

# SHATTERED

**Sexualized Violence Against Holocaust Survivors, 1943–1946**

# LIBERATION

**Edited by**

**Nina Paulovicova, Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, and Joanna Beata Michlic**

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NINA PAULOVICOVA, ANNA CICHOSPEK-  
GAJRAJ, AND JOANNA BEATA MICHLIC

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# INTRODUCTION

NINA PAULOVICOVA

“YOU HAVE BEEN LIBERATED BY THE SOVIET ARMY!” ANNOUNCES THE SOVIET Army soldier from the back of his horse to the group of traumatized Jewish adults and children lying around the train tracks in the final scene of Steven Spielberg’s contested and commercially successful movie *Schindler’s List* (1993) foregrounding flawed rescuer Oskar Schindler’s efforts to save Jews during the Holocaust.<sup>1</sup> In this movie, which entered global historical consciousness, persecuted Jews’ survival hinges on the acts of two main protagonists, camp commandant Amon Goeth and businessman opportunist Oskar Schindler who protects “his Jews” from certain death until their liberation. The ultimate liberation scene, which contains a brief exchange between the Soviet Army soldier and Schindler’s accountant Itzhak Stern, sends out the message about the challenges ahead: “Don’t go east . . . they hate you there. I wouldn’t go west either, if I were you,” a Soviet Army soldier advises liberated Jews. The final moment of the liberation scene, filmed in black and white, shows survivors marching upright toward an unknown future without any clarity of what liberation brings.

Such a lack of clarity in representations of the liberation experience in cinematic production is not new. Even the first documentaries evidencing Nazi crimes in the liberated camps display the signs of illegibility of the camps’ liberation due to “the construction, manipulation of, and exchange values related to photographs and films taken at the time.”<sup>2</sup> For example, when the United States Army liberated Mauthausen, “where the opening of the camp had been [a] confused, appalling and sinister affair, the ‘liberation’ of the camps was subsequently re-enacted in order to fix this glorious photographic memory, with prisoners waving flags, smiling and cheering as the American tank passes by.”<sup>3</sup> To be sure, what liberation documentaries sanitized was not the brutality of the camps but rather “their temporality.”<sup>4</sup> As Didi-Huberman poignantly argues, “A camp is not opened like a door; prisoners are not released from a camp like birds liberated from a cage.”<sup>5</sup> Yet, in cinematography and popular imagination the liberation of Holocaust survivors is often represented as an ultimate rescue from Nazi terror, often depicted as a “joyous affair”<sup>6</sup> or a “Hollywood-style happy ending.”<sup>7</sup> As Annette Wieviorka notes,



the “optimistic imperative” prevails in representations of the Holocaust: “The history of the genocide, it seems, should not end in despair. The story should be told in a way that saves the idea of man.”<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, the liberation as a happy-ending survival closure has been routinely prioritized for educational purposes for decades. Moreover, it has been embedded in some important oral testimony collections such as the USC Shoah Foundation’s Visual History Archive (VHA), which canonize those survival testimonies as “exemplary” and “most dramatically compelling.”<sup>9</sup> But as scholarly works clearly show, the reality of liberation was experienced differently by survivors.

Often plagued by survival guilt, survivors faced “existential angst”<sup>10</sup> and grappled with uncertainty, agony, longing for familial and communal bonds,<sup>11</sup> loneliness, hopelessness, and not infrequently apathy, resignation, and suicidal thoughts. Many needed more time to comprehend the immense loss of loved ones, families, friends, the loss of homes and livelihoods, as well as the erasure of Jewish heritage, communal life, networks, and institutions. Some survivors were liberated in camps. Due to severe malnutrition and disease many would survive only hours or a few days after liberation: at last liberated, “they would pass from a living death to a life of agony.”<sup>12</sup> Others were liberated while on the death march, in hiding, or passing as Christians. Some survivors, like Gerta Solan, experienced liberation “as a surprisingly casual moment”<sup>13</sup>—a mundane encounter with six Soviet soldiers on horses<sup>14</sup> or as an “ordinary liberation”—a simple act of acknowledging the official war’s end.<sup>15</sup> For many, liberation meant homecoming—an experience that Kateřina Králová describes as “the full structural, social and emotional return—in space and in time.”<sup>16</sup> But for survivors whose relatives were mass murdered in the vicinity of their communities, coming home was often not an option. As Shmuel Geller noted, “Next to our graves we cannot build a new life.”<sup>17</sup> Many survivors thus faced the bleak reality of displaced persons (DP) camps, filtration camps, relocation, repatriation, or emigration.<sup>18</sup>

As these diverse experiences suggest, rather than being a “rapturous moment in time”<sup>19</sup> when evil was instantly eradicated by the Red Army appearing on the scene, liberation was an evolving process<sup>20</sup> filled with numerous challenges faced by survivors moving across war-affected regions plagued by interethnic tensions, lawlessness, and political, social, and economic chaos. As Stefan Cristian Ionescu notes, “antisemitic legislation continued to affect the different groups of Jewish survivors and their communities for years” after liberation.<sup>21</sup> Many survivors encountered antisemitic violence, including pogroms<sup>22</sup> or a cold reception by former non-Jewish neighbors refusing to let go of stolen Jewish property. Survivors struggled to recover their property through bureaucratic hurdles, court litigation, or settlements with former aryanizers.<sup>23</sup> “So many of our belongings switched masters,” recalls Nechama Tec in her memoir. “It was as if my finding them so well-adjusted to the new owners mocked my claim to them. Their settled presence made me an intruder.”<sup>24</sup>

There is no doubt that without the Red Army's push against the Wehrmacht and its enormous sacrifices of young men and women, the Allies would not have defeated Nazi Germany and its racial world order. However, this meta-narrative embedded in collective memory does not allow us to fully grasp the microcosm of complex everyday interactions and relations between survivors and the liberator armies including violent aspects of the liberation and gender-based sexual(ized) violence.<sup>25</sup> The gendered nature of survivors' experiences must not be ignored. Survivors' recollections of liberation mention sexual barter to secure food, quick "strange marriages" or "marriages of despair," dealing with infertility and efforts to conceive, forming of surrogate families, pregnancies by liberators and subsequent abortions—just to mention a few.<sup>26</sup> This edited volume addresses sexual(ized) violence inflicted by significant segments of the rank and file of the Red Army, as well as by partisans, non-Jewish rescuers, and personnel in Soviet filtration camps. The goal of this edited volume is to foreground Holocaust survivors' recollections of *shattered* liberation experiences involving liberation sexual(ized) violence as embedded in memoirs and testimonies.

## CONTEXT FOR SILENCES

Given the varied past challenges and the overwhelming silence about the topic, it should not come as a surprise that this will be the first book focusing solely on the Soviet liberation and gender-based sexual(ized) violence against Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe. That this publication is proposed only now, more than eighty years after the war, is a result of the recent developments in the fields of international law, the women's movement, and the historiography of the Red Army, as well as the growing scholarly interest in the social history of Holocaust survivors, trauma, and sexual(ized) violence. In Eastern Europe under communism, censored historiography of the Red Army focused on the celebrations of Soviet victories and expressions of gratitude by the "liberated."<sup>27</sup> In this political context, there was no space for a history of pain and suffering inflicted on local societies and Holocaust survivors by the Red Army. Even after the fall of communism in 1989, scholars paid more attention to the interaction between Western, that is, American and British, armies and Holocaust survivors, rather than to the interactions between the Soviet Army and the survivors.<sup>28</sup> It was finally the sheer amount of sexual(ized) violence against civilians, especially women, during the Yugoslav wars, the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides of the 1990s that brought wartime and military rape into greater scholarly focus on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>29</sup> The past three decades have produced some critical works on the mass rape of civilians by the Red Army in Nazi Germany at the end of the war. This mass rape, often evaluated as revenge against Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union, has garnered more

scholarly and public attention.<sup>30</sup> The subject of gender-based sexual(ized) violence perpetrated specifically on Holocaust survivors by the Soviet Army has been occluded from public knowledge and history production.

Silence, however, did not always reign. The earliest Holocaust survivors' testimonies, collected as early as 1943, spoke about gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, sexual barter, and rape. These unapologetic, often handwritten testimonies displayed a sense of urgency, acute trauma, and "a form of immediacy" that differed from a more careful "formulation of an emotionally and conceptually structured narrative" in later survivors' testimonies shaped by social and political climates of the postwar era.<sup>31</sup> The first survivors' testimonies contained firsthand unfiltered and disturbing recollections of ubiquitous sexual(ized) violence during the Holocaust. They could be found in *The Black Book of Polish Jewry* published in New York in 1943,<sup>32</sup> *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* published in English in 1946, and in *The Unknown Black Book*,<sup>33</sup> only published in Russian in 1993. The accounts of sexual(ized) violence were deposited in the collections of the Central Jewish Historical Commission and Emanuel Ringelblum Archives in Warsaw, the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine in Paris, and the archival collections of the Wiener Holocaust Library in London.<sup>34</sup> Written mostly in Yiddish, these vital collections stayed on the margins of public and scholarly attention for several decades. Only some of the accounts were translated into English while most remained buried in the archives.<sup>35</sup>

Some of these early testimonies, such as Olga Lengyel's *Five Chimneys: The Story of Auschwitz*, that were translated into English sparked an interest among the US reading public precisely because of their mentions of sex barter, sexual(ized) violence, and other horrors that survivors experienced.<sup>36</sup> The mixture of disbelief, curiosity, condemnation, and fascination with Nazi atrocities inspired the commodification of survivors' experiences in popular culture through the publishing of cheap novels. Early postwar sensationalizing of Nazi brutality in Western popular culture foregrounded the storyline of sexual abuse and prostitution of Jewish survivors in concentration camps. In so doing, these novels offered a skewed perception of survivors' plight during the Holocaust. More importantly, they nurtured the environment of doubts about survivors' moral conduct during the Holocaust, implying their complicity with the perpetrators. They thus created conditions for stigmatization of survivors and, in consequence, their careful reconsideration of what to share or not to share with the public.

Similar sensationalizing of wartime prostitution in concentration camps circulated in the Yishuv, a Jewish community in Palestine, immediately after the war but prior to the establishment of the state of Israel in May 1948. According to Na'ama Shik, "the image of Jewish women being raped and serving as forced prostitutes during the Holocaust emerged in the consciousness" of Israeli society in the making.<sup>37</sup> The famous 1945 poem "My Sister on the Beach," written by Yitzhak Sadeh, which by the 1960s

was perceived as “history rather than literature,”<sup>38</sup> offered Jewish women survivors who were raped and forced into prostitution a sense of redemption and permanent home: “Here, in our land you should live, my sister. Here you have our love to you.”<sup>39</sup> In her research on Holocaust memory in films, Liat Steir-Livny notes that “female Holocaust survivors—and specifically their transformation from prostitutes to mothers such as in the movie *My Father’s House* [Beit Avi] (1947)—are presented by the state in films as part of a ‘global media offensive to persuade the public opinion in the West to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel.’”<sup>40</sup> This political goal had an impact on the circulation of early survivors’ testimonies in public discourse. By the late 1940s, the early accounts of Holocaust survivors were erased from public consciousness.<sup>41</sup> As Timm argues, these testimonies “were rarely heroic in any straightforward Zionist sense, and they evoked visceral horror rather than feelings of group solidarity. They were unlikely to help anyone to navigate the bureaucratic nightmare of DP camps, immigration applications, and family reunification efforts. Stories of this type of violence were neither easily politicized (in terms of contributing to efforts to create a Jewish state) nor likely to produce the benefits that DPs most urgently needed. They certainly would not help those who wanted to get to Palestine.”<sup>42</sup>

By the late 1950s, the Holocaust survivors in Europe, the United States, and Palestine/Israel were aware of the public demand for the “ideal victim” built on moral superiority and the exclusion of any acts perceived as immoral or ambivalent at the time. Such societal expectations shaped victims’ choices and careful consideration of which aspects of their stories were deemed (un)sharable. As Pascale R. Bos argues,

Survivors felt compelled to emphasize “the morality of their behavior, believing that any suggestion of impropriety in order to survive detracts attention away from the real perpetrators of the Holocaust.” This led to self-censorship among survivors who had witnessed or experienced morally ambiguous situations such as sexual exchange or rape among (Jewish) inmates, or rape by rescuers or liberators. The narratives that remained were primarily accounts that illustrated the barbarism of the Germans while emphasizing the virtue and heroism of their victims.<sup>43</sup>

Survivors’ self-censorship, however, can be also interpreted as an effort to reclaim one’s identity and one’s life in dignity without the rupture that took both away. In other words, such refusal of Holocaust survivors to share their traumatic experiences might have been the result of “the fear of being trapped in an image in which one does not quite recognize oneself.”<sup>44</sup> It reflected survivors’ desire to move away from the traumatic past and build new families and social and professional lives.

The memory of sexual(ized) violence was shaped not only on an individual but also on institutional levels. The earliest shaping of the collective memory of sexual(ized)

violence can be traced back to postwar trials with Nazi perpetrators and collaborators. Soviet postwar trials shaped the collective memory of rape by removing sexual violence against survivors from the public discourse and relegating it to the realm of novels, testimonies, and memoirs.<sup>45</sup> The International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg and the International Military Tribunal for the Far East in Tokyo focused on prosecuting “crimes against peace as the principal crimes committed by Nazi Germany and the Japanese Army rather than on war crimes and crimes against humanity as a consequence of aggression.”<sup>46</sup> As a result, the postwar trials with Nazi collaborators did not consider gendered experiences and sexual(ized) violence. Article 6 of the Charter of the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg addressed war crimes and crimes against humanity but did not ramify sexual(ized) violence as a category on its own.<sup>47</sup> The Tokyo war crimes tribunal (the International Military Tribunal for the Far East) brought the rape of Nanking to the world’s attention but silenced the plight of comfort women. During the Soviet war crime trials against local collaborators “sex crimes never appeared as a separate type of crime in Soviet regulatory instruments”<sup>48</sup> even though the available documents displayed a “comparatively compassionate attitude of NKGB investigators towards the women.”<sup>49</sup> As Marta Havryshko concludes, “Soviet rape culture,” that is, “a range of perceptions, stereotypes, and myths about rape,” informed the Soviet response to wartime rape and sexual violence.<sup>50</sup> Soviet postwar trials thus effectively erased the history of the Soviet Army’s sexual(ized) violence against survivors by facilitating their version of transitional justice and executing revenge against the collaborators.

It was the victors’ justice. The Soviet Army’s military victories meant a tightening of political control and the introduction of different levels of censorship throughout Eastern Europe under Soviet communism. As Vojin Majstorović shows, the censored historiography of the Red Army was now marked by the celebrations of military victories and an expression of the gratitude of the “liberated.”<sup>51</sup> In this context, there was no space for a history of pain and suffering inflicted by the Red Army. The sacrifices of liberators and the crimes of the Nazis and their collaborators dominated postwar public discourse in the region. Even later, when works about the crimes of the Soviet Army began to emerge, scholars—as Stefan Cristian Ionescu notes in this volume—would rather pay more attention to other crimes of the liberator army, namely “the Soviet authorities’ forcible recruitment of survivors for the Red Army and the labor battalions” rather than sexual(ized) violence. Soviet political discourse drew a rather sharp line between the evil of Nazi perpetrators and the heroism of the Red Army and partisans, thus ultimately pushing the Holocaust survivors’ experiences to the periphery of public attention. But as Andrea Pető shows in her chapter, communal memory of the Red Army’s sexual(ized) violence was not erased. Even though “the crimes of sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers after 1945 went largely unpunished

legally," Pető reminds us, "the emotional and political consequences of this remain evident to this day."

Whereas the Soviet regime's soft and hard power controls such as the May 8 annual celebrations of the victory of the Red Army in the Great Patriotic War, censorship, persecution, and ethnic cleansing made discussions about liberator sexual(ized) violence in Soviet bloc public discourse taboo, the conditions for the discussions of liberator rape in the West took a different course. The topic of the Red Army's sexual(ized) violence committed against German civilians (surviving German Jews were not spared either) was at the forefront of public discourse in Cold War West Germany. It is estimated that the Soviet Army raped "one out of every three of about one and a half million women in Berlin"<sup>52</sup> or about two million women (the number of children, men, and nonbinary civilians is typically not differentiated from the efforts to assess the number of raped) during the fall of Berlin *and* in Eastern Europe.<sup>53</sup> Postwar novels, memoirs, and diaries were vocal about the Red Army's rapes. As Atina Grossmann admits: "I found rape stories everywhere, told matter-of-factly, told as tragedy, told with ironic humor and bravado. Women told their stories to authorities from whom they expected specific forms of redress, and they obsessively retold their stories to each other and to their daughters. They lived, interpreted and represented their rape in a particular historical context which they participated in creating."<sup>54</sup>

Amid the international recovery and geopolitical realignments, postwar West Germany instrumentalized the painful history of sexual(ized) violence committed by the Soviet Army against German civilians to define its place in Europe and achieve European integration and membership in NATO. The all-pervasive feeling of victimhood of postwar German society (as victims of Nazism, Allied bombing, Red Army retaliation and rape, the plight of German POWs in the hands of Soviets, the pain of postwar reconstruction and de-Nazification) tended to obscure the agency and complicity of civilians in sustaining the Nazi regime and underscored the plight of a "new national community of suffering."<sup>55</sup> The memory and trauma of the Red Army's mass rapes of German civilians, mostly women and girls, were instrumentalized inward, that is, toward national cohesiveness mobilized through emotions of suffering, frustration, loss, and pain but also helped to steer the place of Germany in postwar Europe to a "civilized world." The fluctuation of the images of the "barbarous" communist Soviet rapist in postwar popular culture signaled West Germany's "reinvention of itself as a part of the West."<sup>56</sup> As Júlia Garraio contends, "Rape and violation were not recalled as acts of sexual violence against women and young girls in the framework of armed conflicts marked by patriarchal cultures with a strong ethnic component. Instead, they were made into political images that were firmly embedded in Cold War discourses."<sup>57</sup> Cold War tensions thus predetermined the ebb and flow of the discourse on the Red Army's rape in substantial ways.

The Eichmann trial of 1961 introduced a new opportunity for witnessing as the trial brought to the fore the importance of Holocaust survivors' testimonies, which paved the path to the late 1970s proliferation of institutional Holocaust memory.<sup>58</sup> Following the trial, "the survivors acquired the social identity of survivors because society now recognized them as such."<sup>59</sup> The new function of these survivors was "the bearers of history."<sup>60</sup> One of the witnesses or "bearers of history" at the Eichmann trial, Yehiel Dinur, known as Ka-Tzetnik 135633, authored semi-autobiographical novels that, besides everything else, discussed sexual(ized) violences during the Holocaust. Thanks to his texts, sexual(ized) violence emerged as an indelible part and parcel of the Holocaust survivor experiences. Ka-Tzetnik's novels with graphic descriptions of sexual(ized) violence "were indeed initially received as authentic testimony in Israel where they became bestsellers, were studied by members of the Israeli Defence Forces, and were eventually (in the 1990s) even integrated into the high school curriculum."<sup>61</sup> Some Israeli publishers responded to an increase in popular interest in the topic of sexual(ized) violence as a result of Ka-Tzetnik's novels by publishing *Stalags* — "cheaply made novels with racy covers that turned the theme of wartime sexual violence into pornography."<sup>62</sup> Such "pornographization of the history of sexual violence in the Holocaust"<sup>63</sup> through cheap novels published in Israel represented another pathway for the fluctuation of the topic of sexual(ized) violence in 1960s popular culture even though the topic failed to gain attention as a legitimate subject of research in academia.<sup>64</sup>

In the 1970s, the newly emerging discourses on human rights offered fertile ground for the feminist anti-rape movement, "consciousness-raising" as well as "public 'speak-out' on rape," even though rape was not framed as a human rights issue until the 1990s.<sup>65</sup> The emergence of the 1970s women's movement shaped the early scholarly efforts to underscore gendered experiences of the Holocaust as well as more open discussion about patriarchal societies and sexual(ized) violence in war and colonial contexts. Yet, on the part of some feminists, the weight was shifted to the interpretation of rape as a crime of the patriarchal system devoid of intersections with race. This approach alienated BIPOC feminists because it obscured experiences of sexual(ized) violence perpetrated against black and Indigenous communities and people of color.<sup>66</sup> In particular, such an approach ignored the fact that "sexual violence and inter-racial rape became one crucial battleground [of the 1940–1975 civil rights movement] upon which African Americans sought to destroy white supremacy and gain personal and political autonomy."<sup>67</sup> Such alienation has not abated. Even today BIPOC feminists are dismayed by the "masked colonial mindset within First World feminism" that orientalizes sexual violence, projects the problem of rape to "darker continents," and tries to "educate," "help," or "rescue" BIPOC feminists without acknowledging the long history of BIPOC feminists' anti-rape activism.<sup>68</sup>



Racial blindness was persistent when it came to the 1990s discussion of perpetrators of rapes and sexual(ized) violence during liberation. One illustration of this blindness is the release of German feminist filmmaker Helke Sander and historian Barbara Johr's 1992 documentary film *BeFreier und Befreite* (Liberators take liberties). The film interprets the rape of German civilians during the liberation as embedded in universal patriarchal oppression. The film "reveal[ed] the pitfalls of a certain kind of feminist analysis in which wartime rape is seen exclusively as a sexist crime, is defined as the worst kind of harm, and is isolated from the racial-political context in which it takes place."<sup>69</sup> Rape of German women (or any human being) was (and must be) strongly condemned regardless of the perpetrator. The issue is not to question or relativize the suffering and trauma of rape victims. It is important to flag the fact that racial blindness was allowed to foreground the victimization of German women in the hands of the liberator rapists (the rank and file in the Soviet Army and also the British and US armies). In so doing it derailed attention from German women's complicity in racism and genocide of Jews, Roma, and Sinti who were raped, humiliated, persecuted, abused, and exterminated under the watch of Nazism, their collaborators, and ordinary people.

Similarly, in post-1989 Eastern Europe, the theme of liberator rape was instrumentalized by nationalists whose effort was to divert attention from the problematic Nazi, fascist, and Holocaust past by emphasizing the communist-era victimhood. The instrumentalization of rape stories was notable, especially in Hungary, where the conservative stream, including the Catholic Church, widely utilized the narrative of mass rape of civilians by the Red Army as a means of categorical distancing from the communist era. The dissemination of brutal stories of rape depicted Hungary as a victimized nation in the hands of communists while neglecting its wartime collaboration with Nazis and the Holocaust.<sup>70</sup>

The mass rapes during the Yugoslav wars, the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides in the 1990s, and the International Criminal Court's ruling of sexual violence during the war as a war crime and crime against humanity, brought wartime and military rape into greater scholarly focus on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>71</sup> The court recognized mass rape as a mechanism of genocide and concluded that mass rape represents "a threat to national and international peace and security."<sup>72</sup> Mass rapes committed in Bosnia and Rwanda, on the one hand, resulted in the recognition and even prioritization of its racial essence,<sup>73</sup> which solidified the notion of rape as a genocidal instrument during the war. At the same time, mass rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda represented "anchors of departure or first signifiers of securitization [of rape]."<sup>74</sup> Even though the prosecution of the perpetrators of rape by international tribunals has been sluggish, haphazard, and minuscule in the face of the scale of the committed mass rapes, the critical legal transformation of international law had an immense impact on the course of Holocaust and



genocide scholarship. The transformation opened space for academics to pursue the reexamination of the existing knowledge along intersections of gender, sex, race, ethnicity, class, age, ableism, and violence. As a result, scholars approached sexual(ized) violence not as a “by-product” but rather as an indelible part of genocide. This shift toward an intersectional approach to studying genocide was manifested in the emergence of new analytical terms such as “a new grammar of rape—‘genocidal rape,’ ‘ethnorape’ or ‘femicide.’”<sup>75</sup>

## SCHOLARSHIP OVERVIEW

This brief context shows how hard-won the first three decades of emerging debates on sexual(ized) violence among Holocaust scholars were. Although as early as 1975 Susan Brownmiller introduced sexual(ized) violence during the Holocaust as a topic for history writing, it was not until the 1980s–1990s that Jewish women’s wartime experiences gained more sustained scholarly attention.<sup>76</sup> The 1983 groundbreaking Conference on Women Surviving the Holocaust organized by Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz at Stern College in New York marked the emergence of scholarship on gendered experiences during the Holocaust and foundational works of scholars like Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman<sup>77</sup> or Marion Kaplan.<sup>78</sup> But even three decades into the exploration of the subject in 2010, Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel presented their edited volume *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* to readers “as a challenge to claims that Jewish women were not raped or sexually violated during the Holocaust.”<sup>79</sup> To confront such blatant erasure, some historians ventured to break the tabooed topic by focusing on and uncovering a broad range of perpetrators of sexual(ized) violence during the Holocaust: the Wehrmacht soldiers<sup>80</sup> and the soldiers from collaborating nations, the SS, SD, and police battalions and agencies, members of auxiliary administrations, fellow Jewish victims, as well as the non-Jewish locals who took an active part in the persecution and benefited materially from the deportation and mass murder of their Jewish neighbors.<sup>81</sup>

This heavy focus on perpetrators when examining the history of sexual(ized) violence soon yielded works on “gendered practices of masculine performance”<sup>82</sup> and efforts to produce taxonomies of rape (genocidal, institutional, or opportunistic rape) and understand the functions and patterns of sexual(ized) violence inflicted mainly on Jewish women and girls during the Holocaust.<sup>83</sup> Not surprisingly, perpetrator-centered research tended to objectify and sideline rape victims. It was during this phase that some scholars ventured to explore the crimes of the liberator Red Army including sexual(ized) violence against civilians, mainly non-Jewish women and girls in Germany, while leaving the impact of the Soviet Army’s mass rape of Jewish survivors of the

Holocaust during the liberation on the margins of scholarly attention. As a result, the past three decades produced some critical works on the mass rape of civilians by the Red Army in Germany, where the rape was more prevalent<sup>84</sup> and received more attention<sup>85</sup> compared to states between the Soviet Union and Germany.<sup>86</sup> The debate surrounding liberator sexual(ized) violence perpetrated against the Holocaust survivors, in particular, has remained on the margins of scholarly debates.

Despite the burgeoning scholarship about sexual(ized) violence during the Holocaust and in times of armed conflict<sup>87</sup> produced since the 2010s,<sup>88</sup> some scholarly voices still did not hide their skepticism about the risks of discussing such histories in the public space. Considering the scale of the suffering of Jews, Lawrence Langer argued that “the historical significance [of sexual(ized) violence—NP] is very small in the context of the Holocaust experience.” According to Langer, “to make rape a significant part of the narrative, the numbers would have to be in the thousands or tens of thousands. We will never know how often it happened.”<sup>89</sup> Some were concerned that focusing on Jewish women and girls as the victims of sexual(ized) violence might push the suffering of Jewish males aside.<sup>90</sup> Lenore J. Weitzman warned that admitting that rape during the Holocaust was a widespread phenomenon posits a risk of unwanted stigma and trauma for female Holocaust survivors, especially if the victim was not exposed to the ordeal of sexual(ized) violence.<sup>91</sup> Weitzman warned that sharing sexual(ized) violence experiences is a mentally challenging and painful process due to “fear, shame and concern about being blamed or viewed as ‘damaged goods.’”<sup>92</sup> According to Weitzman, the concept of *shanda*, a Yiddish word for shame, dangerously hangs over the family reputation when it comes to sexual relations, sexual violence, and rape.<sup>93</sup> In this line of thinking, some scholars identified the silence of victims as a means of self-defense and protection of the family’s honor.

The more recent scholarship helps to uncover a complicated terrain of erasure and visibility of victims’ experiences of gender-based sexual(ized) violence within existing taxonomies of knowledge shaped by political, societal, as well as institutional contexts of each postwar decade.<sup>94</sup> The survivors’ ability to share the stories of sexual(ized) violence precariously hung on societal acceptance and space for victims to be heard. Fearing indifference, Holocaust survivors were hesitant about sharing their experiences with the public.<sup>95</sup> The ability to share survivors’ stories in a safe space and acquire the role of a witness allows survivors to rebuild dignity and trust that their presence as witnesses is critical in what many describe as mending the wrongs of the past. Yet, witnessing itself and determining the (in)visibility of individual past experiences is a highly gendered phenomenon. Considering the harms of heteronormative patriarchal structures, Dorota Glowacka, for example, points to the issue of the credibility of women’s witnessing amid the prominence of men’s stories in Holocaust memory. She points to a “disavowal of female agency” and the

absence of women's experiences of sexual(ized) violence in Holocaust memory as "a conceptual oubliette" that prompts inquiry into "women's epistemic authority and their status as credible witnesses."<sup>96</sup> Similarly, trans and queer experiences have been made invisible until the recent upsurge of critical scholarship transcending queer and Jewish studies.<sup>97</sup>

## FRAMING AND CONCEPTS

This collection of essays aims to demystify and complicate the history of the 1945 liberation of Holocaust survivors by bringing to the fore their individual and local memories of liberation. It challenges the mnemonic culture glorifying the Red Army and offers a more nuanced interpretation of liberation as a grey zone of rescue. More specifically, the goal of this collection is to conceptualize the Soviet Army liberation of the Jewish Holocaust survivors as an exclusionary process of communal and societal displacement and violence. To do so, the volume employs gender and sexual(ized) violence as critical analytical categories. It also expands the notion of the "Soviet" liberation to partisans and local non-Jewish rescuers whose agency also played a significant role in the process.

Through a close reading of survivors' testimonies and memoirs, our volume thus moves beyond the conceptualization of the Soviet Army's liberation as a "rapturous moment in time."<sup>98</sup> We challenge the date of May 8, 1945, as a definite marker of liberation and instead introduce the notion of the liberation process for the period between 1943 and 1946. This liberation phase (1943–1946) was inspired by a chronology from the margins, that is, a chronology inspired by survivors' recollections of the interactions with partisans, rescuers, and Red Army liberators, including the Red Army's counterespionage service, and SMERSH (an acronym for "Death to Spies") that ran filtration camps in Central and Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union.

The emphasis on the liberation of the Holocaust survivors *as a process* going beyond May 8, 1945, has several implications. First, it challenges the deliberate separation of the difficult topic of sexual(ized) violence from the Holocaust and World War II history and allows for the identification of links and intersections between these fields. Second, it contests the fissure between the occupation and liberation constructed by the national histories fixed on May 8, 1945. Finally, it highlights the flaws of the securitization lens (i.e., "set of interrelated practices, and the processes of their production, diffusion, and reception/translation that bring threats into being"<sup>99</sup>), which identifies sexual(ized) violence as a weapon of war and, in so doing, neglects its presence during the transition to peace and beyond.<sup>100</sup> As Sara Meger points out, the securitization lens "enforces a de facto hierarchy of atrocity that considers

strategic and instrumental sexual violence inherently worse than ‘everyday’ rape and civilian-perpetrated sexual violence.”<sup>101</sup> Such an approach “reinforces a dichotomy between normal versus extraordinary politics.”<sup>102</sup> Meger reminds us that the securitization framework “lures us into a fantasy of gender equity, but in reality it obscures, rather than challenges, the structures that lie beneath wartime sexual(ized) violence.”<sup>103</sup> Such accounting of the structural roots of sexual(ized) violence should not be neglected in cases of sexual(ized) violence committed against Holocaust survivors by non-Jewish rescuers, partisans, liberators, various actors in Soviet filtration camps, or fellow Holocaust survivors.

This does not mean that scholars should abandon the securitization lens when studying sexual(ized) violence during times of conflict. Rather, what this research of sexual(ized) violence during the liberation phase urges us to consider is not the gap, but rather the overlap and continuance of structural and recently prominent securitization approaches to sexual(ized) violence. Approaching securitization and structural theories as embedded in each other collapses the boundaries of these approaches and allows for more plasticity; that is, it allows us to approach liberator sexual(ized) violence not as an oddity or exception but rather as an indelible part and parcel of states’ heteropatriarchal structures *and* an instrument of demarcating power and control to achieve *permanent security* at all times (i.e., regardless of times of conflict, transition to peace, and time of peace) within and beyond the borders of the state.<sup>104</sup>

In terms of the proposed conceptualization, Monika J. Flaschka offers the term “ruined liberation” and argues that “Soviet rape of Holocaust survivors does not fit the usual model of military sexual violence.” Flaschka ventures to examine the social power of rape and its multiple functions as a “public performance of masculinity,” as an expression of what George Mosse earlier described as *Männerbund*<sup>105</sup> or belonging to a “national, gendered and military community,” but also as a revenge or reward. Yuliya von Saal suggests framing rape as a tool of power control and reinforcing hierarchies, or a tool of “misogynic masculinity” in heteropatriarchy. Von Saal approaches liberator rape as a sign of the distortion and collapse of generational relationships and “the demoralization of [the entire] wartime society.” Stefan Cristian Ionescu’s analysis implies instrumentalization of rape as a tool for navigating communal justice and communal memory during an insecure transition to peace. Ionescu points to some Jewish male survivors’ approval of the liberator rape as part of a just revenge: “belief that the Red Army soldiers were entitled to rape and rob in Romania’s cities such as Bucharest,” which “appeared to them wealthy and unharmed by war,” as “a form of revenge for the destruction perpetrated by the Romanian soldiers in the USSR between 1941 and 1944.” Liberator rape was thus an instrument of social power, as Flaschka argues in her chapter. It also functioned as a tool for navigating communal justice and memory in a fragile transition toward

postwar national memory building. As Czech Jewish survivor Lilly Selby said in Monika J. Flaschka's chapter: "I wished them what they did to us," thus refusing to condemn Soviet Army soldiers' rape of women in Slovakia, the state that collaborated with Nazi Germany.

The grey zone of liberation as "shattered" inevitably introduced efforts to conceptualize the agency of historical actors in a way that captured the fluidity of historical agency. For example, Ionescu brings to the fore the category of liberator-occupier, and in her chapter Miranda Brethour carefully works through the conceptualizations of "the dual identity of 'helper-perpetrator'" while distancing herself from the term "rescue" as it implies a successful and positive experience of survivors and obliterates the "grey zone" of rescue. These efforts to recognize the multiplicity and fluidity of agencies of historical actors highlight the importance of implication — namely a category of implicated subject<sup>106</sup> that, more often than not, is absent or outright denied and rejected in the national histories' narratives feeding on national victimhood.

While focusing mainly on traumatic registers of sexual(ized) violence in history and individual and collective memory of liberation, the contributors in this volume did not fail to name and recognize physical and psychological interactions with liberators that went beyond those of sexual(ized) violence. In so doing, the presented edited volume contributes to the recent scholarship that underscores the impossibility of viewing sexual(ized) violence as a fixed category and invites scholars to deeper explorations of what is but also what is not sexual(ized) violence.

The interactions identified by our contributors can be located in the complex space between romantic liaisons on the one hand and rape on the other. For example, Anna Hájková's republished chapter<sup>107</sup> in this volume challenges feminist scholars' interpretations of prostitution and sex work as sexual violence. She brings to the fore histories of various forms of sexual barter and the urgency to destigmatize it. Hájková situates the concept of sexual barter at the intersection of the history of prostitution and the economy of prisoner society and asks "how sexual barter has come to be portrayed as inherently shameful." Her research questions reductive approaches conceptualizing prostitution as sexual violence or rape and, in so doing, rescues victims from the harms of scholarly approaches that implicitly add to victims' dehumanization by denying their agency in extreme contexts. As Hájková asserts, "Sexual barter, that is, exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection, was a frequent means by which Holocaust victims sought to secure their survival." Similarly, Ionescu maps transactional (sexual barter), consensual, or romantic relationships between the Jewish (and gentile) women and the Red Army that included desire, fantasizing, and romance. Ionescu notes that "a few Jewish girls and women found the liberating Red Army soldiers attractive and dated them or fantasized about dating them if they were too young to have a romance."

## METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the editors strove for a survivor-centered approach (i.e., focus on women, youth and children—mainly girls, and to a lesser degree queer adults) and hoped to highlight what liberation meant to the survivors while recognizing how these recollections were institutionally shaped. Carli Snyder's research that built on Noah Shenker's findings shows how institutional expectations of ideal survivor testimony, which was structured around on a 20:60:20 ratio where the majority of the testimony should focus on experiences during the war and the rest should be squarely divided between prewar and postwar experiences, limited survivors' space for the recollections of liberation and navigated it as a resolution to survivors' earlier plight. As Snyder concludes, "For many, liberation did not lead to a sense of resolution and often could not be confined to 20 percent of their retelling."

That was because for most Holocaust survivors, liberation had nothing to do with one moment in time, namely May 8, 1945. First, most of Eastern Europe was liberated much earlier (between the summer of 1944 and early winter 1945), and second, survivors thought of their liberation as a process that began long before and lasted long after the actual event. They also gave it meanings that could not be contained in a 20:60:20 ratio. For some survivors like Jurek Becker, the author of *Jacob the Liar*, who survived the ghetto as a child, the liberation began with longing for freedom while in the ghetto. Jacob dreamed about the liberation by the Soviets just like those in the Warsaw ghetto clung to any news indicating approaching liberation. Even false news triggered "the fantasy of a possible liberation and foster[ed] an imaginary connection to a world in which the enemy seeking the death of the Jews is being battled. It counteracts the sense of being excluded from the world, abandoned by all."<sup>108</sup> Such envisioning could include sexual fantasies about the liberator, as Ionescu's chapter notes. For other Holocaust survivors, liberation also meant experiences from "filtration" camps established by the Soviet authorities as a means to ensure that only loyal Soviet citizens rather than traitors and collaborators were allowed to return. Many liberated Holocaust survivors returning to the Soviet Union were subjected to detention and interrogation at filtration camps—the topic that has been on the margins of scholarly attention and is explored by Daina Eglitis in this volume.

The Holocaust survivors ascribed a variety of meanings to their liberation. As Paulovicova's contribution shows, the diverse memories of liberation ranging from "the anti-climatic liberation of one body, one human being"<sup>109</sup> to memory vignettes describing liberation as "such a terrible thing to happen to be liberated"<sup>110</sup> suggest the presence of unexplored multidirectional memories of liberation worth deeper analysis. Andrea Pető examines how survivors themselves could downplay the liberator rape or recollected liberation as love or "romanticizing narrative mode, built on empathy

and support,” which, as Pető argues, was “also possible in the case of sexual violence.” Flaschka brings to the fore other mnemonic vignettes of liberation, among them Henia Goldman’s recollection of liberation as a “nightmarish experience” that she described “as a punishment” that she “deserved” because she survived the horrors of the Holocaust. Goldman’s memory thus points to the presence of Holocaust survivors’ guilt attached to their survival and liberator rape. Similarly, Carli Snyder’s thorough research of hundreds of testimonies concludes that “the very meaning of liberation was closely associated with rape” for many of these survivors. Miranda Brethour and Monika J. Flaschka analyze testimonies that recall liberator rape as being worse than the terror that the survivors went through.

Many contributors also examine erasures and avoidance in survivors’ recollections of their liberation experiences. The volume thus contributes to the ongoing debates on the modes of silence and erasures surrounding sexual(ized) violence. What the past debates on the silence<sup>111</sup> surrounding sexual(ized) violence revealed is the need to pay closer attention to *how* precisely victims narrate the difficult history of sexual(ized) violence and what modes of avoidance rather than silence they resort to in their testimonies.<sup>112</sup> Paula David notes that during the lifetime of Holocaust survivors, we approach interviewing, recording, listening, understanding, and a careful unpacking of testimonies as an art rather than science and insists that scholars should listen to silence and ask the following questions: “In the context of sexual violence, is the ‘silence’ or excluded narrative a result of personal choice, awareness of personal safety, anticipation of negative reaction, or lack of understanding? Does it stem from a personal or familial protective stance? Is it a carefully constructed one or an intuitive one?”<sup>113</sup>

This volume unpacks various modes of avoidance surrounding the recollection of sexual(ized) violence and rape. The early survivor testimonies displayed specific mentions of sexual(ized) violence whereas the later testimonies display the presence of cautious language that would not evoke judgment. In some cases, Holocaust survivors mentioned sexual(ized) violence only when the circumstances allowed them to escape the imminent threat of rape. Such situations are described in the memoirs of Eva Gossman, Helena Jockel, and Elizabeth Meyer Liener’s book titled *Markus, Planter of Trees: A Memoir*.<sup>114</sup> Even though oral testimonies reveal the reluctance to call sexual(ized) violence by its name, it does not mean that these narratives are not present in the testimonies. One of the survivors, Eva Boros, recalls how they did not want to stay in their house upon returning from the concentration camp because of the danger of the Red Army’s violence. Eva then describes rape as an “attack” (*napadnutie*), and only when prompted by the interviewer about the nature of the attack does Eva use the word rape. Snyder notes the presence of similar euphemisms referring to rape: “go to bed with us” or “have fun with us.” Flaschka observes “how survivors try to make sense of what



happened to them or distance themselves from it through their word choice,” and Monika Vrzgulová identifies the word choice of “calamity” as a signifier of rape. Eglitis argues that “survivors tell of sexual violence that victimized someone else, or which they narrowly avoided. . . . [In many cases,] it is impossible to determine whether a survivor herself was a witness or a victim.” Scholars suggest that the avoidance of naming the rape directly should be studied more carefully, not only as a traumatic memory with its long-term impact on victims but also possibly as “a form of communication” and “strategy for coexistence.”<sup>115</sup>

To better understand factors that played a role in the ways the survivors recollected their past experiences of liberator sexual(ized) violence, some contributions ventured to carefully unpack the ways the interviews were conducted. Snyder’s meticulous scrutiny of the 1990s Shoah Foundation interviews and the interviewers’ training points not only to the lack of preparedness of the interviewers to deal with the survivors’ recollections of liberator rape but also shows how such training shaped their idealized notion of liberation as a resolution to survivors’ narratives. Vrzgulová reflects on self-presentation strategies of Holocaust survivors during the interviews she along with other colleagues conducted in Slovakia between 1995 and 1997 for the international project *Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust* under the auspices of the Fortunoff Video Archive. Vrzgulová offers a first-person reflective account of the interviewer recollecting the interviewing process and technique, the mood among interviewers, challenges of interviewing the Holocaust survivors, as well as factors that shaped the content of survivors’ testimonies. The process of interviewing was not only transformative for both interviewer and interviewee, but it also informed and shaped subsequent interviews: “All future interviews were already different because I had become different too. In each subsequent interview, I was able to better perceive and more meaningfully explore the respondent’s past,” Vrzgulová recalls. Her reference to “embodied presence”<sup>116</sup> nudges us to embrace embodied research by emphasizing the researcher’s positionality and humanity through “witnessing and ‘listening through discomfort.’”<sup>117</sup>

## WITNESSING: ETHICS AND AGENCY

In a society that values intimacy, “testimony appeals to the heart and not to the mind,” Wieviorka claims. “The one who testifies signs a ‘compassionate pact’ with the one who receives the testimony.”<sup>118</sup> The effect of the “compassionate pact” is the emphatic receiver’s “compassionate response.”<sup>119</sup> “Compassionate response” implies careful listening and critical pondering if scholars were “truly listening”<sup>120</sup> to what survivors were saying. Yet, despite their best intentions researchers’ delivery of a “compassionate response” is



often not without risks of perpetuating survivors' dehumanization and stigmatization. The contributors inevitably grappled with questions concerning ethical compassionate response, ethical approach, and methodologies. Paulovicova argues that uncritical and often assumed conclusions that victims of sexual(ized) violence were silent due to their feelings of shame may harm victims as such claims perpetuate the same patriarchal structures within which the act of violent mass rape emerged. She argues that the victims' recollections of rape displayed the presence of screen memory—a sign of the presence of a coping mechanism rather than shame. She suggests breaking the “vicious cycle of [victim] stigmatization” by firmly situating rape victims' silence in the legal protective space of “right to memory.” Protecting the victims from stigmatization has a broader societal impact. Shame attached to victims who were raped does not solely serve as a tool of their oppression and surveillance; it disintegrates the social, political, and economic fabric of the community and society. As the research shows, rape, enforced pregnancies, venereal disease, abortions, unwanted children born out of rape, trauma, and stigmatization attached to rape had a far-reaching impact on society as it often required social interventions and “warped and changed its [society's] communal psyche and identity” and even had the power to “irreversibly alter . . . the nature of the national character.”<sup>121</sup>

Several contributions underscore the importance of approaching *shame* surfacing through recollections of sexual violence, rape, prostitution, or sexual barter as a social construct that needs to be historicized. For example, in her chapter, Pető notes that “the explicit mention of the feeling of shame was more common *after* the liberation than before.” Hájková's research carefully unpacks layers that facilitated the portrayal of sexual barter as “inherently shameful.” Her research shows how sex work and queerness were instrumentalized in othering and shaming survivors who resorted to sexual barter by both their fellow Holocaust survivors and scholars. How to approach survivors' voices that judge or express contempt for other survivors who resorted to sexual barter? She asks “how to examine these voices in a way that shows empathy to judging narrators (themselves victims of the Holocaust) while refusing to shame the people who engaged in sex work.”

While striving for a more victim-centered approach in an effort to restore survivors' dignity and agency, the contributors encountered factors that played a role in depleting victims of their agency and, in turn, contributed to the further dehumanization of survivors. One such factor is the harm of scholarly misconceptualization inflicted on survivors. As Hájková's research shows, misconceptualization of sexual barter as sexual violence or rape can strip victims of agency and ability to choose even in extreme situations. Hájková refutes the entrenched notion of “choiceless choices” proposed by Lawrence Langer and underscores the critical importance of survivors'

agency and survivors' "ability to exercise at least some form of control over sex." Fellow survivors and scholars who resort to moral condemnation, judgments, and shaming of survivors who embraced sex as a vital and often the sole resource that could be commodified not only contribute to profound othering, marginalization, and dehumanization of such survivors but, more importantly, they fortify the very structures of heteropatriarchy that instrumentalize stigmatization as an efficient tool of power and surveillance.

Recognition of the agency of Holocaust survivors in difficult and impossible situations is a vital pathway to the restoration and affirmation of survivors' humanity and dignity. Brethour's research in this volume identifies several important layers of agency as captured in oral histories: "the choice of survivors to narrate the tabooed histories that they tell, the way that their recollections emphasize decision-making, and their embodied ways of telling." Building on the work of Julie Hurst-Whitehouse, Brethour approaches "testifying itself . . . [as] an act of agency through which women, to quote Julie Hurst-Whitehouse, 'reinstat[e] their personhood, including their sexual subjectivity [. . .] despite numerous societal barriers which deem talking about the experience off-limits.'" <sup>122</sup>

Throughout the volume, contributors strive to underscore survivors' agency during the liberation phase and the strategies they implemented to prevent sexual(ized) violence as a refusal of survivors' objectification and means of rebuilding their dignity and humanity. Ionescu, for example, brings to the fore several strategies to which victims resorted to avoid sexual(ized) violence: "such as traveling in large groups, staying indoors after dark, seeking protection from former male prisoners who traveled on the same routes or shared the same transit camps, preparing hiding places, disguising themselves to look older and unappealing, lying about their age, claiming to suffer from contagious diseases, and asking for help from Soviet officers." Brethour identifies strategies of self-defense and decision-making in the context of sheltering of survivors by aid providers. In her chapter on sexual(ized) violence in partisan units in Belarus von Saal identifies strategies that women or young girls implemented to navigate their survival in the face of the ever-present threat of rape by the partisans and in "partly coercive sexual relationships with men." Women would enter into forced marriages, typically with men higher in the power hierarchy among partisans like officers, which von Saal describes as situations with a "blurred line between consensual and forced relationships." Gender and age predetermined the strategies that Holocaust survivors used to navigate their survival among partisan groups. Such strategies would entail efforts of little girls to seek the protection of a substitute parent, impersonating boys, or dressing like boys. Adolescent girls, von Saal argues, "were seeking the protection of a potential partner, with whom they usually (but not always) also had a sexual relationship."

## DISSECTING THE MEMORY OF LIBERATION IN NATIONAL AND TRANSNATIONAL SETTINGS

While some of the contributions ventured to dissect complex factors behind the production of individual memory vignettes of the liberation, few contributors tackled the history and memory of sexual(ized) violence in national and transnational contexts. Andrea Pető's contribution in this volume speaks to these debates by pointing to the presence of a post-1989 "diverse 'market' (academic and political) for stories of brutality by the Red Army" dictated by the political agenda of the ethnostate. Pető argues that while the rape stories of the ethnic majority have "contributed to the formation of national martyrdom," ethnic minorities, such as Jews, and Jewish women in particular, resorted to silence as "a form of resistance to the existing dominant politics of memory," which uncritically glorified the Red Army.<sup>123</sup> These identity-shaping memory dynamics were instrumental to "the illiberal polypore state" and its effort to maintain "mnemonic security."<sup>123</sup> As Pető argues, "The memory politics of the 'polypore state' is to duplicate, depoliticize, and empty the narrative and historical agency by appropriating its meanings."

Kateřina Králová and Janis Nalbadidacis show how "historiography struggles to integrate the experiences of Jewish women that go beyond the usual national framework" and underscore the importance of *transnational linkages* in survivors' accounts that are often erased in national histories. Their meticulous research through multiple sources of the experience of one deportee from Thessaloniki, twenty-two-year-old Palomba Allalouf from Greece, complements the story of the countries that witnessed the physical presence of the liberator Red Army on their respective territories, such as Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, and Belarus. The national framework applied to the past would easily miss the histories of sexual(ized) violence inflicted by the Soviet Army in countries like Greece, which the Red Army did not liberate. Yet, the sole historical fact of the absence of the Red Army on Greek territory does not mean that displaced Jews were not subjected to the threat of liberator sexual(ized) violence elsewhere.

As the current and past political contexts reveal, securitized memory instrumentalizing sexual(ized) violence for identity politics and geopolitical interests varies across regions. As von Saal observes in this volume, different political contexts facilitate the emergence or erasure of the painful memory of rape and a need to account for the *territorialization of memory* as a factor that predetermines the nature of the fluctuation of memory of sexual(ized) violence within specific regional political frames. Such territorialization emerges when one reconsiders narratives in the diaspora. What von Saal's contribution suggests is to consider the different meanings of rape as being time-based

and place-based, hence supporting existing scholarship underscoring the fluidity of rape signifiers across historical time and space.<sup>124</sup>

Sexual(ized) violence as instruments of national and transnational securitization are intertwined with orientalism and civilizationism discourses.<sup>125</sup> As Violeta Davoliūtė's contribution demonstrates, Primo Levi's orientalist gaze directed at the Red Army and the Soviet Union as a country of "a primitive vitality, a pure pagan talent" displays a gendered bias. On the one hand, Levi operates with the notion of the "primitive" side of liberators (orientalist gaze). Concurrently, Levi is apologetical toward the Soviet liberators as he relativizes the Red Army's sexual(ized) violences, portraying it as "innocent" violence. In so doing, Levi erases the experiences of some female victims of sexual(ized) violence whom he describes as "exotic," "fairy-tale like," or "half savage." Orientalism and civilizationism are omnipresent and permeate survivors' testimonies and archival documents. Pető argues that the omnipresence of civilizational and orientaling in public discourse and available documents are entangled with Christianity's civilizationism formed since the Middle Ages as a response to Turkish rule and military threats from the global East.

## METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

In addition to our efforts to restore the agency of the Holocaust survivors as an ethical imperative and identify the harms that scholars inflict through their methodologies, our contributors grapple with a series of other challenges rooted in the nature of testimonies as "constantly mediated, contested, fragile acts of remembering,"<sup>126</sup> with a dual function: as testimonies of the Holocaust and the liberation but also as historical documents of their own era in which they were produced, according to Snyder in this volume. The contributors encountered the challenges of working with fragmented testimonies due to institutional imprint on the process of interviewing, self-censorship of the survivors and specific modes of avoiding discussion of sexual(ized) violence, the problems with "making sexual violence invisible with the indexing practice," according to Pető, or challenges of language translation of handwritten documents, among others.

Researchers who worked with oral testimonies and official records, like von Saal, were confronted with "the presence of extreme asymmetries of power." Eglitis points to "the absence of women's voices in perpetrator or other official documents" and the importance of testimonies as a gap-filling medium that "recognizes tensions between narratives of victimization by liberators and the heroism of liberating armies, and addresses the longtime marginalization of women's stories in the telling of these histories." Snyder's contribution unpacks the methodological challenges behind the production of testimonies, which in turn produce methodological challenges for how to

understand the value of testimonies as a pathway to comprehension of the impact of the Holocaust on individuals as well as their value as historical documents reflecting the politics of the era during which they were produced. What is the additional layer, and always a challenge for all of the contributors, is to reconcile these two layers with our positionalities in the changing world.

## ETHICAL CHALLENGES

A careful contemplation of the possibility of writing an edited volume on the topic of sexual(ized) violence is always wrought with uneasy dilemmas concerning the implications of such publication for individual victims and the community. The decision “To write or not to write on *this* topic?” was not an easy one. The participants of this project had to ask uneasy questions about the risks of writing about the difficult history of sexual(ized) violence. What is our investment in writing this history? From the position of the researcher’s logic, remaining silent about sexual(ized) violence benefits perpetrators as the silence absolves the perpetrators of their guilt and contributes to the environment that perpetuates sexual(ized) violence crimes. On the other hand, writing about sexual(ized) violence poses some serious risks as the surviving victims of sexual(ized) violence might be subjected to unwanted societal attention and reemergence of the traumatic past. How to write about these difficult histories without reproducing harm and stigma? What do we need to unlearn to lower the risks of perpetuating harm?

We also had to consider the risks of being accused of a predatory approach, that is, “collect[ing] stories of pain and humiliation in the lives of those being researched for [purposes of] commodification,”<sup>127</sup> which made us think more deeply about knowledge production in academia and in Holocaust and genocide studies in particular. Annette Wieviorka warns of the dangers of “saturated memory” feeding on “perverse fascination with the horror, morbid taste for the past, the use of victims as political tools.”<sup>128</sup> To avoid this danger scholars must insist on legibility “by studying a singular object [in our case Holocaust survivors’ testimonies] in order to discover how, by its intrinsic complexity, it re-asks all the questions.”<sup>129</sup> The field of Holocaust and genocide studies is rooted in the mindset of documenting genocide, genocidal acts, complicity with *genocidaires*, or what Eve Tuck broadly and historically described as harms or “documenting damage.”<sup>130</sup> In the words of Eve Tuck, “There is an implicit and sometimes explicit assurance that stories of damage pay off in material, sovereign, and political wins.”<sup>131</sup> The question that looms behind is how victims benefit from such an approach. More importantly, do damage-documenting narratives center on or objectify victims? Does the current knowledge production speak *with* victims (if still alive) and *for* victims to “pursue a brighter future” based on survivors’ desires, wisdom, and hope?<sup>132</sup> To what extent

does our research perpetuate the notion of victims as “damaged,”<sup>133</sup> and how should we unlearn harmful approaches, preconceptions, and methodologies leading to such harmful stereotyping? The list of worries and concerns is rather long.

Finding a balance between documenting harm to call out the atrocities and abuses on the one hand, and centering the victims’ healing, well-being, and betterment on the other, is not an easy task as Holocaust scholars in this project, and more broadly, heavily rely on the oral testimonies produced within the guidelines of institutionalized Holocaust memory primarily centered on documenting the persecution, suffering, violence, and trauma incurred during the Holocaust and its aftermath. The sources that the Holocaust scholars work with make balancing damage-centered and victim desire-centered research as a way of restoring victims’ humanity and dignity rather challenging.

While acknowledging these challenges and the limits of testimonies, the editors and contributors in this volume intended to root our knowledge production in the epistemic space embedded in an ethical approach that is centered on survivors’ (rather than perpetrators or nations); the approach that acknowledges trauma, restores victims’ dignity through recognizing agency, and, in so doing, opens the space for healing.

## UNINTENDED ERASURES

We want to approach our critical reflection on what was omitted or erased in this project as a “feminist tactic, not to undermine success or to dole out reprimands,” but to acknowledge that “it comes from a place of critique and reflexivity.”<sup>134</sup> What came to the fore during our discussions was our project participants’ sense of regret for not asking the Holocaust survivors they interviewed in the past about the liberation experience from a gendered viewpoint when survivors were still alive and when only a few would talk about liberation gender-based sexual(ized) violence. One of the contributors articulates this frustration clearly: “There is always the feeling that we started researching this issue [in the Holocaust studies field] too late. Hardly any of the women, men or non-binary survivors affected are still alive, and too few have spoken about it. It remains an unsatisfactory feeling that we have only uncovered the ‘tip of the iceberg.’”<sup>135</sup> Such regret indicates frustration stemming from an incomplete understanding, akin to scratching the surface of what liberation experience with its grey zones meant for the survivors.

Despite our great efforts to address liberator sexual(ized) violence against Roma and Sinti survivors, we were not able to deliver a much-needed chapter on this important topic as one of the experts who joined our project withdrew due to the pressures of the workload. Another participant who intended to deliver the chapter on the experiences of both Jewish and Roma victims of the Holocaust ended up focusing mostly on Jewish survivors. Our inability to include the chapter on Roma and Sinti survivors’

experiences of liberation has deeper roots. The institutional underrepresentation of the Romani Holocaust amounts to Roma's invisibility or "epistemological erasure"<sup>136</sup> due to structural racism in society and academia. Romani scholars are seen as "outsiders within"<sup>137</sup> the field or "quintessential 'halfies' moving between Romani and *gadje* worlds."<sup>138</sup> Their participation in academic production is tokenistic, which is why it is not surprising that Roma scholars do not trust symbolic or "paternalistic 'Roma inclusion'"<sup>139</sup> and representation. Such distrust is further cemented by the knowledge production of non-Roma scholars who often do not speak the Romani language, and thus homogenize the story of Roma and Sinti, and even engender their stereotyping.<sup>140</sup> These issues of structural racism inevitably shape the archives we work with. Ari Joskowicz underscores a direct dependency between surveillance and victim witnessing.<sup>141</sup> Roma and Sinti have been largely reluctant to provide interviews due to racialized stereotyping as "unreliable witnesses"—a result of decades of criminalization. Fear of police profiling and surveillance created tension between Roma's "desire of witness[es] to be heard and . . . their fear of revealing too much."<sup>142</sup>

The pillars for queer Jewish studies were built about two decades ago, and the field is gradually making its way out of the periphery to the center of scholarly attention despite the intensified attacks that nonbinary communities have been facing in the current political climate.<sup>143</sup> Even though the recent scholarship produced critical works on the experiences of nonbinary communities during the Holocaust, only Anna Hájková's chapter covers case studies of both, heterosexual and queer Jewish survivors.

In the early stages of this project, we were asked why we did not address the experiences of non-Jewish women of liberator rape in this volume. There are multiple reasons for our focus on Jewish Holocaust survivors. All contributors are trained Holocaust scholars who mainly work with oral or written testimonies, memoirs, and archival documents; hence, the focus on Jewish survivors evolved naturally. By not including non-Jewish women in this edited volume, we are not erasing their experiences from history and memory, but rather we acknowledge different wartime experiences and asymmetries of power between non-Jewish and Jewish survivors subjected to liberator rape. We believe that we would need more space to contextualize these different experiences and their impact on the recollection of liberation rape.

We are also fully aware that Holocaust scholarship on sexual(ized) violence is heavily based on women's experiences. In contrast, the rape of men, trans or queer, is rarely brought into focus.<sup>144</sup> Despite our effort to invite scholars dealing with masculinities and male rapes, we ultimately ended with contributions heavily focused on the experiences of women and girls. As far as our category of liberator is concerned, we failed to incorporate soldiers of the Allied armies<sup>145</sup> that liberated the Holocaust survivors and tackled only interactions with the Soviet Army, partisans, rescuers, and personnel in filtration camps.



These unintended erasures of this book, along with a key question of what needs to be learned and unlearned at this moment of crisis in the field of Holocaust studies thus serve as an invitation for scholars to transform the omissions in this project as well as inquiries about the state of the field into future research questions, interdisciplinary projects, and constructive debates that will collectively guide us to work through the crisis, transform the field of Holocaust studies, and offer expertise that allows rebuilding thriving communities in a pluriversal world.

## STRUCTURE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE EDITED VOLUME

This interdisciplinary volume is divided into three broad interconnected parts organized around methodology, history, and memory.

Part I tackles methodology and notes challenges that researchers encountered while addressing the topic of sexual(ized) violence. It addresses the methodology behind the production of oral testimonies and the impact such production has on our understanding of a painful history of sexual(ized) violence. This part seeks answers to difficult questions of how we should tell the stories of rape and approach the stigma attached to raped victims.

Part II reconstructs the traumatic history from available ego-documents by describing a range of interactions—aid, romance, exploitation, sexual violence, rape, sex barter, forced cohabitation—during the liberation phase. It tackles sexual(ized) violence committed by the Soviet liberators, partisans, and rescuers, and also maps experiences of the survivors' experiences in Soviet filtration camps. It raises several critical questions: What do we learn from available ego-documents and recorded oral testimonies about Holocaust survivors' liberation experiences? What forms of interactions (i.e., aid, romance, exploitation, sexual violence, rape, sex barter, forced cohabitation) between the Red Army soldiers and the Holocaust survivors can be identified? What does rape during liberation tell us about the immense social power of sexual(ized) violence? How did the constant threat of sexual(ized) violence affect survivors' experience of liberation? How did the victims make sense of the mass rape committed by the Red Army soldiers?

Finally, Part III explores the visibility and/or erasure of sexual(ized) violence and rape in public memory and asks how the incorporation of sexual(ized) violence into collective memory has been occurring. This section underscores the importance of studying liberator sexual(ized) violence in a transnational context as national narratives often erase such experiences. This part also uncovers civilizationism and orientalizing in some survivor testimonies discussing liberator sexual(ized) violence, nudging scholars to consider liberation within the framework of coloniality.



## NOTES

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3. Didi-Huberman, "Opening the Camps, Closing the Eyes," 90.
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6. Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (Yale University Press, 2015), 25.
7. Edit Jeges, "Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global Memory Frames: Digital Storytelling about 'Change' and 'Liberation,'" *Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 3 (2020): 453.
8. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Cornell University Press, 2006).
9. Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony: Modern Jewish Experience* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 83; Jeges, "Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global Memory Frames," 454.
10. Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 31.
11. Kateřina Králová, *Homecoming: Holocaust Survivors and Greece, 1941–1946* (Brandeis University Press, 2025), 1.
12. Didi-Huberman, "Opening the Camps, Closing the Eyes," 107.
13. Gerta Solan, *My Heart Is at Ease* (The Azrieli Foundation, 2014), 34.
14. Solan, *My Heart Is at Ease*, 34.
15. Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 102.
16. Králová, *Homecoming*, 21. See also Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).
17. Magdalena Waligórska, Yechiel Weizman, Alexander Friedman, and Ina Sorkina, "Holocaust Survivors Returning to Their Hometowns in the Polish-Belarusian-Ukrainian Borderlands, 1944–1948," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 37, no. 2 (2023): 210–11.
18. See, for example, Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 113–46.
19. Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 25.
20. For a more detailed analysis of liberation as a process see Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*.

21. Stefan Cristian Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania: Rebuilding Jewish Lives and Communities, 1944–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 56.
22. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, “Postwar Violence Against Jews in Central and Eastern Europe,” in *Our Courage*, ed. Kata Bohus, Atina Grossmann, Werner Hanak, and Miriam Wenzel (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2020), 64–81; Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, “Pogroms in Krakow in 1918–1945: Historical Analysis,” *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2024): 253–67; Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, “The Cracow Pogrom of August 1945: A Narrative Reconstruction,” in *Contested Memories: Poles and Jews During the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, ed. Joshua D. Zimmerman, 221–38 (Rutgers University Press, 2003); Anna Cichopek-Gajraj and Glenn Dynner, “Pogroms in Post-1918 Poland,” in *Pogroms: A Documentary History of Anti-Jewish Violence*, ed. Elissa Bemporad and Eugene Avrutin (Oxford University Press, 2021), 193–218.
23. Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania*; Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence*.
24. Nechama Tec, *Dry Tears: The Story of a Lost Childhood* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 220.
25. This edited volume employs a range of terms, such as rape, sexual violence, sexualized violence, and sexual(ized) violence, among others. The editors did not seek to standardize terminology across the contributions; instead, we allowed authors to apply terminology that best suited their respective analyses. On the “definitional inexactness” of rape, see Miranda A. H. Horvath and Jennifer M. Brown, *Rape: Challenging Contemporary Thinking—10 Years On*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023), 4. On various definitions of sexual(ized) violence consult: Joanna Bourke, *Disgrace: Global Reflections on Sexual Violence* (Reaktion Books, 2022), 11–12; Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Simon and Schuster, 1975), 22; Eithne Dowds, “Towards a Contextual Definition of Rape: Consent, Coercion and Constructive Force,” *Modern Law Review* 83, no. 1 (2020): 35–63.
26. Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*. See also Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2009).
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  31. Na’ama Shik, “Description and Silence: Sexual Abuse in Early and Later Testimonies of Survivors and the Emergence of the Israeli Narrative,” *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 487.
  32. Dorota Glowacka and Regina Mühlhäuser, “Gender-Based and Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: On the Importance of Writing This History Today,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* (2024): 2. Glowacka and Mühlhäuser refer to Jacob Apenszlak, Jacob Kenner, Isaac Lewin, and Moses Polakiewicz, eds., *The Black Book of Polish Jewry: An Account of the Martyrdom of Polish Jewry Under the Nazi Occupation* (American Federation for Polish Jews, 1943).
  33. Joshua Rubenstein and Ilya Altman, eds., *The Unknown Black Book: The Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories*, trans. Christopher Morris and Joshua Rubenstein (Indiana University Press, 2008).
  34. Annette F. Timm, “The Costs of Silencing Holocaust Victims: Why We Must Add Sexual Violence to Our Definition of Genocide,” in *Genocide: The Power and Problems of a Concept*, ed. Andrea Graziosi and Frank E. Sysyn (McGill–Queens University Press, 2022), 49–54.
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  37. Shik, “Description and Silence,” 483.
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  39. Shik, “Description and Silence,” 483.
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  42. Timm, “The Costs of Silencing Holocaust Victims,” 54.
  43. Bos, “Barter, Prostitution, Abuse?,” 12–13.
  44. Wievorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 140.

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47. Marta Havryshko, "Listening to Women's Voices: Jewish Rape Survivors Testimonies in Soviet War Crimes Trials," in *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Neštáková et al. (Academic Studies Press, 2021), 225.
48. Havryshko, "Listening to Women's Voices," 225.
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50. Havryshko, "Listening to Women's Voices," 241.
51. Majstorović, "Red Army Troops Encounter the Holocaust," 249–271.
52. Grossmann, "A Question of Silence," 46. See also Pascale R. Bos, "Feminists Interpreting the Politics of Wartime Rape: Berlin, 1945; Yugoslavia, 1992–1993," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 31, no. 4 (2006): 995–1026; Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Belknap Press, 1995).
53. Sabina Hirschauer, *The Securitization of Rape: Women, War and Sexual Violence* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.
54. Grossmann, "A Question of Silence," 50. See also Grossmann, *Jews, Germans and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany*.
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60. Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness*, 88.
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PART I

# METHODOLOGY



# I

## “AND THIS WAS OUR LIBERATION”

### RAPE OF JEWISH HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS, THE REEVALUATION OF LIBERATION, AND THE SOCIAL POWER OF RAPE

MONIKA J. FLASCHKA

## INTRODUCTION

**I**N HER SHOAH FOUNDATION TESTIMONY, LUBA MOSKOWITZ,<sup>1</sup> A POLISH JEW from Warsaw who had been raped by two Soviet officers, voices her frustration with a particular gap in Holocaust history, saying the following: “What we went through in camp was hard enough, but people never ask us what we went through after liberation. . . . We went through a lot . . . [through] hell after liberation. And nobody ever talked about it, about the Russians. Sure they were our liberators, but they did terrible things to us. They were raping . . . and they said . . . because we liberated you, you owe us.” She continues: “And see, nobody writes about it . . . nobody ever says anything about the Russians. . . . But [to] do that on top of it to us. It was a terrible thing.”<sup>2</sup>

Over the last twenty years, there has been a proliferation of studies of sexual violence during the Second World War.<sup>3</sup> However, the rape of Jewish Holocaust survivors during liberation, what I call liberation rape, is still an understudied topic.<sup>4</sup> We do not know how many women Soviet soldiers raped, and there will never be a way to know, although hundreds of survivor testimonies mention hearing rumors of, experiencing, or witnessing rape by the Red Army. The number does not matter, however. The entire

issue of numbers is problematic, because it implies that there is some threshold whereby the Red Army raped enough women that the topic is now legitimately researchable. What matters is that it happened frequently enough that survivors comment on it, and it was a significant part of their liberation experience. This is particularly noteworthy, as interviewers received little organized instruction on whether or how to ask about rape during liberation.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter will focus only on female victims of rape, although witness testimonies come from both men and women. Given what we know about wartime rape, there is no doubt that men were victims of sexual violence,<sup>6</sup> but there just is not much information about their particular experiences available at the moment. I have viewed most, although not all, of the English-language testimonies about rape by Soviet soldiers available in the USC Shoah Foundation collection, and I have only come across a single testimony that mentions male victims of Soviet rape. I refer to rape by Soviet soldiers or the Red Army, but not by Russians. Of course, a significant number of rapes were committed by those men who would identify as Russian, but there were individuals from a wide geographical area, including but not limited to Russian or Russian-speaking territory, and including soldiers of non-Russian ethnicities.<sup>7</sup>

For the purposes of this chapter, liberation is defined not just as the entry of Soviet soldiers into concentration or extermination camps, but any space where the threat of the arrival or actual arrival of Soviet soldiers resulted in a shift out from under German control.<sup>8</sup> For example, someone in hiding or who passed as non-Jewish in German or Axis territory is liberated by the rumored or actual arrival of the Red Army. In this chapter, the terms rape and sexual violence are used interchangeably. Taking my cues from how survivors describe their experiences, rape is defined as penile penetration of the vagina. That is not *my* overall definition of rape, nor is it how I define rape in all of my work; it is specific to this work, and comes from how survivors discuss experiencing or witnessing nonconsensual sexual intercourse between female survivors and Soviet soldiers.<sup>9</sup> Both interviewer and interviewee seem to understand rape as penile penetration of the vagina. I have not seen an interviewer ask whether a woman was raped anally or with an object, although some survivors discussing non-liberation rape do sometimes go into more detail about non-penile penetration.<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting that when survivors describe experiencing or witnessing the rape of men, interviewer and interviewee seem to assume it is penile penetration of the anus, unless otherwise indicated. This default understanding of rape, whether of men or women, as something that requires penile penetration, is what I call hetero-penetrative—the assumption that in order to be real, sex, consensual or non-, requires penetration in a way that mimics heterosexual penile-vaginal sex.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, while my definition of liberation may be a broad by some standards, my definition of rape and sexual violence is strict, and both are informed by the survivors.

Finally, I do use the words survivors and victims. Normally, I would refer to survivors of rape, rather than victims of rape, in part because I do not like the judgment that accompanies the word victim. However, in this particular case of rape committed by Soviet soldiers, the sexual violence is being committed against those I call Holocaust survivors, whether they survived in camps, hiding, or by passing. To avoid confusion between determining what event the historical subjects are actually survivors of, I refer to Holocaust survivors as such, and those who experienced rape as victims.

The purpose of this chapter is varied and broad. I do not focus on one specific geographical area, or only on those liberated from camps, but on all those Jewish women who experienced sexual violence by Soviet soldiers—it is a transnational examination of rape committed as Soviet troops moved toward Germany. I do provide some biographical detail about the survivors, but I do not examine how that information may have affected their experience or understanding of rape because there is not enough space in this chapter to do it justice. However, it is important that these individuals do come from different countries, rural and urban environments, and were raised with varying degrees of religious observance, because the similarity in their accounts illustrates the social power of rape, its effectiveness in communicating information to the victim and reaffirming the national identity of the perpetrator.

This chapter is divided into four parts. I will first briefly discuss the common explanations for wartime rape, and Soviet rape specifically, and will then argue that Soviet rape of Holocaust survivors does not fit the usual model of military sexual violence. Using USC Shoah Foundation testimonies of Jewish women raped by Soviet soldiers, as well as testimonies from men and women who witnessed rape, this chapter will then examine possible motivations for the rape of survivors. In the third part, I will demonstrate what I call the social power of rape. Based on how sexual violence was experienced, understood, and articulated by victims and witnesses, it becomes clear that the act of rape has tremendous traction in some societies—it is a powerful language that communicates clear and formidable messages not just to victims, but to those around them as well. According to the testimonies, rape was an event powerful enough to negate the elation of liberation, it was often construed as *worse* than what the Nazis had done, *and* it was an experience traumatic enough to be considered reasonable revenge or punishment for those women believed to have collaborated with the Nazis. I do want to point out that there is no one meaning of rape. Some women can be utterly destroyed by the experience, some women may not be. In this chapter, however, I am primarily focusing on the women for whom sexual violence was catastrophic, as described in their own words.

Finally, the chapter will conclude with a theoretical discussion about what I call the catch-22 of rape theory. Scholars are focusing ever more on wartime rape in history and present-day events. This rescues the previously lost experiences of women and



illuminates how war affects women. However, the constant focus on the damage rape does also renders it a continually effective weapon to be wielded by soldiers, armies, and militia. The increased focus and analysis of wartime rape has resulted in significant advances in postconflict international legal punishment. Let me be clear: Rape should absolutely be punished. One of the main ways to ensure that rape occurs in the future is impunity—the absence of punishment. However, the focus on international law and punishment is problematic for a variety of reasons, including that it is tremendously slow; only brings a few rapists or exhorters of rape to justice, while the vast numbers of those who commit rape are not brought to trial; requires an avalanche of evidence, which is often not available; creates archetypal victims, the existence of which erase the experiences of those who do not fit; and is haphazard overall. Some instances of mass wartime rape are subject to international recriminations and jurisprudence, and some are not. Those of us who work on rape theory, who write about wartime sexual violence, especially in the past, are faced with a conundrum: The work is vital, but it may risk reinforcing the very things that endanger women in the present day—discussing the power of rape to ruin, violate, lessen, and destroy.

## WARTIME RAPE

Decades of research has established that rape is a learned behavior, predicated on misogyny and a desire for control that creates and enforces a power differential between perpetrator and victim. It is a language, a “script” that produces and communicates an inferior status for the victim, most often a woman.<sup>12</sup> It can convey messages further based on that manufactured inferiority, such as that women should not be in certain spaces, perhaps looking or acting in particular ways; that a man cannot protect “his” woman; and a variety of other messages. The information communicated has sociopolitical causes, and those vary across time and space. In order to understand those causes, it is important to distinguish between a military’s rape of enemy women and the rape of women who are allies or victims of the enemy. All instances of the rape of enemy women have certain characteristics in common: They communicate racial/ethnic/national/religious superiority; they are a message of defeat to enemy men; an expression of masculinity, especially military masculinity; a means of bonding among soldiers; and a creation and expression of “hetero-nationality.”<sup>13</sup> The rape of allied women, or women who are victims of one’s enemy, as Jewish women were to Soviet soldiers, is more difficult to understand and explain.

Rape as a weapon of war makes a logistical, strategic, and financial sense. It is horrific, but it is cheap. It works to communicate the strength of one’s own army and the weakness and subordinate position of the defeated enemy and its community, or it assists in

actually defeating the enemy. It is also a clear demonstration of masculinity and is understood as such. Whatever the message to be communicated, soldiers commit rape for one basic reason: it works. Whether rape is strategic and organized, or if it is haphazard—it works. Whatever the purpose, form, or response, it works.

## Soviet Rape

Numerous scholars have addressed the Soviet rape of German women, particularly in Berlin, at the end of the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> Scholars have also examined the mass rape of Hungarian women by the Red Army.<sup>15</sup> The above explanations of wartime rape are applicable in the Soviet rape of Germans and Hungarians. In addition, rape was an extreme expression of revenge against the behavior of the German and Hungarian armies in the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup> By contrast, Soviet rape in the former Yugoslavia, a communist country with its own resistance against the Nazis, unlike collaborative Hungary, was less common because propaganda did not attack Yugoslav women the same way it did German women, and Yugoslavs were considered allies, again unlike Hungarians and, obviously, Germans.<sup>17</sup> Wartime rape has patterns, based in part on who the victims of sexual violence are. Soviet rape of German women definitely worked to punish German women for their support of the Nazi regime; to communicate to German men that they could not protect their nation; and at a base level, as revenge for the kind of warfare waged by the German army in the East.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, Soviet military leadership sometimes exhorted men to rape<sup>19</sup> and denied the severity of sexual violence being committed by their own troops.<sup>20</sup> Even when leadership tried to control the soldiers, it took time to change behavior that had previously been either encouraged or tolerated.<sup>21</sup>

On the face of it, the rape of Holocaust survivors, victims of Nazi Germany and their auxiliaries, does not make sense—the enemy of my enemy is my friend. In theory, Jewish victims should not have been targeted by Soviets because they too were victims of the Nazi regime. In this way, Holocaust survivors are not the classic targets or victims of rape as a weapon of war. They were raped during war, but were not the same kind of target of wartime rape as German women—they were not enemy women. Jewish survivors were not a national enemy, or even of one nation; there was no message to be communicated to the men, as ostensibly Jews were not the enemy; rape of Jews served no postwar occupational purpose; Jews did not participate in the war in the East, so they were not targets of revenge—in fact, Jews fought in the Red Army; and Jewish survivors had nothing, and thus were not targets of envy and resentment for the harsh conditions faced by Soviets during the war.<sup>22</sup>

There was no strategic or emotional purpose in attacking those the Germans targeted for extermination, so we must explore the causes of the frequent sexual violence directed at Jewish Holocaust survivors. We can use the testimonies of those survivors

who experienced or witnessed Soviet rape to help determine why Soviet soldiers raped survivors. Clearly, the best source for explaining why Soviet soldiers raped would be their own testimony. However, it is unclear how many sources and testimonies by soldiers specifically address their participation in rape as it is not something that soldiers often freely and frankly admit to.<sup>23</sup> The examination of why Soviet soldiers raped, using their words as evidence, is in its infancy. Failing access to those testimonies, I use the testimonies of victims or witnesses of rape. Rape victims often described what the soldiers themselves said and did. They describe their experiences of the environment, their interaction with the soldiers, what the soldiers said, and the kind of violence they experienced or witnessed. They know why they were raped, or why they were witnessing rape. Aside from the soldiers themselves, they know the most about the experience and are in the best position to explain it. Moreover, motivations for rape really only work when we also know the response. If rape is a language, we must know how the other participant in the conversation received the information in order to have the most complete picture.

## LIBERATION RAPE

### Military Masculinity

Survivors provide a number of explanations for the sexual violence committed by Soviets that they experienced or witnessed, several having to do with the construction, negotiation, and expression of a militarized masculinity. According to those coming into contact with the Red Army, the soldiers were motivated by a desire to demonstrate their manliness, by long periods of enforced celibacy during fighting, a sense that they were entitled to sex for having fought for so long, and by drunkenness. All of these are related in some way to concepts of masculinity, in this case, a specific Soviet masculinity predicated on what the country had experienced during the war and during years of participating in the brutal fighting in the East.

Survivor Ruth Hockley was born in Magdeburg, Germany, in 1924. Her family tried to escape Nazi control by moving to Paris, but had to return; they tried to send her away to Switzerland, but her passport was revoked; and they tried to emigrate, but could not. Thus, she spent the war hiding with a family on the outskirts of Berlin until she was liberated by the Soviets. Hockley believes the Soviets raped for a particular reason: "Men want to be men, [the Russians] tried to get hold of and rape the women . . . they felt they had the need to do that and the right to do that."<sup>24</sup> Hockley compares the behavior of German and Soviet soldiers, saying that the Soviets "were very nice to the Germans—they raped them, but they gave them food . . . so, it's . . . not like [what]

the German soldiers did [to Russian women]. They raped them and killed them.” In her United States Holocaust Memorial Museum testimony, Hockley describes asking a Soviet soldier, who spoke German, “Why do you want these women who are not willing? Aren’t you married? He said ‘Yes, I’m married. My wife is all the way away—we write letters, but what are letters?’”<sup>25</sup>

Survivor Lilly Selby understood what being a woman at this point in time meant. Born in Trnava, Czechoslovakia, in 1910, Selby spent the war in hiding. When asked whether the Russians raped women because they were Jewish, she responded with a negative. The interviewer then asked: “‘They raped you because you were a woman, that’s all?’ She responds, ‘A woman.’ She continues to explain that the soldiers did not care that the women were Jewish, Slovak, Czech, or German. ‘They raped everyone. . . . They raped them wherever they was able.’”<sup>26</sup>

Numerous survivors describe Soviet soldiers, brutalized by years of fighting, drinking to extreme excess and targeting women across Europe. Irene Romer, born in Nyirgyhaza, Hungary, and living a fairly well assimilated life, was incarcerated in a ghetto, escaped, and spent the rest of the war in hiding and passing. She says Soviet soldiers “wanted women, of course. And they were drunk half of the time. Because just imagine what they went through. They came a long way, and for how many years? They were, some of them were like animals.”<sup>27</sup> Survivors believed the perceived fact that Soviet soldiers had no access to sex for long periods of time explained their lack of control. War-time celibacy is a common excuse for rape; it is a long-held belief that men need access to sex in general and to be strong, heterosexual members of a nation in particular.<sup>28</sup> Soviet leadership also believed lack of access to sex facilitated sexual violence. Norman Naimark describes Soviet leadership in the postwar period suggesting that “unless they made sure that no bachelors were stationed in Germany and that families were sent along with married officers, the order [against fraternization] could not be enforced.”<sup>29</sup> The belief appears to have been that sex was inevitably going to happen, and prohibiting fraternization could result in other kinds of sexual contact. If celibacy was a concern in immediate postwar peace, it was certainly a concern as the war was ending, after years of fighting. Even Stalin himself intimated that time away from home, and an inferred access to sex, facilitated violence. In 1944, he said when criticized about violence in Yugoslavia: “Can’t he understand it if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman?”<sup>30</sup>

This belief is reflected in what rapists said and how witnesses and victims of rape explained the violence that was occurring. Miriam Ingber, born into a large family in Czechoslovakia during the war; imprisoned, among other places, in Auschwitz; and liberated in Danzig after a death march, describes the behavior of her liberators: “The night that they freed me, they were worse than, they were just as bad as the Germans. They were so bad, that I didn’t know . . . they were in the war for who knows how many

years. And when they saw a woman, right there, they stretched her out middle of the . . . [they] didn't care if you looked, if you had one eye, one foot in the ground, they stretch you out on the ground and they laid on you. Raped you."<sup>31</sup>

It is also of importance that almost all survivors describe the public nature of rape, or the fact that most rapes involved a few to several soldiers. This is evident in the testimony of Erika Gould, born and liberated in Budapest after hiding and passing during the war. She encountered Red Army soldiers in a cellar where she was hiding. She explains that after drinking everything they could find, the soldiers "wanted women."<sup>32</sup> In her description of her rape, she makes an interesting linguistic distinction between her experience and that of her cousin. She says: "I was lucky at first because this soldier was very nice in the way that he tried to be gentle, and not forceful. And we knew we had to submit to them, there was no way to fight them. And after this one soldier took me to the other room . . . [and] . . . acted quite civilly, [he] took me to the other room and had sex with me. Unfortunately, my cousin . . . was also taken by somebody else, and was also raped."

The gentle soldier had sex with her, but her cousin, whose experience seemed to have been more violent, was raped. She goes on to discuss how her experience changed when more men began participating in her assault: "And one of the guys was kind of forceful and had a problem with me not fitting him or something, and had another soldier pushing him from the back while he was raping me. I think that was one of the most horrible experiences I ever had. And, that was that." When the violence increased, her language changed from sex to rape. This kind of linguistic dissimulation is not unusual. Survivors try to make sense of what happened to them or distance themselves from it through their word choice.

Gould's testimony also illustrates something that is threaded through almost all the testimonies: that the Soviets targeted all women and targeted them publicly. Several other survivors cited above clearly say there were multiple people around when a rape occurred, that it occurred in a street, or imply that there were multiple people when using the pronoun "they." Publicity of rape is part of the performance of superiority and was yet another factor to deal with in the experience of rape. Gould recalls hearing her mother screaming as she, Gould, was being gang-raped: "I must have been screaming, because of the pain, and then my mother heard that in the other room. And then I heard her screaming and begging a soldier there in charge of the other civilians to let me go. And then I was very much afraid that they were going to shoot her." She continues: "So, I had plenty to cope with—my own very degrading experience, and worrying about her, and no way to communicate to her to please shut up!"

Gould is describing public rape, but also a particular kind of rape—gang rape. Gang rape is one of the most efficient ways to mark membership in a group, and it is a public performance of masculinity to one's comrades.<sup>33</sup> Gang rape is so common during war

precisely because it does so well communicate and demonstrate membership in a particular group, which could not be more important than during a war.<sup>34</sup> In wartime, gang rape proves membership in the national, gendered, and military community.

### Rape as Reward

Another explanation for sexual violence committed against survivors is a basic sense of entitlement. Rape is often the product of entitlement—men feel entitled to a woman's body, they feel entitled to ignore issues of consent, they feel entitled to demonstrate their manliness. During the rapes of survivors, Soviet soldiers often justified their behavior by claiming they were entitled to a reward for their participation in a brutal war, they were entitled to a reward for liberating survivors, and they were entitled to what they believed the Jews had done to survive the Germans.

Born in Lodz in 1924, imprisoned in the Lodz ghetto, and then transferred to Tschenschostochau, where she was liberated, survivor Fay Lachman clearly describes this sense the Soviets had of deserving a sexual reward: "They said, 'I liberated you, and you don't want to go to bed with me?' . . . So that was my experience with the Russian soldiers, I have nothing against them, but that's the *right* that the Russians took. They felt that they liberated us [and] we ought to go to bed with them."<sup>35</sup> Joe Potok, born in Bedzin, Poland, was actually liberated by the Americans, but the Soviets took over that particular area. He says the Soviet soldiers were clear in their expectations: "They said 'I fight a war, we died for you, we liberate for you, and you refuse our pleasure? What we want?'"<sup>36</sup> Lea Eisenberg was also born in Bedzin, Poland, in 1925. She was interned in the Bedzin ghetto, in four concentration camps, and was finally liberated in Germany. She also explains that the Soviets felt they deserved sex: "The Russians started to come and visit us, and started to rape. They said, 'We gave you freedom, you give us something else for that.' . . . So from one hell, we went into another . . . it was awful. It was horrible, because here you had the freedom, and still they treated you like [an] animal, even worse."<sup>37</sup>

According to another survivor, Jean Feffer-Matz, born in Poland and liberated in Germany, the Russians "raped the girls . . . because they came to celebrate."<sup>38</sup> Hanna Mishna was born in Lodz, Poland, to a poorer middle-class family as the only child. She and her mother were interned in the Lodz ghetto, then deported to the Tschenschostochau camp, where she was liberated. She describes the soldiers as completely out of control: "They also were looking for girls. They were wild. We heard of raping. Five raped one. I knew one. And it was so horrible, and we were so afraid . . . and when you told them you lived through the war, the terrible war, and you know what they said? They said 'the hell with you. You slept with them, that's why you lived through. You Jewish, you wouldn't live through if you wouldn't sleep with them. You slept with the

Germans, we liberated, you don't sleep with us?' It was the most horrible experience in that month."<sup>39</sup>

Rape is about power and domination, and although it is difficult to understand why Soviet soldiers would want to locate their power in the domination of an already extant victim group, the rape of Jewish women did function to reinforce the masculine identity of the Soviet man, their "hetero-nationality."<sup>40</sup> Red Army soldiers saw women, including those in their own military, as "sexual partners first and foremost,"<sup>41</sup> and thus, Soviet soldiers were defining themselves against *all* non-Soviets and creating and affirming a particular masculinity through the rape of women, *any* women. Moreover, Soviet soldiers constructed themselves as men because they were owed women—liberation rape was a reward for the masculine endeavor of having fought the German troops for so long.

Lisa S. Price, in her work on sexual violence in the former Yugoslavia, explains wartime rape by saying rapists are motivated by the following: "I AM only to the extent that you are not—male because you are female, Serb because you are Muslim, soldier because you are civilian. Your absence marks, verifies my presence and your pain becomes my power."<sup>42</sup> I always return to this formulation because it so clearly encapsulates how wartime rape works, and it is always easier for individuals and groups to figure out who they are by defining who they are not. Soviet soldiers knew they were victors because they were not the imprisoned or fleeing victims they targeted during liberation; they were victors because they were soldiers who had slogged through the most brutal fighting of the war to move west toward Germany, attacking those civilian women who did not "belong" to them;<sup>43</sup> and they were men because they were raping women.

The Soviet Union had a long history of antisemitic pogroms, many characterized by rampant and unpunished sexual violence.<sup>44</sup> However, I would argue that the Red Army was not targeting Jewish women *because* they were Jews, not like they targeted German women because they were German, or Hungarians because they were Hungarians. Rather, I would argue that being Jewish, being victims of the Nazi regime, was just not enough to protect survivors. Military leaders did not direct sexual violence away from survivors; they were horrified by what they found when they discovered Nazi extermination camps, and at first, Nazi atrocities were used in propaganda against the Germans, but publicity of atrocity faded as the Soviets moved west,<sup>45</sup> and the victimhood of Jews was not enough for leadership to warn against or punish the rape of survivors. They had a bigger, formidable, and much hated enemy to confront and punish; they were indifferent to the sexual violence being committed against Jewish survivors. Indifference can normalize sexual violence, making it part of the overall move west into German-occupied lands and Germany proper.



In the above testimonies, we can clearly see how military masculinity facilitated sexual violence, even against non-enemy women. These beliefs about masculinity were mobilized by survivors to explain their experiences as dual victims—of the Nazis and the Soviets. Moreover, it was based on their observations or what Soviet soldiers said to them. It was assumed that soldiers needed access to sex, and when that did not happen, sex drives were uncontrolled and women were raped. In addition, the brutal nature of the war the Red Army soldiers had fought led to excess drinking and brutal behavior that was couched as a reward for the fighting they had done. However, the rape of Holocaust survivors was not unavoidable. It occurred because the Red Army had already established a practice of rape, and leadership made no effort to prevent the rape of survivors.<sup>46</sup> The sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers could be moderated and directed. For example, Soviet rape in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was far less common, as allies or ethnically similar, than in Germany and Hungary, staunch enemies of the Soviet Union.<sup>47</sup> Holocaust survivors were not specific targets, but they were victims of a practice of rape during war.

## THE SOCIAL POWER OF RAPE

As said above, soldiers, armies, and militias rape because it works; it accomplishes a specific goal, such as demonstrating military and national superiority to the enemy. Rape is a language that communicates specific messages because everyone in that society understands that language. They may not know what it means to each specific woman, how it is internalized and how it will affect them later in life, but they do know what rape means for the *perception* of that woman, for her family, her ethnic or national group. In most cases, rape is understood as a ruination or violation of a woman.<sup>48</sup> A raped woman is believed to be of lesser value, qualitatively different from and inferior to who she had been before. This lessening of a woman is illustrative of the social power of rape—it changes a woman's position in society, which has all sorts of ramifications. For example, in some cultures, rape makes a woman unsuitable for marriage, which decreases her value to the community.<sup>49</sup>

Rape is not just a metaphorical language; the actual word itself is often used in place of other words because its use ensures that everyone will *really* understand what is being said. I have always found it striking that in his amazing work on the meaning of torture, Jean Améry finds that one of the best ways to communicate the meaning of torture is to use rape as a lens: “At the first blow . . . this trust in the world breaks down. The other person, *opposite* whom I exist physically in the world and *with* whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on



me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me. It is like a rape, a sexual act without the consent of one of the two partners.”<sup>50</sup>

We can see the social power of rape in how women raped or threatened with rape by Soviet soldiers understood and articulated their experience of rape or the threat of rape. It is further evident in how some survivors advocated for the rape of others.

## Worse Than the Germans

Ann (Hanna) Mishna refers to the rapes committed by Soviet soldiers as “another Holocaust.” She says, “We thought [with] the Germans, we were better off. At least you don’t get venereal disease, and you don’t get raped.”<sup>51</sup> German Gisela Adamski, deported to Theresienstadt and Auschwitz, then transferred to a camp in Germany, and finally escaping from a death march, describes her liberation and the rape of several women who were with her in similar terms. The interviewer asks her, “Was it one of the worst things that had happened?” Adamski responds: “It was. I had just come from being in a camp, supposedly being free now, and this is happening to me . . . it was very painful and hard to understand that they would do that. They may or may not have known we are Jewish, I don’t know, they probably did, but they didn’t care.”<sup>52</sup>

Lilly Selby, describing Soviet rape, laments, “You have no idea what we went through. From one thing to a worse one.” When her interviewer responds, incredulously, with “Was it really worse? Did the Russians try to kill you?” Selby answers loudly, “Not kill, raped!!”<sup>53</sup> Another survivor, German-born and liberated Margot Field, describing the rapes, says, “We all said it was worse than the Germans—they left us alone, the Germans, but [this] was terrible.”<sup>54</sup> According to Austrian survivor Erika Borožan: “The end of the war, that was for me actually almost worse than the Germans.”<sup>55</sup> After spending the war in hiding, she describes the first Soviet troops to liberate her as “Mongolians”:

And these were really wild people, I mean they were raping women. They lined up the soldiers and . . . held [a] gun to the husband and he had to watch as [the Soviet] was raping the wife, and a lot of other women. A lot of women were terribly scared. They committed suicide, jumping into the wells. . . . I saw a lot of that, a lot of atrocities. . . . They were really wild. The Mongolians . . . did terrible things for about a week or so . . . particularly to women.<sup>56</sup>

When asked what happened to her, Borožan responded: “Well, they were not very nice; I would rather not go into it. But, yes, I had a bad experience.” For Doris Martin, the sexual violence perpetrated by the Red Army had a particular effect on her experience of liberation. Incarcerated in the Bedzin ghetto, liberated from Auschwitz, she

says about the rapes: "What happened to the world? Well, it's going to be the end."<sup>57</sup> The sexual violence associated with liberation was the end of the world to her—more than what she had survived from the Germans.

I have always found it striking that given what the Germans did—the social death, ghettos, camps, mass shootings, extermination camps, forced hiding, forced passing, destruction of families and relationships—that so many refer to rape as *worse* than the twelve years of genocidal planning and genocide, *worse* than six years of war. That means that the act of rape and then the changed perception of the victim had tremendous social power.

## Revenge

The desire to avoid rape, as well as, in some cases, the desire for revenge, prompted some survivors to push Soviet soldiers to rape women they believed to have collaborated with the Nazis.<sup>58</sup> Matilda Klein, born a Hasidic Jew in Czechoslovakia, escaped a death march in Germany and hid in a barn until liberated by the Soviets. When a soldier tried to rape her, Klein said: "I'm häftling, why don't you take German girls, why me?" The soldier responded by saying, "If you don't shut up, I'll shoot you."<sup>59</sup> Hungarian survivor George Bozoki, liberated by the Soviets in Austria, describes men who were trying to protect women from rape by encouraging soldiers to find other women to assault: "And, those men who could deal with the Russians, told them that 'Hey, you will be in Vienna [soon and] there will be plenty of German women. . . . [These women] are refugees and they are returning home. What the hell [do] you want?'"<sup>60</sup>

Czech Jew Lilly Selby clearly states that she felt no sympathy for Slovak women raped by Soviet soldiers. She says, "I wished them what they did to us." When the interviewer then asks, "You didn't feel sorry for them?" Selby responds, "Not at all. Not at all." She then recounts the story of a teacher who was threatened with death for hiding something from the soldiers and says, "What can you expect?" When the interviewer asked her whether the teacher was raped, Selby responded, "I hope so."<sup>61</sup>

Sonja Milner, born Orthodox in Wilno, Poland, a territory that was occupied by Soviets and then Germans, was interned in three ghettos and six camps during the war. She was liberated by the Soviets, about whom she says the following while observing the Soviet rape of German women: "I said to myself, Jews never can take revenge for somebody . . . and I was standing with my husband and I said I don't like to look at things like this, but really I was happy [in] my heart. They did [so many things to us], let them taste a little [of] what the Russians do to them."<sup>62</sup>

In one way, it is not surprising that people tried to avoid rape by pushing soldiers to rape someone else. It is an extreme trauma response to the threat of rape—anyone but me. However, they did not just encourage soldiers to rape someone else, but those who

had hurt them. Survivors were attempting to use rape as a means of revenge, because they knew what it would mean to those who would be raped. The violence, the lack of control, the potential physical harm, the power of rape, was a sufficient punishment for the harm they had experienced. Pushing soldiers to rape women who were associated with the Nazis was both a method of survival and of punishment.

## Ruined Liberation

The power of rape is also evident in how it affected the experience of liberation. Survivors recount shifting from great joy at their new-found freedom to utter terror as they realized what this freedom meant.<sup>63</sup> Edith Ressler was born in Oradea, Transylvania, in 1927, the eldest of two in a middle-class family. She was incarcerated in the Oradea ghetto, as well as Auschwitz and the Stuthoff concentration camp. Eventually liberated in Poland, she describes that moment:

And the next morning, somebody opened the door, and they spoke Russian. And we figured, well, we are liberated. It's something. But actually we were not liberated. The Russians never gave us a piece of bread or an ounce of soup or something to eat, to drink, to . . . nothing. To organize that we can get out of there, or what we can do, nothing. They really were looking who looks good enough to rape? That's all they were looking for. They were not really responsible. I am sorry to say that, but this, this, I can testify to, that the Russian Army was not a liberator army. It was a liberator army since they didn't kill us anymore, so I guess maybe I should be thankful. At that point, I couldn't be thankful because I had to be more afraid than I was afraid yesterday.<sup>64</sup>

Polish survivor Fela Machauf, who had been in the Krakow ghetto before hiding in Berlin until the end of the war, argues that the Soviets did not bring liberation: "The only thing . . . they brought us was rape."<sup>65</sup> Survivor Tibor Weston, who had served in a resistance group during the war, clearly articulates his confusion about liberation. Hiding in a room in Budapest, Hungary, Weston first greeted the Russian soldiers with great joy, but then, as he explains, his emotions underwent a radical shift: "One of the Russians [was] raping one of the women, on the ground, right in front of everybody. And I went from the high of being liberated, to a low of 'what is this?' I couldn't fathom. Here I was hoping . . . the day [will come when] I was liberated, [and] here the liberator [is] raping the women. What kind of people are they? Who's going to liberate me from this?"<sup>66</sup> Liberation rape, for some survivors, was an event powerful enough to change the meaning of freedom, and ultimately to negatively affect their ideas about the future. As Weston continues: "And then I realized that the Russians were not there . . . to help

me or to assist me, or to do anything like that. They were, they had their own agenda. . . . I hated them too. How could they destroy my hope in the future, [in] liberation . . . ?”

Henia Goldman, born in Sadowa Wisznia, Poland, lived under both Soviet and German occupation, escaped deportation, went into hiding, and was finally liberated in Germany, where she had been sent as forced labor while she was passing. She provides a heartbreaking explanation of her liberation experience:

I think all we survivors are damaged beyond repair. But at that stage in Germany, when I felt that Germany's beginning to lose, I was hoping, you know, that for the liberation, I was looking forward to this moment of liberating and going back to Poland and finding the family who are somewhere, you know, in different ways perhaps survived. But my liberation was another nightmare, because I was liberated by the Russians. And the Russians have never taken any account whether you were Jewish, or Russian, or Polish, or German. They were raping and looting all throughout. And it was another nightmarish experience, which I personally took very badly because being liberated, I took it as a punishment that I survived, that I deserved that.<sup>67</sup>

In a sad manifestation of survivor guilt, this case demonstrates that not only was the meaning of liberation changed, but rape became a punishment for having survived at all.

## CONCLUSION

The power of rape as a language became clear to me in a bizarre but powerful moment when I was in graduate school. Our department had invited a well-known Holocaust scholar to give a talk on campus, and some graduate students were invited to join her for lunch. While discussing the end of the war and liberation by the Soviets, she said, “Well, the German women had it coming to them, they got what they deserved.” The power of rape as communication became crystal clear to me at that moment; it was and is a tremendously effective language of domination, control, and punishment. This was the moment, informed by the work of excellent scholars of rape theory and rape during war, that started me thinking about the meaning of rape in the specific situation of liberation, an event I had always learned was “the happy end” to a sad chapter in history. Clearly, liberation is more than an event; it is a process, fraught with violence and happiness, freedom and trauma. The testimonies in this chapter help explain why Soviet soldiers raped Holocaust survivors, victims of the Nazi regime and its allies, and how that violence and the threat of violence affected survivors. There was no purposeful targeting of survivors the way there was in the targeting of German women. However, the sexual violence occurred for specific reasons and had specific effects.

These testimonies clearly demonstrate the power of rape. It was considered by soldiers an adequate and reasonable reward for military success. Soldiers believed they were owed sex for their military (read masculine) endeavors, and women, *all* women—victims of the Nazi regime or not—were considered payment for the Soviet effort in the Second World War. The experience of rape was enough to destroy the experience of liberation, the delight caused by freedom from the camps or hiding, and hope for the future; it was enough to render the liberators monsters in the eyes of those they liberated. Rape was so powerful that what Luba Moskowitz called “a terrible thing,” several other survivors explicitly called *worse* than what the Nazis had done to them. That the experience of rape could be worse than years of persecution, in ghettos, in camps, or in hiding, demonstrates the immense social power of rape. Lastly, and perhaps most important for demonstrating the meaning of rape, it was powerful enough to be considered punishment for those believed to have supported genocidal persecution.

What is less clear to me, though, is what we do with this information. What do we do with this interesting, but temporally far-removed information about sexual violence during a war that ended now more than eighty years ago? As a historian, it is enough to write about the experiences of these survivors, to rescue and analyze events that were important enough to them that they brought them up in their testimonies decades later, often unprompted. Rarely do interviewers ask specifically about sexual violence, but these survivors spoke about their own rapes, the rapes of their mothers, the constant threat of rape, even though they found it uncomfortable. Thus, writing about these events is enough in itself, and actually long overdue. I would also add that given what is happening in Ukraine, the sexual violence against women and men, rampant sexualized violence, the targeting of members of the LGBTQ+I+ community, now is an incredibly important moment to be discussing Soviet violence at the end of the Second World War. Perhaps, had there been punishment, or at the very least sustained discussion and condemnation of the behavior of the Red Army, the behavior of the Russian army now might be different. A practice of sexual violence was established *and* successful at the end of World War II, and most importantly, it went unpunished. Impunity breeds repetition.

## EPILOGUE: THE CONUNDRUM

It is with these questions that the catch-22 rears its head. I have made the argument that survivors understood rape as a language that communicates inferiority and ruination, but this argument might perpetuate that meaning of rape. It is difficult to recognize that rape makes women feel hurt, violated, ruined, and unwanted without *making* women feel hurt, violated, ruined, and unwanted by focusing on those effects. We have to

acknowledge the suffering without making it all that matters. Many scholars, particularly recently, have discussed the problems associated with international legal punishment of rape as a weapon of war, as discussed in the introduction.<sup>68</sup> Others have demonstrated that the seriousness with which the international community regards sexual violence is used by militias to garner attention and even political legitimacy.<sup>69</sup> Rape gets them a seat at the international table, because now it has to be acknowledged and punished. Others have emphasized the need to look at rape victims as more than their rape, to examine the gender inequalities that facilitate rape and the disregard of rape victims, and change them.<sup>70</sup> I want to suggest something that I am not even sure is possible—to change the meaning of rape. My thinking here is strongly informed by my former training as an anthropologist, and by Christine Helliwell's article on cultural differences in the understanding of rape. In some cultures, it is not the ruination and trauma that it is in others; for some, "It's only a penis," as Helliwell's article is titled. For others, it is the worst experience in life. If rape can mean more than one thing, then the meaning can be changed.

I have been struggling with this idea for over a decade, and it is still not crystallized in my head, and thus will not be here. So, I want to present it as a thought, not as an instruction. Part of my thinking is perhaps too postmodern—that something is bad because we make it bad. If we stop acting and speaking of rape as ruinous, will it then *not* be ruinous? I have been criticized for this idea, as it is seen as the top of the slippery slope to minimizing or outright negating the trauma of rape, which, let me be clear, is not my intention. But it is the source of the conundrum—how do we change what rape means without telling rape victims that what it means to them is wrong? How do we punish rape without recognizing it as a terrible offense that needs punishment? We cannot simultaneously try to argue that rape does not have to be traumatic and then punish it as a crime that caused trauma.

All that said, though, it seems as if it would be possible to change the meaning of rape. Scholars have already established that rape means different things in different cultures; that it does not occur in all cultures or even all military actions;<sup>71</sup> and rape theory now includes far more discussion of male victims, which has broadened the definition of rape to mean something that now can be done to men, which was not the case historically. Thus, clearly, what rape means can change. So why can we not change it so that it is not considered the worst thing that can happen to a woman, worse than death? We can change parts of the meaning. For example, by not using the threat of rape as a punishment—in fiction, film, TV, and in conversation—could we not start to remove its power as punishment?

Then again, perhaps it is not possible to escape the conundrum. Perhaps two things will have to exist at the same time: Rape victims feel shame and humiliation (in part because we *just cannot* tell them not to), while at the same time rape survivors, activists, and scholars on the ground will say that they should not feel shame and humiliation. I

do not have answers to all these questions I have posed; sometimes I wonder if it is not the job of the historian to ask these kinds of questions, given that our work is grounded in violence eight decades in the past. But, let me explain why I keep asking the question: Soldiers rape because it works. It communicates a powerful message of inferiority, ruination, shame, or degradation; it results in a sense of power, bonding, and masculine belonging. However, if it does not communicate that information, then it will no longer be an effective language. If rape does not work, maybe they will not rape.

## NOTES

1. I do not anonymize the survivors whose oral histories I use for two reasons. First, they discussed sexual violence in their testimonies, knowing that their names would be available in the recordings and that the testimonies would be widely accessible. There was no expectation of privacy; the testimonies were created for the specific reason of recording survivor experiences for the public. Second, anonymizing victims of sexual violence facilitates and continues the idea that surviving sexual violence is something about which victims should be ashamed. See Anna Hájková's contribution in this volume for discussion.
2. Luba Moskowitz, Interview 7784, USC Shoah Foundation Institute. Moskowitz was born Orthodox in Warsaw. She spent time in two ghettos and in hiding, finally being liberated from the Tschenstochau concentration camp by Soviet forces when she was sixteen or seventeen. The majority of testimonies used are housed at the Shoah Foundation, and so only the name and interview code will be used from here forward. If a testimony is from another location, the full citation will be provided.
3. Birgit Beck, *Wehrmacht und sexuelle Gewalt: Sexualverbrechen vor deutschen Militärgerichten, 1939–1945* (Ferdinand Schöningh, 2004); Atina Grossmann, "A Question of Silence: The Rape of German Women by Occupation Soldiers," *October* 72 (1995): 42–63; Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, ed., *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Brandeis University and University Press of New England, 2010); Shannon Heit, "Waging Sexual Warfare: Case Studies of Rape Warfare Used by the Japanese Imperial Army During World War II," *Women's Studies International Forum* 32, no. 5 (2009): 363–70; Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).
4. I argue that there are two kinds of liberation during which sexual violence occurred: territorial liberation, the removal of Nazi control over a territory, and Holocaust liberation, the freeing of Jews from persecution. In territorial liberation, several militaries engaged in sexual violence, including, for example, the Americans and the French, although no other military committed as much sexual violence as the Red Army. During



the liberation of the Jews, however, according to my research thus far, only the Soviet Union's military troops engaged in pervasive sexual violence against Jewish women. Therefore, in this article, liberation rape refers to the Soviet rape of Holocaust survivors.

5. See Carli Snyder's contribution to this volume.
6. Marysia Zalewski, Paula Drumond, Elisabeth Prügl, and Maria Stern, eds., *Sexual Violence Against Men in Global Politics* (Routledge, 2018).
7. Leo J. Daugherty III, "The Reluctant Warriors: The Non-Russian Nationalities in Service of the Red Army During the Great Patriotic War 1941–1945," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 6, no. 3 (1993): 426–45.
8. See Dan Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (Yale University Press, 2015) for a discussion of the process and meaning of liberation.
9. The one exception to this survivor definition of rape I have encountered comes from Ephraim Klamka (13994). In his testimony, he describes that one instance of the rape of men mentioned in the text. According to Klamka, he heard about a "squadron" of female soldiers raping a group of men, what he calls both rape and being "forced to have love with a woman."
10. Women do discuss being digitally penetrated. See, for example, Veronika John-Steiner (47178) who recounts being "finger-rape[d]" before a transport, while Germans were looking for lice, and Maria Scheffer (4187) who describes being "assaulted by hand" upon her entry into Auschwitz.
11. The understanding of rape as hetero-penetrative can be positioned against how Joanna Bourke defines rape for her work: "So long as someone says that an act is 'rape' . . . that claim is accepted." *Rape: Sex, Violence, History* (Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), 9. For Holocaust victims of rape, male and female, hetero-penetrative appears to be the most accurate way to define their understanding of the act.
12. Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (Routledge, 1992), 390.
13. Euan Hague, "Rape, Power and Masculinity: The Construction of Gender and National Identities in the War in Bosnia-Herzegovina," in *Gender and Catastrophe*, ed. Ronit Lentin (Zed Books, 1997), 50–63. See among the following for explanations of rape during war: Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, *Sexual Violence as a Weapon of War?: Perceptions, Prescriptions, Problems in the Congo and Beyond* (Zed Books, 2013); Elizabeth D. Heineman, ed., *Sexual Violence in Conflict Zones: From the Ancient World to the Era of Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Lisa S. Price, "Finding the Man in the Soldier-Rapist: Some Reflections on Comprehension and Accountability," *Women's Studies International Forum* 24, no. 2 (2001): 211–27. For discussion of gender and nationality, see George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (Howard Fertig, 1985), particularly his



- chapter on manliness and homosexuality. See also Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 242–69.
14. See among others: Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (Penguin Books, 2002); James W. Messerschmidt, "The Forgotten Victims of World War II," *Violence Against Women* 12, no. 7 (2006): 706–12; Norman M. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995).
  15. James Mark, "Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944–1945," *Past & Present* 188 (2005): 133–61; Andrea Petö, "Memory and the Narrative of Rape in Budapest and Vienna in 1945," in *Life and Death: Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, ed. Richard Bessel and Dirk Schumann (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129–48.
  16. See Mark and Petö for discussions of the causes of Soviet rape in Hungary, and Messerschmidt for Berlin.
  17. Vojin Majstorović, "The Red Army in Yugoslavia, 1944–1945," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 2 (2016): 396–421.
  18. Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 51.
  19. Norman M. Naimark, "The Russians and Germans: Rape During the War and Post-Soviet Memories," in *Rape in Wartime*, ed. Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 203–204.
  20. Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 51.
  21. Naimark, "The Russians and Germans," 204.
  22. Naimark, "The Russians and Germans" discusses Soviet resentment of German wealth.
  23. Iva Glisic and Mark Edele, "The Memory Revolution Meets the Digital Age: Red Army Soldiers Remember World War II," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 45 (2019), 114.
  24. Ruth Hockley, 2668.
  25. USHMM RG 50.150.0016, Accession Number 1993.A.0094.16, Oral history interview with Ruth Hockley.
  26. Lilly Selby, 18067.
  27. Irene Romer, 54738.
  28. See, for example, Annette F. Timm, "Sex with a Purpose: Prostitution, Venereal Disease, and Militarized Masculinity in the Third Reich," in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Berghahn Books, 2005), 223–55.
  29. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 94.
  30. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 71.
  31. Miriam Ingber, 33836.
  32. Erika Gould, 25797.

33. See Elissa Mailänder, "Making Sense of a Rape Photography: Sexual Violence as Social Performance on the Eastern Front, 1939–1944," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017), 489–520 for an excellent discussion of the performativity of gang rape. See Hague and Price for discussions of the role gang-rape plays in identity formation.
34. Price, "Finding the Man in the Soldier-Rapist," 216.
35. Fay Lachman, 22688, emphasis added.
36. Joe Potok, 53588.
37. Lea Eisenberg, 47578.
38. Jean Feffer-Matz, 17834.
39. Hanna (Anne) Mishna, 55345. Mishna has two testimonies in the collection, so there are two interview codes cited when appropriate. There are also two different names: Hanna (Anne) Mishna and Ann Mishna.
40. Hague, "Rape, Power and Masculinity," 55.
41. Steven G. Jug, "Red Army Romance: Preserving Masculine Hegemony in Mixed Gender Combat Units, 1943–1944," *Journal of War and Culture Studies* 5, no. 3 (2012), 328.
42. Price, "Finding the Man in the Soldier-Rapist," 213.
43. It is also true that Soviet soldiers raped female Soviet soldiers, but I would argue this is a demonstration of militarized masculinity, that they are demonstrating their membership in a particular group by attacking an enemy—not a national or ethnic enemy, but a gendered enemy—women, believing they had the right to do so based on celi-bacy and the brutality of fighting.
44. Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Academic Studies Press, 2018); Elissa Bemporade, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (Oxford University Press, 2019). For the history of antisemitism, see, for example, Frank Grüner, "Did Anti-Jewish Mass Violence Exist in the Soviet Union?—Anti-Semitism and Collective Violence in the USSR During the War and Post-War Years," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 2–3 (2009): 355–79; Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale: The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia* (University of California Press, 2002); Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Indiana University Press, 2014).
45. Anita Kondoyanidi, "The Liberating Experience: War Correspondents, Red Army Soldiers, and the Nazi Extermination Camps," *Russian Review* 69 (2010): 438–62.
46. See Naimark's *The Russians in Germany* chapter on rape for the evolution of the Soviet leadership's response to rape.
47. See Majstorovic, and Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 70 for a discussion of Soviet behavior in Bulgaria.
48. But see Christine Helliwell, "'It's Only a Penis': Rape, Feminism, and Difference," *Signs* 25, no. 3 (2000): 789–816 for a discussion of cultural differences in the understanding and meaning of rape.

49. See V. Spike Peterson, "Political Identities/Nationalism as Heterosexism," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 1, no. 1 (2007): 34–65 for a discussion of women's roles in heterosexual nationalisms and the results of targeting women of enemy nations with rape.
50. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Indiana University Press, 1980), 28, italics in the original.
51. Ann Mishna, 42256.
52. Gisela Adamski, 3233.
53. Lilly Selby, 18067.
54. Margot Field, 42279.
55. Erika Borozan, 10725, was liberated by Soviet forces in Yugoslavia.
56. Several survivors mention "Mongolian" Soviet soldiers.
57. Doris Martin, 29765.
58. Jews most often directed their postwar revenge at Jews who were believed to have aided the Nazis because they absolutely could not understand why Jews would collaborate with the Germans, and because they had no way to seek revenge on those who had persecuted them, like Germans or Axis countries that targeted the Jews. See Laura Jockusch and Gabriel N. Finder, eds., *Jewish Honor Courts: Revenge, Retribution, and Reconciliation in Europe and Israel After the Holocaust* (Wayne State University Press, 2015), especially the introduction, for discussion. Encouraging rape was a way that Holocaust survivors could take revenge as the war was coming to a close or in the immediate postwar period.
59. Matilda Klein, 6525.
60. George Bozoki, 39585.
61. Lilly Selby, 18067.
62. Sonja Milner, 7295.
63. In her work in this volume, Carli Snyder notes how the intended structure of the Shoah interviews, in which 20 percent of the interview was to be on postwar events, was often not enough time to address the difficulties of liberation, including rape. Moreover, recounting the constant threat of sexual violence during liberation did not allow the war to be tied up in a neat, resolved bow.
64. Edith Ressler, 52912.
65. Fela Machauf, 9962.
66. Tibor Weston, 48337.
67. Henia Goldman, 7094.
68. See, for example, Janet Halley, "Rape in Berlin: Reconsidering the Criminalisation of Rape in the International Law of Armed Conflict," *Melbourne Journal of International Law* 9 (2008): 78–124; and Nicola Henry, "The Fixation on Wartime Rape: Feminist Critique and International Criminal Law," *Social & Legal Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014):

93–111.

69. Séverine Autesserre, “Dangerous Tales: Dominant Narratives on the Congo and Their Unintended Consequences,” *African Affairs* 111, no. 443 (2012): 202–22.
70. See Eriksson Baaz and Stern for a discussion of how the international community treated/treats rape victims in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
71. See, for example, Peggy Reeves Sanday, “The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study,” *Journal of Social Issues* 37, no. 4 (1981): 5–27; and Elisabeth Jean Wood, “Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?” *Politics & Society* 37, no. 1 (2009): 131–62. A note of observation: It is not simply enough to include women in armed forces and expect levels of wartime sexual violence to decrease. See Meredith Loken, “Rethinking Rape: The Role of Women in Wartime Violence,” *Security Studies* 26, no. 1 (2017): 60–92.

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# “DID THAT HAPPEN TO YOU?”

## ADDRESSING RAPE PERPETRATED BY RED ARMY SOLDIERS AGAINST JEWISH WOMEN HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS IN SHOAH FOUNDATION TRAININGS AND INTERVIEWS

CARLI SNYDER

### INTRODUCTION

**H**OLOCAUST SURVIVOR EDITH SAT FOR HER INTERVIEW WITH THE SURVIVORS of the Shoah Visual History Foundation in December 1994.<sup>1</sup> Speaking about her experiences during the war was evidently difficult for her. During the first tape break, members of the crew whispered to each other about how nervous she seemed. Worried that she could not remember dates or words, Edith asked if she could call her sister or check her notes to be certain about the details. The interviewer, Mark Rothman, who had recently graduated from the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts Master's program, was patient and helped ease her concerns.<sup>2</sup> When Edith rushed through parts of her story, Rothman prompted her with questions that aimed to ground her in what she did remember. As she described her memories of liberation, she looked away for a moment and said: "I don't know if I should talk about it."<sup>3</sup> Rothman quietly encouraged her, "Yeah, yeah."<sup>4</sup> She began, "I was in a room with . . .," then stopped again abruptly to say to her interviewer: "You say yeah. But my brother told me no. I told my brother about it. And he said I should never



talk about it in my whole life, because it's not very nice for me. But maybe I should tell you. Because maybe that's what they want."<sup>5</sup> Edith decided to proceed. She then described when two Red Army soldiers raped her after liberation.

Edith spoke for four uninterrupted minutes about this painful memory—which was not common in most Shoah Foundation interviews. When I encountered this segment in the Visual History Archive (hereafter VHA), I wondered, which conditions made it possible for her to share this story? Her brother's shame about her rape, which he initially expressed to her in the 1950s, almost dissuaded Edith from bringing it up altogether. Edith's decision to share relied heavily on her comfort level with Rothman, which she explicitly commented on later in the interview. She also assumed that "they," presumably the Shoah Foundation, would be interested in having the memory recorded. Rothman's demonstrated openness to listen was essential. He did not interject or change the subject. At the same time, he seemed almost surprised by the information and did not pose any follow-up questions about it. In the postinterview summary, a piece of writing to be used by those who would process the interview at the Shoah Foundation, Rothman wrote two sentences about the rape—showing that he felt it was significant enough to be mentioned in the records about her interview.<sup>6</sup> He also included "rape" as one of the keywords to describe her testimony. This would alert the indexer to take note of this story while labeling the segments. Edith and Rothman's dynamic ensured that her experience of rape was documented in the institution's collection.

This interaction between Edith and Rothman raises broader questions: Were Shoah Foundation interviewers prepared to hear or ask about rape during liberation? If so, how? Was the Shoah Foundation interested in collecting these sorts of stories? How was this reflected in their methodology? Addressing similar questions from historical and media studies angles, scholars including Annabelle Baldwin, Allison Somogyi, and Lauren Cantillon have recently produced fascinating interdisciplinary research about if and how survivors chose to testify about experiences of sexual violence during Shoah Foundation interviews.<sup>7</sup> This chapter contributes to this conversation by focusing on the role interviewers played in eliciting these memories or curtailing their recounting. I utilized the Shoah Foundation's institutional archival materials, specifically video recordings of interviewer trainings that took place between 1994 and 1998—the peak years during which the Shoah Foundation trained interviewers and conducted most of its more than 52,000 interviews with Holocaust survivors.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter focuses primarily on the first Shoah Foundation interviewer training held in Los Angeles, California, in July 1994 and the interviews conducted by interviewers who were present at this training.<sup>9</sup> Initially, trainers did not mention rape as a possible topic interviewers might encounter. This meant that when survivors shared memories about rape perpetrated by Red Army soldiers, interviewers

| YEAR | NUMBER OF INTERVIEWS COLLECTED |
|------|--------------------------------|
| 1994 | 477                            |
| 1995 | 8,882                          |
| 1996 | 15,637                         |
| 1997 | 13,678                         |
| 1998 | 10,946                         |
| 1999 | 798                            |
| 2000 | 752                            |
| 2001 | 483                            |

were not necessarily prepared for these stories and needed to respond spontaneously. Then, the chapter turns to subsequent English-language interviewer trainings that took place in North American cities in which sexual violence was named as a possible topic. However, interviewers were still not trained to address it in a specific way. The chapter then highlights patterns in interviewer-interviewee interactions in English-language interview segments indexed in the VHA with the tag “liberator sexual assaults” in which survivors spoke about their own experiences of rape, or their fear of it, at the hands of the Red Army and how interviewers responded.<sup>10</sup> This organizational structure serves to highlight the distinctions between how the Shoah Foundation communicated their methodology to interviewers-in-training and how interviewers later implemented and adapted the methodology during interviews in various ways.

I argue that descriptions of rape during liberation conflicted with the training interviewers received for two main reasons: First, interviewers were not trained to ask questions about sexual violence in general. Second, they were trained to frame survivors’ memories of liberation in an idealized way, so that it would contribute to a sense of resolution to their narrative. To understand divergent interviewer responses to these memories, it is useful to pay attention to the contextual elements behind each interview, including the training the interviewer received, their personal background and experience levels, as well as the contemporaneous state of discussions of sexual(ized) violence more broadly.<sup>11</sup> Dawn Skorczewski’s work on the “intersubjective field” between a survivor and interviewer is instructive in this regard.<sup>12</sup> Drawing from theoretical and psychoanalytic perspectives on this concept, Skorczewski highlights the “process in which individuals consciously and unconsciously make meanings together in different contexts,” particularly between survivors and interviewers, and in relation to

the institutional influences of the Shoah Foundation.<sup>13</sup> She traces how in small moments during an interview, an interviewer's reaction or question causes the "intersubjective field" to either constrict (and prevent the sharing of certain stories) or remain expansive and flexible, a state in which even the most difficult memories are shared more freely. The development of rapport between interviewer and interviewee often dictated whether or not stories about rape were recorded.

## SCHOLARLY AND POLITICAL CONTEXTS OF THE 1990S

When the Shoah Foundation initially developed its methodology, sexual violence was not included as a possible topic to ask about at any point of a survivor's narrative, during or after the war. However, hundreds of testimonies in the VHA demonstrate that many survivors' personal narratives of liberation and postwar life do not make sense without their reflections about rape. In a number of studies about liberation and the immediate postwar period, historians have mentioned the rape of Jewish survivors, but these experiences are often overshadowed by the much higher numbers of German women civilians raped by Soviet soldiers.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, in popular narratives of liberation, the rape of Holocaust survivors has been discounted or ignored entirely. However, for those survivors who feared, witnessed, or personally experienced sexual violence during liberation, this had an enormous impact on their decision-making in the postwar period. As historian Dan Stone writes, "Camp survivors' experience of rape was no doubt one of the reasons that the liberated inmates preferred not to remain under Soviet jurisdiction any longer than they had to."<sup>15</sup>

It is crucial to remember that much of the foundational scholarship about these topics did not yet exist during the years the Shoah Foundation was training interviewers. However, it was generally becoming more common to speak publicly about sexual violence in the 1990s. Feminist philosopher Susan Brison describes how "the everydayness of sexual violence" was so common that it was often taken for granted.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, Brison argues, there was a mass denial of its prevalence. Throughout the 1990s, attention to rape, sexual harassment, and sexual assault became increasingly prominent in mainstream media coverage.<sup>17</sup> Women described their experiences on television shows and other televised broadcasts—Anita Hill's 1991 testimony against Clarence Thomas figured significantly in people's minds, for example.<sup>18</sup> Drawing on feminist theories about rape that had been developing since the 1970s, academics and activists spoke out against sexual violence in their writing and in the streets.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the prevalence of mass rapes perpetrated during the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides was reported on the nightly news.<sup>20</sup> We can imagine that at least some of the Shoah Foundation

interviewers and interviewees had been aware of these developments around the time interviews were conducted.

Both of these sets of context are necessary to consider at the same time: Although scholarship on the topic of sexual violence during the Holocaust, and more specifically, rape perpetrated during liberation, was not yet published, public awareness about rape in general had been growing considerably. This means that it is not adequate to simply assume that because research was not available, the Shoah Foundation, individual interviewers, or survivors would not have been considering the significance of rape during the Holocaust in these years. By analyzing both the trainings and interviews with these contexts in mind, the segments in the VHA attain new significance in the ways rape during liberation was or was not spoken about.

## “EMPATHETIC GUIDANCE”

On July 7, 1994, Shoah Foundation staff members and prospective interviewers gathered on the backlot of Universal Studios in Los Angeles for the organization's first training. The lead trainer, Darlene Basch, a psychotherapist and a child of survivors who had long been involved in Holocaust memorialization efforts, described the project as an “unprecedented collaboration” between filmmakers, Jewish community activists, survivors, and children of survivors to gather thousands of survivor testimonies.<sup>21</sup> The Shoah Foundation staff expressed a sense of urgency in this undertaking: The organization needed to work quickly to interview as many survivors as possible before they passed away. As Basch addressed interviewer responsibilities, she explained that they would be the very people who would facilitate the sharing process at this critical moment to preserve survivor narratives for future listeners. The trainees were eager to take up the call.

To get to know each other, each trainee introduced the person who sat next to them to the rest of the group, including their name, their profession, why they wanted to participate in the project, and if relevant, their personal relationship to the Holocaust.<sup>22</sup> These prospective interviewers brought varying levels of personal and institutional knowledge to the project. They were teachers, professors, psychotherapists, artists, and writers. Many were the children of Holocaust survivors and a few were survivors themselves. Some had previously volunteered for institutions like the Museum of Tolerance, Yad Vashem, or the Holocaust Museum LA. A couple were motivated by their concerns about “revisionism”—they felt that the project could serve to combat Holocaust denial. Some stated that they were simply interested in learning about individual survivors' experiences before, during, and after the war. A number felt it was their personal responsibility based on the memory of family members who perished during the Holocaust.

Throughout the day's sessions, which included a presentation by Judge Bruce Einhorn, a discussion led by survivor Renée Firestone, and a mock interview between Basch and survivor Dana Schwartz, sexual violence was not mentioned. Even with this absence, key methodological aspects of the training can help us examine the ways interviewers handled the topic when it did eventually come up in interviews. One of the most important elements was how Basch prepared interviewers to support survivors. Trainees were instructed to act with "empathetic guidance," especially during instances when survivors recalled particularly traumatic memories, by utilizing nonverbal cues to show their attentiveness, such as eye contact, nodding, and body language.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, interviewers were told to remain, to the best of their ability, visibly unmoved so that survivors would not question whether their interviewer could emotionally handle what they were sharing. Basch explained that survivors might become quite distressed and cry. However, interviewers should not stop the tape for any reason unless the survivor explicitly asked them to do so. While rape was not specifically named as a topic interviewers might encounter, these instructions would be what interviewers relied on.

Another element was the Shoah Foundation's narrative structure and logistical interview timing. The trainers wanted interviewers to aim for a 20:60:20 ratio for what they considered to be the ideal testimony: 20 percent of the interview would focus on prewar life, 60 percent on wartime, and 20 percent on postwar experiences.<sup>24</sup> Noah Shenker has described the structure as "the inciting incident of the outbreak of war and persecution, followed by the central events of the Holocaust, and then leading to a sense of resolution through discussion of liberation or other postwar experiences."<sup>25</sup> For countless reasons, survivors' memories could not easily fit into these parameters.<sup>26</sup> For many, liberation did not lead to a sense of resolution and often could not be confined to 20 percent of their retelling. As is evident in the interviews, the survivors who were willing to mention rape during liberation disrupted the narrative structure as it was envisioned by the institution and interviewers, because it directly challenged a sense of resolution. Many survivors anticipated that stories of sexual violence during liberation might not even make sense for the project. During interviews, some wondered aloud about whether that part of their story was relevant or interesting.

This made up the guidance element of "empathetic guidance"—the Shoah Foundation wanted interviewers to assist survivors to articulate their memories in this narrative arc. In the earliest months of interviewing, interviewers were told that they would be provided with four 30-minute tapes with the intention that the first tape would be dedicated to prewar life, the second and third were for wartime, and the fourth was for postwar life, adhering to the 20:60:20 ratio as mentioned above. During this first training, Basch explained a slightly different way to divide the tapes: She instructed trainees to aim for about fifteen minutes for prewar, fifteen minutes for postwar, so that even more of the time would be focused on wartime, with enough time at the end to

show the survivor's photos and in some cases introduce their family members on camera. These logistical instructions may have also had considerable influence on survivors' willingness to discuss rape during liberation and interviewers' ability to ask follow-up questions. For example, if an interviewer was trying to keep a survivor "on track" based on the ratio and they were already low on time, they might have rushed past a memory about rape, a topic they were already not explicitly trained to handle.

We can also glean important context from the trainers' instruction about the role of pre-interview interactions between survivors and interviewers. The Shoah Foundation implemented a pre-interview questionnaire system in which survivors and interviewers would meet or speak on the phone and fill out the questionnaire about key elements of their story. Basch told interviewers that they should ask survivors "to give some thought to the most profound things that happened to you that you want to be put on tape."<sup>27</sup> The Shoah Foundation also informed survivors in advance that a copy of their tapes would be sent to their children and grandchildren. Would survivors consider their own rape or the rape of their family members as "profound"? Would they want these details on tape for their family to hear? The anticipation of future listeners might have contributed to a level of self-censorship or decisions to hold back. Taken together, the lack of training about sexual violence, the mode of "empathetic guidance," the narrative structure, and survivors' sensitivity to future listeners created conditions in which it was in fact quite difficult to provide or receive stories about rape during liberation.

At the training, the Shoah Foundation provided interviewers with copies of a Holocaust Oral History Manual, which trainees were instructed to read "cover to cover."<sup>28</sup> It contained nineteen extensive lists of questions organized by a variety of experiences such as resistance, hiding, ghettos, concentration camps, refugees, child survivors, and more. None of the questions asked about sex, sexual violence, or rape. This absence, among the hundreds of questions, may have signaled to interviewers that it was not relevant, appropriate, or necessary to ask survivors about these issues. It is important to understand that the manual, published by the Center for Holocaust Studies in Brooklyn, New York, in 1991, was written by survivor-historian Yaffa Eliach and archivist and scholar Brana Gurewitsch.<sup>29</sup> Eliach's experiences of interviewing the Hasidic survivor community in Flatbush with the help of her Brooklyn College students influenced the development of the manual.<sup>30</sup> Eliach wrote about the importance of establishing trust with the community. In many cases, students interviewed their own parents or relatives, which may have also contributed to the lack of questions about sex, rape, and sexuality.<sup>31</sup>

The manual also contained the transcriptions of six excerpts of interviews that the Center for Holocaust Studies conducted with survivors. One featured a story from a 1978 interview with Judith Alter, a child survivor who was born in Czechoslovakia. The interview was conducted by Alter's daughter. Alter described her experience of

liberation by the Red Army. She stated: "It wasn't so pleasant with the Russians because the Cossacks were wild animals and anything that they could touch, they destroyed. They would rape, strip and use the women and girls. It was hard to decide who was better, the Cossacks or the Germans, but I guess we were saved by them so the Russians were like saviors for us."<sup>32</sup> If the interviewers had read the manual cover to cover, this would have been the only instance in which they encountered a survivor's recollections about Red Army rapes. Rape was not completely invisible or unmentioned, but it still remained unclear as to how interviewers should ask more about it.

## MEMORIES OF RAPE IN CALIFORNIA-BASED INTERVIEWS

Many of the interviewers set out on their first interviews within the week of their training. This section focuses on three interviewers, Barbara Gordon, Carol Stulberg, and Dana Schwartz, who encountered multiple accounts of rape by Soviet soldiers from survivors and responded in different ways. I selected these interviewers because they had all been present at the first training and each of them conducted a considerable number of interviews for the Shoah Foundation. Their personal backgrounds also provide additional information to think through the individual influences on interviewer-interviewee dynamics. I will address each of their interviewing styles broadly, followed by a specific example from one interview.

The first, Barbara Gordon, was born in Berlin, Germany, and escaped with her family to the United States in 1939. At the training, she mentioned that her sense of survivor's guilt motivated her to take part in the project.<sup>33</sup> In her interviews, Gordon's intervention was minimal. She mostly asked factual questions about dates and geographic locations. When she encountered survivors' stories about rape during liberation, Gordon repeatedly avoided asking follow-up questions. There are at least six interviews in which this occurred. Instead, she usually asked an entirely different question or simply clarified, "You were liberated by the Russians."<sup>34</sup> There are a number of possible explanations as to why Gordon diverted in these moments: She may have been too uncomfortable or thought it was inappropriate to ask more, the stories might not have seemed to fit into the mainstream narrative of the Holocaust that she was familiar with, or she might have felt low on time and wanted to save time for postwar immigration stories or to introduce the survivor's family. Regardless, she decided, possibly due to a combination of these factors, to pass over these stories.

One of Gordon's interviewees, Alice S., described a memory of witnessing Soviet soldiers attempting to rape women. The interview took place on July 20, 1994, about

two weeks after the first training. Gordon began the interview by gathering prewar information: Alice was born in Czechoslovakia in 1926. Her father was a World War I veteran so her family experienced exceptions to certain laws and her immediate family did not have to enter the ghetto. Soon after, though, her family was deported to Auschwitz. At this point, the interview closely followed the 20:60:20 ratio, creating the narrative arc that Gordon was trained to collect. When Alice began to speak about her experiences at the end of the war, she recounted her transfer to the Stutthof camp, then to Proust, a camp near Danzig. From there, she was sent on a death march, became ill, and briefly stayed in a farmhouse with other girls. When Gordon prompted Alice to describe liberation, she said:

Now—I survived. But being liberated by the Russians was terrible. I mean, they looted, they—they raped—a lot of [girls] were killed and raped by the Russians. Later, when I got better, I was in the room with a friend, two sisters, and a Russian officer came in. The sister got under the bed, one of them. The other he wanted to rape, and she resisted. So she was shot while the sister was under the bed. They [pause] they were pretty awful. I mean, they were like animals let out of a cage.<sup>35</sup>

Gordon immediately followed up by asking, “How long were you in this farmhouse until—how—when you became ill, how long—”<sup>36</sup> The follow-up question caught Alice off-guard as evidenced by her brief startled facial expression. Alice did not share any more details about this horrific encounter with the soldiers and instead answered Gordon’s question with information about what happened next. This leaves listeners to wonder: What happened to Alice during this situation? Did a soldier try to rape her that night? Neither Alice nor Gordon brought this instance up again, so we do not have answers to these questions.

The second interviewer, Carol Stulberg, was born in Germany to two survivors.<sup>37</sup> Stulberg modeled an intuitive interviewing style—she managed the tensions present in “empathetic guidance” well. When a survivor alluded to particularly difficult memories, she was adept at following up and asking clarifying questions in a sensitive but straightforward way. In her interviews, Stulberg utilized varied approaches to ask about rape, and she did not always use the word “rape” itself. For example, on one occasion, a survivor mentioned Russians “raping a lot of girls,” and Stulberg asked, “Did you see that happen?”<sup>38</sup> In another interview, Stulberg asked, “Can I ask you, when the Russians came in, were there any problems for you from the Russians? Any of the girls? Were you ever mistreated by the Russians?”<sup>39</sup> Here, Stulberg was alluding to rape, but was not willing to use the word in her question. The survivor responded: “No, I was never mistreated, no.” The survivor appeared to understand what Stulberg was insinuating and did not speak more about it.



In Stulberg's interview with Pepi W. on January 23, 1995, the survivor spoke extensively about her evasion of rape by Soviet soldiers. Pepi, born in 1920 in Czechoslovakia, was liberated with her sister and felt relieved to be able to get some sleep in a nearby house. Soon, she said, "those Russians gave us a lot of trouble."<sup>40</sup> Stulberg asked, "Like what?" Pepi responded: "They wanted sex, first of all." Pepi then described a night when soldiers knocked on the door, came into the house, and one soldier grabbed her to try to rape her. She noticed a pencil in his pocket and used it to stab him in the eye. This allowed her and her sister to escape. This was a key turning point in her personal narrative—after that, she told her sister that they had to leave "because we will not have peace here" with the threat of rape so prominent.<sup>41</sup> They set off on foot and went into another house. Soldiers broke in once again. Pepi had another physical encounter with a soldier and she said that her and her sister's screams prevented another attempted rape. During these segments, Stulberg did not intervene, which allowed Pepi to describe these aspects of her liberation experiences for over six minutes. Once Pepi said all that she wanted to about this, Stulberg and Pepi moved on to the next part of her story.

The third interviewer, Dana Schwartz, was a child survivor born in Lwów, Poland, in 1935. She had extensive experience as a practicing psychotherapist and had been conducting numerous interviews with Holocaust survivors in Los Angeles before her involvement with the Shoah Foundation. Throughout her interviews, there are subtle hints that some survivors may have felt especially comfortable with Schwartz as someone who may have shared certain experiences as a survivor. In one exchange, for example, a survivor asked Schwartz, "You remember that too?," in regard to Russian soldiers wearing multiple watches they had looted during liberation.<sup>42</sup> On multiple occasions, Schwartz explicitly asked survivors about various forms of sexuality and sexual violence, and not just about rape during liberation. When relevant, Schwartz explicitly asked survivors about sexual abuse in hiding, sexual encounters in ghettos, rape perpetrated by German guards or collaborators. She was especially skilled in this regard: She was able to ask these questions in a sensitive way and survivors seemed comfortable sharing with her.

Berlin-born survivor Brigitte M.'s interview with Schwartz took place on October 19, 1994. Brigitte and her parents survived the war by passing as Christians with false documents. Her memories were characterized by her parents' tactfulness and protection of her. When Brigitte recalled Soviet troops marching in to liberate Belzig, where she and her mother were living on an estate, she remembered hearing her mother screaming. Brigitte came running and found a Russian soldier "attacking [her mother], wanting to rape her."<sup>43</sup> Twelve years old at the time, Brigitte recalled hitting and yelling at this soldier, which caused another officer to intervene and pull the soldier away. In the following days, she witnessed Soviet soldiers raping women in the garden outside the house. She said this was "how she learned about sex." Brigitte concluded: "Anyways,

so the Russians in those days weren't so wonderful. They had their own agenda."<sup>44</sup> Instead of moving on, Schwartz asked directly: "Did anyone try to rape you?"<sup>45</sup> Brigitte answered, "No. That's the strangest thing. They didn't try. Nobody ever tried to come near me."<sup>46</sup> Schwartz did not push further and they continued the interview.

Schwartz herself was interviewed by the Shoah Foundation in 1996. Her personal experiences lend some additional information about why she might have been willing to ask about rape. Like Brigitte, Schwartz also survived the war with her mother by passing as non-Jews. Schwartz described an instance when she protected her mother during an attempted rape by a Soviet soldier in 1945 in Lwów, Poland.<sup>47</sup> She remembered jumping on the soldier's back, kicking and scratching him, which allowed her and her mother to run away. The attack on her mother was a pivotal event in their family's narrative: Schwartz connected this instance to her mother's decision to immigrate to the United States.

## RAPE AS A TOPIC IN TRAININGS AND INTERVIEWS

Throughout 1994, the Shoah Foundation organized and hosted trainings in Toronto, New York City, and Miami. Through 1998, additional trainings took place in the United States and countries around the world including Australia, Israel, the Netherlands, France, Germany, England, Argentina, Bulgaria, South Africa, Ukraine, Hungary, Poland, and Russia.<sup>48</sup> No two trainings were exactly alike. With the passage of time, they became considerably more robust: They were multiple days long and covered more Holocaust history. One of the mainstay sessions was a presentation of a broader narrative by a local historian, typically focusing on political and ideological forces that led to the Holocaust. These sessions almost never mentioned women, gender, or sexuality. Trainees also attended sessions in which they reviewed clips of previously recorded interviews, analyzing the interviewer's strategies as ones to emulate or avoid. Interviewers conducted mock interviews with each other and sometimes with survivors. These sessions aimed to help interviewers develop their question-asking skills and prepare them to practice empathetic guidance with an interviewee.

In October 1994, the Shoah Foundation team made their way to Toronto for the first training outside of Los Angeles. At this training, Canadian historian Paula Draper joined as a trainer. Draper had been conducting interviews with survivors since 1981. In all subsequent trainings, Draper integrated a short presentation that focused on the then-current scholarship about the Holocaust, including research about women and gender such as the recently published collection *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*.<sup>49</sup> She emphasized the differences between women's and men's experiences. One

main difference she described was women's vulnerability to "sexual assault and exploitation" in ghettos, camps, and in hiding.<sup>50</sup> Notably, she did not mention liberation. However, this was a major addition to the trainings: Sexual violence was now consistently mentioned as a possible topic interviewers might encounter.

Basch and Draper worked together as lead trainers and fielded questions from potential interviewers about what they might expect. Draper added some new strategies to address what she called "particularly uncomfortable questions," which included rape. Draper recommended asking: "What was your most painful memory of that time?"<sup>51</sup> She urged interviewers not to be too insistent, but to leave space and time for survivors to describe these memories. At the training in Miami in December 1994, one trainee asked if there were any questions that were not allowed to be asked.<sup>52</sup> Basch asked for clarification and the trainee responded, "I mean could you say, when the guard came at you, did he rape you? Did he actually rape you? Could you say something like that?"<sup>53</sup> Basch answered: "No, you do not ask that question, you ask them 'What happened?' That's a leading question. We can't tell people what happened to them."<sup>54</sup> Basch was not against survivors talking about rape, but she was concerned about interviewers applying certain words to an experience that a survivor might not have used themselves and instead wanted interviewers to ask open-ended questions, a strategy that was standard practice in oral history.

At the 1995 training in New York, Draper mentioned to a small breakout group that toward the end of the war, "a lot of women were raped by the Russians, now this is something that was quite common."<sup>55</sup> She explained that despite its frequency, women might not bring up these experiences in their interviews because they might feel uncomfortable speaking about them on tape. This was a rare moment during an interviewer training when rape during liberation was specifically addressed. This small group of New York-based interviewers, among many other thousands of interviewers trained, was alerted to the frequency of rape by the Red Army during liberation. This topic certainly could have come up in smaller moments of other trainings that were simply not captured in the recordings of the trainings. However, as the core presentations of the trainings solidified between 1994 and 1998, rape during liberation did not become a topic that was consistently included in every training, nor was it written into the training materials provided to interviewers such as topical questions lists. This unevenness in the trainings provides users of the VHA with a more complex picture as to why interviewers might have addressed the topic of rape during liberation inconsistently.

When one searches the VHA with the index term "liberator sexual assaults," 512 results appear. After limiting the search results to English-language interviews conducted by the Shoah Foundation, the results narrow to 348. These segments show that for

hundreds of survivors, the very meaning of liberation was closely associated with rape, which undermined the idea that liberation was a “happy ending.” Many survivors were aware that these memories might not have been what the interviewers were expecting to hear. In one interview, a survivor described her disappointment: “With them bringing us freedom . . . I’m sorry, I have to be honest. I don’t know who will understand, but the only thing that they brought us was rape.”<sup>56</sup> The survivor knew she was going against the grain in the context of the interview in that she was not idealizing liberation or the Red Army forces, and she knew she was speaking against commonly accepted knowledge. There was no sense of clear resolution in the narrative if a survivor decided to “be honest” and speak out about rape. Interviewers, in turn, needed to decide if they were willing to provide the space for survivors to talk about it more fully.

These segments contain patterns in both interviewers’ and interviewees’ reactions to the topic. In some cases, interviewees brought up the topic and then decided that they did not want to share the full story. One brought up the issue of rape so it was on the record, but then said, “I’d rather not go into it.”<sup>57</sup> Another said she did “not want to go into detail.”<sup>58</sup> Others shared their story and then became worried about these stories being recorded on the tape. One backtracked: “Please, don’t put this in.”<sup>59</sup> Another survivor became upset and asked the crew to stop recording: “I have to quit. I can’t tell that. You have to cut it.”<sup>60</sup> In some cases, survivors looked to their interviewers before sharing and almost asked for their permission. One was hesitant: “I don’t know if I should tell you, if it’s interesting in the interview.”<sup>61</sup> Another asked, “And then shall I tell you about the rape?”<sup>62</sup> These cases show that some survivors were willing to share, but were unsure if the Shoah Foundation would find those stories interesting or appropriate to include in their taped testimony.

Alternatively, there are many examples of survivors who brought up rape during liberation on their own accord, without having been prompted at all by the interviewer. Sometimes, they did not use the word “rape.” Some euphemistically referenced it with some variations such as “go to bed with us,” “have fun with us,” or “attack us.” In some cases, interviewers asked them to clarify what they meant. In one example, a survivor stated: “Jewish girls had trouble with the Russian liberators.” The interviewer asked, “What kind of problems?” The survivor responded: “Rape.”<sup>63</sup> Other survivors did use the word rape outright. Some spoke about witnessing or hearing about someone else who was raped. In many of these cases, interviewers did not ask whether or not the survivor herself was raped, in the way Dana Schwartz asked Brigitte above.

For survivors who spoke on tape about their own experiences of rape, the interviewers’ immediate reaction was crucial. Take, for example, this survivor and interviewer’s interaction:

Survivor: They [the Cossacks] broke in and they raped some of the girls, including myself. And in the morning we went to—

Interviewer: You're going over that very quickly.

Survivor: I don't like to talk about it.

Interviewer: Was it one of the worst things that had happened?

Survivor: It was [begins to cry]. I had just come from being in a camp, supposedly being free now and this is happening to me. I had just turned seventeen. It was only a few days. It was very painful . . . and hard to understand that they would do that. They may not have known we were Jews, I don't know, they probably did, but they didn't care.<sup>64</sup>

This interview was conducted in New York in June 1995, so it is likely that this interviewer utilized one of Draper's suggested strategies to handle recollections of rape—not necessarily asking for information, but instead holding the space for the survivor to reflect further if she wanted to.

The following interviewer took a different approach by asking multiple follow-up questions. In this case, the survivor was willing to share more details:

Survivor: There was a house that was empty and we went in to sleep and they came and raped me.

Interviewer: Who did this?

Survivor: The Russian soldiers.

Interviewer: How many?

Survivor: I think it was three or four.

Interviewer: At the same . . . on the same night?

Survivor: Same time, same night.

Interviewer: And who were you with?

Survivor: I was with my brother and they told my brother to get out. So there was nothing else to do but go out. You still had that fear that somebody's always bigger than you are and have a gun on your head.

Interviewer: How did you cope with that?

Survivor: There was nothing to cope about it. Just was there and that was it. You don't think about it. You don't talk about it, don't think about it, I didn't know better. I wasn't as educated as the kids right now. That time, you didn't speak about sex or about rape or anything else, it wasn't then. Not like it is now.<sup>65</sup>

This interviewer, Hilary Adah Helstein, was by the time of this interview an experienced interviewer, having already conducted over one hundred interviews with

the Shoah Foundation. The survivor demonstrated her own understanding of the differences in the ways people “spoke about sex or rape” in 1997 versus 1945 and how her own lack of sex education as a young woman did not give her the words to name her experience. The combination of the interviewer’s interest, knowledge, sensitivities, and experience and the survivor’s awareness of what it meant to talk about rape “now” resulted in an exchange in which more details of the survivor’s personal experience were captured.

Some interviewers avoided stories about rape altogether. There are numerous examples in which a survivor mentioned rape and the interviewer disregarded it by asking a completely different question. For example, one survivor described a strategy she used: to lie next to a young man that she knew during liberation, “and that’s how we were safe from rape.” The interviewer immediately asked: “Did you ever get back to your hometown?”<sup>66</sup> Interviewers who did ask follow-up questions after a survivor mentioned rape did so in a variety of ways. Some asked questions avoiding the word rape, such as: “Did anything happen to you?”<sup>67</sup> “How did you protect yourself?”<sup>68</sup> “Did that happen to you?”<sup>69</sup> “Did you have any contact with the Russian soldiers at all?”<sup>70</sup> and “Did they ever try to attack you?”<sup>71</sup> Others did ask survivors questions using the word “rape”: “He was raping you?”<sup>72</sup> “Were you raped by a Russian?”<sup>73</sup> and “Before you continue, did the Russians try to rape you?”<sup>74</sup>

When an interviewer did ask follow-up questions, these interactions often resulted in the most detailed accounts about the prevalence of rape. These segments present important details in which family members tried to protect younger girls in the family, with mothers or aunts hiding daughters and nieces or brothers concealing their sisters. Many survivors spoke about avoidance strategies: Some attempted to avoid rape by “making themselves ugly or old looking” or purposely making their illness obvious to disgust Soviet soldiers with vomit or diarrhea. Some survivors described jumping out of windows.<sup>75</sup> Others remembered women they knew who chose to commit suicide to avoid rape.<sup>76</sup> If they could, some survivors communicated with soldiers in either Russian or another Slavic language and this sometimes helped them avoid rape, either by begging or explaining that they were Jewish and had just been persecuted. Many survivors also told stories about how they would mention they were Jewish and if they encountered a Jewish soldier in the Red Army, they helped to protect them from the threat of rape from other soldiers. One survivor, for example, said a Yiddish word to the soldiers and a Jewish doctor in the Soviet Army immediately embraced her. He provided her with a piece of soap, which she saw as a sign of him recognizing her humanity. The survivor recalled, “He was the first person who gave me back my freedom, my life.”<sup>77</sup>

## CONCLUSION

During one of the trainings, historian Paula Draper explained to the interviewers that survivors often shared relevant stories after the interview was over. Draper herself had multiple experiences in which survivors disclosed stories of rape to her once the camera was packed away. In one case, a woman survivor described her rape on the car ride home. Draper commented that she was unsure whether or not she explicitly asked about rape in the interview, and whether that would have prompted the survivor to share her memory on camera. This woman had never told her husband that she had been raped and did not want him to find out when they received their copy of the tape. In these cases, regardless of the interviewers' approach, some survivors simply did not want their tape to contain such memories. In 2014, Henry Greenspan asked, "Should everything survivors say in connection with the Holocaust—on and off the record, incidental and considered, reflection as much as remembrance—be considered part of their 'testimony'?"<sup>78</sup> Draper's experiences capture how many recollections of rape as part of survivors' testimony were left off the record.

Beyond the interviewing process, historian Andrea Pető has demonstrated that the Shoah Foundation's process of indexing "even raises the issue of silencing and controlling."<sup>79</sup> While interviewers were often insensitive or untrained to handle instances about sexual violence, those who worked to later index the interviews in the 1990s and early 2000s were often ill-equipped to tag these segments sufficiently. Pető highlights how "sexual violence, assault and other key terms are not first level terms" in the indexing system, "and very often the relevant narration starts earlier than indicated in the catalog."<sup>80</sup> As the VHA continues to evolve with the addition of new index terms, definitions of keywords, and various synonyms, this critical analysis of these assumptions remains essential to identify strategies in which scholars, students, and other VHA users may identify and research survivors' testimonies that contain descriptions of rape or fear of rape.

While this chapter has focused on rape of Jewish women survivors by soldiers in the Red Army, this line of inquiry, thinking deeply about interviewer trainings and paying attention to interviewers' questioning strategies, could be applied to any number of other previously or still neglected subjects.<sup>81</sup> Take, for example, queer experiences during the Holocaust, Jewish children's forced labor, or the discovery of the Jedwabne pogrom, just to name a few. The trainings offer fascinating dimensions of the Shoah Foundation's institutional history to consider. As scholars continue to rely on the VHA for its wealth of sources, these layers of context can help answer questions that have long perplexed us.

## NOTES

1. I have decided to use a pseudonym for this survivor because of her initial concerns about sharing this story as she articulated in her interview. I do not intend to reinforce a sense of shame or stigma associated with experiences of sexual violence, but I also want to remain sensitive to her specific concerns. Researchers who are interested in locating this interview can use the interview number below. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I have included the real first names of survivors and their first initial in addition to the interview number associated with their interview in the Visual History Archive (VHA), with one exception, Dana Schwartz, who was both a survivor and Shoah Foundation interviewer who publicly spoke about and published her experiences elsewhere. Additionally, although I refer to the organization as “The Shoah Foundation,” “The Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation” was its original title. Once the organization became associated with the University of Southern California in 2006, the name changed again and it eventually became known as “USC Shoah Foundation—the Institute for Visual History and Education.” For a critical analysis of the Shoah Foundation’s institutional history, see Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Indiana University Press, 2015), 115.
2. Rothman participated in the first Shoah Foundation training in Los Angeles in 1994. This was his seventh interview. Mark A. Rothman, phone conversation with the author, April 2024.
3. Edith, Interview 388. Interview by Mark A. Rothman. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, December 14, 1994. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/388>.
4. Edith, Interview 388.
5. Edith, Interview 388. Edith told her brother about her rape after they had reunited after the war in the 1950s. From this point on, he told her not to speak about it and she listened.
6. Edith, postinterview summary, 388. USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives. The postinterview summary seemed to be a short-lived practice—only the earliest interviews included these documents.
7. Annabelle Baldwin, “Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 16, no. 3 (2010): 112–34; Baldwin, “And What Happened Next?: Emotions and Sexual Violence in Holocaust Interviews,” *Oral History Australia Journal* 41 (2019): 32–42; Allison Somogyi, “Hungarian-Jewish Survivors and Discourse Surrounding Sexual Violence in Testimonies,” virtual lecture, August 27, 2020, posted August 24, 2023, by the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research, YouTube, 1:33:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kjKTRQvzu7o>; and Lauren Cantillion, “Challenging the Shame Paradigm: Jewish Women’s Narratives of Sexual(ized)



- Violence During the Holocaust,” virtual lecture, March 25, 2021, posted August 24, 2023, by the University of Southern California Dornsife Center for Advanced Genocide Research, YouTube, 1:33:03, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Tljl0WUkbY>.
8. For an interactive timeline of the Shoah Foundation’s institutional history see <https://vha.usc.edu/about?tab=interview>.
  9. This California-based cohort of interviewers and interviewees constituted its own “ecology of witnessing,” to use Hannah Pollin-Galay’s metaphorical framework, in that the location and culture of Los Angeles, and California more broadly, came with its own set of social norms, which are reflected in the trainings and interviews. Each of the locations included in the rest of the chapter did too, though in this chapter, Los Angeles will receive the most attention. It is crucial to keep in mind the specificities of cultural norms in each of the cities and towns where interviews took place. Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (Yale University Press, 2018), 2.
  10. This tag, “liberator sexual assaults,” was added into the VHA index as a term on March 14, 1997. A related term, “sexual assault fears,” was added on January 23, 2002.
  11. In this volume, Monika Vrzgulová provides fascinating personal reflections about her transformative experiences of interviewing women survivors from Slovakia in the 1990s. Her first-person reflexive approach demonstrates just how influential individual interviewers’ backgrounds and approaches have been on interviews, in addition to the institutional-methodological structures.
  12. Dawn Skorczewski, “‘You Want Me to Sing?’: Holocaust Testimonies in the Intersubjective Field,” *Dapim: Studies on the Holocaust* 32, no. 2 (2018): 112–27. Skorczewski’s work adds valuable framing to foundational works focusing on Holocaust testimony and trauma, such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1991); Lawrence L. Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991); and Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony* (Praeger, 1998). Oral historians not involved in Holocaust studies have long emphasized the importance of interviewer-interviewee rapport and dynamics. See the foundational essays included in *The Oral History Reader* edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).
  13. Skorczewski, “‘You Want Me to Sing?’” 114.
  14. Dan Stone, for example, commented, “Reports of rape were not uncommon, though camp survivors suffered less in this regard than German women civilians.” Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps: The End of the Holocaust and Its Aftermath* (Yale University Press, 2015), 53. Atina Grossmann included examples of Jewish survivors’ perceptions or experiences of rape by Red Army soldiers in *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007). See also: Miriam Gebhardt,

- Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War*, trans. Nick Somers (Polity, 2017).
15. Stone, *The Liberation of the Camps*, 53.
  16. Susan Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton University Press, 2002), 4. See also: Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," *Signs* 18, no. 2 (1993); and Estelle B. Freedman, "'Not a Word Was Said Ever Again': Silence and Speech in Women's Oral History Accounts of Sexual Harassment," *Oral History Review* 50, no. 1 (2023).
  17. Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York University Press, 2001).
  18. Alcoff and Gray, "Survivor Discourse," 275.
  19. Anne Valk, "Remembering Together: Take Back the Night and the Public Memory of Feminism," in *U.S. Women's History: Untangling the Threads of Sisterhood*, ed. Leslie Brown, Jacqueline Castledine, and Anne Valk (Rutgers University Press, 2017).
  20. Rana M. Jaleel, *The Work of Rape* (Duke University Press, 2021). Mass rape during the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides also prompted feminist Holocaust survivors to reassess their thoughts about sexual violence during the Holocaust. See Doris L. Bergen, "Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Unique and Typical?," in *Lessons and Legacies VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Northwestern University Press, 2014); and Regina Mühlhäuser, "Understanding Sexual Violence During the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research and Sources," *German History* 39, no. 1 (2020).
  21. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.
  22. This helped me to identify individual Shoah Foundation interviewers, and later, search for them in the VHA and trace how their interviewing style developed over time. Their personal stories add fascinating layers to our knowledge about the resulting interviews.
  23. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.
  24. Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, 122.
  25. Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony*, 125.
  26. For a rich examination of how and why Hungarian survivors' stories did not fit this ratio, see Edit Jeges, "Hungarian Holocaust Testimonies in Global Memory Frames: Digital Storytelling about 'Change' and 'Liberation,'" *Hungarian Historical Review* 9, no. 3 (2020): 452–69.
  27. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.
  28. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.

29. Eliach founded the Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation, and Research in Brooklyn, New York in 1974.
30. Holocaust Oral History Manual, *Center for Holocaust Studies Newsletter* 3, no. 7, 1. Institutional Archives, Museum of Jewish Heritage: A Living Memorial to the Holocaust.
31. Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (Vintage Books, 1982), xxii.
32. Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust*, 48.
33. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, Part 1. USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.
34. Valerie F., Interview 99. Interview by Barbara Gordon. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, September 13, 1994. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/99>.
35. Alice S., Interview 22, Interview by Barbara Gordon. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 20, 1994. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/22>.
36. Alice S., Interview 22, Interview by Barbara Gordon. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 20, 1994. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/22>.
37. Interviewer training session in Los Angeles, 1994, USC Shoah Foundation Institutional Archives.
38. Tikva S., Interview 3551, Interview by Carol Stulberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, June 27, 1995. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/3551>.
39. Helen S., Interview 3413, Interview by Carol Stulberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 11, 1995. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/3413>.
40. Pepi W., Interview 615, Interview by Carol Stulberg. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, January 23, 1995. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/615>.
41. Pepi W., Interview 615.
42. Branka S., Interview 17004, Interview by Dana Schwartz. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, July 6, 1996. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/17004>.
43. Brigitte M., Interview 162, Interview by Dana Schwartz. Visual History Archive, USC Shoah Foundation, October 19, 1994. <https://vha.usc.edu/testimony/162>.
44. Brigitte M., Interview 162.
45. Brigitte M., Interview 162.
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81. See, for example, Anna Hájková's work about the erasure of queerness in the VHA in "Why We Need a Queer History of the Holocaust," *Novara Media*, January 27, 2020, <https://novaramedia.com/2020/01/27/why-we-need-a-queer-history-of-the-holocaust>.

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# “THE OTHER CALAMITIES”

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING LIBERATION IN THE FIRST- EVER INTERVIEWS WITH FEMALE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FROM SLOVAKIA<sup>1</sup>

MONIKA VRZGULOVÁ

### INTRODUCTION

“THERE WERE ALSO VARIOUS OTHER CALAMITIES PERPETRATED BY RUSSIANS in Germany during Liberation.” This is how Hilda (b. 1924), one of the respondents in the first-ever Holocaust-related oral history project carried out in Slovakia, remembered liberation. In this chapter, I analyze interviews with women like Hilda to determine *whether* and *how* female survivors remembered the issue of sexual violence at the end of World War II. I use excerpts from individual survivors’ testimonies to show *what* they said about their experiences with soldiers-liberators and *how* it fits into their self-presentation strategy during the interview. I also discuss how the methodology, time and place of the research, and survivors’ age impact the content of their memories. I will briefly introduce the research, its phases, methodology, and interview technique. The core of the text is the analysis and interpretation of excerpts, focusing on the terms used by women when recalling the violence they experienced. Respondents typically express their memories of sexual violence using coded language—words they can say in front of interviewers. At the same time, they find it challenging to describe their ambivalent feelings during liberation—persistent fear of violence, vulnerability, the hesitant awareness of being free, and a slow realization that



their suffering is over. Is it over? I consider Holocaust survivors' strategies of self-presentation and the agenda they pursued in their interviews decades after the Holocaust. In addition, I examine how the issue of sexual violence was addressed in Holocaust studies and conveyed in public discourse at the time of the research. I strive for reflexive writing that highlights my perspective as a researcher, acknowledges my positionality during and after the research, and contextualizes my current interpretations of the selected memories.

This paper draws on oral history interviews conducted for the international project *Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust*, which was conducted from 1995 to 1997 under the auspices of the Fortunoff Video Archive at Yale University.<sup>2</sup> I was part of the research team. The overarching aim of this first-ever Holocaust-oriented research project in Slovakia was to gather as many testimonies as possible to build a substantial pool of data for further analysis. The researchers employed a methodology and interviewing technique designed by the Fortunoff Archive.<sup>3</sup> We tried to be attentive listeners and create an atmosphere of trust, giving the interviewees sufficient time and space to recount their life stories. We recognized the scholarly importance of what we were doing, especially considering the interviewees' age and the project's psychological dimensions. For most of the respondents, the interviews were the first time they would speak openly and at length about their experiences. In Holocaust studies, these interviews can be classified as *late testimonies* due to the time they were conducted. That being said, they were also *the first testimonies* ever recorded in Slovakia. They were provided by men and women who were persecuted during the Holocaust because of their Jewish origins. Most of them had spent their entire lives in Slovakia, and until our meeting, they had shared their experiences of the Holocaust only with their families or people who had shared a similar fate—that is, if they communicated them at all. As many of them confessed during our interviews, we were the first people to hear their stories in their entirety.

When analyzing oral testimonies, I always wonder about the various factors that could have impacted their form and content. Our *first-ever* yet *very late* Holocaust testimonies recorded in the 1990s were mainly shaped by such factors as the *time* and *place*<sup>4</sup> of the interview (the social and political situation in the country), the subject's *particular significance* in the witnesses' private lives, and *its place* in public discourse.

## ORAL HISTORY METHODOLOGY: THE STAGES AND TECHNIQUES OF INTERVIEW

The research involved multiple stages, during which we engaged with each interviewee at least three times. In the first stage, we approached (by phone or in person) potential interviewees, explaining the purpose and objectives of the project, the recording

of interview recording, as well as its subsequent processing. In the pre-interviews, we informed the survivors that they would be able to speak freely, without interruption by the interviewers. We expressed an interest in their lived experiences before, during, and after the Holocaust. The second stage was the actual filming of the interview. The third was an informal social gathering where we provided the survivors a recording of the interview and informed them about the progress of further research and the results.

The first part of the interview was led by the interviewee. It was up to them to select the individual situations and experiences that they would weave into the subsequent narrative. They did this at their own discretion, based on their mood and personal attitude. It was also up to the interviewees to decide how much of each phase of their lives would be represented in their testimonies. We strived to pursue the “ideal” interviewee–interviewer relationship. We aimed to be empathic listeners throughout the duration of the testimony, staying with the narrator, all the way, as much as we could.<sup>5</sup> Initially, they spoke about their family backgrounds and their relations with the community and the majority society before the Holocaust (depending on the age of the interviewee). The core part of the testimonies consisted of the respondents’ stories from 1938 to 1945.<sup>6</sup> Next in order of representation were their experiences from the postwar period. In the second part of the interview, the researchers asked questions, trying to delve deeper into the respondent’s story and bring it into a clearer resolution.<sup>7</sup>

The interviewing technique seemed “safe” for both the narrator and the listener—at least that is what I thought at the time. The witnesses themselves decided what they would bring to recollections. I, as the researcher, would then ask about the situations and experiences they described, trying my best to avoid inappropriate, hurtful questions that might violate the sense of trust and safety. My idea of “safety” was relatively naive. This was my first oral history research project as well as my first project involving Holocaust survivors. I could not anticipate the reactions and emotions that would emerge as the witnesses, in the process of recounting their lives, gradually left their comfort zones. With each interview, I became more experienced and better prepared to cope with the unpredictable. Alessandro Portelli reminds us that interviews are “transformative for the narrator as well as the listener,”<sup>8</sup> and I felt myself changing with every interview. As an interviewer, I experienced what Martha Norkunas calls the “*in-between state*” or “*embodied presence*,” a transformative process in which I gradually changed through the stories of the respondents. All future interviews were already different because I had become different too. In each subsequent interview, I was able to more emphatically perceive and more meaningfully explore the respondent’s past.<sup>9</sup>

The interviews represent a relatively compact set of data collected over three years. Their content is influenced not only by the fifty years that had passed since the end of

the Second World War but also by the current situation in Slovak society. When analyzing memory, it is important to bear in mind that it is not a passive repository of facts, but an active process of meaning-making.<sup>10</sup> Portelli identifies war narrative, and similarly, I would add, Holocaust narrative, as a common means by which survivors make sense of their personal lives in relation to history, or at least to public history.<sup>11</sup> This effort is also present in these late, but in Slovakia, very first interviews, which I analyze in the text.

Why did I focus on these? First, most of them were captured in the Slovak language, and although they have been available for further study for nearly thirty years, only a handful of scholars have made use of them. Second, because I was personally involved in the creation of the interviews, I am familiar with their methodology, the underlying societal and historical circumstances, and, last but not least, the mood in the research team. All of this represents an “added value” that I can bring to the interviews’ analysis and interpretation.

Whenever I go back to the interviews, I realize the immense advantage of having been part of the research team. That advantage was not limited to the duration of the project. Over time, I deepened my relationships with the men and women who had taken part in the interviews. To me, they were not an anonymous mass but individual people. I kept in touch with many of them through informal meetings or as part of my tenure at the Holocaust Documentation Center, where I served as the executive director between 2005 and 2017.<sup>12</sup> My continuing relationships with several of the respondents have enabled me to better understand the meanings and ideas<sup>13</sup> they conveyed in the collected interviews. I have been working with these interviews, on and off, for nearly three decades, employing the optics of different themes and concepts.<sup>14</sup> Getting to know the group of Holocaust survivors, their views, values, and ways of looking at the past and the present also equipped me with a more nuanced understanding and analysis of female survivors’ memories of sexual violence during liberation.

In their biographical narratives, respondents present themselves as social beings.<sup>15</sup> Their memories are influenced by their gender, age, religion, ethnicity, local affiliation, and education, as well as by their health and other situational and personal factors. I view memories as subjective reconstructions of the social reality of a given historical period or event.<sup>16</sup> Survivors interpret their memories for the researcher conducting the interview, but they may also be bearing in mind future listeners or readers. At the same time, they are concerned with building their image. Therefore, in some controversial situations, they choose silence or forgetfulness as effective tools of self-presentation, lest their past actions or current views be misunderstood or perceived negatively.

## SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN INTERVIEWS WITH FEMALE HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FROM SLOVAKIA

My interpretation of the term sexual violence is anthropological: The term refers to not only a physical but also a symbolic assault on the humanity, personhood, and individuality of the victim—in this case, a woman.<sup>17</sup> The term also encompasses assaults on the victim's value and dignity. It is this social and cultural dimension that gives sexual violence its peculiar power and significance.<sup>18</sup> Female Holocaust survivors naturally frame their life stories by their female identity. Myrna Goldberg calls the testimonies of women who survived the Holocaust “impressionistic records of [...] physical and psychic agonies.” She highlights the recurrence of specific distinctive themes and situations in women's narratives.<sup>19</sup> For instance, in the memories of women who survived imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps, Goldberg's “agonies” appear shortly after arrival at the camp: forced public nudity in front of strange men, the shaving of the whole body, the shaving of hair as an act of defeminization, violent body searches, threats against women with small children, the discrimination of pregnant women during selection, forced abortions and menopause, pseudo-medical experiments and sterilization, rape, and sex as a survival strategy.<sup>20</sup> The interviews with women from Slovakia are no exception—they contain references to all of the abovementioned indignities.<sup>21</sup>

When I decided to go back to these interviews, I seemed to remember that they contained relatively few mentions of sexual violence perpetrated against women during liberation. Revisiting the seventy interviews with women (we conducted 148 interviews overall), I noticed that sexual violence was a constant presence in the respondents' life stories, especially in situations unfolding during liberation. I was surprised that despite the *interviewee-led* approach, as many as twenty women spontaneously and explicitly spoke about the sexual violence perpetrated by their liberators.<sup>22</sup>

Besides women who had survived imprisonment in Nazi concentration camps (39 interviews), we also recorded the testimonies of those who had spent the Holocaust hiding in various shelters, living with a false identity (in contemporary Slovakia or Hungary), or roaming the Slovak mountains with antifascist partisans (31 interviews). The experiences of these women are unique because they lived them alone, rather than as part of a group of female prisoners, as was the case for women in the ghettos and labor/concentration camps. The women interviewees who spoke about sexual violence during liberation (20) had either been through one or more concentration camps (10) or had managed to evade capture and deportation by living in hideouts, using a false identity, or living among the armed antifascist resistance in Slovakia, which was formed in 1944

(10). The interviewees who had been imprisoned in concentration camps had survived up to three years under the constant threat of death in conditions of unspeakable humiliation. This affected their perception of themselves and the wider world. Their experience of liberation varied. Some had been liberated while still imprisoned in the camp, others during a death march, and still others when escaping from the camp.

The woman quoted at the start of this paper, Hilda<sup>23</sup> (born in Prešov in 1924 in eastern Slovakia), was assigned to the first transport departing from the wartime Slovak State (March 25, 1942). According to propaganda, the train was taking the women “off to work.” In reality, it was headed for Auschwitz. Hilda and the other women from Šariš Zemplín county were thus some of the first female Jewish prisoners. Hilda spent three years in the camp and then survived a death march from Birkenau to Ravensbrück, where she and some fellow inmates decided to escape, realizing that liberation was near. The group was comprised of several French female resistance fighters, partisans from the former Yugoslavia, and Hilda—a Jewish girl from Slovakia who was the youngest of the lot. In her biographical narrative, Hilda portrayed herself as a left-wing antifascist. Before the war, she had been a member of Hashomer Hatzair, and once at Auschwitz, she fell in with an international sorority of similarly oriented “political” prisoners.<sup>24</sup> These women organized underground resistance at the camp while assisting their fellow inmates. Hilda’s memories are full of self-sacrifice and care, which the group members provided to each other. She spoke about the soldiers-liberators with her characteristic nonchalance:

They’d been through a lot of things, too. I don’t know—I don’t suppose the Americans were much better, but let’s say they were more gallant about it. They’d first give you a cigarette, chewing gum, some canned food—they went about it differently, whereas the Russians were more brutal and direct. They never hurt me, but that Bosnian partisan I told you about. . . . She once. . . . These ten slant-eyed [*sic*] Russians raped her in an attic. Yeah, well, we went through a lot of things.

Recalling the gang rape of her friend, Hilda spoke in a seemingly casual voice, only the stiff smile on her face and the focused look at the interviewer betraying her true feelings. She described the rapists’ “oriental” features; this racialization helped her condemn them as “uncivilized barbarians” who were capable of rape.

She and her companions traveled in the area of Ravensbrück, finding food and shelter in abandoned houses:

It was the first time we’d holed up in a villa, after the Liberation. Because I was the shortest, I was assigned a child’s bed, and that’s what saved me from the Russians, because when they came it got pretty wild, at least until their commanders arrived.

[The other women] told them I was a child, so they left me alone. [...] And while the younger ones among us were sleeping, Nada and Teta, the older Yugoslavians—they're no longer among us—they went at it with the Russians. They had a little fun with them so they wouldn't come in [and rape us].<sup>25</sup>

According to Hilda, what saved her from sexual harassment and violence were her childlike looks and her friends. This dovetails with her other memories of the solidarity, friendship, and togetherness that characterize her Holocaust story.

Manca<sup>26</sup> (b. 1915, central Slovakia) was also deported from Slovakia to Auschwitz in 1942, from Bratislava. The former medical student spent her time working as a medic in the women's quarters at the so-called women's hospital. After surviving a death march, she was liberated in the camp at Neustadt-Glewe. In her interview, she mentioned joining an illegal communist movement motivated by social concerns. Recalling her encounter with the liberators, she said,

The Americans came first, and the Russians came the next day. They didn't care about us, so after about a week we decided to set out on a journey home. It was a terrible, awful journey. [...] We didn't know what was going on. In the first village or town that we came across, we went inside this house. [We were] wild, feral people. We made camp on the first floor. There was a piano there. [The German owners of the house] were very surprised to see us there, but they said nothing. Then we learnt that three drunk Russian soldiers were coming up. Imagine the situation—there were about ten of us upstairs, all women. It was horror to the last degree. Luckily, an officer showed up—I don't know where he came from—and when he saw what was happening, he threatened to shoot the soldiers. He saved us and started playing the piano for us. He played beautifully. The next day, he gave us a horse-drawn cart with a horse so that we wouldn't have to journey on foot. [...] After that, we would often spend the night out in the open, and they would ambush us—I can understand, they were drunk—and they raped and did other things.

In this episode, the figure of the commanding officer emerges as a cultured (he plays the piano) representative of the middle class, who prevents sexual violence. This image was repeated in several accounts. Manca recounted her memories matter-of-factly, dispassionately, in a monotone calm voice almost devoid of emotion. She experienced many difficult, dramatic, and tragic situations in the camp hospital as a member of the staff and therefore interpreted the violence during liberation through the prism of previous experiences and remained outwardly unshaken. In the interview, as well as in her book, which she wrote after the war, she presented herself as an observer caught in the torrent of events. More than herself, she spoke about her fellow inmates and their stories of which she had been a part.<sup>27</sup>

Stela<sup>28</sup> (b. 1932 in Subcarpathian Rus, whose territory fell to Horthy's Hungary after the Vienna Arbitration) was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in May 1944. She and her mother would be the sole survivors of their entire family. In the interview, she spoke about how she and her mother had escaped Birnbäumel, a subcamp of the Gross Rosen concentration camp, with encouragement from their fellow inmate, Lici, who had chosen the pair as suitable partners for the dangerous journey.

Then we heard a car. It was some kind of jeep, and there were Russian soldiers inside. They'd gotten lost—that's how they happened upon that town. They were a scout-unit. [...] There were five of them, and one was a high school teacher. He told us that they weren't going to help us or take us with them, but that if we ran into other Russian soldiers, which we most likely would, we shouldn't tell them that we were Jews. [...] We made our way onto a road that led through a forest. There were a lot of military cars, and one of those cars pulled over. We got in, and they drove us to somewhere around Kielce. [...] There, we managed to get our hands on some food. We also experienced some unpleasant situations where I had to sleep lying across those two women so that the Russian soldiers wouldn't harm them. I was in no danger myself because I was more of a skeleton than a human. I was so light that I did not hurt them.

This excerpt suggests that the women had some knowledge about the Soviet Army, making it difficult to determine whether the liberators were friends or a threat. The role of ethnicity in experiencing liberation is evident in Stela's memory vignette. More importantly, Stela's recollection reveals how children could acquire the role of the protector shielding women from liberators' violence. Even though Stela's age, exhaustion, and poor physical condition made her dependent on the two adult women, she did play an important role. As they slept she protected them with her own body, lying cross-legged on her mother and her fellow prisoner at night. Stela's memory, encored in her past role of a protector, gave her story an empowering meaning and significance she could identify with.

Ester<sup>29</sup> (b. 1930, eastern Slovakia) was liberated by Soviet soldiers while on a death march with her cousin. She remembered the event as follows:

When we woke up in the morning, the Germans were gone. We had been liberated. . . . They formed these groups of ten, eleven people—they were called prison sisters—and each set off in a different direction. Our group arrived in a little village where we found a house that used to belong to Germans. They had run away but left behind their chickens, pigs, and so on. . . . and the next day the Russians came. I remember them being on skis and wearing all white. We were happy to see them and asked where the front line was, but we didn't want to reveal just yet that we were

Jewish; we just asked them how the Jews were doing. “The Jews,” they said, “are doing just great. They’re hanging back, while we’re out here doing the dirty work.” So we decided not to tell them. The Russians were dangerous because they were raping with abandon. When they saw a woman—it didn’t matter if she was a camp inmate, it didn’t matter who she was—they just raped her. They considered it their right to do whatever they wanted. They were the liberators, they were fighting for us, so they could do whatever they wanted. [...] We got lucky because one of the politruks<sup>30</sup> who came there was Jewish. We told him that the [soldiers] were threatening us and that we didn’t know what to do. The Russians were awfully scared of the politruks. And he told them that if they so much as laid a hand on us or did anything to us, they’d be in trouble. They were constantly drunk and kept walking around with those automatic rifles, and there was the danger that *they* would start shooting. When we went to bed at night, we not only locked the door; we barricaded it with desks and wardrobes so they couldn’t get in.

Some of the interviewees did not speak about personal experiences but rather about how they had been affected by the news of the behavior of Red Army soldiers toward women. One of these interviewees was Medy<sup>31</sup> (b. 1923, southern Slovakia), who had survived imprisonment at Auschwitz and been rescued by American soldiers at Augsburg. Her memories of the Americans were positive: “Then we started hearing about what the Russians were doing. [...] We didn’t want to believe it at first because to our generation, Russia, communism, and socialism were unimpeachable. [...] The Jewish youth—and especially the Zionist youth—was very leftist, so we didn’t want to believe it. We didn’t want to believe that [the Russians] were raping women and stealing watches.”

Medy and her parents had lived in southern Slovakia, which had been ceded to Hungary as part of the First Vienna Award. As a former member of the Maccabi Hatzair youth organization, she spoke about her leftist politics and about how she and her comrades from the organization had gone to Budapest to distribute false IDs to Jews living in Slovakia. She believed in the values of communism, idolized the Soviet Union, and was reluctant to believe the rumors of the Soviets’ violent behavior. Only after returning home and meeting her family members did she find out about their firsthand experience with the liberators.

The ten women who had survived the Holocaust with false, non-Jewish identities, hiding out in shelters or among the partisans in the Slovak mountains, also associated liberation with feelings of vulnerability and fear of the liberators. Unlike the concentration camp inmates, they were left to cope with these feelings more or less individually, often in a predominantly male environment. Some of them had experienced liberation in Budapest, where they had fled for their lives.



Magda<sup>32</sup> (b. 1924, southeastern Slovakia) escaped the threat of deportation from the Slovak State in 1942, finding shelter in neighboring Hungary. She spent the war's end in Budapest protected by a Swedish passport. In her testimony, she described Soviet soldiers as treating Slovaks differently from Hungarians, whom they saw as enemies. Those Soviet Army soldiers who were of Russian origin or spoke Russian found it easier to communicate with Slovaks due to these languages' linguistic affinity, which is why, according to Magda, they were friendlier toward them. That is also how she managed to avoid rape:

[After the Russians came,] we all went out, of course, we were jubilant, and Ilonka and I waved at the soldiers. [. . .] It's not that the Russians were engaged in pillage, they just took whatever they could find. I remember going to the command office with another girl to wash the Russians' clothes—we were very naive, we wanted to help our liberators—and there we saw huge bags of nuts and raisins. The Russians fed us and then told us we couldn't go home anymore because the curfew was in effect. So we spent the night there, and it was pretty rough. Because I was Slovak, I managed to explain [to the soldiers] that I'd been waiting for them, and that I was Jewish, so I got off unharmed. But the Hungarian girls paid the price. That was my experience. Because I spoke Slovak, I had managed to convince the man—I think he was called Ivan—to leave me alone. [. . .] But I remember someone screaming, "Magda, help me!" What could I have done? That girl was so shocked afterwards because she'd been expecting liberators, and they didn't care because she was Hungarian. She couldn't explain to them that she wasn't an enemy. She had mental health issues afterwards.

On the one hand, Magda's story conveys the relief of having escaped violence. On the other, she regretted having failed to help her friend. She did not elaborate on the experience in the rest of the interview and instead spoke about food shortages and the speculative practices of grocery store owners whose plans were frustrated because of liberation.

Another woman, also called Hilda<sup>33</sup> (b. 1921, southern Slovakia), remembered escaping violence thanks to serving as the Soviets' translator. Like Magda, she mentioned the soldiers' differing treatment of Slovak and Hungarian women. Their memories suggest that ethnicity, but also the perception of women's belonging to an enemy nation, was an important factor in whether or not they became victims of sexual violence.<sup>34</sup> Women's testimonies reveal additional factors, which could (but also might not) protect women from sexual violence: language—the ability to communicate with soldiers, physical beauty, maturity, and niceness. However, it was not a hard and fast rule. The reality of liberation was chaotic, ambiguous, and momentary luck or chance also played a role.

Hilda spent liberation in Budapest, where she had been living for several months using "Aryan papers." At the end of the war, she was staying with distant non-Jewish

relatives: “We were in Pest [...] when the Russians came. I could understand them. They said things like, ‘tovarish’ and ‘Yak sa mash.’ [‘How are you?’] ‘Ah, Slavs,’ I thought. ‘They are the good guys.’ But they were crass; they tried to get with women. We had to smear soot over our bodies and put on kerchiefs. My sister-in-law was a beautiful woman [...].” At this point, the male interviewer changed the subject and asked Hilda to speak more about living with a false identity. He had apparently misjudged the importance of the subject to the interviewee and inquired about what was important to him instead. Hilda answered,

No one recognized me, and no one cared about me. I looked like a maid. Who would care about a girl like that? I had a long ponytail, farm clothes. [...] I had a fake birth certificate [provided by a non-Jewish acquaintance, author’s note] but never used it. [...] No one asked for my ID. I guess I didn’t look like a Jew. I also spoke German. They probably thought I was a refugee.

After that, Hilda returned to the behavior of the liberating army toward women.

[The Russians] took pretty girls and did God-knows-what to them. They shot at women who refused to get with them. In the morning, some better Russians came. They said they were students from Moscow, and they asked me to translate because I had told them I wasn’t Hungarian. I was supposed to tell the men [in the neighborhood, author’s note] not to fear, that they weren’t going to take them to Russia, but that someone had to shovel the snow. They gave me a bicycle as a reward, but another Russian then took it away from me.

In the memories of Agnes<sup>35</sup> (b. 1924, eastern Slovakia), the liberation of Budapest was inseparable from a sense of danger: “But then it became very unpleasant because the Russians had noticed us two young girls and came banging on our door. [The other residents of the house] protected us as best they could.” Agnes did not reveal how she had managed to extricate herself from the situation—she changed the subject and started speaking about how her uncle had driven her from Budapest to the liberated countryside. The interviewers probed no further.

The excerpts above show that the interviewees had their own agenda and topics they wanted to discuss, which aligned with their strategy of self-presentation. All of the women except for Hilda (b. 1921), Olga (b. 1921), and Elena (b. 1918) had been unmarried during the Holocaust, which could have colored their memories of the sexual violence with which they were threatened. The interviewers, however, did not explore that possibility. The reason for this could have been their inexperience (the project was the first of its kind) and the fear that dwelling on said memories might cause the

interviewee undue distress. Another explanation is that the interviewers were more interested in other issues mentioned in the interview.

Only a few women who had spent the Holocaust and wartime living in the territory of the wartime Slovak State with false papers spontaneously remembered the threat of sexually motivated violence. Dalma<sup>36</sup> (b. 1925, western Slovakia), who had been a member of the Yegorov partisan troop, commented on the liberators' behavior as follows:

The Russians acted in all kinds of ways. I remember having this commander, his name was Kumok. He was a Jew from Kyiv, which was interesting. He was ascetic and thin, he barely ate or slept, he didn't care. He said he was a scientist or something, a literatus of some kind, back in Kyiv. But the others were brutal and mean, they pillaged and did horrible things. I must say that I saved myself from them. They also had their own women and girlfriends with them. [...] It was a difficult life, but like I said, you view these things differently when you're young. You can endure more.

In her biographical narrative, Dalma spoke about her earlier imprisonment in the labor and concentration camp at Nováky, and about her later life using a false identity and her journey through the country in search of help and a safe harbor. She described various dramatic moments and tense situations where she had kept a cool head. Maybe that is why her memories of the aggressive behavior of the liberators comes across as just another episode that she managed to endure thanks to her age and attitude.

Olga<sup>37</sup> (b. 1921) lived in a town on the Slovak-Hungarian border that had been ceded to Hungary as part of the First Vienna Award. Part of her family lived in Slovakia and part in Hungary. In 1944, with the help of her friends from the majority society, she managed to flee to her sister in Slovakia. There she met up with her husband and joined the partisans. After the quelling of the Slovak National Uprising,<sup>38</sup> she fled to the mountains and hid in bunkers, surviving with the help of the local population. She remembered liberation as follows:

On March 22, we were liberated. We were staying in that woodsman's cabin at Brusno. A car pulled up, a soldier got out and threw the door open as if in an operetta. The officer—I think he was an officer or some other top brass—stepped out and came in. We sang until late at night, and then [the officer] chased [the soldiers] out to the shed, right? But imagine this: at night, if it hadn't been for the guard dog... This one soldier... I was a young woman, you know, there were a lot of rumors going around about the Russian soldiers and their behavior toward women. One of them tried to force his way into my room, and the dog wanted to rip him to pieces, he made such a racket. The old woodsman came out, the officer came out—he was staying in the cabin—and he took his revolver and threatened to shoot the soldier if he did that

again. So I was safe—I was protected by Hary, the dog, and the others. And then I was liberated.

Olga also structured her biographical narrative as a series of grave decisions and dramatic events, which she largely survived due to luck, her preparedness, and good relations with people from the majority society. Her memories of liberation aligned with this narrative.

Elena<sup>39</sup> (b. 1918, eastern Slovakia) was hiding in various places in Slovakia and Hungary until 1942. She had avoided deportation thanks to false papers and later found employment at a hotel in Berehove (Subcarpathian Rus, at that time a part of Hungary), where she also experienced the preparations for the coming of the Soviet Army. Only the hotel owner knew her true identity, and he protected her throughout.

Then that part of the country was included in the front line because the Hungarian general staff had left. They'd wanted to take me with them so that I wouldn't stay there; they'd said the Russians were animals. They'd said, "You can't imagine what the Russians are going to do to a beautiful girl like you!" They'd tried to convince me to leave, said they would take me to Budapest, but of course, I didn't go. I said I couldn't betray my boss. [...] On the night of October 26, 1944, the Russians arrived in Berehove. The boss ordered everyone to hide in the basement, except the men who worked at the restaurant, they could stay upstairs. I was reluctant.

Elena articulated this memory in the same vein as the rest of her testimony, where she portrayed herself as a determined, confident young woman with a realistic view of the world. She did not give up and constantly weighed her options, looking for ways to survive with the help of her loved ones, acquaintances, and strangers. It took a lot of nerve, luck, and courage to live "out in the open" with a false identity. Elena had all three, and she survived.

Regarding biographical memories, Sara R. Horowitz writes, "The testimonies of Holocaust survivors make demands on us. They are not transparent windows onto the past, but complicated vehicles of memory filtered through subjective experience. In engaging with testimonies, we need to think about what people remember, how they remember it, what they cannot or will not bring to memory, and how they weave together bits of memory into narrative."<sup>40</sup> I bear in mind Horowitz's observation and strive to view the testimonies in all their complexity. Much like Paula David, I think about what might have remained unsaid, hidden, and why. "A survivor's 'silence' can be present within a personal testimony for many reasons and as scholars [...] we must listen carefully and try to understand it from a range of perspectives. In the context of sexual violence, is the 'silence' or excluded narrative a result of personal choice, awareness

of personal safety, anticipation of negative reaction, or lack of understanding? Does it stem from a personal or familial protective stance? Is it a carefully constructed one or an intuitive one?"<sup>41</sup>

## FACTORS THAT SHAPED THE MEMORIES OF LIBERATION

The memories of the women who took part in the first series of oral history interviews captured in Slovakia after the fall of the communist regime were influenced by *the respondents' identities* (gender, social, ethnic, religious, educational, or political) as well as their personal qualities and character attributes. The women were affected by their experience of the Holocaust and the subsequent communist regime. In twenty of the seventy interviews, we find explicit memories of the threat, or actual experience, of sexual violence perpetrated by Soviet soldiers during liberation. Although none of the women admitted to having been a victim of rape, the threat of sexual violence and the fragility and vulnerability of women was featured in the memories of all. The way the respondents articulated their experiences was also undoubtedly influenced by the *methodology* and *interviewing technique* of the research project, as well as by the relative inexperience of the interviewers. In selecting which memories to incorporate into their testimonies, the women followed their own judgment. Since wartime and Holocaust sexual violence had not yet become a subject of scholarly investigation, researchers did not ask about it unless interviewees mentioned it spontaneously—or perhaps we just subconsciously changed the subject.<sup>42</sup>

Each interviewee had a specific motivation for deciding to tell her life story. Every biographical story is a process of the narrator's self-presentation. By telling your story, you create an image of yourself and your life, and the content reflects that. The interviewee connects the individual episodes into a coherent story corresponding to her idea of herself and her life. Omitting or overlooking situations that do not fit or challenge this image is therefore a natural memory strategy.<sup>43</sup> The memories were shaped by the narrator's effort to self-present, by the urge to "do the right thing" for the researchers (after the interviews, the interviewees often asked if we were satisfied with their performance), as well as by the expectations of future listeners who would hear the recording. These future listeners primarily included the interviewees' families—children and grandchildren. Therefore, the topic of sexual violence did not often appear in women's memories, even if they may have experienced it. The survivors certainly put a great deal of thought into what they spoke about, both in order to tell their story in its entirety and to be able to endure the inevitable mental strain. At the same time, they tried to ascertain whether we, the listeners, would understand what they were trying to tell us.

What they feared most was misapprehension, or even condemnation, of their behavior during the Holocaust on the part of the interviewers. The issue of sexual violence, so inherently hurtful and sensitive, was likely the first topic most interviewees decided to avoid, skip, or simplify.

Women who had survived imprisonment in concentration camps and experienced gender-based violence typically experienced it in a group, which is why they spoke about it more frequently—they assumed that the other survivors, former inmates, would do the same. Sexual violence was embedded in the memory of their *community of common experience*,<sup>44</sup> or as Christopher Browning puts it, part of their *communal memory*.<sup>45</sup> Some memories that the survivors found too difficult to recall were thus omitted in the first interviews, and I only found out about them years later when the interviewee and I had become better acquainted and I had been honored to have earned their trust.<sup>46</sup>

Another factor influencing the interviews, one that was very important in my mind, was the *time* and *place* where they were held. Our narrators wove their experiences into a coherent narrative for the very first time, and “in public”—for researchers of a similar age as their children and grandchildren, and of varying ethnic backgrounds. More than fifty years had passed since the end of World War II. The women were 60 and over, and most had spent their entire lives in Slovakia. They had lived for forty years in a communist regime that had no interest in getting their stories out to the public. During that time, the Soviet army was portrayed as the great liberator, precluding any negative connotations, criticism, or association of the soldiers with sexual violence. This may have shaped the content of the life stories that we captured.

The interviewees’ *age* also influenced the interviews—not only their age during the Holocaust, but more importantly, their age at the time of the interview. In the 1990s, these women were at a mature age; they could reflect on their wartime and postwar experiences. They had had successful careers, finding fulfillment in their work and family lives. They were mothers and grandmothers, and many agreed to be interviewed so they could pass the recording on to their descendants. Survivors’ descendants frequently knew next to nothing about their relatives’ life stories, and the recordings were intended to bridge that gap. The narrator’s conviction that she was recounting her story for the sake of her children and grandchildren undoubtedly influenced which stories and situations she chose to recount and her decision to omit memories of sexual violence.

We carried out interviews at a *time* when Slovakia had for some time held democratic ambitions. Simultaneously, following the dissolution of Czechoslovakia (1993), the country was experiencing an upsurge of nationalism.<sup>47</sup> The public space increasingly provided a platform for apologists of the wartime Slovak State (1939–1945), which had been responsible for the Holocaust in Slovakia. Antisemitism was on the rise. Paradoxically, this situation motivated the survivors to tell their stories and warn their

contemporaries (as they admitted) about the consequences that hate, nationalism, and antisemitism had had on their lives. Their decision stemmed, among other things, from the belief that the younger generations who grew up under the communist regime did not have correct information about the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Contemplating the absence of sexual violence in most of the survivors' memories, I must take into account *how the issue was communicated in public discourse at the time of the research project*. In the 1990s, when sexual violence entered public discourse, it was heavily influenced by conservative, patriarchal stereotypes. Rape victims were—and, unfortunately, continue to be—viewed in a negative light, as complicit in the violence they endured by allegedly having provoked their assailants. They generally were not accorded sufficient empathy and support. The threat of being “labeled,” losing their dignity, or having their value and character denigrated may have also had a subconscious impact on the interviewees' memories.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have analyzed oral history interviews that were carried out in Slovakia in the mid-1990s. Although they were *late testimonies* in strictly chronological terms, they were also the first biographical narratives of Holocaust survivors ever captured in the country. Out of the 148 interviewees, seventy were women. I have examined their testimonies to determine *whether* and *how* they remembered the issue of sexual violence during liberation. The issue appeared in twenty interviews. I have contemplated how the interviewees' memories were influenced by their *gender* and *other identities* and how they fit into their *self-presentation strategy* and into constructing their own life story that gives them meaning. I also evaluated the impact of interview *methodology* and *technique*, *interviewer skill* and *training*, as well as the *time* and *place* of the interviews.

Although today the life stories of Holocaust survivors are part of Slovak public discourse, many issues still warrant further investigation. One of these issues is gender-based violence, especially violence perpetrated by the liberating Soviet Army at the end of World War II. By analyzing the memories of female survivors, I have determined that, despite the interviewee-led interviewing technique—meaning that the interviewers did not explicitly ask about sexual violence—some survivors spontaneously chose to discuss experiences of sexual violence during liberation. Most of the interviewees who articulated memories about their own experiences or who related eyewitness testimonies regarding sexual violence against other women found the subject relevant and compatible with their self-image and life story. Moreover, they were at an age when they naturally looked back on their lives and reevaluated the significance of their experiences for them and the people around them.



Twenty out of seventy women recalled sexual violence being perpetrated by Soviet soldiers in the territory of present-day Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary. Their life experiences help paint a more complete picture of women's liberation and fates during that period. They also challenge the long-prevalent image of the heroic Red Army in Slovak public discourse and create space for a further investigation of the subject matter.

How should we interpret the fact that fifty of the seventy women did not mention the subject of sexual violence during liberation? This is a difficult question to answer. While it is certainly possible that these women did not encounter sexual violence during liberation, it is also possible that they simply chose not to speak about it.<sup>48</sup>

I am convinced that the narrator's age at the time of the interview played a role in this and the state of society at the time. Our interviewees told their stories for the very first time, fifty years after the end of World War II. In deciding how to articulate their memories, they were faced with the challenge of situating them within an objective social, historical, and experiential context of their entire life narrative.<sup>49</sup> They could have struggled with feelings of awkwardness, shame, and fear, or they may have chosen to forever suppress experiences they did not want to share.<sup>50</sup> In an attempt to gain control over the story they had decided to tell us, some of them could have abandoned the ambition to include an experience of sexual violence. Henry Greenspan has pointed out the influence of *the time of the research* and *the age of the narrator*. He has also highlighted the qualitative difference between "bearing witness" in the usual sense—in a one-time meeting between survivor and researcher to capture a testimony—and a more personal, agentic, and multilayered way of reclaiming and retelling one's memories, including the most horrific.<sup>51</sup> I had the opportunity to spend nearly thirty years gradually getting to know some of the Holocaust survivors who participated in the Fortunoff research project. In our many formal and informal conversations, they shared complementary information broadening or specifying the original interview, sometimes providing further exposition of meanings I had initially overlooked.

Another factor influencing the interview content was the interviewer and their skills and preparation. The guiding principles for this research were to create a safe space for survivors to share their life stories, allowing them to decide what to discuss while we asked follow-up questions afterward. We were not specifically guided to obtain information about sexual violence unless the interviewees themselves mentioned it. I remember how, during the research project, I was worried about whether I could withstand the emotional pressure of the interviews. Over time, I learned to read the interviewees' nonverbal cues and thus determined that they would discuss an important but hurtful experience. That was when I began to slow and deepen my breathing and gazed into the interviewee's eyes so that she knew I was there and we could go over the memory together. I felt my vulnerability and impotence acutely. In this regard, I agree with Joan



Ringelheim—sometimes, we try to avoid hearing a story because we are simply afraid, or misjudge its importance to the interviewee.<sup>52</sup> Was it our inexperience, hesitance, or reservedness as researchers that caused the delay in applying gender-based research methods in Holocaust studies, particularly on the subject of sexual violence? The saying goes, better late than never. The research must go on. It helps us to acquire a more complete and detailed image of the experiences and suffering of women as vulnerable beings during the Holocaust and World War II.<sup>53</sup> Another challenge lies in capturing the memories of this historical era from multiple perspectives—through oral history interviews with Roma and gentile eyewitnesses, for example. Sexual violence against women in wartime has always been (as attested every day by the war in Ukraine) “the quintessential act by which a male demonstrates to a female that she is conquered—vanquished—by his superior strength and power,”<sup>54</sup> and by which the male symbolically subordinates the group or country to which the woman belongs.

A dedicated study of sexual violence during the Holocaust and liberation helps to shed light on the gender-based suffering of many women. At the same time, it shows how sexual violence becomes not only a crime against human dignity but also an instrument of war and genocide.<sup>55</sup> It draws our focus to the situation of women and their lives today. It underscores the persistent discrimination, underestimation, and disregard for the challenges they continue to face due to their gender even today.

## NOTES

1. This paper emerged as part of the project VEGA 2/0053/22 Intergenerational Relationships in Families and Communities: An Ethnological Perspective, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology SAS.
2. In Slovakia, the project was coordinated by the Milan Šimečka Foundation. The interviews are available online on the website of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (FVAHT). In my chapter, I use the real names of survivors, as available at <https://fortunoff.aviaryplatform.com/>, when consistent with witness requests.
3. Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 1996), 133 et seq.; Hartman, “The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with G. Hartman, Interviewed by Ian Balfour and Rebecca Comay Conducted on December 29, 2000,” in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Alphabet City Media, 2002), 492–509.
4. Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (Yale University Press, 2018).
5. Dori Laub, “Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori

- Laub (Routledge, 1992), 57–74.
6. 1938 was a crucial year for Slovakia. On October 6, the country declared its autonomy from Czechoslovakia. Its southern territories were subsequently ceded to Horthy's Hungary as part of the First Vienna Award, complete with their population. In consequence, the persecution of Jews took on two different forms, which is reflected in the memories of survivors from Slovakia today. Monika Vrzgulová, "Sociálna zmena v biografických naratívoch obyvateľov dnešného Slovenska. Od Mníchova po 14. marec 1939," *Forum historiae* 13, no. 1 (2019): 131–43, <https://www.forumhistoriae.sk/en/clanok/social-change-biographical-narratives-inhabitants-todays-slovakia-munich-agreement-14th-march>.
  7. Carli Snyder's and Nina Paulovicova's chapters also address the "institutional shaping" that influenced the content and structure of the recorded interviews.
  8. Alessandro Portelli, "Afterword," in *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 273–86.
  9. Martha Norkunas, "Vulnerable Listener," in *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 82.
  10. Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different?," in Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (State University of New York Press, 1991), 52.
  11. Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative and Genre: Contexts and Types of Communication*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson (Routledge, 2004), 26–27.
  12. Monika Vrzgulová, "The Club of Senior Citizens Who Survived the Holocaust: A Case Study from Slovakia," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 41, no. 7, (2021): 33–51; Vrzgulová, "The Closer We Are, the Harder It Gets," *Human Affairs* 31, no. 3 (2021): 299–313.
  13. Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting and Life History* (Praeger, 1998); Greenspan, *The Awakening of Memory: Survivor Testimony in the First Years After the Holocaust, and Today*, Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, Washington, D.C., 2000, accessed September 19, 2023, [https://archive.org/details/bib49303\\_001\\_001](https://archive.org/details/bib49303_001_001).
  14. Monika Vrzgulová, "Interpreting Jewish–non-Jewish Relations in Two Biographic Narratives," in *The Research and Education About the Holocaust in Central Europe*, ed. Monika Vrzgulová and Ján Hlavinka (Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2012), 235–55; Vrzgulová, *Deti holokaustu* (Dokumentačné stredisko holokaustu, 2007); Vrzgulová, *Nevyrozmýšľané susedské histórie: holokaust na Slovensku z dvoch perspektív* (VEDA: Ústav etnológie SAV, 2016); Vrzgulová, "Memories of the Holocaust: Slovak

- Bystanders," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 99–111; Vrzgulová, "The Memory of the Return of Slovak Holocaust Survivors in Jewish and Non-Jewish Testimonies," *Judaica Bohemiae* 53, no. 2 (2018): 53–76; Vrzgulová, "The Oral History Interview-A Relationship and Space of Trust," *Slovenský národopis* 67, no. 4 (2019): 430–40; Vrzgulová, "Remembering the Holocaust After 1989: Slovakia More Than Thirty Years Later," in *War and Remembrance: World War II and the Holocaust in the Memory Politics of Post-Socialist Europe*, ed. Paul Srodecki and Daria Kozłova, 127–43, Series: War (Hi) Stories, Vol. 12 (Brill, 2023); Vrzgulová, "The Holocaust in Women's Lives: Approaching a Slovak Oral History Archive," in *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, ed. Karolina Krasuska, Louise Hecht, and Andrea Pető (Central European University Press, 2015), 99–124.
15. Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Routledge, 2016), 35.
  16. Annette Wieviorka, *The Era of the Witness* (Cornell University Press, 2006); Green-span, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*; Stacey Zembrzycki, "Not Just Another Interviewee: Befriending a Holocaust Survivor," in *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 129–44; Thomas Trezise, *Witnessing Witnessing: On the Reception of Holocaust Testimony* (Fordham University Press, 2013).
  17. Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter During the Holocaust?" *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 43.
  18. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Phillipe Bourgois, eds., *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthropology* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 1.
  19. Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Paulist Press, 1990), 150–66.
  20. Jessie Williams, "Sexual Violence Against Women During the Holocaust: Inside and Outside of Extermination Camps," *History in the Making* 14, article 6 (2021): 81–102.
  21. Vrzgulová, "The Holocaust in Women's Lives," 113–19.
  22. Fogelman writes that out of the 52,000 interviews collected by the USC Shoah Foundation, only 1,040, primarily by women, mentioned fear of rape and/or sexual harassment. Most of the rapes were committed by the soldiers of the liberating army (508). The Fortunoff Archive contains only ten testimonies mentioning sexual assault against the interviewees or against women they knew. Eva Fogelman, "Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women During and After the Holocaust: Psychological Perspective," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 257. I would venture to guess that these improbably low numbers result from the design of the keyword search, which leaves out some testimonies, as I have been able to see for myself. The present analysis of the Slovak-language testimonies shows the importance of listening to the interviews and reading the transcripts carefully.

23. Matilda H. mssa.hvt.3660, Orbis: 4291987, FVAHT.
24. The narrative of resistance, women's solidarity, and support was also the subject of Hilda's memoir, published in Slovak, German, and English. Hilda Hrabovecká, *Arm with Tattooed Number* (PT Publisher, 2002).
25. Translator's note: In the original, these testimonies are unedited and frequently reflect a variety of local dialects. The translator, therefore, edited them for the sake of clarity and consistency while preserving their spontaneous, unrehearsed style.
26. Margita Sch. mssa.hvt.3888, Orbis: 4469449, FVAHT.
27. Manca Schwalbová, *Vyhasnuté oči* (Pravda, 1949).
28. This testimony is at the Fortunoff Archive where the survivor requested to remain anonymous. I used the fictional name Stela.
29. Ester B. mssa.hvt.4126, Orbis: 4847654 FVAHT.
30. "Politruks" were political officers who supervised each military unit, including the commander, and their behavior toward civilians. References to widespread antisemitism among Soviet soldiers and to the strategy of hiding one's Jewishness, as was the case with Ester, were also frequent.
31. Margita H. mssa.hvt.3675, Orbis: 4292124, FVAHT.
32. Magda S. mssa.hvt.3677, Orbis: 4298650, FVAHT.
33. Hilda N. mssa.hvt.3673, Orbis: 4292118, FVAHT.
34. Research on this issue only partially confirms their experience. See for example: James Mark, "Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944–1945," *Past & Present* 188, no. 1 (August 2005): 133–61. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gti020>; Miriam Gebhardt, *Crimes Unspoken: The Rape of German Women at the End of the Second World War*, trans. Nick Somers (Polity, 2016); Antony Beevor, *Berlin: The Downfall, 1945* (Penguin Books, 2002), 28–32. Authors reinforced the idea of the extreme brutality of the Soviets by reference to the rape of Polish and Jewish women who were not representatives of an enemy nation.
35. Agnes K. mssa.hvt.3680, Orbis: 4318229, FVAHT.
36. Dalma S. mssa.hvt.3903, Orbis: 4469492.
37. Oľga L. mssa.hvt.3679, Orbis: 4318224, FVAHT.
38. The Slovak National Uprising began on August 29, 1944, on the territory of the war-time Slovak state against the incipient occupation by Nazi Germany and against the domestic regime and its policies. Part of the Slovak Army was involved as well as civilians. It was the second-largest antifascist uprising in Europe during World War II, constituting more than 80,000 fighters from more than thirty countries. The uprising lasted six weeks from August 29 to October 27, 1944. After its suppression, the partisans continued to fight even after retreating to the mountains until the country was liberated. Stanislav Mičev et al., *Slovenské národné povstanie* (Múzeum SNP, 2010).
39. Elena D. mssa.hvt.3899, Orbis: 4469481, FVAHT.

40. Doris L. Bergen et al., "Burden Words: A Forum on Sexuality, Violence and Holocaust Testimonies," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 502.
41. Bergen et al., "Burden Words," 504.
42. My colleague Peter Salner wrote about the absence of this information in his first book on the oral history testimonies from Slovakia: *Prežili holocaust* (VEDA 1997). Inter-subjectivity, the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and interviewing as a process in which individuals consciously and unconsciously co-construct meanings in different contexts is also addressed in Carli Snyder's chapter.
43. Nicole Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization During the Holocaust," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 15.
44. Peter Salner, *Židia na Slovensku medzi tradíciou a asimiláciou* (Ústav etnológie SAV, 2000), 43.
45. "Christopher R. Browning Presents on Holocaust History and Survivor Testimony in Annual Shapiro Scholar Lecture," May 5, 2018, accessed September 19, 2023, available at <https://sfi.usc.edu/news/2018/05/21951-christopher-r-browning-presents-holocaust-history-and-survivor-testimony>.
46. Vrzgulová, "The Oral History Interview," 430–40.
47. Martin Bútora, "The Light in the Black Box," in *We Saw the Holocaust*, ed. Monika Vrzgulová (Milan Šimečka Foundation, 2005), 10–20; Vrzgulová, "Remembering the Holocaust," 127–28.
48. Nina Paulovicova considers the reasons for the silence of rape survivors during liberation and how researchers should perceive this silence in her chapter.
49. Bergen et al., "Burden Words," 509.
50. Helene Sinnreich, "Rape of the Jewish Women During Holocaust," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 108.
51. Bergen et al., "Burden Words," 510.
52. Joan Ringelheim, "The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust," in *Women and the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Yale University Press, 1999), 342.
53. Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies," 23.
54. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (Random House, 1975), 49, cited in Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies," 18.
55. Marta Havryshko, "Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Perspectives from Ghettos and Camps in Ukraine," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, May 18, 2020, <https://ua.boell.org/en/2020/05/18/sexual-violence-holocaust-perspectives-ghettos-and-camps-ukraine>.

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“I HEARD A RUSSIAN  
VOICE: THEY PROMISED  
US GIRLS. THERE ARE NO  
BLOODY GIRLS HERE.”

REMEMBERING SEXUAL(IZED)  
VIOLENCE BY HOLOCAUST  
SURVIVORS IN SLOVAKIA

NINA PAULOVICOVA

## INTRODUCTION

**M**AY 1, 1945, WAS A MEMORABLE DAY FOR MIRIAM WEISS, THE SURVIVOR of Auschwitz, Ravensbrück, and slave work in the underground aircraft factory in the village of Genshagen in Germany.<sup>1</sup> She recalls the long-awaited moment of liberation as an encounter with a single Red Army soldier who upon seeing the emaciated bodies of women and girls did not hide his disappointment: “Hmm, they promised us girls. And there are no bloody girls here. Where are the girls?” Miriam, her younger sister Vera, and their mother fought for survival in antisemitic wartime Slovakia on their own, without the presence of Miriam’s father, a lawyer, who avoided persecution by leaving the family behind and fleeing to Palestine. Due to the timely intervention of her aunt, Miriam and Vera were saved from the 1942 deportation but their hiding place was revealed, and they were deported to Auschwitz

in 1944. The deportation left Miriam traumatized. Not only was she sexually abused in the deportation wagon by their Jewish family friend who promised to look after the girls, but upon arrival at Auschwitz, Miriam, a teenage girl at that time, was separated from her twelve-year-old sister, who perished in the gas chambers. Emotionally shattered and visibly still bearing the trauma of the loss of her sister, Miriam described the initial reaction to her liberation as “a numbness” that only slowly unfurled into a “huge jubilation. It was a Russian soldier, the reconnaissance, the anti-climatic liberation of one body, one human being, after all that mass discipline and that mass barking and that mass everything. And he came and he liberated.”<sup>2</sup>

While Miriam’s emotional processing of liberation gradually transitioned from numbness to jubilation, the jubilation of another survivor, Jana Gottshall, was shattered by an awakening to the reality of the predatory behavior of some liberators. Born in the poor family of Topolčany’s rabbi, Jana and her brother managed to avoid the 1942 deportation due to their ownership of the ministerial and economic exemptions. Their other siblings, two older sisters, were murdered in Auschwitz. In 1944 Jana was deported too and survived Auschwitz and slave labor in the Siemens factory in Sudetenland, where her health deteriorated due to sustained starvation. Jana, who never learned about the whereabouts and fate of her brother, revealed conflicting feelings around the desire to be liberated:

We were so thrilled. The Russians brought us food and . . . really, give us kindness, and we were so grateful. Only when the Russians came the night before, we were—we were without any guards. And then we were perplexed—what are we going to do now? We were so frightened. We had no security. We didn’t know who is alive, where will we go? But what happened with the kind Russian soldiers who brought us food, who gave us help, and we were so fulfilled and went to sleep at night. And all of a sudden, we hear screaming. . . . when in the morning, when we came out, our fellow inmates, many of them were raped by these soldiers. Beautiful young girls who were skin and bone, who had so much hope the night before and such a—such a terrible thing to happen to be liberated.

Miriam Weiss’s recollection of liberation as “the anti-climatic liberation of one body and one human being,”<sup>3</sup> and Jana Gottshall’s recollection of liberation as “such a terrible thing to happen to be liberated,”<sup>4</sup> suggest the presence of unexplored memories that complicate national and transnational memories of liberation. Survivors’ memoirs and testimonies reveal memory vignettes that challenge the global mnemonic culture of liberation embedded in popular imagination as a “joyous affair.”<sup>5</sup>

Some survivors described liberation as a time during which women and girls had to hide and “be quieter” and the kind of liberation that transferred cities such as Nitra in Slovakia into “an incredible city” where “nearly everybody was pregnant” nine months after liberation.<sup>6</sup>

Survivors’ testimonies and memoirs displayed various modes of recollection of liberation sexual(ized) violence of which silence and avoidance were an indelible part. Yet, some scholars who tackle the history of sexual(ized) violence often quite uncritically and hastily ascribe silence and avoidance of survivors to discuss these difficult memories to feelings of shame. My goal is to contribute to these debates and argue that survivors’ silence and voids encountered in the context of sexual(ized) violence in the collected testimonies could also represent a *coping mechanism*. This coping mechanism, as a critical step toward healing and resilience-building, needs to be protected from an extractivist scholarly approach<sup>7</sup> that doubly dehumanizes survivors by enforcing notions of shame on victims’ silence. To dissect silence in collected testimonies of Holocaust survivors from Slovakia, I apply a Freudian concept of “screen memory,”<sup>8</sup> which suggests that rather than being silenced, the traumatic event of sexual violence is “covered” by a “screen memory,” which allows survivors to process the trauma and heal. In other words, screen memory is a sign that survivors were *coping and processing* the trauma of rape. It is a sign that they were working toward healing and *not* feeling shame as a result of rape, but rather shame was imposed on them by societal and cultural norms through multiple vectors. It is of paramount importance to safeguard this fragile space of survivors’ healing from the harms of scholarly and societal misinterpretations perpetuating the stigmatization of violated Holocaust survivors.

This chapter is structured as follows. The first part aims to “tune readers” into the grey zone of liberation and explore how survivors recalled liberation and what they revealed about the interactions with liberators. Were survivors indeed silent about sexual(ized) violence? The second part then zooms in on survivors and tackles voids, “a conceptual oubliette”<sup>9</sup> of sexual(ized) violence in memory as a result of exogenous and endogenous factors. Here, drawing on two case studies, I first highlight how interviewers’ interventions contributed to silencing survivors’ recollections of sexual(ized) violence, illustrating an example of an exogenous factor. Second, I focus on an example of an endogenous factor, in particular victims’ screening of memories concerning liberation rape, to challenge the scholarly perpetuation of victims’ stigmatization. In the last section, I reflect on how to move away from stigmatization to “dignification”<sup>10</sup> of survivors subjected to liberation rape and suggest possible pathways to breaking the cycle of the harmful perpetuation of stigma.

## SOURCES: INSTITUTIONAL SHAPING AND INTERIOR LABOR OF NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

My analysis is based on available memoirs and recorded video testimonies in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) and the Visual History Archive (VHA). When working with recorded oral testimonies one needs to be aware of a significant degree of institutional involvement in shaping the traumatic memory of the Holocaust. As Noah Shenker shows, such institutional shaping “represent[s] a central source of contestation that often emerges in the dialogue between a witness and her or his interlocutor.”<sup>11</sup> USHMM and Fortunoff VHA archives’ respective interview methodologies are shared but they each also apply their own tailored methodologies and interventions. For example, Fortunoff VHA introduced an “interventionist approach to engaging with witnesses, or in other cases edited interviews to omit familiar, canned stories” to resist the “commercialization and homogenization” of the Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> Fortunoff VHA directed survivors toward “on-camera scenes with family members,” which “represent the redemptive dramatization or ‘Schindlerization’ of Holocaust Memory.”<sup>13</sup> In addition to these institutional interventions in individual memory, one needs to be mindful of survivors’ self-censorship or invisible “interior labor” of individual memory screening.<sup>14</sup> This labor of priming and intervening in the process of recording interviews needs to be accounted for when we reconstruct the past. Such institutional interventions inevitably have an impact on both what is remembered and how it is remembered, ultimately shaping the ways scholars narrate these difficult histories.

The sources used in this chapter—oral recorded testimonies and written memoirs—offered different insights into the studied topic. Compared to oral testimonies recorded in the first half of the 1990s, written memoirs tended to provide a rather unobstructed narrative flow with more detailed reflections on the interactions of survivors with liberators. In this case, the memory of the events was not shaped by the institutional intervention in the early stages as in the case of Holocaust survivors’ interviewing, but rather in the final stage of the memoirs’ editing process prior to publishing. The memoirs in this study were published between 1999 and 2016 when the public discourse was open to discussions about sexual(ized) violence and rape in conflict and genocide. The public urgency to discuss rapes in conflict was the result of the Yugoslav wars, the Bosnian genocide, and genocide in Rwanda, followed by the International Criminal Court’s ruling of sexual violence during the war as a war crime and crime against humanity. This, in part, explains why the early 1990s oral recorded testimonies revealed more constraints when it came to discussing liberation rape as the public discussion about sexual violence in conflict had not yet quite emerged.

Even though memoirs and video-recorded oral testimonies yielded qualitatively different insights into liberation rape, they complemented each other and allowed for a better grasp of the complexities of individual and regional memory production. The memoirs' uninterrupted narrative flow captured the social fabric of the early days of liberation. On the other hand, video-recorded oral testimonies enabled closer scrutiny of the modes of silence and avoidance, interviewers' interruptions, and interventions in survivors' recollections of liberation sexual(ized) violence. Closer scrutiny of these modes of communication allows us to challenge the misrepresentation of survivors' silence as shame that survivors allegedly felt after being violated and shift the discussion toward structures and mechanisms that impose shame on rape survivors.

## SCHOLARSHIP OVERVIEW: UNPACKING SHAME AND SILENCE

One of the challenges of Holocaust historians "is to recognize the expressions of shame in the sources we read and to avoid restating them in our analysis."<sup>15</sup> What we need to do, Anna Hájková reminds us, is to "make shame and stigma into a topic of their own."<sup>16</sup> Yet some scholars avoid a careful unpacking of how shame is constructed and claim that "shame is always there."<sup>17</sup> Another study concludes that "the feeling of shame of women who were raped or sexually violated . . . is so essential that it pushed these women into silence for many years, decades and in other cases, women took this secret with them to the graves."<sup>18</sup> These simplified statements harm survivors through reinstatements of stigmatization and hence endorse, rather than challenge heteropatriarchal structures utilizing shame as a surveillance tool. More importantly, statements that underly shame as a sole culprit of survivors' silence ignore their diverse responses to rape as well as other factors at play.

Sexual(ized) violence does not "have a unitary, monolith meaning for women [and also men, children, and nonbinary individuals—NP] around the world."<sup>19</sup> As a result, silence concerning rape can have a variety of meanings that are typically erased under the prominence of shame paradigm. Silence can be interpreted as "a self-protective strategy"<sup>20</sup> or "a sign of . . . agentic hiding of pain."<sup>21</sup> Silence can signal self-censorship, "personal choice, awareness of personal safety, anticipation of negative reaction or lack of understanding."<sup>22</sup> Baldwin describes survivors' silence as a means to come to terms with memories of sexual(ized) violence, but also "as a cognitive strategy to allow them time to think about and interpret their experiences, before giving them voice."<sup>23</sup> Silence concerning liberation rape can also signal the political stance and effort to highlight the experience of 1945 liberation by downplaying the experience or threat of rape as "a different form of 'truth-telling' to highlight their experiences of 1945 as a liberation."<sup>24</sup>

We need to account for a variety of endogenous and exogenous factors that played a role in voids concerning sexual(ized) violence and rape in survivors' recollections of a traumatic past. For example, the guilt survivors felt that they, and not others, had survived, or accusations and questions that were leveled against survivors about their survival cannot be easily untangled from the silence concerning sexual(ized) violence. More importantly, fear of how survivors' new families would have reacted if they knew that they resorted to sex barter or were subjected to sexual violence, sexual slavery, exploitation, or rape also played an important role in their silence.<sup>25</sup>

Stigmatization has a substantive societal dimension. We must be alert when society and politics facilitate and incite feelings of shame among the survivors. Regina Mühlhäuser warns that the equation of rape survivors' silence with shame and stigma "reinforces the alleged inevitability of shame as a natural response by the individual victim [...], it assumes that families and communities will always shame and stigmatize the victims."<sup>26</sup> That said, we need to keep in mind that stigma is a social construct with ascribed functions that change across time and space.<sup>27</sup> Stigmatization functions as an efficient disciplining and surveillance tool of racialized heteropatriarchal structures.<sup>28</sup> Shaming as disciplining pushes victims and witnesses of sexual(ized) violence into self-imposed silence and hence compliance with patriarchal norms. The inevitable consequence of refusing to be silent pends the risks of marginalization: Stigma facilitated through shame results in societal exclusion, which, in turn, leaves traces on victims' identity formation as they are pushed to the margins of community belonging. Judith Lewis Herman's research on how trauma survivors envision justice shows that "a victim of a violent crime feels abandoned by her community, and her trust and sense of belonging are deeply violated. The victim feels isolated and cast out."<sup>29</sup> Herman suggests that it is due to societal exclusion that survivors feel "a profound sense of dishonor, a disgraced identity."<sup>30</sup> Sara Sharratt's research concerning the prosecution of rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda points to similar findings. Sharratt argues that "women do not necessarily feel ashamed because they have been raped, but they know that in a patriarchal system what happens to her tends to bring shame to her family, her community and her nation. She becomes the shame's owner. And this itself becomes a mechanism to keep many women in such a system silent and subjugated."<sup>31</sup>

Political and societal dimensions of shame and its far-reaching impact on survivors are intertwined. Andrea Pető in this volume reminds us that "the explicit mention of the feeling of shame was more common *after* the liberation than before."<sup>32</sup> Not surprisingly, even today in the era of illiberalism and its memory politics embedded in "new emotional economies" shame continues to be instrumentalized on the geopolitical chessboard.<sup>33</sup> The stigmatization of rape survivors transgresses war and peace as victims of sexual(ized) violence struggle with societal stigma long after war is over. Such pervasiveness of stigma transgressing war and peace makes transformation toward peace and reconciliation impossible to achieve.

## RECONSTRUCTING SHATTERED LIBERATION FROM HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS' MEMOIRS

How did Holocaust survivors in Slovakia recall liberation in their published memoirs and what do they reveal about interactions with liberators? In her memoir *Good Beyond Evil: Ordinary People in Extraordinary Times* (2002) Eva Gossman maps the complex realities of liberation as a perverted continuance of injustice and harm. Fresh wounds from the decimation and displacement of families, loss of loved ones, as well as material loss of homes, businesses, and property due to aryanization was mixed with new suffering inflicted by the pain of returning to their former homes inhabited by Slovak aryanizers and their unwelcoming and hostile attitude to returning Jews.<sup>34</sup> Aryanizers in some ways benefited from the Red Army's looting as it provided cover for their stealing of Jewish property. As Peter Kubicek recalls: "The Russian army . . . became convenient scapegoats, even in places where they had never set foot."<sup>35</sup> When Holocaust survivors returned and acquired their property from the aryanizers, they had a convenient excuse: "*Rusi zobrali*" — "The Russians took it."<sup>36</sup>

Eva was a twelve-year-old child at the time she avoided the 1942 deportation by making a harrowing border crossing to Hungary with her sixteen-year-old brother. She avoided the 1944 roundups of Jews in Hungary by returning to hiding in Slovakia. A long-awaited liberation introduced new dangers and insecurities as liberators approached Jews in Slovakia as members of the nation that collaborated with Nazis:

It would be nice to remember the days of liberation as festivals of rebirth, with songs and dance and sounds of trumpets. But that was not the case. . . . For months, we had dreamt of the day when we would come out of hiding and resume our lives. We knew that we could not turn back the clock and recapture our pre-war existence, but we hoped to find enough familiar markers and signposts to give us a new start. Reality was harsher and more complex than we had anticipated. We were grateful to be alive, but neither jubilant nor quietly contended. The weeks after the war brought their own anxieties, uncertainties and dangers—some of them life threatening. During the war, we were classified as a racial minority singled out for extinction. After the war, we became, ironically, part of the conquered population that had to be punished for its cooperation with German Reich. Our neighbours were not pleased that we survived—and our liberators treated us as citizens of a conquered country.<sup>37</sup>

Gossman, who after the war immigrated to the United States, earned a PhD in philosophy, and later held appointments at Princeton University, observed that during



the liberation, the Red Army did not distinguish Jews from Slovaks. They made a difference only

between the people they fought bitterly and on whom they now felt entitled to take revenge, and those few others, many of them communists, who had led the short-lived partisan uprising in the fall of 1944, whom they trusted and to whom they were prepared to assign official positions. There was no place or privilege, however, for the people who emerged from hiding or who had wandered back, disoriented and despairing, from forced labour centres or from concentration camps. For the Russians we were Slovaks and for the Slovaks we remained Jews.<sup>38</sup>

Eva Gossman situates the brutality of the Red Army in a geopolitical frame: Slovakia needed to be “conquered,” not “liberated,” by Soviets because Slovaks betrayed their Slavic brothers and fought on the side of Germans. Gossman brings to the fore looting and rape as a part of the liberation process:

Since Slovakia was considered a conquered country that had fought on the side of [the] enemy, rather than a country liberated from German occupation (as the Czech and Moravian parts of Czechoslovakia were seen), few restraints were imposed on the occupying Russian soldiers. They looted and raped at will, making no distinction between friends and foes. Rumour had it that the Soviet Army, bitter at what it considered the betrayal by fellow Slavs who had fought against them alongside the German forces, sent some of their most degraded and worst trained troops to occupy Slovakia.<sup>39</sup>

The available sources point to broader varieties of interactions including cases of sexual(ized) violence. Brutal rapes where victims were treated like disposable objects and killed in this early stage of liberation were mentioned in the memoir *Markus, Planter of Trees* (2012) by Elizabeth Meyer Liener who researched the life of Holocaust survivor Marcus Rosenberg. Marcus grew up in a family of a grocery businessman with his three brothers and a sister, Erika, in Bardejov. Erika preferred to work in a retail grocery store owned by her three aunts. She was sixteen when the deportations in Slovakia started. With the help of forged papers and passing as a Christian she was sheltered for a payment in Devínska Nová Ves by the Rocek family who kept her as a housekeeper. During the last year of the war, Erika, with a few other survivors, went into hiding in a cave in the vicinity of the town. Liener reveals an account of the rape of Jewish women hiding in a cave with Erika by Soviet soldiers patrolling the area—the account that is known only because Erika barely managed to escape despite being shot at:

One night, a group of Russian soldiers happened upon the cave during a patrol. When they saw who was in there, the soldiers began forcibly removing all the young women, proceeding to take them to the woods near the mountains. One soldier grabbed hold of Erika under her arm, pulling her up and roughly shoving her out of the cave. "I'm so young," Erika implored to the Russian. "Why don't you let me go?" The soldier pressed his body into Erika and growled in her ear, "Oh, I'm sure you have a boyfriend at home already." For some unknown reason, the soldier let go of Erika at that moment. She began running as fast as she could, zigzagging off to the side rather than going straight ahead. The soldier reached for his gun and began shooting at her, but neither of them could see anything in the pitch black of night. Erika could hear the screams of the other young women being taken from the cave, but she ran farther and farther away.<sup>40</sup>

Erika managed to escape, but none of these young women were ever found: "Word got back that the women had been forced into the woods, raped, and then left for dead."<sup>41</sup>

The mindset of trophy hunting was translated into sexual(ized) violence against selected victims. In her memoir, Eva Gossman notes that at some point, rape was regarded as a trophy for service in the Red Army rather than a military weapon of intimidation and subjugation:

Many of them [Red Army soldiers—NP] were battle weary, ignorant brutal and merciless. Locks and chains on the doors did not deter them. Often drunk and aroused, they had the strength and the will, to break through any homemade barriers to entry. They were neither restrained from committing crimes on civilians, nor were they punished when charges were brought against them. Rape was not a military weapon, as it has become in recent military conflicts, to be used to intimidate, humiliate or subjugate the civilian population. These soldiers looked at rape as a trophy they earned for their war service.<sup>42</sup>

Gossman's testimony urges us to pay attention to linkages of gender-based sexual(ized) violence and structural determinants such as the effort to disrupt and "(re)construct . . . political-economic hierarchies and processes."<sup>43</sup> The Red Army soldiers coped with malnutrition, exhaustion and poor supplies before they stepped on the territory of wartime Slovakia. Many fought abroad against their will and wanted to return home.<sup>44</sup> The Soviet Army had to live on the resources from the liberated territories and did not consider whose supplies or property was requisitioned for the army's needs.<sup>45</sup> It forced locals to provide dwellings, food, and free labor. In addition,

the Soviet soldiers could not comprehend why Germany and its collaborators with much higher living standards attacked the poverty-stricken Soviet Motherland in the summer of 1941. All of these factors as well as the Soviet Army's rage over the higher living standards of the bourgeois world<sup>46</sup> translated into a phase of looting and trophy hunting described by Schechter as "the practice of demarcating the place of one's victory."<sup>47</sup> So-called "*trofejčáci*," mostly lower-ranked Red Army officers, were a part of trophy-collecting units that looted and requisitioned an unprecedented amount of property on Slovak territory.<sup>48</sup> Trophies ranged from valuables, property, scraps, damaged tanks, and weaponry to cities and human trophies, primarily women and young girls subjected to sexual assault.<sup>49</sup>

Women and girls had to hide from drunken units of Red Army soldiers. For Holocaust survivors hiding was not a new experience. Liberation for some survivors like Eva Freedman just meant "a new hiding . . . from the Russians."<sup>50</sup> Eva, still a child at the time of liberation, along with ten-year-old sisters Greta and Vlasta, was saved from drunken soldiers by their neighbor Ms. Trattner, who barged into the room like "a demented fury . . . waving [a] Bible in her hand and screaming 'Ivrity, Ivrity' (Jews, Jews), upon which the stunned officer grabbed the Bible and ordered [the] drunken soldiers to leave the apartment."<sup>51</sup> Just as some Jews found refuge from being deported in prisons, hospitals, and mental wards during the Hlinka Slovak People's Party regime, these girls found hiding in the mental ward pretending mental incapacity a way to be shielded from Soviet soldiers' sexual assault.<sup>52</sup>

To maintain control over liberated territories that faced a critical lack of food supplies, the Red Army's initial sexual assault on civilians, looting, and trophy hunting gradually transitioned into a *modus vivendi* to avoid the resistance of locals. In his memoir *A Simple Life* (2016) Giora Amir reflects on the situation in Prešov, where the disruption of communications and the food supply boosted the black market where the Holocaust survivors cultivated friendlier relations with the Soviet soldiers who used the army trucks to smuggle food and cigarettes from Germany, Poland, and Hungary. Prešov's vicinity to borders turned the town into the main smuggling center with the Red Army's help.<sup>53</sup> Widespread barter was an indication of more consolidated relations between liberators and civilians. Even though the collected memoirs and testimonies did not explicitly mention sex barter,<sup>54</sup> it does not mean it did not occur on the ground; watches and clothes were often mentioned as bartered for food. In her memoir *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust* (1999) Livia Bitton Jackson recalls how her mom was sewing beautiful dresses and blouses for soldiers' young girls in exchange for "eggs, flour, live chickens and even light bulbs. [. . .] Our house was always full of barishnas, and tovarishes, their male companions; five soldiers to every soldier girl. The tovarishes bring along their harmonicas and balalaikas, their good voices and their good humor."<sup>55</sup>

Bitton Jackson's memoir also reveals the reality of forced cohabitation where a female Red Army soldier whom Slovak locals called Barishna targeted Holocaust survivor Mikki Grossman for marriage. Barishna, who claimed to be Jewish and whom Jackson described as having a temper bordering on aggressivity, was determined to marry Mikki and avoid returning to the Soviet motherland after discovering that Mikki was "*bogach*" and the richest man in town. Barishna did not mind that Mikki mocked her and humiliated her. She persisted and made public scenes that Mikki desperately tried to avoid. In the end, he let her stay in his house, Barishna became pregnant, the couple got married, and they left Šamorín for Palestine.

Even though Bitton Jackson was aware of the danger that Soviet soldiers' presence meant, mainly for women and girls, she also contemplated the economic and political aspects of the Soviet presence, particularly the importance of food bartering with the Red Army soldiers and, more importantly, their role in the liberation of Jews from Nazis and their collaborators, which ultimately defines her relations to "Russians": "I love the Russians. They fought the Nazis and their collaborators and helped to save our lives. That's why I love their language. Our neighbors, Slovaks and Hungarians alike, despise the Russians. They see them as the enemy. They see them as crude and primitive occupiers. But to me they are heroes."<sup>6</sup> Here Bitton Jackson constructs a different mode of storytelling by underscoring and prioritizing gratitude to the Soviet army for saving their lives. Liberation and survival mattered more than the reality of the Red Army's sexual(ized) violence and looting.

To briefly sum up, with the help of survivors' memoirs this section showed how survivors recollected the experience of liberation as well as the emotions and politics of liberation at the time, with sexual(ized) violence as an important part of that recollection. The memoirs used for the mapping of the liberation experience were produced since the late 1990s, that is, the times when the topic of sexual(ized) violence in conflict emerged in public discourse. It can also be assumed that the authors of these specific memoirs did not experience sexual(ized) violence, which is why they could talk about it more freely. The second part of this chapter will address voids of sexual(ized) violence that emerged from the early 1990s' video-recorded oral testimonies.

## TACKLING VOIDS OF SEXUAL(IZED) VIOLENCE IN THE VIDEO- RECORDED ORAL TESTIMONIES.

Video-recorded testimonies offer researchers valuable insights into the process of memory production. The following lines will show how the interviewers' interventions

enable silences and how Holocaust survivors themselves screened memories of sexual violence. As Carli Snyder persuasively argues in her chapter, interviewers' techniques of asking (or not asking) questions played a role in erasing difficult memories of sexual(ized) violence in recorded interviews.<sup>57</sup> This could be clearly observed in the recorded interview with Eva Freedman who avoided deportations, survived the war by hiding in an apartment, and was liberated in a small western Slovakian town, Nitra. Freedman's recollection of her first interaction with the Red Army officer was interrupted at *two* occasions: the first time due to a "technical hitch" in the process of interview recording and the second time by the interviewer herself. This is how Eva recalls the moment of liberation:

A Russian officer comes down. Actually, he looked terribly nice, aesthetically, and clean. [PAUSES FOR FIVE SECONDS] And he just saw these wretched people sitting here. He couldn't make out what it was. Because, you see, this was a completely different army. . . . You see, the Russian army, who was fighting in the front, the battlefield, did not know about anything like that. They did not probably even could read and write most of them. They couldn't understand what's going on with the Jews were persecuted and they had to go in hiding, and the Final Solution. They did not know anything about it.<sup>58</sup>

In this part, Eva prepares viewers for what she wants to talk about next—rapes. In this stage, she tries to think out loud about possible reasons behind the Soviet Army rape of Holocaust survivor women: not being educated and not knowing about the Final Solution and the fate of Jews.<sup>59</sup> This initial prepping of the audience is, however, suddenly interrupted by a "technical hitch"—an unspecified technical problem encountered during the recording. After restart, Eva goes back to the point when she interacted with a Soviet Army officer, but now different elements of that memory are addressed—the elements that paint the Soviet Army officer in a positive light, as a helper who warned Eva and other survivors in hiding about approaching danger:

So the Russian officer came down to the basement and pat me. I remember he gave me, I think, the first sweet I had for possibly a year. I treasured it tremendously. And he was telling us what is going on outside. He explained via interpreter—I think our caretaker spoke Russian—what is going on. That the army is coming over, and they haven't seen a woman for years. And all these women were very beautiful, attractive women, in their 30s, 40s. There were probably some a bit older, but—And now a new hiding started. We had to hide away from the Russians. This was quite a surprise. I couldn't wait to be liberated. And [PAUSES FOR 3 SECONDS] so the women were hiding for some time in the cellar, from the Russians.<sup>60</sup>

Eva's pausing for three seconds signals bracing herself to state the reason for their "new hiding." Rather than clearly stating that this time survivors were hiding to avoid rape, she ends up simply repeating that they were hiding from the "Russians." It is at this point that the interviewer sensed Eva's discomfort and uneasiness and interrupted her narration with a question: "INT: At this point, when he came, was that your moment of liberation?" Eva's thoughts are now shifted away from her effort to articulate and possibly address liberator rape toward what she might have anticipated was expected from the interviewer, that is, an answer situated in a broader historical context. Eva's answer thus shifts from the personal toward a geopolitical frame in which she underscores the momentum of overlapping Nazi disintegration and Soviet emerging imperialism as she refers to Soviet liberation as a "new hiding and occupation": "I presume it was our liberation. This was the moment that they came and took over the occupation. I don't know whether it was a general liberation of all the war, but liberation of our town—occupied by the Russians."<sup>61</sup>

In an effort to avoid retraumatizing the survivor,<sup>62</sup> the interviewer's question provided the survivor an opportunity to steer away from confronting and processing liberator rape. But as Snyder's chapter shows, interviewers' lack of training when it came to asking questions about traumatic experiences of sexual(ized) violence played a significant role. In addition, interviewers' idealized approach to liberation as a rupture that put an end to survivors' suffering needs to be accounted for when discussing silences concerning sexual(ized) violence in recorded testimonies.<sup>63</sup>

Holocaust survivors were more likely to mention sexual(ized) violence when the circumstances allowed these women and girls to escape the imminent threat of rape or when they knew about the rape that happened to others.<sup>64</sup> On the other hand, some survivors often refused to call sexual(ized) violence by its name, paused in the middle of traumatic recollections, and used euphemisms. Eva Boros, whose family was sent to the Solosh ghetto and then to Auschwitz, recalled how, after being liberated, they did not want to stay in their house upon returning from the concentration camp: "There was some little bit of danger with the Russian soldiers. They were very wild. Some of the girls, some little friends were insulted, by, not the Germans, by the Russians."<sup>65</sup> Only after the interviewer prompted further and asked, "Only insulted?" Eva named the violence: "Well, raped."<sup>66</sup> Similarly, Alice Tyroler in her recollection of finding shelter in a farmer's house on their way home from the concentration camp in April 1945: "Peasants hid their wives where they kept the potatoes etcetera, you know, because the Soviets liked ladies . . . very much."<sup>67</sup> Eva Boros's description of liberation rape as "a little bit of danger with Russian soldiers" and a "Soviet insult," Alice Tyroler's euphemism for the liberation rape as "Soviets liking women very much," or the word choice of "calamity" as a euphemism for rape<sup>68</sup> deserve more scholarly attention. From the way the interviews were structured and conducted it is difficult to establish if these survivors themselves faced the threat of, or were themselves subjected to, liberator sexual(ized)

violence. What can be established with certainty is that some survivors did not identify rape and sexual violence by its name and used euphemisms instead. But are these euphemisms pointing to the reluctance of survivors to speak about sexual(ized) violence due to feelings of shame? I suggest that rather than hastily ascribing such refusals to feelings of shame, we should consider a more nuanced interpretation and approach these euphemisms as memory vignettes with a specific function.

Freudian screen memory is helpful to identify the ways survivors coped with the memory of sexual(ized) violence, which was often not addressed directly. Instead, a specific "mnemic image" screened out the memory of rape, which was not erased or directly silenced but rather soothed by "generat[ing] a compromise which condense[d] both memories."<sup>69</sup> I suggest that the memory vignettes such as "Soviet insult" of women and "Soviets liking women very much" represent a screen memory that helps survivors to create a safe distance to "cover up a traumatic event . . . that cannot be approached directly."<sup>70</sup> The screen memory of the threat of rape or actual rape as a "Soviet insult" or "Soviets liking women very much" indeed "replaces a disturbing memory with a more comforting, everyday scene."<sup>71</sup> In so doing, screen memory suppresses the original experience "with a 'mnemic image' which screens out the aspects of the original experience which were objectionable."<sup>72</sup> This means that even though screen memory is inherently resistant to traumatic memory, it does not negate it, silence it, or compete with it for primacy. Instead, screen memory challenges the validity of the original memory and "generate[s] a compromise which condenses both memories."<sup>73</sup>

Screen memory does not necessarily manifest through the presence of the euphemism of sexual(ized) violence. It can be any memory that, in some way, mitigates the psychological impact of the traumatic memory of sexual(ized) violence. Locating screen memory in survivors' testimonies can be challenging because traumatic memories are recollected differently from "ordinary memories."<sup>74</sup> Judith Lewis Herman describes the impact of traumatic memory recollection of rape survivors as

enter[ing] a numbed state of consciousness, technically called dissociation. The experience feels unreal; time may feel slowed down, and people may have the sense of leaving their bodies. Memories laid down in this altered state are fragmentary; they lack the logic of an ordinary narrative. Survivors may have intense and painful flashback recall of sensory details like smells and sounds but little or no recall of orienting details like time and place.<sup>75</sup>

Such absence of orienting details along with other signs of trauma is notable in Gita's<sup>76</sup> video-recorded testimony. In Gita's recollection of sexual(ized) violence, screen memory did not manifest itself as a euphemism but rather as another event located in the immediate vicinity of traumatic liberation experience.



Born in Miskolc, Hungary, Gita was hiding during the war and lived under a false identity until liberation by the Soviet armed forces in Slovakia. In her testimony she mentions that she thinks about the Holocaust every day, hates Germans, and will never forgive them for the suffering and for shooting her mother while hiding in the forest. After the interviewer prompted Gita and asked, "Is there anything you would add into the story?" Gita recollected rape by a Soviet Army captain who saved their lives, but suddenly paused, waved her hands at the camera indicating concern, and asked, "Please don't put it in, can you?"

I was raped by Russian soldiers . . . but I never think of it, never, never [shaking her head indicating no], it doesn't come back in my dreams . . . [interrupted by the interviewer who asked: "Can I ask you when did that happen?"] In the forest, one evening, they came down, I told you, it was the same captain who saved our lives. I don't know why he had a, he had a . . . [all of sudden she starts waving her hands at the camera, calls cameraman's name, asking him]. . . please don't put it in, can you? [Interviewer interrupts: "But is there a message that you would like to send to the world about the Holocaust?"]<sup>77</sup>

Witnessing Gita's discomfort, the interviewer promptly diverts her attention away from the traumatic memory by asking a broad open-ended question: "But is there a message that you would like to send to the world about the Holocaust?" The interviewer's question diffuses the emotional intensity of the moment and implicitly invites Gita to reframe her narrative within a more universal framework. Even though Gita felt that the painful memory of liberation rape needed to be included in her testimony, she acquiesced to the interviewer's cue and ventured away from 1945 to address contemporary concerns of the present-day dangers posed by the far right in Oklahoma.

There are a few layers that one might discern from this difficult viewing of Gita's recollection of liberation rape. Gita's inability to specify the orienting details of when rape happened ("one evening") along with a sudden request to delete this part of her testimony point to the depth of trauma. Gita's recollection displays the signs of fragmentation as following the interviewer's cue she opted to "veer" from a chronological narrative by suddenly transitioning from 1945 to 1995 and the dangers of the far right in Oklahoma, displaying what Lawrence Langer calls a moment of "*simultaneity* but not a *sequence*."<sup>78</sup> Gita placed the memory of the far right in Oklahoma in 1995 in the immediate vicinity of the traumatic "ruined liberation"<sup>79</sup> experience of rape in 1945. By placing the screen memory of the contemporary far right threat in Oklahoma next to the traumatic memory of rape by the Red Army officer, the traumatic memory of rape is not erased or silenced, but rather its meaning is condensed so that screen memory allows the survivor to get at a safe distance to process it. In this case, pointing to the



danger of today's far right as a continuance of the Nazi crimes that Gita survived represents a screen memory that aims to prepare the ground for the processing of liberator rape along these lines: Gita survived the brutality of Nazism, which makes her resilient and strong in facing the emerging far right today. Locating the screen memory of the emerging far right of 1995 next to the trauma of 1945 aims to *diminish* the perceived gravity of liberation rape. The presence of the screen memory of the current far right testifies to the presence of a coping strategy to process the trauma of rape by a liberator rather than an internalization of shame.

Gita's recorded testimony raises two issues. First, from the institutional point of view, this section of Gita's testimony would not be seen as ideal, as VHA archives prioritize testimonies that adhere to chronological sequence, whereas Gita's memory following the interviewer's question "veered" from a chronological narrating by suddenly transitioning from 1945 to 1995. This prompts us to think about the tension between personal experience, trauma, and institutional remembrance, which shapes testimonies based on their respective politics and methodologies. In the words of Noah Shenker, such a moment of tension between personal and institutional memories "reveals the difficult, dialogical nature of testimonies in which survivors cannot always accommodate the preferences of the institution recording their accounts."<sup>80</sup>

Second, one cannot ignore the fact that Gita's clearly articulated request to delete the mention of rape from the testimony seemed to be ignored as it is still available to viewers. Perhaps permission was obtained to share the story as it was. The story is not publicly available and can be accessed only by those with institutional access. Otherwise, the institutional failure to honor a survivor's request to delete the mention of rape represents an extreme case of extractionism<sup>81</sup> and perpetuating harm, which questions VHA's goal "to develop empathy, understanding and respect through testimony."<sup>82</sup>

As this part of the chapter showed, when discussing the traumatic experience of liberation sexual(ized) violence survivors' recollections pointed to the presence of coping strategies rather than feelings of shame. The last part of this chapter explains why it is essential to move away from the shame paradigm and stigmatization toward the "dignification"<sup>83</sup> of survivors of gender-based sexual(ized) violence and how this can be achieved.

## MENDING THE HARMS OF STIGMATIZATION

How do we mend the harms of scholarly uncritical ascribing of shame as a primary feeling to rape victims and move away from their stigmatization to "dignification"<sup>84</sup>? How do we respect and honor the space that survivors need to process the trauma of

sexual(ized) violence? How can we pursue research that represents a reservoir of resilience and the empowerment of victims of sexual(ized) violence rather than research that is extractive and perpetuates harm? The starting point to answer these questions is to approach survivors *not* as “living wounds”<sup>85</sup> but rather as “knowledge bearers”<sup>86</sup> and gatekeepers of their own stories—stories to which they are entitled by right to memory. On the one hand, right to memory places responsibility on individuals to contribute to the production of memory culture that is inclusive and just. As a result, survivors inevitably become agents of social change. On the other hand, “right to memory” is also a “health issue with ethical and legal implications.”<sup>87</sup> In this line of thinking, “right to memory” is intertwined with “frameworks of memory that ensure the physical survival and moral wellbeing of people.”<sup>88</sup> Applied to our case, namely survivors like Gita whose wish is to erase mentions of the traumatizing experience of rape from datasets of institutional or public domains, right to memory as a legal tool that protects the physical and moral well-being of survivors offers one potential pathway to safeguarding Holocaust survivors from the harms of societally imposed stigmatization.

In this case, the way to safeguard and protect survivors from harms of stigmatization and misrepresentation of their silence is to firmly place their stories and memories in a rights-based legal context of the right to memory and its respective “right to be forgotten” ruled by the European Court of Justice in 2014 as a right to protect privacy.<sup>89</sup> It entitled individuals to request the deletion of personal information shared by content providers in digital space. “Right to be forgotten” as a rights-based legal realm offers victims of sexual(ized) violence legal space to protect the way they construct, share (or refuse to share), and interpret the past as a way of trauma processing and healing. Even if one must be cautious of the dangers of patriarchal power dynamics in legal processes,<sup>90</sup> the silence of rape survivors approached *as a right* to memory (right to be forgotten) rather than shame has the potential to mitigate the impact of a vicious cycle of stigmatization.

Survivors of sexual(ized) violence in general see justice as a vital part of healing and tend to appreciate diverse processes of restorative justice as a conduit for “acknowledgment, vindication, apology, and amends—from their moral communities.”<sup>91</sup> The community’s acknowledgment that sexual(ized) violence crimes were committed offers another viable path for destigmatization and the restoration of dignity. Herman’s research shows that survivors of sexual(ized) violence “want assurances from the community that they did not deserve to be abused. They want the burden of shame lifted from their shoulders and placed on the shoulders of the perpetrators, where it belongs. . . . [survivors of sexual(ized) violence—NP] were keenly aware that the crimes were intended to dishonor and isolate them; they sought, therefore, the restoration of their own honor and the reestablishment of their own connections with the community.”<sup>92</sup> Herman’s research thus underscores the importance of the “moral community’s”

standing by survivors of sexual(ized) violence: "As the survivor puts down her burden of shame, the community puts down its own burden of guilt for its previous indifference or, worse, its complicity with the perpetrator. In restoring honor to the survivor, the moral community also restores its own honor."<sup>93</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The history of sexual(ized) violence committed by the liberating Red Army on the territory of Slovakia needs to be carefully reconstructed from the available testimonies and archival documents while paying close attention to how sexual(ized) violence is remembered in the context of overlapping Nazi and Soviet imperial projects and how such memories inform survivors' place in the world. This chapter showed that a careful reconstruction of the microhistory of difficult interactions with the Red Army challenges the sanitized collective memory of liberation. It demonstrated that if closely scrutinized, the voids and silences concerning sexual(ized) violence in Holocaust survivors' testimonies offer a much deeper understanding of survivors' ways of coping with trauma as well as a deeper understanding of how stigmatization serves as heteropatriarchy's surveillance tool.

My effort to unpack the voids and silences of survivors showed that rather than silence due to shame, the liberator rape victims' memory vignettes displayed the presence of screen memory, which was an indicator of the presence of survivors' coping mechanism, not feelings of shame. This chapter also raised ethical issues. It is imperative that scholars critically question widely accepted societal norms that rape victims are silent because they feel shame and carefully examine how and why shame is constructed and systemically imposed on victims through heteropatriarchal structures across different historical contexts. This chapter is a call to action for scholars to practice honest and critical self-reflection on the impact of our methodologies on those whose memories we extract for research purposes. It is a call for scholars to shift the focus away from our institutions (How does my institution/university benefit from my research?) toward survivors themselves (How can my research help the community of survivors?). It is a call for a critical self-reflection of one's methodologies as a means to prevent research that presents survivors as "living wounds," deprives survivors of agency, perpetuates stigmatization, and in so doing objectifies survivors and marginalizes survivors' voices.<sup>94</sup> It is a call to prevent such extractivist approaches by acknowledging survivors' space for healing as an indelible part of their right to memory.

Attaching shame as a common denominator to the silence of rape victims is a vicious and yet effective ongoing mechanism of perpetuating and sustaining the patriarchal structures. To break this vicious cycle adequate survivors-centered restorative justice

processes and the community's acknowledgment that sexual(ized) violence crimes were committed need to take place. We must approach survivors' silence as an indelible component of a right to memory, which includes a right to silence that is unassailable, unable to be questioned or misconstrued under the pressure of patriarchal norms and institutional and political interests. Acknowledging a right to memory means respecting the ways survivors share their stories — what they recall and what they *refuse* to recall. In sum, it represents an acknowledgment of the *ownership* of one's own story in this world.

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## NOTES

1. I anonymize this survivor's name and use the name Miriam. In this chapter, I anonymize the names of those survivors who explicitly stated that they were raped. This approach is not intended to reinforce societal taboos or judgments about what is considered shameful. Rather, my decision to anonymize survivors who experienced rape stems from a commitment to prioritizing their well-being. Extracting specific narratives of trauma, humiliation, and pain solely for academic purposes carries the risk of retraumatization. Anonymization seeks to mitigate that risk. Furthermore, anonymizing the names of survivors who endured rape during liberation recognizes that they hold sole ownership of their stories and should determine when and where to share their traumatic experiences.
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# WHY WE NEED A HISTORY OF PROSTITUTION IN THE HOLOCAUST

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ

**I**N JULY 1942, A 24-YEAR-OLD WOMAN, WHOM I WILL CALL ALICE HABERLAND, was deported from Berlin to Theresienstadt. She grew up in a wealthy, well-established Jewish family and arrived without her parents—her mother was gentile and her Jewish father had been murdered. At first shocked by the dirt, hunger, and overcrowding and without any knowledge of Czech or acquaintances to ask for help, Alice found her feet and started providing for herself and her sister, who was in the last stages of tuberculosis, by offering sex for food. Later, when three elderly disabled female relatives arrived at Theresienstadt, she supported them as well. This changed in January 1943, when Rabbi Leo Baeck, the revered leader of German Jewry and friend of Haberland's family, arrived at Theresienstadt. In his 1979 Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Leo Baeck, Leonard Baker relied on a common trope to describe Haberland's experience:

This lovely young woman had known all the comforts that money can bring, and she missed them in Theresienstadt. The crowded conditions, the shortage of food, and the dirt eroded her sense of pride and decency. In hopes of an extra scrap of food, a feeling of warmth, space to breathe in, she became a prostitute. Years later she said: "I don't know why I did what I did. You can't explain those things." Judaism has no dark and private confessional booth. It does, however, have love and sympathy for the troubled individual. "I needed someone to understand my action," she said, "and I used Baeck. His compassion for human errors would not allow him to hold my acts against me. He was my conscience, like my father."<sup>1</sup>

Haberland stopped selling sex. Two months later, her octogenarian grandmother died, followed by Haberland's sister in July 1943. Haberland survived the ghetto, moved to the United States, married, and had children.<sup>2</sup> Unlike most survivors in the Western world, she never gave testimony to any of the many Holocaust oral history projects.

Haberland's story raises questions about how sexual barter has come to be portrayed as inherently shameful. Why did Baker describe the motivation of Haberland's selling sex not as a way of saving her relatives, but rather as a spoiled young woman's mistaken insistence on an "extra scrap of food, a feeling of warmth, space to breath in"? The passage suggests a vision of sexual barter as something that needs to be forgiven. In this article, I propose we read such case histories in a different light, namely, through the framework of the economy of prisoner society and the history of prostitution. In fact, the "extra scrap of food" or better accommodation in Theresienstadt often meant vastly improved living conditions; indeed, for the elderly and sick it could mean the difference between life and death.<sup>3</sup> Histories of sex work offer a paradigm that allows us to refrain from interpreting sex work as either discrediting or solely victimizing. Rather, it was a resource: Alone in a foreign ghetto, without any connections, Alice Haberland was able to provide for herself and four relatives.

Prostitution is among the most stigmatized topics in Holocaust studies. Both scholarly and more popular accounts of the Holocaust tend to either omit mention of sex work, narrate it in titillating fashion, or equate it with sexual violence. The last point means that much of the feminist scholarship on the Holocaust interprets sexual barter primarily as violence. This perspective, I argue, leads our focus away from victims' agency and obstructs our understanding of society in extremis. The experiences of Holocaust victims who participated in various types of sexual barter—from flirting to rational relationships to the straightforward exchange of intercourse for food or protection—were ambivalent and multifaceted, and meant various things to various people over time. Sexual barter could, but did not have to include sexual acts.

Building on my earlier work on sexual barter in Theresienstadt,<sup>4</sup> this article presents a historiographic intervention that moves beyond simplistic and reductive views implied by the term "forced prostitution."<sup>5</sup> I critique the automatic categorization of prostitution as sexual violence or even rape merely because the women and men involved had limited control over their lives. Zoë Waxman is correct in stating that "refusing to acknowledge that even women in extremity can be capable of making choices . . . renders the women involved faceless victims."<sup>6</sup> In the account to follow, I will explore cases of unofficial, unorganized sexual barter by Holocaust victims in various settings such as ghettos, camps, and in hiding, demonstrating why context is key and exploring what sexual barter can tell us about the mentality and limited choices of the participants. The goal is to systematically examine the mechanisms that stigmatized prostitution.<sup>7</sup> I will not address prostitution organized by the perpetrators, such as brothels

for the Wehrmacht, concentration camp prisoners, or forced laborers, because these did not include any Jews.<sup>8</sup> This piece also does not address the sexual barter of children.<sup>9</sup> Whether children's participation in sexual barter could entail meaningful agency is an important debate.<sup>10</sup> However, as but one intervention, this article focuses on cases involving adults only (though some of them were young) in order to avoid the far more complex question of child abuse.

In a departure from my earlier work, here I use sexual barter and prostitution as synonyms. I had been wary about employing the notion of prostitution because of the stigma associated with it, which could render analytical grasp of the concept useless.<sup>11</sup> In the thirteen years since first writing about sexual barter, in teaching the history of sexuality in general and the history of sex work in particular, I often debated the processes of the stigmatization of prostitution with my students, and I realized that my pragmatic decision to distance myself from this term contributed to its taboo. Therefore, I use both terms to refer to the same phenomenon, albeit in different contexts: Prostitution serves here as a meta-term, while sexual barter describes individual acts and relationships between Holocaust victims.

Sexual barter, that is, exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection, was a frequent means by which Holocaust victims sought to secure their survival.<sup>12</sup> It was also a means of exerting agency. I differentiate—depending on whether (and to what degree) sexual barter had a more pronounced social dimension—between two types of relationships: those that were rational, in the sense that they produced longer-lasting affectionate, sexual, and romantic relationships even when one or both of the partners had entered into the exchange for at least partly pragmatic reasons; and instrumental sex, which refers to short-term sexual encounters.<sup>13</sup> Sexual barter during the Holocaust could be, and indeed often was, violent, and thus a form of sexual violence. However, it is important not to equal violent sexual barter with rape, because bartering partners always exercised some degree of individual choice. In contrast, rape is a form of sexual assault in which the victim has no freedom to decide whether they want to engage in the sexual act. While the boundaries were and remain muddled, the ability to exercise at least some form of control over sex defines sexual barter.

I will first present the relevant aspects of the history of prostitution that make it possible to interpret sexual barter in the Holocaust without ahistorical moralizing. I then explore the reasons for the long-standing discomfort around prostitution within Holocaust studies, a discomfort that persisted even after the advent and success of Holocaust women's and gender history. Delving into Holocaust historiography on women and sexual violence, I will investigate in detail how scholars make judgments that are presented as commonly accepted. The third, empirical section of the article, offers a roadmap of various historical examples of sexual barter. First, I explore how sex work was seen and made sense of by onlookers. I then look at the narratives of both heterosexual



and queer participants in sexual barter between prisoners in concentration camps and ghettos, and the sexual barter between Jewish women and men in hiding and their rescuers. The article concludes with an examination of sexual barter between prisoners and guards, a particularly extreme form of dependency.

How can we write a history of such an erased, marginalized topic? Which sources can we rely on? The usual approach of historians of prostitution<sup>14</sup>—to rely on police files—does not work here, since these institutions did not exist in the concentration camps nor, obviously, among groups in hiding. Some ghettos did have Jewish police, but they rarely addressed sex work,<sup>15</sup> and very few documents from the Jewish or Order Police survived. The other common approach, reading files of medical authorities, offers a possibility and was deployed in Robert Sommer's investigation of the camp brothels, whose workers had periodic tests for venereal diseases (VDs).<sup>16</sup> The concern for the dignity of people who engaged in a stigmatized sexual activity would suggest that a repeated discussion of gonorrhea tests—when people's stories are reduced to enforced intimate medical tests—is unfortunate.<sup>17</sup>

In the end, I work with personal testimonies, usually written after the war, and with a few fortunately preserved contemporaneous sources. This means that in the overwhelming majority of cases, we find testimonies about, but not *by*, men and women who engaged in sex work. Most existing memoirs operate within the binary narrative categories of romantic love and sexual violence. In following the call of queer studies, I propose that we need to question our normative assumptions of what is "natural" or "right" and read sources in their own light.<sup>18</sup> Finally, to demonstrate the judgment and contempt of survivors toward women (rarely men) who bartered sex, I include several of their stories. The challenge is determining how to examine these voices in a way that shows empathy to judging narrators (themselves victims of the Holocaust) while refusing to shame the people who engaged in sex work. In spite of the stigmatization attached to sexual barter, in the fifteen case studies presented in this chapter, for eight of these, there is some form of self testimony; six of the protagonists thematized their own sexual barter.

Investigating sexual barter is further complicated by the fact that even when stories of people who sold sex appear in historical documents, we may not be able to identify the people mentioned in those stories, because many narrators did not recall names. In those rare cases in which I was able to locate first-person testimonies of sexual barter, I was faced with the requirement to anonymize individuals imposed by archives, families, or the interviewees. Mara Keire points out that pseudonyms and abbreviated names perpetuate judgments about what is shameful.<sup>19</sup> It is particularly critical to use real names to document the history of people erased in the Holocaust.<sup>20</sup> It can be the relatives of the people we write about who are willing to use legal threats to stop the researcher from using real names, or in fact do this research in any form. The scholar of

prostitution and the Holocaust is left with a conundrum: If we continue to use pseudonyms or abbreviate names, we perpetuate stigma, but if we use real names, we face potential legal, financial, institutional, and personal costs. There are no good solutions.

## BODY/SERVICE: HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SEX WORK IN THE HOLOCAUST

Holocaust historians are profoundly uncomfortable with sex work. A narrative in which (even presumed) prostitution was interpreted as complicity with the Nazis already became common in pre-independence Palestine.<sup>21</sup> Holocaust historians have been influenced by this stigma: They are disturbed by occurrences of sexual barter and most of them avoid the topic altogether. When it is discussed, it is almost always interpreted as sexual violence in which women have little to no (meaningful) control or as a form of complicity in which those engaging in sexual barter were totally responsible for their actions and could be judged for their choices.<sup>22</sup> Gender studies of the Holocaust have largely ignored the historiography on prostitution, even though they have taken up other important trends within gender studies.<sup>23</sup> This neglect may be an unconscious response to the fierce backlash against those who have studied gender with respect to genocide. Indeed, feminists have had to fight for the establishment and legitimacy of women's and gendered perspectives on the Shoah.<sup>24</sup> Such challenges to the study of women and gender might explain why scholars tend to focus on unambiguous histories of women's heroism, suffering, and resilience and why there has been so little space to address presumably shameful acts such as sex work or same-sex desire.<sup>25</sup> To date, women's history of the Holocaust almost exclusively follows arguments that regard prostitution as inherently exploitative.<sup>26</sup> The literature exploring this topic is vast; I will discuss only the most influential works.

The now-standard interpretation of prostitution during the Holocaust is one of "survival prostitution," which posits that when Holocaust victims bartered sex in order not to die they were suffering a form of sexual violence.<sup>27</sup> For example, in their 2004 classic *Sexualisierte Gewalt* (*Sexualized Violence*), the authors claim that asymmetrical, dependent rational relationships (my term) constituted sexual violence because the rank-and-file prisoners had no choice but to engage in them.<sup>28</sup> Regina Mühlhäuser, the leading authority on sexual violence on the German Eastern front in World War II, offers an even-handed portrayal of the circumstances in which women in occupied Soviet territories bartered sex for food with German soldiers, whose actions had created the food shortages in the first place. However, Mühlhäuser focuses on the actions of the occupying soldiers, bypassing questions about the agency of the occupied population.<sup>29</sup> Maren Röger's work perhaps provides the best example of the "survival

prostitution" interpretation. In her study of intimacy in occupied Poland, Röger interprets sexual barter and prostitution as sexual violence.<sup>30</sup> She showed that the women were forced by circumstances to sell sex to the occupiers, but she neglected any investigation of the decisions that women made in order to engage in these encounters, nor did she engage with the historiography of sex work. To bolster her claim of "survival prostitution," Röger set apart former professional prostitutes from those who engaged in sex work only in response to war shortages. This differentiation is frustrating, as it is inherently classist and marks prostitution as dishonorable. Like the formerly "respectable" women who sold sex during the war, the working-class women who engaged in prostitution were motivated by economic necessity and chose to use this resource to make ends meet. Even scholars who are acutely aware of the agency of victims and who seek to avoid judgmental language sometimes unwittingly lend support to the view of prostitution as inherently exploitative. Sara Horowitz explicitly eschews judgmental language but still falls back on the tell-tale phrase "selling one's body," which implies that these women sold something that ought not be traded, that is irreplaceable: The phrase equates a sexual act with a purchase of the entire human being, even the soul.<sup>31</sup> She also included cases of child sex abuse alongside narratives of adult women who made the choice to barter sex.<sup>32</sup> By discussing sexual abuse of a small child alongside grown-up sexual barter, Horowitz, perhaps unintentionally, influences the reader to interpret sexual barter as abusive. In other cases, historians link sexual barter and rape just out of confusion and their lack of an interpretative framework. In Evgeny Finkel's study of Jewish survival choices in Eastern Europe, when discussing Jewish women's choice to engage in sexual barter with Germans, the reference was to literature on sexual violence.<sup>33</sup>

Contrasting this historiographical sketch with an overview of interpretations of sex work is helpful. Feminist historians have taken E. P. Thompson's social history on the agency of "little people" as a point of departure in order to suggest that prostitution has a history and that we need to recognize prostitution as labor.<sup>34</sup> Intimacy can be a commodity; Nicole von Germeten reminds us that "the woman [...] is selling her services, not 'her body and soul.'" <sup>35</sup> From this perspective, sex is just one of the services that can be sold, alongside cooking, cleaning, rearing children, or selling produce in a shop. In her work on the French poor in the eighteenth century, Olwen Hufton shows that prostitution was an integral part of what she termed "the economies of the make-shift," one of the many strategies the poor used to survive. Judith Walkowitz demonstrates in her study of prostitution in mid-nineteenth-century England that indeed sex work was violent, but then so was most of the quotidian life of working-class women. The consensus among historians of prostitution is that we must recognize the agency of the women and men who sold sex. The point is not to romanticize the decisions of women who went into sex work, but to be able to provide a nuanced, historical view of their choices and consent. Mir Yarfitz, in his history of transnational Jewish sex work in

Argentina, reminds us: "As well-intentioned listeners, we must seek to hear the voices of our subjects within their own paradigms."<sup>36</sup>

In her work on East European migrant sex workers, Ilse van Liempt reminds us of why it is problematic to differentiate between women who worked as prostitutes back home and those who became prostitutes only in a new setting (one could say "old" and "new" prostitutes), as in those who are "criminal" and those who were forced into sex work only by circumstances of force.<sup>37</sup> First, this differentiation does not work because most of the migrants had already been in sex work before they departed from Eastern Europe to the Netherlands, and they were in some form informed about what awaited them. Second, this differentiation stigmatizes sex work as morally wrong.<sup>38</sup> Third, van Liempt points out that exploitation is a category that is difficult to measure. She suggests that rather than a narrow focus on consent, we need to pay close attention to the whole process in which sex is sold.<sup>39</sup>

It is immensely useful to take these observations on board. They allow us to discern that, for Holocaust victims, sexual barter was one resource among many; for others it was almost the only one. In order to recognize the lived worlds of the women and men who bartered sex we need to closely explore the situation in which sexual barter took place and try to understand the meanings and values of sex. Our task ought to be to establish a better understanding of the limited freedom and choices of Holocaust victims in navigating the world during the persecution.

## WITNESSES JUDGING SEXUAL BARTER

After the Munich agreement of 1938, Czechoslovakia lost its border regions to Germany, Poland, and Hungary. Tens of thousands of people—Social Democrats, communists, Jews, and emigrants—fled inside the reduced borders of the country, but many were forbidden entry and were forced to stay in refugee camps in the diminished Czechoslovakia. Doreen Warriner was a British social worker who helped political opponents and Jewish refugees escape from Czechoslovakia. In January 1939, she described the situation in several of these camps in a letter to her colleague, Eleanor Rathbone, a British MP and campaigner for women's rights. Dolní Krupá near Ralsko in northern Bohemia was particularly dire. People were sick and dying, and the inmates were clothed in the summer clothes in which they escaped. There was a diphtheria epidemic, and before Christmas, four children died. The women were crying and the general mood was apathetic. Warriner added: "The Czech [local] village boys come and ask for the girls, saying that they have money; and this when the girls [*sic*] come from some of the most self-respecting families, of the leaders of the group."<sup>40</sup> Warriner used the example of prostitution to underline the gravity of the situation in the camp.

She indicated that the young female refugees were being taken advantage of by the local men—as opposed to an interpretation in which the women earned money to improve their situation, to be able to purchase warm clothing and medication. For Wariner, prostitution stood in contradiction to being a respected person and symbolized the collapse of the refugees' society in the camp.

Some of these women were probably able to escape to Britain in 1939 on so-called domestic visas because the country had a shortage of maids. Rose Holmes's important research has shown that German, Czech, and Austrian maids who worked in Britain were confronted with long, exhausting labor, little pay, and expectations of gratitude.<sup>41</sup> Some were sexually harassed by their employers.<sup>42</sup> The women could not complain as they did not want to endanger their visas. The intertwined narratives of shameful sexual barter, sexual violence, and gratitude meant that next to none of these women complained about their treatment during the war. The stories of these women have been largely silenced and overshadowed by narratives of gratitude about the children saved by the Kindertransport.

We owe some of the most forthright documentation of sex work during the Holocaust to Cecylia Slepak, a journalist who was part of the Oyneg Shabes documentation of life in the Warsaw ghetto.<sup>43</sup> She interviewed dozens of women, smugglers, social workers, and also a woman named Guta who provided for her family through sex work between ca. 1940 and 1942. Guta was 23 years old in 1942. Married just after the outbreak of war, she was separated from her husband by the war and continued living with her parents and brother.<sup>44</sup> Slepak outlines how Guta had tried to join her husband in Lithuania, failed, and subsequently worked as a trader. When her parents took in an ethnic German lodger, she became his lover. Slepak argues that “on her side the relationship sprang not from affection but from her excessively erotic temperament and her cool calculation of financial profit.” Similar to the examples of prostitution in colonial Kenya that Luise White examined, Guta offered the appearance of mutual love (the German carried her photograph in his purse and after the forced resettlement of Jews into the ghetto, continued to visit her for months).<sup>45</sup> As an attractive woman, she also provided companionship at evening parties, transforming the apartment into a (in the context of the ghetto) glamorous place of celebration and expensive drinks.<sup>46</sup> She also started working as a waitress, a job that allowed her to widen her social networks. Slepak indicates that this job included prostitution, as “she attracted clients through her looks and sophistication.”<sup>47</sup> Eventually, Guta's relationship with the ethnic German came to an end. To improve her income, Guta partook in smuggling, which also entailed sexual barter with the gentile smuggling leader. This rational relationship, too, was characterized by spending time together and the affection that the smuggler felt for Guta. Smuggling, however, did not offer a secure income, and so Guta began working as a sex worker in a bar, where she received a cut from the drinks she convinced patrons to buy, and sold sex.<sup>48</sup>

One could—and indeed, should!—write an entire book on Guta. But in the space here I want to address several select issues: Slepak describes an enormously resourceful, bold, and hard-working woman who bartered sex as just one of the jobs that she engaged in. Moreover, she had access to some desirable jobs (smuggling or waitressing) only because she was willing to engage in sexual barter. These aspects of her biography are best described using Hufton's "economies of the makeshift" paradigm.<sup>49</sup> Second, Slepak repeatedly stresses the (relatively) luxurious world in which Guta sold sex, so much so that the reader wonders if the writer was not motivated by envy, though she also clearly states that Guta's own needs were modest.<sup>50</sup> This narrative probably reflected a wider discourse on luxury in the ghetto; many essays in the Oyneg Shabes collection described the "high life" in cafes or restaurants with an implied social critique.

Slepak also makes clear that Guta's motivation was helping her family; her mother was clear that it was solely her daughter's support that had saved them from death. Finally, Slepak's narration attempts to be objective and to report on a prostitute as a part of the ghetto's social history, but she judges her throughout.<sup>51</sup> Slepak uses expressions such as "excessively erotic temperament,"<sup>52</sup> "at the price of selling her body she is able to materially survive,"<sup>53</sup> and "sinking deeper and deeper into a moral quagmire."<sup>54</sup> This tension between Slepak's attempt at sociological distance and the moral conventions she fell back on is the same that most Holocaust historians addressing sex work are caught in. In the earlier report, Slepak mentions that Guta's father ran a restaurant and that "she spent her childhood and adolescence in an atmosphere of alcoholism, sexual abuse, and cynicism."<sup>55</sup> The pathologizing narratives in which a prostitute's choice of profession is explained by childhood sexual abuse are well established.<sup>56</sup> Slepak examines who in Guta's surrounding knew about the sexual barter and when; she also tells us that Guta tried to hide it from her social circle, indicating that this was an activity best obscured. At the end of the account, Guta no longer cared about people's opinions, which Slepak interprets as her moral collapse. Slepak's documentation of Guta is fascinating and difficult at the same time: It offers us evidence of a woman surviving, and thriving, in extremely challenging conditions, supporting a family as well a network of friends. But Slepak's account is coated in concealed stigmatizing comments that survive in historians' reading of the account.<sup>57</sup>

This condescension toward sex workers is present in postwar testimonies as well. Following sexual extortion from a Jewish functionary, at twenty-one years of age, Erna Frischmannová was put on a transport from Theresienstadt to Raasiku, Tallinn, and Goldfields in Estonia. Frischmannová was extremely lucky and survived.<sup>58</sup> In her oral history from 1989, she recalled that the camp commandant in the last camp, Fritz Stiwitz, had a relationship with a "Polish Jewish" woman named Anushka.<sup>59</sup> Frischmannová described her as very beautiful, and then she added: "The problem was, Anushka was, even in Poland [pause], a sort of bar girl, she didn't take things so seriously as we

did.”<sup>60</sup> With this reported lack of seriousness was apparently, as Frischmannová expressed elsewhere, the belief that Anushka used to be a sex worker.<sup>61</sup> Once, Stiwitz started looking for other Jewish women to have sex with, and asked for Erna. Anushka stepped in in Erna’s place, thus saving her from what for Erna would have been a rape. Frischmannová recalled that Stiwitz’s reaction was: “Oh, you old whore, come with me.”<sup>62</sup> Thanks to the research of Benjamin Lapp, we know that other survivors also recalled the enforced relationship between Stiwitz and Anushka.<sup>63</sup> However, Frischmannová was the only who mentioned that there was something reprehensible about the woman who saved her from rape. In fact, Frischmannová stated: “I have to emphasise that again and again, she was very good to me.”<sup>64</sup> Anushka, who was from Kovno in Lithuania, survived and moved to Great Britain and later to Israel. She gave an oral history in which she spoke of many difficult aspects of her experience, including the separation from her daughter and queer sexual violence at hands of a woman guard. But she did not mention Stiwitz.<sup>65</sup>

Not all survivors spoke about fellow prisoners who engaged in sexual barter with disdain. Ella Deutsch, a 33-year-old Jewish woman from Ostrava, was imprisoned in the Theresienstadt Family Camp in Birkenau. Her block elder was a fellow Ostrava woman named Nanne, who engaged in sexual barter with the guards in exchange for better treatment and food for her elderly mother: “That young girl kept herself and her mother alive like many others by becoming a lover of an SS man!” Deutsch wrote to her daughter forty-five years later. She then described Nanne as a resourceful woman who, once she was made aware that Ella was the wife of a family friend, became helpful.<sup>66</sup>

A particularly agonizing example of stigmatization of prostitution stems from a teenage girl for whom it was sexual assault. In 1971, the Prague historian and survivor Anna Hyndráková wrote down her wartime memories for her adult children. She had time, having been recently demoted from her former job at the Institute for the History of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. Perhaps because she was starting anew in the post-1968 normalization in Czechoslovakia, she included incidents that, we may speculate, others chose to avoid discussing. Hyndráková, who was born in 1928, was deported via Theresienstadt and the Family Camp in Auschwitz to a satellite camp of Gross-Rosen. In February 1945, when the prisoners were sent on a death march, Hyndráková fled with her best friend, Doris W., and another young woman, Eva Preissová, three and four years older, respectively. Soon, the three were caught and sent to Niesky, another satellite camp of Gross-Rosen. The escapees were treated decently, as they were given food and shelter and were not beaten. However, the men, prisoner functionaries, expected that the women would have sex with them. Hyndráková described the last three months of the war as a total shock and ongoing rape. After the first night, the head capo and Doris and Eva “tried to talk sense” into Hyndráková. They even told her that instead of the old man assigned, she could pick a young lover. The commandant



stopped by, telling them with a smirk: "You can do everything, only don't get children [do not get pregnant]." <sup>67</sup>

Hyndráková continued:

So I decided to be "reasonable." But when they came in the evening, Kurt, Tadeusz, and Dolek [her new assigned partner], I started panicking and fought all night. He [Dolek] begged and tried it with kindness and without. I did, too, I whispered to him, "You are a Pole, don't be a jerk like them!" It was terrible, I was probably hysterical, and I still had the fever. The same thing was repeated the third night. I don't even know if I lost my virginity or not.

A few days later the three were sent to the Görlitz satellite camp. Here, a 33-year-old Cologne Jew took a liking to Hyndráková: "I fought only a little, I no longer had the will or the strength." <sup>68</sup> She went on to explain that he was a helpful man who wanted to take care of her. At this stage, Hyndráková made the following statement: "I was sorry that he did not fall in love with Eva, I thought she would have not minded so much. She once even went [with a man] for a cube of margarine." <sup>69</sup> After the war, Hyndráková and Preissová shared a flat, where they had conflicts because Eva was sexually active with changing partners, and Hyndráková disapproved. <sup>70</sup> At the same time, Hyndráková struggled because most of her relatives had been murdered, she was not made welcome by her surviving family, and she broke off the relationship with the Cologne man, who was upset and made a scene. Hyndráková's uncle implied that her sexual conduct was at fault, thus blaming her for the sexual violence she experienced. Hyndráková chose to leave this history behind her, married, studied, and became a historian. <sup>71</sup>

The difficult, indeed painful story of these young women survivors at the end of the war is instrumental for our understanding of sexual violence and the stigmatization of sexual barter. It shows Hyndráková's feelings of shock and being overwhelmed; what others considered sexual barter, to her meant rape. Judging from Hyndráková's testimony, the other two women were apparently willing to engage in sexual barter. The age difference between 21 (Eva), 20 (Doris), and 16 years (Hyndráková) played a significant role; in addition, Doris and Eva probably had previous sexual experience. It seems that women who engaged in sexual barter were usually comfortable with their sexuality. <sup>72</sup> But while Hyndráková and Doris remained close friends, Eva was hardly mentioned in their testimonies, and she was depicted as morally questionable because she engaged in sexual barter during the war and was not selective in her choice of sexual partners. Of the three women, Hyndráková was the only one who later spoke about this experience. <sup>73</sup> In her oral history, Doris W. only briefly touched on arriving in Niesky, and her account diverged from Hyndráková's considerably. She cited the commandant saying: "'Watch out that there are no children nine months later or any babies here.' [chuckles]



But the men were in such a condition that they didn't care and we were in such a condition that we didn't care."<sup>74</sup> Doris's statement is ambiguous: What did the men and the women not care about? Sex? Threat of pregnancy? Doris did not follow up to explain.

Preissová emigrated to Chile and later to France, where she died in 2002. She left no testimony apart from her reparation file, where she wrote about the lasting health damage she endured from frostbite she contracted in the last months of the war.<sup>75</sup> If it were not for these lines in her reparation file, all that would remain of Preissová's memory would be the depiction of her as the unsympathetic woman who was too sexually active, and thus someone best left unspoken about. But what is the cost of such silences and erasures for understanding what happened to Holocaust survivors?

## NARRATING SEXUAL BARTER IN THE FIRST PERSON

Most of the narratives concerning sexual barter in the Holocaust are about white people, reflecting the majority of victims, and this focus often treats the persecution of racialized victims such as the Sinti and Roma or African-descended people separately. In doing so, this segregation fails to recognize the parallels in victims' experience and prisoner society.<sup>76</sup> In a departure from the prevalent trend, I want to include a story of Zilli Reichmann-Schmidt, a Sinti woman who engaged in sexual barter. Between February 1943 and August 1944, the SS set up a section of Auschwitz Birkenau as the "Gypsy Family Camp." Survivors reported that women prisoners bartered sex with prisoner functionaries. The well-known German-Jewish physician Lucie Adelsberger recalled that the prisoner dentist in Auschwitz, who was among the most privileged prisoners, gave food to women "including a whole group of beautiful Gypsy [*sic*] women, who one after another found their way to his chamber."<sup>77</sup> Adelsberger's description of the "good-natured man" was ironic, because in the next sentence she revealed that he helped the Romani women not altruistically, but in exchange for sex, and that he was able to exert control over a number of attractive women.

A rare description of sexual barter between prisoner functionaries and a Roma prisoner comes from Zilli Reichmann, a 19-year-old German Sinti woman who was in Auschwitz with her three-year old daughter, parents, siblings, and nephews and nieces. Similar to Guta, Reichmann was immensely resourceful: She had escaped from an earlier camp, and she stole food from the warehouse and kitchen. Later, when the Camp Elder, the former interbrigadist Hermann Dimanski, took a liking to her, she agreed to become his lover. Dimanski was fifteen years her senior and for Reichmann, the decision was a pragmatic one. Reichmann's mother was worried that her daughter would be caught stealing. Zilli recalled: "It was not particularly nice. But I was not disgusted by

him or such, he was a clean man. [...] But me and a Gadjo [non-Roma], that was bad.”<sup>78</sup> Her parents approved of the relationship because Dimanski brought them food. Dimanski was apparently genuinely in love with Reichmann and after the war, he traced her and proposed. For Reichmann, however, the relationship was one of convenience.<sup>79</sup> Dimanski’s help meant that Reichmann’s many relatives no longer suffered from hunger, and she was even able to help other inmates in the “Gypsy Camp.”

Reichmann’s story has been told twice, but her biographers’ approach is very different. We owe one biography to Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi, historian of the Nazi persecution of Sinti and Roma, whose interview from 2017–2018 gave space to Reichmann’s experiences, ambivalences, and contradictory protagonists. A 2016 biography by the historian Heiko Haumann depicted the relationship as romantic and Reichmann’s rational motivation is only alluded to.<sup>80</sup> In fact, a 2011 book by Haumann on Dimanski also mentioned his relationship with Reichmann as romantic. It is disturbing that Haumann devoted a significant amount of space to reference Reichmann’s enforced VD tests,<sup>81</sup> especially since the reader learns from them nothing relevant to Dimanski nor Reichmann.

The age gap between partners in sexual barter could also go in the opposite direction. Eva Müllerová was a 46-year-old housewife and mother from Brno who was deported to Theresienstadt several months before her husband Oskar. Her two sons were able to escape deportation.<sup>82</sup> In 1942, Müllerová started working as a housekeeper for a prisoner functionary who was twelve years her junior, Ferdinand Löwy from Plzeň, who was deported alone because his gentile wife had divorced him “on racial grounds” after the German occupation. Löwy ensured that not only Müllerová, but also her husband, once he arrived, were protected from transport. Such a protection was immensely important in the transit ghetto from which transports to the “East” departed regularly. Löwy found Oskar a good position. It is not clear whether Löwy and Müllerová became lovers (for which there are indications), but their connection qualified as sexual barter in the sense of exchange of affection and domestic support for resources. Oskar was jealous and complained in the letters to his sons, while Müllerová presented herself as resourceful and Oskar as irrationally suspicious. She also helped Löwy to rekindle the postal connection to his family in Plzeň, as he was upset not hearing from his ex-wife and daughter. Müllerová’s frankness in relaying her relationship with Löwy and marital difficulties to her two sons outside of the ghetto is unusual, and the fact that these letters survived even more unique. In the end, Müllerová and her husband were deported to Auschwitz and murdered. Löwy was able to survive in Theresienstadt, remarried his wife, and never mentioned the Müllers to his family.

Instances of queer sexual barter are even more difficult to find, as the victim society in camps and ghettos stigmatized same-sex relationships.<sup>83</sup> The Austrian Josef Kohout was one of the very few prisoners with a pink triangle who gave testimony in any form.

Persecuted for article §129 of the Austrian criminal code (same-sex intimacy), Kohout survived Sachsenhausen and Flossenbürg concentration camps in Germany. At first, Kohout was sexually assaulted by other prisoners, who saw him as fair game because they perceived his pink triangle as a marker of femininity, indicating sexual availability.<sup>84</sup> Later, he became the lover of first one and later another prisoner functionary, men who identified as straight, but according to Kohout's testimony, had relationships with him because there were no women present. Kohout described how the first relationship did not arise from his own free will, but how he was able to improve his choice of partner over time.<sup>85</sup> Both men grew to like him, engaging in gestures reserved for established couples, such as jealousy, taking him on labor assignments outside, or crying from joy when receiving his visit in the sick bay.<sup>86</sup> With the help of these relationships, Kohout was able to make a career within the prisoner society, becoming a prisoner functionary himself and eventually acquiring the ultimate sign of status: a freely chosen relationship with another prisoner who was himself persecuted as a homosexual.<sup>87</sup>

Kohout's account was published soon after the decriminalization of homosexuality in Austria in 1971. It was based on Kohout's conversations with Hans Neumann in the late 1960s and appeared in 1972 under the pseudonym "Heinz Heger," and apparently included some of Neumann's own research.<sup>88</sup> Kohout openly reported about the sexual violence that he had experienced and witnessed. Similarly, he directly addressed the situations in which he participated in sexual barter and the limited leeway in which he acted. He was not ashamed of his actions; however, he once remarked that "my will to survive had a high price [...] of morality, decency, and honor."<sup>89</sup> Throughout, however, he represented himself as an empathic, decent, and wherever possible, helpful man. The memoir often uses the phrase "I had no choice," and then depicts a situation in which Kohout chose sexual barter that offered him advantages, while the alternative would have put him in danger. For Kohout, this was not a meaningful choice. This viewpoint contrasts with the often-quoted question posed to Liana Millu in her fictionalized account of Birkenau. Here, a Dutch prisoner called Lotti who signed up for the camp brothel asks: "I'm supposed to refuse life because it's offered on a dirty plate?"<sup>90</sup> thus consciously choosing survival.

## SEXUAL BARTER IN HIDING

Hierarchical relationships and dependencies between the hidden Jews and their rescuers permeated life in hiding. The stigma surrounding prostitution profoundly influenced postwar testimonies, in which first-person narratives of sexual barter disappeared almost completely. This view has largely influenced the research, as historians have interpreted these stories almost exclusively through the framework of romance or sexual violence.<sup>91</sup>

The only important exception is Katya Gusarov's discussion of Jewish women in hiding in occupied Eastern Europe, who examined women's agency and choices in rational relationships in hiding. Gusarov also looked at the value of sexual barter in hiding.<sup>92</sup>

When Marie Jalowicz Simon's memoir of hiding in wartime Berlin came out in 2014, her book radically challenged the expectations about altruistic rescue.<sup>93</sup> Readers across the world were captivated by her sober narrative of bartering her rescue for money, aid, cleaning, affection, company, and sex.<sup>94</sup> Simon's memoir showed that sex was a currency, and just one currency among others. The choice Simon had was to stay and provide what was asked of her, or search for another hiding place (and potentially be caught). And yet, while Simon clearly speaks about her choices, the historian Marion Kaplan, analyzing them, writes: "Are these choices or choiceless choices? [...] I do not have an answer."<sup>95</sup> But as historians of sexuality and the Holocaust, we should attempt these answers, however difficult they are.

While most known instances of sexual barter in hiding were heterosexual and with the woman as the selling party, cases of men selling sex can offer a useful comparison. Perhaps best known is the Berlin Jewish resistance fighter Gad Beck, who offers a queer perspective.<sup>96</sup> As someone defined in the aftermath of the Nuremberg laws as "Gelungsjude," that is, in his case, a person of mixed background but who was a member of the Jewish community, Beck's background offered some protection from deportation.<sup>97</sup> He eventually went into hiding on account of his resistance activities. Together with his friends in the Chug Chaluzi Zionist group, he organized a network that helped Jews in hiding. Beck encountered several gentile men who offered to help, with implicit or explicit demands of instrumental sex. Beck depicts these encounters as sexual encounters that he would not have chosen of his free will, mentions what he did or did not like about their physical looks, and frames them as a part of his sexual biography.<sup>98</sup>

These statements need to be taken with a grain of salt. Beck's ghostwritten memoir is rich in exaggeration, and after its publication some former Chug Chaluzi members rejected his claims about mutual intimacy, whereas others threatened legal action for being outed.<sup>99</sup> But if we decide to follow the story, it is remarkable that Beck not only chooses to speak about his participation in sexual barter, he does it as a sign of his dedication to resistance and as an inherent part of his flamboyant and rich gay identity. There is no sign of shame, nor of sexual violence, echoing the trend from Josef Kohout. It is very probable that his perspective as a man, in particular as a sexually active, confident gay man, influenced the framing of his narrative not as a victim, but an active partner. To take another example, in her analysis of the relationships between French POWs and German women, Cornelia Usborne showed similar narrative expectations of men who participated in sexual barter as being unashamed. These men depicted the women (who, in fact, often had coaxed them into intimacy) as conquests.<sup>100</sup> Wider patriarchal structures within society influenced the ways that men and women framed their sexual

barter: Gay and straight men who had sex within their sexual orientation could integrate these into their sexual biography, whereas women who engaged in heterosexual barter were stamped as having had too many sexual partners. Expectations of a hard sexual orientation is key for this framing: Dorota Glowacka's research into male-male sexual violence experienced by Jewish teenage prisoners in concentration camps indicates that the boys framed the assault as rape. At the same time, the boys made sense of it in homophobic terms by linking the attacker's motivation to his presumed homosexuality.<sup>101</sup> It is not only the gender of the selling party, it is also their identity in terms of sexual orientation that indicates whether the barter will be narrated, and if so, how they make sense of it.

There is even less information on men who engaged in rational heterosexual relationships. There are indications that Jewish men in hiding, just like Jewish women, were expected to secure rescue with affection and intimacy, but if they survived, they almost never spoke about it.<sup>102</sup> We get a glance in Marie Jalowicz Simon's memoir when she recalls her hiding place in winter 1942/43. She stayed with Gerda Janicke, a former patient of Benno Heller, a Jewish gynecologist protected by mixed marriage. Heller helped many Jews go into hiding, setting them up with his former patients. Heller and Janicke used to have a sexual relationship, and now the affair was rekindled in exchange for Jalowicz's hiding place. "Heller himself once asked me angrily, 'Do you suppose I'm doing it for fun? When I have so much on my mind, and we're all of us malnourished? I have to pay Frau Janicke for sheltering you with my prowess in bed.'" <sup>103</sup>

At Janicke's, Jalowicz later met another Jewish woman in hiding, the dressmaker Eva Deutschkron, who was married. However, Deutschkron was hidden separately from her husband, Martin, who was hiding with their friend Mirjam Grunwald, incidentally a former classmate of Jalowicz. Grunwald had access to funds and ration cards. Deutschkron confided in Jalowicz: "But she [Grunwald] could bear her mortal terror only in the arms of a man. So she suggested a very unusual bargain: Eva was to lend Mirjam her husband for an indefinite period of time, getting money and ration cards in return. Part of the deal was that Eva would see her husband just once a month: no love-making, no emotional outbursts, their meeting would be only so that they could know they were both still alive."<sup>104</sup> The Deutschkrons discussed the offer with Heller, who suggested: "In absurd times, everything is absurd. You can save yourselves only by absurd means, since the Nazis are out to murder you all." The Deutschkrons accepted the bargain, which meant that Martin was safe and Eva had extra access to food.

Eva Deutschkron left behind three testimonies of her time in hiding.<sup>105</sup> No testimony from Mirjam Grunwald and Martin Deutschkron is known. None of Eva Deutschkron's three accounts references the deal she struck with Mirjam. She mentioned Benno Heller and his affair with Gerda Janicke; she brought up the separation from her husband in two different hiding spaces; and Heller played a role in her

acceptance to be apart.<sup>106</sup> But each of the three testimonies are unclear on Martin's hiding place in 1943, and the details Eva gave vary. Mirjam is a fixture in Deutschkron's memoirs, but it was Martin and Eva who took her in to their final hiding space. Eva even mentioned weekly fifteen-minute meetings, but in her version, she was checking in on Mirjam who was out on her own.<sup>107</sup> Only once did Eva speak about marital tensions when Martin and Mirjam turned against her at the end of the war.<sup>108</sup> The Deutschkrons remained a couple; the three eventually emigrated to the United States and remained friendly. Finally, all three texts completely pass over Jalowicz's presence—the fellow hidden Jew to whose account we owe this story.

Can we rely on Marie Jalowicz Simon's version of events? The memoir has been praised for its accuracy and honesty. Her son, who is a Holocaust historian, was able to crosscheck all the extraordinary stories. He recalled: "Marie Simon was right, and really had said all that was necessary on a given subject."<sup>109</sup> Jalowicz was honest and unflattering in her descriptions of everyone, and she was open about the fact that she was not particularly fond of either Eva or Mirjam. Perhaps a certain malice combined with the desire to tell "the whole story" is one reason behind Jalowicz's choice to include their story in her account. Eva Deutschkron's storytelling was probably motivated by the fact that unlike Jalowicz, whose postwar life had little to do with the people who helped her survive, Martin remained her husband and father of her children, and Mirjam a family friend. The narrative of sexual barter would have turned the ruling conventions and gender order on their head: The account of the Jewish woman who purchased a friend's husband to ease the stress in hiding transgresses too many normative societal assumptions. Benno Heller did not have the chance to write his memoir. In February 1943, he was betrayed, arrested, and did not survive the war. Gerda Janicke took care of his widow, while Eva Deutschkron ran the network of hidden Jews.<sup>110</sup>

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH PERPETRATORS

How did sexual barter between victims and perpetrators play out, and how did it compare to the instances between victims, and also between victims and bystanders? Did the Jewish men and women here have any meaningful control? Was there an exchange or were they rather coerced into sex? The following examples offer more dimensions of violent sexual barter.

Lili Scholz, a "half-Jewish" journalist in Frankfurt/Main born in 1914 whose mother was Jewish, offers an example of violent sexual barter with a perpetrator. In June 1944, a Gestapo officer, Heinrich Schmitt, whose wife and children were evacuated due to aerial bombardment, gave her a choice: either become his lover, or put the life of her Jewish mother in jeopardy: "I mean—you know the situation of your mother, and it is I

who puts the transport lists together. You understand—I.”<sup>111</sup> Scholz gave in and saw the Gestapo man regularly, even though he repulsed her. For Schmitt, coming from a poor background, having an affair with the educated daughter of a well-known Frankfurt doctor who did anything he ordered was a confirmation of his power.<sup>112</sup> After three months, Scholz became pregnant and organized an (illegal) abortion, all the while without telling anything of it to her parents. Eventually she learned that Schmitt had found several other “half-Jewish” women whom he coerced into relationships in exchange for not harming their Jewish parents.<sup>113</sup> In February 1945, the last remaining German Jews, most of whom were protected by a mixed marriage, were about to be deported to Theresienstadt. They could not know (as we do today), that Theresienstadt was a relatively safe destination at that point, and they were terrified. For the first time, Scholz sought Schmitt of her own will. He hit her in her genitals and then informed her that he had removed her mother from the deportation list.<sup>114</sup> Possibly Scholz included the story of this sexualized violence to frame the one favor she experienced from her abuser. After the war, Scholz married an American and moved to the United States. She published her edited diary in 1974 in the midst of the women’s liberation movement. Thanks to Scholz’s diary we have the account of her enforced relationship with the Gestapo officer, even though she changed his name and we are not able to ascertain his real identity.

A well-known story of romantic involvement between a Jewish prisoner and a guard was documented by Lukáš Příbyl’s films and studies on the transports of Czech Jews to the East. The location was the camp of Ereda in northeastern Estonia, which was one of the camps that Theresienstadt women passed through when they were being deported to Raasiku and later to Goldfields. In Ereda, the commandant, Heinz Drosin, fell in love with the beautiful 18-year-old Inge Syltenová from Brno.<sup>115</sup> The story of their relationship was relayed by the survivors as neither Drosin nor Syltenová survived the war. The narrative in which the eyewitnesses relayed the story followed the conventional romantic framework of an evil man redeemed by the love of a good woman:<sup>116</sup> Syltenová supposedly scolded Drosin when he beat prisoners or withheld food when the inmates talked with people from the outside. She allegedly improved the conditions for prisoners in the camp. In February 1944, Drosin and Syltenová attempted to escape to Scandinavia. Their escape failed and they were both killed. An SS driver who picked up the corpses of Syltenová and Drosin informed the prisoners about their death. It is not clear whether other SS seized and murdered both of them, or whether Drosin, once he recognized that they would be captured, killed first Syltenová and then himself.<sup>117</sup> Either way, Syltenová was murdered by the Germans.

Příbyl endorsed the romantic narrative. He described the episode as “the astonishing and tragic case of a *concentration camp Romeo and Juliet*.”<sup>118</sup> He also wrote about “love between Heinz and Inge,” and the “lovers.”<sup>119</sup> At the same time, Příbyl was able to recognize sexual violence: He mentioned the “sexual abuse” that both female and



male prisoners in Ereda experienced.<sup>120</sup> Unfortunately, Příbyl did not explore the difference between the Syltenová–Drosin romance on the one hand and sexual abuse by other SS men on the other.

Speaking about Syltenová's connection with the commandant in solely romantic terms is problematic because it disregards the asymmetries that defined the relationship. Syltenová, who was born in 1925 and turned eighteen just before her deportation to Ereda, was separated from her parents and family, and had witnessed a considerable amount of violence in the year and a half since her deportation from Theresienstadt. She had nowhere to escape to. It is possible that the young woman was attracted to Drosin, who was reportedly good-looking. But probably more important was that Syltenová could persuade the SS man to treat her fellow prisoners as human beings to support the tight-knit group of her fellow prisoners, receive their admiration, wear decent clothes, and be protected from hard work. Acknowledging this context shows that reading the relationship as a romance between two good-looking, star-crossed lovers misses its entire context of coercion and dependency, much more persuasive arguments for why Syltenová chose to engage in the relationship.

Hertha Poppert offers a particularly striking example of a Jewish victim who used sexual barter to survive and help others, and of the stigmatization she endured because of it.<sup>121</sup> Hertha, née Speier, born in 1913 in Hessian Fritzlar, emigrated to the Netherlands in 1933 with her future husband. They settled in Zaandam, got married, and ran a millinery factory. Hertha identified as a Catholic. In July 1942, the couple was arrested by the Gestapo in connection to smuggling illegal IDs from Belgium. Before, they had been able to send their 8-year-old daughter into hiding.<sup>122</sup> Erich was sent to Sobibór and murdered, a fate that Hertha was able to escape. In March 1943, Hertha was sent from prison to the Vught concentration camp. There she became the secretary of Arthur Lehmann, himself a German emigrant and chief camp clerk, and the lover of Richard Süßkind, another prisoner functionary.<sup>123</sup> She was known for her "fearless" way of dealing with the SS and, once, for punishment, was sent to three months forced labor.<sup>124</sup> Later, she was transferred to the Philips Kommando, a section of the camp where inmates worked for the Philips Company.<sup>125</sup> In June 1944, the Jews of the Philips Kommando were sent to Auschwitz and later to Reichenbach, a satellite camp of Gross-Rosen. The women were sent to further camps in Parschnitz, then in quick order to Porta Westfalica, Beendorf, and from there on a death transport to Hamburg-Eidelstedt. Just before the British army arrived in Hamburg, on May 2, 1945, the survivors, among them Hertha Poppert, were sent to Sweden in a little-known rescue mission organized by an SS man called Franz Göring.<sup>126</sup>

Poppert must have appeared to her contemporaries as a woman of great charm and femininity.<sup>127</sup> We have her (oddly not flattering) description from David Koker: "an eerie vacant face with brown eyes [and] plain blond hair. And her strange gait: a bit



bent forward in the lumbar region, something languid and smooth, soft stepped.”<sup>128</sup> In a classic denunciation of “dangerous” female beauty, women survivors stressed that Poppert dyed her hair and continued to do so, remarkably, throughout her time in the camps.<sup>129</sup> It is not clear whether Poppert had sex with the Germans (as some survivors claimed), or whether she flirted with them, but in either case she succeeded in establishing a working relationship. In her own statements, Poppert steadfastly rejected any intimate relationships with Germans.<sup>130</sup> One particularly useful acquaintance in Vught was Protective Custody Compound Leader Arnold Strippel, later transferred to oversee the satellite camps of Neuengamme.<sup>131</sup> These ties to the perpetrators allowed her to occupy a position as prisoner functionary in all these camps and access inside information. For instance, Poppert knew in Vught that Auschwitz was an “annihilation camp,” and she informed her fellow prisoners upon arrival what they could expect.<sup>132</sup> Gerda Nothmann Luner, a teenage German emigrant, recalled that in April 1945 during a horrible train ride from Beendorf, Poppert recognized in an SS man a guard from Vught, her former lover, who told her to leave the train, which, according to Luner, was directed to an even deadlier place. Poppert took all of the Philips women with her, thus saving their lives. Luner described Poppert as “the camp prostitute”<sup>133</sup> and remarked: “So, in the end, I owe my life in part to a very altruistic prostitute.”<sup>134</sup>

Luner’s recollection addressed, in a muddled way, a central event for which Poppert was to be investigated after the war. In March 1945, the Philips women arrived in Porta Westfalica, where the SS officer in charge happened to be a former SS man from Vught who recognized Poppert and made her the camp elder. This was probably Arnold Strippel, the base commander for Hamburg and the most experienced, and brutal, among his peers.<sup>135</sup> Poppert also served as transport leader on a notorious evacuation transport from the approaching British army six weeks later.<sup>136</sup> Altogether 4,350 inmates were forced into crowded open coal cars that traveled across northern Germany for ten days. There were up to 160 people in a space that would have usually held sixty to eighty; the Philips women were spread among the cars. There was almost no food or water.<sup>137</sup> People in the cattle cars beat each other to death over space. It is estimated that altogether about 500 people died. From the 200–250 women of the Philips group, ninety-three perished.<sup>138</sup> The train traveled without much of a destination, following tracks that were not destroyed. For three days, it stopped in Sülstorf in Mecklenburg. Survivors remarked that even now, Poppert was able to keep her good looks.<sup>139</sup> The survivor Ria de Korte recalled: “The transport leader passes by the train car with her record book. It is beautiful spring weather. She is wearing a borrowed short summer skirt and a spotless collar. Her hair is newly done and shines golden yellow in the sun. She is a prisoner, like us. How many dead? She asks, ‘Nine.’”<sup>140</sup> Strippel ordered Poppert to count the women from the Philips group. She took it as a chance to find two empty cars and brought the Philips women there. The conditions were somewhat better, the cars less full, and most importantly, the

killing among the desperate people in crowded cars stopped.<sup>141</sup> The train then continued for another six days. Poppert was also able to organize another empty car and bring Dutch women from another group.<sup>142</sup> From Eidelstedt, the Dutch women were taken on a transport to Sweden organized by a Gestapo liaison officer.<sup>143</sup>

Luner's portrayal of the woman who repeatedly saved not only her life, but that of many other women of the Philips group, was stigmatizing: The way she used the term "prostitute" implied that Poppert had done something wrong. There is a sad irony in the gap between Luner's judgment and the fact of Poppert's brave and altruistic conduct. Still, in comparison with the statements of other survivors, Luner's judgement was positive. Days after the liberation in Sweden and again one year later in the Netherlands, survivors pressed charges against Poppert, accusing her of "collaboration" with the Germans because she served as a prisoner functionary.<sup>144</sup> Unfortunately, the authors of an otherwise excellent study of the Philips group integrated the survivor accusations against Poppert as part of their analysis: "She worked in cold blood and with focus. [here they bring in a survivor quote] 'She slept with everyone, men, women, Jews, Germans, as long as it brought her advantage.'" <sup>145</sup> The cited quote depicted Poppert as abnormal because of her lack of sexual boundaries. It was the combination of all three, sex work, "collaboration," and queerness, that present powerful mechanisms of othering that the survivors used to other her as deviant.<sup>146</sup> In fall 1945, Poppert, deeply shaken by the accusations of the people who survived with and thanks to her, started to write a testimony in which she tried to set the account right.<sup>147</sup> Over the years, Hertha Poppert was able to get past the Dutch survivors, whose lives she had saved through her charisma and resourcefulness, and not let them ruin her postwar life. She was reunited with her daughter, moved to Belgium, remarried, had one more child, divorced again, and married an English millionaire. She lived the rest of her life as a wealthy and glamorous woman in Paris and on the French Riviera.<sup>148</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I started this essay with a complaint about gendered Holocaust history ignoring prostitution, and I want to end it on a positive note. Since its publication in 2013, my earlier research has, I believe, allowed second- and third-generation Holocaust descendants as well as child survivors to reevaluate the experiences of their family members. Ariana Neumann's and Zuzana Justman's studies of their families in Theresienstadt addressed sexual barter face on.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, Nina Grünfeld published a biography of her Slovak Jewish grandmother, who was a professional sex worker prior to her deportation to Auschwitz and Ravensbrück.<sup>150</sup> These authors were able to incorporate sexual barter, with its complexities and the agency it afforded women, into their narratives.

Incorporating prostitution into our Holocaust histories allows us to write a more nuanced and therefore better history. The concept of sexual barter makes it possible for historians to comprehend how people in situations historians previously interpreted as hopeless looked for resources. Such an approach shows the different values and meanings of intimacy, affection, and sexual acts for the bartering parties. Recognizing the value of sex as something precious meant it could be exchanged for valuable things, such as a “good job” in a camp, protection from transport, a hiding place, or a visa. Rather than looking at sex as something that ought not to be bartered, this perspective allows us to discern that sexual barter could offer a high-cost countervalue: Sometimes it meant a hiding place, rescue from transport to a deadly camp, or even removal from a list to the gas chamber. Looking at intercourse in exchange for life, it is striking how much value this commodity could carry. As Katya Gusarov demonstrated, rescuers motivated by rational relationships put their lives at risk to save the Jews they were hiding.<sup>151</sup>

As Hufton showed with the “economies of the makeshift,” sexual barter was one resource among many. It was often employed by individuals with excellent social capital, such as Guta, Josef Kohout, Eva Müllerová, Anushka, Gad Beck, or Hertha Poppert, people with whom others liked spending time. Context is crucial, necessitating close analysis and careful research: Some situations had minimal leeway (Inge Syltenová in Ereda), whereas sometimes, like Eva Müllerová, individuals had a choice whether to engage in sexual barter and pursued it to unlock new opportunities. The fact that these are difficult histories does not mean that these women and men had no agency. These were not choiceless choices.<sup>152</sup> Lawrence Langer’s concept has become an unfortunate truism, shaping our expectations of Holocaust victims so that they always appear passive, leading to flattened histories. We need to appreciate decisions people made as decisions, such as fleeing or staying, with whom to share food or join in transport—or whether to engage in sexual barter, be it in a selling or purchasing position.<sup>153</sup> Even if their freedom was limited, or if those people did not survive in the end, their choices should not be rendered meaningless.

We should stop using consent when analyzing sexuality in the Holocaust. Consent assumes that people had complete choice, free of any dependencies, but it was the nature of the persecution that victims found themselves most often in networks of dependencies and hierarchies. Instead, we should work with concepts of agency and choice. Such an approach provides us with a better understanding of victims’ perspectives. The victims did not have all choices, but they had some. If we want to understand their agency, we need to explore how they made use of these, and how they created leeway out of minimal spaces.

Over the course of my research, I have often debated my work with friends and colleagues. In bringing up the silence of Alice Haberland, Anushka, Martin Deutschkron, or Eva Preissová, people would respond, “But of course.” When I responded by pointing

to the counterexamples of Zilli Reichmann, Eva Müllerová, Josef Kohout, Gad Beck, Lili Scholz, Marie Jalowicz Simon, and Hertha Poppert, people said that these were exceptions. Our task, I suggest, is to analyze the history of normative assumptions, rather than having them dictate our interpretation of sex work. To go beyond stigma is hard, as it belongs to the utmost pillars of a society. Jennifer Evans reminds us we need to denaturalize our current frames of reference.<sup>154</sup> The nature of shame attached to sex work in itself has been changing, and thus it needs to be historized. In this article, I have traced the emergence of the stigma that came about during the Holocaust. Society could interpret certain acts as permissible (men selling sex to women), but that also varied over time and depended on the context. Inge Syltenová's sexual barter was eminently narratable because the author and director who discovered the story did not interpret it as such but rather as a romance. A romantic relationship between a perpetrator and a Jewish victim is apparently less transgressive than sexual barter. This social expectation of romance, however, distorts the historical setting: Most relationships in the Holocaust were hierarchical and had a transactional dimension. The challenge at hand for future Holocaust historians is to recognize the expressions of shame in the sources we read and to avoid restating them in our analysis. Instead, we need to make shame and stigma into a topic of their own.<sup>155</sup>

Finally, what do we get when we incorporate the Holocaust into the history of prostitution? Doing so raises issues of stratification, class, and its rapid change during the genocide. Much of prostitution history has been in reference to working-class women. One discomfort of Holocaust historians with the sex work paradigm was what one could phrase as "these women would have never engaged in it in normal times," that is, prostitution as labor is a fitting concept only for poor people; for the respectable, it is implied as dishonorable, and therefore it is inherently coercive. It would be worthwhile to explore these class changes. But there are limits to what we can take from the history of sex work as labor, as the history of prostitution in the Holocaust was defined primarily by life and death, rather than work. In the end, we will not know which stories Guta, Eva Müllerová, Inge Syltenová, and Benno Heller would relay of their wartime lives. They did not live to tell them.

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## NOTES

1. Leonard Baker, *Days of Sorrow and Pain: Leo Baeck and the Berlin Jews* (Macmillan, 1978), 294.
2. For Haberland, I have consulted her restitution file in Entschädigungsamt Berlin (#76079).
3. Anna Hájková, *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* (Oxford University Press, 2020).
4. Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 503–33.
5. See, for instance, Evelien Gans, *Jaap en Ischa Meijer: Een joodse geschiedenis* (Bert Bakker, 2008), 362; Eva Fogelman, "Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women During and After the Holocaust: A Psychological Perspective," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (University Press of New England), 255–74; Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence During the Holocaust—The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar* 22, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 103–21.
6. Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 44–45.
7. See also Annette F. Timm, "The Challenges of Including Sexual Violence and Transgressive Love in Historical Writing on World War II and the Holocaust," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017): 351–64, 353, 357.
8. See Regina Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion 1941–1945* (Hamburger Edition, 2010), section III; Robert Sommer, *Das KZ-Bordell: Sexuelle Zwangsarbeit in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Schöningh, 2009); Jessica Anderson Hughes, "Forced Prostitution: The Competing and Contested Uses of the Concentration Camp Brothel" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2011); Anna Fárová, Tomáš Jelínek, and Blanka Chocholová, *Zdeněk Tměj: Totaleinsatz* (Torst, 2001).
9. I define children as younger than fifteen years of age. For child sexual abuse and sexual barter, see Rachel Lev-Wiesel and Susan Weinger, *Hell Within Hell: Sexually Abused Child Holocaust Survivors* (University Press of America, 2011); Sara Horowitz, "What We Learn, at Last: Recounting Sexuality in Women's Deferred Autobiographies and Testimonies," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Holocaust Literature and Culture*, ed. Victoria Aarons and Phyllis Lassner (Palgrave, 2020), 45–66, 51–52; Zoë Waxman, "Buried Words: Reflections on the Diary of Molly Applebaum," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 473–80; William Ross Jones, "'You Are Going to Be My Bettmann': Exploitative Sexual Relationships and the Lives of the *Pipels* in Nazi Concentration Camps,"

- Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, no. 3–4 (2024): 1–20; Pascale Bos, “Barter, Prostitution, Abuse? Reframing Experiences of Sexual Exchange During the Holocaust,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, no. 3–4 (2024): 225–52; Anna Hájková, *People Without History Are Dust: Queer Desire in the Holocaust* (University of Toronto Press, 2025, forthcoming), chapter on Nate Leipziger.
10. Waxman, “Buried Words,” 473–80; Debórah Dwork, “Sexual Abuse, Sexual Barter, and Silence,” *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 495–500.
  11. Hájková, “Sexual Barter,” 505.
  12. Hájková, “Sexual Barter.”
  13. For instrumental sex, see Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 53, 70, 188.
  14. Timothy J. Gilfoyle, “Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities of Documenting the History of Sexuality in the Archive,” *American Archivist* 57 (Summer 1994): 514–27; Judith Walkowitz, “The Politics of Prostitution and Sexual Labour,” *History Workshop Journal* 82, no. 1 (Autumn 2016): 192.
  15. Svenja Bethke, *Dance on the Razor’s Edge: Crime and Punishment in the Nazi Ghettos* (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 74.
  16. Sommer, *KZ-Bordell*; Hughes, “Forced Prostitution.”
  17. Cf. Heiko Haumann, *Hermann Diamanski (1910–1976): Überleben in der Katastrophe; Eine deutsche Geschichte zwischen Auschwitz und Staatssicherheitsdienst* (Böhlau, 2011), 159, 170.
  18. On a critical reading of the notion of “normal,” see Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (MIT Press, 2019); Peter Cryle and Elizabeth Stephens, *Normality: A Critical Genealogy* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).
  19. Mara Keire, “All Things Not Being Equal: Power, Identity, and Writing about Rape,” presented paper at the workshop “What’s in a Name? Should We Anonymise Identities?,” Oxford, September 23, 2016.
  20. Daria Onitiu, “‘The Duty to Remember v the Right to be Forgotten: Holocaust Archiving and Research, and European Data Protection Law’: Notes from Arye Schreiber’s seminar hosted by NINSO,” *Northumbria Internet & Society Research Interest Group*, March 20, 2019. Accessed March 31, 2025. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3343476](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3343476).
  21. Idith Zertal, *From Catastrophe to Power: Holocaust Survivors and the Emergence of Israel* (University of California Press, 1998), 268–69; Pascale Bos, “Sexual Violence in Ka-Tzetnik’s House of Dolls,” in *Holocaust History and the Readings of Ka-tzetnik*, ed. Annette F. Timm (Bloomsbury, 2018), 117; Annette F. Timm, “The Costs of Silencing Holocaust Victims: Why We Must Add Sexual Violence to Our Definition of Genocide,” in *Genocide in Twentieth-Century History: The Power and the Problems of an Interpretive, Ethical-Political, and Legal Concept*, ed. Frank Sysyn and Andrea Graziosi

- (McGill–Queen’s University Press, 2022), 44–86. The narrative of shameful prostitution with the Nazis also applied for the occupied countries in general; see for instance Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (Berg, 2002).
22. Examples of this interpretation include Maren Röger, *Kriegsbeziehungen: Intimität, Gewalt und Prostitution im besetzten Polen, 1939 bis 1945* (S. Fischer, 2015); Evgeny Finkel, *Ordinary Jews: Choice and Survival During the Holocaust* (Princeton University Press, 2016), 107.
  23. Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen*; see also Finkel, *Ordinary Jews* (for inclusion of various social and political theories more generally).
  24. One example is presented in Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering? Women in the Holocaust Testimonies,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Yale University Press, 1998), 361–363; and Ozick’s attack on Ringelheim, cited in Ringelheim, “The Split between Gender and the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Yale University Press, 1998), 340–50. See also directly refuted in Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, passim; William Spurlin, *Lost Intimacies: Rethinking Homosexuality Under National Socialism* (Lang, 2009), 2–3. When the author applied for funding for a conference on everyday Holocaust history in 2010, the funding body stated in their feedback on the application that it was necessary to explain why gender studies was relevant.
  25. Vera Laska, ed., *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses* (Greenwood Press, 1983); Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*; Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men and the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2003).
  26. Walkowitz, “Politics of Prostitution,” 188 has presented this argument.
  27. Röger, *Kriegsbeziehungen*; see also Person, “Sexual Violence.”
  28. Helga Amesberger, Katrin Auer, and Brigitte Halbmayr, *Sexualisierte Gewalt: Weibliche Erfahrungen in NS-Konzentrationslagern* (Mandelbaum, 2004), 150f.
  29. Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen*, 156–64.
  30. Röger, *Kriegsbeziehungen*.
  31. Nicole von Germeten, *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico* (University of California Press, 2018), 8.
  32. Horowitz, “What We Learn,” 51–53.
  33. Finkel, *Ordinary Jews*, 107.
  34. Olwen Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France, 1750–1789* (Clarendon Press, 1974); Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State* (Cambridge University Press, 1980); Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (University of Chicago Press, 1990); Alan Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France After 1850* (Harvard University Press, 1990).



35. Judith Walkowitz, "History and the Politics of Prostitution: Prostitution and the Politics of History," in *Prostitution Research in Context Methodology, Representation and Power*, ed. Marlene Spanger and May-Len Skilbrei (Routledge, 2017), 19–32.
36. Mir Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 137.
37. Ilse Van Liempt, "Trafficking in Human Beings: Conceptual Dilemmas," in *Trafficking and Women's Rights*, ed. Christien van den Anker and Jeroen Doomernik (Palgrave, 2006), 27–42.
38. Van Liempt, "Trafficking in Human Beings," 32.
39. "A narrow focus on whether or not on women consent to prostitution hinders our understanding of the whole process." Van Liempt, "Trafficking in Human Beings," 33.
40. "Warriner to Layton 9th January 1939," National Archives Kew, HO294/53. Thanks to Henry Warriner for providing me with a copy. See also Doreen Warriner, "A Winter in Prague," *Slavonic and East European Review* 62, no. 2 (April 1984): 209–40; Henry Warriner, *Doreen Warriner's War* (Book Guild, 1019), 42–61.
41. Rose Holmes, "Love, Labour, Loss: Women, Refugees and the Servant Crisis in Britain, 1933–1939," *Women's History Review* 27, no. 2 (2018): 288–309.
42. Holmes made this point at her talk "Love, Labour, Loss: Women, Refugees and the 'Servant Crisis' in Britain, 1933–1939," at the Feminist History Group at the University of Warwick, May 21, 2015.
43. Dalia Ofer, "Her View Through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in Warsaw," in *Memory, Place and Gender*, ed. Tova Cohen and Judy Baumel (Valentine Mitchell, 2003), 29–50, 38–43; Samuel Kassow, *Who Will Write Our History?: Emanuel Ringelblum, the Warsaw Ghetto, and the Oyneg Shabes archive* (Indiana University Press, 2007), 245–47.
44. See also Person, "Sexual Violence," 114.
45. White, *Comforts of Home*.
46. Anonymous (= Cecilia Slepak), "The Jewish Woman in Warsaw from September 1939 Until Now (1942)," in *Ringelblum Archive: Underground Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto*, ed. Katarzyna Person (ŻIH, 2017), 1:233–341, 316, 320. Samuel Kassow, *Who Will*, 450, fn 46, believes that these two sections discuss two different women, whereas Dalia Ofer, Katarzyna Person, and I believe they are identical.
47. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 321.
48. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 322.
49. Hufton, *The Poor*.
50. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 321.
51. Ofer, "Her View"; Kassow, *Who Will*, 245–47.
52. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 316.
53. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 248. Notably, Ofer repeats the phrase "selling her body":



- Ofer, "Her View," 41.
54. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 322.
  55. Slepak, "The Jewish Woman," 245. Ofer points out that Slepak's first report on Guta ends just after the move to the ghetto and is more positive to her. Ofer, "Her View," 41–42.
  56. For an example of this narrative, see Melissa Farley, "Prostitution and the Invisibility of Harm," *Women & Therapy* 26, no. 3–4 (2003): 247–80, 252.
  57. Ofer's argument that Slepak "reverberated sympathy to Guta beyond the intellectual empathy of the researcher" is an example of internalized stigmatization of sex work: Ofer, "Her View," 42; see also Kassow, *Who Will*, 246f.
  58. Anna Hájková, "The Holocaust Is Having a #metoo Moment," *Tablet*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/holocaust-metoo-moment>.
  59. On Stiwitz (sometimes spelled Stiewitz), see Ruth Bettina Birn, "Goldfields," in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos*, ed. Geoffrey Megargee (Indiana University Press, 2009), IB: 1498–99.
  60. "Interview of Erna Meissner (née Frischmannová)" (Undated), British Library. The transcript erroneously spelled Anushka without the "h." See also Meissner, interview #37341 where she described Anushka: "She used to be a singer in a bar or something like that. Her husband was there as well. [long pause] You could be critical of her behavior."
  61. Cited after Lukáš Příbyl, "Die Geschichte des Theresienstädter Transportes 'Be' nach Estland," *Theresienstädter Studien und Dokumente* (2001): 148–239, 205.
  62. Erna Meissner, interview.
  63. Ilse Kahane, interview; Engele Billauer, interview, both archive of Benjamin Lapp, to whom I owe many thanks for this information.
  64. Meissner, interview.
  65. "Interview of Anushka F." (Undated), USHMM. With thanks to Benjamin Lapp for identifying this interview and letting me know, and to Simon Goldberg for translation.
  66. "Memoirs of Ella and Otto Deutsch" (Undated), Beit Terezin Archive. I believe that Deutsch erred here; Nanne's sexual partner was probably a prisoner functionary (*kapo*), and not an SS man. See also Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter, and the Holocaust," in "Sexuality, Holocaust, Stigma," special issue, *German History* 39, no. 1 (2021): 112–33, 125.
  67. Anna Hyndráková, "Dopis dětem," in *Svět bez lidských dimenzí: čtyři ženy vzpomínají* (Prague: State Jewish Museum, 1991), 120–76, 156. Hyndráková changed Preissová's last name, and I keep here the form she gives in her memoir.
  68. Hyndráková, "Dopis dětem," 158. The man, Sally Ressler, returned to Cologne and went on to become a key member of the local Jewish community and the German Social Democrats.

69. Hyndráková, "Dopis dětem," 158.
70. Hyndráková, "Dopis dětem," 165.
71. Pavla Neuner, "Anna Hyndráková," Centropa, accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.centropa.org/biography/anna-hyndrakova>.
72. Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion," 118.
73. Hyndráková, "Dopis dětem."
74. "Interview Doris W." (Undated), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies.
75. "Reparation file Eva Preissová" (Undated), State Archive of North Rhine-Westphalia.
76. Firpo W. Carr, *Germany's Black Holocaust, 1890–1945* (Morris, 2003); Tina Marie Camp, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (University of Michigan, 2004); Anton Weiss-Wendt, ed., *The Nazi Genocide of the Roma: Reassessment and Commemoration* (Berghahn, 2015).
77. Lucie Adelsberger, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Story* (Northeastern University Press, 1995), 61.
78. I should like to thank Jana Mechelhoff-Herezi for sharing with me her then forthcoming work on Reichmann. Zilli Schmidt, *God Had Something in Store for Me! Memories of a German Sintezza*, ed. Jana Michelhoff-Herezi and Uwe Neumärker (Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, 2021), 42.
79. Schmidt, *God Had Something*, 44.
80. Heiko Haumann, *Die Akte Zilli Reichmann: Zur Geschichte der Sinti im 20. Jahrhundert* (Fischer, 2016), 138–42.
81. Heiko Haumann, *Hermann Diamanski (1910–1976): Überleben in der Katastrophe: Eine deutsche Geschichte zwischen Auschwitz und Staatssicherheitsdienst* (Böhlau, 2011), 158–70, for VD tests 159, 170. Diamanski added an "a" to his last name after the war to "Diamanski."
82. All names in this case have been changed on the wish of the person holding the papers that reference this paragraph. I have also changed some circumstances.
83. Uta Rautenberg, *Homophobia in Nazi Camps* (University of Toronto Press, forthcoming).
84. Heinz Heger, *Men with the Pink Triangle: The True, Life-and-Death Story of Homosexuals in the Nazi Death Camps* (Alyson, 1994), 28.
85. Heger, *Men with the Pink Triangle*, 61.
86. Heger, *Men with the Pink Triangle*, 62, 72, 76f.
87. Heger, *Men with the Pink Triangle*, 95.
88. Frank Gassner, "Wer war Heinz Heger? Klärung eines Pseudonyms," *Offener Bucherschrank*, accessed April 29, 2020, [https://web.archive.org/web/20151218003102/http://offener-buecherschrank.at/wordpress\\_dateien/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/04/wer-war-heinz-heger.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20151218003102/http://offener-buecherschrank.at/wordpress_dateien/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/04/wer-war-heinz-heger.pdf). Julius Scharnetzky offered important critical remarks on the emergence of the book: "Zur Situation der Haftgruppe der

- 'Homosexuellen' im Konzentrationslager Flossenbürg: Der Versuch einer Rekonstruktion," Dialogforum Memorial Mauthausen, October 1, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/user129634459>.
89. Heger, *Men with the Pink Triangle*, 75.
  90. Liana Millu, *Smoke over Birkenau* (Northwestern University Press, 1997), 172.
  91. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 220; Horowitz, "What We Learn."
  92. Katya Gusarov, "Sexual Barter and Jewish Women's Efforts to Save Their Lives: Accounts from the Righteous Among the Nations Archives," *German History* 39, no. 1 (March 2021): 100–11.
  93. Marie Simon, *Gone to Ground: A Young Woman's Survival in Berlin 1940–1945* (Clerkenwell Press, 2015).
  94. Klaus Hillenbrand, "Retter, die keine Helden waren," *taz*, April 12, 2014.
  95. Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter During the Holocaust?" *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 37–56, 44–45. Kaplan alluded to Lawrence Langer's choiceless choices.
  96. See Gad Beck, *Und Gad ging zu David: Erinnerungen 1923 bis 1945*, ed. Frank Heibert (diá, 1995) and his biography in Lutz van Dijk and Günter Grau, "Einsam war ich nie . . .," in *Einsam war ich nie: Schwule unter dem Hakenkreuz 1933–1945* (Querverlag, 2017), 96–109; Hájková, *People Without History Are Dust*, chapter on Gad Beck.
  97. Maria von der Heydt, "'Wer fährt denn gerne mit dem Judenstern in der Straßenbahn?' Die Ambivalenz des geltungsjüdischen' Alltags zwischen 1941 und 1945," in *Der Alltag im Holocaust: Jüdisches Leben im Großdeutschen Reich 1941–1945*, ed. Doris Bergen, Andrea Löw, and Anna Hájková (Oldenbourg, 2013), 65–80.
  98. Beck, *Und Gad ging zu David*, 169, 293–94, 309–14.
  99. Frank Heibert to the author, August 22, 2018.
  100. Cornelia Usborne, "Female Sexual Desire and Male Honor: German Women's Illicit Love Affairs with Prisoners of War During the Second World War," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (September 2017): 454–88.
  101. Dorota Glowacka, "Sexual Violence Against Men and Boys During the Holocaust: A Genealogy of (Not-So-Silent) Silence," *German History* 39, no. 1 (March 2021): 78–99. For a different interpretation, see Dwork, "Sexual Abuse."
  102. See also the study by Raphael Utz, "Making Love and Make-Belief: Male Sexual Barter in Dov Freiberg's To Survive Sobibor," *Autobiografia* 1, no. 14 (2020): 75–92.
  103. Simon, *Gone to Ground*, 146. Simon used the real names.
  104. Simon, *Gone to Ground*, 171.
  105. Eva Deutschkron, "Die Unsagbaren Aufregungen eines 'illegalen' Lebens," 1958, 950, Wiener Holocaust Library; Deutschkron's Oral History; Arthur Rathburn and Ursula Rathburn, *No More Tears Left Behind: The Remarkable Story of Holocaust Survivor Eva Deutschkron* (Fort Dane Books, 2009).
  106. Deutschkron's Oral History, 45; A. Rathburn and U. Rathburn, *No More Tears*, 107.

107. Deutschkron's Oral History, 46.
108. Deutschkron's Oral History, 59.
109. Simon, *Gone to Ground*, 323.
110. The fact that many of the surviving hidden Jews, who otherwise had no reason to know her, mentioned Deutschkron's name, is a confirmation. Thanks to Martina Voigt for consultation on the Deutschkrons.
111. Lili Hahn, *Bis alles in Scherben fällt: Tagebuchblätter 1933–45* (Argument, 2007), 596. With thanks to Maria von der Heydt. The name of Heinrich Schmitt is changed in the book.
112. Hahn, *Bis alles in Scherben fällt*, 600.
113. Hahn, *Bis alles in Scherben fällt*, 624.
114. Hahn, *Bis alles in Scherben fällt*, 626–28.
115. Příbyl, "Die Geschichte," 199–201; *Forgotten Transports: To Estonia*, dir. Lukáš Příbyl (Falcon, 2008). Sometimes, Drosin is spelled as Drosihn.
116. Another example is Renee Neumann/Viktor Pestek in Theresienstadt Family Camp in Auschwitz. There is also a Christian romance novel, *For Such a Time*, about a relationship between an SS man and a Jewish woman prisoner in Theresienstadt who eventually converts to Christianity: Kelly Faircloth, "Holy Shit, Who Thought This Nazi Romance Novel Was a Good Idea?," *Jezebel*, August 6, 2015, <https://www.jezebel.com/holy-shit-who-thought-this-nazi-romance-novel-was-a-go-1722465991>. The novel was shortlisted for two prizes of the Romance Writers of America annual conference.
117. Příbyl, "Die Geschichte," 201.
118. Rosie Johnston, "Lukáš Příbyl's 'Forgotten Transport' films—Illuminating 'Places Left in Obscurity,'" Czech Radio, May 8, 2009, accessed April 29, 2020, <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/special/lukas-pribyls-forgotten-transport-films-illuminating-places-left-in-obscurity>; repeated on the website of the film.
119. Příbyl, "Die Geschichte," 200, 201.
120. Příbyl, "Die Geschichte," 200.
121. I should like to thank Pim Ligtoet for his generous support and advice on the case of Hertha Poppert, on whom he has been working over twenty years, and to Alyn Beßmann *Šiši* for drawing my attention to her and providing information on the death transport from Beendorf.
122. Pim Ligtoet, "Poppert (Erich)," *Joods Monument Zaanstreek*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.joodsmonumentzaanstreek.nl/poppert-erich-2/#toggle-id-1>. Ellen Goudsmit has been also researching Hertha Poppert.
123. David Koker, *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Concentration Camp Diary; 1943–1944*, ed. Robert Jan van Pelt (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 369; David Koker, "Winter (December 22, 1943–February 8, 1944)," in *At the Edge of the Abyss: A Concentration Camp Diary; 1943–1944*, ed. Robert Jan van Pelt (Northwestern University Press,

- 2012), 299–300.
124. Koker, *At the Edge*, 374; Poppert, SE/RA/420393/02/E10/16, sworn statement. Thanks to Jan van Ommen for sending me copies of these documents, and to Felix Oppenheim for translating them from Swedish.
  125. Peter W. Klein and Justus van de Kamp, *Het Philips-Kommando in Kamp Vught* (Contact, 2003).
  126. Jan van Ommen, 1945—*Destination Sweden: The Journey of Women Rescued from Ravensbrück and Neuengamme Concentration Camps* (self-pub., 2020), 75–83. With thanks to Jan for sending me a pdf.
  127. “Sworn statement” (Undated), Buitenkamp-Degen, Malmö city archive.
  128. Koker, “Winter,” 300.
  129. Klein and von de Kamp, *Het Philips-Kommando*, 274. See also Brommet, interview; and Simons, interview.
  130. “Sworn statement Hertha Poppert” (May 16, 1945), CABR; “Sworn statement Hertha Poppert” (February 16, 1946), CABR.
  131. On Strippel, see Marc Buggeln, *Slave Labor in Nazi Concentration Camps* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 219–20.
  132. “Sworn statement Hertha Poppert” (February 16, 1946), CABR. With thanks to Pim Ligtoet for sending me the copy; Gerda Luner, *Gerda’s Story: Memoir of a Holocaust Survivor* (Elmhurst College, 2002), 434, Kindle.
  133. Luner, *Gerda’s Story*, 434.
  134. Gerda Luner, Gerda (Undated). K4b(1). Wiener Library.
  135. Just five days later, on April 20, 1945, Strippel oversaw the execution of the children who were victims of medical experiments at Bullenhuser Damm satellite camp. Buggeln, *Slave Labor*, 220. In her interview from February 8, 2000, Eva Sanders Mendel identified Strippel by name. See also Susan Hogervorst, “KZ-Überlebende als Zeuginnen. Der Fall Strippel und die Rolle der Frauen von Vught und Ravensbrück bei der Strafverfolgung (1945–1980),” in “Alliierte Prozesse und NS-Verbrechen,” special issue, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der nationalsozialistischen Verfolgung in Norddeutschland* 19 (2020): 109–19.
  136. For the transport: Ria de Korte, “Op Transport: met een naschrift van Jeanne Gompers-Barnes, Mei 1945, op transport naar Zweden,” *Joods Monument*, July 25, 2014, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.joodsmonument.nl/nl/page/420035/op-transport>; Björn Kooger, “Der Häftlingstransport aus dem KZ Beendorf,” in *Der KZ-Zug von Sülstorf: Zur Geschichte einer Gedenkstätte* (Verein Politische Memorialie Mecklenburg-Vorpommern e.V., 2018). With thanks to Alyn Beßmann Šišić.
  137. Kooger, “Der Häftlingstransport,” 32–22.
  138. Kooger, “Der Häftlingstransport,” 29; “Sworn statement Hertha Poppert” (February 16, 1946), CABR. Thanks to Jan von Ommen for sending me copies.

139. Mendel, interview.
140. De Korte, "Op Transport."
141. Mendel, interview; "Sworn statement Hertha Poppert" (February 16, 1946), CABR; Van Ommen, 1945—*Destination Sweden*.
142. Van Ommen, 1945—*Destination Sweden*.
143. Kooger, "Der Häftlingstransport," 43; Van Ommen, 1945—*Destination Sweden*, 75–77.
144. "SwornstatementAnnieMouwes-Messian" (Undated), Malmöcityarchive; Ligtoet, "Erich Poppert."
145. Klein and van de Kamp, *Het Philips-Komando*, 275.
146. Hájková, "Sexual Barter," 523.
147. Pim Ligtoet found Poppert's unfinished account, written in a mix of Dutch and German, in a house in Zaandam. In 2024, he donated it to the Gemeentearchief Zaanstad where it is closed to readers until Poppert's youngest daughter passes away. I thus did not read this document.
148. Ligtoet, "Erich Poppert." Poppert struggled with physical and mental damage that the persecution caused her; see her reparation file in the Hessian Main State Archive, Wiesbaden, 518, #68109.
149. Ariana Neumann, *When Time Stopped: A Memoir of My Father's War and What Remains* (Scribner, 2020); Zuzana Justman, "My Terezín Diary," *New Yorker*, September 16, 2019.
150. Nina Grünfeld, *Frida: Min ukjente farmors krig* (Aschehoug, 2020).
151. Gusarov, "Sexual Barter."
152. Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays* (Oxford University Press), 46.
153. For a similar point on agency, see Eliyana Adler, "Hrubieszów at the Crossroads: Polish Jews Navigate the German and Soviet Occupations," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014): 1–30.
154. Jennifer Evans, "Why Queer German History?" *German History* 34, no. 3 (September 2016): 371–384, 375.
155. Anna Hájková, "Introduction: Sexuality, Holocaust, Stigma," *German History* 39, no. 1 (March 2021): 1–14.

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PART II

HISTORY



# ORAL HISTORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN HIDING DURING THE HOLOCAUST IN POLAND

## MEMORY, AGENCY, AND RECONCEPTUALIZING THE “RESCUER”

MIRANDA BRETHOUR

**A**CROSS THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT, THOUSANDS OF POLISH JEWS FLED the deteriorating conditions of the ghettos and, from 1942, the brutal *Aktionen* and deportations, in search of safety. Many of those seeking shelter found a limited form of protection in the homes and on the property of local gentiles; sometimes prewar neighbors, colleagues, friends, but also complete strangers.<sup>1</sup> Jews in hiding were constantly threatened by the regular searches conducted by German authorities along with remobilized representatives of Polish rural self-government—including village heads and their deputies, volunteer firefighters, the Polish “Blue” Police—the watchful eyes of neighbors, as well as from their often capricious aid-providers. In the recollections of survivors, every day in hiding was felt as a tenuous hold on life, a precarity that increased from October 1941 once all parties involved in sheltering Jews were threatened with the death penalty.<sup>2</sup> Vulnerable to the whims of helpers who could be fearful, greedy, violent, and overall unpredictable, Jewish testimonies of life in hiding often starkly contrast the portrait of aid-providers as overwhelmingly righteous. As the prevailing narrative of the past in many contemporary Polish memorial spaces, this narrative of rescue often serves to obfuscate, minimize, and distract from important and painful conversations about Polish participation in the Holocaust.<sup>3</sup>



Survivor accounts disrupt such portrayals of rescuers as one-dimensional beacons of goodness and capture the complexity of relationships between helpers and Jews in hiding. Diaries, memoirs, and oral interviews record how even formerly consistent and devoted helpers could quickly become exploitative, violent, and retract their prior commitments. Survivor narratives further capture factors that shaped the behavior and decisions of helpers; from a social context that deemed offering help unacceptable (derived from numerous sources, including the threat of the German occupiers to destroy communities where Jews were discovered), to familial pressure and financial stress, among others.<sup>4</sup> In their testimonies, survivors recall that sexual violence perpetrated by aid-providers was one of the many dangers faced by Jews in hiding.<sup>5</sup> Sexual violence was a threat not only once a place to hide and a host had been established, but at all stages of searching for and establishing shelter.<sup>6</sup>

Following the life stories of seventeen survivors recorded in interviews by the University of Southern California Visual History Archive from approximately the early 1990s to mid-2000s, this chapter discusses what survivors' narratives of sexual violence can tell us about daily life in hiding in occupied Poland, particularly concerning the role of aid-providers and the meaning of agency in this context of extreme vulnerability. Recalling their time in hiding, survivors draw attention to the often indistinguishable boundaries between the roles of perpetrator and rescuer: Gentile hosts committed acts of sexual violence and, at the same time, protected those in hiding from the ghettos and deportation to the death camps. Survivor accounts further challenge the image of hiding as a site of protection, as they recount how the terror posed by the world outside the hiding place—the ghetto, the German and Polish police, for instance—was entangled with fears of the hiding place itself, including the sexual threat posed by helpers.

Recorded by Holocaust survivors who were children or young adults during the war (ranging in age between three and nineteen, with an average age of eleven at the beginning of the German occupation), this collection of interviews further sheds light on how the experiences and testimonies of children and youth can contribute to our understanding of hiding. In their interviews, survivors emphasized their creativity and resourcefulness as agents of their own survival; an important theme in the history of children and the Holocaust as captured in the work of Joanna Beata Michlic and Joanna Sliwa, among others.<sup>7</sup> This chapter stresses the importance of children's decision making; the crucial moments in which survivors stress that their decisions to leave a host or to stay, to exchange valuables and services for food and shelter shaped their fate. In retelling their wartime experiences to their interviewers, survivors frequently place particular emphasis on their decisions to fight, flee, and "talk back"—to use Theresa de Langis's formulation—to their hosts and describe the logic that shaped their choices; logic that sometimes drew on their knowledge of the punishments that threatened helpers.<sup>8</sup>

Agency and choice are crucial frames not only to understanding the contents of the experiences that survivors recall, but also their very decision to place their narratives

on tape and the ways that they testify. Scholars of sexual violence in Rwanda, Cambodia, and Chile argue that testifying itself is an act of agency through which women, to quote Julie Hurst-Whitehouse, “reinstat[e] their personhood, including their sexual subjectivity [...] despite numerous societal barriers which deem talking about the experience off-limits.”<sup>9</sup> In the USC testimonies, the power of storytelling is captured in the expressive and embodied ways in which women testify: with raised voices, through direct, prolonged eye contact with the camera, shaking their heads, touching the parts of their body they verbally reference their aggressor having violated, and holding up their fingers and pointing. Oral histories capture layers of agency: the choice of survivors to narrate the tabooed histories that they tell, the way that their recollections emphasize decision-making, and their embodied ways of telling.<sup>10</sup>

Survivors’ narratives further attest to the painful and persistent legacies of life in hiding. In these interviews—conducted more than fifty years after liberation—survivors continue to grapple with how to retrospectively understand and describe the actions of those who sheltered them and offered help while exploiting their vulnerability through acts of sexual violence. My own approach to the language of shelter draws on the reflections of survivors as well as the changing scholarly discourse on hiding. Since, as Agnieszka Wiercholska writes, the term “rescue” assumes that these acts were successful (i.e., resulting in survival) and disguises the “grey zone” of help, I avoid this term altogether.<sup>11</sup> I use “aid-provider” and “helper” as alternatives, which capture the often transitory nature of assistance as well as the violence and exploitation that could accompany help—or sometimes refer to the dual identity of “helper-perpetrator.” This phrase points to the overlap of life-affirming actions and the perpetration of violence, a common theme in Jewish accounts that has garnered much attention in recent literature on the Holocaust in Poland, as characterized by phrases such as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir’s coining of “Unrighteous Righteous and Righteous Unrighteous” and Joanna Beata Michlic’s use of “rescuer-abuser.”<sup>12</sup> The terminology of “helper-perpetrator” reflects the complexity of hiding relationships and further draws attention to survivors’ own processes of narration and linguistic choices.

## SEEKING SHELTER IN THE GENERAL GOVERNMENT: SEXUAL VIOLENCE AND THE ECONOMY OF RESCUE

Shelter with neighbors, colleagues, friends, and strangers was increasingly sought after the establishment of the ghettos and as conditions deteriorated in these “Jewish residential quarters.”<sup>13</sup> The demand for shelter on the so-called “Aryan side”

increased around the time of the first *Aktionen* in the ghettos, which began in the Lublin district in the early spring of 1942.<sup>14</sup> In the days and weeks following the brutal roundups and deportations to the death camps, German authorities frequently conducted repeated sweeps of the besieged ghettos to ensure that only those with permission (i.e., through work permits) remained or, by the final *Aktionen* in late 1942 and 1943, that no survivors could be located whatsoever. Jews sought shelter outside of the ghetto at many moments around the deportations. In anticipation of an *Aktion*, Jews began preparations to secure shelter; some managed to flee during the violent chaos; and others, having survived deportations by sheltering within the ghetto in a bunker, for instance, left for the “Aryan side.” There were numerous paths to securing shelter, from carefully curated and prearranged agreements with hosts to the plight of searching the countryside, knocking on doors, and hiding in fields and barns for the night.<sup>15</sup>

Arranging shelter with a host was a complex—and frequently costly—endeavor. Michał Głowiński recalled that his family organized their path to leaving the ghetto and establishing shelter by paying the man who facilitated their escape from the Warsaw ghetto in addition to the family who had agreed to conceal them once they reached the “Aryan side.”<sup>16</sup> In Warsaw, Jan Grabowski describes the function of a “rescue market” where prices skyrocketed with the high demands for shelter around the deportations of July and August 1942. At that time, Jewish tenants who could not meet the average price were unable to secure a hiding place or were kicked out of hiding.<sup>17</sup> In the countryside, any sum could be feasibly demanded of Jews seeking shelter, often requiring families to supplement their payment in *złoty* with valuables, services, and promises of signing over property deeds after the war. Financial negotiations were a regular feature of the search for shelter. Shraga Feivel Bielawski, who hid in the homes of various Polish hosts in Węgrów County during the Holocaust, recalled that one prospective helper required Bielawski and his family to pay him a month of rent as a deposit before he began constructing the hideout.<sup>18</sup> Whether in the city or the countryside, in 1940 or 1943, the necessity of exchanging payment for shelter—in whatever form possible—was one of the few reliable features of life in hiding.

Cash was only a part of this economy of shelter; Jews exchanged valuables, property, and services with their aid-provider for survival. A number of women’s testimonies convey that they paid for their keep by performing domestic labor, especially handicrafts, cleaning, and caring for children. Sonia G., sheltering in the cellar of her family’s former cleaner near Pinsk, would knit sweaters for her Polish helpers with wool provided by their neighbors in exchange for potatoes and flour.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in hiding in the village of Łada (Biłgoraj County), Naomi Samson and her family undertook a range of handicrafts—sewing, knitting, and crocheting—for their helper, *Pani* (Ms.)

Kowalik. Their services quickly came to an end when residents of Łada became suspicious: "Between our knitting and Srukli's sewing, the Kowalik family started looking well-dressed. Soon their friends and neighbors began asking questions. [...] Then a woman asked Mrs. Kowalik in church, 'Are you sure you are not hiding Jews somewhere?'"<sup>20</sup> Fearful of her neighbors, Mrs. Kowalik immediately reduced the materials she provided for their work—which, in Samson's recollections, had been a source of cherished creative relief in hiding.

Sexual barter took place often as a part of hiding arrangements where Jews in hiding had already negotiated paid agreements with aid-providers—the added benefit of sex could persuade uncertain helpers to continue offering shelter or to increase rations of food, especially when the stakes of shelter prompted helpers to rethink the acceptable balance of risk and reward. While, as Anna Hájková affirms, sexual barter could be a form of sexual violence, these exchanges did not preclude the possibility of pleasure and intimacy, nor did the extreme power imbalances and vulnerability of Jews in hiding "make the decisions they could and did make meaningless."<sup>21</sup> The interviews regularly draw attention to the challenges of characterizing sexual relationships between aid-providers and Jews in hiding as survivors testify to the entanglement of romance, intimacy, excitement, violence, and fear.<sup>22</sup>

The oral testimony of Celia C. who, after escaping the Warsaw ghetto during the uprising of April 1943, hid in an apartment on the "Aryan side" of the city with a Polish couple and eleven other Jews, illustrates the incredible complexities of sexual barter and survivor memories of this exchange. Celia described her life in hiding as one where "everybody had a function," whether that be sewing, cooking, or setting the table. Over time, one of the Jewish girls in hiding, Erna, began to flirt with the Polish man, Cesiek.<sup>23</sup> Soon thereafter, Celia recalled that a pattern began: Cesiek would return to the apartment drunk, his wife would tell him to sleep with the Jews, and Cesiek would go to Erna for sex. Celia remembered that eventually Cesiek began returning home inebriated more frequently, so he could have sex with Erna. In exchange, Cesiek would bring her food, and she would eat it in the night (this way she did not have to share it with anyone else, even with her sick brother, Celia remarked bitterly).<sup>24</sup> After the war, Cesiek and Erna ran away together and got married.<sup>25</sup> Recalling a post-war meeting with the couple, Celia expressed her continued anger toward them, specifically Erna: "It was not him, he was wonderful, but her."<sup>26</sup> Erna's strategic decision to feed herself while in hiding with ten others appeared to motivate Celia's persistent anger—she did not mention any expectation that Cesiek himself could have distributed these extra provisions among the group. Though Cesiek was "wonderful," Celia suggested that his ability or perhaps even his desire to provide adequate food for all in the apartment was limited.

Celia's recounting of Cesiek and Erna's relationship reminds us that sexuality could fulfill many different purposes in hiding, which Katya Gusarov lists as "compensation, for communication and as a source not only of power but also of pleasure."<sup>27</sup> During their VHA interviews, survivors work through what possibly motivated their aid-provider to offer help, and where sexual violence fit in these spaces and relationships that protected Jews from deportation and murder. Survivor Tema R. plainly stated that access to the bodies of Jewish women and girls was what drove the provision of aid in the case of one of her hosts. After fleeing the Wilno ghetto during an *Aktion* in the fall of 1943, Tema ran to an address given by her mother. Tema was received warmly by the woman at this home, Józefa Mackiewicz, who immediately made the sign of the cross and expressed her obligation, as a Christian, to help her. Tema stayed with Mackiewicz on and off through liberation. At one point, due primarily to the danger posed by a Polish neighbor who detected Tema's presence and threatened to denounce her, Mackiewicz arranged for Tema's shelter with Józef Raugiewicz, a middle-aged Polish factory employee who lived nearby. Tema described Raugiewicz as "philosemitic," explaining that, as a man in his late fifties or early sixties, "The only thing he wanted to have were the young women"—referencing herself and another Jewish girl he sheltered.<sup>28</sup> While Raugiewicz also received monetary payment in exchange for shelter, Tema felt that he was overwhelmingly motivated to help for the sexual favors. "He was obsessed," Tema recalled, "with pretty women."<sup>29</sup> After Tema returned to live with Mackiewicz, she continued to have sex with Raugiewicz, an exchange that she described as a pragmatic necessity that enabled her protection from the deeply caring Józefa: "I was poor. And the only thing I could pay with was my use and body."<sup>30</sup> Reflecting on Raugiewicz's commitment to offering shelter—even after he was arrested by the Gestapo—Tema turned to address her interviewer: "He wasn't so bad, you see?"<sup>31</sup> In a final meeting with Raugiewicz before Tema and her husband immigrated to the United States, Raugiewicz apologized for the sexual abuse and stressed to Tema that he never would have denounced her. Tema recognized this statement as true, and suggested to her interviewer that Raugiewicz's behavior must be understood on a spectrum of behavior that included the reality that girls and women in hiding were sexually abused and then denounced by their helpers. Tema's perception of Raugiewicz as a helper was deeply attuned to the vicissitudes of her own vulnerabilities in hiding—especially her financial means, or lack thereof—as well as her understanding of the daily instability that threatened the lives of Jews in hiding, from which she felt sheltered.

## “YOU CAN’T CRY, YOU CAN’T COMPLAIN, OR ELSE YOU GET THROWN OUT INTO THE STREET”: THE UNPREDICTABILITY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

In hiding, Jewish lives were threatened at every turn by regular manhunts in the countryside, the neighbors of gentile hosts, and the vacillations of aid-providers.<sup>32</sup> Postwar testimonies capture the sensitivity of neighbors to any slight change in the behavior of nearby residents. Szapše Grinberg, sheltering with a host in Kosów Lacki together with his wife, son, and another family, described how the house in which he was hiding was searched because the Polish family’s increased wealth raised suspicions that they were hiding Jews.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, over the course of his twenty-eight-month stay on the property of Władysław Kozły in Wiśnicza (Bochnia County), Markus Halpern explained that suspicions were raised by the neighbor of his formerly impoverished host, whose family suddenly appeared well-clothed with nicer bedding. A neighbor brought the Gestapo to search the house when Kozły was not home, but the wife of the host did not waver, and the search was unsuccessful.<sup>34</sup>

One could not depend on the level of commitment showed by Halpern’s host when faced with the death penalty for sheltering Jews. The fluctuations of hosts (often when they felt that the intense threats of death and destruction of property were not worth the payment they received in return) was yet another danger that threatened those in hiding. Szapše Grinberg recalled his family’s experience of this unpredictability in his postwar testimony: “[Stanisław] Marciniak [their host] came every day and shouted that he was afraid. He wanted us to go away. They played with our lives. His wife said that they would be killed for helping Jews. We looked carefully into his eyes. Does he have a calm or sad face? In that way he tortured us until May 18, 1943.”<sup>35</sup> On this date, due to the miserable and threatening nature of life at Marciniak’s, Grinberg and his family left this hiding place and found shelter with a Polish woman in the area of Sokołów Podlaski until liberation.

In the recollections of women who survived in hiding, the threat of being denounced was entangled with the perpetration of sexual violence by those who offered shelter. Trying to regain contact with her father after they were separated during deportations in the ghetto of Skarżysko-Kamienna at some point in 1942, Lillian R. escaped from the munitions factory where she was working and returned to the city. Once again in Skarżysko-Kamienna, Lillian unsuccessfully went to the homes of Polish acquaintances—people she had known all of her childhood and young teenage years, Lillian stressed—in search of shelter. She then approached the house of a German post office employee for whom she and her sisters had previously worked. After explaining

to him that she was searching for her father, the man let her in, said she could stay for a while, and locked the door. "When he did that," Lillian recalled, "I couldn't do nothing," and her initial thought was that she was going to be denounced to the Germans who lived next door.<sup>36</sup> The man raped her, and afterward let her leave to continue her search for her family.

Interviews with two women who hid as young children in the immediate vicinity of Warsaw and Kraków describe how the threat and perpetration of sexual violence was persistent alongside additional fears that their aid-providers would vacillate on their commitment to shelter them. For both Rachel G. and Lillian B-N., the regular drunkenness of their aid-provider made their lives feel even more unpredictable; without warning, their hosts could become violent, disinclined to offer further support, or threaten the concealed lives of those in hiding through acts of indiscretion. In hiding near Kraków, Rachel G. had to frequently switch between homes—leaving the place in which her younger sister was hiding—because of the drunken impulses of Marian Gruca, one of the hosts. On one occasion, following a nearby raid that brought the arrest of a man working for the underground, Gruca, in a state of inebriation, yelled out of the window to capture the Jews that were in hiding at his home. This event prompted Rachel to leave and secure a place to hide with a woman in the neighborhood, where she cared for the children as a form of payment for shelter.<sup>37</sup> During the ten months in which Rachel was in hiding with the former Polish couple, Rachel was attacked by Gruca's brother; when the two men were drinking together, he attempted to rape her before he was stopped by Gruca's wife. Rachel, who was eleven or twelve at the time, recalled that she felt caught between threats inside and outside her place of shelter: This act of sexual violence, "left a very . . . traumatic experience to a child, and you can't cry, and you can't complain or else you get thrown out on the street."<sup>38</sup>

Recalling her time in hiding as a young girl (between the ages of approximately seven and twelve) in Zalesie with her grandmother, Lillian B-N. explained to her interviewer that she was incredibly fearful of Józef Panek, her grandmother's friend (who posed as her husband) with whom they were living. While initially Panek paid no attention to her, he began entering Lillian's room in a state of undress. One day when her grandmother left the house to purchase bread, Panek took away the book she was reading and bribed her to "play with [him]" in order to get it back:

And he took off his pants, and told me to take off mine, and I wanted these books but I didn't want to take off my pants, but eventually, I thought well there can't be any harm in it I want my books back. I was very innocent. And I took off, I took my pants down and he was looking and he wanted me to play with him and finally it



really hit me that this was very wrong and terrible, and I said no, I said if you do this I'm going to tell my grandmother [...] somehow he scared me and I never did tell my grandmother, but he never did it again.<sup>39</sup>

The threat posed by Panek was heightened by his drunkenness and ensuing unpredictability; Lillian felt that she and her grandmother could be denounced at any moment.

In other cases, acts of sexual violence were overtly punctuated by the aid-provider's threats of additional violence and the possibility of denunciation. After the destruction of the ghetto in Borysław, Charlotte H-E. ran from hiding place to hiding place, unable to find long-term shelter. Eventually, she arrived at the home of a Ukrainian couple who were her former neighbors. The wife was very kind to her, she remarked in her interview, but once the wife left the house, circumstances quickly deteriorated: "In the meantime I was left with this man, and he was fondling me and I really didn't even know what he was doing, until it started to hurt terribly and I started crying, and he says to me 'if you're going to tell your father, I'm going to kill him and you' and he says 'if you don't like just leave and don't ever come back here again.'" <sup>40</sup> Charlotte left the couple's home that night and never told her father—terrified that this threat would be realized.

The vulnerability of children in hiding was grievously heightened by the absence of former caretakers, especially their parents—a vulnerability explicitly and cruelly exploited by those involved in the provision of shelter.<sup>41</sup> When she was around the age of five, Joan D. hid with a Polish woman named Marysia and her family in Przemyśl and accompanied the family to their summerhouse disguised as a Polish child. Marysia's ten-year-old nephew, Kubuś, would sexually "torment" her in the bushes near the family summerhouse, and while they were walking back to the house he would point to a young daughter of one of the neighbors, and say: "You know, I bet I couldn't do that [molest] with her, I don't think I could, she's . . . she's not the type, and besides, she has her parents there."<sup>42</sup> Manipulating notions of respectable female sexuality, Kubuś threatened to tell everyone "what [she] let him do" if she confided in anyone.<sup>43</sup> Joan recalls internalizing this self-blame and guilt, and that it deleteriously impacted her perceptions of her self-worth and sexuality. As explicated in Joan's interview, layers of vulnerability characterized life in hiding: the absence of familiar figures of parents and other caretakers and the shock of separation from them, the performance of Christianity and disguise of prewar identity for those who hid "in the open" as a Christian child, the many forms of violence in hiding, including harsh physical labor and emotional abuse, and persistent and extreme fear. Sexual violence overlapped with these other facets of everyday life, intensifying children's feelings of uncertainty and threat from the helper-perpetrators.



## “I KNOW HE WOULD HAVE RAPED ME, IF I HAD NOT THREATENED TO SCREAM”: STRATEGIES OF SELF-DEFENSE AND DECISION MAKING

While life in hiding is frequently described by survivors as intensely vulnerable and dependent, where they were “at the whim” of helpers, at the same time these interviews capture the coexistence of agency and vulnerability: In moments where their lives were threatened, Jews in hiding used their knowledge of the context and their aid-providers’ own vulnerabilities to protect themselves.<sup>44</sup> Ann K., sheltering with a Polish farmer for a night in the area of Włodzimierz, recalled how the very limited physical confines in which she sheltered intensified her sense of her aid-provider’s power over her. She characterized her hiding place as a small space under the potatoes stored for the winter, explaining to her interviewer that “I agreed to everything, you had no choice, you do what they tell you to do.”<sup>45</sup> Later that evening, as Ann waited for her husband to join her the next day—after which they planned to join the partisans—she described the farmer’s attempt to rape her. When she protested as he came closer, threatening that he would be in “big trouble” if he touched her, he replied with “You’re a Jew, what can you do to me.”<sup>46</sup> As the farmer approached her, Ann threatened that she would scream and that the farmer’s wife would overhear her; a threat, she explained, that compelled him to leave.

As this excerpt suggests, when faced with the threat of sexual violence, Jewish girls and women in hiding reacted by identifying what posed the greatest threat to their aid-providers and playing on their own vulnerabilities as a form of protection—a pattern similarly recognized by Joanna Beata Michlic in her research on children in hiding.<sup>47</sup> By the fall of 1941, sheltering Jews was punishable by death; thus, a scream could attract a neighbor, wife, or nearby authorities and threaten the life of the helper-perpetrator. While screaming could also place girls in hiding in danger of being discovered, the threat itself—they hoped—would be sufficiently terrifying to stop the abuser. Rachel, the girlfriend of Shraga Feivel Bielowski, hiding near Węgrów, similarly used this threat as a form of protection from her aid-provider’s son. While hiding in a barn, she felt threatened by the presence of the son: “I was lying by myself one night and in came the owner’s son. He is about eighteen or nineteen years old. Big. Tall. I asked him what he wanted and he didn’t say anything. He just kept coming toward me. I told him to leave me alone, or I would scream. He came closer. I told him, if he tried to touch me, I would scream as loud as I could and his father would come running in. [...] I know he would have raped me, if I had not threatened to scream.”<sup>48</sup> The strategy of threatening to scream was not always possible or effective. In these two examples, both girls

were sheltering in a rural space, where such a commotion would have likely been more audible than in an urban center. At the same time, especially in the sparsely populated countryside, the most likely person to overhear the scream would have been someone in the home or otherwise nearby, such as a wife; thus, the strength of the threat would have also rested on co-residents not being complicit in the sexual violence.

When the wife of the perpetrator was unaware of the attempted rape or sexual assault, threatening to expose this behavior to her could also work as a form of defense. The testimony of Phyllis L. illustrates an example of collective defense against sexual violence through precisely this threat. Along with multiple families—thirteen people in total—Phyllis sheltered for multiple years in a bunker on the isolated property of a poor farmer and his wife near Skalat, where, she explained, the couple received all the families' money, jewelry, and property (they had signed off all their property in Poland) in exchange for sheltering the group. On occasion the farmer vacillated on his offer of shelter, prompting Phyllis's mother to give him her engagement ring. Describing the relationship between those in hiding and the Polish couple, Phyllis explained that they were "at his [the husband's] mercy."<sup>49</sup> One day the farmer got drunk, came to the bunker, and demanded that Genka—a Jewish girl of seventeen or eighteen—join him upstairs.<sup>50</sup> The bunker collectively came to her defense by—quite curiously—threatening that they would leave and disclose to his wife that they left because of the rape. Motivated by the profits gained from sheltering the group, fearful of his wife, or both, the farmer left.<sup>51</sup>

Either preempting the perpetration of abuse or to stop sexual assault already taking place, narrations of physical defense as a form of self-protection feature as particularly powerful moments in this collection of oral histories. The significance of the choice to fight is emphasized through survivors' body language—raised voices, hand gestures, and shaking heads—when retelling these events. Staying on a farm near Łuków, Lillian F. experienced sexual violence from the boys living on the property. After describing going through puberty and struggling to have her period in the conditions on the farm, she paused, adding: "And then you were scared too, because when you were among the boys they always want to grab you."<sup>52</sup> When her interviewer questioned further, Lillian elaborated: "Yeah, I fought once terribly, I remember that, I fought in the worst way, and I was all strong and, dear God, if he didn't kill me that time, and he didn't touch me, I was just the luckiest girl on earth."<sup>53</sup> Lillian then repeated, "I was fighting so strong, unbelievable," recalling the boy's fury when Lillian kicked him, after which she threatened him: "If you're going to touch me, I'll kill you, don't you dare touch me again."<sup>54</sup> As she rearticulated this warning, Lillian raised a finger, gesturing in a threatening manner to underline the power of her words.

In the case of Leah S., in hiding with a Polish couple near Żelków, both a husband and wife collaborated in claiming their power over Leah's body for their own benefit. In

Leah's 1998 interview, she describes her time sheltering in the couple's attic, where she sewed curtains for her keep. As Leah later learned, this couple had formulated a plan to rape her so she would provide them with a child. One day, after the wife left for the market, the husband entered the attic where Leah was hiding. He began molesting her and when she begged him to leave her alone, he implied that to save her life, she must bear his child: "for life, give life."<sup>55</sup> As he was attempting to rape her, Leah scratched him, grabbed a nearby pair of scissors and threatened to kill him if he did not leave. Warning him, "If you don't leave me alone, I mean it, I'm going to cut your throat," the man replied by returning the threat, referencing his over six-foot frame to assert his power.<sup>56</sup> Leah continued to defend herself with the scissors. When he continued to molest her, blood running down his face, she finally warned: "I'm going to smash that window, and I'm going to scream that you've got a Jewess here."<sup>57</sup> Recounting this moment to her interviewer, Leah mentioned that she knew that if a Jew was discovered in hiding the Germans would potentially kill the non-Jewish rescuer and burn down their home. This threat prompted him to leave. After the wife returned home from the market, Leah overheard how she berated her husband for his failure to rape Leah. That same night, Leah fled their home.

The decision to leave—and either return to the ghettos, or, by 1942 and afterward, undertake the arduous attempt to search for shelter and protection from nearby Christians, in the forest, or through joining the partisans—was a further strategy of women and girls in hiding facing sexual violence. The decision of Leah and another survivor, Charlotte H., to leave the home of their aid-providers before securing another place of shelter highlights the significance of their choices as a form of self-defense, as well as suggests that the girls perceived their helpers and the sexual threat they posed as perhaps an even greater threat than the dangers that loomed outside the hiding place.

## “I WAS PUNISHED MORE FOR IT AFTER THE WAR THAN BEFORE”: MEMORIES OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

This collection of oral histories comprises crucial evidence on the commonality of sexual violence in hiding, which was, without a doubt, a much more frequent experience than the volume of sources suggests, due to the small number of survivors and intense postwar taboos and silences around sexual violence.<sup>58</sup> In hiding, several women recalled, they anticipated that their aid-providers or other men and boys in the family were likely to rape or otherwise sexually abuse them. Fay K., hiding with her brother and his girlfriend on a farm of a Polish gentile in Sokołów County, remarked on her surprise that,

although she and her brother's girlfriend were two young girls, this Polish farmer did not touch them.<sup>59</sup> Janina G. hid with her aunt in the stables of a Polish peasant family after deportations in the Lwów ghetto. One night, a man from the family entered the stables and tried to rape Janina's aunt, who pleaded with him to leave her alone, "kneeling in front of him and kissing his hands and begging him not to rape her"—demonstrating through her words and posture the power that the man held over her, and her gratitude for him, in an attempt to defend herself.<sup>60</sup> Her aunt left after that night, while Janina remained with these hosts. She was moved to their house, where she shared a bed with their twelve- or fourteen-year-old son. From that point onward, Janina slept with a stick, as she felt "instinctively [...] that he was going to touch me."<sup>61</sup> Like Janina, other survivors recalled that they learned to anticipate sexual violence by their knowledge of the attempted—or actual—rape of aunts, mothers, friends. When Ann K. hid with a Polish farmer near Włodzimierz for one night, she quickly "was reminded of my best friend Sarah who was raped," and thought that the farmer might do the same to her after he began to stroke her hands and head.<sup>62</sup>

Other interviews describe conversations between reunifying family and friends after the war in which the possibility of sexual violence during the occupation loomed large. After liberation, Rachel G. was approached by her former piano teacher. Her teacher, a Jewish woman who had, Rachel surmised, survived in a concentration camp, immediately asked Rachel: "I just have one question, were you raped during the war?"<sup>63</sup> In their interviews, survivors frequently devote as much space to discussing the legacies and aftermaths of sexual violence following liberation as they do to the event itself. A particularly painful moment described in testimonies is the unbelieving or dismissive reactions of family and friends survivors confided in. As poignantly stated by Lillian R.: "I was punished for it [as a victim of sexual violence] more after the war than before."<sup>64</sup> During her interview, Lillian R. stated that the interviewer was the second person she had confided in; a decision that was made even more challenging by the fact that it "didn't work out" when she first shared her experience with "somebody very special" (a person who she later suggests was her husband).<sup>65</sup> Her decision to entrust her story with USC was a difficult one: "When I heard I was going to be interviewed I wasn't sure whether to talk about it ... because it hurts. [...] I'm happy I am talking about it but still it hurts, it hurts a lot. I don't think it's ever going to go away, I don't think so. [...] That time [period] was worse because you weren't allowed to talk about it, you weren't allowed to go anywhere about it. [...] I went through a lot of bad things, but I think this was really ... and after when I did tell my husband about it, he really didn't support me, and that was even worse."<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, Lillian's children encouraged her to place this part of her story on tape.

Esther M., interviewed by USC in 2017, first publicly shared her memory of sexual violence in hiding during the Holocaust with her interviewer. Like Lillian R., Esther also first confided in her husband, who, a year and a half before her interview, denied her

experience: "He look at me, and I felt that he does not believe me. And probably that's why [in regard to her husband's reaction] . . . I'm sure of it, a lot of people still holding that . . . the survivors holding in them, a lot of things they don't verbalize because who could, who can believe things that people went through."<sup>67</sup> Esther's memory of sexual violence was intertwined with the threat of denunciation. In hiding with a Polish family on a farm with her mother, Esther was briefly left alone on the farm when her mother was captured and interrogated by the Gestapo for her false papers. Taking advantage of her mother's absence, the son of her hosts—who, Esther recalled, "looked so big . . . so tall, so big," forced Esther into the cellar and raped her multiple times.<sup>68</sup> Afterward, the son threatened that if Esther "opened [her] mouth" and disclosed the rape, he would bury her under the coal and no one would know she was dead.<sup>69</sup> Esther was later reunited with her mother, and she did not share what had happened to her while her mother was interrogated. When her interviewer questioned why Esther kept this to herself, Esther replied: "I knew that she suffered a lot, and I didn't want her . . . to suffer more than she suffered . . . and I said to myself, what it will help me?"<sup>70</sup>

Survivors' reflections on their lives after the war and the persistent impact of wartime experiences on their lives precisely illustrate Joanna Beata Michlic's argument on how the testimonies of child survivors "shatter a commonly accepted notion that the Holocaust ended in 1945."<sup>71</sup> Wartime violence resonated strongly through their familial relationships across generations and continued to impact their health. Survivor Helen F., who was raped by her host during a one-night stay near the Czechoslovak border, suggested that this had long-term health consequences, leading her to confide only in her doctor after the war. She later spoke to her granddaughter immediately before her interview, who helped her prepare to record her experiences.<sup>72</sup> For Lynn N., who was raped by the boyfriend of the Polish woman sheltering her in the basement of a church near Warsaw, the way she raised her daughter was immensely impacted as a legacy of sexual violence. She mistrusted men and did not think that relationships with men could be any different from the violence that she had experienced.<sup>73</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In their USC interviews, survivors grapple with many of the same questions that preoccupy the historiography, such as where sexual violence perpetrated by aid-providers fits within the terminology of rescue and help, as well as in public-facing narratives of hiding, which remain so frequently dominated by the history of the Righteous. During her interview with Joan Ringelheim, one survivor attempted to reconcile the possibility that a group of Polish men could both ensure her survival and perpetrate sexual abuse against her: "[But] I have nobody to complain to. Everything has to be wonderful,

because that's what they want to hear. [...] I am happy, everything is fine, I'm alive. They took me from hell. Have to be grateful."<sup>74</sup> Phyllis L., whose Polish aid-provider attempted to take one of the Jewish girls in hiding upstairs, reflected near the end of her interview that the aid-provider ultimately must have had a good heart, since he did not throw the group out of hiding.<sup>75</sup> Struggling to confront the incongruity of the aid-provider as agent of abuse and rescue, certain survivors chose to omit sexual violence from their personal narratives of the Holocaust. A woman from Łódź, Tova, published an autobiography and did not include the sexual abuse in her book. "I was afraid that my children would read it," she explained, "and I did not want them to know. The men who raped me were also the ones who helped keep me alive."<sup>76</sup> Lillian B-N. was asked by the editors of her book to take out the descriptions of sexual assault perpetrated by her aid-provider, since it would "confuse the children as to the goodness of Christian rescuers." Reflecting on her aid-provider, Lillian later expressed that he "turned out to be not a very nice man" but "nice in terms of he kept us alive."<sup>77</sup>

Survivors' recollections of sexual violence in hiding perpetrated by aid-providers encapsulate the challenges of using terminology such as "rescuer" to characterize experiences in hiding and helper behavior. Perpetrators of sexual violence could, at the same time, offer shelter until liberation, or formerly reliable aid-providers could suddenly perpetrate violence or demand that those in hiding leave. As Lillian B-N. articulated, helpers could be "nice" and "not nice," both life-affirming and viciously violent, and their behavioral patterns were incredibly unpredictable. Interviews, which can provide space for survivors to retell their experiences in longer form, often resisting chronology or a particular narrative structure to reconstruct the past in a way that feels personally comprehensible or meaningful, offer a challenging perspective on Holocaust rescue narratives; they add much needed complexity to earlier literature focusing on the "righteous" or "altruistic" personality and prompt scholars to work toward new language and ways of writing histories of hiding.<sup>78</sup> What these narratives of sexual violence in hiding strongly convey is that shelter did not equate to safety whatsoever, nor was the greatest threat over once Jews survived the arduous path to securing shelter. Instead, survivors' memories of sexual violence in hiding depict aid-providers—even those who offered long-term and consistent shelter—as serious and persistent threats to the lives of Jews in hiding.

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## NOTES

1. Natalia Aleksium, "Gender and the Daily Lives of Jews in Hiding in Eastern Galicia," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 27 (2014): 43.
2. On October 15, 1941, *Generalgouverneur* Hans Frank declared that the penalty for sheltering Jews was death. Jan Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews: Betrayal and Murder in German-Occupied Poland* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 55.
3. Mnemonic spaces dedicated to help and rescue in Poland have centered on the Righteous Among the Nations. See the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and what Elżbieta Janicka refers to as its "symbolic topography," the Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk, the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews in World War II in Markowa, and Survivors' Park in Łódź. Elżbieta Janicka, "The Square of Polish Innocence: POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw and Its Symbolic Topography," *East European Jewish Affairs* 45, no. 2–3 (2015): 200–14; Jan Grabowski and Dariusz Libionka, "Distorting and Rewriting the History of the Holocaust in Poland: The Case of the Ulma Family Museum of Poles Saving Jews During World War II in Markowa," *Yad Vashem Studies* 45, no. 1 (2017): 29–60.
4. One poignant example of the social unacceptability of help appears in Jan Gross's *Neighbors*. Polish caregiver Karolina Sapetowa, sheltering the children she was a nanny for before the war, faced intense pressure from her neighbors in Witanowice to denounce the children before the community was collectively punished. As threats mounted and Sapetowa learned of her community's plan to kill the children, she pretended to drown them—effectively quelling her neighbors' protests. Illustrating what Gross deems wartime moral disintegration, he concludes: "We are left with a frightening realization that the population of a little village near Cracow sighed with relief only after its inhabitants were persuaded that one of their neighbors had murdered two small Jewish children." Jan Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Penguin Books, 2002), 158–61. For further discussion of this case, see Jennifer Marlow, "Life in Hiding and Beyond," in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939 to Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Brandeis University Press, 2017), 115–16.
5. For this project, I draw on a definition of sexual violence that includes rape, molestation, genital mutilation, forced impregnation, and abortion, as well as any threat to perpetrate such acts. My definition was drawn from Michelle Kelso's work, who refers to sexual violence as "an all-encompassing term, using it to describe unwanted sexualized acts forced upon victims that include, but are not limited to, rape." Michelle Kelso, "Romani Women and the Holocaust: Testimonies of Sexual Violence in Romanian-Controlled Transnistria," in *Women and Genocide: Gendered Experiences of Violence, Survival, and Resistance*, ed. JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz and Donna Gosbee



- (Women's Press, 2016), 40. I also discuss sexual barter as a form of violence, while recognizing—as Anna Hájková and Katya Gusarov have importantly argued—that relationships of barter were complex and could also involve pleasure and romance. I located these specific testimonies through the University of Southern California (USC) Visual History Archive's (VHA) index terms “hiding related sexual assaults,” “aid giver sexual assaults,” and “hiding-related sexual activities” and well as by the more general categories of “sexual assault” and “sexual assault fears.”
6. In a postwar testimony, a Polish woman living near Treblinka suggested that sexual violence was perpetrated by Poles against Jewish women discovered in hiding before they were denounced to the Germans. She recalled that around the time of a 1942 *Aktion*, “Not only Germans, but also Poles rushed to (*rzucili się*) plunder Jewish belongings. Some Poles, having caught a Jew in hiding somewhere, stripped him not only of gold and clothing, but even [robbed] young unmarried Jewish girls of their honor (*mlode panny żydowskie ze czci*), and then handed them over to the Germans.” Archiwum Akt Nowych, Towarzystwo Pamiętnikarstwa Polskiego w Warszawie, 2/2617/0/-/11155. Numerous other testimonies speak to sexual violence inflicted against Jews immediately before their murder. See Archiwum Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (AŻIH), 301/1185, testimony of Szynom Grinszpán from Sokołów Podlaski, as well as Barbara Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day. . . Jews Seeking Refuge in the Polish Countryside, 1942–1945* (Yad Vashem: 2016), 119.
  7. As Michlic writes, “From the point of view of hidden children, hard work, making yourself as useful and indispensable as possible, using wit and intelligence in dealing with the rescuer-abusers, and sheer luck were the only means that guaranteed their survival.” Joanna Beata Michlic, “What Does a Child Remember? Recollections of the War and the Early Postwar Period Among Child Survivors from Poland,” in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939 to Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Brandeis University Press, 2017), 161. See also Joanna Beata Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland: Survival and Polish-Jewish Relations During the Holocaust as Reflected in Early Postwar Recollections* (Yad Vashem, 2008); Joanna Beata Michlic, “The Aftermath and After: Memories of Child Survivors of the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies X: Back to the Sources*, ed. Sarah Horowitz (Northwestern University Press, 2012), 141–89; Joanna Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Kraków: A Microhistory of the Holocaust* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).
  8. Theresa de Langis, “Speaking Private Memory to Public Power: Oral History and Breaking the Silence on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence During the Khmer Rouge Genocide,” in Stacey Zembrzycki et al., ed., *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2018).
  9. Julie Hurst-Whitehouse, “Historicising Body Stories of Rape in Genocide Through the Feminist Concept of Agency,” paper presented at the Fifth International Graduate



- Students' Conference on Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University, October 17, 2023. See also the volume Zembrzycki et al., ed., *Beyond Women's Words*.
10. Annabelle Baldwin's work with the oral testimonies of Australian Holocaust survivors considers the interview as a moment when survivors cope with and process memories of sexual violence through the act of retelling. See Annabelle Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 16, no. 3 (2010): 112–34; Annabelle Baldwin, "And What Happened Next?: Emotions and Sexual Violence in Holocaust Interviews," *Oral History Australia Journal* 41 (2019): 32–42.
  11. Agnieszka Wierzecholska, "Helping, Denouncing, and Profiteering: A Process-Oriented Approach to Jewish-Gentile Relations in Occupied Poland from a Micro-Historical Perspective," *Holocaust Studies* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 34–58.
  12. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, "The Unrighteous Righteous and the Righteous Unrighteous," *Dapim: Studies on the Shoah* 24 (2010); Michlic, "What Does a Child Remember?," 161.
  13. See Ruta Sakowska, "Polska akcja pomocy Żydom," in *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej* (Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975), 335–53.
  14. The first deportation in the Lublin ghetto began on the morning of March 17, marking the start of *Aktion Reinhard*. Yitzhak Arad, *The Operation Reinhard Death Camps* (Indiana University Press, 2018); David Silberklang, *Gates of Tears: The Holocaust in the Lublin District* (Yad Vashem, 2013), 281–90.
  15. See especially Engelking, *Such a Beautiful Sunny Day*, and, on paid help, Jan Grabowski, *Rescue for Money: Paid Helpers in Poland, 1939–1945* (Yad Vashem, 2008).
  16. Michał Głowiński, *The Black Seasons* (Northwestern University Press, 2005), 41–43.
  17. Grabowski, *Rescue for Money*, 27–29.
  18. Shraga Feivel Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Węgrów: The Memoirs of a Survivor of the Step-by-Step Genocide in Poland* (Praeger, 1991), 93.
  19. Sonia G., interview 54116, interviewed by Avraham Fisher, VHA, USC, May 5, 1994, Toronto, ON, audio: 1:48:50, segment 26–28. Following Anna Hájková's reflection in this volume, I use survivors' full names provided in published accounts and the first name and last initials of women who recorded interviews with the USC VHA. Researchers can reference the interview number to access these testimonies through an institutional login or VHA access site.
  20. Naomi Samson, *Hide: A Child's View of the Holocaust* (University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 84–85.
  21. See Anna Hájková's contribution to this volume, "Why We Need a History of Prostitution in the Holocaust." Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter and the Holocaust," *German History* 39, no. 1 (2020): 132; Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 3 (2013):

503–33.

22. The diary of Molly Applebaum—who, as a twelve-year-old girl, hid alongside her teenage cousin on the property of a middle-aged Polish farmer—describes sex between the girls and the Polish farmer as a method of enticement to ensure further shelter against the background of mounting threats, a source of excitement among the monotony of daily life in hiding, a way to try to procure better food, and, overall, an attempt to persuade him to better attend to their care. Molly Applebaum, *Buried Words: The Diary of Molly Applebaum* (Azrieli Foundation, 2017). For further discussion of Applebaum's diary, see Zoë Waxman, "Buried Words: Reflections on the Diary of Molly Applebaum," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 27, no. 4 (2021): 473–80 as well as the other articles included in this journal issue.
23. Celia C., interview 14385, interviewed by Elise Arden, VHA, USC, April 22, 1996, Aventura, FL, audio: 1:48:18, segment 49.
24. Celia C., interview 14385, segment 60–61.
25. Discussing sexual barter during the Holocaust, Monika J. Flaschka suggests that, whenever possible, researchers should "determine what the historical subjects themselves call these relationships." Monika J. Flaschka, "Sexual Violence: Recovering a Suppressed History," in *A Companion to the Holocaust*, ed. Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 479. Celia's interview, in which the exchange of sex and intimacy for food is narrated secondhand, illustrates the inadequacy of attempting to label choices and behavior in the absence of the perspective of those who participated in sexual barter.
26. Celia C., interview 14385, segment 62.
27. Katya Gusarov, "Sexual Barter and Jewish Women's Efforts to Save Their Lives: Accounts from the Righteous Among the Nations Archives," *German History* 39, no. 1 (2021): 111.
28. Tema R., interview 26360, interviewed by Marvin Greenberg, VHA, USC, February 19, 1997, W. Palm Beach, FL, audio: 1:51:58, segment 16, 20.
29. Tema R., interview 26360, segment 18.
30. Tema R., interview 26360, segment 20.
31. Tema R., interview 26360, segment 20.
32. This is discussed further in Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*; Alina Skibińska, "Perpetrators' Self-Portrait: The Accused Village Administrators, Commune Heads, Fire Chiefs, Forest Rangers, and Gamekeepers," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 457–85; Andrzej Żbikowski, "'Night Guard': Holocaust Mechanisms in the Polish Rural Areas, 1942–1945," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 25, no. 3 (2011): 512–29; Tomasz Frydel, "Village Society and the Holocaust in the General Government: The Case of Kreis Debica," PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2021, among others.
33. AŻIH 301/4161, testimony of Szapke Grinberg from Sokółów Podlaski.

34. AŻIH 301/3865, testimony of Markus Halpern from Kraków.
35. AŻIH 301/4161.
36. Lillian R., interview 5990, interviewed by Florence Shuster, VHA, USC, August 24, 1995, Brooklyn, NY, audio: 1:40:02, segment 25.
37. Rachel G., interview 55341, VHA, USC, January 1, 2007, Edmonton, AB, audio: 2:09:48, segment 61.
38. Rachel G., interview 55341, segment 86.
39. Lillian B-N., interview 40074, interviewed by Irene Dodek, VHA, USC, April 14, 1998, Vancouver, BC, audio: 2:49:35, segment 16.
40. Charlotte H-E., interview 3296, interviewed by Phyllis Lee, VHA, USC Shoah Foundation, June 19, 1995, audio, 2:12:56, segment 39–40.
41. On the dissolution of family structures in hiding, see Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 53–54, 72.
42. Joan D., interview 49009, interviewed by Ileana Kenney, VHA, USC, December 12, 1998, Alexandria, VA, audio: 3:17:22, segment 78–80.
43. Joan D., interview 49009, segment 80.
44. Barbara Engelking, “‘We are entirely at their mercy’: The Everyday Experience of Hiding and Relations with Landlords on the Basis of Fela Fischbein’s Diary,” *Holocaust: Studies and Materials* (2010): 128–50.
45. Ann K., interview 55413, interviewed by Melanie Morningstar, VHA, USC, June 20, 1994, Montreal QC, audio: 1:37:07, segment 83–84.
46. Ann K., interview 55413, segment 84.
47. As articulated by Joanna Beata Michlic, “Some children were able to recognize the vulnerability of their rescuers and protectors in the environment in which they lived. They could grasp their rescuers’ various fears and the challenging situations with which they had to cope.” Michlic, *Jewish Children in Nazi-Occupied Poland*, 80.
48. Bielawski, *The Last Jew from Węgrów*, 82.
49. Phyllis L., interview 31585, interviewed by Lillian Gewirtzman, VHA, USC, July 31, 1997, Deer Park, NY, audio: 3:05:00, segment 19–20.
50. For more on sexual violence and alcohol in the Holocaust, see Edward B. Westermann, *Drunk on Genocide: Alcohol and Mass Murder in Nazi Germany* (Cornell University Press, 2021), 87–113.
51. Phyllis L., interview 31585, segment 20.
52. Lillian F., interview 42816, VHA, USC, May 13, 1993, Bloomfield Hills, MI, audio: 2:05:26, segment 72–73.
53. Lillian F., interview 42816, segment 72–73.
54. Lillian F., interview 42816, segment 73.
55. Leah S., interview 41850, interviewed by Rosalyn Livshin, VHA, USC, May 24, 1998, Manchester, UK, audio: 5:03:59, segment 109.

56. Leah S., interview 41850, segment 110.
57. Leah S., interview 41850, segment 110.
58. On postwar taboos surrounding sexual violence, see Zoë Waxman, "Rape and Sexual Abuse in Hiding," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 175. Furthermore, as Carli Snyder discusses in her contribution to this volume, interviewers played a crucial role "in eliciting these memories or curtailing their recounting"—at best, offering an encouraging, open, and patient space for survivors to share. Carli Snyder, "'Did That Happen to You?' Addressing Rape Perpetrated by Red Army Soldiers Against Jewish Women Holocaust Survivors in Shoah Foundation Trainings and Interviews." Initially, the USC's interview guide did not include questions on gender, sexuality, and sexual violence, and I have encountered interviewers in the VHA collection who, while survivors attempt to share their experiences, push back against the inclusion of sexual violence in narratives of the Holocaust. Anna Hájková, "Why We Need a Queer History of the Holocaust," *History Workshop*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/why-we-need-a-queer-history-of-the-holocaust/>; Snyder, "'Did That Happen to You?'"
59. Fay K., interview 10131, interviewed by Ruth Resnikoff, VHA, USC, December 15, 1995, Delray Beach, FL, audio: 1:57:59, segment 47.
60. Janine G., interview 28452, interviewed by Carol Hurst, VHA, USC, February 24, 1997, Slough, UK, audio: 2:20:37, segment 11.
61. Janine G., interview 28452, segment 12.
62. Ann K., interview 55413, segment 84.
63. Rachel G., interview 55341, segment 1.
64. Lillian R., interview 5990, segment 26–27.
65. Lillian R., interview 5990, segment 26.
66. Lillian R., interview 5990, segment 27–28.
67. Esther M., interview 24771, interviewed by Meryl Loonin, VHA, USC, January 15, 1997, Newton, MA, audio: 2:44:33, segment 17.
68. Esther M., interview 24771, segment 16.
69. Esther M., interview 24771, segment 16.
70. Esther M., interview 24771, segment 16.
71. Joanna B. Michlic, "A Young Person's War: The Disrupted Lives of Children and Youth," in *A Companion to the Holocaust*, ed. Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl (John Wiley & Sons, 2020), 303. For more on this theme of aftermaths of war and sexual violence in the context of the Holocaust, see Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth Century History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
72. Helen F., interview 49493, segment 46–47.
73. Lynn N., interview 15332, interviewed by Ann Page, May 21, 1996, USC, VHA, audio:

- 1:54:30, segment 61–64.
74. Joan Ringelheim, “The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Yale University Press, 1998), 343.
  75. Phyllis L., interview 31585. Joanna Beata Michlic describes the persistent gratitude of survivors in letters and financial exchanges with their rescuers after the war. See Joanna B. Michlic, “‘I will never forget what you did for me during the war’: Rescuer-rescuee relationships in the light of postwar correspondence in Poland, 1945–1949,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 39, no. 2 (2011): 169–207.
  76. Rachel Lev-Wiesel and Susan Weinger, *Hell Within Hell: Sexually Abused Child Holocaust Survivors, the Comorbidity of the Traumata* (University Press of America, 2011), 69.
  77. Lillian B.-N., interview 40074, segment 16.
  78. For examples of literature focused on the history of the righteous and themes of altruism, see Samuel P. Oliner, *Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Free Press, 1992); Mordecai Paldiel, *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust* (KTAV Publishing House, 1993); Bill Tammeus and Jacques Cukierkorn, *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* (University of Missouri Press, 2009); Władysław Bartoszewski and Zofia Lewinówna, *Righteous Among Nations: How Poles Helped the Jews, 1939–1945* (Earls court Publications, 1969).

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# “EVEN THE PARTISANS WERE NOT SAFE”

## SEXUAL ABUSE OF JEWISH MINORS BY PARTISANS IN OCCUPIED BELARUS<sup>1</sup>

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**P**OST-SOVIET MEMORY APPROACHES THE SURVIVAL OF THE JEWS HELPED by the Soviet partisans as the ultimate rescue from the Nazi terror. Although almost all Soviet Jews who came under German occupation were killed, among them about 800,000 Belarusian Jews (roughly 80 percent of the prewar population), some of them managed to survive in the forests. Some Jews went into the forests on their own, whether to participate in partisan warfare or to find shelter. Jews survived not only in the Soviet divisions of the partisans, but also in the Jewish units (Shalom Zorin), in the family units (like the Bielski), or all alone. The presence of the armed Soviet partisans made it possible for thousands of Jews to fight against the Nazis or to seek refuge in the forests. About 15,000 of them, including minors, managed to survive among the partisans.<sup>2</sup> However, the Soviet partisan movement took no direct action on behalf of Jews. And it was precisely the weaker among Jews, women and children, who had difficulty in gaining access to partisans and surviving among them.

Despite there being resolutions passed by the Belorussian Communist Party Committee in February 1943 calling on the partisans to protect Soviet citizens, the partisans were not pleased to accept women and even less willing to accept children. It is one of many Soviet myths that the partisan movement was protecting the local population from the terror of the occupation or that there was a large number of children (25,000) among them.<sup>3</sup> Although further instructions had been issued to the commanders of the partisan brigades and detachments with the request to incorporate women into the partisan movement and to protect civilians, these did not concern the protection of the Jews. In general, the partisans were reluctant to accept vulnerable women and children.

In many respects, these women and children were seen as an additional burden that not only posited further risk to partisan units' survival but also fueled concerns over the limitations of partisans' resistance against the enemy. Another problem was growing antisemitism, misogyny, and sexism among partisans.<sup>4</sup> The relationship between Jews and partisans was ambivalent, and a strong antisemitic stereotype about the inability of Jews to fight was prevailing. Jewish women were doubly discriminated against and endangered: as Jews and as women.<sup>5</sup> Although an unknown number of women managed to find shelter among partisans, many others were coerced into sexual relationships they did not consent to, cast out, abused, or even killed.

This chapter will show that the victims were not only adults but also minors. An unknown number of victims of abuse, including sexual abuse, were children who were reluctant to talk about this experience.<sup>6</sup> Whereas there has been considerable scholarship on the precarious situation of women in the Soviet Red Army and more limited work on women, and especially Jewish women among the partisans, the history of minors in the forests has hardly been investigated in historical studies. There are only a few, usually Western historians, who question the idealized image of Soviet partisans as ultimate rescuers and who differentiate the experiences of children from those of adults.<sup>7</sup>

We now know that not only gender but also age was a critical determinant of survival. On the one hand, the younger the age, the greater the child's vulnerability and dependency. The special need for protection attributed to the childhood phase of life is linked to the greater physical and emotional vulnerability of children. In Nazi logic, however, being young did not protect them from violence and arbitrariness. A child, and a Jewish one at that, was considered "worthless." While Jews who were able to work were allowed to live for a short time, the status of "child" meant certain death. Children of various ages, including infants, were systematically murdered from August 1941 at the latest. On the other hand, several studies have shown that even the extremely vulnerable Jewish children were capable of acting to survive. As paradoxical as it may sound, agency became all the more evident in the case of Jewish children who were exposed to the greatest violence and humiliation. To survive, children developed incredible powers of action and independence, which included enduring hunger in silence, suppressing emotions, assuming responsibility, reversing roles within families, or consciously separating families. The Jewish children sentenced to death in particular proved to be less passive than previously assumed by researchers. A child had different survival resources than an adult and often a much stronger will to use them to survive.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, this should not lead to the misunderstanding that children have higher survival chances than adults. But age played no less a role than a gender.<sup>9</sup>

Age has also mattered in relation to Soviet society. Being underage did not necessarily protect but, conversely, could facilitate more extreme power asymmetries and abuse.<sup>10</sup> This chapter shows that rescuing Jewish girls by partisans in forests could be

accompanied by extreme forms of violence and that even minors were targets of sexual assault by their protectors, who could become abusers. As the other contributions in this book reveal, rescue often had a temporary character. Aid, protection, and even liberation could be accompanied by violence and exploitation, marking the complex ambivalent character of rescuing not only women but also children.<sup>11</sup>

Since childhood is a social phenomenon and is historized differently depending on the time of study and the society, any definition of a “child” and “childhood” is relative. This concept is not linked to distinct and universal age phases but rather to structural characteristics that imply power relations. Accordingly, the definition of who is still a child and who is adolescent or already an adult varies depending on time and the particular social and cultural context.<sup>12</sup> Even though there are no universally valid criteria to distinguish children from adults, when I use the term “child,” I mean the age of sixteen and under, although Soviet civil law defined all those under the age of eighteen as “minors” and therefore as children. Following the limit of sixteen years is a functional delimitation that corresponds to the Soviet sources used for this research. At the same time, I would like to emphasize that the phase of childhood also had fluid boundaries in the Soviet understanding<sup>13</sup> and was massively deformed by the war, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

To fully illuminate the experiences of sexual abuse of underage girls, this section will first describe the peculiarities of the partisan movement in Belarus and then focus on the difficulties that girls faced to be included and accepted in a partisan unit. This essay addresses the agency of children and adolescent girls in the face of the threat of rape. It will detail the strategies that young girls resorted to in order to evade rape by partisans. The next part will discuss the reasons behind the persisting silencing of the studied topic. Finally, the chapter will examine the reasons behind violence against minors. A comprehensive explanation of this violence cannot be offered here. However, this text argues that accounts of sexual abuse should be seen not only in terms of misogynic masculinity among Soviet men but also in relation to the demoralization of wartime society and the generational relationships of the time, which underwent severe distortions due to the war and violence.

The lack of testimonies discussing sexual violence represents a challenge in researching this taboo topic. Most of the available testimonies were collected in the 1990s by the USC Shoah Foundation, USHMM, Yad Vashem, the Blavatnik Archive, or by Holocaust scholars like Nechama Tec in her pioneering books about Jewish women among Belarusian partisans. In addition, there are some memoirs published since the 1990s. As with all oral and written ego-documents, the recorded memories have often been altered by time and social context. Many survivors chose not to share their traumatic experience, in some cases due to missing empathetic listeners.<sup>14</sup> Above all, however, writing a history of survival and sexual violence means using the testimony of the women

themselves to give voice to their own experiences. The limits of the research posed by the lack of testimonies on sexual violence, change of memories over time, or ethical obligation to prioritize the voice of the victims can be partly soothed by the additional research of official records of Soviet partisans.<sup>15</sup> In this regard, the research based on a thorough examination of the available oral testimonies and official records reveals the presence of extreme asymmetries of power due to gender, Jewishness, and age.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The experiences of Jews in the occupied Soviet Union were similar to those of Jews elsewhere in Nazi-ruled Europe as they were subjected to physical extermination. What sets the genocide in this part of Europe apart was its rapid execution before the eyes of the majority population, which left Jews few possibilities for survival. Unlike elsewhere in Western Europe, Jews from these areas were not deported to concentration or extermination camps; they were shot inside the ghettos or at execution sites near the places where they lived. More than half of the Jews had already been murdered in 1942.<sup>16</sup>

The ghettoization and mass murder in ghettos, however, was rather decentralized and unfurled in waves and differently across the region. Belarus was conquered by the end of August 1941 and was largely beyond the front line until the liberation in the summer of 1944. During the entire occupation, Belarus remained territorially fragmented and divided into a civilian (General Commissariat of White Ruthenia, GCW) and a military administration.<sup>17</sup> This division, the rapid occupation, and the relative distance of the civilian-administered areas from the front had catastrophic consequences for the Jews. From the very start of the occupation, Jews were subjected to a wave of looting and sporadic killings. The rapidly moving *Einsatzgruppen* (paramilitary death squads), supported by *Wehrmacht* units, conducted several killing actions directed against suspected communists and Jews in leading positions or “intellectuals.” Women and children had not been the main target yet. Together with skilled workers they were placed in more than ninety ghettos established by the German authorities in the GCW. The ghettoization in the western part significantly differed from ghettoization in the eastern part of the country. Although it was accompanied by the mass murder of the Jewish population as in the east, skilled workers were often selected and sent to forced labor camps or retained in remnant ghettos, serving a variety of labor needs.<sup>18</sup> The ghettoization continued until the spring of 1942. By this time, most of the Jews in the east already had been killed.

Compared to western Belarus, the registration, discrimination, and extermination of the Jewish population in the military administration began much earlier.<sup>19</sup> The

murderous activities initially targeted the male population, but already in the fall of 1941, the killings in the military administration were extended to women and children.<sup>20</sup> If in the GCW some workers with their families were left alive for another year, the Jews in the east of Belarus did not have such a "grace period." If the ghettos were established in this region at all, it was only for the purpose of registering the victims before execution. Most Jews in the Central Army Region were killed between the fall of 1941 and the winter of 1942. Therefore, only very few had the time and the chance to escape execution and go into hiding in these parts of the country. The situation in the west of the country was slightly better. But the options for survival were limited everywhere. Large-scale killings and ghetto liquidations were also the order of the day in the GCW, but it was not until the fall of 1942 that the pace of "liquidation" accelerated in some cases as part of larger anti-partisan operations. By the spring of 1943, there were only a few ghettos left, including Minsk, Lida Navahrudak, and Hlubokae.

Escaping from the ghettos to the partisans was the only viable means of survival. In Belarus, where the partisan movement held the greatest strength, a considerable number of Jews were trying to find refuge in heavily forested areas. However, for many Jews in the east of Belarus this rescue option came too late as the partisan movement began to gain strength during the spring of 1942. Timing mattered. Military groups and detachments were formed on the territory of Belarus, as well as other Soviet territories, as early as the summer of 1941. They included scattered officers and soldiers of the Red Army who called themselves partisans. However, as Polish historian Bogdan Musiał shows in his extensive study, the Soviet leadership was not prepared for a partisan struggle and was so surprised by the Wehrmacht's rapid attack that the Soviet authorities, especially in the western districts, had no time to build up appropriate underground structures. The western areas were not only far from the front line, but they were also permeated with anti-Soviet sentiment. Therefore, the first partisan groups were formed mostly in the eastern districts and especially in the Vitsebsk area, where, owing to the so-called "Surazh Gate,"<sup>21</sup> there was a direct connection to the Red Army units and better coordination of supply of weapons, technology, and medicines.

The partisan movement expanded between the fall of 1942 and 1943 in the entire territory of occupied Belarus.<sup>22</sup> At the beginning of 1944 there were 181,392 partisans active in the Belarusian territory, organized in 1,116 detachments. Considering the whole period of occupation, the number of partisans amounted to about 282,548. However, the partisan movement was spread unevenly in the territory. In January 1944, 30 percent of the partisans were active in the western areas, due to large forest and swamp areas. The remaining partisans operated in the eastern areas where they formed partisan zones, or closed areas controlled by the partisans.

Given the uneven partisan activity across Belarus, the structural conditions for the escape of Jews to partisans differed from region to region. As Israeli historian Yitzhak

Arad correctly notes, the survival of the Jews depended on three conditions: the size of the forest, the possession of weapons, and the will of local Soviet partisan groups to accept the Jews.<sup>23</sup> The better topographical conditions in the west, but also the fact that most of the Jews in the east had already been murdered by the beginning of 1942, explains the high concentration of Jewish partisans and individual groups in the forests of Lipichany, Rudniki, Narach, and Naliboki in the west of the BSSR. In the west, Jews had had more time to organize an escape, and there were also better geographic conditions due to the large forest areas, while the number of partisans *per se* remained relatively small. However, the presence of the Polish Home Army's groups operating in the region since the turn of 1942/43 complicated the situation on the ground. In 1943/44, a local Polish-Soviet partisan war broke out in the Vilna area and near Baranavichy. The relations between Polish groups with a high degree of antisemitic attitudes and Jewish partisans, some of whom acted in family or armed units in the Naliboki forest massif, were rather tense. South of Pinsk, on the other hand, the Soviet-Ukrainian conflict dominated. In addition to the conflict over the respective territories, there were always tensions between the supply squads of different partisan groups.<sup>24</sup>

Despite tensions, widespread antisemitism, and the anti-Jewish prejudice, which significantly affected partisan-Jewish relations on the ground, most Jewish partisans were concentrated in the west.<sup>25</sup> However, not all groups were fighting units. Of all the family units, the best documented are the purely Jewish groups of the Bielski brothers and Shalom (Semion) Zorin, who operated in the Baranavichy region and took in ghetto refugees of all ages. Both were the largest and best-known groups, which saved the lives of about 2,000 Jews. But not all women and girls were able to join Jewish groups, and not all Soviet partisans viewed the protection of civilians as part of their mission. Most Soviet Jews remaining in the occupied territories had been killed and could not be saved. Even if some were able to escape the ghetto and were lucky to find partisans, they were not always welcomed and taken in.

Given the complexities of partisan activity and the challenges described above, what were the factors that played a role in admitting children and youth into partisan groups, and how many of them were included? According to official figures, children and young people under the age of eighteen made up 9.48 percent of the partisans in Belarus. In figures, this amounted to 25,003 minors, 18,467 of whom joined the Red Army troops in the summer of 1944. According to these statistics, 1,237 partisans under the age of eighteen were killed; 917 went missing or were taken prisoner by the Germans.<sup>26</sup> According to very conservative calculations by Belarusian historians, there were around 850 Jewish children under the age of fifteen among the partisans, with the proportion of young people between the ages of twelve and fifteen being the largest at 622.<sup>27</sup> However, how many of them were girls remains unknown.

The inclusion of children and young people in partisan groups was generally not easy at all. Finding partisans, being taken in by partisan groups, and surviving in the forest was often even more difficult than escaping from the ghetto. This challenge was particularly great for Jews who had previously lived in a city. Children who had been “ransomed” from the ghetto by their parents with the last of their savings and entrusted to people who were supposed to lead them to the partisans were often deceived out of greed, deliberately led into the deep forest and left to their fate there.<sup>28</sup> In any case, there was no guarantee that they would be accepted into a partisan unit. A possession of a gun and weapons was often the price of being taken in. And even if the refugees arrived in the forest with a weapon, it could take several weeks or even a whole year to find the connection and to be accepted by partisans. The family of Mikhail Sosensky from the village of Ilya, northwest of Minsk, lived in the forest for almost a year, constantly searching for a partisan group willing to take them in. The fact that the family stayed alive and, after several attempts, was taken in by a unit of the “People’s Avengers” brigade was due to a lot of luck, but also to the perseverance and inventiveness of fourteen-year-old Mikhail, who learned how to produce pitch (resin) in large quantities. This natural product was in great demand among the partisans as a medicine against typhus. Although partisans visited Mikhail several times due to their need of the resin, with the promise that he would soon be taken in, it took six months before he and his family were accepted and included in the partisan brigade.<sup>29</sup>

Children and people unfit for combat in general represented an additional burden. Fear of espionage was also widespread. There were many official Soviet reports about children between the ages of eight and twelve being arrested for “spying” or of girls suffering from syphilis who were supposed to infect as many partisans as possible. Rumors of German espionage schools that recruited Jews to infiltrate the detachments circulated widely.<sup>30</sup> Foreign children were primarily suspected of being spies and were not infrequently shot.<sup>31</sup> As a result, it was almost impossible for Jews as outsiders to enter units unless they were known personally by the partisans. Seven-year-old Esfir Lupyan fled with her mother from the Minsk ghetto to the forest in the fall of 1943, but owing to pervasive suspicion and antisemitism, they were not taken in by any partisans and instead managed to survive on their own in the forests until liberation.<sup>32</sup>

Partisans were also afraid that children who might be arrested would quickly reveal the partisans’ whereabouts. For this reason alone, it is not surprising that the children registered with partisans were mostly their own and belonged to family relatives or good acquaintances.<sup>33</sup> Taking in strangers, especially if they were minors, was not a matter of course. A successful escape from the ghetto did not always mean arrival in a partisan unit. The paths of Jewish refugees to partisan units were usually long and dangerous with multiple detours. And for many minors and girls, in particular, the search for refuge was pending the threat of rape or even death.



## EXPERIENCES OF RAPE AND SEXUAL COERCION AMONG THE PARTISANS

Itke Braun, born in 1931 in Hlubokae, was twelve years old when her mother and father, with her little sister, were killed in front of her eyes during the liquidation of the Hlubokae ghetto on August 20, 1943. More than 3,000 Jews were shot or burned alive, mostly in or close to the ghetto on this day, but several of them managed to escape under cover of darkness.<sup>34</sup> Itke and her brother survived the massacre too but got lost on the same night (she never saw him again). Itke fled into the forest and encountered a unit consisting of local men who, according to her account, raped her.<sup>35</sup> Often girls like her were shot after sexual abuse took place, but she survived.<sup>36</sup> This act of rape, however, was not the last that she suffered. While in a documentary made in the 2000s she spoke of being raped right at her first encounter with partisans, in an earlier interview with Yad Vashem in 1993 and in a conversation with Nechama Tec, she also described a later rape, apparently in the same unit. According to her testimony, despite the violence first inflicted on her, she was accepted by the unit commander and his wife and placed under their protection. The couple even offered her the prospect of adoption and treated her well. However, during an air raid by the Germans, she lost her protectors and was raped by another man from the same unit.<sup>37</sup> Her unit was almost completely destroyed and she never saw her adoptive “parents” again. Whether she was raped twice or misrepresented her experience can no longer be clarified. In both interviews, however, it becomes apparent how difficult it was for her to talk about it at all. She told no one about the incident. But inside she had been broken forever: “To this day I see things through my rape. [...] I never enjoy sex, never,” she told Nechama Tec.<sup>38</sup>

Multiple eyewitness accounts, including those by men, state that women and girls were always in danger of being raped in both non-Jewish and Jewish partisan units. There are several reports of cases in which women were exposed to harassment, raped, and then shot dead.<sup>39</sup> Even in the family camps and Jewish units like the Bielski partisans, whose main mission was Jewish rescue rather than combat, women lived in partly coercive sexual relationships with men.<sup>40</sup> Protection through the man, often the commander of the unit, was crucial for all women and girls in every partisan group whether Jewish or not. Maria Gilmovskaya, who was in the Soviet unit, was twenty when she escaped the Mir ghetto with her sixteen-year-old sister Bella. She had no protective partner and openly admitted in an interview to being raped multiple times. Her young sister Bella was killed by the security commander when she tried to escape his advances.<sup>41</sup> Another girl, Sonia Orbuch, joined the Fedorov Partisan Formation at the age of seventeen. According to her, the wife of the battalion commander took her immediately aside to give her some advice and recommended that she get into a relationship with a man in power as soon as possible to protect herself. But because Sonia had her family

by her side, she could rely on their protection. The situation for other women was quite different. "The women had it very bad," Sonia stressed in an interview.<sup>42</sup> And often their own families could not always protect them. Sonia also recalled a young man who was in love with her. He pretended to be her boyfriend, which Sonia's parents agreed upon as a strategy to protect her. "I was lucky [...] I was never touched," Sonia said, emphasizing her special position in the unit compared to the other, less fortunate women. While little girls were dependent on finding protection in a substitute parent, like Itke, adolescent girls were seeking the protection of a potential partner, with whom they usually (but not always) also had a sexual relationship.

But even a family or sexual relationship with a member of the partisan group did not guarantee protection from assaults, and some additional steps had to be taken to avoid assault. For example, Miriam Brysk, who was with her father in the Soviet partisan unit, describes the danger of being raped at age eight on several pages of her memoir. To protect her from potential rape by partisans, her parents tried to make her look like a boy: Her head was shaved, she wore boy's clothing, and she received a pistol to protect herself. "I felt safer and more powerful pretending I was a boy," Miriam stated.<sup>43</sup> Although her father was highly respected among Soviet partisans as a doctor, this alone was probably not enough to protect his young daughter from possible sexual assaults.

Those who came to the forest without parents, older brothers, or other protection were permanently exposed to the danger of being abused and murdered. Malka Klein from Navahrudak was fourteen years old when she was raped by men from a Soviet partisan group. She was a Jewish survivor left to her own devices and as such was subjected to several attempts of rape.<sup>44</sup> Darlene A., who hid with her mother in the Belarussian forests when she was eleven years old, also recalled: "I remember the only problem was when my mother had to leave me alone in the forests to go and get something to eat. Even the Russian partisans were bad because they would catch you and rape you, and kill you. [...] Even the Partisans were not safe. Jewish Partisans would kill other Russian partisans for their boots and things like that."<sup>45</sup> Historians can only work with surviving testimonies. We will never know how many women and girls were raped or even killed by those whose shelter they sought.

These examples do not mean, of course, that all women or minors among the partisans were sexually abused. Compared to ghettos, where Jews could become victims of mass shootings at any time, the forest and the partisans still provided the only safe place for physical survival for Jewish women of all ages. And there are many examples of how Soviet partisans saved the lives of female youth and protected them. Sixteen-year-old Lialia Bruk kept a diary after she escaped the Minsk ghetto and found protection in the 2nd Suvorov partisan division together with her mother, who was a doctor. Lialia does not address the harassment of the partisan women by the men. The situation of women among the partisans can be discerned between the lines of her diary: "The girls

who peel potatoes with us come from the Smolensk region. [...] They say they are happy to see us partisans. And yet they are a little afraid of partisans.”<sup>46</sup> At the age of sixteen, Lialia was interested in the opposite sex and describes the insistence of boys to “go out with her,” only to state at the end of the diary: “The boys don’t want to be friends with us either, friendship with a girl seems impossible to them.”<sup>47</sup> Lialia’s entries do not suggest any experience of violence, and we do not know what exactly was the reason for her disappointed comments about the boys. But this diary shows that life was not easy for young women among the partisans.

The testimony of another girl, Florence Gitelman Eisen, reveals explicit and constant fear of being abused. Florence was fourteen years old when she lost her father in the woods during a German air raid. She was found by a group of partisans “of Asian appearance” — as she recounted — who cared for her for several months. Contrary to her fears, they did nothing to her: “They watched me for quite a while. Maybe a few months. They didn’t ask for nothing. They didn’t touch my body. I remember every night, I felt a hand on my back, you know. And I said uh-uh, they’re going to do something to me, but they didn’t. They took off the shirt, the jacket from their back and they covered me. [...] They really didn’t touch me sexually; they didn’t.”<sup>48</sup>

As these examples demonstrate, girls and women were always aware of the danger of becoming victims of sexual violence. But despite the dangers they knew about, many of them made conscious decisions to go into the forest. And they developed various strategies to avoid the abuse. Protection by their parents or a higher-ranking member in the partisan hierarchy was usually essential but not available to all. For most women and young female teenagers relationships with the powerful men of the unit, often called “marriage,” were common, whereas younger girls hoped to be “adopted” and protected as daughters by one of the influential men. Particularly noteworthy are examples when girls tried to hide their gender like Miriam Brysk. Miriam changed her appearance and pretended to be a boy so as not to attract attention as potential prey.

As these examples show, both underage girls and sexually mature adolescents and women were aware of the dangers of becoming victims of sexualized violence, to which they responded with different strategies depending on their age. However, their actual experiences also differed depending on the discipline within the partisan unit. The number of acts of violence depended largely on how effectively the leadership acted and whether discipline could be enforced. In some detachments, there was strict discipline, and there are some sources that indicate that male partisans were shot for rapes of female civilians in nearby villages or of female partisans.<sup>49</sup> This is how a male partisan, Viktor Skarakhod, describes the incident in his unit in his memoir. After the harassment of a partisan toward a woman in the group became known, the commander decided to shoot the man. This was intended as a lesson for the others and to maintain discipline. However, the man remained alive only because the woman concerned took

pity on him and changed her statement to protect him.<sup>50</sup> Other commanders refused to accept women and girls into their units in principle to avoid any potential problems between the sexes.<sup>51</sup> In some groups, “marriage” (meaning relationships between men and women in the unit) was even forbidden to avoid all the risks associated with it, including pregnancy.<sup>52</sup> However, the grievances were so widespread and not limited to Belarus that at the level of the Central Committee of the Komsomol of the USSR, they discussed the disregard for the role of women in the partisan movement and drew up recommendations for changing the situation of female partisans.<sup>53</sup> A bill was even drafted to provide for better arming and training of women and the establishment of women’s partisan detachments to eliminate gender “grievances” in the units.<sup>54</sup> However, the draft was not implemented and hence the problem was not solved.

Of course, there were exceptions and positive examples of partisan units wherein women were treated with respect. Overall, however, conditions were anything but women- or children-friendly. Promiscuity was just as prevalent, if not more so, among partisans as in society as a whole.<sup>55</sup> As a former partisan in an interview stated, there was “too much sex” in the forests.<sup>56</sup> In general, however, we know far too little about how the relationships between men and women among partisans were formed, not just because only very few of those who survived considered it worth remembering and reporting, but also because rape, violence, consensual sex, and “marriage” among the partisans had no place in the Soviet narrative of the heroic partisan struggle.

## UNTOLD STORIES

One Jewish survivor confessed to Nechama Tec at the end of a long interview that she too had been raped as a fourteen-year-old girl by one partisan, who stopped her in the forest after she ran away from the ghetto. The exclusion of this experience from the main narrative and the request to remain anonymous demonstrates how difficult it is for women to talk about it decades later.<sup>57</sup> Reflecting on her work with survivors and testimonies, Nechama Tec concluded: “Judging by the hesitation I encountered among interviewees to recount these coercive sexual experiences, I have to assume that most of these stories will die with the victims.” Itke, too, just like other women, preferred to keep silent rather than tell her story.

There were several interwoven factors at different levels—individual, national, and institutional—that have prevented women and girls from talking about it and that favored and cemented this silence. First, as Marta Havryshko reveals in her study about assaults of women in the Soviet legal process after the war, the “rape culture” of Soviet society played a significant role in the Soviet (non)response to wartime rape at the official level. “A range of perceptions, stereotypes, and myths about rape” were decisive for

downplaying the sexual assaults of women in the legal process, especially if the rapists were men at higher political positions.<sup>58</sup> While there were many cases of vigilante justice and executions of perpetrators by unit commanders during the war, sexualized violence was not a subject of Soviet justice after the war, as it wasn't in other European countries. Second, there was growing antisemitism in the late Stalinist period that silenced Jewish people generally. It was not permitted to talk about the specificity of Jewish experiences, about the systematic extermination of Jews, or the high price of their survival. Most survivors, including children, tried to suppress their memories even inside their own families. Many family members did not even know what happened to their wives or mothers during the war or how they survived the Shoah.<sup>59</sup> Third, the emergence of the myth of immaculate partisans versus the resistance of the whole people against the occupiers after the war was another significant factor. In the Soviet myth of heroic partisans, there was no space for rape or "wild marriages." In all the books and films, women were portrayed as equal partisans, and not a word was said about their precarious situation. This image still dominates standard works and textbooks in Belarus today.<sup>60</sup> Fourth, the women's self-identification with the partisans also played a role. In her study of female Belarusian partisans, Anika Walke shows how much the narratives of Jewish survivors are shaped by expectations of the official narrative and self-identification with the resistance to this day and how these conditions led to the marginalization and concealment of such taboo experiences as sexual violence.<sup>61</sup> Finally, immediately after the war, the official Soviet discourse placed women back in their traditional role as mothers so that their experiences as combatants in the army or among partisans were not at the forefront of public discourse. Women were expected to preserve family unity and remain silent about the violence inflicted on them. Some women kept quiet about their wartime life among partisans because they were viewed as "married women" in the eyes of others. They remained silent so they would not be blamed.<sup>62</sup>

No less relevant are individual factors such as age, social status, or character. Sexual violence is an individual and intimate part of her own experience that not every girl and woman wants to or can share, maybe also due to the absence of proper language and an understanding of what happened. As Itke described in her conversation with Nechama Tec, she did not understand what happened to her when she was raped; she only knew that it hurt her.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, a plethora of factors played into the "silence and concealment"<sup>64</sup> of rape in memory. It is no coincidence that the few available testimonies were collected in emigration and only since the 1990s. All the women quoted above have spoken about rape or fears of being raped outside Belarus.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, recalling negative experiences and relationships with men is still difficult for most interviewed women. One can observe the ways women avoid this topic or directly refuse to speak about the relations between men and women among the partisans after being asked. For example, Jewish

survivor Raisa Livshits refused to talk about her conflict-ridden relationship with a partisan in the Jewish unit during the interview. With the sentence “That’s all I can say about it,” she made it clear to the interviewer that she did not want to talk about it anymore.<sup>66</sup>

However, it is worth noting that the topic of sexual assault was absent not only in the context of the Soviet Union but also in the broader public and academic community. The social framework conditions allowing discussion of the painful topic of sexual violence changed slowly; however, they remained unchanged in most countries of the former Soviet Union. The research there continues to be entangled with political interests and national myths. In Belarusian historiography, which is going through a deep crisis following the 2020 repressive turn of the Lukashenka regime, the narrative of the “genocide of the Belarusian people” has been gaining traction, levelling the singularity of the Holocaust and marginalizing gender approaches.

## REFLECTIONS AND INTERPRETATIONS: AGE AND GREY ZONES OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR IN THE SOVIET UNION

The precarious situation of adult women in partisan units has been researched quite extensively. For example, the phenomenon of forced marriages with men higher in the hierarchy, usually officers, is well known, with a blurred line between consensual and forced relationships.<sup>67</sup> There are also some excellent studies on gender relations in the Red Army and among Soviet partisans, showing that chauvinistic and violent masculinity was a deeply rooted product of the war. Sexual violence was perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers not only against Soviet women but also in liberated and Axis territories, as some scholars address in this book,<sup>68</sup> and especially in Germany.<sup>69</sup> However, the explanations for the violence differ. While the rapes in the Allied territories are often attributed to feelings of revenge, this argument is of little use in cases where the victims were Jewish or concentration camp survivors. The same applies to the areas liberated from Nazi rule in general and the Soviet territories. Some scholars have examined the relationship between rape and masculinity.<sup>70</sup> Sexual violence was widespread among Soviet soldiers as a “resource” for self-assurance as men and as soldiers (see Monika J. Flaschka’s chapter in this volume). Through the use of violence, masculine gender identity was reinforced and hierarchies were reestablished and communicated to victims who were not only foreign “enemy” women, but also Soviet female soldiers or civilians.<sup>71</sup> German historian Kerstin Bischl argues that the situation of women worsened as the war progressed due to the dynamization of gender relations against the backdrop of

the brutal war and peer pressure. In the case of Jewish women in the partisan units, antisemitism and the extreme vulnerability of Jewish girls also played a role.<sup>72</sup> Although the above-mentioned scholarly views underscore the critical role of gender, masculinity, and antisemitism in violence against women, they do not often help us grasp the full picture behind the abuse of children.

Therefore, in the remaining pages, I would like to add another observation that may help us better interpret the sexual abuse in the wartime Soviet Union. The German-Soviet war, the everyday experiences of violence resulted in social ruptures—the process that inevitably included distortion of the idea of childhood as a protective phase. As already noted here, “childhood” is a social construct, created in the process of an ongoing social ordering within a society and thus subject to natural change.<sup>73</sup> During the war the “child” category was reframed. Children, and especially Jewish children, had to quickly grow up mentally and physically. The war accelerated their process of maturation. War children had to “function” as adults and, in so doing, they frequently had to take on the function of surrogate partner or parent. The changes were particularly profound in ghettos and camps, and the previously applicable criteria for what was age-appropriate had lost their authority. Children took on the roles and the *habitus* of adults and their true age was often not apparent at all. There was a massive downward shift in the boundary between an adult and a child.<sup>74</sup> As a result the “generational ordering,” namely the expression of social constructed order based on the differentiation of society on the basis of generational affiliation, was disturbed.<sup>75</sup> The blurring of the boundaries between adult and child was a formative experience for many war children throughout Europe.<sup>76</sup> In the case of occupied Belarus, the lowering of the age boundary between adulthood and childhood meant that boys as young as thirteen or fourteen were already regarded as “men” and girls as “women.” Children assumed the *habitus*, the appearance, and the language of adults. Many war children also practiced a coarse style of speech, smoked, drank alcohol, and usually wore oversize clothing. The rapid maturation process and role reversal affected all children and adolescents, but especially the Jewish children concentrated in the ghettos or among the partisans.<sup>77</sup>

Finally, mental maturity went hand in hand with sexual maturity. This is a mostly overlooked point that collides with our ideas of childhood and thus far does not meet our expectations. Some sources indicate that adolescents as young as thirteen were engaged in extremely asymmetrical sexual relationships with adult women in the Soviet Union.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, there are documents revealing the sexual activities of children younger than fourteen years old in the orphanages.<sup>79</sup> For these reasons, in 1944, Soviet artists, writers, and filmmakers seriously debated the question of which films and which literary works were appropriate for the war children who, despite their young age, had become adults as a result of their experiences of violence. One filmmaker contended that “war children” should not be treated as children or adolescents according



to a traditional understanding of the concepts because they were effectively “grown-up persons” at the age of thirteen or fourteen.<sup>80</sup>

These remarks are not meant to be misunderstood as an apology or trivialization of the sexual abuse of underage girls. Of course, they are not enough to explain sexualized violence and abuse of power. However, I think that sexism and antisemitism alone are not sufficient to contextualize the sexual violence toward minors. Furthermore, the demoralization and the brutalization of the entire wartime society, the changes in families and generational structures resulting in the perception of young girls as mature women (or boys as men), on the one hand, and the general shortening of childhood as a phase of life, on the other, must be considered. The general demoralization of the population due to the brutal three-year war of extermination in the occupied parts of the Soviet Union, and the changes in the status of the child were so ubiquitous that they likely lowered the threshold for many men to commit violence, even against underage girls. However, it remains uncertain how often this threshold was crossed in the case of children. In any case, violent masculinity dominated the everyday life of the partisan units, while forced and violent relationships were part of everyday life for adult women. However, many questions remain unanswered, such as how the girls processed the sexualized violence they experienced, whether they even understood what happened to them (see Itke), whether and how they verbalized what they experienced, and what this experience did to them in the short and long term. The only thing we can be sure of is that these traumatic experiences in the Soviet wartime and postwar period were never dealt with, and the raped girls had to cope with them alone, if they survived the war at all.

## CONCLUSION

As this study demonstrates, partisans represented the only viable option of survival for a great number of Jews. However, the weak and children were not wanted in the woods, and their young age did not protect children and youths from violence and abuse. Those women and girls who were lucky enough to be taken in by the partisans were always at risk of becoming victims of sexual abuse or coercion, even if they were underage.

There are different motives and factors that explain this violence, such as chauvinistic and violent masculinity, misogyny, and antisemitism, deeply rooted in war and in the extreme power asymmetries of the occupied society, in which Jewish women and girls were the most vulnerable. The disruption of the generational order in the context of war meant that the construct of adulthood was imposed on minors, which, in turn, accelerated minors' adultification, but at the same time lowered the threshold for men to subject minors to violence and rape. To avoid it, girls and adolescents developed different strategies. Those who came to the forests with their parents were on the better



side; they were most likely to be protected. But as the examples given have shown, this alone was not always enough. And even children as young as eight, like Miriam Brysk, who joined the partisans with her parents, were in constant danger of being raped. Miriam tried to look like a boy to avoid becoming a victim of potential sexual violence. The older girls sought the protection of a male adult, whom they “married” just like adult women. Those who failed in finding such protection or who lost their protector, like Itke Braun, were exposed to violence. The protection of a male adult person, whether in the form of “marriage” for adolescent girls or adoption of a child by older members of partisan units, was significant.

At the same time, and despite the extreme situation in which most Jewish survivors found themselves, the examples given here refute the idea that children are intrinsically passive and vulnerable victims of war. The chapter stresses the agency of children and youths and shows that they are “more than victims.”<sup>81</sup> This finding is not new; it corresponds with the results of the current Holocaust and childhood studies showing that even Jewish children who were deprived of all rights and condemned to death remained capable of acting to protect themselves and made conscious decisions. Before these children joined the partisans, they managed to survive in a ghetto or hiding place, escape executions, find their own way into the forest, and gain admission to a partisan unit, which was not easy at all. Not many children and teenagers managed to do this. Conversely, this does not mean that they were not actors and subjects with their own decisions. How many of them were sexually abused by the men whose protection they sought, however, remains forever in the dark.

## NOTES

1. Darlene A., Holocaust Testimony (FVAHT-2692). Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library. In my chapter, I use the real or abbreviated names of survivors who decided to share their experiences and therefore provided oral testimonies or published their experiences in memoirs.
2. Inna Gerasimova, ed., *Vstali my plechom k plechu . . . Evrei v partizanskom dvizhenii Belorussii. 1941–1944gg* (Asobny dakh, 2005); Yitzhak Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (University of Nebraska Press; Yad Vashem, 2009), 515. The numbers cannot be determined precisely. Historian Leonid Smilovickij estimates the number of Jewish partisans at 15,000, which Bogdan Musial criticized as too high. Leonid Smilovitsky, “Righteous Gentiles, the Partisans, and Jewish Survival in Belorussia 1941–1944,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 11, no. 3 (1997): 301–29, here see p. 318; Bogdan Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen 1941–1944. Mythos und Wirklichkeit* (Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009), 388.

3. Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), f. 623, op. 1, d. 18. See also the Belarusian historian Veronika Bezdzel, *Dzetsi na akupavanai terytoryi Belarusi (1941–1944)* (Vitebsk: University Press, 2013), 109. British historian Olga Kucherenko estimates the proportion of minors among all Soviet partisans to be between 10 and 16 percent. See: Olga Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers: How Soviet Children Went to War, 1941–1945* (Oxford University Press, 2011).
4. Kenneth Slepian, “The Soviet Partisan Movement and the Holocaust,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 14 (Spring 2000): 1–27; Kenneth Slepian, *Stalin’s Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (University Press of Kansas, 2006); Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (Yale University Press, 2003).
5. See Tec, *Resilience and Courage*; Anika Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (Oxford University Press, 2015).
6. The same observation is made by Marta Havryshko in her study regarding Jewish women raped by Ukrainian local collaborators; see: Marta Havryshko, “Listening to Women’s Voices: Jewish Rape Survivors’ Testimonies in Soviet War Crimes Trials,” in *If This Is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, ed. Denisa Neštáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (Academic Studies Press, 2021), 221–42; Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 311.
7. See Kucherenko, *Little Soldiers* and the latest study by David M. Rosen, *Jewish Child Soldiers in the Bloodlands of Europe* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2022).
8. This had already been observed by Maria Hochberg-Mariańska in Poland, who had survived the war with forged papers outside the ghettos and who was active in an underground organization to support Jews. During her work for child welfare, she had the opportunity to collect numerous children’s reports. Maria Hochberg-Mariańska and Noe Grüss, eds., *The Children Accuse* (Vallentine Mitchell, 1996), xviii; from the latest studies see Johanna Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow: A Microhistory of the Holocaust* (Rutgers University Press, 2021).
9. Anika Walke, “Jewish Youth in the Minsk Ghetto: How Age and Gender Mattered,” *Kritika—Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (2014): 535–62.
10. The women-centered approach to Holocaust studies that paid particular attention to the specific nature of women’s survival strategies in extremity has been well established since the pioneering work of Joan Ringelheim in the 1980s. There are a lot of studies dealing with women in the Holocaust in general and with sexual abuse in particular. See for example the following important studies: Joan Ringelheim, “The Split Between Gender and the Holocaust,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, edited by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (Yale University Press, 1998), 340–50; Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Myrna Goldenberg and Amy Shapiro, eds., *Different Horrors, Same Hell* (University of Washington Press, 2013); Helene J. Sinnreich, “The Rape of Jewish Women During the Holocaust,”

- in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Seidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 108–23. For age as a category of analysis and its complexities see above all: Zoë Waxman, “Buried Words: Reflections on the Diary of Molly Applebaum,” *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 473–80.
11. See chapter 6 by Miranda Brethour in this volume reflecting on the complexity of hiding relationships in Poland. In her chapter, Brethour also addresses the sexualized violence against the Jewish minors by their rescuers.
  12. For more details see: Jens Qvortrup, William A. Corsaro, and Michael-Sebastian Honig, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Allison James and Alan Prout, eds., *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood* (Falmer Press, 2010); James Marten, *History of Childhood: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018).
  13. Before the war, children between the ages of fourteen and eighteen were divided into two categories: Those between the ages of fourteen and sixteen were classified as “minors” (*maloletnie*), but could already work under certain conditions, while those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen were considered minors or adolescents (*nesoveršennoletnie podrostiti*). Although Soviet civil law defined all those under the age of eighteen as minors and therefore as children, children from the age of twelve were considered criminally responsible for certain offenses under Soviet criminal law after 1935. This put them on an equal footing with adults. Ėvelina Mel’nikova, *Pravosudie po delam nesoveršennoletnich: istorija i sovremennost’* (Nauka, 1990).
  14. Recounting is always a dialogue with the listener and therefore a long, deep, and interactive process influencing the content of the testimony. For more about recounting and listening see Henry Greenspan, “The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable,” *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2014): 229–43; Henry Greenspan, *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Beyond Testimony*, 2nd ed. (Paragon House, 2010).
  15. As this study is part of a comprehensive research project about Belarusian children under German occupation (1941–1945) and its aftermath, it’s based on many years of research in different archives, especially in Belarus and Russia. The sources on Belarusian partisans are among the largest in Belarus. In the course of my research, I primarily evaluated the files of the Belarusian staff of the partisan movement (*Belaruskii shtab partisanskogo dvizhenia*) and the partisan units at the National Archives of the Republic of Belarus (NARB). Files of the central staff of the partisan movement are in RGASPI.
  16. Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass, eds., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Bd. 7: Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten I. Besetzte sowjetische Gebiete unter deutscher Militärverwaltung, Baltikum und Transnistrien* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2011); Bert Hoppe and Hildrun Glass, eds., *Die Verfolgung und Ermordung der europäischen Juden durch das*

*nationalsozialistische Deutschland 1933–1945. Bd. 8: Sowjetunion mit annektierten Gebieten II* (De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2016).

17. The western part of the land was handed over from the military to the civil administration in August 1941 (General Commissariat of White Ruthenia, GCW) and ruled by Reichskommissar Heinrich Lohse as part of Reichskommissariat Ostland. The territory of Reichskommissariat Ostland consisted of four Generalkommissariate: Weissruthenien, Litauen, Lettland, and Estland, each governed by a Generalkommissar. These territories were subordinated to Alfred Rosenberg as head of the Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete (Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, RMO). Wilhelm Kube was appointed as a general commissioner for *Weissruthenien*. For more general information see Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde: Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Hamburger Edition, 1999), chap. 3.
18. For more details see *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945, Vol. II. Ghettos in German-Occupied Eastern Europe, Part B*, ed. Martin Dean (Indiana University Press, 2012); Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, chap. 7.2–7.4.
19. According to the German historian Christian Gerlach, the expansion of mass murder was based on tactical decisions and an attempt to solve economic problems, which is why the first actions began in the big cities, where hunger and disease were rampant. As Gerlach argues, Jews were murdered in the mostly destroyed eastern territory to prevent scarcity; they could easily be presented as “useless eaters” because there was no need for workers there either. Gerlach also shows ongoing disagreements between civilian and SS administrations as to whether Jews’ labor skills should be used or whether Jews should be murdered as racial enemies. Some big cities like Minsk or civilian areas in the western part of the GCW where there was demand for labor reflected this logic. Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde*, chap. 7.2–7.4.
20. A summary of his theses can be found in the essay: Christian Gerlach, “Deutsche Wirtschaftsinteressen, Besatzungspolitik und der Mord an den Juden in Weißrussland 1941–1943,” in “*Existiert das Ghetto noch? Weißrussland: Jüdisches Überleben gegen nationalsozialistische Herrschaft*,” Projektgruppe Belarus im Jugendclub Courage Köln e.V., eds. (Berlin, 2004): 193–209.
21. The “Surazh Gate” was a gap in the front section between Usviaty and Velizh as a result of an advance by the Red Army in January 1942 and was so named after the town of Surazh, about 40 km. northeast of Vitsebsk. The importance of this frontal gap was underestimated by the German units, and it was not until the end of September 1942 that the German forces managed to close it to a large extent. See Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen*, 125–42.
22. The expending of movement was due to several factors: the intensification of German reprisals and hunts of the able-bodied population on the one hand, and centralization

- efforts in Moscow on the other. By July 1943, 553 divisions with 80,695 partisans and by December, 720 divisions with 123,420 partisans were active in Belarus. As a rule, four to five partisan detachments were combined into one brigade, which dominated as an organizational unit. The partisan groups themselves were also restructured over time and divided into different groups (supply, reconnaissance, medical and defense services). About this and the quantification of partisans see Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen*, 176 et seq.
23. Arad, *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union*, 507.
  24. For more see Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen*, chap. IX.3., and Bernhard Chiari, *Alltag hinter der Front. Besatzung, Kollaboration und Widerstand in Weißrussland 1941–1944* (Droste, 1998), chap. VIII.
  25. According to the Soviet data, at least 3,365 people operated in the Baranavichy Oblast. In comparison, there were only 1,138 in the Minsk region and 648 in Vileika (pre-1939: Wiljka, Poland). Gerasimova, *Vstali my plechom k plechu*, 9; regarding Jewish partisans in the western parts see Sara Bender, “Life Stories as Testament and Memorial: The Short Life of the Neqama Battalion, an Independent Jewish Partisan Unit Operating During the Second World War in the Narocz Forest, Belarus,” *East European Jewish Affairs* 42, no. 1 (2012): 1–24. The historian Kenneth Slepian distinguishes between official and non-official antisemitism and notes that official party policy was not influenced by overt antisemitism. Slepian, *The Soviet Partisan Movement and the Holocaust*; documentation on antisemitism among partisans in Gerasimova, *Vstali my plechom k plechu*, 153–57.
  26. RGASPI, f. 625, op. 1, d. 18; Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen 1941–1944*, 322.
  27. Gerasimova, *Vstali my plechom k plechu*, 9.
  28. This is what happened to Leonid Okun’ (1928), who was left alone in the forest but was discovered by partisans and survived. Okun’ reported that the woman to whom he was entrusted had accompanied several children from the Minsk ghetto into the woods in return for payment. He was accepted into the unit by Shalom Zorin. Leonid Okun’, *106-j evreiskii partizanskiĭ . . . Otryvki iz vospominaniiĭ*, [https://www.solonin.org/live\\_106-y-evreyskiy-partizanskiy](https://www.solonin.org/live_106-y-evreyskiy-partizanskiy), accessed May 1, 2021.
  29. Mikhail Sosenskii, *Nezakonchennaia povest’* (unpublished memoirs, 2003), in: Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).
  30. Razvedyatel’naia svodka Nr. 3 (43) BŠPD, 19.1.1943, in: NARB, f. 1450, vop. 1, spr. 4, pp. 10–13; Razvedsvodka Nr. 24, in: NARB, f. 1450, vop. 1, spr. 4, p. 89.
  31. No statistics were kept on this, but the reports in the internal documentation of the partisan groups confirm the impression that many of the victims were minors. Some examples in: NARB, f. 1405, vop. 1, spr. 959, p. 15; f. 1450, vop. 2, spr. 1300, pp. 53–71. The Belarusian historian Sviatoslav Kulinok assumes that 90 percent of the children suspected of espionage were shot. Sviatoslav Kulinok, “Deti—diversanty nemeckikh spetssluzhb,” *Belaruskaia dumka*, no. 10 (2015): 80–86.

32. Esfir (Esther) Kaplan Lupyan, *Never Erased in My Mind: My Life as a Child Survivor of the Minsk Ghetto, the Forest, and the Gulag* (Universe, 2019).
33. In the name lists of the partisan divisions, there are often notes in the case of minors that the whole family, father, or mother are also partisans. See as an example "Name-Lists of the Chkalow-Brigade" in: Yad Vashem Archive (YVA), M41.3462/36.
34. Some 7,000 Jews passed through the Hlubokae ghetto. Only a small fraction survived, either by joining Jewish or Soviet partisan groups or by hiding in the forest or with non-Jews. For more see *Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945*, 1190–93.
35. See Archive from Maftis, <https://holocaustinussr.com/archive/>, here the Interview with Itke (Lidia Abramson) in the film "Gluboki" (without an exact date, presumably the 2000s). In an interview with Yad Vashem she described the rape differently. For that see further text. See Testimony of Itke Braun (Lidia Abramson), 1993, in: YVA, 0.3/3562313. In the interview with VHA she speaks about fears of being raped. VHA, Code 48374. Here I would like to thank Tamar Aizenberg and Yelena Savchenko (Israel) for their help with translations from Hebrew.
36. See VHA, Iakov Negnevitskii, Interview Code 34787; Rosen, *Jewish Child Soldiers*, 65–66.
37. Testimony of Itke Braun (Lidia Abramson), 1993, YVA, 0.3/3562313.
38. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 312.
39. See VHA, Evgeniia Rutman, Interview Code 24597; Iakov Negnevitskii, Interview Code 34787, Iosif Gavi, Interview Code 35786. In one example, a former Belarusian partisan, Viktor Skarakhod, also describes this danger in his memoirs. He describes that there were many women among the partisans, but they were all very different, some merely in the role of "wives." Viktor Skarakhod, *Takaia maia vaina. Uspaminy belaruskaha partyzana* (Khursik, 2014): 153–73.
40. Nehama Tec describes the pressure on women to be attached to a powerful man to gain both safety and even better food, although she denies that women were raped.
41. Maria Gilmovskaya, Blavatnik Archive, ID NY091.
42. Sonia Orbuch, VHA, Interview Code 53404.
43. Miriam Brysk, *Amidst the Shadows of Trees: A Holocaust Child's Survival in the Partisans* (Yellow Star Press, 2007), 80.
44. Before joining the partisans Malka was raped by the local policeman, who had hidden her in exchange for money. Citation according to Rosen, *Jewish Child Soldiers*, 68.
45. A., Darlene (1931), Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, 4288647.
46. "Tagebuch von Ljalja Bruk," in *Wenn Worte schreien und weinen. Tagebuch der Ljalja und Berta Bruk, geschrieben in Belarus ab 1943*, ed. Verband Belrussischer jüdischer Vereine und Gemeinden, Belarussischen Landesfondes "Holocaust" (IBB, 2004), 23.
47. "Tagebuch von Ljalja Bruk," 39.
48. Interview with Florence Gitelman Eisen, August 18, 1994, in: USHMM, RG-

- 50.030\*0260, citation on p. 23 in transcription.
49. Alcohol abuse, rape, buccaneering, and gratuitous violence were a problem in some units, which was reflected in some official papers. As an example, I refer to the following collection from the Minsk region, which includes cases of drunkenness and rape by the partisans of the 3rd Budjenyi Unit from September 1943: NARB, f. 1405, op. 1, d. 139, pp. 12, 55, 72–73. These documents show that the accused were punished with death by shooting. Often, however, the perpetrators went unpunished. See also Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen*, chap. VIII.
  50. Skarakhod, *Takaia maia vaina*, 171.
  51. Archive of the Institute of the Russian History at the Russian Academy of Sciences (NA IRI RAN), f. 2, razd. 2, op. 4, d. 111.
  52. NARB f. 1399, op. 1, d. 162.
  53. In general, see Musial, *Sowjetische Partisanen*, 329–38.
  54. Proekt prikaza ob uchastii zhenshchin, Juni 1943, in: RGASPI, f. 69, op. 1, d. 1060.
  55. See Yuliya von Saal, “Familäre Gemeinschaften. Kriegsbedingte Familientrennungen und Neukonfigurationen in der UdSSR,” in *Familientrennungen im nationalsozialistischen Krieg. Erfahrungen und Praktiken in Deutschland und im besetzten Europa 1939–1945*, ed. Wiebke Lisner, Johannes Hürter, Cornelia Rauh, and Lu Seegers (Wallstein, 2022), 335–65.
  56. See interviews: Raisa Livshits, VHA, Interview Code 52444; Oskar Adler, VHA, Interview Code 50875.
  57. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 311, note 79.
  58. Havryshko, *Listening to Women’s Voices*, 241.
  59. Interviews with Levina-Krapina Maja (1935), 30.8.2016 and with Rejzman Frieda (1935), 31.8.2016 in Minsk. This observation is the result of my research on Jewish and non-Jewish children in occupied Belarus, which I will not go into here for reasons of space.
  60. See for example the last official volume published by the Belarusian Academy of Sciences: *Istoria belorusskoi gosudarstvennosti*, ed. A. A. Kovalenja et al., Vol. 4 (Belaruskaia nauka, 2019).
  61. Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*.
  62. For the precarious situation of Soviet women and girls in combat see: Beate Fieseler, *Rotarmistinnen im Zweiten Weltkrieg. Motivationen, Einsatzbereiche und Erfahrungen von Frauen an der Front*, in *Soldatinnen. Gewalt und Geschlecht im Krieg von Mittelalter bis heute*, ed. Franka Maubach, Klaus Latzel, and Silke Satjukow (Schöningh, 2011), 301–29; Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); Brandon Schechter, “Girls’ and ‘Women’: Love, Sex, Duty and Sexual Harassment in the Ranks of the Red Army 1941–1945,” *Journal of Power Institutions in Post-Soviet Societies*, no. 17 (2016).
  63. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*, 311–13.



64. According to Andrea Petö, *Das Unsagbare erzählen. Sexuelle Gewalt in Ungarn im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Wallstein, 2021).
65. A single exception, but heavily censored during the Soviet period, was Svetlana Aleksievich's book *War Does Not Have a Woman's Face*, in which she addresses many unpleasant aspects of the female experiences of war, including violence. Uncensored exemplar: Svetlana Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe lico* (Vremia, 2016).
66. Raisa Livshits, VHA, Interview Code 52444.
67. Tec, *Resilience and Courage*; Walke, *Pioneers and Partisans*; for women in the Lithuanian partisan units see: Modiane Zerdoun-Daniel, "After all, I was a 'female' and a 'yid' to boot': Jewish Women Among Partisans in Lithuania, 1941–1944," in *If This Is a Woman*, 201–18; for the similar situation of women in the Red Army see: Kerstin Bischl, *Frontbeziehungen. Geschlechterverhältnisse und Gewaltdynamiken in der Roten Armee 1941–1945* (Hamburger Edition, 2019): 139–240.
68. See chapters from Monika J. Flaschka, Stefan Cristian Ionescu, Daina Eglitis, Nina Paulovicova, and Kateřina Králová and Janis Nalbadidacis in this book.
69. Bischl, *Frontbeziehungen*; Petö, *Das Unsagbare erzählen*; Norman Neimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007). A well-known chronicler of female experiences in liberated Berlin was Anonyma (Marta Hillers), who recorded the countless rapes of German women by soldiers of the Red Army after the conquest of Berlin in April/May 1945 in her diary. First published in German in 1959, the book was long forgotten. It was not until 2003 that a new edition was published, which became a bestseller. On the diary and the controversies surrounding its authenticity, see Yuliya von Saal, "Anonyma: 'Eine Frau in Berlin.' Geschichte eines Bestsellers," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 67 (2019): 343–76.
70. However, most work deals with rape of the enemy and interprets rape as a weapon of war. Discussion on causes of sexual violence is long and much research is available. I refer only to some studies here: Claudia Card, "Rape as a Weapon of War," *Hypatia* 11, no. 4, Women and Violence (Autumn 1996): 5–18; Insa Eschebach and Regina Mühlhäuser, eds., *Krieg und Geschlecht. Sexuelle Gewalt im Krieg und Sex-Zwangsarbeit in NS-Konzentrationslagern* (Metropol, 2008); Hedgpeeth and Seidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women*; Regina Mühlhäuser, "Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht During the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941–1944," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017): 366–401. Sexual violence committed solely by local perpetrators toward Jewish women in Ukraine is the subject of research by Marta Havryshko, *Listening to Women's Voices*.
71. The concept of masculinity has been discussed by scholars since the ground-breaking but also problematic book of Susan Brownmiller, who has written that rape is a political



- act of violence by men to keep all women in a state of fear. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (Simon & Schuster, 1975). On the application of the concept among Soviet soldiers see Bischl, *Frontbeziehungen*.
72. Cohen argues that Soviet partisans raping Jewish women were expressing their superiority. Rich Cohen, *The Avengers* (Vintage Books, 2000), 115; Marta Havryshko explains the rape of Jewish women by locals with their extreme vulnerability due to their persecution during the Holocaust, see: Havryshko, *Listening to Women's Voices*.
  73. On the concept see Allison James and Alan Prout, *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood*. An excellent historical overview is offered by Martina Winkler, *Kindheitsgeschichte. Eine Einführung* (Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 2017).
  74. For more on this topic see: Yuliya von Saal, "Forced Maturity: Children's Experiences Under German Occupation in Belarus, 1941–1944," in *European Holocaust Studies*, Vol. 5: *Childhood During War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic, Yuliya von Saal, and Anna Ullrich (Wallstein, 2024), 53–80.
  75. Generational order is a concept in the sociology of childhood. For more see: Doris Bühler-Niederberger, *Lebensphase Kindheit* (Juventa, 2011).
  76. See for example: Joanna Beata Michlic, ed., *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Brandeis University Press, 2017); Sliwa, *Jewish Childhood in Krakow*.
  77. Von Saal, "Forced Maturity."
  78. Seth Bernstein, *Raised Under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism* (Cornell University Press, 2017): 220–22.
  79. Thus, in two children's homes in the town of Hrodna, up to thirty-six children younger than fourteen years old were infected with sexually transmitted gonorrhoea. CK KP(b) Belorussii tovarishchu Ponomarenko P.K. o sostoianii ustroistva detei-sirot po respublike, in: NARB, f. 4p, vop. 17, spr. 51, pp. 66–81, p. 75.
  80. See Minutes of the meeting in: RGASPI, f. M1., op. 2, d. 234, pp. 175–76; Bernstein, *Raised Under Stalin*, 220–22.
  81. Here I quote Mische Honeck and James Marten in their introduction to *War and Childhood in the Era of the Two World Wars* (German Historical Institute 2019) and refer to a study by me about the agency of war-orphans with the same title and similar findings: Yuliya von Saal, "Mehr als Opfer. Kriegskinder und ihr Überleben in den Kinderheimen im besetzten Belarus," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 68, no. 3–4 (2020): 403–31.

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# LIBERATORS, PARTNERS, AND RAPISTS

## JEWISH WOMEN FROM ROMANIA ENCOUNTERING RED ARMY SOLDIERS AROUND THE END OF WORLD WAR II

STEFAN CRISTIAN IONESCU

### INTRODUCTION

**B**ASED ON JEWISH EGO-DOCUMENTS—DIARIES, MEMOIRS, AND INTERVIEWS—this chapter examines the different forms of interactions between the Red Army soldiers and Jewish female survivors from Romania toward the end of World War II (ranging from liberation, aid, romance, to bartering and rape), the fears and anguish experienced by women Holocaust survivors and their families and communities, and their strategies to avoid rape. I will also analyze Jewish men's perspectives and responses to rape, including some men's indifference and even endorsement and possible complicity in such crimes. Following the fate of the Jews from Romania during the Holocaust, I will investigate testimonies of Jewish Holocaust survivors who were liberated in the former Soviet territories that between 1941 and 1944 were under Romanian rule (such as Northern Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Transnistria), in proper Romania (its core provinces, Wallachia, Moldova, Banat, Southern Transylvania, and Northern Transylvania), and in Auschwitz or in other Nazi camps in Central Europe. Most of the Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina (as well as 25,000–30,000 Roma) were deported to the camps and ghettos in Transnistria, which was an occupied territory in the southwestern USSR, and added to a group of approximately 100,000 Jews who lived in the region at

the arrival of the Axis troops. Only a minority of the deported Jews (around 40,000–50,000 out of approximately 200,000 deportees) and half of the Roma survived and were repatriated to Romania or were liberated by the Red Army. The Jews who remained in the core provinces of Romania during the war (around 275,000 persons) lived under the military pro-Nazi dictatorship of General (Marshal) Ion Antonescu until August 23, 1944, when a putsch organized by King Michael, the opposition parties, and army generals removed the dictator and switched allegiance to the Allies. The majority of the Jews from the core provinces of Romania escaped deportation, stayed in their cities and regions, but suffered discriminatory racial legislation, forced labor, plunder, and selective deportation and killings.<sup>1</sup> Most of them survived the Antonescu regime and recuperated their freedom, equality of rights, and some of their assets, and obtained some reparations after August 1944 only to lose some of their property and rights again as a result of the communist nationalizations and emigration.<sup>2</sup> The Jews living in Northern Transylvania (estimated around 164,000) ended up under Hungarian rule between 1940 and 1944 as a result of the Second Vienna Award, when Hitler and Mussolini divided Transylvania between Hungary and Romania (which retained Southern Transylvania).<sup>3</sup> The overwhelming majority of the Northern Transylvanian Jews were deported to Auschwitz in 1944, and from there to other Nazi camps in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and Austria. Only a minority of them survived to see the liberation by the Allies, and most of these survivors returned to Romania to search for their relatives, homes, and other assets and rebuild their lives, while part of them later emigrated from Romania.<sup>4</sup>

While the scholars who have investigated the history of Romania during World War II sometimes examined the rape of gentile women by Red Army soldiers, the topic of Soviet soldiers' sexual violence against Jewish women—what historian Monika J. Flaschka has named “liberation rape”—has not been addressed in their studies.<sup>5</sup> Nor have the historians of the Holocaust and Jewish history in Romania paid attention to this topic. For example, in his studies examining the whereabouts of Jewish survivors in the aftermath of the Antonescu regime, Jean Ancel did not examine the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence and looked only at the Soviet authorities' forcible recruitment of survivors for the Red Army and the labor battalions sent to reconstruct the Donbas region.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Liviu Rotman's investigation of the Jewish community during the first two postwar decades of communist Romania did not address the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence targeting Jewish survivors.<sup>7</sup> In my own studies on the rebuilding of Jewish lives and communities in post-Holocaust Romania, I neglected to look at the sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet soldiers against Jewish women.<sup>8</sup> From a broader comparative perspective, the sexual violence perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers against gentile women on Axis territory, especially Germany and Hungary, has been explored more thoroughly by scholars such as Norman Neimark, Atina Grossmann, James Mark, and Andrea Pető.<sup>9</sup>



The early accounts (diaries and memoirs) of Jewish women survivors from Romania seem to have been mostly silent about this topic. When they rarely mentioned something about sexual violence and liberators it was not about cases of rape they had suffered or witnessed but about their fear of the possible sexual violence they could encounter if relocated for forced labor in the interior of the USSR. Only decades after the end of World War II, some survivors started to discuss in their ego-documents the sexual violence they encountered after liberation. For example, a book project made of twenty-six interviews conducted in Romania between 2006 and 2007 with Holocaust survivors and gentile eyewitnesses from Northern Transylvania (11 female and 9 male Jewish survivors, while the rest were gentile eyewitnesses) contains four cases in which the interviewees mentioned episodes of sexual violence (rape and attempted rape) by the Soviet liberators and other gentiles.<sup>10</sup> A fifth interviewee discussed the fear of sexual violence she experienced in a Soviet transit/filtration camp after liberation.<sup>11</sup> All those interviewees who spoke about witnessing sexual violence (4 out of 11, 36 percent) or if we include the fear of rape (5 out of 11, 45 percent) were women survivors, which illustrates the gendered nature of the remembrance process. This suggests that women experienced and remembered differently than men the events of the Holocaust/World War II, including by paying more attention to specific aspects related to gender and sexuality, as historian Marion Kaplan and others have argued in their studies.<sup>12</sup> These interviews show that six decades after the events, some women survivors were willing to talk about the rapes perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers even though all of those who mentioned the topic did not admit that they were the victims of rape but other female friends had been victims, or if they mentioned that they were attacked by the Soviet soldiers, it seems that the rape had always failed.<sup>13</sup> Various reasons seem to motivate the women's reluctance to talk about this topic during the first postwar decades, including the fact that the communist authorities who assumed power in Romania in March 1945 discouraged open criticism of the Red Army. More importantly, survivors struggled to process what had happened to them in the context of their gratitude to the USSR for the liberation. Romania was a conservative society with lingering antisemitism and taboos and shame surrounding the victims of wartime rape, which inevitably enforced survivors' silence. The 1989 collapse of the communist regime and its censorship led to a growing public discussion about the crimes of communism, the USSR, and its agents and to a national victimization narrative that presented the local society as a victim of the feared Soviet Union and downplayed the crimes perpetrated by the Antonescu regime during World War II, especially on Soviet territory.<sup>14</sup>

This chapter will scrutinize the various experiences of Jewish women during their encounters with the Red Army around the moment of liberation, followed by an examination of the strategies adopted by the Jewish women and their families to avoid sexual violence, and by a discussion of the Jewish male perspective on the Soviet soldiers' actions of raping women in the liberated countries.



## THE JEWISH WOMEN SURVIVORS' EXPERIENCES DURING THEIR ENCOUNTERS WITH THE RED ARMY

Some Jewish women remembered in their ego-documents the diverse range of encounters they had with their liberators, including instances of sexual violence. In her 1993 memoirs, Tereza Mozes, one of the Jewish women survivors born in the city of Oradea in Northern Transylvania, recounted witnessing a rape perpetrated by a Soviet soldier against one of her female friends and former camp inmates.<sup>15</sup> Liberated by the Red Army in January 1945 in northern Poland around Neumark/Nowe Miasto (the region of Pomerania) from a death march after surviving Auschwitz, slave labor camps in Latvia, and the concentration camps of Stutthof and Guttau, Mozes started the journey to return home in a group of about twenty other women survivors mostly originating from her natal region. Mozes recollected that during a late evening soon after liberation, the survivors found shelter in a house on the outskirts of Neumark/Nowe Miasto. The owners—one older and two younger women—welcomed them with unusual kindness but quickly left the house when it was getting dark, to the surprise of the former prisoners who only later understood that their hosts went into hiding to avoid the Red Army soldiers' night attacks. During that night, one of the Soviet soldiers, whom they treated with gratitude, burst into the house where the survivors rested and unexpectedly attacked one of the women despite the shouts informing him that they were Jewish survivors of a Nazi camp who struggled with illnesses:

It must have been quite late when suddenly the door gave way and a Russian soldier entered. We were taken by surprise, but we were not frightened. Russian soldiers represented liberation for us. We were not wearing our marked clothing, but . . . our short hair betrayed our identity. One of us unexpectedly started to speak: "Jidowski . . . Lager . . . Bolnoi (Jews . . . Concentration camp . . . Sick). It seemed he understood. Suddenly, he took out his gun and fired into the lamp. In the darkness and terror that followed, he threw himself on the first girl in his path. Just as he was, with his coat on and his gun in his hand, he threw her down and pressed her on the ground. It was a harrowing moment. Everyone tried to escape, hiding, under beds, in cupboards or behind them. Many ran out into the freezing night and hid in the pigsty.<sup>16</sup>

Mozes remembered the confusing and traumatizing effects of the horrifying and unexpected rape on the entire group and how she and the other fellow survivors tacitly decided not to talk about that episode of sexual violence perpetrated by a liberator:

After that, we were troubled by conflicting thoughts. Could this be our liberation? How different it was from our expectations! Terror, horror, and confusion took hold of us. In this way, the night passed. No one spoke a word until dawn. In the morning, we looked at each other in dead silence. We did not speak of what had happened, not then, nor since. For years, all those who were liberated together and who returned home together met on the anniversary of our liberation to reminisce and to talk about different events surrounding our deportation. We talked about many things, but never about what happened on that night. We did not want to remember that.<sup>17</sup>

Mozes's words illustrate how the survivors reacted to a rape by a Soviet soldier, the trauma of surviving wartime sexual violence, the coping mechanisms, and the accompanying taboos related to shame and guilt that were enforced by the gender norms of the traditionalist-conservative society in which they were socialized before and after deportation.<sup>18</sup> Only about fifty years after this horrifying event did Mozes decide to disclose the rape episode, without naming the identity of the victim and only mentioning that it was one of the women in her group of survivors. This would fit the pattern of the Holocaust survivors' reluctance to publicly discuss cases of their own sexual victimization. As various historians in this volume noted, even when survivors rarely mentioned liberation sexual violence in their postwar testimonies, most survivors declared that the rape happened to someone else and not to the author/narrator, used euphemisms, or offered incomplete testimonies in order to avoid the social stigma associated with sexual victimization.<sup>19</sup>

Another Jewish woman from Northern Transylvania (from the city of Cluj), at that time a thirty-year-old dentist, Myriam Chanit, gave a similar testimony related to the sexual violence unleashed by the Red Army soldiers against Jewish female survivors and gentile women immediately after the liberation from the Nazi rule of the same area of Nowe-Miasto. Her testimony suggests that Chanit was part of one of the groups of survivors that roamed the same area as Tereza Mozes and her friends.<sup>20</sup> Liberated from a death march at a farm in northern Poland, Chanit and her friends found an abandoned house in Nowe-Miasto and thought they could rest there for a while. The situation in that city was chaotic. Polish militia and the Red Army were occupying the area, and drunken Soviet soldiers were looting and burning the houses they thought belonged to the Germans. Falling asleep in normal beds after a long time, Chanit and her friends woke up in the middle of the night when two Soviet soldiers quietly entered their house. Immediately, the women found themselves caught in a struggle to escape rape and stay alive:

Suddenly, I woke up terrified to see two drunk Soviet soldiers armed with automatic weapons in front of us. Pointing their flashlights towards us, they chose five younger

women and pushed the rest into the next room. Immediately, I realized what a despicable danger threatened us. . . . One of the soldiers jumped on Iulia and began to open her trousers. Panicked by horror and fear, the girl screamed to me for help. But how [could I have helped her]? I shouted to the nurse [one of the women survivors] . . . who spoke the soldiers' language to tell them that we had . . . typhus. I thought that this would scare them and they would leave. Her pleas were in vain. Crying, Iulia was whimpering: "Today is my birthday, I escaped the Germans and now I am going to lose my virginity." A blind rage engulfed me and I began to fight with the soldier: I grabbed his rifle and I threw it on the floor, between us; he tried to put me on the floor and rape me, but he failed. I started to scream, he took a shelf and hit me with it but I rose up and ran into the next room. He pulled out his pistol and shot at me but missed; I was destined to live! Probably the gun shot sobered them because they left just as they had come, quietly.<sup>21</sup>

After this terrifying event, the women stayed awake the whole night afraid that the Soviet soldiers might return. They did not, but Chanit reflected on the intense trauma caused by the vicious attack: "That night remained engraved into our souls and nothing would be able to erase it. We paid dearly for our liberation day!"<sup>22</sup> During the next day, a Polish doctor who hosted them in his house after liberation asked Chanit to give him some help at the hospital, which was overwhelmed with patients, including many women who had been raped by the Soviet soldiers. She agreed. In exchange, the doctor offered them shelter in a hospital room. Thus, Chanit directly witnessed the consequences of the mass rape perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers and recollected them: "Next day I went to the hospital because the Polish doctor had asked me to help. During that night, the liberators raped hundreds of women and girls, both Polish and deportees. Only our group escaped that abominable deed. I performed vaginal washes to the raped women. . . . I helped at many surgeries."<sup>23</sup> While temporarily in a safer environment, Chanit remained terrified of encountering Soviet soldiers, but she and her friends did not experience similar attacks.<sup>24</sup>

The areas around railway crossroads, as Norman M. Naimark showed in his work, represented a particular danger for women after liberation.<sup>25</sup> This is confirmed by Chanit who witnessed another rape attempt by a Soviet soldier while waiting for the repatriation to Romania in a second Soviet transit/filtration camp. As the camp was located near a rail junction where the Soviet authorities were tasked to change rail tracks and unload supply wagons, Chanit and her fellow survivors were taken out for the back-breaking work of unloading the trains. During one of the night shifts, Chanit witnessed how a Soviet soldier grabbed one of the Jewish women survivors and tried to rape her but failed to do so when, alarmed by the shouts of that woman's coworkers, an officer came and "resolved" the problem by slapping, kicking, and chasing away the soldier.

In their interviews recorded by the USC Shoah Foundation, Jewish women survivors from Northern Transylvania, Aurelia Isaac and Matilda Spitzer, also recalled the rapes and the fear of rape they and their friends had experienced on their way back home, including in Soviet transit/filtration camps typically located near railways.<sup>26</sup>

Some of the women survivors of Nazi camps engaged in what some contemporaneous eyewitnesses depicted as “consensual or transactional” sexual relations with their (Western Allies) liberators from whom they received various material benefits. Magda Herzberger, a native of Cluj, was liberated by the British army at Bergen Belsen and stayed for six months in a British rehabilitation camp. At that time a teenager, she remembered that some of her (slightly older) barrack female friends and roommates engaged in sexual relations with the British soldiers motivated by barter and sexual desires and received chocolates, cigarettes, food items, and some clothing.<sup>27</sup> She thought that the other main reason for her friends’ engagement in those relations with the British soldiers was “to prove their femininity and to reinforce the feeling that they were attractive and desirable.”<sup>28</sup> Even though she understood the choices of other survivors, Herzberger’s restraint got her into trouble. She remembered how her friends encouraged her to date British soldiers and how they resented her for refusing to adopt the same behavior as a result of her strict moral-religious principles. They constantly teased her with the nickname “Old Maid,” persecuted her, and even destroyed her most cherished possession, a manuscript of a theater play she wrote for a group she had joined while in the rehabilitation camp. As a result of this persecution, she felt very lonely.<sup>29</sup>

Herzberger’s recollections are supported by the early postwar account of another Jewish woman survivor, Dr. Gisella Perl, who was also liberated by the British army at Bergen Belsen where she continued her work in the camp hospital for the rehabilitation of the former inmates. In her memoir entitled *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* published shortly after the war’s end, in 1948, Perl also remembered the widespread sexual relations between the recently liberated women survivors and the British soldiers and other former inmates. According to Perl, these relations were apparently consensual or transactional—although characterized by an unequal power dynamic—or determined by the survivors’ need to prove they were still attractive and desirable, their craving for intimacy, or their need to obtain extra food, cigarettes, clothing, and other useful objects from the British soldiers or from entrepreneurial male survivors.<sup>30</sup>

While the British soldiers and other officials engaged in a more transactional behavior toward the liberated Jewish women, as we have already seen earlier in this chapter, the Soviet soldiers and officials adopted a harsher approach toward the liberated Jews. After the liberation from the Djurin ghetto in Transnistria, the Dankner family managed to return to their natal Czernowitz in spring 1944. Several months after their return home, Trude (Gertrude), at that time a thirteen-year-old girl, recorded in her diary her family’s and her own fears of the Soviet authorities’ recruitment of Jewish

survivors for military service in the Red Army and forced labor in Donbas. She believed that young women and girls were sent as “prostitutes” into the USSR interior. Trude recorded in her diary how outraged she was by the cruelty of those measures—perceived as examples of injustice and antisemitism—and the ruthlessness of the Soviet male “recruiters.” While she and her family ultimately escaped such a fate, these diary entries reflect Trude’s fears of forced sex work recruitment by the Soviet authorities during the months following their liberation:

Thursday, March 8<sup>th</sup> 1945: Seven and a half months have passed and I didn’t write anything. . . . Most of the men were taken to the (Red) army. . . . They took women of 16 to 50 years old to work in Sverdlovsk and Dumbass (area of Donesk, Ukraine). . . . Who asked about justice? They were sent to certain death to work in coal mines and live in misery. They took girls of 14 years old. It was a horrifying scene. They were indifferent if some had been in Transnistria and suffered so much. Those militia men showed their hatred and their dark anti-Semitic side. . . . They didn’t break into houses where the doors were locked and a lock was put outside. . . . However, those who were inside were fearfully trembling. . . . One of those transports contained young women that were sent as prostitutes to Russia. They received yellow passports for identity and work. It is unbelievable but it is the absolute truth. The girls knew from the beginning what was going on. . . . One who resisted was tethered and transported by a car. They were forced to sign that they voluntarily went to work. I thank God has laid his right hand over our house.<sup>31</sup>

According to Trude’s diary, the deported women were aware of the sexual violence that awaited them in the USSR’s interior and some of them resisted the deportation for sex work. Trude’s diary entries reflect her fear of the Soviet authorities’ real or imagined sexual violence targeting Jewish women and girl survivors in contrast to the absence of the topic from her brother’s recollections, which shows a gendered nature of the topic and of the remembrance process.

While many Jewish women and their families and communities feared sexual assault, it seems that a few Jewish girls and women found the liberating Red Army soldiers attractive and dated them or fantasized about dating them if they were too young to have a romance. This was the case of Lilly Marcou, a young Jewish girl from the city of Iași (eight years old at the time of liberation in August 1944). According to her 1998 memoir, Marcou had romantic and sexual fantasies about the Red Army soldiers, which were rooted in her gratitude for being liberated from the Antonescu regime and from the death threat posed by the retreating Nazi troops. She was attracted to the Soviet soldiers in spite of the rumors about their involvement in robberies and sexual violence against the local population and envied her older cousins for being able to date them.

The memoir suggests that the attraction was based on Marcou's admiration of them as a symbol of liberation and bravery against the Nazis just as it marked her idealization of the Soviet men's masculinity as benevolent and protective. This is how Marcou, who later became a well-respected Sovietologist in France, remembered those days:

My encounter with the Red Army is part of those life defining moments. After so much fear and expectations (. . . we knew that the Germans killed while they retreated), I woke up emotional. My father descended to the basement, in which we had hidden for six months, crying . . . "We can go out: the Russians are here!" How could one forget this sentence? How could I forget the happiness of that morning when climbing out from our basement, I found myself in front of the Red Army? It was personified by the smiling and kind face of a huge captain who warmly took me in his arms: what a feeling of safety. . . . Starting from that day on, I lived for many months adoring the Red Army. Fascinated by the Soviet officers and soldiers, I looked at them mesmerized. I even learnt a few Russian words. Nothing could separate me from them. They were warm, happy, and generous. . . . True, there were rumors about them, about the rapes and thefts of watches they perpetrated. So what? This was not enough to diminish my enthusiasm for them. They won the war, they chased away the Germans. . . . I had had enough. I was determined to tolerate everything from them, to accept any behavior from them. The spell was so powerful that I started to hate the people who circulated those horrible stories about them. On the contrary, my problem was that being too young at that time, they were not interested in me. As an eight-year-old girl, I could not live a love story with one of those beautiful officers who saved my life. Deep down I wanted so much to live such a story. My first erotic fantasies were built around those Russians, all of whom looked beautiful to me, as a result of my enthusiasm. But there was no hope for me, they did not pay any attention to me. Of course, they took me in their arms, put me on their knees in a paternal and warm way; probably, they were also impressed by the girl in their arms who looked at them in extasy. But nothing more. I suffered because I was just a girl and I secretly envied my cousins—seven and eight years older than me—who flirted with these knights from far away.<sup>32</sup>

Marcou's memoir shows her adoration of the Red Army officers, her romantic and sexual fantasies about them, and the fact that some older Jewish teenage relatives (fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds) were flirting with and perhaps even dating Soviet officers in late 1944. As Andrea Pető shows in her chapter, in Hungary too, young Jewish women sometimes fell in love with the Soviet soldiers as liberation contributed to the breaking down of emotional barriers.<sup>33</sup> Marcou's memoir also reveals her frustration that the Red Army men did not pay her attention in a romantic/sexual way but only in a paternal

manner. As we know today, she was lucky, as some of the Soviet soldiers did pay such attention to young girls, which resulted in rapes, physical injuries, traumas, and death. The memoir also shows a political dimension: Some of those who suffered a lot during the Nazi/fascist terror were ready to welcome the liberators as well as their ideology (communism) and culture (Russian language).<sup>34</sup>

## STRATEGIES TO AVOID RAPE

Faced with the violence perpetrated by some of the Soviet soldiers, individual Jews and their families adopted several strategies to avoid the rape of women and girls after liberation. Returning home to the city of Czernowitz after being liberated from a ghetto in Transnistria, Klara Ostfeld (*née* Pesate)—at that time a twelve-year-old girl—remembered in her 1992 memoir how she and her female relatives feared the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence in Czernowitz. Ostfeld recounted how her grandmother advised her other granddaughter—a fourteen-year-old girl named Zitta—to lie about her age and say she was two years younger and register for the fifth grade because she considered that “during the troubled wartime a girl is less exposed to danger if she is believed to be younger.”<sup>35</sup> This shows that the grandmother, who had extensive life experience, believed that the Red Army soldiers and the Soviet authorities would not target younger children for sexual violence or forced labor. As a result, Zitta registered in the same fifth grade as her cousin Klara. A few months later, Klara remembered how scared she and Zitta were about walking home alone after attending a theater play because her male cousin who was supposed to escort them home failed to show up at the theater: “One time Zitta and I went to the theater and we had to meet there with a cousin who was supposed to accompany us home after the play because the city was full of Russian soldiers. During the night, if drunk, these soldiers could be a real danger for two young girls. Our cousin did not show up. Worried, we searched the hall for a familiar face of one of our [school] colleagues who could accompany us home.”<sup>36</sup> In the end, the two girls walked home alone and nothing bad happened to them, but the fact that many decades later Ostfeld still remembered this episode illustrates the fear of many Jewish girls of potential sexual violence by the Soviet soldiers and the ways they tried to protect themselves with support from family and colleagues.

A Jewish preteenager during World War I, Herman Victorov, who lived with his family including three sisters in the city of Bacău, remembered the arrival of the Red Army in summer 1944. As they believed that the Soviet soldiers, “especially the Tatars and Cossacks” would be extremely cruel—this was a widespread expectation in Bacău's Jewish community—the families who had young women and girls were terrified and prepared hiding places for them. He recalled that during one late evening immediately



after the arrival of the Red Army in Bacău, a policeman accompanied by a Jewish informer (a man named Katz) knocked at their door. The policeman transmitted the request of several Soviet officers to send their teenage girls—about whose existence they found out from the Jewish informer—to the officers' house to perform housekeeping chores.<sup>37</sup> Outraged and scared by this request, Herman's parents denied they had any girls in the house, and the mother offered herself to go and clean the Red Army officers' residence. Herman's mother dressed herself in unappealing old clothes and covered her hair with a kerchief like a grandmother, which made her look much older than her age, and went with the policeman to the Soviet officers' house, while her husband followed them from a distance.<sup>38</sup> Everything happened so quickly that Herman and his siblings realized the seriousness of the situation only after their parents left with the policeman. The parents returned safely home an hour later and told them that the Soviet officers were drunk and were having a party. Both disappointed and amused when they saw the old and shabby-looking mother entering their house instead of the expected young women, they kicked her out of their house, shouting, "Babushka, babushka" [old hag] and "get out." Herman's father was enraged by the event and promised to give a major beating to Katz, "the *musar*" [the informer]. He also quickly arranged a special hiding place for his girls in the attic of their house.

The family did not experience any other problems with the Soviet soldiers, but Herman recollected in his memoir that many girls and young women were abused by the Soviet soldiers and that the victims' families used the strategy of requesting the help of Soviet officers when facing such violence.<sup>39</sup> He recorded in detail one of these cases when one of their friends' family experienced sexual assault. According to the information Herman received from one of the victim's best friends (a man named Ancel), one evening two Soviet soldiers invaded the house of the Davidson family—a wealthy and childless family who recently adopted a Jewish orphan from Transnistria named Ariel. They beat up the husband, Sergiu, and tried to rape the wife, Hilda. Injured by the soldiers, Sergiu managed to flee to the street in search for help. He waved a passing Soviet army car, whose officer understood the desperate gestures and went into the house, restrained, and beat up the two soldiers. The Davidsons' friend, Ancel, expressed his outrage to Herman after he told him the story: "Can you believe what these beasts are capable of? Ariel, the boy, was also in the house . . . [and] started to scream as loud as he could. It is good that nothing happened. He had just started to recover from the horrors of [the deportation to] Transnistria. Hilda is everything to him."<sup>40</sup> This case shows how the sexual violence traumatized not only the direct target but also multiple family members. The friends and neighbors of the Davidsons were convinced that Hilda was probably raped before the Soviet officer came to help her, basing their assumption on the fact that after the incident, she completely changed her behavior and avoided meeting even with her close



friends and relatives. Soon after the war's end, the Davidsons immigrated to Palestine and Herman lost touch with them. Herman also noted that after the numerous rapes triggered the complaints of local inhabitants, the Red Army adopted harsh punishments against the rapists—shooting them on the spot—and the number of these crimes declined significantly.<sup>41</sup>

Similarly, the attack by a drunk Soviet soldier who raped one woman from Tereza Mozes's group of female survivors immediately after the liberation—discussed earlier in this chapter—shows that the local population in liberated Neumark/Nowe Miasto was aware and fearful of the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence and adopted some preventive strategies to avoid rape (by hiding). Meanwhile, they did not warn the former camp inmates who were transiting the region of the dangers of the journeys to return home. The latter became aware of this threat only after they directly encountered the first cases of rape perpetrated by Soviet soldiers. Mozes recalled the gesture of three gentle women to allow them to stay in their house while they left in a hurry (to hide) before it got dark: "We forgot to ask them why they were leaving their own home, and they had given no explanation. . . . Lacking life experience and naïve as we were, we did not understand the reason until the following day."<sup>42</sup>

After that traumatic episode, all twenty-one Jewish survivors lived in fear of another attack by the Soviet soldiers and became very suspicious even toward those soldiers who were friendly and helped them with food or who were acquaintances. Especially after dark, the women avoided soldiers in particular, and men in general, even when they recognized the voices of familiar or friendly individuals: "We did not venture out after dark. . . . It was wartime, and lawlessness reigned. One never knew what to expect, what dangers were waiting. When evening came, we all gathered in the house. We locked the door with the key and a padlock and did not open it until morning, not even on the insistence of acquaintances."<sup>43</sup>

On their long and complicated journey home, the Jewish survivors continued to be suspicious and cautious toward soldiers, even toward Jewish soldiers from the Red Army.<sup>44</sup> Mozes remembered how the women refused the offer of a friendly Soviet officer who confessed his Jewish origin and kept it secret from his comrades. He offered to take them in his truck to an abandoned German farm in Poland where they could stay and rest until the spring: "However, we were still afraid of the unknown. After our bad experiences, we were very suspicious."<sup>45</sup> As Mozes recollected in her memoir, the high-ranking Soviet officers were aware of the danger of sexual violence faced by Jewish female survivors who wandered through the recently liberated Poland and advised them not to remain overnight in a town inhabited only by soldiers, in which they stopped accidentally, hoping to rest for the night. Mozes remembered that the women listened to the officers' advice and quickly left the town: "Going out and taking a closer look around, we realized that there were only men in military uniforms in the street.

We trembled, imagining what might have happened to us if we had stayed. We turned on our heels and set out straight away for the nearest village.”<sup>46</sup>

As her memoir makes clear, fear of potential sexual violence also accompanied Myriam Chanit and her female friend survivors on their return home journey from the liberation point in Nowe-Miesto to Romania. Only when they befriended—in a Soviet transit camp—some former French POWs, who treated them nicely, did the women again feel a certain sense of protection and safety: “After a few days, the Russians allowed us to leave. We left together with the French group. This time we felt safer, we were not so abandoned [as before].”<sup>47</sup> Chanit also remembered consensual relationships between many of the female survivors—who were allowed to exit the camp in their free time and wander through the local city—and local men and former French prisoners, who displayed chivalrous and helpful behavior toward the women.<sup>48</sup> We learn about similar strategies to avoid rape from the memoir of Dora Apsan-Sorell, born in Sighet, North Transylvania. She remembered that after the liberation from a Nazi camp—Weisswasser, a (slave) labor camp in Czechoslovakia—her group of women survivors originating from the same region joined another group of former inmates, male French POWs, and shared housing with them “for protection and companionship.”<sup>49</sup>

Apsan-Sorell’s memoir also points to institutional efforts to protect women from the danger of sexual violence. She recalls how the local Czechoslovakian authorities were “protective with the hundreds of liberated women” and ordered them to stay put and not try to return immediately to their countries of origin because of the insufficient means of transportation and other logistical problems, and because “the roads were full of soldiers.”<sup>50</sup> This shows that the local officials were aware of the danger of sexual violence faced by the women survivors during the early post-liberation months and tried to protect them. Ultimately, Apsan-Sorell remembered only some positive encounters with Soviet soldiers in Czechoslovakia and Hungary, whom she described as friendly and helpful when they saw their Auschwitz tattoos.<sup>51</sup>

## HELPERS, BYSTANDERS, AND ACCOMPLICES? MALE SURVIVORS’ PERSPECTIVES ON THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE UNLEASHED BY THE RED ARMY SOLDIERS

Most of the male survivors of the camps and ghettos in Transnistria, proper Romania, or German-controlled areas did not usually record any details about the Soviet soldiers’ sexual violence targeting the Jews in their diaries and other ego-documents. This erasure of sexual violence in male survivors’ ego-documents has roots in several factors:

the fact that rape did not target them directly; in prevailing gender stereotypes; and in the widespread acceptance of soldiers' sexual violence against women in wartime. Such a void was also shaped by their gratitude for liberation from Nazism/fascism, as well as the authors' leftist political commitment and their fear or unwillingness to criticize the actions of the USSR and its agents. Their ego-documents show that they were rather worried about the Soviets' forcible recruitment of survivors to fight in the Red Army or to participate in the reconstruction of the Donbas.<sup>52</sup>

This was the case of Lipman Kunstadt, an intellectual from Rădăuți (Southern Bukovina) who survived the deportation to the Djurin ghetto in Transnistria and kept a diary about that experience, including the months following the liberation of the ghetto by the Red Army in March 1944. Kunstadt depicted the Red Army soldiers as kindhearted people who were benevolent toward the prisoners they had liberated—except those who belonged to the wartime Jewish Councils and the ghetto police—helping them with food or transportation. Kunstadt's only criticism of Soviet soldiers and authorities refers to the forced mobilization of Jewish survivors, including women and girls, for military service on the front line and forced labor in Donbas.<sup>53</sup> Another Jewish male diarist who remained silent about the Red Army soldiers' sexual violence against women was the Bucharest physician and writer Sașa Pană. Working for the communist underground in World War II Bucharest, Pană recorded only positive impressions about the Red Army soldiers, who arrived in liberated Bucharest at the end of August 1944. Perhaps Pană did not mention sexual violence because he did not witness it nor hear about it, or more likely because of his political affiliation and the context of the publication of his diary—in 1970s Romania, when censorship was tight.<sup>54</sup>

The memoirs of survivors Leo Schadach (Murafa ghetto), Yosef Govrin (Mogilev ghetto), Joil Alpern (Tulchin and Stepanki ghettos), and Rubin Udler (Grazhdanovka ghetto and Vovhovo village) also remain silent about sexual violence perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers against Jewish survivors. They, however, remembered (and often criticized) the Soviet mobilization of the liberated Jews for military service or forced labor.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the autobiography of the teenager Armand (Nini) Dankner from Czernowitz reveals the absence of references to sexual violence during liberation. Nini survived the Djurin ghetto in Transnistria together with his extended family and returned to his birth city.<sup>56</sup> His autobiography includes excerpts from the diaries of his mother (Rosika) and sister (Gertrude/Trude). As we have seen earlier in the chapter, even though they lived in the same places during the deportation and the post-liberation months, unlike his sister Trude, Nini did not mention sexual violence by the Red Army soldiers and other officials in his autobiography. This shows a gender dimension in how the Jewish survivors experienced and remembered the liberation and its aftermath.

Surprisingly, some Jewish men appeared to condone the Soviet soldiers' robbery and rape campaign unleashed in Romania, perhaps without thinking that these crimes might have targeted some members of their family or the Jewish community. This was the case of Bucharest writer Mihail Sebastian, who supported the remerged communist party after the collapse of Antonescu but grew disenchanted with it during the next months. Sebastian recorded in his diary (on September 1, 1944) his belief that the Red Army soldiers were entitled to rape and rob in Romania's cities such as Bucharest. These cities appeared to them wealthy and unharmed by war. Sebastian condoned rape and looting by liberators as a form of revenge for the destruction perpetrated by the Romanian soldiers in the USSR between 1941 and 1944:

Bewilderment, fear, doubt. Russian soldiers who rape women (Dina Cocca told me yesterday). Soldiers who stop cars in the street, order the driver and passengers out, then get behind the wheel and disappear. Looted shops. . . . I can't treat all these incidents and accidents as too tragic. They strike me as normal—even just. It is not right that Romania should get off too lightly. In the end, this opulent, carefree, frivolous Bucharest is a provocation for an army coming from a country laid waste. . . . In the end, the Russians are within their rights. The locals are disgusting—Jews and Romanians alike.<sup>57</sup>

Such an opinion seemed to have circulated within wartime Bucharest. On September 10, 1944, a few days after the Red Army entered Bucharest, Emil Dorian, a Bucharest leftist Jewish intellectual and physician, recorded in his diary the opinion of a fascist officer condoning sexual violence and robberies unleashed by the Soviet soldiers against the local population as "normal": "An Iron Guard colonel was saying: 'What foolishness! What the Russians are doing is normal. It doesn't begin to compare with what our soldiers did when they went on field maneuvers: no girl was left unloved, and we left not a pig, not even a chicken in any village.'<sup>58</sup> Dorian did not comment on the officer's sexist, dismissive, and cruel remarks about the rapes and robberies perpetrated by the Romanian soldiers in the country's villages, and there is no way of knowing whether the officer bragged, embellished his soldiers' deeds, or told the truth. At the same time, Dorian's diary entry shows that the local population discussed the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence and theft and that some men not only justified them, but they bragged that they perpetrated similar crimes against civilians, especially women.

As various historians of World War II Romania have shown in their studies, more information has come to light during the last decades about the massive plunder and sexual violence perpetrated by the Romanian troops on Soviet territory between 1941 and 1944, especially against Jewish women and girls.<sup>59</sup> Time passing and changing cultural norms concerning the public perception of the women targeted by wartime and

liberation rape and empathy toward them and their sufferings seemed to have also impacted the way in which some Jewish male survivors remembered the interactions of Jewish women and girls with the Red Army around the time of liberation. It was only several decades after World War II that Jewish men from the core provinces of Romania (Wallachia, Moldova, and Southern Transylvania) recalled in their memoirs the Red Army soldiers' sexual violence unleashed against local women and the fear of rape they and their relatives, friends, and neighbors experienced during the first months after the liberation from the Antonescu regime and his Nazi partners. One such eyewitness was Herman Victorov from Bacău. While happy to be liberated from the antisemitic Antonescu regime in August 1944, he vividly remembered the fears experienced by local Jewish families before and after the arrival of the Soviet troops. Fascinated by the Red Army and its powerful technical capabilities, the young Herman had no such fears. He roamed the streets of Bacău, befriended several Soviet soldiers, hung out with them, delivered them local produce, and received meals from their field kitchens. At that time Herman was torn between his admiration for the Red Army and the news about the behavior of some of its soldiers, especially when they became intoxicated with alcohol: "The people were terrified by their brutality especially when they got drunk and chased women. People talked about women and girls who had been brutally raped, about people attacked on the streets and robbed of their watches and jewelry."<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, Carol Roman, who at that time was a preteen Jewish boy who admired the USSR and lived with his family in the city of Galați, remembered in his memoirs the August 1944 liberation and the events that followed, including the local Jews' fear of the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence targeting women. After their liberation from the pro-Nazi Antonescu regime, the Romans heard the rumors that the Red Army soldiers had perpetrated in their city "a wave of deeds hard to imagine." While they thought the rumours to be false, the Romans decided to be cautious and Carol's mother hid in the back of their courtyard "out of fear."<sup>61</sup> Soon afterward, Carol's father was hospitalized and he and his mother remained home alone and received an unexpected visit at 2 a.m. from two very drunk Soviet soldiers. The soldiers forcibly entered the house and searched the premises. Carol greeted the soldiers alone as his mother hid in the outhouse in their courtyard. Carol regarded the Soviet soldiers with sympathy until they started to trash his house—as it seemed to them to belong to a bourgeois family—and requested women: "*Gde hazaica?*" [Where are the women?] they shouted. As they could not find any women, the soldiers continued to drink in the house until they fell asleep. Scared by the visit, Carol's mother stayed hidden in the courtyard until her husband returned from the hospital after two weeks of absence. This shocking visit started to change Carol's idealized and naive opinions about the USSR and its soldiers. From that moment on, he started to wonder whether life in the USSR was as great as he had imagined based on communist

propaganda and whether he should stay in Romania in a communist-style society or emigrate and find a better and true homeland.<sup>62</sup>

Jewish journalist, writer, and illustrator Godell also remembered an incident involving Soviet soldiers and his wife that took place immediately after the arrival of the Red Army in fall 1944 that, fortunately, did not result in rape because of his quick reaction. Two days after the liberation of his city, Iași, by the Soviet troops, Godell and his wife, Tina, left the bomb shelter where they had hidden during the intense battles and went to see what had happened to the theater where they both worked. Shocked by the destruction they encountered throughout the city, the pair was running toward their home when they were stopped by two Soviet soldiers who asked for their ID cards. After glancing at their identification documents, the soldiers appeared more interested in the woman, grabbed her hand, and tried to take her away. Godell barely managed to convince them to leave her alone, as he remembered in his memoir: “*Dokument*,” shouted one of them and looked carefully at my journalist ID. To our surprise, he said . . . ‘*Haraso* [Good]! You can go, but wait, who is this *barisnea* [young lady]?’ ‘She is my wife!’ ‘Don’t get upset, but from now on, this *crasavita* [beauty] will be mine.’ I thought he was joking, but I had to have a difficult conversation until I convinced him that she was ill. Eventually, the Russian, who had grabbed my wife’s arm, let her go.”<sup>63</sup> This resembles the Soviet soldiers’ search for “trophy wives” in post-Nazi Germany and other central European countries as shown by Nina Paulovicova in her chapter.<sup>64</sup> As the tone of his memoir was constructed so as to present all the occurrences of his life as a funny note, Godell did not give more details about the incident or its psychological impact on his wife and himself. But one can only imagine the anguish they experienced during this brief encounter.

Another Jewish male eyewitness remembered in his memoir the numerous rapes perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers in Iași. Earl (Isaac) Weinstock was a fourteen-year-old boy who returned to his home city of Iași from the deportation in Transnistria in August 1944. As he entered the war-torn city, Weinstock noticed the looting done by the Soviet soldiers, the returning refugees, and the remaining local population, mostly Jewish—as many gentile inhabitants had fled as the front line around the city held for months—and the rapes perpetrated by the Red Army soldiers: “Sometimes, from houses, I heard women scream. I kept walking.”<sup>65</sup> The memoir suggests a sort of indifference toward the fate of local women and that raping became a common occurrence in the general landscape of post-battle destruction and chaos. Weinstock befriended a young Red Army officer (“Misha”) and spent time in the company of Soviet soldiers and, thus, had an insider’s perspective on their behavior and justifications. He noted that the looting and raping continued for several weeks after liberation. His Soviet friend claimed that the soldiers received from their superiors a “three day-pass” to engage in any type of behavior in the liberated city, which resulted in a “continuous

program of murder, rape, and looting.”<sup>66</sup> Weinstock claimed that the Soviet soldiers did not target the Jews, that some Jews collaborated with the Red Army soldiers in the violence against the local population, and described their *modus operandi*: “The Jews, however, were not molested by the soldiers; indeed, many of the Jews joined with the Russians in the violence. . . . The Russian soldiers would walk the streets two or three together. They would peer into the windows of the houses, and if they saw a woman there, they would enter, and the screams would follow. The soldiers would continue to do this even after the first three days. They would always say that the house had been designated to them as a place of prostitution,” and that it had the same function for the Germans and the women were fascist collaborators.<sup>67</sup> It is highly unlikely that only gentile women were raped by the Soviet soldiers in a city where most of the remaining inhabitants were Jewish and not clearly distinguishable from their fewer gentile neighbors to a foreign soldier.

Weinstock appeared to have been a bystander to the (sexual) violence targeting local women—gentile or Jewish. In his memoir, he did not mention anything about complaining to the Soviet higher-up authorities or requesting their help to stop the crimes he witnessed or help the victims, nor did he discuss the reasons behind his passive attitude toward the women attacked by the Soviet soldiers. Perhaps he did not intervene because he could not, was afraid, or did not want to intervene or ask for the intervention of Soviet officers, or he agreed with the violence. As a survivor of the horrific 1941 Iași pogrom, subsequent deportation, and imprisonment in Transnistria, he had already seen many cases of violence against civilians, including women, perpetrated by Antonescu’s authorities and local gentiles, and perhaps he became accustomed, desensitized, or indifferent to the violence targeting civilians in wartime. His recollection that some Jews joined in the violence perpetrated by the Soviet soldiers, his close friendship with Misha, whom he looked up to as a “hero,” and the fact that local informers flagged the houses inhabited by women to the Soviet soldiers, raise the question whether Weinstock himself joined in the widespread looting and rape. Even though, according to his memoir, he refused to engage in violence against the former gentile antisemitic officials of the Antonescu regime or the looting of properties as other Jewish survivors did, perhaps we will never know the answer to this question. He mentioned several times that he wanted to join the looters of local property—that appeared abandoned—but that, in the end, he abstained from doing so. Weinstock did not mention anything about wanting to participate in the violence against women but wrote that he witnessed how Misha tried to take away an old woman who was passing by a group of Soviet soldiers who partied on the streets of Iași, but eventually let her go.<sup>68</sup> Again, Weinstock appeared to have acted as a bystander to the Soviet soldiers’ sexual harassment of local women.



## CONCLUSION

My examination of a limited number of Romanian Jewish survivors' ego-documents shows that the Jewish women had a variety of experiences during their encounters with the Soviet soldiers. While the Red Army liberated the Jews and helped many survivors with food, clothes, medical aid, and transportation, the Soviet soldiers sometimes engaged in forcible rape of women, including Jewish women, in Romania and in the territories under Nazi Germany's sphere of influence. They also had transactional (in exchange for various items and services, or protection), consensual (though in the context of an imbalance of power), or romance relations with the Jewish (and gentile) women they encountered during or after liberation. The evidence suggests that the Soviet soldiers' practice of raping women in the territories that were perceived as German/Axis was part of a broader action of Soviet revenge against the German Nazi/fascist invaders and their collaborators for the extensive destruction they caused in the USSR and the deprivations they endured during the previous years of war.<sup>69</sup> Economic differences seemed to play some role in motivating the Soviet soldiers' revenge in the "wealthier" enemy regions by looting, destroying, and raping the apparent bourgeois and more "prosperous" inhabitants. It also seems that once in Axis countries' territories, the Red Army rank and file had difficulties in distinguishing between German or gentile women and former camp prisoners and local Jews or did not care about such distinctions, especially when they were intoxicated with alcohol and at night. These two factors were often present when Soviet soldiers engaged in indiscriminate rape. This happened in other parts of liberated Europe, as Andrea Pető and Nina Paulovicova show in their chapters. Additionally, it is likely that the Soviet soldiers raped the women they encountered in the Axis territories as a form of asserting their domination over the enemy's land and bodies and, thus, emphasizing their total victory, and as an expression of Soviet military masculinity.

The ego documents show that the Red Army rank and file were more prone to rape women survivors than the Soviet officers. The latter usually failed to prevent sexual violence against women, even though some Soviet officers warned camp survivors to avoid large concentrations of soldiers during their journeys back home. Usually, the Soviet officers responded quickly to the calls for help of victimized women, their co-workers, or their families and friends, and stopped the aggression and punished the perpetrators. Such punishments seemed to have been very mild—beating and chasing them away—which suggests that the officers did not see rape of local women as a very serious crime in the broader context of the anti-Nazi war effort, although there are a few testimonies about harsh punishments (rapid execution) inflicted on individual perpetrators. Sometimes, the testimonies show that some Soviet officers had been involved



in attempts to rape or coerce local women, including Jewish survivors, into sexual relations, which might explain the apparent leniency toward rank-and-file rapists.

The bystanders to the Red Army's sexual violence against the liberated Jewish and gentile women were usually men, but also women. Nevertheless, the latter seemed more inclined to intervene either directly or indirectly by flagging the incidents to the Soviet officers. Some cases discussed in this chapter, such as the one of the Davidson family, show that the neighbors did not usually seem to react when the Soviet soldiers invaded Jewish houses, attacked the inhabitants, and tried to rape the women, nor did they call for help from the Soviet authorities. Following the incident, the neighbors kept the victim (Hilda) under close scrutiny and gossiped about the attack and its result on their female neighbor.

Only one source shows that a few Jewish young women living in Romania had or would have preferred to have had romantic or sexual relations with the Soviet officers, out of their admiration for their role as liberators from Nazism/fascism and benevolent Soviet masculinity, or also perhaps out of their naiveté about the implications of such relationships, or for practical reasons deriving from having a Soviet protector. Overall, it seems that more Jewish women survivors had consensual or transactional relations with a Western (British) liberator or another former male prisoner immediately after liberation.

Women's ego-documents show that, initially, many Jewish survivors did not expect to be victims of the sexual violence perpetrated by their liberators and were shocked by their behavior and started to have doubts about their future under a Soviet-style communist regime. They quickly learned and adapted to the new reality by adopting several survival strategies to avoid sexual violence, such as traveling in large groups, staying indoors after dark, seeking protection from former male prisoners who traveled on the same routes or shared the same transit camps, preparing hiding places, disguising themselves to look older and unappealing, lying about their age, claiming to suffer from contagious diseases, and asking for help from Soviet officers. These ingenious strategies show the agency of Jewish individual survivors and of their families who actively adopted specific measures to avoid sexual violence.

The primary sources also show that Jewish women were reluctant during the first postwar years to publicly disclose the sexual violence they suffered or witnessed because of the stigma and shame associated with rape in local conservative societies and as a coping mechanism. This reluctance was also caused, as Andrea Pető argues in her chapter, by the fact that the Jews had eagerly waited for the arrival of the Red Army, and after liberation the survivors had very few legal avenues to report the Soviet rapists. As a result, for example, the "military rape" by the Red Army soldiers was not publicly represented in Hungary until the 1980s. The same seemed to be valid for Romania. The former victims of sexual violence were more willing to talk about those terrible

experiences when more time (decades) had passed since the events. Testimonies show that women respected and valued the liberation (by participating in commemorations), but the political context and their country's sociocultural norms pushed the horrific gendered experience into the realm of "unspeakable" and silenced the survivors for a long time as a result of the disciplining power of shame imposed on survivors in the patriarchal regime, as Nina Paulovicova argues in her chapter. Female survivors did not usually explain the reasons behind this changed attitude (especially after 1989) toward testifying about sexual violence. This could have happened because of the collapse of the communist regime that previously censored criticism of the Red Army, the USSR, and its agents or because survivors were getting closer to the end of their lives and felt that they had less to lose by making such confessions. As Nina Paulovicova demonstrates in her chapter, the social-cultural norms had changed since the early postwar years to become more accepting of the victims of sexual violence during wartime who were willing to publicly recount their sufferings and trauma in the aftermath of the 1990s wars and the genocides in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda as well as the ensuing transitional justice processes. Monika Vrzgulová also shows in her chapter that the time and place when/where the survivors' testimonies were produced and the significance of the subject of rape in the survivors' private lives and in the public discourse shaped the form and content of the testimonies regarding sexual violence experienced by their authors.

Compared to the women's testimonies, the consulted diaries and interviews produced by Jewish men rarely mentioned sexual violence against women perpetrated by Red Army soldiers. The only two men who mentioned this topic in their diaries recorded some form of justification for the Soviet soldiers' robberies and rapes targeting (generic) women. The insensitive male gaze and mentality of those who could not (or did not want to) grasp the experience of rape and its implications for its victims and the families and communities could be one reason. Political affiliation/ideological belief might have been another factor that inhibited communist or leftist Jewish eyewitnesses of rape from recording and recollecting the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence against women or might have persuaded them to try to justify those crimes. Additionally, the male survivors did not mention cases when they or other men had been the victims of sexual violence. Resembling the trend in women's testimonies, the Jewish men also seemed inclined to discuss more often the Soviet soldiers' rape against women in their memoirs written decades after World War II. Some memoirs show that Jewish women survivors could be the targets of the Soviet soldiers' sexual violence in some cases, while male co-religionists could be bystanders or even accomplices in some other situations. The line between bystanding and complicity was very thin in the chaos, uncertainty, and deprivation surrounding the days following the arrival of the Red Army.

## NOTES

1. Ana Bărbulescu, "The Underlife of Transnistria's Ghettos: Recategorizing and Reframing Social Interaction," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 3 (2021): 196–213; Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail Ionescu, eds., *Final Report* (International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania, Polirom, 2005); Roland Clark, "Fascists and Soldiers: Ambivalent Loyalties and Genocidal Violence in Wartime Romania," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 31, no. 3 (2017): 408–32; Dennis Deletant, *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2016); Anca Filipovici, "Fighting Antisemitism: Underground Resistance of the Zionist Youth During the Holocaust in Romania," *Journal of Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 23, no. 3 (2024): 35–66; Armin Heinen, *România, Holocaustul și logica violenței* (Editura Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2011); Radu Ioanid, *Evreii sub regimul Antonescu* (Hasefer, 1998); Stefan Cristian Ionescu, *Jewish Resistance to "Romanianization," 1940–1944* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Dallas Michelbacher, *Jewish Forced Labor in Romania* (Indiana University Press, 2020); Goran Miljan and Anders E. B. Blomqvist, "The Unwanted Citizens: The 'Legality' of Jewish Destruction in Croatia and Romania During World War II," *Comparative Legal History* 11, no. 2 (2023): 226–55; Ion Popa, *The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2017); Iemima D. Ploscariu, "Institutions for Survival: The Shargorod Ghetto During the Holocaust in Romanian Transnistria," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 1 (2019): 121–35; Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); Svetlana Suveica, "Pianos and Paintings from Transnistria: The Plunder of 'Cultural Trophies' During the Romanian Occupation (1941–1944)," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 36, no. 4 (2022): 261–80; Marius Turda and Adrian-Nicolae Furtună, "Roma and the Question of Ethnic Origin in the Holocaust in Romania," *Critical Romani Studies* 4, no. 2 (2021): 8–33.
2. Julie Dawson, "'As to my emotional anguish, there are days when I feel endlessly miserable': Hachsharot in Early Postwar Romania and the Limits of Belonging," *Quest: Issues in Contemporary Jewish History* 21, no. 1 (2022): 155–84; Stefan Cristian Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania: Rebuilding Jewish Lives and Communities, 1944–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2024); Eugenia Mihalcea, "Selling Jewish Victims' Experiences During the Holocaust for Hard Currency: The Case of the Romanian Communists Compensation Claims Collection from 1970," *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 177–94; Olga Ștefan, "'The Success Is Their Own': The Long, Arduous History of Reparations for Survivors of Vapniarka, the Camp of Death," *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 157–76; Mihaela Șerban,

- Subverting Communism in Romania: Law and Private Property, 1945–1965* (Lexington Books, 2019).
3. Holly Case, *Between States: The Transylvanian Question and the European Idea During World War II* (Stanford University Press, 2009).
  4. Friling et al., *Final Report*; Stefan Cristian Ionescu, “Restitution of Jewish Property in Northern Transylvania During the Early Postwar Years,” *Eastern European Holocaust Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 59–78; Zoltán Tibori Szabó, “Transylvanian Jewry During the Postwar Period, 1945–1948,” in *The Holocaust in Hungary: Sixty Years Later*, ed. Randolph L. Braham and Brewster S. Chamberlin (Social Science Monographs, 2006), 291–314.
  5. Constantin Hlihor, *Armata Roșie în România* (Editura Pro Universitaria, 2012); Dinu C. Giurescu, *România în Al Doilea Război Mondial* (Editura All, 1999); and see the chapters by Monika J. Flaschka, “And This Was Our Liberation,” and Andrea Pető, “The Witness Vanishes,” in this volume. See also James Mark, “Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary, 1944–1945,” *Past & Present* 188, no. 1 (2005): 133–61.
  6. Jean Ancel, “The New Jewish Invasion: The Return of Jewish Survivors from Transnistria,” in *The Jews are Coming Back: The Return of the Jews to Their Countries of Origin*, ed. David Bankir (Yad Vashem, and Berghahn Books, 2005), 231–56.
  7. Liviu Rotman, *The History of the Jews in Romania: The Communist Era Until 1965* (Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Center, Tel Aviv University, 2005).
  8. Ionescu, *Justice and Restitution*; Idem, “The International Struggle of Romanian Jewry for Holocaust Restitution, 1944–1948,” *Israel Journal of Foreign Affairs* 16, Issue 2 (2022): 250–60.
  9. Norman Naimark, *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995); Atina Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies: Close Encounters in Occupied Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2007).
  10. The interviews used in the book come from the collection of the Oral History Institute at the University of Cluj.
  11. For other examples of sexual violence perpetrated by the Soviet soldiers against Jewish survivors who were Soviet or foreign citizens after the liberation, see the chapter by Daina Eglitis, “Homegoing After the Holocaust,” in this volume.
  12. The five female survivors who mentioned rape in their interviews were Edith Fullop, Eva Kondas, Magdolna Koper, Veronica Freund (Roth), and Ecaterina Steinberger (Zelig). Ioana Cosman, ed., *Depoziții despre Viață și Moarte: Holocaustul din Nord-Vestul Transilvaniei. Cercetare de Istorie Orală* (Argonaut, 2009), 148–285; see also Marion Kaplan, “Gender: A Crucial Tool in Holocaust Research,” in *Women and Genocide: Survivor, Victims, Perpetrators*, ed. Elissa Bemporad (Indiana University Press, 2018), 97–110.
  13. Cosman, *Depoziții despre Viață și Moarte*.

14. Viorel Achim and Constantin Iordachi, eds., *România și Transnistria: Problema Holocaustului. Perspective Istorice și Comparative* (Curtea Veche, 2004); Maria Bucur, *Heroes and Victims: Remembering War in Twentieth-Century Romania* (Indiana University Press, 2010); Monica Ciobanu, *Repression, Resistance and Collaboration in Stalinist Romania, 1944–1964: Post-Communist Remembering* (Routledge, 2021); Alexandru Florian, ed., *Holocaust Public Memory in Postcommunist Romania* (Indiana University Press, 2018); Valentina Glajar and Janine Teodorescu, eds., *Local History and Transnational Memory in the Romanian Holocaust* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Mihaela Gligor, ed., *Memories of Terror: Essays of Recent Histories* (CEEOL Press, 2021); Michelle Kelso and Daina S. Eglitis, “Holocaust Commemoration in Romania: Roma and the Contested Politics of Memory and Memorialization,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 4 (2014): 494–96; Valentin Săndulescu, “Like Coals Under Ashes, Ready to Scorch the Earth Once More: Notes Regarding Anti-Jewish Attitudes in Romania (1944–1947),” *European Review of History* 26, no. 6 (2019): 977–95; Raphael Vago, “The Unexpected Cosmopolitans—Romania’s Jewry Facing the Communist System,” *European Review of History* 17, no. 3 (2010): 491–504.
15. The first edition of Mozes’s memoir was published in 1993 in Hungarian, her native language. The Romanian version was published in 1995, and the English one in 2005. Teréz. Mózes, *Bevázott köztáblak* (Literator, 1993); Tereza Mozes, *Decalog însângeraat* (Editura ARA, 1995); Tereza Mozes, *Staying Human Through the Holocaust* (University of Calgary Press, 2005). The quotations come from the English version.
16. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 264–65.
17. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 264–66.
18. For a discussion of the connection between some of the survivors’ “shame” and their silence and avoidance of the topic in their testimonies and the complex motivations behind this response to sexual violence, see the chapter by Nina Paulovicova, “I Heard a Russian Voice,” in this volume.
19. On the pattern of Holocaust survivors’ reluctance to reveal their own sexual violence victimization—but point to that of other friends and acquaintances—in their ego-documents, see Zoë Waxman, “Buried Words: Reflections on the Diary of Molly Applebaum,” *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of History and Culture* 27, no. 4 (2021): 473–80; see the chapter by Daina Eglitis, “Homegoing After the Holocaust,” in this volume; on forgetting as a mechanism of self-healing adopted by some Holocaust survivors, see Arleen Ionescu, “Forgiving as Self-Healing? The Case of Eva Mozes Kor,” in *Arts of Healing: Cultural Narratives of Trauma*, ed. Arleen Ionescu and Maria Margaroni (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020).
20. Myriam Chanit, “*Doctoriță în Infern*,” *Caietele C.S.I.E.R.*, no. 4 (2000): 5–33.
21. Chanit, *Doctoriță în Infern*, 18–19.
22. Chanit, *Doctoriță în Infern*, 19.

23. Chanit, *Doctoriță în infern*, 19.
24. Chanit, *Doctoriță în infern*, 19.
25. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*; Grossmann, *Jews, Germans, and Allies*, 89.
26. See the USC Shoah Foundation testimonies of Aurelia Isaac (no. 20165) and Matilda Spitzer (no. 18970). For a detailed analysis of these USC Shoah Foundation testimonies, see the chapter by Daina Eglitis, "Homegoing After the Holocaust," in this volume.
27. Magda Herzberger, *Survival* (1st World Library, 2005), 330–32.
28. Herzberger, *Survival*, 330.
29. Herzberger, *Survival*, 330–32.
30. Gisella Perl, *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (International Universities Press, 1948), 182–83.
31. The biography of Armand (Nini) Dankner, which includes his sister Gertrude ('Trude), Dankner's Diaries, Yad Vashem Documents Archive, RG 0.33, File 9998, pp. 139–40; on the diaries of Rosika and Gertrude Dankner, see Ilona Angert, "I Have Hope That God Has Not Forgotten Us: Diaries of a Mother and a Daughter Chronicle a Jewish Family's Survival," *Yad Vashem Jerusalem*, no. 85 (March 2018): 16–17.
32. Lilly Marcou, *Sub Stalin și Dej: Memoriile unui om de stângă* (Editura Antet, 1998), 51–52. Young Jewish women survivors in other Eastern European countries, such as Slovakia, mentioned in their testimonies that they refused to believe the rumors about the Soviet soldiers' rapes and thefts perpetrated in their countries. See the chapter by Monika Vrzgulová, "The Other Calamities," in this volume.
33. See the chapter by Andrea Pető, "The Witness Vanishes," in this volume.
34. See, for instance, the diary of a German woman who was a young girl in 1945. Sabina de Werth Neu, *A Long Silence: Memoirs of a Refugee Child, 1941–1958* (Prometheus, 2011).
35. Klara Ostfeld, *Lumini și umbre în viața mea* (Multistar, 1992), 62.
36. Ostfeld, *Lumini și umbre*, 63.
37. Andrea Pető shows in her chapter that in Budapest too the Soviet officers used the pretext of requisitioning local women for work to try to rape them. See Andrea Pető's chapter, "The Witness Vanishes," in this volume.
38. The strategy of disguising themselves to appear too old, too young, or unattractive to the Red Army soldiers was adopted by Jewish Holocaust survivors in other parts of Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe. See the chapters by Daina Eglitis, "Homegoing After the Holocaust," and Monika Vrzgulová, "The Other Calamities," in this volume.
39. Herman Victorov, *Sub aripa neagră a războiului* (Maple Red Publishing House, 2016), 327–29.
40. Victorov, *Sub aripa neagră*, 329–30.
41. Victorov, *Sub aripa neagră*, 330.
42. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 264.

43. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 274.
44. For an overview of the Jewish survivors' long journey home after liberation from the Nazi camps, including the dangers they encountered during their travel in war-torn Poland, see Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence: Jewish Survivors in Poland and Slovakia, 1944–1948* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 30–62.
45. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 268. As Daina Eglitis and Monika Vrzgulová have shown in their chapters, some Jewish women survivors remembered the help they received from Soviet officers and soldiers during their journey home. See Eglitis, "Homegoing After the Holocaust," and Vrzgulová, "The Other Calamities," in this volume.
46. Mozes, *Staying Human*, 290–91.
47. Chanit, *Doctoriță în infern*, 20.
48. Chanit, *Doctoriță în infern*, 22.
49. Dora Apsan-Sorell, *Tell the Children: Letters to Miriam* (Sighet Publishing, 1998); on liberated Czechoslovakia in postwar Europe, see Cichopek-Gajraj, *Beyond Violence*.
50. Apsan-Sorell, *Tell the Children*, 137.
51. Apsan-Sorell, *Tell the Children*, 137, 144.
52. Soon after their arrival in Transnistria and neighboring areas, the Soviet authorities forcibly recruited thousands of Jewish survivors to serve in the Red Army and in labor units for the reconstruction of the war-devastated region of Donbas. Ancel, "The New Jewish Invasion," 239–40.
53. Lipman Kunstadt, *Diary from Hell in Transnistria, 1942–1944* (Yad Vashem, 2022), 514–50; on Kunstadt's diary, see Dalia Ofer and Sarah Rosen, "An Account from Transnistria: The Diary of Lipman Kunstadt, a Social Critic from Within," in *Beyond Camps and Forced Labour: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference*, ed. Suzanne Bardgett, Christine Schmidt, and Dan Stone (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 49–66.
54. Sașa Pană, *Născut în '02: Memorii, file de jurnal, evocări* (Editura Minerva, 1973).
55. Yosef Govrin, *Sub spectrul distrugerii: Amintiri din Transnistria și din timpul imigrării ilegale în Eret Israel, 1941–1947* (Hasefer, 2005); Leo Schachach, *Orășelul pierdut* (Criterion, 1996), 188–89; Rubin Udler, *The Cursed Years: Reminiscences of a Holocaust Survivor* (Chisinau, 2005), 150–64; Joil Alpern, *No One Awaiting Me: Two Brothers Defy Death During the Holocaust in Romania* (University of Calgary Press, 2002), 157–67.
56. Gaëlle Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989* (Berghahn, 2020); Stefan Cristian Ionescu, "'Californian' Colonists Versus Local Profiteers? The Competition for Jewish Property During the Economic Colonization of Bukovina, 1941–1943," *Yad Vashem Studies* 44, no. 2 (2016): 121–45.
57. Mihail Sebastian, *Journal, 1935–1944: The Fascist Years* (Ivan R. Dee, 2016), 611.
58. Emil Dorian, *The Quality of Witness: A Romanian Diary, 1937–1944* (Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), 350.



59. Simon Geissbühler, "The Rape of Jewish Women and Girls During the First Phase of the Romanian Offensive in the East, July 1941: A Research Agenda and Preliminary Findings," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 19, no. 1 (2013): 59–80; Harward T. Grant, *Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2021); Ioanid, *Evreii sub Regimul Antonescu*; Dana Mihăilescu, "Early Postwar Accounts on Jewish Orphans from Transnistria," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 36, no. 3 (2022): 353–71.
60. Victorov, *Sub aripa neagră*, 319–31.
61. Carol Roman, *Să te încrezi în vise* (Editura Balcanii și Europa, 2011), 52–54. Survivors from other Eastern European countries mentioned hiding as a strategy adopted by women to escape rape by the Soviet soldiers. See the chapter by Nina Paulovicova, "I Heard a Russian Voice," in this volume.
62. Roman, *Să te încrezi în vise*, 54.
63. Godell, *Viață de caricaturist: Ziua vesel, noaptea vesel, nicicând trist* (Editura Sirius, 1991), 44.
64. See the chapter by Nina Paulovicova, "I Heard a Russian Voice," in this volume.
65. Earl Weinstock and Herbert Wilner, *The Seven Years* (E. P. Dutton, 1959), 96.
66. Weinstock and Wilner, *The Seven Years*, 104.
67. Weinstock, *The Seven Years*, 104–105.
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# HOMEGOING AFTER THE HOLOCAUST

## JEWISH WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF SOVIET FILTRATION AND VIOLENCE

DAINA EGLITIS

### INTRODUCTION

THE END OF THE NAZI THREAT AND WORLD WAR II WERE MUCH AWAITED after years of acute violence and the destruction of countless lives and communities. European Jews who had survived the genocidal destruction that swept the continent were not of one mind about what to do next, or where to go. Those who had lost track of family and friends during years of terror, imprisonment, and uncertainty were eager to learn of the fate of loved ones. Some were resolved never to return to communities and countries that had betrayed and brutalized them, and turned westward, or sought to make aliyah to Palestine. Others wished to return to their communities in Eastern and Central Europe or the Soviet Union to seek lost homes and missing family members. This chapter traces accounts of the latter group: specifically, Jewish women survivors, caught after liberation in Soviet-administered territories, who hoped to return home, desperate to find the people and places from which they had been separated by Nazis and their local collaborators.

This chapter uses women's testimonies and memoirs to develop an account of the often frightening and violent journeys survivors experienced and remembered, and to highlight the postwar risks encountered by liberated women survivors. It focuses in particular on the process of filtration (*fil'tracija*) that was used by Soviet authorities to investigate perceived threats and traitors and to ascertain the wartime activities and

postwar loyalties of citizens.<sup>1</sup> Millions of Soviet citizens returning from prisoner of war camps, forced or voluntary labor under German authorities, and mobilization in German armed forces underwent detention and interrogation at filtration points and camps that dotted the postwar map of East and Central Europe and the USSR. Among them were also Jewish survivors whose experiences in Nazi-occupied zones were almost invariably brutal imprisonment in concentration camps, but whose survival in German captivity was an object of suspicion in the eyes of Soviet authorities. Significantly, testimonies show that experiences of filtration were gendered: Women were at risk in filtration camps of sexual violence from Soviet officials, soldiers, and guards who believed that their survival had been enabled by sexual collaboration with the enemy.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter turns the lens away from better known subjects of research on the Soviet process of filtration, in particular forced laborers who had toiled for Nazi industry and Soviet prisoners of war (POWs). These were groups of considerable size: It is estimated that 4.3 million Soviet citizens, a significant proportion of whom were women,<sup>3</sup> were pressed into forced labor in manufacturing, agriculture, and mining to further the German war effort. By early 1946, about 3.4 million of them had returned.<sup>4</sup> Estimates vary, but historians suggest that well over 5 million Soviet military personnel fell into German hands, and between 2 and 3.3 million died in captivity; many perished in the horrific conditions of hunger and hard labor they endured in Nazi POW camps.<sup>5</sup> Surviving Soviet POWs comprised about 1.8 million of those repatriated to the USSR. Altogether, returnees numbered roughly between 5.2 million and 5.4 million.<sup>6</sup> Filtration was intended to screen these masses for “perceived deviant or dangerous elements,” and to bring back under Soviet disciplinary control all those who had been exposed to Nazi or Western influence and agitation, or had cooperated or collaborated with enemies of the state.<sup>7</sup> The process of Soviet filtration has been discussed in a number of English-language publications,<sup>8</sup> as well as Russian-language works.<sup>9</sup> I highlight a largely unexamined story of the late- and postwar period: the experiences of Jewish women survivors who underwent filtration, a process characterized by suspicion, paranoia, and sexualized violence as they sought to find a way home after liberation from Nazi camps and death marches in East and Central Europe.

## SURVIVOR VOICES: SOURCES AND CHALLENGES

This woman-centered reconstruction of survivors’ experiences in Soviet filtration camps relies on testimonies and published and unpublished memoirs, often written or recorded years after the events described. Testimonies as historical evidence present a spectrum of challenges, but they also center survivors and give them agency to

shape historical accounts, providing the foundation on which to reconstruct events that might otherwise be marginalized or overlooked.<sup>10</sup> These are individual stories that cannot be a precise rendering of the past but, taken together, constitute a body of evidence for widespread sexual brutalization and exploitation of Jewish women survivors in Soviet filtration camps. They further suggest that the risk of violence was amplified by the acute suspicion of Soviet authorities toward Jewish survivors of Nazi ghettos and camps. As I have written in an account of sexual violence at liberation, "A powerful assumption was that death was the expected outcome for those who fell into the hands of the German occupier: thus, survivors were suspect *because of their survival*."<sup>11</sup>

This chapter cites twenty-one recorded testimonies gathered from the USC Shoah Visual History Archive, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum's Oral History Collection, and Yad Vashem.<sup>12</sup> It also includes two unpublished autobiographical writings by survivors from the archives of Yad Vashem and the Museum of Jews in Latvia, and a written testimony taken from a published collection. These sources cannot be representative of all experiences: Most survivors never gave testimonies,<sup>13</sup> and testimonies that address the topic of filtration were given in a spectrum of languages. The materials used in this chapter draw on language knowledge of English, Russian, and Latvian.<sup>14</sup> This article uses a sample of testimonies by Jewish women survivors that were selected based on language, direct relevance to the topics covered in the chapter, and accessibility in public or semi-public databases. Records of filtration are spread across archives in numerous countries, and precise figures on the number of Jewish women survivors who passed through Soviet filtration camps are not to my knowledge available. Conclusions reached in the chapter should be understood as suggestive, but not definitive. There is further research to be done on this important but overlooked topic.

In researching this topic, the testimonies and memoirs of women survivors are critical. The perspective one gleans from Soviet interrogation records is that of the paranoid Stalinist state, which was determined to root out threats, quash resistance, and "place all returning citizens in a space of transit, a period of probation during which they could try to make sense of and articulate their experiences of war and displacement in terms acceptable to the regime."<sup>15</sup> Interrogation records demonstrate the systematic efforts of authorities to gather information on the wartime activities of subjects, to question their motives, and to shape responses, particularly where a subject was encouraged or coerced to inform authorities about the (real or imagined) collaboration of someone else.<sup>16</sup>

The study of filtration presents particular challenges, as terminology used by some interviewers and survivors can be ambiguous. The term "filtration" was not commonly used in English-language testimonies by either interviewers or survivors, who often referred to the sites to which they were taken by Soviet authorities after liberation simply as "camps." The use of the term "filtration" was more common in Russian-language materials.<sup>17</sup> I encountered several instances in English-language interviews where



survivors spoke of detention by Soviet authorities after their liberation from Nazi camps and used the term “DP camps.” However, displaced persons camps, which dotted the postwar map, were functionally and administratively distinct from the filtration camps to which some survivors in Soviet zones were taken. For example, Tania R., born in Vilno, Poland, survived the Kaunas ghetto, Stutthof concentration camp, and a harrowing death march. After liberation, she recovered with her mother and sister from severe emaciation and illness. She tells that about six weeks after liberation, the women were taken by Soviet soldiers to a camp in Toruń, Poland, where she, her mother, and her sister were held “behind barbed wire.” Tania R. uses the term “DP camp”; the camp at Toruń, however, was a filtration camp.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Hungarian-born survivor Johanna B., who survived Nazi imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau and Breslau, tells that she was liberated and then transferred to a Soviet camp also located in Wrocław (called Breslau during German occupation). Johanna B. remembers that she was taken by “Russians, Russian liberators . . .” to a camp populated by thousands, including Czechoslovak and French soldiers and other Jewish survivors. At this “DP camp” (which she also calls a “Russian DP camp”), she recalls that there were medical facilities and food.<sup>19</sup>

DP camps were located around postwar Germany, Austria, and Italy, and were administered by the Western allies and the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). In these camps, over a million refugees, including an estimated 250,000 Jewish survivors, lived at war’s end.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Soviet filtration camps, which predated the start of World War II in the Soviet Union, existed to identify and root out “betrayers” of the Motherland. In the wake of the Winter War (1939–1940) between the USSR and Finland, over 5,000 Soviet prisoners of war taken by Finland returned home. These returnees underwent filtration to interrogate their loyalties to the state, but the terms of determination and definition were vague. A significant proportion were imprisoned, while some were executed. Filtration camps continued to exist over the course of World War II, though the process of filtration evolved as a spectrum of perceived threat groups were defined.<sup>21</sup>

Women’s testimonies may also present challenges, particularly those that reference experiences of sexual victimization, which occurred in the filtration camps, as well as in German captivity and at liberation by Soviet forces.<sup>22</sup> Shame has often been associated with victims rather than perpetrators of sexual violence. Henry Greenspan notes that “stigma has always impacted how and what survivors retell. Memories of sexual violence may be especially likely to remain unspoken in response.”<sup>23</sup> Silence about rape and humiliation pervades histories of war and genocide, and this historical episode is no exception.<sup>24</sup> In some interviews, including several referenced in this chapter, survivors tell of sexual violence that victimized someone else, or which they narrowly avoided. As Nina Paulovicova writes in this volume: “Holocaust survivors were more likely to mention

sexual(ized) violences when the circumstances allowed these women and girls to escape the imminent threat of rape or when they knew about the rape that happened to others.” She also notes that in some testimonies, survivors “refused to call sexual violence by its name, paused in the middle of traumatic recollections, and used euphemisms” to describe sexual violence.<sup>25</sup> It is impossible to determine whether a survivor herself was a witness or a victim.<sup>26</sup> However, testimonies confirm patterns of experience, including the pervasive threat of and exposure to sexual violence in Soviet filtration camps.

In the sections that follow, testimonies and memoirs underpin a woman-centered narrative of Soviet filtration that draws on existing published sources, but does not duplicate them. This chapter poses questions intended to diversify the historical record: How did Jewish women survivors experience filtration, and how do they remember and recount it? What were key vulnerabilities of women undergoing filtration? How does a woman-centered narrative introduce new questions for researchers studying the end of the Holocaust and World War II? First-person sources offer the opportunity to build a foundation for a broader and more nuanced narrative of war’s end that fills historical gaps that emerge from the absence of women’s voices in perpetrator or other official documents, recognizes tensions between narratives of victimization by liberators and the heroism of liberating armies, and addresses the longtime marginalization of women’s stories in the telling of these histories.

## A LONG JOURNEY HOME: SOVIET FILTRATION CAMPS

At the end of World War II, chaos and uncertainty enmeshed large swaths of European territory. Food, safe shelter, medical care, information on missing loved ones, and reliable transportation were in short supply, but refugees, weapons, trauma, and the desire for revenge were not. It was an environment characterized by desperation, lawlessness, and rage: Elly K., a German-born survivor of the Riga ghetto and the Riga-Kaiserwald and Stutthof concentration camps, remembers, “Everybody had a gun, and people would rob and rape and so on.”<sup>27</sup> Magda Mandel Shapiro, a Hungarian Jewish survivor, writes a third-person account in her memoir of beginning the long journey home:

Two weeks after liberation, they started out, a sad and ludicrous procession. In rolled up men’s pants with bundles wrapped in tablecloths balanced on their heads and rough branches for walking sticks in their hands, they looked like a group of poor begging gypsies. The road was covered with melting snow and puddles of dirty water. The fresh cold wind blew in their faces, the sky was gray, the clouds heavy and low. The houses at the side of the road were burned and demolished. Dead horses lay

at the side of the road. There were only chimneys and doorsteps where once houses stood. On the meadows, cows and dogs, crazed by fear and hunger, ran about wildly. Now and then a tank or a large truck rushed by them.<sup>28</sup>

Even after the defeat of Nazi Germany, risk and uncertainty colored the experiences of survivors as they sought to move westward, or to make their way to Palestine. Some also wanted to return to communities across Eastern Europe and the USSR in the hope of finding families and homes they had lost.

Among the obstacles that impeded survivors from territories liberated from Nazi occupation by the Soviet Army were Soviet filtration camps, located in the war-torn landscape of Central and Eastern Europe, and inside the USSR.<sup>29</sup> While responsibility for population surveillance and counterespionage was delegated across various state authorities, filtration camps were run largely by the Red Army's counterespionage service, SMERSH (an acronym for "Death to Spies").<sup>30</sup> The most active use of filtration took place as the war was coming to an end and the Soviet Army was pushing westward with German forces in retreat. By 1946, responsibility for regular population surveillance had shifted back to entities like the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, the NKVD. The net of suspicion was cast widely, catching those who had retained some control over their wartime fate, as well as those who were victims of Nazi Germany's genocidal policies and practices.

Filtration functioned as a means of interrogating loyalties, exploiting labor, and screening (and sometimes treating) those who passed through for diseases, as well as a site for "political education" to resocialize returnees into the ideological environment of the Stalinist USSR.<sup>31</sup> By one estimate, in early March 1946, "when repatriation was by and large concluded, 4.2 million Soviet citizens (2.66 million civilians and 1.53 million prisoners of war) had passed through the system of Soviet filtration,"<sup>32</sup> though the intensity and length of the process varied significantly across the repatriate population.<sup>33</sup> As noted earlier, figures on the number of those who underwent filtration vary somewhat across sources. Similarly, it is difficult to decisively determine the total number of "camps" at which filtration took place because the terminology used in official documents is not uniform: Franziska Exeler writes that in the Central and East European territories under the control of the Soviet Army in mid-1945, there were 57 "assembly-transit points" and 127 "screening and filtration points" that functioned like "camps that could house large numbers of people, and which were used by NKVD members to register and interrogate [detainees]." Within the borders of the USSR, there were additional filtration camps both in the western regions and deep within the Soviet Union, though the latter were usually reserved for those who had failed to pass earlier rounds of filtration, including those who had served in German military formations.<sup>34</sup>

The labels of “returning citizens” or “repatriates,” which one encounters in publications on filtration, must be qualified to recognize that in some cases, “return” encompassed those who were working or fighting on the German-occupied territories of the USSR. While these were Soviet citizens who had not left the territories they inhabited when Nazi Germany attacked the USSR in June 1941, they had been outside the purview of Soviet authorities and, in some instances, had worked or fought against Soviet interests and forces.<sup>35</sup> For example, in Kurzeme, a Western region of Latvia, there were seven main filtration camps. Soviet authorities mandated that all men ages sixteen to sixty who were in this territory when Soviet troops forced out the German Army and reoccupied Latvia in 1944–45 undergo filtration. This included Latvian men who forcibly or voluntarily served in the German Army, as well as many civilians in the territory.<sup>36</sup> Civilian women who had worked in, for instance, administrative positions with the occupying German Army were sometimes held for filtration. Women in reoccupied territories, including Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, were terrorized in other ways as well: Soviet soldiers victimized many women who had stayed in these territories with brutal sexual violence. As one source on Estonia notes, in the last year of the war, “Local [Communist] party organizations complained in the capital, Tallinn, that [Soviet] soldiers were responsible for rape on an extraordinary scale.”<sup>37</sup>

Soviet authorities almost invariably interrogated and punished those who had fought as volunteer or forcibly mobilized troops in the German Army,<sup>38</sup> or had served the Nazi regime in some other capacity, but their own Red Army prisoners of war were also objects of acute suspicion. Many of those who underwent filtration as they returned to the territories of the USSR were Soviet POWs who had been held in Nazi camps.<sup>39</sup> An August 16, 1941, declaration, Order no. 270, established a policy of labeling POWs traitors, which meant that families left behind could also be punished.<sup>40</sup> The attitude of the Soviet state to captured troops was contemptuous: Stalin is quoted as telling a foreign reporter, “In Hitler’s camps, there are no Russian prisoners of war, only Russian traitors, and we shall do away with them when the war is over.”<sup>41</sup> Frank Ellis writes, “The mere fact that they had been captured by the Germans rendered them objects of deep suspicion,” and interrogation records reveal that captured soldiers were widely regarded by their interrogators as “former” Red Army soldiers.<sup>42</sup> Soviet prisoners of war had endured horrific treatment at the hands of their Nazi captors, including starvation and savage beatings.<sup>43</sup> However, as “former” Red Army soldiers, the homeland to which they returned threatened rather than welcomed them, assuming that their improbable survival was rooted in betrayal of the Soviet Union.

Those undergoing filtration were often treated harshly: As one researcher notes, the fate of repatriates was settled “in cavalier fashion with innumerable instances of the war’s innocent victims receiving the same ‘reward’ as voluntary collaborators.”<sup>44</sup> Clear distinctions between innocent victims and malicious collaborators were blurred by false

accusations and confessions coerced during filtration so that quotas imposed for the identification of spies, saboteurs, and collaborators could be fulfilled by camp staff.<sup>45</sup>

On the one hand, filtration mirrored some of the border control processes that characterize standard state security architecture, clarifying identities, making known the presence and intentions of those who would inhabit a defined political space, and attaching to returnees a status that would make their relationship to the state and larger community known. On the other hand, it served with a heavy hand the needs of a powerful and paranoid state, stripping those held for filtration of rights to recourse for their treatment, legitimizing violence, coercing collaboration, and sowing distrust.<sup>46</sup> Nick Baron characterizes the Soviet state as one that “was deeply distrustful of its own population, especially those individuals who had transgressed its spatial limitations and experienced life outside,” even if that “life outside” was one of persecution and oppression by Nazis and their collaborators.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, many of those who passed through filtration camps experienced the paradox of interrogations that imputed agency to their wartime experiences that they, as POWs, forced laborers, and certainly as concentration camp victims, could not have had.

Did most Soviet citizens returning to the USSR after German mobilization, captivity, or labor go through filtration? Research points to somewhat divergent answers. Filtration was certainly pervasive: Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, “Every returning Soviet citizen had to go through filtration at camps on the Soviet border, sometimes a lengthy process lasting several months.”<sup>48</sup> Seth Bernstein, however, suggests that not all returnees underwent filtration, writing, “They avoided filtration outside the USSR either because they feared repression or because they had tired of waiting weeks or months to return.” He points out, for example, “By August 1945, the Repatriation Administration in Belarus had counted as many as 100,000 returnees. Only 40,000 had arrived in an ‘organized manner,’ via filtration camps and the administration’s reception-distribution points.”<sup>49</sup> Did returnees, including survivors, have agency to “avoid filtration,” and, if so, what circumstances enabled them to do so? Bernstein posits that the sheer volume of arrivals would have overwhelmed the capacity of filtration camps: “The filtration investigation—really a short interview—was a formality in most cases. Investigators typically asked how returnees had been deported or captured, where they had been abroad, and whether they had faced arrest during the war. Some waited months for an officer to interview them for a few minutes.”<sup>50</sup> The account recognizes particular groups as potential threats from the Soviet perspective, including “the thousands of people that the Western Allies had captured in pro-German units and transferred to Soviet control at the end of the war,”<sup>51</sup> but does not examine filtration of liberated Jewish survivors.

While Jewish survivors of Nazi ghettos and camps clearly did not fit the profile of Soviet returnees who had served the Nazi regime, testimonies suggest that their survival in Nazi captivity made them objects of pervasive suspicion, and that many underwent

interrogation, as well as violence and labor exploitation, in Soviet filtration camps at war's end. Jewish women's recollections of filtration used in this research attest to particular gendered risks, including sexual violence, and show that the threat extended to encompass survivors who were not pre-war Soviet citizens.

## WOMEN REMEMBER: FILTRATION AND SUSPICION

In the remainder of this chapter, I highlight women's experiences of Soviet filtration camps, with a focus on Jewish survivors of Nazi ghettos and camps, as they reveal a little-examined layer of postwar history. Bernstein suggests that many filtration interviews were brief,<sup>52</sup> but testimonies and memoirs cited in this study show that filtration could be lengthy and harrowing, even for those whose "contact" with German authorities and institutions took the form of imprisonment in Nazi ghettos and concentration camps. Latvian-born Leia K., who survived the Daugavpils ghetto, as well as camps at Dünaburg, Riga-Kaiserwald, Ereda, Stutthof, Neuengamme, and Bergen-Belsen before being liberated by the British Army, tells that she underwent filtration, including at a camp near Stettin, as she sought to return to Latvia. She tells that she was not free to leave the "*Lager*" and that she worked in war-related tasks (she does not specify what they were), and she was able to return to Daugavpils only in June 1946, a full year after the end of the war.<sup>53</sup>

The repressive organs of the Soviet state blurred the distinction between Soviet citizens who had voluntarily mobilized in the service of Nazi Germany and those who had been victimized by the genocidal regime. Suspicion fell on all those who had been located on German-occupied territory and had survived. Soviet authorities were interested in how their subjects had come into contact with the fascists, how they spent their time while in German-occupied spaces, and what they knew of collaborators and anti-Soviet activities.<sup>54</sup>

The filtration experience was shaped by a variety of factors, including perceptions of Soviet authorities about citizens who had spent time outside of the purview of the state. These perceptions in turn were influenced by the antifascist and anti-German propaganda that was ubiquitous during World War II. At the same time, the Soviet press consistently minimized the Holocaust in wartime and postwar media and public discourse. Special treatment of liberated prisoners of Nazi concentration camps was not foreseen. Vojin Majstorović writes, "I have never found any evidence that the Red Army issued special orders relating to either Soviet or foreign Jews, treating them instead as citizens of their respective countries."<sup>55</sup> While the experiences of troops who liberated territories in the USSR that had been taken by the German Army made them almost

certainly aware that Jewish communities had been largely annihilated during occupation, Majstorović points out,

The overarching Soviet discourse about the wartime fate of the Jews employed euphemisms such as “Soviet citizens” or “peaceful citizens,” concealing the Jewish identity of the victims. The Soviet Union became notorious for obfuscating the singularity of the Holocaust. Moreover, the Soviets never publicly acknowledged that the murder of the Jews was a consequence of Nazi antisemitism; for them what was essential was the Nazis’ anticommunism and to present all Soviet citizens as victims.<sup>66</sup>

The effects of pervasive Soviet propaganda were manifold, but I highlight two of particular relevance here. First, the application of the encompassing label of “victim” to Soviet citizens was blurred by a filtration process that institutionalized state paranoia and imputed malign motivations and actions to those who survived contact with Nazi structures, distorting victimhood—even that of citizens who survived genocide—into potential collaboration. Second, Soviet authorities relentlessly propagated stories and images of Nazi butchery and ruthlessness; survival of innocent victims of ghettos, camps, and death marches was thus perceived as an anomaly. It was their improbable survival that marked them, from the perspective of Soviet authorities, as suspect.

The acute mistrust of citizens undergoing filtration is apparent in testimonies of Jewish women survivors. The story of a Latvian-born survivor, Faniia (Fanija) Pavlova, who was imprisoned in the Liepāja ghetto, as well as the Riga-Kaiserwald, Sloka, Stutthof, and Bromburg camps, highlights some of the challenges of filtration. Pavlova writes in her memoir that she was desperate after liberation to return home. She writes that while she was in the hospital after her release from German captivity, she was already planning her return to Liepāja: “I never once forgot that someone from my family might still be alive and when I returned to Liepāja, I would see them.” The journey northward on the train was slow. In Warsaw, prospective returnees had to pass through a filtration checkpoint where she estimates she spent about a week. She writes, “The KGB was checking everyone who had ended up with the Germans for whatever reason. I was called several times for questioning by an investigator. This happened during the day and night. They asked me everything: how I survived, why I wasn’t shot, because so many Jews had been. They couldn’t fathom that I, a Jewish girl, stayed alive after all those concentration camps. I spent almost two weeks in Warsaw at the ‘filtration’ checkpoint.” Unable to secure a train to Riga from Warsaw, she traveled instead to Minsk, where she was detained for a week at another filtration camp: “Again they asked me how I ended up in the concentration camp, how did I survive, why I wasn’t shot since all the other Jews seemed to have been.” When she finally reached Latvia, she was able to locate a brother, Tolya, who had survived. She remained in Soviet Latvia after the



war and eventually married. She was interviewed in her home city of Liepāja after the reestablishment of independent Latvia.<sup>57</sup>

The suspicion that followed Pavlova from her liberation through two filtration camps is echoed in the experiences of other survivors. Hannah Sara R., born in Lithuania, imprisoned in the Stutthof concentration camp, and liberated by the Soviet Army, recalls: "I told them my story. The commandant said to me that he had witnesses coming in who worked with me in Germany and that they spied with me" — the suspicion was untrue, but common in interrogations. She recalls being told, "Your imagination is so vivid. What you tell me nobody can go through. Nobody can go through it and live."<sup>58</sup> Perhaps improbably, the belief that life in Nazi captivity was one of relative ease rather than chronic threat and terror was not unusual. A post-Soviet memoir by a member of the Red Army who spent time in a German POW camp recalls the accusation that POWs must have been "sitting around with Germans in captivity, while we [Soviet troops] spilled our blood!"<sup>59</sup> Paranoia permeated interactions between citizens and the state in Stalin's Soviet Union: Acute vertical surveillance constructed a context that also fostered horizontal surveillance, as citizens were encouraged—and sometimes coerced—to inform on one another.

Rebecca R., a Lithuanian-born survivor, was liberated by Soviet forces from a harrowing winter death march out of Stutthof. She recalls, "Basically, the Russian[s] put us in the camp after we were liberated." The camp was located in Toruń, and Rebecca R. recalls that there were a lot of other Jews from Šiauliai, Lithuania. Survivors were treated with acute suspicion: "And the Russians weren't much better than the Germans, because they used to come in the middle of the night with flashlights and all kinds of lights . . . and try to find out why we were alive. Why did Hitler kill everybody and you are not dead? They thought we were fascists of some kind, you know, and it was not very nice . . . being with them." In Toruń, her brother-in-law found her and encouraged her not to return to Lithuania. With a handful of other detained women, she escaped to Germany, where she reunited with her husband in Munich.<sup>60</sup>

Jews who had been in hiding outside of Soviet-controlled territory were also suspect. Ukrainian-born Donna R. was subject to the same accusations as she sought to return home from Germany, where she had been living under a false name after being baptized into Catholicism to protect her false identity. She recalls thinking, "So [I] figure maybe I should go back to my country . . . and I'll pick up where I left off." On her way back, she ended up in Lwów (Lviv), where she underwent filtration by Soviet authorities who were skeptical of her story: "Who knows what you did in Germany. Maybe you work against us. Maybe you were spying against Russia. . . . They didn't treat me very good—Very bad." A woman worker at the camp also looked at her with suspicion: "See? You are [a] healthy girl. Look at me. I went through war." She was interrogated again later as she sought to return to her hometown: "They took me in—it's like



a jail, not exactly a jail, but it looks like a jail to me.” Soviet authorities did not want to accept her story: “They didn’t believe me, what I said.” Donna R. tells that she escaped from the “jail” in November 1945, and later lived with a family in Chernivtsi, married, and was able to get to a displaced persons camp in Kassel, Germany, from where she immigrated to New York.<sup>61</sup>

While most literature on filtration focuses on returning Soviet citizens—those whose loyalties had to be investigated before their return and reintegration into Soviet society—testimonies reveal that survivors liberated by the Soviet Army who were not Soviet citizens were also subject in some instances to filtration. Presence in Soviet-controlled territories in Eastern and Central Europe appears to have been a risk factor in itself. After liberation from a death march near Częstochowa, Romanian-born Aurelia I., a survivor of the Satu-Mare ghetto and the Auschwitz and Thorn camps, was taken by Soviet troops to Soviet Belorussia and held there for several months. She tells that after liberation, “The doors were open and of course the Russians were there.” She “figured . . . at least we’re gonna go home or something. . . . Not so.” After being held near her place of liberation in Poland, she and a group of others were taken by train to a Soviet camp in the Belorussian SSR, where she stayed until being released and allowed to return to Romania, where she hoped to reunite with her brother and husband.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Anna K., who spent time in the Bergen-Belsen, Roseldorf, and Strasshof camps, was with her Hungarian Jewish family in a Soviet-occupied zone at war’s end. She remembers that they were taken to a Soviet filtration camp. The camp, she says, had no proper medical care, and conditions “were very similar to the conditions in the concentration camp, except that we had facilities to take a shower every now and then, and we had food. But it was crowded, it was disorganized, it was dirty.” She says that other Jewish survivors were in the camp, which was “filled with gypsies and SS.” The family was told they would be in the camp for a week, but Anna K. says that it was six or eight weeks before they were permitted to travel back to Budapest.<sup>63</sup>

Testimonies suggest that Jewish women survivors from across the formerly Nazi-occupied spaces of Central Europe were at risk after liberation from the violent impunity of Soviet troops and the pervasive paranoia of Soviet authorities. Hungarian-born Gisella B., a survivor of the ghetto at Kiszvárd, as well as the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Nagelstal, Steinort, Strasburg, Stutthof, and Trunz camps, was liberated in Poland and ended up at a Soviet hospital. She was eager to go home to Hungary and, with a group of other women, sought out a train. In the chaos of war’s end, routes and destinations of trains were often not clear, which did not necessarily deter passengers desperate to begin their journeys: “Wherever [the train] went, we went with it.” The train, however, did not take them to Hungary, but to Soviet Belorussia, where authorities “didn’t believe us that we were from a concentration camp,” and the women were herded into a filtration camp near Minsk, where they spent about six months before being released.<sup>64</sup> Karolina S.,

born in Kraków, Poland, and a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau, Krakau-Plaszow, and Lichtewerden, was liberated by the Soviet Army in Lichtewerden, a subcamp of Auschwitz. She tells that she and a small group of women decided to walk back home. On their journey, they were stopped by Soviet authorities and asked for papers, but they had none. They were then taken to a "Russian station" that was largely populated by men: "I feel like we are locked again like in concentration camp." At the camp, she met prisoners who were preparing for deportation to Siberia for cooperation with the Germans. Karolina S. tells that she too was subject to suspicion: "They didn't believe anybody. . . . Are we really from a concentration camp, or we are a spy?" She eventually persuaded her interlocutors that she was from Kraków and was released with four other women, while a few others escaped with an officer's help.<sup>65</sup>

Women's testimonies also reveal that the threat of sexual violence pervaded women's end-of-war experiences. Johanna B., a Hungarian Jew who survived the Monor ghetto and the Auschwitz-Birkenau and Breslau camps, tells that after liberation by the Soviet Army from Breslau, a subcamp of Gross-Rosen, she was ill with typhoid fever, which enabled her to avoid the "unfortunate situations" (a euphemism for sexual violence) she says were common. After liberation she says that she was taken "to a big camp" in Oels, part of Lower Silesia, which was populated by survivors as well as soldiers, where she spent about a month.<sup>66</sup> Stefan Christian Ionescu's chapter in this volume also references the sexual threat in the camps, which he refers to as "Soviet transit camp[s]." For instance, Ionescu recounts the experience of Romanian survivor Myriam Chanit, who saw an attempted rape in the camp. He writes, "During one of the night shifts, Chanit witnessed how a Soviet soldier grabbed one of the Jewish women survivors and tried to rape her but failed to do so when, alarmed by the shouts of that woman's coworkers, an officer came and 'resolved' the problem by slapping, kicking, and chasing away the soldier."<sup>67</sup> For many Jewish women survivors, Soviet filtration camps were sites of considerable risk, where they faced the pervasive threat of sexual violence from Soviet soldiers and guards.

## WOMEN REMEMBER: FILTRATION AND SEXUAL DANGER

Numerous testimonies suggest that Soviet authorities were disdainful of women passing through the filtration camps, including liberated camp survivors, POWs, and forced laborers. Women's experiences were shaped by gendered stigma; that is, women who had survived Nazi occupation or captivity were marked through state paranoia and pervasive propaganda, as well as cultural and institutionalized misogyny, as collaborators and, significantly, as sexual collaborators. Exeler writes, "Eying them with suspicion

and contempt, the NKVD officers in charge of registration and interrogation treated the repatriates with disdain. Women in particular were vulnerable to sexual harassment and violence.”<sup>68</sup>

This chapter sheds light on the particular experiences of Jewish women survivors, whose “contact” with Germans was as victims and prisoners. Their survival was a source of suspicion, and they were treated during filtration as potential collaborators rather than victims of the Nazi regime. However, all women passing through Soviet filtration were at risk. During interrogations, women were often subjected to sexual innuendo and insults, including the accusation of being “German whores.”<sup>69</sup> Testimonies and memoirs show that questions about collaboration intertwined with suspicions that women had survived Nazi captivity because they had “lived with or slept with Germans.”<sup>70</sup> These suspicions, arguably, raised the risk of violent victimization in the filtration camps, sites at which women had little protection and no rights or recourse. Bernstein writes, “Soviet authorities and soldiers assumed that many women who had lived abroad or under occupation had extensive sexual encounters with Germans.”<sup>71</sup>

Sexual violence against women occurred in the camps, though specific figures for this violence are impossible to ascertain, as victims, many of whom returned to the USSR or its satellite states in Eastern Europe, were unlikely to speak of the violation, and perpetrator records do not document such crimes. Bernstein writes, “Most camps for repatriates were next to army settlements. Soldiers regularly invaded these lodgings, asserting that returnees deserved punishment for their wartime biography—even if the state was unwilling to mete it out during filtration.” Risks were compounded by rampant use of alcohol by Soviet soldiers and guards, and a dearth of norms or regulations that would have protected women held in the filtration camps.<sup>72</sup>

The experience of Lithuanian-born Lucy R., a survivor of the Vilnius ghetto and the Riga-Kaiserwald and Stutthof concentration camps, highlights the sexual threats that dogged Jewish women survivors both before and during filtration. Her interactions with Soviet personnel were fraught from the beginning. She recounts that after liberation she was treated by a Russian doctor for a fever that rendered her nearly unconscious; the doctor, a Soviet colonel, returned at night and tried to rape her. In response to her resistance, the officer beat her with a gun, though she tells that she was rescued by other soldiers. The threats continued after Lucy R. found a job interpreting for the Soviet military: “We were always in danger. . . . They liked women and they wanted young girls and they wanted to have fun with them.” She received help to find a train back to Vilnius to try to find her brother, but she recounts that as she sought to return to the city, she was taken off the train and interrogated by Soviet authorities for several weeks. At the filtration point, she was grilled on whether she had sexual relations with Germans. Authorities wanted to know, “How in the world did I survive and everybody else got killed?” She adds, “It was a real interrogation. But finally they

let me go." When she arrived in Vilnius around July 1945, Lucy R. had nowhere to go. She was taken in by a woman she met in Vilnius, but she did not stay long, as she had no close relatives left there, and she traveled back to Poland, where she linked up with other Jewish survivors. She did not return to Lithuania.<sup>73</sup>

Aurelia I., a Romanian-born survivor held in a filtration camp in the Belorussian SSR, recounts the environment of threat that pervaded the camp: "The Russian soldiers were eyeing the young girls, and it was frightening." She notes, "It was rough going. They could come, others at night, they would try . . ." She trails off before sharing a full story.<sup>74</sup> Stories about sexual violence are sometimes told incompletely or using euphemisms. Survivors relating accounts of sexual violence may also remove themselves from the violence, suggesting that they avoided victimization. On the one hand, this is plausible: Victims did not always survive their assaults, and testimonies may be an effort to share the stories of those who could not. On the other hand, sharing a story of witnessing rather than experiencing may enable one to share an experience without being marked by its societal stigma.<sup>75</sup> Hungarian-born Kate B., who survived the Auschwitz concentration camp, remembers that after liberation by "Russian partisans," she was herded by her liberators into Soviet-administered filtration camps, first near Lublin, Poland, and later outside of Minsk in Soviet Belorussia. She notes that "many people died in these camps too because of sickness or malnutrition." In these camps were "really a mix of people" that included Holocaust survivors, as well as "Hungarian fascists" and "German Nazis who were caught." Kate B. tells that Hungarian communists raised the problem with authorities of putting together survivors and Nazis, though it is unclear how or if the problem was resolved. She notes that in contrast to her experience in the Nazi captivity, men were mixed with women and there were rapes. She indicates that she was nearly victimized as well, and that she averted an assault when she kicked her attacker in a "sensitive place." While Kate B. avoids the question of who the attackers were and whether they were Soviet guards or troops, she shares that fellow prisoners came to the rescue.<sup>76</sup>

Austrian-born Alice W., who survived Hungarian ghettos as well as the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, and Neustadt bei Coburg camps before being liberated, tells that she ended up in a filtration camp in Hungary where she was always afraid. She remembers that she and others in the camp were put to work, and she mentions washing floors for a Soviet officer. In response to a question by the interviewer about the possibility of refusal, she notes that this was not an option: "They said to us, 'You worked for the Germans, you have to work for us.' That was their slogan."<sup>77</sup> This "slogan" is striking for its similarity to a recurring theme in women survivors' accounts of sexual assault at liberation: Polish-born Nina K., who survived the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, Majdanek, and Malchow camps, recalls, "A few nights [the Soviet soldiers] used to come in to . . . the private houses at night and want to rape the girls. And some of them got raped

by the Russians. They had the attitude, you slept with the Germans, you don't want to sleep with us. They couldn't understand anything."<sup>78</sup> Klara K., a Lithuanian-born survivor, tells of Russian soldiers harassing her and her mother: "They wouldn't leave us alone." She recalls that the Hungarian women in the group were being abused and that soldiers screamed, "You could live with the Germans, but you don't want to live with us!"<sup>79</sup> Common within these women's testimonies was the pervasive suspicion of Soviet troops and authorities that survival in Nazi captivity was a product of cooperation or collaboration with the enemy, whether in the form of labor or sexual favors, and that the Soviets had the right to demand the same from the survivors.

Significantly, Jewish women survivors relate stories of resistance and rescue in their testimonies about filtration. The dangerous conditions of Soviet filtration camps meant that women needed to protect themselves and one another. Women tell, for instance, of helping one another to escape from the Soviet filtration camps. Bronia S., who was born in Lithuania and survived the Kaunas ghetto and the Stutthof camp, tells that after liberation, many people were ill with typhus and the Soviets constructed a hospital to treat the sick. After her release from the hospital in Upper Silesia, she was taken to a "big Russian camp" because she was a Soviet citizen. Detainees were housed in barracks and forced to work. She worked with a group of Russian women who had been in Germany and were much healthier than the weak, malnourished Jewish survivors. "We were not afraid for our life. But in the morning to walk three miles to the place . . . [it] was very hard labor" dismantling German ammunition that the Soviets had taken into their possession. With a group of four other Jewish women held at the camp, Bronia S. was able to get a permit to see a doctor outside the camp, and the women fled by train to a nearby community where she knew there were "free Jews." She never returned to Lithuania.<sup>80</sup>

Women survivors sometimes sought the protection of male benefactors as they wished to avoid violent victimization, and several tell of Jewish Soviet military personnel who offered help. Romanian-born survivor Matilda S. remembers that after surviving the Auschwitz-Birkenau, Steinort, Stutthof, and Strasburg camps, as well as a death march out of Strasburg, she and her sister were liberated, but their emancipation from Nazi imprisonment did not open a road home, where they hoped to find their mother. Rather, the young women were herded by their Soviet liberators into a series of filtration camps, where they were interrogated and poorly fed. Matilda S. is somewhat vague in recounting her months in camps in Chernovitz (Chernivtsi) and later in Slutsk, Belorussian SSR, but she says, "A lot of, lot of people died after the war by the Russians," including her brother, who was shot. She adds, "I don't want to talk how they treated . . . The Jewish girls, how they went and they, they . . .," implying the incidence of sexual assault. Matilda S. trails off and the interviewer does not probe further, following with a question about her release.

The question of what, if any, protection was available to women who were assaulted, or who were under threat of sexual violence, is only partly addressed in the testimony of Matilda S., who tells that she met a Jewish army captain at the camp and told him, "We're in trouble here," and that soldiers would try to "get the girls and rape them." She says that the Jewish captain gave the women guards, though it is not clear who the guards were.<sup>81</sup> In his chapter in this volume, Ionescu suggests that Soviet officers (not necessarily only the Jewish officers, like the one described by Matilda S.) were less likely to engage in the rape of survivors than rank and file soldiers, but he also notes that they "usually failed to prevent sexual violence against women," and help was often comprised of nominal acts such as warnings to avoid areas with concentrations of soldiers, and relatively mild punishments like beatings.<sup>82</sup>

Esther K., a Lithuanian-born survivor liberated by the British at Bergen-Belsen, set off with her sister to try to return to her hometown of Kaunas, or to Vilnius, to find her father, brother, and husband. After transfer to an area occupied by Soviet troops in Poland, the sisters were taken to a filtration camp: "In order to go home, we had stop in one of the camps, by the Russian, by Stettin [Poland]. We got into a Russian camp there." The sisters were questioned about whether they had cameras, or gold, or watches. She comments that she and nine other women were in another camp in their "liberation days." The camp was populated by "prostitutes, Polish. And they were howling at . . . the Germans. There was such a commotion that, what's going on here? It's a liberation. We have to be free." But they were not free, and Esther K. tells that she, her sister, and the other women ran away from the camp with the help of a Jewish Soviet Army soldier.<sup>83</sup>

Margaret N., born in Czechoslovakia and held in the Sevlush ghetto, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Ravensbrück before being freed, was held at a "Russian military compound" with a small group of other girls and forced to clean and work in the kitchen. They remained there for weeks and: "We were crying. We wanna go home. Instead of being captured by the Germans, we're captured now by the Russians." They also feared the Soviet soldiers, who had raped women survivors after liberation: "They were like animals, the soldiers. They didn't care if you're 70 or 13 or 12, they were like animals." The young women's relief from danger came in the form of a Soviet general that Neuman tells was Jewish (though she says he did not reveal this to comrades), who helped them to craft a plan of escape.<sup>84</sup>

Some women sought to avoid victimization with disguises. Esther K. remembers that even after fleeing the Soviet filtration camps with the help of a Jewish Soviet soldier, she and others in her group disguised themselves as old women.<sup>85</sup> Regina W., a Hungarian survivor of the Auschwitz and Birnbaum camps, also recalls the fear of rape at the hands of Soviet soldiers, telling that at liberation, she "got dressed as a little boy, because I wanted them to think I was a little boy." Later, under control of Soviet soldiers in a filtration camp, she says that she felt safer than in German custody because "they weren't

going to kill us,” but she adds that “to an Orthodox Jewish girl who’s never had sex, the fear of that was horrendous. . . . And yet, we found some nice Russians, the younger ones, who understood, and say, ‘We’ll stay with you tonight. We’ll watch you.’ . . . But it was terribly frightening.”<sup>86</sup>

For most survivors who underwent filtration, relief came in the form of release by authorities or escape from the filtration camp. For some repatriates, however, the end of filtration was not the end of their journey of suffering at the hands of Soviet authorities. Documents and interrogation materials collected during filtration remained in the hands of the authorities and, in some instances, were utilized to stigmatize and prosecute returnees later. By one account, attitudes to (real or perceived) collaborators worsened with the start of the Cold War and punishments became more severe. Some who managed to evade deportation and long sentences endured circumscribed rights and life as “second-class citizens.”<sup>87</sup>

Others endured severe punishment, including exile to Soviet labor camps in the Far East. Irene Šneidere writes of a Jewish survivor from Latvia, S. Krīgere, who was imprisoned by Nazi authorities in the Riga ghetto, where her eleven-year-old daughter, parents, and other family were murdered.<sup>88</sup> She was later transferred to camps in Stutthof, Torun, and Argenau, and then marched westward toward Berlin, ending up in a prison in Karanova, from which she was liberated. She walked back to Poland and then underwent filtration in Vrešeno, spending more than two months in the camp. Upon her 1945 return to Riga, S. Krīgere was arrested and sentenced as a “socially dangerous element” to five years in a labor camp for collaboration with the Nazis. She appealed to the Ministry of the Interior in 1947 and received a negative response. In 1966, she was rehabilitated and the charge expunged from her record, as it was established that it was based on rumors and falsehoods.<sup>89</sup> Notably, this case was part of a wave of arrests of Latvian Jews between 1944 and 1945, when suspicion fell on Jews who had survived their contact with the Nazi structures and authorities during the Holocaust.

## CONCLUSION

The last chapter of Europe’s mid-century maelstrom did not end with the liberation of the Nazi camps and death marches, or with the end of World War II. As many survivors’ stories attest, threats and violence pervaded their postwar journeys in search of loved ones, shelter, and safety. The experiences of Jewish women survivors in Soviet filtration camps have not received significant attention in English-language literature on World War II, but they are, I suggest, significant in revealing both the paradoxes of Nazi victimization and Soviet liberation, and understudied aspects of this historical period.



In Soviet filtration camps, survivors were without rights or recourse: Those undergoing filtration could be subject to violence and exploitation. The demands of the state—whether for political subservience and unquestioning loyalty, for confession of real or imagined crimes and betrayals, or for laborers in an economy that had weathered years of war and occupation—shaped the process of filtration, and even those who had been victimized by genocidal Nazi violence were called to account for their survival.

Jewish women and men passing through filtration were subject to suspicion because they had survived Nazi captivity; a paranoid Soviet state blurred the line between victimhood and collaboration with a widely held perception that survival must have been enabled by complicity with the enemy. Filtration was characterized by acutely gendered risks, and, for both Jewish and non-Jewish women, suspicion of sexual collaboration was acute, deepening the already pervasive risks of filtration. Research and testimonies reveal that among Soviet authorities and troops there was widespread suspicion that women in the Nazi-occupied territories were sexually involved with their captors. This suspicion, I suggest, catalyzed an impulse and inclination to revenge for ostensible collaboration. It also shaped a sense of entitlement: If women had “given” themselves to their Nazi captors, the same could be demanded by their Soviet liberators. As Jewish women’s recollections in this chapter show, Soviet authorities and troops were wary of many survivors’ claims: Even claims of having been held in concentration camps were often received with skepticism because of a widely held belief, underpinned by ubiquitous propaganda, that no one could have survived Nazi barbarism. But some did survive—only to be subject to the violence and paranoia of the liberating Soviet Army and state security apparatus.

Jewish women’s stories draw our attention to underrecognized aspects of the war’s end—and give voice to survivors whose experiences have not been widely told because they were silenced by shame, political and ideological obstacles, and lack of access to the means to bring their stories into the mainstream of World War II and Holocaust history. A recognition of threats, violence, rescue, and resistance recounted by women survivors in their writings and testimonies opens the door to new avenues for research on how the postwar experience for those in Soviet-administered territories was generated and its dimensions shaped by state paranoia, sexist suspicions, and the violent impunity of Soviet troops and authorities.

## NOTES

1. For a broad overview of the process, see Igor Govorov, “Fil’tracija sovetskikh repatriantov v 40-e gg. XX vv.: Celi, metody i itogi,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 49, no. 2–3 (2008): 365–82.



2. Seth Bernstein writes, "Although the Red Army had triumphed, Germany's early victories had enabled the deportation of millions of Soviet people away from the motherland. Many Soviet men assumed that the women could not or did not resist German advances." *Return to the Motherland* (Cornell University Press, 2023), 91. While the filtration experience represents a different manifestation of the phenomenon, male suspicions about women as "sexual collaborators" were not unique to the USSR. In France, an estimated 20,000 women had their hair shorn to punish them for ostensible "horizontal collaboration" with German men in occupied France. See, for instance, Fabrice Virgili, *Shorn Women: Gender and Punishment in Liberation France* (Berg, 2002).
3. Franziska Exeler, "Filtration Camps, Past and Present, and Russia's War Against Ukraine," *Journal of Genocide Research* (2023): 7.
4. Nick Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society: The Filtration of Returnees from Nazi Germany, 1944–49," in *Warlands: Population Resettlement and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945–50*, ed. Peter Gatrell and Nick Baron (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2009), 91–92.
5. Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Ueberschar, *Hitler's War in the East, 1941–1945: A Critical Assessment* (Berghahn Books, 2002), 214–15.
6. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 91–92. In "Fil'tracija sovetских repatriantov," Govorov writes that over 5.4 million citizens repatriated and underwent varying degrees of filtration depending on their wartime status, 377. Other sources offer higher estimates. For instance, Steven A. Barnes suggests, "Some six million Soviet citizens ultimately passed through filtration camps. No fewer than 500,000 were sent to the Gulag and many were shot," though the figure of six million does not comport with most other sources. See "All for the Front! All for Victory! The Mobilization of Forced Labor in the Soviet Union During World War Two," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 58 (Fall 2000): 243. The inconsistency of figures on filtration points to the difficulties in measuring this phenomenon precisely.
7. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 90–91.
8. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society"; Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*; Exeler, "Filtration Camps, Past and Present"; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls: 'Soft' Repatriation of Soviet Citizens from Europe, 1945–1953," *Journal of Modern History* 90, no. 2 (June 2018): 323–50.
9. Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovetских repatriantov"; Nikita Sergeevich Kurganov, "Kazhduyu noch nado bylo idti k trem sledovatelyam po otdel'nosti": memuari nye istochniki o fil'tracii sovetских grazhdan 1941–1953 g.g.," *Tula Scientific Bulletin. History. Linguistics* 1, no. 9 (2022): 55–65; A. V. Latyshev, "Povsednevnyaya zhizn rabotnikov Koltubanskovo filtratsionnovo lagera," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University, History* 68, no. 2 (2023): 376–92.
10. Christopher R. Browning, *Remembering Survival: Inside a Nazi Slave-Labor Camp*

- (W. W. Norton, 2010). I have discussed this topic in greater detail in Daina S. Eglitis, "Women's Experiences of Life Force Atrocities in the Baltic Ghettos, 1941–1944," *East-ern European Holocaust Studies* 1, no. 2 (2023): 521–49.
11. Daina S. Eglitis, "Silences of Memory: Liberator Sexual Assault in the East at the End of World War II," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, no. 3–4 (2024): 316–35.
  12. Two additional oral histories from the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia are referenced, but not used directly in the chapter. Because of the sensitivity of topics covered in this chapter, when quoting recorded testimonies, I do not use the full names of Jewish women survivors. Some archival collections of testimonies routinely include full names (for example, USC Shoah Visual History Archive and U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum testimonies), while others do not (Yale Fortunoff Video Archive of Holocaust Testimonies). I use full names where a survivor has published a memoir under her full name.
  13. Zoë Waxman, "Transcending History: Methodological Problems in Holocaust Testimony," in *The Holocaust and Historical Methodology*, ed. Dan Stone (Berghahn Books, 2012): 143–57.
  14. A considerable number of sources are also available in Romanian and Ukrainian, among others.
  15. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 91.
  16. Kurganov, "Kazhduy noch . . ."; Irēne Šneidere, "Politiskas prāvas pret ebrejiem Latvijā 1944.–1952. gadā," *Totalitārie okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.–1964. gadā*, 13. Sējums (University of Latvia Latvian History Institute, 2004): 328–49.
  17. Testimonies given in Russian were more likely to come from survivors who lived in the USSR after the war, where the term would have been widely known. Many testimonies given in English came from survivors who ended up in the years following the war in Eastern Bloc countries, the West, or in Israel, where the term "filtration" was (and is) less familiar.
  18. Tania R. interview, RG-50.106.0067, U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1997.
  19. Johanna B., interview #9209, USC Shoah Visual History Archive (VHA), 1995. The location of a filtration camp in Wrocław is also referenced in Mark Edele, *Stalin's Defectors: How Red Army Soldiers Became Hitler's Collaborators, 1941–1945* (Oxford University Press), 139. Testimonies often refer to Soviet troops as "Russians," though the ethnic composition of the Red Army was diverse. Where survivors use this as their term of choice, I have not altered it.
  20. David Nasaw, *The Last Million: Europe's Displaced Persons from World War to Cold War* (Penguin Press, 2021; see also U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, "Displaced Persons," *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (accessed January 4, 2024: <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/displaced-persons>).
  21. Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovetskikh repatriantov."

22. Sonya M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (University Press of New England, 2010); Regina Mühlhäuser, "Understanding Sexual Violence During the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research and Sources," *Germany History* 39, no. 1 (2021): 15–36; Helene Sinnreich, "And It Was Something We Didn't Talk About': Rape of Jewish Women During the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 1–22.
23. Doris L. Bergen, Sara E. Brown, Stephanie Corazza, Paula David, Henry Greenspan, and Sara R. Horowitz, "Buried Words: A Forum on Sexuality, Violence, and Holocaust Testimonies," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 504.
24. Nora Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization During the Holocaust," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 12–32.
25. See Nina Paulovicova's chapter in this volume, "I heard a Russian voice: They promised us girls. There are no bloody girls here.' Remembering Sexual(ized) Violence by Holocaust Survivors in Slovakia."
26. As Zoë Waxman notes, "When witnesses do refer to [sexual abuse] they tend to do [it] through the lens of another person — 'it happened to my sister, my aunt' and so on." See "Buried Words: Reflections on the Diary of Molly Applebaum," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 473–80.
27. Elly K., interview #27, UCLA Collection, Yad Vashem Archives, R.G.O.33/1385.
28. Magda Mandel Shapiro, "Magda's Journal," translated from Hungarian by Andrew and Evelyn Nichols (Self-published memoir: Yad Vashem Archives, R.G. O.22, File 9786, Item 12492195), 31.
29. See Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," and Exeler, "Filtration Camps, Past and Present," for descriptions of bureaucratic structures and actors involved in filtration. The filtration camps situated deep inside the USSR were used for repatriates who had not passed earlier screenings for collaboration or loyalty, and conditions in those camps were particularly harsh. A memoir by a Latvian who served in the German Army recounts conditions at one such camp: Normunds Treimanis, *Aukstums, Tumsa, Bads: Latviešu legionāra gaitas padomju gūstā 1945–1947* (Latvijas mediji, 2020).
30. According to Vojin Majstorović, "SMERSH had between 112 and 193 officers embedded in each front. They were responsible for identifying enemy agents, criminals, deserters, and supposed enemies of the government, as well as collecting information on enemy forces and activities. SMERSH was completely outside the regular chain of command, as its officers were under the control of only higher-ranking intelligence officers. Wartime SMERSH chief Viktor Abakumov reported directly to Stalin, bypassing the country's military and police leaderships. See "Red Army Troops Encounter the Holocaust: Transnistria, Moldavia, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria, 1944–1945," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 32, no. 2 (2018): 251.
31. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 93.

32. Exeler, "Filtration Camps Past and Present," 13.
33. Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovetskih repatriantov," 377.
34. Exeler, "Filtration Camps Past and Present," 10. See also Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovetskih repatriantov," 375.
35. Olaf Mertelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, "Soviet Mass Violence in Estonia Revisited," *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 2–3 (2009): 307–22.
36. Museum of the Occupations, Riga, Latvia.
37. Mertelsmann and Rahi-Tamm, "Soviet Mass Violence in Estonia Revisited," 313. The authors point out that civilians in Estonia were "often perceived as bourgeois collaborators," again reflecting the acute risks to populations that were labeled by Soviet authorities as suspicious.
38. Kaspars Zelle writes that while civilians usually spent a few days or weeks undergoing filtration, those who had fought on the side of Germany could expect a harsher fate, including deportation to the Soviet East, a fate that befell an estimated 58,410 Latvians. See his introduction in Treimanis, *Aukstums, Tumsa, Bads*, 6.
39. Key English-language sources on this topic include Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society"; Frank Ellis, "Dulag-205: The German Army's Death Camp for Soviet Prisoners at Stalingrad," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 19, no. 1 (2006): 123–48; Mark R. Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation* (University of Illinois Press, 1982); Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls." Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* includes the story of a World War II Soviet soldier who is briefly taken by the Germans as a prisoner of war, accused (wrongly) by the Soviets of being a spy, and sentenced to imprisonment in a forced labor camp.
40. Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls," 331.
41. Quoted in Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 192.
42. Ellis, "Dulag-205," 124–25, 131–32.
43. Ellis, "Dulag-205," 132–36.
44. Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 204.
45. The use of coercion in interrogations during filtration has, per Govorov, been acknowledged in official sources. See "Fil'tracija sovetskih repatriantov," 381–82. See also Kurganov, "Kazhduyu noch . . .," 60.
46. Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovetskih repatriantov."
47. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 100.
48. Fitzpatrick, "The Motherland Calls," 343.
49. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*, 108.
50. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*, 109.
51. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*.
52. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*. Govorov writes that according to Lavrenti Beria, head of the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), filtration would not

need to be more than five days long for women, teenagers, children, and the elderly, though testimonies show that this was not regularly applied in practice. "Fil'tracija sovjetskih repatriantov," 375.

53. Leia K., interview #38281, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1998.
54. Govorov, "Fil'tracija sovjetskih repatriantov," 376.
55. Majstorović, "Red Army Troops Encounter the Holocaust," 253.
56. Majstorović, "Red Army Troops Encounter the Holocaust," 256.
57. Faniia Pavlova, interview #41331, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1998; Fanija Pavlova, "I Am from the Holocaust," unpublished manuscript at the Museum of Jews in Latvia. The spelling of the first name differs in these two documents.
58. Gurewtisch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 156.
59. Kurganov, "Kazhduyu noch . . .," 59.
60. Rebecca R., interview #426, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1994.
61. Donna R., interview #26359, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1997.
62. Aurelia I., interview #20165, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1996.
63. Anna K., interview #42535, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1998.
64. Gisella B., interview #11586, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1996.
65. Karolina S., interview #7412, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1995.
66. Johanna B., interview #9209, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1995.
67. See Stefan Christian Ionescu's chapter in this volume, "Liberators, Partners, and Rapists: Jewish Women from Romania Encountering Red Army Soldiers Around the End of World War II."
68. Exeler, "Filtration Camps, Past and Present," 12.
69. Baron, "Remaking Soviet Society," 106.
70. See, for instance, Lucy Rapuch, interview #54342, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1988.
71. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*, 111.
72. Bernstein, *Return to the Motherland*.
73. Lucy R., interview #54342, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1988.
74. Aurelia I., interview #20165, USC Shoah Foundation VHA.
75. Zoë Waxman, "Buried Words."
76. Kate B., interview #2025, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1995.
77. Alice W., interview #28273, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1997.
78. Nina K., interview #18564, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1996.
79. Klara K., interview #35527, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1997.
80. Bronia S., interview #13237, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1996.
81. While some survivors share stories of finding protectors in the filtration camps, I have not encountered evidence of accountability within Soviet military or security structures in the camps.

82. Ionescu, "Liberators, Partners, and Rapists."
83. Esther K., interview #49883, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1999.
84. Margaret N., interview #891, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1995.
85. Esther K., interview #49883, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1999.
86. Regina W., interview #1530, USC Shoah Foundation VHA, 1995.
87. Govorov, "Fil'tratsija sovetskih repatriantov," 382.
88. Šneidere, "Politiskas prāvas pret ebrejiem Latvijā 1944.–1952. gadā," 334–35.
89. Šneidere, "Politiskas prāvas pret ebrejiem Latvijā 1944.–1952. gadā."

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PART III

MEMORY



IO

# THE WITNESS VANISHES

## JEWISH WOMEN FROM HUNGARY REMEMBER SEXUAL VIOLENCE DURING WWII

ANDREA PETŐ

### INTRODUCTION

**M**ULTIPLE SILENCES SURROUND THE MEMORIES OF JEWISH WOMEN IN Hungary about Soviet liberation. For most of the Hungarian public memory, World War II began when Soviet troops appeared in the village or town after an often-bloody siege. Hungary was an ally of Nazi Germany in the hope that, in return, it would get the territory it had lost after the First World War. For this reason, it not only participated as an occupying army in the war against the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia but also adopted all the topoi and methods of Nazi propaganda against the Soviet Union, including the antisemitic trope of identifying Bolshevism with Jews. It was Horthy Hungary that passed the first European political antisemitic law, the *numerus clausus*, in 1920, which not only excluded Hungarian citizens of the Jewish faith from higher education but normalized discrimination.<sup>1</sup> The adoption of the various Jewish laws from 1938 was already the result of compliance with Germany. The German invasion of the country on March 19, 1944, due to the considerations of the Hungarian political elite led by Admiral Horthy to sign a separate armistice with the Allied forces did not affect most of the Hungarian population, and the fact that the Hungarian government cooperated with the occupying Germans saved Hungarian women from rape. The situation of Jewish women was fundamentally changed as they became victims of the ghettoization and deportations executed by the Hungarian

authorities. The first perpetrators were the representatives of the Hungarian state apparatus who used their power to assault Jewish women.

In Hungary, the German army was stationed briefly in controlled circumstances, and its entry into the territory of the allied country on March 19, 1944, did not encounter significant resistance when occupying the country.<sup>2</sup> These two factors—the brief duration of the stationing and the fact that they were present on the territory of an allied country, not an enemy country—shaped the memory of sexual violence committed by German soldiers in Hungary so that German soldiers allegedly did not commit rape against Hungarian women.<sup>3</sup>

Women raped by German soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front did not receive any legal compensation, unlike on the Western Front, where women could file a complaint with the administration that remained in office. The latter was also confirmed in Hungary, so that after the German occupation on March 19, 1944, the Hungarian administration, while actively participating in the mass deportation of Jews, paradoxically maintained a legal security that protected Hungarian women from the atrocities of the Allied German soldiers. In Hungary, women of Jewish origin and Hungarian nationality were more likely to suffer violence at the hands of the Hungarian state's uniformed agents, of whom there are many surviving memoirs.<sup>4</sup>

While on the Western Front rape was usually severely punished because of the reputation of the German army, on the Eastern Front punishments were imposed to protect "racial hygiene," and the fact of rape was not recorded. In late 1941, Himmler also set up brothels in some concentration camps with Aryan women, if possible; German, Ukrainian, or Polish, when that was not possible. The measure was justified because selected prisoners would work better if they could go to a brothel. At Mauthausen, German and Ukrainian guards had separate brothels, and Ukrainian and Jewish prisoners were allowed to visit the women held there as a reward. Jewish women were mainly at the mercy of German soldiers.<sup>5</sup> Deportation of Jews from Hungary started in June 1944, relatively late in comparison to other countries occupied by Germany, which offered a chance to survive for some Jewish women in the different, mainly labor camps.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the image of well-disciplined German soldiers occupying Hungary, it is very much part of the Hungarian collective memory that nondisciplined Soviet soldiers perpetrated mass atrocities against Hungarians, Jewish women in hiding, Germans, Poles, Slovaks, and so on. The Red Army, amid bloody battles, defeated German and Hungarian forces supporting murderous ideologies. However, the victorious memory of the war for the Red Army was already lost at the moment of the country's liberation. No matter that the crimes of sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers after 1945 went largely unpunished legally, and the emotional and political consequences of this remain evident to this day.<sup>7</sup>

The popular understanding that for the Hungarian population the war only began in the fall of 1944 when the Red Army liberated the country and the fights were happening at their doorsteps has fundamentally shaped their memory. While for Hungarian women the mass rape by the Red Army, which was estimated between 80,000 and 800,000 (!), marked the end of the war and its beginning, for Jewish women this massive rape had a fundamentally different meaning and different narrative than for the Hungarian victims.<sup>8</sup>

Jewish women had to first endure sexual abuse at the hands of their Hungarian state officials and law enforcement forces during ghettoization, hiding, and deportations.<sup>9</sup> Liberation by the Red Army found these Jewish women in various situations and different places: concentration camps, labor camps, death marches, the ghettos of Budapest, or hidden by gentiles. However, they shared a common perception or rather expectation: viewing Soviet soldiers as liberators and bearers of hope, despite the aggressive propaganda disseminated by the Horthy regime, borrowed from Nazi Germany. This propaganda depicted all Red Army soldiers as rapists with Asiatic features. This chapter initially explores the extent and the way these women were disillusioned due to the behavior of the long-awaited Red Army soldiers. However, this feeling cannot be narrated after 1945 or 1989 or the illiberal turn in the 2010s. Subsequently, the chapter delves into how the framework of remembrance aids in comprehending why the possibility of remembrance for Jewish women was consistently thwarted in each post-1945 historical period.

## CHANGING THE FRAMEWORK OF MEMORY

Discussing sexual violence and especially sexual violence during wartime when rape is a weapon of war is challenging as the space for public narration is constantly changing. Before 1989, the official Hungarian history only acknowledged victims of fascism and Nazism, that is, Jewish victims were not acknowledged separately; only Jewish communities held separate religious commemorations. So, while the Holocaust survivors are now widely seen as heroic individuals, or at least people deserving of sympathy and understanding, this was not always the case—and as I argued elsewhere, it would not remain the case forever.<sup>10</sup> The narrative of the Holocaust was conceived during the Cold War, which, besides determining its characteristics, also elevated the moral command of “Never Again” into a measure of universal integrity. During the 1990s, before the 2004 European Union expansion, the new member states, including the Visegrád Four countries (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic) and the Baltic States, had successfully lobbied for the acceptance of the Memorial Day for the Victims of Communism. This Memorial Day, which was expected

to counterbalance the Holocaust Memorial Day, which raises uncomfortable questions about collaboration with Nazi Germany, created a built-in fracture in the memory culture of Europe because particularism was inserted in a system initially based on universalism.

In post-1989 Eastern Europe, after the collapse of communism, there was a diverse “market” (academic and political) for stories of brutality by the Red Army connected to anticommunism as a basis for the political legitimacy of the new regime. The increasing circulation of stories of women who saw or heard other women being raped has contributed to the formation of national martyrdom. However, some of the women who had experienced sexual violence, such as Jewish women who were greeting the Red Army as liberators but were also raped, continued to remain in silence, so as not to participate in the invalidation of the Red Army’s role in the ending of the war. Silence, for them, was a form of resistance to the existing dominant politics of memory in both periods. When the Red Army was uncritically glorified during communism as well as shamed by the uncritical anti-Soviet sentiments after 1989, these Jewish women still looked at the Red Army as liberators. Their story also underlines that sometimes there are uneasy coalitions behind new memory work.<sup>11</sup> The illiberal turn initiated this new type of memory work, which instrumentalized the “shame narrative” for empowering the “unashamed citizens.” By controlling hegemonic forms of remembrance, the illiberal polypore state works within the framework of what is referred to as “mnemonic security.”<sup>12</sup> The translation of history, its application, and its identity-shaping effect are becoming geopolitical factors. The memory politics of the “polypore state” is to duplicate, depoliticize, and empty the narrative and historical agency by appropriating its meanings. In this historical context, it attributes new meanings of victimhood and anticommunism. This illiberal memory politics functions within the framework of new emotional economies, where the concept of shame plays a new role. It also takes over and empties the concept of shame.<sup>13</sup>

The theoretical frame of different Eastern European national memory strategies, especially the Hungarian one, was founded on competing national victimhood strategies. Countries that were occupied by both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union blame these two countries for all their traumas of the twentieth century. The British scholar Paul Connerton calls this process a “repressive erasure”—a memory frame based on the exclusion of unpleasant elements of the past.<sup>14</sup> The Hungarian state’s current memory discourse is built on this “double occupation” framework, which is double victimization. According to this discourse, Hungary was occupied by both the Germans and the Soviets—as represented by the Monument of German Occupation in Budapest on Liberty (Szabadság) Square, which was erected during the night because of public protests.<sup>15</sup> The plaque, which equalizes the victims regardless of whether they were Jews or Hungarian perpetrators, prompted a counter-monument. The Monument of

German Occupation was erected in 2014 as a sign that the government had started a new phase in memory politics.

Hungary's illiberal memory politics from early 2000 was based on "double victimhood."<sup>16</sup> The citizens, unashamedly driving the revisionist narrative to previous liberal narratives, reject shame as a disciplinary force, reshaping the memory dynamics surrounding sexual violence during World War II. In this transformation, sacrifice and victimhood emerge as predominant narrative frames instrumental in nation-building. This narrative marginalizes assimilated Jewish women, as the storytelling, or rather nontelling, is predominantly controlled by men. The act of recounting becomes predominantly male-centric, with the only avenue for resistance being the right to remain silent.<sup>17</sup> After the illiberal turn, discussions on wartime sexual violence are deliberately separated from the broader history of World War II and the Holocaust, framed as a tale of Hungarian martyrdom and sacrifice in the face of the occupying Red Army, which silenced the experiences of Jewish women.

## SOURCES

Discussing the experiences of Jewish women with Red Army soldiers is challenging. First, there are few and nonrepresentative records of encounters, in general, available. The examples of such relevant records are the documents of the collapsing Hungarian public administration: administrative records, medical records, criminal records. As far as church sources are concerned, such as *Historia Domus*, they recorded the events of the community, protest letters from the Ministry of Foreign Office, and statements from the military discussing sexual violence regarding gentile citizens. These sources are not representative or generalizable because of the regional differences and because the different sources survived sporadically, and they do not include Jewish women. If they do, they often follow the anti-Jewish stereotypes of the time. Second, the Jewish women did not report their experiences precisely because they were waiting for the liberators; and more importantly, the legal options to report Red Army soldiers for their deeds were limited. Therefore, semi-official sources such as oral testimonies, especially the USC VHA collection, are the primary sources, together with private documents such as memoirs or letters. (See more on the limitations of using the VHA archive as a source in Carli Snyder's chapter in this volume.)

The USC Visual History Archive collection contains 54,900 video testimonies of survivors, which can be viewed at so-called access points. The interviews are chronological life story interviews.<sup>18</sup> The interviewers had received training before the interviewing process and followed similar guidelines as discussed at length in Carli Snyder's chapter in this volume. The interviews were indexed and searchable by topic, geographic



location, gender, and language of the interview. In the interviews, women often talk about rape. However, often the interviewers are not ready to listen, and more importantly, the term rape was not indexed for a long time, making sexual violence invisible with the indexing practice.<sup>19</sup>

When I used the VHA for my course on gendering the Holocaust at Central European University, my students searched for the index term “rape,” but they only found “sexual assault.” After I sent my students’ final papers—of course, with their permission—to the VHA, it took them another four years to re-index the stories as rape. Re-indexing revised the concept and definition of rape, and the invisibilization of experiences by indexing in the archive was revisited.<sup>20</sup>

Literature agrees that these traumas were indescribable and unspeakable. The witnesses of the atrocities faced many difficulties while formulating stories about what had happened because they were emotionally injured, unable to adequately convey their experiences with words, or lacked a viable frame for making their experience intelligible to others. However, immediately after the war, evidence shows there were many potential storytellers but few audiences, as these stories were not included in the archives and were not listened to because of the disciplining and silencing impact of shame.<sup>21</sup>

From the 52,000 VHA interviews accessible online, less than sixty testimonies mentioned or were labeled as “embarrassment.” Some of these stories in which shame was explicitly mentioned made the indexer label them with the term “embarrassment,” even though the term was not explicitly mentioned. Interestingly, the explicit mention of the feeling of shame was more common *after* the liberation than before. Before, the stories were connected to exposing naked bodies or being harassed on the street by antisemitic mobs.

The Shoah Institute interviewees were teenagers or even younger at the time of the war and were, therefore, particularly vulnerable to rape. On the private level, it was also not easy because survivors were frequently silenced by strangers, neighbors, and even family members who deemed their experiences undiscussable. Although the interviews are not representative, they can be described as typical stories, especially if the interviewer was sensitive enough to be able to listen to the stories of rape. The stories are fragmented, and the interviewers do not ask for details, as they had to ask a pre-set series of questions. The changing collective memory frames also influenced the process of storytelling. The problem of the memory gap is well known in the Holocaust literature. The interviews were conducted after 1989, when the dominant antifascist historiography was being challenged by the hope of including stories of Jewish women in the canon. However, this attempt turned out to be an illusion by the illiberal turn.

## TESTIMONIES AND THEIR CHANGING CONTEXTS

The unique collection of the VHA has recently become a topic of scholarly critical analysis. Regarding her general critique of the VHA collection, I agree in part with Annette Wieviorka's view that the collection can be explained by the "Americanization" of the Holocaust: The vast collection of interviews results in nothing more than a series of "authentic" survivor stories.<sup>22</sup> The "age of the witness" is based on the assumption that the stories told by survivors and collected by different collections are "the" true stories. This is particularly important as the interviewers of the survivors in Hungary were not familiar with the Hungarian context, which led to silencing important experiences. Nevertheless, the collection gives an accurate picture of the experiences of the various Hungarian-speaking Jewish women survivors deported from different parts of the Carpathian basin at the time of liberation. Although many of them recount the joy they felt at seeing the liberating Soviet soldiers, few think that this could have excused the horrors that followed. As a Stutthof survivor, Gabriella Péter uses the expected mainstream narrative propagated by the propaganda: "We were free then, and they set us free."<sup>23</sup> However, the reality was more complex as Anna Torontáli, from Matészalka, liberated in Markkleeberg, explains: "When we saw the first Russian soldier, the joy! However, the evening came, and the drunken soldiers gathered up all the women they could and raped them. Those who could not jump out of the window met the same fate; many suffered the same fate."<sup>24</sup>

The issue of rape, especially rape by Soviet soldiers, is also a difficult one in terms of witnessing and giving a witness. The sociologist Paul Frosh has shown that "the significance of witnessing lies in its contemporary intersection of personal experience, shared knowledge, and public representation."<sup>25</sup> Personal experience could not be a part of the shared knowledge as even if there were stories circulated about the brutality of the Red Army soldiers, personal stories are not shared because of the disciplining power of shame. Also, military rape did not have a public representation. The first novels and films were made in the late 1980s, giving space for sharing. The narration is made difficult by the different experiences of the survivors.

The Jewish survivors in Hungary survived five different experiences when they encountered the Red Army. The first group of Jewish survivors from Hungary who gave testimonies to the VHA were liberated in the concentration camps. After the Soviets had ensured their physical survival, they were harassed at night. As Lili Flayner, born in Nádudvar and liberated in Duderstadt, recounts, "They would come in at night, fold the blankets, and look for the young girls. Those they took away were never found again. It lasted for a month. On May 7, everyone left, and we were taken home."<sup>26</sup> The

women were also motivated to return home, but the security situation in the camps encouraged them to do so.

The second group of survivors was released in labor camps in Germany or Austria and, on their way home, suffered sexual harassment. As Ágnes Szivós, a Szolnok-born Hungarian Jewish woman, testifies about the Wien-Stadlau camp where she was liberated: "Two Russian soldiers came in. They shot at the picture of Hitler on the wall. They took one of the girls. They let her back late in the evening. Two dozen soldiers went through. They did this every day. They were a bunch of sickos. We could not move; there were three of us. They took Eva away every day. . . . They took Eva off the train. . . . Four of them took her."<sup>27</sup>

On their way home, surviving women were traveling alone. Feigeh Rosman explains what happened to her during the travel from Stutthof: "In the waiting room, the Russian grabbed me from behind. At night, I was wrapped in a blanket. He would have taken me with him; they would never have known."<sup>28</sup> Terézia Mike from Szombathely explained: "I had a terrible experience. They tried to rape me. A Russian soldier came up and said he was going to sleep there. I told him it was out of the question. I ran down the stairs. He took out his rifle to shoot me. Alternatively, he did not want to shoot me, but he did not shoot. I tore myself from his hands and ran to where the six of us used to live together. I climbed through the window and shook. They could have shot me now when we were free."<sup>29</sup>

The third group of Jewish women who gave testimonies to VHA encountered Soviet soldiers while they were in hiding in Budapest, like Irene Karniol from Kömlő: "Russians came in, I knocked from the neighbor's cellar, they broke through the wall and took the 14-year-old girl from her mother. They also took me away to peel potatoes. Five soldiers went through me."<sup>30</sup> Especially in the early interviews, the interviewers were not prepared for these experiences, so they did not encourage the interviewees to talk about rape or the new dangers that liberation brought to Jewish women liberated in the camps and hiding in Budapest. As Ilona Schlesinger, a survivor in Sered, Slovakia, says: "They were already savages. They went into every house and raped. They raped me in front of people [voice trailing off]."<sup>31</sup> (See more on this in Nina Paulovícova's chapter in this volume.)

In Budapest, the situation was different, as grouped neighbors, relatives, and acquaintances were able, if not always, more likely to protect women from violence. If violence had already occurred, nearby acquaintances were important in providing medical and psychological assistance. A Jewish woman hiding in a Budapest cellar, for example, managed to avoid potential sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy thanks to the immediate assistance of a medical student who was hiding with her and her family.<sup>32</sup>

Members of the fourth group met the Soviets when they returned to their Soviet-occupied village after the liberation. Ruzena Deutschova, an Auschwitz survivor, met a Soviet soldier at the railway station on her return home who "said he would take me to the Kommandatura." When she called for help, "a man came out, said I cannot help

you because he is shooting. When he put down his gun and started to rape me, I heard from older women where to kick. I kicked him in the balls and threw the gun in the corn. Two Russian soldiers and a Jewish boy from Galánta came. They shot the Russian on the spot. We were so well received. We survived Auschwitz. Moreover, we will die here. It looked like it.”<sup>33</sup>

Liberation did not signify the cessation of life-threatening circumstances, and Jewish women once again found themselves in perilous situations, frequently without companionship and without any institutions that could protect them. As Ms. Vicsek Zsuzsa from Budapest says, “They died for what? It does not matter now what happened afterward. Then, we were saved. We were saved. I knelt and made the sign of the cross” —which is peculiar for a Jewish survivor and shows the complexities of Jewish experiences.<sup>34</sup>

However, personal experience of sexual violence becomes invisible if it does not become knowledge that can be shared because the vocabulary of public representation and the place to tell it is missing. Trauma is an afterthought; it has a particular temporality. It is not shaped by the experience but by the reception, interpretation, and narration of the experience.<sup>35</sup> Those who have personally experienced the violence describe it in cold and precise terms, as did Ágnes Barna, a survivor born in Dunaföldvár from Ravensbrück: “We were sitting on the side of the road, waiting for fate. The Americans came, and then the Russians came. One of them grabbed Edith, and the other grabbed me and raped me. We could not stand that again, so we returned to the house.”<sup>36</sup>

Those who spoke the languages tried to find out why the soldiers whose arrival they had so much hoped for behaved this way. To one of them, the Soviet commander to whom he had gone to complain said, “Do not be surprised because the Hungarians and Germans did the same to their wives and mothers. They are just paying back what they got. They do not look at who is who, just that they are here and Hungarians.”<sup>37</sup>

Elsewhere alcohol plays an explanatory role, as Vera Foltynova explains: “They [Jewish women survivors who were threatened by rape—A.P.] went to the Kommandatur and told us we were from Auschwitz. The Russian officer said that they had been conscripts for years; I cannot explain to them what the difference is [between German and Jewish women—A.P.] if they are drunk.”<sup>38</sup>

## SILENCED BY OTHERS

The fate of diplomatic documents from Hungary in the last weeks of the war is also dramatic. Not only were few diplomatic representations operating but also the senior diplomats were recalled due to the approaching Red Army. Thanks to the Swiss embassy, I gained access to important sources. The Swiss diplomatic document is a report from the former Swiss embassy’s political section in Budapest, authored by Chief Justice J. O.

Kehrli.<sup>39</sup> It includes a separate chapter in its fifty-page report addressing not only violations of territoriality and property crimes but also violence against women. The source relies on information obtained with high precision from Swiss residents in Hungary, citizens of other countries, diplomats, employees of foreign-affiliated companies, and aristocrats. Thus, it provides insights into foreign citizens who remained in Budapest, hoping their foreign passports would save them during the conflicts.

Due to informal connections and acquaintances, individuals shared information and assisted each other with advice. The report meticulously records the requisitioning of valuables and property by the so-called “Russians,” detailing the value, form, and the failure to prevent it with exemption papers. The section on atrocities against women spans fifteen pages and begins by stating that no female member of the Swiss community suffered harm. This is attributed to the embassy’s interpreter, Dr. Víg, who claimed to be familiar with “the Russians” and urged embassy staff to take appropriate precautions: They hid cars, other material assets, and women.<sup>40</sup>

The report recounts the stroll of Miss Lehmann, one of the representative’s secretaries, during which she encountered a uniformed “Russian” who, though not a clean soldier, was considered a “Russian Jew” due to his good command of German. If a Soviet soldier spoke German, it was documented in writing. The five secretaries also shared a story they had only heard: drunken soldiers in the cellar taking women for potato peeling, shooting those who resisted, hearing female screams in the cellars, and mass rape of Red Cross nurses in the hospital.

In the narratives, the term “Russian soldier” is parenthetically accompanied by “Mongol type.” The report claims that under the influence of alcohol, the soldiers became “bestial,” expressing hope that the next wave of occupying troops would not be as savage. Escaping individuals mention widespread sexual violence on the Buda side and in Vác. The report underscores that Hungarian women were not necessarily innocent victims of sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers. It mentions that Hungarian girls willingly made themselves available to the “Russians” for material goods. Additionally, Jewish women especially, the report notes enigmatically, embraced and kissed the soldiers as liberators, who unfortunately “immediately asked for the price”—as the report cryptically puts it. This report sets the narrative frame of discussing sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers, including Jewish women who greeted them with joy.

## LIBERATION AS LOVE

There is a silenced aspect to the stories of the rescuers, where hidden Jewish women sometimes endured sexual harassment from their saviors in exchange for their lives. However, this could not be spoken of, as after the war, the easiest way to rebuild national

identity was to overemphasize the search for the “righteous” individuals who saved Jews. As Joan Ringelheim wrote from a 1982 interview experience when a survivor spoke to her about sexual violence inflicted on her by her rescuer: “It is clear I was not prepared for what he wanted to say.”<sup>41</sup> From later interviews with survivors, it is evident that even the questions were framed in a way that discouraged women from discussing sexual violence, especially sexual violence inflicted by rescuers. Public opinion did not want to hear about their sufferings.<sup>42</sup>

Liberation may also have led to the breaking down of emotional barriers. A Jewish girl hiding in Vörösmarty Street in Budapest immediately fell in love with a Soviet soldier who entered her cellar. In the video interview, Mrs. Zsuzsa Vicsek also told how they only slept together with her father sleeping on the other side of her because he thought it was important to preserve her innocence. She also recalled wild kissing in the freshly fallen snow. “I fell madly in love with the soldier. After the war, I went to Kharkiv to look for him. He left when he was 18 and fought at Stalingrad. I had a little newspaper with me, his poem in it. I never found it. He died to destroy Nazism. I cannot remember his name.” However, the story reveals that it was thanks to an intimate relationship with a soldier from Kharkiv, whom she called “my little soldier,” that he was able to send away other Soviet soldiers who broke into her house and demanded women.<sup>43</sup>

Zoë Waxman argues that the concept of voluntariness cannot be applied to sexual relationships in which there is a significant power imbalance between the individuals involved.<sup>44</sup> Steven Katz’s use of the term “violent conquest” is questionable when discussing the sexual relationships between German soldiers and Jewish women in concentration camps.<sup>45</sup> The concept assumes that Jewish women had a choice, although due to power inequalities, introducing the “choice” discourse in the Nazi regime is misleading.

The romanticizing narrative mode, built on empathy and support, is also possible in the case of sexual violence. In the country, which was socialized for anti-Soviet sentiments from 1919 and now defeated by the very same Red Army, it was not at all “cool” to date Soviet soldiers. In Márta Mészáros’s film *Aurea Borealis* (2017), the love story between the Soviet soldier and the affluent Austrian girl is an exceptional tale. Despite this, Soviet officers found partners in Vienna or Berlin, primarily due to the pressing food shortage. Hoping for a good meal, young women opted for sexual barter, discussed at length in Anna Hájková’s chapter, and willingly went dancing, especially younger girls.<sup>46</sup> While it is true that the army considered the most democratic in the world was simultaneously the most hierarchical, high-ranking Soviet officers surpassed the average soldier in financial means and cultural refinement. In contrast, in the US Army (where officers were prohibited from forming any closer relationships with the local population), money and “secret goods” like chewing gum and chocolate provided a sexual allure that Soviet soldiers did not possess.

## DIARY OF SECRET SURVIVAL

An important intervention in the public discourse about sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers was the 2014 publication of the diaries of Fanni Gyarmati (1912–2014). She was the wife of the poet Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944), who stood by through every ordeal and wrote about her own experiences in her lengthy diary. Fanni Gyarmati lived through the Soviet invasion of Budapest as a Jew, living in hiding under a pseudonym. In her diary, she writes about the Soviet soldiers in an orientalizing style, describing them as “huge, wild-faced Eskimo figures,”<sup>47</sup> sometimes called a “little Mongolian, a genuine part of the East.”<sup>48</sup> She recounts the story of her rape:

He wanted me to hug him completely, and he kneaded me and kneaded me, striking me on my face, head, side, arms. I did not squeal at these, but I learned that it was true to see sparks when you are hit in the temple with a fist. I had to cover my eyes with my hands to keep him from hitting me, so he came closer and closer, and if I did not want him to beat me to death, I had to give in after a long, long wrestling match, accompanied by part kissing and part cursing between teeth. (...) It was a horror of horrors. (...) I was left there terribly battered.<sup>49</sup>

In the narratives of the contemporaries, “Western,” Christian civilization was often confronted with the “East,” and the norms of behavior accepted in the context of war became precarious. At the level of Hungarian historical memory, the narrative of the occupation is vividly imbued with the ideological traditions of defense against Turkish rule and Eastern military barbarism. The interpretation of Hungary as a bastion of Christianity against Eastern barbarism goes back to the Middle Ages. This topos can also be found in other nations of Europe: The Poles, the Czechs, the Slovaks, the Serbs, and the Romanians are not to be mentioned as perpetrators. The phrases “Muscovy, Tartar hordes” or “Russian steamroller,” which we find in the *Historia Domus*, are based on historical analogies. Many people, including the historian Gyula Szekfű, spoke of a new Turkish occupation at the time of the Soviet occupation.<sup>50</sup> Gyarmati also internalizes the patronizing and colonizing discourse of the mainstream Hungarian culture: “Asia is still breathing down our necks”<sup>51</sup> (...) and “they are huge naughty children, all open and clean.”<sup>52</sup> The portrayal of the Soviets is that they are benevolent but barbaric. This discourse created a space for others to look down on the victors.

Gyarmati remained pregnant after the rape, and she also survived an illegal abortion. She did not turn to any of the existing health institutions but had an abortion in private. Her abortion is not recorded in the official statistics, which shows that the available data should be handled with care.<sup>53</sup>



Gyarmati's diary is remarkable because, despite her multiple experiences of sexual trauma, she did not hate Soviet soldiers as the Soviets liberated her. On the contrary, she had a naive sympathy for the Soviet Union and the Red Army. She saw the atrocities against women as the lesser and tolerable evil—in contrast to the terror of the Arrow Cross and the Germans, which threatened her life. She used different tropes, “cool,” “cool chaps,” and “wild kids” instead of “violent soldiers” to make the soldiers individual perpetrators without making any derogatory comments on the Red Army as a whole and used narrative tools, like calling them “kids,” not criminals, to create distance by undermining the perpetrators' standing. The diary was published only after her death, as she wanted to be silent about what had happened during her lifetime or she did not want to respond to further questions.

## CONCLUSION

For Jewish women, the prevailing narratives under the Horthy regime (1919–1945) portrayed the Red Army as barbaric, shaping the discourse surrounding their experiences of sexual violence during wartime. With the Red Army stationed in Hungary for the subsequent decades, the dominant antifascist narrative integrated the remembrance of traumatic experiences with the Soviets and the Holocaust, not as separate discussions but as part of the broader antifascist context. Unfortunately, Jewish women's stories found little room for expression within this framework, like the Greek context so vividly examined by Kateřina Králová and Janis Nalbadidacis in this volume.

A major change only occurred during the era of the shift in memory culture, marked by the Americanization of Holocaust memory, when the first steps were made to include Jewish women's experiences of rape by the Red Army soldiers. However, this change persisted only until the 2010s. In this period, illiberal memory politics took hold, emphasizing the “true, authentic stories” of rapes committed by Red Army soldiers of the “Hungarians,” using the suffering and self-sacrifice narratives of Hungarian victims for building mnemonic security. The appropriation of shame and trauma narratives by the “unashamed citizens” aimed at constructing a narrative of “double victimhood” for nation-building did not encompass Jewish women as victims.<sup>54</sup>

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  37. 54150. interview, 88. USC VHA.
  38. 18408. interview, 67. USC VHA.
  39. Thanks to Rigó Róbert, who recommended these sources, and Katalin Zöller, who obtained the materials from Switzerland. The two documents received from the Swiss Embassy in Budapest have no archival reference number. The longer report is marked E 2001 (D) 7/15 in pencil. This number does not appear on the online Hungarian diplomatic file of the Swiss Embassy: <http://dodis.ch/P39044>.
  40. No full names are available in the document.
  41. Joan Ringelheim, “Genocide and Gender: A Split Memory,” in Lentin, Ronit ed.

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42. Pető, "Digitalized Memories of the Holocaust in Hungary," 253–61.
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  47. Radnóti Miklósné Gyarmati Fanni, *Napló I–II. 1935–1946. (Diary)*, (Jaffa, 2014), II. 370.
  48. Radnóti Miklósné, *Napló II*, 371.
  49. Radnóti Miklósné, *Napló II*, 384–85.
  50. Gyula Szekfű, *Forradalom után* (After the Revolution) (Gondolat, 1983), 126.
  51. Radnóti Miklósné, *Napló II*, 421.
  52. Radnóti Miklósné, *Napló II*, 452.
  53. See the impact of wartime sexual violence on reproductive rights in Hungary: Fanni Svegel and Andrea Pető, "Nationalism, Pronatalism, and the Guild of Gynecology: The Complex Legacy of Abortion Regulation in Hungary," *Central European History* (57, no. 4 (2024): 499–516.
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## TESTIMONIES

USC VHA Testimonies: 26942, 51550, 48431, 50807, 54140, 2809, 27212, 50208, 50731, 18408.

# THE RED ARMY AND THE MULTIPLE FACETS OF SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE ON HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS FROM GREECE

KATEŘINA KRÁLOVÁ AND JANIS NALBADIDACIS

WHEN PALOMBA ALLALOUF RETURNED TO THESSALONIKI AT THE AGE of twenty-two, after surviving one and a half years in Auschwitz, subsequent death marches, and camps, to be liberated at KZ Malchow by the Red Army on May 5, 1945, she was the only family survivor. Back in her hometown, totally destitute, and forced to live in the Jewish Community housing, she could not bear the company of her dorm mates. While “they were going out a lot,” as she told her interviewer, the British anthropologist Bea Lewkowicz, “they were singing and dancing, wanting to live their freedom,” Palomba “did not want anything.”<sup>1</sup> She was traumatized both by the loss of her family in the concentration camps and the harrowing experience of liberation by Soviet soldiers. Palomba mentions twenty-five to thirty girls together when meeting the Soviet liberators, all former Auschwitz prisoners. Some of them, such as Sarika Nachmia, Hella Kounio, and Yvonne Razon, will be introduced more closely in this chapter. The example of Palomba is one of many; however, she has been the only one of the Jewish women in Greece—as far as we know—to record the personal experience of rape.<sup>2</sup> Hence, she plays a crucial role for our chapter. As *pars pro toto*, her case serves as a lens through which we explore this dark chapter of liberation.

The Soviet liberation was not the first time Jewish women were exposed to sexualized violence. The intimacy and sexuality of Holocaust survivors from Greece, which were not discussed before the deportations due to social norms, were violently trampled upon in a barely comprehensible and communicable way long before they encountered

the Red Army. Sexual harassment, incidents of rape, and the pseudo-medical experiments endured by Jewish women in Nazi camps were among the many forms of sexualized violence inflicted on female prisoners during their detention. This is true for any community of Holocaust survivors. Still, the silence about and silencing of the experience of sexual harassment deserve to be set in the social framework of twentieth-century Greece.<sup>3</sup> Hence, this chapter contributes to three fields of research: the Soviet liberation of the Nazi camps, Greek-Jewish history, and sexualized violence in the context of the Holocaust.

For decades, research suggested a plethora of reasons for the claim that acts of sexualized violence were exceptions during World War II.<sup>4</sup> At most, such claims are wishful thinking. Rhonda Copelon was right when stating that the “war tends to intensify the brutality, repetitiveness, public spectacle, and likelihood of rape.”<sup>5</sup> In the current research, it has become consensus that the surrounding patriarchal culture prevented both women and men from explicitly expressing experiences with sexual assaults or rape.<sup>6</sup> According to Helene Sinnreich, the dominating Holocaust narratives dealt with forced labor, ghettoization, beatings, and starvation: “Since women’s experiences and especially rape do not fit neatly into the standard Holocaust victimization narrative, victims do not always share that part of their experience in interviews or memoirs.”<sup>7</sup> Such a perspective is not least supported by the mere fact that early testimonies were addressing these topics.<sup>8</sup> Soon, however, “women have felt that their testimonies [were] unwanted,” as Katrina Lee Koo concludes.<sup>9</sup>

Still, for the 1970s, Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel stated that “sexual abuse has hardly been acknowledged as a theme, much less a central topic, worthy of investigation,”<sup>10</sup> since it was claimed that no reliable sources would document it properly. As Curry recently observed, this dynamic may have contributed to survivors downplaying or avoiding a discussion of their experiences with sexualized violence. In turn, it reinforced “the erroneous assumption by scholars that sexual violence were indeed rare occurrences.”<sup>11</sup> The capacity to address these problems shifted during the women’s movements of the 1980s and, even more strongly, in the 1990s when the wars in Rwanda and Yugoslavia forced the international community to place rape in the context of collectively perpetrated and politically motivated violence rather than simply devaluing it as an individual sexual crime.<sup>12</sup>

In Greece, this shift of discursive pattern and research interests began even later and developed more slowly than in most European countries.<sup>13</sup> Greek anthropologist Efi Avdela and her co-authors explain it by the “deep-rooted patriarchy, a stronghold of religion on society, and a widespread conservatism” and the dominating rural and thus more prudish character of Greek society.<sup>14</sup> Not least, all these aspects are reflected in the political evolvement in Greece after World War II. While many countries in Western Europe experienced an opening up in the 1960s, when sexual norms were debated

and questioned, Greece faced serious political upheaval resulting in a military dictatorship (1967–1974). Only in the 1980s, with social liberalization under the new leftist government, did the space for debates about sex and sexuality start to open. However, the traditionally conservative Orthodox Church, with a still prominent position in society, and its followers, often from rural Greece and patriarchal backgrounds, remained a strong force in defining the discourse on sexual intimacy. Until today, there has been no conclusive research on sexualized violence committed on Holocaust survivors from Greece, not to speak about a specific focus on Soviet perpetrators.<sup>15</sup> Only a few studies deal with sexual assaults in Greece, and they do so mainly in the realm dominated by the perception of the politically marginalized Left abused by the Right.<sup>16</sup> Such a focus stems from the desire to highlight marginalized groups.<sup>17</sup> Our chapter aligns with this objective by delving into the experiences of another distinct group from the margins, namely Jewish women camp deportees originally from Greece.

We open the chapter by discussing social practices and intimacy in the prewar Jewish community in Greece. Then, we zoom into the wartime harassment of Jewish life before and after the deportations. Since out of 58,000 deported Jews merely 2,000 survived, and most of them were from Thessaloniki, the Jewish community of Thessaloniki will be at the core of our case study. Influenced by the postwar East-West division and Greek state policy, which became fiercely anticommunist, especially in the context of the Greek Civil War (1946–1949), Greece cultivated an anti-Left and anti-Soviet narrative for decades.<sup>18</sup> This is not to say that there were no incidents of sexualized violence committed by Soviet soldiers against Jews of Greece (such as the case of Palomba Allalouf) or that it was easier to speak about such acts, but to better understand the historical facts. Since the Soviet army did not operate on Greek territory—in fact, the Greeks liberated themselves, or rather the Wehrmacht withdrew from Greece in the autumn of 1944 without the physical presence of foreign liberation armies<sup>19</sup>—no Soviet violence could have taken place in Greece on the ground. Therefore, alongside the specific case of Malchow, we examine various categories of perpetrators who sexually assaulted Jewish women from Thessaloniki, like Palomba, during the war—including Jewish guards in the Baron Hirsch transit camp and German personnel in the concentration camps.<sup>20</sup>

Happening outside of Greek borders and to someone belonging to the marginalized groups, Palomba's and similar violations were easily silenced in the frame of national history. The end of World War II was soon overshadowed by the Civil War. For a long time, there was little space and effort in Greece to produce a specific mnemonic culture of liberation and include the Holocaust as a productive historical milestone within national history.<sup>21</sup> Generally speaking, Greek historiography has been facing difficulties in tackling transnational connections and memory production. We argue that as a Jew and a woman "disgraced" by rape, Palomba was neither a suitable martyr nor heroine for the nonsecularized by the largely Greek Orthodox society. Therefore,



we aim to undermine the Greek production of national history and cultural memory along the lines of Greek ethnonationalist victimhood. Instead, we would like to bring to the fore more nuanced perspectives of the personal resilience, agency, and trauma suffered by those on the margins.

## ON SOURCES

As the well-known psychologist and oral historian Henry Greenspan puts it, “survivors do not recount in a vacuum but always to an actual or imagined audience of listeners.” He states that “what survivors say, how they say it, whether they say it at all, will depend, in part, on their perceptions of those listeners as well as on the ways the listeners have made their own hopes, fears, and expectations known.”<sup>22</sup> While excluded from the dominant narratives of the Holocaust and its aftermath—both the Jewish and the non-Jewish—the experiences of the Sephardim, the Romaniotes, and the Ashkenazim of Greece have been kept alive in the diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, document collections, and numerous recordings of audiovisual archives in Greece and beyond. Given the specific events surrounding the liberation of Malchow, we chose to focus on the life stories of Jewish women from Thessaloniki who were liberated there by the Soviets, drawing directly on the personal accounts of seven of them, Palomba notwithstanding. Next to their audiovisual interviews, two collections of published accounts, one in Greek and one in Hebrew, were most conclusive.<sup>23</sup> Two of the survivors, Berry Nachmia from Kastoria and Erika Kounio from Thessaloniki, the latter also the editor and interviewer of the 1998 Greek volume of personal accounts delivered by ex-deportees in 1989, wrote their memoirs.<sup>24</sup>

The audiovisual archives we used in our research on sexualized violence included the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (FVAHT), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Audio Collection, and—predominantly—the Visual History Archive (VHA) of the University of Southern California (USC) Shoah Foundation.<sup>25</sup> All those interviews were recorded in the 1990s. The VHA, with more than 54,000 unedited recordings, holds about 700 interviews in eleven languages with Holocaust survivors born in the territory of today’s Greece and with those who settled there before World War II. Of this total, 396 were conducted with Jews born in Thessaloniki, which is more than half of the VHA interviews from today’s Greece.<sup>26</sup> Given our language limitations and the scope of our research, we focused mainly on interviews with Holocaust survivors who were liberated by the Red Army and delivered their audiovisual accounts in Greek, English, French and Judeo-Spanish. In addition, we analyzed translations of relevant accounts written in Hebrew.<sup>27</sup> While early collections of interviews with survivors exist (e.g., Boder’s

*Voices of the Holocaust* from 1946), they are quite limited in number and do not include questions on and references to sexualized violence.<sup>28</sup> Due to the natural cycle of life, none of the Jewish women in Malchow could be interviewed again in 2023.<sup>29</sup>

To better understand the context of the time and the questions asked and answered therein, we turned to several interviewers who made recordings in the mid-1990s for various audiovisual archives and, in particular, for the VHA, namely Solita Saltiel, Yitzchak Kerem, and Bea Lewkowicz.<sup>30</sup> Their selection was based on several criteria: Saltiel, herself a second-generation survivor whose mother had returned to Thessaloniki from Auschwitz, was active in recruiting interviewees in Thessaloniki for the USC Shoah Foundation and in the local Jewish community, and had herself recorded several VHA interviews in Greek. Kerem, a prominent Sephardi scholar of Holocaust studies in Israel, recorded many VHA interviews of Sephardic survivors in Greek, English, Hebrew, and Judeo-Spanish, some of them from Greece, and therefore possesses a perspective far beyond the Greek national context. This applies also to Lewkowicz, the co-founder and director of the Association of Jewish Refugees (AJR) Refugee Voices and Sephardi Voices UK archives and a social anthropologist who recorded survivors, including Palomba, in French, English, German, and Hebrew for her PhD project on Thessaloniki. Later, she also recorded others for the VHA for a project on the Kindertransporte.<sup>31</sup> Their unique insights are part of our study.

## BEFORE DEPORTATIONS

Born in 1923, Palomba Allalouf's birth falls in the year when the Peace Treaty of Lausanne was signed between Greece and Turkey, which marked the exchange of Muslim and Orthodox populations between the two countries.<sup>32</sup> The treaty also established the borders of mainland Greece as we know them today. Only the Dodecanese Islands, with a once rich Sephardic community on Rhodes,<sup>33</sup> became part of it as late as 1948. In interwar Greece, there were twenty-four Jewish communities, the most important by far being Palomba's native Thessaloniki. Religious affiliation at that time greatly determined the way of life from birth to death, both socially and legally.<sup>34</sup> The fact that Palomba was born Jewish in a community of about 55,000, roughly half of the metropolis before the Greek Orthodox settled in after 1923, meant that she lived among fellow Jews in a Jewish neighborhood, spoke Judeo-Spanish at home, and received her primary education at the Jewish school of the Alliance Israelite Universelle, where she learned French, Greek, and Hebrew.<sup>35</sup> Like many other Thessaloniki Jews, she was from a large family (with six children) and of a relatively poor background. Before the war, she worked as a seamstress, a typical occupation for girls back then. In March 1943, shortly after the deportations in Greece began, the whole family was deported

to Auschwitz. All but Palomba, including her pregnant older sister, were murdered in the concentration camps.<sup>36</sup>

For Greece, the war began at the end of autumn 1940, when Italians crossed its northern borders. With the outbreak of the Italian campaign, the Jewish community stood behind the Greek fascist leader Metaxas and instructed its men to fight for the independence of their homeland. Many were killed or injured.<sup>37</sup> After the German blitz launched on April 6, 1941, Greece was divided into three occupation zones ruled by Bulgaria, Germany, and Italy, with a Greek puppet government installed in Athens. Germans first administered only in the most strategic regions, including Thessaloniki, while Bulgaria took southeast Macedonia and coastal Thrace, and Italy took the rest. Only after the capitulation of Rome at the beginning of September 1943 did the former Italian zone, as well as the Dodecanese, come under the control of the Reich. In the middle of 1942, German authorities ordered the confiscation of communal and, soon afterward, private Jewish property in the German-occupied zone. Public action against Jews culminated in Thessaloniki in June 1942 with the directive on the forced labor of the male Jewish population. Following the introduction of racial laws in early February, Jews in the German zone were forced to make inventories of property and give up the keys to their real estate starting on March 3, 1943. Then, they were gradually isolated in ghettos, banned from leaving them under the threat of death.<sup>38</sup>

The war had thus not just fundamentally changed the economic circumstances of the Jews but also accelerated the emancipation process of Jewish youth. Although sociocultural boundaries for women were somewhat relaxed already in interwar Greece as a result of modernization and the growing affluence of society, only religious marriage was still possible, and its traditional nature included compulsory dowry and matchmaking.<sup>39</sup> Only at the ghettoization, fearing that their growing children would be unprovided for in remote Poland, parents often hastily accepted a contract of marriage otherwise objectionable. According to the chronicle of the Holocaust in Thessaloniki written by local rabbi Michael Molho right after the war, there was a true “marriage epidemic,” with the number rapidly rising from ten to hundred marriages a day in early 1943. “There were no longer any differences of class, property, or education. There was no question of dowry,” Molho says; the aim was “to be able to protect, strengthen and comfort each other.”<sup>40</sup> Sarika Nachmia, born in 1926, soon followed Palomba on the route Auschwitz—Ravensbrück—Malchow, married in the ghetto. She suggests Pepo Asael had been her boyfriend already. Still, their intimate life remains an open question.<sup>41</sup>

Once captured in the transit camp, the Hirsch ghetto, this was the ultimate destination for all Thessaloniki Jews before deportation. Many women who were incarcerated there experienced body shaming through forced nakedness and humiliating body controls conducted by the guards for the first time. More than that, collaborators from the ranks of the Jewish guards were rumored to have sexually abused women in the

Hirsch ghetto. The most notorious among them was the head of Jewish police, Vital Hasson, the only perpetrator tried and sentenced to death in postwar Greece in connection with the persecution of Jews in Thessaloniki.<sup>42</sup> As Molho puts it, “a single mistress was not enough for Hasson’s insatiable desire. With a self-asserted authority, he possessed all the deplorable women who had the misfortune to attract his lustful and avid gaze. He demanded they be brought to him by force against their resistance and entreaties.”<sup>43</sup> Whether by a happy coincidence or due to later victimization that overshadowed the pre-deportation harassments, neither Palomba, Sarika, nor any other of the women who passed through Malchow mention Hasson’s sexualized violence back in Thessaloniki. Yet his actions were exposed in an indictment by Hasson’s victims in the Greek court in 1946.<sup>44</sup>

## IN THE CAMPS

Once entering Auschwitz, Sarika and Pepo Assael were immediately separated by sex. Though Pepo was a young man, he never saw his wife again. Sarika’s younger sister died in the camp, too. Her mother and father did not pass the initial selection. Shortly after her being selected for slave labor, Sarika met a Jewish woman from Thessaloniki, Hella Kounio, who was deported with her family on the first transport on March 15, 1943.<sup>45</sup> Seventeen more followed that year, and in 1944, three additional transports arrived from Greece to Auschwitz with Jews from the former Italian zone. Having already spent two months in the camp, Hella knew all too well what was in store both for Sarika and those who did not pass. Hella, with her daughter Erika, fluent in German, which was an absolute exception among Jews from Greece, was also separated from her husband and son but witnessed the initial reception only from a distance, as they were assigned to the Political Department at Auschwitz as interpreters.<sup>46</sup>

Decades later, Sarika told Erika in detail how she and the other girls were stripped, splashed with ice water, disinfected, shaved, and tattooed. When recounting that, Sarika was already an elderly lady, yet still embarrassed, “standing stark naked while the SS-men walked around us, how humiliating, how degrading!”<sup>47</sup> Unlike the Hirsch ghetto events, this moment, the first sexualized violence for most Jewish women deportees from Greece that they experienced firsthand outside of their country, comes to the fore in many personal accounts, for example, in the one of Yvonne Razon. Yvonne, born in 1928, grew up in the Baron Hirsch neighborhood in Thessaloniki. She was the oldest of four children. Together with her mother and her siblings, she was deported to Auschwitz. The deep embarrassment over the nakedness during the registration process becomes very clear in the Fortunoff Archive interview. Yvonne, liberated at Malchow, whose postwar life was shaped by the experience of aliyah and a more emancipated

kibbutz life in Israel than that of Sarika in Greece, goes even further in her narrative when discussing what she witnessed during the initial disinfection procedure at Auschwitz. However, even she is unwilling or unable to put it into precise words: “The Germans sat around ridiculing us as we passed [naked]. . . . We were then made to shower with ice-cold water. Whoever wouldn’t stand under the shower heads, was whipped, and the water was poured on her. There were horrific things that happened in the showers, but I can’t bring myself to talk about them.”<sup>48</sup>

About a week after Sarika Assael, Aliza Tsarfati entered Auschwitz. Born in 1928, a fifteen-year-old who was married in the Hirsch ghetto just to go along with a spouse to Poland, Aliza had previously experienced terrible starvation in the winter of 1941/42 and after.<sup>49</sup> Coming from a lower middle-class milieu, her family in Thessaloniki was not able to keep a newborn alive or save her grandmother from famine. Once in Auschwitz, Aliza was soon confronted with the fact that her parents were selected for the gas chambers. The labor that she was to execute was not nursing as Aliza expected when taken to the “hospital” but becoming a subject of a pseudo-medical experiment at the hands of Mengele, Clauberg, and Dering. According to her testimony, she survived four surgeries during the sterilization experiments. Only the hope that her brother would still be alive kept her going. At the end of her imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Aliza already struggled with depression linked to the prospect that her future life, which she had never given up, could be deprived of the ability to conceive children.<sup>50</sup>

With the Red Army advancing on the Eastern Front toward Kraków, Auschwitz was evacuated westward, leaving behind only those prisoners who were unable to move. Palomba, Sarika, Yvonne, Aliza, and Hella, with her daughter Erika, as well as many other women, were forced to go to Ravensbrück, which from 1939 served as a women’s camp primarily for political prisoners.<sup>51</sup> Upon arrival, the Jewish women were confronted with an inmates’ apathy that they had not known, even from Auschwitz, and unimaginable overcrowding. “If someone had died, they would simply sleep on top of her—in order to generate heat from the bodies,” Aliza recounts.<sup>52</sup> Those circumstances brought awful sanitary conditions and contagious diseases, including scabies and epidemic typhus, as well as an absolute lack of any food, leading to extremes such as cannibalism. As Aliza recalls, the camp conditions made inmates “eat dead horses, and even parts of dead people.”<sup>53</sup>

Due to overcrowding and thin supplies, Malchow, where they were transferred, came to the brink of collapse at the end of March 1945; by then, it was still a month away from liberation. On May 1, the Nazis took the remaining women who were still able to walk out of Malchow. Only a fraction of the sick and wounded remained in the camp infirmary. The situation around them became opaque, with locals and Wehrmacht deserters fleeing into the arms of the Americans. Both Germans and their collaborators were frightened of Soviet retaliation. As Erika Kounio repeatedly puts it in her accounts, “The Russian soldiers, as we heard later, had been given [an] order: ‘Treat the

Germans as they behaved in Russia. Burn, pillage, and rape!”<sup>54</sup> Even in these last moments before liberation, Malchow guards still shot without hesitation many women prisoners too weak to continue the marches. The day after the last death march began for Palomba, Sarika, Yvonne, Aliza, and other camp prisoners, Soviet soldiers entered the Malchow camp.<sup>55</sup>

## UPON LIBERATION

Marching without any real direction, malnourished, exhausted, and in constant fear of being killed, the only goal of the Jewish women was to stay alive. They knew that the Allied troops and their liberation were close. Parts of the marches dispersed, abandoned by the guards, and then some women and male prisoners of war (POW) set off into the woods. Others followed the Germans in the convoy until they reached the Americans. In this confusing setting, undocumented in official archival records, it is difficult to identify the exact trajectories of the Jewish women from Greece. From their accounts, however, it seems that although they found themselves in linguistically and religiously mixed groups, there were always some of their fellow Jewish women from Thessaloniki who had passed through Auschwitz with them. Even though they may have been in the same place, only a few hundred meters apart, at the given time, their experiences, reflections, and memories of their encounters with Soviet soldiers differed greatly.

Together with other women, Sarika Assael was one of those who had sought shelter in the forest nearby. “We walked around. Then we came to a farm where we stayed overnight,” she recounts. “We heard gunshots and dogs. Then, at dawn, silence fell. We hid among the cows.”<sup>56</sup> The next day, the group met Polish refugees at that farm and crossed paths with two Soviet officers. Sarika believes that since one of them was Jewish, he understood their unfortunate position. The women shared their experiences with the officers and showed them their inked numbers. According to Sarika, the Jewish officer was very moved, even started crying, and then warned the women emphatically: “You are girls,” he said. “The soldiers will not care that you have been captives. You must be careful.”<sup>57</sup>

The then eighteen-year-old Sylvia Molho from Thessaloniki shares a similar experience in her interview. In expressive words, she describes the impression she got of the Soviet soldiers when they entered the camp: “despair, beards down to their chins, covered with mud, a savageness, full of rage.”<sup>58</sup> Again, she describes the Jewish officer in charge as the saving authority. Acknowledging the fierceness of his own troops, he recommended the women, according to Sylvia, “not to stay here, today. [...] Everyone is enthusiastic, everyone will be drinking vodka and will be dancing, and they will want to have women, too.”<sup>59</sup>

These quotations indicate a clear projection of the “us” and “them” categories among Holocaust survivors. The way the “Russians” were expected to behave and how some of the survivors described them is nothing less than barbaric. This, at the same time, contrasts with nearly adoring denominations, sometimes by the very same narrator. Paradigmatic in this way is the quote of Erika Kounio, who, in her interview and her book, recalls her mother’s (Hella) reaction when she saw the Soviet troops: “Like Genghis Khan’s hordes!”<sup>60</sup> Following this line, Erika describes the orders given to the “Russians” as “Burn, pillage and rape!”<sup>61</sup> Less than two pages later, she portrays a Soviet officer with unreserved admiration: “Tall, blond, with blue eyes, he seemed like an ancient God on his horse.”<sup>62</sup>

Such depictions and civilizational discourse clearly refer to stereotypes about the savage “Russians,” as the survivors call the Red Army members without any (non)visible ethnic distinction, which have a long tradition beyond Greece.<sup>63</sup> To consider gender as the leading or even the only category in the perception of sexual behavior is therefore clearly inadequate. Such an assumption is corroborated by the emphasis the women place on the Jewishness of the leading officers. Their shared Jewish background serves as an explanation for protective attitudes, as the fact that they were able to speak in a common language. Sarika argues that way when she points out that “the Russians who came along didn’t harm us because of the Polish people who were with us and who could speak to them.”<sup>64</sup> Hence, the ability to speak in a common language is perceived as an important factor in easing things and preventing sexual assaults.

Erika Kounio makes another valid point about the different behavior of the Soviet army when she stresses the need to distinguish between “fighting forces” and the “occupying forces.” The latter “wore different clothes, they behaved in a civilized way, some even spoke some German.”<sup>65</sup> They were the ones who were “trying to impose some order on this chaos, to feed the hungry people, to arrange shelter for them.”<sup>66</sup> Precisely that point helps to shed light on the different behavior among the Soviet soldiers. Moreover, it suggests why so many of the interviewees specifically described the first three days of their liberation, when nobody was around to establish order, as a very chaotic and dangerous time.<sup>67</sup>

To avoid sexual assaults and rape in these unsettling days, the women solidarized; they tried to stay in groups and barricaded the doors of the houses where they sought refuge.<sup>68</sup> Sarika recalls how they moved a piano in front of the door to prevent anyone from entering the building.<sup>69</sup> “Not even once did we stick out our nose out of the hideout,” says Erika about the oppressive situation during the days of the liberation.<sup>70</sup> Women also used strategies to behave as if they had contracted a highly contagious disease or parasites, such as epidemic typhus or scabies, which they had massive experience with from the camps.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately, such precautionary measures were not always successful. “A drunken man came and struck the door so hard it opened. He grabbed



a woman—a friend of ours who was married—and took her away,” recalls Palomba, who was soon to meet the same fate.<sup>72</sup> Yvonne Razon describes a similarly desperate situation of one woman who took agency to get control over the situation by offering her body to the Soviet soldiers: “When an officer came to the house, she told him that she was willing to ‘spend the night’ with him, on the condition that he posts guards to protect the girls in the house.”<sup>73</sup>

While short anecdotes about other women raped by Soviets can be found more frequently in the accounts of Jewish women liberated in Malchow and elsewhere, personal experiences with rape are rarely brought up. The only Jewish woman from Greece who spoke openly and resolutely about her individual traumatic experience of sexualized violence was Palomba Allalouf.<sup>74</sup> She describes how she became the next victim in the row of women taken by Soviet soldiers one night. When a man entered the room and held her at gunpoint, she first took agency and defended herself against the intruder, then she blacked out. Palomba puts her motions in a specific social and sexual context: “I was a virgin. I would not go. He began to beat me. [...] I would not let him touch me. He held both his sword and his revolver up at me. I fainted.”<sup>75</sup> Sexualized violence, in her case, has not only become a crime but has also affected her cherished chastity, both socially and emotionally.

The “Great Evil,” as Palomba puts the act of rape in shattering words, came overnight.<sup>76</sup> As characteristics for these specific situations, the women emphasize the surrounding darkness of the night, the excessive consumption of alcohol by the perpetrators, as well as their feelings of revenge and recompense.<sup>77</sup> The crimes might appear as individual actions in these accounts since they put emphasis on a single man who committed the crime. At the same time, the women picture these doings not only as tolerated but perhaps even supported by the superiors of the respective soldiers. Hence, the accounts consider such violence not as a painful exception but rather as enabled by a set of intertwined structural factors and individual disposition and motives.<sup>78</sup> On the discursive level, additional information such as “the married ones” or “the virgin,” as in the case of Palomba,<sup>79</sup> or the remark of Erika Kounio that “even old women were not spared”<sup>80</sup> perform an amplifying function in the context of sharing the trauma. Regardless of their precise truthfulness, they serve to emphasize and communicate the horrifying dimension of the committed acts, which often appear as not only unbearable but also unspeakable.

## NORMS AND OMISSIONS

“I can’t remember anything,” says Palomba about the act of rape itself in the 1993 interview in Judeo-Spanish with Josh Almuli, a Sephardic Jew, a journalist from Belgrade



and an active interviewer for the Fortunoff Archive in the Balkans since the late 1980s.<sup>81</sup> The rape as such is omitted in her personal account. It seems, however, that there were more events and experiences she did not touch upon, perhaps to protect herself or other survivors of her community and not to run the risk of discrediting herself or them. Whether as therapeutic reconciliation or traumatic neurosis,<sup>82</sup> the time to recount her story came for Palomba only after her husband passed away in 1986.<sup>83</sup> Although emphasizing that she had a happy marriage, Palomba admits that it was a reasonable solution, not an act of affinity or even love. She never expounds on how much her husband knew about her trauma. When Palomba registered with the community in 1945, her health was marked simply as “good.” The declaration of good health in the community register is recurrent for all camp survivors, even for the subjects of medical experiments.<sup>84</sup> Later in her life and interviews, Palomba claimed that her state of health in the aftermath, both physical and mental, was logically terrible at the liberation.<sup>85</sup>

Fragmented memories and the inability to make sense of the traumatic experiences and to describe them properly are characteristic for the Holocaust interviews. The interviewees tend to fit and adjust their past to the new circumstances to make their lives more bearable. Since the community lacked its prewar archives that were destroyed or stolen during the occupation, including birth records, modifications according to the situation, as Palomba did for her state of health, were a tactic used by many men and women Holocaust survivors in Thessaloniki and elsewhere. The way of talking or silencing the rape experience shows what Cathy Caruth meant when she states that violence inflicts wounds not “[only] upon the body but upon the mind.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, choosing silence can be seen as a self-protective strategy for dealing with this traumatic experience, as Nina Pavlovicova also shows in her chapter in this volume. “I don’t want to remember any of it,” stated Antonia Kivelou, who experienced severe torture under the Greek junta more than two decades after World War II.<sup>87</sup> “When they (the interviewers) choose silence,” Sara Brown argues, “even in the midst of sharing their testimony, they are owning their narrative. This is not to privilege silence over voice—both are significant and meaningful expressions of agency.”<sup>88</sup> For this, researchers are challenged to read between the lines, to make what interviewees maybe did not address clearly because they felt limitations “created by the shame that was reinforced by the surrounding culture.”<sup>89</sup>

This brings us from the interviewees to the interviewers of the Holocaust survivors. Yitzchak Kerem, one of the three interviewers who were interviewed for this chapter, reflected on how he approached sexualized violence during his interviews: “Believe me, I pushed. I even asked women about rape, but they chat very timidly,”<sup>90</sup> he states quite in resignation. At the same time, Kerem points out that only “today these are issues we bring up.”<sup>91</sup> What he implies becomes explicit later when explaining that “the average traditional woman would not even bring up something like this [anything related to sexual intercourse, J.N.]” and warning his interviewer as well as fellow researchers “not

putting your values of today on it.”<sup>92</sup> In this way, Kerem makes clear that the way of communication he recorded for the VHA was limited by the social norms of the 1990s, the cultural background, and the social environment the interviewee lived in, thus also confirming the findings of Carli Snyder in this volume.

The relationship of reciprocal expectations between interviewer and interviewee that naturally affects the interview is complex.<sup>93</sup> Bea Lewkowicz critically reflects on these dynamics with regard to 1993 when she interviewed Palomba: “I really went there as a social anthropologist, and I didn’t go as a Holocaust historian. That is really, really important.”<sup>94</sup> Lewkowicz stresses that her fields of interest were “identity, Greek nationalism, postwar, minorities,” not the individual experiences of violence or the Holocaust. The main premise for her interviews regarding the Holocaust was simply, “I wasn’t looking!”<sup>95</sup> As a consequence of her own academic positioning, Lewkowicz states that it was difficult for her interviewees to bring up individual experiences of violence during the Holocaust. In her interviews, Lewkowicz instantly shied away when she got the impression that she could touch upon a difficult or even traumatic experience that the Holocaust survivor would not want to talk about. Hence, she concludes “the Holocaust testimonies I got are from people who really, really wanted to talk.”<sup>96</sup> This includes the then seventy-year-old woman Palomba.

Sexual assaults are often told in the mode of hearsay, and Lewkowicz agrees that it has become a trope in narratives after the Cold War. However, Lewkowicz insists that the case of Palomba was different: “She says it enough times that it is very, very clear, very clear, that she was raped.”<sup>97</sup> Later in our correspondence, Lewkowicz adds that Palomba “gives a full account of what happened to her. She also clearly relates how the rape affected her after the war: ‘I had suffered a lot, also from the Russians, I did not want anything, others wanted to have fun but I couldn’t.’”<sup>98</sup> Back in 1994, Lewkowicz did not pay further attention to the trope of sexualized violence in Palomba’s narration: “It is said and then she continues the story and I am not going [into further details],” she states.<sup>99</sup> However, Palomba’s experience is included in Lewkowicz’s book and “constitutes the longest piece of uninterrupted testimony.”<sup>100</sup> In her book, Lewkowicz states:

The Russian [*sic*] soldiers did not acknowledge the *plight* of the women concentration camp survivors. They were put to work and sometimes raped or sexually assaulted. Palomba A. comments on this *experience* in the same fashion as she comments on the camp experience: “Another five kilometers and I would have been liberated by Americans. This is life. It’s all a question of luck.” (Afi) After this *ordeal* with Russian [*sic*] soldiers she remained alone again.<sup>101</sup>

Yet, it was not only that experiences of sexualized violence during the Holocaust were not of central interest to her as an interviewer. At the time, sexual experiences in

general, and even more so the experience of painful and traumatic sexualized violence in particular, were topics that could hardly be addressed. Lewkowicz emphasizes that this applied generally but even more for Greece, “where you have a very strong notion of the public and private realm.”<sup>102</sup> Referring to sexualized violence and other intimate themes belonged to the individual private sphere in which Lewkowicz was not ready to intrude. She points out: “I didn’t see myself in the position to discuss these things. [...] and to ask intruding questions.”<sup>103</sup>

Lewkowicz’s attitude corresponds with that of Solita Saltiel, the third interviewee and the only one who is part of the Greek society and the Jewish Community in Thessaloniki. Although she personally interviewed Sarika, in her interview with us, Saltiel repeatedly emphasizes that “no woman talked to me who had experienced violence.”<sup>104</sup> Everything she knows about such topics as sexual abuse and rape Saltiel frames as “hearsay”<sup>105</sup> and “rumors.”<sup>106</sup> In her explanation for the restraint, Saltiel refers to the advanced age of her interviewees as well as to their gender: “Sure, there was shyness. The women had arrived at a certain age, and they were not used to speak openly about topics related to sex. I think that it is something expectable.”<sup>107</sup> Showing much sympathy for the intimate life of women Holocaust survivors in the way Saltiel talks about her interviewees leaves us with a strong impression that, in many instances, she avoids naming any explicit actions of sexualized violence. Using only vague terms like “similar incidents,”<sup>108</sup> unable to “discuss these things,”<sup>109</sup> hints toward how difficult it still might be to speak about rape and sexualized violence both for the first and second generation of Holocaust survivors, and especially in certain social environments such as Greece and the Thessaloniki community to which Saltiel adheres.

## CONCLUSION

Palomba passed away in Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1999, just a year after giving the Visual History Archive the last in a long series of her interviews. Today, none of the women we analyzed in this chapter are alive, which leaves us only with reading between the lines of their narratives. Still, based on their personal accounts, we tried here to shed light on perspectives from the margins regarding experiences of sexualized violence in the context of the Holocaust in Greece in three ways: first, focusing explicitly on female perspectives; second, concentrating only on women from Jewish origins; and third, following these actors and their forced way through Europe, hence taking events into account that did not take place in Greece. Their stories, by their otherness, do not fit into the prevailing line of Greek national history and ethno-nationalist victimhood. This is why Greek historiography struggles to integrate the experiences of Jewish women that go beyond the usual national framework. For the largely traditional Greek Orthodox

society, women like Palomba can hardly serve as figures of identification. However, she and many other Jewish women and their life stories are essential to the reflection on World War II and the Holocaust in Greece and, as such, should be heard and taken into account not only as victims but as survivors.<sup>110</sup>

What strikes first and foremost is the fact that Jewish women from Greece, whose intimate life was always kept private, suffered various kinds of sexualized harassment and abuse, even rape in multiple contexts in just little more than two years of the war. In this regard, one must speak of a chain of painful experiences. The Baron Hirsch ghetto can be seen as the first station in this painful journey, followed by Auschwitz and other camps up to Malchow where they experienced the liberation by the Soviet army. The diversity of contexts is reflected in the groups of perpetrators. Their range goes from Jewish guards and Jewish police in the transit camp in Thessaloniki to the German military in Auschwitz to Soviet soldiers in the liberation of the Malchow camp. In the personal accounts, the experiences of sexualized violence come to the fore, mostly in connection with the German captivity. Given the time the women spent in German camps and their terrifying experiences there, as well as the instructions for and framing of the biographical interviews focusing more on the Holocaust and less on its aftermath in which they shared their way of suffering, that might not be surprising.

The more irritating seems the experience of sexual assaults and even rape in the course of the liberation of the Malchow camp once verbalized. What might have put an end to the horror of the captivity and been a relief turned out to be, for some of the women, just an additional terrifying experience. The accounts of this are inconsistent and fragmentary, which is characteristic of traumatic experiences. In addition, due to sociocultural constraints, such intimate and sensitive topics could hardly be openly addressed in Greek society after the Second World War. The limitations are evident not only in the omissions within the accounts of the women themselves. Our exchange with the three interviewers who conducted their interviews with Holocaust survivors in the 1990s corroborates this assumption. All three interviewers emphasize age and gender as profound reasons for the women's reluctance to speak about their experiences, hence suggesting feelings of shame as a guiding motif for the omissions. At the same time, this point also operates conversely. Lewkowicz in particular emphasizes the reciprocal expectations of the interviewer and interviewee when repeatedly expressing that she "wasn't looking." Hence, first and foremost, these omissions shed light on the societal level and the strong nexus of deep-rooted effects of ascribed emotions such as shame to the experience of sexual assault.

Examining the respective interviews and how they framed the traumatic experiences of sexual assaults, it is remarkable that several interviewees place the acts of rape in the context of an overarching Soviet strategy to shatter the morale of the enemy. Such interpretation reflects the evolvement on an international scale in the 1990s

when the discursive pattern shifted, and rape became considered a collective and politically motivated act of violence, as expressed in the resolutions of the United Nations about the conflicts in Rwanda and Yugoslavia. In this sense, the interviews correspond very much with the then-changing *Zeitgeist*; maybe they can be interpreted as even affected by it.

When it comes to identifying specifics concerning the fact that these were Soviet perpetrators, one needs to proceed with caution. Certainly, Andrea Pető is right when emphasizing that “it is wrong to consider the Soviet rapist soldier as that because he is Soviet [. . .] [b]ut it would be equally wrong if we observed the perpetrator simply as a man.”<sup>100</sup> Based on this premise, we can outline three more central aspects within the narrations: the relevance of time, tropes to illustrate the cruelty, and references to the picture of uncivilized and barbaric Eastern savages. Time did matter. The rapes took place during the night. The darkness is described as an enabling aspect for the excesses in the reports. Following the observation of Kounio and others, time was relevant on another scale, too. A recurring motif appears to be the distinction between the first troops, which stayed for about three days and were followed by occupational troops, which were in charge of rebuilding the area and implementing to a certain degree law and order again. The committed sexualized violence is unequivocally ascribed to the former.

To make clear the brutality of these crimes, the women refer specifically to religiously charged motifs such as virginity or the married woman, which are common to-poi for the patriarchal order in the Western hemisphere. That leads to the third aspect, which aims at the distinction between the civilized “us” and the barbaric “other.” The first troops, especially, are often connected to stereotypes of the uncivilized and barbaric Eastern savage, reflected in physiognomic descriptions of full beards or the ascription of intense feelings of rage and revenge. It is that kind of othering that serves to underscore the women’s own agency and explain the cruel experience soon to follow. At the same time, the attributed Jewishness prompts the women to characterize certain authorities as protective. The specific implications of this characterization, however, except perhaps underscoring their resilience and ability to talk and understand each other in these situations, remain unclear.

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## NOTES

1. Bea Lewkowicz, *The Jewish Community of Salonika: History, Memory, Identity* (Valentine Mitchell, 2006), 194–96. Due to her marriages, Palomba Allalouf's name changed two times during her life. She was born as Benveniste, then took the name of her first husband, Florentin. When she married for the second time, she got the name Allalouf, which we use in our article. In our chapter, we use the real names of the survivors. Since they have decided to make their interviews publicly accessible, we assume this is in their best interest, and we do not want to undermine their decision by making them anonymous.
2. Erika Kounio-Amariglio and Almpertos Nar, *Prophorikes martyries Evreon tis Thessalonikis gia to Olokaytoma [Oral testimonies of Thessaloniki Jews on the Holocaust]* (Paratiritis, 1998), 42–43. See also, e.g., Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (FVAHT), Sarika N., 2786, and Yvonne R., 3538 Holocaust testimony as well as Chella Koynio [*sic*] (née Löwi), 40822, Erika Amariglio (née Kounio), 21678, Yvonne Razon (née Kamhi), 17261, Sylvia Sevi (née Molho), 39060, Shoah Foundation, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA), accessed at the Malach Centre for Visual History, Charles University, Prague, with funding from the LM2015071 LINDAT/CLARIN Research Infrastructure.
3. For conceptual remarks on silencing and sexualized violence during the Holocaust, Anna-belle Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust: Reflections on Memory and Witness Testimony," *Holocaust Studies* 16, no. 3 (2010): 114; Doris L. Bergen et al., "Buried Words: A Forum on Sexuality, Violence and Holocaust Testimonies," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 504. See also Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska, "Introduction," in *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges*, ed. Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska (Instytut Badan Literackich PAN, 2015), 9–24; Maren Röger and Ruth Leiserowitz, *Women and Men at War: A Gender Perspective on World War II and Its Aftermath in Central and Eastern Europe* (Fibre, 2012).
4. See Baldwin, "Sexual Violence and the Holocaust."
5. Rhonda Copelon as quoted in Anne L. Barstow, "Introduction," in *War's Dirty Secret: Rape, Prostitution, and Other Crimes Against Women*, ed. Anne L. Barstow (Pilgrim Press, 2000), 8.
6. For sexual assaults on men see Tommy J. Curry, "Thinking Through the Silence: Theorizing the Rape of Jewish Males During the Holocaust Through Survivor Testimonies," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 447–72.
7. Helene Sinnreich, "'And it was something we didn't talk about': Rape of Jewish Women During the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 3.
8. Na'ama Shik, "Description and Silence: Sexual Abuse in Early and Later Testimonies

- of Survivors and the Emergence of the Israeli Narrative," *Holocaust Studies* 27, no. 4 (2021): 482.
9. Katrina Lee Koo, "Confronting a Disciplinary Blindness: Women, War and Rape in the International Politics of Security," *Australian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 3 (2002): 531. See also Bergen, "Buried Words," 505.
  10. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, "Introduction," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 2.
  11. Curry, "Silence," 459.
  12. Lorena Balardini, Ana Oberlin, and Laura Sobredo, "Violencia de género y abusos sexuales en los centros clandestinos de detención. Un aporte a la comprensión de la experiencia Argentina," in *Hacer justicia. Nuevos debates sobre el juzgamiento de crímenes de lesa humanidad en Argentina*, ed. Centro de Estudios Legales y Sociales (Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2011), 184.
  13. Eleni Fournaraki and Yannis Yannitsiotis, "Three Decades of Women's and Gender History in Greece: An Account," *Aspasia* 7 (2013): 164.
  14. Efi Avdela, Kostis Gotsinas, Despo Kritsotaki, and Dimitra Vassiliadou, "From Virginity to Orgasm: Marriage and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Greece," *Journal of Family History* 45, no. 3 (2020): 319. Herzfeld speaks even of a specific "Greek androcentrism." Michael Herzfeld, "Silence, Submission, and Subversion: Toward a Poetics of Womanhood," in *Contested Identities. Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, ed. Peter Loizos and Evthmios Papataxiarchis (Princeton University Press, 1991), 82.
  15. For general desiderata and current research trends about sexualized violence during the Holocaust, see Bergen, "Buried Words," 501–20.
  16. Katerina Stefatos, *Engendering the Nation: Women, State Oppression and Political Violence in Post-War Greece (1946–1974)* (thesis, University of London, 2011); Maria Michou, "Inhabiting the Memory of Political Incarceration in Greece: Two Women's Narratives from the Civil War and the Junta," in *The Politics of Culture in Turkey, Greece and Cyprus: Performing the Left Since the Sixties*, ed. Leonidas Karakatsanis and Nikolaos Papadogiannis (Routledge, 2017), 33–54; Nikolaos Papadogiannis, *Militant Around the Clock? Left-Wing Youth Politics, Leisure and Sexuality in Post-Dictatorship in Greece, 1974–1981* (Berghahn, 2015).
  17. Michou, *Memory*, 43.
  18. Anastasia I. Mitsopoulou, *O ellinikos antikommounismos ston "syntomo 20o aiona": Opseis tou dimosiou logou stin politiki, stin ekpaideusi kai sti logotechnia* [Greek Anticommunism in the Short 20th Century: Public Discourse in Politics, Education and Literature] (Epikentro, 2014), 201–316; Stratis Bournazos, "To kratos ton ethnikofronon: antikommounistikos logos kai praktikes" [The State of the Nationally Minded: Anticommunist Discourse and Practice], *Archeiotaxio* 16 (2014): 9–49.



19. Tasoula Vervenioti, "12 October 1944, Liberation Trauma and Memorialization in Greece," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* Occasional Papers, no. 2 (2014): 1–12; see also Kateřina Králová, *Homecoming* (Brandeis University Press, 2024).
20. For sharing insides and sources on sexualized violence we are particularly thankful to Spyros Tsoutsoumbis and Alexios Ntetorakis. Without their assistance our understanding of World War II and postwar sexualized violence in Greece would be more limited.
21. Kateřina Králová, "The 'Holocausts' in Greece: Victim Competition in the Context of Postwar Compensation for Nazi Persecution," *Holocaust Studies* 23, no. 1–2 (2017): 149–75.
22. Bergen, "Buried Words," 511.
23. Kounio-Amariglio and Nar, *Prophorikes martyries*; Schmuël Refael, *Bi-Netivey She'ol: Yehudey Yavan Ba-Sho'ah-Pirqey Edut* [The Road to Hell: Greek Jews in the Holocaust. Testimonies] (ha-Makhon le-heqer yahadut Saloniki, 1988).
24. Erika Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz and Back: Memories of a Survivor from Thessaloniki* (Valentine Mitchell, 2000); Kounio-Amariglio and Nar, *Prophorikes martyries*; Berry Nachmia, *Kraugi gia to aurio, 76859 . . .* (Kaktos, 1989).
25. For a critical discussion of these archives see Noah Shenker, *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (Indiana University Press, 2015).
26. The Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu>. Currently, the VHA collection contains interviews, each more than two hours long on average, in 41 languages, amounting to about 115,000 hours of video material. To facilitate working with such a vast quantity of material, the search engines are equipped with a list of over 65,000 thematic keywords.
27. Most importantly, for the interviews in Refael, *Bi-Netivey She'ol*, we used AI technology. For interviews in Hebrew from the Fortunoff Archive, the transcripts in English were most helpful.
28. Voices of the Holocaust David Boder Archive, accessed May 5, 2023, <http://voices.iit.edu/>.
29. Berry Nachmia passed away in Athens in 2013, Erika Kounio in Thessaloniki in 2011, leaving behind not only their memoirs but also many interviews and a great deal of community work.
30. Interviews with Bea Lewkowicz living in London, Solita Saltiel living in Thessaloniki, and Yitzhak Kerem living in Israel conducted online by K. Králová in 2023. The authors are very grateful for their time and inputs.
31. Bea Lewkowicz, "The Jewish Community of Thessaloniki: An Exploration of Memory and Identity in a Mediterranean City" (thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 1999), <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/2910/>. Her VHA interviews, however, do not cover Holocaust survivors in Greece but British Holocaust refugees and survivors.



32. Renée Hirschon, *Crossing the Aegean: An Appraisal of the 1923 Compulsory Population Exchange Between Greece and Turkey* (Berghahn, 2003).
33. Renée Hirschon, "The Jews of Rhodes: The Decline and Extinction of an Ancient Community," in *The Last Ottoman Century and Beyond: The Jews in Turkey and the Balkans, 1808–1945*, ed. Minna Rozen (Goldstein-Goren Diaspora Research Institute, 2005); Isaac Benatar, *Rhodes and the Holocaust: The Story of the Jewish Community from the Mediterranean Island of Rhodes* (iUniverse, 2010).
34. Bernard Pierron, *Evrei ke Christiani sti Neoteri Ellada, Istoria ton diakinotikon scheseon apo to 1821 os to 1945* [Jews and Christians in Contemporary Greece, History of Intercommunal Relations from 1821 to 1945] (Polis, 2004), 146–50.
35. For more on the French network of Jewish schooling, Aron Rodrigue, *French Jews, Turkish Jews: The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Politics of Jewish Schooling in Turkey, 1860–1925* (Indiana University Press, 1990).
36. Palomba F., FVAHT-2779 (1993).
37. Katerina Lagos, *The Fourth of August Regime and Greek Jewry, 1936–1941* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 176–81. See also the interview with Aliza B., FVAHT-3245 (1992).
38. For more on the German occupation of Greece in general and Jews in Greece in particular, see especially Mark Mazower, *Inside Hitler's Greece: The Experience of Occupation, 1941–44* (Yale Nota Bene, 2001); Katherine E. Fleming, *Greece—A Jewish History* (Princeton University Press, 2008); Giorgos Antoniou and A. Dirk Moses, eds., *The Holocaust in Greece* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
39. Rena Molho, *I Evrei tis Thessalonikis: Mia idieteri kinotita* (Pataki, 2014); see also chapters on Thessaloniki in Antoniou and Moses, *The Holocaust in Greece*.
40. Michael Molho and Joseph Nehama, *In memoriam: Gewidmet dem Andenken an die jüdischen Opfer der Naziherrschaft in Griechenland* (Peter Katzung, 1981), 133.
41. Interview with Sarra Nachmias, 41117, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive (VHA).
42. Sarah Abrevaya Stein, *Family Papers: A Sephardic Journey Through the Twentieth Century* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 170–74.
43. Molho and Nehama, *In memoriam*, 136.
44. USHMM Permanent Collection, 2003.4, The Hasson Trial.
45. Sara Nachmia, "Statement," in Kounio-Amariglio and Nar, *Prophorikes martyries*, 153–54.
46. Interview with Chella Koynio [*sic*] (née Löwi), 40822, Erika Amariglio (née Kounio), 21678, USC Shoah Foundation VHA.
47. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 61. See also Palomba Benveniste, 1989, no. 6536, Yad Vashem Documents Archive (YVDA), 5. The authors express their gratitude to Stefania Zezza for bringing the Yad Vashem file to their attention. Zezza also referenced this testimony in her article: Stefania Zezza, "Without a Compass:

- Salonikan Jews in Nazi Concentration Camps and Later," *European Spatial Research and Policy* 28, no. 1 (2021): 45–71.
48. Interview with Yvonne R., FVAHT-3538.
  49. For Jewish experience of starvation in Thessaloniki, see Maria Kavala, "I Thessaloniki sti Germaniki Katochi (1941–1944): Kinonia, Ikonomia, diognos Evreon" [Thessaloniki under German Occupation (1941–1944): Society, economy and persecution of the Jews] (thesis, University of Crete, 2009).
  50. Interview with Aliza B., FVAHT-3245; see also Refael, *Bi-Netivey She'ol*, 155–59.
  51. Silke Schäfer, *Zum Selbstverständnis von Frauen im Konzentrationslager. Das Lager Ravensbrück* (thesis, Technische Universität Berlin, 2002), 47–74.
  52. Interview with Aliza B., FVAHT-3245.
  53. Interview with Aliza B., FVAHT-3245.
  54. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 133. See also her VHA and FVAHT interview.
  55. Irith Dublon Knebel, "Malchow," in *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945, vol. 1*, ed. G. P. Megargee and E. Wiesel (Indiana University Press, 2009), 1213.
  56. Nachmia, "Statement," 161.
  57. Nachmia, "Statement," 161.
  58. Interview with Sylvia Sevi, VHA 39060, min. 4:50.
  59. Interview with Erika Amariglio, VHA 21678, min. 17.
  60. Interview with Erika Amariglio, VHA 21678, min. 17; Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 133.
  61. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 133.
  62. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 135.
  63. Hans-Henning Schröder, "'Tiefste Barbarei, höchste Civilisation': Stereotypen im deutschen Russlandbild," *Osteuropa* 60, no. 10 (2010): 99.
  64. Nachmia, "Statement," 161.
  65. Interview with Erika Amariglio, VHA 21678, min. 18:50.
  66. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 134.
  67. See, for example, interview with Palomba F., FVAHT-2779 and Palomba Benveniste, YVDA, 15. For further discussions of this phenomenon, see Monika J. Flaschka's chapter in this volume.
  68. Interview with Sarra Nachmia, VHA, min. 2:40.
  69. Interview with Sarra Nachmia, VHA, min. 2:50.
  70. Interview with Erika Amariglio, VHA 21678.
  71. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 198–99.
  72. Interview with Palomba F., FVAHT-2779.
  73. Interview with Yvonne R., FVAHT-3538. For a critical discussion of agency and sexual

- barter see Anna Hájková's chapter in this volume.
74. Interesting enough, this was not the case in all her accounts. For example, in her testimony written in Greek that she sent to Yad Vashem in 1989, Palomba skips this experience with the remarkable words: "I'm ashamed of telling that . . ." Palomba Benveniste, YVDA, 15.
  75. Interview with Palomba F., FVAHT-2779. In such situations, fainting can be interpreted as one way the body tried to escape from this terrible experience. Janis Nalbadidacis, *In den Verliesen der Diktatur. Folterzentren während der Militärdiktaturen in Griechenland (1967–1974) und Argentinien (1976–1983)* (Campus, 2021), 309–10.
  76. Interview with Palomba Benveniste, 42950, VHA, Tape 4, min. 26:00.
  77. Aside from the case of Palomba, see for example, in Kounio and Nar, *Proforikes martyries*, the testimonies of Mevorah, 107, Saoul, 198–99, Sevi, 209.
  78. In debates about sexualized violence, individual motifs of lust and rape as strategic means to shatter the opponents' constitution are often discussed as counterarguments instead of seeing their complementing potential for such situations. Christine Buchwald, "Frauen und Kinder zuerst! Aber was ist mit den Männern? Zur Auflösung der stereotypen Geschlechtszuschreibungen von Opferrollen am Beispiel sexualisierter Kriegsgewalt," *Schriftenreihe zur soziologischen Sozialpsychologie* 2 (2013); Regina Mühlhäuser, "Reframing Sexual Violence as a Weapon and Strategy of War: The Case of the German Wehrmacht During the War and Genocide in the Soviet Union, 1941–1944," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 26, no. 3 (2017): 366–67; Rolf Pohl, "Massenvergewaltigung. Zum Verhältnis von Krieg und männlicher Sexualität," *Mittelweg* 36 11, no. 2 (2002): 65–66.
  79. Interview with Palomba Benveniste, 42950, VHA, Tape 4, min. 25:34.
  80. Kounio-Amariglio, *From Thessaloniki to Auschwitz*, 133.
  81. Interview with Palomba F., FVAHT-2779.
  82. Sharon Kangisser Cohen, *Child Survivors of the Holocaust in Israel: Finding Their Voice: Social Dynamics and Post-War Experiences* (Sussex Academic Press, 2005), 212–13.
  83. Interview with Palomba Benveniste, 42950, VHA, Tape 6, min. 4:40.
  84. USHMM, RG-45.011, Archives of the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki, I K TH-02703, the survivors register at the Jewish Community of Thessaloniki (August 1945–March 1946).
  85. Palomba Allalouf, "Statement," in Kounio-Amariglio and Nar, *Prophorikes martyries*, 33–43.
  86. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 6.
  87. Antonia Kivelou in the movie *Ta koritsia tis vrochis* [The Girls of the Rain], 2012, dir. Alida Dimitriou, 1:31:41.
  88. Bergen, "Buried Words," 501–20.

89. Shik, "Description," 489.
90. Interview with Yitzchak Kerem conducted online by K. Králová (2023), min. 4:10.
91. Interview with Yitzchak Kerem, min. 4:10.
92. Interview with Yitzchak Kerem, min. 4:50–5:05.
93. Nalbadidacis, *In den Verliesen der Diktatur*, 97–101; Almuth Leh, "Forschungsethische Probleme in der Zeitzeugenforschung," *BIOS. Zeitschrift für Biographieforschung und Oral History* 13, no. 1 (2000): 66–67. For an in-depth reflection about this complex relation between interviewers and interviewees, see Carli Snyder's chapter in this volume.
94. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz conducted online by K. Králová (2023), min. 8:00.
95. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 8:00.
96. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 8:55. Among others, Henry Greenspan in particular points out the intertwined relation between interviewers and interviewees as well as the aspect of selected listening. Henry Greenspan, "The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable," *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 229–43; and Henry Greenspan, "The Humanities of Contingency: Interviewing and Teaching Beyond 'Testimony' with Holocaust Survivors," *Oral History Review* 46, no. 2 (2019): 360–79. In addition, Pollin-Galay emphasizes how the broader context, as for example the language, affects the interview situation and introduced for that the phrase "ecologies of witnessing." Hannah Pollin-Galay, *Ecologies of Witnessing: Language, Place, and Holocaust Testimony* (Yale University Press, 2018), 14–18.
97. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 1:13:26–1:13:32.
98. Email correspondence with Bea Lewkowicz, February 7, 2024.
99. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 1:13:32–1:13:40.
100. Email correspondence with Bea Lewkowicz, February 7, 2024.
101. Lewkowicz, *Jewish Community*, 162. Words in italics highlighted by the authors to draw attention to discursive euphemisms related to sexualized violence. Afi is the abbreviation for Stella A., one of the interviewees of Lewkowicz.
102. Email correspondence from February 7, 2024.
103. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 20:30–23:20.
104. Interview with Solita Saltiel conducted online by K. Králová (2023), min. 7:50.
105. Interview with Solita Saltiel, min. 1:30.
106. Interview with Solita Saltiel, min. 1:40.
107. Interview with Solita Saltiel, min. 10:00, min. 19:00.
108. Saltiel uses the term "παρό αι περιστάτικά." Interview with Solita Saltiel, min. 14:50.
109. Interview with Bea Lewkowicz, min. 21:30. Saltiel uses in Greek nearly the same terminology, "αυτά τα θέ ατα" (those topics). Interview with Solita Saltiel, min. 1:20.
110. In feminist scholarship, the debate over the terms "victim" and "survivor" goes back to the 1970s; see Jennifer L. Dunn, *Judging Victims: Why We Stigmatize Survivors, and How They Reclaim Respect* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009).

111. Andrea Pető, "Silencing and Unsilencing Sexual Violence in Hungary," in *Continued Violence and Troublesome Pasts: Post-War Europe Between the Victors After the Second World War*, ed. Ville Kivimäki and Petri Karonen (Finnish Literature Society, 2017), 141.

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# TESTIMONY TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE AFTER LIBERATION IN THE HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS OF SARA/HANNAH RIGLER AND PRIMO LEVI

VIOLETA DAVOLIŪTĖ

## INTRODUCTION

**N**ARRATIVES OF WARS HAVE TRADITIONALLY GLOSSED OVER THE PREVALENCE of sexual violence. Even social and cultural histories of war tend to overlook the social and personal dimensions of experience where gender plays a key role. And although studies of sexual violence during World War II have proliferated in recent years, victims of and eyewitnesses to rape are still reluctant to revisit and possibly amplify the trauma by recalling events that many consider it best to forget. For example, when Fanya Heller included in her Holocaust memoirs an account of how German soldiers broke into Jewish homes to rape teenage girls, forcing their parents to watch, she received letters and calls of disgust from other survivors and disapproval from scholars a half century after the events.<sup>1</sup>

The silence that may surround sexual violence is not the result of amnesia. As explained by the Hungarian gender scholar Andrea Pető, rape is something that “everybody” knows about within the community, but it is not communicated beyond the boundaries of that community. Instead, a secret is born and grows, protected by a

conspiracy of silence that serves the perceived interest of all parties, including the victim, the perpetrator, the witness/bystander, and the authorities responsible for preventing and reporting crime. This “social silence” becomes a historical fact, which requires focused study to reveal “who generated this silence on the different levels of narrative in different historical periods, and why.”<sup>2</sup>

In recent decades, activists and scholars have done much to deconstruct the silence surrounding gender and sexual violence during war. But as the efforts of these activists and scholars show, the unsilencing of testimony to sexual violence, and gendered experience more generally, is a contested and political process that brings one vector of memory into tension with established narratives and memory regimes. In an exchange of opinions leading to the first major conference on women and the Holocaust in 1983, writer Cynthia Ozick said it was “morally wrong” to focus on the distinct experience of women because “the Holocaust happened to victims who were not seen as men, women or children, but as Jews.” For his part, the literary scholar Laurence Langer described the Holocaust as a “violated world beyond gender” and worried that feminist approaches would bring the suffering of different categories of people into a “cruel competition.”<sup>3</sup>

The unsilencing of testimony to sexual violence *after* liberation from the camps, after the defeat of Nazi Germany, is entangled with a different set of narratives. For survivors, liberation marked the beginning of a new and difficult journey with limited rations, few resources, and often no home or family to which to return.<sup>4</sup> However, the period after liberation is typically seen to belong outside the scope of the Holocaust narrative and is framed instead by the foundational narratives of the states to which these displaced persons eventually arrived, including the new Jewish state, Israel. This teleology has tended to efface the memory of this period, including the prevalence of sexual violence. As noted by the historian Atina Grossmann, the “fear of rape by Red Army liberators comes up frequently” but only “if one rereads Holocaust memoirs with this issue in mind.”<sup>5</sup>

More recently, historians have begun to study the transition from the collapse of the German occupation to the restoration of a new order, on either side of the Iron Curtain, as a period unto itself, lasting approximately from 1944 to 1947.<sup>6</sup> The US historian Norman Naimark calls it the European Interregnum, marked by fierce civil wars between right and left, irredentist partisans against state security, warring ethnic groups, and rival clans, villages, and families seeking revenge for injustices suffered. He highlights the epidemic of violence against Jews and women as a particular feature of this wild period.<sup>7</sup> Naimark notes that it was not only German, Austrian, and Hungarian, but also Polish, Romanian, and Yugoslav women who were victims of the “widespread incidence of rape, gang rape, and rape murder by Soviet soldiers.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, women were subjects of brutal exploitation through various forms of sexual barter: “There was simply

no other way for them to eat or feed their children than to sell their bodies for sex in exchange for cans of food, cigarettes as a form of currency, and black-market goods.”<sup>9</sup>

Soldiers from all Allied armies committed abuses. It is estimated that US soldiers raped 14,000 women in France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, but this pales next to the estimates of up to two million sexual assaults committed by Soviet troops in Germany alone. Some women, like Róza Bodó, testified to both: Her diary recounts how she was raped several times by Soviet troops during her escape from Transylvania to the West, and describes how the US armed forces exploited women by trading food for sex at a displaced persons camp.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, while women in the Western zones of postliberation military occupation were also subject to sexual violence and exploitation, Naimark emphasizes how “the level of violence was much lower [in the Western zones] than in the Soviet case.”<sup>11</sup> According to the military historian Mark Edele, the wave of violence committed by Soviet troops was an inseparable part of the Stalinist culture of violence. Soviet troops raped women in every town they liberated, including towns deep inside the USSR, treating women as trophies of war regardless of nationality, as illustrated in this volume.<sup>12</sup>

The prevalence of such violence is reflected in the term “liberator sexual assault” employed by sociologist Daina Eglitis. She characterizes such violence in the areas liberated by the Soviets as a gendered “memory void,” which serves to “reinforce historical stories that a country or collectivity tells about itself . . . by excluding voices and experiences that fail to comport with hegemonic narratives.”<sup>13</sup> This chapter seeks to illustrate the memory void hypothesis by comparing how the memoirs of two Holocaust survivors represent the encounter with violence, sexual exploitation, and rape during the immediate aftermath of liberation.

The first is by the Lithuanian Jewish survivor Sara/Hannah Rigler (née Matuson, b. 1928) who turned sixteen as an inmate of the Stutthof concentration camp near Danzig.<sup>14</sup> Upon liberation, she sought to return to her hometown of Šiauliai (Shavel in Yiddish), in Lithuania, though her voyage eastward ended prematurely in the Polish city of Białystok.<sup>15</sup> The second is by a famous writer and Holocaust witness, Primo Levi (1919–1987), who turned twenty-six after he was liberated from Auschwitz, and whose voyage home to Turin in Italy would take a peripatetic, eight-month detour eastward through Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine, before turning south toward Romania and then back to the west.<sup>16</sup>

Rigler and Levi were liberated from concentration camps located in Pomerania and Silesia, respectively, regions where the sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers against the local population was extremely widespread. “Because of the numbers of rapes, the situation in Silesia, much like in Pomerania, can be described only as a natural disaster.”<sup>17</sup> In these regions, Soviet soldiers raped women wantonly in their homes, in roadside ditches, in fields and woods, robbing, beating, and often killing

them. Following the winter offensive of January 1945, rape by Soviet troops against the local population, regardless of ethnicity, assumed epidemic proportions.

The comparison of these two memoirs, published four decades apart, may seem ill advised. After all, the first is an obscure text by an unknown author with no other publications. The second is an international best-seller, just one of several highly acclaimed works by an author hailed as “the visionary of the Holocaust, its presiding spirit and the most perceptive of all writers on this subject.”<sup>18</sup> And yet the highly divergent reception of these works, the first written by a Jewish woman from Lithuania, the second by a Jewish man from Italy, is the manifestation of how the production of historical knowledge through a particular genre—the Holocaust survivor memoir—may have contributed to the perpetuation of a gendered memory void on the question of liberator sexual assault in the East.

The memoirs of Holocaust survivors are widely recognized as an influential genre that has shaped the memory of the Second World War and its aftermath.<sup>19</sup> Reading the little-known memoirs of Sara/Hannah Rigler against this celebrated account of Primo Levi provides significant insight into how the aftermath of liberation was a profoundly gendered experience in which the violence of the Red Army as an occupying force played a key role. Levi’s gendered and geopolitical perspective on the immediate aftermath of liberation, as a man who explicitly identifies with the civilized West against a barbaric but benevolent East, exemplifies the postwar narratives that dissimulated the prevalence of sexual violence and the violence of the Red Army in particular. The subsequent emergence since the 1990s of women’s testimonies to the experience of sexual violence during this same period has only begun to revise the narrative of Soviet liberation.

## SARA/HANNAH RIGLER’S TESTIMONY

Sara/Hannah Rigler was born to a well-to-do Lithuanian Jewish family in 1928 as Sara Matuson in Šiauliai (Shavel), Lithuania. Her father, Samuel-Leib Matuson, was a successful businessman and her mother, Gita (Kutasov) Matuson, was educated in St. Petersburg. They intended to emigrate to Palestine after marrying—Rigler’s sister Hannah, older by three years, was born at a house they purchased in Tel Aviv in 1925—but the family ultimately remained in Šiauliai at the behest of their parents.

Educated at a private Hebrew gymnasium, Rigler grew up speaking fluent Yiddish, Hebrew, Russian, German, and Lithuanian in the industrial town of Šiauliai, population 30,000. About one third of the population was Jewish: “We lived in a Jewish world,” she asserts.<sup>20</sup> Her childhood friends were Jewish, and the only ethnic Lithuanians she recalls were the superintendent of the apartment and the household staff. The rest were neighbors. She asserts not having experienced antisemitism personally,

mentioning only the strong antisemitism of the Cossacks that her father encountered in Russia before the October Revolution.<sup>21</sup> She describes her childhood as happy and comfortable: "We lived in a very nice apartment house; we had a beautiful garden outside. . . . We went ice skating and figure skating, I had piano lessons, other things. We had many festivals where the entire town participated. It was a very nice life."<sup>22</sup>

When the Soviets occupied Lithuania in June 1940, Rigler's father's enterprises were nationalized, part of the regime's battle with the "bourgeoisie," and the family was ready for deportation.<sup>23</sup> Rigler's father was imprisoned for six months, brutally beaten, and interrogated by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police. She recalls that just after her father's release, just before the Nazi invasion, he rejected an offer to evacuate with his family to the Soviet interior. "My father said, using this specific expression in Yiddish, 'one does not jump from fire right into the water to drown.' We will not go anywhere and will wait for the Germans. At least they are a more civilized lot, not as barbarous as the Russians."<sup>24</sup>

This turned out to be a grave mistake. When the Germans invaded in June 1941, Rigler's father was arrested right away along with most of the other Jewish men in the town and killed. At thirteen years of age, Rigler was confined to the Šiauliai ghetto along with her mother and sister. Surviving and witnessing the horrors of several selections, brutal humiliation, and dehumanization, they were deported to the Stutthof concentration camp in 1944, shortly before Soviet forces liberated the area.<sup>25</sup> After unbearable suffering and humiliation Rigler managed to escape from the column of female Stutthof inmates forced to march from the camp, receiving shelter and protection from a group of British prisoners of war.

After liberation, Rigler hoped to rejoin her mother and sister in their hometown of Šiauliai. Her journey home would conclude prematurely in Białystok, a town in what is now eastern Poland, where she learned that her mother and sister died just before liberation. In Białystok, she was taken in by a Jewish relief agency, which smuggled her into the Western zone of partitioned Germany, helping her eventually to emigrate to the United States. To obtain a US visa, Rigler was compelled to enter a sham marriage with a rabbinical scholar. Upon arrival her legal husband was unwilling to grant her a divorce. With great difficulty, she ultimately secured the divorce, completed high school, got a nursing degree, and went on to pursue a successful career as a politician and political activist in Brooklyn.

Rigler's testimony emerged in stages over many years. In 1949, at the age of twenty-one, she published an essay about her survival in the literary journal of her high school, entitled "A Child Again." This two-page text related the destruction of her childhood by war, her miraculous escape from German captivity, and her subsequent efforts to rebuild a normal life, developing the theme of how she had matured beyond her years during the war and now, in America, faced the challenge of growing

into a woman, already much older than her classmates and yet “a child again in comparison to myself.”<sup>26</sup>

The next stage in the public emergence of Rigler’s account took place in the context of her search for the British POWs who helped her to survive. She recalled the name of one of them, Alan Edwards, and sent countless letters to various UK organizations, receiving a positive response from the British War Office in 1963. She entered into correspondence with Edwards and eventually visited the UK, giving interviews to the media, hoping to find more of the POWs who helped her to survive. The media coverage and a televised reunion staged in 1988 generated a narrative focused on the heroic role of the POWs, leading to their collective recognition by Yad Vashem as Righteous among the Nations.

Concerning the sexual violence that marked her postliberation journey to Białystok, Rigler said little in a public way until the late 1980s. From this point onward, she took an active part in the movement to collect and disseminate the testimonies of Holocaust survivors, starting with an interview she provided to Yaffa Eliach’s Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation and Research in Brooklyn. Published in *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, Rigler’s was one of a handful of accounts of sexual violence against Jewish women after liberation to emerge through survivor interviews.<sup>27</sup> Rigler would provide additional audiovisual interviews in 1992 and 2010.<sup>28</sup>

Rigler’s decision to provide a full account of her experience emerged from what she describes as a period of intense social and political engagement. Although she was forced to resign as a New York assemblywoman to enable her husband’s appointment to the state Supreme Court, she was an active participant in Jewish causes like the Soviet Jewry movement and the development of Holocaust commemoration, serving as a board member of the Brooklyn Center as well as the Museum of Jewish Heritage—A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, which was chartered in 1984 and built from 1994 to 1997.

In 2006, Rigler published her testimony as a book, entitled *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*. Notably, Rigler includes her correspondence with Alan Edwards and another British POW, Willy Fisher, who was interned by the Soviets upon liberation, along with a reconstruction of the diary written by the latter. Fisher’s diary includes many pages describing the widespread sexual violence committed by Soviet soldiers against women all along the road he took from Danzig to Odessa.

Rigler affirms that she included his diary into her written memoirs to prove that her recollections of mass sexual violence upon liberation were not imagined. “I saw—I mean, they used to line up women in a barn and just rape them until they were dead. It was animals, absolutely animals. And Willy writes about it, and it’s so difficult for him because he was a communist, and he’s adoring the Russians and he sees all this.”<sup>29</sup> Rigler

also reads passages from Fisher's diary during oral interviews, explaining why she considers it is important to include such corroboration: "I mean, it was really like no man's land. And I thought that just I saw it, but a few things that I want to read out loud, for the record, because I think it is so important. It's not from me; it's from Willy's diary."<sup>30</sup>

Such expressions of anxiety, that testimony to atrocity will be rejected as incredulous, was common in Holocaust memoirs published in the 1950s and 1960s. Langer coined the phrase "anguished memory" to describe the fear of survivors that their story could not properly be told, and any attempt to do so would only drive their listeners away.<sup>31</sup> In the 1990s, the basic facts of the Holocaust were so well known that there was no question of anybody doubting the horrors of the camps. But in her interviews, Rigler expresses the view that her account of the period after liberation was in tension with the received narratives of the period. By including extended selections from Fisher's diary, she turned her memoirs into a hybrid text, introducing an element of shared authorship and authority.

There is a consistency in how Rigler presents her experience in each of her interviews and in the book, suggesting that she has written and rewritten, spoken and repeated her story countless times, often using the exact same turns of phrase, varying only in the amount of detail provided. The structure of these oral and written accounts is identical, dividing her life story into four parts: family life in Šiauliai before the Soviet and Nazi invasions, her imprisonment in the Šiauliai ghetto and the Stutthof concentration camp, her attempted return to Lithuania, and then her voyage to the United States and life as an American.

Until she narrates her experience of return, Rigler relates incidents of sexual violence only in passing, as information gleaned secondhand, as with the rape of her sister by a drunken German guard in the ghetto, a period that she otherwise claims to have blocked from memory out of a sense of self-preservation. In the subsequent account of the aftermath of Soviet liberation, sexual violence comes to the foreground as a pervasive aspect of Rigler's trials and tribulations. From the moment when the Soviet army took control of the town near Danzig where she was in hiding, until her arrival after two months of hellish travel in Białystok, where she was taken in by a Jewish relief agency, Rigler's testimony is preoccupied with describing the acts of sexual violence she witnesses all around her and her own struggles to escape multiple assaults and outwit the abusers. As discussed below, her text recounts how women of all nationalities were treated indiscriminately by Soviet soldiers as trophies of war.

Rigler's first encounter with Soviet troops occurred in the town of Gross Golem-kau (Gołębiewo Wielkie), close to Danzig (Gdańsk). She found work in the household of a Nazi supporter, who discovered that she was a Jewish escapee but gave her protection in exchange for a letter testifying to his good deed, written in Yiddish. After hiding in the cellar with some Polish workers while the Germans and Soviets clashed for



control of the town, she was brought face to face, completely unexpectedly, with Soviet antisemitism. As a Jew and fluent speaker of Russian, she fully expected to be welcomed as one of “us.” Entering the headquarters established in the town by the Red Army, she approached the commander, presenting herself as a Jewish girl who escaped from a concentration camp, looking for fellow Jews among the Soviet forces in town. The commander responded with the antisemitic cliché, “The Jews are all behind the front. They don’t fight!” He then took her to a storage room and tried to rape her. He relented, perhaps out of remorse, she writes, in view of her age, and issued her with papers that declared her to be his wife, requesting safe passage to his home in the Soviet interior.<sup>32</sup>

Shocked in equal measure by the antisemitism, sexual aggression, and naivete of the officer, she proceeded to the next town on the road toward the rear, where she was promptly arrested and accused of being a German spy. After several days of interrogation, she was released and given a place to sleep in a venue where she once again was harassed, escaped, and was forced to spend the night in the outhouse for safety. The next day, she was warned that the men at the train station acted like “animals,” and once again she had to escape the next Soviet official who insisted he wanted to “marry her.” “I had endured the war against the Jews by the Germans, the Lithuanians, the Poles and now the Russians—so much for liberation,” she recalls (67).

Along this journey, Rigler repeatedly witnesses horrendous brutality against civilian women—a motif that she makes a central focus of the story of her liberation and journey “home.” “It was a free-for-all,” she recalls. “Men lined up in front of a barn, where they raped a girl until she died. . . . And this occurred over and over again.”<sup>33</sup> In another “bombed out and deserted town full of yowling cats,” she recounts how two seventy-year-old women, sisters, were raped repeatedly by Soviet troops passing through.

In her memoirs, Rigler corroborates these observations with citations from Willy Fisher’s diary: “We spoke with Polish people. All women had been raped. All watches and rings found stolen. All radios destroyed. Hens, horses, pigs had been taken.”<sup>34</sup> “At one point a body of a girl (I believe German) laying on her back with her trousers pulled down just exposing the V junction of her legs and a part of the belly. We covered the exposed portion with a pillow and went on.”<sup>35</sup> “Women from 15 to 65 being raped nightly, all valuables removed, all pigs and cows and horses. . . . One woman, 3 months with child, raped 38 times in the first day. At night more Russians arrived and as the mother protested, she was shot through the head, unfortunately not killing her. A father had shot his 15-year-old daughter who had been tied to a wagon wheel and raped innumerable times.”<sup>36</sup>

Rigler emphasizes how her survival was possible not only because of good luck but also through the comradeship she established with several other women who ended up in the same horrendous situation. “We decided to stick together,” she says of herself

and Sonia, a Lithuanian Jew from Kaunas, and Anna, a Catholic Pole. All along the way, the three women were repeatedly harassed and assaulted by Soviet soldiers for sex. At one point, Sonia offered to sacrifice her own body to save her teenage friend: "Look, Sara, whatever happens, I was married before the war." The Polish woman, Anna, made the same sacrifice, bartering sex for food and sharing it with her friends in misfortune.

The officer began to search me for guns and then sat me on his lap and told me if I was not good, I would be sent to Siberia. I replied in Russian that Siberia is also Russian soil. This was an old saying that my mother had taught me. I was so plucky that I pushed him and ran out. The Polish girl, Anna, went in and Sonia and I waited for her for a long time. She came out with some bread and a note that said we could go anywhere we wanted to. We owed her our lives for on that day she had saved us, but she endured a brutal rape, they raped her right on the table of that officer.<sup>37</sup>

In another town, the three women found a place to sleep, but could not get any food, forcing them to resort once again to sexual barter. "So, the Polish girl once again was assaulted by a Russian soldier, and we got some food. We went back to the station and got on the trains again."<sup>38</sup> After yet another assault and abuse, Rigler describes the compassion and mutual support that helped them to survive, silently holding hands as they traveled together, illegally, on the train.

However, Rigler's account also conveys that there were limits to solidarity and that a certain hierarchy remained in the eyes of the Soviet army, with German women being at the very bottom. Rigler's account also reveals the inability, due to fear, of the abused women to display solidarity with German women who fell victim to violence. In one station, Rigler and her companions are approached by soldiers but spared, because some empathetic local men manage to protect them from the soldiers, claiming they were their wives. The soldiers then seized a young German mother, leaving her baby crying on the bench. "They raped her all night and threw her body, hardly alive, out of the station in the morning. The baby was crying all night. We listened to the crying, but nobody dared to pick it up because we were petrified."<sup>39</sup>

## PRIMO LEVI'S REAWAKENING (*LA TREGUA*)

The contrast between these harrowing accounts of sexual violence committed by Soviet troops in the immediate aftermath of liberation and Primo Levi's account of his experience of return could hardly be starker. "No book will ever make you love the Red Army as much as this one," according to a 2015 review of *La Tregua*. "It wasn't merely that the Russians had extracted Levi from the black hole of Auschwitz—their heedless

warmth and jovial indifference to bureaucratic niceties made them anti-Germans of a kind (even as, unbeknownst to Levi, they engaged in an orgy of serial rape on their way to Berlin).<sup>40</sup> In explaining Levi's unusually positive portrayal of the Red Army, the reviewer asserts that he could not have been aware of the mass rapes committed by the Soviet troops, assuming that such rapes took place only in Germany.

In fact, the reviewer is mistaken to believe that the orgy of rape "on the way to Berlin" did not include the area from which Levi was liberated and through which he traveled, and it seems unlikely that Levi was ignorant of these events. The first of several representations of sexual relations between Soviet soldiers and local women occurs in chapter 6 of *The Reawakening*, which relates Levi's experience in the camp of Bogucice, about 35 km north of Auschwitz, located in a suburb of Katowice in Upper Silesia in the spring of 1945 and specifically the days leading to the celebration of victory on May 8. However, the way these events are related is highly mediated to the point of being muted, if not entirely silenced. The question is not one of omission, but of style and presentation.

Described elsewhere as "prudish" about sex and demonstrating a "traditional and normative" attitude toward gender roles,<sup>41</sup> Levi's narration of sexuality and sexual violence in *The Awakening* is also obscured by a romanticized masculinity and an exoticized, orientalist gaze toward Russia and Eastern Europe. Levi makes no reference to violence, disorder, or looting, never mind sexual violence. Instead, he describes the exultation of the soldiers over several days of drunken revelry in epic, primitivist terms: "The entire Red Army let themselves go in a paroxysm of delirious excitement. The Soviet Union is a gigantic country, and holds in its heart gigantic tumults, among them a Homeric capacity for joy and abandon, a primitive vitality, a pure pagan talent for demonstrations, rites, choral revelry."<sup>42</sup>

Later in the chapter, sexual relations between Soviet soldiers and local women are framed by the story of the evidently romantic relationship between Levi's Italian friend Cesare and a Polish woman he calls his *panienca* [Polish: *panienka*], which Levi explains is an exact equivalent of *signorina*, a term that became popular in Italy to describe "Allied soldiers' girlfriends, near prostitutes."<sup>43</sup> Driven by his "longing for home and affection" and enabled by the fact that "men were scarce in Poland," Cesare enjoyed a week-long liaison. The affair lasts until Victory Day when, on the way to meet his Polish girlfriend, Cesare sees the coat of a Soviet soldier hanging outside the room of this young woman.

The account does not give any insight into the relations between the Soviet soldier and the Polish woman, but rather entertains the reader with a comedic account of how Cesare stole the soldier's bottle of vodka as a "sentimental reminder" of his lost love, evading capture by the inebriated soldier throughout the night. The story of Cesare's loss of his *panienca* reflects a patriarchal affirmation of the natural hierarchy among men

vis-à-vis their access to women, glossing over the historically documented violence toward local women on the part of armed and inebriated Soviet soldiers.

The historical reality of violence in the aftermath of liberation is further dissimulated in the story of Levi's own encounter with a Soviet soldier who, frustrated with his inability to speak Russian, pulls out a bayonet. This violent gesture was a joke, it turns out, but Levi was alarmed and afraid nonetheless.<sup>44</sup> In the next episode, a Soviet soldier told a story of how he ambushed a group of sleeping Germans, reenacting a frenzied scene of stabbing them all to death. "He looks at the ground, as if amazed not to see the corpses and blood there; he looks around bewildered, emptied; he becomes aware of us, and gives us a childish timid smile."<sup>45</sup>

Such whimsical representations of forced sexual relations continued as the group of Italian DPs pass into western Ukraine and were stationed at a semi-destroyed barracks. There Levi met a man by the name of Mordu Nahum, a Greek whom he knew at Auschwitz. Naum was now "almost unrecognizable in his opulent fatness and the quasi-Soviet uniform he was wearing," a sure sign of upward social mobility. Nahum offered Levi food, clothing, anything he wanted, even "a woman." Levi, not sure what he meant, then notices "twenty huge sleeping girls" in the tall grass.<sup>46</sup>

Levi's representation of these women is quite literally bestial, as if they were a herd of cattle grazing in the grass: "They were blonde and rosy creatures, with powerful backs, massive frames and placid bovine faces, dressed in various primitive and incongruous styles." Having indulged the reader with this whimsical imagery, the narrator then cites Nahum, humorously described as "my Greek master," who comments on the lack of allure of these Bessarabian women to him, however much they may appeal to the noble savage of the East: "The Russians like them like this, white and substantial."<sup>47</sup> Levi declines an offer to take his pleasure and parts cordially with the Greek.

While Levi often uses animalistic imagery to convey empathy for human suffering,<sup>48</sup> in this case the bovine imagery used to describe these women seems rather destined to achieve a comedic and orientaling effect. Levi's portrayal of the Ukrainian women taken to Germany as slave laborers, shipped back to the USSR in cattle cars, is more ambiguous in this regard: "If their young bodies were still solid and healthy, their closed and bitter faces, their evasive eyes displayed a disturbing, animal-like humiliation, and resignation. . . . Their inertia, their fugitive shyness, their painful lack of pudency, was that of humiliated and tame beasts."<sup>49</sup>

Another exoticized portrayal of women subjected to forced sexual relations occurred in the woods near the Red Camp near Starye Dorohi, a camp in Belarus where the Italians stay for a few months. In this case these are two German females who were unable to retreat and hid in the woods because they were "afraid of the Russians." With no way to escape or other means of survival, these women were forced to prostitute

themselves, first to a small community of Allied soldiers, and then the larger community of Italians.

The presence of these women “in the woods” is presented as “exotic,” “fairy-tale like,” and the women themselves are described as “half savage.” Moreover, the Italian men who enjoyed these female bodies in exchange for food are described as having felt “ennobled” for having helped them in their desperation:

In our colony, women were few, not more than two hundred, and almost all had soon reached a stable arrangement: they were no longer available. So, to go to “the girls in the wood” had become a habit for an indefinite number of Italians, and the only alternative to celibacy. An alternative which was rich with a complex fascination; because the matter was secret and vaguely dangerous (much more for the women than for them); because the girls were foreigners and had grown half savage; because they were in need, and so gave one the ennobling feeling of “protecting” them; and because of the exotic, fairy-tale scenery of the meetings.<sup>50</sup>

The “innocent” violence of Soviet soldiers is further developed in the last scene of the chapter, relating the frenzy of a group of soldiers who crowded into a town cinema to watch an American film, drawn by the poster that included a “magnificent” and “scantily clad” Polynesian girl. At the climax of the film, the soldiers tore down the inside of the theatre to construct makeshift ladders that would enable them to climb up to reach the dormitories of single Italian women living on the second floor of the building.

This scene of an attempted mass rape is described as the innocent, primordial violence of noble savages, blending in with the extravagant narrative of the film. As with other scenes of sexual relations, Levi here frames the question in the patriarchal category of male honor. This enables him to relate this scene in a comical manner, given its happy outcome, giving this story a light-hearted, happy end in the male valor of the Italian DPs, who successfully prevent the Soviets from raping their women.

## CONCLUSION

As historians continue to revise and rewrite the historiography of the transition from the German to the Soviet occupation, the eyewitness testimonies of contemporaries shed an essential light on a poorly understood reality. In this process, the role of gender and sexual violence against women in the immediate aftermath of liberation from the camps figures prominently.

For decades, the rape of some two million German women by Soviet soldiers during and after liberation could be known only from a handful of memoirs and testimonies,

like *Eine Frau in Berlin*, published anonymously in 1959. And although Berliners would surreptitiously refer to the statue of the Soviet soldier in Treptauer park as the “monument to the unknown rapist,” it was not until Soviet troops departed from Germany that the mass sexual violence perpetrated by these troops could be openly addressed, as in the controversial 1992 film by Helke Sander and Barbara Johr entitled *BeFreier und Befreite* (*Liberators Take Liberties*), a documentary based on interviews with women survivors in Germany and male perpetrators in Russia.<sup>51</sup>

But if historiography has started along the complex and thorny path of incorporating the experience of sexual violence against Jewish women under German occupation, and of German women under Soviet occupation, the violation of Jewish and other non-German women during the first years of the Soviet occupation remains a story that has been told in memoirs like those of Rigler but has yet to be heard. The archipelago of memory governing the “wolf years” was formed not only along the lines of ethnicity and politics, but also gender.

Primo Levi’s celebrated account of the concentration camp, *Se questo è un uomo*, was written upon his return home after the war. The period after liberation, described in *La tregua*, was written fifteen years later.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the composition of the first volume originated in the “immediate and violent impulse” to bear witness to atrocity, Levi says the second volume was intended to amuse his readers. Thus, in the account of his peripatetic journey through Eastern Europe, Levi emphasises the “strange, exotic, cheerful episodes,” an approach in keeping with the ethos of the Thaw.<sup>53</sup>

Rereading Levi’s travelogue today, after the revelations of sexual violence in the memoirs of Rigler and other women who fell victim to the predations of the Red Army, provides an example of how codes of male honor have framed narratives of sexual violence, including in the memoirs of Holocaust survivors, which constitute a significant genre through which the memory of the Second World War has been shaped over past generations. Throughout *La tregua*, instances of forced sexual relations are effectively silenced, or at least muted, through a narrative lens accentuating the masculine honor of the Italian male or the noble savagery of the Russian/Soviet man.

By way of contrast, Rigler’s account reveals the prevalence of liberator sexual assault and how it affected women of all nationalities, in all areas liberated by the Red Army, not only in Germany, but including Poland and even parts of Soviet Russia itself. Her testimony also illustrates solidarity and mutual support among women under this duress, as well as the limits of such support, for example toward the young German mother assaulted in the train station.

By including extended citations of Willy Fisher’s diary, Rigler not only illustrates that some men displayed concern about liberator sexual assault but also the anxiety that her story may seem incredulous and not trustworthy without the corroboration of his account, owing to its divergence from established narratives about liberation.

In this manner, Rigler's memoirs reveal a gendered aspect of the experience of survival during the aftermath of liberation that is obscured in Levi's narrative of return. In each account, the overcoming of challenges and restoration of the survivor's agency takes place against a background of pervasive sexual violence. While Rigler narrates her experience in the epic mode, Levi narrates his in the comedic. If Levi's text may have contributed to the formation of a memory void on the question of liberator sexual assault in the East, the broader dissemination of Rigler's memoir and audiovisual interviews may contribute to its unsilencing.

## NOTES

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- (2016); Artem Latyshev, "Almost Soviet: Integration of the Liberated Territories of the USSR, 1942–1944," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 68, no. 3/4 (2020).
13. Daina S. Eglitis, "Silences of Memory: Liberator Sexual Assault in the East at the End of World War II," *Journal of Holocaust Research* (2024).
14. Rigler assumed the first name of her sister, Hannah, to honor her memory after immigrating to the United States. She took the family name Rigler from her second, American, husband. For disambiguation, she will be referred to by her present name — Rigler — throughout this chapter.
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20. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 24.
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23. On June 14, 1941, the Soviets deported 17,500 people from Lithuania to the Soviet interior, including Lithuanian Jews. Violeta Davoliūtė, "The Entanglement of Historical Experiences: The Memory of the Soviet Deportation of Lithuanian Jews," *Ethnologie française* 48, no. 2 (2018).
24. Hannah Rigler, "Interview with Hannah R.," interview by Naomi Rappaport, no. mssa. hvt.1883, August 3, 1992.
25. For more on the Šiauliai ghetto, see Aharon Pick, *Notes from the Valley of Slaughter: A Memoir from the Ghetto of Šiauliai, Lithuania* (Indiana University Press, 2023).
26. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 88.
27. Brana Gurewitsch, ed., *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (University of Alabama Press, 1998).
28. On August 3, 1992, she was interviewed by Naomi Rappaport for the Museum of Jewish Heritage, Yale University.
29. Rigler, interview.
30. Rigler, interview.
31. Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (Yale University Press, 1991), 61.
32. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 66.
33. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 69.



34. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 151.
35. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 152.
36. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 155.
37. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 69.
38. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 70.
39. Rigler, *10 British Prisoners-of-War Saved My Life*, 72.
40. James Marcus, "Free but Not Redeemed: Primo Levi and the Enigma of Survival," *Harpers Magazine*, 2015, 151, <https://harpers.org/archive/2015/12/free-but-not-redeemed>.
41. Charlotte Ross, *Primo Levi's Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (Routledge, 2011), 58.
42. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 74.
43. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 72. Just as *panienca* is a distortion of the Polish word *panienka*, or young lady, *segnorina* is a deliberate distortion of the Italian *signorina*, young lady, made by Italians mocking the way in which the Allied soldiers pronounced the word. I am grateful to Giorgio Ruggeri for clarifying this point.
44. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 143.
45. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 145.
46. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 110.
47. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 111.
48. Damiano Benvegnù, "Suffering I: Shared Vulnerability," in *Animals and Animality in Primo Levi's Work*, ed. Damiano Benvegnù (Springer International Publishing, 2018). I am grateful to the historians Andrea Griffante and Giorgio Ruggeri for alerting me to the complexity of Levi's use of animalistic imagery.
49. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 107.
50. Levi, *The Reawakening (La Tregua)*, 133.
51. Norman Naimark, "Rape in Wartime: Genders and Sexualities in History," in *Rape in Wartime: Genders and Sexualities in History*, ed. Raphaëlle Branche and Fabrice Virgili (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
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# CONCLUSION

ANNA CICHÓPEK-GAJRAJ AND JOANNA BEATA MICHLIC

IN HER PREFACE TO JUDITH TYDOR BAUMEL-SCHWARTZ AND DALIA OFER'S *Her Story, My Story? Writing About Women and the Holocaust*, Marion Kaplan passionately argues that giving voice to women's history and to women historians, and thus highlighting women's perspectives, remains a crucial and ongoing task, especially in the field of Holocaust studies.<sup>1</sup> Innovative developments in gender studies as well as the continuing prominence of sexualized violence in post-1945 instances of war-zone conflicts have further framed, expanded, and legitimized today's research on women, children, families, LGBTQ+, disabled people, and other marginalized groups. Building on the decades of pioneering historiography scattered in various journals and edited works, we present readers with the first edited volume dedicated to the history and memory of sexualized violence against (mainly) female Jewish fugitives/survivors during the liberation of German-occupied Eastern Europe in 1943–1946. Although we focus on the impact of the crimes committed by the rank and file of the Red Army, including its personnel in filtration camps (SMERSH), we also devote significant portions of the volume to the sexualized violence committed by non-Soviet rescuers and partisans. We explore survivors' memory(ies) and recollections of the sexualized violence that they experienced, feared, witnessed, avoided, and, ultimately, survived and remembered.

Our book is the fruit of a collaborative process between senior and younger colleagues who were all mindful — most explicitly so — about their decisions concerning the methodology used to tackle this difficult and sensitive topic. One of the basic questions we all had to face was how to name violence under study. Given the rich variety of definitions in existing scholarship, discussed throughout this volume, we allowed our contributors the freedom to choose the conceptual frameworks that best suited their arguments. We do appreciate, however, Brigitte Halbmayer's conceptualization of "sexualized violence," which well encapsulates the phenomenon examined in this volume. In her chapter on "Sexualized Violence Against Women During Nazi 'Racial' Persecution," Halbmayer writes: "The issue is not about the sexuality of the perpetrators, but

rather that violence is committed via sexuality. The term sexualized violence makes it clear that male violence against females is not about sexuality but is a show of power on the part of the perpetrator and includes many forms of violence with sexual connotations, including humiliation, intimidation, and destruction.”<sup>2</sup> We should add that the same applies to sexualized violence against males or LGBTQ+ individuals, and the violence committed by women-perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> This caveat notwithstanding, our volume leaves no doubt about the validity of Halbmayr’s thesis. The violence examined here was, at its core, not about sexuality but about power, revenge, entitlement, masculinity, intimidation, and sheer brutality in the wake of the war.

Although the Soviet “liberation” is a fraught term considering its tragic multilayered consequences for Eastern Europe, it nonetheless did bring an end to the Nazi occupation and its genocidal practice for thousands of Holocaust survivors. As mentioned in the Introduction, we understood liberation not as a moment in time, but as a prolonged process that stretched from 1943 to 1946. Spatially, to use Monika J. Flaschka’s words in her chapter, liberation was “not just the entry of Soviet soldiers into concentration or extermination camps, but any space where the threat of the arrival or actual arrival of Soviet soldiers resulted in a shift out from under German control.” Victims of the Nazi regime waited for “that shift”; longed for it. Our volume, however, shows that the sexualized violence, whether in the form of sexual assaults or rapes committed by the Soviet Army and others, shattered or “ruined”—to use Flaschka’s term—liberation for the survivors who feared, witnessed, or experienced it.<sup>4</sup> As Carli Snyder poses in her chapter, “for hundreds of survivors, the very meaning of liberation was closely associated with rape, which undermined the idea that liberation was a ‘happy ending.’” Flaschka further argues that rape had enormous social power to change survivors’ perceptions not only of the liberation but of the entire period under Nazi occupation (“worse than the Germans”). Hence, the liberators’ sexualized violence profoundly shaped how survivors—especially women—remembered and narrated not only the liberation, but also earlier experiences, in contrast to many male accounts, which rarely acknowledged such violence or even condoned it as Stefan Cristian Ionescu concludes in his chapter.

The liberation was indeed shattered across the devastated landscape of Eastern Europe where Jews remained particularly vulnerable. This included wartime and postwar Belarus, Czechia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, the Soviet Union, and, to some extent, Greece—the national contexts highlighted in this volume. While much has been written about the physical and institutional destruction of the region, this book underscores how this postwar devastation enabled the continued violence, including sexualized violence, against Holocaust survivors. While there were certainly local and national variations, it is no exaggeration to describe the immediate aftermath of the war in these countries as a time of lawlessness, chaos, and displacement; political

terror and rampant banditry; poverty, hunger, and disease; and pervasive political, social, and ethnic violence. Years of terror, brutalization, and life under regimes that enacted murder in the name of law devalued human life, marking everyone's bodies as expendable—most of all, those of the regimes' targeted victims. The disintegration and slow reconstruction of state structures, including law and order, created a power vacuum where all forms of crime thrived, and criminals—including the liberator-soldiers and partisans—were shielded from accountability.

The widespread availability of weapons, alcohol, and the long, dark winter months became critical enablers of sexualized violence—not only in newly liberated German camps and Soviet filtration camps, as described in vivid detail in Daina Eglitis's chapter, but throughout the region. Weapons were easily accessible to Soviet and other soldiers, partisans, and ordinary civilians. Similarly, alcohol was consumed in excess across the region, further facilitating the violence. In his work on the Soviet Army in Yugoslavia, historian Vojin Majstorović convincingly shows that “it is very difficult to say whether the heavy drinking fueled or caused the atrocities, but there is no doubt that [the] vast majority of rapes and murders were perpetrated by heavily inebriated soldiers.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, as Kateřina Králová and Janis Nalbadidacis so clearly articulate in their chapter, “time did matter and as the rapes clearly happened, the night, its darkness, and its tendency to pave the way for excesses is pictured in the accounts.”

This book focuses on liberation sexualized crimes against Holocaust survivors committed mainly by the Red Army. Polish historian Marcin Zaremba points out that the Soviet soldiers quickly turned into objects of “aversion, horror, and, sometimes, hatred” after the initial period of gratitude in postwar Poland. Similarly in Slovakia, as Nina Paulovicova notes in her chapter, the Soviet Army's presence changed its nature: “Looting and trophy hunting gradually transitioned into a *modus vivendi* to avoid the resistance of locals.” They conducted political repression as well as simple banditry. Zaremba describes them as poorly equipped: “Hungry, cold, often in a state of deep trauma—they saved themselves by attacks on the local population, stealing mainly food, underwear and warm clothing, bedding and vodka [as well as watches and bicycles].”<sup>6</sup> More importantly, as documented in our book, the Soviets began to pose a lethal sexualized threat to Jewish women and girls (and likely boys and men, although undocumented in this volume) who had just survived the horrors of the Holocaust.

Who exactly were the Soviet soldiers who committed gender-based sexualized violence in liberated territories?<sup>7</sup> Scholarship seems unclear on this subject. Králová and Nalbadidacis in their chapter find that “a recurring motif appears to be the distinction between the first [combat] troops, which stayed for about three days and which were followed by occupational [rear guard] troops, which were in charge of rebuilding the area and implementing to a certain degree law and order again. The committed sexualized violence is unequivocally ascribed to the former.” This is contradicted by the

account of Lev Kopelev, a wartime Soviet propaganda officer and interpreter of Russian Jewish origins, who openly criticized Soviet atrocities against a civilian German population in early 1945. Soon after, Kopelev was arrested and sent to a ten-year imprisonment in the Gulag. In his recollections, published in *Der Spiegel* in 1981, Kopelev indicates that most of the rapes were primarily committed by members of rear-guard units and not by combat troops of the Red Army.<sup>8</sup> Based on Kopelev's account, Johannes-Dieter Steinert, in his meticulously researched new study about violence against child laborers, argues:

Although it cannot be ruled out that rapes by members of the combat troops took place (and the former child forced labourers remained silent about it), this result corresponds to a finding by Lev Kopelev that rapes were primarily committed by members of rear-guard units and not combat troops. When sexual or sexualised violence was mentioned in the personal accounts, this referred to the period after the liberation, when the combat troops had already moved on.<sup>9</sup>

Majstorović also suggests that many of the Red Army perpetrators of rapes were stray soldiers or deserters.<sup>10</sup>

The Red Army's commanding officers were also complicit. Often seen by Holocaust survivors as their "civilized" protectors from the rank-and-file rapists, they allowed or even encouraged rapes of German and Axis women. The writings of Kopelev throw light on their reasoning. In his postwar memoir written in exile, he reveals that in early 1945 he was denounced by his colleague-officers for his condemnation of mass sexual assaults and rapes against German women. In the following embellished, if not fictionalized, dialogue, Kopelev conveys that even a Soviet general did not see anything wrong with sexualized violence against Germans:

General Okorokov received me coolly:

"Too kind,—he turned to me again,—that's what's the matter with you. Still, you're a Jew. How can you love the Germans? Don't you know what they've been doing to the Jews?" "What is 'love'? I hate the Fascists not as a Jew—I haven't had much occasion to be reminded of that—but as a Soviet Man, a Kievite, a Muscovite, and, above all, as a Communist. And that means my hate cannot find expression in rape or pillage." "There goes our Hamlet again. Who's raping them? They're begging for it, and you pity them!" "Not them so much as us—our morality, our discipline, our glory!" "All right, enough of that. The Party and the high command will somehow take care of morality and discipline without Major Kopelev's help. Now you listen to me. We won't make an issue of this. If we did, they'd throw you out of the Party. This Hamlet complex of yours comes from lack of partyness. You have a

head on your shoulders, but your Party backbone is weak. To pity the enemy is to betray your own.”<sup>11</sup>

As various contributions in our book indicate, some Soviet and Soviet-Jewish officers like Kopelev stopped—or attempted to stop—individual and groups of soldiers from perpetrating sexualized violence on Jews. Certainly, some survivors, cited in this volume, believed that was the case. However, the officers could not always guarantee the safety for which they were asked by young and adult Jewish females. Male Jewish survivors, often fathers, also begged the Soviet Jewish officers to spare their wives and daughters from rape. In such cases, the Jewish officers in the Red Army, who were aware that they could not prevent all sexual assaults, advised them to just hide behind closed doors or flee the area.

These experiences led Holocaust survivors to perceive the Red Army commanding officers differently than their rank-and-file soldiers. While they perceived Soviet officers, especially the Jewish ones, as their real or imagined protectors, they feared the Soviet rank-and-file from the early moments of the liberation. Almost every contribution of our volume illustrates that survivors often described the Soviet rank-and-file as “eastern,” Asian, or “Mongolian”; and as uncivilized, cruel, savage, and barbaric, as opposed to the Wehrmacht soldiers, typically described as orderly and disciplined. While some survivors may have expected violence by the Soviets, most did not. For example, in Romania, as Ionescu points out in his chapter, “initially, many Jewish survivors did not expect to be victims of the sexual violence perpetrated by their liberators and were shocked by their behavior and started to have doubts about their future under a Soviet-style communist regime.” After all, as one survivor put it, “Russian [!] soldiers represented liberation for us.” It was the same for Hungary, as Andrea Pető reminds us in her chapter, where Holocaust survivors viewed “Soviet soldiers as liberators and bearers of hope, despite the aggressive propaganda disseminated by the Horthy regime, borrowed from Nazi Germany.” As Pető succinctly concludes, “The portrayal of the Soviets is that they [were] benevolent but barbaric. This discourse created a space for others to look down on the victors.”

The Soviet liberation rape of Jews did not make sense to many survivors, and at first glance, it did not necessarily make sense to us, researchers. As Flaschka argues in her chapter:

Jewish survivors were not a national enemy, or even of one nation; there was no message to be communicated to the men, as ostensibly Jews were not the enemy; rape of Jews served no postwar occupational purpose; Jews did not participate in the war in the East, so they were not targets of revenge—in fact, Jews fought in the Red Army; and Jewish survivors had nothing, and thus were not targets of envy and resentment for the harsh conditions faced by Soviets during the war.



However, in her 2024 article “Silences of Memory: Liberator Sexual Assault in the East at the End of World War II,” Daina S. Eglitis, one of our contributors, convincingly shows that in fact Soviet soldiers viewed Jewish survivors as complicit with the Nazis by the virtue of their survival, “fueling a thirst for revenge”:

Evidence suggests that many Soviet troops were suspicious of the survivors they liberated. A powerful assumption was that death was the expected outcome for those who fell into the hands of the German occupier: thus, survivors were suspect because of their survival. An account of Jewish prisoners at the Stutthof camp outside of Danzig (Gdansk), notes that, “Soviet soldiers” attitude towards Jewish female prisoners was mistrustful, if not openly hostile, with violent incidents occurring quite often. [...] For some women, the suspicion of complicity took the form of sexual violence or its threat.<sup>12</sup>

Antisemitism also played a role in some instances of sexualized violence against female Jewish survivors, as a couple of our contributors illustrate. In her chapter Violeta Davoliūtė discusses a case of a Holocaust survivor, Hannah Rigler, who recalled a Soviet commander using antisemitic clichés of Jewish cowardice before attempting to rape her. So did Monika Vrzgulová in one of her examples of Slovak survivors who concealed their Jewishness in front of the Soviets spouting the same clichés. At the same time, Flaschka argues in her chapter that victims’ Jewishness was not a factor in the liberation rapes in the context of past Soviet/Russian antisemitism: “The Red Army was not targeting Jewish women *because* they were Jews, not like they targeted German women because they were German, or Hungarians because they were Hungarians. Rather, I would argue that being Jewish, being victims of the Nazi regime, was just not enough to protect survivors.” Further research is also needed to explore how the memories or “scripts” of the mass rapes of Jewish women during the pogroms of the Civil War in present-day Ukraine and Belarus after World War I (1917–1921) affected the sexualized violence committed by Soviet soldiers after World War II.<sup>13</sup> At the very least, prewar and wartime antisemitism marked Jews as the most vulnerable victims, whose lives and bodies were unprotected and deemed available for exploitation.

There are also other compelling explanations of why Soviet soldiers committed “liberation rape” against Jewish survivors. Flaschka cites expressions of military masculinity and a basic sense of entitlement, among others. Most importantly, she conceptualizes rape as a language or an effective “means of communication” and thus uses the survivors’ testimonies to tease out the meanings of rape communicated to the survivors and everyone else around them. She shows how Soviet liberation rape of Jewish women, often public and committed in groups, became the means to demonstrate and affirm soldiers’ masculinity, their belonging to the larger “national, gendered, and military community,”

and their entitlement to the war rewards. As one of Vrzgulová's interviewees articulates: "They considered it their right to do whatever they wanted. They were the liberators, they were fighting for us, so they could do whatever they wanted." Majstorović also finds widespread belief among the Soviet Army in their right to do anything they pleased: "Soviet soldiers and officers were generally convinced that as warriors they needed and had a right to sex."<sup>14</sup> They regarded Jews as particularly indebted for their liberation.

Although the focus of this volume has been the violence committed by the Red Army, the perpetrators in these postwar (and wartime) circumstances were varied and included local non-Jewish rescuers, Jewish and non-Jewish partisans, and fellow inmates, among others. Not discussed in this volume were also the agents of postwar pogroms in Eastern Europe (*pogromchiks*). For example, sexualized violence during the pogrom in Kraków in August 1945 is suggested (although not corroborated by other sources) in this witness account where a half-naked young Jewish woman, who just survived the genocide, disappeared for fifteen minutes amid violence:

[Franciszek Bandys, janitor in a Jewish shelter] pulled out from a crowd, or perhaps walked out from the synagogue building, a girl who was almost naked, in torn skirt and blouse, struggling. He kicked her and nudged her, and behind them the crowd of people swooped down on her. The janitor walked the girl; I do not know where. After about fifteen minutes, I saw the girl in a car that arrived and parked in front of the synagogue. The girl was beaten with sticks and hands, and then the car left again with the girl.<sup>15</sup>

Since our volume centers on Holocaust survivors and their experiences, we do not aspire to present a comprehensive picture of all the perpetrators—both Soviet and non-Soviet—of this gruesome violence, and in this respect, we leave our readers with more questions than answers. What was their social and ethnic background? How large was their cohort? Was sexualized violence a typical and regular experience among young and adult Jewish fugitives in hiding during the war and in its aftermath in Eastern Europe? Could that violence be seen as part of other mental and psychological abuses directed at child and adult Holocaust survivors?

What is undoubtedly clear is that the crime of sexualized violence by Soviet soldiers and other perpetrators blurred the lines between protection and endangerment, between rescue and peril, and between security and danger. For many survivors, the abuse and violence inflicted by those whom they expected to aid, shelter, and liberate them, or at least cause them no harm, only intensified their wartime trauma. It aggravated the already excruciating process of recovery and healing in the immediate aftermath of the war; the aftermath that they expected to be the end, not the continuation of their suffering.

And yet, in chapter after chapter, the authors show how Holocaust survivors did not become mere victims of circumstance but rather developed multiple strategies to avoid, endure, and survive the violence. They escaped, sought shelter, secured protection, “adoption,” or “marriage,” negotiated payments, bartered sex, relied on their knowledge or language skills, “stuck together” with other women, lied about their age and health, faked mental illness, altered their physical appearance, and defended themselves with their bodies, or any object/weapon they could find. They thus enacted an agency that William H. Sewell Jr. defines as a culturally and historically determined human capacity “of exerting some degree of control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree.”<sup>16</sup> Agency is a capacity, Sewell continues, “for desiring, for forming intentions, and for acting creatively.” It is always “structurally embedded,” limited, or shaped by what Sewell calls practical resources and mental schemes or “society’s fundamental tools of thought, but also the various conventions, recipes, scenarios, principles of action.”<sup>17</sup> These structural limitations became significantly more consequential in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when the structures of law and order collapsed and those who were supposed to be agents of rescue instead became perpetrators of violence.

Miranda Brethour, in her chapter, calls those critical limits of Jewish agency an “extreme vulnerability” and dependency on those who could provide “a site of protection,” but often dangerously blurred the boundaries between their roles as aid-givers and perpetrators. Although her piece focuses primarily on the wartime period, her concepts are equally applicable to the war’s immediate aftermath. During the Holocaust, the vulnerability of Jewish women was particularly stark, shaped by the constant threat of death and the absence of resources beyond their own bodies. This extreme vulnerability often blurred the line between sexual abuse and sexual barter, as Brethour illustrates with the cases of Erna and Tema. Additionally, the pervasive fear of denunciation and further violence exacerbated women’s wartime exposure to sexualized violence. As the experiences of two female survivors, Lillian and Charlotte, demonstrate, this fear often undermined their agency and hindered efforts to resist, avoid, and survive such violence.

Brethour’s chapter invites a further critical discussion about the concept of sexual barter introduced by Anna Hájková’s pathbreaking work on prostitution during the war. In her chapter Hájková theorizes the concept of sexual barter as the “exchange of sex or affection for resources or protection” employed by camp prisoners and others to further their chances of survival. She convincingly argues that sexual barter must not be equated with rape as bartering partners exercised some “measure of choice,” although “sexual barter during the Holocaust could be, and indeed often was, violent, and thus a form of sexual violence.”<sup>18</sup> In her research, Hájková focuses on adults and has recently recognized that sexual barter cannot be easily applied to teenagers and

children. She invites scholars to explore “whether children’s participation in sexual barter could entail meaningful agency,” while avoiding the question of child abuse as “far more complex.” In their new important research on children’s experiences in Nazi concentration camps, William Ross Jones and Jonathan Lanz heed her call, finding that Hájková’s concept of “measure of choice” indeed cannot be applied to the young victims of sexualized violence.<sup>19</sup> Jones and Lanz convincingly argue that, in the case of child victims of such violence, we should speak of sexual slavery rather than sexual barter. Thus, age indeed must be considered as a critical category in the discussion of agency and sexualized violence against Jewish children and teenagers, otherwise we risk portraying the youngest victims as conscious participants of the violence forced upon them.

Joanna B. Michlic’s research on Jewish child-survivors in hiding with non-Jewish Polish rescuer-abusers supports the validity of Jones’s and Lanz’s position. She shows that these minors did not have a choice but were subjected to mental, psychological, physical, and sexual slavery.<sup>20</sup> However, our contributor Yuliya von Saal, in her piece on partisans in occupied Belarus, points out that wartime caused “the rapid maturation process and role reversal [that] affected all children and adolescents, but especially the Jewish children.” She offers multiple examples of Jewish minors, mostly female teenagers, who enacted some level of agency in defending themselves from sexualized violence by finding “adoptive” parents or other influential protectors. Children could also act as protectors of their mothers, as Vrzgulová shows through Stela’s striking recollections. Certainly, this is only the beginning of a serious scholarly debate about children’s and teenagers’ agency—or lack thereof—during and immediately after the war. Building on Jones, Lanz, Michlic, and von Saal, and previously referenced Steinert’s scholarship, we suggest that, in the case of sexualized violence against Jewish children and teenage survivors, we need to ask new questions: Was it at all possible for the child and teenage survivors to name and understand the violence they were subjected to? How did the perceptions vary between younger children (under ten years old) and older ones? How or in what terms did they perceive or understand what was happening to them? What did the experience of sexualized violence mean in respect to their dependency on others, especially on the rescuer-perpetrators?

Although some of these questions could also be applied to adults, there is no doubt that adult survivors could enact some level of agency, or a measure of choice, in multiple ways documented in the volume. They evaded, resisted, and survived the violence they feared, experienced, and witnessed. Brethour, for example, describes multiple instances of self-defense and decision-making in the face of the threat of sexualized violence. These included leveraging knowledge of the context in which their abusers operated, threatening exposure to spouses, physical defense, screaming, and flight. In his piece, Ionescu also illustrates various avoidance strategies, such as lying about one’s age,

dressing in rags, covering hair, calling for help, avoiding being out after dark, joining larger groups of male inmates, and claiming to suffer from contagious diseases. Eglitis also details how Jewish women in Soviet filtration camps sought “male benefactors” for protection or cross-dressed as boys. Taken together, our volume highlights the incredible resourcefulness, creativity, and resilience of Holocaust survivors in the extreme circumstances of war and its brutal immediate aftermath.

Agency and resilience remained necessary as the postwar years passed, and the memory of the sexualized violence did not become any less painful for survivors; neither was it easier to tell. As Brethour in her chapter notes:

Agency and choice are crucial frames not only to understanding the contents of the experiences that survivors recall, but also their very decision to place their narratives on tape and the ways that they testify. [...] Oral histories capture layers of agency: the choice of survivors to narrate the tabooed histories that they tell, the way that their recollections emphasize decision-making, and their embodied ways of telling.

It is only owing to Holocaust survivors’ courage to share and revisit painful memories of sexualized violence that this book could have been written. Without their accounts, recorded in a mass of interviews, oral testimonies, memoirs, and diaries, it would not have been possible to interrogate that difficult history. The ways in which our contributors used these sources no doubt complicates our understanding of the history and memory of the Soviet liberation of Eastern Europe as well as the rescue of vulnerable young and adult Jewish fugitives during the Holocaust. Only through the mass of ego-documents—some only recently accessible and/or noticed—so richly and extensively explored by the volume’s contributors does the indelible impact of the sexualized violence reverberate. These sources give new details for the reconstruction of the personal trauma of that violence while allowing us to infer broader patterns of its collective experience. Most importantly, they give voices to its victims. When juxtaposed with other sources, they fill important gaps, complicate historical puzzles, and illuminate difficult and taboo pasts.

As the introduction and multiple contributions show, sexualized violence in the Soviet liberation phase (1943–1946)—and in other instances of wars and their aftermaths—has been a subject of taboos and inhibitions among both the survivors and scholars. Even if there were clear references to sexualized violence in personal accounts of Holocaust survivors, they were often not heard or noticed by listeners for a variety of psychological, cultural, social, and political reasons. Our volume uncovers and interrogates the dynamics of the process of inhibiting and silencing the sexualized violence in the history of the Soviet liberation and, to a lesser extent, the history of rescue and partisan resistance during the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. It also illuminates that

sexualized violence is a personal experience most difficult to approach. In the words of Eva Kovács, sexualized violence is

a wound on a person's sexuality guarded by the strongest shame—it is often the case that event witnesses find it difficult to recall what they saw and even victims speak about it as if they were only witnesses to it. Those who manage to survive sexualized violence without visible consequences often strive to undo it even for themselves and conceal their wounds from the eyes of the others. . . . The violence inflicted on the body creates such an unbearable bodily sensation that one cannot and wishes no more to identify with one's own sensation.<sup>21</sup>

Strong taboos around sexual victimizations have accompanied the survivors straight after experiencing sexualized violence. In agreement with Kovács, Marion Kaplan argues that in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, many survivors—both men and women—saw women's sexual victimization as a powerful stigma to be concealed:

The film *Long Is the Road*, shot on location in a Jewish displaced-persons camp in Germany in 1947, offers a powerful example of this. The young woman wants to confide to her male partner about something that happened to her during the war. But the man gently hushes her and tells her that it's better to forget. Viewers understand that he hopes she will stop dwelling on her trauma, assumed to be rape or sexual barter, but also that he does not want to know.<sup>22</sup>

Our volume, however, profoundly complicates the notions of stigma and shame, silencing and forgetting, brought up here by Kovács and Kaplan. Hájková reminds us that shame and stigma change over time and as such need to become a topic of their own historical inquiry. Pető and Paulovicova ponder the imposed disciplining function of shame within patriarchal and illiberal social structures. More importantly, Paulovicova encourages us to look beyond shame and stigma to better understand survivors' responses and recollections—or lack thereof—to sexualized violence. She argues that shame does not necessarily explain survivors' silences in their postwar recollections. Rather, silence functions as a coping mechanism of healing:

We must approach survivors' silence as an indelible component of a right to memory, which includes a right to silence that is unassailable, unable to be questioned or misconstrued under the pressure of patriarchal norms. . . . Acknowledging a right to memory means respecting the ways survivors share their stories—what they recall and what they refuse to recall. In sum, it represents an acknowledgment of the ownership of one's own story in this world.

Králová and Nalbadidacis as well as Vrzgulová offer similar insights on the survivors' choice of silence, but they also contextualize that choice in broader post-war culture.

Beyond all these factors behind the silencing of sexualized violence was the general expectation that Holocaust survivors must begin life anew—from the Year Zero. This was the view prevalent in most of Europe in 1945. Accordingly, all Jewish survivors were expected to overcome the painful, dark experiences of the Holocaust and the immediate aftermath in spite of the physical, mental, and psychological wounds that they exhibited.<sup>23</sup> The psychological needs to create and recreate new families and build new social and professional lives, and the daily demands of everyday life in new countries, new cultures, and new languages also inevitably played a role in survivors' turning away from these most painful aspects of the Soviet liberation.

In the Cold War regimes, both socialist and postsocialist/illiberal, where historical memory of victimhood from Nazi and Soviet regimes, respectively, became central to nation-building projects, there was hardly any political space for the history of the Soviet Army's sexualized violence. Jewish survivors of that violence were silenced or ignored. For example, in socialist Hungary, as Pető puts it, "the dominant antifascist narrative integrated the remembrance of traumatic experiences with the Soviets and the Holocaust, not as separate discussions but as part of the broader antifascist context. Unfortunately, Jewish women's stories found little room for expression within this framework." Similarly, argue Králová and Nalbadidacis, in the nonsocialist framework of Greek politics of memory, the Holocaust survivors' stories of sexualized violence, "by their otherness, do not fit into the prevailing line of Greek national history and ethno-nationalist victimhood. This is why Greek historiography struggles to integrate the experiences of Jewish women that go beyond the usual national framework. For the largely traditional Greek Orthodox society, [victims of rape] can hardly serve as figures of identification."

It was only the cultural, social, and political changes of the 1990s, described in the Introduction, that slowly allowed for uncovering the experiences of sexualized violence by both its survivors and scholars, as a shifting culture permitted an open public discussion on its current and historical cases such as the one presented in our book. It is now a publicly endorsed recognition that shame and stigma should be removed from the survivors of sexualized violence and put squarely onto the perpetrators—in the case of our analysis, the many members of the Red Army, SMERSH personnel, and non-Jewish rescuer-perpetrators in Eastern Europe who were never formally punished for their crimes.<sup>24</sup> Overall, this shifting culture, of which this volume is the most recent representation, allows a definitive statement to emerge: Sexualized violence against Jewish adults and children during and immediately after the war was more common than estimated in any earlier scholarship.<sup>25</sup>



In 2004, Elizabeth Heineman warned that failure to investigate sexual violence by scholars, for a variety of psychological and cultural reasons, represents bad scholarship in an academic sense and: “In a moral sense, it disregards the imperative both to commemorate past victims and to prevent future atrocities.”<sup>26</sup> Despite gendered “memory voids,” illustrated by Violeta Davoliūtė in this volume, sexualized violence has been largely “unsilenced” and has entered the mainstream field of Holocaust studies and other genocides. However, there are still new questions that need to be asked, especially around sexualized violence against Jewish children and Roma and Sinti youth and adults. Our volume did not discuss these communities and individuals, but we are aware that this topic needs to be systematically researched with or without the application of comparative lenses. More cases of the violence against the young and adults, men and women, LGBTQ+, and disabled survivors are awaiting documentation, and some concepts and theories about sexualized violence need to be reexamined and reconceptualized in the light of new evidence. We also need to further and responsibly analyze gendered similarities and differences in sexualized violence across time and national boundaries, without political instrumentalization or inadequate analogies. We hope that our book will contribute to further development of this important scholarship and to the general field of violence in all past and present genocides.

## NOTES

1. Marion Kaplan, “Preface,” in *Her Story, My Story? Writing About Women and the Holocaust*, edited by Judith Tydor Baumel-Schwartz and Dalia Ofer (Peter Lang, 2020), 17–21.
2. Brigitte Halbmayr, “Sexualized Violence Against Women During Nazi ‘Racial’ Persecution,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 29–30.
3. For example, see James Mark, “Remembering Rape: Divided Social Memory and the Red Army in Hungary 1944–1945,” *Past & Present* (2005): 188, 133–61.
4. It also ruined the ideal of socialism/communism for some survivors, as Monika Wrzgulová shows in her chapter.
5. Vojin Majstorović, “The Red Army in Yugoslavia, 1944–1945,” *Slavic Review* 75, no. 2 (2016): 421. <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.75.2.396>.
6. Marcin Zaremba, *Wielka trwoga: Polska 1944–1947: ludowa reakcja na kryzys* (Wydawnictwo Znak, 2012), 154–55.
7. Our volume invites future comparisons on the sexualized crimes committed by Soviet, American, and British armies-liberators. On sexualized violence perpetrated by American soldiers see, for example, Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the*



- American GI in World War II* (University of Chicago Press, 2013); Robert J. Lilly, *Taken by Force: Rape and American GIs in Europe in World War II* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
8. Lev Kopelev, "Die Polen sind ein großartiges Volk' Der ausgebürgerte Sowjet-Schriftsteller Lew Kopelew über Dissidenten, die Sowjet-Union und Polen," *Der Spiegel*, 5 (1981), cited by Johannes-Dieter Steinert, "He Raped Me Again and Again': Jewish Forced Child Laborers as Victims of Sexual and Sexualised Violence," in *I Haven't Even Told My Mother: Children as Victims of Sexual and Sexualised Violence in the Second World War and Its Aftermath*, edited by Helga Amesberger, Helga Embacher, and Johannes-Dieter Steinert (Verlag-Edition Tandem, forthcoming, 2025). Joanna Michlic would like to thank Johannes-Dieter Steinert for sharing with her his new important prepublished study and its findings.
  9. Steinert, "He Raped Me Again and Again," in *I Haven't Even Told My Mother*.
  10. Majstorović, "The Red Army in Yugoslavia, 1944–1945," 418.
  11. Lev Kopelev, *To Be Preserved Forever* (Lippincott, 1977), 65. See also the pioneering studies about the mass sexual violence against German women by the Soviet Army by Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Harvard University Press, 2001); and Jeffrey Burds, "Sexual Violence in Europe in World War II, 1939–1945," *Politics & Society*, no. 37 (2009): 35–74. Also see Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (Penguin, 2003).
  12. Daina S. Eglitis, "Silences of Memory: Liberator Sexual Assault in the East at the End of World War II," *Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, no. 3–4 (2024): 316–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/25785648.2024.2363468>.
  13. See the groundbreaking analysis of mass rapes during the pogroms of 1917–1921 in Irina Astashkevich, *Gendered Violence: Jewish Women in the Pogroms of 1917 to 1921* (Academic Studies Press, 2018).
  14. See Majstorović, "The Red Army in Yugoslavia, 1944–1945," 421.
  15. Note from August 13, 1945, the Jewish Committee in Kraków; witness Sara Stern from Kraków, Miodowa str. 26/4, Institute of National Remembrance, BU 829/1255. Also see Anna Cichopek-Gajraj, "Pogroms in Kraków in 1918 and 1945: Historical Analysis," Special Issue *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* (2022): 1–15. As Joanna Tokarska-Bakir shows in her outstanding recent monograph on the Kraków pogrom, rape was a regularly used weapon in postwar Poland by both the anticommunist underground and the communist militia. Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, *Kocia muzyka: historia chóralna pogromu krakowskiego*, Vols. I–II (Wydawnictwo Czarna Owca, 2024): 477–486.
  16. William H. Sewell Jr., "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 20.
  17. Sewell, "Theory of Structure," 7.
  18. Also see Anna Hájková, "Between Love and Coercion: Queer Desire, Sexual Barter

- and the Holocaust,” *German History* 39, no. 1 (2020): 112.
19. William Ross Jones, “‘You Are Going to Be My Bettmann’: Exploitative Sexual Relationships and the Lives of the *Pipels* in Nazi Concentration Camps,” *Journal of Holocaust Research* 38, nos. 3–4 (2024): 253–72; Jonathan Lanz, “‘I Behaved Like a Careful Virgin’: Male Recollections of Sexuality and Violence in Birkenau,” in *I Haven’t Even Told My Mother*.
  20. Joanna B. Michlic, “The History of Rescue in Poland and Gender Perspective: New Approaches and Questions,” *Tekstualia* 1, no. 1 (2024): 63–96. Also see Michlic’s forthcoming book, *Through the Eyes of Jewish Child Survivors from Poland: Family, War, Identity and Nationhood* (Northwestern University Press, 2026); Joanna B. Michlic, “What Does a Child Remember?: Recollections of the War and the Early Post-War Period Amongst Child Survivors from Poland,” in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, edited by Joanna B. Michlic (Brandeis University Press/University Press of New England, 2017), 153–72.
  21. Eva Kovács, “Parallel Readings: Narratives of Violence,” in *Memory and Genocide on What Remains and the Possibility of Representation*, edited by Fazil Moradi, Ralph Buchenhorst, and Maria Six-Hohenbalken (Routledge Press, 2017), 43.
  22. Marion Kaplan, “Did Gender Matter During the Holocaust?” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society*, no. 2 (2019): 48.
  23. On the subject of the treatment of Jewish child survivors in Western and Eastern Europe in the immediate postwar period, see Joanna B. Michlic, “Missed Lessons from the Holocaust: Avoiding Complexities of Jewish Child Survivors’ Life Experiences,” *Journal of the History of Children and Youth* 17, no. 2 (2024): 272–81.
  24. This was a recent call of a French woman, Gisèle Pelicot, a victim of rapes by her husband and his co-perpetrators: “It is not for us to have shame—it’s for them.”
  25. On the scope of sexualized violence in atrocities against Jews in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, see David Cesarani, *The Final Solution: The Fate of Jews, 1933–1949* (Blackwell, 2016).
  26. Elizabeth Heineman, “Sexuality and Nazism,” in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, edited by Dagmar Herzog (Berghahn Books, 2004), 22–66.

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## ABOUT THE EDITORS

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JOANNA BEATA MICHLIC is a social and cultural historian specializing in the history of the Holocaust and its memory in Europe, East European Jewish childhood, rescue of Jews, and antisemitism and nationalism in Europe. She is an Affiliate Faculty in Gratz College's Holocaust and Genocide Studies, and Antisemitism Studies Departments, Gratz College, and is one of the editors-in-chief of *Genealogy Journal*. She has just completed her tenure as a Visiting Professor of Holocaust and Contemporary History at Lund University. Michlic is an author of eight books and more than 100 articles and is a recipient of many prestigious academic awards and fellowships, including the Gerda Henkel Fellowship, 2017–22, and Yad Vashem Fellowship, Fall 2025. She also serves as a senior Academic Faculty consultant on the Claims Conference Committee. Her forthcoming publication, *Through the Eyes of Jewish Child Survivors from Poland: Family, War, Identity and Nationhood*, will be published in 2025 in German by Dietz-Verlag and in English by University of Nebraska Press in 2026. Her book *Jewish Family 1939–Present: History, Representation, and Memory* (Brandeis University Press/NEUP, January 2017) made it to the Ethical Inquiry list of the best books published in 2017 at Brandeis University.

NINA PAULOVICOVA is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Humanities at Athabasca University in Edmonton, Canada. Her area of expertise is the history and memory of the Holocaust, the fascistization and racialization of wartime Slovakia,

identity and memory politics, and the mobilization of the far right in Eastern Europe. She published a monograph in Slovak whose English translation is *Jewish Community in the History of Hlohovec (1938–1945): The Story Through Darkness*. She co-edited (with Tomasz Stępniewski) *Yearbook Central and Eastern Europe: Geopolitics and Security Issues* (Instytut Europy Środkowej, 2020), and she is also a co-editor (with George Soroka) of a *Special Issue on the Post-Communist Far Right and Its Transnational Linkages* in 2024 *Nationalities Papers*. Paulovicova is a co-founder of the Justice Webinar and Speaker Series (J-Series), which profiles national and international scholars and hosts events that are collaborative and participatory, bringing grassroots movements, nonprofit organizations, and academic institutions together in conversation and toward tangible action.

# ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

MIRANDA BRETTHOUR is Visiting Assistant Professor of History at Pennsylvania State University. She received her PhD (2025) from the City University of New York Graduate Center and MA (2019) from the University of Ottawa. Her dissertation, entitled “‘Faithful German Servants’ or ‘Good Polish Citizens’? Violence, the Village Head, and Daily Life in Interwar and Occupied Poland, 1918 to 1944,” was supported by fellowships from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Research, the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research, the Center for Jewish History in New York, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. She is interested in Polish-Jewish relations, rural history, and the digital humanities. Her research has been published in peer-reviewed articles in *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History*, *The Journal of Historical Geography*, *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, and *The Journal of Holocaust Research*.

VIOLETA DAVOLIŪTĖ is a Senior Researcher at the Lithuanian Culture Research Institute”; and Project Leader of “Facing the Past: Public History for a Stronger Europe” (Horizon Europe, 2022–2025). Her research interests include forced displacement and national mobilization during the twentieth century, historical trauma, the politics of memory, and reckoning with the legacy of the Holocaust in the Baltics and Europe. She has recently held fellowships with Northwestern University, the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies, Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, Yale University, and L’École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS). Davoliūtė is a co-editor of the CEU Press book series *Memory, Heritage and Public History in Central and Eastern Europe*.

DAINA EGLITIS is an Associate Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at George Washington University in Washington, DC. She holds degrees in Political Science (BA, George Washington University), Russian & Eastern European Area Studies (MA, University of Michigan), and Sociology (PhD, University of Michigan). She is the author of *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in*



*Latvia* and co-editor of *Central and East European Politics*, 5th ed. She has published research on collective memory, socioeconomic inequality, gender, and demographic issues in the Baltic region. Her most recent articles, “Silences of Memory: Liberator Sexual Assault in the East at the End of World War II” (*Journal of Holocaust Studies*), “Women’s Experiences of Life Force Atrocities in the Baltic Ghettos, 1941–1944” (*Eastern European Holocaust Studies*), and “An Unlikely Refuge: Latvia’s Women Volunteers in the Red Army in World War II” (co-authored; *East European Politics & Societies*) examine Holocaust and World War II history and historical memory. Eglitis is a two-time Fulbright Fellow in Latvia and has taught courses at the University of Latvia, Riga Stradiņš University, and the Latvian Academy of Culture. She also served as a visiting fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies.

MONIKA J. FLASCHKA served as a Visiting Assistant Professor at The College of Wooster, The Ohio State University, Ohio University, and most recently Georgia State University. She is currently an independent scholar residing in Tucson, Arizona, and was a 2024–2025 Broadening Academia Initiative Hybrid Fellow in the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Flaschka’s published research focuses on sexual violence during war, and more specifically, during the Second World War and the Holocaust. She is the author of “Only Pretty Women Were Raped: The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Brandeis University, 2010), 77–93; “Sexual Violence,” in *Gender: War*, ed. Andrea Pető (Macmillan Interdisciplinary Handbooks, 2017), 55–69; and “Sexual Violence: Recovering a Suppressed History,” *Companion on the Holocaust*, ed. Simone Gigliotti and Hilary Earl (Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 469–85. She also has a forthcoming work entitled “‘He No Longer Deserves the Right to Wear the Uniform of a German Soldier’: Child Abuse and the Creation of the German Soldier, 1933–1945,” in *Children as Victims of Sexual and Sexualized Violence in the Second World War and Its Aftermath*, ed. Johannes-Dieter Steinert, Helga Amesberger, and Helga Embacher (Edition Tandem, 2025).

ANNA HÁJKOVÁ is a Reader of modern European continental history at the University of Warwick. Her book *The Last Ghetto: An Everyday History of Theresienstadt* came out in 2020 from Oxford University Press. Hájková’s article “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide” received the Catharine Stimpson Prize for Outstanding Feminist Scholarship in 2013. She is an expert on sexuality and the Holocaust; her next book is *People Without History Are Dust: Queer Desire in the*

*Holocaust* from the University of Toronto Press (2025). She is currently working on a book on the Neuengamme guard Anneliese Kohlmann and queer Holocaust history.

STEFAN CRISTIAN IONESCU is the Leon and Sophie Weinstein Associate Professor in Holocaust History and the Associate Director of the Rodgers Center of Holocaust Education, History Department, Chapman University. He was a Senior Lecturer in Holocaust and genocide studies at Hugo Valentin Center, Uppsala University; Judith B. and Burton P. Resnick Visiting Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; and the Theodore Zev and Alice R. Weiss and Holocaust Education Foundation Visiting Associate Professor in Holocaust Studies at Northwestern University. Ionescu holds a PhD in history from Clark University. He is the author of several book chapters and articles in such journals as *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, *Nationalities Papers: A Journal of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of History and Culture*, *Yad Vashem Studies*, and *Culture and Psychology*. Ionescu published two books entitled *Jewish Resistance to Romanianization: 1940–1944* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) and *Justice and Restitution in Post-Nazi Romania: Rebuilding Jewish Lives and Communities, 1944–1950* (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

KATEŘINA KRÁLOVÁ is a Professor of contemporary history and a memory studies scholar at Charles University in Prague and the Czech Academy of Sciences. An expert in modern Greek history with a focus on Nazi persecution and Holocaust studies, Králová has received prestigious fellowships from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Vienna Wiesenthal Institute, Humboldt Foundation, and Fulbright Commission. Králová has authored key publications, including *Das Vermächtnis der Besatzung: Deutsch-griechische Beziehungen seit 1940* (Böhlau, 2016; BpB, 2017), and numerous articles and volumes in Czech, English, French, German, and Greek; co-edited the volume *Diverse Perspectives on Jewish Life in Southeast Europe* (Routledge, 2019); and guest-edited special issues such as “Troubled Pasts and Memory Politics in Central and Southeastern Europe” for *Nationalities Papers* and “Mass Atrocities in Southeast Europe: History and Memory of World War II and Its Aftermath” for the *Journal of Modern European History*. Her book *Homecoming: Holocaust Survivors and Greece, 1941–1946* was recently published by Brandeis University Press (2025).

JANIS NALBADIDACIS is an Assistant Professor at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in the History Department at the chair of European History in the nineteenth century. He holds a PhD and has worked extensively on the dynamics of violence in the twentieth century in the Mediterranean and in Latin America, as well as narrations and representations of it. He co-edited an issue on South European and Latin American

entanglements for the journal *Südosteuropäische Hefte* and published numerous articles in handbooks such as *The Palgrave Handbook of Anti-Communist Persecutions* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) or *Gewalt. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (J. B. Metzler 2013), collected volumes such as *Crises in Authoritarian Regimes: Fragile Orders and Contested Power* (Campus, 2022), *Local Dimensions of the Second World War in Southeastern Europe* (Routledge, 2019), or *Europas vergessene Diktaturen* (Böhlau, 2018; BpB, 2019), and journals such as *Zeitschrift für Genozidforschung*. His prize-awarded research about torture during the Greek and the Argentine juntas was published in 2021 by Campus (*In den Verliesen der Diktatur: Folterzentren während der griechischen und argentinischen Militärdiktatur*). Currently, he is working in the area of environmental history and focuses on the wine crisis in Europe due to the invasion of Phylloxera.

ANDREA PETŐ is a Professor in the Department of Gender Studies at Central European University in Vienna, and a Doctor of Science of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Her works on gender, politics, the Holocaust, and war have been translated into twenty-three languages. She edited three pioneering books in the field of Jewish studies: with Louise Hecht and Karoline Krasuska, *Women and Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (IBL, 2015); with Judith Szapor, Maura Hametz, and Marina Calloni, *Jewish Intellectual Women in Central Europe 1860–2000* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2012); and with Helga Thorson, *The Future of Holocaust Memorialisation: Confronting Racism, Anti-Semitism, and Homophobia Through Memory Work* (Tom Lantos Institute, 2015). Her recent monographs include *Women in the Arrow Cross Party* (Palgrave, 2020) and *Forgotten Massacre, Budapest in 1944* (DeGruyter, 2021). She is the editor-in-chief of *East European Holocaust Studies* (DeGruyter). In 2018 she was awarded the 2018 All European Academies (ALLEA) Madame de Staël Prize for Cultural Values and in 2022 the University of Oslo Human Rights Award. She is a Doctor Honoris Causa of Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden.

CARLI SNYDER is a Historian at the American Social History Project in New York City. She received her PhD from the City University of New York Graduate Center in April 2025. Her dissertation, “‘The Flesh of the Facts’: Toward a Feminist Holocaust Consciousness,” analyzes the political and intellectual development of feminist Holocaust scholarship in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, with a central focus on the career of Joan Ringelheim. She has recently completed fellowships at the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation and Center for Advanced Genocide Research, the Yale Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. In 2024, she published an article in the *Journal of Holocaust Research* entitled “Asking About the ‘Unspeakable’: Joan Ringelheim’s Early Research About Sexual Violence and Same-Sex Practice Among Women During the Holocaust.”

YULIYA VON SAAL is an Eastern European historian at the Leibniz Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ) in Munich and a lecturer at Ruprecht-Karls-University of Heidelberg. She has recently completed her study about the history of Soviet childhood under German occupation during World War II in Belarus (1941–1944). The results of this research will appear in a German publication at the beginning of 2026 entitled “‘Wir wurden damals früh erwachsen’: Kriegskindheiten im besetzten Belarus 1941–1944: Erfahrungen—Erinnerungen—Folgen” (“We grew up early back then”: War Childhoods in Occupied Belarus 1941–1944: Experiences—Memories—Consequences). She earned her PhD from the University of Erlangen-Nuernberg and the *Venia Legendi* habilitation in Heidelberg. Her research interests include the history of the Soviet Union and childhood, the Holocaust, the Second World War, and sexual violence and issues of memory. She has published articles in different academic peer-reviewed journals like *Cahiers du monde russe*, *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, or *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* as well as in several books with a special focus on Eastern Europe, children, and war and sexual violence. Her most recent publication is with Joanna Beata Michlic and Anna Ullrich, *Childhood During War and Genocide: Agency, Survival, and Representation* (EHS, Vol. 5, 2024).

MONIKA VRZGULOVÁ is a Senior Research Fellow of the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, a prominent expert on the Holocaust in Slovakia, issues of memory and identity, the memory policy, and intergenerational communication. She has been conducting oral history research for over three decades. Her interests include tradespeople in urban areas, the wartime Slovak state and the Holocaust (1939–1945), the postwar period and the Jewish community, and memories of the communist regime in Slovakia. She was a member of the Slovak delegation in ITF/IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) from 2005 to 2013. From 2005 to 2017 she was the director of the Holocaust Documentation Center in Bratislava. From 2011 to 2016, she served as the Slovak research team leader in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Oral History Documentation Project: “Crimes Against the Civilian Populations during WW2: Victims, Witnesses, Collaborators, and Perpetrators.” In 2018, she was the Gunzenberger-Reichman Family Fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. She has published her research in seven monographs and dozens of studies. Her book *Oral History and Holocaust in Slovakia: Selective and Contradictory Memories* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2024.

