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In the final chapter of the edited collection, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, authors Dror and Linn comment on a story interviewee Reuven tells about his mother; “There is the world of war, in which the willingness to do anything in order to survive one more day is an adaptive quality. And there is the free and comfortable world, which tests survival according to the criteria of values, culture, and self-respect” (p. 287). For many of the authors in this interdisciplinary anthology, the dichotomous relationship between the two worlds – during and after the war – is used to explain why survivors of sexual violence have kept their stories secret. “Choiceless choices,” such as the exchange of sex for food, made by women to stay alive in concentration camps, ghettos or during transport became sources of personal shame and often community condemnation after the war. Likewise, stories of sexual abuse during the Holocaust have long been discredited, belittled and generally considered insignificant as compared to other atrocities that occurred. As such, each essay in the book offers an opportunity to rediscover and come to new understandings about the reality of women’s experiences during and after the Holocaust. And because sexual violence is a reality of women’s lives today as well as during the Holocaust, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* is well suited for readers interested in deepening their understanding of women’s experiences across time and place as well as those who crave a more precise understanding of the gendered realities of war.

Editors Hedgepeth and Saidel provide a pioneering overview of sexualized violence against Jewish and non-Jewish women during the Holocaust. The sixteen diverse essays contained in the volume unearth narratives about sexual abuse that survivors of the Holocaust have long hid and cinema and literature have long ignored. Sexual violence, which includes but is not limited to: rape, forced abortion, molestation, amenorrhea, and forced prostitution, is an under-discussed reality of women’s experience during the Holocaust. Each of these subjects is approached with compassion in the essays
as the authors’ writing spans a range of methodologies, sources and themes. The first section, “Aspects of Sexual Abuse” provides definitions of sexual violence and discusses sexual violence in terms of: its history as a tool during war, its roots in misogyny, and the specifically Jewish components of sexual abuse during the Holocaust. Part two, “Rape of Jewish Women,” focuses specifically on the act of rape, much of which occurred outside the concentration camps when women were in hiding, in ghettos and while being rescued. Part three, “Assaults on Motherhood,” examines forced sterilizations and abortions and part four, “Sexual violence in Literature and Cinema,” critically analyzes fiction and non-fiction texts. Finally, in part five, “The Violated Self,” interviews with survivors and their children provide a psychological perspective of sexual violence contextualized within modern understandings of shame and war induced trauma.

The introduction to the book makes the necessary argument for why studying sexual abuse during the Holocaust is important. By offering a nuanced approach to the study of the Holocaust, through a topic such as sexual violence, the editors hope to illuminate the detailed reality of Holocaust life in a way more general descriptions of genocide cannot and have not. Furthermore, because the Nazis meticulously recorded their actions and no official mention of rape is made, scholars of the Holocaust have long dismissed the topic as irrelevant. The editors dispute the necessity of hard evidence to argue for the existence of sexual violence. According to respected Holocaust historian Yehuda Bauer, “if all human experience has a gender-related agenda, as women’s studies tells us, the Holocaust can be no exception” (p. 4). And because women’s studies and feminist theory also tells us the shame induced by sexual violence silences many women, the Holocaust can be no exception. For these reasons, Hedgepeth and Saidel’s collection offers the necessary space to tell the stories, which have not been told and fill a much-needed gap is Holocaust studies.

Finding the stories beneath the shame and pushing for more research that deals directly with women’s experiences during the war is the common thread amongst all the essays in the collection. Levenkron’s essay, “Death and the Maidens” describes rape as a byproduct of war and is primarily concerned with providing data to prove this tool of war was in fact used by the Nazis. The illusion of choice, such as trading sex for safety, is the focus of Halbmayr’s piece, which employs the term “sexualized violence.” Rather than
the oft-used term “sexual violence,” Halbmayr insists on a more inclusive definition, one that assures survivors and readers that the choices made by some women were in fact “choiceless.” Waxman’s piece, entitled “Rape and Sexual Abuse in Hiding” places rape and molestation, which occurred outside concentration camps, at the bottom of an unintended but existing hierarchy of suffering. She challenges this hierarchy and argues for a more inclusive conception of what definitions of violence and suffering during the Holocaust should include. Amesberger and Ben-Sefer’s chapters explore motherhood within the camps; they describe not only the painful decision to abort a child or kill an infant so that the mother could survive but also the judgment and condemnation women suffered during and after the Holocaust as a result of their “choice” to survive. Each of the authors whose work grapples with the cinematic and written accounts of suffering describes the tension between telling the truth of a story and exploiting the realities of war. Sivan’s analysis of Yehiel Dinur’s books *House of Dolls* and *Piepel* praises his ability to tell difficult stories. However, she does so against a backlash condemning his gruesome writing and within the frame of a chapter she titles, “Stoning the Messenger.”

In what is possibly the most provocative chapter in the book, “Only Pretty Women were Raped,” author Flaschka suggests rape acted as a reinforcement of feminine and female identity amongst women in concentration camps. Shorn heads and emaciated bodies left women feeling “sub-human” and indistinguishable from one another. (p. 77). As such, the regrowth of hair became a marker for femininity, which led to a certain element of “rapeability.” According to Flaschka, many who survived the camps associated rape with physical attractiveness and the retention of female characteristics. Such feminine characteristic “produced” women “in an environment in which women… no longer existed” (p. 89) and during a moment in time no one should have ever been forced to endure.

The fear of rape is universal for women. At the same time, rape is an intensely private experience. Because, “The study of ‘events that are utterly particular but charged with intensity’ can lead to understanding wider historical perspectives” (p.1), this collection of essays is an invaluable addition to the cannon of Holocaust studies. However, it is not enough. The essays are repetitive and the lack of details often leaves the reader wanting more. The argument for more work of this kind is repeatedly made
throughout the book rather than more work of this kind written in the book. And while the editors deserve recognition for introducing the topic of sexual abuse within the Holocaust, they deserve critique for not providing more information on the subject. But maybe that’s exactly the point – little information exists and more is needed. Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust is a start. And it is a must read for feminist scholars and Holocaust historians of all types.

See also:

Silence lifted: The untold stories of rape during the Holocaust @ http://tinyurl.com/7c72rbe