

## HIDDEN CHILDREN AND OTHER VICTIMS OF SEXUAL ABUSE DURING THE HOLOCAUST

By Rochelle G. Saidel, PhD

In Nava Semel's *And the Rat Laughed*, she tells the fictional story of a Jewish five-year-old girl hidden in a potato pit in Poland during the Holocaust. The girl is repeatedly sexually violated by her supposed saviors' son Stefan. Semel, herself a child of Holocaust survivors, has said that she wrote the novel after "reading between the lines" while attending child survivor and second generation meetings. Her novel—which takes place in the past, present, and future—addresses how memory is transferred from generation to generation. Semel's account is fiction, but a number of hidden children and teenagers are known to have been similarly abused.

Oscar-winning actress Jane Fonda's reading of excerpts from Semel's novel was a highlight of a public event that Remember the Women Institute co-sponsored in Los Angeles in November 2012, along with the USC Shoah Foundation and Equality Now. Human rights activist Fonda, who read with a tissue in her hand, earlier said that she couldn't get through rehearsing Semel's work without crying. In addition to her reading, Fonda introduced a short clip reel produced for the event from a testimony in the USC Shoah Foundation archive. In this 1995 video recording, survivor Manya Horowitz not only speaks of her rape in Auschwitz-Birkenau, but she also stresses how important it is for other survivors to come forward and testify. Following the clip reel, I was part of a panel that included Dr. Stephen Smith, Executive Director of the USC Shoah Foundation, and Equality Now founder and president Jessica Neuwirth. The panel discussed the need for sensitivity in dealing with this subject, as well as our commitment to moving forward to ensure that sexual violence becomes part of the Holocaust narrative. Audience members who commented and asked questions included several Holocaust survivors, all of whom concurred that sexual abuse was part of the Holocaust.

The event was held in conjunction with a two-day symposium for twenty invited academics and other experts from the United States and abroad who work with



Left to right: Dr. Dan Leshem, Dr. Eva Fogelman, Jessica Neuwirth, Jane Fonda, Dr. Rochelle G. Saidel, Dr. Sonja Hedgepeth, and Karen Shulman in Los Angeles at the November 2012 public event about sexual violence during the Holocaust.

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the subject of sexual violence during the Holocaust. One of the main topics deliberated at this symposium was whether we can actually still find primary testimony so that victims' and witnesses' voices can be heard and preserved for the future. Participants concluded that time is running out, but we should still be able to find and record testimonies about sexual violence.

At the end of the symposium, participants drafted the following group statement, which was read at the public event and also released to the press: "Evidence, information, and scholarship are emerging that sexual violence, long largely ignored, was an integral part of the Holocaust in many forms. Absence of acknowledgment of this reality has harmed not only survivors but also the understanding of and efforts to prevent genocide, and efforts to stop sexual violence in genocide, war, and every day. We hope that increasing awareness of this subject, obscured by shame and denial, will bring recognition to the victims—many of whom did not survive—to rectify this omission from history, and support the work of those who oppose these atrocities." The statement was signed by participants that included Patrice Bensimon, Dr. Paula David, Dr. Monika Flaschka, Dr. Eva Fogelman, Dr. Myrna Goldenberg, Dr. Sonja Hedgepeth, Karen Jungblut, Dr. Dan Leshem, Dr. Catharine MacKinnon, Daisy Miller, Jessica Neuwirth, Dr. Amy Parish, Dr. Andrea Peto, Dr. John Roth, Karen Shulman, Dr. Stephen Smith, Dr. Elisa von

Joeden-Forgey, and Dr. Zoe Waxman.

The November 2012 symposium is historic, because it is the first international meeting to focus specifically on sexual violence against Jewish women during the Holocaust. The gathering was prompted by the publication of the book *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, co-editors, Hadassah-Brandeis Series on Jewish Women. Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2010), which broke new ground in exploring the evidence that had been overlooked or ignored by mainstream Holocaust scholars for more than 65 years. This unprecedented anthology, with contributions from historians, social scientists, literary and film critics, and psychologists, opens a window into a world that had been virtually unknown, or at least unspoken. Chapter authors, ranging from seasoned scholars to PhD candidates and coming from countries including the United States, Israel, Germany, Austria, Ukraine, and United Kingdom, wrote the book's sixteen chapters on sexual violence from various perspectives. As the book's chapters detail, not only the Nazis and their allies, but Jews, *Kapos*, non-Jewish prisoners, and even liberators also violated Jewish and other women (as well as some boys and men). The book was designated a finalist for the 2011 Jewish Book Award in the Women's Studies category and chosen as the February 2012 book of the month by

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the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous.

This groundbreaking book raised awareness about the issue, but direct testimony in the voice of survivors of sexual violence is not the focus and is mostly absent. Therefore, as a follow-up to the book, Remember the Women Institute is now searching for such testimony. There has been a lack of awareness, even denial, about this aspect of the Holocaust, and we are searching for survivor voices to testify before it is too late. The Witness Project has been created to identify Holocaust survivors and witnesses of sexual violence who are willing to provide testimony. This project is being coordinated by Jessica Neuwirth, an attorney, founder of the international women's rights organization Equality Now, and a UN expert on sexual violence. She is assisted by Karen Shulman, an education consultant with experience working on the Holocaust and in Rwanda. The American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights and the Ruth Turner Fund provided the seed money for The Witness Project.

While Nava Semel's novel dealt with sexual violation in hiding, there were, of course, many other situations in which women and girls (and some men and boys) were abused. Both the November symposium and the *Sexual Violence* book discussed the wide range of possibilities. For example, there was sexual abuse in ghettos, during the entrance process into camps, in concentration and work camps, as forced providers of sex in brothels or the private dwellings of soldiers or guards. Virtually all women inducted into camps were sexually abused by being forced to stand naked in front of men, and by having their vaginas poked, prodded, and smeared with caustic disinfectant. Sometimes soldiers in the *Einsatzgruppen* who shot Jews into pits in the East first raped young women. Some women were even murdered and then sexually violated afterward. Other women were forced to provide sex for food or other means of survival, also a form of rape. These women were the victims of men in camps who had more power, privileges, or food. The men were not only Nazi guards, but also *Kapos*, and Jewish or non-Jewish male prisoners. Occasionally, a Nazi-appointed Jewish governing council in a ghetto (*Judenrat*) had to furnish Nazis with pretty young women to (temporarily) prevent the general population's deporta-

tion. There is even evidence of sexual abuse by *Judenrat* members. All of this is in addition to the girls and women who were saved in hiding by non-Jews, but who sometimes had to pay with their bodies.

Rape and sexual violence in connection with later genocides have been well documented, and in these cases women have come forward. Some activists, such as Gloria Steinem, who have supported our work, have been motivated by the idea that sexual violence in later genocides might have been prevented if the issue had been better understood in the context of the Holocaust. However, this theory can also be reversed. Now that these atrocities during later genocides have been widely exposed, analyzed, pub-



Dr. Stephen Smith, executive director of USC Shoah Foundation, at the November 2012 public event that featured Jane Fonda.

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licized, and in some cases brought to justice, perhaps this can motivate Holocaust victims to come forward.

The use of rape and sexual violence as tools of ethnic cleansing and genocide has been well documented in many conflicts since World War II, including in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Cambodia, and Sudan. Some victims have testified, their abuse is known to the world, and they have found solidarity in each other and those who support them. For example, the Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), through the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, is currently seeking witnesses to testify in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. In a similar manner, our aim is for the world to hear firsthand what happened to women (and some men) during the Holocaust. The ultimate goals are to bring the issue

of sexual violence during the Holocaust to public attention, and to validate it as an integral part of Holocaust history.

One real but unwarranted reason for the silence of victims of sexual abuse (during the Holocaust and in general) is shame, or *shanda* in Yiddish (with the same root as that of the second half of the German *Rassenschande*—which literally means shaming the race). Some victims who broke their silence have asked that their violation remain a secret. However, no victim of rape (or her family) should be ashamed. The shame always belongs to the perpetrator, despite some cultures' inclination to blame the victim. Is it because of this shame factor that most Holocaust institutions and scholars have chosen to ignore or at best marginalize the issue of sexual violence? Or is there another aspect of shame that has caused them to suppress the issue—the fact that sometimes Jewish men were the perpetrators of sexual violence against Jewish women?

With regard to *Rassenschande*—the Nazi law prohibiting sexual relations between Germans and Jews—this is an invalid reason used by some scholars to deny that sexual abuse of Jewish women took place. The *Rassenschande* law was about consensual sex, rather than rape. And, as we know from daily news reports, laws that do prohibit rape in our own society today certainly do not prevent it. Therefore, the *Rassenschande* law cannot be used as a reason that forced sexual relations supposedly did not happen. In the coercive environment in which German men and their accomplices had complete control over helpless Jewish women, the setting for such abuse was ideal. And the easiest way to silence a victim was to kill her after raping her.

In addition to the false reasoning that the *Rassenschande* law prevented rape of Jewish women, some Holocaust scholars have cautioned that speaking of sexual violence takes away from the narrative of the totality of the Holocaust, the final solution or genocide of the Jewish people. Recently, when I approached a famous Holocaust expert to ask if he had any documentation of sexual violence in his extensive archival material, he said to “forget about it,” and then turned his back on me. However, negating sexual violence is a form of Holocaust denial. Holocaust history is examined via its various com-

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ponents, for example, specific individual countries, *shtetls*, cities, ghettos, camps, partisan units, time periods. And, unfortunately, the trauma of sexual abuse is an equally important and factual component of Holocaust history, which also must be examined and acknowledged.

While it seems there is no evidence that Germans or others were ordered to rape (unlike other contexts such as the war in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s), it does not follow that rape and sexual abuse were not widespread during the Holocaust. Nor does it follow that rape and other forms of

sometimes instead acted as gatekeepers to survivors we are trying to reach. Despite this lack of cooperation, we have interviewed some victims of sexual abuse during the Holocaust. However, we believe there may be a significant number of other living survivors. Of these, it is clear that some do not wish to talk about what happened to them, and we have no intention of trying to force them to do so.

Based in New York City, Remember the Women Institute has since 1997 been conducting and encouraging research and cultural activities that contribute to

the World Congress of Jewish Studies, and the Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust.

Remember the Women Institute has for years been seeking to place the issue of sexual violence against Jewish women and girls (as well as some boys and men) within the narrative of Holocaust history. It is a big step forward to now be partnering with the USC Shoah Foundation, which houses nearly 52,000 life history interviews, some of which are potential agents of societal change. More than 1,700 of their testimonies refer to sexual assaults in all stages of the Holocaust—



Left to right: Participants in the two-day symposium on sexual violence during the Holocaust: Karen Jungblut, Dr. Monika Flaschka, Patrice Bensimon, Dr. Sonja Hedgepeth, Karen Shulman, Dr. John Roth, Daisy Miller, Dr. Eva Fogelman, Dr. Myrna Goldenberg, Dr. Rochelle G. Saidel, Dr. Elisa von Joeden-Forgey, Dr. Dan Leshem, Dr. Amy Parish, Dr. Andrea Peto, Dr. Zoe Waxman, Dr. Catharine MacKinnon, Dr. Paula David, Jessica Neuwirth. (Not pictured, Dr. Stephen Smith, executive director of USC Shoah Foundation.)

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sexual abuse were not used as weapons of war and destruction to humiliate and break women and girls. Although all but ignored during the Nuremberg war criminal trials, today rape would fall within the definition of crimes against humanity. As in other genocidal contexts, during the Holocaust, the persecution of Jewish women was marked by sexual violence.

An accounting of sexual violence should be part of the general history of the Holocaust. Instead, the subject has hardly been discussed. While included in some memoirs, especially early ones, sexual abuse is almost never mentioned in historians' accounts. Holocaust memorial museums have also avoided the subject. Knowing that this topic is sensitive and sometimes denied altogether, we had anticipated some apprehension from organizations and individuals that we sought out for help in finding witnesses. We were nevertheless surprised and disappointed that in most cases there was disinterest or non-responsiveness to our inquiries in connection with outreach efforts. And although some Holocaust memorial institutions did express willingness to help, they have

including women in history. Special emphasis is on women in the context of the Holocaust, with current projects focusing on sexual violence during the Holocaust. The Institute has organized panels, conference sessions, and symposia on women and the Holocaust, and specifically on sexual violence. The innovative symposium in cooperation with the USC Shoah Foundation in November 2012 is the most recent. In March 2011 the Institute worked with feminist activist Gloria Steinem and others to hold a panel discussion on sexual violence during the Holocaust and other genocides, held before an audience of over 300 at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. Other workshops, panels, and conference sessions that we organized include "Beyond Anne Frank: Teaching about Women and the Holocaust," at a Conference on Teaching the Holocaust, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, in 2006. It was as a result of an incident on this occasion that we decided to publish a book specifically about sexual violence. We also organized the first sessions on the subject at the Association of Jewish Studies,

from ghettos to camps, and from forced marches to DP camps. Much of this still needs to be explored and indexed in detail, and some testimonies still need to be translated into English. However, we have already uncovered important first-person testimonies in their archive. Some of these witnesses are no longer living. In addition to these already recorded testimonies, before it is too late, we are seeking to find other witnesses so that we can record their experiences with empathy and understanding. Testimonies regarding sexual violence will help give us a complete picture of the horrors that Jews endured during the Holocaust, and we welcome readers of this article as our partners in identifying those who are willing to speak out. ■

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