

**WEDNESDAY OCTOBER 13, 1999  
AFTERNOON SESSION A 14:00-15:30**

## **Workshop: Integrating Women's History into Holocaust Studies**

*by*

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### **INTRODUCTION**

A basic challenge for education with regard to the memory of the Holocaust in the twenty-first century is to increase awareness that among the "choiceless choices" that Jews faced, some were unique to women. This workshop addresses how to integrate the history of women into Holocaust studies. Topics include: 1) the experiences of Jewish women in ghettos and concentration camps; 2) using published written materials (fiction and non-fiction) and film; 3) bringing the stories of living survivors to students.

### **WORKSHOP OUTLINE**

A case study about Ravensbrück, the major women's camp, presented by Dr. Rochelle G. Saidel, serves as a case study that offers participants the opportunity to discuss the particular suffering of Jewish women during the Holocaust. While no exact records are available, an estimated fifteen percent of the population (which included political prisoners, Jehovah's Witnesses, Gypsies, Soviet prisoners-of-war, criminals, and "asocials") was Jewish. Ravensbrück was supposed to be a slave labor camp, but murder by "medical" experiments, shooting, beating, starvation, torture, and gassing was routine. Of the some 132,000 women who were there at some time between 1939 and 1945, approximately 117,000 did not survive. Based on interviews with Jewish survivors, unpublished memoirs, archival documentation, bibliographic research, and visits to the Ravensbrück memorial, Dr. Saidel offers participants the opportunity to explore how Jewish women always suffered, sometimes resisted, and not infrequently helped others.

Because Ravensbrück was the only major concentration camp that was specifically created to enslave women, and because this camp near Berlin has generally been overlooked in Holocaust histories in English, the workshop places special emphasis on the experiences of the women, especially Jewish women, who were prisoners in this camp. Source materials include information gathered on 1980, 1994, and 1995, visits to study the camp, interviews conducted with survivors and relatives of women murdered at Ravensbrück, materials published by the camp site memorial, and the books, chapters and articles listed in the bibliography (to be distributed).

Dr. Dalia Ofer focuses on the use of a documentary of the ghetto to study the survival skills of women in the ghetto, in their efforts to take care of themselves and their families. This part of the workshop describes a number of personalities depicted in the "Slepak Report." This report contains stories of sixteen women interviewed in Warsaw by Ms. Cecilya Slepak between December 1941 and June 1942. Her account describes the life stories of these women in the months prior to the outbreak of war, during the siege of Warsaw, and under Nazi occupation. Life in the ghetto will be a central theme. This Slepak research was initiated in the Warsaw ghetto by Emmanuel Ringelblum, as part of the central research project, "One Year of Ghetto Life." Members of the Oneg Shabbat underground archives were involved in studying different subjects for this research. The presentation emphasizes the great value of this documentation for education and how it can be used to help students perceive the reality of the ghetto.

A gender analysis of this body of information demonstrates the richness gained by integrating gender perspective into the understanding of ghetto life. Dr. Ofer will describe the ghetto in the context of the following topics: family, work, social activities (such as house committees and education), the relationship between the individual and the authorities, and the fate of children. All of these topics are central to understanding the life of the Jews in the ghetto and their survival strategies. These topics are extremely important for the educator, because they help to make the difficult reality of the ghetto more understandable. At the end of the presentation, Dr. Ofer will address relating to the age of the students who will receive this material, and also suggest some didactic ideas for the classroom.

While stressing that much of our knowledge about daily life comes from extremely valuable and important testimonies of survivors, Dr. Ofer points out that these recently recorded testimonies also convey the contemporary experiences of the survivors. In order to demonstrate the difference between these newer testimonies and Slepak's accounts of her interviews, she suggests using David Boder's book, *I Did Not Interview the Dead*. (New York, 1948) There is a difference between interviews with survivors and the interviews that Slepak provided for us, and introducing this body into teaching is enriching.

Another valuable teaching tool, women's stories and creative representations of their camp and ghetto experiences, are the focus of Dr. Sonja Hedgepeth's discussion with workshop participants. She explores how some women wrote to survive, while others continue to survive only through the works they composed. She addresses questions such as: What can we learn about Jewish women's experiences from fictional versus documentary accounts of the Holocaust? Is there good reason to examine poetry by women, for example, to better understand how some of them were able to survive? Creative works by women who lived through the horrors of the Shoah do indeed deserve to be read along with first-hand accounts, as they vividly convey the emotional experience of daily life under the Nazis. For instance, Ryvka Bosman recounts that the poems she wrote in the camps were literally her lifeline: "For me they are priceless because they were created amidst physical and spiritual suffering. They are not only a

documentation of an era – they are my life and soul. I am convinced that these poems helped me to survive."<sup>1</sup>

Along with the workshop participants, Dr. Hedgepeth will read a short story, several poems, and a few short excerpts from survivor accounts which relate to gender and reflect women's and men's differing experiences. She will discuss how workshop participants might use these materials in the classroom. She will also mention films that bring information about Jewish women's lives into the class classroom, and, if time permits, will show some short clips of films about women's experiences in the Holocaust. The classroom presentation of Jewish women's lives through their words and thoughts truly allows their memory to live on.

The experiences of Jewish women were distinct, in the context of the universal suffering of all of the victims of the Holocaust, and this workshop will help educators to define these distinctions. Jewish women had to confront certain questions both as Jews and as women. On one hand, there were positive aspects related to gender (the social-political aspect of differences between men and women) that enabled women to better struggle against subhuman conditions of degradation, deprivation, terror, and even death. On the other hand, gender-associated qualities caused suffering, and Jewish women were also singled out as Jews. As for biological differences between men and women, both common sense and survivor testimonies point to women's vulnerabilities.

Participants will be able to use this session as a springboard for creating lessons, courses, or curricular units for their own advanced high school or university students of the Holocaust. A bibliography on women and the Holocaust and a model syllabus will be provided. This workshop will help participants to integrate an awareness of gender and of women's particular experiences into the study of the Holocaust.

The three workshop leaders will discuss with participants the idea of having their students interview or prepare an oral history of a female Holocaust survivor. Participants will discuss how to develop an understanding that during the Third Reich and/or the Holocaust in Nazi Europe and subsequently as new immigrants to a strange country, Jewish women had to face certain issues not only because of their religion but also because of their gender. In conjunction with this, workshop participants will discuss oral tradition, and how systematic methods and the technology of audio or video taping transform this tradition into an historical record. It will be emphasized that the purpose of oral history is to identify gaps in the written historical record, such as the gender-related experiences of women, and to fill these gaps as systematically as possible

Other relevant topics that may arise in discussion include such issues as women in pre-war Germany, women as rescuers, women in the ghettos, and women in the resistance. It should be noted that, ideally, there should be no need for a workshop on the experience of women during the Holocaust. Their experience and gender-related

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<sup>1</sup>Ryvka Bosman, "A Bundle of Poems" in *Women in the Holocaust, Vol. II*, compiled and translated by Johoshua Eibeshitz and Anna Ellenberg-Eibeshitz, (Brooklyn: Remember, 1994) p. 185.

aspects of the Holocaust should be an integral part of every course, book, and commemoration. However, at this time in the evolution of courses and publications on the Holocaust, separate treatment is necessary to compensate for decades of failure to address the experiences of women and issues related to gender.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of this workshop is aimed at developing an understanding that during the Holocaust Jewish women had to face certain issues not only because of their religion but also because of gender. Gender is defined "in political and social terms, with reference not to biological constraints but instead to local and specific forms of social relationship and, in particular, of social inequality."<sup>2</sup> It is considered the political aspect of biological sexual differences, a sexual class with a particular status different from that of men, that cuts through economic class lines and racial differentiations. "Woman's biological sexual self is never just that because of the gendered (socialized, culturalized, economized, politicized) relations of patriarchy, which continuously seek to hierarchically differentiate woman from man," in the words of feminist political scientist Zillah Eisenstein.<sup>3</sup> The theoretical assumption behind the workshop is that within the universal suffering of all of the victims of the Holocaust, men and women's experiences were different because of gender differences. Joan Ringelheim goes even further, claiming that "the lives of women became more precarious than those of men because of sexism, not only because of anti-Semitism."<sup>4</sup>

The conceptual concerns of the workshop are related to the interplay between gender relations and the institutional contexts within which they took shape during the Holocaust, rather than individuals' roles and identities. However, studies of individual experiences are essential, in order to draw conclusions about the role that gender played during the Holocaust. Focusing on the gender-related issues specific to women contributes to an understanding of the Holocaust in its entirety. It is one facet of an overwhelming historical event that can only be understood if dissected in its many aspects. While both men and women suffered, they had different experiences. This workshop on women during the Holocaust explores why this was so, and how gender accounted for these different experiences.

Workshop participants will wrestle with questions regarding the fate of women, especially Jewish women, at the hands of the Nazis. The workshop will analyze the specific issues of gender that made the female experience different from that of the

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<sup>2</sup> Michelle Rosaldo in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 400.

<sup>3</sup> Zillah R. Eisenstein, *Feminism and Sexual Equality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Ringelheim, "Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, Roger S. Gottlieb, ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 147.

male. On one hand, it will explore whether there were gender-related positive aspects which enabled women to better cope with the subhuman conditions of degradation, deprivation, terror and ultimate murder. On the other hand, the specific gender-related vulnerabilities that women suffered will be examined.

The goals are: To analyze and raise awareness about the often ignored and complex relationship between antisemitism and sexism, especially in Germany before and during the Nazi regime; to learn about and analyze the assault against the Jewish people waged by Nazi Germany in 1933-1945, and how this assault specifically affected Jewish and other women; to develop an awareness and understanding of racial, religious, and gender prejudice; to attempt to develop insights into the motives and purposes of the Nazi perpetrators, and how these motives and purposes affected women; to develop an awareness of the relevancy and legitimacy of studying how women's experiences in the Holocaust differed from those of men. By focusing on this specific aspect of the Holocaust, the workshop also seeks to develop a better perception of and sensitivity to its overwhelming totality. The workshop's approach is interdisciplinary, appropriate for teachers of Social Sciences, Women's Studies, Holocaust history, European history, Holocaust Literature, and Jewish Studies.

Teaching or studying in a class entitled "Women During the Holocaust" is a task that should be undertaken with humility and caution, because "the political is personal" in a deeply visceral way for Holocaust victims and survivors who suffered both as Jews and as women. Given the emotional and personal nature of this subject matter, teachers and students cannot approach it as though they are completely neutral observers. If the workshop participants impart to their students that they cannot study any topic, especially a topic such as women during the Holocaust, "in a vacuum," they will have taught an important lesson in feminist methodology, and methodology in general.

As political scientist Karl Deutsch, sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, and others have concluded, knowledge is an activity in which subjective and objective perspectives meet.<sup>5</sup> "Once the project begins, a circular process ensues: the woman doing the study learns about herself as well as about the woman she is studying," Shulamit Reinharz wrote regarding feminist biographical methods.<sup>6</sup> We would add that once the study of women during the Holocaust begins, the depth and breadth of the women's Holocaust-related stories can keep this circle revolving indefinitely, if the teacher or student so chooses.

In addition to this personalized aspect of studying about the experiences of women during the Holocaust, the workshop is designed to serve another purpose. Interest in

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<sup>5</sup>See Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government* (London: The Free Press of Glencoe, Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963); and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., 1966).

<sup>6</sup>Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 127.

the experiences of women can lead students to learn not only about this specific facet of the Holocaust, but to broaden their knowledge of the Holocaust in general. Once teachers and students begin learning about the personal histories of individual women, they will need to research the general history and other specific considerations of the Holocaust, in order to place these personal stories in context. Thus the workshop is intended to focus on gender-related issues, but it also opens doors to further study on all aspects of the Holocaust.