Daina S. Eglitis*

Women's Experiences of Life Force Atrocities in the Baltic Ghettos, 1941–1944

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Abstract: This article focuses on Jewish women in the Nazi ghettos of German-occupied Latvia and Lithuania. It uses testimonies and memoirs of survivors to develop a narrative about life force atrocities at these sites, highlighting ways in which being a Jewish woman shaped the experience of the ghettos, where gendered risks were ubiquitous. Being a woman in the ghettos meant being both exploited and undervalued as a source of physical labor, targeted as a potential or actual bearer of children, and violated as an object of racist and sexist ideology and rage. Life force atrocities have physical and symbolic dimensions, targeting bodies, bonds, and norms of the community. This work considers what women's accounts tell us about the presence – or ubiquity – of life force atrocities in the Baltic ghettos. It draws on the concepts of the universe of obligation and social death to highlight key roots and consequences of these atrocities for women. In testimonies and memoirs, we encounter themes of pregnancy, forced abortion, the wrenching loss of loved ones, sexual violence, and decisions made in the desperate hope of saving oneself or another. Survivor accounts are key to revealing life force atrocities as defining features of the Nazi ghettos, and the gendered risks faced by women prisoners in Nazi-occupied Riga, Daugavpils, and Kaunas.

Keywords: Baltic ghettos; genocide and sexual violence; Holocaust in the Baltics; Nazi ghettos; women in the Holocaust

> … Just don't ask me about dates.
> There were no calendars on our walls.
> Our days and hours were uncertain and numbered.
> All Jews were on a conveyer belt
> moving towards the crematoriums all the time
> Only we did not know this …
> If the war would last a little longer
> there would not be any witnesses.
> …

***Corresponding author: Daina S. Eglitis**, Associate Professor of Sociology & International Affairs, The George Washington University, Washington, USA, E-mail: dainas@gwu.edu. https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1451-9842

Pushed into seven little narrow streets of the Ghetto
We just tried to survive, each day at a time.
Taken to work each morning, for hours
We stayed in lines for bread and toilets and bath …
Shaken every time with more actions,
more innocent Jews taken to their death.
Who would keep track of dates …
– Esther Dykman-Gastwirth, Vilno, Poland[1]

The interviews for which thousands of survivors have sat in the decades after the Holocaust usually seek to glean information chronologically, guiding the interviewee through childhood, the outbreak of the Second World War, the atrocities of the Holocaust, the final chapter of liberation and the end of the war, and life in the aftermath. As Esther Dykman-Gastwirth writes in a testimony shared as a series of poems, however, the traumatic experiences of the ghetto did not comport easily with dates on a calendar, and were measured instead in ubiquitous lines, lost lives, and uncertainty. For many Jews, especially those in Eastern Europe, the imminence of the Holocaust was experienced first in the ghettos that were established when the German occupation of the region began.

As this work will show, ghetto histories have been widely told. Within these larger stories, however, are microhistories of groups and experiences that may be missed in historical narratives that rely on perpetrator documents collected from archives, prioritize contemporaneous accounts that few Jewish prisoners could produce as they struggled to survive, universalize experiences of survivors from a limited number of prominent accounts, or focus on *what* happened *when*, rather than on *how* it was experienced. This article focuses on women's experiences in three large Nazi ghettos in German-occupied Latvia and Lithuania. It uses testimonies and memoirs of survivors to highlight ways in which being a Jewish *woman* shaped the experience of the ghettos, where gendered risks were commonplace. Being a woman in the ghettos meant being both exploited and undervalued as a source of physical labor, targeted as a potential or actual bearer of children, and violated as an object of racist and misogynist ideology or rage.

This examination of gendered risks in the ghettos highlights the phenomenon of *life force atrocities*, which were visited upon the entire Jewish community, but were borne in particular ways by girls and women. Elisa von Joeden-Forgey writes that, "What distinguishes genocidal violence from other types of collective killing and brutality is the obsession it shows for the life force in all its worldly manifestations" (2010, 5). Life force atrocities have physical and symbolic dimensions, targeting bodies, bonds, and norms of the community. This work asks what women's

1 Dykman-Gastwirth, Esther. 1980. Written testimony in poems, unpublished. Yad Vashem Archives. R.G. O.33, file 10869, item 13671650.

testimonies and memoirs tell us about the presence – or ubiquity – of life force atrocities in the Baltic ghettos. It draws on the concepts of the *universe of obligation* and *social death* to highlight key roots and consequences of these atrocities in an environment of mortal threat. In women's recollections, we encounter themes of pregnancy, forced abortion, sexual violence and humiliation, the wrenching loss of loved ones, and desperate decisions made in the hope of saving oneself or someone else. Survivor accounts reveal the omnipresence and trauma of life force atrocities as defining features of the ghettos, and provide evidence of the imminence of genocidal practices even before the turn to industrialized mass murder in the Holocaust.

This woman-centered narrative relies primarily on oral testimonies and written memoirs, which recount individual stories shared in the decades after the events described. For years, survivor testimonies were regarded by many historians with skepticism and characterized as being rife with memory flaws and subjectivity.[2] Wendy Lower writes that,

> These academics were skeptical of the factual reliability of victims' accounts and those of other non-German witnesses speaking after the war. Unintentionally, many scholars thereby silenced victims and other subjugated civilians … and inflicted upon them another form of historical repression – extending the power of the Nazis through overreliance on 'official' German wartime documents … (2021, 62–3)

The testimonial poem that opens this work offers some insight into the characterization of survivor accounts as problematic, as it implicitly recognizes the mismatch between perceptions of time and events in a "normal" environment, and those that existed in the extreme and violent circumstances of the ghetto. Comparing interviews with a survivor couple and their daughter, born after the end of the Second World War, Lawrence Langer points out that the daughter "… draws on a vocabulary of chronology and conjunction, while *they* [the survivors] use a lexicon of disruption, absence, and irreversible loss" (1993, xi).

Testimonies are not precise *histories* of an event: in the words of Henny S., a German-born survivor of the Riga ghetto, "I can't remember dates and times. It's all very blurry."[3] At the same time, testimonies and memoirs give survivors voice to shape the reconstruction of significant *experiences* that might otherwise be marginalized or overlooked. I follow Christopher Browning in embracing the position that "there are topics too important to be passed over simply to avoid the challenges of using survivor eyewitness evidence" (2011, 8). Women's experiences of

2 See Waxman (2012) for a thoughtful discussion on use of testimonies that is neither sacralizing nor dismissive.

3 Henny S. 1991. Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies. Interview mssa.hvt.1498. Note that testimonies from the Fortunoff Archive use only first names with the first letter of the family name.

pregnancy, childbirth, coerced abortion, and sexual abuse are not recounted in most published histories of the Baltic ghettos. It is women's voices in testimonies and memoirs that offer an opportunity to build a more diverse account of the past.

As others have documented, the conscious inclusion of women's experiences in Holocaust histories was fostered by efforts that took root in the 1980s. The significance of women's words ("half the history of the Holocaust," per Kaplan 2019, 39) to a comprehensive telling of the Holocaust has since been well-established (Baumel-Schwartz and Baumel 1998; Ephgrave 2016; Hedgepeth and Saidel 2010; Kaplan 2019; Mühlhäuser 2021; Ofer and Weitzman 1998; Ringelheim 1985; Saidel 2004; Sinnreich 2008; Tec 2003). Women's ghetto experiences, including sexual violence and childbirth prohibitions, have also been documented (Chalmers 2015; Hedgepeth and Saidel 2010). Gendered roles tied to family expectations and obligations, and gendered risks related to sexual violence, pregnancy, and childbirth, meant that women's experiences were different from men's. Notably, as Anna Hájková points out, an understanding that gender relations, as well as normative ideas about the feminine and masculine and about sexuality, were related to risk and survival chances has always been present (2013) – it was an acknowledgement of differential experience and vulnerability that lagged behind.[4]

This work begins with an overview of the sources used to develop this narrative. In this section, I also discuss some of the challenges of survivor testimony, and women's testimonies in particular. Next, I offer a brief outline of the large Baltic ghettos, and key scholarship and other writings that document their characteristics and prisoners' experiences. I then elaborate the concepts of life force atrocities, universe of obligation, and social death to frame survivor experiences. This is followed by an examination of testimonies that highlight the Nazi targeting of mothers, pregnant women, and children, as well as survivor accounts of sexual abuse, experiences that have often been obscured and stigmatized. I end with a brief discussion of the significance of women-centered histories and life force atrocities as a marker of genocide.

1 Sources

The key sources for this work are women survivors' interviews and memoirs. Oral testimonies used in this work were accessed through the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies (Fortunoff), which is characterized by free-flowing narratives largely unguided by the interviewer, and the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum interview collection (USHMM) and USC Shoah Foundation Institute Visual History

4 See also Mühlhäuser (2021).

Archive (VHA), both of which use structured interviews and seek to elicit information chronologically.[5] Other sources include testimonies taken by smaller Holocaust centers in Montreal and Melbourne, and Centropa, which offers cleaned, transcribed testimonies, rather than recorded ones. Most of the 28 testimonies cited here were given in English.[6] The seven memoirs used to directly develop the narrative are either published works, or unpublished or self-published works drawn from collections at Yad Vashem and the Museum of Jews in Latvia: these items were in English, Latvian, or Russian. All sources were produced in the aftermath of the Holocaust. Contemporaneous victim sources could only reflect the experiences and understandings of their moment, which was incomplete: ghetto inhabitants knew of the context of imminent risk through personal traumas, partial information, and rumors. Survivors in later decades were cognizant of how Nazi atrocities began and ended, and how and whether their own family members had survived. These accounts of the past cannot be untouched by subsequent events and particular motivations of survivors in telling their stories (Waxman 2012).

Working with women's testimonies also presents some particular challenges. Among the most acute is stigma that is normatively associated with sexual violence: shame is too often attached to victims rather than perpetrators. As Henry Greenspan notes, "… stigma has always impacted how and what survivors retell. Memories of sexual violence may be especially likely to remain unspoken in response." (Bergen et al. 2021, 504; see also Ephgrave 2016).[7] Silences around sexual violence and humiliation are not, however, uniform. They may vary depending on the setting and vehicle: for instance, sharing with family directly, recounting episodes in writing, or interacting with an interviewer (Ibid.).[8] Notably, later interviews, specifically those of the USC Shoah Visual History Archive, asked about whether a survivor had witnessed sexual abuse (Sinnreich 2008), which opened opportunities to share experiences that could be one's own, or that of another.[9] It is estimated that about 1000 of

5 Browning (2010) writes that the former "allow us to see how they constructed their stories and narrated their memories without an intermediary," which was often inimical to easy chronology, "but reflective of the rupture and disorientation of their Holocaust experiences." The latter developed a life-course story, but were more vulnerable to interviewer disruption when a survivor introduced a topic that digressed from the "main story line" (5–6).

6 One testimony of the 28 was in Russian.

7 Stigmatization of sexual violence survivors is a phenomenon, but the terminology is problematic. Defining harms of sexual violence in terms of stigma and shame "brings further problems. It reinforces the alleged inevitability of shame as the natural response by the individual victim" and assumes that families and communities will reinforce this response (Mühlhäuser 2021, 16–7).

8 See Coraza in Bergen et al. (2021). She asks, for instance, "Are survivors more comfortable revealing episodes of sexual violence to a future reader than to a present audience, or vice versa?" (510).

9 Waxman notes, "When witnesses do refer to [sexual abuse] they tend to do so through the lens of another person – 'it happened to my sister, my aunt' and so on" (2021, 475).

the over 52,000 interviews in the USC Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History Archive reference rape and sexual violence by a variety of perpetrators (Hedgepeth and Saidel 2010). Beverley Chalmers points out, "While relatively few of the recorded testimonies recall rape or sexual violence, most of those subjected to these assaults would have been killed. These survivor testimonies, no matter how few, do confirm that rape and sexual violence did occur" (2015, 212).

Pertinent to another topic in this article, Ellen Ben-Sefer writes, "Abortion and forced sterilization still are not discussed in depth in historical books about the Holocaust" (2010, 156). Women's experiences may be marginalized in mainstream accounts if their stories are perceived to be outside the "proper collective memory of the Holocaust" (Ringelheim 1997, 20), or may remain absent because many victims were murdered, and survivors traumatized by the loss of a wanted child or childbearing capacity (Ben-Sefer 2010). Some key work has begun to address this void in the literature (Chalmers 2015; Hedgepeth and Saidel 2010). Published literature on Baltic ghettos, however, continues to be broadly pervaded by silences on this topic, though testimonies confirm that coerced abortions were common, as Nazi authorities prohibited childbirth in the Baltic ghettos.

Testimonies cannot be a precise rendering of the past. Waxman cautions that they are neither "sacred text," nor can they "be representative of Holocaust experience – the vast majority of victims died without writing down their experiences … " (2012, 152). It is important to recognize the subjective nature of personal testimony (Young 1990), but not, at the same time, to segment testimonies into a literary category of cultural products closed off from critical historical writing. Writing of the wartime diary of a young Łodź ghetto victim, Waxman points out that, "in addition to wanting to leave a record of [the victim's] own, and in particular, their families' existence, they also wanted to provide a basis for future historical research" (2012, 146). While testimonies should not be "viewed as history in the strictest sense … each testimony nevertheless constitutes an important historical document, for they all contribute to what we know about the Holocaust and the destruction of Jewish life" (Ibid., 152).

By revealing "more about the life of the victims and emphasiz[ing] the individuality of lived experience" (Waxman 2017, 150), testimonies contribute to our body of knowledge of gendered experiences of life force atrocities in the Baltic ghettos between 1941 and 1944. As the review of literature on the Baltic ghettos below shows, a robust framework within which to build woman-centered accounts of life force atrocities in the Baltic ghettos exists. First-person sources, while fragmentary, enable the development of a historical narrative that fills voids of history that emerge from the absence of women victims' voices in perpetrator or other official documents, the presence of uncomfortable stories about women's lives and losses in the ghettos, and a longtime lack of access to the cultural and social capital (Bourdieu

1984), that would have enabled women to write their experiences into mainstream histories. Women's testimonies, arguably, help us to avoid collective memory's obscuring of the diversity of Holocaust experiences (Waxman 2007, 125).

2 Places of Horror

This work develops a narrative of life force atrocities in large Nazi ghettos in the Baltics, focusing in particular on the Riga and Daugavpils (Dvinsk) ghettos in Latvia and the Kaunas (Kovno) ghetto in Lithuania.[10] The Riga ghetto was established in a working-class neighborhood in July 1941, and sealed in late October, when its population, mostly comprised of local Jews, was approximately 29,600. The population underwent a dramatic shock when the majority of prisoners were murdered in a mass action at Rumbula in late November and early December. The few not killed were herded into the "small ghetto." About 22,000 Jews deported from Germany, Austria, and Czechoslovakia started arriving after the murder of the Riga Jews, and continued to arrive until mid-1942. They were housed in the "large ghetto." German-born survivor Renee B. remembers that when her family's transport arrived in the city in mid-December 1941, "there were 4000 [Latvian Jewish] men left. The women and children, and most men were not there anymore." She describes the surviving men, who had lost their families, as "utterly destroyed."[11] Henny S., who arrived on a transport from Germany, also recalls the near-absence of women: "The few [women] that survived, I think those were mostly … people the Germans had use for."[12] The ghetto was liquidated between July and November 1943 (USHMM 2012, 1019–22).

The history of the Riga ghetto has been documented most fully in *The "Final Solution" in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944* (Angrick and Klein 2009). The book uses German and Soviet records, as well as perpetrator and survivor accounts, to build an expansive story of German and Latvian crimes, the killing of Latvian and Western European Jews, exploitation of Jewish labor, and ghetto liquidation. Largely absent is discussion of the prohibition of births, forced abortions, and sexual violence and its threat, though, as testimonies show, these shaped the experience of many women prisoners. A work on the deportation of Jews from Terezín to the Riga ghetto notes that, "… it also was forbidden to give birth. Pregnant women and newborns were to be destroyed" (Makarov and Makarov 2014, 46). It

10 Though it is important to the history of Jewish communities in the region, I have excluded the Vilnius (Vilno, Vilna) ghetto, as the city was part of Poland for most of the interwar period. Thus, testimonies on pre-war life, for instance, recount Polish-Jewish relations.

11 Renee B. 1991. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.1496.

12 Henny S. 1991. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.1498. The few hundred surviving women were seamstresses.

does not, however, go into detail, and testimonies suggest that pregnant women who underwent abortions were not always killed. Books written and published after the war's end by survivors illuminate some of the quotidian experiences of life and death in the Riga ghetto (Michelson 2004), and endeavor to provide a broader history (Kaufman 2010; Press 2000; Schneider 1979). Schneider's account offers insight into the lives of women in the ghetto, though that is not the purpose of the work.[13]

Before the war, in the southern Latvian city of Daugavpils, Jews comprised about 25 % of the population, or over 11,100 people. The ghetto, located in a Tsarist-era fortress, was created quickly after German occupation and enclosed by July 31, 1941, when it held about 11,000 Jews, most from Daugavpils and surrounding localities. By the end of August, about 6500 prisoners had been murdered,[14] and by the beginning of November, most inhabitants of the ghetto had been killed, leaving behind an estimated 1000 people. The ghetto was largely liquidated in May 1942, though a small number of prisoners remained into 1943 (USHMM 2012, 1001–03). A comprehensive English-language work has yet to be produced on the Daugavpils ghetto, though it is featured in an English-language history of the city (Swain 2004), and is a key subject in memoirs (Frankel-Zaltzman 2003; Iwens 1991), which offer glimpses into the gendered-violence of the ghetto.[15]

In the Lithuanian city of Kaunas, in 1940, a quarter of the population was Jewish – a total of about 40,000 people.[16] The ghetto in Slobodka was created on July 8 and sealed on August 15, 1941: as in Riga, most families went to the ghetto together, and it was "the 'last place' in which the traditional family structure was maintained," writes Sharon Cohen in a review of the experience of Jewish families in the Kovno ghetto (2006, 267). By the end of the December 1941, over 50,000 Jews, many of them Lithuanian-born, had been murdered, most at the Ninth Fort, a fearsome fortress on the periphery of Kaunas (USHMM 2012, 1066–9). Survivors recall several mass actions, especially those that targeted children and the elderly. In contrast to Riga, Lithuanian Jewish prisoners included both working-aged men and women, many of whom toiled at the airport, which was about an hour and half by foot:[17] women were not specifically targeted as they were in Riga.[18] The ghetto, with a small number of remaining inhabitants, was liquidated as the Red Army returned to Lithuania in 1944

13 Survivor and historian Gertrude Schneider's video testimony is also included in this article.

14 The *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of Ghettos* lists a higher figure: it estimates that between July 13 and August 21, 1941, about 9000 Jews were murdered in Daugavpils (2009, 151–4).

15 Ročko has published in Russian and Latvian on the Daugavpils ghetto (2008, 2016).

16 Estimates vary on the number of Jews in Kaunas in 1940: according to Yad Vashem, the figure is about 37,000 (2009, 297). Avraham Tory's published ghetto diary places the figure at 30,000 (2000, viii).

17 Hilda G. 1986. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.718.

18 Among the testimonies that describe changes in the ghetto population is that of Esther M., 1984. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.259.

(Yad Vashem 2009, 297). The ghetto has been the subject of an illustrated history based on an exhibition (USHMM 1997), published diaries (Anonymous members of the Kovno Jewish ghetto police 2014; Tory 1991) and memoirs (Ginaite-Rubinson 2005; Gordon 1992; Mishell 1988; Zilber 2019). Tory's diary recounts sexual violence and child-hiding in the ghetto, and Zilber describes her mother's forced abortion, but a fuller political and social history of the ghetto remains to be written.

The suffering of Jewish prisoners in the Nazi ghettos of Latvia and Lithuania was immense. Historical works convey the process and scale of community destruction, and memoirs and diaries offer insights into the lives of those trapped in the ghettos. This article aims to contribute to this body of work by consciously introducing a "female voice": I follow Waxman in putting this forth as "an antidote to what remains an overwhelmingly male narrative, and which throws light on experiences which might hitherto have gone ignored such as sexual abuse, pregnancy, amenorrhea and sterility, and childbirth" (2017, 8). In contrast to mass murder by gassing, which was characterized by an engineered distance between victim and victimizer, and has come to be emblematic of the Holocaust, testimonies and memoirs show that gendered atrocities in the ghettos were often intimate, bringing perpetrators, victims, and witnesses into immediate proximity. Much of the violence was enacted in public spaces, and, particularly in the first months of the Nazi occupation, was often perpetrated and experienced by residents of the same localities.

Women's stories show that life force atrocities were key markers of crimes against those who had been brutally expelled from the universe of obligation (Fein 1979). Jews were stripped of the right to claim or expect protection, care, or empathy, and were subject to both capricious and systematized violence. For women, this was often manifested in atrocities that targeted them in their normative family roles, or subjected them to sexual brutality.

3 Building a Narrative of Women's Lives in Baltic Ghettos

The horrors of Nazi death camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, and Treblinka are well-known (Wachsmann 2015). However, before the Final Solution turned these camps into vehicles of an industrialized process of mass murder, atrocities were occurring in territories occupied by Nazi Germany in the summer of 1941. The violence of this period was intimate and intense, carried out by men with guns in a town square, at the edge of a wooded pit, or steps from a shoreline where victims may have spent summer days with family in years before the war. At the same time, the

victimization of Jewish girls and women was often carried out in the ghettos that imprisoned them.

Many perpetrators were German soldiers and officers, but they were often accompanied by local collaborators who held a formal affiliation with the Nazi authorities, or perhaps did not – acting of their own volition even before the German occupation was complete or civil structures of occupation in place (Bankier 2011). Many Jewish families had lived in Latvia and Lithuania for generations. Some victims and perpetrators knew or recognized one another. Kaunas-born Henny Fletcher Aronson remembers, "It was just neighbors, people who you dealt with. Then suddenly – it was almost like they waited for it, like hungry dogs and so it was rough. It was really rough."[19]

The Nazi ghettos were instruments of social control and sites of displacement and danger. They were tightly packed spaces, carefully surveilled, and organized with brutality. Gendered violence existed and thrived, rendering even more acute the daily precarity of dignity, family, and survival. Robin Schott writes that women in the Holocaust were targeted as Jews, but their risks were "gender multiplied – where social and symbolic facts multiply the original harm done to victims" (2011, 6). They were targets of the life force atrocities that mark genocide as a gendered crime. Von Joeden-Forgey defines life force atrocities as "a ritualized pattern of violence that targets the life force of a group by destroying both the physical symbols of its life force as well as its most basic institution of reproduction, especially the family unit" (2010, 2).

These "ritualized patterns of violence" operate through two practices of genocidal action: first, Joeden-Forgey notes the presence of "violent inversion rituals," which target and tear normative hierarchies and relationships within families through, for instance, the forced witnessing or perpetration of crimes like rape or torture of family members (2010, 2). Wendy Lower writes of brutal scenes where "Wives and children were forced to watch their husbands and fathers suffer beatings conducted with canes, truncheons, and electrical rods, which were often deliberately applied to the genitals" (2021, 111). In an account of the Daugavpils ghetto, Geoffrey Swain recounts a story told to Soviet authorities after the war: "… ghetto commandant Zaube and senior police officials liked to select attractive Jewish women and rape them, before having them killed. Such rapes sometimes took place in public, even in front of the parents of the girl concerned. According to one source, the sister of a local Daugavpils doctor, Dr. Goldman, was raped in this way and tried to persuade her brother to help her commit suicide, such was the shame. Suicide in the ghetto was not uncommon" (2004, 66). The circle of agony extended beyond the individual on whom the violence was enacted, transforming and fraying normal kinship relations: "… acts of sexual violence carried symbolic meanings of power

19 Henny Fletcher Aronson. 1994. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Interview RG-50.030.0290.

while alienating victims from their kin, destroying their sense of control over their bodily reactions and devastating their social relations" (Mühlhäuser 2021, 35).

Second, Joeden-Forgey notes the significance of "ritual mutilation and desecration of symbols of group reproduction" (2010, 2). These atrocities are enacted to harm women's and men's reproductive capacity, women's pregnant bodies, and infants and children as carriers of a community's future. Lithuanian-born Bertha Wilk Taubman remembers that, "The [Lithuanian] Partisans robbed, bullied and raped many … … The Jews of Radvikiski were murdered by the partisans as they passed through a forest on their way to Žagaré … Wild men would cut off fingers together with rings and also the breasts of women, mothers of suckling children (1988). Von Joeden-Forgey points out that, life force atrocities "betray a specific state of mind among perpetrators, who are not merely engaged in killing but also in a subjective metaphysical struggle with the life force itself" (2010, 2).

Violence in the ghettos and the killing sites at which prisoners from the ghettos were murdered was rarely hidden: rather, it was brazen and performative, unbound from legal or moral limitations. Public violence engendered fear at the community level and functioned as means of social control. Lore Oppenheimer, a German-born survivor of the Riga ghetto, remembers public hangings for those who violated ghetto regulations. She tells of a young man who tried to help her father after he fell ill: "… we had to watch that while they hung him … And [the young man and other prisoners] hung for three days, each person."[20]

Widespread Nazi deception curtailed resistance, sometimes by generating hope for better conditions. Survivors recount deceptive practices that ended in mass death. German-born Susan Taube recalls the arrival of her Berlin transport and the transfer of prisoners to the Riga ghetto:

> Once we arrived, the doors opened up and there was the SS and the dogs and the trucks and 'Out Out Out!' And people could hardly move, they were frozen stiff … Again they assembled us in front of the train, 'If you can walk, it's about 5 km to your destination. And if not, you can go on the truck and we will take you there … 'Well, whatever we left there we never saw again, and the people who went on the truck we never saw again either.[21]

These were the notorious blue gas vans, in which vulnerable new arrivals, often children and the elderly, were murdered.[22] Lithuanian-born survivor Miriam K. tells

20 Lore Oppenheimer. 2014. Holocaust Memorial & Tolerance Center of Nassau County. Survivor Testimony: Daily Life in the Riga Ghetto. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOePlluxMW8.

21 Susan Taube. 2009. USHMM First Person Podcast Series, 9 June 2009. https://www.ushmm.org/remember/holocaust-survivors/first-person-conversations-with-survivors/first-person/susan-taube-deportation-to-the-riga-ghetto.

22 The blue vans, which were used as mobile gas chambers to murder the weak, appear in numerous testimonies, including those of Renee B. and Henny S.

of the Kaunas ghetto that, "The day before the ghetto closed the Germans asked for 500 people with college degrees between the ages of 25 and 40. The SS said they needed to make an archive and they only wanted people with degrees. They never came back."[23] At least initially, deception enabled family separations and killings in ways that engendered cooperation and diminished resistance.

A corollary concept for framing gendered atrocities in the ghettos is Claudia Card's notion of "social death" (2003). Card's concept is significant because, as James Snow points out, there is a "… split between memory and official histories in general, and the split is especially pronounced with respect to women's experiences of genocide" (2016, 608). Social death puts the loss of relationships and community, which women's testimonies often highlight, at the center of research on genocide. Lithuanian-born survivor Zlata Santocki Sidrer remembers a mass killing in Kaunas: "It was a cold day with snow on the ground … The Germans came in and started the 'selection.' Left and right; left and right. At least half of the people in the ghetto were killed … thousands, families were broken up. It was the biggest tragedy … " (in Zilber 2019, 28). Sidrer lost her grandmother and aunt, but her recollection of the event is encompassing: every family was victimized.

The concept of social death distinguishes genocide from other mass atrocities and shifts the focus from the "ruin of individual careers, body counts, statistics on casualties, and material costs of rebuilding," which are common ways of assessing the consequences of war and terror, to ways in which aggression tears at social vitality and existential meaning (Snow 2016, 617). Physical death is but one manifestation of demise: social death illuminates genocide as an atrocity that pervades individual and community existence long after the killing has ceased. Indeed, "It could well be argued that social death as opposed to mass homicide, is the very telos – the end or purpose of genocide" (Ibid.).

Social death is poignantly rendered in testimonies. Women's normative social roles were intimately tied in pre-war Europe to family bonds and obligations: "… uniting European Jewish family life, whether middle- or working class, urban or shtetl, secular or religious, was the fact that women's primary roles were as wives and mothers" (Waxman 2017, 13). Evading physical death in a genocidal environment permeated by mortal threats meant struggles with social death, a status that some women resisted. Latvian-born Valentīna Freimane, who remained outside the Riga ghetto with her gentile husband, recalls that her Jewish parents decided that if other members of their community were going to the ghetto, they would go too. Freimane tells that her mother had the opportunity to hide, but it was clear she would not leave her husband.[24]

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23 Miriam K. 1988. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.1169.

24 Interview with Valentīna Freimane. *Geto stāsti. Rīga.* 2013. Producer Linda Olte."Latvia's television" film.

Women's accounts of the Holocaust are not devoid of agency: women resisted and acted to nurture ties that sustained them and restored community. Judith Tydor Baumel has written on the phenomenon of "camp sisters," unrelated women who formed quasi-family ties of mutual support and care in ghettos and camps where many biological ties were severed (Baumel-Schwartz and Baumel 1998). Myrna Goldenberg adds, "Although all respected Holocaust sources by survivors and scholars emphasize the fact that survival, first and foremost, was random, virtually all memoirs by women implicitly or explicitly credit survival to some manner of women's friendships and collaboration" (1996, 86). Latvian-born survivor Maly Kohn recounts a story of Ljuba, a young Jewish woman from Daugavpils, who had long blonde hair that she used to cover her yellow star to steal away from the ghetto "… to bring in some food to the compound." Kohn tells that "She was very bold and she wasn't afraid to talk to the German officers if she had to intervene [for] some unfortunate Jew. She would talk to the highest ranks whoever she could meet … In this time when Dvinsk had to give up their children, she spent the whole night taking the children to farmers that she knew, and so she was walking around the whole night and hiding as many children as she could with farmers." Ljuba was arrested, but some of her friends bribed a German guard, who let her go: "And it was so important that we cared for each other, that one risked her own life for the sake of others … "[25]

The final concept employed to engage with Jewish women's experiences of the Baltic ghettos is the universe of obligation. Seeking to understand the origins of genocidal atrocities, such as those visited upon Armenians and Jews in the twentieth century, Helen Fein observes that, "… the collective (or common) conscience is defined by the boundaries of the universe of obligation – that circle of persons toward whom obligations are owed, to whom the rules apply, and whose injuries call for expiation by the community." She continues:

> Within any polity, the dominant group defines the boundaries of the universe of obligation and sanctions violations legally. Injuries to or violations of rights of persons within the universe are offenses against the collective conscience that provoke the need for sanctions against perpetrators in order to maintain the group's solidarity … Violations of (or collective violence against) those outside the boundaries do not provoke such a need; instead, such violence is likely to be explained as a just punishment for their offenses. (1979, 33)

The resistance or response of Nazis, local collaborators, or bystanders was, from this perspective, dependent upon whether Jews were included within, or expelled from, the universe of obligation. Political ideologies and exclusionary laws, layered with racism and sexism, enabled acts of violence. Most perpetrators of the Nazi genocide

25 Maly Kohn. 2015. Jewish Holocaust Center, Melbourne. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqKQ5v7bogU.

in the Baltics did not kill before the Holocaust, nor did they kill afterwards. The definitive and devastating expulsion of Jews from the universe of obligation was a necessary condition for mass violence against communities that had coexisted for generations.

In the independent interwar Baltic states, Jews had a legal and cultural place. In Latvia's 1935 census, an estimated 94,000 Jews resided in the country, making up about 5 % of the national population and 11 % of the municipal population of Riga. An estimated 94 % were Latvian citizens and about 70 % were fluent in Latvian. They were granted political rights, but were often segregated educationally, economically, and socially (Eglitis and Bērziņš 2018). Lithuania was home to a larger population: about 160,000 Jews, over 7 % of the population, were Lithuania's largest minority and an active part of democratic political life until the coup of 1926. Cultural and religious life remained active across the interwar period, in which government-financed education in Jewish schools continued, though there were restrictions and segregation in university studies and some professions (Vardys and Sedaitis 2018). There were no pogroms in either independent country before the Second World War. The arrival of Nazi forces in 1941 erased not only legal, political, and economic rights (though these had been significantly diminished since the Soviet occupation a year earlier), but violently pushed Jews outside of the boundaries of even basic care and protection.

For many of the Jews who made their homes in the Baltics, there was little anticipation of the horrors to come. Valentīna Freimane remembers a sentiment expressed by her parents: "This is, after all, Latvia, our home, we are among our own [*starp savējiem*], Latvian citizens, so we can feel safer" (2010, 234). The sentiment did not match the brutal reality. Both of Freimane's parents were murdered in the Riga ghetto.

German-born Trudi Birger, who moved with her family to Memel and later to Kaunas, after the rise of Nazism in Germany, remembers that, "People had scores to settle, real and imaged, for things that had happened under the Russians. Lithuanians, who had been our neighbors, our customers, and our partners in business took up the profitable sport of shooting Jews. It was like that scene from my childhood in Frankfurt all over again, only much, much worse" (1992, 52). Lithuanian-born Nesse Godin tells that she was blonde and blue-eyed as a teenager, but she could not remove her star because the neighbors knew she was Jewish and would tell the authorities: "Some helped, very few, but most of them just let it go." Safety was not to be found in the care of neighbors, or the protection of authorities: Godin adds that, "The Lithuanian police, the same policemen that I was told as a little girl if I get lost, I should go for help – I had to be afraid of."[26]

26 Nesse Godin. USHMM First Person Program, 13 April 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V0pC8a_02kE.

The expulsion of Baltic Jews from the universe of obligation is captured by Freimane's comment that when German occupation began, "All Jews as a single mass were slowly step by step transformed from equal persons to things with which one could do as they pleased."[27] Maly Kohn remembers the first weeks of Nazi occupation in Latvia: "… after the first two weeks [during which Latvians were capriciously beating Jews in the streets] came the first German rules, not to protect the Jews, but to put them completely outside the law."[28]

In the sections below, I use survivor accounts to show the intimate violence of the Baltic ghettos and highlight the significance of life force atrocities as an axis around which the annihilation of Jewish communities was organized, in particular in the period before the "Final Solution" shifted the focus to industrialized mass murder. Stories of women's lives and losses in Baltic ghettos attest to an abrupt, brutal expulsion from the universe of obligation and to the trauma of social death that carried on long after the end of the Nazi genocide.

4 The Death of the Family

For Jewish women, suffering and loss in the Holocaust included the brutal destruction of motherhood. In this section, I examine two components of life force atrocities connected to Jewish motherhood: separation of mothers and children, and the Nazi prohibition of births in the Baltic ghettos.

4.1 Family Separation in the Ghettos

The separation of mothers from their children was a fundamental enactment of life force atrocities in the ghettos. Rather than being protected in accordance with normative entreaties to care for the most vulnerable members of society, they were targeted for extreme violence. Lithuanian-born Channa Anne Veller Milner recounts the loss of her son to a "children's action" in Kaunas: "When [my husband] Nachum tried to stop the soldiers from taking Avremele, they hit him hard. Avremele was gone when Nachum awoke, just another body thrown into the grave at the Ninth Fort" (no date). Bertha Wilk Taubman tells of her daughter Rivke'la, from whom she was separated in November 1943:

27 *Geto stāsti. Rīga.* 2013.

28 Maly Kohn. 1995. USHMM. Interview RG-50.407.0256.

> The Ukrainian soldiers and Lithuanian partisans participated in this action … When we returned from work the murderers stood at the gates of the camp and caught the few remaining children that had managed to escape and go off with us to work. I turned to the commanding officer named Forster … a tall man who had headed the action against the children. I begged him to return my daughter to me and then take both of us. His answer was: 'You have to work and we will take care of your daughter.' It is hard to think aback on the depression, misery and mourning through which I went. My whole body was as though paralyzed. I felt tingling like needles stuck into me. In this condition I was carried the next day by my friends. (1988, 33)

Rose Meyer, who was imprisoned with her husband and two children, ages 4 and 7, in the Kaunas ghetto recalls a children's action earlier that year. She hesitates on the date – March 27, 1943 – but remembers the scene described when she returned to the ghetto after being forced to work and leave her children alone. She tells that the Gestapo came with big trucks that played music, and German Sheppard dogs: "… children was [sic] running outside in the streets. And the Gestapo grabbed them … threw them in the big trucks." Elderly prisoners were taken too, she recalls: "Somebody not working – not supposed to be alive."[29]

The circle of those victimized by the "children's actions" was expanded by the separation of children from parents in public spaces of the ghetto.[30] This performance of atrocity imprinted in the memories of witnesses. Paula G. remembers an "Akcija for children" in Kaunas:

> They took away the children. This was the most terrible thing … I have a woman here … they took her two daughters and she ran after the car. So they sent a dog and the dog bit her. And they took away her two children …
> And I had a friend, so she hided [sic] a girl – it was drapes, heavy drapes – she put her. But they walked in, and you could hear every step. 'Sind hier Kinder da? … From the voice, the girl got scared. She started to cry. They took her away …
> The ghetto was something unbelievable.[31]

Mothers to dramatic lengths to try to ensure the survival of their children in the ghettos. Trudi Birger, who was imprisoned with her family in Kaunas, remembers,

> Mothers in the ghetto who lost all hope of survival for themselves, who accepted death as inevitable, but who couldn't accept the idea that their babies would share their fate. Sometimes

29 Rose Meyer. 1997. USHMM Interview RG-50.462.0748.

30 Gertrude Schneider remembers that in the early Western European transports to the Riga ghetto, entire families with small children were taken away to be killed, even though the parents could work. Separations were, she suggests, less common because authorities "didn't want to alarm the ghetto." See Schneider, Gertrude, Wasserman, Rita and Hirschhorn, Lotte Hirschhorn. 1978. Fragment from Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*. USHMM. RG-60.5015.

31 Paula G. 1988. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.0984.

> they managed to make an arrangement with a Lithuanian peasant family who was willing to take a baby, often for money. I witnessed such scenes in our apartment block. Mothers would wrap up their infants and cushion them in jute bags. Then they would drug them with sleeping powder so they wouldn't cry, and at night they threw the babies over the ghetto fence to the waiting peasants. That memory … dwells with me as strongly as anything that happened to me." (1992, 66)

Decisions about safety or rescue could never be made with enough information to ensure survival. The cost of a decision or indecision could be death – and, for women who lost loved ones – social death. Lithuanian-born Chasia Spanerflig was imprisoned with her child and niece in the Vilnius ghetto. After her husband Boris's escape from the ghetto, she was offered the opportunity to flee:

> They were brothers-in-arms and friends of Boris, who being on the free side, kept on getting people out of the ghetto. That time he asked to take me and I was supposed to give my consent. The first question I asked was whether I could take my children with me. I was told that I couldn't, moreover I wouldn't even have a chance to say good-bye to them or to Boris's parents – I had to leave at once. I was told that the underground people were informed that ghettoes would be exterminated in a couple of days and being on the free side I might be able to liberate my children. If I was to remain in the ghetto, I would die with them.

Within days, the news reached Spanerflig: her husband had perished in a battle in Western Ukraine and her son, niece, and parents-in-law had perished in the ghetto. At the end of the war, she still searched: "I didn't lose hope and decided that I would go from one village to another and look for people, who survived the ghetto – maybe they would know something about my kids. I also didn't know anything about my parents and brother, and I hoped to find out about them too." Spanerflig found only her brother, who had escaped from the ghetto.[32]

The trauma of loss is related in many testimonies from the perspective of a mother losing her beloved children, but the corollary to this is the memory of loss by children of their mothers. German-born Elly K. was transported to the Riga ghetto with her family. She remembers their arrival shortly after the mass action against Latvian Jews in late 1941, telling that in some apartments there was still food on the table – and that blood ran in the streets. In 1943, the ghetto was shrinking. She was working and living with her sick mother and a young brother. A family friend from Germany who was a bookkeeper in the ghetto tried to protect her mother and sibling, who could not work and were under imminent threat. When they could no longer be protected, Elly K. accompanied them to the *Appel* where selections were taking place – she wanted to go with them, fearing being left alone. At the site, her mother sent her back to the family's apartment, telling her that she should return to get a pair of shoes left behind. She dodged a group of SS men and successfully retrieved the

32 Chasia Spanerflig. 2005. Centropa. https://www.centropa.org/en/biography/chasia-spanerflig.

shoes, but when she made it back to the *Appelplatz*, she tearfully recalls, "They were gone. I was all by myself." [33]

Elly K. was stripped of the company and bonds of her family, and she remained alone until the ghetto was liquidated in 1943 when she was sent to the concentration camp at Kaiserwald, and later to Stutthof. Writing of women's experiences, Goldberg notes, "… women's Holocaust memoirs reveal the pains of unbearable choices and unspeakable loss: whether to send one's children to the gas chambers alone or hide them with strangers and expose them to betrayal or accompany them to the murder pits" (1996, 669). The listener infers that Elly K.'s mother sought to save her from transport and almost certain death, so she sent her back to the apartment, understanding that they would never see each other again.

Latvian-born Sonja Gottlieb Ludsin, tells of her family's forced move to the Riga ghetto, but notes, "We were happy as long as we were together." Within months, however, the family – four siblings and two parents – was gone. Ludsin remembers working outside the ghetto and hearing about an impending mass killing action against the inhabitants of the ghetto: "Naturally we wanted to be with our loved ones, but we also wanted to save ourselves." With the help of a Jewish friend who had communication with the German SS and acted to protect her, she remained away from the ghetto and survived: "We were very few lucky ones," but after the killing, she was 14 or 15 years old and "I had no idea where my family was."[34]

[Correction added after online publication on November 16, 2023: The term "without" was changed to "with" in the phrase "Naturally we wanted to be with our loved ones".]

Bonds of family were also torn asunder with the separation of adult children from their elderly parents. In Daugavpils, "Many women had to cope with their children and aged parents all by themselves, for their men had been killed in the prison massacre" (Iwens 1991, 47). Paula Frankel-Zaltzman recalls her family's move to the Daugavpils ghetto in July 1941: "There were very old barracks there that had served as horse stables for the Latvian military when they were stations on that side of the river … Now the barracks/stables had neither floors nor windows, nor a roof, only bare walls … From these buildings the ghetto was made." An estimated 11,000 Jews were imprisoned in the ghetto: "There all the Jews of the town were pressed in. People lay on top of one another and it was choking." In this environment, the family searched for a place to lay her ill father and had to settle for "a piece of bare earth" (2003).

Survivor Susan Taube tells that, in early 1942 "a lot of elderly people were still [in the Riga ghetto], and they couldn't go to work in the city." At this time, "caretakers" of

33 Elly K. 1988. Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.0417.

34 Sonja Gottlieb Ludsin. 1994. USHMM. Interview RG-50.030.0262.

the ghetto houses had to tell the Gestapo if there were elderly residents still living there. The old were offered an opportunity to go to a "fish factory" where they could clean fish, and be indoors and warm: "People were happy to go, but they never went to the fish factory. They went to the cemetery. That's it." [35] Henny Fletcher Aronson, who was imprisoned in the Kaunas ghetto with both her and her husband's family, recalls a mass action against children and the elderly. Her disabled mother-in-law was a victim:

> … I stood in front of her and I said [to the policeman], 'She can't walk." So they gave me a slap. She can't walk, so carry her … She was wearing a nightgown … I tried to pull down her dress – it would break my husband's heart – her nightgown, and we carried her out and the street was a nightmare because all you could see were young people carrying these old people like animals … And we carried her to the place where the busses were stationed … There was no seat, so I had to put her in the aisle, and I covered her up.[36]

Among the key characteristics of life force atrocities is the severing of vital family bonds and the loss of defining relationships. As Snow (2016) points out, this destruction, a form of social death, is no less a defining characteristic of genocide than mass death.

4.2 Mothers and Babies: A Brutalized Bond

Von Joeden-Forgey writes that, "Pregnant women – commonly viewed as the most harmless of civilians – are, for *génocidaires*, a direct and double threat: they are themselves agents of creation rather than destruction, and as creators they threaten the goal of annihilation of the targeted group" (2010, 10). The misfortunes of anticipated or new motherhood were acute in the Baltic ghettos. In spite of the prohibition of child-bearing in the ghettos, "many women continued to get pregnant in the ghettos. One of the reasons for this appears to be the suppression of menstruation, which gave women the impression that they would be unable to conceive" (Waxman 2017, 31).

Beginning in 1942, births were prohibited in the Vilnius, Kaunas, and Šiauliai (Shavli) ghettos in Lithuania (Chalmers 2015, 71–7).[37] Ettie Zilber writes,

> One of the many new laws in the [Kovno] ghetto [from July 24, 1942] was the one forbidding women to give birth under threat of death. As it turned out, my mother did get pregnant. Because of the risk involved, she decided to have an abortion. I remember the doctor who came

35 Susan Taube. 2016. USHMM First Person Program, 24 March 2016. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1mGC2SJ6kU. A similar story is related by Lore Oppenheimer, who was also a prisoner in the Riga ghetto.

36 Henny Fletcher Aronson. 1994. USHMM. Interview RG-50.030.0290.

37 This was not the case in all Nazi ghettos: in Łodz, for instance, an estimated 2306 babies were born across the four years of the ghetto's existence (Unger 1998, 123–4) and in Theresienstadt, there were about 230 births (and 350 abortions; Chalmers 2015, 79), though births were later forbidden.

> to our home. I remember that my mother did not make a sound – not a sound – during this time and there was no anesthesia. I was there in that room with her during the abortion. (2019, 31)

A small number of births took place in secret. Tobias Jafetas, who was imprisoned as a child with his family in the Kaunas ghetto remembers the birth of an infant girl in the fall of 1941: "She was given the name of Ghettele, after the place where she was born. She was born illegally, since childbirth was forbidden in the ghetto." The child survived for several years, but fell victim to a children's action in the last year of the ghetto, 1944:

> The fascists captured Ghettele, a two-year-old girl, our favorite. Her mother was out of her mind and the fascists killed her in the yard. When Mama returned from work, she told me that I had to leave the ghetto since one could no longer stay in the ghetto. She had discussed this with some people and had everything prepared for my escape.

Jafetas escaped the ghetto, but never saw his mother again.[38]

In Riga, births were forbidden and pregnant women were, according to survivors' stories, subject to punishment. Selma Metzger Winkler, a German-born survivor of the Riga ghetto writes that after arrival in Riga, "… the SS commandant ordered all pregnant women to report to the one-room infirmary near the Dvina [Daugava] River. Here women were given abortions, even though some were in the last months of pregnancy." She tells that abortions were performed without anesthesia and with few appropriate instruments, and that as punishment for her pregnancy, she was sent to perform hard labor in a peat bog in Latvia (Winkler 1984). German-born survivor Emmi Loewenstern, who tells that some women became pregnant by guards or officers, also remembers that "… there were no children to be born, at any time in the Riga ghetto.[39]

Rita Wasserman, an Austrian-born survivor of the Riga ghetto, tells that as a young teen she was an orderly in the ghetto hospital. She recalls that pregnant women were not murdered, as they were in some ghettos and camps: "They gave an abortion, even if she was in her eighth month." Her sister, Gertrude Schneider, notes that women cried and screamed, but they had no choice, and sometimes babies aborted in a late stage of pregnancy were drowned in a toilet. She adds that Dr. Joseph, a Latvian Jewish doctor, was given strict orders to make sure the women never became pregnant again, but "He didn't follow those orders all the time," and sometimes abortions were disguised as other surgeries ("appendicitis with hands and feet") or completed without record to avoid orders for sterilization of pregnant women.[40]

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38 Tobias Jafetas. 2005. Centropa. https://www.centropa.org/en/biography/tobijas-jafetas.

39 Lowenstern, Emmi. 1981. USHMM. Interview RG-50.462.0393.

40 Gertrude Schneider, Rita Wasserman, and Lotte Hirschhorn.1978. Fragment from Lanzmann's *Shoah*. USHMM. RG-60.5015.

Ruth Foster, a German-born Jewish survivor who worked as a nurse in the Riga ghetto, relates the story of Ben Ghetto:

> We were twenty nurses … The hospital was on two levels. We performed lots of operations there, complicated ones, and also a lot of abortions, because nobody was allowed to give birth to babies. The women who found themselves pregnant, even from arriving pregnant into the ghetto, or became pregnant from their husbands while they were still with their husbands, had to have their pregnancies terminated … It so happens that one Latvian Jewish woman gave birth to a little boy who was called Ben Ghetto.[41] The Germans found out … when I say now the Germans it was the Kommandantur where the SS were sitting, they found out about it, and this baby and the mother were brought to our hospital, and the baby had to be killed. First of all there were SS men put in front of the room where the mother and the baby were, and at a certain time the baby had to be killed.[42]

Zipora Zygielbaum, who was also imprisoned in the Riga ghetto, relates the story of a pregnant acquaintance, Annushka, who arranged with a dressmaker to get a corset so her pregnancy would not be visible. When the commandant was informed of the baby's birth, the child was killed and Annushka was sent to a camp as punishment, though she survived.[43] Renee B. remembers a similar scenario: "There were no births taking place in the ghetto at all, because any pregnant woman would be immediately sent away … We had no children at all in the ghetto."[44]

Gertrude Schneider recounts a period in Riga in 1942 when there were rumors of German struggles at the front and, perhaps, hope among the prisoners that the war would soon end. She tells that, "The stirrings of hope moved not only in the mind but also assumed physical expressions." Nazi authorities, evidently noticing an increase in abortions, circulated an order that sexual relations between ghetto inmates would henceforth be forbidden (1979, 63). Schneider and her sister, Rita Wasserman, remember together that a *Housekommandant* was sent around the ghetto to announce the news, but it could not be enforced and "Everybody in the ghetto made jokes about it." Schneider adds that while this action was the source of humor, it was an indicator that the Jews of the ghetto were marked as subhuman.[45]

Dana Pomerants-Muzurkevich is one of the few infants born in the Baltic ghettos who survived. Born in October 1941, Pomerants-Muzurkevich was smuggled out of the Kaunas ghetto in a potato sack by a Lithuanian acquaintance

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41 In Schneider's account, the infant was called Moses Ben Ghetto, and the baby survived for a short time, but was murdered by ghetto authorities. Schneider, Wasserman, and Hirschhorn. 1978. Fragment from Lanzmann's *Shoah*. USHMM. RG-60.5015.

42 Ruth Foster. 2003. VHA Interview 9538.

43 Zipora Zygielbaum. 1995. VHA Interview 4896.

44 Renee B. 1990, Fortunoff. Interview mssa.hvt.1496.

45 Schneider, Wasserman, and Hirschhorn.1978. Fragment from Lanzmann's *Shoah*. USHMM. RG-60.5015.

of her mother. She tells that in an effort to hide her from an imminent killing action, her father had rushed with her to five shelters, only to be turned away because those in hiding feared bringing in a child who could cry and reveal their location. The father and daughter were accepted at the sixth shelter. After being smuggled from the ghetto, Pomerants-Muzurkevich was taken in by a Lithuanian opera singer, Kipras Petrauskas, and his wife, Elena Zalinkevicaite Petrauskas, a stage actress, who knew the girl's father, a famous violinist in Lithuania before the war.[46] Her survival is a significant anomaly where few children had a chance to survive.

5 Sexual Danger

Von Joeden-Forgey writes that perpetrators of genocide use means other than mass death to annihilate the targeted group. As the previous section showed, family separation and the destruction of intimate ties leading to social death were commonplace practices and indicators of the imminence of genocide even before the initiation of industrialized mass murder. Von Joeden-Forgey points out that genocidal rage is enacted in inversion and desecration rituals that humiliate and harm women and families and include using sexual abuse and mutilation of symbols of group reproduction (2010). Humiliation came in many forms, ranging from forced nudity to public rape. Even the rituals of daily life, such as washing, were threaded with practices that functioned to shame women: Riga ghetto survivor Lore Oppenheimer remembers that, "… we had no bathing facilities, nothing … they took us to an open lake. I don't know. Everybody could watch us. And we had to get undressed and get washed. We had no choice."[47]

It has been argued that Nazi regulations and ideologies of "racial purity" foreclosed sexual contact with Jews, but as Helene Sinnreich writes, "… the suggestion that a German man would not commit *Rassenschande* (racial shame) by engaging in sexual relations with a Jewish woman is as untenable as any argument which insists that the existence of rules against an action prove that it could or would not take place" (2008, 2). The rape of Jewish girls and women was not a policy, but as testimonies and memoirs show, it was practiced, and the conditions of the ghettos rendered women acutely vulnerable to violation.

Women were not shielded from sexual violence by being Jewish: cast out of the universe of obligation, they were vulnerable to rape or other atrocities without recourse or consequences in any location – a home, a public street, a camp, or a

46 Dana Pomerants-Muzurkevich. 2019. USHMM. Interview RG-50.030.1055.

47 Lore Oppenheimer. 2014. HMTC. Survivor Testimony: Daily Life in the Riga Ghetto. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aOePlluxMW8.

prison. Their dehumanization fostered pervasive risk.[48] Lower suggests that actions on the periphery were sometimes more brutal than at the centers of Nazi power, as they were not subject to the direct supervision and scrutiny of the Reich's authorities. "The commissars and regional police forces did not carry out the Nazi goal of genocide in a banal fashion: they fulfilled it barbarically, often encouraging sadistic methods that exceeded the expectations of their superiors, who wanted to maintain order, a measure of control, and secrecy" (2002, 8).[49]

Some survivors describe the heinous crimes of Latvia's notorious Nazi killing unit, the Arājs Commando. They include rape and killing of women by the Commando's leader, Viktors Arājs, and other members of the group: "[Arājs] seized as headquarters for himself the luxurious residence of a Jewish banker on Valdemars Street and turned it into a house of horror for Jews, a veritable robbers den, where he and his 'boys' tortured and murdered Jews for sport and kept Jewish women for sexual entertainment" (Lumans 2006, 204). Latvian-born Zelda-Rivka Heit was one of a small number of Latvian Jews to survive the Riga ghetto: she recalls an encounter with Arājs. Heit tells that she and other young Jewish women were brought to the building and taken to the basement.

> All [the men] were drunk, all had pistols in their hands. The so-called officer facing me said 'upstairs,' and I did go upstairs because there was no other way out. It was in his office, he raped me, he humiliated me, he tortured me sexually … I wouldn't have known but when I was crying and weeping and asking for mercy he said, 'you bitch, don't you know who is standing before you?' He said 'I am Viktors Arājs, the boss of this place.' I was taken downstairs, we were all sitting, all the girls were weeping, looked terrible, some had torn clothes, dresses.

Heit's survival is an exception, though it seems to have been the result of intervention by a German officer: 'Suddenly the door opened … and the [*Pērkonkrusts*] guard called my name … German officer Ervin Henkemann, German officer for whom I had been working, he saved me from the Latvians, he had saved my life. My nanny had seen me join a group, she had been following us, she saw that we had been taken to this headquarters so she had rushed to Henkemann … he tried to save my life and he succeeded.'[50]

The ghettos were sites of acute sexual danger. A male survivor's diary from Kaunas recalls a ritual termed "going to peel potatoes," which was practiced by the guards: "Night after night, the Lithuanian henchmen would proceed to select their

48 In her work on the Armenian genocide, Derderian (2005) points out that rape by Turkish soldiers contributed to the dehumanization of Armenians, and their dehumanization in turn increased the risk of rape.

49 Lower (2002) notes that this lack of scrutiny could also open the door to disobedience in the form of rendering assistance to Jews in the occupied territories of the periphery.

50 Zelda-Rivka Heit. 2003. VHA. Interview 26792.

victims: the young, the pretty. First, they would rape them, then torture them, and finally murder them" (Tory 1991, 24). Women's stories suggest that the threat was pervasive. Latvian-born Sia Hertsberg, who was 14 when her family was forced into the Riga ghetto remembers that her family's room was visited by three Latvian militiamen, one of whom she knew from before the war. The officer threw Hertsberg on a bed, declaring, "I like this girl. I will have her." Her mother begged the officer to take her instead. Hertsberg was helped by the young man she knew, who distracted the officer by drawing his attention to some ostensible shooting outside and the men left, with the young man advising Hertsberg to lock the door and stay inside.[51] Frankel-Zaltzman, who was working as a nurse in the Daugavpils ghetto hospital after being imprisoned in July 1941, remembers "… we suffered greatly from the Latvians. Every night they would come and seek out some women. God protected me from this because I was in the hospital and they didn't come here" (2003).

Latvian-born survivor Ella Medaly'e, remembers her encounter with the men of a Latvian auxiliary unit. In her memoir, she writes that she and her mother were taken to a building in the first days after German occupation and were compelled to turn over their valuables: a woman who had nothing to turn over was taken to the yard and beaten. The women were held in a damp basement with low ceilings and a filthy toilet (2006, 14–17). Medaly'e tells that the guards were largely members of the Latvian *Aizsargi* or *Pērkonkrusts*. One of them took a liking to her, telling her that she looked like his wife. One evening, when the *Aizsargi* were on the second floor talking, an officer went downstairs and started staring at the young Jewish women sleeping on the floor. He called a girl over and took her to an upper floor. After some time, the weeping girl came back downstairs: "Then they came for the second, the third, and they all took them upstairs and then we started understanding that there was an orgy [gang rape] upstairs and they were using the Jewish women." Medaly'e tells that she thought she would be next, so she locked herself in a nearby toilet. The guard who had shown some sympathy to Medaly'e knocked on the door and cautioned her, "stay here, they're all drunk, I'll tell you when you can get out." The next day, the women who had been raped were taken away and shot. She says that more women were brought to the building over the next three weeks, and adds that she and a small number of others were eventually released.[52]

Edward Westermann writes, "… far away from Berlin and senior SS and police leaders, these [*Rassenschande*] prohibitions were widely ignored, and the abuse of alcohol often proved to be a key contributing factor … The intersection between alcohol consumption, aggression, and male bravado found repeated expression in

51 Sia Hertsberg. 1996. VHA. Interview 14139.

52 Ella Medaly'e. 2005. VHA. Interview 32793.

crimes of sexual violence in the East" (2021, 87–8). Valentīna Freimane remembers a pair of Latvians – an older man and a young man, just a few years older than she was– coming to her parents' apartment, already drunk but asking for more libations. One of men declared that Freimane's family should hand over the "things they had tricked the Latvians out of." Having taken the family's gold jewelry and watches, one of the men encouraged the other to ask young Valentīna to show him the apartment's "other rooms," saying that if he liked something there, he should boldly take it. The implication, she says, was clear.

> Girls and young women were particularly under threat, because looting was commonly accompanied by rape. Such an event had just occurred with my classmate Angelika, a beautiful redhead, who was raped by some drunken [militia men] …, and she almost lost her mind … She too later perished in the ghetto. (2010, 243)

Westermann suggests that German SS and policemen would use Jewish women, keeping them in sexual bondage, and murdering them if they became pregnant (2021, 93–4). Latvian-born survivor Eli Gever recalls a story told by a friend about Gestapo officers raping Jewish women in the Daugavpils ghetto where Gever was imprisoned. He remembers a Jewish woman who became pregnant by "Gestapo guys," and adds, "They put her on ice, it was winter. They put her on ice to drown in the Dvina river."[53]

Rassenschande laws could also be turned on the victims. Iwens relates an incident that took place in Daugavpils in March 1942, a time at which only a few hundred Jews remained alive in the ghetto. He writes that Mina Gittelson was "an attractive woman in her twenties. She was accused by her Latvian employer of breaking the racial-sexual laws. Actually – the true facts were known in the ghetto – the Latvian suspected that Mrs. Gittelson had discovered that many Jewish valuables were in his possession and decided to eliminate her. He denounced her, and she was condemned." Mrs. Gittelson was publicly hung, and her body, which remained in the open for three days, showed "obvious marks of physical torture" (Iwens 1991, 93).

Ghettos were sites of chronic sexual danger: "… the accompaniment of the physical conquest of the East with acts of sexual humiliation and subjugation established a precedent and a regular practice that would last throughout the German occupation" (Westerman 2021, 97). There were no injuries that called morally or legally for amends, and Jews could expect no care or safety in the territories many had called home. The threat in the East was rendered acute by an amalgamation of racist ideology and propaganda, the development of an environment characterized by total control and unlimited power in the hands of those who wore the Nazi uniforms, pervasive sexism and misogyny, and the extensive presence

53 Eli Gever. 2005. VHA. Interview 1416.

of alcohol in the spaces where lethal power was exercised. Few victims lived to tell their stories, but survivors give voice to the sexual atrocities that brutalized the prisoners of the ghetto.

6 Conclusions

Women's stories matter. While ghetto histories written in the decades after the end of the Holocaust offer robust and significant narratives of power and pain, women's voices contribute to a more diverse telling of the past. As survivor testimonies and memoirs show, the Baltic ghettos were sites of intimate violence that characterized the period before industrialized murder became a hallmark of the Nazi genocide. Expelled from the universe of obligation and denied legal and moral protection from brutalization, prisoners were acutely vulnerable to violence.

As von Joeden-Forgey posits, life force atrocities are a key marker of genocide (2010). These atrocities were ubiquitous in the ghettos, where the rare evasion of physical death translated into enduring social death for survivors. Indeed, social death permeated the experiences of girls and women, whose normative social roles were closely tied to their roles in the family. Women's voices reveal underrecognized gendered components of the early years of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and give voice to women's unique experiences and traumas related to pregnancy, childbirth, motherhood, and sexual violence that may not be visible in other accounts of the Baltic ghettos. Much work remains to be done to reveal the complexities of women's experiences and their recollection in the aftermath of war and genocide, a process that has just begun in the study of the Baltic ghettos.

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