JEWSH WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES DURING THEIR INTERNMENT IN AUSCHWITZ

by

ELIZABETH ANN BRYANT

(Under the Direction of Miranda Pollard)

ABSTRACT

This study analyzes eleven memoirs written by female, Jewish Auschwitz survivors to demonstrate that their experiences within the camp were complex. Though similar to men’s in some ways, only women had to cope with sex specific issues such as pregnancy, the threat of infertility, or amenorrhea. Other experiences, such as the shaving of their heads, affected women differently than men. By studying the voices of these eleven women, while recognizing they cannot and should not speak for all females who were interned in Auschwitz, this study proves that their experiences were dissimilar enough so that male Auschwitz survivors should not be allowed to continue to speak for all who survived.

JEWISH WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES DURING THEIR INTERNMENT IN AUSCHWITZ

by

ELIZABETH ANN BRYANT

BA, Florida State University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2005
JEWISH WOMEN’S EXPERIENCES DURING THEIR INTERNMENT IN AUSCHWITZ

by

ELIZABETH ANN BRYANT

Major Professor: Miranda Pollard
Committee: David D. Roberts
John Morrow

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2005
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to Adam Morgenstern, who spent many hours editing, making suggestions, and re-reading the changes that I put in place (when I am sure there was something more interesting on TV.) I love you.

I would also like to thank my parents for all of their help and support throughout the entire MA process.

Ethan Grossman, thanks for answering all of my queries about Judaism, as random and simplistic as they might have been at times.

Dr Whigham, your smiles, dirty jokes, and encouraging words kept my spirits up and gave me a laugh when I needed it most.

I would also like to thank all of my committee members for all of their helpful feedback and support.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I was at the University of Georgia, the following professors influenced me tremendously: Keisha Thomas (Psychology), Amy Ross (Geography), and Blaise Parker (Women’s Studies). You are all amazing, inspiring women. Thanks so much for all of your help and support. I only hope I can become half as good of a professor as you are.

I also would like to thank all of my professors at Florida State, especially Jim Jones. You taught me all that I know and I could never have made it this far without you. I look forward to coming back.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>..........................v</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Introduction</td>
<td>..................................................1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rena Kornreich Gelissen</td>
<td>...............................11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Elias</td>
<td>..................................................12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anita Lasker-Wallfisch</td>
<td>.................................12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olga Lengyel</td>
<td>..................................................13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie Weisz Miklos</td>
<td>...............................13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara Nomberg-Przytyk</td>
<td>.................................14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livia Bitton Jackson</td>
<td>.................................14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabella Leitner</td>
<td>..................................................14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth Kluger</td>
<td>..................................................14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eva Mozes Kor</td>
<td>..................................................15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucille Eichengreen</td>
<td>.................................15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Thoughts</td>
<td>..................................................15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Auschwitz</td>
<td>..................................................17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Arrival and Processing</td>
<td>...............................26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Daily Life</td>
<td>..................................................38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roll Call</td>
<td>..................................................39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latrines</td>
<td>..................................................40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Title</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Violence and Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other Activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Maternity and Fertility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Lesbians</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sara Nomberg-Przytyk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rena Kornreich Gelissen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anita Lasker-Wallfisch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eva Mozes Kor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Livia Bitton Jackson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sophie Weisz Miklos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruth Kluger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruth Elias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucille Eichengreen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isabella Leitner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final Thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One:
Introduction

In German controlled territories during the Second World War, Jewish women faced the double burden of racism and sexism. While the Nazi state extolled the virtues of “kinder, küche, kirche” for Aryan women, Jewish women, in contrast, were vilified as being guilty of racial degeneration.¹ As early as 1924, in Mein Kampf, Adolf Hitler warned his followers about the dangers of mixing Jewish and Aryan blood. He cautions,

look at the ravages from which our people are suffering daily as a result of being contaminated with Jewish blood. Bear in mind the fact that this poisonous contamination can be eliminated from the national body only after centuries, or perhaps never. Think further of how the process of racial decomposition is debasing and in some cases even destroying the fundamental Aryan qualities of our German people, so that our cultural creativeness is gradually becoming impotent.²

In particular, Hitler viewed Jewish women as especially dangerous because of their ability to give birth to new generations of perceived enemies of the Reich. In order to prevent this from happening, Doris Bergen demonstrates that Nazi

propaganda portrayed Jewish women as using their “sexual wiles to entice Aryan men to their ruin.”

Carol Rittner and John Roth assert that the Nazis “insisted with a vengeance that Jewish motherhood must be eradicated forever.” Once Hitler had obtained power, policies dictating Jewish women’s abortion rights and maternity rights were implemented. In 1935, with the passage of the Nuremberg Laws, it became illegal for Jews to enter into sexual relationships with Aryans.

Policies targeting Jewish women, and in particular mothers, were expanded upon in the concentration camps, especially Auschwitz. For Jewish women, passing the initial inspection when they entered the camp was especially difficult. The majority of women arriving on the transports were pregnant, had children under fourteen, or were older than forty-five and deemed too old to work by the SS so they were sent immediately to the gas chambers. Raul Hilberg theorizes that men were less likely to immediately be sent to their deaths upon arriving in Auschwitz because the Nazis needed healthy men to work as a slave labor force.

---

were usually in their twenties and had no children. According
to camp records, of the 400,000 prisoners in Auschwitz between
1940 and 1945, only 130,000 were women.\(^6\) The problem with using
these records is that only those who entered Auschwitz as
workers were officially recorded. Those who were selected for
death upon arrival were never counted, leaving historians with
an incomplete record of the true number of individuals who were
ekilled there.

Records indicate that on January 17, 1945 only 16,577
female inmates remained for the final roll call.\(^7\) When Soviet
troops liberated Auschwitz ten days later, of the seven thousand
prisoners who were not made to leave by the SS in forced
evacuations, over four thousand were women.\(^8\) Though these
individuals were on the brink of death, they had not succumbed
to Hitler’s so-called Final Solution, the objective of which was
to exterminate all European Jews. In spite of all odds, these
women had survived.

But what constitutes a Holocaust survivor? A survivor is
not simply someone who lived through World War II under the Nazi
regime. The term does not include members of communities that
were left intact or people who continued to live in their own

---

homes throughout the war. Instead, a survivor is someone who lived through the Nazi labor/concentration camps, one of the few individuals who managed to escape from the camps, and the men and women who were in hiding for the duration of the war. In other words, to be a Holocaust survivor, an individual must have been a victim of Nazi persecution.

Of the over 1.6 million individuals who were sent to Auschwitz, only 1% of women who are thought to have survived have chosen to write about their experiences. In the words of Rittner and Roth, much of the “widely read scholarship treats the Holocaust as if sexual and gender differences” are irrelevant which explains why, to date, “Holocaust scholarship as been influenced most frequently by men.”

This is problematic because what men and women experienced in Auschwitz was not identical. According to Myrna Goldenberg, women and men often experienced “different horrors within the same hell.” Only women had to cope with sex-specific problems such as amenorrhea, rape, pregnancy, abortions, and invasive gynecological exams by eager SS ‘doctors’ and Kapos looking for valuables.

---

10 Carol Rittner and John Roth, *Different Voices*, xi, 38.
Carol Gilligan believes that as we have listened for centuries to the voice of men... so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women, but the difficulty of hearing what they say when they speak. The failure to see the different realities of women’s lives and to hear the differences in the voices stems in part from the assumption there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation.  

By continuing to take male perspectives as “representative of the experience of all Holocaust victims,” historians inadvertently continue to silence women. Though male Auschwitz survivors such as Elie Wiesel, Tadeusz Borowski, and Primo Levi “are exceptional writers,” it is a mistake for historians to regard their memoirs as “typical of ‘the’ Jewish Holocaust experience.” Without listening to women’s voices, there can never be an accurate depiction of women’s daily lives in Auschwitz.

While reading memoirs, it is important to remember that similar experiences are not identical. The eleven memoirs examined in this thesis do not and cannot encompass every aspect of every woman’s experience in Auschwitz. No one voice or set

---

15 The memoirs examined are, by date of publication: Olga Lengyel’s Five Chimneys (1947); Isabella Leitner’s Fragments of Isabella: A Memoir of Auschwitz (1978); Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land (1985); Lucille Eichengreen’s From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust (1994); Rena Kornreich Gelissen’s Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz (1995); Eva Mozes Kor’s Echoes from Auschwitz: Dr Mengele’s Twins: The Story of Eva and Miriam Mozes (1995); Livia Bitton Jackson’s I have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in the Holocaust (1997); Ruth Elias’s Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel.
of voices could accomplish such a feat. Each experience of every Holocaust victim is unique and deserves individual commemoration.

With the exception of Olga Lengyel, who published *Five Chimneys* in 1947, the rest of these authors waited at least thirty years after Liberation before they began publishing their memoirs, with the majority being published in the mid to late 1990s. With Liberation occurring over sixty years ago, many survivors seem to feel a sense of urgency to make known one’s experiences in Auschwitz. This sense of urgency would explain why both Sophie Weisz Miklos and Eva Mozes Kor did not have their works printed by mainstream publishers. Miklos paid Author’s Choice Press to publish *Paper Gauze Ballerina*. Kor published her memoir through her organization CANDLES Inc., a group she founded to find other individuals who were forced to partake in Dr Mengele’s twin experiments.

This rush to publish in the last ten years is because many of these women fear that once the final survivor dies, people will forget the atrocities that occurred in Auschwitz. With so few survivors still alive, and knowing that their own death is also imminent, these women hope that by publishing and making people remember about the horrors of Auschwitz, that they can

prevent a genocide of that magnitude from ever happening again. Sophie Weisz Miklos recognizes that “the words (I) write here today will be here when (I) am long gone.”\textsuperscript{16}

Another reason these women may have felt the need to publish memoirs is that they may have realized that most individuals only knew the stories of prominent men in Auschwitz, such as Borowski or Levi. Though both of these men mention women in their memoirs, albeit briefly, they cannot give a true depiction of women’s life in the camps. The images that are portrayed, while not necessarily inaccurate, only comprise one component of women’s experiences.\textsuperscript{17} It is for this reason that many women who published their memoirs in the 1990s seem to play up the gender specificity of issues focusing in depth on conditions that concern women especially pregnancy and amenorrhea. By focusing on these issues, these women seem that they want to make known that they faced issues that men did not.

For these women, Ellen Fine believes “the literary act” of writing memoirs was “an act of resistance.”\textsuperscript{18} It was often a psychological necessity for them to share with others the

\textsuperscript{17}For instance, Borowski, when talking about women in Auschwitz describes how sex can easily be bought for food. He also mentions the “Puff Houses” where women prisoners were forced to work as prostitutes. This depiction of women takes away from the complexity of their experiences and just makes them sexualized beings.
experiences that they had once endured.\textsuperscript{19} Sophie Weisz Miklos even admits, “without these words, I would not have been able to go on living.”\textsuperscript{20}

Though Miklos and other female survivors realized that language had its limitations, they felt that they must try to recapture their memories because during the Holocaust, the Nazis killed an estimated six million Jews. Kenneth Harper believes that while

the numbers are stultifying… statistics promote a sense of abstraction divorced from the vagaries of the world, individual life is full of the peculiarities, quirks, and idiosyncrasies that make for its comedy, its sadness, its tragedy- its diverse humanity.\textsuperscript{21}

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch wrote because she realized that while her “story has a happy ending” for “millions of others… there are no graves to testify that they ever did exist.”\textsuperscript{22} Thus, for her and many other survivors the ability to

write their personal testimonies- to bear witness for those… in the cattle cars whose life stories were to remain unfinished- the mission of memory has become the survivors’ personal strategy of survival and ultimately, the justification for their existence.\textsuperscript{23}

Not all survivors are willing to put their memories in print. Some flatly refuse to represent the Holocaust on the grounds that any form of artistic depiction could not but betray the

\textsuperscript{19} Andrew Leak and George Paizis, The Holocaust and the Text, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000), 2.
\textsuperscript{20} Sophie Weisz Miklos, Paper Gauze Ballerina, 75.
actual events."\textsuperscript{24} Even Ruth Kluger worries in her memoir \textit{Still Alive} “that the very act of literature betrays what was experienced in the Holocaust: don’t words make ‘speakable’ what is not?”\textsuperscript{25}

One criticism of memoirs is that one should “never trust memory fully”\textsuperscript{26} because “no memory is fully primary” especially when trying to recount events that happened over thirty years ago.\textsuperscript{27} As Hayden White once wrote, “a ‘fact’ must be regarded as ‘an event under description’.”\textsuperscript{28} Herbert Hirsch, a professor of political science, believes that any individual attempting to reconstruct his or her own history from what Langer calls the “ruins of memory” should be aware of the fact that what they come up with is composed partially of remembered experiences, partially of events we may have heard about which may be part of the family or group mythology, partially of things that are vague and that we even perhaps created from a series of vaguely remembered events.\textsuperscript{29}

In spite of these reservations, Hirsch goes on to argue that “despite this possibility, historians agree that personal recollections” are needed to “construe the individual and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[26]Daniel Schwartz, \textit{Imagining the Holocaust}, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999), 35.
\end{footnotes}
collective past.” 30 Another critique of memoirs from Lawrence Langer is that the text is a “calculated effort” that allows the author “more time to phrase” his or her choice of words in order to appear in the best possible light. 31 Despite these criticisms, memoirs are still “a crucial source for history.” 32

This thesis hopes to contribute to the field of women in Holocaust literature. Though there have been books written on literature of the Holocaust, both by and about women, none focus exclusively on memoirs written by Jewish female Auschwitz survivors. Indeed, many of these works seem to lump together all women survivors, as if there was one universal female Holocaust experience. While the differing experiences of many men are documented, the study of women and the Holocaust seems to focus exclusively on three women: Anne Frank, Charlotte Delbo, or Gerda Klein. While it is important to study their experiences, it is only by understanding the diversity of the victims, and the complexity of their experiences, that the lessons of the Holocaust can be fully integrated into history. 33

30 Herbert Hirsch, “History as Memory”, 54.
32 Dominick LaCapra, History and Memory after Auschwitz, 19.
33 Three examples of excellent books on Holocaust literature are: Lawrence Langer’s The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination, Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi’s By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature, and Alvin Rosenfeld’s A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature. However, none of these books concentrates exclusively on women or on Auschwitz survivors. There are few mentions of women at all in these works, and none would fit the criteria for inclusion in this thesis (ie Jewish and imprisoned in Auschwitz.) The only woman mentioned in Langer is Anne Frank, who was sent to Bergen-Belsen.
The eleven women examined, through the act of writing, all contribute to historians’ understanding of the Holocaust. There were several criteria for choosing the memoirs that were analyzed: the authors must be women, must be Jewish, and had to have been interned in Auschwitz. Also, the memoirs had to be either written in, or translated into, English. Other than that, their life-stories were varied, as described below. Some were married, most were not. One had children, another was pregnant, but the rest did not have any offspring. The majority were from Eastern Europe. While in the camps, their experiences continued to differ. Some were lucky enough to work in privileged positions; others were forced to perform manual labor. Some remained with members of their families throughout their internment, while others were the lone survivors.

Rena Kornreich Gelissen

Gelissen, a Polish citizen, was only twenty-one when she volunteered to come to Auschwitz on the first women’s transport in 1942. Gelissen claims she came because she believed the Nazi propaganda that Auschwitz was a labor camp and that she would only be imprisoned for a few months. Another reason Gelissen

Ezrahi mentions Frank and Charlotte Delbo, who was in Auschwitz but is not Jewish. Rosenfeld focuses on Frank, Delbo, and Gerda Klein, who was imprisoned in several labor camps. It seems, by examining these works, the experience of every female Holocaust survivor is either equated with men or generalized as being the same as other women survivors regardless of religion or place of internment. Other works, such as Carol Rittner and John Roth’s Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust, focus exclusively on women, but include women from different camps and of different religions.
went to Auschwitz was that she was an Orthodox Jew who had fallen in love with a Christian Pole named Andrzej, who was a member of the Resistance Movement. Though he was willing to convert to Judaism, she knew that her parents would never accept him so she refused his proposals of marriage even though she wanted to be his wife. After hearing of Andrzej’s death, she became engaged to another man, Schani, but she did not want to marry him and saw Auschwitz as an escape from her impending nuptials. A few weeks after Gelissen arrived, her sister Danka also volunteered to come to Auschwitz.

**Ruth Elias**

Elias, a Czechoslovakian, was deported to Auschwitz from the Theresienstadt ghetto in December 1943. Her immediate family had been deported over a year earlier and she had heard rumors that they had been gassed on arrival. She and her husband Koni made the journey together but soon became estranged because Koni was not interested in Elias’s pregnancy. While in Auschwitz, Elias gave birth to a baby girl, who was made an unwilling participant in one of Josef Mengele’s inhumane experiments.

**Anita Lasker-Wallfisch**

Though a German Jew, Lasker-Wallfisch was categorized as a Karteihäftlinge, or prisoner with a file, because she and her sister Renate had been caught forging papers so that they could
immigrate to England to be with their sister Marianne. Wallfisch was transferred to Auschwitz in December 1943. A gifted cellist who had studied under Leo Rostal in Berlin, she auditioned for, and became a member of the camp orchestra. Her sister, Renate, arrived in Auschwitz two weeks after Lasker-Wallfisch, and the two women were reunited.

Olga Lengyel

In 1944, Lengyel volunteered to go to Auschwitz because the Nazis informed her that they were deporting her husband for allegedly refusing to distribute German medicine at his hospital. Worried about her family being torn apart, Lengyel insisted on going and had her parents and her children accompany them. During the initial selection, Lengyel, still believing Auschwitz was a labor camp, inadvertently sent her mother and her sons towards death. While in Auschwitz, Lengyel worked as a doctor in the camp infirmary. Though Jewish, she makes no mention of her religion in Five Chimneys.

Sophie Weisz Miklos

Miklos, a Romanian, was deported to Auschwitz in March 1944. Upon arrival, her father was immediately sent to the left towards death. She, her mother, and her sister Agnes were only imprisoned in Auschwitz for six weeks before being transferred to a labor camp in Stutthof, Germany, where her mother was dragged to death.
Sara Nomberg-Przytyk

Though raised in Poland as a Hasidic Jew, Nomberg-Przytyk does not mention religion at all in her memoir. Instead, she self-identifies as a Communist. On January 13, 1944, Nomberg-Przytyk arrived in Auschwitz. Through her Communist connections, she was able to secure a job for herself working as a clerk in the camp infirmary.

Livia Bitton Jackson

Jackson, a Czechoslovakian, was only thirteen when she was deported to Auschwitz in May 1944. During the initial selection, Mengele urged her to lie about her age because he liked her long, blond hair. Throughout her time at Auschwitz, Jackson was able to remain with her mother. During the final, forced evacuation in January 1945, she was reunited with Bubi, her older brother, who had been imprisoned in Auschwitz I.

Isabella Leitner

Leitner arrived in Auschwitz in June 1944. A Hungarian Jew, she was fortunate enough to remain with three of her sisters in Auschwitz, though her mother and baby sister were sent to the gas chambers immediately upon arrival.

Ruth Kluger

Kluger, an Austrian Jew, entered Auschwitz in the company of her mother in May 1944. Kluger was only twelve, but on the advice of her mother and a friendly clerk, lied and said her age
was fifteen so that she and her mother could be transferred together to a labor camp.

**Eva Mozes Kor**

Kor, and her twin sister Miriam, were only nine when they were deported to Auschwitz from an extremely religious family in Hungary in 1944. Though underage, she and her sister’s lives were spared so they could be guinea pigs in Josef Mengele’s twin experiments. The sisters were lucky enough to remain together throughout their time in Auschwitz, since the rest of their family was murdered upon arrival.

**Lucille Eichengreen**

Eichengreen was a German Jew whose family retained Polish passports, so she was classified as Pole by the Nazis. She lived in the Lodz ghetto for three years. Due to her connections in the ghetto, she was not sent to Auschwitz until Lodz was liquidated in August 1944, though her family had been deported over a year earlier and were killed. Not long after her arrival in Auschwitz, she was selected to work at a labor camp in Germany.

**Final Thoughts**

Analyzing these eleven memoirs will demonstrate that women’s experiences in Auschwitz were diverse. Though, as this thesis will prove, their experiences in many ways were similar to men’s, there were many gender specific dimensions that need
to be analyzed in order for a complete picture of life in Auschwitz to emerge.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{34}There is no doubt that the majority of experiences in Auschwitz were shared by members of both sexes, including violence, humiliations, a lack of food, having to stand for roll call, work details, and the lack of personal hygiene. However, women reacted to shared humiliations in different ways than men. For instance, while the shaving of the inmate’s heads was common to both sexes, women reacted much worse to this procedure than men. Also, maternity and fertility issues were gender-specific. As this thesis will prove, many of the Nazi’s plans were designated to specifically humiliate women, in their capacity as mothers. Also, women reacted differently to the conditions within the camps. Where, in male memoirs, selfishness seems to be the rule, rather than the exception, women seem to have a special bond of solidarity, even helping those who are total strangers.
Chapter Two:

Auschwitz

Ruth Elias recalls her experience when she first arrived at Auschwitz:

I mustered up some courage and asked one of them, “Where are we?” Without looking at me, he said, “Auschwitz.” That meant nothing to me. It was the name of one of the many towns in Poland. I didn’t know how deeply Auschwitz would be engraved into my very being, so indelibly, it could never be erased.35

Little did Elias know when she arrived that she had entered what Ruth Kluger refers to as “the asshole of creation.”36

Oswiecim prior to the German occupation in September 1939 was a town much like any other. Prior to World War II, this Polish town “had a flourishing Jewish community.”37 Of the approximately 12,000 residents, 7,000 were Jewish.38 And yet, Oswiecim was “the site of the largest mass murder in history” and became known as the place where over one million Jewish men,

35 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope: From Theresienstadt and Auschwitz to Israel (New York: John Wiley, 1998), 107. The “them” she references is a male kapo.
38 Daniel R. Schwartz, Imagining the Holocaust, 25. Yisrael Gutman disagrees with the number of Jews Schwartz gives and approximates the Jewish population in Oswiecim to be closer to five thousand. See Yisrael Gutman, “Auschwitz,” 7.
women, and children were killed. The Germans chose Oswiecim, which they renamed Auschwitz, as the site of the largest of the more than ten thousand concentration camps in the Third Reich. Auschwitz was located conveniently, from a Nazi point-of-view, at the junction of several major European railway lines. The town also had access to several important raw materials including coal, water, and lime, which were crucial to the German war effort.

Rudolf Hoess was appointed commandant of Auschwitz in April 1940. On June 14, 1940, the first prisoners arrived, mostly members of the Polish underground, students, and other Polish intellectuals, though the camp at this point had yet to be constructed. These men were forced to build their own living quarters around old Polish army barracks, and through this process Auschwitz I was created. In February 1941, Heinrich Himmler, leader of the SS, ordered the town of Oswiecim to be completely cleared of its civilian population so that the camp had the space so that it could be expanded. The Jewish population was forced out and resettled, the preliminary stage before their eventual deportation back to Auschwitz where they would be killed with hundreds of thousands of other European Jews. According to Hoess, in March 1941, Himmler visited the

---

camp for the first time and “started to discuss in earnest the new tasks he had for Auschwitz.”41 Himmler expected Auschwitz I, which then held 10,000 men, to be immediately expanded to hold an additional 30,000 prisoners. Himmler also ordered the construction of a camp suitable for 100,000 POWs. Construction of this new camp, known as Auschwitz II or Birkenau, did not start until October 1941, when the first Soviet POWs arrived and were required to start building the new camp in murderous conditions. More than 10,000 Soviet soldiers died during the construction of Birkenau. Once construction was complete, Himmler and the SS decided to expand Auschwitz’s industries using their newly enslaved labor force.

In January 1942, the Wannsee Conference was held with the goal of formulating the so-called Final Solution, which included the ‘resettlement’ of 11 million European Jews to the East. This effectively sealed the transformation of Auschwitz from a concentration camp to the major killing center in the Nazi’s plan for the annihilation of all European Jews. In February 1942, Hoess, SS architect Karl Bischoff, and Hans Kammler, head of the central SS buildings office, decided to move the projected new crematorium from Auschwitz I to Birkenau. This crematorium, first used a month later in March 1942, became known as the ‘little red house’ or ‘bunker one.’ It had the

capacity to gas approximately 800 people at a time. A few weeks later, the 'little white house' or 'bunker two' was also constructed in Birkenau, and had the capacity to kill 1200 individuals at once.

In March 1942, the first female transport arrived in Auschwitz. It consisted of 999 German women prisoners and 999 Jewish women from Slovakia. The Slovakian women, including Rena Kornreich Gelissen, came to Auschwitz believing Nazi propaganda that it was a labor camp, and thought that they would be released within a few months. Although Auschwitz to this point had been “an exclusively male institution,” 17,000 women, the majority of whom were Jewish, arrived between March and mid-August 1942. Because of the poor conditions, approximately 5000 of these women died from disease before they were relocated from the Auschwitz I main camp to Birkenau in August 1942. Rena Kornreich Gelissen recalls the transfer:

Birkenau is a cruel awakening. In Auschwitz, there was a lot of death, but it was not such a daily fact of life. Now we see death every day. It is a constant like our meals. And there are not just one or two girls dying, like before, but tens and twenties and losing count.

As Gelissen notes, the death rate in Birkenau was extraordinarily high, not just from the gassings, but also from the high rate of disease.

By mid-1942, Auschwitz-Birkenau had become a fully operational killing center with trains of European Jews arriving daily. Yet, it was not until July 1942, two years after Auschwitz had received its first inmates, that systematic selections began. Upon arrival, prisoners were separated by sex. Those who were deemed healthy enough by the SS were selected to work as laborers, and were allowed to enter the camp. Those not chosen to work, approximately ninety percent of each transport, were sent to the crematoria.\textsuperscript{45} Women were more likely to be sent immediately to the gas chambers than men, because men were thought by the SS to be more capable of performing manual labor. The few women who were spared, beginning in August 1942, were sent directly to Birkenau, not the Auschwitz I main camp.\textsuperscript{46}

Olga Lengyel recalls,

when the selectors told off the deportees on the station platform “Right!” or “Left!” they were sending them to either Birkenau or Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a slave camp. Hard as life was at Auschwitz, it was better than Birkenau. For the latter was definitely an extermination camp.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{46}In Birkenau, Sector Bla was the main women’s camp in the Auschwitz compound. In addition, women were housed in Bilb (the Theresienstadt family camp until August 1944 then it held exclusively women), Bilc (Hungarian women), Bilé (the Gypsy camp) and Bill (‘Mexico’). After August 1942, no sector in Auschwitz I was dedicated to women.
Lengyel feels that “prisoners at Birkenau... were merely waiting their turn to be gassed and cremated.” This perception was prevalent among prisoners because Birkenau contained four crematoria and the odor of burnt flesh was omnipresent.

The conditions under which women were forced to live in Birkenau were deliberately degrading and brutal. Barracks commonly held 800 to 1000 inmates in a space that was originally designed as a stable for 52 horses. Women, such as Rena Kornreich Gelissen, who had been housed in both camps felt that conditions in Birkenau were worse than in the Auschwitz I main camp. None of the 250 barracks had running water, thus they quickly became infested with insects and vermin, which led to a high rate of disease, especially typhus. Though Auschwitz was a concentration camp, the conditions in the barracks led directly to the deaths of many inmates, which was perfectly compatible with Nazi aims.

By early spring 1943, the Auschwitz concentration camp had successfully combined the Nazi goals of slave labor and mass murder. This policy of “vernichtung durch arbeit” or “destruction through work” was well understood by its victims. When prisoners in Auschwitz, or one of its sub-camps, “were no

48 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 34.
longer judged useful,” they were sent, in Olga Lengyel’s words, to Birkenau to “die in the ovens.”

In addition to the intensive expansion and construction around Auschwitz I and Birkenau, between 1942 and 1945 forty sub-camps were established around Auschwitz. The populations of these sub-camps ranged from under a dozen to several thousand. The prisoners worked as slave laborers doing agricultural work, forestry work, coal mining, producing armaments for the German war effort, and working in the IG Farben chemical plant.

Yisrael Gutman, a historian of the Holocaust, reminds us that the establishment of such a network of satellite camps was necessary because prisoners could not march more than several kilometers to work, and mines and other sources of raw materials were often located a significant distance from the main camp.

By the early summer of 1943, the process of genocide was increasingly streamlined in Auschwitz-Birkenau according to Nazi architectural plans. In this industrialized killing center, four specially designed combination gas chambers-crematoria had the capacity to murder and burn 120,000 men, women, and children each month. For each day, this represented 4,416 victims.

---

49 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 34.
With the construction of new rail tracks leading straight into Birkenau in May 1944, selections became even easier for the SS. Eva Mozes Kor recalls this cynical ‘improvement’:

originally the groups of people selected for the gas chambers walked the three kilometers or so from the Auschwitz station to the Birkenau camp. In early 1944, a direct rail line was built to the Birkenau camp, stopping practically at the door of the crematorium.51

With the construction of these new rail lines, women became even more susceptible to being murdered on arrival because the SS led entire trainloads of people into the crematoria for ‘showers.’

In mid-1944, due to the transports of Jews from Hungary and the liquidation of the Theresienstadt and Lodz ghettos, Auschwitz-Birkenau became even more efficient and murderous. During the next six months, Auschwitz was the final destination for more Jews than had arrived in the preceding two years.

The approach of Soviet troops changed everything. Gassings stopped on November 2, 1944. Three weeks later Himmler ordered the destruction of the gas chambers and the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau hoping to cover up the murderous deeds that had occurred there.

On January 18, 1945, with the Soviet army rapidly approaching from Krakow, the SS decided to evacuate Auschwitz taking with them 60,000 prisoners who were deemed healthy on a forced march towards Germany. On January 20, 1945,

Obergruppenfuhrer Schmauser issued orders to kill any remaining inmates. 200 Jewish women were shot before the SS blew up Crematoria I and II. On January 23, 1945, the “SS set fire to barracks full of clothing in the ‘Canada’ section,” the very place where some female Jewish prisoners had managed to survive due to the comparatively good work conditions.\(^2\) On January 27, the remaining SS officers blew up the last crematorium, which had been kept for the disposal of bodies, and then fled. Miraculously, more than seven thousand inmates, over four thousand of whom were women, were alive to thank their Soviet liberators.

Chapter Three:
Arrival and Processing

Most women survivors, when writing about their experiences in Auschwitz, describe the transport and arrival processes in nearly identical terms whether they arrived on the first women’s transport in 1942 or during the summer of death in 1944. With the exception of Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, who was transferred to Auschwitz from the Stutthof concentration camp in a passenger train that had a “wash basin, water, and a toilet,” the other women recall feeling like trapped rats in overcrowded cattle cars during their journey. Each car contained between fifty and one hundred individuals in a space that only would have accommodated eight horses. These cars were so crowded that women recall not being able to sit or lie down even if their journey lasted a week.

Conditions in the cattle cars on the journey to Auschwitz were designed to be humiliating and degrading for their occupants. The cars had only one tiny window for ventilation

---

53 While the arrival and processing procedures were almost identical for both sexes, women, as this chapter demonstrates, had different views and reactions about what was happening to them.
which was covered in barbed wire in order to prevent anyone from escaping. The SS gave the prisoners no food regardless of how long their journey lasted. Though on some occasions SS officers were ‘kind’ enough to give the prisoners a bucket of water, in exchange for some sort of bribe, one bucket was not nearly enough for all the inhabitants of the car to have a sip.\textsuperscript{55} The cars had no latrines so individuals were forced to use a pail, often the same one that was used to hold fresh water, when they had to relieve themselves. At first, individuals were embarrassed to be urinating and defecating in front of others. After some time had passed, they could no longer control their bladders and bowels and the pail overflowed with waste leaving the car with a terrible stench. For Isabella Leitner, the trip was especially rough because she was menstruating, but she could not change her pad.

Worse than the smell of the bucket overflowing with urine and feces was the stench that arose when a person died. Though the trains usually stopped several times en route to their destination, the SS seldom let their prisoners remove the bodies of the deceased. During one stop, when Eva Mozes Kor’s father asked a guard if he would remove a dead body, “the guard

\textsuperscript{55}Olga Lengyel describes how the passengers in her car were forced to give up their jewels in exchange for one bucket of fresh water. See Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz}, (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1947), 18.
laughed” in response.\textsuperscript{56} Olga Lengyel worried that since prisoners were in such close proximity that “the entire company would be exposed” to diseases such as dysentery and scarlet fever.\textsuperscript{57} Indeed, by the time they reached their destination, there was not one author who left the train not feeling significantly weaker than when she first started.

Sophie Weisz Miklos, when describing her journey, recalls,

I regained “consciousness” only when the train came to its final destination. The door opened and air rushed in like a welcome visitor. We were practically thrown off. We all looked and acted like zombies. I heard an SS soldier yell, “raus Schweinen Jüden”—Out, dirty Jews. They poked us with their sharp rifles.\textsuperscript{58}

Upon arrival, Lucille Eichengreen wondered,

“Where are we? What is this place,” I whispered. A young, gaunt-looking man in blue-and-gray striped pants and a matching long shirt and cap overheard us. The red armband on his sleeve read ‘kapo.’ His sunken eyes looked at us incredulously. “Auschwitz! This is Auschwitz! You mean to tell me you’ve never heard of this place.”\textsuperscript{59}

Though many prisoners had been allowed to carry a suitcase containing their valuables, upon departing the train SS officers insisted that inmates “drop their bags” promising that they would be returned to them later.\textsuperscript{60} Some inmates, like Livia Bitton Jackson, though confused about how the SS would figure out whose bags belonged to whom, believed that the Germans “must

\textsuperscript{56} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes from Auschwitz: Dr Mengele’s Twins The Story of Eva and Miriam Mozes} (Terre Haute, IN: CANDLES, 1995), 65. Similarly, Olga Lengyel described a guard when asked to remove a dead body responding, “Keep your corpse. You will have many more of them soon.” See Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 19.

\textsuperscript{57} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 18.


\textsuperscript{59} Lucille Eichengreen, \textit{From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust} (San Francisco, CA: Mercury House, 1994), 89.

\textsuperscript{60} Lucille Eichengreen, \textit{From Ashes to Life}, 91.
have a system” for redistribution because “they were famous for their order.” Inmates who hesitated to give up their possessions were beaten with rifle butts or shot. Little did the new transports know that they would never see their bags again. Instead, their belongings were sent to Canada, a Nazi sorting area, where other, more privileged prisoners scoured through the new arrivals’ goods searching for gold and other valuables that could be sent to the Reich.

Since each transport to Auschwitz contained several thousand people, the scene that unfolded as people emerged from the cattle cars was nothing short of chaotic. SS men kept screaming “Raus! Raus! Schneller! Schneller!” Isabella Leitner feels this was because the Germans were always in such a hurry. Death was always urgent with them—Jewish death. The earth had to be cleansed of Jews. We didn’t know that sharing the planet for another minute was more than this super-race could live with. The air for them was befouled with Jewish breath, and they must have fresh air.

New arrivals tried in vain to stay with their families, but the SS guards did not allow this.

“Men to the right, women to the left!” shouted a voice. Everyone moved slowly, reluctantly. Husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, parents and children, terrified at the thought of separation, held onto each other desperately. But quickly and without mercy, rifle butts came crashing down on tightly clasped fingers. There were no good-byes, only screams and broken, bleeding hands.

---

61 Livia Bitton-Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing up in the Holocaust (New York: Simon Pulse, 1997), 72.
63 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life, 90.
None of the new arrivals was exactly sure what was going on. As Rena Kornreich Gelissen recalls, “the direction” that the Nazis sent her in held “no meaning” for her. Olga Lengyel, though she arrived in 1944, also had no idea of the SS’s nefarious plan. When it came time for the initial selection, Lengyel wanted to spare her eldest son “from labors that might prove to be too arduous for him.” Though the “Chief Selector” questioned Lengyel, she insisted that her sons and her mother be sent to the left because she believed “that the old and the very young would be cared for” and only “the able-bodied adults would have to work.” Unwittingly, she had sent her mother and her sons to their deaths. Though most new arrivals tried to stay with their families at all costs, Yisrael Gutman believes that the overwhelming majority of those who were “transported to Auschwitz were unaware of their destination or its nature until the very end.”

Members of the SS saved other women from immediate death for various reasons. One SS officer, who was later identified as Josef Mengele, the infamous chief doctor of Auschwitz, saved Livia Bitton Jackson, age thirteen when she first entered

---

Auschwitz, simply because he liked her hair. She recalls the exchange:

I tremble as I stand before him. He looks at me with friendly eyes. “Goldene Haar!” he exclaims and takes one of my long braids into his hand. I am not certain I heard right. Did he say “golden hair” about my braids? “Bist du Jüdin?” Are you Jewish? The question startles me. “Yes, I am Jewish.” “Wie alt bist du?” How old are you? “I am thirteen.” “You are tall for your age. Is this your mother?” He touches Mommy lightly on the shoulder. “You go with your mother... Go. And remember, from now on you’re sixteen.”

Of course, not all members of the SS were as seemingly benevolent. Eva and Miriam Mozes, who were only nine years old, were dressed identically when they entered Auschwitz. A guard saw them standing with their mother on the train platform and asked her, “Are they twins?” When she answered in the affirmative,

without a word of explanation to my mother, he grabbed us away from my mother and dragged us away leaving her standing there with her bewilderment showing on her face.

Little did the Mozes twins or their mother know then that the guard’s ‘kindness’ in sparing them from an immediate death was little more than an attempt to placate Dr. Mengele’s horrible temper by supplying him with guinea pigs for his twin experiments.

Regardless of how these women made it through the initial inspection, whether it was by luck, trickery, or with the ‘help’ of a seemingly benevolent SS officer, the women who survived

---

68 Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years.* 73.
69 Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz,* 70.
70 Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz,* 71-71.
were part of a minority. Rarely were more than twenty percent of inmates chosen to work as laborers; more commonly, upwards of ninety percent of each transport were sent immediately to the gas chambers.\textsuperscript{71} Of the 400,000 inmates who were registered in Auschwitz, less than one-third were women.

Once inmates had passed the initial selection, they were brought inside the camp to be registered and ‘deloused’ in a series of humiliating practices. These procedures were implemented because it was not enough for the Nazis to just kill the prisoners. Instead, as Robert Jan van Pelt believes, “they had to be totally broken first.”\textsuperscript{72} For women, this process usually involved a shower in front of the watchful eyes of the SS and male Kapos, the shaving of all bodily hair, a gynecological exam to make sure the inmates were not hiding any valuables in their vagina or rectum, the loss of one’s clothing and personal effects, and the tattooing of a number on each inmate’s wrist. It often was impossible for new arrivals, including Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, to determine “which of the ‘initiations’ was most unpleasant.”\textsuperscript{73}

Some ‘privileged’ prisoners, such as Eva Mozes Kor, were not forced to partake in all the processing rituals. Kor insists that although “twins were given privileged treatment” often “the privilege... was not really a privilege at all.”\textsuperscript{74} For example, twins were allowed to keep their hair. However, as Kor recalls, “within two weeks our heads were filled with lice... and had to be shaved.”\textsuperscript{75} Kor was also given the advantage of keeping her own clothes once they had been fumigated. Though she knew that other inmates felt “it was another privilege to have our own clothes,” Kor did not believe it to be such.\textsuperscript{76} Instead, she “hated the big red cross on her beautiful burgundy dress” because she felt it was just another way for the Germans “to mark us so we couldn’t escape.”\textsuperscript{77} Because of her young age, Kor was not subjected to a gynecological examination either.

Though Kor complained about her so-called privileges, other female inmates would have been jealous of her seemingly good fortune. For an Orthodox Jew, such as Rena Kornreich Gelissen, the processing procedures at Auschwitz violated not only her, but also her religious beliefs. Of particular offense was the practice of shaving the heads of the new arrivals. When Gelissen entered Auschwitz, she thought “this must be an insane

\textsuperscript{74} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes of Auschwitz}, 75.
\textsuperscript{75} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes of Auschwitz}, 75.
\textsuperscript{76} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes of Auschwitz}, 75.
\textsuperscript{77} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes of Auschwitz}, 75-76.
asylum” filled with “crazy, bald people.” She did not realize the true nature of the camp until she was held by the head and pushed abruptly into a chair. The cuss of electric shears moves closer to my ears, as a tough hand pushes my head forward. “Don’t move!” I am spoken to roughly, handled as if my skin was sandpaper. Running from the nape of my neck to my forehead, the clippers cut and scrape against my skin, tearing the hair from my head. Only married women shave their heads. Our traditions, our beliefs, are scorned and ridiculed by the acts they commit. They shear our heads, arms; even our pubic hair is discarded just as quickly and cruelly as the rest of the hair on our bodies. We are shorn like sheep.

Though only a minority of the female inmates were Orthodox, the removal of body hair affected all women profoundly. Nechama Tec believes the reaction of “women to having their hair shaved transcended national boundaries” because “all of the inmates were deeply shamed by this procedure.” Isabella Leitner recalls that after the shearing, she did not even recognize her own sisters thinking instead that some “naked-headed monster was standing next to me” and another “naked hair monster was standing next to her.” Though Anita Lasker-Wallfisch thought all of the initiation processes were horrific, she found “the shaving off of my hair” to be “the most traumatic experience” because it made her “feel totally naked, utterly vulnerable, and reduced to a complete nobody.” Sara Nomberg-Przytyk concurred,

---

79 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, *Rena’s Promise*, 63.
81 Isabella Leitner, *Fragments of Isabella*, 35.
stating that as women “without our hair we felt totally humiliated.”

Though she was upset to have lost her hair, Ruth Elias considered the tattooing to be the worst part of the registration process. Elias believed that once this number was on inmates’ arms the SS would “no longer consider us to be human beings.” Elias felt as if “we had been loaded into the railroad cars like cattle and, like cattle, we were now being branded.” Lucille Eichengreen also felt the tattoos represented that inmates were “just expendable Jews.” Both women were correct in their assessment. Once the inmates were tattooed, they were no longer unique individuals with their own name and identity. Instead, prisoners were forced to forfeit their names for a number.

Though it may have not been the worst part of the registration process, many women describe the humiliation of being naked in front of male Kapos and SS officers for the showers and the gynecological examination. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk was stunned that female prisoners “were not allowed any modesty in front of these strange men.” Livia Bitton Jackson was hopeful

---

83 Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Auschwitz, 14.
84 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 109.
86 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life, 94.
87 Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Auschwitz, 14.
that by not looking at anyone... no one will see me. I hesitate before removing my bra. My breasts are two growing buds, taut and sensitive. I can’t have anyone see them. I decide to leave my bra on. Just then a shot rings out. The charge is ear shattering. Several women begin to scream. Others weep. I quickly take my bra off.\textsuperscript{88}

In addition to the humiliation of having to be naked in front of men, women prisoners were also forced to undergo gynecological examinations, supposedly for the purpose of looking for hidden contraband, but in reality designed to be degrading for the new arrivals.

After all these processes had taken place, women hoped that at least they would be given the comfort of getting back their own clothes. With the exception of Eva Mozes Kor, this was not to be. Olga Lengyel recalls, “I cannot think of any name that would fit the bizarre rags” that the prisoners were given as clothing.\textsuperscript{89} Lengyel feels as if no one cared whether these rags fitted the internees. Large, buxom women had to wear little dresses that were too short and too tight and did not come to their knees. Slender women were given huge dresses, some with trains. And there was no way to alter them. Buttons, thread, and safety pins were unavailable. To best complete the style, the Germans had an arrow of red paint, two inches wide and two feet long, on the back of each garment. We were marked like pariahs.\textsuperscript{90}

Ruth Elias complained that the clothes they received were not appropriate for the weather. Though it was ten degrees outside, she received only a “flimsy dark-blue silk dress to wear.”\textsuperscript{91} Most women did not even receive shoes. Instead, if they were

\textsuperscript{88}Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 77.
\textsuperscript{89}Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 29.
\textsuperscript{90}Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 30.
\textsuperscript{91}Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 108.
lucky they received “wooden clogs and no stockings” or shoes that were worn-out and had holes in them that did not fit properly.\textsuperscript{92} Despite the seriousness of their situation, women, such as Lengyel, could not help but “laugh as they saw the others so ridiculously outfitted.”\textsuperscript{93}

Once all of these measures had taken place, the inmates were finally ready to enter the camp as zugangi, or new arrivals. Many women survivors feel that the first few days in Auschwitz were a test to see which prisoners were strong enough to survive, and which others would succumb to the pressure and give up on their desire for life. Eva Mozes Kor strongly believes that “the first day in camp was very crucial to those who survived.”\textsuperscript{94} Zugangi were considered to be at the bottom of the camp hierarchy because they “did not know how to ‘organize,’ did not know how or where to hide” and because they made themselves look “absurd trying to defend their human dignity” by trying to defend themselves if they were beaten.\textsuperscript{95} They did not yet understand what was expected of them or the true measures that were necessary for survival.

\textsuperscript{92} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Auschwitz, 15.  
\textsuperscript{93} Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 30.  
\textsuperscript{94} Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 87.  
\textsuperscript{95} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Auschwitz, 13.
“Raus, raus!” For women living in the Auschwitz concentration camp, each day began at approximately four o’clock in the morning with these shrill words forcing them out of bed. Each day inside the camp posed new challenges for women’s survival although their routine was nothing if not monotonous. Ruth Kluger describes her experiences in Auschwitz in the following terms, “I stood in rows of five and was thirsty and was afraid of dying. That’s it, that’s all, that’s the sum of it.”

The SS regulated nearly all of the prisoners waking time, even dictating when and how long inmates could use the latrines. In the morning, inmates would be rushed out of bed and given a few minutes to use the toilets. Then, they were required to stand for hours, lined up in rows of five, for roll call. Though many inmates were exhausted after being forced to stand for extended periods of time, their day was just beginning. They were given a few minutes to drink the ‘coffee’ that was

96 Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 100. This is also true of male prisoners. Much of daily life in the camps was similar for men and women because they had to contend with many of the same issues.
their breakfast before being assigned to that day’s work detail. They would put in a whole day of labor, breaking only briefly for lunch, before returning to the camp to stand in rows of five for evening roll call. It was only after all of this that the women got any time to themselves, most of which was used for sleeping before repeating this schedule the following day.

Like their male counterparts, women in Auschwitz were forced to follow a strict Nazi-dictated regimen each day, though their individual experiences were varied. Some women were privileged in the fact that they earned a coveted position working indoors. A few were fortunate enough not to have to stand outside for roll call. Still others were subjected to extreme violence and degradation on a near-daily basis. The complexity of their experiences demonstrates that even within the camp and the confines of their daily routine no two prisoner’s lives were identical.

Roll Call

Sophie Weisz Miklos recalls, “we were inventoried, accounted for every day.”97 In Auschwitz, inmates were forced to line up in rows of five twice a day, regardless of the weather, so that the Germans could account for all prisoners. Lucille Eichengreen remembers if anyone “fainted from the heat or

dropped from exhaustion,” they were “taken away never to be seen again.”

 Individuals “who did not come out of the barracks” for roll call “were immediately sent to the gas chambers.” Kor recalls there were “no excuses” for not partaking in this morning ritual. During Appell, prisoners were required to “stand erect for whatever number of minutes or hours the roll call lasted... because it was one of the sacred rituals.”

Women, regardless of their age or health, were forced to wait in the scorching sun or freezing cold for several hours before the SS came to count them, though the actual count was usually accomplished in a matter of minutes. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch felt Appell was meant to be a form of torture because prisoners were “strictly forbidden to move” even though this often meant standing in line with “shit running down” their legs.

**Latrines**

Time spent in and access to the latrines was rigidly controlled by Kapos and members of the SS. Olga Lengyel recalls only being permitted to “go to the latrines twice each day.”

Livia Bitton Jackson insists that inmates were only allowed to

---

use the toilet during the day “under guard in groups of fifty.” She also remembers, “luckily, the German guards could not bear the stench and” stood at a distance while inmates used the lavatory. Often, SS guards took hours to show up to escort the women to the toilets so the women learned “how to wait, and control nature.” Sometimes though, this was not possible. Rena Kornreich Gelissen remembers the only severe beating she got in Auschwitz was over access to the latrines. She and her sister Danka, who had arrived at Auschwitz the day before, were at roll call when Danka whispered,

“Rena, I have to go to the bathroom.” “That’s not allowed. You should have gone before roll call.” “I can’t help it.” “You have to wait until roll call is over.” Reality is cruel. She holds her legs together. I take Danka’s hand, leading her back to our block where Elza is standing on the steps. “Elza, will you please let my sister inside? She has to go to the bathroom, she has diarrhea.” “I can’t do that. You know nobody goes into the block after roll call. There are rules!”

Gelissen, wanting to help her sister, began shaking Elza to distract her while Danka ran to the bathroom. She was badly beaten in return. From that day forward, Danka learned to use the latrines only when the inmates were given access.

When the Kapo yelled for the first time after inmates entered the camp, “line up for the latrines,” women, including

---

105 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 95.
106 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 135.
107 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), 75-76.
Lucille Eichengreen, were shocked to find “no toilets.”\textsuperscript{108} Instead, they found “holes in the ground, and no paper.”\textsuperscript{109} Robert Jan van Pelt in his article “A Site in Search of a Mission” describes the prisoners’ morning ritual:

Imagine 7000 inmates at sunrise suffering from diarrhea or dysentery, trying to enter, find an unoccupied place, defecate, manage not to fall into the sewer and get out in the 10 or so minutes allowed by the camps regulations to such necessities. Assuming that 150 inmates could find a place at one time, and also assuming that all 7000 inmates were able to move their bowels in the morning, it would require 46 successive “seatings,” with all the traffic jams involved.\textsuperscript{110}

Besides having a terrible stench, the latrines lacked seats and there were no shame walls, which meant women had no privacy while they were using the toilets. Ruth Kluger felt particularly sorry for older women in the camps because they were forced to defecate next to one another even though they continued to hold the pre-war “rigid standards of modesty.”\textsuperscript{111}

Though the Geneva Convention (1929) had mandated that prisoners “were to be lodged in barracks affording all possible guarantees of hygiene and healthfulness,” the SS ignored this mandate even though they attempted to give the pretense of adherence.\textsuperscript{112} The SS also ignored another protocol issued during the Geneva Convention that stated belligerents were to furnish

\textsuperscript{108} Lucille Eichengreen, \textit{From Ashes to Life}, 97. \\
\textsuperscript{109} Lucille Eichengreen, \textit{From Ashes to Life}, 97. Ruth Elias also complains about the lack of toilet paper. See Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 121. \\
\textsuperscript{111} Ruth Kluger, \textit{Still Alive}, 103. \\
\textsuperscript{112} Robert Jan van Pelt, “A Site in Search of a Mission,” 127.
prisoners with a “sufficient quantity of water for the care of their own bodily cleanliness.”\textsuperscript{113} Since there were not enough toilets for all of the women in the camp, individuals who were sick were “incapable of holding back” their bowels movements which led to “uncleanliness around the latrines” which were rarely cleaned.\textsuperscript{114} At times, women were reduced to performing their bodily functions in the same bowls they used for eating and drinking. Women had no access to sinks or showers and had few other methods of cleaning themselves. This was especially problematic when women were menstruating because they had no way to clean off the blood that ran down their legs.

\textbf{Labor}

Though Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, claimed that work helped inmates “get over the emptiness of imprisonment,” few women agreed with this assessment regardless of whether they were physical laborers or a skilled worker.\textsuperscript{115} In Auschwitz, there were many different measures as to what constituted a privileged position. Most often, the main criteria was that the job was inside away from the harsh weather. Sometimes, the women were lucky and their positions let them escape from having to partake in roll calls or selections, which gave them time to recoup some of their strength. In other instances, women

\textsuperscript{113} Robert Jan van Pelt, “A Site in Search of a Mission,” 128.
\textsuperscript{114} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 57.
received an extra helping of food or some other privilege. Their job or occupation before the war was rarely a factor for the SS when deciding what type of labor detail to assign the women. Very infrequently did the SS allow inmates to do the type of work to which they were accustomed or trained. Rather, Lengyel feels the SS got a sick pleasure from placing “the illiterates in the office jobs and reserving the backbreaking work for the intellectuals.”

Anita Lasker-Wallfisch believes that she was saved from death because she made known that she was a cellist who had studied under some prominent musicians in Berlin. When the SS heard this, they had her audition for a seat on the camp orchestra, which she easily passed. Lasker-Wallfisch realizes that her “experiences were of course different from those of the vast majority of prisoners for the simple reason that” she “was lucky enough to be in the orchestra.” She felt that as a member of the orchestra, she “had not lost her identity totally... and melted away into the grey mass of indistinguishable, nameless people” which in turn allowed her “to maintain a shred of human dignity.” Instead, she was recognized throughout Auschwitz as ‘the cellist’ for she was the only one who played that instrument. One of the most enviable privileges of her

116 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 38.
117 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 75.
118 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 76.
position was that members of the orchestra were not required to line up outside in the winter for roll call. Instead, they, while still required to line up in rows of five, were lucky enough to be counted inside their barrack. Lasker-Wallfisch also received an extra ration of food, which she shared with her sister Renate.

Eva Mozes Kor’s assignment in Auschwitz was to be a guinea pig in Dr. Mengele’s pseudomedical twin experiments. She and her sister Miriam were considered privileged prisoners because they were allowed to keep their hair and clothing, did not have to perform any hard physical labor, and even had a three-hole latrine in their barrack.

Kor, after first hearing about the gas chambers was puzzled as to why she and her sister were left alive while the rest of her family had perished. She thought, “this is ridiculous. We are children. We cannot work but we are alive.” 119 When Kor questioned some of the other children as to why twins were so privileged, a girl replied that Mengele used them in experiments. Kor wondered, “what experiments are you talking about?” 120 The next morning she and Miriam were to find out. Though her first impression of Mengele was that he was handsome, she soon found out what a monster he truly was. Three times a

119 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 85.
120 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 85.
week, Kor and the other twins were “marched to Auschwitz I
where” they “were forced to sit naked... for six to eight
hours.”121 During this time, they were “photographed, painted,
measured and marked, and our records were compared” leaving Kor
to feel that she “was merely a piece of meat.”122 Also during
these excursions, the twins were subjected to injections and
blood tests, many with long-lasting effects. Because Mengele
had so many specimens at his disposal, he was not overly
concerned with the health of his twins. If a twin died during
one of his experiments, “then the other twin was killed” so a
comparison could be made during the autopsy of the two bodies.123

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s position was also considered
privileged, yet it had none of the downfalls of Kor’s. Because
of the Communist connections she had among the other women
prisoners, Nomberg-Przytyk was able to land a coveted position
working as a clerk in the camp infirmary. Her job was simply to
register prisoners entering the infirmary. In this position,
Nomberg-Przytyk was no longer be subjected to selections, no
longer had to endure the daily roll call, and did not have to
perform heavy, physical labor.

Olga Lengyel also secured a place for herself working in
the camp infirmary. Unlike Nomberg-Przytyk, who had no prior

121 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, (no page # given)
122 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, (no page # given)
123 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 107.
medical experience, Lengyel, before she was deported, had worked as a surgical assistant in her husband’s hospital. She obtained her job as a doctor because the SS issued an order that “all internees with any knowledge of medical practice should make themselves known.” She, along with four other women, were responsible for taking care of the 30,000 to 40,000 individuals interned in the camp and saw as many as 1500 people each day. Though Lengyel was disheartened that she could not do more for her patients, because of the lack of proper medical supplies, she took comfort in the fact that at least she was helping others to the best of her ability. For Lengyel, the best perk of her job was that she “had the luxury of a good wash” each day because there was a basin and soap in the infirmary.

For the women who were not lucky enough to be working in such privileged positions, Pelagia Lewinska feels it was “difficult to say which was more exhausting the physical effort or the terrible sterility of long hours where the mind grasps nothing but the boring labor.” Some prisoners reportedly felt “hard work was preferable to easier forms of monotony because time that is passed unperceived wears us less even if our limbs end up aching,” but Ruth Elias would have disagreed with

124 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 69.
125 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 71.
them.\textsuperscript{127} Elias was assigned to a work detail that “moved heavy rocks from one spot to another.”\textsuperscript{128} The following day they “had to carry the same rocks back to their original location.”\textsuperscript{129} Elias soon realized that “it was totally senseless work” designed to kill the inmates “not only physically but also spiritually.”\textsuperscript{130} Determined to survive, she and the other women in her work detail “marshaled all our strength and continued to drag the rocks back and forth.”\textsuperscript{131}

Rena Kornreich Gelissen also was forced to perform mindless physical labor the majority of the time she was imprisoned at Auschwitz. Initially, she and her sister Danka were forced to “sift sand through… nets and load it onto lorries.”\textsuperscript{132} Once the truck was full, the women were required to push it up a hill, where the sand was unloaded in a separate pile. After they had unloaded the truck, they were forced to “push the lorries back down the hill… and start all over again.”\textsuperscript{133} Still believing Auschwitz was a labor camp, Gelissen thought the work she performed was ridiculous, yet she felt she “was helping the

\textsuperscript{127} Pelagia Lewinska, “Twenty Months,” 98.
\textsuperscript{129} Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 113.
\textsuperscript{130} Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 113.
\textsuperscript{131} Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 113.
\textsuperscript{132} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 76.
\textsuperscript{133} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 77.
Germans build something” which allowed her to hope that she would achieve freedom sooner.\textsuperscript{134}

Gelissen realized during her next assignment that Auschwitz was not truly a labor camp. She and the other members of her work detail were forced to carry ten bricks at a time across a field. For the next few days, the women were required to stand in line and toss bricks to each other until the entire pile was back in its original location. This demoralizing experience was one that was typical of Auschwitz.

Food

As we know from better-known survivor testimonies like those of Elie Wiesel, throughout their time at Auschwitz, regardless of sex, inmate’s lives revolved around food. The food distributed by the SS was poor in quality and inadequate in quantity. Elias recalls that the food was so disgusting that inmates ate their allocation “with a combination of aversion and ravenous hunger.”\textsuperscript{135} When prisoners first arrived at Auschwitz, they were not given a bowl or any utensils though soup was a daily staple of their diet. While some women made due “slurping soup out of their dirty… palms,” others found more ingenious methods of eating so as not to waste any precious drops.\textsuperscript{136} Lucille Eichengreen recalled using a friend’s wooden shoes as a

\textsuperscript{134}Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 77.
\textsuperscript{135}Ruth Elias, \textit{Triumph of Hope}, 144.
\textsuperscript{136}Lucille Eichengreen, \textit{From Ashes to Life}, 98.
bowl. Though she felt “slightly revolted by our degradation,” hunger “blanked out the images of pigs eating out of dirty wooden troughs.”  

Olga Lengyel remembers an even more degrading experience. In her barrack, the blocowa “commandeered the boiler as a chamber pot” and her cronies insisted that bowls be used for the same purpose due to the lack of adequate access to the latrines. Lengyel recalls in the morning, we had to be content rinsing the bowls as well as we could before we put in our minute rations. The first days our stomachs rose up at the thought of using what were actually chamber pots at night. But hunger drives, and we were so starved that we were ready to eat any food. That it had to be handled in such bowls could not be helped. 

Tec states that by the decision to not issue inmates any utensils, “prisoners would have to lap up the soup, doglike, (which was) a degrading experience in itself.”

The food distributed by the Nazis was often not really food at all. When Livia Bitton Jackson first arrived in Auschwitz with her mother, her aunt Celia, who had been imprisoned for several months, insisted that the women eat her ration of bread. While her mother refused to eat it because it looked like a “cake of mud,” Jackson forced it down though the lump turned

---

137 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life, 98.
138 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 35.
139 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 36.
into “wet sand particles.” Eva Mozes Kor’s first impression of the bread was that it “tasted very much like sawdust.” Though Kor and her sister Miriam, having grown up in an extremely religious household refused to eat anything their first day in the camp because “it was not Kosher,” they ultimately were forced to “violate God’s law” and eat whatever food they were given in order to ensure their survival.

The soup that was distributed each day contained few vegetables but often had “pieces of glass... and wood... and cloth” as well as “buttons and all other kinds of junk.” Lengyel felt that “under normal conditions, it would have been absolutely inedible” but she and others such as Leitner realized they had to be prepared to “eat shit” if necessary in order to survive. Women soon learned to “remove the undesirable items and eat the rest.”

Though the food was disgusting, eating one’s rations meant the difference between life and death. Ruth Elias continued to drink the “ersatz coffee,” which she called dishwater, “because it warmed our freezing bodies a little.” Elias also resorted

---

141 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 89.
142 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 81.
143 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 82.
144 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 89. Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 93.
145 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 37. Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella, 36.
146 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 93-94.
147 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 113.
to sucking “green weeds poking out of the soil” for hours at a
time imagining “the little leaves were driving away (her)
hunger.”

Elias recalls that in an effort to stave away their
current hunger, inmates talked about food constantly. Every day after work we ate the meager
supper that had been provided, devouring our entire daily bread ration. Then a few young women would get together on the third tier and start
“cooking”—that is, we talked about all the various foods and dishes we
had known back home. These conversations were like self-inflicted
torment, but they gave us a feeling of having eaten our fill. We
cooked in our imaginations for hours at a time, even though most of us
were too young to have much experience actually cooking. This cooking
also affirmed the ties to our families and strengthened our will to
survive, to hold out so that we could see our families again.

While prisoners were starving, Nazi guards had plenty of
food for themselves and their families. Ruth Kluger recalls one
incident where

a German guard on the other side of the barbed wire preens with a
walking stick that has a loaf of bread on the end. The idea is to show
the starving prisoners that one has the power to let bread spoil in the
dirt. ... the loaf of bread at the end of the stick hit me like a blow
in the diaphragm, because it was such a crudely sarcastic expression of
undifferentiated hatred.

To add insult to injury, Rudolph Hoess had a vegetable garden
that backed the crematoria. Other SS officials had their fill
of gourmet food seized from the luggage of new arrivals and from
Red Cross packages that were meant to be distributed to the
inmates.

148 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 122-123.
149 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 122.
Though constantly hungry, many women recall how they could not sate an unbearable thirst for water. Livia Bitton Jackson recalls that “getting used to the thirst is the hardest” aspect of living in Auschwitz.\textsuperscript{151} Ruth Kluger agrees and states that “hunger was less of a problem than thirst.”\textsuperscript{152} Kluger realizes

… how long it takes a person to die of hunger and how quickly he dies from thirst. You can live for weeks, or even months, without food, but you die of thirst within days. Accordingly, thirst is more nagging, harder to put up with than hunger. In Birkenau, our food, our daily nondescript soup, must have been very salty, for I was always thirsty.\textsuperscript{153}

Indeed, water was not distributed in Auschwitz. According to Jackson, the only liquids inmates received were “black coffee in the morning and soup in the evening.”\textsuperscript{154} Lengyel insists that coffee was a presumptuous word for this “insipid, brownish liquid” that inmates were forced to drink as their morning meal.\textsuperscript{155} If prisoners really wanted water, they had to drink from the “lake, a large hollow in the ground filled with murky water.”\textsuperscript{156} Though Jackson was horrified by this “filthy, smelly swamp,” she drank thirstily because water “quenches and revives.”\textsuperscript{157} Jackson kept drinking until her cousins warned her that “some girls got very sick” because “they drank too much.”\textsuperscript{158} Rain was a godsend because it gave the inmates an opportunity to

\textsuperscript{151} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 95.
\textsuperscript{152} Ruth Kluger, \textit{Still Alive}, 100.
\textsuperscript{153} Ruth Kluger, \textit{Still Alive}, 100.
\textsuperscript{154} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 86.
\textsuperscript{155} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 37.
\textsuperscript{156} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 86.
\textsuperscript{157} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 86-87.
\textsuperscript{158} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 87.
quench their thirst and wet their dry throats. Some women became so desperate for water that they were willing to trade their daily ration of bread for a few drops.

Organizing

Organizing was a way to get commodities in the camp that were not readily available including but not limited to bowls, clothing, shoes, utensils, and food. Lasker-Wallfisch believes that organizing was the “camp parlance for bartering” and felt with “connections and bread, you could obtain anything.”\(^{159}\) Kor described organizing in somewhat different terms and stated that it was “taking anything that would enable you to survive.”\(^{160}\) Lengyel, though she felt “to ‘organize’ meant to steal,” was surprised that so many “women, who formerly would not have taken a hairpin, became utterly hardened thieves and never suffered the slightest feeling of remorse.”\(^{161}\) However the women chose to define organization, most agree that it was necessary for survival.

While at Auschwitz, Kor organized a pot that had been left unattended and food. Though she was caught once taking potatoes, she only received a reprimand, “child, it is not nice to steal. Put them back.”\(^{162}\) This however did not discourage her from stealing food again in the future. Kor believed theft

---

\(^{159}\) Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, *Inherit the Truth*, 81-82.  
\(^{160}\) Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 100.  
\(^{162}\) Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 120.
was necessary for keeping her and her sister alive and was “prepared to do whatever” she “had to do to live.”\textsuperscript{163} Not all inmates organized food or other necessities. Sometimes, they attempted to get luxury items. Anita Lasker-Wallfisch recalled “organizing cigarettes by paying for them” with her extra rations of bread.\textsuperscript{164} Of course, the consequences if the SS caught prisoners with contraband materials were harsh. Prisoners found with illegal goods were forced to “kneel down and eat whatever they were caught with” including packs of cigarettes.\textsuperscript{165}

Not all organization efforts were condoned though. Nomberg-Przytyk recalls one blokowa named Cyla who was in charge of the death block whom she felt took organization too far. Inmates assigned to the death block “were not to receive any food, thereby conserving the gas it would take to eradicate them.”\textsuperscript{166} Since these prisoners were still on the camp register, Cyla received large rations of food that were meant for these condemned inmates. Cyla exchanged these rations “for cigarettes and would then exchange the cigarettes for luxuries that were brought into the camp by prisoners who worked outside the camp.”\textsuperscript{167} She often shared these goods with other inmates, such

\textsuperscript{163} Eva Mozes Kor, \textit{Echoes from Auschwitz}, 122.
\textsuperscript{164} Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, \textit{Inherit the Truth}, 75.
\textsuperscript{165} Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, \textit{Inherit the Truth}, 76.
\textsuperscript{166} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 57.
\textsuperscript{167} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 57.
as the infirmary staff. Though she gave Nomberg-Przytyk presents such as chocolate and a dress, Nomberg-Przytyk believed that Cyla “was a monster” for taking advantage of the situation.\footnote{Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, 57.}

**Violence and Death**

Sophie Weisz Miklos believed that the SS “took an extreme sadistic pleasure in the slow and torturous deaths they inflicted on us.”\footnote{Sophie Weisz Miklos, *Paper Gauze Ballerina*, 24.} Indeed, all of the women examined mention the extreme brutality of the SS, Kapos, and even fellow prisoners regardless of whether they had experienced such cruelty personally. Violence and the fear of death seemed to dominate the daily lives of women living in Auschwitz.

In Auschwitz, “death was an every day part of living.”\footnote{Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 108.} Elias recalls that the “constant odor of burnt flesh” from the crematoria surrounded the camp.\footnote{Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, 115.} Women saw “dead bodies… everywhere” and were constantly reminded by the SS that they “were going to be dead before long” because the Germans were “going to kill all” Jews.\footnote{Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 108.} Nomberg-Przytyk believes that once she had lived in Auschwitz for a few months “she could look at the dead with indifference.”\footnote{Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, 115.} Instead of going around corpses

\footnotetext[168]{Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, 57.}
\footnotetext[169]{Sophie Weisz Miklos, *Paper Gauze Ballerina*, 24.}
\footnotetext[170]{Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 108.}
\footnotetext[171]{Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, 115.}
\footnotetext[172]{Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 108.}
\footnotetext[173]{Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, *Auschwitz*, 115.}
in her path, she “stepped over it, as if” she “was merely stepping over a piece of wood.”\textsuperscript{174}

Some women came closer to death than others. Livia Bitton Jackson recalls having several violent and near-death experiences, all while trying to protect her ailing mother. The first time resulted from her asking her block elder for a favor.

I apologize to Elsa, and explain that my request is extremely urgent. Elsa glares at me, “Go back to your place immediately.” “Please understand. The bed is broken above my mother and she is too weak to move away. Please, tell the women to get off the cracked plank before it breaks completely and falls on my mother. Please. They will listen to you…” My voice chokes with anxiety. Elsa looks at me incredulously. “You. You dare come here and interrupt? Get out of here you stupid little dog!” Her outrage is underlined by a fierce blow to my right cheekbone. My head reels from the impact of the slap.\textsuperscript{175}

Another time, while visiting her mother in the infirmary, Jackson was caught by an SS guard. Though she was certain she was going to be executed for walking around the camp unescorted, the guard demonstrated some kindness and allowed her to escape with a ‘light’ punishment. She was “ordered to kneel on the gravel in front of the command barrack for twenty-four hours without food or drink” where passerby could see her and witness her humiliation.\textsuperscript{176} On another occasion, Jackson’s mother was beaten for taking too long to get dressed. Jackson, hoping to help her mother, jumped

at the tall, husky woman and shove her against the wall. “Leave my mother alone. Don’t you see you are going to break her arm?” The

\textsuperscript{174} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 115.
\textsuperscript{175} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 125.
\textsuperscript{176} Livia Bitton Jackson, \textit{I Have Lived a Thousand Years}, 130.
towering buxom figure in the dreaded SS uniform swings around. Her fist on my cheek sends me reeling. A second punch knocks me to the slippery floor. Now she is on top of me. She is kicking me in the face, in the chest, in the abdomen. She is kicking my head. The black boots gleam and my blood splashes thinly on the wet floor. A kick in the back sends me rolling across the floor toward the exit.\(^{177}\)

Though Jackson was seriously injured, she remained grateful to the SS officer reasoning that she “could have shot me. But she did not.”\(^ {178}\)

Olga Lengyel also experienced violence early and often during her imprisonment in Auschwitz. While she was being ‘deloused,’ a SS officer singled her out and ordered the barber not to “clip that one’s hair.”\(^ {179}\) Lengyel, fearful of what the officer would expect for granting her this privilege, decided to “disregard the order, and got in line to be shorn.”\(^ {180}\) When the officer reappeared and saw her bare skull, he grew angry and slapped her face “as hard as he could” then ordered a guard to give her “a few lashes with his whip.”\(^ {181}\)

As terrifying as this incidents was, nothing prepared Lengyel for the cool cruelty of Irma Griese. When Lengyel first encountered Griese, she “felt sure that a woman of such beauty could not be cruel… for she was truly a blue-eyed, fair-haired

\(^ {177}\) Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, 145.
\(^ {178}\) Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, 145. As both Jackson and Lengyel demonstrate, female guards and Kapos were often more violent and vicious than their male counterparts towards the interned women.
\(^ {180}\) Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 29.
\(^ {181}\) Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 29.
This assumption held until one day when Griese decided that Lengyel had made her look foolish in front of other prisoners. Lengyel’s only offense was obeying Dr Klein, an SS doctor and her immediate supervisor, who told her to ignore the orders issued by Griese. Though Griese did nothing to Lengyel at the time, she later summoned Lengyel to her office. Griese put the “cold barrel of her revolver” on Lengyel’s left temple and proceeded to crack “the butt of her gun on” Lengyel’s “head, once, twice, again and again.” Then she hit Lengyel in the face with her fist multiple times drawing blood. The incident made Lengyel question “how could such animal fury dwell in so beautiful a body?”

Other Activities

Ruth Elias believes “the Nazis wanted to kill our minds even before they killed us physically.” Prisoners were completely cut off from the outside world and had no access to newspapers, books, or radio. Women worked to counteract this in several ways.

One of the key methods they employed was simply talking with other women. Though they could not associate with each other while working, for fear of being beaten, they got together at night in the barracks. They talked about food, shared

recipes, told stories, sang songs, recited poetry, quoted scripture from the Torah and Talmud, and recalled their life before the war. They also discussed what they were going to do once Auschwitz was liberated. In this way, women kept from succumbing to the Nazi plan to make them into the living-dead. By recalling memories of happier times, women remembered that they had something to live for which encouraged them to fight even harder for their survival. This “mental and spiritual nourishment” also allowed the women to put their “brain-cells to work to keep them from atrophying.”

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, when she first arrived at Auschwitz, could not understand how the women she worked with could “joke, dance, and tell stories” when “the sky above was red with the flames of the crematorium.” After being imprisoned in Auschwitz for several months, she too recited poems and told jokes. On December 31, 1944, the women who worked with Nomberg-Przytyk in the infirmary even threw a New Year’s Eve party complete with wine and presents. Though such blatant illegal activities were rare, her case demonstrates that life could go on with some degree of normalcy, even under the omnipresent shadow of violence and death.

The themes of maternity and fertility have special importance in Holocaust memoirs written by women. Though these topics comprise only one component of women’s experiences in Auschwitz, they suggest a form of suffering specific to the female sex. Because women, particularly mothers, were especially threatened by Nazi policy and because the future for European Jews seemed unlikely to many inmates, narratives tend to place a high value on themes surrounding motherhood. Though both men and women “were subjected to similar kinds of torment—filth, starvation, forced labor, and death,” only female inmates were forced to cope with “pregnancy, amenorrhea, abortion” or infanticide.  

Amenorrhea is especially important because it affected nearly all women in Auschwitz above the age of puberty and threatened them with infertility. Though some writers attributed “the lapse of menstruation to poor food or trauma, others to a drug put in the soup,” the theme “is nearly always

---

mentioned in the memoirs of women.”189 According to Marlene Heinemann, the cessation of menstruation “must be considered a form of psychological assault on a woman’s identity, since most women had no idea if fertility would return if they survived.”190 Heinemann believes amenorrhea threatened women “with the loss of the specific biological function which society” at the time insisted was the chief vocation for women.191 Thus, the possibility of infertility was seen as a threat to having a worthwhile life after Liberation. Yet, if menstruation continued while women were in the camps, it “became an additional reason for beatings” from Kapos and the SS.192

Tec states that as long as women “continued to get their monthly periods, the experience would be enveloped in a series of humiliations.”193 The lack of washing facilities contributed to the inmate’s feelings of degradation since they could not adequately rinse the blood off themselves. Usually women stopped menstruating within a short period after arriving in Auschwitz. Though many women thought bromide was mixed into their food to prevent menstruation, there is no evidence that

191 Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 19.
192 Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 20. Ellen S. Fine agrees with this assessment. See “Women Writers and the Holocaust,” 82.
proves this to be an accurate assumption. Rather, historians, such as Tec, generally agree that “poor nourishment and the rundown state of women’s bodies were responsible for the change.”\textsuperscript{194}

Yet some female survivors to this day continue to believe the rumors. Though only eight when she entered Auschwitz, Eva Mozes Kor recalled hearing that the food distributed by the Nazis “contained some type of bromide” that caused menstruation to cease.\textsuperscript{195} Olga Lengyel also attributed amenorrhea “to the mysterious chemical powder with which the Germans dosed our food.”\textsuperscript{196} Lengyel claimed “the Lagerälteste, the blocovas, and the Stubendiensts, as well as the kitchen employees, none of whom ate the ordinary camp food, were, in most cases, free from menstrual problems.”\textsuperscript{197} Lengyel, however, was never able to see or get any of this powder because the “SS woman mixes it into the food herself” and “nobody else is allowed to go near it.”\textsuperscript{198}

Other women, such as Ruth Kluger, realized that in Auschwitz “everyone was so undernourished that no one menstruated.”\textsuperscript{199} Kluger did not believe the rumors that the

\textsuperscript{194} Nechama Tec, Resilience and Courage, 168.
\textsuperscript{195} Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz: Dr Mengele’s Twins: The Story of Eva and Miriam Mozes (Terre Haute, Indiana: CANDLES Inc, 1995), 94.
\textsuperscript{196} Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys: A Woman Survivor’s True Story of Auschwitz, (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing Company, 1947), 98.
\textsuperscript{197} Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{198} Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 99.
Nazis had put a powder in the inmate’s food. Instead, she felt this rumor “only goes to show how well-off” the other women “had been before since they didn’t know the effects of starvation.”

Some women, like Lucille Eichengreen, who had been interned in the ghettos for several years, stopped menstruating before they entered Auschwitz. Eichengreen, like Kluger, attributed this to “poor nutrition.”

As a young teenager, Livia Bitton Jackson was grateful that her last menstrual period occurred before she entered Auschwitz. Soon after her arrival, Jackson, while standing at roll call, saw another girl with “a thick red stream of blood on the inner thigh of each leg.” Initially, Jackson thought the girl had been shot before realizing that she was menstruating. Because inmates had “no underwear, (and) no sanitary napkins,” the blood simply flowed down their legs. Jackson felt embarrassed for the girl and insisted that she “would rather die than have blood flow down my legs! In full view. Oh my God! I could not bear it.”

Jackson then realized that her next cycle was set to begin in less than three weeks. She comforted herself by

---

201 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994), 66.
203 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 95.
204 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 95.
saying, “there’ll not be a next time. By then the war will be
over.” 205

Rena Kornreich Gelissen menstruated longer than most women
since she came directly from her home, where she was well-fed, to
Auschwitz. When her cycle began while she was interned in
Auschwitz I, she had no access to rags or sanitary napkins so
she was forced to take a few squares of newsprint, wipe them
against her trousers to make sure that they were clean, then
“crumple them up and place the newspaper between” her legs. 206 A
few months later when she was transferred to Birkenau, Gelissen
found that there was no newspaper for her to use. She “didn’t
think the latrine in Birkenau would be any different than the
one in Auschwitz” so she did not bring any extra newsprint with
her. 207 She did not anticipate newspaper “being a luxury that”
women “no longer deserve.” 208 Gelissen became apprehensive about
menstruating.

Once a month my period arrives without any prior warning. It is
something I dread and wait for, never knowing when it will make its
appearance. Will I be working? Will I be in the shaving line on a
Sunday, embarrassed in front of the men? Will today be the day that I
cannot stop the flow and the SS decide to beat me to death for being
unclean? Will today be the day that the scrap that I find gives me an
infection? 209

205 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 95.
206 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz
(Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995), 81.
207 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise, 104.
208 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise, 104.
209 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise, 104-105.
What bothered Gelissen most was that she could not wash. She recalled that no matter “how hard, nor how often I scrub, it always feels that something is left on my flesh.”\textsuperscript{210} She feared that “the smell of blood” on her legs “will attract the dogs to me” and they would maim and even possibly kill her as they did many other women.\textsuperscript{211}

Though Gelissen worried about being beaten for menstruating, she and others knew that for women, the “greatest crime in Auschwitz was to be pregnant” or to arrive with young children.\textsuperscript{212} Katharina von Kellenbach believes the “Nazi Holocaust against the Jews was the most intentional and systematic in its war against a Jewish mother’s capacity to reproduce the Jewish ‘race’.”\textsuperscript{213} Jewish women “were not killed simply as Jews, (but as) women who could carry and give birth to the next generation of Jews.”\textsuperscript{214} As the Nazis “tightened their control over Jewish life, Jewish women lost control” of their fertility and “were in no position to prevent, accept, or terminate a pregnancy.”\textsuperscript{215} In Auschwitz especially, the struggle

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Renata Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 105.
\item Renata Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 105.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
for one’s own physical survival was “all encompassing, drowning out ethical and religious... decision making.”\textsuperscript{216}

For women deported to Auschwitz who were pregnant or “with children under fifteen, gender was destiny”\textsuperscript{217} and “pregnant women... were doomed from the beginning.”\textsuperscript{218} Nazi policy in the camps focused attention on women’s biological roles and throughout the twenty-eight months of selections at Auschwitz women who were pregnant or had small children were immediately sent to the gas chamber without the reprieve of working. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk believes that “here in Auschwitz the German thugs murdered women and children first.”\textsuperscript{219} As von Kellenbach points out, “mothers were singled out for killing by the Nazis, and they died in disproportionately higher numbers.”\textsuperscript{220}

Nechama Tec believes that “because mothers were identified more strongly with young children than fathers, their fate was more closely tied to their children’s.”\textsuperscript{221} Jewish children were not economically valuable to the Nazis and were seen as undesirable because they were symbolic of a Jewish future which was perceived as a threat to the Aryan race. As a rule, all children entering Auschwitz with the exception of the children

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{216} Katharina von Kellenbach, “Reproduction and Resistance,” 28.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{218} Irena Strzelecka “Women,” in Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 405.
\item \textsuperscript{219} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, Auschwitz, 80.
\item \textsuperscript{220} Katharina von Kellenbach, “Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust,” 21.
\item \textsuperscript{221} Nechama Tec, Resilience and Courage, 161.
\end{itemize}
who were chosen as participants in Dr Mengele’s experiments were
to be immediately sent to the gas chambers. A few mothers,
realizing what was happening and feeling a strong sense of self-
preservation, tried to give their children to older women they
knew were going to be gassed. Yet, the majority of mothers
refused to part with their offspring even if they knew what was
coming. Even Rudolf Hoess, commandant of Auschwitz, reportedly
observed how “families in Auschwitz wanted to stay together at
all costs.” Laurence Rees believes,

even though the Nazis lost valuable labor by sending some young,
healthy women to the gas chambers with their offspring, they realized
that to wretch boys and girls from their mothers against their will at
the initial selection would result in such horrendous scenes that
efficient management of the killing process would be almost
impossible.

The Nazis soon realized “it was almost always counter to their
own interests to separate mothers forcibly from their
children.”

Some pregnant women were able to conceal their condition
when they entered the camp and gave birth while imprisoned. It
was very difficult for the SS to catch all women who were
pregnant during their arrival because, as Lengyel recalls,
“women usually wore several layers of clothing, one on top of

---

the other, which they hoped to keep” which concealed all but the most obvious pregnancies.\footnote{Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 115.}

Women whose pregnancy was discovered by the SS after entering Auschwitz were put to death. If by chance a woman carried a pregnancy to term and gave birth, and the infant was discovered, both mother and child were sent to the gas chambers. Since childbirth was difficult, and often punishable by death, the event, which was cause for celebration in the outside world, was an unhappy occasion in Auschwitz. Only women who aborted or killed their infants could escape the punishment for illegal births. Yet some mothers, like Esther in Sara Nomberg-Przytyk’s \textit{Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land}, “refused to have an abortion” or kill their newborn because they were “convinced that they would find a way to keep their babies.”\footnote{Nechama Tec, \textit{Resilience and Courage}, 164.}

Nomberg-Przytyk, as a clerk in the camp infirmary, knew firsthand that pregnancy was a death sentence for both mother and child. When her friend Esther, who was pregnant approached Nomberg-Przytyk and said, while asking to stay in the hospital, “I want to give birth to this baby,” Nomberg-Przytyk did not know how to respond.\footnote{Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz: True Tales from a Grotesque Land} (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 68.} Nomberg-Przytyk tried to tell Esther what happened to women who had babies in the camp infirmary, but Esther refused to believe her and insisted on checking into the infirmary.
hospital announcing, “I am sure that when Mengele sees it he will let me raise it in the camp.”\textsuperscript{228} Esther proceeded to give birth to a healthy baby boy and rejected saving her own life by refusing to not feed him so that he would die. At the next selection, when Esther proudly showed her baby off to Dr. Mengele, she was immediately marked for the gas chambers.

Olga Lengyel, who was a doctor in the camp infirmary, insists that the Germans “sent all pregnant women to the gas chambers.”\textsuperscript{229} Lengyel believes that even inside the camp it was not easy to determine which women were in the family way. For the word went around that it was extremely dangerous to be found pregnant. Those who arrived in this condition, therefore, hid themselves when they could and, to this end, had the active cooperation of their neighbors.

Incredible as it may seem, “some succeeded in concealing their conditions to the last moment, and deliveries took place secretly in the barracks.”\textsuperscript{230} Lengyel and Weisz-Miklos both recount incidents where women had the misfortune of going into labor during roll call.

Ruth Elias knew firsthand the repercussions of being pregnant in the camps. Elias was already two months pregnant when she entered Auschwitz. Knowing the German policy concerning expectant Jewish mothers, she tried to secure an abortion for herself in the Theresienstadt ghetto, but was

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{228} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 70. \\
\textsuperscript{229} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 115. \\
\textsuperscript{230} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 115. 
\end{flushright}
unable to find a doctor who was willing to take the risk of being caught and executed by the Nazis for violating their policies. In December 1943, Elias, Koni, and his mother were deported to Auschwitz. Since Elias was not yet showing any signs of being pregnant, she passed the initial selection and was forced to perform hard, physical labor. While in Auschwitz, Elias continued to try and find someone willing to perform an abortion, but could not. She felt she “had no choice but to hide my condition as well as I could and wait to see what the future would bring.” 231

By the fifth month of her pregnancy, the changes in Elias’s body had become visible. Not wanting anyone, especially the SS, to notice her condition, she tried to conceal her changing body to the best of her ability. Elias realized that all prisoners in Auschwitz “lived under immediate threat” but knew that “because of my pregnancy my prospects were much worse.” 232 Overworked and undernourished, Elias was able to temporarily secure an indoor job making machine-gun slings where she “could at least sit down instead of dragging rocks back and forth.” 233 At this job, she was no longer exposed to the elements and did not have to expend as much energy.

In another stroke of good fortune, Elias recalls when the camp hangman, Henker Fischer, ordered her to come to his barrack one night. Elias was afraid of him but feared the repercussions of not showing up so she went. When she arrived, Fischer asked how many months along she was. Then, to Elias’s surprise, Fischer gave her a raw onion and a piece of bread, and ordered her to come to his barrack every other day to get some supplemental nutrients because she “had a responsibility for the development of her child.”

Alas, her good fortune was not to last. When Elias was eight months pregnant, she was forced to go through one of Dr Mengele’s selections. Naked and knowing that her belly would send her towards death, Elias came up with a plan.

I asked a few of the women standing behind me to pass me in line. Maybe the man in Mengele, after seeing their young bodies, would overlook me. What I asked them to do didn’t present them with additional risks, so the women readily agreed. And with his infamous gesture Mengele directed all of us— including me— to the side of the young and the healthy.

What Elias did not realize was after this selection, she and the other women who passed were going to be transferred to Birkenau. After being in Birkenau for a few days, the women were ordered to undergo a gynecological examination. Elias felt “this would mean certain death for me— they would surely see that I was in the last month of my pregnancy” and lost all hope of

---

surviving. Elias was lucky enough to pass the examination. She later realized that the SS “examination had nothing to do with the state of our health.”237 Rather, “it was a search for contraband.”238

Elias was then transferred to Hamburg, Germany to work clearing the rubble caused by Allied bombing. However, Elias was not allowed to stay at this job for more than three days because her block elder denounced her and another woman, Berta, as being pregnant to an SS officer. The SS officer promised to bring them to a maternity hospital, but the women, both hardened by their time in Auschwitz, were wary of believing him. Elias and Berta were taken to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, an all-women’s facility. The day after they arrived, an announcement was made stating “all pregnant women are to report to the office immediately so they can be taken to the maternity hospital.”239 Elias and Berta reported to the office but immediately became suspicious because they “didn’t trust the good nature of the SS.”240 Seeing no other alternative, Elias whispered to Berta to pretend that she was going into labor so they would not have to go with the others. Berta, having given birth once before, knew exactly how to fake the symptoms. Elias went to the camp administrator, and acting as if she was

237 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 131.
238 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 131.
239 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 136.
240 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 136.
ignorant, explained that her sister had just gone into labor and could not travel in such a condition. Elias said if the officer would be kind enough to send them to the infirmary long enough for Berta to give birth, they would be more than happy to join the other prisoners the following day. Surprisingly, the SS woman agreed to Elias’s request.

Elias and Berta were taken back to the infirmary, while the other pregnant women were sent “trustingly to their death.”\(^{241}\) The next morning an SS doctor examined Berta and found no signs of dilation. Berta kept to her story that she had experienced labor pains but they had mysteriously disappeared during the night. The SS doctor then decided that the women should be transferred immediately. What Elias and Berta did not realize was that they were being sent back to Auschwitz, which they had left less than a week before. Elias, trying to save herself and her friend, made a spur-of-the-moment decision to “remove the yellow triangles from our dresses and flush the scraps down the toilet” of the train.\(^{242}\) This way, when they entered Auschwitz, they could not be identified as Jews and hoped to receive better treatment because of this. Their ruse worked. Upon entering Auschwitz, they were sent to the infirmary in the woman’s camp.

\(^{241}\) Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, 137.
Soon after entering the infirmary, their story began to spread. Elias recalls,

even Mengele heard about us. He appeared in our block and ordered that we be brought to him. We stood at rigid attention; this was the second time I had been in such close proximity to him. He began to interrogate us, asking us endless questions. Where were we during the selection? Where was he standing at the time? Where were the other doctors standing? What else had we observed there? It was probably inconceivable to him that he, who was all-powerful in determining the fate of the Jews at Auschwitz, had overlooked two pregnant women during the selection process. Finally he said, "First you will deliver your babies, then we'll see."  

Elias and Berta remained in the infirmary while waiting to give birth. While both women wanted "to get it over with," they "also wished to delay the moment because pregnant women got a supplementary food ration."  

On August 3, 1944, Elias went into labor and gave birth to a baby girl. When she heard the first cry of her baby, Elias "could no longer keep back the tears" which were "an expression of despair at the fate of my child." It was for this reason that Elias refrained from naming her daughter and only referred to her as 'my child.' The next morning Dr Mengele came by and saw that Elias had given birth. He took one look at the child and "directed one of the women doctors to tightly bandage" Elias's breasts. By doing this, Elias could no longer breastfeed her baby. She now had become an unwilling participant in one of Dr Mengele's experiments because he wanted

---

244 Ruth Elias, *Triumph of Hope*, 143.
“to see how long a newborn infant can live without being fed.” A week passed, and Elias was still forbidden from feeding her daughter. Her baby “turned ashen-gray” and was too weak from hunger even to whimper. On the seventh day, Mengele told Elias that he would fetch her and her daughter at eight o’clock the next morning. Elias knew that this meant that she and her child were destined for the gas chambers.

Elias, feeling helpless, started telling her story to a Czech Jew named Maca, who listened and promised to help. That night, Maca returned to the infirmary with a hypodermic needle filled with morphine to kill Elias’s baby. Elias at first resisted, “I can’t be the murderer of my own child! Won’t you give her the injection?” Maca, a former dentist, firmly insisted that Ruth do it because she refused to break the Hippocratic Oath. Maca said,

Ruth, you’re young. You must stay alive. Look at your child. She cannot live; in a few hours she will die, anyway. But she must die before Mengele comes to pick you up. If the child is still alive when he gets here, he’ll take you both.

Tired of resisting and knowing that Maca’s argument made sense because she knew that her daughter was going to die soon from starvation anyways, Elias finally agreed. She remembers, “I did it. I killed my own child. Mengele had turned me into a child

---

murderer.”

Aside from Maca, Elias did not tell anyone, not even Berta, what she had done. When Mengele arrived the next morning and inquired about her child, Elias told him that her daughter had died during the night. Mengele seemed pleased and told her, “you’re very lucky. You will leave Auschwitz on the next transport.”

Elias was allowed to remain in the infirmary to support Berta, who had not yet given birth. When Berta’s contractions began, both Maca and Elias were there. The two women decided to spare Berta the agony that Elias had endured by immediately injecting her baby with morphine. When Mengele came by in the morning, the women told him that Berta’s son was stillborn. Mengele then promised Berta that she too would be on the next transport out of Auschwitz.

Elias’s story demonstrates how difficult it was for pregnant women to secure abortions. The Nazis forbade abortions for Jewish women, though their goal was to ensure that there would be no more Jewish births. Instead, they felt it easier to kill both mother and child. Once inmates realized that pregnancy meant certain death, “clandestine abortions and infanticide became life saving alternatives” and some expectant mothers in Auschwitz were able to save their own lives by

---

procuring illegal abortions with the help of inmate physicians and nurses. However, if the SS found out about these prisoners disregard for Nazi policy, they were immediately executed. Hence, access to fellow inmates who were willing to perform these services was extremely limited.

Katharina von Kellenbach argues that “it was part of the Nazi plan to dehumanize their victims by creating situations which left them no moral choice.” The choice was between women saving their own lives or that of one’s children. The will to live was thus put into conflict with one’s maternal instinct. Knowing the internal conflict that pregnant women were experiencing, some rabbis reminded them that the Talmud permits abortion, up until the moment of birth, in order to save an expectant mother’s life. Since Nazi policy was to kill all expectant mothers, abortions were portrayed as life-saving measures.

Though many women sought abortions, most were unsuccessful. In order to save themselves, women carried their pregnancies to term but risked giving birth in the bunkers rather than in infirmaries, hoping to hide their babies and in this way ensure their survival. Nomberg-Przytyk describes one incident where she went with Mancy, a doctor with whom she worked in the

infirmary, to witness a birth. Mancy warned the woman about to give birth that she was “forbidden to utter a sound”\textsuperscript{255} and though the woman was in extreme pain she remained silent throughout the delivery. Though the baby was born healthy, Mancy, like a number of other doctors and nurses working in Auschwitz, told the mother that the child had been born stillborn and proceeded to drown the newborn in a bucket of water before he had a chance to cry. Mancy then dumped the corpse in a pile in front of the barrack ensuring the mother’s survival.

As horrific as this seems, the euthanasia of newborn children by prisoners was a common occurrence. As cruel as this must sound today, one must understand the twisted logic expressed by the chief doctor of Auschwitz, Josef Mengele who reportedly stated,

\textit{when a Jewish child is born, or a woman comes to camp with a child already, I don’t know what to do with the child. I can’t set the child free because there are no longer any Jews who live in freedom. I can’t let the child stay in the camp because there are no facilities in the camp that would enable the child to develop normally. It would not be humanitarian to send a child to the ovens without permitting the mother to be there to witness the child’s death. That is why I send the mother and the child to the gas ovens together.}\textsuperscript{256}

In order to spare women from this fate, doctors, nurses, and sometimes the mothers themselves killed babies either by drowning or with an injection of morphine or phenol if the child was born healthy.

\textsuperscript{255} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 70.
\textsuperscript{256} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 68.
Olga Lengyel recounts experiences similar to Nomberg-Przytyk’s. She recalls that “as soon as a baby was delivered at the infirmary, mother and child were sent to the gas chambers.” The mother was spared only if “the infant was not likely to survive or it was stillborn.” The conclusion she and other doctors drew from this “was simple: the Germans did not want the newborn to live; if they did, the mothers too must die.”

Lengyel and the other doctors, tired of sending both mother and child to their deaths, decided to try to save the mothers. To accomplish this, they had to pass the infants off as stillborn without raising the suspicion of the SS. Unfortunately, the fate of every baby had to be the same. After taking every precaution, we pinched and closed the little tike’s nostrils and when it opened its mouth to breathe, we gave it a dose of a lethal product. An injection might have been quicker, but that would have left a trace and we dared not let the Germans suspect the truth. We placed the dead infant in the same box which had brought it from the barrack, if the accouchement had taken place there. As far as the camp administration was concerned, this was a stillbirth.

Lengyel lamented the fact that “the Germans succeeded in making murderers of even us” and wondered if a child she had killed was not the next “Pasteur, Mozart, or Einstein.” Her only consolation was that “by these murders we saved the lives of the mothers” and that without the intervention of the doctors the

---

mothers “would have endured worse sufferings, for they would have been thrown into the crematory ovens while still alive.”

The Nazis, noticing the extraordinarily low birth rate, resorted to trickery to catch pregnant women. Similar to Ruth Elias’s experience, Lengyel recalls the SS announcing that “pregnant women, even such Jewesses who were still alive, would be given special treatment” and promised expectant mothers that they “would be allowed to remain away from roll call, receive a larger ration of bread and soup, and be permitted to sleep in a special barrack.” The SS went so far as to guarantee that women “would be transferred to a hospital as soon as their time came.” Though the Nazis did not intend to fill these promises, many women fell for the deception and announced themselves. They were promptly killed.

Chapter Six: Solidarity

In a place where selfishness and self-preservation should have reigned supreme, few women in Auschwitz held an ‘every woman for herself’ attitude. Instead, women stayed with their families or befriended other female inmates and treated them as family members, even if they were complete strangers, which suggested a specifically female form of bonding and solidarity. These relationships were designed to help women in a number of ways, not the least of which was keeping up their spirits. Indeed, the solidarity and support found in these groups often aided survival.

Since Auschwitz was designed to strip prisoners of their individuality, families, whether surrogate or biological, remained one place where women were seen as individuals rather than the number tattooed on their arm. These relationships provided an avenue for inmates to recover their identities and reclaim their humanity. Indeed, many women claim that they survived Auschwitz because the other members of their group

---

265 Men, in their memoirs, rarely talk about the relationships they had with other prisoners, except occasionally in passing. Women tend to focus extensively on these friendships in their memoirs and often credit them for being the reason they survived Auschwitz.
pooled their “resources and energies, and devoted considerable effort to helping” to make sure everyone in their family stayed alive.\textsuperscript{266}

Having other people to trust was especially important in a place like Auschwitz where survival was based on scant physical resources. Membership in a family gave inmates a sense of security and often served as protection against the theft of food and other valuables.

For many women, staying with or “forming a family in Auschwitz was an act of resistance at the personal level because” it offered them “hope and support.”\textsuperscript{267} Indeed, Ami Neiberger asserts these relationships “imbued their lives with meaning and gave them the strength to embrace life.”\textsuperscript{268} In addition to sharing material goods, membership in these groups allowed women the belief that they could survive and have a future after Auschwitz. Indeed, Joan Ringelheim believes, their relationships— their conversations, singing, storytelling, recipe sharing, praying, joke telling, gossiping— helped them to transform a world of death and inhumanity into one more act of human life.\textsuperscript{269}

Acts as simple as having nightly conversations with other inmates gave women “a way to maintain hope and community in

\textsuperscript{267} Ami Neiberger, “An Uncommon Bond of Friendship,” 144.
\textsuperscript{268} Ami Neiberger, “An Uncommon Bond of Friendship,” 145.
inhumane conditions.”  

Ellen S. Fine states that this “sharing of memory... constituted a form of resistance.”

While Ami Neiberger believes that “risking one’s life for another makes very little sense in the world of Auschwitz,” women, through their memoirs, recall that it happened quite frequently. Indeed, as Marlene Heinemann states, many of these same memoirs “contain evidence” that contradicts the assumption “about the predominance of selfishness over cooperation” in Auschwitz. Instead, women often mention the “comforting power of conversation, the saving of comrade’s lives, or the pain of seeing others suffer.” It seems, as Heinemann states, that “only the most selfish in character became so hardened, while for many their incredible personal suffering only increased their concern for the need of others.”

This was especially true for women whose immediate families were in Auschwitz. All of the women analyzed who had members of their biological family with them recount the tremendous chances they took, often risking death, to try and help their relatives.

273 Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 81.
274 Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 81.
275 Marlene E. Heinemann, Gender and Destiny, 6.
survive. For women, helping their family members, even if they were distant relatives, provided them with a reminder of home.

This was certainly true in the case of Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, who found out that her sister Renate was in Auschwitz quite by coincidence. Lasker-Wallfisch and Renate were German Jews but were classified by the Nazis as Karteihäftlinge, or prisoners with a file, because both women had participated in “helping enemies of the Reich and forging papers in order to escape from Germany.” Renate, as the older sibling, was thought to be more responsible for their crime so she was moved to a different prison than Lasker-Wallfisch. Soon after her trial, Lasker-Wallfisch was forced to sign a document “to say that I was going to Auschwitz voluntarily” and she was then transferred.

Upon arriving at Auschwitz, Lasker-Wallfisch, realizing that she was going to lose her shoes anyway, gave them to another inmate who had asked for them rather than surrender them to the Nazis. Her shoes were quite distinctive: black pigskin with red laces and bobbles. At the time, she had no idea “what effect this transaction would have.” Lasker-Wallfisch had been in Auschwitz for approximately two weeks when the same girl to whom she had given the shoes came.

---

277 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 71.
278 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 79.
running into the block and asked me to come immediately to the Reception Block with her. She said, ‘I think your sister is here...’ I raced over and she was. It was incredible. You need to take into account the vast size of the camp to appreciate the enormity of the coincidence. What had happened was that my sister arrived with a transport from Jauer and was being processed by the very person who had processed me shortly before. Renate noticed her shoes and asked where they came from. When she heard that they had belonged to someone who... was now in the orchestra, she knew instantaneously that it could only be me.279

The two sisters were overjoyed to be together again. Unfortunately, their reunion was short-lived. Renate, who did not play an instrument, could not be housed in the orchestra barrack with her sister.

Lasker-Wallfisch, as a privileged prisoner, made a conscious decision to try and help her sister. Risking her life, she went to Maria Mandel, “the camp commander” and an extremely sadistic guard, and asked her “whether it would be possible for her (Renate) to become a Lauferin.”280 In this position, Renate would receive “marginally better housing” and the possibility of “better rations.”281 Mandel, creator of the camp orchestra, surprisingly agreed to Lasker-Wallfisch’s request. This led Lasker-Wallfisch to believe that she could “safely say that the cello saved not only my life but my sister’s life as well.”282 The sisters continued to help and support each other through the duration of the war.

279 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 80.
280 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 80. A Lauferin was a camp messenger.
281 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 80.
282 Anita Lasker-Wallfisch, Inherit the Truth, 81.
Isabella Leitner and three of her sisters, Rachel, Cipi, and Chicha all survived Dr. Mengele’s initial selection and found each other inside Auschwitz even though they had been separated in the confusion of the unloading of the cattle cars. Upon seeing each other for the first time, Leitner recalls, “we are so happy” even though “we look so terrible” from having their heads shaved. Immediately, the four women vowed to stay together at all costs. Though she loved her sisters, Leitner recalls,

to be a lone person... was perhaps a blessing. To have sisters still alive, not to be alone, was a blessing too, but fraught with tests, daily, hourly: When this day ends, will there still be four of us?

Leitner feels that “if you are sisterless, you do not have the pressure, the absolute responsibility to end the day alive.”

Though Leitner felt that having her sisters with her in Auschwitz was sometimes a burden, she acknowledges that she most likely would not have survived without their help and support. Her sisters echo her sentiment. Leitner recalls her sister Rachel once saying,

alone, I won’t make it. I don’t want to make it. Whatever effort I am making now is all for you. I no longer care to live—unless, and only if, we are together. The minute we’re separated, I’ll be on my way to the crematorium, and that will be fine with me. You are forcing me to stay alive...

---

284 Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella, 44.
285 Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella, 44.
286 Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella, 45.
During selections, the sisters frantically tried to make each other look healthier by pinching their cheeks “to an unnatural redness” and having their youngest sister, Rachel, stand on her toes so she would look older than her fifteen years.²⁸⁷ Ami Neiberger theorizes, as in the case of Isabella Leitner’s sister Rachel, that “group pressure played a significant role in maintaining personal appearance.”²⁸⁸ When an individual like Rachel no longer had the will to live, their family, much like Leitner’s, could force them to continue in their battle for survival. Women realized that their appearance “was extremely important because it influenced an individual’s attitude, denoted status within the camp, and affected surviving a sudden selection... for death or a labor transport.”²⁸⁹

Leitner and her three sisters forced each other to remain strong during their time at Auschwitz and did not allow the others to succumb to the temptation of becoming musselmen, or individuals who no longer had the desire to live.

Eva Mozes Kor, unlike Leitner and Lasker-Wallfisch, did not have to worry about being separated from her sister Miriam. In order for Mengele to “create the perfect race, the Master race,” he felt he had to study twins so that he could understand their

²⁸⁷ Isabella Leitner, Fragments of Isabella, 56.
genetic make-up. If one twin died during an experiment, “then the other twin was killed” and the bodies compared during an autopsy. Kor, once she had this realization, recognized that her survival was contingent on Miriam’s.

Kor believed that her sister “Miriam had been the weaker one all along” so she felt a sense of responsibility to ensure that Miriam survived. Even when Kor was injected with a drug that brought her to the brink of death and even Mengele believed “she... has only two weeks to live,” she continued to fight for her life so that she and Miriam could be reunited. Miriam could not visit Kor in the infirmary, but helped her to the best of her ability by sending over her daily ration of bread once she realized that Kor was not receiving any food. Once Kor was released, her happiness about being reunited with Miriam was short-lived. In her absence, Miriam, thinking Kor was going to die, had become a musselman. Kor knew that her “absence and the toll of my disease had severely affected Miriam.” Kor believes,

that part of the reason she was so weak, so ill was that she thought I was not coming back. I had to help her. I believed we were the only ones left in our family. I could not lose her.

291 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 107.
292 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 109.
293 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 113. To this day, Kor does not know the substance with which she was injected.
294 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 117-118.
295 Eva Mozes Kor, Echoes from Auschwitz, 119.
It was for this reason that Kor, who was still weak from her illness, decided to volunteer for a job working as a food carrier so that she could organize some potatoes for her sister. She felt that the extra food would lift Miriam’s spirits. The potatoes that Kor organized, in her opinion, “provided Miriam with enough nourishment that they worked like a miracle drug on her” and “she became healthier and more willing to fight for her own life.” The two sisters continued their reliance on each other throughout the duration of the war.

Rena Kornreich Gelissen felt a special responsibility to ensure the survival of her sister, Danka. Danka volunteered to come to Auschwitz because she wanted to be with Gelissen and she too believed the Nazi propaganda that Auschwitz was a labor camp. Once Gelissen saw Danka, she knew that she had found her “reason and will to live.” Gelissen convinced Elza, her block elder, to let Danka stay with her in the barrack. Elza agreed at the expense of another girl who was already living there. Gelissen recognized, “this is a selfish act, but I have a sister that I have to keep alive and that is all that matters.” Gelissen knew that in order to save herself and her sister pre-war standards of morality were not applicable. She recalls, “I

296 Eva Mozes Kor, *Echoes from Auschwitz*, 121.
know I must be with my sister. I know I must make sure she lives; without her I cannot survive.” 299 For her, “nothing else matters but” to “be with Danka.” 300 Throughout their time at Auschwitz, Gelissen endured several beatings and punishments all in the name of helping Danka.

Of course not all familial relationships in Auschwitz were comprised solely of sisters. Livia Bitton Jackson, her mother, and her aunt Serena arrived at Auschwitz at the same time. During their initial selection, Jackson and her mother were separated from Serena, who was sent to the left. Imagine Jackson’s surprise once she entered the camp to find her cousins Suri and Hindi, who had arrived a few days prior. Her cousins were excited to spot her and promised, “we will be together from now on.” 301 They rushed off to find Jackson’s mother and in the process spotted her aunt Celia. The women “decide to form a family of five and vow never to be separated from each other.” 302 On Jackson’s tenth day in Auschwitz, Celia informed her that she had found a woman in Jackson’s bunker willing to switch barracks with her. Jackson’s cousins were “also looking for girls willing to change places with them.” 303 This way the five women

299 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise, 99.
300 Rena Kornreich Gelissen, Rena’s Promise, 101.
302 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 89.
303 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 98.
could stand together during roll call. Jackson’s cousin Suri believed,

it is much easier to survive in Auschwitz if you are five. Bread and food is distributed in Zahlappel. Every five get one portion of bread and one bowl of food. Those ahead of you take the first bites of bread and the first gulps of soup. If you are tall and stand last, you get the smallest piece of bread and the bowl may be empty by the time it reaches you. But if you have family or friends on the line, you are careful to share it equally.304

Suri realized that most women would not better their own life at the expense of their family.

In her article “An Uncommon Bond of Friendship,” Ami Neiberger insists that “cooperating within a group of five was very practical”305 because as Jackson demonstrates members “would share the soup equally,” “help prop each other up during the long” roll calls, and “warn each other” if danger, usually in the form of an SS officer, was approaching.306 Neiberger believes having a ‘family’ of five was also beneficial because occasionally, when the work parties marched through the camp gate going to or from their assignments outside the camps, the officials would perform a sudden inspection by standing on each side of the gate and observing each row as it marched through. Anyone who stumbled, tripped, or looked ill was removed and killed. Families shielded their weaker members by strategically placing them on the inside of the row and a few paces further from the eyes of officials.307

Of course, as Jackson later realized, in Auschwitz not every family consisted of five members.

304 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 89. See also Ami Neiberger, “An Uncommon Bond of Friendship,” 136.
306 Livia Bitton Jackson, I Have Lived a Thousand Years, 98.
Unfortunately, before Celia, Suri, or Hindi could move into Jackson’s barrack, she and her mother were placed on a labor transport to Plaszow and were unable to let the rest of their family know what had happened to them.

When Jackson and her mother re-entered Auschwitz a few months later, they were unable to find their relatives again so Jackson assumed full responsibility for the well-being of her mother. By this time, Jackson’s mother had lost all of her will to live. Jackson refused to let her mother succumb to becoming a *musselman* because she believed that her survival was contingent on her mother’s. When Jackson’s mother was badly injured in an accident in their barrack, Heinemann demonstrates that Jackson’s reactions to her mother’s injury and illness “prove... that great personal courage can arise from the belief that someone else’s survival is necessary to one’s own.”

Jackson, risking death, visited her mother in the infirmary every day until she heard rumors that a selection was about to take place. When she heard this, Jackson desperately turned to Mrs. Grunwald and Ilse, neighbors from her native Hungary for help. Jackson recalls the exchange:

“I’m asking you to risk your life,” I whisper. “I need your help.” Without a moment’s hesitation Mrs. Grunwald’s reply comes, “I’ll come.” “I’ll come, too,” young Ilse Grunwald volunteers. I need one more person to help me sneak Mommy out of the infirmary and carry her all the way to our cell block. It is a dangerous undertaking- and if we get caught we will be sent to the gas chamber. I have been warned by

---

308 Marlene E. Heinemann, *Gender and Destiny*, 105.
the SS commandant that I would be put to death if I so much approached
the Revier. But I have no alternative. Mommy must be smuggled out.\(^{309}\)

Knowing she could not carry her mother to safety without the
help of one more person, Jackson enlisted Yitu, a woman who
lived in her barrack. She too agreed to risk her life to help
Jackson’s mother. The four women were able to successfully
sneak Jackson’s mother out of the infirmary and she passed the
subsequent selection. Jackson, however, did not. In her desire
to be with her mother, Jackson bypassed the SS and underwent
another selection, which she passed. Jackson’s thoughts though
were not about her miraculous escape from death, but happiness
that “we are together, Mommy and I. What a divine miracle.”\(^{310}\)

Ruth Kluger, like Jackson, entered Auschwitz in the company
of her mother. Wanting to protect her daughter, Kluger’s mother
asked her their first night in the camp, quite nonchalantly, if
the two of them should commit suicide by walking into the
 electrified fence. Kluger thought that her mother was not
serious and dismissed her proposal. Her mother accepted her
refusal “and she never returned to her suggestion.”\(^{311}\) Only when
Kluger had children of her own did she “realize that one might
well decide to kill them in Auschwitz rather than wait.

\(^{309}\) Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, 134.
\(^{310}\) Livia Bitton Jackson, *I Have Lived a Thousand Years*, 143.
\(^{311}\) Ruth Kluger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* (New York:
 Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2001), 97.
Committing suicide is... certainly more acceptable than the prearranged death at Birkenau.”

Kluger’s mother never brought the topic up again. Instead, the two women tried to take care of each other in the best way either of them knew how. Kluger recalled one incident where

my mother carries soup. The enormous barrel is suspended between two poles. All together four women carry it, two in front, two behind. The weight is too much for my mother. I am stunned to see her this way, her face red and the veins protruding. She must have volunteered for the extra bowl of soup. For me. I don’t want that. Don’t do this to me!

Kluger and her mother did not always see eye-to-eye in the camp and disagreed quite frequently. Despite their differences, Kluger expected her mother to take care of her in ways she did not even admit to herself. During one selection, Kluger told the guards that she was twelve and was not selected to go with her mother to a labor camp. Her mother was notified that “she would leave the camp shortly.” Kluger’s mother told her that she would not leave the camp without her, and pleaded for Kluger to try again, this time lying about her age and saying that she was fifteen. Kluger resisted and told her mother she would only say that she was thirteen. When she got back in line, a clerk told her to lie to the guard and tell him that she was fifteen. Kluger heeded the clerk’s advice and her number was also written down for transfer. Kluger acknowledges if the roles were

---

reversed, “I wouldn’t have sacrificed myself for my mother, though I would have considered it natural if she had stayed with me.”

Once the two women were moved from the Auschwitz family camp to the women’s camp, Kluger’s mother adopted an orphan named Susi, who was “without a soul to turn to.” Kluger’s mother simply said to her, “come along and join us” which Susi did. Kluger was impressed that her mother “decreed without any fuss that this girl belonged with us, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.” Her mother “made her (Susi) feel like she mattered.” Kluger felt that without us Susi “would have remained isolated; with us she was part of a family, and was thus valuable.” Kluger suspects “that perhaps all three of us can claim a share in having saved each other.”

The women described above were part of a minority because it was often impossible for female inmates to stay with their biological families in Auschwitz. Some women were deported alone, others lost track of their family members in the confusion of the unloading of the cattle cars, while many were directed by the SS during the initial selection to go in one
direction while their relatives were sent in another. These conditions made it so that the women who stayed or met up with their biological families in the camps were few in number.

Yet, the harsh conditions did not stop women from forming surrogate families once they were inside Auschwitz. These groups consisted of women whose goal was to stay together at all costs. Only a small fraction “of these associations were based on (loose) familial ties.”322 More frequently they consisted of “non-relatives who behaved as surrogate family members.”323 These families were formed so that women could help each other both physically and emotionally. Indeed, some historians such as Joan Ringelheim believe that “women were able to transform their habits of raising children or their experience of nurturing into the care of the non-biological family.”324

As close as these women became, they knew that these relationships were at the mercy of SS officers who could transfer and murder inmates at will. Not surprisingly, women who were separated from their families tried desperately to get back to them. Though women tried to stay with their families at all costs, they recognized that this was not always an obtainable goal. Therefore, women realized that they had to be

323 Nechama Tec, Resilience and Courage, 176.
flexible in creating or joining new families if it was no longer possible for them to stay with their old one.

Olga Lengyel for example had no family members on whom she could rely. When Lengyel arrived in Auschwitz, she, like Gelissen, believed the German propaganda that it was a work camp. Since she did not want her mother to be overextended, Lengyel persuaded her to accompany Lengyel’s two sons to the left, wanting to spare her from hard work. Inadvertently, she had condemned her to death. Her husband, Miklos, was sent to the male camp, but not long after they had arrived, “the men were removed from the camp” and Lengyel heard no news from or about him. Distraught at having lost her entire family, Lengyel was ready to commit suicide by taking the poison she had hidden in her boot. Before she could kill herself, Lengyel, a surgical assistant in the pre-war era, was assigned to work as a doctor in the camp infirmary. She and other members of the infirmary staff bonded in the evenings “pondering the chances for liberation and endlessly analyzing the latest developments in the war.” Other nights, they reminisced, speaking of the ones who were dear to us, or simply discussing the tormenting problems of the day such as should we or should we not condemn the newborn to death in order to save the poor mothers. We even recited poetry to lull ourselves into a calm state of mind to forget, to escape the frightful present.

326 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 72.
327 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 72.
For Lengyel, these twelve women became her surrogate family. Like any family, they "laughed together..., cried together" and had their "differences of opinion," but were willing to "make sacrifices for each other." Ultimately, these women gave Lengyel a reason to survive. They kept her spirits up when she was depressed and their selflessness, even in the harsh world of Auschwitz, gave her a reason to believe that she could have a good life after Liberation.

Though her sister Renate was also in Auschwitz, Anita Lasker-Wallfisch did not live in the same barrack as her and could not see her as often as she wanted. For these reasons, she created a surrogate family consisting of some of the other members of the orchestra. Their shared isolation from the other inmates created "a feeling of being together 'in the same shit' and firm friendships were formed." Lasker-Wallfisch believes, it is very important not to underestimate the mutual support we gave one another. I think we all contributed a little to each other’s survival. We watched everyone and bullied people when... we noticed the first signs of slacking in personal hygiene.

Lasker-Wallfisch remembers the time when she was ill with jaundice. Unable to "endure the eternal turnip soup any longer," her friends "fished out whatever bits of potato they could find... and gave them to me," which was a tremendous

---

328 Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys*, 147, 150.
The bonds that Lasker-Wallfisch formed with these women were so strong that “most of us kept in touch over all the years that have passed since the war.”

Ruth Elias arrived in Auschwitz with no family other than her husband, Koni. Elias’s immediate family had been deported from the Theresienstadt ghetto over a year before and she had heard rumors from fellow inmates that they had been killed in the gas chambers. Though Elias and Koni initially “got together every evening after work on the camp street,” Elias “soon began to feel a sense of estrangement” from Koni because he was not interested in her pregnancy. During her first period of internment in Auschwitz, Elias mentions no friends other than her husband. It was only after she was briefly transferred to Hamburg, Germany and then to the Ravensbruck concentration camp that she befriended another pregnant woman named Berta.

When Elias and Berta returned to Auschwitz, the two women were taken to the camp infirmary where Josef Mengele waited for them to give birth. Though both women had healthy babies, Elias risked her life and injected both newborns with morphine in order to save her and Berta’s lives. Mengele, happy that both children died, allowed both women to be transferred together to Taucha, a “labor camp satellite of the Buchenwald concentration camp.

---

The two women managed to stay together through the duration of the war. After Liberation, when they returned to their native Czechoslovakia, Elias stayed with Berta in her apartment until she could find one of her own.

Like Elias, Lucille Eichengreen’s family had been deported from the Lodz ghetto and killed before she was deported to Auschwitz. In the ghetto, Eichengreen had befriended a girl named Elli. In Auschwitz, the two women were fortunate enough to be assigned to the same barrack. During their first night, their Kapo, Maja informed them that in the morning they “would line up outside for Appell (in) straight rows of five, in alphabetical order.” This information was a cause for alarm because Eichengreen and Elli “wanted to be able to stay together and face whatever fate might await us.” Eichengreen then had an idea.

“We’ll stand with the S group,” I suggested. “They have no records of our names, and we no longer have papers. If they should ask, I’ll tell them that I was married to your brother in the ghetto. They can’t prove anything now.” Elli did not look convinced. “But what if they find out somehow?” Finally, she nodded a reluctant agreement. I was relieved, and the other three in our group followed my suggestion, each thinking of a name that started with an S.

Her plan initially worked, but soon after their arrival there was a selection. The five women marched past the SS together,

---

334 Ruth Elias, Triumph of Hope, 162.
335 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust (San Francisco, California: Mercury House, 1994), 97.
336 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life, 97.
337 Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life, 97.
but only Eichengreen and Elli were sent to the right. The two women were transferred to a labor camp in Germany together. Sara Nomberg-Przytyk had a different kind of family in Auschwitz. Though she had been raised as a Hasidic Jew, she self-identified as a Communist. Upon arrival in Auschwitz, conditions were so bad in her barrack that Nomberg-Przytyk decided to commit suicide. The day before she was set to kill herself a fellow Communist, Sonia, with whom Nomberg-Przytyk had previously been imprisoned, came to see her and promised to get her out of her barrack by the following day. Sonia also promised to “organize a warm sweater and boots” as well as food for her. Before Sonia had an opportunity to make good on her promises, Nomberg-Przytyk’s barrack was chosen to undergo a selection. Weak from her journey to Auschwitz, Nomberg-Przytyk did not think that she would pass. Suddenly, an “angel” came and took Nomberg-Przytyk away before it was her turn to be examined. Curious about whom this girl was since Nomberg-Przytyk had never seen her before, the girl explained that she too was a friend of Sonia and had saved Nomberg-Przytyk as a favor to her. Sonia’s motto was, “Do you know why I came here? To find friends and help them as much as we can. We are not

without means, even in this hell.”\textsuperscript{340} This statement demonstrates the lengths that women were willing to go to help each other, even if meant making one’s life slightly less comfortable.

Nomberg-Przytyk’s help from her Communist ‘family’ did not end there. After she was saved from the selection, she ran into another friend Masza, “a slightly rebellious Communist,” who also promised “in a few days, we’ll get you out of here.”\textsuperscript{341} True to her word, several days later Nomberg-Przytyk was summoned to the infirmary. It seemed Masza had convinced Orli, a German Communist who was a Lagerälteste, to give Nomberg-Przytyk a job as a clerk. Nomberg-Przytyk upon hearing this thought to herself, “maybe this was the help from my friends that I had been waiting for.”\textsuperscript{342} Orli, it seemed, commonly used her position to help her fellow comrades. The other women in the infirmary with whom Nomberg-Przytyk became close were predominantly Communists as well. The women bonded like any real family would, and were not afraid to take chances for each other, such as organizing a New Year’s Eve celebration in 1944. Though Nomberg-Przytyk was wearing a yellow Star of David instead of a red triangle, the help she received from fellow

\textsuperscript{340} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 24.  
\textsuperscript{341} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 30.  
\textsuperscript{342} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 36.
travelers meant the difference between life and death on more than one occasion.
Chapter Seven: Lesbians

Sometimes the friendships that women made with other women developed into something more. Though none of the authors examined admit partaking in any homosexual activity, lesbian relationships did exist in Auschwitz and were more common than generally acknowledged. Joan Ringelheim asserts that women’s attitudes in their memoirs “toward lesbian relationships in the camps seem at best ambiguous or ambivalent.” Part of the reason for this is during the post-war era “lesbians were socially ostracized into silence.” Until recently, it remained taboo for women survivors to discuss “love (and) sexuality... between women” when writing about their experiences in Auschwitz. Therefore, few female survivors wrote memoirs that contained lesbian content.

For historians, it is problematic determining what constitutes a lesbian. Claudia Schoppmann, in Days of

---

Masquerade, acknowledges that “the lowest common denominator is their love of women.”

Schoppmann wonders, should the term pertain only to a sexual practice, which normally cannot be proven anyway, or to a lifestyle in which the political, intellectual, emotional, and sexual energies of a woman are directed toward other women? Or should the term lesbian be used to refer only to women who define themselves as such?

This is often problematic because many members of the older generations are reluctant to self-identify as such. As R. Amy Elman states, historians focusing on women in the Holocaust are forced to, “read between the lines.” This does not mean that one discovers lesbians where none exists. Rather, marriage and other public postures notwithstanding, one is especially careful to avoid presumptions of heterosexuality. After all, assertions of heterosexuality, however minimal, have frequently furnished many gays and lesbians with protection from identification, arrest, and sometimes, even death.

Women persecuted as lesbians by the Nazis, regardless of their ‘race’ or religion, were sent to Auschwitz and other concentration camps marked as ‘asocials’ along with thieves, murderers, and prostitutes. Unlike gay men, lesbians in the camps did not compose a distinct category of prisoners. Instead, lesbians, along with all other Nazi deemed ‘asocials’ were marked with a black triangle on their clothing. R. Amy Elman believes “few recollections of lesbian persecution exist... because lesbians were not as readily identifiable” as gay men,

---

347 Claudia Schoppmann, Days of Masquerade, 25.
348 R. Amy Elman, “Lesbians and the Holocaust,” 10. See also Schoppmann, Days of Masquerade, 25. Adrienne Rich also makes this argument in “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.”
whose pink triangles “exclusively signified their ‘crime’.”

This is because, for the Nazis, lesbianism was not as serious of a threat to an Aryan future as male homosexuality. Schoppmann notes that “there was no criminal persecution of lesbians, whereas approximately 50,000 men were convicted under Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code,” 10,000 to 15,000 thousand of whom were interned in concentration camps. Male homosexuality was punished more harshly in part because the “majority of Nazis believed that female sexuality did not represent a threat to the German national community.”

Due to the fact that it was very difficult to tell who in the ‘asocial’ group was a lesbian, and that there are no concrete figures on the number of lesbians sent to Auschwitz, lesbian activity in the camps is often explained away “as an act of desperation for women lacking in ‘male companionship’.” Others, including Sybil Milton, feel that many instances of lesbian activity occurred because “traditional anxieties and guilt about sex were not applicable in the world of total

---

349 R. Amy Elman, “Lesbians and the Holocaust,” 11. The Nazis believed that lesbians were less of a threat to an Aryan future than gay men. Their belief was that lesbians could continue having sex with men and procreating, but male homosexuals could not. This was important to the Nazis because they wanted as many Aryan babies as possible born in order to continue the Third Reich. Gay men were seen as traitors because they were not performing their ‘duty’ by not having children.

350 Claudia Schoppmann, Days of Masquerade, 10. Paragraph 175 made homosexual activity between men punishable.

351 Claudia Schoppmann, Days of Masquerade, 15.

For example, Vera Laska believes, 

as in prisons, in concentration camps women who would otherwise regard lesbianism with abhorrence could gradually slide into the acceptance of such liaisons. 

Laska however acknowledges, “this was mostly true in the cases of couples where one of the lovers was in a privileged position.” Many female survivors, including Isabella Leitner, have the tendency to mention lesbianism exclusively in relation to power. Laska would agree with Leitner to some extent, stating

if a woman had a position of eminence within the camp hierarchy, such as a block senior or Kapo, with separate quarters, chances were better for such friendships to evolve into a sexual relationship.

Yet, there were no doubt hundreds of lesbian relationships in Auschwitz between equals. Often, these relationships could not be distinguished from the close friendships that many women shared. Laska believes that more of these relationships would have existed if it was not for “the ever-present fear of punishment and the lack of privacy for physical love making” not to mention “the fear of being discovered, ridiculed, or beaten-up by bed partners.” It is for this reason that Schoppmann

355 Vera Laska, “Vera Laska,” 263.
356 Vera Laska, “Vera Laska,” 263.
357 Vera Laska, “Vera Laska,” 264.
asserts “the number of women who were subjected to the horrors of the concentration camps because they were lesbians cannot be documented.” She believes that “most lesbians were spared a fate in the camps... if they were willing to conform” and act as if they were heterosexual.

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk describes the social taboo of homosexuality in that era by stating, “only in the camp was it possible to find such affection among women.” While inmates were often “repelled by... flirtations,” lesbian relationships, according to Nomberg-Przytyk, were loathed primarily when one of the females in the relationship was a Nazi. Inmates who willingly entered into relationships with Nazi leaders, such as Irma Griese, were the most reviled women in the camps for breaking not one but two social taboos.

For example, Isabella Leitner’s descriptions of her experiences with lesbianism in Auschwitz were limited to what happened with her sister, Chicha, who was pursued by Irma Griese. Leitner recalls of Griese that “it is said that Chicha appeals to her.” Yet, these feelings only manifested themselves “in the fact that she always recognizes her and

358 Claudia Schoppmann, *Days of Masquerade*, 23.
tortures her more than others” for refusing to enter into a sexual relationship with her.\textsuperscript{363}

Rena Kornreich Gelissen was personally propositioned by someone in a position of authority, Erika, who was a Kapo. Initially, Erika approached Gelissen and asked if Gelissen wanted “to come and see our block.”\textsuperscript{364} Gelissen, thinking that this was a strange request, said she could not because she was Jewish and not allowed in Erika’s block. Erika persistently informed Gelissen that she would “take the responsibility” if Gelissen was caught.\textsuperscript{365} Gelissen, not wanting to anger Erika, finally agreed to accompany her to her barrack. Once Gelissen entered Erika’s room, Erika asked her “have you ever loved a woman?”\textsuperscript{366} Gelissen misunderstood the question and said “of course. I love my mama and my sister.”\textsuperscript{367} Erika then asked if Gelissen would like to spend the night with her. Gelissen, though tempted by the offer of clean sheets and warm blankets, politely refused saying that her sister Danka would be too worried about her. Erika laughed and said,

“You go back to your block. You’re not ready for this.” She leads me to the door. “Here.” She slips me an extra piece of bread. I take it quickly, not understanding why she would offer me such a nicety, not comprehending anything that has just happened.\textsuperscript{368}

\textsuperscript{365} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 87.
\textsuperscript{366} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 88.
\textsuperscript{367} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 88.
\textsuperscript{368} Rena Kornreich Gelissen, \textit{Rena’s Promise}, 88.
Unlike Gelissen, other women chose to enter into sexual relationships with their superiors for comfort and to ensure themselves one extra plate of bread or bowl of soup everyday. Nomberg-Przytyk claims that inmates had mixed feelings about these relationships. An example of this is the relationship between her blokowa, Ania, and her lover Liza. Though the women on her block acknowledged that Ania always treated them fairly, they still knew that she would always “manage to reserve a warm and comfortable place to sleep and a plate of thick soup for herself and her darling Liza.”\textsuperscript{369} This affection led Ania to “feed and dress her; she did all the hard work for her” which led to feelings of resentment from the other women in her barrack.\textsuperscript{370}

Olga Lengyel, unlike most women survivors, describes lesbianism in Auschwitz in some length, which is surprising because \textit{Five Chimneys} was published in 1947. Lengyel recalls that “love, or what passed for it in the degraded atmosphere of the death camp, was but a distortion of what it is for normal people.”\textsuperscript{371} Unlike other survivors who believe that their libido was lowered in Auschwitz, Lengyel feels “the constant nervous tension under which we lived did little to depress our

\textsuperscript{369} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 4.
\textsuperscript{370} Sara Nomberg-Przytyk, \textit{Auschwitz}, 4.
On the contrary, “the mental anguish seemed to provide a peculiar stimulus.” Lengyel recalls, as in all prisons, Birkenau had its perverts. Among the women there were three categories. Those who were lesbians by instinct formed the least interesting group. More troublesome was the second classification, which included women who, because of abnormal conditions, suffered changes in their sexual viewpoint. Often they yielded under the pressure of necessity. In the third category were those who discovered their lesbian predilections through an association with corruption. This was encouraged by the “dance soirees” that were sometimes organized in the Dantesque world of Birkenau.

Lengyel believes that during “these orgies the couples who danced together gradually became attached to each other.”

Eventually “some of the women assumed male attire to lend an air of reality to the proceedings.” Lengyel recalls one occasion when she wondered, “what is a man doing in this place? For she looked exactly like a male.” When Lengyel questioned another inmate, she was surprised to find out “this man is not a man- ‘He’ is a she!” This same individual later tried to pursue Lengyel, who on one occasion lamented, “I actually had to run to escape her.” Though Lengyel insists that she never partook in the dances, she acknowledges she was often “awakened by kisses and caresses” from her admirer until it got to the point where she was afraid to sleep while a dance was

---

372 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 195.
373 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 195.
374 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 197-198.
375 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 198.
376 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 198.
377 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 198.
378 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 198.
379 Olga Lengyel, Five Chimneys, 198.
occurring.\textsuperscript{380} Though the other women in her barrack “were amused by her ardent courtship,” Lengyel was not.\textsuperscript{381} She later admits that perhaps her “disgust was groundless under the circumstances” because she understood the need for human contact and companionship.\textsuperscript{382}

\textsuperscript{380} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 199.
\textsuperscript{381} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 199.
\textsuperscript{382} Olga Lengyel, \textit{Five Chimneys}, 199.
Chapter Eight:
Conclusions

Though these eleven women were liberated from Auschwitz over sixty years ago, they have never been able to fully leave this chapter of their life behind. Auschwitz follows them wherever they go, no matter how hard they may have tried to forget their experiences there. Regardless of what path their lives were taking prior to their internment, after Liberation their plans changed drastically. Most of these women, in their memoirs, shared some details of their lives after the war.

Sara Nomberg-Przytyk

Following Liberation, Nomberg-Przytyk immediately returned to her native Poland. On her way to Lublin, she excitedly told a soldier “I am rushing back to my country because they are building a Socialist state there.”383 Though excited that Poland had a Communist government, Nomberg-Przytyk was warned by this soldier not to tell the people she meets that she is a Communist because she could suffer violent repercussions. Nomberg-Przytyk married and stayed in Poland until October 1968, when she was

forced to leave for undisclosed reasons. She immigrated to Israel, where she stayed until 1975 when she left for Canada to be with the eldest of her two sons.

**Rena Kornreich Gelissen**

On July 29, 1947, Gelissen married John Gelissen, the Dutch commander of the Red Cross Relief Team No. 10. In 1954, they immigrated to the United States. They had four children together. Each year, John gives Gelissen “red and white carnations to celebrate the anniversary of... liberation.”[^384] He writes, “this day is more important than your birthday... because without this day there would be no birthdays to celebrate.”[^385]

**Anita Lasker-Wallfisch**

Lasker-Wallfisch, unlike most survivors who wanted to return to their home countries, had no desire to return to her native Germany. Immediately after she was her liberation from Bergen-Belsen, she took a job as an official interpreter for the British army, though her English was limited. During the Lüneburg Trial, she acted as a witness for the prosecution and testified against prominent Nazi figures in the camps including Griese and Klein. On March 18, 1946, she was finally allowed to immigrate to England to be with her sister Marianne, which she had been attempting to do since the 1930s. In 1949, she became

a founding member of the English Chamber Orchestra. She married Peter Wallfisch and has two children.

**Eva Mozes Kor**

Immediately after the war, Kor and Miriam moved to Romania and lived with an aunt. While there, Kor became active in the Communist Party, until she was told she “was not supposed to think.” In 1950, Kor, Miriam, and her aunt immigrated to Israel. In 1952, Kor was drafted into the Israeli army and became a sergeant-major. In 1960, she married an American Holocaust survivor and immigrated to the United States, where she had two children. In 1984, she formed CANDLES Inc., an organization dedicated to finding the medical records of the Mengele twins. Though she has publicly forgiven Mengele, much to the chagrin of other survivors, Kor realizes that “the echoes from Auschwitz (will) haunt me and influence me for the rest of my life.”

**Livia Bitton Jackson**

In 1951, Jackson and her mother, hoping for a fresh start, immigrated to America, though Jackson would rather have moved to Israel. Jackson earned a PhD in Jewish History and Hebrew Culture at New York University. She is a professor of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at the Herbert H Lehman College of the City

---


University of New York. She holds dual citizenship with Israel and the United States.

**Sophie Weisz Miklos**

In 1949, Miklos and her husband immigrated to the United States. For a long time she suffered night terrors and eventually checked herself into a psychiatric hospital to help herself recover from the horrors she suffered in the concentration camps. She feels that it took her “ten years to regain her health completely.”388 Miklos, after being asked to speak about her experiences, received such a positive response from her audience that she continued to share her stories with children at various schools and temples.

**Ruth Kluger**

In 1947, Kluger immigrated to the United States. She attended Hunter College and then earned a PhD from University of California at Berkley. She married an American soldier, who had participated in D-Day, and they had one son before getting divorced. Kluger is a professor of German at the University of California in Irvine. To this day, she still considers Susi to be her sister.

---

Ruth Elias

After the war, Elias returned to Czechoslovakia with Berta and Kurt, a man she had fallen in love with at Taucha. Since Berta had an apartment in Prague before the war, Elias stayed with her until she could find housing of her own, which was difficult because Czechoslovakia was having a housing shortage. Several months later, Elias was surprised to find out that Koni, her estranged husband whom she had thought had perished in Auschwitz, was alive. Elias decided to tell Koni that she was divorcing him. She and Kurt moved in together, and as soon as they confirmed that Kurt’s wife and child had perished in the camps, they married. In 1949, due to the political situation in Czechoslovakia, they decided to immigrate to Israel. They had two sons, who they agreed not to tell about their past because they wanted them to grow up without being burdened with their memories.

Lucille Eichengreen

After the war, Eichengreen went to Paris, trying to obtain a visa so that she could immigrate to the United States. After arriving in New York, by chance she met Dan Eichengreen, the son of two of her closest friends in the Lodz ghetto. Dan and Eichengreen fell in love and were married on November 7, 1946. They had two sons together.
Isabella Leitner

After the war, Leitner immigrated to America. She married and had two sons, Peter and Richard, who she vows to teach “to love life, to respect man, and to hate only one thing—war.”

Final Thoughts

As the above histories demonstrate, these women’s experiences after Liberation were just as varied as their time in Auschwitz. While they were imprisoned, they all shared the double burden of being persecuted for both their ‘race’ and their sex.

Sixty years after Liberation, these women’s experiences in Auschwitz continue to live on through their memoirs, even if the authors have since died. Through the lens of these testimonies, individuals who were not in the camps are able to have an idea of what daily life was like for Jewish women. Each of these individuals had a unique experience that deserves to be remembered and commemorated in its own right. Yet, by examining their memoirs collectively, historians are able to better gauge what daily life was like for Jewish female inmates as a whole. Yet, as this thesis demonstrates, many of women’s experiences in Auschwitz were extremely similar to those of men. Both men and women were forced to undergo the threat of daily violence and

---

humiliations, the lack of adequate food and water, and their daily life was similar. Yet, as this thesis demonstrates, similar experiences in Auschwitz were not identical. Women were forced to deal with the Nazi’s sex specific policies that targeted them both as women and as mothers. They had no control over their reproductive rights, and were constantly worried about the threat of infertility after the war. In addition, women had different survival techniques than men did and depended on the surrogate families they formed to help them survive Auschwitz.

Only by examining memoirs written by Jewish women and seeing how their experiences were both similar and different from other inmates will historians stop assuming men can speak for all Auschwitz survivors. It may have been the same hell, but the conditions and challenges faced while there were not identical.
Bibliography

Books

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


Gutman, Yisrael, Michael Berenbaum, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and U.S. Holocaust Research Institute. *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp.* Bloomington, Indiana: Published in association with the United States Holocaust


Films