

Displacement and Danger: Women in the Nazi Ghettos of Eastern Europe

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The Baltic countries of Latvia and Lithuania were home to a significant number of Jewish ghettos during the Holocaust. The ghettos of Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja, Kaunas, Siauliai, and Vilnius, among others, held tens of thousands of Jews from the Baltics, as well as from countries that included Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia. The ghettos were sites of displacement and danger and the last home that many Jews knew before they were murdered by Nazis and their local collaborators. This work highlights quotidian threats and violence of life in the ghettos with a particular focus on the experiences of girls and women.

Gendered violence in the ghettos took a multitude of forms. The term gendered violence in this instance focuses on coercive phenomena that targeted prisoners of the ghettos as both Jews and women. The spectrum of violence, which included murder, psychological humiliation, assaults on the body, and loss of property, were visited mercilessly upon both men and women, but the purpose of this account is to build a narrative, using women's own voices as witnesses, victims, and survivors, that recognizes experiences that may not be shared by men and women and that may be obscured in accounts that universalize the experiences of the ghettos. As Helene Sinnreich (2008) points out, "Jewish women as Jews were placed in situations which made them particularly vulnerable to any type of violence...As women without legal recourse, they were vulnerable to sexual abuse" (16) and, as I show in this paper, a plethora of forms of gendered violence.

This work addresses the following key questions: *What do survivor and witness accounts tell us about women's experiences in the ghettos of Latvia?*¹ *What are the dominant themes that emerge from survivor accounts? What do women's accounts of ghetto life contribute to historical accounts of the Holocaust?* In sociology, feminist standpoint theory highlights the idea that knowledge is incomplete if it is produced from just a single standpoint, which is usually that of a dominant group in society. It posits that the production of knowledge is a form of power:

¹ A longer planned version of this work will cover Baltic ghettos more broadly. This one focuses primarily on Latvian territories.

theorists Dorothy Smith (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argue that narratives and images produced by a dominant group function to exclude and control women. Seizing the power to create knowledge is fundamental, not only for women's empowerment but, indeed, as in this case, to ensure the integrity and breadth of that knowledge. Key accounts of ghetto life written by inhabitants who survived, and many who did not survive, provide significant insights into violence, resistance, and quotidian efforts to achieve some semblance of normalcy in a dramatically abnormal situation. Perpetrator documents also influence the narrative, as these are often the documents that populate the archives upon which contemporary historians rely. I follow Sinnreich (2008), who suggests that the "dominance of male voices in Holocaust historiography has had multiple effects," including relative inattention to the pervasiveness of sexual violence (as well as other forms of gendered violence). I posit that by inviting women's voices into the stories of history, we fill voids of memory that open up when women are not given the opportunity to exercise agency in constructing dominant narratives of the past.

Sources of Data

Waitman Wade Beorn (2018) points out that "We owe much of our knowledge of ghetto life to the hundreds of individuals and organizations who dedicated themselves to preserving the history of their experience even in the face of their own deaths" (175). Indeed, the quotidian experience of ghetto life could not be adequately captured in perpetrator documents and much of what is known has relied on information assembled contemporaneously by those who were imprisoned in the ghettos. From this, one learns of the Herculean efforts that were taken to create some semblance of normalcy in ghettos through the provision of food, education, medical care, and even the continuation of cultural and religious activities.

In this paper, the focus is on the experience of women and girls in the Nazi ghettos, a topic that cannot be found in perpetrator documents. In seeking to construct an account of gendered violence perpetrated against girls and women, I rely primarily on survivor and witness testimonies and memoirs, few of which are contemporaneous and many of which were recorded after the end of the war. It is thus important to address the key sources of data: first, some historians reject survivor testimony as documentary evidence or use it with trepidation. I follow Christopher Browning (2010), however, in suggesting that, "there are topics too important to be passed over simply to avoid the challenges of using survivor eyewitness evidence" (8). A close examination of women's experiences of violence of gendered violence must rely on personal

accounts of survivors: Omer Bartov (2011) writes that, “such testimonies should be treated as historical documents...because they provide different insights into these events from those available in official documentation and because they ‘save’ from oblivion events that cannot be found at all in other documents” (486). Simon Geissbüler (2014), who uses oral histories extensively to reconstruct the story of the mass murder of Jews at the chaotic beginning of the war by local residents in Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, writes of his key source that, “Obviously we must read them critically and in light of whatever other evidence may be available. But in many cases, survivors’ testimonies are the only evidentiary material available” (432).

Second, testimony on sexual violence in particular is, even apart from the Holocaust experience, fraught with challenges. Mühlhäuser (2016), who writes on sexual violence against Jewish women by the German Army after the attack on the USSR, suggests that,

Inevitably, all of these sources are shaped by contemporary ideas of heterosexual violence as well as by gendered conceptions of guilt and shame. In many cases, the sources do not offer reliable details. We have to take account that eye witnesses deliberately conceal details (many consider the details to be too intimate) or exaggerate the degree of violence...Despite these short-comings, we must assume that the testimonies – as a collective body of evidence – refer to real occurrences: for every account there are others that describe similar form of sexual violence (34-35).

Individual accounts of sexual violence constitute a body of data that, while imperfect, comprise a corpus of evidence about the past that can be situated in events that are robustly reinforced by other sources. No less importantly, they comprise a little-told historical story in spite of the ubiquity of rape as a component of genocide: in the words of Helene Sinnreich (2008), “There is a strong connection between rape and genocide...rape occurs during genocide not only as a systemic means of attack but also because it places its victims in physically vulnerable positions with limited or non-existent access to redress” (1). It is notable that testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History archive represent a unique resource for studying this issue as, “Unlike in previous interview projects, interviewees were specifically asked whether or not they had witnessed sexual abuse” (Ibid.:4).

The shame and stigma of sexual victimization creates a context where testimonies about a friend may be an account of one’s own experience. At the same time, they may also be witness

accounts or, as is the case in some testimonies, second-hand accounts of sexual violence. I have not excluded accounts that speak to the experience of someone other than the survivor giving the account because testimonies and memoirs like those used here show that many of those victims did not survive to tell their own stories. As Doris Bergman points out, "...given that Aryan men could be punished for sexual relations with women from groups labeled 'undesirable,' they had extra incentive to destroy evidence of their transgressions by killing their victims" (187).

This work also uses material that discusses the cruelties visited on women in the ghettos in their roles as mothers and caregivers. Women were less likely than their male counterparts to survive the Holocaust (Grossman 2007: 227) and their stories, often both tragic and heroic, of mothering, sacrificing, and suffering emerge from survivor and witness accounts that give voice to their particular experiences in the ghettos.

Latvia's Big Ghettos: Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja

Beginning shortly after the full Nazi occupation of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic in July 1941, a multitude of ghettos were constructed in Latvia's cities and towns. The three largest were in Riga, Daugavpils, and Liepaja, historical homes to a sizable number of Jewish communities. In this section, I offer brief historical overviews of these ghettos before turning to the topic at hand, women's experiences as prisoners in Latvia's Nazi ghettos.

The Riga Ghetto

In interwar Latvia, Jews were Riga's most significant minority population: they were deeply enmeshed in the capital city's economic, cultural, and political life, and comprised about 10% of residents, numbering about 40,000 in all. The persecution and murder of Riga's Jewish population commenced immediately after Nazi occupation. Orders from the civil authorities included requirements that Jews wear the yellow star, not appear in public places, and have access to only meager food rations. The decision to create a ghetto in Riga was taken in August 1941, but the establishment of the ghetto followed in late fall: on October 23, orders were given that all city Jews must relocate to a working-class quarter of the city known as *Maskavas forstate*. Within two days, the approximately 16-block area was populated by about 30,000 Latvian Jews, who were fenced into the ghetto with barbed wire. Mostly Latvian guards manned the perimeter and the single gate leading into the sealed ghetto (Angrick and Klein 2009).

The ghetto itself lasted through December 1943, though most of its Latvian Jewish population lasted just a few weeks before being murdered in a mass killing action at Rumbula

forest on November 30 and December 8, 1941. Documents suggest that the killing of an estimated 26,000 Jews was precipitated by the need to make room for large transports of Jews from other parts of the Reich, who were to be located in the ghetto. Only about 4,500 male Latvian Jews who were part of skilled work brigades and a small contingent of 500 Jewish Latvian seamstresses were spared the atrocity at Rumbula (Angrick and Klein 2009).

After the massacre at Rumbula, the ghetto largely imprisoned Jews deported from the Western territories of the Reich. Those who survived the years 1942 and 1943 in the ghetto were moved upon liquidation to the concentration camp at Kaiserwald and subcamps nearby, where many remained until they were forcibly evacuated West with the Germany Army. Many ended their brutal journey in the camp at Stutthof, just outside of Gdansk.

The Daugavpils Ghetto

At the start of the war, the southeastern city of Daugavpils was home to about 12,000 Jews. After the beginning of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, the German army arrived quickly in the city, reaching it by June 26. The arrival of the Nazis was followed in short order by *Einsatzgruppe A* (Lumans 2006: 242). The memoir of survivor Paula Frankel-Zaltzman (2003) suggests that on July 15, an order was given that Jews in the Daugavpils community must display a yellow star on their clothing.

Within weeks of the full German occupation of Latvia, authorities made the decision to create a ghetto in Daugavpils. The ghetto was, according to Swain (2004), “administered by Eduards Zaube, a Latvian official appointed by the city’s administration. He had been a white-collar official in [independent Latvia’s President Karlis] Ulmanis’s day, but was reduced to working in the railway depot by Soviet authorities” (65). Notably, the ghetto’s establishment took place even before a civil administration was created in the city. The ghetto was populated not only by city’s Jews, but also by communities from neighboring towns like Rezekne, Subate, and Kraslava. According to the memoir of survivor Sydney Iwens (1990), the ghetto also held Lithuanian Jews who had been apprehended as they fled German occupation.²

Paula Frankel-Zaltzman remembers being ordered to report to the ghetto, which was established in an old fortress: “There were very old barracks there that had served as horse stables for the Latvian military when they were stations on that side of the river... Now the

² This is confirmed by survivor Eli Gever, a Jew from Daugavgriva, Latvia. USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive interview with Eli Gever, #1416.

barracks/stables had neither floors nor windows, nor a roof, only bare walls. At one time there were windows up high, now everything was ruined.” She writes of her family’s short journey to the ghetto: “From the distance we saw the gray, half-destroyed buildings. It was fearful to behold. These were historical buildings of the one-time Romanovs...From these buildings the ghetto was made” (Frankel-Zaltzman 2003).

An estimated 11,000 Jews were imprisoned in the ghetto at the end of July: “There all the Jews of the town were pressed in. People lay on top of one another and it was choking,” writes Frankel-Zaltzman, pointing out that the family was searching for a place to lay her ill father and had to settle for “a piece of bare earth.” The Daugavpils ghetto was sealed on July 31, 1941, well before the ghettos of Riga and Liepaja imprisoned their Jewish populations.

Neonila Grigoryeva, who was born near Daugavpils in 1926, recalls that the region’s Jews were taken to the city’s ghetto at the “very beginning of the war, 1941, and first people, walking to their own execution by shooting, had no idea what was awaiting them because they had bundles with personal possessions.”³ She tells that she witnessed Latvian policemen escorting Jews to a shooting site, noting that “many of them were drunk and irritated.” The scene witnessed by Grigoryeva at the shooting site, where she says that other civilians were also present and watching, was horrific:

The pit was heavily guarded. The Jewish people tried to talk to bystanders, but they were ordered to keep quiet. They begged to at least save the children, offering gold, but there was no way to help them. Everyone feared to be shot. It was horrible. Little children were snatched from their mothers, thrown in the pit alive, and their mother would jump in on top of them, as if trying to protect them...Elderly women, who could hardly walk, were thrown in alive as well. This huge pit was filled with blood. This scene was just unbearable.

Though she does not name the site, it is likely that the massacre Grigoryeva witnessed took place at Pogulianka in early August 1941. A similar scene is described in Sidney Iwens’s memoir (1990), where he tells of events described by local gentiles to friends who were inmates of the ghetto: “After marching some distance from the ghetto, the column was suddenly surrounded by many German and Latvian auxiliaries. The people were beaten and driven to previously prepared ditches, and then were butchered. It is said, that the Nazis did not even bother to shoot babies but hurled them into ditches while still alive” (50).

³ U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum collection interview with Neonila Grigoryeva, RG-50.568.0016.

Many of the ghetto's inhabitants were murdered within weeks or months of its establishment: a police document dated December 5, 1941, lists the ghetto's inhabitants as numbering just 942. In November or December of 1941, a typhus epidemic began and an estimated half of the remaining population died.

In the spring of 1942, an order was given to liquidate the remaining inhabitants of the Daugavpils ghetto. On May 1, *Obersturmführer* Gunter Tabbert and, by some accounts, members of the Arājs Commando, conducted a selection and the majority of the inhabitants of the ghetto in the Citadel were killed. According to survivor Sidney Iwens (1990), Latvian collaborators “threw old and sick people through second floor windows, shot those who refused to leave their rooms, and killed some of the very small children by cracking their heads against the concrete walls of the buildings” (96).

The Liepaja Ghetto

The interwar Jewish community in Latvia's second largest city was substantial, numbering about 7,400 in 1935. The community had deep historical roots in the region, many of the residents having come to Liepaja from the small neighboring town of Aizpute, a historical home of many Baltic Jews.

The killing in Liepaja began immediately after the German army entered the port city. While a few members of the Jewish community had fled when the Red Army was in retreat in late June of 1941, an estimated 5,700 remained in Liepaja. By the end of 1941, a significant number had been murdered by Nazis and their local collaborators. The mass action at Šķēde, the only site at which the atrocity was documented in photographs that later surfaced in the Nuremberg war crimes trials, took place over three days in December of 1941. At least 2,730 Jews were murdered in this brutal killing on the dunes of the Baltic Sea (Anders 2011).

The ghetto in Liepaja was established relatively late and contained a small number of inhabitants: in May 1942, the order was given to construct the ghetto and about 830 people were enclosed in a several-block large space with barbed wire. Notably, a small number of Liepaja Jews survived longer than their counterparts in Riga and Daugavpils: “The creation of a formal Liepaja ghetto appears to have followed rather than preceded the liquidation of all but the sturdiest and most work-capable Jews... the Liepaja ghetto housed around 800 souls and differed little from a concentration camp in size and purpose...” (Lumans 2006: 247). By the end of 1943,

the liquidation of the ghetto was ordered and its remaining residents largely sent to concentration camps, including Kaiserwald.

Displacement and Danger: Jewish Women and Girls in Latvia's Nazi Ghettoes

The experiences of Jews imprisoned in Latvia's Nazi ghettoes at the hands of their German and Latvian captors were violent and vicious. Every member of the community was subject to their brutality and impunity. In this section, I focus in particular on the experiences of girls and women with the goal of recognizing ways in which vulnerability and threat linked to being Jewish was compounded by being female.

Jewish Women and Girls and the Pervasive Threat of Rape

Nazi propaganda purveyed an image of the Jew as a sexual predator, an abettor of prostitution and moral degradation, and a spreader of sexually transmitted diseases like syphilis. The 1940 film *Jud Suess* depicted an 18th century Jewish money lender who was engaged in exploitation of Germans, extorting money from men and abducting and raping a lovely young girl. The film was popular and responses to the story were acute and “vocally anti-Semitic.” Notably, on Himmler's orders, the SS were required to watch the film; it was also screened for non-Jewish audiences in Eastern Europe, particularly those found in the proximity of concentration camps (Chalmers 2015: 11). The media message was clear and dramatic, elevating an image of moral and sexual depredation that portrayed the Jew as a villain and victimizer. Paradoxically, the threat of sexual (and other) violence loomed not over the “good Germans” of the film, but over the vilified Jews, in particular girls and women.

For Jewish women and girls, the threat of sexual violence in the ghettoes – and often outside of them – was pervasive (Sinnreich 2008). On the one hand, the notorious *Rassenschande* laws would seem to have foreclosed at least that form of violence in ghettoes, camps, and other sites of Nazi victimization: the 1935 Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor prohibited sexual contact between Aryans and Jews. On the other hand, some scholars argue that Jewish women were used as prostitutes in camp brothels (Sinnreich 2010) and were sometimes selected by German camp officers for sexual exploitation (Chalmers 2015: 18). Indeed, as Sinnreich (2008) notes, “...the suggestion that a German man would not commit *Rassenschande* by engaging in sexual relations with a Jewish woman is as untenable as any argument which insists that the existence of rules against an action prove that it could not or would not take place” (2). Bergen points out that, “Nazi ideology did not constitute a barrier to

violence of a sexual nature,...Instead, ideology shaped the forms that sexual violence took: it helped determine what the authorities permitted encouraged, and rewarded; it influences what those ‘on the ground’ could even imagine as possible; it decided what would be recorded, in the sense that disobedience would be concealed or punished” (180).

Documentation of this phenomenon is not, however, expansive: “Although some autobiographical Holocaust fiction deals with rape and the bartering of sex for temporary rescue, very few memoirs or other historical sources discuss actual rapes, and owing to the age of the survivors and to the seriousness of the crime of *Rassenschande* (‘race defilement’), there is virtually no likelihood that extensive Nazi documentation will be found” (Goldenberg 1996: 83). By some accounts, the *Rassenschande* ideology encompassed virtually any bodily contact between Aryans and Jews, including casual embraces or kisses; even friendship or conversation could be suspect (Chalmers 2015: 15). Put another way: survivors may have been hampered by fear and shame from revealing rape, while perpetrators were unlikely to document their actions in violation of *Rassenschande* laws.

Any deterrent effect that the fear of punishment or “racial defilement” prohibitions may have had on German actions toward vulnerable Jewish girls and women did not carry over to Baltic collaborators. As Wendy Lower (2002) has pointed out, actions on the periphery were sometimes more brutal, as they were not subject to the direct supervision and scrutiny of the Reich’s authorities: “The commissars and regional police forces did not carry out the Nazi goal of genocide in a banal fashion: they fulfilled it barbarically, often encouraging sadistic methods that exceeded the expectations of their superiors, who wanted to maintain order, a measure of control, and secrecy” (8).⁴

Significantly in the case of the Latvian ghettos, I follow Bergen in positing that, “...sexual violence reinforced dominant hierarchies...sexual violence served to dehumanize victims and thereby maximize the distance between killers and their prey” (187). In many of Latvia’s urban and rural communities, Jews, Latvians, and Russians, the country’s most significant population groups, had lived side by side for generations. The dramatic brutality unleashed by ethnic Latvians against the country’s Jewish communities may have functioned in

⁴ Lower (2002) notes, however, that this same lack of scrutiny could also open the door to disobedience in the form of rendering assistance to Jews in the peripheral territories.

part to help killers distance themselves from victims, who were known to them if not individually then certainly as a societal group (Ibid.).

Among the stories that have circulated about the heinous crimes of Latvia's most notorious Nazi killing unit, the Arājs Commando, are those describing the rape – sometimes followed by killing – of women by the Commando's leader, Viktors Arājs and other members of the group: “[Arājs] seized as headquarters for himself the luxurious residence of a Jewish banker on Valdemārs Street and turned it into a house of horror for Jews, a veritable robbers den, where he and his ‘boys’ tortured and murdered Jews for sport and kept Jewish women for sexual entertainment” (Lumans 2006: 240). Zelda-Rivka Heit⁵, who was born in Kuldīga, Latvia, in 1920 and was one of a small number of Latvian Jews to survive the Riga ghetto, recalls an encounter with Arājs at the headquarters of the group. Heit tells that she and some other young Jewish women were brought to the building and taken to the basement.

All [the men] were drunk, all had pistols in their hands. The so-called officer facing me said ‘upstairs,’ and I did go upstairs because there was no other way out. It was in his office, he raped me, he humiliated me, he tortured me sexually...His name was Viktors Arājs. I wouldn't have known [his name] but when I was crying and weeping and asking for mercy he said, ‘you bitch, don't you know who is standing before you?’ He said ‘I am Viktors Arājs, the boss of this place.’ I was taken downstairs, we were all sitting, all the girls were weeping, looked terrible, some had torn clothes, dresses.

Heit's survival is an anomaly, though it seems to have been the result of intervention by a German officer: “Suddenly the door opened...and the [*Perkonkrusts*] guard called my name...German officer Ervin Henkemann, German officer for whom I had been working, he saved me from the Latvians, he had saved my life. My nanny had seen me join a group, she had been following us, she saw that we had been taken to this headquarters so she had rushed to Henkemann...he tried to save my life and he succeeded.” Heit adds that she never saw Henkemann again.

Jewish Latvian survivor, Ella Medaly'e,⁶ remembers her encounter with the men of another Latvian auxiliary unit. In her memoir, she writes that she and her mother were taken to a building in the first days after German occupation and there they were compelled to turn over all

⁵ USC Shoah Visual History Archive interview with Zelda-Rivka Heit, #26792.

⁶ USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive interview with Ella Medaly'e. #32793.

of their valuables: a woman who had nothing to turn over was taken to the yard and beaten. The women were held in a damp basement with low ceilings and a filthy toilet in the corner (2006: 14-17). In her testimony, Medaly'e tells that the guards in the building were largely members of the *Aizsargi* or *Pērkonkrusts*. One of them took a liking to her, telling her that she looked like his wife and asking why she was crying. One evening, when the *Aizsargi* were on the second floor talking, an officer went downstairs and started staring at the young Jewish women sleeping on the floor. He called the girl over and then took her to an upper floor. After some time, Medaly'e recalls in her testimony, the weeping girl came back downstairs: "Then they came for the second, the third, and they all took them upstairs and then we started understanding that there was an orgy [gang rape] upstairs and they were using the Jewish women." Medaly'e tells that she thought she would be next, so she locked herself in a nearby toilet. The guard from earlier, who had shown some sympathy to Medaly'e knocked on the door and cautioned her, "stay here, they're all drunk, I'll tell you when you can get out." The next day, according to Medaly'e, the eight or nine women who had been raped were taken away and shot. She says that more women were brought to the building over the next three weeks and adds that she and a small number of others were eventually released by Arājs.

The threat against Jewish women, especially from Latvian collaborators with the Nazis, was acute. Elmars Rivošs, who was born in 1906 and spent his entire life in Latvia, survived Nazi occupation: he was taken with his family – his mother, wife, and two young children – to the Riga ghetto. After losing his entire family at Rumbula, he escaped the ghetto and hid in a cellar in central Riga until the end of the war. In the memoir he penned while in hiding, which was published posthumously, Rivošs (2006) remembered the first days in Riga after the Germans chased out the Red Army. He writes that,

I don't know from whence these Latvians have appeared – volunteers, with the national colors wrapped around their hands. Small groups, sometimes accompanied by a German, started going house to house. The landlords had to show where the Jews lived. They arrived, shook down, beat up, collected valuables, took away the majority of the men. At the [police] prefecture the *Perkonkrusts* sets up a headquarters. Without the knowledge of the Germans – who saw this as racial pollution – [to the headquarters] they transported Jewish women – possibly the youngest and loveliest. After [the Latvian *Perkonkrusts*'s]

racial “pollution” and the Jewish race’s “honoring” [translator’s note: rape] women were often “arrested” – with a bullet (138).

He relates the story of an acquaintance from Riga, E. Goldberga, who told of her own rape by the *Perkonkrusts* men. Unusually, he wrote, she was released rather than killed after her rape, probably because her victimizers were drunk (157).

The story of small bands of Latvian men wandering from house to house in the immediate aftermath of German occupation is reiterated in the memoir of Valentina Freimane, a Latvian Jew who survived the Holocaust in hiding with her non-Jewish husband, though she lost her parents and numerous close relations in the ghetto (2010). Freimane remembers a pair of Latvians – an older man and a young man, just a few years older than she was at the time – coming to her parents’ apartment, already drunk but asking for more libations. After a few drinks, one of men declared that that Freimane’s family should hand over the “things they had tricked the Latvians out of.” Having taken the family’s gold jewelry and watches, one of the men encouraged the other to ask young Valentina to show him the apartment’s “other rooms,” saying that if he liked something there, he should boldly take it. The implication, Freimane points out, was clear. She notes that,

Girls and young women were particularly under threat, because looting was commonly accompanied by rape. Such an event had just occurred with my classmate Angelika, a beautiful redhead, who was raped by some drunken [militia men] ..., and she almost lost her mind... She too later perished in the ghetto (243).

Her own story, however, took a different turn: she tells in her memoir that the young man took her to a room and closed the door, but he did not do her harm. Rather, he confessed that he had sought revenge after the Soviets’ deportation of his family, but he was regretful about the turn that the anti-communist (and pro-Nazi) Latvian militias had taken. Freimane went on to become an acclaimed theater critic and scholar in Soviet and, later, post-communist Latvia. Her epic story was, in 2014, adapted as an opera and shown in Riga and Berlin.

Survivor Paula Frankel-Zaltzman, who was working as a nurse in ghetto hospital in Daugavpils after being imprisoned with her family in July 1941, recalls that, “...we suffered greatly from the Latvians. Every night they would come and seek out some women. God protected me from this because I was in the hospital and they didn’t come here” (2003). Survivor accounts collected by Soviet authorities after the war suggest that,

ghetto commandant [Eduards] Zaube and senior police officials liked to select attractive Jewish women and rape them, before having them killed. Such rapes sometimes took place in public, even in front of the parents of the girl concerned. According to one source, the sister of a local Daugavpils doctor, Dr Goldman, was raped in this way and tried to persuade her brother to help her commit suicide, such was the shame. Suicide in the ghetto was not uncommon (Swain 2004: 66).⁷

While most testimonies and memoirs on sexual violence against Jewish women in Latvia's ghettos implicated ethnic Latvian perpetrators, this is not uniformly the case and, as noted earlier, the *Rassenschande* laws that unequivocally forbade sexual contact between Germans and Jews did not in fact foreclose that threat. Daugavpils ghetto survivor Eli Gever recalls a story told by a friend about Gestapo officers raping Jewish women in the ghetto. He tells of a case of Jewish woman who became pregnant by "Gestapo guys," noting that, "They put her on ice, it was winter. They put her on ice to drown in the Dvina river."⁸

Motherhood and Loss

The ideological manipulation of motherhood was a signal characteristic of the Nazi regime. On the one hand, the German government was singularly determined to raise the birth rate among Aryan German women: legislation was passed that outlawed abortions and sterilization, as well as contraceptives and even advice on controlling fertility. In the pre-war years, as birth rates rose, divorce rates began to outpace marriage rates. Divorce in cases where a woman was infertile or too old to bear children was nominally encouraged by the state, which loosened divorce laws (Chalmers 2015: 47-50). As Chalmers writes, "Reproduction was held to be not a private matter but a sacred duty to ensure a racially valuable reservoir of good blood to lead Germany into the future" (Ibid.: 59).

For Jewish women, however, the myriad traumas of suffering and loss in the Holocaust included the intentional and dramatic destruction of motherhood. The violence visited on women targeted them as reproducers of their community, carriers of culture, and caregivers to both the very young and old. Women in these roles appear in accounts as victims, losing bodily autonomy, their loved ones, their capacity to reproduce, and their lives. But they also appear as

⁷ The original testimony comes from Soviet archives available digitally at the USHMM at GARF 7021.93.22, p.6.

⁸ USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive interview with Eli Gever, #1416.

heroes, taking risks and making sacrifices to protect those left their charge. In this section, I examine four components of gendered violence connected to motherhood: abortion, forced sterilization, the prohibition on births in Nazi ghettos, and infanticide.

In an account of Czech Jews deported from Terezin camp to the Riga ghetto, the authors write that, “Riga ghetto inmates lived in family groups. Many women stopped menstruating, but could still get pregnant. Sometimes gynecologists said it was too late to have an abortion, but it was also forbidden to give birth. Pregnant women and newborns were to be destroyed...” (Makarova and Makarov 2014: 46). Gertrude Schneider (2001), a German Jew imprisoned in the Riga ghetto, recounts a period in 1942 when there were circulating stories of German struggles at the front and, perhaps, some hope among the prisoners that the war would come to an end. She writes that, “The stirrings of hope moved not only in the mind but also assumed physical expressions. Before long, the German authorities, evidently noticing an increase in abortions, circulated an order that sexual relations between ghetto inmates would henceforth be forbidden” (63). Alas, while the attempt to ensure minimal disruption of the workforce was known, the ability of the authorities to curb intimacy was limited. Resistance to the order was addressed, however, by the authorities: “On [ghetto commandant] Krause’s orders, sterilizations were to be performed on all women coming in for second abortions,” and Krause sometimes insisted on being present for operations. However, compliance with the order was circumscribed since there was no SS physician at the ghetto hospital, which was staffed by Jewish doctors and nurses.

Coercive practices used to prevent births in camps and ghettos were among the cruelties visited on women. The birth of a child in the ghetto could lead to the killing of the infant, its mother, or even the entire family. The consequences of a ban on births created a situation that encompassed not only a woman and her own family, but also the *Judenrat* in the ghettos, which sought to minimize danger to the community. A surviving document from Sauliai ghetto (also known as Shavel), in neighboring Lithuania, recounts a meeting of the *Judenrat* to discuss specifically how to avoid childbirth in the ghetto. From the minutes of the meeting, the reader learns that M. Leibovich lamented that,

The law forbidding childbirth is strictly enforced in all the ghettos, Recently, in Kovno, there was a case of childbirth, and the whole family was shot. Yet, in our ghetto, we take this matter too lightly. Several cases of pregnancy have occurred against which no preventive methods have been employed.

Dr. L. indicates that about twenty women are pregnant in the ghetto and that as of last August, there have been three births. He points out that only two have agreed to an abortion and adds that all pregnant women be called to the clinic in the ghetto to be told that danger awaits them. According to the minutes, Dr. L. says of a woman in her eighth month of pregnancy that, “We dare not let the child be born, since we shall have to report it. We have been asked three times already, whether there have been any births in the ghetto. We have answered each time that there have not been any.” The doctors and *Judenrat* members clearly struggled with agonizing decisions, but, ultimately, resolved to induce a premature labor in the pregnant woman so as to discourage other women from giving birth and to protect the family and ghetto community (*The Black Book* 1946: 331-333).⁹

Ruth Foster, a German Jew who worked as a nurse in the Riga ghetto, recalls as well that babies were not permitted to be born. None the less, a small number of pregnancies were carried to term. Several testimonies and writers tell the story of “Ben Geto,” a baby born in the Riga ghetto.¹⁰ Ruth Foster remembers that,

We were twenty nurses, two male nurses and eighteen girls. The hospital was on two levels. We performed lots of operations there, complicated ones, and also a lot of abortions, because nobody was allowed to give birth to babies. The women who found themselves pregnant, even from arriving pregnant into the ghetto, or became pregnant from their husbands while they were still with their husbands, had to have their pregnancies terminated. So we had quite a lot of abortions. It so happens that one Latvian Jewish woman gave birth to a little boy who was called Ben Ghetto. The Germans found out - I mean the Kommandantur; when I say now the Germans it was the Kommandantur where the SS were sitting, they found out about it, and this baby and the mother were brought to our hospital, and the baby had to be killed.

Survivor Gertrude Schneider (1979) writes that Ghetto Commandant Krause visited the hospital regularly and “it was he who disposed of the few babies born in the ghetto” (50).

The Daugavpils ghetto was, according to Josifs Ročko (2008), a scene of horror for new mothers. As in the Riga ghetto, births were prohibited. However, some births did occur. Ročko

⁹ By one account, in early 1943, the Kovno (Kaunas) *Judenrat* engaged in debate over how to deal with an estimated 20 pregnant women in the ghetto, including one who was 8 months pregnant (Chalmers, 2015: 73).

¹⁰ USC Shoah Visual History Archive interview with Ruth Foster, #9538. Ruth Foster’s testimony is also available at <http://www.bl.uk/learning/histcitizen/voices/testimonies/ghettos/allowed/pregnancy.html>. The story of Ben Geto (“son of the ghetto”) is one that appears in several accounts of the Riga ghetto, including that of Gertrude Schneider (2001).

recounts witness testimony that describes Latvian police entering a room occupied by a new mother, congratulating her on the birth, and tossing the infant out the window (162). Dr. Max Weinreich, a Latvian Jewish physician born in Riga in 1891, tells a similar story from the Liepaja ghetto, where he was held and worked in the ghetto hospital. According to survivor Bernhard Press (2000), a Latvian-born survivor of the Holocaust,

One of [Weinreich's] most dreadful memories of that time was the visit paid to the hospital one day by the notorious murderer H[erberts] Cukurs. Cukurs, bent on finding able-bodied men and women who might be hiding in the hospital, had forced his way into the women's ward, where he discovered a newborn baby. Births were forbidden in the ghetto. Cukurs snatched the baby by its feet from its mother's bed, smashed its head against the wall so that the skull broke, and tossed the lifeless body to the ground (145).

Notably, Cukurs, who was also from Liepaja, spared the life of Dr. Weinreich and another local Jewish physician,¹¹ who had apparently once been his own doctors. They were sent to Riga with a few other Jews and survived the war.¹²

Parents who entered the ghetto with babies were not spared the violence. Sam Zelikson, a Latvian-born survivor of the Daugavpils ghetto who worked for a German *Obersturmführer* at the ghetto, remembers that, "The [Latvian] *Aizsargs* [sic] were worse than the Germans."¹³

They took the men and women, the pregnant women and the little babies, they put on the second floor...And they told us everything that we have, like suitcases, or baggage, to leave outside, and they put us in different rooms. And upstairs I saw about 6 or 8 Germans going up upstairs while I was lighting the fire for the guard. And I saw they opened the windows. I watched it. And downstairs was maybe about 12 guards. And they took the rifles and put bayonets on the rifles. And then I saw the other Germans, the Nazis, threw out babies, little babies, they were crying, and picked them up on the bayonets. And there was a lot of dogs and they threw the babies to dogs.

¹¹ It is likely that this was Dr. Maxim Sick, born in Liepaja in 1904. He was held in the Liepaja ghetto and survived. He died in Riga in 1986. Dr. Weinreich died in Riga in 1972 (Anders and Dubrovskis 2001). Original testimonies from these survivors are not available in the data bases I have searched.

¹² Infanticide is also recounted in an account of Lithuania's Kovno ghetto, where a heavily pregnant Jewish woman was shot by an SS officer. She was taken to a hospital in the ghetto, where an emergency cesarean was performed, leading to a live birth. "As events transpired, the outcome was disastrous. The Germans returned to the hospital to record the name of the dead woman, found the baby had lived, and were furious. They picked up the baby and dashed its head against the walls of the hospital room" (Chalmers 2015: 75).

¹³ USC Shoah Visual History Archive interview with Sam Zelikson, #8002.

Survivor Max Curtis, also from Daugavpils, recalls a similar scene: “they threw the children from the first, second floor down, you know, in the yards. That was a terrible killing.”¹⁴ Loss was often too much to bear. Neonila Grigoryeva, a Latvia Jew from Daugavpils, remembers mothers jumping into a killing pit after their children in a mass action against prisoners of the Daugavpils ghetto.¹⁵

On Riga ghetto Commandant Krause’s orders, both women and men could be forced to undergo sterilization, though the regularity of enforcement of that order cannot be determined (Schneider 2001: 91-92). Information on sterilization in the ghettos, or indeed, outside of them, is incomplete. Some information suggests that women in the ghettos were forcibly sterilized after a second abortion, though first-hand testimony, as well as official documents, do not fully confirm this.

Survivor documents suggest that births did take place in some ghettos, including the Vilnius (Vilno) ghetto in Lithuania. They did so in secret, however, in a delivery room that was hidden within the hospital. When the babies were older and could be taken out in public, they were registered with the *Judenrat*, but their birthdates were recorded as preceding the ban on births that took effect in February of 1942 (Ritvo and Plotkin 1998).

In 1961, nearly two decades after the passage of the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, Adolf Eichmann was convicted in Jerusalem of, among other atrocities, “directing that births be banned and pregnancies interrupted among Jewish women” in the Theresienstadt camp (Chalmers 2015: 72). Significantly, it was the U.N. Convention that determined that the imposition of measures to prevent births was part of the accepted definition of genocide.

It bears noting, finally, that women and men were also victimized as adult children of elderly parents who were forced to endure dramatic hardship and humiliation. The trauma of being witness to children’s suffering was, for many compounded by the pain of watching aging parents endure hardship and humiliation at the hands of the German and Latvian captors. In the Daugavpils ghetto, the burden fell heavily on women. Survivor Sidney Iwens (1990) writes that, “Many women had to cope with their children and aged parents all by themselves, for their men had been killed in the prison massacre” (47).

¹⁴ USC Shoah Visual History Archive interview with Max Curtis, #39938.

¹⁵ U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum collection interview with Neonila Grigoryeva, RG-50.568.0016.

Dehumanization and Humiliation

Pervasive and systematic humiliation was a key part of the process of dehumanization of Jews that was central to the Nazi racial ideology. Indeed, dehumanization enabled the dramatic acts of cruelty and malice that characterize the Nazi era and the Holocaust itself. Humiliation contributed to the process by promoting images of Jews as “subhumans, infectious, dirty and polluting.” Chalmers (2015b) points to acts of degradation that were used to construct such images: Jews were forced, among other things, to “...wash floors with their underwear and then to don them thereafter...” (189). These humiliations were visited on both women and men.

Women in ghettos, transports, and camps were also regularly subjected to sexual degradation that targeted individual pride and shame, and cultural norms of Jewish communities that valued modesty and humility. Women and girls were subjected to body searches and forced nakedness. Elmārs Rivošs (2006), a survivor of the Riga ghetto, remembers that women, particularly young women, were subjected to searches, including searches in which guards pushed their hands beneath women’s clothing and on their uncovered bodies (189).

Cavity searches were common in many instances, including before victims were killed (Chalmers 2015b: 189). In the Kaunas ghetto, women were regularly forced to disrobe for gynecological searches conducted, ostensibly, to find hidden valuables (Tory 1990).

Humiliation was routine and victim accounts recognize the pleasure gleaned from this ill treatment by their male captors. Frankel-Zaltzman (2003) writes of the transportation of the last survivors of the largely decimated Daugavpils ghetto to the ghetto in Riga in 1942. She writes of suffering two days without food or drink, but also notes that, “It was dreadful when someone had to ‘eliminate’ and didn’t have where to do this. The [Latvians] who accompanied us would sometimes stop the train and let us out. With the cudgels in their hands they used to stand and look where the women do what they have to do, and they used to mock.”

Trude Meyer, a German Jewish survivor who was deported to the Riga ghetto and moved after its liquidation to the Kaiserwald Concentration Camp, remembers being forced to disrobe in front of her captors: “The worst thing was when we came to Kaiserwald there, only barracks, the worst thing...was when they said ‘take off your clothes.’ The first time in your life you had to dress in front of someone you don’t even know and we got out clothes, our striped prison clothes. And then they shaved our hair off. That was the worst thing. And all we had left were

those five little pictures from my family” which she had saved in her shoes or sometimes under her arms.¹⁶

Though women were routinely subjected to sexual exploitation and humiliation, sometimes by local collaborators and sometimes by German soldiers and officers, *Rassenschande* laws could also be turned on the victims. Survivor Sidney Iwens (1990) tells of an incident that took place in the Daugavpils ghetto in March 1942, a time at which only a few hundred Jews remained alive in the ghetto. He writes that Mina Gittelsohn was

an attractive woman in her twenties. She was accused by her Latvian employer of breaking the racial-sexual laws. Actually – the true facts were known in the ghetto – the Latvian suspected that Mrs. Gittelsohn had discovered that many Jewish valuables were in his possession and decided to eliminate her. He denounced her, and she was condemned. Iwens notes that Mina Gittelsohn was publicly hung and that her body, which remained in the open for three days, showed “obvious marks of physical torture.” The hanging was conducted, under coercion, by Pasternak, the head of the Jewish ghetto police (93). It is clear that violence never touched only the direct victim and had a deep reach into the communities from which the victims hailed.

Exploitation and humiliation were a routine part of the treatment of ghetto inmates. For women, the processes were often sexualized, targeting them as both Jews and women, which compounded their vulnerability.

Conclusion

Tens of thousands of Jews passed through the brutal ghettos of Nazi-occupied Latvia. Over nearly three years, these ghettos were the sites of violence and victimization. In this account, I have sought to draw out the particular experiences of girls and women in the ghettos. The goal of the work is to build another layer on to the history of the Baltic ghettos through the use of testimonies and memoirs that put women as victims, witnesses, and survivors at the center. As noted earlier, feminist standpoint theory posits that knowledge is incomplete unless told from a multitude of standpoints, including those of women. I suggest that the lived experience – the human history – of the Baltic ghettos cannot be told without the recognition of women’s experiences, which were shaped by dual vulnerabilities to violence.

¹⁶ USC Shoah Visual History Archive interview with Trude Meyer, #52478.

Further, in the case of the Latvian ghettos, historiography has been largely shaped by the study of perpetrator documents (Angrick and Klein 2009; Ezergailis 1996). While this perspective is necessary and valuable, it cannot encompass the quotidian experiences of imprisoned populations. These experiences were shaped by interactions between inhabitants of the ghettos, as well as between inhabitants and their captors, including Latvian collaborators. Post-communist Latvian historiography has tended towards an interpretation of the Nazi past that places *German* crimes on Latvian territory at the center of the Holocaust narrative. While it is clearly the case that German occupation was the catalyst for genocide, local collaborators were deeply implicated in the enactment of violence, a historical point that is perhaps obscured by official documents, but is underscored by the microhistories embodied in survivor accounts.

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