

# The Treatment of Women during the Holocaust

***Amanda Buhse***

## **Inception**

This paper was originally submitted to Dr. Jody Perrun's "Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust" in the fall of 2015.

When Adolf Hitler's Nazi political regime came into power in Germany in 1933, it marked a horrific change in the treatment of any member of society who did not reflect Nazi ideologies. While many different groups were targeted, it was the Jewish population, which suffered the most loss of lives, followed by the Roma and Sinti, also known as Gypsies, and anyone considered asocial. At a time when belonging to one of these groups was virtually a death sentence, the added element of being female often meant that the awaiting atrocities were far worse than those of their male counterparts. The examination of the treatment of women during the Holocaust is a relatively new vein of research that occurred as a result of the popularization of works and ideas of feminist scholars. Previous research focused on women in terms of homemakers, wives, and mothers and was limited to those themes because nobody would dare add to their pain by asking about the existence of sexualized violence.<sup>1</sup> Although it was common knowledge that sexual relations were strictly forbidden between Germans and Jews, sexual acts were happening—regularly and violently. What took place during

---

<sup>1</sup> Beverly Chalmers, "Jewish Women's Sexual Behaviour and Sexualized Abuse During the Nazi Era," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): 184–196.

the Holocaust, with respect to sexual crimes against Jewish women at the hands of German men was a massive contradiction of legal policy. The use of sexualized violence and humiliation attacks on Judaism, and work duties that would break the spirit and heart of any mother, were all used to destroy women during the Holocaust before the gas and bullets would complete the job. This paper discusses a range of topics relating to the specific abuses suffered by women including rape, sexual humiliation, forced abortions and sterilization, religious restrictions and the stigma associated with being a Holocaust survivor.

The Nazis had a plan to eliminate all Jews, Gypsies, and those deemed asocial from all of Europe, initially through mass emigration and ultimately through sterilization and extermination. Prior to Nazi rule, 1920s Germany was remarkably liberal, both sexually and occupationally, for women. They were able to work and their sexual health choices were respected. Birth control was easily available and there were numerous sexual health clinics. The Nazis coming into power in 1933 marked the end of these freedoms for women that were members of the targeted groups.<sup>2</sup> Being a Jew or a member of one of the other identified groups while being a woman was a double punishment. Women were not chosen to be leaders within the ghettos, often were not strong enough to be an asset in the labour camps, and—unless they were going to be used sexually—were generally considered expendable and were the first to be killed.<sup>3</sup> Women were considered to be the worst members of the Nazis' enemy groups because they were the ones who bore the children, thus expanding the

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Rachel Pascale Bos, "Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003), 23–50.

hated race. Forced sterilization, forced abortions and murder were seen as the best solutions for halting their expansion.<sup>4</sup>

The first plan to deal with the Jews and other minorities was to corral them into enclosed communities known as ghettos. This ensured that the Germans could keep constant surveillance, knowing their whereabouts and activities at all times. In these ghettos, women were at a disadvantage as they were never appointed to positions of power within the Jewish Councils or the police force and therefore had the least priority with respect to social equality.<sup>5</sup> These women quickly realized that they had to take action themselves in order to survive; they used their bodies to do so. While the acts they performed were not, in fact, forced upon them, the alternative would have often been imminent death. The prostitution within these ghettos was much less about the needs of men than about the survival of women. Women traded sex for food, supplies, and protection and in that manner they were able to not only help themselves but also provide for and protect their families. One woman's willingness to trade sex for necessities could save an entire family, so it was not uncommon for family members to encourage the prostitution of their healthy and attractive young women. This often meant that a husband or brother would support the prostitution of their wife or sister as a means of survival. A relationship with a powerful man was often the difference between being hungry and living in the streets or being fed with a roof over one's head.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this prostitution, there was other violence perpetrated against the women in the ghettos.

---

<sup>4</sup> John K. Roth, "Equality, Neutrality and Particularity: Perspectives on Women and the Holocaust," in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*, eds. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003), 5–22.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence During the Holocaust—The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103–121.

When the *Einstazgruppen*, the “mobile killing squads,” went into the ghettos to gather the Jews for transport to one of the concentration camps, young women were taken into synagogues where the SS guards would cut off the breasts of nursing mothers, violently conduct cavity searches for hidden valuables, beat and rape these women and then bury them in mass graves or simply leave the bodies where they were.<sup>7</sup>

Inside and outside of the ghettos and concentration camps, the Germans used sexual humiliation as a punishment, particularly for Jewish women. In public areas, SS guards forced them to clean sidewalks and floors with their undergarments and then made the women wear that same underwear; they had to clean and eat contents of toilets, and had to dip their heads in excrement-filled toilets and were forbidden from washing afterwards. These women were then paraded through the streets to perpetrate German propaganda that Jews were a dirty race and encouraged onlookers to shout ‘Dirty Jew’ as the women walked by.<sup>8</sup> Further humiliation came upon arrival to the camps, where women were forced to strip naked in front of each other and the guards before being given ill-fitting clothing and having all body hair shaved. This loss of femininity and dignity left the women feeling like they were no longer women; they were gender neutral.<sup>9</sup> They also suffered assaults upon their religion. A major tenet of Judaism is personal cleanliness as it is considered to be “a sign of and [an] invitation to the holy.”<sup>10</sup> Considering this fact, the conditions at the

---

<sup>7</sup> Chalmers, “Jewish Women’s Sexual Behaviour,” 184–196.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Monika J. Flaschka, “‘Only Pretty Women Were Raped’: The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 77–93.

<sup>10</sup> Melissa Raphael, *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 66.

camps were even more unbearable for the Jewish women. When the women first arrived at the camps, they were still healthy enough to be menstruating. As a further means of humiliation, no feminine hygiene products were provided and women were horrified at the state of their bodies and their clothes. This was humiliating in and of itself but the solution from the guards was even worse as it was an assault on Judaism as well as women. They were given pages torn out of religious books and pieces of prayer shawls to use as underwear. Malnutrition soon halted most women from menstruating, taking away yet another piece of these women's identities.

While consensual prostitution and sexual and religious humiliation were terrible situations women were confronted with, their situations worsened once they were interned in the concentration camps. Women and girls as young as eight years old were immediately sexually sterilized via radiation, surgery, and injections. If any woman was found to be pregnant upon admission to the camps, they were either killed immediately, or if it appeared that they were otherwise healthy and could be used for manual labour, they were subjected to forced abortions.<sup>11</sup> Many women who became pregnant by other prisoners, with the father often being their husband, would conceal the pregnancy as long as they could because the punishment for this infraction was immediate death. There were many women in the camps who were nurses and gynecologists and secret abortions frequently took place in the middle of the night under their care as a means to protect the mother from death. Both early and late term abortions were conducted, and in the case of the latter, mothers would often take a moment or two with their infant before strangling or drowning the baby to save it from a life of imprisonment. These women would then report for work duty in

---

<sup>11</sup> Brigitte Halbmayr, "Sexualized Violence Against Women During Nazi 'Racial' Persecution," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 29–44.

the morning.<sup>12</sup> Adding to their anguish, one of the work duties they were assigned was to push all the strollers belonging to murdered children to a collection depot so that German mothers could have strollers for their babies.<sup>13</sup> At a time when the Jewish, Roma, Sinti and those deemed asocial were having their pregnancies forcibly aborted, it was illegal for German women to abort a fetus. It was their duty to expand the master race, creating a need for an abundance of strollers.<sup>14</sup>

Not all of the abuses suffered by these women were sexual in nature. Doctors within the camps viewed these women as perfect test subjects for their medical experiments. In addition to perfecting sterilization methods, other brutal surgeries and trial and error procedures were inflicted upon them. The guards would purposefully wound the women and would then rub woodchips, fecal matter, and dirty water in the wounds to ensure infection. This served as a way for the doctors to experiment with the efficacy of various antibiotics. Unsurprisingly, many of these antibiotics did not work and countless women died of deliberate infection. There were also experimental transplantations of muscles and bones, with fatal results. These procedures were done without anesthesia.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the fact that Nazi law forbade sexual relations between Germans and Jews—a concept known as *Rassenschade*, which translates into “racial shame”—it is well documented that this was a

---

<sup>12</sup> Ellen Ben-Sefer, “Forced Sterilization and Abortion as Sexual Abuse,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 156–173.

<sup>13</sup> Roth, “Equality, Neutrality and Particularity,” 5–22.

<sup>14</sup> Halbmayr, “Sexualized Violence Against Women,” 29–44.

<sup>15</sup> Sybil Milton, “Hidden Lives: Roma and Sinti Women,” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*, ed. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003), 53–75.

common occurrence.<sup>16</sup> German guards were known to choose women from the hundreds of naked Jews en route to the gas chamber, pull them out of line, rape them, and then immediately lead them to their execution.<sup>17</sup> There are accounts of SS guards who would come into the camps at night and haul away women they found to be attractive, take them back to their private quarters, rape and murder them. After the war, many of these private quarters were found to have mass graves outside containing the bodies of the women they had used and killed.<sup>18</sup>

19

Further evidence of sexual crimes against women can be seen in the existence of German-run brothels. Hitler's goal was to expand Germany, and the prisoners were tasked with building infrastructure to meet that goal. Senior officials, upon visiting some of the camps, felt that low morale among the prisoners was slowing down work. An incentive program was implemented in which exceptionally hard working prisoners would receive the right to visit a brothel. Women were recruited from the camps with the promise that if they went to work at the brothels, there would be better food, better facilities, and they were often promised early release. These promises were never granted, and the women were shipped off to be sex slaves for other prisoners. Rather than investing in providing better living conditions and adequate food to increase productivity, the Germans chose to further victimize the women. While daytime hours allowed the women to read and converse with others, the fact remained that these women had to work as sex slaves for two hours every evening at the end of the prisoner work shift.

---

<sup>16</sup> Chalmers, "Jewish Women's Sexual Behaviour," 184–196.

<sup>17</sup> Person, "Sexual Violence During the Holocaust," 103–121.

<sup>18</sup> Chalmers, "Jewish Women's Sexual Behaviour," 184–196.

<sup>19</sup> Nomi Levenkron, "'Prostitution', Rape and Sexual Slavery During World War Two," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 13–28.

Each man was allowed fifteen minutes, which equated to eight men per evening per woman.<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that there were incidences of Jewish boys and men also being raped by German guards within the camp, however this happened far more infrequently than incidences of sexual violence against women.<sup>21</sup>

After the war was over, these women were not able to simply move on and forget the horrors they had faced. Some women who survived Auschwitz or any of the other camps were ostracized by their community as word spread as to what these women had done or what others had done to them in order to survive. In the 1940's, psychological counselling was not common and these women were alone in their mental and physical health recovery. Years of malnutrition, beatings and lack of any medical care had left many women with lifelong effects such as renal and circulatory problems and dental issues. Additionally, after the end of the war, although these women were now allowed to have children, their forced sterilizations made that impossible. Their inability to conceive further identified and stigmatized them as survivors, and the vicious circle of judgement and labeling was prolonged.<sup>22</sup>

The Holocaust is thought of as the worst event that has ever occurred in our world in terms of the horrors humans inflicted upon each other. Millions of people were horribly and needlessly murdered because the Nazis wanted Europe to be dominated by what they had determined to be the master and superior race. It is certainly true that anyone that lived through this period of time suffered greatly, but the fate of women

---

<sup>20</sup> Robert Sommer, "Sexual Exploitation of Women in Nazi Concentration Camp Brothels," in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 45–60.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Levenkron, "'Prostitution,' Rape and Sexual Slavery," 13–28.



is especially tragic. Their sexual integrity was continually violated, their ability to procreate—the very thing that made them women—was forcibly taken away from them, they were tortured through medical experiments and suffered many different facets of humiliation. There must be nothing worse than watching a child be killed, having a child aborted, or killing a child to save them from the suffering that the Nazi world had in store for them. While Jewish men and other minorities suffered greatly, being a woman resulted in especially horrific gender-specific treatments and policies.

## **Bibliography**

- Ben-Sefer, Ellen. "Forced Sterilization and Abortion as Sexual Abuse." *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, 156–173. Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010.
- Bos, Rachel Pascale. "Women and the Holocaust: Analyzing Gender Difference." *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*. Edited by Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, 23–50. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.
- Chalmers, Beverly. "Jewish Women's Sexual Behaviour and Sexualized Abuse During the Nazi Era." *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 24, no. 2 (2015): 184–196.
- Flaschka, Monika J. "'Only Pretty Women Were Raped': The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps." *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, 77–93. Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010.
- Halbmayr, Brigitte. "Sexualized Violence Against Women During Nazi 'Racial' Persecution." *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, 29–44. Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010.
- Levenkron, Nomi. "'Prostitution', Rape and Sexual Slavery During World War Two." *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*.

Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, 13–28.  
Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010.

Milton, Sybil. "Hidden Lives: Sinti and Roma Women." *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*. Edited by Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, 53–75. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.

Person, Katarzyna. "Sexual Violence During the Holocaust – The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103–121.

Raphael, Melissa. *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Roth, John K. "Equality, Neutrality and Particularity: Perspectives on Women and the Holocaust." *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis and the Holocaust*. Edited by Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, 5–22. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003.

Sommer, Robert. "Sexual Exploitation of Women in Nazi Concentration Camp Brothels." *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. Edited by Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, 45–60. Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2010.