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**“Somebody’s Mother, Somebody’s Child, Somebody’s Lover, Somebody’s
Bride.”**

Women’s Collective Holocaust Experiences in Memoir

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Author's Declaration

I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where indicated by referencing, and that I have followed good academic practices set by the University.

Alexandra Mason

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This thesis is dedicated to Elli, Isabella, Dita and Gisella and their fellow women. I carry your stories with me.

ABSTRACT

Since the emergence of the field in the 1980s, feminist scholars have sought to amplify Jewish women's Holocaust experiences in an effort to address the void left by universalised post-war applications of male testimony- that is, they have sought to address the divergence of female experiences from that of their male counterparts in accordance with the assertion that women experienced the horrors of the Shoah differently due to their social and biological status as women. This thesis seeks to contribute to this discourse, by examining the gendered dimensions of women's experiences in Holocaust concentration and death camps (the 'Lager'), arguing that embodied suffering, interpersonal relationality, and maternal identity together shape a distinctly female mode of survival and meaning-making under extreme conditions. Chapter One explores the embodied experiences of imprisoned women, focusing on physical experiences in which female bodily integrity was compromised within the camps. Exposing instances of sexual and gendered humiliation, overt and covert sexualised violence and reproductive violence, this chapter seeks to access the impact of degradation, at once physical and gender-specific, while rejecting the perpetrator mindset of essentialisms of the Jewish female body. Chapter Two investigates the relational bonds that emerged among women in the camps, analysing friendships, mutual aid, and community cultural and spiritual expressions as practices through which women cultivated resilience, dignity, and ethical responsibility in the face of systematic dehumanisation. Significantly, this chapter will engage with the moral complexities of co-existence under extremity, challenging pre-determined conventions of how the woman-survivor should behave. Chapter Three considers motherhood as a site where physical embodiment and relational obligations converge, demonstrating how maternal identities, whether rooted in actual caregiving, symbolic motherhood, or remembered ties, function

simultaneously as burden, coping mechanism, and moral anchor. Specifically, this chapter will address the parentification of children under the severity of genocide and highlight moments of frustrated connection between mothers and daughters, challenging pre-existing, exclusionary, conventions of the idealised maternal trope. Across these chapters, the thesis argues that women's embodied and relational practices not only challenged Nazi efforts to erase individuality and community, but also reveal forms of agency, both troubling and empowering, that persist even within structures of extreme oppression. By foregrounding gendered experience, the study contributes to ongoing efforts in Holocaust scholarship to integrate feminist, phenomenological, and relational frameworks into the analysis of survival, memory, and the ethics of witnessing.

DEFINITIONS FOR THE PURPOSES OF THIS PAPER

Blockova/Blockälteste – ‘block leader.’ Prisoner functionaries, typically Kapos, who supervised other prisoners in a particular barrack of a block.

Judenrein – the concept ‘freedom from Jews’; the ideology of their exclusion from society.

Kapo – supervisory role for a prisoner, supervising other prisoners, particularly during work details.

Lager – Nazi concentration and death camps; labour and extermination centres.

Lebensraum – ‘Living space.’ Land specifically for German nationals.

Oberscharführerin – SS rank; senior squad leader.

Shoah – Hebrew; term used for ‘Holocaust.’ Refers to the mass murder of Jewish people by the Nazi Regime.

Sonderkommando – groups of prisoners, mostly Jewish, forced to work in killing centres to process the bodies and belongings of the dead before and after their murder.

SS – Schutzstaffel or Protection Squad; ‘elite corps’ and self-described ‘political soldiers’ for the Reich. In the context of this thesis, oversaw the camps.

Introduction

“What we have been, we still are. The same worn-out bodies. But linked together, by the same memory.” Charlotte Delbo

Since the emergence of feminist Holocaust studies in the 1980s, scholars have increasingly argued that the historical, testimonial, and ethical landscape of Holocaust research is incomplete without a careful examination of women’s experiences. The development of gender-specific Holocaust research has unfolded over several decades, shaped by broader historiographical trends, the expansion of survivor testimony collections, and shifts in social attitudes toward women, trauma, and sexuality. Before the 1980s, female Holocaust testimony was largely subsumed under that of their male counterparts. Early feminist critiques, most notably by Joan Ringelheim, questioned the assumption that women’s experiences were the same as men’s and highlighted the lack of gender analysis in Holocaust historiography (Ringelheim 1984a). Sybil Milton also contributed significantly to establishing women as a legitimate field of inquiry, emphasizing the need to examine sexual violence, reproductive abuse, and gendered labour (Milton 1984b).

The 1990s marked the consolidation of gender-specific Holocaust research as a legitimate and influential subfield. Landmark publications such as Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman’s *Women in the Holocaust* (1998) and Myrna Goldenberg’s essays on gender and survival provided systematic frameworks for analysing women’s experiences not simply as “add-ons” to existing narratives, but as essential to understanding the mechanisms of persecution and survival. Goldenberg’s influential formulation of “Different Horrors, Same Hell” (Goldenberg 1996) captured the idea that while men and

women faced the same genocidal system, the nature of their suffering and their avenues for survival often diverged due to socialisation, bodily experience, and gendered roles. During this period, scholarship also began addressing topics previously avoided due to their sensitive nature, such as sexual coercion, forced nudity, menstruation, pregnancy, and abortion under Nazi rule (Grossmann 1995; Heinemann 2005). At the same time, scholars explored women's strategies of survival, such as the formation of mutual aid networks, or "camp sister" relationships, which were often more pronounced among female prisoners (Horowitz 1997). From the 2000s onward, gender-specific Holocaust research moved fully into theoretical sophistication, integrating insights from gender studies, trauma theory, sociology, and cultural memory studies. Scholars such as Zoë Waxman, Atina Grossmann, Elizabeth Baer, and Sara R. Horowitz expanded the scope of research to include the dynamics of silence and post-war testimony, the politics of representation, and the cultural and psychological legacy of sexual violence. Waxman (2017) argues that women's testimonies often employ relational modes of storytelling that differ from male narratives, emphasizing networks, emotions, and the continuity of identity.

Another significant development has been renewed attention to Primo Levi's concept of the "Grey Zone." Levi used this term to refer to the morally ambiguous spaces where victims were coerced into forms of labour or relationships that blurred distinctions between agency and victimization (Levi 1988). Scholars have applied this framework to gendered forms of coercion, including sexual barter and women's participation in camp hierarchies (Goldenberg & Shteinman 2013). This work has complicated earlier narratives of heroism or resistance and challenged simplistic categories of victim/perpetrator, underscoring the extreme constraints under which decisions were made. Today, gender-specific research is recognized not as a niche subfield but as a central component of Holocaust historiography. The field increasingly incorporates intersectional analysis, examining how gender interacted with nationality, class, age, language, and religious practice to produce different

experiences and outcomes (Baer & Goldenberg 2003; Waxman 2017). By foregrounding women's voices and examining gender as a structural force within genocide, scholars have transformed the historical record, revealing new understandings of survival, community, identity, and trauma under the most extreme forms of violence. Overall, the development of gender-specific Holocaust research exemplifies the evolution from early silence to recognition, from marginalization to centrality. Its contributions have enriched the scholarly understanding of the Holocaust, demonstrating that gender shaped not only how individuals experienced persecution, but also how they remembered and narrated their experiences in the decades that followed.

This thesis situates itself within this feminist lineage by examining the gendered nature of women's experiences in concentration and death camps ('the Lager') through female survivor memoir, arguing that embodied suffering, interpersonal relationality, and maternal identity together form a distinctly female mode of survival and ethical agency. While this argument does not claim a universal model of 'the female experience,' it insists that gender shaped the conditions, threats, and possibilities available to women and therefore must be treated as a central analytic category rather than an ancillary one. The aim of this thesis is not only to illuminate particular aspects of women's lives in the camps but also to challenge the historiographical habits that have long rendered these aspects peripheral. It also seeks to demonstrate how unbridled access to women's testimonies resist both the homogenisation of Holocaust experience and long-imposed essentialisms governing the palatability of personal histories which reach outside traditional realms of historical and social feminine roles. Overall, this thesis seeks to reject exclusionary narratives arising from constraining conventions surrounding women's Holocaust testimony. Such constraints particularly arise where women are expected to perform passively or solely in care-giving capacities, in line with broader gender-roles and what comforts the post-generation in their interactions with Holocaust memory. In exploring women's memoirs,

the thesis refrains from essentialising femininity or suggesting that certain behaviours, such as nurturing, emotional labour, or self-sacrifice, are inherent to women. Instead, it situates these behaviours within the sociocultural structures that shaped Jewish women's lives before imprisonment and within the oppressive conditions of the Lager itself.

To access such histories, this thesis will rely on a close reading and analysis of four female survivor memoirs: *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* by Gisella Perl, *Fragments of Isabella* by Isabella Leitner, *Elli: Coming of Age in the Holocaust* by Livia Bitton-Jackson, and *A Delayed Life* by Dita Kraus. This selection, while limited in number, reflect a deliberate effort to foreground diverse female perspectives on survival under Nazi persecution, while also maintaining a critical dialogue with specific theoretical frameworks. Each author consistently reflects on her own moral framework, articulating internal dilemmas and ethical self-assessment in response to the extremity of camp life. Thus, while our applied theories from secondary scholars provide an important interpretive lens, the selected texts resist any totalising claim of moral suspension by preserving the authors' narrative agency and ethical self-consciousness throughout their testimonies. The corpus is also shaped by a considered diversity of age, experience, and temporal distance from publication, allowing an increased insight into life in Auschwitz-Birkenau for the women interned and killed there. In *A Delayed Life*, Kraus writes from the perspective of adolescence, yet with significant retrospective latency, having published her account approximately seventy-five years after liberation. Her experience in the Auschwitz "family camp" further distinguishes her narrative, offering insight into a rare and complex communal structure within the Lager. Similarly, Bitton-Jackson's *Coming of Age in the Holocaust* presents an adolescent perspective, though with far less temporal distance, emerging during a period when Holocaust testimony- particularly women's narratives- was beginning to gain broader recognition. Notably, both Kraus and

Bitton-Jackson experienced the camp alongside their mothers, allowing for a nuanced exploration of the mother–daughter relationship under conditions of genocidal trauma and the ways in which familial bonds informed survival strategies and moral decision-making. In contrast, Leitner’s *Fragments of Isabella* offers the perspective of a young woman of marriageable age, whose relative maturity enables a different mode of processing and interpreting events as they unfold. Her narrative provides particularly valuable insight into maternal loss and the subsequent formation of “surrogate” familial structures among sisters, foregrounding alternative kinship networks within the camp. Published in 1978, her work also predates the wider cultural and academic “Holocaust consciousness,” especially regarding gendered experiences, further underscoring the independence of her narrative voice. Finally, Perl’s *I Was a Doctor in Auschwitz* contributes a markedly different perspective shaped by age, profession, and maternal identity. At thirty-six, she occupies the position of an “older” woman within the camp and is the only author in this study who writes as a mother. Her testimony provides crucial insight into issues of sexual exploitation, forced abortion, and the ethics of medical care under extreme coercion, as well as the broader realities of disenfranchised healthcare provision among prisoners. Published in 1946, her memoir emerges in the immediate postwar period, prior to the full public reckoning with the Holocaust, lending it a particular immediacy and urgency. Taken together, these texts form a deliberately varied and complementary body of sources. Differences in age, familial context, professional role, and moment of publication enable a multifaceted exploration of women’s experiences in Auschwitz which actively avoids essentialisation of female Holocaust experiences, while reinforcing the importance of attending to each author’s distinct narrative voice. This diversity not only reflects a considered methodological choice but also strengthens the central argument of this study: that women’s memoirs must be read

as acts of narrative agency, in which ethical reflection, personal perspective, and historical testimony remain deeply intertwined.

Consideration of the lives behind these testimonies is essential in order to recognise the memoirs not simply as illustrative texts, but as situated narratives shaped by distinct personal histories. Dita Kraus (born Edith Polachová in Prague in 1929) was raised in a secular, educated Jewish family. She was thirteen when the Nazi occupation transformed her life, and was deported with her parents first to Theresienstadt and later to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where she was held in the so-called “family camp.” Liberated from Bergen Belsen in 1945, she was one of the few children from her original transport to survive. After the war, she eventually settled in Israel, and her memoir reflects both her adolescent experience and the long retrospective distance from which she writes.

Similarly, Livia Bitton-Jackson (born Elli Friedmann in 1931 in Samorin, then Hungary) came from a religious Jewish family and was closely bound to her mother throughout her deportation. She was thirteen at the time of the German occupation of Hungary in 1944 and was subsequently deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau before being transferred through several labour camps. She was ultimately liberated in 1945. After the war, she emigrated to the United States, where she pursued an academic career. Her memoir, published decades later but with less temporal distance than Kraus’s, reflects both her adolescent subjectivity and a developing postwar discourse around Holocaust testimony, particularly women’s voices.

In contrast, Isabella Leitner (born in Kisvárda, Hungary, in 1920) was a young adult at the time of deportation, having grown up in a large, traditional Jewish family. Deported to Auschwitz in 1944 along with her mother and sisters, she experienced immediate and devastating familial loss, with her mother murdered upon arrival. She

and her sisters were later transferred to labour camps and eventually liberated in 1945. After the war, she emigrated to the United States. Writing from a position of greater maturity than Kraus and Bitton-Jackson, her account reflects a more immediate adult processing of events, as well as the reconstruction of familial bonds through her surviving sisters. Published in 1978, her memoir predates the wider emergence of gender-focused Holocaust scholarship.

Finally, Gisella Perl (born in 1907 in Sighet, then part of Hungary) came from an Orthodox Jewish background and was an educated physician prior to the war. Married and a mother, she was thirty-six at the time of her deportation to Auschwitz in 1944. There, she was forced to work as a camp doctor under Josef Mengele, confronted with extreme ethical dilemmas, particularly surrounding pregnancy, abortion, and the preservation of women's lives under conditions of coercion. Liberated in 1945, she later emigrated to the United States, where she resumed her medical career. Her memoir, published in 1946, stands apart for its immediacy and for its focus on medical and overt gender-specific violence within the camp.

Taken together, these brief biographies underscore the diversity of backgrounds—adolescent and adult, secular and religious, daughter and mother, civilian and medical professional—that inform the narratives examined in this study. Attending to these differences is crucial, as they shape not only what each woman experienced, but how she interprets, narrates, and assigns meaning to those experiences in her memoir.

With close inspection of common *and* distinctive themes explored by these women in their memoirs, in conjunction with secondary resources from varying scholars in the field, I seek to present authentic female Holocaust histories which humanise their speakers and release them from the judges of history: **those which celebrate particular responses to**

genocidal extremity, particularly those which fall within comforting standards of female behaviour, and condemn others which do not fall within such borders . This approach is invaluable as it relies on both first-hand and secondary accounts.

One important conceptual touchstone for this project is Laurence Langer's notion of "choiceless choices." Langer argues that in the Holocaust, moral agency was radically reconfigured because victims were confronted not with true choices but with coerced decisions between one intolerable option and another (Langer 1982, 72). Evaluating victims' actions through peacetime ethics obscures the structural coercion that defined their world. Langer's framework is instrumental for this thesis because it allows for a nuanced understanding of women's agency in contexts where bodily violation, relational pressure, and maternal obligation produced situations of extreme moral constraint. "Choiceless choices" provides the ethical vocabulary necessary to approach women's actions not through idealised moral standards but through recognition of the unprecedented pressures under which they acted. It also complicates post-war expectations of how a woman- or indeed, a mother- ought to behave, revealing how these expectations often fail to account for the deep distortions of moral reality imposed by the Lager.

This thesis is not an exhaustive representation of women's Holocaust experiences. Many experiences are lost to the void of history as their possessors were murdered. Further, women's experiences of genocide did not begin in the Lager. For some, their stories began and ended far away from the Nazis' concentration and death camps; in the ghettos, in the ravines and forests where entire families were shot, in crowded and deathly cattle cars being transported across Europe. Some women lived out the Holocaust in hiding, or as 'Aryan' passing before being caught or liberated- whichever came first.

This thesis focuses specifically on women’s experiences in Auschwitz-Birkenau, using ‘the Lager’ to encompass the main and various subcamps that it was composed of, rather than attempting to represent the full range of Nazi concentration and extermination camps. While the Holocaust encompassed a vast and varied camp system, Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned as a unique site in terms of its scale, its dual role as both concentration and extermination camp, and the particular conditions that shaped prisoners’ daily lives. By concentrating on this specific context, this study does not seek to generalise across all camps; instead, it offers a more grounded and precise analysis of women’s narratives within Auschwitz-Birkenau itself. This focus allows for more careful attention to the distinct social, moral, and narrative dynamics that emerge in memoirs rooted in this environment. I have chosen to look specifically at women’s experiences in the Lager as that is where the majority of our memoirists’ stories take place, and what they possess in common. It also allows me to address Auschwitz-Birkenau as one pivotal expression of the Nazis’ Final Solution, amongst other camps, ghettos and killing centres.

As per Zoë Waxman, “gender is culturally constructed and conditioned” (7). For the purposes of this paper, I rely on the same conceptions of gender as Waxman in her emphasis of Joan Wallach Scott’s argument that gender is “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” and, further, that it is a way in which humans predominantly signify power (2000, 42). In this paper, gender differences between the male and female experiences reflect “the relational aspect of normative definitions of femininity,” however, relationships of power may be informed by race, class, ethnicity or social process (Scott 1986, 1069). Diane Richardson claims that “gender is understood as a hierarchy that exists in society, wherein one group of people (men) have power and privilege over another group of people (women)” (9). According to Edwin S. Segal in Cultural

Constructions of Gender: “gender is taken to refer to a culturally based complex of norms, values and behaviours that a particular culture assigns to one biological sex,” with ‘sex’ referring to “biological characteristics” (3). This thesis will work with these notions, whilst still considering Jewish women’s perceived reproductive role by the Nazis and contextualising them within their historical setting.

Our memoirs have been chosen as they each offer a divergent perspective on female-specific suffering in the wake of the Holocaust. Publication dates vary from immediately Holocaust in 1948 to the 1970s and 80s, to present-day (2020), allowing an insight into memoir-writing in conjunction with historiographical trends, as well as access to histories written at different levels of latency. Our authors come from Czechoslovakia, the Transylvanian region of Romania and Hungary, highlighting the reach of Nazism and enabling us to see women’s experiences in conjunction with their variance of culture. The authors I have chosen are varying in age and social identity, with Gisella in her 30s and a parent, Isabella in her 20s and Elli and Dita in their early teens. Further, Gisella and Elli make reference to their faith, where Dita and Isabella keep their stories more secular. Both factors allow us insight into our authors’ various understandings and relationships with their experiences. Finally, our memoirs present different styles in terms of storytelling, with Gisella and Isabella offering more fragmented retellings of their experiences, and Dita and Elli opting for a chronological approach- a telling of before, during and after. This enables us to deeper discern the intricacies of remembering and a broad spectrum of authentic relationships with personal traumatic histories. Overall, all four texts provide an insight into the Jewish experience of **Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination Camp**, and, importantly, **an insight into this specific** Nazi ‘world’ of terror and severity for Jewish women.

Perhaps the importance of amplifying Jewish female experiences lies with the Nazi essentialism of the female body itself. The Nazi regime's essentialisation of the female body operated through a rigid, racialised ideology that reduced women to biological vessels for the reproduction of the "Volk," while simultaneously weaponising pseudo-science to dehumanise Jewish women (Kaplan 1984, 174). "Aryan" women were idealised as healthy, fertile, and morally pure, their value measured primarily through motherhood and physical conformity to racial norms; their bodies were framed as national property whose reproductive capacity served the state (Stephenson, 16). In stark contrast, Jewish women's bodies were cast as racially corrupt, dangerous, and degenerate. Nazi propaganda depicted them as threats to the purity of the German nation, using misogynistic and antisemitic stereotypes to portray Jewish femininity as sexually deviant or contaminating (Stephenson, 12). This dual construction—idealisation of the Aryan maternal body and demonisation of the Jewish female body—helped legitimise both the coercive pronatalism imposed on "Aryan" women and the extreme violence, sterilisation, and extermination directed at Jewish women within the genocidal machinery of the Holocaust (Stephenson, 16). Nazism was a notoriously patriarchal system which pervaded not just politics, but domestic life (Stephenson, 10;11). Women among the Jews were singled out to be killed first and in greater numbers and proportions than men, for reasons articulated chillingly by the Nazi leadership: Heinrich Himmler himself declared women were to be targeted first in order to "obliterate the biological basis of Jewry" (Smith and Peterson, 1974). Women and children had to be killed to eliminate "the germ cell of a new Jewish arrival," as described in the Wannsee Protocol, or to "deprive Jewry of its biological reserves," as put forward by Otto Six of the Reichssicherheitshauptamt¹ (Young, 1779). According to the Nazis, Jewish women were defined by their biological function and were to be targeted for such. The

¹ Reich Security Main Office.

brutal awareness of women to this fact is chillingly exposed by Charlotte Delbo: “for the women and children always go first” (7).

Chapter One examines women’s embodied suffering under Nazism through the lens of Stacy Banwell’s concept of “woman-as-Jew,” a theoretical frame that recognises that Jewish women were targeted not merely as Jews, nor merely as women, but through a fusion of both identities in ways that made their bodies uniquely vulnerable to sexual humiliation, invasive medical procedures, reproductive violence, and gendered degradation. Banwell argues that female prisoners were subjected to a specific ideological construction that turned their reproductive and sexualised bodies into sites of genocidal invasion (Banwell 2015). By employing Banwell’s concept, Chapter One argues that the Lager was a space in which the Nazi racial project fused antisemitism with misogyny to produce uniquely gendered forms of humiliation. Women’s bodies were stripped, shaved, displayed, penetrated, examined, sterilised, and starved with the explicit intention of severing their connection to biological continuity and communal belonging. The chapter thus navigates the difficult tension between recognising the extremity of bodily violation and acknowledging women’s ongoing embodied subjectivity.

Chapter Two investigates the relational bonds formed among imprisoned women. These relationships, whether mutually caring friendships, symbiotic families, cultural or religious groups, became essential mechanisms of survival and dignity. However, as Primo Levi famously argued in his essay “The Grey Zone,” life in the camps cannot be understood through binaries of good and evil, victim and perpetrator, or moral and immoral (Levi 1988, 36). Instead, the Lager produced situations in which survival often required acts that fall into an ethically ambiguous grey zone, where categories of culpability, virtue, and responsibility become profoundly blurred. Applying Levi’s concept to women’s relational practices allows Chapter Two to approach female friendship and mutual aid without romanticising them as inherently nurturing or ethically pure, as well as addressing how

jealousy, competition for scarce resources, privilege, collaboration, or morally fraught interpersonal strain emerged within the female social world of the camps. By integrating Levi's *Grey Zone*, the chapter highlights that women's relationships were shaped by extreme coercion and shifting power dynamics, yet they nonetheless served as vital sources of resilience, identity, and ethical responsibility. The chapter argues that relationality under genocide reveals a complex female agency; one that encompasses acts of solidarity, creativity, and courage alongside choices shaped by fear, hunger, and coercion.

Chapter Three explores maternal identity as one particular site where embodiment and relationality intensely converge. In the Holocaust context, motherhood operated across biological, symbolic, and remembered dimensions, shaping how women attached meaning to their survival and how they cared for others under impossible conditions. This chapter draws on Carmelle Stephens's analysis of the maternal trope in Holocaust memory, which argues that post-war representations of the mother often rely on sentimental or idealised portrayals that obscure the lived complexities of maternal experience in the camps (2018; 2020). Stephens challenges the notion of the "heroic mother," illustrating instead how maternal identities were fractured, fraught, and shaped by both deep love and deep despair. Chapter Three extends this argument by analysing not only biological mothers but also symbolic or remembered mother-child relationships, demonstrating that maternal identity was transformed by the extremity of genocide. Additionally, the chapter addresses parentification, in which children were forced to assume adult responsibilities for their survival and sometimes for the survival of their parents, complicating normative assumptions about maternal authority and protection. By drawing on both Banwell and Levi, the final chapter argues that maternal identity resides at the intersection of gendered embodiment and ethical relationality, encapsulating the intense moral pressures that defined the female experience in the camps.

Taken together, these three chapters reveal how women's bodies, relationships, and maternal identities were targeted, reshaped, and weaponised by the Nazi system, but also how these same dimensions became sources of fragile, contingent forms of agency. **While instances of agency may at times be described as resistance, we must take caution as doing so can risk oversimplifying the deeply constrained nature of women's choices.** Langer's "choiceless choices" framework warns against interpreting actions taken under coercion as freely chosen moral stances. This thesis therefore adopts a more cautious vocabulary, speaking of women's agency as emergent, constrained, and often morally ambiguous. Such agency does not imply empowerment in a celebratory sense but indicates the persistence of human subjectivity even in contexts explicitly designed to annihilate it. Women's attempts to preserve dignity, care for others, protect their children, or maintain cultural practices must be understood within the structural coercion of the Lager, where every decision was shaped by hunger, terror, and the constant threat of death.

Methodologically, this thesis approaches survivor testimony as a complex, layered form of knowledge shaped by trauma, retrospective interpretation, and cultural pressures. Testimonies rarely present a linear or comprehensive account of experience; they contain silences, ruptures, hesitations, and omissions. These gaps are particularly visible in narratives of sexual violence, which many women chose not to disclose publicly due to shame, stigma, or fear of judgement within post-war communities. In many cases, as is the case for our chosen memoirs, such experiences are talked about covertly and impersonally, as though watched from afar or heard about from the women around them. Feminist scholars have emphasised that such silences must not be read as absence of experience but as indicators of the pressures shaping what can be spoken and what remains unspoken.

Furthermore, memories of relational or maternal tensions may be softened or omitted, and moments of moral ambiguity may be reframed through later ethical expectations. This thesis acknowledges that testimony is always situated and shaped by factors of transience: the time of the event, the time of narration, and the time of reception. Gender operated not

as a biological destiny but as a historically contingent framework that shaped expectations, vulnerabilities, and possibilities. The Lager did not erase gender; rather, it intensified gendered forms of violence while simultaneously producing new gendered behaviours and identities that emerged under coercion. Our responsibility lies in allowing these women to speak for themselves, and- more importantly- in conscious efforts to listen.

Chapter One- Embodiment: The Female Body as Narrator of the Holocaust

'There is No Memory Without Body Memory'

“Can one imagine the Holocaust *without* thinking about bodies?” Christopher E. Forth asks of his readers in a chapter about the relationship between the body and the Holocaust. He continues, “The graphic images of the slaughter are now etched in Western consciousness like the tattoos imprinted on the arms of inmates” (166). Much research has been dedicated to the spatial geography of the Holocaust- the 40,000 camps, the ghettos, the forests and the ravines; marked maps across Europe detailing journeys and deportations. Notably, fewer studies exist regarding the body as a site of violence, specifically, the body as a bearer of that violence and therefore as a significant narrator of the Holocaust. Dita Federman, Tova Band-Winterstein and Galit Sterenfeld, in a 2016 study, highlighted the body’s “crucial voice” in memory reconstruction (26). Looking at the relationship between body movement and oral retellings of Holocaust experiences, they found that “the survivor’s body, which houses past events, sensations, and emotions, allows the survivor to reexperience the self as an active participant in the creation of the survivor’s own story” (25). Similarly, Forth asserts “the wounding implied in trauma is not thought to be of a purely mental nature. Rather psychologists commonly note how often the initial traumatic

experience is displaced into physical symptoms, which has led to claims that in trauma it is the body that ‘remembers’ or ‘bears the burden’” (172). The body acts as “the bearer of actual violence or a site of emotional expression;” it houses or carries the events inflicted upon the individual (173). The importance of the somatic memory should not be understated: “there is no memory without body memory” (Casey, 172). The body hosts and tells its history and therefore must be considered in the uncovering of Holocaust testimony. The idea of the body bearing the burden of trauma is present in our memoirs, not just through the degradation of physical health but also through the transformation of trauma into somatic phenomenon. For Elli in particular, distress time and again manifests itself in the form of physical symptoms. Elli revisits the stomach pain and nausea she experiences as a result of the emotional distress she is in; at times her stomach lurching, her anxiety resulting in vomit bubbling up her throat **(86;110)**.

The body formed a key element of Nazi ideology from the early 1930s (Plunka, 34). Placing emphasis on the strong, ‘Aryan’ form and comparing it with the alleged weakness of Jewish citizens, the Nazis rejected a culture of intellectualism,² placing pressure on German women to procreate, produce children for the Reich, banning abortions and providing awards for the women who did bear children. Meanwhile, they outlawed marriage and sexual relationships between Jews and non-Jews, employing a system of forced sterilisation on ‘unworthy’ individuals and doing little to prevent abortions amongst the ‘undesirable’ population. The body formed a large section of the Nazi ethos, to the extent that Jews were advertised in their propaganda as an illness or disease to be eliminated in order to protect the body of the ‘master race’; or the ‘body politic.’ (Forth, 168). In the Lager itself, physicality played a significant role: firstly, in the sense that prisoners would be stripped of their possessions, their clothing and their shoes, their names

² Josef Goebbels, Reich Minister for Propaganda stated: “when I hear the word ‘culture,’ I reach for my gun”, quoted in Plunka, 34.

and family members. They were shaved and starved, often tattooed with numbers and clothed identically to one another. This deprivation of home, familiarity, of purpose, individuality and culture left only “the body to suffer” (Plunka, 35).

Further, the deprivation inflicted upon prisoners as well as various beatings, humiliations and impossible labour, made for an environment of extremity where survival became contingent on bodily strength, or at the very least an appearance of health. Isabella portrays this, intimating an instance where her and her sisters must try to save her deteriorating sister from selection: “Suddenly, frantically, we try to make Rachel healthier looking, older looking... One of us has a piece of cloth. We place it on [her] head as a kerchief. We make her stand on tiptoes... We pinch her face to an unnatural redness...” (55;56). The primary aim of selection in the Lager is to seek out the Musulmans: “those who are totally emaciated, those who have no possibility of being chosen for work transport... for the oven” (55). While survival was chance, efforts to survive were intentional. For Gisella the imperative to survive seemed universal: “Who can ever forget those thousands of women who rushed around madly trying to find a loose brick, to break it into pieces and rub the red dust into their cheeks so as to seem strong and healthy...?” (84). Terrence Des Pres argues that survival was more of a biological imperative than a cultural one (vii). This is echoed by Elli: “we [were] an army of impassive bodies animated by the hysterics of survival” (81). Gene A. Plunka asserts that “bodily decay is... another part of the genocide process specifically designed as one more form of mass execution” (42). This seemingly stems from Terrence de Pres’s notion of excremental assault; the Nazis’ deprivation of even the dignity to relieve oneself; another reduction to bodily function and close to no access to the means of practising hygiene, in an attempt to ‘humiliate’ and ‘debase’ prisoners further (de Pres, 57). Still, many made effort to resist this decay, asserting their relationship with their physical body as their only possession **and a site of expression for human identity and dignity**. For Primo Levi, self-grooming and bodily maintenance with limited access to

water and under little self-agency became a routine, a lifeline- performed “so as not to begin to die” (1987, 45).

Indeed, for our authors, the physical plays a significant role and is interwoven throughout each account- each strikes a balance between the physical and the psychological, producing a dense tapestry of her Lager experience. Each details the enforced reduction to her physical being: Dita describes herself in Bergen-Belsen, just before liberation, as existing “on a biological level only, devoid of humanity.” Similarly, while in the ‘hospital at Birnbaumel, Isabella strikingly refers to herself as “the bone” (72); she and her anatomy become one two-dimensional thing, devoid of personalisation. This is deepened by her continued reference of prisoners as “fodder” for the crematoria- physical property of the gas chambers, food for the fires in such a way as straw is to cattle. Visual, anatomical descriptions of their bodies become integral to the depiction of our authors’ deterioration, particularly in illustrations of emaciation and starvation. Dita writes of herself: “... the layers of fat go and when all of it is absorbed, the roundness of the belly disappears until it caves in and looks like a bowl with the hipbones for handles. After that the flesh itself starts vanishing, from the cheeks, from the arms, and from the legs. When I stood with my feet together I could insert my open palm horizontally between my thighs” (201).

Physicality must form part of Holocaust testimony- it is entrenched in the event itself. **We must acknowledge the ethical responsibility entailed in approaching such material. To analyse violence enacted upon women’s bodies risks rendering those bodies once again objects of scrutiny. To write about humiliation risks reinscribing the shame that the perpetrators sought to impose. Yet to remain silent would be to replicate the erasures embedded in both Nazi ideology and later historical narratives which circumscribe female experiences to that of their male counterparts; the conditions which set forth the emergence of the Holocaust through a gendered lens. The chapter thus strives for a scholarly approach that neither sensationalises nor sanitises, that**

bears witness without appropriating suffering, and that foregrounds women's voices and testimonies as central to understanding the gendered dimensions of genocide.

Embodying the Holocaust as Women: "Woman-as-Jew"

Today, while still arguably underacknowledged, scholars and organisations across the world seem to be beginning to accept that a key aspect of physical and emotional female experiences during conflict is the sexual victimisation of women. Further, sexual violence during times of conflict is pre-empted by existing gender power imbalances. For the UN project the 'Integrated Regional Information Networks' (the IRIN): "the extreme violence that women suffer during conflict does not arise solely out of the conditions of war; it is directly related to the violence that exists in women's lives during peacetime. Throughout the world, women experience violence because they are women... They are subjected to gender-based persecution, discrimination and oppression, including sexual violence and slavery" (11).³ This holds true for scholar Nicole Ephgrave, who argues "the bodies of women were a particular site of Nazi violence" (17), particularly through targeting of their bodily integrity (16). As Ephgrave also points out, sexual violence during the Holocaust is under researched, as most survivors will only suggest its occurrence, or discuss it "in euphemistic terms" (19). Jessie Williams credits the lack of representation of sexual violence with "the general taboo that exists around the topic of rape and sexual abuse during the Holocaust" (82). Stigma surrounding sexual violence, in collaboration with a sense of guilt or shame arising from mentions of sexuality and survival has created a silence which has long prevented women from sharing their experiences. What Williams credits most for the silence, however, is the fact that stories of sexual violence died with many victims of the Holocaust, rendering them inaccessible (83).

³ Note that the IRIN is now known as 'The New Humanitarian.'

Stacy Banwell's "woman-as-Jew" framework emerges most clearly in her article, *Rassenschande, Genocide and the Reproductive Jewish Body: Examining the Use of Rape and Sexualized Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (2015). Banwell argues that Jewish women during the Holocaust were victims not only because they were Jews (race) but also because they were women with reproductive capacity (gender); a dual status that made their bodies especially vulnerable to genocidal violence. Specifically, Banwell critiques the traditional "dehumanisation" thesis, which suggests that sexual violence was simply a consequence of general hatred and devaluation: instead, she claims that rape, forced sterilisation, forced abortions, and other forms of sexualized violence were part of a deliberate strategy aimed at destroying the reproductive potential of Jewish women (217;218). The core idea of "woman-as-Jew" is that during the Holocaust, women's bodies became symbolic sites of racial, ethnic and religious identity reproduction. As such, violence against those bodies functions as violence against the group as a whole (210;214). Banwell draws on the broader notion sometimes called "woman-as-nation" (i.e., when women's bodies represent a community's continuity) and adapts it to the Holocaust context: in her view, Jewish women were treated as "reproductive repositories" whose sexual and reproductive destruction was meant to contribute to the annihilation of the Jewish people. By foregrounding this intersection of gender and race, Banwell's approach offers a more nuanced understanding of Holocaust-era sexual violence; one that acknowledges women's unique vulnerability, not as collateral or peripheral, but as centrally targeted because of their potential to bear future Jewish generations.

The Holocaust experiences of men and women do possess shared traits: that of resistance, deprivation, pain, starvation, deportation, separation from families, forced labour, and mass murder. However, there exists for women a divergence from universal Lager experiences; one where their sexuality was integral to Nazi rationale for their murder and degradation,

debasement and humiliation (Young, 1780). Goldenberg refers to this when she describes life in the Lager for women as “different horrors” in the “same hell” (1996, 79). Banwell illustrates the divergence of women’s Holocaust experiences from those they share with their male counterparts: “Women were vulnerable to abuse in a number of ways: rape, forced abortion, forced sterilisation, sexual abuse, pregnancy, childbirth, and the killing of their newborns” (211). Such abuses represent women’s experiences of sexualised violence experiences of women during the Holocaust that males typically do not share.

But what do we mean when we discuss ‘sexualised violence’ in the context of the Holocaust? Like Banwell, I rely upon Brigitte Halbmayr’s notion of sexualised violence:

a show of power on the part of the perpetrator... includ[ing] many forms of violence with sexual connotations, including humiliation, intimidation, and destruction. From this we can derive that violent acts can be understood as sexualized if they are directed at the most intimate part of a person and, as such, against that person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual integrity (30).

As such, I wish to follow Banwell’s concept of sexualised violence as including “rape, forced abortion, forced sterilisation and other bodily sex-based violations that can be viewed as emotional expressions of violence (for example, public nakedness and the shaving of hair from intimate parts of the body (2015, 209).” Integral to this chapter are depictions of wider violence, not just including physical injury, but also the infliction of a system which victimises an opposed people within their person. As such, I seek to venture that situations of sexual assault or victimisation through sexualisation can be covert, hidden amongst tales of acute violence, within the layman’s realm of extremity we can expect when engaging with Holocaust testimony- that is, instances of abuse, starvation, forced labour, deportation, humiliation, and death. With this in mind, this chapter seeks to

expose the sexualised violence experienced by Jewish women in the Lager, particularly that of infringements upon women's bodily integrity, modesty and conventions of femininity, sexual violence including physical assaults and sexual exchange, and reproductive violence, including abortions, sterilisation and contraventions of intimate bodily events such as menstruation. Each seeks to address the Nazis' biological and social perception of the Jewish woman as the bearer of the next generation of Jews and its manifestation into targeted, deeply patriarchal, genocidal violence.

Forced Nudity and Head Shaving

For Joan Ringelheim, a common feature in female Holocaust testimonies is the “humiliating feelings and experiences surrounding [their] entrance to the camp” (1984b, 743;744). Indeed, each author portrays her arrival into the Lager with precise detail, representing a step towards what they understand to be their destruction: the Final Solution. Each woman attempts to depict the sheer chaos and terror of arrival at the camps. Not only is arrival an extremely visceral experience where a lot is happening emotionally for the authors, much is happening to them physically. Ordered to undress in a crowded room, women found themselves in a completely alien landscape with which there was nothing they could relate from their prior lives, with only one possession left- their bodies. In understanding the space they had entered as one that was expressly violent and inherently patriarchal, we are able to understand how women experienced this process differently from men, despite going through the same procedural stages of entry to the Lager (Kippen, 2003). Goldenberg calls the concentration camp “an ultimate expression of the extreme masculinity and misogyny that undergirded Nazi ideology” (1998, 163). The Lager itself was not a space of these women's creation and was often inhabited disproportionately by male guards. Women's personal ‘space’ of the body was engulfed by the public ‘space’ during these procedural stages, opening them up to new vulnerabilities.

Women were forced to surrender what was left of their bodily autonomy which marked a critical juncture for their identities (Szabó, 422). Each survivor details a drastic physical change as she moves through the Lager. For Belle Marie Joseph, in consideration of the ‘grotesque body’ in Holocaust poetry, “all in all, human transformation was so radical as to appear a sort of metamorphosis” (Joseph, 78). In particular, feelings of dehumanisation and debasement arrive shortly following entrance to what Gisella sardonically refers to as ‘the Beauty Parlour:’ the series of rooms in which women were shaved, disinfected and issued uniforms before entrance to the Lager (31).

A significant assault on women’s bodies upon arrival in the Lager was the forced nudity of prisoners. Ordered to undress upon arrival, women were shorn and ‘disinfected’ - either being sprayed with harsh torrents of water or coated with a caustic substance- before being issued camp garb. Many women-survivors found their diverse social identities meant for increased discomfort and distress. In particular, Elli finds herself in the throes of puberty upon arrival at Auschwitz, a source of great embarrassment and fear when she is ordered to strip, lest she is shot: “The room is swarming with SS men... I hesitate before removing my bra. My breasts are two growing buds, taut and sensitive.” Adamant she “can’t have anyone see” her developing body, she decides not to remove her bra: “Just then a shot rings out... I quickly take my bra off” (77). This scenario highlights the duress women are under at the hands of their oppressors. Any hesitancy about nudity, particularly in front of men, must be quickly be abandoned for fear of violence. Even still, Elli’s depiction serves as a stark reminder of her adolescence in the moment of her imprisonment. The commonplace bodily awkwardness of puberty reminds us of her girlhood, before it is abruptly invaded by the unfamiliarity of SS violence. The stark assault of her body represents the beginning of a prolonged intrusion of her youth. It is also prudent to address the attack on relational and familial identities that forced nudity imposed. Elli is unable to look anywhere apart from

directly forward while removing her clothes, hoping that by doing this nobody will see her (77). Not only is she embarrassed by the presence of SS men, she is self-conscious amongst her fellow women. She looks to her mother for permission to undress, yet another reminder of her childhood vulnerability. During this scene, Elli sees her mother naked for the first time, an incident which reflects Zoë Waxman's description of moments of "irrevocable breach[es] of familial propriety" (87). Elli is struck with empathy for her mother, stating "how awful it must be for her" (78). Her empathy serves as a reminder that this moment is not only a breach of body for the women undressing, but also a breach of parent-child boundaries, a forced departure into the taboo and an undermining of precious conventions of decency. This exposure of women's bodies, in conjunction with the power imbalances between them and the SS guards watching them highlights an impossibility of consent, presenting a new level of suffering for these women. For Gisella, the process of being forced to undress represents a departure from the dignity of social conventions surrounding nudity of the past: "in a few short minutes, modesty, which had been drilled into us by generations of parents and educators, became a thing of the past" (31). Elli personifies this childhood of modesty: "Get undressed, here? In front of the men? No one moves" (77).

The forced hair removal of prisoners dates to the Nazis' earliest establishment of concentration camps (Pergament, 48). Officially done for reasons of 'hygiene' (Czarnecka, 149; 152), hair removal also served as punishment for prisoner 'infarctions' (Piątkowska, 52).⁴ In reality hygiene had limited bearing on the choice to shave inmates; evidenced by the arbitrary enforcement of head shaving (some privileged prisoners were allowed to keep their hair intact, including Dita)⁵ and the fact it was at times used as a punishment. Importantly, head shaving was used to allow prisoners to be identified, as a distinguishing

⁴ For example, Dita Kraus recalls a girl in her barrack being shaved as a punishment for attempting to escape (178).

⁵ This privilege was, however, mostly limited to non-Jewish prisoners.

feature between Jews and other ‘unworthy’ individuals, and so-called ‘Aryan’ prisoners and control inmate activities (Pergament 48, Czarnecka 162). Further, head-hair posed an economic gain, or a contribution to the Nazi war effort, being collected to be used by way of textiles: in July 1943 the Main Economic and Administrative Office of the Reich confirmed the collection of 3,000 kg of women’s hair from the Auschwitz and Majdanek camps (Pergament, 49). According to Gisella, hair was removed and collected “to be shipped to Germany for use in important war industries” (32). The state’s forcible removal hair represented the economic exploitation of these women, and an effort to utilise their physical bodies in the process of elimination; a ‘harvest’ of their remains, “to drive Germany’s industrial machine” (Pargament, 49, Ryback, 68).

The *reality* behind the reasoning for hair removal, and perhaps the most keenly felt amongst women survivors was indeed “to humiliate the internees yet again all the more severe as it was because associated with the intimate aspect of corporeality, and, at the same time, stigmatising in a striking way” (Czarnecka 150). This is very clear to Gisella, who admittedly is older than her survivor author counterparts:

Its purpose was to deprive its unwilling clients of even their last remnants of beauty, freshness, and human appearance. It was one of the typical Nazi jokes, a creation of their devilish imagination, which served to humiliate their victims and make their short remaining lifespan all the more horrible and distressing (31).

Barbara Czarnecka argues that “for females, experiences surrounding forced hair removal are deeper, more intense, and acute. They remain just on the borderline of intimacy, or actually within that area. Each of them is associated with a different image of the camp, and a different story” (146). For Elli: “We are lined up and several husky girls in grey cloaks begin shaving our hair- on our heads, under the arms, and on the pubic area. My

long, thick braids remain braided and while the shaving machine shears my scalp, the hair remains hanging, tugging at the roots. The pain of the heavy braid tugging mercilessly at the yet unshaven roots brings tears to my eyes... as my blonde tresses lie in a large heap on the ground, the indifferent hair butcher remarks: 'A heap of gold.'" (78). The process presents as abrupt and violent, and her use of the word 'butcher' likens the process to slaughter. The violence of the operation is echoed by Isabella: "We are being shoved, pushed, lined up. Some girls are working away in a fury. Only the work is unbelievable. We have never seen anything like it before. They are shaving the heads of the new arrivals. And their pubic hair. And their underarms. The furious speed is unbelievable..." (21). Her reference to the fury of the procedure depicts it as violent; abrasive. Her series of short sentences explaining the parts of the body being shaved, her repeated use of 'and' reflects the disbelief at what is occurring, as well as the invasiveness of hair removal, as well as the apparent limitlessness and intensity of the Nazi's bodily invasion. Indeed, it is important to note that while Isabella and Elli do not elaborate on the shaving of the body which occurred during admission to the Lager, including the pubic region, they are the only two of our authors to make reference to this incredibly invasive phase of the shaving procedure. Czarnecka identifies this as common amongst survivor authors:

Recalling that stage of the admission procedure which was associated with hair most often used the generalising term of *shaving*, they referred to *removal of hair*, or shaving only the head. That was probably a result of their embarrassment, or an attempt to avoid articulating directly that what was also shaved and disinfected were armpits, mons pubis, and the crotch. Rarely can one find accounts of the technical side of the procedure, while usually a woman to be shaved had to stand naked with her legs spread apart on two stools in front of a barber or a hairdresser (151).

Embarrassment or shame regarding attacks on the perceived ‘sexuality’ of prisoners have been identified as a barrier to women sharing such memories, as above (**Czarnecka, 151, Williams, 99**). The transformative power of the shearing of hair constitutes a peak moment in which women in particular are robbed of any individuality, or any notion of a past life. Gisella recounts: “...when we looked up again we hardly knew one another... our heads had acquired a nightmarish appearance, cropped close by unskilled hands, so horrible to look at, that we did not know whether to laugh or to cry” (32). For Elli, the loss of hair presents a physical reduction in size for the group of women she is amongst: “Individuals become a mass of bodies... In a matter of minutes even the physical aspect of our numbers seems reduced- there is less of a substance to our dimensions” (78). Any concept of individuality or distinction was removed at the moment of shaving.

“Appropriate Femininity”, Modesty and the Jewish Female Body

Nicole Ephgrave contends “ideas of what constitutes “appropriate femininity,” including expectations of modesty and beauty, run throughout women’s testimonies and... attest to the fact that women experienced methods of dehumanization, including public nudity and head shaving, very differently from men,” and it is in fact the Nazi exploitation of these social conventions which set the framework for gender-specific degradation (20;21).

Indeed, notions of feminine identity and hair often appear in women-survivor testimonies as parallel with one another; Gisella, referring to women’s hair as “the crown of our female beauty” (32), illustrates the forced removal of hair as a removal of distinguishing female pride. Following on from the notions of physical transformation above, for Elli, “the haircut [had] a startling effect...” (78). Our authors relate the loss of personhood for women through the forced removal of hair. Isabella refers to her now shaved sister as “that shaved thing” and as a “naked-headed monster” (31;32). Similarly, Gisella states, “Sisters, friends did not recognise each other any longer, and the prettiest girls and most beautiful women looked like a bunch of grisly monsters, ridiculous, and sub-human” (33). The

impact of the forced removal of hair is so drastic as to allow these women to view themselves as their oppressors do: unhuman.

Sociologically, the significance of hair cannot be understated. Often seen as a symbol of fertility or sexuality, hair is particularly significant for women, in whom it is more common to possess longer tresses. One cannot ignore the aesthetic nature of hair, particularly in terms of performing gender. For Pergament, “Inferences about a person’s morality, sexual orientation, political persuasion, religious sentiments and, in some cultures, socio-economic status can sometimes be surmised by seeing a particular hairstyle” (44). As such, the loss of hair may represent a loss of these facets of humanity. This is reflected in Gisella’s lamentation, upon being shaved, of the actual impact of hair on a person’s self-identity: “We [lost] our identity, our individuality which made us different from the other women around us, and our pride which, as we learned, gets most of its support from outer appearance” (31). Startling for these women, too, is the loss of individual self-worth caused by the shaving: Elli notes, “[We] become a monolithic mass. Inconsequential” (78).

The forced removal of hair and its impact on female prisoners in Lager testimony highlight a blurring in boundaries between male and female gender performance (160). For Elli, her thick, blonde hair is her pinnacle physical attribute. Without it, her mother comments she bears resemblance to her brother. Later, upon transport from Auschwitz to a work camp, herself and her peers are mistaken for men. Indeed, the loss of hair, combined with a change in physique due to emaciation creates a physical appearance which results in a masculinisation of female prisoners, or, at the very least, imposes upon them an external androgyny which actively supersedes any social conventions of performative femininity from before the war. Women lost their quintessentially feminine attributes- their hair, their breast tissue, their hips. Any conventions as to what women should look like were interrupted and destroyed. Isabella highlights this, stating of her and her fellow prisoners:

“we look like neither boys nor girls.” Elli laments, “We were all like men. Flat.” (105).

Further, some accounts go as far to remove any personification from themselves and their peers following hair-shaving, likening them to ‘monsters;’ creatures from another realm, abstract and unhuman. This experience evoked deep trauma-induced reactions, including laughter, hysteria and horror (**Bitton-Jackson, 81, Perl, 33**).

Hair poses a religious significance too, often steeped in notions of modesty and chastity. For religious women, the action of having their hair exposed in front of strangers, often male or female prisoner counterparts and male and female members of the SS, reflected a breach of *tziniyoot* (modesty). According to the Talmudic statement Berakhot 24a, a woman’s hair is a sexual enticement. Most ultra-orthodox women wear their hair long and cover it with wigs, scarves etc. Some members of Hasidic courts closely crop their hair after marriage and hide the remnants under wigs or *shternichel*. Elli and her mother are observant orthodox Jews; Elli’s mother covers her hair in her day-to-day life to the extent that her mother’s shaven head does not shock her. It follows that the exposure of women’s hair, particularly where religious, and the subsequent un-ceremonial removal of that hair formed a unique instance of gendered violence or victimisation: one which disrupted socially and religiously imposed conventions of modesty and destroyed feelings of self-worth and purity. This, paired with enforced nudity in direct contrast with the social and religious conventions of their upbringing constituted a “physical and spiritual nakedness” (Milton 1984a, 24).

Ultimately, it is evident that for Jewish women, the forced hair removal and forced nudity of the admission process to the Lager is representative of a wider experience of bodily invasion, a loss of autonomy, self-worth and femininity (particularly imposed upon them during peace time), as well as an infringement on their modesty, whether this is religiously instilled within them or promoted by social ideals of propriety for women.

Covert Sexualised Violence

Sexual violence may not always be explored overtly- that is, portrayed as an obvious violation of personal intimacy. It may be covertly present, encased in texts exploring universal suffering. Enclosed within 'larger' moments, that is, moments of seemingly more importance, readers can miss the sexualised undertones of these women's interactions with the Lager and its actors, and therefore a key facet of gender-specific Holocaust trauma. An example of this lies with Elli's description of selection at the hands of infamous Dr Mengele upon arriving at Auschwitz: "'Goldenes Haar!' he exclaims as he takes one of my long braids into his hand." He asks her age and she answers honestly- thirteen: "you are tall for your age... You go with your mother... Go, and remember, from now on you are sixteen" (75). Elli credits her hair, which is shortly after forcibly shaved from her head for her selection to be sent to the 'life' side (78). This is not the only time Mengele is depicted as selecting women and girls to live for physical beauty: Gisella Perl relates the story of Ibi Hillman, whose "unusual beauty... caught Dr Mengele's fancy... he ordered her to undress completely, feasted his eyes on her perfect body as yet unmarked by Auschwitz..." (88). Stepping off the train, Isabella and her sister are addressed by a male prisoner, "what are you looking for, pretty girls?" (26). Implicit in such scenes are a sexual sadism, a singling out of these women, who in turn are victimised or viewed for their physical traits, especially those considered by the men in power to be attractive. Elli is saved for her hair, Ibi is forced to undress and Isabella and her sisters are taunted as a result of their youthful beauty. **These women are singled out for their attractiveness.** This is particularly troubling when regarding the Nazis' consistent sexualisation of Jewish women, either through the imposition of biological reproductive roles or through dehumanisation: Elli recalls herself and her fellow prisoners being referred to as "idiotic whores" (78). Gisella proclaims to her readers the 'perversion' of the SS men, as if there is a sexual aspect to

their enjoyment of the suffering they were unleashing on the women (31, 32). Evident, between these examples, is the sexualisation, objectification and essentialism of the Nazi regime, a reduction of Jewish women and girls to their sexuality, **as well as the inherent exacerbation of patriarchy within the Lager environment**. Such instances contribute to the illustration of a fascist culture in which sexual violence is normalised through the dehumanisation of women, and utilised in order to exert a genocidal regime.

Overt Sexual(ised) Violence

Gisella Perl makes note of the various instances where she is witness to the sexual assault of her peers. Before the Lager, she is witness to a disturbing display of cavity searches amongst women in her ghetto, where authorities would penetrate victims vaginally with their hands: “I had to stand by and watch while they seized one woman after another and with dirty fingers searched the depth of her body for treasures” (15). Upon arrival, she chronicles the humiliation and physical assault induced in the experience of forced nudity: “We were undressed there before the laughing SS guards who showed their appreciation for some of the beautiful bodies by slashing them with whips” (23). Later, upon the liquidation of Camp C, where she had been carrying her work out as a doctor for her fellow prisoners, she relates that “[the SS] ordered the two to three thousand women to undress. Completely naked, these unhappy creatures were forced to run, between two rows of S.S men who whipped them just for the fun of it” (83). Each scenario, of course, stands as a direct intervention of bodily autonomy, integrity and intimacy and the fear endured by these women a direct bypassing of consent. Further, she describes the women tearing bits of material off their shirts as toilet paper, before being denounced to the SS: “We had to lift our skirts and hold them up while laughing SS men walked through our lines whipping our naked bodies and selecting many among us to die in the flames... for having ‘damaged camp property’” (26). **The Nazis facilitate an environment in which women are forced to take desperate measures in tearing their minimal, insufficient clothing,⁶ in turn, their punishment is state-sanctioned nude exposure, sexual humiliation, assault, and even death.**

⁶ Implicit here once again is de Pres’s Excremental Assault; a deprivation resulting in prisoners’ degradation to drastic, unsanitary and ultimately dangerous measures.

Sexual assault and rape were not just committed by the German SS and their collaborators- research shows that civilians and fellow prisoners also took part in the sexual victimisation of women and girls (Banwell 2015, 209). Gisella is physically assaulted and propositioned by a fellow male inmate, a Pole, upon asking to swap her ration of bread for a piece of string to allow her to walk in her shoes which are too big for her: “‘First I want you... you...’ his hand, filthy with the excrement he was working in, reached out for my womanhood, rudely, insistently.” She runs away, but for Gisella this is representative of a desperate fall to depravity and degradation (42). Gisella’s assault raises a complex aspect of life in the Lager; that of sexual bartering. While not seeking to exchange her ‘womanhood’ for the string that she needed, she writes of witnessing male and female prisoners entering into such exchanges, particularly in the camp latrines: “The latrine also served as a ‘love-nest.’ It was here that male and female prisoners met for a furtive moment of joyless sexual intercourse in which the body was used as a commodity with which to pay for the badly needed items the men were able to steal from the warehouses” (55). The complexity of this area arises due to the ‘murky’ nature of consent in the Lager space (Williams, 82), and whether women were able to consent due to a power imbalance between the individual purchasing sex through the promise of life-saving essentials and the person providing that service (typically female). This is particularly significant when considering that sex obtained through coercion counts as rape. Indeed, as contended by Phyllis Lassner and Danny Cohen, “sex within the tight bounds of prisoner society became an essential element of the prisoners’ economy while revealing that male prisoners with access to food and other necessities could exercise a power that mirrored gendered power relations in ordinary society” (5). The sexualisation of women generally in the patriarchal society inherited and exacerbated by the Nazis, must therefore play a role: after all, “[The men] chose their women amongst the youngest, the prettiest, the least emaciated prisoners, and in a few seconds the deal was closed” (56). The Nazis were aware of, and were entertained, at the idea of these practices. Gisella explains, “they even knew who was

whose 'kochana' (lover) and were much amused by it all" (56). Even where not directly involved in such exchanges, the Nazis remained complicit.

The propensity for sexual barter to constitute rape- that is, sexual intercourse without any full consent between two equal parties- is perhaps best illustrated by Dita Kraus. Dita fears she will have to reward her 'favour' as a young woman to a Polish man who gifts her an egg, highlighting an awareness of this practice, as well as a fear of it as a means of disrupting her bodily integrity. The act of the gift-giving is an uplifting tale of kindness from one human to another- for Dita it is clouded by a very tangible fear of sexual violence. This fear is echoed by Goldenberg in her statement that "women were terrorised by rumours or threats of rape" (1998, 336). In fact, some researchers have gone so far as to describe the exchange of sex for survival as "entitlement rape" (Fogelman, 20). At times, however, Gisella presents sexual exchange as a choice by women, even threatening to withhold treatment if "they didn't stop prostitution" (56). Lassner and Cohen view an indirect power in sexual exchanges: "as Gisella also recounts, even the briefest sexual encounter in unimaginably filthy conditions could remind women that their bodies could produce twinges of pleasure, that perhaps this meant that as a whole, they were still alive" (5). As time goes on, Gisella appears to become aware of the indirect agency sexual bartering offered women in their survival: "I saw that the pieces of bread saved lives... when I met a young girl whom a pair of shoes, earned in a week of prostitution, saved from being thrown into the crematory, I began to understand- and, to forgive" (56).

Interpretations of sexualised violence, especially those of rape and assault are varied. For example, Monika Flaschka cites rape as a feminising event for many women in the Lager. Citing scholar Sharon Marcus (391), Flaschka endorses a line of questioning when approaching survivors who experienced sexualised violence which seeks to investigate whether rape served as a reminder of their femininity (78). Banwell uses this to promote

sexualised violence against women as a result of their essentialisation, rather than their dehumanisation: “When women entered the camps, their heads were shaven, they were given formless clothing and starvation meant loss of body weight especially from their breasts and hips: their quintessentially feminine attributes were diminished. Perhaps the rape of these women served, paradoxically, to reinforce their gender identity that had hitherto been challenged by the camp environment” (2015, 221). Sensitivity around this subject is required. Instead of asking if rape served as a reminder of their femininity, it is worth addressing the conditions created by the Nazis in which such an admission can be made. I do not seek to present essentialist claims regarding the sexuality of our authors or their peers. The horrors of the Lager constitute an event in history beyond human conceptualisation. As such, I cannot impose experiences of rape upon women, or absolve them of such experiences. **What I do seek to highlight is these experiences as they are told by their survivors, and the complexity of the physical female experience within the Lager they reveal, with the notion that each woman will form her own relationship with the sexualised incidents of her Lager experience.** Indeed, Gisella’s repugnance at the practice of sexual bartering, as well as the shame responsible for the silence surrounding sexualised Lager experiences highlights a relationship of these women with sexuality that is their own- in whichever form it presents itself- **informed by their own experiences.**

Reproductive Violence: Abortion, Sterilisation and Menstruation

The Nazis singled out and targeted Jewish women as the bearers of the next generation of Jews, and as above, sought the elimination of the biological basis of European Jewry. The Nazis had begun a legal campaign of forced sterilisation of ‘*Untermenschen*’- those they deemed ‘unworthy’- in 1933, through the passing of the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring. The following 1935 Lebensborn programme, which advocated ‘pureblood’ relations between Germans, allowed for the criminalisation of

interracial couplings, including those between Jew and non-Jews, creating a platform in which relationships, resulting pregnancies and ‘unworthy’ bodies could be scrutinised and invaded. The Lager, a final step in the Nazis’ Final Solution became the ultimate expression of Nazi lebensraum; where pregnant women and women clutching newborns and younger children were murdered on arrival. Important to note is the experimentation that took place in the Lager against non-consenting women and men. In particular, Block 10 in Auschwitz became infamous for the experiments on women’s reproductive organs and forced sterilization that took place via radiation, injections, and surgery. The experiments conducted were poorly performed and often injured or killed the victims involved, who were rarely, if ever, told why they were experimented on. (Williams, 88) Gisella notes Ibi Hillman, who had been sent to Block 10. One of very few to return, she was in a massively depleted state of health, with yellow skin and “hands and feet swollen to tremendous proportions. (88). Ibi “had the marks of two major operations on her abdomen,” and no knowledge of what cruelty had been enacted on her.

Gisella discusses abortion within her capacity as doctor in Auschwitz on several occasions. From her memoir, we can divide it into two categories: clandestine abortions performed in secret **by fellow inmates acting as camp doctors such as Gisella** to save the life of the mother, or those ordered by the Nazis and forcibly performed (Williams, 89.) Gisella intimates being ordered, in her capacity as prisoner gynaecologist and doctor, to ‘interrupt’ a pregnancy and “conserve the embryo in formaline” (79). It stands to reason that, particularly in terms of Nazi-ordered abortions, such procedures constituted a distinctive aspect of sexualised violence; invasive, unmedicated, and performed under duress or with a lack of consent **from either ‘doctor’ or ‘patient’**. Gisella’s involvement in this may reflect Langer’s concept of ‘choiceless choice,’ discussed in the following chapter. **As such, she also becomes a secondary victim to this bodily invasion through being forced to enact violence on the Nazis’ behalf.** Gisella also recalls instances of secretly performing

procedures to induce labour in pregnant women, ‘interrupting’ pregnancies to save the lives of women who would have otherwise been killed “On dark nights when everyone else was sleeping in dark corners of the camp, in the toilet, on the floor, without a drop of water, I delivered their babies. First I took the nine-month pregnancies, I accelerated the birth by the rupture of membranes, and usually within one or two days spontaneous birth took place without further intervention. Or I produced dilation with my fingers, inverted the embryo and thus brought it to life. In the dark, always hurried, in the midst of filth and dirt. After the child had been delivered, I quickly bandaged the mother’s abdomen and sent her back to work... I delivered women pregnant in the eighth, seventh, sixth, fifth month, always in a hurry, always with my five fingers, in the dark, under terrible conditions” (57, 58). Regardless, such procedures were dangerous, committed without appropriate sanitation and instruments. Gisella recounts her prayers to God to help her save the mother under such conditions (58).

In the Lager, overt sterilisation procedures were being experimentally performed, as above, without consent or care towards the victims. Additionally, Gisella notes the presence of saltpetre in their food, intended to “destroy our sex organs” (49). In a similar vein, Elli depicts rumours of their food being laced with bromide, in an attempt to “[experiment] with mass sterilisation. (103).” She illustrates the panic of her married counterparts: “Married women keep wondering about the bromide in their food again and again. Will they bear children again? What will their husbands say when they find out? Perhaps less of the food will cause less of a damage. Some try to eat less and the conflict is painful. Rejection of a means of survival for the sake of dubious gain. (103, 104).” Implicit here are conventions of the female role as mother and caregiver within these women’s society. Within these women remains a plan for the future to exercise their societal role, for families with children, however ‘dubious,’ and the Nazi system places this at direct odds with survival. They must choose: women are deprived of their hopes of ‘maternal

vocation,' and therefore their femininity, but may be sustained to live another day. The other choice is death.

Often, but not always, menstruation acts as a sign of adolescent maturation, and can be a signifier of fertility, or the body's physical aptitude for pregnancy. Implicit, then, in discussions of sterilisation and fertility must be menstruation, particularly as a historical indicator of women's biological function. Limited mention perhaps as a result of menstruation ceasing in the camps. Dita remarks, "First, already back in the ghetto, we stopped menstruating, as if the body had decided that it was wasteful to lose blood when replenishment is uncertain. (200-201)" Indeed, amenorrhoea (the cessation of menstruation) occurs when the body is in the throes of malnourishment and starvation. For Gisella, however, the cessation of menstrual bleeding comes as a result of the emotional distress of extremity: "We did not menstruate, but that was more of a consequence of psychic trauma caused by the circumstances we lived in... (55)" Yet, those women who did arrive bleeding were forced to live without the means of practicing personal hygiene. Dita states "from now on we lived without a change of clothes, without a comb, toothbrush, towel, needle, scissors or knife, pencil, not to mention toilet paper or sanitary pads." (138) Isabella depicts the indignity of menstruation without access to period products: "I am menstruating. There is no way for me to change my napkin... no room to sit... no room to stand... no air to breathe. This is no way to die. It offends even death" (22). Under such circumstances, menstruation transforms from a marker of womanhood to a source of degradation, shame and ultimate debasement. Elli is able to describe the humiliation and fear she feels surrounding the prospect of menstruating in the Lager, through her depiction of watching another girl: "She is menstruating. Poor girl. Of course, we have no underwear... there are no pads... the blood simply flows. Down her legs. My God, but this is horrible... why doesn't she say something? Ask for a pad or something? But from whom? Whom can she say anything to? She might even be shot for reporting that she is

bleeding. Does menstruating constitute sabotage...? I would rather die than have blood flowing down my legs. In full view. Oh, my God! I would not bear it... (93, 94)” Her series of questions and her exclamations to God illustrate her panic, and perhaps act as a signifier of her adolescence. Further, her suggestion that menstruation may constitute sabotage highlights the Nazi’s weaponization of bodily exertions and arbitrary victimisation of women’s existence in their own bodies.

Langer’s Choiceless Choices

Lawrence Langer’s idea of “*choiceless choices*” is especially illuminating when considering the realities of sexual barter and abortion in the Lager, where women confronted situations so coercive that no option preserved dignity, autonomy, or safety. Sexual barter did not represent genuine consent but a survival tactic within a system that weaponized starvation and vulnerability. Similarly, the decisions surrounding abortion, whether forced by camp authorities or undertaken clandestinely to avoid bearing a child and condemning both mother and baby to death, exemplify moral terrains in which women had no meaningful alternatives; thus terrains in which Perl performed abortions to give mothers a chance of survival. Within the Nazi camps, pregnancy was often punishable, infants rarely survived, and women faced lethal repercussions for giving birth; under such conditions, the decision to terminate a pregnancy became another “choiceless choice,” shaped entirely by coercion and the machinery of genocide. Langer’s framework clarifies how both sexual barter and abortion were not expressions of agency in any conventional sense but **expressions of agency in the employment of** strategies for staying alive in an environment designed to eradicate the very possibility of free, human choice.

Concluding Remarks

Chapter One set out to interrogate the lived realities of Jewish women in the Lager by using Banwell’s concept of the “woman-as-Jew” as a critical lens through which to

understand the gendered dynamics of Nazi persecution. In tracing the entanglement of antisemitism and misogyny, this chapter has argued that Jewish women were not simply victims of a generalised system of racialised brutality, but were specifically targeted through a fusion of ideological constructions that located their bodies at the centre of the Nazi genocidal project. The Lager, as the chapter has shown, was not merely a space of imprisonment or labour; it was an environment meticulously engineered to reduce certain bodies to racialised and gendered objects of domination. Women's embodied suffering must therefore be understood not as an incidental by-product of Nazi policy but as a deliberate strategy—one that weaponised femininity, reproduction, and sexuality in the service of extermination. By foregrounding Banwell's notion of "woman-as-Jew," the chapter has demonstrated that the intersection of gender and Jewishness in the camps cannot be disentangled. Jewish women's bodies were rendered doubly legible within Nazi ideology: first as racial contaminants, threatening the imagined purity of the Aryan body politic, and second as bearers of reproductive capacity, whose ability to produce future generations of Jews posed a biological danger. This meant that Jewish women were subjected to forms of violence designed not only to punish or degrade them but to symbolically and materially annihilate the possibility of Jewish continuity itself. In this sense, reproductive and sexual violence in the camps functioned not merely as instruments of individual terror but as tools of genocidal logic.

The chapter has explored how the Lager became the stage upon which this ideological fusion manifested itself in daily practices of control, humiliation, and dehumanisation. The stripping away of possessions, the shaving of hair, and the exposure of naked bodies to both guards and fellow prisoners enacted a regime of surveillance and vulnerability that targeted women's gendered aspects of bodily identity. These practices were not simply meant to shame; they reconfigured women's bodies as sites of spectacle, control, and domination. In collapsing the boundaries between public and private, between body and

identity, the Lager environment sought to dissolve women's sense of bodily autonomy. Yet at the same time, the very extremity of these acts reveals the Nazi anxiety over the female Jewish body: its sexuality, its fertility, and its symbolic and literal capacity to generate future life.

Reproductive violence, as discussed in the chapter, further illuminates how women's bodies became the terrain upon which ideological fantasies were enacted. Forced examinations, invasive procedures, coercive sterilisation, and lethal experimentation transformed the clinical into the punitive, the scientific into the sadistic. These interventions were at times framed as exercises in racial hygiene, yet they also operated as technologies of gendered control, aimed at policing and ultimately extinguishing Jewish reproduction. What emerges from this analysis is a clearer understanding of how the Nazis mobilised medical authority to legitimise violence that was both racialised and gendered. The female Jewish body was recast as an object of study, manipulation, and destruction, with women's biological functions scrutinised, interrupted, or eradicated.

It is important to emphasise that this amalgamation of abuses did not erase women's embodied subjectivity. While the Lager's genocidal mechanisms sought to reduce women to passive objects of domination, the lived experiences of prisoners reveal a more complex dynamic. Jewish women continued to inhabit, experience, and interpret their own bodies even in the midst of violence. Their suffering was not simply inscribed upon them by external forces but was navigated through processes of internal meaning-making, emotional resilience, and relational solidarity. Recognising this ongoing subjectivity is essential, not only as a corrective to narratives that portray prisoners solely as victims, but also as an ethical imperative that honours their humanity amid systematic dehumanisation. This chapter has sought to balance the necessity of confronting the extremity of bodily violation with an acknowledgement of the agency, perception, and endurance of those who lived through it.

Reflecting on the conceptual framework of “woman-as-Jew,” the chapter has also illuminated its potential contributions to Holocaust scholarship. Banwell’s theory underscores the inadequacy of analyses that treat gender and race as separate vectors of oppression, instead inviting a more intersectional engagement with how identities interact under conditions of extreme violence. In the context of the Lager, gendered practices cannot be understood apart from racialised ones; nor can reproductive violence be meaningfully analysed without situating it within the broader ideological project of extermination. This framework therefore provides a vital corrective to readings that marginalise gender within Holocaust studies or that universalise suffering in ways that obscure the specificities of women’s experiences. Banwell’s favouring of the essentialisation theory behind sexualised violence allows us meaningful insight into the perpetrator mindset of women as the proliferators of an ‘enemy race.’ However, this chapter presents a fusion of the essentialist and dehumanisation theory—one where essentialisation forms the basis on which the Nazis enacted their violence, while dehumanisation becomes an intended symptom of that violence.

In conclusion, Chapter One has argued that Jewish women’s embodied suffering under Nazism can only be understood through an analytical frame that recognises the intersectional nature of their persecution. The concept of “woman-as-Jew” reveals how the Nazi racial project was inseparable from its gendered logic, and how women’s bodies became pivotal sites of ideological enactment. Through sexual humiliation, invasive medical procedures, reproductive violence, and bodily degradation, the Lager system attempted to sever Jewish women from their identities, communities, and futures.

Importantly, only a minority of women who experienced such extremity survived to bear witness to these invasions; many women’s experiences were lost with their deaths, and of those who did survive, only a minority shared accounts of such experiences. Yet despite the extremity of this violence, women’s embodied subjectivity persisted, challenging the

totalising ambitions of the Nazi regime. By tracing these dynamics, the chapter lays the groundwork for subsequent analyses in the thesis, which will continue to explore how gender shapes experiences of state violence, memory, and representation. Ultimately, the chapter insists that any meaningful account of the Holocaust must attend to the ways in which gender and race intersect to produce specific forms of vulnerability, resistance, and survival. Only by recognising this complexity can we begin to do justice to the women whose bodies bore the weight of a genocidal ideology.

Chapter Two – On the Precipice of Humanity: Relationality

Between Women in the Lager

“If you are sisterless...”

For Alexander Prentinger, the burning question regarding the conditions of the Holocaust is: “How was it possible to survive under the conditions of terror and permanently threatening death?” (2). The answer, as increasingly acknowledged by recent scholarship, varies from female to male survivors, with gender deeply shaping survival experiences. In the 1980s and 1990s, scholars such as Myrna Goldenberg and Judith Tydor Baumel began to emphasise the significance of social and relational histories in strategies of survival and psychological endurance. This shift illuminated the ways in which gender influenced daily life in camps, particularly through relationships. Women’s friendships, mutual aid networks, caregiving roles, and surrogate families provided frameworks for resilience, and emotional forms of resistance that traditional political histories had not captured (Ofer and Weitzman, 4).

In the case of the Lager, the Nazis sought to create an environment that disoriented and isolated its victims before murdering them. Segregating Jewish people from their non-Jewish counterparts, violently separating wives from husbands, children from parents and siblings from one another, victims were often imprisoned in unfamiliar countries. In the case of our survivors, Dita was deported from Czechoslovakia, Gisella was deported from Transylvania, and Elli and Isabella from respective parts of Hungary. All began their Lager experience in Auschwitz, in the upper Silesian region of Poland, but were continuously moved throughout the camp systems of Poland and Germany. Dita conveys an awareness that the constant rotation from one site to another, even within the sub-camp system of one camp, was a pivotal hinderance to human connection (164). Isolation became another mode of complete degradation and another step in the crushing of human spirit.

Even still, the importance of unity in the Lager and its vitality in survival became abruptly evident. For Isabella, ““If you are sisterless, you do not have the pressure, the absolute responsibility to end the day alive” (43) Immediately upon arrival at Auschwitz, Elli meets her cousins, Suri and Hindi, who make it clear: “Suri says it is much easier to survive in Auschwitz if you are five” (89). Indeed, each of our authors continually makes clear the importance of groups of five within the Lager. Counted twice daily at Zählappell (rollcall) in rows of five and subsequently fed in these fives, relationships of trust and mutual aid became an imperative. Elli conveys the importance of family and friends being among this five, noting:

Every five get one portion of bread and a bowl of food, and then it is divided among them. If you don't know the others, you may end up without provisions... the bowl may be empty by the time it reaches you. Everyone gulps as large a gulp as she possibly can. Even though there are only four gulps to a person, if each takes too large gulps, the bowl may be empty by the time it reaches you...(89).

For some of our survivors, there already seems an implicit knowledge instilled within them of the vitalness of family connection, or at the very least, a recognition of the importance of family under extremity. Elli depicts the chaos of arrival, coming face to face with women desperately searching for familiarity in an unfamiliar space:

A steady stream of inmates passes, shouting and calling names, or directly addressing anyone milling about, searching faces for familiar features... Sometimes an exclamation and wild embrace follow, then shrieks and exclamations, cries and embraces. Sometimes a lonely figure moves on, looking and searching, with every failure appearing more forlorn and dejected (86, 87).

Coming across her Aunt Cili, her mother's sister, we can see her relief at this familiarity: "the vehemence of my embrace almost sweeps her off her feet... she rocks me in a tight embrace. She is kissing my scalp. And we both begin to cry" (88). Our authors discuss the establishment of Lager 'families.' These were established biologically and otherwise, and women recognised their importance. When a bunk falls on Elli's mother, paralysing her, she is told by a fellow prisoner: "You will not be alone. We will take care of you" (129).

Observing female Holocaust testimony, Myrna Goldenberg notes the frequency of "stories of interaction, of connection, or of frustrated connection" (1996, 79). Similarly, Ringelheim's research records "liaisons created out of loneliness, friendship, [and] the need for help..." (1984b, 745). Goldenberg contrast this with the bonding of men, which she considers more political in nature than from an established ethic of caring (1996, 91). For Carol Gilligan, the importance of forging bonds is integral to the woman's relationship with herself, stating that "intimacy goes along with identity, as the female comes to know herself as she is known, through her relationships with others" (17). The instinctive

relational bonds formed in the camps are perhaps shaped by the societal norms of the pre-war period which informed the social and caregiving roles of women within the Lager (Waxman, 102). The existing pre-war societal identities of women as caregivers influenced their response to the suffering of others and often structured relational life in the camps (Baumel 62). This does not diminish the significance of their actions; rather, it highlights how pre-war gender roles became survival strategies under genocide. For Marion Kaplan, the establishment of female units pre-date the Lager: “[women] belonged to a sex-segregated religion and a sex-segregated society” (1991, ix).

A pre-existing fostered kinship between women allowed open communication between women in the Lager, which became a lifeline. Sharing personal stories-about families, homes, children-deepened emotional bonds and helped women process trauma collectively (Klein 118). This emotional openness helped create relationships that provided deep psychological strength. In contrast to the isolation the Nazis intended, women built pockets of community through shared emotional expression and bonds of mutual aid and support. Such cooperation was facilitated by cultural traditions of communal women’s domestic labour (Ofer and Weitzman, 26). In terms of our authors, Dita’s depictions of the significance of her pre-war relationships are evident through chapters dedicated to childhood friends Anita and Gerta (27, 32), which are clearly translated to her dependence on her friendships in the Lager, as we will see later on. The established traditions were translated and adapted to the brutality of the Lager, allowing for a subversion of the Nazis’ alienation approach in which they fostered competition for survival and a distrust of one another, through the resolute establishment of inter-cultural and social bonds (Ames, 46).

This chapter explores deeper the concept of community withing the Lager and what this meant for our woman-survivors and their peers. Seeking to identify and illustrate moments of solidarity and mutual bonds we can access the impact of community on our authors’ life

and survival in the Lager. Further, this chapter aims to access and apply Primo Levi's "grey zone" to inter-woman interactions within the Lager space, in order to investigate the intricacies of relationality under severity, both troubling and empowering.

The Language of "We," not "I"

The impact of a camp 'sisterhood' or a convention of solidarity between women can be seen through various female-survivor memoirs. Indeed, women's testimonies reveal a distinctly relational mode of Holocaust remembrance. Many women recount their experiences specifically through the lens of relationships: who helped whom, who survived or perished, how friendships formed, and how emotional networks shaped endurance (Waxman 11). Importantly, there is a distinction between male and female testimonies, with women tending to refer to the 'I' as 'we'. We must pay attention to collective experiences because that is the way in which women locate themselves within their story; one amongst many. In their memoirs, our authors use "we" far more often than "I" when discussing daily life and survival in the Lager,⁷ signalling that camp survival (and trauma) was deeply collective. As such, memories are narrated through relationships, and women often describe themselves as inseparable from the friends, "camp sisters," or surrogate families who shared their suffering (Goldenberg 1996, 81). This relational testimony contrasts with many male accounts that emphasize individual strategies or internal psychological battles (Baumel 19). This does not imply that men lacked relationships, but rather that women's narratives often foregrounded relationality as the primary interpretive lens.

⁷ Isabella states "...yes, they took us to the crematorium."; "We stood there all night... And the serenity we felt, we will never forget... We cheated them out of the joy of tearing us in four different directions" (59); Dita comments "That was all we had" (138); Elli demands "who is mad? You? Or we?" (76); Gisella shares "we were given a coarse linen shirt" (33); "to save one another's lives we dragged the sick..." (49).

Our memoirists often frame their experiences through companionship, caregiving, and emotional exchange. Elli illustrates a stark moment of almost ‘assimilation’ amongst her fellow prisoners in the lager (76). She states, “groups of people linger about the barracks on the other side of the fence. Are they men or women? Their heads are shorn but they wear grey, dresslike cloaks... they stare at us. Blank stares. They must be insane. This must be an asylum for the mentally ill. Poor souls” (76). This represents an existing separation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ on arrival at Auschwitz; a separation between those already incarcerated, pitiful characters, and those just arriving, unaware of what is to follow. Elli details the ‘admission’ process in Auschwitz. Once they are ordered to remove their clothes, she makes her first reference to a group experience by using the term ‘We,’ in stark contrast with her use of ‘they’ in pages previously: “We are herded, over a thousand, shivering, humiliated nude bodies, into the next hall...” (77). Disinfected, Shaved, and clothed in the Lager uniform, with jarring realisation, Elli becomes aware of the reality of her situation and the figures she had when arriving in Auschwitz: “...the idea strikes me. The people we saw as we entered the camp, the shaved, grey-cloaked group which ran to stare at us through the barbed wire fence, they were us...! We look exactly like them. Same bodies, same dresses, same blank stares. We, too, look like an insane horde- soulless, misshapen figures” (80). Finally, she bitterly relates her entrance to the Lager as an initiation of sorts: “We become members of an exclusive club. Inmates of Auschwitz” (80). Even at this point it is clear she understands the implications of entering this place, and becoming one of many enslaved within it; the commonness of their fate, the ‘exclusivity’ of which will never be understood by others.

Similarly, Isabella infers the creation of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ through a comparison of herself and her fellow prisoners with the Nazis who imprison them: Who is mad? You? Or we? Somebody, please, tell us” (50). This signifies an inference of commonality, common innocence and a unification between the prisoners. **For Gisella, the commonality**

between herself and her fellow prisoners is clear upon entering the disinfection hall of Auschwitz, as well as her status-based distinction from them as their physician.

Ordered to calm the hysterical women around her who are panicking in fear, she calls: Do not be afraid! This is only a disinfection centre, nothing will happen to you here. Afterward we'll be put to work, we'll all remain together, friends, sisters in our common fate. I am your doctor.... I'll stay with you, always, to take care of you, to protect you... please calm down..." (22).

Physicality, Relationality and Survival

The imperative of survival, discussed in the previous chapter, in collaboration with distinct feelings of care towards one another beseeches an investigation into the ways and means of physical collaboration amongst women: moments of physical sustenance as a result of the existence of these units.

Starvation in the Lager was a universal reality. Women often pooled food rations or redistributed portions to the weakest among them. Even a small gesture, such as dividing a crust of bread, carried immense emotional significance (Lengyel 34). When reunited with Elli and her ailing mother upon their arrival at Auschwitz, Elli's Aunt Cilli produces her bread ration and gives it to them, sensing their distress and depleted physical state from their journey. Survivors frequently recalled these acts as reminders that humanity could endure even in the most brutal conditions. In our memoirs, there are various occasions of women sharing what limited provisions they had. In the Revere (hospital) ill with typhus, Isabella's sister brings her her bread ration, insisting she is not hungry (49). Dita recalls the generosity amongst the women in the Lager as necessity rather than nobility: "If a girl acquired some extra food, she would divide it into equal parts and share it with her friend. This may sound a little too noble, but it really was so, and I believe it was necessity that caused such behaviour" (169). For some, the sharing of food came at great risk. Elli recalls

girls she is working with digging in fields smuggling potatoes under their coats, and “little by little enough potatoes are smuggled into the camp to allow at least one potato per person almost every evening” (165).

As above, our authors continuously convey the importance of groups of five in the Lager, particularly during *Zählappell* (roll call) and food distribution. In familial groups or surrogate families, women would share the food before Elli notes: “if you have family and friends on the line, you share the food equally. You may even pool your bread ration” (89). Isabella shares an instance in which her sister “organised” (stole) a knife from amongst confiscated luggage, “and when we sliced our bread into paper-thin miracles, we were able to delude ourselves that we had a lot of food.” The significance of such moments cannot be underestimated. For Isabella and her sisters, this signified a sly moment where they could undermine the Nazi system: “*you see, Hitler, we are smarter than you. This will keep Musulmanship away from us*” (46). A moment of mind trickery symbolised a defiant act of resistance, however small, in the face of starvation.

In an environment of starvation and relentless physical work, it became necessary for women to provide physical support to one another- **an extension of their emotional support**- especially in order to avoid selections to be killed. If a prisoner was not fit to work through emaciation or illness, she would be sent ‘to the gas.’ To avoid this, and to ease the long process of being counted, Gisella details women who “dragged the sick, the dying along with us and held them up through those endless hours of numb, bestial suffering,” in order to “save one another’s life” (49). For Elli, the protection of one another during roll call continues: “We are forbidden to sit or lie down... Secretly we do sit or lie, though. But when a German approaches we give a slight kick to those asleep on the ground, and in a flash all are on their feet” (95).

On cold nights, women relied on each other to stay warm. Dita recalls winter nights “lay[ing] close together under both our blankets for warmth, and when one turned over in her sleep, the other had to follow and wedge her knees again into the proper shape in order not to leave openings for the cold air to come between us” (170). Elli recalls being cradled for warmth by another woman in the absence of her mother (132). These moments, however minor, represent a mutual care for the physical life of another, as well as a reciprocal reliance on one another to survive.

Gisella shares a distinguishing feeling of duty towards the health and physical wellbeing of her peers. In her role as prisoner-physician, Gisella is able to provide limited medical care to her fellows. Without sterile equipment, lighting, or the means of proper hygiene, she spends her spare moments in the barracks tending to wounds and illnesses, despite the ‘hopelessness’ she feels in her work (30). There are several occasions in Gisella’s role as doctor she makes decisions to preserve the lives of the women around her. Realising the threat facing pregnant women, who were murdered when their condition was discovered, she clandestinely performed abortions, or, where the pregnancy was too far along, she would secretly deliver the mothers of their infants and **kill** the new-borns before bandaging the mothers’ abdomens and sending them back to work. For mothers unable to return immediately to work, she would admit them to the ‘hospital’ with falsified diagnoses of pneumonia (an illness *not* punishable by death) to allow them time to recover. For Gisella, the loss of these infants was devastating: “No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy⁸ these babies... I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own child whom I killed to save the life of a woman” (58). The actions of Gisella, despite the known threat to her own safety and the great personal

⁸ “destroying” babies refers to the necessary measures carried out by Perl to kill newborn children to save the lives of their mothers, who would have been murdered if they had been discovered. The “interruption” of pregnancies refers to the necessary act of carrying out medical abortions on pregnant women to save their lives.

turmoil it caused her, acted to preserve the lives of her fellow women, just as she had vowed to do.

Psychological Survival: Emotional Intimacy and the Responsibility to Survive

In line with the idea that female author-survivors present the suffering of the Holocaust as a collective trauma, is the significance of our author's internalisation of another's trauma through witnessing. This is particularly evident for Dita upon witnessing the death of an older woman falling from a truck: "The full truck started with a sudden jerk... the old woman lost her balance, toppled over and fell from the truck. As she was falling, her white hair spread around her head like a halo and she seemed not to fall but to fly. Her long black cape opened like a sail and descended slowly over her body on the ground. She stayed sprawled on the frozen earth and no one came... for me, a girl of fourteen the memory of the old, nameless woman has become the quintessence of the Shoah that was Auschwitz" (136-137). Another girl's death presents the same effect: "I don't remember her name; I did not really know her... [we] had not been together long enough to know each other... It is she, the faceless victim, who visits me all these years in my bad dreams" (166-167). Similarly, when a girl is taken away by the Gestapo for planning to escape: "we were distressed, believing she would be killed..." When she returned and they realised her head had only been shaved: "we laughed with relief; what is a bald head when we feared for her life?" (178). Gisella, too, has extremely visceral responses to the women and girls she comes into contact with, taking great care to remember many of their names and tell their stories with extreme detail.⁹ In a chapter dedicated to five-year-old Julika Farkas whose coat she comes across, she mourns the loss of a little girl and imagines the final terror-filled days of her life with deep clarity.

⁹ See chapters entitled "Charlotte Junger" (39); "The Story of the Fatal Handkerchief" (67); "One Woman's Death" (71); and "The Story of Jeanette" (81).

Isabella recounts a distinctive expression of female solidarity between female prisoners; a moment in which her sister's suffering becomes universal, felt by her sisters and the unknown women around them. Her sister Chicha is unfairly and arbitrarily singled out for punishment by an SS woman and forced to kneel, holding two rocks with extended arms: "And no wavering of the arms! If you do, you'll die!" Isabella describes Chicha, being watched by 'thousands of eyes', as "the rock herself." She depicts her fellow prisoners as

eyes turned heavenward in prayer: God, do not let her drop the rocks, because then she'll die, and a little bit of our spirit, our determination to live and tell this tale, will die with her. God, help us to imbue her with our unified spirit, keep her arms straight, keep our souls riveted to hers, and maybe we'll all live... A halo is glowing around her shrivelled body. Her strength is being tested ferociously. Her three sisters' strength is being tested ferociously, too (52).

In this moment, Chicha becomes an angel-like figure, and the physical manifestation of the women's will to survive. The pain of one becomes the pain of many. This moment of solidarity is furthered, by the comments of their friend, a non-Jew deported for trying to help her Jewish friends: "I had to save my friends... yet, through these months of suffering, I have thought of the luxurious ways of the privileged that I gave up... but today... I know with certainty why I am here. This is where I belong. I could not be anywhere else... At this moment in history I belong here, with you, with the innocent, with Chicha... I belong standing next to [you], caressing your wounded hearts..." (53). Even with women and girls they do not know, even women with whom they do not share a culture or religion, our authors are innately aware of and convey an empathy in pivotal moments which manifests itself as a solidarity, **which only they and their peers can share.**

Moments borne out of mutual bonds, care, and genuine altruism became a life-saving force as significant as moments of physical sustenance. Friendship emerged as one of the most significant relational forms among women in the Lager. Prisoners faced unpredictable violence, starvation, and the constant threat of selections. In this context, emotional constancy from a friend could transform daily survival (Helm 119). Some friendships were formed through shared nationality or language, while others arose spontaneously out of shared suffering. Survivor testimonies repeatedly emphasise that friendships gave structure to life in a system designed to destroy emotional connection. Even where Dita finds herself 'devoid of humanity' she is reminded of the empowerment behind the bonds she has forged with her peers. Dita explores the significance of friendship in the Lager, with deft reference to the empowering, symbiotic nature of its formation: "The support of a friend was often the only way to overcome a black mood, some pain or illness, homesickness and loneliness" (169). The necessity of deep emotional bonds and their reciprocation was clear: "you needed someone to listen to you, someone to whom you could talk to about your home and family, about your fears and anxieties. We came to know our friend's innermost world, the intimate details of her past, all her secrets... You couldn't let her down when she needed encouragement, when she lost her will to struggle on and survive. It helped you to overcome your own depression when you had the responsibility to boost her morale. You talked yourself into new hope and made both of you believe it, for the next time it would be her turn to do the same for you" (169-170). Mutual caring bonds became for women in the Lager an intimacy of "utmost importance" (169), which could not be replicated or understated. Gisella dedicates a chapter to her 'colleagues' in the hospital. For her, "those evenings in the hospital are the only bearable memory of my Auschwitz days. We were nine friends, nine women of the same cultural and social background, with the same interests, the same enthusiasm, the same ideals. We knew what we were living for and we helped one another in our common fight" (64). For Elli, the significance of inter-woman relationships, and its driving force behind survival in the Lager cannot be understated; she

is able to find a “pocket of love” in a place designed for death, even when she is at her most vulnerable and separated from her mother (132).

The reciprocal nature behind these bonds gave rise to another facet of psychological survival in the Lager: the feeling of duty towards one another created a sensation of responsibility to survive; not for oneself, but for each other. Perhaps this feeling of duty towards others is most clearly evidenced by Elli: when inmates are instructed to go out into the severely cold yard to clear rubble without their coats, Elli and other girls decide to hide, as the conditions mean ‘certain death.’ When their superior orders that the camp is to go without rations for three days, they come out of their hiding spots and are forced to work (174;175). **Their personal comfort and safety is placed below the collective wellbeing of their camp, as the health risk arising from being denied already limited food becomes too grim a responsibility: the few thus become responsible for the lives of many.** Isabella considers her responsibility towards her sisters: “How many times did that responsibility keep us alive? I cannot tell. I can only say that many times when I was caught in a selection, I knew I had to get back to my sisters, even when I was too tired to fight my way back, when going the way of the smoke would have been easier... at those times, I knew also that my sisters... expected me to get back” (43). She conveys the rousing power of the obligation of survival through an ambivalent rhetorical question: “Does staying alive not only for yourself, but also because someone else expects you to, double the life force? Perhaps. Perhaps” (44).

Cultural and Spiritual Expressions and Community

As explored previously, the Nazi glorification of body resulted in a stark rejection of intellectualism and culture. Additionally, before the war, the Nazi Nuremberg laws ensured the expulsion of Jews from the cultural life that *did* exist. This paved the way for day-to-day life in the Lager, which in and of itself was the ultimate expression of the separation of

prisoners from culture or any means of self-expression. Where physical and emotional needs could be met (even if in a limited capacity), there remained a cultural or intellectual gap for women which they sought to fill. Isabella illustrates a friendship between herself and her sisters and a Gentile Hungarian woman; one in which they spoke of books. She depicts the need for intellectual stimulation in the wake of extreme bodily deprivation, stating “strange must be the ways of the hungry, for even when the body is starving, the mind may crave nourishment too” (53).

In her initial internment at Theresienstadt, Dita intimates various experiences of cultural and intellectual exchange amongst herself and her peers: “[we read a lot, mainly poetry... they would read famous novels... and discuss them. Each of us girls brought from home a favourite book or two in our backpack and we exchanged them among us...” (123). In secret, and in crowded rooms with no desks and limited stationary, she and other children would receive clandestine lessons from prisoners who specialised in various subjects to satisfy an eagerness to learn, imposed by the Nazi exclusion and imprisonment of Jewish children from school life. She details the ‘revelation’ of such lessons, signifying the significance of these moments in not only her internment, but also in her youth: [Friedl Brandeis] had a large book of [art] reproductions, one of them Van Gogh’s Sunflowers. She made us notice the bold brush strokes, suggesting the wildness of the flowers... It was a revelation for me” (124). Her teachers would instruct them under great threat, to maintain a level of stimulation which had been taken from them. Dita recounts particularly fondly her participation in the children’s opera at Theresienstadt: “[We] would sing such unusual, attractive, modern melodies... The performance took place in a large room in the Magdeburg barracks... when our heads and shoulders suddenly became visible, the audience led out a loud ‘Aah’. How I loved that moment!” (125). The tone she conveys here allows an insight into community expressions of culture within the oppressive space of the Lager, and the impact on its participants, who were able to find moments of joyful

expression under genocidal threat. Upon arrival at Auschwitz, Dita is placed in the Kinderblock (children's block), **a temporal space as part of the 'Family Camp' cynically created by the Nazis to home transports from Theresienstadt.** She becomes entrusted with the very few books there, earning her the title 'Librarian'. She intimates the efforts of prisoners to sneak any books into the Kinderblock, most likely at great personal threat (144). This perhaps illustrates an awareness among the prisoner community of the importance of intellectual stimuli. Further, the fact that these books were sneaked into the Kinderblock may suggest a care on part of older prisoners for the lives of the few children imprisoned there and a hope for a future in which these stories could be of import.

Though work details were gruelling, dangerous and relentless, Elli details that they were an opportunity to socialise, which they looked forward to (102). For women, the ability to converse was the means of deep emotional connection, a reminder that they were still human, despite Nazi attempts to reduce them to otherwise. For Gisella, this was a conscious resolution: "Yes, I was going to remain a human being to the last minute of my life- whenever that would come... I began talking in a low voice to the women lying close to me. I told them about my old life... to my surprise they listened with rapt attention... one after the other, they opened up their hearts and from then on half our nights were spent in conversation" (42). The 'rapt attention' of her peers highlights a universal need for human connection within the Lager, and the immediate opening of their hearts to Gisella suggests this need as deeply ingrained and integral to feelings of personhood. Elli speaks particularly of the sharing of recipes amongst the women in her work detail: [the women] are trading recipes. They describe meals they cooked at home... they are also composing dishes, like shipwrecked musicians thinking musical notes out loud... We work with the shovel but our souls indulge in dreams" (103). Her comparison of the creation of recipes to the composition of music highlights the idea of a melodic facet to their conversation, which feeds their souls and, however momentarily, their starving bodies. Implicit here is

the idea that food is culture, and the composition of these conversations so significant to each woman, it becomes a means of art. Her description of herself and her peers as 'shipwrecked' brings us back to the grim reality of their situation- though momentarily, the women and the reader are released. Gisella details the passage of evenings in the barracks: "Later, as we came to know one another better, we invented games to keep our minds off the sordid present. We recited poetry, told stories of the books we had read and liked, and sang songs, in a low voice..." (42). She shares in particular a game entitled 'I am a Lady...' in which the speaker would compose a fictional day for her listeners. Typically a day of shopping, lunching, walking and theatre with family and friends, Gisella notes how the listeners "hung on every word, following me around... and when my happy, lovely day was over, they fell asleep with a smile on their faces." For Gisella, "These evenings acted like a stimulant. They reminded us that although the odds were all against us, it was still our duty to fight... All we had was our human dignity, which was our home, our pride, our only possession- and the moral strength to defend it with" (43). When reflecting on her hospital colleagues, Gisella shares: "When we were hungry, we consoled ourselves by talking of literature, quoting passages from the works we loved. When we were tired, when Mengele beat us- to break our spirit- we put our heads together and recited songs of freedom. We did not break... we could not break. We knew that thirty-two thousand helpless women needed us" (64). Moments of tender cultural expression helped her and her fellows to continue providing the care they could to the women around them, and this did not leave their minds. Such moments of cultural and individual expression, whether through sharing memories of leisurely days at home, of favourite meals or favourite books allowed each woman a momentary transfer back to better times of freedom and agency, providing limited liberation. The psychological import of such moments must be acknowledged- in an environment bereft of agency, or laced with choices which did not represent freedom at all, these moments became a stirring event within women's minds, allowing them access to a psychological resistance which, at times, satisfied the emotional

requirements of survival. For Dita, a night of singing and dancing becomes a symbol of the end of her and her peers' suffering: "We returned to our rooms after midnight... I was suddenly overcome by a strong conviction that this year- 1945- would be the last of our imprisonment" (182, 183). Such expressions meant for a reminder to women of their humanity, of their vitality, and thus **represented resistance in the metaphysical tenets of survival insofar as it bore influence, joined with mere chance.**

A distinct means of bond formation and helping others to survive present in our authors' memoirs is through language translation; a key expression of nation and culture, those who spoke the same language were able to communicate more freely and establish common ground. Deborah Lee Ames establishes this fact, but counters the inverse must also be true- that "not sharing a language can divide people" (52). Prisoners **at Auschwitz-Birkenau** were deported to unfamiliar lands, and imprisoned amongst strangers from across Nazi occupied Europe.

Both Elli and Gisella act as translators during the admission process into the Lager, providing vital information and establishing a limited calmness amongst their confused and hysterical peers. The efforts of women in translating information barked at them in foreign languages by the brutal SS provided vital instruction as to survival (Ames, 51). Deborah Ames contends the powerful nature of understanding language, particularly in times of distress, citing its comfort (50). When Gisella is abruptly moved from Auschwitz to a labour camp in Hamburg, other women take the time to explain to her the layout of the camp and the threats to those who resisted or ran away, "in German, Russian, Polish, Hungarian" (99). Language constituted a large proportion of information sharing within the Lager, as evidenced by Gisella and Elli's translation efforts. When Elli is reunited with her cousins Suri and Hindi upon arrival at Auschwitz, they provide her and her mother with rudimentary information to aid in their assimilation to the camp, including the location of

the 'lake'- "a fairly large hollow in the ground filled with murky water" (85)- their only means of fighting dehydration in the camp. Further, Hindi stops Elli from drinking too much, warning her of illness. Much later, Juliska Tauber, treating her mother for paralysis in the camp hospital, warns Elli of an impending selection so that her mother may be spared from death (95).

The shared language of Jewish women and men in the Lager, or at the very least of religious or culturally observant individuals, **in exercise of religious ritual**, can be determined as Hebrew. The theme of spirituality permeates in particular Elli's memoir, her religion providing her comfort in moments of extreme distress. When her barrack is sentenced to be decimated by the SS for having committed 'sabotage,' Elli's anxiety manifests itself into visceral imaginings of herself and her mother being shot, and a physical sharp pain in her head. On the eve of their decimation, several girls begin to pray: "the girls... are reciting the Psalms... they have received a small prayerbook from somewhere and manage to say evening prayer daily. Sometimes they lend it to mother..." Elli and her mother begin to join in. "The murmur is louder now and Mother and I are able to repeat the verses in Hebrew after them. The pounding in my temples subsides" (112). The women pray until morning. This scene illustrates Elli's spirituality and that of the women around her as a source of comfort (for Elli, this is even physical) in the terrifying face of death, and as a restoration of meaning within the brutality of their circumstances. Moments of spiritual and religious expression meant for the restoration of communal identity, and a reminder of religious homes and communities stolen from these women, and thus a means of emotional stability amongst genocidal chaos. Elli illustrates another in which relationality and spirituality converged for her and her bunkmates. Potatoes are smuggled secretly into the barrack, and some decide to save them for the Jewish festival of Hannukah. Lit using oil smuggled from a factory and thread from their blankets used as wicks, Elli and her peers are able to observe a Jewish festival: "When Hannukah came and

the first light was lit, a girl was posted at the door as lookout... [every night] another lookout stands at the entrance watching the corridor, while someone stands at the window in readiness to put the lights out at a signal... the rest are singing Hanukah songs” (167). This expression of religious and cultural identity, even under great threat of punishment symbolises a stark moment of communal spiritual resistance, and thus a subversion of the Nazis’ attempt to annihilate the Jewish race: the proliferation of a religion in an environment intended to exterminate its people stands as a means of existential resistance—where the community could still practice important expressions of faith and belief, the Nazis had not succeeded.

Moral Complexities and the Ambiguities of Camp Relationships

Adam Brown highlights the pressure of survival for prisoners in an environment specifically designed to foster competition, distrust and pit prisoners against one another: “Subject to extreme levels of coercion, these victims were compelled to act in ways that have been judged as both self-serving and harmful to fellow inmates” (408). We must be careful not to depict every instance of relationality between women in the Lager as harmonious or positive. Like everyday life, human relationships are complex, and the intricacies of such relationships were intensified by the extremity of the Lager. These complexities reflected the extreme pressures of the environment, not the moral failings of the prisoners who acted within it (Levi 1988, 112). Life in the camps is characterised by both an emotional and physical story, as told by our writers; one which is impacted greatly by interactions with each other; women rely on one another for physical support and sustainment but equally are at one another’s mercy in the Lager environment.

Levi’s “Grey Zone”

Primo Levi’s essay “The Grey Zone,” from *The Drowned and the Saved*, examines the moral complexities that arose within Nazi concentration and death camps, challenging the

simplistic division of people into victims and oppressors. Levi argues that the camps produced a morally ambiguous space; a “grey zone,” in which prisoners were often forced into situations that blurred the boundaries between coercion, collaboration, and survival. He focuses in particular on the Sonderkommando; prisoners who were compelled to assist in the machinery of extermination through the administration of the crematoria, sorting through the bodies and possessions of murdered victims. While these individuals sometimes appeared to be collaborators, Levi insists their choices cannot be judged by the standards of ordinary life. Extreme duress, starvation, and the systematic destruction of agency forced prisoners into roles that compromised their moral autonomy.

Levi’s purpose is not to exonerate or condemn but to understand how totalitarian systems corrupt ethical clarity. By examining figures such as Chaim Rumkowski, the controversial head of the Łódź ghetto, Levi shows how power within the camps served as both a survival mechanism and a moral impasse. The Nazis, he argues, engineered these hierarchies deliberately to distribute guilt downward and blur responsibility. Levi concludes that acknowledging the “grey zone” is necessary for an honest understanding of the Holocaust. It reminds us that human behaviour under extreme conditions resists simple moral judgment and that the integrity of victims was systematically assaulted alongside their bodies. Ultimately, Levi’s analysis warns against the seemingly comforting illusion that good and evil are easily distinguishable. He emphasises the fragile, often compromised, nature of moral choice under oppression. This rejection of binary conceptions of “good” versus “evil,” or perpetrator-collaborator versus victim permeate our memoirs. For Isabella:

The German genius had, of course, variations of evil, one of which was to appoint torturers from among the inmates themselves. Brother against brother. Sister against sister. And if you survived long enough, you realised that the minutest advantage might help you make it through. In many cases the Germans realised

their intentions. They succeeded in brutalising some of us. But only some. Only some (65).

Similarly, Gisella recognised the pitting against one another of inmates as integral to the Nazi process of dehumanisation: “The Nazi method of completely dehumanising us before throwing us into the fire worked beautifully. Only a very few, the strongest, the cleanest, the noblest were able to retain a semblance of human dignity; the rest were engulfed by the gurgling swamp of crime, mental deterioration and filth. (28)” Such testimonials acknowledge the ‘genius’ of the Nazi scheme: complicity in the victimisation of each other; a direct attack on inmates’ morality and human dignity.

Myrna Goldenberg’s research refers to instances of ‘frustrated connection’ between women during the Holocaust, particularly in the Lager space. Women often had to make difficult decisions in order to survive. Some hid illnesses from friends who might have otherwise taken on additional burdens. Others avoided associating with weaker prisoners who could slow down work details and lead to punishment (Levi 1988, 131). Many women later wrote that they regretted these actions, but acknowledged they were dictated by life-or-death circumstances (Klein, 103). It is also important to recognise the proximity of prisoners in the Lager- being forced into close quarters, often with strangers of a different nationality or language. Exasperated communication and spatial proximity contributed to a feeling of tension and distrust. Gisella notes, “an unbearable tension in the air which turned the prisoners against each other and bred hostility instead of solidarity,” and further, “in the darkness we stepped on one another’s hands, feet or even heads. These accidents brought forth torrents of curses and cruel words...” (28). Dita also makes reference to heated exchanges. While interned at Theresienstadt, she details an argument with her bunkmate, in which she insults her, shocking her fellow girls and herself: “I felt terribly ashamed; I knew I had done something forbidden, crossed some boundary, which is taboo. I also felt

the shock of the other girls...” (123). Isabella depicts a moment in which the duty of survival translates into great internal conflict and relational strain between her and her sisters. Chicha attempts to escape a death march, but comes back for her sisters: “I couldn’t leave you. I can’t live while you die. We must all escape or perish together” (74). She implores, “Dear Chicha, how much longer will our pact hold...? We must learn to break the bond... We must make a new pact- each for herself... Please, let each of us understand this” (74). Her pleas for them to understand the necessity of survival for oneself betrays their hesitancy, and the impact of the longstanding commitment to remain together and help each other to survive. Further, Isabella’s statement of the ‘awesome burden’ of responsibility towards each other to survive hints at a strain between her and her sisters, as well as an internal struggle between survival and the urge to give up. She illustrates the internal conflict she faces between loyalty and survival, and the knowledge that the Nazis’ genocidal system places these at direct odds with one another.

Tension also existed between more ‘seasoned’ prisoners and new arrivals, who were often labelled “*Zugangen*.” Elli recalls being ‘bitterly resented’ as an incoming Hungarian prisoner at Płazow camp, by Polish-Jewish inmates: “We lived in the security and comfort of our homes for the last two years while they were exposed to the torture of the camps. ‘You went to the theatres and resorts in Hungary, while our families were shot and burned, and we suffered in the camps,’ they would say to us” (104). Such resentment gave rise to fear-mongering warnings of what was to come towards newcomers: “they would dramatize the dangers of the camp. They would tell us to forget our families, we will never see them again... they hinted darkly at the gas chambers and crematoria...” (104). Dita also recounts hearing fear-raising remarks by others imprisoned long before her, describing them as making statements such as “we will go up the chimney,” or “we will end in the gas chambers” (137). These tensions demonstrate how relational life in the camps was shaped

by both empathy and the crushing pressure of survival, as well as the traumatic nature of what had been witnessed by their longer-serving counterparts.

The scarcity of food and the constant threat of death sometimes fostered competition. Women occasionally fought over rations or sought better work assignments to ensure survival (Lengyel 58). Conflict was an inevitable result of a system designed to pit prisoners against one another. Gisella watched, as “women who in their former lives were decent, self-respecting human beings now stole, lied, spied, beat the others, and- if necessary- killed them, in order to save their miserable lives” (54). Further, she was assured of the knowledge and intention behind Nazi interaction with prisoners: “The SS were... greatly amused by these practices and encouraged them by showing special favour to some, so as to awaken the jealousy, the hatred, the greed of the others” (54, 55). In particular, she intimates the jealousy fostered through the distribution of food, with women taking sips of soup from the same container in turn: “The container went from hand to hand and we swallowed quickly, convulsively, so as to get some of it down before the next in line grabbed it from our hands. We counted each other’s swallows jealously, enviously, careful that none of us should get more than her share” (30). Starvation and the tensions of coexistence led to instances where women would compete, and often steal each other’s provisions, especially food and water. Dita and her mother save up portions of their daily ration of bread, requiring “enormous self-denial” before it is stolen and their efforts have been “in vain” (186-187). Similarly, Gisella notes the ‘organisation’ (theft) of “the piece of bread of [prisoners’] neighbour(s), regardless of whether she might starve to death as a consequence, or ‘organised’ their bedfellow’s shoes, no matter if her bleeding feet might condemn her to be cremated. By stealing bread, shoes, water, you stole a life for yourself, even if it was at the expense of other lives” (54). Chronicling the daily “battle for water”, often kicking and screaming at one another (27), and the ‘jealous’ assault and robbery of

women with aluminium cups for drinking (55), Gisella illustrates a world in which the conditions are so deprived that personal morals are overtaken by an instinct to survive. Part of the destruction of humanity within the Lager was the establishment by the Nazis of a camp hierarchy: a system in which some select prisoners exerted power and control over their peers, in return for certain privileges. Such roles included that of *Kapo*, and of *Blockova* or *Blockälteste*. Such roles created complex relational dynamics. Some used their authority compassionately, protecting weaker prisoners and advocating for less brutal working conditions when possible (Saidel 151). Others abused their power, often mimicking SS behaviour to preserve their own status or ration privileges (Ofer and Weitzman, 163). For Elli, the word *Kapo* meant “supreme authority over life and death” (99). Further:

“Encouraged to exercise any method of control, including beating and torture to death, the *Kapos*... assume an aura of dread beyond normal human concept. As if they had made a pact with the devil, the *Kapos* seem to revel in their cruelty. There is a devilish delight etched on their hard faces when they wield the whip” (100).

The privilege and the significance of *Kapos* in exercising the Nazi machine of genocide was clear to regular prisoners: when faced with selection Isabella and her sisters pretend to be *Kapos* to avoid it: We screamed incoherently. We looked important... Anything, so long as we could convince the SS that we were working, that we were aiding the beast” (31-32). In a similar vein, *Blockältestes* are depicted by our authors as ‘privileged’ (149). For Elli, they represent something even more sinister, defined by “arbitrary authority, cruelty, sadism...” (92). Abruptly they became aware of the power their superiors had, and the extent to which their lives depended on them (Perl, 57). Elli, after a disturbance through the night, recalls the anger of her *Blockälteste*: “You are lucky you were not all shot for what happened in your barrack during the night. Sabotage. If it happens again you will be

sent to the gas. I am responsible for your behaviour. If any of you makes sabotage any time, I shall immediately report you” (93). The intense apathy, and separation between prisoner superiors and their charges in the Lager becomes evident, combined with their aptitude for violence. For Elli, Felicia, the Blockälteste becomes the manifestation of the Nazi’s success in stripping prisoners of their humanity by assigning such roles: “Felicia’s dislike of us sometimes turned to intense hatred... She would wake us with loud curses in the morning and drive us to Zählappell with kicks and shoves and slaps” (108).

Levi’s moral “grey zone” comes in when we gain further insight into Felicia’s own experiences and in turn, her humanity- firstly, when Elli’s Block can hear civilians being interrogated, being beaten: “as the shouts of the SS and the shrieks of the civilians penetrate our night, Felicia covers her ears and weeps” (108-109). Later, we are told the reason for her brutality: Felicia, a Jewish Pole intimates being made to shoot her entire family one by one by German soldiers in her own home after watching her baby be ripped apart in front of her very eyes. She is ‘awarded’ role of Blockälteste for her ‘bravery’ by the soldiers (116;117). When Isabella is confronted with the opportunity of being assigned as a Kapo, she recognises the value in such a position: “if I learned how to be a Kapo, I reasoned, who knows, we might stay alive and be there to greet our liberators. I owe it to my sisters to try to keep all of us alive. Ah, dear God, teach me how to be a Kapo!” (66). Her plea to God signifies an interminable need for survival. She uses such power to protect her sisters from dangerous labour: “I was able to assign Rachel to be the toilet cleaner of the Camp, Chicha to be the cleaner of our celt, and Cipi to be her assistant. All of this meant that they did not have to go out daily to dig in the forest and return with their legs frozen, as so many did” (66). An SS woman gives her a stick and shows her how to beat prisoners who committed infarctions, however, her role as Kapo is short lived: “I tried to sound as brutal as possible, and I used the stick with as much might as I could muster. But at last I was caught by the SS. I was striking the walls of the celt, not the inmates. I

simply couldn't... I *couldn't* hurt anyone" (66-67). Isabella depicts the role of Kapo as a desirable position, as well as one that can be used to save lives, but fraught with difficult decisions, SS pressure and need for ruthlessness. Isabella also hints at the unique dangers of being in charge in the suggestion she could have been shot for failing to comply with the demands of her role (67).

Langer's Choiceless Choices

Langer's notion of "*choiceless choices*" also helps illuminate the complex relationality among women in the Lager, where extreme conditions shaped bonds of solidarity, dependence, and survival. Yet even these relationships were marked by the coercive structure of the camp: friendships, "camp families," and protective pairings could provide lifesaving care, but they were all forged under circumstances where survival itself forced impossible compromises. These forms of relationality therefore occupy an ethically fraught space; simultaneously acts of care and responses to a system that destroyed ordinary moral choice. Through Langer's lens, the bonds between women in the Lager reveal both the persistence of human connection and the tragic reality that such connections were often shaped by decisions made under conditions of radical coercion.

Concluding Remarks

Chapter Two has examined the intricately woven network of relationships formed among imprisoned women and argued that these bonds—whether expressed as friendships, improvised families, cultural groups, or religious affiliations—were indispensable components of survival within the Lager. Yet this chapter has also insisted on resisting any temptation to idealise these relationships as uniformly nurturing or ethically unambiguous. Drawing on Primo Levi's concept of "The Grey Zone," it has demonstrated that interpersonal relations within the camps emerged within a moral terrain shaped by

starvation, terror, coercion, and the omnipresent threat of annihilation. Under such conditions, women forged connections that could be lifesaving and sustaining, but these same connections were also susceptible to strain, ambivalence, jealousy, and compromise. Rather than presenting female relationality as either wholly redemptive or hopelessly corrupted, the chapter has sought to show that it existed precisely in the densely textured space between these poles. By situating women's relationships within Levi's Grey Zone, the chapter contends that categories such as friendship, solidarity, betrayal, and collaboration cannot be understood in isolation from the structuring mechanisms of Nazi domination. The Lager was a system that systematically distorted social relations by weaponising scarcity, manipulating hierarchies, and eroding the boundaries of moral choice. Within this environment, women's relational ties did not simply mirror peacetime norms of intimacy or care; rather, they were reshaped by the perverse logics of survival, which forced prisoners into dilemmas that blurred distinctions between agency and coercion. This chapter has thus illuminated how the extremity of camp life challenged conventional understandings of ethical behaviour and complicated the interpretive frameworks through which we understand women's interactions under genocide.

One of the central contributions of the chapter has been the articulation of relationality as both a survival strategy and a moral practice. Acts of kindness, mutual aid, and shared labour often provided women with physical resources, emotional support, and psychological anchoring. These gestures had profound significance in a setting where the Nazi regime sought to destroy not only the body but also the bonds of community and selfhood. Relationships could reinforce a sense of continuity with pre-camp identities, create microcosms of meaning within a world structured by meaninglessness, and affirm the humanity of individuals who were systematically dehumanised.

Yet the chapter has also recognised that mutual support was not evenly distributed nor consistently offered. Privilege, access to resources, and proximity to power shaped the

possibilities of relational practice, and these inequalities often determined who could help others and who was in greatest need of assistance. Women who held positions of relative advantage- whether as kapos, clerks, or workers assigned to less lethal labour- frequently found themselves forced into morally fraught negotiations between self-preservation and responsibility to others. Even when assistance was motivated by genuine care, it was mediated by structures that placed prisoners in impossible situations: to help one person might mean jeopardising oneself or withholding aid from another. Chapter Two has therefore argued that situating female agency within the Grey Zone allows for a more historically honest understanding of the relational bonds that emerged in the camps: bonds that were neither wholly innocent nor wholly compromised. In exploring this complexity, I challenge simplistic gendered narratives that position women as inherently more cooperative, caring or altruistic. While many women certainly expressed remarkable capacities for solidarity, creativity, and emotional resilience, these qualities cannot be read as inherent to femininity. Rather, they must be understood as contingent responses to the pressures of camp life, shaped by individual biographies, cultural norms, and the micro-politics of survival. The chapter has shown that women's social practices encompassed a spectrum of behaviours, from self-sacrifice and care to competition, resentment, and strategic alliance. This spectrum does not diminish the heroism embedded in moments of solidarity, but it does prevent their romanticisation. It also honours the full complexity of women's experiences by acknowledging that they were neither saints nor villains but human beings navigating extreme conditions.

A further key insight of the chapter is its emphasis on relationality as a form of ethical life under duress. Even within the coercive structures of the Lager, women continued to make moral choices—choices shaped by hunger, fear, exhaustion, and desperation, but choices nonetheless. These decisions were rarely clear-cut; they were informed by shifting loyalties, pragmatic calculations, and the demands of emotional attachment. The chapter

has argued that attending to these nuanced forms of agency allows us to see how women enacted responsibility even when the conditions of genocide rendered traditional moral categories almost unrecognisable. In this sense, relationality was not merely instrumental; it was a space where women attempted to maintain, however tenuously, a sense of ethical orientation. At the same time, this chapter highlights the fragility of these bonds. The strain of scarcity could fracture relationships, erode trust, or provoke conflict. Jealousies around access to food, clothing, or minor privileges could intensify, not because women were inherently competitive, but because the system was designed to pit prisoners against one another. The chapter's engagement with Levi underscores that such tensions are not evidence of moral failure, but reflections of a reality in which survival was inseparable from compromise. By framing these tensions within the Grey Zone, the analysis refuses both condemnation and absolution, choosing instead to illuminate the impossibility of assigning simple moral categories to those forced to navigate impossible choices.

Ultimately, Chapter Two has argued that the relational world of imprisoned women reveals a complex and deeply human form of agency—one that cannot be reduced to idealised narratives of female solidarity nor tainted by assumptions about collaboration or moral weakness. The relationships women forged in the camps were adaptive, fragile, creative, and ethically charged. They helped women endure, but they were also shaped by the coercive apparatus of genocide. These relational practices allow us to glimpse how women sustained themselves and one another in a world bent on their destruction, and how they negotiated the contradictions of care within a morally devastated landscape. In closing, the chapter positions women's relationships in the camps as crucial to understanding the broader dynamics of survival and identity under Nazism. These relationships expose the interplay between structure and agency, between moral aspiration and coercive necessity. They remind us that even in conditions of overwhelming brutality, human beings seek connection, meaning, and responsibility. By bringing Levi's Grey Zone into dialogue with

the lived experiences of Jewish women, the chapter deepens our understanding of how relationality functioned as both a lifeline and a site of ethical ambiguity. It underscores that genocide does not eliminate human complexity; rather, it reveals it with devastating clarity. As the thesis moves forward, the insights developed here will continue to shape a more nuanced understanding of gendered experience, moral agency, and the social worlds constructed under conditions of extreme violence.

Chapter Three – The Maternal Body and Mother-Daughter

Relations

Carmelle Stephens and the Palliative Maternal Trope

Emerging research has put forth the notion that interaction with Holocaust experiences in recent years has tended to investigate familial experiences, as oppose to those of the individual. This occurs particularly where women’s stories are being shared. According to Natalia Aleksion, “family networks are key to understanding Jewish survival strategies during the Holocaust” (36). Even a cursory look at women’s memoirs detailing their Holocaust experiences reveals an insight into the familial, subconscious or otherwise. Further, this is a characteristic unique to female-written memoirs, particularly those who experienced the Holocaust in their formative years: “There are stark differences between the style of women survivor writers and their male counterparts. The former are more likely to recount the memories of domestic life and the complex child-parent relationships therein by presenting their own childhood perspective on events...” (Clementi, 10). Aleksion poses an intriguing question to her readers in her study titled “A Familial Turn in Holocaust Scholarship?” Here, she dedicates focus to the particular plight of mothers, citing that women’s identities are “closely tied to family.” Further, she explains, “women’s testimonies, including oral histories and memoirs... [focus] more on the private sphere,

[bringing] to attention new intimate and familial experiences that had largely been overlooked in Holocaust narratives” (31). This is further supported by Esther Hertzog in her article ‘Subjugated Motherhood and the Holocaust,’ in which she states that “feminist scholars suggest that mother-child relationships are profoundly embedded in the socialisation of females. From this point of view, the fate of Jewish mothers in the Holocaust offers an extreme example of the fatal bond constructed by society and the fatal implications of women’s socialisation as mothers.” Additionally, it bears noting that often mothers are consigned to a status of martyrdom amidst an “absence of a socially acknowledged right for a mother to live when her children’s lives are being taken away. Thus, the profoundly accepted norm is that the woman-mother does not, in effect, have the right to exist independently and apart from her children” (2016, 16).

In her doctoral dissertation *The Holocaust and the Maternal Body*, and in her later article *Saints and Martyrs: Popular Maternal Tropes in Holocaust Memoir*, Carmelle Stephens critiques the widespread use of idealised motherhood in Holocaust narratives. She argues that this “maternal paragon” often functions as a rhetorical and emotional device, transforming mothers into symbols of heroic self-sacrifice, purity, and moral innocence (2018). This serves to channel trauma into familiar gendered frameworks rather than confronting the full complexity and horror of the Holocaust (2018). According to Stephens, idealised maternal imagery- the ‘angelic mother,’ the suffering woman protecting her children, the sanctified martyr-mother- is often invoked to generate meaning in memoirs or testimonies even when such symbolism may distort reality (2020, 101-102). This use of maternal tropes can become a kind of ‘palliative device,’ offering moral comfort or a narrative of redemption, but at the cost of reducing mothers to archetypes, thus undermining the varied individual experiences, agency, ambivalence, suffering, silence, or survival strategies these real women had (2020, 103). Stephens further draws on psychoanalytic frameworks such as maternal attachment and projective identification to

show that these maternal tropes operate not simply as cultural or sociological motifs, but as deep psychodynamic constructs that resonate with Western symbolic understandings of identity, selfhood, and memory (2018). She suggests that turning the maternal body into a conventional ‘memorial vessel’ risks subsuming the Holocaust under conventional notions of motherhood. This limits our ability to contend with its ethical and existential disruptions (2018). Ultimately, Stephens’s rejection of the maternal-Holocaust trope amounts to a call for a more critical, honest, and less sentimental mode of Holocaust representation; one that resists transforming mothers into sanctified symbols and instead preserves the authentic and fractured reality of bodily suffering, loss, memory, identity and survival.

Motherhood and the Holocaust

Holocaust memoirs written by women themselves will expose an inextricable connection between mother and child. This, however, argues Hertzog, is founded on societal conventions, rather than biology itself. Hertzog makes a significant distinction: “Most feminist, social, psychological, historical and anthropological studies suggest that motherhood is neither an innate instinct nor a universal feature of women. Rather, it is highly subject to cultural, psychological, political, religious, age, race and economic influences” (2009, 2,3). Still, there is very little scholarship available which explicitly addresses the mother-daughter relationship in particular- this is supported by F.K Clementi in *Holocaust Mothers and Daughters: Family, History and Trauma*, in which she states: “In literary criticism as much as in psychoanalytic theory, there is a gap on the subject of the mother-daughter relationship, which tends either to take on the perspective of the mother or to be subsumed under the broader mother-child rubric.” As such, Clementi seeks to investigate these relationships in their entirety, “...despite or because of – through and beyond- the impact of genocide.” Further, she aims to “make visible... the courageous act of portraying the complex, ambiguous, and sometimes unbearable side of a girl’s love for

and inextricable bond with her mother- and vice versa- under the extreme conditions of a great historical upheaval” (10).

The Holocaust presents one of the most profound moral and historical ruptures in human experience. Within this landscape of devastation, there existed no social role immune to erosion, distortion, or destruction. Yet few roles reveal the intersection of human vulnerability, ethical extremity, and endurance more clearly than motherhood. For Jewish women- whether pregnant, caring for infants, raising young children, or simply bearing the social identity of “mother”- the rise of Nazism and the unfolding genocide forced decisions, traumas, and losses almost unimaginable outside the context of total war. The Holocaust not only destroyed millions of families; it targeted motherhood as a biological, social, and symbolic foundation of Jewish continuity. The arrival procedure at camps like Auschwitz-Birkenau involved immediate selection and separation of families: men were separated from women and young children before being scrutinised by SS officers and selected to either live or die. This mechanised moment shattered families. For many, it was the instant that motherhood ended in one world and continued in another, transformed by grief. Most young children and mothers with infants were sent straight to the gas chambers.

Traditional Woman-Mother Roles of Jewish Women

A brief note must be dedicated to placing Central and Eastern European Jewish women into a broader historical context, as well as the political, social and legislative scape that the Nazis inherited which enabled and proliferated their system characterised by ‘twin circumstances’ of racism and misogyny (Goldenberg 1996, 79). Jill Stephenson refers to the “normative division of labour” between men and women as “that of men acting as breadwinners and women as homemakers” (3). Despite interwar evolution and increased emancipation of women, Europe remained a largely patriarchal environment: “In

patriarchal society,” Stephenson notes, “women are subordinate to men in virtually all areas of both public and private life... entrenched in a wide variety of societies by legislation and custom... including religious institutions.” Stephenson explains the term ‘patriarchy’ as “the way in which men have accumulated and exercised political, economic and social power, particularly in Judæo-Christian society” (3).

Margarete Myers Feinstein sets out the parameters for typical gender roles in the Jewish home during this period: “Women were the organisers of the household in terms of procuring food and clothing, caring for possessions, maintaining cleanliness and providing emotional and practical support for the family... Men had the responsibility for planning the children’s future and protecting the family from the brutality of the outside world, in addition to their professional and civic roles” (161). Further, Stephenson illustrates “the image of a married woman’s life as that of full-time housewife and mother reflected not only entrenched tradition but also the realities of early twentieth-century life in societies where the traditional division of labour obtained” (9). As such, the Nazis ‘inherited’ a patriarchal system, one which was expounded by their own racist and misogynistic edicts, delivered under the guise of ‘race theory’ (10;11).

As previously noted, the Nazis divided German society, and later the societies of German-occupied territories, into classes based on their concocted ‘theory of race.’ Proponents of this ‘theory’ divided people into ‘worthy’ (‘Aryans’, who upheld the expectations of Nazi eugenics) and ‘worthless’ (those who did not, including Jews, Roma and Sinti individuals, disabled people, homosexuals, people of colour, as well as social or political enemies.) Gisela Bock draws attention to firstly the Nazi policy on child-rearing generally, as it applied to ‘Aryan’ women, comparing it with their attitudes to the reproduction of those the Nazis considered to go against their ideal of a ‘Judenrein’ Europe. They actively promoted the birth of ‘Aryan’ children by restricting abortion access for ‘Aryan’ women,

while enacting sophisticated schemes which promoted the forced sterilisation of 'worthless' individuals (1991, 9).

The sociocultural norms regarding gender which are noted above are evident in a number of memoirs where our authors discuss pre-war family life. For instance, In *Fragments of Isabella*, Isabella recounts trips to the market with her mother, who would "feel the force-fed geese to see if they were fat enough to nourish her six growing children..." (9).

Normative gender roles can also be seen in *Elli*, where Elli's brother does not need to fight to attend the Jewish seminary in Budapest because he is male- he is deemed as having a natural ability, in comparison with his younger sister's 'ambition'- the natural consequence is his attendance at school (9). In *A Delayed Life*, Dita shares various instances where she seeks her mother's guidance and comfort, particularly regarding the reproductive cycle and throughout a bout of childhood illness- her mother nurses her and maintains her care. The reproductive role of women in society is particularly evident where Dita asks her mother about her dowry, and her mother responds: "Your dowry is in your belly" (70), alluding to her biological ability as a female to rear children, as well as its persistence as an accepted societal rule.

Particularly, the Nazis targeted Jewish women as the producers of the next generation of Jews. In **Auschwitz-Birkenau**, women who were visibly pregnant or found to be pregnant were immediately designated for death, as were women accompanied by young children. Isabella sardonically refers to these children as "fodder" for the gas chambers (25). Gisella Perl relates instances of pregnant mothers being beaten to unconsciousness and thrown-alive- in the crematoria. Embodied maternal experiences in the Lager were marked by a profound collision between the biological rhythms of motherhood and the dehumanising machinery of the camps. Pregnancy, birth, lactation, and an instinctive drive to protect one's child unfolded in conditions designed to extinguish both bodily integrity and

emotional attachment. Women often struggled to preserve fragments of maternal identity through small gestures- limited parental discipline, sharing limited food, shielding children from violence or dangerous labour- acts that affirmed their humanity even as their bodies were starved, exposed, and violated. At the same time, the Lager transformed the maternal body into a site of acute vulnerability: pregnancy was punished, infants were frequently killed or taken, and breastfeeding could become impossible under extreme malnutrition. These embodied maternal experiences reveal not only the physical brutality of the camps but also the resilience and painful contradictions of mothering within a system intent on erasing both bodies and bonds. Gisella laments the fate of the pregnant women who arrived on the ramp at Auschwitz: “The poor, young women who were brought to Auschwitz from the various ghettos of Hungary did not know that they would have to pay with their lives and the lives of their unborn children for that last, tender night spent in the arms of their husbands” (57). SS officers would encourage them to come forward, telling them they would be taken elsewhere with better conditions. The reality was grim: “They were surrounded by a group of SS men and women, who amused themselves by giving these helpless creatures a taste of hell, after which death was a welcome friend. They were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots. Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory- alive” (57). Gisella utilises her doctoral skills to clandestinely deliver children before ‘destroying’ them or ‘interrupting’ pregnancies in order to save the lives of expectant women.¹⁰ Ruth Bondy approaches the impossible decisions placed on the shoulders of women in the face of Nazi brutality: “some women knowingly chose to accompany their children to death even when presented with the option of saving themselves. Survivors portrayed this decision as one of admirable maternal devotion, implying that women

¹⁰ See note 8 for an explanation regarding terminology referring to the ‘destruction’ of infants and the ‘interruption’ of pregnancies.

who chose otherwise were unnatural and inferior mothers...” (324). It is important, however, to note that the Nazis were solely responsible for the fates of these women and their children, despite attempts by mothers to maintain some form of parental responsibility, or otherwise. (Feinstein, 165).

“Weakened Fathers,” “Competent Mothers”

At the rise of the Nazis, antisemitic legislation was increasingly applied, limiting the social, religious and economic freedoms of the Jewish population, firstly in Germany and then in other German-occupied territories of Europe (Feinstein, 161). Initially, there was a general belief amongst the Jewish community that men would be the target of Nazi violence. As such, many husbands and fathers chose to leave their families behind to escape persecution or to secure immigration papers so their families could join them later. (Feinstein, 162). According to Marion Kaplan, antisemitic legislation **in Germany** *did* initially strike at fathers’ economic abilities, which “for Jewish women... increased the burdens of caring for increasingly impoverished families... sometimes this led to an ‘enforced equality’ between men and women” (1998, 7). **Subsequently, such policies were variably enforced in Nazi-occupied territories.** As a result, Jewish men stayed in their homes. Renée Fodor observes, “the father sat around the house without work, and his authority diminished. He became apathetic, fearful and helpless” (135). Mothers were forced to take on roles they had not assumed before, along with their traditional roles, leading to a ‘forced equality’. They were encouraged to support their families and promote security within the home (Kaplan 1998, 7).

Sara R. Horowitz credits this ‘forced equality’ between men and women as the result of a “weakened” paternal state and a “competent” maternal one within the home (1994, 276).

Similarly, Feinstein cites ‘paternal failure’ as a reason for the disproportionate number of mothers featuring in Holocaust life-writing compared with fathers (157). Some chosen memoirs do allude to either a ‘weakened’ father or a paternal failure, namely evidenced by Dita’s ‘shock’ where her father was helpless against two boys urinating on her in an antisemitic attack and, later, dragging her away after she had been struck by a bicycle so as not to draw attention to themselves because they were Jewish (93-94). Dita’s father’s weakened state is also evident where they are interned at Theresienstadt and she washes his bowl for him, stating “He never washed his mess bowl properly. I began feeling responsible for him and often went to put his things in order” (128). Elli also refers to the weakened state of her father due to the impact of war and increased antisemitism at the hands of the Hungarian Military police in: “He is thin and they are sturdy” (13). However, the so-called paternal ‘failure’ of fathers to protect their families must be treated with care, particularly given the arbitrary nature of Nazi violence. Over the years, scholars have agreed as to the “randomness” of survival. The powers of the Nazis’ ‘Final Solution’ surpassed any ability or lack thereof of any parent to protect their children- survival was pure chance. Paul Chodoff states this: “in the face of the Iago-like malevolence of the SS... it cannot be emphasised too strongly that how prisoners behaved was far less important than luck, accident, and chance- whether the prisoner happened to be when a selection for the gas chamber was taking place, the quota of victims established for that date, the mood of the selector at the time” (152). Isabella contrasts these claims of a lapse in faith placed within fathers, taking care to address her father’s ‘failure’ to secure immigration papers for his family before they were deported, addressing him directly: “You tried, Father. You tried” (8). Additionally, while Feinstein’s claim may be true, it is also true that predominantly the camp system was a sex-segregated environment, specifically designed to tear apart families. Thus, because women coexisted while encountering the horrors of the Holocaust, their female counterparts are more likely to feature in their retellings.

Parenthood and the Holocaust

In order to address the impact of the Holocaust on 'traditional' or 'secure' mother-daughter boundaries and the way the Nazi regime affected them relationally, it is important to firstly address the pre-war relationships of authors with their mothers before discussing the boundary confusion itself. As explored above, the traditional role of mothers could be defined as the role of the educator in social conventions and values, the caregiver, the comforter and the moral guide- they impart their wisdom; and they scold when they must.

Isabella notes her mother's smile the day of their deportation to Auschwitz. In smiling despite the precarity of their situation and her own personal fears regarding the fate of Jews, Isabella's mother takes the role of comforter (5). Dita Kraus characterises many of her childhood memories with moments of maternal affection from her mother; one of her first being an incident in the bath at the age of three or four: "mother is sitting on the rim. Suddenly I see tears flowing silently from her eyes. Mother is weeping soundlessly... 'What have I done?' I ask... but she only shakes her head and doesn't answer." (7). Her mother's silent weeping may indicate a desire to hide her sadness from her child, and preserve her from pain. Certainly, her refusal to provide an answer as to the source of her tears is an act of protection. It also reinstates the childlike reasoning of Dita at such a young age, through her automatic assumption that it is her that made her mother cry. Similarly, after an operation on her abdomen, Dita expresses distress when she sees the scars left by the procedure and her mother responds saying: "You just won't become a belly dancer" (67-69). This attempt at humour to divert Dita's concern signifies a relationship in which Dita can approach her mother with her anxieties and seek solace in her mother's comfort. Even upon arrival at Auschwitz a clear parent-child boundary between Elli and her mother can be seen, particularly where they are ordered to remove

their clothes for disinfection and Elli looks to her mother for permission before doing so (77).

It is extremely important to acknowledge insofar as possible that as our authors are experiencing these grotesque and brutal moments for the first time, as are their mothers. It cannot be understated that “capacities of parents are seriously impaired due to an external massive destruction, like the Holocaust” (Bar-On and Chaitin). As such, the Holocaust is no medium for measuring the successes and failures of parenting, but rather prompts examination of the intricacies of mother-daughter relationships in the wake of the Shoah. Gisella illustrates her utter powerlessness to exercise any maternal duty- arriving at the Lager with her young son, she cannot comfort or protect: “My son just looked at me, with his big, blue eyes. ‘Mother...’ they said. ‘Mother...’ (21).

Dan Bar-On and Julia Chaitin identify ‘parental mistakes’ as a key theme pertaining to parenthood and the Holocaust, where children of parents are unable to understand their decisions under the extreme circumstances of war. Through conducting interviews and accessing testimony from child-survivors, both male and female, they identified that “the issue of understanding certain parental decisions arose. At times, the [child] survivor expressed the notion that their parents acted strangely, or made ‘bad’ choices, thus putting themselves or other family members in danger” Additionally, they acknowledge the difficulty many survivors experience in identifying these ‘mistakes,’ particularly because it imposes behavioural conventions on human beings living through the unthinkable. Isabella’s portrayal of her mother as a paragon of wisdom (addressed later) might act as evidence of this, particularly as there are times where she admits her criticism as a child of her mother’s generosity with other people: “Sometimes I was resentful. Must she care about everyone in this world? Look at me! Praise me! I want to be the most important!”

(10). Perhaps her mother did have moments where she was less than perfect, but regardless she maintains saint-like status in the wake of Isabella's grief at her death.

There are instances of perceived parental mistakes within the chosen memoirs which relate directly to the author's Holocaust experiences, exposing the intricate nature of relationships between parents and their children. In *Fragments*, there are moments where Isabella's mother fails to bring comfort to her children in the short time the reader is offered an insight into her childhood experiences; one being on their day of transport to Auschwitz itself: "My mother's face, her eyes, cannot be described. From here on she keeps smiling. Her smile is full of pain... And she keeps smiling at me, and I can't stand it. I am silently pleading with her: 'Stop smiling'" (5). In these short sentences, Isabella portrays a number of apparent emotions between herself and her mother, none of which are spoken. She alludes to the 'pain' of her mother, the anticipatory dread for what is to come, and her mother's all-knowing knowledge that this is how she herself will meet her end. She exposes her own discomfort with her mother's smile which seeks to disguise these emotions; her despair at witnessing her mother hide her pain and potentially her frustration that her mother will not just expose her true feelings- the maternal smile, designed to comfort, does very little in such a moment of uncertainty and fear. Isabella recalls her mother's 'oft-made' remark: "Hitler will lose the war, but he'll win against the Jews." (11). While not outwardly criticising her mother for such actions and comments, there is an inherent suggestion that her mother has, inadvertently or otherwise, instilled fear into her "bright, handsome, sensitive kids" (9). Any attempts at comfort are futile, her previous comments have been ingrained into Isabella's psyche, and retain their hold. The notion of Bar-On and Chaitin's parental 'mistakes' may be reflected in the explored passages. Juxtaposed with the seemingly saintly depictions of motherly behaviour, there is an implicit internal struggle which female writers face. As they observed about their own

study participants, “it appears as if the daughters feel the need to present an idealized picture of their mother, perhaps, in order to help them explain to themselves why their parents acted as they did during the traumas of the Holocaust. The daughters can only hint that the mother occasionally let them down and was not able to protect them from the Nazi persecution.”

For *Elli*, her accompaniment by her mother and vice versa through their camp experiences gives way to a number of instances where the theory of parental mistakes may be applied. One might be in the ghetto where her father is forced to report by himself to the authorities for deportation to a labour camp, leaving his family behind. Elli begs her mother to wake her up for her to say goodbye. Her mother agrees but ultimately decides to leave her sleeping. Elli is distraught, hysterically demanding “How could you do it? You promised to wake me! How could you do this to me? I did not even say goodbye to Daddy. I could not even kiss him goodbye. How could you do this?” (47). However, in the camps, it is two particular occasions which stand out: one being her mother’s attempts to save her from extremely laborious work during their internment at Płazów labour camp, and the other upon their transfer from Płazów back to Auschwitz where her mother feels she cannot go on. In Płazów, Elli describes the most notorious task as the stone commando [the passing of heavy stones uphill between prisoners for building purposes] and refers to it as “the dread of the camp.” Overseen by a ‘tyrannical’ Kapo, Elli’s mother “would order me to pass only the smaller stones... Mother would [then] have to lean forward with the heavy rock, balancing it precariously, while the girl above me would have to lean down to receive it from her hand, causing additional burden to her” (106). Elli describes this as causing her deep anxiety, as she was unable to understand or reconcile the extra burden to her mother and the woman who received the stone in place of her. Upon transport from Płazów back to Auschwitz Elli’s mother begins to deteriorate: “She has lost her will to live... she seemed unable to grasp the mechanics of survival. She wanted to stay in the wagons with those

unable to walk. Indifferent as to its implication, she kept insisting that she was unable to march and asked to be left behind” (123). Elli’s desperation translates in this moment into aggression: “I grabbed her and shook her violently: ‘Stop! Do not say that! You can walk. Come, walk!’ I pulled and dragged her along” (124). As an **SS officer** takes notice of her mother’s depleting state and asks her if she is able to work, Elli convinces her: “I poke her sharply in the rib and whisper under my breath: “Say yes. Say it, for God’s sake!”” and her mother is saved from selection (125). Both of these signify instances where Elli is unable to understand her mother’s actions, resulting in the upset, anxiety and frustration of her daughter and threat to both of their lives.

Motherhood Under Extremity- “Boundary Confusion,” Role Reversal and Regression

Occurrences of Bar-On and Chaitlin’s “parental mistakes” can engender considerations of what may be termed “boundary confusion” between parent and child. I use this phrasing to represent situations where the extremity of the Holocaust interrupts ‘traditional’ parent-child roles; namely during peacetime, where the parent has the means and capacity to care for and guide their child. Throughout the chosen memoirs and very possibly as a result of the violence and threat of their situation under Nazi terror, each woman continuously transforms, often involuntarily, from a girl in the throes of childhood or adolescence to an adult who is faced with markedly difficult decisions, especially regarding the care of their parents. This issue, along with theories of attachment, is commonly investigated in conjunction with survivor-parents’ relationships with their second-generation children- that is, parents who have survived the Holocaust and gone on to have children of their own (Amit et al, 752). Little investigation has been done into the parent-child relationship dynamic throughout the camps. A distinct loss of childhood inflicted by the Nazis on young individuals is explored by survivor Regine Donner: “I missed out on my childhood and the best of my adolescent years.” Scholar Elizabeth Monnig states: “It seems that the

atrocities of daily life and the quest for survival turned these children into premature adults.” (43). Addressing the coping strategies of Jewish children generally, she cites a poem from Hanus Hachenburg who was imprisoned in Theresienstadt: “...now I am no more a child, for I have learned to hate. I am a grown-up person now, I have known fear.” (Volavkova, 22, 23). These ideas put forth by Hachenburg and Donner highlight the impact of the traumatic nature of the Holocaust on children’s psyche, particularly a loss of childhood. In our memoirs, the authors perpetuate this notion through representations of their relationships with their mothers, and where the secure mother-daughter boundary- that is, a relationship characterised by the traditional dependence of a child on their mother- is confused or distorted.

Jenny Macfie, Laura E. Brumariu and Karlen Lyons-Ruth put forth definitions applicable to the parent-child relationship in the wake of traumatic events. “Role reversal” was used to describe children who may take control of the relationship, acting as caregiver themselves. Role reversal itself can be divided into two categories: “controlling-caregiving,” whereby the child assumes a nurturing, empathic role over the parent, and “controlling-punitive;” a role which is more dominant and authoritarian in nature. “Role reversal” was later increased to contain scenarios where a parent or child may assume a role in their relationship contrary to what is considered “developmentally appropriate.” Macfie et al also address “filial responsibility”, applying it to children in immigrant or refugee families, particularly where children assume a more parental role (36.) Indeed, “filial responsibility” or “filial obligation” are terms applied by scholars to the children of Holocaust survivors, particularly in caring for them in their old age, however little research exists in terms of accessing the immediate impact of the Holocaust on feelings of responsibility over parents. However, with access to authors’ descriptions of relationship dynamics between them and their mothers, it can be hypothesised that filial responsibility did increase **during the Holocaust**, as explored below.

Just as our authors convey distinct instances of moments of boundary security, so too do they expose moments where that boundary is confused, both overtly and covertly, due to the horrors unfolding around them. Many detail moments in which they are compelled to take on a role beyond their years and experiences as young people, or roles in which they are faced with a grim reality, that their mothers cannot protect them from Nazi violence. For Isabella, a distinct loss of childhood innocence can be identified early in her memoir, as her and her family are deported from the ghetto to Auschwitz. Her mother is singled out by an SS Officer as he whips her. Philip, Isabella's brother leaps forward as though to defend her, but Isabella and her sisters stop him: "My mother's blood will flow right here in front of our eyes. Philip will be butchered. We are unarmed, untrained. We are children" (6). The realisation of her powerlessness against the SS Officers who have targeted her mother implicates a realisation of her mother's own powerlessness. In this moment, Isabella is taken away from her childhood "cradle of love" (13), and transforms from her mother's "birthday baby" (5), into a young woman faced with the task of protecting her family from further brutalisation. Furthermore, this incident acts as an abrupt interruption to her sheltered upbringing, her idealisation and admiration of her mother. Before her very eyes her mother becomes a victim. Elli also alludes to her mother's increased vulnerability when relating their arrival in Auschwitz, where they are made to undress for 'disinfection': "I have never seen my mother in the nude" (77). "Avoiding a glance of her body" (79), Elli's inspection of her mother's face, however, her shock and inability to even cast a look at her mother's naked body suggests her recognition of this vulnerability. Elli's filial responsibility can be seen in the scenarios laid out above. A young teenager, Elli is forced into a situation where she must chastise and scold her mother in her desperation to keep her alive. This might employ the "controlling-punitive" aspect of role reversal previously explored. This is familiar when reading Dita's conflict with her mother in the camps: "She [mother] sat on the floor, her face unwashed, her hair uncombed... I started pleading with

her, coaxing her. ‘How do you look! You haven’t washed your face. Comb your hair, don’t let yourself go like this!’ (194). Dita cajoles her mother into practicing self-care and dignity- a practice traditionally passed on to children by their mother.

Inverted roles of protection are furthered by Elli’s exploration of an incident where she tries to stop her mother from eating food that is infested with insects and her mother angrily dismisses her: “I wanted to save mummy from a terrible thing. Disease. Or even death” (102). The most extreme illustration of Elli’s protection of her mother is seen where a bunk falls on top of her mother, critically injuring her to the point of paralysis.

Another inmate, a doctor, assesses her mother’s condition and tells her that her mother is going to succumb to her injuries. Elli stays with her mother throughout the night: “Sitting at [Mummy’s] head, I am able to wipe the rainwater from her head... Mummy must be cold... All I can do is rub her legs with my hands to warm them” (129-130). This, contrasted with an instance where Elli contracts an illness which her mother helps her to conceal (110), highlights a distinctive change in her role in her and her mother’s relationship; one where she must act as nurse and nurturer and comfort her mother in what she believes are her final moments. Miraculously, her mother survives. This, however, is not the end of Elli’s filial responsibility. Her mother is sent to the *Revier* (Infirmary). If she remains there over a month she will be killed. Elli communicates with her mother through a hole in the wall and is able to track her improvement, as she is able to move more and more of her body and her speech returns. After over four weeks, there is a rumoured selection in the *Revier*. Elli convinces some of her friends, at great risk, to help her move her mother who is still unable to walk. Elli is plagued by worries of her mother’s survival: “Mother cannot walk to the Block after *Zählappell* (roll call). She has to be carried and that, too, has to be accomplished without the *Blockälteste*’s notice.” Rumour of a selection to another camp in Germany convinces Elli that she must try and get her and her mother on the transport: “We will get away from here to a place far from the gas

chambers” (141). At great personal risk, Elli remains preoccupied with saving her mother’s life- they leave behind close friends who have been instrumental in their survival so far so that her mother might be at less risk of being put to death. Elli’s protection of her mother extends further than that over her physical wellbeing. She details her “debilitating” fear of the unique abuse she receives from the Oberscharführerin: “I cannot convey my fears to mummy. I do not want to frighten her. Instead, I comfort her whenever she is saddened and pained because of this abuse. I insist it does not matter while my fear and apprehension deepen” (172). The frailty of her mother takes precedence over her own fears as she assumes the role of comforter. Elli begins to put her mother’s needs before her own. The protection of the authors’ mothers is visible even where their mothers did not survive the war. In the chapter ‘Grave,’ Isabella implores for a grave for her mother who was murdered on arrival at Auschwitz; she “crave[s] so a small piece of earth” to dedicate to her mother. The fierceness of her demand, and in turn her protectiveness over her mother, is clear: “*You beast! Give me the body, that frail little body. I want to bury it*” (19). Similarly, Dita loses her mother shortly following the liberation of Bergen Belsen. She demands her mother be buried properly, in a lone grave (234). Despite their status as displaced persons, she actively promotes the dignity and security of her mother in death, despite the lonely position she is now faced with, having no family left with her.

The scenes in which we see our authors adopt parental roles over their mothers may suggest a regression on part of their mothers in the face of the horrors they were forced to endure. Chodoff states: “regressive behaviour of a greater or lesser degree was almost universal and, paradoxically, probably served an adaptive function. Some prisoners, like children, became quite dependent on their savage masters so that attitudes toward the SS were marked more by ambivalence than by conscious overt hostility, the expression of which, of course would have been extremely dangerous.” Chodoff hypothesises an example of this may include women’s perceptions of SS men, including Josef Megele as

“tall, radiant, immaculately dressed figure[s], sitting nonchalantly astride a chair, like Osiris...” (152). Likewise, Isabella puts forth an almost flattering description of notorious SS Officer Irma Grese, who personally victimises her sister: “Is the face a mirror...? Flawless skin. A head of natural blonde hair. Almost perfect features” (33). Elli refers to herself as “a statue of impassivity” (170;171) in the wake of increased threats from a particular SS Officer. Our authors do not resort to outward hatred of their oppressors, but rather allude to an adaptive behaviour of complete subordination.

It postulates, then, that this regression may be applied elsewhere in addition to subservience to their oppressors, such as in instances where the authors, or indeed their mothers, lapse into moments of childlike behaviour. Particular instances may include where Elli and seven others hide from work in freezing temperatures. They are made to reveal themselves when they are told the whole camp will not be fed for three days because of them. When they come out of their hiding place, they are made to stand all day without food (176). Elli and her mother are observant of their religion and decide to observe Passover by Elli not eating her bread ration and her mother compensating for this by sharing her meals at noon and in the evening. When Elli returns from her punishment her mother has saved her entire evening meal and they argue over who should eat it. In a childlike fit of anger, her mother spills the food on top of their bed: “I cannot believe my eyes. The soup. There is no soup! Mummy has deliberately spilled it... Oh, my God, what has happened? What has happened to her? My God, what has happened to us... Mummy begins to cry” (178). In their disagreement, Elli’s mother resorts to childlike behaviour, spilling the food, in what may be perceived as a moment of frustration or anger- perhaps that Elli won’t let her exercise what limited function she has as a parent in the genocidal frame of Auschwitz. It is evident too that Elli is shocked by this behaviour and that it is out of character for her mother, who she has previously marvelled at for her elegance. In recounting her separation from her mother upon arrival at Auschwitz, Isabella repeatedly

calls out for her mother: “Mama! Turn around. I must see you before you go to wherever you are going. Mama, turn around. You’ve got to. We have to say goodbye. Mama! If you don’t turn around I’ll run after you. But they won’t let me... Mama!” (16). This may be reminiscent of the way in which a frightened child calls out for their mother. In a short series of sentences Isabella conveys her helplessness and despair over the loss of her mother- she is reduced to only being able to call out for her again and again.

Interdependence

The previous chapter referenced the symbiotic nature of women’s Lager relationships. In a similar vein, our daughter memoirists depict relationships with their mothers in the Lager which are at times fraught, and characterised by interdependence on one another, in a way that subverts traditional parent-child relationships outside. Elli appears to have fewer reservations than her fellow memoirists about exposing the misgivings of her mother. Throughout, her relationship with her mother is characterised by moments where she is compelled to fulfil a maternal role, while still being a child herself who is in need of care from her mother. There exists between them a constant back and forth of give and take; a co-dependency which brings them together as a familial unit. Thus, the parameters of role reversal and feelings of filial responsibility are not set in stone- there are times where the authors’ mothers fulfil their roles as mothers insofar as they are capable. It is important to acknowledge the interdependence our authors and their mothers have between one another, as well as their independence as separate individuals, in experiencing the atrocious conditions of the Holocaust first hand. Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery state that these relationships are “always poised on the dialogic edge between unity and differentiation. They face the challenge of sustaining fused interdependence with one another while simultaneously sustaining differentiated, independent selves” (79). Just as their mothers rely on them for protection or sustenance, so too do our authors look to their

mothers for the care they received as children. Elli's mother has moments where she fights to maintain her parental authority. When they are transferred to Waldlager- a satellite camp off of Dachau in Southern Germany- they meet Elli's brother Bubi, who is in a death-like state. Their mother does not recognise him. They throw him some bread, and do so the following day. When their mother is transferred to the kitchen for vegetable peeling, she loses her ration. To compensate for this loss, she tells Elli to only give Bubi half of her own ration. Elli argues with her: "Mummy felt that I could not afford to give up my portion of bread every day. But I felt I could. Mummy then began to shout and ordered me to obey her" (186). This grasp at what is left of their maternal capacity is also exercised by Dita's mother immediately upon their liberation at Bergen Belsen: guessing the danger of eating after an extended period of starvation, Dita's mother orders her not to eat anything "unless I approve of it" (205). It is instances like these which remind us of our author's remaining girlhood when facing extreme conditions, and in turn their mothers' remaining parental capacities. In addition, the dependence of children on their mothers acts as a driving force behind their will to survive. As above, Elli frequently revisits her fear that if her mother is to die, she will die too (112). It postulates that this is the reason why Elli's mother continues on despite having given up, or that Dita's mother engages in maintaining some form of self-care at the implorations of her daughter- such moments, among others, serve as reminders that their daughters need them to survive. This idea has been explored by Irit Dublon-Knebel in conducting a study of women deported to Ravensbrück Camp and separated from their male counterparts: "the dependence of the children on their mothers motivated the women to survive" (5).

Loss, Guilt and Disenfranchised Grief

The consideration of the mother-daughter relationship in Nazi death and concentration camps evokes examination of themes arising from such relationships, including loss, guilt and disenfranchised grief; that is, grieving a loved one in an inherently oppressive space. According to Ruth Jaffe, “it is relatively simple to detect influences harmful to the body and to estimate their impact upon physical health. The situation is different regarding emotional influences on mental health” (307). In “Examining Traumatic Grief and Loss Among Holocaust Survivors,” Ruth Malkinson and Eliezer Witzum provide a psychological account of grief among Holocaust survivors, investigating the concept as something that can be experienced collectively and individually at the same time. In particular, they expose the impact of Holocaust experiences on victims’ expression of trauma and grief through creative means, giving especial regard to the literary works of survivor Aaron Appelfeld. In their study, they reject the early psychological analysis of grief by Sigmund Freud that emerged in the interwar period- that of deatthexis, a concept they explain as “the bereavement process [which] breaks the bonds between the bereaved and the deceased in order to invest libidinal energy in a new object” (131). Malkinson and Witzum reject this notion, stating that “evidence-based studies have shown no support for relinquishing bonds with the deceased” (131). According to them, and others, the relationship between the deceased and the person who survives is a continuous venture for as long as the survivor lives: “[this relationship] always occurs within a sociocultural context. Grieving, based on this conceptualisation, is the act of reconstructing a world of meaning that was challenged by the loss” (131). It is informed by societal and cultural influences which will impact the way in which they are grieving. As such, Ruth Malkinson and Eliezer Witzum name this the “continuing bonds hypothesis” (131), insofar that feelings of grief are lifelong and allow a person to maintain their connection with the

deceased individual. The person which survives them is able to “find places for the dead in their ongoing lives.”

The “continuing bonds” hypothesis is particularly evident in Isabella Leitner’s relationship with her mother, which permeates throughout *Fragments*, despite her mother having been murdered on arrival at Auschwitz. Time and again Isabella addresses her mother as if speaking only to her. In the years following her liberation, Isabella falls pregnant with her first and second children, writing as though addressing her mother directly: “Mama, Mama, I’m pregnant! Isn’t that a miracle, Mama? Isn’t it incredible?... Two lives in one, Mama- I’m pregnant!” (79). Her continuing relationship with her deceased mother can be seen where she tells her mother of her chosen name for her unborn child: “We’ve named him Peter. You know how much I like that name. It translates into stone, or rock. You were the rock, Mama. You laid the foundation.” Additionally, Isabella has found a place for her mother in her ongoing life by continuing to ask her for help: “Help me, Mama. Help me to see only life” (80). When Isabella has her second son, Richard, she addresses her mother once more: “He is the sound of your soul.” She sees her mother in her two children and continues to associate the world’s good with the memory of her mother’s image and disposition. She applies her mother’s lessons to the way in which she raises her sons: “Mama, I make this vow to you: I will teach my sons to love life, to respect man, and to hate only one thing- war” (81).

Chodoff identifies depression and feelings of guilt as “very common” among Holocaust survivors (153). Principally, Chodoff interacts with ‘survivor guilt’, distinguishing it as acutely and uniquely felt throughout the survivor population: “the different ways in which it was experienced shows that survivor guilt is not a unitary phenomenon. Some concentration camp survivors felt guilty because of specific actions on their part which endangered the life of others, or which they interpreted as having this effect...” Further,

Chodoff explores the sources of such guilt, and how it may not arise from one specific incident: “Sometimes survivor guilt was felt as a nonspecific conviction of having done something wrong and shameful, even without the feeling being grounded in any event. Finally some survivors felt guilty simply because they remained alive when so many others had died” (154). Jaffe also explores this phenomenon, discussing various examples of actions committed by genocide victims and survivors which they viewed to have caused the death of a loved one; often being unable to accept the idea that their actions were inconsequential in the fate of their lost loved ones (308). Here it is important to reiterate that most Holocaust Historians and scholars attribute survival to sheer chance and the utter unpredictability of fate under the Nazi system. Indeed, Isabella appears to express guilt in her description of her separation from her mother. Having stopped to search for their cigarettes before leaving the train after their arrival in Auschwitz, Isabella and her sister “waste precious time.” As a result, she is unable to say goodbye to her mother who Josef Mengele selects for death. She calls out repeatedly for her mother; reduced to a childlike state; begging her to turn around one last time so they can share a final glance. Guilt and depressive feelings are also evident through the authors’ depictions of post-war reflections, with Chodoff explaining, “one important factor in such depressive states and the accompanying anhedonic¹¹ lifestyle was the prolonged and irremediable mourning for lost loved ones” (154). Isabella refers to her inability to enjoy the month of May, which marks the anniversary of her deportation to Auschwitz: “May is damned. May should be abolished. There should only be eleven months in a year. May should be set aside for tears. For six million years, to cleanse the earth” (78). Her reference to six million signifies her grief for the innumerable dead. She relates being unable to even apply lipstick, without the memories seizing her once more (75). Similarly, Elli, upon returning home is unable to enjoy the Hungarian landscape she once loved. When asked where she belongs, she is

¹¹ Referring to “Anhedonia;” or the inability to experience joy from living.

unable to answer: “How can anyone understand the aching that is Auschwitz...? The search, the reaching out. The futility. The irrevocable statement that is Auschwitz... The loss. The total, irreconcilable loss. I belong to this void... [I belong] to Auschwitz” (268). Jaffe acknowledges the post-war grief and its impact on guilt: “after liberation, when the re-adaptation to normal life (with its disappointments) was resumed... the survivors’ sustaining hopes evaporated. Their past, being ineradicable, caused the emergence and intensification of guilt feelings, feelings that they had no right to live and, above all, no right to enjoy life. Grief for the innumerable dead, longing for the lost loved ones, together with their sense of guilt and feeling of isolation, produced a state of unrelieved depression and pre-occupation with the past” (313).

Interestingly, Jaffe poses another type of guilt which may be present in child-survivors: “it postulates that for the child, thoughts can be equated with deeds. It is recognised that during early life children are normally ambivalent in their feelings towards their sibling and parents; that is, at one and the same time they can be both hostile and loving” (312). This promotes consideration of our authors’ depictions of their mothers, especially when their behaviour does not follow the expected patterns. In particular, Isabella’s criticism of her mother- her reference to her jealousy regarding her mother’s charity may be an example of this. Separately, Elli says of her mother, “Mother admires my hair... she likes nothing else about me...” (41). which alludes to feelings of insecurity imposed upon her by her mother in her early years. Jaffe states that “relatives met their deaths... often in the presence of family members. Archaic death wishes of early childhood could thereby be revived unconsciously, that is, without the person’s having any notion of their existence...” (313). As a result, survivors may place blame on themselves, resulting in manifestations of guilt as noted above.

The Idealisation of Mothers

Judith Tydor Baumel, in a 1996 article on the representation of women in Holocaust memorials, makes a striking comparison of wartime mothers to the Pentateuchal Mother, Rachel (100). Mother of Joseph, Rachel dies during childbirth and spends her time alone, dwelling in a neglected nearby grave, forced to watch the suffering of her children, powerless against it. Indeed, this comparison bears significance in unravelling Holocaust discourse, particularly when regarding Rachel's religious significance and the deeply-felt sociocultural significance the Holocaust emits in readers today. The story itself can be connected with the wartime experiences of Jewish women whose memoirs I selected for this analysis: Rachel perishes during childbirth; in fulfilling what may be considered her biological (*and* Torahic) role as a woman and mother during that period; or what Bock refers to as: "the reproductive aspect of women's unwaged housework" (1984, 271). Similarly, Jewish women were targeted by the Nazis as the bearers of the next generation of Jews, and many lost their lives for this very fact. Additionally, Rachel must dwell alongside her children, without the ability to speak with them or ease their struggles. During the Holocaust mothers were faced with threats against their lives and their children's, continuously brutalised, often murdered in front of their own children and crudely buried or cremated in their vicinity- often powerless against the bipartite nature of the racist, patriarchal Nazi machine. It is difficult to encounter any representation of the **murdered** war-time mother as anything less than saintly sufferer; their stories are characterised by extreme representations of martyrdom, and this has informed and shaped even the most candid memoirs.

Tydor-Baumel's comparison of Holocaust Mothers to Rachel has significant visual and symbolic implications, particularly portraying these women in a sanctified manner.

This sanctification might also be seen when engaging with Myrna Goldenberg's "Gentle Heroines" (1996, 78), or Sara Horowitz's notions of the "weakened father" compared with the "competent mother." Hertzog, cites that "mainstream attitudes" are characterised by "heroizing" the Holocaust mother, particularly where she refuses to abandon her children. Such notions prompt the idealisation of particular mothers and perceived conventional motherly behaviours in the shadow of genocide. Bar-On and Chaitlin state idealisation as a "main contribution," relating to the themes that arise when considering the impact of the Holocaust on parenthood. Implicit, then, in this concept, is the idea of the self-sacrificing mother as martyr. This very idea has been perpetuated and criticised by Holocaust scholars throughout all aspects of Holocaust commemoration and representation, particularly Carmelle Stephens: "the semiotic narrative of martyrdom that influences the proliferation of particular imagery in popular Holocaust representations partly originates in Holocaust memoir" (2020, 96). Hertzog concurs, explaining "motherhood in the Holocaust has been treated mainly as a symbol of sacrifice and exemplary self-abnegation" (2009, 2).

There are reservations amongst survivors in exploring the more negative memories of their dead relatives. The idolisation of Holocaust victims is evident; survivor Viktor Frankl famously proclaimed that "we know [that] the best of us did not return" (7). M. Nutkiewicz interprets this as a "humble and strangely self-deprecating statement," regarding it "a comment about the survivor's guilt complex" (13). Isabella Leitner's depictions of her mother in *Fragments* certainly reflect such ideas. As put forth by Stephens, "[Isabella's] mother is a saintly paragon who plays a central role in the creation of an idealised vision of life before the cataclysmic events of the Holocaust. She becomes a posthumous source of comfort in moments of extreme suffering and transforms the traumatic events of the Holocaust into a coherent narrative in its aftermath" (2020, 97). Isabella reflects warmly on her childhood, referring to her mother as "noble" and as a "woman of love." She describes her mother's thirst for knowledge and her compassion for

other people, declaring her “a poor man’s Eleanor Roosevelt.” Her consistent return to her mother throughout her memoir as a beacon of reason and hope, particularly following the war years, addressing her directly, highlights Isabella’s perception of her mother as righteous and all-knowing. Her mother is certainly an example of idealised Holocaust victims, sanctified by those who mourn them. Nonetheless, some memoirists go against this tradition, with Clementi stating that they “tend not to follow the longstanding tradition of talking about victims of injustice in highly idealised terms,” and in terms of mother-daughter relationships, “women often don’t hide the fact that “hating” their mothers, even during the Holocaust, was as much a part of their relationship as depending on them for life and survival” (10). Using the example of Ruth Kluger’s memoir *Still Alive*, Clementi challenges this notion of idealisation, stating that Kluger seemingly has fewer reservations about exposing the misgivings of her mother. Similarly, Elli relates memories of her imprisonment with her mother in a more balanced manner than some of her memoirist counterparts, detailing incidents where both her and her mother’s behaviour challenge their notions of reasonable peacetime behaviour. This can be seen in particular instances explored above, where their behaviour goes against that which is traditionally expected of them within their role as mothers, and where they face distinct moments of conflict fraught with emotion and terror.

Langer’s Choiceless Choices

Langer’s “*choiceless choices*” are perhaps nowhere more visible than in the sphere of motherhood in the Lager, where the very conditions of the camps stripped women of the possibility of enacting motherhood in any recognisable or safe form. Pregnant women faced immediate danger: many were killed upon arrival, forced into abortions, or compelled to conceal their pregnancies to avoid selection. Mothers who entered the camps with children confronted the unbearable reality that staying with a child often meant being sent to death together, while separating might offer the mother a slim chance of surviving;

an impossible decision with no humane option. In the case of our memoirs, motherhood meant the considerations for daughters in an environment with little parental capacity. Even acts of maternal care within the Lager were shaped by deprivation so extreme that survival itself forced women into morally agonising situations. In Langer's framework, motherhood in the camps exemplifies choicelessness: decisions about protecting, relinquishing, or mourning children were made in a world where every path was shaped by coercion, terror, and the Nazi project of annihilation. In this context, maternal love persisted, but it unfolded within a moral landscape deliberately engineered to make such relationships constrained, and unbearably costly.

Concluding Remarks

Overall, this chapter has discussed the inherent risk which followed mothers victimised by the Nazi regime. Those who sacrificed their lives for their children are hailed as heroines, when those who chose not to come under intense scrutiny. Hertzog acknowledges that “the profoundly accepted norm is that the woman-mother does not, in effect, have the right to exist independently and apart from her children” (2016, 22). This chapter reveals the complexity between mothers and daughters, particularly where their relationship is challenged by the mechanisms of Nazi genocide. It exposes that the study of mothers and daughters; not just parents and children or mother and child must be conducted in order to access the true impact of the Holocaust- on women particularly but also in terms of the impact of the Holocaust as a whole, through the investigation of key themes which arise from depictions of varying mother-daughter relationships in selected memoirs. Each memoir is interlinked by themes of grief and loss, whether the author is grieving the loss of a parent murdered at the hands of the Nazis, grappling with the constant threat of loss of a

mother or indeed the loss of a secure relationship with their mother in the scape of genocide; one defined by clear boundaries between the parent and the child.

In examining motherhood in the lager through Carmelle Stephens's framework of maternal tropes, it becomes evident that the Nazi camp system not only shattered conventional notions of maternal care but also distorted the very foundations of familial structure. Stephens's insights into the elasticity and fragility of motherhood illuminate how camp conditions forced women into impossible positions where nurturing, protection, and emotional presence were constantly undermined by deprivation and terror. Within this environment, motherhood became both a site of resistance and a locus of profound psychological rupture.

The phenomena of parentification, parent-child role reversal, and boundary confusion reveal how the brutal logic of the camps collapsed age-appropriate roles and thrust children and mothers into new, often painful configurations of responsibility. Children were frequently compelled to assume adult functions—providing emotional support, assisting in survival strategies, or even comforting their mothers—thereby becoming caretakers in contexts where childhood was violently erased. Likewise, the inversion of authority, in which children sometimes possessed greater access to information, mobility, or work assignments, created a reversal that undermined traditional maternal authority and further destabilized family identity.

Boundary confusion intensified these distortions. The camps systematically dismantled private space, bodily autonomy, and familial intimacy, leaving mothers and children to navigate emotional landscapes where safety and vulnerability bled into one another without clear markers. Maternal behaviour, as Stephens suggests, became layered with contradictions: protective yet powerless, nurturing yet burdened by the impossibility of

shielding a child from suffering. These blurred boundaries were not the result of dysfunctional family dynamics but of a system designed to erode human relationships.

Ultimately, motherhood in the lager must be understood as a complex negotiation between agency and coercion, love and loss, identity and erasure. Through Stephens's maternal tropes, the experiences of mothers and children in the camps emerge not only as testimonies of unimaginable hardship but also as expressions of the enduring human instinct to preserve relational bonds even under the most dehumanizing conditions. In recognizing the parentification, role reversals, and boundary disintegration that shaped these relationships, we acknowledge both the resilience and trauma embedded in maternal narratives of the Holocaust.

Significantly, we must approach women-mothers who experienced the horrors of Nazism with the postfeminist knowledge that the existence of women is so much more than how their oppressors viewed them; whether that be the men of a society which constrains them, or the Nazis, whose violence was more overt, systematic and political. These women were mothers and daughters according to their biological destiny, but they were also human beings living through excessive brutality and persecution. Therefore, the terminology of paternal 'mistakes' and 'failures' must be treated carefully, and contextually rather than definitively. The exclusivity of the Holocaust as a unique genocidal event lies with the far-reaching impact of Nazism- a Europe-wide endeavour which sought to target women and men of various social, economic and religious backgrounds. This chapter highlights where some stories may converge and where they may differ from one another, while exploring the emotional impact of the Holocaust on mother-daughter relationships. Moreover, it seeks to free Jewish mothers from the extreme martyrdom forced upon them; a martyrdom which almost dehumanises them through extreme sanctification, resulting in an unspoken convention that under the terror of the Holocaust, there is a correct way in which people, especially women, should behave. An examination of relationships between mothers and

daughters in the traumatic environment of genocide in the extreme actively challenges the iconisation of the Jewish mother and depicts them as human beings under dual threat of unprecedented racial victimisation and misogyny, whilst giving insight into their daughters' relationship with their own experiences.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the gendered dimensions of women's experiences in the Holocaust by analysing the interplay of embodied suffering, interpersonal relationality, and maternal identity in the Nazi concentration and death camps. It is by no means exhaustive of all Holocaust experiences. By foregrounding women's testimonies, it has challenged longstanding historiographical patterns that privileged universalised, male-centred accounts and obscured the specific forms of violence and resilience expressed through women's bodies and relationships. As argued in the introduction, these experiences were not marginal variations on a male norm but essential aspects of the Holocaust's reality; dimensions embedded in the Nazi racial system, in the lived temporality of the Lager, and in the post-war narratives that survivors constructed. The overarching goal of this thesis has been to reclaim these gendered experiences from historical silence and analytical neglect, not to isolate them as anomalous but to recognise them as elemental to the broader terrain of Holocaust testimony. The three central theoretical frameworks for each chapter- Stacy Banwell's notion of the "woman-as-Jew," Primo Levi's "Grey Zone," and Carmelle Stephens's critique of the idealised maternal trope in Holocaust literature- have enabled a nuanced understanding of the ways women endured and navigated the Lager. In combination with Laurence Langer's concept of "choiceless choices," they have made it possible to approach agency, morality, and identity without distorting them through idealised, peacetime ethical lenses, or constrictive notions of gender roles. The conclusion

now brings these threads together, demonstrating how the modes of survival observed among Jewish women reveal a deeply intertwined set of embodied, relational, and maternal strategies shaped by coercion, vulnerability, and the persistent desire for meaning.

One of the central contributions of this thesis has been its attention to embodiment as both a site of violation and a source of subjective continuity. In the camps, the body became the primary arena in which Nazi domination was enacted. Banwell's concept of "woman-as-Jew" is crucial here: it highlights the fusion of antisemitic and misogynistic ideologies that rendered women's bodies uniquely dangerous in the racial logic of the regime (Banwell 145). The Nazi assault on women's bodies- public shaving, forced nudity, sexual humiliation, reproductive violence, invasive examinations, and repeated violations of bodily privacy-served not only to cause physical suffering but to destroy the dignity, autonomy, and symbolic integrity of women as bearers of community and continuity. Sensations of hunger, cold, pain, menstruation, pregnancy, and labour continued to shape identity in ways that anchored women to a sense of lived reality. Even under conditions of extreme degradation, the body became a ground upon which memory could attach itself.

The embodied experience cannot be separated from relationality, which formed the core of women's survival strategies within the Lager. Women cultivated friendships and symbiotic familial units, mutual aid networks, symbolic kinship roles, and nurtured fragments of cultural or spiritual life, often in direct defiance of the camp's atomising mechanisms. These bonds were not always harmonious or heroic; they were shaped by scarcity, fear, and coercion. Levi's "Grey Zone" illuminates the moral complexity inherent in these interactions, offering a framework that resists simplistic judgments about victim conduct (Levi 1988, 37). Survival depended on negotiations, compromises, and sometimes ethically fraught decisions. Hierarchies among prisoners, assigned privileges, desperate bargains, or small betrayals cannot be interpreted through a binary of innocence or guilt. Instead, the Grey Zone underscores that even acts of care or solidarity existed within a universe where

agency was severely constricted and where every choice carried the shadow of Langer's "choiceless choices" (Langer 1982, 72). Women's relational bonds thus reveal a moral landscape characterised not by perfect altruism but by persistent, context-dependent efforts to maintain dignity, connection, and ethical integrity amid profound coercion.

The final thread of the thesis- that of maternal identity- demonstrates how embodiment and relationality converge in a particularly powerful way. Stephens's critique of the idealised maternal trope in Holocaust memory challenges the post-war tendency to depict mothers as one-dimensional figures of sacrifice or purity (Stephens 2018; 2020.) The testimonies examined throughout this project reveal a far more complex maternal reality: mothers who made impossible decisions under coercion, who experienced guilt when unable to protect their children, who relied upon symbolic motherhood as a coping mechanism, or who were themselves supported by their children in patterns of parentification. These dynamics complicate the conventional feminist model that assumes maternal care as an inherently empowering or morally unambiguous force. Instead, maternal identity in the Lager was fragmented, overwhelmed, and reshaped by starvation, separation, terror, and the systemic murder of infants and pregnant women. As such, motherhood became both a burden and a lifeline: a source of despair and a beacon of meaning. Taken together, the three chapters have shown that women's experiences cannot be reduced to any singular pattern of victimhood or resilience. Embodiment, relationality, and motherhood are not discrete categories; they are overlapping fields of experience through which women navigated the impossible. Embodiment conditioned relationality, as women's physical vulnerability shaped their capacity to care for others or to engage in mutual aid. Relationality shaped motherhood, as symbolic kinship emerged to replace lost biological ties. Maternal identity shaped embodiment, as women experienced their own bodily suffering through the lens of reproductive trauma or responsibility. These interlocking experiences made women's survival strategies deeply multidimensional. A major purpose of this conclusion is to

emphasise the ethical implications of these findings for Holocaust scholarship and memory work. Traditional historiography has often struggled to incorporate gender without reproducing essentialist assumptions or sentimentalising women's behaviour. By integrating feminist and phenomenological frameworks, this thesis demonstrates that gender is not a secondary or supplementary lens but a necessary corrective to universalising tendencies. Attending to women's testimonies foregrounds forms of violence and survival that cannot be seen otherwise—sexualised humiliation, covert relational networks, symbolic motherhood, the parentification of children, or the embodied experience of menstruation, pregnancy, miscarriage, and reproductive terror. These dimensions expand the historical record and deepen our understanding of the everyday life-worlds of women in the camps.

Moreover, the integration of Langer's "choiceless choices" offers an ethical vocabulary that resists moralising interpretations of survivor behaviour. Women who bartered sexual favours for food, who favoured daughters over strangers, or who formed exclusive relational bonds in order to survive have often been judged through retrospective moral frameworks that ignore the coercive conditions of the Lager. Langer reminds us that in situations of radical oppression, choices rarely reflect true agency; rather, they represent constrained decisions between competing horrors (Langer 1982, 74). This perspective compels us to approach women's experiences with humility and compassion, recognising the limits of moral evaluation under genocide.

Similarly, Levi's *Grey Zone* disrupts narratives that portray women's relationships as inherently selfless or morally superior. Instead, this thesis has shown that relationality among women was shaped by complicated emotional and pragmatic calculations. Acts of solidarity coexisted alongside fear, rivalry, resentment, or privilege. Acknowledging these dynamics does not diminish women's courage; it highlights their humanity. It also resists the gendered romanticisation that has sometimes characterised early feminist scholarship,

which—though well-intentioned—risked replicating essentialist assumptions about women’s inherent moral purity or nurturing dispositions.

Stephens’s intervention regarding motherhood is equally significant for the ethics of testimony. The maternal trope often used in Holocaust memory has sentimentalised mothers as symbols rather than attending to the fractured, painful, and morally conflicted reality many endured. By returning to survivor accounts that highlight maternal despair, frustration, or ambivalence, this thesis seeks to restore complexity to maternal identity. Motherhood, as experienced in the camps, was not a stable role but a dynamic negotiation of responsibility, fear, love, guilt, and survival.

The concluding insight of this thesis is that women’s experiences, understood through the entangled frames of embodiment, relationality, and maternal identity, constitute a powerful challenge to universalised narratives of the Holocaust. These dimensions illuminate aspects of camp life that remain invisible in testimonies that focus primarily on labour, hierarchy, and political identity. They also reveal how gender operated within Nazi ideology and practice, shaping both the methods of violence and the survival strategies available to women. Furthermore, the findings of this thesis carry important implications for the ethics of witnessing. Testimonies are not neutral documents; they are shaped by memory, trauma, cultural norms, and the expectations of audiences. When women minimise or silence experiences of sexual violence, when they present their relationships as less conflicted than they were, or when they describe their maternal decisions through the lens of post-war guilt, these narrative effects are themselves part of the historical record. Recognising the pressures shaping testimony allows for a more compassionate and accurate engagement with survivor voices. It also demands that scholars avoid projecting normative ideals of femininity, motherhood, or moral behaviour onto women who faced circumstances beyond all normative frameworks.

In closing, this thesis reaffirms that understanding the Holocaust requires attention not only to its political and structural dimensions but also to the intimate, gendered spaces in which violence and survival were enacted. The bodies of Jewish women, their relationships with one another, and their maternal identities formed core sites of both vulnerability and resilience. These dimensions testify not only to the destructiveness of Nazi ideology but also to the persistence of human subjectivity in the face of extreme oppression. Women's experiences reveal agency—not heroic or autonomous, but emergent, constrained, and often morally ambiguous. They also reveal how the smallest acts of care, memory, and connection can become profound assertions of humanity. By returning to women's voices, this thesis participates in ongoing efforts to reshape the landscape of Holocaust scholarship. It calls for continued attention to gendered experiences, continued interrogation of moral categories in the context of genocide, and continued humility before the testimonies of survivors whose words offer the closest access we have to the lived reality of the Shoah. The Holocaust cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the gendered suffering and survival of Jewish women. Their stories challenge us to rethink not only history but also the categories through which we interpret moral action, identity, and the possibility of meaning in conditions of extreme suffering. In embracing these complexities, we move closer to an ethical form of witnessing; one that honours the full humanity of the women whose lives form the centre of this study. This thesis is by no means an exhaustive investigation into the experiences of Jewish women in the Lager. It is by no means the final word on the divergence of female experiences during the Holocaust in its entirety. It is, however, an invitation to scholars to address and challenge the twofold universalism that plights female Holocaust experiences: the subsummation of women's Holocaust experiences into that of their male counterparts *and* the exclusionary nature of viewing such experiences in the context of perceived female roles. It is a contribution which accepts the struggle to conceptualise the Holocaust but understands that embracing authentic female survivor histories releases women from constricting societal roles, and

leads us to a richer, more free mode of Holocaust remembrance for its survivors and victims.

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