



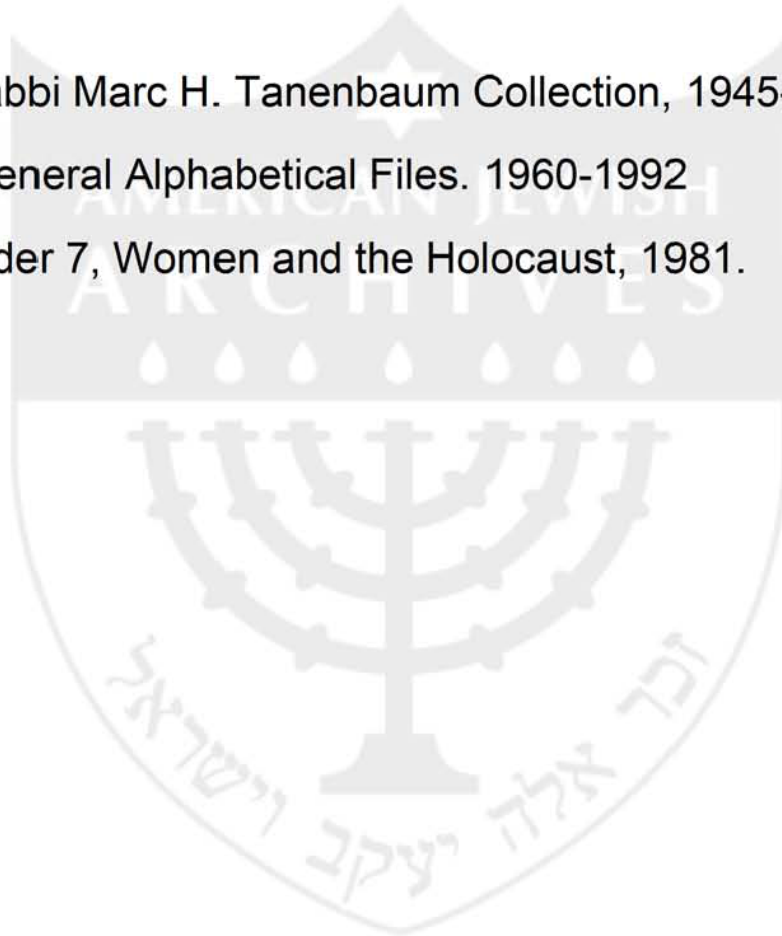
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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

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Box 94, Folder 7, Women and the Holocaust, 1981.



THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

date May 21, 1981
to Marc H. Tanenbaum
from Judith H. Banki
subject Meeting on "Women and the Holocaust" Project

As I mentioned, I was much impressed with a paper delivered by Joan Miriam Ringelheim at the NCCJ Holocaust Conference, and that a number of other women at the conference were similarly impressed to the extent that they gathered for a lunch to discuss the possibilities of a research project focusing on the experience of women during the Holocaust, to what degree it differed from men's experience, and to what degree it may challenge conventional wisdom about how people survived the Holocaust experience.

The women have set up an adhoc group, which hopes to put together a small planning conference consisting of survivors and scholars to conceptualize the issues and point to areas requiring further research. Joan Ringelheim submitted an application for a modest research grant for this project to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which turned it down, and said that she would probably not be able to secure funds from major Jewish organizations or organizations like the National Jewish Conference Center. The adhoc group of women has, therefore, decided to try to raise some seed money for a planning conference by a direct appeal to women who have indicated some interest either in Holocaust studies or feminist issues. They have put together a list of about 50 to 100 women; I have not seen the list, but it includes such public types as Beverly Sills and less famous women known to be affluent. In order to assure that contributions are tax-exempt, the project will be sponsored by a tax-exempt foundation called Programs in Public Philosophy. They are looking for four or five prestigious names to appear on the letterhead of the letter which will be sent asking for funds.

I did not recommend the names of any potential "big givers" (I don't know them anyway) and informed the group that those of us who worked for Jewish organizations would probably not be able to become publicly identified with a fundraising project that might be seen as competitive with our own organizations. But I did say that Claire Huchet Bishop might agree to have her name on the letterhead, and offered to call her.

I think this is an interesting project to which AJC should be related in some fashion -- not necessarily financial support, although you might consider

... more

May 21, 1981

a very modest contribution to the planning conference. I am not sure whether this falls in our department's bailiwick, or whether it should be handled by Gladys or Sheba. (There are Christian women interested in the project -- Alice Eckardt called together the lunch meeting which launched this adhoc group, and one of the women at the small meeting I attended Tuesday is not Jewish -- but I don't know whether the survivors who will be involved in this research project are all Jewish, or whether there will be an effort to compare the experience of Jewish women with that of non-Jewish victims.)

I suggest we set up a meeting next week, including Inge, Sheba and Gladys to talk about this project. I have attached a copy of Ringelheim's paper.

JHB:mr

- Enc. -

cc

I. Gibel

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The Unethical and the Unspeakable:
Toward a Feminist Interpretation of the Holocaust



Joan Miriam Ringelheim
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"The Unethical and the Unjustifiable"
 Toward a Feminist Interpretation of the Holocaust"

We are not us we were...an earthquake of immorality and merciless atrocity on such a scale, cannot happen and then pass us by unaltered. The landscapes of our minds have shapes, hollows, illuminations, mounds and shadows different from before. For us who live in the aftermath of the cataclysm, the total fact of the Nazi 'selection' appears to affect, to continue to affect all the regions of our ideas. 1

The Holocaust calls into question brute moral facts, and the human potential for action. Our views of the limitations for inflicting suffering, for organized terror has certainly been called into question. Our familiar categories of thought and widely held assumptions about human beings have been exploded. Even so, the haunt of this past seems to fail to grip the imagination or concern of most philosophers. Be that as it may, philosophy is challenged by these events too--no matter that it is ignored.

To speak about the Holocaust, we must be willing to fall into the darkness of its seeming unintelligibility;² to plunge into the heart of the darkness of silence in spite of its precariousness. In that darkness, there is the unfolding and revelation of horror at the heart of reason, of evil at the heart of morality: reason as a tool seems to push us toward a form of "madness"--the passionless destruction which justifies itself and knows no limits. The Holocaust asks us to question our deeply held assumptions about the primacy of reason--that to be rational is to be civilized and thus, to be civilized grants some special sort of goodness or morality to our human relations. Rationality however, was not a restraining force in the Holocaust. Some of us would say that it "even contributed³ to that process itself."³

With some bold strokes, I can state my talk in the following

ways--there is a predominant model of reason that has been central to Western civilization which philosophy assumes, that the Nazis perfected, and to which ^{many} Holocaust historians (and writers) fall prey. ⁴ Philosophers search for universal laws (truths), and take little heed of significant differences: the Nazis tried to destroy significant differences by making people (particularly the Jews) interchangeable and destroyable; and the Holocaust historians try to create universal statements about "survivors" as a whole, or about the "Holocaust experience" as a whole.

This striving toward universal statements or generality creates mystification (even erases) our understanding of what may be the primary mechanism by which the Holocaust occurred-- simply, the operation of reason as domination.⁵ Philosophers work on language and concepts, the Nazis worked on the Jews, historians work in categories and periods: however, the procedures of rationality appealed to are painfully similar. If one accepts these appeals to rationality, one winds up talking too about the "victims" (or with too much wrong talk about the "victims")-- the Jews, and too little about the oppressors and their ferocity. This perspective erases force in favor of victimization and we lose what I think are more important questions. Namely, (1) how were so many "reasonable" persons able to do evil so easily;⁶ and (2) by what means did the Jews resist and survive and which of these proved most effective? Thus ethical questions of right and wrong must be directed at the oppressors and not the victims; and the only question about the Jews is how and by what means did they resist/survive (since that some Jews survived is good)?⁷

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In order to get to these questions, we have to look at the issues connected with the idea of "striving toward universal statements" which, I claim, creates mystification.

In Holocaust literature, one feature of this mystification predominates: survivors seem to be all the same. While there may be some differentiation given credence (certainly in many cases survivors are treated as individuals--thus we have some token recognition of differentiation)--none of these are seen as so significant as the simple and complex fact of having been a prisoner in a concentration or extermination camp, or a resistance fighter, or survivor of a ghetto. Surely there are experiences which are shared among the survivors; there is recognition and commonality. However, to not recognize difference even in this commonality seems misguided.

What I wish to explore is the relationship between the epistemological ^{and ethical} problems in history, philosophy, and science which makes our current understanding of the Holocaust limited and obscure, and the claims (of survivors and others) that the ways of resisting and surviving are different for different people; in particular, the hypothesis that women's and men's experience of the Holocaust was different (i.e. different survival capabilities, different work, roles, relationships, etc). I hope to show that in the revealing of significant differences some of what has been obscured and limited in the understanding of the Holocaust can be uncovered.

I will begin with Bruno Bettelheim whose analysis of the Holocaust experience in THE INFORMED HEART and other places

has rightly upset many people.⁸ He represents (if more starkly than others) a good deal of what is wrong with philosophical analysis in general and with historical interpretation of the Holocaust in particular.⁹ Bettelheim writes about the Jews in some singularly problematic ways. And one of the biggest problems with this analysis is that many people, including scholars have relied on it alone--as if it is the unimpeachable statement about Jewish resistance. Bettelheim says:

Psychologically speaking, most prisoners in the extermination camps committed suicide by submitting to death without resistance... (245) It may have been Jewish acceptance, without fight, of ever harsher discrimination and degradation that first gave the SS the idea that they could be gotten to the point where they would walk to the gas chambers on their own. (253)... why did so few millions of prisoners die like men, as did the men of only one of those commandoes? (278) 10

Although there is room to think about how the victims--survivors responded, it is clear that we have been less concerned with questions of why the oppressor oppresses than with the impossible and immoral question of why the victim is a victim. The terms of the question are usually framed in such a way that it appears that the victim has some real choice.¹¹ That indeed had s/he done certain things there would have been no victimization or it could have been lessened. These terms lead one to the ludicrous conclusion that the crimes against the Jews stemmed from something intrinsic to the Jews, rather than having something to do with the oppressor--the Nazis, ^{or the} Western civilization and/or Christianity ^{nationalism, racism, etc.}

Andrea Dworkin says:

The central question is not: what is force and what is freedom? That is a good question, but in the realm of human cruelty--the realm of human history--it is utterly abstract. The central question is: why is force never acknowledged as such when used against the racially or sexually despised? Nazis terror used against the Jews is not in dispute. Still, there is an

almost universal--and intrinsically anti-semitic--conviction that the Jews went voluntarily to the ovens. Rational discourse on how the Jews were terrorized does not displace or transform this irrational conviction. ... A statement is made about the nature of the Jew...the nature...is to be a victim. A metaphysical victim is never forced, only actualized. 12

What has upset many is not so much the sort of definitions or ideas Bettelheim has about honor or courage, or even about how we might behave in certain situations of stress; but what is most troubling is that what he says is not applicable to this situation of extermination of the Jews because this level of extremity is different. We can't apply the same values or valuations as we might in situations filled with less terror and force and brutality. For those who disagree with Bettelheim about the possibilities for armed resistance (or somehow meeting force with force), there is horror at the question "why did so few millions of prisoners die like men?" What can he mean when he raises this so-called value of masculinity? It appears that Bettelheim doesn't understand what force can be (or how different kinds of force can work) and so he too appears to blame the victim, inappropriately and immorally.

I would like to suggest that there is another philosophical problem both with what he says and with the criticisms that have been levelled against him. Honor and courage do not have one meaning. And while the experience in the camps may preclude certain kinds of honor and courage, it may well include other kinds. Bettelheim narrows the concepts of honor and courage as if they can be applied as a universal constant, independent of place or person--gender, nationality, age, background, etc..

Here Bettelheim serves as an example of taking concepts out of proper context, or ignoring others in favor of applying a single

brush(stroke) to give us a way to interpret this part of the Holocaust. It distorts and violates other perspectives. But not simply because Bettelheim seems particularly vicious in these lines--although that goes a long way--it would also be a violation even if the theory gave all Jews compliments. There is a serious problem with striving for such universalization or generalization (& survival) because significant differences are not noticed. If resistance doesn't mean the same thing to everyone, then expectations and analysis about resistance (& survival) have to be different than what we see from someone like Bettelheim (or others who generalize too much).

Others, in addition to Bettelheim, take events of some magnitude--revolutions, wars, floods, etc., and reconstruct them as if they happened in the singular--as if they occurred in such a way that everyone experienced the event, as "an event." However, this is not how we experience--we undergo or have experiences which often cannot be "placed," or are not understood until after they occur. The Holocaust is certainly an event of great magnitude. Sheer numbers are insufficient to express it. Yet it is the very numbers and the wide geographical sweep and the particular configuration of (Christian vs. Jew, which seems to make it necessary to discuss it as a macrocosm. By generalizing, the enormity seems easier. The more general, the more theoretical, the easier it is to discuss and appropriate.

But this distancing poses problems for philosophy, science, and history. Philosophy purports to be a science--a science of wisdom, and therefore requires facts (evidence, cases) and, more importantly,

general laws or "truths" which hold beyond perspective, which hold in spite of subjectivity. And so it resides in dichotomy: ^{abstract/concrete; ideal/real; mind/body; culture/nature; facts/change;} subject/object; value free/value laden; right/wrong; reason/emotion; self/other; true/false; good/evil. Unfortunately, for philosophy (like science) general laws-truths- are more important than differences or variations. Because philosophy (like science) wants to do without the context--without the conflict, confusion, and questions and without the feelings (too subjective)-- ^{which, it thinks} /ends up obscuring more complete truths?

Applying this philosophical and scientific view to the world of the Holocaust one ends up negotiating differences, dichotomies so that one group is seen as superior and others inferior; one the master and the other, the slave. We assume human mastery and control through the human intellect. We then try to become, in promethean fashion, whatever we wish to be, or to make others what we wish them to be. ^{negotiations of differences, of dichotomies,} ^{Such / in our modes of thinking in the} ^{have established} ^{lives we lead, the governments we have structured, /paradigms of} ^{dominance relations.} ; simultaneously it is maintained that they are not symptomatic of the structures we have made but rather of human nature itself (and hence unchangeable). One of the consequences of not seeing the relationship between structure and individuals, is how difficult it is to admit that the Nazis were suffering from a thought disorder which rages in Western civilization--the valorization of reason over the emotions. (philosophy may be trapped in a similar thought disorder.) We want to believe that reasonable persons have limits (we want to see the Nazis as an example of madness (irrationality) taking over rather than an example of reason going too far.). ("The dreams of reason often produce monsters." Goya)

Those , like Arendt who have tried to discuss the normality not of the deed but of the perpetrators, are seen to be communicating that the Nazis were not as guilty or that their crimes were not quite so horrible. On my view, it is quite the opposite. If these men were not monsters, while their deeds were (they were not some unique aberration on the history of Western Europe), then we have more to be afraid of than if they were simply mad or irrational. It is precisely "the normality" of the perpetrators which is so dreadful about this history--the person who with patience, diligence signs papers, operates railroad cars, inserts the ^{us} Zyklon B-- murders without passion. Hilberg tells ^{of} the perpetrators; they were ... Lawyers, accountants, physicians, engineers, diplomats, bankers, clerks. ... ^{the railroad men} were seldom psychotics. They were rarely the sort of people one thinks of as having been highly indoctrinated. As a matter of fact, one could say of them that as family men they were decent, as friends they were loyal, as ordinary citizens they were law-abiding in every sense of that word, bourgeois always or almost always. 14

How did they cope with their task of transporting millions of Jews to killing centers? ... in the most ingenious way by not varying their routine, and not restructuring their organization, not changing a thing in their correspondence or mode of communications. The machinery of destruction ... was structurally no different from organized German society as a whole; the difference was only one of function. The machinery of destruction was the organized community in one of its special roles... every profession, every skill, every social status was represented... Even the killing units and the killing centers did not obtain professional killers. 16

This "concentration camp universe for the Jews had as its purpose not only the sheer loss of life but also the impoverishment of human life and the reduction of the person to something less than human, to someone who counts for nothing, who is ultimately and (indefinitely) replaceable. One who no longer can begin but is at most only allowed to go on. 17

Unquestionably a world of madness-but not created by madmen. Reason then is not simply a good; it harbors within itself a deadly distortion; or perhaps the concept of what it means to be rational which has developed in Western civilization has been distorted.¹⁸

After all this, can it be that we can use philosophy to talk about the Holocaust? Do we need philosophy to tell us that the Holocaust was evil? Surely not. Can philosophy help with the questions of judging actions to be right or wrong? The Holocaust simply does not give us many situations where a theory or a principle which would tell us "x is right to do" or "x is wrong to do" would be of any use. The Holocaust demonstrates that moral decision making as we have come to know it, is not applicable. The results of these decisions are too filled with ambiguities, unclarity, ambivalence, pain, suffering. No satisfactory conclusions; no closure. More, rather than less evil is often produced. What sort of a universe is that in which to act "morally?" (e.g. it cannot be a good to kill your baby and save yourself or kill self and the baby, etc.) We are not in the world of ethics as traditional philosophy has constructed it. We are in the time of a radical switch, not simply a radical moment. These apparently new possibilities were created in part because of the destruction of European Jews by the Nazis.

The scholarly investigation of a problem or an event--what facts emerge and which among them are emphasized never takes place in a vacuum. It always develops out of a particular perspective or from some particular angle. Such hermeneutical questions tend to be obscured in the case of an extraordinary event like the Holocaust and all the more so when the very essence of that event seems

to be the annihilation of all distinctions. Nevertheless, it remains true that the analytical framework we bring to the study of the Holocaust governs what we are able to discover about it and how we comprehend what we discover.

It has been said that the horror of the Holocaust is of such proportions that any attempt to make distinctions of class, nationality, or age, let alone gender--is outrageous. Yet making distinctions and attempting to discover the real distinctions that exist among various groups and classes, forms a large part of an historical enterprise. It may be that the Holocaust obliterates all such distinctions. Still that should not be the guiding assumption of scholarly research, but its conclusion.

I have indicated that philosophical categories, etc., are not helpful in understanding the Holocaust (as have any number of other writers). Also I have suggested that philosophers do not usually differentiate in their theories--rather the perspective is the universal or at least an attempt to speak for all persons or things independent of perspective. The literature about the Holocaust has done something very similar. Talk about ethics in philosophy and talk of moral dimensions of the Holocaust usually speaks as if there were no categories other than that of "persons." That category however mystifies many differentiations.¹⁹

While women have written diaries, memoirs, and novels, their testimony has not received the sort of publicity or prominence as that of the men. And further, that testimony has not been made with an eye toward differentiation. In fact current literature on the Holocaust, by reflecting primarily the lives of men as

seen by men, leads us to believe that everyone whether young or old, male or female, rich or poor, merchant, peasant, professor, nurse, doctor, teacher, mother, child, experienced the Holocaust in the same way. (Or that the experiences that were shared, are what is important for us when we study the Holocaust.) If this were in fact true, it would be extraordinary, perhaps unprecedented. But current writing on the Holocaust gives us no way of knowing whether it is true.

Let me give you some examples of statements which, when you think about them, demand attention--from the historian, from the philosopher--from any of us who are thinking about the implications of the Holocaust. If human values were destroyed in the Holocaust, we need to ask what that means--which values? whose values?

1. ...if you asked an enemy for mercy, it was better that the enemy should be a man rather than a woman because there was no chance at all with a woman. The women they had known as their SS captors, had invariably been crueler than the men. 20

This statement was in the text as a matter of truth. However isn't it an empirical claim that we need to investigate? How would we know if it is true? What criteria are used? What does it mean to judge in this way? Does it have something to do with the notions that we have that women are not expected to be cruel? Thus when women are cruel, or brutal, they are judged more harshly than the men? Or, are women seen as potentially more cruel and thus judged accordingly when given the opportunity.

2. In his rather large book, Ainsztein, JEWISH RESISTANCE IN NAZI OCCUPIED EUROPE, mentions women in only a few places. Yet, without analysis, he says the following about survival and death:

The greatest atrocities at Auschwitz were committed against Jewish women and children. The young children were all murdered on arrival in the camp, while most of the Jewish women selected for work were imprisoned at Birkenau. In 1941, Dr. Ferdinand Fredrich Zucker, a specialist in water emergency and professor

at Breslau University, prepared a report on the Birkenau area for Himmler, in which he stated that the water found there was not even fit for rinsing one's mouth and consequently the SS were forbidden to drink it. The water was further polluted, especially in the women's camp, by excreta and urine, due to the absence of even primitive latrines. The prisoners therefore constantly suffered not only from hunger but also from thirst. 21

In a conversation, Charlotte Delbo (author of NONE OF US WILL RETURN) claimed that the situation for women was worse than for men when she was in Auschwitz (Jan 1943). As example, there was one tap for 15,000 women, the conditions of the barracks were worse than for the men. etc. At the same time she claims that women survived better than men. What does she mean? She speaks of women bonding with each other (different from the men (who, it seems for the most part did not)) to help in the possibility of survival. (about Eichenwald) Tillion in her book RAVENSBRÜCK says that Kogon's observations about prisoner resentment and sense of abandonment was more true for men than for women. She claims "while some male prisoners aided their comrades for the highest motives, others did so as they became hardened to the necessity of the task, and many became cruel to the point of sadism, largely because of repressed sexual desires. In the women's camps, only the most selfish in character became so hardened, while for many the incredible personal suffering only increased their concern for the needs of others. 22

Again these are empirical claims even though in these statements they appear to be givens. Certainly the relationship (if any) between repressed sexuality in the men and violence needs to be investigated and not simply stated. What of the repressed sexuality of women? Does it really produce such a different response in women? or do the relations between the women and between the men result from altogether other causes?

A conversation with Raul Hilberg, revealed that in his research he noticed that young men (adolescent age) survived better than men over 30. However, he also noticed that fathers were not able to survive.

well. Women who lost their families were better able (he thinks) to survive the loss of children or other members of their family than the men. 23 Here again we have an empirical claim about women's survival which needs to be investigated--did women survive better and what does that mean?

3. Des Pres in communication with me said that while he did not approach the subject systematically he was "struck again and again by the ways in which, under infinitely more terrible circumstances, women in places like Auschwitz and Ravensbrück made better survivors... they knew how to sew...they were more at ease in matters of intimate help...they seemed to care more for life...and being less dependent on inflated egos, as men were, where these egos cracked and were swept away, women recovered faster and with less bitterness."

4. Attina Grossman, an historian, has the following impressions from her research: *Women in many cases seemed to make better 'adaption' than males and ...were more extremely victimized than men, not only as camp inmates in general but specifically in terms of their gender (or sex). (For example it seems clear that a majority of German Jewish victims were women; widows who couldn't leave or other women who remained behind past the point of no return because they felt responsible and were held responsible for other family members in a way men weren't.*

Might it be that what constituted survival and resistance for women is different from that of men? Certainly if women were in the majority in certain areas then our views about what constituted resistance or survival must in some sense depend on understanding that population in relation to the Nazis. Research is clearly in order.

5. Ilona Karmel, author of AN ESTATE OF MEMORY has written me of another question: sexual contact between Jewish women and Jewish police in the ghettos: "Sexuality was a means of buying protection from the Jewish policemen...who had means and power." What does

mean for the understanding of resistance and survival for women? Can the ways in which women could be used sexually (or use sexually) in ways apparently different from men, be ignored?

The above indicates a few things. There have been questions in the minds of some writers concerning the differences in the lives of women from that of men during the Holocaust. And that the significance of these differences has often not been communicated; or if communicated done without paying much attention to the possible consequences of the claims, or worse as if the differences weren't there in spite of the sentences to the contrary. It does not seem possible any longer to deny that the experiences and perceptions of women would be different--and perhaps would differ significantly from that of men during the Holocaust. While the content of those differences cannot be fully articulated now (indeed I can only suggest hints) since the research is just beginning, we can say some things. Not only have we been led into ignoring certain evidence and not telling the stories of women as if they were/as important as those of the men; but also we have been led into misunderstanding or mishandling questions that have to do with resistance, passivity, compliance, etc.. We need to bring out what women were doing--who were they? where were they? the couriers, the smugglers of weapons, the secretaries at Auschwitz, the teachers, the mothers, etc.. Not simply the token heroines (e.g. Mala, Wanda, Anne Frank,...) we have been told about. For instance, A major source of information pretty much ignored by the historians were the Jewish women in Auschwitz-Birkenau who worked in the SS camp offices. They were told by the SS--"you can know everything--since you will all die anyway"--All of us know (those of us who have been secretaries and those who have used secretaries) just how much secretaries know

(indeed how many secretarial hours did it take for many of us to be here)--and yet this source has been practically ignored in terms of learning about the camps. Some of us didn't even know from the history texts that these women worked as they did. It is possible that we can get clues to a different perspective on the Holocaust through looking at the lives and understanding of these women.

Women's history, as K Joan Kelly [Gadol] has pointed out "has disabused us of the notion that the history of women is the same as the history of men, and that the significant turning points in history have the same impact for one sex as for another." 24 The literature in women's studies shows that women do not share with men the same ideas about self, family, heroism, character, power, sacrifice and loyalty. Consequently, any general or apparently gender-neutral statements about survival, resistance, the maintenance or collapse of moral values, and the dysfunction of culture in the camps and ghettos must be analyzed anew from the perspective and experience of women.

I would like to do some analyses to more fully demonstrate that such a different perspective is in order--that the ways in which women have been excluded from the interpretation of events in history is similar to what has been done in the Holocaust. 25 My first example will return to the analysis that Bettelheim makes in THE INFORMED HEART about prisoners and their so-called passive response. (You will recall his view that prisoners should have died like men...) Listen to how he uses this in a story which seems to represent the model or paradigm of action. It is the final story he tells in his chapter on the responses of the prisoners. He talks of naked prisoners lined

up for the gas chamber. An SS officer having learned that one of these prisoners was a dancer, orders her to dance for him. She does. As she danced

she approached him, seized his gun and shot him. She too was immediately shot to death. 26

Bettelheim then comments:

This dancing made her once again as a person. No longer was she a number, nameless, depersonalized prisoner, but the dancer she used to be. Transformed, however, momentarily, she responded like her old self, destroying the enemy bent on destruction, even if she had to die in the process... exercising the last freedom that not even the concentration camp could take away--to decide how one wishes to think and feel about the conditions of one's life--this dancer threw off her real prison. This she could do because she was willing to risk her life to achieve autonomy once more. If we do that, then if we cannot live, at least we die as men. 27

Bettelheim criticizes the Jews because they (we) don't act like men--and ironically this woman is complimented because she is acting like a man. The "real prison" was what she thought and felt, and not what was done to her? How appalling to say this? How off the mark it is. Can we praise her for not being a victim in this case? Impossible. Of course she was a victim. The choices were all structured and limited beyond belief. But we are told here that there is only one way to be an honorable victim: that we die as men should. If those kinds of actions are performed then the victim (thinks Bettelheim) might well negate the force of the oppressors? Certainly the instances of armed resistance (e.g. Warsaw ghetto, et al.) ought to be sufficient proof against such claims. Bravery of this sort, is not the only bravery possible. Why, in the name of women, should we suppose that revenge is the value or action that is to be appreciated when it comes to survival?

The value that Bettelheim suggests is the value that most

men may appreciate. The reason most men speak in these terms is because they are applicable to the experiences and understanding men have of their lives. Whereas they do not seem useful for women-- we do not ^{usually} think of ^{or lives} our lives in these terms. If this is so, then we need to see whether different values are at stake or different ways to survive other than the standard Bettelheim proclaims. (Is it also possible that the lives of men were changed more radically than the lives of the women which might account for the views that women "survived better" than men?)

Lawrence Langer in his article "The Dilemma of Choice in the Deathcamps" speaks of "choiceless choices," where critical decisions did not reflect options between life and death, but between one form of 'abnormal' response and another, both imposed by a situation that in no way was of the victim's own choosing. ... 28

There is an absence of "humanly significant alternatives".²⁹

Other than Bettelheim's example, there are other examples of such "choiceless choices": the Greek mother told she could "choose" which of her three children she could save; women who decided not to let newborn babies and their mothers die (as the Nazis would have it)--"rather that...we must at least save the mothers...so, the Germans's succeeded in making murderers of even us."³⁰ At the close of his article Langer says: "The real challenge before us is to invent a vocabulary of annihilation appropriate to the deathcamp experience; in its absence, we should at least be prepared to redefine the terminology of transcendence--"dignity," 'choice,' 'suffering' and 'spirit'--so that it conforms more closely to the way of being in places like Auschwitz, where the situation that consumed so many millions imposed impossible decisions on victims not free to embrace the luxury of the heroic life. 31

I am not sure that we need to invent a new vocabulary--I think we have to investigate those whose vocabulary, whose concepts, and more importantly, whose lives and deaths were usually different

from those suggested by the "heroics" of a Bettelheim or the analysis of a Frankl (who talks about "decisions to survive")

The kinds of choices that were asked of the prisoners which Langer calls "choiceless choices" are similar in kind--though ~~in~~ not in degree (at least not usually) with what women are familiar. It is deeply related to the lives of women, or to the lives that women know about, and not to the lives of most men. Thus women understand "choiceless choices" and men's lives having been more in the world of the public sphere--not in the domestic one--may find these situations even more shocking than the women do. Who has or aborting children (regardless of circumstances: rape, etc.), of responsibility for bearing \ feeding her family no matter where the food comes from (e.g. prostitution, marrying for money etc), decide about what child will have shoes, clothes, or even food: The men are usually part of a culture different from the women-- this is certainly true in Jewish history as well.

While it is not true that Jewish (or nonJewish) women were confronted (prior to the Holocaust) to the same degree with the terror of "choiceless choices" about newborn children for instance. The issue of abortion, forced abortion, or ^{abandonment} of a baby because of impossible material conditions ^{for instance,} is not a new one for women. For this reason perhaps, women relate to these experiences ^{is} and stories/different, and so too their actions during these events.

That is to say (to repeat) that there seems to be some evidence that the bonding of women was different from men-- that women were able, because of our different material conditions and social relations throughout life, to create or re-create "families" and so provide networks of survival. Surely we cannot overlook

this and simply go on with the ideas about isolation between prisoners or about the destruction of values. It is not so clear how much women's values were destroyed.

I would like to cite ³³ other example of the ways in which certain issues are obscured. In Kren and Rappoport's book THE HOLOCAUST AND THE CRISIS OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR, they talk about individual survival and wonder what would account for that other than luck and the determination to survive. They say:

Survivors themselves who embody this quality/will to live have for the most part been unable to provide more than simple descriptions emphasizing their refusal to give up... One exception is Bruno Bettelheim...the essential requisite for survival was an 'autonomous ego': a sense of self-respect, inner dignity, and meaning. He suggests that many of the victims might have survived if they had been able to see beyond their everyday material concerns and appreciate their situation in time either to flee from the Nazis or to organize resistance. Once in the camps, he says, many died because, lacking ego autonomy, they lacked the inner strength to persevere. ...Frankl...with much more extensive experience in the camps than Bettelheim...his perception was that life and death in the camps depended on whether persons could find a deep conviction about the meaning of their lives. ...These prominent psychological perspectives stand in obvious counterpart to more widely descriptive material showing that deep commitments to political or religious values were an important aid to survival. ...What emerges...is the picture of a concrete, personal struggle against the ultimate result of depersonalization: destruction of the will to live...the will to live in the camps can best be grasped as a defiant, perhaps transcendental resistance against reduction of the self to an object of sacrifice. 33

Do we really need a theory like this? I don't ^{even} know what it means.

Perhaps that is how to describe the men or some of them. Delbo gives me much more than the above. What survival means here seems some simple acts of relationship. Charlotte was to give up--she wants to "surrender to death." Viva slaps her back. She clings to Viva who keeps her from falling into the snow. Her choice is to listen to Viva: "Heads up. On your feet" "Are you feeling better" she asks. "Yes, Viva..." ³⁴ Another time she says to her friend that she

cannot take it any more. Lulu changes tools with her (her pounder) because Charlotte's is too heavy for her. Lulu asks her to get behind her: You can have a good cry...I cry. I did not want to cry, but the tears spill over, run down my cheeks. ...Sometimes/Lulu/ turns around and with her sleeve, she gently wipes my face. ... Lulu tugs at me. "That's all right now. Come work. There she is." With so much kindness that I am not ashamed of having cried. It is as though I had cried on my mother's breast. 34

Keeping humanity in tact has always been different for men than for women. Since it is the lives of men that are mirrored in traditional philosophical ethical theory, it is obvious why when using that theory, that language, that the Holocaust cannot be spoken about. It is not that the unethical cannot be spoken about or is unspeakable. It is that what is unethical is considered within certain narrow confines such that the emotions, feelings, the lives of women, Jews, Blacks, cannot be spoken about. What is unspeakable in philosophy is what the Holocaust is about because the Holocaust puts that unspeakable material before us. It asks us to speak to ^{and} about situations, events, feelings, emotions, rationality which has not been considered in the range of what is unethical. These are not the considerations of philosophy except to discount or devalue.

If we look at ³⁵ and to the lives of women in these situations, we may be able to discover something our language or our questions blind us from seeing because we are not only ~~xx~~ not used to looking at these situations of women, but more, what women say about their lives is discounted as being of significance to help us understand the events under question. If there is trust about what women say, there is also judgment about the limitations of the personal analysis. The situation called "choiceless choices" is one of familiarity to women.

The very idea that gets harder to say
 that the situation in one of choiceless choices, and hence out of
 the range of moral language that is traditional, is the very situation
 that gets us into women's choices ^{for} survival, which have been
 at the heart of the morality of women.

It is not the case that the choices can now be seen as better
 or easier. But rather that they can be seen in a different way.
 Namely that the situation the Nazis produced for men and women
 was in some sense a new version of situations that women have
 always found themselves(ourselves)in and in order to find out why(or
 whether)it might be that women survived better, we must look at the
 ways in which women developed survival strategies that apply in
 our varying situations of oppression. Women's culture(and not/biology)
 allows us to act and react in situations of stress differently than
 the culture of men. It is this set of responses that I think are
 crucial to help us understand the moral dilemmas and choices that
 occurred.

This perspective may allow us to speak not of a new
 language as if it were to be developed whole cloth for both
 men and women. Rather "we can listen to a language" heretofore

unspoken.³⁵ We must take the language and life experiences
 of the women it represents, and speak of it to men and women alike.
 That is what has been unspeakable in ethics, and that is part of
 what has been unspeakable in the literature about the Holocaust.

Coda

My mother
 she was hands
 she was a face
 They set our mothers before us naked

Here mothers are no longer mothers to their children.

Delbó
 NONE OF US WILL RETURN
 p. 15

