



Meeting or Beating Gendered Expectations during the Holocaust

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During the Nazi Regime, Nazi officials looked for more efficient ways to ‘solve the Jewish problem’ with the Nazi idealization of the master race and Lebensraum. Imprisonment, exploitation, and death of Nazi outsiders began as early as 1933 with the opening in Dachau. In the early years, men were more likely to be selected for the eventual death in labor camps, but as the years progressed, the expansion of the camp systems took place, ghettos became overcrowded, the war with the Allies became more brutal, and mass murder of Nazi outsiders became the easy solution for Nazi officials. As the mass killings began, many officers hesitated at the command to slaughter women and children, but ruthless volunteer killers were never hard

to find. Men and women were humiliated in different ways based on their gender identity, and perpetrators, victims, and bystanders faced different challenges based off of their gender as the years progressed. The role of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders during the Holocaust was specified and shaped by gendered expectations of the Third Reich, which determined how the atrocities committed affected them throughout the regime.

At the early stages of the Final Solution, there was confusion and hesitation among the perpetrators of the mass murder on how to conduct themselves when following out orders to kill. The hesitation among the killers was greatly based on gender roles. Lieutenant

Heinz Buchmann of Reserve Police Battalion 101, learned about an up incoming order to massacre the village of Josefow where all women, children, and elderly were to be shot on the spot. Buchmann explained to Lieutenant Hagen that “as a Hamburg business man and reserve lieutenant, he would in no case participate in such an action, in which defenseless women and children are shot”.²⁴⁷ In Buchmann’s case, he showed some signs that his beliefs were not wholly enveloped by Nazi perversions of manhood as being violent. In Buchmann’s case, he saw himself as an honorable German that could not justify killing women and children, at the least, and their Jewishness was irrelevant.

Gender also affected perpetrators of the mass killing during the Third Reich greatly because of how ideas about ‘proper’ behavior of men and women influenced the occupations available to men and women. The specific gender expectations in Nazi Germany affected the career path of men and women early in their development with education through the Hitler Youth. Hitler Youth membership was required for all “Aryan” German Youth from ages 10 to 18. Hitler youth- both boys and girls- “were to be guided and strengthened by physical activity, education, and sports”, gaining confidence, self-esteem, and political enthusiasm. Yet at the age of fourteen, the programs shifted so that the boys received training preparing them for military action, political involvement, yet

the girls received “training in health, child care, domestic skills, and self-improvement in preparation for motherhood, domesticity, and comradeship in marriage”.²⁴⁸ The division in the Hitler Youth based on gender roles reflects the division in German and Nazi employment. Men received more military positions and more often acted directly in the mass murder of Nazi outsiders while women were expected to play more domestic roles.

However, despite gendered teachings, many women sought to play an active role in Nazi agendas. There were even both female and male SS guards who brutalized prisoners of the concentration camps and death camps.²⁴⁹ Many women tried to encourage Nazi ideology by becoming teachers through the Hitler youth. For example, Melita Maschmann of the League of German Girls, was eager to be a part of German colonization of Poland, and to ‘improve’ the Polish land where she thought “the noble, refined and intellectual qualities were everywhere in danger of being suppressed by the brutality of the primitive”, referring to the Polish.²⁵⁰ Melita was supportive of the Nazi ideals of race and space, and tried to do her part to assist in the colonization of Poland, but was limited as a perpetrator based on gender expectations that kept her from having a more direct impact as a perpetrator. However, in some cases, a person’s occupation made them a

²⁴⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992, 1998), 56.

²⁴⁸ Ursula Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009) 94-95.

²⁴⁹ Doris L. Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust* (Lanham, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 227.

²⁵⁰ Melita Maschmann, “A German Colonizer of Poland in 1939 or 1940”, from *Account Rendered: A dossier on My Former Self*, 1963, 114-115.

perpetrator without them even realizing. In the Siauliai ghetto, where Jews were forbidden to have children, women were forced to have abortions. A woman in her eighth month of pregnancy was forced to have a premature birth at the hands of the doctor, while the nurse was to kill the child “in such a way that she would not know the nature of the act”.²⁵¹ If the statement held true, this woman was a direct perpetrator, but was made unaware of the fact due to her gender and employment position, thereby blurring the lines between bystander and perpetrator.

Gender affected the perpetrators of the mass killing in Nazi Germany in varying ways based on the idea that Nazi Germany was so entrenched in violence, that violence became a significant factor for sexuality. Ursula Mahlendorf remembers the only sexual education she received in the League of German Girls was from her instructor who said, “When your future husband makes you a mother, he will put his member into you like a sword thrusts itself into its sheath, and his seed will impregnate the ovum in your belly”.²⁵² This violent rhetoric made Ursula more afraid and confused about sex in general, and even more terrified when Nazi propagators used rape or sexual intimidation as a political statement. The map that Melita Maschmann’s father had of Europe illustrates propagation of foreign sexual aggressors, by showing a crying baby girl, Germany, about to be overrun by a strong baby boy, Poland, to represent the need for Germany to raise the birth rate to

protect Germany in the effort towards race and space.²⁵³ Fear of sexual intimidation influenced some women to encourage destruction of ‘enemies’ who they thought were rapists. Ursula Mahlendorf almost became a direct perpetrator herself when she was a nurse in a hospital where two orderlies were prepping a Russian POW for surgery, and told her “that the Russians are rapists” and that they would kill “the dog” if she wanted. Had she not been interrupted by another doctor, Paul, she reports that she would have told them to kill the Russian soldier.²⁵⁴ The scenario with Ursula and the two soldiers reflects a common occurrence in Nazi Germany where male perpetrators would try to appeal to or impress the woman in their life with evidence of their violence towards outsiders by sending home pictures of themselves next to piles of dead Nazi outsiders²⁵⁵ or letters from the Eastern front describing their ‘masculine’ “achievements...in the battle against these subhumans [population of the Soviet Union]”.²⁵⁶

Male victims of the Nazi persecution who were trying to hide from Nazi perpetrators or pass as ‘Aryan’ struggled in different ways than female victims. Circumcision of Jewish men left them at risk for discovery since most non-Jewish men of Eastern Europe at this time very rarely were circumcised, and with physical examination, Jewish men were easily discovered. This was a fear Jewish men had that Jewish women did not. In Warsaw, about two-thirds of Jews hiding

²⁵¹ Raul Hilberg, “Two Thousand Years of Jewish Appeasement” From *The Holocaust*, ed. Donald Niewyk (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 146.

²⁵² Mahlendorf, 123.

²⁵³ Maschmann, “A German Colonizer of Poland in 1939 or 1940”, 114.

²⁵⁴ Mahlendorf, 210.

²⁵⁵ Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 148.

²⁵⁶ Karl Fuchs, “A German Soldier’s Letters from the Eastern Front”, Letter, 1941, 119-124.

on the Aryan side were women,²⁵⁷ which reflects the difficulty men had trying to pass, especially by 1943 when most German 'Aryan' men within the age range for the military were drafted. Therefore, Jewish men were more likely to be stopped out of suspicion and, without false identification, less likely to pass for 'Aryan'.²⁵⁸

Female victims of Nazi persecution struggled and lived with fear in different ways than male victims when going into hiding. Female outsiders in hiding were vulnerable to sexual assault and persecution, which would go unpunished. Fanya Gottesfeld Heller described how her aunt was raped in front of her uncle when the gestapo couldn't find Heller, and how the few members of her family she told didn't believe her.²⁵⁹ Heller's story represents the risk of sexual assault at the hands of Nazi perpetrators, but women in hiding were also at great risk to be sexually exploited by people who understood their vulnerability and took advantage of their opportunity for unpunished sexual assault and coercion. Joan Ringelheim wrote of a Jewish survivor "Pauline" who was molested by male family members of the people who hid her, and she was kept silent by threat of denouncement. Pauline told Ringelheim "I can feel the fear... Sometimes I think it was equally frightening as the Germans. It became within me a tremendous... I didn't know how... what to do. I had nobody to talk about it".²⁶⁰ Pauline's experience represents a unique circumstance of

isolation, fear, and victimization more commonly familiar and understood by female victims in hiding during the Holocaust. Pauline, like many other women, was unable to seek help and escape her abusers because that would endanger the lives of her family, but lived in torment which she suffered with more than Nazi perpetrators.

Women's and men's experiences as victims of the Holocaust differed in terms of deportation and the camp selection process, as is described by Myrna Goldenberg's statement that men and women shared "different horrors, same hell". From 1939 to 1940, men were more likely to be taken from the Ghettos to the labor camps, and therefore more likely to be killed by Nazi persecutors. However, from 1941 until the end of the war, women were more likely to be selected for death in the expanding system of death camps, especially if these women were pregnant or clinging to small children,²⁶¹ who went directly to death according to survivor, Ruth Kluger, who claimed that "to get out of the camp [Auschwitz], you really had to be alive more than twelve years".²⁶² Female victims of the Holocaust suffered in different ways from men based on the gendered expectation and common reality that women were to be more devoted care takers of their children compared to men. According to survivor Lawrence Langer, most mothers who refused to be separated from their children at Auschwitz-Birkenau and were sent to the gas chambers, sometimes

²⁵⁷ Zoe Vania Waxman, "Women and the Holocaust" From *The Holocaust* ed. Donald Niewyk (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 130-131.

²⁵⁸ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203.

²⁵⁹ Waxman, *The Holocaust*, 131.

²⁶⁰ Waxman, *The Holocaust*, 131-132.

²⁶¹ Bergen, *War and Genocide: A concise History of the Holocaust*, 191.

²⁶² Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press, 2001), 149.

against the advice of experienced prisoners to give the children to the elderly who were to be killed along with the children.²⁶³ However, women suffered based on the gendered expectation that women are the primary care-giver for children within their families whether they reflected this expectation in their actions or not. In *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, Tadeusz Borowski described how a woman he saw tried to claim a crying child wasn't hers to escape death. A sailor named Andrei, knocked her down, picked her up by her hair, then threw her in the truck that was taking Jews away after saying, "Ah, you bloody Jewess! So you're running from your own child I'll show you, you whore!"²⁶⁴ This woman had already faced tormenting dehumanization at the hands of the Nazis, and saw that she was bound for death if she reminded with her son. Yet, she was shamed for not holding true to the gendered expectations of a moral mother by a ruthless figure who was assisting mass murder, and despite the fact that she was facing a completely immoral and senseless environment.

Concentration and death camp prisoners, male and female, were vulnerable to sexual assault and exploitation, despite the fact that published testimonies of sexual assault of male victims in the camps are less common. Many women, such as Judith Magyar Isaacson, were terrified of the vulnerability to rape inside the camps, which Isaacson described in her book *Seed of Sarah*.²⁶⁵ There are published testimonies of the fear woman had of

vulnerability to molestation, which could reflect that men were less aware of their own vulnerability due to the fact that women were more often raised to be aware of their sexual vulnerability more so than men, or could reflect lack of testimony. However, men were also vulnerable to sexual assault in the camps. Roman Frister was raped by another prisoner in Auschwitz at age 15, as he described in his book, *The Cap or the Price of a Life*. The title of this book refers to the cap which his molester stole from him, which Frister replaced by stealing another cap, which may have resulted in the death of another prisoner, for prisoners without caps were shot.²⁶⁶ Frister was vulnerable to rape and theft which almost led to his death, and did lead to the death of another. Frister suffered from the psychological and physical abuse of rape, which he was vulnerable to inside the camp, where every Nazi outsider was little more than an animal to the Nazi persecutors, especially as the war and violence progressed over time. The only qualifier is that more women have reported sexual assault in the camps, yet there are millions of untold stories and experiences that will forever go unreported.

Methods of humiliation, demoralization, and dehumanization often differed during the Holocaust in a gendered form. Photos of Battalion 101 officers smiling next to Jewish elders on kneeling on the ground testify to the joy Nazi persecutors found in humiliating their victims.²⁶⁷ Older Jewish men were targeted by the Police Battalion 309 soldiers for humiliation due to the elders'

²⁶³ Waxman, "Women and the Holocaust", 135.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 226.

²⁶⁶ Waxman, "Women and the Holocaust", 133.

²⁶⁷ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992, 1998), 40-41.

position of respect. Elderly Jewish men were threatened to dance before the officers, and if the men did not dance as the officers wished, the Jewish men would have their beards set on fire.²⁶⁸ The elderly men were targeted because of the position of masculine power in their Jewish culture, and by forcing the Jewish men to dance and lighting their beards on fire, the Nazis tormented the elderly men in ways that specially related to their sense of morality as men.

Female victims suffered humiliation in different ways than male victims at the hands of the Nazis. Photos of smiling reserve police of Battalion 101 at the around women at the “undressing barracks” testify the gendered humiliation of victims. The “undressing barracks” were a humiliating part of the deportation process which was implemented by Lt. Gnade in Fall of 1942 when the Miedzyrzec ghetto was subjected to brutal “clearing operations” which meant that the Order Police strip searched the Jews for valuables.²⁶⁹ When this part of the deportation process was introduced in 1942, men would be completely naked while women would sometimes be allowed to keep so underclothes on,²⁷⁰ but eventually with the escalation of the war, gender had less of an influence on how the victims were treated and everyone would be completely naked in the process of entering the camps. Zoe Vania Waxmen states that a comparative study of the

testimonies of male and female victims shows that more women describe “the agony of having to stand naked in front of men, of being searched for hidden valuables, of being subjected to obscene remarks, of being shorn of all their hair, and being tattooed”.²⁷¹ Female victims were traumatized and humiliated by strip searches because of their socially constructed ideals of their own identity, humanity, and womanhood grounded in religion and modesty. Rena Korneich Gelissen described her tearful devastation from the strip searching and tattooing with the understanding that “Our traditions, our beliefs, are scorned and ridiculed by the acts they commit”.²⁷² Even though the victims were forced into the strip searches, they felt ashamed, and the humiliating exposure they faced is reported to have had a more apparent influence of humiliation for the female victims of the Holocaust.

In the cases where victims were homosexual or in a ‘privileged marriage’, women were persecuted less aggressively than men. Nazis persecuted homosexuals because Nazis saw that homosexuality could lead to the “end of the Germanic world”²⁷³. However, lesbians were not seen as a threat to the birthrate due to the argument that lesbians would not “lastingly withdraw from normal sexual relations”²⁷⁴, or women could just be forced to have children, which the Nazis showed with their implementation of the Lebensborn program.²⁷⁵ Jews in mixed

²⁶⁸ Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, “Hitler’s Willing Executioners” From *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation* (3rd Ed.) ed. Donald L. Niewyk (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 93.

²⁶⁹ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 40-41.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 82.

²⁷¹ Waxman, “Women and the Holocaust”, 138.

²⁷² *Ibid*.

²⁷³ Heinrich Himmler, “On the Question of Homosexuality”, speech to the SS-Gruppenfuhrer, February 18, 1937, 94.

²⁷⁴ Robert G Moeller, *The Nazi State and German Society: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 93.

²⁷⁵ Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood*, 198.

marriages were more protected than other Jewish people until the 1944, for the Nazi officials feared protest from 'Aryan Germans' who would be offended by the persecution of Jewish people they are related to. Ursula Buttner argues that Jewish people in mixed marriages were going to be killed and the end of the war saved them, which reflects the events of increased deportation of Jewish people from mixed marriages in 1945.²⁷⁶ Similar to male homosexuals, Jewish men in mixed marriages were at greater risk for persecution than Jewish women in mixed marriages because the household was defined by the male figurehead.²⁷⁷ However, increased deportation at the start of 1945 shows how persecution of all outsiders escalated aggressively. Nazi officials disregarded gender even more, which Himmler illustrates with his 1943 statement that "Whether 10,000 Russian females fall down from exhaustion while digging an anti-tank ditch interests me only in so far as the anti-tank ditch for Germany is finished".²⁷⁸ Himmler statement provides an exemplary representation of the fact that in the later stages of the Final Solution, gender made no difference in the agenda of 'war of annihilation' in the sense that every victim was to die, but there was a large differentiation in murder method.

Gendered limitations for employment and the fight for economic survival in war time influenced how female bystanders knew about Nazi crimes against outsiders in different ways, and how the individuals reacted to

the knowledge. Ursula Mahlendorf's mother expressed after the war that she had been worried about Ursula's enthusiasm for Hitler, yet, when she opposed Ursula's request that she join the Women's League or become a party member, all her mother said was "I cannot afford the time for anything except making a living for us".²⁷⁹ Ursula's mother may have opposed the regime, but as a single mother, may have felt as though she could not risk voices her opinions to her daughter because of the enthusiasm Ursula held. However, her mother may have just not cared enough about politics when she had a family to raise, which had been sent into poverty with the death of her husband.²⁸⁰

Female bystanders who opposed the oppression of outsiders may have felt pressure to stay silent due to the gendered expectation that women remain politically conscious, but not voice their opinions against the politically dominant 'Aryan' male. When Teresa Stangl learned of her husband, Franz Stangl's involvement of administration in the T-4 program, she was disturbed by the knowledge, could not have sex with him, and moved away to continue the marriage at a distance. However, she expressed inconsistencies in later interviews by saying that her husband would have given up his work had she asked, and later saying she could not have stopped him from being involved.²⁸¹ Teresa's inability to voice her political and moral opinion to her husband reflects a troubling gender dynamic of the Nazi regime. If Teresa

²⁷⁶ Marion A. Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 191-197.

²⁷⁷ Kaplan, *Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany*, 149.

²⁷⁸ Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 171.

²⁷⁹ Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working through a Nazi Childhood*, 115.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 58.

²⁸¹ Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*, 193.

was sickened by her husband's affairs as she claims, she may not have voiced her thoughts about his actions because she felt politically powerless and fearful of the Nazi political influence.

Female bystanders of the Holocaust were affected by sexual exploitation and rape within the chaos of war. The obsessive emphasis that the Nazis put on the issue of 'race and space' led to the development of the Lebensborn program where "women of supposedly pure Germanic stock encouraged to have children with blond Aryan SS men", which they would have the children in state clinics to give the child to Nazi training institutions when they reached school age.²⁸² The Lebensborn program exemplifies a gender specific effect of the Holocaust for female bystanders. Female bystanders faced sexual exploitation and fear at the hands of the state and invading Allies. Ursula Mahlendorf witnessed many women being taken by Russian soldiers in the middle of the night to be raped, and a reported 7.1 percent of women of childbearing age had been examined in clinics after one or several rapes by Russian soldiers following the fall of the Third Reich.²⁸³ Vulnerability to and fear of sexual exploitation was a concern that affected female bystanders of the Holocaust more so than male bystanders of the Holocaust according to the mathematic figures of Russian liberation and personal testimony.

Nazi tactics of outsider persecution evolved with the increased violence through the years of World War II. The original hesitation that some of the perpetrators had when facing the order to kill women and children did not stop the

ruthless slaughter of massive populations of men, women, and children. Men may have been more likely to meet their death in the labor camps, but with the development of the gas chamber executions, women were more likely to be killed with their children by gas. Gender did not influence who died, but gender influenced how the victims would be humiliated, demoralized, and murdered. Both men and women acted as perpetrators to the mass killing, but gendered expectations meant men had the dominant role in the atrocities, despite the attempts of some women to elevate themselves within the Nazi party. Yet, often when female bystanders opposed Nazi politics, their own understanding of gendered expectations kept them from speaking out against the regime, whereas male bystanders that spoke against the violence of the regime would fear appearing like an un-masculine traitor. Gendered expectations of the Third Reich specified and shaped the role of perpetrators, victims, and bystanders during the Holocaust, which determined how the atrocities committed affected them throughout the regime.

²⁸² Mahlendorf, *The Shame of Survival: Working Through a Nazi Childhood*, 198.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 220.