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Testimony and Silence: Sexual Violence and the Holocaust

The Nazis were indiscriminate in their targeting of the Jews – every Jew, male and female, was condemned to death. Both men and women were forced to endure the acute shortages and degradation of the ghettos, the uncertainties and fear of life in hiding, and the unimaginable sufferings of the concentration and death camps. The vast majority of the Jews in occupied Europe – six million is the figure named by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg in its final judgement – were murdered without ever testifying to the agonies they were forced to endure on the way to their deaths.

Within this context of death and annihilation – of genocide – it may seem remarkable to focus on rape. Indeed, no reference was made to rape at Nuremberg. In fact, until relatively recently, rape and sexual abuse has remained an untold chapter in the history of the Holocaust. The mostly female victims of sexual violence were not only unlikely to have survived, but the few that did have largely stayed silent about their experiences. This stems from both cultural taboos regarding public discussion of rape and sexual abuse, and also because such experiences are not considered to be part of the narrative of the Holocaust.

Given the unimaginable scale of the Holocaust it is unsurprising that many scholars have been reluctant to acknowledge the possibility of specifically gendered suffering within it. However, if our aim is to understand the Holocaust more fully we must consider that men and women might have had quite different experiences. A refusal

to pursue gender as a line of enquiry has meant ignoring the often gendered nature of lived experience.

Rape and sexual abuse is a test case of this. It allows us to move towards an understanding of the complex relationship between the experience of sexual violence during the Holocaust and the contingencies of recounting such experiences in a context that insists that rape and sexual abuse do not belong to the history of the Holocaust. While we have now reached a time when all but the child survivors of the Holocaust are no longer alive, this discussion holds some significance for the more recent survivors of ethnic cleansing and genocide. For example, women in the former Yugoslavia have complained that because rape and sexual abuse *is* acknowledged to be an integral part of their particular genocide, researchers are only interested in their experiences insofar as they do testify to rape, forced impregnation or prostitution. Testimonies of raped women can all too easily be misused to satisfy voyeuristic tendencies, or serve political agendas. The challenge remains to represent victims of sexual abuse in a way that does not denigrate their experiences or themselves.

Unlike the former Yugoslavia where tens of thousands of women were raped, or the Rwandan genocide where women were raped on an even greater scale, rape was not part of the genocidal strategy of the Holocaust. Rape as such was not a crime as Jewish women were not regarded as human beings and therefore could not be victims. Nonetheless 'The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honour' passed on September 15, 1935, firmly prohibited sexual relations between 'Aryans' and Jews. This applied to both marriage and extramarital affairs as well as forced intercourse. It is, however, difficult to gauge how completely individual soldiers adhered to this regulation. Also, in the German satellites of countries such as Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Lithuania, where it was the local authorities who took responsibility for the persecution and destruction of their Jewish inhabitants, the domination of Jewish women through rape was not subject to the same ideological deterrents. The result was a series of spaces in which rape could and did occur.

More than half a century after the events she describes, Ruth Elias writes of her incarceration in Auschwitz:

Drunken SS men sometimes made unexpected appearances in our blocks; the door would suddenly be flung open, and they would roar in on their motorcycles. Then the orchestra was ordered to play, and the SS men would sing along while they continued to drink, their mood getting ever more boisterous. Young Jewish women would be pulled from their bunks, taken away somewhere, and raped. Raping Jewish women wasn't considered *Rassenschande* (race defilement) therefore it was allowed... I cannot describe the pitiable state of these poor women when they came back to the barracks.

Nevertheless, if caught having sexual relations with a Jewish woman an SS man would probably be stripped of his much coveted position in a concentration camp and sent instead to the Russian front. In most cases, therefore, the SS would have made use of the concentration camp brothels and the less emaciated non-Jewish women who serviced them. More plentiful are the reported cases of rapes perpetrated by the German civilians who ran the factories in which the prisoners worked, and also by other prisoners, in particular by low level prisoner functionaries. In an early interview conducted in a Displaced Persons camp in 1946, a Polish-Jewish survivor remembers:

There was a German foreman by the name of Krause, the most terrible in the factory... Sometimes he would get drunk, pick a few women and rape them, and later they were shot so that there would be no "race pollution." There was a well known SS [officer who] did the same thing.

Ultimately, however, there is no way of knowing how widespread the rape of women was.

In the far smaller body of testimonies documenting the experiences of those who survived in hiding or by passing as Aryan, stories of rape and sexual abuse are more numerous, if by no means abundant. Still, these experiences of rape are mostly hinted at, or told through the lens of another person – friend, aunt, and so on. This mirrors the difficulties of women in civilian society in finding a space in which to talk about, or write about and be believed about rape. Fanya Gottesfeld Heller waited fifty years before writing about the rape of her aunt in front of her husband after a Gestapo raid: ‘My aunt told a few members of the family but they didn’t believe her – they didn’t want to hear or know about it. She never told her children, and for that reason, I have not disclosed her name’. Gottesfeld Heller also describes what she classifies as a consensual sexual relationship between herself as a teenager and the Ukrainian militia man who rescued and protected her, but was later accused by her family of murdering her father. Clearly, whether or not such a relationship based on such an extreme power imbalance can be understood in terms of consent, is somewhat contentious despite Gottesfeld Heller’s insistence on its reciprocity. At the same time it is important not to appropriate Gottesfeld Heller’s experience as an example of sexual abuse in the Holocaust if this was not the case. As this suggests, testimony does not only provides answers. It also raises questions.

Experiences of sexual exploitation – or negotiated sex – are a particularly vulnerable area of human experience and as such are not easy to talk about. For survivors and their families there is an understandable reluctance to confront the fact that mothers, sisters, grandmothers, or friends might have been raped or perhaps more uncomfortable still, engaged in sexual activity for the procurement of food or protection. This is starkly illustrated in a scene witnessed by the Hungarian survivor, Aranka Siegal immediately after liberation in a makeshift hospital. In the same ward, she listens as a young girl named Mindi pleads for an abortion: ‘I’m not taking an SS bastard child home with me... I’m only twenty. I want to start a new life.’ When her sisters try to silence her she asks, ‘Who did I do it for, if not to save you from

starvation? This is the thanks I get. Suddenly you can afford the luxury of shame'. The point of this discussion is not to expose the most personal or humiliating of moments for the survivor, or to suggest that survivors of the Holocaust are concealing aspects of their survival, but is rather to point to the possible implications of 'the unsaid' and 'the unspeakable' in making sense of narratives of lived experience. Arguably, rape – the violation of one's body at the hands of someone seeking to cause both physical and mental pain – is one of the loneliest and most alienating of things that can happen to a person. As the rapist is usually all too aware it silences the victim and leaves them alone in a world they can no longer recognise. The experience of rape shows the victim that the world is not as it seems. Sex is transformed from an act of intimacy into a tool of violence and even language is destroyed as 'no' becomes 'yes' and 'stop' gives rise to further pain.

Writing about rape should have the potential to write the victim back into the world. This has proved to be difficult in the case of the Holocaust where rape and sexual abuse have tended to be written out of its history. Either it is argued that rape did not happen or it is reduced to the cliché that rape is part of life and not specific to war or genocide. Joan Ringelheim interviewed a Jewish survivor called 'Pauline' who was molested by male relatives of the people hiding her. Pauline was told that if she complained they would denounce her. She confessed to Ringelheim that the effects of this on her life were enduring: 'I can still feel the fear... Sometimes I think it was equally as frightening as the Germans. It became within me a tremendous... I (didn't) know how (to deal with it)... what to do with it. I had nobody to talk (to) about it. Nobody to turn to'. It is an experience which, as Pauline herself realizes, is not easily reconciled with traditional Holocaust narratives. She states: 'In respect of what happened, (what we) suffered and saw – the humiliation in the ghetto... is this (molestation) important?'. In the words of Ringelheim: 'Her memory was split between traditional versions of Holocaust history and her own experience'. Victims of rape such as Pauline may feel obliged to stay silent about certain aspects of their experiences for fear that they do not belong to the history of the Holocaust, or that the experiences will not be easily understood. It will not be until comprehension of the Holocaust is broadened to acknowledge types of experience that stand outside traditional narratives that stories such as this will be explored and that particular

experiences of sexual violence can be connected to the broader suffering of the Holocaust.

While there is little evidence of a sustained pattern of rape within the concentration camps, women did experience sexual abuse during the Holocaust. Indeed, careful and close attention to testimonies allows the historian to discern evidence of rape. Reading between the lines, we can provide a voice for women whose experiences were often regarded – even by themselves – as unvoiceable. In the ghettos, women – and particularly young women – unwittingly found themselves in positions where they were forced to provide sex as means of procuring employment, food for their families, or exemption from deportation. In the Łódź ghetto, Lucille Eichengreen, who at 17-years-old, found herself the sole caretaker of her 12-year-old sister desperately tried to find her sister a place in one of the ghetto's factories which fronted as a school, describes her horror upon realizing the price she would have to pay was herself: 'I was stunned. The realization was sudden and painful: there were favours to be bought, but they had to be paid for one way or another – even among our own'. That the man who propositioned her was a fellow Jew was particularly traumatic and served as the ultimate betrayal of trust. It also highlights the uncomfortable reality that Jewish women also abused by Jewish men.

A common theme of women's Holocaust testimonies is the trauma of their initiation into the concentration camps. Here, too, there are signs in some testimonies of sexual abuse. Women were forced to undress in front of SS men making obscene comments and then suffer the indignity of having to spread their legs as part of the shaving process before having their names replaced by tattooed numbers. They also had to undergo painful examinations of their oral, rectal and vaginal cavities, supposedly to check for concealed valuables.

For many women, the trauma of the initiation process was so great that they gave up the will to live. However, abuse continued right up until the moment of death, and – again – careful reading of the sources reveals the reality of rape within the camps.

Leib Langfuss, who worked in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, wrote that a certain SS officer, 'had the custom of standing at the doorway... and feeling the private parts of the young women entering the gas bunker.' He continues 'There were also instances of SS men of all ranks pushing their fingers into the sexual organs of pretty young women'. For those destined to live a little longer, abuse continued in the form of forced sterilizations, forced abortions and sexualized violence.

Unsurprisingly, the sexual abuse of women and the accompanying feelings of shame and degradation contributed to a climate of dehumanization amongst the prisoners where women could be bought for a morsel of food. It has been argued that women were not seen as sexual beings in the concentration camps because they were emaciated unwashed, louse-ridden, and bald. While this may have been true of many women prisoners, women who held so-called 'privileged positions' tended to be better fed and cleaner. Joan Ringelheim interviewed a woman named 'Susan', who was deported to Auschwitz when she was 21- years-old and quickly became a 'privileged prisoner'. A male Polish prisoner came to Susan one day and offered her some sardines. He told her when and where to meet him, and not realizing his motives, she said, she did. Then, as Susan confessed to Ringelheim, 'he grabbed and raped me'. It is significant that Susan is careful to point out that it was not a Jewish prisoner, but a Polish prisoner who raped her. It is likely that it is only because her assailant was Polish rather than Jewish that she is able to speak of the assault at all. That dire necessity made Jewish women sexually vulnerable with Jewish men in positions of privilege of authority or power will no doubt remain one of the lasting taboos of the Holocaust.

Most survivors who talk about rape in their memoirs imply that the victims were murdered after being raped. However, it is unlikely that even had they lived they would have testified to their experiences in a context which insists that rape is not part of the Holocaust. As Judith Magyar Isaacson, who survived Auschwitz, remarks: 'The Anne Franks who survived rape don't write their stories'. The decision to remain silent is of course still a decision – it remains the right of every women to

tell her story or not as she chooses. Nonetheless, women can – and do – find themselves silenced. As perpetrators of rape know all too well, rape can silence women in a way that deliberately alienates them from their families and communities. In the words of Susan Brownmiller, ‘rape is an act of a conqueror’. Historically, a victorious army will rape the women of the conquered people as a permanent mark of their victory. Testimonies of rape victims in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda speak as much about the ongoing stigma of the rape as the rape itself. It is unsurprising, therefore, that women might wish to conceal aspects of their experiences, particularly in an effort to protect their families – including future generations. This is fuelled by a culture of memory that insists that to bring discussion of rape and sexual abuse into the context of the Holocaust is to belittle the memory of the dead.

However, when writing rape into the Holocaust, historians and other custodians of memory also need to ensure that they are not imposing on survivors their own concerns and preoccupations. While it is clear that the humiliation, degradation and dehumanisation of women were an integral part of the Nazi persecution of the Jews, it nevertheless needs to be acknowledged that actual physical act of raping Jewish women not only was not a specific genocidal policy, but was also legislated against. Unfortunately, this not only leaves the unfortunate women who were raped unable to find a context for their violent memories but also makes any coherent analysis of sexual violence during the Holocaust highly problematic. Yet however difficult it is, it is the duty of the historian to develop an understanding of both the Holocaust and of rape that is sufficiently nuanced to capture these experiences and to tell these women’s stories.