As the grandchild and great-niece of women who were incarcerated in Ravensbrück, the first all-female concentration camp, which began functioning on May 18, 1939, I read with much interest Dr. Judith Buber Agassi’s 2007 publication, Jewish Women of Ravensbrück: Who Were They? More than all the other concentration camps, extermination centers, and ghettos combined, the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp stands as the symbol of these unique, female-targeted atrocities. However, until the past couple of years, it was greatly overlooked in the shadow of more infamous and widely discussed killing sites, such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, and Treblinka.

In recent times, we have witnessed an increase—not only in Holocaust memoirs in general—but in those testimonies that provide a female gendered voice to the brutalities of World War II. Since 2006 alone, we have seen the publication of two scholarly works: The Jewish Women of Ravensbrück Concentration Camp by Rochelle G. Saidel (March 2006); Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They? (July 2007), in addition to several personal accounts pertaining to Ravensbrück, including the following: American Heroine in the French Resistance: The Diary and Memoir of Virginia D’Albert-Lake by Virginia D’Albert-Lake (May 2006); Are You Here in This Hell Too: Memories of Troubled Times (1944-1945) by Elisabeth Sommer-Lefkovits (January 2007); Michelangelo in Ravensbrück: One Woman’s War Against the Nazis by Karolina Lanckoronska (March 2007).

Indeed, one of the first issues that Buber Agassi addresses in her highly detailed, thoroughly researched, and deductive book is that of why the Ravensbrück chapter of the Holocaust has been so sorely neglected by researchers concentrating on Jewish prisoners in specific concentration camps. This is only one of the numerous questions that the author sets out to answer for herself by interviewing—together with a team of researchers—138 survivors of Ravensbrück on more than three continents, and by sifting through primary

2 According to Buber Agassi, an additional scholarly study edited by Irith Dublon-Knebel of the Jewish women in the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp entitled, A Neglected Chapter in the History of the Holocaust: The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück is yet forthcoming. (See: Buber Agassi, p. 7, footnotes).
4 Chiefly included among the countries in which the Jewish survivors of Ravensbrück currently reside are Israel, the United States, Canada, Hungary, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, and Australia. Women were...
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and secondary sources, as well as some 100+ published and unpublished memoirs and manuscripts. All of this was necessary in order to “reconstruct the crime” as it was committed over the course of 6 years, from 1939 to 1945. In the process, Buber Agassi also succeeded in uncovering vital data about the more than 16,000 individual Jewish victims—both those who were murdered and those who survived.

According to Buber Agassi, whose own mother, Margarete Buber-Neumann, was incarcerated for 5 years in Ravensbrück, there were a number of obstacles to Jewish commemoration. One of these is steeped in the uniqueness of the Jewish experience during the Holocaust, as Ravensbrück does not fit this traditional model. Indeed, it was a “place of suffering to women from all over Europe, the Jewish women among them constituting a minority.” From the Israeli perspective, which places the commemoration of heroic behavior and resistance—especially armed resistance—at the core of the Holocaust discussion, Ravensbrück once again plays a problematic role, since no such acts could be expected of this all-female group. Finally, an unfortunate myth developed in Israel in the early years after World War II: that some Jewish woman—particularly young and beautiful ones—had bought their survival by essentially selling their bodies to the German forces.

As a sociologist specializing in gender and work Buber Agassi felt that her chief goal in constructing such a book was to ascertain some of the following questions: Who were these Jewish women? Or—more specifically—which countries did they come from? What was their age distribution? What types of professional roles did they hold prior to the war? Did they come from traditional (i.e., religiously observant) backgrounds or not? What types of social interactions and emotional support existed among and between the various groups of women, i.e., Jews, non-Jews, Zionists, non-Zionists, Communists, Socialists, et al.? What forms of resistance existed among the Jewish women of Ravensbrück? What were the mortality and survival rates among various groups of women? We also witness the author’s great concern for the accuracy of numbers: of the murdered, the survivors, and those which are yet unaccounted for—as though this in itself could serve as a means by which to commemorate the dead and honor the living.

Thus, we learn that the Jewish prisoners of Ravensbrück originated in 27 different countries, that the majority of Ravensbrück’s prisoner population was actually comprised of non-Jews, and that among the countries of origin represented in the camp, Hungary rated the highest at 47.85 percent, followed by Poland at 24.06 percent, Slovakia at 9.92 percent, and Germany at 6.9 percent. We also learn that the largest age range represented was that of 19-25, which accounted for 31.7 percent of the prisoner population during the course of

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6 Buber Agassi asserts that Jewish women Holocaust survivors were viewed with the greatest of contempt among the survivor-immigrants, who were by default, viewed suspiciously as possible collaborators. (Ibid., pp. 13-14).
7 Buber Agassi incorporates statistics throughout her book, which she concludes by providing an entire section devoted to diagrams of pie charts and bar charts bearing the following categories: “Countries of Origin,” “Age Groups,” and “Formal Citizenship.” (Ibid., pp. 263-279).
8 “Slovakia” includes Czechoslovakia and Czechia. (Ibid., pp. 211-212).
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Ravensbrück’s six-year-history. Among Buber Agassi’s more surprising discoveries, was the fact that there existed many artists, writers, storytellers, actors, and especially singers among the female inmates of Ravensbrück. Storytelling, in particular, served multiple functions: it provided a creative context for social interactions between women prisoners, while enabling them to detach, if even temporarily, from their horrific surroundings.

As for the question of Jewish resistance—What forms did it take and why did it not occur on a broader scale?—Buber Agassi provides several logical explanations. For one thing, there were no known attempts of sabotage among the Jewish prisoners; they were an isolated minority in the camp, and were not organized on a grand-scale level. Accounting for this lack of organization was the fact that Jewish women were a highly diversified group, bearing some 27 different nationalities and speaking multiple tongues, which frequently did not coincide with one another. This does not even begin to take into account the varying ideologies espoused by or the different religious backgrounds of this particular group of women. Furthermore, close to half of Ravensbrück’s overall Jewish population had already been subjected to the horrors of Auschwitz, which must have taken a serious physical and emotional toll on these women. Finally, the simple truth of the matter was that by the latter part of the camp’s existence—what Buber Agassi delineated as its fourth and fifth periods—the lack of nutrition, housing, and hygiene had reached devastating heights. Under these combined conditions, when taken as a whole, it is not difficult to understand why there were not more overt attempts at resistance.

In light of the aforementioned remarks, it is also important to consider the meaning of resistance, which took on various forms in the midst of even the most severe and horrific circumstances. According to many Jewish survivors of Ravensbrück, one of their greatest concerns was that of retaining a “human face” and moral character—not succumbing to the utter state of animals—that was expected of them. In the words of one such survivor, Lotte S., the term “resistance” could be defined as follows:

In reality anybody who strived to survive performed resistance. Any act of solidarity, any small piece of bread, each friendly and encouraging word was resistance. Any attempt to evade a blow of the stick of a guard was resistance. But equally so if one went to one’s death with head held high and contempt for one’s tormentors.

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9 This included the Viennese actress, Silvia Grohs and the Dutch singer, Louise van de Montel. The claim that there was a relatively high percentage of storytelling and literary ability among these women may be further substantiated in light of the fact that to-date, 33 of them went on to write published memoirs, while 67 contributed articles or entries about their wartime experiences to books edited by others. (Ibid., p. 254). Storytelling, in particular, became a source of communal entertainment and an emotionally healthy manner of coping during this horrible period.

10 Ibid., p. 248.

11 The two largest countries of origin among the Jewish women of Ravensbrück were Hungary and Poland. Most Polish Jews possessed fluency in Yiddish, whereas that was not the case for many Hungarian Jews, who neither spoke Yiddish nor Polish. This proved a “serious obstacle to the development of a general group-wide Jewish social organization among the Jewish prisoners in the main camp of Ravensbrück, as well as in its two major external camps – Malchow and Neustadt-Glewe” (Ibid., p. 234).

12 Buber Agassi states that many survivors mention a point “when they were in danger of losing their human face” (Ibid., p. 248). This fear of becoming dehumanized was usually evoked when they became utterly apathetic—not caring about how they appeared or behaved toward others. Ibid., p. 248.

13 Ibid., p. 250.
In her concluding remarks, Buber Agassi addresses the question of gender and the impact this construct—the matter of being women—had on the fate and behaviors of women in the Holocaust as a whole, in contradistinction to those of men, whose circumstances were comparable or similar. This question proved rather elusive to our author, since, as she points out, we do not know of any single group of men who resembled this group of women—in terms of their countries of origin, age groups, conditions of arrest, imprisonment in ghettos, deportations, et al.—that also spent time in a concentration camp with conditions that were similar to those of Ravensbrück. According to Buber Agassi, the few salient distinctions that emerge concerning the unique experiences of women during the Holocaust are steeped primarily in the physiological and socialization processes, which directly affected women.

For example, the fact that most women had less physical strength caused them greater danger than men, since they were frequently and purposely made to carry out jobs which were physically taxing even for men. Furthermore, the Jewish women prisoners of Ravensbrück were frequently in maternal positions of having to care for children and young teenagers, something that was far less common among Jewish male prisoners during the Holocaust. Finally, natural factors such as menstruation, pregnancy, and the fact that women are much more prone to sexual assault and rape than men, also placed them in an extremely precarious—if not dangerous—situation as compared to their male compatriots.

In conclusion, Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They? is an outstanding and impressive work of scholarship, which was clearly many years in the making. Moreover, given her own familial connection to the Ravensbrück Concentration Camp—a point which Buber Agassi, in my opinion, has perhaps gone too far to objectify—this project was undeniably part of the author’s personal and lifelong calling. Buber Agassi’s book, because of its fine attention to factual detail, would be better read in conjunction with some of the other works on Ravensbrück indicated above, particularly the survivors’ own memoirs, which provide a greater illustration of the challenges and horrors with which these women were forced to contend on the day-to-day level; in certain instances—as in the case of Buber Agassi’s own mother—for several years, in this singular “hell for women.”

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14 Ibid., p. 250.
15 Women prisoners were often employed in hard physical labor including road-building, the shifting of earth and stones, and the unloading of trains and boats. Ibid., p. 255.
16 Ibid., p. 254.
17 In most cases in which a female inmate was discovered to be pregnant, both she and her child shared the common fate of death. Sexual acts of violence created mental, emotional, and physical damage to the women inmates, which added an extra burden in the face of survival, both during captivity, as well as after liberation. Ibid., p. 255.