

Fiona White

Dr. Harvey

Final Essay

12/15/22

Women and Gender During the Holocaust: Women in the Camps

Within the topic of the Holocaust, it is important to examine how the intersection of gender effected the victims and their experiences. While gender effected all experiences related to the Holocaust, such as women's roles within resistance movements as well as their experiences with passing or hiding within the regime, the lives of those in the concentration camps were heavily impacted. Therefore, due to the wealth of information on such topics, this essay will focus on the camps, and those within them. Examining this context, it is clear to see that during the Nazi reign, Jewish women were in a position of doubly increased risk, as they were both Jewish, and hence slated for the demise the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question" entailed, as well as women, making their experiences while in the camps unique to them. Overall, records reveal that Jewish women were less likely to survive the camps, many being selected for the gas chambers during the first selection. This was due to a variety of factors, including the fact that within the Nazi worldview, women were deemed the inherently weaker sex, therefore making them less desirable for work in the slave labor camps that would have enabled them to survive longer. Their role as mothers often ended up sentencing them to death as well. This was due to Nazi policies stating that "all visibly pregnant women (as well as women with small children) were selected for

immediate killing”¹. These policies that were geared at selecting out those unfit to work, or what the Nazis deemed “useless eaters,” and thereby ensured that most women and small children never integrated into the camps.

The women that did make it into the camps were targeted in many ways that were unique to them as women, and Jewish women at that. Most of the official ways in which these Jewish women were targeted had to do with their reproductive capacity. This is because, due to the genocidal ambitions of the Nazis, women and children are seen as dangerous vectors for continuation of the population that they were trying to eradicate. In the book, *Women and the Holocaust*, it states that “Genocide, as opposed to other forms of war, specifically attacks women in their traditional role as child bearers and child rearers”². This meant that, in cases of genocide, such as the Holocaust, women were higher on the list of targets, since they had the ability to bring new life into the world. Women’s role as child bearers were exacerbated in the case of Jewish mothers, as traditionally, Jewishness was passed through the mother. Although Nazis counted all people of Jewish descent, regardless of which parent was Jewish, the association with Jewishness and motherhood put Jewish women at great risk. Orthodox women, especially, were more likely to face heavier consequences, as they were overall less assimilated in clothes and speech than more secular Jews, and usually had more children. This made them more likely to be selected for the gas chambers early on. This environment made it extremely hostile for women, and they faced severe consequences for reproducing, as well as targeted attacks to prevent such an event. Within the camps themselves, being or becoming pregnant was extremely dangerous, and even deadly,

¹ “Women in the Holocaust,” *Jewish Women’s Archive*, n.d., <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/women-in-holocaust>.

² Esther Fuchs et al., *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation (Studies in the Shoah Series) (VOLUME XXI)*, pg. 20, (University Press Of America, 1999).

with pregnancy being regarded as “a death sentence in Auschwitz-Birkenau, as women discovered to be pregnant were automatically sent to the gas chambers”³. Indeed, most concentration camps held similar policies of death for women discovered to be pregnant.

One way that pregnant women attempted to avoid the selections was to perform an abortion. These abortions were illegal, dangerous, and most often, the only chance at survival women in these positions had. This is because, even if the mother could avoid the selections and give birth to her baby, “newborns and mothers were also sent to the gas chamber. Thus, performing a secret abortion could save a woman’s life”⁴. Practices like these were performed frequently by fellow inmates who were doctors or midwives before the camps. In some cases, however, abortions were too late, as the woman had progressed too far along. In these cases, in order to save the life of the mother, the women or nurses that delivered the baby “conspired to deliver the babies in silence and secrecy, in the barracks, rather than the infirmary”⁵. Delivering in the barracks was safer, as venturing to the infirmary would alert the camp authorities, who would then send the mother and baby to the gas chambers. These women would then kill the infant and tell the mother that the baby had been stillborn, allowing the mother to go on without a baby. This was in an attempt to avoid selections, due to the policies against children. One of the only camps to allow pregnancies was Theresienstadt, who’s grounds held a mother and baby ward. The camp, however, only allowed women who were already pregnant upon entering to live. They disallowed conceiving while within the camp, as “in Theresienstadt, births as a result of conception within the

³ Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, 1st ed., pg.162, (Brandeis University Press, 2010).

⁴ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 162.

⁵ Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, pg. 329, (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 1998).

camp were forbidden, and any woman who conceived was forced to have an abortion”⁶. If she refused, she would be deported to death camps further East, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, thereby ensuring her death. Ravensbrück, “the largest Nazi concentration camp established for women”⁷ was also a place where many clandestine abortions are recorded as happening. This is due, once again, to the Nazi policy of death for any woman found to be pregnant.

Another way in which Jewish women were targeted was in regard to the experiments that many were forced to undergo while imprisoned in the camps. These experiments were unique to women and their gender, as they focused on women’s unique reproductive capacity as well as their roles in motherhood. In many experiments, such as those performed by Carl Clauberg at Auschwitz, the goal was to find a way to effectively perform mass sterilization on the Jewish population. In these experiments, methods such as X-rays were used to render women’s ovaries unable to function. As a result of these experiments, Clauberg “reported that he would be able to sterilize hundreds, if not thousands, of women each day”⁸. Other experiments conducted on women focused on them and their children. In one set of experiments by Dr. Mengele, a woman was disallowed from nursing her child, as he “was interested in finding out how long a newborn child could stay alive without sustenance”⁹. These cruel experiments were tantamount to torture for those involved, and after their conclusions, patients were not usually spared, instead being sent to the gas chambers.

⁶ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 162.

⁷ “Women during the Holocaust,” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, n.d., <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/women-during-the-holocaust>.

⁸ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 161.

⁹ Fuchs et al., *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation (Studies in the Shoah Series) (VOLUME XXI)*, pg. 29.

In addition to the violence and persecution women faced as a result of the Nazi regime, sexual violence was also widespread within the camps. Within many cases of sexual assault, prisoners associated the victims of such attacks with being attractive, assault a sign of beauty. In Auschwitz, one prisoner recounted that “she associated being raped with being pretty”¹⁰. The presence of hair was one of the main factors that inmates discussed, as hair was to them a feminine feature, “A characteristic associated with physical attractiveness”¹¹. This was due to the regular shaving of prisoners’ heads, alienating many of the women from the ways in which they perceived themselves as attractive. The presence of attractive features was a way in which the prisoners explained the assaults that they witnessed, as they shared the association that only “pretty girls” were raped. This can be in part due to the fact that while in the concentration camps, the women were stripped of the markers of their gender identities, both outer, physical possessions such as makeup and clothes, as well as physical attributes like their hair and curves. Indeed, upon entering the camps, the women are described as suffering from starvation that “frequently caused cessation of menstruation and loss of body weight, including in the breast and hips, two regions stereotypically associated with femininity and attractiveness”¹². This caused women to frequently feel the loss of their gender. Therefore, when sexual assault did occur, many scholars posit that it may have acted as a gendering experience, reminding the inmates that they were in fact women, with “sexualized violence and the affirmation of gender identity”¹³ having a closely intertwined relationship within the camps. This gendering remained present in the preserving of femininity for

¹⁰ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 77.

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¹² Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 80.

¹³ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg.81.

those experiencing sexual violence. In explaining the sexual assaults, survivors have stated that “she considered herself attractive, and that, in her opinion, is why the German soldier wanted to rape her”¹⁴. Frequently, those who were being abused within the camps in settings such as brothels, were considered attractive, and were therefore given larger rations in order to retain “the means to ensure their feminine attractiveness”¹⁵. This gendering of the victims of assault, however, was not limited to the women inmates. Men who were on the receiving end of abuse were also subject to the feminization inherent in these assaults. In *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, it is stated that “When survivors recount the sexual abuse of men, the victims are also described as attractive or even feminine”¹⁶. This association of victims of assault, of any gender, with femininity asserts the theory of feminization of the victims. In the cases of male assault during the Holocaust, these cases were less numerous than the number of cases present with women, and the systematic abuse, such as the presence of brothels, was absent. This leads to the affirmation of the unique challenges faced by women during the Holocaust. Jewish women especially were at higher risk, as Jews of any gender were at the bottom of camp hierarchies. While their Jewishness put them in a vulnerable position, it also may have lessened their risk for some sexual assaults, due to race laws that prevented German guards from having relationships with Jewish women. These laws, however, did not prevent all guards and even other prisoners or workers from being potential threats.

Overall, the ways in which the women caught up in the Holocaust suffered and were persecuted were unique to them as women due to the difference in experiences that they faced.

¹⁴ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg 84.

¹⁵ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 85.

¹⁶ Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust (HBI Series on Jewish Women)*, pg. 85.

Jewish women especially were one of the most targeted groups throughout the Holocaust due to their capacity to reproduce and bring forth the next generation of Jews into the world at a time when the Third Reich was actively trying to eradicate all Jews. This led to the horrific experiences suffered by these women as they underwent forced abortions and pregnancies, as well as their systematic forced sterilization. Jewish women also faced the threat of rape and other sexual assaults while in the Concentration camps as a result of both their Jewishness and womanhood.

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