Disproving Myths Surrounding Sisterhood in Nazi Concentration Camps

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Honors Thesis

In the early 1990s, Ruth Kluger, a survivor of the Theresienstadt and Auschwitz concentration and death camps, published her memoir. By that time, many women had begun sharing their stories of survival, but Ruth Kluger broke the mold. Instead of an inspirational work which was based on recollections that were almost half-a-century old, Kluger recounted the specifics of what she had experienced when trying to survive. Only the challenge was not just the struggle of a single individual, it was the struggle of generations of Jews wanting to be heard, and willing to share the challenges that they had faced while attempting to survive. Kluger's memoir contributed to questioning notions of sisterhood within the Holocaust. As such, her memoir broke several traditional interpretations of the tragedy. Including a move from a male-driven narrative and questioning constructions of the female "special bond" that early feminist scholars argued existed in the Nazi camps. This thesis proposes to continue on the path of gender scholarship of the Holocaust by examining sisterhood within the concentration camp setting.

Using three memoirs by Ruth Kluger, Hanna Levy-Hass, and Olga Lengyel I intend to show that women did not form "sisterhoods" within concentration and death camps willingly, but rather as a necessity to survival. In the 1980's, early feminists emphasized the notion of "sisterhood" as a way to set female-authored memoirs apart from male-authored memoirs. As a result, much of the female Holocaust experience was glossed over or ignored; therefore, a careful reexamination must be made in order to understand the full extent of suffering that Jewish women faced.

To situate better this thesis' contribution, a brief historiographical review immediately follows as a way to explain the importance of gender studies to our understanding of Holocaust victims. It will allow me to better situate the multi-layered tragedy which Jewish women

experienced. Following this, I intend to show that some of the ideals of "sisterhood" that early feminists emphasized when discussing female-authored testimonies were not the result of good intentions, but of a cognizant effort to gloss over the struggles women faced. To these early scholars, it seemed more important to extract a moral message which offered some meaning to the meaningless suffering. I then turn to three examples from scholars who have shown the need to qualify such notions of sisterhood before surveying three memoirs that will illustrate my point. I conclude with a look at an unpublished memoir as a test case, as well as a brief consideration of Primo Levi's, *Survival in Auschwitz* in order to introduce the notion of a brotherhood and show that a reexamination of established memoirs is necessary.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

In early studies of the Holocaust, scholars combined the testimonies of men and women who suffered from the tragedy into a single experience. It was not until the 1970's that scholars realized the extent to which gender differences offered different perceptions of suffering. Prior to that time, men were the primary writers of Holocaust history, whether as survivors or as historians. Male scholars often ignored the fact that women faced gendered humiliation that their male contemporaries did not. Due to the silence of female Holocaust survivors immediately following the end of the Shoah, the field of Holocaust studies remained a male dominated field until the 1980's. Consequently, this resulted in suppressed female memories even though women were encouraged to share their experiences. Thus, the memories of male survivors continue to be more prevalent today. It was not until the 1980's that early feminists constructed the notion of sisterhood within concentration camps. However, after careful examination of three female

memoirs, this notion proves to be a cognizant effort to emphasize certain ideals and set women's memoirs apart from their male contemporaries.

When the Third Reich came to power, Jewish women were stuck living in a society that primarily valued women for their ability to produce children in order to help expand the German population. As such, Jewish women had to deal with the consequences of being both Jewish and female in a society where antisemitism became law. As Myra Goldenberg notes, female victims of the Holocaust were:

> (…) double victims- in a misogynistic, racist, totalitarian society. (…) Men and women survivors both describe gratuitous and deliberate violence by Kapos and SS. However, women's memoirs also share strikingly similar characteristics with each other that differ from men's memoirs and that stem from their experiences as women and as Jews- thus as double victims- in a misogynistic, racist totalitarian society.[1]

In other words, the Third Reich and Nazi officials valued "Aryan" women who were able to produce children and expand the German population. As such, Nazi officials found it necessary to persecute Jewish women because they had the potential to add to the Jewish population, which went against Nazi ideals.

Furthermore, Carol Rittner and John Roth go on to explain: "Because women are the ones who bear children, they are put uniquely at risk as members of a group targeted as racially inferior."[2] The Third Reich did not want the Jewish population to expand because they wanted to put an end the thriving Jewish culture within Eastern Europe. They believed that one of the most effective ways to ensure that the Jewish population would not grow any larger was to cut off the source. In other words, German Jewish women were singled out and persecuted due to their

[1] Myrna Goldenberg, *Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives*. (Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, 1996), 78.

[2] Carol Rittner and John Roth, eds. *Women and the Holocaust: Different Voices* (New York, NY, Paragon House, 1993), 3.

ability to perpetuate German Judaism. This reproductive dimension had special consequences once the Holocaust began in 1941 and women were transported to concentration and death camps.

One of the first societal changes that Jewish women had to face after the Nazi regime came to power was the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws. Almost all Jewish men lost their jobs; therefore, Jewish women were forced to produce not only a sufficient food source for their families, but also a stable, safe home space which was meant to give an air of normalcy. Marion Kaplan writes, "Women took on the increased burdens of daily survival, from living in tighter quarters, to preparing ersatz foods, to providing sociability and diversion. Housewives and mothers strove to preserve a sense of "normalcy" in the midst of desperation—while learning to cope with less and to expect even worse."[3] Because it was extremely unsafe for men to leave the home because of antisemitic legislation and frequent round ups, women were forced to find and prepare food. They were forced to interact with officials on behalf of their families, and they were more often than not in charge of finding new places for their families to live. Before Jewish women were ever sent to concentration or death camps they were placed in tough positions which they had never experienced before, yet their experiences before the Holocaust started are rarely discussed in depth.

Once Jewish women had been rounded up and were sent to concentration or death camps, sexual humiliation, which was common for female prisoners, started immediately. Joan Ringleheim explains, "Almost every woman referred to the humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding her entrance to the camp (for my interviewees, this was Auschwitz): being nude:

[3] Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York, NY, Oxford University Press,1998), 236.

being shaved all over—for some being shaved in a sexual stance, straddling two stools: being observed by men, both fellow prisoners and SS guards."[4] Entering the concentration or death camps and being forced to remove their clothing was a way to humiliate Jewish women and a way to immediately assert that they, as Jews, were unworthy of having unique identities. The shaving of female hair was a way to remove feminine identity. All prisoners would have had their hair removed; however, more often than not, hair has a greater significance for women. The way in which females entered camps was a systematic method for the Nazis to assert their power and control; it illustrates that the Jewish people were also pawns in the Germans' twisted plan to exterminate as many Jews as possible. Most women discuss these experiences in their memoirs or oral testimonies; by contrast, men do not discuss it, as they did not have the same experiences. This is clear right from 1933. Yet, early feminist scholars did not focus on this aspect of the female experience because it did not fit into the specific mold that they intended to craft, a distinct example of their effort to gloss over examples of women's suffering.

As the "final solution" evolved in the context of the lengthening war, Nazi officials decided not to immediately kill all females who were taken to concentration and death camps. Instead, young, able-bodied women were used as manual labor to help the war effort. Women, like men, were underfed and very often worked to death. However, women once more faced the threat of being double victims because if they were discovered to be pregnant they were killed. Not only were pregnant women killed, but mothers who arrived at the camps with young children were generally selected and sent to die at the same time as their children. Nazi officials realized that women were not effective workers after their children had been taken away from

[4] Joan Ringelheim, *Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research*. Communities of Women (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 744.

them. As such, women were uniquely affected due to the joint fate they often shared with their children. Whereas, men were generally affected less as they were not grouped together with the children.

It is important to consider the percentage of women who were killed in the death camps and concentration camps. Joan Ringelheim writes that "Women and children made up 60 to 70 percent of those gassed in the initial selections. Based on deportation and death figures as well as the numbers of Jews in DP camps at the end of the war, it appears more Jewish women were deported and killed than Jewish men."[5] Many women had been killed immediately upon entrance into the camps because they were a risk to Nazi ideology by potentially perpetuating the "Jewish" race. Therefore, fewer female survivors were able to testify and share their unique stories at the end of the war. The sheer number of women who were killed during the Holocaust is an indicator as to why early feminist scholars believed it was important to craft a specific version of the female Holocaust experience through women's memoirs. They believed that it was more important to gain attention for female-authored texts and certain aspects of women's unique gendered experiences rather than losing momentum by pushing to acknowledge all that women suffered.

Due to the lack of female response following the Holocaust, women's unique experiences have not been discussed or documented as well as they should have been. As Ringleheim notes,

> At the very least, we must acknowledge the special abuse of women in sexual and parental roles, in gender-defined conditions and roles within the ghettos, in resistance groups, and in the camps. We need to define women's values and show how they helped shape their experiences.[6]

[5] Joan Ringelheim, *Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research*. Communities of Women (Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 745.
[6] Ringelheim, 747.

Joan Ringleheim notes that it is important for historians to evaluate and define the prominent role that gender played in women's Holocaust experiences. In order to honor and commemorate the women who perished in the Holocaust, it is important to illustrate their stories and their experiences. Ringleheim thus believes that it is essential to understand the prominent role that gender played in different situations, not just in the concentration camp and death camp experience. Ringelheim echoes the pioneering work of Joan Wallach Scott who argued in the 1980s that gender is a useful category of historical analysis.[7] Ringelheim and other prominent scholars have shown how gender was an important factor in everyday life throughout Nazi Germany.

As noted above, women often had to face the threat of sexual violence in addition to that of extermination. Many women were raped during the Holocaust; however, it is a topic that is not often discussed due to the guilt and shame associated with the crime. As Ofer and Weitzman explain,

> "Others feel that discussions of sexuality desecrate the memory of the dead or the living or the Holocaust itself. While these positions are understandable, the fact remains that v ictimizations of Jewish men during the Holocaust did not usually include their sexual exploitation."[8]

It appears that early feminist scholars posited that discussing the issue of rape in the Holocaust distracted from the memory of the victims and the survivors. In fact, this is an important discussion, for it further sets apart the male and female experience.

An open discussion about rape during the Holocaust shows that women should not feel shame or guilt over the situation. Very rarely did men have to worry about being sexually

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[7] Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, NY, Columbia University Press, 1988), chapter 1.
[8] Salia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press. 1998), 345.

assaulted. Women constantly had to fear rape. Not only was there psychological harm to consider, but if the rape resulted in pregnancy, as previously noted, the victim would have to worry about having a forced abortion or being sent to the gas chamber. Rape was another element that scholars did not discuss until the 1980's when the first significant break in women's silence occurred. Yet the fear of rape was a topic that many female memoirs touch upon, which is why a corrective continues to be necessary.

The hidden female experience first came to light when scholars began to argue against a cohesive male and female Holocaust experience. Up until the late 1970's, scholars often believed that it was more important to argue for a cohesive experience rather than to accept a large collection of individual experiences. Raul Hilberg, a pioneer scholar of the Holocaust, was influential in contradicting and disproving the idea that the Holocaust should only be talked about in terms of a cohesive experience. Hilberg writes that "The road to annihilation was marked by events that specifically affected men as men and women as women. Thus, women's memoirs reveal "different horrors" of the "same Hell."[9] As mentioned throughout, there were significant differences that scholars of female Holocaust studies had noticed and decided they needed to be studied and expanded upon. Until Hilberg spoke out against a cohesive male and female experience, many of his colleagues did not believe that separate experiences should be discussed or expanded upon, fearing that a large collection of experiences could fuel those who questioned the Holocaust. Hilberg's prominence within his field helped to move gendered Holocaust scholarship along, and it is this facet of the victim's experience which is now considered more closely.

[9] Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, and Bystanders* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 83.

TRAGEDY AS HOPE: EMPHASIZING THE MORAL MESSAGE

Although gendered Holocaust studies have begun to get more attention over the last three decades, for the most part the experiences of male Holocaust survivors are still the primary memoirs through which people learn about the Holocaust. Yet famous female memoirs do exist, and include, for example, Anne Frank's, *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Sarah Kofman's *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, and Judith Isaacson's, *Seed of Sarah*. All three memoirs tend to focus on the positive aspects of being in hiding and living through the Holocaust, thus offering a message of hope, regardless of the outcome.

For instance, Anne Frank's diary barely mentioned the horrors of the concentration or death camps that she ultimately ended up in, and yet it has become a symbol for the Holocaust and is the most read female Holocaust memoir. Though she disappeared in a concentration camp, Anne Frank is never discussed in terms of her death, but rather in terms of her life, always focusing on her positive image of the world. Marouf Hasian writes,

> Anne Frank the person would die in Bergen-Belsen during a typhus epidemic in March 1945, but Anne Frank the icon would live on in many popular memories (…) Over the years, different generations have remembered many of the details of Anne Frank's years in the Annex, but they have forgotten about the Belsen trials and the last several months of her short life.[10]

Anne's diary has reached great heights of popularity due to its relatability. It is easy for people to focus on Anne's positive outlook of humanity rather than to think about the horrible death that she faced in Bergen-Belsen. As such, when many people think of the Holocaust, they do not think about the typical experiences that many Jewish women shared. Instead, they think about

[10] Marouf Hasian, *Anne Frank, Bergen-Belsen, and the Polysemic Nature of Holocaust Memories* (East Lansing, MI, Michigan State University Press 2001), 351.

Anne Frank who survived a majority of the war, relatively safe in the confines of her family's secret annex in Holland. This shows how engrained the early impact of Holocaust memoirs truly remains. Even new directions in gender theory have been slow to encourage the reading of other memoirs.

Similarly, Sarah Kofman and Judith Isaacson's memoirs focus on the positive outcomes of the Holocaust rather than on the horrors that they faced. All three memoirs in fact center around the relationships between the authors and their families, specifically their mothers and grandmothers. In most female memoirs, women focus on relationships and connectivity rather than on the isolation that they might have felt. On the other hand, male memoirs by writers such as Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and even transcriptions of experiences by "second-generation" descendants of survivors, such as Art Spiegelman, focus primarily on the relationships that they did or did not have with their fathers or on the isolation that they felt within the camps and after liberation.

Although it is remarkable that women who experienced the Holocaust are finally sharing their stories, the issue of memory forces historians to analyze why the survivor decided to share their story at that particular moment. Memory plays a significant role in writing a memoir. Because many Jewish women waited decades to recall their stories, what they chose to focus on and what they chose to leave out of their memoirs is revealing. As David Thelen explains, "Memory, private and individual as much as collective and cultural, is constructed, not reproduced. (…) This construction is not made in isolation, but in conversations with others that occur in the context of community, broader politics, and social dynamics."[11] More specifically,

[11] David Thelen, "*Memory and American History*," *The Journal of American History* 75, 4 (1989), 1119-1121.

the experiences that women who survived the Holocaust had experienced following the war and in the decades that followed would have influenced their memoirs. Contemporary politics, relationships and repressed memories all play significant roles in deciding what the survivor chooses to highlight and focus on in their memoir. Had women written memoirs immediately after their experiences, their memoirs almost certainly would have focused on different aspects than they chose to focus on decades later. Due to the significant role that memory plays in female holocaust memoirs, historians have to look at them through not only historical lenses but also contemporary lenses in order to see what contemporary issues affected the construction of their memoirs.

QUESTIONNING ESTABLISHED NARRATIVES

As noted above, the need for an acknowledgment of gender differences means that a reexamination of known sources and memoirs must take place; this challenges all who are interested in interrogating both what is said and *not* said. Three examples will help situate and justify this investigation.

In her article, *Gender Identities and the Remembrances of the Holocaust*, Karen Remmler discusses two Holocaust memoirs, one fictional, of lesser relevance here, and one authentic, written by Mali Fitz. The author of *Essig gegen den Durst* ("Vinegar against the Thirst,") Fitz was an Austrian anti-fascist who was arrested, tortured, and sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Using Fitz, Karen Remmler discusses the difficulties female holocaust survivors have experienced in sharing their Holocaust experiences:

> "Female experiences like those of Holocaust victims do not easily enter public discourse. Their representation relies heavily on writers and witnesses willing to name the

> institutions and perpetrators who continue to marginalize the experience of victims as exceptional cases or to subsume different experiences under single categories."[12]

In Mali Fitz's case, she had to overcome an Austrian society that was not interested in discussing the "final solution" or the role that its citizens played in its implementation. Remmler writes, "Fitz captures the irony of the survivor having to vouch for her existence. She testifies to the society's denial of her experience."[13] Fitz was one of a small proportion of women who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau, yet she did not publish her autobiography until 1986, more than forty years after she had been liberated. When she did so, she helped "counter a public memory that obscures the suffering of the victims in the present for the sake of national harmony by exposing modes of misremembering in the respective public sphere"[14]

Overall, Karen Remmler shortchanges the value of her insights by comparing an authentic Holocaust autobiography with a fictional memoir. The analysis of Mali Fitz's autobiography is relevant, but it does not appear to be translated into English.

Of greater relevance, however, is a piece by Judy Tydor Baumel. The essay, *"You Said the Words You Wanted me to Hear but I Heard the Words you Couldn't Bring Yourself to Say": Women's First Person Accounts of the Holocaust*, outlines the progress that scholars have made to understand the gendered differences of Holocaust victims. As such, Baumel focuses on the importance of women's autobiographies and women's oral testimonies.

Baumel ultimately argues that women's autobiographies and oral testimonies have been essential in shedding light on topics which have not been adequately discussed until recent years.

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[12] Karen Remmler, "Gender Identities and the Remembrances of the Holocaust," *Women in German Yearbook*, 10 (1994), 177.

[13] Remmler, 173.

[14] Remmler, 173.

Throughout the essay, Baumel gives important facts which are essential to understanding gendered Holocaust studies. Baumel writes,

> "At first, it appeared that more women survivors were writing memoirs than were men, possibly because women were often granted a longer rehabilitation period before having to rejoin productive society… Many if not most were pivotal figures in the Eastern European Jewish resistance movement or women who had acted as camp functionaries."[15]

The notion of "functionary" implies a hierarchy, and thus a potential for conflict. My research echoes this notion as several of the women who wrote memoirs had been pivotal figures within the camp setting. Olga Lengyel for instance, had been a nurse at Auschwitz. After being liberated, she immediately set to share her story: she was childless, and useful to the Nazi camp system. Women with children on the other hand, were often killed with them: their space in the female hierarchy was lesser than that of a woman who could be put to work immediately.

Baumel also notes that when women wrote their Holocaust memoirs shortly after they had been liberated, the scholarly readership tends to be more receptive to these because they are: "characterized by their authenticity… Early memoirs were usually a factual, if often emotional reconstruction of the author's wartime experiences, devoid of the moral preaching or long range ideological conclusion which characterize many of the later Holocaust memoirs."[16] Early memoirs from the Holocaust usually bypass moral implications. Instead, they focus on direct experiences and often the loss which they felt. Such immediacy adds to gendered Holocaust studies and may help remove some of the veneer of sisterhood seen in early feminist scholarship of the Holocaust. Some later memoirs do the same, as will be seen further. Baumel ends her

[15] Judy Tydor Baumel, "You Said the Words You wanted me to hear but I Heard the Words you Couldn't Bring Yourself to Say": Women's First Person Accounts of the Holocaust," *The Oral History Review* 27, 1 (2000), 28.

[16] Baumel, 29.

well-crafted essay by summarizing the state of gendered Holocaust studies in today's day and age:

> "The transformation of Holocaust studies from an examination of the policies which led to mass murder into an exploration of the strategies which were composed the fabric of daily life under Nazi rule has shifted gender from a marginal issue to a central topic worthy of study… gender scholars dealing with the Holocaust have uncovered a counter-narrative to that which was traditionally expressed from the male vantage point." (56)

Going beyond Baumel's advocacy, scholars have begun reexamining testimonies that point to the tensions that existed between women in the same concentration camps. In her examination of Jewish women at Ravensbrück, for example, Judith Buber Agassi finds inherent tension characterized the life of female inmates.[17] She finds that small groups or "camp-family" ties made a difference in determining survival, and that to suggest sisterhood was prevalent is an exaggeration. She notes for example that any woman facing the "concentrationary universe" alone came away shocked and dispirited. She cites the case of survivor Rosi Mauskpf who, after describing fist fights over a slice of bread adds "I experienced neither friendship nor solidarity."[18] In light of the reevaluation such scholars as Remmler, Baumel and Agassi provide, it becomes clear that sisterhood is a relative term that requires careful evaluation and qualification.

EXAMINING "SISTERHOOD:" THREE MEMOIRS

Despite the fact that it is important for historians to consider the element of memory when examining Holocaust memoirs, memoirs are a direct look into survivor's experiences, as

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[17] Judith Buber Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* (Oxford, UK, OneWorld, 2007).
[18] Quoted in Agassi, 239.

such, they are an invaluable tool, especially when reexamining relations among women in concentration camps. Among these, three Holocaust memoirs which specifically discuss gender relations within the concentrations camp setting are the *Diary of Bergen-Belsen 1944-1945* by Hanna Levy-Hass, *Five Chimney's: A Woman Survivors True Story of Auschwitz* by Olga Lengyel and *A Girlhood Remembered* by Ruth Kluger. All three memoirs reveal the tense relationships that women had with one another in the concentration camp setting, disproving the notion that women consciously formed sisterhoods in order to survive.

To start, Hanna Levy-Hass author of, the *Diary of Bergen-Belsen 1944-1945*, miraculously wrote her diary while imprisoned at Bergen-Belsen. Before being captured, Hanna was born in Bosnia, which is now modern day Yugoslavia. However, Hanna did not live in Yugoslavia long because her family often moved. She eventually made her way to Italy where she began to fear for her life when Italy fell under Nazi influence. As a result of Nazi influence, Hanna joined a partisan group, which was captured in February of 1944 and transported to a Gestapo jail until June of 1944. That same month, Hanna was transferred to Bergen-Belsen, which was classified as a concentration camp, not a death camp. Hanna's diary, which was written over the course of a year, is a useful first-hand account that documented the atrocious things that occurred in Nazi concentration camps without the interference of memory or moral evaluations. Instead, Hanna's narrative expresses straight forward facts which lend credibility to the notion that women's memoirs were initially taken at a base level and glossed over in search of specific facts.

Olga Lengyel's, *Five Chimney's: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz*, tells the story of a young woman from Vienna who was sent to Auschwitz with her mother and two young children in 1944. Before being sent to Auschwitz, Olga's husband, Miklos Lengyel was a

prominent doctor who owned and operated his own hospital. In 1944 Miklos was denounced and was placed on a transport. Scared of the unknown, Olga made a successful effort to be sent on the same transport with her elderly mother and her two children. Upon their arrival at Auschwitz, Helga was separated from her mother and children who were sent to the gas chamber. Olga ultimately spent the last several months of the war in Auschwitz-Birkenau as a nurse. Her sole motivation for remaining alive was to share her story and bare witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Ruth Kluger's, *Still Alive: A Girlhood Remembered*, first appeared in Europe in 1992. It was not until 2001 that the memoir was translated into English and altered in order to suit an American audience. Because of the harsh words that she wrote about her mother, Ruth only allowed the memoir to be translated into English after her death in 2000. The phenomenon of memory had affected her just as deeply as it would any survivor writing positively about their family.

Such tensions over sisterhood and friendship exist elsewhere. In her *Diary of Bergen-Belsen 1944-1945,* Hanna Levy-Hass explains that resources were extremely scarce at the camp and that she went to great deal of trouble to scavenge up as many scraps of paper that she could find in order to write down all that she witnessed. Hanna wrote her diary while she was imprisoned, not in retrospect as several Holocaust survivors have done. As such, she gave vivid details as to what occurred within the camp. Unsurprisingly, a majority of the entries focused on the lack of food, the terrible hygienic conditions, and the effects that illness had on her contemporaries. Hanna also focused a great deal on the loss of human dignity and the loss of normative society.

In one particular entry, Hanna clearly discussed the loss of normative society and its effects on women and the relationships that they had with one another. Hanna writes,

> Quarrels are inevitable, especially among the women, either when the beds are being made or when the laundry is being done. Each woman feels uniquely threatened or mocked, a victim of a unique injustice, without realizing that her neighbors are no less miserable… It's on purpose that they let us insult each other, bicker and argue, to make our existence unbearable, to reduce us to animals, to be better able to mock us, humiliate us, torture us.[19]

In other words, Hanna observed that as normative society dissolved, the women in the camp did not come together and form sisterhoods. Instead, Hanna observed that most of the women felt uniquely victimized and alone. Hanna went so far as to note that the Nazi guards wanted the women to disagree with one another as a way to continue the intended degradation of their victims.

Hanna's diary is unique in the fact that she wrote it while she was a prisoner at Bergen-Belsen. This is unique because most prisoners were not able to find the resources necessary in order to write down their stories. Furthermore, most prisoners did not have the strength or the will to record their stories as the Holocaust unfolded. As such, it is important to read Hanna's story because she was not affected by a change in memory as often occurs with other Holocaust survivors who write memoirs years later.

However, because Hanna was writing the diary while she was a prisoner, it is a short piece of only eighty-five pages. The rest of the diary which is currently in print, is one hundred and sixty-six pages, and is written by Hanna's daughter, Amira Hass. Amira gives pertinent details of her mother's life before and after the Holocaust, which Hanna did not have the space to

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[19] Hanna, Lévy-Hass, Sophie Hand, and Amira Hass, *Diary of Bergen-Belsen* (Chicago, IL, Haymarket Books, 2009), 54.

originally include within the diary. As such, Amira plays a significant role in how the diary is contextualized and interpreted. Although it has several shortcomings, Hanna Levy-Hass's diary gives an inside look at the relationships that women had with one another. Nevertheless, Amira's interpretation of her mother's early life allowed for the interference of outside sources who chose to focus on certain aspects of her life.

Five Chimney's: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz was published three times with three different titles, and first appeared as a French translated into French in 1946. Due to the fact that it was published directly after the war had ended, people were not ready to confront the atrocities of the Holocaust. As such, the memoir did not receive much attention; however, it is speculated that the popular movie *Sophie's Choice* is loosely based off of sections of Olga's memoir. Despite the fact that the memoir did not gain much attention, it as an interesting read, and like Hanna Levy-Hass' diary, it clearly confirms the notion that women did not seek out bonds of sisterhoods within concentration camps.

Like in Hanna's diary, Olga Lengyel's memoir gave several examples of women actively competing against each other within the concentration camp setting. For instance, Olga describes the way women shared food, writing, "Jealously, they counted every mouthful and watched the slightest movement of her Adam's apple. When she had swallowed her share of mouthfuls, the second-in-turn tore the bowl from her hands and ravenously drank her portion of the evil smelling liquid."[20] In other words, the women that Olga was imprisoned with did not readily share food rations or allow other women to take more than their share. Olga frequently notes that

[20] Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimney's: A Woman Survivor's True Story of Auschwitz* (Chicago, IL, Academy Chicago Publishers, 1995), 38.

each woman had to look out for herself in order to remain alive. If friendships were formed, it was due to sheer luck and necessity not from a longing for friendship.

Olga goes on to note that the concentration camp guards played a prominent factor in the competition that the women were forced to take part of. Olga writes, “It seemed as though the Germans constantly sought to pit us against each other to make us competitive, spiteful, hateful.”[21] The Nazis often aimed to dehumanize their victims. As such, by forcing the women to fight with one another over the tiniest things, the Nazis contributed to a breakdown of normative society. Based on the Nazis' desire to dehumanize their victims, the women had to compete with one another in order to gain the basic necessities. As such, Olga’s story makes it hard to believe that women formed bonds of sisterhood consciously and shared food with other women.

Ruth Kluger's memoir, she began by explaining that she was transported with her mother to Theresienstadt were they spent up to twenty months, a time that she appears to look back upon almost fondly. Ruth claims that during her imprisonment in Theresienstadt she learned to identify herself as a Jew despite the fact that she does not believe in God. She explains that the scholars she listened to and the culture she witnessed were key factors in learning what it meant to be Jewish. Ruth makes the reader believe that being imprisoned in Theresienstadt for twenty months was not terrible. This hints Ruth naivety and the fact that she was merely eleven years old at the time. As Ruth grew up in Vienna she had never experienced a normal childhood due to antisemitic legislation. As such, Theresienstadt must not have seemed as strange to her as it does to the common reader.

After twenty months, Ruth and her mother were transported to Auschwitz for a two month period. During that time, Ruth noted that relationships between women changed

[21] Lengyel, 36.

drastically from what she had experienced in Theresienstadt. Ruth writes, “Five of us were sitting on our bunk, and we had a bowl of water, which we were to share among us. I was the last and the smallest and I begged the others, do leave a sip for me, I am so thirsty. The woman whose turn it is looks at me maliciously, or so it seems, her eyes narrowing as she lifts the bowl a second time to her mouth and empties it”[22] Ruth was only thirteen years old at the time that she was sent to Auschwitz. As such, she often found herself drawing the short end of the stick, the other women did not show her mercy even though she was only a young girl. Ruth’s experience once more illustrates the fact that women had to look out for themselves.

Ruth and her mother were eventually saved from extermination when they were selected for a work transport to Christianstadt. Despite the fact that Ruth and her mother ultimately survived Auschwitz and were able to escape a death march, Ruth and her mother had a tense relationship at best. Ruth explains, “I feel no compunction about citing examples of my mother’s petty cruelties towards me, my hearers act surprised, assume a stance of virtuous indignation… In our heart of hearts, we all knew the reality. The more we have to put up with, the less tolerant we get and the texture of family relations becomes progressively more threadbare”[23] Ruth directly notes that as situations got worse, relationships become unimportant, even the relationship of a mother and a daughter. As civil society dissolved, Ruth seems to suggest that familial ties are easily dissolved as well.

Overall, Ruth Kluger’s memoir is unique because it shares her Holocaust experience while offering a contemporary analysis of the Holocaust. This approach casts Ruth as very detached from the events she describes. However, Ruth Kluger continuously reinforce the idea

[22] Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York, NY, The Feminist Press at the City University of New York. 2001,) 111.
[23] Kluger, 52.

that women did not willingly form sisterhoods while in the camp setting. The fact that Ruth waited until she was in her seventies to write the memoir seemed to play a significant role. In several spots she looked back on her experience almost nostalgically. However, one thing that remained constant was Ruth's harsh criticism of the women of the camp, specifically her mother.

MAKING SENSE OF SISTERHOOD:

Although they each had unique and personal experiences while trying to survive Nazi concentration and death camps, Hanna Levy-Hass, Olga Lengyel, and Ruth Kluger each focus upon specific topics that bring the notion of "sisterhood" into question. Despite the fact that the three women wrote their memoirs at different points in their lives, they each focus on several of the same issues. For instance, each woman goes into depth in the memoirs about food and the competition to get food. They each discuss the sense of anger, fear, and even disgust that they felt surrounding food in the concentration camp setting.

Food was such a scarcity that many people starved to death in the concentration camp setting. Therefore, it is not surprising that each woman went in depth about their struggles for food. In several memoirs that were written decades after the Holocaust had ended, a distinctive effort was made by early feminist scholars to highlight examples where women helped each other to get enough food, constructing the notion of the sisterhood. Yet, in diaries written during the Holocaust and in memoirs written immediately after the event occurred such as those by Hanna Levy-Hass and Olga Lengyel, the women focused upon the selfishness of women in the concentration camps, noting that women in the camps only looked after themselves. Ruth Kluger contributed to this notion by discussing the women who went out of their way to ensure that she did not get anything to eat, focusing on how cruel the women in the camp could be. These

memoirs that were written closely following the end of the Holocaust were not glossed over by early feminists, thus more is revealed about what Jewish women experienced.

The memoirs by Hanna Levy-Hass, Olga Lengyel, and Ruth Kluger go on to focus upon the brutality and cruelty of the female guards in the concentration camps. Early feminist scholars used the brutality that female guards exhibited as a way to establish the notion of sisterhood. They believed that the brutality of the concentration camp guards made women turn to one another as a way to find solace and compassion. Yet, Hanna, Olga, and Ruth's diaries reveal that women did not turn to one another after witnessing brutality. Instead, it would appear that many women turned a blind eye and hoped that they would not be the next victim of such brutality. In the face of brutality stemming from the guards, it would appear that the male and female response was not all that different.

As previously noted, historians must always consider the aspect of memory when examining memoirs. In the case of Hanna Levy- Hass, she wrote her diary while still in the Nazi concentration camp setting. Therefore, her memoir is free of much of the moral discussions that are present in many Holocaust memoirs. She did not have much paper to write her memoir with either, therefore, she only wrote about things that she found to be vastly different from normative society. Olga Lengyel wrote her memoir directly after the Holocaust ended as a way to bear witness. In her memoir, she does not go into moral issues either. She focused upon issues that she found to be the most distressing. As such, both memoirs are not glossed over and are true to what they experienced. Although Ruth Kluger wrote her memoir several decades after the event had occurred, her memoir is a straight analysis of what she experienced, she does not implement traditional ideals which were often inserted years later.

A TEST CASE: THE STORY OF TWO SISTERS

In many cases, women who shared their Holocaust experiences, shared their memoires through a memoir. As such, unless the survivor wrote the memoir directly after the Holocaust ended, which was rare, these memoirs were often glossed over and specific aspects were focused upon. Yet, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives in Washington D.C. I discovered an unpublished memoir by Rela and Hela Stein, two sisters who survived several concentration camps. Because their memoir was not published, it focused upon what the women distinctly remembered and what distinctly stood out to them. Besides the close relationship that Rela and Hela maintained, their memoir emphasizes the notion that women did not form sisterhoods or close bonds with other women, but were typically forced into competition with the other women.

For instance, Rela explains the women in the concentration camp were so used to competing with one another that they did not understand why Rela worked so desperately to save her sister from starvation, disease, and ultimately death. Hela explains, "They [other women] were so surprised" that they asked her "why do you sacrifice so much for your sister?" and Rela would answer "I have no one else in the world."[24] Rela and Hela had lost their mother and father to the Nazi death camps and were unsure of the fate of their other sister. As such, Rela felt a familial duty to her sister to help her recover and to survive. The other women in the camp could not understand why Rela would use her resources to save her sister when she could save them for herself, revealing the true nature of the camp. Women did not go out of their way to help one

[24] Stein, Hela and Rela. *The Story of Two Sisters*. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives. Np. Nd. Page 17.

another, instead they focused on saving themselves. As mentioned, starvation was a real threat and women in the camps could not afford to share their food with others.

Throughout the Holocaust, Rela and Hela managed to stay together and ended up surviving. In order to survive, they had to deceive others, just as other women actively deceived them.

> "One of the women asked Rela if she could borrow her blue coat. Rela agreed and after she had returned the coat she found in one of the pockets, money, no doubt, which this woman had earned from the 'cousin'. The woman thought that she had left the money in the pocket of the coat and asked Rela to return it to her but Rela pretended that she was unaware of the money (…) The money bought Rela and I slices of bread."[25]

After Rela and Hela had their clothing stolen by other women, it was revealed that Rela managed to keep a beautiful blue coat. When one woman asked Rela to borrow the coat, the woman forgot to take the money she had earned from a male out of the pocket. When Rela and Hela discovered the money, they decided to take advantage of the situation and keep the money for themselves. If an ideal sisterhood had been established, Rela and Hela would have felt that it was necessary to return the money to the other woman, or to share food with her. Yet, they found that it was more important to keep the money for themselves and buy extra food in order to supplement their own supply.

Just as Hanna, Olga, and Ruth thoroughly discussed food throughout their memoirs, Rela and Hela distinctively discussed the food situation as well. They write:

> "I gave my portion to Rela and then went to stand in line again to take another portion, this little scheme of mine went unnoticed for 2 or 3 days (…) However, we had antisemitic Polish women who watched us like hawks to protect their own interests and that was to make sure that more was left in the cooking pot for themselves. One of the women noticed that I was on the line twice and immediately reported it to the German supervisor."[26]

[25] Stein, 20.
[26] Stein, 25.

Rela and Hela were able to get more food by deceiving the cooking staff for 2 to 3 days. However, a polish woman who was antisemitic discovered the trick that the sisters were playing. They woman worried that she was losing out on extra food because of the trick that Hela and Rela used to take advantage of the cooking staff; therefore, the woman quickly reported the sisters and effectively put a stop to their extra food. It would appear that the camp experience was a solitary existence unless you were 'lucky' enough to be in a situation like Rela and Hela.

After examining several memoirs, the reexamination of the female experience may seem a necessity to many, yet it has caused tensions among feminist scholars. For example, they were accused by female survivors of trivializing women's experience and thus masking the fact that the prime reason for persecution had not been womanhood, but Judaism.[27] This "push-back" reminds one of the need for acknowledging gender as a category of analysis in relation to the male experience, not just among women. The Nazi system of persecution was one set up by men, but it persecuted men *and* women. As such, one should ask the question whether, like sisterhood, there was in fact a phenomenon of *brotherhood*.

GENDER A USEFUL TOOL TO REDISCOVER SISTERHOOD

Early Feminist scholarship of the Holocaust has emphasized the uniqueness of female bonds as a way to survive the camp experience. It points to male memoirs that testify to the violence among prisoners. Yet as the subsequent waves of feminist scholars have acknowledged, gender approaches are richer by helping emphasizing not only differences, but commonalities, too.[28]

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[27] Lisa Disch and Leslie Morris, "New Feminist Perspectives on the Holocaust," *Women in German Yearbook* 19 (2003), 11-13.
[28] Scott, chapt. 1.

Primo Levi's work, one of the strongest testimonies of the Auschwitz hell illustrates the charge well. Whenever he was away from his bunk, or spent time at the infirmary early in his captivity, his personal items were stolen; in fact his first experience, beyond the obvious violence, was the lack of trust among prisoners.[29]

In fact, Primo Levi would not have been able to survive without the help of several friendships, including a one within the camp setting. Several times, Levi mentions persons he likes, but we do not read much about them later. They include Chajim, one of Levi's bed companions. whom he trusts "blindly," or Alberto, his work companion.[30] Levi also acknowledges the friendships of convenience that spring up in relation to the circumstances, but "leave a bad taste in [his] mouth:" Henri is a "schmoozer" who makes contact only when he needs something, having "cut off every tie of affection" following the death of his brother.[31] Levi's true friendship, what helps him live mentally through his ordeal, is a Frenchman who should be ordering Levi around, yet befriends him by expressing an interest in Italian culture. Levi sets about teaching him a few words, but also longs to share cultural views with him, by learning poems. The friendship as a form of intellect is what prevents Levi from devolving to animalistic instincts.[32] Such special bonds, if they were established, were therefore not constrained to women's camps. Thus, it would appear that if scholars are to discuss an established sisterhood for women, a brotherhood for men must also be considered as well; gender as a category is important to the male and female experience.

[29] Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, (New York: Touchstone Books. 1996), chapter 2.
[30] Levi, 47, 57, 103.
[31] Levi, 97-100.
[32] Levi, chapt. 11.

CONCLUSION

After examining three memoirs from Hana Levy-Hass, Olga Lengyel, and Ruth Kluger the notion of a sisterhood or the formation of special bonds does not appear to be as prominent or as important as early feminist writers from the 1980's portrayed it to be. Although the three memoirs reveal that connections with other women were useful and important, they were not an end all be all as it had previously appeared. As such, the notion of the sisterhood is arguably a construction of early feminist writers in an effort to set female-authored texts apart from male-authored texts. Although early feminist scholars felt the need to set female-authored texts apart from their male contemporaries, when read, women's experiences are unique and distinguish themselves without being glossed over.

Before women were ever taken to concentration or death camps they often had different experiences then men. Once the Nazi regime came to power in 1933, Jewish women were forced to assume roles that they never had before. Jewish men were quickly fired from their jobs due to antisemitic legislation and frequent round ups, as such, Jewish women had to assume the role as the primary bread winners while still maintaining the home and caring for the children. Then, once women were sent to concentration and death camps, they were subjected to sexual humiliation that men were not. The element of sexual humiliation and sexual exploitation was an aspect that early scholars bypassed and glossed over despite the fact that many female-authored memoirs discuss elements related to their sexual humiliation. This was a cognizant effort on the part of early scholars to ensure that female memoirs were distinguished as unique from the male experience, but were not so far removed that they were called into question.

As a direct result of scholars presenting a certain image of female-authored memoirs, memoirs such as the *Diary of Anne Frank* and *Seed of Sarah,* which offered messages of hope

despite the outcome, are still the primary female-authored memoirs through which people learn and read about the Holocaust. Even with the presentation of new directions in gender theory, the message of hope presented in early memoirs remains prevalent.

As such, the memoirs written by Ruth Kluger, Hanna Levy-Hass, and Olga Lengyel are significant because they remain true to their experiences while refraining from preaching on the moral aspect of the Holocaust. Furthermore, their memoirs have not been affected by efforts to create a specific vision of the female Holocaust experience. Through their memoirs, they reveal the true nature of the concentration and death camps and reveal that sisterhoods were not created as frequently as had previously been suggested. This notion is confirmed in the unpublished memoir of Hela and Rela Stein, two sisters who survived the Holocaust and only relied on each other, making frequent comments on the competitive and spiteful nature of the women in the concentration camp setting.

Although Levy-Hass, Lengyel, and Kluger's memoirs reveal that a correction needs to be made to previous understandings of the female experience, this does not devalue other female-authored Holocaust memoirs, instead, it suggests that women suffered even more than they had originally let on. As revealed in the four memoirs, it was difficult for women to create special bonds with other women due to the competitive nature of the camps. As such, women had to be resourceful and learn to rely on themselves. In order to do justice to the women who suffered through the Holocaust, it is important to distinguish the true nature of the female experience from the carefully constructed version that was crafted in an effort to set female-authored texts apart from male-authored texts.

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