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The Myriad Expressions of Solidarity Amongst Female Prisoners in the Concentration Camps

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Abstract

The Holocaust, which was the organized, state sponsored execution resulting in the annihilation of six million Jews stands as the touchstone of trauma in the global history. While the Nazi Germany was impartial in its treatment and execution plan towards the victims, an event as horrific as the Holocaust elicits different responses from both the genders. My paper aims to explore the manifestations of solidarity among female prisoners as well as females employed in vocations in the concentration camps during the Holocaust. Being always in double jeopardy, firstly as Jews and secondly as women, made their survival more arduous in the dehumanizing camp conditions. The women thus resorted to various survival strategies in order to keep up the struggle for

survival in the camps. My paper, which also forms a part of my ongoing research, thus intends to analyze the various ways in which the women prisoners sought solidarity and the stratagems they employed for their survival. Besides, it will also trace the role of *kashariyot*- the courier girls who formed a vital segment of the resistance against the Nazi-occupied Europe.

Keywords: Cookbooks, dehumanizing, gender, kashariyot, Ravensbrück, recipe, solidarity, survival.

Introduction

The years 1941-1945 imprint an extraordinary cataclysmic event in the European history. The term Holocaust has sources in the Greek interpretation of the Hebrew articulation *olah* as *holokauston*, signifying 'a burnt offering. The equivalent Hebrew word, *Shoah*, implies a complete destruction and alludes to the practically complete obliteration of Jews in Europe. Thus the term Holocaust is presently utilized as a proper noun to depict the particular outrage of the Nazi system. Considering Holocaust as a 'problematic' term, Dominick La Capra legitimizes its utilization firstly by expressing it as a superior semantic decision than the Nazi label and secondly because of the moral and spiritual ground that it holds for the people in question. La Capra sees the Holocaust as neither novel nor practically identical. He legitimizes his attestations of uniqueness and similarity in hazardous manners that differ with one's subject positions

and decisions concerning the necessities of a circumstance or setting.

Post liberation, the second half of the twentieth century saw an upsurge in the Holocaust narratives mostly written by male survivors such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* (1947), Eliezer Wiesel's *Night* (1960), Władisław Szpilman's *The Pianist: The Story of One Man's Survival in Warsaw, 1939-45* (1946) and Mikłos Nyiszli's *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account* (1946). Such narratives alongside many others with their attention on the male perspective and their horrendous encounters remained the standards of Holocaust accounts. While sufficient research had been directed on what was basically the male experience during the Holocaust, there had not yet been a source for the investigation of the other gender.

While a significant advancement with respect to the female voice in Holocaust Studies came a couple of years later (during 1980s), however the rumblings of progress were felt much previously. One of the first recorded work apportioning the encounters of women in the inhumane imprisonments was *Ravensbrück: An eyewitness account of a women's concentration camp* written by Germaine Tillion published in 1973. Opposing the Nazi control of France, Germaine Tillion turned into a functioning member of the French Resistance. Following her capture in 1943, Germaine alongside her mom Émilie Tillion was transported to Ravensbrück. Being an idealistic and confident lady, Germaine never lost expectation and used to engage her kindred prisoners of the inhumane imprisonment, which in a way added and aided to her

endurance. Within days of her stay in Ravensbrück, Germaine Tillion got acquainted with the idea of the death camp. As a getaway from the savage system of the camp and all the while additionally as a support methodology, she furtively started composing operetta. The backdrop of the operetta, a three-demonstration work named "Le Verfügar aux Enfers" (The Camp worker goes to Hell), was the camp encounters. Kept with Tillion for around sixty years, the operetta was first acted in Théâtre du Châtelet (Paris) in 2007 for her hundredth birthday celebration. Tillion passed away a year later in 2008.

In her story, Tillion portrays not only her own battles in Ravensbrück, but also portrays the encounters and battles of her kindred detainees. Calling it a place of slow annihilation, Germaine believes that the possibility of endurance was legitimately related to the connections shaped inside the camps. Such was the dread of the camp system that in any event, for the recently deported inmates, who would be prepared eventually to become one of the SS (corps of the Nazi Party) guards that the typical orientation period to get accustomed was either a week or up to fourteen days or maximum a month. Thus, all through her stay in the camp Tillion strived to keep the string of solidarity alive through her performances.

A two day conference on "Women Surviving: The Holocaust" held at Stern College on March 28, 1983, denoted the primary significant advance towards women's activist grant on the Holocaust. This is the principal conference that took up the gender issue and has been the just one till present. Aside from the convener of the meeting and the moderators, the

gathering incorporated a few female survivors of the Holocaust. The convener Dr. Joan Miriam Ringelheim is the present Director of the Department of Oral History, Research Institute of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). Being the primary meeting concerned about the thematics of gender in the Holocaust, it featured the need of focusing on the exploration on the female experiences of the Holocaust. Parallel to this, the conference dates additionally corresponded with the publication of *Women in Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses* by Vera Laska on 29th March 1983. Vera Laska, a political captive and a Holocaust survivor, portrayed her sufferings and encounters in the Nazi camps. Considering herself a 'gatherer of memories', she likewise expounded on the encounters of thirty other female survivors, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In her assortment of memoirs, she likewise talked about their resistance during their stay in the different inhumane imprisonments. Despite the fact that it came up short on the notoriety appreciated by the male stories, still the conference and the account of Vera Laska were reassuring turns in the female scholarship of the Holocaust. The coming year, 1984, saw the parallel distributions of "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust" by Joan Miriam Ringelheim and "When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany", edited by Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan, little girls of German-Jewish ladies survivors. Ringelheim's paper centers around the traumatic shock that dominated the delicate physiology of the female body. The latter is a compilation of essays that uncovered issues of women experiences under the fascist Nazi

regime. Accepting gender as an investigative category, the articles likewise analyze the situation of women in "double jeopardy", their exploitation both as females and furthermore as Jews.

This was additionally surveyed in *Different Voices; Women and The Holocaust* edited by Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, distributed in 1993. The everyday struggles of the Jewish women, the permeation of the thought of prejudice and the individual level reactions of different women under the Nazi regime are the multitude subjects investigated.

However it was with the publication of *Women in the Holocaust* in 1998, composed by Leonore Weizmann and edited by Dalia Ofer that opened the necessary window for scholarship on women. Among a few books expounded on the evildoings of the inhumane imprisonments, the encounters and endurance techniques of the Holocaust survivors, this was the principal book in which gendered encounters were accounted sequentially and the gender based methodology was restricted to Jewish women as it were. Discussing the prewar function of ladies, she expresses that before the Holocaust, when ladies were basically liable for their youngsters, families and homes, and men for their family's monetary help. These jobs gave the two genders various spheres of information, abilities and beneficial encounters with which to tackle the Nazi on-slaughter. Myrna Goldenberg's *Experience and Expression; Women the Nazis and the Holocaust* in 2003 alongside *Different Horrors Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* published in 2013 and edited by Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H Shapiro were empowering

turns towards the feminist scholarship of the Holocaust. Affirming the significance of gender in the investigation of Holocaust, Goldenberg states

*The Holocaust, like every genocide, was enmeshed
with everyday life, and study of women and gender is
essential in order to fully grasp this terrifying fact (24).*

Another critical contribution was made in 2015 with *If This is a Woman. Inside Ravensbrück: Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* by Sarah Helm. Sarah Helm, a British columnist, composed the book under two separate titles, *Ravensbrück: Life and Death in Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women* and *If This is a Woman: Inside Hitler's Concentration Camp for Women*. The latter is allusive of Primo Levi's *If This is a Man: Survival in Auschwitz*. Nonetheless, while Levi's memoir is about his individual experiences in Auschwitz, Sarah Helm's book is an assortment of first person accounts of the women prisoners of Ravensbrück. In the pioneering and moving account, Sarah Helm not just depicts the encounters and sufferings of the individual detainees, yet in addition portrays her passionate expedition of the inhumane imprisonments. Two contemporary works adding to the on-going scholarship of women and the Holocaust are Zoe Waxman's *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* published in 2017 and Agnes Grunwald-Spier's, *Womens' Experiences in The Holocaust In Their Own Words*, published in January 2019. While the former is a sequential record of the key components that happened in the scholarship of women and the Holocaust, for instance, conferences, workshops and articles expounded on women encounters and sufferings, the latter spotlights especially on

the Jewish opposition as the field where ladies accepted positions of authority that were equivalent to those of men. In a few ghettos, including the Warsaw ghetto, ladies like Zivia Lubetkin were among the focal heads of the uprising. Zivia Lubetkin was one of the three commandants of the Warsaw ghetto revolt, and generally perceived as an astounding motivation for their noteworthy stand for Jewish honor. Further, the formation of various Holocaust Museums in order to document the names of the victims further aided towards a proper gendered historiography of the Holocaust.

Women and Solidarity: Emanation and Manifestations

In the Nazi Germany, when the first anti-Jewish laws were passed, and Jews were terminated from their positions and vocations; Jewish men were affected the most. Men who had spent their entire lives working were abruptly terminated and cut off from their work, their associates, and their everyday schedules. Since they were forced to be inactive and were no longer ready to accommodate their families, they felt mortified by their loss of pay, their loss of status and their loss of confidence. This resulted in the pace of male suicides being expanded drastically during this period. For Jewish women, conversely, the early long stretches of the Nazi regime had the contrary impact: it brought them more work and greater obligation as they attempted to deal with their family units with less cash and no assistance. They had to search for food in menacing stores, help their scared young ones adapt to badgering at school and give solace and comfort to their spouses.

The deportations to the concentration camps started soon after the same were established in different parts of Europe. The Dachau concentration camp was the first to be established in March 1933, initially established for political prisoners. The other major extermination campsites included; included Auschwitz (Auschwitz I, Auschwitz II or Birkenau, Auschwitz III or Monowitz), Belzec, Chelmo, Majdanek, Sobibor and Treblinka. The perpetrators utilized these locales for a host of purposes, including constrained work, confinement of individuals thought to be foes of the state, and for mass homicide. When the deportations to the concentration camps started, the different treatment towards both the genders was seen as soon as they stepped down from the cattle cars on the selection ramp. Men who deemed fit to work were largely sent to the labor camps, whereas women with children, pregnant ladies and elderly were sent to the gas chambers straight away. The trauma of women thus started the moment they landed on the selection ramp. The sagacity of gendered research can be further accounted by the ways in which the prisoners of both the genders were dealt with during their stay in the concentration camps.

Those women who were chosen for work instead of being sent to the gas chambers were first compelled to disrobe and stand stripped before German male guards, while they were shaved all over and afterward inked with numbers. Women survivors depict this routine as horrendous, demeaning, embarrassing and mortifying. Many wailed from the attack and disgrace, which was frequently reinforced by seeing one's own parent or sibling being exposed to similar callousness — while one had to remain by defenselessly. While Jewish men

depicted the humiliating cycle of being deprived of their identities, they were not as emotionally distressed as the women. The female prisoners were treated as commodities within the camps for exchange of an extra food item and other privileges and were often forced to have intercourse with the SS officers. In order to create work incentives camp brothels were set up in ten concentration camps between 1942-45, intended to encourage male prisoners to work. The first one was established at Mauthausen and the remaining ones were established at Gusen, Flossenburg, Buchenwald, Auschwitz, Mittelbau, Dachau, Neuengamme and Sachsenhausen. At Dachau, the brothel room had slits in the door, which served as peepholes in order to ensure the sexual act was taking place appropriately. Having just a bit of flat bread and some earthy colored watery substance that supplanted the proper 'kosher' supper, the women developed amenorrhea, which they confused with sterility. Consistently after supper their private parts were searched to check if they were concealing a piece of vegetable or a utensil that may be useful to them in any capacity. Twin girls served as guinea pigs for Dr. Mengele's investigations in the inhumane imprisonments. The ones who passed it endured, while the others were quickly gassed.

While men could steal food from the larder and needed to take care of just themselves, this task turned out to be more unwieldy for the women as they had their foster families to take care of. The solidarity among the female prisoners sharing the same barracks was esteemed substantially more than that with blood relations. Whenever found stealing, the penalty for men was whipping, while for women was twofold,

as it included raping after enduring the whipping torment. These additional factors ascribed to the consumption of self so much that the women quit feeling mortified, as they never again were 'human'. They filled in as perfect representations of one another, all malnourished and without disgrace.

The women, who were arrived at the concentration camps in their initial phases of pregnancy and could no longer hide it later, were sentenced to death right away. Few of them, who could conceal it, were aided by other inmates or by women doctors in the delivery of their baby. One such example that deserves mention is of Gisella Perl, who was employed as a gynecologist in the Auschwitz concentration camp. Whenever Dr. Perl would learn of a pregnant prisoner, she would disclose to the hopeful moms the future circumstance—if the SS realized she was pregnant her life as well as that of her unborn child would be over. Hence Dr. Perl would perform premature births and end pregnancies usually in the night with her bare hands and with no surgical instruments, sedation, wraps or anti-infection agents. Seldom, a women would get to the last phases of her pregnancy, unnoticed by the SS and at times, without knowing it herself. Dr. Perl would silently perform the births, on the grimy floors and bunks of the sleeping shelter and whenever possible, would exterminate the babies to spare the lives of their mothers. Thus, even though working under the supervision of Dr. Mengele, Dr. Perl maintained the bio ethics of her medical profession through her acts of solidarity.

The importance of food in the Jewish community is multifold. Talking about the significance of food, Claudia Roden in her book, *The Book of Jewish Food* states:

Dishes are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, a symbol of continuity. They are that part of an immigrant culture, which survives the longest, kept up even when clothing, music, language, and religious observance have been abandoned (11).

For Jewish women, food arrangement and preparation has consistently assumed an essential function in their customary life. From being the primary ones engaged in the food preparation, and being the sole bread winners for the family in the war times to being the caretakers of the foster families in the concentration camps, women always had the responsibility of dividing the small quota of food among many to ensure that everyone had their fill. Concentration camps- a place where the women had nothing in common as they came from various nations, communicated in various dialects, and were at various degrees of strict recognition, food planning and preparation was a common zone that permitted them to fashion solidarity. This thread of solidarity bound them together in a unique way that additionally fortified their craving to endure. Recollections of home gave them the expectation that they would see their loved ones and their friends and family once more, and gave a feeling of commonality in the midst of the savagery they had to persevere.

One of the cookbooks made by women in the death camps that deserves a special mention is the one housed at the Sydney Jewish Museum in Darlinghurst. Placed along with the other Holocaust items, this cookbook, commonly known as the Ravensbrück Cookbook, was assembled in 1945 by a Hungarian Jew named Edith Peer while she was a prisoner at the Ravensbrück death camp in northern Germany. Scarcely

out of youth, Peer did not even know how to scramble an egg. She would sit with the women and hear them out as they talked about myriad recipes. In Edith's psyche these occasions became cooking exercises and she was resolved to gather their recipe ideas as she proposed to endure. Peer was given a work task in an office and so she had the option to take paper and pencils for the women to use them in recording the family dishes and recipes for special events and occasions.

Such cookbooks composed by women buried in death camps during the Holocaust are amazing articulations about how memory, food and endurance are coordinated in Jewish culture. While going through an encounter that is incomprehensibly terrible, these women swore by what made up a portion of their most significant recollections of typical life and home. Thus, in an urgent need of an adapting stratagem, the women in the concentration camps depended on recollections of home and hearth and the formation and recipes of suppers, which gave them the required sustenance for survival and also assisted them in staying confident.

During their stay in the different concentration/death camps, women additionally assumed vital roles in different types of opposition in the ghettos, such as building up unlawful schools, mystery libraries and also indulged in underground social functions, and frequently initiated underground endeavors to rescue their brethren Jews. Even minor trifling acts like composing journals, keeping themselves clean, stealing an extra morsel and talking about recipes were viewed as validations of opposition. One intriguing group of women in the Jewish resistance was the 'underground

couriers' who worked outside of the ghettos. The account of the female couriers of Nazi-occupied Europe is an account of resistance that has generally stayed in the shadows and has often been eclipsed by the narratives of armed resistance in the ghettos of Europe. However it is an account of overwhelming dauntlessness displayed by a group of Jewish young women aged fifteen to mid-twenties. Known as *kashariyot*, the young ladies voyaged illegally, masked as non-Jews. These young ladies conquered every threat and became the connecting links between the Jewish communities throughout the war-scarred Europe. Camouflaged as non-Jews, they moved reports, papers, cash and eventually ammunition and weaponries across fringes and into ghettos.

The *kashariyots* were additionally the first to sneak firearms, explosives, ammunitions and different weaponries into a large number of the ghettos. These young girls who took a chance with their lives to move from ghetto to ghetto likewise filled an exceptionally human need – they motivated and brought trust, alongside data, to Jews who might somehow have been cut off from the whole world, as though to promise them that they had not been overlooked. Every ghetto was distinctive in its inner arrangements and administration just as in its outside isolation: some were inexactly monitored while others were airtight fixed; high dividers encased some while others were encircled by wall. Nonetheless, every ghetto was segregated and cut off from its general surroundings. Travel via train was precluded for Jews. Mail was controlled. Radios were prohibited. This was all essential for the German arrangement. Fixed inside their ghettos, Jewish ideological groups, youth developments and different associations in various urban

communities could at this point don't keep up their contacts. There was no real way to comprehend what was going on the opposite side of the ghetto door.

The Jews expected to discover some approach to arrive at the rest of the world and speak with one another. Out of this need, the dispatch framework was conceived. Youth developments were the first to send their individuals across outskirts to arrive at different ghettos. In any case, it turned out to be progressively hazardous for Jews to be found outside their ghettos – the Germans, at an early stage, started to force capital punishment on anybody so found. At this stage, the Jews caught in their ghettos started increasingly more to depend on ladies as *kashariyot*. This happened for several purposes. Above all, a Jewish man could undoubtedly be recognized accordingly – he had distinctly to be requested to drop his jeans and the indication of his circumcision would part with him. Moreover, the Jewish men who were all over town on the roads garnered doubt due to their physical appearance. It was a lot simpler for women to walk the roads, apparently joyful, while in transit to a get-together with companions, or for shopping. Women were likewise bound to communicate in the colloquial language; for example, unlike the Jewish men, the women had been mostly taught in Polish common schools and could thus communicate in Polish fluidly, without a Jewish emphasis that could part with them, and felt more comfortable on the Polish roads. An extra motivation behind employing the young girls as *kashariyot* was their instinct. This instinct helped them to detect when somebody on the road was gazing at them excessively long,

when somebody could be trusted, when a contact was really a Nazi teammate, and when to come and go.

When the Germans started to annihilate the Jews, nonetheless, the job of the *kashariyot* changed. The Einsatzgruppen (the portable slaughtering units) dispatched the annihilation strategy. In the fall of 1941, the Germans had chosen the infamous "Final Solution" for the Jews. The Jews however didn't yet perceive that the Germans' aim was to devastate the whole Jewish country. Here the key job was played by the *kashariyot*, who spread the word about the murdering units and the shooting activities. It was the data spread by the *kashariyot* that empowered Jewish pioneers in far-flung places and in various networks to put the bits of the riddle together and to understand that the German arrangement was not only to slaughter Jews in specific areas, but also to murder all the European Jewry. The *kashariyot* thus put their lives in danger in playing out their missions. They had almost nothing to depend on, other than illegal papers and their looks – which meant facial highlights that didn't part with them as Jews. A fragment of the messengers dyed their hair blonde; whereas others masked their facial features in the guise of cosmetics. Besides this, they all needed to have dauntless courage and a steady determination to get them through checkpoints, over fringes, into and out of ghettos, and around Europe with illicit reports, weapons and other stash – all in all, to face the challenges they took each day. It would be putting it mildly to state that the missions of these girls were loaded with consistent threat. Needless to say, a large number of the *kashariyot* lost their lives with attempting to satisfy their tasks. Thus, in lieu of the actual families, blood relations and

homemade food, the women prisoners engaged in solidarity acts such as making foster families, sharing recipes, writing cookbooks, caring for each other and being a part of the resistance groups, which in turn aided in their survival.

Conclusion

As the scholarship of the Holocaust generally disregarded the qualifications of gender, the cataclysmic event was usually viewed as a homogenous one, which influenced the Jewish populace the same, regardless of the gender orientation. Further, the standpoint of the Holocaust trauma only comprised of the sufferings, encounters and horrible recollections of the male gender. Thus, the feminist scholarship of the Holocaust began in the last decade of the 20th century, as there felt a necessity to record the anguishes and combats of the female gender independently. The debates surrounding the need to study and research the female gender separately under the broad spectrum of Holocaust Studies is an ongoing research and has faced some daunting oppositions. Noticeable figures, for instance, Hannah Arendt, Cynthia Ozick, and Helen Fagin, stand by the idea that this specific subject, of genocide on a scale that is almost immense, appears to make such investigations as the feminine one quite unimportant. They feel that centering on a specific gender takes the Holocaust off its primary value of abomination and obliteration. However, this evoked a firm response from Janet Jacobs, who in her ongoing work, *Memorializing the Holocaust* (2010) stated that while gender may not characterize the Holocaust, nonetheless it is not an unimportant issue by the same token.

While women's experiences during the Holocaust were not completely unique in relation to those of men, it would likewise be misdirecting to affirm that they were indistinguishable. There happen numerous occasions wherein a person's tribulation was molded by the individual gender and it is simply by understanding what was exclusive to women and men that a total record of what happened can be given. To declare that women and men had unlike experiences during the Holocaust isn't to state that the enduring of one faction supplanted that of the other. Focusing on a specific faction aids in viewing individual people instead of an aggregate overwhelming figure of six million. In their recent ongoing volume, *Different Horrors/Same Hell: Gender and Holocaust* (2013), Myrna Goldenberg further expands the subject as she expresses that gender and sexuality create vital fragments of knowledge that may seem trivial or inconsequential at first. It was the contribution of the female gender, which made Emmanuel Ringelblum acknowledge and state the following in his work, *Notes From The Warsaw Ghetto*, something that still holds value.

The historian of the future will have to devote a fitting chapter to the role of the Jewish woman in the war (380).

Thus, focusing on gender in Holocaust Studies reveals an insight into the more obscure side and is useful in providing an extension of information on the chronicled events such as the Holocaust. Using gender as a framework for assessment is fundamentally to end up being more careful to the expected results of one of the huge center point of all social

relationships—alongside age, class, race and religion. It should be seen as an analytical approach to achieve the most comprehensive understanding possible. The capacity to change, adapt endure and proceed not only makes women the real champions but also illuminates a dull/gray zone of the Holocaust that ought to be examined further.

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