



5. Women in the Holocaust



Employees of a sewing workshop in the Lodz ghetto.

Photo Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum



UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

Professor Lenore J. Weitzman

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She is now completing a book on “the Kashariyot”, the young women who were secret underground “couriers” for the Jewish resistance movements in the ghettos. This book chronicles their courageous missions to reach Jews trapped behind ghetto walls and to mobilise resistance, revolt and rescue.

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Women in the Holocaust

by Lenore J. Weitzman

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Why, you may ask, should we talk about WOMEN when we know that the Nazis murdered six million Jews without regard to whether they were men, women, or children?¹ One answer is that concentrating on a particular group helps us break down that daunting number of six million, and helps us think about individuals.

When we hear about a mother who saved the one piece of bread she was given in the ghetto factory for “lunch”, to take home to share with her emaciated children; and when we hear about the teenage girl who was helping her grandmother, and held her arm on the ramp at Auschwitz, and ended up being sent to the gas chambers with her, we understand that these were ordinary women like us – like our mothers, and our sisters, and like our daughters and granddaughters – ordinary innocent people who were caught up in Nazi terror.

A second answer is that a focus on women provides us with a more detailed, more nuanced and more complete understanding of what happened to Jews during the Holocaust.

¹ I am indebted to Professor Dalia Ofer of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, my co-author of the original article on “Women in the Holocaust”, which is the basis for this talk. It was first published in our coedited book *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998).

This paper explores three spheres of gender differences:

First, how the roles of women before the war shaped their experiences during the Holocaust; second, how German policy treated women differently; and third, how Jewish women developed different ways of coping in the ghettos and the camps.

1. Pre-war Roles

We first examine the roles of men and women before the Holocaust, when women were primarily responsible for their children, families and homes, and men for their family's economic support. These roles provided the two sexes with different spheres of knowledge, skills and life-experiences with which to face the Nazi onslaught.

For example, in Nazi Germany, when the first anti-Jewish laws were passed, and Jews were dismissed from their jobs and professions, Jewish men were affected most directly. Men who had spent their whole lives working were suddenly fired and cut off from their work, their co-workers, and their daily routines.² Because they were forced to be idle and were no longer able to provide for their families, they felt humiliated by their loss of income, their loss of status and their loss of self-esteem. It is therefore not surprising that the rate of male suicides increased dramatically during this period.³

For Jewish women, in contrast, the early years of the Nazi regime had the opposite effect: it brought them more work and more responsibility – as they tried to manage their households with less money and no help, shop for food in hostile stores, help their frightened children cope with harassment at school and provide comfort and solace for their husbands.⁴ In fact, as late as February 1938, five

² Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 24-29.

³ Christian Goeschel, *Suicide in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁴ Marion Kaplan, "Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women's Responses to Daily life in Nazi Germany", in Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 42-43.

years after Hitler assumed power, an article in a German Jewish newspaper still encouraged Jewish women “to light the candles and brighten their homes with cheer”.⁵

2. German Policies

A second source of gender differences was German policy and the many rules and regulations that specifically targeted Jewish women.

One painful example was the policy that prohibited pregnancy and the birth of Jewish children in Lithuania. Jewish doctors in the ghettos were required to report every pregnancy and to perform an abortion to terminate it. The penalty for non-compliance was death – for the woman and for the doctor. For example, in the Kovno ghetto the order of July 24, 1942 stated that “Pregnancies have to be terminated. Pregnant women will be shot”.⁶

Despite the death penalty, some young women in the Kovno ghetto decided to defy this order and to remain pregnant. These women were engaged in a conscious act of resistance because they did not want to allow the Germans to deprive them of the experience of giving birth and the experience of motherhood.⁷ They were fortunate to find a Jewish doctor, Dr. Abraham Peretz, who agreed to help them – at the risk of his own life – and to shelter them through their pregnancies (even though they all knew that they might be caught and killed).⁸ This example also reminds us of how important it is to examine how the Jews responded to German orders – and how they tried to cope and resist – instead of treating German decrees as a *fait accompli*.

⁵ Ibid, p. 43.

⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Hidden History of the Kovno Ghetto* (Little Brown and Company, 1997), p. 245. See also the diary of Dr. Aharon Pick in the Shavli ghetto: *Writings from the Death Area, Memoirs Written in the Ghetto of Shavli Lithuania During 1942-1944* (in Hebrew).

⁷ Aharon Peretz, *Ba-Mahanot lo bakhu : reshimot shel rofe* (only in Hebrew) (In the Camps They Did Not Cry: a doctor's notes) (Tel Aviv: Masadah publishing, 1960), p. 36.

⁸ Ibid.

Pregnancy was also a death-sentence for women in the concentration camps where all pregnant women — and women with children — were selected for immediate murder. The selection process on the arrival ramp of the Auschwitz concentration camp determined who would be sent to forced labour, and who would be sent to the gas chambers to die. Those Jews who appeared strong enough for work were sent to one side, while those who looked too young, too old, or too weak to work, were sent to the other side — which led to the gas chambers.

The one exception to this rule was for a woman who was carrying a child in her arms or holding the hands of her children. Even if she looked healthy and fit for work, if she was holding onto a child, she was automatically sent to the gas chambers. Some of the Jews who worked on the arrival ramp at Auschwitz, who of course knew what was going to happen to these mothers, devised a way to try to save some of them. In a whisper, they told the mothers “be sure to give your child to their grandmother” because the workers knew that all the older women would be sent to the gas chambers anyway, and they hoped to save the lives of the mothers if they were not holding onto their children.

3. Different Reactions and Coping Strategies

We now turn to the third sphere of gender differences, the responses of Jewish men and women in the ghettos and camps.

3a. Reactions and Coping Strategies in the Ghettos

In Eastern Europe, where the ghettos were located, the Holocaust was much more violent than in Western Europe. For example, in Germany it took six years, from 1933 to 1939, to implement over 400 anti-Jewish laws.⁹ But in Poland, in contrast, the same measures were instituted in a matter of months and were accompanied by physical violence from the very start. The Jews in Poland were then forced into overcrowded ghettos and trapped behind their gates and

⁹ Michael Berenbaum, *The World Must Know* (Little Brown & Co, 1993), p. 22.

walls. They were stripped of their homes and possessions, barred from their bank accounts, and cut off from their jobs, shops, offices and business.

Jewish men, especially those who were most visible because of their beards and traditional clothing, were immediately targeted for beatings, humiliation, harassment, arrest and execution. Many were assaulted and had their beards ripped off, mocked and jeered on the streets, and taken away for harsh forced labour. It is therefore not surprising that many Jewish men were simply afraid to leave their homes during the day, and they increasingly relied on their wives to deal with the world outside. As a result, their wives began to take over many of their husbands' former roles.

For example, the distinguished historian of the Warsaw ghetto, Emmanuel Ringelblum wrote in his diary:

(The) men don't go out...

She stands on the long line (for bread)...

When there is need to go to the Gestapo, the daughter or wife goes....

The women are everywhere....

(Women) who never thought of working are now performing the most difficult physical work.¹⁰

But how could these women, most of whom had never worked outside the home, manage to support their families? Most of them could not really do it. Some found jobs in ghetto factories, labour brigades, and soup kitchens, and others did private cleaning, laundry or childminding. But there were severe job shortages, and most women simply could NOT find regular work. In Warsaw, for example, in September 1941, about half of the inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto (200,000 to 250,000 people) had no regular jobs and were starving to death; most of them were women and children.¹¹

¹⁰ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes from the War Period: Warsaw Ghetto* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1992), pp. 51-52.

¹¹ Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, "Introduction" to *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 9.

This led many women to turn to the dangerous and illegal “occupation” of smuggling as the only way to feed their children.¹² They had to first escape from the ghetto, and then find non-Jews willing to buy their cherished belongings in exchange for food. Little by little they parted with their favourite dress, the bedding from their dowry, and, eventually, even their wedding rings.¹³

While we may be surprised to learn that many women became food smugglers, we understand it better when we know that the daily calorie ration for people in the Warsaw ghetto was only 181 calories for each person. But, in the end, despite all of their efforts, we know that most women simply could not manage to support their families: the draconian odds in the ghetto were all stacked against them. Their heartbreaking efforts show that they did everything they could to try – including depriving themselves of food to keep their children alive. But most of them gradually exhausted all their resources, and most of them gradually exhausted themselves.

This desperate sacrifice of mothers is one of the most common themes in ghetto diaries. For example, as 15-year-old Dawid Sierakowiak described his emaciated mother on the eve of her deportation from the Lodz ghetto (in Poland):

*My little, emaciated mother,
who suffered so many calamities.....
(She) devoted her whole life to others ...
My poor mother, who always took everything on herself...
She agreed when I told her that she had surrendered her life
by lending and giving out food,
but ... I saw that she had no regrets.*¹⁴

¹² Dalia Ofer, “Gender Issues in Diaries and Testimonies of the Ghetto”, in *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 152-162.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Dawid Sierakowiak, *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto*, Alan Adelson, trans. (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 219-220.

3b. Women in the Jewish resistance

While that was the fate of most women in the ghettos, it is important to take note of a small group of women who were NOT mothers or caregivers and were therefore “free” to participate in the Jewish resistance in the ghettos. These women were typically young and single, without family responsibilities, and were actively involved in the groups that planned the ghetto revolts.

The Jewish resistance was one arena in which women assumed leadership roles that were equal to those of men. In several ghettos, including the Warsaw ghetto, women like Zivia Lubetkin were among the central leaders of the uprising. In fact, Zivia Lubetkin was one of the three commanders of the Warsaw ghetto revolt, and widely recognised as a powerful inspiration for their historic stand for Jewish honour. Women also played critical roles in other forms of resistance in the ghettos — establishing illegal schools, secret libraries, and underground cultural events, and they often spearheaded underground efforts to rescue other Jews.

One fascinating group of women in the Jewish resistance were the underground couriers who operated outside of the ghettos, who are the focus of my current research. Known as *kashariyot*, these young women travelled illegally, disguised as non-Jews. They smuggled news, information, money, food, medical supplies, forged documents and other Jews in and out of the ghettos of Eastern Europe. Their missions took guts, courage, chutzpah and nerves of steel.

Once they learned about the mass killings, these couriers set out to warn the Jews in far flung ghettos who were cut off from the news and information. They wanted to reach the isolated Jews before the Germans could deceive them with promises of “resettlement”, when, in fact, the Germans were planning to send them on trains to the death camps.

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The couriers urged the Jews NOT to board the trains, but to instead join the Jewish underground and resist — by telling others about the true nature of the deportations, building bunkers for those who were most vulnerable, and by fighting and thwarting the Germans in any way possible. The kashariyot also set out to secure arms and ammunition and to smuggle them into the ghettos for the planned revolts. Their final mission was to rescue other Jews from the doomed ghettos and to provide them with false documents, homes, money and moral support. Though most women were not in a position to do what these daring young women did, it is important for us to remember their heroism and their special role in the Jewish resistance.

3c. Reactions and Coping Strategies in the Camps:

Finally, we consider the reactions and coping strategies of women in the concentration camps. One of the greatest differences in the experiences of men and women in the concentration camps was their response to their initial “processing”. Women who were selected for work were first forced to undress and stand naked in front of German male guards, while they were shaved all over and then tattooed with numbers. Women survivors described this process as traumatic, degrading, humiliating and mortifying. Many sobbed from the assault and shame — which was often intensified by having to witness one’s mother or one’s daughter being subjected to the same brutality — while one was forced to stand by helplessly.

While Jewish men also described the degrading process of being stripped of their identities, they were not as emotionally distraught as the women. And when they wrote about the processing, they appeared to be most upset about the ways that their wives, mothers, and daughters were treated. In fact, the men reacted as if they themselves were personally assaulted by the humiliation of their women.

Once in the camps, we find three coping strategies that appear to be unique to women.

The first was the way that women coped with hunger. Although this may sound counter-intuitive, they talked about meals, and what

they served on Jewish holidays, and they shared their favourite recipes for their mother's gefilte fish or cholent.¹⁵ At night, in the barracks, they told each other stories about special family dinners and how they celebrated each Jewish holiday. Some survivors say that these conversations had a satiating effect. But whether or not they actually did, they clearly affirmed the women's identities as mothers, wives and daughters. And that was important in a place where there was an explicit plan to destroy those identities and to dehumanise them.

A second coping strategy was women's continued use of their homemaking and grooming skills. For example, they made an effort to improve their looks by pinching their cheeks to look healthier, and rubbing black coal into their greying hair to look younger. This not only improved their chances of being seen as fit for work during the endless roll calls and "selections", it also helped them maintain a more human appearance and their dignity. In addition, as Felicia Karay observed, women's attention to personal hygiene and their appearance induced their overseers in the labour camp to treat them more humanely.¹⁶

A third coping strategy was the formation of "Camp Sister" relationships in which two women supported and sustained each other like sisters, by sharing food and other resources, trying to protect each other from threats and assaults and taking care of one another when one became sick. This was especially important during roll call when women were required to stand for hours on end and those who were sick needed a camp sister to hold them up.¹⁷

Women also played critical roles in other forms of resistance in the ghettos – establishing illegal schools, secret libraries, and underground cultural events, and they often spearheaded underground efforts to rescue other Jews.

¹⁵ See, for example, Myrna Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender", in *Women in the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 1998), p. 335.

¹⁶ Felicia Karay, "Women in the Forced-Labor Camps", in Ofer and Weitzman (1998), p. 305.

¹⁷ Brana Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters* (University of Alabama Press, 1998), pp. xviii-xix.

Camp sisters also encouraged each other not to give up and die. It is therefore not surprising that many survivors refer to their camp sister as the person who “kept them alive”, both physically and emotionally. In addition, many women spoke of feeling that they themselves had to remain alive so that they could help their camp sister.

4. Conclusion:

Initially, many of us assumed that if we learned more about the Holocaust, we would have the tools to be sure that it could never happen again. And yet we have witnessed so many atrocities and so many mass killings in the years since then, and in most of them we have seen women singled out for abuse. In addition, most recently we have seen the horrifying phenomenon of rape used as a weapon of war. At first, this might lead us to conclude that we have not made any progress since the Holocaust. But, at the same time, we have also seen something that never happened during the Holocaust. We have seen the international community stand up, and speak out, and try to stop these genocides.

In addition, we have seen the international community define the specific targeting of women as a war crime and rape as a crime against humanity. While we shudder at the terror of today's genocides in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and Darfur, we should also think about how much worse they could have been, and how much longer they could have continued, had these events been ignored, as the Holocaust was and had they been met with the silence of the international community that prevailed during the Holocaust. Thus even though we know that the international community can and should do more, we can also point to the many ways in which the lessons of the Holocaust have already helped to change the course of recent history.

Please see page 62 for discussion questions



Jewish women and children on their way to the gas chambers, Auschwitz-Birkenau, in German-occupied Poland, May 1944.

Photo Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archives



Women at forced labour in Plaszow, Poland, 1943.

Photo Credit: Yad Vashem Photo Archives

Women in the Holocaust

Discussion questions

1. How did the changed reality under Nazi rule in Germany affect women's roles within their families?
2. How did women cope with life in the ghettos and the camps?
3. How were women's experiences different from men's?
4. Why is it important to learn about women's experiences during the Holocaust?
5. What might the international community do to help protect women against violence today, especially in conflict situations?