Fertility and Femininity during the Holocaust:
The Experiences of Jewish Women

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Abstract:
Until recently, much of Holocaust scholarship has relied heavily on the experiences of Jewish men. While all Jews were first discriminated against based on their so-called “racial inferiority,” women’s experiences in the Holocaust were different than that of men: “Even the most impartial and sensitive male survivor will be unable to provide an insider’s picture of women’s experiences in the Nazi camps, since male and female prisoners were segregated in separate camps” (Heinemann 2-3). By only relying on memoirs of Jewish men, the Jewish Holocaust experience is only half documented. Women must be included in this discourse for it to truly be complete. Within the literature that holds this view; two different interpretations of Jewish women’s Holocaust experiences emerge. The first argues that Jewish women had fundamentally different Holocaust experiences than men because they represented the societal roles of reproduction and femininity – both of which factored heavily into the Nazis’ hatred of the Jewish people (Heinemann 14). In contrast, scholars such as Rachel Brenner argue that Nazi racism turned all Jews into, “‘grey, uniform, suffering masses,’” and it was the “individualistic responses” of Jewish women to the Holocaust that gendered their suffering (Brenner 152). Both interpretations hold elements of truth. By examining SS brutality against Jewish mothers, Nazi eugenic philosophy, and sexual abuse towards Jewish women, one can see that the Third Reich separated Jewish women from men in areas in which they represented the societal roles of reproduction and femininity/sexuality. However, even in cases where Jews of all genders were equals in misery, such as starvation and unsanitary living conditions, Jewish women still saw themselves as the embodiment of these societal roles – thus experiencing the same horrors differently than their male counterparts.
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In 1943, Dr. Raphael Lemkin first created the term genocide in his book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress*. In this book, Dr. Lemkin defined genocide as, “…a state sponsored, coordinated plan aimed at the physical annihilation of a national group or groups” (Gilkerson & Schell). By focusing on nationality in his definition, Dr. Lemkin conveyed how one could not forget how Nazi Germany targeted all members of a group for slaughter – regardless of factors such as age or economic background. It may seem, then, that Dr. Lemkin would agree with some Holocaust scholars that the recent studies of the specific experiences Jewish women had as Holocaust victims and survivors could turn, “…the Shoah merely into an example of sexism [and]…detract from the much more fundamental fact that…‘the Holocaust happened to victims who were not seen as men, women, or children but as Jews’” (Rittner & Roth 4). But assuming that Dr. Lemkin would feel an examination of Jewish women detracts from Holocaust scholarship is an oversimplification of his work. For instance, The *Harvard Law Review* described *Axis Rule* as an, “…invaluable sourcebook from which to document…[the] pseudo-legality with which the Nazis…sought to make death and slavery palatable to the world”’ (Gilkerson & Schell). In other words, Dr. Lemkin was committed to providing the most detailed documentation of the Holocaust as possible.

Studying the experiences of Jewish females during the Holocaust adds new dimension and detail to Holocaust studies, something of which Dr. Lemkin would approve. While it is certainly true that Jewish women and men were first discriminated against based on their so-called “racial inferiority,” women’s experiences in the Holocaust were different than that of men (Bock “Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany” 96). As Marlene Heinemann points out, “Even the
most impartial and sensitive male survivor will be unable to provide an insider’s picture of women’s experiences in the Nazi camps, since male and female prisoners were segregated in separate camps” (Heinemann 2-3). By only relying on memoirs of Jewish men, the Jewish Holocaust experience is only half documented. Women must be included in this discourse for it to truly be complete. Within the literature that holds this view; two different interpretations of Jewish women’s Holocaust experiences emerge. The first argues that Jewish women had fundamentally different Holocaust experiences than men because they represented the societal roles of reproduction and femininity – both of which factored heavily into the Nazis’ hatred of the Jewish people (Heinemann 14). In contrast, scholars such as Rachel Brenner argue that Nazi racism turned all Jews into, “‘grey, uniform, suffering masses’…The issue of gender, therefore, should…be considered from the point of view of the…victim…[as it] occupies an important place in the victims’ individualistic responses to the persecution” (Brenner 152). Both interpretations hold elements of truth. By examining SS brutality against Jewish mothers, Nazi eugenic philosophy, and sexual abuse towards Jewish women, one can see that the Third Reich separated Jewish women from men in areas in which they represented the societal roles of reproduction and femininity/sexuality. However, even in cases where Jews of all genders were equals in misery, such as starvation and unsanitary living conditions, Jewish women still saw themselves as the embodiment of these societal roles – thus experiencing the same horrors differently than their male counterparts.

Both Nazis policies that deliberately attacked Jewish women as females and differences between how Jewish women and men reacted to Nazi brutality faced by both genders were influenced by two roles traditionally assigned to women by patriarchal society – sexuality and fertility (Heinemann 14). While Nazis first targeted all Jews as members of an “inferior race,”
“Any consistent Nazi plan had to target Jewish women specifically as women, for they were the only ones who would finally be able to ensure the continuity of Jewish life” (Rittner & Roth 3). While men were also obviously involved with the procreation of an ethnic group, patriarchal German society specifically saw women as representatives of fertility and procreation. As Jewish women were seen as the producers of future generations, they were selected for special treatment by the Nazis.

This fact is interesting as Hitler’s racist views in Mein Kampf deal only in a minimal way with condemning Jewish women both as members of a hated group and as members of the female gender (Heinemann 18). This does not mean, however, that Nazi policies against Jewish women as symbols of sexuality and fertility were not systemic. While Hitler may not have written heavily about the topic, one of his most infamous officials, Heinrich Himmler, addressed it. Himmler once stated that the Nazi party saw itself as, “‘engaged in a primitive, primordial, natural race struggle’ and Gisela Bock [Holocaust survivor and scholar] has argued that ‘the significance of this largely women-centered definition…[is] one element of the singularity of the National Socialist genocide of the Jewish people’” (von Kellenbach 19). Bock defines Himmler’s description of the Nazi world view as “‘women-centered’” because the words “primitive,” “primordial,” and “natural” seem to focus on the destruction of the biological aspects of the Jewish identity. As mentioned previously, women were seen as the embodiment of theses biological characteristics (Heinemann 14). Thus, as Bock acknowledges, while National Socialism targeted all Jews, Himmler’s statement makes it clear that one significant aspect of Nazi ideology dealt specifically with women.

No where is this more evident than in an examination of the special treatment of Jewish women by Nazi officials in the death camps as symbols of fertility and sexuality. One of the
most disturbing examples of this phenomenon as it pertains to fertility is the plight of Jewish mothers. For mothers deported to the camps with children under fifteen years of age, “‘gender is destiny…To save the SS difficulties all mothers who accompanied young children went to the gas chambers, irrespective of their age’” (Heinemann 14). It is important to note that unlike motherhood, paternity did not directly affect the survival chances of a Jewish male in the death camps (Heinemann 18). Nazi officials also targeted pregnant Jewish women. Gisella Perl, a former Auschwitz inmate, describes the brutal death they faced:

A few days after the arrival of a new transport, one of the SS chiefs would address the women, encouraging the pregnant ones to step forward, because they would be taken to another camp where the living conditions were better…Even I was naïve enough to believe the Germans, until one day I happened to have an errand near the crematories and saw with my own eyes…They were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, drug around by the hair and kicked in the stomach…Then when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory – alive. (von Kellenbach 21)

SS officials in concentration and death camps deliberately and separately targeted Jewish women as symbols of reproduction – both those who already had children and those who were expectant mothers. Particularly in the case of pregnant women, they were murdered with extreme brutality – as if to punish them for daring to stand in the way of the Nazi Final Solution. There is evidence to suggest that Jewish women also saw hiding a pregnancy and the subsequent birth of a child from the Nazis as an act of rebellion (von Kellenbach 28). In the extremely rare case that this was possible, it gave female camp inmates hope for the future (Heinemann 26). Fania Fénelon, a Bergen-Belsen camp survivor, describes how she helped deliver and hide a woman and her new
born baby from the Nazis at the end of the Second World War: “‘I forgot the immense weariness that was making me so indifferent…I was super-excited, super-alive, and I wanted to shout: ‘That’s it, he’s born’” (Heinemann 26). This quote illustrates that both Nazi officials and their would-be victims understood that women were being targeted as symbols of fertility and motherhood. In such a brutal environment, the brave actions of women like Fénelon can be considered dramatic acts of resistance (von Kellenbach 26-27).

Closely related to the concept of reproduction as resistance are the Nazi’s sterilization experiments on women. While Jewish men also faced sterilization, many of the laws governing the experiments seem to be specifically directed at women (Lengyel 119). To understand this, one must not only look at the sterilization laws and experiments against Jewish women, but how those experiments and laws related to the field of eugenics. As early as the end of the nineteenth century, it was argued that, “those considered transmitters of hereditary forms of ‘inferiority’ [including Jewish people]…should be prevented from having children…The proposed remedy was to…impel the ‘superior’ to have more children and the ‘inferior’ to have fewer or none” (Bock “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany” 165). In other words, the goal of eugenics was both to limit or stop the birthrate of so-called “inferior races” and to increase the birthrate of the “superior” group. Bock tells us that this philosophy particularly targeted women because, “its mythology of hereditary character traits, is concerned with the supposedly natural or biological domains in which women are prominent – body, sexuality, procreation, education…” (Bock “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany” 163). Because women were seen as the representatives of reproduction, nineteenth century eugenics tended to focus on them more heavily than men.

On 26 May 1933, the Nazi regime codified this pseudo-scientific theory into law by legalizing sterilization for eugenic purposes and prohibiting voluntary sterilization for Aryan
women. In 1936, a second law was introduced, allowing for the destruction of the gonads of “inferior” women through the use of x-ray machines. Nazi physicians took full advantage of the law permitting this procedure in concentration camps, particularly against Jewish women (Bock “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany” 167 & 176). However, it was not only the reproductive organs of women that were damaged by these experiments: “When they [the women] emerged, they were deathly yellow and white like ghosts. They were holding their tummies and wailing without end” (The Stations of the Cross 224). Additionally, Olga Lengyel, a Jewish inmate at Birkenau that worked in the infirmary, writes that the victims of these experiments often received severe burns, and would be submitted to radiation repeatedly until they were no longer capable of conceiving a child. They were then sent to the gas chambers (Lengyel 124). If these brutal experiments were simply a prelude to the death of Jewish and other women, what purpose could they have served? Lengyel offers us some insight when she describes the plight of the woman Georgette: “She had been used as a guinea pig in sterilization experiments, and when she returned to the hospital she was no longer female” (Lengyel 125). As mentioned previously, the Nazi eugenic policy was two-fold – it both prohibited procreation by women of “inferior groups” and “idealized and encouraged” the reproductive and maternal role of Aryan women. Thus to simply kill Georgette as an inferior without first denigrating her reproductive and maternal roles as a woman would be inconsistent with Nazi eugenic theory.

As mentioned previously, Hitler’s regime specifically targeted Jewish women differently than Jewish men as symbols of reproduction. However, in situations where Jewish women were equals in misery to Jewish men, they experienced the same horrors differently because they were also influenced by the idea that they were responsible for the continued reproduction of their ethnic group. For instance, both men and women in the concentration camps suffered from
severe starvation. Perhaps the Nazis did not see the connection between lack of food and reproduction, but Jewish women did. Livia E. Bitton Jackson, a Hungarian Jew and former inmate in the Auschwitz, Plaszow, and Dachau camps, wrote in her memoirs of the Holocaust that the starvation she experienced made it impossible for her to menstruate, causing a condition known as amenorrhea (Jackson 81). Jackson is not the only Jewish woman to write about amenorrhea. In fact, Marlene Heinemann’s survey of female Holocaust survivor’s memoirs showed that virtually all women, whether they wished to eventually become mothers or not, wrote about the loss of their menses and how it constituted the loss of an important part of their identity because this, “specific biological function [is what]…society insists upon as the chief vocation for women” (Heinemann 19). Both Nazis and Jewish women were socialized to believe that women were the chief representatives of an ethnic group’s fertility. Thus, the loss of their menses caused considerable fear, as no woman knew if she would remain permanently infertile (Heinemann 19). This comment is interesting as the menses was, and remains, a very taboo topic in the Jewish faith. It is often described as a “’monthly neurosis,’” and not seen as a welcome event. (Heinemann 21). But as one woman’s Holocaust memoir stated, “’It’s upsetting not to go through those unclean periods…You begin to feel like an old woman…And what if they never come back afterwards?’ At her words a ripple of horror swept over us…Catholics crossed themselves, others recited the Shema; everyone tried to exorcise this curse the Germans were holding over us: sterility. How could one sleep after that?’” (Heinemann 18-19). Outside the camps, the menses was seen as a routine, but shameful, event. Within the camps, it was the lack of menstruation that was shameful – for a woman could not be a societal representative of reproduction and new life for her people if she were infertile. In this way, Jewish women were both victimized by Nazi policies that targeted them as symbols of reproduction and by programs
that made them equals in misery with Jewish men because they feared such programs would threaten their abilities to reproduce.

Sexuality/femininity, another traditional role ascribed to women, also influenced both Nazi policies toward Jewish women and the women’s views of themselves. In the concentration camps, this perceived role meant that women were much more likely to face sexual abuse than men. This abuse often occurred at the beginning of the concentration camps experience (Heinemann 27). Goldenberg recounts the experience of one Jewish woman, saying that while both men and women were forced to strip and be shaved upon arrival at the camp, women were forced to endure an additional humiliation: “‘We were marched off in groups to a brick factory near the station for a degrading body search…The women and girls were lined up on one side and were ordered to lie on our sides on a wooden table. While an SS officer gawked and jeered, woman with a stick poked our private parts. My burning cheeks betrayed my sense of shame and humiliation’” (Goldenberg 330). Men did not go through this horribly invasive process, leading credence to the claim that the Nazis wanted to destroy the sexuality of Jewish women, just as they wanted to denigrate their reproductive role. One can see further evidence of this fact by examining how SS officers communicated with Jewish women. Heinemann’s survey of Jewish women’s Holocaust memoirs includes a passage where a “…kapo beats a…woman to unconsciousness for no reason, shouting ‘Disgraziata putana (disgraceful whore),’ as if the woman’s guilt was thus established” (Heinemann 29). Just as Jewish women were separately targeted by the Nazis as symbols of fertility, they were again targeted as symbols of sexuality. The beating described above includes no language referring specifically to race, showing that while women were often first brought to concentration camps because of their ethnicity, the sexual abuse they received upon arrival was often based on their gender instead.
Like their Nazi tormentors, Jewish women also often saw themselves as their people’s representatives of femininity/sexuality. Thus, even when facing similar situations to men, they often reacted differently (Ofer & Weitzman 7). In her case study of gendered responses to similar situations in the Skarzysko-Kamienna forced-labor camp in Poland, Holocaust scholar Felicja Karay discovered that both men and women engaged in back-breaking labor in squalid, unsanitary environments. Despite these similar circumstances, women often seemed much more preoccupied with their physical appearance than men (Karay 287 & 305). An inmate’s appearance was crucial to his/her continued existence because it, “…affected surviving a sudden selection by the SS doctors for death…Appearance anxiety escalated into panic-stricken activity immediately before a selection. One survivor recalled how prisoners would bite their lips and pinch their cheeks to make them rosier before a selection” (Neiberger 138-39). The more clean and healthy prisoners appeared, the less likely they would be sentenced to death via the crematoria or gas chambers. It was therefore in the best interests of all prisoners, regardless of their gender, to engage in what little personal grooming they were able. But if this were the only motivating factor for maintaining a “pleasing” appearance, why would women be more involved in personal grooming than men? One answer lies in how women perceived their own sexuality/femininity. Livia E. Bitton Jackson, an adolescent during the Holocaust, describes how a lack of adequate food caused her breast tissue to be absorbed into her body and disappear – making her feel, “…like men” (Jackson 81). For a child undergoing her sexual awakening, this must have been a very traumatic experience. Holocaust scholar Ami Neiberger argues that an interest in personal upkeep allowed women to restore their sense of femininity and dignity during these traumatic experiences:
Gisella Perl [a Holocaust survivor]...remembered that the women in her block played the ‘I am a Lady Game’ before they went to sleep. They would reminisce and describe a day in their lives at home, filling their stories with details. Gisella wrote that the game helped the women sleep peacefully and restored a sense of the femininity of their past lives. (Neiberger 139-40)

Women took an interest in personal appearance not only because it was more likely to ensure their physical survival. If this were their only motivating factor, it is unlikely they would have engaged in more personal grooming than men. In addition to their physical survival, women engaged in more personal grooming than men because it restored their sense of femininity/sexuality. This is particularly clear in the case of the game described above. The game had no affect on purely physical survival, but instead focused on reminding women that they were different than men and that these feminine differences were an essential piece of their identity that they could not afford to forget. Once again, both Nazis and their Jewish female victims saw their femininity/sexuality as an essential piece of their identity. The Nazis sought to destroy that sense of self through cruel tortures, while women worked to maintain it through an interest in their physical appearance.

Both Jewish women and their Nazi tormentors associated womanhood with the characteristics of fertility and femininity. One can see this by studying SS brutality against Jewish mothers, Nazi eugenic philosophy, and sexual abuse towards Jewish women, as well as how Jewish women reacted to gender-universal torments such as starvation and unsanitary living conditions. In these ways, Jewish women were constantly being confronted with their female societal roles. While in many cases this was a cause for despair, in others Jewish women’s desire to maintain their unique gender identity helped them survive - both in body and in spirit.

Bock, Gisela. “Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany: Motherhood, Compulsory Sterilization, and the


Goldenberg, Myrna. “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender.” *Women in the


