

Book Review

Janine P. Holc, *The Weavers of Trautenau: Jewish Female Forced Labor in the Holocaust* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2023)

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Janine Holc's *The Weavers of Trautenau* presents a ground-breaking study on the experiences of Jewish girls and young women subjected to forced labour during the Holocaust under the Schmelt system. The book documents how approximately 3,000 Jewish girls and young women were deported from their homes in the Zagłębie region of Poland, around Sosnowiec which became the headquarters for the Organisation Schmelt, to labour camps and factories. Girls, some as young as eleven, and young women were deported as forced labourers in textile factories in Sudetenland, in the Trautenau region, the Nazi occupied border region of former Czechoslovakia (today's Czechia), where they faced not only the hardship of labour but also the complex social dynamics of survival under oppressive and dehumanising conditions.

Holc's work stands out in Holocaust scholarship by using an extraordinary sample of testimonies – both by number and by incorporating an under-researched group of survivors. Holc analyses particularly those testimonies archived by the USC Shoah Foundation – to convey both collective and individual experiences, and provide a window into their emotional and psychological resilience. She innovatively utilizes testimonies, juxtaposing the experiences of several girls and women on the same topic. Apart from the deep dive into USC Shoah Foundation testimonies, the book includes rich body of sources from archives in five countries.

In nine chapters, Holc traces changes in living conditions and statuses of forced labourers and their impact on the studied group of survivors. While the book chronologically follows the fates of Jewish girls and young women in Trautenau, the chapters are organised by themes, such as Jewish girlhood in the pre-war world; the system of the worksite as well as the worksite as a social world; the impact of Hungarian women arriving from Auschwitz to the Trautenau factories in 1944, together with the knowledge this brought the girls and young women in Trautenau; the ethics of care for one's self and others inside the camps; desire in the coerced labour camp system, and finally the narratives of liberation. The book explores the distinct, gendered impact of forced labour and examines the layers of identity that shaped how these young women endured and interpreted their ordeals. She juxtaposes survivor

narratives with social history, enriching her analysis with the cultural and political backdrop, which allows for a nuanced understanding of how these young women navigated daily realities in the camps. Her methodological approach emphasises the survivors as active “producers of knowledge,” not simply as passive subjects of study. This framing offers a powerful counter to earlier, more generalised Holocaust narratives, highlighting the unique ethical and emotional challenges faced by young women in these extreme conditions. The thematic chapters cover a broad spectrum, from daily camp interactions and the role of objects as anchors of personal identity or relations with gentile Czech and German workers, to the complex and often taboo topic of sexualized violence within the camps. Holc provides a comprehensive examination of the psychological toll and social alliances that shaped survival strategies, grounded in what she terms an “ethics of care.” Her research extends to the impact of liberation, which brought a new set of traumas as these young women encountered violence from their supposed liberators.

If there is a slightly unsatisfactory aspect in Holc’s book, it lies in her portrayal of the Hungarian Jewish female labourers who arrived in 1944. Their arrival is predominantly understood as an arrival of terrifying knowledge about Auschwitz, rather than an arrival of individuals. So while Holc provides an in-depth account of the experiences of Polish Jewish women in forced labour, the Hungarian women are depicted more generally, appearing almost as a nameless group defined solely by their Hungarian identity, and their experience in Auschwitz. But despite this aspect, Holc’s work makes a vital contribution to Holocaust studies by foregrounding a historically marginalised perspective on Jewish female forced labourers. The book provides insight into not only the horrors of forced labour but also the strategies and resilience these women demonstrated, enriching our understanding of Holocaust narratives with depth and empathy.

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