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# The Aryan- and Polish-Passing Women and Girl Couriers of the Jewish Resistance Movements in Nazi-Occupied Poland

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## Abstract

In the fight against Nazi occupation, underground Jewish movements in Polish ghettos sought to mount resistances through illegal educational and cultural activity, trafficking individuals and families to safety, and armed resistance. Key to these efforts were the women and girls who smuggled weapons, communications, food, medicine, and people, in and out of the ghettos by passing as Aryan or Polish. However, these couriers have been left out of the mainstream historical narrative; their contributions to both the movements and the historical record have been undercut by a variety of factors. This paper seeks to better understand the processes by which women—and specifically these women—have been neglected and ignored as historical subjects and to recuperate that history. I ultimately seek to demonstrate the significance of the act of passing in the context of the couriers' historical actions, and in their memoir and testimony. I propose my own close, feminist readings of these texts using the lens of passing in order to demonstrate the importance of the couriers as central actors in the Jewish resistance movements.

## Executive Summary

The norms of Holocaust historiography hold that women are peripheral actors in major events; these norms are also invested in a few tropes of women's experiences, limited in scope. I offer to the reader, instead, the narratives of the women and girl couriers of the Jewish resistance movements. These stories are powerful not only because they center women as protagonists, but also because they are so in tune with the categories of gender, race, and class. The couriers' testimony and memoir, and their afterlives, comprise a boat-rocking gestalt that may alter the way contemporary readers understand history, thus changing history itself.

During the Nazi occupation of Poland (1939-1945), Jewish communities resisted ghettoization by mounting armed resistance movements in multiple cities. Crucial to these efforts was the work of women and girls who smuggled weapons, communications, people, money, food, and other goods in and out of the ghettos. They did this by passing themselves off as Aryan or Polish. Such a performance was achieved through the manipulation of race as it was defined in that context. The couriers used language, fashion, social cues, and flirtation to convince their German occupiers and Polish neighbors that they were innocent Polish civilians and not Jews condemned to death. However, their narratives have been ignored and hidden in mainstream Holocaust historiography among larger trends of deemphasizing and denigrating women's contributions to the genre, and the relevance of gender as an analytical category. This project is a recuperative one, intended to bring those stories into the fold; but it is also an intervention, intended to critically examine the way these stories are told and to suggest new ways of looking at the genocide of European Jews.

My materials are diverse; I engage conventionally published memoirs (most in translation from their original manuscripts), handwritten and typed testimony, and video testimony. The

latter two I retrieved at institutions such as the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland, and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. I also rely on the writing and research of Holocaust scholars, feminist scholars, critical race theorists, and intersections of the three.

I apply a feminist reading to these texts. I define my feminist approach by multiple agendas. First, my goal is to critically explore the categories of gender, race, and class as socially constructed and intersecting. I engage these categories as structural phenomena subtly embedded in systems, institutions, and norms. Second, I prioritize lesser-known self-representations by the couriers over established historians based on my understanding that the subjects—who are women—are authorities on their own experiences. Third, I understand these texts and their authors to be political and complex ones worthy of critical analysis. Lastly, my project is aimed toward an ultimate end of justice. I strive to create a historical resource that represents Jewish women on their own terms. Through their self-writings, I see them as capable, resourceful, influential, dynamic leaders in a world in which Jewish women are represented as quite the opposite, if at all.

While acknowledging the vast breadth of the narratives of the couriers, I focus on just two for their unique circumstances. Not only are these narratives of passing, but they are also deeply mediated narratives. The couriers' stories have been filtered, re-framed, and altered; my feminist reading of those stories underscores how the changes and omissions happen. The editors of Gusta Draenger's posthumous manifesto-memoir, *Justyna's Narrative*, re-framed her narrative when it was published more than fifty years after it was first written; their revisions resulted in an account that centers men as protagonists, and in which women can only play a limited role in the confines of sexist tropes. In my analysis, I expose those biases and re-read the text through a

feminist lens. *Justyna's Narrative* emerges through my framework as a complicated political manifesto with an equally complex cast of women characters; their relationships, previously discounted in the original editorial framing, speak volumes about the act of passing. Vladka Meed's video testimony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is another example of how narratives and memory shift and are constructed over time; Meed drastically edited the transcript of her testimony ten years after it was recorded, thus expressing a desire to represent herself differently—to pass. Her narrative is colored by racial and class-based anxieties that speak to her experiences as a Jew in both Nazi-occupied Poland and post-war United States. I examine the differences between Meed's testimony and its transcript as indicators of her conscious and subconscious self-presentation.

Both Meed's testimony and Draenger's memoir are narratives about passing, in that they tell the stories of two couriers' experiences during the Holocaust; but they are also performances of passing themselves—the narrative's afterlives take on new shapes, and stories are retold in new ways over time. Just as storytelling is a performance, so is editing. The couriers' narratives flow with and against official frameworks and structures of Holocaust history. Neither Meed nor Draenger exist within the fold of the mainstream narrative, and while I seek to include them in my discussion as central subjects I see them interrupting the mainstream narrative. The couriers understand, both explicitly and implicitly, in all their testimonies, oral histories, and memoirs, that race, gender, and class are critical to our understanding of the Holocaust and its fallout. They know through their experiences in passing in and out of the ghettos that the manipulation of these dynamic and multi-faceted categories is not only possible, but a matter of life and death. There is no unmediated Holocaust narrative, just as there is no Holocaust narrative untouched by structures of power. This critical, feminist analysis represents a departure from the established

norms of Holocaust historiography; the couriers widen the discourse by posing alternatives to the tired tropes that have dominated Holocaust literature and scholarship through the basic but radical understanding that the personal is political.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*Poland, 1942.* The train from Bialystok to Lithuania has cars designated for Poles, and cars designated for German military. A young woman of twenty-three glances at her two options, and quickly steps into the former. She suddenly finds herself in a compartment with eight Austrian soldiers, who are not suspicious of her short stature and blonde hair. In German, she asks if she can stay. They agree and address her as *Kleine*, little one. The woman takes great pain to make sure that she smiles at all their jokes. The journey is spent laughing, eating, and flirting, even though she admits to them that she is travelling without the necessary permits (an infraction punishable by arrest, fine, interrogation, or deportation). At the train station in Grodno, the soldiers hide their new traveling companion; at the Lithuanian border, they again do not give her away. She slips away, and transfers to another train to Vilno.

Her name was Chajka Grossman. The Austrian soldiers did not realize that this unassuming woman was a Jew passing as a Pole, nor did they suspect her of being a member of any sort of resistance movement. Once in Vilno, she convinced occupying administrators to give her a travel permit, which Jewish partisan Abba Kovner then forged for liaisons to be sent to Moscow. Grossman herself was a courier for Hashomer Hatsair, a Zionist youth organization that mounted uprisings in multiple Polish ghettos against German occupiers and complacent *Judenrat*, Jewish puppet governments.

Jewish women and girls participated in Jewish resistance movements throughout Nazi-occupied Poland as couriers. As liaisons between the movement leaders, Jews in hiding, sympathetic Poles, underground arms dealers, partisans, and aid organizations, they smuggled weapons, money, forged documents, food, medicine, communications, and even other people in and out the ghettos. As a result, events such as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising were possible; Jews hiding in cellars and attics and backrooms were fed; refugees were given false papers.

Jewish resistance movements during World War II grew out of youth organizations, such as Hashomer Hatsair and Akiva, and the young members of other Jewish socialist organizations such as the General Jewish Labour Bund. Before the occupation of Poland in 1939, such organizations had kibbutzim (collective farms) and political education programming throughout the country and Eastern Europe; the imposition of German anti-Semitic law, forced relocation into unlivable ghettos, and deportation to death camps prompted a change in direction. The organized youth's new goals ranged from protecting their members and families from deportation, to illegal cultural education, to armed resistance.

Ghettoization outlawed the freedom of movement for all Jews. Yet the resistors needed guns, chemicals for explosives and people who knew how to make them, papers that would allow them to work (unemployed, disabled, and elderly ghetto residents were the first to be deported), and money for bribes and underground transactions. To accomplish this, movement leaders in Warsaw, Krakow, Bialystok, Vilno, Grodno, and other smaller ghettos selected members—most often young women—to act as liaisons between them and the world outside their ghetto. They were generally between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four, and completed their missions by passing as non-Jews outside of the ghettos. These couriers were much more than mere

messengers; they defied death on multiple occasions, saved lives, and were crucial components in armed resistance movements.

I seek to recuperate a small piece of the history of women in the Holocaust, which has been largely neglected. My project also exceeds this goal. True, the women and girl couriers of the Jewish underground in Poland have gone ignored—unmentioned, untranslated, and unpublished. Of course, who we remember (and how) tells us a great deal about who is valued in the present. Their narratives also convey important ideas about modern categories of gender, race, class, and sexuality that are connected to the work they did as smugglers. I take heed from feminist Holocaust scholar Susannah Heschel who wrote, “The study of gender and the Holocaust should not simply place women within the historical narrative, but should change the nature of the narrative as well” (303). I use this quote as a guiding feminist framework of intervention in this recuperative project.

The couriers’ self-writings are unique accounts of resistance and survival; as passing subjects, they speak critically to questions of race and class that can fundamentally change the way we understand Holocaust history. Beginning with the recuperation of courier testimony and memoir, I aim to examine the mediations and shifts that have shaped the couriers’ narratives that hold the power to change the historical record.

## **MATERIALS**

I initially came across the couriers in the fall of 2015 at the Żydowski Instytut Historyczny (ŻIH), or the Jewish Historical Institute, in Warsaw, Poland. The archive there held a vast collection of testimonies collected in the years directly following the end of World War II. In the handwritten and typed testimonies, ranging from two to twenty pages and mostly in Polish,

several women detailed their stories of passing and smuggling for various resistance movement; included in these were the testimonies of Rejza Klingberg, Wanda Blankenheim, Anna Kossowska, Chai Grosman [Chajka Grossman], Bronia Winnicka, and Hanka Borensztein. A visit to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. in the spring of 2016 revealed video testimonies from more couriers, such as Vladka Meed, Leah Hammerstein Silverstein, and the aforementioned Bronia Winnicka under her married name, Klibanski. I also found in the USHMM archives an uncatalogued, unpublished handwritten memoir under the title *Courier: A Memoir*, which was authored by Leah Hammerstein Silverstein. Several couriers published memoirs in English and other languages, which will be discussed further below. These three genres—written testimony, video testimony, and memoir—emerge out of starkly varying circumstances. The video testimonies, which range in length, engage visual and aural components absent in the written accounts. The memoirs are the results of years of writing, editing, translating, whereas written, typed, and oral testimonies were completed in no more than a couple sittings. While I cannot treat these media as comparable sources, I do see them as a gestalt of narrative. Each contributes complementing evidence and perspectives regarding the work of the couriers. Genre informs and shapes much of this research, since sources of different genres contribute different perspectives to the narrative. For instance, as I will later discuss, the differences between a memoir and a memoir-manifesto are subtle; however, their goals are distinct, and therefore I aim to be keen to those disparities. The couriers' narratives are mediated through their own desires to perform particular identities in addition to the expectations of other actors, such as editors and audience—genre is one of many possible sites of manipulation and reframing.

While the accounts that figure most centrally in my analysis are those from ŻIH and the USHMM and the published memoirs, there were also other sources that provided context and connections to findings; these would be crucial to future research on the couriers. Yad Vashem in Jerusalem, the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University, the USC Shoah Foundation, the Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, the YIVO Institute for Jewish research in New York, and the Hebrew University Oral History Archive

## **METHODOLOGIES**

Through close, contextualized readings, I apply a feminist analysis to these texts. I define my feminist approach by multiple agendas. First, my goal is to critically explore the categories of gender, race, and class as socially constructed and intersecting through the couriers' narratives. I engage these categories as structural phenomena subtly embedded in systems, institutions, and norms. Second, I prioritize lesser-known self-representations by the couriers over established historians based on my understanding that the subjects—who are women—are authorities on their own experiences. Third, I understand these texts and their authors to be political and complex and worthy of critical analysis. Lastly, I hope that my project will contribute to a world of more just representation and opportunities for marginalized historical subjects. I strive to create a historical resource that represents Jewish women on their own terms. Through their self-writings, I see them as capable, resourceful, influential, dynamic leaders in a world in which Jewish women are represented as quite the opposite, if at all.

In privileging the experience of passing as a critical lens into historical narratives, I aim to understand the ways that hierarchies and dynamics of race, class, and gender permeate both the couriers' self-writings and the Holocaust historiography generally. In the instance of Gusta

Draenger's manifesto-memoir, I interrupt and resist the androcentric and misogynous norms applied by the editors of her book in the editorial introduction. I alternatively lay bare the moments—subtly buried in the text—of dissonance and rupture that grate against those norms. In the instance of Vladka Meed's video testimony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, I expose the ways that she herself has mediated and reshaped her own narrative in accordance with larger structures of race and class, and with the expectations of audiences and institutions. Specifically, I do this through a close reading of her video testimony alongside the video transcript, in search of agreement and divergence between the two.

### **HISTORIOGRAPHICAL FRAMES**

*“...they dismissed her with an impatient wave of the hand, signalling her not to disturb them at this critical moment.*

*She withdrew obediently, though she longed passionately to be in that room with them! Since she already knew so much about what was going on, she had a right to be there among the four when the fate of their people was being weighed in the balance. But it didn't have to be Justyna — it could just as well have been Anna or Mira or Eva, any one of them, as long as at least one woman was present.”* –Gusta Davidson Draenger, *Justyna's Narrative* (81-81)

Lenore Weitzman's 2009 article in the Jewish Women's Archive entitled “Kashariyot (Couriers) in the Jewish Resistance During the Holocaust” is one of the most extensive and comprehensive descriptions of the couriers and their work. She identifies their shared characteristics—participation in youth movements (generally Zionist or socialist), Aryan appearance and behavior, Polish language skills, youth, and the fact that they were women—and their “missions”: creating links between individuals, organizations, and regions; spreading news of the Final Solution and encouraging resistance; participating in the resistance especially through the smuggling of weapons; and smuggling people out of the ghettos. Weitzman concludes that the role played by *kashariyot* in ghetto resistance movements was crucial and



central, often regarded as paramount by leaders of the resistance themselves, and that “It is, in fact, difficult to imagine a Jewish resistance during the Holocaust without them.” And yet, like many other women, they have been excluded from the historical narrative. Their roles, experiences, and characters have been simplified for the sake of the story and to make room for other figures. And they also have been made fallaciously larger-than-life.

Gusta “Justyna” Draenger and several other women in the Krakow Jewish resistance movement wrote the passage in the above epigraph in a secret diary while in prison. Though Draenger consciously and deliberately subordinated herself to her husband’s activism and leadership for the sake of the movement, she and her comrades expressed clear frustration with the old boys’ club even as they carried out some of the underground’s most dangerous work as couriers. Despite this, their voices and those of other couriers are absent from mainstream narratives of the Holocaust. Weitzman attributes the erasure of the couriers to the contemporary understanding of ghetto fighters (and heroes more generally) as conventional fighters who held guns. While she does not altogether reject the possibility of sexism in historical research and Holocaust studies, Weitzman purposefully places this argument on the sidelines of her conclusion. While Weitzman is correct in saying that the couriers were unconventional fighters, I would argue that their unconventionality stems from the gendered nature of their work. The definition of militancy that Weitzman identifies as the marginalizing force in the couriers’ absence in dominant historiography is one with masculine attributes. I see this overwhelming silence as indicative of misogynous and androcentric systemic repression of women’s voices and narratives. I have identified three main mechanisms, referenced and described in depth below, that erase, reduce, and distort women as historical subjects in Holocaust studies and historiography. I draw on existing feminist Holocaust scholarship to complicate the effacement

of women's narratives in a multigenerational discussion to open up new possibilities of telling and retelling Holocaust narratives.

*Erasure.* Women or a gendered analysis are markedly absent from texts in the genre of Holocaust studies. Scholar Joan Ringelheim, who was an early pioneer of feminist Holocaust studies, writes:

The Holocaust is defined by death. In this domain of death, it is crude if not obscene to avoid talking about gender. The death rates in certain ghettos have been broken down by sex, as have some ghetto deportation lists and some Einsatzgruppen reports identifying the sex of those murdered. And yet, in the mid-1980's, when I began to research death and survival rates, no historical or sociological analyses of the documents had been conducted from the point of view of gender. (349)

Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, the authors of *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* found that "in their archival work...women's voices and their texts were often obscured or lost altogether" which has led to creative and unorthodox approaches in feminist research methodologies, and the understanding that archives are not apolitical but rather are subject to power dynamics and can contribute to a hegemonic (in this case, androcentric) narrative (xiii-xv). Ringelheim responded to public criticism in the *Wall Street Journal* even in the late 1990s regarding the validity of studying women as historical subjects distinct from men in terms of their experiences—critics painted the intentional inclusion of women in Holocaust history as feminist propaganda to demonize Jewish men, who sometimes exploited Jewish women while being persecuted themselves. In the closing paragraph of her

letter to the editor, Ringelheim must assert the very basic idea that “The study of women in the Holocaust is a legitimate and important field of research” (A19). The delayed and frustrated nascence of feminist Holocaust studies remains an issue in research efforts today. In an introduction to the Jewish women’s studies journal *Nashim*, Dalia Ofer notes “the prevalence of apologetic or even missionary-sounding titles like ‘What Do Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Contribute to Understanding the Holocaust’ or ‘The Contribution of Gender to the Study of the Holocaust’” (5). The discursive values of women and the lens of gender were still in question twenty years after Ringelheim began her research, and women’s history remains a decentralized subgenre.

Ringelheim points to other barriers to the inclusion of women’s stories—or aspects of them—in Holocaust literature. Many of these narratives include moments of sexual exploitation and abuse, which are considered taboo or painful subjects. Individuals and communities remain silent rather than be re-traumatized or seen as shameful. Sexuality is considered an inappropriate topic for such a solemn historical moment, effectively trivializing it and disrespecting the dead. Doris L. Bergen acknowledges the discomfort created by such analyses, and the necessity to research through that discomfort: “Paying attention to sex, to bodies, brings out the pain in immediate ways that one can feel within one’s own body...But when pursued with courage and rigor, emotional identification can also cut through abstraction to open up insights” (6).

Primary sources on the couriers—if they exist, and if they are found—are problematic. The Jewish underground sought to cover its tracks—communications, such as letters or telegrams, were destroyed after having been read. If caught with incriminating materials, the couriers would eliminate them rather than betray the movement. As Yael Margolin Peled writes of Krakow

courier for Akiva (a youth Zionist movement) Hella Rufeisen-Schüpper, who was arrested as a suspected Jew:

She was in especial danger this time, since she was carrying the forged papers for her colleagues in the Warsaw Ghetto. Keeping her nerve and ability to maneuver, Schüpper insisted she was Polish and that she had to use the toilet urgently. Once there she flushed all the papers down the toilet. After three days of detention, the police released her as a Polish Catholic woman and even apologized. (Peled, "Hella Rufeisen Schüpper")

The Warsaw Ghetto's Oyneg Shabbos archives, hidden and buried, and others like them have only been partially recovered; Oyneg Shabbos' documentation of Jewish resistance disappeared entirely (Kassow 7). Many witnesses and participants did not live to record their testimonies or write memoirs in which couriers—many of whom did not survive themselves—would be remembered. Those who did might write in languages that are belatedly, if ever, translated decades later. For the couriers, there are a handful of memoirs, and even more testimonies scattered throughout historical institutes, museum archives, and online video libraries in existence today. Chajka Grossman's *The Underground Army: Fighters of the Bialystok Ghetto* was not translated into English from Hebrew for twenty-two years after its initial publication; Gusta Draenger's diary took fifty; Vladka Meed's *Both Sides of the Wall* was originally published in Yiddish in 1948, and in English in 1972 (it was translated into Spanish thirteen years before English). Testimonies in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw where I conducted part of my research are in Polish, except for a few technical translations. In the introduction to *The Underground Army*, Grossman laments that "Holocaust researchers in the

United States seldom rely on original sources, especially those which are available in Hebrew only... [In Israel] There is prevalent a certain disdain and avoidance of authentic witnesses and participants, and the reliance on the written word only” (vi). But the lack of translation also speaks to a lack of value in the works, or to the lack of an audience, despite their literary and historical importance.

Additionally, many of the couriers had multiple names with multiple spellings by virtue of their work. They adopted Polish names when they were passing on the Aryan side, took conspiratorial *noms de guerre*, and had married names. For instance, Fajgele Peltel was also Władka Meed, which in Polish is spelled Władka or Władka. Translation into English and other languages also changes spellings, turning Cywia into Zivia and Czapnik into Chapnik. Diminutives were often used, making Bronia, Bronka, and Chaja, Chajka. These changes might seem obvious or easily circumvented, but the difference between “n” and “ń” was, in my research, the difference between finding a testimony and coming up empty-handed. The changes in name or spelling inhibit cross-referencing or searching through digitized libraries. Some of the couriers changed their names and addresses often to avoid detection, which means, ironically, that they are still succeeding in that effort today.

These are technical barriers; there are also discursive ones. Some of the most popular and reputable sources on ghetto resistance movements have been written by their male leaders. Sometimes they mention the couriers by name—but often, they do not. In the case of Marek Edelman’s *The Ghetto Fights*, which was published in 1945, names change frequently throughout the book due to discrepancies in documentation that may have purposefully obscured identities to prevent detection. Barbara Engelking and Jacek Leociak’s *The Warsaw Ghetto: A Guide to the Perished City*, one of the most detailed and analytical texts on ghetto life and

events, references courier work in general, naming several couriers and citing their memoirs and testimonies (453, 674-678, 789). The immense scope of the encyclopedia-length work seems to limit the possibilities for discussion of the couriers' work (I would challenge the reader to rethink the knee-jerk decentralization of these narratives, since, as proven by Weitzman, there would have been no resistance movement without them). On the other hand, the couriers and their actions are put into conversation with other ghetto activities and events in the vast text, such as smuggling economies and the Ghetto Uprising.

The lack of public value of the couriers' self-writing in comparison to other memoirs is also indicative of a general misunderstanding of the importance of their roles. The couriers' accounts are unique windows into moments in Jewish and European history as members of an uncommon group: those who experienced life on both sides of an otherwise hermetically segregated society. Consider Chajka Grossman's (a courier for Hashomer Hatsair, a socialist Zionist youth organization in eastern Poland) retelling of her escape after the Bialystok uprising in a testimony:

Walking onto Poleska Street, along the rail lines, I understood why the self-defense had been broken up so quickly. The whole embankment was enclosed by the military which became larger and larger. There was a triple ring around the ghetto. Heavy and light artillery was everywhere around. Ukrainian cavalry rode along the ground, and it was a beautiful summer day. In the city there was a lot of movement. Cars from the German gendarmes controlled the streets. Plac Kosciuwski was being guarded. Later I learned that a tank entered from Fabryczna Street. You could feel that great forces had been mobilized to fight in the ghetto. (Grosman [sic], Testimony)

Because Grossman was able to flee and continue living on the Aryan side as a partisan liaison, she gained glimpses into the workings of the machines of war from a nuanced perspective. Considering their transversal activities and vigilant dispositions, it was most often couriers, such as Grossman, and Bronia Klibanski and Bela Hazan (both couriers for Dror-Freiheit, a socialist Zionist youth group), who brought the first news of annihilation from Vilna or the camps to Jewish youth organizations in the ghettos, who were otherwise cut off from the outside world.

Adina Blady Szwajger (a Warsaw courier for the Jewish Fighting Organization [ŻOB]) calls on Czesław Miłosz's poetic analogy of the Campo dei Fiori to describe the horror of hearing the start of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising from the Aryan side, where she is surrounded by laughing children on a carousel near the ghetto (86-87, 164). Witnessing the same juxtaposed image in Warsaw—the carousel at the liquidation of the ghetto—Silverstein describes the anti-Semitic jokes of onlookers. In a passage quoted in the introduction of this thesis, Vladka Meed (a member of the youth branch Zukunft of the Bund, an anti-Zionist Jewish socialist party, and a courier for ŻOB in Warsaw) witnesses a Jewish man being turned in by blackmailers on the Aryan side:

A large crowd had gathered. I studied the faces and gestures. The Gentile onlookers were not especially proud of what they had witnessed. Some shook their heads, others smiled wryly. But none interfered or protested. They resume their Sunday stroll as if nothing had happened. How could the Poles remain so indifferent? For the rest of the day I wandered about in great distress. I could not go home as yet; my landlady was expecting some relatives and didn't want them to know that she had a lodger. (88)

What emerges is a critical perspective of Polish society embodied in Jewish identity, if masked. The shameless passivity and gaiety of the couriers' neighbors evidently left an impression as these couriers struggled to hide their grief and fear. As passing subjects constantly under threat, the couriers offer intense insight into not only the ghetto resistance movements, but the norms and cultures of the groups that participated in their oppression.

**Reduction.** The second mechanism, of the three that I have identified, is reduction: the distortion of narratives to diminish people, events, or relationships. One example of reduction has been described by Susannah Heschel: a strict binary between heroism and victimhood, which will be further discussed below. Sara Horowitz echoes and expands this critique: "In many Holocaust narratives by men, women are portrayed as peripheral, helpless, and fragile; as morally deficient; or as erotic in their victimization" (299). She identifies two approaches engaged by Holocaust scholars reporting on gender differences: one that seeks to demonstrate the ways that men and women were made equal in their oppression, and one that seeks to demonstrate their essential differences. Both of these, while partially illuminative, are deeply flawed and problematic.

Dalia Ofer describes a similar reductive function of two popular models of writing on women in the Holocaust: continuity and discontinuity. In the continuity model, pre-war gendered activities and expectations, such as caretaking and maternal qualities, shaped women's experiences in contrast to those of men, such that they translated into distinctly feminine patterns of survival that can be traced back to their pre-atrocity feminine social roles. In the discontinuity model, women were forced to drastically change their behavior and "[engage] in activities that would previously have been unthinkable" (6) (that is, unthinkable in their gendered nature). This is similar to the equality-oriented approach described by Horowitz, in that it is tempting to



describe these experiences as liberatory, and in that women escaped the domestic limitations of pre-war femininity; but Joan Ringelheim succinctly warns us on this front that “Oppression does not make people better; oppression makes people oppressed” (757). Likewise, the continuity model and difference-based approach both rely on an essentialism that pigeonholes women as inherently nurturing and selfless. While these shouldn’t be undesirable qualities, the idea that all women in the Holocaust and beyond it are the same is reductive, and ignores the fluidity, intersectionality, and historical specificity of gender.

Feminist scholarship, and more specifically feminist Holocaust scholarship, provides many opportunities to understand, complicate, and resist the mechanism of reduction. Janet Jacobs deconstructs the gendering of public memory through the representation of women at the memorials and museums of Auschwitz. Jacobs exposes the ways that women have been remembered and misremembered in the various exhibits as two figures: as mothers, and as “embodied subjects of Nazi atrocities,” (213) which foregrounds a memory of emasculation of Jewish men as impotent fathers and failed protectors (217-218). The price for the reification of this old anti-Semitic trope is the flat but titillating representation of the racialized woman in genocide. But most importantly, she notes that the gendered objects of Holocaust remembrance and study (especially the many photographs taken by Nazi officers of women prisoners) nearly all exist out of a state of non-consent “[and] yet, in the construction of collective memory, it is primarily their victimization that has become the means through which we study, remember and visualize the genocide of the Second World War” (223).

Marek Edelman, a Bund activist and the author of *The Ghetto Fights: Warsaw 1943-45*, a concise recount of the Ghetto Uprising, is a respected (though controversial) authority on ghetto resistance. The short volume has been reprinted multiple times and serves as a sharp Socialist

contrast to the overwhelmingly Zionist narrative of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that is predominant in contemporary Israel. Edelman makes one reference to a woman courier when describing the “liaison men” of the Jewish Fighting Organization: Vladka Meed (57). The issue is not in the political incorrectness of the word “men”; rather, what is at stake is a) the historical record of smuggling in resistance movements and of the extent women’s participation generally, and b) insight into the category of gender as it functions then and now. In contrast, Vladka Meed references several other couriers in her memoir, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, though in the introduction Elie Wiesel reductively calls these “a band of frightened, dauntless Jewish girls from Warsaw itself, like Vladka and her handful of friends” (5). Meed describes a complex network of idealistic resisters from all over Poland, Belarus, and Lithuania who crossed borders and entered forbidden spaces inaccessible to Edelman and outside the scope of *The Ghetto Fights*. In focusing on her personal experience and feelings, Meed’s memoir incorporates a subjectivity impossible in *The Ghetto Fights*. However, rather than inhibiting her objectivity, she captures emotions—panic, depression, relief—that are absent in Edelman’s writing, which is coded in more official, archival language. This potentially positions him as omniscient in contrast to the limited scope of Meed’s epistemological positionality as an individual subject. However, by approaching the texts through standpoint theories (the idea that all knowledge is to some degree situated in particular political investments and thus subjective), it is possible to understand her writing as knowledge-rich and just as consequential as Edelman’s account (Harding 6-7). Take for instance the passage quoted earlier, in which Meed witnesses a Jewish man being turned in by blackmailers on the Aryan side. This passage is not merely “raw material” for analysis; Sara Horowitz posits that “Women have themselves been interpreters and analyzers of their own experiences, using the space of their writing to think through the

complexities of the Shoah for its survivors and for others” (374). Meed’s voice is present as she witnesses, thus situating her necessarily within the events. She gains access to the decisions and emotions of those around her, and ultimately a deeper understanding of Polish-Jewish relations. I believe that the couriers’ writings are unique from other accounts of resistance and survival for their multi-consciousness and subjective geographies. I also believe they also convey cogent ideas about gender and race that hold weight years after their publications. Without investment into the recovery, translation, and accessibility of their words and actions, such interruptions will be precluded.

*Glorification.* Tied up in the mechanism of reduction is the mechanism of glorification (which could possibly be described as a kind of reduction). Joan Ringelheim sees the proclivity toward glorification in the school of cultural feminism, which she regrets subscribing to in her earlier research. Cultural feminism positions liberation as an apolitical personal development, but more specifically it essentializes femininity through the exaltation of biological and cultural phenomena deemed womanly (motherhood, menstruation, etc.) without questioning the fundamental attachments of these experiences to womanhood, and their subsequent exploitation. “Thus,” writes Ringelheim, “cultural feminism overthrows a theory of masculine superiority for its opposite rather than standing such an idea on its head or throwing it out the window” (754). The couriers demonstrate clearly in their self-writing that their resistance and work as passing smugglers was not predicated on their biology or femininity. They recognize the larger political systems that enable them to pass rather than chalking up their survival and activism to an individual success of womanhood. The couriers do not identify culturally with Aryan or Polish women, but pass as them out of necessity to save their friends and families and advance their goals of conspiracy.

On the other hand, Judith Tydor Baumel's *Doubly Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* explores the specifically feminine modes of survival about which Ringelheim was so cautious and ambivalent in her own research. While centering her research on the relationships between women, Baumel couches it in a larger discussion of gender and memory that is predicated on the profound intersections of Nazi racism and sexism. Memorialization and martyrdom, selective processes subject to the influence of mass media, tend to flatten the experiences of women into limited figures: mothers, virgins, warriors, and grieving old women. In pointing to manipulations in memory, Baumel avoids the tendency to frame the Holocaust as an opportunity for women to flex their superior survival skills. To again quote Ringelheim: "The Holocaust is a story of loss, not gain."

To push back against the worship of feminine modes of survival begs the troubling question of what constitutes resistance. Worrying about the reduction of armed resistance in historical narratives, Ringelheim draws a thick line of rhetorical questions between survival and resistance, which does not include "manipulation of the system" (760). Susannah Heschel also expresses these anxieties about defining "any and all engagement in the life of the mind and the imagination...as resistance" due to the implications for "those who gave up their lives by blowing up Nazi installations or killing Nazi officials, such as the women who destroyed the crematorium at Birkenau" (302). These concerns, while understandable, privilege particular kinds of actions (especially militaristic ones with masculine qualities) over others; but I would warn against being seduced into trivializing women's subjectivities through uncritical reverence for militant and armed fighters and rebels. Some of the couriers' most radical work involved passing, undetected, through various layers of security, to deliver small amounts of supplies (or even just provisions and communications to Jews in hiding). I admire them not because they

were somehow more successful at surviving than men, or were Amazonian Jewess Nazi-hunters, but because they understood the political nature of passing and its revolutionary potential in defying Nazi occupation and racial ideology; I admire that they acted on this, even in small ways.

Such moments of glorification abound in authoritative texts on the Holocaust. Ghetto historian Emmanuel Ringelblum's *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* is one of the most famous firsthand accounts of ghetto life; he does in fact make mention of the couriers. In the following, oft-quoted passage, he expresses his deep and abiding reverence for them:

The heroic girls, Chajke and Frumke—they are a theme that calls for the pen of a great writer. Boldly they travel back and forth through the cities and towns of Poland. They carry “Aryan” papers identifying them as Poles or Ukrainians.... They rely entirely on their “Aryan” faces and on the peasant kerchiefs that cover their heads. Without a murmur, without a second's hesitation, they accept and carry out the most dangerous missions.... They are the ones to do it, simply, without fuss, as though it was their profession.... How many times have they looked death in the eyes? How many times have they been arrested and searched? Fortune has smiled on them. They are, in the classic idiom, “emissaries of the community to whom no harm can come.” With what simplicity and modesty have they reported what they accomplished on their journeys, on the trains bearing Polish Christians who have been pressed to work in Germany! The story of the Jewish woman will be a glorious page in the history of Jewry during the present war. And the Chajkes and Frumkes will be the leading figures in this story.

(Kindle Locations 4023-4035)

Surely, Ringelblum means well with this passage. However, the result is a glorified abstract figure that does not do justice to the lived experiences of the couriers. Chajke and Frumke (whose last names, Grossman and Płotnicka respectively, are never mentioned) are no longer names of two women who smuggled communications and weapons—their pluralization flattens them into tropes, to stand in for the other women who also smuggled but whose names will not be remembered. While it is true that many couriers' physiognomy enabled them to be chosen for the liaison work initially, they did not “rely entirely” on their faces—on the contrary, their testimonies and memoirs detail an arsenal of strategies for passing and smuggling successfully (such as the physically strenuous work of constant travel between fraught spaces, seeking out or flirting with German officers in order to assuage suspicions, creating deceptive linings in clothes or bags, or switching languages to fit into different environments). Ringelblum's praises of divine luck (e.g., “Fortune has smiled on them,” and “to whom no harm can come.”) obscure the fact that many were caught, tortured, and killed, and again downplay the strategic and decisive nature of their work. He applauds their “simplicity and modesty,” which indeed are very nice ladylike traits, while conveniently ignoring the drastic decisions made by many women in resistance movements to abandon family and tradition,<sup>1</sup> and the complex immodesty required of those who dared to transgress the boundaries of the ghetto walls. Though Ringelblum was progressive for his time, he was not exempt from the influence of cultural norms regarding gender. Jewish women are half of the entire story—not just a

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Peled, Yael Margolin's articles “Hella Rufeisen Schüpper” and “Mire Gola” in the online *Jewish Women's Archive*; and Draenger, Justina Davidson. *Justyna's Narrative*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1996, p. 104.

page—of the Shoah. His testimony of the couriers should be read in the context of these gendered politics, rather than taken for granted as objective truth.

This is my goal with the narratives of Jewish couriers, though this is impossible to do without first understanding the technical and discursive occlusions that tend to tag along with gendered historiography.

### **SOME CAVEATS AND THE CHAPTERS AHEAD**

It is important to note that while the couriers are by no means central figures in popular and dominant Holocaust narratives, they are privileged in other ways. As young, educated, and often conventionally attractive young women, they fulfill ideals of femininity and beauty present in many narratives of Holocaust heroines. Zoe Waxman has addressed this extensively in her research on women's testimonies generally, which are often deployed and interpreted in larger histories in order to promote a redemptive narrative for the reader seeking a positive moral to the story, regardless of the intentions of the writer (*Writing the Holocaust*). In her study of Holocaust heroines in film, Esther Fuchs asks the reader to think about the array of possibilities outside of these reductive representations: "What about ugly women, and what about mundane women, or rough, insensitive, and untalented women? What about unsophisticated women, and illiterate women, and disabled women, or selfish and cowardly women, or pessimistic and depressed women?" (110).

I cannot advocate for the uncritical incorporation of the couriers into the hegemonic Holocaust narrative; this narrative is fundamentally defined by the very misogyny and myopia that has silenced the couriers in the first place, and their addition to the canon will not radically change such systemic repression. My feminist Holocaust historiography doesn't start from

scratch because these stories have been radically and irrevocably altered by their environs. In examining the couriers' contributions and self-representations, I am also called to understand the archivists, editors, and institutions that have influenced their shape over time. Not only am I mapping the history of the Holocaust with women as its central subjects, but I am also mapping the act of mapping as it occurred in the development of fields such as Holocaust literature and scholarship.

In Chapter 2, I will examine the relationship between the couriers' work and identities to the act of passing. In the couriers' narratives, passing as a racialized performance goes beyond the realm of physiognomy. The corpus of testimony and memoir demonstrate the degree to which race—as a category that intersects with those of class, gender, and nationality—is internalized at metaphysical levels. However, as Chapters 3 and 4 will show, passing is not just a performance in the moment in which the couriers acted as Polish or Aryan; the couriers pass through literary and memorial performances as they shape and edit their self-representations in history. This chapter acts as a foregrounding chapter to the following two; Chapter 2 describes the context and machinations of passing in Nazi-occupied Poland, whereas Chapters 3 and 4 are concerned with the mediations of the couriers' narratives through institutional and structural norms.

In the following chapter, a study of Gusta Draenger's *Justyna's Narrative*, I will answer Esther Fuchs' earlier question by understanding the character of Justyna as complicated, political, and a carefully constructed persona of the author through careful attention to the question of genre. *Justyna's Narrative* is a collective memoir written clandestinely by several women in a cell of the Helclaw Street Women's Prison in Krakow in 1943. *Justyna's Narrative* is centered around (though not exclusively) the experiences and character of resistance leader Gusta Dawidsohn Draenger (whose Polish name was Justyna). The "diary," which was written



on toilet paper and other scraps and smuggled out in sections, reads more like a manifesto, so strong and central are Draenger's political convictions. While Draenger has been hailed as a martyr and a literary genius, her diary has lived in relative obscurity and been subject to misrepresentation and lionization common to women's accounts of genocide and resistance. Rather than focusing on the passionate self-reflexivity displayed by the writers or the dynamics of resistance or the poetically described relationships among the activists, the editors, Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch, dwell on Justyna's ultimate decision to turn herself in to the Gestapo when she discovers her husband has been arrested. Indeed, Justyna's dedication to Szymek Draenger is palpable throughout the text—though so are her relationships with others, many of whom are women. Though she survives the prison and escapes into the forests, the act of turning herself in is described as “suicidal” and the editors want to know why such a smart young lady could behave so irrationally. They settle on her womanhood for an answer. That she was a woman was important because it played a role in how she participated in the resistance movement (for instance, smuggling and posing as a Polish housewife) and experienced life as both a Jewess and a Jewess-as-Aryan; however, her womanhood does not denote total peripherality to masculine actors, a lesson historians are not wont to internalize. Her subjectivity involves her love for Szymek, but she cannot be solely defined by it. It is also worth mentioning that Justyna is the only courier-author who did not survive to see the publication of her memoir—she thus had little agency in the framing of her narrative. Perhaps this agency could have been amplified with a more sensitive approach by the editors.

In Chapter 4, I will discuss a heavily edited video testimony by courier Vladka Meed. The couriers perform passing not only during the events of the Holocaust, but also after the fact in their recollections. These mediations, once deconstructed, tell us about how the couriers as

passing subjects conceptualize their positions as Jews, women resistors, immigrants, and refugees in a variety of contexts. In addition to recuperating and illuminating the couriers' narratives in the context of an androcentric Holocaust history, my project is one of self-representation. The couriers do not only exist between the years of 1933 and 1945; after the war, their narratives continued to grow and change as they told their stories to family members, museums, politicians, and memoir readers. The couriers continue to breathe and speak in this afterlife, as their words pass through the mouths of editors, archivists, and others.

## Chapter 2

### “Nothing More Than a Jew Without an Armband: Perspectives on Passing from Nazi-Occupied Poland

*At your every step they would look straight into your eyes — impudently, suspiciously, challengingly — until you would become entirely confused, turn beet red, lower your eyes — and thus show yourself to be undeniably a Jew.*  
- Gusta Draenger, Justyna’s Narrative (53)

*The eyes were a special danger sign. A careworn face might be transformed by a smile; an accent could be controlled, church customs and prayers could be learned, but the eyes...How could one hide the mute melancholy, the haunted look of fear?*  
- Vladka Meed, On Both Sides of the Wall (194)

The couriers understood their work to be a socially constructed function of the eyes with reference to a material reality of racial violence and hierarchy. The act of passing as Polish women involved an embodied performance of race which they enacted through their expressions, behavior, and other features, with the eyes as the centerpiece of the act. Every movement outside of the ghettos’ walls involved the negotiation and management of racial identity and expression. In passing, the couriers do not abandon their Jewish identities or fully inhabit those of Aryans; as they manipulate the markers of race, they gained heightened awareness of the constructions of racialized difference. In this chapter, I will be drawing on memoirs and testimonies from a broad variety of couriers from multiple ghettos across Poland to demonstrate the far-reaching consequences that these narratives of passing have for contemporary readings of racialization

and Jewishness in the Holocaust. The diversity of voices, and the perspectives they provide, is crucial to understanding the couriers as a distinct, contextually specific group, and to drawing general conclusions about their experiences and contributions to Holocaust history. This chapter will foreground the act of passing as not only a crucial tool in survival and resistance under Nazi occupation, but also as a factor in the mediation of the couriers' narratives, described in Chapters 3 and 4.

The couriers' passing can be described as performances, an act that Liora Moriel describes as "ancient" (169). In "Passing and the Performance of Gender, Race, and Class Acts: A theoretical framework," Moriel outlines a variety of perspectives on the subject of passing, but she primarily understands the act to begin with theories of performance—that is, to pass is to perform the cues of a social category to which one does not belong (175-176, 198-199). Likewise, Louis Miron and Jonathan Inda describe race as a "speech act" that is performed discursively through active "utterances" (89-90). Historically, passing has been a prominent feature and subject of inquiry in African American literature; texts such as Nella Larson's seminal novel *Passing* or Langston Hughes' poem of the same title exemplify the widely-examined phenomenon of light-skinned Black people who choose to pass as white in the context of the Harlem Renaissance. While it is important to recognize this theoretical genealogy in this discussion of passing, it is also crucial to recognize the fundamental differences in historical and geopolitical contexts; what's more, the Black literary tradition of passing often concerns subjects that are of mixed racial identity or heritage, whereas the couriers most often came from solely Jewish families and upbringings (though these backgrounds varied in observance and

tradition). The couriers cannot be fully described using paradigms of passing that have developed in American contexts, and so I draw on other corpora as well.

Lenore Weitzman's research on Holocaust survivors who passed as Aryan (a strategy she contrasts with hiding) shows that women more often than men chose to pass as non-Jews in Nazi-occupied Poland, an assertion that can be supported by the substantial number of passing couriers who were women (compared to the few who were men). However, unlike the couriers in this chapter, most of the survivors in Weitzman's study were not directly involved in organized resistance movements (189). So, while not representative of the vast majority of narratives of passing in the Holocaust, the couriers remain cogent historical and literary subjects because they disrupt assumptions regarding passing, racialization, and gender in the broader dominant discourse of the Holocaust. The couriers' subjectivity as activists allows them to explore their Jewishness with reference to their political ideals, European anti-Semitism, violent resistance, and positions of conspiracy.

The couriers' position in Polish society was transversal, because they were, as the title of Vladka Meed's memoir states, on both sides of the wall. This double perspective was accompanied by a double consciousness, a phrase first developed by W.E.B. DuBois to describe the way that African Americans inevitably understood themselves through the eyes of white America.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the couriers tapped into the ways that they saw themselves as Jews through

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<sup>2</sup> The application of "double-consciousness" to lived experiences of Jewishness is not intended to conflate *Jewish* with *Black* or to elide the contextual differences between early 20<sup>th</sup>-century African American writing and Holocaust testimony. DuBois acknowledged in his 1940 *Dusk of Dawn* that the phenomenon of internalized racism was shared by Jews and African Americans. Robert Phillipson's *The Identity Question: Blacks and Jews in Europe and America* builds on this assertion, stating that "Blacks and Jews were forced to define themselves in opposition to and in conjunction with European ideas about who they were."

Aryan culture in order to become Jewish-as-Aryan. I write “Jewish-as-Aryan” as opposed to simply “Aryan” intentionally—it is clear that they were haunted by the distinct possibilities of being caught and failing the movement; they knew that their performances, no matter how convincing, would not undo their Jewishness. Thus, the couriers implicitly understood that fallacy of the binary construction of race under which they lived. Moriel theorizes passing as a non-linear spectrum: “[the theory of] variable visibilities complicates the singular dichotomy of an identity category that is too often simplified into “A” and “non-A” when in fact it is, perhaps, a complex intersection of A, B, V and Z...” (172). To apply this to the case of the couriers, one might say that instead of simply being a Jew passing as or even becoming a non-Jew, the couriers could not let go of their Jewishness as they passed. In doing so, they did not just pass as Polish, or Aryan; they also passed as Catholic, as financially stable, as native Polish and German speakers (but not speakers of the mutually intelligible language of Yiddish), and so on. Their Jewishness was a reference point for all of these aspects, even as they aimed to hide it.

Sara Ahmed conceptualizes a mode of racialized relations and ontologies in which “origin” and “arrival” are not mutually exclusive subjectivities (88). The multiplicity of a subjectivity of passing can be summed up in Moriel’s clever turn of phrase, “it takes one to know three” (201). She is referring to the multidimensional dynamics of legibility involved in passing—there are not simply a true identity and a disguise; nor can one abandon the “origin” identity for the performed identity. In passing, one simultaneously embodies multiple subjectivities. Ahmed further describes this simultaneity in the gaps between subject performance and audience perception that are filled with assumptions:

...passing takes place through encounters with others in which there is a crisis of reading, a crisis that hesitates over the gap between an image that is already assumed and an image that is yet to be assumed....Passing, by definition, is a movement through and across. Passing as the literal act of moving through space...can be linked with passing as a set of cultural and embodied practices (passing for the other). In the act of passing through a given place one does not come to a halt and inhabit that place. Likewise, in the act of passing for an-other, or passing through the image of an-other, one does not come to inhabit the image in which 'one' moves (away from oneself). (94)

For Ahmed, passing is a dynamic and fluid state that requires a constant negotiation of liminality. While the couriers may have at times convinced their non-Jewish neighbors of their Polishness, their narratives demonstrate that they never truly felt at home while passing; in fact, many of them describe heightened states of fear, depression, and terror when outside the ghetto walls. To say they passed as Aryan would not be specific enough—which, again, is why I prefer to describe their passing as Jewish-as-Aryan because this phrase more wholly and adequately describes their embodied experience. The stakes were not high because the couriers passed as Aryan; the stakes were high because they were Jews passing as Aryans.

I understand passing to be a generative and historically specific process of meaning-making. That is, the markers of race, gender, class, and sexuality, are resynthesized across space and time, and thus the manipulation of those categories must also be adapted. While the racialization and othering of European Jewry was not something the couriers could control, their self-writings prove the fallibility and flexibility of racial boundaries by consciously deviating from and reforming them in their individual lives.

## THE ACT OF PASSING: TOOLS AND TACTICS

*Ontological Perspectives.* Two historical preconditions were necessary to create a context in which passing was possible for the couriers and for Jews generally. First, the imposition of rigid Nazi racial ideologies, fertilized by popular anti-Semitic stereotypes, posited strict definitions of categories such as “Aryan” and “Jewish”—encompassing as many people as possible, even the assimilated, secular, and intermarried, in the latter to purify the German race. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum explains this broad ideology in their encyclopedia:

In Hitler's view, all groups, races, or peoples (he used those terms interchangeably) carried within them traits that were immutably transmitted from one generation to the next.... These inherited characteristics related not only to outward appearance and physical structure, but also shaped internal mental life, ways of thinking, creative and organizational abilities, intelligence, taste and appreciation of culture, physical strength, and military prowess.... For the Nazis, assimilation of a member of one race into another culture or ethnic group was impossible because the original inherited traits could not change: they could only degenerate through so-called race-mixing.... Regarding the Jewish religion as irrelevant, the Nazis attributed a wide variety of negative stereotypes about Jews and “Jewish” behavior to an unchanging biologically determined heritage that drove the “Jewish race,” like other races, to struggle to survive by expansion at the expense of other races. (“Victims of the Nazi Era: Nazi Racial Ideology”)

Such discourse of Jewishness, while predicated on centuries of European anti-Semitism that posited Jews to be degenerate and greedy baby-killers, was a significant departure from historical



anti-Semitism because it encompassed all forms of Jewish expression, from the most assimilated and Germanized individuals to the most insular shtetls. The couriers made quick use of these rigid boundaries, ranging from physical characteristics to mannerisms, to pull one over their Polish neighbors and German occupiers.

Second, the assimilation of the Jewish minority into the larger Polish population (a trend throughout Europe generally) enabled young Jewish girls to attend Polish public schools, where they would learn Polish language and cultural norms. Lenore Weitzman writes of this phenomenon in her article in the Jewish Women's Archive:

Because a Jewish education was considered more important for boys, many Jewish boys were sent to special Jewish schools, the *heder* and the *yeshivah*, while their sisters were sent to the "inferior" Polish schools where they learned Polish literature, customs, songs, prayers and manners, along with their colloquial Polish. Some Jewish girls also acquired non-Jewish friends and acquaintances who might be willing to help them in the future.

("Kashariyot")

Before the war, intermarriage and secularism had blurred racial and religious boundaries throughout Europe.<sup>3</sup> Many European Jews were necessarily familiar with the dominant culture of their region or country, which roughly 10% of all Holocaust survivors capitalized upon by passing (189).

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<sup>3</sup> For more analyses of Jewish "relation[s] to alterity," heterogeneity, and diasporic subjectivities, see Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 179.

Before comprehending the significance of the couriers' self-representations as passing subjects, it is necessary to state that such representations vary in form, voice, and politics, especially when it comes to the ontology of passing itself. For Chavka Raban-Folman (Dror, Warsaw; also known as Havka Folman Raban), smuggling and passing were literally part of a theatrical performance—a conscious affectation that she compares to her games as a child in which she pretended to be various animals. In an oral history recorded by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Dror courier Leah Hammerstein Silverstein attests, “I felt like an actor on a stage, playing a role which I hated, but I had to do it in order not to be detected. You had to acquire the, the way of talking, the way of behaving” (USHMM, 54). Later, she recounts a Christmas party when she convinces her coworkers that she is indeed Polish: “It was like battle christening for me. I made it. I was Leoska. I wasn't Leah anymore, I was Leoska and it was okay” (58). Chajka Grossman, in turn, describes a more ontologically embedded process of becoming through a renaming she characterizes as baptismal; she also describes the act of passing as putting on “the ‘aryan’ hat” (Grossman 173). Adina Blady Szwajger concluded that she must “shed everything, even my memories, and be, once again, a normal person in the streets of an ordinary city,” though she realizes that “normal” and “ordinary” are designations in flux, and will require a great deal of adaptation (79). Moving between the Aryan side and the Warsaw ghetto, Hela Rufeisen-Schüpper (of B’nei Akiva, a religious Zionist youth movement, Krakow) writes in her memoir that she “put on an armband, and again I was Jewish.” Here, she conceptualizes the act of passing as something similar to disguise. In the same passage, she declares to an officer who suggests that she might be Jewish: “Sometimes yes, and sometimes no,” hinting at a sort of hybridization in her passing act. Silverstein also echoes Rufeisen-

Schüpper in her testimony: “[I] took off my armband and I had this false birth certificate in my pocket and, voila, I was a Polish girl” (53).

However, regardless of the diversity of outlooks on the nature of their work, the couriers all understood race to be a flexible and fallible category, one that they could manipulate through performance. The couriers did not jump between two distinct racial categories; rather, they passed through a gray area. Rufeisen-Schüpper’s latter statement captures her manipulation of racial markers, no matter how strictly regulated the construction and consequences of race were under Nazi law or amplified by Polish anti-Semitism. She demonstrates how race is constructed socially, through articles of clothing, for instance. Her passing simultaneously exposes, undercuts, and deploys the markers of race.

*Physiognomy and “Variable Visibilities.”* Physical appearance was often an entry point into courier work—in many accounts couriers describe their “good looks” or “Aryan looks” as the reason they or others were initially selected to live among Aryans (Katz; Folman; Klingberg; Szwajger). As in many other narratives of passing, some of the couriers passed unintentionally before they realized the value of such activity to the resistance (Grossman 8). Though men sometimes passed as Aryan to smuggle, women were more often chosen by Jewish youth movements to go to the Aryan side. Unlike Jewish men, Jewish women were unmarked by circumcision. Women were also seen as comparatively unthreatening by police and Gestapo, and were not as often targeted for labor roundups. In a testimony, Krakow courier Rejza Klinger (Hashomer Hatsair) spoke of undercover resistance leader Romek “Laban” Leibelowicz: “Laban at the time walked around in a Polish uniform and he never walked around alone, only with another woman under the arm” (Klingberg). Chajka Grossman passed off Edek Boraks “with his Jewish face” as her fiancé when her apartment was randomly searched (Grossman 33-34).

Evidently, a carefully constructed facsimile of Aryan womanhood could be used as a subversive tool in a racist and sexist society, even to proximally project the illusion of Aryan masculinity onto Jewish men.

Moriel suggests the problematic concept of “variable visibilities” in order to better comprehend passing as a defensive response, akin to fight and flight; building off the understanding that identities are multiple, she astutely posits that “we are not only who we are but also who we look like” (171). Similarly, Catherine Rottenberg and Sara Ahmed have asserted the centrality of assumptions—specifically, the assumption of whiteness and its invisibility in Nella Larson’s *Passing*—in the act of passing. Analyses of passing should consider the perception of passing subjects by others, particularly those whom the subjects are passing as. A successful performance is premised on how the passing subject is read or is assumed to be. However, Moriel acknowledges the limitations of an optical primacy when other senses and “epistemological explorations” are crucially involved in the processes she identifies as key to passing: recognition, categorization, and evaluation (171).

***Language, Class, and Other Cultural Characteristics in Passing.*** Language was a particularly important facet of both racial formations and the couriers’ work. Grossman writes of one particularly daring last-ditch effort to smuggle two youth resistors out of the Wolkowysk concentration camp in her memoir. She writes that she pretended to be a German-speaking Polish factory owner, fooling both the German sentry and the infamously exploitative Jewish camp commander. Assuming an air of entitlement and authority, Grossman even went as far as to appropriate anti-Semitic language, telling the ingratiating commander, “I don’t need the help of a dirty Jew” (160). Anti-Semitic discourse was so ubiquitous in public spaces that it was an unavoidable practice for those attempting to pass—Raban-Folman laments that “Whenever the

talk turned to Jews, I had to join in—and if I wanted to avoid suspicion I could not use mild language” (130-131). Grossman was so believable in her daily performance that her comrade’s sympathetic Polish landlady forbade their meetings, believing her tenant’s friend to be a Jew-hater (333-334).

But what is most remarkable about the event at the Wołkowysk concentration camp is Grossman’s ability to speak several languages at once, in terms of both linguistics and demeanor: she shouts at an inmate to convince the sentry of her superior social status, but the inmate “understood; I hinted in a whisper that the matter was important” (159). In masking her conspiratorial exchange with abuse, Grossman succeeded in handing off forged documents undetected.

In context, language is also gendered; Lenore Weitzman identifies the public schooling of girls as the reason the couriers’ Polish was fluent and devoid of incriminating Yiddish accents (private religious education was more expensive, and Jewish families often chose to send only their sons when they could not afford to do so for all their children) (Weitzman). Leah Hammerstein Silverstein went through a charade of knowing no German language and letting her German employer teach her words and phrases, since Poles who understood German were suspected of being Yiddish-speaking Jews in disguise (75). At the same time, couriers could prove their Jewishness to other Jews who thought them Aryan by using Yiddish instead, or even affecting regional accents (Grossman 11).

In a world where Jewish occupations, commerce, and movement were tightly controlled, it is easy to see how race, gender, and class intersected in Nazi-occupied Poland; not only were Jews ghettoized and forced to labor for the German war effort, but new expenses also emerged, such as bribery, paying off blackmail, and participating in the black market. The couriers understood

that passing as Polish meant also passing as relatively economically stable. Sometimes, passing convincingly across class lines was enough to mute distinct racial physiognomy. As Raban-Folman writes of courier Frumka Płotnicka, “She did not look very genteel, but she was dressed elegantly and her lips were painted red to improve the masquerade...” (131-132). Raban-Folman herself traveled with props, such as a copy of Proust, to enhance the performance. Grossman recounted the following regarding one of her trips to Warsaw, “This time my sister had dressed me properly. I wore a big hat that made me look older by about five years at least. My lips were painted. I wore a fancy coat and had an expensive leather purse (which I had borrowed from a friend, who had taken it from her mother)” (104). On a later visit when she spontaneously decides to travel in a German car, the purse aids in her performance as a haughty well-to-do traveler. The importance of an intersectional analysis attuned to the compounding relationship between race, class, and gender cannot be understated; makeup, accessories, and nice clothes were tools in the couriers’ passing, and were read by others as markers of race.

Couriers were also able to successfully blend into Polish life through their connections. School friends, Polish underground army liaisons, and other friendly Gentiles could produce identity documents, references, and places of refuge. Lenore Weitzman understands the Polish friends made by girls in public schools as another factor in their ability to smuggle. Grossman acquired life-saving work cards from a factory manager for whom a friend worked; she even made acquaintances with sympathetic Germans who would offer shelter or assistance through her connections in the underground, though this did not change her distrustful attitude toward the German people (Grossman 186, 194). Olla, a gentile friend of Grossman’s sister, would open her strategically located apartment to Grossman so that she could avoid wandering the streets swarming with blackmailers between assignments (Grossman 164-170). Meed arranged for a

Polish friend to stop by her apartment regularly and pose as her mother in order to assuage the suspicions of her neighbors (Meed 215). In these instances, the couriers demonstrate how gender and class collide and manifest in the construction of racial identity. Structural qualities of assimilated Jewish femininity in Poland (Polish language, social status, and connections) intersect with performances of Aryan womanhood (access to fashion, vocal anti-Semitism) in the couriers' acts of passing.

*The Three C's and the Two Eyes – Chutzpah, Confidence and Charisma.* If it was enough to just look or sound Aryan or to be a woman, many more Jews might have survived the Holocaust. In her introduction to *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion*, Linda Schlossberg points to the invisible ambiguity of Jews and homosexuals, which could preclude their persecution: “the Nazis’ pink triangle and Star of David can be seen as an anxious overcompensation for the fact that these two identities are not immediately readable or recognizable in visual terms” (2). Thus, it makes sense that couriers would have consciously manipulated these social boundaries in order to move across physical ones. According to Moriel, “passing requires an intimate understanding of the mechanisms by which a society claims to discern differences between the group being left and the group being entered; ...and to keep each space segregated even as its borders are violated” (201). The couriers understood that race was a complex set of factors and traits, which is how some couriers who were phenotypically Jewish still passed and smuggled. Their experiences and reportage demonstrate the urgency of the auditory, the tactile, and less tangible spheres of semiosis. Chajka Grossman writes of another courier: “Vitka didn’t have my flaxen hair but she had boundless courage” (129) and Chavka Raban-Folman of another: “Frumka was always the first one to volunteer to travel and was never concerned that her looks might betray her. I thought her self-confidence and composure lent an

Aryan expression to her demeanor” (132). The authors of *Justyna’s Narrative* describe Krakow courier Mirka:

Mirka was constantly at risk because it wasn't easy for her to disguise herself as a non-Jew...But what was most difficult to conceal were her raven tresses and her jet black eyes. Sparks leaped from those eyes, and her smile generated a friendly intimacy that seemed to enclose everyone in its embrace. If anyone looked at her suspiciously, she would disarm suspicion with her cheerful, untroubled visage. She made her way with a charisma that was hard to resist. (Draenger 88)

In fact, it was the performance of confidence that was the couriers’ greatest tool in passing. Sheryl Ochayon identifies the “one trait that all the couriers required in order to succeed. They all had to have incredible poise and nerves of steel to get them through checkpoints, over borders, into and out of ghettos, and around Europe with illegal documents, weapons and other contraband” (“The Female Couriers During the Holocaust”). Charisma could be affected in several ways, depending on the particular situation. Confidence and composure were integral to the couriers’ understanding of race. Their actions and writings also point to a deft manipulation of race that ultimately expose its status as a socially constructed category.

I would like to return to the opening paragraphs of the introduction, in which I recounted a scene from Chajka Grossman’s memoir. She describes traveling in train cars reserved for Germans or German soldiers—first by accident and later purposefully (109, 124-125, 136.). By flirting with the soldiers and joining in their jokes and games, she not only assuages any suspicion of her Jewish origins but also convinces them to hide her during a border check, even



though she is traveling without a proper permit. In general, flirtation was an indispensable tool to the couriers, contingent upon and reinforcing the perception of their being Aryan. Chavka Raban-Folman writes: “I threw [the Polish policemen] a friendly, coquettish smile. Yes—I had even learned how to do that” (135). Grossman, Meed, and Szwajger, when accosted by blackmailers, all turned to Polish and German police in response, knowing that such indignation and recourse would not be expected of Jews who were terrorized by law enforcement (Grossman 116; Meed 92; Szwajger 110). Krakow youth resistor Zygmunt Mahler, a witness of the arrest of Anka Fischer, who had been exposed by a blackmailer, reports back to the other activists in *Justyna’s Narrative*, “She [Fischer] walked with such confidence that it seemed she was leading the policeman, and not the reverse” (Draenger 125). Fischer maintained her innocence for weeks of imprisonment, and was ultimately released with an apology.

I would posit, though, that the couriers’ performed confidence did not erase their experience of fear as Jews; in fact, the two dispositions rather informed each other. Gusta Draenger describes the ever-present Jewish subjectivity that could not be escaped in passing:

No matter how dark that doorway, there will always be someone who notices that you stepped into it a Jew and stepped out as if you were a human being. Why “as if you were a human being”? Because to take off the armband successfully, you first have to regain your sense of human dignity. Without that, you are nothing more than a Jew without an armband.” (Draenger 52)

For Draenger, performed and perceived Jewishness is juxtaposed to “human dignity.” As stated earlier, it was not enough to simply look Aryan or speak like a Pole. The couriers

understood that their Jewishness was informed by segregation, poverty, surveillance, police brutality, etc.; dehumanization was a fundamental component of the Nazi genocide. The performance of being Aryan thus included the performance of humanness. Yet passing did not provide a viable alternative for survival. Nearly every courier writes or speaks of the unlivable isolation outside ghetto walls; Grossman goes as far as to describe herself as freer after having smuggled herself *inside* the ghetto (24). Meed depicts a stifling and alienated sort of freedom in her new apartment that she would have abandoned had it not been for the support of Benjamin Miedzyrzecki, another Jew on the Aryan side and her occasional roommate (who would eventually become her husband) (214). Both Grossman and Meed relied on the support of other Jews passing as Poles, usually other activists, in order to survive. Grossman describes the lively and bright youth leader, Tosia Altman: “By coming, she broke the siege under which we lived” (41). In fact, the couriers’ sense of Jewishness was often enhanced by their denial rather than maintained despite it. Draenger writes:

The deeper inside they buried their Jewish identities, the more intensely Jewish they felt....They were never more conscious of their Jewishness than when concealing it, and there was never a doubt that they would remain Jews until their very last moments...Other underground fighters had to conceal their resistance activities and everything related to them, but the Jewish fighters had to mask every part of themselves — their origins, appearances, customs, mentalities, ideas, even their Jewish souls, which had been nurtured painstakingly through the centuries. Only when they had succeeded in effacing the essence of their beings could they start planning underground activities. (55)

Clearly, there can be flexibility and management of race across categories thought to be natural and hermetic without a loss of allegiance to the “identity of origin,” to use Moriel’s phrase. These passages point to the social construction of race and simultaneously to the material consequences of racial hierarchies. Jewishness and Aryanness are constructed with reference to each other as foils; one cannot exist without the other, and the couriers employ this binaristic construct to enhance the perception of their Polish neighbors that they belong outside the ghetto walls.

Necessary for this performance of Aryanness was the suppression of terror. Terrorism and terror shaped Jewish identities and experiences in WWII Poland. According to Leah Hammerstein Silverstein, “Fear was the constant feeling that accompanied me since the war began until the war ended. You live in constant fear. Day by day, week after week, month after month, year after year” (47). Passing for Aryan thus necessitated the control of any outward expression of fear. According to the couriers’ accounts, race is also something even more inexplicably metaphysical, expressed beyond the realm of physiognomy or behavior. While the couriers could be blonde and blue-eyed, have spotless documents, and speak perfect Polish, passing went much deeper than these relatively shallow affectations. A recurring concept in most narratives is that one of the most telling sites of Jewishness is the eyes—not in their shape or color, but in the light behind them. The couriers make plain that it is not biology or culture that make Jewish eyes distinct; instead it is the political processes of genocide that dehumanize those eyes. Vladka Meed explains this in the following passage:

The eyes were a special danger sign. A careworn face might be transformed by a smile; an accent could be controlled, church customs and prayers could be learned, but the eyes...How could one hide the mute melancholy, the haunted look of fear?

‘Your eyes give you away’ our Gentile friends would tell us. ‘Make them look livelier, merrier. You won’t attract so much attention then.’ But our eyes kept constantly watching, searching the shadows ahead, glancing quickly behind, seeing our own misfortune and foreseeing even worse to come. Haunted by fear of betrayal, our eyes betrayed us, and this knowledge only increased our fear. (194)

Gusta Draenger touches on the subject in multiple passages of her memoir:

You would reveal your Jewishness in a thousand small ways: every anxiety-filled move; every step taken with a back hunched over from the yoke of slavery; every glance that bespoke the terror of a hunted animal; the entire form, the face on which the ghetto had left its indelible mark. You were nothing more than a Jew, not only because of the color of your eyes, hair, skin, the shape of your nose, the many telltale signs of your race. You were simply and unmistakably a Jew because of your lack of self-assurance, your way of expressing yourself, your behavior, and God knows what else....At your every step they would look straight into your eyes — impudently, suspiciously, challengingly — until you would become entirely confused, turn beet red, lower your eyes — and thus show yourself to be undeniably a Jew. (53)

A feminist reading of these texts would prioritize the embodiment of experiential trauma described here; race is not anything essential, but something internalized and embedded (and then disguised, hybridized, or passed through in the couriers' work) in the body, such as in the eyes. Szwajger confirms the damning of "'sad eyes,' eyes that betrayed the pain within" (83). Grossman depicts another emotional manifestation of Jewishness: her comrade Lizka was picked out of a crowd by a Polish blackmailer simply for sighing: "Only Jews sigh that way" (356-357). The couriers imagine and articulate their Jewish identities based on that which they must suppress in their eyes and other arbiters of emotion. To rearticulate a central thesis of this chapter—that passing does not allow the subject to statically inhabit the performed identity or to erase racialized difference—the performance of happiness, carefree ease, and confidence was never a state in which the couriers felt truly at home. In passing, they become sharply aware of the traces and effects of violence that are left on the body in the social and political process of racialization.

Racialization as humanization and dehumanization (the normalization of able-bodied Aryans and the marking of Jews and other undesirable categories as other, or as inhuman) come to be synonymous in these narratives. The eyes, as described earlier in the couriers' self-representations, were one such site of racialization—Jewish eyes are not essentially one way (to say so would homogenize Jewish experience across historical and geopolitical contexts), but are read as such once the Jewish body has been subjected to physical and symbolic violence that unravels humanity. A potentially useful tool for comprehending this collision is the work of Black feminist scholar Alexander Weheliye, who theorizes the human (Man) and the nonhuman as "racialized assemblages" rather than an as objective biological truth (19). Utilizing frameworks of Black feminist thought, Weheliye centers Black flesh as an epistemological

subject in order to expose race and colonization as cruxes of modernity. This is an important example and reference for a relational analysis that situates the couriers in the context of a popular biological racism under a fascist state. While Nazi occupation, surveillance, and racial policies have been described as state terrorism, it is important to underscore the participation of civil society—the “they” to whom Draenger refers in the earlier passage is literally “everybody outside the ghetto,” whether Polish or Lithuanian, civilian or militia (53). Aryans, in this case the category racialized as human, are a necessary party in the racialization of the Jews. The penetrative act of looking into the couriers’ eyes is an attempt to read their race. Both Draenger and Meed describe this reading as invasive; they describe it as a kind of incursive act that causes the couriers a heightened awareness around their racial otherness. In being interrogated every step outside of the ghetto, the couriers experience terror, anxiety, and despair; the very emotions that mark them as Jewish in the first place. Thus, the reading of eyes is a contributing factor in the racialization of Jews in this context. The public penetration into their eyes is also an interrogation into their humanity, and so the couriers lived tormented by the possibility of exposure as nonhuman subjects. Weheliye’s work provides an excellent framework for comprehending the couriers’ embodied conceptualization of race; he is particularly concerned with the ways that race is written onto the body (in line with Hortense Spillers’ “hieroglyphics of the flesh”) in order to be collided and conflated with nature, simultaneously and contradictorily preceding the category of human/Man while constituting it (27, 43). It is the tools of domination, the “calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet” (I think of the armband, the cattle car, the ghetto wall) described by Sylvia Wynters in addition to juridical and political processes that shape race and imbue it with meaning (Weheliye 39). For the couriers, racialization occurred with every step outside of the ghetto. They understood the social and

political mechanisms whereby Jews internalized their Jewishness—and they also understood the material consequences of racialized difference in the context of occupation, ghettoization, and deportation.

My intention is not to compare the historical oppression of Jewish and Black people (which would maintain a logic of equation and competition not conducive to solidarity or anticolonial critiques<sup>4</sup>). But I find Weheliye's theories of race and racialization useful for explaining the multi-subjective couriers as passing subjects. Propelling the discussion of race—that which makes or undoes Jewishness—to the intangible plane of performance in the context of state and popular terrorism, the couriers confirm Weheliye's thesis that race is a social and political construct that comes to be understood as natural and apolitical. In the couriers' narratives, "Jewish eyes" are signified by a look of sadness and fear that is taken to be naturally occurring by onlookers. In this description of racialization, Weheliye maintains that

Despite having no real basis in biochemistry, the hieroglyphics of the flesh requires grounding in the biological sphere so as to facilitate... the political, economic, social, and cultural disciplining (semiosis of procedure) of the Homo sapiens species into assemblages of the human, not-quite-human, and nonhuman... (43)

In response to the pervasive Nazi racial ideologies predicated on biology, the couriers developed an array of coping strategies to manipulate the supposedly immutable and essential markers of race. When the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising begins, Szwajger masks her face in a

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<sup>4</sup> See Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

bouquet of flowers that may also remind her of happiness. She and her comrades tell each other jokes in the street as they hear gunfire and explosions coming from the Jewish side of the wall. She writes, “I saw my own house burning. And I kept laughing” (89).

Concealment of sadness and fear was a necessary tactic for all the couriers—if not the most important one. When Szwajger first smuggled herself out of the ghetto, the calmness she commanded in her eyes immediately protected her from blackmailers (76). Raban-Folman writes that she only cried once during the entire duration of the war (136). Szwajger and Bronka Feinmesser, a courier for ŻOB and the Bund, would cover for the late visits of strange men to their apartment, which doubled as a meeting place and refuge, by throwing raucous parties (Szwajger 103). Not only did these shindigs convince neighbors that they were simply fun-loving teenagers, but they also provided a moment of gaiety in lives the couriers describe as ruled by terror and depression. Unfortunately, Szwajger’s dependency on vodka in order to last through long nights and treacherous missions apparently developed into alcohol abuse, if not addiction. The angst and emotional agony brought on by isolation and identity crisis is a major motif in other narratives of passing, such as Nella Larsen’s novel. To restate the title of this essay in other words, racial identity is not undone in passing, though racial markers are modified. A Jew without an armband still carries the anxiety of capture and the racial trauma of poverty, dispossession, and annihilation. For passing Jews, anxiety, trauma, terror, and depression come to replace the armband as the visible indicators of Jewishness.

The couriers’ narratives of passing and racialization tumble through history and take on new meaning when they enter into new literary and memorial contexts. Passing remains a key lens of analysis for understanding how the couriers have represented themselves and have been represented by others; just as they passed in life, they pass in their testimonies and memoirs.



Justyna Draenger's intimate portrayal of herself and her comrades in her manifesto-memoir is inextricably connected to their lives as passing women, and their solidarity with each other as a result. Likewise, Vladka Meed's positionality as a passing subject is such an irrevocable component of her experiences and identity that it remains present even in her post-war testimonies. In the following chapter, I will examine Draenger's *Justyna's Narrative* and Meed's video testimony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum not only as narratives of passing, but as performances in passing themselves. At stake here is an insurgent historical record; I hope to demonstrate the couriers' actions and desires in self-representation as they have run against the grain of institutional and popular norms of Holocaust historiography. The testimony and memoir of the women and girl couriers are not unmediated, but are subjects of contextually specific archival and editorial power structures and dynamics.

### Chapter 3

#### Re-reading *Justyna's Narrative* as Feminist Historiographical Praxis

Between the months of February and April in 1943, Gusta “Justyna” Dawidsohn Draenger,<sup>5</sup> a leader and courier of the Akiva youth Zionist group and the Krakow Jewish resistance organization, and several of her cellmates in the Helclaw Street women’s branch of Montelupich Prison composed a memoir on scraps of toilet paper, which they then hid and smuggled to partisans hiding in the forests outside of the city. In the face of torture, starvation, and the deaths of their comrades, they collectively wrote what would eventually be reconstituted and published in 1946 as a hundred-page epic of the youth resistance movement in Krakow called *Justyna's Narrative*. It was not translated into English from Polish until fifty years later, when it was published by the University of Massachusetts Press. As such, the narrative is incomplete, sometimes disjointed, and (like all narratives) deeply mediated by a multitude of actors and factors. Unfortunately, the editors of the 1996 edition do not attend to the categorical nuances of what I refer to as a manifesto-memoir: a text that is simultaneously a recollection of memory, and a defiance of memory in favor of an alternative narrative. While Justyna has been hailed as a

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<sup>5</sup> A note here on names: “Justyna” was Gusta Draenger’s pseudonym, a necessary precaution for an illegal underground movement. She is also at times referred to in secondary sources as “Tova,” her Hebrew name. When referring to the literary character described in *Justyna's Narrative*, I will use the name “Justyna”; in discussions regarding the historical figure who wrote the narrative I will alternatively use the name “Gusta.” As I discuss later, this is not to say that the text is fictional or historically inaccurate; rather, it is because *Justyna's Narrative* is hagiographical rather than autobiographical.

martyr and a literary genius, her diary has lived in relative obscurity and been subject to misrepresentation and lionization common to women's accounts of genocide and resistance. In this project, I call for and enact a feminist reading of *Justyna's Narrative* that intervenes in this misrepresentation. Such an intervention would engage Justyna as a complex, human character situated in an epic literary representation.

This text merits individualized attention and contextualized discussion because of its uniqueness and ambiguity as a historical text. Zoë Waxman describes the delicate balance between the perspective that Holocaust testimony is sacred and thus should not be subject to analysis, and the instrumental perspective that would validate a Holocaust testimony solely for its historical value (thus discounting the narratives that are fragmented, misremembered, or recalled too long after the events to be accurate) (“Transcending history?”). The methodological concerns in analyzing a partial text that was written during the war under extreme and violent conditions by multiple people and that does not conform to the conventions of memoir are manifold. Who counts as a narrator? Can a text that defies chronology and historical accuracy be trusted? Can a text that is intentionally exaggerated and chimerical provide insight into Holocaust resistance? What do we do with historical sources that are intentionally ahistorical? At stake in posing these questions are structures of power that determine who—and which bodies—have political value and on what conditions. In better understanding the representation of Justyna as a passing subject, one whose representation throughout history has been mediated by herself and by others, her contributions to Holocaust literature and history may be taken more fully into account. The historical conversation around race and the Holocaust widens.

I believe that it has been misinterpreted consistently for the past seventy years, which has been conducive to a major void in Holocaust literature and historiography. I seek a feminist

reading of *Justyna's Narrative* that will consider its disregard for conventions of genre, Justyna's emphasis on friendships between women couriers, and her understated subversion of gendered tropes of heroism in Holocaust literature. Each of these themes slipped through the cracks in the 1996 publication of the English translation of *Justyna's Narrative*. The editors who compiled, translated, researched, and annotated *Justyna's Narrative* did so with their own understanding of the text's significance and central themes, but without attention to its more subversive possibilities. In addition to the aforementioned framing questions, the specific research questions I pursue in this chapter include: how are the politics of genre negotiated between Draenger and the editors? How is the gendered framing of *Justyna's Narrative* maintained and manipulated in its editorial and publication processes? And how is this all reflective of the desires of Draenger, the editors, and their audiences? The editorial framing of the 1996 edition of *Justyna's Narrative* speaks volumes about the institutional and popular investments into the narrative norms of Holocaust studies. A feminist analysis of *Justyna's Narrative*, on the other hand, holds a key to a more complex understanding of the genocide of European Jewry. The intersections of race, gender, class, and other categories manifest in the text as symbols of Justyna's political ideologies, though the editors miss these key components; a feminist rereading of the editors' mediations and Justyna's efforts at self-representation underscore the force and ubiquity of the gendered norms of Holocaust literature. Through a close reading of the narrative and complementing historical and scholarly texts, I aim to deconstruct the androcentric power dynamics that have governed what otherwise could be considered a subversive and insightful document.

## **A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY**

Gusta Dawidsohn was born in Krakow, Poland in 1917 to a Hasidic family. She joined the Akiva youth Zionist movement in her adolescence, which required a break with her family's religious orthodoxy, and rose to positions of leadership at the national level. She became engaged to Shimshon "Szymek" Draenger (alias "Marek"), a young leader within Akiva and a future anti-Nazi resistance leader, in 1939. Her father and sister were deported in June 1942. Gusta continued to serve the resistance movement as a courier, smuggling people, weapons, and other items in and out of the heavily surveilled Krakow ghetto, and seeking out potential locations for meetings and the printing of documents and newsletters. In the latter half of 1942, she masqueraded as a Polish housewife in Rabka, outside the city of Krakow; at night, she and Szymek printed pamphlets and forged identity documents. When Szymek was arrested in January 1943, Gusta turned herself into the Gestapo as well so that they would not be separated (this was the second time she had done so), and she was incarcerated in the Helclaw Street women's branch of the Montelupich Prison. She and the other women in her cell staged an escape in April of that year. While the end of her life is unclear due to a lack of documentation and witness accounts, it is believed that Gusta was executed along with her husband less than one year later in the forests of Nowy Wiśnicz.

#### **EDITING AND PUBLICATION OF THE "MEMOIR"**

The 1996 English edition of *Justyna's Narrative* (originally *Pamiętnik Justyny* or *Justyna's Diary*) was co-edited by Holocaust survivor and literary critic Eli Pfefferkorn and professor of literature David H. Hirsch. They combined the original piecemeal manuscript with testimony from surviving comrades of Justyna and her husband in order to reconstruct the fragmented events and characters of *Justyna's Narrative*. The text is heavily annotated with footnotes that

explain the true identities of the *noms de guerre* to which Justyna refers, describe the fates of the individual resistors, or provide the reader with additional information about dates and places.

The Borgo Press released a slightly different version of the narrative in 1995, edited by Nathan Kravetz and translated by Majka Shephard. This edition is rarely referenced by scholars and was not widely reviewed at its publication. It differs slightly in both editorial framing and translation from the 1996 version. Because Borgo Press was such a small and short-lived publishing company (it closed in 1998), this version of Justyna's secret writings was released and continues to live in obscurity. Given the closeness in release date to the 1996 version, it is likely that the two versions were being translated, edited, and published at the same time. Since a critical site of my analysis here is the 1996 editorial introduction to the English translations, I will include discussions of the 1995 edition only where most relevant.

The cast of *Justyna's Narrative* comprises roughly forty named characters, all participants in the Krakow resistance to Nazi occupation. Some are described in extensive (and often grandiose) detail; others are mentioned only in passing. The setting begins in the first chapter at the pastoral Akiva kibbutz in Kopaliny, where Justyna converses with the other resistance leaders about the inevitability of death and the possibilities for resistance (the farm was abandoned in August 1942 and all its members moved to the Krakow Ghetto). The rest of the narrative takes place in the subsequent autumn months inside the ghetto or at Justyna's outpost in Rabka. These chapters document the activities of individuals within the resistance, conversations between leaders, arrests, and more general discussions of life as a Jew in a world of scientific racism, forced labor, and state terrorism. Much of the action occurs at Jozefinska 13, the address that served as bustling resistance headquarters, though Gusta herself as a courier on the Aryan side never visited.

### CONTEXT AND RATIONALE: THE “HOW” AND “WHY” OF THE NARRATIVE

In the “Last Will & Testament” which follows the bucolic Kopaliny chapter, Justyna explains her rationale for writing:

From this prison cell that we will never leave alive, we young fighters who are about to die salute you. We offer our lives willingly for our holy cause, asking only that our deeds be inscribed in the book of eternal memory. May the memories preserved on these scattered bits of paper be gathered together to compose a picture of our unwavering resolve in the face of death. (33)

The “you” described here refers to surviving comrades who have immigrated to Palestine. That Justyna had accepted her death is unquestionable. This is the first insight into the relationship between Gusta and Justyna; having admitted the inevitability of deportation or execution, Gusta desperately tries to document the resistance (a catch-22, given how important anonymity and secrecy were to the movement at a time when they were still wanted by Nazis and their collaborators). She paints a tragic tableau of youthful heroism and uncompromising anti-fascist politics. She makes careful decisions about how she represents a band of ill-equipped, malnourished, dirt-poor, and poorly trained fighters—and she invests that same kind of care into how she represents Justyna, the beautiful, fearless, and devoted courier. This passage is the only reference to the prison cell in which Gusta wrote the memoir of the resistance, and thus provides key insight into the conditions that mediated the narrative.

Through the testimony of such survivors as Hela Rufeisen-Schüpper, Elsa Łapa, Yehuda Maimon, and Genia Meltzer, editors Pfefferkorn and Hirsch are able to piece together the “how”

of the memoir. These are invaluable sources, as they offer insight into what might otherwise be interpreted as impossible. Based on these interviews, the editors write:

In the relatively spacious cell (seven by seven meters, housing about fifty people), Gusta claimed a private corner next to the barbed-wire window. A handful of women huddled together in a circle, and in the center of the circle sat Gusta, inscribing tiny letters on scraps of paper. When her fingers became numb from exertion, another woman would take over the writing while Gusta dictated. Every single note was checked by Gusta before being stashed away...Gusta began writing the notes on toilet paper given out to the inmates. When this supply ran out, she turned for paper and pencils to a group of Jewish auto mechanics who worked for the Gestapo during the day and were housed in the Montelupich Prison at night. The nature of their work allowed them some leeway to move around in the prison courtyard, and from there they established contact with the women by facial gestures and hand signals...Two complete sets of notes were hidden in the prison, and another two were smuggled out. Only one set survived. (Hirsch and Pfefferkorn 10)

The surviving set of notes was incomplete, with some of its earliest chapters missing, including one chapter thought to describe life in Helclaw prison (Pfefferkorn 2). Elsa Łapa, another inmate in Gusta's cell and a member of the underground, is quoted at length in the editors' introduction regarding the prison cell; she goes into detail about Gusta's meticulous and deeply involved writing process, the logistics of hiding and recovering the surviving copy, and



the daily environment of the prison cell. Pfefferkorn and Hirsch quote the following from an interview:

We wrote four copies. We hid one copy inside the stove that was placed in the cell. Gusta said that the stove would never be lit, anyway. Another we hid inside the upholstery covering the door; a third we passed through a window for either the boys working in the garage or a member of the Polish underground to pick up; and the fourth we hid under the floor. I have the feeling that we wrote much more, and that some was lost. All of it is written on toilet paper that we used to get from the prison warden. The pencils were given to us by Polish girls, who used to receive food parcels from home with hidden pieces of pencils in them...When not writing, we participated in seminars, discussing what the world would look like after the war, believing that this would be the last war; we studied Hebrew and challenged our minds. Gusta tried to arrange everything in a collective manner. We ate our daily portion of bread, 110 grams each, together; we kept up the tradition of Oneg Shabbat with singing and poetry recitation. (12-13)

Genia Meltzer, another surviving inmate, corroborates Łapa's account of Gusta's role as a moral and spiritual leader in the prison cell: "...that place, known only for torture and death, actually became a place of life to me. It had a life's rhythm. And that rhythm emanated from Gusta Draenger" (Hirsch and Pfefferkorn 13). An image of a dignified, nurturing, and disciplined luminary emerges through these statements, though this image should not be taken at face value. The editors describe Gusta's writing style as simultaneously philosophical, poetic, epic, and frank—they cite the influence of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Polish romanticism and enlightenment thought

alongside her orthodox upbringing and socialist Zionist political affiliation. Gusta's writing and actions in prison mirror those of other enlightenment-influenced Jewish women writers during the Holocaust such as Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, and Etty Hillesum, which, Rachel F. Brenner argues, emphasize the role of the enlightenment and humanistic ethics in their writing (22). These four writers' resistance to horror and isolation manifested in "ethical self-development" not unlike the lifestyle Gusta curated for herself and her comrades in their prison cell. She organized seminars, poetry, and music both as an immediate means of resistance to fear, torture, and violence and as a way to maintain their "ethical and spiritual mettle" (Brenner 22). Yet there is more to this story—unlike Anne Frank's account from the annex or the other writings analyzed by Brenner, *Justyna's Narrative* cannot be fully comprehended through the architecture of autobiography, memoir, or diary alone; before proceeding, I must attend to the question of genre.

### THE QUESTION OF GENRE

Pfefferkorn and Hirsch emphasize the "counterpoint of moral and spiritual triumph" that pervades *Justyna's Narrative*, in juxtaposition to the failure of the youth resisters. Indeed, Justyna's story is one of dignity in the face of inhumanity—however, uglier themes of angst, vengeance, and despair abound as well, albeit at a more subtextual level. I will return to this issue later, as it is of great import to our understanding of the gendered dynamics of memory. The editors continue their description of Gusta's redemptive writing style:

Unlike most ghetto diaries, *Justyna's Narrative* does not dwell on the day-to-day squalor, deprivation, and sadism of ghetto life. Whatever the hardships and cruelties of the Krakow Ghetto, it is not Draenger's purpose to portray them. On the contrary, her

purpose is to reveal a small group of people who have made a deliberate decision not to yield to the machinery of dehumanization. Draenger captures the aura of exaltation arising out of the solidarity of the Akiva youth group. (16)

Pfefferkorn and Hirsch thus group *Justyna's Narrative* alongside works such as Emanuel Ringelblum's *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* and Chaim Kaplan's *Scroll of Agony*.<sup>6</sup> Defining *Justyna's Narrative* in terms of genre is a difficult discussion, though one that is generative in exposing the outer limits of such an expansive narrative. In a reader's report addressed to associate editor Janet Benton of the University of Massachusetts Press, Nechama Tec described the manuscript of *Justyna's Narrative* to be "neither fish nor fowl" (Reader's report to Janet Benton, 1). While *Justyna's Narrative* has all the makings of a wartime ghetto diary, it is not comparable to the celebrated writings of Ringelblum or Kaplan. While Justyna is the primary author and protagonist, the voice of the narrator is omniscient, delving into the inner thoughts and feelings of the cast. Absent are the descriptions of daily life; rather than recounting the environment in which the text is being written—a prison cell—the writing focuses on the events leading up to imprisonment of the group. Janet Benton, an associate editor at the University of Massachusetts Press in 1996, thought that the un-diary-like structure of the manifesto-memoir was directly informed by Gusta's lived experience as a prisoner and subject of terrorism: "...perhaps this structured narrative (rather than the usual diary) played a vital part in sustaining her; the process of creating a narrative structure itself may have provided a frame for her

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<sup>6</sup> These texts are published diaries written during the authors' internment in the Warsaw Ghetto. Both were written with the intention of acting as historical records of Jewish life and underground activity in the wake of total destruction.

fractured circumstances that made it possible for her to survive, as well as offering this same help to those around her” (Benton).

So, though *Justyna’s Narrative* might constitute a recollection of memories, it does not perfectly fit into the confines of the memoir or diary genres. While Gusta carefully edited and refined the telling of her story, she did not benefit from the removed positionality afforded to Holocaust survivors who wrote their life histories down post-liberation. She wrote under incredible duress—between tortuous interrogations, starvation, and cramped living quarters, she wrote, thus creating a text that is remarkably unlike the aforementioned definitive Holocaust memoirs. This is reflected in the minute details of names (all coded for fear that the Germans might find the incriminating pages) and in the larger redemptive and martyrlly arc of the narrative, intended as a message of courage to surviving comrades in Palestine rather than as another iteration of *Night* or *The Pianist*.<sup>7</sup> I would argue that Gusta’s mission was one of both record keeping, memory preservation, historical interpretation, and political manifestation. The question of how we can read Holocaust testimony (or, memorial texts that are neither testimony nor memoir but something else altogether) ethically and accurately remains. Understanding this dynamic of genre and mediation between Gusta and the editors is crucial to comprehending the complexities and potential contributions of *Justyna’s Narrative* to the literary and historical canon.

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<sup>7</sup> Władysław Szpilman’s *The Pianist* and Elie Wiesel’s *Night* are two works—autobiographical and semi-autobiographical, respectively—function as archetypal Holocaust narratives. Both center men as narrators and protagonists and follow a similar chronology of deportation, ghettoization, despair, and redemption. *Night* follows characters through concentration camps and death marches and acts as the first installment in a trilogy (*Night, Dawn, Day*) that follows an obvious and redemptive path. *The Pianist* is described in its English translation as “The Extraordinary True Story of One Man’s Survival.”

As wartime writing, *Justyna's Narrative* also walks along the border of what Raul Hilberg would refer to as a document (rather than a testimony) (*Sources of Holocaust Research*). The writing is a firsthand account, therefore the events and characters therein may serve as evidence of life under occupation or the poorly equipped youth resistance movement. The recovery and preservation of the original scraps of paper involved an archaeology both physical and literary. However, Gusta Draenger's prose does not resemble the statistical data, military communications, or other institutionally generated material to which Hilberg refers as "documents." Though her language is poetic, it is not descriptive of daily life, or of any events outside of the resistance movement's purview. Her characterizations are grandiose and larger-than-life. The question should not be whether the text is fictionalized or exaggerated, but what Justyna's subjectivity says about the lives of women resisters in the ghettos. Her words, and how they are read, demonstrate the potential importance of the couriers as historical authority through their positions as passing subjects. The implications of this are that *Justyna's Narrative* can be classified only partially as documentation.

Pfefferkorn, Hirsch, and reviewers of *Justyna's Narrative* have marveled at the conditions in which Gusta wrote—they take the prison space alluded to in the "Last Will and Testament" preceding the story as an indicator of a literary miracle of a prolific writer with an unquenchable will. The prison space is used to explain the gaps in text, the coding of names, the shifting of narrative voice, and the brevity of the account; this is to say that the prison as the location of memory recollection and collective writing describes that which is lacking, the unstated, and unknown in the narrative. However, I posit that the over-crowded cell in the women's branch of Montelupich Prison is in fact a generative space that imbues the writing with meaning. Though the women are limited by their exhaustion, starvation, and lack of writing tools, their collective

situation begets an account that disobeys conventions of point of view, narration, or character development. This becomes especially clear when the theme of isolation is considered as a central motif in the narrative among multiple characters. Gusta's penchant for the heroic and romantic bespeaks not only her literary influences, but also the desperation of the incarcerated writers in a doomed movement. They write neither for future historians, nor for future generations; they write for themselves and their comrades, and construct their story on their own terms. Through this act of self-writing and the accompanying culture of support that defined the prison cell, I would describe the space as a feminist one—in doing so, I depart from popular trends in Holocaust literature that would depoliticize and romanticize women's narratives.

*Justyna's Narrative* co-opts genre rather than defying it altogether. Reading it becomes an interdisciplinary and multi-method project. The editors of the narrative do not attend to its function as a political manifesto, or as an example of prison literature in its introduction—though it is clear that in the process of publication, they were aware of the complex and undefinable nature of the text (Hirsch, Personal Notes). A feminist reading of *Justyna's Narrative* makes room for these complexities and emphasizes the political nature of the act of writing such a text. In describing *Justyna's Narrative* as simultaneously manifesto and memoir, we as readers gain access to a multitude of possibilities for interpreting Justyna and her relationships outside of Pfefferkorn and Hirsch's framework.

#### **CHISELING AWAY AT ANDROCENTRISM AS A HEGEMONIC HISTORIOGRAPHICAL FRAMING**

Justyna is a complex and dynamic character, and yet the editors' introduction scaffolds her narrative with constant reference to her husband. Pfefferkorn and Hirsch are obsessed with the unstated reason why such a radical visionary could sacrifice herself—and thus her cause—in order to join her husband in prison and in death. They sum up this predicament early in the

introduction: ‘Eli Pfefferkorn asked why an idealist as dedicated to the cause as Gusta would commit so suicidal an act. Yehuda Maimon offered his opinion: ‘She was a fighter, she was a writer, she was an idealist, but she was a woman first’ (8-9). The editors do not add to this opinion or question it; they move on to another subject in the next paragraph, leaving the reader to assume that Justyna’s womanhood and heterosexuality are her most definitive and damning traits. Insultingly, the category of “woman” is here understood to be mutually exclusive with those of “writer,” “fighter,” and “idealist.”

Jozef Wulf’s introduction to the 1946 Polish edition introduces Gusta as Szymek Draenger’s wife after several pages describing the male leadership of Akiva. He continues to describe Gusta as “an attractive, intelligent woman of great charm. Her love for Szymek transformed her in some significant ways...Gusta was a completely dedicated woman with a deep soul and a warm, generous heart” (28). Wulf describes Justyna’s devotion to her husband and her fervent politics as “an inner contradiction” (29), in which her political identity and her sexuality engage in a struggle for her freedom. Wulf also spotlights Justyna’s yearning for Szymek when he is busy with meetings: “[She] suffered in silence because her husband, Szymek, did not have time for her. She suffered but she understood what was driving him, and she encouraged him to keep on fighting” (28). In Wulf’s literary imagination, Justyna takes the shape of the ideal activist-wife of an activist, herself nowhere near as crucial as her husband. She is utterly submissive, dutiful in her support, and politically nurturing.

Indeed, Justyna loved Szymek—the first scene in Krakow describes an exhausted Justyna entering the ghetto after a long and terrifying journey. This is at the nascence of the ill-fated resistance movement. She is greeted by a crowd of comrades and admirers who lead her through the streets; finally, her husband arrives to greet her:

She now realized that she would be alone in this difficult time, that she would have to depend on her own strength, agility, and inventiveness. It had all grown clear in an instant: Marek's personal life had come to an end. He was obsessed with the cause, and from now on that was the only thing that would have any meaning for him. Everyone else would have to subordinate to that femme fatale. As Justyna looked at the features cast in bronze around his steely blue eyes, she perceived clearly that he no longer saw her, that he was seeing beyond her into the distant future, seeing those things fated to happen, concentrating on what had to take first priority in his life. (47-48)

This interaction, within the first few pages of the manifesto-memoir, sets the tone for Justyna's relationship with Szymek. Their conversations throughout the text consistently last only moments before he is called away to a meeting. She is "overcome with sadness" when he leaves minutes into a reunion. It is easy to find in these words a woman who is enamored with and dependent on her husband, who literally lives for nothing else such that she would turn herself into the Gestapo just to be with him. In the 1995 edition, Nathan Kravetz interprets this dynamic differently, and writes in the introduction that "She [Justyna] explores, subtly and without animosity, her relationship with her husband. He is too deeply concentrated on his tasks as a leader in the resistance, leaving her as a courier, a house-tender, an inspirer for all the others in their combat group" (6). These interpretations of her marriage maintain the centrality of her husband and the permanence of Justyna's submissiveness. A feminist reading of Justyna makes room for her to have more complex relationships not only with Szymek, but also with the other women in her life.



### RECOVERING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WOMEN.

I would argue that there are other relationships in *Justyna's Narrative* that figure as prominently and consequentially her marriage (if not more so). Consider the following passage in which the courier Hela Rufeisen-Schüpper is discussed:

Since Genia lived in the same building, Justyna ran up to the third floor, where she found Genia and Hela together. They sat at the table, engaged in conversation. Hela had a fair complexion and full, rosy cheeks. Genia was pale, with beautiful, smooth hair. Her lovely eyes were staring intently at Hela, taking in every word. ...Justyna leaned over to Hela and kissed her affectionately. Hela hugged her and pressed her close. 'So, she's suffering,' Justyna thought. 'You would never know it from the lively way she's telling stories to Genia. This girl knows how to control herself.' Justyna felt respect for Hela and looked into her eyes. Hela stared back with a sad gaze, to which Justyna responded with a meaningful smile. As Justyna pulled up a chair, Genia left the room. They conversed in hushed tones, unburdening themselves of their deepest feelings. Each found new strength in the other. (94-95)

The last two sentences are especially demonstrative of the intense affection embedded in the friendship between two women who were all too familiar with the stress and fear of life on the Aryan side. Hela is thus able to communicate her anxiety and "suffering" wordlessly. Another example of such a relationship might be Justyna's relationship with Hanka Blas, a courier who also worked outside of the ghetto walls. While Justyna's life in Rabka was comfortable, she was

assailed by isolation and depression. Blas was Justyna's only connection to the comradeship at the Jozefinska 13 resistance headquarters; she was also an intimate friend. Though the narrator of the following paragraphs is unclear, Justyna and Hanka's affectionate relationship is described in visceral detail:

Though Hanka lived only twenty minutes away, she was supposed to keep her distance from them. The two concealed bases of operation in the town were intended to be completely independent. But how could Hanka stay home by herself in the villa when Justyna and Witek [Justyna's nephew and ward] were only a few hundred steps away? I don't quite know how to describe their relationship, whether to call it friendship or sisterly love. During the long months of separation while Hanka was in Warsaw, she had yearned for Justyna whenever terror, misery, or despair had assailed her soul. At such moments, she would send her thoughts out to Justyna, as if to some far-off and peaceful realm. Now, after a separation of a year and a half, they were finally together again. They wanted to take advantage of every moment, so Hanka would come early every morning and remain till late afternoon...It was an opportunity for them to make up for lost time, an opportunity for two souls to fuse into one. (103-104)

Gusta's dramatic and romantic style comes through in this passage, where the two couriers share a connection indescribable without such esoteric language. The friendship defies the limitations of space as the two are drawn apart, and serves the purpose of bringing them a sense of tranquility and fortitude. Though it was perhaps not prudent for Hanka to be visiting the

reclusive Polish housewife so regularly, they ultimately judged the time spent together to be as valuable as the caution with which they led their conspiratorial lives.

Pat O’Conner’s 1992 feminist inquiry into women’s friendships acknowledged that the study of platonic same-sex relationships (or even ambiguous relationships that cannot be described as sexual, economic, or political) are understood to be “trivial” and “tangential,” and are thus largely unexamined (1). These are relationships Adrienne Rich would have placed somewhere on the “lesbian continuum,” a spectrum of emotional and political connections between women that would challenge the patriarchal centrality of men in women’s lives (135). However, “lesbian” is a historically and geographically specific term that does not necessarily map onto the relationships between couriers.

Judith Tydor Baumel’s studies on group cohesion, mutual support, and leadership among Jewish women in the Holocaust represent crucial feminist interventions into Holocaust scholarship. Her chapter on the subject in *Doubly Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* is limited to studies of concentration camps; the ghetto, while still a space of despair, starvation, forced labor, and death, is a completely different ecosystem of genocide. She identifies the most crucial factors in the creation of such groups (which increased the possibility of the survival of their members): shared educational backgrounds, familial connections to one another, and common geographic origin. She characterizes the relationships therein as unequal, in which certain women supported more dependent women. Such distinctions were determined based on personality. Cohesion was maintained through a collective ethics of loyalty, solidarity, and sharing.

Baumel cites the importance of gender in these arrangements, since mutual assistance in men’s camps did not occur at the same rate as it did in women’s; she concludes that pre-war

social conditioning and the internalization of maternal values prompted inmates to seek out normalcy and support through familiar roles (92). Rather than an essentialist perspective in which women are biologically or culturally better equipped to survive, she demonstrates the particular contextual and political factors that granted the women in question a set of “choiceless choices” (Langer 224).

In her “Reconsideration of Research,” Joan Ringelheim grapples with the question of how to understand such important and creative relationships without glorifying oppression (758). She too examines the gendered strategies of former concentration camp inmates, which are presented urgently alongside the distinct possibilities of sexual violence. Following a screed of rhetorical questions, she sarcastically asks the reader, “If sexism makes women better able to survive, why get rid of it?” (758). Zoë Waxman has also weighed in on the subject from a more literary perspective, writing that “Accounts of mutual care and concern become problematic when used to obscure the horrors of the concentration camps by introducing a redemptive message into the Holocaust” (147).

In *Doubly Jeopardy*, Baumel contrasts the collective survival tactics of women in concentration camps with the agency exercised by women in the ghetto underground. She notes that women were able to rise to positions of leadership in Zionist, Bundist, and anti-fascist organizations, citing Gola Mire who appears in *Justyna’s Narrative* as Justyna’s Communist alter ego (referred to as “Lydka”). Baumel doesn’t attend to the sexually homogenous community of the prison cell in which Justyna and Gola foster a culture of resistance. She instead focuses on the factors which contributed to remarkably egalitarian youth resistance movements. Not surprisingly, these are also the factors that contributed to the phenomenon of women and girl couriers as the main interface between resisters, partisans, Jews in hiding, and

the outside world. Jewish women were afforded slightly more mobility than men in the ghettos. Indeed, due to the patriarchal norms of Nazism, women were seen as less immediately threatening than men; women were not suspected of conspiratorial activities or targeted for labor roundups. This is not to say that Jewish women suffered less than men; scholars such as Myrna Goldenberg (“Sex-Based Violence and the Politics and Ethics of Survival”; “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors”), Gisela Bock (“Racism and Sexism in Nazi Germany”), Marion Kaplan (“Jewish Women in Nazi Germany”), and David Patterson (“The Nazi Assault on the Jewish Soul through the Murder of the Jewish Mother”) have written about the many ways that Jewish women were made especially vulnerable as central objects in the destruction of the Jews. But in the particular example of pedestrian movement throughout the city streets, women had a marginally better chance at survival.

Justyna was preoccupied with and haunted by the act of passing. Pages and pages of the narrative are spent discussing the ins and outs of such a performance, and the effects of passing on the Jewish psyche. I would like to focus on a passage quoted earlier in Chapter 2 that demonstrates Justyna’s fear and hypervigilance as a passing Jew:

You would reveal your Jewishness in a thousand small ways: every anxiety-filled move; every step taken with a back hunched over from the yoke of slavery; every glance that bespoke the terror of a hunted animal; the entire form, the face on which the ghetto had left its indelible mark. You were nothing more than a Jew, not only because of the color of your eyes, hair, skin, the shape of your nose, the many telltale signs of your race. You were simply and unmistakably a Jew because of your lack of self-assurance, your way of expressing yourself, your behavior, and God knows what else. You were simply and

conspicuously a Jew because everybody outside the ghetto strained to detect your Jewishness, all those people eager to do you harm, who couldn't abide the thought that you might be cheating death. At your every step they would look straight into your eyes—impudently, suspiciously, challengingly—until you would become entirely confused, turn beet red, lower your eyes—and thus show yourself to be undeniably a Jew. (52-53)

It is thus unsurprising that Justyna felt that she was “suffocating” in her serene, middle-class life outside the ghetto (100). Justyna's friendship with Hanka Blas takes place in the context of this constant terror, isolation, and loneliness—the context in which she ultimately writes about the relationship (the Helclaw Prison cell), however, is one of communal resistance. Justyna glorifies the camaraderie of the Akiva activists, though she herself never witnessed firsthand the “general atmosphere of euphoria” that characterized the Jozefinska 13 headquarters (118). Hanka Blas would return to Justyna with trinkets and mementos from Jozefinska 13; in a conversation between the two, Hanka refers to Justyna's villa as “barren,” prompting Justyna to respond despondently, “Hanusha, is it really so hard for you to stay here with me?” (118). When placed into the context of passing, the friendship between Justyna and Hanka was life-saving and thus fundamentally political in a time when Jewish life was illegal.

Clearly then, Gusta's marriage to Szymek was not the only motivating force in her life. While the editors weren't concerned with the friendships between the couriers who lived fraught lives of public concealment, it is clear that Justyna thought highly of these networks. Her language regarding Hanka and Hela bespeaks moments of tranquility in a treacherous

atmosphere. While her descriptions of Szymek are infused with her sense of longing to be with him, they are not as intense or affectionate as the words spent on the women in her life.

The editors were content with the conclusion that Justyna's dedication to her husband overshadowed all her work as an activist; if one reads *Justyna's Narrative* as a text that is primarily autobiographical or documentary, Szymek Draenger clearly looms as a subject of affection, to whom Justyna regularly defers. But to read *Justyna's Narrative* simultaneously as a treatise of anti-Nazi, romantic, and Zionist politics is to read Gusta as a more central subject in her own story; her marriage was inseparable from the labor of resistance. Justyna's relationship with her husband is demonstrative of political dynamics of life under state terror; descriptions of Szymek are imbued with nothing but longing (just as she longs for freedom and the Holy Land), and almost are always in reference to his political work. Her descriptions of her relationships with other women are comparatively more expressive, passionate, and sensitive. Subordinating herself to Szymek's activities and leadership represents less Justyna's sense of gender roles, and more her unequivocal dedication to the movement. Like the ill-fated youth's impossible desire to triumph, Szymek is constantly absent and unattainable. Gusta used her relationship as a literary device for political commentary, rather than magnifying the atmosphere of fear, pain, and rage.

#### **TROUBLING THE HOLOCAUST HEROINE, IDEAL FEMININITIES, AND REDEMPTIVE NARRATIVES**

As I alluded to earlier, Justyna is not a value-neutral character—as a carefully crafted literary persona, she embodies various ideals of gender. While Gusta intended to create a paragon self-representation in the face of annihilation, she also created a subject that would be read within the confines of strict feminine archetypes of survivors and heroines that make up Holocaust scholarship and literature. The editors note values that are “key tenets of...Jewishness,” which

have been wrested from Holocaust victims and yet which Justyna has miraculously fostered in her narrative: compassion, modesty, and communal spirit (16). However, these are also distinctly feminized values, especially when they are placed within the context of the Polish romanticism so influential to Gusta. She sought to create a character that rang true as a heroine in her own context and language, so that in the narrative might be intelligible as one of courage to her comrades; unfortunately, even in retrospect the editors of the book neglected other qualities of Justyna that would have made her more lifelike and complex as a historical subject.

The popularity of redemptive Holocaust narratives is also a gendered phenomenon: Zoë Waxman writes that “In the case of women’s testimonies, and particularly those of young girls, [the desire to see Holocaust testimony as a cathartic act of memory] often expresses itself in a sentimentality that has nothing to do with the original concerns of the writer” (129). These narratives are transformed in the eyes of readers from complex and often dark accounts into “epic[s] of love and courage” (Waxman 129). Rachel F. Brenner understands this to be the distortion of horror into simplistic and sentimental terms, thus reducing a genocide to the humanistic lessons it can teach us (2003). In her 1999 study of Jewish heroines in films about the Holocaust, Esther Fuchs noted of such archetypes:

Jewish heroines of feature films and docudramas are glorified for being high-minded, innocent, optimistic, humane, kind, beautiful, and asexual...[They are] beautiful souls. They are altruistic and optimistic. They believe people are basically good, and that things turn out all right at the end. They affirm basic values of the Enlightenment: humanity, fraternity, equality, freedom. The



Beautiful Soul is often a free spirit. She is an aspiring author; she is a playwright, a singer, a woman who believes in the power of imagination and creativity. (97)

This characterization closely resembles the archetype of “the virgin” which Judith Tydor Baumel described as a major motif in Israeli Holocaust memorials. The other three motifs are the warrior, the mother, and the elderly weeping woman (Baumel 214-215). Such tropes are also common in literature and film about the Holocaust. There is little room outside of these flat and limited figures for more complicated characters. Both Rachel F. Brenner and Zoë Waxman reference Anne Frank as the quintessential Holocaust heroine in terms of the virginal archetype; the famous quote from her diary, “I still believe, in spite of everything, that people are truly good at heart,” affirms her intact innocence and idealism as a metaphor for the intact moral order challenged by Nazism (Fuchs 110). The heroines herein become “paragons of selflessness, moral fortitude, and endurance...” at the expense of the diversity of experiences that constituted the Holocaust (Brenner 78). To restate Fuchs’ prompt to think about the array of possibilities outside of these reductive representations: “What about ugly women, and what about mundane women, or rough, insensitive, and untalented women? What about unsophisticated women, and illiterate women, and disabled women, or selfish and cowardly women, or pessimistic and depressed women?” (98).

Justyna easily fits into the mold of the idealistic, compassionate, virginal, and intelligent heroine. As previously mentioned, the editors are enamored with her “counterpoint of moral and spiritual triumph” that “strikes a note of joy that overwhelms the despair” (15). I would argue that such a reading not only ignores Justyna’s complexity as a Jewish woman passing as a Polish woman, but further reifies such restrictive stereotypes into yet another heroine who does not

resemble any real person. I will also return to my argument that *Justyna's Narrative* is not a primarily autobiographical text. Rather, as a political manifesto written in prison, the text was meant not to represent herself or her peers accurately but instead to preserve her political ideals for surviving comrades. The editors miss her subliminal characterizations that manifest in far more undesirable traits than they would let on.

In the 1995 edition of *Justyna's Narrative*, Nathan Kravetz intimates a different scenario; he writes, "She [Justyna] is often depressed, yet keeps it from her Diary—most of the time. 'I am already dead,' she tells a friend who reports to us" (6). There are only hints between the lines of Justyna's inclinations toward despair and rage. Justyna does dwell on the draw of revenge, though not against the Nazis or Germans as a whole, as a politicized act of resistance; rather, she is obsessed with the thought of retribution against the informers who tore her family apart:

In Krakow last June, when she [Justyna] had lost her father and sister and had been unable to get over her sorrow, she had felt a powerful urge to attack the enemy with her bare hands. For the first time in her life she had felt that desire for revenge and that urge to strike out, even to kill. Though violence was alien to her nature, the desire kept growing, and only the strictest self-discipline kept it in check. This was her private grief: she knew who had committed the heinous deed, the culprit who deserved to have his face spit into. She knew the identities of those who had debased themselves. She would have no peace until she had avenged the wrongs done to her family. (41-42)

Similarly, the editors of the 1996 edition describe Justyna's entrance into the ghetto after her long journey by referring to her "euphoria" (16) at the expense of her exhaustion and anxiety.

Gusta writes of Justyna:

She was worn out after a week of tribulation. For days she had been on the move constantly, waking up at the crack of dawn, walking for miles, living in a state of uninterrupted nervous tension. Moreover, the trip back to Krakow had been draining: ...the sleepless nights; the never-ending anxiety over the safety of the loved ones whom it was her responsibility to save—each had added further to Justyna's exhaustion. Although Justyna had managed to accomplish what she had set out to do, it was now only with the greatest difficulty that she was able to force her swollen legs to drag her to the Jewish Quarter. Justyna's face was uncharacteristically pale, and there were black circles under her eyes. She had but one desire: to collapse into bed and sleep for a week. (44)

Indeed, Gusta does go on to depict a scene in which Justyna is greeted by a warm and loving crowd of friends, through whom she finds strength. Yet her mood throughout her passage through the ghetto is one of such fatigue that she cannot even identify to whom the voices around her belong. Her exhaustion is only acknowledged by Hannah "Hanka" Spritzer, an activist and nurse, who tells Justyna that she looks as if she's been "crucified" (50). Such distress is matched by her sense of isolation and dehumanization when passing outside the ghetto. As discussed earlier, such exile and terror had such a profound effect upon the couriers that it shaped Justyna's relationships as necessary sources of support and solidarity. These, rather than her relationship with her husband, form the crux of her narrative.

Passing pervades the story, but is not presented by the editors as a significant factor in Justyna's subjectivity. The manifesto-memoir describes the invasive and terrifying ordeal of travel, in which police, military, blackmailers, and civilians investigate the passing subject for signs of Jewishness, which must be denied at all costs. A particularly humiliating experience documented by Gusta is the necessity of remaining quiet and expressionless while listening to the casual anti-Semitism peppered into the conversations of travelers. Even the slightest expression of distaste could prove fatal for the passing Jew. She writes that "For Gentiles, a train trip was an uncomfortable experience, but for a Jew every step outside the barbed wire was like passing through a hail of bullets. It was like standing at the front line of a battle. The only thing that could save you was chance, chance and inner strength" (54). While Justyna assures the reader of the "inner toughness" of the ghetto fighters that enabled them to maintain their sense of Jewishness even as they were forced to deny it, it is clear that this is not a redemptive situation—despite their "swagger" and vivaciousness, the youth resistors remain vulnerable, disadvantaged, and resigned to their deaths.

Justyna's moments of anger are written so subtly that they are easily overlooked. During a conversation with Hillel "Antek" Wodzislawski about the merits of mounting an impossible fight, "Justyna lost all self-control" (74). Keeping to the epic and romantic conventions of the narrative, she goes on to deliver an impassioned diatribe about the necessity of preserving what little dignity remained despite the inevitability of death. Such monologues are common and conspicuous throughout the manifesto-memoir, but Justyna's frustration with the male leadership of the resistance is comparatively understated. In these moments, she simultaneously resists and saves face for her movement. In one vignette, Szymek and the topmost cell of the underground are meeting; when Justyna pokes her head in, "they dismissed her with an impatient wave of the

hand, signaling her not to disturb them at this critical moment” (81). She reluctantly complies, but not without complaint. She waits “irritably” and “impatiently” outside, and is quick to make the connection to the gendered power dynamics of the resistance: “But it didn’t have to be Justyna—it could just as well have been Anna or Mira or Eva, any one of them, as long as at least one woman was present” (82). Gusta subtly interlaid her burning passion for the movement with her dissatisfaction; I read the anger in her memoir-manifesto as a resistance to the status quo as she negotiates with her desire to present her movement as a spiritually successful one.

## CONCLUSION

Gusta Draenger did not live to see her manifesto-memoir published; she could neither explain the gaps in the story nor control the editorial process fifty years after the end of the war. There are too many variables in play to evaluate the “would-haves,” but it is more than possible to learn from the material legacy of Justyna and her comrades—the scraps of paper left in their wake.

*Justyna’s Narrative* deviates from so many norms of Holocaust literature; indeed, the epic and romantic voice of the narrator might initially sweep the reader off her feet and into a world of youthful and energetic martyrs who value their dignity above all else. This is the reading Eli Pfefferkorn and David H. Hirsch favored when they published the English translation of *Justyna’s Narrative* in 1996. However, my goal here has been to demonstrate that this is far from the only reading of such a complicated text. Instead, I have shown that Justyna created a romantic image of herself and her comrades in a precarious world, when they desperately needed a more hopeful story than their own.

The manifesto-memoir is carefully constructed and reflective of the unlikely and fraught circumstances in which it was written. What’s more, Justyna as a character is presented as

submissive and simplistic in her heroism. In fact, some of her most important relationships exist outside of her marriage, and further elucidate the life and labor of a courier living outside the ghetto walls. Justyna's emotional matrix is also far less redemptive than the 1996 editorial introduction, which reduces Justyna to an ideal of femininity that is unrealistic and untrue to her intentions, might lead the reader to believe.

Feminist interventions into Holocaust studies are imperative in expanding our understanding of the people and events implicated in the Nazi genocide. Recuperating neglected or disregarded texts to expand the conversation is one aspect of that intervention; resisting the patriarchal norms of historical interpretation—norms that would posit women as flat and limited characters—is another. A feminist intervention into Holocaust narratives should ultimately prompt readers, historians, students, the descendants of survivors, and all those who engage with history to rethink these norms of erasure and disregard within and beyond Holocaust literature and history.

Gender infiltrates nearly every aspect of historical research: which subjects are deemed worthy of inquiry, whose testimonies are favored, which memoirs are published, how particular settings are described, etc. The rhetorical norms of Holocaust literature vis-à-vis women and girls suggest caricatures rather than people. Justyna, as a courier, demonstrates these ruptures and mediations because of the gendered nature of her work and writing. As a courier, she relied on her relationships with women and was sharply aware of the political implications of her self-writing. Her self-mediation, as she shaped a narrative that was both manifesto and memoir alongside her fellow inmates, in addition to the mediation of editors and readers after her, have deeply impacted this record of history, and matter to an honest feminist analysis.

I have focused solely on one woman and how her narrative was manipulated into an androcentric and sexist effigy; I have also shown how a feminist reading of her narrative works

as an intervention. But Justyna is not the only example; critical evaluation of gender in Holocaust literature is a massive project that will need further investigation across a variety of subjects and disciplines. In seeking a more just world, more just representations—feminist representations—are a prerequisite. In the next chapter, I will turn to a different courier and different genres of self-representation to interrogate the gendered and racialized roles that institutions play in the articulation of Holocaust survivor narratives.

## Chapter 4

### Archival Transcriptions: Decoding Mediations of Holocaust Testimony

In her oral history video testimony at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., Vladka Meed is seventy years old. Her hair is a light chestnut—it is one of the many features that enabled her to pass as Polish in a context where dark hair was coded as Jewish. Her pale skin is creased, and her smiles are thin and brittle. She wears a turquoise blazer and a white blouse with a sparkling clasp. The year is 1991. According to the guidelines of her interviewer who was also the director of the oral history department, such testimonies should last between one and two hours; Vladka Meed's interview runs at about four and a half hours. In that time, she describes her life and work as a girl recruited by the Jewish resistance movement to carry messages, money, and weapons in and out of the Warsaw Ghetto. The transcript of this interview no longer exists; ten years later, it was replaced by a new, revised transcript, provided by Vladka Meed herself. This new transcript is vastly different from the original testimony. It would actually be impossible to recount all of the changes Meed has made to the transcript in this paper. Nearly every single sentence in the four and a half hours has been adjusted in some capacity. Meed ultimately sought to recreate herself in an image of racial and classed respectability in her post-war home through revised narrative that was more redemptive and legible than her original performance.



Vladka Meed was a courier for the General Jewish Labour Bund of Lithuania, Poland and Russia (here referred to as the Bund), a secular Jewish socialist organization, and eventually for the Jewish Fighting Organization (ŻOB), a coalition of youth movements. She was born in 1921 as Feigele Peltel (sometimes spelled Fejgele or Fajgele, all transliterations of the Yiddish name “פֿײַגעלע”). Three years after the war ended, she wrote her memoir, *On Both Sides of the Wall*, a title intended to evoke her unique position as a courier who lived both within the ghetto as a Jew and outside its walls as an Aryan-passing Jew. It was not translated into English from Yiddish until 1972. As a result of the publication and translation, she rose to a level of modest renown as an outspoken Holocaust survivor in the United States, to which she immigrated in 1946 (Saidel).

In June 1991, Vladka Meed was interviewed by Linda Kuzmack, the director of the oral history department of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM). This interview was recorded on videotape and archived in the burgeoning museum’s collections. While there are other interviews with Vladka Meed in the USHMM archives, this is the only one recorded by museum staff for the purpose of inclusion in the collection; others were donated by other institutions or individuals. This means that for over fifty years, Meed performed and rehearsed her narrative in a multitude of interviews and written media. Lawrence Langer has explained this simply as “all telling modifies what is being told” (*Holocaust Testimonies* 41). In this case study, I examine the extent to which Vladka Meed mediated her own narrative in the transcript of her 1991 interview, and what that mediation means for our understanding of Holocaust historiography through the experiences of the couriers. I am also concerned with the genres of video testimony and transcript as arbiters of complementing and competing narratives.

The catalogue entry for the video testimony details the following conditions on access:

On Dec. 10, 2002, Vladka Meed provided the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives with an alternate transcript and summarization, containing what she feels is a more accurate summarization of her interview. Ms. Meed feels that it would be beneficial for researchers viewing her interview to do so while referring to this alternate transcript and summary and requests that anyone using her interview do so.<sup>8</sup>

While it is not uncommon for interviewees or interviewers to correct minute details after recording an interview, Meed's alternate transcript far exceeds these relatively superficial edits. Instead, Meed has meticulously revised her own words (nearly every single one of them) to the point that the narrative itself is changed. The original transcript is no longer included in the collection. The gap between the video and the transcript, two carefully curated records of memory, is itself a testimony to Meed's subjectivity as a passing subject.

Vladka Meed's edits expose her own agency (or lack thereof), self-doubt, and desires as meaningful sites of inquiry. They also delineate the museum's gatekeeping, composition, and regulation of an institutional and historical narrative. What emerges is an interchange between memorial subject, memorial institution, and memorial narrative as each struggle to negotiate the lofty and impossible goals of authenticity, legibility, and desirability. Rather than understanding Vladka Meed's memory to be particularly flawed or her anxieties around these flaws to be particularly potent, I would argue that the relationships between Holocaust survivors and their post-war memorial institutions and social structures are fundamentally mediatory and subject to

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<sup>8</sup> "Oral history interview with Vladka Meed." *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections*. 3 March 2016. <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504647>. Accessed 1 May 2016.

influence. These transtemporal relationships impact Holocaust history; the contemporary context of recall and recording of memory are crucial to the events between 1939 and 1945. More specifically, Meed's performance of memory is also a performance of raced and classed passing; in reading between the lines of her transcript, and listening in between the soundbites of her video, we gain insight into her subjectivity, as well as her audience's expectations regarding Holocaust survivor narratives.

### **CODEMAKING AND CODEBREAKING**

Meed's memories interact across temporalities and geopolitical, racial, national, and class contexts. Her performances are exercises in agency, though these do not occur in a vacuum. As she mediates herself, she works within the confines of institutions and under the gaze of her audiences. Meed constructs a figure of an optimistic, fluent, and assimilated Holocaust survivor.

My project in this chapter is to map the discursive ruptures endemic to oral history and necessary to the functioning of the archive and their manifestation in one woman's testimony; I will examine broadly Meed's rhetorical decisions and investments in memory curation—that is, the planning and arrangement of words, images, and expressions to form a larger narrative of the past. While a new transcript (or even the original document, of which the archivists disposed) might be useful to researchers seeking to work with digitized archives, it would not be as cogent an indicator of her memorial desires and anxieties—this altered transcript exposes the multiplicity of one figure because it is so starkly different from the video it's supposedly based on. I am less concerned with what Meed “actually said” in her video testimony (thus implying a purer or more truthful memory than that of the transcript), and more interested in the shift in her positionality between the 1991 video recording and the 2001 re-written transcript. I am also

concerned with the mediating structures and institutions she encounters. This analysis aims to interrupt the automatic celebration of Holocaust narratives without denying their critical historical value.

Meed's agenda is multi-layered; she simultaneously edits information she understands to be erroneous or flawed while she adds contextualizing statements and greater detail throughout the interview. Her speech patterns are drastically altered in the transcript, to the point where it is not clear that the video and the transcript are of the same subject. Certain passages of the transcript do not even remotely resemble the oral history (even though the transcript is supposed to be a record of the oral history—the record of the record). Through her self-editing, Meed engages with the themes of linguistic politics in the diaspora of bodies and memories, hegemonic narratives of the Holocaust, and gendered subjectivities of memory. The end goal was to alter her audience's perception of herself and her memories, and to re-narrate an individual and collective history. Vladka Meed's attempt to doctor and reconstruct an archived testimony is a gendered and racialized performance in respectability: as a published writer and a memorial activist widely known in the USHMM institution, Meed was consciously a public figure. She could have expected her audience to include Holocaust scholars, human rights activists, fellow writers, survivors, students, and tourists. Their expectations and desires for memorial culture and narratives infiltrate and shape Meed's recollections even as she takes them into her own hands.

*Intersections of Racial and Class Anxieties of a Jewish Refugee.* The precarity of Jewish immigrants in the United States was in flux throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century; by 1991, the year of Meed's testimony to the USHMM, Jews were by and large assimilated into whiteness (the exception being insular communities of Hasidim and other Orthodox sects) (Boyarin; Brodtkin). The substantial government investment into the very existence of the USHMM speaks to this

assimilation. The USHMM carries the authority of an official narrative of World War II, in which the United States' heroic interventionism and American exceptionalism ultimately rescue the Jews from their grisly fate—thus, Jews are folded into a military narrative of nationalism, even though the United States had turned away thousands Jewish refugees prior to and during the war through immigration quotas (Gross 2015). The year 1991 saw the end of the Cold War following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The resounding silence of Holocaust survivors in the years directly following the end of WWII was, in part, influenced by the popular Western anti-Semitic conflation of Jewishness and Communism—Jewish communities did not want any attention in their new homes, even if sympathetic. The outpouring of memory that occurred as the Cold War era came to a close was also facilitated by the urgency of survivors' advanced age. After WWII, through policies and structures such as the 1944 GI Bill of Rights and access to the fruits of suburbanization, Jews were able to gain the education and financial security denied to Black and Latino communities still today (Brodkin 40-52). This absorption of Jews into financial and racial privilege (model minority status) came on the heels of experiences of violent European anti-Semitism. The racism that prevailed in Nazi-occupied territories differentiated humans from others by a broad set of traits that included language, lineage, and other metaphysical qualities. The couriers, including Meed, demonstrate this point aptly through their recollections of passing as non-Jewish.

I would argue that the internalization of race—race as an identity, a positionality, and a relationship to others—is a powerful process that cannot be undone even while racial hierarchies shift across geopolitical and temporal contexts. In 1991, Vladka Meed understood herself to be an immigrant, a refugee, and a genocide survivor in a country with a fraught and complicated history of racism. Though we may read her as white because of the color of her skin, this would

be a simplistic reading of race and racial constructions. Meed's experience with race taught her that her linguistic skills (or lack thereof) were a source of either normality or Otherness. She negotiated this spectrum during the war by suppressing her Yiddish on the Aryan side of the wall, and reveling in it when within the ghetto. Even the slightest Yiddish accent when passing would have tipped off neighbors, blackmailers, and police. It thus makes sense that one of her main focuses in the alteration of the video transcript was to enhance her English language proficiency, since language is tightly bound to performances of race. In maintaining herself as assimilated and fluent (and thus implicitly white and affluent), Meed creates a character and a narrative that her audience of American museum tourists and memoir readers may take seriously and even identify with.

Vladka Meed's linguistic insecurity is clear in her meticulous editing of the interview transcript. In the translation of an aural medium (i.e., one in which an accent may be detected) to a written one, these decisions are crucial to understanding how Meed wished to be perceived by her audience. Throughout the testimony, she carefully revises her grammar and sentence structure. This sometimes means the minute difference between "I recall one time *it* was an Aktion in the shop," and "I recall one time *there* was an Aktion in the shop,"<sup>9</sup> or between "I had to have some work" and "I had to be employed" (emphasis mine). These changes were possibly intended to be aesthetic, to make her language conform to syntactical conventions of Standard English. In the video, she says of her comrade and leader of the Bund Marek Edelman that "He was never afraid to be contradictory," though in the transcript this is revised to "contradictory." Edelman also is initially described as "a good person by heart" and a "family

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<sup>9</sup> *Aktion* refers to the mass gathering and deportation of Jews from ghettos to concentration camps.

person” (as opposed to “a good-hearted person” and “a member of the family,” respectively, as she writes in the transcript). Though she refers in the video testimony to the “influential section” of Warsaw, she later corrects this to “affluent.”

In addition to grammatical manipulations, Meed also exchanges her own language for more conventional phrasing. The sentence “It took quite a long time until the truth that everybody would be deported went into the mind of the ghetto people,” becomes “It took quite a time until the realization, that everybody would be deported, was understood.” “I was frightening” becomes “I was frightened.” And while Meed favors the expression “at that time” throughout the video testimony, in her transcript she replaces this with other phrases such as “usually” or “then.” Again, while these are possibly aesthetic alterations to enhance the literary value of the narrative, they also suggest a speaker who is fluent enough to vary her use of transition phrases throughout the testimony.

In the video, Meed tells most of her narrative in the present tense—in the transcript, she prefers the imperfect past tense. For instance, in her description of Marek Edelman she says in the video testimony, “You can rely on him, and he could be a good friend. I liked him. He was a close friend, my peer, and I could always tell him what I think.” In her transcript, she changes this to “You *could* rely on him, and he could be a good friend. I liked him. He was a close friend, my peer, and I could always tell him what I *thought*.” This trend is present throughout the testimony. The present tense is often the first tense learned in a new language, and thus perhaps easiest for a non-native speaker enduring a four-and-a-half-hour marathon of intense disinterment of traumatic memory. Andrea Reiter points to the discursive power in speaking in an adopted language as a signification of a new life in a new linguistic context (*Narrating the Holocaust*). Meed was multilingual—her narrative indicates a mastery of Yiddish and Polish (to

the point where she could fool blackmailers who could discern Yiddish accents); she most likely also knew or had some working proficiency in Hebrew and German. And yet she is dissatisfied with her English skills, and fastidiously works to make herself appear to be more fluent before her English-speaking audience. Roughly two hours and ten minutes into the interview, Meed finds that she does not have the language to describe the files smuggled into the ghetto so deportees could break out of cattle cars. For several seconds, she struggles with the words; Kuzmack intervenes, not understanding and attempting to clarify. Meed waves at the camera, looking directly into the lens and mouths the word “stop.” They sort it out (Kuzmack muses aloud, “*Those* kinds of files!”) and the story proceeds; Kuzmack prompts Meed to start again, repeating her own words back to her. The interaction does not appear in the transcript.

Meed takes the opportunity to amend her class presentation where possible. Within the first minute of the interview, she describes her father as a “scholar,” though in the transcript this word is replaced with “intellectual.” While these might appear synonymous to the contemporary English reader, they carry different connotations; Meed’s father was a laborer and the family was poor. While he was educated and an avid reader, he did not teach or write for a living. However, the phrase “intellectual” might be deployed here to evoke the respectable class of the Polish intelligentsia, who were also widely persecuted during Nazi occupation. Later in the interview, she revises the statement that her mother could not always read the pamphlets Meed brought home to one saying she did not “[know] what they were.” It is likely that Meed’s mother was not illiterate, but was less literate and in fewer languages than Meed. These revisions represent a response to the feeling of exposure once class insecurities are magnified on a public platform such as an archived interview at the USHMM.



Meed is clearly concerned with her presentation as respectable and assimilated. Language is one of the many points where classed and racialized respectability politics intersect on the plane of immigrant, refugee, and Holocaust survivor. Most USHMM video testimonies are conducted in English, a language in which Meed was proficient. However, the vast majority of the changes made to the transcript have to do with eradicating any indication that Meed is a non-native speaker, from grammar to idioms to the organization of entire paragraphs. An expert in the act of passing, Meed here seeks to pass as fluent. While she cannot edit her accent out of the video (not without recording an entirely new video, at least), Meed exercises what little control she has by completely re-imagining an interview as a subject who is not merely fluent but profoundly so. Without intending to do so, Meed upholds the burdensome demands upon immigrants and refugees in Western states. She dresses fashionably. She transforms herself from a subject who struggles to remember the word “bar” in English to one who has better conventional English skills than most university students. Her fluency is conflated with her whiteness under the gaze of the American audience that now does not necessarily differentiate between *Jewish* and *white*. In the context of a state-sponsored institution like the USHMM, which seeks to normalize a particular narrative of redemption, such respectability politics should not come as a surprise. Just as she used the Polish language to pass in Polish society during ghettoization, Meed uses English in her transcript to enhance her performance of passing as white. From her experiences as a courier, she knows that a discernable accent or clumsiness with syntax and phraseology may jeopardize her precarious belonging to the category of “white.”

***Trauma, Vulnerability, and Anticipating the Expectations of a Post-war Audience.*** Meed’s edits reflect a concern with her potential audience’s perceptions; she constructs for herself a character that is simple and moral, and a narrative that is redemptive and easily digested by her

American audience. Throughout the testimony, she exchanges the word “illegal” for “secret” or “underground” in describing the Bund and her activities as a courier. Her goal is to elicit acceptance from her audience; in eschewing the word “illegal” for euphemisms (indeed, all Jewish activity and life became illegal under Nazi occupation), Meed is able to disassociate herself from criminality. She may present herself as daring, righteous, and creative without coming off as felonious or immoral. Her respectability as a survivor and witness remains intact.

Meed protects her emotional vulnerability at other points in the narrative as well. Throughout the interview, Meed must pause, choking on words, to wipe away her tears. These interjections do not appear on the transcript. It is clear that the gradual and seemingly inevitable loss of her family was a particularly distressing experience for Meed. Though she promised her mother that the family would stay together, everyone except Meed was deported. She states that “This is maybe even today one of the most painful memories.” This sentence is omitted from the transcript. At the end of the first tape, after Meed has just recounted how she got the name Vladka, Kuzmack notifies Meed that they are switching tapes. Here there is a break in the transcript, but Kuzmack and Meed continue to talk. Meed is visibly upset, and reaches for off-screen tissues. Her sentences are incomplete: “I still—whenever I think about it...” Kuzmack interjects, “Of course, and it’s okay,” to which Meed responds, “Yes, but it’s still in me.” Here the viewer catches a glimpse of what Lawrence Langer (1991) calls “deep” memory, memory that cannot be explained through conventional chronology. In contrast to “common memory,” which includes memory as recalled by the self before the Holocaust or the present self, deep memory is rooted in the very moments of loss, pain, and terror. Despite being years in the past, Meed’s anguish and trauma reside nearby, even within her. The tape cuts out—when the visual returns, Meed is still crying.

When recounting the pain of witnessing the uprising and liquidation of the ghetto from the other side of the wall, Meed is tense and sorrowful; she does not mention in the transcript that she saw Jews jumping from buildings, though this is something she recounts in the testimony. She ultimately edits out her criticism of the apathetic or actively anti-Semitic Poles with whom she was forced to live; she states in the video that she did not hate Germans though she did wish to take revenge. Interestingly, the revised transcript is adamantly opposite this stance; Meed writes, “Did I hate the Germans then? Of course, I hated them.” Much of this passage, which describes the hollow and isolated existence outside of the ghetto is finely edited. Meed’s words in the video immediately communicate an experience with depression, as she stops caring about danger and cuts herself off from the outside world. The transcript is less evocative in this way.

Even happier emotional expressions are removed from the transcript; her first interactions with her future husband Ben Miedrzyrzecki are bright moments that she marks as a milestone in the interview (“This was my first step to get to know him”), ones that are accompanied by laughter. Noah Shenker (2015) writes that such moments are “often consigned to the periphery rather than the center of the archival process” (2), a point that is made clear when they are obscured, muted, or altogether removed from Meed’s interview transcript.

Vladka Meed’s narrative carries many of the redemptive qualities popularly preferred in Holocaust literature and historiography. She injects her hatred for Germans into a milder perspective, rather than preserving the more complicated image of the militant courier who seeks revenge and yet also feels something more complex than flat rancor—sympathy? Pity? Frustration? Her discomfort with intimate (and often painful) memories is exposed as she obscures the moments when she cannot continue, or is at a loss for words, as these are the passages heavily edited. The audience loses Meed’s sense of isolation and emptiness when we

can no longer hear the gaps between words as she is unable to articulate her heartache. The alternate rendition provided in the transcript gives us something else instead, a more palatable and poetic reading of the events that may be readily digested (though not without sadness). Neither is any less mediated than the other; they serve distinct functions, and reflect different articulations of the same narrative under different influences and pressures. Meed anticipates her audience's desire for "bracing pieties like 'redeeming' and 'salvation'" and "the indomitable human spirit" (Langer 2) and adds these elements into the transcript even when they are not so detectable in her original video. Through her edited transcript, Meed is continuing in her performance of passing as the "right" kind of Holocaust survivor: respectable, accent-less, affluent, and ultimately redeemed from her trauma, depression, and shame. In reconstructing herself into a simpler and more easily digestible persona, Meed can better embody the optimism demanded of immigrants and refugees putatively "liberated" into the American dream.

#### CONTEXTUALIZING HOLOCAUST TESTIMONY

Early in his timely work *Reframing Holocaust Testimony* (2015), Noah Shenker writes of the "formations and ruptures of intimacy" endemic to the collection of Holocaust-related testimonies. He writes that "The work of a video testimony can never be reduced to a typed transcript" (6), meaning that the embodiment of testimony in its audiovisual manifestation—the meaning of body language, facial expression, intonation, etc.—is not legible in other formats. Henry Greenspan's (1998) testimonial framework in *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors: Recounting Life and History* refers to interviewees as *participants* rather than *subjects* or *informants* in order to invoke the cooperative labor involved in the interview process. Instead of adhering to the so-called purity of testimonies in the way Shenker would conceive it, I would

argue that transcriptions of such testimonies as in the case Meed's are a generative process of meticulous listening, evaluation, and reconstruction that offers the audience profound insight into the lives and experiences of all participants involved.

Shenker describes four interpretive frameworks for understanding Holocaust testimony: the labor of testimony (physical expressions of memory); the interplay between common and deep memory—the former being recollections that conform to chronological and narrative conventions, and the latter being those that represent the most intimate recollections of trauma and cannot be articulated; aspects of the testimony that occur off-screen or between recordings; and the participants' contentions of individual and collective memories and moral narrative qualities. I am most interested in the third of these, since the writing of the transcript is labor performed outside of the interview itself. The transcript is off-screen—in this instance, it is more than ten years off-screen. Like the video editing process, its creation and development from recording and notes to a typed record occur outside of the audience's gaze. This off-screen aspect of the transcript is shaped by the invisible structures of race and class as Meed encounters them in the United States as a Jewish refugee with white skin. These then determine how her memories are remembered, performed, and absorbed into institutions such as the USHMM.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum is a state-sanctioned and partially government-funded institution. It was established through an Act of Congress in 1980; Shenker (2015) also points to the physical location of the museum among other national and federal institutions in Washington, D.C. (6). For Shenker, the USHMM represents the centralization (consolidation of materials and resources into one central location) and the Americanization (the normalization and centralization of U.S. perspectives) of Holocaust testimony. In contrast to the Fortunoff Archive at Yale University, whose testimonies are not available to the general public and are recorded so as to deemphasize the role of the interviewer, Shenker describes the

USHMM testimonial model as “interventionist,” whereby interviewers and archivists take a more active role in the shaping of a testimony through guided questions, screening processes, and even a testimony rating scale for the ultimate consumption of museum visitors.

The oral history department, like all others in the museum, is intended to supplement and support the Permanent Exhibition, the main attraction of the museum. Shenker (2015) describes the guiding principles of the museum as “an emphasis on the uniqueness of the Holocaust and on the moral obligations of American remembrance” (56). The Permanent Exhibition sought stories and accounts that contained particular narrative elements, settings and events that were shocking, moving, or dramatic and that would appeal to a U.S. audience. The experience was to be the kind of visceral and entertaining engagement expected after the Holocaust became a popular subject in Hollywood productions. While not all interviews are recorded with the intention of being included in the Permanent Exhibition, all are influenced by the guidelines developed for this purpose. The themes of memory preservation and moral and spiritual reflection are present throughout the enormous collection. This is reflected in the USHMM’s *Oral History Interview Guidelines*, which are still used today:

In general, we look for persons who have compelling or interesting stories. Clarity of memory and the ability to relate one’s experiences in a coherent narrative often will take precedence over any priority list. At the same time, if a person’s ability to tell his or her story is less than perfect, the historical importance of a story may take precedence. Since we are limited in the numbers of interviews we can do per year, we must use some criteria for the choices we make, even though the criteria need to be flexible.

(Ringelheim 2)

The oral history department was formalized in 1988 when Linda Kuzmack was hired as the first director. The museum did not open until 1993. The years between saw a great deal of internal conflict regarding interview methodology. Many of the interview subjects were found and contacted through the National Registry of Jewish Holocaust Survivors, which was founded by Vladka Meed and her husband Ben Meed. Vladka Meed was not an anonymous figure in the landscape of American Holocaust memory—she was, in fact, deeply involved in the USHMM’s very formation and tied to a community of survivors. Unlike the memoir which she published in relative inconspicuousness in 1948, Vladka Meed recorded the 1991 video testimony with the expectation that it would be viewed by people who already knew parts of her story.

Kuzmack’s preferences for particular testimonial conventions were not necessarily shared by others involved in the creation of the museum, according to Shenker. While she was less concerned with “deep” memory and understood secondhand experiences and historical context to be valuable components of an interviewee’s memory, Martin Smith, the first director of the Permanent Exhibition, advocated for the prioritization of deep and personal memories for a more visceral experience for the museum visitor. The latter ultimately prevailed in terms of institutional criteria for inclusion in the Permanent and special exhibitions—deep memories may be especially poignant, violent, or dramatic, meaning that they make for prime Permanent Exhibition material. Kuzmack’s interview guidelines reflect a combination of the two frameworks in which the interviewer takes an active role in the shaping of the narrative through clarifying questions and chronological framing. This model, which segmented the narratives and prioritized events that occurred during the Holocaust, “made it difficult for survivors to express seemingly digressive yet nonetheless vital paths of exploration that did not correspond with the itinerary of the oral history department” (Shenker 81). The screening process developed and

employed to identify subjects and testimonies who could be included in the collection or Permanent Exhibition defined “excellent” interviews as those that were the most dramatic or extreme, especially those that included redemptive themes. Such discourses would contribute to the curation of a larger narrative of forgiveness and salvation that is far more palatable than the unknowable trauma and anguish of genocide. The museum visitors would instead be left with the most eloquently articulated renditions of forgiveness, spiritual triumph, and survival.

In addition to museum exhibition, testimonies like Meed’s also plays a role in Holocaust historiography. Zoë Waxman (“Transcending history?”) contends that Holocaust testimony may be simultaneously sacred and a source of historical data. Unlike the historians who question the veracity of subjective accounts and those who do not wish to expose such intimate retellings to the scrutinizing gaze of historical analysis, Waxman understands testimony to be a transtemporal experience that expresses a simultaneity in past and present. Henry Greenspan’s 1998 *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors* includes the listener, the reader, and the viewer in this mediation. He writes of this interplay of self-fulfilling expectations:

Every version is not only ‘selective’ but precarious, often contested by memory at the same moment that memory is given voice. As listeners, however, we hear what we hear—which includes what we anticipate hearing and what survivors, anticipating our anticipations, have constructed to be hearable. As a result, what we take as ‘the testimony’ may turn out to be radically unlike the terror actually recalled. (xvi)

The intimacy of Meed’s most painful memories surface and grate against Meed’s present reality in 1991, the point of recall. It does not translate easily or legibly for her audience. As the



past is recounted, it is necessarily mediated by the present context, and everything that has happened in between. Vladka Meed's testimony must be analyzed with reference to multiple relevant time periods: the war years in which she experienced the events she describes, the post-war period when she adjusted to life as an immigrant, the early 1990s when she recorded the testimony, and the early 2000s when she rewrote the transcript. Even after the recording of the testimony is completed, viewers will continue to perceive through their own frames of reference given their particular contexts. Past and present intertwine. The reader gives shape to the narrative, filling in gaps and facing the witness with trust, disbelief, or apathy. Greenspan repeats the words of a survivor named Victor regarding details omitted or obscured: "What is not told is also true; what is not in the book is also true" (xix). What is not in the transcript is also true; what is not in the video testimony is also true. The readers, viewers, and listeners are not explicitly articulated as agents in Meed's testimony, though they are materially imagined, impacting the testimony even as they exist only in the interviewee's imagined audience.

## CONCLUSION

Meed's testimony of the Holocaust speaks to a public passing. Meed has laid bare her life history multiple times on multiple platforms for an enormous audience. Each rendition is mediated and multi-layered. Meed performed copious amounts of labor to curate a palatable version of herself and her testimony that would pass as respectable and assimilated within the U.S. Holocaust remembrance landscape. Meed's actions are initially protective and defensive (covering up flawed memories and challenges with language), and ultimately a manifestation of memorial norms in which deep memory must wrestle with the audience's expectations and desires. These anticipations reflect a U.S.-centric narrative (one with transnational ramifications)

in which themes such as entertainment and redemption figure strongly, and in which racial and national anxieties loom behind the subject in the video as specters, haunting the testimony.

Whether intentional or not, Vladka Meed wrote those specters into her transcript between lines of respectability and narrative prowess.

Vladka Meed's testimony and transcript are the afterlives of her passing subjectivity. The act of re-mediating her story in the interest of a racialized and classed performance speaks to her experiences as a courier. Even after Poland is liberated, even after she emigrates, even after she achieves recognition as a survivor and author, Meed is dissatisfied with her representation and seeks to amend it. She continues to deftly manipulate racial markers, inhabiting the passing subjectivity of a courier in her video testimony even though years have passed since her time in the ghetto. Her memory is an example of how passing is a cogent lens for viewing the Holocaust and its fallout; the couriers are crucial to understanding Holocaust history as a narrative that is constantly in negotiation with larger structures of patriarchy, class hierarchy, and white supremacy.

## Postlude

Even after death, the couriers' stories live on in their testimonies and memoirs. My dream is that they will one day live in textbooks of Jewish history, textbooks of Holocaust history, textbooks of women's history, and textbooks of world history. I also dream that they will have their own textbooks one day. Representation in educational media is powerful, and communicates whose lives and narratives have value. From my position in the United States, I dream of a world in which there will be positive and diverse representations of Jewish women as strong, politically engaged, complicated, and valued players in our history. I dream of the young Jewish girls and women who will have access to new role models and possibilities. I dream of their courage, their self-love, and their activism that will pose a sharp contrast to the American stereotypes of the so-called Jewish American Princesses, overbearing mothers, and other harmful tropes.

The couriers' narratives echo urgently in our current political landscape. I ask the reader to think about what we can learn from the exploration of passing and narrative mediation when we consider a contemporary world characterized by racialized phenomena such as the school-to-prison pipeline, police profiling and brutality, and Islamophobia. How is race marked? How is it created? And how does power inform the consequences of those racial markers? In the spirit of Vladka Meed, I also prompt my Ashkenazi Jewish readers to think about their complicated location in this racial landscape. How does race move with you across different spaces? How do

you experience otherness—even if you do not have language for it? How have you held and exercised power? What costs of assimilation have you reckoned with?

The couriers initially found me during an impromptu visit at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Poland, but they have stayed with me since then. I feel the weight of their decisions and the intensity of their actions at odd moments throughout my day; I am motivated and arrested by their voices. They haunt me, and this project has been an ineffective attempt at exorcism, for they have been pressed into my skin through hours of second-hand witnessing. As the title of Chavka Raban-Folman's memoir states, they are still with me.



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