

THE POLISH JEWISH WOMAN FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE OCCUPATION TO THE DEPORTATION TO THE GHETTOS

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The war changed the lives of the Jews in
Polish towns at great speed. No one day
was like the previous day, and the
pictures flashed by as in a movie.

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The focus of this article is the woman's image that arose from those pictures flashing by, as reflected in the words of Jewish writers who were both contemporaries and eyewitnesses to what happened. We

- 1 Raquel Hodara passed away before her time, before putting the final touches to the manuscript that she submitted for publication. Hodara accepted the readers' comments, but her illness prevented her from making the requisite changes. When she was on her sickbed I talked to her about the article, which was based on a chapter in her doctorate that she had submitted to me and that I had found to be outstanding. In publishing the late Raquel Hodara's article, it is my hope that the minor changes that I have made, following the reviewers' comments, faithfully reflect the author's historical approach, while doing justice and paying tribute to her personality and talent. The pain of Raquel's loss is still fresh. I truly hope that this article will be of help to those studying and undertaking research into the history of the Jews during this period, thereby perpetuating Raquel's memory. — Dalia Ofer
- 2 Emanuel Ringelblum, *Last Writings; Polish-Jewish Relations, January 1943–April 1944* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters' House, 1994), p. 11.

will look at how women were affected by the upheavals that took place in the early months of the occupation; follow the deterioration in their living conditions; and examine how they coped with the exceptional challenges with which they were confronted. The article addresses two central issues: (1) the changes that took place in the everyday lives of women and their self-awareness from the beginning of the German occupation until they were enclosed in the ghettos; and (2) the distinctive fate of Jewish women among the occupied civilian female population. Focusing on women should also help expand our knowledge about everyday life during the period in question.³

Research about women in the Holocaust, a field that has developed in the last decade or so, poses fundamental questions with respect to the simplistic feminist approach that always sees women's gender as the primary factor in what happens to them. This school of thought also tends to ignore the suffering of men, who are described in all situations as being the lords and masters over women's lives. Undoubtedly, certain aspects of women's hardships and distress, as well as their reactions, were rooted in their gender, but there is no denying that, in this case, it was their Jewishness — not their gender — that determined their special situation. In this respect, there was obviously no difference between Jewish women and Jewish men. Hence what needs to be written is “a dual look back at history” that will identify those aspects specific to each gender while avoiding the drawbacks of an isolationist approach. The purpose of such a gender-based history, as well as of

3 According to Ringelblum, the historian will need to devote a “suitable page” to the Jewish woman in the war, *Diary and Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto: September 1939–December 1942* (Hebrew), Yisrael Gutman, Josef Kermisz and Israel Shacham, eds. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem and the Ghetto Fighters' House, 1993), pp. 380–381. In my present research I hope to make a modest contribution to the subject in question. Due to space constraints, I will not discuss women's public activities during this period. Nor will I address a number of issues relating to the functioning of the family, such as the prohibition on using the ritual baths, the increased numbers of weddings that took place during the period in question, and so on.

this article, is to describe what may be defined as the female and individual, in an attempt to reach “the human through the feminine.”⁴

As, however, in other areas of history, we have very few sources that were written by women, in order to unearth traces of women’s experiences, we must refer primarily to material written by men. In most cases such traces are few and far between, or must be pieced together by reading between the lines. Generally, the material quoted here is based on diaries written at the time that the events recorded were taking place, as well as on the documentary efforts undertaken in the various ghettos. In order to open up and shed light on the subject, I have examined accounts and memoirs, most of which were written by women.

The German army’s invasion wreaked total upheaval in all aspects of life in Poland. The massive bombardments left untold numbers of people homeless, in addition to the vast numbers of refugees who fled from the invaders. Epidemics were rampant; basic commodities were scarce; and essential services were severely curtailed. People were forced to wait in line for hours for water, coal, and food — and then frequently leaving empty-handed. As Chaim Kaplan wrote on September 26, 1939: “We lack all the necessities of life.”⁵ He goes on to relate how, as soon as the curfew was over, at 5 A.M., the streets were filled with people

rushing off to stand in line in order to get a loaf of bread after standing for six or seven hours; others are rushing to get water from the few artesian wells, with thousands of people standing

- 4 Billie Melman, “The Angel of History Has a Sex: History of Women, History and Politics 1880–1993” (Hebrew), *Zmanim* (Winter 1993), pp. 19–33, especially p. 30. I thank Amia Lieblich for the expression “the human through the feminine.”
- 5 Chaim Aharon Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan* (New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1973, c1965), p. 39. Editor’s note: Where possible, citations from Kaplan’s diary will be from this somewhat abridged English edition. Where the citation exists only in the Hebrew edition, published under the same title (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem and Am Oved, 1965), the reference will indicate this.

around them for hours on end in order to get a few drops of water for drinking and cooking ... The streets are bustling. People are hurrying to get bread; rushing to get water; dashing off to sort something out for the things that they have rescued from a fire. An endless rushing, rushing.⁶

As soon as they entered Poland, the Einsatzgruppen that accompanied the invading army immediately unleashed brutal operations against the civilian population. The acts of murder, looting, and abduction for forced labor were unprecedented. In the midst of all of this, however, the 2,225,000 Jews who were trapped in those parts of Poland that were under German control as a result of the agreement with the Soviet Union suffered particularly grievously.⁷ The indignities to which they were victim were on a particularly large scale; they were more exposed to abduction for forced labor and looting of their apartments and stores; and the numbers of Jews murdered was higher than the average. They were

6 Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony* (Hebrew), p. 39. On all the facts referred to above, see pp. 97–98, 100–101, 105–106; Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw 1939–1943: Ghetto-Underground-Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), pp. 4, 7. Ringelblum, *Writings*, p. 159; Adolf Berman, *The Place Where My Fate Was Sealed – With the Jews of Warsaw 1939–1942* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuahad, 1978), p. 102; Leni Yahil, *The Holocaust: The Fate of European Jewry, 1932–1945* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem and Schocken, 1987), pp. 219–220; *The Book of Atrocities* (Hebrew), Binyamin Mintz and Israel Klausner, eds. (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1945), pp. 36, 40, 44; Drora Eisner, *Rolling Through the Tunnels of Slavery* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1983), pp. 17–18; Adam Czerniakow, *The Warsaw Diary of Adam Czerniakow*, Raul Hilberg, Josef Kermisz and Stanislaw Staron, eds. (New York: Stein and Day, 1979), pp. 76–78; *The Diary of Dawid Sierakowiak: Five Notebooks from the Lodz Ghetto*, Alan Adelson, ed. (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 73; Rachel Auerbach, *Warsaw Testaments* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Israel-Bukh, 1974), p. 49; Chaim Shashkes, *Pages from a Diary* (Yiddish) (New York: Glantz, 1943), p. 11.

7 Yisrael Gutman, "The Jews of Poland During the Holocaust," Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman, eds., *Existence and Crisis – The History of the Jews of Poland* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 1997), pp. 454–455. The

also attacked as they lined up for vital necessities and forced to leave the line.⁸

After a short period — the precise timing varied by area — orders were given to mark Jewish businesses, and individuals were forced to wear a mark indicating their Jewishness. Forced labor became an obligation, mainly for men, and was viewed at the time as “the most terrible of the disasters visited by the Nazis on Polish Jewry.” In addition to the countless restrictions imposed on them, from February 1940 onward, the Jews suffered discrimination in both the quantity and quality of their food rations. In all districts they were stripped of their assets and jobs and deprived of entitlement to any support by Polish institutions.⁹

exceptional nature of these acts is identified not only in sources written by the victims—Jews and non-Jews alike—but also as a result of the reservations expressed by army commanders; Karl Dietrich Bracher, *The German Dictatorship: The Origins, Structure and Effects of National Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1970), pp. 414–415, as well as Avihu Ronen, *The Jews of Zagłębie During the Holocaust, 1939–1943* (Hebrew), Ph.D. dissertation, Tel Aviv University, 1989, pp. 32–33; which makes it clear that, despite these protests, there is a great amount of evidence that soldiers also played an active role in the pogroms. Yisrael Gutman and Shmuel Krakowski, *Unequal Victims: Poles and Jews During World War II* (New York: Holocaust Library, 1986), pp. 27–30.

- 8 Inter alia Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 43–44; *Zygielbojm Bukh* (Yiddish), J.S. Hertz, ed. (New York: Unser Tsayt, 1947), pp. 116–117; Ringelblum, *Writings*, p. 196; Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, pp. 8–9; Sierakowiak, *Diary*, p. 39; Riva Chirurg (Zitrin), *Here They Come* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Milo, 1998), p. 31. Chirurg notes that, in these instances, the main people to suffer were bearded Jews.
- 9 See the observations by a woman refugee who testified in Tel Aviv at the end of February 1940, Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 38; and inter alia also Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 107; Isaiah Trunk, *Ghetto Lodz: A Historical and Sociological Study* (Yiddish) (New York: Yad Vashem and YIVO, 1962), p. 32; Yael Peled (Margolin), *Jewish Krakow 1939–1943: Steadfastness, Underground, Struggle* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuah, 1993), p. 47; Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony* (Hebrew), p. 192; Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 83; Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 26; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 36; Berman, *The Place Where My Fate Was Sealed*, p. 57; hospitals, old-age homes, and orphanages were also banned from providing assistance to Jews, *Zygielbojm Bukh*, pp. 117–119.

In May 1940, a woman refugee who appeared before the Jewish Agency's Rescue Committee said:

The worst evil is not the sign of shame; the worst evil is that the Jews have been robbed of any possibility of doing anything whatsoever. The Jews have been excluded from the framework for life. Jews are not allowed to engage in commerce, crafts, work in industry and the liberal professions. The Jews are prohibited from enjoying any public support money and allocation of funds.¹⁰

THE FLIGHT FROM POLAND AND ITS IMPACT ON THE SITUATION OF WOMEN

A gender-based analysis of the Jews' situation shows a manifest shift in the normal numerical equilibrium between the sexes. "A marked change in the structure of the Jewish population" took place in the overwhelming majority of locations.¹¹ A number of factors contributed to the marked reduction in the numbers of men: out of the 90,000 or so Jews from Poland's western and central districts who enlisted in the Polish army at the outbreak of war, many died in battle or were captured in September;¹² others disappeared during the German invasion; they were either abducted for forced labor, arrested, or murdered. Undoubtedly, however, the most decisive factor was the high proportion of men who fled to the East.

The flight began with the outbreak of war, even before people experienced any actual encounter with the invader. The number of Jews who escaped from the borders of the *Generalgouvernement* is commonly estimated at some 300,000 — the vast majority of them

10 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*. On revoking entitlement to pensions and comments by Starzyński, see *ibid.*, pp. 35–36, testimony of July 1940. See also Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 34; Peled, *Krakow*, p. 54.

11 Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, pp. 34–35. On a similar demographic change that took place in Germany from 1933 onward, see Marion Kaplan, "Keeping Calm and Weathering the Storm: Jewish Women's Responses to Daily Life in Nazi Germany 1933–1939," Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 50–51.

12 Gutman, "The Jews of Poland During the Holocaust," p. 454.

men.¹³ This phenomenon of the disappearing male population was so striking that it gave rise to new expressions: somebody who left in September following the call to arms issued by the chief of the General Staff was described as “*awek als man*” (“went as a man”), while somebody who went over to the Soviet side during the 1939–1940 winter was said to have gone “*awek als Yid*” (“went as a Jew”).¹⁴ With the imposition of the labor requirement, this tendency increased.

Between December 5 and 8, 1939, Emanuel Ringelblum made the following observations in his diary: “More than half of the men have fled Sosnowiec. The women and children are left behind. A major problem for the entire country — the flight of the dynamic, working stratum.”¹⁵

Two years later, the “Oneg Shabbat” instructions to Cecilia Slepak for research about “the Jewish woman in Warsaw in September 1939 and up to the end of 1941,” included the following

13 On an estimate of the numbers who fled, see *ibid.*, p. 455; for estimates varying between 300,000 and 400,000, see Sarah Bender, *In the Face of Death Waiting to Pounce: The Jews of Bialystok During the Second World War* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1997), p. 67. There are many histories of flight in various locations—on Lodz: Michal Unger, *Inside the Lodz Ghetto 1940–1944* (Hebrew), doctoral dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997, p. 65; Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 34; Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides, eds., *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege* (New York: Viking, 1989), pp. 34–53; on Krakow: Peled, *Krakow*, p. 37; on Lublin: David Zakalich, *Struggle* (Tel Aviv: Peretz Bibliothek, 1958), pp. 64–65; and many others. On the relatively small numbers of women who fled: Yisrael Tabaksblatt, *The Destruction of Lodz* (Yiddish) (Buenos Aires: Central Association of Polish Jews in Argentina, 1946), p. 16; Shlomo Frank, *Diary of the Lodz Ghetto* (Yiddish) (Tel Aviv: Menora, 1958 [2nd edition]), p. 106. Also see Herman Kruk, *The Last Days of the Jerusalem of Lithuania: Chronicles from the Vilna Ghetto and the Camps, 1939–1944*, Benjamin Harshav, ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 80–81, who describes how he fled Warsaw for Vilna; Tikva Fatal-Knaani, *The Jewish Community of Grodno and Vicinity During the Second World War and the Holocaust, 1939–1944* (Hebrew), Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1995, p. 85, and many others.

14 Rachel Auerbach, *Testaments*, p. 339 and n. 3.

15 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 15.

sections: “How did those women (in the earliest days of the war) in all areas who remained with their husbands and those who remained alone but with children, manage to survive,” and “[the Jewish woman] as a smuggler of money, watches, goods, letters, the women who themselves smuggled to their husbands or who sent them letters, money, items via smugglers.”¹⁶

Apparently the majority of women and children stayed in their places of residence. This was mainly because they thought that they would be safe from harassment — a belief that was based on standard practice in earlier times and on the personal experience of many people during World War I. “In their innocence they believed that old people, women and children would not be harmed, and therefore the family remained in town.”¹⁷ This statement, referring to Lodz, expresses the thinking of the Jews throughout Poland.

In this spirit Calel Perechodnik from Otwock writes: “Nobody imagined that women and children were in danger ...”¹⁸ Rachel

16 Yad Vashem Archives (YVA), M.10.AR.1/128. This research was to be part of a “two and a half year” program “intended to review the life of the Jews in Warsaw over two and a half years of the war” (Ringelblum, *Writings*, p. 6). Cecilia Slepak, who was a journalist and an intellectual, translated into Polish Simon Dubnow’s *A Short History of the Jewish People*. According to Ringelblum (*Last Writings*, p. 122), she was deported in the first roundup, which began on July 22, 1942, and was murdered in Treblinka, but, according to an editorial note, she died when the Trawniki camp was liquidated in 1943, *ibid.*, p. 122, n. 10; and also Auerbach, *Testaments*, pp. 53–60. See also Dalia Ofer, “Gender Issues in Diaries and Testimonies of the Ghettos,” Ofer and Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust*, pp. 143–168. The Ringelblum Archives include sixteen interviews carried out by Slepak (hereafter Slepak, *Interviews*). I would like to thank Prof. Dalia Ofer for providing me with a translation of the interviews. See also Dalia Ofer, “Her View Through My Lens: Cecilia Slepak Studies Women in the Warsaw Ghetto,” <http://www3.sympatico.ca/mighty1/essays/slepak.htm> (originally published in Hebrew in *Yalkut Moreshet*, 75 (April 2003), pp. 111–130).

17 Unger, *Lodz Ghetto*, p. 65.

18 Calel Perechodnik, *The Sad Task of Documentation: Diary of a Hideout* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Keter, 1993), p. 24. An edited and sanitized edition appeared in English: Calel Perechodnik, *Am I a Murderer? Testament of a*

Auerbach relates that, on the night of September 5–6, 1939, she learned that fifteen places would be allocated to Jewish journalists on a train that was about to leave Warsaw. She decided to escape together with all the others, but “they turned a deaf ear. A committee member dismissed me with the sentence: ‘Women aren’t in danger. If only they could take those at greatest risk.’”¹⁹

Similarly, attempts to hide the men while the women stood by the entrance doors, ready to provide “warnings” if German soldiers approached, indicate that they believed men to be in far greater danger than women.²⁰

The women also remained because there were insufficient financial resources for the entire family to set out,²¹ as well as out of fear that their home would be taken over by strangers if it remained unattended. Another factor was the difficulty of wrenching themselves away from their relatives, especially aged parents.²² One of the reasons for this state of affairs was the impact of previous patterns, such as men who left their homes for extended

Jewish Ghetto Policeman (Boulder: Westview, 1996); as well as Ruth Kornblum-Rosenberg, *Oath — Memoirs 1938–1945* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet and Sifriat Poalim, 1986), p. 12; and also Peled, *Krakow*, p. 37; Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw*, p. 4. On similar positions among German Jews, see Kaplan, “Jewish Women’s Responses,” pp. 49–50.

19 Auerbach, *Testaments*, pp. 30.

20 Testimony by Feiweł Szłomowicz, YVA, O.3/7007; and also Eisner, *Rolling Through the Tunnels of Slavery*, pp. 18–19.

21 Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, p. 26; this state of affairs appears in many sources; see, for example: Sarah Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window of My Home* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1964), p. 33; Yaacov Mirenberg, “The History of the Lodz Ghetto” (Yiddish), *In the Years of Jewish Destruction — The Voice of the Underground Bund* (New York: *Unser Tsayt*, 1948), p. 215; and also Peled, *Krakow*, p. 37.

22 *Testimonies of Survival: Personal Testimonies from 96 members of Kibbutz Lohamei HaGetaot* (Hebrew), interviewed and edited by Zvika Dror (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters’ House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1984), vol. I, p. 72; although both the father and the mother should have stayed in order to look after the home, in our context what is important is the argument. See Chirurg, *Here They Come*, p. 35; cf. Kaplan, “Jewish Women’s Responses,” pp. 49–50.

periods in order to study at *yeshivah*,²³ Hasidim who went off for lengthy visits to rabbinical courts,²⁴ as well as men who emigrated on their own even if they were married.²⁵

Some women encouraged their husbands to try to save themselves by fleeing. Many said to their husbands and sons, for example, “You go, you’re in danger, it’ll blow over, the war will come to an end, you’ll come back and everything will be all right. What will they do to me, a woman with two little children, will they do anything to me?”²⁶ Others begged their menfolk not to leave them alone during those terribly difficult times.

Leib Reiser, a Jew who fled Grodno after weighing things up and reaching the conclusion that he had no chance whatsoever of escaping with his five-year-old daughter, relates with a dreadful feeling of guilt how he wavered between his moral obligation and his love for his wife and daughter and his “bestial” survival instinct. The instinct to survive eventually won out, and he informed his wife “briefly and cruelly” that he had to escape. He describes the

23 Emanuel Etkes, “Family and Torah Study Among Students in Lithuania” (Hebrew), *Tsion*, 51 (1986), pp. 97–99, 194. Etkes notes that, in “student society,” this pattern was extremely common and was presented as a natural step. However, he makes a point of stating that those involved were an elite that constituted a very thin stratum of the Jewish community.

24 Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 170–171. The book was first published in 1952, and I have not found any more recent studies. There is an extremely brief reference in David Bial, “The Desire for Asceticism in the Hasidic Movement” (Hebrew), *Eros, Betrothal and Prohibitions*, Israel Bartal and Yeshayahu Gafni, eds. (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 1989), pp. 219–220.

25 Bernard Weinryb, “Polish Jews Heading Outside Poland” (Hebrew), Bartal and Gutman, *Existence and Crisis*, pp. 369–398 (especially p. 385). Quite a few families left “in stages”: the father left first and was later joined by the other family members. See Haim Avni, *Spain, the Jews and Franco* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1982), pp. 76–77; Sharon Kangisser Cohen, *The Experience of the Jewish family in the Nazi Ghetto — Kovno: A Case Study*, M.A. Thesis, Hebrew University, 1997, p. 41.

26 Testimony by Feiwei Szmolowicz, YVA, O.3/7007; see also Ruth Altbeker Cyprys, *A Jump for Life: A Survivor’s Journal from Nazi-Occupied Poland* (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. 41.

conversation they had at that point: “‘No, don’t run away, we’ll stay together’ — she sobbed — ‘whatever happens to everybody will happen to us.’” And when he tried to explain to her that he had no choice and every minute counts, she asked, “And what will become of us? To whom are you abandoning us? Will I see you again?”²⁷

There were women who viewed the departure of their husbands, sons or brothers as a contemptible, selfish act.²⁸ There were also women who tried to join their husbands some time later, but a few of them at least were arrested or forced to retrace their steps because of the tremendous difficulties that prevented them from crossing the border. Others decided to go back out of loyalty to their kith and kin.²⁹

The relatives of those who fled experienced great confusion, anxiety, and fear, as graphically described by a number of writers. Shlomo Frank, for example, referring to the flight from Lodz of “tens of thousands of people, the vast majority of them men,” recorded in his diary that “they left their wives and children, their elderly fathers and mothers, to the grace of God.”³⁰ Some describe the special difficulties of those women who gave birth on their own.³¹

27 Memoirs of Leib Reiser, YVA, O.33/296 (manuscript reference; typescript reference O.33/254). Although the Germans did not reach Grodno until June 1941, it must be assumed that similar conversations also took place in the areas and periods referred to in this article.

28 Rivka Grzebin, “Last letters” (Hebrew), *Yalkut Moreshet*, 8 (March 1968), pp. 19–41, especially p. 20.

29 For example, Mrs. C. in Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 16, and Kruk, *Last Days*, pp. 80–81; Cyprys, *Survivor’s Journal*, pp. 19–20.

30 Frank, *Diary*, p. 106; also Szlomowicz’s statement: “We departed, leaving our families behind, that’s strange too.”; O.3/7007.

31 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 10: memoirs of Guta Sienawlaga, O.33/1523–1524, p. 24. These memoirs, which the author began to record in Poland in March 1944, are especially fascinating with respect to all the material relating to the subject matter of this article. Sienawlaga recounts how she led her sister-in-law, who was due to give birth, from one hospital to another in the ruins of Warsaw; see also Cyprys, *Survivor’s Journal*, p. 28, describing her return home during pogroms after a difficult birth, and noting that she had nobody whom she could consult about what to call her daughter.

THE AUTHORITIES' ATTITUDE TO MEN AND WOMEN

Apparently, however, families came to terms with the separation. This was probably because, during the early period of the occupation at least, it looked as if the Germans' behavior was confirming the assumption that there were different rules for the two sexes. Yet in contrast to early expectations, the Nazis did harass women as well. They were just as brutally punished as men for flouting the rules, and sometimes they were murdered for "offenses" of this type.³² They also figured in the abductions for forced labor; they were taken off to daily jobs, generally involving cleaning, washing or pulling up weeds and tree felling. They were sometimes treated reasonably,³³ but frequently they suffered all kinds of humiliations as they worked. Many sources report with horror that women were forced to clean floors and toilets using their hands, their coats, or their underwear, and, as soon as they finished, they were forced to put on the same filthy, wet garments, a practice that was not only insulting but also involved a real health risk.

In Krakow, Jewish women were banned from curling their hair, walking about in short sleeves, and wearing high-heeled shoes. Women also had their hair shorn during the brutal disinfection operations to eradicate typhus epidemics, or when they were picked up for various jobs. And although men's hair was shorn under similar circumstances, the experience was particularly humiliating

32 See Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 144; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 71–72.

33 See, for example, on Warsaw: Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, pp. 77, 164, and Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 38, 49; on Krakow: Peled, *Krakow*, p. 91; on Płonsk: YVA, M.1.Q/343 (name of the person testifying is unclear); on Lodz: Tabaksblatt, *Destruction of Lodz*, pp. 18–19, Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 55; Zilla Rosenberg-Amit, *Preserving the Image* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Moreshet, Ghetto Fighters' House, and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad), pp. 20–21; YVA, M.10.AR.1/448; *ibid.*, M.1.Q/318; Perechodnik, *Diary of a Hideout*, p. 21; testimony of Prof. Aharon Weiss, 1942, YVA, O.33/991, p. 18.

for women.³⁴ During body searches for money and valuables, no consideration whatsoever was paid to the sensibilities of women: they were ordered to strip and to stand naked in front of all the residents of a house or apartment, who, because of the bombings and the large numbers of refugees, frequently also included neighbors and second-degree relatives. Sometimes these searches were carried out in the town square.³⁵

The available documentation indicates that Jewish women were also raped by Germans during these months, although it is not possible to assess the extent of the phenomenon. This subject is frequently referred to in contemporary documents and later accounts. Sometimes these are only general rumors, but not infrequently more specific details are referred to, such as statements by physicians who had examined “large numbers of young girls who had been raped” and gave them an injection against syphilis, or indications of where the rape took place.³⁶ Consideration must be given to the fact that women tended to keep such attacks secret, and it stands to reason that their relatives, as well as the doctors who treated them, refrained from disseminating information likely to identify them.

Such behavior on the part of the Germans was of course in breach of the “race laws” and constituted a violation of the

34 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, pp. 78, 122; Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, p. 190; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 60; testimony on Pabianice (Lodz District), YVA, M.1.Q/330.

35 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 121; *The Book of Krakow, A Major Jewish Center*, Aryeh Bauminger, Meir Bossak, Natan Michael Gelber, eds. (Jerusalem: Harav Kook Institute, 1959), p. 386; on crowding into relatives' homes, see, for example, Slepak, *Interviews*, pp. 38, 42, “The Woman Peddler,” p. 1, Mrs. H., p. 43; see also the Hartglas Report in Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 5; Berman, *The Place Where My Fate Was Sealed*, p. 53; Sienawlaga, *Memoirs*, pp. 14–19; testimony about Mława: Sarah Mlawer, M.1.Q/277; as well as Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1961), p. 127, based on German reports.

36 Report of The Information and Documentation Center of the Polish Government-in-Exile, taken from Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 16, 18, 45, 51; Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 28; Peled, *Krakow*, p. 54.

“*Rassenschande*” regulations.³⁷ There were Jews who assumed that there was no risk of such acts being committed against Jewish women.³⁸ A variety of sources indicate that not all Germans behaved in this way.³⁹ From the fact that preventative measures were adopted by various commanders we gather that there were Germans who had romantic liaisons with Jewish women, or had sex with Jewish prostitutes, in addition to the cases of rape.⁴⁰

Despite this distressing description of the hardships suffered by women, during the early period of the invasion German cruelty was apparently primarily directed against the men. They were snatched more frequently and taken off for harder work and longer periods. From 1940 onward, many of them were sent to labor camps, where

37 These regulations are derived from the Law for the Protection of German Blood and German Honor, one of the Nuremberg Laws of September 15, 1935; see Yitzhak Arad, Israel Gutman, and Avraham Margalio, eds., *Documents of the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1981), pp. 78–79.

38 About women’s perceptions that they were protected against rape, see, for example, the testimony of Aharon Weiss, YVA, O.33/991.

39 On sexual assaults on Jewish women during *Kristallnacht* (apparently also including rape), see Hilberg, *Destruction*, pp. 126–127. On instances of rape during the war in the later years, see Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), p. 152; *The Grajewo Memorial Book* (Yiddish) (New York: United Grayever Relief Committee, 1950), pp. 189, 201–202. On relationships between German men and Jewish women in labor camps, see Felicja Karay, *Death Comes in Yellow: Skarżysko-Kamienna Slave Labor Camp* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1996), pp. 79–81, 95–96. Of special interest in this context is Karay’s comment: “The Germans did not consider the many cases in which rape ended in murder as instances of ‘racial impurity’” (p. 95). See also the comment by Rapp in *The Grajewo Memorial Book*, p. 202.

40 Hilberg, *Destruction*, pp. 126–127; Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 24; Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony* (Hebrew), p. 84. On a romantic liaison between a Jewish woman and a German man and the punishment meted out to the two of them, see Rosenberg-Amit, *Preserving the Image*, p. 21. On the arrests of Jewish women because of this “misdemeanor,” see Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 32. On relationships whose nature is not sufficiently clear, see Czerniakow, *Diary*, pp. 178–179 and *passim*. In the same connection, see Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 52 and footnote.

they suffered extremely arduous conditions.⁴¹ The hostages — those who returned home after a while, as well as those who disappeared forever — were practically all men. The same applies to the victims of the mass murders during the early period of the occupation. As a result, many men — generally with the encouragement of their family members — tried as much as they could to avoid going outside, particularly at certain times, and also lay low in cellars or other hiding places.⁴²

The assumption that the absence of circumcision and women's better command of the local language would make it more difficult to identify them as Jews reinforced the feeling that women were nevertheless safer.⁴³ Female beauty was also likely to be of assistance in the day-to-day struggle for survival. Even though it involved risk, since attractive women were more likely to be picked up for labor and to suffer different forms of abuse,⁴⁴ it would appear to have influenced more than once the willingness of men — Jews and non-Jews alike — to help women in all sorts of ways.⁴⁵

41 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, pp. 40, 52; testimony in YVA M.1Q/331 about Fajntshe; Shmuel Mondezyisz, *ibid.*, M.1.Q/494; Ephraim Lipa, *ibid.*, M.1.Q/495 (both testimonies are about Wierzbienik Sztarów); S. Grynbaum from Piotrków, *ibid.*, M.1.Q/340, 341; and others (name not clear); Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, p. 195; Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 99; Unger, *Lodz Ghetto*, p. 7; Peled, *Krakow*, p. 39; Ronen, *Zagłębie*, pp. 40–41; Sierakowiak, *Diary*, pp. 57–59; Rabbi Shimon Huberband, “*Kiddush Hashem*”: *Jewish Religious and Cultural Life in Poland During the Holocaust*, Josef Kermisz and Nachman Blumenthal, eds. (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1987), pp. 34–35.

42 On Warsaw, see, for example: Czerniakow, *Diary*, pp. 87–88, 92, 102–103, 108–109, 125–126, 154, 166–167, 184; on Lodz: Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 60, 64–68; Tabaksblatt, *Destruction of Lodz*, pp. 21–24; on Sosnowiec: Ronen, *Zagłębie*, p. 44–47; on Bendin: Haika Klinger, *A Diary from the Ghetto* (Hebrew) (Merhavia: Sifriat Poalim and Kibbutz Haogen, 1959), p. 18.

43 For example, Ringelblum, *Writings*, p. 230.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 75; on the harassment of good-looking and well-groomed women, see testimony from Radom in the Ringelblum Archive, YVA, M.10.AR.1/448; see also Sarah Erlichman, *In Impure Hands* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Young Guard of the Poalei Eretz Israel Party, 1960), p. 14.

45 For example Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony* (Hebrew), pp. 17, 44.

CHANGES IN WOMEN'S PATTERNS OF BEHAVIOR

All of the factors discussed so far, as well as women's traditional gender role as the person responsible for running the household,⁴⁶ led them to assume many tasks imposed by the times. Women made up a large proportion of those lined up for food, water, and coal.⁴⁷ A goodly number of women also dared to take major risks on the assumption that it was harder to identify them. When a bureaucratic matter had to be arranged, it was the women who went to the

46 Looking after children and the household generally, and specifically worrying about food for the family, are considered women's primary duties in all cultures that have been studied; see, for example, Françoise Thiebaut, "The War and the Triumph of Social Division," Pauline Schmitt Pantel, Georges Duby, Michelle Perrot, Françoise Thiebaut, eds., *A History of Women in the West, Vol. V: Toward a Cultural Identity in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA., London: Belknap Press, 1994), pp. 21–75, especially p. 37; David Gutmann, "Parenthood: A Key to the Comparative Study of the Life Cycle," Nancy Datan and Leon H. Ginsberg, eds., *Life-Span Development Psychology: Normative and Life Crises* (New York: Academic Press, 1975), pp. 164–187, especially pp. 178–179; Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Woman, Culture and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), "Introduction," pp. 1–15, especially pp. 5–6. For a psychoanalytical analysis, see Nancy Chodorow, "Family Structure and Feminine Personality," in Rosaldo and Lamphere, *ibid.*, pp. 43–66, especially pp. 43, 59, 66. Even though in Eastern Europe Jewish society's gender-based differentiation was less rigid than the norm in western societies, undoubtedly in the former worrying about the home and family were viewed as a woman's key duties; see, for example, Paula Hyman, "Continuity and Change in the Migrant Jewish Family in the United States" (Hebrew), Bartal and Gafni, *Eros, Betrothal and Prohibitions*, p. 343. Mrs. K. II represents this tradition very clearly when she (having worked before the war as well) says that her husband, when he sat at home with the children after his business affairs were ruined, "tried to fill his wife's shoes"; see Slepak, *Interviews*, "The Woman Peddler," p. 1.

47 See, for example, Czerniakow, *Diary*, pp. 7–8; Sierakowiak, *Diary*, p. 52; Chirurg, *Here They Come*, pp. 31, 35. See also Sarah Plager-Zyskind, *The Crown of the Lodz Ghetto and the Camps* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1975), p. 21. Zyskind relates that at first it was her father who stood in line, but, after he started to be scared, her mother assumed the task. See also Klinger, *A Diary from the Ghetto*, p. 17; Tabaksblatt, *Destruction of Lodz*, p. 21; Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, p. 149, among many others.

Gestapo offices, waiting in line for hours on end.⁴⁸ There were women who did not wear the identifying mark when they left home, even though quite a few people knew them as Jews;⁴⁹ others were bold enough to travel by rail, which involved frequent inspections and sometimes also being in the company of Germans, in order to improve their camouflage.⁵⁰

Many women were forced to break away from the role that they had played before the war and to increase their contribution to their family's livelihood, or even assume the burden of providing for its entire income. And even though the bourgeois outlook, which viewed a woman's devotion to care of the home and raising the children as an ideal had not become thoroughly entrenched in Eastern Europe because of economic hardships, apparently the percentage of working women still did not exceed 35 percent.⁵¹ Since the average age for marriage was fairly high,⁵² and some women at least — including those in the liberal professions — stopped working after they had children, it is quite possible that the percentage of working women among all married women, especially among those with children, was even lower than this figure.

From what Ringelblum writes about women's activities in the first months of the occupation, it can be deduced that many of them

48 For example, Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, p. 43, who describes how his sick wife lined up for more than ten hours in an attempt to regularize a particular license.

49 See, for example, in Slepak, *Interviews*, Mrs. Z., p. 6 and Mrs. P. II, p. 23. See also Ofer, "Gender Issues," p. 149.

50 See, for example, Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 67–68; Berman, *The Place Where My Fate Was Sealed*, p. 63; YVA, M.10.AR.1/866; Slepak, *Interviews*, pp. 45–46.

51 Compare Garncarska-Kadari, "Changes in the Material Situation of the Jewish Working Classes in Poland (1930–1939)" (Hebrew), *Gal-Ed*, 9 (1986), p. 169, and Michal Unger, "The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto," Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, pp. 123–142, especially p. 128.

52 Saul Stampfer, "Marital Patterns in Interwar Poland," Yisrael Gutman, et al., eds., *The Jews of Poland Between the Two World Wars* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989), pp. 173–197.

had previously not been concerned with making a living.⁵³ However, given the serious deterioration in the economic situation that affected all of Poland with the outbreak of war, and particularly the Jews — with more and more men absent from home, out of work, having taken to their beds because of beatings they had sustained, or being prevented from leaving their homes because of the great danger outside — women saw themselves as being responsible for compensating for what they had lost.⁵⁴ Many took advantage of new opportunities for work, such as replacing Polish maids and caregivers who had left, preparing armbands with the Jewish star, sewing clothing to order, or producing all kinds of foodstuffs in small quantities for sale.⁵⁵ Even women who had not previously worked outside the home or who had provided minimal help in their husbands' businesses were now forced to spend more time on matters relating to the family livelihood.⁵⁶

Women from the affluent classes were also forced to learn a trade or to look for a job that did not require any special skills. Female members of the liberal professions, or young women studying for a prestigious academic degree decided willy-nilly to try their luck in simpler trades. Helena Szarszewska, who had previously enjoyed an utterly middle-class existence, wrote in her memoirs that one of her daughters had enrolled at the nursing school, saying, "if I can't be a doctor, at least I'll be a nurse," while another daughter, who had taken three exams toward a master's

53 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 51.

54 Zakalich, *Struggle*, p. 26.

55 Pnina Grinstein-Frimer, *Our Days Were the Nights* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1984), p. 29; Mrs. D. in Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 24; Adina Bar-El, *I Am Lola* (Hebrew) (Ahva College: Privately published, 1983), pp. 13–15. Regarding Polish maids being replaced by Jewish women, see also Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 203–204.

56 Slepak, *Interviews*, pp. 28–29; see *ibid.*, testimony by Mrs. H., relating that she had to support her husband and his entire family because, as a result of the abductions for labor, "her husband suffered panic attacks about going out and about. He sat at home for weeks on end. She was isolated in the struggle for survival, it was very hard for her."; *ibid.*, p. 43.

degree, began studying pattern cutting and sewing.⁵⁷ When the schools were closed down, Rina Antopolski from Warsaw, who was born in 1923, and came from an extremely wealthy family, registered to study sewing, “[so] that I’ll have something.”⁵⁸

Once all employment possibilities disappeared — and after a short while most Jews were in fact out of work — assets and possessions became the primary means of subsistence.⁵⁹ Here, too, the women were those who usually engaged in selling or bartering personal items. Ringelblum writes: “Trade is in the hands of women, the men do not dare go outside.”⁶⁰ Generally speaking, however, trading as an occupation, even if it provided for the family’s basic needs, lasted for a short period only.

The women interviewed by Slepak exemplify women’s efforts to find all sorts of ways to keep their families going — sometimes together with their husbands and sometimes on their own. Referring to one of her interviewees, Slepak makes observations that are indicative of the change that came about in many women’s lives: “She managed as best she could, like many Jewish women in this war. She sold valuables from home, her own clothing, that of the children and her husband. None of this lasted for very long. She started to see poverty. And then she shook off her cloak of passivity and assumed the burden of undertaking the economic struggle.”⁶¹

Even young girls felt responsible for the family’s livelihood. Masza Puttermilch recounts how when their apartment was damaged and her father could not make a living,

57 Helena Szarszewska, *The Last Chapter* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters’ House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1980), vol. I, p. 26; see also about Mrs. P. II in Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 23; cf. Kaplan, *Women’s Responses*, p. 41.

58 YVA O.3/5847.

59 Ringelblum, *Writings*, vol. II, p. 196; this is referred to in practically every diary, testimony, and memoir.

60 Ibid.; YVA, O.33/296; see also Alicia Appelman-Jurman, *Alicia, My Story* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1988), pp. 123–142, especially p. 128. She describes how her mother sold all of the family’s bedding and the tablecloths that had been handed down from one generation of the family’s women to the next.

61 Slepak, *Interviews*, the author of “The Concierge,” pp. 2–3.

I decided that I had to look after my parents ... I felt obliged ... At that time, all the trading took place on the streets. The shops were all closed. And I said, I'll do it. I'm more capable of running away and so on, and I stood on our street, on Nalewki, and I would yell at the top of my voice for the first time in my life, but that was quite all right, no one was ashamed or embarrassed in the slightest, and that's how I became a saleswoman. I would pay someone some amount and I would bring food home — until the Germans caught me that might have been in October-November, it was still 1939.⁶²

Women also tried all sorts of ways to prevent the men from being picked up. They ran various errands instead of men; and they would also run after their husbands or sons who had been abducted, begging the kidnappers in the hope of arousing their compassion. Their efforts were seldom successful, and sometimes they were cruelly beaten for their pains.⁶³ Some were forced to report to the Gestapo offices and to pay a ransom in return for the release of their menfolk. If the promise for release was not kept, they did not give up; instead, they would redouble their efforts to rescue them from their incarceration through a variety of stratagems and ruses.⁶⁴ When men vanished without trace, wives and mothers did not despair, continuing to insist that the Judenrat find out what had happened to them.⁶⁵

Czerniakow, for example, devoted a considerable proportion of his diary entries to a description of the emotional and incensed applications made by the women, who sometimes expanded their protests to include other matters that they considered to be related to a distortion of justice.⁶⁶ Once Czerniakow even noted

62 YVA, O.3/7635, pp. 7–19.

63 For example, Reuven Ben-Shem, *Warsaw Diary*, YVA, O.33/959, p. 48.

64 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 72–73. Also the tremendous efforts undertaken by Guta Sienawlaga to get her brother-in-law released, *Memoirs*, pp. 31–34.

65 Sienawlaga, *ibid.*, p. 57; testimony in the Ringelblum Archive, YVA, M.10.AR.1/433, p. 40.

66 See Czerniakow, *Diary*, for example, p. 92 (November 21–23, 1939), p. 93 (November 25–26, 1939), as well as pp. 177–178, 186–188.

specifically that he was afraid of “a revolt by women.”⁶⁷ When the various Judenräte tried to regularize the recruitment of workers in order to meet the quotas demanded by the Germans, the women sometimes demanded that the burden be distributed more equally. Some organized noisy demonstrations to this end, and sometimes appointed their own representatives to conduct negotiations with the Judenrat.⁶⁸

If their approaches to the Judenrat did not bear fruit, the women tried to trace their menfolk in the prisons and detention camps,⁶⁹ and even to redeem them by their own efforts, despite the great risk involved. To this end they not only approached Polish lawyers or institutions such as the Red Cross,⁷⁰ but also the German authorities themselves.⁷¹ When it became clear that despite their efforts their husbands or sons would remain behind bars, they would stand for hours on end trying to make contact with them by any means they could devise and to bring them clothes and food. Sometimes they waited for days and nights near where their menfolk were detained, suffering beatings and humiliation, with some of them also being arrested.⁷²

Just a few months after the outbreak of the war, Ringelblum expressed his admiration for the women’s initiative, energy, and endurance. In December 1939, he wrote:

Women’s power to endure. The main breadwinners. The men don’t go out. When [the man is picked up for labor] the woman does not

67 Ibid., p. 162.

68 *Documents from the Lublin Ghetto: Judenrat Without Direction* (Hebrew), Nachman Blumenthal, ed. (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1967), pp. 36, 40, 51–53.

69 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 36.

70 See, for example, Eisner, *Rolling Through the Tunnels of Slavery*, pp. 28–33; Erlichman, *In Impure Hands*, p. 12; Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 35.

71 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 47–48. After Sienawlaga managed to get her brother-in-law released from prison, the town’s Jews asked her to convince the authorities to allow them to return to their homes; her husband urged her to take on this mission; Sienawlaga, *Memoirs*, pp. 52–53.

72 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 51; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 48, 66; Mirenberg, “History,” p. 214.

give up. She runs after [the kidnappers], screams and pleads “Please, Sir!” — she is not afraid of soldiers. She stands in endless queues — some of them are taken off to work. The woman who dressed up fancily and lorded it at Ziemański’s [coffee house] belongs to the past. Women of status sit in offices and deal with people who come to see them. The fancy hats have disappeared. In wartime — a kerchief. When it’s necessary to go to Aleja Szucha [Gestapo headquarters] — the daughter or the wife goes, in the worst case scenario she stands in the corridor and waits — when a parcel has to be handed over from the shop, when things must be handed over, the husband, the brother, from the other side [accompanies] the wife, many women — — do their shift in the coal line. Many have given up their maids and run their own households — — not the way things were in the Polish period. The woman is everywhere, because [the man] has been taken off for all kinds of work. The husband has run off and his wife is obliged to be the sole breadwinner. — that they never thought they would be forced to earn a living, they became willing to undertake the hardest work.⁷³

This praise is too general, Ringelblum’s admiration may also derive from the marked discrepancy between stereotypical (albeit unconscious) views of a woman’s abilities generally, as well as her functioning in times of crises specifically, and her actual behavior, particularly in circumstances such as these.⁷⁴ Moreover, even if all the women interviewed by Slepak managed to contribute greatly to their own and their families’ survival, we have no way of checking whether they were a representative sample: perhaps the women who were chosen had demonstrated their endurance in one way or another — whether by trading, undertaking public work, working as

73 See Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 51. The passage includes additions that were added by the editors of the diary; the dashes indicate words that could not be deciphered.

74 On the perseverance of such stereotypes, see Françoise Thiebaut, “Work, Gender and Identity in Peace and War,” Billie Melman, ed., *War and Peace, 1830–1930* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), p. 20, as well as Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford, *Women and Gender, A Feminist Psychology* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1996), pp. 554–582.

a bar girl, or as a mistress of a *Volksdeutscher* or a Polish man. There were obviously also women who did not manage to overcome the shock of the invasion and deal with the vicissitudes of their lives under occupation.⁷⁵

It should be noted, however, that when referring to women as a sector, and not individually, Ringelblum's and Slepak's position is endorsed not only by contemporary sources but also by a number of studies that have looked at the changes in women's lifestyles during wartime. When they are forced to tackle the need to make a living for themselves and their children, while, at the same time, having to run a household in wartime conditions, they are also forced to adopt new strategies in order to obtain even the most basic commodities.⁷⁶

These studies also reinforce Slepak's conclusions about the new awareness that many women acquired about their abilities. This awareness strengthened their self-confidence and acted as a further incentive to persevere in their new undertakings.⁷⁷ This applies also to women who had worked before the war, because their contribution to the family's income was now essential and of vital importance in the struggle for survival.

75 This is implied, for example, in the entire book by Tamara Lazerson-Rostowski, *Tamara's Diary: Kovno 1942–1946* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House, 1975), and, in particular, p. 15; as well as Selver-Urbach, *Through the Window*, p. 34.

76 Hanna Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France 1939–1948 Choices and Constraints* (Essex: Longman, 1999), pp. 44–45, 126; see also Melman, "The Angel of History has a Sex," especially the presentation of the problems in the introduction, pp. 1–20; Thiebaut, "Work, Gender and Identity," p. 208; as well as in the article about the situation in Kosovo, "After the Massacre, the Women Learn to Manage Without the Men" (Hebrew), *Haaretz*, January 8, 2000. Other studies provide a similar picture for other eras of atrocities, such as postwar periods, migration, etc. See for example Peggy B. Sanday, "Female Status in the Public Domain," Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society*, pp. 195, 197.

77 Thiebaut, "Work, Gender and Identity," p. 208; Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France*, p. 11; and also Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 40.

RUNNING THE HOUSEHOLD, ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES, AND NEW MEANING

Many men were utterly traumatized during this period. Their inability to fulfill their traditional gender role as breadwinners dealt a serious blow to their self-image. Their lives lost meaning as a result of the loss of the employment that, in the past, had frequently given them a sense of interest and success. Chaim Kaplan laments that “important proprietors now attend to their household’s needs, returning home laden with foodstuffs; in one pocket — a loaf of bread; in another pocket — an onion. ... Authority has vanished; nobility has passed. They are ashamed of small things because they’re not big...”⁷⁸

Many men’s dignity was also affected, because they were unable to conceal from their family members the terror that haunted them of being picked up for forced labor, or the degradation they had experienced after being beaten and humiliated. Riva Chirurg, then aged nineteen, relates, for example, that her father

came home one day badly beaten and terrified. ... After that sad day, I noticed a change that came over him... When the cry “All the Jews outside” ... was heard, I would run to hide myself, my father would stand there looking at me, helpless, shaking like a leaf. ... I saw that he was looking for a hiding place. ... He was a broken man. ... And then my mother had an idea. She moved a cupboard, put it in the door alcove, and my father went and hid

78 Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo, “Woman, Culture and Society: A Theoretical Overview,” Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society*, pp. 17–42. Different degrees of esteem attach to the roles conventionally performed by each gender — “masculine” activities are always considered more important. See, for example, Rosaldo, *ibid.*, especially pp. 19, 23; on p. 20 there is an interesting footnote about this issue in East European Jewish society; see also Sherry B. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” Rosaldo and Lamphere, *Woman, Culture and Society*, pp. 67–87, especially pp. 67, 69–70. On the Jewish issue, see also Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

behind the cupboard. ... Poor father, as frightened as an abandoned child, like a beaten dog, would sit there until evening and not say a word.⁷⁹

At the same time, married women's tasks — looking after the home and the children — were not interrupted but actually became the focus of life, thereby acquiring even more importance. This continuity provided an anchor of relative stability, which enabled many of them to persevere and continue functioning. It would appear that the enormous difficulties confronting them actually strengthened some women's feeling of responsibility, making them and their surroundings view themselves with new respect and appreciation, and encouraging them to expand the range of their activities even further.

Life demanded that she take action. And Mrs. K. followed the call of life. A feeling of weighty responsibility for her husband and daughter helped her overcome the metamorphosis, the shift to independence with equanimity. ... She managed quite well. ... She sent her husband [in the labor camp] the things he asked for, money, warm underwear, a sweater, pencils and pens. ... The fees extorted by the "*machers*" swallowed up vast sums and the means at her disposal dwindled at an alarming rate from one day to the next. Mrs. K. introduced limits in her housekeeping. She cooked, kept the house tidy, and did the washing on her own. At the same time, she became more attentive to her daughter, who helped her with household chores and even handled all sorts of business matters in town. ... She organized her life in a harmonious fashion, and as a result she managed to devote herself to the entire range of her duties.⁸⁰

Many women explained that their maternal feelings were what

79 Chirug, *Here They Come*, pp. 31–32. On the irreversible change in somebody who has been tortured, see Jean Améry, "Torture," idem, *At the Mind's Limits* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 33, 39–40.

80 Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 35.

drove them to take action.⁸¹ However, even women who had no children talked about the sense of satisfaction that they experienced as a result of their ability to run their households properly, in light of the adverse conditions, and, at the same time, to attend to the needs of those who were dependent on them. Mrs. H., who was referred to above, for example, provided for both her husband and his parents.

There were some women refugees, however, who began to channel most of their energies into providing not just for objective needs but also as a reaction to the frustration they felt at losing the anchor of familiar household chores. Mrs. Guta Sienawlaga, who started bartering purely by chance, quickly became a large-scale trader; her husband, who worked with her, now actually worked under her management. In her writings, replete with highly detailed descriptions of her transactions, she boasts of her achievements and initiatives. At one point she relates that “before he [her husband] managed to go out, I had already managed to sell.” Elsewhere she quotes people as saying to her, “Gutshe, you have a good head, people can rely on you.” This is particularly striking in contrast to her own report of the feeling of humiliation she felt months earlier when she learned that her house in the town had been destroyed (actually, the house was seized by Poles after all the Jews had been expelled from town): “Now I fell in my own eyes, too. No bed, no pillow, how long can you live as somebody’s guest? Even with your parents ... All of my status just collapsed.”⁸²

There were women — whether married, mothers of children, or spinsters — who derived their strength from the new professional opportunities that the war offered them. Mrs. B., aged forty-eight, had trained as a nurse and physical-education instructor in Berlin.

81 On Mrs. P. II, Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 14. See a similar explanation in *Women in the Ghettos — An Anthology* (Yiddish), L. Szpizman, ed. (New York: Pioneering Women’s Organization, 1946), p. 12.

82 YVA, O.33/1523–1524, p. 36.

From March-April 1940, she was the principal of a boarding school for orphans, feeling that the work “opened up to her space for initiative and intellectual activity.”⁸³ Another unmarried woman, more than forty years old, who had completed courses before the war in hygiene and nutrition in Palestine, without managing to find any employment opportunities, observed that “the war enabled me to express the potential that had been latent within me.”⁸⁴ An agricultural engineer claimed that the war “finally” gave her “an opportunity. I found an area of activities that suited me.” During the bombardments, she was in the advanced stages of pregnancy and walked 12 kilometers every day to the office and back, returning in order to organize the communal kitchens. She had the baby during the forced move from Grochów to Warsaw, and then had to combine the roles of mother, clerk, and housewife.⁸⁵ Dr. Tula Mintz, a pediatrician from Warsaw, decided after her husband was conscripted to take up residence with her six-year-old son in the hospital in Medyrzyszyn, near Otwock; she was immediately appointed director of the institution. In a letter that she sent to her sister in Paris in 1941, she related how, never having performed an operation in her entire life, she had begun to undertake the most complex surgery on children; she expressed her amazement at the strength that individuals can muster during times of danger, strength unimaginable in ordinary times.⁸⁶

CLASS DIFFERENCES AND THEIR INFLUENCE

During this period class differences can be seen to have had a major impact on women’s lives. Affluent families were able to escape together, without having to separate, moving from one location to

83 Slepak, *Interviews*, p. 39.

84 *Ibid.*, pamphlet entitled, “A Guide to Communal Kitchens,” pp. 1–2.

85 *Ibid.*, Mrs. Rea.

86 Testimony by Tula Mintz, YVA, O.33/1073.

another under far more convenient conditions.⁸⁷ Food stores and the value of objects in the home could be decisive factors in determining the family's ability to cope with shortages during the early months of the war. A family that had a Polish maid could get by in part or altogether without the misery of standing in line and the danger of being expelled from queues. Or, as David Sierakowiak put it: "Downtown, Nazi agents remove Jews from all food lines, so a poor Jew who doesn't have a servant is condemned to death by hunger."⁸⁸

Paying a ransom or giving a bribe could also be helpful in those days. People of means were able to buy their way off the lists of those to be sent to labor camps, or to be rescued from forced labor locally in return for a "legal" ransom that the Judenrat then used to provide assistance to the young people who were sent to the camps.⁸⁹ If the husband could be released from the obligation to provide labor — and, in particular, from being sent to a camp — the wife would no longer have to bear the burden of providing for the family on her own, or, at the very least, would be spared the distress and worry of being on her own.

A variety of sources indicate that women from prosperous families who did not flee and had not yet been evicted from their apartments managed during the period prior to the deportations to

87 Yisrael Gutman, "The Distinctiveness of the Lodz Ghetto" (Hebrew), *Chronicles of the Lodz Ghetto*, vol. I, January 1941–May 1942 (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1987), p. 45; on the "legendary sums of money" that the Jews in Lodz paid *Volksdeutsche* in order to be smuggled to Warsaw, see Hartglas's observations in Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 48; and also testimony by Tula Hudin, YVA, O.3/6628; Slepak, *Interviews*, Mrs. G.

88 Sierakowiak, *Diary*, p. 39; and also Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 29–30. Concerning Polish maids, some identified with the suffering of the Jewish families for whom they worked, while there were others who gladly took advantage of the relative edge that they enjoyed as a result of the new circumstances; see Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p.12; Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 92.

89 Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 194–195; Perechodnik, *Diary of a Hideout*, p. 25; Berman, *The Place Where My Fate Was Sealed*, p. 64. On bribes, see Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 166; Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 41.

the ghetto — and, of course, the length of this period varied from one location to another — to maintain a fairly comfortable lifestyle without drastically changing their habits. When they became involved in the provision of welfare, they did so in a way that characterized the philanthropic activities of women from middle-class circles. Women who belonged to the ranks of the lower middle classes were also able to maintain their normal practices and customs as long as the husband managed to continue to provide for the family.⁹⁰ This relative continuity was particularly striking in contrast to the crisis that affected most low-income families.

Wealth could, however, also be a negative factor. Higher percentages of affluent Jews were abducted as hostages, and some of them never returned.⁹¹ Luxurious apartments were extremely attractive to the occupying forces, who looted them time and time again, confiscating some of them, contents and all, and evicting the families that had lived in them without the slightest notice.⁹²

Lower-class women were apparently more adaptable than their wealthier sisters — particularly members of the liberal professions — since the latter now found it difficult to run their own households. Some of them did not even know “how to wash a floor.”⁹³

90 In Slepak, *Interviews*, Mrs. G. and Mrs. K., p. 29, and “The Concierge,” p. 1; in Ofer, “Gender Issues,” pp. 148–149, this can also be gathered from how Rachel Auerbach describes Slepak herself in *Testaments*; also, Sierakowiak, *Diary*, p. 53; Perechodnik, *Diary of a Hideout*, pp. 24, 26.

91 For example, Eisner, *Rolling Through the Tunnels of Slavery*, p. 29; Klinger, *A Diary from the Ghetto*, p. 18; Alexander (Senya) Rindzionski, *The Destruction of Vilna* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters’ House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1987), p. 26.

92 Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 99; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 136–137; Cyprys, *Survivor’s Journal*, pp. 25; and in Gutman, *Lodz*, p. 45, we find juxtaposed the two aspects of the effect of wealth: on the one hand, families that managed to flee together, and, on the other hand, families that were expelled precisely because they were affluent.

93 For example, testimony of Ruth Barten, YVA, O.33/1343, pp. 6–7.

THE REFUGEES

The most flagrant gaps between the classes were to be found between those who continued to live in their own apartments during this time and those who had been rendered homeless. Most of the families whose apartments had been destroyed in the bombardments, and especially the refugee families, quickly became the poorest groups. They never again acquired a roof over their heads; in the best of circumstances they squeezed in with relatives or in improvised shelters. A goodly proportion of these families wandered the streets.⁹⁴ Many of them soon lost all their resources, especially anything saleable.

The majority of the most affluent families who had become refugees also finished up eking out a hand-to-mouth subsistence existence, as reflected in this 1940 account: "People who until a day or two ago had owned their own homes, people of stature, have now become riffraff..."⁹⁵ These families had to rely on the good graces of community organizations and charities; in Warsaw, an important role in this area was played by the house committees that began to be organized there.⁹⁶

Under these conditions women obviously could not run a household that resembled in the slightest the pre-war situation.⁹⁷ Moreover, in certain cases refugee family units were so undermined that not a few parents abandoned their children on the doorstep of public institutions. Ringelblum notes in anguish that there were

94 For example, Slepak, *Interviews*, pp. 38–40; pp. 41, 42, "The Peddler," p. 1; Bauminger, *Krakow*, p. 386; Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, pp. 136–137.

95 See Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 157; Sienawlaga, *Memoirs*, pp. 36, 43–44; Cyprys, *Survivor's Journal*, p. 29.

96 Ringelblum, *Writings*, pp. 34, 192; Slepak, *Interviews*, pp. 32, 41; Berman, *Diary*, pp. 51, 53; Peled, *Krakow*, p. 81; Bender, *Bialystok*, pp. 70–71; Fatal-Knaani, *Grodno*, p. 88.

97 We should bear in mind the fact that householders who put up numerous relatives were also unable to enjoy a normal life, and tensions developed within these situations; see, for example, Sienawlaga, *Memoirs*, pp. 14–15, 19.

parents who suffered terribly, longing for their children, but refrained from visiting them, apparently out of fear that the children might be expelled from the institution.⁹⁸

The number of women among the refugees was far higher than that of the men — twice as many among the refugees who came to Warsaw — and generally comprised a particularly vulnerable population.⁹⁹ Apart from the material aspects, their situation had a terrible impact on the self-respect and modesty of the women refugees who were forced, for example, to perform their bodily functions in public.¹⁰⁰ A particularly excruciating form of anguish was suffered by refugees who were pregnant, or who gave birth just before the deportations; nursing mothers whose milk had dried up, or those who were unable to find any food for their children.¹⁰¹

JEWISH AND POLISH WOMEN

A brief comparison of the situation of Jewish women in the months prior to the establishment of the ghettos and that of Polish women during the same period reveals a fair number of similarities. The Polish women also suffered from the reign of terror that the Nazis unleashed in Poland and the hardships involved with obtaining food, water, and coal. They, too, tried to discover the whereabouts of the men who had disappeared and came to the Gestapo offices for this purpose. They were also more exposed than Jewish women to the risk of being picked up and sent to forced labor in Germany

98 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 100.

99 Ibid., p. 250; *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor! ...Selected Documents from the Warsaw Ghetto Underground Archives "O.S."* ["*Oneg Shabbat*"] edited and annotated by Josef Kermisz (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1986), p. 362.

100 Oskar Rosenfeld, describing how natural functions were performed in public, Adelson and Lapides, eds., *Lodz Ghetto*, p. 27.

101 Ringelblum Archive, YVA, M.10.AR.1/433; Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 60 (English), 118 (Hebrew); Eva Trzinska, *Just You and Me* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ghetto Fighters' House and Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuahd, 1989), pp. 37–42.

and were apparently also raped more frequently.¹⁰² However, Polish women also enjoyed numerous advantages over their Jewish counterparts. The terror did not affect all of them, since the Nazi terror policy directed at the Polish population was not as comprehensive as the equivalent that targeted the Jews. The proportion of Polish women who remained homeless was far lower than that of Jewish women, because Poles were expelled only from those areas that were annexed to the Reich, as opposed to the Jews, who were expelled from large numbers of towns throughout the entire area under occupation.

This selectivity was also expressed in the economic sphere. Polish women suffered greatly, as did the entire Polish population, but they were not stripped of absolutely everything: their property was confiscated and looted to a smaller extent. Rural women, who constituted a very high proportion of the total Polish populace, suffered practically no economic hardship during this period.¹⁰³ In addition, since the Poles, unlike the Jews, were from the outset a “vital basis for the functioning of the system [of the Reich],”¹⁰⁴ many of the working women were allowed to retain and, indeed, supplement their jobs, and any woman who was forced to work for a livelihood for the first time in her life could readily find employment. Polish war widows were entitled to receive a pension from the state at a time when granting pensions to Jewish women

102 Gutman and Krakowski, *Unequal Victims*, especially pp. 1–30; about a clerk who worked for the Jewish community who was rounded up to be sent to work in Germany and was released when her Jewishness was discovered, see Czerniakow, *Diary*, p. 198; about a Christian maid who was raped “because the Nuremberg Laws do not apply to her,” see Kaplan, *Scroll of Agony*, pp. 46–47; for how the situation was depicted in Polish eyes during the period in question, see “The Part Played by Polish Women,” lecture delivered on June 24, 1942, at The Scottish-Polish Society — London Branch, London 1942, pp. 10–11, 18–19.

103 Gutman and Krakowski, *Unequal Victims*, p. 29.

104 Ronen, *Zagłębie*, p. 61; Poles themselves also discriminated against Jewish women in work-related matters in the early part of the war; see Slepak, *Interviews*, Mrs. H., p. 41.

was utterly prohibited.¹⁰⁵ Polish women were not expelled from the queues for basic items, and travel to the countryside in an attempt to buy extra food involved far lower risks.¹⁰⁶ An extremely important difference lay in the attitude of the surrounding population: whereas Jewish women suffered numerous attacks by some of the Polish populace, Polish women benefited from the manifestations of solidarity characteristic of the Polish people at that time.¹⁰⁷

In other areas under occupation — in France, for example — there were also large numbers of women on their own who had to fight tooth and nail to support their families and cope with the serious shortages of basic items. The difference, however, was that official institutions geared up to help them, even if the assistance was generally on the meager side in financial terms. The general society also tried to extend a helping hand, offering solutions for the women's children, and so on. Not only were the women in these parts of Europe not dismissed from their jobs, they were offered possibilities of finding employment to replace the men who had disappeared. Women going out to work constituted a widespread phenomenon during the war in other European countries, too.¹⁰⁸

It should be noted that French women — and, presumably, women in other occupied countries as well — were able to choose various ways of cooperating with the Germans as an additional strategy of coping with the constraints of the period.¹⁰⁹ This option was, of course, not available to Jewish women — other than a few instances of assisting the Nazis by acting as an informer.

105 Mintz and Klausner, *Book of Atrocities*, p. 35; Peled, *Krakow*, p. 54.

106 Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, p. 250; Kermisz, *To Live with Honor and Die with Honor!*, p. 362.

107 On this solidarity, see, for example, Yisrael Gutman, "Polish and Jewish Historiography on the Question of Polish-Jewish Relations During World War II," *The Jews in Poland*, Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk, Antony Polonsky, eds. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 184.

108 Diamond, *Women and the Second World War in France*, especially pp. 20, 23, 27–29, 42, 54–55, 61–62, 205.

109 Ibid., pp. 71–86.

In any event non-Jewish women in the various occupied countries were forced to act as primary breadwinners only if their husbands were conscripted. When their husbands came home after the war, most families quickly adjusted to their return, reverting to their pre-war patterns of life.¹¹⁰ For many Jewish women, in contrast, there was no choice other than to assume the breadwinning burden even when their husbands were still at their side. This fact clearly had highly significant implications and ramifications for the woman's place in the family structure.

CONCLUSIONS

The period reviewed above came to an end with the order to move into the ghettos. Jewish women were torn away from their homes, the place where, in normal times, most of them had spent the majority of their waking hours and was the center of their activities and focus of their status as perceived by society. They were now also forced to part with their household possessions — an integral part of their very existence — and to make a precipitate choice of a few vital items. Women who were without their husbands not only had a more difficult time physically transporting the few bundles that they were allowed to take with them but also were alone in the free-for-alls — always difficult and sometimes cruel — that accompanied finding living space in the ghetto.

Running a household in the ghetto, trying to feed their families, and maintain their children's health in ever-worsening conditions demanded of the women efforts that would have previously been unimaginable, even by the poorest among them. Yet some of these women found ways of also taking part in public activities in the ghetto — from running soup kitchens to cultural life.

The findings presented here confirm and endorse what we know about how women behave in times of crisis, such as during migration or war. From the Holocaust studies' point of view, it seems that a gender-based examination is likely to benefit the

110 Ibid.

discussion of key issues and can highlight women's distinctive position in the areas of German occupation prior to the incarceration in ghettos.

The unflagging efforts of a considerable proportion of women to sustain their families, and their readiness to fight for their husband's release and to alleviate their suffering, impart additional meaning to the concept of resistance during the Holocaust period. We see how this resistance came about as soon as the acts of persecution began, and, although it was unarmed, it was extremely active and even effective to some extent for certain periods.

A comparison between the reactions of various Judenräte to the women's requests and entreaties can help set new criteria for examining their actions. Examining the relative strength conferred on women by their activities in the self-help system might perhaps better explain the relative weight of the various institutions in the ghetto.

And finally, concerning the path that led to the "Final Solution": The Nazis made no distinction whatsoever between Jew and Jewess, whether in theory — in Nazi ideology — or in practice, in its most extreme implementation in the death camps. Yet this was not always the case during the interim phases. Even in Poland — the country with the most extreme conditions of oppression of all the countries under German occupation — the Nazis initially treated men and women differently. In addition, figures show that the acts of mass murder perpetrated in the first weeks following the invasion of areas in the East were directed almost exclusively against Jewish men. It should be stressed that the few Germans who refused to continue taking part in these massacres did so in light of the murder of women and children.

I believe that these differences cannot be dismissed on purely expedient grounds. I believe that they indicate that even in the Nazis' eyes, matters of gender were significant, even if they were made subject to race theory. They knew perfectly well that murdering women and children was perhaps the last taboo of

human society. Its removal required greater indoctrination and brutalization than any other crime. Once this last taboo was lifted, Pandora's box was well and truly opened.¹¹¹

Translated from the Hebrew by Ruth Morris

111 In order to discuss this last issue, I have drawn on the following sources, among others: Steven Aschheim, *In Times of Crisis: Essays on European Culture, Germans, and Jews* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), pp. 153–154, 185; Konrad Kweit, “Rehearsing for Murder: The Beginning of the Final Solution in Lithuania in June 1941,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, vol. 12, no. 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 3–26; Gisela Bock, “Ordinary Women in Nazi Germany: Perpetrators, Victims, Followers and Bystanders,” Ofer and Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust*, pp. 85–101.