

Book Review

Denisa Nešťáková, Katja Grosse-Sommer, Borbála Klacsmann, and Jakub Drábik (eds.), *If this is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust*, Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2021, 292 p. ISBN: 978-1-644697-10-8.

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As I was reading through the collection *If this is a Woman: Studies on Women and Gender in the Holocaust* that gathers various articles dealing with women and gender issues in the Second World War and the Holocaust, and delving inside their intriguing points of view and insights, the photos of Ukrainian women and their children fleeing their homes and becoming refugees were constantly on the news. I was reminded, yet again, of what heavy toll women pay in times of war and crisis initiated by men, and contemplated some of the very questions this book deals with: how is their experience different from that of men's?; what kind of strategies and solutions must women seek to protect themselves and those who depend on them?; what awaits them at the end of the road?; what does it mean for them to lose their homes, and their way of life, and face uncertainty?; and how unique is their predicament?

These questions and many more are discussed in this volume of 13 papers based on the presentations given at a conference held at Comenius University in Bratislava, Slovakia, in January 2019, with the participation of mostly young, female scholars from East-Central Europe. As the editors explained at the time: "The conference was organized against anti-gender narratives and related attacks on academic freedom and women's rights, currently all too prevalent in East-Central Europe."

The research on gender aspects in Holocaust Studies goes back to the mid-1980s, and it might have been expected that the current initiative would smoothly follow the path of the pioneer scholars in the USA and Western Europe whose works are well known and highly appreciated. However, as becomes clear from the editor's introduction: "In the geopolitical space of East-Central Europe, attacks on Gender Studies have recently become particularly common," and include attempts to delegitimize the academic credibility of female scholars, who challenge old narratives (Nešťáková et al. 2021, xv). Moreover, "an offensive against the ideas of 'progress', gender equality and individual freedom... and the devaluation of the humanities in its entirety is now taking place, with Gender Studies singled out as a special target."

Thus, the conference organizers had decided “to stand against the anti-gender narratives and related attacks on academic freedom and women’s rights” (Nešťáková et al. 2021, xvi), and indeed held the event and put together an impressive book containing its results. In this regard, this book is not only a scholarly contribution to the fast-growing field of studying the Holocaust with a social and gender-related approach but an actual act of courage.

I do believe that as scholars, we need not apologize for using gender-related methodologies in research, nor need we add further justifications to its legitimacy and high contribution. The fact of the matter is that after 40 years of “wandering in the desert,” so to speak, this field “sits at the heart of Holocaust research,” as claims historian Naama Shik of Yad Vashem (Shik <https://www.yadvashem.org/articles/general/why-study-the-issue-of-women.html>). Unfortunately, still today there are historians who live and write in societies that do not recognize the importance of their work.¹

In her illuminating opening theoretical article, Israeli historian Dalia Ofer, one of the pioneering scholars in this discipline, notes that there is now a large corpus of works presenting several models of women’s responses and flexible coping strategies to the war, which thus had changed as the Holocaust proceeded (Ofer 2021, 5). Natalia Aleksium devotes her theoretical analysis to the different perspectives in the research of families during the Holocaust (Aleksium 2021, 20) and concludes that “with family lens, we gain new insights into Jewish agency, choices, strategies, emotions, communal patterns, and gender roles” (Aleksium 2021, 40).

This collection is conveniently organized by themes dealing with a vast range of issues that obviously cannot be covered in length here. There are papers presenting general insights, and others that focus on a particular geographic area or a certain person. Evidently, there are differences between the responses of women in camps and those in the resisting organizations, as well as between strategies of women – and men – who lived under direct German occupation and of those who were citizens of countries, which were at war with Germany but were not occupied by it, like England for example. Agnes Laba points to the different

¹ The book editors mention Joan Ringelheim, Zoë Waxman, and Anna Hájková among others. In the editors’ introduction, they write specifically about attacks on and the undermining of Gender Studies in the academia in certain East-Central European countries. They hint at their own situation: as young scholars who struggle to make their work noticed and respected in these countries, but do not mention specific names: “In the geopolitical space of East-Central Europe, attacks on Gender Studies have recently become particularly common. These include attempts to delegitimize its academic credibility by disparaging discussions of specifically female historical questions” (Nešťáková et al. 2021, xv). See the Introduction for further discussion on the attacks on Gender Studies in East-Central European countries (Nešťáková et al. 2021, xii–xvi).

influences on the daily life of people from these two categories, and the long-term consequences which were different as well. She talks about the reconstruction of everyday lives under occupation, which changed gender roles, and concepts of masculinity and femininity, and about phenomena such as widowhood and fatherlessness, which continued to influence European societies in the post-war period (Laba 2021, 46–47).

I found the subjects of women in the “Jewish Councils” particularly intriguing in Laurien Vastenhout’s article, which analyses private case studies of two women: one in the Netherlands and the other in France, who used innovative practices to play important roles in their respective communities. Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern were engaged in important welfare work for Jewish women by using the Councils’ legal cover for various activities that were not in line with the official policy of compliance propagated by male leaders (Vastenhout 2021, 144–145).

Three papers are devoted to women in various spaces of resistance: in Kraków Poland (Sliwa 2021), in Sobibór, and among the partisans in Lithuania’s forests. Each emphasizes the unique gender aspects of women’s participation in various forms of resistance. Modiane Zerdoun-Daniel shows how even among Soviet partisans fighting for the same cause and being espoused to gender equality, misogyny was common. Women were expected to fulfill traditional roles like cooking and nursing; female membership in the units was often based on romantic relations with a male partisan, and events of rape occurred as well (Zerdoun-Daniel 2021, 205).

Hannah Wilson opens her discussion on female narratives on the uprising in Sobibór camp with an emotional quotation from Emmanuel Ringelblum’s diary, written in June 1942:

The historian of the future will have to devote a fitting chapter to the role of Jewish women during the war. It is thanks to the courage and endurance of our women that thousands of families have been able to endure these bitter times. (Wilson 2021, 181)

She mentions the well-known fact that for many years after the war women’s narratives had been neglected in the development of collective Holocaust memory and tries to amend this in her work. Her paper not only focuses on women’s active part in the uprising itself, but also outlines their role in the camp structure, their lives following the event, and the efforts of female survivors to preserve the memory of Sobibór “by providing testimonies and participating in the war crime trials of former camp personnel from the 1960s onward” (Wilson 2021, 183). The women’s stories include horrific descriptions of sexual abuse and

harassment by guards. Some of the stories were told already during the legal proceedings in 1965 (Wilson 2021, 190).

This leads me to the last part of the book that deals with “sexuality and sexual violence” with just two papers, of which only one discusses women. The other by Florian Zabransky, talks about “male Jewish sexuality in Germany” and describes the marginalization of sexuality in Holocaust Studies in general and that of men in particular. Indeed, the topic of sexuality had been silenced and repressed for decades. Many of the victims perished, and survivors were not ready to open up due to shame and their wish to bury these memories and forget. As Christopher Browning once suggested: “There is a kind of tacit consensus that these are memories of events and behavior that outsiders might not understand” (Zabransky 2021, 248). But this too, has changed, and in recent years there have been more legitimization and openness to talk about such experiences.

Marta Havryshko’s contribution to this part of the book deals with testimonies of Jewish women who were subject to rape during the war. The testimonies were given in the Soviet war crime trials after 1945. These cases of extreme abuse had been committed by local collaborators in Ukraine and were told from the point of view of their victims. The paper gives voice to those forgotten, wounded women and asks broader questions both about the patterns of sexual violence against Jewish women, and about the attitude of Soviet justice to their testimonies and their influence on the punishment of the perpetrators (Havryshko 2021, 227–228). Havryshko analyzed three trials of rape cases and found several patterns used by locals: systematic serial rapes, rapes committed in the presence of relatives and friends after breaking into homes, detention of girls and women for periods of time to provide sexual services for perpetrators and shooting them to death later, including sexual slavery by locals and their German supervisors, and unplanned “opportunistic rape” by individuals, which did not necessarily have to do with the Jewish identity of the women (Havryshko 2021, 230). These stories are indeed rather hard to read.

In conclusion, this book’s articles are diverse in methodology and themes, and in the editors’ words “offer a multifaced contribution to the field of gendered experience in the Holocaust and World War II” (Nešťáková et al. 2021, xviii). The fact that most of the writers are young scholars who are deeply engaged in this topic, promises further scholarly efforts and seeks new innovative directions in the Holocaust research for years to come. Once again, I extend my appreciation to my colleagues of East-Central Europe whose work is not always welcome and appreciated in their homelands, and am sure that by their persistence and academic integrity they would overcome these obstacles.

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