

EACH WOMAN DIES HER DEATH A THOUSAND TIMES

VOICES OF FEMALE EXPERIENCE
IN THE HOLOCAUST

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

While the experiences of Holocaust victims are well studied in history, the nuances of female-centric elements of these experiences have been under-represented in Holocaust historiography until relatively recently. While there is no single, “typical” female experience in the Holocaust, a woman’s path, as well as elements of her suffering, were significantly shaped by her gender in unique ways. Utilizing female authored memoirs, this thesis examines experience and memory to illuminate unique elements of how the Holocaust was experienced by female victims. The ways in which gender influenced Holocaust experiences in the pre-WWII era, the era of deportations, and in camp confinement are explored, along with unique and significant examples of female-centric means of resistance. Issues such as menstruation, lesbianism, sexuality, hair loss, beauty standards, childbirth, fetishization of the female body and grief are explored in order to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of how women experienced the Holocaust.

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Dedication

For my Mum, Janet, and all of the mothers lost in the Holocaust.

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Introduction

Happy are you who cannot see what they have done to your women.

- Charlotte Delbo¹

In life, women assume a number of roles. Daughter, sister, friend, lover, wife, mother, caregiver, grandmother and matriarch, among others. These roles are defined variously through self-identification, and through the relationships which women have with the people in their lives. Female identity is therefore various, heterogeneous, and hard to pin down to a single tangible identity. Equally, while laymen sometimes view the Holocaust as a single event, it is actually a conglomeration of many different events, experienced by many people in many geographically diverse places.² Therefore, it is an especially difficult task to set about defining female experience in the Holocaust. While there are certain universal experiences, by and large female experience is individual experience.

An archetypal image of the Holocaust is the *musselman*, a slang-term used in Auschwitz, brought to public consciousness by Primo Levi in *If This is a Man (or Survival in Auschwitz)* to describe the starving, emaciated concentration camp prisoner whose suffering has been so profound that they have given up any will to live. In Levi's words, they are "the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection".³ In most visual representations of the Holocaust, these *musselmen* feature prominently – usually in photos of those who managed to survive until their camp's liberation and were photographed or filmed by liberating armies. They have become an enduring, profound visual representation of the horror of the camps and of the Nazi persecution of the Jews. An important feature of the *musselmen* is

¹ Delbo, Charlotte, *None of us Will Return*, (Boston, NE: Beacon Press, 1978), 122.

² Waxman, Zoe Vania, *Writing The Holocaust: Identity, Testimony, Representation*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), 2.

³ Levi, Primo, *If This is a Man*, (London, UK: Abacus, 1987), 94.

that they are usually male. Many photos show these *musselmen* in the nude, their bodies rendered sexless through the grotesqueness of their suffering; however, even in states of extreme starvation and sickness, they are distinctly male. These powerful and enduring images ask an important question, articulated first by John Roth and Carol Rittner in their edited volume *Different Voices*: “where are the women”?⁴

Through the power of this iconography and male-centric historiography, Holocaust victims have been widely conceptualized without gendered nuance in academia and popular culture; this exemplifies, in the words of historian Sara Horowitz, “the marginality of women’s experience in constructing a master narrative of the Nazi genocide”.⁵ Consequently, the gendered facets of Holocaust experiences have remained under-explored until recently. Some female survivors and historians alike, such as Ruth Bondy,⁶ Helen Fagin and Cynthia Ozick,⁷ have leveled a criticism at a female-centric focus that by studying the Holocaust through a gendered framework, certain suffering, in this instance female, is elevated over others. Of course it is integral to Holocaust scholarship that victims are equally represented in both academic discourse and memory. This is a myopic argument which effects the same outcome that it is critical of by ignoring certain experiences and realities, thereby diminishing the suffering of certain (female) victims. As such, female experience is one of the most understudied aspects of the most studied period in history.

In discussing female-centric suffering, this work does not seek to minimize the suffering of men and children. In fact, by acknowledging the nuance of female experience in the Holocaust, a certain

⁴ Rittner, Carol, and Roth, John K., (eds.), *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*. (New York: Paragon, 1993), xi.

⁵ Horowitz, Sara, “Women in Holocaust Literature”, in *Women in the Holocaust*, Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman (eds.), (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 367.

⁶ Ofer, Dalia, and Weitzman, Lenore (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 12.

⁷ Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 4.

degree of male suffering is explored by proxy. In discussing a mother's experiences with children in the camps, for instance in the example of Hetty Verolme, the unique elements of her father's experience are touched upon in order to distinguish the gendered facets of her mother's experience. In other instances in this work, male experience is used as a reference point to extrapolate female experience – given the overwhelming amount of academic study which has been undertaken by historians on this subject over time, and the familiarity that most people have with a typical narrative of the Holocaust, it is useful to point out aspects of this narrative which a female-centric reading deviates from or challenges. It is not this work's ambition to undertake a comparative analysis of gendered experiences, but it is important to state at the outset that *all* victims of the Nazis suffered. This work's intention is to explore a more nuanced account of that suffering, and to illuminate unique ways in which women were victimized in the Holocaust. In evaluating this suffering, we do the victims further justice by illuminating the specificity of their experience, bringing to light certain horrors and atrocities which have been long ignored in Holocaust scholarship.

While female-centric studies of the Holocaust are now an emerging trend in wider Holocaust studies, this area was previously relatively under-studied. The dearth of academic works on this subject began to ease in the 1990s, as feminist historical discourse has continued to gain prominence and emerge as an important modern historical paradigm. Several significant volumes have been written on this subject, including: *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (1993), edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Women in the Holocaust* (1998), edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weizman, *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation* (1999), edited by Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (2010), edited by Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel, *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (2013), edited by Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro, and *Wartime Rape and Sexual Violence: An Examination of the Perpetrators, Motivations, and Functions of Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (2013), written by Alana Fangrad. These

works have served to provide broad context for this work given their emphasis on female experience in the Holocaust.

Interestingly, Ofer and Weitzman, Hedgepeth and Saidel, Ritner and Roth, Goldenberg and Shapiro, and Fuchs all report resistance from scholars, survivors, and the wider academic community in their ambition to evaluate the Holocaust through a gendered lens. Hedgepeth and Saidel state that when “some feminist Holocaust scholars began to suggest that women suffered differently (but not more or less severely) than men during the Holocaust, most mainstream scholars either ignored or criticized their research”.⁸ Ofer and Weitzman claim that they faced “considerable resistance... sometimes, outright hostility” from detractors of a gendered Holocaust history.⁹ Esther Fuchs identifies a perceived frivolity that detractors of female-centric Holocaust histories feel towards the issue of gender. Her response to this criticism is uncompromising; she contends that “the Nazis produced an ideology of both racist and sexist supremacy”.¹⁰ In Fuchs’ view, controversially, race and gender in the Holocaust are equally weighted. Weitzman and Ofer’s detractors also contend that, in their female-centric reading of history, they “were imposing today’s concerns on the past – allowing a feminist agenda, which may be appropriate to our era, to ‘take over the Holocaust’”.¹¹ While acknowledging, like Ofer and Weitzman, that a victim’s Jewishness rather than their gender was the catalyst to their persecution, this work does put forward that gender is an imperative, useful lens through which to view any history, including the Holocaust.¹²

⁸ Hedgepeth, Sonja M., and Saidel, Rochelle G. (eds.), *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 3.

⁹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 12.

¹⁰ Fuchs, Esther (ed.), “Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation.” *Studies in the Shoah* Vol. xxii (1999), ix.

¹¹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

Doris Bergen, in Goldberg and Shapiro's edited volume *Different Horrors, Same Hell*, acknowledges that while such virulent resistance to feminist scholarship on the Holocaust as that experienced by Ofer and Weitzman is not as common as it once was, challenges do still exist. She states that "studies of gender and sexuality are accepted, but as 'different voices' ..., voices that speak from and for the most part to a 'separate sphere,' removed from what count as the big questions in the field".¹³ While feminist centric studies do focus specifically on the experiences of women, these studies should be integrated into the mainstream of Holocaust studies in order to form a full picture of experience, rather than be maligned to the sidelines of mainstream scholarship as Bergen states.

In her essay "Women as Citizens in the Theresienstadt Prisoner Community", Anna Hájková argues that the construction of a "master narrative" serves to bring a unity to both contemporary and historical memory. She identifies the master narrative of Theresienstadt whereby the ghetto existed "not only as a place of suffering but also as a meaningful site of civilization"; this master narrative, she argues, was constructed by male authority figures and social elites, but critically was adopted even by those in the worst circumstances within the ghetto because it "enabled them to be part of something positive, rather than being persecuted". This logic can be extended to the master narrative of the Holocaust itself, which, while serving to unite victims, has dictated that a victim's gender is irrelevant to their persecution. Hájková contends that "in conceptualizing the mechanism of women as citizens in the victims' community during the Holocaust we gain a better understanding of how women were left out of the framework of larger, official, histories – including the Holocaust's history". In Theresienstadt, as in the wider history of the Holocaust, women's lives were considered to be private business, irrelevant, or downright threatening to male hegemony. This informs the precept of this work: that women's stories

¹³ Bergen, Doris, "What Do Studies of Women, Gender and Sexuality Contribute to Understanding the Holocaust?", in Goldenberg, Myrna, and Shapiro, Amy (eds.), *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and The Holocaust*, (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2013), 17.

have been shrouded in marginalization and preconceptions of irrelevance throughout history, and that this has been accepted specifically within the historical master narrative of the Holocaust for too long. We must leave behind the comfort of this master narrative, and instead create a narrative in which accuracy and equal representation are of primary import.¹⁴

The analyses of all of these aforementioned historians support the conclusion that by exploring female experience in the Holocaust new and relevant aspects of the history of this period are brought to light. The common thread which ties each of these aforementioned works together is their assertion that “questions about gender lead us to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding of the Holocaust”.¹⁵ This statement accurately reflects the ambition of this work. Along with the aforementioned works by other feminist historians, this thesis seeks to contribute to a growing canon of historical literature which, by volition of its existence, redresses an oversight in Holocaust historiography.

¹⁴ Hájková, Anna, “Women as citizens in the Theresienstadt prisoner community”, Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, [online], published on: 27 June, 2016, accessed 23/07/2018, <https://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/women-citizens-theresienstadt-prisoner-community>, ISSN 1961-9898.

¹⁵ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 1.

Style of Writing

As I finish the last chapter of my book, I feel at peace, at last. I have discharged a burden, and paid a debt to many nameless heroes, resting in their unmarked graves.

- Gerda Weissmann Klein¹⁶

This work is equally concerned not just with a broad summary of female experience in the Holocaust, but also *how* women have chosen to convey their experiences. As such, this work deals primarily with memoirs, and occasionally with other forms of primary source materials published in the post war era. While there are many contemporary sources by both women who survived and women who were murdered which could be evaluated, such as wartime diaries, this work is concerned with the acts of remembrance and commemoration which are inherent to post-war memoirs. Accordingly, this leaves ample room for an evaluation of the style and content of memoirs and diaries written by women.

There have been criticisms leveled against the usefulness of memoirs in academic study by historians who have tackled this subject such as Zoe Waxman, Susan Nowak, Catherine Bernard, and Alana Fangrad.¹⁷ They argue that the fallibility and malleability of memory negates, to some extent or totally, the reliability of these written testimonies. Either a study of memoirs should be undertaken in conjunction with a study of other historic records to corroborate the claims being made, or some conditions of selection should be applied to the memoirs used which guarantees “clean” information, free from issues of degradation of memory over time, or the unconscious influence of the copious information and scholarship on the Holocaust which has helped to foster a “typical” Holocaust narrative.¹⁸ These are legitimate concerns of fallibility of memory which have been usefully applied to

¹⁶ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, (New York, NY: Hill & Wang, 1995), preface.

¹⁷ Fangrad, Alana, *Wartime Rape and Sexual Violence: An Examination of the Perpetrators, Motivations, and Functions of Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, (Bloomington, IN, Authorhouse, 2013), 20-21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

other works on this subject. For instance, Alana Fangrad has restricted the usage of memoirs in her evaluation of sexual violence in the Holocaust to those written from 1945-1960, a period preceding the mass proliferation of material on the Holocaust which occurred in the final decades of the twentieth century, and which she contends inevitably influenced memoirs written post 1960.

In this work, however, these issues need not be so stringently addressed. While of course quality of data is always of central importance to the historian, quality of data is, in some instances, subjective. This work seeks to evaluate female experience *alongside* female memory. Therefore, whether or not a rape can be proven to have happened is not relevant here. Memories of course fade and can be reshaped over time, but if an instance of rape is recounted by a survivor in their memoir then this work seeks to evaluate *how* that rape is recounted; it does not seek to question whether or not it has happened at all. Does the incident feature heavily in the memoir, with emphasis? Or is it presented with much less significance than other aspects of the story? If other features of the author's experience have been more heavily emphasised, what significance and meaning can be extrapolated from this? If a woman recounts an element of her trauma at in old age, what can be gleaned about the profundity of that experience for the author? This work does not dismiss the aforementioned issues of memory; it actively engages with them at every step. Fundamentally, and especially given the silence which surrounded this topic in early Holocaust historiography, this work seeks to provide a study whereby no voice which has gone through the burden of publication is ruled out or cast aside. Through this broad exploration, this work seeks to bring to light facets of female experience which are significant to women as a whole, based on individual accounts and on trends which reveal themselves through personal experiences.

It should be said that the works evaluated in this thesis are exclusively published in English. Some of the authors included in this thesis originally wrote and published their stories in English, while others have been translated from their original language in subsequent editions. Of the nineteen

survivor works cited here, just five were originally written in a language other than English; Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys*, Mary Berg's *The Diary of Mary Berg*, and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land* were all written in Polish, while Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After* (which includes the work *None of us Will Return*) was originally French, and the collectively authored *In Memory's Kitchen* was originally written in both German and Czech. The relationship an author has with the language of their work is an interesting one. For some, the ease of familiarity of their first language is preferable when committing their stories to the written word, particularly in memoirs which are authored shortly after the war. For others, the European language of their pre-war lives is either tainted by their experiences or far removed from their post war lives, and so they write in English – the language of their liberation to Britain, Australia or the United States. Ruth Kluger stands out as a unique exception, as she wrote two distinct versions of her memoir *Still Alive* on separate occasions, first in German and then in English. She explains that while her mother (of whom she is very critical) was still alive, she would not do her the disrespect of writing an English version which could be read by her family and friends in the US.¹⁹ She refers to the English version as “a parallel book” to her first, “neither a translation or ... new”.²⁰

While most of the works evaluated in this book are typical autobiographical memoirs, with the exception of *The Diary of Mary Berg* which is a contemporary account of time spent in the Warsaw Ghetto, some women have chosen to share their experiences in different forms. Some tell their stories in conjunction with historians, journalists or other writers; this has been done primarily by women who have kept their experiences to themselves for much of their lives and have decided to share their stories late in their lives. For instance, *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* was co-authored by Rena

¹⁹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, (New York, USA: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 210.

²⁰ Ibid.

Kornreich and the writer Heather Dune Macadam. Dune Macadam describes her role in authoring the book as “an emotional archaeologist”, who conveys Rena’s spoken words to the written page.²¹ Doris Martin’s memoir, *Kiss Every Step*, is a collaborative effort narrated by herself and most of her surviving siblings, and “committed to paper” for them by her husband, Ralph S. Martin.²² Similarly, Sara Tuel Bernstein’s *The Seamstress* is co-authored by her daughter and her daughter in law, who pieced together the book and its historical chronology from Sara’s taped testimony.²³ For some women it is more practical to have a representative commit their words to paper for them, or help them structure a series of memories which have been locked away in the mind for decades. Others use more creative forms to convey their experiences, most notably Charlotte Delbo, who forgoes prose for poetry in her seminal work *None of Us Will Return*. More unconventionally yet, the women of Teresin kept a cookbook of traditional recipes from their hometowns while in captivity, which will be used here as an indicator of female experience and resistance.²⁴ Given how relatively recently in history that significant attention has been given to the specific experiences of women in the Holocaust, meaning can be extrapolated from all sorts of seemingly unusual sources, in all sorts of seemingly unusual ways. This work endeavors to make this unusualness usual, and argues that any example of female experience is a valid and useful one.

As each work is personal to the survivor who has written it, each story starts and ends in a different place. For some women, their pre-war experiences are of utmost importance. They serve to provide context and contrast for the reader between a usually idyllic pre-war life and the horrors of their Holocaust experiences, and are especially significant to the author in that they feature the lasting memories of family members, friends, or indeed entire communities who were murdered and lost

²¹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 6.

²² Martin, Doris, *Kiss Every Step: A Survivor’s Memoir from the Nazi Holocaust*, (Self Published, 2009), preface.

²³ Tuel Bernstein, Sara, *The Seamstress: A Memoir of Survival*, (New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1997), xxiv.

²⁴ De Silva, Cara (ed.), *In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996).

forever. For some women, it is the period of the height of their trauma which is of primary concern – usually their deportation and survival in the camps; the details of their former lives become irrelevant in the face of such overwhelming suffering and adversity. For others still, details of their liberation and post-war experiences are an integral part of their story. These are women who are proud of the efforts that they have made to recover their lives from this trauma, and of the lives that they have built from the ashes of the camps. Especially in cases where a woman has lost close relatives, the rebuilding of their family is of the utmost importance. Alternatively, some women include aspects of their post-war experiences to convey that their liberation was not the end of their suffering; these stories include experiences in post-war displaced persons camps, memories of returning “home” to hostility and desolation after their liberation, the experience of reuniting with what little family had survived, or confronting the extent of their loss and grief, and details of any post-war emigration which a survivor may have undertaken. For the sake of conciseness and fulfilling this work’s ambition of extrapolating individual female suffering in the Holocaust, I have chosen not to analyze survivors’ post-war experiences in detail.

As such, this work follows a roughly chronological structure in terms of chapters, spanning from pre-war life to liberation, with detailed analysis of important elements of female experience found in each époque. Certain elements are simply too significant and expansive to be contained within a chronological chapter, and so have been given dedicated sections later in this work.

Chapter one is concerned with female memories of pre-deportation life, undertaking an analysis of events, themes, or details that are presented with import or emphasis in the authors’ pre-confinement memories. A focus is put on familial and romantic relationships, as well as unique elements of gendered danger in this period. For those women who have chosen to include memories of their pre-war experiences, pre-war female experience and development are evaluated as a comparative baseline for evaluating the extent to which suffering either reinforced or altered female identity and

values. For some of the female authors who come of age during the Holocaust, this chapter evaluates the ways in which the transition from girlhood to womanhood was impacted by their experiences.

Chapter two details the experience of deportation to ghettos or camps as it is presented by women who experienced it. Issues of familial and community separation are engaged with, as well as specific gendered elements of the deportation experience.

Chapter three deals with various elements of the experience of internment in ghettos and concentration camps, and the ways in which gender impacted this experience for female victims. As most camps were segregated by gender, specific violent practices and camp realities are evaluated through a gendered lens. What specific suffering was perpetuated against female populations of concentration camps by the Nazis? How much of this suffering was deliberate, and how much was inadvertent based on their gender?

Chapter four evaluates the nuances of female sexuality in the Holocaust, dealing with specifically female issues such as pregnancy, menstruation, rape and sexual violence. Lesbianism, both as means of persecution and as a phenomenon within the camps, will also be evaluated.

Chapter five identifies key examples of instances and means of female resistance throughout the Holocaust. This chapter will also investigate smaller, less conventional acts of resistance which, regardless of how wide or far reaching their impact, served to help women maintain dignity, resilience and a sense of self amidst the total destruction and dehumanization of the Holocaust.

By definition and design, any genocidal undertaking is an attack on womanhood, on a female's ability to reproduce and propagate the next generation.²⁵ When the intention is to eliminate a group of people from existence, women and their bodies become the front lines of the battle for future survival.

²⁵ Fuchs, Esther (ed.), "Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation", 20.

It is therefore impossible to stress how important female experience is in this context. While of course widespread annihilation, indiscriminate of gender, was the intention of the Nazis' Final Solution, this deeper, insidious female-focussed philosophy of destruction lies at the heart of the Holocaust, and is a narrative that has not yet been fully told. The women who have written the works evaluated in this study have experienced suffering that for anyone else is unimaginable. In confronting this misery, we honour their sacrifice and loss, and acknowledge that their experiences were shaped by their sex in ways which have previously been considered insignificant, but which in fact are critical to our central understanding of the genocide which was endeavored by the Nazis in the Holocaust.

Author Backgrounds

The role the prison plays in the life of an ex-prisoner cannot be deduced from some shaky psychological rule, for it is different for each one of us, depending on what went on before, on what came afterwards, and on what happened to each during his or her time in the camps. Though the Shoah involved millions of people, it was a unique experience for each of them.

– Ruth Kluger²⁶

This work evaluates the experiences of women from all manner of different circumstances and backgrounds. The stories of housewives, mothers, students, a doctor, a resistance fighter, a seamstress, and others are all evaluated side by side in the pages of this thesis. These women range in age from pre-teens to middle age, and came from places spanning the continent – France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, Romania, and Czechoslovakia. The lives of these women, when categorized in this manner, seem unrelated and disparate. Their lived realities as women would have been affected by numerous and nuanced factors specific to not only their professions and nationalities, but other smaller, more personal influences (for instance family, lifestyle, education, etc.). However, they all were to be united in circumstance by the horror of their experiences at the hands of the Nazis. While this shared suffering broke down many of the factors that may have separated these women in their pre-war lives, their pre-war realities may also offer ideas of how an individual managed to survive (beyond sheer luck, which is inherent to all Holocaust survival stories).

Ruth Kluger asks in her memoir, *Still Alive*, “How are we ever going to understand what happens when a civilization comes apart at the seams, as it did in Germany, if we fail to see the most glaring distinctions, such as the gender gap?”²⁷ This thesis seeks to address Kluger’s contention, and contribute to wider academic efforts to expose the gendered nuance of the experience of victims of the Holocaust. Whether Jew or Gentile, young or old, rich or poor, all of the authors studied in this thesis have one

²⁶ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 66.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 115-116.

thing in common: they are women. Where their stories intersect, a pattern of shared experience emerges between these otherwise disparate people, all of whom suffered egregiously and profoundly at the hands of the Third Reich.

Chapter 1: Life at Home

Comfortingly, the past was unwinding before me, my wonderful childhood, safe and sheltered, too sheltered perhaps for what the years ahead were to bring, but full of lovely memories from which to draw strength.

- Gerda Weissmann Klein¹

Undertaking a comparison of the gendered facets of experiences of men and women in any society is made difficult due to the nuance of individual experience, which I have touched upon briefly in the introduction to this thesis. In *Women in the Holocaust*, Lenore Weitzman and Dalia Ofer put forward that “when we undertake a gendered analysis, we typically look at the relative positions of men and women in the social structure (their occupations, wealth, or political power, for example); the cultural definition and expectations of the two sexes; and the difference in how men and women experience their lives”.² Before this thesis lays bare the specifics of female experience in confinement and oppression, a baseline evaluation of the typical experiences and status of women in their pre-war lives is necessary.

The typical lives of women in pre-war Europe “followed traditional gender patterns”, whereby men and women occupied separate spheres outside of the family unit.³ The lived experience of this reality depended on a family’s class standing, but generally speaking, men were responsible for the economic wellbeing of the household, and as such worked outside of the home and earned the family’s primary income. Women, on the other hand, were responsible for managing the household and raising children. These female household responsibilities were not exclusively physical labour or chore based –

¹ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 24.

² Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.

beyond the physically intensive work of maintaining a household and rearing children, women in middle and upper class families were also responsible for “the family’s psychological and spiritual well-being”.⁴

This being said, not all of the women evaluated in this thesis had such typical family situations before the Holocaust. Ruth Minsky Sender came from a widowed family, and as such there was no patriarchal figure in the home. Her mother raised 7 children on her own; she ran a tailor factory and “work[ed] very hard to be able to send [her children] to private schools”.⁵ Here, it was a woman’s responsibility to both financially support the household as well as run it internally. Sender’s pre-war memories are idealizations of this admittedly busy and hectic family life, but in spite of this absence of a male presence in the home, Sender states that her mother “gives us the best she can in a home filled with love”.⁶

The familial circumstance of Minsky Sender is atypical to the memoirs evaluated in this thesis. While many men were either killed or separated from their families during this era, Ruth’s is the only family studied here which was a matriarchy before the war began. While there are notable exceptions to this trend, the analysis to follow is based in part on the consequences of pre-deportation male persecution, both on women as individuals and families as a whole.

⁴ Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, 21.

⁵ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*. (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Publishing, 1997), 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Gendered Danger

Why would the Nazis, with their racist ideology, refrain from harming women?

- Ruth Kluger⁷

In this pre-deportation period, before the proliferation of ghettos and before the Final Solution to the “Jewish question” was answered at Wannsee in 1942, Jewish men faced much more overt danger than Jewish women and children. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the Nazis initially only targeted Jewish men in roundups and imprisonment; and secondly, random acts of violence by both the SS and anti-Semitic members of the general populations of Europe became increasingly common in the streets of occupied countries.⁸ As women generally were not as active in the public sphere as men, due to the aforementioned centralization of female duties in the home, men were more often in direct proximity of these early roundups and random acts of violence. Gerda Weissman Klein recounts this early stage of public violence against Jewish men and her subsequent feelings towards walking in public with a man, stating that she “always felt his humiliation when we met German soldiers and he had to take his hat off and step down from the sidewalk to let them pass”.⁹ Secondly, a pre-war sensibility which valued the protection of women and children over men served to protect women from these actions for a time.¹⁰ This protection was short lived, as once roundups and deportations explicitly targeted Jews of both genders, women faced many more obstacles in their path to survival.

The prevailing chivalric norms of European culture were so strong that they sometimes served as an inadvertent death sentence for women whose families presumed that, because they were female, they would be safe from Nazi persecution. This is especially true of elderly women, who would have

⁷ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 72.

⁸ Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, 6-7.

⁹ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 59.

¹⁰ Ofer and Weitzman (eds.), *Women in the Holocaust*, 6-7.

faced greater health related difficulties and issues of upheaval than the young were they to emigrate, and for whom the psychological difficulties of uprooting from communities they had known their whole lives would have been especially pronounced. When Anny Pächter had the opportunity to emigrate to Palestine with her mother and young son, her mother refused to go with her, stating “You don’t move an old tree. Beside, who will do anything to old people?”¹¹ Anny’s mother died in Theresienstadt. Olga Lengyel’s belief in this exceptionalism for elderly women was so strongly held that, upon arrival and selection at Auschwitz, she unwittingly encouraged her mother to go to the left – in the direction of the gas chambers – along with her two young children, stating “at her age she had a right to the treatment accorded to the elderly”.¹² As it happened, the Nazis had a very different idea of what treatment accorded to elderly Jews should be, and actively took advantage of these strongly held preconceptions to placate and deceive their victims as to their true murderous intentions.

Similarly, Ruth Kluger tells the story of her paternal grandmother, who had raised ten children and who died in Theresienstadt without any of them with her. She states that “of those who had emigrated, no one thought of taking her along”.¹³ This may seem particularly cold, or even downright disrespectful of a familial matriarch, but Kluger informs us that this “wasn’t unusual”, pointing to “the old idea, or rather the old prejudice, that women are protected by men”, which she states “was so deeply ingrained in that society that they overlooked what was most obvious, that is, that the weakest and the disadvantaged are the most exposed”.¹⁴ The fact that “the concept of chivalry outshin[e]d that of racism in the minds of our people” leaves Kluger, herself an unabashed feminist, startled but not surprised, as she points out that the notion that “only men had to put up with anti-Semitism” was

¹¹ De Silva, Cara (ed.), *In Memory’s Kitchen*, xxxix.

¹² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz*, (Chicago: Academy Publishers, 1995), 24.

¹³ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 72.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

commonly held in this pre-war era, even by prominent figures in the political Zionist movement.¹⁵ As it happened, the very same vulnerabilities which were used to justify these women staying behind in dangerous, occupied areas were to be the cause of their eventual demise. Once women such as Kluger's grandmother were caught up in the Nazi net, their chances of survival were slim. Kluger states: "my grandmother died a prisoner in a large room crammed with other sick people who were doomed to die because of the circumstance".¹⁶ If these women, who had either been abandoned by their families, or who were suddenly beyond the reach of familial help, were deported to a ghetto, they were especially vulnerable to the threats of disease and famine, which were commonplace there. If they were deported to a camp, they were considered too old for work and therefore immediately sent to the gas chambers. It is for this reason that so many of the works studied in this thesis are written by younger women – the chances of survival for older women were much less than for the young, due to "the circumstance" of the elderly which Kluger so eloquently and succinctly identifies.

For the women who lived through these early days of male-centric persecution and wrote about it, the story is often similar. The first event which drove home the reality of the threat against them and their family unit was perpetrated against a male or males of the household. Gerda Weissmann Klein states that in her hometown of Bielsko, Poland, there were "instances when German soldiers came to a house for information, and if a man happened to open the door, took him along; frequently that was the last the family ever saw of him".¹⁷ Outside of the home, "it was less dangerous for a girl... to venture into the streets than for a man".¹⁸ Alicia Appleman-Jurman lost four brothers and her father one by one; a recollection of these losses constitute the opening lines of Appleman-Jurman's memoir:

¹⁵ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 72.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 12.

¹⁸ Ibid., 25.

“First they killed my brother, Moshe. . . .
Then they killed my father. . . .
Then they killed my brother Bunio. . . .
Then they killed my brother Zachary. . . .
Then they killed my last brother, Herzl.
Only my mother and I were left.”¹⁹

In this recollection, each death is distinct, but simultaneously connected in the way she constructs her first passage using periods of ellipsis. Few passages in any female-written survivor memoir drive home the reality of male loss as profoundly and succinctly as Appleman-Jurman’s. This trend is repeated in many other memoirs evaluated here. Ruth Kluger lost her brother and father, while her mother survived the war with her.²⁰ Lucille Eichengreen’s father was rounded up in October 1938 as a Polish national in Germany; in 1941 the Gestapo returned his ashes from Dachau to the family in a cigar box.²¹ Rena Kornreich Gelissen’s father was the first member of the family to be explicitly threatened by the Nazis.²² Gerda Weissmann Klein’s brother was deported at the very beginning of the war and was never seen again.²³ Olga Lengyel’s husband and Ruth Kluger’s father were the first in their families to be rounded up for deportation or imprisonment by the Nazis, and neither survived the war.²⁴ In these examples, the male focus in Nazi persecution during this early period of the Holocaust is laid bare.

With the reality of men being targeted for violence and the possibility of arrests becoming more apparent to the Jews of Europe, women were placed in a unique position of power and authority in the

¹⁹ Appleman-Jurman, Alicia, *Alicia: My Story* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1990), 1.

²⁰ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*.

²¹ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*. (San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1994), 32.

²² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 24-25.

²³ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 21.

²⁴ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 14-15.

family unit. Because men were targeted more explicitly, women took advantage of standards of propriety which existed, whereby they would not be as readily abused as men by the Nazis. While dangers would have usually been assumed by the men of the family, in this new reality of Nazi persecution women understood that they were able to navigate certain situations under less of a threat than their male family members. Charlotte Delbo argues that generally this was difficult for men to come to terms with, that “they experienced the sting of the decline of strength and manly duty since they could do nothing for the women”. Delbo is sympathetic of this emasculation, acknowledging that the more that these men saw women suffer, the more they themselves helplessly suffered, “realizing their inability to protect and defend us”. As such, “from the start, the women had released them from all responsibility, unburdened them all at once from their manly care for women”.²⁵ The consequence of this for women was not only increased personal risk, but also the assumption of an additional burden.

If this added concern for men did in fact burden women, they made a point to keep any complaints to themselves and outwardly “comforted the men by not allowing exhaustion, distress, and above all anxiety to surface”.²⁶ This is exemplified in several memoirs evaluated for this thesis. For instance, Hetty Verolme’s mother assumed the danger of going to the SS to buy work exemptions for the family, a task which was incredibly dangerous; “many people had gone there and not returned”.²⁷ She was able to convince her husband that she should be the one to go, reasoning “that a woman might have a better chance of being admitted”.²⁸ Likewise, Lucille Eichengreen’s mother “had only one goal” while still living in Germany prior to the family’s deportation to the Lodz ghetto: “to get (Lucille’s) Father out of prison”. Lucille explains the self-sacrificing lengths that her mother was willing to go to in order

²⁵ Delbo, Charlotte, *Auschwitz and After*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 117.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁷ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, (West Fremantle, Australia: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 2000), 12.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

to accomplish this, stating “week after week, all alone, she had fearlessly trekked to Gestapo headquarters and stubbornly pleaded with the Germans to obtain Father’s release”.²⁹ These incidents demonstrate a breakdown of traditional patriarchal familial power structures, whereby Hetty’s father had no choice but to allow his wife to assume this risk on his behalf, and Lucille’s mother had no choice but to defy all threats of anti-Semitic violence on her imprisoned husband’s behalf. A consequence of this male-centric persecution is that women voluntarily put themselves in danger for their husbands’ or male relations’ sake.

No incident better demonstrates this reality than Rena Kornreich Gelissen’s brave and dramatic intervention when her father was taken from their local synagogue by Nazis to be shot for the crime of worshipping on the Sabbath. She jumped in front of him at the last minute, so close to death that she “blinked into the barrel of their shotgun”, but counted on her gender to protect her.³⁰ “They won’t kill me; I’m a young girl”, she rationalized, while simultaneously acknowledging how “naïve” she was, in hindsight, to imagine that these grounds would have made any difference to the German soldiers.³¹ The fact is that her father’s life being spared was miraculous; this example truly evidences the divide between male and female perceptions and experiences of pre-war danger.

²⁹ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life*, 40.

³⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 25.

³¹ Ibid.

Familial Relationships

In spite of all these troubles and hardships, I was simply grateful that our family was together.

- Rena Kornreich Gelissen³²

Family stands paramount in many Holocaust memoirs. The institution of family is very important in Jewish culture, which is steeped in tradition and places a high value on cultural history and ancestry. Mothers, fathers, siblings and indeed wider family groups are recounted by memoirists with as much detail as memory allows, influenced by the age of the memoirist in those pre-war years. While some of the memoirs evaluated here do not include experiences outside of the Holocaust, for instance the works of Charlotte Delbo and Olga Lengyel, many others begin with either idyllic memories of a loving, secure, happy family unit, or longing lamentations for the lives they had before the Holocaust and which were subsequently lost forever. Tropes of simplicity, innocence, romance and nostalgia are common in those memoirs which elaborate on pre-war experience. The first chapter in Doris Martin's *Kiss Every Step* is called "The Innocent Life"³³; Livia Bitton-Jackson's first chapter, detailing her life before her persecution, is called "The City of my Dreams" after her hometown, Somorja, Czechoslovakia.³⁴ This romanticization is occasionally used as a literary device, foreshadowing the contrast between idyllic pre-war life and what was to come. Ruth Minsky Sender states of life before the war that "we are all happy, surrounded by friends we can trust and count on"; before she is deported to the Lodz ghetto, these same friends all turned on her family, robbing them of their possessions (including the stove, which was the only source of heat for the seven children in the home), ostracizing them from the community, and embracing the persecution of their former friends.³⁵

³² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 39.

³³ Martin, Doris, *Kiss Every Step*.

³⁴ Bitton-Jackson, Livia, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, (New York, NY: Simon Pulse, 1999), 12.

³⁵ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 9.

In *All But My Life*, Gerda Weissmann Klein regularly employs narrative foreshadowing in the description of her early life before deportation. This memoir is unique as it is the only one evaluated in this thesis which presents the traumas endured in the Holocaust as a foregone conclusion in its narrative structure; hers is a story which has already been told and concluded even in the first pages. When her brother is deported, Gerda shares that he insisted nobody come to the train station with him to see him off. She describes this by stating that “he didn’t want us to see how he was going to be locked up in a cattle car under the whips of the Nazis”; this was not at all what her family understood to be happening at the time, but the knowledge which Gerda acquires subsequently inflects the narrative with this chilling prophetic tone.³⁶ Similarly, Gerda describes her friend Ilse playing the piano for her on a visit to her house. She describes the emotions which Ilse’s music elicits in her as she plays, while simultaneously connecting these emotions to Ilse’s ultimate, tragic outcome: “Her music seemed to ask over and over again that painful “Why?” that our hearts kept asking; and that “Why?” she asked with bluish lips three and a half years later in another darkness in a wet, cold meadow as she died in my arms, having barely turned eighteen”.³⁷

This trend towards idealization might stem from the grief which looms large over each of the stories evaluated in this thesis, not only for lost family and friends, but for an entire way of life. Even memoirs with overt themes of strength and triumph of life at their core are affected by the author’s grief and loss – how could they not be? When family members, or indeed entire families, have been erased from existence, it is hard to paint a flawed picture of these victims. They not only are family to the authors, but also historical relics. Very often the portrayal of these family are the only existing evidence of that person having ever existed. In such contexts it is understandable perhaps as to why it seems very hard for authors to disparage, or level any degree of criticism against these lost relatives.

³⁶ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

Holocaust survivors recall their hometowns, whether large cities or small rural villages, with the same kind of fondness – these are places which subsequently destroyed families once occupied, and are consequently idealized as pastoral, dream-like spaces. Ruth Minsky Sender begins her memoir with the recollection of a giant oak tree in the front yard of her childhood home in Lodz, explaining the different ways in which the tree was admired by all those in its vicinity. When the Germans invaded Poland, the landlady of the property cut the magnificent tree down, stating “I do not want you Jews to enjoy the beauty of my tree”. Here the tree symbolizes the idyllic nature of pre-war life; when it is cut down Ruth’s mother tells the vindictive landlord that “the dead tree will help us remember what you became”.³⁸ The dreaminess these family homes take on is helped by the fact that not one of the women studied in this thesis was able to return to intact places that their families formerly occupied. The physical reality of their former lives was destroyed alongside everything else which was lost. In her memoir, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz*, Gisella Perl states: “I knew that I had died on March 19, when the Germans overran Hungary and compelled us to give up everything that meant anything to us”.³⁹ Similarly, Rena Kornreich Gelissen remarks: “On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland, and there was no more innocence in our lives”,⁴⁰ and Gerda Weissmann Klein states that she “bade farewell to her childhood” when the family was forced into a ghetto in April of 1942.⁴¹ The idyllic life which had preceded was to be incrementally stolen away; this first act of theft – German occupation – often serves as a turning point in Holocaust memoirs.

Even in some works which focus exclusively on time spent in ghettos or camps, family is not far from focus. In *Five Chimneys*, Olga Lengyel begins her story with a confession of sorts: “*mea culpa*, my

³⁸ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 15-16.

³⁹ Perl, Gisella. “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), 104-118, (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 1993), 108.

⁴⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 19.

⁴¹ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 75.

fault, *mea maxima culpa!* I cannot acquit myself of the charge that I am, in part, responsible for the destruction of my own parents and of my two young sons. The world understands that I could not have known, but in my heart the terrible feeling persists that I could have, I might have, saved them.”⁴² Even without any long descriptive passages regarding her pre-war life, the reader is compelled to feel the profundity of her loss in this statement, and in doing so this life is presented as something to be longed for. An understanding of the level of happiness and fulfillment Lengyel enjoyed in her pre-war life can be extrapolated from this simple, heartbreaking introductory statement.

The relationship between mother and daughter is of utmost import. Many female memoirists speak of strong, loving bonds between mother and daughter, and mothers are remembered with admiration and beauty. Gerda Weissmann Klein recalls how “proud” she was of her mother’s beauty in a simple pre-war memory of attending an open-air concert; this is the last moment in Gerda’s life before the war slowly invaded her daily life, and it is not insignificant that it was a recollection of her mother’s youth and beauty.⁴³ As Rena Kornreich Gelissen grew up before the war, she idolized her mother and the domesticated role she assumed in her ultra-Orthodox Jewish household. When she jumped in front of the barrel of the gun intended for her father, she explains that she was actually inspired to action by the thought of her mother; “I don’t care to admit this, but the truth is, at that moment all I could think about was having to tell Mama... The thought of her pain-stricken face was more than I could bear, so ... I tried to come up with a plan that would save me from having to tell Mama that Papa was dead”.⁴⁴ The undeniable bond between mother and daughter is seen here to inspire incredible acts of bravery and self-sacrifice.

⁴² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 11.

⁴³ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 13.

⁴⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 25.

When Rena was forced to flee to Slovakia for her safety, the hardest part was leaving her parents behind. While away, she still sent food and gifts over the border to them, naively presuming that the items would make it through German border checks. While she talks about her parents collectively, and misses the security and normality of her family unit as a whole, there was a unique grief she felt from being separated from her mother: “‘I miss you, Mama.’ I murmur her name like a Sabbath prayer”, Rena states. She was compelled, in her absence, “to remember everything” that happened to her, so that when they were reunited she “can tell her all of my heart”.⁴⁵ In this statement, the first inclinations that Rena had to bear witness were inspired by missing her mother, and as such, a unique power can be extrapolated from this maternally-centric grief.

On the other hand, some of the women shared special bonds with their fathers. The first line in Lucille Eichengreen’s memoir, *From Ashes to Life*, describes her father “bending over [her] bed kissing [her] cheek”, which itself speaks to the legacy of her relationship with him.⁴⁶ She describes him as a generous, empathetic man who was well respected and admired in the community, stating that “other fathers were not like him”,⁴⁷ and that her father’s approval, as opposed to her mother’s, was what was most important to her.⁴⁸ When her father informed her that she had the opportunity to go to England on the now famous *kindertransport* in 1938, Lucille refused to even consider his idea, unable to fathom leaving her parents behind.⁴⁹ When her father was subsequently taken from the family home for deportation, Lucille assumed great personal risk and traveled to the Jewish collection site to bring him a suitcase with clothing and food for his travels, stating that “all the fears I usually had when out alone on the streets were dissipated by my overwhelming desire to help Father”.⁵⁰ In this example, the effect of

⁴⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 44.

⁴⁶ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life*, 1.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

paternal love upon the life of a daughter can be seen. Lucille repeatedly ignored her own best interests in order to help her family, spurred on by the love which she felt for her parents.

Some memoirs, however, stand apart from this trend towards idealization of pre-war life. In *Still Alive*, Ruth Kluger presents her mother as a flawed, suspect character, and does not frame her relationships with her family in the same idealized archetype that many other memoirists do. She judges childhood nostalgia in logical, blatant terms, stating: “there is the quaint nostalgia we experience when we think of the men and women we knew in childhood, which is mere self-love, the love of one’s own roots”.⁵¹ Her life before the war was not bad in any conventional sense – she was well off, lived in a large home with her family in Vienna, and received a good education – but she presents her parents as complicated characters, worthy variously of both admiration and judgement. At times each of them is presented as downright flawed; she describes her mother essentially bullying her, at 8 or 9 years old, into defying a Nazi ban on Jews attending the cinema, which put Ruth in significant danger when she was found out by a zealous neighbor who recognized her, without anyone around to help her.⁵²

Equally, while Ruth idealized her father as “an authority figure in the life of a small girl”, she dismisses her early, happier memories of her father: “I recount these childish trivia because they are all I have of him”.⁵³ Kluger seemingly does not have very much attachment to these happy glimpses of memory, partly because of her young age while her father was still alive (she was only nine years old when he fled Austria and left the family), and partly due to the complicated legacy of horror and mystery that surrounded her father’s death. She asks the reader (and herself) to imagine a kind, loving father, who “often claimed that he had no elbows, he wasn’t pushy, he couldn’t stand up for himself”, trampling the weak and clambering over women and children during his last moments dying in the gas

⁵¹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 33.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45-46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33.

chambers of Auschwitz.⁵⁴ Any love or respect she has for him does not outweigh this critical attack against his memory, made possible by the ambiguity of her memory of him and the circumstances of his death. In fact, Kluger presents this horrible notion as a foregone conclusion, using the extensive historical research which has been conducted on the Holocaust as justification:

The strong climbed on top of the weak in that last agony, as they choked. So the men were always on top when they pulled out the corpses, and the women and children at the bottom. That is what came to mind when I heard that he liked to say he had no elbows: the question of whether he trampled on those who were weaker. My father did this? On kids like me, when he died? Perhaps he didn't since he had no elbows. But do you have a choice, or have you reached the limits of freedom, when you are choking on poison gas? These are the questions I cannot answer and cannot shed.⁵⁵

Her comments reveal the complicated ways that Holocaust survivors are forced to conceptualize the past and their loved ones – in light of her remarks, one cannot help but understand why many survivors choose not to engage in these complicated issues of memory, and instead present their pre-war pasts as separate and distinct from their experiences in the Holocaust, uncomplicated by the tragedy which was to follow.

Kluger presents her mother, on the other hand, as emotional, distracted, irrational, a woman who makes it difficult for the young Ruth to feel close to her. Kluger states of her mother's opinion of her: "I was a nuisance and often in the way, useless and lazy, yet all that was left".⁵⁶ With the benefit of hindsight, the pressure that Ruth's mother was under given the circumstances explains her hostility and coldness to some extent; her older son from a previous marriage was not allowed by his father to return to Vienna from summer holidays in Czechoslovakia following the German invasion of Austria, and was never seen again by either Ruth or her mother.⁵⁷ He did not survive the war, and the conflict that

⁵⁴ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 38-39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 28.

existed between Ruth and her mother throughout their lives – beyond Auschwitz – is partly accounted for by the grief of losing the men in her life, both her son and her husband.

That the men of the family are the ones who were lost while the women survived is not insignificant to this tension between mother and daughter. In a culture which placed men atop familial and social hierarchies, and which consequently valued sons over daughters, Kluger's mother's attitude and behaviour towards her daughter can be seen as a wider reflection of these strongly held and internalized sexist values. Kluger's work, with the ostensible purpose of conveying her Holocaust experiences, is equally valuable in its ambition to come to terms with the antiquated understanding of a woman's place in the world propagated variously by European culture, Jewish culture and the women of this era, like her mother. This sanctioned sexism is addressed by Kluger as she recounts a joke that her maternal grandfather used to make, "with playful somberness", that when he died his dog would be the only one around who would be able to say the Kaddish (Jewish prayer for the dead) for him; in Orthodox Judaism, the Kaddish may only be said by men, and Kluger's grandfather had no sons.⁵⁸ Kluger is highly critical of these gendered components of Orthodox Judaism: "That's how he talked to his dog in front of his two daughters ... and my mother, who adored him, told me the story without the slightest criticism, accepting the humiliation like a good Jewish girl".⁵⁹ She further criticizes a woman's mandated place in Judaism, stating: "If it were different, if I could mourn my ghosts in some accepted public way, like saying the Kaddish for my father, I'd have a friendlier attitude towards this religion, which reduces its daughters to helpmeets of men and circumscribes their spiritual life within the confines of domestic functions."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Clearly Kluger is much more at odds with her past, both in terms of her family and her faith, than other memoirists. In her life after the Holocaust, she has no deference for the life she lived in Vienna before the war. She explains that she chose to give her first-born son an English name as opposed to following tradition and naming him after her father, stating: “sometimes I think that was a betrayal of the past. Or perhaps I wanted to pay him back his own betrayal, the fact that he left without me and never returned? And therefore refused to let him live on in his grandson, who is quite happy with the name he’s got”.⁶¹ While Kluger’s tone is clearly mournful, it is equally dripping with bitter remorse and defiance. Kluger’s relationship with and presentation of her family is certainly atypical for a Holocaust memoir; she acknowledges both the positive and painful elements of the legacy of her pre-Holocaust childhood with unflinching self-criticism and honesty. The sincere presentation of the fraught relationship with her surviving mother and the ghost of her father serves to demonstrate the wider complexities of a woman’s relationship with her family and her past, and shows us that even such a horrendous event as the Holocaust does not negate complicated feelings that one may have about such things as family and the place of tradition. In her own words:

When I tell people that my mother worried about my father’s possible love affairs while he was a refugee in France, and that my parents had not been a harmonious couple in their last year together, or that my mother and her sister literally tore each other’s hair in my presence, so that their aunt, my great aunt Irene, threw herself between her nieces to separate them, or that I feel no compunction about citing examples of my mother’s petty cruelties towards me, my hearers act surprised, assume a stance of virtuous indignation, and tell me that, given the hardships we had to endure during the Hitler period, the victims should have come closer together and formed strong bonds... But this is sentimental rubbish and depends on a false concept of suffering as a source of moral education.⁶²

There is a wealth of significance to be found in these pre-war recollections, indicated in part by the amount of time spent recounting these pre-Holocaust family memories in a given memoir. For

⁶¹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 52.

those women who look back on these early memories fondly, they serve as very effective literary juxtaposition against the horror which we, the reader, know is imminent. These sections convey not only the innocence of youth, but also the innocence of the world before it witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust. They inform us of a time before it was fathomable that entire families could be systematically murdered, and communities completely destroyed, in a world which was subsequently inalterably changed by the events which were to come.

Romantic Relationships

A woman makes a life somewhat easier for a man, and two people together feel more secure amidst the terror.

- Mary Berg⁶³

The women studied in this thesis were of various ages and circumstances before the war, including both married and single. Most of them were teenage girls or young adults during the war, living at home with the family unit and inexperienced in terms of relationships and romance. For unmarried women, including teens, pre-war relationships are generally sentimentalized and tragic. Likewise, tragedy is not uncommon in the stories which married women tell. For any woman, the destruction of pre-war romances and relationships are devastating, and are recounted with profundity.

In 1938, the impending war was far from Rena Kornreich Gelissen's mind.⁶⁴ A childhood friend, Andrzej Garbera, had secretly proposed to her.⁶⁵ He wrote to her that he had loved her "since the first day [he] saw [her] when [they] were children" and asked, "If you love me as well, why should we not be happy?"⁶⁶ Rena called the proposal "a dream come true", but as a daughter in an ultra-Orthodox Jewish household that forbade any romantic contact with gentiles, she was forced to refuse him.⁶⁷ Before the impending escalation of Nazi actions were able to tear them apart, she was forcibly separated from Andrzej by her religious community; when they were seen talking to each other without a chaperone she was reprimanded by the elder of her synagogue in front of Andrzej, and when her parents found out about the entirely platonic incident, "Mama wept and Papa sternly forbade [her] to have anything to do with Andrzej ever again".⁶⁸

⁶³ Berg, Mary, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 185.

⁶⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

In spite of this imposed segregation, Andrzej was not ever far from Rena's mind, even in old age. He is one of the first subjects discussed in her memoir, and is the saviour in her post-war nightmares; Rena describes a recurring dream in which she and her sister are back in the hands of the Nazis, but Andrzej suddenly appears to save them, before vanishing once they are safe.⁶⁹ In real life, Andrzej proposed to Rena a second time following her fleeing to Slovakia, which he helped to make possible with her family, in spite of their rejection of him. He wanted to marry Rena to protect her, believing that she would be spared from deportations if she was married to a gentile.⁷⁰ She confesses that "my heart ached to tell him just once that I loved him too", but she remained "silent and dutiful to [her] family", and as such rejected him yet again.⁷¹ The last time they were able to speak to each other, Andrzej told her that he loved her; Rena was still bound to her family and unable to reciprocate his affections. She only "blushed and darted away before he could kiss me again, so I wouldn't lose my heart to him forever."⁷²

Within a few weeks, Andrzej was dead. When Rena found out, she was devastated. In spite of the fact that she had subsequently agreed to an engagement with a Jewish man in Slovakia, she immediately returned home to Poland, stating: "I cannot bear to be here anymore. I am tired of being safe".⁷³ This is a remarkable statement given the real danger she faced back in occupied Poland; at this point, however, her grief for Andrzej was her sole motivation, and she was not concerned with her own fate. The depth of her loss is tangible not only in this drastic action upon his untimely death, but also in the legacy of Andrzej in her memories. In an author's footnote, Heather Dune Macadam shares that, while the letters that Andrzej sent to Rena were all lost in the war, she "seemed able to recount them word for word because she had read them so often".⁷⁴ Their ill-fated love for each other stands out

⁶⁹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

amongst all of her experiences as an example of absolute loss: not just of young love, but ultimately of the restrictive orthodox culture which stole Andrzej from her long before he was dead.

Hetty Verolme sentimentalizes a pre-war friendship with her “very special boyfriend” Herman, a boy who was in her class at school.⁷⁵ He was deported to Westerbork along with Verolme and her family, but was subsequently deported to “destination unknown” with his parents six weeks after arriving at Westerbork. Hetty received a parcel on the night of his deportation containing a watch with a photograph of himself and a fountain pen, a “valued possession” of his.⁷⁶ Verolme describes this gesture from Herman as conveying his “sorrow and love”, and laments that they were “parted in such a cruel manner”.⁷⁷ Her mother, who featured prominently as a role-model and mentor in the memoir of such a young girl coming of age in the Holocaust, was a silent source of comfort, and held her as she cried for her loss. This loss was the first of many for Hetty in the years to come, and she remembers it with bittersweet tragedy as a contributing event in the demise of her girlhood innocence.

In the Lodz ghetto, Ruth Minsky Sender fell for a boy called Yulek, who like her was forced to assume a parental role for his younger sibling following his mother’s going mad and the deportation of father. They bonded over this shared responsibility, and were staples in each other’s lives until Yulek found himself on a deportation list. Ruth desperately tried to convince Yulek to stay and hide, but he was resigned to his fate. She visited him to help him pack, and in these final moments together the reality of the situation hit them both. Only then, for the first and last time, did they kiss and embrace each other; Ruth exclaims: “We are safe as long as we are together”, but lamentably this was impossible under the circumstances.⁷⁸ Yulek was deported and never heard from again.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 30.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 121.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

In a wartime diary which she began in 1939 on the occasion of her fifteenth birthday, Mary Berg details the events of her day to day life living in the Warsaw ghetto. While the entries feature many friends, family members and other assorted characters, one person stands out above all others in her memories. His name was Romek Kowalski, and he was in love with Mary. Given the standards of propriety which dictated behaviours between men and women in this era, the story of Mary and Romek is incredibly restrained. Romek was a source of strength, comfort and support for Mary over the course of the years which she spent confined in the ghetto (her mother had claim to American citizenship, and so Mary and her family were remarkably evacuated from the ghetto and eventually immigrated to the United States in 1944).⁸⁰ However, in spite of the strong feelings which he had for her, and made known to her, there was no future that could be had for them together. The last time that they saw each other was a dusky July evening in 1942; Mary describes how, in these final moments together, she saw “his eyes begin to shine, as though a lamp had been lighted in them”.⁸¹ He leaned in as though to kiss her, but pulled back at the last moment, unable to accept that they were to be parted. The pain was so immense, the tragedy so profound, that the two could not even look at each other before parting ways. In March of 1943, following Mary’s removal to an internment camp in Vittel, she received a final letter from Romek which stated: “I am happy to know that at least you are safe. Do not worry about me, it is not worth it; we shall never see each other again... I know my days are numbered. I wish you all the best. Your Romek.”⁸²

Mary’s example is unique as her experience was drawn from a wartime diary, which was published before the war had even finished, as opposed to a post-war memoir; as such, the legacy of Berg’s feeling towards her experiences cannot be extrapolated from her written account.⁸³ Following the war, Mary

⁸⁰ Berg, Mary, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, xxi.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 218-219.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, xvii.

Berg was “a personality in New York”, who frequently gave interviews and discussed her diary and experiences. Suddenly, in the early 1950s, she removed herself from public life and disassociated herself with the diary, stating that “she wanted to forget the past”.⁸⁴ In this dramatic gesture, the true impact of such loss, particularly so early in life, can be seen. Whereas others, such as Gerda Weissmann Klein, have devoted their lives to honouring the losses they suffered in the Holocaust, for women like Mary Berg the pain of her grief was simply too great to be similarly engaged with.

Such tragic pre-war relationships are significant for two reasons. Firstly, they serve as a window into the loss of the life that could have been lived by these women; a baseline of happiness and love which would be destroyed in the Holocaust. Secondly, they evidence the importance of these early relationships in the lives of these women. Pre-war relationships are frequently mentioned in the memoirs in question as a source of comfort or inspiration to the women in their suffering, and in their post-war recollections are still looked back on with an idealized lens of what might have been. However, not all of these sorts of early relationships are similarly idealized.

Gerda Weissmann Klein’s good friend Abek proposed to her in late 1941, a point in the chronology of her experience whereby her outlook for the future was realistically resigned.⁸⁵ Gerda was immediately reticent about the proposal, but significantly much of her opposition lay in the fact that she didn’t “want to be bound, tied”.⁸⁶ This was an incredibly progressive attitude compared to the other women whose pre-deportation relationships are evaluated here. There is an element of confliction present in Gerda and Abek’s relationship as well; while she felt trepidation towards any commitment to Abek, she still relied on him for comfort and support in the same way that the other girls mentioned in this chapter did with their partners.⁸⁷ The turmoil which Gerda felt, while unique to her memoir, was

⁸⁴ Berg, Mary, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, xxxii.

⁸⁵ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 60.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

still a direct result of coming of age in such uncertain circumstances as those faced by Gerda as a young Eastern European Jewish girl in 1941. In this capacity, the significance of their relationship is much the same as the other couples evaluated in this chapter – that is, to ease the pain and isolation of their persecution.

When Gerda was moved to a transit camp, Abek's family were able to acquire a work permit for her which would have spared her from being deported. However, much to the bewilderment of everyone privy to her circumstance, she declined this lifeline, stating: "a frightening thought crossed my mind. If I accepted their offer, it was clear that I must marry Abek".⁸⁸ Weighted equally in her considerations were both her feelings towards Abek, and the grim reality of what the wedding would look like given the circumstances; she imagined "a hurried wedding... quickly before the Gestapo might knock, and everyone crying because [her] parents were not there."⁸⁹ She courageously rejected this scenario, stating that "if I should live, I wanted perfection in marriage".⁹⁰ Gerda valued self-determination so much that she refused to capitulate to the wartime reality which had engulfed her life, but even in this refusal she was left without agency. By rejecting the work permit, she resigned herself to deportation; in this sense, Gerda risked sacrificing her life in order to have a chance to keep it. This is a choice which is unique to female survival; her possibility for freedom was directly connected to her femininity, but even this empowered choice was not emotionally straightforward for her. Abek continued to write love letters to and pursue Gerda through to the spring of 1944, and even volunteered for a work detail that would bring him to the same camp as her at great expense to his health and wellbeing.⁹¹ All the while Gerda continued to coddle him to keep him motivated to survive, and responded to his adulations with "what he would want to hear".⁹² Gerda dreamed of a future with a man who would know no such

⁸⁸ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 109.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 136.

bitterness and loss as not only Abek did, but as she herself did. During the war, however, Gerda was bound to Abek by volition of his endless love for her, but his neediness and intensity were far too much for her to handle. Atypically for a man, Abek adheres to the trend established in this chapter whereby women in relationships found strength and an increased imperative to survive; Gerda, too, is atypical for the fact that she “did not like” Abek’s romantic overreliance on her.⁹³ Instead, she was spurred on to survive by the happiness which she imagined for herself after the war as a free woman with choice.⁹⁴ Gerda and Abek give an important counter-perspective to the topic of pre-deportation relationships. For other couples considered here, the stress and impending uncertainty of the war fostered incredibly deep bonds very quickly, which was the very opposite of Gerda’s reaction in the very same set of circumstances.

For those women who were married, relationships with husbands feature heavily where pre-deportation memories are concerned. Given the fact that so many memoirists evaluated here were unmarried women during the Holocaust, this section explores marriages directly involving authors of memoirs (where applicable), as well as the marriages of close family members which are recounted in detail by memoirists (for instance, parents). Generally, these married women were involved in relationships which adhered to traditional conditions of early twentieth century relationships, whereby men and women generally lived very separate lives outside of the family unit which connected them. The relationship of Rena Kornreich Gelissen’s parents fit this archetype of early 20th century marriage; they were ultra-Orthodox Jews who had a very traditional marriage, founded on a shared religiosity. Rena idealized their example as a young girl, stating that “to be married like Mama and Papa” was what she and her sisters “yearned for” as young Orthodox Jewish girls.⁹⁵ Rena relays memories of love and

⁹³ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 137.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁹⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 11.

intimacy that they shared, describing how “every time Papa passed Mama he reached out to touch her”, and that “his hand would fall between her shoulder blades and drift across the middle of her back, and sometimes, when he thought we weren’t looking, he would pat her behind”.⁹⁶ While they are fondly remembered as being very loving and close, their relationship simultaneously adhered to the strict gender norms dictated by both their faith and their time. The very first lines in Rena’s memoir emphasize this; “Papa believed that a woman’s place was to bear children, keep a kosher kitchen, and know how to pray”.⁹⁷

Olga Lengyel’s relationship with her husband Miklos, however, is unusual in that it deviates from this standard, and their lives were quite intertwined. Miklos was “the director of his own hospital”, and Olga served as his first surgical assistant.⁹⁸ When Miklos was suddenly and immediately to be deported, under vague pretenses of being sent to Germany, Olga made the instant decision that she should accompany him, stating “in the future, as in the past, my place would be at my husband’s side”.⁹⁹ As a result of this, Olga’s parents and her two young children also ended up on this transport, and after a seven day train journey, they were sent to the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

In stark contrast to this is the relationship between Anna, a Jewish camp medic at Mittelsteine, and her husband, as told by Ruth Minsky Sender in her work *The Cage*. She tragically shared with Ruth that she was married for a short time to a gentile, who was drafted into the war by the Nazis. His service for the Third Reich, and Anna’s present incarceration in a camp, created an insurmountable gulf between them. She states: “He is free; I am here. His family is alive; mine was murdered in Auschwitz”; she cannot excuse or forgive that he “[heals] the killers of my people”.¹⁰⁰ While she states unequivocally

⁹⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 12.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹⁸ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 12.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰⁰ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 227.

that she still loves him, she explains that “if I survive I will never go back to him. The barbed wire will always be between us”.¹⁰¹ Here is a uniquely tragic example of the ways in which the Holocaust completely distorted notions of love and marriage, and destroyed pre-war sensibilities of relationships and marriage.

In the years prior to their deportation and incarceration, many women took comfort in various sorts of relationships. For some, including Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Olga Lengyel, Hetty Verolme, and Alicia Appleman-Jurman, family was of central import to their lives and emotional well-being, while others, such as Mary Berg and Ruth Minsky Sender, were insulated and comforted by romantic relationships. Others still, such as Ruth Kluger, were emotionally self-reliant in their pre-deportation lives. Whatever the nature of these women’s relationships with family and suitors or partners, the unfortunate reality that men were explicitly targeted for violence, intimidation, deportation and incarceration in this early era of Holocaust history bore tragic outcomes for many women and families. In this era, which preceded the Final Solution, women faced less overt danger than men; however, this danger which disproportionately affected Jewish men certainly damaged the lives of the women who knew and loved them. Not only were women put in difficult positions whereby they were obliged to assume roles and responsibilities within families and relationships that they had not previously held, but the targeting and victimization of Jewish men also had a devastating emotional impact on women and families, evidenced in the testimonies of female survivors.

¹⁰¹ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 227.

Chapter 2: Deportation and Separation

More and more frequently the dreaded word Aussiedlung (deportation) crept into conversations. Young people, we heard, were sent to labor camps. The old ones were sent to Auschwitz. Even then we knew what kind of camp it was. Somehow we never believed that what happened to Jews in other towns would ever happen to us.

- Gerda Weissmann Klein¹

The experience of deportation varied greatly depending on individual circumstance, geographic location, and at what point in the history of the Holocaust victims found themselves in a transport. In some instances, men, women and families were kept together in transit until they arrived at their destination. When transports arrived at Auschwitz, for instance, the first step in the camp selections was to separate men and women. Lucille Eichengreen describes it thus upon her arrival: “husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, parents and children, terrified at the thought of separation”.² In other instances, families were kept together for some amount of time even after their transport – see Hetty Verolme’s family in Belsen. Charlotte Delbo recalls that the train she was on from Drancy to Auschwitz contained families segregated by gender: “bunches of people were pushed in together, with the men herded in the head cars. As they climbed in, they cranked their necks to have one last look at their wives and children waiting for their turn”.³ For others still, women and men were transported at different times, and so deportation was the point in their Holocaust experience where the explicit divide in gendered experience began. Once this gendered segregation occurred, the experiences of men and women, while sharing certain universal features, became distinct in notable ways. This chapter seeks to illuminate the nuance of this shift in shared experience between men and women, while detailing the

¹ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 79.

² Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life*, 90.

³ Delbo, Charlotte, *Auschwitz and After*, 290.

events that occurred during and immediately following deportation for the women whose experiences are being evaluated in this thesis.

Deportation Experiences

Now there was so little light in the truck that we could hardly see each other's faces. It was like descending into Hell. The wagons shuddered and the cattle train began to move.

- Eva Schloss⁴

Rena Kornreich Gelissen was one of the 998 women on board the first ever mass registered transport to Auschwitz in March 1942.⁵ Her sister, Danka, arrived shortly after her on the second ever transport.⁶ Unbelievably enough, Rena volunteered herself for the transport, stating in a letter to her sister that “I don’t see that there is any way out of this situation but to turn myself into the authorities and go to a labour camp”.⁷ She was concerned for the safety of the Christian family who were housing her, but also had resigned herself to her fate, acknowledging that “the forces that are taking control of all our lives have accelerated like an avalanche through a mountain pass, and everything we know and love has been swept up into its path”.⁸ She was just two weeks away from marrying a Jewish boy whom she was ambivalent towards, and so perhaps the decision to leave was in part based on her reticence towards her impending nuptials.

When Rena reported to the authorities for transport, she took care to look her best, stating that “it is important to make a good first impression”.⁹ She carefully considered her travelling outfit, choosing a green checkered suit which “is both warm and attractive”, and “gorgeous white felt boots with red trim”;¹⁰ She was “careful not to step in any mud” so as to keep the boots pristine in anticipation

⁴ Schloss, Eva, *Eva's Story*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 54.

⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, xi-xiii.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

of her arrival at her final destination.¹¹ Her efforts did not benefit her in any way; they served instead to benefit the SS woman who stole her boots following Rena's camp registration.¹² Her ignorance to the extent of the threat she faced upon her deportation seems almost unbelievable to the reader, particularly when compared with other accounts by women who did everything in their power to avoid what Rena volunteered herself for. Her naivety can perhaps be attributed in part to her insulated life thus far, both as a relatively affluent orthodox Jew, with access to a vast support network in the early years of the war, and as a woman in an extremely patriarchal society in which her choices were made for her. When she was left to her own devices she was ill-equipped to resist the forces which sought to entrap her. She did not seem to comprehend just what she had signed up for until it was too late, remarking "I have been snared" upon her first night in confinement prior to her deportation the following day.¹³

The experience of Rena's transport is particularly informative in that it allows us to consider how the process of transportation was experienced in its inception, and consequently how it was "improved" by the Nazis over the years and transports which followed – an elderly Rena interjects in her retelling that the Nazis were not "expert at shipping human cargo yet".¹⁴ There are several notable differences between Rena's experience and the experiences of the women evaluated in this thesis who were deported after her. Firstly, Rena explains that "the stops are so many I give up trying to count them"; Rena's journey was made painfully long not by distance, but by a relative lack of efficiency on the part of the Nazis. Also, unlike any other woman whose experience has been evaluated for this thesis, Rena's cattle car was opened once mid-journey for the human waste to be discarded. The effect of this was not as favourable as one might think: while it was of course a welcome relief to be able to empty the

¹¹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 55.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

overflowing bucket that was used for the toilet, Rena explains that “now that we have something to compare it to, the closeness is more suffocating than before”.¹⁵

It is hard to imagine, but some Holocaust victims described their transport experience as a bizarre but welcome reprieve from the suffering and deprivation which Kornreich Gelissen describes. The conditions of the holding area that Livia Bitton-Jackson was kept in for the week prior to her deportation were so bad that when “hundreds of cattle cars ... arrived at the train station”, signaling their imminent deportation, her immediate response was “Thank God!”. Livia would rather face “anything but this intolerable crowding, heat, and hopelessness”.¹⁶ Of course no one described their experience on over-crowded cattle cars in a positive light. However, in contrast to eastern European examples, the Nazis tended to transport western European victims on regular commuter trains, complete with seats and amenities, which certainly deviates from the master narrative of the Holocaust.

Hetty Verolme’s family was sent as a unit first to Westerbork, and then to Belsen. The family’s deportation experience stands out because they traveled in a passenger car as opposed to a cattle car in both of these transports.¹⁷ Upon arrival at Belsen, Verolme and her mother assumed the burden of carrying the family’s luggage to their new barracks while their father was forced to help the Germans get other luggage off the train. While the experience of the father was not unremarkable, as many able bodied men were utilized for this kind of labour by the Germans, his absence left the women of the family to do the hard work of getting the family’s luggage into the camp. A German man saw the women struggling and refused to help – this is notable as, prior to their deportation, Hetty’s mother was able to utilize her female allure to obtain work exemptions for the family. Now, her gender has become irrelevant to this passerby; her Jewishness overtook all other identification, and the former tactics

¹⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 51.

¹⁶ Bitton-Jackson, Livia, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, 70.

¹⁷ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 38.

available to her as a woman to procure help for her family were no longer available. This exemplifies the breakdown of pre-war chivalric norms, which have been explained in detail in the first chapter.

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk's deportation experience also deviates from the common experience of a cattle car transport. She is sent from Stutthof to Auschwitz in a regular commuter train, where everyone had a seat in compartments, the cars had windows, and the deportees had access to washrooms, running water, and were fed regularly. Even Nomberg-Przytyk understood as she boarded the train that this experience was unusual. The immediate impression she relays, upon seeing the train pull into the station and being politely told to board, is that the SS are mocking them, and soon they will return to the normal state of affairs of being beaten and herded by the SS.¹⁸ In fact, Nomberg-Przytyk goes on to explain that once they were in transit, even after a woman threw herself from the moving train to escape, no punitive measures were taken against the rest of the women on the train. They were still fed and served hot coffee the following morning, and the SS escorts on the transport "still smile" at the women while on the train.¹⁹ This was indeed a unique state of affairs for a transport to Auschwitz – however, as soon as the train arrived at its grim destination, Nomberg-Przytyk's experience returned to a conventional narrative of violence and subjugation at the hands of the SS. Nomberg-Przytyk states of her arrival: "at that moment, the devil in our escorts showed himself"²⁰; any comfort or kindness which may have been shown to the prisoners in transit immediately ceased, to be replaced with blows, shouts and selection.

Ruth Kluger's deportation is a much more horribly typical experience. She and her mother were sent from Theresienstadt to Auschwitz on a packed freight car – which she says "even today... give me

¹⁸ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

bad vibes”.²¹ However, Kluger does not blame the mode of transport itself for the horrendous experience, pointing to the fact that animals are transported in such freight cars quite commonly without humans “terrorizing and overcrowding them”.²² She instead singles out the severe overcrowding of the cattle cars used in the Holocaust as the source of her suffering – it is from this detail that all other miseries stem; The oppressive heat, the “still air [which] smelled of sweat, urine, excrement”, the “whiff of panic [which] trembled in the air”, the “great evil of our collective helplessness” – all were caused and compounded by the inhumanly close quarters of the cattle cars.²³

Kluger goes on to discuss the ways in which her experience in transport “doesn’t fit the framework of social discourse” given how extreme it was in its brutality and traumatic effect.²⁴ She explains that the experience of being confined in the cattle car is very difficult to compare to any other regular example of claustrophobia, while simultaneously challenging herself by “asking the question of how we can understand anything if we can’t relate to it”.²⁵ She asks the reader to compare an execution to a fatal car accident, which have the same end result, but are incomparable otherwise, in order to understand the challenges of comparisons between experiences in the Holocaust with more ordinary experiences. In the end, Kluger concedes that people who have experienced claustrophobia have “a bridge to understanding” the experience of her transport, in the same way that she believes the experience of her transport gives her “some understanding of dying in gas chambers”.²⁶

Olga Lengyel and her family were sent to Auschwitz on an “endless train”, which took seven days to reach its destination.²⁷ Interestingly, Olga and her family found themselves on this transport

²¹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 91.

²² *Ibid.*, 92.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

²⁷ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 17.

only after her husband was arrested and scheduled for immediate deportation. She made the decision to keep her family together and join him on the train with reassurances from the SS; stating “they intimated that there was nothing to fear. So in a dozen little ways they mollified, and even encouraged me”.²⁸ This entrapment of families through the arrest of the patriarch was not uncommon according to Lengyel. She explains that “many other men had been similarly arrested and their families encouraged to go with them”, pointing to a cruel tactic used to placate families into willing compliance.²⁹ This echoes the experience of Ruth Minsky Sender, who reports that the SS implored families to volunteer to leave the Lodz ghetto together, promising that “families who leave together will remain together”.³⁰ Lengyel’s experience of deportation was the last experience she had with her murdered sons and parents, and is so significant to her that the first chapter of her book is titled “8 Horses – or 96 Men, Women and Children”.³¹ This title evokes the lack of humanity inherent in such a monstrous transport, while simultaneously reminding the reader that it was indeed men, women and children upon whom this monstrosity was inflicted.

Lengyel describes the train journey with an exceptional amount of detail. Where many other authors are restrained, either sparing the reader from the nitty gritty details of death and suffering in the transports, or sparing themselves from having to relive the worst of the experience, Lengyel is forthcoming with her memories. By her account, her journey on a cattle car to Auschwitz was a descent into bedlam. At first, she says, “everyone tried, despite common terror, to be courteous and helpful”.³² However, within just a few hours things began to collapse and “little by little, the atmosphere was poisoned”; by the time that night fell, the passengers in the cattle car “lost all concept of human

²⁸ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 122.

³¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*.

³² *Ibid.*, 17.

behaviour”.³³ In response to this, the people in the car designated Olga and another doctor as “captains-in-charge”. As such, she was tasked with maintaining “the most elementary discipline and hygiene”, as well as with providing medical care and comfort to the sick and agitated.³⁴ Twice a day the Germans would conduct inspections of the train,³⁵ and occasionally they demanded a “tax” of valuables in exchange for a single bucket of water, which was of course inadequate for a car of 96 people; so much so that Olga’s young son Thomas nobly relinquished any so that those who needed it more might drink.³⁶ There was exceptional sickness and suffering on the train, and the passengers were not able to dispose of their dead at any point on the journey.³⁷ Olga refers to the train as a “wooden gehenna” – that is to say, a Jewish hell of extreme torment and suffering.

Deportation experiences varied greatly for women depending on where they came from, and the circumstances of how they found themselves on a train. Some women, such as Rena Kornreich Gellisen and Olga Lengyel, naively volunteered for traumatic transports on cramped and grueling journeys in overcrowded cattle cars, while others like Hetty Verolme and Sara Nomberg-Przytyk were transported on comfortable commuter trains which belied the truth of the horror which was to follow. As the majority of mothers of young children were sent straight to the gas chambers with their children upon arrival at Auschwitz, relatively few voices of young mothers have survived for historical analysis. However, Olga Lengyel’s experience with her sons provides a unique window into the experiences of mothers with small children on such long and horrendous transports. Regardless of the circumstance of

³³ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 17.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

their transport, life became exceedingly more nightmarish for any women who found themselves at the gates of a camp or ghetto.

Chapter 3: Women in Confinement

The death camps seem easier to comprehend if we put them all into the basket of one vast generalization, which the term death camps implies, but in the process we mythologize or trivialize them. Even terror and deprivation are different from case to case. Not everyone was equal behind the barbed wire curtain, and no camp was like any other. No man is an island, and yet each of us occupies her own place on the map.

- Ruth Kluger¹

Following their experiences in transit, the female deportees studied here found themselves in unfamiliar and unnatural places, which impressed upon them varying degrees of confusion and fear. In each story of Holocaust experience whereby the author was interred in a camp, there are certain incidents or realities which are so shocking, horrible or disorienting that they feature in some capacity in virtually every story analyzed here. Of all the camps, none left such a horrifying impression as Auschwitz. Upon her arrival, Livia Bitton-Jackson is so overcome that “a spasm of nausea hurls a charge of vomit up [her] throat”.² Some of the strongest, most haunting passages concern arriving here. In particular, the initial selection upon arrival and subsequent camp registration process (including being tattooed, shaved, the first shower and assignment to a barrack), are traumatic milestones in all of the memoirs which involved time spent at Auschwitz. This chapter will detail the experiences of women upon arrival at a camp, and the effect of these experiences.

Charlotte Delbo’s work deals exclusively with her time spent at Auschwitz. She does not share with the reader any details of her life before Auschwitz, nor does she offer any afterward to share her post-war recovery; it is as though there is no life before Auschwitz, and any life afterwards is never fully

¹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 71.

² Bitton-Jackson, Livia, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*, 72.

removed from her experiences in the camp. The title of her work, *Auschwitz and After*, drives this point home.³ Her work deals exclusively with the confines of the camp; there is nothing after Auschwitz.

For Delbo, it is impossible for anyone to comprehend the suffering which occurred at Auschwitz; no sense can be made of her experiences, no underlying logic or reason is to be found – sensory evocation is her primary aim. While we will never understand why this torture was enacted by the Nazis upon their victims, Delbo’s work seeks to inform how it felt for her and the women with her. In her poetry this simultaneity is explored – she must explain the nuance of the suffering of the women around her, and spares no detail in this retelling. With every statement Delbo makes, the reader is left asking why. Where many of the women who wrote about their experiences did so in general, observational terms, with the aim of informing an audience of their experience so that the horrors of the Holocaust are not forgotten, Delbo seems to need to expose the worst, most microscopic aspects of her suffering. However, she does this while constantly reaffirming for the reader that this will not serve to fully inform them.

While Delbo’s story is one of visceral, impersonal female experience, Nomberg-Przytyk’s is a story of women themselves. Her story is one which constructs femininity not through actions or events, but through the personalities she presents. This is an interesting distinction when considering the various ways that gender can be engaged with and constructed by an author. For Delbo, gender is extrapolated through experience. She does not share personal information or individual details for any of the women she discusses in *Auschwitz and After*; a sense of femaleness is constructed through unique elements of experience and suffering. In contrast, Sara Nomberg-Przytyk presents femaleness through the people present in her work. She does not go into such profound details of suffering as Delbo, on either an individual or collective level, but the women who she writes about act and react to the

³ Delbo, Charlotte, *Auschwitz and After*.

situations around them in ways which reveal the details of their gendered experiences. In the translator's forward, Roslyn Hirsch states that what struck her about this work was "the author's ability to make the characters in the camp emerge as unique individuals, even against the backdrop of camp depersonalization and imminent extermination".⁴

⁴ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, ix.

Camp Arrival, Selection and Registration Process

Their purpose is not only to destroy and defile us; it is to make a mockery of every positive value we have: beauty, grace, love.

- Rena Kornreich Gelissen⁵

After the horrible ordeal of her long transport, Olga Lengyel describes feeling “nothing but a deep sense of relief” upon arriving at Auschwitz. She of course did not know at this point of the reality of the place, but she remarks that “anything would be better than this terrible uncertainty” of the “prison on wheels” from which she had come.⁶ The true nature of what was to follow within the camp walls was incomprehensible to Lengyel, even after such a traumatic transport. Rena Kornreich Gelissen, too, still expected some semblance of humanity when she arrived at Auschwitz. After exiting the cattle car with her luggage, she asked an SS man how she would be able to find her suitcase later, remarking “I figure I am a human being; I have a right to ask”.⁷ In response, she was met with the barrel of a gun in her face. Even after this exchange, Rena struggled to come to terms with what her confinement at Auschwitz really would entail. Upon marching through the front gates of the camp, under the infamous *Arbeit Macht Frei* sign, Rena naively recalled: “we believe what the sign says... we will work hard and be set free”.⁸

The selections were each woman’s chaotic welcome to the camp. Ruth Minsky Sender describes the experience as so disorienting that it was as if she were in “a horrible dream”.⁹ It is at this point where those who had thus far managed to stay with family members of the opposite sex were separated. In this capacity, the selections served as the final parting place from loved ones for many

⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 123.

⁶ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 21.

⁷ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁹ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 149.

victims. Minsky Sender describes a “crowd of dazed people”, exhausted and disoriented from the experience of their transport, who are herded quickly either to the left or right by the blows by rifles, clubs or whips. There was a cacophony of human noise around her; “Children calling their mothers. Mothers calling their children. Husbands calling to wives their last good-byes”.¹⁰ As the women are urged onwards by the blows of whips, “outcries of pain echo all around us”.¹¹ The “German commands”, however, echo out above any other auditory memory.¹² By the time they pass through the gates of the camp, Minsky Sender states that she was “like a zombie”, totally overwhelmed mentally and physically by the experience.¹³

After selections, the new arrivals had their first encounters with the other women interred in the camp. The impressions of these women upon the new arrivals are striking and indicative of the horrendous conditions of the camp, and what effect those conditions had on the humanity of the prisoners. Olga Lengyel’s first impression of the women of Auschwitz was that they were insane, that there had to be some rational justification for this “courtyard of a madhouse” that she finds herself in.¹⁴ She states: “I was unable to conceive that women of sound mind and guilty of no crimes could be so humiliated and so degraded. Above all, I was far from imagining that before long I, too would be reduced to the same pitiful condition”.¹⁵ Rena Kornreich Gelissen had the same impression when she first saw the other inmates, only her reaction is much more indicative of innocence than the reaction from the more mature Lengyel. As there were no other women in the camp at the time of her arrival on the first mass transport, she first reacted to the male political, military and religious prisoners who were interned there, stating: “I think to myself, this must be an insane asylum, but why would they make the

¹⁰ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 149-150.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹² *Ibid.*, 150.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹⁴ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 25.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

mentally ill work? That's not fair".¹⁶ As the camp registration progressed, she lined up outside of Block One for a yet unknown reason. As she waited she states: "people start coming out of the other side with no hair on their heads"; Rena thought these were yet more "crazy people" until one of the bald women called out by name to a companion standing in line with Rena. She didn't bother to explain why she had no hair, and instead hastily advised the women in line to discard any jewellery on their persons into the mud below their feet, lest they be taken from them by the authorities inside.¹⁷

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk says that new arrivals at Auschwitz were "at the bottom of the ladder", and accordingly lived in a unique state of suffering. She points out that new arrivals were more likely to be beaten or face punishment because the rules of the camp were unfamiliar, in a language they could not understand. It is worth noting that Nomberg-Przytyk does not describe this experience in female terms – no mention of gender is included in her description of *Zugangi* (new arrivals). Her emphasis here is on *humanity* – she states that new arrivals "made themselves absurd trying to defend their human dignity; when an inmate asked why she was being hit, she implores "I am a human being".¹⁸ In the very next paragraph, this human identification is usurped by the identification of "a stinking *zugang*". For Nomberg-Przytyk, her femininity is not mourned here – her humanity is.¹⁹

It is not until Nomberg-Przytyk's first shower upon arrival at Auschwitz that she describes an experience with distinct implications for her as a woman. She and the women in her transport were all made to strip naked and wait in an unheated room for SS men to arrive. When they did arrive, Nomberg-Przytyk describes the women standing naked before "a large group" of men, who "looked [them] over slowly, with disdain in their eyes".²⁰ She describes this incident as "terrible", but not just for

¹⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 55.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz*, 12.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the obvious reasons; “Old women with large stomachs and sagging breasts, poor and wrinkled, stood at attention in front of them, taking pains at all costs to hide their age”.²¹ In Olga Lengyel’s account, she affords these anonymous victims a small final dignity at this junction, stating that “despite the weariness and the sufferings, many of the women still retained the beauty of their faces and bodies”.²² In Nomberg-Przytyk’s story, her first female-centric trauma is shame; Lengyel does not contradict this shame inherent to the experience, but unlike Nomberg-Przytyk, she makes efforts to reinstate the dignity of these women after the fact.

Shame is a common response to this first degradation of camp life. Ruth Minsky Sender states, upon being forced naked out into the open following the first shower, that her “cheeks [were] hot from embarrassment”; as she tried feebly to cover herself with her arms, she remarked: “I feel so degraded”.²³ Rena Kornreich Gelissen points out that the women in her transport had “never stood naked in front of strangers before”, and that this caused so much embarrassment even just amongst themselves that they “look at the floor, hoping this will protect our modesty”.²⁴ The camp authorities are said to have been “insensitive to [their] nudity”, prodding them forward to be disinfected with “a green liquid that feels as if it will eat the flesh off our bodies”.²⁵ This pervasive experience of humiliation, and the shame which is inherent to this indignity, is a response which is encountered over and over again in all female stories of the Holocaust. In female-centric Holocaust experience, shame is a uniquely and deliberately employed weapon of the Nazi arsenal, and a feature which stands out as paramount in the process of dehumanization utilized so efficiently in the camps to create disorientation and complacency in the new female internees.

²¹ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz*, 14.

²² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 28.

²³ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 153.

²⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 57.

²⁵ Ibid.

Olga Lengyel's describes the occasion of her first shower at Auschwitz as absolute chaos, fraught with such violence and confusion that she states that even her "shame [was] engulfed in terror".²⁶ She was forced to part with her last remaining possessions at this point, which included treasured photos of her family. She stood before these photos for the last time and looked down on the smiling faces of her parents, her husband and her children. Lengyel felt such shame that she cut short these last moments with the only physical mementos of her family left, and hid the photos away out of sight in her discarded jacket: "my family should not see my horrible degradation", she remarks.²⁷ This indicates that the shame of the ordeal was so profound that not even her grief, or the love of her family, exceeded it.

Before entering the showers, the new female arrivals at Auschwitz were subjected to "a thorough examination in the Nazi manner, oral, rectal, and vaginal".²⁸ Olga Lengyel was examined "in the presence of drunken soldiers who sat around the table, chuckling obscenely".²⁹ Few other women evaluated in this thesis are so forthcoming about the details of this degrading inspection. Rena Kornreich Gelissen narrowly avoided having these invasive examinations performed on her, calling this her "first accomplishment in Auschwitz".³⁰ She observed a girl being held down by two men, with an officer in rubber gloves standing before her. Her naivety is displayed once more in this episode, but her instincts have now begun to catch up with her, as Rena states that she had "no idea what he [was] doing", but that she knew that she didn't "want him doing it to [her]".³¹ Having heard the screams of the girls undergoing these exams in the next room, and having observed the "blood [which] drips down the

²⁶ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 27.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 28.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 58.

³¹ Ibid.

thighs of the girl-women coming away from the man and his gloves”, Rena quickly joined the next line, proudly asserting that “no one gives me a gynecological exam”.³²

While one of the most enduring images of Auschwitz are the numbered tattoos put on the arms of inmates by camp authorities, this was not something which was inflicted on all of the people who survived the initial selection and were registered in the camp.³³ For those who were tattooed, it was a painful ordeal which branded them for life. Olga Lengyel explains another, more lasting effect that the tattoos had upon internees, stating that “it is impossible to estimate the effect it had on morale. A tattooed woman felt that her life was finished; she was no longer anything but a number”.³⁴ Ruth Minsky Sender echoes this sentiment, but refused to allow herself to be reduced to a number. She was told by camp guards to forget her name – that only her number mattered now – but she refused to let herself be dehumanized as such. She spoke her name aloud to herself every time she spoke her number to counteract the effect of having her name taken from her by her oppressors.³⁵

³² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 58.

³³ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 118.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁵ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 175.

Hair Loss

Was this hideous sight me? I lifted my arms to touch my head, but revolted by the reflected image, I dropped my hands, denying for a moment the shock, the nightmare that was me.

- Lucille Eichengreen³⁶

In the many volumes of testimony which have been evaluated here, the moment of having one's hair shorn off features prominently, with significant detail and import. While this was done to both men and women who were interred at various camps, hair loss had a particular significance for the women upon whom this was inflicted. Beyond the orthodox Jewish religious attachment, a woman's hair is connected to her femininity – particularly in this era, to be shorn bald was considered, to some varying extent, as losing a piece of your womanhood. In the words of Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, "it did not bother them that we were women and that without our hair we felt totally humiliated".³⁷

Hetty Verolme's "very special boyfriend", Herman, first informed her of the possibility of losing her hair. It is not insignificant that a male love interest is the harbinger of this bad news; it demonstrates the value placed on a woman's hair, and by extension beauty, by men and society at large. He informed Hetty of a rumour that she would be shaved as part of a health inspection upon her arrival at the camp; Hetty was "heartbroken" at this prospect.³⁸ He recommended that her mother cut her hair short so that she passed the initial inspection and avoided being shaved. Ultimately, this strategy worked and her hair grew back to its full length while in Belsen. This is something which Hetty clung to as a source of pride and comfort.

³⁶ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, 94.

³⁷ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 14.

³⁸ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children's House of Belsen*, 30.

The experience of being shaved featured various traumas and abuses depending on the storyteller. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk recounts that, upon arrival at Auschwitz, she and the women in her transport had their hair cut “with scissors so dull that they tore bunches of hair out”.³⁹ Some women, whom Olga Lengyel considered “lucky”, were shorn instead with “fast moving clippers”.⁴⁰ Rena Kornreich Gelissen, however, explains that those women who were shaved with electric clippers did not fare much better, stating that “the clippers cut and scrape against my skin, tearing the hair from my head”.⁴¹ Those who were cut with scissors, including Lengyel, had their hair trimmed “in such haste” that they were left with “irregular tufts on their skulls”; Lengyel remarks that it was “as though they deliberately sought to make us look ridiculous”.⁴² When the ordeal was finished, which also involved having the hair on the whole of their bodies, including the pubic area, “discarded just as quickly and cruelly as the rest of the hair on our bodies”,⁴³ Nomberg-Przytyk states “we ceased as thinking, feeling entities”.⁴⁴ In this instance, not only is the womanhood of these prisoners literally torn from them – the full effect of being shaved robbed these women of a sense of their own humanity.

As if this first trauma was not already gruesome enough, women in Birkenau were re-shaved every three weeks by “our own boys”; the SS conscripted Jewish men to do this work, adding another level of humiliation to an already degrading procedure. Rena Kornreich Gelissen shares that “sometimes the men shaving the women are friends, sometimes they are relatives; mothers get shaved by their own sons, sisters get shaved by brothers – everyone suffers embarrassment”.⁴⁵ While Rena was “lucky” to not ever encounter a man she knows, she still felt disgraced by the process; “we are young women,

³⁹ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 14.

⁴⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 28.

⁴¹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 58.

⁴² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 28.

⁴³ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 58.

⁴⁴ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 14.

⁴⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 131.

virgins; it is not in our religion to bare ourselves even in front of our husbands”.⁴⁶ To Rena, it is “so demeaning” that she “can’t bear it”.⁴⁷ While Rena herself concedes that this procedure was not life-threatening, the severity of its impact is not lessened by this fact. In the wider scheme of female experience in the camps, unfortunately, it is but “one more degrading thing they make us do”.⁴⁸

Ruth Kluger was sent from Auschwitz to Christianstadt in the summer of 1944, a sub-camp of Gross-Rosen. Upon her arrival, she marveled at the relative improvement in her circumstances. This sentiment is articulated in part through comments she makes about the length of her hair: “Even our hair had only been cut short, not shorn as was common”.⁴⁹ While she was happy to have kept her hair and to have avoided another traumatic shaving, she does not ascribe kindness or compassion on the part of her captors as justification for this change in policy. She contends that the reason the women in Christianstadt kept their hair was their proximity to the local civilian population, and the potential that hairless women had to evoke an emotional response of sympathy or indignation among that population; “bald women are bad public relations for the shearers, even in a totalitarian state”.⁵⁰

Olga Lengyel was similarly suspicious of Nazi intentions when an SS officer attempted to save her from being shorn. Upon being ordered out of the queue for the barbers, Olga evaluated her options – she was baffled as to why she was singled out, and while she accepted that she may have received better treatment, she resolved that “from this foe one could expect no mercy, except at an ugly price”.⁵¹ As such, she ignored the order that was given to her and reintegrated herself into the line. While she paid a hard price for this decision, and upon being discovered bald by this SS officer was subjected to

⁴⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 131.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 113.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 59.

her first beating in the camp, she astutely sacrificed her hair and her dignity for the sake of avoiding potential dangers brought on by her beauty.

As briefly mentioned, hair has a particular significance for Jewish women. In ultra-orthodox Hasidic culture, it is customary for a woman to shave her head after marrying. These women wear wigs and scarves in daily life, but remain hairless for the rest of their lives, even if they are widowed. This is done for reasons of cleanliness, and also as a means for a woman to humble herself before her husband. She rejects this traditional source of female beauty and desirability as a symbol of her fidelity; she makes herself symbolically undesirable to other men as a gesture of her commitment to her husband. In other, less strict sects of Judaism, married women do not shave their heads entirely, but are required to cover most of, if not all of, their hair. This ceremonial hair loss is a source of pride for the women who follow this custom, and celebrates a wife's modesty, tradition and devotion.⁵²

Rena Kornreich Gelissen came from an Orthodox Jewish family in Poland which engaged in this practice. She recalls with pride the ritual she undertook periodically to maintain her mother's shaved head; while Rena ran clippers across her scalp, "Mama would close her eyes as if in meditation". Rena used these moments "to study the serenity in her face".⁵³ Here, Rena remembers the tradition of shaving her mother fondly as a moment of bonding between the two women. Rena recollects that she "dreamt of the day that [she] would have [her] head shaved as a solemn vow to [her] husband", but is simultaneously open about the trepidation she felt undertaking such a dramatic physical transformation, particularly considering the attachment that exists between a woman's hair and notions of femininity. She confesses that she "worried about being ugly", and that "to lose one's hair was not such a wonderful thing".⁵⁴ Her older sister is said to have "cried and cried" and "begged Papa to let her

⁵² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

keep a little bit of her hair” upon the occasion of her own marriage. There exists a complicated relationship between these orthodox women and their baldness, even when considered as a privilege of their religiosity. In Rena’s words, it was “a rite of passage that we feared yet longed for”.⁵⁵

The apprehension relayed here by Rena adds new dimensions of cruelty and suffering to the Nazi policy of shaving the heads of camp inmates. If, even in the context of a sacred religious honour, the idea of having one’s head shaved evokes this kind of anxiety, then the pain felt by the women who had this forcibly done to them must have been immense. The Nazi practice took an ancient and honoured Jewish tradition and desecrated it – whether this occurred to any of the officials who made the decision that heads would be shorn, or to those who enacted this policy, is not known. But to the orthodox women who went through this degrading and dehumanizing process, the ironic cruelty of the action is not lost. Kluger recounts that being shaved was used as punishment increasingly towards the end of the war by the guards at Christianstadt, and calls this practice “a punishment that filled the women with a despair I couldn’t comprehend, since I was too young to grasp the deeper and symbolic significance of this despoilment”.⁵⁶ Not only were these devout women robbed of their hair, they were robbed of the honour of shaving themselves for their husbands upon their marriage.

Reinforcing the extreme significance of hair loss for the women studied in this thesis, Lucille Eichengreen dedicates an entire chapter to a scarf which she miraculously found amongst rubble in her work detail. While this scarf certainly was useful to Lucille while working outside in the elements, this was not what was most meaningful to her. She confesses that “it was, of all things, vanity” which compelled her to take the scarf, eschewing concerns of “the pain of [her] frostbitten toes, icy hands, and rain-drenched body” and risking “whatever punishment” to cover her bald head for the sake of her

⁵⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 10-11.

⁵⁶ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 116.

pride.⁵⁷ When she was nearly caught by an SS guard, she articulated her fear of being discovered in seemingly unconventional terms. Rather than stating that she was afraid that she would be caught stealing, she states that she was afraid that the SS man “knew [her] secret”, which was not that she was concealing a stolen cloth, but that her “absurd vanity would be [her] death”.⁵⁸ In this instance, Lucille is unapologetic about how important the scarf is to her as a woman without hair, stating that “the scarf covered my humiliation and provided me with some small sense of dignity”.⁵⁹ Even in the nihilistic circumstances of the Holocaust, this comfort is paramount to the survival of Lucille’s humanity through her bondage.

⁵⁷ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life*, 103-104.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

Gendered Camp Hierarchy & Deviations from Gendered Norms

Women were observed to be more resourceful and skillful than men at passing messages between jail cells and barracks, on work details, and during roll calls. They were also more skilled at trading cigarettes and food to obtain essentials for their friends and prison families.

- Sybil Milton⁶⁰

Given the general breakdown of behavioural norms which took place in the camps, female prisoners lived existences which deviated from pre-war societal standards in unprecedented ways. Olga Lengyel calls this “the melting pot of Auschwitz-Birkenau”, where “social barriers fell away and class prejudice vanished”.⁶¹ This melting pot, however, had both positive and negative elements to it. While “simple, uncultured peasant women accomplished wonders in the way of ‘organization’, and gave proof of magnificent selflessness”, “sophisticated women whose morality had never been doubted pretended to engage in ‘organization’ to the detriment of their comrades”.⁶² In other words, it was generally the formerly upstanding, upper class women, with good reputations, who behaved in the stereotypical manner of a lower class, amoral woman, demonstrating that the lived reality of Auschwitz inverted pre-war reputations.

While these deviations undoubtedly had negative effects on the lives of female internees, some of the new realities of camp life introduced women to traditionally male experiences and opportunities. Hetty Verolme was able to invade traditional male spaces and participate in traditionally male affairs – she attended a secret Rabbi’s meeting in the camp and was the only girl present.⁶³ In this way, the camp

⁶⁰ Milton, Sybil. “Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women”, In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), 213-249, (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 1993), 231.

⁶¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 110.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 52.

broke down prescribed gender divisions which existed in civilian life. A girl, let alone such a young girl, would not have been invited to participate in such an important activity in any other circumstance.

Women in Auschwitz found themselves in an environment in which women filled all manner of roles, including police-women, fire-women, secretaries, kitchen staff, and corpse gatherers.⁶⁴ In this sense, with full acknowledgement that these were positions of slaves, and of the absolutely horrid conditions of work, the camp system deviated from societal gender norms pertaining to work. This can be explained by the fact that the prisoners of Auschwitz were considered sub-human; while a lady would not be suitable to serve in some of these roles, there was nothing to stop an internee - especially a Jew - from performing any necessary function.

For some, the camp certainly did provide authority and titles which would have been otherwise unattainable in their former lives. Olga Lengyel recounts a woman who served as *Lageraelteste*, “the uncrowned queen of the camp”.⁶⁵ She explains that this was a position bestowed upon “the woman who had been there longest”, and that it “[conferred] upon her the highest authority among the deportees”.⁶⁶ By Lengyel’s account, “the only restriction on her liberty was that she was not permitted to leave the precincts of the camp”, otherwise her authority was sweeping and unprecedented, particularly in Auschwitz but also for such an unremarkable woman in nearly any circumstance imaginable in this era.⁶⁷ In her former life the *Lageraelteste* was “a young kindergarten teacher from a small Czech city”, but she now found herself in a circumstance whereby “she reigned as supreme mistress over the 30,000 in the women’s camps”.⁶⁸ Lengyel rightly observes that “never in her native city could she have dreamed of such authority”.⁶⁹ Equally, Lengyel recounts the story of a *blocova* who

⁶⁴ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 54-55.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

had worked as a maid prior to her arrival at Auschwitz. As a *blocova*, she was able to choose her own helpers from the general population of deportees. As it happened, her former mistress was also interred at the camp, and so the *blocova* chose her former boss to serve under her. With the former, pre-war power structure inverted, the former mistress found herself the “personal servant” of her ex-maid.⁷⁰ These are but a few examples of the ways in which the camps subverted societal expectations and gendered norms to create an exceptional new reality, whereby ordinary women could hold such unconventional power while simultaneously struggling to survive.

Conditions of Nazi confinement also inverted pre-war standards of female beauty. In the camps, where most women were dangerously thin, “the woman with the fullest figure and the most opulent charms” became the most desirable. Any women who had somehow retained any girth “were envied by others who a year earlier, would have endured tortuous diets to reduce their weight”. Significantly, the male internees, who themselves were also drastically reduced in weight and stature, are said to have been “repelled by bony bodies and hollow cheeks”. The inequity demonstrated here is only made possible through patriarchal hypocrisy.⁷¹

In a much more negative capacity, the breakdown of pre-war gender norms destroyed any value which had been previously placed on female modesty. The camps were such close quarters for those interred there that prisoners had little choice but to do whatever was necessary to survive, and to tolerate whatever conditions they found themselves having to exist in. When men began to sleep in the same barrack as women and children in Belsen, Hetty Verolme was unbothered by it. She points out that she “did not care much” how this had come to pass, or even when it had come to pass, stating that “women were not prudish anymore”, dressing and undressing and washing themselves, “sometimes

⁷⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 54.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 197.

naked, in front of strangers”.⁷² Verolme explains the rationale behind this new disregard, stating “who cared! Who would want to look at those skinny women?”.⁷³ While she was young and relatively innocent in terms of her sexuality at this point in her life, here Verolme views female dignity in explicitly sexual terms. Given that the women of the camp were all emaciated, in Verolme’s mind the requirement for demureness in women vanishes. In this reading, without male desire there is no need for female reservation, which presents a very interesting implication of the condition in the camps, and the effect of those conditions on gendered norms.

In Auschwitz, though the highest authority was in the hands of SS men, it was not uncommon for women to be abused and taken advantage of by other women.⁷⁴ Nomberg-Przytyk’s Auschwitz is a place where, on a daily basis, other women lorded over the prisoners; female SS officers were only accountable to their male SS counterparts. There also existed prisoner-held positions of privilege which, in most instances, invited those who held them to abuse their power at the expense of the ordinary prisoners. Nomberg-Przytyk describes the camp’s chain of authority as “a devilish system in which the SS men and the functionaries were united by a chain of cruelty”.⁷⁵ In this statement, the daily horrors and oppression enacted against her and other prisoners was directly linked to a hierarchy which was run by men, but utilized by women for whatever meager profit and privilege were possible. Privilege and special treatment in circumstances designed to expedite starvation and death enabled this system of collaboration to thrive – “the contrast between their splendor and our misery kept them constantly aware of what they stood to lose in the event that they failed to carry out the orders of the SS men”.⁷⁶

⁷² Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 101.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Olga Lengyel discusses the behaviours of these privileged SS women in the context of the atypical methods of torture and abuse that they could perpetuate against other women. Irma Grese wore strong perfumes of various “tantalizing” and exotic scents, which gave the prisoners a reprieve from the “sickening odor of burnt human flesh, which covered the camp like a blanket”. Lengyel identifies this simple action as “perhaps the supreme refinement of her cruelty”, contending that even the act of wearing perfumes was a deliberately nefarious action taken “to remind us of our terrible position”.⁷⁷ Lengyel likewise categorized her extravagant wardrobe as an exercise in flaunting her privilege, while she and her fellow prisoners also viewed her sexual liaisons with high ranking SS officials as a self-interested and cynical demonstration of her power. It is interesting that in the camps, female SS guards weaponized even beauty.

Due to the scarce resources for which prisoners had to compete, a hierarchy of privilege existed amongst the prisoner population – with Jewish women in the lowest position. As is evidenced by Nomberg-Przytyk, power disparity existed even amongst Jewish prisoners. Usually this privilege was borne of time spent in the camp – the longer a prisoner had survived, the faster she had learned to “organize” what she needed to survive, and the more adept she was at navigating the camp systems. Nomberg-Przytyk states that all the female blocks in the camp, Jewish and otherwise, were “ruled by the Jewish women from Slovakia”. These were the first prisoners to populate the camp, and so were heavily involved in the construction of the camp and consequently were both proud of their work and hardened by it.⁷⁸ She states that these women behaved “as if the *zugangen* deserved nothing better than ill treatment and death”, that “we existed only so they might have somebody to kick around, somebody to beat up on, somebody to serve as a background to their reflected glory”.⁷⁹

⁷⁷Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 160.

⁷⁸Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 20.

⁷⁹Ibid.

Equally, Nomberg-Przytyk discusses another privileged class of camp hierarchy called *sztubowe* (room overseers). Comprised of Polish Jews from earlier transports, she describes these women as “vulgar and coarse” – a description which certainly stands out against the total vulgarity of the entire camp and all activity within it. Notably, she criticizes this oppressor class of women in gendered terms, stating that “they marched with a mannish step”, and juxtaposes this characterization with a description of these women physically abusing prisoners.⁸⁰ This is not insignificant, and immediately evokes imagery of domestic abuse for the reader. She describes the humiliation inherent in attacks by these women, while simultaneously reclaiming female dignity, stating that “the women used to walk around with blackened eyes, which we elegantly called sunglasses”.⁸¹ This is an incredible example of female resilience, and exemplifies the importance of maintaining a sense of dignity in the face of humiliation and victimization.

⁸⁰ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 21.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Female Bodies in Confinement

The German officers parade back and forth, looking at us as if we are interesting specimens in their insect collection. If there is a beautiful girl, they stare unrelentingly. How anger-defying it is to stand and be visually defiled by these murderers.

- Rena Kornreich Gelissen⁸²

Graphic images of the female body feature prominently in many female survivor memoirs; from Olga Lengyel being accused of plucking her naturally thin eyebrows and consequently being beaten by Germans and ridiculed by her fellow internees,⁸³ to the extreme sexual violence inherent in Sara Tuvel Bernstein having her nipple torn off in a beating by the SS (this being so traumatizing for Sara that it is excluded from the self-curated version of her experience – it is her daughter who informs the reader of this fact and the consequential lifelong difficulties it caused her, particularly when nursing her children).⁸⁴ These were arbitrary circumstances which uniquely threatened women, but which were impossible to predict as there was no consistency or codification of these threats to a woman's appearance or body. Cumulatively, these additional gendered threats necessitated increased vigilance and anxiety in female internees, which undoubtedly had a profound effect on their day-to-day experiences, and contributed a unique element to the overall trauma suffered by women in the Holocaust.

Many of the women who write about their experiences within a camp setting recount particularly graphic or striking images of the women around them; these snapshots are seemingly emblazoned into the author's memories and woven into the narratives of their experience without making any overt contributions to the story. It is as though the grotesque dissolution of femininity in the camps is as profoundly tragic as any other torturous element of the camps. These images are

⁸² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 131.

⁸³ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 148.

⁸⁴ Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, *The Seamstress*, xv.

presented with enough frequency and in enough memoirs that they merit further evaluation and consideration as to how they contribute to the totality of female experience in the Holocaust.

Gisella Perl recalls a particularly sadistic means of victimization of female bodies perpetrated by Irma Grese, the infamous female SS officer – and highest ranking woman at Auschwitz - with a well-documented predilection towards sexual depravity.⁸⁵ Perl describes it as “the most horrible sight I have ever seen, the memory of which will haunt me for the rest of my life”, which reinforces the profundity of the incident in question.⁸⁶ Grese observed Perl operating on a woman whose breast had been cut open in a whipping and subsequently became infected; the operation on such a delicate area, without any anesthetic, is “particularly painful”, and so the poor woman on the operating table screamed and cried throughout the procedure. When Perl looked up from her work she saw Grese in a state of “complete sexual paroxysm”. Following this experience, Grese went around the camp specifically targeting “the most beautiful young women” and “slashed their breasts open with the braided wire end of her whip”.⁸⁷ When the wounds inevitably “got infected by the lice and dirt which invaded every nook and corner of the camp”, Grese would attend the operations and “give herself completely to the orgiastic spasms which shook her entire body and made saliva run down from the corner of her mouth”.⁸⁸ Lengyel says that Irma Grese “inspired me to the most violent hatred I ever experienced”.⁸⁹

This disgusting episode demonstrates the fetishization of violence and depravity against women and their bodies which was pervasive in the camps. It is in this context that many of the following observations made of female bodies in confinement can be better situated and understood. We are invited to leer at these upsetting, grotesque or degrading images of female bodies in so many memoirs

⁸⁵ Perl, Gisella. “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, 116.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 117.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 160.

written by women because they communicate succinctly the horror and shame which was a unique feature of female experience in the camps.

Olga Lengyel devotes particular attention to the clothing provided for the women in her transport upon arriving at Auschwitz. Camp officials did not provide them with conventional striped uniforms, but instead were given tattered rags which were once extravagant dresses that Lengyel remarks “made one think of a fantastic masquerade”.⁹⁰ The clothing was not distributed to the prisoners with any consideration of fit, and so “large, buxom women had to wear little dresses that were too short and too tight”, while “slender women were given huge dresses, some with trains”.⁹¹ The images these women, and of Lengyel herself in “one of those formerly elegant dresses of tulle, quite tattered and transparent, and without a slip” which “was open in the front down to the navel and in the back down to the hips”, are absurd and striking. Lucille Eichengreen describes that once the women of her transport were dressed, they “looked like Kafkaesque, insane creatures ready for a costume party”.⁹² Upon seeing her husband in the camp for the first time, Lengyel compared her new absurd appearance to her former identity, remarking that “in my tattered dress, in which I was half exposed, in my striped drawers, and with my clipped head, I must have shocked him... Certainly I did not look like the woman who had been his wife and companion in happier days”.⁹³ In this instance, her physical transformation is attached to the loss of her former personhood. There is an undeniable element of irony and humiliation inherent to these ridiculous outfits; women dressed for a ball, in someone else’s former finery, who were confined to a barren hell on earth.

⁹⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 28.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁹² Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life*, 95.

⁹³ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 43.

Ruth Minsky Sender and her friend Rifkele from the Lodz ghetto are also given tattered, random civilian clothing upon arrival at the camp; Ruth herself received “a petticoat big enough to wrap myself in”, while Rifkele was given a blouse which “hardly reach[ed] to the end of her buttocks”.⁹⁴ While Olga Lengyel reports that “most of the internees, even those who had the chance, refused to exchange their ‘dresses’ with their neighbors”,⁹⁵ Ruth and Rifkele traded garments with each other. Ruth was much smaller than her friend, and so the blouse which barely covered Rifkele nearly fell to Ruth’s knees. This gesture was so meaningful to Rifkele that her eyes filled with tears as she made the exchange: “we are not animals yet” she remarks, “we still have our pride”.⁹⁶ In this gesture, the dehumanization and shame which the Nazis inflicted upon these women was mitigated, if only momentarily, by basic human compassion. That these women resisted this small component of their degradation and stood up for each other in such a simple way is a meaningful example of the importance of female friendship within confinement.

Upon her arrival at Auschwitz, at a relatively early point in its existence, Rena Kornreich Gelissen was given men’s clothes which were stained and full of holes. Some women had already put the clothes on before they realized that the holes were created by bullets, not moths, and that the stains were of blood, not dirt, as they had presumed. The women in Rena’s transport had been given the unwashed clothes of murdered men by the camp staff; they had no choice but to accept the garments as they were.⁹⁷ Additionally, the clothes were made of wool, which chafed against Rena’s skin as she moved. This problem of chafing became so severe that within a week her “nipples (were) red and raw” from a combination of her clothing, the cold, and the fact that even her bra was taken from her upon arrival at the camp. She states that she felt “as if someone [had] taken sandpaper across [her] breasts until there

⁹⁴ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 153

⁹⁵ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 30.

⁹⁶ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 153.

⁹⁷ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 59.

[was] no skin left”.⁹⁸ The pain evoked by this graphic description is unimaginable, and illuminates a unique issue faced by women while in confinement. When Rena was given a bra from a friend in *Kanada*,⁹⁹ she remarked: “I cannot believe the difference these tiny luxuries make in my outlook, my mood. To have one less things to be in pain about gives me less to worry over”.¹⁰⁰ This serves to demonstrate how important even simple comforts were in the lives of internees; the bra not only brought relief to “her poor nipples, scabbed and blistered from the constant rubbing of wool”, but Rena’s “focus is more clear”, and not having the distraction of constant pain enabled her to “feel more alert”. The bra was so important to her well-being that Rena remarks: “I think this bra helps save my sanity”.¹⁰¹

Occasionally the camp and its inhabitants would go through a process of disinfection, whereby all of the internees’ clothing would be taken away by camp officials to be fumigated, along with the blankets in the barracks. This left the women of the camp completely naked, wet and cold, with the camp administration “in no hurry” to return the garments and blankets to the exposed women.¹⁰² While pneumonia posed a real threat, it was not the worst menace in this process by any measure. When the clothes came back they would not all be returned. This meant that any number of women would be left with nothing to wear. These women were forced to quickly ‘organize’ scraps of clothing, or wear a blanket until such time that they could acquire new clothes. Some unfortunate women who could not obtain clothes or a blanket were forced to attend roll call “completely naked”, as “it was impossible to remain in the barracks and not appear for roll call”, no matter the circumstances.¹⁰³ Any woman forced

⁹⁸ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 73.

⁹⁹ *Kanada*, or Canada, was the section at Auschwitz where the seized goods of new arrivals were sorted, and as such was a place where rare or contraband items could be found.

¹⁰⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 117.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 132.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 133.

into this position was beaten and sent to the gas chambers by the SS for their shamelessness. To avoid this fate, desperate women would wear whatever scraps of clothing they could find; Olga Lengyel recalls an inmate who “had nothing to wear for days except a blouse which covered only her arms and shoulders”.¹⁰⁴ The degradation inherent in this experience is almost unimaginable. It is incomprehensible that these poor naked women, engaged in a frantic and desperate search for clothing, did so not simply for the benefit of their modesty, but to keep their lives. The fear and humiliation which go hand in hand in this instance are exemplary of the unique circumstances of suffering for female internees.

Hetty Verolme’s experience at Westerbork was relatively privileged compared to other camp experiences – there were toilets, laundry and the barracks were clean and new. Still, she found herself in close quarters with many strangers. This closeness created intimacy between strangers which Hetty was not used to. She sees an elderly woman “stood as God made her”, and asks “Do all women look like this when they grow old?”. She graphically describes her dry, yellow skin, and her breasts “like empty paper bags” which drooped down to her waist. Of course a girl of Verolme’s young age would not have had any occasion to see strange women naked before, and certainly the sudden, forced intimacy of the camp contributed to her revulsion. Eventually, the sight of the woman “became too much for even [her] mother”, and both of the women were forced to confront the fact that “their own inhibitions would no longer be considered”. This was a pivotal moment for Hetty, and served as “the start of the degeneration of our values which we were to experience more over the coming years in Belsen”.¹⁰⁵ Hetty’s coming of age happened in the confinement of the camp; here, the lessons learned in the transition from girl to woman are perversely taught.

¹⁰⁴ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 133.

¹⁰⁵ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 44.

Verolme likewise observes a group of French women who arrived in the camp in September 1944. She shares how physically striking these women were to her, describing them as looking like “Amazons”.¹⁰⁶ This is an interesting assessment to make so late in the war – surely these women had suffered from malnutrition and mistreatment, but Hetty saw them as “strong, tall women”, in a derogatory rather than empowering sense.¹⁰⁷ Their habits were vulgar to her, and Hetty was repulsed watching these women care for themselves. She describes that these women would “take a bowl of water and squat over it and wash themselves between their legs... in front of everybody, including men and children”.¹⁰⁸ That they did not adhere to a dignified pre-war standard of female propriety was what Hetty found so striking. However, when she was later interned at Belsen, Hetty’s experience was not far removed from that of the French women who previously repulsed her. This serves to demonstrate that the deteriorating conditions in the camps systematically dehumanized women by employing shame, destroying previously held conceptions of female propriety.

While Hetty casts these women in such a grotesque light, she simultaneously acknowledges the comradery between these French women. They took turns holding each other’s towels so that they were not stolen while they wash, and critically she observed that they cooperated with each other, working together in pairs. This example of female solidarity is notable for the fact that, while these women had no shame left and were critically judged for this by observers like Hetty, they had each other, and this affects Hetty as much as their repugnant display does. While we cannot know the exact impact of this female solidarity on these French women themselves, it certainly stands out in Hetty’s story as a rare instance of cooperation amongst camp internees fighting for the same severely limited

¹⁰⁶ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 80.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

resources. That it is curiously couched with this repulsive memory serves to demonstrate the ways in which even positive elements of camp experience are contaminated with the profane.

In November 1944, Verolme describes another group of women who arrived at Belsen. These women came from Auschwitz, and Verolme's impression of them is distinct. She is horrified, refusing even "to go near these women".¹⁰⁹ She states that "the sight of them... had scared me to the depths of my soul" and that she "had sensed evil spirits surrounding them".¹¹⁰ They move silently, their bald heads covered with dirty scraps of fabric, which was especially striking for Hetty as she had been able to keep her hair while interned in Belsen. While Hetty is repulsed by both groups of women, the women from Auschwitz stand in stark contrast to the French women who arrived a few months earlier. They made the French women seem dignified by comparison, and absolutely no comradery existed between them. Hetty states that "all the time we could hear them fighting and screaming amongst themselves".¹¹¹ This encounter with these emaciated, desperate women left Verolme with an undeniable impression that the lack of dignity forced upon these women had made them less than human in her eyes. They were prisoners, the same as her, but they also existed in a state which is far beyond any that she could empathize with.

But a question exists as to whether Verolme was repulsed by these women because of their lack of recognizable humanity, or because of their lack of womanhood. While lack of humanity and lack of womanhood do indeed share certain features, a distinction between these two states seems to be evident in Verolme's recollections. It is interesting to see the fixation of so many female survivors, including Hetty Verolme and Sarah Nomberg-Przytyk, on the bodies and sexual organs of female internees. It is curious that these survivors found these images of women so grotesquely memorable

¹⁰⁹ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children's House of Belsen*, 88.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87.

despite the fact that the physical realities of camp life and the effects of starvation destroyed the bodies of all internees, regardless of gender.

It could be argued that perhaps one of the key elements that brought about this unique response is shame; specifically, the shame that women are socialized to feel about their own bodies, projected onto the helpless and agentless, and therefore shameless, female victims recounted in these memoirs. Charlotte Delbo's *None of us Will Return* contains a powerful refrain: "Try to look. Try to see."¹¹² This section seeks to honour Delbo's request, and to bring to light some of the most graphic examples of physical abuse and degradation suffered by women in Nazi confinement. I, like Delbo, contend that the inclusion of such a graphic chapter is essential in any attempt to expose the true extent of female experience in the Holocaust. Though we, the readers of such memoirs, will never personally know such horror, we are obliged to acknowledge the worst of these Holocaust atrocities so that we might "see", and understand.

¹¹² Delbo, Charlotte, *None of us Will Return*, 95-97.

Sex

Love, or what passed for it in the degraded atmosphere of the death camp, was but a distortion of what it is for normal people, for society in Birkenau was but a distortion of a normal human society.

- Olga Lengyel¹¹³

Given previously discussed issues of shame and taboo, as well as a lack of sexual impulse in the camps which is documented in many of the memoirs studied here, sexual intercourse is not an overtly prominent feature of documented Holocaust experience. That being said, the topic of sex in the camps is particularly interesting for the fact that “traditional anxieties and guilt about sex were not applicable in the world of total subservience reinforced by the terror in the camps”.¹¹⁴ Many of the memoirs evaluated in this thesis discuss sex in confinement as an opportunistic exercise; a perverse means of acquiring desperately needed resources, or a tool of emotional comfort against the constant assault on basic humanity which occurred daily in the camps. However, “nature dictates that wherever men and women are together there shall also be love”,¹¹⁵ and so alongside more frequent instances of sexual impropriety or victimization there exist stories of romantic love which are inspirational affirmations of hope in the midst of destruction. Rena Kornreich Gelissen succinctly explains the nature of romantic love in Birkenau, stating “we cannot be selfish with affection of gratitude. If we don’t say it today, there may never be another chance.”¹¹⁶ This section will detail the plethora of sexual encounters experienced by women whilst in Nazi confinement.

Sexuality and female degradation were so rampant in the environment of the camps that it is said even the SS men had difficulty resisting these humiliated women, who were sub-human and worthy

¹¹³ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 195.

¹¹⁴ Milton, Sybil, “Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women”, 231.

¹¹⁵ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 195.

¹¹⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 151.

of annihilation in any other context. Olga Lengyel states that camp brothels existed “so that the S.S. might not become overly excited by the presence of many young and beautiful internees who they saw naked and in every degree of exposure”, which speaks to the threat of sexual violence that existed just beneath the surface in the daily life of each woman.¹¹⁷ In fact, internees who were especially attractive or particularly desired by an SS man were sometimes enlisted to work in these brothels, which were also frequented by male internees in rare, “exceptional favours”.¹¹⁸ Gerda Weissmann Klein reports of an unusual examination she endured in which women were told to strip and step into a circle drawn in chalk on the floor in front of a panel of army officers and SS women. No further action was required of these women, which left them confused as to the meaning of this examination. Eventually, rumours circulated that this inspection was a selection for “pretty and healthy girls” to serve as sex slaves for sick and wounded German soldiers.¹¹⁹ This effectively demonstrates the gendered hierarchy of the camps; while both men and women were victimized by the Nazis, even within the camps women lived as second-class citizens, and as such experienced unique punishments which men were spared from solely by volition of their gender.

Female internees could also be sent to the brothel at Auschwitz by camp officials as punishment. While punishment suggests transgression, in Auschwitz one could be punished for no fault of their own, or no reason whatsoever. Irma Grese, a notorious sadist, set her eye on a male internee who Lengyel describes as “unbelievably good looking” in spite of “the terrible mistreatment and starvation” he faced; he was so strapping that “the story of this handsome Georgian had passed by word of mouth through the camp”.¹²⁰ This man had fallen in love with a young Polish girl, and when Grese found out she summoned the girl and boy to her quarters together, so that she might compel the man

¹¹⁷ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 195.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 178-179.

¹²⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 201.

to submit to her sexual advances by beating the woman he loved in front of him until he complied. When the beating finally came to an end, the handsome man was shot by Grese anyways, but the young girl faced a fate worse than death: she was sent to the Auschwitz brothel, where God only knows what horror and suffering she endured before meeting her final end.¹²¹ This demonstrates, yet again, the Nazi weaponization of sex, and the unique, sexualized methods of punishment and torture used against the women in the camp.

As previously mentioned, some women reported a sexual black market which existed in the ghettos and camps, whereby “food was the coin that paid for sexual privileges”.¹²² While most of the following examples exhibit vague, albeit distorted, adherence to notions of consensual sex, this system of course left ample room for abuses and coercion. In the Lodz Ghetto, Lucille Eichengreen was informed by a factory manager that sexual favours could be exchanged for a place in a ghetto school for her sister. This devastated her, not only because this was her first realization that in the ghetto “there were favours to be bought” which “had to be paid for one way or another”, but because this was true “even among [her] own kind”; that this sexual opportunism could be perpetuated against Jewish women by other Jewish men truly shocked and hurt Lucille.¹²³ Whilst working in Märzdorf, a factory in the Gross-Rosen camp complex, Gerda Weissmann Klein became the sexual target of a supervisor. He attempted to coerce her into submission by means of bribing her with food, but when she was not responsive to his advances he promised vaguely that she “will be sorry”.¹²⁴ Gerda was put in an impossible position by this man, stating that “there was so much I wanted to say, but I knew that my life was in his hands. I was afraid even of silence”.¹²⁵ Gerda validly points out that this man had many

¹²¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 203.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹²³ Eichengreen, Lucille, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*, 49.

¹²⁴ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 148.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

means of victimization at his disposal: “he could have taken me by force, he could have made up a story for the *Lagerführerin* and I would have been sent to Auschwitz”. Instead, this man decided to use his authority to “break [her] resistance”.¹²⁶ The consequence of her non-compliance was that she was assigned to work two different grueling work details by this man, one during the day and one at night. Were it not for the miraculous intervention of one of her friends, Gerda would not have survived such an intensive work schedule for much longer than the week and a half that she managed.¹²⁷ This example serves to demonstrate the plethora of risks that women faced simply by volition of their sexuality; here, Gerda was guilty of nothing but catching the eye of a sadistic man in a position of authority over her, and was punished for her sexual reservation and integrity.

Three weeks after her arrival at Auschwitz, Olga Lengyel was approached by a man who did repairs in her barracks called Tadek. They befriended each other, with Lengyel remarking that “his was the only human-sounding voice I had heard in the camp”. She asserts the platonic nature of their relationship, stating that while she waited for him to arrive every day she “was not expecting him as a man”.¹²⁸ One day he gave her the gift of a potato – “the first scrap of food [she] could keep in [her] stomach” since arriving at the camp – as well as a shawl to cover her naked head. Tadek remarked that “it must be a terrible thing for a woman to go around without any hair”, singling her baldness out as justifying such an extravagant gift (by Auschwitz standards), and once again demonstrating the social significance ascribed to a woman’s hair.¹²⁹ He offered to bring Olga food every day, and to try and organize more clothing items for her in the future, but this kindness was not freely given; Olga recounts that suddenly, “as though talking to himself, he said, ‘It’s a strange thing, even though you have no hair and are dressed in rags, there is something very desirable about you’”. The price of Tadek’s generosity

¹²⁶ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 148.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 152.

¹²⁸ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 60.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

was sex. When he began to grope her, Olga's "world fell to pieces again" – in saying "again" here, she likens this blow to the initial shock of her arrival at Auschwitz, which reveals the level of profound trauma effected by Tadek's actions.¹³⁰

Olga rejected his offer, but Tadek made it clear that without her repaying him in sexual favours, she would receive no further food or help from him. Olga was in a desperate state at this point in her confinement, well on her way to starving to death without intervention, which is perhaps one of the reasons that she was singled out by Tadek in the first place. He justified his callousness to her by explaining that "women are cheap enough", and in such "misery and excitement" men need more sex than "in normal life". This is a unique insight into the motivations of a man who saw nothing wrong with using a woman's very survival to bribe her into sexual complicity.

Olga remarks that she "learned afterwards that his was the finest style of lovemaking in Auschwitz. The ordinary approach was much more crude and to the point".¹³¹ In this statement, the nature of coerced sexual relations in Auschwitz is laid bare. Sex was a scarce but valued commodity – like all commodities in the camp – and could be acquired either for a price or by force. Tadek visited Olga each day with an offering of food, persistently trying to entice her consent before giving the food to another, more willing participant in his intended arrangement. Olga was faced with a devastating choice: she could either offer herself to this opportunistic lecher, or be left to starve without intervention. In this instance she learned one of the lessons of the camps: that a "Sophie's choice" existed in Nazi confinement, whereby no one would consider her well-being without it coming at a cost to her well-being.

¹³⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 60.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

This incident speaks to the reality that “prostitution, with all its lamentable consequences: venereal diseases, pimps, etc., was an ordinary phenomenon at Birkenau”.¹³² As it happens, Olga later provided treatment for syphilis to one of the women who chose to take advantage of Tadek’s offer, which speaks to the dangerous reality of sex within the confines of the camps; sexually transmitted diseases could be contracted without any proper means for treatment outside of black market bartering for medicine.¹³³ Much later on, Olga encountered a sick and “broken” Tadek again. He was nearing the end of his life, and felt compelled to defend his actions, telling Olga that he “was not sick” when he propositioned her; that he was a respectable professional man before the war, a university professor in Warsaw. This suggests that, in his mind, the only problem with his behaviour was the context of the camp, which had driven him to lasciviousness. He offered Olga no apology. The question is left unanswered as to whether or not, in the context of his former life as an urban academic, he was able to treat women in a similar way with impunity; nothing which he says to Olga in this final exchange suggests otherwise, save for his final statement: “Anyway, you cannot hate me any more than I hate and abominate myself.”¹³⁴

The bathrooms at Auschwitz were the unsanctioned meeting place for men and women in the camp. Not all men were able to traverse the border between the male and female camps, but some workers with various functions had duties which called for their presence in the female sections, and many of these men would gather in the toilets on their lunch breaks.¹³⁵ As such, a de facto meeting point for men and women was established. Here black market transactions were carried out,

¹³² Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 196.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 196.

information was exchanged between people from separate parts of the camp, and men and women could find a place with relative security to engage in sexual relations.¹³⁶ Starving women would come to the washroom when the men took their lunch break and congregate “around them in circles, three or four deep, their hands stretched forth like beggars”, while “pretty girls sang the latest songs to attract attention”.¹³⁷ The men occasionally took pity on a woman and shared their food with her. There was undoubtedly a sexual component to this pity, which some women certainly were willing to utilize in order to acquire desperately needed food or goods. For others, this carnal price tag was too steep a cost for a potato or soup. Lengyel cautions her readers that “it would be heartless to condemn women who had to sink so low for a half crust of bread”, arguing instead that “the responsibility for the degradation of the internees rested with the camp administration” for intentionally creating the circumstances under which these conditions for women could flourish.¹³⁸

When Olga herself visited the toilets to take advantage of these circumstances, desperate for food, the scene she found inside was “demoralizing”.¹³⁹ There was sex and fraternization everywhere, which Lengyel describes graphically: “The smell of the unwashed bodies mingled with the stale odors of mouldy food and the general dampness. The air was unendurable.”¹⁴⁰ A grotesque older man offered her two undercooked potatoes, but another woman immediately pounced on Olga, screaming at the old man that the potatoes had been promised to her. He justified his choice of charity recipient on the grounds that Olga “is younger”, and told the hysterical woman to go to hell, that he does what he pleases, before he pushed her to the ground and kicked her repeatedly. This episode reinforces how

¹³⁶ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 62.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 196.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

disposable women were in these sexual transactions, and how precarious this means of support was for women who relied on it.

In these accounts, we can see that patriarchal authority still existed between male and female prisoners within the gender-segregated confines of the camp. Women had this avenue available to them in order to acquire desperately needed resources, but for some this constituted a second act of victimization, and as such was an unacceptable option. The frequency with which women engaged in sex for survival is unknown, and will never be fully known, but such detailed testimonies as Lengyel's serve to inform the reality of sex in Nazi confinement as brutish, inequitable and perverse.

However, in spite of this awful reality of sexual bartering and victimization in the camps, consensual romantic and sexual relationships did exist. While this is difficult to imagine given the immense strain of daily life in the camps, Lengyel contends that "the mental anguish seemed to provide a peculiar stimulus".¹⁴¹ Women with partners "enjoyed real distinction" amongst their fellow internees due to the fact that men were in short supply; *Blokovas* would lend out their rooms, at an exorbitant price, to those looking to host their partner for a few hours.

Rena Kornreich Gelissen met a man called Marek with whom she carried on a love affair while working in the *stabsgebäude* (staff quarters) at Auschwitz. They spoke while working together when possible, and tossed rocks with messages tied to them back and forth daily.¹⁴² Rena ascribed a great deal of significance to her new relationship, stating that "it is moments like these that help us feel alive".¹⁴³ The relationship is distinct in Rena's memoir as it quickly developed sexual overtones. Marek was very amused when she confessed her virginity to him; "We're in Auschwitz and you are

¹⁴¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 195.

¹⁴² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 190.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

embarrassed?”, he asked when she blushed at his line of enquiry.¹⁴⁴ Rena was proud of her virginity, but privately shared in Marek’s amusement at her self-consciousness, understanding that it was absurd in a way, given the humiliation she faced on a daily basis. Of all the women evaluated in this thesis, Rena spent the longest amount of time in a camp, and consequently came of age while in confinement. When she met Marek, she was a woman of twenty-three years who had spent nearly three years in the midst of the most stressful and horrifying conditions possible, exclusively in the company of other women. Therefore, her newfound receptiveness towards Marek and his overt sexuality was quite understandable given these circumstances, as well as the new, privileged environment she found herself in while housed in the staff quarters.

This relationship with Marek is a distinct sign of Rena’s growing maturity. She is remarkably meek and naïve when it comes to anything involving sex throughout the rest of her memoir, and so her embracing this adult side of herself is certainly a departure from the Rena that the author comes to know in both Auschwitz and Birkenau. When Marek and Rena first kissed, she openly confesses that she was unable to “resist the warmth of human comfort, the longing to be held close and dear”; this was the first time in her life that she kissed someone “long and endearingly”.¹⁴⁵ Marek then proposed to Rena, asking if she would marry him when they were freed. Unfortunately, Rena’s new maturity also furnished her with a realistic understanding of the circumstances they found themselves in as prisoners of Auschwitz. Her response was appropriately brief: “Marek, how do we know what will be?”¹⁴⁶ This episode informs us that the harsh reality of the camps remained the same, regardless of whether or not two people found themselves in love; no promises could be made in a place where not even tomorrow was promised.

¹⁴⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 195.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

A few stories exist which exemplify the heights of both love and despair in Nazi confinement. Olga Lengyel recounts the last day of a Czech boy whose group was being liquidated imminently; he was in love with a girl in Olga's camp. Knowing that he was not long for this world, he traded a diamond he had stolen from "Canada" for the chance to spend his last afternoon with her. Lengyel says "it was somehow arranged... The *blocova* left the young people alone in her room. The other inmates stood outside to watch for the Germans".¹⁴⁷ It seems an impossible set of circumstances; the collaboration which took place between so many internees is miraculous. All of this to facilitate the opportunity for a final, intimate goodbye for the two lovers, whose future together was tragically stolen away in the fires of Auschwitz.

While many experiences in Nazi confinement are shared equally by both men and women – for instance the fear of selections, the hunger and thirst which pervaded the camps, the backbreaking forced labour, and the squalid and dangerous living conditions – certain experiences had distinct ramifications for female internees. For instance, while both men and women had their heads shaved in the same manner, as this chapter has detailed, this experience was distinctly more traumatic for women than for men. Equally, the various sexual threats faced by women, which are well documented in the memoirs of female survivors, were not shared with male internees. The brutal context of Nazi confinement most persuasively lays bare the relevance of a gendered reading of this history; the Nazis deliberately employed unique tactics of fear, humiliation and subjugation against female internees. The results of these deliberate actions taken against women in Nazi confinement have distinct and profound effects on the summation of female experience in the Holocaust. Therefore, it is only right to consider

¹⁴⁷ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 95.

the most horrifying nuance of Nazi treatment of women in camps and ghettos as part of a more complete and well rounded master narrative of the Holocaust.

Chapter 4: Sexual Victimization

Here love became corrupt excitement for the slaves and sadistic entertainment for the overseers.

- Olga Lengyel¹

There are certain realities of Holocaust experience which transcend epochal categorization, but which are extremely important elements of female experience. These are unique situations or circumstances faced by women, specifically on account of their gender, and exacted against them by means of their sex.

Women in the Holocaust were victims of a distinctly sexual component to the Nazi menace. Depravity ran to the core of the regime, and so this depravity coloured the ways in which sexual violence manifested in the Holocaust. Various women studied here make sickening claims of sexual abuse, either witnessed or experienced themselves. In the camps, punishment for women could involve elements of sexual violence or humiliation on a whim. Olga Lengyel recounts unique indignities exacted upon the nuns who had the misfortune of being sent to Auschwitz, referring to the torture performed against them as “German sport”.² In one example, a nun has her habit taken from her and is forced to march for SS troops; all the while the SS officers take turns wearing her habit and doing obscene dances. Lengyel also informs us that “the Germans assembled a large collection of nuns’ habits and gave them to the women in their brothels”, adding a twisted element to an already degrading and grotesque situation.³ She is told first-hand of young girls being raped by dogs “whom the Nazis had specially trained for this sport”, while their mothers look on helplessly, forced into complicity by being made to undress their daughters and watch the abuse take place.⁴ These are but a handful of occasions of sexual

¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 200.

² *Ibid.*, 122.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

victimization which occurred during the Holocaust and are recounted in the memoirs of female survivors studied here. While some components of this element of female experience are much less openly discussed by survivors than others - for instance rape - the following chapter will explore, in detail, the most prominent elements of sexual victimization which women faced.

Pregnancy

Thank God I don't have a child, I thought. I'm so glad that I never married and had children. How unbearable it would be to be locked on this train with a child crying for a drink of water.

- Sara Tuvel Bernstein⁵

Pregnancy is one of the most important subjects in an evaluation of female experience in the Holocaust. It is in the capacity of childbearing that the most grotesque example of female-centric suffering and persecution in the Holocaust is found – in the Nazis war against Jewish motherhood. Given the genocidal intent of the Nazi regime, female bodies and their capacity to procreate were specifically and viciously targeted in the Holocaust – in this capacity, an attack on womanhood was seen as an attack on the future of the Jewish race. Without mothers to birth and rear Jewish children, the next generation of Jewish people would not exist, and the long-term Nazi aim to annihilate the Jewish people would be won. As such, various measures of suffering and oppression were enforced uniquely against women, many of which are detailed in the memoirs written by female survivors. As historian Joan Ringelheim states, “Jewish women were to be killed as Jewish women not simply as Jews – women who may carry and give birth to the next generation of Jews”.⁶

Simply put, pregnancy for a Jewish woman during the Holocaust meant death in most circumstances. It did not necessarily mean her own death (though this could come about due to dangerous conditions during an abortion, pregnancy or childbirth), but provided she did successfully deliver her child, a mother would have to choose between her own life or that of her child – if the circumstances of her childbirth even allowed for her to have agency in her or her child's fate.

⁵ Tuvel Bernstein, Sara, *The Seamstress*, 192.

⁶ Ringelheim, Joan, “Women in the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), 347-417, (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 1993), 393.

From 1942 onwards, it was decreed that all pregnant women in the ghettos of Eastern Europe were to be killed, an act which confirmed the genocidal aims of the Nazis by attacking Jewish life at its very inception.⁷ Abortions were available to Jewish women up until this point, but had been outlawed for Aryan women since 1933 - evidencing the Nazi ideology which saw Jewish procreation as a threat, while elevating the status of Aryan procreation via legal "protections", from the very beginning of their regime.

Interestingly, Ruth Kluger's father worked as a gynecologist before the war, and was imprisoned by the SS on the charge of performing an illegal abortion on an Aryan woman. This was an experience which Kluger says irrevocably changed him as a person, and ultimately precipitated his leaving the family behind and emigrating to Italy, then France, for safety in 1940. The safety he sought was short-lived – Kluger's father did not survive the war and the circumstances of his death remain unknown. However, Kluger did not view her father's conduct with any ill-judgement, stating: "there is no doubt that he performed abortions, especially in those days, when few families wanted children. He aborted a child of his own, which would have been a boy, my mother says, and he was 'sad for days.' (None of us would have survived if there had been a baby)".⁸ That Kluger states so matter-of-factly that this abortion saved her and her mother's life, while simultaneously setting events into motion which would ultimately lead to her father's death, is a testament to the profundity with which she views this issue as a woman. Kluger and her father's story demonstrates the dichotomous morality and reality of the legacy of wartime abortions via the microcosmic impact that she explained it had on her own family.

After 1942, illegal abortions in ghettos were not uncommon, in spite of the sanctity of prenatal life in Judaism, and were in fact performed and sanctioned by rabbis in some instances, who understood

⁷ Von Kellenbach, Katharina, "Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust". In *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, 19-32, (Esther Fuchs, *Studies in the Shoah*, Vol. xxii, 1999), 21.

⁸ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 35.

the threat being posed directly against pregnant Jewish women.⁹ In Jewish religious law, abortion is allowed “up until the moment of birth if the woman [is] unable to deliver the baby and [is] in danger of dying”.¹⁰ While this would usually be applied to situations of medical duress either in pregnancy or childbirth, the Rabbis of the Kovno ghetto, for instance, decided that the Nazi decree to murder pregnant women constituted justification for abortion without breaking religious law.¹¹

Even still, some women chose to become pregnant and see their pregnancies through to childbirth in spite of threats against Jewish motherhood, “motivated by religious and political beliefs and [acting] in defiance of extermination policies”.¹² Particularly for German Jews, whose lives were relatively privileged compared to those of their Eastern European counterparts, childbirth was occasionally a means of defiance and resistance for women against Nazi oppression and control.¹³ Ruth Cronheim was a Jewish woman from Berlin who had put off plans to have a second child on account of the preceding years whereby Berlin Jews had been “harassed, economically dispossessed, legally confined and brutalized” by the Nazis. In 1942, she made the decision to become pregnant, ignoring “rational reasons” to postpone having another child and instead embracing “the ardent hope for a better future”.¹⁴ This prioritization of the future, and rejection of the fear and restrictions which the Jewish community in Germany faced, regardless of how tragic this decision can be seen to have been in hindsight, can simultaneously be understood as an act of resistance by Cronheim. Her story came to a tragic end, however, and the joy and agency which she reclaimed in the act of having a child was soon taken from her and her family. Her second child, a son called Wolf, was born on December 11, 1942.

⁹ Von Kellenbach, Katharina, “Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust”, 21.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 22.

¹² Ibid., 30.

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

On March 2, 1943, Cronheim, her husband Alfred, and her two sons were deported to Auschwitz, never to be seen again.¹⁵

Upon arrival at any concentration camp, visibly pregnant women and women with young children were automatically sent to the gas chamber;¹⁶ where a man of the same age and abilities had the possibility of being chosen to work and could thereby avoid death for at least a little longer, a woman was murdered by volition of her status as mother. If a woman had the good sense to conceal her pregnancy upon arrival (provided she was able to), further measures were taken to weed her out. In Auschwitz, pregnant women would be encouraged to come forward in “special selections” with promises of extra food to help build strength before labour.¹⁷ Gisella Perl, a Hungarian Jew who served as a doctor while imprisoned in Auschwitz, claims in her autobiographical testimony that she once saw these specially selected pregnant women being “beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by their hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots”. She goes on to say that once the women collapsed “they were thrown into the crematory – alive”.¹⁸ This cruel torture of pregnant women demonstrates the absolute hatred and vitriol felt by and directed towards pregnant Jewish women by the Nazis, while also demonstrating the unique ends the Nazis would go to in order to destroy the prospect of the Jewish race’s survival. Perl says that this sight gave her a new imperative to live, as she was one of the few people in a position to save “all the pregnant women in Camp C from this infernal fate”.¹⁹ As such, she began performing abortions for any women who came to her, and her testimony serves as a unique window into the reality of pregnancy at Auschwitz.

¹⁵ Von Kellenbach, Katharina, “Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust”, 30.

¹⁶ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 115.

¹⁷ Perl, Gisella, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, 113.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 113-14.

If a woman in Auschwitz did manage to defy the odds and deliver the baby successfully, the mother and child were both in peril. While Dr. Mengele would “take every precaution during an accouchement, watching to see that all aseptic principles were rigorously observed and that the umbilical cord was cut with care”, he would send that same mother and child to their deaths “half an hour later”.²⁰ Olga Lengyel shares that she and her fellow camp medics would often struggle with whether or not they should “condemn the newborn to death in order to save the poor mothers”;²¹ most of the time both mother and baby would be sent to the gas chambers following childbirth. The exception was if a baby “was not likely to survive or...it was stillborn”.²² Olga explains that in spite of how incredibly difficult this decision was, she made the decision that they “must at least save the mothers”, and so it became policy in her hospital ward to poison new born babies and pass them off as having been stillborn. Lengyel points out how exceptionally cruel this was, that “our own children had perished in the gas chambers and were cremated in the Birkenau ovens, and we dispatched the lives of others before their first voices had left their tiny lungs”.²³

However, there were periods in Auschwitz where various policy changes temporarily took place, and mothers and their babies were spared from this fate for a period of time.²⁴ Olga Lengyel calls this the Nazis’ “usual trickery”, but Gisella Perl is much less critical in her account. Perl recounts a spell where Dr. Mengele decided that pregnant women would be allowed to live, which made her feel “jubilant”, as this way she would be able to better provide for the pregnant women in her care, which was more likely to preserve the ability for these women to be able to have children in the future.²⁵ In an action which demonstrates simultaneously the callous, disposable attitude the Nazis had towards Jewish

²⁰ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 159-160.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

²² *Ibid.*, 113.

²³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁴ Perl, Gisella, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, 114-116.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

women, and their disdain for the female capacity for motherhood, Dr. Mengele suddenly reversed this decision at a point when 292 pregnant women were in the hospital of Camp C.²⁶ The women were rounded up at gunpoint and burned alive in the crematoria – as was done to all women discovered to be pregnant in the camp - a horrifying fact which is corroborated by Olga Lengyel.²⁷

SS doctors conducted various experiments on women’s reproductive capacity, including forced sterilization procedures which were performed on some women. Gerda Weissmann Klein describes these experiments as something which “filled [her] with unspeakable horror”.²⁸ Procedures involving artificial insemination were also performed by SS doctors on internees; the patients who were chosen for these experiments are described by Olga Lengyel as “the most beautiful of women”. These experiments “offered no results” scientifically, and the women who were forced to participate were “ashamed to admit the experiments”, which hints at the brutality and trauma inherent in such an invasive forced procedure.²⁹ Women were also injected with unknown “sex hormones”, for which the results are unknown save for some of the women affected who were treated in a camp hospital for abscesses. Another experiment, for which no scientific reasoning was provided, saw women have “a thick whitish liquid...infused into the genital organs” every four weeks, which caused “a terrible burning sensation”. The worst outcome seen by Lengyel in her capacity as a camp medic saw a woman return from such experiments “no longer a female”; her degradation was so immense that she decided “to pass for dead” and shun her fiancé, who was also in the camp.³⁰ Ultimately, upon seeing this fiancé with another woman just one day after being told of her “death”, she threw herself from a top bunk in the

²⁶ Perl, Gisella, “Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research”, 114-116.

²⁷ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 115.

²⁸ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 155.

²⁹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 190.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 135.

barracks and killed herself. This story drives home the devastating consequences of such destructive actions taken against women's bodies in the Holocaust.

Perhaps the worst example of abuses committed under the pretense of scientific discovery were sterilization experiments, which "attempted to compare the results of the surgical methods and x-ray treatments".³¹ Women were treated by Lengyel for "serious burns caused by the clumsy application of these rays", which was the best outcome of this experimentation imaginable. Some women were subjected to treatment with "short-wave rays", after which "the belly of the sick woman was *opened* to observe the lesions"; only two women out of fifty subjected to this survived to recount their experiences to Lengyel.

Dr. Mengele initially hand selected Rena Kornreich Gelissen for this "work detail". Unaware of the grotesque danger which she faced, she bribed a kapo to have her sister Danka added to group with her.³² Four days into the group's quarantine from the regular camp, where the two women were spared from the daily forced labour and grueling roll calls, Rena saw a prisoner of privilege anxiously sneak one of the girls in the group away. Rena needed no more than this gesture to understand that this was not a work detail that they would want to be involved with; at the last possible chance they were able to sneak away from the group, and as such narrowly escaped participation in these experiments. Kornreich Gelissen's account of women being burned with "electric shocks" from "hot plates on their stomachs" until they died, with those who survived this stage of the experiment being "cut open in order to take their female organs out", corroborates the details of Lengyel's account.³³ When Rena learned of the true nature of these experiments, she was absolutely shaken. She could not understand why this would be done to any woman, or why she and her sister were able to miraculously spare

³¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 190.

³² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 163.

³³ *Ibid.*, 170.

themselves from a torturous death. The entire event left her in an existential crisis, asking: “Is life a privilege or a curse?”³⁴

³⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, *Rena*, *Rena's Promise*, 171.

Menstruation

It is something I dread and wait for, never knowing when it will make its appearance. Will I be working? Will I be in the shaving line on a Sunday, embarrassed in front of the men? Will today be the day I cannot find anything to stop the flow and the SS decide to beat me to death for being unclean? Will today be the day the scrap I find gives me an infection?

- Rena Kornreich Gelissen³⁵

I have chosen to include menstruation in the chapter on sexual victimization despite the fact that this facet of female suffering is not explicitly sexually violent. However, I contend that the deprivation of privacy in issues of menstruation are a facet of the deliberate sexual shame which was exacted against women in concentration camps, and that the summary result of experiences pertaining to menstruation (or quite often a lack thereof) were defined by humiliation. Inadequate facilities create feelings of humiliation in all people, but issues of menstruation are uniquely female, and so will be explored in the following chapter.

The burden of menstruation while in confinement was heavy. Women who were in a position where they had to deal with this issue found it difficult to manage. With limited resources and a lack of ability to self-determine access to toilets and washing facilities, menstruating in the camps would have been a downright repulsive experience to endure. While in Belsen, Hetty Verolme was tasked with watching drying laundry and saw panties with menstrual stains. While she found it strange to see evidence of menstruation in the camp, she “deeply pitied” the woman who had the unfortunate fate of having to deal with menstruation in these circumstances. She remarked that “maybe it wasn’t such a bad thing” that she and her mother both stopped menstruating after arriving in the camp, given how difficult it would have been to obtain pads, and to stay clean.³⁶ Likewise, Gerda Weissmann Klein

³⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 96.

³⁶ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 69.

reports that most of the women around her in Gross-Rosen also stopped menstruating, and were similarly thankful rather than concerned.³⁷ In these examples, the medical implications of amenorrhea are less relevant than issues of convenience, which serves to demonstrate just how significant these issues of convenience were for the women in the camps.

In Rena Kornreich Gelissen's account, Verolme and Weissmann Klein's observations regarding the severity of the burden of menstruation on a female internee are confirmed. Shortly after her arrival at Auschwitz, Rena had the misfortune of waking up "knowing that something has changed in [her] body". She describes vividly "the slow moistness on the wool against [her] legs", the "cramp in [her] stomach", the unmistakable "stains on [her] thigh", the increase in flow after she stands up, the "blood [which] trickles down [her] leg"; given that Rena was "frightened by [her] own blood" while back at home, even with the help of her mother available to her, the complex mix of emotions which this circumstance causes in Rena whilst in confinement is hard to imagine, but evokes a great deal of empathy in the female reader.³⁸

Rena has "no rags or sanitary napkins" available to her, "only small squares of newspaper", and as such was forced to make do with the bits of newspaper, "wiping them against [her] trousers to make sure they [were] clean". She does not allow herself to ruminate on the situation; she was too disgusted by the actions she was forced to undertake, and the indignity which she endured as a consequence. She had no choice but to crumple up and "place the newspaper between [her] legs" for the remainder of the day.³⁹ Her feelings are such that she refused to share this experience even with her sister; she concludes the matter by stating that "dealing with this curse means praying that it will go away quickly

³⁷ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 155.

³⁸ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 75.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

and never return”.⁴⁰ While it unfortunately returned the following month, “even though everyone else’s has stopped”, Rena was better prepared, both for the physical reality of menstruating while in Auschwitz, and for the emotional tumult which it caused her. She declared herself “lucky”, as there happened to be newspaper scraps in the toilet on this particular day, and carried on with her day.⁴¹

In her third month in confinement, Rena’s luck ran out. She was relocated to the Birkenau section of the camp, where the living conditions were significantly worse than at the main camp. She was no longer able to go to the toilets in the night – it was forbidden to leave the barracks once the door was shut for the evening, there were no sinks in the latrines anymore, and even newspaper scraps were impossible to come by. She was forced to endure her menstruation without any access to sanitary facilities or products throughout the days spent at work, or the long hours spent in roll call. She explains how these horrendous realities made her daily life all the more burdensome, stating: “I hate the smell... no matter how hard, nor how often I scrub, it always feels as if something is left on my flesh”.⁴² These conditions of deprivation affected her anxiety so acutely that she became afraid that “the smell of blood [would] attract the dogs”, which were her greatest fear “of all camp horrors”.⁴³ Here, Rena’s gender was directly responsible for this terrifying additional threat against her life, in addition to the unique elements of misery which she had no choice but to privately endure.

Remarkably, and according to Kornreich Gelissen’s account, mercifully, most women reported that menstruation stopped in themselves and the women around them after entering a camp. Each author seems to have a different justification for this fact, and so there is some debate as to the true cause of the widespread amenorrhea in the camps. Hetty Verolme states that it was “generally believed” that

⁴⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 75.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the Germans put camphor in the camp food, which not only contributed to a lack of menstruation, but “stopped all sexual reactions in men and women”.⁴⁴ Rena Kornreich Gelissen points to “something in the tea; I think they call it bromide” as accounting for the fact that “breasts and the cycle disappear[ed] as quickly as our fellow prisoners” in Auschwitz.⁴⁵ Olga Lengyel too posits that a “mysterious chemical powder with which the Germans dosed our food” accounts for this phenomenon; she cites a kitchen worker who shared with her that this mysterious powder was exclusively handled by the SS, who mixed it into the food themselves.⁴⁶ Lengyel went to great lengths to obtain proof of this chemical interference with the internees “sexual reactions”, but to no avail. However, in the absence of physical proof, Lengyel observes that “the Lageraelteste, the blocovas, and the Stubendiensts, as well as the kitchen employees” did not eat the standard camp food, and were “in most cases, free from menstrual problems”.

Ruth Kluger is dismissive of the idea that the Nazis drugged the women imprisoned at Auschwitz, instead ascribing blame to widespread undernourishment and the conditions of “imprisonment itself”.⁴⁷ In fact, Kluger is slightly derisive of women who believed that something in their food was the culprit, stating that this “only goes to show how well-off they had been before, since they didn’t know the effects of starvation”.⁴⁸ Rena Kornreich Gelissen, who is a rare example of an internee who continues to menstruate for many months after her arrival, vaguely echoes the sentiment of Kluger’s skepticism. She believes, as do most of the women evaluated in this thesis, that there is some chemical interference being committed against the female internees, but explains her own exceptionalism in the following terms: “I don’t know why the bromide doesn’t work on me, but the starvation does”.⁴⁹ Her periods

⁴⁴ Verolme, Hetty, *The Children’s House of Belsen*, 69.

⁴⁵ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 130.

⁴⁶ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 99.

⁴⁷ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 119.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 130.

became shorter and lighter, “as the weight [dropped] from [her] body”, and inevitably disappeared altogether after some months of starvation conditions.⁵⁰

Olga Lengyel has a unique perspective to offer on this issue as a medical professional who worked in Auschwitz. She observed corpses in the morgue of the hospital which had “become abnormally swollen”, and suggests that in the female bodies it was not the commonly proffered diagnosis of malnutrition that was to blame, but “menstrual difficulties”.⁵¹ To provide further proof of this phenomenon, she cites a Russian professor involved in autopsies and investigations conducted post-war on victims of Auschwitz, who found that “nine out of every ten internees revealed a distinct withering of the ovaries”.⁵² As a consequence of this staggering statistic, dysmenorrhea, or painful menstruation, is also identified by Lengyel as “almost a general phenomenon” in female camp internees. Lengyel offers her personal opinion that “a contributing factor was the constant anguish under which we lived”, acknowledging that “this is no place for scientific explanation”, but simultaneously stating that it is “necessary to add” this rationale for female-centric suffering to her memoir.⁵³ She does not deny other more scientifically justifiable factors which may contribute, but to Lengyel, the mysterious effect of the unique torments of camp life have an undeniable effect on the female body.

⁵⁰ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 130.

⁵¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 98.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Lesbianism

Women who were Lesbians when they entered the camps or became so afterward are hidden behind a double veil of hypocrisy and silence.

- Vera Laska⁵⁴

The subject of lesbianism in the experience of women in the ghettos and camps is one of the most taboo topics in female Holocaust experience. Given the centrality of the Jewish religion in the targeting of victims in the Holocaust, and the extreme suffering which was inherent to Holocaust experiences, it is a subject which is only touched on in a handful of the memoirs studied here.

Homosexuality was not widely accepted in Western society for much of the twentieth century, and as such, accounts of lesbianism are imbued with shame or judgement. For instance, Olga Lengyel, who authors one of the most blatantly feminist memoirs evaluated in this thesis, refers to lesbians in the camp as an issue of “perverts”.⁵⁵ Given this intolerance which permeated the concept of homosexuality, even those lesbian relationships or encounters which are shared could readily be stripped of any significance beyond a woman doing what she need to in order to survive. This discriminatory stance is based upon “a centuries-old patriarchal tradition”, whereby “a self-assured sense of female sexuality, including homosexuality, was unfathomable”.⁵⁶ Consequently, in most of the memoirs studied here, stories of lesbianism are recounted anecdotally and briefly. However, when evaluated in conjunction with a modern understanding of the prevalence of homosexuality, these brief mentions serve to represent a phenomenon which was undoubtedly more common than is reported in survivor memoirs.

⁵⁴ Laska, Vera, “Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses”. In *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), 250-269, (St Paul, MN: Paragon, 1993), 264.

⁵⁵ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 197.

⁵⁶ Schoppmann, Claudia, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians During the Third Reich*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1996), 15.

The study of lesbianism in the context of the Holocaust faces another challenge – that homosexuals in this era “are generally envisaged as men”, and there is therefore a real shortage of historical material and records which refer to lesbians specifically.⁵⁷ Lesbians faced the same homophobic bias as gay men, but were generally overlooked as a threat in comparison to male homosexuality “because lesbians were fewer in number, politically less prominent, and harder to identify”.⁵⁸ Put another way, “gender-specific treatment with respect to homosexuality was based on the different assessment of male and female sexuality in general and can be traced back to the unequal status of men and women”.⁵⁹ Many lesbians were able to successfully hide behind strong European cultural presumptions of heterosexuality, and therefore Nazi policy and opinion did not consider lesbianism an issue which deserved any redress. Remarkable as this may sound given the aggressive Nazi aversion to male homosexuality, in 1935 the Reich Ministry of Justice “rebuffed efforts to include women in the penal code (Paragraph 175) that prohibited male homosexuality”. Rather, “the Nazis relied more on intimidation than legislation” in addressing lesbianism in German society, and so “camouflage became necessary to lesbian survival”.⁶⁰ With a very prescriptive notion of femininity coming to dominate Nazi culture, lesbians changed their appearances and married to avert suspicion of homosexual tendencies. For non-Jewish lesbians, masking their sexuality was usually sufficient for them to be spared from deportations to concentration camps. This is unlike the experience of gay men, who after 1936 were deported to camps, though not en masse, for violation of Paragraph 175.⁶¹

Once interned, Non-Jewish gay men were considered to be curable (unlike those interned for being Jewish, for instance), and so were subject to torturous acts of “rehabilitation” – only 2% of men

⁵⁷ Elman, R. Amy, “Lesbians and the Holocaust”, In *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, 9-17. (Esther Fuchs, *Studies in the Shoah*, Vol. xxii, 1999), 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁹ Schoppmann, Claudia, *Days of Masquerade*, 15.

⁶⁰ Elman, R. Amy, “Lesbians and the Holocaust”, 10.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

found guilty of being gay were considered to be incurable, so rehabilitation was the reality for most gay men in confinement. Rehabilitation included “castrations, testosterone injections, and ‘re-education’ to ‘convert’” homosexuals.⁶² The Nazis would also force homosexual men into sexual activity with women forced into sexual slavery in camp brothels, where activity was monitored to determine if a man had been “sufficiently cured”.⁶³ In this treatment of homosexual men, a discrepancy clearly existed between the persecution and treatment of gay men versus the persecution of lesbians, although in this case the discrepancy favoured women. However, unique victimization occurred in the forced sexual work performed by imprisoned women for men who violated Paragraph 175, and in some memoirs it has been claimed that lesbians were the preferred subjects for this form of sexual servitude.⁶⁴ Furthermore, accounts exist of lesbian prisoners being subjected to SS sanctioned gang rape by French and Russian war prisoners, to “fuck them up good and proper”.⁶⁵ And so while non-Jewish lesbians weren’t subject to criminal prosecution or imprisonment (unless found to be guilty of asocial behaviour or subversion), women still suffered in relation to the treatment of homosexuals by the Nazis. Of all things, this serves to reinforce the invisibility of women, both in the Holocaust and in wider Nazi culture. Unfortunately, this invisibility remains true to lesbian victims of the Holocaust, as homosexuality remains to this day a divisive subject, and as such gendered nuance in the scholarly discourse of homosexuality is lacking.

In the memoirs evaluated for this work, lesbianism is most commonly described as a vehicle for protection and survival in the camps, which surely harkens to the aforementioned dearth of openly homosexual Holocaust accounts. Rena Kornreich Gelissen was propositioned by a kapo called Erika, but is too naïve to comprehend that this woman was desirous of anything but friendship.⁶⁶ Even if the

⁶² Elman, R. Amy, “Lesbians and the Holocaust”, 12.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Schoppmann, Claudia, *Days of Masquerade*, 21.

⁶⁵ Grau, Gunter, *Hidden Holocaust? Gay and Lesbian Persecution in Germany 1933-45*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 83.

⁶⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 82.

author herself was repulsed by the lesbianism that she recounts, it is nearly universally justified as a means of self-preservation. Olga Lengyel refers to these relationships as “troublesome”, blaming the “abnormal conditions” of the camp for altering a women’s “sexual viewpoint”. While Lengyel accepts that some women are “lesbians by instinct” (she calls them “the least interesting group” of perverts), the aforementioned “troublesome” lesbians are women she says have “yielded under the pressure of necessity” after what must have been, she presumes, “a great battle against the temptation”.⁶⁷ Her discussion of lesbianism is dripping with homophobic bias, to the extent that even when she acknowledges that “perhaps my disgust was groundless under the circumstances”, her rationale is that “the horrible distractions provided a few hours of forgetfulness, and that in itself was worth almost anything in the camp”. The only factor which tempered her disdain for lesbian inmates is the victimization they shared with her as fellow internees, but this empathy does not extend to their sexual choices or have any effect on her overall opinion of lesbians. The German authorities of the camp, “among whom was a high percentage of homosexuals”, were simply worse for the fact that they were among the abusing class; in Lengyel’s view, both gay internees and gay Germans were still the same sort of perverts.⁶⁸ While her memoir is full of displays of empathy, her discussion of homosexuality is distinctly self-centered and dismissive. Her disdain for homosexuals is emblematic of the era in which these events occurred, and serves to demonstrate the unique struggles that lesbian women would have faced both in Holocaust-specific persecution, and wider societal exclusion.

There is an opportunism inherent in the description of some relationships between women – in many instances, the relationship in question existed between a younger woman, who is described as extraordinarily beautiful and delicate, and an older partner; there is the suggestion that this woman would be unable to survive without the protection of her older, more privileged partner. For example,

⁶⁷ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 197.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk describes the relationship between Ania, a *blokova*, and a woman called Liza. Ania doted upon Liza while interred at the Bialystok ghetto, “fed and dressed her; [and] did all the hard work for her”. Ania is described as being “proud of Liza’s beauty”. Lesbianism is not explicitly claimed here by the author, harkening back to notions of shame and consequential silence surrounding the topic, but Nomberg-Przytyk does say that “only in the camp was it possible to find such affection among women”⁶⁹ – suggesting that while she had not encountered lesbian relationships in her life before the war, in the camps they were a distinct phenomenon.

The biased supposition that lesbian encounters or relationships in the Holocaust were borne exclusively of opportunity and proximity is applied to lesbianism in other vaguely comparable situations of confinement, such as prisons; in fact, this idea is so prevalent that it has been a significant pitfall to academic discourse of lesbianism in any context throughout the history of the last century (and beyond). R. Amy Elman points out very validly that “no comparable interpretation of male homosexuality is proffered as the consequence of confinement”, and invites her reader to imagine if “we were to likewise dismiss heterosexual intimacy as the outcome of desperate circumstances”.⁷⁰ It is indeed hard to imagine such an understanding being so widely applied to heterosexual relationships born in concentration camps, and so this thought exercise affirms the notion that we still have not fully addressed this imbalance in perception in our own world, let alone in our reading of history. This is an important notion to grasp, as this perceptual imbalance factors largely in any modern analysis of lesbianism in the Holocaust, and unfortunately, given the prevalence of bias against lesbians in history, will always serve to limit our understanding of lesbianism in the Holocaust to an extent.

⁶⁹ Nomberg-Przytyk, Sara, *Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land*, 4.

⁷⁰ Elman, R. Amy, “Lesbians and the Holocaust”, 14.

Rape

According to the Nuremberg Laws, any Aryan having sex with a non-Aryan could be punished by death, and many of the Jewish families thought their daughters were safe because of this concept of Rassenschamde, or “race disgrace”.

- Rena Kornreich Gellisen⁷¹

After death, rape is amongst the most violent threats posed against women in modern warfare. While rape is not exclusively female-centric, the following chapter will deal exclusively with rape perpetuated against women. It is an incredibly graphic and difficult subject, and as such a culture of silence exists around the topic in Holocaust discourse. While this statistical deficiency makes it difficult for historians to perform a thorough analysis of rape in the Holocaust, it is important to acknowledge that rape did occur at the hands of “Germans and their Nazi collaborators, as well as by other Jews, in ghettos and in hiding; by Germans and collaborators, and by Jewish and non-Jewish prisoners, in camps; and by liberators”.⁷² Given the aforementioned race shame present in the culture of the Third Reich, which undoubtedly influenced rates of Aryan-Jewish miscegenation, rape in the Holocaust is a unique case when compared to other instances of Genocide in the twentieth century. Rape was not “used as a strategy of war” by Nazi soldiers as it was in other subsequent genocides, such as those in Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, and therefore is not as statistically common when compared to these examples.⁷³ However, in spite of this dearth of formal information, some of the women evaluated in this thesis are forthcoming, to various extents, about their experiences pertaining to this sexual threat.

For Rena Kornreich Gelissen, the threat of rape by German soldiers following the invasion of Poland was the greatest that she faced before entering the camps. A German soldier forced himself into

⁷¹ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 26.

⁷² Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, 1.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 31.

her family home with nefarious sexual intentions, but she was successfully able to hide from her would-be rapist in the attic. He was so determined to have her that he attacked any potential hiding place of hers with his bayonet, with the hope that her parents would reveal her whereabouts before he stabbed her “in her pretty eye”.⁷⁴ She is mercifully not discovered by this soldier, but it is this event which precipitates the removal of Rena and her sister Danka to Slovakia. Rena was broken-hearted to leave her parents, and strongly resisted the idea of fleeing. Eventually, her mother was able to compel her by articulating the acute threat of sexual violence she faced, which was so great in her opinion that she threatened to “go somewhere and just die” if Rena did not flee, stating “I never want to see my girls raped”.⁷⁵ And so in December of 1940, Rena and Danka left Poland, never to see their parents again. In this instance, the threat of rape was more immediate than any other that the family faced, including deportation and starvation. This serves to demonstrate the depth of trauma inherent to the threat of rape against women, before all other forms of persecution faced at this early stage in the war.

It is well known that Russian troops practiced “systemic gang rapes [as] Russian revenge for German atrocities”, which specifically targeted German women.⁷⁶ However, Ruth Kluger astutely observes that, while other victims of the Nazis shouldn’t have felt threatened under these circumstances, “victors who exact justice by committing crimes against civilians aren’t necessarily that discriminating”.⁷⁷ As such, the threat of Russian rape was universal to Jewish and gentile women, even after liberation from the unspeakable bondage of the camps.

These examples constitute the explicit mentions of rape in the memoirs evaluated here. While other sorts of primary sources have been used in *Wartime Rape and Sexual Violence* by Alana Fangrad and the edited volume *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, the scope of this

⁷⁴ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 27.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁶ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 142.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

thesis excludes police and court documents and non-published testimonies that these works rely upon for their analysis. That being said, the dearth of the topic in memoirs is telling of the shame and horror inherent in this violent act committed against female bodies, and the negative perception of rape victims in post-war society. When so many other forms of sexual violence are discussed openly and in detail by female memoirists, this silence on the subject of rape becomes painfully pronounced.

For female victims of the Holocaust, undeniable realities of their gender served to bring about their increased suffering. While certain examples of this increased suffering were deliberately executed against female bodies by the Nazis, such as medical experimentation and the persecution of pregnant women, other examples were inadvertent, for instance issues of access to facilities during menstruation. In other circumstances still, being a woman lessened the suffering and persecution experienced by a victim, for instance in the example of Nazi treatment of gay men versus lesbians. However, whether or not the Nazis deliberately set out to victimize women in certain specific gendered capacities, the effect was that unique circumstances of suffering were experienced exclusively by women, characterized by feelings of shame and degradation. To form a complete and well-rounded understanding of the experiences of all victims of the Holocaust, it is critical that these unique and often-overlooked aspects of female experience are considered. These gender-specific traumas are not insignificant, and add horrifying nuance to the overall experience of Holocaust victims.

Chapter 5: Female Resistance and Empowerment

We lived to resist and resisted to live.

- Olga Lengyel¹

Given the totality of Nazi oppression, there was less opportunity for explicit resistance in most cases without the immediate consequence of death for the resistor. For women, their physical disadvantage against men meant that they had even less opportunity for traditional violent means of resistance. That being said, organized revolts were staged which included the participation of women at Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and possibly Bergen-Belsen.² Much more common, however, were individual gestures of resistance. On October 23, 1943, a woman by the name of Franceska Mann, who was on her way to the gas chambers, stole the pistol of an SS officer. She shot two of the guards, killing one. The other women in her group followed her lead, seizing the chance to revolt and attacking the SS with their bare hands. In spite of their valour, Mann was murdered in Crematorium II along with all of the other women who fought back, but the “news of this resistance becomes legendary in the camp”.³ There was also a place for female involvement in larger plots; when the *Sonderkommando* blew up Crematorium IV in October of 1944, the explosives used had been smuggled by women.⁴ In fact, Olga Lengyel, who was a member of the organized resistance at Auschwitz, was directly involved in such rebellions by volition of her duties as a messenger and intermediary for parcel exchanges within the Auschwitz resistance movement.⁵ Much more common than such grand or violent acts, however, were more inadvertent forms of resistance which emerge from the stories written by female survivors. Defiance of the Nazis

¹ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 173.

² Milton, Sybil. “Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women”, 231.

³ Rittner, Carol, and Roth, John, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, 31.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 167-169.

and their genocidal ambitions assumed various forms, some of which are more unconventional than others, but all of which are worthy of consideration here for their assertions of the individual and collective humanity of the persecuted.

In some accounts, simple, everyday acts served as important actions of resistance. In the struggle for life and death in the squalor of the camps, staying as clean as possible was a helpful step for women to take in the battle against disease and infection. For Rena Kornreich Gelissen, maintaining personal tidiness is described as a means of maintaining her humanity throughout her incarceration at Auschwitz. She went so far as to create a crease down her striped prison pants, moistening the fold with her own saliva and sleeping, on a cold night, with her pants flat under her mattress to press the crease.⁶ Her rationale is simple: "If I can't be clean, at least I can be neat".⁷ In Olga Lengyel's account, however, the act of personal grooming transcends practicality. There is an emotional component to this action; Lengyel claims that "no spectacle was more comforting than that provided by the women when they undertook to cleanse themselves thoroughly".⁸ The women in her barrack shared one single brush "with a firm determination to resist the dirt and the lice", and in this microcosmic act of resistance are said by Lengyel to be "waging war against the parasites, against our jailer, and against every force that made us its victims".⁹ The significance of this exercise is immense. In this simple gesture these women were able to reclaim, even in small part, a sense of their own humanity. In doing so, they resisted against the overarching Nazi ambition - to strip these women of just that.

Equally, some women are able to maintain a sense of humanity while in confinement by means of performance and artistic expression. Charlotte Delbo explains that, while in Auschwitz, creative pursuits

⁶ Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena's Promise*, 82-83.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁸ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 135.

⁹ *Ibid.*

were impossible, stating that “imagination is the first luxury of a body receiving sufficient nourishment, enjoying a margin of free time, possessing the rudiments from which dreams are fashioned. People did not dream in Auschwitz”.¹⁰ However, when she was transferred to a privileged commando elsewhere, she states that the women in her group “were coming back to life”. Their first impulses in these improved circumstances were to “think of theatre”; put in Delbo’s poetic tone, “The dead do not sing... but no sooner are they resurrected, they do theatre”.¹¹ Here, a direct connection is made by Delbo between survival and creative expression.

Likewise, Mary Berg is active in various artistic endeavours while interned in the Warsaw Ghetto, including a relatively successful theatre group, graphic art courses, and several talent shows.¹² These activities distracted her from the grim reality around her and gave her an opportunity to behave as she would have if she was a free girl, while simultaneously enabling the continuation of her education and personal development in spite of her confinement. Similarly, Gerda Weissmann Klein organized weekly plays with some other prisoners while interred at a weaving factory at Bolkenhain, part of the Gross-Rosen camp complex. Unlike Mary, Gerda’s actions were not explicitly for her own benefit; instead Gerda began writing plays for the benefit of the girls she was interred with. She claimed that, while she certainly did find personal fulfilment in performance, she loved most of all “those upturned faces between the bunks, the smiles and sudden laughter, the knowledge that it was in my power to bring them an hour of fun, to help them forget”.¹³ Gerda later used this tactic to motivate her fellow internees at the end of the war to keep them going in the midst of an arduous death march.¹⁴ The effect that this had on Gerda stayed with her long after her persecution ended. Speaking to the wider

¹⁰ Delbo, Charlotte, *Auschwitz and After*, 168.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹² Berg, Mary, *The Diary of Mary Berg*, 46-47.

¹³ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 141.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

significance of such a simple act, Gerda states that to have been able to bring even fleeting moments of joy and relief to her fellow prisoners “was the greatest thing I have done in my life”.¹⁵

The most unique expression of female resistance discovered in the research for this thesis is a cookbook which was compiled by a group of women in Theresienstadt during their internment. Mina Pächter is the primary author, but she worked in collaboration with her friends in the ghetto to create a “collective memoir”.¹⁶ In this way, the recipes included speak not only to Mina’s experience, but to the collective condition of an unknown number of women who were acquainted with Mina. Recipes for desserts, dumplings, and traditional Jewish dishes are all included; however, certain realities of wartime confinement find their way into the recipes. Some call for imitation ingredients on account of wartime shortages, and eggs are often included in parenthesis as optional on account of rationing. While all of the recipes were written by Jewish women, some are not kosher, which indicates that some of the contributing authors were from other, more assimilated parts of Europe.¹⁷ The condition of the recipes is a unique window into the conditions of the ghetto. Some of the recipes are missing ingredients, some are missing steps, some contain spelling and grammatical errors, and some are simply confused, which enables the reader to “discern [the] distress” of these women “from the recipes”, even in the absence of any personal information.¹⁸ Equally, the women occasionally inject their recipes with personal inflections; for instance, a recipe for cold stuffed eggs includes the instruction “let fantasy run free”.¹⁹ In this capacity, even the recipes recorded here “bear witness” to the conditions of the ghetto.²⁰

¹⁵ Weissmann Klein, Gerda, *All But My Life*, 142.

¹⁶ De Silva, Cara (ed.), *In Memory’s Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), xl.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xli.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xli.

In a forward by the scholar Michael Berenbaum, the contents of this book are described as a “manifestation of defiance” and a “spiritual revolt”.²¹ Likewise, the editor of this volume asserts that “the creation of such a cookbook was an act of psychological resistance, forceful testimony to the power of food to sustain us, not just physically but spiritually”.²² The title of this collection, *A Legacy from the Women of Terezin*, is itself indicative of resistance. These were women whose legacies the Nazis intended to destroy, and yet somehow they were able to look beyond their own starvation and confinement and “dream of a world after the camps”.²³

Ruth Kluger also observes this passive form of female resistance in Christianstadt. She says that the women in her block “exchanged recipes the same way I recited poems”; Kluger is a poet and became a professor of literature following the war, and so this comparison suggests that Kluger saw the recipe recitals which took place among the women at the camp as natural expressions of their core identities. She further explains that “at night a favourite game was to surpass each other with recital of generous amounts of butter, eggs, and sugar in fantasy baking contests”, which she marveled at, as she was young and as such unfamiliar with many of the dishes they recited recipes for.²⁴ For these grown women, who had lived much longer lives out of confinement than Kluger (who was only 13 while in Christianstadt), these recitals served to return them to their pre-war identities. To recite a favourite recipe from this former life was to reconnect with that life, and maintain the dignity and humanity inherent in existence outside of confinement and persecution.

For some women, the very act of writing their personal accounts and recording what happened in the Holocaust was a means of resistance. Ruth Minsky Sender, who dabbled in poetry as a free young

²¹ De Silva, Cara (ed.), *In Memory's Kitchen*, xv-xvi.

²² *Ibid.*, xxvi.

²³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

²⁴ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 117.

girl in Lodz, managed to acquire brown paper bags on which to write while interred at Mittelsteine. Her friend, the person with the ability to acquire the bags, was confused when Ruth first asked if she could have one; “Poetry? Here?”.²⁵ But she soon came to understand Ruth’s imperative for writing and became excited by the thought that maybe Ruth’s poems would “survive to tell our story”.²⁶ With this justification for their use, Ruth’s friend not only agreed to retrieve any brown paper bags that she could from the garbage cans of the SS – she also stole a pencil from the desk of her foreman on Ruth’s behalf, assuming a great risk to her person in doing so. With the new possibility of being able to write, Ruth states: “my feet seem lighter now, my empty stomach forgotten”.²⁷ This small gesture critically gives her new stamina and will to cope with the conditions of her confinement; “my heart is so full of joy, their insults cannot touch me. I have a pencil! I want to shout for joy. I have paper! I have friends! I am going to write again.”²⁸

Minsky Sender’s small act of resistance against the dehumanizing conditions of the camps is so profound that it transcended the personal realm. When she began to write again, the other women in her barrack were rapt, demanding that she recite the poems aloud for them. She describes the response to her first recital: “heads poke out from cubicles. Swollen red eyes stare at me, waiting... sobs fill the room”; when she finished, one of the women remarked “you speak for all of us... They cannot kill our spirit, our hunger to survive”.²⁹ In this example, the acute effect of this means of resistance on not only the author, but those in proximity to the author, is evidenced. Ruth’s articulation of the shared emotions of the internees served to spurn them on, encouraging their survival and reinstating a sense of

²⁵ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 186.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 187.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 195.

meaning to them collectively. Simultaneously, Ruth's writing enabled her to transcend her suffering and grief, empowering her towards survival, and ultimately bearing witness.

The full extent of the power of Ruth's poetry was revealed when she developed a potentially fatal blood infection. Without surgery, she would die, and the facilities to perform such a procedure did not exist at the camp. The camp doctor managed to convince the commandant to take Ruth to a civilian hospital for treatment, which was unheard of for a Jew interred at a concentration camp. The basis for this miraculous event was Ruth's writing: the doctor said to the commandant: "I told you about [Ruth's] poetry because I wanted you to see her as a person, not just as another inmate. I also wanted you to know what her poetry does for the morale of the other girls".³⁰ When the commandant is dismissive of this justification for intervention, the doctor continued: "Is it not important that those girls be able to work for you? Madam Commandant, if those girls can no longer work, you will have no camp to lead... as long as the girls have a will to live, they can still work."³¹ Incredibly, this appeal was successful, and an amazing episode in Holocaust history takes place: a Jew was taken, under Nazi guard, from the confines of a concentration camp to a civilian hospital, and an operation was performed which saved her life.

At Mittlesteine, the internees put on a Christmas performance for their captors, and Ruth performed a poem in Yiddish which opened with the following passage:

"A message for Mama.
Blue little clouds, floating so free
Won't you please carry a message for me
if on your journey you should
happen to see

³⁰ Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 203.

³¹ Ibid.

my mother.”³²

Ruth describes her performance in collective terms, stating: “my personal message to Mama is the message of the four hundred Nazi victims in this camp to four hundred mothers crying for their children”. By Ruth’s account, the Commandant was so moved by her recitation that she visited with Ruth privately, giving her a notebook and telling her: “you do not have to hide your poetry... I was sure that we killed all your emotions...Your poems are full of hope, of love. You still feel. You still dream. You yearn for your mother. You reminded me that I, too have a mother”.³³ This is extremely hard to fathom given what we know of the depths of cruelty that existed within the camps, but taking Sender at her word, this was an exceptional incident which demonstrates that even in such confinement, a small gesture of resistance was able to effect significant and meaningful change in the life of Ruth Minsky Sender.

In *Five Chimneys*, Olga Lengyel goes to great lengths to quantify the extermination which takes place around her, which similarly is a meaningful act of resistance for Lengyel. In a chapter called “A New Reason for Living”, itself suggestive of defiance, Lengyel describes how she became a messenger for the camp resistance movement.³⁴ Her position in the hospital, with its heavy and various traffic, made her ideal for a position whereby she could pass on news and information. Through this work, she made connections with several men working in the resistance, and as such was privy to unique information that many other prisoners did not possess. This adds a unique dimension to Lengyel’s memoir, as it simultaneously acts as early historical record – a categorization which, for Lengyel, gives her purpose. She presents detailed statistics of the murder taking place in the gas chambers, as well as a detailed account of the experience of those who were gassed, informed by contacts in the *sonderkommando* and

³² Minsky Sender, Ruth, *The Cage*, 231.

³³ *Ibid.*, 234.

³⁴ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 79-89.

other witnesses in the resistance. While the statistics she presents are extrapolations, and have since been superseded by more accurate numbers acquired through subsequent historical research, the effort she made to record this information is itself an act of resistance. She states that her involvement in the resistance gave her “two reasons to live”: the first was to help the resistance as long as she could, and the second was to serve as record-keeper of the atrocities committed in Auschwitz, to “go free and tell the world ‘This is what I saw with my own eyes. It must never be allowed to happen again!’”³⁵

Lengyel’s work makes the explicit connection between testimony and resistance. Where so many others were silenced, Lengyel spoke up, and as such performed the most profound act of resistance possible: bearing witness.

Katherina Von Kellenbach argues that alongside traditional masculine-centric, armed and violent notions of Jewish resistance in the Holocaust stands a female-centric form of resistance in “maintaining, nurturing, and sustaining life”.³⁶ For Von Kellenbach, both of these forms of resistance are necessary in the fight against genocide, and significantly she challenges the “falsely gendered connotations” of each of these categories of resistance.³⁷ Olga Lengyel similarly contends that survival and self-care are defiant actions; “To eat and not let oneself become enfeebled – that, too, was a way to resist”.³⁸ The various examples of resistance detailed in the preceding chapter all share the same imperative of female-centric resistance articulated by Von Kellenbach - to maintain, nurture and sustain life. The actions of brave women such as Francescka Mann affirm Von Kellenbach’s contention that violent resistance is not an exclusively masculine domain. Other, more passive actions of resistance to maintain morale and encourage survival undertaken by the likes of Charlotte Delbo, Gerda Weissmann Klein, Mary Berg, Olga

³⁵ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 89.

³⁶ Von Kellenbach, Katharina, “Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust”, 26.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Lengyel, Olga, *Five Chimneys*, 170.

Lengyel or Ruth Minsky Sender serve to demonstrate that women were actively engaged in all manner of resistance to Nazi dehumanization, and that no gesture of resistance which served to maintain, nurture or sustain life is insignificant. Those who resisted through the simple act of recording their experiences of confinement, including all of the memoirists evaluated in this thesis, adhere to this imperative to maintain and nourish life in their ambition to create a recorded legacy of Holocaust experience for posterity. In the face of so much overwhelming pain, suffering, and death, this act of remembrance is the single most effective means of continued resistance against the Nazi ambition to erase their victims from the pages of history.

Conclusion

Listen to me, don't take it apart, absorb it as I am telling it and remember it.

- Ruth Kluger¹

Following this detailed analysis of the experience of women in the Holocaust, it is worth considering the ways in which these women broadly position themselves amidst the chaos of their experiences. Some women, like Olga Lengyel, Ruth Kluger and Charlotte Delbo, present themselves as strong, empowered survivors, and hold back very little from their testimonies. Their memoirs are full of analysis and philosophical considerations of various aspects of their traumas – these considerations are incredibly useful in extrapolating elements of their experience which are not self-evident, for instance the psychology and inner dialogue of female victims as well as insights into their thought processing and decision making. Their stories are full of examples of agency and choice, even in the midst of their bondage. Others, like Ruth Minsky Sender, Hetty Verolme or Rena Kornreich Gellissen present themselves with much less agency. Their testimonies convey the confusion and fear which permeated their persecution, but are much more passive than the experiences presented by other women. Their lack of critical consideration of their experiences – not asking aloud the hard questions that are borne of their experiences – speaks to the degree of trauma experienced by these women, and how they carried on, having lived through such absolute horror.

It is also worth considering the total effect of the experiences these women endured. Many of these women were born in an age which was generally extremely stifling and prescriptive for women, but emerge from the camps to a world in which self-determination was possible, and previously

¹ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 109.

unfathomable opportunities abounded. Rena Kornreich Gelissen came of age in a world in which her prospects were extremely limited by pre-war chivalric and religious norms; in her post-war life, she moved to America, fell in love and married a gentile – all by her own volition.² The pressures to conform that she faced in the past were also destroyed in the Holocaust.

In a world which still struggles with gendered bias, but which is ever-increasingly moving towards equality of the sexes, the legacy of these women is as significant as ever. Obstacles which stood in the way of their testimony have gradually dissipated over the decades. When Rena Kornreich Gelissen finished recounting her story, she was overcome; “no one ever listened to the whole thing before”.³ Ruth Kluger states that most of her readers are “likely to be female, since males on the whole, tend to prefer books written by fellow males”.⁴ While Kluger’s observation has generally been true throughout history, even within in the realm of academia, where male voices have been the predominant influence in the construction of our history, this thesis contributes to a trend within Holocaust history which seeks to redress this historic inequality. It is visionary women like those evaluated in this thesis who are instrumental to this shift by making the decision to share their stories; determining that their perspectives are worthy of consideration, their voices worthy of being heard, and their experiences worthy of historic record. We owe an enormous debt to these women, who have laid their very personal suffering and losses bare so that we, both now and in the future, might better understand the experiences of women in this most violent episode of history.

This thesis will conclude as it began, with the illuminating voice of Charlotte Delbo, whose work was most inspirational to this thesis:

² Kornreich Gelissen, Rena, *Rena’s Promise*, 248.

³ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁴ Kluger, Ruth, *Still Alive*, 71.

*And if the dead demanded of those who returned that they give an account, they would be incapable of doing so.*⁵

While the preceding pages have humbly attempted to illuminate a broad understanding of female experience in the Holocaust, words are ultimately inadequate tools to this end. Despite this element of futility, however, we owe it to these women to, in the very least, face the horror which they survived, so that everything possible is done to spare future generations from such unspeakable terror borne of arbitrary hatred.

⁵ Delbo, Charlotte, *None of us Will Return*, 72.

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