

Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?

Marion Kaplan

Looking back on the past four decades of historical studies on Jewish women and the Holocaust is no small task. I started my own research in the 1970s, focusing first on the German Jewish feminist movement, the Jüdischer Frauenbund, and later on women's roles in Jewish families in late nineteenth-century Germany. My interest stemmed from my family's refugee history and from my engagement with the women's movement as a student. But it took a while for me to gain the courage to address Jewish women and families in Nazi Germany. It felt too close. Still, as with my other scholarship, I wondered, "Might women have experienced this era differently from men? And if so, how?"

Early Questions about Women and the Holocaust (1983–2000)

The early American scholars of women and the Holocaust assumed that the answer to these questions was *yes*, but we needed to do the research. I will start there, but first, a historical reminder: 1980s feminists may have propagated this agenda, but we did not know that questions about gender arose long before. Polish Jewish historian Emanuel Ringelblum's collection of testimonies, reports, and surveys in the Warsaw ghetto from 1939 until 1943, later known as the Oyneg Shabes project, asked questions of and about women, and many women participated in this undertaking. Philip Friedman, a Polish Jewish historian who survived Lvov in hiding, set a gendered agenda for future research (later published in English as *Pathways to Extinction*, 1980) as early as 1945.¹

Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* n.s. 24, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 37–56. Copyright © 2019 The Trustees of Indiana University. doi: 10.2979/jewisocistud.24.2.05

The first large-scale research impetus came in 1983. Scholars Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz organized a pathbreaking conference in New York City entitled *Women Surviving the Holocaust*. For two days, four hundred survivors and feminist scholars tried to figure out *whether* and, if so, *how* gender mattered. At points, we broke into small survivor groups. I took notes for one such session and recall my surprise and confusion when many survivors both *rejected* the salience of gender and also *highlighted* it.² In other words, these women claimed being a woman “didn’t matter” and then described how, indeed, it mattered! I thought then and still think that many survivors did not want to support a feminist inquiry and yet hoped to tell their stories for posterity. That same year, Vera Laska, herself a survivor, published her *Women in the Resistance and the Holocaust*, using women’s published testimonies.³ Perhaps due to the popularity of the women’s movement on American campuses as well as in society more generally, these discussions and debates emerged in the United States first.

Twelve years after the New York gathering, in 1995, Dalia Ofer and Leonore Weitzmann organized the International Workshop on Women in the Holocaust at the Hebrew University, including American, Israeli, and German scholars who had begun to research this topic. Why did it take so long? The short answer is that we needed to do the research that connected women’s history, memoirs, feminist theory, and the Holocaust. This took time. In the 1990s, for example, the annual *Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust* offered just two articles about women in its first three volumes.⁴

Feminist historians’ focus on Jewish women caused some opposition in the 1990s, part of a conservative backlash against feminism. One critic accused women’s and (female) gender studies scholars of enacting a “macabre sisterhood with the dead Jewish women of Europe,” and others faulted feminists for using the Holocaust for their own agendas.⁵ Specifically, these critics saw a gender analysis as “privileging” women—that is raising women’s suffering above that of men—and insisted on the irrelevance, indeed irreverence, of this scholarship.⁶

Thankfully, this debate died down quickly. Women’s historians had always underlined that being Jewish mattered first and foremost. But as Joan Ringelheim wrote, “the end—namely annihilation or death—does not describe or explain the process.”⁷ And as Mary Felstiner pointed out, “along the stations toward extinction ... each gender lived its own journey.”⁸ I added, rather defensively, but probably appropriately for 1998, that “to raise the issue of gender can never place blame on other survivors for the disproportionate deaths of

Jewish women. Blame rests with the murderers. To raise the issue of gender also does not place it above racism.”⁹ Nevertheless, I insisted, gender helped to tell a fuller, “more intimate, more nuanced story,” giving Jewish women “a voice long denied them and ... a perspective long denied us.” I believe that to this day.

Research on Jewish women did not occur in a void. American scholars of women’s history began publishing titles such as *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (1976) or *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (1977).¹⁰ British historians in the mid-1970s started to explore women in Nazi society, especially non-Jews.¹¹ In the 1980s, American scholars like Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and me (*When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*, 1984), as well as Claudia Koonz (*Mothers in the Fatherland*, 1987), continued to research non-Jewish German women but also included German Jewish women in these histories—but separately.¹² Research on Jewish women in the Nazi era therefore coincided with and was greatly influenced by the scholarship of women’s history as well as its entry into academia.

How did we write these histories? First, we needed to discover traditional materials in newspapers and in government and organizational archives. Many of us also turned to memoirs, diaries, letters, and interviews as crucial first-person evidence. Reapplying the feminist motto “the personal is political,” we insisted that the personal was also historical—that without women’s memories we missed half the history of the Holocaust. More specifically, without women’s memories we missed not only familial and domestic aspects of the Holocaust but also gendered public behaviors and humiliations and gendered persecutions in ghettos and camps. Indeed, one scholar recently concluded that diaries and memoirs dating from the war and postwar years are the two major sources regarding pregnancy, birth, and sexuality.¹³ In addition, comparing personal testimonies of both Jewish women and men makes gender an obvious—really an inescapable—lens.

The conference in 1995 opened new research avenues, including the history of Jewish women and families before the war in both western and eastern Europe; women’s struggles in ghettos, camps, and the resistance; and women’s accounts in Holocaust literature. Most of these topics focused on women rather than comparative gender analyses, but some did that as well. These themes set the stage for the next 20 years of studies. Researchers benefited from the topics raised at this event, the sources suggested there, and the creative energy bursting from the conference itself. Ofer and Weitzman’s *Women and the Holocaust* came out three years later, as did Judith Tydor Baumel’s *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*. This brings me to the topic of

[39]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*

•

Marion
Kaplan

gendered suffering and survival strategies that I delivered at that conference, out of which grew my book *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, published in 1998.

I found that although the calamity that hit German Jews affected them as Jews first, they also suffered based on gender. At first, Nazis assaulted and arrested Jewish men, even if ultimately Jewish women were also enemies doomed to perish in the Nazis' "race war."¹⁴ Not only was early Nazi racism and persecution gendered, but so too were the victims' survival strategies in both practical and psychological terms. The victims reacted not only as Jews but as women and men. A focus on women led me to recognize, for example, that in contrast to men, most women took the warning signals of Nazism more seriously than did most men, adjusting to the abrupt changes in law and culture embraced by many non-Jewish Germans. Women eagerly trained for jobs and crafts useful abroad, whereas men hoped that they would be able to maintain their businesses, careers, or professions in Germany. And many women became breadwinners, often for the first time, as husbands lost their businesses or jobs. As Jewish women pressed to flee Germany, Jewish men thought they had—and indeed did have—a great deal more to lose by leaving. Over 80 percent of Germany's approximately 525,000 Jews lived solidly middle-class lives. These men had to tear themselves away from their life work, whether a business or a professional practice. Usually more educated than women, many men felt a deep attachment to German culture. Additionally, many had fought in World War I and believed that their service and patriotism would count for something. Most importantly, since men had previously been the primary breadwinners, as long as they made a living, they hesitated to face poverty abroad.¹⁵ In light of their identity being strongly tied to their occupation, men often felt trapped into staying. Women, whose identity was more family oriented, struggled to preserve what was central to them by fleeing with it.¹⁶

In addition, men and women led relatively distinct lives and often interpreted daily events differently. Raised to be sensitive to social situations, women's social antennae were finely tuned and also directed toward more unconventional—what men might have considered more trivial—sources of information: what the baker said, whether the neighbor gave her usual greeting. Women's "narrower" picture—the minutiae (and significance) of direct everyday contacts—brought politics home. Still, a widespread assumption that women lacked political acumen—stemming from their primary domestic roles—often

gave women's warnings less credibility. And the prejudice that women reacted "hysterically" in the face of danger worked to everyone's disadvantage. When Else Gerstel urged her husband, a former judge who had lost his job, to emigrate, he responded, "[T]he German people, the German judges, would not stand for much more of this madness."¹⁷ Women also seem to have been acutely aware of their children's unhappiness at school—another reason to flee. Toni Lessler, the founder and director of a Montessori school in Berlin forcibly turned into a Jewish school, pointed to fathers' "stand tough" approach and assumed that "it must . . . have been a false pride that caused the fathers in particular to keep their children in city schools."¹⁸ Recalling debates within Berlin Jewish families, Peter Wyden summed up: "It was not a bit unusual in these go-or-no-go family dilemmas for the women to display more energy and enterprise than the men. . . . They seemed to be less rigid, *less cautious*, more confident of their ability to flourish on new turf."¹⁹ Gender made an enormous difference in deciding between fight and flight.

Finally, women's perspectives highlighted entirely new public/private dimensions of history. For example, men wrote of the public spectacle of the November Pogrom—smashed shops and burning synagogues, the lasting images of broken glass in the streets. A powerful image, mentioned often and only in women's memoirs, is that of flying feathers covering internal spaces, the home, hallway, and courtyard. Similar to pogroms in Russia at the turn of the century, the marauders tore up goose feather blankets and pillows, shaking them into the rooms, out the windows, down the stairways. Bereft of their bedding, Jews lost the kind of physical and psychological security and comfort that this represented. In addition, Jews could no longer replace these items, due to their cost and because the looming war economy severely limited linens.²⁰ Broken glass in public and strewn feather beds in private spelled the end of Jewish family life and security in Germany.

Gender differences in perceiving danger accompanied gender-role reversals. In what Raul Hilberg (as early as 1992) described as communities of "men without power and women without support,"²¹ we find, for the most part, anxious but active women who, early on, greatly expanded their traditional roles, for example, interceding for their men with the authorities and seeking paid employment for the first time. When we observe grassroots developments, we see clearly that the public and private lives of Jews varied in accordance with gender.

[41]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan

Three examples will have to suffice. The first focuses on the November Pogrom of 1938, highlighting women's activities under dire circumstances. In addition to destroying Jewish property, the thugs also beat and arrested about 30,000 men, interning them in concentration camps.²² Although some women were publicly humiliated, beaten, and murdered,²³ most stood by, forced to watch their homes and shops torn apart and their men abused. Later, women summoned the courage to overcome gender stereotypes of passivity in order to find any means to free men from camps and organize a mass emigration of Jews.²⁴

The second example focuses on women making family decisions. In the aftermath of the pogrom, women not only arranged the release of loved ones but also sent their children on Kindertransports, sold property, and made emigration decisions. Accompanying her husband home after his ordeal in a camp, one wife announced that she had just sold their house and bought tickets to, of all places, Shanghai for the whole family. Her husband reflected, "Anything was okay with me, only not to stay in a land in which everyone had declared open season on us."²⁵ Similar expressions of thankfulness, tinged perhaps with a bit of surprise at women's heroism, can be found in many men's memoirs.²⁶ Traditionally men had publicly guarded the honor of the family and community; now, suddenly women found themselves in this difficult position.

Third, gender made a difference in matters of life and death. Even though women transcended certain gender roles, gender as such caused serious consequences in emigration. For example, more women than men remained trapped in Nazi Germany. Though there are many explanations for this—including male deaths in World War I, a higher number of widows, the intention of men to emigrate first and bring their families over when they had settled, and so on²⁷—it is also clear that more men got out before the escape doors shut, either through business connections, capitalist visas, or because they faced physical danger earlier than did women, and many women sent them out first. The disproportionate number of elderly women whom the Nazis murdered suggests that (female) gender and age were a lethal combination.²⁸

What Happened in the Next Twenty Years?

To this day, there seems to be a good deal of Holocaust social history and women's history, including local histories of eastern and western

Europe and histories of camps and ghettos. Often these social and women's histories *include* women but are not consciously *about* gender. If we approached topics in a gendered way, might it change our narratives? Or not? Historians—especially male historians—rarely ask *how* women experienced aspects of the Holocaust differently from men or how this might change our understandings. Fewer historians seem to go beyond including women. Literary scholars, in contrast, ask gendered question of their texts and come to memoirs or fiction with a particular interest in gender and women.

Still, some promising research in Holocaust history has appeared lately. I cannot go into all of it but will mention two areas: work on eastern Europe and Russia and work on the topic of sexuality. Regarding the former, there is new work on Jewish women inside and outside the Kraków ghetto that includes their family lives and strategies of survival within and outside the ghetto;²⁹ women hiding in bunkers;³⁰ social roles in ghettos;³¹ testimonies, literary perspectives, and cultural studies;³² and work on individual women like Rachel Auerbach (of the Warsaw ghetto).³³ The Soviet context has also been represented, including oral histories.³⁴ In addition, autobiographies have flourished. In 2009, Louise O. Vasvári gathered four hundred entries of women's life writing from central and eastern Europe—and these are only the ones in English!³⁵ The collection resulted from a “boom” in such writings that occurred after years of mostly remaining unpublished by the women themselves or being refused by publishers.³⁶

Research on sexualities, the body, and sexual violence have made significant progress in recent years, mostly as women's history.³⁷ In 1993, Claudia Schoppmann addressed how the Nazis targeted lesbians, and we can find the article “Lesbians and the Holocaust” in the series *Studies in the Shoah* in 1999.³⁸ But we need more research, and taboos make this difficult.³⁹ Still, books about same-sex desire exist: I have used Erika Fischer's *Aimee and Jaguar* (1995)⁴⁰ in teaching and will translate parts of a relatively new book in the series *Jewish Miniatures* that focuses on another couple, Marta Halusa and Margot Liu.⁴¹ In addition, queer history itself and how queer history may answer questions about women's lives *in extremis* need work, though these topics get harder to research as survivors age and because the numbers were much smaller than the general survivor population to begin with.

Endangered as Jews, women also experienced sexual vulnerability.⁴² Sexual violation often started with sexual humiliation: nudity and shaving. Anthropologists have pointed out that we need to understand violence not solely as physical but as an attack on the humanity, the personhood of individuals.⁴³ In camps, for example, many daughters

[43]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan

had never even seen their mothers undressed⁴⁴—and then in front of male guards! Nor had most women ever shaved their heads: one survivor wrote of the “blow” to her morale after such a shaving. “We could have been shot, gassed.... And yet, this single act of German brutality, constituted a sacrilegious act on our bodies, our only possessions.”⁴⁵ This may have affected religious women even more due to their strict upbringing regarding modesty and nudity. Men, too, were shaved but in general spoke far less about sexual violation or worried about nudity.⁴⁶

The sexual economy and sexual barter during the Holocaust need further exploration.⁴⁷ Many survivors—male and female—saw women’s sexual victimization as a 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.

If or when sexual barter occurred, how do we understand this? As a choice? A “choiceless choice?”⁴⁸ The memoir of Marie Jalowicz Simon (published in 2015) may offer some clues.⁴⁹ Born to a Berlin middle-class Jewish family, she was only 20, young, slight, and pretty when she decided to go underground in 1942. Luckily some non-Jews helped her throughout her subterfuge as a “half Jew,” but her sexual relationships with men made a decisive difference in her survival. Her first shelter included having sex with the husband of the woman who had taken her in: “I just let him have his way.” She left in two days.⁵⁰ The next man who provided a refuge, a Bulgarian painter, actually fell in love with her and offered to take her to Bulgaria. She agreed, hoping to make her way to Palestine from there, but those plans fell through. Still, she spent safe weeks with this man, whom she also considered her lover, although she realized they would never share a future together if she survived.⁵¹ She also traded sex for an “engagement”—at least for an attempt at an engagement—with a different man, someone who did not speak more than a few words of German, a relationship that lasted one day.⁵² Luckily for her, one man who offered her a hiding spot “confessed” to her that he “was no longer capable of any kind of sexual relationship.” She was overcome by “relief and jubilation.”⁵³ Marie Simon also allowed a woman who sheltered her for several weeks to kiss her goodnight every night and caress her body on

one occasion, describing the event as “not unpleasant” but a “sin.”⁵⁴ Her last relationship, two years long, involved a Dutch worker who had come to Germany on his own, earlier than Dutch forced laborers, and who opposed the Nazis. An intermediary told this inexperienced young man that Marie would be his “sexual liberation” and that she would keep house for him. She saw him as a safe haven. They lived as a couple, although he occasionally hit her, angry at her love of reading. He could also be “pleasant . . . and considerate,” and they had a lot to talk about with regard to the war.⁵⁵

How do we analyze this story? As I asked before, are these choices or choiceless choices? How do historians—even the victims—distinguish between forced and consensual relationships when these could mean the difference between life and death? I do not have an answer. The interesting and arresting part of Simon’s story is that she understood her situation, bartering sex for safety, and still sometimes even *liked* the man she was with. In no sense did she see herself as purely a victim of these men, even when she let one of them “have his way.” She makes it clear that she was a victim not of these men but of the Nazis.

Rape during the Holocaust took many years to address, not only because taboos exist around this subject.⁵⁶ Sarah Cushman has written about the difficulty of representing “sexuality without crossing the line to pornography.” Yet she also reminds us of Elizabeth Heinemann’s assertion that “failure to investigate evidence that appears time and time again is, in an academic sense, bad scholarship. In a moral sense, it disregards the imperative both to commemorate past victims and to prevent future atrocities.”⁵⁷

Sources were and are available, but they are complicated and scattered.⁵⁸ To confound matters, much of this testimony is partial and some of it is unclear. Nazi documents, army cases, and postwar trials of perpetrators have their own issues, although they need to be used—with care.⁵⁹ Scholars Regina Mühlhäuser, Zoe Waxman, and Beverley Chalmers, among others,⁶⁰ have used oral and written statements by victims, perpetrators, and witnesses as well as army and Nazi documents. I would argue that their work should not only be seen as specialized histories of rape during war but also as Holocaust scholarship. Recently substantiating this notion, David Cesarani in *The Final Solution: The Fate of the Jews, 1933–1949* (2016) showed that almost every atrocity against Jews in Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine included rape and sexualized violence against Jewish women, sometimes by Germans, sometimes by their local helpers.

[45]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan

Who were the main perpetrators of rapes against Jewish victims? Research highlights the *Einsatzgruppen* (SS paramilitary death squads) and the *Wehrmacht* (German armed forces) as perpetrators, particularly after the beginning of the war of annihilation against the Soviet Union. Some of this information comes from later testimonies of German soldiers, since rapists often killed the victims to prevent incrimination of the perpetrators.⁶¹ Other German soldiers proved reluctant to talk about these events even after the war, either to avoid being seen as brutal or purportedly for fear of admitting to what the Nazis termed *Rassenschande*, or “racial shame.”⁶²

Yet new research makes absolutely clear that we can no longer accept this interpretation: “racial shame” did *not* as a rule inhibit sexual contact in the East. Inside Germany, courts treated this transgression harshly, but most soldiers got away with it at the eastern front.⁶³ As Mühlhäuser has pointed out, sexual violence, though seen as a crime against military discipline and racial purity, became a “normal part of everyday warfare,” and gang rape also strengthened loyalty within the squadron.⁶⁴ In other words, rape may not have been part of the Nazis’ original genocidal plans, but it figured in the continuum of violence even near mass executions.⁶⁵

Looking Ahead

I would like to raise some areas that need further attention in both older and newer historical fields.

There has been important research on Jewish women’s bonding experiences and “camp sister” relationships in extreme situations, but we need more—and more comparisons with males.⁶⁶ We have seen young girls adopted by young female strangers or by girls from their hometowns.⁶⁷ Camp sisters tried to stay together, giving purpose to their lives and protecting each other as long as they could.⁶⁸ We have also learned that women sometimes created fictive families. For example, Ruth Klüger’s mother adopted a daughter in Auschwitz! The three survived together and remained a family once they immigrated to the United States after the war. How widespread was this? And do we find similar relationships among men (besides Primo Levi)?

I also see family histories as opportunities to highlight gendered reactions and gender roles when faced with persecution. Although family histories have sometimes elided or ignored gender, newer histories raise these issues.⁶⁹ The history of mothering during the Holocaust

needs more attention. How did mothers manage to feed, clean, or nurture children? How did they flee? For example, Lea Lazego, with two children and a three-month-old infant, climbed the Pyrenees on foot in 1943. She arrived in Lisbon in time to have the children sent to relatives in the United States.⁷⁰ One camp survivor repeated, as a mantra, “I had a mother, I had a mother,” underlining how her mother made the difference between her life and death.⁷¹ The important issue here—besides the all-important one of survival—is that gender roles proved malleable. Women often performed roles expected of men. How often did men take on women’s roles? We might also think about sites—locations—where women transgressed familial and gender norms, such as saving husbands from the Gestapo, protecting children from German armies, or fighting in the resistance, but then later returned to more traditional gender roles in postwar displaced-persons camps or when starting their lives over. Waxman concludes that “gender was the last thing ... to survive the camps.”⁷²

The new concern with what have been termed microhistories and microgeographies⁷³ during the Holocaust has opened further areas to explore. How would we comprehend gender relations in a town? Or in a family bunker?⁷⁴ Or in forests in the East? The history of emotions opens still more new avenues to explore: how did female and male victims feel about their daily lives, and how did they express this? We have often assumed that we knew, but as we take memoirs, letters, and diaries more seriously, they inform us of frustration, hope, and fear. After many exasperating visits to inhospitable consulates, one woman concluded: “It would have taken the pen of a Kafka ... to depict the world of visas in all its surrealistic absurdity; that of a Dostoevsky to render the nightmare of the petitioners’ struggle for survival.”⁷⁵ Having finally made it to an American consul, a young man felt himself “trembling and shaking.”⁷⁶ What can we learn about gendered reactions? Did they flatten? Or did later memories of persecution and escape return to gender stereotypes of the emotional woman and the “strong” man?⁷⁷

So, what is to be done? The big job awaiting all Holocaust historians is the need for a gendered analysis. We need to more fully incorporate women’s life stories as primary tools of analysis and to pay attention, as well, to how these differed or stayed the same as those of Jewish men. I do not mean simply “women and ...” but real comparisons between Jewish women and men as well as the relationships between the two genders.⁷⁸ We should more explicitly uncover the imbalances of power relations between men and women in public and private; the different factors that helped men and women survive; and the breakdown

[47]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan

of social and cultural norms among Jews (and non-Jews), often with regard to how women were treated.

I would also like to see how gender intersected with ethnicity and class. How did class and ethnicity express themselves through gender roles in ghettos and camps, or forced labor or hiding, and in passing? For example, poor women in Warsaw had a much harder time than wealthier women both in the ghetto and on the “Aryan” side. As much as we emphasize “chance” or “luck” with regard to the concentration camps, we need to explore who may have had better prospects: a woman who knew four languages, a nurse/doctor, or a seamstress? This would include masculinity studies, as well.⁷⁹

We have rarely highlighted age and life cycle. We could contrast, for example, single women, mothers, wives, and grandmothers with men at those same stages of life. One question that always haunts me is how respect for the elderly—and especially elderly women—transmuted into seeing them as expendable when deportations began. Did views of elderly men and women differ? Did their own gender affect younger people when looking at the elderly?

Finally, just as I began this discussion by reminding readers of the European and Jewish women’s histories that provided a context for gender and Holocaust studies, today broader genocide studies such as *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (2018), edited by Elissa Bemporad and Joyce Warren, have taken other ethnic murders into account and have analyzed the gendered similarities and significant differences across time and national boundaries. We have come quite a way since the topic of women entered some of the literature.⁸⁰ But we still have a distance to go.

Notes

- 1 Friedman included the biological impact of starvation, statistics of biological destruction, the disintegration of the family, and postwar medical and psychological exams of survivors, all of which implied at the very minimum gender and generational analyses. In addition, European survivors had written about gendered experiences as soon as 1945. See, for example, Giuliana Tedeschi, *Questo povero corpo* (Milan, 1946).
- 2 Indeed, even some scholars who denied the importance of gender gave many examples of gender in their own works. See Ruth Bondy, “Women in Theresienstadt and the Family Camp in Birkenau,” in *Women in the Holocaust*, ed. Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman (New Haven, Conn.,

- 1998), 310–26, as well as Lawrence Langer, “Gendered Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies,” in Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 351–63.
- 3 A year later, Joan Ringelheim concluded that “Jewish women were to be killed as Jewish women, not simply as Jews—[as] women who may carry and give birth to the next generation of Jews.” Joan Ringelheim, “The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust,” *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 69–87, reprinted in *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, ed. Carol Rittner and John Roth (New York, 1993), 392.
 - 4 Claudia Koonz, “Genocide and Eugenics: The Language of Power,” *Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust* (1991): 155–77; Judith Baumel, “Gender and Family Studies of the Holocaust,” *Lessons and Legacies of the Holocaust* 2 (1998): 105–17. The annual was published by the Holocaust Educational Foundation.
 - 5 Gabriel Schoenfeld, “Auschwitz and the Professors,” *Commentary* (June 1998), <https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/auschwitz-and-the-professors/>. See also Joan Ringelheim, “The Split between Gender and the Holocaust,” in Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 348, where she quotes Cynthia Ozick, who argued that feminists were asking a *morally* wrong question. See also the responses in the Aug. 1, 1998 issue of *Commentary*.
 - 6 Ringelheim, “Split,” 344.
 - 7 *Ibid.*, 350.
 - 8 Mary Felstiner, *To Paint Her Life: Charlotte Salomon in the Nazi Era* (Los Angeles, 1997), 204–7.
 - 9 Marion Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York, 1998), 237.
 - 10 Elizabeth Koltun, ed., *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives* (New York, 1976); Renate Bridenthal and Claudia Koonz, eds., *Becoming Visible: Women in European History* (Boston, 1977).
 - 11 Timothy Mason, “Women in Germany, 1925–1940,” *History Workshop* 1 (Spring 1976): 74–113; 2 (Fall 1976): 5–32; Jill Stephenson, *Women in Nazi Society* (London, 1975).
 - 12 Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion Kaplan, *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany* (New York, 1984); Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland: Women, the Family and Nazi Politics* (London, 1987). See also Donna Harsch and Karen Hagemann, “Gendering Central European History: Changing Representations of Women and Gender in Comparison, 1968–2017,” *Central European History* 51, no. 1 (2018): 114–27, published in the journal’s fiftieth-anniversary issue. Aryan women, whom I have not discussed here but whom many see as “second-tier agents of terror” (to quote Doris Bergen, “Forum: Holocaust and the History of Gender and Sexuality” *German History* 36, no. 1 [2018]: 78–100), need further investigation despite the good work already done (by Claudia Koonz, Wendy Lower, Elizabeth Harvey,

[49]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*

●
Marion
Kaplan

and Franka Maubach, to name a few). And, I still consider the study of *interactions* between Jewish and non-Jewish women a necessity. There have only been a few successful attempts so far, especially for women in hiding in Germany. For Munich, see Susanna Schrafstetter, *Flucht und Versteck: Untergetauchte Juden in München* (Wallstein, 2015), and for Berlin, see Erika Fischer, *Aimee and Jaguar: A Love Story, Berlin 1943* (New York, 1995).

- 13 Beverley Chalmers, *Birth, Sex and Abuse: Women's Voices under Nazi Rule* (Surrey, 2015), 5.
- 14 For a fuller history of this period, see Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (New York, 2003).
- 15 In 1933, less than a third of Jewish women worked outside the home.
- 16 For examples, see Else Gerstel, memoirs, 71, Leo Baeck Institute, New York (hereafter LBI), and John Foster, ed., *Community of Fate: Memoirs of German Jews in Melbourne* (Sydney, 1986), 28–30.
- 17 Gerstel, memoirs, 71.
- 18 Toni Lessler, memoirs, 22, LBI. Sometimes even the “Aryan” wives of Jewish men took the lead. Verena Hellwig, for example, feared for her two “mixed” (*Mischling*) children even as her husband, also of “mixed blood,” insisted on remaining in Germany until his approaching retirement. When her teenage son could not find an apprenticeship, she spoke to a Nazi official, who told her that people of “mixed blood” were “our greatest danger. They should either return to Judaism ... and suffer the fate of the Jews or they should be prevented from procreating.” She had reached her turning point: “Germany was dead” for her. She soon immigrated to England with her children, after which her husband followed. Verena Hellwig, memoirs, 25–26, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- 19 Peter Wyden, *Stella* (New York, 1992), 47 (emphasis added).
- 20 For feathers during the November Pogrom, see Francis Henry, *Victims and Neighbors: A Small Town in Nazi Germany Remembered* (South Hadley, Mass., 1984), 116–18. See also Erna Albersheim, memoirs, 28; Elsie Axelrath, memoirs, 43; and Alice Baerwald, memoirs, 72, all three from Houghton Library.
- 21 Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims and Bystanders* (New York, 1992), 127.
- 22 Rita Thalmann and Emmanuel Feinermann, *Crystal Night* (New York, 1972), 117.
- 23 These exceptions seem to have occurred mostly in small towns (although for examples from Nuremberg and Düsseldorf, see Thalmann and Feinermann, *Crystal Night*, 70, 81). See also Henry, *Victims and Neighbors*, 116–17; *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, 1939 (Frankfurt, 1980), 920. In addition, some women were taken hostage for husbands who had hidden. Andreas Lixl-Purcell, *Women of Exile* (Westport, Conn., 1988), 71; *Deutschland-Berichte*, 1939, 922. Finally, the elderly, female and male, were not spared physical brutality

- either; *Deutschland-Berichte der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands*, 1938 (Frankfurt, 1980), 1340. For women incarcerated before the war, see Kim Wünschmann, *Before Auschwitz: Jewish Prisoners in the Prewar Concentration Camps* (Cambridge, Mass., 2015), 1100–1132.
- 24 For examples, see Charlotte Stein-Pick, memoirs, 41, LBI, and Ruth Abraham, memoirs, 3–5, LBI.
- 25 Siegfried Neumann, “A Notaryship Is Revoked,” in *Germans No More: Accounts of Jewish Everyday Life, 1933–1938*, ed. Margarete Limberg and Hubert Rübsaat, trans. Alan Nothnagle (New York, 2006), 30–36. See also Edith Bick (b. 1900, Hamburg; emigrated to the United States Nov. 1938), interview, Jan. 1972, 18, Research Foundation for Jewish Immigration, New York.
- 26 Charlotte Stein-Pick, memoirs, 45. See also Gerdy Stoppleman, memoirs, 5, LBI.
- 27 See Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair*, 119–44.
- 28 Elizabeth Strauss worked on a project titled “The Elderly in the Ghettos: A Study of Łódź, Vilna, and Kovno, 1939–1944” as a fellow at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (2008).
- 29 Thank you to Natalia Aleksium for reading this essay and for suggesting the following titles about eastern Europe: Martyna Grądzka-Rejak, *Kobieta żydowska w okupowanym Krakowie, 1939–1945* (Kraków, 2016) (on the varieties of female experiences in and after the ghetto, such as hiding, religious life, labor, daily challenges, family life, and Jewish women’s strategies of survival), and idem, “‘Myśmy się nawzajem poznawały po oczach’ ... Z badań nad strategiami przetrwania kobiet żydowskich funkcjonujących ‘na powierzchni’ po tzw. aryjskiej stronie w okupowanym Krakowie i okolicach,” *Pamięć i Sprawiedliwość* 26, no. 2 (2015): 51 (on women’s strategies of survival on the Aryan side).
- 30 Natalia Aleksium, “Daily Survival: Social History of Jews in Family Bunkers in Eastern Galicia,” in *Lessons and Legacies XII: New Directions in Holocaust Research and Education*, ed. Wendy Lower and Lauren Faulkner Rossi (Evanston, Ill., 2017), 304–31.
- 31 Aleksandra Ślósarska, “Życie ‘pod grozą rkm-u’: Role społeczne kobiety w warunkach getta,” *Żydzi wschodniej Polski* 3 (2015): 369–77.
- 32 Aleksandra Ubertowska, “Kobiece ‘strategie przetrwania’ w piśmiennictwie o Holokauście (z perspektywy literaturoznawcy),” *Ślady obecności* (2010): 317–36 (literary perspective, testimonies); Andrea Pető, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuska, eds., *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (Warsaw, 2015) (cultural studies and social history, international collection).
- 33 Rachel Auerbach, *Pisma z getta warszawskiego*, ed. Karolina Szymaniak (Warsaw, 2015) (writings from the Warsaw ghetto, gendered letters; Auerbach put part of the diary of her love life in the Ringelblum archive). Szymaniak wrote a gendered history of the Warsaw ghetto as an introduction. See also Bassia Temkin-Bermanowa, *Dziennik z podziemia* (Warsaw,

[51]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan



- 2000). Temkin-Bermanowa ran libraries in the Warsaw ghetto and was the wife of a prominent member of the Jewish underground. See further Elissa Bemporad and Glenn Dynner, eds., “Jewish Women in Modern Eastern and East Central Europe,” special issue, *Jewish History* (2019); and Inbar Raveh and Rotem Wagner, “*I Never Even Lived*”: A Teaching Unit—Women in Holocaust Literature, ed. Felice Kahn Zisken, trans. Lisa Katz (Jerusalem, 2000), <https://www.holocaust-trc.org/i-never-even-lived/>.
- 34 See, for example, 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; idem, “Memory, Gender, Silence: Oral History in (Post-)Soviet Russia and the Blurry Line Between the Public and the Private,” in *Laboratorium: Zhurnal Sotsialnykh Issledovaniï* 3, no. 1 (2011): 181–83; and idem, *Pioneers and Partisans: An Oral History of Nazi Genocide in Belorussia* (New York, 2015). Thanks to Elissa Bemporad for the Walke tip.
- 35 Louise O. Vasvári, “Introduction to and Bibliography of Central European Women’s Holocaust Life Writing in English,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 11, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1422>.
- 36 See also Kamiłła Łaguna-Raszkiewicz, “Stefania Wilczyńska: Matka sierot z ulicy Krochmalnej,” *Żydzi wschodniej polski* 3 (2015): 65–78, and Michał Unger, “Separation and Divorce in the East European Ghettos” (paper presented at The Holocaust and Its Aftermath from the Family Perspective, Prague, March 15–16, 2017, <http://www.jewishhistory.usd.cas.cz/conferences/the-holocaust-and-its-aftermath-from-the-family-perspective/>.)
- 37 For early memoirs of sexual abuse, see Na’ama Shik, “Sexual Abuse of Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau,” in *Brutality and Sexuality: War and Desire in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London, 2009), esp. 242 n. 6.
- 38 Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade: Life Stories of Lesbians during the Third Reich* (New York, 1996); R. Amy Elman, “Lesbians and the Holocaust,” in *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*, ed. Esther Fuchs (Lanham, Md., 1999), 9–17.
- 39 Regarding taboos, see Anna Hájková, “Holocaust and the History of Gender and Sexuality,” *German History* 36, no. 1, (2018): 78–100, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gerhis/ghx123>.
- 40 Fischer, *Aimee and Jaguar*.
- 41 Ingeborg Boxhammer, *Marta Halusa und Margot Liu: Die lebenslange Liebe zweier Tänzerinnen* (Berlin, 2015). See also Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade*, and Ilse Kokula, *Jahre des Glücks, Jahre des Leids: Gespräche mit älteren lesbischen Frauen* (Kiel, 1990).
- 42 Brana Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1998), xvii.

- 43 Nicole Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies: Experiences of Dehumanization during the Holocaust," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 2 (2016): 23, quoting Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Phillipe Bourgois, *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Oxford, 2003).
- 44 Ephgrave, "On Women's Bodies," 22, referring to Livia Bitton Jackson.
- 45 Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (Mahwah, N.J., 1990), 150–66.
- 46 Perhaps this was due to the view of male sexualized victimization as anathema to masculinity. Sarah M. Cushman, "The Women of Birkenau" (Ph.D. diss., Clark University, 2010), 83. But we know very little about how Orthodox men felt when Nazis shaved or cut their beards or sidelocks.
- 47 Anna Hájková's work on Theresienstadt, for example, highlights the power dynamics of unequal relationships but is also stymied by taboos. Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503–33; idem, "Strukturen weiblichen Verhaltens in Theresienstadt," in *Genozid und Geschlecht: Jüdische Frauen im nationalsozialistischen Lagersystem*, ed. Gisela Bock (Frankfurt, 2005); see also Chalmers, *Birth*, 158–62.
- 48 Lawrence L. Langer coined this term in *Versions of Survival: The Holocaust and the Human Spirit* (Albany, N.Y., 1982) to describe the unprecedented situations of conflict that Jews found themselves in during the Holocaust.
- 49 Marie Jalowicz Simon, *Underground in Berlin: A Young Woman's Extraordinary Tale of Survival in the Heart of Nazi Germany*, trans. Anthea Bell (New York, 2015), transcribed from recordings by her son, Hermann Simon. See also Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide," 506.
- 50 Simon, *Underground*, 99.
- 51 Ibid., 129.
- 52 Ibid., 144.
- 53 Ibid., 8.
- 54 Ibid., 152.
- 55 Ibid., 230, 238, 242, 270.
- 56 See also Helene Sinnreich, "And It Was Something We Didn't Talk About: The Rape of Jewish Women during the Holocaust," *Holocaust Studies* 14, no. 2 (2008): 1–22. In contrast, the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York showed an art exhibit, "Violated: Women in Holocaust and Genocide," April 12–May 12, 2018, that highlighted sexual brutality and rape.
- 57 Cushman, "Women of Birkenau," 289–90, quoting Elizabeth Heineman, "Sexuality and Nazism," in *Sexuality and German Fascism*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (New York, 2004), 22–66.
- 58 Eva Fogelman cites 1,040 testimonies that mention rape or fear of rape out of 52,000 at the USC Shoah Foundation; Eva Fogelman, "Sexual

[53]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*



Marion
Kaplan

- Abuse of Jewish Women during and after the Holocaust: A Psychological Perspective,” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel (Waltham, Mass., 2010), 255–74. See also Shik, “Sexual Abuse,” and Natalia Aleksium, “Limited Agency: Surviving the Shoah in Eastern Europe,” about relationships between Jews and rescuers that involved implicitly or explicitly sexual relations. See the report of Feb. 15, 2018 on the conference About Truth, About Power: Eastern Europe Facing the Shoah; A History of Engagement, 1941–2016, Jena, June 8–9, 2017, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7546>.
- 59 Regina Mühlhäuser, “The Unquestioned Crime: Sexual Violence by German Soldiers during the War of Annihilation in the Soviet Union, 1941–45,” in *Rape in Wartime: Gender and Sexualities in History*, ed. Raphaele Branche and Fabrice Virgili (London, 2012), 38. Equally complicated is the question who was a Jewish victim and who was thought to be Jewish.
- 60 Insa Eschebach and Regina Mühlhäuser, eds., *Krieg und Geschlecht: Sexuelle Gewalt im Krieg und Sex-Zwangsarbeit in NS-Konzentrationslagern* (Berlin, 2008); Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence*; Zoe Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford, 2017); Shik, “Sexual Abuse”; Chalmers, *Birth*; Monika J. Flaschka, “Race, Rape and Gender in Nazi-Occupied Territories” (Ph.D. diss., Kent State University, 2009); Cushman, “Women of Birkenau,” 299–303. Research on this topic continues. See, for example, Buried Words: A Workshop on Sexuality, Violence and Holocaust Testimonies, Toronto, Oct. 2018, which was supported by the Azrieli Foundation Holocaust Survivor Memoirs Program. One session of this workshop focused on sexual violence against boys and men. Videos of the conference are available at <http://memoirs.azrielifoundation.org/BuriedWords>.
- 61 Chalmers, *Birth*, 218–21, 228–32. See also Hedgepeth and Saidel, *Sexual Violence*; Mühlhäuser, “Unquestioned Crime”; and idem, “Sexual Violence and the Holocaust,” in *Gender: War*, ed. Andrea Pető (Farmington Hills, Mich., 2017), 111.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Regina Mühlhäuser, “The Historicity of Denial: Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the War of Annihilation, 1941–1945,” in *Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, ed. Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Ill., 2014), 46.
- 64 Mühlhäuser, “Unquestioned Crime,” 36, 39. See also Regina Mühlhäuser, *Eroberungen: Sexuelle Gewalttaten und intime Beziehungen deutscher Soldaten in der Sowjetunion, 1941–1945* (Hamburg, 2011).
- 65 Mühlhäuser, “Sexual Violence and the Holocaust,” 113, and idem, “Historicity of Denial,” 41, where Mühlhäuser goes further than I would, arguing “sexual violence was part of the genocidal *project* of the Final Solution in the Soviet Union” (my italics), if “project” means plans.

- 66 Judith Baumele, "Die 'Zehnerschaft' als Beispiel für weibliche Selbsthilfe unter dem NS-Regime," *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 21 (1992): 271–88; Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*.
- 67 Ibid., 98, 180–86.
- 68 Ibid., 101, 170–79. See also Sarah Cushman's point that terms like *sisters* or *mother-daughter* obscure the fact that these women acted as protectors and providers, traditionally male roles, and since dehumanization had deprived people of gendered signifiers, nontraditional behaviors were not remarkable at this point. Cushman, "Women of Birkenau," 135.
- 69 Rebecca Boehling and Uta Larkey, *Life and Loss in the Shadow of the Holocaust: A Jewish Family's Untold Story* (Cambridge, Engl., 2011).
- 70 Fanny Stern-Lazego, video, Camp des Milles, Aix en Provence, France. She could not acquire a visa for herself until 1944. My thanks to Page Delano for sharing this story with me.
- 71 Edith Horowitz, in Gurewitsch, *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters*, 8, 64–76.
- 72 Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 91.
- 73 Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, eds., *Microhistories of the Holocaust* (New York, 2017). My newest work—focusing on microgeographies of flight, such as borders and consulate lines, as Jews escaped from German armies to Portugal—shows a *flattening of gender roles* rather than an extreme role reversal: both men and women stood in consulate lines, both applied to aid organizations, both waited and worried in cafés, and both had lost homes, homelands, and their places in society. Still, men may have suffered more from their status loss even as women shared their grief, economic decline, and fearful waiting for visas and ships. See Marion Kaplan, *Jewish Refugees Fleeing Hitler: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal, 1940–1945* (New Haven, Conn., 2019).
- 74 Aleksun, "Daily Survival."
- 75 Carla Pekelis, *My Version of the Facts*, trans. George Hochfield (Evanston, Ill., 2004), 148–49.
- 76 Kurt Ibson, letters to family in the United States, Aug.–Nov. 1940. Thank you to Ralph Ibson for sharing his father's letters with me.
- 77 The expanding field of postmemory also has much to offer, yet gender as a category of analysis is not highlighted even though women have written some of the best postmemoirs. Gender appears only at the periphery: in hiding, passing as an Aryan, or the huge number of cases of refugees who fled westward and eastward. See Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York, 1989); idem, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History, and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York, 2004); Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish History* (Berkeley, 2010); Paula Fass, *Inheriting the Holocaust: A Second-Generation Memoir* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2009); and Helen Epstein, *Where She Came From: A Daughter's Search for Her Mother's History* (New York, 2005). In the introduction to Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York, 2012), Hirsch describes coming to memory studies in the

[55]

*Did Gender
Matter
during the
Holocaust?*

●

Marion
Kaplan

[56]

*Jewish
Social
Studies*

•

Vol. 24
No. 2

way she approached feminist studies; memories allowed her to explore women's experiences that they might not have documented during or directly after the Holocaust. Now it is time for gendered memory studies.

78 One of the newest works available is Andrea Peto, Louise Hecht, and Karolina Krasuka, eds., *Women and the Holocaust: New Perspectives and Challenges* (Warsaw, 2015). I look forward to Atina Grossmann and Dorota Glowacka, *Gender and the Holocaust*, forthcoming.

79 See Lisa Pine, "Gender and Holocaust Victims: A Reappraisal," *Journal of Jewish Identities* 1, no. 2 (2008): 121–41.

80 Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren, eds., *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington, Ind., 2018). See also JoAnn DiGeorgio-Lutz and Donna Gosbee, eds., *Women and Genocide: Gendered Experiences of Violence* (Toronto, 2016).

MARION KAPLAN is the Skirball Professor of Modern Jewish History at New York University. She is a three-time National Jewish Book Award winner, for *The Making of the Jewish Middle Class: Women, Family and Identity in Imperial Germany* (1991), *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (1998), and *Gender and Jewish History* (with Deborah Dash Moore, 2011). Her newest book, *Jewish Refugees Fleeing Hitler: Hope and Anxiety in Portugal, 1940–45*, will be published in 2019. marion.kaplan@nyu.edu

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.