

# THE EXPERIENCES OF JEWISH WOMEN IN THE HOLOCAUST

JENNY PIASECKI

Communicated by: Dr. Margarete Feinstein

*Department of History*

## ABSTRACT

Throughout the Holocaust, Jewish women revealed their strength in the face of adversity. During the 1930's, they tried to keep their families safe and create a sense of normalcy. When their husbands and loved ones were being sent to concentration camps, they either went underground and became a part of the resistance movements, or they helped other women in the camps to survive. This paper explores the experiences of Jewish women during the Holocaust.

Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January of 1933. Almost over night, the Jewish people in Germany saw their everyday lives change. Everything from where they could shop for food, where they could work, and even who they could marry or adopt all was affected by Nazi laws. Still, the Jews tried to make their lives tolerable and as normal as possible in the increasingly hostile conditions within their homeland. However, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, the Nazi anti-Semitism increased, and soon Jews (along with Gypsies, homosexuals, and various other enemies of the state in Germany) were being sent to forced labor camps and concentration camps. In their roles as wives and mothers, along with the Nazi's attitudes about the different sexes, what were the experiences of Jewish women during the Holocaust? How were their traditional gender roles affected by the mounting Nazi racism?

Nazi persecution of the Jews intensified over the 1930s in Germany. In 1933, a bill was passed to keep Jewish people out of German state jobs, such as prosecutors, judges, lawyers, doctors working for the national health plan in Germany,...etc. (Kaplan 24-25). The only way Jewish men in these positions (as they were dominated by men during this time period) could keep their jobs was if they had served in World War I, or had been in that job before 1914 (Kaplan 27). As a result, millions of men lost their jobs. The unemployment rate began to rise in the Jewish male population, and it was becoming harder for them to find work in the Nazi regime. Therefore, Jewish women, many who had never left the house for outside employment before in their lives, now had to go out and get a job to help keep the basic needs of their families sustained. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted in Germany. These laws described who was Jewish. Anyone with at least three

Jewish grandparents, who belonged to the Jewish community, or who had married a Jew were considered to be full Jews to the state (Kaplan 77). While other countries in Europe did not have such racially motivated laws, there was still a strong sense of anti-Semitism in other countries.

It was during this time that Jewish women (especially those of the middle classes) experienced a new role in their lives. This was the beginning of what author and Holocaust historian Marion Kaplan calls a "gender role reversal" among the Jewish women (50). Jewish women were now the family providers, a predominately masculine role, in middle-class German society during the 1930s. This was not the case for those Jewish families who were not fully integrated into German Jewish society, such as orthodox Jews, or Eastern European Jews. These women kept the traditional gender roles of the era. For those women working outside the home, a double burden was created. Working outside the home created the responsibility of running the household: comforting the children, shopping for food, and basic housework (54). This left many women with a lot of stress and very little time to themselves.

Another form of "gender role reversal" among these women was to become the protector of the family. As the harassment by Nazis and "Aryans" increased, Jewish women began to promote the idea of emigration to their husbands (Baumel 7). The connection between family protector and emigration is that these women were trying to move their families away from the Nazi threat. Judith Tydor Baumel, a Holocaust historian, in her book *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, believes the reason for this heightened sense among Jewish women (and their urgent need to emigrate) was

due to the fact that Jewish women had more contact with grassroots anti-Semitic movements than their male counterparts (7). This would make sense, given that women usually went out to do the grocery shopping, clothing shopping, and so on. Jewish women were more likely to come in contact with the every day citizens who took up the Nazi cause. However, men were more integrated in the political and economic spheres of Germany, and thus tended to take a more "objective" view on the Nazi's rise to power, feeling that Hitler's anti-Semitic preachings were nothing more than "propaganda" to win the election (Kaplan 66). Many men ignored their wives' pleas for emigration, believing that Hitler and the Nazi party would not be in power for any significant amount of time.

This need to emigrate greatly increased after *Kristallnacht*, the pogrom of November 9, 1938. During this pogrom, the SS and other Nazi sympathizers woke Jewish people up at three in the morning, and destroyed their homes and synagogues. Later that morning, the SS made those same Jews clean up the destruction (Kaplan 122-123). After the destruction, the SS had created, Jewish men were rounded up and sent to concentration camps. Only those who could prove they were about to leave the country could escape the camps (123). Jewish women scrambled to get the necessary emigration papers and money to free their male counterparts from the camps (127). This is a good example of the protective nature of the "gender role reversal." Jewish women were now trying to save their husbands or fathers physically from the Nazis.

Another form of protection used by Jewish women, if they could not get visas or the necessary papers, was to make the decision (along with their husbands) to send their children to another country, hoping to keep them away from the Nazi threat and keeping them safe (Baumel 8). Marion Kaplan writes that between 1934 and 1939, nearly 18,000 Jewish children left Germany for other countries, mainly Great Britain (116). While the care-taking and rearing of the children was a traditional female role during this era, one could assume that physical protection of the family would have been a masculine role. Since women were convincing their husbands to let their children emigrate to places like Great Britain, they became the physical protectors of the family, thus illustrating the "gender role reversal" that was common throughout the Holocaust.

Anti-Semitism in other countries helped to pave the way for Nazi collaboration. In Hungary for example, Shula Gara Lack, a Jewish woman, recalls a pre-war incident that happened to her in the fourth grade:

. . . The fourth year when I went to another elementary school [there] were very few Jews in that school and in the very beginning of the year, one of the girls [threw] me into the lap of another girl, and [she] was very annoyed and screaming, "Don't throw that Dirty Jew to my lap." And that was the first time in my life that I heard that distinction that a Jew is something else than

Hungarian. I looked at her, I said "What you mean dirty Jew? I am a Hungarian like you are," and then I get, "No you are not, you are a Jew." (*Daring to Resist*)

For Shula, the idea of being thought of only as a Jew came as a shock. However, the idea that Jews were a separate race was at the core of Nazi ideology. Yehuda Bauer, a Holocaust historian writes, "Hitler saw the Jews as a kind of anti-race, a nomadic mongrel group. . . the Nazis described them as parasites, viruses or loathsome creatures from the animal and insect world (rats, cockroaches)" (91). The existing anti-Semitism also helped the Nazis to invade other areas of Europe, such as Austria or Hungary, since these people would accept the Nazi ideology of the Jews being the enemy of all the non-Jews in Europe.

From 1938 onward, the Nazis stepped up their persecution of the Jews. It was also around this time that Nazis began to conquer Europe. Shortly after the November pogrom of 1938, Jewish people were being called up and sent to forced labor camps. The Nazis began to mobilize Jewish labor in Berlin in May of 1940 (174). Marion Kaplan writes, "All Jewish men between 18 and 55 and Jewish women between 18 and 50 had to register with the division in charge of forced labor in their communities" (174). Many Jewish women were forced to work in various factories in Europe. Hitler's "Final Solution" began in 1941, in which mass deportations of Jews were sent to concentration camps. By December 1941, some of camps were now beginning the extermination of the "enemies of the state" (Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, and political enemies) (179). This new camp situation, where every day was a struggle for survival, presented a new set of problems to which Jewish women had to adapt.

Once Jewish women arrived at the camps, the first thing the Nazis decided was who was to be selected for work or for death. Young men in their twenties were automatically selected for work. However, there were factors that determined whether or not a woman would be selected for work. Gerda Weissmann Klein, a teenager in Poland during the Holocaust, describes a scene where people from the Bialitz ghetto where being selected for work or death:

. . . The dying old woman was thrown on a truck meant for the aged and ill. Here the SS man kicked her and she screamed. He kicked her again. On the same truck [was] . . . the mother with her little girls. The twins were smiling; unaware of what was happening, they were busy catching the raindrops. An epileptic woman was put on the truck; her dog jumped after her. The SS man kicked the dog away, but the dog kept trying to get in the truck. To our horror, the SS man pulled his gun and shot the dog. (88)

This truck was being filled with those who were selected for death. The Nazis considered the sick, the elderly, and those with small children unfit for work. Judith Tydor Baumel

writes, “Women who were pregnant or carrying small children were automatically selected for death. Scarred women . . . women who looked older than their years were also selected for death” (22). The Nazis believed that these people would not be able to do the hard work that they would require of the inmates at the camps, and thus sentenced them to immediate death. Conversely, women who looked young, healthy, and who did not have small children were selected for work, and were able to avoid death for a little longer. Women coming from traditional Eastern European families were also more likely to be selected for death, since they often had young children accompanying them.

The reasoning behind the selection process was Jews were to be used as slave labor. They had to be able-bodied people, who could do hard work. For example, Ruth Elias, a Czech Jew in her early twenties, who was sent to Auschwitz, was forced to move heavy rocks from one spot to another, for no apparent reason (113). The amazing part of Ruth’s story is that she was able to conceal her pregnancy up until she gave birth by alluding Dr. Mengele (a Nazi doctor known for using the Jews for various medical experiments) during a selection (126). She was able to give birth to a daughter in Auschwitz (146). Once Dr. Mengele found out about the baby, he had Ruth’s breasts tightly bound so she would not be able to feed her child, wanting to see how long it would take for the baby to starve to death. The child died six days later after a morphine injection administered by another inmate (146-151). However, Ruth’s story is unusual, since many pregnant women were selected for death.

Those who survived this stage of selection then had to figure out ways to survive. Many women created “mutual assistance” groups to share food, information, and offer protection. Baumel notes three elements in the formation of these groups: a similar education (especially important was religious education), family ties, and a common geographical origin (74). In other words, with similar backgrounds, the members of these groups felt like they could trust each other. For example, Bertha Ferderber-Salz, an orthodox Jewish woman from Poland, worked in a clothing factory in the Bergen-Belsen camp. She worked with seven other females, all whom had the common bond that they were separated from their families and missed them terribly (118-119). The quota for their group was sixty-four items of clothing, or eight items each (118). Each of the women tried to help out one woman who had heart disease, so that the group would make their quota (118). Ferderber-Salz’s niece, Sabina, became close friends with the other women who worked in the kitchen in Bergen-Belsen. Sometimes they would give her some leftover food, and she would take it back to her aunts who lived in the same block as her (156).

Many Jewish women used the domestic training that they received before the Holocaust for their survival. Baumel writes:

. . . Pre-war training in domestic matters—sewing, food preparation, personal hygiene—stood them in

good stead in camp situations where a torn uniform meant death and where a properly treated dirty potato peel could mean the difference between starvation and one more day’s survival. (26)

Throughout the camps, many women formed these mutual assistance groups, seeking strength in numbers. They formed deep bonds with each other, which also helped to increase their chances for survival. In other words, with emotional involvement, there was more of an interest invested in the group to see that everyone in the group survived.<sup>1</sup>

Another side to the story of Jewish women in the Holocaust is the role they played in the underground and resistance movements. Many women, especially teenage girls, saw what was happening to other Jews in their towns, and made up their minds not to be sent to the concentration camps. They tried to hide from the Nazis. Barbara Ledermann Rodbell was a teenager in Holland in 1942, when the Nazis invaded (*Daring to Resist*). She recalls the day that the Nazis came to her town:

. . . There was a sudden roundup by the Germans, they rounded up the Jews in our area and as I saw them coming, I got very much afraid and I took off my star and I ran down the stairs and ended up I saw the tram roll and the Germans had stopped the tram, and I could get on and go to my dancing class where there were people who were going to hide me for the duration of this particular roundup . . . This was when I decided that it was time for me to disappear. I changed my name, took off my star, I became a non-Jewish person. (*Daring to Resist*)

Going underground was the only alternative for some Jewish people to being sent to the camps. It is estimated that in Berlin alone, between 5,000 and 7,000 Jews went into hiding (Kaplan 228).

In order to go into hiding, a Jew needed two things: false papers that separated themselves from their Jewish identity, and a lot of money (Kaplan 207). It also did not hurt if the person did not fit the stereotype of a Jew (dark skin coloring or dark, curly hair), but looked more “Aryan”- like (blonde hair and blue eyes) (205). Jewish men had the added problem of being circumcised (whereas Christian Europeans did not circumcise), which would automatically give them away as being a Jew during the war. Circumcision was an easy check for Nazi soldiers if they suspected a man was Jewish. It was

<sup>1</sup> Jewish men also formed mutual assistance groups, but many historians do not feel that they met with the same success as women’s groups did. One of the reasons for this is the way men and women are brought up. Carol Gilligan (a psychologist who studies women’s development) feels that women define themselves in the way that they care for others. Nancy Chodorow, another psychologist, says, “. . . men’s mature relationships often reinforce separation, [while] women view ongoing attachment as the path that leads to maturity. . . .” In other words, women’s groups were more successful because women are taught to work with each other more. See Baumel, pages 85 and 92.

also easier for women to go into hiding because able-bodied, non-Jewish men were expected to be fighting in the war. Women, however, were not as likely to be turned in during this time.

After having gone underground, women faced a whole new set of problems. Questions such as getting food or worries about being caught by the Nazis were on their minds. One serious issue was how could they hide themselves and their families. Many families who went underground would separate themselves; the children would hide in one spot and the adults in another.

For most women, their children's safety was a serious issue. Bertha Ferderber-Salz, for example, left her two young daughters with a Christian woman, so they would not be caught and sent away to one of the death camps. This woman, as Ferderber-Salz found out later, kept the children hidden with the idea that should the two girls become orphaned after the war, she would have them baptized, thus "saving their souls" (65). She also later found out that her children had been abused, through hard labor and a starvation diet (77-78).

Going underground was an extremely dangerous option, both for adults and children. Of the 5,000 to 7,000 Berlin Jews who went into hiding, only 1,400 of them survived (Kaplan 228). However, to these Jewish women who went underground, it was worth the risk. To them, the only other option was dying in a concentration camp at the hands of the Nazis.

Resistance also took a political form for Jewish women during the Holocaust. Many women, most likely of the middle class, had been involved in political movements, even before Hitler and the Nazis had completely taken over. The main political parties that Jewish women (mainly in Germany) were active in were the Socialist and the Communist parties (215). These parties were the main opposition to the Nazi party. Hitler had outlawed the socialist and communist parties soon after he took office. These parties (along with the Jewish women who had joined them) wanted to make sure that the Nazis were out of power as soon as possible.

Another movement Jewish women were a part of was the Zionist movement. Zionism was more of a youth movement in which Jewish teenage girls often played a role. Shula Gara Lack (the Hungarian Jew mentioned earlier) was 13 years old when she joined a Zionist youth movement in Budapest, Hungary (*Daring to Resist*). Shula was able to access information on what was really going on in the concentration camps of Eastern Europe by helping Polish Jews who had escaped. Shula says:

And from these peoples we learned about the gas chambers and about all the terrible things that was going on. And, we learned the young people, we believed them, but the older people, like my parents, just couldn't believe it, and my parents was always telling me, "even if it's true what

you're telling me, it cannot happen to us." (*Daring to Resist*)

Information was a valuable resource for those who were determined to evade the Nazis.

Sometimes, the resistance took on a more direct form. Author and Holocaust survivor Vera Laska writes:

They [female resisters] purloined German equipment, including arms. They sabotaged railways, blew up fuel depots, mined bridges and tunnels, cut telephone and telegraph wires. They placed explosives into barracks and under vehicles. They slashed tires. They dropped lice on German personnel. They blackmailed or talked the Germans into selling their insignia belts, identification cards and even their guns. (253)

While this kind of violent resistance was not widely practiced by Jewish female resisters, it does help to illustrate the idea of Kaplan's gender role reversal. This would normally be seen as something men would do: men are stereotypically more violent than women. However, the Holocaust was anything but a normal situation, and thus called for somewhat unorthodox measures by those who wanted to survive.

Even those in the concentration camps found ways to resist. It may not have been as overt as their counterparts, but they still tried to make their voices heard. For example, Judith Baumel writes about one particular clothing sorting station:

[Women working at a clothing- sorting station at one of the camps] would sabotage the clothing operation by placing handwritten notes into the pockets of coats being returned to Germany, telling the new owner that the coat had once belonged to a Jewish woman who had been killed. (341)

Ferderber-Salz worked in a clothing factory during her time in Bergen-Belsen. One of her main tasks in the factory was to sew the clothing Nazi officers would wear. She claimed that any item of clothing that came her way would not leave her workstation "... without a serious defect" (87). Although subtle, it still was a way for those Jewish women who were imprisoned in the camps to resist.

There were also acts of sabotage by Jewish women who had worked in the forced labor camps. A camp at Plazów, Poland deliberately damaged anti-aircraft shells they were working on (Karay 293). Another example of resistance was by one woman who refused to go to the bomb shelter when her camp came under attack, preferring to have the bombs kill her instead of the Nazis (Kaplan 180). While suicide is not normally seen as a form of resistance, many felt that if they were going to die, they were not going to die at the hands of the Nazis. Their last act of defiance was to die on their own terms. Even those who might not have had a voice in the concentration camps found ways of letting themselves be

heard.

Jewish women were a strong force in the Holocaust. In the 1930s, they tried to keep a sense of normalcy within their households to keep the family from worrying about the growing anti-Semitism. They got jobs when their husbands or fathers had lost theirs; they had become the family provider. As they tried to find food with their shrinking resources, they came into contact with the grassroots anti-Semitism. They realized early on that the situation in Germany would get worse for those of the Jewish faith, and these women urged their husbands to emigrate so as to get out of harm's way. When the Nazis were rounding up the Jewish people in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, they took it upon themselves to get the money needed to emigrate from the country. In these two situations, Jewish women had become the protectors of the family.

Family provider and protector were traditional masculine roles during the 1930s in Europe. As the Nazis stepped up their persecution of Jews in Germany, and later throughout Europe, Jewish women adapted to and confronted those situations by doing what they felt was best to help themselves and their families. For those who were sent to the camps, they formed groups to help and ensure their survival. For other women, they went underground and became a part of the resistance movements. For various reasons (social contacts, physical traits, money), women seemed to have the edge in survival in the underground. All of these facts show just how important Jewish women were to the role of survival during the Holocaust, just as it is important to recognize the contributions women make to history. In horrific situations, it is always

amazing to note how the human spirit finds ways to keep people alive and to help them keep some of their dignity. In that respect, that could be seen as the greatest lesson of all.

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JENNY PIASECKI graduated in May 2001 with a degree in History and minor in Political Science. This paper was originally written for H215, *The Nature of History*, taught by Dr. Chestnut. "The Holocaust has always been an interest of mine, since I read *The Diary of Anne Frank* in the eighth grade. I am hoping to make the Holocaust or genocide studies my main areas of study when I attend graduate school."