In a Very Silent Screams – Jewish Women in Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration and Extermination Camp, 1942-1945

Abstract

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"Before, I thought we could write about life only when we had recovered from our wounds; when we were able to touch old sores with a pen and revive the pain; when we could look back free from nostalgia, madness, and a sense of grievance. [...] We never get our memories out of our systems. That is why we paint. That is why we write. And that is why some of us die, too."¹

More than one million Jews and tens of thousands of people of other nationalities were murdered in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration-death camp². At the end of World War Two the camp became one of the most significant symbols of the Holocaust of European Jewry, and of the radical evil the camp embodied. This thesis, however, does not focus on the camp for that reason alone. First, out of a desire to study in depth the experience of Jewish women in concentration and death camps, Auschwitz was almost the only possible choice. As we know, Auschwitz and Majdanek were the only camps that were a combination of concentration and death camps. Unlike Auschwitz, the majority of the Majdanek inmates and murder victims were not Jews. Jewish women were of course murdered, or were inmates in other camps too, but in contrast with Auschwitz, these camps, such as the Ravensbrück or the women camp in Buchenwald, were solely concentration camps rather than the combined concentration and death camps that interested me, as did the fact that most of the inmates in these women’s camps were not Jewish. Furthermore, the structure and manner of Auschwitz’s development, i.e., the fact that it constituted a combination of various types of camp, led to the majority of the death camp survivors coming from Auschwitz. For purposes of comparison, only hundreds survived the Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka camps, whereas some

¹ A. Mosteghanemi, Memory in the Flesh, From Arabic: A. Shchabri, in: Interview with A, Shchabri, Ha’aretz, 23.7.2008.
sixty-five thousand male and female inmates, Jews and non-Jews, survived Auschwitz. Consequently, the corpus of memoirs and testimonies from Auschwitz that we have at our disposal is far greater in comparison with those of the other camps noted above. Second, the history of the camp surprisingly lacks methodical research on the experiences of its women inmates in general, and the fate of its Jewish women inmates in particular. My focus on an analysis of the experience of Jewish women inmates is intentional. The lives of the Jewish women inmates of Auschwitz-Birkenau were frequently totally different from those of its non-Jewish women inmates. First and foremost, this difference derived from ideological reasons. In contrast with the women inmates of other nationalities, with the exception of the Sinti-Roma inmates, the Jewish women inmates were ultimately destined to be murdered – with their children, in the event that they had given birth in the camp – as part of “The Final Solution”. Unlike the inmates of other nationalities, the majority of the Jewish inmates’ families either died or were murdered before they came to the camp, or were murdered on their arrival. Their families, homes, and communities were almost totally annihilated. The extent of these losses, and the clear knowledge that this fate was also to be theirs, constituted the basis of their life in the camp. Additionally, the living conditions of the Jewish women in the camp were even worse than those of the inmates of other nationalities. This fact derived from the ideological aspect noted above, and was manifested in selections for death as a consequence of which more Jewish women were murdered than women of other nationalities; the fact they did not have families that could support them with aid packages, and also the strength and mental fortitude lent by the knowledge that they were alive. Furthermore, fewer Jewish women attained positions of power in the camp, which enabled a more tolerable life, and even increased the chances of survival and fewer Jewish women worked on the labor kommandos that were considered relatively good, where the work was done indoors, and where extra food might be obtained. Jewish women inmates also suffered anti-Semitism at the hands of other inmates and the scope of the physical and mental abuse they suffered was greater than that suffered by other

The scope of the proposed study restricted the possibility of introducing the experiences of non-Jewish inmates into the discussion, since by doing so the scope of the study would have to be extended, and even have additional parameters introduced for examination. Yet in several instances I have chosen to add to the discussion citations from the testimonies and books of non-Jewish female and male inmates, in order to add the perspective of these inmates who observed the life of the Jewish female and male inmates at close quarters.

The question of whether a discrete section in Holocaust research should be devoted to women’s experiences has already been answered in the affirmative. The uniqueness of women’s experiences in the Holocaust in general, and specific subjects and locations, is dealt with in a solid corpus of research. This corpus emerged between the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and it was during this period that the groundbreaking studies in this sphere were written. In the main they focus on the uniqueness of the female experience during World War Two and the Holocaust. During this period, too, study of women in the Holocaust made significant achievements, and thanks to these studies the subject became both significantly present and a benchmark for future studies.

The objective of the present study is not to propose a new explanation of Nazism and the Holocaust; neither does the study deal with them in general, but rather in one location and

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at one period of their time. I have attempted to provide a historical description and as far as possible propose a new and comprehensive narrative of the Jewish women’s experiences in the camp. This why the study neither contains long discussions of Nazi ideology nor psychological and philosophical reflections on the murderers or their victims. It attempts to paint a picture that will constitute a description of one place and the fate of those imprisoned in it. The picture is of course incomplete, or one that cannot be contemplated, and it is doubtful whether it can relate “events as they took place”. I have attempted to outline the female experience in Auschwitz between 1942 – when the first Jewish women arrived at the camp – and 1945, as it appears in testimonies, autobiographical literature, and interviews either written or oral, from the period immediately after the war to the present day.

In the study I shall attempt to show how the life of the women in the camp was characterized by two intertwined experiences. The first is derived from the “shattering reality” of the camp. This was a human experience shared by Jewish men and women alike. It was composed of harsh experiences of dehumanization and the shattering of the “self”, fear, cold, terror, uncertainty, helplessness, and a sense of overall non-existence, or “[...] not quite alive, yet not quite dead”, as Isabella Leitner termed the extreme phenomenon of becoming a ‘mussulman’. The second experience possessed clear gender characteristics and was derived from female physiology together with connections to the Nazi worldview, from gender-cultural characteristics related to the way women experience their life, and from how they remember their experiences and relate them. In this sense, the main contention of the present study will be that the differences between men’s and women’s experiences in the camp stem from a combination of factors that may be termed objective, i.e., physiology, the Nazi worldview, and feminine socialization, coupled with the gender differences in the way men and women experience, remember, and relate those experiences, and also the way in which they accord meaning to them. In other words, the study will show that even when women and men undergo seemingly identical experiences, they remember, relate, write, and accord them meaning through

gender. Additionally, it is important to bear in mind that in many respects, these gendered narratives even function as a tool for introducing logic into an individual’s past, and derive from a need to justify and normalize it due to previously-held gender perceptions and socializations.

The Jewish women survivors did not write, and certainly did not give testimony during their incarceration. The first testimonies and books on life in the camp began to appear in the first years after the war, and continued to be published and given in four main publication cycles, up to the present day. Beyond the differences between the various writers or testifiers – their sensitivity, analytical ability, language, biography, camp history, and so forth – important characteristics can be found that distinguish between the testimonies and books published in the different periods. The various publications can be divided into four chronological waves: the first was published between 1945 and 1948; the second between 1952 and 1970; the third between 1970 and 1980; and the fourth and last began in the 1980s and continues to this day. In contrast with conventional wisdom prevailing in the general public, and the almost total absence of women from Holocaust historiography in the decades immediately following the war, women’s memoirs were published in significant numbers after it. However, men’s books constituted the historiographic basis of Holocaust research, and the foundations of its collective memory.

The testimonies given and books published in the first wave constitute a unique corpus whose characteristics and meanings are one of the leitmotif in the present study. Whereas in the three subsequent waves of publication traces can be found of the influences of the way in which memory was shaped in the years following the war, as well as the way in which the Holocaust “should” be talked about, in the early corpus, and to a certain extent in the second, we can find the following characteristics. The first wave of publications contained mainly, but not exclusively, the writings of women survivors who held posts in the camp or who had “privileges”, and mainly those written by women survivors who did not write, and certainly did not give testimony during their incarceration. The first testimonies and books on life in the camp began to appear in the first years after the war, and continued to be published and given in four main publication cycles, up to the present day. Beyond the differences between the various writers or testifiers – their sensitivity, analytical ability, language, biography, camp history, and so forth – important characteristics can be found that distinguish between the testimonies and books published in the different periods. The various publications can be divided into four chronological waves: the first was published between 1945 and 1948; the second between 1952 and 1970; the third between 1970 and 1980; and the fourth and last began in the 1980s and continues to this day. In contrast with conventional wisdom prevailing in the general public, and the almost total absence of women from Holocaust historiography in the decades immediately following the war, women’s memoirs were published in significant numbers after it. However, men’s books constituted the historiographic basis of Holocaust research, and the foundations of its collective memory.

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not live in pre-state Israel. These books and testimonies were written or given under the impression of the initial shock, and almost without reading other memoirs or testimonies and being influenced by them. In them, the various atrocities, hardships, and abuses appear in a far more forthright and less “literary” manner than in later writings. In them can be found very laconic and emotionally “flat” descriptions, and also a sincere, painful, and exposed confrontation with what the camp inflicted on the “self”, together with an almost total absence of self-flagellation (hereinafter, “survivor guilt”). The women writers do not even provide reasons for writing their memoirs, and their writing contains neither lessons to be learned, nor the philosophical musings that are to be found in abundance in later memoirs and testimonies. Furthermore, with regard to the memoirs, it seems that the women who wrote the early ones did not suffer from inhibitions that derived, inter alia, from the Holocaust discourse being written and shaped as a predominantly male narrative, and which later characterized some of the women survivors, many of whom were involved in the public sphere even before the war.\footnote{Although the discussion presented here on the characteristics of the first wave of publications and testimonies applies to both genres, one important difference should be noted: with regard to the memoirs, the question of entering the public sphere on publication comes into play, whereas the testifiers did not necessarily address an anonymous public audience, and there were possibly cases in which they perceived their testimony as a historical document that would not be revealed on the public level at all.} Additionally, the majority of the women writers who published their books during this period were inmates of relatively high status in camp life, and consequently to some extent could influence their own fate and that of other women inmates. This gave them a broader perspective of camp life, and also the ability to maintain a certain “inner freedom” that enabled a more “healthy” survival due to the relative sense of choice they still had.\footnote{A. Pawelczynska, \textit{Values and Violence in Auschwitz}, California, 1979, p. 127.} These characteristics contributed to reducing the shame and guilt feelings that characterized other survivors, and which possibly prevented them from publishing their own memoirs. Their relatively high credibility derives not only from their chronological proximity to the events, but also from the fact that the women who wrote them were less influenced by various opinions and reactions that appeared after the war, were and later less exposed to the perception of the survivors as “sheep to the slaughter”, accusations of using female sexuality for survival, and other accusations leveled at them. In this context
it is worthy of note that the characteristics of the early writings discussed above are very similar when comparing the writings of women and men.

The study’s conclusions are that on the one hand experience in the camp was universal, and uniquely female on the other. In the study’s various chapters I have attempted to ground these contentions. I am fully aware of the fact that some will say that women and men experience their life differently simply because they are men and women; that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible to speak of universal experience, that this is an outdated argument. However, in my opinion, precisely because of the extreme nature of Auschwitz there were experiences in the camp that make it difficult to draw an unequivocal, clear, separating line between the way in which men and women experienced them. Can we indicate differences in the pain of loss? Can we find differences in the way in which human beings experience terror and fear? Can we quantify suffering, and from it draw conclusions, and within it draw a line between the sexes? Are compassion, sacrifice, and joy substantially different between the sexes? I think that assertions of this kind diminish broad perceptions of humankind. Moreover, in this context I think it would more correct to draw distinctions between different people while considering the overall complexity, delicacy, and difficulty of deciphering their personality and self, and the ways in which they were created and shaped, and less in the gender context. Ruth Bondy opens the chapter in her book, “Holocaust of the Female Gender – Women in the Terezin Ghetto”, with the words: “Zyklon B did not differentiate between men and women, the same death swept them all away. Therefore dividing the Holocaust and its suffering by gender seemed obscene to me. And if I have reconsidered, despite my inner objection to dealing with the subject, I have done so only because I did not consider myself entitled to keep silent in the name of the women of Terezin. I therefore examined, first of all for myself, how the lives of women and men differed there, and how justified it is – if at all – to relate separately to the female gender, a trend which belongs to another generation, another era, to the present-day ‘politically correct,’ meant to meet contemporary needs.”12 While my conclusions in the present study do present differences between women and men, they also include the fact that they

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underwent common experiences. Furthermore, in my opinion, in some studies on women and the Holocaust one can sometimes find conclusions on the uniqueness of the female experience that are subordinated by contemporary theories on the reality of life in the camp, and they sometimes ignore sources that present a more complex and less unequivocal picture. In these respects the distinction drawn throughout the study between early testimonies and books, mainly those written between 1945 and 1948, and the later ones, is accorded substantial added validity. Bondy’s contention that in some studies, the research relating to women and men separately during the Holocaust is a contemporary thing meeting immediate needs, is substantiated. While in the early testimonies and memoirs there are very similar descriptions by men and women of human behavior in the life-shattering reality of the camp, for example regarding the hunger and mutual aid, in the later writings there are gender distinctions. In my opinion, in this context both the women survivors and the researchers were influenced by contemporary gender perceptions. In other words, the researchers sought what they wanted to find, and in some cases the women survivors adapted their story, either consciously or unconsciously, to these expectations. “Any thesis can be proved,” wrote Bondy when discussing relationships between the inmates of the Terezin ghetto, and added: “In the dozens of women’s testimonies and memories on the Terezin ghetto there is proof of comradeship, mutual aid, friendship, and sacrifice among the women, of an organized life together. By the same token one can also read about the opposite.  

As shown in the first and second chapters, the experience of the journey to the camp, the pain of separation and the sense of loss during the selection, the hunger, the freezing cold, the humiliation of the human being in his or her naked wretchedness and the subjugation to appalling sanitary conditions, the harm to and sometimes destruction of the self experienced by the inmates, were common to men and women alike. I cannot find a way – and I think it would be mistaken – of trying to find clear gender distinctions in them. That the Holocaust was of our times and can meet contemporary needs is substantiated in these writings.

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Bondy, p. 51. 

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There was also, of course, gendered experience in Auschwitz that was unique to women. It is contended that this experience derived from a combination of three main factors: female physiology, the Nazi worldview, and gender – the way in which women experience their life – and the way in which they remember their experiences and relate them.

The monthly menstrual period, and the sexual abuse are at the core of the physiological experience. On the face of it, they can all be placed in the narrow physiological, almost instrumental definition, but in fact they possessed gender foundations that preceded the detention, and also long-term effects following the liberation, since – and there is nothing new in this assertion – the body does not stand alone but is an integral part of a socio-cultural framework, and is hence gender-related. In the purely physiological sense, the loss of the monthly period in the camp brought relief, since not only did the hygienic conditions not allow any possibility of dealing with it, but if the periods did not cease, it could have meant the murder of the woman. Thus far we can indeed talk about the monthly period as a physiological practice, but its loss also engendered fears of harm to fertility and the ability to have children should the women survive. This was an ability perceived by the women themselves and also by the society from which they came, and to which they would return if they survived, as an essential part of the definition of femininity – motherhood. Similar to this were pregnancies. At the practical level in the camp they meant death for mother and child, both at the first selection on entry to the camp, and also in the camp itself.

There can be no doubt that women were far more exposed than men to the threat of sexual abuse, and also to actual sexual abuse. Although there were also men, mainly youths, who suffered this in the camp, women were the real victims of this type of exploitation. Women in Auschwitz suffered from fear of sexual, verbal, and physical exploitation. Yet as described in the chapter on this subject, in my opinion sexual exploitation in the camp was not at the center of the women’s experience in it. It was mainly manifested in the constant threat of this kind of exploitation, and the “sauna” and daily life in the camp were not characterized as a prolonged practice of sexual abuse. As I have noted, cases of rape in the camp were rare, in contrast with some of the other labor camps in Poland and Germany, and particularly in contrast with the cases of rape of
Jewish women by Germans and non-Germans that took place mainly on the Eastern front, in the USSR, and on which studies have begun to be published in recent years. This, of course, does not diminish the women’s suffering and the protracted psychological harm they suffered in practices of this kind, but in my opinion, the fact that sexual exploitation in the Holocaust, particularly of women, occupies such a central place in the general research on women and the Holocaust, is problematic since it embodies a narrow gender-physiological diminishment that again presents women as helpless victims. In other words, although with regard to Auschwitz at least, we cannot, in my opinion, indicate practices of sexual exploitation that constitute the core of Jewish women’s experience there, in the research, as in public opinion, it occupies a central place. Do the few findings on cases of the rape of Jewish women in the camp derive from a “conspiracy of silence” on this subject? In my opinion they do not. As I have shown throughout the present study, women, particularly in their early testimonies and memoirs, did not avoid speaking about cases of sexual exploitation in the camp or about other harsh, traumatic experiences. The premise that the scope of sexual abuse in Auschwitz was far greater than is shown in these sources, since women avoided speaking about it, seems to me to be erroneous. Furthermore, and at a level that may be termed practical, in contrast with the Eastern front it was far more difficult for the Germans in Auschwitz to rape Jewish women and escape unpunished, and the fact that the Jewish women in the camp were less “attractive” than those recently captured by the Germans, were raped by them and murdered immediately afterwards. Jewish women were indeed sexually exploited in Auschwitz, but the main scope of this exploitation was manifested in the practices discussed in depth in the chapter dealing with this subject, and rape was not one of them. There is, of course, nothing in this assertion to diminish the mental and physical suffering

that was part of the sexual exploitation, but in my opinion the source of the overstating of this subject, like the attempt to prove that sexual exploitation in the camp was far more prevalent than is shown in the testimonies and autobiographical literature, is connected more to contemporary perceptions and agendas, and less to the reality of life in the camp.

The Nazi worldview that perceived Jewish women as the bearers of the next Jewish generation, and as a less efficient workforce than the men, was manifested in the camp mainly in the first selection carried out on arrival at the camp and concerning pregnancies. In this selection, some of the women, particularly the mothers, were forced to face the decision of whether to go with their children in an unknown direction that boded ill, or to enter the camp as inmates and receive borrowed time to live. This is one of the subjects unrelated to sexual exploitation about which women avoided speaking and relating. It seems that the majority of the Jewish mothers chose not to be separated from their children. However, it emerges from my sources that there were also mothers who entered the camp without their children. Some chose to do so, while others were forced to. We cannot, of course, establish their number. In my opinion, it is these mothers who are missing from the testimonies and memoirs, not the women who were sexually exploited. It is almost impossible to find testimonies or autobiographical literature by women who chose to enter the camp without their children. Also relatively few are the memoirs and testimonies of women who were forced to part from their children. Where citations of this kind are found they appear mainly in the earlier testimonies and memoirs given or written between 1945 and 1948, for the reasons analyzed throughout the study.

At the beginning of my summary I wrote that I do not think that suffering can be quantified, just as it is impossible to essentially describe and share it with another. However, I think that the abandoning of children, even when the decision to do so was taken in an extreme and traumatic situation – which is sometimes difficult to term “choice” – was one with an open wound of incurable pain, and also the breaking of an overwhelming social and personal taboo, and so there is hardly any mention of it.

Consequently, pregnant Jewish women who succeeded in getting into the camp as inmates were forced to make a choice between their own life and that of their children. The reversal of natural order in this context, which is extensively discussed in the relevant chapter, turned giving birth, a moment of giving life, into a moment of death,
when the mother’s choice of her own life was also a choice of death for her child or fetus. For many mothers this choice was a spiritual death that remained with them for many years. As I have shown, even mothers who gave birth to other children after the Holocaust continued to suffer harsh guilt feelings, and sometimes prolonged, unremitting mourning. Despite their choice being for life, and although they knew full well that Jewish infants would not survive in Auschwitz but would be brutally murdered, many of them experienced harsh feelings of betrayal of their feminine, maternal nature.

Among the experiences I found to be gender-linked in social terms was the attitude toward hunger and hygiene, and also the relationships between the women inmates. I have written about the discursive aspect of the experience, the memory and testimony, and their gender characteristics. As I have contended, following Pascal Bos, while women and men underwent similar experiences, but due to gender their impact and the way in which they were remembered and related – in both the short and long term – were different. Hunger was hunger for both sexes, but sometimes men and women coped with it in different ways, particularly on the levels of fantasizing or brooding about it. In my opinion, this does not mean that women endured it “better” than men, or coped with its hardship in a more moral way. They “simply” related and remembered it differently than men, and for this reason the assertion found in some studies stating that these differences brought about an essentially different way of coping with it is, in my view, exaggerated.

The hygiene conditions were appalling in the men’s and women’s camps alike, but the way women remembered and related them was different from how the men did so. Whereas in the men’s testimonies and memoirs we can find extensive preoccupation with the difficulties caused by hunger, similar emphasis is placed by the women on the suffering caused by the hygiene conditions in the camp.

The discussion on human relationships in the camp brings me back to the differences between the corpus of early testimonies and memoirs and the later ones. While the research places great emphasis on this subject, and contentions raised regarding the essential difference in relationships between men and women in the camp, in my view, a deeper reading of this corpus provides a more complex picture. It seems to me that especially in this case, we can find a sort of research bias, whereby the researchers found what they wanted to find, i.e., that due to feminine socializations that preceded the
detention, which emphasized nurturing and friendship as part of gender socialization, women did indeed present more pronounced manifestations of these characteristics than men during their detention. The early corpus of sources proposes a more complex picture wherein clear gender differences cannot necessarily be indicated, but rather very similar behavioral characteristics between men and women. Furthermore, this corpus did not constitute the basis of post-Holocaust research, and was not at the basis of the narrative advanced by studies and commemoration institutions. In other words, in this case it seems that we can indicate perceptions that deviate from historical reality and constitute a “falling into line” of survivors and researchers alike behind gender-social perceptions. As I have stated in the chapter dealing with this subject, it is not my intention to claim that there were no profound friendships and mutual aid between some of the camp’s women inmates. I do, however, seek to argue that there were similar relationships among the men. Similarly, harsh and bitter relationships existed between female inmates and between male inmates alike. The gender difference I find in this context, apart from the fact that women formed larger “alternative families” than men, is the difference fostered after the Holocaust due to gender perceptions projected onto the female experience, and less due to substantial, concrete differences in the life of the male and female inmates themselves.

I have argued about the experiences common to men and women, and also about gender-specific experiences. In conclusion, I would like to add a further common experience that is hard to put a name to, and difficult to quantify, but which in my view constitutes one of the basic Auschwitz experiences. The anomaly of Auschwitz also brought with it what I have termed throughout the study ‘becoming a body’. A body which exists, which cannot deviate from its own limits, a body abandoned by what are known as soul and spirit, and which remains, per se, naked and abandoned from the entire gamut of elements that turn human beings into beings created in God’s image. The nature of this body is embodied in the figure of the mussulman, and as we know, the majority of them did not come back to relate their experience. But there are also numerous survivors who were in these physical
and mental states, and came back to life. Some of them tried to shed light on this extreme experience, which our language, consciousness, and cognition cannot grasp. Some came back silent, or did not even attempt to relate what is perhaps impossible to relate. This is not a gendered experience. It is tempting to say that it is not even a human one, but since human beings did experience it, and other human beings caused it, it is human.