



The Gender of Survival

Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust

Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel

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Reviewed by Rochelle G. Ruthchild

The Holocaust remains a largely male story, although women were probably the majority of its victims. Its most well-known chroniclers, from historians to survivors, have been overwhelmingly of the XY type, and their accounts largely reflect the male experience of this horrific time. Even after the explosion of gender studies, in most Holocaust scholarship women are an afterthought. Timothy Snyder, for example, in his recent, critically acclaimed *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (2011) devotes part of a paragraph to the subject of women partisans. In his only discussion of women and the Holocaust, he claims, on the basis of one German source, that “In partisan units the standard form of address to girls and women was ‘whore.’” None of the reviews in major publications have noticed this rather significant omission.

If women’s Holocaust experience has been marginalized, the topic of sexual violence, an issue still surrounded by taboos, silence, and shame, is even more so. If it is discussed in the context of the war and the Holocaust, the main focus is the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers, especially toward the end of World War II. The subject of sexual violence by Jewish men against Jewish women in the camps is especially unthinkable. At least one scholar dismissed the idea completely, claiming that in the camps women were too malnourished to be sexually attractive to anyone.

For these reasons, among others, Rochelle Saidel and Sonja Hedgepeth’s *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* is a significant addition to the scholarly literature. Dedicated to all those who experienced sexual violence during this period—“those who were silenced, those who have spoken out, and those who have chosen to remain silent,” it is a comprehensive review of the subject.

An art installation in the Jewish Museum Berlin by Menashe Kadishman titled “Shalechet” meaning “Fallen Leaves.” The faces are a memorial to the Holocaust made from steel and completely covering the ground. Visitors are asked to walk on the faces, creating an eerie clanking sound.

Saidel and Hedgepeth, in their Introduction, set the parameters and argue for the importance of the topic. They note, for example, that scholarship, memorials, and museums have been mum about sexual violence. “In the Auschwitz memorial in Poland,” they observe, “guides are trained to discuss mass genocide, but block 24a, the official camp brothel, is not mentioned. Nor has *Yad Vashem* [the official Israeli Holocaust memorial established in 1953] dealt openly with sexual abuse.” Similarly, Shulamit Reinharz, in her Foreword, notes that the issue of sexual abuse was always there, but “no one had pointed it out and labeled it as such.”

The book is divided into five sections, with contributions by fifteen scholars in addition to the editors. The sections are “Aspects of Sexual Abuse,” “Rape of Jewish Women,” “Assaults on Motherhood,” “Sexual Violence in Literature and Cinema,” and “The Violated Self.” Those who contributed essays include a good cross-section of European, US, Canadian, and Israeli scholars: Nomi Levenkron, Brigitte Halbmyer, Robert Sommer, Kirsty Chatwood, Monika J. Flaschka, Helene J. Sinnreich, Zoë Waxman, Helga Amesberger, Ellen Ben-Sefer, S. Lillian Kremer, Miryam Sivan, Yvonne Kozlovsky-Golan, Eva Fogelman, Esther Dror, and Ruth Linn. Anatoly Podolsky contributes the one essay from the former Soviet Union. Topics discussed include prostitution, pregnancy, childbirth, forced sterilization, abortions, and trading sex for favors, as well as rape—by Germans, their collaborators,

Jewish police, “rescuers,” partisan men, and female guards abusing female prisoners. Throughout, questions of memory, survivor guilt, torment, and resistance in the midst of unspeakable horror pervade the essays.

The essays go far in demonstrating the complexities of the powerless position of most Jewish women during the Holocaust. In the case of the partisans, many women who had fled to the forests did feel the need to find a male protector in order to survive. Levenkron observes that “a woman who provided sexual favors for food was defined one-dimensionally as a prostitute rather than as a person who struggled for survival.” Was this prostitution, a consensual sexual relationship, desperation in the face of death? The contributions to this book go far in complicating simple answers. As Levenkron notes, “When a woman is found in a situation of ‘choiceless choices,’ there is only the appearance of choice.”

And what was resistance? As Zoë Waxman notes, the focus on women partisans also ignores a larger group of female survivors, those who passed as “Aryan.” In Poland and other countries as well, the majority of those who outwitted the Germans in this manner were women. The patriarchal laws that marked Jewish men with circumcision made it difficult for them to evade detection—obviously not an issue for women. As Waxman notes, “a refusal to pursue gender as a line of inquiry has meant ignoring the often gendered nature of lived experience. This avoidance of gender analysis is particularly evident when exploring the question of hiding during the Holocaust.”

While the collection catalogues all kinds of horrors and torments, even in these extreme conditions, there are examples of all levels of resistance. A remarkable example of open resistance is that described by Chatwood in "Schillinger and the Dancer." In the undressing room before the gas chambers in Auschwitz, two drunken SS officers enter and order an especially beautiful woman to undress. She mesmerizes them with a mock striptease, in the middle of which, in a lightning move, using her high heeled shoe as a weapon, she hits one SS man in the head, grabs his gun, shoots and kills the other and wounds the first. Although neither she nor the other women in the room survive, several Jewish prisoners witness the act; it becomes the stuff of legend. The very symbols of female objectification—the high heeled shoe, the striptease, the naked woman's body—become weapons in the most extreme of environments.

Several of the essays discuss evolving Israeli attitudes towards the Holocaust and the subject of sexual abuse. In her essay, "Stoning the Messenger": Yehiel Dinur's *House of Dolls* and *Piepel*," for example, Miryam Sivan observes that "fiction has sometimes filled the lacunae of historical documentation and discourse regarding Jewish sexual slavery and abuse during the Holocaust." Dinur, also known as Ka-Tzetnik 135633, from his Auschwitz designation and number, has been a particular target of vituperation within Israel. Sivan attributes this to his writing about sexual slavery and the especially taboo subject of pedophilic sexual slavery. This is the only place in this collection where male-on-male sexual violence is discussed. The most vicious criticism of Dinur's work comes from those who did not

experience the Holocaust, who denigrate Dinur's *kitschy* style rather than attempt to come to terms with his subject matter.

Despite popular notions in the West, most of the Nazi killings and atrocities took place in the "bloodlands" of the East—Poland and the Soviet Union—before the construction of concentration camps. Babi Yar (literally the Old Woman's Ravine), near Kiev, the Ukrainian capital, was the site of numerous mass shootings by the Nazis. The first took place on September 29 and 30, 1941—ten days after the Germans occupied Kiev. An estimated 34,000 Jews perished in two days of shooting. When I visited Kiev in 1967, Babi Yar was a wooded area, with many big grassy lumps among the trees, and no official signs indicating that anything had happened there. Anatoly Podolsky traces the history of Soviet denial of Nazi genocidal policies specifically directed at the Jews and the emergence of Holocaust scholarship in post-Soviet Ukraine. But even in recent studies, Jewish women are often invisible, and information about rape and other sexual violence from memoirs, diaries, and oral testimony is relegated to footnotes or ignored completely. Podolsky challenges the "ridiculousness" of assertions that the Nazis did not sexually abuse Jewish women because of their policies regarding race defilement.

Some of the most heartbreaking essays are about mothers and children—the ones who survived, the ones who were aborted—and the life and death choices made by pregnant women in the camps and the killing fields of Eastern Europe. Saidel has named the forced abortions and the murder of babies to save their mothers "childdeath." Gisela Perl described the many abortions she performed in "dark corners of the camp, in the toilet, on the

floor, without a drop of water, I delivered their babies....I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman."

I cannot do justice to all the thought-provoking contributions gathered by Hedgepeth and Saidel. This book has received some attention in the mainstream press, but deserves much more. The influential *New York Review of Books* is reliably sexist; its one extended foray into paying attention to women's issues was Frederick Crews's articles, published in the early 1990s, critiquing recovered memories of sexual abuse—as if women were not as believable as the accused male perpetrators. Saidel and Hedgepeth demonstrate that there is ample documentation of the most vicious sexual abuse in the heart of "civilized" Europe during the Holocaust. In their excellent collection, they go far in shining a spotlight on this fraught topic. Wake up, "New York Review of Books" and others! Review this book. 📖

Rochelle G. Ruthchild grew up surrounded by stories of the Holocaust. This eventually led her back to the Eastern European lands of her grandparents. She is the author of *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* (2010) as well as articles about feminist and Jewish-Bundist women activists in Russia and the Soviet Union. This review is dedicated to her great-aunt Anna Goldberg, who was among those sterilized during experiments by Josef Mengele and other Nazi doctors at Auschwitz.



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