

Foreword

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For decades, scholars of the Holocaust have shied away from addressing the role of sexual violence in the Holocaust. The inevitable result has been the production of taboos and processes of silencing. How could anyone be surprised about this? Any serious scholar setting out to investigate the topic was immediately confronted not only with gender bias and moral squeamishness but also an avalanche of culturally produced sexual mythologies that were all the more enduring because they rested on rumor while confirming both political and gender ideologies.

A 1945 poem written in Hebrew by Yitzhak Sadeh under the pen name Y. Noded is a case in point. Sadeh was commander of the Palmach and later the chief of the general staff for the Haganah, both precursors to the Israel Defense Forces. His poem, entitled “My Sister on the Beach,” presents the story of a fictional Jewish soldier’s encounter with a “wild-haired” woman dressed in tatters who had just disembarked from a boat carrying illegal immigrants to Palestine. He immediately recognizes her as a Holocaust survivor and notices that “her flesh is branded: ‘For Officers Only.’” Although the narrator is sympathetic, welcomes the woman “home,” and tells her that he will do “everything” for her, the poet gives her no voice. Deeply identifying with her plight on the surface, the soldier does not ask but simply assumes that the woman performed sexual acts in order to survive. She remains a mute symbol of victimization in striking contrast to the agency of the soldier as he deploys her history of degradation to proclaim the values of a future Jewish state.¹ Given the prominence of the author and the fact that this poem was republished many times, we can assume that it either represented or helped foster (likely both) a dismissive and demeaning attitude toward female survivors. Sadeh’s expression of empathy could not counter the religious and social prejudices against selling or living off the proceeds of sex. In her 1997 memoir, the Czech-Israeli journalist and translator Ruth Bondy, who survived Theresienstadt, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Bergen-Belsen, describes the question often posed to her after she immigrated to Israel in 1948: “How did you live through it? What did you have to do to survive?

There was a glint of suspicion in their eyes: a kapo? A prostitute?"² That these questioners could only imagine survival in these deeply gendered terms—with the men serving as overseers over other prisoners and the women as whores—helps explain why Holocaust survivors quickly stopped speaking about interprisoner exploitation or about the most graphic aspects of their suffering.

The tendency to assume that female survivors had engaged in survival sex was particularly common in Israel,³ but it was given international currency in literary and popular representations in the postwar period. Sadeh's branding imagery was repeated on the covers of one of the most successful Holocaust books of the postwar period: the 1953 novel *Beit habubot* (*House of Dolls*), by the Auschwitz survivor Yehiel De-Nur, writing in Hebrew under the penname Ka-Tzetnik (a moniker he claimed was common in Auschwitz and was derived from the German abbreviation for *Konzentrationslager*, or concentration camp). Although De-Nur sought to represent the authentic experiences of all Holocaust victims, and although like Sadeh, he intended *House of Dolls* to foster empathy for the sexual exploitation of Jewish women, his readership was influenced by the tendency to depict sexual violence as voyeuristic titillation in the popular culture of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of the English editions of *House of Dolls*, which sold over ten million copies by 1980, were adorned with an exploitative image of a woman baring her chest to reveal the tattooed word *Feld-Hure*—field whore, or a woman who served the sexual needs of the German military. This survivor/whore trope took flight after the media sensation of De-Nur's 1961 testimony against Adolf Eichmann—the first time that the true identity of the famous author Ka-Tzetnik was revealed. Both in Israel and many other countries, purveyors of smut turned De-Nur's well-meaning (though historically flawed) account of Jewish women's service in the "Joy Division" brothel of Auschwitz into pornography, both in trashy pulp fiction and Nazisploitation movies and in supposedly more respectable literature and film. A book that was written with the fierce intention of testifying to the suffering of Jewish women ironically helped inspire even more historically inaccurate and exploitative depictions of sexual exploitation in the Holocaust, which, collectively, frightened serious scholars away from the subject.

There is much to say about the social, political, and international dynamics of this phenomenon, and we now have a wealth of scholarship examining Holocaust representation, the sexualization of Nazi evil, and the gendered nature of persecution and survival. But for the purposes of introducing this book it suffices to say that the survivor/whore trope propagated in Sadeh's poem and De-Nur's novel helped ensure that the subject of sexual violence

and exploitation in the Holocaust remained virtually unexplored for several decades after World War II. When Robert Sommer first published his Humboldt University dissertation (*Das KZ-Bordell: Sexuelle Zwangsarbeit in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern*, Schöningh) in 2009, he could rely on only very few previous studies of how women, girls, young men, and boys had been forced to perform sexual acts in order to survive the Holocaust. As is also clear in the translation you have before you, Sommer is very generous to pioneering scholars like Christa Paul and Claudia Schoppmann, who specifically wrote about female sexual persecution, and to Jerzy St. Giza and Wiesław Morasiewicz, who examined male sexuality in the Holocaust. But he still achieves something that these scholars did not: a meticulous, statistically convincing, and all-encompassing examination of forced sexual labor in the camps. No Holocaust scholar who has written about this subject since the publication of *Das KZ-Bordell* has failed to rely on its authoritative empirical research. It was only this book that definitively laid to rest the claims—popularized by Sadeh and De-Nur but circulated also through maliciously whispered rumor—that Jewish women had worked in concentration camp brothels. Having amassed an impressive and unimpeachable statistical accounting of all of the available evidence, Sommer has provided not only a convincing historical narrative but a treasure trove of data for future researchers.

Without summarizing the arguments of this book, let me briefly state what makes them so important. It is first of all noteworthy that Sommer has been able to determine the precise number of women who worked in camp brothels and has specific data for at least 80 percent of individual cases. These are impressive statistics, and they make it possible for Sommer to make definitive claims about the selection, experience, and treatment of these women. He demonstrates that the buildings looked quite different in each camp, that the organization meant to reward exemplary prisoners for their labor was not known as the “Joy Division”—a name that sprung from De-Nur’s imagination—and that the small improvements in living conditions that the inhabitants enjoyed served only to ensure their survival and further deployment in ways that the architects of the Holocaust believed would serve military goals. In the twisted logic of Heinrich Himmler and other architects of the camp system, the women needed to be fed enough to keep their breasts so that other prisoners would see access to their bodies as a reward. Their clients were primarily other prisoners, rather than SS men, and at least within the camps, sexual exploitation followed Nazi guidelines on racial segregation. That a percentage of the women had been sex workers before the war tells us only that the Nazis were looking for workers they

believed would be most suitable for the job. It does not disprove the forced nature of this work or the suffering it caused.

Sommer's attention to detail means that we are also informed about SS voyeurism, sexual torture, and tolerance of pedophilic and otherwise exploitative sexual relationships between kapos and younger male prisoners. Indeed, it is one of the great contributions of this book that Sommer does not separate male from female sexual exploitation, presenting them instead as part of the same sexual system of the camps: a subordination of all human sexual impulses to the purposes of labor productivity. That this logic was not only inhumane but unhinged from reality is demonstrated in the passages of the book that detail the very small percentage of prisoners who ever visited a brothel and the incredibly low labor productivity of the camps. In some cases, camp commanders ordered starving prisoners straight from hard physical labor to the brothel, believing that sex would somehow revive their exhausted bodies so that they could work harder the next day. Because Sommer covers all aspects of the phenomenon, we also learn that even men who voluntarily visited a brothel often found the sexual act either unimportant or secondary to another purpose. Several testimonies tell of men who simply sought a few minutes of genuine human contact and kept their pants on; others saw intercourse as a last human act before death—either as the first or the last time that they would have nonviolent physical contact with another human being. That some networks of resisters, particularly in camps with organized communists, bribed men not to have sex when the door to the brothel bedroom was closed is an indication that the women were viewed as victims by at least some of their fellow prisoners. This book exudes empathy for all those who suffered in these camps, carefully describing categories of relative privilege while making it unmistakably clear that the margin of difference between those at the top and those at the bottom of the camp hierarchy was only a matter of a few extra degrees of likelihood that survival might be possible.

Sommer is not, of course, the only commentator to have insisted on exploring the humanity of all the participants in the system of control that governed the camps. Many survivors—foremost among them Primo Levi—have argued that the “gray zones” of life in the camp were not antithetical to mechanisms of control but integral to the function of what De-Nur called “the other planet”—that universe of moral confusion and physical disorientation that survivors found so difficult to explain to anyone who had not experienced it. The fact that prisoners exploited other prisoners was as central to the operation of this other planet as the seemingly paradoxical reality that precious moments of human connection could be forged within

physical encounters that were orchestrated to produce value only for the needs of the racial state. In highlighting these troubling moral realities, Sommer does more than achieve that cliché of all scholarly writing—filling a “gap” in the research by adding the story of a previously ignored group; he provides evidence that is central to our understanding of how Nazi racial persecution operated. This is a book that must be read by all scholars of the Holocaust because in the process of demythologizing the role of sex in the system of persecution, Sommer underlines key mechanisms of the Nazi system of power as a whole. Building on previous histories of sexuality in this period, he demonstrates that there was no unanimity about sexual matters in the Third Reich, and he provides evidence that in this sphere, as in almost every aspect of Nazi policy, an emphasis on economic “productivity” intertwined with racial logic to produce a system of unparalleled inhumanity.

I would like to highlight one aspect of Sommer’s argument that may strike readers as counterintuitive or even heretical. Both in popular depictions and in scholarly writing that fails to take sexuality seriously as a legitimate object of historical investigation, sexual depravity often serves as a metaphor for Nazi evil. When otherwise serious authors only hint at sexual violence, they imply that it either cannot be explained historically or that directly addressing it threatens academic decorum or objectivity. The book you are about to read demonstrates with aplomb exactly how such attitudes have damaged our historical understanding. Allowing sex to remain taboo risks depicting those who deployed it for racial purposes as evil geniuses; it implicitly grants Heinrich Himmler and his followers expertise in human psychology and economic management that they did not possess. That neither the postwar public nor historians were willing to tackle this subject for so long made it particularly attractive to those seeking powerful metaphors for simplistic stories about the Holocaust. It is only through the kind of careful empirical study that you are about to read that we can take apart the pernicious effects of mentioning sex only in hushed tones or as jarring anecdotes whose ultimate function is only to titillate even when the intention is to demonstrate the authenticity of the account. Because it turns out that Himmler’s ideas were not just inhumane and racist; they were also deeply irrational. This was a man, Sommer reminds us, who ordered subordinates to produce alcohol from the exhaust air of SS bakeries and who believed in the continuing relevance of carrier pigeons for modern communications. There was no economic genius in accepting only fifty-pfennig pieces in the brothels, creating a black market for that one coin that worked against the reward system. And there was no political genius in using sexual rewards

to extract labor from walking skeletons. Although the clients of the brothels belonged to a relatively privileged class in the camps, the logic of thinking that sexual release could create superhuman levels of output is the same logic that made camp guards think that the discipline of hours-long roll calls and calisthenics would encourage the starving to perform useful work. The results were torturous, and the ideas were simply crazy. Let us finally get beyond the fantasies of Nazi omniscience and omnipotence that have only clouded our understanding of how they managed to achieve so many of their goals. This will mean revealing Himmler as the small-minded, prudish, and vastly overconfident man that he actually was rather than depicting him as the puppet master of brainwashed sex fiends.

I hope that this book will also leave readers with the impression that what happened behind the walls of the brothels was no more or less depraved than anything we have already learned about the concentration camp system. While it is critical to note that there was nothing voluntary about the labor performed in the brothels that this book describes, Sommer convincingly demonstrates that what took place there was not unlike the perfunctory acts common in brothels outside of the camps, with the important exception that the women worked under threat of murder and starvation. It is clear that some SS guards broke the rules to visit and abuse these women, but the most extreme acts of sexual depravity occurred outside the walls of the concentration camps, in the killing fields of Eastern Europe. It is only with this book, first in German and now in English, that this fact can be definitively demonstrated. It is also important to note that had we researched the history of the brothels sooner, we would have been able to gather more testimony from survivors and their protectors, further revealing the various gray zones of the camp experience. The evidence presented in this book demonstrates that some brothel clients helped the women create new lives even after the war by adamantly refusing to reveal their identity. This act of empathy for the “choiceless choices” (in Lawrence Langer’s famous phrase) that these women also faced should inspire us.⁴ Hearing their stories should also produce outrage at the way stories of sexual violence in this period were exploited for political purposes in the postwar world. The fact that we have looked away from this aspect of the Holocaust for so long says much more about the power of our own sexual taboos than it does about the core evil of the Holocaust, which was always racism. This book encourages us to approach the subject of the experience of forced sex with humanity rather than self-righteousness or moral indignation. By searching for every available trace of the authentic voices of those who either worked in or visited camp brothels, Sommer refuses to emulate the gesture of the

SS guards who voyeuristically looked through the peepholes. Instead of metaphors that equate loveless sex with evil or that credit the guards and their political bosses with having otherworldly insights or organizational skills, Sommer concentrates on the extremely human motivations of sex workers and their clients. He thus thoroughly revises popular misconceptions while avoiding the trap of righteous demythologization. Now finally available in English, this book points the way forward for a more nuanced scholarly, literary, and cultural approach to these subjects.

