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Between Life and Death: Pregnancy, Abortion, and Childbirth in the Nazi Concentration Camps

Grace Corkran

History 485: Independent Study

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Abstract

To date, Holocaust historians have often grappled with documenting life and death in the Nazi concentration camps for pregnant women. As a result of limited source material, historians have struggled to incorporate the narratives of pregnant women into the historiography and tend to group topics surrounding pregnancy into larger works on gender in the Holocaust. This approach has created a gap in the historiography on reproductive health and female bodies in the Holocaust. In this paper, I will examine the narratives of Holocaust survivors, including the testimonies from pregnant women and doctors, as well as the photographs and drawings from inmates who witnessed the murder of pregnant women and children. My paper will answer the following question: how did pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth influence the experience of pregnant women in the Nazi concentration camps? I will argue that while pregnancy increased the risk of experimentation and extermination for women, the bodies of pregnant women within the camp system experienced a physical deterioration which concealed the pregnancies of many women during subsequent selections and led to an increase in abortions performed by inmates in secret and infanticides after childbirth. To answer my research question, I will focus on the following camps: Theresienstadt, Ravensbruck, and Auschwitz-Birkenau. These camps will showcase the ways in which hybrid, work, and death camps influenced the experiences of pregnant women. Beyond its focus on pregnant women, this study can help historians better understand how a particular demographic could have different experiences depending on the type of camp they were imprisoned in.

During the Second World War, the Nazi regime created an intricate system of camps to extract labor and murder members of ethnic groups they deemed to be racially inferior, predominantly Jewish populations in Eastern Europe. Within the camp system, pregnant women and children were targeted for extermination due to their limited ability to provide forced labor for the Third Reich. Because few pregnant women survived to give testimony about these atrocities, historians have struggled to understand how pregnancy and female reproductive health influenced women throughout the duration of their imprisonment in the concentration camps.¹ Through my research paper, I aim to answer the following question: how did pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth influence the experience of pregnant women in the Nazi concentration camps? I will argue that while pregnancy increased the risk of experimentation and extermination for women, the bodies of pregnant women within the camp system experienced a physical deterioration which concealed many of their pregnancies during subsequent selections and led to an increase in abortions performed by inmates in secret and infanticides after childbirth.

Historians have primarily discussed female reproduction in connection to gender and the experiences of women in the concentration camps.² This heavy focus on gender roles ignores the

¹ For survival narratives of pregnant women see Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 354, 355-57, 364-66, 371-74. For more information on gaging the number of victims killed in the Holocaust see: "Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC: 2020); "Jewish Losses During the Holocaust: By Country," *Holocaust Encyclopedia* (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC: 2020); Megargee, Geoffrey, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Vol. 1, "Early Camps, Youth Camps, and Concentration Camps." (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC: 2020).

² For general sources on the narratives and experiences of women in the Holocaust see: Esther Fuchs, *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999); Myrna Goldenberg, "Different Horrors, Same Hell: Women Remembering the Holocaust," in *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 150-166; Myrna Goldenberg, "Lessons Learned from Gentle Heroism: Women's Holocaust Narratives," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 548 (1996): 78-93; Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2003); Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998);

ways in which the conditions of the camps affected the bodies of pregnant women, and instead emphasizes the behavioral habits of women over the physiological changes they experienced. For example, in *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, Judith Tydor Baumel, focuses on how gender roles influenced the unique experiences of women within the camps. Baumel aims to contextualize gender while avoiding an all-encompassing description of a singular gendered experience for women. The main focus of the book is grounded in the emotional and behavioral reaction women had in the camps, as well as the breakdown of a gendered identity, but does not dive into discussions on how reproduction influenced the experiences of women.³

Women in the Holocaust, by Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, gives greater attention to the role of reproduction in the lives of female inmates. Pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth are specific to female reproductive health, which in turn influences the gender roles experienced by women as mothers, care-givers, and nurturers within the camps. Ofer and Weitzman argue that pregnant women and mothers with infants were targets for extermination unless they received an abortion, had their babies killed after birth, or were separated from their children during selection.⁴ This is the general overview Holocaust historians have portrayed for the outcomes of

Jutta T. Bendremer, *Women Surviving the Holocaust: In Spite of the Horror* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997); Esther Katz and Joan Miriam Ringelheim, *Proceedings of the Conference on Women Surviving: The Holocaust* (New York: Institute for Research in History, 1983); Felicja Karay, *Hasag-Leipzig Slave Labour Camp for Women: The Struggle for Survival, Told by Women and their Poetry* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2002); Stefania Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Joy Erlichman Miller, *Love Carried Me Home: Women Surviving Auschwitz* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Simcha Press, 2000); Ringelheim Ofia and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Joan Ringelheim, "Thoughts about Women and the Holocaust." In *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust*, edited by Roger S. Gottlieb, 141-149. New York: Paulist Press, 1990; Joan Ringelheim, "The Unethical and the Unspeakable: Women and the Holocaust." *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual* 1 (1984): 69-87; Carol Rittner and John K. Roth. *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust* (New York: Paragon House, 1993); Nechama Tec, *Resilience and Courage: Women, Men, and the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

³ Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1998) 39-55. The authors discuss reproduction in connection with the experiences of women on page 41.

⁴ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, on abortions: 7, 95, 315; birth control: 29, 30; menstruation: 298, 315, 370; pregnancy: (death camps) 7, 281-82, 329, 336, 354 (forced labor) 7, 290, 291, 298 (survivor narratives) 354, 355-57, 364-66, 371-74.

pregnancy in the camps, which does not offer a complete look into the complex and dynamic factors which impacted pregnant women. The authors focus their discussion on pregnancy in connection with topics relating to sexuality, sexual assault, and mass killings.⁵ This wide range of experiences in relation to pregnancy provides key insights into Nazi policies on reproduction and race relations. Elizabeth R. Baer's and Myrna Goldenberg's work, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* demonstrates the policies Nazis created to regulate reproduction both for women in the concentration camps and forced laborers working in Germany.

Beverley Chalmers' *Birth, Sex, and Abuse: Women's Voices Under Nazi Rule* provides the clearest look at the laws in Nazi Germany regulating sex and reproduction for both German and Jewish women. Chalmers is not a historian, but a medical doctor who has dedicated her career to studying pregnancy, childbirth, and sexual assault on a transnational stage. Her monograph on childbirth and sexual abuse in Nazi Germany offers the reader a baseline understanding of the historical context surrounding the Holocaust. The book is filled with primary sources taken from the diaries of Holocaust survivors and Jewish doctors. Chalmers does not analyze the personal narratives for their historical significance, but instead contextualizes the medical practices and procedures that took place in the concentration camps through the lens of a medical professional. The majority of her study examines the medical practices and legal restrictions on reproduction for women during the 1940's. Chalmers divides her study between childbirth and sexual assault in order to examine how women's reproductive health was used and abused by the Nazis. Chalmer's research highlights how sexual assault,

⁵ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, on sexual violence 7-8, 270, 290-92, 332-333, 336, 340-42, 346.

abortions, medical experimentations, and various forms of sex-based violence impacted pregnant women in the concentration camps and throughout the Third Reich.

Additionally, in *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel examine the impact of sexual assault and pregnancy on Jewish women. Hedgepeth and Saidel make the argument that forced abortions are a form of sexual assault as they involve the insertion of a medical device inside a woman's uterus through her vagina without her consent. Historians have been slow to recognize that sexual assault encompasses any form of vaginal penetration without consent. This framing of forced abortions as sexual assault has helped shift the focus onto the bodies of pregnant women and the ways in which they suffered abuse during the Holocaust. Both *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* and *Birth, Sex, and Abuse* discuss how sexual assault impacted women and the risks of pregnancy during the Holocaust. They take a step back from the traditional approach that gender historians have used, and instead focus on the bodies of pregnant women and the abuse they physically and mentally suffered.

To add to this conversation, I will focus on the bodies of pregnant women and the ways in which they were able to adapt survival mechanism from ghettoization to avoid detection during camp selections. This approach will draw from some of the same primary sources in Chalmers' study, but will provide the historical analysis she overlooked. I will argue that while pregnancy singled Jewish women out for experimentation and extermination, it became difficult for the SS guards to detect pregnancy as a result of the camps' effect on pregnant women's bodies. This depended on the type of camp Jewish women were imprisoned in and the medical facilities available to them. The concentration camps were divided between work, transition, and death camps, which created unique experiences for pregnant women at each stage of the

Holocaust. As the bodies of pregnant women experienced physical deteriorations, their pregnancies were concealed during subsequent selections and led to an increase in abortions performed in secret by inmates and infanticides after childbirth.

Development of the Concentration Camps

In order to understand the conditions pregnant women were exposed to in the camps, it is important to discuss how the Holocaust took shape in Europe. Initially, the Nazis rounded up Jewish civilians in towns for execution.⁶ The mass executions initially targeted men, but quickly led to violence towards women and children. Karl-Heinz Drossel, former lance corporal in the German army during the war, recalled a mass shooting which took place in Romania. He said in an interview, “Directly below me was a boy, maybe six years of age. He was reaching to the right, I assume his father was standing there, when a soldier shot him in his neck and kicked him into the pit.”⁷ The original order had been to kill only the men in the village, but women and children were murdered as well.⁸ Heinrich Himmler, a Nazi party member in charge of organizing the execution of Jews, viewed the killing of children as a necessary part of eliminating all Jews from Europe.⁹ Drossel recounted the emotional strain he experienced upon

⁶ For more information on mass shootings of Jews see Alex J. Kay and David Stahel, *Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Europe* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2018); William Hagen, "Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin," *Shofar* 30, no. 3 (2012); Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷ Maurice Philip Remy, *Hitler's Holocaust*, Germany: MPR Film und Fernsehproduktion, Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, 2000.

⁸ Remy, *Hitler's Holocaust*.

⁹ For more information on Heinrich Himmler see Peter Longerich, Jeremy Noakes, and Lesley Sharpe, *Heinrich Himmler* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

seeing Jewish children executed. “That is when I knew I had enough. That little boy is still with me today.”¹⁰

One of the great lies to come from the Second World War was the myth that Nazi soldiers were forced to carry out these executions if they were to avoid being killed themselves for disobeying orders. There are no documented cases of Nazi soldiers who were killed for refusing to participate in these shootings.¹¹ Instead, alcohol consumption increased and Nazi soldiers turned to locals to participate in the mass executions. These mass shootings took place in Nazi occupied territories where they encouraged the non-Jewish civilian population to take part, fueling existing anti-Semitism, and supplying people with bullets and alcohol.¹² It became clear to the Nazi command that this system was proving to be too time-consuming, costly, and came with increased risk of alcoholism in the SS divisions. The concentration camps became critical for the Nazis to dehumanize the process of murder and create a system of camps which would utilize the slave labor of inmates.

To that end, ghettoization of Jews in cities condensed urban Jewish populations into walled off areas and expose them to conditions that were designed to physically weaken them

¹⁰ Remy, *Hitler's Holocaust*.

¹¹ For more on the death squads (Einsatzgruppen) and mass shootings see Christian Goeschel and Nikolaus Wachsmann, "Before Auschwitz: The Formation of the Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-9," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 3 (2010): 515-34. It is important to note that some soldiers found it mentally straining to shoot civilians and they opted out without facing any consequences for doing so. This challenges the idea that they had to shoot Jews or be killed for refusing to do so. There was not a single case of a soldier refusing to shoot that was then demoted or killed for his actions so part of the psychological strain could be avoided by not killing people. What the army was really aiming for was to limit the amount of alcohol that soldiers in this position were drinking after these mass murders. Drinking was their way of coping but it carried its own set of problems. The gas chambers made it so that the system of killing was more efficient and could be done with fewer resources.

¹² For more on civilian involvement and anti-Semitism in occupied territories see Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Alexander M. Martin, *The Holocaust in the East: Local Perpetrators and Soviet Responses* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014); Wendy Lower, "Pogroms, Mob Violence and Genocide in Western Ukraine, Summer 1941: Varied Histories, Explanations and Comparisons," *Journal of Genocide Research* 13, no. 3 (2011): 217-46; Barbara Engelking, "Murdering and Denouncing Jews in the Polish Countryside, 1942-1945," *East European Politics and Societies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 433-56.

before relocating them into the camps.¹³ Ghettos functioned to separate Jews from non-Jews and make it difficult to communicate to the outside world. Food was scarce, causing many to starve to death or become weak from the constant hunger.¹⁴ This helped the Nazis subdue Jewish populations and made resistance increasingly difficult. The lack of access to medicine, proper housing, and sanitation quickly led to the spread of disease which killed many.¹⁵ Within ghettos, there was usually a Jewish implemented council that could help organize life in the ghetto under the constraints of Nazi officials.¹⁶ These councils could, at times, make limited decisions about who would be sent on transports to the East. Fanny England, a German Jew living in the Cologne ghetto, had asked the Jewish council if she could be sent East on the transport her mother had been assigned to. The council denied her request and she was later told by the Nazi officials, “You will be with her soon.”¹⁷

Ghettos would be liquidated as the Nazis moved Jewish populations into transports headed to the concentration camps, destroying evidence of their existence and effectively erasing them from the city landscape.¹⁸ The camp system was divided between transition, work, and death camps which could help manage the flow of people coming on transports from the occupied territories and city ghettos. These cattle cars tended to separate families between men, women, children, and the elderly. These divisions in transports based on gender and age would

¹³ For background on ghettoization see Martin Dean, Mel Hecker, and Eliyana Adler, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Volume 2, “Ghettos in German-occupied Eastern Europe,” (2012).

¹⁴ For more information on hunger in the ghettos see Helene J. Sinnreich, “Hunger in the ghettos,” in *The Ghetto in Global History* (2017).

¹⁵ For information on disease and hunger see Charles G. Roland, *Courage under Siege: Starvation, Disease, and Death in the Warsaw Ghetto* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ For an example of Jewish Councils in Ghettos see Dina Porat, “The Jewish Councils of the Main Ghettos of Lithuania: A Comparison,” *Modern Judaism* 13, no. 2 (1993): 149-63.

¹⁷ Remy, *Hitler’s Holocaust*.

¹⁸ For liquidation of ghettos see Martin Dean, Mel Hecker, and Eliyana Adler, *The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Encyclopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933-1945*, Volume 2, “Ghettos in German-occupied Eastern Europe,” (2012).

influence the destination of the trains, either to work or death camps.¹⁹ Transports carrying the elderly would be sent straight to death camps. The extermination camps Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, and Majdanek, kept only a few inmates to remove the bodies of those who arrived on the transports and were sent straight to the gas chambers. Other death camps had work camps section with larger inmate populations, like Auschwitz-Birkenau. These camps kept inmates to work in the camp until they died or would outsource inmates to nearby factories.

Concentration camps had existed in Germany and had been sites of abuse and murder for political prisoners prior to the Holocaust.²⁰ The gas chambers transformed the concentration camps into fully functioning murder factories. The development of the gas chambers allowed for prisoners to be killed in large rooms where hundreds could be trapped inside. Originally, these chambers used car engines to supply carbon monoxide to suffocate the people within.²¹ This proved, again, to be too costly and time-consuming for the Nazis, who soon developed their notorious solution for mass murder, a chemical known as Zyklon B.²² This gas was most effective at higher temperatures, so the Nazis would wait for the body heat of the prisoners to warm up the chamber before throwing the can in through a roof top hole, sometimes speeding up the process with the addition of a heated brick. It took an average of 20 minutes to kill the people within these chambers. David Olere was an inmate in Auschwitz assigned to work in the

¹⁹ For more on transports and demographics see the example in Matthew R Smallman-Raynor, and Cliff, Andrew D. "Theresienstadt: A Geographical Picture of Transports, Demography, and Communicable Disease in a Jewish Camp-Ghetto, 1941–45," *Social Science History* 44, no. 4 (2020): 615-39.

²⁰ For more on concentration camps in the 1930's and how the Nazis covered up deaths as suicides see Christian Goeschel, "Suicide in Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-9," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 3 (2010): 628-48. For information of the formation of camps see Christian Goeschel and Nikolaus Wachsmann, "Before Auschwitz: The Formation of the Nazi Concentration Camps, 1933-9," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 3 (2010): 515-34.

²¹ Helena Kubica, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), gas chambers: 157-225.

²² Helena Kubica, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), Zyklon B: 157, 209, 238, 261, 304; gas chambers with Zyklon B: 162, 167, 169, 170, 172, 233; delousing: 213, 215.

crematoriums. He was tasked with removing the bodies from the gas chambers and piling them by the ovens. His drawings demonstrate the suffering of the victims within these chambers as the fumes caused them to suffocate and lose their ability to retain their bodily fluids. Image below shows a mother and infant child cramped into a gas chamber as the fumes suffocate them. Because women with infants and young children would be sent together to the gas chambers, David Oler devoted several pieces of artwork to depict the death of women and children as a way to memorialize their suffering and the suffering of others selected for death.

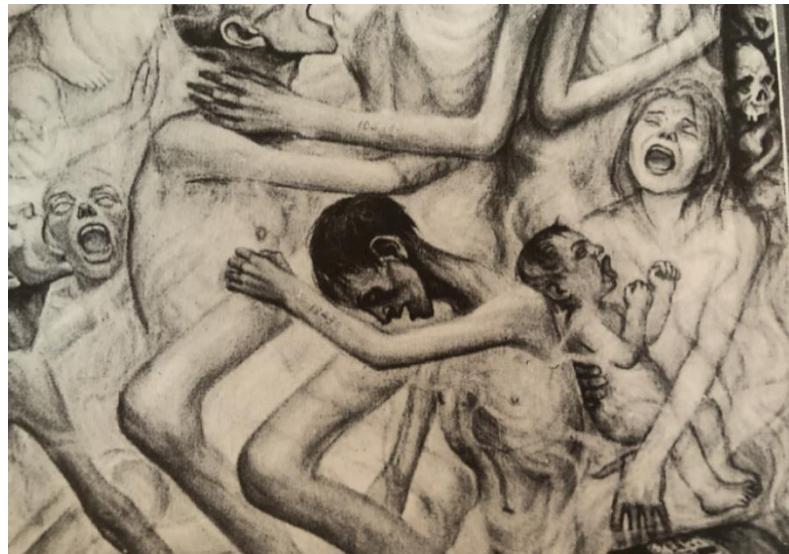


Figure 1: David Oler and Alexandre Oler, *Witness: Images of Auschwitz*, "Asphyxiation in the Gas Chamber," (Richland Hill, Texas: West Wind Press, 1998) 7. This image depicts the scene within the gas chamber through the eye of a peephole. It captures the expressions of pain on the faces of people as they struggle for air.

Given the horror of the Holocaust on all of its victims and the unimaginable suffering Jews endured, historians debate if gender had a significant impact for the experiences of men and women.²³ Gender historians make the argument that gender did play a critical role during the

²³ For a framing of this debate within the literature see Marion Kaplan, "Did Gender Matter during the Holocaust?" *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (2019): 37-56; Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998) introduction. Also see C.L. Muehlenhard and Peterson, "Distinguishing Between Sex and Gender: History, Current Conceptualizations, and Implications," *Sex Roles* 64, (2011): 791-803.

Holocaust, specifically for women, but have received push-back from historians who feel they overstate the significance of gender in the camp system. In recent years, gender historians focusing on topics outside of the Holocaust have tried to step back from the dichotomy between gender and biological sex to create a more encompassing discussion on how societies view and understand gender roles in relation to bodies for males and females.²⁴ This has not been the case for gender historians concentrating on the Holocaust. They have used female reproduction as a stepping stone to discuss issues surrounding mass death and violence for women in the camps and the behavioral and emotional reactions which followed. Holocaust historians have grappled with the scale of violence and the significance gender roles had in proportion to the all-consuming horror of the Holocaust. So far, this focus on gender in relationship to identity and society has largely ignored the role of the body.

This paper, in contrast, focuses on the bodies of pregnant women within the camp system in order to understand the physical deterioration they experienced and how that influenced the ways in which women were able to conceal their pregnancies. This approach does not focus only on gender roles for women, but is instead rooted in how female reproductive health was affected by the conditions of the camps. The reason for this is that gender has previously been the only lens historians have used to study pregnancy during the Holocaust and has created a gap in our understanding of the bodies of pregnant women due to the debate on gender roles. I order to

²⁴ For more on gender within historical analysis see Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (1986): 1053-1075. Scott pushes back against separating gender from discussions on the body, however her article has been at times misinterpreted by Holocaust gender historians who have used it as a way to perpetuate the dichotomy between these two concepts rather than viewing them in tangent with the other. Scott later clarified certain points of her original article in 2008. Joan Wallach Scott, "Unanswered Questions," *The American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (2008): 1422-429.

analyze how the bodies of pregnant women influenced their experience in the concentration camps, I will first provide the context for the laws regulating reproduction in Nazi Germany.

Laws on Reproduction

The Nazi regime created a series of laws to control female reproductive health for German and Jewish women. The Nuremberg laws of 1933 and 1935 had strict regulations on so called “Blood purity,” and “Aryan blood.” The “Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health: July 14, 1933,” stated in Article One that, “Anyone who suffers from an inheritable disease may be surgically sterilized if, in the judgement of medical science, it could be expected that his descendants will suffer from serious inherited mental or physical defects.”²⁵ This law allowed for sterilization of people the Nazi regime viewed as physically or mentally “feeble,” and opened the legal gate way for many members of Jewish populations to be sterilized.²⁶ Laws on sterilization and euthanasia were used to decrease populations that the Nazis viewed as a threat to their ideal “Aryan race.”²⁷

The “Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935,” created stricter legal regulations concerning reproduction for Jewish and German men and women. It stated, “Entirely convinced that the purity of German blood is essential to the further existence of the German people, and inspired by the uncompromising determination to safeguard the future of the German nation, the Reichstag has unanimously resolved upon the following law,” then

²⁵ Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health: July 14, 1933.

²⁶ Law for the Protection of Hereditary Health: July 14, 1933.

²⁷ For more information on euthanasia and sterilization see Beverley Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse: Women's voices Under Nazi Rule* (Grosvenor House Publishing, 2015), 23-41. For more information on the development of Nazi policies on race and reproduction see James Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, 2017).

proceeded to list regulations to eliminate Jews from having children with Germans.²⁸ Article One declared that, “Marriages between Jews and citizens of German or kindred blood are forbidden. Marriages concluded in defiance of this law are void, even if, for the purpose of evading this law, they were concluded abroad.”²⁹ Article Two declared that, “Sexual relations outside marriage between Jews and nationals of German or kindred blood are forbidden.”³⁰ To make sure that German women were not impregnated by Jewish men, Article Three declared that “Jews will not be permitted to employ female citizens of German or kindred blood as domestic servants.”³¹ The Nazis had created a series of propaganda images following Article Three, which portrayed Jewish men as rapists and a danger to German women. Finally, Article Five laid out the punishments for disobeying these laws: “A person who acts contrary to the prohibition of Section 1 will be punished with hard labor. A person who acts contrary to the prohibition of Section 2 will be punished with imprisonment or with hard labor.”³²

As Nazi eugenicists were trying to sterilize Jews and limit the births of Jewish children, they were actively encouraging pregnancies for German women for supposed national salvation. German women were encouraged to have many pregnancies with their German husbands, and it was illegal to have an abortion.³³ Hitler gave a speech in 1935 in which he depicted German women as having a national duty to reproduce. He contrasted German women with Soviet women and policies allowing for abortions in the Soviet Union during the 1920s.³⁴ He said, “The

²⁸ Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935.

²⁹ Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935.

³⁰ Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935.

³¹ Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935.

³² Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935.

³³ “Between 1935 and 1940 there were only 14333 applications to terminate pregnancy and 9701 approvals. Under Nazi Germany abortion became illegal for the Aryan population, but was encouraged and freely available for Jewish women.” Quote from <https://weimarrepublicandnazigermany.weebly.com/investigation-1---comparison-women.html>

³⁴ For more information on Soviet policies towards abortion in the 1920’s and Stalinist policies of the 1930s see Semashko, “People’s Commissariat of Health, On the Protection of Women’s Health” (text). *Seventeen*

granting of equal rights to women, which Marxism demands, in reality does not grant equal rights, it instead constitutes a deprivation of rights, since it draws women into realms of society where they are inferior. The woman has her own battlefield; with every child that she brings into the world, she fights her battle for the nation.”³⁵

These views on reproduction did not originate with Hitler, but instead had a longer history in Roman legal codes. Hitler adapted Roman ideology found in Augustinian legislations, which advocated reproduction as a way of increasing the empire’s power.³⁶ Roman ideology surrounding reproduction became tethered to Christian religious theology which Hitler drew upon for his own political purposes.³⁷ This combination of Roman and Christian ideology was weaponized by Hitler to advance his nationalist agenda and build a third empire. German women who had multiple births were given the “Ehrenzeichen der Deutschen Mutter,” which translates to the “Cross of Honor of the German Mother.” This was a way for Hitler to link a traditional symbol for Christianity to his Nazi legislation on female reproduction. Rolf Wiggerhaus, a Nazi eugenicist, discussed “Kindersegen,” a German word referring to women with children, as assets to the empire. Wiggerhaus said “The worth of a nation is shown in the willingness of its women to become valuable mothers. Germany must once again become a fertile land of mothers and children; the existence or non-existence of our people is decided solely by the mother.”³⁸

Moments in Soviet History. London: Gollancz, 1924; Alexandre Avdeev, Alain Blum, and Irina Troitskaya., "The History of Abortion Statistics in Russia and the USSR from 1900 to 1991," *Population: An English Selection* 7 (1995): 39-66. David Heer, "Abortion, Contraception, and Population Policy in the Soviet Union," *Demography* 2 (1965): 531-39. Susan Gross Solomon, "The Demographic Argument in Soviet Debates over the Legalization of Abortion in the 1920's," *Cahiers Du Monde Russe Et Soviétique* 33, no. 1 (1992): 59-81.

³⁵ Adolf Hitler (September, 1935) Speech.

³⁶ David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians* (Synkrisis. 2017) 1-39.

³⁷ David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians* (Synkrisis. 2017) 39-84.

³⁸ Quote found on "Alpha History." *Alpha History: Nazi Germany*. <http://alphahistory.com/nazigermany/women-in-nazi-germany/> (accessed November 10, 2013).

The Nazis used laws on reproduction as a way of controlling populations. For German women, this meant increasing the number of births they had throughout their lifetime. For Jewish women, these laws were a form of enacting genocide through forced abortions and sterilizations. Holocaust historian James Glass writes, “No other genocide had its major impetus in the language of science, law, and administration of the society.”³⁹ The Nazis created a legal basis for their genocide against Jewish populations in Europe. These laws on reproduction served as the legal foundation for forced abortions, sterilizations, and killings used throughout ghettos and in the concentration camp system. It is important to note that while these legal codes influenced the policies throughout the concentration camp system, the camps themselves had different methods of managing pregnancy for Jewish women. I will now examine the policies and experiences of pregnant women in transition, work, and death camps in order to highlight how each type of camp regulated female reproduction.

Ghettoization and Transition Camps: Theresienstadt

Theresienstadt was a ghetto-camp hybrid located outside of the city of Prague and served a unique purpose for the Nazis as a family camp used for propaganda. Theresienstadt, also referred to as Terezin, was advertised as a home for the elderly and was marketed to Jewish families as an “end camp,” meaning that families would not be sent further East from Theresienstadt. Being “sent East,” was a constant fear for Jews living in central Europe, especially for those already relocated into ghettos. While the extent of the horror of the concentration camps was not yet known to many Jewish communities, the fear of deportation

³⁹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 23.

was pervasive throughout ghettos. This made the promise of security and stability highly encouraging and resulted in families signing contracts to move to Theresienstadt to work, alongside those coming into the ghetto from Prague.⁴⁰ Theresienstadt was a walled off garrison town that provided the perfect setting for the Nazis to structure their camp. Conditions were crowded, with limited access to food and equipped medical facilities.⁴¹ This home for the elderly, family camp, and ghetto was a site of misery and death for thousands.

The personal narrative of Anka Nathanova details her experience in Terezin while pregnant. Anka Nathanova was sent to Terezin in November, 1941, along with her husband and family.⁴² Though Anka Nathanova was in the same camp as her husband, men and women were housed in separate barracks. Concentration camps had separate units for men and women in order to keep couples from having sexual intercourse to avoid pregnancy.⁴³ Occasional exceptions were made for camps with family sections. These sections had small spaces where families would be housed together to be used as propaganda for the Nazi regime to prove to the Red Cross that the camps were following international laws.⁴⁴ Anka Nathanova was separated from her husband and parents in the camp, but was able to find moments where she and her

⁴⁰ For documentary film on contracts and photographs of documents see Infobase, Film Distributor, and MVD. *Theresienstadt: Holocaust. Holocaust*. 2017.

⁴¹ For medical provisions in Theresienstadt see Kateřina Horáčková, Ševčovičová, Andrea, Hrstka, Zdenek, Wichsová, Jana, and Zaviš, Monika, "Paediatrics in Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Central European Journal of Public Health* 28, no. 2 (2020): 155-60; Anna Hájková, "Medicine in Theresienstadt," *Social History of Medicine: The Journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 1 (2020): 79-105; Margalit Shlain, "Nursing in the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 36 (2020): 60-85; Ritvo and Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, Theresienstadt health care, 28-33, 64-70, 142; Matthew R Smallman-Raynor, and Cliff, Andrew D. "Theresienstadt: A Geographical Picture of Transports, Demography, and Communicable Disease in a Jewish Camp-Ghetto, 1941-45," *Social Science History* 44, no. 4 (2020): 615-39.

⁴² Eva Clarke, "Against All Odds: Born in Mauthausen with Eva Clarke," *The Library Channel*, July 2, 2018.

⁴³ Eva Clarke, "Against All Odds: Born in Mauthausen with Eva Clarke," *The Library Channel*, July 2, 2018.

⁴⁴ For information on Family Camps see Shimon Adler, "Block 31: The Children's Block in the Family Camp at Birkenau," *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1994): 281-315; Judith Hemmendinger and Robert Krell, *The Children of Buchenwald: Child Survivors of the Holocaust and Their Post-war Lives* (Jerusalem: Gefen House, 2000); Ruth Schwertfeger, *Women of Theresienstadt: Voices from a Concentration Camp* (New York: Berg, 1989).

husband could meet in secret and ultimately conceive their son. When asked by her daughter years later why she dared to take such a risk, she replied that, “It was one of the few pleasures left that kept us alive.”⁴⁵

Nathanova’s pregnancy put her life at risk; Nazi policy considered a Jewish woman becoming pregnant within the ghettos and camp system a crime.⁴⁶ Anton Burger, the SS camp commandant of Theresienstadt, ordered that pregnancies be reported to his office.⁴⁷ Not only was becoming pregnant considered a crime, it was illegal to hide pregnancies in the camp; all pregnancies had to be reported. Pregnant women who were seven months along in their pregnancies would be forced to receive abortions and those further along would be made to sign legal documents agreeing to have their babies euthanized after birth.⁴⁸ The Nazi officials at Theresienstadt would not murder the mothers, but instead used abortions and committed infanticide after women gave birth. This allowed for the women to continue to provide forced labor for the Nazis in the ghettos.

These regulations raise the following question: How did Jewish couples react to the laws regarding sex and pregnancy during ghettoization as part of the initial stages of entering the camp system? Some women had decided with their partners that they would abstain from sexual intercourse or use birth control in order to avoid pregnancy and the dangers that would accompany caring for children in a ghetto or camp.⁴⁹ Birth control was limited, but effective, for Jewish families in managing the birth rates of children and family planning.⁵⁰ Nazi officials

⁴⁵ Anka Bergman and Eva Clarke, interview by Emily Davis, *The Baby Born in a Concentration Camp*, BBC One, April 19, 2011.

⁴⁶ Wendy Holden, *Born Survivors: Three Young Mothers and Their Extraordinary Story of Courage, Defiance, and Hope* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015) 106.

⁴⁷ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 107.

⁴⁸ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 107-108.

⁴⁹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, birth control: 29, 30.

⁵⁰ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, birth rates: 29, 30.

encouraged lectures on birth control in ghettos by Jewish doctors and, at times, distributed birth control as a means of controlling the Jewish population they had imprisoned.⁵¹ Oskar Rosenfeld, a survivor of the Lodz ghetto, kept a diary where he recorded how couples abstained from sex or lost their sexual desires all together. In fragmented sentences, he wrote, “Women without periods, complete death of the erotic, especially among the Western Jews, thus no marriages... Lovemaking has on the whole withered away.”⁵²

The other approach couples had was to seek comfort and intimacy during this period in which their fate was unknown, just as Nathanova had done.⁵³ This should not be treated as a form of willful carelessness, but rather a form of coping with the traumatic situation couples found themselves in. While the SS had made marriages in ghettos illegal as a way of limiting pregnancies, there were couples who married in secret and engaged in sexual intercourse with their partner.⁵⁴ Sex became a way for couples to express love, hope, and desire during this period of uncertainty and unrest. Some couples viewed the risks involved with intercourse to be relatively low with the end of the war approaching. This was a way for couples to express their hope that liberation would arrive before the pregnancies reached the ninth month.

Another element to consider when studying pregnancy in ghettos was the risk of forced prostitution, sexual slavery, and sexual assault on women in ghettos and hybrid camps.⁵⁵ Sexual

⁵¹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, birth control: 29, 30.

⁵² Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 69

⁵³ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 27.

⁵⁴ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 68

⁵⁵ For information on forced prostitution, sexual acts, and sexual assault to women in ghettos, see Anna Hájková, “Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 no. 3 (2013): 503-533; Katarzyna Person “Sexual Violence during the Holocaust: The Case of Forced Prostitution in the Warsaw Ghetto,” *Shofar* 33, no. 2 (2015): 103-21; Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, on sexual violence 7-8, 270, 290-92, 332-333, 336, 340-42, 346; on prostitution in ghettos see page 163. Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) on sexual violence see 6, 7, 133; on prostitution see 17-18, 190.

violence against females carried the risk of becoming pregnant. Sexual barter was part of a larger sexual economy in Theresienstadt between inmates and the SS as a way of securing resources.⁵⁶ Sex was also used as a method of survival for women in ghettos who were desperate for resources for themselves and their families. There were brothels where Jewish women were forced into prostitution and sexual assaulted. Additionally, sexual violence was used as acts of oppression, supremacy, and warfare by the Nazis.⁵⁷ The SS guards in charge of the ghettos would often inflict sex-based violence on Jewish women with impunity.

If a woman became pregnant in a ghetto or transition camp, either by consensual sex or rape, they would likely face five possible outcomes: miscarriage, abortion, childbirth, euthanasia of the child, or death of both mother and child. Miscarriages in ghettos are difficult to analyze because there is very little data available to historians regarding their frequency. The conditions of ghettos and transition camps were horrendous, with very little food and sanitation, which could have contributed to an increased chance in a pregnancy ending in a miscarriage. A comparative case study is the Dutch Famine of 1945, when malnutrition led to increased prenatal health risks and complications.⁵⁸ This was because of the starvation women experienced, which

⁵⁶ Anna Hájková, "Sexual Barter in Times of Genocide: Negotiating the Sexual Economy of the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38 no. 3 (2013): 503-533

⁵⁷ For more information on brothels in ghettos see Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 116.

⁵⁸ For sources on the effects of starvation on pregnancy in case studies on the Dutch Famine of 1945 see Veenendaal MV, Painter RC, de Rooij SR, Bossuyt PM, van der Post JA, Gluckman PD, Hanson MA, Roseboom TJ. "Transgenerational effects of prenatal exposure to the 1944-45 Dutch famine," *BJOG* 5 (2013): 548-53; Stein AD, Lumey LH., "The Relationship Between Maternal and Offspring Birth Weights after Maternal Prenatal Famine Exposure: the Dutch Famine Birth Cohort Study," *Journal of Human Biology* 72 (2000): 641-54; Rooij SR, Veenendaal MV, Räikkönen K, Roseboom TJ. "Personality and Stress Appraisal in Adults Prenatally Exposed to the Dutch Famine," *Early Human Development* 88 (2012 May): 321-5.

impacted their ability to reproduce. It is difficult for starved bodies to become or maintain a healthy pregnancy.⁵⁹

Primary sources from women who survived ghettoization and the camp system tend to discuss the long-term impact the conditions could potentially have on their reproductive health and future pregnancies, with the fear of miscarriage or infertility.⁶⁰ Menstruation for females in ghettos tended to become irregular, lighter, and sometimes stop altogether.⁶¹ The cessation of a menstrual period is referred to as amenorrhea. The rise in cases of amenorrhea raised concern for Jewish women about their ability to become pregnant, maintain a pregnancy, and have children after the war. Amenorrhea also caused panic for women who saw the loss of their period as a sign that they were pregnant and had to be told by doctors in the ghetto that they had instead lost their period without becoming pregnant.⁶²

Women did become pregnant in Theresienstadt. As previously mentioned, the SS camp commandant Burger ordered pregnancies in Theresienstadt to be reported and for the women to receive abortions. Abortions fell into two categories. The first were forced abortions that Nazis made Jewish women receive. The second, were abortions that inmates preformed in secret to save the lives of women within the concentration camps.⁶³ As women became further entrapped within the camp system, abortions were often performed by other inmates in secret. The

⁵⁹ For more information on medical research into pregnancy and starvation see Roseboom TJ, Painter RC, van Abeelen AF, Veenendaal MV, de Rooij SR. "Hungry in the Womb: What are the Consequences? Lessons from the Dutch Famine," *Maturitas* (2012): 141-5.

⁶⁰ For long term health impact on pregnancy see survivor narratives in Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 354, 355-57, 364-66, 371-74.

⁶¹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, (menstruation cessation) 298, 315, 370. Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow*, (menstruation supplies) 94, 213; (cessation) 42, 214, 250; (nutrition and menstruation) 15.

⁶² Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 71

⁶³ For more information on forced abortions by the SS and secret abortions by inmates, see the discussion in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Brandeis University Press, Waltham: Massachusetts, 2010) 156-175.

abortions were used to try and prevent pregnant women from being killed. Forced abortions were compulsory for women in ghettos, transition camps, and as forced laborers in Germany because the Nazis wanted to keep these women alive to provide labor, but did not want them to have children. All doctors in ghettos were under orders from the SS to perform abortions should they discover a Jewish woman was pregnant.⁶⁴ Abortions in Theresienstadt were compulsory by 1943 and women who gave birth in secret were ordered onto transports to death camps.⁶⁵ Lack of compliance with the order resulted in death for the woman, infant, and at times the entire family.⁶⁶

Gynecological practices within ghettos were ordered to perform abortions on pregnant women the SS arrested.⁶⁷ Data from the Vilna ghetto shows that around 257 women were hospitalized for abortions in 1942.⁶⁸ Dr. Moshe Figenberg, who operated a gynecological practice in the Vilna ghetto, testified in the trial of SS guard Martin Weiss about the conditions facing women in the Vilna ghetto. “Because the death penalty loomed over any woman who gave birth in the ghetto, the women’s department in the hospital where I worked was loaded down with abortion cases.”⁶⁹ Amenorrhea, as a result of starvation in ghettos, led many women to believe they could not become pregnant, but there were cases of women who had pregnancies after they had lost the ability to menstruate.⁷⁰ Dr. Aharon Peretz, a gynecologist in the Kovno ghetto, described how women, who became pregnant after the loss of their periods, were forced to receive abortions.⁷¹ This raised the issue of whether or not doctors could force Jewish women

⁶⁴ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 43-50.

⁶⁵ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 106-7.

⁶⁶ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 72-3

⁶⁷ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, “Women in the Holocaust,” *Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*.

⁶⁸ Dalia Ofer and Lenore J. Weitzman, “Women in the Holocaust,” *Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*.

⁶⁹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74.

⁷⁰ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74.

⁷¹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74.

in ghettos to have abortions. Forced abortions were a form of sexual assault against Jewish women and required a medical instrument to be inserted into a woman's uterus through her vagina without her consent. Leaders in the Shavli Judenrat, a Jewish ghetto council debated this matter in 1943; their moral dilemma played out in the notes from the meeting.

There was a birth recently in Kovno and all members of the family were shot and killed. Can the pregnant woman be forced to have abortions performed? There are about 20 pregnant women in the ghetto, most of them in the first few months, but some who are already in the fourth or fifth month and one even in the eighth month. Only two of the pregnant women refuse to have an abortion... They must be persuaded to have an abortion. They must be told what happened in Kovno and Riga... be warned in the presence of the doctor and a representative of the Delegation, and the full danger that waits them be explained... How can one perform an abortion on a woman who has already reached the eight months of her pregnancy? And what will happen if despite everything the child is born alive? Shall we kill it? Very difficult in a case like this for no doctor will take upon himself the responsibility of killing a live child... perhaps we should let the child be born and give it to a Christian? ... We cannot allow the child to be born because we are required to report every case of a birth.⁷²

This raised the discussion on how abortion was viewed by the Jewish councils and the religious ramifications for Jews living in the ghettos. Rabbi Oshry was in the Kovno ghetto and advocated for abortion as a way of saving the life of the mother in the face of death to both mother and child.⁷³ Pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth in the ghettos created dangers that pressured Jewish Councils and Rabbis toward adapting Jewish Law to try and save the lives of women. For example, under Jewish Law corpses were not allowed to be defiled, but when a pregnant woman was shot by the SS this law had to be adapted by Rabbi Oshry for the doctor to perform a caesarean on her corpse to save the baby.⁷⁴ This also raised questions about doctors performing caesarean's on women close to death who would not survive the operation. Who should they save, the mother or the child? Jewish councils had to make decisions that challenged

⁷² As cited in Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 73.

⁷³ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74-5.

⁷⁴ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74-5.

their religious beliefs in order to try and save as many women as they could. This resulted in an increased number of Jewish doctors aiding in forced abortions to try and save the life of the mother.

Forced abortions were not only used during ghettoization and in transition camps, forced laborers coming from Eastern Europe to Germany were also made to have abortions if they became pregnant. Elizabeth R. Baer's and Myrna Goldenberg's work, *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust* examines pregnancy and abortion for forced laborers under Nazi rule. There are larger bases of personal narratives which detail the experiences of female forced laborers who were made to have abortions. Their narratives provide historians with an avenue to explore abortions outside the camp system. Forced laborers living in Germany were targets of violence, and women experienced the majority of sex-based violence and rape that carried the risk of pregnancy.⁷⁵ Because of the "Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935" discussed earlier, the pregnancies of forced laborers were also subject to forced abortions under the same legal regulations that Jewish women in ghettos faced.

For Jewish women who managed to escape forced abortions and gave birth in ghettos, there was still the risk of death for the mother and infant. Babies were taken from mothers and killed by the SS when discovered. Women were sometimes killed immediately after they delivered or sent on transports East to death camps. In one case, an infant delivered by caesarean after the SS shot the mother was killed when the Nazi officers of the ghetto realized the baby had survived.⁷⁶ In another instance, Macha Rolnikas, a 14-year-old girl living in the Vilna ghetto in

⁷⁵ Baer and Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression*, 48, 54, 78-84, 262.

⁷⁶ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 74-5.

1941, wrote in her diary that she saw a pregnant woman crawling in the street in labor. She recounted how the woman screamed when she experienced contractions and died after giving birth due to the lack of medical aid.

All night long, rolled up like a ball, exhausted, full of pain, she felt the approaching delivery. She continues to advance on all fours. She flops down in the middle of the street, very close to the entrance of the ghetto, crawls to the sidewalk so as not to get run over. She won't ever get up again. She turns over and over in pain, in a kind of convulsion, writhing like a snake. She startles and death comes to interrupt her anguish at the same moment as her little girl comes to this world of pain and shadows. She is found next to her and is taken into the ghetto and named Ghetala. Poor little girl.⁷⁷

Theresienstadt had pregnant women who miscarried, received forced abortions, and gave birth. Nathanova, who was pregnant in Theresienstadt, managed to still be excited about her pregnancy and hopeful that news of the Allies' advances and the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto were signs of the war's end approaching.⁷⁸ She had limited access to the food and nutrition that she needed, but even without prenatal care she was able to maintain her pregnancy. Her stomach had started to swell and at four and a half months she felt her baby kick for the first time.⁷⁹ In an interview she gave she recalled the joy she felt while working and that she told the other women, "It started moving!"⁸⁰ However, when the SS camp commandant found out she was several months pregnant, he ordered her baby to be euthanized after birth.⁸¹ When it was explained to Nathanova that she, as well as four other women, had to sign a document that legally authorized the Nazis to murder her baby after the birth, she nearly fainted from the horror.⁸²

⁷⁷ Laurel Holliday, *Children in the Holocaust and World War II: Their Secret Diaries* (New York: Pocket Books, 1995), 187-8.

⁷⁸ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 107.

⁷⁹ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 107.

⁸⁰ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 107.

⁸¹ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 108.

⁸² Holden, *Born Survivors*, 108.

Theresienstadt had a hospital and infant shelter in place, but did not want women to become pregnant or give birth. The purpose of the camp was to serve as a source of propaganda for Germans as well as an international audience through the medium of film.⁸³ The depictions of Theresienstadt in these propaganda films was meant to pacify the audience and crush rumors of the genocide against Jewish populations. Because Theresienstadt was the site of Nazi propaganda, the ghetto-camp hybrid had medical units to show to the Red Cross. Dr. Bimko, a Jewish doctor sent to Theresienstadt, ran a care center for children in the camp and was able to provide medical aid.⁸⁴ The medical units had only basic provisions to provide care and had to do so without proper sanitation facilities.⁸⁵ Those who were severely ill and dying were sent on transports to death camps to make the hospital units appear less crowded with healthier patients at any time filming was taking place in Theresienstadt.⁸⁶

Nathanova and a few other pregnant women were allowed access to a hospital within the camp run by imprisoned Jewish doctors.⁸⁷ She gave birth to her son in 1944, fully expecting him to be murdered, and was shocked when the Nazis let him live. It is unclear whether or not the Nazis in charge of Theresienstadt had allowed some infants to live for the purpose of creating propaganda or if there were additional factors which influenced their decision. Regardless, the

⁸³ To see clips of the propaganda film of Theresienstadt, see Infobase, Film Distributor, and MVD. *Theresienstadt: Holocaust. Holocaust*. 2017.

⁸⁴ Kateřina Horáčková, Ševčovičová, Andrea, Hrstka, Zdenek, Wichsová, Jana, and Zaviš, Monika, "Paediatrics in Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Central European Journal of Public Health* 28, no. 2 (2020): 155-60.

⁸⁵ For medical provisions in Theresienstadt see Kateřina Horáčková, Ševčovičová, Andrea, Hrstka, Zdenek, Wichsová, Jana, and Zaviš, Monika, "Paediatrics in Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Central European Journal of Public Health* 28, no. 2 (2020): 155-60. Anna Hájková, "Medicine in Theresienstadt," *Social History of Medicine: The Journal of the Society for the Social History of Medicine* 33, no. 1 (2020): 79-105; Margalit Shlain, "Nursing in the Theresienstadt Ghetto," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues*, no. 36 (2020): 60-85; Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) Theresienstadt health care, 28-33, 64-70, 142. Matthew R Smallman-Raynor, and Cliff, Andrew D. "Theresienstadt: A Geographical Picture of Transports, Demography, and Communicable Disease in a Jewish Camp-Ghetto, 1941-45," *Social Science History* 44, no. 4 (2020): 615-39.

⁸⁶ Infobase, Film Distributor, and MVD. *Theresienstadt: Holocaust. Holocaust*. 2017.

⁸⁷ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 105.

conditions of the camp were so deplorable that Nathanova's baby died of pneumonia a couple months after birth.⁸⁸ Before the end of the war, Theresienstadt was liquidated and the inmates were sent to work and death camps for selections, meaning that the families who were kept alive in the family camp were separated and murdered.

Nathanova's story, and the experiences of the women in her unit, do not fit into the standard narrative of pregnancy in ghettos or transition camps, and are often overlooked, but it is important to recognize that they were not alone in their experiences. While there were around 350 abortions in Theresienstadt, there were also 230 births.⁸⁹ There were a few camps that provided minimum supplies for medical services for the people within. This was not the standard for camps and can give the misleading perception that the camp officials were concerned with the wellbeing of the inmates. This was definitely not the case; the camps that had rudimentary medical facilities were there to keep prisoners alive so they could work. This meant, though, that there were some Jewish babies who were born and not euthanized.

This points to the idea that the policies regulating pregnancy in the camps were not carried out in a uniform manner. While there were a few camps that allowed infants to live, it is important to remember that the end goal of the Nazis was to eliminate all Jews. The idea was that even infants who were born would eventually be killed as part of the Final Solution. Therefore, even in camps where babies were born, the threat always existed that pregnant women and mothers with babies could be sent on a transportation East to face selections at death camps. While ghettos and transition camps were the sites of death for many, the Nazis did not have the

⁸⁸ Anka Bergman and Eva Clarke, interview by Emily Davis, *The Baby Born in a Concentration Camp*, BBC One, April 19, 2011; Eva Clarke, "Against All Odds: Born in Mauthausen with Eva Clarke," *The Library Channel*, July 2, 2018.

⁸⁹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 79

same instruments for committing the mass murder on the same scale as they did in the death camps with gas chambers. As a result, transition camps and ghettos created different conditions for pregnant women leading Nazi officials to rely on abortions and infanticides to control Jewish populations. These became adapted survival methods used by Jewish inmates as they were transported into work camps.

Work Concentration Camps for Women: Ravensbruck

Ravensbruck was constructed as a camp for female inmates and provides historians with a case study on how a women's camp handled issues relating to reproductive health.⁹⁰ Women could enter work camps from ghettos with early or concealed pregnancies, or could become pregnant during the duration of their captivity as a result of rape and forced prostitution. Women who were visibly pregnant were sent to death camps, not to Ravensbruck. This meant that women would either hide their pregnancies when entering the camp, or became pregnant during their captivity. It is important to break down how women became pregnant when looking at sex-based dangers for women in the concentration camp system. As previously stated, sexual abuse and assault were pervasive throughout ghettos and used against forced laborers in Germany. Work camps were sites of heightened violence and abuse towards vulnerable inmate groups.

⁹⁰ For background information on Ravensbruck see Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, Ravensbruck 89, 90, 283, 329; Judith Tydor Baumel, *Double Jeopardy: Gender and the Holocaust*, Ravensbruck 5, 21-4, 26, 41, 6-, 71; Baer and Goldenberg, *Experience and Expression*, Ravensbruck 5, 57, 61-3, 188; Roger A. Ritvo and Diane M. Plotkin, *Sisters in Sorrow: Voices of Care in the Holocaust* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1998) Ravensbruck 16-17, 26-27, 248, 274; Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004); Judith Buber Agassi, *The Jewish Women Prisoners of Ravensbrück: Who Were They?* (Oxford: One world, 2007); Jack G. Morrison, *Ravensbrück: Everyday Life in a Women's Concentration Camp, 1939-45* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2000); Grit Philipp, *Kalendarium der Ereignisse im Frauen-Konzentrationslager Ravensbrück, 1939-1945* (Berlin: Metropol, 1999).

Women were separated from their families and imprisoned in Ravensbruck, this led to an increase in sex-based violence from the SS guards.

Forced prostitution was a form of sexual slavery common in Ravensbruck. For female inmates, the power disparity within the camp system created a sex-based hierarchy that used sexual assault as a way of controlling and dominating women. Sexual assault was not only used against women in the concentration camps, but women became the main targets for sex-based violence and acts of control, like rape, by the SS guards. Prostitution became a survival mechanism for some women in Ravensbruck as a way of gaining access to life saving food and supplies. Women in Ravensbruck could be forced to serve as prostitutes in order to receive food, which should be treated as examples of sexual abuse and assault. Additionally, there were women who had been employed as sex workers in Germany who were arrested as “asocial” and sent to Ravensbruck, where they were used as prostitutes by the SS guards against their will.⁹¹

Women in Ravensbruck were used by the SS guards as commodities for a sex-based economy. The SS forced these women to work as prostitutes for male inmates within the camp system. Females forced into prostitution were used to create a reward system for male inmates within the camps and provided entertainment for the SS guards to watch. Women coming from Ravensbruck were forced to serve as prostitutes in Buchenwald, Mauthausen, Sachsenhausen, Neuengamme, Dachau, Flossenbug, and Mittlebau-Dora.⁹² A sixteen-year-old girl named Margarethe W. was brought to Ravensbruck in 1939 and labeled as “asocial” because she had

⁹¹ For more information on prostitution in Nazi Germany see Victoria Harris, "The Role of the Concentration Camps in the Nazi Repression of Prostitutes, 1933-9," *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 3 (2010): 675-98.

⁹² Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 214.

sexual intercourse with a Jew.⁹³ She was then outsourced by the SS in 1943 to work as a forced prostitute in Buchenwald, where she tried to kill herself.⁹⁴ Forced prostitution was a form of sexual assault and violence used against women, and carried with it the risk of pregnancy and increased rates of suicide among female inmates.⁹⁵

It is critical for historians to draw their attention towards the potential risks of pregnancy posed by forced prostitution for female inmates. Forced prostitution, in general, has often been an overlooked area within the historiography on the Holocaust. In *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust*, Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel make the argument that forced prostitution was a form of sexual slavery used against women. This helps historians redefine notions of prostitution within the concentration camp system by connection prostitution to sexual violence. Hedgepeth and Saidel critically examine forced prostitution and forced abortions as forms of sexual assault and violence towards women, but do not dive in depth into the risks of pregnancy in association with forced prostitution. Not only was forced prostitution used to sexual assault women in the camps, it also placed women at risk for becoming pregnant.

Forced prostitution was not the only form of sex-based violence towards women in Ravensbruck. Women, of all ethnicities, were targets for sexual assault and rape by SS guards. Mass rape of Jewish women and girls by the SS would often be followed by mass shootings to eliminate any chances of pregnancy and mixing of “Aryan” and Jewish blood.⁹⁶ The Nazis framed the sexual assault of Jewish women within this conversation of “Rassenschande,” which

⁹³ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 214.

⁹⁴ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 214.

⁹⁵ For more information on forced prostitution during the Holocaust, see the discussion in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Brandeis University Press, Waltham: Massachusetts, 2010) 13-29.

⁹⁶ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 290-92.

literally translated means racial shame. “Rassenschande” was the ideological backing for the “Law for the Protection of German Blood and Honor: September 15, 1935,” that made it illegal for Germans to procreate with Jews. It also influenced how Nazis viewed the rape of Jewish women. The rape of Jewish women was not prohibited because it violated women sexually, but because it ran the risk of Germans impregnating Jewish women and “mixing” their blood. This distinction is critical in order to understand the act of sexual assault and violence towards Jewish women in the concentration camps.

The SS would, at times, murder the women they raped, especially if they suspected that they had become pregnant as a result of the attack.⁹⁷ This was not confined to Ravensbruck, but was instead a threat to all women in the concentration camps. For example, Walter Glaue, a German factory manager outside Ravensbruck, raped Bella Sperling and had her shot because he feared she had become pregnant.⁹⁸ Fritz Bartenschlager, a Nazi guard, would pick out women during selections to sexually abuse and rape. Bartenschlager took five Jewish women from selections and forced them to serve him at a party naked, and then had his guests rape the women.⁹⁹ Herbert Boettcher and Franz Shippers joined Bartenschlager and raped then murdered three of the women, including a nineteen-year-old girl named Gucia Milchman.¹⁰⁰ The SS feared legal repercussions should the women become pregnant with “mixed” children, so they murdered the Jewish women after having committed sexual assault as a way of preventing pregnancy.

This has led historians to reexamine the intersection between gender and violence for women in the Holocaust. Rochelle G. Saidel discusses topics on sex, gender, and violence in *The*

⁹⁷ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 290-92.

⁹⁸ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 290.

⁹⁹ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 290.

¹⁰⁰ Ofer and Weitzman, *Women in the Holocaust*, 291.

Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp. Saidel makes the argument that women in the concentration camps had a unique set of experiences as a result of their gender.¹⁰¹ Saidel connects the role of gender and reproduction without conflate the two concepts. However, while pregnancy was a major threat to women in the camp system, Saidel only delegates a small section of her book to its effects on the lives of women in Ravensbruck concentration camp.¹⁰² Historians who study Ravensbruck cite reproduction as an element that influenced the gendered experience of women in the camp, but devote little space to unpacking its impact on female inmates.

For women who did become pregnant in Ravensbruck, they either had an abortion in secret, were forced to kill their child after birth, or were killed when their pregnancy was discovered.¹⁰³ It is critical to note that abortions in work camps differed from abortions in ghettos and transition camps. During ghettoization, abortions were compulsory for pregnant women because the Nazis still saw use in Jewish women as potential slave laborers, but did not want to have to care for any children. In work camps, Jewish women were already being exploited for their labor and were close to death. Pregnancy singled women out for extermination because the Nazis viewed them as unable to provide further labor. The Nazis transitioned away from forcing women into having abortions in work camps and would instead kill them or send them on the next transport to a death camp. This meant that the abortions performed in Ravensbruck were done increasingly by inmates and doctors in secret without the knowledge of the SS.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 204-217.

¹⁰² Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 204-212.

¹⁰³ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 211.

¹⁰⁴ For more information on forced abortions by the SS and secret abortions by inmates, see the discussion in Sonja M. Hedgepeth and Rochelle G. Saidel, *Sexual Violence Against Jewish Women During the Holocaust* (Brandeis University Press, Waltham: Massachusetts, 2010) 156-175.

Inmates performed abortions in the middle of the night to try and save the lives of other women. These abortions happened with no medical equipment or knowledge and carried the risks of infection, bleeding, and death for the women. The inmates performing abortions were also risking their lives, should the SS guards discover that they had known about a pregnancy and not reported it, they would have been shot. For women who managed to hide their pregnancies, their infants were killed after birth. Saidel uses the term “child-death” in lieu of childbirth to describe the infanticide of newborns by inmates in order to protect the life of the mother. Some infants died on their own soon after birth or were stillborn. For example, Lola Goldstein Taubman, a Jewish inmate in Ravensbruck, witnessed the birth of a stillborn in the bunk next to her. She recalled that “While in Ravensbruck, a woman in the bunk next to me gave birth to a dead baby. We didn’t have any scissors, so they tore the umbilical cord and threw the baby away.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 211.



Figure 2: Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 14. An inmate, whose name is not known, drew this picture of a woman receiving a beating by an SS guard.

If women did not have abortions and continued with their pregnancies, they faced the dangers of execution or deportation should they be discovered during selections. Pregnant women in work camps were sometimes made to endure public executions as a warning to other women about the dangers of pregnancy. In Ravensbruck and other work camps, corporal punishment was a form of public punishment and was sanctioned by Heinrich Himmler, who ordered that women receive whippings while naked as an “educational punishment.”¹⁰⁶ The image above depicts the beatings women would receive, while bound to whipping tables. These punishments were done under the supervision of the doctors in the camps. The doctors were

¹⁰⁶ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 15.

there to confirm that the punishment had taken place according to Himmler's guidelines, not to provide medical aid for the victim. Two SS doctors can be seen in the image above alongside the camp guards. Anneliese Kohlmann, an SS guard in the Neugraben subcamp, was infamous for beating and whipping pregnant women until they passed out or died.¹⁰⁷

As conditions worsened in work camps and more people were deported to death camps, it is critical to reexamine how pregnancy was affected and the changes to women's bodies as a result of long-term starvation and abuse from work camps. The bodies of pregnant women within work camps experienced a physical deterioration which concealed the pregnancies of many women during subsequent selections. This led to an increase in abortions performed by inmates in secret, rather than the forced abortions used by the Nazis during ghettoization. Additionally, infanticides were used by inmates after birth in the hopes of saving the life of the mother. Inmates adapted abortions and infanticides as survival methods for pregnant women in the concentration camps. Pregnant women who were discovered in work camps were sent on transports to the death camps: Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka, Majdanek, or Auschwitz.

Extermination and Work Camp: Auschwitz-Birkenau

Auschwitz-Birkenau was a complex of around 40 camps culminating in a death factory. Auschwitz-Birkenau was constructed in 1940, and over the course of the Second World War was the site of death for 1.1 million adults and children.¹⁰⁸ Large groups of people were deported in

¹⁰⁷ For more information on Anneliese Kohlmann, see Daniel Patrick Brown, *The Camp Women: The Female Auxiliaries Who Assisted the SS in Running the Nazi Concentration Camp System* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Military History, 2002).

¹⁰⁸ Helena Kubica, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), gas chambers: 157-225.

crowded cattle-cars from ghettos and occupied territories to Auschwitz where they would be selected for either labor or immediate death. This meant that there were women who had become pregnant in either work camps or ghettos arriving at Auschwitz to face selection. Selections were used to sort groups as they arrived, but were also a staple of daily life within the camps. In order to break down the selection process for pregnant women and new mothers coming to Auschwitz-Birkenau, it is first critical to understand how pregnant women and mothers were transported to the death factory.

Many Jewish women entering extermination camps were coming from ghettos. Pregnant women and women who had recently given birth were transported straight to death camps or death camps with work sections, where they were sent to gas chambers. Women who gave birth or had young children were among the first to be deported to extermination camps as the Nazis began to liquidate ghettos. Abel Herzberg, a Holocaust survivor, wrote in his diary, “The sick, the blind, the hurt, the mentally disturbed, pregnant women, the dying, orphans, newborn babies- none were spared on the Tuesdays when the cattle-trucks were being loaded with human freight for Poland.”¹⁰⁹ This listing of various groups from the ghettos demonstrated how the Nazis viewed pregnant women as possessing no further use and were therefore first in line to be killed.

In the Lodz ghetto, for example, a maternity ward was destroyed after the women were sent on transports to death camps. A twelve-year-old boy, whose sister had given birth in the ghetto before being sent on a transport East, witnessed Nazis murdering the infants. He described how the Germans went to the upper story and opened the window so that they could throw the babies out of it. He testified that after the window was opened, “A naked baby was pushed over

¹⁰⁹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 82

the ledge and it dropped to its death directly into the truck below.”¹¹⁰ The SS enjoyed murdering Jewish infants and turned it into a game. “The young SS butcher rolled up his rifle sleeve and caught the very next infant on his bayonet. The blood of the infant flowed down the knife onto the murderer’s arm.”¹¹¹ The women in the ward were sent to death camps to face selections, while the SS killed the infants left behind. The separation of women and infants directly after birth can be seen in the report given by Matylda Gelenter, a survivor of the Katowice ghetto, as she described a public birth that was used as a spectacle before the mother was taken to a death camp.

The Ukrainians and Germans who had broken into her [Mrs. Greenberg’s] house found her giving birth...she was taken from her home in a nightshirt and dragged into the square in front of the town hall... when the birth pangs started, she was dragged onto a dumpster in the yard of the town hall with a crowd of Ukrainians present, who cracked jokes and jeered and watched the pain of childbirth and she gave birth to a child. The child was immediately torn from her arms with its umbilical cord and thrown. It was trampled by the crowd and she was stood on her feet as blood poured out of her for a few hours by the wall of the town hall, afterwards she went with all the others to the train station where they loaded her into a carriage in a train to Belzec.¹¹²

The groups of women coming to Auschwitz-Birkenau included pregnant women, women who had just given birth with their infants, and women who arrived after birth without their infants. These three categories are important to recognize in order to understand how they were seen during the initial selection. The physical condition of these women determined if they were sent to the gas chambers or selected for work. Women were selected for death if they were visibly pregnant, were in poor postpartum health with or without their babies, or were in good health but holding their newborns. Joseph Mengele, the SS officer in charge of selections at Auschwitz, would send healthy women with children to the gas chambers because the children

¹¹⁰ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 82-83

¹¹¹ Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 82-83

¹¹² As cited in Chalmers, *Birth, Sex, and Abuse*, 84

could not work and he wanted to avoid panic by separating mothers from their children.¹¹³ Some of the inmates working on the rail lines during selections would try to take children from mothers to save the lives of women. Norbert Lopper, a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz, recalled in his testimony an instance when he tried to separate a baby from the mother to save her life, but was unable to do so. “There was a young woman of perhaps 20, with a baby. I went over to her and bent down and in a whisper told her to give me the baby. When I told her to give me the baby she started to cry and protest.”¹¹⁴ The photograph below shows a mother and her infant being sent towards the gas chambers as three male inmates watch.



Figure 3: “Photography Collection” United States Holocaust Museum, accessed February 11, 2020. Image shows a mother and her baby being sent in the direction of the gas chambers. Even when the mother was physically fit for work, if she had a baby in her arms, she was sent to the gas chambers.

¹¹³ For more information on children during the Holocaust see Werner T. Angress, *Between Fear & Hope: Jewish Youth in the Third Reich* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); Shimon Adler, “Block 31: The Children’s Block in the Family Camp at Birkenau,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 24 (1994): 281-315; Helena Kubica, “Children” in *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); Deborah Dwork, *Children with a Star: Jewish Youth in Nazi Europe* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); *Children of the Holocaust* [videorecording], Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities & Sciences, 1995. For child testimonies see Anita Brostoff and Sheila Chamovitz, editors, *Flares of Memory: Stories of Childhood during the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Yaffa Eliach, editor, *We Were Children Just Like You* (Brooklyn, NY: Center for Holocaust Studies, Documentation and Research, 1990); Wiktoria Sliwowska, editor, *The Last Eyewitnesses: Children of the Holocaust Speak* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁴ Remy, *Hitler’s Holocaust*.

Lopper's testimony, as well as the personal narratives from other survivors demonstrates the wider impact that reproduction had on inmates during the Holocaust. Pregnancies and children are usually discussed only with regards to female inmates, but male inmates were also traumatized by the murders they witnessed during selections. The drawings of inmates who witnessed the murder of pregnant women and children provide a unique lens into their ordeal and what their experience meant to the emotional state of inmates in the camps. Drawings speak to the lasting effects of the concentration camps on the psychology of those imprisoned and gives a voice to those who were killed in the devastating genocide. Artist and survivor David Olere has spent his life creating a collection of drawings and sculptures that capture the suffering of pregnant women who were experimented on by Joseph Mengele.¹¹⁵ Olere was assigned to the removal of bodies to the camp's crematorium and documented the murder of pregnant women and mothers with infants through his artwork. Olere's drawing, featured below, demonstrates the fear and anguish of mothers arriving in Auschwitz with their children. In the image, the mother is trying to protect her child from the horror of the gas chambers, but is unable to do so. This particular mother and child are later drawn by Olere as corpses on the floor of the gas chamber.

¹¹⁵ "David Olere Collection," United States Holocaust Museum, accessed February 11, 2020. <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/bib32644>. For drawings by children see Státní Židovské Muzeum, *I Never Saw Another Butterfly: Children's Drawings and Poems from Theresienstadt Concentration Camp, 1942-1944* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).



Figure 4: “David Olere Collection,” United States Holocaust Museum, accessed February 11, 2020. Drawing by David Olere, a survivor of the Holocaust. This image was created in October, 1944.

Women who were pregnant but not obviously showing had a different experience during selection. Mengele devised a test for determining if women entering Auschwitz were pregnant. First, he would ask if any of the women were pregnant. Many SS guards would pretend to be gentle with women they suspected might be pregnant by offering them assistance. Priska Lowenbeinova recalled an SS guard whispering to her with a smile, “Are you pregnant, pretty lady?”¹¹⁶ Rachel Abramczyk had a guard pull her off the train and say, “Good Morning pretty lady, are you pregnant?”¹¹⁷ Both women were pregnant, though in the early stages of pregnancy and lied to hide their condition from the SS. Other women entering the camp might not have even known at the time of the selection that they were pregnant. This is what happened to Anka Nathanova who had become pregnant again after the death of her infant son in Theresienstadt. Nathanova was sent to Auschwitz when Theresienstadt started to be liquidated and was unaware

¹¹⁶ Priska Lowenbeinova, Interview 15134, accessed online at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on February 2, 2020 <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/vha15134>.

¹¹⁷ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 34.

that she was pregnant again. It was because she did not have her son with her that she was selected for work, not death.

Priska Lowenbeinova, Rachel Abramczyk, and Anka Nathanova were able to enter Auschwitz because their bodies did not look pregnant and they did not admit to being pregnant. If Joseph Mengele suspected that a woman was secretly pregnant, he would squeeze hard on her breasts to see if any milk would come out.¹¹⁸ He also had the SS guards go down the line of women and perform this act on all of them. This part of his test was not only cruel and dehumanizing, it failed at catching many pregnancies. Women in earlier stages of pregnancy would not have had milk leaking out of their breasts. Additionally, the harsh conditions of the ghettos and camps meant that those women who might have been pregnant were still less likely to have begun lactating. Mengele was ignorant of the fact that strained and starved bodies were often unable to produce milk, and instead thought that his test was guaranteed to discover any hidden pregnancies.

With the initial selection over, there was still the issue of pregnancy once women entered the camp. Their physical conditions led to their bodies deteriorating, an issue that was exacerbated by the harsh labor and horrendous living conditions in Auschwitz. Starved bodies experience a bloating of the stomach that allowed pregnant women in the camps to hide their condition.¹¹⁹ In the image below, the woman in the center of the photograph was pregnant, but was able to hide her pregnancy as a sign of stomach bloating. The women in the photograph all show signs of starvation, specifically in the bloating of their stomachs. There was also the possibility for pregnant women to miscarry as a result of starvation. Some women died because

¹¹⁸ Holden, *Born Survivors*, 145.

¹¹⁹ Saidel, *Ravensbruck Concentration Camp*, 205.

of the lack of food and the unimaginably cruel treatment, so while their pregnancies might have gone unnoticed, they were still killed. It all amounts to a culmination of factors that the Nazis inadvertently created that made pregnancy within the camp even harder to identify.



Figure 5: “Photography Collection” United States Holocaust Museum, accessed February 11, 2020. Image shows a line of women some of whom appear pregnant. The woman in the middle with a dark head covering has a bump showing and others experience a swelling of the belly as their bodies adapt to starvation.

For women who either entered the camp with a concealed pregnancy or became pregnant in the camp, there was the constant threat of extermination and experimentation. Pregnant women would be either killed upon discovery or sent to Mengele for experimentation.¹²⁰ Mengele was particularly fascinated in twin birth and breast feeding.¹²¹ Twins provided a control

¹²⁰ Anne Reamey, “Gisella Perl: Angel and Abortionist in the Auschwitz Death Camp,” *Holocaust Archives*, accessed February 11, 2020, 1-2.

¹²¹ Gerhard Baader, Susan E. Lederer, Morris Low, Florian Schmaltz, and Alexander V. Schwerin, “Pathways to Human Experimentation, 1933-1945: Germany, Japan, and the United States,” *Osiris* 2, no. 20 (2005): 205-31; Lucette Matalon Lagnado and Sheila Cohn Dekel, *Children of the Flames: Dr. Mengele and the Story of the Twins of Auschwitz* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992); Anne Reamey, “Gisella Perl: Angel and Abortionist in the

subject for his horrific experimentation. There is still debate amongst historians to see if Mengele was trying to use twin births to discover how to increase the number of infants born to German women in a single pregnancy. As a result of Mengele's experimentation, some pregnancies were allowed to continue under his strict orders and supervision.



Figure 6: David Olere and Alexandre Oler, Witness: Images of Auschwitz, "The Table," (Richland Hill, Texas: West Wind Press, 1998) 59. In this drawing the artist depicts how pregnant women were used for medical experimentations that subjected them to torture and death.

The types of experiments performed on pregnant women were absolutely barbaric. David Olere drew the image above of a pregnant woman on a medical examination table being restrained by an SS guard as another inserted an instrument into her vagina reaching into her uterus. The insertion of an object into a woman's vagina is a form of sexual assault that was used

Auschwitz Death Camp," *Holocaust Archives*, accessed February 11, 2020; William E. Seidelman, "Mengele Medicus: Medicine's Nazi Heritage," *The Milbank Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1988): 221-39; Günther Schwarberg, *The Murders at Bullenhuser Damm: The SS Doctor and the Children* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984); George M. Weisz, "Managing Pregnancy in Nazi Concentration Camps: The Role of Two Jewish Doctors," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 9, no. 3 (2018): 1-8.

against pregnant women in the concentration camps. This is important to note, because some historians do not categorize medical experimentation as a form of sexual assault. Medical experiments on female genitalia and reproductive organs were used to torture inmates and traumatize those who witnessed the brutality. David Olerer recounted hearing women scream as the SS guards tortured them and he had to wait for them to bleed to death before removing their bodies. It could take days for women to die from the medical experiments performed on them.

In order to try and save women from extermination and experimentation, an inmate named Dr. Giselle Perl, who worked in the hospital at Auschwitz, performed abortions, deliveries, and infanticides to protect the mothers from Mengele. Dr. Perl's task in the medical unit was to report directly to Mengele and inform him of any pregnancies in the camp, but she instead risked her life to save these women.¹²² Dr. Perl performed hundreds of abortions and tried her best to save the lives of women. She wrote in her memoir that she would have to use blunt instruments and sometimes use only her hands to perform abortions on women. These abortions were incredibly painful and Dr. Perl recounts in vivid detail how the women would scream and cry during the procedure and there was nothing she could do to stop the pain.

Some women were too far along in their pregnancies that she had to force labor and others came to her after their water had already broken.¹²³ Inmates recounted in their testimonies during the Nuremberg trials of women giving birth in the crowded barracks with a doctor aiding the mother. One account described a difficult labor that occurred at night saying, "One more final scream, one last push, and the baby has come into this world. The exhausted mother leans

¹²² Dr. Gisella Perl, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1948) 72. For more information see Anne Reamey, "Gisella Perl: Angel and Abortionist in the Auschwitz Death Camp," *Holocaust Archives*, accessed February 11, 2020, 1-2.

¹²³ Dr. Gisella Perl, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1948) 81.

back and closes her eyes.”¹²⁴ It was left to the Jewish doctors and inmates to kill the baby after birth to protect the mother.¹²⁵ Anna Keppich, a Jewish woman in Auschwitz, recalled that in the hospital there were 76 pregnant women, 14 of whom went into labor early while the others were sent to the crematorium.¹²⁶ Keppich wrote, “I saw in the hospital how women who had given birth in a natural way smothered their children because the Germans compelled them to do so... It was hard for me, as a doctor, to give those women injections and to see how other doctors did the same, but we were forced to do so and had to do it.”¹²⁷

Historians have estimated the number of babies born in Auschwitz to range anywhere from seven hundred to over a thousand.¹²⁸ The Nazis killed almost all of these infants, often by drowning them in a bucket in front of the mothers.¹²⁹ Women were forced to kill their own children in order to save them from the pain of Mengele’s experimentation. Ruth Elias, a Jewish prisoner in Auschwitz, recounted in an interview the heartbreaking decision she had to make after going into labor and giving birth to her baby. Mengele was aware of her pregnancy and had ordered for her breasts to be bound painfully in bandage after she gave birth so that she would be unable to breastfeed her baby. After listening to her baby cry for several hours a Jewish doctor working in the hospital brought her an injection of morphine to kill her child and stop the pain.

¹²⁴ Helena Kubica, Editor, *Pregnant Women and Children Born in Auschwitz* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2010) 27.

¹²⁵ Dr. Gisella Perl, *I was a Doctor in Auschwitz* (Madison: International Universities Press, 1948) 83. “In the end it was I who gave her a present- the present of her life- by destroying her passionately desired little boy two days after his birth.”

¹²⁶ Helena Kubica, Editor, *Pregnant Women and Children Born in Auschwitz* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2010) 29.

¹²⁷ Helena Kubica, Editor, *Pregnant Women and Children Born in Auschwitz* (Oświęcim: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, 2010) 29.

¹²⁸ George M. Weisz, "Managing Pregnancy in Nazi Concentration Camps: The Role of Two Jewish Doctors," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 9, no. 3 (2018) 1-8.

¹²⁹ Rochelle G. Saidel, *The Jewish Women of Ravensbruck Concentration Camp* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004) 211.

When Elias was told this she said, “You want me to kill my baby?”¹³⁰ After talking with the doctor for hours, Elias said, “I lost the power to resist. I killed my own baby.”¹³¹

Within this horror, Dr. Perl worked to save the lives of thousands of women in her medical unit. Anne Reamey, a Holocaust historian, compares the Angel of Life, Dr. Perl, with the Angel of Death, Mengele.¹³² Mengele sought to torture and murder Jewish women and Dr. Perl worked to save their lives and shield them from medical experimentation. This juxtaposition between Mengele and Dr. Perl demonstrates the intersectionality of religious imagery and gendered language used by both Holocaust survivors and historians. The Holocaust had major religious ramifications, so the need among historians, especially those coming from a background within Abrahamic traditions, to identify moments of miraculous heroism and angelic figures helps to create meaning within these horrific events. The language surrounding Dr. Perl demonstrates the connection made between women and nurturing, which carries with it a gendered perspective on her role as a medical professional.

Religion is also a useful lens to examine the issue of adoption in Auschwitz. Race and religion cannot be easily separated. The two concepts weave together and influence the ideology behind the Nazi party. The concentration camps were a means of carrying out genocide directed towards individuals from eastern Europe. Jewish women were targeted for extermination due to the intersectionality of race, religion, and sex in Nazi ideology. The Nazis not only viewed Jewish women as belonging to a racial and religious group they sought to eliminate, but additionally viewed their ability to reproduce as a threat to future generations. Other racial

¹³⁰ Remy, *Hitler's Holocaust*.

¹³¹ Remy, *Hitler's Holocaust*.

¹³² Anne Reamey, “Gisella Perl: Angel and Abortionist in the Auschwitz Death Camp,” *Holocaust Archives*, accessed February 11, 2020, 1-2.

groups were subjected to persecution based on their race, religion, and gender; however, their experiences differed from Jewish women in the camps. None of this is to minimize the suffering of one group in relation to another, it is instead to show the unique experiences of Jewish women in the concentration camps.

Adoption was the exception, rather than the rule for children born in Auschwitz. Margita Schwalbova, a Jewish physician working in the camp hospital, documented the plight of pregnant women and children born in Auschwitz and the rare cases of adoption. Dr. Schwalbova recounted how pregnant women in Auschwitz before 1942 were either killed by a phenol injection administered by Dr. Bodmann or bleed to death when given an abortion by the SS.¹³³ Dr. Schwalbova wrote, “At the end of 1942, the SS doctor at the time, Dr. Vetter, sent a letter to Berlin inquiring whether newborn infants could be placed in German nursery schools (in other words, to be Germanized) while the mothers remained in the camps.”¹³⁴ Only non-Jewish infants would be eligible for adoption, but the SS changed their minds and after a few weeks sent both the mothers and infants to the gas chambers.¹³⁵ As a result, the majority of pregnancies ended in abortion or infanticide after birth, not in adoption.

Additional Factors: Location and Death Marches

The Nazis transported inmates from work and death camps into factories and subcamps to provide labor for the war effort. These subcamps were associated with larger camp complexes, but had smaller inmate populations and at times, provided more resources depending on their

¹³³ APMA-B, Studies Fond, vol. 69, The Women’s Hospital.

¹³⁴ APMA-B, Studies Fond, vol. 69, The Women’s Hospital.

¹³⁵ APMA-B, Studies Fond, vol. 69, The Women’s Hospital.

location. Inmates were outsourced to factories to provide slave labor to fuel the war effort. As a result, the inmates working in these factories tended to be valued higher than those in larger camps because of the skills they provided for the war. They still faced horrendous conditions and death, but were physically removed from death camp gas chambers and could receive some basic medical care in order to continue to provide labor.

Anka Nathanova, Priska Lowenbeinova, and Rachel Abramczyk were all sent to work in a factory manufacturing war material after spending several months in Auschwitz. During their time in the infamous death camp, their pregnancies were never detected by the SS guards. The Nazis did not have an accurate way of identifying women who were pregnant because the bodies of these women were so drastically altered due to the conditions that Nazis themselves ironically created. All three women were due to give birth around the same time but continued to hide their conditions while working in the Nazi factory until bombing from the Allies caused the factory to deport all workers.

During this final stage of the war, the Nazis killed as many prisoners as they could in order to hide their crimes and moved the remaining prisoners closer into Germany. The Nazis believed that the enslaved labor from the camps could be used to rebuild the Reich after the war.¹³⁶ Those they could not kill or send on transports, were left in the camps to be liberated by the Red Army. Additionally, the increased bombing by the Allies meant that concentration camp populations were being shifted around and that the railway lines connecting the camps were at times damaged, which could delay transportations. There were also smaller pockets of inmate populations in factories spread out in the territory the Nazis had occupied. The SS tried to

¹³⁶ Wendy Holden, *Born Survivors*, 205.

condense these populations to transport them closer to Germany as the Soviets approached. The Nazis organized death marches to move prisoners away from the advancing liberating armies.

Nathanova, Lowenbeinova, and Abramczyk were sent on a death march from the factory to Mauthausen. Lowenbeinova went into labor a day before the factory was to be cleared out. Because the SS guards in charge of the inmates assumed the baby would be born dead, they decided not to murder her, but instead allowed an inmate doctor to attend the birth. Lowenbeinova recalled passing in and out of consciousness during the labor, but gave birth to a live infant. The Nazi officers sent Lowenbeinova and her baby on the death march the next day assuming both would die along the way.¹³⁷ Priska Lowenbeinova and her baby were loaded into crowded cattle cars on the same train as Rachel Abramczyk and Anka Nathanova. Abramczyk went into labor as the train was halted due to bombing and the SS allowed the same doctor to help her deliver her baby. The SS guards allowed Abramczyk's son to live because the baby had been born on April 20th, which was Hitler's birthday.

Anka Nathanova was the last to give birth and went into labor on the ground outside of Mauthausen, the death camp the women had been sent to. What none of the women knew was that the gas chambers had been destroyed days ago as the Nazis ran out of Zyklon B and feared what would happen if the Allies discovered their death factories.¹³⁸ Nathanova gave birth to a daughter and survived to see the camp liberated on May 5, 1945 by the Red Army. Nathanova, Lowenbeinova, and Abramczyk all survived Auschwitz, the death march, and Mauthausen while pregnant and were able to keep their children alive. In the end, they were able to return home to

¹³⁷ Priska Lowenbeinova, Interview 15134, accessed online at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum on February 2, 2020 <https://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/vha15134>.

¹³⁸ Eva Clarke, "Against All Odds: Born in Mauthausen with Eva Clarke," *The Library Channel*, July 2, 2018.

the members of their families who had survived the Holocaust. Unfortunately, all three of them had been separated from their partners during the selections in the camps and never saw them again. They raised their children to learn about the horror of the Holocaust and let them know that they were born survivors.¹³⁹

Their babies were not the only ones to survive the camps. Dr. Erno Vadasz was a Jewish obstetrician in a satellite camp associated with Dachau.¹⁴⁰ During his time in the Nazi concentration camps, he performed abortions in order to save the lives of the pregnant women imprisoned in the camps. Because of his medical knowledge, he was able to run a rudimentary medical facility in the satellite camp. Towards the end of the war, Dr. Vadasz created a *Schwanger Kommando* (pregnancy unit) and where he helped seven women safely deliver their babies. The women were photographed after the Red Army liberated the camp and can be seen in the image below. The lives of these Jewish mothers were spared because of his bravery, the redistribution of supplies towards the end of the war, and the liberation of the camp.

¹³⁹ Wendy Holden, *Born Survivors*, conclusion.

¹⁴⁰ George M. Weisz, "Managing Pregnancy in Nazi Concentration Camps: The Role of Two Jewish Doctors," *Rambam Maimonides Medical Journal* 9, no. 3 (2018) 1-8.



Figure 7: “Photography Collection” United States Holocaust Museum, accessed February 11, 2020. Image shows five mothers with their newborns in a satellite camp of Dachau.

Conclusion

Pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth created additional dangers for female inmates in the Nazi concentration camps. Initially, the Nazis used forced abortions and euthanasia programs to regulate female reproduction for Jewish populations in city ghettos. As more Jews were transported to concentration camps, the tactics used by the Nazis during ghettoization were adapted by inmates to save the lives of pregnant women in work and death camps. Abortions and infanticides became methods of survival to protect pregnant women from experimentation and extermination once they had become entrapped within the camp system. Additionally, the bodies of pregnant women experienced physical deteriorations, allowing for their pregnancies to be concealed during subsequent selections. It is therefore critical for scholars to examine the bodies of pregnant women in order to understand how the type of camp impacted female reproduction.

In the past, the historiography on pregnancy during the Holocaust has emphasized the role of gender in relation for female reproduction. Pregnancy, abortion, and childbirth are specific to female reproduction, and while they can influence notions relating to gender, reproduction should not be seen as only a gendered issue. By shifting the focus away from gender and onto the bodies of female inmates, historians can better understand how the stages of the Holocaust impacted female reproduction. Beyond its focus on pregnant women, this study can help historians better understand how a particular demographic could have different experiences depending on the type of camp they were imprisoned in.

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