

The Holocaust and its Aftermath from the Family Perspective

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Family is a fragile social construction, which can suffer greatly in historical upheavals. Nevertheless, when ELIYANA R. ADLER (Pennsylvania State University), RUTH LEISEROWITZ (German Historical Institute, Warsaw) and KATEŘINA ČAPKOVÁ (Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences) decided to organize a conference around the theme of the family in the context of the Holocaust, besides the devastation they also expected papers about the reconstruction of the family units in the immediate post-war times. The flood of stimulating proposals indicated that they were right: family as such becomes more and more central within Holocaust research. Thanks to the organizers more than 30 researchers met to present their papers and exchange scientific knowledge related to „The Holocaust and its Aftermath from the Family Perspective“.

This conference was a joint event of the Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences and the German Historical Institute in Warsaw in cooperation with CEFRES in Prague, and it took place in the beautiful Villa Lanna, in Prague. Listening to the presentation one could grasp how family unit was stunningly differently understood by the various participants. There were presentations referring to the concepts of mixed Jewish – non-Jewish couples, others talked about the larger Nomadic Roma families in the Holocaust, while the supporting role of imagined family members and foster parents were also discussed based on survivors' testimonies. Operating with these different definitions, the speakers touched upon themes such as the changes in solidarity within the family and the changing situational relations.

Historians and Holocaust researchers for

decades concentrated mostly on the perpetrators' history. It was the introduction of gender perspective which brought the victims more into the fore, and the gender analysis was a reoccurring aspect of the current conference as well. For instance, in case of the Nomadic Roma families, which included some 40-50 people, it was the council of married men which had to decide in important questions. At the same time, the mothers were the breadwinners of the family, often by activities like fortunetelling or even begging with a baby on hand. The inevitable visibility which followed from these activities made these Roma mothers easy target for Nazi persecution.

Contrary to this, among Jewish families enclosed in ghettos a role reversal was described by several conference participants: women had started to do the jobs of the missing men within the family. Some speakers even suggested understanding this more as a role extension, since the women in question had needed to do the usual housework also while performing as well typically male tasks in these crucial times. Moving from the Eastern European ghettos more to the East, the audience heard about Polish Jewish refugees in the Soviet Union. In this unique refugee set up, ATINA GROSSMANN tried to draw up the mindset of the family members when stating that women appeared to be more prepared for their tasks than most of the male refugees for their unusual work assignments. The latter group was for example sometimes ordered to do military service in Central Asia, in Uzbekistan or in Kazakhstan, or sometimes they had to perform dangerous forced labor. At the same time, the women tried to keep a household, kept their positions as sexual partners, and continued to be mothers.

A few presenters elaborated on the difficult process of decision-making, a topic within which it seemed to be an agreement on the general trend: at the beginning of the war young men were more endangered by the Nazis; therefore they were more likely to flee, while women wanted more to stay. Yet, there were significant context based differences. It is enough to mention here the decision making of those Soviet mixed couples who had to decide whether or not, and if yes, then when to move to the remote areas of the So-

viet Union, in order to avoid ghettoization or murder by the Nazi firing units. Soviet evacuation concerned them in case they worked for state administration: some of them were evacuated, some had to continue to work and stay as long as until the German occupiers arrived. However, since here the researchers work with family stories which were mostly influenced by personal circumstances, it is sometimes difficult to find regularities in decision making.

Speaking about similar problems concerning decision-making, BOAZ COHEN brought examples from Galicia, where parents occasionally chose to send their children from an endangered Jewish home to Christians, while other Jewish parents rather searched actively for hiding places for the entire family. However, when this proved to be impossible, they tended to send their children to safe places individually. Thus, this continuous search for safer options needed heavy decisions on how to hide: together or separately? And as Boaz sees, surviving was less the matter of a conscious strategy than continuous ad-hoc choices.

Another problematic question was raised during discussion when some of the presenters were asked if their project was serving more the purpose of commemoration or the purpose of scientific research. („Is this a project about knowledge or memory?“) One speaker admitted that researching one's own family history can naturally make someone emotionally deeply involved in it, still, this kind of zooming in on a family unit – for instance on a family from Thessaloniki – can give an alternative story of the Holocaust than it is usually described by historians.

Several papers investigated the destruction of traditional family bonds. JOANNA MICHELIC spoke of child survivors from mixed marriages, who got to know about their (partial) Jewish origin in a later phase of their lives. Joanna described this as a broken family line, where the brake has consequences on the identity crisis of these individuals. Many faced this information on their Jewish roots first time only after the fall of Communism, in their late forties or early fifties. They recalled that they did not know the Jewish tradition, and they felt that their cultural identity

suffered because of this. On the other hand, NATALIA ALEKSIUN talked about substituting real family members by so-called surrogate families. During the war, developing strong bonds with these family „replacements“ became a successful survival strategy. Two ladies, who survived thanks to supporting each other like sisters in the early 1940s Polish and German cities decades later ironically summarized their relation saying they had become „the Thelma and Louise of Nazi Germany.“

Finally, issues related to the postwar rebuilding and restructuring in a changing Europe was discussed at the conference. New dilemmas occurred, such as immigrating to Israel or not, and how this decision-making was influenced by a postwar Polish state, which clearly organized its policies around socio-economic and ethnonational principles in its crucial stage of nation building. At the same time, Hungarian Jews had to work out their strategies in maximizing the humanitarian benefits received from the American JOINT. Here again occurred the question on the parents' side: should they stay together with their offspring or rather give the children to care institutions, where they were entitled for double portions from basic means of food than if they stayed at home. And a dilemma of a completely different nature which concerned almost all the survivors: how to approach the traumas of the past? One option was to simply bury it, while others decided to go to psychotherapy, or to visit the scenes of suffering to process the trauma.

The conference participants spent a stimulating two-and-a-half-day together, and, at the end, they left motivated – as one of them phrased it – to write more in-depth case studies in a comparative and transnational nature. Others saw the primary importance of the conference in challenging the borders of the family definition, and emphasized the persisting significance of a gender view on the topic. Summarizing the conference, SHARON KANGISSER talked about the moment of silence, when a survivor realizes that he or she stayed completely alone. In many ways, the conference papers talked about this very specific silence. In their closing remarks, the organizers made it clear that the confer-

ence did not target to idealize the concept of family, therefore it was important to hear in the presentations how a family could become the source of solidarity, but at the same time it could be the source of tension and distress as well. Nevertheless, they were especially happy to see the balance among the presentations in the sense that they not only showed the wartime devastation, but also the rebuilding of Jewish family units in a post-Holocaust context.

Conference Overview:

Family and Genocide

Chair: Eliyana R. Adler (Pennsylvania State University)

Dalia Ofer (Hebrew University of Jerusalem): Narrating Families' Daily Life in East European Ghettos: Concepts and Dilemmas
Michal Unger (Ashkelon Academic College, Israel): Separation and Divorce in the East European Ghettos

Volha Bartash (Hugo Valentin Centre, University of Uppsala): Romani Family in the Holocaust: Ethnographic Field Notes from the Belarusian-Lithuanian Borderland

Family Correspondence

Chair: Kateřina Králová (Charles University, Prague)

Joachim Schlör (University of Southampton): 'I could never forget what they had done to my father': The Absence and Presence of Holocaust Memory in a Family's Letter Collection

Rony Alfandary (Bar Ilan University): Family Letters from Thessaloniki: Real and Imaginary Consequences

Family and Choice

Chair: Ruth Leiserowicz (German Historical Institute, Warsaw)

Kiril Feferman (Ariel University): Changing Roles: Flight Decision-making in the Mixed Families in the Soviet Union, 1941

Alina Bothe (Free University of Berlin): 'This was the last time I saw my mother' – Families Responding to the First Mass Deportation in October 1938

Atina Grossmann (Cooper Union, New York City): Negotiating Gender, Family, and Survival behind the Lines: Perspectives from the

Margins of Holocaust History

Children's Perspectives

Chair: Clara Royer (CEFRES, Prague)

Boaz Cohen (Western Galilee College, Akko; Shaanan College, Haifa): Family Survival Strategies as Seen by Survivor Children in Their Early Testimonies

Sarah Rosen (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem): The Survival of Deported Families in Transnistrian Ghettos as Reflected in Diaries of the Youth

Joanna Beata Michlic (University College London): Grayer Shades of Jewish Identity: Atypical Histories of Child Survivors from Mixed Polish-Jewish Families in the Aftermath of the Holocaust

Imagined Families

Chair: István Pál Ádám (CEFRES, Prague)

Natalia Aleksium (Touro College, New York City): Uneasy Bonds: On Jews in Hiding and the Making of Surrogate Families

Rita Horvath (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem): Hasidic Families under Pressure: An In-depth Analysis of the Holocaust Testimonies Collected by Yaffa Eliach

Viktória Bányai (Institute for Minority Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences): The Impact of the Joint's Assistance Strategy on the Lives of Jewish Families in Hungary, 1945–49

Post-war Dilemmas

Chair: Stephan Stach (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague)

Laura Hobson Faure (New Sorbonne University): Siblings in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath: Rethinking the 'Holocaust Orphan' in France and the United States

Marcos Silber (University of Haifa): Migrations, Gender and Family: Bottom-Up Perspectives on Migrations and Nation Building in 1950s Poland and Israel

Kamil Kijek (Wrocław University): Jewish Family Confronting the Holocaust Aftermath and Demise of Modernism: The Case of Polish Lower Silesia, 1945–57

Rebuilding the Family

Chair: Kateřina Čapková (Institute of Contemporary History, Prague)

Robin Judd (Ohio State University): 'Expe-

riencing Family and Home': Jewish Military Brides, Allied Soldier Husbands, and the Centrality of Kinship, 1944–50

Anja Reuss (Independent historian): 'Return to Normality': The Relevance of Motherhood and Family for Sinti and Roma Survivors in the Aftermath of World War II

Sarah Wobick-Segev (Kobner Center, Hebrew University of Jerusalem): Looking for a Nice Jewish Girl . . . : Personal Ads and the Creation of Jewish Families in Germany during and after the Shoah, 1938–53

Concluding round table

Eliyana R. Adler (Pennsylvania State University) / Ruth Leiserowitz (German Historical Institute, Warsaw) / Kateřina Čapková (Institute of Contemporary History, Czech Academy of Sciences) / Sharon Kangisser Cohen (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem)

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