

Women's Experiences During the Holocaust – New Books in Print

Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998, VII + 402 pp.; Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998, XIX, 292 pp.

Reviewed by
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In 1999, for the first time in twenty-nine years of conferences, the Annual Scholars' Conference on the Holocaust and the Churches presented a plenary on women and the Holocaust. As co-chairs of this plenary, Dr. Myrna Goldenberg and I decided to feature recent scholarly books on the subject and to entitle the session "Women's Holocaust History: Books in Print." The occasion was historic beyond the fact that the subject was deemed important enough for a plenary, because, by early 1999, a core of "books in print" had made possible a session with such a title.

While some women's diaries and first-hand accounts have been available in English since the late 1940s and 1950s,¹ in 1998 there was an unprecedented crop of more analytical publications; and even more began to appear in 1999. Two out of the three finalists for the 1998 National Jewish Book Awards in the Holocaust category were about women and gender: *Between Dignity and Despair* by Marion A. Kaplan²; and *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman. The Ofer-Weitzman book and another by

¹ For example, Mary Berg, *Warsaw Ghetto: A Diary* (New York: L.B. Fischer, 1945); Kitty Hart, *I Am Alive* (London: Abelard-Schumann, 1946); Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis, 1947); Gisella Perl, *I Was A Doctor At Auschwitz* (New York: International Universities Press, 1948); Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl* (first published in English in 1952) which was most recently published as *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), and Gerda Weissman Klein, *All But My Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957), republished in 1992.

² Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, are the focus of this review. However, I have also included brief comments about some of the other books on women and the Holocaust that appeared in 1998 and early 1999.

All the books discussed in this review address the specific gender-related questions that make the female experience different from that of the male — although some do so more forcefully than others. They explore whether gender affected women's ability to struggle against the subhuman conditions of degradation, deprivation, terror, and even death, and how being female offered benefits yet also produced liabilities. Among the possible benefits were homemaking and nurturing skills that equipped women to form surrogate families, care for one another, and keep themselves and their living space as clean and hygienic as possible under the circumstances. Liabilities included the difficulty of overcoming inbred modesty and submissiveness.

In addition to gender-related issues, other variables, such as the socio-economic, political, religious, and national backgrounds of the women, as well as their ages and family situations, played a definite role. And the obvious biological differences between men and women, especially with regard to women's reproductive systems and their vulnerability to rape and sexual abuse, were significant factors in the situation.

Writers about women during the Holocaust need to keep in mind that it is not possible to analyze the experiences of women (or men) during the Holocaust without understanding gender issues. There is a need for studies "to reveal the ignored and complex relationship between antisemitism (as a form of racism against Jews) and sexism prior to and during the Holocaust," as Joan Ringelheim has written.³ "While it appears that antisemitism contains a monolithic view of Jews, in fact it looks at and treats Jews who are male and female quite differently. Our ignorance of these differences creates blind spots in the memories and reconstructions of the Holocaust."

In order to clarify what I mean by the word "gender," I offer two explanations that I consider clear and succinct. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Ringelheim point out that "for humans, biology becomes important largely as it is

³ Joan Ringelheim, "Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust," in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 145.

interpreted by the norms and expectations of human culture and society.”⁴ In other words, gender is considered the social-political aspect of biological sexual differences. It is a class in which women have a particular status different from that of men, and it cuts through economic class lines and ethnic differentiation. “Woman's biological sexual self is never just that because of the gendered (socialized, culturalized, economized, politicized) relations of patriarchy, which continuously seek to hierarchically differentiate woman from man,” in the words of feminist political scientist Zillah Eisenstein.⁵ The theoretical assumption behind the new books on women and the Holocaust is that, within the universal suffering of all of the victims of the Holocaust, men and women's experiences were different because of gender.

The essays in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, contain a broad geographic scope and range of experiences, with the focus on the women as their common denominator. This book is the outgrowth of an unprecedented conference on women and the Holocaust organized by Ofer and Weitzman at Hebrew University in 1995. The combination of Ofer's expertise as a historian of the Holocaust at Hebrew University, and Weitzman's, as a feminist sociologist at George Mason University, works well to balance historical accuracy with an American understanding of feminist social theory. They write in their introduction:

When we undertake gender analysis, we typically look at the relative positions of men and women in the social structure (their occupations, wealth, or political power, for example); the cultural definitions and expectations of the two sexes; and the differences in how men and women experience their lives (p. 2).

As this is an anthology, the emphasis on gender analysis varies with the background of the authors and their individual sensitivity to these issues. On one hand, chapters by such scholars as Marion Kaplan, Myrna Goldenberg, Sarah Horowitz, Joan Ringelheim, Gisela Bock, and Weitzman, who are known for their ground-breaking work related to women and gender, strongly define how gender played a role in Holocaust experiences. In some of the

⁴See Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture, and Society*, (Stanford University Press, 1974), “Introduction,” p.4.

⁵ Zillah Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984), p. 150.

other chapters, however, the analysis is less overt, and one sometimes has to read “between the lines” in order to draw her or his own analytical conclusions regarding the role of gender. It is to the credit of the co-editors that they included a broad range of views. The one exception is author Lawrence Langer, who concludes that gender differences are not as important as other factors, but uses the term “gender” to simply mean men and women, rather than the editors’ definition of a hierarchy of social differences.

For each of the sections, the editors provide an introduction that also serves as a summary. This volume is rich in the variety of topics addressed, with survivors and scholars covering gender-related experiences preceding World War II, in Polish ghettos, in the resistance and rescue, and in labor and concentration camps. The book is divided into these four sections. In the section entitled “Before the War,” the Holocaust and the role of women are put into historical context by Paula Hyman, comparing gender and the Jewish family in pre-war Western and Eastern Europe; Gerson Bacon, writing on Jewish women in inter-war Poland; Marion Kaplan on Jewish women in pre-war Germany; Daniel Blatman presenting a detailed account of women in the Jewish Labor Bund; and Gisela Bock on non-Jewish women in Germany.

Kaplan’s chapter, which is based on her prize-winning book, details how women, grounded in neighborhood and household activities, began to sense that they and their families had been turned into pariahs. Regarding *Kristallnacht*, the “November Pogrom” in her words, she writes that women’s recollections were of flying feathers, symbolic of their destroyed households, rather than of broken glass. Afterward, women took on new roles. They were crucial in arranging to free their husbands from concentration camps and, sometimes, in organizing their families’ subsequent emigration.

The section is generally well integrated and coherent, with, for example, Blatman quoting Hyman and Hyman quoting Kaplan. Bock’s excellent analysis of “Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany,” however, has at least as much to say about the war years as the pre-war era. As all of the other chapters and sections in the book concern only Jewish women, I imagine that there was no better place for her fine contribution, but the co-editors would have done well to warn readers that this chapter overreached their time delineation. As

Blatman says of the pre-war period, “My firm conviction is that the two eras are connected. It would be a mistake to regard the Holocaust period, no matter how unique its horrors, as somehow detached from the rest of history” (p. 64).

In the section on “Life in the Ghettos,” we see a clear difference in the approaches between survivors and scholars, even when the survivor is a scholar herself. Liza Chapnik, a survivor and resistance fighter who has a Ph.D. in foreign languages, wrote a personal account that is anecdotal. On the other hand, Dalia Ofer’s discussion of gender in the Warsaw ghetto (based on a study done in the ghetto by Cecilya Slepak) and Michal Unger’s account of women in the Lodz ghetto are analytical. As always, Ida Fink is brilliantly able to sum up the ghetto situation in two and a half pages, in a fictionalized and previously published story entitled “The Key Game.”⁶

In the introduction to “Resistance and Rescue,” the co-authors offer a broad definition of resistance that includes spiritual resistance and defying the Nazis in any way possible. Bronka Klibanski, a survivor and former archivist at Yad Vashem, was in the underground in Bialystok with Liza Chapnik. Although her account is personal and not analytical, she presents important evidence about women as leaders in the resistance. Weitzman, on the other hand, in her “Living on the Aryan Side in Poland,” offers a scholarly account, based on interviews, written testimonies from the Yad Vashem Archives, and secondary sources. Another sociologist writing in this section, survivor Nechama Tec, writes about women among the forest partisans and concludes that both old traditions and new arrangements “shaped the lives and destinies of men and women differently” (p. 231). Historian Renée Poznanski, an expert on the Holocaust in France, writes about women in the French underground and offers an insightful analysis of why their role was not better recognized. Finally, Yehuda Bauer, one of the most respected Holocaust historians, writes about Gisi Fleischmann, who played a major role in the Zionist leadership and the Judenrat in Slovakia. Although Bauer does not usually approach history from a feminist perspective, he acknowledges in his conclusion that “gender studies provide us with an additional perspective on a case like this” (p.263).

⁶ English translation first published in 1987 by Pantheon Books.

While the section on labor camps and concentration camps is filled with rich material, the introduction is somewhat problematic. Ofer and Weitzman make a statement that should have been worded more carefully in a book about women in the Holocaust: “After the pogrom of November 9-11, 1938, the concentration camps were packed with German Jews” (p.267). However, the camps were, in fact, packed with German Jewish *men*. This is an important gender distinction that needs to be emphasized and not glossed over in a volume that strives to demonstrate that Jewish men should not be considered the norm for all Jews (e.g., see Kaplan, pp. 46-47 in this volume). Likewise, in mentioning the selection process upon arrival at Auschwitz, it should have been emphasized that mothers, rather than fathers, went to the gas chambers with their young children. Furthermore, Ravensbrück, the only major concentration camp that the Nazis created exclusively for women, is not even mentioned.

In this section, survivors Lidia Rosenfeld Vago, Felicja Karay, and Ruth Bondy, who in various ways have all devoted themselves to Holocaust education, present graphic testimonies about women and gender issues in camps. The section also includes chapters by Myrna Goldenberg, Sarah Horowitz, and Lawrence Langer, who are professors of English and Holocaust literature, and Joan Ringelheim, a pioneer on women and the Holocaust. In examining the memoirs of three survivors, Goldenberg finds common denominators in their sexual humiliation and their social bonding as women and restates her belief that “hundreds of memoirs written by women survivors document ‘different horrors within the same Hell’” (p. 327). Ringelheim sums up her chapter in a similar manner:

If in the gas chambers or before the firing squads all Jews seemed alike to the Nazis, the path to this end was not always the same for women and men. The end — namely, annihilation or death — does not describe or explain the process (p. 350).

And Horowitz, speaking of the experiences of a female survivor, writes:

The bringing together of both sets of details — one particular to women, one relevant to all Jewish inhabitants of the camps — implies that

survivors' reflections are inevitably gendered, and also that gender does not constitute the totality of one's experience (pp. 370-71).

The only discordant voice is that of Lawrence Langer, who uses survivor testimony to try to demonstrate that “gendered behavior” played a “severely diminished role” (p. 351). Throughout his chapter, he uses the term “gender” to mean the male or female sex, as opposed to the social relations between men and women. His examples, moreover, are all biological and deal with motherhood, as if this were the only relevant aspect of womanhood. “I have found little evidence that mothers behaved or survived better than fathers,” he wrote (p. 362). Perhaps this is because the mothers who went to the gas chambers with their small children were unable to leave evidence or testimony.

One-third of the twenty-one chapters are personal recollections by women survivors who are themselves scholars or professional writers. The breadth and depth of this book make it an invaluable tool for those who are integrating the study of women and gender during the Holocaust into their personal or classroom readings on the Holocaust.

Judith Tydor Baumel, who now teaches at the Department of Jewish History at Bar-Ilan University, is the author of another book published in 1998, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*. Much of the material in this book enriches our understanding of gender and the Holocaust, and one wishes that Baumel's publisher had provided her with an editor who could have better shaped the material into a coherent package. Although this collection of essays is written entirely by Baumel, like the Ofer-Weitzman book its chapters do not all approach the issue of gender with equal strength. Perhaps this is because — with the exception of the introduction and one chapter — all of the essays included in the book originally appeared elsewhere; sometimes in Women's Studies' journals, but more often in general historical, or Jewish and Israel Studies' publications (Baumel, pp. xviii-xix). Baumel states that “several of the essays included in this book originally appeared in historical journals or conference proceedings and have been updated and expanded for inclusion in the present volume” (p. xv), but then lists all but one of them as having already been published. Furthermore, poor editing resulted in a lack of

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