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Gender and the Holocaust: Male and Female Experiences of Auschwitz

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Introduction

The lens of gender has been applied comparatively recently both to the Holocaust, in particular, and to genocide studies, more widely. Research on gender and genocide has expanded considerably over recent years.¹ Gender-based distinctions provide a useful analytical tool in the discussion of genocides. As Adam Jones has noted, the perspective of gender allows us to define how men and women are targeted during episodes of genocidal violence.² Moreover, Stephen Haynes, writing on “ordinary masculinity” in Chapter 7 of this book, underlines how a greater recognition of the gendered character of male experiences can enhance our understanding of the Holocaust. Haynes’s chapter is concerned with perpetrators, but a discussion of male attributes in Holocaust victims and the behavioral norms expected of Holocaust victims as men is also highly significant. Much of the writing on gender to date has been on women and their experiences. This chapter examines both male and female experiences, and both as particular to their gender, rather than as *universal* experiences. Femininity and masculinity are both about the social construction of particular kinds of identities and behavioral expectations, and this chapter will explore how this related to women and men during the extreme and extraordinary circumstances of the Holocaust.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the main developments in the historiography of the Holocaust in relation to gender. This is an important starting point, as the implications and knowledge from this research are very significant to our understanding of the Holocaust. Having established the parameters of the existing research in this area of scholarship, the chapter turns to a discussion of the concepts of gender and gendered expectations in relation to Holocaust victims. The social construction of male and female identities and roles was important in the history of the Holocaust. This chapter examines, first, the structural sources of gender difference in relation to Nazi persecution before the war and then the distinctions between the ways in which Jewish men and women experienced the Holocaust, using significant examples from both male and female survivors' accounts to underline and illustrate the key points. In particular, it discusses gender-related experiences at Auschwitz. It considers both male behavior that reflected expected gender norms, such as egotism, strength, and identity through work, and male behavior that deviated from these expectations, such as social bonding to enhance chances of survival. It then examines female behavior that met with traditional gender norms, such as adaptation and coping mechanisms and social bonding among female victims. Lastly, it moves to a consideration of female behavior that differed from the expected female type. While this is an uncomfortable topic, it is nevertheless an important one. The literature has tended to overlook the desperate actions taken by Holocaust victims in order to survive under the appalling conditions in which they found themselves. But this does not mean that they did not occur. The purpose of such discussion is not to judge but to offer a more complete picture of Holocaust experiences and to try to establish a greater historical understanding of the subject.

Historiographical Developments

Raul Hilberg argued that "the road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women."³ Yet, the subject of gender was a relative newcomer in the wider field of Holocaust studies. Gender studies of the Holocaust emerged as a response to existing research and available sources within the broader fields of both Holocaust studies and women's studies. The term "gender" refers to the social and cultural construction of the roles of men and women in society. The application of a gendered perspective to comprehend the Holocaust has been an important development in the area of Holocaust studies since the 1980s.

Yehuda Bauer has suggested that "the problems facing women as women and men as men have a special poignancy in an extreme situation such as the Holocaust."⁴ Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman have emphasized that, rather than distracting us from the Nazi brutality against all Jews, a gendered approach enhances our understanding of it "by locating it

in the specificity of individual experiences.”⁵ It expands our knowledge base and provides a greater and more differentiated understanding of the experiences of Holocaust victims. As Myrna Goldenberg has suggested, a separate examination of “the lives of women and of men” allows us “to determine the differences and the similarities in the way they were treated as well as the way they responded.”⁶ The situations faced by Jewish men and women under Nazi persecution meant that some aspects of their traditional gender roles were increased, while others were decreased. As Anna Reading has suggested, some “aspects of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ and their respective cultural scaffolding were disarticulated and dismantled.”⁷

In addition, certain aspects of life and experiences have been taboo subjects in the writing on the Holocaust. Joan Ringelheim has referred to the “sexual” vulnerability of women: sexual humiliation, rape, sexual exchange, pregnancy, abortion, and vulnerability through their children. Women expressed feelings of “sexual vulnerability as women, not only about mortal danger as Jews.”⁸ These were concerns that men either described differently or did not describe at all. Stories about sexual abuse are infrequently told, as Ringelheim has noted: “Some think it inappropriate to talk about these matters; discussions about sexuality desecrate the memories of the dead, or the living, or the Holocaust itself. For others, it is simply too difficult and painful. Still others think it may be a trivial issue.”⁹ Moreover, as Anna Hardman has noted, the tendency in historical writing has been to define Jewish women “with a very particular notion of what constitutes female behavior”—as mothers, sisters, and nurturers.¹⁰ Testimonies that homogenize women’s experiences and identities can be misleading.¹¹ Sara Horowitz challenges the type of interpretation that “erases the actual experiences of women and, to an extent, domesticates the events of the Holocaust.”¹² Zoë Waxman argues that assumptions that women only had motherly and caregiving roles “obscure the diversity of women’s Holocaust experiences.”¹³ She states that “the collectivization of Holocaust memory has led to a homogenization of Holocaust comprehension that eschews difficult testimony or stories that fall outside accepted narratives.”¹⁴

Pascale Bos, too, has examined the place of gender in the study of Holocaust victims and survivors.¹⁵ She has called for a more critical approach to the evidence of gender distinctions in Holocaust narratives, emphasizing the discursive construction of the experience, memory, and representation of the past. Indeed, Bos argues that “precisely in acknowledging (and highlighting) the elements of choice and subversive power in the creation of (gendered) personal narratives we can conceive of survivors’ agency in compelling new ways.”¹⁶ The lens of gender enables readers to consider what is distinctive between the ways in which women and men have selected and constructed their narratives. As Bos argues, “Men and women experience, remember, and recount events differently,” because of their socialization.¹⁷ For example, in her testimony, Giuliana Tedeschi uses knitting, a traditionally feminine

activity, as a metaphor to describe the significance of female bonding at Auschwitz.¹⁸ This mode of narration is particular to a female voice. It is indicative of how women not only experienced their imprisonment differently to men, but also remembered and expressed their experiences in ways that were prompted by their gender. As Baer and Goldenberg have noted, "Gender-based experience influenced the way women survivors interpreted and transmitted their experiences."¹⁹ This is also true about men's writings if we analyze them through the lens of gender, rather than simply accepting them as "universal."

Gendered Responses to Nazi Persecution before 1939

In the early twentieth century, the dynamic of most Jewish families in Western Europe corresponded to the bourgeois model, in which the men were the breadwinners and the women were responsible for the spiritual essence and harmony of the family.²⁰ Their roles and responsibilities involved them in different experiences, social environments, and networks, which gave them different knowledge and skills with which to face the Nazi persecution and, subsequently, the "Final Solution." Their roles changed and their relationships transformed as living conditions for Jewish people in Germany deteriorated throughout the 1930s.²¹ As Jewish shops and businesses were closed down and Jewish men became unemployed, they were no longer in the position to make all the important decisions. Women had to both run their households and keep up the morale of their family members. They comforted their husbands and children, who faced abuse and hostility outside the household.²² They tried to maintain a semblance of normality in the home at a time of growing uncertainty and persecution outside the home. Many also undertook voluntary work for Jewish women's organizations.²³

Jewish women were generally less assimilated into German society than Jewish men, who had non-Jewish business and professional contacts. They took refuge and solace in their familial duties such as cooking. They tried to retain their composure for the sake of their children.²⁴ A gendered analysis of the desire to emigrate highlights distinctions between men's and women's priorities and perceptions. Women were generally more keen than men to leave Germany, being "less status-conscious, less money-oriented . . . more confident of their ability to flourish on new turf," but in practice, as Marion Kaplan states, "fewer women than men left Germany," often because they ultimately chose to stay behind with elderly parents.²⁵

In terms of anticipatory reactions to the Nazi regime, most Jews, especially at first, believed that the Germans were "civilized" and therefore, honoring traditional norms, would not harm women and children. (The reality,

however, turned out to be exactly the opposite.) Hence, they formulated plans to save the men, whom they believed to be the most endangered. Jewish families generally decided that the men should have priority in their plans for emigration, hiding, or escape. Even in everyday activities, such as queuing for bread, expectations of German behavior dictated that women should go out because Jewish men, especially those in traditional garb, were easy to identify and harass. Their beards, sidelocks, and clothing made Orthodox Jewish men identifiable as such, and they were subjected to abuse because of these features. Many Jewish families believed that it was safer for the women to go out than for the men.

How did Jewish men and women differ in their responses to Nazi persecution? An analysis of testimonies demonstrates significant differences in the impact of Nazi persecution upon men and women. Much of the testimony given by men initially focused on feelings of being betrayed by their fatherland. Edwin Landau recalls his feelings on the day of the national boycott of Jewish shops and businesses on April 1, 1933:

I was ashamed that I had once belonged to this people. I was ashamed of the trust I had given to so many who now revealed themselves as my enemies. . . And when, as always, I consecrated the Sabbath [my] composure was at an end. The whole weight of the day's experiences struck me, and I broke down, just barely stammering the last words. . . This was my leave-taking from everything German, my inner separation from what had been my fatherland—a burial.²⁶

This sense of betrayal and the feelings brought about by the situation in which he found himself were closely connected to gendered notions of both citizenship and men's place in the public sphere.

In contrast, the testimony of women often highlighted their unselfish feelings of concern and worry for the welfare of their children and husbands, particularly in cases of physical separation. As Hilberg has noted, this was an era in which "the newly isolated community consisted of men without power and women without support."²⁷ Both men and women recounted feelings of despair at the worsening situation and its impact upon their children, in particular. Men who lost their businesses and jobs, their financial security, and their ability to provide for their families experienced a corresponding loss in their status and dignity. They were unable to fulfill their traditional roles and became demoralized and depressed. On a psychological level, too, men felt damaged in their capacity to act as men, specifically as protectors of their wives and children. They could not fulfill this traditional gender role, and this was an assault upon their sense of manhood and their identity. Women shouldered an increased physical workload and psychological duty to compensate for these changes. They did not blame the men, but tried to help them. Women's testimonies have tended to relate in more detail the impact of the physical destruction of their homes. Margaret Czellitzer

described the state of her house when she returned to it after the “Night of Broken Glass” (November 9–10, 1938):

I found my radio broken at the garden door, my lovely china smashed all over the kitchen floor, the beds overturned, the mattresses cut into pieces, the paintings as well as all the other valuables stolen . . . We were all heartbroken, but especially myself, who had discovered . . . that lovely place and built our little house according to my own ideas.²⁸

After the war began, the Nazis’ persecution of the Jews escalated rapidly, culminating in the construction of death camps in Poland where the “Final Solution” was carried out. The following sections of this chapter discuss the privations and experiences of male and female internees at Auschwitz, in particular.

Men at Auschwitz: Experiences and Behavior²⁹

The terrible privations and circumstances of internment at Auschwitz included thirst and hunger, extremes of temperature, arduous physical labor, overcrowding, inadequate food and foul water, lengthy roll calls, exhaustion, illness, injury, and the constant fear of “selection” for the gas chambers. In terms of men’s behavior, gendered expectations were centered on strength and hardness, toughness, and determination.³⁰ Signs of weakness fell short of normative behavior for men. Victor Frankl states that “it was necessary . . . to keep moments of weakness and furtive tears to a minimum.”³¹ Men did not wish to appear cowardly or weak. As a result of different social constructions of gender, men were less likely to discuss emotions or admit to weakness or the need for another person with whom to share their burden. Lagerway notes that “male survivors framed their narratives in order and coherence, and often de-emphasized emotions” and that they told of “personal isolation, personal survival at any cost, ruthless competition.”³² It appears that, because men had been socialized into being independent and autonomous, these characteristics were the ones most often portrayed in their narratives. Male and female survivor accounts also represent work as a means of survival very differently. Pride in work and its impact on their identities is much more common in male writings. By contrast, female accounts have tended to be much less specific about work and how it was conducted. This suggests that work was more central to men’s experiences, in line with contemporaneous gendered norms.

While “food talk” among women at Auschwitz has been much written about (see the section on Women at Auschwitz: Experiences and Behavior), Victor Frankl also recounts men engaging in food talk. He states that the majority of prisoners, when they were working near each other and were not closely watched by guards, “would immediately start discussing food,”

asking each other about their favorite dishes. Frankl writes: "Then they would exchange recipes and plan the menu for the day when they would have a reunion—the day in a distant future when they would be liberated and return home."³³

Male memoirs have tended to underplay bonds and relationships and instead to emphasize examples of individual valor, strength, or autonomy. Bruno Bettelheim has explained his view on the subject of survival in the camps as follows:

Survival in the camps—this cannot be stressed enough—depended foremost on luck. . . . While nothing one could do could assure survival, and while chances for it at best were extremely slim, one could increase them through correctly assessing one's situation and taking advantage of opportunities; in short, through acting independently and with courage, decision, and conviction, all of which depended on the measure of autonomy one had managed to retain.³⁴

Dutch survivor, Louis de Wijze, underlined the need for care of the self in his memoirs as well: "Everyone lives for himself. Our one and all-encompassing credo is: Survive! Between the outer limits of life and death, previous values and norms lose their meaning, and our spiritual baggage gradually erodes. The only norm that counts is 'I.'"³⁵

It is important to note and add, however, that references to close relationships do appear in male narratives, and there are instances of male writing that show men behaving in ways that differed from expected male gender norms. Richard Glazar, who survived the Treblinka death camp, recalls:

My friend Karl Unger and I were always together. We were like twins. In this camp you could not survive an hour without someone supporting you and vice versa. We knew that we were destined to die. No individual could make it alone. . . . I and my friend Karl survived because we supported each other constantly. We divided absolutely everything, even a small piece of bread.³⁶

Of course, such support groups in themselves could not avert death, but where they existed they were, in some ways, life promoting, as Glazar's experience shows. Primo Levi provides another example of this, telling of an Italian civilian worker, Lorenzo, who brought Levi "a piece of his bread and the remainder of his ration every day for six months."³⁷ Without Lorenzo, Levi believes that he would not have survived Auschwitz. He states that this was

not so much for his material aid, as for his having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that

there still existed a just world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage. . . . Lorenzo was a man; his humanity was pure and uncontaminated, he was outside this world of negation. Thanks to Lorenzo, I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.³⁸

He later describes a “tight bond of alliance” with Alberto, another prisoner.³⁹ Hence, social bonding did apply to male experiences, not only to female ones.

Furthermore, the testimonies of other male survivors underline the importance of the father-son relationship to survival, when fathers and sons had managed to avoid separation and stay together. Henry Wermuth recalls: “The presence of my father was, without a doubt, a major factor in my survival; but it also meant that I did not have, nor was I in need of, any other social contacts.”⁴⁰ This suggests that the father-son relationship was so strong and significant that it completely replaced the necessity for other bonds. On the death march from Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel recalls his momentary desire to fall out of line, to the edge of the road, and die: “My father’s presence was the only thing that stopped me. . . . He was running at my side, out of breath, at the end of his strength, at his wit’s end. I had no right to let myself die. What would he do without me? I was his only support.”⁴¹ Wiesel shows here the significance of his relationship with his father and their mutual support.

The death marches have been described in many memoirs and testimonies as driving Holocaust victims to increasingly desperate behavior. Hans Winterfeld recalls the death march from Auschwitz:

Normally, one could talk to the other prisoners, but when food was distributed, they began to look and act like lunatics: their eyes stared rigidly at the ladle or at the arm that distributed the bread. When they received their ration, they constantly watched other prisoners to check that nobody had been given more. It was completely irrelevant what kind of person it was: uneducated and primitive, or educated and intellectually superior. I often wondered how cultivated human beings could behave like animals.⁴²

Indeed, Levi comments too on the aim of the Nazi camps to “reduce us to beasts.” But, he writes, “we must not become beasts; that even in this place one can survive, and therefore one must want to survive, to tell the story, to bear witness; and that to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization.”⁴³ His desire to survive was thus underpinned by his desire to bear witness. He was determined to defend his strength and dignity for this purpose. As Eva Kolinsky has noted, many other survivors defined their own personal code of behavior in a bid to maintain a sense of their own self-value.⁴⁴ In Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz*, for example, Steinlauf insisted on washing, even though washing did not

get him clean, because it enabled him to keep his dignity and demonstrated his refusal to become a beast, thus undermining German goals. This type of behavior is also evident in the writings of female survivors.

Women at Auschwitz: Experiences and Behavior

Female prisoners at Auschwitz had to deal with a number of problems that affected them specifically as women. Their testimonies highlight the trauma of losing their sense of their physical selves. One significant aspect of this was the SS camp ritual of shaving the inmates on their arrival. Having their heads shaved was a much more traumatic and degrading experience for women than for men. While all prisoners were deeply shamed by this measure, for women this was a blow to their feelings of femininity and to their sexual identity. Livia Bitton-Jackson writes of newly arrived female prisoners having the hair shaved from their heads, under their arms, and in the pubic area: "The shaving of hair has a startling effect. The absence of hair transforms individual women into like bodies. Indistinguishable. We become a monolithic mass."⁴⁵ Rena Gelissen describes the humiliation of being "naked in front of strangers" and of being shaved by male prisoners: "They shear our heads, arms; even our pubic hair is discarded just as quickly and cruelly as the rest of the hair on our bodies."⁴⁶ Another survivor, Isabelle Choko, in her memoir, also relates that at Auschwitz, "at the precise moment my head was shaved, I ceased to exist as a human being."⁴⁷ Rose Meth, who was deported to Auschwitz in August 1943, gives a similar account of her arrival: "I can't begin to describe the shock and the humiliation. We were sheltered children. They made us undress completely in front of the Nazi soldiers. We wanted to die. They shaved our heads. They shaved all our hair, everywhere. We were given numbers."⁴⁸

The tattooing of their camp numbers was described by survivor Eva Schloss as "part of the process intended to strip me of my pride and identity. When I was marched away from Auschwitz railway station, I left the girlish Eva Geiringer and her dreams, behind."⁴⁹ Olga Lengyel describes the degrading and humiliating treatment of female inmates on their arrival: being made to undress and undergo physical examinations before being allowed to dress in camp clothes. Gelissen mentions the gynecological examination for new female prisoners as well. These gynecological examinations were invasive and humiliating; they were painful and traumatic experiences recounted with much horror by female survivors.

The distribution of random and ill-fitting clothes had a significant impact on women as new camp inmates. Their individuality and their sense of feminine identity were entirely removed by all of these actions. Gelissen recounts her feelings of despair when she noticed her "lovely white boots

with their red trim" being worn by an SS woman.⁵⁰ Lengyel describes the "bizarre rags that were handed out for underwear" that were "not white or any other color, but worn out pieces of coarse dusting cloth."⁵¹ In addition, tattered dresses were randomly distributed with no regard to size. In terms of the emotions these circumstances generated, Lengyel states: "In spite of the tragedy of our situation, we could not help but laugh as we saw others so ridiculously outfitted. After a while, it was a struggle to overcome the disgust we felt for our companions, and for ourselves."⁵² A similar reaction to their "grey, sack-like dresses" is described by Bitton-Jackson, as she compares herself after her arrival at Auschwitz with inmates who had been there longer:

The strange creatures we saw as we entered the camp, the shaven, grey-cloaked bunch who ran to the barbed wire to stare at us, we are them! We look exactly like them. Same bodies, same dresses, same blank stares. They, too, must have arrived from home recently. They, too, were ripe women and young girls, bewildered and bruised. They too longed for dignity and compassion. And they, too, were transformed into figures of contempt instead.⁵³

After the initial shock and horror engendered by their new appearance, some women attempted to improve their outfits. In the space of twenty-four hours, they adjusted their ill-fitting garments to their bodies and sewed up the holes, "using needles made out of wooden splinters and threads pulled out of the one blanket allocated to them."⁵⁴ Isabelle Choko describes feeling a need to hide her shaved head and tie up her dress, which was much too large: "I ripped a piece from the bottom of my pale pink shirt to tie around my head like a turban and another piece to roll into a belt. My mother helped me since I had no mirror. . . . Other women, too, were trying to 'look human' again."⁵⁵

Menstruation became a significant biological problem that women had to confront in Auschwitz. Bitton-Jackson describes a girl in front of her at roll call: "The blood simply flows down her legs."⁵⁶ When they menstruated, women and girls had no way of stopping the flow of blood, which was extremely difficult and humiliating. Gelissen recalls her first period at Auschwitz: "I scour the ground for anything that might help me hinder the flow. There is nothing."⁵⁷ Over time, in the abnormal circumstances in which they were living, women stopped menstruating. While this removed the problem of humiliation, the cessation of menstruation created other concerns for many women. Some felt a loss of their identity as women, while others feared they would never be able to have children. Lengyel attributes the ceasing of menstruation partly to "the constant anguish under which we lived," but she also suggests a "mysterious powder" or "substance" "mixed into all the food given to the inmates."⁵⁸ Gelissen writes similarly that "most of the girls and women in camp" lost their periods.⁵⁹ Female

inmates, specifically, faced these biological and psychological issues relating to menstruation and its cessation.⁶⁰

In addition, some girls and women were subjected to appalling violence, as well as sexual abuse and violations. In her desperation for some string to use as shoelaces, Gisella Perl hoped to exchange her bread ration for a piece of string from a Polish male prisoner:

I stopped beside him, held out my bread and asked him, begged him to give me a piece of string in exchange for it. He looked me over from head to foot, carefully, then grabbed me by the shoulder and hissed in my ear: "I don't want your bread. . . . You can keep your bread. . . . I will give you a piece of string but first I want you. . . . you. . . ." For a second I didn't understand what he meant. . . . His hand, filthy with the human excrement he was working in, reached out for my womanhood, rudely, insistently. The next moment I was running, running away from that man, away from the indignity that had been inflicted on me, forgetting about the string, about the shoes, about everything but the sudden realization of how deeply I had sunk.⁶¹

After this shameful experience, she was determined to maintain her dignity in the face of every humiliation, every torture. Women's vulnerability, their fear of rape, and their reactions to humiliation are amply evident in the narratives of female survivors. For example, the fear of rape and the theme of humiliation run through the account of Judith Magyar Isaacson, a Hungarian Jew deported to Auschwitz in 1944.⁶² Schloss too writes: "It seems hard to believe that the German SS guards would take a sexual interest in the starving, dirty, ragged women they were ruling over—but some of them did."⁶³ Hence, while rape was not official policy, because Nazi racial laws prohibited German sexual relations with Jewish women, there is evidence that at least some German guards and others, including Kapos (prisoner-supervisors) and other prisoners, raped Jewish women. Women and young girls were subjected to traumatic sexual abuse and violations.

In Liana Millu's first narrative in *Smoke over Birkenau*, a young inmate, Lili, was the victim of the cruelty of her Kapo, Mia, whose "frustration and impatience" turned to anger if her boyfriend was late or failed to turn up: "A violent shove sent my head slamming against the iron bar."⁶⁴ This was commonplace behavior on the part of the Kapo. Lili's position was invidious and fraught with tension. She was a pretty, young, and gracious girl, and because of this, she was favored by the Kapo, who gave her good work—sewing. However, Lili was in a very dangerous situation, as Mia's boyfriend liked her. On one occasion, Mia's boyfriend, who had drunk too much, began overtly flirting with Lili and kissing her, "his lips brushing her neck." This proved catastrophic for Lili, as Mia was furious and savagely attacked her, inflicting terrible injuries.⁶⁵ She called Lili "a whore" and subsequently ensured that she was selected for the gas chambers.⁶⁶

In another of Millu's narratives, Zina, accused of being "a whore," was violently attacked by an old camp guard: "Raising his club, he began beating Zina furiously on the chest and shoulders. The blows were so fierce that in her frail state she collapsed instantly. He kept on beating her as she lay there on the ground."⁶⁷ Bitton-Jackson describes violence from the moment of her arrival at Auschwitz and numerous episodes of random punishments and beatings.⁶⁸ Lengyel similarly details the threat of violence from the outset and refers to many occasions on which she and other female inmates were subjected to violence and physical abuse.⁶⁹ Gelissen's writing too mentions many incidences of extreme violence and brutality directed against female prisoners.⁷⁰

Apart from such examples of random punishment and brutality, Lengyel further describes "medical" experimentation on female inmates, including experiments in relation to menstruation, subjection to artificial insemination, injection with sex hormones, sterilization, and gynecological experiments.⁷¹ Gelissen's narrative makes reference to such experiments as well.⁷² Sterilization experiments on women at Auschwitz took place in Block 10, a place described by Robert Lifton as "quintessential Auschwitz."⁷³ The notorious Block 10 induced fear and terror in female victims.

At Auschwitz, women tried to adjust and adapt to their changing circumstances. They used resourcefulness, homemaking skills, and cleaning in order to establish some modicum of control over themselves and their space. For instance, they tried to clean themselves and to rid themselves of lice. Lengyel recounts how they "passed the single scrubbing brush to one another with a firm determination to resist the dirt and the lice. That was our only way of waging war against the parasites, against our jailers, and against every force that made us victims."⁷⁴ Gelissen too writes of how the women engaged in a "ritual cleansing" of lice.⁷⁵ Furthermore, there was a need for cooperation in extreme circumstances and self-preservation through mutual help, which has been highlighted, in particular, in many female survivor testimonies. At Auschwitz, women used different strategies to cope with their situation, such as the formation of *ersatz* families and "camp sister" relationships, as well as the sharing of recipes, cooking methods, and memories of Sabbath and Festival meals.

Millu writes of Gustine, a prisoner at Auschwitz from Holland, who talked about her home, "for hours on end," as a coping strategy: "The fire sparkling in the big blue tiled stove and her mother preparing the snacks for tea, the smell of fresh bread, the most comforting smell in the world, and the butter, the ruby-hued currant marmalade, the gaily colored curtains on the windows. Oh, beloved home, the most cherished place on earth!"⁷⁶ Gelissen recalls the Sunday morning picnics with cheese Danish pastries that she used to have with her sister Dank: "Around noon we open Mama's Danishes, still warm from the oven, or maybe the sun kept them warm, and eat them while languishing in the sun. . . . How I miss . . . eating Mama's

homemade sweets.⁷⁷ Lengyel too talks of reminiscing and reciting poetry as coping strategies, “to escape the frightful present.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, Gisella Perl recalls: “Later, as we came to know one another better, we invented games and recited poetry to keep our minds off the sordid present.” Other evenings, Perl describes:

We played another game, which spread from block to block until every woman in Auschwitz played it enthusiastically. We called the game “I am a lady.” . . . I am a lady—I said one night—a lady doctor in Hungary. It is morning, a beautiful sunny morning and I feel too lazy to work. I ring for my assistant and tell her to send the patients away, for I am not going to my office today. . . . What should I do with myself? Go shopping? Go to the hairdresser? Meet my friends at the café? Maybe I’ll do some shopping. I haven’t had a new dress, a new hat in weeks.⁷⁹

The references in this game are clearly gender specific to the women’s previous experiences and social construction.

Furthermore, kitchen memories reminded women of their former position in their families and communities and reaffirmed their own sense of value. Women used conversation as a distraction from their circumstances and talked about their “old” lives.⁸⁰ Women’s exchanges with each other reminded them of their strengths as nurturers, homemakers, and cooks. Food preparation was part of the ritual of living in family, social, and community life, as well as Jewish festivals, and it defined the former status of many women. The sharing of recipes and cooking tips was significant for women psychologically, because it indicated a commitment to the future.⁸¹ In addition, they fantasized about the future, a time when the war would be over, as a coping strategy.⁸² These types of themes are common in female survivor testimonies and narratives. Furthermore, by describing the food they once cooked to another inmate, “they shared a familiar experience and connected to another person.”⁸³

Female narratives often describe how inmates shared food with each other. For example, Lili shared a “precious gift” of “some cabbage leaves” with two of her fellow prisoners.⁸⁴ Gelissen describes clandestinely sharing a packet of macaroni, procured from a nearby factory, between a few women in the laundry room: “Dividing the noodles evenly into their waiting bowls, I figure, accurately, that there are five tablespoons for each girl, then pour the hot water on top, making sure everyone gets some. Danka and I are served last. The rest wait until we are all served; then in silent unison we begin to eat the warm, nourishing macaroni.”⁸⁵ On another occasion, she describes sharing another rare provision: sugar. Rena and Danka agreed to share a bag of sugar they procured with “twenty of our closest girlfriends after everyone is asleep.” Rena carefully leveled off each spoon, “making sure that everyone gets an equal amount.”⁸⁶ Bitton-Jackson recalls smuggling

potatoes and how her mother saved her own in order to use them in place of candles on Friday night:

One evening while shoveling snow in the yard, we discover mounds in which potatoes are stored for the winter. We quickly dig them up and, hiding them under our dresses, smuggle enough potatoes into the camp to allow each inmate at least one potato. We wash them in the toilet and eagerly await our bedtime. . . . Noiselessly, with utmost care, so as not to attract the attention of the guard on patrol we bite into the hard, delightful skin of the raw potato. But Mummy saves her potato. "For Sabbath lights" she says. Friday at sunset Mummy kindles her Sabbath lights in the carved-out potato halves using oil smuggled from the factory and threads from our blankets for wicks.⁸⁷

This example illustrates not only the resourcefulness of these women, but also the determination of Bitton-Jackson's mother to try to continue her tradition of lighting candles for the Sabbath. She was caught but not punished on this occasion. Bitton-Jackson goes on to relate how they subsequently saved "potatoes for a Hanukkah celebration with lights." With care and secrecy, they lit "Hannukah oil lamps in carved-out potato halves" and succeeded in kindling the lights for eight nights without being caught.⁸⁸ Millu writes of maintaining rituals and the celebration of Hannukah as well.⁸⁹ These attempts by women to uphold religious traditions were valuable coping strategies.

Family relationships were of great significance where mothers and daughters, or sisters, could stay together, as illustrated by Gelissen's account. She was fiercely protective of her sister, Danka, and tried to shield her as much as possible. Rena's promise, after all, was to protect and look after her sister—indeed, her determination to bring her sister back alive was her *raison d'être* and motivation for survival:

My one great feat in life, my fate, is to survive this thing and return triumphant with my sister to our parents' house. I will succeed because I have no other choice. Failure does not even occur to me. We may die in the interim—death cannot be avoided here—but even that will not dissuade me from my sole purpose in life. Nothing else matters but these four things: be with Danka, be invisible, be alert, be numb.⁹⁰

She looked after Danka when she had scabies and procured lotion to treat it, and she cared for her sister when she became ill with malaria.⁹¹ In Danka, Rena found her "reason and will to live."⁹² Gelissen kept up her sister's spirits when she lost the will to go on and swore to her that if Danka was ever selected for the gas chambers, Gelissen would accompany her.⁹³ Ultimately, they both survived. Millu's writing also notes the strength of feeling between sisters in the camp and observes that most of them loved each other "with an almost morbid attachment."⁹⁴

Moreover, even in *ersatz* family relationships, such as those of “camp sisters,” social bonding, in groups of two or more, helped women to keep up their struggle to survive. Meth describes her *ersatz* camp sister: “Estusia and I were like sisters. People never knew that we were not really sisters. As soon as all my real sisters were taken away from me and Estusia saw my condition, she helped me a lot morally. She told me I must be strong and survive.”⁹⁵ Such surrogate families cared for each other and improved women’s chances of survival. Lucie Adelsberger describes her camp family in which her “daughters” provided her with clothing and food whenever they could. She states that members of such families often put their own lives at risk and that even for those who did not survive “the friendship and love of a camp family eased the horror of their miserable end.”⁹⁶ This kind of bonding was not exclusive to women, but it appears to have been much more prevalent among women and has been expressed in many testimonies written by women, including those of Isabella Leitner and Charlotte Delbo.⁹⁷ Female prisoners offered each other support, comfort, and solidarity. Women were able to “transform their habits of raising children or their experience of nurturing into the care of the nonbiological family.”⁹⁸ As the isolation and separation of families was deliberately imposed by the camp system, the creation of new “families” helped inmates by giving them a system of mutual support and a source of material and psychological strength in place of their real families.⁹⁹ For example, Tedeschi recounts “a small, warm hand, modest and patient, which held mine in the evening, which pulled up the blankets around my shoulders, while a calm, motherly voice whispered in my ear, ‘Good night, dear—I have a daughter your age!’”¹⁰⁰ She goes on to describe how this *ersatz* mother, Zilly, comforted her when she felt desperate. Such relationships gave prisoners the courage to live a little longer.

Behavior Outside Female Gendered Norms

There has been a taboo on considering women whose behavior did not match perceived gender norms and expectations that largely reflects a reluctance to deal with a painful and difficult subject. Yet, examples of such behavior in female narratives do exist. Fanya Gottesfeld Heller states in her memoirs that “the unrelenting fear of death and gnawing pain of hunger led to acts of desperation among many who survived; some stole, others lied and schemed. Still others took comfort in intimate relationships that might be considered illicit or misguided in ordinary times. It was not all pure and righteous, but it happened.”¹⁰¹ Gendered norms about expected types of female conduct such as social bonding and nurturing were contradicted by examples of spiteful and hateful behavior. Millu describes how physical hardship and deprivation produced competitive, self-interested behavior—women who were “ready to pummel and trample over the others in order to get in first and grab a good place.”¹⁰² Lengyel relates how women, “who formerly would not have taken a hairpin, became utterly hardened thieves

and never suffered the slightest feeling of remorse."¹⁰³ Millu also refers to inmates stealing food from others: "It's so awful to sleep with a thief. You can't ever relax. Just last night she nibbled up a piece of bread someone had left over for the morning. A regular rat!"¹⁰⁴ Schloss too states that "if you kept some of your ration to eat later, another starving inmate would usually steal it from you."¹⁰⁵ Gelissen, who shared everything with her sister, was dismayed to see a teenage girl eating a whole lemon without sharing it with her mother, who begged for a bite: "I do not understand the selfishness before me."¹⁰⁶ Bitton-Jackson details an episode when a bed collapsed onto her very weak mother. The other inmates did not care or help, as they were awaiting the distribution of food—"They laugh at my alarm. . . . Not one of them pays attention to my frantic pleas."¹⁰⁷ Millu describes the "morbid curiosity" of the women at Birkenau at the selections for the gas chambers. They craned their necks to see "like spectators at a sports match."¹⁰⁸ Such behavior was at variance with gendered norms about women's conduct.

Millu depicts the transformative and destructive effect of Birkenau on the identity and behavior of its prisoners over time. The inmates taunted and abused each other. She writes: "I recoiled in shame from their weary eyes gleaming with malice and their pinched mouths spewing out vulgarities, sick at the sight of what our misery had made of us. . . . Soon I would be a true daughter of the *Lager* [camp]. . . . I would be no different from the old-timers."¹⁰⁹ Lengyel too states that "it seemed as though the Germans constantly sought to pit us against each other, to make us competitive, spiteful and hateful" and notes how even "the most peaceful souls were occasionally seized with a desire to strangle their neighbors" in the overcrowded conditions in the bunks, through exasperation at their circumstances.¹¹⁰

Lesbianism was a taboo form of behavior, and references to it are uncommon in survivor narratives; however, in the context of Auschwitz, sexual identity and behavior that differed from traditional gender norms emerged, and there is some mention of lesbianism. Lengyel distinguishes between "three categories" of lesbians: the first group, who were "lesbians by instinct"; the second group, who "because of the abnormal conditions, suffered changes in their sexual viewpoint" and often "yielded under the pressure of necessity"; and the third group, who "discovered their lesbian predilections through an association with corruption." She goes on to describe lesbian "orgies."¹¹¹ In Millu's book, there is a reference to a "most evil Kapo" with a "black triangle" on her shirt, portrayed as "fat and sturdy."¹¹² There is an implicit connection drawn between her appearance, her lesbianism, and her "evil" character. There is reference to another lesbian Kapo, the "Kapo of the dressmakers renowned for her lesbian predilections."¹¹³ The "heavy, resounding footsteps" of the "formidable" Frau Gotti could be heard every morning as "she came to wake her lover with a long kiss as well as a little snack." The suggestion here is not only of lesbian stereotyping but also of sexual favors granted for food. Gelissen too details an occasion on which Erika, a Kapo, asked her to spend the night with her, although Gelissen did

not understand her meaning: "Erika laughs. 'You go back to your block. You're not ready for this.' She leads me toward the door. 'Here.' She slips me an extra portion of bread. I take it quickly, not understanding why she would offer me such a nicety, not comprehending anything that has just happened."¹¹⁴

The fight for survival also affected women's sexual conduct. Survivor narratives refer to the granting of sexual favors by some girls and women in exchange for food, other items, or "camp luxuries." This was commonplace and formed a significant aspect of what women found to be so humiliating and degrading about the camp experience. Lengyel describes an episode when Tadek, a carpenter who came to mend the bunks, was friendly and attentive to her. She describes him as handsome, tall, and smiling. He gave her food, but then he made it clear that he expected sexual favors in return.¹¹⁵ Some women adopted the survival strategies of flirting, bantering, or acting coy with men and performing sexual favors as a way of gaining extra food or luxuries. The final chapter in Millu's book tells the story of Lise, who, although married and devoted to her husband, ended up submitting to the foreman's demands for sexual favors in exchange for food and a harmonica. The story particularly focuses on how Lise grappled with her dilemma and offers an insight into her motivations for making her choice. Lise was upset at the suggestion that she was getting "prettied up" for Sergio, "the foreman with the harmonica."¹¹⁶ Her distress intensified later on, as she had to decide whether or not to grant him sexual favors; her dilemma is constructed in terms of a choice between chastity and death. Yet Lise applied different standards to other women. She was not "like those little tarts who for a slice of bread spread themselves out for half the camp."¹¹⁷ She was "a respectable woman who loved her husband." In the end, she submitted to Sergio's demand for sexual favors. Her predicament was that she felt forced into a contradiction: "If I deceive my husband, it's because I love him."¹¹⁸ Lise's capitulation to Sergio's demands makes a statement about the nature of existence at Auschwitz and the types of choices it might have been necessary to make. Sergio had a predatory, callous demeanor and made it clear that he expected sexual favors from Lise in return for allowing her to play his harmonica. He made cruel remarks about Lise's husband and was physically aggressive toward her, yet ultimately she acquiesced to his sexual demands.

The impact of the existence of the *Puffkommando* (brothel) on different women was significant. There was a marked difference of attitude between those women inside the brothel and those outside. On one level, there was the moral stance of rejection of a woman for prostituting herself, yet on another level, there was some jealousy and resentment about the "luxuries" that life in the brothel afforded. References to this type of prostitution are difficult to find, but they do demonstrate behavior that deviated from perceived attitudes and conceptions about the appropriate conduct of women. Indeed, in the historiography of women's experiences of the Third Reich and the

camps in general, brothels have been mentioned only comparatively recently as these fields have developed to encompass them.¹¹⁹

Pregnancies had to be concealed at Auschwitz, because all pregnant women were sent immediately to the gas chamber. Pregnant women hid their condition for as long as possible, for "the camp was no maternity ward."¹²⁰ Despite the attempts of German officers to trick women into revealing their pregnancies, Lengyel writes: "Incredible as it may seem, some succeeded in concealing their conditions to the last moment, and the deliveries took place secretly in the barracks."¹²¹ At the infirmary at Auschwitz, as soon as a baby was born, both mother and infant were sent to the gas chambers. Lengyel describes how, to save the lives of the mothers, newborn infants were killed: "And so, the Germans succeeded in making murderers of us. . . . The only meager consolation is that by these murders we saved the mothers."¹²²

Gisella Perl, a Jewish doctor, also recounts killing newborn children "to save the life of the mother."¹²³ "It was up to me to save the life of the mothers, if there was no other way, than by destroying the life of their unborn children." She recalls that the procedure took place "in the dark, always hurried, in the midst of filth and dirt. After the child had been delivered, I quickly bandaged the mother's abdomen and sent her back to work." She states:

I delivered women pregnant in the eighth, seventh, sixth, fifth month, always in a hurry, always with my five fingers, in the dark, under terrible conditions.

No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies. After years and years of medical practice, childbirth was still to me the most beautiful, the greatest miracle of nature. 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 . . . and if I had not done it, both mother and child would have been cruelly murdered.¹²⁴

Conclusion

The lens of gender provides a useful tool for interpreting the behavior and experiences of Holocaust victims. Gender is a characteristic of all human experience. Both masculinity and femininity have been socially constructed and shaped by historical circumstances and expectations. Moving away from universal interpretations, both women's experiences as specifically female and men's experiences as specifically male are significant to our understanding of the Holocaust. The field of Holocaust studies that was gender-neutral until the 1980s now includes a substantial body of literature on gender. Furthermore, a comparatively recent yet substantial output of memoirs and testimonies by female Holocaust survivors has ensured

that women's voices are no longer unheard. These developments in the historiography have meant that scholars are now in a much better position to comprehend the diversity and complexity of the experiences of Holocaust victims.

Both male and female survivors state that luck played a large part in their survival. For example, Eva Schloss, with a similar view to that of Bruno Bettelheim, writes: "A large part of my survival was down to pure luck."¹²⁵ Emerging gender analyses that include discussions of men as men and of masculinity shed light on the differences in, and similarities of, male and female Holocaust experiences. For example, men's traditional role as protectors of women and children entirely turned on its head during the Holocaust, as Jewish male victims were unable to fulfill this role, and Nazi perpetrators in the death camps dispensed with women and children with alacrity.

In the face of experiences at Auschwitz, it is important to note not only the distinctions in how men and women have written their testimonies but also that not all female and not all male behavior in the camp was homogenous. The formation of surrogate families was life-sustaining when families were separated. While this is mentioned more widely in female writings, it is also evident in male writings. Sharing recipes, reminiscing, and forming social bonds were important survival strategies and coping mechanisms that many women utilized. In some ways, although women had more severe circumstances, this was balanced by the additional support from and solidarity with other female prisoners, in close bonds or *ersatz* families. However, the situation in which women found themselves at Auschwitz led some to behave in desperate ways. Some women lied, schemed, and stole. Some granted sexual favors to men (and women) who were in a position to ameliorate their circumstances in some way in return. A reluctance to treat subjects such as lesbianism, prostitution, indifference, or cruelty—that is, modes of being or behavior that did not fit into broad traditional gendered expectations—has led to the creation of an incomplete picture in much of the historical literature. Previously unknown and unheard voices have begun to find their place in our knowledge and understanding of Holocaust experiences.

Moral choice has gendered implications too—not only did women have to make choices that men did not have to make, but also they were judged (and indeed judged themselves) by a double moral standard that was harsher. This often engendered a sense of shame and guilt. At times, women were forced to make very difficult moral decisions. Langer's term "choiceless choices" refers not to "options between life and death, but between one form of abnormal response and another, both imposed by a situation that was in no way of the victims' own choosing." Some women worked as prostitutes in the camp brothel. Other women had to make extremely difficult decisions in relation to pregnancy and childbirth, as Jewish newborn infants, babies, and young children were completely expendable to the Nazi rulers, and so too were their mothers.

In many ways, women were placed in a position of “double jeopardy”—they were in a position of blame not only for behaving in a particular manner or for carrying out an act or deed but also because, by so doing, they contravened the social construction of femininity whereby they should not prostitute themselves or kill their babies in order to survive. Women were placed in moral and physical situations that men did not have to face. During their imprisonment at Auschwitz they had to opt for agency and make choices in a variety of ways that were distinct from those made by men. Frankl notes that for men, too, the “choice of action” existed even in the face of the terrible privations they endured at Auschwitz.¹²⁶ In the end, all Jews were equally destined for death, but there were differences on the road to that destination for men and women. Women’s and men’s experiences of the Holocaust were not identical, but, as Goldenberg has suggested, they were “different horrors” within the “same hell.”¹²⁷ Hence, an analysis of gender-based distinctions in Holocaust experiences and the ways in which they have been narrated by men and women adds an important angle to our knowledge and understanding of this dark chapter in modern history.

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