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# Jewish Women in the Ghettos, Concentration Camps, and Partisans During the Holocaust

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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE GHETTOS, CONCENTRATION CAMPS, AND  
PARTISANS DURING THE HOLOCAUST

By

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## ABSTRACT

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Jewish Women in the Ghettos, Concentration  
Camps, and Partisans during the Holocaust

Men like, Primo Levi, Viktor Frankl, and Elie Wiesel, have provided us with valuable insight on the suffering of the Jewish people during the Holocaust. Only until recently, was there a disproportion of female memoirs of the Holocaust beyond the story Anne Frank. The purpose of this study was to research the Jewish women's experience in the ghettos, the concentration camps, and the partisans to add to a broader understanding of the Holocaust and its female victims.

The hostile environment for Jewish males after Hitler's rise to power led to a complete role reversal for Jewish men and women. Jewish women were forced out of their domestic sphere and were thrust out into the working world to support their families. Women had the added burden of maintaining a peaceful family life while facing life and death decisions on whether to stay or leave Germany. Generally speaking, women took on their new responsibilities with grace and fortitude. I found that women thought life was bearable until in 1941 all Jews were confined to ghettos.

Ghettoization meant that Jews were forcefully relocated and isolated into small chosen sectors of cities. In this study, I looked at the Lodz and Warsaw ghettos in Poland. Historians argue that ghetto life further blurred the distinctive roles of men and women as both genders were faced with an equal struggle to survive. This study evaluates how women responded to the endless disease, long hours of work, crowding, starvation, and death that were present in the ghettos. I found that in the Warsaw and Lodz ghettos, Jewish women were innovative, creative, and relentless in their desire to endure.

Following the liquidation of the ghettos, the concentration camps segregated Jewish women from men. This study explores the horrors in the camps that were distinct to the female gender. The shaving ritual upon arrival at the camps, the fear of sexual assault, and children and motherhood, all contributed to Jewish women's suffering. Many have attributed survival to the product of luck, of having a friend or sister to live for, or trying to maintain some sense of human dignity. I found that survivors were either able to find meaning in their suffering, or were haunted by loss and traumatic memories indefinitely.

Few sources address women who played a role in the fighting partisan movement. It was exceedingly difficult for women to be accepted within the partisans simply because they were women, and Jews. In most cases, a woman needed a male protector in the forests who would care for her in exchange for her services as a mistress. Life in the partisans was one of constant movement, fear of German assault, and torture and death if caught.

Some people discredit studying the experience of women in the holocaust believing that gender isn't relevant considering men and women were targeted as Jews. It has been argued that separating the male and female narratives takes away from the suffering of Jewish people as a whole. This study doesn't seek to distract from the magnitude of Jewish suffering in the holocaust. My intention is to provide an understanding of how women specifically experienced life in the ghettos, the concentration camps, and in the partisans.

### **German Jewish Women Pre 1941**

To be a Jew in Germany wasn't a distinguishing factor until Hitler's rise to power in 1933. German Jewry enjoyed a great degree of assimilation within the German culture. Jewish men were active in commerce and industry, and rallied into battle during WWI to fight for their country. Jewish women primarily cared for their children and were engaged in social gatherings. Following Germany's defeat in WWI the "women question" or what was considered the appropriate role of women was highly disputed. Women achieved suffrage and an active role in the work place but knew their duty as wife and mother to be their first responsibility. The "new" woman helped her family economically and took on a paying job. This woman was resourceful, thrifty, creative, and skilled at cultivating a peaceful and welcoming family life. Post 1933 up until the deportations of 1941 the Nazi regime forcefully restricted the livelihood of the German Jews and gender norms were abandoned in the growing chaos disappointments and confusion of life as an outcast. "Being a German, a woman and a Jew are three duties that can strain an individual to the utmost, but also three sources of... vitality. They do not extinguish each other, in fact they strengthen and enrich each other."<sup>1</sup> In the coming years German, Jewish women's strength would be tested in innumerable ways.

In WWI, Germany realized women were an untapped labor force that could replace the vast number of men sent to the front lines. German Jewish women joined other women to become active participants in society and the economy, a role once

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<sup>1</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48.

denied to them by the patriarchal world-view that confined women to their homes. “Suddenly a system that, until 1908, had made it illegal for women even to attend gatherings at which politics might be discussed and barred women from earning university degrees, told women the nation’s very survival depended upon their taking up jobs previously done by men.”<sup>2</sup> Jewish women entered into the realm of commerce and industry, but held jobs of a lower status than their male counterparts.<sup>3</sup> “More women than ever worked in factories, and by far the majority of women’s jobs remained in heavy agricultural work, textiles, food processing, and assembly- line production. All exhausting, low paid occupations.”<sup>4</sup> Despite the long hours and the monotonous nature of factory work, women seemed to welcome the added responsibility of working plus cooking and housework.

Before the war, Jewish families followed the traditional bourgeois model that followed a classic division of the sexes. Women cared for children and kept house, sometimes volunteering with other women or joining women’s clubs and organizations. A woman’s first duty was to her husband as exemplified by a traditional prayer to be recited by a wife that states, “and that it is his wife’s duty...to restore calm and serenity to her husband’s heart through her...submission, her indulgent character.”<sup>5</sup> Women’s civic duties were an added element to daily life, but they were still expected to guard the home and preserve their family’s peace of mind. Though all women shared in new

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<sup>2</sup> Caludia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, The Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, edited. *Women in the Holocaust*. (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Caludia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, The Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 45.

<sup>5</sup> Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, edited. *Women in the Holocaust*. (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 27.

responsibilities outside their home, Rahel Straus, who worked closely with other German women during the Weimar Republic claims that German Jewish women were still in a separate sphere. She says, “We lived among each other, sat together in the same schoolroom, attended university together, met each other at social events- and we were complete strangers.”<sup>6</sup> This being said, many Jewish women enjoyed friendships with women of other religions and nationalities. German women were unique in that they achieved in a short number of years what would take other women decades, they gained the right to vote in 1918 when an interim socialist cabinet enacted reforms.<sup>7</sup> German women had paying jobs, and a voice in the world of politics. German women achieved sexual liberation during inflation when money for a dowry was scarce. The idealized new woman was youthful, educated, and employed, with greater social mobility. With these advancements came setbacks, and many women were disillusioned with the new freedoms given to them by the Weimar Republic. They did not see themselves as equal to men, and only had access to a few realms of public policy such as education, health and religion. Women in the Weimar Republic and in the beginning of the Third Reich experienced a time of chaos and confusion as men and the government tried to decide what role they wanted the women to play; whether it be a homemaker, or an active participant in policy and government.

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany. Hitler was clear about his intentions for German women. He wanted to revert to the old model of confining women to domestic life and expel women from public influence. The Nazis wanted to relegate women to their own feminine sphere below men, and excise the Jews

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<sup>6</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 22.

completely from society. Hitler and his cabinet released new laws and decrees to gradually limit Jewish rights. The initial change was frustrating but manageable, and the Jews adapted to new rules and regulations that interfered with their daily routines. Jews were banned from public places, restricted by curfews, and were slandered with anti-Semitic propaganda. The Nazis' sought to isolate and ostracize the Jews, by lowering their socio-economic status, and making it difficult for them to support their families. Jews were expelled from professional professions in April of 1933. In 1933 only 8% of Jews were manual workers but in 1939, 56% of Jews fell into that category, a marked difference.<sup>8</sup> Women had to run their households with tight budgets, little or no household help, and no kosher meat.<sup>9</sup> By 1936, rental agencies canceled rental contracts with Jewish families, and by 1938 there were "relatively few families in which the wife [did] not work in some way to earn a living."<sup>10</sup> The German Jews found that there was a reversal of the roles of men and women as the Nazis targeted the male gender and usually left the women alone.<sup>11</sup> Jewish women passed more easily as a gentile than men because the Nazi caricature of "the Jew" was most often male.<sup>12</sup> This proved very valuable as men continued to be ostracized within the professional world and were encouraged to stay off the streets to avoid the wrath of the Germans. Jewish men were easy to identify because all males were circumcised. Those with long beards or who dressed in traditional orthodox clothing were easily identifiable on the streets. At first, most Jews believed the Germans wouldn't dare harm the women and children. Women still had freedom of

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<sup>8</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 42.

<sup>10</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 44.

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 35.

movement and opportunity to work in the lowest positions and most unskilled jobs. To support their families, middle-aged women found themselves thrust into a job market with an elementary school education and few marketable skills. Despite this, memoirs and statistics show women eagerly sought opportunities to either train for a job or retrain for new jobs.<sup>13</sup> One woman and her daughter studied Spanish, English, and baking but then became apprentices to their laundress, a complete role reversal.<sup>14</sup> Others who were served upon all their lives became servants for gentile Germans. Memoirs of Jewish observers said women seemed “more accommodating and adaptable” than men were about taking on new jobs and were “willing to enter retraining programs at older ages.” Statistics show, men stopped retraining by age 40 whereas female retraining was distributed between ages 20 and 50.<sup>15</sup> Jewish men and women found themselves in a situation that no amount of education could have prepared them. The ability to adapt, to find ways to survive was a crucial skill and with men detained from daily life, women had to fill in the gaps. The Nazi regime destroyed the old patriarchal order and in most scenarios a woman, who took on other duties to meet the growing needs of her family, filled the void of the male provider.

Hitler succeeded in isolating the Jewish population by the mid 1930s. Jewish women who were in the same social circles as other non-Jewish women soon found themselves thrust out of their social sphere. Women and men often reacted differently to cutting ties with old friends. Women more openly expressed their sorrow at losing

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<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 31.

<sup>14</sup> Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman ed., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 41.

<sup>15</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28.

friendships with other German women whereas men tended to separate themselves coldly.<sup>16</sup> A woman from Nuremberg said, “It had become a great guessing game as to which of your friends would have the courage to stand by you and which ones would suddenly abandon you.”<sup>17</sup> Women especially, interacted with other women, sharing in the burden and joys of motherhood, and household duties. Jewish women felt betrayal as old friends slandered them with *Rufmord*, defined as “death by gossip, lies, hostile comments, slander, and false allegations.” Milena Jesenska quotes the impact of *Rufmord* on Jewish women saying, “*Rufmord* is an altogether new weapon, and it wounds more deeply than steel. You bring a murdered person to the cemetery. There he finds his peace. The victim of *Rufmord* has to keep on living and yet cannot really live”<sup>18</sup> Jewish newspapers from 1938 gave suggestions to their disheartened readers but said, “We must learn to endure loneliness.”<sup>19</sup> Not everyone was hostile to Jews at the beginning and most Jews could name more than one decent German who still showed them kindness. A German neighbor put a warning sign on her door saying, “Do Not Leave Packages or Messages Next Door. THEY ARE JEWS.” The word “Jews” was underlined in red.<sup>20</sup> Too few Germans took a stand with their Jewish friends and neighbors. In the mid 1930s the outside world become hostile and unfriendly for the Jews, so they turned inward to family for comfort and support.

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<sup>16</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 371.

<sup>17</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family, and Nazi Politics* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1981), 369.

<sup>19</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 62.

<sup>20</sup> Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 38.

The traditional mother figure cared for each member of the family, comforting small children, boosting the morale of their husbands, and managing a routine to maintain a sense of normalcy. One woman struggled with helplessness as her husband sank into depression, saying, “He stopped eating, as he said no one had the right to eat when he did not work and became...despondent...he feared we would all starve...and all his self assurance was gone...These were terrible days for me, added to all the other troubles, and forever trying to keep my chin up for the children’s sake.”<sup>21</sup> The majority of Jewish women rose to the occasion and reacted in a way that psychologists then called, “temporary frames of security” such as engaging themselves and their families with practical solutions and taking solace in additional housework.<sup>22</sup> The women realized that maintaining the family’s peace of mind largely fell on their tired shoulders. Patriarchy still reigned supreme as exemplified by a quote from the League of Jewish Women stating, “We demand no sacrifices from husbands- only some consideration and...adjustment to the changed circumstances.”<sup>23</sup> The League of Jewish Women maintained its confidence in the ability of overworked and overwrought mothers and wives to meet the needs of their families. Oftentimes the social isolation and hostility from the public meant that the role of the family took on a greater meaning, as a refuge and a cache of love, support, and encouragement. “Although some Jews turned to Jewish organizations, for most the family replaced lost ties, and also provided the setting for intense debates and deep emotion.”<sup>24</sup> One survivor says, “If I search for the special

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<sup>21</sup> Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998),61.

<sup>22</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 248.

element associated with...existence as an outcast, then what I think of first is a positive gain...the increase in the intensity of family life...”<sup>25</sup> It was a woman’s unique obligation to create a peaceful environment for her family that transcended the overwhelming sense of fear and apprehension. This was arguably their most important duty yet most overwhelming task. Women had the added burden of comforting children too young to understand the unwarranted actions and insults of gentile Germans. After the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, articles in Jewish newspapers focused on the mother and child relationship with titles like, “Mommy do you have time for me?”<sup>26</sup> It was a woman’s role of a mother to young children that needed the most creative of solutions. How could a mother explain to a child what she could not fathom herself?

The situation became precarious especially after the 1938 pogroms when Jewish families struggled with the decision to stay or leave Germany. Generally speaking, men usually wanted to stay in Germany, believing their ancestry, professions, and ties to society would sustain them. Men usually wanted to follow in the masculine tradition and stay and defend their families. Men and women were divided on emigration simply because they assessed danger differently and experienced anti-Semitism in different ways. Women had more ties to the community, interacting with postal workers, neighbors, grocery clerks and other families. Men more often read danger signs through the media and newspapers.<sup>27</sup> In most cases, “Jewish men by and large withstood the economic pressures of the 1933 edicts and consequently faced the future with confidence that their world of finance and business would offer them a niche as long as they could

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<sup>25</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 50.

<sup>26</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 45.

find a loophole here or an economic necessity there.”<sup>28</sup> Other sources noted that, “Often it was young people and women in Jewish families who accurately read the danger signals before fathers and husbands, for they did not feel as deeply invested in their milieu as the men.”<sup>29</sup> Women lived within a smaller circle of interpersonal relations that alerted them to danger and the desire to flee. Especially among rural Jews, “the role of women were the prescient ones...the ones ready to make the decision, the ones who urged their husbands to emigrate.”<sup>30</sup> For most women, patriotism and allegiance to Germany didn’t factor in their decision, preserving the family’s future was forefront on their minds. Peter Wyden, a Berlin Jew attests to women as, “less status-conscious, less money-oriented...They seemed to be less rigid, less cautious, more confident of their ability to flourish on new turf.”<sup>31</sup> A woman focused on her family’s survival and was typically more confident that useful skills of child rearing and cleaning would transplant themselves more easily in other countries. The decision to flee or stay in Germany haunted Jewish families because each scenario was fraught with danger and uncertainty. In order to emigrate, Jews needed to obtain permits and papers, a bureaucratic nightmare unless a German citizen helped them.<sup>32</sup> Jewish families risked deportation with either staying or leaving Germany.

Pre Nazism German Jews and their families lived the ebbs and flows of the Versailles treaty, Depression and inflation, the Weimar Republic, and the shift to Nazism. The German Jewish case deviates from the other Germans when Hitler was appointed to

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<sup>28</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 363.

<sup>29</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 349.

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, *Dignity and Despair*, 62.

<sup>31</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 47.

power on January 30, 1933. Following his rise to power came social isolation the Jews and the loss of their livelihoods. German Jewish women took on an extra burden of working for meager wages, with children at home who needed attention and men who needed reprieve. Many didn't believe that the Nazi's would end up targeting and deporting millions of Jews. Those that decided to stay behind were soon caught up in new decrees confining Jews to ghettos. Jewish women struggled with added responsibilities and mounting pressures that was only the start of what would be demanded of them in the ghettos. Life in the ghetto was a new form of hell.

## **Jewish Women in the Ghettos**

The next phase of Jewish destruction was ghettoization. The Jews lost their socioeconomic stature and in the year leading up to 1940 they lost their homes. The idea behind the ghetto was that complete isolation, combined with starvation, exhaustion, and disease would lead to death. There are several general trends of the female ghetto experience. Generally speaking women in the ghettos fought desperately to feed their families and provide comfort for whomever they could. Most women were unafraid and willing to smuggle in and out of the ghetto or to masquerade as non- Jews in Aryan parts of the city. Many Holocaust accounts highlight how women were intent on doing something, anything to help themselves and their families. Surviving in the ghetto was a continuous uphill battle, but Jewish women took on any new role available that might help them and their families survive. The ghetto was a death trap of starvation and disease, but by making choices and performing their daily tasks, ghetto women desperately hoped to endure.

An important case study of women in the ghettos happened in Warsaw. Starting in September of 1939, the Polish government called for all able-bodied men in Warsaw to head east for work camps. Most of these men did not return. By October of 1939, the Jewish population of Warsaw was composed of 54% women. The building of Warsaw took most of the year 1940 and by the summer of 1941 a wall 8 feet high was completed around the Jewish quarter.<sup>33</sup> The Germans timed their announcement of the establishment of the Warsaw ghetto to fall on Yom Kippur of 1940, and women and their families

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<sup>33</sup> Jacob, Sloan, ed. and trans. *Notes From the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958), 59.

gathered as much as they could in preparation to move.<sup>34</sup> By November 15, 1940 the Warsaw ghetto was sealed off from the Aryan side of the city. The population density of the Jewish ghetto was extremely high, 400,000 people were confined to a space of 1.3 square miles. Multiple families had to share one room and were plagued by cramped and inhumane conditions. The ghetto was set up to expedite the destruction of Polish Jewry. They were forced to work extremely long days on an average food ration of 800 calories. Work combined with starvation made any sort of disease an easy killer. The ghetto destroyed any previous social order and created stature based on the ability to survive in an almost Darwinian type society of adaptability to oppressive external factors. To survive in the ghetto meant following a new social order based on audacity, self-preservation, and the willingness to use whatever connections necessary.

Cecylia Slepak was instrumental in our knowledge of a gendered response to the Nazi machine. She along with Emmanuel Ringelblum, recognized the importance of describing the path to Jewish destruction in the Warsaw ghetto. They both made significant observations about how females fared in worsening conditions and whether or not their pre Holocaust gendered roles in society aided them in their struggle for the survival. Slepak conducted a study of 17 Jewish women in the Warsaw ghetto and referred to them by their initials. The aim of her study was to “understand the metamorphosis of women from the eve of the war through the different stages of ghetto life until the spring of 1942.”<sup>35</sup> She concluded that ghetto women generally fell into two categories when faced with the horrors of ghetto life. The women separated themselves

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<sup>34</sup> Michal Grynberg, and Philip Boehm, ed. and trans. *Words to Outlive Us: Voices from the Warsaw Ghetto*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1993), 10.

<sup>35</sup> Dalia, Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, ed. *Women in the Holocaust* (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 143.

into those who struggled for life because they believed it was their duty for themselves or their families; and those who rose to the challenge posed by the Nazi regime, and were willing to use the opportunity to identify with the suffering of the Jewish people.<sup>36</sup> An example of the latter is, Mrs. B. who created a children's lending library in the Warsaw ghetto and found joy in her work despite hardship. She took great risk by hiding any books or toys she found when working for the refuge department and distributing them to Jewish children. Her library functioned illegally for half a year before she was able to obtain a permit from the Germans. She said to Slepak, "With my library work, although what I do is physically more taxing, and the surroundings are less agreeable...and even though I am now undernourished, I feel healthy and invigorated. I feel fulfilled. My feeling of self-fulfillment must be strengthening my immune system."<sup>37</sup> She used the challenges of ghetto life as an opportunity to exercise her potential as a contributing member to society. Another example is Mrs. R3 who helped relatives of Jewish children who were sent from other ghettos to Warsaw after their families had been deported.<sup>38</sup> Other women in Warsaw willfully rose to the challenge of helping others despite the disparaging conditions in the ghetto.

In Warsaw especially, some people felt that helping others would be a weapon against the demoralization they suffered at the hands of the Nazi regime. House

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<sup>36</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>37</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 44.

<sup>38</sup> Dalia, Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in the Warsaw Ghetto," originally published in Hebrew in *Yalkut Moreshet*. (April 2003): 9, accessed November 11, 2013, <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/essays/HerViewThroughMyLens.pdf>

committees established in the Warsaw ghetto functioned as self help societies enacted out of peoples' desire to help the less fortunate. The house committees constructed soup kitchens, helped arrange medical care for the poor, and provided schooling and food for children. Women specifically sometimes set up "women's circles" that employed poorer girls to sew clothes for themselves and their families.<sup>39</sup> As the war dragged on and food supply dwindled, it became harder and harder for house committees to provide meaningful relief. Men became tired of the thankless task of trying to help the growing numbers of hungry, sick, and poor. Emmanuel Ringelblum noticed a significant change in the role of women in the ghetto in 1942. He remembers that, "Lately we have seen an interesting phenomenon. In many house committees women are replacing men who are leaving because they are burned out and tired. There are now house committees where women comprise the entire leadership."<sup>40</sup> Ringelblum might have been referring to someone such as Rachel Auerbach who managed a soup kitchen in the Warsaw ghetto. Rachel Auerbach wrote an essay on her soup kitchen because she wanted people to remember the names and stories of the people that died, not just remember the way in which they died. Her job became excessively difficult as time wore on and food resources became scarce. She continued working because she felt a moral obligation as a member of the Jewish intelligentsia to help people in any way she could. Rachel felt helpless and decided to single out one man in an attempt to feel as if she was making a difference. She vented her frustrations saying, "I have decided to do everything possible to rescue this man. I would regard it as the greatest defeat for our kitchen if we cant keep

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<sup>39</sup> Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 122.

<sup>40</sup> Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?*, 239.

a person like this alive. What is the use of all our work if we cant save even one person from death by hunger.”<sup>41</sup> The man perished from starvation. Even the task of saving the one man was futile. She, as well as others had to come to terms with their inability to help the starving members of the ghetto. Self-help measures began to seem pointless because no one could prevent inevitability of death. In the end, only human compassion could provide comfort. One man noticed that his secretary, named Czeslawa, wouldn’t hesitate to stroll into a crowd of lice ridden children and take the children in her arms to console them. Despite warnings of typhus she continued to comfort sick children. She said, “In present conditions, dying from typhus transmitted by a louse is not the worst of deaths.”<sup>42</sup>

The family provided a powerful motivator and incentive to survive. Anna Eilenberg lived in the Lodz ghetto with her father, mother, and brother. Her and her family were Hasidic Jews so the telltale dress and hair styles of Hasidic men meant that her father and brother needed to stay hidden.<sup>43</sup> With her mother sick, the responsibility of working and finding food fell entirely on Anna. She wanted to give up many times when faced with the realities of the ghetto but she said, “I wanted to run but I felt caged. I wanted to die of the cold, but I had obligations to my family. I wanted to get rid of my life, but then who would take care of my mother.”<sup>44</sup> Despite the hardships of the ghetto,

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<sup>41</sup> Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History? Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Kassow, *Who Will Write our History*, 126.

<sup>43</sup> Anna Eilenberg, *Breaking my Silence* (New York: Shengold Publishers inc. 1985), 26.

<sup>44</sup> Anna Eilenberg, *Breaking My Silence* (New York: SHengold Pushblishers inc. 1985), 109.

Anna gained strength because she knew her family needed her, and she provided for her family until they died.

Mrs. F was motivated by her family of five. Before the war she had helped her husband sell shoes in the marketplace. When her husband was deported and she was moved into the ghetto as a single mother she used her ingenuity by removing her armband and trading and smuggling items on the Aryan side. When her husband returned from forced labor a broken man unwilling to venture out on the streets, she continued her work in order to feed her family. In the fall of 1941, the Germans introduced a law forbidding all unauthorized crossings between the ghetto and the Aryan side but Mrs. F disregarded the threat because she needed food. At the end of 1941 an informer leaked her name to the Gestapo and she was put to death.<sup>45</sup> Slepak interviewed women who felt the responsibility to the well being of the community and worked tirelessly to pursue a better life for themselves and those they cared about. These women were innovative and creative in finding new unconventional means of sustenance and support. They did not hesitate to take on new unprecedented roles and they did not give up. Of the 17 women interviewed in Slepak's study only Mrs. B survived, the rest perished in the camps or were murdered by the Gestapo.<sup>46</sup>

All the women in Slepak's study experienced a reversal in their pre-war roles though in some cases, women saw their new roles in the ghetto as an extension of their nurturing roles to husbands and children. Because the Nazis targeted males first, females greatly outnumbered males in the ghetto. In the Lodz ghetto especially there was a disparity between the number of men and women. The Lodz ghetto was sealed on May 1,

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<sup>45</sup> Dalia Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens," 7-8.

<sup>46</sup> Dalia Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens," 10.

1940 and in June of the same year a census was taken and a total of 156,402 Jews were recorded. 54.4 percent were women, which equaled to about 119.4 women for every 100 men.<sup>47</sup> Because men were mobilized to join the Polish army at the beginning of the war, or fled or were deported, women were left alone and had to shoulder the burden of caring for families themselves. One woman describes her anguish at being left alone by her husband who escaped to Russia. “She vents all the bitterness of her soul on her husband, who had abandoned her and her son. Why did he have to flee on the first day of the war? What frenzy gripped him when the Germans arrived?... ‘I have to get away, I have to flee.... The Germans wouldn’t dare harm the women.’”<sup>48</sup> Many felt the same way about the Nazis, but in the end they did not discriminate or hesitate to kill women and children.

Men that still remained oftentimes had to avoid the daylight hours to avoid recognition. Those still able to work sometimes found the failure to support their families as the male provider debilitating. Pre war society was largely patriarchal with the women fulfilling the submissive, cooperative and nurturing role to the male dominant and rational role. It could cause a legitimate crisis for a male who found that the ghetto was a relentless reminder of the failure to live up to traditional male roles. In some cases this caused the men to completely shut down and neglect their families. Dawid Sierakowiak’s diary of the Lodz ghetto sums up the plight of women whose husbands failed to support them. His father abused his mother, buying food and never sharing with his family, and never helping her in her fight to curb the family’s hunger. When she received a notice

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<sup>47</sup> Daila Ofer and Lenore J Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 123.

<sup>48</sup> Daila Ofer and Lenore J Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 124.

notifying her of her impending deportation Sierakowiak told of how she handled her fate with grace and dignity.

Dear mother, my tiny, emaciated mother who has gone through so many misfortunes in her life, whose entire life was one of sacrifice of others, relatives and strangers... She kind of admitted that I was right when I told her that she had given her life by lending and giving away provisions, but she admitted it with such a bitter smile that I could see she didn't regret her conduct at all, and although she loved her life so greatly, for her there are values even more important than life, like God, family etc. She kissed each one of us good-bye, took a bag with her bread and a few potatoes that I force on her and left quickly to her horrible fate.<sup>49</sup>

Mr. KR, who owned a women's coat store before the war failed in his efforts to trade or smuggle in the ghetto and was very frightened to be out in the streets. In the beginning he stayed at home with the children and did household chores. Mr. and Mrs. KR's relationship deteriorated until Mrs. KR took her children and moved in with her two sisters, living as a single mother and supporting her children with goods she smuggled through the Aryan side.<sup>50</sup> Alexandra Sololowejczyk- Guter lived in the Warsaw ghetto and noticed a similar disintegration in her father. She remembered, "He was not only helpless but a broken, dejected man who could not take care of his family. He was undernourished, run down; he got pneumonia and died. In contrast, my mother was someone who did not give up. Internally she was a strong person. Somehow she had the strength to keep our home spotless without soap."<sup>51</sup> Her father seemed concerned with an overwhelming dismal picture of life, whereas her mother was able to concentrate on normal everyday tasks such as cleaning. The normal and the mundane tasks were instrumental in maintaining some sense of normalcy and purpose. This does not mean that men are predisposed to weakness when they fail to uphold their duty as breadwinner,

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<sup>49</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 139.

<sup>50</sup> Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens," 10.

<sup>51</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 54.

but studying the ghetto lives of families suggests that, “Women of all classes were more able and more likely to concentrate on everyday, little things. They were not trying to get so deeply into all those other things, as men do.”<sup>52</sup> One woman attests to her mother’s continuous effort to keep working. She says, “I am very worried about mother, because she is terribly emaciated, shrunk and weak. Nevertheless, she still works in the garden most of the time, is not sick, and even cooks, cleans, and if there is need, does laundry.”<sup>53</sup> Women were constantly trying to adapt and adjust, believing that despite the destructive forces, if they were working towards obtaining food, that they would not perish and starve.

Most women were willing to use any means necessary, any skill set they possessed or could acquire, to simply stay alive. They were not afraid to use their femininity to manipulate men. Emmanuel Ringelblum who established the Warsaw ghetto archive made a significant observation about women at the beginning on 1940, “women did not hesitate, for example to play on men’s gallantry, or to appear poor and unhappy in order to receive sympathy.”<sup>54</sup> One woman in Slepak’s study became a mistress to a gentile and accepted his help in maintaining her family’s restaurant. Ms. KR started by selling vegetables, then sold fish. When the ghetto closed she found a way to sell bread for a small profit and after contracting typhus she sold all of her possessions. Ms. KR and her children perished in Treblinka but not for lack of trying. She perished because of an oppressive political regime intent on her destruction, not because she

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<sup>52</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 51.

<sup>53</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 62.

<sup>54</sup> Dalia, Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, ed. *Women in the Holocaust* (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 155.

stopped making decisions.<sup>55</sup> Ringelblum also commented on the women's perseverance – to give up vanity and household help to be the sole provider for their families. These women did not hesitate, they did not submit to fear, they simply did what needed to be done in order to preserve the remnants of their broken families. They survived by constantly making decisions, always recognizing there were choices to be made that would either help or hurt them in their cause. As long as the women continued to make decisions and exercise options they could find a way to survive.

The lives of women in the Warsaw ghetto largely focused on ways to supplement the meager food rations to prevent starvation and disease. In the early stages of ghetto life women would get in line at six a.m to wait for food.<sup>56</sup> Following waiting for food was an eight to ten-hour workday, and at night, cleaning and cooking. When the Aryan side was open, a network of trade and smuggling was active that helped abate the hunger. They were bound to illegal activity by the necessity for food. In the beginning women were able to sneak past the guards and take off their armbands to masquerade as non-Jews. Once on the Aryan side, they could sell personal items, buy food to sell in the ghetto, or contact Polish acquaintances that might help them acquire food. Daily life centered on finding food for the next meal, a task which became harder and harder as the years wore on. "Food rations were incalculably small: Other than dark bread, which was supplied irregularly, and vegetables, which were scarcely ever available, there was practically nothing to eat, especially no meat or fat of any kind."<sup>57</sup> The ghetto became a death trap of overcrowding, of typhus, starvation and despair. The streets of the ghetto were a dismal

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<sup>55</sup> Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens," 5.

<sup>56</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 133.

<sup>57</sup> Michal Grynberg and Philip Boehm, ed. and trans. *Words to Outlive Us: Voices From the Warsaw Ghetto*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1993), 39.

sight, “At every step you see emaciated people weakened by hunger, tottering about and fainting.”<sup>58</sup> Sometimes children would help smuggle goods in and out because they could easily fit through holes in the wall. This was particularly difficult for mothers because, “It is easy to guess what happens to a mother when a child is under permanent danger of death.”<sup>59</sup> Children too young to have jobs were taken to a daycare, sometimes at 5am where they would stay all day. Women were the unsung heroines in the ghetto, putting aside their own hunger and concern for their safety in an attempt to provide for their families. Edith Horowitz remembers her mother refusing to stop smuggling even after she was caught. Another woman remembered her mother selling everything she had for frozen potatoes. Helen Foxman gave her child to a Polish woman and snuck out of the ghetto to visit her son whenever she could.<sup>60</sup> Women of the ghetto fought against despairing odds.

A common motif in survivor literature is mothers cutting back on food for themselves in order to give bigger portions to their children or husbands. One woman remembers, “we had very little food...My mother insisted that I eat her part, because she said I was smallest and I needed to grow.”<sup>61</sup> This attests to a mother’s overwhelming love for her children, choosing to starve herself than let her children starve. Oskar Signer, who was in the Lodz Ghetto, wrote about his mother who withheld her food for the same reason. He says, “Naturally, it is not the children who can be deprived... We don’t even

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<sup>58</sup> Michal Grynberg and Philip Boehm, ed. and trans. *Words to Outlive Us: Voices From the Warsaw Ghetto*. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1993), 36.

<sup>59</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 162.

<sup>60</sup> Brana, Gurwitsch, ed. *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998)

<sup>61</sup> Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 55.

want to ask what she has sold, our hearts would break. That her feet are swelling, we already know...She is one of the many unknown soldiers of the ghetto.”<sup>62</sup>

Besides maintaining their dignity and working to feed their families some Jewish women took on roles of defiance that put them in great danger. A few courageous women acted as couriers between the ghettos, in an effort to warn Jews about German activities, urge them to resist, or help rescue and save lives. The couriers were predominately female because Jewish men were circumcised, and men were not as prevalent on the streets during the day whereas a woman’s presence on the street wasn’t as suspicious because women were usually out shopping or doing errands. These women usually had Aryan looks and forged papers so they could travel throughout Poland, to smuggle secret documents, weapons and news to the underground resistance. They were referred to as *kashariyot*, which comes from the Hebrew word for connection.<sup>63</sup> These women were lifelines, a human radio connecting the Jewish resistance, risking everything for a chance that some people could be saved. Couriers had to not only disguise their identity, but carry the psychological burden of the grim news they needed to report. They had to carry themselves with confidence and maintain a positive demeanor. Couriers needed to speak fluent Polish without a Jewish accent and were usually single and in their late teens and early twenties. One woman writes, “We knew that Jews could be recognized by the sadness in their eyes...my parents kept telling me, ‘pretend you’re happy. Think about

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<sup>62</sup> Diary of Oskar Signer in Lodz ghetto 197

<sup>63</sup> Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on November 25, 2013)  
<<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust>>.

happy things. You must have happy eyes.’’<sup>64</sup> As the war dragged on many women were burdened with the knowledge of the Final Solution, and had to give the news to isolated ghettos. They needed great courage, a quick wit, and unbelievable nerves to fool any German authority of their true identity. Years after the war the women do not get the recognition they deserve yet their efforts were imperative in the Jewish resistance. Ringelblum had the utmost respect for these women, he refers to two couriers and said, “These heroic girls, Haika and Frumka, are a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer. They are in mortal danger every day... Without a murmur, without a hesitation, they accept and carry out the most dangerous missions... Nothing stands in their way. Nothing deters them... How many times have they looked death in the eyes? How many times have they been arrested and searched?’’<sup>65</sup> They acted with the knowledge that if they were discovered, torture and painful death awaited them, and yet they were adamant to their cause despite the risk.

A Jewish woman had to take on many roles in the ghetto. She was a provider, a worker, and a smuggler or thief. She had to cook and clean and care for children. She had to hold onto hope for her family. She was often by herself, because the Germans deported the men to concentration camps, the next step in the destruction of European Jewry. Jewish women persevered, and they helped each other, often times bringing friends and refugees into their already broken families. In 1942, women stepped in for men in the house committees. They took the place of those who were too tired, killed, or deported.

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<sup>64</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*. 213.

<sup>65</sup> Lenore J. Weitzman, "Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust." *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*. 1 March 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. (Viewed on November 25, 2013)  
<<http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kashariyot-couriers-in-jewish-resistance-during-holocaust>>.

Women were involved in every aspect of ghetto life. The ghetto equalized men and women, they both served the same functions and worked towards the same goal, to persevere another day. Women bore the burden of providing for their families when most of the men were deported or killed. They had superior self-restraint and outstanding courage. Ringelblum was impressed with the strength of the women in the Warsaw ghetto. In January of 1940 he says, “the toughness of women. The chief earners. The men don’t go out. When they [catch a man for labor], the wife is not afraid. She runs along, yells, screams. She’s not afraid of the soldiers.”<sup>66</sup> This is a testament to the strength of Jewish women in the face of death.

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<sup>66</sup> Samuel D. Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes Archive*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 242.

## **Jewish Women in the Concentration Camps**

In 1941 the Nazis enacted a plan called “The Final Solution” which meant all Jewish men, women, and children were to be sent to concentration camps for slave labor and extermination. Nazi documents from the period state that, “The totality of living conditions- the food, the hours and conditions of sleep, the hours and conditions of work, lack of health care, lack of elementary hygiene, the way the power structure is organized, the routine duties of a prisoner, the roll calls, the creation of an environment in which epidemics and various diseases spread- serves to reduce the chances of survival.”<sup>67</sup> The new arrivals at the camps were separated by gender, and were treated accordingly. The women’s capability to bear and mother children, and their susceptibility to sexual assault or rape, made women especially vulnerable. There aren’t many words to help readers to understand the atrocious living conditions, or the way women struggled to hold on to some form of human dignity. Female holocaust testimony speaks of the tendency of women to bond with each other in the camps, to help aid in survival, or to simply help ease their miserable passing. To be a woman in a concentration camp meant the loss of a feminine identity, fear of rape, constant starvation and an assault on motherhood. We cannot even begin to comprehend their suffering. As Gertrud Kolmar says so poignantly “You hear me speak. But do you hear me feel?”<sup>68</sup>

Every aspect of the concentration camp experience had a distinct purpose. The filthy living conditions, sadistic rituals, and starvation diet was deliberately planned and executed to make human beings into a group of inconsequential bodies ready to be

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<sup>67</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 16.

<sup>68</sup> Carol Rittner, and John K. Roth, ed., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1993), 1.

discarded or exploited for slave labor. The process began with a selection when the elderly, mothers with children, and anyone else not fit for slave labor was sent to the gas chambers. Those selected for work then had to endure a humiliating and degrading shaving ritual. Rena Kornreich arrived at Auschwitz on the first Jewish transport and remained there for three years and forty-one days. She was an orthodox Jew whose faith dictated that married women would shave their heads to pledge absolute commitment and obedience to their husbands. Upon arrival at Auschwitz the traditions of Rena Kornreich's faith were mocked and ridiculed when male guards sheared off her hair and pubic hair. She was then branded like an animal with the number 1716, and was given uniforms of dead Russian soldiers, stained with fresh blood.<sup>69</sup> Every three weeks she and the women around her were forced to repeat the shaving process but were shaved by their own Jewish men, as an absolute disregard to the rules of decency. This experience mocked the privacy of the young women, mostly virgins, whose religion mandates that they can only bare themselves in front of their husbands. Rena remembers,

Our own Jewish men, prisoners obeying orders, wait for us, clippers in hand...Our own boys, our own men are forced to see our nakedness, forced to shave our heads, our legs, our pubis...Danka and I are lucky. We meet no one we know...Why can't they let us shave each other?<sup>70</sup>

Sometimes women guards would shave the women when they arrived in camp but the experience was still traumatizing. Magda Herzberger remembers the SS woman that cut off all her hair took pleasure in her distress. "She was enjoying herself, smiling and laughing while she [cut my hair]. It was a horrible experience when I saw my hair fall

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<sup>69</sup>Rena Kornreich Gelissen, and Heather Dune Macadam, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996),63-69.

<sup>70</sup> Rena Kornreich Gelissen, and Heather Dune Macadam, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996),139.

down in one piece.”<sup>71</sup> Sara Tuval Bernstein, known as Seren in her early years, remembered an SS woman cut each prisoner’s hair, one by one, and put the pieces in piles by hair color. They were all made to stand naked in the freezing cold and watch as each woman’s hair was hacked off. The guard made sure that, “Disparate tufts stuck out in one place while in another the hair was cut so close that the whiteness of the scalp was visible.”<sup>72</sup> The women were shorn like sheep, which indicates that the brutality wasn’t limited to men.

Seren makes an important observation about the women around her. She says, “as I looked around at the women beside me withdrawn into their meager, worn rags, I saw that we were no longer the strong women who had been able to endure...The shearing of our heads and vulvas, the stealing of our clothes and everything we owned, took from us the last traces of who we had been.”<sup>73</sup> The female gender is defined in part by femininity, and appearance. By denying women their hair and clean clothing, they are denying them part of their humanity, their unique female characteristics. And though hair and appearance are a part of one’s outside appearance, it added to the culture shock of the degrading environment and the inhumane treatment by guards who may have took pleasure in their humiliation. Starvation caused a drastic loss in body weight, especially in the breasts and hips, two areas associated with femininity. Erna Rubinstein felt the loss of womanhood when she ceased menstruating and said, “A woman who doesn’t

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<sup>71</sup> Roger A. Ritvo, and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust*, (Texas: A &M University Press, 1998),118.

<sup>72</sup> Sara Tuval Bernstein, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival*, (New York: Berkley Trade, 1999), 197.

<sup>73</sup> Bernstein, *The Seamstress*, 199.

menstruate? We lost our dignity in Auschwitz.”<sup>74</sup> The loss of hair and the matching ill fitting, lice ridden uniforms, went a long way in the loss of individuality. Livia Bitton Jackson attests to how a diverse group of women and girls became a “monolithic mass” of bodies, with little distinguishing features of age, height, or weight.<sup>75</sup> After the initial shock of their bare heads and dismal surroundings wore off the women had to realize their best chance of survival was to quickly adapt to camp life.

No words can accurately describes the general camp life, of endless rituals, senseless routines, and random killings. In Auschwitz, women were not provided with drinking water and every living surface was covered in mud or filth. Rudolf Hoess, commander of Auschwitz said, “for the women, everything was a thousand times harder, much more depressing and injurious, because the living conditions in the women’s camps were incomparably worse. The women were allocated smaller living space, the hygienic and sanitary conditions were greatly inferior...”<sup>76</sup> The camp in Birkenau, next to Auschwitz was built on swampy grounds, creating a breeding ground for disease. Barracks meant to house 600 to 800 women often held 1,000 to 1,4000 women and were originally meant as stables.<sup>77</sup>

For women accustomed to maintaining family homes, and performing domestic duties, the difference of camp life was shocking. Human dignity lay in simple attempts at cleanliness. One survivor said that the women would help each other pick out lice from

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<sup>74</sup> 81 sexual violence

<sup>75</sup> Carol Rittner, and John K. Roth, ed., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1993), 78.

<sup>76</sup> Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, ed., *Women in the Holocaust*, (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 307.

<sup>77</sup> Anna Pawelczynska, *Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis*, trans. Catherine S. Leach, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 28.

their bodies, "...these were mothers, wives, young girls, *human beings* struggling furiously to hold on to their dignity in the most monstrous conditions imaginable."<sup>78</sup> The routine at Auschwitz was deliberately mundane and miserable. Four am wake up call meant standing for hours on end so the guards accounted for everyone living or dead. Work commandos meant twelve hours of hard labor, or if they were lucky, cleaning or laundry duties. Seren and her friends were forced to toss bricks to each other, Judith Isaacson was called a horse and forced to drag wagons of shells from one place to another.<sup>79</sup> After a long workday the women waited in agonized hunger for a meager evening meal that left them hardly satisfied and yearning for more. The degree of hunger felt by the starving women is inconceivable for the reader of Holocaust history. Gisella Perl compares waiting for food, "with the same burning impatience, the same excited imagination with which a young girl waits for her lover. Dinner was the most important moment of the day, the only moment worth living for."<sup>80</sup>

The longer the women lived in the camps the less they tended to focus on their past lives. Their new existence revolved around the routine of camp and the intense desire for food. Some women used their mind as a place of refuge and reprieve but for most of the day simple survival instincts took over. Livia Jackson says, "In time we learn the game of the camp. This game is the stuff of our life. Beyond it things start to matter less and less."<sup>81</sup> The goal of the lifestyle and living conditions of the camps was to dehumanize the women. The SS witnessed every humiliation, like in Ravensbruck,

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<sup>78</sup> Carol Rittner, and John K. Roth, ed., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, (St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1993), 92.

<sup>79</sup> Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, ed., *Women in the Holocaust*, (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 335.

<sup>80</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 109.

<sup>81</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 82.

women would defecate and eat in the same cup, and in all camps women with their periods were denied cloth to clean themselves. Even a woman with a cultivated mind and an aptitude for resilience could not escape the reality of camp life during the waking hours. Charlotte Delbo remembers the overwhelming reality of Auschwitz and the endless suffering from cold, hunger, and fatigue. She would tell other women stories or talk about a play or poem in order to remind herself she was alive, and still had memories of ordinary life. Delbo said, “Never did that succeed in nullifying the moment I was living through, not for an instant.”<sup>82</sup> The pain of living in the camps was endless, and suicide and the loss of will to live transcends almost every narrative. Women sometimes gained minimal comfort from a friend or familial tie to be another set of eyes, or to reaffirm the value of life because, “No one believes she’ll return when she’s alone.”<sup>83</sup>

Almost all survivors remember a time when they lost the will to fight. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk remembered preparing a noose to hang herself after the humiliating shaving ritual when she arrived at the camps. Another political prisoner found her and gave her bread, a warm sweater, and some boots. During selections another woman moved her into a safe group so she wouldn’t go to the gas chambers. These acts of kindness brought her back to life and later she “adopted” a younger girl who was struggling and the two of them were eventually liberated.<sup>84</sup> Two sisters, Cecilie and Mina, survived the initial selection of their family. After Cecile learned of the death of her infant son she wanted to commit suicide but she abstained because of her love for Mina. After some time the sisters reversed roles and Mina lost the will to live. Cecile

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<sup>82</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 330.

<sup>83</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 99.

<sup>84</sup> Dalia Ofer, and Lenore J. Weitzman, ed., *Women in the Holocaust*, (New York: Yale University Press, 1998), 327.

pulled herself out of a place of deep despair and each day convinced Mina to live another day, finding new reasons to sleep one more night before attempting suicide. Both Mina and Cecile wanted so desperately to die but the love they felt for each other was stronger than the will to end their lives.<sup>85</sup>

Seren came to Ravensbruck with three friends from her hometown and together they formed a pseudo family. The friends weren't related by blood but acted as sisters. Each girl acted on her own strengths, and took turns taking risks because together they were each other's best defense against the Nazis. On the first morning in Ravensbruck Seren watched as the guards pile up dead corpses to be counted and vowed to keep her and her friends alive. She said to herself, "I felt completely responsible for these three young girls; to me we were all sisters. I had to do everything in my power to enable us to remain alive. Survival became a matter of establishing rules and adhering to them religiously. I was the oldest; I made the rules."<sup>86</sup> In the camps the SS dictated the prisoners' daily lives with a set of senseless and cruel rules. Seren took responsibility for herself and her friends by creating rules of her own, taking back some of the power of decision-making she lost in the camps. Lily lost her glasses in a beating and from then on the other girls took Lily with them wherever they went, shielding her from the guards and talking to her to calm her fears at night. On one occasion the SS read a list of the numbers of women who would be transferred to another camp. Esther and Lily's numbers were called but not Seren and Ellen's and the same pattern happened with other pairs of women. "Each pair would be cut in two, leaving every woman far less than half of what

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<sup>85</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 331.

<sup>86</sup> Sara Tuval Bernstein, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival*, (New York: Berkley Trade, 1999), 210.

she had been in a pair. Having a sister, a cousin, or a friend in the camp with you was sometimes the only thing that gave you the courage to go on; each lived solely for the other.”<sup>87</sup> The girls weren’t separated; the SS only told them they were going to be separated as a cruel and absurd joke to instill fear in the women that they would have to leave their loved ones. Seren’s memoir stressed the need of connectedness in the camps as a tool for survival. The four girls became a unit of absolute trust, and each lived to remind the others of the love they shared. These feelings of familiarity and trust carried them through the most unspeakable of horrors.

Surviving in the camps was an uphill and often selfish battle. An extra portion of bread, a sugar cube, a work commando inside, any sort of advantage could make the difference between life and death. And yet, women who didn’t know each other would rally to help someone in need. Survivor literature and testimony supports the notion that women have an enormous capacity to care for others. Ruth Reiser felt relief at first because she was alone in Auschwitz; she knew she would be in pain if she had to witness her mother suffering. She maintained her independent stance until during one of the *Appells* she fainted and wanted to die, she no longer feared pain or punishment. Reiser remembers, “there were two or three girls around me, and they started to revive me. They just pushed me up and held me standing up. Then they put my head up and down. I thought, oh, if they only would let me go. That was the only time I thought I really didn’t want to go on anymore. The girls got me through the *Appell*, and my will to survive never

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<sup>87</sup> Sara Tuval Bernstein, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival*, (New York: Berkley Trade, 1999), 243.

left me again.”<sup>88</sup> Three nameless girls lifted her up off the ground and out of her despair. Helen Sperling remembers suffering a beating, which resulted in the loss of a kidney. During a selection in the winter she was dripping blood onto the snow, an indication of internal injury. The women around her pushed her to the middle of the pack so the SS would not notice her bleeding, a sure way to the gas chambers. Though not sisters, or even friends, women still supported their fellow prisoners, saving a life for even one day as an ultimate victory against a system to expedite death.<sup>89</sup>

Rena Kornreich was in Auschwitz with her sister, and one day a group of middle aged women joined them in their barrack. This came as a surprise to the younger women, because usually any woman that looked past middle age was gassed upon arrival. At this point Rena and her sister had been living in Auschwitz for two years. Both were hardened to the death, suffering, and constant hard work and hunger. The older women struggled in the heat of outside work details and one day Rena was left in charge while her Kapo went to prostitute herself with a guard. Rena told the older women to sit down and rest and an SS man discovered what she had done and beat her until she passed out. Despite the beating Rena said, “I will feel better if I can help these women.” She and her sister went “from one block to another telling the block elders and room elders and other prisoners about the elder women, begging for kerchiefs so they can at least protect themselves from the sun.” Rena calls these women, “our mothers” and is heartbroken when they are gassed in the middle of the night.<sup>90</sup> At this point Rena is experienced in camp life and can

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<sup>88</sup> Roger A. Ritvo, and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust*, (Texas: A &M University Press, 1998), 80.

<sup>89</sup> Helen Sperling to Sara Vicks

<sup>90</sup> Rena Kornreich Gelissen, and Heather Dune Macadam, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996), 169.

retreat into herself, turning her emotions off, only functioning as a body without a spirit. Turing off her emotions serves as her defense mechanism, but she is able to empathize with the elder women, recognizing that most of them were once mothers. Rena almost sacrifices herself to provide minimal comfort to the elder women in their suffering. Rena had a women's maternal instinct, the distinct feminine trait to mother other human beings. Yet this is also the same women who said of herself and of her fellow inmates, "we aren't living in Birkenau. We are always almost dead."<sup>91</sup>

Days in the camps were long, with always the same schedule, always near death. The only amusement from their daily struggles was conversation with the other inmates. A common motif in survivor literature was women bonding over talking about food and sharing recipes. The women would take turns describing meals they or their mothers prepared in painstaking detail. One woman said, "Our whole amusement shortened to tell each other what kinds of soups and meats and vegetables and cakes our mothers used to make. I learned to cook at nights in the factory."<sup>92</sup> Sharing these memories reaffirmed their community and was a way to connect to the past, to remember they had lives before their horrifying present. Gisella Perl was a doctor in Auschwitz and struggled to hold on to her human dignity. She started to tell the girls in the barrack about her old life and to her surprise they listened with rapt attention, which proved to her that, "their souls, their minds were just as hungry for conversation, for companionship, for self expression as mine. One after the other, they opened up their hearts, and from then on half our nights

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<sup>91</sup> Rena Kornreich Gelissen, and Heather Dune Macadam, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, (Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>92</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 335.

were spent in conversation.”<sup>93</sup> Perl also invented a game which spread to all the barracks in Auschwitz. It had the women invent themselves around a sentence starting with “I am a lady...” These simple stories and games was their only reminder of their former lives. The women had their memories and their minds, their last possession to fight for and to protect.

The concentration camp system left a low chance of survival for even the most able bodied or resilient male or female. For mothers with children and pregnant women the odds of survival were almost nonexistent. The SS dealt with pregnant women in camps in two ways, they were killed or used for medical experiments. Pregnant women had the awful quandary of whether to carry the baby to term and hand it over to the SS or have a Jewish doctor perform an abortion, even during a late stage pregnancy. A Jewish woman had no right to bring forth a child into the world governed by Nazi doctrine that pledged to annihilate all Jewish people. The concentration camp environment provided nothing that supported life or growth of children. Dr. Mengele gave his justification for the killing of mothers and newborns and his thought process is as follows,

When a Jewish child is born, or a woman comes to camp with a child already... I don't know what to do with the child. I can't set the child free because there are no longer any Jews in freedom. I can't let the child stay in the camp because there are no facilities...that would enable the child to develop normally. It would not be humanitarian to send a child to the ovens without permitting the mother to be there to witness the child's death. That is why I send the mother and the child to the gas ovens together.<sup>94</sup>

In one of Dr Mengele's more sadistic experiments he allowed a woman, Ruth Elias, to have her child in Auschwitz. After the birth, he bound her breasts to see how long the child could survive without nutrition. Thankfully a physician took pity on her and killed

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<sup>93</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 109.

<sup>94</sup> Roger A. Ritvo, and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust*, (Texas: A &M University Press, 1998), 13.

the suffering child with morphine.<sup>95</sup> Pregnancy and childbirth in the camps was especially traumatic and a woman's response to her situation varied based on the timing of the war and the attachment the woman felt to the fetus. Despite different circumstances if a woman survived pregnancy and childbirth in the camps the damage on her body and psyche was deeply traumatic and irreparable.

Jewish women doctors in camps faced an equally distressing choice when caring for pregnant women. If one such doctors wanted to help a pregnant woman she was forced to make a "choiceless choice" to either perform abortions or kill newborns. Killing the child was the only way to save the mother. Sometimes the SS told pregnant women to step forward during selections, saying pregnant women would receive better care. Gisella Perl, a Jewish gynecologist discovered that these women were in actuality, "beaten with whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots. Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory-alive."<sup>96</sup> From that point on, Perl attempted to save any pregnant woman she could. To save their lives meant to kill their children. Perl ran an infirmary in Auschwitz without any instruments, medication, beds, or bandages. Her only tools against death were "words, encouragement, and tenderness." Any drugs Perl could acquire were used to kill newborns. This practice cost her dearly. She said of her task, "I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman."<sup>97</sup> The women's ill-fitting clothing and distended stomachs due to starvation made it easy to conceal pregnancy. In one instance, a "girl of

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<sup>95</sup> Ritvo and Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, 14.

<sup>96</sup> Ritvo and Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, 15.

<sup>97</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 114.

seventeen arrived pregnant, after having been raped by a guard, and tried to conceal this, and in spite of her condition she worked as hard as the others. Her camp mates looked after her most tenderly, sharing their meager food ration with her and hiding her from the guards.” The baby was born stillborn and died ten days later. The mother continued to work.<sup>98</sup> Saving a life by ending a life was the ultimate oxymoron. Words fail to describe the pain of the mothers who lost a child, the doctor that was forced to kill, and the women who had to witness the birth and death of the newborn. All women in the camps were affected by the loss of children, even if they were not mothers themselves.

Years after the Holocaust, the death of innocent children continued to haunt survivors. Sally H. remembers a girl named Rachel in the late stages of pregnancy that arrived with her transport. Though Sally H. was only 12 at the time she remembers Rachel’s family made a circle around her when they entered the camp to hide her condition from the SS. Sally H. never knew what happened to Rachel, but later she discovered what lay ahead for pregnant women. Sally H. remembers, “when I became pregnant, all of a sudden Rachel’s face was always in front of me. What happened to her.”<sup>99</sup> Sally H.’s experience as a mother was haunted as a consequence of her incarceration. Arina B. had a child in secret in the camps, but the midwife killed the child to give her a chance at life. She survived the camps and found her husband again but the unnatural death of her first child caused her great misery and despair. So great was her fear of losing another that she aborted her first pregnancy after the war. Thankfully Arina’s story had a happy ending and she brought two children into the world. She loved her children dearly but said, “I’m like stone, sometimes I feel I’m stone-inside, you

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<sup>98</sup> Ritvo and Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, 133.

<sup>99</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 354.

know.”<sup>100</sup> Pregnancy and birth caused hope for many expectant mothers and other inmates. This hope was futile in the camps, and the hope and then extreme agony and powerlessness felt after the loss of a child would affect every aspect of their lives post war.

The SS used the death of children as a form of psychological torture for women in the camps. Sunday was the only day of rest for Giulian Tedeschi in Birkenau and yet one Sunday she and fifty other women were taken to a crematorium where fifty empty baby carriages were waiting. The SS had the women push the empty baby carriages two miles for “safe keeping.”<sup>101</sup> Women were most likely deliberately assigned this task to generate the grief, pain, hopelessness and agony they felt pushing reminders of children or families they lost. In Auschwitz, Rena and the rest of the women were made to line up and watch as oblivious children were led to the gas chambers. Rena was a young woman at the time and after two years in Auschwitz was accustomed to death and dying. Yet she remembers, “I am standing there just like a ghost. Their little angelic faces, the white knuckles of their tiny hands haunt me. I fight back my tears, my rage. My heart screams, Stop! Stop this madness! They are babies!”<sup>102</sup> Her reaction days afterwards was equally as intense. She says, “I have been staring at nothing for days, going through the motions of survival, unable to shake the cherubic faces haunting me...I cannot let myself feel this much pain and still survive, but it is a fresh wound, not yet disguised by the calluses I have learned to develop.”<sup>103</sup> Rena’s feelings are similar to other women who were never

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<sup>100</sup> Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 358.

<sup>101</sup> Elizabeth R. Baer, and Myrna, Goldenberg, ed., *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 16-17.

<sup>102</sup> Gelissen, and Macadam, *Rena’s Promise*, 135.

<sup>103</sup> Gelissen, and Macadam, *Rena’s Promise*, 137.

able to forget the murder of innocent children. Unfortunately the trauma of memory was too great, and some women could not find happiness in children in the post war period.

Various components of Nazi cruelty in the Holocaust have been analyzed and released to the public but hardly anything has been said about the rape or sexual assault of Jewish women. It is widely known that the Nazi's followed a strict policy regarding *Rassenschande*, or race defilement that forbade intercourse between Aryans and Jews. And yet survivor testimony indicates that Nazi officials and Germans alike didn't always abide by the racial policy. An article from 2011 for CNN provided some numbers on the prevalence of rape and other sexual crimes during the Holocaust. Of 52,000 video testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation institute for visual history and education, more than 1,700 testimonies included references to sexual assault, sexual harassment, abuse, molestation, or rape.<sup>104</sup> Rape testimony is marginalized because survivors rarely report it but a Greek Jewish woman, Laura Varon reported three SS officers in Auschwitz raped her and a friend. Survivor Emil G. reported that while he was in Auschwitz the Germans arranged a "show" and raped twenty Jewish women in front of his labor group. He testifies that the men were supposed to stand and applaud. He knew one woman from his hometown survived this ordeal but committed suicide soon after liberation.<sup>105</sup> These types of accounts exist in many variations. Women in concentration camps were particularly vulnerable to sexual crimes given the extreme, forced, and subservient nature

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<sup>104</sup> Jessica Ravitz, "Silence lifted: The untold stories of rape during the Holocaust." *CNN*. June 24, 2011, Access January 28, 2014.

<sup>105</sup> Sonja M. Hedgepeth, and Rochelle G. Saidel, ed., *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2010), 111.

of their captivity. Women were also sexually assaulted or coerced into sex with other Jewish male prisoners.

Camp survivors mention sex as a primal instinct still felt by men and women despite more pressing instincts like the need for food or rest. There was usually an intense trade or bartering system in the camps and women who possessed next to nothing sometimes traded sex for a useful item. Simple items such as shoes, or an extra piece of bread could mean the difference between life and death. Giselle Perl noticed the latrine was used to barter between men and women and because men had greater opportunity to steal food and other useful items, a woman had to use her body as a commodity in the exchange. Perl started to treat venereal disease and was shocked and revolted by these women but said, “when I met a young girl whom a pair of shoes, earned in a week of prostitution, saved from being thrown into the crematory, I began to understand- and to forgive.”<sup>106</sup> To commit to survival meant utilizing any means of acquiring more food, better clothes, and more rest.

The women’s feminine identity, sexuality, and reproductive capabilities were deliberately targeted by Nazi racial and genocidal policy. No one female had the same experience in the camps but general points are universal among many narratives. The shaving experience especially diminished the women’s individual identities. The bald heads and loss of distinguishing physical characteristics destroyed their individuality and made them look like asexual beings, neither male or female. Pregnant women were faced with grievous decisions to protect and save their children. And yet, saving a child meant killing the newborn, by either a prisoner’s hand, or the Nazi’s. Women sometimes faced

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<sup>106</sup> Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 113.

sexual violence or gender based discrimination in camps, either by other prisoners or by SS officials. Few recorded cases doesn't provide enough evidence that Nazi race laws inhibited such actions that are often a byproduct of wartime. The drudgeries of life in camp and the close relationship of death meant surviving was an uphill battle. Women survived in the camps, they did not live in the camps, because they were reduced to the bare instinctual and primitive acts of surviving. The women no longer had the right to make decisions for themselves, the only semblance of control they had left was on their minds, and sometimes even this was impossible due to the overwhelming misery of their captivity. Women responded to their circumstances by bonding with the other women. As Carol Gilligan puts it so eloquently, "women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care."<sup>107</sup> Bonds with other women helped to support them physically, mentally, and spiritually. Despite their tendency to bond, it could never diminish their suffering. Women in concentration camps suffered in immeasurable ways, and if by some miracle they were able to survive the repercussions of their incarceration would haunt survivors for the rest of their lives.

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<sup>107</sup>Ritvo and Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, 7.

## **Jewish Women in the Partisans**

Surviving the horrors of concentration camps was a significant act of Jewish resistance. Yet sometimes, in some cases, resistance meant joining a partisan movement that actively fought to sabotage the German war effort, send messages between ghettos, and save Jews. A Jewish woman in a partisan movement was a rarity but not unheard of. Women in the partisans faced the same discrimination against their sex, anti-Semitism, and sexual harassment that all women faced. Despite these challenges, they also had the added burden of hiding, living in the forests and fighting the elements, facing the possibility of torture, and constantly facing death. Each partisan movement in Nazi occupied countries was different, and viewed women differently. Some women were seen purely as sex objects for male commanders, others performed duties typically regulated to their gender, and some even played an active role in the fighting. Jewish women in the partisans were motivated by a calling to forgo their own safety and to be a part of a movement bigger than themselves. Jewish women in the partisans chose a different narrative for their people, a narrative of bravery, selflessness, and defiance.

When the Nazis occupied countries they established a brutal, oppressive regime. Surprisingly, every Nazi occupied country in Europe had some type of resistance movement.<sup>108</sup> Many factors influenced the relationship of women to the movement. An underground movement completely relied on secrecy and coordination. Opposition usually originated in the ghettos and became a reality when people escaped to the surrounding forest or countryside. Geography played a decisive role in the partisan movement because without forests, they would have no means of hiding from the

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<sup>108</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 261.

Nazis.<sup>109</sup> New movements realized they couldn't be selective in who was involved, so women were more readily accepted in the early stages of a movement. New underground movements in especially dangerous territory were more likely to accept women in their midst and let them accompany the men on missions. The more organized their entity became; the more women were designated to a position considered more suitable to their sex.<sup>110</sup>

The underground in Soviet territory especially was usually allied with the communist movement. The allied powers rarely, if ever, acknowledged or relied on underground movements, and they would never recognize a Jewish movement.<sup>111</sup> No one organization was exactly alike, the functions and form of the organization depended on many factors and they were constantly evolving depending on circumstance. People were needed to go on missions for food, to travel and acquire information, to steal weapons, and go on combat missions. The underground made mistakes as they went and unfortunately many people died before they established a concrete presence in a specific country or area. Despite these differences, all organizations started as a small group of people who were willing to risk their lives in order to make change.

The role of women in the partisan movements varied greatly. Women were very effective as couriers to carry news between ghettos and smuggle weapons and supplies. Women took this role because the Germans were less likely to suspect them, and generally assumed women were emotional, submissive, and didn't have the strength or

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<sup>109</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 261.

<sup>110</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 265.

<sup>111</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 262.

aptitude to take such a great risk. “The average life of a woman courier did not exceed a few months... It can be said that their lot was the most severe, their sacrifices the greatest, and their contributions the least recognized. They were overlooked and doomed.”<sup>112</sup> Ania Rud was a courier who lived illegally in Bialystok as a Belorussian Christian. She would travel to and from the ghetto to the forest and her underground duties were to make contacts with Jewish partisans and aid newly arrived Soviet partisan organizers. She remembers on these missions she would dress like a peasant. She said, “Sometimes we would go to the village to buy guns. We would dismember them, and we would each take different parts and bring them to the forest... We would put the guns underneath in the baskets and camouflage them with bread and other goods in case we were stopped”<sup>113</sup> When a former courier was asked what she feared the woman replied, “I was afraid of only one thing. I was very much afraid that if they caught me I wouldn’t be able to keep my mouth shut, I wouldn’t be able to keep from talking about other people... especially under torture.”<sup>114</sup> In rare cases women were able to participate in fighting or sabotage missions. Eva Kracowski was a member of the ghetto communist underground and a forest partisan. Her motivation for joining the partisans was, “I did not want to perish in Treblinka. I wanted to die where I was. I wanted to die with a gun in hand.”<sup>115</sup> Eva Kracowski escaped the ghetto with two males and joined a partisan group of eight men. The group had four or five shotguns though some bullets didn’t fit the guns. The group would surround a peasant hut and make a lot of noise so the peasants thought there was a large group of them. Two of them would enter the hut and take food. Eva was

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<sup>112</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 264.

<sup>113</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 278.

<sup>114</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 269.

<sup>115</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* 256.

adamant that they only confiscated food from the peasants, and it was never enough. In 1944, Soviet detachments came into the forests and distributed the Jewish partisans among their groups. In the Soviet group she was treated as any other member and had the opportunity to go on military missions. Her and another woman, Mina Dorn had to accompany a group of men whose mission was to derail a train. The women were given the task of tying explosives to the tracks because they had the smallest hands. When they finished tying the explosives they ran back into the forest and the men shot at the explosives as the train was coming.<sup>116</sup> From 1943 to 1944 the Jewish partisans in the Rudnicki Forest organized thirty-nine anti- German military missions. Men headed all missions but for three of the expeditions three women participated. The Germans were unaware that these women were partly responsible for the successful derailing of a military train.<sup>117</sup>

The majority of women's roles within the partisans were domestic work, nursing or other service jobs. The partisans had a social structure that stratified its members according to how valuable they were to the movement. Lower class men who worked manual labor or other such jobs pre Nazis were chosen as leaders because they transitioned better into the tough forest life. Eva Kracowki remembers these men cursed and often behaved very poorly.<sup>118</sup> Pre war elite faced discrimination in the forests because they typically had difficulty with the rough circumstances. Those that didn't prove valuable to the movement were likely labeled as *malbushim*, after the Hebrew word for clothes. *Malbushim* would perform the least desirable jobs and women usually

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<sup>116</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* 279.

<sup>117</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* 281.

<sup>118</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* 285.

fell into this category. Tamara Rabinowcz, who joined a partisan division with her husband said, “I was a malbush and my husband too...All intellectuals were malbushim.”<sup>119</sup> Intellectuals, and professionals weren’t fit for the harsh life in the forest. Women could improve their position in the partisans if they were willing to sleep with men, and in exchange the men would protect and provide for them. Those that refused and were celibate were considered malbush. With a few exceptions, women that were willing and wanted to join in on military missions were ignored and still relegated to service jobs. If by chance there were children in the otraid (partisan detachment), a rarity because children were seen as unnecessary burdens, the women had to care for the children. One woman when asked what she would’ve done if she was a man in the partisans said, “I would not have worked with children. I would have been in a real resistance group and not, as I mostly was, in a unit that took care of children.”<sup>120</sup> Women were disadvantaged by men’s perception of appropriate duties of women.

It was extremely difficult for Jewish women in most non-Jewish partisan groups because there was a great degree of anti-Semitism and as well as gender bias. Jewish women in the forest entered into the forest to escape death and deportation in the ghettos. A group head or commander would determine whether or not they would accept women into their division. Especially in the Soviet partisans all women were viewed with contempt. The proportions of women in the Soviet partisans were 2 to 5%.<sup>121</sup> The number was low because women were judged as unfit for forest life. The Soviet partisan groups are more often associated with anti-Semitism. Mina Dorm was in a Soviet unit in 1944

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<sup>119</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage* 303.

<sup>120</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 269.

<sup>121</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resistance: Jews and Christians Who Defied the Nazi Terror*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and wanted to fight a Russian woman who was slandering Jews. Another Jewish male, one of the seventeen in the Soviet group, implored Mina to “Be blind and deaf. We cannot afford to be so sensitive. With one word you can kill the rest of the Jews, all seventeen.”<sup>122</sup> Jewish members of these Soviet units were scapegoats if a mission went array, and were envied if they were particularly good partisans. Their position in the partisan unit was precarious and each Jewish member had a collective responsibility to the other Jews in the unit. The Soviet partisans killed hundreds of Jews running into the forests for safety because any stranger in the woods who didn’t belong to a group was shot. Many innocent people were killed this way.<sup>123</sup> A former partisan recounted a harrowing story that happened in the Soviet brigade. A prominent communist commander took him to the Niemen River on the side that was recognized as partisan land. Lying there on the banks of the river were bodies of dead Jewish women. The commander said, “It was obvious that these women had tried to save themselves. They had succeeded in swimming through Niemen and then they were murdered. They had come to our side. On our side there were no Germans. We stood stunned.” Later on they found out that the leader of their brigade had heard a rumor that they were sending Jewish women into the forests to poison food kettles. The women had escaped the Nazis only to find themselves killed by the people that were supposed to be on their side.<sup>124</sup>

Despite the difficulty of in the forest without modern comforts, men and women still engaged in sexual relationships. These relationships were rarely born out of love, and

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<sup>122</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 294.

<sup>123</sup> Fay Schulman, *A Partisan’s Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust*, (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995).

<sup>124</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 155.

were a business transaction. If men wanted to advance their position in the partisans they needed to acquire a gun. In order for a woman to improve her position in the partisan group she had to find a man to protect her. This man would provide for her, help her family escape from the ghetto if she desired, and feed her for the price of her services as a mistress. In the Soviet partisans women who were mistresses to commanders had the title of a “transit wife.”<sup>125</sup> Sometimes acceptance into a Soviet brigade was dependent on whether or not a woman was willing to sleep with the commanders. Unfortunately acceptance as a mistress meant the women needed to possess the two qualities men desired, youth and beauty. Not all women entering the forests had either feature. Sometimes women who proved themselves useful, as a nurse or cook, could avoid sex with men. Yet if a man ever did a favor for a woman, he expected to be paid with sexual favors. One Russian commander was quoted saying, “all women were whores unless proven otherwise.”<sup>126</sup> It is unclear why women were reduced to sex objects especially in the Soviet brigades but a woman alone in the forest was at significant risk of other partisan groups who could accuse her of being a spy. One woman who was interviewed but refused to give her name recounted the following, “I was walking alone in the forest. A man with a rifle stopped me... I thought it was a partisan, but I was not sure. I was frightened. He pretended to be arresting me. He was forty or so, maybe a Belorussian. He told me to follow him and took me to a tent. Then he forced himself on me....He did not ask...he just did it. He raped me.”<sup>127</sup> For this woman, her first sexual encounter was the rape by an unknown man. She eventually joined the Bielski otrain but never participated

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<sup>125</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 306.

<sup>126</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 307.

<sup>127</sup> Nechama Tec, *Defiance: The Bielski Partisans*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 154.

in sex nor wished to. The male focus on sex made some women who survived the forest think about men differently. Sulian Rubin said she didn't value men after the war because of her experience in the Partisans. She said, "I did not see one man sacrifice himself and go to the grave with his children. My cousin went. She could have survived; a German wanted to save her. She was gorgeous, with blue eyes and dark curly hair..." When the German offered to save her but said he couldn't save her children she chose to die with her children.<sup>128</sup> Another woman was repulsed by the male apparent need for sex in the forests. She remembers how men whose mistresses or wives died would immediately look for another woman to start sleeping with.

Women in the Jewish otrads weren't always cohered into sex with the men but it was still a distinguishing factor between women who were considered useful and those who were considered a malbush. The largest of the Jewish partisan groups was the Bielski otriad led by three Bielski brothers. Tuvia, the leading brother accepted all women and children into his group at great risk to the other members. The Bielski otriad eventually grew into a forest community of more than 1,200 Jews, which distinguished itself as the leading rescue operation of Jews by Jews. When a large group of men, women and children found Tuvia and his partisans he said to them, "Comrades, this is the most beautiful day of my life because I lived to see such a big group come out of the ghetto!... we will do all we can to save more lives. This is our way, we don't select, we don't eliminate the old, the children the women."<sup>129</sup> The three Bielski brothers were extremely courageous and worked endlessly to help those that relied on them for safety. Their leadership in the partisan unit gave them more opportunity to sleep with multiple

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<sup>128</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 168.

<sup>129</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 4.

women in the otriad. Tuvia, Asael, and Zus, the three bothers, all had wives and yet they continued to sleep with other women. Zus's wife Sonia Boldo complained about his habit of sleeping with other women, claiming that women pushed themselves on him. From time to time she would refuse to sleep with him because of his affairs with other women but eventually would allow him to come back to her. Asael's wife, Chaja was the only woman in the Bielski partisans who could accompany the men on food and sabotage missions. Her relationship to Asael as his wife, made this possible. Tuvia's third wife, Lilka, was considered the most beautiful girl in the forest. And yet she was willing to overlook his indiscretions even though they caused her much pain. She said, "his private life was his business. If he went on a mission and slept with someone, I did not see, I did not know. Who cared?...even in front on me women approached him."<sup>130</sup> It is likely that women flocked to the three Beliski brothers in part because they represented safety and security as leaders. They always had guns, a status symbol in the forest, and each were commanding in their own right.

A women who had sex with a Jewish man in the partisans was more likely to view sex as voluntary than if she was having sex with a non Jewish male. This was the case for women in the two Jewish otriads in western Belorrurisa, the Bielski and Zorin detachments. In these two groups sex was common among women and men but women achieved greater personal autonomy and felt like they had a choice in having sex with whom they wished.<sup>131</sup> Jewish partisan groups usually had a greater contingency of women given they usually accepted all Jewish people that needed help. Tuvia Bielski, the leader of the Beilski Otriad always accepted Jews regardless of their age, or sex. Sulia

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<sup>130</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 164.

<sup>131</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 313.

Rubin belonged to the elite class in her native town of Nowogrodek. When she came to the Bielski otriad in 1942 she was ranked as a malbush and become very depressed. She was supposed to help with cooking but didn't know how. Someone introduced her to Boris Rubierzewicki, a brave partisan in the division. She remembers being revolted by his common manners but was impressed with his bravery. She admits she never found him attractive yet she became his "tavo", his mistress, which in Hebrew translates to "come here".<sup>132</sup> She remembers after joining with Boris, "Right away I was dressed. Right away, I got a pair of boots. I had a fur. To have a man who did not look at anybody else and who protected you was something marvelous."<sup>133</sup> In pre war society women and men married within the eligible singles within their class. Life in the forests switched the class structure so a lower class male would be in the high echelons of the social structure in the forest. Lower class males usually had the physical strength, resourcefulness and skills that were of higher value to the partisans. These men could promise safety to the women in the forests and therefore could choose any women in the otriad.<sup>134</sup> Sulia an upper class woman, was paired with Boris because he could provide for her. She said, "for my husband it was a great thing that he got a supposedly 'superior' woman. He was grateful to me for it. He was proud of the fact that I wanted him and behaved very well toward me. I am not even sure if he loved me or not. For me his goodness was compensation for everything else."<sup>135</sup> She gave him status with the partisan group and in exchange he protected and provided for her. Sometimes upper Jewish parents who were brought to the otriad by an upper class woman's "tavo" were horrified to find their

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<sup>132</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 315.

<sup>133</sup> Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 317.

<sup>134</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 158.

<sup>135</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 162.

daughter consorting with a crude, lower class male. Sometimes this resulted in the parents disowning their daughters, or wishing them dead instead of with someone in a different social sphere.<sup>136</sup> The unions between men and women weren't considered as legal marriage, but 60% of the men and women in the Bielski partisan group lived as couples.<sup>137</sup> It is unclear whether these unions were purely physical or if they had any emotional value. The relationships may have arose from the need to maintain some sense of normalcy in a extenuating circumstance.

Heroism was present in every narrative but in a few cases women truly distinguished themselves. Hannah Senesh was a wealthy teenage who emigrated to Palestine at the start of the war and become very involved in Zionism. Hannah kept a diary, which shows her incredible insight in the suffering of the Jewish people and her sense of duty and obligation to respond. Hannah wanted to be a writer and she could've lived through the war in relative safety in Palestine, but she felt an intense desire to help her family and other Jews in Nazi occupied countries. She felt an overwhelming guilt that she lived a life of relative ease while her fellow Jews were suffering. She wrote, "I'm conscious-stricken that I have it so good and easy here while others are suffering, and I feel I ought to do something- something exerting, demanding- to justify my existence."<sup>138</sup> Hannah joined the Yugoslav partisans and a woman who was in the same group as her was in awe of her great fever and passion for the cause. Her commander said of her, "I'll never forget Hannah's amazing composure. I could glance at her from time to time, lying there, pistol cocked, a heavenly radiance on her face. I was literally overwhelmed by

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<sup>136</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 156.

<sup>137</sup> Nechama, Tec, *Defiance*, 160.

<sup>138</sup> Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life & Diary*. Translated by Marta Cohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 103.

wonder for this unique girl.”<sup>139</sup> Hannah showed incredible maturity beyond her years, she wasn’t motivated by revenge and never thought of her own safety. She was always mindful of suffering Jews that needed help. Hannah was the only female sent on a parachuting mission to cross the Hungarian border and save a group of Jews who were to be deported to Auschwitz. She fell into German hands and they repeatedly tortured and beat her yet she refused to give up her radio code. Hannah even tried to kill herself but failed. Her beloved mother was captured by the Germans and used as a means of torture for Hannah. The Germans threatened to kill her mother who spoke of Hannah’s courage and said, “I was only too familiar with her extraordinary courage, will-power and perseverance when faced with seemingly insurmountable obstacles.”<sup>140</sup> She remains a symbol of Jewish resistance, of a strong young woman who was all too willing to forgo her life of luxury to do something even at the price of her own life. She wrote a poem while in prison in Budapest in 1944, an excerpt which appears here,

But death, I fear is very near.  
I could have been 23 next July  
I gambled on what mattered most,  
The dice were cast. I lost.<sup>141</sup>

Hannah was executed by a firing squad. She refused to be blindfolded and stared defiantly at her murderers.

Another brave woman, Fay Schulman was a member of a partisan group, near Lenin, Poland. Her whole town except twenty-six civilians who were considered valuable to the Germans were spared. She was spared execution because she could use a camera

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<sup>139</sup> Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life & Diary*. Translated by Marta Cohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 177.

<sup>140</sup> Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life & Diary*. Translated by Marta Cohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 208.

<sup>141</sup> Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh*, 257.

and they wanted her to document the massacre of her town. She managed to escape and joined the partisan unit. Accepted because her brother in law was a doctor, and they assumed she knew about medicine, she became a nurse. Fay photographed her partisan unit, documenting the harsh realities of life in the forest. The partisans gave her a gun and allowed her to go on a mission to destroy her former town, which the Germans were using as a base. She said in her memoir, “A gun was in my hand now. I would learn to shoot, to aim at the enemy. Now, if the enemy pointed his gun on me, I could shoot back. I had the opportunity to avenge the blood of my mother, my father, my sisters, my brother, and my sister’s two children. I was not afraid of being killed. Responsible only for myself, I no longer had much to lose except for my life.”<sup>142</sup> Faye lived to see the end of the war and her photographs continue to provide evidence of Jewish resistance.

Jewish women in the partisans faced the dual consequences of being a woman and a Jew. Those that were able to overcome these factors faced a life of constant movement, fear, and the burden of constantly proving their value to the movement. They should be admired because they did whatever needed to be done to gain acceptance and help their fellow Jews in captivity. Today, there isn’t enough credit given to Jews who helped Jews even though the Nazi’s brutal campaign to murder their people made it especially difficult to resist. These Jewish women didn’t accept the fate of their people; they did not willingly submit to the Nazi regime, they fought for their lives. Jewish women in the partisans are a testament to the strength and resilience of the Jewish people.

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<sup>142</sup>Fay Schulman, *A Partisan’s Memoir: Woman of the Holocaust*, (Toronto: Second Story Press, 1995),

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