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The demolition of a woman during and after the Holocaust

In his memoir *Survival in Auschwitz*, Primo Levi writes, "Then ... we became aware that our language lacks words to express this offense, the demolition of a man." While it is important not to diminish any victim or survivor's experiences, many of the insights surrounding the Holocaust continue to be male-dominated, providing only a limited perspective of history. This essay therefore explores the demolition of a *woman* during and after the Holocaust. In particular, I will discuss three ways in which Nazis systematically broke down the identity of Jewish women in concentration camps — through stripping their individual and feminine identity, violating their female sexuality, and assaulting their roles as mothers. I then demonstrate how this had long-lasting implications on their lives even after the war.

Female prisoners were treated in ways that took away their identity. Most significantly is the shaving of their hair. In *Who loves you like this*, Edith Bruck, who survived the Holocaust as a child, describes the process: "In an instant, I found myself … beneath the razor of a woman in a black uniform, bald" (28). Hair shapes a woman's appearance — after their heads were shaved, many women could no longer "recognise close relatives or good friends" (Halbmayr 37). This was a deliberate act of dehumanisation by the Nazis, aimed at homogenising Jews and removing any concept

of the individual. Moreover, the prisoners' personal possessions were discarded upon arrival at the camps — "we had to throw away everything we had" (Bruck 27). By going so far as to remove even what was on their bodies, the Nazis sought to erode each Jew's identity to the core, leaving them with no sense of familiarity or ownership - and hence, no power.

While this parallels the way male prisoners were treated, the implications for each gender were vastly different. Hair is a defining trait of the feminine identity, viewed as a symbol of a woman's culture and beauty throughout history. In her memoir, survivor Erna Rubinstein questions, "What is a woman without her glory on her head, without hair?"[1] Indeed, across female accounts of the Holocaust, many specifically emphasise the loss of their hair amidst the wide scope of abuse they experienced, underscoring the value of hair to a woman. The shaving of hair was therefore a targeted assault on Jewish women's feminine identity.

Further, as Bruck suggests, the process was "instant" (28) — they had no warning or time to process what was happening. This surely rendered the loss even more harrowing. Indeed, Bruck's straightforward recount of her experience here can be read as a trauma narrative; as the events unfold, she simply lists each step with little hint of emotion. "Meanwhile, a robust woman cut off the rest of our body hair." (28) It reads almost like a factual report, illuminating an uncomfortable sense of dissonance between Bruck's seeming apathy and the horrors of reality.

Women also experienced repeated sexualised violence during the Holocaust. Specifically, forced nudity was prevalent in camps, from arrival procedures to daily

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[1] Owusu , Jo-Ann. "Menstruation and the Holocaust." *History Today*, 5 May 2019, www.historytoday.com/archive/feature/menstruation-and-holocaust.

activities such as morning roll call and using the latrines. This almost always occurred in front of men, forcing female prisoners to endure constant embarrassment. This was particularly degrading given the traditional emphasis on modesty that Jewish women were accustomed to[2]. Zipora Nir, a Jewish survivor, describes having to use the toilet in the presence of male prisoners as "one of the most terrible things" (Halbymar 34), underscoring the extreme humiliation that many women felt.

The female prisoners' physical nakedness also served as a powerful symbol of vulnerability, both as Jews and as women. By taking away their agency to cover themselves, the Nazis sought to demonstrate racial and patriarchal superiority. Moreover, Halbymar warns of the "constant impending danger of becoming the victim of sexual assault" by German soldiers (30). The forced nudity and continuous humiliation that female prisoners suffered meant that the power imbalance only widened each day, heightening this "impending danger". Female prisoners were hence trapped in a vicious cycle of sexual violence.

Perhaps most degrading of all was "sex for survival" (Halbmayr 35). Female prisoners sometimes engaged in sexual barter with German soldiers in exchange for more rations or less strenuous work. Bruck writes, "By now life depended on having a protector." (39) Put this way, the choice seems straightforward. After all, wasn't survival of utmost priority? Yet women were trapped in a lose-lose situation, forced to make a choice between morality and mortality — an impossible dilemma. Sexual barter was hence akin to rape, since it was ultimately against their own will. As Halbmayr explains, these acts were "against the person's physical, emotional and spiritual integrity" (30).

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[2] Lamm, Maurice. "Modesty (Tzniut)." *My Jewish Learning*, 1 May 2017, www.myjewishlearning.com/article/modesty-tzniut/

Beyond violating one's total personhood, sexual barter had implications for the broader community of Jewish women. The German soldiers were the very same people who brutally mistreated the prisoners each day. Entering a sexual relationship with them was almost like an acceptance - or worse, endorsement - of their actions, granting them even more legitimacy as "superior" German men whilst further diminishing the value of Jewish women. This perpetuated the cycle of sexual violence for all female prisoners.

Furthermore, the very concept of sexual barter is an attack on women's sexuality. Sexuality is conventionally associated with *social* meanings of romance and love. However, because female prisoners engaged in sexual acts out of sheer necessity rather than genuine desire, sex became an economic exchange. The commodification of relationships skewed many women's attitudes towards sexuality. For instance, Bruck was indifferent towards sexual barter: "What does it matter if they're disgusting? Meanwhile, we'll die here in the camp." (39) Having developed her views on sexuality based on her experiences in the camps, she saw sex as nothing more than a form of currency and a tool for survival.

Consequently, a Jewish woman's dignity was utterly quashed. In *Inside Auschwitz*, survivor Philomena Franz explains that over time, she "felt no shame anymore" being undressed in front of men. Women had been physically and psychologically degraded so thoroughly that they lost the capacity for sexual feelings. Franz then says, "Everything was gone. We were nothing anymore." Her diction here is striking — "*were* nothing", as opposed to "had nothing", suggesting that the female prisoners had fully internalised their Nazi-given identity of 'sub-human'.

Additionally, the Nazis assaulted Jewish women's motherhood by forcing them to prioritise 'self' over 'other' - including their children - at all costs. Prisoners were trapped in a culture of scarcity, with overwhelming numbers of prisoners but "very little food" (Bruck 42). Bruck highlights the extent of starvation: "Someone who had an entire loaf of bread … wouldn't give up even a crumb to someone who was dying from hunger." (42) Amidst this senseless inhumanity, mothers were reduced to mere prisoners trying to survive, at times harming their own children out of desperation. "We stole from each other the little food we had; mothers stole from daughters…" (Bruck 42). This directly contradicts conventional notions of motherhood which revolve around love and self-sacrifice.

The diminished role of mothers is further exemplified in *Inside Auschwitz*, when Franz describes how pregnant women had to give birth while standing in line near train wagons — "and then the baby just lay there", because the mothers "weren't allowed to get out of line or they would have been shot". Here, we see how mothers were forced to defy their maternal instincts - unable to protect or care for their newborns - in order to preserve their own lives. The Nazis destroyed the concept of motherhood through creating a culture dominated by fear, disempowerment, and a mad desperation amongst prisoners to stay alive.

Even for mothers who were able to retain their maternity, a mother's love paradoxically often entailed harming their children. On her first evening in Auschwitz, Ruth Kluger recalls her mother proposing that both of them "should get up and walk into [the electric barbed wire]" (96). For a mother to suggest killing her own child is jarring — as Kluger writes, "[T]he thought of dying, now, … on the advice of my very own mother,

whom God had created to protect me, was simply beyond my comprehension." (97) Yet, Kluger later says, "Only when I had children of my own did I realise that one might well decide to kill them in Auschwitz rather than wait." (97) Kluger's mother had her best interests in mind, seeking to protect her from further abuse. Given the lack of rationality in the Holocaust, it was difficult for mothers to discern the best decisions for their children, further complicating the role of motherhood.

The relentless degradation of women during the Holocaust had long-term implications that lasted far beyond the war. For many, the sense of worthlessness ingrained by the Nazis persisted into adulthood. Survivors often had to rely on relatives for food and shelter after the war while attempting to rebuild their lives. For women whose education had been abruptly interrupted or who were largely confined to domestic roles before the war, employment options were much more limited compared to male counterparts. Bruck writes, "I was a burden to my relatives because I didn't even have a ration card" (80). The word "burden" connotes strong feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Although survivors were no longer under the Nazis' authority, the reliance on others accentuated their lack of power and freedom even after the war, further diminishing their self-esteem.

Women also suffered Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). This was a more subtle but equally vicious form of "demolition". The psychological damage sometimes ran so deep that even the most trivial day-to-day things could trigger flashbacks. Kluger explains, "We would drive past a police cordon and [Alma] would say: "There, you see. I told you they were after me." (123-124) In Alma's mind, the war never ended. Even in

objectively safe environments away from the Nazis, she could no longer distinguish between real and imagined dangers.

We witness Bruck's PTSD when she is raped by a male acquaintance in a hotel. The assault brought back traumatic memories of what she saw and experienced in the concentration camps. Throughout her recount of the incident, there is an acute sense of dissociation — "He continued to whisper words of love, which I didn't hear, just as I didn't feel his body next to mine." (114) Consequently her narrative is disjointed and random. She writes, "I was thinking of my job and about tomorrow", then "I remembered when I was a little girl … " (114). The incoherence here highlights how she alienated herself from what was happening — a clear trauma response.

These mental health impacts were worsened by the way survivors were treated after the war. They were denied space to speak about and process their experiences due to a "diffuse sense of shame" surrounding the Holocaust (Kluger 182). Kluger's aunt tells her, "You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. ... Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard." (177) The taboo not only undermined survivors' experiences but also forced them to suppress their trauma for years. It was therefore extremely challenging for them to heal from their experiences.

For females in particular, societal stigmas surrounding sexuality and sexual abuse posed another barrier to addressing their trauma. When Bruck watched a movie with a male family-friend, her sister called her "disgraceful" (71), underscoring the expectation of modesty for females during the postwar era. If merely spending time with a male was frowned upon, one can only imagine the stigmatisation against sexual assault and barter. Women therefore remained silent about their experiences for fear of

being ostracised. However, this left many without proper closure and an even deeper sense of shame. Furthermore, the disregard for their personal experiences amounted to a devaluation of their very personhood; after all, it is stories and lived experiences that form the foundation of a person's identity.

While Kluger seemed to have moved on from the war, later building a family and stable career, we see that she had in fact never fully processed her Holocaust experience. In 1989 she met with an accident with a cyclist, triggering a traumatic awakening. Her description of the collision serves as a jolting metaphor of the Holocaust. "It was too close, too fast … I think he is chasing me, wants to injure me ..." (Kluger 206). Here, the incoming cyclist represents the Nazis hunting Jews; there is a contradictory sense of alarm yet helplessness. Just as Kluger cannot avoid the cyclist, Jews were trapped — literally, in ghettos and camps, and metaphorically, in a system of brutal persecution. Kluger then writes, "I crash into metal and light, like floodlights over barbed wire." (206) Floodlights and barbed wire — these are visual symbols of the Holocaust concentration camps, illustrating Kluger's mental return to the past. Following the accident, her memories of the Holocaust begin to resurface — "But the memories remained … They had at last caught up with me." (208) Even 45 years after the Holocaust, her memories are still vivid, underscoring how deeply she had buried them after the war, and therefore how acutely the years in the camps had scarred her. The profound trauma that women suffered in subsequent years punctuates the illusion that survival alone sufficed to end their suffering. The degradation continued internally in the form of emotional turmoil.

To portray Jewish women only as victims, however, would be a mistake. In the face of Nazi violence, many prisoners and survivors displayed remarkable tenacity and courage. One instance is when Eliz stood up to a SS soldier to save Bruck. Initially as the soldier beat Bruck with his rifle, Eliz “begged him to kill [Bruck] and to kill her, too” (Bruck 51). This was a desperate plea for mercy to end their suffering quickly, and underscores the wide power disparity between the siblings and the German soldier. Yet out of nowhere, Eliz “gave the SS man a shove and he fell on the snow” (Bruck 51). In just one stroke Eliz reverses the power dynamic, even if just momentarily — she is now standing while the German soldier is on the ground. It is a powerful symbol of triumphant defiance. Subsequently, the soldier chose not to kill the siblings, saying that “whoever had the courage to touch a German in a moment like that had the right to live” (Bruck 51). Despite the Nazis’ commitment to violence, this incident illustrates that women were not entirely defenseless. Courage was a form of power against the evils of racial and gendered violence.

Franz also displayed extraordinary inner strength when she claimed a Polish girl as her own after the mother was killed (Inside Auschwitz). She says to herself, “Now I’ve got the child” — a declaration of her resolve to protect this young girl, a stranger, despite the risk of immediate death if she were to be caught lying. Such a compelling act of sacrifice can only be driven by one’s compassion and maternal instincts, traits that Franz was clearly still able to access in a world of inverted values. Therefore, although the Nazis sought to wholly “demolish” Jewish women, they did not always succeed.

Moreover, in spite of the immense cultural and psychological barriers survivors faced, some did succeed in moving on from the war. Bruck was eventually able to gain employment at a garment factory and earn an income, alleviating her reliance on relatives. She says, “At last I was being paid for my work, and I felt like someone.” (80) Work empowered female survivors to become independent, offering them a crucial sense of purpose. Later on in life, Bruck even became an acclaimed writer, receiving several literary awards. Writing was a medium for her to process her experiences, and more importantly, rebuild her sense of self. In an interview, she proudly proclaims her identity: “I exist as Edith Bruck, as a writer in the Italian language.”[3] It was hence not impossible for female survivors to reclaim the self-worth that the Nazis had stripped away.

Similarly, despite Kluger’s initial difficulties assimilating into American society, she was able to find opportunities for upward social mobility. She received tertiary education at no cost, which served as a stepping stone for her to attend a prestigious college[4] and later succeed as an academic. More deeply, Kluger’s ability to reclaim her own narrative further speaks to the resilience of women who survived the Holocaust. Throughout *Still Alive,* she does not shy away from describing the degradation and raw humiliation she suffered. She writes, “Before we left Auschwitz there had been a “gynecological” exam … in intimate parts of the body. I find it difficult to write this down and notice that I have done so in a rather circuitous way.” (119) It is an honest account of her story, stripped of sentimality, suggesting a deep acceptance of what had transpired. With acceptance then comes the ability to move forward. When others express pity for Kluger, she

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[3] Doda, Denida. “Edith Bruck, 11552.” *Impactmania*, 15 May 2021, http://www.impactmania.com/im/edith-bruck-11552/.

[4] University of California, Berkeley

responds, “But I say, this, too, was childhood. … And I wish it had been different. But it was as it was. And, I repeat, this, too, was childhood.” Her personal voice rings strong and clear: “The place which I saw, smelled, and feared … has nothing to do with the woman I am.” (111) Kluger stresses that the degradation she suffered during the Holocaust was only a part of her life, and does not define her as a person. She has full authority over her own story.

Ultimately, the Nazis’ intentions were clear — to break down Jewish women until they were “nothing”. Yet, “the demolition of a woman” only tells half the story. Eliz and Franz exemplify extraordinary courage in standing up to the Nazis, even in a landscape defined by relentless intimidation and fear. Stories like Kluger’s highlight that female survivors were fully capable of reclaiming their identities and lives after the war. Therefore, the female story around the Holocaust is not merely one of loss and suffering, but also one of courage, resilisence, and personal integrity.

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