

**TRACING THE DESTRUCTION OF WOMEN'S BODIES: SURVIVOR
TESTIMONIES OF MENSTRUATION IN THE HOLOCAUST**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, based on 132 survivor testimonies, examines menstruation during the Holocaust as another way National Socialism assaulted, abused, and decimated women's bodies. Women reveal that due to the lack of bathrooms, adequate sanitary napkins, and proper hygienic practices in concentration, slave labour, and death camps, experiencing a monthly cycle while imprisoned resulted in a gendered form of terror. Survivors detail the short and long-term effects of their experiences with menstruation, including physical violence and fear of death, infertility, and a loss of feminine identity. This form of gendered humiliation and the dehumanizing nature of the camps affected women's bodies into the post-war period. This thesis, the first scholarly work to look specifically this topic, further complicates the narrative of women's lives in the Holocaust, by exploring the ways menstruation, in both its occurrence and disappearance, impacted how women lived and died.

DEDICATION

To the women. Your resilience is unparalleled.

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My last two years at UNB have been the most difficult while simultaneously the most rewarding, and writing this thesis has challenged and encouraged me in ways I never expected. It has ultimately led me to push my limits and has inspired me to find love and sanity in the most unique places. Thank you to the UNB History department for taking a chance and believing in me, at a time when I didn't believe in myself. This program and the people within it have taught me to think, understand, and listen in a way that's constantly evolving. Thank you for always letting me express myself, even if it was talking about menstruation at 8:30am in the lounge. I always felt heard. To the women professors in the UNB History department, thank you for always reminding me how powerful, important, and impressive the female voice is. Every time I look down the Tilley hallway, I am inspired by your resilience, scholarship, and ability to dismantle parts of the patriarchy. The lessons you have taught me both inside and outside the classroom, have shaped me as a scholar, feminist, and a woman. I am forever grateful for that.

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Introduction

In 1944 Helen F. was deported from Satu Mare, Romania to Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹ Twenty-three years old, sitting in the mud with her sister Miriam, Helen was waiting for directions from the Nazis about where to sleep. Miriam, was the mother of a two-year-old child who was taken from her and killed only hours earlier by the Nazis.² Heartbroken and devastated, Helen recalled how her sister's emotions and grief became too much for her own body and its natural reaction was to menstruate.³ In Helen's oral history testimony, archived by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), she stated that her sister Miriam got "her period, too, from the big excitement – and I couldn't let her sit in the mud, so I said 'You know what? It makes no sense that both of us should

¹ Within this thesis, female survivors will be explicitly referred to in the text by their first name and the first letter of their last name. This is in an attempt to retain some anonymity for the survivors; however, it is important to note that all of the testimonies are available for public consumption. Therefore, the women were aware that their testimonies could be used for a project such as this one. It is also important to note that this thesis will refer to the survivors as female or woman and will be done through a gyno-centric lens. The literature and scholarship on Transgender, Cisgender women, and those who identify as non-binary are very important and underrepresented in Holocaust scholarship. However, this thesis will look overtly at the biological makeup of women to understand how both the occurrence and disappearance of menstruation affected female survivors. This thesis examines female sexuality, and the abuse and assault against women's bodies in the Holocaust. This thesis is in no way stating that men did not experience forms of sexual, verbal, and/or emotional assault by the Nazis. This is instead an examination of the biological functions and makeup of the female body, and how that subjected them to very gendered forms of abuse. Lastly, often this work uses the term 'non-Aryan' when discussing the survivors. While I understand the largest persecuted group in the Holocaust was the Jewish population, I will be using oral testimonies from women of all different backgrounds, who were persecuted for many different reasons.

² Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

³ Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

sit in the mud. I'll sit in the mud, you sit in my lap.”⁴ It was here that Helen recognized the double burden with which, not only her sister, but almost every woman in the Holocaust had to contend: the hells and horrors of the Holocaust while they simultaneously experienced both the occurrence and disappearance of their menstrual cycles.⁵

Helen's oral testimony was one of the first conversations I heard that explicitly discussed what it was like to witness, experience, and lose a menstrual cycle inside the Nazi camps. Helen returned to the conversation of her menses several times, and each admission revealed a new detail or emotion that was attached to her biological function. Helen's pointed and open discussion of her monthly cycle prompted me to look further into female survivor's oral testimonies. It became clear early on in the research for this thesis, that survivors of the Holocaust recalled explicit moments in their internment where they experienced their own, or witnessed a fellow prisoner, deal with a menstrual cycle. This moment became a foundational aspect of their imprisonment when they realized that their biological makeup would impact how they would live and die within the walls of the camps. Further, these oral testimonies of female survivors began to illuminate a divide between the experiences and survival techniques of men and women, and thus it became a moment in women's oral testimonies that revealed a very personal

⁴ Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

⁵ While Holocaust is one of the most recognized terms to discuss the mass murder of 6 million people of Jewish faith, the terms Final Solution, Nazi-orchestrated genocide, and Shoah can all be interchangeably used, and the author is aware of the slight differences between them.

detail of life during the Holocaust. This thesis examines menstruation during the Holocaust, as another example of the ways National Socialism assaulted, abused, and decimated women's bodies.⁶ I argue that women experienced an intensely gendered form of humiliation inside the Nazi camp and ghetto systems, due to their ability to menstruate. This research, based on written memoirs and oral testimonies, complicates scholarship on gender and genocide by creating a new understanding of women's relationships with their bodies in conditions of extreme violence.

Despite the plethora of Holocaust survivor oral testimonies dealing with menstruation, there remains a resistance, in both the public and academic spheres, to recognizing the importance, or legitimacy, of this work. In fact, it took until the 2000s for gender and sexuality in the Holocaust to be accepted as a viable subject, with work only beginning in the late 1980s. Therefore, the challenge attached to writing a thesis in part, is due to the deeply engrained societal taboo that currently still exists. A notable example comes from a research trip I completed in the summer of 2018, at the Auschwitz-Birkenau Archives. I had been in contact with the archivist for several months leading up to my visit and had presented them with a detailed explanation of my research and my thesis. However, upon my arrival, the archivist's first question was, "why are you writing on this? Women don't talk about it." While the subject matter is sensitive and still considered taboo for both casual and academic discussions, the archivist's question further illuminates the very need for this study. Because of the patricentric archive, these

⁶ Baer, Elizabeth Roberts, and Myrna Goldenberg. *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. 11.

women's stories are scattered, disorganized, and at times, silenced. Thus, this thesis will be applying a feminist lens to women's testimonies to investigate how women saw their own bodies during their internment as victims of Nazi violence. Like Helen, all the women examined throughout this thesis have, on their own terms, discussed menstruation in the oral testimonies. Therefore, this topic is something the survivors themselves believed to be a critical element in the understanding of the Holocaust.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, my peers, colleagues, and professors, were openly supportive and encouraging of my pursuit of this subject matter. However, I was also questioned on the legitimacy of this project, with questions such as, 'why does this matter?' Or, 'how does this deepen the historical understandings and research on the Holocaust?' On several occasions, I was even made to feel embarrassed or ashamed for explaining my topic to people outside of my field. Primarily, men would respond with, "well I did not need to know about *that*", refusing to even repeat the word menstruation. The avoidance of conversation pertaining to menstruation, demonstrates that there are major patriarchal constraints on historical subjects that specifically deal with women's bodies. Thus, when a new subject breaches the historical norm, historians are made to feel uncomfortable. One of the main goals of this thesis is to demonstrate the legitimacy and importance of this topic.

Methodology

As the first work to explicitly look at women and menstruation inside the Nazi camp and ghetto systems, this thesis relies heavily on primary source research. Specifically, I utilized oral testimonies from survivors of the Holocaust that were

previously conducted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, and are accessible through online databases. I also conducted on-site archival research at the Archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim, Poland and at the National Institute for Holocaust Documentation at the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, in Washington, D.C. The combination of these resources allowed me to read, listen to, and watch, 132 distinct oral testimonies. Most of these testimonies allowed me to examine the continuities and changes of how women discussed their monthly cycle during the Holocaust, through to the post-war period. However, there is still work to be done on this topic. When a researcher uses the keyword ‘menstruation’ in the database search engines, 115 different results appear on the USHMM website, with an additional 870 results on the USC Shoah database. This large number of testimonies once again demonstrates the degree to which women discussed their own bodies and their relationship to menstruation and how it impacted how they lived and died.

Being the first work to openly discuss menstruation in the Holocaust, it is my goal to shatter the constraints and normalize the historical discussion of menstruation. Thus, the thesis relies on feminist methodologies and approaches, such as those used by Zoë Waxman’s in her 2017 book, *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*, in which she acknowledges that “this book...is not only written on the premise that gender is culturally constructed and conditioned. It is also, quite explicitly, a feminist history. In other words, it is predicated on the assumption that feminists are right to see gender not only as

universal but as a system of oppression – a system that operates to subordinate women.”⁷ Applying Waxman’s understanding and explanation of gender, my goal is to further complicate the feminist lens presented in the current scholarship on gender and sexuality in the Holocaust. Through feminism, this thesis seeks to understand, reveal, and explore women’s relationships with their own bodies through their oral testimonies.

This thesis has also been methodologically shaped by Joan Sangster’s chapter, “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral Testimonies,” to understand how to center my work around the voices of the survivors while simultaneously addressing how their testimonies contribute to a larger project in the field of feminist Holocaust scholarship. This thesis has specifically noted Sangster’s argument that “we need to avoid the tendency, still evident in historical works, of treating oral history as a panacea designed to fill the blanks in women’s or traditional history, providing ‘more’ history, compensating where we have no other sources, or ‘better’ history, a ‘purer’ version of the past coming, unadulterated, from the very people who experienced it.”⁸ In following this practice, the thesis has refrained from conducting interviews, as a way to highlight the many women who have already discussed menstruation. Instead it relies on the organic inclusion of menstruation in testimonies since the beginning of the 1980s until the present day. The research findings in this thesis have been shaped by the 132 distinct survivor testimonies; however, I have consciously decided to include excerpts from fewer narratives. These testimonies all include very

⁷ Zoë Waxman. *Women in the Holocaust: A Feminist History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.⁷

⁸ Joan Sangster. “Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History.” In *The Oral History Reader*. Edited by Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson. Routledge: New York, 1998. 88.

traumatic and heavy discussions of gendered and personal aspects of individual lives. Therefore, by focusing upon a small number, it allows the narratives the space and agency they deserve. Because the testimonies used in this research discuss exceptionally difficult and heartbreaking moments of individual lives, I referred to Petra M. Schweitzer's *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust: Writing Life* for guidance on navigating the dehumanization of, and assaults against, women's bodies. As Schweitzer argued, "within the framework of the concentration camp, the female bodies are owned by the Nazi regime for the purpose of annihilation... The female body becomes a subject to display and public denouncement in a space from which there is no escape; the nakedness of the women embodies their body as an object of destruction to the perpetrator's gaze."⁹ This statement reaffirmed my understanding of Nazi views of 'non-Aryan' women's bodies, which directly impacted how women viewed their own bodies in the Holocaust. It also allowed me to investigate the Nazis' targeting of the women's reproductive bodies and to further understand the ways in which women discussed their own bodies as a weapon that could be used against them in times of war. Moreover, Schweitzer's methodological approaches allowed this thesis to recognize the female body as a target of Nazi violence, which created a burdened relationship between women and the way they viewed themselves under Nazi rule.

This thesis views the inclusion of conversations about menstruation in oral testimonies as a symbol of humanity and humility. I argue that this subject symbolized

⁹ Petra M. Schweitzer. *Gendered Testimonies of the Holocaust: Writing Life*. London: Lexington Books, 2016. 75.

that under the inhumane and horrific conditions of the Nazi camps, the women were still human. Their blood reminded them that they were able to bring the next generation of children into the world, and by stating this in the testimony, it was a reminder to both the survivor and the interviewer that they still contained humanity within them, regardless of the conditions created by the Nazis. There were four distinct ways that conversations on menstruation entered into oral testimonies. First, the interviewer asked a vague question pertaining to menstruation inside the camps or ghetto, and the survivor would give short, succinct answers. These women often seemed uncomfortable, but still acknowledged their menses. Second, the interviewer asked about menstruation, and the survivors would provide detailed answers and would willingly engage in conversation. Third, some survivors asked the interviewer if they were allowed to discuss ‘women’s talk’. These women wanted to discuss their menses but felt uncomfortable discussing it without an acknowledgment that the interviewer was going to engage in conversation with them. Finally, some female interviewees quite randomly mentioned the disappearance of their menstrual cycles. These comments often came without any pretext and unfortunately, in most cases, were not probed further by the interviewer.

Two examples illustrate these differences. Genia G., in her oral testimony conducted by the USHMM, recalled her imprisonment inside the Nazi concentration camp Grünberg in Schlesian, located outside Berlin. Throughout the testimony she discussed her pre-war life, the transport to the concentration camp, and thoroughly explained the conditions inside the camps. However, when the interviewer posed the

question, “did you lose your menstruation?” Genia quickly responded, “definitely.”¹⁰ The interviewer continued to ask five more questions that pertained to menstruation to which Genia answered with an abruptly short one-word answer. For many, Genia’s responses might seem irrelevant or nondescript. However, in her answers she revealed necessary information to understand how women lived in the camps. However, they also demonstrated another important aspect in the conversation surrounding menstruation. Often these women seemed uncomfortable or unsure of how much they should state, or if they should even answer the question. Their uncertainty is likely rooted in the deeply engrained societal taboo that is attached to menstruation. Perhaps in the 1980s when the interviews were conducted, women felt insecure or unable to discuss their bodies and their experiences with menstruation without disrupting societal norms?

In contrast, Magda S., in her interview conducted by Ellen Szakal and Judy Antelman at the USHMM, was prompted with the question, “one often hears that women stopped menstruating. Is that true?”¹¹ This question again defied the norm for questions asked in oral testimonies. However, the questions presented by the interviewers were quite vague, so the survivors could answer in as much or as little detail as they felt necessary. In her answer Magda stated, “Yes. Yes. Yes. We didn’t menstruate, no. Again I don’t know whether they put something in the food. Yet we hardly ate the soups, or I

¹⁰ Genia Ganger. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 12 April 1983.

¹¹ Magda Silberman. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 26 August 1992.

don't even know what it was lacking of something. I don't know. At times they said they did put something in the food. I'll tell you it was a good thing there was no menstruation. Otherwise, I mean, all these women – what can you do?"¹² In her response Magda answers with quite a bit of detail and reveals her emotional response to the disappearance of her menses. Magda and the large number of Holocaust survivors who had elaborate responses to questions about menstruation demonstrate the necessity and willingness to have this conversation.

The third type of conversation that emerged in oral testimonies, was with survivors who wanted to discuss their monthly cycles, but did not feel comfortable bringing it up in the interview without any context. Therefore, many survivors asked the interviewer permission before they started discussing their experiences with menstruation. Helen B., in her interview with the USHMM, was in the middle of talking about food in the camps, when she turned to the interviewer and asked, "I want to mention something. Can I? It's a little more women's talk." When the interviewer agreed, Helen stated that "we had very little nutrition and no vegetables. And most young ladies – I don't know how to..." To which the interviewer questioned, "Menstruation?" Helen responded, "Lost their menstruation. I remember it took some ladies two, three years with good nourishment and with good food and they became back ladies, and maybe this is

¹² Magda Silberman. "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children's Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties." Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 26 August 1992.

one of my reasons that I have no children.”¹³ Helen’s interjection during the interview is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that she was self-conscious and concerned that the interviewer was not going to engage in conversation on menstruation, which for Helen was clearly an important aspect of her internment that has continued to plague her and how she views her body. Second, Helen’s willingness to discuss menstruation validated the complexities and fears attached to women’s bodies while they were interned. Helen also complicates the conversation around menstruation to show how Nazi violence left lasting effects on her body, in turn, altering her relationship and understanding of her biological makeup. This testimony also, demonstrates the vastly different ways survivors thought about menstruation and deepens the narrative of women’s experiences with it within the Holocaust.

Many women felt it necessary to discuss menstruation regardless of their interviewer’s intentions, and thus women began randomly mentioning menstruation in their oral testimonies. Their comments often came without any pretext and unfortunately in most cases was not probed further by the interviewer. This can be seen in Regina L’s oral testimony with the USC Shoah foundation. The interviewer questioned Regina about the medical help, or lack thereof in Ober Altstadt concentration camp. It is here that Regina casually admits, “another thing we didn’t...we didn’t menstruate. I don’t know what did it. Most of the girls were amazed. I was just beginning to be a girl... I was just

¹³ Helen Bromberg. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 1989.

beginning. There was no cycle. None of the women had their periods at that time.”¹⁴ This random admission of an immensely personal experience suggests to the listeners that the loss of Regina’s menses was a monumental moment inside the camp, so much so that she needed it to be included in her oral testimony. Therefore, survivors who saw the necessity in discussing, or at the very least mentioning their monthly cycles in their oral testimonies demonstrated that the loss highlighted a key moment in their internment, one that was worthy of mention even if they were not asked directly about it. Regardless of the length of the discussion, when the loss of menstruation was discussed by the survivor it represented their understanding of its significance. Therefore, for many women the loss of menstruation directly contributed to the gendered double burden and violence they experienced while interned during the Holocaust.

The emergence of these four distinct ways conversation surrounding the conversation of menstruation entered into oral testimonies conducted by both the USHMM and the USC Shoah Foundation reaffirms the vast and complex terrors and humiliations that accompanied being a woman inside the Nazi camps. From short one-word answers to detailed conversations about menstruation, all of the women’s admissions of their experiences with a lost monthly cycle contributes to the complexities of how women survived and lived inside the Nazi camps with the disappearance of their menses.

¹⁴ Regina Lewin. “University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Collection.” Interview. Conducted by Deborah Kattler-Kupetz. 27 January 1995.

Throughout the survivor's testimonies, it became evident that women discussed their menses in several distinct ways. They either recalled living with a menstruation inside the walls of the camps, they discussed what it was like to lose a monthly cycle, or they reflected on the long-term reproductive effects of this loss. Therefore, for clarity, this thesis separates women's experiences with menstruation into three distinct chapters. Chapter One examines the existing scholarship on gender, sexuality, and menstruation, and illuminates the necessity for a comprehensive work solely focused on women's complex relationship with their bodies, and specifically their monthly cycles during the Holocaust. Chapter Two examines women who either menstruated inside the Nazi camps or ghettos, or who witnessed women menstruate. Within these testimonies the women reveal that due to the lack of bathrooms, adequate sanitary napkins, and proper hygienic practices, experiencing a monthly cycle while imprisoned resulted in an extremely gendered form of terror, one that forced them to feel humiliated and betrayed by their own bodies, and to resort to extreme measures. The chapter further examines how menstruation in the camps could lead to physical violence, humiliation, and the fear of death.

Chapter Three explores the oral testimonies of women who discussed the short and long-term effects of a lost menstrual cycle. Within the 132 oral testimonies examined for this thesis, there emerged distinct conversations surrounding the short-term effects of a lost menstrual cycle. For instance, many survivors referred to the cessation as a welcomed disappearance. Often the testimonies used positively reinforced language, noting that if all the imprisoned women menstruated there would have been a

‘unmanageable’ mess.¹⁵ Many women also believed the Nazis added chemicals to their morning ‘coffee’ or ‘tea’ to unnaturally force the cessation of their monthly cycles.¹⁶ However, this chapter also investigates the long-term effects a lost menses had on women’s emotional and biological resilience in the post-war period. Many women experienced infertility or felt betrayed and confused by their own gender identities. Thus, this chapter will further explore how gendered humiliation did not just exist within the confines of the Nazi camps and ghetto systems. Rather, the dehumanizing nature of the camps exploited and affected women’s bodies well into the post-war period.

The combination of these three chapters seeks to articulate how female survivors’ experiences with menstruation inside the walls of the Nazi camps and ghettos, and during the post-Holocaust era, critically impacted women’s relationships with their own bodies. While this thesis explicitly explores oral testimonies of female survivors of the Holocaust, it is important to remember those women whose lives were taken from them by the Nazis; the millions who experienced a menstrual cycle inside the Nazi camps and the women who quickly lost their menses, who were simultaneously abused, assaulted, and murdered. In the ground-breaking documentary film *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann interviewed Filip Müller, a former *Sonderkommando* in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Müller was remembering the unbearable task of collecting the perished bodies from the gas chambers

¹⁵ Cecilia Einhorn. “The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Lynn Rappaport. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 12 November 1984.

¹⁶ The women always refer to coffee or tea that they were given in the morning, but quickly qualify this statement by explaining that these drinks were often just hot dirty water they had to drink in the morning.

when the interviewer had asked him if he was ever witness to bodily excrement. To this Müller responded, “yes, the people...vomited...bleeding. From their ears, from their noses, there was menstrual blood maybe. Not maybe, for sure. All that was going on in the fight for life, in death.”¹⁷ As Filip demonstrates menstruation factored into all aspects of life and death inside the Nazi camp systems. Similarly, Rena G. a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau recalled in her memoir that she was, “afraid of what getting my period means in this place...dealing with the curse means praying that it will go away quickly and never return.”¹⁸ These two sentiments presented in testimonies by survivors who lived very different lives within the Nazi camps, exemplifies the constant fears and anxieties that were attached with to a menstrual cycle. It also demonstrates how its occurrence and absence was acknowledged by both males and females, but truly these statements illuminate how women were forced to live and die inside the Nazi camps while contending with their menstrual cycles.

¹⁷ *Claude Lanzmann Shoah Collection, Interview with Filip Müller.* Directed by Claude Lanzmann. Interview with Filip Müller. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 1979.

¹⁸ Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam. *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. 75.

Chapter One: The Historiography of Women, Gender, and Sexuality in the Holocaust

For decades following the end of the Second World War, the history of the Holocaust was largely dominated by male-centric narratives and scholarship that largely discounted the importance of women's history, gendered analysis, and the history of sexuality. It was not until the 1980s that the discussion of gender entered into the field of Holocaust scholarship and academics began to discuss the reality of what it meant to be a woman persecuted by the Nazis.¹⁹ As a way to include women in the conversation of the Final Solution, Esther Katz, Joan Ringelheim, Sybil Milton and Myrna Goldenberg organized the first conference that solely examined the female experience in the Holocaust. They faced sharp criticism from scholars such as Lawrence Langer and Ruth Bondy, who argued that the study of the Holocaust through a gendered lens further divided the scholarship and detracted from the overall understanding of genocide. Instead, they firmly believed that the Nazis' goal was to exterminate all Jews, based on 'race,' disregarding markers such as gender and sexuality.

This chapter illustrates how, from the foundational works on women and the Holocaust, the scholarship expanded to look at how gender and sexuality impacted the experiences of Holocaust victims. Exploring both gender and sexuality, Marlene E. Heinemann, Anna Hájková, Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion A. Kaplan

¹⁹ Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossmann, and Marion A. Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny: Women in Weimar and Nazi Germany*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1984. 297.

looked at how sexual assault, rape, and female sexuality subjected women to very different horrors in the Nazi camp systems. Scholars Sonja M. Hedgepeth, Rochelle G. Sidel, and Vera Laska, have all contributed work on menstrual cycles within the Nazi camps, but they have tended to discuss the subject briefly, and only as part of other studies. While these works are essential in the understanding of how the Nazis systematically attacked the biological makeup of women's bodies, there is still a gap in the literature. There remains no extensive scholarly work that considers the multifaceted connections between gendered suffering, menstruation, and the treatment of women's bodies inside the Nazi camps and ghettos. This MA thesis intends to fill that gap.

The Debate on Gendered Holocaust Studies

In 1983, Joan Ringelheim and Esther Katz introduced a new narrative to the scholarship of the Holocaust. As the founders of the "first conference to look at women surviving the Holocaust," their goal was to, "aid both scholars who have just begun to look at the issue of gender with regard to the Holocaust, and women survivors who have not heretofore had a place to speak, either as women or as survivors."²⁰ It was the first time women were given an outlet to express their unique experiences. With more than 400 women participating, the conference led to ground-breaking work. As the conference began, organizers presented the question, "why women?" to the

²⁰ Esther Katz and Joan Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. New York, N.Y.: Institute for Research in History, 1983.1

participants.²¹ The conference sought to demonstrate how gender contributed to how women lived within the walls of the Nazi camps. Speakers examined relationships, survival tactics, love, vulnerabilities, and oppression as a way to answer the question, “what was it that women did to get through the day?”²² The participants were either survivors, children of survivors, and/or scholars, the conversations unveiled information that set the parameters of gendered Holocaust studies and sparked interest in a field that at the time had very little literature written on it.²³ When the conference was conceptualized in 1979, scholars believed it was in their best interest to begin their research by interviewing female survivors.²⁴ Susan was the first survivor interviewed for the conference, and the questions Susan answered ranged from her parents’ names, her place of birth, to if she knew of any rapes in resistance groups.²⁵ Throughout the interview process, the female survivors had begun to discuss experiences that were unique to their gender because of their biological makeup. Thus, Ringelheim and Katz aimed to make the conference the first-time female survivors were formally questioned on how their experiences in the camps differed from men’s.²⁶ The new attention and focus on female survivors opened the discussion for further investigation on how they

²¹ Katz, Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 22

²² Katz, Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 25

²³Baer, Elizabeth Roberts, and Myrna Goldenberg. *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. Xviii.

²⁴ Ringelheim, Katz. “Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 22.

²⁵ Katz, Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 24.

²⁶Katz and Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 26.

survived the Holocaust as women. It gave the survivors the authority to differentiate their experiences and became a tool that changed the narrative of Holocaust scholarship.

As both a Holocaust survivor and a scholar at the 1983 conference, Sybil Milton accompanied the 400 other participants in sharing their personal experiences. However, Milton also presented a paper on the first day of the conference entitled “Issues and Resources.” This presentation gave a brief but thorough introduction to the oppression and violence done by the Nazis to German and German-Jewish women, with a focus on pre-war persecution. By connecting this discussion to the topic of female prisoners in the Nazi camp system, Milton outlined and examined how gender subjected women to very different forms of violence in comparison to male prisoners.²⁷ For instance, Milton discussed women’s unique relationship to food inside the camp system, in contrast to men’s.²⁸ Women swapped recipes inside the camps, and discussed their favourite dishes to both eat and make. Food became a form of comfort and a direct correlation to their home life before the war.²⁹ Something as mundane as eating became a factor in how women survived under the Third Reich. Food also represented a gendered aspect to survival. Women imagined themselves in a kitchen, working together to imagine a dish that for a moment relieved them of the hells and horrors of the Nazi camps. Milton emphasized how gender affected the ways that women lived inside the Nazi camps in a

²⁷ Katz, Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 15-16.

²⁸ Katz, Ringelheim. Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 17.

²⁹ Ringelheim, Katz., Conference on Women Surviving: the Holocaust, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving--the Holocaust*. 17

new and specific way that forced scholars to reimagine and restructure the linear narratives of Holocaust experiences.

Milton went on to contribute “Women and the Holocaust: The Case of German and German-Jewish Women” to Renate Bridenthal, Atina Grossman, and Marion Kaplan’s influential 1984 work, *When Biology Became Destiny*.³⁰ The chapter came a year after the conference and highlighted the same themes Milton presented in her paper; however, she also incorporated testimonies conducted at the conference. Within this chapter, Milton noted the bias that was not only in her own work because of her personal experiences in the Nazi camp system, but also the bias in the previous work done by Holocaust scholars who only looked at it through the stories of male survivors.³¹ By addressing the male-centric narrative, this chapter sought to examine the role of German and German-Jewish women, and to explore how they were targeted and persecuted. With a direct focus on the Nazis’ entrenched sexism in the prewar period, this work led scholars to better understand how gender affected women in the Nazi camp systems. Milton maintained that in Germany, in 1939, there was 123,104 female Jews, in comparison to 90,826 male Jews.³² With such a large difference in the Jewish male to Jewish female ratio in Germany, Milton argued that “more German-Jewish women than men were deported and murdered after October 1941.”³³ Arguably one of the most important aspects of sexism she revealed was how violence was targeted at the biological

³⁰ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 297.

³¹ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 297.

³² Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 301.

³³ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 301.

make-up of women's bodies. Specifically, Milton used an example of a Nazi guard who attacked a woman at the prisoner-of-war (POW) camp Hohenstein³⁴. She recalled that, "SA men tripped the marching women with night sticks and extended [their] legs, threw water up their skirts and then teased them for 'urinating' and insulted them as 'slovenly sluts.'"³⁵ Using a feminist lens, Milton demonstrated to her fellow Holocaust scholars the importance of studying women and gendered differences, in order to gain a more complete understanding of the Holocaust.³⁶

When Biology Became Destiny also compared Jewish women's freedoms and equalities in the Weimar Republic, to women's experiences of violence and oppression in the National Socialist State, to lastly the United States under the Presidency of Ronald Reagan. The scholars saw this triad of comparisons as a way to enlighten their readers "to the debate on how feminists and the leftist and the left – and the leftist feminists in particular – could respond to the New Right's assault on women's reproductive rights [in the United States]."³⁷ This was a very theoretical approach to understand what it meant to be a woman in a state that had repressive laws against sexuality, access to abortion, and to contraceptives. Bridenthal, Grossman, and Kaplan looked at how the biological makeup of the female body destined women, and in particular Jewish women to a certain

³⁴ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 303.

SA is an abbreviation for *Sturmabteilung*. An organization within the Nazi Government, the SA department was in charge of rallies, meetings, ensuing violence, and intimidating anyone they believed could not contribute to the Third Reich. See Pierre Ayçoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich: 1933-1945* (New York: New Press, 1999).

³⁵ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 303.

³⁶ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 230.

³⁷ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. XI.

fate.³⁸ This fate subjected them to violence from neighbours, classmates, and the Nazis. In doing so they highlighted the different forms of assault on Jewish women but dedicated the majority of their chapters to German women. They emphasized how biology predestined Jewish or German-Jewish women to certain gendered roles when they were living in Germany during the Nazis' rise to power. Throughout *When Biology Became Destiny* the assault on the female body was demonstrated through the male-centric lens to exemplify how the social construction of gender roles were directly tied to the biological makeup of women's bodies, and thus subjected them to a very distinct and explicit form of violence.

Sybil Milton's work became the "standard of excellence for the feminist scholars who followed."³⁹ Indeed, Myrna Goldenberg and Elizabeth R. Baer dedicated their volume, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* to Milton, after her death. In their work Goldenberg and Baer broadened the scope of feminist Holocaust scholarship to include non-Jewish women.⁴⁰ *Experience and Expression* concentrated on the persecuted groups of the "Roma and Sinti, the homosexuals, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the mentally and physically disabled, the slave laborers, those involved in various non-Jewish resistance groups, and others" to give a detailed description of non-Jewish women who were persecuted by the Nazis.⁴¹ In her chapter, "Food Talk," Myrna Goldenberg "examined how women experienced daily life inside the

³⁸ Bridenthal, Grossmann, and Kaplan. *When Biology Became Destiny*. 13.

³⁹ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. Dedication to Sybil Milton.

⁴⁰ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. XV.

⁴¹ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 2.

Nazi camps, making it particularly important to my own research. She discussed the relationships that women had with food and recipes and connected them to the argument that Milton made in her paper presentation at the 1983 conference.⁴² According to Goldenberg women measured the time of day by their hunger, similar to the schedule of when the female prisoners used to eat breakfast, lunch and dinner.⁴³ Women tended to channel the hunger in an extremely gendered way and found comfort and solace in their fellow female inmates. Female prisoners would tell descriptive stories of their families in the kitchen, what their favourite meals smelled and tasted like, and what they would eat if they ever made it out of the horrors of the Holocaust.⁴⁴ Similarly to Milton's work, this chapter demonstrated that women found strength in the conversations that surrounded food and made a conscious effort to direct their hunger into ambition and determination. For example, imprisoned women would often pick weeds from the grassy fields in the camps, or find roughage like bark or soil to create what they called "salads."⁴⁵ Food for women was a discussion that Goldenberg claims "reminded them that they were not the animals or vermin the Nazis claimed they were," it was a form of communication that for many allowed them to keep fighting for their lives.⁴⁶ As Milton and Goldenberg argued, the conversations that revolved around food allowed women to form a bond and relationship with each other, a monumental factor in many women's strength and courage as they constantly fought for their lives in a time of mass extermination.

⁴² Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 161.

⁴³ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 162.

⁴⁴ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 162.

⁴⁵ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 162.

⁴⁶ Baer and Goldenberg. *Experience and expression*. 174.

Not all scholars agreed with this new gendered approach to Holocaust history. Lawrence Langer contributed a chapter to Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman's work, *Women in the Holocaust* entitled, "Gender Suffering? Women in Holocaust Testimonies." This chapter critiqued the previous gendered analysis of Milton, Goldenberg, Joan Ringelheim, and Marion Kaplan and reasoned that when studying the Holocaust through a gendered lens, scholars were attempting to create a hierarchy of survival skills, relationships, and genders.⁴⁷ He stated "that nothing could be crueler or more callous than the attempt to dredge up from this landscape of universal destruction a mythology of comparative endurance that awards favor to one group of individuals over another."⁴⁸ To Langer the argument that women had a different experience in the Holocaust also meant that they had an easier time surviving, or there was a method to survival in the Nazi camp system. Further, he specified that one had to be "lucky" to make it out alive, and it had nothing to do with gender. He used female survivors' stories of forced abortions, still birth children, and their murdered children, to argue that if the gendered language is substituted with "more generic ones of parent and child, we move...the women I have been discussing into a human orbit that unites them through a kind of regret that cannot be sorted by sex."⁴⁹ Langer tried to emphasize that the death of a child affected both the mother and the father comparably.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998. 362.

⁴⁸ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 362

⁴⁹ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 361.

⁵⁰ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 162.

In response to such critiques, Goldenberg continued to reaffirm the importance of the study of gender and the Holocaust. In a 1998 chapter, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivor: The Burden of Gender.” Goldenberg was quick to highlight the differences in female and male survivors’ oral testimonies. She noted the experiences of a female survivor who encountered Dr. Josef Mengele at Auschwitz. The survivor described that the scientist “smiled as he ordered the death of all newborns and their mothers. There is no place on earth for Jews, [Mengele] explained, and ‘it would not be humanitarian to send a child to the ovens without permitting the mother to be there to witness the child’s death.”⁵¹ As she noted, women were more likely to be sent to the gas chambers because of their biological connection to their children and because of their maternal roles. Nazi decision-makers did not view men and their paternal roles in the same light. Therefore, Goldenberg’s work illustrated some of the ways the Nazis systematically attacked women’s reproductive bodies.

Ruth Bondy began her Holocaust scholarship with very similar sentiments to Langer but after extensive research agreed with the new direction the scholarship was taking. Bondy believed that regardless of gender, the Final Solution was a systematic attempt to decimate all the Jews in Europe, and rid the continent of the men, women and

⁵¹ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 329. Dr. Josef Mengele was a Nazi doctor who worked at Auschwitz-Birkenau. He was often a part of the selection process the prisoners would go through upon arrival at Auschwitz. See Annas, George J., and Michael A. Grodin. *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. And Astor, Gerald. *The "Last" Nazi: The Life and Times of Dr. Joseph Mengele*. New York: D.I. Fine, 1985.

children who did not contribute to the *Volksgemeinschaft*.⁵² Her early scholarship maintained that “Zyklon B did not differentiate between men and women; the same death swept them all away” and the concept of gendered Holocaust studies “seemed offensive to [her].”⁵³ Bondy; however, changed the narrative of her scholarship after she conducted research on the “family camp” at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Through the literature and oral testimonies, Bondy came to realize that due to the stereotypical gender roles of the 1930s and 1940s, men and women experienced very different losses. For females the materialistic losses included their homes, their family heirlooms, and their maternal instincts,⁵⁴ whereas men focused on the loss of their jobs, their economic security, and their statuses within society.⁵⁵ As the gendered aspects of the testimonies revealed themselves, Bondy argued that the Nazis first and foremost targeted Jews for their faith, but the way the violence was perpetrated and how survivors experienced this violence was dependent largely on their gender and biological makeup. This research further emphasized the importance in complicating the linear narrative of Holocaust scholarship that was presented and written about for so long.

Marlene E. Heinemann’s work *Gender and Destiny: Women Writers and the Holocaust* explored the ways the biological makeup of the female body subjected women to rape, unwanted pregnancies, and forced abortions.⁵⁶ This analysis originated at the

⁵² Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 312. *Volksgemeinschaft* refers to a racialized peoples’ community that the Nazis believed would allow the Third Reich to last for a thousand years.

⁵³ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 311.

⁵⁴ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 311.

⁵⁵ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 311.

⁵⁶ Heinemann. *Gender and Destiny*. 21.

patriarchal view of the female body, and the belief that female bodies could be manipulated and used for a man's pleasure.⁵⁷ Heinemann took the National Socialist perspective on the female body and applied it to understand the role of child birth and maternity in the camp systems. If the women made it past the selection process, and were sent to work inside the camps, they often became exposed to the constant threat of sexual abuse.⁵⁸ Heinemann relied heavily on female testimonies that discussed sexual assault and/or rape to try and comprehend the reasons why the Nazis committed these heinous crimes. Heinemann used memoirs to demonstrate the forms of dehumanizing subjugation by the guards when arrived at a Nazi camp.⁵⁹ Heinemann argued that the best way to understand the "sadistic" torture and abuse from the Nazis was to have the survivors tell their own stories. She stated that when the Nazis raped and sexual assaulted the female prisoners they did so because "sexual abuse directly show[s] that women's sexuality constitutes an additional method of Nazi persecution."⁶⁰ This was a form of gendered oppression that was systematically targeted at persecuted women in an attempt to show the inferiority of their bodies, their gender and their sexuality.⁶¹

Abuse, Assault, and Sexual Violence in the Holocaust

By the late 1990s, more historians were beginning to recognize the significance of the history of sexuality to the study of the Holocaust, and that many of the violent acts committed against imprisoned women were a form of gendered and sexualized violence.

⁵⁷ Heinemann. *Gender and Destiny*.14.

⁵⁹ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 29.

⁶⁰ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 34.

⁶¹ Ofer, Weitzman. *Women in the Holocaust*. 35.

Scholars increasingly analyzed the social construction of ‘gender’ to understand how the patriarchy oppresses women’s bodies through sexuality. The works of Doris Bergen and Anna Hájková have been vital to this developing scholarship.

Doris Bergen’s 2006 article, “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Unique and Typical?” argued that there are four distinct ways sexual assault and violence enters, or has failed to enter, the field. First, it can be “overlooked...as part of warfare wherever and whenever it occurs and therefore unworthy of much thought.” Second, because it can be seen as, “inappropriate, disturbing, and offensive.” Third, through “sensationalizing it, as often occurs in popular culture, where the Holocaust and violent sex are frequently intertwined.” Lastly, Bergen admits the most difficult of all, is the confrontation of sexual assault and sexual violence and the attempt to understand it.⁶² Through the examination of the ways sexual violence is perpetrated against men and women, this article illuminates the multifaceted ways sexuality is oppressed and exploited through the patriarchy. While Bergen admits the challenges of studying the subject, she also calls upon scholars to dedicate their time to understanding sexual assault in genocidal conflicts.⁶³ This article was foundational in the research for this thesis because it not only validated the research topic itself, it also acknowledged the effect it has on both mental and emotional health of the scholar. Bergen articulately addressed the implications that are associated with gender and sexuality in the field of the Holocaust, while simultaneously expressing the necessity of it.

⁶² Doris L. Bergen. “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust: Unique or Typical”, in *Lessons. And Legacies Volume VII: The Holocaust in International Perspective*. Edited by Dagmar Herzog. 179.

⁶³ Bergen. “Sexual Violence in the Holocaust.” 194.

Anna Hájková's work also examines the sexualized nature of assaults on the female body. In her 2013, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of Theresienstadt," she recognizes the biological makeup of the female body as a tool to negotiate female survival in the Theresienstadt ghetto. Hájková examines how prisoners were forced to use their bodies as a form of sexual bartering system, which could range from flirting, to sex, in exchange for goods such as larger rations of food.⁶⁴ Hájková makes clear the distinction between "sexual bartering," which required consent, and sexual violence, which did not.⁶⁵ This system offered persecuted women a small sense of control over their lives, and over the choices they made both in their survival tactics and in their sexual activity. This could result in a "lively sexual and romantic life" between women and men. Hájková argues that sexual relationships acted as a form of comfort that offered the prisoners relief from the revolting conditions in which they were living.⁶⁶ There was however, a very gendered dynamic when it came to the logistics of sexual barter. Women could not purchase sex from men in exchange for goods, only men could buy a women's sexual offer. Women were only left with a choice of whether to accept a man's offer. They were not permitted to create their own offers, which exposed women to a different form of sexual oppression.⁶⁷ This forced women into situations

⁶⁴ Anna Hájková. 2013. "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto Winner of the 2013 Catharine Stimpson Prize for Outstanding Feminist Scholarship". *Signs*. 38, no. 3. 506.

⁶⁵ Hájková. "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide." 506

⁶⁶ Hájková. "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide." 511.

⁶⁷ Hájková. "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide." 512.

where they were abused and “coerced...into providing sexual favours or a relationship.”⁶⁸ The women who engaged in sexual barter were labelled “deviant while leaving the men who bartered with them out of the question.”⁶⁹ Hájková’s work is part of a broader attempt to address how the patriarchal oppression of women’s bodies influenced how the Nazis perpetrated violence against women.

Menstruation in the Holocaust

The Nazis assaulted “non-Aryan” women through various forms of sexual, emotional, and verbal abuse that centered around female reproductive abilities. Thus when assaulting women’s bodies the Nazis viewed women’s ability to menstruate as an indicator of fertility.⁷⁰ As will be examined Chapter Three, for women within the camps a regular menstrual cycle did not last long due to “malnutrition, hard labour and extreme physical duress.”⁷¹ Women referred to the horrendous and deathly conditions of the Nazi camp systems as a form of gendered violence that forced their bodies to cease menstruation. Commonly, the condition is referred to as amenorrhea, which means there is no monthly cycle for a minimum of three consecutive months.⁷² However, for many women the Nazis did more than just force their bodies to stop menstruating through natural conditions. Rather, the rhetoric that emerged in oral testimonies accused the Nazis

⁶⁸ Hájková. “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide.” 524.

⁶⁹ Hájková. “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide.” 505.

⁷⁰ Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie. *Menstruation: A Cultural History*. Basingstoke, Hampshire [England]: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 15

⁷¹ Sonja M Hedgepeth, and Rochelle G. Saidel. *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2010. 181-182.

⁷² Hedgepeth, Saidel. *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. 182.

of systematically adding a chemical into their daily ration of food or drink as a way to unnaturally cease their cycles.⁷³ While this sentiment was expressed in hundreds of oral testimonies, it has yet to be proven by any scholars. Instead, scholars have opted to discuss menstruation in an extremely insufficient way. All of the works examined for this section have dedicated no more than a paragraph or line to the experiences of menstruating women in the Nazi camp systems. While these works demonstrate the larger image of how menstruation fits in the scope of Holocaust scholarship, they do not give enough attention to the subject. While Sonja M. Hedgepeth, Rochelle G. Saidel, Vera Laska, and Anna Hájková have not dedicated entire works to this subject, they have, however, started the conversation on the importance of understanding menstruation in histories of the Holocaust.

In Hedgepeth and Saidel's work *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, the scholars note that women often associated humiliation and disgust with their monthly cycle. Thus, this created a plethora of fears and anxieties that forced women to question what would happen if they were to start menstruating while interned. The authors succinctly noted that due to the harsh sanitary conditions that women were expected to live in filth while simultaneously menstruating. This meant that they were forced to go without access to sanitary napkins or adequate bathrooms, and it resulted in them having to 'free-bleed.'⁷⁴ The scholars argue that the loss of a monthly cycle for

⁷³ Gideon Greif. "The Daily Life of Auschwitz Prisoners," Yad Vashem.

⁷⁴ Hedgepeth, Saidel. *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. 34.

prisoners alleviated the stress of bleeding in front of fellow prisoners and made the fact that they did not have access to clean bathrooms easier to contend with.⁷⁵ Throughout this examination Hedgepeth and Saidel referred to a few oral testimonies to further argue the point that for the women, “the inability to menstruate [was] a form of sexualized violence.”⁷⁶ This acknowledgment of the importance of the loss of the monthly cycle for many women deepens and complicates the feminist lens in which Holocaust scholarship is written. However, it does not sufficiently cover the intricate and complex realities attached to menstruation. Like *Sexual Violence: Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Rochelle G. Saidel’s second work, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*, looked at how the loss of a menstrual cycle specifically affected Jewish women in the Holocaust. This work states that “menstruation or its cessation was also a problem specific to women in Ravensbrück and other concentration camps” and continues to connect this sentiment back to her understanding and conception of Nazi sexualized violence.⁷⁷

As another connection of menstruation to sexual violence, Vera Laska’s work *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*, briefly discussed the implications and consequences of menstruating as a prisoner at Auschwitz-Birkenau.⁷⁸ Laska recalled a personal memory of the shower she was forced to take when

⁷⁵ Hedgepeth, Saidel. *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. 81.

⁷⁶ Hedgepeth, Saidel. *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*. 81.

⁷⁷ Rochelle G. Saidel. *The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp*. Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006. 22.

⁷⁸ Vera Laska. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1983. 176.

she was a prisoner inside the camp, and stated that the Nazis had led a group of women to the shower where they forced them to strip naked while the guards proceeded to stare and laugh at them. However, Laska explicitly recalled that while they were in the showers a “menstruating women [was] kicked for messing up the floor.”⁷⁹ In this moment the Nazis opted to express their disdain and anger that this woman was menstruating through the exertion of physical violence. It is interesting to note that Laska specifically remembered the Nazis beating the woman for creating a ‘mess.’ The negative association of messiness with menstruation forced women to examine and understand their bodies through a different lens; one that could be systematically used against them.

Lastly, and the most recent addition to the scholarship, Anna Hájková’s article, “Medicine in Theresienstadt” addressed the gynecological research completed in Theresienstadt by doctor František Bass. Bass looked specifically at the effects of amenorrhea on women’s bodies and connected the eventual loss of the prisoner’s menses to the “physical shock of incarceration.”⁸⁰ However, Hájková’s analysis of Bass looks directly at the reproductive abilities of women, specifically at fertility, rather than menstruation. Still, this recognition and acknowledgment of menstruation as a gendered form of violence that was explored by doctors within the camps, demonstrates the progression and acceptance of this field.

⁷⁹ Laska. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*. 75.

⁸⁰ Anna Hájková, "Medicine in Theresienstadt." *Social History of Medicine* 31, no. 3 (2018): 1-27.

Conclusion

Gender and feminist Holocaust scholarship have contributed to the field significantly since 1983. Scholars, most often female scholars, have dedicated their entire lives to exploring the ways the Holocaust directly impacted women and their bodies. More specifically, the scholarship has used a feminist lens to shift traditional narratives to look at the multifaceted nature of Nazi violence. This has allowed Holocaust scholars to complicate our understandings of how women lived and died in the Nazi camps. The 1983 conference was also very important in establishing parameters for oral history methodologies and promoting the use of first-person narratives and survivor testimonies. In the three decades since, historians have worked to build a literature on women's bodies, female networks, gendered suffering, sexuality and sexual violence, and medicalized assault. Nonetheless, it is still important to note that no books or articles have yet been dedicated to the study of menstruation. The failure to specifically discuss menstruation has created a gap in the literature. This thesis aims to build on the growing historiography to partially fill that gap.

Chapter Two: “When is yours due?” Menstruation in the Ghettos and Camp Systems

When Judith I. was interned in Hessian Lichtenau, a concentration camp south of Göttingen, Germany, she noticed a woman asleep in the barracks who had blood running down her thighs. Judith recalled that the woman’s “skirt was hitched up, her nude thighs spread to the sun. She was smeared with thick blood, some of it still flowing, most of it caked. The messy paste covered her shaven crotch, trickling along the inner thighs, she must have been flowing for days. Her bunched up skirt was soaking it up – a loathsome bandage. That’s what we are, [Judith] shuddered, under the clean clothes and modest panties, that’s what I have been.” Judith continued, as she acknowledged the large number of fellow prisoners who surrounded the bleeding woman, that she was especially concerned that the male prisoners would awake and see the blood. However, instead of waking up the young woman, she whispered to her friend Magda “are you asleep?” and proceeded to “point at the menstruating girl” and said “I want to puke. When is yours due?” To which Magda responded, “I can’t remember.” Judith agreed, “me neither. Suppose it’s soon. What then? If only we had some cloth or paper.” As she closed her eyes to fall back asleep, Magda whispered “Don’t worry...we won’t last until then.”⁸¹

The anonymous menstruating woman mentioned in Judith’s oral testimony was just one of thousands of women who experienced at least one monthly cycle inside the

⁸¹ Judith M. Isaacson. *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*. Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Ill. Pr., 1990. 72.

Nazi camp systems. As often mentioned in survivors' testimonies and memoirs, menstruation and the fear of a looming cycle represented a double burden and gendered form of violence. This is evident in survivors' memoirs, and in hundreds of oral testimonies conducted by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation. A close reading of these sources illustrates that many women Holocaust survivors believed the Nazis attacked women who were menstruating because of the inferiority of their bodies and because the 'free-flowing' menstrual blood created a 'mess' inside the camps and ghettos. Therefore, when women sought protection, it represented a threefold form of relief. First, protection provided by sanitary napkins or discarded pieces of newspaper could subside the embarrassment and humiliation of bleeding in front of fellow prisoners, specifically male prisoners. Secondly, it relieved the women from having to work, sleep, and socialize while covered in their own blood, and thus it returned some dignity to the women who felt completely dehumanized by their own bodies. Lastly, women went to extreme lengths to reduce some of the 'free-flowing' blood, because it provided them a sense of protection from violence perpetrated by the Nazis. Thus, when the women within the camps lacked access to adequate bathrooms and sanitary napkins during their monthly cycles, they were forcibly subjected to extreme physical violence, humiliation, and the fear of death. Therefore, this chapter will examine the multiple ways women who menstruated in the Nazi camp systems and in the ghettos experienced a deeply gendered form of violence and humiliation.

Deprivation of Bathrooms and Hygiene

Inside the Nazi camps, prisoners were exposed to immensely inhumane, dehumanizing, and horrific sanitary conditions. Those who were interned in the Nazi camp system were forced to go without access to proper hygienic practices, running water, adequate bathrooms, and proper nutrition. Those who were persecuted under the Nazi regime had their basic human rights taken from them and in return they were treated like animals. One of the most terrible aspects of life within the Nazi camps were the tightly packed sleeping conditions within the barracks. Specifically, in Auschwitz-Birkenau, there could be upwards of four to five people sleeping in one bunk. Thus, when diseases like typhoid and typhus became prevalent in the camps due to the lack of sanitary conditions, they were passed on extremely easily due to the close sleeping quarters.⁸² Due to the lack of clean water and the sickening sanitary conditions, “nearly all the women suffered from severe diarrhea, which led to total exhaustion, emancipation, and death... Thus of 28,000 prisoners brought to the camp in 1942 barely 5,400 remained alive at the end of the year. In 1943, some 28,000 women prisoners died in Birkenau; the highest monthly death rate was recorded in December – about 9,000 women.”⁸³ The massive number of deaths that were caused by the lack of proper sanitation indicated to the prisoners inside the Nazi camps that they were unworthy of proper care. In Holocaust survivor Eugen Kogon’s book, *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German*

⁸² Yisrael Gutman and Michael Berenbaum. *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. 401

⁸³ Gutman and Berenbaum. *Anatomy*. 401

Concentration Camps and the System behind Them, he dedicated an entire chapter to the sanitary conditions in several Nazi concentration camps. Outlining the medical care facilities, the access and quality of bathrooms, and the sleeping arrangements, Kogon stated that, “to become sick in a concentration camp meant to be doomed.”⁸⁴ The conditions within the camps made life infinitively harder for prisoners who were weak, or had been infected with a disease. However, these conditions also presented a hell for the women who experienced a monthly cycle in the camps. The cramped sleeping arrangements, no running water, and disgusting toilets meant that the women were forced to live, work, and socialize in their own menstrual blood. This complicated the ways women had to live within the walls of the Nazi camp systems.

In 2006, Dr. Alfred Pasternak and Dr. Philip G. Brooks, from the departments of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of California Los Angeles and the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, completed a study that “evaluated the effect of internment in the German concentration camps during World War II on menstrual function; future fertility; and ultimately, on gynecological diseases or future surgery needs.”⁸⁵ The study included 580 Hungarian female survivors of Nazi concentration camps, who had the “mean age of 23.4 at the time of their internment.” Out of the 580 women 91.1% percent of the women

⁸⁴ Eugen Kogon and Heinz Nordon. *The Theory and Practice of Hell: The German Concentration Camps and the System behind Them*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006 (org. 1950), 137.

⁸⁵ Alfred Pasternak and Philip G Brooks, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, David Geffen School of Medicine at the University of California Los Angeles and the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Los Angeles, California. "The Long-Term Effects of the Holocaust on the Reproductive Function of Female Survivors." *The Journal of Minimally Invasive Gynecology* 14, no. 2 (2007): 211.

reported that they had regular menses before their internment, whereas only 8.9% of the women reported having unpredictable cycles. Pasternak and Brooks also reported that 78.9% of the women who reported having normal cycles pre-imprisonment had menses that lasted four to seven days, with the remaining 18.6% of women stating it lasted at most three days.⁸⁶ While the sample of survivors in this study was very specific, I would reason that these statistics represent a more general understanding, that most young women in Europe in the interwar era had relatively ‘normal’ menses. These statistics additionally reveal that 16% or 88 women out of the 580 experienced at least one cycle in the camps or ghettos.

While sixteen percent reveals itself as a relatively small percentage, the women who experienced a monthly cycle were deeply impacted by the inaccessibility to adequate bathrooms while simultaneously dealing with the hells of the Holocaust. As demonstrated in Judy F’s oral testimony, those who were interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau could only use the toilets in the morning before roll call, and in the evening after an exhaustively long work day.⁸⁷ For many prisoners, the time period between bathrooms breaks could range upwards to ten to fourteen hours apart, which forced women to wait in hour long lines for their turn to use the toilets. This was especially cruel to those who missed one of the bathroom breaks, or to those who were sick to their stomach in the camps. Rena G., a former prisoner of Auschwitz, recalled in her memoir that her sister Danka had missed the time allotted for the morning use of the bathroom. In an attempt to help her sister,

⁸⁶ Pasternak and Brooks. “Long Term Effects of the Holocaust”. 213

⁸⁷ Judy Freeman. “The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 21 April 1985.

Rena went and asked her *Kommando*, “Elza will you please let me sister inside? She has to go to the bathroom; she has diarrhea...Please, Elza. You know they will beat her if she messes herself.” When the *Kommando* refused to let Danka use the toilets several times, Rena resorted to grabbing Elza by the shoulders and shaking her, as a way to distract her from Danka running to the bathroom. For this action, Rena recalled that she was “slammed...with her collar pulled back choking [her]. Hurlled through space, [she] falls roughly to the ground, seeing only the reddening face of an SS woman before her boot finds [her] ribs.”⁸⁸ This statement reaffirms the Nazis’ strict and brutal rules within the camps and their willingness to exercise abusive power where they saw fit. The scarce and valuable bathroom breaks also exhibited both the prisoners and guards’ recognition of the varied forms of humiliation that existed inside the camps, which for some women increased ten-fold when they lacked access to the toilets during their menstrual cycle.

For women who experienced at least one monthly cycle inside the camps, access to toilets provided them with a very small, but significant form of solace and when this was taken away, they were forced to contend with a form of gendered humiliation and violence that only extended to women. In her oral testimony, an anonymous Holocaust survivor recalled that, “when I got [my menses] for the first time outside and I went to the Blockälteste (senior block inmate), because I needed something, and she said to me: ‘hold your hand underneath it.’ So, you can imagine how we really stank.”⁸⁹ The woman’s recollection of her monthly cycle is significant for a multitude of reasons, but her explicit

⁸⁸ Rena Kornreich Gelissen and Heather Dune Macadam. *Rena’s Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2015. 70.

⁸⁹ Hedgepeth and Saidel. “Sexual Violence.” 34.

reference to the smell associated with her menses demonstrates her consciousness of the free-flowing blood, yet it also shows her awareness of her own body around fellow prisoners and guards. The lack of access to showers or to adequate sanitary conditions had resulted already in an extremely pungent smell from all prisoners interned in the Nazi camp system, however, when the anonymous woman recognized her own smell, it added a layer to her experience as a prisoner inside the camps. The deprivation of adequate bathrooms created a gendered form of humiliation that was uniquely tailored towards women.

Absence of Sanitary Napkins

In addition to the lack of toilets, the Nazis often confiscated women's sanitary napkins upon their arrival to the camps and ghettos. Many women, upon learning of deportation orders, purposely packed sanitary napkins, knowing that regardless of where they were going, they were almost certainly going to have their menstrual cycle. Gerda H., upon her arrival at the Schleusse ghetto, stated, "we were so worried when they [the Nazis] took our, our napkins as contraband in Schleusse. And of course, by the way, those were not these elegant little contraptions that young women use today. It was something that we used, had to wash out afterwards, and used again. And we were so worried when it was...when those were taken from us..."⁹⁰ Gerda was not alone in this experience, Olga I. recounted that, "it's pretty hard to talk about it. Like we came into

⁹⁰ Gerda Schild Haas. "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection." Interview. Conducted by Joan Ringelheim. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 12 September 1995.

Auschwitz, the first thing they cut off our hair. They gave us a dress. Here I am menstruating and I'm – and they take away all my napkins. Now, you ask them, 'please, give me some.'" To which the Camp guards responded, "'don't worry about [it].'"⁹¹ For Gerda and Olga, when the guards deliberately deprived them of sanitary napkins, it not only removed a necessary tool that helped to hinder their blood flow, it also forced the women to find alternative ways to help control their monthly flow, and to cope with the lack of control they had over their bodies.

The deprivation of sanitary napkins required women to become creative and resourceful, to reduce the humiliation of bleeding in front of other prisoners. Rena G., in her memoir *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, reflected on a moment in her internment when she experienced her first menses in the camp. As a prisoner in Auschwitz, Rena stated that she woke up,

In the morning, before anyone else has even opened their eyes, I wake knowing that something has changed in my body. I stare up at the bunk above me for a few minutes: then it comes. The slow moistness on the wool against my legs. The cramp in my stomach. I sit up with a start and pull down my trousers to check. The stains on my thigh are unmistakable. I have my period. Slipping downstairs to the toilet, I look for something to use, but there are no rags or sanitary napkins, only small squares of newspaper. The flow has increased since I stood up. As I check the searchlights before stepping outside, blood trickles down my legs...I scour the ground looking for anything that might help me hinder the flow. There is nothing...I return to the block toilet, I take a few squares of newsprint. Wiping them against my trousers to make sure they're clean, I shudder. Then,

⁹¹ Olga Issenberg. "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, acquired from Jewish Family and Children Services of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 11 April 1983.

without thinking any further about it, I crumble them up and place the newspaper between my legs. I spend the day completely self-conscious, afraid of what getting my period means in this place... Dealing with this curse means praying that it will go away quickly and never return.⁹²

To Rena, the lack of sanitary napkins required her to endure the painstaking difficulty of trying to find a routine, one where she could access the toilets before she was forced to perform her brutal and intensive duties inside Auschwitz, as well as one where she had time to scrounge the floors for the smallest piece of cloth or paper to subside the free-flowing blood. The absence of napkins to protect her from her menstrual blood forced Rena to go to extreme measures in search of something that could obstruct the flow. Recalling how she “check[ed] the searchlights before stepping outside” indicates that Rena was willing to go against Nazi authority and leave her barrack without permission. Rena also reluctantly placed a dirty and discarded piece of newspaper between her legs in desperation. Without knowing where this paper had come from, or what it had been used for, she disregarded those fears to save herself the humiliation of other prisoners or guards seeing her bleed.

Rena was one of the few women who never lost their menstrual cycle throughout their entire internment inside the Nazi camps. Shortly after her imprisonment at Auschwitz, she was transferred to Birkenau, to the section of the camp that was built for slave labour. In Rena’s memoir, she openly discussed how her transfer to Birkenau

⁹² Gelissen and Macadam. *Rena’s Promise*. 75.

further complicated the ways she cared for her body's natural biological functions. She stated,

My monthly curse wakes me. In the confusion of moving from one camp to another, I didn't think the latrine in Birkenau would be any different than the toilet in Auschwitz. How naïve I am; newspaper is a luxury that we no longer deserve. Once a month my period still arrives without any prior warning. It is something I dread and wait for, never knowing when it will make its appearance. Will I be working? Will I be in the shaving line on a Sunday, embarrassed in front of the men? Will today be the day I cannot find anything to stop the flow and the SS decide to beat me to death for being unclean? Will today be the day the scrap I find gives me an infection? I hate the smell. I hate not being able to take a bath. The sink in Auschwitz was a relief, but in Birkenau there are no sinks, just faucets. It is impossible to remove the dirt and grime from my body without soap... No matter how hard, nor how often I scrub, it always feels as if something is left on my flesh. I worry that the smell of blood will attract the dogs to me. Of all the camp horrors, the dogs scare me the most. I pray that if I must die, I do not die screaming.⁹³

It is evident from Rena's recollection that menstruating inside a death camp presented itself with a plethora of fears, the majority of which could have been reduced with access to sanitary napkins. However, the absence of adequate supplies consequently left women like Rena to experience an extremely gendered form of terror and humiliation, as shown when Rena questions "will today be the day I cannot find anything to stop the flow and the SS decide to beat me to death for being unclean?"⁹⁴ It is here that she demonstrated not only her own embarrassment of having to bleed in front of fellow prisoners and

⁹³ Gelissen and Macadam. *Rena's Promise*. 96.

⁹⁴ Gelissen and Macadam. *Rena's Promise*. 96.

guards, but also her own fears of being brutally abused or attacked by the guards dogs if she was caught with a monthly cycle. The reality of menstruating without adequate supplies left women like Rena to experience a gendered form of terror and humiliation, that complicated our understanding of survival and life inside Nazi camps. Interned women had to contend with the biological makeup of their bodies as a form of betrayal. Therefore, the extreme lengths women went to in order to find some form of napkin to subsidize their flow was necessary for their own humility, as well as their safety from camp guards.

Yet, fear of Nazi perpetrated violence did not stop women from asking the female Nazi guards within the camps and ghettos for sanitary napkins. Livia J, discussed a moment during her time at Auschwitz, where she was walking behind another prisoner and noticed there was blood running down her legs. Livia thought to herself,

Oh, my god, she must've been shot! I panic[ed]: what should I do? Then in a flash I realize: she is menstruating. We have no underwear, no sanitary napkins...the blood simply flows down her legs. Poor girl. My God, this is horrible. Why doesn't she say anything? Ask for a rag, or something? Whom can she say anything to? From whom can she ask for anything? She might even get shot for bleeding. Does menstruation constitute sabotage?⁹⁵

Within this testimony, Livia critically understands the ways in which women were forced to see their bodies as a systematic form of gendered violence that leaves them vulnerable to violence and infection. When Livia asked the question, 'does menstruation constitute

⁹⁵ Livia Bitton Jackson. *I Have Lived a Thousand Years: Growing Up in the Holocaust*. New York: Simon Pulse, 2009.95.

sabotage', she is drawing the broader understandings of the difficult, cruel, and deadly nature of the Nazi camps, to the women's abilities to survive under these conditions, while concurrently agonizing over the consequences of menstruating in the Holocaust. Livia questioned her own relationship with her body and her understanding of the female body as a whole. This connection further complicates the narrative of the ways in which violence was perpetrated inside the Nazi camps and deepens the gendered analysis of women's experiences.

In contrast to the women who were refused access to sanitary napkins, there were women who entered the Nazi camp systems while wearing a sanitary pad. For Isabella L, she had been menstruating on the day that she was deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau in a cattle car. The trauma of being forced out of her home and crammed into a small cabin with far too many other people was horrific enough. However, Isabella also recalled that due to the large capacity of people in the cars, "people were screaming, and I had my period and I couldn't change my napkins, and people were dying and going mad."⁹⁶ This statement echoes the sentiments of Filip Müller's, amongst the chaos and death women were still subjected to their menstrual cycles and under Nazi rule, women were forced to experience an incredibly gendered humiliation that subjected women like Isabella to go without changing their sanitary napkins.

The removal and the refusal of sanitary napkins, as well as subjecting women to conditions that were not conducive to changing a napkin, placed women in a position

⁹⁶ Isabella Leitner. "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, The Jeff Toby and Herr Oral History Collection." Interview. Interview conducted by Andrew Dilorio. 8 December 1991.

where they saw their body as a weapon that could be used against them. Specifically, through the gendered humiliation women experienced when the Nazis created conditions within the camps that forced them to ‘free-bleed’, women were made to feel ashamed of their biological functions, but also came to fear the consequences of menstruating in front of their fellow prisoners and the Nazi guards. Thus, when women experienced a monthly cycle in the Nazi camps, they began to resent their bodies for subjecting them to a gendered terror, one that left them questioning ‘what it meant to get their menses in a place like the Holocaust’, but also made them wish that it would ‘leave quickly and never return.’⁹⁷

Nazi Violence

For women, the humiliation of menstruating inside the Nazi camps and ghettos extended beyond their own perspective of their bodies. It impacted the ways the camp guards viewed them as prisoners. Lucille E. recalled that during her time in the Lodz ghetto, she had found a cloth that was rust-coloured and, in her attempt to hide the cloth from the guards during the mandatory strip search, she placed the cloth between her legs. During this search, one of the guards pulled Lucille into a secluded area, with the intention to rape her. However, when he found the rag between her legs, he “flung her aside”, and proceeded to shout, “you filthy, useless bitch! Pfui! Menstruating!”⁹⁸ Even the possibility that Lucille could have been menstruating repulsed the Nazi and invoked a

⁹⁷ Gelissen and Macadam. *Rena's Promise*. 75.

⁹⁸ Lucille Eichengreen and Harriet Hyman Chamberlain. *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust*. San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994. 107.

strong emotional and physical reaction directed at Lucille's ability to menstruate. Lucille's memoir adds a complicated and multifaceted understanding to the nuanced ways women in the Holocaust are studied. In this instance, Lucille was protected from being raped by her monthly cycle, however to the SS guard, her blood represented more than a just bodily function, it indicated both the inferiorities of her body and its impurities. It also demonstrated to the Nazi that he would not have been able to rape Lucille with the 'messy' side effects of menstrual blood. Thus, in his disgust he opted to physically abuse her instead of sexually assaulting her.

Emilie D., a survivor from Auschwitz-Birkenau, recalled a similar experience within the camp. After an interviewer asked her about violence and injuries within the camps, Emilie stated, "Oh, one German kicked me in the genitals, Lord God... For no reason; he kicked me for no reason and I started bleeding; I didn't bleed there for four years, I didn't have women's bleedings, nothing, you couldn't have anything, yeah, how could you have menstruation from that food when you were treated like a dog; from that food you were not going to get it." This recollection continued, as Emilie noted that she had experienced a menstrual cycle inside the camp and because she was given no cotton or any form of protection from the free-flowing blood, she was beaten.⁹⁹ The interviewer went as far as to explicitly ask her, "you are saying that, that is the reason why he hit you, that you got your period?" Emilie responded, "Yes my goodness... there wasn't water; the

⁹⁹ Emilie Danielova. "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, courtesy of the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation." Interview. English transcription. Transcriber unknown. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 8 March 1997.

water was shut off there; for four years I did not wash myself and I didn't even know what water was, for God's sake, I beg you, you must believe me – for five beatings.”¹⁰⁰ For Emilie, her menstrual cycle subjected her to extreme violence that was targeted directly at her reproductive organs. The Nazis treated her body like a weapon that could be used against her because of the biological makeup of her body. This directed violence created a gendered experience that made women fear for the implications of menstruating inside the camps.

In the Nazi camp and ghetto systems, it was quite common for perpetrators to commit forms of violence for a multitude of reasons. However, a common denominator throughout the majority of testimonies discussed in this chapter, were women who were conscious of the brutal violence committed against them when menstruating, if they were found with any blood on their bodies. Yet, in all of the testimonies that I have listened to or read, very few discuss the actual violent acts. Historian Vera Laska's work *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*, briefly discusses a personal recollection, of a time when she was interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹⁰¹ The Nazis had led a group of women to the shower where they forced them to strip naked while the guards proceeded to stare and laugh at them. Laska remembered one woman in particular who had her monthly cycle and due her nakedness and lack of underwear, had

¹⁰⁰ Emilie Danielova. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, courtesy of the Jeff and Toby Herr Foundation.” Interview. English transcription. Transcriber unknown. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 8 March 1997.

¹⁰¹ Vera Laska. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1983. 176.

blood running down her legs. The Nazis saw this blood and physically beat this interned woman in front of her fellow prisoners for messing up the bathroom floor. In this description Laska refrains from revealing explicit details from this event, and this exclusion could have been for personal reasons, or an unclear memory of the exact brutal acts that unfolded on this day.¹⁰² Regardless, in that shower the Nazis attacked the anonymous woman because of the blood that ran down her legs. This could lead to a series of questions that investigate the Nazis' reasoning, or why the Holocaust survivors rarely discuss the severe violence perpetrated against menstruating women. However, I argue that regardless of the lack of oral testimonies, the fears and concerns of the violence expressed in a large percentage of testimonials from women represents a gendered form of terror that only extended to women. The constant fear of both a looming monthly cycle and the violence that could have resulted from it, forced women to make deliberately gendered choices, and it often resulted in the women experiencing a deeply gendered form of humiliation that directly connected to their monthly cycle.

Conclusion

When women entered the Nazi camps with a menses, or worried about when their next cycle would arrive, their relationship with their body drastically altered. The lack of access to sanitary napkins, hygienic practices, and adequate bathrooms, as well as the direct violence that was perpetrated against women's reproductive organs, signified to

¹⁰² Laska. *Women in the Resistance and in the Holocaust: The Voices of Eyewitnesses*. 75.

women that their own bodies would constitute part of the gendered humiliation and terror waged against them. All the women in this chapter have on their own terms discussed their experiences and relationships with menstruation. These women persevered through a moment in time that was seen for many as their most vulnerable, but still recognized the importance of sharing these stories. For most of the women, after their first month of being inside the camps, their cycles disappeared for the remainder of their internment. This loss resulted in fears of infertility, unknown pregnancies, and of a lost feminine identity. Therefore, with both its occurrence and its disappearance, menstruation forced women to experience a gendered form a violence, unique to their biological makeup¹⁰³

¹⁰³ While this chapter examines only a few oral testimonies, there are 43 out of the 132 that explicitly discuss experiences with a menstrual cycle inside the Nazi camps, ghettos, and in hiding. Some of these survivors are, Betti Frank, Ilse Friedman, Barbara Gerson, Oskar Haber, Leah Henson, Mania Kohn, Ellen Nebel, Lillian Saunders, Franka Sachter, Trude Levi, Glorinda Lyon, Esther Rosenberg, Naomi Warren, Anna Shore, Winter Clare. While this list is not exhaustive, it does demonstrate that this sentiment was shared by many survivors.

Chapter Three: The Short- and Long-Term Effects of a Lost Menstrual Cycle

“First in Theresienstadt...people stopped having their menstrual and there was one young woman in our room. She was married, and she was worried to death that she was pregnant because we just didn’t know. I don’t know any more how long I had my menstrual period, but I lost it which was a blessing because there were times that we didn’t have any material to protect ourselves.”¹⁰⁴ Doris R. made this remark during her oral testimony with the USHMM, in reference to her internment at Theresienstadt and Auschwitz from 1941 until 1945. For many women like Doris, the loss of a menstrual cycle came almost immediately after internment in the Nazi camps. The combination of malnourishment, harsh physical labour, and extreme environmental conditions forced the women’s bodies to deteriorate mentally, physically, and emotionally. However, for many women the deterioration resulted in the disappearance and subsequent absence of a menstrual cycle and spawned a sign of relief. Most of these women viewed the loss positively because they no longer feared the implications of bleeding in front of fellow prisoners and guards without any sanitary napkins, or access to adequate bathrooms and sanitary conditions. As demonstrated in Chapter Two, the women were justifiably worried about the consequences of menstruating in the camps, and as a result they experienced a form of gendered terror and burden that left them to feel humiliated due to their free flowing blood and the lack of control they had over their own bodies. The first

¹⁰⁴ Doris Rauch. “The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Conducted by Gail Schwartz. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 7 July 1995.

part of this chapter will explore the ways the effects of a lost menstrual cycle provided women immediate relief from the gendered horrors of menstruating inside the camp system, while simultaneously creating a plethora of new anxieties that forced women to question the biological implications of a disappeared menses. For women, menstruation and the complications associated with it, did not end when their menses stopped, in stark contrast, the disappearance added a deeper more complex layer of gendered violence and terror associated directly with women's abilities to menstruate.

However, this chapter will go further to create a more complex understanding of women's relationships with their menstrual cycle. Thus, the second part of this chapter will explore how women discussed their menstrual cycles in the post-war period. For many women the fear of infertility presented itself as a fear when they were still imprisoned inside the Nazi camps. However, quickly after liberation women's fears expanded beyond just infertility. They questioned their own feminine identities and their bodies' ability to function. Therefore, for women the biological impact of Nazi abuses did not cease within the camps. Rather, the gendered humiliation and terror that was attached to both the disappearance and occurrence of a monthly cycle menses had lasting implications on women's relationships with their own bodies, that continued to plague them well into the post-war period.

Short-Term Effects of a Lost Menstrual Cycle

As explored in the previous chapter, menstruating inside the Nazi camps forced women to resort to complicated, dangerous, and unsafe practices in order to relieve some of their free-flowing blood. If they had the ability to hinder some of the blood, it restored a sense of humility and humanity, and also provided a small but significant form of relief from the fear of violence perpetrated by the Nazi guards, or their dogs, at the sight or smell of blood.¹⁰⁵ However, the dirty scraps of discarded paper, the inability to find any spare pieces of cloth, and the ‘caked on’ and dried blood on the menstruating women’s bodies, resulted in a very gendered form of humiliation that complicated the camp experience for women.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, when menstruation ceased, many of the imprisoned women regarded this as a positive occurrence, a welcomed disappearance that relieved them of some of the fears and worries that were attached to menstruating inside the Nazi camps, or as a ‘blessing,’ to use the words of Doris R. that began this chapter. In terms of theological understanding, it is difficult to articulate whether the women used the term ‘blessing’ because of their religious or spiritual beliefs, or rather because its disappearance represented a monumental amount of relief. However, for this thesis the importance of the term lies in its contextual understanding and not in its literal interpretation.¹⁰⁷ For example, Rosa N., in a speech to a largely male audience, explicitly discussed how the sub-human conditions in the Nazi camps forced her body to quickly deteriorate. A key moment in her speech came when she began to discuss the experiences

¹⁰⁵ Gelissen and Macadam. *Rena’s Promise*. 96.

¹⁰⁶ Judith M. Isaacson. *Seed of Sarah: Memoirs of a Survivor*. Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Ill. Pr., 1990. 72.

¹⁰⁷ Melissa Raphael. *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz*. London: Routledge, 2006. 75.

of very young women inside the camps. She recalled that, “15, 16 maybe a couple of 17-year-olds I’m not sure. But somehow, it was a tremendous psychological shock not only on our minds but on our own system. From the four years [after I was deported] ... I have to tell you what kind of shock this was to our systems. None of the girls had their monthly periods, which was a blessing believe me.”¹⁰⁸ In her use of the term a “blessing,” acknowledged the complications of menstruating inside the camps and understood that while its disappearance could present complications later in her life, the immediate relief was warmly welcomed. Female survivors like Rosa who lost their cycles were willing to accept that their bodies may never fully recover from the catastrophic abuse experienced inside the camps and ghettos.

Likewise, Anna W. stated in her oral testimony that she had lost her monthly period from the very beginning of her internment in Auschwitz and did not get it back until she was liberated and living in the United States. However, she still saw this as “a blessing.” As she explained, “I didn't menstruate since we were put in the prison in Krakow. And I didn't menstruate until I came to New York. And I really think it was a blessing because I just cannot image thousands of women without any sanitary facilities having their periods...the rest of us just were sterile I suppose. But what amazed me was that really, it was almost like a miracle that we didn't menstruate because it would have been a big, big mess.” As seen in the previous chapter, Judith I. made similar remarks

¹⁰⁸ Rosa Nissenholz. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. June 1982.

when she discussed the woman asleep who had ‘caked’ menstrual blood covering her vagina.¹⁰⁹ This concept that menstrual blood produced a ‘filth’ or a ‘mess’ on top of the already atrocious conditions of camps like Auschwitz, highlights that women felt that their bodies could betray them, and force them to contend with the complexities of a gendered double burden within the camps. This double burden presented itself in both the relief of the lost menses, but, as we shall see, also in the worries of the long-term effects its loss could have on the women’s bodies.

Other survivors of Nazis camps and ghettos opted to use the term ‘lucky’ when describing the disappearance of their monthly cycles. In Judith A’s oral testimony, conducted by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation, Judith was asked if women in Auschwitz continued to menstruate during their internment and if they did not, at ‘what point did it cease to happen?’ To which Judith responded, “as far as I know none of us menstruated...Very luckily, very soon after we got there. Within months. A month of two. You had no facilities to do anything about it. No clothes even to use, no paper. Very soon.”¹¹⁰ The use of the term ‘lucky’ emphasized the relief for some survivors in its rapid cessation. From Judith’s response it is clear that women struggled to find reliable, safe, and adequate supplies to protect themselves. Therefore, she revealed the great deal of relief in the disappearance of her menses for the remainder of her internment. This sentiment was echoed by fellow survivors who also saw the importance in the disappearance of their menses. For these women, they would rather have a

¹⁰⁹ Judith Isaacson. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 26 August 1993.

¹¹⁰ Judith Angell. “University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Collection.” Interview. Conducted by Jill Traub. University of Southern California Shoah Foundation. 13 May 1998.

necessary biological function cease then have to contend with the deprivation of adequate bathrooms and sanitary napkins.

Another group of women who emerged in the oral testimonies were those who highlighted the relief in the disappearance of their menses through affirmative language, often stating that they were ‘happy’ or ‘glad’ that their menses ceased. Regina G. stated, “I’ll tell you it’s a good thing there was no menstruation. Otherwise, I mean, all these women – what can you do?”¹¹¹ Her use of the term ‘good’ implies that there was a positive reassurance in its disappearance. One that relieved women of the gendered humiliation of having to bleed without access to bathrooms or proper hygienic practices. Women were willing to look past the obvious fears associated with a lost menses, to demonstrate that with a menses their lives inside the camps were much more difficult. Therefore, when it disappeared, they were able to direct their focus and concerns to the violence, brutality, and horrific conditions inside the camps.

Similarly, Susan C. expressed relief when she lost her menstrual cycle almost immediately after she was interned in Auschwitz-Birkenau. This sentiment came after the interviewer asked if she had started to menstruate inside the camps. Susan recalled that “That was, I mean a godsend that the menses stopped the day I came into the camp, practically...But that was a godsend, at least with everything else I mean; with having

¹¹¹ Regina Laks Gelb. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Joan Ringelheim. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 2001.

diarrhea continuously, that was a godsend.”¹¹² Susan’s repetitive acknowledgment of how lucky she was to have lost her monthly cycle exemplified the point that when women were interned in the Nazi camps they welcomed the loss. This is particularly critical in understanding how women dealt with menstruation in the Holocaust, because they were willing to accept the degradation and deterioration of their bodies in order to find solace in the loss of their menses.

References to ‘Brom’ in Survivor Testimonies

Throughout my research of over a hundred and thirty survivor testimonies, I have been struck by the common occurrence of women speaking about losing their periods because of “brom.” These women believed that actions by Nazi administrators and doctors were intentionally causing the cessation of their menses. For instance, regardless of how the conversation entered the oral testimony, the women almost always equated the loss of their menses to ‘brom’ or ‘bromo’. The women believed that the chemical bromide was added to their ration of daily ‘soup’ or ‘coffee,’ and that due to its solvent properties ‘bromide’ would dissolve to guarantee the women’s consumption of it. The women believed the Nazis distributed this chemical to systematically cease their monthly cycles. Mainly, this was used to control the ‘mess’ that would have been associated with hundreds, if not thousands, of women menstruating in the Nazi camps. Therefore, when

¹¹² Susan E. Ceruyak-Spatz. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.” Interview. Interview conducted by Peter Ryan. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 24 March 1999.

the women learned that the Nazis had distributed the chemical in a portion of their daily rations, they often believed the Nazis had forced them to choose between menstruation, which many equated to fertility, or starvation.

Alice J. was initially asked by an USHMM interviewer about her uniform in Auschwitz. She responded with a quick statement about the uniform, but quickly transitioned to the quality of food in Auschwitz. Alice stated, “they brought us all supper, the first supper. We couldn’t eat it, because we felt something in the food, in the food. But then we learnt that it was a sedative, bromide, or brom, and – and we couldn’t eat it. But it was good, it was useful for us, because we stopped to have menstruation for three years, we didn’t have menstruation with these sedatives.”¹¹³ However, when the interviewer moved onto questions about the conditions of the bathrooms in Auschwitz, Alice was quick to answer about the pipes in the bathrooms, then returned to a discussion on bromide. She stated, “where are we, yes so there we [indecipherable] for – for supper, and – and this one, and then, as I said, this bromide, brom, we felt [that there is a] sedative in [it].”¹¹⁴ Upon the second admission of bromide into the oral testimony, the interviewer probed further to question when Alice found out about the brom, but when Alice stated it was not until later that she discovered this, the interviewer again moved on to discuss tattoos inside Auschwitz. However, the interviewer a few minutes later, stated

¹¹³ Alice Jakubovic. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Joan Ringelheim. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 2001.

¹¹⁴ Alice Jakubovic. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Joan Ringelheim. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 2001.

to Alice that, “you know some people say there was nothing put in the food.” To which Alice responded, “Hundred percent, I can swear on it, brom or bromide. Because when -- when it was possible to avoid the food, we did have times when we could somehow get potatoes or -- or -- something like that, so you [indecipherable] prepare to avoid food of this sedative bromide. That’s it.”¹¹⁵ From the several conversations that surround bromide within this oral testimony, it is clear to see that Alice believed that the Nazis had put brom into her food in an attempt to cease her monthly cycle. Similarly, Susan R. referenced a chemical added to her coffee, though she did not refer to it as ‘brom’. Susan recalled that she only had her menses “two or three times before the war. And so, the first month we arrived most of the women and girls had it. Then after it stopped by itself. Why? Because they were mentioning that in the coffee, they were giving us in the morning, they were putting in morphine or some kind of medication that would stop people from having their menstruation. And we never had a true [menses] when we were in the camps.”¹¹⁶ Susan and Alice’s discussions of foreign substances placed in their food and drink demonstrate some of the emotional tolls and gendered complexities of living inside the Nazi camps as a woman.

Similarly, Lydia L., as part of her oral testimony with the USC Shoah Foundation, was discussing her first three weeks spent in Auschwitz when she stated, “[we had] soup water coffee with brom – to take out the monthly menstruation and that it and a little

¹¹⁵ Alice Jakubovic. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Joan Ringelheim. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 2001.

¹¹⁶ Susan Rubin. “University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.” Interview. Conducted by Florence Shuster. University of Southern California. 19 April 2001.

piece of bread.” In confusion about what Lydia meant, the interviewer questioned, “coffee with what?” Lydia reaffirms, “coffee with bromide – it was a chemical to cut the monthly menstruation of the woman. No woman menstruated in German camps. All the women were stopped from menstruating. Can you imagine? No panties, no cleaning, no Tampax, no nothing. They had to do it for sanitary reasons. So, the first week they took care of it by giving us the certain chemical in the coffee to stop everyone from menstruating.”¹¹⁷ The assertion in Lydia’s description of bromide established a very confident understanding that the Nazis indeed added the chemical into the women’s coffee. In her definition of bromide, Lydia was clear in her understanding of why the Nazis had given her the chemical and, in part she, was in agreement. However, Lydia complicated her sentiments after the interviewer asked her if she had ever heard of “any other side-affects from [bromide.]” Lydia answered, “well later on you did. A lot of people could not get pregnant, I had terrible pain the first time [menstruating] again after the war. But in a way it was something they had to do. You know sanitary conditions were completely none – they had to do it.”¹¹⁸ Lydia admitted that women feared that they would not be able to get pregnant due to the bromide they were given. She also admitted that when she had her menses for the first time after the war she was in immense amounts of pain and yet she still, approved of the Nazis use of the drug. For Lydia, the fear of menstruating inside the camps without access to proper supplies outweighed the fear that she may never menstruate again, and the fear that she would become infertile. She

¹¹⁷ Lydia Lebovic. “University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.” Interview. Conducted by Ada Horwich. University of Southern California. 12 April 1995.

¹¹⁸ Lydia Lebovic. “University of Southern California Shoah Foundation.” Interview. Conducted by Ada Horwich. University of Southern California. 12 April 1995.

willingly accepted the complications of bromide in order to relieve herself from menstruating inside the Nazi camps.

The women's belief that the Nazis intentionally ceased their menses is also significant because, for many women, the mention of their menstrual cycles in their oral testimonies was a way to demonstrate their humanity in inhumane conditions. Throughout the abuse, violence, and death, they still were able to view their bodies as capable of reproduction. However, when the women discovered their menses stopped due to unnatural circumstances, they viewed the abuse as a deliberate form of gendered violence targeted at their reproductive abilities. Noemi B., a former prisoner from Auschwitz, recalled that, "when I was drinking that soup...the period stopped. We later heard that they had some medicine put in, and must have been a strong one because I know of at least three people whose inside was so destroyed with that, that they were never ever able to have children."¹¹⁹ Comparably, Rifka F. stated in her oral testimony that "we only had soup and a little piece of bread. They gave us watery soup so we shouldn't get out periods. So nobody, yeah. They told us. That's what I remember here. A lot of girls came back and they could never have children."¹²⁰ Both Noemi and Rifka stated that the some of the fellow prisoners lost their ability to have children due to the medication that was added to their daily soup or coffee.

Similar discussions of 'brom' or 'something put in our soup and coffee' circulated through several different concentration and slave labour camps. In the research for this

¹¹⁹ Noemi Ban. "University of Southern California Shoah Foundation." Interview. Conducted by Wendy Barrett. University of Southern California. 16 December 1997.

¹²⁰ Rifka Fried. "University of Southern California Shoah Foundation." Interview. Conducted by Florence Shuster. 22 July 1996.

thesis alone, I have found evidence from women who were imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen, Theresienstadt, Mannheim, Mauthausen, and Ravensbruck. Despite the plethora of oral testimonies that reference ‘brom,’ there remains a massive gap on this topic in the secondary literature. Many historians have opted for an explanatory footnote when they use an oral testimony that mentions it. However, there has been no complete work on the subject and in part this could be due to the fact that no one has yet found evidence that the Nazis actually used bromide. In Zoë Waxman’s 2003 article, “Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: The Representation of Women’s Holocaust Experiences,” she argues that the use of bromide became a rumour that was spread around the camps “as part of an experiment of mass sterilization.”¹²¹ The use of the term ‘rumour’ is arguably problematic; while it implies that part of the story could have been falsified and references the wide-spread knowledge, it fails to acknowledge the complexities and implications of bromide. It also glosses over the hundreds of oral testimonies and just how widespread the conversation of bromide was. I argue that while there is no evidence that the Nazis systematically used bromide to cease the women’s monthly cycles, the high percentage of women who reference ‘brom’ in their oral testimony reflects a larger argument. It demonstrates that the women saw the use of bromide as a form of gendered violence, in a direct attempt to alter the biological makeup of their bodies.

¹²¹ Zoë Waxman, "Unheard Testimony, Untold Stories: The Representation of Women’s Holocaust Experiences." *Women’s History Review* 12, no. 4 (2003): 673.

The Long-Term Effects of a Lost Menstrual Cycle

As this thesis has repeatedly demonstrated, menstruation formed an important part of Holocaust survivors' recollection of their wartime experiences, one which they often linked to their continued humanity in the face of dehumanizing violence. Thus, when women began to discuss its disappearance, it came as both a welcomed loss, but also acted as a stressor that created a number of new fears. The fear of infertility ranked high on this list. After liberation, women's fears expanded beyond infertility. They questioned their own identity with femininity and with their bodies' ability to function biologically. Therefore, the biological impact of Nazi abuses did not cease with the camps. Rather, the gendered humiliation and terror that was attached to both the occurrence and disappearance of a monthly cycle had lasting impacts on women's relationships with their own bodies.

In most testimonies and memoirs, the survivors were able to recall the month, year, and/or geographical location, of the return of their monthly cycles. For instance, women often provided a detailed explanation of their cycles, noting the period of time between their last menses, usually right before their internment or within their first month inside the camp or ghetto, and the first 'normal' cycle after they were 'liberated' at the end of the war. The survivors' spatiotemporal awareness highlighted the significance of the return of their menses. For comparison, in the majority of oral testimonies, women also recalled exact dates or locations for their birthdates, wedding days, the birth of their children, when they were deported, the date their family members perished, their transportation to different camps and when they were liberated. All these events were life-altering for most of the women and represented key moments of significance.

Therefore, when the women opted to also include the date and/or location when their monthly cycles resumed, it solidified how substantial this moment truly was.

In 1944, after a year of being interned in the Łódź ghetto, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, Sally A. was liberated. In her extensive interview with the USHMM, Sally discussed the conditions of the barracks in Bergen-Belsen when she admitted that, “I don’t know how I survived, really, it’s unbelievable. First of all, they put chemical in your food. What this is very important that you stop to have feelings. You don’t know if you are woman, first of all the girls, the first minute, everybody lost the period from the shock. I didn’t have, didn’t menstruate for as long as I was in concentration camp and when I came to Sweden, it took a few months until I came back to my normal.”¹²² Within this statement Sally referred to her life in the post-war period, when she fled from Germany to Sweden to seek refuge. It was in Sweden that her body was able to menstruate normally; however, in her oral testimony Sally continued to discuss the numerous doctors’ appointments, medication, and needles she needed in order for her body to function regularly. To describe the result of the extensive medical care that Sally received, she used the term ‘bring you back’ when referring to the return of her menses. Even after liberation, and the start of her new life in Sweden, it was not until her menses resumed that she felt that her body was ‘back.’ Sally was not alone in this sentiment, rather, many survivors regard regaining the ability to menstruate as an important aspect of their survival. The prominence of its return presented itself within oral testimonies in

¹²² Sally Abrams. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 October 1981.

two conversations that often intersected. First, women like Sally began to discuss the reappearance of their menses as the return of their ‘bodies,’ noting that their humanity, humility, and biological function returned to them, even after the most horrific and inhumane conditions. Second, it signified to the women that the Nazis failed to destroy the reproductive abilities and fertility of all interned women inside the camps and ghettos systems. This fear of infertility was especially prevalent for the women who believed the Nazis had given them ‘brom’ or a chemical to cease their monthly cycles. Thus, these two conversations intersected through their encapsulation of humanity and humility, and their understanding of how menstruation represented the possibility of reproduction.

Like Sally A., Anna S. spent a year as a prisoner inside both Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen in 1944. However, Anna’s story was unique because at the time of her internment she was only ten years old. This was quite an exceptional circumstance, considering that most young children who entered the camps were immediately sent to the gas chambers. Anna equated her survival to the early physical development in her body and to her height, as she recalled she was quite tall for her age. Within the same remarks, Anna also equated her survival as a ten-year-old to getting her menses early in life. Remembering that, “at the age of 10, 9 or 10, a young lady, I was menstruating. I, they give us so many medications, I didn’t menstruate till I was 19 years of age.” When Anna was liberated from Bergen-Belsen on 15 April 1945, she was approximately ten or eleven years old. Thus, it was not until eight or nine years after her liberation that her body began to menstruate. The massive absence of her monthly cycle worried Anna. As she continued in her oral testimony, the Nazis “completely poisoned my system. I don’t

know what I was injected¹²³ with. But they told me that I will never be able to bear children. That's why they call, we call Jeff our miracle child, because they told me I will never be able to carry, with all these injection[s] what they were injecting, never be able to bear children."¹²⁴ Anna's chronological discussion of her monthly cycle signified how throughout the hells and horrors of the Holocaust, she was constantly aware of her biological growth. Even as a young woman who was interned at ten years old she was conscious of how her body was being altered and abused by the Nazis and feared for her reproductive ability. Thus, the birth of her son represented more than just healthy reproductive organs. The Nazis had failed to decimate her body. The injections and unknown medications that she had been given during her internment were unsuccessful. The return of her menses reminded her of humanity and that she had survived the most inhumane conditions.

¹²³ In several testimonies, women refer to being injected with a substance, or make other note of the Nazis experimentation attempts on their bodies. Medical experimentation in the camps was part of a larger eugenic project to rid the *Volksgemeinschaft* of so-called undesirables. These experiments included the use of X-ray technology and the tracking of "the menstrual cycle of each women" by the minute to understand the effects of "intervening in the reproductive organs of healthy women", specifically older women because "other sterilization operations were found to be too dangerous." Paul Weindling notes that many experiments targeted women's reproductive abilities; for example, by 1935 doctors were attempting to make women's reproductive organs visible through the study of 'Fetography'. They would do so by "injecting large doses of radioactive element Thorium" then the doctors would "remove amniotic fluid, while injecting the X-Ray contrast medium, and extracted the foetus from the womb." Nazi efforts to sterilize 'non-Aryan' women reduced women to the worth of their reproductive capabilities. However, it also exemplified the fascination with women's bodies, specifically their menstrual cycles and their fertility. See Paul Weindling, *Victims and Survivors of Nazi Human Experiments: Science and Suffering in the Holocaust* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2015).

¹²⁴ Anna Sultanik. "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, gift of the Gratz College Holocaust Oral History Archive." Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 June 1996.

When survivors' menses returned, it did not guarantee that it would be 'normal'. For many women their bodies still were deeply affected by the horrific conditions. However, many women were still able to give birth. An interviewer asked Dorrit O. whether she had 'physically matured on time' and if she 'menstruated on time?' Dorrit remembered, "Not at all. Not at all. My menstruation didn't start till I was 18, even past 18. When I got married at 19, I didn't menstruate for six months after that It was never okay, it...the only time it got regulated is after I had my son. After that I had no more problem."¹²⁵ While Dorrit was still able to give birth, she still had a trying time with her pregnancy, which she equated directly to the loss of her menses and the 'difficult situation that she went through as a young teenager.'¹²⁶ Dorrit's complex relationship with her own body demonstrated the way in which the long-term effects of a lost menstrual cycle affected women differently. It was not until after she gave birth and her menstrual cycle became regulated that she felt her body return and saw herself as a healthy woman without reproductive health problems.

Throughout the oral testimonies that discussed the long-term effects of a lost monthly cycle, women began to discuss the return of their 'regular' monthly cycles while simultaneously being pregnant with a child. Several years after Margot K.'s liberation from Auschwitz and her menses returned to normal, she and her husband decided that they wanted a child. At thirty-five years old, Margot told the interviewer from the

¹²⁵ Dorrit L. Ostberg. "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection." Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 29 July 2000.

¹²⁶ Dorrit L. Ostberg. "United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection." Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 29 July 2000.

USHMM that, “if God wants us to have a child there will be a time when we have one, and that’s what happened.”¹²⁷ However, when the interviewer asked Margot how she felt when she found out she was pregnant with her daughter, she responded, “don’t ask me that question. I didn’t know I was pregnant for five and a half months” and proceeded to laugh. Margot continued and clarified that, “I knew something was different with me, but it was not really visible, or I don’t know if I can go into medical terminology here. Menstruation wise, I was still menstruating too, so I did not know that I was pregnant.”¹²⁸ Unlike Dorrit, who was successful in conception with an irregular menses, Margot continued to menstruate ‘normally’ throughout her pregnancy, which complicated her understanding and relationship with her own body. The long-term effects of a missing menses impacted survivor’s bodies in a plethora of ways. However, for the women who became mothers, the return of their menses signified their humanity and the failures of the Nazis who attempted to decimate their bodies.

Helen F., whose testimony began this thesis, survived Auschwitz-Birkenau, and successfully escaped from a death march to Bergen-Belsen in 1945. Helen and her sister returned to their hometown in Romania to reunite with their family. In the first months following their escape, Helen watched as her sister’s monthly cycle returned due to the consumption of ‘normal food’. Helen, however, became worried when hers did not return in the same quick time frame. This prompted Helen to recall, “my sister, in a month or so,

¹²⁷ Margot Kirsch. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Council for Relationships.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 06 March 1995.

¹²⁸ Margot Kirsch. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, Gift of Council for Relationships.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 06 March 1995.

she got her period. I didn't. But what did I get? I got a staph infection."¹²⁹ Through several medical treatments and doctor visits, Helen received an injection that she believes helped to bring on her monthly cycle and treat her infections. However, the return of her menses did not guarantee her fertility. Following the 'normalization' of her monthly cycle, Helen and Joe continued to struggle to have children for several years and even sought out adoption. However, on 9 February 1958, Helen recalled having her final monthly cycle and then immediately became very ill. After consulting her doctor and taking a pregnancy test, she and Joe were elated to find out she was pregnant and nine months later at the age of thirty-eight, their daughter was born.¹³⁰ After 1958, Helen did not have another monthly cycle, however, the concern was no longer so intense because she had been able to give birth. In Helen's case, the Nazi abuse against her biological makeup lasted well into her post-war life. Helen was constantly reminded of the implications of being a prisoner inside a Nazi concentration camp. Her ability to give birth to her daughter was a signifier that the Nazis did not destroy her monthly cycle.

The oral testimonies of Sally, Anna, Dorrit, Margot, and Helen represent five different conversations around the loss and return of a monthly cycle. Each of the women had regained their cycles at different times in the post-war period and all encountered complications in their relationships with their bodies, but ultimately were able to have children. For these women the recollection of the exact year, month, or date of its return highlighted how deeply concerned the women were with the future of their body's

¹²⁹ Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

¹³⁰ Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

biological functions. Even in the celebration of its return and their successful conceptions, the women were still greatly impacted by the Nazi abuse that occurred inside the camps and ghettos. Thus, this deep-seated gendered humiliation that accompanied menstruating in the Holocaust and in the short-term effects of its loss, presented itself once again in women's views of their bodies after their liberation.

'Feminine Identity'

Several women survivors began to question what it meant to be a woman or 'feminine.' After months or years of imprisonment women's conceptions of 'womanhood' and feminine identity were altered. For Zophia S., her identity and femininity were first questioned inside the camps and she notably stated to the interviewer during her testimony with the USHMM that she "wanted to digress, remember, about women. Women had particularly a hard time. We were so dehumanized, you know."¹³¹ Zophia openly stated that the Holocaust was more complicated for women, and she quite tellingly continued to connect the hardships of women directly to their biological makeup and gender roles. "We lost our femininity because we, we had, we had no menstrual periods. Due to malnutrition. They were also putting something, I understand into the, what wasn't food, to make us amenorrhoeic. And so we had no breasts, we had no appearance, we had no looks. We were feeling – men had it a little easier, although the men did suffer as much as we did. But as self-image of a person,

¹³¹ Zophia Shulman. "The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, acquired from Jewish Family and Children Services of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.". United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 11 April 1983.

when we came out of the war, we really had a very hard time. We lost five years of our lives. How to dress, who are we? The question constantly came up, what is it like to – you also wanted to be part of a human family. In addition to have your own – you wanted to have your own family and everything.”¹³² Within this very revealing and raw testimony, it is evident that Zophia’s struggles with her feminine identity and womanhood carried with her after she was liberated and free from Nazi abuse. She specifically highlighted her lack of menses and breasts as triggers to why she constantly questioned her ‘womanhood’ in the post-war period. I would also argue that while she does not make the direct connection in her statement, when Zophia revealed that she wanted to have a family of her own, she was specifically concerned about not fulfilling this wish because she stopped menstruating for such a lengthy period of time. The confusion and questioning of identity was a form of gender humiliation that forced women to look at their relationships with their bodies through a different lens that impacted their life in the post-war period.

Itka Z. also spoke about her body, femininity, and gender in her extremely detailed interview conducted by the United States Holocaust Museum. Itka disclosed to the interviewer that after she was liberated from Auschwitz, “I remember the shock I got when I saw myself for the first time in the mirror. I didn’t know myself. I didn’t see myself all those years. And it was no sign of womanhood.”¹³³ Itka continued to connect

¹³² Zophia Shulman. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, acquired from Jewish Family and Children Services of San Francisco, The Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.”. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 11 April 1983.

¹³³ Itka F. Zygmuntowicz. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.” Interview. Conducted by Randy M. Goldman. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 30 May 1996.

this loss of female identity and womanhood to the loss of her menses. She recalled that, “during this Auschwitz I didn’t get my period. Until this day, I don’t know the reasons why. That was malnutrition or whether they were putting something in the food? I would suspect it’s malnutrition. And I didn’t know if I am going to be like a normal woman. And when I saw myself in the mirror, I started to scream.”¹³⁴ As Itka entered the post-war world and discovered how the Nazi abuse affected her body, she viewed her body and her body’s biological abilities differently. She began to question the fundamental aspects of herself that made her identify and live within the construction of ‘womanhood’ in the pre-war period. The lack of menstruation specifically triggered a very specific set of emotions that profoundly made Itka investigate her ability to be a ‘normal woman’ if her menses never returned. The Nazi assaults on women’s bodies during the Holocaust produced these gendered humiliations and fears that prompted women to question their relationships with their bodies.

These two women, Zophie and Itka, exemplified the rhetoric and confusion for female survivors in the post-war period, who were made to question their feminine identity and what it meant to be a woman. After surviving under the brutal and inhumane conditions of the Nazi camps, the implications of not menstruating for months, and sometimes years, continued with these women into their new lives. Through Nazi abuse women were made to feel unworthy in their own bodies, forced them to feel completely riddled with guilt, and to fear biological repercussions of their absent monthly cycles.

¹³⁴ Itka F. Zygmuntowicz. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection.” Interview. Conducted by Randy M. Goldman. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 30 May 1996.

Thus, this unique form of gendered terror encapsulated the multifaceted anxieties women had attached to their own bodies in the post-war era.

‘Maybe That’s Why I Don’t Have Children’

Through the fears and anxieties of not menstruating in the Holocaust, a group of women survivors quickly had their fears of infertility turn into a reality. As the evidence will illustrate, the majority of women attributed their inability to have children to the long-term effects of Nazi abuse on their monthly cycles. These women were often disheartened and devastated when discussing their inability to conceive. Other survivors reflected on their relationships with their own bodies and often saw themselves as failures as women or unsuccessful in life. For Fanny A., the effects of Nazism stayed with her for the remainder of her life after 1945. As a woman who quickly lost her monthly cycle while she was interned in Auschwitz, she saw the devastating effects this had on her body after she was liberated. Fanny recalled that, “Well, I – don’t forget, we didn’t have our period. The day we – till – two months after being in Auschwitz, and I think experimentation, we don’t know what was put in the body, we don’t know what was taken out from the body.”¹³⁵ Fanny continued to acknowledge that, “well, another thing which was difficult for me to talk about, especially here, where you have single people, who fortunately were able to start a life again and have a family. And I couldn’t have

¹³⁵ Fanny Aizenberg. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, funded by a grant from the Mickey Shapiro Charitable Trust.” Interview. Conducted by Ina Navazelskis and Steven Vitto. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 21 April 2011.

children anymore.”¹³⁶ Fanny personally connected her lack of menstruation and her fears of experimentation of her body to her inability to have children in the post-war era. In this statement she directly linked the abuses perpetrated by the Nazis to her lack of menstruation and openly held them accountable. However, Fanny continued to compare herself to her fellow survivors, who, after the war were able to get married and have children and in her discussion of these survivors, she used the term “start life again.” In this statement, Fanny that her infertility deeply impacted the way she viewed herself and her life after the war. She was not able to gain a renewed sense of being and instead saw her life as stagnant. In the later sections of her oral testimony, Fanny admitted to the interviewer that she was unable to make peace with herself after the war because she could not conceive. She harbored a deep-seated guilt from at least the end of the war until this interview was conducted on 21 April 2011. This heartbreaking testimony highlighted why women’s own conceptions of their body were greatly altered due to wartime violence.

Not all of Fanny’s fellow survivors were as open and willing to discuss the profound emotional consequences of their inability to have children. Helen B., who survived many different camps but ultimately ended up being liberated from Bergen-Belsen, asked her interviewer if she could discuss “a little more women’s talk.” After the interviewer had agreed, Helen informed her that most women, “lost their menstruation, I

¹³⁶ Fanny Aizenberg. “United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Collection, funded by a grant from the Mickey Shapiro Charitable Trust.” Interview. Conducted by Ina Navazelskis and Steven Vitto. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 21 April 2011.

remember it took for some ladies two, three years with good nourishment and with good food and they became back ladies, and maybe this is one of the reasons I have no children.”¹³⁷ This quick but highly notable acknowledgment of her inability to have children tells us that Helen had considered and questioned this loss before. By her asking if it was okay to discuss menstruation, Helen saw the necessity and urgency in connecting the Nazis to her infertility. It is also important to acknowledge how Helen used the term “they became back ladies.” In this statement Helen only sees ‘womanhood’ returning with the reappearance of a monthly cycle and it is within this explanation that Helen’s own emotional attachment is revealed. She was forced to see her body as a weapon that was abused and assaulted during the Second World War and it was so deeply damaged that forced her to complicate and view her own body through a different lens, one that questioned its biological capabilities.

Both Fanny and Helen expressed the long-lasting effects that Nazism had on their bodies and how it forced them to view their inabilities to have children through a complex lens that understood the Nazis’ role in causing the infertility, but also questioned their own role and relationship with infertility. While Fanny was more open with her emotions and grief, both women demonstrated that gendered humiliation expanded beyond the return of a monthly menses and the questioning of feminine identity in the post-war period. The women revealed that the long-lasting effects of Nazism revealed a

¹³⁷ Helen Bromberg. “The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, acquired from Jewish Family and Children’s Services of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties.” Interview. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 20 February 1989

new form of gender humiliation that made the survivors feel stagnant in their lives if they were unable to bring the next generation of life into the world.

Conclusion

This chapter used several oral testimonies to explore the short- and long-term effects of a lost menstrual cycle inside concentration and slave labour camps. Many women felt the loss provided them with a small solace and would subside the constant fears of ‘free-bleeding’ in front of fellow prisoners and guards. However, it is evident that not all women discussed the short-term effects of their lost menses in the same manner. Rather, conversations emerged in oral testimonies in three distinct ways. First, women simply mentioned or referred to the disappearance of their cycles. This was usually a quick conversation between both the survivor and the interviewer that quickly transitioned to another topic. The second group of women discussed the loss through positively reinforced language, often using the terms “blessing,” “luckily,” or “glad,” when explaining the effects of the loss of the cycle. Lastly, the largest group of women were those who believed the Nazis distributed a medicine, or chemical, often referred to as ‘brom,’ into their daily ration of soup or coffee. Many women saw the chemical as a necessity, a way that the Nazis could contain the impeding ‘mess’ if all the interned women were to menstruate. Other women were thankful for the chemical, as it significantly reduced the gendered humiliation and fear of menstruating inside the camps without any supplies. However, for various survivors the chemical was remembered as an attempt to forcibly sterilize women within the Nazi camp systems. Thus, they equated

their own, or their fellow prisoners' inability to have children directly to the Nazis use of 'brom.'

This chapter went further to explore the ways in which women's relationships with menstruation were complicated in the post-war period. The majority of women had varied experiences and relationships with their own bodies after they were liberated from the camps and were expectantly waiting the return of their menstruation. However, three prominent rhetorical streams emerged in oral testimonies. First, women began to discuss the moment when their menses returned in the post-war period. They often referred to an exact date or location to demonstrate to both themselves and the interviewers that they were spatially and temporally aware of their bodies. Second, women would reveal in their testimony that the lengthy absence of their menses forced them to question their feminine identity and their own relationship with their bodies. Finally, women associated the loss of their menses inside the Nazi camps and ghettos to their own or their fellow prisoners' inability to reproduce in the post-war period. The evidence in this chapter has further complicated women's connection to menstruation during the Holocaust, and demonstrated the complex and intricate ways the short-term anxieties, worries, and reliefs quickly transitioned to the fears of the long-lasting effects an absent menses would have on their bodies, and gendered humiliation stayed with women well into the post-war period.¹³⁸

¹³⁸ There are approximately another 60 oral testimonies from female survivors of the Holocaust who discussed and stated their relationships with the menstruation in the both short and long-term implications of a lost menstrual cycle. Some of these women are: Edith Csgeneri, Renee Dureing, Cecilia Einhorn, Lenci Farkas, Doris Fredid, Dorothy Finger, Dora Freilich, Anna Bergman, Ruth Brand, Rita Childs, Yolana Frank, Annie Glass, Chana Gitalios, Dezi Kalderon, Matilida Klein, Irene Kleinburd, Ida Levy, Sonia Orcbuch, Linda Penn, Cela Sarna, Vera Vit, Clare Winter, and Marta Zelcer.

Conclusion

In Helen F.'s oral testimony, which began this thesis, she traced her menses from the start of her internment, all the way through to her last monthly cycle. Her relationship with her body, along with the dozens of oral testimonies that were examined throughout this thesis, exemplified the ways menstruation impacted how women lived and died inside the Nazi camps. These oral narratives offer an extremely personal perspective on how gender transformed the ways women experienced Nazi violence, and further complicates our understandings of the Holocaust.¹³⁹ Helen's testimony was one of the first that I heard that explicitly detailed menstruation in the Holocaust, and how women discussed it. Helen, along with the other survivors, demonstrated how deeply complex women's relationships were under Nazi rule and further highlighted the ways in which their biological makeup was used against them. Thus, when I began to listen to oral testimonies that were similar to Helen's, I started to ask questions like, 'what did women do when they had their monthly cycles?' Did they receive any napkins to protect themselves or were they forced to free bleed? Through the oral testimonies, I was given specific answers to these questions. However, the women and survivors went further to complicate this picture, providing information on how they, and their fellow prisoners, dealt with their fears, anxieties and how the disappearance of a menses relieved a lot of stress. Lastly, the testimonies revealed how women saw their bodies in the post-war

¹³⁹ Helen Farkas. "The Bay Area Holocaust Oral History Project." Interview. Conducted by Evelyn Fielden and Lori Rice. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 13 September 1990.

period through a spatial-temporal lens, that demonstrated that Nazi violence did not cease in 1945. This thesis brought together women's stories, as presented in written memoirs and oral testimonies, to create a more complex understanding of women's Holocaust experiences, specifically how their survival was impacted by the biological function of menstruation. Therefore, this thesis argued that women experienced an immensely gendered form of humiliation inside the Nazi camp and ghetto systems, due to their ability to menstruate.

This thesis represents the first comprehensive study of menstruation in the Holocaust. Chapter One illustrated the ways academia has brushed over, or completely ignored, women's conversations on this topic. However, the existing literature on women, gender, and sexuality, provided a framework for this research. Starting with the 1983 conference, Holocaust scholarship shifted to explore women's everyday experiences in the Nazi camps. From this conference, scholars began to write, research, and study the Holocaust through a feminist lens, beginning first with the methodologies of women's history, next incorporating the findings of gender history, and, most recently, by incorporating the history of sexuality. Thus, while literature on women in the Holocaust was only popularized in the 1980s, the field has grown significantly since then. This thesis has filled a gap in the scholarship.

Further, this thesis has sought to explore women's direct relationship with their monthly cycles inside the Nazi camp and ghettos. In Chapter Two, I examined how, due to the lack of bathrooms, adequate sanitary napkins, and proper hygienic practices, experiencing a monthly cycle while prisoner left resulted in an extremely gendered form of terror. Women were made to feel humiliated and betrayed by their own bodies and

went to extreme lengths to reduce their menses. They did this for three reasons. First, the testimonies revealed that protection provided by sanitary napkins or discarded pieces of newspaper could subside the embarrassment and humiliation of bleeding in front of fellow prisoners, specifically male prisoners. Furthermore, they could relieve the women from having to work, sleep, and socialize while covered in their own blood, and thus it returned some dignity to the women who felt completely dehumanized by their own bodies. Finally, the narratives demonstrated that women went to extreme lengths to reduce some of the 'free-flowing' blood, because it provided them a sense of protection from violence perpetrated by the Nazis. This deliberately gendered violence perpetrated by the Nazis forced women to adjust the ways they lived inside the camps, in order to protect themselves from verbal, physical, and sexual violence. However, as previously discussed, Nazi violence was utilized against women's bodies even after women found some sort of relief from their free-flowing blood. This violence was directly perpetrated against women's reproductive organs, and often was followed with degrading comments about their bodies.

In addition to understanding the consequences of women menstruating in the Holocaust, this thesis explored how the loss of a menses again altered women's experiences with their own bodies. More explicitly, this thesis explored the oral testimonies of women who discussed the short-term effects of an absent menses. Survivors noted in their testimonies that they, or their fellow prisoners, saw the disappearance as a welcome loss. They discussed the effects and consequences of the loss through positively reinforced language, often stating that it was a 'blessing,' or that they were 'lucky,' that they did not have to experience the hells of the Holocaust while

simultaneously menstruating.¹⁴⁰ Women were quick to note in almost all of the oral testimonies used for this thesis that the Nazis added chemicals to their morning ‘coffee’ or ‘tea’ to unnaturally force the cessation of their monthly cycles. This chemical was utilized to destroy their reproductive organs, but women also believed that the Nazis distributed ‘brom’ to stop the ‘mess’ of having thousands of women menstruating inside the camp and ghettos systems. Within these two conversations, there was often overlap and similar sentiments when women discussed their relationships with their bodies after their menstrual cycles disappeared. Therefore, this thesis concluded that with both the absence and disappearance of a monthly cycle, women were still subjected to a unique form of gender humiliation and terror within the Holocaust.

Lastly, this thesis sought to investigate how the absence of a menstrual cycle resulted in long-term implications and effects not only on the biological makeup of women’s bodies, but also on the relationship women had with their bodies. Through first examining women’s spatial-temporal awareness of their bodies in the post-war period, this thesis argued that commonly, women recalled the exact year, month, or date that they had their first ‘normal’ menses in the post-war period. The survivor testimonies did begin to differ however, when they discussed their views of their bodies after the war. For instance, women began to question what it meant to be a woman after they had gone without a menses for a long period of time. This forced women to look at their bodies through a different lens, that made them become socially and physically aware of how

¹⁴⁰ Cecilia Einhorn. “The Jeff and Toby Herr Oral History Archive.” Interview. Conducted by Lynn Rappaport. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. 12 November 1984.

they presented themselves to the world. This thesis also explored the biological implications of not menstruating inside the camps and ghettos. Specifically, women became to question their reproductive abilities, and feared infertility. Many women sought out adoption as an alternative to having their own children, but still blamed both themselves and the Nazis for their lives not ‘progressing’ after their liberations. Thus, this thesis concluded that the abuses and dehumanization that occurred inside the camps and ghettos had long-lasting effects on how women discussed and saw their bodies in the post-war period. This in turn highlights that Nazi violence did not come to an end with the collapse of the Third Reich and the liberation of the camps. The 132 different testimonies that I watched, read, and listened to over the past two years of my Master’s degree have impacted my life in more ways than I expected. The survivors’ courage, tenacity, and willingness to share these stories have encouraged me, along with those in my cohort, to normalize the discussion of menstruation. However, we have simultaneously become hyper aware of the challenges that women around the world face daily due to gender inequality. Women are still made to feel ashamed, humiliated, and oppressed because of their ability to menstruate. Thus, this thesis, and the survivors, have taught me to apply my knowledge of history and the Holocaust to a broader scope, one that examines how women live their lives around the world every day, while simultaneously menstruating. Throughout this thesis, I have sought to bring together the way’s women discussed their bodies and their ability to menstruate, the gendered violence perpetrated by the Nazis, and how survivors remembered and recounted their experiences.

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Publications

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