

Her View Through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in the Warsaw Ghetto

Dalia Ofer, Ph.D.

Avraham Harman institute of Contemporary Jewry
Hebrew University of Jerusalem

This paper is dedicated to the late Israel Shaham who introduced me to Slepak's work and helped to translate it.

The document I am studying in this paper is a report based on interviews of women conducted in the Warsaw ghetto between December 1941 and the spring of 1942 by the journalist Cecilia Slepak.

Following her introduction, she presents several brief biographies of women from different social classes. Her work was part of a wider initiative to document life in the Warsaw Ghetto a year after its establishment and to evaluate its impact on both individuals and the public.

Writing in the midst of the extraordinary situation in the Warsaw Ghetto, Slepak juxtaposed women with formerly unacceptable occupations such as thief, a woman who used sex to make a living, and beggar alongside traditional "women's work" and new occupations for women. She describes the lives of sixteen women among them housewives; a cleaning woman; one who worked in the food storage centers, public kitchens, and orphanages; and a woman who served on the house committees. She also wrote about women in the performing arts - a dancer, an actor, and a musician - as well as small vendors and smugglers and professional women such as agronomy, translator librarian.

Slepak did not hesitate to describe the dark sides of women's life, and the reality that emerges from their life stories may be interpreted in different ways. We today look at the history of the ghetto residents with a clear image of the ghetto's ultimate destruction, whereas for Slepak, the ghetto is a reality to be accepted and criticized. She empathized with the women and their plight; she does not pass judgment on their choices, but views their activities as part of their effort to live.

Before the war, Slepak had been part of an intellectual elite immersed in secular Jewish culture as well as integrated into Polish culture. These individuals took a realistic and critical view of the Jewish community and the conduct of individual Jews. Thus, including a woman that used sex to make a living in the sample of ghetto women was no outrage for Slepak. Prostitutes had been part of Jewish life before the crisis of the war and the formation of the ghetto, and there was no reason to think that such professions would be abolished in the ghetto. Moreover, in the context of ghetto life, it was merely one more way to get by.

None of the post Holocaust terminology referring to the Jews as martyrs or saints appears in her report. She was viewing the rhythm of life around her with an open mind and with great respect to her interviewees, aware of their femininity. Nevertheless her own biases come through her descriptions.

I will examine Slepak's representation in the context of the ghetto and it's meaning for me as a woman historian. I read her text with the awareness that my view is colored by the construction of the memory of the Holocaust in today's culture, particularly in Israel, and with a gender perspective that was not formulated then as it is today. I will therefore move back and forth from the year 2000 to the 1930s and 1940s, hoping to establish a dialogue that will enrich my understanding of the women in the ghetto and yet will not violate Slepak's authenticity.

In my discussion I will describe the women and how they functioned in the environment of the ghetto: at work, in the family, and in their social lives. I will reflect on how they understood their role as women and their own attempts to foresee their future. I will study the impact of Nazi policy on their inner world - their approach to universal and

Jewish values - after two and a half years of German occupation and a few months before the mass deportation to Treblinka. I will ask if there is a gender differentiation in both their understanding and representation of the reality.

My methodology will be mostly narrative analysis including content and style, active and passive voice, and terminology. I will be looking for conflict and resolutions suggested by the text, and will examine their outlook on the future of Slepak and the women she spoke with. I will engage in a dialogue with the text in which I will try to "link" myself with the mindset of the women and create an interconnection despite the distance of time, space, and mentality between us.

I am aware that my conclusions and observations are more tentative than certain.

I begin my dialogue with Slepak by turning first to her table of contents in which she lists women's functions, work, and professions.

[Dialogue]

I imagine myself interviewing Cecilia Slepak about her work, and I ask her: I want to understand your view on the metamorphosis of the women from the time of the initial storm of the war and occupation to the confinement in the ghetto. You interviewed the women after one year of ghetto life, during which thousands in the ghetto died of typhus, starvation, and cold, and daily life was no longer "normal." In the months preceding the establishment of the ghetto, what was the impact of the war and occupation on the women's point of view? In the ghetto itself, how did they view their present lives, and what was their perspective on the future? Ghetto conditions allowed for little privacy, and the public sphere continually penetrated the private sphere. Individual and community were bound together by the orders of the occupier, and the relationship often proved to be contentious.

What were the roles of women at home, in the workplace, and in public activities, and how did they accommodate to the situation? Today we know that regardless of any heroic or fearful efforts to make a living, regardless of success or failure to save the dear ones, the fatal end had already been decided and scheduled, even as you and your friends initiated the research project on ghetto life. Is this knowledge an obstacle or an advantage for understanding this particular human endeavor in the ghetto?

From the list of women's workplaces I learned of educational institutions, orphanages, illegal activities, and places of detention. I read of women working in restaurants and dance halls, of women who died in the hospital, and one who established a library. I read about mothers left alone after their husbands were deported or arrested, and about a woman who separated from her husband because of a family disagreement and was then left alone to provide for the children. Women were involved in the petty economy of small commerce, exchanging household's goods for food, and smuggling. There were women who were able to obtain daily credit in order to be able to trade, repaying the loans by the evening. Your narrative, Cecilia, presents the contradictions of living in a society that functions with great difficulties and ample suffering, with great feelings of loss and mourning. And yet the voices of the women epitomized the vitality of living, the desire to overcome the tragedies, alongside great weariness. In addition, women's voices expressed the legitimacy of enjoying pastimes, such as a card game during the long evening curfew; a session at the hairdresser, and to listen to a whisper of love.

You gave little space to accounts of ghetto institutions like the Judenrat, but told of a woman who begged for a job in its employment office. You commended the women who established public kitchens, a source of professional and social satisfaction, while also giving a voice to those who depended upon the kitchens and expressed great reservation about them.

You were not the only one who viewed ghetto life with an open and critical eye, with neither hatred nor heroic acclaim. This attitude was shared by most of the participants in the research project on "A year in the life of the ghetto -- two and a half years of Nazi occupation". Unlike others who dealt with a single major theme, such as education, hunger, medicine, religion, or armed resistance; you presented multi-dimensional life stories of women.

The dominant theme of your report is living, perseverance and resistance, providing a broad description that touched almost all of these other themes and included all aspects of being.

I wish to understand your narrative, which is about daily life in the midst of an extreme political and social crisis. All routines had been transformed and people had to reinvent their daily reality. Is it right to speak about every day life in the ghetto? Your narrative opened with a portrait of a sunny day in the Warsaw ghetto at 10 o'clock:

The Jewish streets are hustling with an apprehensive rhythm of their uprooted life. People [like] trees, walk, almost with no movement, they stand bound to the wall. Faces, voices, smiles mingled with each other. _

Your phrase, "the rhythm of uprooted life" follows the description of the people as almost paralyzed, motionless like trees facing the ghetto's wall. Yet voices rather than silence is ruling the air. Were they waiting for a smuggler with whom they planned to meet? Passively waiting for an associate to rescue them from the isolation from their previous life? Or perhaps this is their form of protest and quest for liberation?

The description goes on and makes us listen to the voices and imagining the scenes:

"Fresh roll, good, white, cheap!"
"Warsawer Zeitung [Warsaw newspaper]"
"The best cigarettes, cheap cigarettes"
"For potatoes,... carrots"
"Good people have mercy on a mother of three orphans!"
"Sweets - Oi geweld! A thief! Catch her!"
"I am hurrying to the hairdresser... I have an appointment in the afternoon."
"Thank G-d I made some money this week."
"At the office, the payments are late."
"I have nothing more to sell, how can I provide for the family?"
"Yes, the appeal for the children had good results."
"How expensive! I do not know how and on what to save."
"Spring, what a beautiful sun. We want so much to live. We must endure."

Your own voice concludes: "At 10 in the morning the Jewish streets are already vibrating with the multitude of voices of the destitute and the light of hope of the day." _

Jealousy and hatred, love affairs, family feuds, professional satisfaction - are you merely turning the tragedy of these women and the ghetto into a series of detailed, but banal, stories? I wonder if such stories could be termed banal at all in the face of the Nazi oppression and the goals of their anti-Jewish policy. You, Cecilia, never forgot the political dimension; you were preoccupied with the Nazi rule, the tragedy of the Jews, and the suffering of the Poles. For me, the political aspect already includes the "Final Solution" and the attempted annihilation of the Jews. I step back to the winter of 1942, and erase from my mind the knowledge that two months after you completed your draft - a copy of which I read today - you and probably all the women you interviewed were sent to Treblinka. I cannot help thinking about the life stories you recount, your comments, and I ask myself: what would you have written had you been aware of the inexorable doom?
[End dialogue]

The dialogue between Slepak and myself is tricky, for I must provide both questions and answers. My tentative responses will employ a number of concepts: identity and self-understanding in relation to the family; activities in the domestic and public sphere; the responsibility of earning one's living; external and inner conflicts and their resolution; the means of survival, the need for flexibility and other behavioral characteristics.

I'll start with your story of Ms. KR., a vegetable seller, in the spring of 1942. (I ask, when in May: before the night of the killings on the 18th, or afterward, when nightly killings became routine.) She was sitting on a small bench leaning against a wall, praising the low prices and the freshness of her vegetables in her tired voice. She looked much older than her age, her thin face and blinking eyes reflect her hunger.

Selling vegetables was not a new trade for Ms. KR. Before the war she had a large stand in the market, and together with her husband, who manufactured women's coats, they provided for their family of two children, a 10-year-old daughter and a 7-year-old boy. They lived well in a three-room apartment and kept extra food supplies at home in case of hard times. When the war broke out in September 1939, she continued to go to the market place every day, unafraid of the shells and bombs that hit the city. Her sister-in-law convinced her and her husband to leave their apartment, since a fire brigade was located in their courtyard, and it was feared that this made the building more vulnerable to bombardments. She agreed reluctantly to move in with her sister-in-law and continued to go to her own apartment daily and take belongings and food. In the heavy bombardment of the city on September 25, her building was hit and burned and the family lost all it had. Ms. KR. was shocked at the loss, and regretted that on the previous day, despite her wish to go there to remove food and valuables, she had not done so. Instead, she had listened to her sister-in-law's fatalistic approach that one never knew what was safe, and therefore one should let things happen. Mr. K, by contrast, had always believed that she should consider various options and be flexible to meet the new challenges. Thus, one period of Ms. KR.'s life ended. She had to begin anew, without her belongings and all that she had achieved over the decade of her married life.

The family was unable to rent a new apartment and they moved into the kitchen of her brother's one-room apartment. Conditions were very difficult, but the couple tried to recover their businesses. Her husband lost his small workshop and turned to trade, but as Ms. K said "he had no talent for trading." Afraid of the Nazi raids in the streets, he stayed home with the children and tried to replace his wife in doing domestic chores. "Yet no one can escape his fate," said Ms. KR. One day the Nazis came to the apartment and took all the men for work. Mr. K was physically weak and was hurt badly by the Germans, who were unhappy with his slow pace of work. Ms. K returned to her vegetable stand in the market, but the scarcity of produce led her to try a new venture together with her two sisters who sold fish. They worked hard from early morning to the curfew hour and managed well. She was happy that she was able to provide for the family and they were not hungry, although their cramped living conditions were still her major problem. In June 1940, she decided to move in with her sisters. Her husband, who didn't get along with the sisters, stayed behind and thus, some nine months after the loss of her home and possessions, Ms. KR.'s family was dismembered despite the recovery of her business. She began a new period in her life as head of her family and sole provider. As we know very little about Ms. KR.'s relationship with her husband before the war, we cannot know the reasons for their separation. It is clear, however, that the decision was not easy for Ms. KR. Despite being an independent woman and the support she received from her sisters, she had to "regain her self-confidence and cure herself from the shock of the separation." Still, we see that she conducted her life according to her own preferences and was making choices.

The five months between June and November 1940 are not presented in detail, although they conclude a dramatic time in her life, beginning with the German occupation in October, the economic venture established with her sister and her emergence as sole provider for her children.

The establishment of the ghetto in November 1940 cut her and her sisters off the marketplace, which was outside the demarcation lines. This was devastating, and their economic conditions worsened every day. Selling vegetables was not profitable because of the limited supply and high prices. Most Jews were poor, could not afford vegetables; only bread was in demand. After learning the new situation Ms. KR. and her sisters decided that "their way to an economic recovery" would be by selling bread.

Thus began the third period in Ms. KR.'s life. Together with her sisters, they organized a stand, carrying the loaves from the bakery a few times a day, watching carefully to keep thieves off their backs as well as at the stand itself, since the starving people kept trying to grab a loaf and quickly eat it up. The three sisters and their children divided the tasks and all were involved in the business in one way or another. Yet they barely made a living, and could only have made a profit by expanding the business. But they had no resources to invest and each day they depended on a credit of 100 Zl from the baker. The three families together earned 20-25 Zl. per day, barely enough to live (a loaf of bread at the time cost 3-3.5 Zl.), but "they were happy because the bread sufficed for all of them."

The three sisters portrayed great energy during the worst months of the ghetto economic and social situation. Being able to provide for the three adults and six children was quite an achievement under those conditions. Thousands died of starvation and typhus in the winter and summer of 1941. Many records documented the unburied corpses on the ghetto streets, and the constant noise of beggars and children singing and begging for food. Slepak's appreciation for the efforts of Ms. KR. and her sisters is summed up by her statement: "these were the last days of no hunger for Ms. KR. and her family."

This period in Ms. KR.'s life ended abruptly in September 1941 when she came down with typhus. The chain of events ended with the tragedy of the death of her two sisters. Unable to afford medicines, she and her sisters were forced to borrow money from neighbors in order to provide better food for those who were ill. One of the sisters died at home, and the other, although receiving somewhat better care in the hospital, also died. Ms. KR. was left with six sick children (four of them the children of her sisters), a number of debts to repay, and she no longer had the bread stand. She sold her remaining possessions to provide medicine and food for the children, who recovered.

But she had no rest, for she had to find work. She washed laundry and cleaned homes - jobs that were physically demanding, yet she was happy when she had work. She also received a meal in the homes where she worked and often got leftovers to take home. The children's situation was very difficult, for they were lay in bed during the long winter days, without clothing and heat, and ate a meal only after she returned home with food. Yet they were not dying or swollen of hunger. She sold her food rations to buy a larger amount of grains, which was their main source of nutrition. Despite the dire conditions, Ms. KR. maintained a positive attitude and did not despair. She was grateful that she was still alive, and that the children endured as well, which she considered a miracle.

Ms. K shared with Slepak a shocking experience she had during the winter. One evening on her way home, she stared at the window of a sweet store and asked the saleswoman the prices. The saleswoman scolded her and drove her away: "no sweets, no price, we know you, get out of here you thief." She was painfully hurt; this was not the only time that people rejected her because of her appearance.

During the spring of 1942 she was unable to carry on with cleaning and washing and so went back to selling vegetables. Her story is telling. A neighbor lent her some money in the morning, which she must repay in the evening. With this loan, she bought produce from a smuggler. Since she got her goods through a middleman she paid a higher price, but she was unwilling to risk going to the matta - the place by the wall where smugglers passed the produce for a cheaper price. Her daughter replaced her at the stand when she went to fetch the produce, with her son to help protect her from thieves along the way. Once again, everyone cooperated in order to provide food for the family, but it remained very difficult. She made only 5-6 Zl a day at a time when the price of a loaf of bread was 11-12 Zl.

"I learned to compromise," Ms K. told Slepak, "I was once an observant woman and would not eat treif (non-kosher food); now I do not ask what is in the soup. I am happy that I have a bowl of soup for me and for the children." And Slepak added, "The war did not corrupt her morality, her honesty, and self respect. Even in the most difficult moments, even when she confronted the death of her dear ones, she did not go out to beg and did not send the children to do it." And to make sure that the reader would be convinced Slepak added in parenthesis, "as a neighbor acknowledged."

This was the final period of Ms. KR.'s life story in both senses. Slepak's interview was ended, but a more tragic ending emerged a few weeks later with the mass deportation to Treblinka. Ms. KR. and her children were probably among the first to be deported. Apart from this painful knowledge, we see that in this final period, she continued to struggle and did not collapse despite the unimaginable calamities. If her life moved steadily downhill, it was not because she failed to try to invent a new reality and create new options, but rather due to the political system that doomed her. Although aware that things were getting worse and worse, she was not fatalistic; she continued to make decisions and to exercise what options remained to her. When interviewed in the late spring of 1942, she thought she could somehow endure that she could try some new venture and make an easier path for herself.

[Dialogue]

Cecilia, you end Ms. KR.'s story with her hope for a better future. She planned to immigrate to the United States to be with her sister. Twice, her American sister had sent food parcels, which Ms. KR. sold in order to buy basic nutrition, keeping only a small part of the package for her own family. The prospect of emigration was an anchor of hope and an assurance of her self-respect. You also emphasized that Ms. KR. was too proud to reveal her full distress even to her sister; she was ashamed of her situation, and felt that its full disclosure would have stripped her of human dignity. You thought that this explained why she never walked into the self-help institutions, and only lately had she received free vouchers for her children to receive meals in the public kitchen, and three free food rations. You expressed admiration for her fortitude.

Only two of her inner conflicts were presented in your narrative. The first was her dismay over having listened to her sister-in-law and consequently failing to remove food and valuables from her apartment, and the second, her decision to move away from her brother's apartment to live with her sisters and separate from her husband. Ms. KR. had revealed that she was religiously observant and I can understand that separating from her husband was unconventional. However, once she made the decision, she did not keep troubling herself about it, and she and her former husband remained on good terms, although neither supported the other financially. Her husband then disappeared from the narrative and was not mentioned in her account of the months in the ghetto.

Your narrative brought to light your respect for Ms. KR., and your appreciation of her choices. She preferred to obtain daily credit, sell vegetables, and live on 5-7 Zl. a day rather than beg or apply for assistance from the self-help organizations. Her independence and flexibility were evident in her efforts to try new jobs and open new ventures as an entrepreneur in the petty business of the ghetto. She did not lose her core belief in the humanity of her neighbors and those around her and believed strongly in human dignity, seeking to maintain her own as well. Beyond your terrifying image of the old-looking, poor, thin, ragged woman, you found expectation and hope.

[End of dialogue]

Another woman described offers a more perplexing and no less fascinating portrait. Slepak left us two versions of this life-story. I will first tell her story combining the information of both versions and then try to understand the difference between them and what I learn about your account from the different narratives._

Guta was an attractive 19-year-old when the war began - only one week after her happy marriage. She had grown up in a family who owned a restaurant where much alcohol was served and the environment was quite brutal. While helping her parents, she had learned how to charm and calm drunken patrons. Her husband, a dental technician, fled to Vilna a few days after the war broke out, and promised to send for her shortly after the violence would cease. She was very fearful during the three weeks of the shelling and bombing of Warsaw, but was able to control herself and help her parents in the restaurant, which remained open during that time. Soldiers came to the restaurant and consumed a lot of alcohol. Since her parents had stored flour and other supplies, they did not suffer from shortages during these difficult weeks.

In October, after the battles were over, her husband sent for her. A person who would help her cross over to Vilna, which was not under German occupation at that time, contacted her. She was happy at the prospect of joining her husband, but she returned to Warsaw after nearly being hit by the shouting of the Soviet's border guards. She was shocked by witnessing people being injured, killed, or barely escaping with their lives when confronting the Soviet border guards. In Warsaw, she found her parents dazed after the Nazis had confiscated their restaurant stores. Unable to maintain the restaurant, their economic situation deteriorated.

Guta however, did not lose courage. She engaged in trade in order to recover her parents' restaurant. Success did not come easily, but after a while she was able to establish some fine business contacts as a broker of gold and jewels, and thus assisted her parents to reopen the restaurant, which provided a base for her trading contacts. The place attracted many suspicious people - Jews who worked with the Germans, as well as Germans, Poles, and others, an adventurous company that posed some risk to the family.

At the same time, Guta developed a romantic relationship with a Volksdeutsche who had rented a room in her parents' flat. Her parents' hoped that their tenant's presence would shield them from further Nazi confiscation. Thus, they kept much of their valuables and items not allowed to Jews, such as furs and foreign exchange, in his room. The intimate connection with the Volksdeutsche led to a broader trading business. The Volksdeutsche was able to cross the border from Poland to the Reich where he exchanged gold and jewelry for goods demanded in the Polish market.

Guta and her lover went out to dancing hall and other public places, she without her armband. Their intimate relationship was well known to others living in the apartment house. Perhaps because of informants, the restaurant and their apartment saw a number of visits by police and Gestapo agents, who seized some of their possessions each time. Guta and her Volksdeutsche friend were arrested by the Gestapo and interrogated for Rassenschande, but they managed to keep from revealing their relationship, even though Guta as a Jew received harsh treatment. This stormy period of her life lasted more than ten months, until the family was driven into the ghetto in November 1940.

Despite the loss of capital her parents suffered with the move to the ghetto, they were able to find a place and reopen a restaurant. As long as Guta's lover was able to visit her in the ghetto, the family managed to retain their new business. He supplied the restaurant with food and alcohol at prices that allowed them a good profit. With his help, Guta was also able to obtain passage permits to the Aryan side, and so she was able to continue her trade. She was also a vivacious and charming spirit in the new restaurant and the patrons loved her. All this lasted for a few months until her romantic relationship began to cool. Her lover came less often, and then his visits stopped altogether. After a period in which Guta and her parents labored hard to maintain the restaurant, they finally had to close. The family, which included her father, mother, brother, and sister in law, reached the brink of hunger, and Guta felt a responsibility to pull them out.

Guta had to start all over again. As a new beginning, she found a job as a waitress in a café and dance hall. Yet despite her long hours, she found she could not provide for the family. Determined to succeed, she once again took up her trade and smuggling, as well as continuing her job. Her activities caused much pain to her father, but her mother tolerated them, since they were a valuable contribution to the survival of the family.

Taking advantage of the location of their apartment building close to the ghetto wall, she contacted a Polish acquaintance - a shoemaker who lived across from them on the Aryan side. She telephoned her order for fruit, cigarettes, tobacco, and other goods, and after midnight, they signaled each other to begin the transfer of the merchandise. She was quick and knew her way around, and the operation proved very successful. She also developed friendly relationship with her partner, who often crossed the wall assumedly for business, but actually as part of their intimate relationship.

One night, this new venture almost cost Guta her life. A German policeman caught her by the wall, but she managed to run away, and the dark night saved her from his deadly bullet. However, in December 1941, at the peak of her new success the ghetto borders were redrawn. Guta's family moved to a single room in another family's apartment, away from the passage out of the ghetto walls.

Guta did not give in to despair and her adventures did not end at that point. In July 1941, she was offered a job in a new café-bar. She had a great reputation as an attractive, intelligent, and interesting young woman who liked to enjoy herself with her clients in the bar. Here, her chances to make better money were higher. The place was notorious for its guests, mostly non-Jews and Jews who worked with Germans. After awhile, she developed a relationship with Bolek, a Polish police inspector who became very fond of her and wanted her to be his mistress only.

Guta enjoyed this relationship, which offered many advantages to herself and her family. She also tried to help others who were in trouble or caught by the Polish police. Among them people who confined for crossing to the Aryan side, and people picked up in street raids to be deported to forced labor camps. Slepak hinted that Guta and her parents did not refuse payment for such services. Unfortunately, when her brother was picked up she was unable to save him despite elaborate efforts. He was sent to an unknown destination.

Slepek's talks with Guta ended in May 1942. Saddened by her brother's deportation, she took some time off work, but maintained her relationship with Bolek the police inspector. What was her fate in the critical months from July to September 1942? We do not know. Was she able to get false documents and pass to the Aryan side? Perhaps; in any event, her chances were better than those of Ms. KR., although still very limited.

[Dialogue]

Guta's story reveals a number of peaks and ebbs, although exact dates are uncertain:

- September-November 1939
- December 1939-November 1940
- December 1940-Summer 1941
- Summer 1941 - December 1941
- January 1942 to the date of the interview (probably after May 16, the last date named in the interview, but before June 1942).

I learn that Guta showed consistent effort to deal with the crises that followed the arbitrary rule of the Nazi occupiers. She was daring, courageous, and creative, knew how to maneuver people, and was ready to engage in illegal activity and make use of conditions in her favor. Although she expressed her terror of the violence of the war, she continued to work with her parents in their restaurant during the siege of Warsaw. She seems to have been free from hypocrisy, self-righteousness, and self-pity. Can I read in her story a moral deterioration - for she was not faithful to her husband, and was willing to sell her body in order to maintain a good life? I don't think this was the intent of your narrative, despite the unease often expressed in your subtext. Your own embarrassment was reflected in your two versions of Guta's life story; as you elaborated the ups and downs of her tale, I read two distinct narratives.

While in your first version you labored on the fourteen months before the move to the ghetto, you concluded the last period of the ghetto in a few lines. You only mentioned that she was ready to sell her body. Moreover, before you reached this stage you explained why she had to take this job that pushed her to the ebb. In this context and your selection rendered a favorable explanation to Guta's conduct.

In the second version Guta and her parents were depicted as very instrumental people. Their relationship with the Volksdeutsche was motivated only by their interest to safeguard their economic situation. You hardly mentioned her effort to cross the border to her husband. However, the last stage of Guta's life-story was central in your narrative of this version. The description was long and detailed and it offered a behavioral pattern -- a chain of relationships from the Volksdeutsche to the Polish shoemaker and to Bolek. Moreover, we were told that she received the job as a bar-cafe-girl because she had a reputation as an attractive young woman that received the favor of clients.

Why did you write two versions of Guta's story? Which one did you prefer? I sense your empathy for her, and your appreciation for her irresistible clinging to life, her devotion to her parents and those with whom she worked. You detailed the interrogation by the Germans after they discovered the photo of her Volksdeutsche lover in her pocket, and you stressed that despite the harsh treatment she received, she kept silent, knowing what a grave sin he had committed in their eyes.

You sought an explanation for her future development by looking at the environment of Guta's childhood - in the restaurant, surrounded by alcoholics and low class people. Yet you did not portray as inevitable the path she took - indeed, that path was chosen by her, and not altogether rejected by her family. Though you mention the criticism of the neighbors, you qualified this by stressing the moral atmosphere of the ghetto. The permissiveness came out of a general spirit that accepted unconventional manners. You wrote this judgment in relation to Jewish women in the ghetto, but added in brackets that such conduct was typical for women in the war years.

When such interpretations entered your straightforward narrative, your attitude to Guta became more respectful, disclosing your own conflict over this manner of survival. Unable either to condemn or praise Guta, you were not, however, a neutral observer of Guta in the ghetto. You, too, were part of the ghetto environment and felt its pain and

fears. Therefore your voice was ambivalent - you reverberated sympathy to Guta beyond the intellectual empathy of the researcher. Was it the woman in you that in these tragic days reasoned out how difficult it was for a young attractive girl like Guta to avoid using her femininity and sex to make a living? I think that it follows what you wrote in your introduction concerning the means and strategies that Jewish women employed from their cultural and social resources to "become victorious in the struggle for life." Therefore, the part of you that might denounce Guta in normal times was not allowed to speak up. You related to her temperament as a cause for her romantic involvement, but also to her readiness to confront challenges courageously.

Did Guta herself suffer from any inner conflict? You never voiced it directly, but you related to the fact that her association with men did not satisfy her own feelings, she was looking for affection and connections, in particular after her first relationship with the Volksdeutsche. You also described her long working days and the pace that ate up the energy demanded to accommodate clients. Was she losing control, you asked? You demonstrated how limited was her freedom to decide when and how much to be engaged in the business. By putting her situation in these terms you alluded to the fact that the pleasures of wine and other drinks and her own safety were shaky more than could have been imagined otherwise.

The final story that I have chosen is that of librarian Bathia Temkin - the only woman named in Slepak's report who survived the war by passing as an Aryan. Temkin was also mentioned in Ringelblum's notes.

Temkin at that time was 30 years old, married, and a certified librarian with a university education. She had continued to work in a public library -- even during the siege of Warsaw - until December 1939, when a Nazi order was issued that prohibited Jews from working in a non-Jewish institution. She had enjoyed her work and her co-workers maintained friendly relationship with her even after she was forced to leave her job.

In January 1940, she received a job in the clothing department of CENTOS, the refugee aid committee. Tens of thousands of refugees poured into the city following the deportations of Jews from smaller towns and villages and from the Western parts of Poland. In the cold winter of 1940, the need for clothing for the refugees (who often arrived with nothing), was very acute. Temkin demonstrated her devotion and skill in organization and distribution, making use of all every garment that was contributed to CENTOS. Although she was helping many people, she had her own dream. Among the contributions were also toys and books; and she set aside the books, hoping to establish a children's library. This was a courageous unlawful enterprise, since the Nazis had closed the Jewish schools and other educational institutions, including libraries.

However, with great zeal she gathered all the books and toys and hid them in the garment storage. After her work hours, she would select those suitable for the future library and distributed the others to children's homes, refugee assembly centers (punkts) and the "children's corners" established by the house committees.

In May 1940, CENTOS was reorganized, and she was dismissed, since her husband, who was one of the directors of CENTOS, provided for the family. She continued to work as a volunteer, however, as a means of concealing her true goal of collecting and hiding the children's books for the future library. November 1940 approached, and the rumors about the formation of the ghetto became a reality. Bathia Temkin felt that now she had to find a suitable place for her books otherwise she would lose them. When she discovered that the hall of one of the city libraries would be in the ghetto area, she began to lobby to keep it as a library. It had to be hidden from the Nazi authorities, however, and she managed to convince the CENTOS directors to place their plaque at the entrance.

Once she had an "official" place, and the tacit cooperation of CENTOS for her work, she became even more energetic in collecting books from previous libraries and private collections all over town. She lobbied the Judenrat to obtain permission from the Nazis to allow the library to operate openly. Despite two refusals in the fall of 1940 and in April 1941, the desired permit finally arrived after the library had functioned illegally for nearly half a year. The library - open only a few hours each day - was located in the unheated and poorly lit basement of the building. Temkin was assisted only by one 13-year-old girl from one of the children's homes.

After half a year of operation the use of the library was extended. Children were allowed to borrow two books each time, one in Yiddish and one in Polish. Temkin encouraged them to read Yiddish literature and was even ready to teach Yiddish. Once a week she read aloud to the children at story time. Some of the young patrons told her their fathers would read the books they had checked out to the family on Fridays. She also opened a reading room for journals and reference books, and adults also came to read. Temkin was happy. It was a dream come true. Children from the orphanages and children's homes, came along with the happier children who lived with their families to find comfort with the books. Payment was set similar to regular public libraries, with the poor children being exempt.

From November 1941, Temkin was nominated director of the library and received payment for her work, which she needed in order to support her mother and refugee sister. She felt embarrassed to be paid, since she knew how little CENTOS had, and she appreciated her own satisfaction: "I work with love; I live because of my work, and emotionally it was healing me. I believed that I am promising a future for these children. When I was working in better conditions in the garment department of CENTOS, I was often sick and missed work. Today I am working in worse conditions and more intensively yet I am healthy; my good feelings about my work is strengthening me and made me immune."

[Dialogue]

When I read Bathia Temkin's account, I feel your great admiration for her. She was a woman of vision who was able to integrate the public service with her own need for personal satisfaction in her work. Her dedication to her work shows her selfless concern for something greater than personal survival. Yet I feel this portrait is only partial: you have told us nothing of her personal life, and the circle of her family. In this "clean" account, we find no personal hungers and wants, no fear or violence experienced during the siege or under the oppressive Nazi occupation. It is an intellectual account of responsibility, her enthusiasm and dedication to her work, and her love of books are the only emotions revealed. You wrote about her feelings of satisfaction, and recorded that she herself felt that such feelings were at odds with the reality of the ghetto environment.

Temkin possessed a clear sense of self-identity; she was a professional woman with educational and cultural goals. She established the library because it was an important part of her understanding of what it was to be human. Like all children, those in the ghetto deserved to have access to the treasures of reading; it held out the promise for their future and their human qualities. You described Temkin's inner voice that called her to her mission and left her restless until it was accomplished. You wrote: A person called by his mission believes in it against all odds. Temkin believed as strongly as a belief could be that in the final analysis she would accomplish her goal. This leaves me with troubling thoughts. In regular times perhaps this is true, but what about the period of destruction? So many dedicated people with beautiful goals were starving to death, were being deported to forced labor camps, or were sick with no hope of getting well. Because she and her husband worked with CENTOS, Temkin was among those able to sustain their dreams. She was not among the newly wealthy who "lived well" in the ghetto. The dividing line between craving for food and being full was very thin, and yet she was among the privileged for whom destitution did not ruin their ability to dream of a cause, activate their capacities to serve it, and find satisfaction in doing so. This, in turn helped them overcome the physical hardship and scarcity, as Temkin herself indicated in the quote given above. You described her as self-confident, active, and creative. Your narrative however, does not leave room for pride, since you emphasize her apologetic tone for being paid as director of the library. Her subtext: I should have done it for free since I get so much out of it, but I need the money.

Conclusion

I have reconstructed three of Slepak's biographies and introduced an imaginary dialogue between us, emerging from the text. I can name this process "to imagine the real"._ This is basically the task of historians. In this I am following Collingwood's Idea of History in which he called upon the historian to walk in the footsteps of his historical protagonist, assuming that the common human capacities can bridge between present and past. But I also follow Sam Weinburg's opinion that the historian must appreciate the differences between herself and the historical hero_. The gap in time, mentality, and culture, that divides past and present calls upon the historian to view history as the study of the "other." Only then, said Winburg, can a historian establish the historical empathy called for by Collingwood. I am also aware of the tension between the reconstruction of the historical past and collective memory.

I am approaching the past not only with my own personality, values, and ideology, but also with the images and myths assimilated as a member of a community. I am myself both consumer and contributor to the collective memory. Therefore "to imagine the real" is a difficult task. My first task was to study Slepak herself, but little information was available. Thus her representations of other women becomes the major source from which to understand Slepak. I view her as a cultural and social feminist. She was an educated, liberated woman. She placed a high value on education, for she thought that tradition and society prevented women from developing and kept them in the domestic sphere. However, despite the ugliness of the war, the crises and tragedies of life in the ghetto, the situation nevertheless brought forth the potential of many women. Only in this context can we understand what she meant when she wrote that women were victorious on the battlefield of life.

Slepak thought that human life must be inspired by an engagement between the individual and the collective. She thought that even in the most difficult times the individual must be responsible for the well-being of the community. Therefore she expressed most appreciation for those working at the refugee assemblies, helping in the public kitchens, educating children, and doing volunteer work. She was critical of women who took on "high-status" tasks, such as Ms. Chairperson of a house committee; and she expressed her reservations about the upper bourgeoisie. _ She admired the working women who found the energy to pay attention to the poor and needy. _ (Her comments about it come after the description of Ms. H (p. 2 (47))???. In Slepak's value system, it was those who showed self-respect, did their utmost to find work, and refrained from begging who won her admiration. She evidently felt that those who could be inspired by and dedicated to a cause were the ones best able to endure life in the ghetto and preserve their humanity.

Activism was important in Slepak's ideology. The abnormal conditions of the war and occupation demanded that women become active in promoting the survival of their families in non-conventional ways. Slepak rarely used the word "love" but refers to the relationships of couples and other relatives, mothers and children, and between friends. In the face of many dangers, especially the possibility that men would be conscripted abruptly for forced labor, women assumed they were in less danger, and were able to move about more freely. They also did not hesitate to make use of "women's mannerisms" to distract Polish and German police and thereby save lives.

In the wartime situation, and in particular under ghetto conditions, choices were very limited. However the women Slepak described did make choices; they were constantly thinking of alternatives. Some choices that she noted were those of the decision to work and not to beg in the streets, to engage in smuggling, to cross to the Aryan side despite the danger, or to become a prostitute. Choices emerged as an outcome of both general and specific conditions, a woman's particular personality, and her standards. Making choices reflected a sense of autonomy and activism, but one also finds resentment toward the enforced situation. In addition, women made deliberate decisions such as to cross the border to Vilna, to establish a library, or to look for a particular job.

Slepak wrote as if there was a future for the women she interviewed. They believed that they would survive the war, emigrate, create a new life for themselves, perhaps acquire new professions. Despite the obvious hardships, hunger, death and misery, her narrative is one of hope. Her heroines were dedicated to life, to overcoming, to enduring, and to survival.

Were we writing these biographies, our narrative would be quite different, as we know the end.

Notes:

Cecilia Slepak's research is to be found in the Ringelblum Archive (ARI/49), divided into a number of bands. Her subjects are identified only by an initial. I use the Yad Vashem Archives copy (YVA) inatures JM/217/4 and JM/215/3 (henceforth Slepak, followed by a band number).

We have very little information of Slepak. Ringelblum writes that she received her reputation from the translation of Shimon Dubnor 12 volumes of History of the Jews to Polish and she was asked to write on the women in the ghetto. He mentions that she was deported to Treblinka in the First great deportation, Summer 1994, see: Emmanuel Ringelblum, Ketavim Aharonim, vol. 2 (Jerusalem:Yad Vahsem, 1994), pp. 223-225.

-Ringelblum's notes were published in English as Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: 1958). The Hebrew version, however, offers the full original Yiddish text

_ For further information on this research initiative in the ghetto see, Joseph Kermish, (Ed), To Live with honor and Die with Honor: Selected Documents from the Ghetto underground Archives "O.S" (Oneg Shabbath, (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986);

-Raya Cohen, "Emmanuel Ringelblum: Between historiographical Tradition and Unprecedented History", Gal-Ed on the History of the Jews in Poland, Vol. XV-XVI, 1997, pp. 105-117.

_ Slepak, band 1 table of content. See also the plan of the research "prospect of the research", YVA JM 3489.

_ I was assisted greatly from the methodology presented in the following works: Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality", in Critical Inquiry, Vol 18, 1991, pp. 1-21;

June Price: In "Acknowledgment: A Review and Critique of Qualitative Research Texts", in Making Meaning of Narratives in The Narrative Study of Lives, Vol. 6 1999, pp.1-24, --Shula Reinharz, "Who am I? In, Ruth hertz (Ed.), Reflexivity and Voices, (Thousand Oaks:Sage Pub., pp. 3-20);

-Paul John Eakin, "Autobiography and Value Structures of Ordinary Experience, The Narrative study of Lives, Vol. 6 1999, pp. 25-43;

-Gabriele Rosenthal, "National Identity or Multicultural Autobiography: Theoretical Concepts of Biographical Construction Grounded in Case Reconstruction", The Narrative Study of Lives, Vol. 5 1997, pp. 21-39;

-Janelle L. Wilson, "Lost in the Fifties: A study of Collected Memories, Ibid., pp. 147-181;

-Ruthellen Josselson, "Imagining the Real: Empathy, Narrative, and the Dialogic Self ", The Narrative Study of Lives, Vol 3, 1996, pp. 27-44.

_ See note 2 (Kermish)

_ Slepak Band 1

_ Slepak Band 1

_ Slepak Band 3

_ On Friday night of May 18 small group of SS men walked into the Ghetto and entered specific houses according to a list of names they had.

They dragged the men out and shot them in the streets. Their bodies were left to be collected in the morning. There was no explanation why these 52 men were shot (there were 60 names on the list) and it created great terror in the ghetto. The night was named the Night of Barthelomei or the Bloody night. Since then and until the great deportation from the ghetto, starting on July 21 1942, the terror reigned in the ghetto and almost every night killing of Jews was taking place. For details see, Yisrael Gutman, The Jews of Warsaw 1939-1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1982),???

_ Slepak Band 3.

_ Emmanuel Ringelblum, Ketavim aharonim, vol. 2 (Jerusalem:Yad Vahsem, 1994), pp. 223-225. Ringelblum's notes were published in English as Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto, ed. and trans. Jacob Sloan (New York: 1958). The Hebrew version, however, offers the full original Yiddish text.

_ I borrowed this expression from the title of Ruthellen Josselson's article, see note 4.

_ Robin George Collingwood, The Idea of History, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Sam Winburg "Making Historical Sense" in Peter Seixas &Sam Winburg (Eds.) Teaching and Learning History in a National and International Context, (New York: New York Uni. Press, 2000, pp. 14-18 -----"Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts", _ HYPERLINK <http://www.pdkintl.org/kwin,9003.htn> _www.pdkintl.org/kwin,9003.htn _.

_ Slepak Band 3 Ms G. aged 31 a housewife and mother of 13 year old girl, who is described as a nouveau riche

_ Slepak band 1, Ms H. age 30 described as very pretty an Aryan looking from the lower middle class, who worked in the stocking department of a large export enterprise before the war and lost her job when the war broke out. In the ghetto despite her difficulties helped refugees.