

Ra-Quelle Parker

History 492: The Holocaust

Professor Whalen

10 December 2022

The Holocaust Experienced by Jewish Women

Abstract

We have plenty of information on The Holocaust from the male point of view, such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and Viktor Frankl, but the topic of women in The Holocaust is hardly discussed beyond the point of Anne Frank or Ida Fink. This study shows the horror in the camps that women had to face. Women feared sexual harassment, among other horrible treatment in different camps. The sole purpose of this paper is to find more information on Jewish women's experience in the ghettos and concentration camps and to understand the female victims of The Holocaust from different articles.

Introduction

It all started in Germany in 1933 after Adolf Hitler was appointed chancellor. Once Hitler was appointed chancellor, the Nazi regime started to separate Jews from the German economy, political, and social life of Germans. Jews were put into concentration camps based on sex and age. Women are thrown into a world of having to defend themselves, along with their families. Once the Holocaust took a turn for the worse. Women were taken away from their children and husbands once the concentration camps started.

Methodology

My interest in the women perspective of The Holocaust started when reading Ida Fink's book. Fink talked about many sad but interesting experiences that she experienced. I have researched

many articles that talk about how women felt during the Holocaust. There have been articles and books that talk about how some women came to terms and accepted their conditions that they are in. In other articles there are representations of women not being able to cope in terms of what they have experienced. In effect, they would kill themselves or push others away who would try to help. In my research I have found that there are a lot of articles that state the encounter from the women perspective. My primary sources are credible because they are diaries and experiences from a person who lived during the Holocaust.

Jewish Women Pre 1941

Once Hitler was in power in 1933, he wanted to regulate the roles of women. Doing this meant that German women would be confined back to being in the house. Once Hitler accomplished this goal, the next goal was to remove the Jews from society. Hitler and his board cabinet started to make laws that made it hard for Jews to live. These new laws made it frustrating but manageable for the Jews to continue to live their daily routine.¹ The women took jobs cleaning houses and doing laundry. They would tend to teach their daughters different languages, and even how to bake.²

When Hitler succeeded in isolating the Jewish population by the mid-30s, Jewish women and non-Jewish women were upset about losing their social lives.³ Women tend to express the sorrow they felt about losing the ability to have a social life. Jewish women tend to express themselves to one another when they are struggling.⁴ Many women did not want to up and leave their elderly parents to try and escape the raft that was coming. Also, there are situations where

¹ Hochstadt, Steve. 2004. *Sources of the Holocaust*. Edited by Steve Hochstadt. New York: Palgrave (Chapter 30 pg.96)

² Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman ed., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)

³ Hochstadt, Steve. 2004. *Sources of the Holocaust*. Edited by Steve Hochstadt. New York: Palgrave (Chapter 25 pg.79).

⁴ Ida Fink, Madeline Levine, and Francine Prose, *A Scrap of Time and Other Stories* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995).

the parents could not afford to send their child or children to another country.⁵ Those who stayed behind were caught in a new devastating world that would confine them to the ghettos.⁶ The new responsibilities that came with being in the ghettos would bring enormous pressure, which would become a new form of hell.

Women in the Ghettos

Hitler planned to have the Jews isolated in the ghettos, destroying their socioeconomic status and causing them to lose their homes in 1940 and even sell different household items.⁷ The whole idea of the ghettos is to create starvation, isolate which will have an effect that will cause diseases to run through the camps.⁸ Women in general fought to feed their families and took great risk to cross the Aryn border just to get food for their families.⁹ Trying to find food for their families would put even more stress on the women to supply and feed their families. Many parts of The Holocaust focus on how women's main intentions are to stay strong for their families and still take on the motherly role to others. Surviving the ghettos is hard on its own, but having to take on new roles that might be available to them to help others.

There was a time when the Polish army wanted all men who were able to work to leave for work camps in the east.¹⁰ The Jewish women population was around fifty percent, once the men left Warsaw and never returned. It took a couple of years to build a wall around the Jewish camp. The wall stood to be 8 feet tall. Once the announcement of the wall, the women had to

⁵ Hochstadt, Steve. 2004. *Sources of the Holocaust*. Edited by Steve Hochstadt. New York: Palgrave (Chapter 31)

⁶ Sara Vicks, "Jewish Women in the Ghettos, Concentration Camps, and ... - Union College," accessed November 19, 2022, <https://digitalworks.union.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1609&context=theses>.

⁷ "Holocaust Chronology of 1938." n.d. www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org.
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/holocaust-chronology-of-1938>.

⁸ Hochstadt, Steve. 2004. *Sources of the Holocaust*. Edited by Steve Hochstadt. New York: Palgrave

⁹ Plisco, Sabrina, ed. 2001. *The Uprising*. Directed by Jon Avant. New York City: NBC.

¹⁰ Jacob, Sloan, ed. and trans. *Notes From the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958)

pack and prepare their families to be moved to yet another camp.¹¹ Being moved to different camps caused women to break off into two different types of women in the camps. One being who struggled to live because they thought it was their duty to live for themselves or others. Secondly, to rise against the Nazis and do something about their current situation.¹² Most women feared that helping others in Warsaw would be seen as an act against the Nazis. In the ghettos, women would set up groups called “women’s circles” that would help girls fix clothes for themselves and their families in the ghettos. Some women had jobs to maintain food and make sure there is food for the women in the camps to eat. When the food supply started to go downhill the women would try to share food with one another.

Women had to struggle with the ghettos being liquidized by the Nazis.¹³ The Nazis would make them move to a concentration camp that would be where they would work or sometimes be put to death. The camps were divided by a couple of factors, such as transition camps, work camps, and death camps. These factors would help the Nazis with population control and pick which group to send to the death camps.

Many women trapped in the concentration camps would create informal groups that would help one another.¹⁴ The group is usually formed by women who are from the same city or area. The groups shared the style of living or even the same level of education. The other women in the camps would survive based on the SS officers who would deploy them in fixing clothes, doing laundry, and other household cleanings. The women in The Holocaust tried their best to survive in many different ways.

¹¹ Jacob, Sloan, ed. and trans. Notes From the Warsaw Ghetto: The Journal of Emmanuel Ringelblum. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1958)

¹² Dalia, Ofer, “Her View Through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in the Warsaw Ghetto,” originally published in Hebrew in Yalkut Moreshet. Accessed November 25, 2022, <http://www.theverylongview.com/WATH/essays/HerViewThroughMyLens.pdf>

¹³ Corkran, Grace, "Between Life and Death: Pregnancy, Abortion, and Childbirth in the Nazi Concentration Camps" (2021). Student Research Submissions. 394. https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/394

¹⁴ Dalia Ofer, “Her View Through My Lens,”

Pregnant Women in Concentration Camps

Pregnant women were one of the many that were killed in gas chambers. Many women would try to hide their pregnancy to have a fighting chance in the camps. Those who did hide their pregnancies would usually have to kill their own baby at birth.¹⁵ The mother of the babies would be killed along with the baby by lethal injections or drowning. It was a risk that a lot of men wanted to take by having secret abortions. Not only did the mother have to protect herself doing this, but also the doctors and others who helped her during the progress. The abortions would kill the baby inside the mother. Causing it to be a still-birth if the Nazis came across the information of her being pregnant.¹⁶

A woman by the name of Doctor Perl, watched as the Nazis killed pregnant women and vowed to never have a pregnant woman walk the camps. Perl would perform the abortion on the dirty floor, with her unwashed hands and no equipment or anesthesia.¹⁷ If the pregnancy was too far along Perl would pierce the amniotic sac that would force the mother's cervix into labor. Despite her religion and her belief, she did this hoping the women would survive and then perhaps bear more children in the future.¹⁸ Doctor Perl saved so many women's lives at the cost of their babies to continue to work and fight another day in the ghettos.

Not all women were sent to Doctor Perl in the concentration camps. Some were sent to the maternity ward where they waited out the rest of their pregnancies. A midwife by the name of Sister Klara would help take part in drowning the babies right in front of the mothers after

¹⁵ Dalia Ofer, "Cecila Slepak," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/slepak-cecila>.

¹⁶ Corkran, Grace, "Between Life and Death: Pregnancy, Abortion, and Childbirth in the Nazi Concentration Camps" (2021). Student Research Submissions. 394. https://scholar.umw.edu/student_research/394

¹⁷ Dalia Ofer, "Cecila Slepak," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/slepak-cecila>.

¹⁸ Dalia Ofer, "Cecila Slepak," Jewish Women's Archive, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/slepak-cecila>.

they gave birth.¹⁹ Sister Klara would say that the child's cause of death was a stillbirth. Sister Klara was sent to the maternity ward to help usher along the deaths of the babies and sometimes the mothers included.²⁰

Not every baby was murdered right out of the stomach. Some babies were fortunate enough to pass off as Aryn babies. The ones passed off were given to Nazi families who could not have children on their own. In doing the process, Leszczyńska and her assistants would try to tattoo every baby.²¹ Hoping they would discover their true identity and find their mother or know their true culture. Leszczyńska would watch as she would have to starve the other babies because they would not let the mothers breastfeed their babies. When the Nazis forced a death march to leave Auschwitz, she stayed till the camp was destroyed. In doing so she earned the name “mother” to everyone in the camps.

Even after The Holocaust there were women who were unable to conceive. Due to the amount of trauma and stress the women went through caused them to not be able to carry their own child.²² Some women who could conceive were not able to carry to full term. The ones who did carry to full term would often suffer from postpartum depression. Another factor was how malnourished the mother would be while trying to conceive. The Holocaust put women through such a traumatic experience that it takes some women a year or two to have a regular menstrual cycle.

¹⁹ Erin Blakemore, “This Midwife at Auschwitz Delivered 3,000 Babies in Unfathomable Conditions,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, March 2, 2018), <https://www.history.com/news/auschwitz-midwife-stanislaw-leszczynska-saint>.

²⁰ Erin Blakemore, “This Midwife at Auschwitz Delivered 3,000 Babies in Unfathomable Conditions,” History.com (A&E Television Networks, March 2, 2018), <https://www.history.com/news/auschwitz-midwife-stanislaw-leszczynska-saint>.

²¹ Dalia Ofer, “Cecilia Slepak,” Jewish Women's Archive, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/slepak-cecilia>.

²² Author link., “Women's Experiences of Infertility after the Holocaust,” Social Science & Medicine (Pergamon, August 22, 2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953622005561#:~:text=Ninety%2Deight%20percent%20of%20women,losses%20is%20likely%20much%20higher>.

Ravensbrück Concentration Camp for Women

The largest concentration camp for women was Ravensbrück.²³ There were about 100,000 women who were deployed to Ravensbrück and forced to do hard labor that would eventually lead to the majority of the women's deaths. The women were moved from Lichtenburg women's concentration camp which is in Saxony. Women were subjected to being beaten and raped in both concentration camps and ghettos. As we know pregnant women were forced to have abortions or die after the birth of their children.

Himmler, who was in charge of what went on in the camp, wanted to start using the T4 gas chambers to kill the women. Himmler's doctor would advise him that the T4 is too premature to start using in the camp. The big picture that is at rise is the growing effect of women having gonorrhea.²⁴ The disease could have been transferred by the women being forced to sleep with the guards who were sleeping with other women. In 1942 there were about 1,600 women and 300 men were sent to their death in the gas chamber. The Germans gassed about 5,000 to 6,000 women at Ravensbrück right before the Soviet troops went to liberate the camp in April 1945.

In the summer of 1942, the doctors at the camps started to experiment with certain prisoners. They started to experiment with treating wounds and different ways for them to treat them without certain medicine.²⁵ Later the doctors would start working with methods that would try to transplant bones into another person. Amputations were also a part of the process that the doctor would undergo learning.

²³ "Defying Expectations: Women Resistance Fighters during the Holocaust," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed November 28, 2022, <https://www.ushmm.org/online-calendar/event/mehweinmann1121>.

²⁴ Sarah Helm, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 2016). 3

²⁵ "RAVENSBRÜCK," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum), accessed November 29, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/ravensbrueck>.

Women in the Resistance

The main role that women played in the resistance is a courier, who would bring information to the ghettos. Most women were involved in the Socialist, Communist, or Zionist youth movements. In the resistance, women played major roles in the different ghettos resistance. In the resistance, they would pick women who look like they could pass as an Aryan.²⁶ In some cases they would carry bombs to the ghettos and try to help them escape the hell hole they are in.

Many women would escape to the forest in eastern Poland during the Holocaust. Some of the women who escaped would go on to try and free others in the Holocaust. Some would lose their lives at the hands of the Nazi soldiers, while others would help free other Jews. These women would stand up for what they believed was owed to them. Some would be great leaders of the resistance, while others would operate inside the concentration camps.²⁷

Conclusion

It all started in Germany with its appointed leader Adolf Hitler. Hitler was able to accomplish some of his plan to eliminate all Jews. But the Jews found the strength to fight back no matter their age and gender. The Women experienced a lot of traumatic trauma but were able to fight and survive. Even after the worst, the women still tried to have families and live a normal life. In doing so every woman who lost their life died so others can live and continue to share their stories for them.

²⁶ Plisco, Sabrina, ed. 2001. *The Uprising*. Directed by Jon Avant. New York City: NBC.

²⁷ "Women & Resistance," Holocaust Center, accessed November 25, 2022, <https://wagner.edu/holocaust-center/survivor-collections/women-resistance/>.