

XX. Century Conference: If This Is a Woman

Veranstalter: Jakub Drábik, Institute of History, Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava; Katja Grosse-Sommer, Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg; Borbála Klacsmann, University of Szeged, Szeged; Denisa Nešťáková / Eduard Nižňanský, Comenius University, Bratislava; Anna Ullrich, Institute for Contemporary History, Munich

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Focusing on aspects of gender in the study of the Holocaust has been proliferating in the academic landscape since the 1980s. The many publications, conferences, and academic discussions point to a comfortable establishment of the study of gender in the larger context of Holocaust research, although still understudied aspects such as the inclusion of male-specific experiences or gender's intersection with class and family structures remain to be explored further. Over the course of this conference, the second edition of the conference series at Comenius University Bratislava, 30 researchers gathered to present their recent work and exchange ideas.

The conference lent itself well to introduce attendees to historical specificities of the Holocaust in Slovakia as well as its current state of commemoration and museal presentation through a walking tour of the city as well as an excursion to the former labor camp of Sereď.

The conference itself showcased new research while simultaneously referring back to issues that have been recurring in the field of gender studies and the Holocaust. Among these was a topic relevant both in the selection of the conference's papers and throughout the conference itself: to what extent is there an over-proportional focus on women and an anachronistic will to focus on women's stories and highlight women's experiences when speaking of „gender“? Although the organizers' aim was to include a focus on male experience, the final program nevertheless over-proportionally examined female experiences during the Holocaust and World War

II. This was also touched upon by the conference's keynote speaker, DALIA OFER (Hebrew University of Jerusalem), who in her lecture showcased the historical development of women's and gender studies as part of Holocaust research of the past four decades.

The importance of gender in determining women's positions in resistance activities was questioned by ANNA NEDLIN-LEHRER (Albert-Ludwigs-University, Freiburg), presenting the biographies of two members of the Zionist Dror youth movement who were active in the resistance of the Warsaw ghetto: Zivia Lubetkin in its leadership, and Havka Folman, who supported the group's resistance activities in her role as a courier. Arguing, in Lubetkin's case, that gender did not define women's roles in the movement's leadership, Nedlin-Lehrer showed that it was nevertheless significant in determining Folman's role as a courier, as women tended to attract less unwanted attention. The perceived relative inconspicuousness of women was also the focus of MODIANE ZERDOUN-DANIELS's (Uppsala University) presentation on Jewish women partisans in Lithuania, showing that generally, women's roles in the Lithuanian resistance movement tended to be in supporting functions, rather than in direct combat. Women's traditionally more marginal roles also could mean that they would receive less attention and potential punishment, an idea mirrored in MARINA ZAVACKÁ's (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava) presentation. She argued that in Slovakia's Ilava detention camp for those defined as enemies of the state, female internees were generally at a lower risk of physical violence and suspected less of resistance activities.

An important issue evident from a number of presentations was the necessity to compare expected norms for women's behavior with their actual activities, since theory and practice did not necessarily correspond. For Slovakia, EVA ŠKORVANKOVÁ (Comenius University, Bratislava) compared the actual involvement of women in political life to the roles Slovak National Socialist ideology proscribed them, showing both discrepancies and concordance.

The conference focused also on gendered

historical narratives and their changes over time; the question of women's experiences that are disproportionately highlighted because of a modern wish to emphasize female experience and influence. In this line, KAROLINA SZYMANIAK (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw) presented her work on Rachel Auerbach, today seen as the most prominent female member of the Oyneg Shabbes archive in the Warsaw ghetto. Auerbach has recently been moved into the spotlight, so argued Szymaniak, through shifts in modern narratives which include the film „Who Will Write Our History“ (dir. Roberta Grossmann, 2018). Therefore, she is seen today as one of the main voices of the Warsaw ghetto, although she did not hold a contemporary position of leadership in her time. HANNAH WILSON's (Nottingham Trent University) presentation, which cited film depictions of the Sobibor uprising and compared these with the roles played by women in the actual uprising of 1943, contrarily argued that female involvement in the uprising's narrative has been studied only insignificantly. Instead, narratives that focus on women tend to romantically link them to men, whose stories are more prominent.

A further point raised in the conference was the issue of medial representation of historical events, which may increase their access beyond academia, evident in discussions surrounding the film screening of „Return to the Burning House“ (dir. Anna Grusková, 2016). With both the director ANNA GRUSKOVÁ as well as producer MIRKA MOLNÁR L'ACHKÁ (both Bratislava) present, the introductory lecture by ROCHELLE SAIDEL (Remember the Women Institute, New York) emphasized the importance of characters such as the film's focus on Haviva Reick. Born in Slovakia and emigrating in 1939 to Palestine, she joined Palmach and later returned to her country of birth for the British intelligence – a mission she did not survive. In response to the dramatic depiction of Reick's life, participants questioned to what extent women's stories should be used to transmit history, and to what extent their depiction as inspirational figures is historically accurate as opposed to dramatically exaggerated.

The question of availability and extrapo-

lation of information from sources, including gathering implicit information from testimony, in particular when it comes to those subjects seen as taboo, was a further topic of the conference. Some interpersonal relationships can only be read and implied from the context, argued GABRIELLE HAUTH (Clark University, Worcester), calling for using the concept of „intimacy“ as a more nuanced approach to interpersonal relationships. FLORIAN ZABRANSKY (University of Sussex), researching oral history interviews for mentions of male Jewish sexual experiences, and JAY GELLER (Vanderbilt University, Nashville), presenting on male circumcision and its effects on marking Jewish male bodies and the consequences for identification and persecution, showed that the question of sexuality is often not mentioned explicitly in the sources. On the other hand, MARTA HAVRYSHKO (Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences, Lviv), detailing instances of sexual violence perpetrated by members of the Ukrainian OUN, showed that even though sexuality and sexual assault was seen as a taboo subject, survivors do in fact mention it. Rather, she argued, it is the perpetrators of said violence that avoid mentioning it. GERGELY KUNT (University of Miskolc) argued that implicit descriptions of sexual violence include coping mechanisms that include, among others, a relativization of the experience: terminology such as „making love“ or „going to bed“ were used to describe rape in the diaries that made up his case study of three Hungarian women's diaries.

Criticism levelled throughout the conference made the case that research being done in the field today must be built on and refer back to both fundamental works in feminist scholarship as well as the work done specifically in gender and Holocaust studies. Furthermore, it became clear that the approach of intersectionality is crucial when attempting to bridge the gap in historiographical writing between individual experience and larger stories. The presentations of NATALIA ALEKSIUN (Touro College, New York), JOANNA SLIWA (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, New York), ANNA-RAPHAELA SCHMITZ (Institute for Contemporary His-

tory, Munich), KERSTIN SCHWENKE (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich), and AGNES LABA (Bergische University, Wuppertal) all included a directed focus on the family, gender, class and social background as factors of analysis crucial to understanding the experiences of victims, perpetrators, and rescuers during the Holocaust. Family structures, which are closely linked to class differentiation and social opportunity, crucially influence individuals' ability to respond to the changes in social roles and circumscribed narratives that took place during occupation, whether individuals reacted to opportunism, exploitation, or aid.

Other issues linked back to larger questions of historiography. Evident from the discussion following IRINA MAKHALOVA (National Research University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow), presenting on women's participation in Jewish persecution in occupied Crimea, was the issue to what extent one can write a representative historical account from individual stories and their nuances. The consequence that individual cases reflect the broader differences in structures of persecution was evident from the presentation of LAURIEN VASTENHOUT (University of Sheffield). In comparing the cases of Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern, influential members of the Dutch and French Jewish Councils, she worked out a micro- rather than macro-level historical narrative.

The conference's final panel, bringing together ANDREA LÖW (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich), ANDREA PETŐ (Central European University, Budapest) and MONIKA VRZGULOVÁ (Slovak Academy of Sciences), reemphasized the necessity of scholarship that creates a „meaningful intersection“ of gender and the Holocaust. As a result from the three-day long conference, the panelists emphasized that gender studies can be a valuable addition to Holocaust scholarship. Scholars wishing to use this term must be careful of defining what the term itself signifies and be critical in its intended usage: should these criteria be fulfilled, then gender can continue to be an enriching and valuable concept to understand both individual and collective experiences during the Holocaust and World War II.

Conference Overview:

Denisa Nešťáková (Comenius University, Bratislava) / Andrea Löw (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich) / Jakub Drábik (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava): Opening and Welcome

Anna Ullrich (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich): The EHRI-Project and Its Offerings to Researchers

Keynote

Dalia Ofer (Hebrew University of Jerusalem): „Will you hear my voice?“ Women in the Holocaust: Memory and Analysis

Panel 1: *Shifting Gender Roles*

Moderator: Matej Ivančík (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava)

Agnes Laba (Bergische University, Wuppertal): Defeated Masculinities? A Gender Perspective on Everyday Life under German Occupation in France and Poland

Anna Nedlin-Lehrer (Albert-Ludwigs-University, Freiburg im Breisgau): Equal Fighters: Women of the Dror Youth Movement in the Warsaw Ghetto

Marína Zavacká (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava): Women at the Ilava Detention Camp

Panel 2: *The Body as a Site of Violence*

Moderator: Borbála Klacsmann (University of Szeged)

Marta Havryshko (Ukrainian National Academy of Sciences, Lviv): Rape in Hiding: Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust in Ukraine

Gergely Kunt (University of Miskolc): Jewish Women as Double Victims: Narrating Rape in the Wartime Diary of a Hungarian Holocaust Survivor

Jay Geller (Vanderbilt University, Nashville): Circumcision and Male Jewish Survival during the Holocaust

Haviva Reick: Local and International Hero

Moderator: Katja Grosse-Sommer (Hochschule für Jüdische Studien, Heidelberg)

Rochelle Saidel (Remember the Women Insti-

tute, New York City): Guest Lecture

Anna Grusková / Mirka Molnár L'achká (both Bratislava): Film Screening of *Return to the Burning House* (2016)

Opening of the Virtual Museum of Gisi Fleischmann

Excursion to Sered' Holocaust Museum

Panel 3: Guiding and Preserving the Community: Women in Jewish Leadership

Moderator: Denisa Nešťáková (Comenius University Bratislava)

Laurien Vastenhou (University of Sheffield): Female Involvement in Jewish Councils of the Netherlands and France: Gertrude van Tijn and Juliette Stern

Karolina Szymaniak (Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw): „Words as Milk of a Breast-Feeding Woman“: Representations of Witnessing and Documentation in Rachel Auerbach's Writing

Panel 4: Sexuality and Intimacy

Moderator: Martin Posch (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava)

Gabrielle Hauth (Clark University, Worcester): Female Intimacy in Concentration Camps

Florian Zabransky (University of Sussex): Male Jewish Sexuality in Concentration Camps

Panel 5: Gender, Youth and New Family Concepts

Moderator: Michala Lónčíková (Comenius University / Holocaust Documentation Center, Bratislava)

Natalia Aleksiu (Touro College, New York): Girls Coming of Age during the Holocaust: Gender, Class, and the Struggle for Survival in Eastern Europe

Kerstin Schwenke (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich): „It was hard to find any resemblance between this distorted body and the man my father used to be“: Female Family Members of Concentration Camp Inmates in Personal Contact with the Camps

Joanna Sliwa (The Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany): Polish

Women Rescuers and the Jewish Children They Sheltered in Kraków, Poland

Panel 6: Collaborators, Perpetrators and Changing Concepts of Gender

Moderator: Anna Ullrich (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich)

Anna-Raphaela Schmitz (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich): „My family was well provided for in Auschwitz.“ The Lives of the Wives of SS-Members in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Irina Makhalova (National Research University, Higher School of Economics, Moscow): Participation of Soviet Women in Persecution of the Jewish Population in the Crimea during the Nazi Occupation

Eva Škorvanková (Comenius University, Bratislava): Women and the Ideology of Slovak National Socialism

Panel 7: Resistance

Moderator: Borbála Klacsmann (University of Szeged)

Modiane Zerdoun-Daniel (Uppsala University): Jewish Women among Partisans in Lithuania, 1941-1945

Hannah Wilson (Nottingham Trent University): The Forgotten Narratives of Women in the Sobibor Uprising: The Case of Selma Engel

Final Panel Discussion

Moderators: Anna Ullrich (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich) / Eva Škorvanková (Comenius University, Bratislava)

Participants: Andrea Löw (Institute for Contemporary History, Munich) / Andrea Petö (Central European University, Budapest) / Monika Vrzgulová (Slovak Academy of Sciences, Bratislava)

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