes to the ongoing historiographical renewal regarding the place and role of women in the Resistance. Several theses are in progress, and conferences have been or will be organized. Two exhibitions[20] on women deported to Ravensbrück were presented in 2023 and 2024, and an exhibition on the Women in the Resistance is currently on display at the Musée de l'Ordre de la Libération.[21] Finally, a National Memorial to Women in Resistance and Deportation[22] will be set up in the next few years at the Romainville fort, from which more than half of France's women deportees departed.

The quality and rarity of Julia Pirotte's photographic testimony illustrate just how valuable all sources are for tracing the itineraries of women and men in the Resistance and writing their stories. The itineraries of the two sisters allow us to better question them. Their destinies, at

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20 *Déportées à Ravensbrück, 1942–1945,* Archives Nationales (Pierrefitte), February 3–June 16, 2023. / *Résistance. Répression. Déportation. Femmes de France au camp de concentration de Ravensbrück, 1942–1945,* Archives départementales du Nord, April 16–June 7, 2024.

21 *Résistantes*, Musée de l'Ordre de la Libération, June 13–October 13, 2024.

22 https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/fort-de-romainville-des-graffitis-preserves-pour-transmettre-l-histoire-des-resistantes-et-deportees-7380353 Mémorial national des femmes en résistance et en déportation, www.memorial-national-femmes-resistance-deportation.fr, accessed 15-11-2024.

once similar and very different, illustrate the multiplicity of Jewish women's journeys during World War II and the Holocaust.

With each new step in the work on the two sisters, new avenues are opened up, and the story continues around the transmission of Julia Pirotte's work and the memory of Mindla Diamant. New projects are already planned, including a podcast in which Julia Pirotte relates the highlights of her stay in Marseille,[23] a traveling exhibition and a book.

23 See Grégoire-Georges Picot's documentary, *La Libération de Marseille* (1994). Historian, documentary filmmaker, and friend of Julia Pirotte, Grégoire-Georges Picot collected one of the last audiovisual testimonies of the photographer several years before her death. The audio tracks of his work will make a valuable contribution to an upcoming podcast, for which we thank him.

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Reflections on Teaching Projects: Researching Local Women's History During National Socialism with Students

Randi Becker

In the summer semester of 2020, having recently completed my master's degree, I began teaching as a visiting lecturer at the University of Giessen. One of my initial seminar concepts was part of the module, "Introduction to Political Education" in the summer semester of 2020, which was designed for prospective teachers of all subjects. I delivered a seminar on "Women in National Socialism," where there were at least three key takeaways that have remained with me:

1) The students reported that they had never encountered the topic throughout their schooling. For them, focusing on women in the national socialism era was a novel approach, and they consequently lacked any prior knowledge, aside from what they had observed in films.

2) The participants demonstrated a noteworthy interest and dedication to the topic. The focus on women appeared to challenge the common perception among German students that they already possessed

Randi Becker, doctoral candidate, University of Passau, email: randibecker@gmx.de.

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.15039171

comprehensive knowledge about national socialism and were thus disinclined to engage with the topic further. The emphasis on women seemed to offer new avenues for exploring the history of national socialism in general. The participants subsequently produced excellent term papers, which, however, did not reach any further readership after being read for grading.

3) Furthermore, the students expressed interest in learning about local women during the Nazi era. During the seminar, we addressed the topic of women during national socialism in a general manner. We covered the gendered images of Nazi anti-Semitism and antigypsyism, the concept of an "Aryan" woman, and the actions of women as perpetrators. This was an insightful topic, but in retrospect, it would have been beneficial to include local references. However, upon conducting further research, it became evident that there was a dearth of introductory literature pertaining to the subject of women in national socialism within the context of the city of Giessen. A number of articles have been published on individual women or individual places that have some relevance to women, but there are no texts that focus specifically on women in Giessen during the Nazi era. I then posed the following question to myself: How might I address the experiences of local women during the Nazi era in my seminars, thereby contributing to the ongoing process of contextualization within the city and the region?

How might the students and I ascertain more about local women during the Nazi regime, gain a deeper understanding of them, and potentially create a resource that could also facilitate learning and engagement with the topic for others? How can the integration of teaching, research, political education, and memory culture be achieved? These questions were the inspiration behind the emergence of several projects and seminars that attempt to combine all of these ideas.

1. "Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism" (In German: "Gießener Frauen, Opfer, Mitläuferinnen und Täterinnen im Nationalsozialismus"

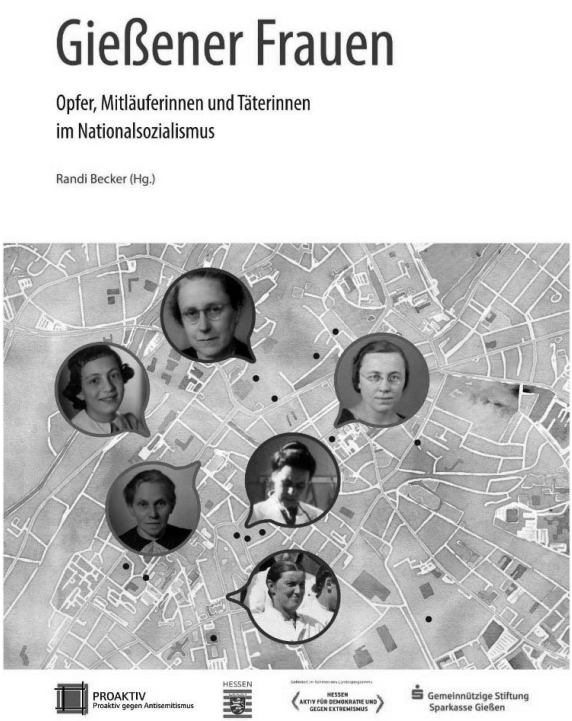

Illustration Nr. 1

In the summer semester of 2021, I conducted an additional seminar on the topic of women during national socialism. The seminar resulted in

the production of a 120-page booklet containing biographies of various women who lived during this period.[1] Due to the prevailing circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, the seminar was conducted exclusively digitally. Consequently, it was evident from the outset that it would not be possible to undertake any visits to archives.

Preparation

Leading up to the seminar, I endeavored to identify as many women as possible who had lived during national socialism with a connection to the city of Giessen and whose stories were already part of existing literature that would be accessible to my students despite the pandemic. I then undertook an exhaustive examination of all the literature on Giessen under national socialism for women's names, subsequently creating an extensive Excel spreadsheet with names and corresponding literature references. Furthermore, I prepared supplementary materials on research methodologies and the formal requirements for the texts to be submitted.

1 Randi Becker, Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism (original title in German: Gießener Frauen, Opfer, Mitläuferinnen und Täterinnen im Nationalsozialismus, first and second edition printed, third edition online, JLUpub, publication platform of the Justus Liebig University of Giessen: http://dx.doi.org/10.22029/jlupub-18487)

The seminar

The seminar was conducted digitally on a weekly basis over the course of three months. A total of 48 students who were pursuing teacher certification, but were studying disparate teaching subjects, participated in the seminar. In the initial session, I presented my concept of the booklet about Giessen women to the students and provided them with a spreadsheet containing the potential topics. In the second session, the students were then required to select a topic which they were to research and work on independently for the duration of the semester. In the subsequent seminar sessions, we engaged in a critical analysis of selected texts on the representation of women in national socialism. The course of study encompassed the ideologies of national socialism and its gender images, followed by an examination of specific strands of persecution and, finally, an investigation of women as perpetrators. In each session, select students also presented the status of their research, affording us the opportunity to discuss the difficulties they encountered up until that point. In addition, I offered weekly digital office hours to support their research.

In September 2021, all participants submitted their term papers, which consisted of short texts, images, image descriptions, and a research diary. With the consent of the authors, I then utilized this material to design the booklet, which was published in December 2022. 1,500 copies of the booklet were printed with the assistance of my cooperating partners.[2] The booklet was then made available free of charge to all

2 The printing of the brochure's first and second edition was made possible through cooperation with the Netzwerk für politische Bildung, Kultur und Kommunikation e.V. (https://nbkk.de) and with the support of the

interested parties. The result was our 120-page booklet, a guide for city tours on local women's history during national socialism.

> **The result: A booklet on Giessen women during National Socialism**

The booklet is designed as a city tour explicitly for political education. It consists of 48 short texts that are each one double-page long and can therefore be read on the move at the reader's respective location, but just as well in the classroom. The texts introduce 23 women from Giessen and frame their biographies with introductory texts. Each biography is linked to a specific location in Giessen, such as a house, a square, or a place of historical significance. These locations serve to contextualize the biography and provide a tangible understanding of the individual's role in the city's history. A large double-sided map of the city center is provided on the first pages listing all of the locations. This enables individuals and educators to create their own city tours, selecting the content and spatial focus according to their own preferences.

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state program "Hessen – aktiv für Demokratie und gegen Extremismus" and the Gemeinnützige Stiftung der Sparkasse Gießen.

Illustration Nr. 2

The brochure is structured around biographical accounts. In the beginning, there are some introductory texts on women under national socialism. These include analyzes of how gender images were utilized to delineate in-group and out-group dynamics, as well as an examination of the Nazi representation of women and the role of women's organizations within the Nazi apparatus. This is followed by biographical sketches of five Jewish women, accompanied by an article on the persecution of Jews in the Giessen region. Subsequently, the booklet addresses the persecution of women on account of their political views, of Sinti and Yenish women, of those deemed "asocial," and in the context of "euthanasia," as well as forced labor. These topics are always structured in the same way: introductory texts explain the

overall context of the persecution of a specific group, while exemplary biographies illustrate this persecution on a personal level by means of each woman's individual case.

The booklet then turns to women as perpetrators. Here, too, the topic is first introduced with introductory texts and then various forms of perpetration are presented with specific examples. For instance, the city of Giessen saw the involvement of a female Gestapo agent, a female Nazi social politician, several female "racial hygienists," as well as numerous female Nazi doctors who were engaged in the "euthanasia" program after completing their medical studies in Giessen. The concluding chapter focuses on the role of women in local resistance groups. Here, very different women from the various camps of political resistance are portrayed, from bourgeois to communist resistance groups.

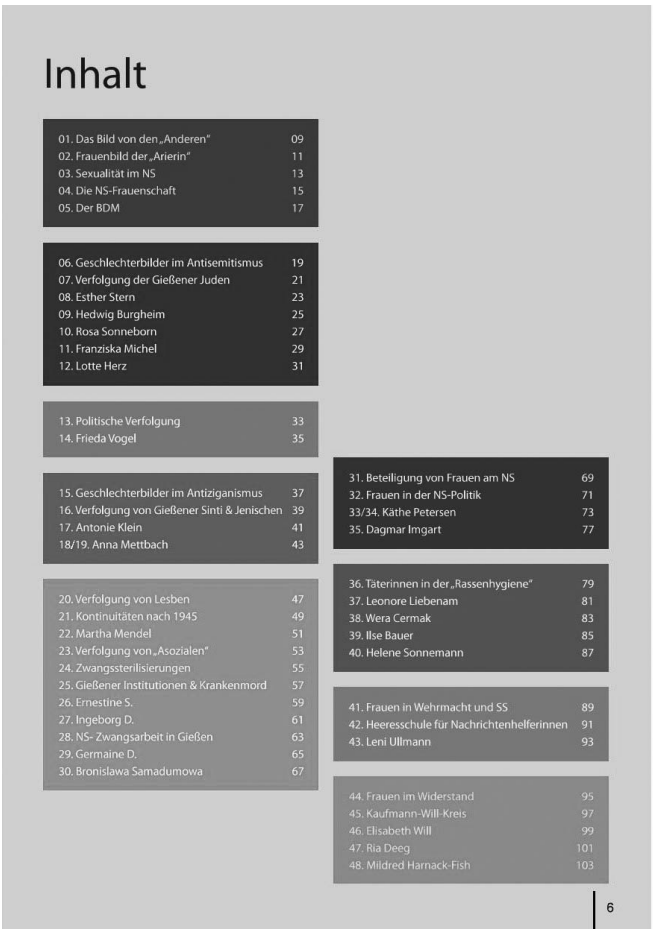
The selection of biographies

The selection of individuals presented in the booklet is mainly based on existing literature. The following topics were investigated: Where do women's names appear in existing local research on national socialism? Where can sources and points of reference be found? The selection of the persecuted people was not in any way based on fame or the supposed importance of the person for the city's history. Conversely, the selection encompasses a diverse range of women, including those of various ages, statuses, and backgrounds. It was not the booklet's intention to demonstrate why these individuals were deserving of recognition or remembrance, which is often the outcome seen in smaller

towns in Germany. Those who are particularly well-known in the town are remembered, while the everyday persecution of the general female population – including ordinary housewives, schoolgirls, and grandmothers – is largely ignored. The booklet's aim was rather to illustrate that women from different walks of life were subjected to persecution and death under the Nazi regime and for this injustice alone, deserve to be recognized and remembered. All kinds of women – ranging from old to young, famous to unknown, academics to housewives, and who had all previously been an integral part of German society – deserve to have their stories told.

Additionally, the women selected were intended to represent various groups affected by national socialism in different ways. These groups included Jewish women, Sinti women, women considered disabled, women persecuted as "asocial," lesbian women, as well as forced laborers deported to Germany. The selection was also influenced by specific local aspects, such as the existence of specific Nazi structures in the city under investigation. For instance, were there special research facilities or local Nazi institutions? The city of Giessen offers a particularly fruitful avenue for investigation. One might, for instance, examine the role of the local university in indoctrinating students who subsequently participated in Nazi crimes. Another promising avenue of inquiry is the special army school for female helpers for the Nazi military (Heeresschule für Nachrichtenhelferinnen), as well as the role of women in the local Gestapo office, which was responsible for the entire region.

Editing material on women during national socialism for a young target group



Inhalt

6

Illustration Nr. 3

The objective of the booklet is to provide an easily accessible educational opportunity for all interested parties that engages with the experiences of women in their local communities during the national socialist era. By doing so, it aims to illustrate the diverse realities of women's lives during this period on a local level.

In developing and revising the texts, we considered the needs. not only of pupils and young adults, but also those with limited prior knowledge of history – particularly outside of an academic setting – as the target audience for our work. The final product was therefore meant to not only be concise, accessible, and informative, but also appropriate and respectful to the topic. The information conveyed was not to appear drab or scientific, but rather engaging and contemporary. To this end, both the booklet's cover and contents are highly visual, colorful, and feature an array of images. For the final booklet, each chapter was assigned a distinct color to visually differentiate the contents: different strands of persecution were marked with varying shades of green, while the different groups of perpetrators were marked with shades of blue. The angular colors ("Winkel") associated with the concentration camps were deliberately not used in order to avoid the adoption of Nazi categorizations in terms of color. Each topic and biography are presented on a double-page spread and written in a simplified language to ensure that individuals with limited prior knowledge can work with the material. To further facilitate comprehension, the brochure includes a glossary of terms in straightforward language that provides a detailed explanation of specific Nazi terms, laws, and persecution campaigns.

Use of the booklet

The initial print run of 1,500 copies of the booklet's first and second editions is now completely out of stock. The publication generated considerable interest not only from educational institutions, but also from the general public. Teachers have indicated that for their students, having a local connection to the women in the brochure facilitated a novel approach to historical understanding; students could relate to the topics on a more personal level because what occurred had happened to an individual who was born and raised in the same city where they currently live or were also raised. The subject matter's proximity to the pupils' lived experiences and daily routines ultimately rendered – and continues to render – history more accessible and engaging. The online availability of the brochure in 2024 has further expanded the potential for teachers to utilize the material, with the expectation that this will continue into the future.

2. Exhibition – "Women from Central Hesse in the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp" (in German: "Mittelhessische Frauen im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück"[3]

Illustration Nr. 4

3 Randi Becker, Exhibition "How did anyone deserve such humiliation? Not even cattle would be treated like this," Women from Central Hesse

The second project, which was an exhibition on local women in the Ravensbrück concentration camp, originated from a seminar with prospective teachers at the Justus Liebig University of Giessen during the summer semester of 2022.

Preparation

A significant amount of research was conducted prior to the seminar to ensure that students would be adequately prepared to conduct research on a biography. In order to gain an understanding of the historical context of Giessen during the Nazi era, it was necessary to conduct extensive research into the existing literature on the subject. This involved consulting a wide range of databases, including those of the German archives. Among the German archives were: ARCINSYS, the online system for the archives of Hessen; Arolsen Archives of the International Center on Nazi Persecution; the German Gedenkbuch des Bundesarchivs; and the archive of the Ravensbrück memorial. The preliminary research resulted in the compilation of the names of at least 30 women who had lived in the central Hesse area and were then deported to Ravensbrück. Cases with multiple files were ultimately chosen for the seminar to ensure that the students had sufficient research material for their projects.

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in the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp (original title in German: "Wo hatte man eine solche Entwürdigung verdient? So begegnete man keinem Vieh." – Mittelhessische Frauen im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück), https://randibecker.org/ausstellung-mittelhessische-frauen-im-kz-ravensbruck/

The seminar

In the initial session, all 18 students selected a name or topic from the pre-selected list and then received preliminary instructions on how to conduct their research. These instructions included guidance on where to locate relevant files, as well as advice on the most appropriate individuals or institutions to approach for further information. In the second session, the head of our local city archive provided an introduction to the process of conducting research and utilizing archives. The students were then afforded the opportunity to pose questions regarding the logistics of archive visits, including queries such as: "How should I prepare?"; "How should one proceed in ordering files from disparate archives?"; and "To what extent should one be attentive to specific details during a site visit?".

Over the course of the semester, the students conducted independent research in various archives of their choosing. While the students were conducting research, we were also collaborating on preparations for the upcoming excursion. In the first week of September, we took part in a tour of the former Ravensbrück concentration camp, accompanied by the head of the education department, Matthias Heyl.

Our visit to the memorial provided us with a deeper understanding of the history of the camp and the circumstances of its prisoners. We engaged in a constructive dialogue with Mr. Heyl, who was instrumental in facilitating our learning experience. Furthermore, all students were afforded the opportunity to spend a few hours in the memorial archive, where they could search for additional information about their subjects. This was again made possible by the kind assistance of the memorial archive.

The research yielded detailed texts on the biographies of 12 women and one man who were either born in or lived in the central Hesse area. They were persecuted as Jews, Sinti women, political opponents, or "asocials" and subsequently deported to Ravensbrück. In order to disseminate these narratives and shed light on the plight of these individuals, the biographies were subsequently abridged, arranged, and printed on roll-ups as a traveling exhibition.

The traveling exhibition

Illustration Nr. 5

The exhibition focuses on the women's stories of persecution. Its contents were made comprehensible for varying target groups ranging from young to old. The exhibition commences with a cover page, a

preface, and three texts: one on the Gestapo Giessen, the Nazi authority responsible for initiating all deportations to Ravensbrück; one text on the camp's history and its conditions; and one text that introduces women as guards in the Ravensbrück camp. The introductory texts are designed to provide an overview of the Ravensbrück concentration camp and the pathways from Giessen to Ravensbrück. This is followed by the biographies that are combined into chapters on the respective persecution group. Combining the information in chapters portrays not only general information on the persecution history of that group explained in an introductory text, but also the biography of the specific life story of each woman. The introductory texts shown in grey are visually distinct from the biographies presented in purple. The publication of the roll-ups was first presented o 2023, and the roll-ups continue to be exhibited throughout the entire region of central Hesse as a traveling exhibition. The exhibition was displayed in various locations, including local museums, youth centers, libraries, and educational institutions, where it attracted considerable public interest.

Feedback on the exhibition

With now 13 stations (as of July 2024), the exhibition has been made accessible to many people. In discussions with the lending institutions, the feedback has been nothing but positive, particularly amongst teachers. The provided guest book gave visitors the opportunity to leave feedback. The biographical approach and local references have been particularly emphasized in the guest book. One pupil wrote: "I think the exhibition is very successful. Each individual story is presented very clearly and

the introduction prepares you well for the rest of the exhibition. After the exhibition, your perception of the surroundings changes enormously, as you now understand the history of the buildings better."[4] The guestbook often contains the phrase that the local reference "makes the topic even closer." One teacher reported back that she was particularly impressed by the level of interest and engagement that her pupils developed in the stories during their visit to the exhibition: "I was very impressed by the fact that ninth-grade pupils spent a lot of time looking at the texts, asking questions and using opportunities for discussion, even though they hadn't yet dealt with the topic in class."[5]

The exhibition has repeatedly encouraged contact between the students and relatives of the women we portrayed. There were times when the students contacted relatives directly while conducting research. At other times, contact was first established after the publication – when relatives participated in exhibition events and approached us. The feedback from the children, grandchildren, cousins, and nephews of the women we portrayed was particularly important to us and was – fortunately – exclusively positive. Because many of the women portrayed

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4 Guestbook of the exhibition, originally in German: "Ich finde die Ausstellung ist sehr gelungen. Jede einzelne Geschichte ist sehr verständlich dargestellt und die Einführung bereitet einen gut auf den Rest der Ausstellung vor. Nach der Ausstellung ändert sich die Wahrnehmung der Umgebung gewaltig, da man die Geschichte der Gebäude nun mehr versteht."

5 Guestbook of the exhibition, originally in German: "Dass sich Schüler der neunten Klasse sehr lange und intensivmit den Texten befasst haben, Fragen gestellt und Gesprächsanlässe genutzt haben, obwohl sie das Thema noch nicht im Unterricht behandelt haben, war für mich sehr beeindruckend."

had previously played no role in the culture of remembrance, it was an important experience for many relatives to know that their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers were being remembered in an appropriate and respectful manner. As a direct result of our research, Hedwig Kersten was included in the list of people remembered in Giessen every year in March ,on the anniversary of the deportation of Sinti and Yenish persons from Giessen. Hedwig was not known to the city beforehand and therefore not publicly remembered. Changing that not only meant a lot to thestudents, but also to her daughter, who contacted us during the research. Other relatives did not reveal themselves as relatives, but rather left entries in the guestbook. A grandchild of one of the portrayed women wrote: "Thank you very much for the great exhibition! My father always had a very negative relationship with this city and region. With your work, you are giving the families a piece of home back."[6]

Practical advice for similar projects

What can now be taken from projects like this?

The preparation of such projects must be quite intensive and detailed to ensure that the students have clear instructions and topics to research. Students can quickly – and quite rightly – be overwhelmed by

6 Guestbook of the exhibition, originally in Ggerman: "Vielen Dank für die tolle Ausstellung! Mein Vater hatte immer ein sehr negatives Verhältnis zu Friedberg und der Wetterau. Mit eurer Arbeit gebt ihr den Familien ein Stück Heimat zurück."

such a project. Experience has shown that it is the teachers' responsibility to prepare the project in such a way that the students' tasks are well manageable. This includes the selection of specific topics and biographies that are to be researched and should also include clear instructions on how to conduct this kind of research either on a local or national level.

Moreover, a publication, an exhibition, or whichever chosen format requires a clear focus or frame: 1) Who do you want to portray? Do you want to portray one specific persecuted

group, persecuted women in general, or should local female perpetrators be included?; 2) Do you want to give a general impression on the diversity of female biographies during national socialism with a wide focus or do you want to show specific aspects, such as the region's connection to a certain camp?; 3) Are there special local aspects that would influence the frame of such a project? Asking yourself these questions, while at the same time reflecting on your personal interests and the history of your own region will provide a concrete framework for your own project on women under National Socialism.

How can the project then be further structured? In the projects I have presented, we chose to structure the biographies in terms of victim groups of national socialism. This made sense as it ensured that our target audience would also learn the history of different strands of persecution during national socialism in general. However, it also meant summarizing very complex stories into categories and thus simplifying them.

How can biographies then be arranged to highlight the women as individuals, while also providing sufficient context about Nazi persecution? Depicting the women's stories also means having the ambition

to do them justice. On the one hand, this can be made more difficult by a lack of sources, as many gaps in the women's stories will remain because they were subject to death and were thus no longer able to write accounts of their experiences. Doing them justice also means handling the available information with care. Upon publishing their stories, itis important to not only treat these individuals' lives with care and respect, but also to act legally and ethically. It is important to consider which laws apply regarding the personal details that will be researched and potentially published, and ultimately adjust the selection of biographies accordingly. As an example, German law allows archive files only to be used and openly published 100 years after the death or 100 years after the birth of a person. Ethical questions must be raised and reflected upon constantly, which should be an integral part of the teaching and accompaniment of students. How can the women portrayed be given justice when there is only limited (and mostly Nazi-written) material available? How can the texts be written in such a way that they provide information about the stigmatization that these women have experienced without essentially reproducing this stigmatization? What personal details can and should be published, and which details are too personal?

Further practical questions are those of resources: are there enough resources to invest enough time in such a project to ensure that the students are well-accompanied on this research project? Is it possible to receive funding to define the layout of the project and get it printed?

Questions of an appropriate format, language, and layout for the respective target audience are important to ask and discuss. Shall the final product be a book, an online resource, or an exhibition? What is easiest for the target audience to access and how will they use it? Is the

content and language appropriate for the target group? Is the layout appropriate not only for the target group but also regarding the topic?

Summary

Even though there is much to reflect upon, to consider, and to be careful with, these projects offer a multitude of benefits, with the potential to make a significant impact on numerous levels.

First and foremost, students have gained a deeper understanding of the historical context of National Socialism, which they then disseminated to their families and friends, as well as potentially within future professional contexts. This knowledge is particularly valuable for prospective teachers who are inspired by the subject matter and motivated to incorporate it into their future teaching practices. Some students have also initiated their own projects at their schools, engaging with their peers on the subject. Others have borrowed the exhibition for use in their school.

Furthermore, the local public has benefited from this new knowledge. Local history has and can be made available through these kinds of projects, and anyone in Giessen can read the booklet or visit the exhibition. The results of the research can also become valuable sources for the local culture of remembrance: discovered names can be included in places of significance, printed on signs, or even mentioned during occasions of remembrance.

Finally, contact with relatives in particular was of great considerable benefit for participants in the seminar. In numerous instances, our

research represented an opportunity for the relatives themselves to gain further insight into the lives of their mothers, aunts, and cousins, as they had not previously had access to the relevant files. In other cases, the group was able to facilitate further learning about the history of these women collectively by clarifying contradictions in the files through conversations with relatives or by gaining more knowledge about the women through the memories of their relatives.

Research projects on local women under National Socialism help to shed light on the lives of women who had previously been invisible. Giving them and their families 'piece of home back' is the least we can do as teachers.

List of Illustrations

1) Cover of the booklet, Randi Becker: "Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism."

2) Map of the booklet, Randi Becker: "Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism," pp. 7–8.

3)Table of content, Randi Becker: "Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism," p. 6

4) The cover of the exhibition "Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism."

5) Exhibition at a school, source: Randi Becker.

References

Randi Becker, Giessen's Women. Victims, Bystanders, and Perpetrators during National Socialism (original titele in German: Gießener Frauen, Opfer, Mitläuferinnen und Täterinnen im Nationalsozialismus (first and second edition printed, third edition online, JLUpub, publication platform of the Justus Liebig University of Giessen: http://dx.doi.org/10.22029/jlupub-18487).

Randi Becker, Exhibition "How did anyone deserve such humiliation? Not even cattle would be treated like this." Women from Central Hesse in the Ravensbrück concentration camp (originaltitle in German: "Wo hatte man eine solche Entwürdigung verdient? So begegnete man keinemVieh."-Mittelhessische Frauen im Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück), https://randibecker.org/ausstellung-mittelhessische-frauen-im-kz-ravensbruck/).

Guestbook of the exhibition

Epilogue

As we pointed out in this publication's Prologue, the idea behind this book was to open the space for many different voices of women who spoke about their experiences during the Holocaust. This book uses a polyphonic texture gathered from various academic disciplines and areas. All of these voices are similar in their desire to fill the still-missing space for knowledge about women's Holocaust experiences, yet different in their approaches, writing styles, generational perspectives, and choice of topics. This diversity, however, speaks in unison when it comes to the responsibility and care that we owe to the women who survived to tell the truth about the Holocaust and to those who never had a chance to do so due to the Holocaust itself. The kaleidoscope of women's voices we have presented in this publication is thus transtemporal – it sheds. light on women's both past and present voices. Just as the kaleidoscope never gives a finished image – constantly opening anew as its particles fall into numerous patterns, we hope this book will have the same potential of carrying pieces of women's Holocaust history into future research, conversations, initiatives, and projects.

Although it was not planned, all of the chapters in this publication were written by women. In a largely male-dominated world, it is difficult to understand why there is still such a small number of men who would devote their time to research on women's realities, struggles, and histories. Of course, women's research perspectives on female experiences during the Holocaust have immense value and, as seen in this publication, they weave around the firm thread of thematizing women's bodies in survival, pain, and crisis; women's inscriptions in the fields of arts and

daily culture; and women's commitment to change the unjust circumstances of the world. However, these perspectives deserve to engage in a dialogue with many more authors who are capable of filling and expanding this research niche. In this sense, we hope this book might inspire our colleagues across the academic field, regardless of gender.

At the end of this book, we would like to express our gratitude for the privilege of meeting each other and working together. Beginning with the first WHISC conference in Belgrade in 2023—and continuing through the planning and preparation of this academic publication, we look forward to many more opportunities for fruitful professional and friendly cooperation.

Editors
Dragana Stojanović
Lily Halpert Zamir
Batya Brutin

Notes on Editors and Contributors

Randi Becker studied social sciences, sociology, and political theory in Gießen, Frankfurt am Main, and Darmstadt. Her three theses focused on forced prostitution in concentration camps, on women as perpetrators and their representation in memorial sites, and on the reproduction of antisemitism within the concept of intersectionality. As a PHD candidate (University of Passau), she researches antisemitism in postcolonial theory. As an educator at a state education center for the German civil service, she teaches political education. Additionally, she is a visiting lecturer at various German universities and researches local women's history in national socialism with her students.

Batya Brutin is a researcher of art during and after the Holocaust, as well as a researcher of art on Holocaust monuments in Israel and worldwide. From 2000 to 2018, she was the Director of the Holocaust Teaching in Israeli Society Program at Beit Berl Academic College in Israel. She published academic books, essays, and educational materials and curated art exhibitions on the abovementioned subjects. From 2002 to 2013, she organized six international conferences on "Women and the Holocaust", a joint project by Beit Berl Academic College, Beit Terezin, and Beit Lohamei Haghetaot, Israel. Dr. Brutin is on the Advisory Board of the *Remember the Women Institute* in New York. Since 2018, she has been a Research Associate at Chair of the Abraham and Edita Spiegel Family Chair in Holocaust Research at Bar-Ilan University. In 2018, she received the Yad Vashem Award for her lifetime achievement in Holocaust education. Since 2022, Dr. Brutin has been a member of

the Academic Steering Committee of WHISC in Moreshet, Israel. Since 2022, Dr. Brutin has also been a member of the Scientific Council of the Yearbook of the KL Plaszow Museum, Poland.

Nevena Daković is a full professor of Film and Media Studies in the Department of Theory and History, Faculty of Dramatic Arts (FDA), Belgrade, a film theorist and scholar. She is also the director of the Institute for Theatre, Film, Radio and Television. Nevena Daković is an author (*Images without Memory: trauma, film, transmission*, 2020; *Balkan as a Film Genre: image, text, nation/Balkan kao filmski žanr: slika, tekst, nacija*, 2008) and editor of more than 15 books. Her works have been published nationally and internationally (in the UK, Turkey, Slovakia, Italy, Austria, France, and the US), and she has been invited as a guest lecturer at European and American universities. Nevena Daković is a member of Academia Europaea and associate editor of ER (European Review, Core Cambridge Journal). Her research focuses on film and media studies, memory studies, identity and representation, and Balkan studies.

Angela Ford is a second-year PhD student in Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her research areas include sexual violence against women in 20th-century wars; masculinity and the military; memory, representation, and silence; and creative nonfiction craft. She has earned graduate certificates in Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights, as well as in Creative Writing, and is currently writing a memoir about sexual abuse, identity, and estrangement. Angela was the recipient of the Hillel A. Feinberg Award and the Istvan and Zsuzsanna Ozsváth Research Award, and was named the Mala and Adolph Einspruch Fellow for Academic Year 2025.

Caroline François has been working at the Memorial de la Shoah for over 16 years as exhibitions coordinator. The history and memory of

women in the Resistance and deportation are at the heart of the themes she addresses through the curating of temporary exhibitions such as *Women in the Resistance* and *Julia Pirotte* and travelling exhibitions *Women's Commitment to the Resistance*, *Simone Veil*, *Ginette Kolinka*. Author of several articles on women during the Second World War and *The Shoah: Itinerary of Women in Resistance, Nuns in Resistance, Felka Platek*, she has given lectures on femicide and genocide, workshops, and scientific presentations on the Shoah through a gender lens. She also takes part in the Memorial de la Shoah international training program on discrimination, gender issues, and sexual violence in the context of the genocidal process. Moreover, she is responsible for scientific and cultural programming and partnership policy for high places of national memory in Ile de France (ONaCVG) and project manager for the National Memorial of Women in Resistance and Deportation.

Lily Halpert Zamir is the Co-Founder and Academic Director of WHISC. She is a Professor of Holocaust and Gender Studies, a member of the Academic Council, and Head of the Center for Women's and Gender Studies at the David Yellin Academic College of Education in Jerusalem, Israel. Prof. Zamir serves as the Presidential Advisor on Gender Equality and Sexual Harassment Treatment and Prevention Commissioner of the college. She has published several books, seven of which discuss the Holocaust, as well as dozens of articles in Hebrew and English that focus on Holocaust and gender studies and one monography on Danilo Kis in Serbo-Croatian. Her last book, *Lili Kasticher: The Woman Who Wrote in Auschwitz*, was published by Moreshet in 2022.

Bruna Lo Biundo, born in Italy and based in Paris, is a scholar specializing in the representation of women during the interwar period, with a particular focus on the surrealist avant-garde and the work of the French filmmaker and feminist Germaine Dulac (1882–1942). After

earning a PhD in French Literature from the University of Palermo in 2007, she began a career as a research officer and curator for historical exhibitions at institutions such as the Mémorial de la Shoah (Paris), La Contemporaine (University of Nanterre), and Génériques (Paris). In 2018, she co-founded the association Past/Not Past, which promotes research in the field of cultural heritage. As a scientific and cultural curator for Génériques, a European research center dedicated to immigration heritage, Bruna Lo Biundo has worked extensively on the history of immigrant and refugee women in 20th-century France, contributing to numerous international conferences. In October 2024, she joined INA Campus, the corporate university of the French National Audiovisual Institute, as Teaching Manager for the Master's degree in Audiovisual Heritage.

Verena Meier studied History, English Philology, European Art History, and Philosophy at the Ruprecht-Karls University Heidelberg and Hebrew University of Jerusalem. From August 2018 to October 2024, she was a PhD candidate at the Research Centre on Antigypsyism at the University of Heidelberg. Her PhD project "Criminal Police and Genocide: The Nazi Persecution of Sinti and Roma in Magdeburg and Transitional Justice after 1945 under the Allies and in the GDR" was honored with distinction. She held a fellowship from the Women in the Holocaust International Study Center at Givat Haviva in 2024 and received the prestigious Gerald D. Feldman fellowship and travel grant from the Max Weber Foundation. In 2021, she was awarded with the Young Talent Award of the Society for Schleswig-Holstein History for her monography on the Camp and memorial for Soviet prisoners of war in Gudendorf. Her research interests include police history, the history of ideas, gender studies, and research on historical antisemitism and antigypsyism.

Natalija Perišić is a full professor of Social Policy at the University of Belgrade Faculty of Political Science, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, where she lectures on national and European welfare states, aging, and migration at the undergraduate, master's, and Ph.D. levels. She is also a lecturer in the Migration Studies master's program at the University of Belgrade and a visiting professor at the University of Eastern Sarajevo and the University of Tuzla, Bosnia and Herzegovina. She is a Vice Dean for Undergraduate Studies at the Faculty of Political Science. Her scientific and research interests include the nexus between aging, migration, and welfare state, national and European social policies, and gender perspectives. She has published extensively in national and international journals and contributed to several edited books.

Dragana Stojanović is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory and an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Media and Communications in Belgrade. Her interdisciplinary research involves Holocaust and memory studies, culture studies, gender studies, education studies, and art and media theory. Prof. Stojanović participates in and organizes numerous international and national scientific conferences, round tables, and seminars in the abovementioned areas. She is also a member of the Academic Steering Committee of WHISC (Women in the Holocaust International Study Center). Besides her work in formal educational and research fields, she is active in informal Jewish education. She is an Educational Project Consultant and Educational Programs Facilitator for the Haver Serbia organization.

Žarka Svirčev is a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Literature and Arts, Belgrade, in the Department for Periodical Studies. She has published the following books (in Serbian): *Ah, that identity!*

Deconstruction of gender stereotypes in the work of Dubravka Ugrešić (2010), *Vinaver's Literary Republic* (2017), *Portrait of the Predecessor: Draga Dejanović* (2018), and *Avant-Garde Women. Essays on Serbian (female) avant-garde literature* (2018). She is the editor of the conference proceedings book *Ženski pokret: 1920–1938.* [Women's Movement: 1920–1938.], co-edited with Jelena Milinković, and *Postajanje autorkom u srpskoj kulturi* [Becoming a Women Writer in Serbien Culture]. She has edited the book *Nemiri između četiri zida* [*Riots Between Four Walls*], an anthology of short stories by Serbian female writers of the first half of the 20th century, and the book *Razilaženja*, a selection of short stories by Frida Filipović.

Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin is a researcher in the Department of Historical and Contemporary Studies at Södertörn University in Stockholm, Sweden. She has been a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Holocaust Studies at the Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, and the recipient of the International Ephraim E. Urbach Post-Doctoral Fellowship in Jewish Studies awarded by the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture. She earned her PhD in History and Jewish Studies at the University of Toronto. Sylwia Szymańska-Smolkin has international research and teaching expertise at several universities and institutions in the history of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust. She has taught at the University of Toronto, York University in Toronto, University of Warsaw, and Uppsala University. Her research and writing have been supported by external funding from various federal and private organizations including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University, and Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

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CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд

341.485(=411.16)(100)”1939/1945”(082)
341.485-055.2(=411.16)(100)”1939/1945”(082)

A SPACE of Her Own : Women in the Holocaust / edited by Dragana Stojanović, Lily Halpert Zamir, Batya Brutin.
- Belgrade : University, Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory ; Israel : WHISC – Women in the Holocaust
International Study Center, 2024 (Belgrade : Alta Nova). - 246 str. : ilustr. ; 21 cm

Tiraž 300. - Str. 11-12: Acknowledgements / editors Dragana Stojanović, Lily Halpert Zamir, Batya Brutin.
- Str. 237-238: Epilogue / editors Dragana Stojanović, Lily Halpert Zamir, Batya Brutin. - Notes on editors and contributors: str. 239-244. - Napomene i bibliografske reference uz tekst. - Bibliografija uz svaki rad.

ISBN 978-86-82324-95-9 (IPST)

а) Холокауст -- Зборници б) Жене -- Холокауст -- Зборници

COBISS.SR-ID 165665801