Jewish Women and the Nazi Vision

Jessica M. Adach

A colossal bigotry against women was applied in different ways by the Nazi regime leading up to and during the Holocaust. The unique differences between how Jewish men and women were treated throughout this period defined their experiences and potentially, affected the outcomes for both. Life for all women under the Third Reich was restrictive and precise, involving specific roles they were subtly forced to undertake, such as providing a positive home environment for "Aryan" children – a necessity for the future success of the German race. For Jewish women societal restrictions were more intense and multifaceted – from slow depletion in the work force to eventual ghetto life – which increased in the years leading up to the Holocaust itself. In extermination camps, Nazi policy made certain that Jewish women felt the brunt of the Final Solution, even if the Nazis implementing these regulations were female themselves. Women's memoirs of events that took place throughout the Nazi reign, and especially during the Holocaust, paint a different picture than that of men. Of course, "the final solution was intended by its creators to ensure the annihilation of all Jews…yet the road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women."[1] Simply put, the treatment of Jewish women differed from that of men because of Nazi rationale and its inherent vision for what comprised their ideal of world domination. The different facets of Nazi ideology resulted in the exploitation, physical and

[1] Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 126.

emotional torture and murder of Jewish women.

Nazi society was male-dominant in the extreme. When the Nazis came into power they held intense biases against all women, allowing only certain roles for them, as well as imposing a variety of limitations. Primarily, no women were allowed in politics under the Nazi regime. Between 1919 and 1933, 111 women were elected to the Reichstag as deputies; however, the National Socialists did not have one female Member of Parliament.[2] In fact, the *Nationalsozialistische Monatshefte*, one of the Nazi periodicals, stated:

> The National Socialist movement is an emphatically male phenomenon as far as the political struggle is concerned. It regards women in parliament as a depressing sign of liberalism…we believe that every genuine woman will in her innermost being, pay homage to the masculine principle of National Socialism; for only then will she reemerge as a whole woman.[3]

Clearly, the Nazi party represented chauvinist values that signaled men as the superior sex. In addition, "Aryan" women were encouraged to return to traditional roles, most important of which, was motherhood. Hitler explained in his Party Day speech of 1934 that "the man's world is the state, woman's the home and the two worlds complement each other; women ought not attempt to penetrate the world of men."[4] Several initiatives were taken to promote this idea, such as awards given to productive mothers and loans for women to start families. In German society there was a definite underlying theme that advocated the superiority of men. This premise affected all women regardless of religion, how-

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[2] Matthew Stibbe, *Women in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2003), 16.

[3] Ibid., 16

[4] Leila J. Rupp, "Mothers of the 'Volk': The Image of Women in Nazi Ideology," *Signs* 3:2 (Winter 1977), 362.

ever for Jewish women it was overpowering, as "Jewish women suffered both as Jews and women from anti-Semitism and sexism."[5]

In contrast to the non-Jewish female population, daily life for Jewish women was steadily diminished because, "between 1933-39…they saw their economic livelihoods imperilled and their social integration destroyed."[6] Just at the point the Nazis came to power, Jewish women were beginning to thrive in the workforce. Shortly into Hitler's reign, however, this prosperity for Jews ended, especially for Jewish women. In fact, the Nazis "scheduled an official boycott of Jewish businesses and professional establishments for April 1, 1933. On that day, storm troopers stood in front of Jewish stores, threatening and exhorting shoppers to 'buy German.'"[7] This, and other measures of the "April Laws" that were passed by the Nazis, as well as events like "Crystal Night," or "Night of Broken Glass" in November 1938, had a devastating impact on Jews and their role within society, as 91 Jews were murdered and 7,500 shops destroyed. Jewish working women were affected "because…fifty-three percent of Jewish women worked in business and commerce…they lost their jobs as family businesses and Jewish shops closed down."[8] As opposed to men, who were able to maintain or find replacement work as more opportunities were available to them, Jewish women had to be extremely versatile and resourceful in order to provide for their families. In fact, women "trained for new jobs and then retrained when they lost newly acquired jobs. One woman took a speed course in becoming a corsetiere. Although Jews could no longer be licensed by the

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[5] Joan Ringelheim, "Women of the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 374.

[6] Marian A. Kaplan, "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933-39," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 188.

[7] Ibid., 192.

[8] Ibid., 195

time she finished, she quickly developed private customers and supported herself."[9] Jewish women could not escape the injustices of Nazi society, and loss of job was not the only way in which this ideology manifested itself.

Jewish women suffered loss of self and participation in terms of the social aspects in which they could no longer be a part. Jewish women as mothers, housewives and storeowners were deeply involved in their communities through institutions, volunteering and organizations. Truly, their lives bridged the gap between family and community.[10] However, once the Nazis established the "April Laws", the Nuremberg Laws, and merely through their favouring of the "Aryan" race, the women were excluded by these institutions and groups. One woman recalls that she stopped going to her monthly gatherings with friends as she thought the non-Jewish members would respond awkwardly to her presence:

> Later one woman tried to convince me that they were all still my friends, so I decided to go to the next meeting…I couldn't sleep at all the night before the gathering. I was worried about my Christian friends, but I was also worried about myself…I knew I would observe them very carefully. I would notice even a shadow of their discomfort at my entry…But I didn't have to read their eyes or note a change in their tone. The empty table in the booth where we had always met spoke loudly and clearly.[11]

Jewish wives were also directly targeted in an outpouring of propaganda that demanded Christian husbands divorce them.[12]

[9] Marian. A. Kaplan, "Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women's Response to Daily Life in Nazi Germany, 1933-1939," *Women in the Holocaust*, D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 41.

[10] Ibid., 40

[11] Kaplan, *Different Voices*, 193.

[12] Ibid., 217.

In addition, Jewish mothers not only had to deal with their own humiliation among their social groups, but console their children who were getting the same treatment from friends and teachers at school. One mother reported:

> That her daughter cried, not because she couldn't go to the theatre [with her class]…she cried because she was ostracized from the group, as though she wasn't good enough for her classmates…I believe the Nazi teacher was ashamed of herself…because she phoned me several times and asked that I not send the child to school on the days when some thing enjoyable had been planned for the children.[13]

In general, Jewish women were the demographic that was most oppressed by the implementation of Nazi ideologies. While they adapted to new types of jobs outside the business or commercial realm within which the majority were familiar, they were also trying to provide for their children and families regarding these new social changes, familiarize themselves with their new role societal status, and find alternate means to keep their household expenses down and under control. In fact, Kaplan quotes the League of Jewish Women as it said, "it is the duty…of the Jewish woman to regulate the schedule and organization of the household so that everyone is satisfied…she has to adjust without being subordinate. This is more necessary than ever, given today's living arrangements."[14] Due to these factors regarding social and household life, it is obvious that Jewish women were affected by the Nazi regime in ways that were harsh and devastating, in ways that differed from both Jewish men and Christian women.

During this interim period, after the Nazis gained power and before the Holocaust, Jews had to deal with the "maelstrom

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[13] Ibid., 197.

[14] Ibid., 198.

that led to the Holocaust; impoverishment and ostracism for most; emigration for many; hiding for a handful; and ghettoization, forced labour and extermination for the rest."[15] Indeed, emigration was a top priority for many Jews. However, more men actually followed through with these plans to leave their country. Fewer Jewish women emigrated for various reasons – they had to take care of their children, they feared for their elderly parents who could not make the journey, and they truly believed Nazis would spare women and children of severe sentences, as "men faced more immediate physical danger than women and were forced to flee promptly."[16] Thus, Jewish women encouraged men to emigrate for safety. In fact, statistics from the Jewish Agency show that, between 1933 and 1942, 27,202 men immigrated to Palestine from Germany in comparison with 24,977 women.[17] As a result, more Jewish women and children were forced into ghettos when the Nazis, unfortunately, did not spare this demographic from serious harm as the women had hoped.

As well as the fact that fewer Jewish women emigrated, there existed a higher female population in Germany due to male losses in World War One; thus it is no surprise that more women were contained within ghettos and subsequently sent on to concentration camps. Even until that point however, daily life for women in the ghettos was incomparably worse than those conditions they struggled with as an immediate affect of the Nazi rise to power in German society. First and foremost, the ghettos offered horrible living situations as, in the Warsaw ghetto between October 28 and November 15 1940, thirty percent of Warsaw's population was herded into two percent of its land.[18] This type of overcrowding under any circumstances is bound to cause enormous

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[15] Ibid., 189.

[16] Kaplan, *Women in the Holocaust*, 49.

[17] Ibid., 50.

[18] Dalia Ofer, "Gender in Ghetto Diaries and Testimonies: The Case of Warsaw," *Women in the Holocaust*, D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 152.

difficulties; however, combined with the lack of food and money, ghetto life truly tested the human will to survive. The majority of Jewish women in the ghettos were single mothers and, because employment was mainly open to men, women had to find other means to provide for their family. Often women traded household belongings for food and other necessities or they smuggled items from the "Aryan" side back into the ghetto at an increasingly higher risk, as the punishment became death.[19] The journal entries from one young girl in the Lodz ghetto acts as a statement on how hard mothers worked for their families:

> March 11, 1942…I ate all the honey. I am selfish. What will the family say? I'm not worthy of my mother, who works so hard. Other than the hard work at the resort, she also works for a woman who sells underwear in the street. My mother looks awful, like a shadow. She works very hard. When I wake up at twelve or one o'clock at night she's sewing, and at six in the morning she's back on her feet. I have no heart, I have no pity. I eat anything that lands near me…March 14 1942…mother brought the bread ration from the resort. I don't know what she lives on. She works the hardest and eats the least.[20]

Indeed, Jewish mothers in the ghettos did have a great deal to balance between scrounging for money and food, and taking care of their families adequately, with much more peril than previous societal life. Caring for the children was a primary concern as both parents tended to be preoccupied with work or finding sustenance. There were actually reports of three and four year old children sneaking out of the ghetto in order to find food, which could

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[19] Ibid., 156.

[20] Michal Unger, "The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto," *Women in the Holocaust*, D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 134.

[21] Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, 162.

be a fatal mistake.[21] Ultimately though, no matter what precautions and securities women undertook to supply their families, they and their children were deported to the camps.

There existed a vicious cycle for Jewish women in ghettos which added to their vulnerability and increased their deportation rate. The first selected for deportations from the ghettos were those who were unemployed and those on welfare. Of course, significantly less job opportunities were open to women and single mothers, and therefore it follows that those being unemployed were the ones most reliant on welfare.[22] This being the case, it was inevitable that more women than men be sent to camps. In fact, in the Lodz ghettos between January and May 1942, sixty-two percent were women, and additionally, women who were between the ages of 20-40 were sent in numbers double that to men of the same age.[23] One specific event that reflects this sentiment is known as Black Tuesday. On July 16th, 1942, 9,853 women and children were taken on a transport to Auschwitz in comparison with 3,031 men.[24] The ghetto experience for Jewish women was distinctive from men who maintained work and were not as burdened with household chores, seeking food, and care of children.

In the camps, it is apparent that Jewish women were treated differently as well. Three main facets of Nazi ideology solely targeted women and were inflicted upon them in the camps – the enforcement of male-dominated authority, exploitation of women simply because of their biology and Nazi perception of same, and finally, putting an end to Jewish reproduction.

The idea of a patriarchal society resonated within the camps, both in the guards and, at times, even the male prisoners as well. Although in the camps prisoners were all meant to have the same fate, in some cases the Nazis tended to favour men over women, resulting in perhaps a better chance at survival for those prisoners. Men were generally given the leadership roles within

[22] Unger, *Women in the Holocaust*, 126.

[23] Ibid., 126.

[24] Weitzman and Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, 5.

the camp if one needed to be filled. In *Theresienstadt*, all twelve members of the *Judenrat* were men during the entire three and a

half years the camp existed.[25] In addition, in the labour camps and German factories, in which wages were paid to the prisoners, women got paid less than men at an average of 1.25 marks a day as opposed to 1.75 marks a day – even when performing the same duties.[26] These aspects of higher rank and pay may have provided men with a better chance of survival. However, while it can only be speculated on what authority and money can offer a prisoner, in most cases, women simply did not receive support in that way.

Although Jewish men were given the leadership roles among the prisoners, female SS guards did exist. In fact, "nearly every concentration camp had its women's section and small brigades of booted, uniformed women guards."[27] These guards had a profound effect on the women prisoners because it was so difficult to comprehend how a woman could inflict brutal punishments, let alone upon other women. Many believed that, "for a woman to become a guard required so major a departure from the normal values and experiences of women, perhaps the few who ended up on camp assignments were more apt to be depraved or deranged than the men."[28] Although female SS guards were less prominent than male guards, the women prisoners maintain specific memories of these guards being exceptionally atrocious. One survivor, Susan Cernyak-Spatz, recalls:

> "In my experience the matrons were cruel, more vicious (sadistically vicious) than any SS man. These women who,

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[25] Ruth Bondy, "Gendered Suffering?" *Women in the Holocaust*, D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 321.
[26] Unger, *Women in the Holocaust*, 133.
[27] Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the family and Nazi Politics* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 404.
[28] Ibid., 404.

> as I read later, ranged from baronesses and countesses to prostitutes were the most vicious. You rarely found SS men who played games with their dogs in which the point was for the dog to get the prisoners' derrieres, but the matrons did."[29]

It seems almost unimaginable for women guards to commit these horrific acts upon other females, however numerous testimonies by women prisoners affirm this cruelty. Jolana Roth confirms that "the ones you did see – they were worse than men. I will never forget the one who would stand at the peephole of the gas chamber just because she wanted to."[30] Roth remembers another guard, a "tall, blonde SS woman would stand in her knee breeches, hands on her hips, with a whip and laugh as people went into the gas… A sadism no one can explain."[31] The female guards were malicious in general, however, there are some particular SS women who stand out among others for their brutality.

Irma Griese was one guard who was notorious for her unexplainable and horrendous conduct towards her prisoners. One memoir offers insight into specific punishments Griese imposed on the women in Auschwitz. Leitner writes about an incident involving her sister Chicha:

> It is said Chicha appeals to [Irma Griese]. This manifests itself only in the fact that she always recognizes her and either tortures her more than the others or…(on one occasion) does not send her off to die…the girl resting on the ground was caught in the act by Griese. But Griese attributed the "crime" not to the girl, but to Chicha…she yanked Chicha out of the line to punish her…She made her kneel, lifted Chicha's arms high in the air, and placed two heavy rocks in her hands. She then ordered Chicha to hold

[29] Ibid., 404.
[30] Ibid., 405.
[31] Ibid., 426.

> her arms straight up for the duration of the [roll call]. "And no wavering of the arms! If you do, you die!"…endless hours passed. At last, Griese returned…she knew she had
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> been defeated…"put the rocks down," she said.[32]

It is impossible to understand why female guards felt it necessary to inflict such pain upon their women prisoners. It is clear that the women in the camps believed the female guards were often much worse, however it can be speculated that "women guards seemed more cruel because their behaviour deviated farther from our conceptions of 'feminine' models than men guards' behaviour departed from stereotypes about men."[33] Whatever the reasoning might be, the women under the guard of female SS had an unusual experience being treated in such manners by other women – their biological peers who, one would expect, understand the essence of femininity. Whether these SS guards were in fact harsher is hard to measure, but the impact they had on the women prisoners was obviously profound.

The second factor that separated women from men in the camps was the fact that the Nazis cared less about them than men because they could not benefit the Nazi scheme. Therefore, due to their biology, women were generally seen as weak and utterly useless. Thus, "[women] usually disappeared in fire and smoke."[34] In fact, women were deemed to be ineffective and worthless on a scale different than men. For instance, on a transport to Auschwitz, March 5, 1943, eighty-four percent of the

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[32] Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1978), 53.

[33] Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, 404.

[34] John K. Roth, "Equality, Neutrality, Particularity: Perspective on women in the Holocaust," *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 16.

[35]Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 395.

women and children were gassed right away.[35] For those who did remain in the camps, especially the female camps, women suffered a horrible standard of living. One camp commandant said that the "general living conditions in the women's camp were incomparably worse [than in the men's camp]. They were far more tightly packed-in and the sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior."[36] In fact, one survivor recalls that she and the other prisoners of the women's camp were not permitted to bathe for 67 days.[37] Women were continually exploited and abused in this way, all because the Nazis had even less use for Jewish women than Jewish men.[38] Lastly, although this did not happen too often due to "racial shame" felt on behalf of the Nazis, women prisoners were sexually assaulted in various ways. Actually, the guards "especially liked to put lesbians to work in the brothels. They thought it would shape them up."[39] As women were constantly living with the prospect of being treated in these especially degrading ways, this made their camp experience a different kind of hell than that of men.

The final aspect of Nazi ideology that was implemented against women in the camps was putting an end to Jewish regeneration. A quotation from Himmler sums up this Nazi dogma as he stated:

> "We came to a question: what about the women and children? I have decided to find a clear solution here too. In fact I did not regard myself as justified in exterminating the men – let us say killing them or having them killed – while

[36] Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 228.
[37] Ibid., 228.
[38] Ringelheim, *Different Voices*, 392.
[39] Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 21.
[40] Ringelheim, *Different Voices*, 392.

> letting avengers in the shape of the children…grow up. The difficult decision had to be taken to make this people disappear from the face of the earth."[40]

Of course, this affected women in several different ways and, thus, was probably one of the most hideous facets of camp life that women had to deal with. It is clear that the Nazi rationale behind killing was quite specific when it came to women, as they did not want Jewish women to produce more Jewish generations. It is true that "the mother/child relationship was one that the Nazis aimed to destroy; nothing about the Final Solution was more definite than that" and the Nazis ensured measures would be taken to enforce this.[41] One action that was taken is revealed by a survivor who was a young girl in Auschwitz: "Three weeks pass and I do not menstruate. Neither does anyone else. With amazement we all realize that menstruation has ceased in the camps… There is bromide in our food, we are told by old-timers. Bromide is supposed to sterilize women. The Germans are experimenting with mass sterilization."[42] In fact, "the Nazis invested considerable time and energy to find the most effective ways to sterilize them, but the 'final solution' for this 'problem' was death."[43] Thus, in each 1942 transport to Auschwitz, women of childbearing age, fifteen to forty-nine, were sent to the gas chambers at twice the rate of men the same ages.[44] By sterilizing and killing potential mothers, the Nazis were making certain the least possible amount of Jewish children, and future generations, were born.

However, many women were already pregnant upon arrival in the camps. For the women in the family camp of *Theresienstadt*, life was more secure than those in extermination camps.

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[41] Weitzman and Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, 8.

[42] Livia E. Bitton Jackson, "Coming of Age," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner an J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 80.

[43] Roth, *Experience and Expression*, 8.

[44] Ringelheim, *Different Voices*, 379.

[45] Weitzman and Ofer, *Women in the Holocaust*, 7.

They were allowed to give birth until July 1943 when a law passed that all pregnant women had to abort their babies. Any woman who disobeyed was sent on the next transport to Auschwitz.[45] Of the approximate 230 births that did take place there, only twenty-five of the children survived.[46] In contrast, pregnant women in extermination camps were inevitably condemned to death.

Gisella Perl is a survivor of Auschwitz and was a prisoner who worked in the hospital, as she was a doctor before the war. Her haunting memoir explains how pregnant women were actually treated and the torture they all endured under Dr. Mengele. Upon arrival in Auschwitz,

> SS chiefs would address the women, encouraging the pregnant ones to step forward, because they would be taken to another camp where living conditions were better…I happened to have an errand near the crematories and saw with my own eyes what was done to these women…They were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by their hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots. Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory – alive.[47]

This horrific event inspired Perl to take action.

> [I would] save the mothers, if there was no other way, than by destroying the life of their unborn children…I delivered women pregnant in the eighth, seventh, sixth, fifth month, always in a hurry, always with my five fingers, in the dark, under terrible conditions…First such delivery was a women called Yolanda…Yolanda's little boy was born…I

[46] Lawrence L. Langer, "Gender Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies," *Women in the Holocaust*, D. Ofer and L. Weitzman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 316.
[47] Gisella Perl, "A Doctor in Auschwitz," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 113.
[48] Ibid., 114.

> took the warm little body in my hands, kissed the smooth face, caressed the long hair – then strangled him and buried his body under a mountain of corpses waiting to be cremated.[48]

Perl was ecstatic when Dr. Mengele decided that pregnant women could, in fact, deliver their babies. This meant the women would no longer have to hide their pregnancy and thus, not give birth in the horrible conditions of the latrines where Perl was performing this procedure. However, Perl "had two hundred and ninety two expectant mothers in my ward when Dr. Mengele changed his mind. He came roaring into the hospital, whip and revolver in hand, and had all two hundred and ninety two women loaded on a single truck and tossed – alive – into the flames of the crematorium."[49] It was this type of unspeakable behaviour by the Nazis that Jewish women had to endure and bear witness to. Women being exposed to this first hand, had to somehow learn to cope with the brutality of losing friends, family and children in this manner.

Women responded and dealt with their emotions in different ways after losing their children. One thing they held in common was that the "tiny piercing screams of the babies, dragged from their cots in the middle of the night," reached into the very core of women, especially mothers, as they were the ones directly confronted with this horror.[50] The majority of women felt immense guilt for not being able to protect their children from what would happen to them. One survivor explains in her memoir how she felt responsible for both her mother and her son's death upon arrival in Auschwitz:

> Children and old people were told off automatically 'to the left.' At the moment of parting came those shrieks of

[49] Ibid., 115.

[50] Etty Hillesum, "A Letter from Westerbork," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 49.

> despair, those frantic cries, 'Mama, Mama!' That will ring forever in my ears … Our turn came. My mother, my sons and I stepped before the 'selectors.' Then I committed my… terrible error. He classed my younger son Thomas with the children and [the elderly] which was to mean immediate extermination. He hesitated before Arvad, my older son … 'This boy must be older than twelve'… 'no' I protested … I wanted to spare him from labours that might prove too arduous for him. 'Very well, to the left!'… I had persuaded my mother that she should follow the children and take care of them…How should I have known. I had spared them from hard work, but I had condemned Arvad and my mother to death in the gas chambers.[51]

Some mothers were forced to resort to an inhuman response in coping with the loss of their children. Later in Gisella Perl's memoir she speaks of a mother with an infant:

> The mother turned her back on it, wouldn't look at it, wouldn't hold it in her arms. Tears were streaming down her cheeks incessantly, terrible, silent tears, but she wouldn't speak to me. Finally I succeeded in making her tell what was on her mind. ' I dare not take my son in my arms, Doctor,' she said ' I dare not look at him, I dare not kiss him…I feel it, I know it, that somehow they are going t o take him away from me…' And she was right…a new order came, depriving Jewish mothers of the additional food, a thin, milky soup mixed with flour, which swelled their breasts and enabled them to feed their babies. For eight days [she] had to look on while her son starved slowly to his death.[52]

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[51] Olga Lenguel, "The Arrival," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 72.

[52] Perl, *Different Voices*, 116.

While Jewish women and mothers responded in various ways to their situations, one thing is definite: women, in comparison with men, endured camp life differently as theirs was not only the burden of their own survival, as a Jew and as a female, but also as the guardians of the children.

Jewish women, as seen before the war, were much more involved in their communities than men. This was repeated in a smaller and much different scale in the camps as well. Women provided support and council for other women in their surroundings, and this often helped them get through the camp struggles. One survivor, Charlotte Delbo, appreciates female sensitivity as her friend LuLu helped her through a crisis:

> LuLu has a good look around us and seeing there's no kapo nearby she takes my wrist, saying: "Get behind me, so they won't see you. You'll be able to have a good cry." … Dropping my tool upon the ground…I cry my eyes out… LuLu continues to work and stay on the lookout at the same time…LuLu suddenly pulls me: "that's enough now! Back to work." … She says it so kindly that I'm not ashamed of having cried. It's as though I had wept against my mother's breast.[53]

It is clear that women were open to each other about their fears and emotions, and thus were more able to receive help from others. One survivor, Rose, tells it best:

> We helped each other. We had to cling…you had to have somebody. We helped each other…women were 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…[During roll

[53] Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 102.

> call] the women holding each other and keeping each other warm…someone puts their arm around you and you remember…can you imagine how much it meant to us over there! Men were crouching into themselves – maybe five feet apart…as much as I saw in Auschwitz, the men were falling like flies. The woman was somehow stronger… woman friendship is different than man friendship you see…we have these motherly instincts, friend instincts more….men can be nice to each other, be nice to each other…but that's as far as it goes, you know? …They talked to each other but they didn't, wouldn't, sell their bread for an apple for the other guy. They wouldn't sacrifice nothing. See, that was the difference.[54]

Through the memories of survivors, it is clear that women and men responded in different ways and used different methods to cope with the circumstances that surrounded them. It cannot be said that one gender acted better or more appropriately, but it is interesting to speculate on their differences. Even if the action was small, it meant something to the women. This is often how women showed their resistance as well.

Resistance on the part of the prisoners within the camps was never able to defeat the Nazi powers, however it was these acts that gave something for the prisoners to work toward, and a reason to maintain hope. There are examples of both male and female acts of resistance in the camps. For women, resistance included anything that kept their spirits up within the confines they were held and the horrors they were faced with everyday – teaching, giving gifts, singing, writing, praying and daydreaming with each other, allowed women to sustain themselves, and focus on something worth surviving for. One woman created a cookbook while in the camp, as she felt sharing recipes with one another helped women bond and take their minds off their strife: "exhausted, cold and hungry they [the women in her barrack]

[54] Ringelheim, *Different Voices*, 380.

would talk endlessly about the food they longed for, about family meals they had shared and the dishes they would make if they survived to the end of the war…it seems as these stories…served as a talisman, sustaining their humanity and hope in a time of little hope."[55] Although seemingly meagre, these acts defied the Nazis in small ways, and the women, through bonding and helping each other were determined to stay alive.

In contrast, women performed some of the largest acts of resistance, as well. Women completed various tasks throughout the Holocaust that challenged the Nazi ideals and made a statement about the risks they were willing to take in order to survive. Women such as Zivia Lubetkin and Vladka Meed were resistance leaders in the Warsaw ghetto uprising. Franceska Mann shot an SS guard in the Auschwitz crematorium before she herself was murdered, and Mala Zimetbaum was the first female to escape Auschwitz. Even when she was caught and sentenced to hang, she took her own life in a final act of retaliation.[56] Probably the most famous act of resistance was the explosion of Crematorium IV in Auschwitz on October 7, 1944, by female inmates. Anna Heilman tells of her involvement in this scheme:

> We were about seven or eight girls no more. Out of this friendship evolved the idea of resistance…how about taking gunpowder? We started to talk about the idea. The gunpowder was within our reach. We thought 'We can use it!'…we smuggled the gunpowder from the factory to the camp…the fourth girl, who was executed, was the one who used to give it directly to the man who worked in the crematorium. I think we were involved in it for about eight months.[57]

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[55] Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 55.

[56] Anna Heilman and Rose Meth, "Resistance," *Different Voices*, ed. C. Rittner and J. Roth (Minnesota: Paragon House, 1991), 130.

[57] Ibid., 132.

The plan was enough of a success that the crematorium was damaged, but four of the women were caught and sentenced to death by hanging in the camp. One of the women was Heilman's sister. Many acts of resistance were not as powerful as this example, nor were they always what the prisoners hoped for or expected. Nonetheless, these women shared a common passion to fight the enemy in order to preserve what was most important to them – their lives and the lives of those they loved.

Leading up to and throughout the Holocaust, Jewish women were singled out due to their societal roles, their biology, the prospect of motherhood, and the perceptions Nazis held them in. Essentially, Jewish women suffered in a ways that were distinctive from men, simply because they held even less status in the Nazi vision of world domination. It was true that "to the Nazis, Jewish women were not simply Jews; they were Jewish women, and they were treated accordingly in the system of annihilation."[58] While the two genders faced unique struggles at the hands of the Nazis, women responded and reacted to these situations in different manners; whether it be through forming valuable friendships or resisting to the best of their ability. There was no better or more appropriate way to adapt or react in response to the events surrounding the Holocaust. They stand as testimony to illustrate a history that was exclusive to Jewish women and, it could be said, that many shine as tiny pinpoints of light in a very dark time.

[58] Ringelheim, *Women in the Holocaust*, 349.