

PROBLEMS IN EUROPEAN  
CIVILIZATION SERIES

# The Holocaust

Problems and  
Perspectives  
of Interpretation

Third Edition

*Edited by*

Donald L. Niewyk

*Southern Methodist University*

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evening . . . brought coffee to the sick. The last time she brought it was on the eve of her own death." Sometimes it took the form of one group helping another, as when a work squad had to carry sacks of cement from the storeroom to a building site:

*I was equal to the job, but working with us were weaker men who grew exhausted after a few trips. The younger of us, myself included, pitched in to help them. We had agreed among our group that we would help one another to whatever extent was possible, rather than surrender to the dog-eat-dog philosophy which poisoned the minds of some prisoners.*

And sometimes help came collectively, unplanned and uncalled for, where and when it was needed:

*For example, five women are pushing a conveyor car loaded to the brim with gravel . . . the car jumps the track . . . then it gets stuck in the sand. The women stop, completely helpless. Fortunately the chief is not around. All efforts to replace the car on the tracks are fruitless; the heavy-laden car will not budge and the chief may appear at any moment. A clandestine congregating begins. Stealthily, bent figures sneak toward the derailed car from all directions: the women who work on the mound of sand, those who level the gravel, a group just returned from delivering a track. A common exertion of arms and backs raises the car, the spades dig into the sand under the wheels and heave — and the loaded car moves, shivers. Fear gives strength to the workers. With more pushing, one wheel is on the track. A Kapo comes rushing from afar, she has noticed people missing at various points of work. But before she can get there, one more tug, one more push — and the gravel-laden conveyor car proceeds smoothly along the tracks.*

The survivor's experience is evidence that the need to help is as basic as the need for help, a fact which points to the radically social nature of life in extremity and explains an unexpected but very widespread activity among survivors. In the concentration camps a major form of behavior was gift-giving. Inmates were continually giving and sharing little items with each other, and small acts like these were enormously valuable both as morale boosters and often as real aids in the struggle for life. Sometimes the gift was given outright, with no apparent relation between donor and receiver:

*One evening we were served a soup made with semolina. I drank this with all the more relish since I often had to forgo the daily cabbage soup because of my bowels. Just then I noticed a woman, one of the prostitutes, who always kept very much to themselves, approaching my bunk, holding her bowl out to me with both hands.*

*"Micheline, I think this is a soup you can eat; here, take mine too."  
She emptied her bowl into mine and went without food that day.*

The assumption that there was no moral or social order in the concentration camps is wrong. Except peripherally and for brief periods similar to the "initial collapse" of individuals, the general condition we call chaos or anomie — what philosophers designate as the "state of nature" — did not exist. Certainly it did not prevail. Through innumerable small acts of humanness, most of them covert but everywhere in evidence, survivors were able to maintain societal structures workable enough to keep themselves alive and morally sane. The "state of nature," it turns out, is not natural. A war of all against all must be imposed by force, and no sooner has it started than those who suffer it begin, spontaneously and without plan, to transcend it. . . .

The survivor is the figure who emerges from all those who fought for life in the concentration camps, and the most significant fact about their struggle is that it depended on fixed activities: on forms of social bonding and interchange, on collective resistance, on keeping dignity and moral sense active. That such thoroughly human kinds of behavior were typical in places like Buchenwald and Auschwitz amounts to a revelation reaching to the foundation of what man is.

Sybil Milton

## Women's Survival Skills

The fate of the deported women depended less on nationality and the reason for arrest than on a variety of other factors: date of arrest, place of incarceration, and conditions of deportation. Survival also depended on luck, special skills, physical strength, and membership in a supportive group. Women had significantly different survival skills and techniques

Sybil Milton, "Women and the Holocaust," as appeared in Rittner and Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*, Copyright © 1993.

than did men. Although there were neither killing centers nor ghettos in western Europe, German-Jewish women and those of other nationalities frequently used similar strategies for coping with unprecedented terror. Women's specific forms of survival included doing housework as a kind of practical therapy and of gaining control over one's space, bonding and networks, religious or political convictions, the use of inconspicuousness, and possibly even sex.

Women appear to have been more resilient than men, both physically and psychologically, to malnutrition and starvation. Clinical research by Jewish physicians in the Warsaw Ghetto confirmed the impressionistic accounts of contemporaries and brought proof to the assertion that women were less vulnerable to the effects of short-term starvation and famine. Women in Gurs, Theresienstadt, and Bergen-Belsen reported that men "were selfish and undisciplined egoists, unable to control their hungry stomachs, and revealed a painful lack of courage." Women also shared and pooled their limited resources better than did men. In Berlin, the Gestapo allowed small groups of Jewish women to provide food for the deportees at the railroad station. The women, experienced in trading for scarce and rationed food, performed this job until the end of 1942. In the camps, women swapped recipes and ways of extending limited quantities of food. Men could be overheard discussing their favorite banquets and restaurants. Since women had been primarily responsible for their families as housewives and cooks, there was some direct correlation between their own survival and previously acquired skills.

After the initial trauma of deportation in freight trains and cattle cars, women were separated from their husbands and children when they entered the camps. Entire groups were automatically sent to the gas chambers at Auschwitz on arrival: the old, the young, and the weak. Usually, mothers were not separated from their small children and, thus, perished immediately with them. Fathers were not linked to children in this way. Instead of the protection normally extended to these weaker individuals, women were more vulnerable and their chances of survival decreased if they were pregnant or accompanied by small children.

Those who survived the deportations and selections faced great deprivations. Stripped naked, shorn of hair, and with all possessions confiscated, the women were shocked and numbed. At Auschwitz and Ravensbrück this scene was repeatedly enacted. France Audoul,

deported from France to Ravensbrück in 1943, described being "skinned and shorn":

*One day the order came to go to the showers and there all illusions soon ended. Baggage, clothes, jewelry, letters, souvenirs, and even our hair disappeared under the hands of expert prisoners, hardened by this kind of work. Cries and tears only brought beatings. A hot shower was soothing, but only for a brief moment, for the distribution of shoes and bathrobes was made without any thought of size and height, and this horrible leveling, this ugliness was completed at the political office by the loss of all identity. Names were replaced by triangles with numbers on them. The concentration camp system closed over the terrified women.*

Religious Jewish women, who, once married, kept their hair covered in public under either a wig or scarf, felt both a physical and a spiritual nakedness, thus unprotected and exposed to the whims of their Nazi tormentors. The initial trauma of loss and separation was compounded by isolation in quarantine followed by claustrophobically cramped living conditions in noisy overcrowded barracks where sometimes as many as seven women shared one bunk or straw mattress. The brutal separation of husbands from wives and parents from children only increased the sense of shock and despair. Even in the milder conditions of the Theresienstadt ghetto and transit camp, lack of space led to mass dormitory housing in separate men's, women's, and children's barracks. Many of the German-Jewish women were of middle-class origin; others came from small, close-knit rural communities; all were stunned by the noise of the overcrowded ghettos and camps.

Epidemics also spread more quickly in the confined quarters, exacerbated by constant hunger and thirst. Inadequate sanitary facilities, latrines, and even water for drinking and washing reached unusual extremes in the women's camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In January 1943, one faucet served 12,000 women for drinking and washing. Charlotte Delbo mentioned being unable to wash for sixty-seven days, unless it snowed or rained. Even Camp Commandant Höss remarked that "general living conditions in the women's camp were incomparably worse [than in the men's camp]. They were far more tightly packed-in and the sanitary and hygienic conditions were notably inferior."

Vignettes and diaries by women interned in Gurs, Ravensbrück, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen revealed that women's traditionally domestic roles as wives, daughters, and mothers aided them under

conditions of extreme duress. In Gurs, during the winter of 1940–1941, despite the increased overcrowding caused by the dumping of the Baden Jews, women fought against the primitive conditions. “They fought the dirt and lassitude with cleaning, scrubbing, and orderliness.” This cleaning apparently lowered the spread of disease and consequently decreased mortality in the women’s barracks. Comparative mortality statistics by gender in Ravensbrück for August 1943 reveal a similarly lower death rate in the women’s barracks. Survivors of other camps in western and eastern Europe reported similar experiences. In Bergen-Belsen, it was reported that “women revealed signs of a more practical and community-minded attitude, chiefly for the sake of the children. They steel themselves to find ways of remedying the situation and show real courage, even prepared, if necessary, to make sacrifices.” Cleaning not only prevented the spread of disease; it also functioned as did other familiar “housework” routines as a form of therapy enabling women to gain control over their own space.

Small groups of women in the same barracks or work crews formed “little families” and bonded together for mutual help. Hanna Schramm reported that in Gurs “at first, the women were an undifferentiated mass; one did not recognize individual faces and personalities. Gradually, tentative friendships began.” These small families, usually not biologically related, increased protection for individual internees and created networks to “organize” food, clothing, and beds, and to help cope with the privations and primitive camp conditions. At the French jail at Rieucros, 360 refugee women pooled their pennies to buy a second-hand kettle, since the prison food was inedible and the water unsanitary to drink.

Mutual support also came from membership in a religious, political, national, or family unit. Clandestine channels of communication existed in every concentration camp. Lone individuals, men as well as women, had a smaller chance for survival. Kitty Hart attributed her survival to the fact that her mother, deported along with her, was always in close contact. Homogeneous religious groups like Jehovah’s Witnesses retained a cohesiveness and comradeship that increased the emotional and physical will to survive. Depending on the situation, this could be either life-saving or very dangerous. Contemptuously nicknamed “Bifos, Bible-Bees, and Bible-Worms” by their SS tormentors, the Witnesses earned a reluctant and secret respect, which occasionally resulted in lighter work assignments as domestic servants in SS homes. But their religious scrupulousness sometimes proved dangerous; a small group of fundamentalists in Ravensbrück refused to eat blood sausage because of

biblical injunctions and thus increased their risk of malnutrition and starvation as well as corporal punishment. [This refusal to eat prohibited foods also applied to some Orthodox Jews.] The Witnesses’ pacifism led to their refusal to tend rabbits, whose fur was used in military clothing, resulting in the execution of several women for treason.

Similar group cohesion existed among Orthodox Jewish women from Hungary and Subcarpathian Ruthenia. When Sabbath candles were unavailable they blessed electric light bulbs; their colleagues assigned to the Canada barracks at Auschwitz (the barracks where food, clothing, jewelry, and other goods taken from prisoners were stored) filched supplies for them to make Sabbath candles improvised from hollowed-out potato peels filled with margarine and rag wicks. During Channukah, *dreidels* (tops) were clandestinely carved from small pieces of wood. Christmas was celebrated among the arrested French and Spanish women members of the resistance at the French camp of Les Tourelles “crouched on our straw mattresses, heads hidden under the covers, each sang whatever song she knew . . . through the night.” If caught violating camp prohibitions against religious observance, the women were punished by whippings or detention in dark, cagelike solitary confinement cells, and often “selected” for the gas chambers. Similar episodes of religious observant behavior also occurred in men’s camps and barracks. Bonding because of religious or political convictions may not have been specific to women, but the degree of group cohesion and noncompetitive support available to women seems markedly greater than among men.

Survival frequently depended on a prisoner’s ability to remain inconspicuous; reading a Bible or prayer book during roll call was a conscious risk. Religious Jewish women interned in Gurs during 1940 and 1941 sometimes refused to take advantage of Saturday releases from the internment camps, because of the traditional prohibitions against travel on the Sabbath. By staying, they were sometimes trapped and later deported to Auschwitz, where they perished. Religious group cohesiveness among Orthodox Jews and fundamentalist Christians had both positive and negative implications for survival. During 1944 and 1945 it was tolerated, even in Auschwitz, whereas earlier in the war it often marked a prisoner for more rapid death.

Ability to withstand the extremes of winter made survival more likely. Almost all the memoirs refer to the miserable climate and swampy or clay soils that turned into seas of mud in Gurs, Birkenau, and Ravensbrück.

In freezing winter rains, this mud became as slippery as ice. Fetching food in Gurs during the winter was an acrobatic balancing act; prisoners sank up to their thighs in mud with arms filled with cauldrons of hot soup or ersatz coffee. Those women who were deported from the warmer and milder Mediterranean climates of Greece and Italy could not adjust to the harsh winters of eastern Poland; this increased their vulnerability to disease and death. Inadequate thin prisoner clothing and clogs were unsuitable for standing in rain, ice, and snow during roll calls, many of which lasted up to ten hours. Some of the women repaired their ragged garments and groomed themselves carefully despite the lack of water for washing; this imitation of normal behavior was a conscious and rational attempt at survival. A few prisoners with special skills, like the Communist plumber Charlotte Müller in Ravensbrück, enjoyed somewhat better living conditions. Favored labor brigades were plumbers, masons, and electricians; they received better barracks and rations, which increased their odds of survival.

A popular postwar myth, sometimes exploited and sensationalized, held that Jewish women were forced to serve as prostitutes in the SS bordellos and were frequently raped. Although such cases did undoubtedly occur, it was not the norm and reflects a macabre postwar misuse of the Holocaust for popular titillation. Kitty Hart calls these sexual fantasies of postwar literature and television "ridiculous misconceptions." Sexuality, either heterosexual or lesbian, was most likely practiced by prisoners who were camp functionaries and therefore better fed.

Still, clandestine heterosexual liaisons did occur, even in Auschwitz, where men were assigned to labor details in women's camps. Brief stolen moments were arranged in potato storage sheds, clothing depots, warehouses, laundry vans, the bakery, the canteen, and even in chicken coops. Despite the risks if caught, the border zone between the men's and women's subcamps in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz became a place for reassuring visual contact, signals, and covert messages. In Gurs, a limited number of passes were allotted to each barracks so that women could visit their interned husbands in the men's enclosure. Although privacy was hard to find, in Theresienstadt, for example, lovers met hurriedly in the barracks' corridors at night. Weddings also took place in Theresienstadt and other ghettos and transit camps where milder conditions prevailed; and if both spouses survived, these symbolic marriages were often legalized in postwar civil ceremonies. There were also deep friendships between women that may have become lesbian relationships.

These have been difficult to document given the inhibitions of survivors and historians. Occasionally, flirtation and sex were used to buy food or a better work situation; even sex could have served as a strategy for survival. Traditional anxieties and guilt about sex were not applicable in the world of total subservience reinforced by terror in the camps.

Every camp had an active resistance movement linked to the outside world. Women were observed to be more resourceful and skillful than men at passing messages between jail cells and barracks, on work details, and during roll calls. They were also more skilled at trading cigarettes and food to obtain essentials for their friends and prison families. Inmate physicians in Ravensbrück saved many prisoners from selections; for example, the Yugoslav doctor Najda Persic wrote false diagnoses and the Polish doctor Maria Grabska tried to remove or change the tattoos on Austrian women slated for death.

There were even open revolts in which women participated at Sobibor, Treblinka, Auschwitz, and possibly even Bergen-Belsen. It is believed that French-Jewish women inmates revolted during October 1942 at the satellite camp of Budy near Auschwitz and were consequently massacred by those arrested as asocials and prostitutes together with SS officers. The only surviving evidence is from the memoirs of Pery Broad, an SS man in the Political Department at Auschwitz. This event, if accurately reported in documents by the perpetrators, is unique, since there is no other instance of one category of prisoners massacring fellow prisoners on the same work detail.

Flight, escape, subversion of the rules, noncompliance, and sabotage on work details were common forms of resistance in every camp and ghetto of occupied Europe. Every camp had an active clandestine cultural life with concerts, theater performances, puppet shows, reading circles, music, and art. Schools for children were also secretly organized. The care, supervision, and teaching of children were tasks that were frequently allotted to the interned women. Child care and education in the home were traditionally women's work and, after deportation, those children who survived were usually housed with the women. Hanna Lévy-Hass recorded in her Bergen-Belsen diary that she tried to teach 110 children of various ages ranging from three to fifteen.

Lawrence L. Langer

## Gendered Suffering?

If the world of the German labor camps, concentration camps, and death camps has taught us anything, it is that abnormal living conditions prompt unpredictable responses. Listening to the voices of women who survived those domains reminds us of the severely diminished role that gendered behavior played during those cruel years. Even when we hear stories about mutual support among women in the camps, the full context of these narratives shows us how seldom such alliances made any difference in the long-range effects of the ordeal for those who outlived it. Because it can never be segregated from the murder of the many, the survival of the few cannot be used as a measure of why some women survived and others did not.

Let me begin with the written monologue of Mado from Charlotte Delbo's trilogy *Auschwitz and After*, which appeared in full English translation only in 1995. Delbo, a non-Jew, was arrested for underground activity and sent to Auschwitz in January 1943, together with 230 other French women. Only 49 returned. Delbo visited many of them after the war, and in one of her volumes she explored the damaging effects that their interlude in the camp had on their subsequent lives. Mado, one of these survivors, reveals a neglected consequence of the camp experience, which I call the "missed destiny of dying." In our haste to celebrate renewal, we are inclined to ignore the scar that intimate contact with the death of her women friends and supporters has left on the memory and feeling of the witness.

Mado begins: "It seems to me I'm not alive. Since all are dead, it seems impossible I shouldn't be also. All dead. Mounette, Viva, Sylviane, Rosie, all the others, all the others. How could those stronger and more determined than I be dead, and I remain alive? Can one come out of there alive? No. It wasn't possible." Delbo then invites us to unravel the tapestry of paradoxes that Mado weaves around the belief that she is "living without being alive" — a talking corpse. This idea recurs often

Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*. Copyright © 1998. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Yale University Press.

enough in our encounter with the voices and faces of other women survivors to force us to admit it into our colloquy about the Holocaust. Its fate there, however, will depend on whether we let it fester or pledge to explore the sources and echoes of its taint.

Mado does not exalt her own survival, or the aid from her friends that helped to make it possible; instead, she mourns the death of others: "One morning, when it was still pitch dark, I woke up to the sound of roll call. Next to me, Angèle Mercier did not move. I did not shake her. Did not feel her. Without even looking at her I knew she was dead. She was the first to die next to me." Mado then gives us a lucid and honest appraisal of what it means for her to be among "those who came back": "I do what one does in life, but I know very well that this isn't life, because I know the difference between before and after." She tries to explain what she means by this: "All the efforts we made to prevent our destruction, preserve our identity, keep our former being, all these efforts could only be put to use over there [*là-bas*]. When we returned, this hard kernel we had forged at the core of our hearts, believing it to be solid since it had been won through boundless striving, melted, dissolved. Nothing left. My life started over there. Before there was nothing. I no longer have what I had over there, what I had before, what I was before. Everything has been wrenched from me. What's left? Nothing. Death."

In other words, the immediate threats of Auschwitz led to the creation of a community among Mado and her fellow deportees that may have sustained some of them as memories of their lives prior to the camp faded and vanished. But that community, she says, is gone now, most of its members victims who did not return. Mado refuses to delude herself about the rupture that prevents her past from gliding into a fruitful future: "This superhuman will we summoned from our depths in order to return abandoned us as soon as we came back. Our stock was exhausted. We came back, but why? We wanted this struggle, these deaths not to have been in vain. Isn't it awful to think that Mounette died for nothing, that Viva died for nothing? Did they die so that I, you, a few others might return?" She knows that this question should be answered in the negative, even as she clutches at the opposite possibility in futile hope of minimal consolation.

The experience of staying alive in the camps cannot be separated from the experience of dying in the camps. The clear line that in normal times divides life from death disappeared there, and memory is unable to restore it. Mado is married and has a son, but her family is unable to

help her forget. It's not a matter of forgetting, she insists. You don't choose memories; memories choose you. And because of that, she cannot embrace her roles as wife and mother. Love has become a gesture, not a source of fulfillment. She can't tell this to her husband, because then he would realize that "all his caring hasn't alleviated the pain." Mado's concluding words give shape to the idea that one can outlive a deathcamp without having survived it: "People believe memories grow vague, are erased by time, since nothing endures against the passage of time. That's the difference; time does not pass over me, over us. It doesn't erase anything, doesn't undo it. I'm not alive. I died in Auschwitz but no one knows it."

Is Mado's story exceptional? Judging from the testimonies I have seen, I would have to conclude that numerous other women who outlived the atrocity also inhabit two worlds, the world of then and the world of now. One biological feature of their gender, the capacity to bear children, has had a singular impact on their efforts to confront their ordeal, an impact that they could not and cannot share with male inmates. The phenomenon of maternity continues to haunt them with the memory and anticipation of a special suffering that lacks any redeeming balance. When Charlotte Delbo went to visit one of her Auschwitz companions in a lying-in hospital in Paris after the war, her friend complained that her newborn infant brought her no joy; all she could think about was the children in Auschwitz being sent to their death in the gas chambers. Like Mado, this woman has not escaped the taint of memory that has frustrated her bid to reclaim her role as mother.

Because this dilemma seems gender-specific, let us pursue it for a moment. In her testimony, Holocaust survivor Sally H. recalls the march to the train that would carry most of her family to their death in Auschwitz. Her most vivid memory is of a young girl among the deportees who was in an advanced stage of pregnancy:

*People did get married in the ghetto. People think that the ghetto was just, you know, closed in — they were getting married, because people had hope things would go on. And there was that, my mother's, a friend's daughter. She was eighteen years old, Rachel Goldfarb. I have to mention names, they're not here. She got married, and she got pregnant, became pregnant. And when we had the, when they took us out of the city we didn't have a train, there were no trains, to walk to the trains . . . I don't know the mileage to Garbatka. And I always remember Rachel, she*

*had a very big stomach, I was eleven and a half, close to twelve. So at the time, you don't think about things like this. She was pregnant, and she was very big. It was very hot, it was the second day of Succoth, it happened to be very hot. And she was wearing a trenchcoat and her father's shoes. Isn't that something? I can't forget it. And my mother, her mother, her father, and some other women were walking around her, made a circle around her, because — I don't know — either she would deliver the baby soon, or they didn't want the SS to see her. I don't know. And she never complained, she never asked for water or anything.*

*Years and years later when I had my own children, all of a sudden she came to mind. I mean all that time it was just like everything else, but when I became pregnant, all of a sudden Rachel's face was always in front of me. What happened to her. Because when we walked to the trains, there again like I said before, if you would be here that minute and not there, I wouldn't be here now. We were at the train station, and there must have been thousands of people sitting and waiting for the train.*

Because Sally H. and her sister, together with about a dozen other young girls, were randomly chosen by the SS to go to a nearby farm to work in the fields, she was not there when the others were deported that night, although she remembers hearing their screams. She and her sister were subsequently shipped to Skarżysko, and they were still alive when the war ended. Her parents did not return but, together with the pregnant Rachel, were gassed in Auschwitz.

Like Mado, Sally H. cannot simply celebrate the birth of her own child because in her imagination she associates it with the doom of Rachel and her unborn infant. She suffers from what I call a tainted memory, and neither the passage of time nor an unwilling amnesia can erase it. There may be a valid text about small communities of women who survived through mutual support or some strength of gender, but it exists within a darker subtext emerging in these testimonies. To valorize the one while disregarding the other is little more than an effort to replace truth with myth.

Yet witnesses are often reluctant to forgo the option of a dignified gendered response. This reluctance can result in a clash between texts and subtexts that frequently remains unnoticed as the auditor engages in what we might call selective listening, in search of proof for a particular point of view. A classic example is the testimony of Joly Z., who lost all her family in Auschwitz except her mother, with whom she remained despite a transfer to Hamburg and then Bergen-Belsen, where they were

liberated by the British in April 1945. She insists that the mutual support between mother and daughter enabled both to survive, and she ends with a little homily about the duty of asserting moral responsibility in the camps no matter what the conditions.

Embedded in her testimony, however, is a subtext, what I call a durational moment, that challenges her main text and reminds us how complex is the task of judging gendered behavior when painful circumstances like the following deprive one of the freedom to enact moral responsibility:

JOLY Z.: *There was a pregnant woman among us. She must have been in a very early pregnancy when she got in the camp. Beautiful woman. I remember her eyes always shining. Maybe the very fact that she had a life within herself gave her this extra energy and hope, to want to survive. But the time had come and she had to deliver, and in the washroom they prepared a bed for her, and I was assisting . . .*

INTERVIEWER: *In Auschwitz?*

JOLY Z.: *No, this was not in Auschwitz, this was already in Hamburg. And I was assistant to the doctor there, and that was a prisoner doctor. And I prepared the little box with some soft rags for the baby. And in the other room I heard suddenly the cry of the baby. I never saw or remembered before a newborn baby. And I was waiting for the baby with the little box in my hands. And then a tall SS man brought out the baby holding him or her upside down. And put it under the sink, and opened the water, and he said, "Here you go little Moses, down the stream." And drowned the little baby.*

INTERVIEWER: *What did you do?*

JOLY Z.: *For a long time, for a long time, it was very difficult to have hope after that.*

Compassion plays a negligible role here. The ritual of childbirth may be defined by the witness's expectations, based on her innocent sense of what should happen, but the outcome is decided by the SS, who sees both mother and child, and the witness too, as victims of a specific doom, not agents of their own fate. When giving birth and killing at the same time became the rule rather than the exception for the cruel directors of this bizarre drama, its "actresses" were victimized by events beyond their control that mocked their efforts to create for themselves a gendered part.

Indeed, in some instances, women were forced to *reject* what they regarded as one of their natural roles, as a result of their ordeals in the camps. Consider the testimony of Arina B. She was married in the Warsaw ghetto in 1941. The following year, she and her husband were deported to Treblinka, but on the journey he managed to tear the wire grate from the window, help her out, and leap after her. Others who tried to get out were shot, but they managed to escape. They lived for a while with local farmers, then returned to Warsaw to stay on the Aryan side, but were finally drawn back within the ghetto's walls by a desire to visit her parents and his brother. Subsequently, she was sent to Majdanek, and then to Auschwitz. Her narrative moment begins:

*The worst — you know, the worst part of my being in concentration camp, my nine months' pregnancy. I was pregnant when I came to camp. In the beginning I didn't know that I'm pregnant, nobody knew. But when I find out . . . it's hard to understand what I went through. Especially the last days, when the child was pushing to go out, and I was afraid I'm gonna make on the — you know how we call the beds, you know the bunk beds, and they're gonna beat me up. And I was so afraid because I got twenty-one [lashes] in Majdanek. And all the time my body was, you know, blue, my whole body was blue. I was afraid of beating because I didn't want to be crippled. I said to myself, if something — let them shoot me, you know, to finish my life, because it was very hard to live, very hard. Many times I was thinking to go on the wire, you touch it and just finish, but in the back of my head was "Who gonna tell the world what happen?" Always the same thing. . . .*

*And when I came back one time from the outside, I got terrible pains, and we had midwife in the barracks, and she heard the way, you know, and she said to me, come out on the oven. You know, in the barrack was a great oven going through. I went out to the oven, and the baby was born. And she said, "You have a boy." And she took away the boy, and till today I don't know where is the boy. I beg her, I hear crying, and I beg her to give me the baby. I'm very, I said, "I don't want to live, I want to die with my baby, give me my baby. I don't have any, you know, I said I lost my, you know, strength and everything, I can't fight any more, I want to die." And she look at me, and she sit down, and she beg me to quiet up, and she said: "You're so beautiful. You're gonna find your husband. You're gonna have children, still children." I still remember the words what she told me. I said, "I can't live any more. I want to die. And till now I don't know where's my baby."*

How shall we read this narrative? That in the camps, women helped each other to survive? My earlier mention of the role that the "missed destiny

of death" plays in the memories of witnesses receives concrete expression here. In the chaotic scheme of values created for their victims by the Germans, a birth moment is a death moment, and a mother's ambition is to leave her life to join her murdered infant. In the dialogue between hope and despair that we have just heard, nothing remains to praise. Whose spirit can the midwife's soothing words gladden?

But Arina B.'s story doesn't end here. She continues:

*I was lucky. I find my husband after the war. I didn't know for three months if he's alive, but I count on two people — my sister and my husband. And they're alive . . . I find my husband. And finally we made home in Marburg an der Lahn in Germany. And I was so afraid to have a child; he wants family. And I said: "For what? Again gonna happen, again gonna kill our children?" I was so afraid always. And I got my son. I was pregnant with second child and I didn't want it. I was afraid again. And I said to my husband, "I don't want to have a child any more. I hate to be in Germany; I hate all the Germans. I can't stand these stones, covered with blood, everything is in blood." And I was so . . . if he was thinking to have a baby, I was angry at him. And I said, "Fine, I'm going to look how to get rid of it, the baby." And I went, I got rid.*

The chronological text of Arina B.'s story has a happy ending, as her midwife in Auschwitz proves to have been a subtle prophet. Six years after coming to the United States, Arina B. had another child, and she now salutes with pleasure her two beautiful children and four grandchildren. But almost in the same breath, she furnishes a durational subtext, unwittingly internalizing her own image of stones covered in blood: "I'm like stone," she reports, "sometimes I feel I'm stone — inside, you know." We are left with a complex portrait of a woman who has survived an unspeakable ordeal to pursue a normal life while simultaneously abnormal death continues to pursue her. Although her previous "homes" include Majdanek, Auschwitz, and Ravensbrück, she has adapted far better than Charlotte Delbo's Mado; however, we must still face the dilemma of defining vitality for a witness who calls herself a woman of stone.

The testimony of Shari B. gives us a vivid glimpse into how circumstances could curtail the independent spirit of a young girl between her seventeenth and eighteenth year, a spirit that under normal conditions would certainly have flourished with a decided feminist flair. Arrested by the Gestapo while living in Bratislava with false papers, she is interrogated and beaten at night and during the day forced to clean out the police officials' offices. One afternoon, she approaches a window on the second

floor and is wondering whether to jump out when an officer enters and says, "Are you thinking of jumping? I can put you out of your misery right now, if you want." He aims a pistol at her head, and she remembers thinking, "If I faint, they will surely kill me," so she tells herself: "This moment will pass. This moment will pass." Finally, he puts the gun away, saying, "I don't want to cause a mess in the office. They're going to shoot you like all of the Jews anyway."

Eventually, she is deported to Theresienstadt. Her determination not to let the Germans kill her is further tested on the journey, when she tries to climb through the small window of her boxcar. The other people in the car pull her back, arguing, "If you escape, they'll come and shoot us." A fracas ensues among the prisoners, and Shari B. remembers turning to them and crying, "You are old; you are all old and have lived your life already, but I am young and want to go on living." Fear is a powerful deterrent to community spirit, however, and the illusion that one woman's survival can be isolated from the potential death of innumerable others can be maintained only by ignoring the inroads that German terror made on the individual will.

In spite of her inner resolve to resist, in Theresienstadt Shari B. is reduced to the demeaning state of utter vulnerability, a situation that many of her gender report as worse than the threat of death. She and the other women in her barrack are lying around naked when some SS men start walking through the room. She weeps as she speaks: "We were dehumanized. This was our most humiliating moment and I hated them that they should be able to walk around and see us naked." But there was nothing she could do. The episode is seared on her memory, as she relives it still engulfed by hatred and shame.

This is bad enough, but in Shari B.'s narrative we have an instance of how her ordeal lingers on in the response of her son. She and her husband had left Czechoslovakia and come to the United States after the war, but he died young of lung cancer, leaving her with two small children to raise herself:

*Once I read a report that children of Holocaust victims are affected, and I asked them [her children], "How do you feel about this? Do you feel you are affected?" And they said, "Mommy, how can you ask such a question? Of course we are affected!" And I said, "But you know, I never really told you anything as long as you were little." And they said, "Yes, but do you think we didn't know every time someone spoke about Germans or so on, you always had a comment?"*

And then I recalled an incident that happened. My son went to school, he was about six and a half or seven, and at school they must have told him about the Holocaust. And he came home, and he raised his hand and said, "Heil Hitler!" And I did not say anything, but I said, "You know, Robbie, don't ever say that." And he became very serious, and he didn't ask me why not. He went to the bathroom, and wouldn't come out for quite a while, and . . . So I would knock, and said, "Now, what are you doing there? Come out, please." And he came out, and his hand was bleeding, and so I said, "How did you hurt it, what happened?" And he said, "I scratched it out, so I should never say it again."

So I don't know. I didn't tell him anything. I felt I never really spoke to them while they were little, yet I must have conveyed something.

Holocaust testimony is not a series of links in a chain whose pattern of connections can be easily traced, but a cycle of sparks erupting unpredictably from a darkened landscape, teasing the imagination toward illumination without ever offering it the steady ray of stable insight. My final fragment of women's witnessing probes how Edith P., who, as she says, has a wonderful family but no past, strives to merge her memories of Auschwitz into her present life. In the course of her meditation, she accents for us the delicate balance between gender and human identity, and the tension between personal and cultural origins of the self, that surface in so many of these oral narratives:

*I just want to say, I've been liberated thirty-five years, going to be this month — April fourteenth [1980]. And as I get older, and my children are all self-sufficient and no longer at home, and I am not busy being a mother and a wife, and I can be myself — I have given a great deal of thought how I should conduct myself vis-à-vis the Germans, how I should feel. Should I hate them? Should I despise them? . . . I don't know; I never found the answer. . . . But sometimes I wish in my darkest hours that they would feel what we feel sometimes, when you are uprooted, and bring up children — I'm talking as a mother and a wife — and there is nobody to share your sorrow or your great happiness. Nobody to call up and say something good happened to me today: I have given birth to a beautiful daughter; or she got all "A"s; she got into a good college. I mostly remember when holidays come, I have tried to preserve the holidays as I saw it at home, transfer it to my own children. We have beautiful Passovers like I saw it at home. But the spirit is not there. It's beautiful, my friends tell me, when I invite them, that it's beautiful, it's very spiritual. But I know it's not the same. I . . . I . . . there's something missing. I want to share it with someone who knows me really . . .*

"I am no longer busy being a mother, a wife, and I can be myself" — under other circumstances, we might applaud this as a triumphant liberation of the pure feminine spirit from more traditional and, for some, confining activities. But how can we say that in this case? Edith P.'s Holocaust experience has undermined the rhetoric of renewal and self-discovery. The subtext of her life and her testimony is not a quest for release but an admission of irreplaceable loss. What she calls her absent past is permanently present *inside* the woman who is utterly alone at a Passover seder despite the company of her husband, her children, and her friends.

The curtailed potential of her stillborn life as a sister and a daughter, or her incomplete life as a wife and mother, because she is cut off together with her husband and children from the family she cannot share with them, leaves her a legacy of internal loneliness that nothing can reverse. But if we substitute for these gendered terms the more generic ones of parent and child, we move Edith P. and the other women I have been discussing into a human orbit that unites them through a kind of regret that cannot be sorted by sex. To be sure, pregnancy and childbirth are biologically unique experiences, and we have heard how they have been endured under unbearable conditions. But if we examine the following brief, complex moments of testimony, involving not only a wife, husband, and infant but also the daughter of the witness by a second marriage, we may glimpse the danger of overstating the importance of a biologically unique experience. The family is awaiting deportation, and the witness records the feeling of utter helplessness that seized so many victims at moments like these:

*This was summer. Outside there was a bench. So we sat on the bench, my wife holding the kid [their infant child] in her arms. In my head, what to think first of. You want to do something, and you know you're in a corner. You can't do anything. And when somebody asks me now, "Why didn't you fight?" I ask them, "How would you fight in such a situation?" My wife holds a child, a child stretches out [its] arms to me, and I look at him, and she says, "Hold him in [your] arms, you don't know how long more you'll be able to hold him. . . ." [The witness sobs with remembered grief, as his daughter from his second marriage, who is sitting next to him on the couch, puts a consoling arm around her father and leans her head on his shoulder.] Me, a man, crying.*

Exactly like Edith P., Victor C. might protest, "I have a family, but no past," and could we reasonably argue that there is a gendered difference

between the two expressions of anguish? The origins of humiliation were often dissimilar for men and women, because womanhood and manhood were threatened in various ways. But the ultimate sense of loss unites former victims in a violated world beyond gender. Victor C. clings to his daughter in the present, but the subtext of his life is the moment when, as the member of an earlier family, he was separated from his wife, his child, his mother, and his grandmother, all of whom were shipped to Auschwitz and gassed. Shall we celebrate the fact that because he was a man, and able to work, his life was saved? I think that he, a man crying, would not agree.

In the testimonies I have studied, I have found little evidence that mothers behaved or survived better than fathers, or that mutual support between sisters, when possible, prevailed more than between brothers. We do have more accounts of sisters staying together than brothers, but that is probably because brothers were more often separated by the nature of the work they were deemed able to do. This is an example of situational accident, not gender-driven choice. In all instances, solicitude alternated with frustration or despair, as the challenge of staying alive under brutal conditions tested human resources beyond the limits of decency — although we hardly need to mention that the victims shared no blame for their plight.

As for the ability to bear suffering, given the unspeakable sorrow with which all victims were burdened, it seems to me that nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from this landscape of universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that awards favor to one group of individuals over another. The pain of loss and the relief of survival remain entwined in the memory of those lucky enough to have outlived the atrocities. All efforts to find a rule of hierarchy in that darkness, whether based on gender or will, spirit or hope, reflect only our own need to plant a life-sustaining seed in the barren soil that conceals the remnants of two-thirds of European Jewry. The sooner we abandon this design, the quicker we will learn to face such chaos with unshielded eyes.