

Women's Survival in the Camps

Rationale

Jewish women's diaries and memoirs were among the earliest forms of Holocaust-related writing to be published after World War II. However, the field of women's Holocaust literature did not begin its serious development until the mid-1970s. The profusion of women's memoirs that emerged at that time was linked to a worldwide interest in Holocaust issues.

As we examine this body of work, a question arises: Is there anything characteristic or distinctive about women's experience of the Holocaust? Scholars of women's Holocaust literature disagree as to the validity or usefulness of assigning purely gender-related reasons for survival. Some writers stress the universal nature of experiences, such as thirst, hunger, deprivation, and death.

In her essay "Representation of the Holocaust in Women's Testimony," in The Holocaust and the Text, Anna Hardman comments on the views of early critics Myma Goldenburg and Joan Ringelheim. Both writers indicated the distinctly "female" resources of women as reasons for their survival, interpreting women's socialization toward cooperation and caring as traits that would later develop into female bonding or "sisterhood" in the camps. They proposed that these gender-specific traits were distinct advantages, compared to men's independence and competitiveness. In contrast, Hardmann cautions against viewing women's camp experiences primarily through the lens of gender. She refers to men's memoirs that speak of such "feminine" themes as close friendships and emphasis on cleanliness. Another dissenting voice in the gender-

differences dispute belongs to novelist Cynthia Ozick, who holds that Holocaust victims were seen primarily as Jews rather than as particular gender or age group.

In *Women in Holocaust Literature*, Sara Horowitz identifies two types of narratives describing female vulnerabilities of pregnancy and motherhood: tales of heroism or tales of atrocity. She also asserts that men faced gender-related humiliation. With passing time and reflection, Joan Ringelheim has come to reassess her earlier work. In *Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research*, she admits that her research had been conducted and interpreted under the influence of an unconscious bias: cultural feminism. She poses new questions about women and men, survival, and gender roles.

How were the Nazis' sexism and racism manifested in the process of the destruction of the Jews? This question is the focus of the research still required in this complex field of study. Here, we present excerpts from female survivors' stories against the backdrop of historical facts about life in the concentration camps. Students will read about human reactions to inhumane treatment. They will learn about the "choiceless choices" presented to women daily. They will engage in thought-provoking activities to encourage critical thinking about this important area of investigation. Through exposure to the texts and various selected materials, students will come to understand the complexity of the circumstances of survival. Although each survivor's case is unique, students will become aware of patterns reflected in these selections. Some of the most salient reasons for survival that we highlight include acts of kindness by others, strong bonds of "camp sisterhood/families" with fellow inmates, continuation of ordinary acts of normal life (discussing recipes, cleaning, writing), and quite simply, luck.

