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Abstract

This historiography researches historians' view of Jewish motherhood during the Holocaust. For several decades, Holocaust research primarily focused on the male experience, as it was seen as normative. It was not until the 1980s that female historians had to argue that Jewish women experienced the Holocaust differently than men. Specifically, Jewish women were targeted by the Nazis for the ability to bear and raise Jewish children. The Nazis criminalized pregnancy (which led to abortions done by Jewish women and inmate doctors and infanticide), forcibly sterilized Jewish men and women, and caused amenorrhea in the camps by poor nutrition and overworking Jewish women. Immediately after the war, issues of sexual assault and loss of fertility were not discussed as much. In response to these attacks, Jewish women used their various homemaking skills to make life more comfortable in the concentration camps. They formed foster families to care for one another, and tried to keep up spirits by sharing recipes, making gifts, and teaching skills to one another. By bringing attention to these topics the paper is contextualized in feminist theory. I have also incorporated feminist theory explain why men's experiences being viewed as normative is harmful. Though historians no longer argue that Jewish women survived better than Jewish men with these particular actions and skills, it is acknowledged that Jewish women had different experiences, because many of them embodied the role of mothers and caretakers. At the same time, historians are also highlighting that

women's experiences were not homogenized, as there were Jewish women who were scorned for not upholding gender roles.

Keywords: History, Women's History, Historiography, The Holocaust, World War II, Women's, Gender, Sexuality Studies

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Introduction

For several decades, Holocaust research primarily focused on the male experience, as it was seen as normative. It was not until the 1980s that female historians had to argue that Jewish women experienced the Holocaust differently than men. This assertion did not go without backlash, and even to this day historians are refining their descriptions of Nazi treatment of Jewish women during the Holocaust. Broadly speaking, Jewish women were targeted and sexually abused by the Nazis for the ability to bear and raise Jewish children. The Nazis criminalized pregnancy (which led to abortions done by Jewish women and inmate doctors), forcibly sterilized Jewish men and women, and caused amenorrhea (the ceasing of menstruation) in the camps by poor nutrition and overworking Jewish women. In response to these attacks, Jewish women used their various homemaking skills to make life more comfortable in the concentration camps. They formed foster families to care for one another, and tried to keep up spirits by sharing recipes, making gifts, and teaching skills to one another. Though historians no longer argue that Jewish women survived better than Jewish men with these particular actions and skills, it is acknowledged that Jewish women had different experiences than men, because many of them embodied the physical and social roles of mothers and caretakers. At the same time, historians

are also highlighting that women's experiences were not homogenized, as there were Jewish women who were scorned for not upholding gender roles.

The Effects of Male Normativity in Holocaust Studies

In her book, *The Second Sex*, feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir describes how women are made to be an "Other". She argues that society limits women's roles to mother and wife yet allows men to experience broader lives. De Beauvoir notes the period in a young girl's life during which she realizes that she is not the protagonist of her own story, but rather has a much more limited life in front of her:

> It is a strange experience for an individual who feels himself autonomous and transcendent subject, an absolute, to discover inferiority in himself as fixed and preordained existence… this is what happens to the little girl when, doing her apprenticeship for life in the world, she grasps what is means to be a woman therein. The sphere to which she belongs is everywhere enclosed, limited, dominated, by the male universe: high as she may raise herself, far as she may venture, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that will block her way. (297)

It is a painful realization—that maleness is normative, and that femininity is the Other. De Beauvoir notes that "man" is seen as the baseline (we call humanity "mankind", for example). This can be applied to Holocaust studies before the 1980s. Jewish men's experience during the Holocaust was viewed as the experience of every victim of the Holocaust. Not only is this simply false, as this paper will argue, but this is also harmful to Jewish women who do not see their stories, or the stories of their ancestors represented in Holocaust history and memory.

In an article for *Ms. Magazine*, feminist writer Andrea Dworkin describes her personal relation to the Holocaust: family members that shared their trauma of sexual assault (Dworkin).

Yet when she went to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., she lamented the lack of information of women's experiences (Dworkin). She points out that Jewish women were not just "abstractly" attacked by the Nazis, but rather had an embodied experience, which is described later in this paper (Dworkin). With this publication in 1994, Dworkin calls for more research:

> I want the suffering and endurance of women--Jewish or not Jewish, in Auschwitz or Ravensbruck, Bergen-Belsen or Dachau, Majdanek or Sobibor--reckoned with and honored: remembered… I want this museum changed so that remembrance is not male. I want to know the story of women in the Holocaust. (Dworkin)

With this call, Dworkin urges for all female victims of the Holocaust to have their story told, she doesn't exclude non-Jewish women. However, her call is explicitly for female experiences, as Holocaust remembrance was oversaturated with the male experience so much that the remembrance seemed gendered. Dworkin also stakes her claim personally, discussing her family's experience earlier in the article, but also broadens her discussion, as she desires recognition of *all* Jewish women. We can see that some historians did eventually heed Dworkin's call.

Holocaust Studies in the 1980s: Looking at Women's Experiences

During the 1980s, historians began to realize there was a lack of research on women's experiences in the Holocaust. Joan Ringelheim, in an article published in 1984, was one of the first historians to make the claim that Jewish women experienced the Holocaust differently than men (70). She argued that the entire study of the Holocaust should be re-examined through the perspective of women, as previously it was men who told stories of rape, abortion, and prostitution (73-4). However, as Zoe Waxman notes in her 2017 book *Women in the Holocaust,*

there was fervid backlash to Ringelheim's assertion of needing women's histories. Other historians argued that by studying women's lives during the Holocaust, thereby taking a feminist lens, there was less focus on the inherent Jewishness of the Holocaust (Waxman 2). It did not help that Ringelheim was rather radical in her assertions—she declared that women "survived better than men, due to their specific ability to form bonds with other prisoners" (70). Though not as radical as Ringelheim, Waxman still argues in the 21st century that there is a scholarly assumption that men's experiences in the Holocaust are normative, and that women did not experience the event uniquely (6).

An article by Nadine Brozan published in the New York Times in 1983 outlines where the research stood when Joan Ringelheim began her quest. Brozen writes, "How were women treated differently from men and how did they respond?... What kinds of relationships did they form with one another? Did they ever laugh? What did they talk about?" (Brozan). Over time, historians have begun to answer these questions. At the same time, the article continues the argument that women survived "better". The article cites Sybil Milton, director of archives at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York, as saying, "Women were better able to survive starvation than men. They had better strategies for sharing and extending food" (Brozan). This exemplifies the rather bold, sure statements from historians in the 1980s.

Gender Roles in Nazi Germany

Historians have looked to gender roles in Nazi Germany and in Jewish culture to understand why Nazi ideology singled out Jewish women in their roles as mothers. Historian David Patterson notes that the concept of Jewishness is tied to the mother, as she is the one responsible for passing on Jewish culture to children through education. This is in part because Judaism is matrilineal—to be Jewish means one has a Jewish mother, not father (notwithstanding

conversion) (167). Patterson argues that because the Jewish mother is the source of Judaism, Jewish motherhood is thus the most "heinous crime" to the Nazis (164). However, through his argument, Patterson engages in some gender-essentialist language, by describing mothers as "self sacrificing" and "divine," in addition to his assertion that "defining the mother is the womb" (168-9, 167). With this language, Patterson is implying that women are essentially only their ability to recreate, and mothers only have children through their own womb. Later this paper discusses how some survivors rejected the expectation to have children postwar, and how there are also many accounts during the Holocaust of foster and adoptive mothers. This reveals that though women's gender roles were very much linked to motherhood during the Second World War, not all women followed expectations. Though Patterson does not seem to quite get the idea that motherhood (biological or otherwise) does not equate entirely to womanhood, his points still stands that the Nazis attacked Jewish mothers because of their ability to create more Jewish children.

Historians' understanding of gender roles in Nazi Germany before the Holocaust began influenced their reasoning for these bold statements about "surviving better". Marion Kaplan researched Jewish women's responses to Nazi policies in Germany. Kaplan highlighted the burden the anti-Semitic Nazi restrictions and laws placed on Jewish women in particular. She highlights the supposed expectation for Jewish women to keep the home and private sphere as a haven from public life, which was riddled with cultural and legal anti-Semitism. She writes "[Jewish women] were the ones to calm the family, to keep up the normal rhythms of daily life" (50). Women were to act as the flagship for the family, having moral strength to maintain order in the household despite the barrage of difficulties outside and inside the home. Kaplan also emphasizes the material work women did, making food and repairing clothing, in addition to

work and later, forced labor (54). Overall, Jewish women engaged in many actions that could be classed as "mothering"—from the emotional labor to the daily tasks that made their houses into homes. Several historians argue that Jewish women took these gender roles and homemaking skills to the concentration camps.

One of Waxman's main arguments is that in the concentration camps, many facets of personal and social identity were stripped by the Nazis while institutions of gender remained intact (94). She writes, "gendered behaviors and pre-war morality still mattered" in the camps (18). Though many survivors describe a dehumanization in the camps, gender disappearing was not part of that process (for women). This echoes Ringelheim's claim that the Holocaust was not "sexless" (81). One way in which Jewish women were attacked specifically as women was sexual assault and harassment in the camps (111). Jewish women also keenly felt the initiation process as robbing them of their identity when their hair was shorn, their few personal items stolen, and their bodies examined (111). However, this paper focuses largely on Jewish experiences *as mothers* during the Holocaust. This is, in part, due to Waxman's argument that the Nazis stripped women to biological functions, which thereby "targeted Jewish women as a distinct biological and racial group" (Waxman 9). Waxman explains that the Nazis violated women with the same qualities that made them women, by attacking their maternity and reproductive functions through the limits on pregnancy and attacking their sexuality through sexual violence (149). Thus, if one is to look at Jewish women's experience, reproductive topics are inherently tied to that experience.

Nazi Attacks on Jewish Motherhood

One of the key restrictions that the Nazis placed on Jewish women was limiting their ability to create more Jewish children. One of the Nazis' main methods of eliminating Jewish

motherhood was making pregnancy illegal in the ghettos and later the camps. Writing on sexual violence women experienced during the Holocaust, historian Helga Amesberger asserts that because reproductive rights were revoked for Jewish women and men, the Nazis took away their "self-determinism" (141). She thus describes the ghettos and camps as "areas of physical confinement as well as spheres of absolute power" (139). Waxman writes that this attack on Jewish motherhood was particularly painful for Orthodox Jewish women, as "the identity of religious women was dependent to a large extent on their ability to bear and raise Jewish children" (35). Historian Ellen Ben-Sefer suggests that Jewish women suffered emotionally because the Nazis took away "a fundamental function of one's defined feminine role," being that motherhood was so linked to a woman's place in society during that period (157).

In addition to criminalizing the birth of Jewish children, the Nazis also forcibly sterilized Jewish women and men, as well as forced abortions on Jewish women (157). Sterilization often occurred without the victims' even being aware of the exact nature of the procedure. Some victims learned after the Holocaust that the Nazis took their ability to bear children (160). Ben-Sefer describes the Nazis' methods of "selectively controlling breeding" as "forms of sexual abuse because they interfered with a woman's right to control her own body and sex life" (157). Perhaps this outright naming of Nazis' control of Jewish women's reproductive abilities as sexual abuse is a part of the movement in the 21st century to discuss the sexual violence Jewish women faced during the Holocaust. Previously, survivors (and thereby, historians) were less willing to examine the particular sexual and gender-based nature of the assault on women.

In addition to being permanently sterilized, Jewish women also experienced temporary sterilization—amenorrhea. Rochelle Saidel interviewed several Jewish women who survived Ravensbruck concentration camp, the only camp that only had female prisoners. Saidel found

through her interviews that "changes in women's bodies made them feel in some ways they had cease to be women, even as they struggled to keep a semblance of their normal lives and social conditions as women" (Saidel 215). This points to the fact that during this time Jewish women's understanding of "normal" was very tied up with their social role as women. Saidel also notes that there is a misconception that all women stopped menstruating in the camps. Some women did menstruate and had to manage so with a lack of sanitary napkins (Saidel 210). This specific fact from Saidel underscores recent historians' efforts to generalize less. When scholars assume that *all* women stopped menstruating, they leave out the experiences of so many others. By focusing on both sets of women, Saidel shows that both stories are important to our understanding of the Holocaust. Furthermore, Waxman describes this possible loss of fertility as a blow to Jewish women's psyches, as they worried about their potential to be mothers and wives after the war (Waxman 93). Once freed, Saidel and Waxman assert that some Jewish women viewed the recommencement of menstruation and thus fertility as a cause for rejoicing, and also saw motherhood and procreating as an act of defiance to the Nazis (Saidel 198; Waxman 72).

Due to the Nazis criminalizing pregnancy, bearing children was very dangerous for Jewish women (Waxman 11). Several scholars, Saidel most notably, have said that "childdeath" was synonymous with "childbirth," because pregnancy was so threatening to mother and child (211). In the camps, pregnant women were immediately sent to gas chambers upon arrival at the camps, or upon birth of the child if discovered to be pregnant once already in the camp (Waxman 94). Survivors and historian alike are haunted by the abortions that concentration camp prisoners performed on pregnant inmates. Inmate doctors had to make the difficult decision to kill newborns, in order to protect their mothers. The doctors tried to save poison for this, but at times had to suffocate babies, and sometimes mothers even had to kill their own children themselves

(Waxman 98-9). Olga Lengyl, a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, worked as an inmate doctor in the camp. In her memoir *Five Chimneys*, she describes having to kill newborns in an attempt to save the mother from the gas chambers (100). She writes, "And so the Germans succeeded in making murderers of us. To this day, the picture of those murdered babies haunts me" (100).

Yet not all historians are capable of taking a sympathetic and nuanced view towards the actions of these inmate doctors. Though Ben-Sefer makes sure to underscore that abortions done by Nazis were different from abortions that were done to save the mother in the camps or ghettos, she is still critical of the actions of inmate doctors (162). She argues that these secret abortions violated the Hippocratic Oath (which requires that medical professionals be held to certain ethical standards) and were often done without the mother's consent or forgiveness (163). Though it is truly awful that some women had to experience the death of their children without giving consent to this, this was a "choiceless choice" that the inmate doctors made. In Holocaust studies, the term "choiceless choice" was coined by scholar Lawrence L. Langer, who argued that "these victims, who were plunged into a crisis of what might call 'choiceless choice, where critical decisions did not reflect 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 victim's own choosing" (224). Other historians, such as Waxman and Saidel, are less hasty to assign guilt to the decisions of inmate doctors who committed abortions and infanticide, preferring to address the entire situation as a "choiceless choice". After all, inmate doctors did not take the Hippocratic Oath before beginning practicing medicine in the camps. Ultimately, the Nazis took away the ability for victims of the Holocaust to make sane, moral decisions in the concentration camps. This nonetheless did not stop survivors such as Lengyl from being haunted by the decisions they were forced to make.

Jewish Women's Response to Nazi Attacks

Jewish women had several different responses to these attacks on their abilities to mother, both in the sense of establishing a home and caring for it, and literally having children. Ringelheim argued that women specifically took on mother-like roles in the camps and that Jewish women had "different survival capabilities, different work, roles, and relationships," which prepared them for these roles in ways that men were not prepared (70). Because Ringelheim was writing in the 1980s, she had to specify that it was women's culture (not their biology) which provided "women with specific and different conditions in which to make moral choices and act meaningfully" (81). Writing around the same time as Ringelheim, Claudia Koonz highlighted the differences between men and women's skills and how that translated into the camps. Koonz specifically argued that men underwent "feminization" in camps, by learning to "share, trust, and comfort one another, admit their fears, and to hope together," which were all behaviors that women already were familiar with (381).

Later historians were less open to say that women "survived better;" however, historians such as Saidel still argue that women, coming from a background of homemaking, used those skills in the camps to survive. Though women certainly faced specific adversity due to their gender (such as sexual assault and pregnancy), Saidel argues that "there were positive aspects related to gender that enabled women to better struggle against the subhuman conditions of degradation, deprivation, terror, and death" (22). For example, homemaking and "nurturing skills" enabled women to create foster families, and within those families, care for one another and perform housekeeping routines such as hygiene and medicine that would help with survival (Saidel 22). Ringelheim relates that this particular skill of Jewish women in the camps of being "able to create or recreate 'families'" as thus constructing "networks of survival" (80). Waxman

writes that "women responded to the suffering they were forced to endure by trying to maintain familial or emotional bonds… women even "adopted" children to look after" (105). Similarly, Saidel defines the term camp sisters as "blood sisters, other female relatives, or unrelated women who had bonded to help each other survive in concentration camps" to describe this sort of familial bond between women (208). Specific examples of these camp sisters include women babysitting for a mother on a work detail, or even adopting orphaned children (Saidel 208). In Ravensbrück, where women had no access to weapons, Saidel describes the resistance that women used was "aimed at keeping up spirits" (53). For example, women would share recipes, make small gifts (including poetry, cards, embroidery, drawings) and teach language skills (Saidel 53). Thus, this task of homemaking was not just about simple physical survival, but also about fulfilling emotional needs.

Jewish Motherhood in Holocaust Memory

After the Holocaust ended, some women did view children as success. However, other historians have argued that this view of children as a "symbol of triumph" over the Nazis is a cliché (Amesberger 150). Some Jewish women mentioned not wanting any or any more children after the war for a variety of personal reasons (Amesberger 150). Amesberger argues that this association of motherhood and fulfillment after the war assumes that women are "predestined" to become mothers (151). In the same vein, comparative literature scholar Frederica Clementi notes in her book that Holocaust survivors (especially female Holocaust survivors) are upheld in "reverential" tones, for their supposed sacrifices for the sake of their children during the war (13). However, Amesberger points out that not all mothers made sacrifices which put "their child's life before their own" (145). Women had abortions, and other women committed infanticide for the sake of the mother's life. After the war, these women were stigmatized for not

upholding gender roles and expectations (Amesberger 145). In memoirs written by Holocaust survivors and children of Holocaust survivors, mothers are not always described with glorying language, but rather as the complex humans they truly are. Clementi describes these memoir writers as painting their mothers "as simultaneously heroic and unbearable protagonists, victims and victimizers, half-crazed women yet lifesaving forces, their daughters inexorable nemeses but also the origin and raison d'être of their art or writing" (13). This quotation highlights the different roles that mothers played in memoirs, in the fact that these roles were not always dichotomously good or evil, but rather incredibly complicated. Clementi argues that by even going as far as critiquing their mothers, these daughters give their mothers an "existence outside the genocide" (14).

Perhaps due to this volatile nature of identity-based histories and politics, historians will now make disclaimers before their arguments. For example, in 2010, Amesberger clarified that she was *not* saying that women suffered more than men (139). She also was not arguing that women exclusively suffered from sexual policies, or that women were a homogenized group with the same experiences (139-40). However, the historians cited in this paper do still argue that Jewish women experienced the Holocaust differently than Jewish men did, particularly because of their reproductive abilities. Overall, historians are moving away from claiming that Jewish women survived better than men, and rather simply arguing that Jewish women survived differently than men. Also, historians are clarifying that Jewish women's experiences cannot be generalized as the same experiences. There are many stories of the Holocaust that have not been researched, and historians are recognizing that their research has only just begun to develop a nuanced view of the Holocaust.

Though the Nazis targeted and murdered a variety of groups of people, more attention has been paid to Jewish men, with Jewish women's experiences being seen as essentially the same as men's. It was not until the 1980s that historians began to call for research on women's stories during the Holocaust, because women experienced certain attacks on their reproductive abilities and homemaking roles. The Nazis specifically targeted Jewish women for their ability to make more Jewish children. The Nazis criminalized pregnancy, forcibly sterilized Jewish men and women, and caused amenorrhea in the camps. In response to these attacks, Jewish women used the skills they gained through socialization (homemaking and mothering) to make life more comfortable in Germany during Nazi reign and later in the concentration camps. Some historians have gone as far as to argue that women survived better than men due to these skills, but most agree that women used their housekeeping and bonding skills in the camps to create family groups. After the war, some women saw their resumed fertility as a triumph over the Nazis, but not all women took this stance. Finally, while female Holocaust survivors have been held up to be self-sacrificing, memoirs revealed that many Jewish mothers were complex human beings, despite and because of their experiences. This is not to say that historians have put down the research on women's experiences. In fact, Marion Kaplan recently published an article calling for more research, 35 years after Ringelheim's original cry. She writes, "There has been important research on Jewish women's bonding experiences and "camp sister" relationships in extreme situations, but we need more—and more comparisons with males" (Kaplan 60). Thus, she wishes to go back and reexamine Ringelheim and Koonz's original arguments that women were equipped with skills better for survival in camps, by explicitly comparing women's experiences with men's experiences to come to a more nuanced conclusion. Regardless of who

"survived better," it is now very much acknowledged by historians that Jewish women did experience the Holocaust differently than men because of their position as women.

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