

SIMPLE DEPICTIONS, COMPLEX MEMORIES:
CONTEXTUALIZING POSTWAR PORTRAYALS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE
HOLOCAUST

A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

In 1943, the *New York Times* ran an article titled “93 Choose Suicide Before Nazi Shame.” The article described the story of ninety-three *Bais Yaakov* girls, Orthodox schoolgirls, in a Polish ghetto who committed suicide to avoid forced prostitution at the hands of Nazi soldiers. Similarly, in the immediate postwar era, *House of Dolls* told the story of a prostitute in a Nazi brothel who commits suicide to restore her honor and dignity. Whether these are true tales or pious fiction, both stories resonated with Israeli society as they exemplified heroism and rebellion. This paper examines the direct conflict these myths had with individual testimonies and memories. By juxtaposing the myth of the 93 with sexual violence that took place in the ghettos and *House of Dolls* with what occurred in the camps, this article argues that these stories simplified the multiple layers of complexity of sexual violence in both locales. In reality, Jewish women faced sexual violence such as rape, barter, and sexual humiliation at the hands of German and non-German perpetrators. Stories like the 93 and *House of Dolls* created a dominant image that did not align with women’s experiences of sexual and sexualized violence. These forms of media contributed to popular Israeli memory of the Holocaust by making these women active resisters of this form of violence. By transforming these women into heroes, Jewish women who did not “resist” this form of violence felt shame and were ultimately silenced. Overall, sexual violence in Holocaust literature paradoxically crafted a dominant narrative in popular discourse while simultaneously contributing to a public silence of the complexities and nuances of women’s experiences and memories.

CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES

Contributors

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INTRODUCTION

In the immediate post-WWII era, large parts of Israeli society understood sexual violence against Jewish women in the Holocaust to be exclusively rape and sexual slavery at the hands of Nazis. The emergence of postwar representations contributed to this understanding, such as the myth of the 93. On January 8, 1943, the *New York Times* ran an article titled “93 Choose Suicide Before Nazi Shame.” The article described the story of ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls, Orthodox schoolgirls, in a Polish ghetto who committed suicide by ingesting poison to avoid forced prostitution and rape at the hands of Nazi soldiers.¹ The news reached New York because of a supposed letter written by one of the girls that contained her will and the story of the 93. The letter was reported to have been sent by the young girl to the American Beth Jacob Committee in New York. She wrote that the girls were told German soldiers would visit them the next day in their ghetto. To avoid “Nazi shame,” they swore to die together to maintain their purity. The girl wrote in her letter, “Yesterday we all swore to die...all of us have poison. When the soldiers come we shall drink it. We have no fear.”²

Similar to the myth of the 93, the novella *House of Dolls* also had lasting effects on Israeli society for its portrayal of sexual violence against young Jewish women.³ *House of Dolls* remains one of the most cited instances of Nazis forcing Jewish women to service them in concentration camps. Yehiel De-Nur, under his penname Ka-Tzetnik 135633, wrote the novella

¹ The location of these 93 girls at the time of the letter is unclear. The *New York Times* article cites both a Beth Jacob School in Warsaw and the Kraków ghetto.

² Author unknown, “93 Choose Suicide Before Nazi Shame,” *The New York Times*, Jan 8, 1943, ProQuest Historical Newspapers (1851-2004), 8.

³ There appears to be no connection between *House of Dolls* and the 1879 Norwegian Play, *A Doll's House*. *House of Dolls* is directly translated from the Hebrew title, *Beit Ha-Bubot*. The title refers to the brothels and the “dolls” employed in the “joy divisions.”

in 1953. Imprisoned in Auschwitz during the Holocaust, De-Nur managed to survive and emigrated to Mandatory Palestine at the end of the war.⁴ Unlike those who remained silent about their experiences after the war, De-Nur wrote several autobiographical accounts detailing his time in Auschwitz and even provided testimony at the Eichmann trial in 1961. His most notorious work by far is *House of Dolls*, which sold millions of copies, was translated into several European languages, and made De-Nur a household name in Israel.⁵ De-Nur claims *House of Dolls* to be an autobiographical work of his sister Daniella's imprisonment in Auschwitz and her experiences in the women's camp. The book then shifts stylistically and becomes Daniella's diary. In this section, Daniella described how she was selected by the SS in the camp to be a *Feld-Hure* ("field whore") and is even branded with a tattoo labeling her as such. In order to survive, Daniella serviced camp officers in the camp brothel. However, at the end of the novel, Daniella's brother, Harry, sees her with German officers in the men's camp. Overcome with guilt that her brother had seen her in such a state, Daniella commits suicide by guard. She walks out of the camp "proud, erect," is shot by a guard, and "the night lapped up the spilled blood of the seventeen-year-old doll."⁶

Although historians and survivors often did not discuss sexual violence until the late twentieth century, authors and filmmakers utilized sexual violence as a plot device in Holocaust media of the immediate postwar era. Historians like Pascale Bos have deconstructed the trope

⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, "Ka-Tzetnik 135633: The Survivor as Pseudonym," *New Literary History* 33, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 344-346.

⁵ Pascale Bos, "'Her Flesh Is Branded: 'For Officers Only'": Imagining and Imagined Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, edited by Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 73.

⁶ Ka-tzetnik 135633, *House of Dolls* (Simon and Schuster, 1955), 242-243.

and the role it played in the 93 and the novella *House of Dolls*, illustrating what the trope meant for its contemporary audience.⁷ The myth of the ninety-three Bais Yaakov girls and the *House of Dolls* significantly impacted Israeli culture and memory of the Holocaust. These two works emphasized the heroic nature of women who resisted sexual violence in a way that emphasized dignity over survival. In such a way, postwar public narratives worked to shame Jewish women who, rather than maintaining their chastity, “chose” to survive by using their sexuality. Situating these works in their historical context is crucial because in the immediate postwar era, Israeli society and contemporary historians believed the legend of the 93 and *House of Dolls* to be fact rather than fiction.

Building on previous scholarship, this article explores the plot device of Nazis attempting to rape Jewish women, arguing that these representations played a role in ignoring the diversity of Jewish women’s experiences during the Holocaust.⁸ While previous literature has examined the literary function of such a trope, applied gender analysis on sexual violence in the Holocaust, or examined what these works meant to postwar Israeli society, this article explores the tension between popular representation and individual memories. It argues that Israeli postwar depictions both simplified and rendered tolerable the range of sexual violence against Jewish women. This article provides further context to these representations by using postwar recollections in

⁷ See Omer Bartov, “Kitsch and Sadism in Ka-Tzetnik’s Other Planet: Israeli Youth Imagine the Holocaust,” *Jewish Social Studies* 3, no. 2 (Winter 1997): 42-76; Pascale Bos, “‘Her Flesh Is Branded: ‘For Officers Only’’: Imagining and Imagined Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, edited by Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Kerstin Steitz, “No ‘Innocent Victim’?: Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust as Trope in *Zeugin aus der Hölle*,” *Women in German Yearbook* 33 (2017): 101-27.

⁸ See the works of Pascale Bos, “‘Her Flesh Is Branded: ‘For Officers Only,’” Miryam Sivan, “Stoning the Messenger: Yehiel Denur’s *House of Dolls* and Piepel,” in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, edited by Sonia M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010).

memoirs and oral history testimonies to examine the complicated nature of sexual violence in the ghettos and the camps.⁹ In this article, the myth of the 93 and *House of Dolls* are used as a framework to compare popular understanding of sexual violence in the ghettos and camps with women's diverse experiences in both locales. This violence took on many forms beyond rape and sexual slavery. For example, desperation in the ghettos, along with the positions of power Jewish men held, occasionally led to victim-on-victim violence. Additionally, Jewish women in hiding were in a particularly defenseless position as their lives depended on their saviors. Jews in the camps faced death and, as a result, Germans were more likely to overlook the crime of *Rassenschande* (racial defilement) and sexually exploit female prisoners. By expanding the definition of sexual violence and listening to individual life-stories, we see that many forms of sexual and sexualized violence against Jewish women took place in various locales and at the hands of diverse perpetrators.¹⁰ Their identities as both Jews and women made them uniquely vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Using sexual violence against Jewish women as a plot device at once enabled a dominant narrative in popular discourse while also contributing to the public silence over the complexities and nuances raised in individuals' memories. Literature and film of the immediate postwar era

⁹ Jewish women began recalling their experiences and publishing memoirs about their sexual traumas in the 1980s-1990s. This article discusses many experiences sourced from the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and the USC Shoah Foundation's digital archives and have not been used in previous literature. Scholars of history and literature have discussed the myth of the 93 and *House of Dolls* in previous scholarship.

¹⁰ This article uses Waitman Wade Beorn's definitions of "sexual violence" and "sexualized violence." Beorn defines sexual violence as a nonconsensual sexual act. "Sexual assault" can be used interchangeably with sexual violence as it describes a range of sexual violations. This article frequently discusses rape, which is the forcible, nonconsensual penetration of a woman. "Sexualized violence" is any form of violence with a sexualized undertone, but does not involve a sexual act. For example, sexualized violence includes verbal sexual harassment and sexual humiliation against Jewish women. Sexual violence and sexual assault encompasses rape, forced prostitution, and barter. Understanding the complexities of sexual and sexualized violence is necessary to fully understand its pervasiveness and scope in the Holocaust. For Beorn's definition, see Waitman Wade Beorn, "Bodily Conquest: Sexual Violence in the Nazi East," in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, eds. Alex J. Kay and David Stahel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 196-197.

homogenized the complexities of sexual and sexualized violence in the Holocaust. In this, early Israeli narratives of sexual violence were part of a broader, postwar process: the drive to use wartime memories to create a “homogenous and harmonious society.”¹¹

Never Forget: Israeli Historical Memory of the Holocaust

The myth of the 93 and *House of Dolls* fit within broader Israeli collective memory and narratives about sexual violence, heroism, and resistance in the Holocaust. Collective memory aggregates individual memories into a narrative influenced by national identity, social narratives, and politics.¹² Collective memory also influences and is influenced by the way a group interacts with history.¹³ In Israel, collective memory and research, especially with regard to sexual violence, were in a constant dance of denial and acceptance. The fledgling state established a national narrative focused on building a strong nation with strong people.¹⁴ Israeli attitudes toward victims of the *Shoah* also reflected this notion. Israeli society viewed Jews who perished or did not actively resist Nazism via partisan efforts or rebellions as “Old Jews,” characterized by

¹¹ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 7. See also Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory: The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹² Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (November 1999): 333–48.

¹³ Bettina Warburg, “Germany’s National Identity, Collective Memory, and Role Abroad,” in *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations*, ed. Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 53.

¹⁴ Irit Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma, 1948-1973: The Collective vs. the Individual,” *Israel Studies* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2018): 95. See also Eviatar Zerubavel, *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

weakness and passivity.¹⁵ Israelis instead focused on “New Jews” that epitomized heroism and resistance.¹⁶

As a new nation, the Israeli state understandably concentrated on Jewish heroism and defined heroism as active resistance against the Nazis. After the existential threat the Jews faced, Zionist leaders forged a national identity that embodied power, valor, and resistance.¹⁷ The collective Zionist narrative of the struggle for, and the necessity of, a Jewish homeland integrated stories of heroism and resilience. For example, Israel revered the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, in which the Jewish inhabitants of the ghetto led a coordinated paramilitary insurrection against the German administration and the last transports to death camps.¹⁸ The state co-opted the uprising and it became a symbol of national and Jewish pride.¹⁹ This is evident in the day designated for Holocaust remembrance itself. The name was changed several times, from “Holocaust and Ghetto Rebellion Memorial Day” to “Holocaust and Heroism Memorial Day.” After this, the day became known as “Holocaust, Rebellion, and Heroism Day” and it eventually became the Holocaust Remembrance Day that is observed today.²⁰ Regardless of the changes, national memorial culture bound the Holocaust to heroism and rebellion. Stories of victimhood did not

¹⁵ Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma,” 99-102.

¹⁶ See Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million*

¹⁷ Iris Milner, “Homecoming Deconstructed in Israeli Holocaust Literature,” in *National Responses to the Holocaust: National Identity and Public Memory*, ed. Jennifer Taylor (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), 175.

¹⁸ For more on the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, see Yitzhak (“Antek”) Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicle of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Israel Gutman, *Resistance: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994).

¹⁹ Daniel Gutwein, “The Privatization of the Holocaust: Memory, Historiography, and Politics,” *Israel Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 39-41.

²⁰ Tom Segev and Haim Watzman, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005), 418-420.

belong. This notion overshadowed stories of individuals' traumas and suffering as the collective—the state of Israel—was prioritized over the individual. Stories of bravery and defiance eclipsed stories of war trauma and supposed weakness.²¹

This national attitude bled into the social sphere. With limited notions of what courageousness, strength, and resistance entailed, a large part of Israeli society criticized survivors for what they deemed to be cowardice, weakness, and passivity. Many Israelis viewed victims with disdain, criticizing them for going “like sheep to the slaughter.”²² One survivor, Hanzi Brand, reported that in her interactions with the native Jews in Israel (*Yishuv*), the *Yishuv* frequently asked why she did not resist against the Nazis. Brand recalled that she felt that she had to apologize for simply surviving, stating that “the country wanted heroes” and she “could only offer a story of survival.”²³ The *Yishuv* also viewed survivors with suspicion for making it out alive while millions perished. Many pondered what the survivors had done to outlast the war. Israelis viewed survivors as remnants of the weaker “Old Jew” rather than the stronger “New Jew.”²⁴

The myth of the 93 reflects the value Israeli society placed on stories of resistance and heroism. For the most part, historians have disagreed about the authenticity of this story despite its wild popularity in Israel.²⁵ Soon after the news broke in the *New York Times*, the story of the

²¹ Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma,” 96-98.

²² Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma,” 96-98.

²³ Hanzi Brand in an interview with Tom Segev, cited in Segev and Watzman, *The Seventh Million*, 454.

²⁴ Keynan, “The Memory of the Holocaust and Israel’s Attitude Toward War Trauma,” 98.

²⁵ Judith Tydor Baumel and Jacob J. Schacter, “The Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls of Kraków: History or Typology?” in *Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung*, ed. Jacob J. Schachter (Jason Aronson, Inc., 1992), 110.

93 spread to ultra-orthodox newspapers in Tel Aviv. Commemoration efforts were held in cities like Jerusalem and Haifa and many in Israel began to remember the 93 girls in religious sermons and memorial prayers.²⁶ Some districts within mandatory Palestine named their streets after the 93.²⁷ Whether this is a true tale or pious fiction, it resonated deeply with Jews in the immediate postwar era. The thought of 93 young Jewish women choosing to martyr themselves to protect their chastity made their story a religious tale for observant Jews. For more secular Jews, the tale represented heroism and rebellion. Instead of becoming sex slaves for Nazi soldiers, these girls resisted and chose suicide.

The popularity of this legend suggests how large swaths of Israeli society viewed both sexual violence and sexual purity. This, in turn, implied that Jewish women who underwent this form of violence had invalid experiences. Prostituting oneself or bartering to survive during the Holocaust was shameful; it was preferable to die instead and become a martyr while remaining a modest virgin. Legends like the 93 both overtly and covertly conveyed what was to be memorialized and what was to be silenced. Although the article did not explicitly state that Jewish women who did not martyr themselves to remain pious virgins were shameful, it was certainly implied. The title of the article itself stated that the 93 girls avoided Nazi shame through suicide. Jewish women who experienced sexual violence had an impossible standard placed upon them, thus promoting the silence surrounding the topic.

Similarly, the popularity of *House of Dolls* contributed to the promotion of building a nation with strong, New Jews. One Israeli man wrote to his girlfriend: “I have just finished reading *House of Dolls* and I feel with my entire soul the horrors of that terrible Holocaust...I

²⁶ Baumel and Schacter, “The Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls of Kraków,” 98.

²⁷ Baumel and Schacter, “The Ninety-Three Bais Yaakov Girls of Kraków,” 100.

want to know that bottomless eyes will never again gaze from behind electrified fences...Strong and proud Jews! Never again to be led to the slaughter.”²⁸ Furthermore, the book contributed to a narrative of heroic resistance. Although Daniella was prostituted for years in the camp, she regained her honor and integrity by choosing suicide rather than letting her brother see what she had become during her imprisonment. *House of Dolls* communicated a message of heroically dying with honor rather than living with shame. To Jewish women who had sexually bartered themselves in the camps or experienced rape and survived, this message would have fortified their silence.

Women who survived sexual violence were also regarded with suspicion by their communities. Some Israelis suspected that women had utilized prostitution and sold their bodies to survive.²⁹ Because of cultural norms and taboos, this was deemed immoral, despite its necessity for survival in the camps and ghettos. To avoid being ostracized and isolated in their new lives after the war, women kept quiet about any experiences deemed promiscuous and indecent, like barter and other forms of sexual violence.³⁰

Memoirs published in the immediate years after the war also stressed the dignity of Jewish victims and their heroism. Publishers wanted memoirs written by members of Jewish resistance movements.³¹ From the start, Israeli society ignored survivors who did not fit a certain framework because of public attitudes and national narratives. When Holocaust survivors first arrived at the ports of Palestine, the survivors themselves and the way the *Yishuv* interacted with

²⁸ Segev and Watzman, *The Seventh Million*, 432.

²⁹ Beorn, “Bodily Conquest,” 197.

³⁰ Esther Dror and Ruth Linn, “The Shame is Always There,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, eds. Sonia Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 287.

³¹ Waxman, *Writing the Holocaust*, 105.

them influenced the “Great Silence.”³² After experiencing severe trauma and loss, many survivors emigrated to Israel in search of a new life. Survivors were conflicted between holding on to their cultures and leaving the past in the past to become Israeli. Many attempted to fit into Israeli society by Hebraicizing their names and speaking Hebrew instead of Yiddish.³³ The desire to move on resulted in many staying silent about their experiences during the Holocaust. Many women who moved to Israel focused on starting new lives with new families and found it easier to do this if they kept their sexual trauma in the past.³⁴ Life continued in the postwar era and many survivors had to leave their memories behind to fully move on.

The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann resulted in a tangible shift in the way the world understood the Holocaust. Eichmann, a high-ranking official of the SS, was responsible for managing the logistics of the genocide. He specifically oversaw the mass deportation of Jews. In his trial in Israel, Eichmann claimed he was simply following orders. The trial broadcasted Nazi crimes and effectively brought about a more complete understanding of the Holocaust in Israeli society. Using survivor testimonies as evidence, the court convicted Eichmann under Israel’s 1950 Nazi and Nazi Collaborators’ Punishment Law.³⁵ The testimonies forced Israelis and the world to confront the suffering survivors and victims had experienced. However, the prosecution and judge still occasionally questioned the survivors as to why they had not fought back against

³² The “Great Silence” refers to the collective silence surrounding the Holocaust immediately after the war ended. Israeli society did not want to hear tales of Jewish victimhood and survivors wanted to move on.

³³ Yablonka, “Holocaust Survivors in Israel,”: Time for an Initial Taking of Stock,” in *Holocaust Survivors: Resettlement, Memories, Identities*, eds. Dalia Ofer, Françoise S. Ouzan, and Judy Tydor Baumel-Schwartz, (New York; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2012), 193-197.

³⁴ Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 129.

³⁵ Laura Jockusch, “Prosecuting Crimes against the Jewish People’: The Eichmann Trial and the History of a Legal Concept,” in *The Eichmann Trial Reconsidered*, ed. Rebecca Wittmann (University of Toronto Press, 2021), 80.

the Nazis.³⁶ Even though the Eichmann trial allowed for the Israeli public to experience a variety of testimonies, there remained an obsession with resistance. Regardless, after the Eichmann trial, Israeli society heard stories of traumatized individuals and gradually understood that rebellion and valor were nearly impossible. As a result, these terms were eventually redefined to include the difficult task of surviving. While Israeli national identity and public discourse initially prohibited conversations about sexual violence from taking place, the collective memory made room over time. With groundbreaking moments like the Eichmann trial, Israelis began to consider the wide range of Holocaust experiences.

Additionally, with the privatization revolution of Israel in the 1980s came a significant shift in discussing the Holocaust.³⁷ This movement resulted in an emergence of privatized memory, in which the Holocaust became a personal experience. Jewish testimonies were each individually valued and themes other than heroism finally entered public discourse.³⁸ This change was also reflected in the historiography. Prior to the publication of historian Joan Ringelheim's seminal 1985 article, in which Ringelheim proposed that scholars examine Jewish women's experiences closely, many opposed a gendered approach to Holocaust studies. For example, scholars often argued that adding gendered analysis would imply that Jewish women suffered more than Jewish men. Many worried that focusing on gender would create a harmful hierarchy in Holocaust studies and would suggest that Jewish women were targeted because of their gender rather than their identity as Jews.³⁹

³⁶ Segev and Watzman, *The Seventh Million*, 343.

³⁷ Gutwein

³⁸ Gutwein, "The Privatization of the Holocaust," 38-39.

³⁹ For Joan Ringelheim's initial scholarship and the pushback she received, see Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research," *Signs* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 741-761; Dalia Ofer and Lenore J.

However, with the pioneering work of historians like Ringelheim, scholars have increasingly explored women's stories.⁴⁰ One of the unique facets of Jewish women's experiences included sexual vulnerability.⁴¹ This topic remained underexplored until the 1990s as some viewed rape as a historically marginal Holocaust theme.⁴² Additionally, others believed the Nazi regime's criminalization of sexual relations between Germans and Jews theoretically—and paradoxically—protected Jewish women from rape.⁴³ Furthermore, historians had difficulty

Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1999), 12-16; Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1-6.

⁴⁰ For more scholarship on women in the Holocaust, see Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House, 1993); Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998); Dalia Ofer and Lenore Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Elizabeth Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2003); Myrna Goldenberg and Amy H. Shapiro, *Different Horrors, Same Hell: Gender and the Holocaust* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013); Zoë Waxman, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Elissa Bemporad and Joyce W. Warren, *Women and Genocide: Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018); Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?" *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 37-56.

These works address the differences in Jewish women and men's experiences. Some touch upon sexual vulnerability.

⁴¹ Though there is evidence to suggest men and children experienced sexual violence during the Holocaust, this article focuses solely on women's experiences because recent developments in the literature suggests that sexual violence against Jewish women was rampant. Furthermore, men were less likely to talk about this type of violence after the war. For scholarship on sexual violence against Jewish men, see Dorota Glowacka, "Sexual Violence Against Heterosexual Men During the Holocaust: A Genealogy of (Not-so-Silent) Silence," *German History* 38, no. 4 (May 2020): 78-99; Rachel Lev-Wiesel and Marianne Amir, "Holocaust Child Survivors and Child Sexual Abuse," *Child Sexual Abuse* 14, no. 2 (2005): 69-83.

⁴² Sonia M Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010), 1-4.

⁴³ In a response to the publication of Sonia M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel's *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Lawrence Langer commented to CNN that "I have no doubt that some women were raped...the historical significance is very small in the context of the Holocaust experience." However, Langer failed to consider that sexual violence can include the forced nudity, verbal harassment, attacks on femininity and motherhood, prostitution and various other forms of sexual violations that Jewish women endured in the Holocaust. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/06/24/holocaust.rape/>.

The Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor (1935) outlawed sexual relations between Germans and Jews as a crime of *Rassenschande* (racial defilement).

asking survivors to recount their intimate traumas in their testimonies. Despite these early criticisms and setbacks, gendered analyses and the study of sexual violence have grown significantly as there has been a proliferation of scholarship on the topic over the past thirty years.⁴⁴ Additionally, Jewish women increasingly published their stories or recalled them in their oral histories since the 1980s.

Survivors no longer had to suppress their traumas for the sake of the collective's comfort. Israeli society began to fully appreciate the diversity of Holocaust experiences and many sympathized with the individual. Though it did not happen immediately, this revolution paved the way for women who experienced sexual violence to tell their stories. The disparity between the collective memory and individual stories slowly reduced as women who bartered their bodies in exchange for survival or were raped could begin to disclose their traumas. These testimonies challenged common perceptions of what sexual violence in the ghettos and camps meant.

Contextualizing Sexual Violence in the Ghettos

Although the 93 attained a status so high that many accepted the tale as fact, it simplified the wide array of sexual and sexualized violence that took place in the ghettos. Ghettoization isolated Jews from their own communities and herded them into segregated sectors of towns and

⁴⁴ For scholarship on sexual violence in the Holocaust, see Sonia M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, eds., *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010); Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Signs* 38, no. 3 (2013): 503-33; Pascale Bos, "'Her Flesh Is Branded: 'For Officers Only'": Imagining and Imagined Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust," in *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, edited by Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014); Regina Mühlhäuser, "The Historicity of Denial: Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the War of Annihilation, 1941–1945," in *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, edited by Hilary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014), 31-58; Katarzyna Person, "Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto," *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103-21; Waitman Wade Beorn, "Bodily Conquest: Sexual Violence in the Nazi East," in *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe*, edited by Alex J. Kay and David Stahel, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 195-216.

cities. Under these overcrowded living conditions, unhygienic environments, and starvation, bartering and smuggling became part of everyday life in the ghettos.⁴⁵ For some women, the only thing they had left to offer after living in such destitute conditions was their own bodies.⁴⁶

Sex became a valuable form of currency. Payment for the sex came in a variety of forms, ranging from food or other scarce resources to being kept off the list of the next deportation.⁴⁷ Women typically participated in prostitution and sexual barter to ensure that they could survive another day. Bartered sex and other forms of sexual exchange are a unique type of sexual violence, the nature of which suggests agency in the transaction. The German administrators of the ghettos certainly forced these women into horrible positions; however, many women chose to participate in sexual exchanges to survive. Some recalled that the transactional sex came with a degree of choice.

Barter was particularly widespread in the Theresienstadt Ghetto. Anna Hájková writes about the sexual economy of the ghetto, arguing that sex carried social capital and became a type of currency. Women who bartered could increase their own agency.⁴⁸ Furthermore, bartering

⁴⁵ Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, *Documents on Nazism, 1919-1945: Foreign Policy, War and Racial Extermination* (Viking Press 1975), 1067.

⁴⁶ A note on sources: The following sections on sexual violence in the camps and ghettos draw primarily from oral testimonies from the USC Shoah Foundation and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum. To give some indication of the frequency of sexual violence in these locales, a search for the term “rape” under the video testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation collections yields 2888 results. A search for “prostitution” in the USC Shoah Foundation collections yields 109 results. Searching for “rape” under the video testimonies **only** in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum, a vast collection with over 260,000 records, yields 711 results. There are 263 results for video testimonies under “prostitution” in the US Holocaust Memorial Museum collections. Evidence from oral histories alone indicates that, despite decades of historiographic silence, sexual violence in the Holocaust remains a historically significant phenomenon.

⁴⁷ Anna Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,” *Signs* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 512.

⁴⁸ Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide,” 512.

provided women with access to materials necessary to be at the top of the social pyramid, such as food, better accommodations, and protection from transports. Social norms shifted in Theresienstadt—sexuality became a coping mechanism for ghetto inhabitants and sexual bartering became a standard feature of the economy.

Another form of sexual barter was prostitution. Though the line between them is very thin, sexual barter and prostitution differ in key respects. Both are forms of instrumental sex, a short-term sexual encounter as part of an exchange, with some degree of agency.⁴⁹ However, barter indicated trading sex for some type of favor, while prostitution constituted sexual intercourse for hire. Although there was no official brothel in the Warsaw Ghetto, there are reports of women prostituting themselves. A Jewish informant reported to the General Commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto, *Kommissar* Heinz Auerswald, that there was a growing issue with venereal diseases that could be traced back to prostitution. Per the informant, it was “the poverty of the females” that resulted in a proliferation of prostitution in the ghetto.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Ringelblum referred to a prostitute while describing cultural life in the ghetto, noting that the nameless prostitute “serves everyone.”⁵¹

However, it is unclear from the official documentation of the General Government and Ringelblum's notes who these women were, what their conditions were, and who they serviced. It is also unclear whether all forms of prostitution in the ghettos were forced. For instance, one survivor reported that during her time in the Postow Ghetto, she rejected propositions for sexual

⁴⁹ Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide,” 506.

⁵⁰ Katarzyna Person, “Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (Winter 2015): 108.

⁵¹ Emmanuel Ringelblum, *Notes from the Warsaw Ghetto* (Normanby Press: 2015), 16/June 1941 entry.

favors and exchanges. She worked under the Polish commandant and recalled that eventually, the commandant propositioned her and asked her to be his lover. She refused and was subsequently grabbed off the street and beaten by guards throughout the night. However, she stressed that she remained steadfast and refused his proposition to resort to prostitution despite her desperate circumstances.⁵²

There are other reports of a practice known as “waitressing,” which blurred the line between consent and coercion. Some waitresses in cafes in the Warsaw Ghetto performed sexual acts for rich men who conducted business at the cafes. Patrons of the cafe subjected women to indecent propositions and harassment. The managers of these establishments frequently turned a blind eye to this callous behavior because these waitresses brought attention and business to their cafes. Waitressing was unique in that it was both an enviable position to have while it was also looked down upon. The businessmen and smugglers who frequented these establishments paid those who “waitressed” them generously, making this job attractive to many women. However, some viewed waitressing and prostitution to be a symbol of the death of Jewish values. Traditional Jewish men and women criticized waitresses for discarding their morals to service these men. However, there is little criticism directed at Jewish men for soliciting prostitution. The same informant who tied prostitution in the ghetto to “the poverty of the female” also stated that prostitution was not a result of “the desire of the males.”⁵³ The responsibility for the presence of prostitution laid with the prostitutes themselves.⁵⁴

⁵² Cecile Kassow, “Oral history interview with Cecile Kassow,” interview by Joan Ringelheim, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 20, 1983, Video, 32:06. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn47940>.

⁵³ Person, “Sexual Violence during the Holocaust,” 111-112.

⁵⁴ Several sources reference prostitution in the ghettos. See, for example, the oral testimonies of Cecile Kassow, “Oral history interview with Cecile Kassow,” interview by Joan Ringelheim, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 20, 1983, Video; Arnold Mostowitz, “Oral history interview with Arnold Mostowitz,” US Holocaust Memorial Museum, July 1994, Video; William Loew, “Oral history interview with William Loew,” interview by

When the sun set in the ghetto, Jewish women confined in their apartments remained vulnerable to violence. As the myth of the 93 illustrates, some German officers paid no mind to the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor and took advantage of the opportunity to sexually exploit and humiliate Jewish women. They occasionally forced Jewish girls to strip and dance naked all night. These officers hid their crime of racial defilement by killing the girls in the morning.⁵⁵ They also humiliated Jewish girls in front of their parents. The sexual violation of daughters by German policemen reminded Jews of their state of imprisonment and helplessness. In one instance, drunk soldiers and officers broke into the apartments at night and wreaked havoc. They “rape[d] girls before their parents’ eyes, [threw] things around, and then disappear[ed].”⁵⁶ Committing these acts of violence in the middle of the night terrorized the Jews as they laid in wait and feared that their homes would be invaded and their daughters violated.

Alcohol further fueled the violence. In a pogrom carried out in the Minsk ghetto, survivors recalled that it “surpassed all limits of the human imagination in the crimes they committed.”⁵⁷ They noted that German officers and policemen, in a drunken stupor, raped young Jewish girls in front of their mothers violently and “took their knives and cut out sex organs.” The “mothers threw themselves on the fascists in fits of rage and then fell dead with their skulls crushed.”⁵⁸ As Christopher Browning notes in his work, the use of alcohol helped numb those

Joan Ringelheim, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, March 1, 1995, Video; Leah Hammerstein Silverstein, “Oral history interview with Leah Hammerstein Silverstein,” interview by Randy M. Goldman, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 22, 1996, Video; Alfred Zajdorf, interview by Marek Pelc, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, April 8, 1997, Video.

⁵⁵ Snyder, *Bloodlands*, 230.

⁵⁶ Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman, eds. *The Complete Black Book of Russian Jewry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2002), 101.

⁵⁷ Ehrenburg and Grossman, *The Complete Black Book*, 130.

⁵⁸ Ehrenburg and Grossman, *The Complete Black Book*, 130.

committing atrocities and alleviated their psychological burden.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the use of alcohol emboldened. The witnesses of these acts reported that the German soldiers and policemen violated these girls “without a trace of shame in front of each other.”⁶⁰ In his study of Reserve Police Battallion 101, Browning argues that men feared being outcasts and conformed to the group’s behavior.⁶¹ The soldiers and policemen who violated these Jewish women in the Minsk ghetto reinforced and conformed to each other’s behavior by committing these acts in front of one another.

The myth of the 93 highlights Nazi soldiers as the primary offenders in soliciting sex from the Bais Yaakov girls. However, although there are reported cases of German soldiers openly pursuing Jewish women once the Germans entered Poland, Jewish men often solicited prostitutes and bartered resources for sex. Jewish policemen in particular utilized their positions of power for their own sexual gain. The policemen played a role in deciding who would be sent to the concentration and extermination camps on the next transport. The lives of the Jews in the ghetto were, quite literally, in Jewish policemen’s hands. These policemen often allowed Jews to avoid the death sentence of being shipped off to the camps in exchange for money. Ringelblum noted several instances in which the Jewish policemen in the Warsaw Ghetto dangled survival in front of Jewish women’s faces in exchange for “an insidious payment...the women’s bodies.”⁶²

Some policemen resorted to more violent methods. In the case of Regina Stark, a Jewish woman imprisoned in the Lwów Ghetto, a Jewish policeman attempted to assault her while she

⁵⁹ Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 79.

⁶⁰ Ehrenburg and Grossman, *The Complete Black Book*, 130.

⁶¹ Browning, *Ordinary Men*, 87.

⁶² Ringelblum, *Diary and Notes*, 432.

was carrying wood in from a shed. She reported: “One of them followed me. And I thought maybe he’s kind enough to help me to carry the wood in. But he wasn’t kind enough at all. He—he was horrid.” The policeman forced himself on Stark and tried tearing off her clothing, but she managed to fight him off. She later reported the incident to the chief of police. However, rather than reprimanding the police officer, the chief explained to Stark that “those things happen here...you have been the closest target, and he got you.” The police chief’s response to Stark’s attempted sexual assault indicated that Jewish policemen recognized their positions of power and often took advantage Jewish women. Furthermore, his response illustrates that this matter was, to some degree, accepted. In this in-between space, policemen committed acts of sexual violence against women and faced no repercussions.⁶³

Other policemen took advantage of Jewish women while performing their duties, such as checking to see if Jews were smuggling food. Alfred Winter recalled that when the police checked to see if women were hiding goods, they inspected the women’s breasts or looked under their skirts. Beyond this humiliation and violation of privacy, at times they molested Jewish women in the process. Furthermore, if the policemen found food after the invasive examination, they subsequently beat the women for violating the laws of the ghetto.⁶⁴

Other Jewish men took advantage of their privileged positions. In one instance, *kapos* (privileged prisoners who were typically Jewish and assigned by the SS to supervise other

⁶³ Regina Stark, interview by Vera Goldberg, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, September 5, 2005, Video, 23:04. <https://vha-usc-edu.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=5510&returnIndex=0>. See also the testimony of Raymond Kamonier, Interview by Josette Zarka, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 27, 1989, Video.

⁶⁴ Alfred Winter, interview by Lauren Kempton, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, July 11, 1996, Video. <https://vha-usc-edu.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=18067&returnIndex=0>. It is not clear from Winter’s testimony if the policemen were Jewish or not.

prisoners) were sent to clean up the Warsaw Ghetto and its rubble after most of the Jews had been transported to camps. In its place, according to one of the Jews selected to clean up the ghetto, a German monument was to be built. This survivor recalled that while the *kapos* were cleaning up the ghetto, a group of them raped a Jewish woman. The *kapos*, thus, used their privileged status to take advantage of Jewish women.⁶⁵

Non-German collaborators in positions of power also perpetrated acts of violence against Jewish women. These collaborators, who were frequently members of communities that were conquered by the Germans, assisted in leading the ghettos and provided troops to support the Nazi war effort. Some of these collaborators committed acts of sexual violence to gain German respect and recognition. Irvin Szames reported that while he was at the Łuck ghetto (currently in present-day Lutsk, Ukraine), Ukrainian collaborators grabbed Jewish women, raped, and killed them for reward from German leadership.⁶⁶ Other collaborators appeared to rape Jewish women in the ghetto simply because they could. Helen Rieder, a Jewish woman who was imprisoned at the Tacovo ghetto in present-day Hungary, recalled a family in the ghetto with three daughters. She witnessed the Hungarian guards take the daughters and rape them.⁶⁷ Miriam Frankel, who was also imprisoned in the Tacovo ghetto, supported Rieder's account and reported that drunk,

⁶⁵ Raymond Kamonier, "Oral history interview with Raymond Kamonier," Interview by Josette Zarka, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, November 27, 1989, Video. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn507949>.

⁶⁶ Irvin Szames, interview by Michael Berkowitz, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, December 26, 1995, Video, 11:00. <https://vha-usc-edu.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=9787&returnIndex=0>

⁶⁷ Helen Rieder, interview by Vera Goldberg, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, September 5, 1995, Video, Tape 3, 18:43. <https://vha-usc-edu.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=5874&returnIndex=0>.

singing Hungarian troops raped Jewish women. Jewish women began to recognize the Hungarians' singing and hid when they realized the troops were coming through the ghetto.⁶⁸

The legend of the 93 emphasized the vulnerability of Jewish women in the ghetto. However, by using the threat of rape as a literary device, the myth ultimately communicated that resisting rape and protecting one's dignity through suicide was honorable. Simplifying narratives of sexual violence in the ghettos to entail only Nazi perpetrators, the threat of rape, and resisting through suicide diluted the complexities of this violence. The popularity of the myth of the 93 resulted in a distortion of the various forms of sexual violence and the array of perpetrators in the ghettos. The 93 myth, albeit unintentionally, invalidated experiences that did not align with those prevalent in popular consciousness.

Contextualizing Sexual Violence in the Camps

House of Dolls directly contributed to a narrative of Nazis sexually exploiting Jewish women in the concentration camps.⁶⁹ For decades, historians and the Israeli public believed SS forced Jewish women into sexual slavery within camp brothels. Beyond the sexual violence, these women were also often thought to have been forcibly sterilized or to have underwent forced abortions. However, literature on the camp brothels by scholars like Robert Sommer have shown that there is little to no evidence to suggest that Jewish women were utilized by SS men in these "joy divisions."⁷⁰ Historians do confirm the existence of camp brothels. However, more often

⁶⁸ Miriam Frankel, interview by Paula Draper, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, June 5, 1989, Video, 16:00. <https://vha-usc-edu.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=57721&returnIndex=0#>.

⁶⁹ Bos, "'Her Flesh is Branded: 'For Officers Only,'" 73.

⁷⁰ This myth has been disproved in several historians' work. See Robert Sommer, *Das KZ-Bordell: Sexuelle Zwangsarbeit in nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2009); Brigitte Halbmayr, "Sexualized Violence against Women during the Nazi 'Racial' Persecution," in *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust*, eds. Sonia Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Sidel (Brandeis University Press, 2010), 29-44; Pascale R. Bos, "'Her Flesh is Branded: 'For Officers Only'": Imagining and Imagined Sexual

than not, the women who worked in these brothels were typically non-Jewish Slavic women and they mostly serviced well-behaved non-Jewish prisoners. Jewish women were forbidden from prostitution under the Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor. Although this law did not prevent Jewish women from being sexually exploited by the SS and the *Wehrmacht* on the Eastern front, the concentration camps were under more strict supervision. This exaggerated narrative of the systemic prostitution of Jewish women in the camps takes away from the traumas of the women who were forced to work in these brothels, who faced consistent re-victimization, and who faced attacks on their womanhood.⁷¹ Additionally, this disregarded the experiences of Jewish women. While many had considered *House of Dolls* to be fact disguised as fiction, with the new literature, it is most likely fiction disguised as fact.

Although Jewish women were not subjected to systemic sexual slavery, they did often experience sexual and sexualized violence at the hands of Nazi camp leaders, collaborators, and other prisoners. A substantial number of oral testimonies and memoirs report incidents of sexual violence in the camps.⁷² When inmates arrived at the concentration and extermination camps, they were shaved to prevent lice infestations. Survivors often recalled this detail of their experiences in the camps as it was dehumanizing. Anna Jakab Wollner discussed her forced shaving when she arrived at the camp and when asked if a man or woman shaved her, Wollner

Violence Against Jewish Women during the Holocaust,” in *Lessons and Legacies XI: Expanding Perspectives on the Holocaust in a Changing World*, eds. Hillary Earl and Karl A. Schleunes (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014): 59-85.

⁷¹ See Monika J. Flaschka, ““Only Pretty Women Were Raped””: The Effect of Sexual Violence on Gender Identities in Concentration Camps,” in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, ed. Sonia Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2010): 77-93.

⁷² Nearly 2,900 video testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual Historical Archive include some reference to rape and an overwhelming majority of those testimonies are labeled as “camp sexual assault.” 109 video testimonies in the USC Shoah Foundation Visual Historical Archive include some reference to prostitution and 103 of those video testimonies are labeled as “camp brothels.”

responded that the person who shaved her “didn’t quite feel like a human being” because she could not distinguish their gender.⁷³

Shaving rid Jewish women of their femininity by taking away their hair, a feature connected to their perceived beauty.⁷⁴ One survivor indicated that Jewish women in the camps had tied hair growth to sexual attractiveness, reporting that a friend of hers had been raped in Auschwitz because “she was beautiful, and her hair grew in.”⁷⁵ In this instance, femininity became dangerous. Jewish women knew that their femininity and beauty could result in their violation as well. Women like Gina Sack had witnessed German guards in Auschwitz sexually assaulting women and killing them afterwards. To protect herself, Sack purposefully made herself less attractive to discourage the guards by spreading a paste composed of flour and water on her face to make her skin appear pale and flakey.⁷⁶ The brutal conditions in the camp often destroyed traditionally feminine and beautiful features. Jewish women no longer felt like women and subsequently, no longer felt human. Conversely, some women felt sexually vulnerable because of their beauty.

Though *House of Dolls* stresses sexual slavery at the hands of the Nazi camp leadership, non-German collaborators also perpetrated sexual violence against Jewish women in the camps. Collaborators, especially Ukrainian collaborators, committed sexual violence against Jewish

⁷³ Anna Jakab , “Oral history interview with Anna Wollner,” interview by Gail Schwartz, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 18, 1994, Audio, 0:50:00. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504433>.

⁷⁴ To many Jewish women of various denominations, hair holds religious significance as well. Revealing and shaving the hair of Orthodox Jewish women was both an attack on their femininity and their faith.

⁷⁵ Pearl Gottesman, interview by Mickie Schulman, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, September 21, 1995, Video.

⁷⁶ Gina Sack, “Oral history interview with Gina Sack,” Interview by Joan Ringelheim, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, August-November, 1983, Video, 1:08:29. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn47946>.

women in the concentration camps.⁷⁷ Jankiel Wiernitz, a Jewish man who was imprisoned in Treblinka and one of the few Jews to have escaped during the Treblinka uprising and survived, discussed the conditions of the camp in a report on Treblinka. This document is incredibly significant, as most of the Jews imprisoned in Treblinka were murdered and the camp was destroyed by the Germans near the end of the war.⁷⁸ In this report, Wiernitz describes an incident in which the Ukrainian collaborators that assisted in the extermination of Jews raped “the most beautiful among the Jewish virgins” before their murders.⁷⁹ In this case, it was the collaborators themselves, not the Nazi camp guards, who took advantage of the power imbalance and victimized these women once more before sending them off to the gas chambers. Without Wiernitz’s testimony, this horrific tale would have remained buried among the rubble of Treblinka.

Those who ran the camps, whether SS guards or collaborators, exhibited great savagery as they controlled the fates of inmates. Camp leadership administered punishments that inflicted severe exhaustion, starvation, and death. Irma Grese, a female SS guard, known as the Bitch of Belsen and *die Hyäne von Auschwitz* (“the hyena of Auschwitz”), was notorious for her brutality and the vicious beatings she inflicted on inmates.⁸⁰ There are also reports of Grese committing sexual and sexualized violence against the female inmates of Auschwitz. Nina Kaleska, a Jewish

⁷⁷ See Flaschka, ““Only Pretty Women Were Raped,””77-93.

⁷⁸ See Chris Webb and Michael Chocholaty, *The Treblinka Death Camp: History, Biographies, Remembrance* (Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2014).

⁷⁹ Jankiel Wiernitz, *Treblinka Report*. Report. 7. US Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Julius Kühn Collection*, undated. Translated by Nada Al-Jamal.

⁸⁰ “Close-up of Irma Grese, known as ‘The Bitch of Belsen’, an SS wardress in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Ravensbrück, and Bergen-Belsen concentration camps,” US Holocaust Memorial Museum Collections, accessed February 17, 2020, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa7623>.

survivor from Auschwitz, described her recruitment by Grese to stand guard while Grese had sex with Jewish women.⁸¹ The case of Irma Grese shows that perpetrators of sexual violence were not exclusively male. Grese, like other perpetrators, had a substantial amount of power over the Jewish women she assaulted.

Occasionally, German guards used rape as a form of retaliation and punishment, reminding Jewish women of their power imbalance. On a cold, wintry day in Stutthof, three women managed to escape past the electric fence and into the wilderness beyond the camp. As a result, the German guards punished Dora Goldstein Roth, her mother, and several other women. The women were forced to stand naked for twelve hours in the cold weather. At one point, the guards selected a few women from the row and “raped [them] in a rape that I have never heard or seen.”⁸² As she was just a child at the time, Roth’s mother covered her eyes to shelter her daughter from the sexual violation taking place in front of them. The guards saw her mother shield Roth’s eyes and beat her. In this case, the guards utilized rape as a way to simultaneously exercise control and invoke fear. To emphasize their position of power and to discourage others from escaping, the guards punished these Jewish women, who had nothing to do with the escape, with brutal rape.

The horrors of the camps did not cease with liberation—there are several reports of Soviet liberators raping the vulnerable Jewish women they encountered. Wanda Luos Lorenc was arrested after participating in the Warsaw Uprising and sent to Ravensbrück, where she stayed until it was liberated by Soviet forces at the end of April 1945. Lorenc described how

⁸¹Nina Kaleska, “Oral history interview Nina Kaleska,” interview by Linda G. Kuzmack, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 3, 1990, Video, 1:45:45. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504595>.

⁸²Dora Goldstein Roth, “Oral history interview with Dora Goldstein Roth,” interview by Linda G. Kuzmack, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, June 8, 1989, Video, 41:29. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn506760>.

drunk Soviets raped young Jewish women in a barn, remarking, “we brought you freedom.”⁸³

Soviet liberators who engaged in rape felt entitled to Jewish women’s bodies because they had freed them, as evident in Lorenc’s testimony. Many Jewish women feared Soviet liberators because they had witnessed them raping other women. Pauline Buchenholz recalled:

In the morning two girls, leading another one in the middle, came by, explaining that she was raped three times that night and that they were going with her to a doctor. We also heard another story: a Russian soldier wanted to abuse a young 15-year old girl, but her mother took the outrage on herself to save the daughter. We lived in a state of great nervousness and attentive observation. If the Russians came to see us during the day, we were sure that they will come back at night, and we ran into the fields...some other time they caught us unprepared and the girls closer to the window had time to escape before the soldier came into the room. But I was sitting at the round table covered with a long tablecloth down to the floor, and I instinctively hid under the table. From there I could hear the heavy steps of the soldier who apparently paced the floor in surprise of not finding anybody. I was deadly afraid, that he will hear my wild heart beat and find me under the table.⁸⁴

Anna Jakab Wollner, who was liberated by Soviet soldiers while marching to Germany, described the rape of three “good looking, hefty looking” women by Soviet liberators. She recalled her fear of rape at the hands of the Soviets. However, her fears were quickly dispelled because, unlike these women, Wollner was a “walking skeleton” at the end of the war.⁸⁵ Wollner attributed her protection from sexual assault to the de-feminization she experienced. Zophia Shulman had a similar experience after her liberation by the Soviet army from a camp at Biesdorf in 1945. She, like many others, reported that the Soviet soldiers began raping

⁸³ Wanda Luos Lorenc, “Oral history interview with Wanda Wos Lorenc,” interview by Ina Navazelskis, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, May 7, 2013, Video, 0:30:22, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn59194>.

⁸⁴ Pauline Buchenholz, *As I Remember: Memoirs from the War and Concentration Camps* (1983), <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn547024>.

⁸⁵ Anna Jakab Wollner, “Oral history interview with Anna Wollner,” interview by Gail Schwartz, US Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 18, 1994, Audio, 0:29:00, <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn504433>.

indiscriminately.⁸⁶ However, Shulman stated that, “fortunately for [her], [she] was so worn out that [she] didn’t probably look human...like a woman or girl.”⁸⁷ Like Wollner, the destruction of Shulman’s femininity ultimately saved her from the mass rape perpetrated by the Soviet troops.

House of Dolls portrayed the sexual vulnerability of Jewish women through Daniella. However, Ka-Tzetnik 135633’s novella contributed to the construction of a widely-believed myth of systemic sexual slavery at the hands of the Nazis. Like the legend of the 93, *House of Dolls* emphasized Jewish women’s heroism and resistance by depicting Daniella committing suicide to preserve her dignity despite being a *Feld-Hure*. Because of the novella’s wild popularity, Israeli society and historians of the immediate postwar era assumed that Jewish women staffed camp brothels and serviced Nazi men. However, Jewish women also faced numerous forms of sexual and sexualized violence at the hands of numerous perpetrators. *House of Dolls* and its significant place in collective memory and popular culture simplified the understanding of sexual violence that Jewish women experienced in the camps.

Portraying the Taboo

Whether it be *House of Dolls* or the legend of the 93, postwar representations reveal a clear fascination with the topic of sexual violence. The question must be asked: Why was it so prominent in popular culture but ignored in historiography and public discourse? It may well be

⁸⁶ The mass rape that came with Soviet liberation is a common theme in women’s testimonies in the postwar era. For example, see the oral history testimonies of Anne Tieger, “Oral history interview with Anne Tieger,” US Holocaust Memorial Museum, January 10, 1988, Video.; Caroline Blumenthal, “Oral history interview with Caroline Blumenthal,” interview by Fred Stamm, February 5, 1981, Video.; Margit Hársfalvi, “Oral history interview with Margit Hársfalvi,” interview by Borbála Kriza, June 4, 2012, Video.; Luna Kaufman, “Oral history interview with Luna Kaufman,” interview by Sidney Lander, 1983, Video.; Lotte Salus, “Oral history interview with Lotte Salus,” interview by Gail Schwartz, February 26, 1996, Video.

⁸⁷ Zophia Shulman, “Oral history interview with Zophia Shulman,” US Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 11, 1983, Video, 13:44. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/irn47710>.

that it is easier to digest the topic of sexual violence if presented in the form of sensationalized fiction than to hear women from the community disclose one of the most traumatic and intimate forms of violence and expressions of power. Both historians and survivors convey in interviews the pain and discomfort that arises from hearing about sexual violence.⁸⁸ Artists could also utilize it to emphasize the suffering and horrors of the Holocaust.

In the case of the legend of the 93 and *House of Dolls*, however, the function of rape is clear. The writers of these forms of media utilized rape as a plot device to demonize Nazis. By labeling them rapists who took advantage of vulnerable Jewish women, Nazis became more than murderers or cogs in the genocidal machine. They became violators and perpetrators of an intimate and taboo form of violence. This simultaneously emphasized the purity and honor of Jewish women, especially those who resisted their rapes through suicide. This worked to serve the narratives of heroism that characterized Israel's collective memory of the Holocaust. However, by utilizing the trope of sexual violence against Jewish women, only certain accepted narratives had room in the public consciousness. The complexities of sexual violence and testimonies that deviated from the accepted trope could not break into the framework of postwar Israeli collective memory. By portraying perpetrators solely as Nazi Germans and by martyring assaulted Jewish women, these forms of media presented an incomplete image of sexual violence in the Holocaust. The plot device does not address topics such as consent, coercion, and victim-on-victim violence. As this article has demonstrated, individual stories and the history itself are far more nuanced.

⁸⁸ Ringelheim, "Women in the Holocaust," 741-761.

CONCLUSION

This article examined sexual violence as a trope in the myth of the 93 Bais Yaakov girls and *House of Dolls*. In both tales, Nazis attempted to subject Jewish women to sexual slavery and the protagonists resisted through suicide. These representations contributed to postwar Israeli narratives of heroism and rebellion. By examining the wide array of sexual and sexualized violence that took place in the camps and ghettos, this article has argued that the legend of the 93 and *House of Dolls* simplified the complexity of Jewish women's experiences. In reality, Jewish women faced sexual violence such as rape, barter, and sexual humiliation at the hands of German and non-German perpetrators.

As outlined in the article, German officials were not the sole perpetrators of sexual violence in the ghettos. Those who held substantial power over Jewish women took advantage of their sexual vulnerability, such as non-German collaborators and Jewish men in power. Additionally, Jewish women experienced various forms of sexual and sexualized violence, including barter and prostitution, sexual humiliation, and rape. In the camps, the perpetrators also held positions of power, such as German guards, non-German collaborators, and privileged prisoners. However, unlike the sexual slavery in *House of Dolls*, perpetrators raped, molested, and harassed Jewish women. Additionally, the forced shaving and starvation in the camps diminished their sexuality and femininity. Overall, Israeli popular representations did not accurately reflect the scope of sexual violence in the Holocaust.

These stories sensationalized Jewish women's traumas and promoted them as pure and heroic virgins who resisted the sexual barbarism of Nazis. By labeling the protagonists as heroes and active resisters, Jewish women whose stories did not align with the ones available in popular culture felt shame and were ultimately silenced. These stories crafted a prevailing narrative in

popular discourse while contributing to a public silence enshrouding the complexities of Jewish women's experiences and memories.

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