Voices from the Darkness: Women in the Nazi Camps and Soviet Gulag

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Voices from the Darkness: Women in the Nazi Camps and Soviet Gulag

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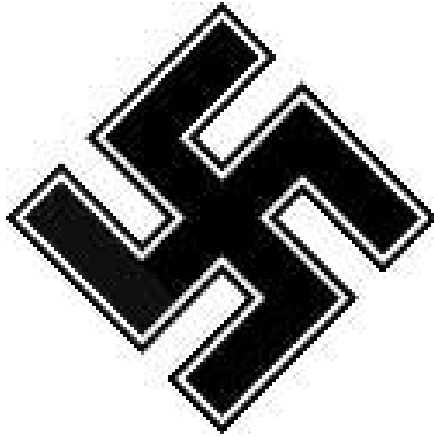

Introduction

The Holocaust and the Soviet Gulag are frequently remembered for the vastness of their human cost. Rightly so, for the Holocaust claimed 6 million Jewish victims and 5 million non-Jewish victims.[1] Estimates for the number of victims that deaths and ordered executions in the Gulag claimed range widely—from 3.5 million up to 20 million, with most estimates putting the mark in the range of 10-12 million.[2] These numbers are absolutely staggering. It seems almost impossible to put such statistics into any concrete terms; how, separated by generations and geography, can we begin to understand the tangible meaning of a loss of life on the order of ten or twenty million people? How can we understand the far-reaching effects of that sort of terror perpetrated by humans, and of that sort of terror inflicted on humans? Moreover, what sort, exactly is the terror that we are referring to when we talk about the events of the Holocaust and the Gulag? To a certain extent, the answers to these questions are out of our grasp; only those who experienced these events firsthand can begin to comprehend them. Even survivors attest to the incomprehensible nature of their experiences.

In order to at least try to shed light on some of these questions, however, this work attempts to look at the Holocaust and the Gulag through the eyes of

[1] Vera Laska, "Non-Jews and Women in the Fight Against Nazism" in John J. Michalczyk, Resisters, Rescuers, and Refugees: Historical and Ethical Issues. (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997) 93.

individuals who lived through the ordeal, in the hopes that this will start to make these events more comprehensible. I have chosen to focus specifically on women, partly because the massive size of the body of Holocaust and Gulag literature necessitates some sort of narrowing of the field, and partly because women confronted a different face of terror than did men; their gender intrinsically shaped their experiences. It is an attempt to find out how some women—for the number examined is too small to make any claims to universality—lived through such extenuating circumstances. The bulk of it is based on selective findings in personal memoirs and narratives. While personal accounts may not be the most accurate source for historical data, they are an ideal location for gaining a greater understanding of the personal human cost. Numbers can attest to the staggering magnitude of the terror; personal accounts can attest to the depth and the effect of the terror on the victim. The historical events of the Holocaust and the Gulag were the reasons for the socio-psychological aspects of resistance and survival that is the main focus of this study.

While examining the Holocaust and the Gulag at a personal level was the intention of this endeavor, nothing could prepare me for the vastly emotional experience of glimpsing the women's worlds of horror, hope, and struggle for survival. During my process of researching this topic, I was often confronted by the question, "why am I writing this?" The memoirs of the Holocaust and Gulag survivors were oftentimes powerful enough to bring me to tears, then laughter, then depression, and then hope. In short, I experienced nearly the full gamut of human emotions in the course of my research. My questions became, "how can I possibly

[2] Edwin Bacon, The Gulag at War: Stalin's Forced Labour System in the Light of the Archives. (New York: New York University Press, 1994) 10.

do these women any justice by writing about them, and what can I hope to add to these already replete accounts of human experience?"

In tackling these questions, I was forced to examine why I was so touched by these women's memoirs. Claude Lanzmann—the film director of the epic *Shoah*—in his essay entitled "The Obscenity of Understanding," refers to a seemingly unbridgeable gap between all of the tenets of fascism and anti-Semitism and the execution of the Holocaust, with all its horrors and human tragedies. In some ways, I felt as though I were trying to reconcile my own "obscenity of understanding;" how could I bridge the historical, emotional, and experiential divide between empirical knowledge about the Holocaust and the Gulag and the stark and powerful realities that these women's memoirs depict? Was there any hope of conveying, with justice and clarity, some sense of what these women actually felt and experienced? It made me question the legitimacy of my entire process and doubt the prospects of a successful outcome.

Throughout the body of memoirs focussed on Holocaust and Gulag experiences, there was this recurrent theme of "bearing witness." As Halina Birenbaum, a survivor of multiple Holocaust camps, said in an interview "if we do not remember today—forever—we do what they [the Nazis] wanted!"[3] Fania Fenelon, a French singer made famous by the film *Playing for Time*, survived the irrational world of Auschwitz largely through her participation in the camp orchestra. She once stated that her aim while in the camp was "to remember everything."[4]

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[3] Halina Birenbaum, Hope Is the Last to Die: A Coming of Age Under Nazi Terror. David Welsh, trans. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996) ix.
[4] Daniel Mann, dir., Playing for Time with Vanessa Redgrave (Los Angeles: Media Home Entertainment, 1984)

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, author of the monumental witness-text to the Soviet Gulag*,* *The Gulag Archipelago*, dedicated his work:

> to all those who did not live
> to tell it
> And may they please forgive me
> for not having seen it all
> nor remembered it all,
> for not having divined all of it.[5]

In these powerful words we find Solzhenitsyn's suggestion that remembrance is a way of honoring those who perished at the hands of the Gulag. This is not so unusual; remembrance is a common way to reverence the dead. In the case of the Gulag victims and survivors, however, remembering is so much more than just paying respect. The Gulag, like the Holocaust, sought to expunge people from the earth, to make their existence simply disappear. Hitler sought the extermination of Jews and other "undesirables" through his Final Solution. Stalin likewise sought to "purge" any elements that threatened to his hold on power. Remembering, thus, becomes a way to ensure that this never happens again. The idea of bearing witness to the Holocaust and the Gulag, of communicating them to future generations, is one of the only ways that such an irrational and unnecessary loss of human life can be given any meaning. If we cease to talk about them and to remember, then those who died will also cease to exist. The perpetrators of the Holocaust and the Gulag cannot be allowed to achieve their goals, even decades later.

To remember these women, their lives, their suffering, and their hopes—that was why I was doing this. I could not hope to add to their experiences, or to make them any more powerful. What I can do, and what I have tried to accomplish here,

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[5] Aleksandr I Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, vol. I-II. Thomas P. Whitney, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973) dedication, no page

is to perpetuate the witnessing of these women's experiences in the Holocaust and Gulag by communicating—and through communication, remembering—their daily battles and struggles, their losses and gains on the battlefield for survival and human dignity.

What was perhaps most striking about the memoirs was the endurance and strength of the women that come across. They were confronted with threats to their physical and mental survival; their identities as women and as humans were constantly challenged. At times, they seem superhuman in their resilience—perhaps it would be easier to simply think of their experiences in this way, as distant and impossible events. Historical time and geographical space may make this easy to do for most of the time. One must remember, however, that the women are, indeed human. Even more quixotic is the realization that their persecutors were likewise human—although at many times, seemingly in physical form only. This understanding of the persecuted and persecutors as human beings poses a problem to understanding—how is one to measure their seemingly superhuman or inhuman actions when the yardstick of human experience seems ill-suited for the task?

On closer examination, surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly, the women's survival mechanisms and forms of resistance are not so distant from everyday human experiences. Perhaps what is more surprising than the fact that they resisted in the face of inhuman forces is that the very ways in which they did so were very much human. To resist was not to achieve something higher than humanity; rather, it was to maintain a sense of themselves as women, and as humans, when their situations and persecutors were doing their very best to take away those things. Many of what we might consider to be defining characteristics of

our lives as humans were absent from these women's lives while they were imprisoned in either the Gulag or the Holocaust concentration camps; as such, the study of these women's resistance and survival mechanisms becomes a study in the definition of humanity and womanhood.

The Holocaust and the Gulag were both instruments of terror on a very large, and frighteningly successful, scale. The terror of the Holocaust and the Gulag lay in the fear that they created—the fear of becoming a victim, which was moreover the fear of losing one's life. In the context of the camps and prisons of the Holocaust and the Gulag, losing one's life took on a myriad of meanings that might not commonly be associated with the phrase. Losing one's life referred to so much more than the physical death of the body, although that was certainly the ultimate outcome in many Gulag victim's cases, and the essential goal in the case of Hitler's Final Solution. Life includes many layers on top of the essence of beating heart and breathing lungs. One's life is particular to one's identity—including profession, class, gender, personal relationships, and spirituality or value system. On a simpler level than that of identity, we find daily items and rituals—as simple as bathing, using a fork, or reading a newspaper. On an even more basic level are the things that are intrinsically necessary to sustain life—namely the basic necessities of food, water, shelter, hygiene, and clothing. All of these elements, and more, combine to form what is typically considered a European, or Western, life.

In the hands of the executors of terror in the Holocaust and the Gulag, many of these elements ceased to have the same importance as in pre-camp, or so-called "normal," life. Prisoners in the Soviet Gulag prisons were better off materially; they were often allowed to receive packages from relatives, but then many of them,

especially the political "enemies of the state," were faced with years of solitary confinement, hearing no more than five or six spoken words in a day. While Eugenia Ginzburg attests to the "purification" effect that solitary confinement had on prisoners, filling them with love for their fellow sufferers, the psychological torture of being deprived of human contact offers a challenge to one's human identity all the same.[6]

In the Gulag labor camps, as in the Nazi concentration and death camps, starvation and the "law of the jungle" take over as the dominant governing systems, allowing for human contact but often pitting prisoner against prisoner in the fight for material survival. Nevertheless, even in the camp world of a "revaluation of all values," to quote Nietzsche, prisoners needed to find some way to adapt to the radical change in living conditions. Anna Pawelczynska, in her Values and Violence in Auschwitz, maintains that while one's value system almost invariably had to be altered to allow for material survival, prisoners who kept some set of values and avoided succumbing entirely to the "law of the jungle" by helping each other had a much better chance of survival.[7] The key was to keep some vestiges of normal human life even when the prison or camp situation dictated the exact opposite. This is what the women's memoirs convey most poignantly—the will to maintain life, both materially and psychologically—at all costs. I hope that I will elucidate this successfully.

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[6] Eugenia Semyonovna Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995) 264.

[7] Anna Pawelczynska, Values and Violence in Auschwitz: A Sociological Analysis. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979). 137-8.

The Gulag: A Brief History

The Gulag, and its surrounding terror, is most commonly associated with the name Stalin and with the period known as the Great Terror, or the Great Purge, which lasted from 1936 until 1939. During these years, the Soviet security organs and the Gulag camps were extremely busy with the task of inflicting terror. In 1937 and 1938, there were an estimated 7 million arrests.[8] From 1933 until 1936, an estimated 750,000 Communist Party members were expelled or purged. Add to that an additional loss of 500,000 members—the majority of these arrested and imprisoned—in 1937, the first year of the Great Purge, for a total loss of 1,250,000 members in five years. This is even more striking when one notes that Party membership in 1933 was 2 million.[9]

These years, while representing the climax of the terror, were by no means the incipient ones of the system of labor camps dubbed, by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*. In addition to the Great Purge, there were large waves of arrests in 1929-30 and 1944-6. In fact, the Gulag camp system was essentially in place from nearly the start of Soviet Russia, as early as 1918.[10]

The term "Gulag" is a Russian acronym for Chief Administration of Corrective Labor Camps.[11] It seems simple enough—the head office of the corrective labor

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[8] Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 485.
[9] Martin Malia, The Soviet Tragedy. (New York: The Free Press, 1994) 247-8.
[10] Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, I-II. trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973) 3.
[11] Solzhenitsyn, 638.

camps. Corrective labor sounds relatively innocent. It might conjure up images of prisoners—those who have committed a crime, have somehow taken something from society—paying off their debt through hard, but healthy work. The prisoners must be there for a reason; there must be something that they have done wrong. This image is as false as, according to Solzhenitsyn, the belief that the Soviet security organs "are humanly logical institutions."[12]

The security organs may not have been "humanly logical institutions" in their actions, but the system was vast—a whole series of organizations comprised the well-developed security system. The Cheka was first in the evolutionary process. The Cheka, the common name for the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle against Counterrevolution and Sabotage, came into being on December 7, 1917 via Lenin's orders.[13] The Cheka reigned as the chief secret police body until the formation of the OGPU, or Unified State Political Administration, in July 1923. In July 1934 the NKVD, short for the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, replaced the OGPU, and thus took over control of the Gulag. With each new body, the secret police consolidated power and became better organized. The NKVD, for instance, reduced the percentage of Gulag prisoners escaping from 16 percent of the total prison population in 1934 to less than 1 percent by 1939.[14]

The Gulag was officially formed in April 1930, when the OGPU received authorization to create "Corrective Labor Camps," known by the Russian acronym ITLs. The Gulag was the administrative body formed to oversee the system of camps. The Gulag itself may have been new, but the concept of purging was not. In a 1918 essay, titled "How to Organize the Competition," Lenin wrote that

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[12] Solzhenitsyn, 12.
[13] Malia, 113.

"communes and communities" should compete among one another in order to discover the best possible method of "purging the Russian land of all kinds of harmful insects."[15] He suggested imprisonment and forced labor as possible methods.

Indeed, the variety of security enforcement and terror inflicting mechanisms was highly variegated. In Moscow alone, there were five major prisons. Lubyanka, Butyrki, and Lefortovo were reserved for "politicals" only, while Taganka and Sokolnika housed both "politicals" and other prisoners. Lubyanka, which doubled as the secret police headquarters, was small—with only 110 cells—but somewhat more pleasant (i.e. cleaner, larger cells) than the other prisons. Due to its proximity to the police headquarters, it was the site of many of the more high profile prisoners' imprisonment, interrogations, and executions. Lefortovo was slightly larger, with 160 cells, and was known as the "great torture center," although torture was practiced on a smaller scale in the other prisons, as well.[16] Interrogators were not sanctioned to use torture until April 1937.[17] Butyrki was the largest prison in Moscow. At the height of the Great Purge, it housed approximately 30,000 prisoners.[18] Taganka and Sokolnika were dirtier and less efficient than the prisons reserved solely for "politicals." Eugenia Ginzburg, survivor of multiple prisons and labor camps, described the implications of prison organization as "the cleaner the jail, the more we got to eat, the more courteous the jailers, the closer we were to death."[19]

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[14] J. Otto Pohl, The Stalinist Penal System. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc., 1997) 16.
[15] Solzhenitsyn, 27.
[16] Conquest, 268-9.
[17] Eugenia Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1995) 69.
[18] Conquest, 269.
[19] Ginzburg, 104.

Unlike the prisons, the Gulag labor camps were far from any sort of civilization. They were concentrated in the massive, inhospitable areas of the Russian North and Far East. Exile in Siberia was a very real and possible threat. As of December 1, 1945, there were 53 labor camps, and 475 labor colonies. The labor colonies were less severe, and were generally for prisoners with sentences of less than three years. The labor camps were reserved for those who had committed more severe crimes, including almost all of the political prisoners.

The greatest concentration of camps was in the Kolyma River basin, an area about the size of the Ukraine in the far northeastern corner of Russia. A camp song went as follows:

> Kolyma, Kolyma, you distant land
> Where it's winter for twelve months in the year,
> And summer for all the rest![20]

The harsh, Arctic climate made for an extremely high death rate amongst the prisoners in Kolyma area camps. There were women's camps, men's camps, and mixed gender camps spread throughout the region. Elgen, described by Eugenia Ginzburg and Eleanor Lipper, was one of the largest women's camps. Mylga, a women's "disciplinary" camp, was also in this area.

Prisoners in transit to the Kolyma basin camps faced a long, arduous, and dangerous trip. Prisoners would first travel to Vladisvostock by train, approximately a one-month journey from Moscow, on overcrowded and poorly provided for trains—prisoners were allotted one mug of water per day, or in some cases had only a dirty, communal bucketful.[21] They were then transferred to a boat and shipped from

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[20] Ginzburg, 350.; Conquest, 327.
[21] Ginzburg, 277.; Elinor Lipper, Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951), 79.

Vladivostock to Magadan, the main port city in the Kolyma area. The week-long boat journey was equally as terrible as the train.

Eugenia Ginzburg described her journey on the *Dzhurma,* one of the more notorious ships to travel the route.[22] The ship was massively overcrowded—female criminals, or *urkas*, were mixed in with female "politicals." This was especially difficult for the "politicals," as "the dregs of the criminal world" introduced them "thoroughly to the law of the jungle" by taking what meager possessions and rations they had.[23] The guards did not venture down into the hold where the prisoners were kept; they threw the inadequate rations into the packed hold, leaving each prisoner to fend for herself.[24]

Virtually no one was immune to the far-reaching effects of Soviet terror. The terror was so widespread that it was often met with disbelief. Victims would be certain that Stalin would "find out" about the excesses and release those wrongfully imprisoned. Others felt that the best way to stop the terror was to denounce as many other Party members as was possible, falsely believing that someone would have to take notice and put a stop to it if the numbers imprisoned became too high.[25]

A high-ranking office within the Party was far from a guarantee of safety, more likely than not, it was a disadvantage. By 1939, the NKVD had executed five former Gulag leaders, including Lazar Kogan, the very first chief.[26] Nikolai Yezhov, the brutal head of the NKVD from 1936 until 1938, was arrested in April 1939, and

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[22] Conquest, 326.
[23] Ginzburg, 353-4.
[24] Ginzburg, 351-4.
[25] Ginzburg, 74-5.

[26] Pohl, 12.

executed the following year. Ironically, those at the very center of orchestrating the Terror were able to experience it first hand.

The Terror did not spare high-ranking officials; neither did it discriminate against women. Women were both direct and indirect victims of the Gulag and its surrounding terror. Direct refers to those who were arrested and imprisoned or sent to the Gulag camps. The indirect victims, if one can really call them that, were the women whose husbands, sons, or other close male relations were arrested. A significant feature of the terror was the uncertainty; the NKVD did not readily give out information about a prisoner. Relatives were not readily given information as to the prisoner's whereabouts, alleged crimes, or fate. A wife would not be told to which prison her arrested husband had been taken. Russian poet Anna Akhmatova wrote eloquently of the experience of waiting in prison queues in her foreword to *Requiem*:

> I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad. One day somebody "identified" me. Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly woke out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): "Can you describe this?" And I said: "Yes, I can." And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.[27]

Her son, Lev Gumilev, was imprisoned in Leningrad during "the fearful years of the Yezhov terror."[28] Akhmatova joined thousands of other wives and relatives in the quest for information. In Moscow, a wife in search of news of her husband would have to go to all five of the main prisons, each time waiting in line with hundreds of women for hours, only to be told that her husband was not there. The prison

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[27] Anna Akhmatova, Selected Poems, trans. D.M. Thomas. (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) 87.
[28] Akhmatova, 87.; Nikolai Yezhov, nicknamed the "Bloody Dwarf" and notorious for his sadism and alcoholism, was chief of the NKVD from 1936 until 1938, the worst years of the Great Purge.

officials would frequently not admit to holding the prisoner in question—it often took a second or third inquiry in order for the information to be released.

Women were also among those arrested. In 1934, they made up a little over 5 percent of the prison population; by 1945, this number had climbed to 24 percent.[29] They could be arrested under nearly all of the categories for which men could be arrested, and even had separate categories of their own—"wives of enemies of the people," for instance, was its own category on a list of people to be executed.[30] These women, called *zhenia*, were guilty of nothing more than being their husband's wives. It may seem to be a discriminatory act towards women to punish them for their husbands' deeds. It most certainly was, although not for the gender-based reason that one might think. All Soviet citizens were subjected to the unfairness of the idea of guilt by association. Parents whose children had been arrested were arrested themselves. The same went in the reverse. There was a story of a young woman whose brother had been shot by the NKVD. She was arrested nearly a year after his death, for "failure to denounce."[31] This, of course, was not surprising, as political arrests in Soviet Russia "were distinguished…precisely by the fact that people were arrested who were guilty of nothing."[32]

The bulk of the women whose narratives are cited within this work were classified as "politicals." This meant that they were charged with crimes such as "anti-Soviet agitation" or "counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity." Article 58 of the Soviet penal code dealt with these charges, with section 8—terrorism—dealing with the worst "enemies of the state." Many of the charges were falsified; at the height

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[29] Pohl, 30-31.
[30] Z.T Serdyuk, "Speech to the XXIInd Party Congress" (Pravda, 31 Oct 1961); Moscow News, no. 18 (1988) in Robert Conquest, The Great Terror: A Reassessment (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 235.

of the purge the NKVD had to fill quotas for every arrest category. If there were too many "anti-Soviet agitators" some of those would have to be changed to "bourgeois nationalists" or "counterrevolutionary Trotskyist terrorists."

There was a sharp contrast between the inexperienced "politicals," sometimes called "little roses," and the hardened criminal women, referred to as "little violets" or *urkas*.[33] *Urkas* were convicted of common crimes, such as theft and prostitution. Like the *kapos* in the Nazi camps, the *urkas* were highest up in the camp hierarchy; they were often given positions of power and authority within the camp. Section 8 "politicals" were at the bottom of the heap, destined for the hardest work and worst material conditions. The *urkas* were notorious for inflicting terror on the "politicals"—they typically accepted, and often demanded, material bribes and, in some cases, sexual favors in return for decent treatment.

The politicals were also treated with greater severity than common criminals under the Soviet system. In addition to longer sentence lengths, they were largely excluded from the wave of amnesties granted after Stalin's death in March 1953. As a result, there was an outbreak of political prisoner uprisings within the Gulag labor camps. Women played an active role in these revolts. In the Pechora camp, prisoners had gathered at the center of the camp. The female prisoners stood in a ring around the mass of inmates, the idea being that the soldiers would be less likely to fire upon women than upon men. This logic proved flawed, as the soldiers used sandblasting machines to subdue the prisoners.[34] Another uprising occurred at the Kingir camp in what is now Kazakhstan. The prisoners tore down the barrier

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[31] Lipper, 71-74.
[32] Solzhenitsyn, 11.
[33] Conquest, 315.

between the men's and women's camps, and took control of the camp. For 42 days, it was run by a coalition of 1 female and 14 male prisoners. Soviet troops eventually suppressed the uprising with tanks, with 200 women among the prisoners killed.[35]

One finds that the world that female victims of the Great Terror faced was fraught with a whole array of different threats. Their status as women offered them no measure of protection or kindness at the hands of camp and prison officials. In the prisons, solitary confinement and psychological isolation were worse than the material conditions, which, far from being comfortable, were generally sufficient to sustain life. The Gulag labor camps, on the other hand, were harsh in every aspect—climate, lack of food, abuse at the hands of the *urkas* and male prison officials. These, along with others, formed the formidable body of threats to which the women had to respond.

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[34] Veronica Shapalov, ed. and trans., Remembering the Darkness: Women in Soviet Prisons. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001) 13.

[35] Shapalov, 13.

The Holocaust: A Brief History

Adolf Hitler came into power as Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. By 1934, he had used the Reichstag fire as an excuse to pass the Decree of the President for the Protection of People and State on February 28. Essentially, this decree abolished all constitutional rights and granted the police immunity to any laws governing lawful search, seizure, or arrest.[36] This set the stage for progressively worsening persecutions of the Jews and other undesirables. The Gestapo was free to arrest people at will, and imprison them for indefinite periods of time. Some of the first victims of this power were the Communists, whom Hitler blamed for the Reichstag fire.

The Nazis also began to chip away at the rights of the Jewish citizens of Germany. The SA and SS randomly terrorized individual Jews, at first. This was followed by local, regional, and national boycotts of Jewish businesses. Many of the Jews' rights were taken away, *de jure*, by the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, but, in practice, they had already been subjected to violence and oppression. The street violence against the Jews culminated with the *Reichskristallnacht* on the night of November 9-10, 1938. The *Reichskristallnacht*, the pogrom often referred to as "The Night of the Broken Glass," was provoked when Herschel Grynszpan, a Polish Jew, murdered Ernst vom Rath, a Nazi working at the German embassy in Paris. The result was widespread destruction of Jewish businesses, homes, and

[1]Michael Burleigh, The Third Reich: A New History (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). 154-5.

synagogues, and violence directed at the Jewish people. After this, the rhetoric against the Jews became increasingly strident and threatening, and the violence directed at them increasingly organized.

At the same time that the Nazis were developing methods of persecuting the Jewish population, the Jews were creating coping mechanisms and resisting. Starting in April 1933, the Central Committee for Aid and Reconstruction—formed by a coalition of Jewish groups—helped to find jobs for Jews and offered interest-free loans. In the same year, the Jewish Cultural Foundation began offering employment to Jewish artists and intellectuals. In October 1935, the Jewish Winter Aid campaign helped to procure food, clothing, and shelter to about one fifth of the German Jewish population. The issue of the Nuremberg Laws in that same year meant that many Jews lost their sources of income, and stores became increasingly unwilling to conduct business with Jews.

There is often the question of why organizations such as these did not rally for greater resistance to the Nazis or simply try to get as many Jews out of Germany as was possible. There was a variety for reasons for this. Perhaps first and foremost was simple disbelief. In the post-World War II era, the collective consciousness provides for the conception and understanding of mass killing—it was not so in the 1930s.[37] Up until the Holocaust, the dominant belief was that science and technology would ultimately lead to upward societal advancement. The Nazis took science and technology and twisted them to provide both the means (gas chambers and crematoria) and the justification (eugenics) for the Holocaust.[38] Thus,

[37] David Engel, The Holocaust: The Third Reich and the Jews. (New York: Longman, 2000). 63.
[38] Alan Rosenberg, "The Philosophical Implications of the Holocaust" in Randolph L. Braham, ed., Perspectives on the Holocaust, (The Hague: Kluwer-Nijhoff, 1983). 10-11.

the internment in the ghettos, SS executions of Jews, the first news of the concentration and death camps—were all met with disbelief, or perhaps hope that these tales were not true. The Central Committee for Aid's official line on emigration was that "there is no honour in leaving Germany in order to live untroubled on your income abroad, free from the fate of your brothers."[39] Emigration was often seen as an admission that the Nazis were right, that Jews did not belong in Germany. It was, moreover, an expensive endeavor, and illegal after October 1941. Resistance was sometimes seen as potentially counter-productive; Jews hoped, especially early on, that full cooperation with the Nazis would assuage the persecutions.[40] In addition, the Nazis made the *Judenrat*, or Jewish Community Council, head of the ghetto and completely subservient to them—the *Judenrat* was to assist in the oppression of its own people.[41]

There was, however, an active resistance movement. In April 1943, the Jewish Fighting Organization mounted a force in the Warsaw ghetto, and engaged the Germans in battle for 19 days. They killed Nazi Storm Troopers, Gestapo officers, and Jews who had collaborated with the Nazis.[42] Halina Birenbaum, then a young teenager in the Warsaw ghetto and survivor of four concentration camps, recalled the time leading up to the uprising.

> …the atmosphere in the ghetto was changing. As the extermination of most Warsaw Jews proceeded, the authority of the *Judenrat* decreased. We saw nothing but enemies and traitors in them. Now the only people who were listened to were the leaders of the secret resistance movement; they were trusted, their orders awaited. They were our pride, they inspired our admiration.[43]

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[39] Engel, 44.
[40] Engel, 66-7.
[41] Halina Birenbaum, Hope Is the Last to Die. trans. David Welsh. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1971) 6.
[42] Birenbaum, 55.
[43] Birenbaum, 54-5.

Although the uprising was eventually put down, considering their limited supplies and other disadvantages, it was quite a feat. More importantly, as Halina Birenbaum shows, it gave the people in the ghetto the feeling that they could do something. Moreover, it struck fear into the Nazis, who no longer wandered alone through the ghetto, but always went about in groups or with Jewish police.[44]

There were also Jewish Communal Organizations, established to replace the Jewish Community Committees that had become marionettes of the Nazis. They ran public kitchens, medical clinics and children's centers. The organizations also kept synagogues and schools running in secret, and organized food smuggling into the ghettos. Non-Jewish involvement was integral to the resistance movement; in October 1943, activist Danes warned 8,000 Jews of a pending Nazi raid, and assisted them in hiding or leaving, so that only 300 were ultimately caught.[45]

Women played a significant role in the Resistance and general fight against Nazism. They were as effective, if not more so, than men were because they were less likely to be suspected.[46] They often took roles as couriers or messengers. Women also took even more active roles in battling Nazism. Marie-Madeline Fourcacle headed a spy network for the Allies of 3,000 spies, known by the German Gestapo as "Noah's Ark." The Belgian Andrée de Jongh, nicknamed "Little Cyclone," created an underground railroad known as the Comet Line. On a level of more personal resistance, one finds the case of the Czech actress Katerina Horowitzova—she managed to shoot a Nazi guard before going to the gas chambers.[47]

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[44] Birenbaum, 55.
[45] Engel, 72.
[46] Vera Laska, "Non-Jews and Women in the Fight Against Nazism" in John J. Michalczyk, Resisters, Rescuers, and Refugees: Historical and Ethical Issues. (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997) 97-98.
[47] Vera Laska, Nazism, Resistance and Holocaust in World War II. (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1985) xii-xiii.

Although the Soviet NKVD invented wildly farcical charges and often obtained confessions through torture, the majority of the victims of the Nazi concentration camps were never even arrested, charged, or interrogated. More often than not, concentration camp inmates were there simply because of their race, religion, or political views. If one was a Gypsy, a Jehovah's Witness, or a Jew, a concentration camp was all but a forgone conclusion. Political prisoners need never have committed any crime against the Reich or National Socialism—merely being a Communist was enough to warrant imprisonment. In the case of those imprisoned for their roles in the Resistance, there was, at least, some action that had led to their imprisonment. Most prisoners, however, had "done" nothing, the camps were not a punishment, and there was no length of sentence set. Margarete Buber survived the Gulag labor camp, Karaganda, and the Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbrück. For her, waiting was "one of the chief occupations of the concentration camp inmate"—waiting for roll call, waiting for orders, waiting for Nazi defeat.[48]

The concentration camp system responsible for this started shortly after Hitler came to power. Dachau and Moringen were the first two, established in 1933. Dachau was the men's camp, and Moringen the women's camp. Sachsenhausen followed in 1936; Buchenwald was built in 1937. Flossenbürg and Mauthausen were next in 1938. The camps were formed in response to prison overcrowding; at this time, they were mainly concentration camps, not the nefarious death camps that were to come later in Eastern Europe. This was not to say, however, that concentration camps were anything resembling a pleasant place to reside. The

[48] Margarete Buber, Under Two Dictators, trans. Edward Fitzgerald. (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, no year) 198.

express purpose of the concentration camps was, after all, to break the spirit of those unlucky enough to be imprisoned there.

Ravensbrück, a concentration camp for women, was, in the summer of 1940, a clean and meticulous affair. Lawns and flower beds were very well kept, women prisoners were dressed in regulation camp uniforms, and stringent, military neatness was required in areas such as bed-making.[49] Prisoners were given relatively adequate food rations and had the use of lavatory facilities with running water. The basic material considerations, however, should not undermine the real purpose of the camp. Brutality abounded amongst the prison staff. A typical punishment, for example, for not making one's bed to the block leader's standards was 8 days without either the morning or evening meal. Punishments increased as the number of offenses rose.[50]

Prior to the start of World War II, Jewish prisoners were not the majority among camp inmates. The primary inhabitants were Communists and others in political opposition to the Nazis, gypsies, and criminals—often termed asocials. Another large category within the early prisoners was the Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses were imprisoned mainly for their staunch pacifist stance—they refused any undertaking that might further the war effort. They had a unique position within the concentration camps—they could obtain their release at any time by signing a document swearing that they renounced their faith. Very, very few ever signed.

As the years progressed, the conditions in the concentration camps worsened. At Ravensbrück, the first executions by gassing started in the winter of

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[49] Buber, 186-193.

1941-1942.[51] The first crematorium opened in the spring of 1943. In the year 1940, only 47 prisoners died; by the later years, death tolls were at 80 prisoners per day, not counting those who perished in the gas chambers.[52] The shadow of death loomed much larger over prisoners at Ravensbrück.

At about the same time, late 1941 into early 1942, the death camps and the "Final Solution" took form. At the Chelmno camp, the Nazis instituted a "pilot" extermination plan—the gassings started in December 1941. Three more death camps opened in 1942—Belzec, Sobibor, and Treblinka. These camps were intended only for Jews and only for death. Auschwitz-Birkenau and Majdanek were both concentration camps and death camps; they also housed prisoners other than Jews.[53] The very name Auschwitz was feared among prisoners, as reports began to filter back to other camps about the horrors that went on there. When women from Auschwitz were evacuated to Ravensbrück in the spring of 1945, a Ravensbrück prisoner noted that "it was possible to recognize a prisoner from Auschwitz at a glance."[54] This was because the wretched conditions had made survival their one and primary objective.

Even "free" women under the Third Reich were hardly liberated. While the Weimar government had given women the vote and equal rights as men, the Nazis took a decidedly conservative approach to the role of women. Hitler, in a September 1934 speech, declared that "the slogan, 'Emancipation of Women,' was invented by Jewish intellectuals and its content was formed in the same spirit."[55] While he was

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[50] Buber, 193.
[51] Buber, 208.
[52] Buber, 211.
[53] Alexander Donat, ed., The Death Camp Treblinka. (New York: Holocaust Library, 1979) 12.
[54] Buber, 303.
[55] Jeremy Noakes and Geoffrey Pridham, eds., Documents on Nazism 1919-1945. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974) 364.

not particularly clear about what that "same spirit" was, one can feel safe in the assumption that he did not consider it to be a positive good.

The dominant Nazi image of women focussed on their roles as mothers and housewives. Joseph Göebbels once stated that "the mission of woman is to be beautiful and to bring children into the world."[56] A veritable "mother cult" sprouted up in Nazi Germany. May 10 was designated as the Day of the German Mother. Celebrations had elements of eugenics interwoven, and included the performance of plays and poems devoted to maternity.[57] 1938 brought further exaltation of the role of motherhood with the institution of Mother's Crosses, awarded to families deemed "rich in children." Not surprisingly, Jews and Gypsies were automatically precluded from receiving this award.[58] Women were, furthermore, generally excluded from high level positions in the workplace and public sphere, as well as being discouraged from pursuing higher education.

Jewish women faced all this, and much, much more. They were oppressed as women, and as Jews. As their husbands lost their jobs and their livelihoods, Jewish women were alienated from social intercourse—they were no longer welcome at women's groups that they might have belonged to, and such banal tasks as shopping became progressively harder, as more and more shops refused to do business with Jews. Furthermore, the task of putting up a strong front in the face of all these difficulties, more often than not, fell to the woman in the family.[59]

The Nazi view of what proper women's roles were had a special significance for Jewish women. The Nuremberg Laws of September 1935 included the Law for

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[56]Noakes and Pridham, 363.
[57] Michael Burleigh, The Third Reich: A New History (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). 230.
[58] Burleigh, 230-1.

the Protection of German Blood and Honor. This law expressly forbade intermarriage between Jews and Germans. By banning marriage, with the idea of, de facto, eliminating children of mixed blood, Jewish women had to feel that their reproductive capacities were devalued. Moreover, when the perfect mother and housewife were the highest Nazi symbols of womanhood, how was a Jewish woman to feel when she could not procure enough for her children to eat and she was struggling to hold together a household?

Primo Levi, in a poem prefacing his memoir, *Survival in Auschwitz*, asks his readers to:

> Consider if this is a woman,
> Without hair and without name
> With no more strength to remember,
> Her eyes empty and her womb cold
> Like a frog in winter.[60]

Women victimized by the Holocaust were faced with a myriad of challenges to their survival. Each faced threats to her identity, her femininity, her memories, her life. She had to bear insults to her race, to her gender, and to her self.

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[59] Burleigh, 301.

[25] Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz. trans. Giulio Einaudi (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). 11.

More Than Numbers: Women and Identity in the Soviet Gulag and Nazi camps

When women were imprisoned in either the Nazi concentration camps or the Soviet prisons and Gulag labor camps, one of the first threats that they were faced with was the loss of their identity. Their knowledge of themselves as women and as humans was directly challenged. From humiliating physical searches and loss of personal property, to being referred to only by one's prisoner identification number or cell number, the aim and effect of both of the systems was to break the prisoner's spirit and to reduce the prisoner to a level below that of humanity. As Margarete Buber, a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp, Ravensbrück, put it:

> The one great blow, the loss of freedom, is only the first, and after that you are made to suffer, deliberately made to suffer, constantly. … You had lost all human rights—all, all without exception. You were just a living being with a number to distinguish you from the other unfortunates around you.[61]

And yet, she was able to survive the horrors of the concentration camp somehow.

A prisoner's world was turned upside down upon being confined in a prison, labor camp, or concentration camp. Almost none of her actions or possessions were her own any longer. Her personal possessions were taken away. Her name was likewise removed, in many cases; she was often given an identification number or referred to only by her cell or barrack number. She was issued with a standard camp or prison uniform. In many cases, her head was shaved. Her ability to bathe and to use the lavatory was taken out of her control. The facilities were usually

inadequate or virtually nonexistent. Furthermore, when, and for how long, she was able to use them was also strictly controlled. All of this combined had the intent of changing the woman into a number. Stripping her of her individuality and identity was designed to break her will and make her suppliant to the authority of the prison or camp administration. How was she to cope with this? When all of what she formerly took for granted to be part of her self, and part of her life, was in danger, even the tiniest vestiges of her free life took on a new importance.

Prisoners' individuality was taken away by the literal reduction to a number. In the Nazi concentration camps and death camps, prisoners had a colored triangle and a number sewed on to their uniforms. These were the only way that prisoners were officially identified. The colored triangle was coded according to the reason that an inmate was imprisoned. Red was for political prisoners, green for common criminals, black for vagrants or anti-social elements, pink for homosexuals, and violet for the Jehovah's Witnesses. Gypsies were included under the vagrant category. A yellow triangle sewn on, in addition, to form a six-pointed star designated a Jewish prisoner. As an even greater humiliation, besides wearing a number on her uniform, each prisoner had a number tattooed on her left arm upon arrival. Jews had an additional triangle tattooed beneath the number.[62] Those who went directly to the gas chamber never received a number; they were reduced directly to ashes.

In Soviet prisons, prisoners in solitary were referred to only by their last initial or by their cell numbers. Upon entry to the labor camps, each prisoner was issued with a number. At roll call, she had to recite her number, name, offence, and

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[61] Margarete Buber, Under Two Dictators. Trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, no year) 214-15.
[62] Anna Pawelczynska, Values and Violence in Auschwitz, trans. Catherine S. Leach. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979) 92.

sentence.[63] While this was not nearly as traumatic as having a number tattooed one one's body, it nevertheless served to undermine a prisoner's identity. She became merely an initial, a number, or existed only in relation to her crime and sentence.

It was difficult to directly resist being classified as a number, a letter, or a color. How was a prisoner to force her tormentor to acknowledge her by name, thereby making her human? A prisoner's best recourse in this matter was to ensure that she did not forget who she was when she still had a name, before she was "prisoner number 25,876," and help those around her to do the same. This often took the form of telling stories and recounting fond memories of past times in freedom. It could also include making plans for the future, when she would again be free.

In the Soviet prisons, a woman's first point of entry into the prison and Gulag system after arrest, one of the first degradations described by the prisoners, was the physical search. Margarete Buber was a German Communist who went through the Soviet prisons, the Gulag labor camps, and, later, the Nazi concentration camps. For her, the search was a tangible demonstration that "not even the most intimate parts of your body are any longer decently your own…you are a thing, an object to be mauled unceremoniously."[64]

Upon entering the Lubyanka prison, the inmate was subjected to a thorough search, but allowed to remain clothed. Items confiscated included identification papers and any items of values, such as jewelry and money. The initial search in the Butyrki prison was a strip search, carried out by a female guard. Every square inch of the prisoner was searched—her mouth, her nostrils, her anus—for any

[63] Buber, 62.
[64] Buber, 27.

possible "forbidden" item. Highest on the list of forbidden items were scraps of paper or anything that could be written on, and any sharp objects that could be used against the guards or for suicide attempts.[65]

The search procedure was one that would remain with the prisoner throughout her stay in Soviet prisons and Gulag labor camp. Anytime she was transported to another prison or camp, she would be subjected to these humiliations. In addition, they were a part of regular life—searches occurred periodically at Soviet prisons and Gulag labor camps.

Despite the prison and camp administration's best efforts, it was nearly impossible to keep the prisoners from obtaining or holding onto forbidden items. When prison uniforms were issued, women were given only course undershirts; they were not allowed bras. Despite this, most of the prisoners managed to hold on to one and to conceal it from the guards during routine searches.[66] Although personal sewing needles were strictly prohibited—a prison needle would be issued on request, for repairs only—a prisoner made them by sacrificing the tooth of a comb, if she were lucky enough to have one, by whittling a match stick, or by extracting fish bones from the soup.[67]

Since prison-issue needles were to be used for repairs only, sewing new garments—a useful way to occupy time and to replace items of clothing grown tattered through years of imprisonment—was likewise prohibited. Nevertheless, Margarete Buber recounts a story whereby her cellmates cooperated to make a new dress for a woman whose dress was falling apart. It really was a remarkable bit of

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[65] Elinor Lipper, Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps. Trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951) 5-6.
[66] Eugenia Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995) 206-7.
[67] Buber, 37-8.; Ginzburg, 235.

ingenuity. Prisoners were allowed to buy rough linen towels with the 50 rubles that their relatives could send to them. These became the cloth. They had no scissors with which to cut it, so the cloth was folded and a lit match run along the fold—this burnt the fold through. The women obtained thread by pulling it from other pieces of clothing. They even went so far as to embroider the finished product with different colored thread.[68]

Such acts as these may not be as radical as an open prison revolt; however, their status as acts of resistance should not be overlooked. The very fact that these women had the desire to hold on to such simple, everyday items demonstrates that the prison system's goal of dehumanization had not been realized. The actions were, moreover, forbidden, and thus they represented a rejection of the prison authority.

Searches were also a prominent feature of the Nazi concentration camps. In Ravensbrück, the Jehovah's Witnesses, with the aid of their block leader, went to great lengths to conceal their Bibles and other religious literature. Had the camp officials found a Bible, each woman would have faced severe punishment—weeks or months in a dark cell with little food, whippings, or both. Despite the fact that their faith was the reason for their imprisonment, and that by renouncing it they could gain their freedom, they put themselves in even greater danger by clandestinely continuing their devout religious convictions. The Jehovah's Witnesses studied at night and on Sundays, and staunchly upheld this part of their former lives—which was absolutely vital for them. It was their faith that put them there, their faith that

[68] Buber, 37-9.

kept them there, and still the vast majority managed to keep their unwavering faith throughout their persecution.[69]

The shaving of hair was another factor that contributed to a prisoner's loss of identity, and particularly femininity. In the women's concentration camp, Ravensbrück, prisoners were searched for lice, and if any were found, their heads were automatically shaved. Margarete Buber described this process as being traumatic for the women whose heads were shaved, as "no begging or pleading were of any avail" on the part of women who were told they must have their heads shaved.[70] In Auschwitz, women typically had their heads shaved upon arrival. One transport of particularly vocal Yugoslav prisoners of war was able to keep their hair. It was "an exterior sign of separateness [that] symbolized their great unity and determination to resist."[71]

Upon arrival in the Gulag labor camps, the process was similar. Any woman found with lice in her hair had her whole head shaved. In addition, prisoners had all of their underarm and pubic hair shaved.[72] If there was a woman barber in the camp, she performed this task; if not, however, a male barber would shave all of the women's hair. Eugenia Ginzburg, upon her first encounter with women who had had their heads shaved, felt that "the shaving of the heads of the Suzdal prisoners…was the supreme insult to their femininity."[73] One of these women revolted, took the scissors from the barber and bit him, thereby managing to save her hair.[74]

When the conditions were worse, as for Ginzburg in the depths of the Arctic winter in a labor camp, hair was not as much of an issue. Then, she "paid no

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[69] Buber, 224-29.
[70] Buber, 188-9.
[71] Pawelczynska, 90-1.
[72] Lipper, 83.

attention to the appearance of any woman's head."[75] In the Nazi death camp, Majdanek, survivor Halina Birenbaum gave little thought to having her hair cut. In this case, however, it was done as a favor by her sister-in-law to save her the trouble of caring for it.[76] When the struggle for survival became the prisoner's foremost concern, lesser humiliations lost importance.

More than just being a silly vanity for female prisoners, having their heads shaved was another way that their individuality and femininity were being threatened. Being able to keep one's hair was a comfort—it meant keeping something from her former life and, in some cases, keeping something that was forbidden by the camp officials. Both of these, by their very nature, are forms of resistance.

Another important form of resistance to the loss of her human identity was a prisoner's maintenance of basic hygiene. Although this was often close to impossible amidst the squalor and chaos that abounded in the Gulag labor camps and Nazi concentration camps, it was the attempt and the desire for cleanliness, more so than the outcome of the effort, that mattered. Facilities were generally worse than inadequate, and prisoners were often given too little time to use them, or forbidden from using them at all. At the women's camp in Auschwitz, there were two washrooms that could hold forty prisoners each. However, they were off limits to the majority of prisoners, as prisoners in positions of power monopolized them. Toilets did exist, but "the concept of 'hygienic conditions'" was "totally useless for

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[73] Ginzburg, 323.
[74] Ginzburg, 324.
[75] Ginzburg, 324.
[76] Halina Birenbaum, Hope Is the Last to Die. trans. David Welsh. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996) 81.

evaluating them."[77] The conditions in Ravensbrück were significantly better, in this respect. In 1940, each hut was equipped with sinks and toilets that flushed and the camp was generally quite clean.[78] As time went on, however, conditions deteriorated, and lice were rampant.

In the Soviet prisons, access to washrooms was varied. In the Butyrki prison in Moscow, 110 women had forty minutes each morning to use a washroom that consisted of 5 lavatories—which were really just holes in the ground—and ten sinks.[79] Some women went without a turn, and everyone was hurried. If a prisoner needed to relieve herself at any other time during the day, there was a bucket in the corner of the cell for the purpose.

During transport to the labor camps, and in the labor camps themselves, hygienic facilities were virtually nonexistent. During transport by train, lavatories often consisted of just bucket in the car. Prisoners en route from Moscow to Vladivostock received a water ration of just one mug per day, and were instructed by the guards to "do what you like with it—drink, wash, brush your teeth…"[80] Needless to say, one mug of water was not even enough to drink, let alone have any left over with which to wash. Eugenia Ginzburg recounts a time when the train she was on stopped and the women aboard were let out to wash. After being deprived of it for so long, "the splashing of water was accompanied by ripples of laughter."[81] In the camps themselves, lice abounded and the washing facilities and scant availability of water made washing oneself and one's clothes difficult. Margarete

[77] Pawelczynska, 30.
[78] Buber, 192.
[79] Buber, 36.
[80] Ginzburg, 277.
[81] Ginzburg, 317-8

Buber describes being in the Karaganda camp in present-day Kazakhstan, and having neither the time, water, or soap to wash properly.[82]

Nevertheless, prisoners generally tried to wash as best as they could, given the circumstances. Women stealthily washed undergarments, although this was often prohibited. When placed in the punishment cell—a dark, damp, unheated room—Eugenia Ginzburg refuses to eat because of the filth. She also uses part of her water ration to wash her face and hands, so that she "was once more a human being and not a grimy, hunted animal."[83] While refusing bread and sacrificing part of a water ration was a luxury that prisoners did not often have, it nevertheless shows that hygiene was an important part of a prisoner's maintaining a sense of herself as human.

Despite the best efforts of the prison and camp officials, the task of stripping women prisoners of their identities was not such an easy one. Comforting, everyday items could be forbidden, but the prisoners found ways to beat the system. Not every prisoner could succeed in resisting all affronts to her identity—she had to pick her battles—but these women resisted in their own ways to the various threats. Although some of the battles may seem small, it is important to remember that every action done with contempt or disregard for the camp or prison authority was a victory in the woman's struggle to maintain her sense of self. It meant that she still understood herself as a human being and as a woman, who, therefore, deserved better treatment. If she began to acquiesce, then the systems of terror were working. Far from implying that she was not trying to resist, if she succumbed, it

[82] Buber, 102-4.

[83] Ginzburg, 218-19

was a symptom of the severity of the prison and camp systems. It was their brutal nature that made resistance of any size significant.

“The Main Thing is to Make Contact:” Communication and Prisoner Solidarity as Resistance

Communication was another very important tool of resistance for prisoners. There were two main paths of communication—between the camp or prison world and the outside, free world and within the camp or prison itself. The first avenue was important because it allowed prisoners to have contact with relatives and friends. It also allowed inmates to gain information about what life was like outside of their confined world. This aided in strengthening the prisoner’s feeling of hope; the continued existence of friends, family, and normal life served as a reminder that there was a reason to survive the current misery of her situation until she could again be free. The second avenue had a twofold importance: some information could help prisoners to resist, such as warnings of impending selections for the gas chambers, secondly, communication among prisoners was integral to the formation of relationships.

Relationships, or solidarity amongst prisoners, were of utmost importance for their survival. Without a sense that there was someone in the world who cared about her, and who she could care about, the prisoner was left to flounder about in a pool of loneliness and suffering. While forming relationships with other prisoners could not prevent suffering, it was a means of making it more bearable. Prisoners could help each other by sharing what little material possessions they had—food, clothing, medicine—and also by supporting each other on an emotional and

psychological level. Prisoners united were much more effective at beating the system through resistance and survival than a lone prisoner. This point did not go unnoticed by those who orchestrated and conducted the terror. As such, the Nazi concentration camps, Soviet prisons, and Gulag labor camps each had effective mechanisms for the prevention and dissolution of prisoner solidarity.

Although prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps were surrounded by other people, to the point that there was little or no privacy, the physical proximity was often a hindrance to solidarity. The dearth of space, food, and clothing often meant that prisoners were driven to fight amongst themselves in a struggle to procure enough to survive.

In the case of Auschwitz, as with other concentration and death camps, the structure of the camp itself was designed to impede the formation of relationships among prisoners. In writing about Auschwitz, Anna Pawelczynska asserted that the blocking or breaking up of prisoner solidarity was a key point in the destruction of morale.[84] The camp was divided up into a series of housing units, called barracks or huts. Prisoners were often assigned to barracks so as to minimize the possibility of the formation of bonds between them—inmates with a common nationality, ethnicity, or language were split up into separate huts.[85]

In addition, the Nazis often imposed limitations on communication between barracks. A prisoner was not supposed to have contact with other prisoners, except for those in her hut or in her work crew. The Nazis used the tactic of the *Blocksperre* to hinder communication even further. A *blocksperre* was a camp-wide ban on leaving one's own barracks. It was often used before a selection for the gas

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[84] Anna Pawelczynska, Values and Violence in Auschwitz. trans. Catherine S. Leach (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979) 44.

chamber, so as to keep the prisoners from being able to prepare or resist. Despite this, however, chains of communication developed, whereby a prisoner could get a message to another prisoner in a different barrack, or information about impending selections for the gas chambers could be disseminated.[86]

One way that these chains formed was through the work crew. Depending on the type of work, the work crews could function as a medium for communication and relationship-formation. The work crews allowed prisoners from different barracks to safely communicate with each other. Indoor work crews, in addition to being easier, also tended to be more permanent. Thus, they allowed for the development of social groups.

The Nazis also utilized the prisoners themselves in an effort to hinder solidarity. The green and black badges, or criminal and asocial prisoners, were typically given positions of authority within the camp. These prisoners were often as brutal—if not more so—than the Nazi officials. In the inverted world of the camp, the prisoners imbued with authority tended not to associate "us" and "them" with "prisoner" and "Nazi officials," but with "strong" and "weak."[87] As a result, these notoriously cruel wearers of the green and black badges served to enhance the environment of fear; an inmate could not be guaranteed of another inmate's goodwill simply because they were both prisoners. Margarete Buber described the worst characteristic of the asocials block—of which she was the block leader, for a time—as the denunciations.[88] Prisoners would denounce fellow prisoners to the S.S.

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[85] Pawelczynska, 34.
[86] Pawelczynska, 34.
[87] Pawelczynska, 44-5.
[88] Margarete Buber, Under Two Dictators, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1951) 200.

Block Leader, often leading to a punishment of whipping or solitary confinement for the denounced, as a result of petty squabbles or thievery. In her words:

> It was pitiful and heart-breaking. Friendship and comradeship in prison and concentration camp play an even more important role than they do outside in freedom. I had always thought that the common misery and common dangers of a concentration camp would strengthen these feelings, but it was certainly not the case…[89]

Thus it was not just on prisoners with different badges that they inflicted terror, but on each other, as well. Denunciations were not just limited to the asocials. In fact, the Nazis recruited spies and informers to denounce other prisoners as a means of increasing the terror and stepping up the level of discipline in camp.[90]

In the Soviet prisons and labor camps, as in the Nazi concentration camps, denunciations played an important role in the break up of prisoner solidarity. In the Soviet system, the greatest fear was that a spy would report some sort of continued counterrevolutionary activity, and the prisoner would receive a longer or more severe sentence. This was not unfounded—in 1940, there were approximately ten informers for every 1000 prisoners.[91] The effects of this paranoia can be seen in an account that Eugenia Ginzburg gave of her experience in a Soviet prison. Upon recognizing a woman, Zina, whom she knew from home, Ginzburg went to give her a comforting kiss.

> To my amazement, Zina reacted to my kiss as to a serpent's bite. With a wild shreik, she leapt away from the door, nearly overturning the slop pail. It flashed through my mind that she really was demented, but her next words cleared up the mystery.
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> "There's a peephole in the door. The warder can see…He'll think we're old friends. And you…they wrote about you in the paper…"[92]

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[89] Buber, 200.
[90] Buber, 253.
[91] J. Otto Pohl, The Stalinist Penal System (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., Inc, 1997) 15.
[92] Eugenia Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind, trans. Max Hayward and Paul Stevenson (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995) 122-3.

Zina's fear of being denounced was so great that she rejected Ginzburg's friendly gesture. The Soviet system of terror had worked.

Denunciations were not the only manifestation of the successful prevention of prisoner solidarity. Halina Birenbaum recounts a story from Auschwitz, where prisoners were similarly isolated from one another. There was an area in camp called "Canada," by the prisoners. "Canada" was the place where all of the belongings of Jews who had been murdered in the gas chambers were sent. Crews of prisoners worked there, sorting the belongings. It was considered a desired job because it was not physically demanding and there were opportunities to steal items for one's personal use, or for the purpose of bribing one of the green or black badges in authority—they were quite prone to accept bribes in exchange for better treatment. In the final weeks of Auschwitz before liberation, Birenbaum recounted that the gassing had slowed down, and thus the need for workers in "Canada" diminished. The women who worked there bemoaned the loss of their jobs, rather than being encouraged by the lessened gas chamber murders.[93]

These women are not put forth for judgement. Actions in Auschwitz can only be evaluated within the context of the horrific struggle to survive. What this incident demonstrated, however, was the extent to which the concentration camps were successful in breaking down the prisoners' sense of connection to other prisoners. A prisoner's fight to maintain human relationships and avoid retreating into her own world of suffering was not an easily won battle.

It was, however, an important battle, and one that many women did win. For Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman from Amsterdam, her fate was inseparable from

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[93] Halina Birenbaum, Hope Is the Last to Die, trans. David Welsh (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996) 134-45.

the collective fate of her people. Her best possible course of action was to accept their terrible situation and to try to help as many people as she could along the way. Although she had a job as a typist at the Jewish Council, and could possibly have delayed her deportation to a concentration camp, she volunteered to go to the transit camp, Westerbork, with the first mass transport of Dutch Jews, in July 1942. There, Hillesum worked at a hospital. More importantly, her association with the Jewish Council enabled her to obtain permission to travel between Westerbork and Amsterdam on several occasions. Significantly, she carried letters and delivered messages from people in Westerbork to Amsterdam—some of these even had to do with the Resistance movement.[94]

Hillesum remained passionately committed to helping those around her and to transmitting messages. In a letter from Westerbork, Hillesum vowed that "against every new outrage and fresh horror we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves."[95] She stayed connected to her inner self; she did not allow the chaos of the camp to change that. In turn, Hillesum projected her own personal strength outwards and remained closely connected with other prisoners.

Hillesum's determination to help others was a form of what Anna Pawelczynska termed collective or mutual defense. Collective defense was an integral part of survival, and included a whole range of actions.[96] There was an organized resistance movement in Auschwitz, the main goals of which were: to save the lives of as many prisoners as was possible, to tell the international community

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[94] J.G. Gaarlandt, Introduction to Etty Hillesum, An Interrupted Life, trans. Arno Pomerans (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983) xii.
[95] Hillesum, 198.
[96] Pawelczynska, 115.

about the camp, and to bear witness to the crimes committed within the camp.[97] Notably, the movement was able to mobilize the prisoners in order to destroy two crematoria and attempt a large-scale escape.[98] In addition to the tangible activities, such as procuring food and disseminating information about impending selections and transports, of the organized resistance movement, there were other, harder to define aspects of resistance. Storytelling, discussing plans for the future, and humor were also means of collective defense. They united prisoners and helped them mentally in their resistance.

In the Gulag camp, Elgen, a prisoner-storyteller, Maria Nicolayevna, was loved and respected by all the prisoners, politicals and criminals, alike.[99] This was no small feat for, as in the Nazi concentration camps, the criminal prisoners were known for their propensity for inflicting terror on the other prisoners. However, when she recited poetry or told stories, the prisoners gathered around, eagerly and respectfully. Elinor Lipper, a survivor of Elgen, recalled working alongside Maria in temperatures so bitter, that she was "crying like an infant from the pain of the cold."[100] Maria turned to her and recited a Russian poem about roses. Lipper was so moved that:

> When she had finished reciting I went up to her and embraced her. As long as we could keep alive an awareness of beauty, as long as such feelings could flower at forty degrees below zero, there was nothing that could break us.[101]

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[97] Pawelczynska, 112.
[98] Pawelczynska, 115.
[99] Elinor Lipper, Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951) 221.
[100] Lipper, 224.
[101] Lipper, 224.

This was a powerful testament to the ways in which a specific type of communication, poetry, could have an immense psychological affect. From Lipper's words, one can conclude that it imbued her with new hope.

Some of the inmates in the Soviet prison system had a different set of problems in establishing contact with other prisoners. While in the Nazi concentration camps and Gulag labor camps, prisoners were surrounded by other people, whereas in the Soviet prisons, solitary confinement or cells with just one or two women was very common. The Soviet officials made every effort to ensure that inmates never saw another prisoner, besides her cell mates. When escorting a prisoner though the hallways, the warder would strike his or her keys against his or her belt buckle, in order to warn other warders who might also be escorting prisoners.[102] Inmates went to great lengths to circumvent the isolationist system. A prisoner's arsenal included writing her initials on the shelf above the sink in tooth powder when she went to the washroom, or clearing her throat while walking through the corridor, so that if any prisoners knew her they might recognize her voice. By far the most elaborate means of contacting other prisoners was the coded alphabet that the prisoners used to communicate by knocking on the walls. The alphabet was divided up into five rows of five letters each. There were two sets of knocks for each letter: the first set, done slowly, designated the row number, and the second set tapped quickly, indicated the column number.[103] The story of how Eugenia Ginzburg learned the alphabet was likewise fantastic. Each day, her neighbor would be taken to the washroom immediately before her. He would trace the word "greetings" in tooth powder on the bathroom shelf. After she returned

[102] Buber, 31.
[103] Ginzburg, 71-2.

from the washroom, he would tap the word "greetings" on the wall. Eventually, she was able to connect the two, and realize that the random knocks were not random at all, but a code—a discovery that she met "with wild excitement."[104]

Eugenia Ginzburg wrote about being in solitary confinement that "the great thing was to establish contact."[105] This was a common theme of resistance. Contact—communication amongst prisoners and between prisoners and the outside world. Whether it was through the walls, through a story or poem, through laughter, or through a helping hand, the establishment of human relationships was one of the most important and potent forms of resistance that a prisoner had. That the desire to make this contact was so strong that it engendered special prison alphabets and long communication chains in order to relay messages shows the true nature of its importance.

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[104] Ginzburg, 72.
[105] Ginzburg, 70

Inescapable Biology: Women's Resistance to Gender-specific Threats

A woman's experience of the Holocaust or the Great Terror was inseparable from her gender. Polish Holocaust survivor, Anna Pawelczynska asserted in her *Values and Violence in Auschwitz* that traditional European sexual distinctions "were totally eliminated in camp; traces of these distinctions were reflected solely in the extra possibilities for tormenting and humiliating the prisoners."[106] While this was true in some respects, women in the Nazi concentration camps and Gulag labor camps were nevertheless encountered an array of gender-specific abuses.

Prior sexual distinctions such as the division of labor, whereby women were not typically expected to do as much demanding physical work as men were significantly blurred in the camps. In the Gulag labor camps, women were just as likely as men to find themselves felling trees or wielding a pick axe in the stone quarries in the Arctic climate as were men.[107] Even in the harshest of the Arctic Gulag labor camps, however, there were still some jobs, the worst of the worst, which were reserved for men alone. Gold mining was one of these; in the years 1938-1941 the mortality rate of 30 percent among gold miners was higher than that of nearly any other group of workers in the camps.[108]

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[106] Anna Pawelczynska, Values and Violence in Auschwitz, trans. Catherine S. Leach (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979) 53.

[107] Eugenia Ginzburg, Journey Into the Whirlwind, trans. Paul Stevenson and Max Hayward (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995) 404-5.; Elinor Lipper, Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951) 132.

[108] Lipper, 108.

That women were spared from working at one exceedingly harsh occupation does not undermine the broader reality that, in general, a woman's gender earned her few, if any, concessions from demanding physical labor. In the Nazi concentration camps, as in the Gulag labor camps, lucky women might find themselves with lighter work assignments, such as sewing military uniforms or washing clothes. They were not, however, exempt from more strenuous outdoor labor, such as digging ditches.

While conventional gender differences were leveled through work assignments, there can be no denying that women were additionally saddled with the burdens of their biology. Pregnancy and motherhood provided a female prisoner with further difficulties. A mother or pregnant woman was faced not only with fighting for her own survival, but also for that of her child or children. In both the concentration camps and labor camps this was often out of her control.

In Ravensbrück, a Nazi concentration camp for women, pregnant women who had been arrested for having had sexual intercourse with Jews or foreigners were forced to undergo an abortion procedure, even if the woman was in her seventh or eighth month of pregnancy.[109] In later years, women were allowed to give birth to their children while in Ravensbrück. While the "idea that the babies were allowed to live delighted" the prisoners, the Nazis allotted no provisions for feeding the children, and the mothers were usually too malnourished themselves to be able to nurse their infants.[110]

In the Gulag labor camps, some concessions were made for pregnant women and their infants. Until the sixth month of pregnancy, women were expected to

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[109] Margarete Buber, Under Two Dictators, trans. Edward Fitzgerald (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, no year) 251.

continue with normal work. After that, they were given lighter work assignments, such as fieldwork or snow shoveling. In the final month, pregnant women were exempt from work and received the highest bread ration—21 ounces per day.[111] Women were also exempted from work for the first month after giving birth.

The infant and mother were allowed to stay together for one week, after which the child was placed in the camp nursery, called the children's combine. The mother was permitted to nurse her baby until the age of nine months, after which she could see her child for just two hours every month—provided she was not transferred to another labor camp.[112] Children were not transferred along with their mothers. Upon her release, the mother was entitled to take her child with her—provided she could locate him or her.

Pregnancy and motherhood did not only pose difficulties for women when they arose while in the camps. Women who already had children at the time of their arrest faced a different set of challenges. Under the Soviet system, women were arrested and imprisoned without regard to whether or not they had children or were pregnant at the time. As such, the loss of their children and concern for their children's well being was a recurring theme in the narratives of imprisoned women.

Children whose mothers and fathers had both been arrested were often placed in state-run children's homes. Theoretically, the mother was allowed to resume custody of her child upon her release from a Gulag labor camp—once again, this was contingent on her ability to find out in which home her child had been placed. Eugenia Ginzburg was not able to find her eldest son after her release—the day of her arrest was the last time that she saw him.

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[110] Buber, 306.
[111] Lipper, 120.

The loss of one's children was, quite clearly, a serious trauma. One of the only ways that the women in the Gulag labor camps found to cope with their tremendous sense of loss was to banish it from their thoughts. "Time and time again," wrote Ginzburg, "we had agreed that we must not [speak about our children]."[113] The experience was simply too painful. After a group of women prisoners broke down and spoke about their children, they "thought obsessively of death."[114] Forcing herself not think about her children was not an act of callousness on the prisoner's part, but a form of resistance. Thinking about the fate of her children would only put her into a state of despair. Surviving until her release was her best means of being reunited with her children.

From being propositioned for sex in exchange for food or better treatment to out right rape, sexual abuse, and the threat of it, was part and parcel of a woman's life in a concentration camp or labor camp. Both the camp officials and her fellow prisoners perpetrated this abuse—she was not guaranteed of safety within either group. For example, in 1944, a group of young peasant girls was sent to the Kolyma region labor camps. These girls, called *ukazniki*, had been arrested for minor offenses, such as unauthorized absences from their factory jobs. On the ship voyage from Vladivostock to Magadan, the male criminal prisoners broke into the area where the *ukazniki* were being kept and raped them at will.[115] The guards did nothing to put a stop to it, and the male criminals beat any of the prisoners who tried to protect the girls. The male criminals' reign of terror did not stop there. On the same voyage, they were able to bribe the guard posted at the entrance to the

[112] Lipper, 120.
[113] Ginzburg, 286.
[114] Ginzburg, 287.
[115] Lipper, 94.

main women's hold to send a few female prisoners into the male criminals' hold each night.[116]

In the Nazi concentration camps and Gulag labor camps, sex was a commodity with which to barter for food or favors. There were "professional" prostitutes among the criminal prisoners in both the Nazi concentration camps and the Gulag labor camps—they were able to practice their trade within the camps, as well. However, it was not just women who had been prostitutes in their free lives who used sex as a means of physical survival. Trading sex for food or a better position within camp did not only take the form of single encounters. In the Gulag labor camps, male and female prisoners would sometimes form "marriages of convenience." While in the Gulag camp, Karaganda, Margarete Buber received a proposal from the camp barber, who asked her to live with him and be his "camp wife" in exchange for his sharing the benefits of his higher status in camp—more food, better living conditions, and lighter work.[117] Buber politely declined, and the barber accepted her refusal graciously.

Not all men who propositioned a woman for sex were willing to accept no for an answer, however. Verbal abuse was common, so was physical violence and rape. Elinor Lipper, a German survivor of several Gulag labor camps, recounted the story of how she averted the advances of a drunken prisoner:

> …suddenly he came stumbling towards me. "Little countess," he hiccuped, "I want you."
> My face was gray from the smoke of the eternal kerosene lamp;…my hands were cracked and calloused from the work and the cold. I turned my head away to escape the reek of alcohol and moved as close as possible to my bedmate. She put her arm protectingly around me, but that did not stop him from molesting

[116] Lipper, 95.
[117] Buber, 82.

> me. Then several women fell upon him and with a few vigorous Russian curses shoved him out of the barrack door.[118]

Her physical description of herself showed that she was depleted and exhausted. The last thing that she needed was a drunken male prisoner staggering into her living quarters demanding sex. It took the assistance of "several women" to protect Lipper from this swine. Not only did female prisoners share in the exhaustion, hunger, and humiliation that the male prisoners experienced—they also had to fend off the uninvited and threatening sexual advances of fellow male prisoners.

A woman's gender was a double-edged sword. Previous gender conventions, such as the assumption that a woman should do less demanding physical labor than a man no longer held within either the Nazi concentration camps or the Gulag labor camps. Regardless of whether or not one objects to the supposition that a woman is more suited to jobs such as washing clothes or cooking, the fact of the matter was that these jobs were less strenuous, and therefore increased a prisoner's chances for survival. The leveling of traditional divisions of labor thus did women no favors.

Furthermore, women had to face the threat of sexual abuse and rape on a fairly consistent basis. While prostitution was a means through which a woman could provide for her physical survival, it carried with it a question of values. Anna Pawelczynska, in analyzing characteristics that were conducive to a prisoner's survival asserted that:

> Models and values that are deeply internalized create the strength to resist every alien system which denies those values. This does not mean that these models and values could be put into action in their pure form at Auschwitz. Translated into the language of everyday camp conditions, they defined the field of each individual's battle, on which he sustained defeats as well as victories.[119]

Thus a prisoner had to decide what she could bear. She had to decide just how far she was willing to go in order to provide for her physical survival. She had to be able to reconcile her actions with her own values in order to maintain some

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[118] Lipper, 215.
[119] Pawelczynska, 137.

sense of freedom. Acting in accordance with her own value system was a means of doing so. What exactly her value system allowed or forbade was not of particular importance; what mattered was that she was comfortable with her behavior. Thus if she could exchange sex for food and not feel guilty or ashamed of herself, than it was not a damaging activity. However, among the women whose narrative accounts are included here, not one of them chose to do so. For them, then, being propositioned for sex was another humiliation and part of the threat of sexual abuse.

The particularly female experiences of pregnancy and motherhood only served to further threaten her survival. A pregnant woman may have experienced the trauma of a forced abortion at the hands of Nazi physicians. If she were allowed to keep the child, she was then faced with another set of dilemmas—if providing for her own survival was often impossible, how was a woman expected to cope with providing for her children's survival, as well? If they were in the camp with her, she had to struggle with the scarcity of food and other necessary provisions. If they were not inside the camp, she was often faced with terrible uncertainty and always with a sense of loss. She often had no way of knowing whether her children were safe with relatives, in a cold and impersonal Soviet-run children's home, or if she would ever see them again. This was a supreme psychological and emotional burden for her to have to bear. A woman's experience of the Nazi concentration camps or Gulag labor camps was thus inextricably tied to her gender.

Conclusion

These women were able to stand strong in the face of abuses and humiliations that are unimaginable from the average reader's perspective. The survivors of the Holocaust and the Great Terror were then, and are today, monuments to the resilience of the human spirit. All but one of the women whose narratives I analyzed in this study survived their ordeals in the Holocaust and the Great Terror. Etty Hillesum, a Jewish woman living in Amsterdam, perished in Auschwitz. The title of her personal account, *An Interrupted Life*, is descriptive of the broader experiences of these women. They were plucked out of life with its normal, everyday activities and interactions and thrown into a parallel universe where nearly all conventions and traditions were shattered to bits. Since the conditions under which these women lived in the camps seem so foreign to those who have never experienced a concentration camp or labor camp, the women's experiences may seem otherworldly.

No matter how separated we may feel from these events, however—by time, geography, and experiences—we must remember that aliens or monsters did not perpetrate the Holocaust and the Great Terror, and that their victims were not merely statistics. It is easier to think of the victims either as numbers or as heroic martyrs and their perpetrators as subhuman monsters. There is, however, the inescapable fact that both perpetrators and victims were human beings. Here we

enter into a "Grey Zone." This complicates our perspective. It forces us to look at these events in a new light—they are not so remote from us as they might seem.

We, as human beings, have the mixed blessing of being historical creatures. In his essay, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, Nietzsche writes of man's conflicted relationship with his past:

> He…wonders at himself, that he cannot learn to forget but clings relentlessly to the past: however far and fast he may run, this chain runs with him. And it is a matter for wonder: a moment, now here and then gone, nothing before it came, again nothing after it has gone, nonetheless returns as a ghost, floats away—and suddenly floats back again and falls into the man's lap. Then the man says 'I remember' and envies the animal, who at once forgets and for whom every moment really dies, sinks back into night and fog and is extinguished forever.[120]

Our memory of the past is at once a burden and a blessing. While constantly remembering what has gone before and being unable to escape the past may seem a burden, it is also what makes us human. We cannot exist solely in contented ignorance if we hope to call ourselves truly human.

In an interesting twist, the women's pasts took on an important role—remembering became a key element of resistance. These women had to remember that there was something else out there, beyond the walls and barbed wire that now defined their area of existence. In this case, their remembrance of the past was not a burden at all, but rather a blessing. Without it these women may have slipped into the misery of the moment and lost the will to survive, as many others did who took their own lives.

It is important to remember—if we do not, then the suffering of those that survived and those that perished was in vain. It can live on only in memory, and so we must continue to bear witness to the crimes of the Holocaust and the Great

Terror. They were so much more than objective historical events that can stand silently on a page of a book. Elinor Lipper, a German survivor of multiple Gulag labor camps, wrote in the forward to her *Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps* that "this book is an attempt to make that silence [of those dead in Siberia] speak."[121] I hope that I have made these women's experiences continue to speak.

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[120] Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" in Untimely Meditations, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambride University Press, 1997) 61.
[121] Elinor Lipper, Eleven Years in Soviet Prison Camps, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1951) viii.

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