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Living Their Own Journey: Women Survive the Holocaust

by Megan Posch

(Honors English 103)

The Assignment: Students were assigned to write eight-twelve page research essays on Holocaust-related topics that explored controversial aspects of this area of study.

All history books that contain information about the holocaust contain one, undisputed statistic: six million Jewish lives were lost. While this statistic is shocking, the fact that an entire genocide can be reduced to mere numbers is disheartening. Six million lives means six million stories, six million histories and six million futures destroyed. Many of those that escaped becoming one of the six million have made it their mission to testify to what they endured at the hands of Adolph Hitler and his Nazi counterparts. Both male and female survivors have emerged, bringing with them their stories to share with the world. Although the suffering endured by Jews throughout the Holocaust was equal for persons of both genders, the experiences and tactics used for survival by women were different from those of men, and these differences are reflected in their written accounts. Mary Felstiner summed this up by stating that, “Each gender lived its own journey” (qtd. in Ofer and Weitzman 8). Because women are designed differently than men, the way that they cope with hardship and overcome difficulty is unique to them. While these differences do not discount the experiences of men, they provide different viewpoints and insights essential when studying any historical event. The journey of women enduring the Holocaust is one that can be appreciated by both the males and females of today.

Before the war, Jewish women in European countries lived gender specific lives due to the nature of their culture. In Western Europe, Jews were more likely to achieve middle or upper-middle class status than those living in Eastern Europe (Hyman 28). Because of their social status, gender roles in Western Europe were more distinct (28). Middle and upper-class wives did not need to contribute to the household income and were thus relied on to handle domestic responsibilities (28). These responsibilities included the religious education of their children, household maintenance, preparation of meals, arranging of vacations, and contributions to the Jewish community, such as volunteer work (28-29). In Eastern Europe, the gender roles were less specific because most families did not achieve middle-class status. Having less money meant that women were expected to contribute to the “economic support of their households” and an “ideal” Jewish woman was one that was “strong and capable” of working to help support her family (31-32). Besides these roles, women were relied on to maintain the psychological well being within the family. Men were considered to be “endowed by nature with rationality and physical and mental strength and women with tenderness and spirituality” (28). Men had yet to find out how many of their male attributes women possessed in addition to their own. The amazing survival skills of women would show that they were not only strong spiritually, but also mentally and physically.

Daily life changed for all Jews beginning when Hitler came into power. He began by isolating the Jewish population. This had the greatest impact on Jewish women because their domestic lifestyle revolved around interactions with others outside of their home, many of which were not Jewish (Kaplan 40-41). Gerda Weissmann Klein wrote in her memoir, *All But My Life*, how the Germans slowly took away everything that they had. Two days before Christmas they were commanded by a German policeman to move their family into the basement where the non-Jewish housekeeper had lived. the housekeeper then took over the house that had been in Klein’s family for years (33). On May 8, 1940, Gerda’s sixteenth birthday, she went to her family garden for a walk in the buttercups and daffodils and found a sign reading “Only Germans Allowed” (43). After taking away her home, the Germans took away one of her favorite places, a place filled with memories. Jewish businesses were also put under German control and their professional titles were taken away. Lucie Edelsberger was living in Berlin during the beginning of Hitler’s reign. She had served for twenty years as a physician specializing in

immunology and allergies and had her own private practice, a great achievement for a Jewish woman doctor at the time. When Hitler began to take his first steps toward extermination, her title was taken from her and she was reappointed a *Judenbehandler* or an attendant of Jews (Adelsberger xi). By April of 1938, 60% of Jewish businesses were closed and over 60,000 Jews were facing unemployment (Kaplan 41). It was during these dire circumstances that gender roles began to change. It was also during this time that assumptions made about how Jews would be treated by the Nazis began to emerge. Many believed that women and children would be spared and that the danger was for Jewish males. Judith Isaacson, in her memoir *Seed of Sarah* writes about the rumors that were first heard about the Nazis shipping Jews, women and children included, to death camps. Her mother chided her for believing such things and said, "Why would they take children. It doesn't make sense" (Isaacson 36). Because of these attitudes, men began to stay behind closed doors, and women were left to carry out most family responsibilities alone (Ofer and Weitzman 6). While their husbands kept a low profile, women ventured into the workforce, but they only made two-thirds of the wages that males would have earned (Ofer and Weitzman 7). This was only the beginning of the struggles to be faced by Jewish women. During this time, women fulfilled both male and female gender responsibilities. They worked during the day and were then expected to come home and complete the domestic chores and raise the spirits of their family members. Women were expected to be "cheerful when gloom was all about," and then made it their mission to keep the family stable through the everyday continuity of a "normal" routine (Kaplan 33). Even with terror all around them, women still believed that the Nazis were "civilized" and would not harm them. This belief resulted in women taking on male roles such as family decision maker and defender. As Hitler's power became more pronounced, many men began to immigrate to other safer countries, leaving women "safely" behind. On July 13, 1942, also known as Black Thursday, men were warned that there were going to be raids and that Jews were going to be arrested. Most people assumed that only Jewish males were in danger. Many of them escaped, but women and children, thinking that they would be spared, stayed behind. In the end 5,802 women and 4,051 children were gathered and sent to Auschwitz (Ofer and Weitzman 5). With men gone, women were left to care for children and the elderly on their own (Kaplan 50). An important decision that women were left to make on their own was how to keep their children safe. Margaret Mishkin, who spent the entirety of the war hidden with a Christian family, lived because her mother gave up her children so that they could live. Left alone after her husband was taken on a transport, she had the burden of giving up the only family that she had left. She died alone two weeks before liberation, but because of her selflessness, her children are alive today (May 13, 2003).

Soon after business, titles and homes were taken away, the Nazis began the building of the ghetto, an area where they planned to confine the Jews remaining in German occupied countries. When Klein, her mother and her father were resettled in the ghetto they were three of only 250 Jews left in the city of Bielitz, Poland (Klein 78). Only the elderly and small families with a sick member, like Klein's father, remained. While in the ghetto, he would hide in a wooden wardrobe and let his daughter handle the police when they came for inspections (80). This act of protection and bravery by a woman was not uncommon in the ghetto. Most women took it upon themselves to go to the ghetto authorities when their husbands, sons, or brothers were arrested. Not even the Gestapo scared them when it came to keeping their family safe because that was their mission (Ofer 147). In a diary written while in the ghetto, Haim Aharon Kaplan wrote about how women are the weaker sex and "dependent on men." Ironically, he also wrote about his wife waiting in line in order to retrieve some of their confiscated belongings. When the authorities refused to give them back, she broke in and took them back herself (Ofer 149-159). Liza Chapnik also wrote of a similar experience. In 1941 Germans invaded near her hometown of Grodno, Poland. Her family tried to flee to the East but was later surrounded by the Nazis in another city. The men and boys were arrested and placed in a camp and the women and children were told to go back home. Chapnik refused to leave her brother in the camp and made it a daily habit to bring food to the men and boys imprisoned. At first the Germans said nothing to her but when she did not go away, they began shouting at and beating her. Still, she was not deterred and continued her daily activities until one day the head of the camp came for an inspection. A guard told him that she refused to leave without her

brother. That night, the Germans released her brother and they began their journey home (110). Chapnik's tenacity and courage saved her brother's life.

Survival in the ghetto was not easy, and women often dealt with the hardships alone. Despite the circumstances, women outlived men in the ghetto because they "adjusted better than men" and "coped better with the hunger and harsh changing circumstances" that were part of everyday life (Unger 125). A woman's first duty in the ghetto was feeding her family. Hours were spent in line waiting for rations (Unger 133). An anonymous ghetto diary entry reads, "March 14, I don't know what (my mother) lives on. She works the hardest and eats the least" (Unger 134). Women spent most of their day trying to figure out how they would feed their family and stretch their rations. Most of the time they did this by depriving themselves.

Despite the Nazi's best efforts, women found ways to survive in the ghetto. Some used their sexuality to save their life and the lives of their family. In ghetto conditions sex often equaled survival and protection (Ofer 163). Female sexuality gave women an advantage over men, due to the fact that men held most positions of power. For example, a young married woman began an affair with a non-Jew for the sole purpose of obtaining the products needed to restock and reopen her parent's restaurant that was luckily located within boundaries of the ghetto (148). Another woman, a corset maker, made money by sneaking out of the ghetto and carrying on with her business. While on the Aryan side, she gathered food and brought it back for her family, friends and neighbors (154). Many other ghetto women participated in ghetto trading. But instead of trading objects for money, women traded whatever household goods they may have had left for food to feed their families (154).

The position as head of the family left women as major decision makers. Because of the terrible conditions within the ghetto, some women made the decision to end their family's suffering. Chapnik writes about women dentists that she knew who had access to arsenic. Some of these women chose to poison their family and themselves in order to escape death and suffering in the hands of Nazis (Chapnik 113). Isaacson wrote about her mother dividing up the poison that they all would bring on the transport. She made enough bags for all the family members but not enough for herself (Isaacson 47). She was making a choice to stay alive and suffer alone if their situation became very bad. As the mother, she took this on as her duty. Art Spiegleman writes about an event that highlights the lengths that women went through to prevent their families from suffering. In his book, *Maus*, he writes about the older brother Richiev, whom he never met. During the Holocaust, Spiegleman's father and mother made the decision to send their only son away from their ghetto to a place that they thought would be safer. In the end, the "safer" ghetto was raided. The woman looking after him would not let herself or her children go to "their" gas chambers, so she gave them all the poison that she had managed to save. Richiev died along with her children, but he never had to know the horrors of the gas chamber (Spiegleman 107-109).

If women were successful in surviving the ghetto, the camps presented a new and horrible challenge. Women faced condemnation to the gas chambers faster than men did because women often arrived off the transport with their children at their side. Children were not welcome in camps because they could not work and also because Hitler's goal was to completely dehumanize the Jews. He achieved this goal by stripping them of everything that they had, and children represented a bond that Hitler realized was strong enough to overcome hardship. By taking away the last thing that women had to love, he hoped that he would kill their will to live. When women arrived with their children, they were immediately sent to the gas chambers. Mothers were often told by sorters to give their children to an elderly relative because the elderly were automatically condemned as well (Ofer and Weitzman 100-110). In Auschwitz-Birkenau some mothers were given a choice about their destiny that men were not, a choice between life and death. The women were told that they could either live, work and send their children to the chambers alone, or they could go accompany their children to the gas. Out of the 600 women given this choice, only two mothers chose to live. The others refused to let their children go and were doomed (Ofer and Weitzman 12).

After sorting, the women that were not selected to die simply because they were mothers were sent next to the showers. It was here that they experienced a procedure that was meant to strip them of any quality that made them a woman. Lidia Rosenfeld Vago survived Auschwitz and wrote about her

experiences in a narrative entitled “One Year in the Black Hole of Our Planet Earth.” She describes in detail what it was like to suffer the humiliation of the stripping, the showers and shaving of the hair that is such a part of female identity:

The culture shock proceeded as our female bodies were stripped of our fig leaves and exposed to the lascivious gaze of the German soldiers. Oh, no! It was a terrible, agonizing thought...I decided not to feel ashamed, humiliated, degraded, defeminized or dehumanized. I looked through them. It was an act of defiance although no one else realized it (Vago 275).

Isaacson experienced similar culture shock. After her shower she finds herself outside in a clearing surrounded by other prisoners. After a moment she realizes that she is amongst men. “...I am naked! My hands flew to my breasts and crotch...We wanted to cover our nakedness. We women are a strange sex. I decided: we sustain ourselves with mere trifles. Even in hell” (Isaacson 66, 77). When she finally sees her mother, she is shocked by her “strong features” and her “masculine nose” and she wonders, “Was it a mere hair style that made her feminine?” (67). Without their hair, prisoners were reduced to genderless beings. Women were greatly affected by this because it is their hair that distinguished them from males, and now they were nothing but “Jews.” Along with the loss of their hair, women suffered the loss of their womanly cycle later on due to the living conditions within the camp. Vago reflects on the last menstrual cycle that all of the women had while in camp. She says that, because of the filth and the conditions, most women were “grateful” for the end to something that “made them who they were” (Vago 277).

Survival inside the camps after the humiliation was a feat that women handled better than men. For example, an analysis of a male and female worker in the work camp Pikryna revealed that a male worker, Izak Jakober, met his daily quota only when “encouraged by beatings,” sold his clothes for food and resorted to wearing a paper smock and never washed. A female worker, Towa Zilberberg, stole in order to make her quota, washed and drank at every break, did odd jobs in exchange for bread and found a sweater that she unraveled and re-knit as an item to sell (Karay 304-305).

In addition to resourcefulness, the survival of women is linked to the relationships that they formed with others for support and the retention of basic human dignity in inhuman conditions. Women in camps formed relationships and “families” with their fellow women, and they relied on this support in order to keep their sanity. Adelsberger wrote about family-type relationships that helped “(ease) the horrors” of the camp (100). Klein wrote about Isle, a girl her age who was her best friend throughout her transfers from one camp to another. She always took care of Isle, forcing her to eat and holding her hand when she cried at night. Taking care of her friend gave Klein a purpose, so the relationship benefited both of them. During their march from the labor camp Isle dies and Klein was so disheartened at the loss of her “sister” that she climbed into the sick wagon, a wagon reserved for those that are too weak to walk. Only those that were succumbing to death rode in the sick wagon. She had lost her will, but later on, an older girl who pushed the wagon refused to let her ride in it, knowing that she was strong enough to live. This girl became to Klein what she had been to Isle. She would not let her give up (Klein 205-207). Relationships and support like this kept women alive. “(Sisters) accepted responsibility for each others survival by sharing food, risking punishments, encouraging each other and providing physical care” (Goldenberg 331). In a collection of spoken testimonies, a survivor known simply as Hannah F. recounts her relationship with her bunkmate:

In my bunk there was a woman... When she took sick, when she got extremely cold, she took the blanket. I covered her till, you know, the shakes were going away, subsided. And when I took sick, she used to take the blanket and cover me (Breene and Kumar 137).

Because of the support system that women established, survival became a little less heard to bear.

Along with support, women needed the help of other women to deal with problems that men did not encounter, such as pregnancy. “According to SS guidelines, every Jewish child automatically

condemned his mother to death” (Adelsberger 100). Pregnancy while in a camp was a death sentence and so women had to take extreme measures in order to stay alive. Adelsberger, because of her background as a physician, encountered many situations regarding pregnancy:

The child had to die so that the life of the mother might be saved... We saved all of the poison we could find in the camp for this purpose and it still wasn't enough. It's amazing what newborns can bear... We never had enough for them. One time there was no poison available and so the mother strangled the child she had delivered... She was a Pole, a good mother who loved her children more than anything else. But she had hidden three small children back home and wanted to live for them (Adelsberger 101).

Circumstances like pregnancy were ones that men did not have to endure. Women loved their children, but they had to survive. “It was sometimes necessary to be cruel” (Goldenberg 329).

Along with pregnancy, women had to deal with the threat of rape within the camps. Isaacson wrote that she “feared rape more than death” and she later realized that “...there was and always will be a way for captured women to avert death: by becoming concubines... For women, submission was the safest tactic” (Isaacson 91). Rape was often on the minds of women prisoners but as their circumstances became increasing horrible, many of them began to accept the fact that their sexuality might be needed as a method for survival. Klein discusses this topic as well. While on their last march she mentions the SS commandant and his girlfriend, a prisoner. The girlfriend and her friends ate bread and drank warm drinks (Klein 183). They traded their sexuality for survival advantage. While some women refused to compromise their morals and suppress their hatred for Germans in order to survive, those that did had an advantage due to their gender that males did not.

Along with establishing relationships and accepting the realities associated with their sex, women also contained a sense of humanism that helped them to survive. Women who attempted to keep up a “normal,” human appearance were treated in a more human way (Karay 305). By defying Hitler’s intentions of dehumanization, women were able to overcome and cope better than males. Men stopped washing and when they let go of their appearance they became exactly what the nazis wanted: a slave without gender, life or freewill. Women who kept their hair and body clean “avoided personal deterioration” (Karay 305). The will to live can be easily lost in horrible situations, but Jewish women proved that by keeping up appearances, they also kept up their spirit.

Jewish women and their Holocaust experiences are unique because of their gender, a gender that condemned them as the reproductive future of the Jewish people (Adelsberger xxxiii). Their gender-specific stories offer insight essential for complete understanding of the horrors that were the Holocaust. Because of female-specific strengths, women, often thought of as the weaker sex, were able to overcome Holocaust circumstances better than men. Their survival is a testament to the mental and physical toughness possessed by women.

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