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JEWISH WOMEN IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS:
PHYSICAL, MORAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL RESISTANCE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

By

Anna Marie Anderson

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the methods of resistance used by Jewish women in the concentration camps. These women based their resistance on their pre-camp experiences, having learned valuable skills during the economic crises and violent anti-Semitism of the 1920s to 1930s. This study demonstrates that Jewish women had to rely on alternative forms of resistance—such as the formation of “camp families,” saving food, repairing clothing, and personal hygiene—in order to survive the camps. This work relies on survivor testimonies and memoirs.

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For my parents, Benita and Peter Hentges

*The more one took from the Germans and sent into the barracks of the camp for the use of the internees instead of letting it be dispatched into Germany, the more one helped the cause.*¹

- Olga Lengyel (Auschwitz survivor)

INTRODUCTION

Resistance has traditionally been defined as armed opposition to an occupying force or repressive regime. Thus, historians studying groups living under authoritarian leaders or in abject subjugation—such as inmates in concentration camps—considered them to have been submissive since there were few uprisings. Scholars asserted that on the whole Jews did not resist going to their deaths during the Holocaust.

More recent scholars have challenged this view, insisting that we account for the historical context when considering how individuals resist. These scholars recognize that systems of brutal subjugation severely limit the possibility of armed resistance.

Historians now argue that resistance can take many forms.² It is clear from Olga Lengyel's quote, with which this thesis begins, that inmates in the concentration camps viewed stealing from the Nazis as a form of resistance. Jews in the Holocaust resorted to unconventional forms of resistance to survive the attempted annihilation of their race.³

The historiography of Jewish women and their resistance to the Nazi terror and repression is relatively recent. Gendered examinations of the Holocaust did not become common until the 1980s and it was nearly another twenty years before historians began to

¹ Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz*, trans. Clifford Coch and Paul P. Weiss (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing Company, 1947), 95.

² For example see Brana Gurewitsch's argument in Brana Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 221-229.

³ For the purposes of this paper "race" will be used in the context of how the Nazis defined the term as persons with three grandparents who practiced Judaism. There is no biological basis for the Nazis construction of a Jewish identity as "racial."

analyze gendered resistance efforts. This thesis draws upon the work of several renowned historians who led the discussion of Jewish women's gendered experiences before and during the camps, as well as broadened the definition of resistance.

In "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933-1939," Marion Kaplan argues that the pre-war period better demonstrated the gendered experiences of Jewish women.⁴ However, this thesis will show women's experiences in the camps and their resistance efforts continued to be gendered. Kaplan clearly proves that Jewish women developed skills of sewing and cooking with few resources in Nazi Germany before the war.⁵ Yet, she does not address how these skills were later utilized to resist the genocidal policies of the Nazis after these women were incarcerated in the concentration camps.

In *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, Brana Gurewitsch provides a brief introduction to the resistance efforts of Jewish women. Gurewitsch was among the first historians to suggest that resistance encompassed more than armed actions. She states, "Resistance during the Holocaust may be defined as any act or course of action taken between 1933 and May 8, 1945, that directly defied Nazi laws, policies, and ideology and that endangered the lives of those who engaged in such actions."⁶ Rather than delving into alternative forms of resistance, Gurewitsch addresses the issue through numerous survivor testimonies that she included

⁴ Marion A. Kaplan, "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933-1939," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 580.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 589.

⁶ Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 221.

in her work.⁷ The debate over what constitutes resistance, specifically during the Holocaust, continued in the years that followed.

In *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939-45*, historian Jack Morrison discussed the importance of clothing and personal items to inmates, as well as the formation of familial units.⁸ However, he does not assert that these actions are forms of resistance. In addition, Morrison's study pertains to all inmates at Ravensbrück and he tends to focus on political prisoners rather than Jewish women.

In *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, Rochelle Saidel expands the definition of resistance as it pertains to the Holocaust. She argues that the inability to perform armed rebellion does not mean that Jewish women did nothing to resist Nazi policies. In her examination of resistance efforts, Saidel includes drawings, gifts, lectures, and written recipes as sources.⁹ Only one chapter of Saidel's book, aptly entitled "Resistance that Lifted the Spirit," specifically deals with the topic of resistance. However, in this chapter, Saidel alters the perception of Jewish women in the concentration camps. Still, other historians continue to assert that the traditional definition of resistance precludes the actions of Jewish women from being considered.

In *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* Judith Buber Agassi suggests that Jewish women in Ravensbrück were unable to perform acts of resistance. Agassi maintains the traditional definition of resistance "as armed or otherwise violent resistance."¹⁰ Instead, she asserts that Jewish women performed a few

⁷ Ibid., 221-229.

⁸ Jack C. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp 1939-45* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2000), 119-123, 125-129.

⁹ Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 53-63.

¹⁰ Judith Buber Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 248.

individual acts of sabotage and “acts of major moral effort.” Yet, Agassi does not view instances of women sharing food, clothing, gifts, and friendship as acts of resistance.¹¹ This thesis will demonstrate that these everyday acts were indeed resistance and that the Jewish women themselves considered any efforts to preserve human dignity and life as such.

For most inmates of concentration camps armed resistance was not an option. Divested of any weapons, their jobs, financial resources, and social standing before the Final Solution was put into full effect, Jews rarely had the means to fight the Nazis. Upon entering the concentration camps, Jews were stripped of all their belongings—including the very clothes on their backs—shaved, and given scant clothing that did not protect them against the elements. Watchful guards would kill any suspected dissenter; in fact, they routinely and summarily killed inmates who violated minor rules. Even small acts of sabotage could rarely be carried out because the guards routinely checked for faulty items.

Under such repressive and punitive conditions, the act of taking food from the SS kitchen to supplement their starvation diet or of removing items from garment sorting centers should be considered a form of resistance. Nonetheless, few inmates were in a position to carry out such acts. Instead, many inmates resisted the Nazis on another level. They wrote poetry and cookbooks, shared food with one another, mended and made clothes, and even made gifts to give to each other. They washed themselves and their clothing, saved their bread for barter, and formed “camp families” in resistance to Nazi

¹¹ Ibid., 248-249.

policy.¹² Thus, what had once been interpreted as compliance for many years following the Holocaust is now seen as Jews' alternative forms of resistance to a brutal system aimed at destroying them.

Survivor testimonies and memoirs reveal that Jewish women, who endured the harshest conditions in the camps, utilized gendered resistance techniques within the camps and endured the harshest conditions. Jewish women were at the bottom of the camp hierarchy. As we know, Nazism rested on racial theory that designated Jews as an inferior race, dangerous to Germany that needed to be eliminated. Camp guards filled with Nazi propaganda despised the Jewish inmates in general and particularly Jewish women since they were the only ones who could carry on the Nazi-defined race according to eugenics theories popular at the time. Historians Carol Rittner and John Roth argue, "Because women are the ones who bear children, they are put uniquely at risk as members of a group targeted as racially inferior."¹³ As a result, camp doctors sent more women (and children) directly to their deaths, rather than using them as slave labor. For those who were not killed at once, the camp design and regulations often kept Jewish women segregated from the rest of the female and male population.

In spite of such horrible conditions, Jewish female inmates formed camp families, shared their food with their camp sisters, and attempted to keep themselves and their surroundings clean. Jewish women utilized the same forms of resistance common to all

¹² Judith Buber Agassi uses the term "camp families" in Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 237.

¹³ Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House, 1993), 2.

female prisoners, but in an environment specifically designed to bring about their complete annihilation.¹⁴

This thesis examines the lives of European Jewish women before and during the war, and the methods of resistance they utilized in the concentration camps. Evidence reveals that Jewish women based their camp resistance efforts on their pre-war experiences. Once in the camps, these women created specifically gendered resistance methods that rested on women's traditional roles and gendered practices, such as creating a family unit, saving food, sewing, and cleaning.

My research draws largely from survivor testimonies and memoirs of camp survivors. While many historians are wary to use sources written years after the event in question, in the case of the Holocaust survivors the vast majority of accounts fit that description. A few diaries written by inmates during their time in the camps exist; however, these are rare. Some survivors wrote down the events as they remembered them shortly after their liberation, but left them to be discovered later by their children and published. Many Holocaust survivors focused on rebuilding their lives and families; they did not write about their Nazi-era experiences until later in life.¹⁵ Even so, secondary sources can be used to verify and provide context for these primary sources. Thus, this thesis rests on survivor accounts that are deemed historically accurate. In particular, renowned historians Rochelle Saidel and Judith Agassi's books highlighting the position of Jewish women during the Holocaust proved invaluable to my research.

¹⁴ Unless explicitly stated otherwise, all individual examples are of Jewish women inmates. However, general statements about women may not refer to any particular race, nationality, or group.

¹⁵ See Richard Vinen's discussion on these types of sources in Richard Vinen, *The Unfree French: Life under the Occupation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 6-10.

The four chapters of this thesis examine the development and use of resistance by Jewish women. The first chapter provides a brief background on the history of anti-Semitism in Europe since the Middle Ages, focusing on the countries of Germany, Poland, and France from the end of World War I to the early 1930s. The second chapter looks at the daily struggles of Jewish women as anti-Semitism intensified during the 1930s. This chapter demonstrates that Jewish women's experiences during the 1930s—ironically—uniquely prepared them with the skills necessary to survive the camps. The third chapter analyzes Jewish women's resistance techniques in the camps. The fourth chapter addresses acts beyond daily survival, the rare instances of Jewish women's sabotage and escape. Few inmates in general, much less Jewish women, could perform these difficult acts. Thus, we must note and understand how these rare but dramatic acts came about.

On the most basic level, Jewish women resisted the dehumanizing ideology of the Nazis. Lotte S., an Austrian-Belgian Jew who survived Auschwitz and Ravensbrück, wrote, "In reality anybody who strived to survive performed resistance. Any act of solidarity, any small piece of bread, each friendly and encouraging word was resistance."¹⁶ The Nazis intended to obliterate the Jewish people. Thus, for those caught in the concentration camps, survival itself represented an act of resistance.

¹⁶ Lotte S. quoted in Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 249-250. Also see Gurewitsch's discussion of resistance in Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 221.

CHAPTER ONE

PRELUDE TO THE CAMPS: ANTI-SEMITISM IN EUROPE BEFORE 1933

Anti-Semitism was not unique to Nazi Germany; rather it has a long and sordid history in Europe that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. What separated the Nazi from centuries of hatred towards the Jew was the racial basis and genocidal scale of their anti-Semitism. Nazi policies amplified state and canonical laws against the Jews stemming back to the first century. From the Middle Ages, Jews faced social ostracism, lack of political rights, and pogroms throughout Europe; they based their reactions to surges of anti-Semitism on these experiences. The Jews did not constitute a race (as the Nazis and others would later assert), but they did share a history of extensive oppression. The Holocaust was the culmination of centuries of mutual suspicion, but the first real upsurge of anti-Semitism took place in the Middle Ages.

Anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages the Jews faced accusations of association with the devil. Medieval writings and art depicted the devil and Jews with similar physical attributes. Both were “hook-nosed” and had horns, both widely associated with goats. Carvings and paintings showed Jews riding goats, owning them, or—as in depictions of the devil—having a goat-like beard. The devil and demons were frequently shown as goat-like creatures. The badges Jews were forced to wear often had images of a goat horn and

their houses were marked with the image of the devil. The Vienna Council of 1267 required Jews to wear a “horned hat” and the dictate became popular throughout Europe.¹

Likewise Jews were accused of ritual murders, also known as blood libel, for a variety of reasons. The most common tale was that the Jews needed Christian blood during Passover, whether for the baking of matzo, a ritualized crucifixion—especially of children—or even eating the flesh and organs of Christians. While these beliefs had no basis, the allegations continued throughout the Middle Ages and periodically appeared even in the nineteenth century.²

In medieval society life was nasty and short, with no knowledge of germ theory. People often died of diseases now easily treatable and when these deaths occurred Jews were often scapegoated. Jews faced charges of poisoning the wells and Jewish doctors were accused of murdering their patients. Often Jewish physicians could not treat Christians for fear that they would give them poison. “In 1161, in Bohemia, a mass execution occurred when eighty-six Jews were burned as accomplices in an alleged plot of Jewish physicians to poison the populace.”³ This idea persisted well into the sixteenth century when the Jewish doctor of Queen Elizabeth I, charged with trying to poison her, was executed.⁴ A widespread explanation of the Black Death held that Jews had poisoned the wells and thousands were murdered for their supposed connection.⁵

The most persistent condemnation of the Jews related to their involvement in usury. Generally prohibited from farming and crafting, Jews became traders and lenders

¹ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943), 26, 44-47.

² *Ibid.*, 124-139.

³ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 102-106.

as the Church forbid Christians from charging interest on loans, referred to as usury. Following the end of the First Crusade when trade with the East was largely cut off, many Jews found that moneylending was the only profession still available to them.⁶ As many professions remained unavailable to Jews for centuries, they continued to be overly represented in the practice of moneylending as it transitioned into modern banking.

Having excluded Jews, they were then accused of being unable to participate in society as other persons. A myriad of laws, both religious and secular, restricted Jews and their contact with others.⁷ As early as 306, the Synod of Elvira stated that Jews and Christians could not marry each other. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 required Jews to wear a badge and earlier they had been ordered to wear yellow belts.⁸ In seventeenth century Frankfurt, Jews had to mark their houses and could only travel under certain conditions. Likewise, during the French Revolution documents marked the holders as Jews. However, during the French Revolution, in 1791, France emancipated the Jews and gave them full citizenship. Nevertheless, French anti-Semitism continued overtly and covertly well into the twentieth century and elsewhere in Europe the practices also persisted. In nineteenth-century Frankfurt, for example, Ludwig Börne had “Jud” on his passport.⁹ The Nazis later reinstated all of these measures and more.

“Scientific” Justification for Anti-Semitism

In the nineteenth century Social Darwinism provided seemingly “scientific” justification for deep-rooted anti-Semitism. Charles Darwin focused on the impact of the

⁶ Ibid., 188.

⁷ Ibid., 12, 18.

⁸ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979), 5.

⁹ Ibid., 7.

environment on animals in his book *Origins of the Species* published in 1859; however, others adapted his theories to form the argument that heredity was the main factor in human behavior and characteristics. Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin, wrote *Hereditary Genius* in 1869, wherein he introduced the idea of eugenics.¹⁰ In the book Galton argued, "that a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance, under exactly the same limitations as are the form and physical features of the whole organic world."¹¹ Applied human eugenics posited that various races were endowed with specific character traits, usually seen as hereditary. This argument, based on virtually no data or evidence, seemed to give scientific proof of the long held assertion that regardless of conversion or other actions "a Jew remained a Jew."¹² Therefore, Jews could not change because they were an inferior biological race. The association of Galton's racism with science and Social Darwinism insured their widespread acceptance.

Blood Libel in the Twentieth Century

Some anti-Semitic practices and ideas might seem far removed from the twentieth century, but in one form or another they persisted. Historian Helmut Walser Smith describes an incident in the German (now Polish) town of Konitz in 1900, where the townspeople accused the Jewish residents of ritualistic murder.¹³ Over the course of two months the dismembered body of eighteen-year-old Ernst Winter was found dispersed around the village. The residents accused the town's Jews of murdering him in order to

¹⁰ William I. Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 97-98.

¹¹ Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1914), 1.

¹² Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, 13.

¹³ Helmut Walser Smith, *The Butcher's Tale: Murder and Anti-Semitism in a German Town* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 17.

use his blood to make the traditional Passover matzo.¹⁴ Smith writes, “Between mid-April to mid-June 1900, three waves of some thirty separate anti-Semitic riots wracked these communities, [Konitz and close towns] instilling fear in the Jews and shattering their sense of belonging.”¹⁵ A Jew by the name of Moritz Lewy was later sentenced to prison for the killing, although in 1903 Kaiser Wilhelm II exonerated him.¹⁶ This incident illustrates how easily medieval accusations could resurface and helps to explain the fertile ground the Nazis built upon.

Anti-Semitic Publications

In the same year that Moritz Lewy was released from prison, the first edition of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* appeared in a Russian newspaper. In 1905, Sergei Nilus (a Russian mystic) published *The Protocols* as an appendix to one of his books. *The Protocols*, which alleged a Jewish conspiracy to assume global domination, at first attracted little notice. *The Protocols* were to have been written by Jewish conspirators explaining their plot. In the early 1920s the book appeared throughout Europe—including Germany, Poland, France, Italy, and England—with the new allegation that the Jews were to blame for the Russian Revolution. By 1921, Phillip Graves of the *London Times* proved *The Protocols* to be a complete forgery written by Russian agents. Other journalists also denounced the book as being completely falsified. However, the damage had already been done and the book continued to garner a wide audience among the

¹⁴ Ibid., 18, 25-31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., 210.

political right. The Nazi party alone published twenty-three editions of the book between 1919 and 1939.¹⁷

Urbain Gohier, in his French translation of the book, argued that the Jews would never be able to assimilate into French society. *La Libre Parole*, an anti-Semitic newspaper, published *The Protocols* as a series. Excerpts of it also appeared in newspapers that were not anti-Semitic.¹⁸ In Great Britain, *The Protocols* spurred the publication of multiple books addressing the perceived Jewish threat. These included *The Jewish World Problem* and the journal *Jewry über Alles*. The Romanian version also blamed the Jews for the communist revolution in nearby Hungary.¹⁹ Anti-Semitic publications were not limited to Europe; in the United States, Henry Ford published a revision of *The Protocols* as *The International Jew*. Ford also funded numerous anti-Semitic newspapers and journals.²⁰ *The Protocols* turned attention to the Jews as a convenient scapegoat for the dire economic and political situations plaguing much of Europe in the 1930s.

Anti-Semitism in Germany World War I to 1920s

The emancipation of the Jews in the German states proved to be a slow process. In 1812, the Prussian government emancipated the Jews in its territory, however they remained the only German state to do so for over thirty years. At the Frankfurt Assembly

¹⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Timeline," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007244> (accessed February 11, 2013); United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007058> (accessed March 20, 2013); see also Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 98.

¹⁸ Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 124, 282.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 150, 313.

²⁰ USHMM, "Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Timeline."

of 1848-1849, all the German states finally emancipated the Jews. Still, many states did not fully enforce Jewish rights and even Prussia curtailed the issue by stating that Jews were not distinct from the general population.²¹ In so doing the Prussian government alleged that no special protection of Jewish rights was necessary. The unification of Germany in 1871 failed to provide the Jews with better political protection. Despite the Prussian government's assertion that Jews were not different from others, they thwarted Jewish attempts to become civil servants. The economic crises of the 1870s further undermined the position of Jews, who were blamed for "the 'social costs' of rapid economic growth [since society regarded...] Jews as synonymous with materialism, liberalism, and modernism."²²

Although German society continued to view Jews as outsiders, prior to Nazi rule, violence was infrequent. In contrast, during the late 1800s Russian Jews faced multiple pogroms, and starting in 1894, the Dreyfus Affair aroused a passionate national debate in France.²³ In Germany, meanwhile, Jews appeared to be gaining more social acceptance by the start of World War I. The German military finally opened the officer ranks to Jews and Jewish businessman Walther Rathenau headed the War Resources Department. According to historian William Brustein, "nearly 10 percent of the directors of the war corporations were Jews."²⁴

As the war began to bog down and casualty rates mounted, general attitudes towards the Jews changed, signaling a rise in anti-Semitism that continued to expand over the ensuing two decades. Germans began to accuse Jews of avoiding military service,

²¹ Donald L. Niewyk, *The Jews in Weimar Germany* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2001), 3, 5.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁴ Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 219.

although 100,000 Jews served in the German military. Some also accused Jewish businessmen of war profiteering, through their government contracts and positions in the German government.²⁵ The irony was that given the historic restrictions on Jewish professions, during the war some Jewish industrialists became the ideal candidates to run war industries.

Many right wing voices in Germany blamed Jews for the Russian Revolution given the involvement of Jewish communists in the Russian revolutionary movement, especially in leadership positions. Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century many Jews found socialism appealing for, among other things, its position against anti-Semitism. Although neither Karl Marx nor Ferdinand Lassalle practiced Judaism, they were both of Jewish descent. Anti-Semites pointed to this fact as evidence of a Jewish conspiracy to overthrow the German government. These allegations led to physical attacks against Jews in Berlin and Munich in late 1918.²⁶

Despite the reputed link between Jewish socialism, some communists denounced Jews as capitalists, and they did not hold favored positions within the communist parties as many were inclined to believe. Indeed, post-communist pogroms in Russia should have made clear that the communist government—rather than being under Jewish leadership—in fact harbored an abject hatred for Jews. “Communist militant Ruth Fisher told the German Communist student union in July 1931: ‘Crush the Jewish capitalist, hang them, smash them!’”²⁷

²⁵ Michael H. Kater, “Everyday Anti-Semitism in Prewar Nazi Germany: The Popular Bases,” *Yad Vashem Studies* XVI (1984): 133; Martin Gilbert, *The Jews in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 2001), 71.

²⁶ Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 265-269, 291-293; Kater, “Everyday Anti-Semitism,” 133-134.

²⁷ Amos Elon, *The Pity of It All: A History of Jews in Germany, 1743-1933* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2002), 385; also see Niewyk, *The Jews of Weimar Germany*, 68-69.

Similarly, some German military leaders diverted attention from their own deficiencies and blamed Jews for causing Germany to lose the war. In fact, of the 100,000 German Jews who fought in World War I, over 31,000 had earned the Iron Cross.²⁸ Despite their honorable service Jews became targets of the stab-in-the-back myth. They were also blamed for, “every subsequent disaster that ensued: civil unrest, hyperinflation, depression, bankruptcies, and any other kind of misery one can imagine.”²⁹ This equation of Jews with the stab-in-the-back-myth coupled with the accusations of “Jewish Bolshevism” and economic crisis amplified anti-Semitism in interwar Germany.³⁰

Many political parties and even civil servants committed acts of violence against Jews. Matthias Erzberger, who signed the World War I armistice and remained involved in German politics as the leader of the Center Party, was murdered in August 1921. Erzberger was of Jewish decent, but practiced Catholicism. In its account of his death, the *Oletzkoer Zeitung* alleged, “the majority of the German people breathe a sigh of relief at this moment.”³¹ Less than a year later, in July 1922, Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau was also murdered. While the government and civilian population responded strongly against Rathenau’s murder, those responsible escaped punishment.³² By the early 1920s, discontent with Jews in general positions of power clearly multiplied and the government’s ability (and willingness) to punish acts of violence waned.

²⁸ Gilbert, *The Jews in the Twentieth Century*, 71.

²⁹ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 2, 20; also see Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 382.

³⁰ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 98; Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 273-274; Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 346, 353.

³¹ *Oletzkoer Zeitung* quoted in Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 99.

³² Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 100-101; Gunter W. Remmling, “Prologue: Weimar Society in Retrospect,” in *Towards the Holocaust: The Social and Economic Collapse of the Weimar Republic*, eds. Michael N. Dobkowski and Isidor Wallimann (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1983), 8.

Although Jews had technically received equal rights during the Napoleonic occupation, it was not until Weimar that they saw the fruition of their political rights. Thus, the Weimar Republic's work to solidify Jewish rights unintentionally strengthened anti-Semitic feelings in Germany.³³ On the political right, some believed the process to be proof that Jews were gaining power.³⁴

The political far right and anti-Semitic publications increasingly referenced to Weimar as the "Jew-Republic." Despite the violence against Jewish politicians and civil servants in Germany, the Weimar government failed to realize the seriousness of the situation. Historian Amos Elon found:

The courts offered little protection against ethnic slander, dismissing remarks such as 'We don't need a Judenrepublik' and 'Pfui Judenrepublik' as harmless banter. The Supreme Court split hairs in a learned finding that such remarks were legitimate criticism of the 'current constitution of the Reich,' not an offense against the state as such.³⁵

Thus in the interwar period the Nazi Party was not alone in its exploitation of the political animosity towards the Jews. The political right used anti-Semitic propaganda equating Jews with animals or insects that were "ensnaring" the world.³⁶ In particular, anti-Semites characterized Eastern European Jews as bugs that would infest the country.³⁷

Given the economic disruptions of the era—inflation, followed by depression—many Germans accused the Jews of causing the economic crises that plagued Germany in the interwar years. Immediately following the war, Germany experienced rampant inflation, which by 1922 exploded into hyperinflation.³⁸ First "prices rose at an average

³³ Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 358.

³⁴ Kater, "Everyday Anti-Semitism," 132-133.

³⁵ Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 374; also see Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 39, 98.

³⁶ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 98, 321.

³⁷ Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 139.

³⁸ Theo Balderston, *Economic and Politics in the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35-36.

daily rate of 1.6 per cent... from July 1923, the average daily rate of wholesale price rise shot up to 12 per cent.”³⁹ In 1923, 4.2 billion marks equaled one American dollar, with a loaf of bread costing 140 million marks. That same year Adolf Hitler attempted the Beer Hall Putsch. The German middle class had been badly hurt; many lost all their wealth and savings.⁴⁰

The seeming financial stability of some German Jews spurred resentment among their neighbors. The prevalence of Jews in banking and retail businesses—while a historic consequence of anti-Jewish policy—enforced the idea that Jews profited from the rising inflation and costs, albeit these charges were entirely unfounded.⁴¹ In addition, the increased immigration of Eastern European Jews into Germany caused fears that they would take jobs away from struggling German families.⁴² On 5-6 November 1923, an anti-Semitic “mob of 30,000 descended upon the ‘Scheuneviertel’ in Berlin’s central district where a great many Eastern Jews lived and maintained shops. For two days Jewish passersby and shopkeepers were beaten, and nearly one thousand Jewish-owned stores were looted.”⁴³ With the desperate economic situation in Germany, any perceived threat to unemployment became a serious matter.

The German economy experienced a slight economic upturn beginning in 1924 and through late 1928 it appeared the economy had stabilized. However, the Great Depression brought economic disaster to Germany once again. In 1929, the unemployed numbered 1.9 million. Indeed, from 1921 to 1938, total German unemployment averaged

³⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁰ Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 367; Niewyk, *The Jews of Weimar Germany*, 51; also see Remmling, “Prologue,” 3.

⁴¹ Kater, “Everyday Anti-Semitism,” 134, 136; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 59, 168.

⁴² Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 139; Niewyk, *The Jews of Weimar Germany*, 48.

⁴³ Niewyk, *The Jews of Weimar Germany*, 51.

just over 15 percent.⁴⁴ The political right, always blamed the Jews for these problems and given the wide scale misery, increasingly the public accepted that rhetoric.

Rise of the Nazi Party

The Nazi Party had its origins in the end of World War I when it was known as the German Worker's Party (DAP). Hitler first became involved with the party in September 1919 under his position in propaganda for the German army. Hitler joined the DAP to observe the organization. However, upon leaving the army Hitler became a permanent member of the DAP, which changed its name to the National Socialist German Worker's Party (NSDAP) by 1920.⁴⁵ Hitler became a popular speaker at the group's meetings, appearing at over seventy-five meetings between 1919 and 1920. Hitler's popularity grew within the group and on 29 July 1921 he was elected as the head of the party. On 3 August 1921, Hitler created the *Sport und Turnabteilung* (SA) paramilitary force.⁴⁶ Historian Joachim Fest states, "The initials originally meant Sports Division [simply a cover for its activities]; only later did they come to stand for Sturmabteilung or storm troop."⁴⁷ Hitler took advantage of worsening hyperinflation to gain support for the NSDAP.⁴⁸ However, the NSDAP remained one of many right-wing political and paramilitary groups prominent throughout Germany during the early years of the Weimar Republic.

⁴⁴ Balderston, *Economics and Politics*, 34; Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 217; Elon, *The Pity of It All*, 353.

⁴⁵ A. J. Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 4th ed. (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2000), 90-91.

⁴⁶ Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 136, 149-150.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 156-157.

The membership of the NSDAP increased as hyperinflation reached its peak in 1923; Hitler took this as an opportunity to try and take power, in an event known as the Beer Hall Putsch. Hitler persuaded Gustav Ritter von Kahr, General Otto von Lossow, and General Erich Ludendorff to support an overthrow of the Weimar Republic. On 9 November 1923 Hitler and the SA marched in Munich demanding an end to Weimar. After allowing the march to precede the police stopped the action when it neared the main section of the city. Both parties fired shots and one person was killed. Despite Hitler's blatant attempt to overthrow the government, the Munich courts only sentenced him to five years in prison.⁴⁹ During Hitler's imprisonment, a period of economic stability, the NSDAP lost support, but Hitler spent his time in prison writing *Mein Kampf*. He was released in December 1924, having served merely a year of his sentence. He had come to realize that he needed a way of gaining control over the German government legally.

From 1924 to late 1928 the Germany economy and government appeared to be stabilizing. In May 1928, the Nazi Party only managed to get three percent of the vote in the Reichstag.⁵⁰ However, once the Great Depression hit the Nazis began to gain parliamentary seats. In the September 1930 elections, they held the second highest number of seats, after the Social Democrats.⁵¹ The Nazis and other political parties used the economic crises and general dissatisfaction with Weimar to gain popularity. More importantly these groups instigated much of the violence during the early 1930s. Scholar Gunter Remmling tells us, "In 1932 German jails were crowded with close to nine thousand Leftist political prisoners. In the basements of their headquarters, the Nazis

⁴⁹ Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 108-109; Fest, *Hitler*, 203.

⁵⁰ Remmling, "Prologue," 10.

⁵¹ Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 148.

tortured their enemies to death; in the streets, Communists and Nazis fought pitched battles.”⁵² As creators of this violence, the Nazi Party quickly became the only ones who could control it. General von Schleicher allowed the Nazi SA and now SS to operate, in a naïve attempt to bring stability. By the July 1932 Reichstag elections the Nazis received thirty-seven percent of the vote.⁵³ Within a year Hitler had complete control of the German government.

On 30 January 1933, President Hindenburg appointed Hitler Reich Chancellor. In late February, a Dutchman started the Reichstag on fire and Hitler used the situation to claim that the Communists were trying to overthrow the government. Although ironic, given Hitler’s own such attempt in the Beer Hall Putsch, he nonetheless was able to declare the emergency decree for the Protection of the People and the State. This allowed arrests without cause and limited freedom of speech. In March 1933, the Reichstag passed the enabling law that allowed Hitler to govern without consent.⁵⁴ Hitler soon turned his attention towards the Jews and enacted legislation that severely limited their position in German society.

Anti-Semitism in Poland

Like Germany, Poland also had a complicated history with similarly long standing prejudice towards the Jews. For practical reasons, in the sixteenth century Polish royals were unable to directly conduct business; therefore they carried out all their business transactions through Jews. On behalf of the royalty the Jews also collected taxes and

⁵² Remmling, “Prologue,” 11.

⁵³ Ibid., 10-12.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 13; Nicholls, *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 167-169.

managed their estates.⁵⁵ According to historian Joanna Beata Michlic, “The last Jagiellonian monarch, Zygmund August (Sigismund August) (1548-72), granted Polish Jewry unique communal autonomy in religious and legal matters.”⁵⁶ However, their position in the Polish community largely dissipated with the end of the Jagiellonian line. From then on, anti-Semitism took a similar path to that of most countries in Europe.

After the partition of 1700, Poland lost its independence. Movement to restore the nation resurfaced in the nineteenth century. Polish nationalism from the 1880s to 1918 purported that the Jews were the main threat to the goal of establishing a Polish nation. Michlic argues that the “ethno-nationalism” of Poland, rather than the more common civic nationalism of other European countries, made the Jews a specific danger to the prospects of a Polish nation.⁵⁷ The powerful Catholic Church in Poland and the political right depicted the Jews as a “harmful other.”⁵⁸

After the Versailles Treaty returned sovereignty to the Poles after years of foreign control, the nationalist opposition strengthened against the Jews in Poland. The new constitution promised equality, but the provisions of the law were not strictly enforced. Although Jews only constituted ten percent of the population the National Democracy party opposed their involvement in the economy.⁵⁹ Jews could not hold certain jobs, such as in the “public sector [and...] were rarely employed in non-Jewish factories.”⁶⁰ As a result the poverty rate was high among Polish Jews and increased with the additional,

⁵⁵ Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 29-32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3, 25.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 69-70, 72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72.

albeit unofficial, restrictions on their professional lives.⁶¹ Unlike Jews in Germany and France, who were mostly middle or working class, many Polish Jews lived in poverty.

In addition many non-Jewish Poles blamed the Jews for the Minorities Treaty, which called for the protection of the rights of religious and political minorities, that Poland had to sign in July 1919. Many Poles believed the treaty to be a violation of their right to rule themselves and “saw the Jews as intruders.”⁶² The legal protection of Polish Jews generally remained unenforced. Although the Polish government passed no anti-Semitic legislation, discrimination against Jews in Poland remained prevalent.

The Catholic Church in Poland did nothing to discourage anti-Semitism. In fact, the Polish constitution of 1921 reaffirmed the position of Catholicism as the majority religion in the country. As nationalism increased, so too did the adherence to the Catholic Church, which was viewed as a staunch supporter of Polish nationalism.⁶³

Anti-Semitism in France

Anti-Semitism in interwar France typically remained much less violent than in Germany and Poland. Although France had virulent anti-Semitic groups—common throughout Europe at this time—they did not meet with the same success as the Nazis eventually did during this period. However, France did not experience the same political and economic crises in the interwar years, as did Germany. In addition, France had

⁶¹ Celia S. Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction: Jews of Poland between the Two World Wars* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), 74.

⁶² Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 72-73; Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction*, 3-4, 54-56, 61.

⁶³ Heller, *On the Edge of Destruction*, 109.

emancipated its Jews in 1791 during the French revolution.⁶⁴ In so doing, France became the earliest European nation to emancipate the Jews.

Despite Jews' history of political freedom in France since the late eighteenth century, in the late nineteenth century a new radical anti-Semitism emerged as it had in Germany and Poland. While submerged during World War I, tensions rose again after the war ended. From 1919 to 1939 the Jewish population in France almost doubled, mostly due to increased immigration from Eastern Europe.⁶⁵ Many newly arrived Jews had fled the pogroms in the Soviet Union, Poland, and Hungary. These immigrants stood in stark contrast to the highly assimilated, long-standing community of French Jews.⁶⁶

France represented an asylum to them, but given difficulties of interwar economic problems the newly arrived Jewish immigrants provoked negative responses. Anti-Semites did not welcome these Jewish immigrants, but the established Jewish community in France also hardly embraced them. The French Jewish community feared—rightly so—that the immigrants would bring unwanted attention to all Jews in France.

During the interwar years, anti-Semitic publications increased in France, linked to the rise of the radical right. Robert Brasillach, a French fascist and the editor of *Je suis Partout*, published an article entitled “The Monkey Question.” In this article he equated Jews to animals that should be bereft of political rights.⁶⁷ However, unlike Germany and Poland, anti-Semitism in France remained relatively limited, without much influence over

⁶⁴ Gary Kates, “Jews into Frenchmen: Nationality and Representation in Revolutionary France,” *Social Research* 56 (1989): 215.

⁶⁵ Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 137; Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 123.

⁶⁶ Brustein, *Roots of Hate*, 103, 114.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 126.

the political sphere during the 1920s.⁶⁸ Jews in France faced a more latent antipathy often directed at immigrants rather than the established Jewish community.

Conclusion

The end of World War I signaled a distinct resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout Europe. Even countries such as France with a continued commitment to “*Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*” could not stem the rising tide of anti-Semitism. The very contributors to anti-Semitism, political and economic instability, also distracted those in power from the dangers represented by the current level of anti-Semitism. Government officials, average citizens, and Jews alike assumed that support for anti-Semitism would wane once the situation stabilized. The history of anti-Jewish sentiment in Europe supported their presumptions. Few could have anticipated that anti-Semitism, carried on the shoulders of the Nazis, would escalate so intensely within a matter of years.

⁶⁸ Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 145.

CHAPTER TWO
ANTI-SEMITISM IN EUROPE AFTER 1933:
THE POSITION OF JEWISH WOMEN

As Hitler came to power in Germany the level of anti-Semitic policies steadily intensified and Jewish women found themselves uniquely affected. All members of the Jewish community felt the effects of the anti-Jewish legislation. At the same time, social expectations for the woman to care for the home and physical needs of the family put additional strain on Jewish women. They relied on gendered skills of cooking and sewing to care for their families.

As during World War I and the Great Depression, women were expected to find ways to “make-do,” an expectation that proved daunting for Germany’s Jewish women after 1933. They set food on the table when they had little access to supplies and their cupboards were seemingly bare. Jewish women had to repair and reuse old clothing items when they could no longer obtain new ones. These skills later helped them to survive the coming Holocaust.

Women’s Gendered Roles in Germany Prior to Hitler

World War I demonstrated the importance of household efficiency to the entire country, where proficiency in the home was essential to the war effort.¹ After the war, the German government devoted new attention to the home. In 1921, Germany formed the National Advisory Board for Productivity (RKW), which promoted efficiency in the

¹ Nolan, “Housework Made Easy,” 553, 555.

home. The RKW conducted studies to determine the most effective means of conducting common housework such as mopping and cooking.²

In pre-1933 Germany, as in much of Europe during this time period, society generally believed that public life reflected life in the home. Having already improved the output of factories, efficiency experts turned their attention to the home. They argued that if efficiency could be obtained in the home then it would be reflected in every other aspect of a person's life.³ This program of household efficiency focused on the working-class home, since many middle class women hired a housekeeper.⁴

In Germany the focus was on the method of performing household work, rather than utilizing new and better appliances to ease the work for women as was popular in the United States. Many working class homes did not even have electricity.⁵ In addition, women in Germany were expected to do all of the housework and to not rely on their husbands for occasional help. Classes offered by schools and organizations taught women the most efficient ways to cook and sew.⁶ While women could improve the efficiency of their cooking, they still usually had to shop daily to keep necessities in their pantries.⁷ Store-bought clothing did become popular, but many women repaired their own clothes and some, especially in more rural areas, continued to sew their family's wardrobe.⁸

² Ibid., 554-556.

³ Mary Nolan, "'Housework Made Easy': The Taylorized Housewife in Weimar Germany's Rationalized Economy," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 3 (1990): 551.

⁴ Ibid., 552.

⁵ Ibid., 552, 565-556, 572.

⁶ Ibid., 553, 563.

⁷ Lynn Abrams, "At Home in the Family: Women and Familial Relationships," in *The Routledge History of Women in Europe since 1700*, ed. Deborah Simonton (New York: Routledge, 2006), 41.

⁸ Anne-Marie Sohn, "Between the Wars in France and England," in *A History of Women in the West, Volume V: Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Françoise Thébaud, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1996), 103-109.

Later in the 1920s the RKW published pamphlets on housework, including *Housework Made Easy* and *Home Washing*. The RKW's information often appeared in women's magazines. The pamphlets proved to be fairly popular, with *Home Washing* selling out within two months.⁹

The main ideas of household efficiency reflected the dire economic situation in Germany. According to historian Mary Nolan, the key concern was "maximum output for minimum input and the elimination of all waste."¹⁰ The concept continued to be important once World War II started and rationing was instituted.

Jewish Women Across Europe during the Interwar Years

While the economic crises hurt everyone, Jewish women especially found themselves in an increasingly daunting situation. During World War I and the postwar turmoil in Europe, their families continued to expect them to find ways to make a filling meal and keep them clothed despite the economic problems, political hardships, and rising anti-Semitism. Even women who worked outside of the home remained in charge of food purchases, gardens to supplement the family's diet, and mending or making clothing items when new ones could not be bought. Thus, in the interwar period, many Jewish women (and women in general) learned how to make meager food and other basic supplies last.

For example, Sonia Shainwald Orbuch, a Polish Jew, remembered her mother refashioning old clothing items and finding inventive ways to provide food for her family. Orbuch recalled, "She could take a shabby secondhand coat, turn it inside out,

⁹ Ibid., 557-558.

¹⁰ Ibid., 559.

add a sporty collar and a row of buttons, and a lovely garment would emerge. And she made one article of clothing after another for my two fast-growing brothers.”¹¹ Thus, Jewish women learned to repair or make clothes out of whatever items they could obtain. Orbuch further recalled that her mother cooked meals for a couple of local teachers to make some extra money.¹² While she could not continue to provide a “proper” Sabbath meal, Orbuch’s mother always managed to find something to put on the table.

Jewish woman in particular would find skills such as these useful after Hitler came to power and passed anti-Semitic legislation. These laws greatly impacted the daily lives of Jewish women as they performed the basic necessities of shopping, preparing food, and clothing their families. As Jews lost their jobs and control over their businesses, women had to become even more creative to accomplish their daily housework. They would later find these skills crucial in the concentration camps where a scrap of food or clothing meant the difference between life and death, and survival itself became an act of resistance.

Anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany

Although anti-Semitism had a long history in Germany and throughout Europe, Jewish women were distinctively affected by it after Hitler came to power. Hitler passed numerous acts of anti-Jewish legislation and violence against Jews greatly increased. Jewish women (and men) had to overcome these obstacles to provide for their families.

¹¹ Sonia Shainwald Orbuch and Fred Rosenbaum, *Here, There are no Sarahs: A Woman’s Courageous Fight Against the Nazis and Her Bittersweet Fulfillment of the American Dream* (Muskegon, MI: RDR Books, 2009), 7. Orbuch and her family were not sent to a concentration camp. They managed to escape from a ghetto and fought with partisans for the remainder of the war.

¹² Orbuch and Rosenbaum, *Here, There are no Sarahs*, 22.

Official reports show that crimes against Jews, especially shop owners and businessmen, significantly intensified during the early months of 1933. Anti-Semites and members of the SA and SS destroyed store windows on countless occasions.¹³ The Nazi organizations orchestrated this terror to induce Jews to close their businesses and leave the country. The SA and SS tried to make it appear as if the civilian population supported the violence whole-heartedly, often conducting attacks at nights or out of uniform so they looked like civilians.

Other times the violence committed by the Nazis was bold and outright, but those involved were rarely punished. The district governor of Lower-Bavaria reported on 30 March 1933, that “several men dressed in dark uniforms” had kidnapped and murdered Otto Selz, a Jewish businessman.¹⁴ In another incident members of the SS “pummeled in a shocking manner with rubber truncheons” three Jews from Hörstein. The local SS leaders were arrested but later released on official orders from the Bavarian Political Police.¹⁵

Alongside the orchestrated violence, the Nazis multiplied their legal attacks on the Jews. On 1 April 1933, the Nazis issued directions for “the practical systematic implementations of a boycott of Jewish shops, Jewish goods, Jewish doctors and Jewish lawyers.”¹⁶ Although this boycott was not very popular with the general population, it

¹³ Otto Dov Kulka and Eberhard Jäckel, eds. *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports on Popular Opinion in Germany, 1933-1945*, trans. William Templer (New Haven, NH: Yale University Press, 2010), book, Doc. No. 3, p. 6-7.

¹⁴ Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, book, Doc. No. 4, p. 7.

¹⁵ Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, book, Doc. No. 18, p. 16.

¹⁶ Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Abraham Margalio, eds., *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union*, trans. Lea Ben Dor, 8th ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), Doc. No. 7, p. 32. Hitler called off the boycott after one day in order to avoid international repercussions, however some localized boycotts of Jewish businesses continued. See Irene Guenther, *Nazi Chic? Fashioning Women in the Third Reich* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 152-153.

did not stop the Nazis from implementing—a mere six days later—the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service. Issued on 7 April 1933, this law stipulated that non-Aryan civil servants would be “retired” or “dismissed” from their positions. The law temporarily exempted those who fought or had family who died fighting for Germany in World War I.¹⁷ Increasing restrictions on the professions Jews could work in hurt many families and hindered the ability of women to provide their families with food and clothing.¹⁸

Many German Jewish women worked in a family business or were self-employed. In general, fewer Jewish women were employed than their non-Jewish counterpart.¹⁹ Thus, Nazi employment restrictions and business closures often caused Jewish families to lose all sources of income. Likewise, when Jewish men lost their jobs their wives were less likely to have a job to support the family.

In Germany, numerous Jewish organizations provided aid for the increasing number of persons hurt by the new legislation. Already established societies such as the Working Group of the Jewish Women’s Organizations (1931) in Dresden worked with six other women’s groups to provide needy Jewish families with necessary food, clothing, and even monetary aid.²⁰ Similarly the Women’s Chevra Kaddisha organization (1935) offered care for the sick and proper Jewish burials.²¹ According to historian Marion Kaplan, “By April 1938, more than 60 percent of all Jewish businesses

¹⁷ Arad, Gutman, and Margalio, *Documents on the Holocaust*, Doc. No. 10, p. 40.

¹⁸ See Paula Schwartz, “The Politics of Food and Gender in Occupied Paris,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 7, no. 1 (1999), 35, 39. Schwartz stated that standing in queue lines and cooking family meals were distinctly “gendered” as female tasks. Her argument refers to women in general, not specifically to Jewish women.

¹⁹ Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 581, 587.

²⁰ Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, book, Doc. No. 57, p. 76-77; also see Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 598-599.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 134, p. 134.

did not exist, and Jewish social workers were trying to help 60,000 unemployed people.”²² As the Nazis forced more people from their jobs and restricted access to money in Jewish bank accounts, Jewish aid societies found it increasingly difficult to provide for the destitute.

On 15 September 1935 the Nazis instituted the infamous Nuremberg Laws. The Reich Citizenship Law defined a Reich citizen as “a subject of the State who is of German or related blood” and further stipulated that “the Reich citizen is the sole bearer of full political rights in accordance with the Law.”²³ The law did not specifically label Jews as non-citizens, but it provided a precedent whereby they could be stripped of their remaining political rights.

The Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor expressly stated that “Marriages between Jews and subjects of the state of German or related blood are forbidden [and...] extramarital intercourse between Jews and subjects of the state of Germans or related blood is forbidden.”²⁴ This law also prohibited Jews from employing Aryan women under the age of forty-five in their homes. Breaking these laws was punishable by prison sentences from one year to life.²⁵

These laws provided the measures necessary for the Nazis to disenfranchise or revoke Jewish citizenship on 14 November 1935, with the First Regulation of the Reich Citizenship Law. According to the law, “A Jew cannot be a Reich citizen [and...] A Jew is a person descended from a least three grandparents who are full Jews by race.”²⁶ With

²² Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 587-588.

²³ Arad, Gutman, and Margaliot, *Documents on the Holocaust*, Doc. No. 32, p. 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 33, p. 78-79.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 33, p. 78-79.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 34, p. 80.

this pronouncement Jews became stateless individuals who did not even have the rights accorded to foreigners.

During *Kristallnacht*, a violent Nazi-organized action on 9 November 1938, wherein over one hundred Jews were murdered, Jewish businesses were destroyed, and synagogues burned down.²⁷ After this the plight of the Jews deteriorated as the Nazis completed the Aryanzation of Jewish businesses. The Regulation for the Elimination of the Jews from the Economic Life of Germany, issued on 12 November 1938, stated that Jews were prohibited from “offer[ing] for sale goods or services, to advertise these, or to accept orders.”²⁸ According to an official annual government report:

The Jewish Winter Relief [*sic*] had a satisfactory balance sheet for the winter 1937/38 everywhere. But the beginning of the winter 1938/39 was less pleasant for the organization as far as the results of collecting were concerned. In the course of the year, the number of people to be given assistance has increased, the number contributing has declined. Among the wealthy Jews, almost nowhere was it possible to obtain donations on the previous scale. One simple reason was that these Jews no longer can dispose so freely of their assets as was possible before.²⁹

This report reveals the harsh impact of the 1938 law. The anti-Semitic ordinances affected all Jews.

The restrictions on food, clothing, and other items required even those relatively well-to-do Jewish women who had been largely unaffected by the Great Depression to master skills of stretching paltry food supplies and mending or repurposing old garments. Kaplan writes, “Welfare organizations suggested sewing-related jobs for women, such as knitting, tailoring, or making clothing decorations.”³⁰ Kaplan goes on to state that Jewish

²⁷ Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 584.

²⁸ Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, Doc. No. 52, p. 115-116.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 412, p. 415-416; also see *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 413, p. 417-419 and *Ibid.*, Doc. No. 414, p. 419-431; also see Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 600.

³⁰ Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany,” 588.

“women were more integrated into their community,”³¹ which may have given them more social connections; yet, these were generally within the Jewish community. Given the circumstances, it would have been difficult for Jewish women to maintain any relationship with non-Jewish women, who were still in the position to purchase goods.

After the war started, the Nazis implemented curfews and food constraints for Jews. As of 12 September 1939, Jews had a curfew of 8:00 p.m.³² Oftentimes shopping could only be done during a one to two hour interval each day. This time period was generally in the evening when shops had already sold out of most grocery items.³³ However, in Cologne, Jewish women had “from 8 to 9:30 a.m.” to complete their shopping.³⁴ By 1941, Germany instituted a one-hour period for shopping throughout Germany for Jewish women.³⁵ Although rationing began for all those living in Germany with the start of the war, additional severe limits were made on the items Jews could obtain in Germany and throughout the expanding occupied territories. For example, on 23 January 1940 the Reich Economy Ministry prohibited Jews from receiving their clothing ration cards and on 11 March all further food ration cards issued to Jews had the letter “J” stamped on them. Furthermore, Jews could not purchase certain meats such as chicken and fish, despite the fact these foods were not even rationed items.³⁶

³¹ Ibid., 593.

³² Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, Doc. No. 454, p. 469.

³³ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 253.

³⁴ Ibid., Doc. No. 460, p. 472-432; also Ibid., Doc. No. 463, p. 473-474.

³⁵ Arad, Gutman, and Margaliot, *Documents on the Holocaust*, Doc. No. 67, p. 151.

³⁶ Kulka and Jäckel, *The Jews in the Secret Nazi Reports*, 700; see also Associated Press, “Germany Tightens Jews’ Ration Curbs,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1940, <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.lib.uh.edu/docview/105163825?accountid=7107> (accessed November 18, 2012); also see Louis P. Lochner, “Jews in Germany Suffer Another Blow—No Meat,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, January 14, 1940, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=RbRQAAAAIBAJ&sjid=ZCIEAAAIBAIAJ&pg=2519,4361214&dq=jews+ration&hl=en> (accessed November 19, 2012).

As the Nazis began to send Jews from Germany and the occupied territories to internment and concentrations camps—often sending the males first—women continued to find ways to provide for their families. As early as the 1939 invasion of Poland *Einsatzgruppen* (Nazi killing units) had started rounding up Polish Jews to be executed or sent to ghettos. In 1942, the Nazis began deporting Jews from France and Germany itself was considered *Judenfrei* by 1943. During the period of deportations within each country Jewish men were often sent to the camps prior to women and children. Under these conditions, Jewish women who were still in their homes quickly learned to survive on subsistence diets as it became impossible to obtain government aid lest they be considered a burden on the nation and “sent to an internment camp.”³⁷ Family members, friends, and Jewish aid organizations could only offer limited assistance as funds were quickly depleted. Women increasingly became the heads of their households as men were sent away or remained in hiding, naïvely believing the Nazis would not harm women.³⁸

Poland under Occupation

As discussed in the previous chapter, anti-Semitism was strong in Poland prior to the Nazi invasion in 1939. Although most Poles did not adhere to Nazism and its particular form of anti-Semitism, many Poles already harbored hatred for the Jews based on nationalism. This persisted during the occupation and the Germans used it to their advantage.³⁹

³⁷ Renée Poznanski, *Jews in France during World War II*, trans. Nathan Bracher (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2001), 60, 130.

³⁸ Gerda Weissmann Klein, *All But My Life*, expanded ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), 12.

³⁹ Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other*, 133.

The ghettoization of Polish Jews began in 1940 and by the end of the year few Polish Jews could exit the ghettos; those who did were strictly guarded. During the previous year, the Nazi state had quickly implemented many of its anti-Semitic laws in Poland, such as prohibitions on employment and rationing.⁴⁰ The Operation Reinhard death camps—Treblinka, Sobibór, and Belzic—were all located in Poland. These camps were built specifically for the destruction of the European Jews.⁴¹ Although not one of the Operation Reinhard camps, Auschwitz also served primarily as a death camp.

Rising Anti-Semitism in France after 1933

Between Hitler's rise to power and the invasion of France in 1940, many Jews fled to France believing they would be safe from Hitler's grasp. Historian Paula Hyman explained:

Because of its proximity to Germany and its tradition of offering asylum to victims of political persecution, France took in more refugees than any other European nation. In 1933, for example, France accepted twenty-five thousand refugees from Nazi Germany, 85 percent of whom were Jews, out of an estimated total of sixty-five thousand persons who fled from the Reich in that year.⁴²

However, within the next year (1934) the French government passed several laws that severely restricted its borders to emigration. Regardless of the constraints, those fleeing the ever-expanding Nazi empire had few other choices and continued to stream over the borders in an attempt to escape. By 1938, "there were approximately sixty thousand Jewish refugees from central and eastern Europe in France, living hand-to-mouth existence in a hostile society."⁴³ Those who believed safety awaited them in France

⁴⁰ Ibid., 140-141.

⁴¹ Ibid., 141.

⁴² Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 152-153.

⁴³ Ibid., 153.

would quickly realize they were unwanted; French officials went to great lengths to ostracize and expel them from their borders.

After war broke out in 1939, France immediately placed restrictions upon all immigrants from foreign countries. Those from Germany and Austria could not serve in the military in spite of their strong desire to fight against those who had forced them to leave their homeland. As early as January 1939, Jewish and Spanish refugees found themselves detained at camps including Gurs, Le Vernet, and Argelès.⁴⁴

By late 1939, the French government had already interned many foreigners, including Jews from Germany. Inmates were forced to perform work and the living conditions—unpleasant to begin with—became increasingly harsh. Inmates with family outside of the camps found it difficult to maintain any communication and did not know when or if they would be released. After December 1939, some detainees obtained conditional releases, but strict guidelines severely limited the number of persons able to leave. Released detainees often had to report to get an extension, sometimes as frequently as once a day.⁴⁵ They were the lucky ones, as many more were never released. David Vogel, interned at Arandon, recalled, “In short, we were constantly on the verge of being released. The lists proved it! If not, what use would they have served? We were going to receive blankets, clothes, shoes, underwear. The lists proved it! No one was released. No blankets were given out.”⁴⁶ Conditions deteriorated further after the Germans invaded France, as the camps became ever more crowded and French Jews found they were not immune from the roundups as they too were eventually targeted.

⁴⁴ Poznanski, *Jews in France*, 20-21; Adam Rayski, *The Choice of the Jews Under Vichy: Between Submission and Resistance*, trans. François Bédarida (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 20.

⁴⁵ Poznanski, *Jews in France*, 21-22; Rayski, *The Choice of the Jews*, 20-21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

Occupied France

With the defeat of and fall of the Third Republic, the resulting right wing government established at Vichy issued numerous anti-Semitic measures. Historian Michael Marrus found “no fewer than 143 laws and actes réglementaires generated by the Vichy government.”⁴⁷ These laws were passed long before the Nazis made any demands on the Vichy government. Initially in 1940, the Germans did not impose anti-Semitic legislation in Vichy and, in fact, requested that Vichy actually curtail these activities.⁴⁸ These measures in France represented the empowerment of the right that had a growing resentment, fear, and hatred of foreign Jews in France.

From 1940 to 1941 laws restricted Jewish employment. Among the first to lose their jobs were musicians, journalists, and painters. In 1940, those in public administration and lawyers were prohibited from working in those professions; restrictions extended to all government positions including teachers. By 1941, nearly fifty percent of Jews in France were unemployed.⁴⁹ As in Nazi Germany, the inability to work placed Jews in a dangerous position. Not only did providing for themselves and their families become extremely difficult, but immigrants had to worry about being viewed as jobless and stateless foreigners who caused further strain on the French economy.

Usually unable to draw aid from the French government, by German directive, Jews depended on religious or independent relief organizations. The Amelot Committee ran soup kitchens, but had to charge three francs per person just to pay for expenses. The

⁴⁷ Michael R. Marrus, “Foreword,” in *Vichy Law and the Holocaust in France*, Richard H. Weisberg, (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1996), xxi.

⁴⁸ Weisberg, *Vichy Law*, xviii-xix, 38.

⁴⁹ Poznanski, *Jews in France*, 26-29, 42, 44-45.

Colonie Scolaire provided clothing, medicine, and offered doctor appointments. Near the Poitiers internment camp the Amelot Committee set up a home for Jewish children they were able to release from the camp.⁵⁰

By 1940, the Occupied Zone alone had over forty thousand Jews either partially or entirely dependent on aid. Requesting government aid could be dangerous. Historian Renée Poznanski reported the case of an immigrant who was released from a camp only to be sent to another after requesting aid relief.⁵¹ Such actions forced Jews to decide between starvation and asking for help, only to face the possibility of being interned.

In the Occupied Zone, the Nazis operated much as they had in Germany. In December 1941, they required all Jews to have their identification cards stamped with the word “Jew.” In order to account for all Jews in the territory, they initiated a census that was carried out beginning in 1940 and continuing until August 1944.⁵² The census made it possible for the Nazis to account for all Jewish businesses, Aryanized beginning October 1940.⁵³ Thus, the Germans quickly worked to single out and isolate the Jews from the rest of the French population.

By the fall of 1940, Jews were interned in seven different camps throughout France, including one specifically for women. These Jewish inmates were usually more recent immigrants who were not viewed as “French” Jews.⁵⁴ The percent of Jews interned varied according to camps, ninety percent of the inmates at Gurs were Jewish,

⁵⁰ Ibid., 50-51, 65.

⁵¹ Ibid., 67.

⁵² Ibid., 32-33.

⁵³ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 173, 181.

but only twenty percent at Le Vernet. The camps indiscriminately held men, women, and children.⁵⁵

Having ghettoized Jews and sent them to concentration camps in Poland in 1940, Germany turned its attention to French Jews in 1942. Germany began demanding quotas of Jews from France and deported these Jews to the East. Although immigrant Jews were usually sent first, French Jews were not completely spared. On 16-17 July 1942, German and French authorities rounded up Jews in the so-called “Spring Wind” operation. Their target was 28,000 Jews living in Paris, but many escaped with help from the French. However, the approximately 13,000 Jews arrested faced one of the worst horrors in France, the Vélodrome d’Hiver internment where they were kept for five days in a stadium intended to handle only 10,000 people.⁵⁶ From Vélodrome d’Hiver the Jews were sent to other internment camps, including Pithiviers and Beaune-la-Rolande. Here guards separated children under the age of fourteen from their parents, all others they put on trains bound for Auschwitz.⁵⁷ Later all the children were also sent to Auschwitz and immediately went to the gas chambers. Among the approximately 75,000 Jews sent from France to the East during the German occupation, only about three percent survived.⁵⁸

The situation in France demonstrates that very few safe havens existed for Jews in the years leading up to and during the Holocaust. Although Vichy attempted to protect those specified as French Jews for a period of time, immigrant Jews continued to be viewed as the dangerous other. Eventually French Jews would be targeted too. Most

⁵⁵ Ibid., 176-184.

⁵⁶ Rayski, *The Choice of the Jews*, 78-91; Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 173.

⁵⁷ Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France*, 173.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161, 173-174.

Jews assumed they would be safe in France, but once the war started they found themselves suspects along with the thousands of other recent immigrants.

Conclusion

The strident anti-Semitism of the interwar period forced the Jews to deal with material and physical hardships. For Jewish women these experiences would prove invaluable to their survival in even grimmer conditions when they were sent to concentration camps such as Ravensbrück, Auschwitz, and Theresienstadt. These women took the skills of stretching food supplies, mending garments, and others that they learned and used them to resist succumbing to the brutal system aimed at destroying them. Ironically the deplorable conditions Jewish women faced before the camps provided them with the skills and coping mechanisms necessary to survive the camps.

CHAPTER THREE

INTRODUCTION TO CAMP LIFE AND METHODS OF RESISTANCE

Jewish women's prewar experiences prepared them for life in the concentration camps. During this period they learned and improved upon skills such as cooking and mending. These women relied on social connections for support when their fathers and husbands were taken to the camps or hid believing their wives would be safe without them. As the Nazis placed restrictions on the jobs Jews could hold and access their to bank accounts, Jewish women had to "make-do" with the resources available to them. Jewish aid societies recommended sewing jobs for women. As women they were expected to manage the home and maintain a sense of stability.

Jewish women in the camps faced the harshest conditions because of their race and gender. Within the camp hierarchy they were below Jewish men and non-Jewish women. Accounts of the dismal camp conditions frequently refer to the extreme overcrowding in sections of the camps that housed Jewish women. Additionally, they could be assigned the same work details as men, but received lower caloric diets.

Proficiency in the household tasks of cooking, sewing, and cleaning transformed into resistance within the camps. Jewish women saved their meager bread ration and ate it throughout the day. They repaired their issued clothing and made necessities with items stolen from sorting centers. They cleaned themselves and attempted to keep their living area clean, which not only gave them a sense of dignity, but helped them ward off disease and lice. And, they formed camp families that provided mutual physical and

emotional support. In this manner, Jewish women used their gendered practical and social skills and bonding to resist and endure the brutal camp environment.

Arrival at the Camps

Jewish women sent to the camps came from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences with Nazi oppression. Some women had been taken straight from their homes, while others had been held at so-called collection centers for a few days to weeks before being loaded on trains headed for the camps. Many had lived in ghettos for months or even years and had already faced extreme deprivations. However, earlier experiences could only partially prepare Jewish women for what they encountered upon reaching the camps.

Transport to the camps typically entailed hours or days packed in train cattle cars or trucks. There was no food or water; at best a bucket was provided for waste, no heat in the winter, no air in the summer, and no room to rest. Some despaired while others clung to the hope that conditions would improve upon their arrival.¹

Jewish women's introduction to camp life varied depending upon whether they were sent to a concentration or labor camp, but even these two types of camps had their own deviations. With literally thousands of camps, no one standard description of the initiation can be given.² Oftentimes the women experienced several camp inductions, as

¹ Helena Rotstein, "Helena Rotstein (alias Ilonka Gutman)," in *Auschwitz—The Nazi Civilization: Twenty-Three Women Prisoners' Accounts: Auschwitz Camp Administration and SS Enterprises and Workshops*, ed. Lore Shelley, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), 14; Anny Rosenhain, "Anny (Ann) Rosenhain (née Neumann)," in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 34-35; Irmgard Mueller, "Irmgard Mueller," *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 40; Helen Kuban, "Helen Kuban (Klein) (née Stern)," *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 76.

² Recent research by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum reveals that there were "30,000 slave labor camps" and "980 concentration camps" (in addition to ghettos and P.O.W camps) throughout Nazi occupied territories. See Eric Lichtblau, "The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking," *New York Times*,

the Nazis routinely transferred them from camp to camp in order to fulfill manpower needs or, sometimes, for seemingly no reason. Despite these variances, survivors' accounts provide a general illustration of the process that reveals some similarities.

Most women experienced profound shock upon arriving at the camps. At Auschwitz, screaming, well-armed SS guards, barking dogs, and the sound of utter chaos greeted them.³ Ann Neumann recalled her arrival at Auschwitz: "The doors [to the cattle car] were opened and I witnessed a scene I would never forget and which seemed to me like arriving in hell itself. There were SS-men all over the place shouting... while German shepherd dogs were barking."⁴ Irmgard Mueller remembered, "The arrival at the ramp [at Auschwitz] was the most shocking experience of my life. There were guns pointed at us all around, and a pandemonium of warning shots, of shouted orders, barking dogs and the screams of terrorized families being torn apart."⁵

The Selection Process

The SS guards began a series of selections and separations as soon as inmates entered the camp. They separated husbands from wives, children from their elderly parents. The SS moved men and older boys in one line, sending women, girls, and little children to another. Then the guards decided who was able to work and sent the rest to the gas chambers. At times children would be taken away from their mothers, but generally having young children proved a death sentence for the mother. Alternatively,

March 1, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/sunday-review/the-holocaust-just-got-more-shocking.html> (accessed March 3, 2013).

³ Rotstein, "Helena Rotstein," 14; Rosenhain, "Anny (Ann) Rosenhain," 34-35; Mueller, "Irmgard Mueller," 40; also see Aranka Siegal, "The Destruction of a Family," in *The Holocaust: Personal Accounts*, eds. David Scrase and Wolfgang Mieder (Burlington: University of Vermont, 2001), 136.

⁴ Emphasis added. Rosenhain, "Anny," 34-35.

⁵ Mueller, "Irmgard," 40.

the elderly, mothers with children, and those deemed unfit to work would be loaded together onto trucks bound for the gas chambers; then a division based on sex would occur.⁶

A high proportion of Jewish women did not survive the initial selection process. While Nazi society praised the idealized Aryan mother, it accorded Jewish mothers an equal amount of contempt. The SS guards particularly despised Jewish women, since they were the only ones who could carry-on inferior—albeit objective—Nazi-defined race. Historians Carol Rittner and John Roth argue, “Because women are the ones who bear children, they are put uniquely at risk as members of a group targeted as racially inferior.”⁷ As a result, camp doctors selected more women (and their young children) for death, rather than using them as slave labor.

Being sent to the left—gas chambers—or right—to work—could be random chance, but unbeknownst to the new inmates simple actions also influenced the decision. Elka Friedman recalled that two of her cousins were likely sent to the gas chambers merely because they were holding a sister’s children.⁸ In the chaotic selection process there was no opportunity to explain that the children were not theirs and, at the time, the women did not know that their kindness would result in their deaths.

Guards typically sent mothers with their young children to the gas chambers, although occasionally they would select the mothers for work and send the children alone or with another relative. Aranka Siegal recalled being sent to Auschwitz with her mother,

⁶ Rotstein, “Helena Rotstein,” 14; Rosenhain, “Anny (Ann) Rosenhain,” 34-35; Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 40.

⁷ Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices*, 2; also see Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 40.

⁸ Elka Friedman quoted in Rita Horvath, “[She] Was Not Married at All”: The Relationship between Women’s Pre-Deportation Social Roles and Their Behavior upon Arrival in Auschwitz,” in Zygmunt Mazur et al., *The Legacy of the Holocaust: Women and the Holocaust* (Kraków: Jagiellonian University Press, 2007), 199.

older sister and two young siblings. The guards at first separated the mother from the two youngest children; however, she could not bear to have them go off alone. “Turning from Iboya and me, she picked up Joli and took Sandor by the hand. ‘They need me more,’ she said... It was her last act as our mother.”⁹

Induction into the Camp

After the selection process the guards forced the women to strip, shower (or bathe in large tubs), and shaved their hair. The guards took whatever material possessions the women had managed to hold onto. Helen Pelc had her earrings ripped out of her ears.¹⁰

Another inmate Leah Weis-Neuman recounted:

In the first room we were literally attacked by ‘barbers’ who shaved our heads with a vengeance. Then we were pushed into another room which was already very crowded, and we were ordered to undress. In a third room, under the watchful eye of a young SS man, the other parts of our bodies were shaved... After the shaving we were thrust into a hall lined with several faucets running hot water. We enjoyed the shower for just a couple of seconds and were then chased out to receive our clothes.¹¹

Countless women recalled similar treatment. Roselia J. remembered also having disinfectant thrown on her.¹²

⁹ Siegal, “The Destruction of a Family,” 136-137; see also Rotstein, “Helena Rotstein,” 14; Rosenhain, “Anny (Ann) Rosenhain,” 35; Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 40.

¹⁰ Helen Pelc, “Helen Pelc: Young Polish Jewish woman, Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Forgotten Voices of the Holocaust*, ed. Lyn Smith (London: Ebury Press, 2005), 161. The tubs were generally filled with a mixture of water and strong chemicals to delouse the inmates.

¹¹ Leah Weis-Neuman, “The Odyssey,” in *Women in the Holocaust: A Collection of Testimonies Volume I*, ed. Fayge Silverman, trans., Jehoshua Eibeshitz and Anna Eilenberg-Eibeshitz (Brooklyn, NY: Remember, 1993), 166.

¹² Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women Survivors Remember the Holocaust: An Anthology of Life Histories*, ed. Ilana Rosen (Dallas: University Press of America, 2004), 62; for a similar description see also Edita Maliarova, “Edita Maliarova,” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 63; Kuban, “Helen Kuban,” 76; Lotte Weiss, “Lotte (Charlotte) Weiss (née Frankl),” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 90; Ester K. Atlas, “Ester K. Atlas (née Kassvan),” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 105; Margit Bachner, “Margit Bachner (née Grossberg),” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 116; Sophie Sohlberg, “Sophie Sohlberg (née Loewenstein),” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 166; Éva B., “Éva B.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 23; Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 40; Rosi S., “Rosi S.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 54; Roselia J., “Roselia

Many survivors noted how much their appearance changed upon being shaved causing even family members and old friends not to recognize each other. Aranka Siegal stated, “Iboya [her sister] looked right at me and didn’t recognize me. We all looked alike, stripped of our individuality and human dignity.”¹³ Scholar Daniel Landes noted that for Jewish women—especially those from Orthodox families—the practice of having their heads shaved and left bare was especially demeaning. Jewish women typically wore a *tikhl* (a type of headscarf) after marriage. Not only did the guards strip away their dignity, but their actions assaulted these women on a spiritual level as well.¹⁴

Issued Clothing

After the guards took away all their clothing and personal items, women typically received one thin dress as a uniform. However, the allotted clothing changed depending on the work the women did and the fortunes of war.¹⁵ Leah Weis-Neuman stated that upon their arrival at Birkenau the women in her group received underwear, a gray dress, and mismatched shoes. Other survivors recalled that some women only got one shoe.¹⁶ Later when Leah was transferred to Mauthausen she had, “a pair of long, gray men’s underwear, a man’s short-sleeved shirt, and a pair of shoes.”¹⁷ At Reinikdorf labor camp in Berlin, Chava Bronstein wore a dress and wooden shoes. Sometime during the winter

J.,” 62, 64; Sybil Milton, “Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women,” in *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, eds. Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan, eds., (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), 312.

¹³ Siegal, “The Destruction of a Family,” 137; also see Pelc, “Helen Pelc,” 161.

¹⁴ Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 40; Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” 62; Daniel Landes, “Modesty and Self-Dignity in Holocaust Films,” in *Genocide: Critical Issues of the Holocaust: A Companion to the Film Genocide*, eds. Alex Grobman and Daniel Landes (Chappaqua, NY: Rossel Books, 1983), 11-12; Siegal, “The Destruction of a Family,” 137; Milton, “Women and the Holocaust,” 312.

¹⁵ See also Guenther’s *Nazi Chic?* 252-259. Guenther’s examination of clothing in the Third Reich and the concentration camps inspires my own analysis.

¹⁶ Éva B., “Éva B.,” 23.

¹⁷ Weis-Neuman, “The Odyssey,” 166, 189.

the guards issued coats, as Chava stated, “realizing that if we froze to death we would be of no use to them.”¹⁸ Magda G. remarked, “We each got a threadbare silk dress. We were bald and barefoot.”¹⁹ Ann Neumann, whose transport arrived at Auschwitz in April 1943, wrote that they got “old Russian prisoner of war uniforms and wooden clogs.”²⁰

The women made do with whatever clothing they received, since the guards normally only allowed replacements if the women were sent to another camp. As the Nazis began to lose the war they typically stopped issuing the standard striped prison clothing; instead, the inmates received whatever items were available. Women did manual labor barefoot and underwear became a luxury item.²¹ Lucille Eichengreen (born Cecilia Landau), sent to Auschwitz in 1944, described the disorder. “We were thrown a rag that remotely resembled a dress, but we were given neither underwear nor shoes, except for one woman, who without rhyme or reason, was thrown a pair of wooden clogs.”²² The guards clearly made no attempt to issue clothing that fit the women or that was appropriate for the extreme weather and working conditions.

In rare instances an inmate might be able to hold onto an item of clothing in the camps. Gerda Weissmann Klein’s father instructed her to wear her skiing shoes when they received the deportation orders in June 1942. Somehow she managed to keep the shoes through transfers to Bolkenhain, Märzdorf, and Landeshut, among others. She credited her survival in part to the shoes, which likely kept her from losing her feet to frostbite during the forced marches ahead of the Russian army advance.²³

¹⁸ Chava Bronstein, “The Engineer,” in Silverman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 214.

¹⁹ Magda G., “Magda G.,” in Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women*, 29.

²⁰ Rosenhain, “Anny (Ann) Rosenhain,” 35.

²¹ Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” 65; Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, 17.

²² Klein, *All But My Life*, 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 86, 116, 144, 152.

Clothing: “Organizing,” Sewing, and Mending

Stealing, repairing, and making clothing items for themselves and other inmates was one method of resistance used by Jewish women. Such actions were necessary since the garments provided did little to protect them from the harsh Central and Eastern European winters. Working in the clothing sorting centers—referred to as Canada by the inmates in Auschwitz—provided women with the opportunity to sneak items back to the barracks. Women who had repaired their family members’ clothing during the economic crises that hit Europe put those skills to use once again. Some women knitted or repurposed items. Even when it was not cold outside, the issued clothing proved insufficient. Additionally, one of the side effects of starvation—namely a lower body temperature—necessitated warmer clothing.²⁴

Inmates “organized” clothing from sorting centers such as Canada (where belongings of newly arrived persons were sorted) or from the crematorium. Éva B. who worked in the sorting center at Birkenau smuggled items to other inmates. She did not care about being caught, she claims, because she thought she would end up dying in the camp anyway.²⁵ Zipora B. worked in Canada and brought dresses and underclothes to other women from her town.²⁶ Kitty Hart-Moxon recalled, “Very often I’d go into the camp wearing five or six layers of clothes with various objects pinned on my back and would smuggle these back into the camp.”²⁷ However, few women found work in

²⁴ Leonard Tushnet, *The Uses of Adversity* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1996), 52.

²⁵ Éva B., “Éva B.,” 23; see also Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 240; Gisella Perl, “A Doctor in Auschwitz,” in *Different Voices*, eds. Rittner and Roth, 108; Myrna Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, eds. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 331; Gelissen *Rena’s Promise*, 120-123; Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 126.

²⁶ Zipora B., “Zipora B.,” in Rosen, *Hungarian Jewish Women*, 100.

²⁷ Kitty Hart-Moxon, “Kitty Hart-Moxon: Young Polish Jewish woman, Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Forgotten Voices*, ed. Smith, 178-179.

Canada and none of the other camps had a sorting center as vast as Auschwitz, if they had one at all.

Other women used materials to make clothing items. Helen Ernst made undergarments for other women out of yarn that she took from a stock room. This provided the women with something personal, when all else had been stripped away.²⁸

Fela N. recalled that the women made clothing items out of their blankets, knowing that the Soviet Union's advances would necessitate a forced march. She stated:

It was winter. It was in January. And before we started out—we know that someday we would have to march—many girls had made themselves socks and caps out of blankets... It wasn't permitted. We were hiding them. They would have killed us if they had known that we had made these things. And then, on the day of the transport when she [the camp chief] saw that we had these things on us, she did not care anymore. She was already leaving the camp. And that was part of our salvation because it was terribly cold.²⁹

Unlike most men, the majority of women knew how to repair the clothing issued to them. Judith Isaacson remembered, "The women began to repair their dresses the first day. They borrowed a few pins they found in the dresses from one another. They tore a piece of the long dresses and put it on the head to be nicer."³⁰ Women even shared their clothing with each other, giving those who were sick any piece of clothing they could spare.³¹ Although these acts seem innocuous, prisoners who had additional items of clothing could be reported to the Kommandant.³² During the Depression and years of hardship before entering the camps, these women had unknowingly been preparing

²⁸ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 274. It is unclear if Ernst was Jewish.

²⁹ Fela N., "Fela N." in *Fresh Wounds: Early Narratives of Holocaust Survivors*, ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 63.

³⁰ Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," 333.

³¹ Fela N., "Fela N." in Niewyk, *Fresh Wounds*, 63.

³² Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939-1945* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1990), 750-751.

themselves with the skills necessary to survive the camps. Without the ability to repair their clothes many more women would have died shortly after arriving at the camps.

Jewish Women in the Camp Hierarchy

Their gender and race placed Jewish women at the bottom of the camp hierarchy. They lived under the worst conditions and had little contact with other inmates. Anna Binder stated that the treatment of non-Jewish women upon arrival in Auschwitz—although still frightening—was not as horrible as that reserved for Jewish inmates. In addition, she noted that the plight of Jewish women remained “incomparably harder” than that of other females.³³

The guards usually kept them isolated from the general inmate population. Jewish women were forbidden from having contact with Jewish men. The guards generally segregated Jewish women in barracks apart from the rest of the female population. When lack of space required the guards to house women together, then Jewish women were typically restricted to a certain section of the barrack. Jewish women could not be block supervisors, unless all the inmates were also Jewish; frequently political prisoners or so-called asocials oversaw the Jewish women’s barracks. These factors prevented Jewish women from forming larger networks by which to obtain necessities and news.

Even within the Jewish camp population women got harsher treatment. Male Jewish inmates noted the deplorable state of women in the camps. Aviezer Burstyn, a member of the *Scheiss Kommando*, had the rare opportunity (if disposing of sewage can

³³ Anna Urbanova, “Dr. Anna Urbanova (née Binder),” in *Auschwitz*, ed. Shelley, 49.

be called such) of being able to move throughout the “forty divisional camps” at

Auschwitz.³⁴ In so doing he witnessed the situation of a variety of inmates. He noted:

We knew that out of all the prisoners, the women in Birkenau B suffered the most... The Jewish girls there were literally crushed by their monstrous SS overseers, who created inventive forms of torture to degrade them. One of their tactics was to give large, oversize clothing to the more petite girls, and short, tight dresses to taller women. No undergarments were given; no rips were repaired.³⁵

Women’s accounts also suggest that they received less food than men simply because they were female, regardless of the fact that they labored comparably to men.

At Ravensbrück, a women’s camp for political prisoners, Jewish women again received the harshest treatment. There the SS assigned Jewish women the worst jobs within the camp, such as “the cleaning of the sewage trenches.”³⁶ The Jewish women, already cut off from the rest of the camp, found their conditions deteriorating further in 1944 as the number of incoming inmates far exceeded the capacity of the available barracks. In 1944, when the SS transported approximately 500 Jewish women from Hungary, Ravensbrück had no barracks left to hold them, so they lived and—more often—died in a large tent.³⁷ As the Soviet army advanced in 1944, the SS forced additional women from Auschwitz to march to Ravensbrück. Those who survived the march (about 400 miles, sometimes completed by train) arrived to find the tent to be the only shelter offered to them.³⁸

³⁴ Rabbi Aviezer Burstyn, “A Request in Birkenau,” in Silverman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 200.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

³⁶ Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 50.

³⁷ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 18. There was also a tent at Bergen-Belsen, see Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, “Anita Lasker-Wallfisch: Young German Jewish woman, Bergen-Belsen,” in Smith, *Forgotten Voices*, 237.

³⁸ Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 243, 249; Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam, *Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 252; Eva Tichauer, *I Was No. 20832 at Auschwitz*, trans., Colette Lévy and Nicki Rensten (Portland, OR: Vallentine Mitchell, 2000), 80. Even German political prisoners took pity on the Jews’ plight at Ravensbrück and

Nearly 3,000 Jewish women and children in the Ravensbrück camp ultimately ended up living in this gigantic tent, which shocked even the hardened inmates from Auschwitz. Dagmar Ostermann remembered, “For two days we traveled in cattle cars to Ravensbrueck [*sic*]. There we were housed in a giant tent for six weeks, suffering from hunger and cold.”³⁹ One inmate’s drawing depicted women lying on the floor, as the tent did not even have the infamous bunks to keep them off the frozen dirt.⁴⁰

Camp officials also recognized the glaring differences between the treatment of Jewish women in comparison with other groups in the camps. Auschwitz Kommandant Rudolf Höss stated:

But then everything was much more difficult, harsher and more depressing for the women, since general living conditions in the women’s camp were incomparably worse. They were far more tightly packed in, and the sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior. Furthermore the disastrous overcrowding and its consequences, which existed from the very beginning, prevented any proper order being established in the women’s camp.⁴¹

As a result of their position in the camp hierarchy, Jewish women had to develop their own methods of resistance and support in order to survive.

Camp Families

Under these circumstances some women saw no reason to go on, but on a regular basis their fellow inmates offered them much needed physical and emotional support.

This gendered form of support provided women with a small network of close contact

provided them with soup from their own allotment. See Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 243.

³⁹ Dagmar Ostermann, “Dagmar Ostermann (*nee* Bock),” In *Secretaries of Death: Accounts by Former Prisoners Who Worked in the Gestapo of Auschwitz*, ed. Lore Shelley (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1986), 177; Iris Nachum and Dina Porat, “Die Geschichte des Konzentrationslagers Ravensbrück im Spiegel seiner Funktionen,” in Dublon-Knebel, *Schnittpunkt des Holocaust*, 37.

⁴⁰ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 80.

⁴¹ Rudolf Höss, “Autobiography of Rudolf Höss,” in *KL Auschwitz Seen by the SS*, ed. Jadwiga Bezwinska, (New York: Howard Fertig, 1984), 75-76; see also Margret Lehner, “Margret Lehner: ‘If anyone here

who could help them navigate the chaotic camp system. These friendships—that often developed into familial type bonds—gave women access to clothes stolen from the sorting centers, shared food scraps, and other basic necessities. On the most basic level, they fulfilled the need for emotional support and gave the women someone with whom they could talk.

In the case of Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, a Jewish Communist, the aid she received kept her from committing suicide.

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. A political comrade from the Bialystok ghetto, however found her and provided the bread, warm sweater, and boots that restored her physically; no less important, the other woman promised friendship.⁴²

Jewish woman thus provided support to the new inmates who had no connections or survival skills.

Based on survivor's writings, this level of support was more common amongst women in concentration camps. The scholar Joan Ringelheim proposed that society conditioned women to take care of others.

Women were able to transform their habits of raising children or their experience of nurturing into the care of nonbiological family. Men, when they lost their role in the protection of their own families, seemed less able to transform this habit into the protection of others. Men did not remain or become fathers as readily as women became mothers or nurturers.⁴³

The separation of husbands from their wives and younger children removed the opportunity for men to protect their families. Social norms dictated that men should

mentions humane treatment..." in Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin, eds., *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998), 57; Sybil Milton, "Sybil Milton," in Rittner and Roth, eds., *Different Voices*, 227.

⁴² Goldenberg, "Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors," 328.

⁴³ Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," in *Different Voices*, eds. Rittner and Roth, 378; also see Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, xviii.

provide for and safeguard their families, but the camp design stripped them of the means to fulfill this role. Bereft of their patriarchal position, men had a more difficult time forming substitute families within the camps.

In contrast, the women quickly looked for family, friends, and even old neighbors who might provide them with some sense of familial bond. They responded to their deplorable conditions by forming camp families (alternatively referred to as camp mothers or camp sisters) that they could look to for emotional and physical support. Their new family helped them resist the dehumanizing efforts of the SS guards and assisted them in surviving the harsh induction into the concentration camps. Historian Sybil Milton argued, “Bonding because of religious or political convictions may not have been specific to women, but the degree of group cohesion and noncompetitive support available to women seems markedly greater than among men.”⁴⁴

Camp families could be composed of actual relatives, such as mothers, daughters, in-laws, and cousins, or they might include old friends and neighbors. If women became separated during transport to the camps or the selection process, then strangers that arrived together formed these substitute family units. The camp family usually consisted of two to ten members who made every effort to remain together in their barracks and work assignments.⁴⁵

For example, Cecilia Landau and a small group of friends arrived together at Auschwitz. The women found out that the *appell* (roll call) was done alphabetically, so they all decided to say their last names started with “S.” This allowed them to maintain

⁴⁴ Milton, “Women and the Holocaust,” 314.

⁴⁵ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 125-126; Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 239-241.

their camp family unit at *appell* and in the barracks.⁴⁶ While a seemingly small act, such methods of resistance enabled Jewish women to maintain a support system during their time in the camps.

Obstacles

In order to form camp families Jewish women overcame certain obstacles.

Whereas the guards often created barracks groups based on the inmates' nationality, Jews were put together without reference to their country of origin. In Ravensbrück, for example, the Jewish women came from twenty-seven countries, resulting in language differences, cultural barriers, and the lack of a shared milieu before entering the camp.⁴⁷

Leah Weis-Neuman wrote of Birkenau, "The confusion grew from minute to minute, a mixture of rising cries and shouts in a medley of languages: Hungarian, Yiddish, German, Slovakian, Rumanian, Polish, Russian. It was a new Tower of Babylon."⁴⁸ Given that numerous languages were spoken in the camps, a language unique to the camps

developed. Kitty Hart-Moxon stated "the camp had its own language and I was at an advantage because I could understand it: it was part German, part Yiddish, part Polish."⁴⁹

Despite these impediments, women found ways to endure their situation. Knowing multiple languages put some women at an advantage and befriending a woman who knew the camp language made survival more likely.

⁴⁶ Lucille Eichengreen and Harriet Hyman Chamberlain, *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 97.

⁴⁷ Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 50, 231.

⁴⁸ Weis-Neuman, "The Odyssey," 168.

⁴⁹ Hart-Moxon, "Kitty Hart-Moxon," 173.

Food Allotments

As mentioned above, the Germans allotted inadequate food rations for Jewish women in the camps. While all groups suffered hunger, Jewish women possibly received the lowest rations of any group, according to at least one survivor Margret Lehner. She reported that Jewish women's rations constituted about 1,000 calories a day.⁵⁰ Aranka Siegal related, "Breakfast consisted of the same bitter liquid [ersatz coffee or tea] we had received on arrival [at Auschwitz...] and a piece of black bread. The main meal consisted of a thin soup of turnip and vegetable peelings from the Germans' kitchen."⁵¹ Roselia J., also a survivor of Auschwitz, stated that they "received almost no food except for a bowl given to every fourteen women, like they do for pigs—one dish for a whole bunk."⁵² Those served first received only a watery substance as most of the vegetables fell to the bottom of the pot. Only rarely do survivors' testimonies recount any type of meat being found in the soup. The bread was very coarse and some women suggest that it may have contained "sawdust and dirt."⁵³

Supplementing Starvation Diets

Jewish women already had the skills to help them cope with the low food allotments, having become adept at saving and stretching out food supplies during their pre-camp experiences. The women would parcel out their food throughout the day to help prevent hunger pains. Alternatively, they could obtain additional food through a camp family member's access to the SS kitchens.

⁵⁰ Lehner, "Margret Lehner," 57.

⁵¹ Siegal, "The Destruction of a Family," 138-139.

⁵² Roselia J., "Roselia J.," 63.

⁵³ Magda G., "Magda G.," 29; for similar caloric consumption at the Warsaw Ghetto see Tushnet, *The Uses of Adversity*, 23, 62, 91.

Jewish women saved, stole, and shared food to make up for the lack of allotted calories. According to Aranka Siegal, “After the first week Iboya [her sister] and I learned to save some of the bread ration for midday.”⁵⁴ Despite the fact that they both only received one slice of bread, the Siegal sisters refrained from eating it all at once. It was better to save it for later in the day to suppress hunger pains. Helen Stern “learned to divide the slice of bread: two bites in the evening, two bites in the morning and one bite in the late afternoon.”⁵⁵ Sometimes she could not control herself and ate all the bread at once, causing her to have hunger pains throughout the day.⁵⁶

Susanna Rosenthal worked in the SS offices at Auschwitz where she received extra rations, but the guards prohibited her from taking these items with her back to the barracks. However, she also got the standard portion of food at the barracks. Therefore, she gave that portion to other inmates with whom she had arrived the camp.⁵⁷

A more dangerous method of getting food was by stealing it—normally from the kitchen—an act the inmates referred to as “organizing.” This proved difficult because the guards kept a strict account of the food supplies. Irmgard Mueller worked in the offices tabulating camp resources. “Once each month, I was marched by a guard to the prisoner’s kitchen in the men’s camp, to compare my ledger with the one kept by the bookkeeper for Unterscharfuehrer Eggersdoerfer, and we then ‘justified’ any discrepancies.”⁵⁸ Irmgard’s account demonstrates the difficulty in procuring extra rations from the kitchen, since members of the SS monitored food distribution. However, working in the kitchen remained a privileged position and women assigned there often

⁵⁴ Siegal, “The Destruction of a Family,” 138-139.

⁵⁵ Kuban, “Helen Kuban,” 77.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ Shoshana Heyman, “Shoshana Heyman (née Susanna Rosenthal),” in Shelley, *Auschwitz*, 9.

⁵⁸ Mueller, “Irmgard Mueller,” 41. Mueller is referring to Unterscharführer Karl Eggersdörfer.

did managed to bring food to family and friends. Rika S. brought “potato and carrot pieces” to two of her relatives and once to a pregnant woman who had managed to pass the selections.⁵⁹

Ariella G. stole food from the kitchen during the night for her sick sister. An SS guard saw her, but she made it back to her barrack without being caught. Amazingly the guard did not search the barracks and Ariella was able to cook the potatoes for her sister.⁶⁰ Had she been caught the punishment would have been severe. Rosi S. revealed, “If one of us ever tried to steal food... they would write down her number, and during roll call... they would whip her—twenty-five lashes.”⁶¹

Many women took food waste from the garbage piles and shared these items with others. Nechama E. recounted:

I was in Bergen-Belsen three months. The hunger was a terror. We went to the garbage heap and picked the peels from the turnips that were cooked in the kitchen. And if you chanced to grab a turnip... [*sic*] I was very daring. I fought strongly to stay alive. Outside the gate was the kitchen with wires so you would not be able to get near. I risked it. I got out through the gate where they were shooting and grabbed a turnip. And a minute later they shot a girl who grabbed a turnip. I knew the moment I grabbed it the bullet might hit me, but hunger was stronger than death. I returned to the block. People, corpses assaulted me that I should give them some too. I shared it with them. We rejoiced.⁶²

Some inmates could not bring themselves to eat from the garbage piles. Zlata Borenstein-Shnur-Gephart, a Shtubowa (block overseer) at Walden-Lust, walked by the garbage everyday when she brought the coffee to the barracks. Realizing that she was too “shackled by pride” to pick the bits of potato or carrots up, she started sending

⁵⁹ Rika S., “Rika S.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 83.

⁶⁰ Ariella G., “Ariella G.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 41-42.

⁶¹ Rosi S., “Rosi S.,” 55.

⁶² Nechama E., “Nechama E.” in *Fresh Wounds*, ed. Niewyk, 105-106.

different women from the barracks for the coffee so they had the opportunity to get more food.⁶³

Zlata recalled an incident when the women under her direction saw two soup pots with no guards nearby. The women “attacked the kettles” knocking them to the ground and proceeded to eat the mixture of soup and sand. The guards found out later and made all the women stand at *appell* for hours in attempt to identify those involved. The women remained at *appell* through a hailstorm and into the night. Zlata told the women not to say anything. Eventually the Lagerfuhrer (camp commander) threatened to hang Zlata. Ironically an air raid saved the women from further punishment.⁶⁴ The determination to be punished together rather than giving the Lagerfuhrer a name saved many of the starving women from an even harsher penalty or even death.

Saving, sharing, and stealing food enabled women to stave off starvation due to the less than subsistence diet provided in the camps; however, food also became a form of money in the camps. Eva Tichauer, a French Jew in Auschwitz, remembered, “Comb, toothbrush, knickers, brassiere, woollens [*sic*]: I had to go without food to acquire them.”⁶⁵ Women also traded one food item for another.⁶⁶ Women used their meager food rations to barter for other items also necessary for their survival. Rena Kornreich traded her bread for sulphur to treat her sister Danka’s scabies.⁶⁷ The guards discouraged such actions since most of the items they could obtain would have been contraband items taken from sorting centers or elsewhere.

⁶³ Zlata Borenstein-Shnur-Gephart, “The Protector,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Silverman, 237-238.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 238-240.

⁶⁵ Tichauer, *I Was No. 20832 at Auschwitz*, 44.

⁶⁶ Weis-Neuman, “The Odyssey,” 171.

⁶⁷ Gelissen, *Rena’s Promise*, 128.

Hygiene

Based on the evidence we have, women attempted to keep their bodies, clothing, and barracks clean to a greater extent than men in the camps. Although women could not maintain a completely clean environment, their attempts helped them to resist typhus, malaria, and other diseases that ran rampant throughout the camps. Rose [last name unknown] recalled women “picking each other like monkeys [for lice]... Never remember seeing the men do it. The minute they had lice they just left it alone; the women have a different instinct [having been taught to keep a tidy house]. Housewives. We want to clean.”⁶⁸ Rena Kornreich wrote that she spent most of her Sundays killing lice on her clothes.⁶⁹ Any attempts to prevent lice infestations could help the women avoid contracting diseases and pass inspections. It also made it more likely for them to be chosen to work in better positions, such as the sorting centers, SS laundry, or offices.

Other women found ways to wash their bodies even though the guards rarely permitted access to the showers. Rena Kornreich washed herself with water everyday and took a “sponge bath” on Sundays.⁷⁰ She recalled, “in Birkenau there are no sinks, just faucets... On Sunday, if there’s time, I use my red bowl for a sponge bath, although there is no sponge and the water is nothing but cold.”⁷¹ Rika S. also washed with icy cold water everyday.⁷² Most women kept clean with meager supplies—often with just water—viewing soap as an unattainable luxury. However, sometimes inmates obtained soap, which they then shared with friends.⁷³ One of the camps Magda G. worked at

⁶⁸ Rose quoted in Ringelheim, “Women and the Holocaust,” 380.

⁶⁹ Gelissen, *Rena’s Promise*, 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 80, 89, 105.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁷² Rika S., “Rika S.,” 84.

⁷³ Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 249.

issued “tickets for buying things at the Canteen. My first purchase was a pair of wooden clogs... and a piece of soap, so I could wash.”⁷⁴ Washing themselves reduced the flea and lice infestations, thereby helping the women to remain healthier. In addition, they could survive longer on their inadequate diets if their bodies did not need to burn additional calories to fight off disease.

Keeping their clothing clean also remained an important survival tactic for many women. Helen Ernst washed her uniform at night and dried it under her bunk in order to maintain a sense of dignity.⁷⁵ While living in atrocious conditions, having a clean uniform demonstrated her sense of self-worth. It also probably helped their clothing last longer because it was not constantly coated in filth.

The women even found ways to deal with the absence of toilets. Eva Tichauer and her camp sisters had two bowls. They used one to eat from and the other for human waste.⁷⁶

There were a few Jewish women—such as those working in the Registratur at the Gestapo office in Auschwitz—who had the advantage of clean clothing, barracks, and working conditions, because their bosses did not want to catch any diseases or lice. However, the women remained in constant fear for their lives because they worked everyday with the guards. These women kept the records of the living and the dead in the camp. They referred to themselves as the *Himmelfahrskommando* (on the way to heaven squad) in the belief that eventually the SS would kill them (and they would have) due to their knowledge of the mass murders carried out within the camp.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Magda G., “Magda G.,” 31.

⁷⁵ Guenther, *Nazi Chic?*, 274.

⁷⁶ Tichauer, *I Was No. 20832 at Auschwitz*, 43.

⁷⁷ Shelley, *Secretaries of Death*, xv-xvi.

Makeup

Another prewar gendered experiences that helped women survive was their use of makeup to give themselves a healthier appearance during the dreaded inspections. The SS routinely inspected the women to determine if they were fit to continue working, those deemed unsuited being sent to the gas chambers. Anna K. used makeup to give herself the appearance of being healthier. She stated that Jewish women sent to Auschwitz would sometimes bring makeup, not knowing what their fates would be. Inmates assigned to the collection areas gathered the makeup and passed it out to those who looked unfit.⁷⁸ Helen Pelc's mother somehow managed to get pass the initial inspection with lipstick. She later put it on her face and Helen's so they had a rosy look during an inspection conducted by Mengele. Her quick thinking kept them alive and ensured their transfer to a work camp.⁷⁹ In the absence of makeup inmates would pinch their cheeks to bring back some color to their faces.⁸⁰

Survival of the Mind

Despite the abominable conditions in the camps Jewish women not only managed to perform basic functions of survival, but they also engaged in intellectually stimulating activities. Olga Benário Prestes taught other Jewish women in Ravensbück French and Russian. She also discussed literary works with them. Maria Wiedmaier recalled another

⁷⁸ Anna K., "Anna K.," in *Fresh Wounds*, ed. Niewyk, 211. Cecilia Landau stated that she put makeup on her younger sister Karin in the ghetto in an attempt to keep her from being transported due to her young age. However, Cecilia's attempts were unsuccessful. See Eichengreen and Hyman, *From Ashes to Life*, 51-52.

⁷⁹ Pelc, "Helen Pelc," 161, 223.

⁸⁰ Leah S., "Leah S.," in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 97.

inmate lecturing on politics and philosophy.⁸¹ Zipora N. taught Hebrew before the war; in Auschwitz she continued to give lessons.⁸² Zlata Borenstein-Shnur-Gephart retold literary works and taught Jewish history at night in the barracks.⁸³ Thus, the women took care of their minds as well as their bodies.

Some women made up games. Gisella Perl started a game called “I am a lady” where the women imagined a life outside the camp and recited what they might do during a make believe day.⁸⁴ Similarly, Gerda Weisman Klein wrote that women played games during the Sunday day of rest. One was called “Adventure” where each girl would describe a place they would like to visit. Once they altered the game and spoke of what they wanted their future husbands to be like.⁸⁵

Other women wrote poems or made drawings. Becky Teitelbaum made a small drawing that survived in Ravensbrück.⁸⁶ Edita Maliarova wrote several poems while in Auschwitz; her position in the SS offices provided her with better access to materials with which to do so. In one poem she wrote:

Columns are marching out
Since work supposedly liberates
With every step
Memories of home resound
Past images resurface
Between song and kommandoruf
And hope appear in many a hesitant step.⁸⁷

⁸¹ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 44; Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück*, 51.

⁸² Zipora N., “Zipora N.,” in *Hungarian Jewish Women*, ed. Rosen, 105.

⁸³ Borenstein-Shnur-Gephart, “The Protector,” 242-243; see also Perl, “A Doctor in Auschwitz,” 108;

⁸⁴ Perl, “A Doctor in Auschwitz,” 109-110.

⁸⁵ Klein, *All But My Life*, 156.

⁸⁶ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 57-59.

⁸⁷ Maliarova, “Edita Maliarova,” 69-70.

Maliarova's line "Since work supposedly liberates" clearly refers to the sign at the entrance to Auschwitz *Arbeit macht frei*, a cruel insinuation that work would set the Jews free.⁸⁸

While seemingly harmless actions, the SS punished women found with such items. Historian Jack Morrison emphasized, "The women were there to work, not to think, let alone create. If, during on of the 'controls' [searches] so feared and despised by inmates, sheets of poetry were found, there was certain to be punishment."⁸⁹ Working together they evaded the "controls" and smuggled a number of these items out with them on the forced marches.

The women also wrote shared recipes and even cookbooks. In Ravensbrück Rebecca Buckman Teitelbaum worked in the Siemens factory attached to the camp, which enabled her to obtain paper. Along with other women in she wrote a recipe book in French of 110 pages.⁹⁰ Likewise, Mina Pächter wrote a cookbook in Theresienstadt that included over seventy recipes for foods such as *Makaronen*, *Apfel Knödel*, and *Baierisch Brod*.⁹¹

Jewish women also gave gifts to each other and celebrated birthdays and holidays within the camps. Gerda Weissmann Klein received handmade gifts from other inmates for her nineteenth birthday in the Bolkenhain work camp. "I got other wonderful gifts that day, more precious and harder to obtain than any I will ever get: shoelaces made from factory yarn; three bobby pins made from the wire on which spools were suspended

⁸⁸ See also Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 60-63.

⁸⁹ Morrison, *Ravensbrück*, 147.

⁹⁰ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 53-57.

⁹¹ Wilhelmina (Mina) Pächter, in Cara De Silva, ed., *In Memory's Kitchen: A Legacy from the Women of Terezín* trans., Bianca Steiner Brown (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 5, 13, 27.

over the loom; a pair of stockings not too badly darned.”⁹² When gifts were unattainable the women still gave birthday wishes.⁹³ Leah Weis-Neuman wrote, “I discovered under my bunk a package and a note from my cousin, congratulating me on the occasion of my birthday, which I had completely forgotten. In the package was a slice of bread, a pat a margarine, a piece of cheese.”⁹⁴ Celebrating birthdays enabled the women to maintain a sense of normalcy.

Sometimes the inmates even enjoyed some entertainment. While at Auschwitz Mila Veyslitz, an actress, performed multiple concerts for the Jewish women in Block 10.⁹⁵ Gerda Weissmann Klein wrote short plays and performed them with other girls on Sundays at Bolkenhain.⁹⁶ Such performances allowed the inmates to momentarily escape their surroundings and—like the lessons—offered mental stimulation.

Conclusion

Despite their appalling circumstances, Jewish women found ways to resist that improved their chances of surviving the Holocaust. Their previous experiences with economic hardships and violent anti-Semitism, ironically, helped to prepare them with the skills essential to surviving the camps. Their position in the camp hierarchy and general living conditions made it necessary for Jewish women to resort to alternative methods of resistance.

⁹² Klein, *All But My Life*, 140.

⁹³ Wanda Koprowska, “Delousing,” in *Reminiscences of Former Auschwitz Prisoners*, ed. Kazimierz Smolén, trans., Krystyna Michalik (Oswiecimiu: Panstwowe Muzeum W Oswiecimiu, 1963), 53.

⁹⁴ Weis-Neuman, “The Odyssey,” 181; also see Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 59-60.

⁹⁵ Yonas Turkov, “Latvia and Auschwitz,” in Rebecca Rovit and Alvin Goldfarb, eds., *Theatrical Performance during the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 116; Alvin Goldfarb, “Theatrical Activities in the Nazi Concentration Camps,” in Rovit and Goldfarb, *Theatrical Performance*, 118.

⁹⁶ Klein, *All But My Life*, 140-141.

Unlike many male inmates, women formed camp families that helped them to obtain food, clothing, and other items necessary for survival. Sharing food augmented the women's deficient diets, while patching or making clothes helped them withstand the harsh elements. Additionally, these women offered each other emotional support, which was crucial in preventing depression and suicide. The women's efforts to remain clean improved their chances of avoiding the rampant diseases in the camp and preserved a sense of dignity. Learning new languages and listening to lectures provided intellectual stimulation in a situation devoid of reason. Those who survived the hellish world of the concentration and labor camps are a testament to the success of the small acts of daily resistance Jewish women performed even under the worst of conditions.

CHAPTER FOUR

SABOTAGE AND ESCAPE

While small acts of gendered resistance were the most common among Jewish women, a very small number went beyond these to direct resistance of sabotage and escape. Such accounts are rare, but demonstrate that Jewish women were involved in traditional resistance and took the same risks as men in these roles. In perhaps the most memorable event, Jewish women made possible the revolt of the *Sonderkommando* and the destruction of Crematorium IV at Auschwitz. Yet it is important to be clear, the guards closely supervised the inmates—they took immediate and brutal measures—making extended acts of sabotage and escape an exceptional testimony to the bravery of a few heroic Jewish women in the camps.

Difficulties of Sabotage

Although extremely difficult to carry out, sabotage was important. It slowed down the manufacturing of armaments and other wartime industry. Sabotage was especially significant for inmates' morale because it allowed them to participate in the war against the Nazis.

Survivor testimonies repeatedly refer to the constant supervision of the guards while working. Roselia J., an inmate at the Duderstadt factory that produced armaments, recalled the difficulties of sabotage. “The S.S. [*sic*] guards were always watching us so that no prisoners could cause damage.”¹ Likewise, Leah Weis-Neuman, wrote that at the Breslau-Hundesfeld camp supervisors checked the women's work every hour to deter

¹ Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” 65.

sabotage. “They [the armament pieces] must have been of great importance, because every hour a middle-aged man in a white coat and gold-rimmed spectacles checked our work and examined the pieces with a special instrument.”² The women not only had to be careful of the SS, but block commanders and civilian managers could also turn the women in for acts of sabotage. Even an innocent mistake would usually be punished as sabotage.

The guards warned inmates that an act of disobedience would lead to worse conditions. Having been transferred from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Leah remembered the guards at Breslau-Hundesfeld threatening to send inmates who did “not behave” back to Auschwitz.³ Knowing that they could be transferred to a worse camp deterred many women from attempting sabotage.

Punishment for sabotage ranged from loss of food to death. Roselia J. resisted the idea of sabotage until older inmates convinced her that it was one thing they could do to work towards eventual freedom. Roselia recalled her punishment, “the next time when I failed to carry out the job, they cut my hair again and gave me no food for two days.”⁴ However, Roselia continued to work, likely because the living conditions at Duderstadt were better than Auschwitz.⁵ However, already subsisting on a starvation diet the prospect of having no food for two days could easily have weakened a woman to the point of not being able to work and in the camps, which was equal to a death sentence.

In Ravensbrück the SS punished sabotage with, “[s]olitary confinement in the dark and airless prison cells of the Bunker [...and this] was frequently accompanied by

² Weis-Neuman, “The Odyssey,” 175.

³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁴ Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” 65. Roselia does not list the specific type of sabotage she committed, but from her account she at least slowed down her production.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

severe beatings. Punishment by up to twenty-five lashes with a whip was officially instituted in 1940.”⁶ Inmates knew that being caught in an act of sabotage would instantly bring violent reprisal by the guards. Even if they were not killed instantly, the beating or torture might make it impossible for the woman to work, effectively sentencing her to death.

Successful Sabotages

Despite the dangers they faced, some Jewish women did perform successful acts of sabotage. Group solidarity among the women made sabotage possible as women watched out for guards and reinforced explanations for damaged products. These actions enabled women to reclaim a sense of purpose and empowerment. While their actions might not hurt the guards who directly oversaw the camps, damaged armaments contributed to the defeat of the German army. In this sense many saboteurs viewed their acts as saving lives and working towards their own freedom.

Some women were able to carry out acts of sabotage without being turned in because their civilian overseers feared being punished for not having properly supervised the women. For example, Anna K., held in Lippstadt, was forced to make machine gun cartridges. She recalled, “The assigned quota was twelve thousand, but I would produce fifteen thousand pieces. But fifteen thousand smaller [or] larger ones, never the caliber that was required. When they discovered it, there were eighty thousand rejected pieces.”⁷

⁶ Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück*, 14-15.

⁷ Anna L., “Anna L.” 211.

The foreman did not turn Anna in or punish her, leading her to surmise that he considered his lack of oversight made him equally culpable.⁸

Occasionally women worked alongside civilians or political prisoners in the factories attached to the camps. Roselia wrote that partisan workers at the Duderstadt factory encouraged the women to commit sabotage. She explained, “We now caused more and more damage, but always made excuses. We would say the drill was bad, that it broke down too often. In the meantime we managed to slow the production rate and defend ourselves [from punishment] at the same time.”⁹ The guards usually did not supervise civilian workers as closely as the inmates. Partisans, such as those Roselia worked with, reinforced the women’s commitment to the larger effort, justifying faulty work for faulty work.

Likewise, Ariella G. related that she had a German communist assigned to oversee her work in the Sömmerda factory. This man showed her how to ruin the missile parts she produced and made sure Ariella was not around for the inspections. Ariella wrote, “He said he was a Communist and had no wish for a Nazi victory. He also said that I needn’t fear the weekly review that we had every Friday. He would send me to the toilets and take full responsibility.”¹⁰ Ariella continued sabotaging the parts for about six months until the camp was evacuated in front of the advancing United States army.¹¹

French prisoners of war worked at the factory Breslau-Hundesfeld and were tasked with fixing the machines the women used. Leah Weis-Neuman, Sarah Wieliczker, Elanka Weinberg, and Clara Weisfeld, started sabotaging the armament pieces they

⁸ Ibid., 211-212.

⁹ Roselia J., “Roselia J.,” 65.

¹⁰ Ariella G., “Ariella G.,” 42.

¹¹ Ibid., 42.

made. Eventually about eighty women joined the operation.¹² Although the French prisoners were not to talk to the inmates they noticed the women's actions. When the women started wrecking the machines, causing pieces to break, one Frenchman would fix the machine while others distracted the guards so they could not see the damage. The French prisoners could see that the women were breaking the machines on purpose, but refrained from informing the guards.¹³

Chava Bronstein worked in an aircraft factory in Berlin where she severely hurt her hand on a machine. Unable to use her hand Chava pretended to work at her machine lest she be sent to the hospital and killed once the guards realized she was unable to work. Chava convinced a Yugoslavian engineer not to turn her in and the next day he brought her ointment for her hand.¹⁴ She wrote:

From that time on the engineer was especially kind to me. He even closed his eyes to my sabotage. Many of us quietly damaged the exchange parts we were handling so that the Germans would not be able to make use of them. I don't know where I found the strength and tenacity to continue my sabotage.¹⁵

Regina Saperstein started out making ineffective bomb relays in factory at Auschwitz. She noticed that the relays were inspected in a certain order and arranged the bad relays so they were less likely to be noticed.¹⁶ Later she joined the *Sonderkommando* sabotage efforts.

However, most Jewish women could not count on the assistance of civilians or other prisoners. The women had to decide whether to carry out a small act and carefully watch how the other workers reacted. Sometimes they approached fellow inmates and

¹² Weis-Neuman, "The Odyssey," 175-176. Leah Weis-Neuman does not provide an exact time period for when the sabotage began. The women arrived at Breslau-Hundesfeld on August 9, 1944, but did not immediately start sabotaging the machines.

¹³ Ibid., 176-177.

¹⁴ Bronstein, "The Engineer," 215-219.

¹⁵ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶ Rose Meth, "Rose Meth," in Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 301.

suggested sabotage. Either option could result in quick reprisal from the guards if a civilian or other inmate chose to turn them in rather than assist.

Jewish Women and the Destruction of Auschwitz Crematorium IV

On 7 October 1944, in one of the Nazis most notorious death camps, Auschwitz, a group of about 250 mostly Jewish inmates (the *Sonderkommando* work group) attacked the SS guards and blew up Crematorium IV, which they had been forced to operate. In a ruthless response, the SS killed 451 members of the *Sonderkommando* in one day. None of the men who operated Crematorium IV lived; of the 663 inmates in the *Sonderkommando* only 212 survived the Nazi reprisal.¹⁷ The *Sonderkommando* instigated the attack even though they knew the guards would respond brutally. This rare act of large-scale Jewish inmate resistance has become famous. However, fewer people know that Jewish women provided critical support by supplying the necessary materials for the action.

Rose Meth, who worked in a munitions factory at Auschwitz-Birkenau, recounted how another female inmate approached her about stealing gunpowder from the bomb relays they made. Meth, Regina Saperstein (mentioned earlier), Genia Fischer, and Estusia Wajcblum (also known as Esther) used waste gunpowder instead of the good powder in the relays. This allowed them to accumulate tiny quantities of good gunpowder, which they hid and passed onto the *Sonderkommando* over a period of about eight months. Meth recalled, “The good powder we put in little pieces of cloth... We

¹⁷ Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 724-726; Shelley, *Secretaries of Death*, 348; Hermann Langbein, “The Auschwitz Underground,” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, eds. Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 501. The *Sonderkommando* consisted of male inmates only whom the SS guards routinely killed because of their detailed knowledge of the crematoriums. See Laurence Rees, *Auschwitz: A New History* (New York: MJF Books, 2005), 256-257.

kept the powder on our bodies or in our pockets... In a day three of us could collect about two teaspoons full.”¹⁸ Meth further stated, “I knew that we were going to try a mass escape. The men would go first and maybe the women later. Whether anyone would survive was doubtful, but at least we would try. This was our main goal.”¹⁹ While the destruction of Crematorium IV was successful, the escape attempt itself failed.

Another inmate denounced Estusia for talking to a male prisoner, leading to the merciless interrogation and torture of several women. Estusia, Regina, Roza, and another inmate Ella Gartner were taken to the notorious Auschwitz Block 11 on 10 October 1944.²⁰

Auschwitz Block 11

Inmates in Auschwitz quickly learned to fear Block 11 where the Nazis questioned and tortured those accused of sabotage or trying to escape. Tadeusz Chowaniec, a physician who entered Auschwitz three days after the Russians liberated it, recalled his first impressions upon entering Block 11.

The murdered lay in various postures, among tables, stools, blankets and clothing, thrown about in disorder... In the other rooms one could see heads and hands hanging down from bunks. The sight was gruesome, full of horror. There was blood on the open, inert hands, on lips—on the cement floor. Big, stinking blood stains.²¹

¹⁸ Anna Heilman, “Anna Heilman,” in Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 295-297; Meth, “Rose Meth,” 300-302; see also footnote no. 6 in Guerwitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 364. Meth stated that Regina Saperstein and Estusia Wajcblum were Jewish, but it is unclear whether Genia Fischer was also Jewish. Also see Langbein, “The Auschwitz Underground,” 500.

¹⁹ Meth, “Rose Meth,” 302.

²⁰ Meth, “Rose Meth,” 303-304; see footnote no. 29 in Meth for the names of the inmates hung; Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 774-775, 801-805. Czech provides different spellings for some of these women’s names, but the documents clearly refer to the same persons. Although Sybil Milton does not specify whether they were Jewish, women were involved in the uprisings at Treblinka and Sobibor. See Milton, “Women and the Holocaust,” 231. Also see Langbein, “The Auschwitz Underground,” 502.

²¹ Tadeusz Chowaniec, “Epilogue,” in *Reminiscences of Former Auschwitz Prisoners*, ed. Smolén, 167.

The doctor went on to describe a room filled with dead bodies and the blood and human filth that covered the floors.²²

It was to Block 11 that four of the women who aided the *Sonderkommando* were sent for three months. On 6 January 1945 the SS hanged the four women for their involvement in blowing up the crematorium. This was the possible fate that could await any inmate accused of sabotage or caught trying to escape. In the “death block,” few inmates survived the torture. The building could hold numerous inmates at once since it was the same size as the housing blocks in Auschwitz.²³ Other camps had similar torture buildings, although generally not on as large of scale as Block 11.

Regina Steinberg, an inmate at Auschwitz, remembered when prisoners who had escaped were taken to Block 11. “He [Oberscharfuehrer Will Boger] tortured those escaped prisoners who were recaptured in a cold-blooded fashion. These prisoners were customarily sent to the camp prison [Bunker 11], and after a few days, Boger would order them to be slain.”²⁴ Torture and death were not the only punishments that awaited prisoners who tried to escape. Twenty-one days after the four Jewish women who assisted the *Sodernkommando* were hanged for their actions, Soviet troops liberated Auschwitz.²⁵

Difficulties of Escape

Multiple factors ensured that few prisoners managed to escape from the camps.

Taken from countries across Europe, many inmates did not know the local language,

²² Ibid., 167-168.

²³ Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 4.

²⁴ Regina Steinberg, “Regina Steinberg (*nee Hofstaedter wid. Lebensfeld*),” in *Secretaries of Death*, ed. Shelley, 134-135; see also Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 36, 278.

²⁵ Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 801-805.

which made it nearly impossible for them to survive outside the camps. In addition, inmates were usually already in a terrible state before they ever reached the camps, having often spent considerable time in the ghettos or the severely overcrowded cattle cars used to transport them to the camps. Within weeks it would have been unlikely they could blend in with the general population. Even if they did manage to make it outside the fence and not draw the attention to themselves, they had no identification papers or rations cards on which to survive.

Writing on Auschwitz, historian Henryk Swiebocki argues that four factors prevented inmates from escaping. First, their shaved head and striped camp uniform easily identified them as inmates. Second, many did not speak Polish (even Jews from the area often spoke Yiddish instead of Polish). Third, as soon as a prisoner escaped, camp leaders notified the local Gestapo, who began searching immediately. Lastly, camp officials also alerted the local police in case a prisoner evaded the Gestapo.²⁶

Still, there were a few Jewish camp inmates who attempted to escape. Two years after arriving at Auschwitz, Mala Zimetbaum escaped with Edek Galinski on 24 June 24 1944; they made it to the Slovakian border before being arrested. The SS tortured them and intended to hang both before the other inmates as a warning. However, Zimetbaum cut herself in an attempt to take her own life rather than allowing the guards the satisfaction. Regina Steinberg remembered the guards' response. "SS-men chased her to the main street of the camp while hitting her all the time. All Jewish prisoners there had to witness her ordeal. After an hour of beatings, Mala was thrown in a semi-conscious

²⁶ Henryk Swiebocki, "Prisoner Escapes," in Gutman and Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*, 504.

state into a wooden box with wheels and taken to the crematorium.”²⁷ Witnesses disagree over whether Mala was dead before reaching the crematorium because of their physical point of view. Piecing together the descriptions, most likely she died on the way to the crematorium, but as the inmates could not follow the wagon their accounts varied. Still, her murder sent a severe warning to any inmate considering escape.

If the guard dogs, watchtowers, and possibility of torture were not enough to deter inmates from escaping, these inmates also had to come to terms with the fact their actions would affect those left behind in the camps. Reprisals for escape attempts resulted in a reduction of food rations and extended roll calls for the entire camp.²⁸ The guards often chose ten or more prisoners from the same block as an escaped inmate and shot them.²⁹

The first escape from Auschwitz, by Tadeusz Wiejowski, resulted in a twenty-hour roll call. On 6-7 July 1940, from 6:00 p.m. to 2:00 p.m. the following day, the prisoners stood at the roll call while the guards beat them. The first death at Auschwitz occurred when David Wingoczewski, already in bad condition, could not withstand the additional physical strain of the extended roll call.³⁰ Civilians suspected of helping any inmate escape were themselves taken to Auschwitz Block 11 (still Block 13 at the time) and later put in the Penal Company.³¹ Escapees had to worry not only about their own safety, but also the reprisals carried out against those who helped and the unfortunate inmates left behind.

²⁷ Steinberg, “Regina Steinberg,” 137; Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 650-651; Edith S., “Edith S.,” in Niewyk, *Fresh Wounds*, 318; also see Shelley, *Secretaries of Death*, 351. For a detailed account see Wieslaw Kielar, “Edek and Mala,” in *Reminiscences of Former Auschwitz Prisoners*, ed. Smolén, 77-98.

²⁸ Edith Kramer, “Dr. Edith Kramer: Hell and Rebirth—My Experiences during the Time of Persecution,” in *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust*, eds. Ritvo and Plotkin, 139.

²⁹ Swiebocki, “Prisoner Escapes,” 504-505.

³⁰ Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 17; Swiebocki, “Prisoner Escapes,” 504.

³¹ Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 17-18.

Cyla Stawska's Escape from Auschwitz

Cyla Stawska was one Polish Jewish woman who successfully escaped from Auschwitz. On 21 July 1944 she and another inmate, Jerzy Bielecki, obtained an SS uniform and false documents. Under this guise he escorted Cyla out of the camp as a guard. Stawska stayed with a Polish family near Miechów until the end of the war.³² Successful escapes such as Stawska's were rare and, as stated above, even when inmates were fortunate enough to escape those left behind faced the retaliation of the guards.

Conclusion

Clearly the SS guards' brutal suppression severely limited organized sabotage and escape attempts within the camps. The guards watched closely for acts of sabotage and if they even suspected an inmate of doing so they could torture and kill an inmate. Those few inmates who did escape had to rely on the generosity of those living near the camps, persons seemingly aware but largely unsympathetic to those within the camps. Inmates often did not speak the local language, having often been sent to camps far removed from their homelands. The revolt of the Sonderkommando, arguably the most memorable act of resistance within the camps, resulted in the immediate deaths of nearly 500 inmates. In spite of the odds, a few heroic women engaged in acts of sabotage or escaped from the camps.

³² Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle*, 668; Shelley, *Secretaries of Death*, 351; Swiebocki, "Prisoner Escapes," 508-509. Cyla Stawska's last name is spelled Cybulska in one account.

CONCLUSION

Anti-Semitism in Europe stretched back to the Middle Ages when Jews were accused of associating with the devil and blood libel. In the nineteenth century Social Darwinism seemed to provide a scientific justification for the years of hatred directed towards the Jews. This so-called race science expanded into the twentieth century with the rising popularity of eugenics. By this period, Jews rarely faced age-old accusations of poisoning the wells of Christians during the medieval period; instead, they were alleged to have monopolized banking and commerce. Following World War I, many right-leaning political factions blamed the Jews for the economic hardships that hit Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. Alternatively, they were also accused of leading the Russian Revolution and plotting to overthrow other European governments. Although ultra capitalists and ultra communists represented clearly conflicting theories, anti-Semites often espoused both as evidence of the secret power Jews held over domestic and foreign governments. Yet, in this long history of anti-Semitism nothing matched the expanse and mechanization of the Nazi policy of annihilation directed towards the Jews.

During the interwar years, Jewish women across Europe coped with escalating anti-Semitism, political instability, numerous economic crises, and the rise of right wing political parties. Countries such as France were relatively accepting of Jews already established in the community, but less than welcoming to recent immigrant Jews. In Poland Jews were viewed as outsiders who were a threat to national unity, regardless of their long-standing presence in the country. In Germany, the Jews were blamed for the

rampant economic problems and fears that communists would overthrow the Weimar government.

Nevertheless, throughout Europe Jewish women provided for the wellbeing of their families by working in the family business, preparing meals, and mending clothes. The woman of the house insured that her family was properly clothed and fed by repurposing old garments and minimizing food expenses. Under the Nazis' anti-Jewish legislation such skills would prove invaluable.

After the Nazis came to power in 1933 Jewish women throughout the expanding Nazi territory faced increasing pressures and hardships. Violence against Jews dramatically increased and Jews could not depend on police protection. The German Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service and subsequent legislation caused many Jews to lose their jobs. Women had to learn how to make meager food supplies last and make or adjust clothing for growing children. Jewish aid societies encouraged women to look for sewing jobs that might provide additional income for the family.

After the war started in 1939, rationing and restricted shopping hours specifically affected Jewish women in Germany. They had to arrange their schedules around the allotted shopping times for Jews. The rations issued to Jews systematically diminished throughout the war. By 1940 no clothing ration cards were issued to Jews so they had to repair the clothes they already had to make sure they would last.

When the Nazis first began deporting Jews to the concentration camps, in 1941, women and children were often left behind.¹ Bereft of financial and emotional support,

¹ The year deportations began varied by country. For example, Polish Jews were rounded up into ghettos in 1939, but not sent to concentration camps until 1941, while French Jews were not deported in large numbers until 1942. Hungarian Jews did not face deportation until the end of the war, in 1944.

these women had to find ways to provide for themselves and their remaining family. They often relied on the charity of friends and Jewish aid societies.

Jewish women deported to the concentration camps women faced a demoralizing induction into camp life. Separated from husbands and fathers, stripped of all their belongings, shaved, and given inadequate clothing these women relied on each other for physical and emotional support. Jewish women formed camp families that gave them a sense of belonging and purpose; their new family became a means of obtaining extra food, clothes, and other necessities.

Jewish women encountered some of the harshest conditions within the camps. The SS guards usually kept them separated and isolated from the other female inmates, which prevented them from forming larger networks wherein they could obtain necessities and information. The guards regularly assigned the worst jobs to Jewish women. In addition, Jewish women faced more crowded living conditions. During the last year of the war, 1944-1945, many Jewish women in Ravensbrück lived in a large tent because the barracks were overflowing. Jewish women also received lower food rations compared to other inmates.

For Jewish women, the camp family, the practices of saving and sharing food, intellectual stimulation, and emotional support literally meant the difference between life and death. Sharing food augmented their deficient diets, and patching or making clothes helped them withstand the harsh elements. Offering each other emotional support was crucial in preventing depression and suicide. The women's efforts to remain clean improved their chances of avoiding the rampant diseases in the camp and it helped them

preserve a sense of dignity. Learning new languages and listening to lectures provided women with intellectual stimulation in a situation void of reason.

Although it was extremely dangerous, a few Jewish women performed various acts of sabotage. Many of them damaged armament parts or misused the machines causing them to breakdown repeatedly. Jewish women in Auschwitz, provided gunpowder to the *Sonderkommando*, resulting in the destruction of Crematorium IV on 7 October 1944. However, such sabotage came at a high price, resulting in the deaths of nearly 500 inmates including several of the women involved. Sabotage in general proved difficult under the watchful eyes of the guards who severely punished those caught in such acts.

Inmates in general had virtually no opportunities to escape and the attempt brought deadly reprisals from the guards. Most were caught before making it out of the camp, but as the case of Mala Zimetbaum demonstrates, even those who made it to the border could be recaptured and brought back. Although Cyla Stawska managed to successfully escape Auschwitz, such accounts, especially of Jewish women, are very rare.

Resistance is usually defined as armed opposition, but during World War II a number of individuals challenged this traditional view with their courageous, wide-ranging resistance activities. Individuals hid Jews and falsified documents; Catholic schools enrolled Jewish children; priests created false baptismal certificates; and people from all walks of life gave food to foreign workers. Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg prevented over 100,000 Hungarian Jews from being sent to Auschwitz. And, in Germany, the White Rose published and distributed leaflets to galvanize opposition to the Nazi regime.

Unfortunately, these acts of resistance were not the norm. Those who collaborated with the Nazis, and there were many, attempted to justify their actions following the end of the war. In *Nazi Chic?*, Irene Guenther relates how the French fashion industry claimed that it resisted the German occupation by making designs that required exorbitant amounts of material. The designers argued that they prevented this material from being used by Germans. “The frivolous and, at times, excessive designs were, [Lucien] Lelong explained, a way of getting back at the Germans. Every yard of fabric was a yard less of fabric that could be sent to Germany.”² Yet, Lelong did not acknowledge the many Nazi customers French fashion houses served and profited from throughout the occupation. And while the French designers insisted that they resisted by using excessive amounts of textiles, the French considered similar actions on the part of German women as simply “bad fashion.”³ Guenther’s work reveals the complications and contradictions in expanding the definition of resistance beyond armed conflict.

However, this thesis has shown that for the inmates of concentration camps traditional forms of resistance were invaluable means to fight the all-encompassing genocide. Armed resistance proved nearly impossible; the most famous case of the *Sonderkommando* blowing up a crematorium at Auschwitz ended with the SS murdering hundreds of inmates and no escape. Unlike people living in occupied zones, relatively no possibility of escape existed for camp inmates. If their act of armed resistance failed, they would quickly be caught and killed by the SS guards. Small acts of sabotage could be carried out if the SS guards were not attentive, but the guards often checked items for defects. Taking food from the SS kitchen and removing garments from clothing sorting

² Guenther, *Nazi Chic?* 211.

³ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

centers became common forms of resistance in the camps. Yet, many inmates were not in a position to carry out such acts; these inmates resisted the Nazis intellectually and culturally. They wrote poetry and drew pictures, kept diaries, and composed songs, acts strictly prohibited by the SS who did not want reports of their actions to survive. As the Nazis attempted to annihilate their race and direct relatives, Jewish women formed new camp families, which gave them physical support and the will to survive. Women had special knowledge and skills with food, sewing, and cleaning that enhanced their ability to survive under the harshest circumstances.

There is something in the human spirit that resists dehumanization—as in slavery—wherein small acts of resistance carry immense significance. Resistance provides the oppressed with a gleam of hope in a situation otherwise full of violence and cruelty. These seemingly minute acts of day-to-day resistance enabled Jewish women to endure the appalling conditions within the camps and rebuild the lives the Nazis had endeavored to destroy.

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