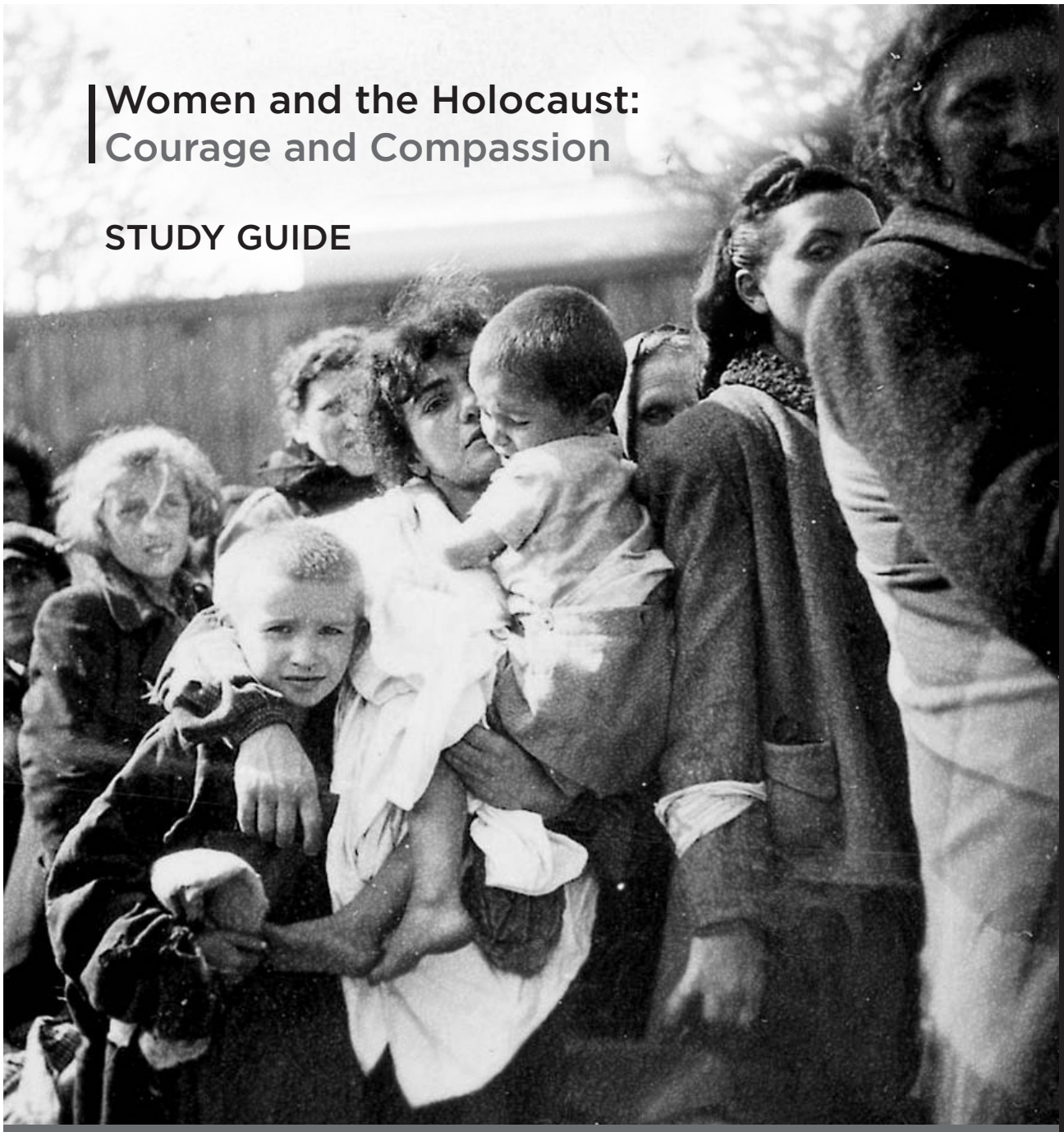
Women and the Holocaust:
Courage and Compassion

STUDY GUIDE



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United Nations

"JEWISH WOMEN PERFORMED TRULY HEROIC DEEDS DURING THE HOLOCAUST. They faced unthinkable peril and upheaval -- traditions upended, spouses sent to the death camps, they themselves torn from their roles as caregivers and pushed into the workforce, there to be humiliated and abused. In the face of danger and atrocity, they bravely joined the resistance, smuggled food into the ghettos and made wrenching sacrifices to keep their children alive. Their courage and compassion continue to inspire us to this day".

BAN KI-MOON, UNITED NATIONS SECRETARY-GENERAL

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FOREWORD

THE UNITED NATIONS DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION has partnered with two leading institutions of scholarship, the USC Shoah Foundation Institute and the International School for Holocaust Studies at Yad Vashem, to produce a study guide and companion DVD with survivor testimony on women and the Holocaust. This educational product aims to help high school students better understand the experiences of Jewish and Roma and Sinti women during this period of upheaval and terror brought upon them by the Nazis and their collaborators.

Each chapter of the study guide highlights different ways in which the lives of these women were changed, often forever. Faced with discrimination, impossible living conditions, and the prospect of death at every turn, these women were determined to meet their families' needs and protect their children to the best of their ability. As their husbands, sons and fathers were arrested and deported, traditional gender roles changed, placing greater responsibilities upon women in the family and community in the ghettos, and often making the difference between life and death in the camps. Women organized soup kitchens and care for those who needed it and created a support system for each other and those who had come to depend upon them.

They did their best to see that their children received a basic education and observed religious traditions as much as possible. Once homemakers and caregivers, women had to work outside the home and adapt to stay alive in the worst of circumstances — even when their children were killed before their eyes. Many summoned the courage to resist Nazi policies and even join partisan groups. And, despite being subject to constant humiliation, deprivation and violence, many women went on to rebuild their lives after the Holocaust, a testimony to the human strength to persevere and endure, not just for oneself but for those from whom care is sought and those to whom it is given.

Today, the United Nations honours these brave women. The Organization is working to ensure the protection of the rights of women and girls around the world, and their capacity to contribute to human well-being. The recent establishment of UN Women, a new entity for gender equality and empowerment, reflects this mission.

Some months ago, the Department of Public Information launched a Twitter campaign where contributors were asked what message they would have sent Anne Frank, had they been able to reach out to her through this medium as she remained in hiding from the Nazis. The many messages we received reflected solace, courage and hope but, above all, solidarity.

Anne Frank herself put it the most eloquently when she wrote: *"It's a wonder I haven't abandoned all my ideals, they seem so absurd and impractical. Yet I cling to them because I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart".*[1] That is the belief that animates the United Nations, and the women and men whose sacrifices, aspirations and endeavours gave it being.

KIYO AKASAKA

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information

ENDNOTES

Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl, trans. M. Moyaart-Doubleday (Toronto: Bantam,1993).

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INTRODUCTION

DURING THE HOLOCAUST, APPROXIMATELY SIX MILLION JEWS AND COUNTLESS OTHER MINORITIES were murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the war in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination. Driven by a racist ideology that considered Jews and other minorities to be inferior to the "superior" German people, the Nazis set out to subjugate and later, eliminate them.

The killing began with shootings and evolved to murder by gas. Because Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, many historians consider this the start of the Holocaust era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's regime, but they were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely. This genocide of the Jews resulted in the murder of two-thirds of European Jewry.

Numerous people fell victim to the Nazi regime for political, social, or racial reasons. Germans were among the first victims persecuted because of their political activities. Many died in concentration camps, but most were released after their spirit was broken. Germans who suffered from mental or physical handicaps were killed under a "euthanasia" program. Other Germans were incarcerated for being homosexuals, criminals, or nonconformists; these people, although treated brutally, were never slated for utter annihilation as were the Jews.

Two women say goodbye as Jews are rounded up before deportation in Lodz, Poland.

Roma and Sinti were murdered by the Nazis in large numbers. Estimates range from 200,000 to over 500,000 victims. Nazi policy toward Roma and Sinti was inconsistent.[1] In Greater Germany, Roma and Sinti who had integrated into society were seen as socially dangerous and eventually were murdered, whereas in the occupied Soviet Union, Roma and Sinti who had integrated into society were not persecuted, but those who retained a nomadic lifestyle were put to death.

The Slavic People of Belarus, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia were also deemed racially inferior by the Nazis. As such, they were discriminated against, imprisoned and murdered as Hitler attempted to reorganize Europe on racial grounds.

This study guide provides an important educational tool for understanding one group's experience during the Holocaust, that of women. Each chapter reveals a particular struggle that women faced and how they dealt with it, from caring for their families when deprived of basic needs to trying their hardest to maintain some sense of purpose, humanity and strength, when all hope appeared to be lost. The companion DVD contains the personal stories of six women who lived through this period and experienced the Holocaust in different ways.

What makes the study of women and the Holocaust so important? What can we gain from studying it? Today, there is a broader and deeper perspective of research, which now includes the comparison of the female experience in the Holocaust to that of men in physical, psychological and social terms.

While not physically equipped, women were required to perform hard labour, which, along with malnutrition and stress, had an adverse effect on their ability to conceive and care for their children. The psychological effects of such extraordinary circumstances came in the form of depression over the loss of their families, hope for rescue, and as a result of being deprived of their womanhood and femininity. Women also experienced anxiety over the fate of their children, and feared sexual abuse and rape.

Socially, women still attempted to create a home-like environment and provide some normalcy amidst the uncertainty of the daily life. Crowded into ghettos or deported, often separated from the men, they had to adapt. Despite the extreme situation, these women showed determination, leadership, compassion, dedication, courage and the willpower to survive.

ENDNOTES

1 The Holocaust Resource Center, Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, http://www.yad.vashem.org .

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What was Nazi racist ideology?
2. Which groups were targeted by the Nazis for discrimination, imprisonment or murder?
3. What does study about women during the Holocaust tell us?
4. How can we combat racism, xenophobia and anti-Semitism in our world today?

A woman with a baby begging in the ghetto, Warsaw, Poland, 1941.

CHAPTER I : **DETERMINATION**

Emanuel Ringelblum, the historian who documented the Warsaw ghetto, wrote in his diary: *"...The future historian will have to dedicate an appropriate page to the Jewish woman in the war. She will take up an important page in Jewish history for her courage and steadfastness. By her merit, thousands of families have managed to surmount the terror of the times".*[1]

To paraphrase Ringelblum, one of the important pages of history on the Jewish woman in the Holocaust should relate to her heroic role within the family unit. Irrespective of whether the family was Orthodox or secular, rich or poor, large or small, the Holocaust caused radical changes in familial daily life. The traditional roles within the Jewish family shifted, as it suffered from hunger, terror, fear, and murder by the Nazis. As part of life in the ghettos – as well as that in hiding, in the forest, in transit camps, or elsewhere – Jewish women, primarily mothers, were forced into a daily struggle for survival. This struggle principally revolved around assuring food supply, work, maintaining hygiene to prevent disease, and a desperate, stubborn attempt to keep family members alive. These changes caused an upheaval in the traditional gender roles, in which women took on new roles, and were forced to face extreme situations they had not previously encountered.

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Upon selection for forced labour at Auschwitz Birkenau, the women suffered further humiliation by having their heads shaved.

The continued deterioration in the women's living conditions, the escape eastward of men in conquered Poland, their random recruitment to forced labor – and thus their fear to go out onto the street – caused an expansion in the women's sphere of operation, and increased their influence within the family. As a result, women were the first to be forced to deal with a range of hardships and difficulties. One sphere was the problem of hunger. In ghettos and in hiding places, where Jews still maintained a family unit, the family members endured terrible hunger. Some women and girls risked their lives to smuggle food. Mothers were forced to contend with pitifully small ration quotas, and thus face the dilemma of how to divide food among the family members. Many mothers withheld food from themselves in order to try and protect their children. Forced to work, they suffered great anxiety while the children were often left home alone, under constant threat of house raids.

Jewish women and mothers tried stubbornly to preserve hygiene, under impossible circumstances, in order to prevent often fatal diseases. They protected and helped their sick children, even when they themselves were ill. They did their best to represent or defend their men when necessary and at times stood defiant against the Nazis at great personal risk. Hana Abrotsky (born in Warsaw, Poland, in 1932): *"In the ghetto, Mother revealed herself in all her resourcefulness. Mother – who before the war I had never seen in the kitchen, who had never cleaned, laundered, scrubbed or washed dishes with her bare hands – maintained our apartment's cleanliness with gritting teeth and at great personal risk".*[2]

The Holocaust was a cataclysmic event for Jewish and Roma and Sinti families, and most did not survive roundups, incarceration, deportation and the camps. The ability of the women to adapt, their capacity to improvise, and their bravery are some of the remarkable phenomena of the Holocaust. Irena Liebman (born in Lodz, Poland, in 1925), wrote in testimony submitted to Yad Vashem: "From what magical stream does my mother draw strength for all of this? There must be some great, hidden force, a force of love, a force of tremendous will to hold on and watch out for us".[3]

ENDNOTES

1 Emmanuel Ringelblum, Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan, (New York: Schocken Paperback, 1974).

2 Hana Abrotsky, A Star among Crosses (Tel Aviv, 1995) 96-97 [Hebrew].

3 Irena Liebman Testimony, Yad Vashem Archives, O.3/3752.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were some of the problems women had to contend with in their daily struggle for survival?
2. How did mothers help their families to survive in the ghettos?
3. In what ways did the traditional roles of women change during the Holocaust?
4. How did women find the strength to deal with such difficult circumstances?

Jewish women and girls are washing laundry in a concentration camp in France.

CHAPTER II : **LEADERSHIP**

Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.
Blessed is the flame that burns in the secret fastness of the heart.
Blessed is the heart with strength to stop its beating for honour's sake.
Blessed is the match consumed in kindling flame.

— HANNAH SZENES

This poem was written by Hannah Szenes, 23, a Hungarian Jew and a member of a group of parachutists who were sent from Palestine on rescue missions to Nazi-occupied Europe. Although the chance of success was small, she felt that the group would be an inspiring and morale-raising symbol of hope for the Jews of Europe. Hannah was captured by the Nazis upon crossing the border into Hungary in 1944, tortured and later executed by firing squad.

Hannah was one woman among many who assumed leadership roles that were traditionally occupied by men. These women inspired their communities and provided strength and hope at a time when it was most needed. They headed community and social groups; they ran soup kitchens and day care centres for children; and they provided relief from the day's hardships for men, women and children.

Cecila Slepak was a journalist and translator who lived in Warsaw before the war. Emanuel Ringelblum, founder of the archive "Oneg Shabbat", commissioned Slepak to conduct research on Jewish women living in the Warsaw ghetto. Held during the winter and spring of 1942, Slepak's interviews provide a unique description of women's strategies for coping with the increased dangers that they were facing and their shifting patterns of accommodation, defiance and resistance.

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Rachel Rudnitzki joined a group of partisans that operated in Rudniki forest, Lithuania.

While very few women were able to join the ranks of the decision-makers in the ghetto, Gisi Fleischmann was accepted as a member of the male-dominated Judenrat in Slovakia. The Judenrat was a Jewish council set up in the ghettos by the Nazis to ensure that their orders and regulations were carried out. According to Professor Yehuda Bauer, a historian of the Holocaust, Gisi headed an underground group in the Slovak Judenrat and she was involved in efforts to get as many Jews as possible out of Slovakia. Professor Bauer indicated in his book, Rethinking the Holocaust, that the documentation shows that it was precisely because of her qualities as a woman, along with her strong personality, commitment, and wisdom, that the men accepted her leadership[1].

Another woman who was involved in Judenrat operations was Dr. Rosa Szabad-Gabronska, a physician, who became a member of the Vilna Judenrat upon entering the ghetto. In this capacity she coordinated the care of young children, and at her initiative, a day-care centre was established, where children were fed, received medical aid, and played until their parents returned from work. Dr. Szabad-Gabronska also opened a special centre for the distribution of milk for young children, and a centre for orphans. Dr. Szabad-Gabronska was murdered in Majdanek, a concentration and death camp in Nazi-occupied Poland.

Women also led efforts to organize cultural activities whenever possible to lift spirits and foster a sense of community. At this time of darkness, there was an extraordinary need for some signs of normalcy, such as art, music and dramatic performances that provided relief from the persistent anxiety and despair. Vava Schoenova (Nava Schaan) was a famous theatre actress in Prague before the war. In July 1942, she was deported to the Terezin ghetto where she continued to perform, direct, and create theatre for children and youth. A woman survivor of Terezin told Schaan years later: "I owe you my childhood. …When I was your 'firefly,' this became my best childhood memory: to run around the stage and sing 'the Spring will come.' It was for me more than you can imagine. You created there, under the difficult conditions, great moments for the children".[2]

ENDNOTES

1 Yehuda Bauer, Rethinking the Holocaust (New Haven,CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

2 Nava Schaan, To be an Actress, Trans. Michelle Fram Cohen (Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2010).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why could Hannah Szenes be considered a leader in her day?
2. Why are Cecilia Lepak's interviews with the women of the Warsaw ghetto so important today?
3. What was significant about the participation of a woman in the Judenrat?
4. In what other ways did women serve as leaders in their communities?

The title of Righteous Among the Nations was posthumously bestowed upon Elisabeth Hedwig Leja for saving Jewish children during the war.

CHAPTER III : **COMPASSION**

"Whosoever saves a single life, saves an entire universe".

(MISHNAH, SANHEDRIN 4:5)

Attitudes towards the Jews during the Holocaust mostly ranged from indifference to hostility. Most people watched as their former neighbors were rounded up and killed; some collaborated with the perpetrators; many benefited from the expropriation of the Jews property. Yet in a world of total moral collapse there was a small minority who mustered extraordinary compassion to uphold human values. These were the Righteous Among the Nations. More than half of them were women.

Righteous Among the Nations is an official title awarded by Yad Vashem, The Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority, on behalf of the State of Israel and the Jewish people to non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust. The title is awarded by a special commission headed by a Supreme Court Justice according to a well-defined set of criteria and regulations.

The price that rescuers had to pay for their action differed from incarceration in the camps to execution. Notices warning the population against helping the Jews were posted everywhere. Many of those who decided to shelter Jews had to sacrifice their normal lives and to embark upon a clandestine existence – in fear of their neighbors and friends – and to accept a life ruled by dread of denunciation and capture.

© Yad Vashem

After the war's end, Bergen Belsen became the largest Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Europe, with 10,000 inhabitants in 1946.

Most rescuers were ordinary people. Some acted out of political, ideological or religious convictions; others were not idealists, but merely human beings who cared about the people around them. In many cases they never planned to become rescuers and were totally unprepared for the moment in which they had to make such a far-reaching decision. They were ordinary human beings, and it is precisely their humanity that touches us and should serve as a model.

Elisabeth Hedwig Leja, was one of these rare people.

Edward and Dora Gessler, a Jewish couple, lived with their children, in the city of Beilsko Biala in Southern Poland. In 1938, Elisabeth Hedwig Leja, a Polish Catholic woman of ethnic German origin joined the family as a nanny of the family's three young children, Elek, 11, Lili, 4, and Roman, 1. At the outbreak of the war, rather than join her family in safety, Elisabeth chose to remain with the Gesslers and help them as they fled from Beilsko Biala to Lvov. In Lvov, Dora, unable to bear the strain, committed suicide. Elisabeth remained to assist Edward, now a widower with three young children. Towards the end of 1941, Edward and his son Elek escaped to Hungary. Lili and Roman remained in the care of Elisabeth. Several months later in March 1942, fearing for their lives, Elisabeth, Lili and

Roman fled Lvov, and journeyed to Hungary via the Carpathian Mountains to join Edward and Elek. Elisabeth sewed her meager valuables into the lining of young Roman's coat, and hired a rickety cart and two guides to take them through the mountains. As darkness approached, the group was stopped by the Gestapo. Elisabeth, with her native German, successfully convinced the officers that she was hurrying to find a doctor for her sick children. Elisabeth went to great lengths to protect the children, even dying Lili's hair lighter and teaching them Christian customs, at real risk to her own life.

Eventually they were reunited with Edward and Elek in Budapest. Separated again when Elisabeth and Edward were arrested in 1944 and sent to a concentration camp, the family eventually was able to flee to Romania.

On 11 October 2007, the title of Righteous Among the Nations was posthumously bestowed upon Elisabeth Hedwig Leja Gessler.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is a "Righteous Among the Nations"?
2. What could have motivated people to rescue their neighbours or people they did not even know when punishment for this could have been death?
3. Why do you think more people did not try to help those persecuted by the Nazis?
4. Why is the story of Elizabeth Hedwig Leja so unique?