

The Experiences of Women During the Holocaust



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April, 2004

Introduction

The study of women and the Holocaust has barely begun, and the complexities and contours of the subject... will keep historians and other analysts occupied for many years.

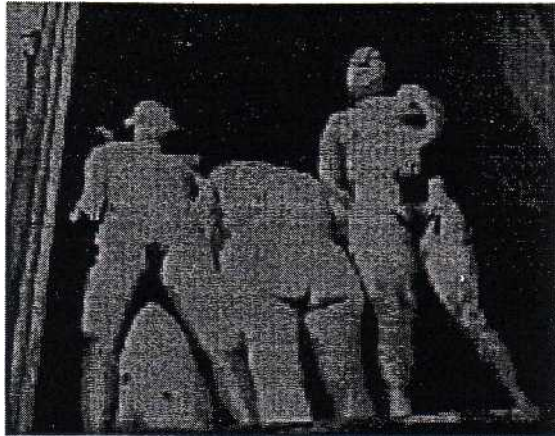
Sybil Milton (as cited in
Rittner & Roth, 1993)

The Holocaust can be defined as the systematic, bureaucratic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of approximately six million Jews by the Nazi regime and its collaborators. Holocaust is a word of Greek origin meaning, *sacrifice by fire* (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2004). The Holocaust occurred when German Nazi's believed that many individuals (e.g., mentally and physically challenged, homosexuals), religions (e.g., Judaism, Catholic), and cultures (e.g., Gypsies, Slavakians) were unworthy of existence. The Nazi's considered themselves to be a superior race and were guilty of genocide through horrendous acts of human extermination.

During this tragic period, women in particular faced dangerous and dreadful times. Although, women and men shared many ghastly events, each gender encountered unique emotions and experiences. For example, women demonstrated an extraordinary caring for one another due to their, "...preoccupation with hunger and obtaining food, the importance of social bonding, heightened fear of physical vulnerability and sex-specific humiliation, and reliance on prewar homemaking skills as coping strategies" (Ofer & Weitzman, 1998, p. 335). Goldenberg (1998) discussed the connectedness, nurturance, and care giving in women's memoirs and stated, "... such bonding was not exclusive to women but is difficult to find consistent evidence of men's caring about one another to the extent that women did" (p. 337).

Women were tortured and victims of extreme violence (Kaplan, 1998). Ofer and Weitzman (1998) recounted, "...women's shame and humiliation while standing naked, being shaved,

having to endure body searches, and being terrorized by the rumors of rape" (p. 270). Because the Nazi's viewed women as unintelligent and worthless, they were expected to *produce* children, clean, and care for their husbands. Further, they were forbidden to continue their education or attend university. By disallowing educational opportunities, women were unable to learn about world events or how other women were treated. Without an education, many women struggled with low self-esteem.



Different Ways in Which Women Suffered

*Men and women did suffer the "same hell " at Auschwitz
but the horrors were often remarkably different.*

(Gisella as cited in
Rittner & Roth, 1993)

This section describes how women were physically and emotionally injured. Included are dreadful examples of torture, maltreatment, and cruelty. As described below, examples consist of maltreatment within ghettos, shearing, forced sterilization, lack of hygiene articles, rape, and gassing.



Ghetto Life

Jewish citizens were forced to move into ghettos prior to their relocation to concentration camps. Ghettos were enclosed by fences, buildings, walls, or barbed wire (Aktion Reinhard Camps, 2004). The gates of the Warsaw ghetto, for example, were guarded by Polish, German, and Jewish Police (Ofer, 1998). It has been recorded that, "Conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto were so bad that between 1940 and 1942 an estimated 100,000 Jews died of starvation and disease in the Warsaw Ghetto" (Jewish Ghettos, 2004). Such estimates are highly inaccurate because many deaths were not accounted for. For example, "In many ghettos the Germans instituted a policy of compulsory abortion" (Weitzman & Ofer, 1998, p. 7). Also, infants were murdered prior to or at birth. Rittner and Roth (1993), highlighted Dr. Perl's *choiceless choice* when having to preserve a life by taking a life and recalled this physician's experience, "I took the warm little body in my hands, kissed the smooth face, caressed the long hair - then strangled him and buried his body under a mountain of corpses waiting to be cremated" (p. 115). Because males were at high risk of being deported to forced-labor camps, married women assumed responsibility for completing outdoor chores such as standing in line for food so their husbands could remain hidden indoors (Ofer, 1998).

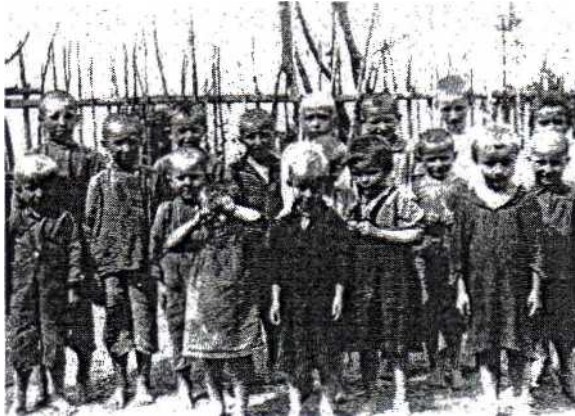
Women within ghettos were also targets of rape and public humiliation by the Gestapo. Chapnik (1998) stated, "In the ghetto all Jews were potential victims of Nazi sadism. Members of the Gestapo would come to the ghetto - alone or with friends - for entertainment. This entertainment consisted of taking potshots at a child, raping a woman, cutting the beard off an old man, humiliating people in the street, and so on" (p. 113). It has been noted that to avoid hysteria as a result of their despair, women remained active (Ofer, 1998).

Forced Sterilization

The Nazi sterilization law was enforced on January 1, 1934 and was designed to *prevent lives unworthy of life* (Rittner & Roth, 1993). The Nazi's used two types of forced sterilization to prevent women from having children. Some women were unknowingly sterilized when highly toxic chemicals were secretly put in their food. These chemicals resulted in excruciating pain, internal haemorrhaging, itching, the formation of holes in the mouth cavity and long lasting anguish (e.g., Cohen, 2003; Greenhouse, 2003). The second type of forced sterilization involved the use of x-rays to burn and destroy a woman's ovaries. Both methods of sterilization were used to break a woman's spirit and attack her femininity.

Gas Chambers

Gas chambers were used by the Nazi's to exterminate prisoners. Ravensbrueck was the largest concentration camp for women in all of the German Reich, in which over 100,000 women from over 20 countries were imprisoned, and where 5-6,000 women perished in the gas chambers. According to Ofer and Weitzman (1998), "The gas chambers were made to look like showers, and the victims were told that they were going through a process of disinfection" (p. 269).



Shearing

The Nazi's would shear women using rusty razor blades. They worked quickly and would shave a victim's entire body including her pubic hair. The purpose of shearing was to degrade, humiliate, and annihilate a woman's sense of femininity and will. Recalling the despair of one woman prisoner, Goldenberg (1998) wrote, "After the humiliating process of being shaved, she felt so dehumanized, so alone and so deeply depressed, that she prepared a noose with which to hang herself" (p. 328).



Menstruation

After entering a concentration camp, being sheared, and experiencing astounding stress, some women ceased menstruating. Women who did menstruate had to contend with blood streaming down their legs because they were not provided with proper hygiene articles. Consequently, these women would be humiliated, criticized, and assaulted by Nazi soldiers for appearing unclean. Although these women were distraught as a result of their treatment and appearance, they considered themselves fortunate because they knew that they could still bear children.

Rape

Women were often raped in concentration camps and consequently, endured intense physical injury and broken spirits. In some concentration camps, brothels were set up for soldiers and select prisoners. Brothels were actually designed for organized rape and were places where women lacked control over their bodies. Women who were considered pretty and possessed strong bodies would be *inspected for physical appearance* and *tried out*. In essence, these women would be exploited and raped.

Prostitution and Survival

While imprisoned in concentration camps, women would commonly prostitute themselves while asking for favours in return. For example, in exchange for sexual favors, women would plea for food or to live another day. It must be emphasized that these courageous women sacrificed their bodies to feed their children and survive Holocaust atrocities.

Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre

To gather additional research information for this paper, my family and I travelled to Winnipeg and visited the Holocaust Museum within the Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre. I read, observed, and learned many interesting things while exploring the museum. For example, I learned that guards at concentration camps were volunteers and that the Nazi's also discriminated against the physically and mentally challenged. I also found artifacts including the passports and clothing very interesting and well preserved. The pictures that appeared in the colorful quilt were very impressive. My visit to the museum reminded me that the unspeakable events of the Holocaust *must not* be forgotten.

Conclusion

Writing this paper involved extensive research, time, and effort. Although difficult at times, completing this project was most revealing. It was sad and troubling to learn how women were

treated under Nazi reign. For example, I was dismayed to learn that women were considered useless and unintelligent.

I realized that all people are equal and that hatred, discrimination, and the violation of human rights can begin with the belief or idea that a race is superior. While completing this project, I considered how much my parents love me and my good fortunes. Moreover, my parents and siblings value me as an intelligent and productive woman. Most importantly, I cannot take what I have for granted! I am blessed and I live in a warm and safe home. The purpose of reading *herstory* is to prevent hatred, intolerance, and the recurrence of atrocities such as the Holocaust.

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