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IN THEIR WORDS: WOMEN'S HOLOCAUST MEMOIRS

by

SHANA LATIMER

Under the Direction of Dr. Tanya Caldwell

ABSTRACT

Sara Tuvel Bernstein's *The Seamstress* and Rena Kornreich Gelissen's *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz,* both Holocaust memoirs, offer insight into the rise of violent anti-Semitism prior to World War II and the authors' experiences in concentration camps. The purpose of this project is to better understand the unique trauma women experienced during the Holocaust and the impact of that trauma on their literary responses.

INDEX WORDS: Holocaust, Trauma studies, Women, Memoirs

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SHANA LATIMER

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Dedication

For Joseph, Callan, and Chase Latimer, and for my mother, Gail Beam.

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1 Introduction

The initial exposure to Holocaust literature often comes in a classroom. As a result, the literature embraced by academia directly affects public Holocaust literacy. For years, educators at varying academic levels have regularly engaged their students with two texts, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night*, as a way to facilitate discussion about the Holocaust. Samuel Totten states that the narrow academic focus on specific texts and a lack of teachable material served as the impetus for *Teaching Holocaust Literature*, a pedagogical resource published in 2001 and edited by him, that seeks to enhance knowledge about the Holocaust using a variety of pedagogical tools and lesser known texts. In an analysis of his research, he comments specifically about *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Night*:

> The pedagogical pieces I did locate…mainly dealt with *The Diary of Anne Frank* and, to a lesser extent, Elie Wiesel's *Night*. Many of the lessons on Anne Frank's diary treated it as if it were the only piece of Holocaust literature available….Furthermore, most of the pedagogical pieces dealing with the *Diary* neglected to situate Anne's story within its historical context, thus leaving students bereft of key insights into why the Nazis committed genocide against the Jews. (Totten 1)

Concern about the narrow focus of academia with regard to Holocaust literature persists, although perhaps in a different way than Totten initially recognized. The inclusion of *The Diary of Anne Frank* as a primary means of facilitating discussion, specifically about women in the Holocaust, is concerning because the suffering so many women experienced is absent in Frank's diary.

The love of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, in some ways the embodiment of absence – absence of language to describe the horrors of the Holocaust, absence of humiliation, abuse, and death – is its appeal. Elaine Culbertson, a scholar on the Holocaust and Holocaust literature, states about *The Diary of Anne Frank*:

> The book skirts the real issues of the Holocaust because the story takes place apart from them…. [U]sing a book like *The Diary of Anne Frank* provides a very skewed view of that world, and does not really accomplish what I believe should be the goals of Holocaust educators: to provide a glimpse of the world that was lost, to show how actions by responsible individuals can make a difference, and to empower students to believe that they do make decisions in their lives that will affect them and those around them. I do not believe that Anne Frank's diary can accomplish these goals. What it can do is to provide a very sentimental picture of one girl's experiences. (65)

One might ask in what ways a reader of Anne's diary is enlightened about the world in which Anne lived and, ultimately, died. *The Diary of Anne Frank* is a problematic text insofar as its narrow scope continues to be used as a primary tool to understand a complex event that occurs largely outside the framework of its narrative.

In the same vein, although *Night* is a haunting account of what occurred in Auschwitz and its lasting effects on author Elie Wiesel, it is from a distinctly male perspective. Louise O. Vasvári notes that "Holocaust scholarship still tends to privilege the Holocaust experience of men as universal and is reluctant to acknowledge testimony that does not follow preconceived gender stereotypes and suitable female behavior or pre-existing narratives of survival" (2). The initial privilege of the Holocaust narrative extended to men and, in the case of Anne, a young,

unthreatening female. The privilege extended to some narratives over others is too complex to adequately analyze here; however, it derives from the patriarchal ideology of a pre-feminist world that valued male testimony as authoritative.

In *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché undertakes the enormous responsibility of compiling poetry that responds to the major wars and human rights violations of the twentieth century. She offers a brief analysis of the included poets:

> This collection reflects the abundance of works in translation from European languages, but unfortunately underscores the scarcity of works translated from Asian and African literatures. In addition, fewer women poets seem to have survived the horrors of our century than their male counterparts, and many fewer have been translated. (31)

Forché does not offer reasons for or further analysis of why women authors, in particular, do not survive in rates comparable to their male counterparts or why there is a gender disparity in translated works. Her commentary on the subject is limited to what is quoted. Despite the fact that many Holocaust survivors' native language is not English, Louise O. Vasvári notes, "It is in English that most Holocaust life writing has been written and published because so many survivors ended up in emigration in English-speaking countries; in addition, most scholarly work on the Holocaust has appeared in English…so that English has turned out to be the *lingua franca* of Holocaust Studies" (2). However, Vasvári also notes the difficulty in locating texts written prior to emigration as well as the difficulty in accessing those that have not been translated. Forché acknowledges the problem of underrepresentation, specifically with regard to female voices, and Vasvári addresses the problem by compiling a bibliography of Holocaust literature written by women; however, there is little analysis of the space in between the acknowledgement and ad-

dress. Scholarship exists about the suffering of women in the Holocaust and memoirs exist that painstakingly detail their suffering; however, there is a dearth of scholarship linking the traumatic events of the Holocaust to the underrepresentation of female voices.

Cathy Caruth, a leading scholar in trauma studies, examines the possibility of a lapse between the traumatic event and the survivor's ability to revisit the event. Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). She further develops the idea of latency and describes it as "the period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent" (Caruth 183). I argue that upon liberation many survivors of the Holocaust, male and female, entered a period of latency; however, the manifestation of latency appears to be gendered.

Some male survivors of the Holocaust, including well-known authors Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, wrote poetry and autobiographies in the immediate aftermath of the liberation; however, forty years after the Holocaust Primo Levi died in what many classify as a suicide and, upon hearing of his death, Elie Wiesel famously stated, "Primo Levi died at Auschwitz forty years earlier." Levi's latency phase did not prevent him from writing about his experiences, but he was not able to process his experiences in a way that facilitated recovery from them. One could argue that his exit from the latency phase resulted in his death.

Conversely, for many female survivors of the Holocaust, this latency phase manifested itself in a profound silence that prevented them from recording their experiences. Not until years later, upon exiting this latency phase, did they begin recording their experiences. In *Women in the Holocaust*, Lenore J. Weitzman and Dalia Ofer examine the role of gender in the Holocaust. Their analysis does not make a judgment about the severity of suffering, and neither do I, but

they acknowledge differences in the effects of the Holocaust experience. In the introduction, Weitzman and Ofer ask, "Why women? Why should a book on the Holocaust – which targeted all Jews for annihilation irrespective of their sex or age or any other social characteristic – focus on women?" Their answer mirrors my reason for this project, "This book shows how questions about gender lead us to a richer and more finely nuanced understanding of the Holocaust" (1). The purpose of this analysis is not a quantitative judgment of trauma but an exploration of the relationship between particular traumatic events and the absent voices in a literary genre that owes its existence in part to their suffering.

The foundation of my argument is predicated upon a close examination of the historical, religious, and cultural contexts in which Jewish women experienced the Holocaust. My primary texts include *The Seamstress* by Sara Tuvel Bernstein and *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* by Rena Kornreich Gelissen. *The Seamstress* chronicles the life of Sara Tuvel Bernstein (nee Seren Tuvel) from her Orthodox Jewish childhood, through the rise of violent anti-Semitism, to her imprisonment in Ravensbrück concentration camp and her life post-liberation. *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* gives fewer details about the childhood of Rena Kornreich Gelissen, although she does highlight specific details of her Orthodox Jewish upbringing. The majority of her text details the three years Rena and her sister, Danka, spent in Auschwitz.

My first chapter introduces my primary texts, *The Seamstress* and *For Rena: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, and outlines the relevant aspects of trauma studies including Cathy Caruth's expansion of the concept of latency and how latency created a vacuum in Holocaust literature. The information gleaned from close readings will be used to support the theory that latency born out of trauma informs a delay many female survivors experienced prior to recording their Holo-

caust experiences. My second chapter analyzes the construction of response from two perspectives – Sara's and Rena's responses to the traumas they experienced and, later, their literary responses. This chapter uses excerpts from the texts to understand how the patriarchal world in which the authors grew up affected their lives after liberation. Understanding the circumstances in which Jewish women lived in Europe prior to World War II is essential to understanding their responses to a series of unthinkable traumatic events. The ideological constraints under which Jewish women lived prior to the Holocaust only reinforced the silence they adopted as a way to cope with the traumatic events they experienced. Caruth's development of the concept of latency provides a psychoanalytic structure wherein there can be appropriate analysis about why women survivors of the Holocaust delayed recording their experiences and why years later they were compelled to do so. The second aspect of response deals with the authors' literary responses and the reasons why both Sara and Rena utilized a co-writer. My goal for this project is not only to analyze the causal relationship between trauma and the delay in recording of experiences but also to increase literacy about the Holocaust.

2 Trauma and Latency

It goes on burning in the bones,

in the brain, years after, smoke

still rising behind the walls, even on

May second, a birthday to liberate

all others. In Poland, though the stone

well-water near Tylicz never ceases,

it never soothes the smoldering,

nor the fearful dreams fueling sleep.

Annette Allen, *The Story (for Rena)*[1]

Working with relatively unknown texts is as rewarding as it is challenging. One of the challenges inherent when working outside the mainstream of most literature departments is that the content of the literature is unfamiliar to fellow scholars. In 2009, Louise O. Vasvári stated about Holocaust research that "[a]lthough the emergence of research on women in the Holocaust dates from the 1980s, the task of integrating the role of women – and that of children – into Holocaust studies is far from complete, not the least because of the publication of so many women's texts during the last decades, most of which remain virtually unknown" (2). Although some women published poetry and memoirs in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, the majority of Holocaust memoirs written by women were published much later. Vasvári states about the gendered writing of Holocaust memoirs:

> Holocaust life writing continued to be published in a slow but steady stream, but

[1] Annette Allen's complete poem "The Story (*for Rena*)" can be found in Rena Kornreich Gelissen's memoir *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*

> it was not until around 1990, in what has been called by Leigh Gilmore "the age of the trauma memoir," which includes survivor discourse and narratives of recovery, that a boom in such works started…. The overwhelming majority of Holocaust texts are written today by women survivors or by their daughters. (5)

The authors of *The Seamstress* and *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, Sara Tuvel Bernstein (nee Seren Tuvel) and Rena Kornreich Gelissen, are among the women who published Holocaust memoirs in the late 1990s. The purpose of this project is to analyze these texts, both relatively unknown, through the lens of trauma studies in an effort to better understand the relationship between trauma and the delay in Holocaust literature written by women.

In May 1945, the liberation of concentration camps interrupted Hitler's attempted eradication of the Jewish race; therefore, memoirs written by Jewish survivors of the Holocaust allow us unique insight into the innerworkings of genocide. A common aspect of Holocaust survivor memoirs is the narrative of survival against the inescapable specter of death. These memoirs not only provide stories of those who survived, but in many cases survivors pass on stories of the dead. James Berger states about survivors that "the interest [is] in the enigmatic figure of the survivor, the one who has passed through the catastrophe and can tell us what it is like. The survivor is a kind of living "black box," a source of final knowledge and authority" (571).

There is some debate about how to approach memoirs, specifically as it relates to the reliability of memory, a legitimate concern when considering the majority of Holocaust memoirs written by women were published 50 years after the fact. Charlotte Delbo, a French survivor of Auschwitz, famously wrote in *Auschwitz and After*, "Today, I am not sure that what I wrote is true. I am certain it is truthful" (1). For the purposes of evaluating what is truthful, Holocaust memoirs written by women tell a collective story in which many similar stories emerge – the

horror of the train rides that delivered millions of Jews to concentration camps scattered around Europe, the initial selections, the immediate gassing of mothers and their young children, the humiliation Jewish women experienced when stripped naked and shaved of all body hair, the threat of sexual assault, and the death of fellow camp women. The individual experiences of Holocaust survivors form a mosaic to which authors of Holocaust literature add their pieces and from which we are able to form a picture of what it meant to survive.

During the late 1930s and early 1940s when Jewish women were being humiliated, tortured, and murdered in concentration camps, there was no language available to them to articulate their experiences. The combination of the intensely patriarchal structure of their pre-war lives and the trauma they experienced disallowed, in many cases, an immediate response. Cathy Caruth states about trauma, "Through the notion of trauma…we can understand that a rethinking of reference is not aimed at eliminating history, but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, of precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" (182). Temporal distance from the Holocaust has allowed a fuller understanding of the traumas its victims experienced. James Berger supports Caruth's argument and goes a step further in his application to language, "Trauma theory is another such discourse of the unrepresentable, of the event or object that destabilizes language and demands a vocabulary and syntax in some sense incommensurable with what went before" (573). He also adds his interpretation of Caruth's evaluation of trauma as it applies to narrative, "Caruth argues that trauma as it first occurs is incomprehensible. It is only later, after a period of latency, that it can be placed in a narrative" (577).

The concept of latency, a period during which survivors process their traumas, is applicable to male and female survivors of the Holocaust; however, I argue that the way in which latency manifested itself in male and female survivors may be gendered. For men, latency often mani-

fested itself as a ”period during which the effects of the experience are not apparent” (Caruth 183), perhaps best illustrated in the life of Primo Levi. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi wrote prolifically about their Holocaust experiences, the extent to which their texts shape the Holocaust literary canon. Other well known male authors of Holocaust literature, including Paul Celan, published as early as 1948. For these male authors the latency period did not prohibit them from placing their experiences in a narrative but, perhaps, did affect their ability to consciously process their experiences. Male authors of Holocaust literature often fit more in a psychological category of latency that did not preclude the recording of experiences. This psychological latency is more in line with the expected processing of a traumatic event. The patriarchal structure of Jewish life privileged men with language and decision making as noted by Sara and Rena in descriptions of their fathers and, later, again by Sara as she recalls the committee of men designated as decision makers in the ghetto in which she lived. Even though the Holocaust was equally traumatic for men, the traumas they experienced were not so gendered as to exist outside the realm of their existing language. Their understanding of these traumas evolved, as is evident in the ways in which their narratives evolved in the decades after the Holocaust, but this evolution occurred alongside language as opposed to apart from it. Primo Levi wrote for years after the Holocaust and died in 1987 in what many classify as a suicide, indicating his latency period ended and the effects of the Holocaust became overwhelmingly apparent in his life to the extent that he could not recover from them.

Conversely, female authors of Holocaust literature often fit more in a category of linguistic latency that precluded the recording of experiences into a narrative. This psychological versus linguistic latency is understandable as a predisposition toward it is present in the lives of Sara and Rena prior to their experiences in the Holocaust. Their fathers often made pronouncements

about the ways in which they should live their lives and retreated emotionally from their daughters when they failed to submit to fatherly instruction. Sara and Rena often resorted to silence as a way to cope with tension and shame. Not only were Sara and Rena predisposed to silence, but their gendered suffering contained no linguistic reference point for them to verbalize their traumatic experiences. It was only after immigration, the feminist movement, and temporal distance from the Holocaust that language evolved and they were able to verbalize what happened to them. To understand why female Holocaust survivors delayed recording their experiences it is necessary to understand the trauma that formed their silence.

Hitler certainly intended for all Jews to suffer and die. The establishment of Jewish ghettos enfolded in its walls men, women, young, and elderly without discrimination. The trains transported Jews to concentration camps regardless of gender or age. However, upon arrival at the camps, some Jews were selected for death over others, specifically mothers with children, the very young and elderly not capable of working, and anyone with physical or mental disabilities. This kind of differentiation affected daily life in the camps as well. John K. Roth offers an astute analysis of this differentiation, "the hell was the same for Jewish women and men during the Holocaust, but the horrors were frequently different" (7). When attempting to understand this distinction it is important to avoid devolving into a quantitative evaluation of suffering. No scholars studying the Holocaust deny the universal suffering of male and female prisoners; however, the ways in which they suffered were often gendered. I argue that the specific, gendered suffering women experienced during the Holocaust delayed the recording of their experiences for many decades, during which time language evolved for women to discuss their suffering, resulting in the increasing publication of Holocaust memoirs written by women in the 1990s.

Gendered suffering most notably began after prisoners arrived at the concentration camps. Although children may have gone with their fathers, historical accounts generally have young children with their mothers. Children not old enough to work were immediately sent to the gas chamber and, thus, by extension the able-bodied mothers that refused to abandon them were sent to their deaths as well. *Women in the Holocaust* notes the many survivor accounts of this particular aspect of selection, "Testimonies from survivors are filled with heart-wrenching accounts of mothers in the prime of life who were sent to the gas chambers because they were holding the hands of their young children" (Weitzman and Ofer 7). Rena, among the first transport of women to Auschwitz, witnessed a selection upon arrival but did not understand the reality of what was taking place. While on the train ride to Auschwitz, Rena observed a young woman caring for her baby. As she disembarked the train, she noticed that the baby was dead and the woman, refusing to be separated from her dead infant, was segregated with group of young women with children and the elderly. She notes about the woman with the dead baby, "how kind of him [Dr. Mengele] to send her over to the group who is obviously weaker" (Gelissen 58). A short time later she observed this same group being loaded onto a flatbed truck, and she doubted her earlier conclusion, "For one sick moment it occurs to me that maybe they're not going to be treated as well as I've been thinking, but I chase that thought away" (Gelissen 59). Rena could not have known and certainly did not understand what was taking place; however, as time passed more trains arrived, she underwent many selections, and she understood what happened that first day. The same is true about the man Rena witnessed conducting that first selection. She did not know then that he was Dr. Mengele, and even as rumors about him and his experiments spread in camp, it took years for Rena to understand his horrific role in the Holocaust. This understanding about selections and Dr. Mengele brings to mind Caruth's assertion

about "permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not" and occurred not only during Rena's time in Auschwitz, when she realized what happened to the women, young children, and elderly in the initial selection, but in the intervening years between liberation and authoring her memoir. Also important is Rena's initial rejection of what she witnessed. Her subconscious was aware that the women loaded onto the truck were not going to be treated compassionately, and yet she denied that reality.

A particular and often noted humiliation women experienced upon arrival at concentration camps was being stripped naked and shaved. Many memoirs authored by women, including *The Seamstress* and *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*, recall the humiliation of being forced to strip in front of guards and, in some cases, women being shaved by male friends and relatives: "Our own boys, our own men are forced to see our nakedness, forced to shave our heads, our arms, our legs, our pubis. Sometimes they are friends, sometimes they are relatives; mothers get shaved by their own sons, sisters and brothers suffer this embarrassment" (Gelissen 139). Many of the women who include this aspect of their arrival in their memoirs, including Rena, parallel it against memories of extreme modesty in their homes, "Why can't they let us shave each other? We are young women virgins; it is not in our religion to bare ourselves even in front of our own husbands. This is not life-threatening, but it is degrading. One more degrading thing they make us do" (Gelissen 139).

In *The Seamstress*, Sara suffers a series of train rides and marches that deliver her to Ravensbrück; however, the details of her arrival at Ravensbrück begin most notably with being stripped naked and shaved:

> As I stood there, drawn deep inside myself, the other guard approached and ordered me to spread my legs apart. My body obeyed, my mind remained dark,

> numbed. I felt a sharp pull on my pubic hairs followed by a biting pain as the razor made two, three swipes across. The guard moved on, swishing her razor in a bowl of water black with hair, traces of red floating on the dirty scum. I looked at my legs. A trickle of blood was easing down the inside of one calf. *I would almost rather die than suffer this*, I thought, and crept back into the softness inside my head. (Bernstein 198)

This passage emphasizes the dehumanization and disassociation Sara experienced very early in her time at Ravensbrück. Her disassociation allowed her to continue obeying the guards and, in some ways, helped facilitate her survival. After being stripped and shaved, she recalls a guard's introductory remarks to her and the other women: ""You are in Ravensbrück, an all-women camp. There are no men here except for a few doctors in the hospital. You are our first Jewish prisoners. We have honored you by giving you the Star of David." The speaker glanced quickly at the other guard, barking out a short laugh" (Bernstein 200). Sara later reemphasizes the different treatment of Jewish and Gentile prisoners, "Forced to unload these trains while the Gentile prisoners slept undisturbed, we walked by their barracks, glancing through unbroken windows at softly lit rooms, at the layers of blankets on each bed, ever on the outside looking in" (Bernstein 223). The living conditions of non-Jews is described in stark contrast to Sara and other Jewish women's living conditions in which the barracks were overcrowded, windows were broken which often led to hypothermia and death while sleeping, and the ever present shortage of blankets. Throughout her imprisonment at Ravensbrück, Sara was painfully aware of the dangers she faced as a woman and as a Jew.

As a child, Rena remembers Yom Kippur as her favorite holiday and fondly recalls shaving her mother's head. "Every few weeks Mama would take off her wig and I would shave her

head, as is customary in Orthodox homes," she explains (Gelissen 9). In Orthodox Jewish homes, shaving the head signifies a wife's fidelity to her husband. "I dreamt of the day I would have my head shaved as a solemn vow to my husband," Rena remembers (Gelissen 10). These rituals and traditions governed much of Rena's childhood. Michael S. Berger states that the "European…society, which relegated women to the home, also elevated the role of women in helping maintain religious identity, closely linking concern for the family with religious ritual" (11). Rena's treasured memory of shaving her mother's head is grotesquely paralleled later in her memoir when her head is shaved upon arriving in Auschwitz. Rena recalls an experience eerily similar to Sara's of being shaved:

> The cuss of electric shears moves closer to my ears as a tough hand pushes my head forward…. Digging my fingernails deeper into my arm, I try to prevent tears from falling down my disinfected cheeks. Only married women shave their heads. Our traditions, our beliefs, are scorned and ridiculed by the acts they commit. They shear our heads, arms; even our pubic hair is discarded as quickly and cruelly as the rest of the hair on our bodies. (Gelissen 63)

Rena's recollection parallels the comforting ritual of shaving her mother's head earlier in her memoir against having her head shaved in Auschwitz and categorically defines it as suffering specific to Jewish women. That is not to say that being stripped naked and shaved was not humiliating for all the women, but she believed it an insult as a woman and more specifically as a Jewish woman.

A number of other concerns and traumas loomed for camp women. Rena notes in her memoir that after she was shaved she wondered, "They can't possibly do anything more – what else is there?" (Gelissen 63). She then witnessed women being given brutal gynecological ex-

ams. She managed to avoid the trauma of an exam but the threat of sexual assault and medical experimentation loomed for the remainder of her time at Auschwitz. She narrowly escaped a "work detail," that was, in fact, an experimentation group for Dr. Mengele, all of whom perished. Although Germans were forbidden from having sexual relationships with Jews, "Jewish women were more likely than men to be subjected to sexual harassment and rape" (Weitzman and Ofer 7). Another issue some women faced during their imprisonment, including Rena, was dealing with menstruation in deplorable conditions and without the necessary feminine hygiene products. The women in concentration camps, not just Auschwitz, were given bromide that caused them to cease menstruating. For those that failed to respond to bromide, starvation eventually arrested menses. However, Rena menstruated for the duration of her imprisonment in Auschwitz. Starving and tired, she struggled with menstrual cramps, and to find bits of paper to stanch the flow of blood. Already in constant fear for her life, Rena lived in fear of being killed for having her period:

> Once a month my period arrives without any prior warning. It is something I dread and wait for, never knowing when it will make its appearance. Will I be working? Will I be in the shaving line on a Sunday, embarrassed in front of the men? Will today be the day I cannot find anything to stop the flow and the SS decide to beat me to death for being unclean? Will today be the day the scrap I find gives me an infection? (Gelissen 105)

Conversely, other women feared the cessation of menstruation as a result of pregnancy. "Pregnancy was also a life-threatening event in the concentration camps. There, too, visibly pregnant women (and women with small children) were selected for immediate killing," note Weitzman and Ofer (7).

Although many women and children were immediately murdered upon arrival at the concentration camps, mothers, or more specifically Jewish motherhood, existed as a threat to the Nazis. John K. Roth states about this threat that "[t]he racism of Nazi ideology ultimately implied that the existence of Jewish families, and especially the Jewish women who mothered them, constituted a deadly obstacle to the racial purity and cultural superiority that Germany "deserved." Jewish women constituted that threat fundamentally because they could bear children" (11). Consequently, Nazis allowed able-bodied women to avoid initial selection but often sterilized them to insure that the Jewish race could not continue. To further emphasize the intended destruction of the Jewish race from the perspective of offspring, they continued to demoralize women, specifically, by openly killing children. The role of women during this era, and especially Orthodox Jewish women, revolved around their responsibilities to their husbands, children, and homes. In *Mothers, Sisters, Resisters: Oral Histories of Women Who Survived the Holocaust*, Brana Gurewitsch states, "Motherhood, women's most gender-determined characteristic, posed particular challenges during the Holocaust. At the simplest level, it was the mother's responsibility to keep her children alive" (3). The helplessness these women faced as they saw women murdered alongside their children was not limited to the selections that occurred with the arrival of new transports. Rena recalls witnessing the arrival of Jewish children from an orphanage:

> Hundreds of pairs of tiny children's feet file past me and my sister and every woman in camp. Some of their little faces are buried in their toys, choking the stuffing out of these inanimate objects of comfort…. The SS march them toward the gas chamber. Clutching dolls and stuffed animals close to their hearts,

> they shuffle past in rows of five guarded by SS men with their dogs and rifles. (Gelissen 135)

The women who survived selection because they did not have children were not spared the horror of losing children they could not save. The impact of surviving women witnessing the murder of Jewish children affected those who had no familial connection to the children, "The suffering and murder of the children was not only tragic for those young victims of the camp but also added to the misery of their birth mothers, surrogate mothers, and other sympathetic prisoners" (Saidel 78). Rena recalls how she felt after watching the Jewish orphans marched to the gas chamber, "To work would be a relief, anything to take our minds off the children, but there is no respite in this place…. I have been staring at nothing for days, going through the motions of survival, unable to shake the cherubic faces haunting me" (Gelissen 137).

A unique aspect of camp life for women was that they tended to form community groups. Some groups formed naturally, such as Sara and her sister, Esther, and Rena and her sister, Danka. Other non-blood relatives were sometimes incorporated into these groups. Community groups tended to be exclusive because "jealousies, rivalries, stealing, and other immoral behavior" existed in the camps as women fought to survive (Gurewitsch 100). Additionally, camp women knew anyone could die at any moment and maintaining emotional distance aided in the preservation of emotional sanity. Women who formed these community groups often referred to each other as camp sisters, and "[t]he trait that best characterizes the relationship of sisters, both blood relations and camp sisters, is trust" (Gurewitsch 100). Once the groups formed, members were fiercely loyal. In camp, the women were completely dehumanized, and so"[a]nother reason why sisterly relationships were, and continue to be, such a source of strength to those who sustain them is that they allow the women to retain a sense of their prewar selves" (Gurewitsch 100-

101). The death of a camp sister was devastating on many levels – the loss of a friend and companion, someone who may have helped in the acquisition of food and other resources, and another lost link to life before the war. Many memoirs are demarcated by an event that fractured the hope and resolve women maintained for the majority of their imprisonment, and this is true for Sara and Rena as well, specifically as it relates to the death of members of their community groups. Sara's group consisted of Sara, her sister, Esther, and friends Ellen and Lily. Astonishingly, the four women survived Ravensbrück together. As the war neared its end, the surviving women of Ravensbrück were evacuated to Dachau by the SS. Sara describes this train ride in great detail. Her friend, Lily, was in an obvious state of decline, and Sara struggled to care for her during the train ride. Sara recalls Lily's final moments, "She woke up, blinking once or twice, and looked at me for a long time, her large, dark eyes filling with tears. Finally, she said, "I'm not going to live anymore, Seren." Before I could answer she put her head on my breast and died. Two hours later the Red Cross opened up the cars and gave us soup" (Bernstein 249). Two days passed before the women were removed from the train, the dead, including Lily, remained in a pile in the corner of the car. "The four of us together seemed indestructible," notes Sara (Bernstein 250). She does not delve further into the impact of Lily's death on the group, but as she disembarked the train and left Lily's body there, it was obvious that the Sara, Esther, and Ellen were profoundly affected. ""Lily! Lily…" I cried one last time, only my heart speaking," Sara recalls (Bernstein 250), an early indication of the inaccessibility of language to describe traumatic events.

Rena's priority was always her sister, Danka, and her constant refrain during her time in Auschwitz was a version of an early promise made to Danka shortly after arrival at the camp: "And this is my dream, Danka – I am going to bring you home. We're going to walk through our

farmhouse door and Mama and Papa will be there waiting for us. Mama will hug and kiss us, and I'm going to say, 'Mama, I got you the baby back'" (Gelissen 73). For Rena, it was the promise to her mother to take care of Danka that fueled her will to live. Rena, in particular, was very hesitant to become attached to any camp women; however, there is a notable exception. After Rena had been imprisoned in Auschwitz for about a year and a half, a group of elder women were brought to Auschwitz, and she was greatly affected by their presence. She recalls seeing them for the first time:

> It is strange to see women in their fifties; they usually select any women in their forties or older for the gas. But here they are, these fifty women staring at us, looking like our mothers. Their sweet, wrinkling faces reveal the fear and trepidation this place forces on us all. They are probably thinking about their own daughters and sons and grandchildren. I cannot turn away from their faces. It is terrible to see elder women without kerchiefs on their heads and as bald as we are. For a moment I think how Mama would have felt if she'd been forced out in public without her wig or babushka. (Gelissen 164)

Rena became very attached to these women and risked her life to provide kerchiefs for the women to wear while they worked. One morning, Rena stood in line for roll call and noticed that the elder women were not present. She scoured the camp looking for them and discovered that in the middle of the night they were sent to the gas chamber. As Rena rejoined her work detail, she dissociated from the trauma:

> The numbness in my heart expands through my body. The body digs the dirt. The body sifts the sand. The body screams with pain as the lungs expand against bruised and maybe broken ribs. But it is the eyes which hurt most. They ache until

> it feels as if the head will split apart, bleeding across the barren land as we sift more sand to make more bricks and concrete to make more blocks for more Jews. (Gelissen 172)

As a testament to the impact these women had on each other, Brana Gurewitsch notes, "Many of these camp sister relationships are maintained today. These relationships are a substitute for the extended family of their own generation, which Holocaust survivors lack" (101). *The Seamstress* and *Rena's Promise* recall the deaths of other women, many of the women unknown to Sara and Rena, their experiences recorded by the only ones left to tell their stories, their deaths remembered by the only ones who survived.

Disassociation from traumatic events was common for both Sara and Rena. Throughout both of their memoirs they give accounts of the ways in which they disassociated and denied certain realities. This occurs in the midst of specific traumas and in the ways in which they ordered their thinking about reality that interfered with internal narratives they created in order to survive. This is first apparent for both women in their arrivals at Ravensbrück and Auschwitz; however, it occurs repeatedly throughout the memoirs. In *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders: Concepts and Therapy*, included in the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the assertion that "[t]he person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death with serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of others" and "[e]fforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the trauma" (Yule 6). These criteria, among others, for PTSD are clearly experienced by Rena and Sara early in their arrival at the camps, repeatedly throughout their imprisonment, and after liberation. For example, a conversation between Sara's co-writer, Louise Loots Thornton and Sara's daughter, Marlene, revealed that Sara had left out of her memoirs two major traumas she experienced. Sara

was beaten severely and her injuries from the beating included a badly broken leg, which resulted in one being shorter than the other and chronic back pain for the remainder of her life; and, in another beating, one of her nipples was torn off (Bernstein xiv-xv). This conversation occurred after Sara's death, and so we will never know why she chose not to include accounts of these beatings in her memoir. Other indications of PTSD include Sara's description about the deaths of women she witnessed, "The image of that pile of bodies frozen in the cold, gray light never left me" (Bernstein 206), and the avoidance of stimuli that reminded her of camp life, "These are a few of the things Meyer [her husband] and I will not do: stand in long lines, use metal dishes, eat turnips, read books or watch movies about the Holocaust, or watch any violent movies" (Bernstein 332). The constant confrontation of death, the suffering she experienced, the lifelong avoidance of certain stimuli, certainly indicate Sara suffered from PTSD and that she remained profoundly affected by her Holocaust experiences for the rest of her life.

Rena's disassociation throughout her memoir is pervasive. It is always, however, most notable with regard to the fate of her mother. Rena comments about the passage of time, "We have a calendar in Birkenau. It is hunger" (Gelissen 200). With hunger being the primary marker of time, it is, therefore, difficult to know precisely when certain events occurred. At some point during Rena's imprisonment in Auschwitz, she was reunited with a neighbor, Manka, from her hometown who asserted that she saw Rena's parents killed. Rena was completely devastated by Manka's assertion, but denied the reality of her words:

> The vision starts to fracture. The crack is long and deep, scarring my mother's patient and loving face. Mending it quickly, as if I am a bricklayer securing a fortress, I smear concrete across my memory. Mama is waiting for us. They are at the farmhouse waiting. They are safe…. Manka's out of her mind, I tell myself.

> She wasn't there. She's crazy. She's out of her mind, I repeat to myself over and over again. (Gelissen 163)

Eventually Rena came to terms with her mother's death but the trauma she experienced and other factors of her survival indicate she had difficulty in the years after liberation. Perhaps Rena's words, in the midst of suffering, best describe the way in which these women survived: "We are silent in our shame" (Gelissen 140).

One could argue that in the aftermath of liberation, Sara and Rena, suffering from PTSD, reestablished their identities by living lives that reflected the values of their parents and continued the rituals of their families. Sara and Rena transferred the hope of being reunited with their childhood families including mothers, fathers, and siblings, in so many ways the families of their pasts, onto families they created shortly after liberation that became the families of their futures. James Berger states that "[t]ransference in psychoanalysis is itself a return of the repressed, or rather a more conscious summoning of the repressed; transference repeats or acts out a past event or relationship in a new therapeutic setting that allows for critical evaluation and change. Transference is the occasion for working through the traumatic symptom" (576). For years, transference allowed Sara and Rena to work out their traumas, their linguistic latency phases lasting decades after liberation, until language and understanding about the Holocaust evolved and allowed them to record their experiences.

3 Constructing a Response

Let us sift the ashes for new life, for the story

forged in suffering; where the birth into

language is as terrifying as fire or love.

Annette Allen, *The Story (for Rena)*[2]

For Sara and Rena, and many female Jewish survivors, a response to the Holocaust occurred in two phases. The traumas of the Holocaust had, for many women, thoroughly stripped them of a sense of self. The first phase of response began in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust as women sought to reestablish their identities. This phase enacted James Berger's notion of transference in an effort to establish a sense of normality and, with few notable exceptions, this normality frequently adhered to the ideological structures of their pre-war lives. The patriarchal ideology that governed much of their lives is best illustrated in recollections of the relationships Sara and Rena had with their fathers, the importance of their paternal relationships and Jewish rituals prior to the Holocaust, and the circuitous return to both after liberation. In the analysis of this phase of response, it is beneficial to examine aspects of Sara's and Rena's childhoods that were recreated in their lives after liberation and that are highlighted, perhaps subconsciously, in their memoirs.

Sara spent much of her childhood observing her mother care for her family and home. Of her Orthodox Jewish upbringing, she recalls the joy of having her brother, Shlomo, home from yeshiva, and the awe of watching her half-sister, Louise, passing under the chuppah at her wedding. Michael S. Berger notes about Orthodox Jewish families that the "family was, in many cas-

[2] Annette Allen's complete poem "The Story (*for Rena*)" can be found in Rena Kornreich Gelissen's memoir *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz*

es, the primary vehicle for preserving distinctiveness from the majority culture, and so the tradition used in law, custom, and lore govern its formation and maintenance" (1). Understanding the importance of family and tradition is imperative to understanding the degree to which the sense of self was stripped in concentration camps through the removal of all personal possessions, the dehumanizing conditions in which the women lived without adequate food, water, and clothing, and the constant fear of torture and death. In the aftermath of liberation, women often adopted pre-war rituals as a way to both reconnect with lost family members and repair fractured identities.

As a child, Sara was always an excellent student and encouraged by her mother in scholarly pursuits. Her first day of school was met with anti-Semitism when a group of classmates taunted her on the schoolyard, ""Stinkin' Jew!" they yelled at me. "Dirty, stinkin' Jew,"" which prompted her to ask her mother, "Do my clothes smell bad?" (Bernstein 20). In accordance with Jewish tradition, she observed the Sabbath on Saturdays; however, "If we stayed home [from school] to celebrate our Sabbath on Saturday we were marked absent and given failing marks in all of our subjects that day" (Bernstein 1). These instances of anti-Semitism did not go unnoticed by Jews, but European society had normalized anti-Semitism to the degree that it was treated as an irritation as opposed to a serious threat. Michael S. Berger states about this normalization of anti-Semitism that "Judaism has been, for most of its history, the tradition of a minority – a powerless, stateless, and often persecuted minority" (1). It is only through the lens of history that we understand the instances of anti-Semitism Sara and others experienced were not on the spectrum of anti-Semitism Jews had experienced for most of their lives but were, instead, building toward an unthinkable conclusion.

At thirteen years old, Sara won a scholarship to a gymnasium in Bucharest. Although her mother was pleased, her father's reaction to hearing about her acceptance reflects the patriarchal culture in which she grew up, "An education is wasted on a girl. Let a boy take her place. She can stay home and learn what she really needs to know – how to make a decent meal. I'm sure that's something she doesn't know, does she?" (Bernstein 31). Against her father's wishes, Sara accepted the scholarship and moved to Bucharest. Her relationship with her father was strained as a result. In Bucharest, Sara faced persistent anti-Semitism, noting that every day in her religion class her teacher "told us how all Jews were thieves and murderers. He would point to a passage in the Bible and say, "Now this is when the Jews killed Jesus!" He knew that the one boy and I were Jewish, but he did not change his lectures because of us" (Bernstein 32). Disillusioned with academics because of the anti-Semitic treatment by her religion teacher, Sara quit school when she was thirteen years old and became an apprentice seamstress at a salon in Bucharest. Sara did not tell her family about leaving school, but she did visit them during the summer when she was given time off from the salon where she worked, which coincided with when she would have been home from school. Her relatives frequently inquired about her classes and how school was progressing. She never acknowledged that she had left school and always replied that everything was fine. In her memoir, she makes note of the relationship with her father at this time, "My father normally would have asked to see my report card, but since I disobeyed him by leaving home, he showed no interest in me whatsoever" (Bernstein 38).

In 1933, when Sara was fifteen years old, she finished her apprenticeship and was hired as a seamstress at the salon where she had been working for two years. She knew she had to be honest with her parents about her life in Bucharest. She presented her father with a tie and told him that she purchased it with money she had earned at her job. At first, he was displeased, but

she recalls that he frequently wore the tie she bought for him. However, appearances in the small town where her parents lived still mattered, and her father was a proud man. Sara recalls a conversation with her mother:

> Could you please your father in this one thing and not tell anyone? Your job is a great source of embarrassment to him. I know that he is very old-fashioned about women working, but this is the way he is. He feels it is his responsibility to provide for his family." *Ah, Father,* I thought. *I will not betray you*. (44)

The disapproval Sara faced in the wake of her decisions and her father's subsequent treatment of her set up silence as a default coping mechanism. Sara was constantly concerned about her father's approval. His approval hinged on her ability to stay silent about what shamed him and their family.

In Bucharest, Sara had enjoyed freedom and success, but the increase in violent anti-Semitism worried her. "In the early spring of 1935 I began to feel that this way of life was being threatened, that everything would come crashing down around our heads," she recalls (Bernstein 46). Many friends were immigrating to Palestine. She approached her father about her desire to immigrate, "Little by little Hitler has taken away almost everything from the Jews living there [in Germany]. They can no longer work as teachers, doctors, lawyers, or even artists – even if they have only one Jewish grandparent and are otherwise of Gentile blood…. He thinks us to be less than human" (49). Her father replied, "You're too anxious. We're still safe here in Romania. This isn't Germany" (Bernstein 50). Sara observed her tearful mother sitting quietly in the wake of her argument with her father. She decided against fleeing to Palestine and opted to return to Bucharest.

Five years after Sara's appeal to her father to immigrate to Palestine, the situation in Bucharest had deteriorated to the extent that she fled Bucharest for her family's home in Valea Uzului now under the control of Hungary. She was reunited with her mother, father, and sisters, Zipporah and Esther. A few months later, in 1941, Hungarian gendarmes knocked on the door of their home and took Sara and her father into custody. They were put in prison, accused of being spies, starved, and tortured. Sara was eventually released; her father was shot to death.

After her release from prison, Sara reunited with her mother and sisters. For a time, they lived together, with Sara supporting her mother and arranging a job for her youngest sister, Esther. Zipporah was in and out of relationships with men and frequently shirked her responsibilities. In a panic, she approached Sara for help because she was unmarried and pregnant. Before Sara could help her, they were put into a work detail. One day, as they were walking in formation, a guard called for Zipporah to step out of line:

> The guard strutted to a place a few feet from her side, raised his rifle, and in one quick, terrible instant, in one movement that almost stopped my heart, he fired. Zipporah fell to the ground. "No! No!" I screamed, and ran to her, lifting her from the ground…. I cradled Zipporah's head in my arms and rocked slowly back and forth, back and forth. She was so still. She who had whirled about on the dance floor joyously, in complete abandon, now lay quiet, arrested. (Bernstein 162-163)

Not long after Zipporah's death, Sara was released from the work detail and reunited with her sister, Esther. Sara recalls, "I told Esther everything – except about Zipporah's pregnancy" (Bernstein 165). Again, Sara employed silence about that which might bring shame on her family. Sara and Esther were unable to reunite with their mother who was living in another town.

They continued to live in fear and were eventually further cut off from friends and family when their neighborhood was established as a Jewish ghetto. She recalls that several respected Jewish men were assembled into a committee that made decisions for the ghetto. “We were Jewish women who had been taught from childhood to respect the judgment of men without stopping to either analyze or criticize their pronouncements,” she remembers (Bernstein 170). Not long after the ghetto was instated, Sara, her sister, Esther, and friends, Ellen and Lily, began a series of marches and train rides that took them to Ravensbrück concentration camp.

Rena’s memoir begins with an odd mix of past and present, both Rena and co-writer Heather Dune Macadam not quite sure where to begin. Rena does not spend as much time as Sara on her childhood or the events leading up to her imprisonment in Auschwitz. The stories she tells, however, emphasize her Orthodox Jewish upbringing and foreshadow the coping mechanisms that aid in her survival during her time in Auschwitz and after her liberation. In large part, her concern for others, specifically the Gentile family with which she lived early in the war, drove her to turn herself in and resulted in her imprisonment in Auschwitz. Her concern for her sister, Danka, fueled her will to live for the duration of her imprisonment.

Among Rena’s earliest memories are those involving the caretaking of her younger sister, Danka, who nearly died as an infant. As a result, their mother was always concerned for the Danka’s safety. Rena took it upon herself to watch over Danka. This concern and promise to always watch over her sister followed them throughout the Holocaust and serves as the inspiration for the title of her memoir. Rena’s recollections are not always linear and she transitions from one family dynamic to another. Upon meeting Rena for the first time, co-writer Heather Dune Macadam recalls, “She launches into her family history with relish, making sure that I understand the lifestyle of Orthodox Jews and diagramming family dynamics for me…. Rena’s father,

Chaim, believed that a woman's place was to bear children, keep a kosher kitchen, and know how to pray" (Gelissen 7). This description of Rena's father and his expectation of women is similar to Sara's, specifically the passage that recalls Sara's father's response to her scholarship.

Andrzej Garbera, a Gentile, was one of Rena's childhood friends and was admittedly in love with her for many years. Her memoir recalls a chance meeting:

> Happy to see each other, they talked about their favorite books and subjects in school. Rena made sure she maintained the proper distance away from him at all times, as she'd been instructed, but she forgot to watch the time. It was almost dark when a member of the synagogue passed by on his way to temple and saw her. It was prohibited for Rena to speak with a Gentile boy, or any boy for that matter, without a chaperone, and the man reminded her of that before going to inform her father of her conduct. (13)

For several years after this meeting, Rena and Andrzej had no contact except through secret letters. He wanted to marry her but Rena, knowing her parents would forbid her marriage to a Gentile, consciously avoided the subject of a relationship him. Finally, in a letter, he formally proposed, and in another letter, she refused.

As Rena recalls, "On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland. And there was no more innocence in our lives" (21). After the invasion, a German soldier noticed Rena, and her parents knew it was only a matter of time before she became his victim. Even though Germans were forbidden from having sexual relationships with Jews, the threat of rape existed. Rena's father appealed to her friend, Andrzej Garbera, now active in resistance efforts, to smuggle her across the border to safety. Andrzej safely delivered Rena to her uncle in Slovakia. Months later she learned that Andrzej died while hiding from German soldiers; his death drove her back her

parents in Poland. She grieved for him openly but even that was regulated, "I was lost in my heart for Andrzej. Wandering the streets of Tylicz, I found my way to the village graveyard. I could not place anything on his headstone because it was against German law for a Jew to put flowers on a Gentile's grave -- that would be considered desecration; I would be shot" (Gelissen 40). Rena's parents, still fearing for her safety as well as the safety of her sister, Danka, sent them to live in Bratislava. Rena and Danka were placed with a kind family. Fearful that the family with which she was living would be punished for housing a Jew, Rena turned herself in for what she believed would be a work camp. She boarded a train that took her to Auschwitz. Three days later, her sister, Danka, arrived and the girls were reunited.

The anti-Semitism Sara and Rena experienced as children normalized maltreatment of Jews to the degree that events leading up to the Holocaust were less alarming than they would have been without a long history of persecution. Persecution at every level – mental, physical, and economic – decreed by the German government and carried out by the majority of German citizens disallowed Jews recourse against those that persecuted them. The trauma Sara and Rena experienced in Ravensbrück and Auschwitz destabilized their identities to the degree that when they were liberated they sought to reestablish their identities by reclaiming the ideological structures of their lives prior to imprisonment.

In the months and years after liberation, both Sara and Rena were surprisingly resilient and lived what many would classify as normal lives. Again, James Berger's notion of transference is relevant as Sara's and Rena's post-war lives are very similar to the lives their fathers prescribed for them. Sara married her husband, Meyer, also a Jewish survivor, five months after liberation. In the retelling of her wedding day, she mentions how she, Esther, and Ellen "lifted up the *chuppah*," bringing to mind the beginning of her memoir and her memory about her half-

sister, Louise, passing under the chuppah on her wedding day, and she also recalls that she "donned a double heavy veil, as was the custom" (Bernstein 307), indicating a keeping with tradition. After her marriage, she struggled to obtain food, and she recalls standing in long lines for food only to be turned away because she believed those in charge knew she was Jewish. Eventually, she found delight in learning to cook, reminiscent of her father's admonition to her about cooking before she went to school in Bucharest. Shortly after her marriage to Meyer she became pregnant and had a son, Jacob. She enjoyed motherhood and continued working as a seamstress. Marlene, Sara's daughter, notes about family life:

> My brother and I often joked about the extent to which she doted on our father, almost as if he were another child in the family, taking care of him, protecting him from unpleasant experiences and bad news, waiting on him hand and foot. Her role as caretaker and guardian had become so ingrained during the course of her camp experiences that she never succeeded in letting go of that posture, even to the slightest degree. (Bernstein 335)

While it is true that Sara was an exceptional caretaker and extremely resourceful during her time in Ravensbrück, the qualities her daughter, Marlene, mentions are traceable to Sara's mother and how she cared for her father. The intense devotion of a woman to her husband and family was instilled in Sara long before the Holocaust extracted that devotion from her in service to her biological and camp sisters. Marlene also hints that although Sara's external life was normally constructed, the effects of the Holocaust were deep and lasting:

> Posttraumatic stress syndrome was not a concept that existed in her world. It was always quite clear that thoughts of her experiences and their effects were not only party of her daily life but also have permeated much of mine. As children,

> they [Meyer and Sara] often left us feeling somehow inadequate – there was nothing we could do to "fix" the damage that had been done to her, the opportunities that had been taken away forever, but worse, once could never quite anticipate situations that might evoke some unpleasant memory. (Bernstein 343)

Marlene's account of life with her mother indicates the extent to which she suffered for the rest of her life even if she did not always have a vocabulary to articulate that suffering.

One of Sara's primary goals after liberation was "to leave Germany. Living in a country ravaged by war was difficult in itself, as all goods were scarce and strictly rationed. But this would have been bearable if it had not been for the realization that…Jews…were still not wanted" (Bernstein 309). It was in Sara's desire to immigrate that she most noticeably broke with her father's wishes. Early in her memoir, she recounts many instances of anti-Semitism and a few instances of warning her father about the increase in violent anti-Semitism and begging him to let her immigrate. It is under the weight of this lifelong oppression that Sara geographically fractures from her pre-war family and seeks refuge. One will never know with certainty the path her life might have taken if her father had allowed her to immigrate to Palestine as she so desperately wanted. Regardless, in 1949 Sara, Meyer, and Jacob immigrated to Canada, and in 1960 Sara immigrated to the United States with Meyer and their two children, Jacob and Marlene, eventually moving to Chicago to be near Sara's sister, Esther, and her family.

For Rena, life after liberation was terrifying and hopeful. Rena and Danka eventually ended up in Holland but did not have any identification and faced deportation to Germany. She was befriended by "John Gelissen, commander of Red Cross Relief Team No. 12," who gave Rena and Danka "jobs helping Dutch citizens get home after being released from forced labor

camps in Germany" (Gelissen 267). Rena remembers, "We hoarded bread under our cots until it got moldy," indicating the fear of starvation that loomed even after liberation (Gelissen 267). Eventually, Rena married John Gelissen, had four children, immigrated to the United States in 1954, and "retired in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, which remind Rena of the Carpathian Mountains in Poland" (Gelissen 268). Like Sara, Rena's post-war life is, in many ways, the traditional family life her father envisioned for her. She also immigrated but Rena's immigration was more in line with what her family wanted than Sara's, with Rena's parents sending her and Danka away from their hometown in an effort to protect them. A notable exception to her father's wishes is in her marriage to John, a Dutchman (a non-Jew), a mirror of her relationship with Andrzej Garbera, the Gentile boy she was forbidden to marry for religious reasons, who saved her life, and died in resistance efforts. This comparison is not meant to denigrate Rena's choices in love but to illustrate the way in which, in this area, she followed her heart as she wanted, but was unable, to do with Andrzej. In a follow-up to the painful recollection of not being allowed to properly mourn him, Rena states that "[i]n 1990, [she] returned to Poland for the first time since the war and was finally able to place flowers on his grave" (Gelissen 270). About the life she constructed after liberation, Rena asserts, "I found a good husband and have a good life…but I will never forget" (Gelissen 268).

This first phase of response allowed Sara and Rena to marry, have children, immigrate to the United States, live successful lives and, in many ways, paved the way for the second phase of their response to the Holocaust. The second phase, a literary response, occurred decades after liberation and resulted in the publication of their memoirs; however, for both women, the construction of a literary response was complex and arduous. In James Berger's analysis of Cathy Caruth's seminal essay, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History," he states that

Caruth "is concerned principally with questions of reference and representation: how trauma becomes text, or, as she puts it in her introduction, how wound becomes voice" (Berger 577). For Sara and Rena, "how wound becomes voice" is their progression through latency, the solidifying of post-war identities and, ultimately, the penning of their memoirs.

The impetus for Sara's desire to tell her story occurred when she attended a lecture about the Holocaust during which a professor claimed "the Holocaust wasn't nearly as bad as the Jewish people made it out to be" (Bernstein x). In the 1970s, Sara began recording her memories on tape but needed help putting those memories into narrative form. A series of events put Sara in touch with Louise Loots Thornton, a recent graduate with a creative writing degree, who was initially reticent to help Sara with her story because she felt unworthy of and overwhelmed by such an endeavor. Eventually Thornton acquiesced and began the painstaking preparations for writing what became *The Seamstress*. In the preface for *The Seamstress*, Thornton recalls how she prepared to co-write Sara's memoir, "The question that had been burning in my mind was: Why did *she* survive when so terribly few, especially women, did not? The answer, I felt, lay in her life before the war – in her childhood, her family, her innate sense of self. To find out if this were true, I would have to ask questions about her entire life" (xiii). Her holistic approach emphasizes the importance of considering all aspects of these women's lives when attempting to offer an analysis of their Holocaust experiences. Although Bernstein and Thornton co-wrote a version of Bernstein's memoir in the late 1970s, *The Seamstress* was not published until twenty years later.

Dori Laub, analyst and cofounder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust testimonies, states:

> The listener to the narrative of extreme human pain…faces a unique situation…. While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma…has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore the process and place wherein the cognizance, the "knowing" of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (qtd. in Levine 5)

To simplify, Laub asserts that sufferers of extreme trauma need someone onto whom they can project their trauma. This someone is a listener, a witness, who then becomes a kind of validation of trauma. Sara had been recording her experiences into a tape recorder for years, but it was only after meeting Louise Loots Thornton and repeating her story to a witness, that her traumatic experiences had validation. Thornton recalls the process of recording Sara's experiences, writing a narrative around those experiences, and sending the finished product to Sara:

> As the book began to take shape, I sent her rough drafts to check for accuracy, and weeks went by while they lay in her bottom dresser drawer. Then she would call me. "I apologize for the delay. I was finally able to read what you sent me. I don't even remember telling you some of those things, but I must have. It's exactly as it happened. Sometimes I can't believe you weren't there with me." Sometimes, although it was impossible, I thought I was. (Bernstein xiii)

What occurred between Sara and Thornton is a projection of trauma. Sara emerged from her latency phase, during which she acquired language to articulate her experiences; however, she was

often overwhelmed by her articulated trauma. Thornton became a canvas onto which Sara projected her trauma. The trauma, in some ways, was inscribed on Thornton but not so much so that she was precluded from arranging that trauma into a narrative.

Similarly, Rena hints at the long process of writing in her dedication, "Dear Mama and Papa: This book is for you. For fifty years I've been telling you this story in my mind. Now it's finally written down and I won't have to tell it anymore. Love, Rena." Like Sara, Rena had difficulty assembling her memories into a narrative form, and she worked with co-writer Heather Dune Macadam to tell her story. Rena's dedication indicates that she had been telling her story for years in her mind, but that the process of internally telling her story was not enough. It was only after it was written down that Rena considered the responsibility of telling her story complete. Rena's memoir begins with regular text describing her childhood experiences mixed with italicized text, inserted by co-writer Heather Dune Macadam, which offers commentary or clarification of Rena's streams of consciousness. Macadam, like Sara's co-writer Thornton, takes on the mantle of Rena's experiences, "*I have tried to foster a sense of trust between us, but we progressed beyond that phase quickly. It's as if we've known from the beginning that we are friends. She still tries to protect me at times, but I am insistent that she does not have to endure Auschwitz alone anymore*" (Gelissen 16). As the memoir progresses, the italicized portions remain, but the distinctions between Rena and Macadam cease until the narrator of the story is one, authoritative voice – Rena's.

When analyzing Holocaust literature from the perspective of gender, an interesting aspect of Sara and Rena utilizing co-writers is that some of the earliest male authors of Holocaust literature did not utilize co-writers. This is true for the well-respected and widely read *Night* by Elie Wiesel. Wiesel undoubtedly suffered, and inarguably there were lasting effects, but his suffering

did not preclude him from recording his experiences. His literary response was neither delayed nor required assistance. The privilege afforded men through language is a complex issue; however, history is rife with examples of the value placed on male testimony and narrative as authoritative. Elie Wiesel's suffering was not less, although it was different, but living in a patriarchal world his proximity, as a man, to accessible language afforded him the opportunity to record his experiences with fewer complications than his female survivor counterparts.

4 Conclusion

As knowledge about the Holocaust evolves we are more aware of the extent to which Jewish women suffered. Memoirs such as *The Seamstress* and *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* provide historical context for the anti-Semitism that lead to the Holocaust, the experiences of women in concentration camps, as well as what it meant to survive. To parse suffering is difficult, delicate work, but to fully understand the impact of the Holocaust it is also necessary. To say that women and men had different experiences during the Holocaust is not to say the suffering of one group supersedes that of the other group. It is merely an analytical approach implemented in order to achieve the most thorough understanding possible. Joan Ringelheim emphasizes the importance of acknowledging the unique experiences of women during the Holocaust:

> To the Nazis, Jewish women were not simply Jews; they were Jewish women, and they were treated accordingly in the system of annihilation. Research suggests that more Jewish women were deported than Jewish men, and more women than men were selected for death in the extermination camps. Jewish men did not stand in line for Jewish women when it came to the killing operations; Jewish women stood in their own lines and were killed as Jewish women. Nor can Jewish men stand in for Jewish women as we try to understand their everyday life during the Holocausts, with its terror, loss, escape, hope, humor, friendships, love, work, starvation, beatings, rape, abortions, and killings. (Ringelheim 349-350)

The issues Ringelheim brings up are many and complex and deserve careful attention; however, women suffered as women and analysis of their suffering should take into account the role of gender in persecution.

As scholarship continues to emerge about the Holocaust and, specifically, gendered suffering, we must not stop with acknowledgement that gendered suffering exists but continue to analyze the repercussions of its existence. One way in which we are able to increase our awareness about women's suffering is to read the texts survivors so painfully and thoughtfully recorded. So many times, in a mass trauma, the individual experience is lost in the shadow of the event. *The Seamstress* and *Rena's Promise: A Story of Sisters in Auschwitz* excise the individuals from the event. In memoirs, a sense of self is restored in the individual retelling of the traumatic experience.

Some scholars assert that by studying the Holocaust we may learn strategies for prevention of genocide. I would like to be in this optimistic group, although I admit that it may be overly simplistic. Cynthia Ozick asserts, "Never again is not the message we got from the Holocaust. The message we got is that the Holocaust will replicate itself. What was acceptable once will be acceptable again" ("Education about the Holocaust"). Unfortunately, Ozick is correct. Bosnia and Darfur are recent examples of genocide in a post-Holocaust world. When considering the Holocaust and the literature, pictures, video, and art that emerged in its aftermath, it is difficult to believe that its horrors are being replicated around the world. It is equally difficult to believe that we have learned all there is to learn from the testimonies survivors have left behind. Survivors of the Holocaust, whose memoirs are available to us, continue to shed light on unimaginable narratives of suffering and survival. Perhaps these emerging texts will develop greater understanding that will lead to transformational knowledge we cannot yet imagine. Sara Horowitz, a leading scholar on the Holocaust, says about Holocaust studies:

> I envision the future of Holocaust studies, in a world in which those events are no longer within living memory, leaving open the questions of "best" or

> "necessary" or "definitive" novels, memoirs, poems, films, plays, analytic approaches or theoretical frameworks reminds us of what we do not know, amid all that we have come to understand. Shuffling our readings, shifting our lenses, encompassing lesser known works and new ways of reading, does more than keep our perspectives fresh and original. (qtd. in Kluge and Williams vii)

One wonders what Horowitz envisions when she speaks of more. Reading texts and continuing to analyze the Holocaust and its existing effects can only deepen our understanding of its many complex layers. It is impossible to know for certain the results of reading these memoirs. Perhaps the impact of awareness, much like the impact of these women's traumatic experiences, will not be known for decades.

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