

We Will Not be Broken:
The Preservation of Identity in Memoirs of Women from the Lodz Ghetto

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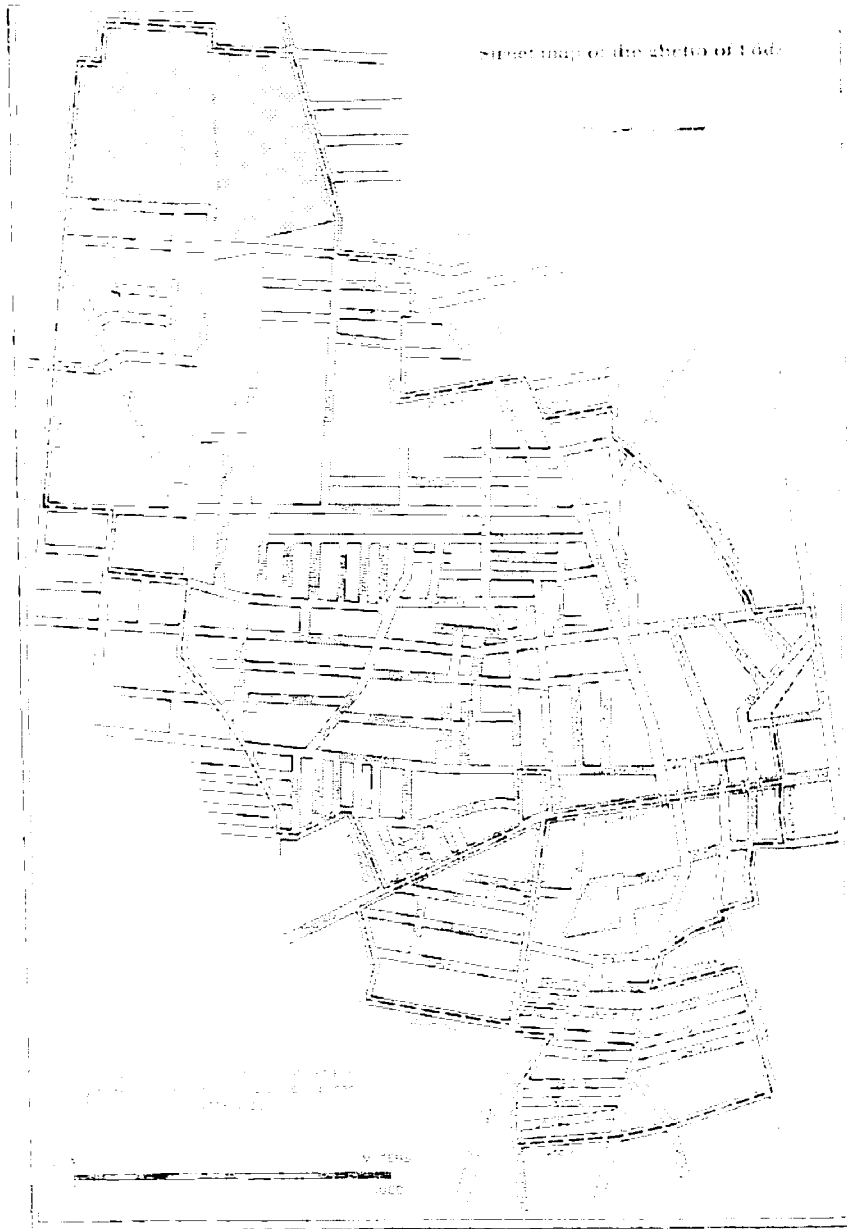
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Introduction

Ruth Minsky Sender...Rita Kerner Hilton...Anna Eilenberg...Lucille

Eichengreen...Sophie Machtinger... Ruth Kent...Anna Gerut...Franka Charlupski... Elizabeth

Reif...Lili Susser... These ten women all experienced the Holocaust and survived to either write

or talk about it.¹ They all came from different backgrounds, some middle-class, some working-

class; but all were Jews, lived in the Lodz Ghetto until 1944, and then were transported to

Auschwitz and other concentration camps where they survived until the end of the war. Each

woman had a distinct personality, different interests, different resources, but they all shared the

common horrific experience of life in the Lodz Ghetto. All ten women either wrote a personal

account of their experiences in the Holocaust, or participated in interviews to record their

testimonies. What motivated the women to fight for survival in the face of dehumanization and

degradation? What facets of the experience did they emphasize in their memoirs? How did their

experiences in the Lodz Ghetto shape their reactions to the concentration camps? This thesis

will use the memoirs and interviews of these ten young women to explore the importance of

relationships and preservation of life within community to their own perceptions of how they

¹ Primary sources are comprised of a collection of published memoirs and unpublished archival material from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC. Ruth Minsky Sender, The Cage (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986); Rita Kerner Hilton, "My Story" unpublished memoir, RG-50.155*0002, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Anna Eilenberg, Breaking My Silence (New York: Shengold Publishers Inc., 1985); Lucille Eichengreen, From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994); Sophie Machtinger, "Recollections from My Life's Experiences" Unpublished memoir, Trans. Douglas Kouril, RG-02.012*01, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Ruth Kent, Interview by Sid Bolkolsky, Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories, University of Michigan, Dearborn, 7 August 1984, RG-50.155*0003, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Anna Gerut, "When the Living Envied the Dead" Unpublished memoir, RG-02.165, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Franka Charlupski, Interview by Sid Bolkolsky, Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories, University of Michigan, Dearborn, 18 June 1985, RG-50.155*0008, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Elizabeth Reif, "Concentration Camp from October 1941 to May 1945" Unpublished memoir, RG-02.148, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC; Lili Susser, "Lilli's Story: A Memory of the Holocaust" Unpublished memoir, Trans. and Ed. Lois Hull, Mary Cortese, Rebecca Susser, Kerry Susser, Herman Susser, and Peter Roper, RG-1996.A.0102, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

preserved identity in spite of the pressures of dehumanization in the Lodz Ghetto and subsequent concentration camps.

The women's common experience of the Lodz Ghetto made their overall experience of the Holocaust different from that of many other survivors. Between World Wars I and II, Lodz, Poland had one of the largest and most active Jewish populations in Eastern Europe; some 233,000 residents, or 33.5 percent of the city's population, were Jews.² Lodz was also an extremely important industrial center with a large number of textile factories. During the early months of German occupation, an estimated 71,000 members of the community, mostly men, fled eastward toward the Soviet Union, leaving many women and children behind.³ The women and children largely remained in Lodz because of the mistaken belief, perpetuated by the observations of humane treatment at the hands of the Germans during World War I, that "the Germans were 'civilized' and would honor traditional gender norms and would not harm women and children."⁴ This created a great discrepancy between the number of men and women left in the city by the time the Germans ordered the Jews into the ghetto. This discrepancy continued to grow for the duration of the ghetto because "women outperformed the men in the imperatives of endurance and adjustment," as explained by Michal Unger in her study on the status of women in the Lodz Ghetto.⁵ Unger studied demographic and contextual data to uncover the reasons for the broadening of the gender disparity, and to investigate how the ghetto environment led to changes in the social, cultural, and political standing of Jewish women in Lodz. She used memoirs and diaries to support her suppositions about the ways in which women's roles changed in the ghetto,

² Ezra Mendelsohn, The Jews of East Central Europe Between the World Wars (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983) 23.

³ Julian Baranowski, The Lodz Ghetto 1940-1944 (Lodz: Bilbo, 1999) 28.

⁴ Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer, "Introduction: The Role of Gender in the Holocaust" Women in the Holocaust Ed. Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 5.

⁵ Michal Unger. "The Status and Plight of Women in the Lodz Ghetto" Women in the Holocaust Ed. Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 138.

but did not investigate the psychological motivations behind their strive to adapt and survive in the Lodz ghetto. Her study provides an important basis for analysis of the Lodz Ghetto community.

In addition to the gender discrepancy studied by Michal Unger, Lodz was unique because of its hermetically sealed nature, which prevented news of the Final Solution or the war from infiltrating the ghetto until late in the war, and because its population was quickly mobilized into a highly productive industrial zone for the Third Reich, therefore delaying its final liquidation until the summer of 1944. Because of the industrial nature of the ghetto and its duration, the women were forced to spend the majority of the war living and working in the ghetto and entered the concentration camp system much later than most Jews. The ghetto was open for a little more than four years, and during this time, the Jews within its walls maintained a sense of community as they participated in cultural events, education, politics, and family life. These activities were meticulously documented in the daily *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*.⁶ This daily account of life in the ghetto was commissioned by the ghetto administration, and is one of the most complete accounts of daily life in an Eastern European ghetto. The *Chronicle* carefully documented the important events in the community and kept a close record of the quality of life of its inhabitants. This invaluable resource was complemented by a collection of diaries and journals written by members of the community as they lived through the daily horrors of the Lodz Ghetto. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides compiled an extensive collection of diary and journal material to accompany the *Chronicle*. Their work traces the major events of the ghetto,

⁶ Lucjan Dobroszycki ed., The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto 1941-1944 Trans. Richard Lourie, Joachim Neugroschel, etc. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).

pairing individual accounts with the journalistic reports of the daily chronicle, helping to give a human touch to the blood-chilling accounts documented in the *Chronicle*.⁷

The memoirs collected for this thesis came from both published sources, and from the archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Because they were written or recorded after liberation, they provide a different perspective on life in the Lodz Ghetto than that expressed in either the *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* or *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege*. The ten women grappled with the reality of their horrific experience in their accounts, but do so from the perspective that they already know how it ends. As a result, they spent a great deal of time trying to delineate the motivational factors that caused them to act as they did, and to understand how their decisions might have had some bearing on why they survived and many others did not. This thesis will add to the existing literature on the Lodz Ghetto by moving beyond the studies of gender discrepancies and status mobility within the ghetto and by exploring the ways in which the women felt relationships, family, community, and hope factored into their survival. This thesis will provide a different view of life in the Lodz ghetto and connect how the lessons learned in that community influenced the ways in which the women lived through and reacted to dehumanization in the concentration camps.

In addition to adding to existing literature about the Lodz Ghetto experience itself, the recollections and experiences of these women challenged many of the traditional theories on how human nature manifested itself during the Holocaust and on what could be considered resistance to the Nazi pursuits. Many of their chosen forms of resistance were firmly rooted in their identities as women. Each woman described, in her own way, how she gained strength from her relationships with family and friends, as well as from her place within the greater family

⁷ Alan Adelson and Robert Lapides Eds., *Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989).

structure. They all remembered how participation in life within the ghetto community, whether through education, cultural events, or political activism, helped them to maintain hope for the future and a purpose for life in spite of the horrors of the ghetto and camps. They were all young at the outbreak of war, and their youth afforded them a great advantage. They were of prime age to be selected for work details in the ghetto and camps, thus saving them from certain death in the gas chambers. Their experiences demanded a reexamination of the traditional literature on human nature and resistance through the lens of gender.

Primo Levi, Viktor Frankl, and Hannah Arendt provided the foundations for the traditional discussion on the ways in which human nature is revealed in the concentration camp environment. Both Levi and Frankl were survivors of Auschwitz, and they took different approaches as they tried to cope with and relate the behavior they saw and experienced during their time in the camps. Levi argued that in the camps, the constant degradation and persecution drove the inmates to become animals, losing all sense of dignity and morality. He emphasized this assertion when he wrote, "The law of the Lager said: 'eat your own bread, and if you can, that of your neighbor; and left no room for gratitude'"⁸ He painted an extremely dismal portrait of life and morale in the camps when he described the utter despair and isolation of every inmate, whether it be self-imposed or inadvertent: "here the struggle to survive is without respite, because everyone is desperately and ferociously alone."⁹ He likened life in the camps to war where "all are enemies or rivals."¹⁰ By putting aside the morality of the outside world, the inmates compromised their own identities and succumbed to the pressures of the Nazis. Although he survived, he felt as though his survival was purely a stroke of luck, as did most survivors, not the

⁸ Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz: The Nazi Assault on Humanity trans Stuart Woolf (New York: Touchstone, 1996) 160.

⁹ Levi 88.

¹⁰ Levi 42.

result of a preservation of self or an attempt to maintain a sense of hope for the future. Human nature left no room for the preservation of social morality in the dire conditions of the concentration camps.

Viktor Frankl described many of the same situations in his recollections of the concentration camps. He portrayed the isolationist and brutal aspects of life in the men's camps of Auschwitz in terms of the Kapos, or "prominents." He addressed their behavior with the statement that "on the average, only those prisoners could keep alive who, after years of trekking from camp to camp, had lost all scruples in their fight for existence; they were prepared to use every means, honest and otherwise, even brutal force, theft and betrayal of their friends, in order to save themselves."¹¹ In spite of these observations, however, he believed that the only way to survive was to find meaning through the suffering. He felt that "a man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life."¹² His assertions imply that the only way to survive is by preserving identity through preservation of morality and by taking on responsibility for others.

Hannah Arendt framed her discussion of the effects of concentration camps on human nature through a discussion of the methods of totalitarianism. She argued that the concentration camps were microcosms of totalitarian society in which the state exerted total and complete control over its inhabitants. In this environment, the psyche was destroyed through persistent intimidation and physical abuse to the point where "once a moral person has been killed, the one thing that still prevents men from being made into living corpses is the differentiation of the

¹¹ Viktor Frankl. Man's Search for Meaning rev. and updated ed. (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985) 23-24.

¹² Frankl 101.

individual, his unique identity.”¹³ This individuality, for Arendt was the one vestige of humanity left to the men in the camps, and she argued that “in a sterile form such individuality can be preserved through a persistent stoicism, and it is certain that many men under totalitarian rule have taken and are each day still taking refuge in this absolute isolation of a personality without rights or conscience.”¹⁴ Her theory left no room for the redemption of man through the productive formation of relationships that might provide support and morale to the prisoners. She doomed the prisoners to be nothing more than “ghastly marionettes with human faces, which all behave like the dog in Pavlov’s experiments, which all react with perfect reliability even when going to their own death, and which do nothing but react.”¹⁵

These three well-known theories focus on the dehumanizing experience of the Holocaust as experienced by two men, and then theorized in the context of a totalitarian regime. The literature fixated on themes of psychological isolation, alienation, hunger, and disease. In contrast to these stark depictions of the degradation of human nature in the concentration camps of the Holocaust, the ten women in this study each described the loving, caring relationships they formed with other inmates in the concentration camps. Most of their relationships were either rooted in family ties, or friendships developed while in the ghetto. Each woman described the degrading and horrifying conditions of Auschwitz and other labor camps, but revealed their own struggle to maintain the very sense of humanity and morality that Levi and Arendt felt must be destroyed in order to survive. Frankl did argue that preservation of self was the only way to survive, and that this self was only preserved through the active protection of those around them, but he did not demonstrate any of these qualities himself in his accounts of his time in the camps. Levi, on the other hand, undermined his own argument with poignant descriptions of his own

¹³ Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc., 1973) 453.

¹⁴ Arendt.

¹⁵ Arendt 455.

relationships with Alberto and Lorenzo, two other inmates of the concentration camps. Inga Clendinnen noted this contradiction when she argued, “He [Levi] tells us that while in Auschwitz he became an animal, but we do not believe him. No animal could observe or respond as he does, no animal could have framed such memories.”¹⁶ She believed that Levi’s argument did not memorialize the *Müsselmänner* as much as it celebrated the struggle of those who managed to preserve their identities in spite of the dehumanizing circumstances.¹⁷

The discussion of the effects of the camps on human nature brings forth the question of how to define resistance in the Holocaust. Raul Hilberg limited his definition of resistance to that which is armed. He did not acknowledge spiritual resistance, or any form of pacifistic resistance as an effective way to combat the goals of the Nazis.¹⁸ This strict definition implied that those Jews not involved directly in an act of armed resistance passively went to their deaths. Isaiah Trunk, on the other hand, described the importance of spiritual and moral resistance in preserving the morale and identity of the concentration camp inmates and the ghetto inhabitants. He described that, “while many religious Jews armored themselves with their faith against the Nazi persecutions and degradations, for secular Jews, non-believers, this faith was often replaced by a national consciousness, which had reached a high stage of development during the first decades of the century in Eastern Europe.”¹⁹ This definition of resistance greatly broadens the ways in which the actions of the people in the Holocaust could be interpreted.

Inga Clendinnen also disagreed with Hilberg’s limitation of resistance to that which was armed. She argued; “it is a simple failure of imagination to expect overt acts of defiance or

¹⁶ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999) 50.

¹⁷ Clendinnen 45.

¹⁸ Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews: Revised and Definitive Edition*. Vol 3. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1985) 1030.

¹⁹ Isaiah Trunk, *Jewish Responses to Nazi Persecution: Collective and Individual Behavior in Extremis* (New York: Stein and Day, 1979) 25.

resistance under concentration camp conditions.”²⁰ She understood that the fear of widespread retribution precluded any attempts at widespread revolt. The danger to the lives of innocent bystanders was too great. She believed instead that “the most viable and effective ‘resistance occurred within the mind, with the determination not to yield to despair but to survive, whether by obdurate stoicism or sinuous adaptability.”²¹

In recent years, much more scholarship has been published about women’s experiences in the concentration camps and ghettos that shed doubt on the ability to apply the traditional arguments about human nature and resistance to everyone in the Holocaust. It is gradually becoming apparent that the pressures and degradations targeted at women were different in many ways from those aimed at men. The very definition of genocide accounts for many of these differences. According to the United Nations Resolution genocide is defined as “the following five acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious groups, [by acts] such as:

- a) Killing members of the group.
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group.
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.
- d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group.
- e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.²²

When this definition is thought of in terms of its implications for women, it helps to promote a new understanding of women’s experiences in the Holocaust. Suddenly, simple acts of living, such as reproduction, caring for children, and acting as a mother or sister to another woman could be viewed as resistance, and not merely just living.

²⁰ Clendinnen 58.

²¹ Clendinnen 60.

²² Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by Resolution 20 (III) of the U.N. Assembly in 1948; U.N.T.S. No 1021, vol 78 (1951), p. 277, Katharina von Kellenbach. “Reproduction and Resistance During the Holocaust” Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation ed. Esther Fuchs (New York: University Press of America Inc., 1999) 20.

Historians examining the Holocaust from a gendered perspective have greatly expanded the definition of resistance by including aspects that are central to human nature, like childbirth, mothering, and sisterhood, but also emphasized the importance of maintaining femininity and cleanliness in spite of constant attempts to destroy these attributes. Katharina von Kellenbach and Joan Ringelheim argue that women are specifically targeted in genocides because of their ability to reproduce. This explained the irreverence of the Nazis to the life of a child or a pregnant mother, and also why mothers with small children as well as pregnant women were all sent immediately to the gas chambers in Auschwitz. Von Kellenbach then asserted that reproduction and childbirth in the ghetto was a form of resistance because it defied the Nazis' wish to stamp out life and the will to live.²³ Ringelheim focused on the threats of sexual vulnerability. She believed that the threat of sexual assault and on the ability to reproduce and raise children provided an entirely different way to terrorize women in the Holocaust that the men were not forced to face.²⁴

Ruth Bondy studied the women living in the Theresienstadt Ghetto and in Birkenau, a part of the Auschwitz complex.²⁵ She described how the women placed a great deal of importance on trying to maintain a feminine appearance, and a homey and inviting atmosphere in the barracks.²⁶ Felicja Karay also described the ways in which the women in a factory camp called Skarzysko-Kamienna in Poland preserved femininity in their barracks. She felt this was

²³ Von Kellenbach 26-27.

²⁴ Joan Ringelheim, "Women and the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research" Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust Ed. Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, (New York: Paragon House, 1993) 373-418.

²⁵ Ruth Bondy, "Women in Theresienstadt and the Family Camp in Birkenau" Women in the Holocaust ed. Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1998).

²⁶ Bondy 311-315.

an important form of passive resistance especially in conjunction with relationships and family-like bonds between women in the camps.²⁷

Felicja Karay, Myrna Goldenberg, and Judith Tydor Baumel described how the women in the camps would form close relationships with one another for mutual aid and protection from sexual assault. These “camp families” were often composed of four or five women who would share all of their food and possessions, and protect one another from harm as best as they could while also providing mutual support.²⁸ She argued that “for women, such ‘female’ traits as the ability to cope with hunger, a sober view of reality, a willingness to establish relations with others for mutual aid and support, a sense of responsibility for their immediate surroundings, and a willingness to compromise were of great utility.”²⁹ Myrna Goldenberg investigated the formation of relationships in the camps as well, but she referred to them as “camp sisters,” and asserted the “importance of connectedness, nurturance, and care giving in women’s memoirs.”³⁰ Judith Tydor Baumel expanded the discussion of relationships formed in ghettos and camps to present her theory on the importance of “mutual assistance groups” in the fight for survival in the Holocaust.³¹ The core of her theory states that “Particularly in crisis situations, the re-creation of a similar family through the development and strengthening of mother-daughter bonds did not only provide an outlet for nurturing and a source of support, but also allowed the participants an illusion of normalcy, creating a system which fostered a positive role identification within what was generally an illogical, immoral, and ultimately negative world.”³²

²⁷ Felicja Karay. “Women in the Forced Labor Camps” Women in the Holocaust, ed. Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 305.

²⁸ Karay 295.

²⁹ Karay 305.

³⁰ Myrna Goldenberg, “Memoirs of Auschwitz Survivors: The Burden of Gender” Women in the Holocaust ed. Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) 327-339.

³¹ Judith Tydor Baumel. Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998) 78.

³² Baumel 91-92.

This thesis will combine analysis based on the changes noted by Unger with testimony to the spiritual, political, and mental resistance employed by the ten young women portrayed. It will combine forms of resistance that were described as inherently feminine, such as reproduction and the formation of close, nurturing relationships, with the assertions of spiritual and political resistance embraced by much of the larger community of the Lodz Ghetto. Their testimony also helps to support the theories of resistance espoused by Isaiah Trunk and Inga Clendinnen. Through the descriptions of their resistance and their attempts to preserve their identities in the face of Nazi degradation and dehumanization, their recollections provided support for the assertions of Viktor Frankl on the nature of humanity, while also providing concrete examples of how this struggle helped them maintain morale during their time in the ghetto and concentration camps. In addition, this thesis will add to the broader literature of the Holocaust by exploring the ways in which a small group of women from the Lodz Ghetto remembered their struggle to preserve identity in the face of dehumanization.

Chapter one will explore the nature and importance of nurturing relationships between the women and their families and friends. Through an exploration of their changing roles within the family, from sister to mother, or from child to caregiver, the chapter will investigate how the increased responsibility for others gave the women something to live for. The chapter will also trace the changes in the nature and importance of the relationships as the women leave the ghetto and enter the camps. An exploration of the relationships within groups of women in the ghetto will investigate how the women supported one another through the changing circumstances of the ghetto and camps and inquire as to how the relationships influenced their desire to survive.

Chapter two will shift the focus to a more general investigation of how the women struggled to preserve identity through their community. They remembered becoming involved in

education, enriching cultural life, perpetuation of political organizations and ideology, and religion. It will examine the impact of the community and societal values on their decisions in the ghetto, and also on their continued fight to survive in the face of extreme deprivation in the concentration camps. This chapter will explore how the unique nature of the Lodz ghetto shaped the lives and decisions of the women both in the ghetto and in the camps. Finally, it will show how the women gained strength from the belief that their survival would allow them to make a difference in the world by exposing the effects of hatred and prejudice.

Forward: The History and Context of the Lodz Ghetto

Prior to World War II, Poland was home to the second largest Jewish community in the world, numbering close to 3.5 million, second only to that in America.³³ Approximately ten percent of the population was Jewish, thus making Polish Jewry a viable minority with a vibrant, active culture.³⁴ Immediately prior to the Nazi invasion in September 1939, approximately 233,000 Jews lived in Lodz, comprising the second largest Jewish population in Poland and 33.5 percent of the population of the city.³⁵ The development of this community resulted from centuries of toleration under a Polish state, and, after the partitions of the 18th century, the differing policies of Austrian, German, and Russian rulers.

The legacy of Polish toleration dated back to the Middle Ages, when Poland became the largest refuge for European Jewry. Under Polish rule, the Jews enjoyed the status of a separate, autonomous estate. They were allowed to establish their own governing council, the *kehilla*, their own courts of law, and could participate in trade, unlike in most of the Western European countries.³⁶ These rights were first confirmed by charter in 1265, and were later expanded by the Statute of General Toleration, passed in 1573, which guaranteed the rights of the Jews for the duration of autonomous Polish rule.³⁷ At a time when Jews were being expelled from most Western European countries, Poland became a haven that attracted the founders of the large, vibrant community that developed by the 20th century.

³³ Emmanuel Ringelblum, Polish-Jewish Relations During the Second World War Trans. Dafna Allon, Danuta Dabrowska, and Dana Keren. Eds. Joseph Kermish and Shmuel Krakowski (New York: Howard Fertig, 1976) 3.

³⁴ Jan T. Gross, Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland. (New York: Penguin Books, 2002) xviii.

³⁵ Israel Gutman, "The Distinctiveness of the Lodz Ghetto" The Last Ghetto: Life in the Lodz Ghetto 1940-1944 (Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem, 1997) 19.

³⁶ Karbonski, Stefan, The Jews and the Poles in World War II (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1989) 2.

³⁷ Norman Davies, Heart of Europe: A Short History of Poland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) 287-295.

In the late 18th century, Poland collapsed under the pressure of invading armies and internal corruption. At this point, the autonomous state of Poland disappeared, as the territory was partitioned in 1772, 1793, and again in 1795 among Austrian, Russian, and Prussian powers.³⁸ For the next 150 years, the Jews living in former Poland were subjected to the differing policies of the three partitioning powers. Each power tried to restrict the freedom of the Jews, but used different tactics to do so. In the Russian partition, where present-day Lodz was located, Jews were subjected to mandatory military conscription, but were not allowed to rise into the senior ranks. Hebrew was also banned from use in schools and official documents. Jews also could not buy land, and were given only limited access to higher education and the professions. These restrictions led to widespread emigration from Poland that continued well into the 20th century.³⁹

At the time of the partitions, the present-day city of Lodz was nothing more than a small town of approximately 191 people. Only with the advent of industrialization in the early 19th century in Poland did Lodz begin to grow into a large city. Within only 100 years, Lodz had transformed from a small hamlet with only a handful of inhabitants to the rapidly growing textile powerhouse of the Russian Empire that eventually became known as the “Manchester of Poland.”⁴⁰ The city began producing woolen cloth, switched to linen, and then finally to cotton production in 1837, which proved to be the most successful of the ventures. By the latter half of the 19th century, Lodz had a population of close to 315,000, and the textile manufacturers of Russian Poland had become more successful than those of both the Austrian and Prussian

³⁸ Davies, *Heart of Europe* 306-311.

³⁹ Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland in Two Volumes. Volume II: 1795 to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 243-244.

⁴⁰ Davies, *God's Playground* 171.

partitions combined as they serviced the textile demands of the enormous Russian Empire.⁴¹ The Jewish community was particularly influential in the development of the Lodz textile industry, forming a vital part of the city's economy. Comprising approximately 25 percent of the population in the late 19th century, the Jews of Lodz helped to establish the industrial power of Lodz both by founding factories and providing much of the manpower for the workshops and major manufacturers.⁴² For example, Jews owned and ran 105 of the 156 factories built in Lodz between 1881 and 1900.⁴³ The restrictions preventing the Jews from owning land forced them to make a living in other ways than farming, which provided the livelihood for much of the Christian Polish population, thus providing the Jews with ample opportunity to establish themselves in commerce, industry and trade.

By the end of World War I Lodz was already established as one of the top producers of textiles in Europe and Lodz Jewry was firmly entrenched in this important part of the Polish economy. The Jews in the community functioned as "entrepreneurs, merchants and managers, and as workers, artisans, and cottage industry laborers."⁴⁴ The "scorched earth" policy of the retreating German army at the end of World War I wreaked havoc on much of Poland's economy, both by destroying valuable farmland and by raiding the textile factories of Lodz and other large industrial centers and transporting much of their equipment back to Germany.⁴⁵ The destruction of land and property left much of the Polish population struggling to rebuild their industries and livelihood. It was under these harsh economic circumstances that Poland finally regained its autonomy as a condition of the Treaty of Versailles in 1918.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Davies, God's Playground 171-174.

⁴² Bolshaia Entsiklopekia, vol XII (St. Petersburg) 283.

⁴³ Gutman, 19.

⁴⁴ Lucjan Dobroszycki, Introduction The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto 1941-1944 Trans. Richard Levine, Joachim Neugroschel, etc. Ed. Lucjan Dobroszycki (New Haven: Yale University Press. 1984) xxx.

⁴⁵ Davies, God's Playground 177.

⁴⁶ Oskar Halecki, A History of Poland (New York: Roy Publishers, 1956) 281.

Originally, the government of the 2nd Republic of Poland (1918-1939) was representative with an elected *Sejm*, or parliament that held the majority of state power. The fledgling Polish government was already strained by the problems of combining three partitions that had been under different rule for close to 150 years, thus providing the setting for increasing conflict between the different factions. There had been six different currencies in circulation, three legal codes, and two incompatible railway systems, and at least four different languages in the area governed by the Polish state.⁴⁷ In 1926 Joseph Pilsudski, the acting leader of the Polish government, took advantage of the turmoil in the government and overthrew the *Sejm* during a coup, thus creating a semi-dictatorship.⁴⁸ Pilsudski's party, the *Sanacja*, implemented strongly nationalistic policies throughout the interwar period that facilitated the rise of anti-Semitism in Poland prior to World War II.

The outbreak of the great depression in 1929 caused great economic hardship throughout much of the devastated Polish countryside. In response to the plight of the Polish farmers, the *Sanacja* government encouraged the Polish Christians to take over the market stalls of their Jewish neighbors. The market persecutions were not limited solely to the Jews, but also targeted the Ukrainian and Byelorussian minorities in the Southeastern parts of Poland. The government also participated in the creation of anti-Semitic legislation by increasing the burden of taxes on Jewish merchants and artisans as well as making it more difficult for Jews to obtain credit in the banks.⁴⁹ The government implemented strategies aimed at limiting the number of Jews admitted to the professions. The anti-Semitic legislation reached a new fervor after the Polish government renounced any responsibility from the 1919 Minorities Treaty and signed an anti-aggression pact

⁴⁷ Davies, *Heart of Europe* 120.

⁴⁸ Robin Okey, *Eastern Europe 1740-1985: Feudalism to Communism* 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 170.

⁴⁹ Ringelblum 14-19.

with Nazi Germany in 1934.⁵⁰ By 1936, some of the racial decrees of the German Nuremberg laws had already found their way into comparable Polish legislation. In 1937-38, some universities began to force their Jewish students to sit on special benches on the left side of the classrooms. These special benches, dubbed, "ghetto benches," became a serious point of contention between Jewish and Polish students, as many Jewish students began to stand in the backs of the classrooms in protest rather than sitting in the segregated areas.⁵¹

With the establishment of the 2nd Republic of Poland, the Jewish community had regained full civil rights as a condition of the League of Nations dedication to preserving minority rights; the Polish renunciation of this treaty in 1934 undermined the efforts of many Jews to integrate themselves into Polish society and politics.⁵² The events of the interwar period marked a growth in political idealism amongst various groups of Jews resulting from the newfound enfranchisement and growing state-sponsored anti-Semitism, and a resurgence of Jewish cultural life in the larger Polish cities. In response to the increasing levels of anti-Semitism in the later years of the Republic, the Jewish community began keep primarily to itself, forming its own political parties that often paralleled mainstream Polish parties, and to increasingly rely on the authority of the local *kehillas* for guidance.

Although there was an increased level of secularization and assimilation amongst Polish Jews, many traditional aspects of the Jewish community experienced a resurgence of vitality in the large cities of Poland.⁵³ Many Jews responded to the persecutions by contributing to the boom in Jewish cultural life while many others tried to immigrate to Palestine or the United

⁵⁰ Emanuel Melzer, "Antisemitism in the Last Years of the Second Polish Republic" The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars Ed. Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, and Chone Shmeruk (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989) 126-128.

⁵¹ Melzer 18.

⁵² Davies. God's Playground 259.

⁵³ Ezra Mendelsohn, "Introduction: The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars" The Jews of Poland Between Two World Wars Ed. Yisrael Gutman, Ezra Mendelsohn, Jehuda Reinharz, and Chone Schmeruk (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1989) 5.

States. By the time of invasion in 1939, there were “130 Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals; 15 Yiddish language theaters; 266 elementary, 12 high school, and 14 vocational schools using Yiddish or Hebrew.”⁵⁴ The Jewish community in Lodz was no different from those in the rest of Poland. When the German army occupied Lodz on September 8, 1939, they found a community in which the distinct, Polish, Jewish, and German populations existed in a delicate balance. They found a large, vibrant Jewish community with cultural centers, Yiddish language theater groups, political parties, and periodicals that was primarily insular, with the exception of their economic activity.⁵⁵ Many members of the community were highly involved in business and commerce, owning more than fifty percent of the large and mid-sized businesses in the city.⁵⁶ The events of the previous twenty years, however, had caused “racialist and nationalistic hate propaganda [to become] the Trojan horse which Nazism used to invade the Polish community, starting the process of deterioration and inner rot.”⁵⁷

At the time of invasion, Lodz had a Jewish population of approximately 233,000. Within the first few months of German occupation, most of the wealthier Jews, the intelligentsia, and many middle-class Jews had fled to the east trying to avoid persecution by the Nazis. Many out of fear of the rumors they had heard about the Nazi treatment of Jewish men. The members of the community left behind comprised largely of working class men and women along with the elderly and the children. Much of the prewar leadership of the Jewish council had either fled or been murdered by the Germans, leaving the Jewish community in the hands of whoever stepped up to the position.⁵⁸ Chaim Rumkowski, one of the few remaining members of the prewar

⁵⁴ Korbonski 9.

⁵⁵ Baranowski 10-14.

⁵⁶ Baranowski 8.

⁵⁷ Ringelblum 20.

⁵⁸ Gutman 21.

kehilla, was appointed the Eldest of the Jews by the German administration, therefore making him responsible for the welfare of the Lodz Jews.⁵⁹

Shortly after occupation, the Germans began to levy decrees against the Jews while also implementing a program of germanization in the city of Lodz itself. In the last few months of 1939 and the first few months of 1940, the Jews of Lodz were subjected to increasing numbers of regulations against their economic and social status. They were deprived of any way of earning a living through wage freezes and freezes on their bank accounts. Jews were also barred from using main streets or public transportation. They were only allowed to leave their homes during certain hours of the day, and were always subject to assault in the streets.⁶⁰ By October 1939, all businesses were to be marked with the nationality of the owner so as to make the identification of Jewish businesses simpler. Suddenly, the prominent Jewish businessmen were demoted from influential citizens to the scapegoats and subhuman group that would define their status for the remainder of the war. They were persecuted not only by the Nazis, but also by people they had previously considered friends, as attested by many of the women in this study.⁶¹ In November of 1939 many of the largest synagogues in Lodz were blown up and the members of the Jewish *kehilla* arrested, tortured and shot.⁶² In addition, the Jews of Lodz were subjected to the same degradations as the German Jews, including the Nuremberg Laws, fully implemented in December of 1939, which required them to walk in gutters amongst other degradations.⁶³

In November, the city of Lodz and the surrounding area, Warthegau, was annexed into the German Reich because of its worth as an industrial center.⁶⁴ The annexation was an

⁵⁹ Gutman.

⁶⁰ Gutman.

⁶¹ See Ruth Minsky Sender, The Cage; Rita Kerner Hilton, "My Story:" Anna Eilenberg, Breaking My Silence; among others.

⁶² Baranowski 28.

⁶³ Gutman 21.

⁶⁴ Gutman 19

important and defining moment for Lodz Jewry because it meant that, like the rest of Germany, the Jewish population was to be entirely expelled.⁶⁵ The annexation also meant that the Nazis began to give the ethnic Germans already in Lodz preferential treatment, as well as to encourage Germans from other parts of the Reich to move to the city and conduct business. The rapidly increasing German population caused much of the city of Lodz to be hostile to the cause of the Polish underground, adding to the difficulty in establishing contact with the inhabitants of the ghetto.⁶⁶ Instead of the planned, speedy expulsion, however, the industrial nature of the city, and its importance to the German war effort provided the Jews with an opportunity to preserve their community until May of 1944.

On February 8, 1940 the Jews were officially ordered into the ghetto that was being formed in the Baluty district, the slums, of Lodz. The area for the ghetto was originally 4.13 square kilometers, but by May of 1941 this area had shrunk to 3.82 square kilometers.⁶⁷ On April 30, 1940, the ghetto was officially sealed. This ghetto was unique from the outset in that it was the only one completely isolated and sealed from contact with the outside world. There was no sewer system and no bordering houses, which made it virtually impossible to sneak in and out of the ghetto. This made smuggling increasingly difficult, and also kept news of the war and the outside world from coming in.⁶⁸ The work done by its inhabitants was confined entirely within the walls of the ghetto, therefore negating the possibility for workers to leave during the day as well. A report sent by the Jewish National Committee in Warsaw in May of 1944 attested to the impossibility of infiltrating the Lodz Ghetto: "The Lodz Ghetto is still hermetically sealed. Despite our many efforts to make contact with the Lodz Jews...we have failed to make our way

⁶⁵ Gutman.

⁶⁶ Gutman, 34.

⁶⁷ See Map. Gutman 30.

⁶⁸ Gutman 32-34.

into the ghetto. It is an island, totally cut off from the rest of the world."⁶⁹ As a result of this isolation, the inhabitants of Lodz were the last to know about the death camps like Auschwitz and were cut off from the resistance movements on the outside. Because of this virtually impenetrable seal around the ghetto, Israel Gutman attributed the lack of armed resistance in the Lodz ghetto to the fact that they were deprived of knowledge of the death camps and outside resistance at least for the first two years of imprisonment.⁷⁰ There is evidence that a letter made its way into the ghetto in the summer of 1942 outlining an eyewitness account of the Chelmno death camp, but it is not certain how much heed was paid to the warning because of the lack of supporting evidence. The official *Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto* does not even acknowledge the existence of such rumors until June 24, 1944 when they were still considered to just be rumors.⁷¹

Unaware of the Nazi's greater plan for the Jews, the leader of the ghetto, Chaim Rumkowski, endeavored to make the ghetto useful to the Germans because he felt that this would help them all survive. Over the four years 1940-1944, he was able to mobilize the population of the ghetto to become one of the largest industrial centers in the German Reich. Work came primarily from military commissions, and the vast majority of the population was employed in some factory or another. The tailor workshops, shoemakers, straw product factories, metal product factories, carpentry workshops, and rubber workshops were the largest producers in the ghetto.⁷² Their productivity as an industrial center compelled Hans Biebow, the German commissar of the Lodz Ghetto, to become more actively involved in the day-to-day

⁶⁹ Jewish Underground Document, May 24, 1944. Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege Ed. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidus (New York: Viking, 1989) 412.

⁷⁰ Gutman 34.

⁷¹ Dobroszycki xxi and 514.

⁷² Dobroszycki 46-48.

administration, while also convincing the higher German authorities of the necessity of keeping the ghetto open as a “significant element in the economic system.”⁷³

In addition to facilitating the establishment of factories, called *ressorts*, the ghetto administration set out to establish the ghetto as a community within a community. Because it was illegal for ghetto inhabitants to have either Polish or German currency, the administration opened the Bank of Issue in June 1940 to issue a special currency, the Rumki, and to control exchange rates. Although this development provided the inhabitants with currency, it also made commerce outside the confines of the ghetto exceedingly difficult because the inhabitants in the ghetto were forced to exchange all of their money for the nearly worthless notes.⁷⁴ An extensive school system opened in 1940 to educate the elementary, intermediate and high school age students in the ghetto. By 1941 these schools had been banned by the German administration, but education continued in secret workshops in the factories.⁷⁵ Rumkowski also established a community center, a welfare system, a tram system, and authorized the compilation of a daily chronicle of ghetto life.⁷⁶

In spite of these attempts to create a sense of community within the ghetto, the inhabitants were still faced with the daily degradations of imprisonment, fear of torture or death at the hands of the German guards, and of deportation from the ghetto. The Nazi's strictly controlled the amount of food coming in and out of the ghetto and used this power to try to starve the community as they waited to transport them to death camps. The rations were constantly decreased as the years went on. “During the best times in the ghetto- in mid-1940 the average person's daily intake has been estimated at about 1800 calories, while the required level

⁷³ Gutman 27.

⁷⁴ Gutman 54.

⁷⁵ Gutman 50.

⁷⁶ Gutman 56-58.

of nutrition for a working person is between 3000 and 5000 calories. At the end of 1941 the average ghetto Jew's nourishment was brought as low as 700 to 900 calories a day."⁷⁷ For the most part families were allowed to remain intact, but were crammed into small rooms in the extremely overcrowded ghetto. Living conditions were extremely unsanitary, and disease ran rampant as a result of malnourishment and proximity to the filth of the ghetto. The families lived in constant fear of deportation or death by starvation.

The transports of people out of the ghetto occurred with frequency throughout the ghetto's existence. In the beginning some of the transports were for work details and the men were returned a few weeks later, but later the transports were taken directly to Chelmno, one of the infamous Nazi death camps, where the people aboard were immediately gassed. In January 1942 alone, over 10,000 people were deported to Chelmno and gassed.⁷⁸ Although the population did not have any concrete evidence about the fate of those deported to the East, the fear of the unknown as well as fear of being separated from their families kept many struggling to remain in the ghetto. The deportation that occurred September 5-12, 1942 was by far the worst, and the one that left the greatest imprint on the community of the Lodz Ghetto. This deportation came to be called the Children's Transport by many of the memoirists because the Germans demanded the deportation of all children under age 10, the elderly over 60, and the ill. Others refer to it as the *Gesperre*, meaning curfew, because of the twenty-four hour curfew imposed on the ghetto while the deportees were rounded up. The speech made by Rumkowski announcing the transport is one of the most recorded moments in the history of the Lodz ghetto:

They have asked us for the ghetto's most precious people: the children and the elderly.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, I have never had the merit of bearing a child of my own, and therefore I devoted my best years to children. I lived and breathed with them. I never imagined that

⁷⁷ Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidés, "A Collected Consciousness" Lodz Ghetto: Inside a Community Under Siege Ed. Alan Adelson and Robert Lapidés. (New York: Viking, 1989) xvii-xviii.

⁷⁸ Adelson and Lapidés, "A Collected Consciousness" 29.

my hands would be forced to bring the sacrifice to the altar. In my old age, I am forced to stretch out my hands and beseech you: 'My brothers and sisters- give them to me! Fathers and mothers- give me your children!'⁷⁹

The profound impact of this event resonated through the remainder of the existence of the ghetto. It marked the turning point between community and labor camp for the ghetto population. After the deportation of the children, the only people allowed to remain in the ghetto were those who worked in the factories. The ghetto still retained some semblance of a community in that the families that had managed to survive the roundup continued to live together, and cultural events still occurred, but the tone of life in the ghetto was changed. The Lodz ghetto remained a work camp until its liquidation between June and August of 1944. The remaining 70,000 inhabitants of the ghetto were transported either to Chelmno and gassed or to Auschwitz where some were selected for work and others murdered.⁸⁰

Life in the Lodz Ghetto profoundly affected everyone who experienced it. The unique nature of the ghetto provided those who lived there with a different perspective on the Holocaust because of its hermetically sealed nature, lack of armed resistance, ignorance of the Final Solution, and its duration. The Jews who lived there were forced to cope with the daily threat of death by starvation, but still believed that life would eventually get better as long as they could keep themselves and their loved ones alive. The ghetto environment facilitated the establishment and perpetuation of personal relationships, family and family-like units, and support groups within its walls. Because of this unique situation, the inhabitants carried these different expectations and experiences with them when they were forced into Auschwitz and the other concentration camps in 1944.

⁷⁹ Gutman 31.

⁸⁰ Baranowski 94.

Chapter 1: Relationships as Resistance to Dehumanization in the Holocaust: The Women of the Lodz Ghetto

Next to us on the hard floor was the elderly couple we had met on the train. Their names were Julie and Julius. Mother made her bed between Karin and me and slept fitfully. During the long weeks that followed, there were many nights when I would cry out in the dark and Julie's arms would comfort me. Her warmth and love were heartfelt and given spontaneously and unconditionally.⁸¹

Lucille Eichengreen wrote these words in her memoir, *From Ashes to Life*, to describe how her friendship with Julie, an elderly woman from Hamburg, helped her cope with the initial shock of life in the ghetto. Lucille was the eldest daughter in a middle-class family, and had spent her entire life living in Hamburg, Germany. Her parents were both Polish-born and they suffered many persecutions at the hands of the Nazis while still living in Germany. Her father was killed in Dachau in 1941, and a few months later, Lucille, her mother and sister were deported to the Lodz Ghetto.⁸² The sudden shock of losing everything she had even known, coupled with sleeping on the floor of an old schoolhouse in the midst of a ghetto where she could not even speak the language, was very difficult for Lucille to accept. Her relationship with Julie proved invaluable as she tried to cope with the severity of the new situation.

Relationships helped the victims of the Holocaust to retain humanity and dignity in the face of the Nazis increasing efforts to dehumanize them. Examining the relationships they formed, and the reasons and motivations that drove them to act allows a glimpse into the minds of these women, and an understanding of the forces that compelled them to maintain humanity against such incredible adversity. In the case of the women of the Lodz Ghetto, many gained strength and support from friendships and bonds formed in the ghetto that they retained throughout their subsequent experiences concentration camps. The types of relationships

⁸¹ Lucille Eichengreen. *From Ashes to Life: My Memories of the Holocaust* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1994) 37.

⁸² Eichengreen 18-35.

explained by each of the women in this study were complex and often multi-faceted, but in all cases they centered on helping one another to preserve identity in the face of horror. The relationships formed and perpetuated by the women in the Lodz ghetto mostly originated either in family or friendship. Some of these relationships involved men, but most were single-sex because of the demographics of the ghetto and then the nature of the concentration camps. In the memoirs, the women described how they garnered strength from their roles as daughters, sisters, mother figures to younger siblings, female friends, and compassionate women. The roles often overlapped, and in some cases, the women played several different roles for the same person. The complexity of these relationships and the versatility of the women helped them to shift their perspectives and learn to cope with exceedingly difficult circumstances.

Relationships between family members played a dominant role in preserving the morale of several of the women. Rita Kerner Hilton remembered the importance of her role as daughter and granddaughter in her small family upon arrival in Lodz from the smaller ghetto of Pabianice in 1942. The ghetto in Pabianice, a small suburb of Lodz, was not sealed, so her mother, a dentist, had been able to keep up a steady flow of both Jewish and Polish patients for the first few years of the occupation. As a result of this continued business, the family amassed some savings before being forced to move to Lodz. It was illegal for Jews to have money other than that issued by the ghetto administration, so her mother converted all of her earnings to diamonds. Diamonds were easier to conceal, and could be sold on the black market to obtain food and other necessities.⁸³ This hoarde of jewelry proved very helpful once in Lodz because they were able to trade some of the individual pieces to obtain such "luxury" items as onions and vitamin drops to

⁸³ Rita Kerner Hilton. "My Story" unpublished memoir. RG-50.155*0002. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archive, Washington, DC 62.

supplement their diets.⁸⁴ Each member of the family helped to provide food and support for the others because survival depended on their willingness to work together and to sacrifice for the well being of all. After arriving in Lodz, Rita began a job in a factory that made corsets; her grandmother worked tying rags together to make rugs for export to Germany. Both her mother and grandfather, who was also a dentist, utilized their medical training to quickly find positions as nurses in factories. After a while, the strenuous hours, lack of nutritious food, and hard work took its toll on the health of the grandparents, so Rita and her mother became the primary providers for the family.

During the first winter in Lodz Rita began to suffer from malnutrition. Through her connections from before the war, her mother found Rita employment in the gardens, where she could be outside and exercise.⁸⁵ That work allowed her to bring home extra food for her family, and partially regain her health. She and the other field workers were rationed an extra bowl of soup each day. Instead of eating both bowls of soup and her normal food allotment at home, she would eat her two bowls of soup at work, and then distribute her normal ration at home among the rest of her family members.⁸⁶ She could supplement her own meager diet while also providing extra food for her family. Later on, she was able to bring home weeds that she pulled out of the garden in order to provide her family with essential nutrients that were missing from their everyday diet. She also shared the extra vegetables she earned from working in the fields, so her family was able to eat slightly better than the general ghetto population.⁸⁷

Although her grandparents had weakened to the point where they could no longer have jobs, each took great pride in the fact that they still tried to help support the family. The com

⁸⁴ Hilton 67.

⁸⁵ Hilton 79.

⁸⁶ Hilton 81.

⁸⁷ Hilton 89.

network of support within her close-knit family helped to sustain their physical strength and morale. Rita described how her grandmother would go out every morning to buy hot water for Rita and her mother so they would not have to make a fire and waste fuel rations. Her frail condition made the journey down from the apartment to the street very treacherous, and she fell and hurt herself on numerous occasions. Eventually, the family stopped her from going to preserve her health.⁸⁸ Her grandfather, a dentist, “would stay in lines for rations like meat and because of his age and because of the fact that he was a doctor they would sometimes let him go ahead of the line.”⁸⁹ This contribution, however small, was important to the well being of the family. Because of his status as a member of the medical community and because he was not working, he had the time to stand in the long lines and generally could actually get the many of the special rations that were otherwise difficult to attain. “He was always very proud when he would bring some meat or some dairy products home.”⁹⁰

Rita and her mother maintained not only the nutrition, but also the morale of the family. Their close mother-daughter relationship gave them the strength to fight the pains of everyday life in the ghetto and the camps. Her grandfather died in the ghetto in 1944, and her grandmother was selected for the gas chambers upon arrival in Auschwitz after its liquidation.⁹¹ The loss of these two vital family members took a great toll on both Rita and her mother, but they still could live for one another. Acknowledging the power of this relationship, she wrote, “The fact that we were together, mother and I throughout the war, through the camps, we were able to sustain

⁸⁸ Hilton 67.

⁸⁹ Hilton.

⁹⁰ Hilton.

⁹¹ Hilton 85, 94.

other. We helped each other and made each other survive.” She felt, “there was a reason to survive...a reason to live.”⁹²

Close friendships forged with other women also proved beneficial to maintaining morale in the ghetto and camps. Rita and her mother were transferred to Bergen-Belsen approximately two weeks after their arrival in Auschwitz, where her mother served as a doctor for the inmates, and Rita assisted her as a nurse. They had access to more food and to medical supplies due to their positions, which gave them an advantage over many other inmates. They formed close friendships with some of the other women in their barrack, and were also joined later by other friends from Lodz. Rita described in particular her friendship with Alina, who had also come from Lodz. “We spent several weeks giggling at night, telling each other secrets, and in general we had someone to talk with about the past,” she recalled.⁹³ The fact that these women could perpetuate their bonds beyond Lodz, and find reason to laugh and tell secrets in the midst of the horror that was the concentration camp attests to the power of the support found in the relationships formed in the ghetto. Their friendship, partially borne out of bonds formed in the face of adversity, provided both women with a vital outlet during their incarceration in Bergen-Belsen. Rita, Alina, and both of their mothers survived the camps, and were liberated in 1945.⁹⁴

Sophie Machtinger spent much of her time in the ghetto caring for and trying to save her mother's life. Her identity formed around her role as a loving, protective daughter. When the Germans invaded in 1939, she had been married to Pinio Machtinger for about a year. After the Jews were forced into the ghetto, her mother and in-laws moved in with her and her husband into their apartment. She and her mother were very close, and she described how she would try to protect her from deportation during the selections. “At such times I tried to make my mother

⁹² Hilton 91.

⁹³ Hilton 117.

⁹⁴ Hilton 150.

look young and beautiful, but the ghetto had taken its toll and it was impossible to hide the effects of hunger which made a person look twice her age, nothing but skin and bones."⁹⁵ In spite of the hardships, she was able to keep her mother from being deported on several occasions by using this trick.

When it came time to liquidate the ghetto, Sophie's family was allowed to stay a little longer than most others because her husband was a skilled worker in a metal factory.⁹⁶ At this time, her mother fell into even greater danger of being deported. The head of the factory demanded several times that she be turned over to the deportation authorities, but when it came time for her to go, Sophie and her husband hid her under a pile of backpacks in the barrack and there she avoided detection. Sophie remembered how "the poor woman lay there under the weight of these backpacks perspiring from the heat and from fear."⁹⁷ Protecting her mother from deportation was so important to Sophie that she did not even make the effort to obtain extra food from the warehouses. "We did not think about food. My only thought was to save my mother."⁹⁸ Not long after this, the entire family was deported to Auschwitz. While on the train, she and her mother made plans to reunite in case they were separated upon arrival. Once in Auschwitz, however, Sophie and her mother were separated, and her mother sent to the gas chambers.⁹⁹

After the selections in Auschwitz, Sophie found herself in the same transport group with her mother-in-law and two sisters-in-law. The four immediately took on the responsibility for the well being of the others and began to assist one another. The bonds of friendship and mu

⁹⁵ Sophie Machtinger, "Recollections from my Life's Experiences," unpublished memoir, trans. Douglas Kouril, RG-02.012*01, United States Holocaust Memorial Archives, Washington, DC 40.

⁹⁶ Machtinger 41.

⁹⁷ Machtinger 42.

⁹⁸ Machtinger 43.

⁹⁹ Machtinger 48.

respect developed by interaction in the ghetto helped the women to immediately step into the roles of mother and sister-figures to one another. They were all related either by blood or marriage, and treated one another as family. Sophie described the horrors of their first night in the barracks in Auschwitz and how her mother-in-law protected her and her sisters-in-law from a group of men who had broken into the barrack and raped many of the women. She would place herself “some place at random where she would draw the attention of the men away from us” young women.”¹⁰⁰ She was willing to put herself in danger to protect her daughters and daughters-in-law from harm. As they were transferred from camp to camp, the four managed to stay together, where they would watch out for one another. She and her sister-in-law, Sula, were particularly close. “Every moment was filled with fear, and we shared that fear, making it a little easier.”¹⁰¹ They would also share rations and would work together to obtain extras when they could. “Sometimes my sister-in-law, Sula and I would each surrender a chunk of bread for an extra plateful of soup, which we would consume together from the same bowl.”¹⁰² The friendships and family bond helped each of the women fight to survive and continue to resist the deprivation of the camps.

In an interview with Sid Bolkosky in 1984, Ruth Kent explained how her family played a crucial role in her survival. She entered the ghetto in 1939 with her mother, older sister, and four brothers. She was very young when Poland was occupied, and as a result, only had two years of school before being forced into the ghetto. She was young enough to be in danger during the *Gesperre*. Her older brothers risked their lives to protect her from deportation. She described how, during selections, they would hide her younger brother, mother, and her in the basement of

¹⁰⁰ Machtinger 54.

¹⁰¹ Machtinger 70.

¹⁰² Machtinger 63.

the bakery where they worked.¹⁰³ The close, supportive family relationship helped them all to survive in the harsh ghetto environment. Once they were deported to Auschwitz, however, Ruth and her sister were separated from the rest of the family. Her mother and younger brother were sent to the gas chambers, and her older brothers sent presumably to work.¹⁰⁴

Once in the concentration camp system, Ruth's relationship with her sister became very important. "I was just fortunate that I still had my sister with me. And she was like a mother to me."¹⁰⁵ Ruth remembered how "she could sort of look after me and she would give me her bread if she could and I would always try and give her my bread. We would just share things" as they were transferred from camp to camp.¹⁰⁶ Her sister found strength in the ability to mother her younger sister, and Ruth gained strength from the fact that her sister was with her and provided comfort. She also described how she fought to survive because she looked forward to reuniting with her brothers after the war. "Every night, the thought that really kept me alive was the thought that my brothers may survive...I would always think of my two brothers because they were young and strong and so good looking, and I was hoping they would survive... that's what really kept me going, the thought of finding my brothers."¹⁰⁷ Her role as a sister provided her with the motivation to fight through the degradation of the camps and hope for a better future.

Anna Eilenberg attributed her survival to the constant feeling of being needed, either as a daughter, sister, or mother figure to her younger sister. Even before ghettoization, the role of sole provider for the family fell to Anna. Her mother was very ill with a heart condition, her sister too young, and her father and brother unable to go outside for fear of kidnapping or being

¹⁰³ Ruth Kent. Interview by Sid Bolkolsky. Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories. University of Michigan, Dearborn. 7 August 1984, RG-50.155*0003, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁰⁴ Kent.

¹⁰⁵ Kent.

¹⁰⁶ Kent.

¹⁰⁷ Kent.

targeted for a work detail or even killed. Her family was Hasidic, so her father and brother both wore beards and sidelocks, which made it even more dangerous for them than for other Jewish men¹⁰⁸ This responsibility as a daughter and sister gave her reason to try to survive in spite of the fact that “besides feeling helpless, [she] felt horrified, degraded and humiliated, thinking of what awaited [them] in the future.”¹⁰⁹ She described her commitment to her family when she wrote, “I wanted to run, but I felt caged. I wanted to die of the cold, but I had obligations to my family. I wanted to get rid of my life, but then who would take care of my mother.”¹¹⁰ Her dedication to her mother and her role as the protective daughter overpowered her almost overwhelming desire to escape the pain of the ghetto.

Anna lost both her mother and brother while in the ghetto, and these losses deeply affected her. Her mother died first, leaving Anna feeling helpless---as though her purpose for living had died with her. It took her sister’s shy, scared plea to make her realize that someone else needed her. “You, you have to be my mother now...” her younger sister cried. “The fact that I was needed by my younger sister, “Anna remembered, “gave me some purpose in struggling for life.”¹¹¹ From that point on, she, her sister, and her father made an effort to support one another and speak about their mother. From the stories he would tell about their mother and the understanding they developed as a result, she realized, “He taught me not to forget what I had lost, but at the same time not to forget to appreciate what I still possessed.”¹¹² It was important for her to feel both needed, and cared for. Her close relationship with her father helped her cope with the new responsibilities of being a mother to her younger sister. Before the ghetto was

¹⁰⁸ Anna Eilenberg, *Breaking my Silence* (New York: Shengold Publishers Inc., 1985) 26.

¹⁰⁹ Eilenberg 30.

¹¹⁰ Eilenberg.

¹¹¹ Eilenberg 68.

¹¹² Eilenberg.

liquidated in 1944, the three promised that, should they be separated, they would search for each other after the war using a combination of their and their mother's maiden names.¹¹³

Anna and her sister were separated from their father in Auschwitz, but continued to provide crucial support for each other as they traveled from camp to camp. They made an agreement after experiencing the first selection in Auschwitz that "she would- as long as we were here- always be in front of me at the selection. For, I feared that she might not be allowed to live because she was so small and frail. I did not want to survive without her."¹¹⁴ Although they were both selected for death about a week after their arrival in Auschwitz, a sudden order for slaves saved them from the gas chambers at the last minute.¹¹⁵ The combination of the responsibility she felt from her mothering role to her younger sister, and her hope to one day find their father gave Anna a reason to fight for life.

The loss of their father was a harsh blow to Anna, but her relationship with her sister, and a relationship formed with a benevolent peasant woman who was not an inmate, helped her to recognize that there were people in the world who had not fully forsaken them. After their sudden brush with death, Anna and her sister were transported to Halbstadt, to the Schrohl spinning factory, where they were forced to work long hours running massive spinning machines. On her first day in the factory, the peasant woman approached her while she was working. Because of her limited knowledge of German, and the dialect the woman spoke, Anna could not understand much of what the woman said, but understood enough to know that she was telling her to go to the waste bin where the workers disposed of the waste cotton. When Anna was finally able to sneak away from her machine, she found a sandwich wrapped in white paper

¹¹³ Eilenberg 89.

¹¹⁴ Eilenberg 97.

¹¹⁵ Eilenberg 100.

hidden in the waste bin. She hid the sandwich in her apron, and then shared it with her sister at the earliest possible moment.¹¹⁶

Just as a pious Jew would not forget to put on his Phylacteries each morning (except for the Sabbath) so did the Peasant woman not forget to bring me a sandwich with white cheese every day. ...For seven full months- until the liberation- she supplemented our miserable daily ration in the concentration camp. For months I yearned to exchange a word with her, to express my gratitude and let her know that her kindness kept my sister and me alive.¹¹⁷

Anna was never given a chance to speak with the woman while they were still incarcerated in the camp, and never found out what caused the woman to reach out to her in particular, but her assistance and warmth gave her and her sister strength to endure the tortures of the final months of the war after their long journey from the ghetto in Lodz and through the concentration camps. After liberation, she and her sister found the woman, who embraced them both warmly, fed them, and then gave them each a new dress. She did not allow the girls to thank her, and only said, "that she did what she had had to do."¹¹⁸ Her humility and benevolence provided the sisters with a renewed faith in the idea that there were still selfless, decent people in the world.¹¹⁹

Relationships formed with compassionate women, such as Anna's with the selfless peasant woman, in the camps and ghetto provided much strength to many of the memoirists as they struggled to retain their identities in the face of horrific circumstances. The relationships were often formed in the presence of the strong family relationships, but in some cases, served to provide a surrogate family for those who had been separated from their loved ones at various points during the Holocaust. Many of the women described how the help and compassion of strangers helped to renew their faith in the inherent goodness of human nature, while also providing for their physical subsistence.

¹¹⁶ Eilenberg 104-106.

¹¹⁷ Eilenberg 107.

¹¹⁸ Eilenberg 109.

¹¹⁹ Eilenberg 108-110.

Family responsibility and close, nurturing friendships also helped Ruth Minsky Sender to form her identity as a daughter, sister, mother, and friend in the Lodz Ghetto and concentration camps. Before the war, her mother had owned a small tailoring factory and raised her seven children after her husband died.¹²⁰ When Lodz was occupied by the Germans in 1939, she sent her three oldest children east in an attempt to protect them. As many Jews had reasoned from the experience of the First World War, Ruth's mother also thought that, "the Germans won't hurt women and young children."¹²¹ After ghettoization, Ruth and her mother used her mother's business connections to find jobs in a factory for German military coats. Their work helped to provide for the large family, but when her mother was taken in the large selection in September of 1942, she realized that "I am a mother now."¹²² One of her younger brothers contracted tuberculosis, so Ruth quit her job in the factory to stay home and take care of him.¹²³ She took a job as a "home-worker," which took away her daily ration of soup, but allowed her the flexibility to stay at home and watch over her brother.¹²³ Although she jeopardized her health, she felt it was more important to be able to care for her brother. When the Child Welfare department in the ghetto found out that they were all living together without a legal guardian, they tried to split them up. Ruth fought to be allowed to adopt her brothers and sisters so they could stay together.¹²⁴ She gave up her own status as a child and the benefits that came with it, in order to keep the family together. Her dedication to her brothers provided her with the motivation to fight for their collective future. For Ruth, the role of mother allowed her to fill the void left in all of their lives by the deportation of her own mother.

¹²⁰ Ruth Minsky Sender, The Cage (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1986) 7.

¹²¹ Sender 20.

¹²² Sender 32.

¹²³ Sender 37.

¹²⁴ Sender 50-54.

When the family was deported to Auschwitz during the liquidation, they managed to be on the same train as several of their close friends from the ghetto. The small group vowed to watch after one another regardless of the circumstances once they reached their destination.¹²⁵ Upon arrival, Ruth and the other women in the group were quickly separated from her brothers and the other men. Although Ruth feared for her brothers and also for her own life, she thought, "I must live...Motele and Moishele [the brothers] need me. I must search for them as soon as we get out of here. I must search for Mama."¹²⁶

After selections in Auschwitz, Ruth and four other women from Lodz were sent to Mittelsteine, a work camp in Germany where their friendship became a strong support system. The four women had been friends in the ghetto, and immediately began to look out for each other's welfare. Her friends knew that she had written poetry in the ghetto and, put their own lives at risk to collect paper lunch bags and pencils from the factory when they discovered that she wanted to try to write in the camp as well. Her poetry provided a crucial outlet for her emotions both in the camp and the ghetto, but took on a new purpose at Mittelsteine.¹²⁷ Once she wrote her first poem, her friend, Tola, asked her to read it aloud. She explained, "you speak for all of us"¹²⁸ Her poetry was so important to the morale many of the women in the barracks that, when Ruth needed surgery for an infected hand, the camp doctor, another inmate, put her own life at risk and appealed to the camp commandant on Ruth's behalf. The commandant was impressed by the tenacity of the doctor, and arranged for Ruth to have surgery in a nearby town. The doctor had explained about Ruth's poetry in an attempt to show the commandant how important Ruth was to the morale and health of her workforce. After her surgery, the same

¹²⁵ Sender 144.

¹²⁶ Sender 164.

¹²⁷ Sender 192-195.

¹²⁸ Sender 195.

doctor taught her how to write with her left-hand, so she could continue to write poetry for the other women.¹²⁹ Not long after Ruth began to recover, the inmates were forced to put on a show for the guards and commandant: Ruth decided to read a poem. She recited a poem she had written about her mother, but fainted at the end. Her words were powerful, and even touched the Nazi commandant, who visited her that night in the infirmary:

You do not have to hide your poetry, I was sure that we killed all your emotions, that all you can feel is hunger, all you can think of is bread. Your poems are full of hope, of love. You still feel, you still dream. You yearn for your mother. You reminded me that I, too, have a mother.¹³⁰

She gave Ruth a notebook and pencil as she left, and then arranged for her to receive a special position in the factory infirmary, where she received extra food and could recover instead of being forced into hard labor.¹³¹ The friendships she cultivated in the ghetto and camp literally saved her life. Because Ruth was able to break through to the commandant, she forced the woman to recognize that the inmates were still human. Ruth and her three friends all survived the war.

Lucille Eichengreen also gained much strength from her role as mother to her younger sister. After her father was executed in Dachau in 1941, her mother was left to support the two children.¹³² The family was relocated to Lodz in 1941, and her mother provided for them by bartering off their extra belongings and money, but she soon became ill. Lucille got a job and began to care for her mother and sister.¹³³ Before her mother died she made Lucille promise to care for Karin, her little sister. The family bonds were still extremely important to her even as

¹²⁹ Sender 224

¹³⁰ Sender 234.

¹³¹ Sender 235-264.

¹³² Eichengreen 35.

¹³³ Eichengreen 37-43.

she was dying.¹³⁴ Determined to care for her sister, Lucille found her a job in a ladies' hat factory that housed a secret school. In doing this, she not only allowed for her sister to be registered as a worker, which was essential to survival in the ghetto, but Karin could also receive at least a rudimentary education.¹³⁵ During the selection in 1942, later to be called the Children's Transport; Lucille put makeup on Karin in an attempt to make her look older. Although Karin was twelve-years-old, the malnutrition made her look much younger, and she was taken anyway.¹³⁶ The loss of her sister was a great blow to Lucille, but she felt as though she must carry on in case they were reunited after the war. At the time, no one knew that these children were sent directly to Chelmno to be gassed. Her relationship with her sister and her sense of responsibility to her as a mother figure helped Lucille fight to survive the war.

The relationship that had the greatest impact on Lucille, however, was the friendship formed with Julie in the first weeks of incarceration in Lodz. The unique connection between the elderly woman and teenage girl surpassed generational differences. They supported one another through the initial shock of life in the ghetto, and gave each other hope as they talked about their dreams for the future. Julie and her husband Julius had a son, Dan, who immigrated to New York in 1941, and was trying to find a way to bring his parents over as well. The couple garnered great strength from the idea that they would soon be in New York with their son, and spread their optimism to Lucille as well.¹³⁷ Lucille remembered how Julie would "sigh with this dreamy, faraway look in her eyes," and say, "we'll be there, you and I... and you'll meet my son and together we'll walk along Broadway."¹³⁸ This relationship was extremely important to Lucille, and when Julia and Julius were deported out of the ghetto in 1942, she promised them

¹³⁴ Eichengreen 43.

¹³⁵ Eichengreen 49.

¹³⁶ Eichengreen 51.

¹³⁷ Eichengreen.

¹³⁸ Eichengreen 182.

that she would find their son after the war. After their deportation, she never saw either of them again. They had been deported to Chelmno, the death camp sixty kilometers away from Lodz. Ironically enough, she did indeed meet Dan after the war was over, and eventually married him.¹³⁹ When she first met Dan, she told him about her friendship with his mother, saying, “During those six weeks in the school, she and I were inseparable. We talked, we giggled; I admired her calm, patient disposition. Her hair was still red, intertwined with some gray. To me she was loving, gentle, and kind.”¹⁴⁰ She thought of Julie long after she and Julius left the Lodz ghetto, and the memory of her provided her with strength long after she was no longer in Lodz.

Elizabeth Reif was a pharmacist from Vienna who was transported to Lodz not long after the occupation of Poland. She was separated from her mother, who was later sent to Theresienstadt, and was forced to travel to Lodz alone. Once in Lodz, she found a family friend who had arrived on a transport a few days earlier.¹⁴¹ Her friend, whom she called, Barber, was an elderly man. She found a job as a pharmacist not long after arriving in the ghetto, but he was unable to find work and was growing weaker every day. She gained strength and purpose in her attempts to help him survive. She described the situation when she said, “I was poor too, but every week we met, I gave him a few sandwiches which he devoured.”¹⁴² This act of compassion for another person was an example of how she sacrificed some of her own well being to help a friend. Barber died about six months after their arrival in the ghetto. Soon after, Elizabeth found a roommate, another single woman. The two of them helped one another by sharing their rations and the household chores. This type of support and friendship helped give

¹³⁹ Eichengreen 184.

¹⁴⁰ Eichengreen 181.

¹⁴¹ Elizabeth Reif. “Concentration Camp from October 1941 to May 1945” unpublished memoir, RG-02.148, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC 1-3.

¹⁴² Reif 3.

each of them purpose.¹⁴³ Although she had no family in the ghetto, Elizabeth still formed relationships in which she felt as though she were needed. These friendships served to partially fill the void left by the lack of family in the ghetto. They kept her from feeling lost and alone. Her memoir does not go into detail about her relationships after the liquidation of the ghetto, but she was transported to Auschwitz, and then on to Mittelsteine, where Ruth Minsky Sender was also a prisoner.

Franka Charlupski described how a German woman in Bremen helped to feed her and raise her morale while she was in the concentration camp outside of the city. She, her sister, and a friend were all working to clean out bombed out houses in Bremen. Somehow, Franka managed to wander slightly away from the group, where she met an older German woman with one arm. "As I was walking by I asked her if I could help her. Somehow the one arm bothered me, although she was German and I really shouldn't have felt probably that way, but it did bother me and then I thought maybe some chance I would get and extra piece of bread. The woman accepted her assistance and then invited her into her home. She gave Franka sandwiches for herself, her sister, and her friend. Franka was already surprised at the amount of food the woman gave her, but then she surprised her further by turning on the radio. Franka questioned her, "you are risking enough, why are you putting the radio on?" and the woman replied, "I want you to know what's going on. This is your only chance to find out."¹⁴⁵ After that day, the woman continued to bring Franka into her house, feed her, and let her listen to the radio. The friendship continued until the inmates were moved to another worksite. Franka recalled, "I never

¹⁴³ Reif.

¹⁴⁴ Franka Charlupski, Interview by Sid Bolkolsky, Holocaust Survivor Oral Histories, University of Michigan, Dearborn, 18 June 1985, RG-50.155*0008, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC.

¹⁴⁵ Charlupski.

forgot it. And I felt, that I owed the woman an awful lot"¹⁴⁶ The courage and compassion of the woman allowed Franka the opportunity not only to gain strength from food, but companionship, and also to obtain knowledge of the outside world. The fact that a strange woman would risk her life to help her made a great impression on her, and helped her in her struggle for survival.

The relationships formed by these women helped them to maintain the strength they needed to survive the horrors of the Holocaust by providing them with motivation to live. Whether they felt as though they must survive because they were needed by a loved one, or simply because the support of other women helped the days pass more easily, the relationships play a prominent role in their memoirs. Many of the women kept in touch with the other members of their groups after liberation, and are still friends and still support one another. The nurturing roles of mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends allowed the women to focus their energy on something besides their own hunger and pain. Many of the women were able to gain solace through the projection of a family-like relationship onto another, unrelated woman, thus fulfilling the void left by the loss of family for both women involved. By caring for someone else, they found reason to fight for their lives. Through the formation of supportive relationships, they ensured a system from which they could both gain, and lend strength. By helping the others around them, the women maintained their own sense of humanity while not giving up their individual identities.

¹⁴⁶ Charlupski.

Chapter 2: Preserving Identity Within Community

*When my tormented heart can't take any more
 The grief within rips it apart;
 My tears flow freely- they can't be restrained
 I reach for my notebook- my friend.
 I speak to my friend of my sorrow
 I share my anger, my pain.
 I speak to my friend of tomorrow
 Of a future we'll build once again!
 The pillars I build for the future to come,
 I knock down and build once again.
 I share my dreams, share my hopes with my friend
 Share the pain that is filling my heart.¹⁴⁷*

Ruth Minsky Sender wrote this poem on September 23, 1944 in a notebook made of scraps of brown lunch bags stolen from the factory in which she and the other prisoners of Mittelsteine Concentration Camp worked. She would read this poem, and others she wrote in the same notebook and later in the notebook provided by the camp commandant, to the other inmates in her barrack, helping to boost not only her own morale, but that of the other women as well. Her poetry spoke of hope and dreams for the future and challenged her and the other inmates not to give up their dreams or their identities. For Ruth, poetry provided an escape from the horrors of the Holocaust while also allowing her to resist the dehumanization and degradations heaped upon her daily by life in the concentration camp. The act of writing poetry represented Ruth's attempts to preserve normality in her life as well as providing her with an outlet for her frustrations. Writing poetry served the dual purpose of raising both her morale and that of the other women as well as to perpetuate a habit and form of release she had employed both in the Ghetto and in her prewar life. She explained the importance of this act: "Some days I am filled with hope; others, despair takes over. I put my feelings on brown paper bags. I write poems. The poetry she wrote in the ghetto did not survive, but the other poems, such as this one, written

¹⁴⁷ Sender 194-195.

¹⁴⁸ Sender 196.

in the camp expressed her will to live that was shared by the other inmates of the camps and the survivors.¹⁴⁹

The will to live was of paramount importance to the women of the Lodz Ghetto through both their lives in the ghetto and their travails in various concentration camps. In spite of the constant degradations imposed by the Nazis, the women continued to adjust their lifestyles and preserve many aspects of prewar life and identity under the gradually depraved conditions. The memoirs of the ten women expressed how the ghetto took on the form of a veritable community-within-a-community for the duration of its existence. Their descriptions and recollections painted a portrait of fairly normal community life and behavior in spite of the pressures of persecution, starvation, overwork, and dehumanization. The hermetic nature of the ghetto played a great role in the preservation of community and also in determining much of the behavior of the ghetto inhabitants. Because of the tight seal around the ghetto, knowledge of the Final Solution did not infiltrate the population of the Lodz Ghetto until fairly late in the war. The first rumors of the Final Solution did not reach Lodz until late 1942, but the information was so scant and unsubstantial that "the Jews in Lodz neither knew nor understood the significance of the Final Solution until the ghetto had been liquidated."¹⁵⁰ The lack of knowledge helped to perpetuate the belief that life in the ghetto was only a temporary state. As a result, life for much of the community continued on much as it had prior to the war, establishing schools, community centers, perpetuating a vibrant cultural life, and preserving religious traditions. Anna Eilenberg emphasized the tenacity of the Jewish community when she argued that "if the ghetto was created with the aim of destroying the will-power of the victims to struggle and live, then the determination of the inmates to remain alive at all costs was another way of expressing

¹⁴⁹ Sender 145-146.

¹⁵⁰ Gutman 32.

resistance.”¹⁵¹ The memoirs of the young women explained how they tried to preserve the many facets of their identities through their community as they wrote about attempts to further their education, participate in politically active youth groups, preserve crucial tenets of their faith, preserve their femininity in spite of the squalor of the ghetto and camps, protect their reputations in the eyes of their friends and neighbors, and form loving relationships that even sometimes led to marriage.

In mid-1940, the ghetto administration established a system of 47 schools to educate the children.¹⁵² Education had always been an important part of Jewish life, and took on new importance within the confines of the ghetto because it could provide the children with the knowledge needed to survive in the world after the war. The approximately 15,000 children attending the schools were given a bowl of soup at lunchtime, just like the workers employed in the factories in the ghetto, providing an extra incentive to attend.¹⁵³ The curriculum reflected the renewed interest in Jewish history and in understanding what it meant to be Jewish that had been sparked by the persecutions. The resurgence of interests in Jewish topics directly countered the trend of assimilation that had characterized the interwar period. The students studied the history of their religion and people with renewed vigor, in addition to the traditional subjects taught in a typical gymnasium of the time. Anna Eilenberg described the importance of these schools in helping to maintain morale: “it was of urgent importance for the youth to live with hope that a future for them was still possible.”¹⁵⁴ These schools only existed for about a year before being abolished by the Germans in the fall of 1941; the buildings were used to house large groups of

¹⁵¹ Eilenberg 38.

¹⁵² Michal Unger, *The Last Ghetto: Life in the Lodz Ghetto 1940-1944* (Tel Aviv: Yad Vashem, 1997) 134.

¹⁵³ Lili Susser, “Lili’s Story: a Memory of the Holocaust” unpublished memoir. trans. and ed. by Lois Mary Hull. Mary Cortese. Rebecca Susser. Kerry Susser. Herman Susser. and Peter Roper. RG-1996.A.0102. United States Holocaust Museum Archives. Washington, DC 18.

¹⁵⁴ Eilenberg 38.

people being shipped into the ghetto from German-occupied territories or Germany itself. The official schools were quickly replaced by a series of clandestine study groups and underground schools housed in factories. Before the Children's Transport in 1942, many of these secret schools doubled as day care centers of sorts so that mothers with young children could work. By 1943, however, most of these schools had been deprived of their younger pupils, and then, offered quasi-vocational courses that included lessons in Yiddish and arithmetic.¹⁵⁵ The factory heads established these schools with the knowledge that their discovery would bring about swift and harsh retribution, but continued anyway in order to ensure at least a rudimentary level of education for the children "working" under them.¹⁵⁶

Lili Susser attended the official ghetto schools during the year they existed and remembered learning Latin, German, Hebrew, Yiddish, and Jewish History, among other courses.¹⁵⁷ She was fourteen years old when the ghetto was sealed, and like many others, did not fully understand the consequences of the incarceration. The existence of the schools provided a sense of security and normality to their otherwise disturbed lives. She described her behavior and that of her classmates as "typical of any 14 year old... We ridiculed the food and the way things were run, and we even played games and pulled pranks on our teachers."¹⁵⁸ Throughout the course of this year, life for the students continued much as it had prior to the war in spite of the rapidly changing living conditions in the ghetto and the increasing levels of starvation.

After the schools were abolished in 1941, Lili worked in the "youth department" of a hat factory, where they would make ladies hats for four hours and study for four hours every day. In this way she could maintain a rudimentary level of education and interact with other children

¹⁵⁶ Unger. The Last Ghetto 134.

¹⁵⁷ Susser 18

¹⁵⁸ Susser.

her age. Over their lunch breaks from the factory, the children would sit together and dream about what life would be like in the future. She remembered one girl in particular, Maryla, who dreamed of “people going to the moon, pills taking the place of food, and robots doing the work of humans.”¹⁵⁹ The discussions between the children in the factories showed that the spirit and imaginations of the youth had not been damaged by the difficult situations. They still acted very much like they would have under normal circumstances, laughing and creating dream worlds and telling stories to one another.

In some cases, education went hand in hand with political activism. Ruth Minsky Sender and her younger brothers also joined study groups in the ghetto and were active members of the *Skif*, or Children’s Socialist Movement.¹⁶⁰ Before their mother was taken from them, they would attend study groups outside their apartment. After her deportation, the four children stopped studying periodically, until they remembered that education was extremely important to her,¹⁶¹ they resolved to teach themselves history and Jewish literature at night.¹⁶¹ In time, Ruth wrote, “learning takes the place of food now. The books give us hope, strengthen our will to live, to plan for a better, brighter tomorrow.”¹⁶² After her younger brother, Laibele, died of tuberculosis, and they were forced to move to a new apartment, the three children deepened their involvement in the *Skif*, and even housed the secret library compiled by the adult Socialist Bund.¹⁶³ If they had been caught, they would have all been executed. Ruth remembered her feelings on this “We cannot give up the library. But what price do we have to pay to house it? We must put our own lives in danger.” She then told her brothers, who were looking to her, the eldest, for

¹⁵⁹ Susser 22.

¹⁶⁰ Sender 92.

¹⁶¹ Sender 51.

¹⁶² Sender 100.

¹⁶³ Sender 99.

approval, "Well, someone has to do it, so why not us? Why not here?"¹⁶⁴ She felt that they were able to do more good for the Socialist movement by taking responsibility for the library. After moving the library to the apartment, it became a central meeting point and hiding place for many members of the *Skif* as well as the adult Socialist movement, and for friends hiding from forced deportation and the police.¹⁶⁵ Ruth and her brothers felt that their political ideals and the people they studied with deserved that level of commitment. Housing the library was also an important way for the three children to reconcile the move they had been forced to make from their childhood home into an old grocery store. They were able to make the best of their loss by contributing something back to a political movement in which they believed very strongly. Continued political activity such as that described by Ruth Minsky Sender affirmed the dedication of much of the ghetto population to causes that had been important to them prior to the outbreak of the war and the incarceration in the ghetto.

The continuation of a vibrant cultural life in the ghetto helped many inhabitants to preserve identity and a semblance of a normal life for the duration of incarceration in the ghetto. Lucille Eichengreen described her experience at a secret concert in the ghetto and the memories it elicited. She recalled listening to a soprano sing a few ballads written in the ghetto by a friend of hers, then to a small ensemble playing chamber music. After the concert, they all danced to accordion music until early in the morning. She said she was "sad to see this wonderful, happy occasion end."¹⁶⁶ For her, the concert recalled a happier time in her life when she would go to concerts with her parents and reminded her of how "grown up and happy" she had felt then.¹⁶⁷ By describing how poetry and music continued to be written and songs performed, Lucille

¹⁶⁴ Sender 100.

¹⁶⁵ Sender 108-130.

¹⁶⁶ Eichengreen 70-71.

¹⁶⁷ Eichengreen.

painted a clear picture of the tenacity of the ghetto community. The artists refused to give up their art, and instead of ceasing to write and compose, they tailored their work to reflect their current situation, much like the poetry of Ruth Minsky Sender. Through their artistic reflections, they provided a voice for many of the downtrodden ghetto inhabitants and greatly affected the morale of people like Lucille Eichengreen.

The preservation and continued observance of many religious rituals and practices became a strong form of spiritual resistance and a way to fortify their identity as Jews for many women in the ghetto. Almost all of the memoirists expressed their pain at being forced to give up certain religious practices and in some cases, at how their experiences caused them to lose their faith. The issue of religious practice was highly important to many of the inhabitants of the ghetto because their religion was a central part of their identity as Jews. The insistence upon following the laws of the faith and praising God was a strong statement of resistance for many of the deeply religious families in the ghetto. The Jewish population of Poland was predominantly rural, and therefore unassimilated, which gave them a remarkably different character than that of the Western-European Jews. The Jewish population in Lodz was very prominent, and there was a strong faction of assimilated Jews and Zionists, but there were also a very large number of Orthodox and Hassidic Jews who strictly followed the laws of the Torah. As a result of the existence of such a population, the dilemma over whether to try to continue the observance of many of the rituals was particularly important.

Franka Charlupski and Anna Eilenberg both addressed the moral dilemma over whether or not to break kosher in order to help themselves survive. Both of these women came from very religious families that strictly adhered to the laws of kosher cooking. For orthodox Jews, it was forbidden to eat animals "which did not chew the cud and did not have split hooves- horses for

example.¹⁶⁸ The *kashrut*¹⁶⁹ was an important cultural tradition in the Jewish community because it helped to maintain their individuality and provide a distinction between the followers of Judaism and other religions. Breaking this code created a great moral dilemma for the religious Jews in the ghetto because it meant giving up a custom that helped to distinguish them as a distinct group in the greater Polish community. There were provisions in Jewish law, the *Halakha*, which in times of dire need could override the customs if it meant the difference between life and death. The rabbis in the ghetto understood the gravity of the situation, and took this opportunity to put these provisions into action, thus providing a way for the religious Jews in the community to justify eating the horse meat, but in some cases even this was not enough encouragement.¹⁷⁰ Franka described how her father refused to eat the horse meat, so on the Sabbath, none of them would eat it, and they would have the Sabbath dinner without it: “my mother prepared Shabbos to the best she could from potato peelings, she made some kind of potato latka or a soup or whatever she had whatever she could do.”¹⁷¹ Her father continued to follow all of the tenets of Orthodoxy for the duration of their time in the ghetto. Although he could no longer attend services in the ghetto, he maintained every aspect of his religion that was under his control and encouraged his family to do the same. Through this perseverance, they remained strongly in contact with their identity as Jews.

The dilemma over the horsemeat became a struggle between spiritual and physical survival for some of the more religious Jews. Anna’s older brother, for example, refused to eat the meat, even though it could have saved his life. He said, “I would rather die than live,

¹⁶⁸ Eilenberg 78.

¹⁶⁹ Jewish dietary law

¹⁷⁰ Eilenberg 78-79.

¹⁷¹ Charlupski.

knowing that my soul was poisoned with *trief*.¹⁷² Although the family tried to convince him to eat the meat for medicinal purposes, he refused, and died shortly thereafter. He felt that his eternal salvation was more important than his earthly one, and refused to compromise any of his beliefs or practices in order to facilitate his physical survival. Prior to his death, he was deeply involved in a Hassidic study group of Talmudists in the ghetto. Anna described the power of their deep faith and spirituality through her admiration of how “they could turn a meager supper into a feast with their enthusiastic spirit, songs, and tales. It amazed me how this Hassidic group was neither broken nor frightened nor confused but, rather, full of hope.”¹⁷³ After his death, the rest of the family decided to eat the meat in an attempt to survive, but in order to appease their aching consciences, they recited the following out loud as they ate: “We eat this meat not because it is food and we are hungry, but because it is medicine.”¹⁷⁴ Although their faith was still strong, they recognized the need to eat the meat if they wanted to physically survive the war and tell their stories to the world.

The struggle of maintaining religious identity was not limited to the question of observing kosher. Rita Kerner Hilton and her family did not force themselves to continue to observe the kosher laws in the ghetto, but instead went to great lengths to ensure that her grandfather was given a proper religious burial in the ghetto in spite of the difficulty and the cost. Rita was able to use connections with the ghetto police to hire a man to prepare her grandfather for burial. This was a difficult situation and required the intervention of her friend because

...There were horror stories about them [the burial society].¹⁷⁵ Some of them would come to the household after settling up on the price and then in the middle of the preparations they would demand more money. They were blackmailing the family to pay them more.

¹⁷² *Trief* is non-kosher food. Eilenberg 77.

¹⁷³ Eilenberg 72.

¹⁷⁴ Eilenberg 79.

¹⁷⁵ The burial society is what she called the men and women who prepared the bodies of the dead for burial. Hilton 86.

When they were at the household preparing the body they would look over everything, steal food, or anything they could lay their hands on they would steal.¹⁷⁶

Rita's friend took the ration card of the man they hired and promised to return it only if the family was treated fairly. She also went to great lengths to find clean sheets to make a burial shroud for her grandfather, as this was the tradition. She eventually was able to borrow two clean sheets from a couple that had lost their child a few weeks prior to the death of her grandfather. This burial was extremely important to Rita and the rest of her family, so they sacrificed whatever was needed in order to make sure that it happened.¹⁷⁷ This action, which would have been performed without question before their incarceration in the ghetto, was difficult to perform under the circumstances, but by insisting on maintaining the standards for burial, Rita and her family were able to gain solace from the religious meaning behind the service.

Maintaining a level of cleanliness and femininity in the ghetto became an important vehicle for the preservation of dignity and identity in the Holocaust. Some of these efforts were direct attempts to save their lives, while others, such as dating and the formation of romantic relationships provided a degree of normality to the stark conditions in the ghetto. Rita Kerner Hilton described the situation in which her family lived and how because they had no bathroom they were forced to use a bucket to wash. "We washed up in a basin, there was no way of washing, there was no way of using a bathroom, and there was certainly no way of bathing."¹⁷⁸ They coped as best as they could by pumping water downstairs and bringing it up in a bucket. They rinsed any clothes they had in cold water in this same bucket, and would rotate sending out their linens to the laundry because it could take up to three months before they came back.

¹⁷⁶ Hilton.

¹⁷⁷ Hilton 87.

¹⁷⁸ Hilton 66.

Although the situation was difficult and it would have been easier to just give up and live in squalor, they attempted to keep their clothes and linens as clean as was possible under the circumstances.¹⁷⁹

They would also spend much time at night trying to make sure they did not have any lice. This was an issue for the family because her grandmother worked in a factory in which she sorted fabrics and rags for the purpose of making rugs and other things. "Very often the stuff was so infested with lice that when poor grandma came home, she had lice on her feet because the lice would fall down on her clothing through the mesh under the table."¹⁸⁰ They would take the time every day to delouse everything that the lice could possibly have come into contact with to avoid becoming ill. The idea of cleanliness as resistance might seem somewhat absurd, but in the light of the squalor and inhumane conditions experienced by the inmates of the ghetto, any attempt to counter the effects signified a dedication to life. The attempts to remain clean and stretch the food were in stark contrast to the sight of the streets lined with dead or dying people, rivers of open sewage, and rampant illness.¹⁸¹

The use of cosmetics in the ghetto exemplified the attempts of many of the women to maintain a level of femininity. Many women wore cosmetics as they tried to hang on to semblances of normality, but in the case of Karin Landau, it represented a rite-of-passage for a young girl as she fought for her life. Her older sister, Lucille Eichengreen allowed her to wear makeup for the first time in an attempt to make her twelve-year-old sister look older for the selection, later called the Children's Transport, in 1942.

Today you, too, can wear lipstick and rouge! For the first time in weeks, a smile crossed her face. Quickly I applied powder, rouge, and lipstick. She seemed to enjoy the

¹⁷⁹ Hilton 69.

¹⁸⁰ Hilton 63.

¹⁸¹ Unger, The Last Ghetto 97.

attention and the change in her face. When I looked at her, I could hardly recognize my little sister.¹⁸²

Although the makeup was applied in an effort to save her life, the young girl obviously reveled in the idea of being allowed to wear makeup like a grown up. Her reaction was just like any other young girl when allowed to wear makeup or grown up clothes for the first time. She considered it a sign of being grown-up, not an effort to disguise her age. Her sister felt that by applying makeup to her sister's face, she would make her look more like a young woman, therefore drawing attention away from her small stature. This action expressed the belief of many of the women, that if they looked more feminine and human, it would be harder for the Nazis to look away and continue to harm them.

The development of romantic attachments emphasized the relative normality of daily life in the ghetto in spite of the inhumane conditions. Lucille Eichengreen, Ruth Minsky Sender, Rita Kerner Hilton, and Franka Charlupski, and all remembered falling in love in the ghetto. These relationships showed not only the natural desires of these young women to fall in love, but also revealed the lingering concerns about morality, the opinions of their friends and neighbors, and preserving their reputations that resulted from the understanding that the ghetto was still a small neighborhood community. Lucille Eichengreen began to date Szaja Spiegel, the director of a bureau in which she worked for several months. He was many years older than she, and separated from his first wife, who also lived in the ghetto, but they found solace in each other's company. Lucille described how he would read poetry that he had written and take her for long walks in the evenings after work.¹⁸³ They spoke of getting married, but since his divorce was not final, it was not possible. It was, in many ways, similar to a normal courtship outside the ghetto; they attended concerts, walked together, had long talks, and he wrote poetry for her. When Szaja

¹⁸² Eichengreen 51.

¹⁸³ Eichengreen 54-87.

asked her to either move in with him or take an apartment alone so that he could come visit her, however, she vehemently refused. In spite of the dire conditions of the ghetto, and the fact that many women had already succumbed to participating in illicit sexual relationships, Lucille chose not to because she “was certain about only one thing; such an arrangement would lead to ugly rumors and scandal.”¹⁸⁴ Although the societal codes of the ghetto had somewhat changed, she did not feel comfortable engaging in an act that she would be ashamed of after the war was over. Their relationship eventually ended, but they regained contact after the war and remained close friends.¹⁸⁵

Ruth Minsky Sender made a similar choice after her friend Schmulek returned from a labor camp. His entire family had been taken in a deportation raid, and she and her brothers were the only friends he had left in the ghetto. She wanted to help him, but refused to have him move in with her and her brothers because she felt that, although their relationship was platonic, it would be highly frowned upon. Instead she arranged for him to stay with a neighbor, Henry, who had also lost his entire family. In a letter written to her mother¹⁸⁶, she explained herself, saying “I know some people feel that the moral codes we grew up with have no meaning anymore. There may not be any tomorrow... But I cannot feel that way, even if there is no tomorrow. I still care what people think, and I feel that I have to do what I think is right.”¹⁸⁷ She and Schmulek never had anything more than a platonic relationship, but they did remain friends until they were forced to leave the ghetto. The concerns exhibited by these two young women, revealed much about the nature of the ghetto community by exposing the fact that upbringing and social morality did still matter in spite of the increasingly dire conditions of the ghetto. They

¹⁸⁴ Eichengreen 66.

¹⁸⁵ Eichengreen 188.

⁴⁰ Sender 50.

¹⁸⁷ Sender 70.

still felt desirable as women, thus preserving their femininity, but also continued to maintain the values they had espoused before the war.

Ruth did, however, fall in love with another member of the *Skif*, a young man named Yulek. He had also lost both of his parents in the ghetto, and was caring for his younger sister much in the same way that Ruth looked after her three younger brothers. The two became close friends, and he would come by the apartment every night to read to her and talk with her. He was very close to her brothers as well, and they all looked up to him. Because he was in a similar position of responsibility within his family, the two could relate very well to one another. When Ruth began to question whether they would have a future he quickly berated her saying,

Don't you ever speak of dying! You are giving up? Don't you ever, ever give up. There is a tomorrow for us! We will live to tell our story to the whole world. We must teach mankind what evil, hatred, and prejudice can do. We must make a better world by not letting them forget what has happened here. So you keep on writing, and never stop being yourself.¹⁸⁸

Their relationship provided both Ruth and Yulek with a support system that supplemented those developed between the respective sets of siblings. They not only were able to allow their feelings for one another to develop, but also to reflect these emotions and the support they received from them into their relationships with their younger brothers and sisters. Not long after they became close, Yulek was placed on a deportation list, and chose to go and take his sister with him. He felt that his sister might possibly have a better chance of survival wherever they were being taken, and also knew that she would not survive in the ghetto without him. The night before they left, Ruth promised him "I'll wait until you return to read again."¹⁸⁹ They had formed a bond that they felt was worth waiting for, and the relationship helped to buttress their own identities as simultaneous caretakers and youth. Unfortunately, Yulek's transport occurred

¹⁸⁸ Sender 94.

¹⁸⁹ Sender 118.

during the time when most of the ghetto's transports were sent directly to Chelmno, where the passengers were immediately gassed. Neither he, nor his sister survived the war.

Rita Kerner Hilton remembered dating several different boys during her stay in the Pabianice and Lodz ghettos. She described the dating as a part of life, and a testament to the fact that life was going on as normal in spite of the ghetto. She explained that, "[she] had a whole string of boys who [she] was seeing one after another."¹⁹⁰ Their dates would consist mainly of walking around and visiting other friends, since there were no restaurants or other places to go. She would receive gifts from her suitors, even though money was almost nonexistent and food was scarce. The gifts, however, reflected the nature of their situation. She described how a new boyfriend "had a very fancy little carry pot with a cover and my initials on it, made for me."¹⁹¹ This little pot was the receptacle for the soup that the workers would receive every day as part of their ration. The gift probably cost the young man a week's worth of bread, at the least, but was a thoughtful and useful way of showing affection and dedication to her. The young man's thoughtful, yet somewhat "expensive" gift was reminiscent of those exchanged between young couples who were seeing one another under more favorable circumstances.

Other young couples took their courtship a step further and actually married in the ghetto. Anna Eilenberg's older brother, Benjamin, was one such man. He and his wife became pregnant and their willingness and desire to bring a new life into the world in spite of the horrors of the ghetto emphasized their faith in God and dedication to the idea that life would get better. Franka Charlupski was only nineteen years old when the ghetto was established, but she married a man she had been dating prior to the invasion of Poland. They were married in a civil ceremony in the ghetto, and were subsequently allowed to live together in a small room, alone. This was a

¹⁹⁰ Hilton 51.

¹⁹¹ Hilton 64.

privilege in the ghetto. Most families were living all together in one room, sometimes with more than one family to a room. The overcrowding was terrible, but their status as newlyweds afforded them the opportunity to live alone as they started their life together.¹⁹² The willingness to start a new life together served as a testament to the fact that life was continuing in spite of the efforts of the Nazis to bring it to a halt. They did not have any children together, however. They were separated upon arrival in Auschwitz, and her husband did not survive the war.

After deportation to Auschwitz, many of the restricted freedoms still exercised by the people of the ghetto were suddenly taken away. The opportunity to study, read or pray was suddenly taken away and replaced with extreme measures designed to break the remaining will to survive. The physical activities that helped the women fight for survival were no longer an option, and they were forced to reevaluate their situation. Dreams of a better life, faith in God, and the desire to live to tell about the experience became extremely important to the women as they were forced to face the threat of death and dehumanization daily on a more mean and inhumane level. The ability to believe in a brighter future and in the inherent goodness of mankind in addition to the perpetuation of many habits formed in the ghetto allowed many of the women to fight to preserve identity in spite of the increasingly horrific conditions of the concentration camps.

Cleanliness and femininity took on even greater importance in the context of the concentration camps. Lucille Eichengreen and Sophie Machtiger both described the ways in which they attempted to satisfy their lingering traces of vanity after the dehumanizing and degrading experience of being completely shaved and stripped at Auschwitz. Lucille risked severe punishment by the guards at Dessauer Ufer when she stole a scarf she found hidden in the rubble of a bombed out house. "I still wished for something to cover my bald head, but not

¹⁹² Charlupski.

because of the cold wind or driving rain. It was, of all things, vanity. I thought of my once long, shiny brown hair and wondered if vanity was still possible. ...But for some strange reason, it still mattered to me- even beyond the pain of my frostbitten toes, icy hands, and rain-drenched body."¹⁹³ The scarf satisfied this desire to mend her appearance and appear more feminine and human. The idea that her appearance still mattered helped her to remember that she was still a beautiful young woman with a bright future ahead of her.

Sophie Machtinger described similar feelings as she reached for clothes in the Stutthof Concentration Camp after she went through the "disinfection" process in preparation for transfer to another camp.

I ran up to a small table on which some dresses were lying and grabbed one that at one time had been rather pretty and had certainly seen better days- it was a brown knit dress. I saw in a flash that it would fit me so I pulled it out of the pile. It had a few holes in it, but that did not matter. I thought that I could mend it and somehow look presentable again, which was still a dream of mine, for after all it had only been three months since we had been transformed into vermin.¹⁹⁴

She was the one woman out of the ten who was able to stay with her spouse throughout most of her time in the camps. The situation was highly unusual, considering that every other transport into Auschwitz was immediately segregated by gender, with the old and very young being sent immediately to the gas chambers. Their transport, however, was allowed to remain intact, and she was housed with her mother-in-law, and sisters-in-law for the duration of the war in a situation where she could periodically visit with her husband. The desire to appear presentable stemmed in part from the fact that she still wanted to appear attractive to her husband. They both still believed that although "our miserable lives were spent in constant fear, [they] had no desire to die for although [they] found no joy in their lives [they] were young after all."¹⁹⁵ This

¹⁹³ Eichengreen 103-104.

¹⁹⁴ Machtinger 75.

¹⁹⁵ Machtinger 70.

emphasis on youth and femininity emphasized her efforts to retain her sense of self in the camps and not to let herself fall into the depths of inhumanity and despair.

Religiosity took on new meaning in the concentration camps as well. It shifted from a struggle over what to eat and how rigidly to observe the laws of the Torah to a bastion of strength, identity and hope for many of the women. Several described instances in which women in their barracks would pray or sing religious songs around the holidays. Ruth Minsky Sender recalled how the women in her barrack began to sing a traditional song when they realized it was Hanukkah. Because the holiday is dedicated to the celebration of the sacrifices of the ancient Jews in the name of religious freedom, the song was particularly poignant to their particular situation. As they sang the words, "Jews, there were battles you waged/ Jews, there were victories/ All so hard to believe," Ruth felt uplifted by the strength of her ancestors, and felt that "we too, have just won a victory."¹⁹⁶ This moment allowed the women in the barrack to remember what they fought for, and gave them strength to persevere against the pressures of dehumanization and prejudice.

Rita Kerner Hilton remembered attending a secret Kol Nidre service in the barracks of Bergen Belsen. The service was celebrated as a traditional part of Yom Kippur. Although the women attending were not allowed to participate in the service for fear of being overheard by the guards, she recalled how "A whole Kol Nidre service, with some other prayers, was conducted from memory." It was "chanted beautifully without any books by this woman and her young girl." She remembered that there were approximately two-thousand women crammed into the little tent, all crying softly because "we were not allowed to sob or answer the prayers...we had to be absolutely silent because we were afraid that if the Germans found out about it we would

¹⁹⁶ Sender 198.

be punished.”¹⁹⁷ The power of the prayers and the faith of the two women touched her deeply, as she recalled that “this was the most touching Kol Nidre service I have ever been to.”¹⁹⁸ The continued faith in God allowed the women to stand up to the Nazis constant attempts to turn them into animals, and to persevere and struggle for survival.

The desire to live to tell the story of the horrors of the Holocaust drove many women to fight for survival. They felt as though they could help build a better, more tolerant future if they could show the world what hatred and prejudice could do to people. Anna Gerut explained that youthful idealism played a great role in this belief and motivational factor because “you have hope, you believe something will happen. You always dream that this is not forever. Today I would not live through one day. I said, my goodness, if I could get out of there and tell the world, everyone would help us.”¹⁹⁹ She felt as though she could make a difference if she could tell her story. Her father, a respected rabbi from Lodz, told her before he died in the ghetto, that “[she] had to live and tell the world what had happened.”²⁰⁰ Although he did not have the strength to survive, he recognized that his daughter did, and made sure that she understood the importance of passing on the message.

Lucille Eichengreen and Ruth Minsky Sender both emphasized the importance of living to pass on the story of the Holocaust as well. Lucille Eichengreen worked in the office of Dr. Oskar Singer during her time in the Lodz Ghetto. This office compiled the chronicle of the day-to-day activities of the ghetto administration and population. She explained that “Dr. Singer hoped that perhaps after the war there would at least be records to tell the world of our disma-

¹⁹⁷ Hilton 114.

¹⁹⁸ Hilton 115.

¹⁹⁹ Anna Gerut, “When the Living Envied the Dead” unpublished memoir, RG-02.165, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Archives, Washington, DC 4.

²⁰⁰ Gerut 3.

existence.²⁰¹ The records compiled in this office were hidden during the liquidation of the ghetto and found not long after liberation. Lucjan Dobroszycki edited, compiled, and published them in 1984 as *The Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*.²⁰²

Ruth Minsky Sender did not work in an official office to help to compile and record the events of the ghetto and her life, but instead created her own personal record through a series of letters, journals, and poems written during her time in the ghetto and in Mittelsteine. After her mother was taken in the Children's transport in 1942, Ruth began to write daily letters to her and her three older siblings who were hiding in Russia. Although mail could not go in or out of the ghetto, she continued to write the letters in the hopes that one day she would be able to give them to her family to read, thereby explaining much of what she and her three younger brothers had experienced in the ghetto. The letters remained in a drawer in their apartment in the ghetto when they were transported to Auschwitz, and it is not known what actually happened to them.²⁰³ Although these letters and her journal have been lost, her poetry remains as a reminder of the feelings and hopes she experienced during the horrors of the Holocaust. Her yearning to share her pain and that of the other victims of the Holocaust is evident in her poem, "Why?"

*All alone, I stare at the window
 Feeling my soul in me cry
 Hearing the painful screams of my heart
 Calling silently: Why?
 Why are your dreams scattered, destroyed?
 Why are you put in this cage?
 Why is the world silently watching?
 Why can't they hear your rage?
 Why is the barbed wire holding me prisoner
 Blocking to freedom my way?
 Why do I still keep waiting and dreaming
 Hoping...maybe...someday...
 I see above me the snow-covered mountains
 Majestic, proud, and high
 If like a free bird I could reach their peaks
 Maybe from there the world will hear my cry... Why?²⁰⁴*

²⁰¹ Eichengreen 204.

²⁰² Eichengreen.

²⁰³ Sender 50 and 133-134.

²⁰⁴ Written by Riva Minska, Number 55082, Camp Mittelsteine, Germany, January 14, 1945, translated from the Yiddish by Ruth Minsky Sender, Free Person, New York City, USA, 1980. Sender forward.

The depictions of the relative normality of ghetto life, and then the ways in which this behavior transferred to their experiences in the camps pervaded the memoirs of all ten women from the Lodz ghetto. The experiences in the ghetto in Lodz and in the concentration camps of the Holocaust instilled them with a will to live and to improve the world they lived in. Through their words and actions, each woman expressed the fact that it is possible to live, remain human, and maintain identity and integrity in the face of degradation and persecution. The many ways in which they approached the preservation of identity expressed the complexity of their Holocaust experience, while also emphasizing their individuality and perseverance.

Conclusion

The fight to preserve identity in the Holocaust was not an easy one by any means. The constant degradations and persecutions designed to strip the Jews of any remaining sense of dignity proved difficult to overcome, and many succumbed to the pressure. The experiences of these ten women are a testament to the fact that it was possible to withstand the pressure and maintain humanity and dignity in spite of the Nazi program of dehumanization and destruction. The conditions of the Lodz Ghetto provided them with a relatively sheltered view of the situation for the first four years of incarceration, but also allowed them to grow and develop relationships and skills that would help them survive once thrust into the hell of Auschwitz and the subsequent camps.

Although the inhabitants of the Lodz ghetto did not resist the persecutions of the Nazis in the traditional, armed, sense, the mere fact that they struggled to survive every day was a testament to their tenacity and mental resistance. The ways in which they cared for the other members of their families and their friends expressed a desire to live and a fighting spirit that the Nazis could not combat. The persistence of community activities; education, cultural events, libraries, political movements, and religious gatherings, gave the women strength and a source of support within the confines of the ghetto walls.

The recollections gathered in the memoirs and interviews with the ten women from the Lodz ghetto provided an invaluable resource as we try to gain insight into the mind of the female Holocaust survivor. The fact that their testimonies are based on memory, not taken in the midst of the experience gave them a certain distance from the events, causing them to examine their own experiences more closely and create new narratives. This perspective provided an amazing amount of detail as the women tried to understand why and how they survived when so many

other people did not. They focused their discussions on the strength they gained from their friendships and family relationships, often insisting that their main source of strength came from the presence of another person. They emphasized the importance of feeling needed because it gave them a place and a focus for their lives at a time when everything they had ever known was being destroyed. These relationships sometimes served to fill a void left by someone who had died or been taken in a transport, but other times merely arose out of a desire to have a friend, someone to confide in, to reminisce with about a former life.

The Lodz Ghetto community greatly shaped their experiences as well, by creating a quasi-safe space within the walls of the prison. The ghetto was a living hell, but the community still functioned; plays and books were still written, children still attended school, and life continued with a strange degree of normalcy. The hermetic nature of the ghetto protected them from the harsh realities of the Holocaust, and they were able to live and work amongst friends and family for almost the entire war. The ghetto environment also allowed the women to develop skills that proved crucial to their survival in the concentration camps. Their experiences proved dramatically different from the dismal portrait painted by Levi and Arendt. They did not devolve into immoral, ruthless beings, destroying others in order to save themselves, but instead formed supportive, sharing relationships with other women or family members, and actively fought to preserve their identities as strong, capable women. They sacrificed for their family and friends, even risked their lives at times to better the experience of another, and resisted the urge to give up with every ounce of strength they had. They learned to live on the meager rations, and made the best of their situations, never giving up hope that someday life would be better again.

The resistance to dehumanization shown by the ten women from the Lodz ghetto might not have fulfilled the strictest definition of resistance, but it showed their inner strength and

character as they struggled daily to maintain their morals and dignity. In light of the fact that the whole purpose of the ghettos and concentration camps was to break the human spirit, these women practiced the most effective form of resistance possible: They refused to be broken by degrading circumstances and attempts at dehumanization. Their tenacity and strength provide a strong model for the bravery and spirit of the Holocaust survivor.

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