

Silence surrounding sexual violence during Holocaust
Several writers and academics are shedding light on the lost connection between modern genocide and abuse of women.

By Marisa Fox-Bevilacqua | Jun. 16, 2014 | 3:57 PM | 1



The women of Rwanda, Bosnia and Nigeria may not be the only ones to be empowered by Angelina Jolie's "Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict," that just wrapped up in London. The conference, and the recent pledge by the International Criminal Court in The Hague to step up its investigation and prosecution of sexual and gender-based crimes, serve as the basis for a discussion on the taboo topic of sexual violence against Jewish women during World War II.

“The official stand was that there was no abuse of women,” says Israeli author and playwright Nava Semel, speaking from her home in Tel Aviv. Her first work of published prose was the short-story collection “Kova shel Zekhukhit” (“A Hat of Glass”), based on her mother’s experiences in the Holocaust. A main figure in the book is Clarissa, her kapo at a concentration camp and a “camp whore.” And while sex slavery was hardly novel in 1985, when the collection was first published, it was met with trepidation and even hostility.

“Nobody wanted to acknowledge that the Holocaust had anything to do with Israeli identity,” Semel says. “We were warriors, not scared and scarred Jews.”

That mentality shamed survivors into silence. For women, the stigma was double.

“Holocaust historian Ruth Bondy talks about being asked ‘What did you do to survive?’ by those who spotted her tattoo,” says Holocaust researcher Nili Keren, who helped write the Holocaust studies curriculum for Israeli schools. “The implication was that the only women who stayed alive were whores, that they had to do something to survive. We blamed the victims and scratched our wounds instead of letting them heal.”

“Sexual violence was simply not taken seriously,” says Jessica Neuwirth, a New York-based, international women’s and human rights lawyer who consulted on the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda and has collected testimonies on sexual violence during the Holocaust.

“It was all about politics and sexism then. In some cases, there were stories of ‘liberation rape’ [by soldiers who liberated the camps] and an attitude of ‘men will be men’ and women are part of the ‘spoils of war.’”

A major element in the denial and silence surrounding sexual violence in the Holocaust is the “shanda [“shame,” in Yiddish] factor,” as Rochelle Saidel, cofounder of the Remember the Women Institute, puts it. She and her colleague Sonja Hedgepeth encountered this at a workshop at Jerusalem’s Yad Vashem Holocaust museum in 2006.

“I was in the middle of a whole laundry list of atrocities against women when I mentioned the word rape,” recalls Saidel. “Lawrence Langer, a well-respected Holocaust authority and one of the keynote speakers, got up and very rudely interrupted me, demanding, ‘Where’s your evidence? Who was raped?’”

The heckling spurred Saidel to gather testimonies, which proved problematic because rape wasn’t even indexed in Yad Vashem’s archive. Undeterred, she and Hedgepeth commissioned research, which led to their book [Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust](#)” (Brandeis University Press, 2010). The first academic book on the topic, it inspired Gloria Steinem to launch the [Women Under Siege](#) project and declare that a better understanding of sexual violence during the Holocaust might have prevented such violence in later instances of genocide.

“Women have been raped during war since the dawn of time,” says Saidel. “Why would there be a six-year hiatus during World War II?” While collecting material for her book, she came across a five-minute videotape testimony by Manya Horowitz, a survivor who was taken to work in a Nazi home and was raped repeatedly. A few days after Saidel gave a presentation on the testimony, she received an email titled “I am Manya’s daughter.”

Saidel: “I waited a day to read it ... and was greatly relieved that she thanked me for using her mother’s testimony because she wants the world to know about what happened to these women, and to help this from happening to future generations of women during war.”

Genocide policy

But there is a big difference between sexual violence during the Holocaust and in subsequent conflicts, says Holocaust researcher Eva Fogelman. The New-York-based psychologist, author and filmmaker contributed to Saidel and Hedgepeth’s book and to “Rape: Weapon of War and Genocide,” edited by John Roth and Carol Rittner (Paragon House, 2012).

“Rape has been the policy in genocide, except for the Holocaust and Cambodia,” Fogelman says. “In Rwanda and Sudan, for example, soldiers were given explicit orders to rape women. There is also evidence of the widespread rape of Muslim women in Bosnia. And though there were many instances of women being raped, violated, humiliated, and many sadistic SS men and women who were perpetrators, it was not part of the Nazi agenda. If anything, it was forbidden because of *Rassenschande* [i.e., "racial defilement" caused by sexual relations between Aryans and non-Aryans].”

“Wehrmacht soldiers were sometimes brought to justice because of *Rassenschande* by German authorities,” notes Dr. Simon Geissbuhler, a Swiss diplomat and historian. “But with regards to the rape of Jewish women by Romanians and others, there was 100-percent impunity.”

Given the prohibitions on sex with non-Aryans, how did the Nazis justify creating a brothel in Block 24 at Auschwitz? Fogelman says it was set up as an antidote to homosexuality, which the Nazis feared, and was at first mostly “staffed” by non-Jews. Still, she adds, it is hard to find first-person testimony from the brothel, though there is ample evidence of sexual violence against women throughout the Shoah.

“Most of the sex slaves were killed,” she says. “And there was a reluctance to ask about sexual abuse among those who collected Holocaust testimony because you felt you were invading [the survivor's] personal boundary ... I guess part of it was sensitivity.”

Fogelman remembers returning from one of her first interviews with a survivor in 1978. Her supervisor, the late Dr. Hillel Klein, a prominent psychoanalyst, asked her whether she had inquired about sex offenses.

“It didn’t occur to me,” she recalls saying. “It’s such a difficult subject to broach and I will say, after all these years, that the testimonies of victims of sexual abuse are the most difficult ones to sit through.”

Furthermore, she notes, interviewers for the Shoah Foundation were not instructed to explicitly ask about sexual abuse. Most interviews took place with a survivor’s family, which further restricted the freedom to

speak candidly.

According to Fogelman's research, perpetration of rape was widespread not only by the Nazis, but among people who hid women and children in their attics, by partisans and even by relatives and rescuers.

"When you coerce a woman to have sex with you for a piece of bread so she can survive, that's rape," says Fogelman. But many survivors blamed themselves, perpetuating the silence and shame.

Only one testimony, collected at Bergen-Belsen from Hadassah Rosensaft in September 1945, mentions the two types of selection for women in Auschwitz: one to determine who went to the gas chamber, the other, to the brothel.

"After her remarks, there was no follow-up by the prosecutor or defense," Fogelman explains. "Many of the women became domestics or worked in the kitchens or homes of S.S. men, where providing sex was expected ... It is an absolute failure in these trials that perpetrators were given impunity, [after committing] crimes against humanity."

Complicating matters was the lack of a definition of sexual violence. The chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, Fatou Bensouda, noted in a policy paper earlier this month that sex crimes now also include "forced nudity," which has profound repercussions when discussing the Holocaust.

Different zeitgeist

"Any woman who passed through the gates of a Nazi camp was a victim of sexual violence," says Nava Semel. "It isn't just rape that constitutes sexual violence."

And though there was controversy over her "Hat of Glass" 30 years ago, it is now required reading in Israeli schools.

"When I first published it, I heard from so many survivors who were relieved that someone was talking about this because they couldn't,"

Semel says. “And through the years, I have heard from every woman in the story, except one: Clarissa.

“I like to think of my book as *tikkun*,” she says, referring to the Jewish concept of helping to “mend” the world. And she views Jolie’s London summit, and the recent decision by the Hague tribunal to improve its handling of sexual crimes, in a similar way.

“Not perpetuating the notion that the victim is to blame and prosecuting the offender is so important. That’s why women survivors didn’t speak out. Their biggest achievement was their family,” explains Semel. “And they didn’t want to risk anything that could destroy that. Now, the zeitgeist is different. They can speak out against sexual abuse, and retain their dignity and pride and integrity, and not fear they will be blamed or treated differently by their kids or society.”

For her part, Rochelle Saidel is also buoyed by the Hague’s decision and by the conference organized by Jolie. The Holocaust was included in a panel at the London summit that featured Manya Horowitz’s testimony, presented by the Shoah Foundation, which chaired a symposium on sexual violence during the Holocaust in 2012 at the University of Southern California, indexing some 1,200 testimonies that referenced rape.

“It will open more doors if it’s not too late,” she notes. “The point is there is a link between the Holocaust and modern genocide. “

“We are still missing the public voices of Jewish women who suffered sexual violence in the Holocaust,” says Jessica Neuwirth, mentioning the Korean “comfort women” who first came forward more than 20 years ago, and have demonstrated regularly outside the Japanese embassy in Seoul against the atrocities they suffered during World War II.

“The first step,” Neuwirth notes, “is for those who have taken responsibility for documenting the atrocities of the Holocaust to take the stigma of sexual violence away, and if they do that, they need to actively look for evidence and they will find it.”